The Varied Games in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a poem composed in the Middle Ages, whose purpose is to demonstrate the ideal, chivalric knight. Through varied forms of game play, containing apparent and hidden tests, “Sir Gawain is…measured against a moral and Christian ideal of chivalry” (Abrams 113). The testing of Gawain’s virtues begins with the challenge of the beheading game as purposed by the Green Knight. The beheading game seemingly has very few stipulations. The Green Knight wishes for someone to behead him as he lay still, awaiting the blow, as long as in one year he be allowed the same. Stepping in for King Arthur, Sir Gawain accepts the challenge. As the Green Knight is otherwordly, he survives the beheading, and has succeeded in ensnaring Gawain into his calculated scheme. Adhering to the rules of the game, Gawain travels towards the Green Chapel to receive his return blow. Along the way, he is welcomed into the home of Lady and Lord Bertilak, who cunningly create games of seduction and exchange in order to test Sir Gawain’s chivalry, stalwartness and faith. Having agreed to the exchange game, which includes an elaborate metaphor involving the hunting of game, Gawain is unknowingly thrust into the seduction Game of Lady Bertilak. All three games culminate in the Green Chapel during the return blow of the beheading game, where it is revealed that Lord Bertilak is the Green Knight. Every trial Gawain faced
during that year was a component of the grand beheading game, designed to test Gawain in every facet possible to prove or deny his worthiness as a perfect, chivalric knight.

* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight * begins at Christmas time. King Arthur’s court is all gathered at a festive feast. When supper is upon them, King Arthur refuses to eat until “he had heard first/Of some fair feat or fray some far-borne tale” (Gawain 93-94). It can be postulated that Author’s insistence summons the Green Knight to his court. The Green Knight “hurts” into the hall to satisfy King Arthur’s request for a marvelous tale (Gawain 136). It is immediately known that the Green Knight is otherworldly by his and his horse’s appearance. “For man and gear and all/Were green as green could be” (Gawain 149-150). The instance of the color green associates the Knight with the natural world, or one of vegetation. Green is the color of spring or life, insinuating that the Green Knight has everlasting life. The holly the Knight carries also symbolizes his inability to die in the human sense, as it too is alive in the dead of winter. His long beard indicates his maturity and strength. He uses this physical attribute of his to undermine Arthur’s men, calling them “beardless children” (Gawain 280). The Green Knight doesn’t find any of Arthur’s knights worthy of a physical battle, and suggests a “Christmas game,” which is known as the beheading game (Gawain 283). Arthur is goaded by the Knight into accepting the challenge, but Gawain steps in, saying he is “barren of worth,” whereas King Arthur’s life is indispensable (Gawain 357). As Allan Markman says, “the fundamental motivation for Gawain’s intervention is really his sense of duty, or decorum…” (Markman 577). Whatever the motivation, Arthur agrees and Gawain, aware of the rules of the game that have been spoken, takes his turn in the beheading game.
The beheading game can be categorized in several ways. Tison Pugh calls it a godgame. “A godgame occurs in literature when one or more characters creates an illusion, a mazelike sequence of false accounts, that entraps another character” (Pugh 526). According to Pugh, the godgame exists to force the player to contemplate existence and his relationship to God. Markman categorizes it as a controlled test, “pitting a real man against a marvelous, unnatural man, [to see] what a perfect knight can do when he is forced to face the unknown” (Markman 575). Johan Huizinga classifies the beheading game as a tournament game, which is designed to test the “heroic reputation of the Round Table” (Martin 70). All of the classifications are relevant to the poem and are concurrent with the outcome of the beheading game.

The game, as classified above has a common thread of underlying falsities and inequalities. In the godgame, the player is in essence forced into the game by the manipulative game master who does not reveal all of the rules. However, the player usually ends up the victor. In the controlled test, it must be noted that Gawain does not possess the supernatural powers that the Green Knight does. His strength is that of any other mans, his sword is no sharper, his horse is no faster. The beheading game as a tournament game, is initiated by the Green Knight with the understanding 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” (Martin 69). However, the Green Knight is not subject to human limitations, and when Gawain serves the first blow, the Knight does not die. As a supernatural being, the Knight picks up his severed head and
continues to exist. The Knight presents the game under false pretenses where he “did not stipulate equality of risk” (Martin 70). In spite of trickery by the Green Knight, Gawain has entered into a contract with the Knight and must abide by the spoken rules. He will meet the Green Knight at the Green Chapel in one year to receive his own death blow.

After an arduous journey, which leads him into the spirit world, Gawain is guided to a castle owned by Lord Bertilak on Christmas Eve. The long journey serves to express to the reader that Gawain is a worth adversary for the Green Knight. Gawain possesses a pentangle shield with five points. The five points liken Gawain to Christ as they figure the five wounds received during the Passion, symbolize his “faultless…five senses”, and also represent his chivalric virtues of courage, humility, courtesy, loyalty and piety, all of which will be tested in the forthcoming games (Gawain 640).

Obliged to Lord Bertilak for food and shelter, Gawain adheres to another set of rules, this time to exchange winnings. However, “Gawain does not understand the full ramifications of this “new” game” (Pugh 531). Lord Bertilak, knowing Gawain’s virtuosity will force him into consent ing says:

“And Gawain,” said the good host, “agree now to this:

Whatever I win in the woods I will give you at eve,

And all you have earned you must offer to me;

Swear now, sweet friend, to swap as I say,

Whether hands, in the end, be empty or better.” (Gawain 1105-1109)

Gawain is unaware again of the underlying trickery that awaits him. Lord Bertilak, being one and the same as the Green Knight, intends to impose another game upon Gawain, without his knowledge of it. The exchange game therefore, exists in corroboration with
the temptation game to trick Gawain into perjuring himself. The exchange game and temptation game work in tandem to ruse Gawain into sinning, which will ultimately cause him his life in the beheading game. Before the effects from the two latter games can be seen as cohorts of one another in alliance with the original game, it is necessary to explicate the intricacies of them.

Each day of the hunting game and the temptation game parallel each other. On the first day of the hunt, Lord Bertilak and his troops chase after deer in the same manor Lady Bertilak chases after Gawain. “She is as intent upon her prey as Bertilak upon his” (Benson 160). However, the hunting scenes are physical and unambiguous in nature, whereas the pursuits in the bedroom are more mental and confusing to Gawain. It also removes Gawain from being tested as a public hero and examines his inner being. This test is, according to Stevens, “the moral center of the poem, for it is here that Gawain’s basic virtue, his truth, is tested” (Stevens 71). Lady Bertilak “slyly” enters Gawain’s chamber and slips into his bed. Gawain feigns sleep, deftly and shyly, attempting to hide from Lady Bertilak, just as the deer attempt to hide from Lord Bertilak. Realizing he is trapped, Gawain wakes and speaks to the Lady to uncover her intentions, which she boldly states. “My body is here at hand,/your each wish to fulfill” (Gawain 1237-1238). The lack of social propriety on the Lady’s part worries Gawain immensely. He 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 him are not well received. At this point, the reader knows that Gawain can not fall into the Lady’s trap just yet, as he and the innocent and pure deer are figures
of one another and in the hunting scene it is said that it is a “crime…[to] molest the male deer” (Gawain 1156-1157). The deer, although spry are the easiest animals to kill, and kiss that Lady Bertilak requests from Gawain is the easiest to resist. Upon returning from the hunt, the people of the Bertilak household are given the chore of slaughtering the deer to make it ready to eat. The slaughtering of the deer foreshadows the eventual slaughter that awaits Gawain in the beheading game. Bertilak shares the venison, and asks Gawain for his share of Gawain’s spoils, to which Gawain kisses him. Bertilak asks Gawain where he received such a prize and Gawain answers, “That was no part of the pact, press me no further” (Gawain 1395). Gawain remains true to his chivalric nature during the trials of the first day of testing.

The second day of the exchange and temptation games tries Gawain’s perfection a little more fervently. Bertilak and his men ride out to the countryside to ensnare boar. “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 noticeably direct, more curt and combative” (Stevens 73). Lady Bertilak stalks her prey and pounces on him.

This 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, (Gawain 1550-1552) The Lady steals two kisses, which are shared with Lord Bertilak at the end of the day. The Lord admits to Gawain, “for I have tested you twice, and true have I found you” (Gawain 1679). 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 exchange pact made between them.

On the third day, Bertilak and his men hunt the most elusive and cunning animal of all, the fox. Because the fox, or Gawain is so difficult to capture, Bertilak’s wife must pull out every arsenal she has to seduce him. When she fails to fracture Gawain’s knightly vow of chastity, she resigns herself to bestowing a love token upon him. At first, the Lady offers Gawain a magnificent red ring, to which he refuses. The Lady then offers Gawain something more valuable, a magical green girdle imbued with the power to protect him from physical harm. Jessica Cooke proposes that Gawain accepts the girdle because, “the ring, representing both wealth and protection, poses the graver sin, and the girdle, whose sole quality is protection, is the lesser evil” (Cooke 2). The girdle, a sign of femininity, symbolizes the 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 temptation. The girdle can also be considered a “prophylactic, as it is thought to ward off both death and further sexual demands from the Lady.” (Heng 507) It is at this moment of the game when Gawain’s incredible sin is committed.

The acceptance of the green girdle to protect him from harm from the Green Knight illustrates Gawain’s fallibility. He does not have complete faith in God and is not an entirely honorable knight. When he meets with Bertilak at the end of the day to take part in the exchange game, Gawain shares his three kisses, but withholds the girdle. The fox, who is associated with cunning, exemplifies Gawain during the third day of the
exchange game for his, “treachery, and his falsehood” for taking and concealing the
green girdle from Bertilak (Stevens 73). Unaware that he is a pawn in more than one
game, Gawain has not employed any form of strategy up until this point. However, by
cheating in the exchange game, it unknowingly becomes part of his strategy for survival.
By lying to Bertilak, Gawain has broken one of his commandments on his shield, honesty
and has effectually doomed himself. Bertilak will win the ultimate battle, but he allows
Gawain to believe he has won the exchange games as to create a false sense of security
with the intent to “defeat him subsequently” (Pugh 533). It can be argued that Bertilak
only wins because he employed the use of his wife in tempting Gawain, but Gawain’s
weakness has allowed him to be tricked. Because of his pride for life, Gawain has put his
faith in the hands a material object rather than in God. The exchange game and the
temptation game, as tools of the beheading game prove to be successful in dismounting
Gawain from his virtuous pedestal. His act of betraying God by accepting the girdle,
means certain defeat in the beheading game.

Gawain rides towards the Green Chapel to face the Green Knight and allow him
his turn in the beheading game as stipulated in the rules spoken a year ago. Although
Gawain has proven himself flawed, he is still the only knight that can face

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” (Pugh 535).
As far as the reader is concerned, the Green Knight’s opponent must be Gawain, because “he is the very best knight who sums up in his character the very best traits of all knights who ever lived” (Markman 576). No one else would be able to survive the game.

Work Cited


