Benson, Larry D. *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1965. Benson states that all of the game play in *Sir Gawain* reflects on one another. The beheading game and the seduction game contain material links. The lace of the girdle acts as a “love token” and alludes to the lace cloth on the Green Knight’s axe (40). The parallelism between the hunting scenes and the temptation scenes are crucial to demonstrating the true test Gawain faces. The hunting and eventual capture of the fox is parallel to the Lady’s capture of Gawain. The fox slyly outwits Bertilak but in the end stumbles into a trap and is captured. The same occurs between Gawain and Lady Bertilak when she convinces Gawain to accept the green girdle. “She is as intent upon her prey as Bertilak upon his” (160). The viewpoints exhibited in the hunting scene are also the same as depicted in the bedroom…hunter and the hunted.

Clein, Wendy. *Concepts of Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Norman,OK: Pilgrim Books 1987. 101-116. The bedroom scenes with Lady Bertilak are parallel to the hunting scenes with Bertilak himself as they both “enact rituals demonstrating the nobility’s mastery of primal impulses” (101). However, the hunting scenes are physical and unambiguous in nature, whereas the pursuits in
the bedroom are more mental and confusing to Gawain. When approached in his bed by the Lady, Gawain feigns sleep, but uncertain of how that will alleviate the situation, he tries something else. “More semly hit were/to aspye with my spelle in space quat ho wolde” (1198-99). The lack of social propriety on the Lady’s part worries Gawain immensely. Gawain genuflects, showing the reader how dangerous the promiscuous wife of Bertilak really is. She whispers words of courtly love to Gawain, her strategy to make him live up to his code of honor, which would in fact insist that he not turn her down. However, her manipulations on Gawain are not well received and the hero remains one in the eyes of the reader. The next two seductions again relay the parallelism with the hunt, as Gawain is hunted just as the Boar and the Fox, however, he is not captured and the physicality of the hunting scenes are not transposed to the seduction.


In the chapter entitled “Hautdesert and the Felix Culpa”, Haines presents the argument that upon first reading of the poem, the reader has no inclination that Lady Bertilak is engaged in any sinister game play with Sir Gawain. Haines postulates that “it is possible to participate with a good motive in the plot to test Gawain’s heroic behaviour as a Christian Knight...” (130). The author likens Lady Bertilak to God, in the sense that they both have noble reasons for testing the knight. Lady Bertilak is testing Gawain because she is a charitable woman who wants to see Gawain prove that he is virtuous person. Haines quotes W.A. Davenport “the poet indicates to us that the Lady’s wooing is a performance from
start to finish” (132). Haines believes Davenport has “blurred” the two possible readings of the story, pre and post knowledge of the denouement. Haines suggests that it is possible that Lady Bertilak heard from her husband that Gawain was going to face the green knight and she “merely wanted to enjoy the last chance for sex with the famous Gawain” (133). Upon first reading, there are no other clues in the text to insinuate that the Lady is aware that Gawain’s conduct with her in the bedroom will directly affect the outcome of the beheading game. After Lady Bertilak is unsuccessful in goading Gawain into bed with her, she wonders if he might be gay. If her intentions where anything other than unadulterated, the Lady would have no reason to ponder such an idea. By assuming that the “luf,” that keeps the Lady awake at night and makes her not give up her purpose is non-erotic love, then the reader must deduce by the third day that the Lady’s intentions are pure.

Heng, Geraldine. *Feminine Knots and the Other in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* *PMLA* Vol. 106, No. 3. (May, 1991): 500-514. <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0030-8129%28199105%29106%3A3%3C500%3AFKATOS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-C> The feminine, lady Bertilak plays a game of seduction on Gawain, “but it’s precise outcome and consequences are veiled from the knightly participant’s understanding”. (501) The lady marks Gawain with a “luf-face” also known as a sexual signifier which is displayed to all of the knights. Gawain is also left with a small scar on his neck for all to see. This is evidence of the theory that woman “dominate and shape the destinies of men.” (501) The girdle, a sign of femininity, also symbolizes circumambience which is an ongoing theme in the
poem. Gawain is encircled by Lady Bertilak’s arms, he is involved in the circle of Bertilak’s household, and most especially the beheading game, which within it holds the two other games, the exchange of winnings and the seduction. The girdle could also be considered a “prophylactic, as it is thought to ward off both death and further sexual demands from the Lady.” (507)

Markman, Alan M. The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. PMLA Vol. 72, No. 4. (Sep. 1957): 574-586. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/460169> Markman puts forward the notion that the purpose of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is to demonstrate Gawain’s virtuosity via a “controlled test” (575). A controlled test in the medieval romance genre is characterized as “pitting a real man against a marvelous, unnatural man, what a perfect knight can do when he is forced to face the unknown” (575). The love test from Lady Bertilak on the other hand is a test for the chivalric knight. Markman notes that Gawain does not have superhuman powers of any kind. His strength is that of any other mans, his sword is no sharper, his horse no faster. However, he is not an average man either, “he is the very best knight who sums up in his character the very best traits of all knights who ever lived” (576). In the process of depicting Gawain as the perfect knight, the nature of the tests or the “romance function” of them are elucidated to the audience (576). Both the beheading and romance tests serve to illuminate Gawain’s romance hero characteristics. His adherence to the ethical code of knighthood leads him to accepting the Green Knight’s challenge. As Markman says, “the fundamental motivation for Gawain’s intervention is really his sense of duty, or decorum…” (577). His physical prowess enables him with the strength
and skill to pick up the Knight’s sword and decapitate him. His endurance is depicted during his ride to the Green Chapel, as well as his compassion for Gringolet which demonstrates knightly horsemanship abilities. The non physical traits which Gawain possesses and are inscribed on his pentangle shield are courage, humility, courtesy and loyalty. Gawain exhibits courage by accepting the Green Knight’s challenge, humility by refusing to accept glory when he returns to Arthur’s court, and courtesy which is shown by his attitude towards everyone, including Lord and Lady Bertilak. However loyalty is Gawain’s most formidable asset. The loyalty he bestows upon King Arthur by serving in his court and taking on the Green Knight in his stead and his loyalty to Lord Bertilak by refusing to bed his wife is the attribute revealed most by the tests. All of these virtues make Gawain the only man who could be tested by the Green Knight and survive with his honor in tact.


“A godgame occurs in literature when one or more characters creates an illusion, a mazelike sequence of false accounts, that entraps another character” (526). According to Pugh, the godgame exists to force the player to contemplate life and existence. Although the player is in essence forced into the game by the
manipulative game master who does not reveal all of the rules, the player usually ends up the victor. Any character can be either the player or the master at any given time. All of this can be said of circumstances that ensnare Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The Green Knight, as the game master, initiates the beheading game and assigns rules to which Gawain must adhere. At Bertilak’s castle, Gawain adheres to another set of rules to exchange winnings with Bertilak, however “Gawain does not understand the full ramifications of this “new” game” (531). Both of the aforementioned games are chivalric in nature, but Gawain is beholden to a set of Christian rules portrayed on his pentangle shield. Pugh suggests that Bertilak participates in the exchange game and the game of the hunt seriously, whereas Gawain believes it to be for mere fun. Gawain’s perfection is at stake due to these games and the Christian rules he upholds, and he is not initially aware of it. Bertilak allows Gawain to seemingly win the three exchanges so as to create a false sense of security with the intent to “defeat him subsequently” (533). In a cunning stratagem Bertilak employs his wife and her game of seduction to trick Gawain into losing the exchange game and ultimately the beheading game. Unaware that he is a pawn in more than one game, Gawain has no strategy to assist him in any of the games. However, he cheats and withhold the girdle from Bertilak which unknowingly becomes part of his strategy for survival. Also, by kissing Lady Bertilak and accepting her girdle, Gawain has broken the rules of his pentangle shield, proving himself less than perfect. In this instance, Bertilak has won the game. In order to win the ultimate
battle against the Green Knight, “Gawain, tricked by his own reputation, must learn who he is based upon a better understanding of Christianity” (535).

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The Norton Anthology of English Literature. 1 8th ed.*

Eds. M.H. Abrams, et.al. New York: Norton, 2005. 160-213. Games play a large part of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* The poem begins with the Green Knight entering the castle where Arthur and his knights are feasting at Christmas time and challenges Arthur to a beheading game. Right away, the reader is aware that the Green Knight is a supernatural being by his appearance, "For man and gear and all/Were green as green could be" (sdfks;fdlk). He is from the natural world, one of vegetation. Green is the color of spring or life, and the Green Knight appears to have everlasting life. The knight is described as having a long green beard, which indicates his maturity and strength. The Green Knight’s hair is also similar to the hair of his horse which again ties him to the animal or natural world. The Green Knight purposes that he will allow someone to behead him with his own ax. Gawain beheads the Green Knight, but he is not killed. The rules of the game state that Gawain will be subject to the same form of beheading, but not until a year from then and at the Green Chapel. Gawain rides into the other realm, towards the Green Chapel where he is subject to the exchange game, comprised of the game of the hunt and the temptation scenes. The deer, the boar, and the fox are important symbols in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* While at Bertilak’s castle, the men are involved in three hunts and for Gawain, three temptations. The first hunt is for a deer. The deer is innocent and pure, as is Gawain. The description of the deer’s slaughter can be considered and inference
to the slaughter that awaits Gawain from the Green Knight. The deer, although spry is the easiest animal to kill, and the first kiss from Bertilak’s wife is the easiest to resist. The Lady tells Gawain she would be willing to marry him, and Gawain retorts, "You are bound to a better man, yet I prize the praise you have proffered me here." (228) The second day they hunt a boar. The boar is a fierce animal and much harder to catch and kill, just as Gawain is hard to catch and seduce even though Bertilak’s wife gives him two kisses, "Thus she tested his temper and tried many a time, whatever her true intent, to entice him to sin, but so fair was his defense that no fault appeared." (234) At this point Gawain is still an honest and chivalrous man as he has given Bertilak one kiss, then two kisses, in accordance with the honesty pact made between Gawain and Bertilak. On the third they hunt the most elusive and cunning animal of all, the fox. “The fox is a thief, wily, and a shrew,” which is all true of Gawain and his restraint for Lady Bertilak. Because the fox, or Gawain is so difficult to capture, Bertilak’s wife must pull out every arsenal she has to seduce him and again she fails. However, she convinces Gawain to take what she calls a magical green girdle. The acceptance of this gift to protect him from harm from the Green Knight depicts Gawain’s fallibility. He does not have complete faith in God and is not a completely honorable knight. This fact is also strengthened when he does not mention receiving the girdle to Bertilak. Gawain travels to the Green Chapel to face the Green Knight, armed with the girdle. Although afraid, Gawain takes his place to be beheaded. The Green Knight taunts Gawain when he flinches on the first blow, mocking Gawain’s chivalry. Gawain stands still for the second blow
and also on the third, which only nicks his skin. The Green Knight then confirms that the beheading game was never truly about death, but revealing the so called perfect knight as imperfect. Gawain realizes his has failed to be truly heroic and wears the garter on his arm to symbolize this. The rest of the court forgives Gawain for his faults, but the beheading game is indeed successful is dismounting Gawain from his virtuous pedestal.


Stevens believes that game and play are the two key components to which the poem is structured around. When the Green Knight lays down the first challenge, or game, it is understood that the rules are determined by the chivalric code of honor. The two opponents however, are not equally matched. Gawain is forced into the position of the “sympathetic underdog,” by adhering to the rules of the game which state that “he will deal a death blow, and the spoils of victory will have been gained unfairly” (69). However, the Green Knight is not subject to human limitations, and when Gawain serves the first blow, the Knight does not die. The Knight has in fact presented the game under false pretenses where he “did not stipulate equality of risk” (70). The beheading game as it is called, is classified as a tournament game according to Johan Huizinga and is a game that is designed to test the “heroic reputation of the Round Table” (70). Gawain’s heroic reputation is tested further in the seduction temptations. By shifting away from the beheading game to the seduction scenes in the middle two fits of the story, the poet removes Gawain from being tested as a public hero and examines his inner
being. This test is, according to Stevens is, “the moral center of the poem, for it is here that Gawain’s basic virtue, his truth, is tested” (71). As the hunting scenes and seduction scenes comprise the exchange game, they are almost always compared to one another in terms of narrative movement. Gawain can be compared to the deft and shy deer of the first hunt, as during the first seduction scene, he too attempts to hide from Lady Bertilak by pretending to be asleep. “The boar, usually represented in heraldry as bold, spirited, fierce in conflict and ready to confront his assailant, is paralleled in the second wooing scene by a Gawain who is more noticeable direct, more curt and combative” (73). The fox, who is associated with cunning, exemplifies Gawain during the third seduction scene for his, “treachery, and his falsehood” for taking and concealing the green girdle from Bertilak (73). By accepting the girdle, Gawain has also cheated in the beheading game and has doomed himself because he has put his faith in the hands a material object rather than in God. His pride for life is shameful for a knight of his caliber. Only when he has been nicked by the Knight’s sword, and flinches, proving that he does not have faith in the powers of the girdle, is Gawain admonished of his sins. His mortal hold on life outweighs his chivalric code of honor and Gawain is ultimately a loser even though he is physically a winner.