

Substitution and Suppression: Sexuality in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

İkame ve Baskılama: “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”da Cinsellik

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Abstract: In the Middle Ages few works with content that aroused sexual desire were fortunate to escape the censorship of the Church through some creative and cunning ways and means hidden within the pages. Although it is initially a story of chivalric virtues, a religious piece for edification as well as a didactic masterpiece, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has been considered one of those texts that carry concealed sexual allusions indicated by a seductress eager to kiss a newly arrived guest, a man kissing another man, a girdle and a ring as symbols of sexuality and so on. This paper argues that certain parts of the text, particularly the hunting and butchering scenes, are exceptionally rich in terms of pornographic imagery, to the point where they leave behind the obvious sexual undertones of the provocatively dressed lady and the bedroom foreplay. Through textual analysis, this study questions whether these sections potentially function in the development of, or in abstention from the sexually charged sub-thematic plot.

Keywords: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Sexuality, Substitution, Suppression, Imagery

Öz: Ortaçağ'da içinde cinsellik ve pornografi öğeleri barındıran az sayıda metin, bazı yaratıcı yöntemler sayesinde kilisenin sansürüne maruz kalmamıştır. Özünde şövalyelik kavramının erdemini anlatmasına ve dini aydınlanma öğretilerinin önemli örneklerinden birisi olmasına rağmen, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* başlıklı şiir de - baştan çıkarıcı bir hanımın evine yeni gelen bir misafiri öpmek için can atması, bir adamın diğer bir adamı öpmesi ve Gawain'e verilen ve cinselliği çağrıştıran semboller olarak algılanan kuşak ve yüzük üzerinden - üstü kapalı şekilde cinsellik içeren bir metin olarak ele alınmıştır. Bu çalışmada, adı geçen şiirin bazı bölümlerinin, özellikle de avlanma ve hayvan kesme sahnelerinin, daha aleni biçimde cinselliğe gönderme yapan kışkırtıcı biçimde giyinen ev sahibi hanımın varlığını ve yatak odası sahnelerini bile geride bırakacak şekilde pornografik atıflar barındırdığı tartışılmaktadır. Ayrıca çalışmada, bahsedilen bölümlerin, hikayenin cinselliği çağrıştıran alt temalarının gelişiminde veya bu sahnelerin bastırılmasında herhangi bir katkısı olup olmadığı metinsel analizlerle incelenmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Cinsellik, Baskılama, İkame, İmgelem

Stefan Thomas Hall (2006, 1) claims that the “survival” of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (SGGK) is “not just fortunate but miraculous”. The journey of the SGGK manuscript (along with *Pearl*, *Patience*, and *Purity*) from MS. Cotton Nero A.x. to a private library in Yorkshire, and then to the British Library is indeed a precarious one. Also, I have always thought that it is a pleasant coincidence that the manuscript of SGGK, a story of a young Arthurian knight, was brought under the spotlight by another equally young knight at the British Museum. Knighted at the age of thirty-two for his brilliance in palaeography (“St James's Palace” 1833, 123), Sir Frederic Madden, Keeper of Manuscripts at the time, believed that one of the texts he found among the brittle and damaged manuscripts in the archives was worth reading and publishing

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(Borroff & Howes 2010, vii). Published in 1839, the manuscript contained the ancient metrical romances of *Syr Gawayne* including *SGGK*. However, Madden's resolution to retain the medieval qualities of the text produced a poem that was too dense and highly complicated for common readers and, therefore, only received attention from the academic circles. Over a period of almost two hundred years, Madden's contribution became the starting point for a number of editions of Sir Gawain's adventures, particularly his quest to the Green Chapel. Many of these works were intended for the reading public and, thus, were stripped of the Medieval English in which the original text was written, although, it should be added, each of these transliterations has remained faithful to at least one aspect of the meticulously knit alliterative structure and allusive narration of the manuscript.

From the first attempts to modernise the partly inaccessible language of *SGGK* such as Brian Stone's 1959 version to recent renditions like Michael Smith's 2018 edition (see Marie Borroff's (1967), J. R. R. Tolkien's (1975), Jessie L. Weston's (2003) editions for other transliterations), the number of modernisation attempts, prose and verse, alone illustrates the popularity of the text among readers, especially in the second half of the 20th century, not to mention numerous stage adaptations, films, and even operas. A short account such as this of the publication history of *SGGK* briefly answers *how* *SGGK* became so fashionable. Yet, for the question *why*, we need to turn to the text itself.

One of the most frequent explanations I get from students of English literature when I ask them "why" they have enjoyed reading this two-thousand-line 14th-century poem is related to the climactic twist followed by an equally enchanting - so to speak - denouement. The students have a point. *SGGK* is a moral text as much as a detective story and a mystery poem at the same time. Sir Gawain's adventure even after centuries appeals to readers from all walks of life with its complexity, allusive texture, and fluent story line. Moreover, the recent popularity of this renowned Arthurian romance is also partly due to the references to sexuality that have been underlined by several critics in the late 20th century. Scholars such as Gail Ashton, Lawrence Warner, and Carolyn Dinshaw, mention a few, have approached the text as a chivalric story woven with intricate subplots of homosexuality in a heteronormative world. For Dinshaw (1994), the kisses Gawain delivers to the lord of the house may not necessarily be entirely innocent. She concludes that the way the story unfolds shows that *SGGK* is in fact "a history of the production of heterosexuality in Western Christendom via the containment of the deviant, and the concomitant history of various strategies deployed to resist that containment" (1994, 223). Ashton's (2005, 51) reading of the text takes this a step further, to claim that *SGGK* has "...a sodomitical potential that exceeds even the hint of homosexual desire". The sexuality oriented readings of the poem with the prevailing shadow of Freudian criticism lurking in the background are many despite criticism from more traditional scholars, who might find it highly disturbing, even repugnant, to analyse a romance on human virtues with the erotic, pornographic, and homosexual in mind. Nonetheless, this analysis is yet another of those modern readings of the subplots in *SGGK* adding up to the sexuality-spotting vogue in the poem.

I argue that certain sections in *SGGK* as well as their order of appearance may be regarded as a substitute of albeit veiled pornographic imagery. Rather than the kissing scenes, these sections are the accounts of capturing prey in the forest and the seemingly irrelevant scenes of animal slaughter. A close reading of these sections may complement the sexual dissatisfaction evoked in the bedroom scenes of the poem. While doing this, I do not deny that *SGGK* is initially a romance based on strong didactic tenets of Christianity, yet I believe that these sections play a

critical role in the development of the subordinate sexuality theme, a stimulating *parergon* to the major themes like chivalric honour. Further, I also posit that the same sections may have a secondary yet more direct purpose within the framework of Gawain's experiences in Bertilak's castle, testing his desires. I discuss these points on structural and lexical levels by referring to the sexually charged instances in the poem as well as several critical readings of the text. To this end, I employ some abbreviations that provide a thematic outline of the sections I refer to. For the hunting and/or chasing scenes I use "HC" while "CB" refers to the capturing and/or butchering scenes; "BDR" to the bedroom scenes; "O" to the other scenes in between HC and CB as in Gawain's encounter with the lord of the castle to deliver the kisses. I have also appointed a small case Roman numeral from "i" to "iii" to each day Gawain spends in Bertilak's castle (see Table 1). Therefore, HCi, for instance, refers to the hunting and chasing scenes on the first day while BDRii refers to Gawain's engagement with the lady on his second day in the castle.

Table 1. List of Abbreviations

HC	Hunting / chasing scenes
CB	Capturing /butchering scenes
BDR	Bedroom scenes
O	Others (linking sections)
i	Day one
ii	Day two
iii	Day three

With reference to the brief account on the transcriptions of *SGGK* above, I have chosen to use a recent translation of the text by the celebrated poet Simon Armitage. Undoubtedly, Armitage's text is "a poetic translation" rather than an academic one (Claypole 2010). The etymological clues such as place names and old dialect words indicate that the poem was created and/or penned by someone from the Peak District, possibly around North Staffordshire. Armitage's rendering successfully preserves these vernacular differences as well as after a meticulous study of the dialects in the region, the highly alliterative qualities of the text. The translation, therefore, enables readers to easily visualise the medieval and supernatural atmosphere the poet of the original text aims to create. Further, Armitage's emphasis on the strongly oral and musical Anglo-Norman poetry and his insistence on the original etymology of words highlight the purportedly peripheral details particularly in the butchering scenes, which, I believe, are crucial in linking the events taking place inside and outside the castle.

Indeed, there are numerous similarities and parallelisms between the hunt outside and the indoors chase, the object of which is Gawain himself. Through doe to fox, as the bounty of the hunt in the woods gets more sophisticated, so do the Lady's temptations. On many levels, this reflects the complex structure of Gawain's tale and invites readers to avoid a simple reading of the text (Estes 2001, 66). Many scholars have found underlying meanings in these animals, the three kisses on the third day (there are twelve kisses altogether in the poem excluding farewell kisses), the exchanging game, the lady's function in the story and have thoroughly explained these points with reference to psychoanalysis, feminism, homosexuality, and so on. All this intricate web of games and events is in Fitt III (Pamus III), possibly the most frequently quoted section in this 2530-line Medieval poem. So far, Gawain, weary of his long journey in search of the Green Chapel, finds shelter in a "...most commanding castle...in the midst of tall trees" (767-70). The lord of the castle warmly welcomes him and, after listening to Gawain's story of the beheading game, he offers the knight to play "a pact... a wager" (*SGGK* 2012, 1105-6):

“...‘what I win in the woods will be yours, / and what you gain while I’m gone you will give to me” (SGGK 2012, 1106-7). With this Gawain immediately finds himself in another game of exchange, and an even more complicated one.

Only twenty lines after this is where Fitt III opens. Fitt III is 870-lines long and, as each hunt in the forest corresponds to the events in the castle, it is carefully balanced. The lady’s first and the mildest temptation attempt, for example, is represented by the doe the hunting party delivers. Similarly, in the more complicated BDRiii in which the lady offers Gawain tokens of love (and partly for the knight’s protection), the lord comes back to his castle with a fox, a more cunning animal after a more difficult hunt. As I have mentioned previously, my focus here is on the relationship between the hunts by concentrating on the seemingly less attractive CB.

Within the three-day story line, there are 394 lines of the BDR, where the temptation by the seductive lady is underway. The poem devotes 279 lines to the CB and HC (see Table 2). It is interesting to note that more than half of the lines depicting the hunting scenes do not actually focus on the hunting and chasing exercises. These sections, which form almost 10% of the whole poem, tell us how the retinue of the lord who are “skilled in the art [of butchering]” (1327) and how they expertly cut the animals into pieces in precise detail. In other words, rather than lines about the hunters like these:

*So as morning was lifting its lamp to the land
his lordship and his huntsmen were high on horseback,
...
The deer in the dale, quivering with dread
hurtled to high ground, but were headed off
by the ring of beaters who bellowed boisterously
(SGGK 2012, 1137-8; 1151-3).*

readers are exposed to more of these:

*Next they lopped off the legs and peeled back the pelt
and hooked out the bowels through the broken belly
...
Then the shoulder blades were severed with sharp knives
...
Its hind legs pulled apart
they slit the fleshy flaps
then cleave and quickly start
to break it down its back
(SGGK 2012, 1332-4; 1337; 1349-52).*

In a way, it looks as if the HC serve as a preamble to the CB, an illustrated butchering lesson in verse. Full of grotesque imagery with bodily parts being torn apart, the CB is almost 160 lines in total. Although these lines do not dominate the overall text, the presence of these outwardly weird sections raises the question of relevance: “What would a Medieval romance lose if we were to leave out severed intestines, shattered bones, and wasted flesh and guts from it?” or, more precisely, “What is the purpose of these lines on animal slaughter in a 14th-century poem on chivalric virtues?” To answer these questions, another aspect of the poem needs to be considered.

Table 2. Thematic Distribution of Lines from Fit III

	Lines	Total Number of Lines	%
HC (I)	1127-1178; 1362-1369	58	21%
BDR (I)	1179-1318	139	49%
CB (I)	1319-1361	42	15%
O (I)	1370-1411	41	15%
HC (II)	1412-1433	21	8%
BDR (II)	1468-1560	92	33%
CB (II)	1434-1467; 1561-1618	90	33%
O (II)	1619-1687	68	26%
HC (III)	1688-1730	42	14%
BDR (III)	1731-1894	163	53%
CB (III)	1895-1921	26	9%
O (III)	1922-1997	75	24%

Apart from the unfolding events in the O, HC, BDR, and CB, the order of appearance of these instances is also worth pointing out. In line with the rest of the poem, Fitt III contains a strong pattern. Soon after Fitt III starts with the depiction of the lords getting prepared for hunting (Oi), readers find themselves zooming into Gawain's bedroom (BDRi). The lady comes in dressed up in a tempting dress, "...looking her loveliest, / most quietly and craftily closing the door, / nearing the bed" (SGGK 2012, 1187-89). Gawain, half-naked in the bed, pretends to be in a "state of false sleep" (SGGK 2012, 1195) until she wakes him up by saying: "Good Morning Sir Gawain" in a soft, inviting voice (SGGK 2012, 1208). The temptation gets fierce after this point. She first warns Gawain that she has trapped him in his bedroom. Then she makes offers that are hard to turn down:

*"Bide in your bed - my own plan is better.
I'll tuck in your covers corner to corner,
then playfully parley with the man I have pinned
...
And right here you lie. And we are left all alone
with my husband and his huntsmen away in the hills
and the servants snoring and my maids asleep"*
(SGGK 2012, 1223-5; 1230-2).

While her offers are difficult to decline, the lady also assures Gawain about the safety of this attempt. This is followed by the climax of this dialogue where the lady reveals her intentions openly:

*"You're free to have my all,
do with me what you will.
I'll come just as you call
and swear to serve you well"*
(SGGK 2012, 1237-40).

As the tension escalates, Gawain, a young man at the peak of his youth, at first seems to be enjoying the wooing game. In a knightly manner, he indicates that he wants the playful intruding lady to stay longer:

*“In-good faith, said Gawain, such gracious flattery,
 ...
 I don’t dare to receive the respect you describe
 ...
 But by God, I’d be glad, if you give me the right
 to serve your desires, with action and speech
 bring you perfect pleasure. It would be pure joy”*
 (SGGK 2012, 1241; 1243; 1245-7).

Both the lady and Gawain enjoy each other’s company for hours until the lady decides to take her leave. It is at this moment the lady asks for a kiss and she well knows that a kiss has been in Gawain’s mind all along:

*“A good man like Gawain, so greatly regarded,
 the embodiment of courtliness to the bones of his being,
 could never have lingered so long with a lady
 without craving a kiss...”*
 (SGGK 2012, 1297-1300).

Gawain, as courtesy requires, does not turn down the lady’s offer and “The lady comes close, cradles him in her arms, / leans nearer and nearer, then kisses the knight” (SGGK 2012, 1305-6). It would not be too far off the mark to say that this kiss in the BDRi, which has obviously been leading to foreplay, rises readers’ expectations, so to speak, as they have so far been given the perfect conditions of an extramarital sexual relationship: a bedroom, a handsome young knight, an exceptionally stimulated lady, plenty of time, and no distractions. What immediately follows the BDRi, however, is truly unexpected and leaves readers (whether Medieval or modern, I would say) quite confused, and, those who were looking forward to see “some action,” dissatisfied. Only fifteen lines after the passionate aura created by the BDRi, the poem moves on with the following lines:

*Through the sliced-open throat they seized the stomach
 and the butchered innards were bound in a bundle.
 Next they lopped off the legs and peeled back the pelt
 and hooked out the bowels through the broken belly
 ...
 Then they clasped the throat, and clinically they cut
 the gullet from the windpipe, then garbaged the guts.
 Then the shoulder blades were severed with sharp knives
 and slotted through a slit so the hide stayed whole.
 Then the beasts were prized apart at the breast,
 and they went to work on the gralloching again,
 riving open the front as far as the hind fork,
 fetching out the offal, then with further purpose
 filleting the ribs in the recognised fashion.
 ...
 Then each side was skewered, stabbed through the ribs*

*and heaved up high, hung by its hocks
 ... Using pelts for plates, the dogs pegged out
 on liver and lights and stomach linings
 and a blended sop of blood and bread
 (SGGK 2012, 1330-4; 1335-43; 1356-7; 1359-61).*

It is appalling to read such butchering-instruction-like depictions with the tiniest details of which bones and organs to cut out (and how) right after the well-crafted BDRi. In this particular section, it is interesting note how a list of body parts of the doe (breast, hind fork, ribs, windpipe, throat, guts and so on) are mingled with a butchering lexis and vernacular words such as offal, gralloching, hocks, and prizing. The CBi is not the only example of such shift from a soothing love making scene to blood-filled slaughter. The CBii, too, takes place right after a quite exciting encounter with the lady. This time, the lady of the house presses harder and looks as if she is there to complete an unfinished business:

*She approaches the curtains, parts them and peeps in,
 at which Sir Gawain makes her welcome at once,
 and with prompt speech she replies to the prince,
 settling by his side and laughing sweetly,
 looking at him lovingly before launching her words.
 “Sir, if you truly are Gawain it seems wondrous to me
 that a man so dedicated to doing his duty
 ...
 you have already lost what yesterday you earned
 in the truest lesson my tongue could teach”.
 ...
 “If someone were so snooty as to snub your advance,
 a man like you has the means of his muscles”
 (SGGK 2012, 1476-82; 1486-7; 1497-8).*

The lady drops all the clues of love making. She mentions body parts, complements the man, and shows eagerness in her moves. The lady's inspiring act leads Gawain to give in and the lady, once again, asks Gawain to kiss her in the most passionate way possible:

*“...I come
 to learn of love and more,
 a lady all alone.
 Perform for me before
 my husband heads for home”
 (SGGK 2012, 1530-34).*

The BDRii, too, is followed by unappetising details of animal slaying, this time a boar. The butcher in the CBii is man “wise in woodland ways” and he begins “carefully to cut and carve up the carcass” (SGGK 2012, 1605; 1606):

*First he hacks off its head and hoists it aloft,
 then roughly rives it right along the spine;
 he gouges out the guts and grills them over coals,
 and blended with bread they are tidbits for the bloodhounds.
 Next he fetches out the fillets of glimmering flesh*

and retrieves the intestines in time-honoured style
(SGGK 2012, 1607-11).

One more time, the incomplete love-making scene of the BDRii is immediately replaced by a series of disturbing details of butchering. A similar point can also be made for the BDRiii and CBiii, but first a couple of critical points concerning the CBi and CBii need to be underlined.

As can be seen, one of the most striking aspects of this shift from love-making to butchering is the order of the scenes. To be sure, there is a strong pattern at work: every time the lord of the house and his retinue leave the castle to go on a hunt (HCi, HCii, and HCiii), the lady of the house visits Gawain's chamber (BDRi, BDRii, and BDRiii). Just as the encounter with the lady heats up, the narration immediately skips to the off-putting scenes of animal slaughter (CBi, CBii, and CBiii). This change from delicate bedroom talk to gut-churning butchering is cleverly designed and it substitutes for the nonetheless inconclusive foreplay in the BDR.

A close reading of the BDR and CB side by side reveals that there are many overlapping details on the lexical level. In the BDRi, the underlined bodily parts such as "lips," "ruddy red cheeks," "bones," "arms" as well as other details such as the lady "pinning" down Gawain and telling the knight that he can have her "all," Gawain promising to serve the lady's "desires... to bring [her] perfect pleasure" and so on correspond to the examples of butchering practice such as pulling "legs apart" and breaking down backs in the CBi (SGGK 2012, 1207; 1204-5; 1298; 1306; 1225; 1237; 1246-7; 1349; 1352). In a way, the lady's body, which is inaccessible in the BDRi becomes an accessible object. The harsh treatment of this objectified version of a body, in turn, fulfils the dissatisfied desires and serves as a covert connotation to sexuality, even pornography.

A similar pattern is observed in the next hunt. The sweet and soft speech of the lady, who comments on Gawain's "muscles" and asks him to "perform for [her] before / [her] husband heads for home" in the BDRii, transforms into a scene dominated by words like "neck" and "flesh" in the CBii (SGGK 2012, 1497; 1533-4; 1591; 1611). Here, too, the lady, who is both available (physically) and unreachable (on principle), turns out to be represented by the "body" and "flesh" of the dead animal, which serves as a free canvas for the bestial acts that would normally follow.

Objectifying bodily desires in a shift from a bedroom experience with physical (albeit inconclusive) contact to the bone breaking, flesh slaying, leg separating, rib filleting and throat cutting of the CB could, therefore, be regarded as a form of substitution. In this exchange, the worldly desires to touch and feel is satisfied with sections packed with cutting, pulling apart, cleaving, and riving (all of which calls for the sense of touch). So, metaphorically, the incomplete sex act turns complete with a predominantly physical, though savage, intervention.

Corresponding to the fox, the most cunning of all the prey in SGGK, the temptation in the BDRiii is the most challenging one for Gawain. This climax in terms of sexuality (along with the textual and physical substitution), however, is not projected in the CBiii. This can also be observed in the length of these consecutive sections: the BDRiii is 163 lines as opposed to the 26-line CBiii. This reduction of the CB is understandable as the BDRiii has a prevailing control on the plot as this is when the lady offers the tokens (the girdle and the ring) to Gawain, which will be instrumental in the resolution of his adventure. Further, a more detailed CBiii projecting the apex of physical encounter in the BDRiii would complicate the flow of the plot and hinder character development by overshadowing another critical encounter, the one between Gawain and Bertilak, in which the knight delivers the kisses but not the girdle.

Of course, turning the female body into an object may raise objection even within the context of *SGGK*. However, as the readers of the poem will recall, the lady of the castle is one of the players in the plot designed by Bertilak to test Gawain, in particular, and Arthur's court, in general. In Warner's words, if anything, it is the lady that should be blamed since she leaves him no space to make decisions throughout the BDR (Warner 2013, 264). Indeed, Gawain has been resolute against the advancing lady and her attempts and stood his ground: "...remain[ing] on guard /...cool in his conduct" as he "fairly and without fault... defended himself" (*SGGK* 2012, 1281; 1284; 1551). This is a defence mechanism protecting the honourable knight against the lady pressing hard and an act of self-restraining. From this perspective, while the CB may be an element of substitution for the unfinished bedroom experience, it can also be analysed as a form of suppression. By suppression, I still refer to the suppression of physical desires. Therefore, the BDR that imply wild acts of sexuality through the complementing CB can be associated in suppressing carnal passion and muzzle the physical needs of a young knight (and the readers enjoying this romance on honour and Christian faith). In other words, the excruciating details of animal slaughter in the CB may be read as off putting aimed to cool off the heated atmosphere of the BDR.

At the outset, *SGGK* is a medieval story accentuating crucial aspects of Christian knighthood such as righteousness and truthfulness and is likely to disappoint modern readers who read the poem for the first time (with little or no background knowledge of the text) as a poem with a certain amount of sexuality in it. Still, the contents and characters of the story are not entirely innocent. In this respect, Cox's detailed analysis of *SGGK* can shed light on the contrasting aspects of the text as she finds similarities between the story of Original Sin and Gawain's venture including (and, in certain ways, illustrating) sexual connotations (Cox 2001, 378-20).

Consequently, while the CB subdues the lasciviousness raised in the BDR, the grotesque images in the CB also fill in for the otherwise impossible act of sex. The act is particularly impossible on two levels. Firstly, the pornographic elements in a text reinforcing Christian faith very much like a medieval *Book of Hours*, a typical medieval devotional book with illustrations (although some of these books portrayed men and women - usually religious figures - having heterosexual and homosexual intercourse on the margins) would not just be inappropriate but also unacceptable. And finally, (a pragmatic point), if Gawain had given in to the temptations of the lady, it would be absurd for him to undergo homosexual intercourse with the lord in a world strictly woven with heterosexual norms and in total contradiction to the doctrinal teachings of the poem.

SGGK is a positively encouraging text inviting readers to take away whatever they can get. It is rich and suggestive, rendering the story a fine target for literary and academic investigation. This abundance of textual details by no means makes the poem a sloppy collection of alliterating lines; on the contrary, each detail, (specifically those about butchering animals) is there for a reason. I believe that a more in-depth analysis of these sections will yield more interesting results than simply those presented in this brief study, suggesting preliminary ideas concerning the idea of substitution for and the suppression of sexual desires.

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