

# The Criterion

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Volume 2022

Article 1

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2022

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### Recommended Citation

Gavis, Meghan (2022) "Gawain, Women, and the Hunts: How the body influences human-animal relationships in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *The Criterion*: Vol. 2022, Article 1.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/criterion/vol2022/iss1/1>

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## Gawain, Women, and the Hunts: How the body influences human-animal relationships in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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As Sheila Fisher bluntly puts it, “women can make and unmake men” in medieval texts (“Women” 161). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it seems animals help “unmake” men too. This “unmaking” manifests in subverting Gawain’s famed chivalry, defined by honesty and selflessness. The three hunts of the doe, boar, and fox, while fortifying the masculinity of the huntsmen, indirectly threaten Gawain’s honor. Though the bedroom and hunt scenes occur simultaneously without explicit communication between them, the Lady borrows from the hunts to model her temptations and coax Gawain into behaving with dishonorable self-interest. The relation between the bodies of the women and of the beasts allows for Gawain to reduce the presence of women as well as for the ladies to fortify their power over the masculine sphere. In aligning with the increasing individual attention and diminishing ceremony of the animal hunts, the women of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* undermine Gawain’s chivalric identity. The simultaneous marginalization and power of the body — female, male, and animal — present a human-animal hierarchy in flux and grounded in associations between human and animal forms.

A prominent reading of the text, that the hunts directly correspond with Gawain’s evasion techniques, is flawed, and the animals can be more reasonably related to the Lady. Though some readers see a connection between Gawain’s behavior and that of the hunted animals, a clear parallel between each bedroom scene and hunt does not exist. As Avril Henry puts it, “Gawain does not seem to manifest the terror of the hunted hinds, or the ferocity of an embossed boar, however appropriate the fainting of the fox” (187). Peter McClure suggests that the animal’s behaviors are models of what Gawain is meant to ignore. This can be seen, as Gawain resists the impulse to “quiver with dread” like the doe and chooses to “openly ask” the Lady’s purpose in sneaking into his room (McClure 377). In fact, it is easier to see the Lady borrowing from the hunted animals as opposed to Gawain. She enters the knight’s bedroom with a “slyly made sound, . . . most quietly and craftily closing the door,” demonstrating a foxlike approach (1982-88). In the third temptation

scene, the Lady's seductive dress shows her more daring and physical flirtation, "her neck was naked,/ and her shoulders were bare to both back and breast" (1740-1741). In a weird similarity, the boar's "impenetrable shoulders" are his best defense against the advancing hunters, while the lady's naked shoulders aid in her pursuit of Gawain (1456). Again though, the Lady's emulation of the animals does not exactly align with the simultaneous hunts, prompting the texts to be analyzed in a different way.

As Henry proposes, reading the text "vertically" reveals the hunt's progression from collective to individual effort. According to Henry, reading "vertically" signifies evaluating the progression of the hunts instead of focusing on the virtues or behaviors attributed to the animals (188). When read in this manner, the hunts progress from a group affair to a more individualized relation between a single animal and hunter. In the most obvious sense, the hunts begin with hundreds of huntsmen and hounds rounding up herds of does. The second hunt features a more singular relation between the hunter and hunted, as only one particular beast is pursued, rather than a species. Though remains the detailed imagery of many hounds descending upon a single beast, the boar is killed personally by Lord Bertilak, "the moment they clashed the man found his mark,/ knifing the boar's neck, nailing his prey,/ hammering it to the hilt, bursting the hog's heart" (1592-93). Not only is the boar dispatched by a single blow from Lord Bertilak, but is referred to as "his," prey, emphasizing a personal (as opposed to collective) relationship between hunter and animal. This individualized relation is made more prominent by Bertilak's dismount and unhanding of his horse (Henry 190). The final hunt displays acute attention to the fox, as he is named "Reynard" after the "trickster hero of the *Romance of Reynard the Fox*" (Badke). Not only is the fox named but haggled, "Here he was ambushed by bushwhacking huntsmen/ waiting with a welcome of wounding words;/ there he was threatened and branded a thief;" (1723-25). Far from the mass prey of the first hunt, the fox seems targeted specifically, through physical and verbal pursuit.

The regression of individual attention to the animal bodies presented by the "breaking" scenes marks the diminishing ceremony of the hunts. The first hunt concludes with the extraordinarily detailed butchering (or breaking) of the hinds, "Then they clasped the throat, and clinically they cut/ the gullet from the windpipe then garbaged the guts.../ Then the beasts were prized apart at the breast,/ and they went to work on the galloching again," (1335-40). Though this hunt was understood as an emblem of collective pursuit, the precise carving of the hinds suggests a focus upon the individual corpses of the does. While there are hundreds of hinds being butchered by as many huntsmen, at times individual bodies are described as being broken by several men, seen in the short phrase "*they* clasped *the* throat." Though a mass butchering is undertaken for the hinds, their skinning is wrought with

individual, clinical attention. The butchering of the boar displays a reduction in ceremony, even as the physical hunt is more individualized. The widespread precision of the breaking of the hinds is replaced by a single butcher acting with markedly less care, “First he hacks off its head and hoists it aloft,/ then roughly rives it right along the spine” (1607-08). The words “hacks” and “roughly” denote a more haphazard method of butchering. In a formal sense, the number of lines dedicated to describing the boar’s flaying is ten to the does’ nearly forty, tracing a diminishing sense of importance. The final hunt of the fox demonstrates the most unceremonious depiction of butchering yet. The only mention of the breaking fails even to show the meat or body of the fox, “Then red fur rips — Reynard/ out of his pelt is prized” (1920-21). The noticeable lack of exactness in the fox’s breaking apart clashes with the increased specificity of the hunt. Though the fox is given a name, there is no specification of the butcher, completely lacking a pronoun to denote the identity or even number of hunters.

The regression from a highly ritualized to imprecise butchering demonstrates a shift from honorable to dishonorable focus upon the animal body. The initial hunt of the hinds depicts a properly ritualized hunt that “recruits all present as active participants” (Crane 104). Within this ritual, the fallen prey is cut up with collective precision (Crane 106). However, as the sense of cooperation breaks down, and emerges greater connection between a single hunter and beast, the butchering process loses its ceremony. It seems attention to the individual body is honorable when in a collective, ritualized frame. As the hunts become increasingly specific between hunter and animal, focus upon the body becomes dishonorable.

Mirroring the hunts, the Lady progresses from general flirtation to a focused attack upon Gawain’s character, attacks deflected by Gawain’s courtly speech. Upon first entering the bedroom, the Lady showers Gawain with praise of his “princely honor” and offers the prospect of sex, “You’re free to have my all,/ do with me what you will” (1228,1237-38). The knight deflects these advances by politely diverting attention to the Lady. He counters, “I’m not nearly such a noble knight/...you are kind and the fairest of the fair” (1242, 1264). The first bedroom scene closes with the Lady’s questioning of Sir Gawain’s identity saying, “I know that Gawain could never be your name..../ A good man like Gawain, so greatly regarded,/... could never have lingered so long with a lady without craving a kiss,” (1293, 97, 99). Here the Lady begins to transition from courteous flirtation to a more focused approach. Though she calls Gawain by name, her remarks read as more good-natured than an attack upon his character. The following day, though, the Lady begins her visit with more direct doubt of Gawain’s identity, “If this is Gawain who greets me, I am galled/ that a man so dedicated to doing his duty/ cannot heed the first rule of honorable behavior,” (1481-83). While again the Lady only speaks of a kiss, her

questioning is focused upon his adherence to chivalrous virtues in her mention of “duty” and “honorable behavior.” She again invokes chivalry when asking the knight to teach her of love, directly challenging Gawain’s failure to proffer education on the subject:

...yes, how can it follow  
that twice I have taken this seat at your side  
yet you have not spoken the smallest syllable  
which belongs to love or anything like it.  
A knight so courteous and considerate in his service  
really ought to be eager to offer this pupil  
some lessons in love, and to lead by example. (1521-27)

Her speech instead of flattering becomes more inflammatory. Her use of the word “ought” implies a sense of duty, duty that Gawain has failed to fulfill. She pairs claims of Gawain’s virtue against disbelief of his chivalry, seen by the words “courteous and considerate” succeeded by her doubtful “ought,” and exemplified in her question “Is he actually ignorant, this man of eminence,” (1528). The adjacent placement of contrasting evaluations targets Gawain’s character and throws it into uncertainty, mimicking the sharp attention of the second hunt. However, the knight continues to use courtly speech to deflect the focus from himself, asserting the Lady “has more insight and skill/ in the art” than he does (1542-43).

Through the individualized progressions of her temptations, the Lady coaxes Gawain into focusing first upon his character and then upon his body, ultimately causing him to act dishonorably. In the final bedroom scene, the Lady succeeds in getting Gawain to focus upon his own image. She so challenges him, the knight is forced to defend his identity with words akin to vanity, “But I would not wish upon you a worthless token,/ and it strikes me as unseemly that you should receive/ nothing greater than a glove as a keepsake from Gawain” (1805-07). Though this comment is certainly flattering to the Lady, Gawain’s use of the third person implies an underlying self-importance (Henry 191). At the end of the scene, the Lady succeeds in pushing Gawain into acute focus upon himself by tempting him with physical protection. By presenting an allegedly magical girdle that grants the wearer immunity from physical harm, the Lady traps Gawain into the self-importance she had projected upon him throughout the temptations. When read parallel to the hunts, the Lady echoes the animals’ increased individualization by targeting Gawain’s identity. He had artfully escaped these attempts during the first two temptations, but slips into concern about his body. This slip mirrors the de-ritualized breaking of the fox. As his responses become less informed by chivalry, less deflective to the lady, the knight follows the “narrowing of focus and reduction in dignity” presented by the hunts (Henry 191). In the parallel scenes, the individual — as opposed to the ritual — denotes dishonorable

attention to the body, the fox's coat and Gawain's concealed girdle acting as symbols of this disgrace.

In many medieval texts, women and animals function as underlying devices to strengthen the image of knighthood, but work in this text to undermine Gawain's honor. Stories of knights are often defined by animals and women. As Susan Crane points out, the knight and his steed often become conflated and inseparable. She describes the horse as a "prosthetic" piece that enhances a knight's performance while going largely unnoticed (Crane 144). Animals affirm male identity in the hunts, as the ritualistic style fosters a masculine "dominion over animals," both over the hounds and prey (Crane 111). Knighthood is also typically defined by the presence of a "damsel in distress," as a knight's chivalric trials often involve acting in the service of a needy woman. Like animals, the emotional or intellectual presence of women is rarely necessary, as their physical presence is enough for the knight to perform his grand rescue. According to Sheila Fisher, "[w]omen often figure significantly not so much for their own sakes, but in order to become involved in the construction (and at times, the destruction) of men's chivalric identities ("Women" 152). Though women seem to underscore this text, they act according to Fisher's parenthesized motivations, to undermine Gawain's virtuous identity. In conjunction with the women, the animals, too, serve to destruct Gawain, in the lady's use of their figures and in the the more obvious way of highlighting an emasculated Gawain that lays in bed rather than hunts.

Though women, specifically Morgan le Fay, are the catalysts for the narrative plot, they are marginalized by both Gawain and the form of the poem. Upon first seeing the Lady and Morgan, the narrative lapses into textbook "objectification." The *Gawain*-poet, presumably voicing the knight's impressions of the women, offers detailed descriptions of the respective pleasing and ugly qualities of the Lady and her old companion, "[t]he body of the beauty seemed to bloom with blood,/ the cheeks of the crone were wattled and slack" (952-53). In his focus upon their appearance, Gawain reduces the ladies to bodies, much like typical medieval females, and much like the hunters' reduction of the beasts from living prey to dissected corpses. According to a recent psychological study, Gawain also participates in "animalistic dehumanization" by sexually objectifying the two women (Morris, et al. 1303). His assessment of the Lady's "upper breast and bright bare throat" and Morgan's "buttocks [that] bulged and swelled," arguably veiled sexual observations, serve to marginalize the ladies by underscoring their sexual or reproductive value (957, 967). Gawain ties the women to their physicality in a way that likens them to animals.

Gawain's angry speech, widely deemed an "anti-feminist rant," works with the poem's form to silence the Lady and Morgan. After the Green Knight

reveals his identity as Lord Bertilak and his lady's role in testing Gawain, the knight embarks on a slanderous speech:

Adam fell for a woman  
and Soloman for several, and as for Samson,  
Delilah was his downfall, and afterwards David  
was bamboozled by Bathsheba and bore grief.  
All wrecked and ruined by their wrongs; if only  
we could love our ladies without believing their lies. (2416-21)

Though his speech is generally regarded as a commentary on all females, Gerard Morgan argues that “Gawain is not in the first place offering a statement of universal feminine nature, but invoking the fact of personal experience” (277). While this critique is supported by Gawain’s invocation of specific men and women, Morgan (and Gawain himself) weaken the argument in stating the knight is “not the first man.... to be undermined by a woman he *loves*” (Morgan 277, my italics). The audience would be hard-pressed to find any evidence of love (not lust) between the Lady and Gawain, making the knight’s outburst read more as a critique of the broader “wily womankind,” specifically attractive females possessing a “womanly guile” (2426, 2415). This attack on female deceivers serves, like his objectification, to marginalize the Lady based upon her body. While this speech comes before Morgan’s reveal, the form of the poem aids in diminishing the sorceress, as she is mentioned only a few lines from the end. This formal, almost literal marginalization mimics Gawain’s variety as the few lines physically constrain Morgan’s presence — making her scheme to test Arthur’s court and scare Guinevere to death seem trivial rather than powerful. This physical marginalization is bolstered by the poet’s “refrai[n] from quoting the old lady though direct speech” as she is limited to the instances where the poet chooses to insert her name or body (Haruta 209). As Gawain used courtly conversation to evade the Lady’s physical advances, his speech and the absence of Morgan’s binds her to the physical realm.

Though Gawain and the poet attempt to dismiss the Lady and Morgan by limiting their bodies, Morgan subtly resists marginalization. Because Gawain’s speech was only focused on attractive female manipulators, and uttered before his enlightenment of Morgan’s involvement, it excludes the sorceress. Due to her renowned magical abilities, some scholars suggest that Morgan purposefully chose a more unsightly form to execute her plan (Haruta 211). If the sorceress was able to transform Lord Bertilak into an immortal green knight, it seems plausible that she altered her figure to appear old and ugly. Compared to the still “berdles” (“beardless”) youth of Arthur’s court, Morgan seems suspiciously old (280). Though the *Gawain*-poet does not explicitly support this analysis, the discrepancy (clear to a medieval audience) subtly combats Gawain’s objectification and implies that the women’s reduction to bodies is more significant than it appears. Like how the Lady uses the bodies

of the prey to inform her temptations, Morgan may use her own appearance to resist verbal marginalization.

Morgan upsets the effects of her physical marginalization by altering the physical appearance of Gawain and Arthur's court. After Morgan's reveal as the catalyst of the plot, she is quickly glossed over, leaving the audience to question her relevance and the totality of her power. Though it appears that Gawain is reintegrated into the masculine society of Arthur's court, Morgan seems to leave her mark on the knight. Gawain's insistence on wearing the girdle and its adoption by the rest of Arthur's court could be interpreted in a few ways. The universalization of a symbol of Gawain's failure could be seen as erasing the severity of the knight's self-interest. By extending the symbol of Gawain's focus upon his body to be worn on all bodies in the court, the girdle and Gawain become "re-ritualized," and again honorable, in the courtly scene. Of course, the prevalence of the girdle could also function as a sign of Morgan's enduring presence in the masculine sphere. Though the girdle becomes a symbol of honor, of "the tested man," it remains a woman's article that is (allegedly) wrought with magical powers, intrinsically connecting it to Morgan le Fay ("Leaving" 150, Ashton 69). The girdle displays a tension between Morgan's presence and erasure, but Gawain's scar represents a permanent marker of Morgan's test. The scar is unable to be borne by the rest of Arthur's court, so its personal value seems more intact than the girdle. It is also a "physical deface[ment]" reminiscent of not only the heightened physicality of the women and animals, but of Gawain's failure in concerning his physical body over his contract with Lord Bertilak (2507). By leaving Gawain with a scar, Morgan again draws on the physicality of the animal bodies and echoes their sliced necks. Though the knight attempted to marginalize women by demoting them to mere bodies, Morgan manipulates Gawain's body in a stamp of feminine power.

The dynamics between women, animals, and Gawain in this text challenge the human hierarchy presented by other medieval standards. Like most medieval depictions of knighthood, this poem includes figures of women and animals used in conjunction to the knightly image. However, instead of a clear delineation from man to woman to animal, the knight and the ladies display power in flux. Gawain undercuts the Lady and Morgan by reducing them to physical presences, but the women conversely use physicality to trap Gawain into dishonor and permanently mar his image. By mirroring the sharp individualization and simultaneous dishonorable regressions of the hunts, the Lady fosters "a consciousness so subtly modified and corrupted... that Gawain remains unaware of what has happened until instructed by the Green Knight" (Henry 192). Instead of firmly placing the chivalrous identity above the body, this text depicts, in tension, marginalization and power derived from bodily form, functions grounded in their association to animals.

The human-animal hierarchy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* evades definition by its dual marginalized and empowered physical forms. However, important to consider is the women's conflation with the animal group and use of animal bodies. Morgan and the Lady are defined by traditional medieval physicality, but they draw on animal forms to dismantle the knight. By emulating the hunt and butchering of the animals, instead of their associated virtues, the women not only heighten the sense of physicality, but dissociate the animal with the virtuous, articulated knight. Though it would be difficult to argue that the prey displays overt power in their mutilation, the women repurpose animal bodies to combat the chivalrous image of knighthood. Women and animals, even while belittled for their physicality, together demonstrate an empowered reclamation of the body, resisting their portrayals as static — static as in devoid of significant character or, in the beasts' case, static as corpses. Whether the body functions as a marker of marginalized women or empowered ones that alter the image of a knight, animals are aligned with women far more closely than with Gawain. It seems Susan Crane is correct in stating, "the wild animal cannot be as fully recruited into the rules as humans can be" (106). In this poem, the women do not ask animals to participate in a ritual; they align themselves with animal bodies to deconstruct the ritual neither of them aims to be a part of.

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