# "TO LUF HOM WEL, AND LEVE HEM NOT": THE NEGLECTED HUMOR OF GAWAIN'S 'ANTIFEMINISM'

Howard V. Hendrix

Lines 2414-2428 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,* the so-called antifeminist outburst of Gawain, have occasioned much critical comment. The passage itself has been called "an abuse of women . . . as whole-hearted as that found anywhere in the *blasme des femmes* tradition"[1] and an antifeminist "invective more appropriate to a homily than a romance."[2] The character of Gawain himself also has suffered much critical aspersion-casting due to the passage: we are told that Gawain "raves uncontrollably against the wiles of women, his *cortayse* quite abandoned"[3] and that Gawain is "suddenly slipping into a diatribe in which he blames a woman for his downfall," a diatribe which "seems to have all the rigidity and pomposity required to evoke laughter."[4]

The terms 'diatribe' and 'laughter' are the key ones for evaluating line 2414-2428. The small sampling of critical thought listed above is representative of a long-standing tendency toward viewing Gawain's statement as an antifeminist diatribe and misogynistic raving. Lines 2414-2428 have been seen as a flaw of the poem itself and a thoughtless use of the long-standing antifeminist tradition in literature, and even those critics who have refused to regard the passage in this light have usually been at best able to say only that the lines are a 'momentary lapse' on Gawain's part which is indicative of

*All line notations are from the Tolkien and Gordon edition.

[1] Mary Dove, "Gawain and the *Blasme Des Femmes* Tradition," *Medium Aevum* Volume XLI Number 1 (1972), p. 26.

[2] Francis Lee Utley, *The Crooked Rib: An Analytical Index to the Argument about Women in English and Scots Literature to the End of the Year 1568*, (Columbus, 1944), p. 32.

[3] A. C. Spearing, *"Patience"* and the *Gawain-Poet*", *Anglia* Volume 84 (1966), p. 329.

[4] Douglas R. Butturff, "Laughter and Discovered Aggression in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Literature and Psychology* Volume XXI Number 3 (1972), p. 146.

the effect on Gawain's character of the trial he has just endured at the hands of the Green Knight.[5]

Fortunately, the view of the passage as a diatribe or flaw or weakness is slowly but steadily changing. The change is taking place because more and more critics have come to see the essential playfulness and humor in *SGGK*. Morton W. Bloomfield's speech delivered before English Section I at the MLA Convention in Chicago in December 1959 was probably one of the earliest signals which strongly indicated that scholars were beginning to recognize and appreciate the humor in *SGGK*. A more detailed version of this speech was later published under the title "*Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*: An Appraisal" (*PMLA*, March 1961), which contains the following summary statement:

> Humorous romances are not unknown in the Middle Ages, and this genre can contain such tensions and oppositions not all romances are straightforward tales of adventure, or rich pageants of chivalry, or even religious quests, but some indeed are at one and the same time witty, ironical, and religious. Such a one is, I believe, *Sir Gawain*.[6]

Bloomfield also remarks on the frequent references to laughter and smiles in the text, the vividness of its language, the subtleties of the lines, and the extraordinary lightness of tone. All of these, according to Bloomfield, "bespeak a sophistication, an irony, a sense of humor which illuminates the whole thing from beginning to end."[7] In the December 1963 issue of the *Modern Language Quarterly*, R. H. Bowers makes a similar case. Starting from the basis that "after all the fundamental purpose of ME romance is entertainment, not didactic instruction," Bowers argues that "the laughter in *SGGK* should be granted its proper place in setting the tone and hence the meaning of the poem."[8]

The critical rediscovery of the humor in *SGGK* has led to many publications on the subject since the early sixties, yet Gawain's 'antifeminist'

[5] D. S. Brewer, as quoted by David Mills in his article "The Rhetorical Function of Gawain's Antifeminism," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* Volume LXXI Number 4 (1970), p. 634.

[6] Morton W. Bloomfield, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: An Appraisal," *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* Volume LXXVI Number 1 (1961), p. 16.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] R. H. Bowers, "*Gawain and the Green Knight* As Entertainment," *Modern Language Quarterly* Volume XXIV Number 4 (1963), p. 340.

statement has elicited little comment in this new light. Perhaps the most important statement made thus far in the shifting view of Gawain's anti-feminism is that of David Mills in his article "The Rhetorical Function of Gawain's Antifeminism," in which Mills considers that Gawain's 'attack' on women is made "in a semi-humorous fashion."[9]

I would argue, however, that Gawain's antifeminist speech is not merely 'semi-humorous' and that its purpose is certainly deeper than a mere 'raging' against women. The passage is outrightly funny in a particular way. Gawain's antifeminist statement is made in a vein of wry, self-deprecating male humor that is equal parts Gawain's realization of masculine befuddlement in the face of that oldest of puzzles (Woman), and his excuse to salve his wounded honor.

In order to see the possibility of such a reading, one must first understand the dialectical nature of medieval thought, particularly in regard to the antagonism of the sexes. *SGGK* derives much of its dramatic force from the dialectical tension inherent in the balancing of an entire series of intimately connected opposed ideas. The Christian worldview Gawain represents is balanced against the pre-Christian worldview represented by the Green Knight. The antifeminist tradition that was primarily a product of clerical thought is balanced against the courtly love tradition that was the product of aristocratic thought and is evident in the writings of Lorris, Cappelanus, Chaucer and Rabelais. The Cult of the Virgin is balanced against the cult of the earthly lady and chivalry. The Praise of Woman inherent in the vision of Mary as Queen of Heaven and symbol of the spiritual is balanced against the Blame of Woman inherent in the image of Eve as the Gate of Hell and symbol of the carnality responsible for Man's downfall. Gawain's 'morality' in his resisting temptation is balanced against Lady Bercilak's 'immorality' in trying to seduce him. Gawain sacrifices the present for the sake of the future when he suffers the pain implied in abstaining from this-worldly pleasure for the implied eternal pleasure in the after-life, while Lady Bercilak sacrifices the future for the sake of the present when she desires the pleasure of adulterous union with Gawain in the present despite the implied pain of eternal damnation in the after-life. The character of Gawain, especially in the scenes with Lady Bercilak, embodies the infrastructural conflict between the clerical idealization of the moral code of asceticism ('chastity') and the aristocratic idealization of the civil code surrounding physical love ('courtly love').

[9] David Mills, "The Rhetorical Function of Gawain's Antifeminism," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* Volume LXXI Number 4 (1970), p. 636.

Had we but world enough and time, many more connected opposites could be listed for *SGGK*, but even from the examples given it is clear that for the medieval mind antagonism between the sexes was part of a much larger ideological framework concerning the nature and purpose of human existence. In one of the finest balancing acts in all literature, Gawain manages to successfully walk the bridge of swords between his chastity and his courtly reputation, but in so doing falters ultimately because he cannot balance his essential humanity–his pride in life and desire to go on living–against his honor. While he is busy balancing his courtly respect for women against his moral respect for Christian marriage, Gawain proves himself vulnerably human in his almost offhanded acceptance of the magic love-token offered to him by Lady Bercilak. In accepting the token, Gawain sins against his major trait, a trait considerably more important than his courtliness: his nearly super-human honor.

The folkloric Gawain who comes to us out of the legends of northwest England's Druid country was most importantly a hero, a man of honor, and not a courtly lover. Gawain's sense of social and personal honor still lingers in our poem. It is not so much his chastity that keeps Gawain from succumbing to the sexual temptation Lady Bercilak poses as it is Gawain's honorable respect for Christian marriage and the laws of hospitality that prevent him from entering into an adulterous liaison with her. Women will always run a poor second to Gawain's obsession with his honor, and in a very real sense it is Gawain's honor that keeps him chaste–just as it is his honor that drives him to enter into the exchange of blows with the Green Knight, just as it is his honor that drives him to search out the Green Chapel a year later so that he might honorably receive the blow that's coming to him, and just as it his honor that causes him to chastize himself for his weakness in accepting the green girdle from Lady Bercilak.

Gawain is a most honorable man: he would rather take the chance of sacrificing his life than besmirch the honor of Camelot and himself, and the green girdle itself fittingly becomes the symbol of the subtleties of honor, pride, and humility when it becomes the green baldric worn by the Round Table Knights.

Finally, it is Gawain's concern with honor that motivates him to give the antifeminist speech of the final section. To deny the antifeminism of Gawain's speech in lines 2414-2428 would be futile: his choice of male biblical heroes notably betrayed by women (Adam, Samson, David and Solomon) as his historical analogs and predecessors is the sort of thing the Wife of Bath's last husband with his 'book of wikked wyves' might have been guilty of.

The allusion to Adam in the passage recalls the long antifeminist tradition of woman as temptress: "Now the woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eyes, and desirable for the knowledge it would give. She took of the fruit and ate it, and also gave some to her husband, and he ate." (Genesis 3:6). The tree is of course the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and by eating of it herself and tempting Adam to eat of it as well, Eve had brought evil into the world and condemned the human race to be tainted with original sin.

The allusion to Sampson refers specifically to Judges 16, wherein Sampson tells the secret of his great strength to the woman Delilah, who then betrays this secret to the Philistines so that they might weaken and capture him. Delilah's bedroom beguiling of Sampson is not carried through immediately: she tempts him to tell his secret three times, failing each time because Sampson does not trust her and therefore lies about the source of his strength, foiling the Philistines' plot and her betrayal. It is only on the fourth attempt, after she has gained his trust, that Sampson reveals his secret, is captured and led away to die in his own destruction of the Philistine temple. The testing of Gawain by Lady Bercilak is remarkably similar to the temptation of Sampson by Delilah, and the Sampson episode may be one literary antecedent, one work the *Gawain*-poet misread, for the way in which Lady Bercilak's bedroom beguilement of Gawain is written.

The allusion to David pertains to the episode in 2 Kings 11, wherein David falls into the crime of adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of Urias the Hittite. David then arranges for Urias to be placed in the part of the battle-line where the fighting will be fiercest, so that Urias might be killed and Bathsheba be widowed so that David might take her legally. Urias *is* killed, and Bathsheba is taken by David for his wife, and she bears the son she conceived of David while she was yet wife of Urias. David's actions in the matter displease the Lord, whose curse descends upon David and his house, which results eventually in the death of the son born from the adulterous relationship. The specific relevance to Gawain's case is the idea of adultery: the possibility of an adulterous liaison between Gawain and Lady Bercilak provides much of the tension found in the temptation scenes at Bercilak's Castle.

The allusion to Solomon in the antifeminist statement pertains to 3 Kings 11, wherein Solomon takes to wife hundreds of foreign women who turn his heart from Yahweh to the worship of their foreign religions. For this sin, the Lord curses Solomon, saying, "I will rend (the kingdom) out of the hand of thy son." (Verse 12.) What is the relevance of this biblical episode to Gawain-testing? It lies in the idea of woman as the instrument by which a man is seduced away from faith in the true God and seduced toward faith

in false gods: Lady Bercilak's offer of the green girdle to Sir Gawain (Mary's knight) seduces Gawain away from his faith in God and Mary and toward faith in magical pre-Christian talismans.

Lady Bercilak, then, is a temptress uniquely composed of elements found in all the Bible passages alluded to. She is an Eve, tempting Gawain first with her body and then with the green talisman. She is a Delilah, testing Gawain's reputation for courtesy just as the original Delilah tested Sampson's reputation for strength. She is Bathsheba, tempting Gawain into an adulterous liaison. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, she is—like Solomon's women—a temptress leading Gawain from his Christian beliefs toward a belief in magic and superstition.

I am not here suggesting that the *Gawain*-poet specifically modelled Lady Bercilak upon the women in the Bible passages alluded to in Gawain's speech, although such an argument could possibly be made with some success. What I *am* suggesting is that the portrait of Lady Bercilak as temptress, and Gawain's speech reacting to her as such, are part of a long-standing tradition of literary antifeminism which was of peculiar prominence during the Middle Ages.

Antifeminist sentiment did not, of course, either begin or end with the Middle Ages. Satire on women is "as old as the Egyptian Book of the Dead and as new as the American comic strip."[10] The Middle Ages were unique, however, in that it was during this period that satire against women was first formalized, just as the idea of love was first formalized: the writers of the time devoted countless single poems to woman's vice and virtue.[11] The dubious wisdom contained in the antifeminist tradition would have come readily to the *Gawain*-poet's hand, or to Sir Gawain's mind as a character in a Medieval romance. Such 'wisdom' is part of what passes for contemporary opinion on the question of woman in every age, and what passed for contemporary opinion in the Middle Ages came primarily from two sources—the church and the aristocracy. Gawain's antifeminist statement and the religious import of the poem itself indicate the influence of the clerkly literary tradition upon the *Gawain*-poet. Similarly, the descriptions of Arthur's court, the prominence of *cortayse*, the extensive descriptions of Gawain's armor and Bercilak's castle and the hunting scenes—all indicate the influence of the courtly literary tradition upon the poet. Sardonic statements about women in the *Gawain*-poet's time undoubtedly were at least as common as similar statements about women's liberation and feminism

[10] Utley, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
[11] Utley, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-5, 38, 89-90.

have been in our own time. Assuming that it takes a fit of antifeminist rage on Gawain's part to call up his antifeminist statement–a statement of a comparatively mild nature when considered in the context of the rhetoric of praise and blame so prevalent at the time–the very idea that Gawain's antifeminist sentiment could only come from a character in the throes of misogynistic 'raving'–such notions implicitly deny the pervasiveness of antifeminist thought in medieval literature. Antifeminism was so common a convention, so common an aspect of sex antagonism, that it is hardly necessary to postulate the need for an extraordinary emotion to call it forth.

A consummate artist like the *Gawain*-poet could have appreciated full well the ambiguities of the views on women held by his contemporaries and himself, and he seems to have made them one of his special concerns in this poem. Both Gawain's speech and the bedroom temptations must have gained much of their satiric force (for the original audience, at the very least) from the war of ideas concerning women which was raging during the poet's lifetime–a war that rages to a greater or lesser extent in all times. The poet's attempt to reconcile the disparate but related notions of courtly respect for the lady and moral respect for the institution of Christian marriage–within the same poem–necessarily involves the poet in a consideration of woman's nature and thus makes the praise and blame of Woman a very important theme of the poem.

Gawain's antifeminist speech is neither a lapse in his courtesy nor a lapse in the poet's art. The presence of the antifeminist statement in this romance makes it clear that courtesy and antifeminism could successfully co-exist in art as surely as they did in life, and that antifeminism itself was not necessarily regarded as discourteous. In no way should the antifeminist speech be viewed as a flaw of the poem, but rather as a necessary and indeed positive element of the poem's construction–the element of 'blame' needed to balance the abundant praise of Lady Bercilak found elsewhere in the poem, the blame needed to complete the dialectic of praise and blame. Without the presence of such blame, one of the primary themes of the poem would be substantially lacking in development and wholeness.

The scene which follows the Green Knight's explanation of his three 'taunts' of Gawain is a key to my argument here. In the explanation scene, the Green Knight points out that his wife's wooing and beguiling of Gawain were all part of a scheme to test the "fautlest freke that ever on fote yede" (one of the most faultless men that ever walked), and that Gawain "lakked a lyttel" to pass the test. Gawain's initial reaction to this information, it should be noted, is not against the women who schemed against his honor but rather against himself. Gawain rages not against women but against

his own heart, against his own very human vulnerability in his desiring to save his own life–a desire which Gawain insists on calling 'cowarddyse' and 'covetyse' (lines 2374, 2379-2380).

The Green Knight's reaction to Gawain's self-berating anger is laughter–laughter designed to ease Gawain's self-disgust and calm his troubled mind. From the evidence of what follows, the Green Knight clearly succeeds in bringing Gawain's self-directed anger back under control. We are told that Gawain takes off his helmet (2407), relaxing his war-like vigor in so doing. Gawain thanks the Green Knight for the lesson (2408) and bids the Green Knight good luck (2409). Gawain asks to be commended to the very women who tricked him, namely Lady Bercilak (whom he calls 'comely' and 'courteous' in line 2411) and the old woman (Morgan la Fay, who also resides in the Green Knight/Bercilak's castle). Gawain even goes so far as to call himself their ('hor') knight and says that he has been "koyntly bigyled" ('quaintly beguiled') by these ladies.

Gawain's statements and actions here in lines 2407-2413 of the poem clearly indicate that his anger and rage have spent themselves, and that he is once again the controlled and courteous Gawain of his reputation and Lady Bercilak's expectations. These lines precede the antifeminist speech, and this fact dispels the notion the Gawain's speech is made in *rage* against women. The notion that the antifeminist statement is a glaring lapse in his cortayse simply does not fit the evidence from the text: namely, Gawain's very courteous considerations toward Lady Bercilak and Morgan, both of whom he wishes to be commended to as *their* knight.

We are thus faced with a dilemma in dealing with the passage in much the same way that Gawain is faced with dilemmas in dealing with Lady Bercilak and the Green Knight: Gawain's speech is not made in rage, is not a lapse in his *cortayse*, is not a flaw of the poem or of the poet's art–but it is undeniably antifeminist.

Perhaps this dilemma can be resolved by considering the possibility that the medium is the misogyny, but not the message. Is it not possible that the *Gawain*-poet is indulging in a uniquely complex irony and multilevel satire when he has Gawain speak the antifeminist speech? A satire cutting several ways at once, as when Chaucer had his Cock say, with superabundance of male pride in his learning,

> *Mulier est hominis confusio,–*
> Madame, the sentence of this Latyn
> is,

"Womman is mannes joye and al his
blis."[12]

If one grants the possibility of such complexity, it is easier to consider the possibility that the *Gawain*-poet is having Gawain satirize himself in satirizing women, just as Gawain had earlier berated himself in his initial bitter reaction to the self-revelation afforded him by the Green Knight's explanation of the three taunts. Gawain calls himself a fool (*fole*, 2414), and says that it is no marvel if a fool act madly, and through the wiles of women he brought to sorrow (2414-2415), for even Adam was with one beguiled, and Sampson, and David, and Solomon too (2416-2418). Since even these men, who were of old the best, whom fortune followed, who preeminently among all under heaven's kingdom, were bemused, and all of whom were beguiled by the women that they used and undone by Her wiles, it would be a great gain to belove them well and believe them not ("To luf hom well, and leve hem not"), *for a man that could*. But that is exactly the point, the necessary subtext of Gawain's speech: *no man can*. The impossibility of "luf hom wel, and leve hem not" is ruefully recognized by Gawain, and that impossibility is the given underlying Gawain's antifeminist statement. This speech by Gawain is made in a tone of self-deprecating, very wry male humor—the same sort of humor contained in the proverbial notions of "Women: you can't live with them, you can't live without them" and "It happens to the best of us"—that even the Solomons and Davids and Sampsons are beguiled by women, and Gawain is poking fun at himself and all men when he says, in lines 2427-2428,

Thagh I be now bigyled,
Me think me burde be
excused.

(If *I* am now beguiled, me thinks I ought to be excused!)

Gawain's speech, then, although superficially aimed at women, is more properly seen as directed by Gawain at himself as well. The speech in lines 2414-2428 is both Gawain's self-satirizing chastisement of himself for his failure to live up to his idealized code of honor and, in an even subtler way, his attempt to salvage what he can of his honor by making the best of what has happened. Though simultaneously mildly self-satiric and wryly humorous, the speech is still a very real attempt by Gawain to excuse himself for his failure.

The Gawain who feels the need to be excused for his failing is a changed

[12] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, lines 3164-3166.

Gawain from the man whose initial reaction to discovery of his weakness was savage self-berating. Gawain has perhaps come to realize that he is at last a man like other men, subject to temptation and fall, a man who must finally realize his own humanity. The Gawain of the antifeminist statement is also a Gawain with a developing human willingness to take his flaws in light-hearted stride quite in contrast to his initial angry and bitter reaction to the revelation of his human failings. The self-depracatory humor of the speech is a sign of evolving humility on Gawain's part, a realization of failing that is perhaps even tied to an inkling on his part that he has been *too* concerned with his vaunted honor–that he has grown *proud* of his honor. This is Gawain's tragic flaw, the one dialectical tension he could not resolve because the pre-test Gawain was unable to see pride and honor as distinct and often quite opposed.

The green baldric that Gawain makes a part of the attire of the well-dressed Round Table knight is a token of humility and a warning against excessive concern with, and pride in, one's honor. In the broadest sense, the Gawain who feels the need to be excused also feels the desire to be forgiven, and has taken an important step on the road toward possession of a humble and contrite heart, the true sign of a Christian Knight.

**Howard V. Hendrix** finished the first draft of this *SGGK* article on his twenty-second birthday (3/5/81); graduated in 1976 from Covington Latin School, Covington, Kentucky; graduated 1980, Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, having double-majored in Biology and English; received Master of Arts in English Literature 1982, University of California at Riverside; working toward eventual doctorates in Ecology and English; his three vocations–acting, writing, teaching–remain rewarding though unprofitable.