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VOCABULARY IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

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I guess you think you know this story.
You don't. The real one's much more gory.
The phoney one, the one you know,
Was cooked up years and years ago,
And made to sound all soft and sappy
Just to keep the children happy.

I am not about to suggest anything as revolutionary as Roald Dahl's pistol-totin' Red Riding Hood, or Cinderella who marries not Prince Charming but a marmalade maker, but there is a parallel here. Arthur's court doesn't realize what kind of a *gomen* this is to be, nor does Gawain until he meets the Green Knight for the second time. As the Green Knight gallops out of the hall, head in hand, Arthur and Gawain "laugh and grin," surely a relief of tension. Arthur attempts to regain control of the situation, to comfort Guinevere. What they have seen, he says, is simply a Christmas festivity, on a parallel with *enterludez*, entertainments between courses at a feast, and Arthur does eventually sit down to meat having seen the *selly* that custom required. What the Green Knight has asked for is a *gomen* (273). And so it remains for most of Fitt I: a *Crystemas gomen* at 283, and at 365 the courtiers agree to award the *game* to Gawain. We have heard a good

deal, in recent years, about "game and play" in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but to my knowledge only two critics, Patricia Kean for the whole poem and Myra Stokes for Fitt III, have begun to explore what I want to suggest is a complex system of repetition, parallelism, and irony achieved by the poet's deliberate exploitation of the ambiguity of certain words.

Gomen is not quite invariable in Fitt I. In his request to be allowed to take over the contest from Arthur, Gawain calls it a *melly* (342). In the wheel of the concluding stanza of Fitt I, the narrator, who knows better, suggests that Gawain has undertaken an *aventure* (489), and a decidedly dangerous one. In the opening stanza of Fitt II, the narrator sees that, several months later, the game has begun to turn sour:

Gawan watz glad to begynne pose gomnez in halle
Bot þa3 be ende be hevy haf 3e no wonder, (495-96)

and by line 535 Gawain's increasing uneasiness has turned it into an *anious uyage*, a troublesome journey. As he prepares to leave the court on All Souls' Day, to search for the Green Chapel, the courtiers, wise only after the event, begin to blame Arthur for the waste of such an excellent knight:

Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take
As knytez in cauelaciounz on Crystmasse gomnez? (682-83)

Cauelaciounz ("quibbles," "trivial, pointless arguments") is used again, by the Green Knight this time, at the second meeting:

Nawþer fyked I ne flaze, freke, quen þou myntest,
Ne kest no kauelacion in kynges hous Arthor, (2274-75)

to which Gawain makes the wholly reasonable retort that *he* can't put his head back on again. It isn't a particularly common word. *MED* (*cavillacioun*) cites *Summoner's Tale*, Wyclif, and several examples from the fifteenth century. The word often has a gloss: false, subtle, or great and odious *cavillaciouns*; *fraude* or *cauelacioun*; even a *womans cauylacioun* (the sort of thing that undid Adam and Hercules). Although it goes back to Latin, it entered English, like so many other borrowings, via French; perhaps it was a relatively new word at this date. But my point here is that the court link it with *gomnez*. Unlike Gawain and the narrator, they have not realized the true nature of the quest. They think they know this story: Gawain is going to have his head chopped off and it's all Arthur's fault.

The pentangle, too, or at least its interlocking pattern, is called a *gomen*:

Withouten ende at any noke I oquere fynde,
Whereeuer þe gomen bygan, or glod to an ende, (660–61)

presumably a reference to the ingenuity of its construction. Some “games” are clearly more than they may seem. Gawain’s journey is difficult, dangerous, and cold:

Now ridez þis renk þurȝ þe ryalme of Logres,
Sir Gauan, on Godez halue, þaȝ hym no gomen þoȝt. (691–92)

No *gomen* now. “No game,” I think, might have been colloquial, like our “no joke.” *Game* covers six columns in *MED*, but sense 1(a) seems to suggest this: “þan answered þe riche soudan, þat hadde no gamen of þan” (*Guy of Warwick*, 3116), “But goldless for to be, *it is no game*,” from the stuffy Merchant of *The Shipman’s Tale*, VII, 290; and one which *MED* doesn’t quote but which is interesting because it concerns courtly love, the unhappy, quaking, and tongue-tied young Knight in Black of *The Book of the Duchess*, faced with an unresponsive Lady:

I seyde ‘Mercy!’ and no more.
Hyt nas no game; hyt sat me sore. (1219–20)

By the close of Fitt II, as the Lord questions Gawain as to why he should have been journeying on his own at such a season, Gawain calls the affair *a heze ernde and a hasty* (“an urgent and important mission” 1051). Clearly this game has got out of hand.

Games, however, do have rules. Even as he offers the bargain to anyone in the assembled court, the Green Knight is careful to state the terms in true legal fashion:

If any freke be so felle to fonde þat I telle,
Lepe lyȝtly me to, and lach þis weppen —
I *quit-clayme* hit for euer, kepe hit as his auen —
And I schal stonde hym a strok, stif on þis flet,
Ellez þou wyl *diȝt me þe dom* to dele hym an oþer
Barlay,
And ȝet gif hym respite,
A twelmonyth and a day. (291–98)

The terms are restated by Gawain, at the request of the Green Knight, immediately before the latter bends his neck to receive the first blow. Gawain has to identify himself, formally and by name, and swear by his *seker trawep* as a knight to turn up in one year’s time to receive the return blow. Before the Green Knight rides off, he reminds Gawain, yet once more, of what he

had promised. The axe is hung on the wall so that men may see the *trwe tytel* (480), the actual evidence. The pentangle is similarly authenticated:

Hit is a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle
In bytoknyng of trawþe, *bi tytle þat hit habbez*. (625–26)

Gawain is all ready to leave Hautdesert after the celebration of the second Christmas because

þer watz stabled *bi statut* a steuen vus bytwene
To mete þat mon at þat mere, *zif I myzt* last. (1060–61)

Bertilak, however, says there is no need; the Green Chapel is less than two miles away, and so, on each of the next three mornings, Gawain can lie in whilst he goes out hunting. Each of the three subsequent exchanges of winnings is specified in correct legal terminology: *couenaunt(ez)* four times (1123, 1384, 1408, 1642), *forward(ez)* five times (1105, 1395, 1405, 1636, 1934), and *cheuicaunce* three times (1390, 1406, 1678) are the words used. (Incidentally, Gawain receives the proffered respite *gomenly* (1079) — this really does look like a game and of course has to appear so to Gawain — and Bertilak maintains his exuberant manner (989 and 1376), doing everything he can to entertain his guests *with gomnez*.) At the second meeting at the Green Chapel there is once more talk of *couenauntez* (2242 and 2328), *ryzt* (2346), and *forwarde* (2347). Gawain is given *bot two bare myntes* for the first two sets of kisses because, as the Green Knight says, “Trwe mon trwe restore / þenne þar mon drede no waþe” (2354–55).

Legal language, however, has by its very nature and purpose to be unambiguous. I have illustrated it here as an example of the poet’s mastery of one particular register.¹ Time prevents me from mentioning the use of other technical vocabularies — of armour, hunting or architecture — but these are well enough known. Colloquialisms, some of which may be dialectal (Clark: 1971), and puns might repay further study. Is Arthur’s advice to Gawain to give a good sharp blow in order to finish off the Green Knight

And if þou redez hym ryzt, redly I trowe
þat þou schal byden þe bur þat he schal bede after, (373–74)

intended as a pun, *byden* meaning both “wait for” and “endure”? In the final stanza of the first fitt, the king tells Gawain *heng up þyn ax*, both literally and in the proverbial sense “it’s all done with” (if only it were!). The very first line of Fitt II refers to *This hanselle* (“this Christmas box”) which the court — and especially Gawain — had been given; the word was

used earlier (66) as part of the normal Christmas festivities. *Costes* is more interesting still. Gawain tells Arthur that he must set out on his journey from Camelot to the Green Chapel since they both know *þe cost of þis cace* (546), "the nature of this business," but Gawain rides along *Carande for his costes* (750), increasingly aware of the difficulties involved. Lady Bertilak is the fairest of all in looks, complexion, and *costes* ("disposition"? 944). A similar meaning is intended at 1272, but perhaps her later teasing of Gawain:

"Sir, gif ze be Wawen, wonder me þynkkez,
Wyze þat is so wel wrast alway to god,
And connez not of companyye þe *costez* vndertake," (1481-83)

is double-edged: he does not yet realize the true *costez* of her company. But the Green Knight has always known, and can pun on *cosses* and *costes*;

"Now know I wel þy *cosses*, and þy *costes* als." (2360)

When Gawain returns to Camelot he

Biknowez alle þe *costes* of care þat he hade. (2495)

Costes (like *gomen*) has grown in meaning: depending on a man's behaviour there may be a price to be paid.

When Gawain arrives at the castle of Hautdesert, he is praised not as a great Round Table knight seeking adventures but as a prime exponent of courtly manners and *luf-talkyng*, what is later (1116) termed *Frenkysch fare and fele fayre lotez*. In Fitt III the "game" and the "love-talking" are constantly associated:

Bot zet I wot þat Wawen and þe wale burde
Such comfort of her companyye cazten togeder
Þurȝ her dere dalyaunce of her derne wordez,
Wyth clene cortays carp closed fro fylþe,
Dat hor play watz passande vche prynce *gomen*,
in vayres. (1010-15)

Outside the Lord too is engaged in *game*, both the pursuit (1314, 1894) and the quarry itself (1635—cf. Modern English *game*). Indoors the Lady pursues the *lel layk of luf* (1513) where Scandinavian-derived *layk* is substituted (because of the alliteration) for Old English *gomen*, although she does ask him to teach her *sum game* at line 1532. The *luf-talkyng* of line 927 becomes more flirtatious *luf-lazyng* at 1777, although the Lady complains at 1523 that she has, as yet, heard "no wordez / þat euer longed to

luf." But Gawain quickly realizes that words are safe, because words can be ambiguous. This must be his defence against a Lady who, contrary to all the "rules" of courtly love, takes the initiative in wooing. They both recognize the conventional image of the man as the Lady's "prisoner"; at first she pins him in his bed but he laughingly secures his "release":

"Bot wolde 3e, lady louely, þen, leue me grante
And deprece your prysoun, and pray hym to ryse,
I wolde boze of þis bed, and busk me better;
I schulde keuer þe more comfort to karp yow wyth." (1218-21)

To *karp* ("talk") is so much safer! There is similarly no danger in his calling her his *souerayn* and himself her *seruant*. So they take up their positions in what is a recognizable love duel:

And ay þe lady let lyk as hym loued mych.
Ðe freke ferde with defence, and feted ful fayre. (1281-82)

She is playing a part (*let lyk as*) and he is constantly on the defensive. Kisses, too, need not be dangerous, but Gawain keeps control, politely but surely:

"I schal kysse at your comaundement, as a knyzt fallez.
And fire lest he displese yow; so plede hit no more," (1303-04)

and again when she replies to his suggestion that it would be wrong of him to offer more lest he be refused, with the predictable "And who's going to refuse you?":

"Ma fay," quop þe meré wyf, "3e may not be werned;
3e ar stif innoghe to constrayne wyth strenkþe, 3if yow lykez,
3if any were so vilanous þat yow devaye wolde."
"3e, be God", quop Gawayn, "good is your speche;
Bot þrete is vnþryuande in þede þer I lende,
And vche gift þat is geuen not with goud wylle.
I am at your comaundement, to kysse quen yow lykez;
3e may lach quen yow lyst and leue quen yow þynkkez." (1495-1502)

He establishes the boundaries, firmly but ever so politely. This may involve some self-deprecation on his part, but no matter. They both recognize the ambiguity of courtly love language: *I* know that *you* know that *I* know:

"Bot hit ar ladyes innoze þat leuer wer nowþe
Haf þe, hende, in hor holde, as I þe hadde here,
To daly with derely your daynté wordez,

Keuer hem comfort and colen her carez,
 Þen much of þe garysoun oper golde þat þay hauen." (1251-55)

Line 1252 has two instances of the affectionate *þe*; as aristocrats they normally employ the polite *you*. *Keuer hem comfort and colen her carez*: she implies the sexual interpretation, Gawain pretends to understand the polite, innocent one. To combat her he has to use *speches skere* ("pure," "innocent," 1261). She leads him to the brink, especially on her third visit, in her jewels and low-cut dress, but somehow he doesn't topple over. "Love-talking" is what he is famed for and love-talking will save him:

With luf-lazyng a lyt he layde hym bysyde
 Alle þe spechez of specialté þat sprange of her mouthe. (1777-78)

She has two other tricks, at least, in her extensive repertoire. "You can't be Gawain," she teases him, not *Gawain* and behaving like this — nothing is *happening* (1293-1301, 1481-83). Names are important in romance because they are a guarantee of status and therefore of the appropriate behaviour. In Fitt 1 the Green Knight demands Gawain's name, although he himself will admit only to being the knight of the Green Chapel. Gawain discloses his name to the attendants at Hautdesert (906). When Gawain glances aside as the axe comes whistling down, Bertilak immediately reproves him with the same words as his wife had used earlier: *þou art not Gawayn* (2270). It is a very literary weapon, though, that the Lady uses for her second approach. She has clearly read several romances and knows the romance register:

"And of alle cheualry to chose, þe chef þyng alosed
 Is þe *lel layk* of luf, þe *lettur* of armes;
 For to telle of þis teuelyng of þis trwe knygztez,
 Hit is þe *tytelet token and tyxt* of her werkkez,
 How ledes for her lele luf hor lyuez han auntered,
 Endured for her drury dulful stoundez,
 And after wenged with her walour and *voyded her care*,
 And brozt *blysse into boure with bountées hor awen*." (1512-19)

Why can't life be like literature? Once more there is the deliberately ambiguous language. She presents herself as a *zonke bynk*, eager for instruction from (and, by implication, putty in the hands of) this man who has such a reputation with the ladies. Gawain, as usual, says that, on the contrary, she knows much more than he, even about the *temes of tyxt and talez of armez* (1541). On the third visit she strikes two different attitudes: "You've got another lady, somewhere else" (which Gawain denies, 1782-91) and finally, almost the oldest trick in the book, "You don't love me, then." With a deep

sigh she visualizes herself finally (perhaps from lyric rather than romance) as the little woman love has passed by:

I may bot mourne vpon molde, as may þat much louyes. (1795)

This device — which I suppose we would now call intertextuality — may even extend to the poet's other works. Gawain, Mary's knight, uses *speches skere* (1261) and *clene cortays carp closed fro fylþe* (1013). In *Cleanness* God speaks of sexual love in terms of courtly love:

I compast hem a kynde crafte and kende hit hem derne,
And armed hit in Myn ordenaunce oddely dere,
And dyzt drwry þerinne, doole alþer swetest,
And þe play of paramorez I portrayed Myseluen, (697–700)

and, shortly afterward, in the same poem, He uses the phrase *stille stollen steuen* (706), just as the Lady, seated next to Gawain at supper, has a *stille stollen countenaunce* (1659). This is the same poet who refers, somewhat puzzlingly, to *Clopyngnel's clene Rose* (*Cleanness*, 1057) and sees man as ready to *dele drwrye with Dryztyng* (1065).² In *Pearl*, if it is indeed his,³ the intricate metrical scheme requires the exercise of polysemy, indeed the deliberate extension of meaning in words like *date* and — interestingly for my purposes here — *cortaysye* in section VII, behaviour characteristic not only of courts on earth but also of the Court of Heaven. Deliberate ambiguity is present at the beginning of the poem in words like *luf-daungere* (11) which, by the end, has become *luf-longyng* for heaven (1152). The Green Knight, in pretended surprise at the lack of challenge from Arthur and his knights, asks

"Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?" (311–12)

gryndellayk — "fierceness"; much later when Gawain, amazed and delighted that he has escaped with just a small cut, is ready to defend himself against a second blow from Bertilak, the latter advises him to *be not so gryndel* (2338), exactly the same words as God uses to Jonah (*Patience*, 524).

But even if I am wrong in suggesting that the poet of Gawain may have intended his audience (and it may have been a relatively intimate audience in a provincial castle) to recall his other poems, we are surely meant to recognize the same words repeated later within the same poem. In an illuminating article Myra Stokes has illustrated the lexical and syntactical repetitions within the conversations in Fitt III where Gawain and the Lady engage in a kind of debate, almost a *flytyng*, "with the important comic

difference that it is compliments rather than insults that they politely turn back on one another" and where "each tends to vye for the subordinate rather than the dominant position" (45, 46). It is easy to find examples of such echoes elsewhere in the poem. I have already mentioned *sourquydrye* in connection with the Green Knight's visit to Camelot. At the end he reminds Gawain that one of the reasons for his enchantment by Morgan was to check on the court's *surquidré* (2457). The same word — not just "pride" but "excessive pride" — is used about the Dreamer in *Pearl* (309) and, incidentally, in *Troilus and Criseyde*, 1.213. Gawain's courtly virtues are, we are told in the description of the pentangle, *happed* ("fastened") to him more securely than to any other knight, but much later he says he cannot *vnhap* the *harme* the girdle reminds him of (2511). The Lady tells the knight that if he wears the girdle he cannot be killed *for slyzt upon erpe* (1854). Gawain accepts the gift because of its protective magic qualities; if he can save himself this way *þe slezt were noble* (1858). Perhaps you can only meet magic with magic. The fox, faced with Bertilak and his drawn sword, *schunt for the scharp* (1902) and doubles back right into the path of the onrushing hounds who tear him to pieces. As Gawain finches, Bertilak checks the blow *wyth a schunt* (2268). And so on.

Gawain returns to Camelot, as proper Arthurian heroes do. He then makes his report to the court, like knights in Malory for instance. Yet this is no triumphant Gawain. He does not have in tow a defeated Green Knight, perhaps later to be admitted to the Round Table, a kind of Palomides. For Gawain, as Finlayson says, the adventure has been anything but a success, even though he may have escaped with his life. But how does the *Gawain*-poet view the court? At the beginning it is presided over by an unusually young Arthur, exuberant, in love with life, *sumquat childgered*. His courtiers are the most famous knights there ever were and the ladies the loveliest who ever lived. The vocabulary is at its most courtly and at its most bland: *hendest, comlokest, luflych, gentyle*. They are so described again at the beginning of Fitt II — *Knyztes ful curtays and comlych ladies* (538) — but only at the beginning. For they are about to lose Gawain into a world of danger, complexity, and ambiguity in which Bertilak, who arranges for his wife to woo Gawain, has been turned into the Green Knight by Morgan le Fay who is the old woman in the castle and who is Gawain's aunt. When he returns, against all expectations, they are welcoming, kind and comforting, and agree that each should wear a green girdle as a baldric, as the badge of an in-group. And why not? They have only heard the adventure narrated,

whereas Gawain and we (vicariously) have *lived* it. They think they know this story — only they don't.

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NOTES

- ¹ This has been demonstrated much more fully by Blanch and Wasserman (1984).
- ² In *Patience* God is "hende in þe hyzt of His gentryse" (398) and shows "cortaysye and bounté of debonerté" (417-18).
- ³ Cooper and Pearsall (1988) are inclined to believe not.

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