

Boxed In:

Alice Munro's "Wenlock Edge" and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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Boxed In: Alice Munro's "Wenlock Edge" and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

JOANNA LUFT

FIRST PUBLISHED IN THE *New Yorker* in December 2005, Alice Munro's short story "Wenlock Edge" is an elaborate intertextual engagement with the Middle English Arthurian romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.¹ The reader is alerted to this relationship between the two works because the narrator of Munro's story is a university student writing an essay on the medieval romance. Munro's stories are full of literary references and allusions, so her incorporating of *Sir Gawain* into "Wenlock Edge" is not unusual. Indeed, the story may be considered a recasting of the medieval poem.² Many characters in "Wenlock Edge" recall characters from *Sir Gawain*, and the narrator herself resembles Gawain. Like him, she misjudges her situation, compromises herself, and, upon discovering the truth, is overwhelmed by shame. One of the most striking similarities between the two stories concerns their composition. Each is constructed as a series of interlocking boxes, a narrative technique known as *emboîtement*. This structural similarity highlights the interconnectedness of events in "Wenlock Edge" that might otherwise go unnoticed and is key to an understanding of the narrator's transformation from self-delusion to self-knowledge. As in *Sir Gawain*, however, the extent of this new-found self-knowledge is debatable. The *emboîtement* also has symbolic significance. Spatially, it provides a mental image of the trap in which the protagonists are caught, revealing not only the treachery that surrounds them but their own complicity in its success.

Before proceeding, it should be noted that this essay is based on the original *New Yorker* version of the story. The version of "Wenlock Edge" published in Munro's recent collection of stories *Too Much Happiness* differs in significant ways from the original. As a result of these changes, references that generate ironies in the story have disappeared. In addition, the similarities between "Wenlock Edge" and *Sir Gawain* are less pronounced.³ To me, these changes seem unfortunate and the original version superior to, not to mention edgier than, the revised work.

The protagonist and narrator of the story is an unnamed young woman whose naive misjudgments and subsequent humiliation force an unwelcome self-knowledge upon her. A scholarship student, she shares a room off campus with Nina, who has been allowed to attend the university by her possessive and controlling lover, a much older man named Arthur Purvis. One Friday, Nina feigns illness to facilitate her escape from Mr. Purvis. She has the narrator phone Mr. Purvis with the news that she will not be returning to his house on the weekend (as she always does) and urges the narrator to accept his invitation to dinner on Saturday night in her place. Upon her arrival, the narrator is ordered to remove her clothes by Mrs. Winner, the woman whom Mr. Purvis employs to spy on Nina. Upon being called a “bookworm,” the truth of which she is eager to disprove, the narrator complies. In this state of complete nudity, she dines with Mr. Purvis and reads to him from A.E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad*. Lulled by the sound of the poems and her own naïveté, she succumbs to the delusion that she is on an equal footing with him. A few days later when Nina, who had disappeared from their lodgings on Saturday night, phones, the narrator discovers that her housemate has moved in with Ernie Botts, one of her own relatives. She promises Nina that she will not tell Mr. Purvis where she is staying. At their habitual every-other-Sunday dinner at the Old Chelsea, Ernie tells the narrator that Nina is gone. The story then goes back in time to an event that occurs before Nina’s disappearance. The narrator writes Ernie’s address on a piece of paper which she puts in an envelope and mails to Mr. Purvis. She betrays her promise to Nina by informing Mr. Purvis of the young woman’s whereabouts. We are left to infer that Mr. Purvis leaves the city with Nina since the house has been abandoned.

Munro weaves the most significant elements of *Sir Gawain* into “Wenlock Edge” so subtly that the closeness of the two stories may not be immediately apparent. One difficulty is that the recasting does not consist of a series of exact parallels.⁴ One of her housemates is named Kay, which suggests Sir Kay and the Arthurian court. Ernie, or Earnest, resembles the ideal courtly knight — so Gawain as he is reputed to be — in his courteous treatment of women, his compassion for others, his loyalty, and his sincerity. Another difficulty is that many characters in “Wenlock Edge” evoke several characters from *Sir Gawain*. Mr. Purvis combines aspects of both Arthur and Bertilak. Like Bertilak, he is a lavish host who toys with his guest. Like his namesake, Arthur, who will

not sit down to eat on special festive days until he hears an entertaining story of wonders or marvels or sees a joust, Mr. Purvis desires to be entertained. He seems to require the marvellous presence of a naked young woman before settling down to an elegant dinner on Saturday nights, which are, according to Nina, "special" (*New Yorker*, 84). This comparison also highlights a contrast. The old, frail Mr. Purvis is the exact opposite of the youthful, energetic Arthur. The reputation of Arthur's court for the courtesy and courage of its knights accentuates Mr. Purvis's perversion of these virtues. He preys on the vulnerability of young women and hides behind Mrs. Winner.

Mrs. Winner incorporates elements of both the Green Knight and Lady Bertilak. Her goading of the narrator, "So you're just a bookworm. That's all you are" (85), to get her to remove her clothing, which she is reluctant to do, recalls the Green Knight's goading of Arthur's court into doing something that none of them wants to do. The taunt also echoes Lady Bertilak's mockery of Gawain for breaching the rules of courtesy she has just taught him (1293–1301, 1481–86). The Green Knight chastises him in similar fashion when he flinches at the first stroke of the axe: "Thou art not Gawayn" (2270).⁵ These affronts threaten his status as an exemplar of chivalric virtue. Being called a "bookworm" similarly diminishes the narrator. The taunt touches a chord with her since she is sensitive about her lack of worldly experience. Upon hearing the story of Nina's life, she feels "like a simpleton" (83). Unable to withstand this insult, the narrator, like Gawain, steps into a trap that verifies the truth of it.

Nina, on the other hand, combines aspects of Bertilak and Lady Bertilak. As Lady Bertilak does with Gawain, Nina enjoins the narrator to keep a secret. By not revealing Nina's whereabouts to Mr. Purvis, the narrator crosses her host, as is implied by Mrs. Winner's threat, "If you know anything, it would be better to tell us" (88). This recalls Gawain's situation, caught between his host and his host's wife. Nina is also the original owner of the undershirt that, like the green girdle made by Lady Bertilak, reminds the narrator of her shame. The parallel between Nina and Lady Bertilak may suggest that Nina is part of a plot to test the narrator, as Lady Bertilak is part of her husband's plot to test Gawain for the appearance of the Nina/Mr. Purvis/Mrs. Winner trio in the narrator's life is as sudden and bizarre as the appearance of the Green Knight-Bertilak/Lady Bertilak/Morgan le Fay trio in Gawain's

life.⁶ This interpretation is dependent on the extent to which the story is read as a version of *Sir Gawain*. It is also dependent on the extent to which it is read as a romance, for the unrealistic intrusion of Nina, Mr. Purvis, and Mrs. Winner as conspirators into the narrator's life must be considered a marvellous, almost supernatural, event.

Like Bertilak, Nina misleads the narrator by setting her up for what she does not realize is a game. The mutual duplicity of Nina and the narrator also recalls that of Bertilak and Gawain. Just as Bertilak tricks Gawain, who then breaks his word to his host, Nina tricks the narrator, who then breaks the promise she made to her friend. While the narrator betrays her word after discovering Nina's duplicity, Gawain does so before discovering that of Bertilak. Prior knowledge of Nina's trickery does not exonerate the narrator, however. Investing herself with "wickedness" (91) suggests that she knows this. While the stakes are higher for Gawain who stands to lose his life, he harms nobody but himself. Meanwhile, the narrator's betrayal of Nina has serious consequences, which seems to make her dishonesty more egregious than Gawain's and her self-condemnation more appropriate than his. Has Nina been seriously harmed, however?

Nina, which means "little girl" in Spanish, is unlike the other characters because her name is deceptive. Whereas Ernie is earnest, Mr. Purvis a pervert, and Mrs. Winner a winner (she cajoles the narrator into removing her clothing and recovers Nina), whether or not Nina is vulnerable and innocent remains unclear. She is portrayed as child-like throughout the story, despite her colourful past. Like a child, she needs the help of the narrator and places the secret of her whereabouts in her hands. At the same time, she skilfully plans her escape from Mr. Purvis by setting up the narrator to take her place, knowing full well what awaits her, using her as a decoy to evade Mrs. Winner. Her sickness is feigned and her explanation of how she arrived at Ernie's house suspect: her knowing the bus route by heart suggests that she has made her own way over there before, and there is no evidence of the magazine that Ernie supposedly dropped off for the narrator in her room at the boarding house. "Nina" is not even her real name; Mr. Purvis "gave her the name Nina. Before that, she had been June" (82). "June" may not even be her real name, merely a prior one. The lies she tells Ernie — and if not Ernie, then the narrator — mean that nothing about her can be verified. Like Bertilak's transformation into the Green Knight,

Nina's vulnerability may be an act. Unlike Bertilak, however, who is a shape-shifter, whether Nina is other than she appears to be cannot be determined. Her ambiguity recalls that of the Green Knight, at once the scheming judge of and sympathetic confessor to Gawain.⁷ Embodying and belying the meaning of her name makes Nina a radically ambiguous figure. Neither her actions nor her motives can be ascertained, which makes it difficult for readers to know where to place their sympathies.

The narrator of "Wenlock Edge" most closely resembles Gawain, and each of the three references to the essay she is writing on *Sir Gawain* occurs in a situation that recalls her shameful conduct and, thus, links her to the Arthurian knight. On the morning after her encounter with Mr. Purvis, the narrator is interrupted from her work by Mrs. Winner: "I was still in my pajamas, writing an essay on 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'" (88). Her being in her pajamas evokes Gawain's early morning encounters with Lady Bertilak, whom Mrs. Winner, in part, resembles, for Gawain is still in bed when Lady Bertilak sneaks into his bedroom. The second reference to *Sir Gawain* occurs after the narrator returns from seeing Nina at Ernie's house and goes "to the college library to work on her essay" (90). This is followed by a description of the narrator's shame upon running into a poster en route to the library advertising a recital "of songs composed to fit the poems of the English country poets" (90). The suddenness of the narrator's horror at the memory of her conduct at Mr. Purvis's house recalls that of Gawain when at the Green Chapel he is confronted with his dishonesty by the Green Knight. The third reference to *Sir Gawain* alludes to the second: "That day in the library I had been unable to go on with Sir Gawain" (91). The first reference to *Sir Gawain* follows the narrator's dinner with Mr. Purvis and establishes a similarity between her and Gawain, both of whom, without realizing it, profoundly compromise themselves. The second and third references to *Sir Gawain* highlight a difference. The narrator recognizes that she was a pawn in a game set up by Mr. Purvis and concludes that the standards of academe are of no real importance. This is unlike Gawain, who disavows his status as a pawn in the goings-on at Bertilak's castle and continues to maintain a rigid reverence for the standards of chivalry despite the more relaxed stance of his peers.

The behaviour of Gawain and the narrator confirms the validity of the insults aimed at them. Just as Gawain is revealed as less than the ideal courtly knight, the narrator is exposed as a bookworm. Each

forsakes his or her defining virtue. Gawain fails to be trustworthy in spite of his reputation for *trauthe*⁸ (or moral integrity), and the narrator fails to be perceptive despite her A standing as an English and philosophy major. Even writing an essay on *Sir Gawain* does not lend her any insight into her own similar situation. Indeed, it is precisely the narrator's bookwormish tendencies that get her into trouble, and she is hoodwinked, rather than guided, by her intellect. Even though completely naked, she is lulled into a sense of security by the familiar cadences of the poems she reads: "I had come to feel somewhat remote and philosophical. The thought came to me that everybody in the world was naked, in a way. Mr. Purvis was naked, though he wore clothes. We were all sad bare creatures" (87). Nothing could be further from the truth, she realizes later. The narrator is able to appreciate the Housman poems for their literary merit but is unable to apply their message to herself. Her insight into them is entirely academic and verifies Mrs. Winner's insult. The narrator reads the line "On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble" (87) to Mr. Purvis without recognizing that his house is a version of Wenlock Edge and that the wood is her. As an A student, she would have noted the comparison in the third stanza of the poem that the speaker makes between the Roman, the wood, and himself: "The tree of man was never quiet: / Then 'twas the Roman, now 'tis I" (Housman 15-16). Being a bookworm, however, she does not extend the poem's meaning to herself.

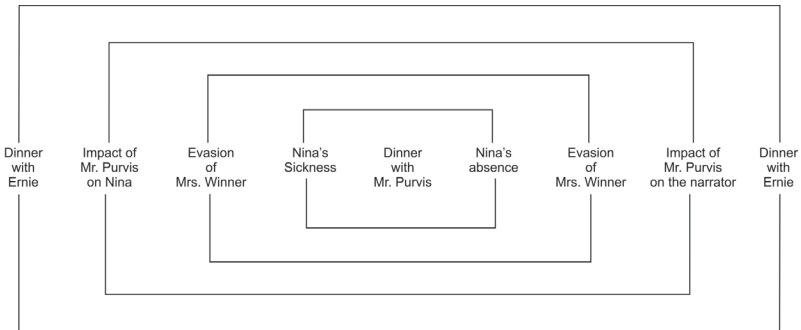
A similar lack of insight characterizes her knowledge of philosophy. Even though her favourite philosopher is Plato and she is familiar with the "Allegory of the Cave" (86), she cannot see that she is currently imprisoned in the depths of the cave. Her entry into the "cavernous" (85) garage of Mr. Purvis's house implies as much. Like the cave-dwellers of Plato's allegory, she is deluded by a false interpretation of events. She cannot discern the true nature of her situation because her hermeneutic skills are limited to books. Her understanding of the real world is, like Gawain's, partial and inadequate. What she had supposed at the time to be a triumph of self-possession returns to memory with a flood of shame. As she is leaving the house, the narrator almost forgets her scarf. This scarf evokes the green girdle — a belt or decorative sash — and the moral tangle in which Gawain becomes caught. It suggests that she, like him, has been tricked, has compromised herself, and has confirmed what she set out to refute — all without realizing it. This intertwining

of academic knowledge and worldly experience raises the question of the nature of the relationship between them. It may be ironic that the narrator does not apply what she is so good at analyzing to her own life, but the story reveals that self-knowledge is gained through experience, not reading. *Sir Gawain* cannot teach the narrator that she is no better than anybody else, but it can help her more deeply to understand the unpleasant experience of having learned this.

The structural similarity between “Wenlock Edge” and *Sir Gawain* involves a type of chiasmus known in romance scholarship as *emboîtement*. *Emboîtement* may be understood as a series of interlocking boxes in which parallel episodes are arranged symmetrically around a central point. The parallels are inverted so that a story written in an *emboîtement* pattern begins and ends similarly. The first and last episodes echo one another, as do the second and second-last episodes, the third and third-last, and so on, to the episode (or episodes) embedded in the centre. The structure is important because it invests the stories with aesthetic meaning by symbolizing the ordeals of the protagonists. Consisting of a systematic closing in on the pivotal scenes of testing and failure, the spatial layout of the narratives evokes the image of a trap and the entrapment of each protagonist. *Sir Gawain* begins with references to Troy, to Brutus (the mythical founder of Britain), and to Arthur’s court.⁹ The story ends with these references inverted: first Arthur’s court, then Brutus, then Troy. The second episode is the posing of the beheading challenge and the second-last the fulfilment of the beheading challenge, in which Gawain discovers that the games of the hunt, the attempted seductions, the exchange of winnings, and the beheading are all interconnected. (Gawain receives a small cut on the neck from the third stroke of the Green Knight’s axe in retribution for having broken his word to Bertilak — who is also the Green Knight — by not giving him the girdle which he “won” from Lady Bertilak on the third day of what amounts to a successful seduction of him. While not compromised sexually, Gawain is seduced into choosing self-preservation over being honest.) The third episode is Gawain’s ride to seek the chapel, and the third-last Gawain’s ride to seek the chapel. Embedded between these journeys to the chapel, and thus in the centre of the series of interlocking boxes, are Bertilak’s day-long hunts, his wife’s attempts to seduce Gawain, and the exchange of winnings between Bertilak and Gawain.

The spatial centrality of that which is embedded in the *emboîtement* emphasizes its thematic importance. In “Wenlock Edge” and *Sir Gawain*, the embedded episodes consist of the tests that the protagonists fail and that prove them ordinary, rather than supreme, beings. (Please refer to the two diagrams for pictorial representations of the *emboîtement* patterns of event and place in “Wenlock Edge,” discussed below.) Embedded in the middle of “Wenlock Edge” is the narrator’s dinner with Mr. Purvis; it is enclosed on the one side by Nina’s sickness and on the other by Nina’s absence from the boarding house.¹⁰ On either side of these episodes with Nina are incidents with Mrs. Winner, each of which ends with a portrayal of Ernie as Nina’s rescuer. Bracketing these, the second and eighth parts of the story contain descriptions of significant events in the lives of Nina and the narrator that feature Mr. Purvis. The first and second-last parts of the story form the outer box. The story opens with a description of the narrator’s dinners with Ernie at the Old Chelsea, the restaurant to which he takes her every other Sunday night. The penultimate section of the story describes another such dinner with Ernie.

Emboîtement of Event



The embedded episode in “Wenlock Edge” alludes to the embedded games in *Sir Gawain* by combining the juxtaposed hunts and seductions of the romance. In courtly literature, hunting is often an image of seduction, and the metaphoric relationship between the two implies a comparison between Gawain, cornered in his bedroom by Lady Bertilak, and the animals Bertilak hunts. Like the animals, Gawain is Bertilak’s prey, “hunted” by him through the amorous advances of his wife. In similar fashion, the narrator is represented as an animal and resembles the Cornish hens that she and Mr. Purvis eat. Imagining the gaze of Mr.

Purvis upon her, the narrator refers to herself with words and images that apply to animals. Her breasts are “like bald night creatures” (86), and she is glad that Mr. Purvis goes before her into the library because “I thought that the back of the body . . . was the most beastly part” (86). When “assaulted” by the lines of the poetry she had read to him upon seeing them on a poster at the university, she remembers “feeling the prickle of the upholstery on my bare haunches” (90). While “haunches” equates the narrator with an animal, “prickles” suggests a hunter’s spear or arrows as well as the “kerre” or “knot” (1421, 1431, 1434: “thicker”) in which the boar hides. It also suggests the “rogh greve” (1898: “rough grove”)¹¹ through which the fox runs, thus linking the narrator’s discomfort and shame to Gawain and the third, crucial day of hunting. Mr. Purvis’s expertise in sectioning the Cornish hens evokes the scenes of undoing the deer and unlacing the boar in *Sir Gawain*. Just as Gawain resembles the animals that Bertilak hunts, the narrator falls apart under Mr. Purvis’s skilful manipulations as easily as the Cornish hens do.

This metaphoric relationship between hunting and seduction also suggests a similar relationship between eating and reading in the embedded episode of Munro’s story. “Reading is eating” (Ross 149) functions as a cultural metaphor in both modern and medieval literature. In Munro’s story, the narrator’s body doubles as a book that Mr. Purvis reads and as food that he eats. His deft carving of the Cornish hen is a metaphor for his adept reading of her character. After dinner, he settles back to enjoy her in another metaphoric fashion, captured by the word *ruminate*.¹² To ruminate means “to revolve, turn over and over in the mind; to meditate deeply upon” (“Ruminate,” def. 1a) and relates to the eating habits of ruminants, as in “to chew, turn over in the mouth, again” (“Ruminate,” def. 2a). While she reads to him, he ruminates not only upon the poetry but upon her body. She is like an open book before him, and he feasts his eyes on her nakedness. Just as the narrator fixes her “appetite and attention on every spoonful” (86) of dessert, Mr. Purvis, who doesn’t eat much dessert, fixes his “appetite and attention” on the narrator. His request once seated in the library that she not cross her legs (87) makes this consumption of her highly sexual. The metaphor “reading is eating” is also captured by that word: “bookworm.”¹³ The narrator is not only a bookworm in the figurative sense of a voracious reader. As the agent of her own destruction, she is like a bookworm. It is with her help that Mr. Purvis devours her, as she

has exposed herself to him. She is both book and worm, hen and dinner guest, the eaten and the eater, complicit in the devastation wrought upon her by Mr. Purvis.

The thematic importance of the complicity, the self-betrayal, of Gawain and the narrator is emphasized by the *emboîtement* structure and the spatial centrality of the embedded episodes. The interlocking boxes relate to the meaning of the works by providing a mental picture of the trap into which each protagonist naively wanders. Just as Gawain is ensnared by his hosts, the narrator of “Wenlock Edge” is ensnared by the combined efforts of Nina, Mrs. Winner, and Mr. Purvis, who, even if working at cross purposes, outmanoeuvre her. While an animal trap is set by trappers, it is tripped by the prey; similarly, Gawain and the narrator end up trapping themselves. In believing the girdle to be a life-saving charm, Gawain succumbs to “cowardise and covetyse” (2508: “cowardice and covetousness”); he is afraid to die and covets not the girdle but his life. The narrator, succumbing to her insecurity, believes the taunt of “bookworm” to be a challenge. Both girdle and taunt are bait. The bait in both cases is concealed in that its true significance is hidden, leading each of the two protagonists to misinterpret it. These misinterpretations are not innocent, however; they are caused by a capitulation to fear — of losing his life for Gawain and of appearing childish for the narrator.

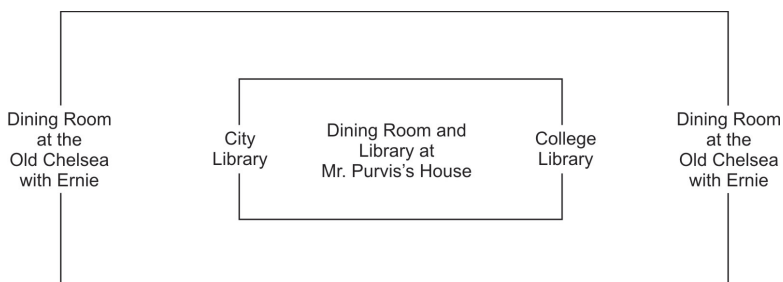
The *emboîtement* also provides a structural equivalent for the covert linkages between games devised by the host of each protagonist. The interconnectedness of the attempted seductions and gift exchanges is one of the poem’s main features, and the intertextual presence of *Sir Gawain* points to there being similar connections between the games in “Wenlock Edge.” Significantly, it is only while writing her essay on *Sir Gawain* that the narrator comes to believe that what she thought were serious challenges, namely, her university education and her dinner with Mr. Purvis, are really games. University “was only a game. And I had thought it was the other way round. Just as I had made myself believe that it was a challenge with Mr. Purvis and that I had won, or come off equal” (90). By funding public scholarships, men like Mr. Purvis foster the bookwormishness of young women like the narrator, whose sensibilities they then toy with in private. It is doubtful that Nina would make the mistake of believing herself Mr. Purvis’s equal, which may

be why she does not call him by his first name, claiming “it wouldn’t sound natural” (83).

The continuity of the episodes in *Sir Gawain*, where the outer box of the beheading game is related to the embedded games of the hunt, the seduction, and the gift exchange, point to a similar continuity in “Wenlock Edge” between the outer box of the dinners with Ernie and the embedded dinner with Mr. Purvis. While the dinners in “Wenlock Edge” are not as directly related to one another as are the games in *Sir Gawain*, they are linked, as is implied by the narrator’s referring to her Sunday night dinners with Ernie during her dinner with Mr. Purvis. As with Ernie, she is not offered an alcoholic drink, although for different reasons. Mr. Purvis is concerned about breaking the law, while Ernie disapproves of drinking. At the Old Chelsea, she “always ordered the most exotic offering on the menu” (81), which is echoed by the exotic nature of the fare served by Mr. Purvis. The “chicken vol au vent or duck *à l’orange*” (81) that she orders at the Old Chelsea reappear at Mr. Purvis’s house as Cornish hens. The restaurant’s cream-filled desserts also reappear as English trifle — a revealing name since she is being trifled with. Her conversations with Ernie and Mr. Purvis revolve around her studies. Her scorn for Ernie contrasts, however, with her embarrassment in front of Mr. Purvis. The parallels between her initial dinner with Ernie and her dinner with Mr. Purvis suggest that while the men are profoundly different, she is the same: misguided in her assessments of each. She mistakes the courtly Earnest for a buffoon and the depraved Mr. Purvis for a gentleman.

Mr. Purvis’s house contains not only a dining room (which refers backward and forward to the dinners with Ernie at the Old Chelsea) but also a library. There are two other libraries in “Wenlock Edge,” the city library and the college library, so the story’s *emboîtement* pattern involves place as well as episode. The narrator’s visit to Mr. Purvis’s house is bracketed by her journey to the city library sometime beforehand and to the college library a few days after. These trips to the library are, in turn, bracketed by her dinners with Ernie at the Old Chelsea at the beginning and end of the story. This interconnectedness of place sets up a relationship between the events at Mr. Purvis’s house, with its dining room and library, and the narrator’s behaviour in the libraries and at her dinners with Ernie.

Emboîtement of Place



The three visits to the library trace a shift in the narrator's perceptions. Her recognition of the superior knowledge of Nina and Ernie in the college library recalls and corrects her implied belittlement of them in her thoughts at the city library. This shift is occasioned by her realization that she was completely wrong in thinking her encounter with Mr. Purvis a meeting of equals, an error she makes while reading to him in his personal library. At the city library, the narrator checks out "the sort of book that showed simplified charts of history" (83) for Nina and a copy of *The Scarlet Letter* for herself. Reference to the novel implies a contrast between the bookish naïveté of the narrator and the greater life experience and astuteness of Nina. While the narrator requires *The Scarlet Letter* for a course, Nina has lived the events in the book. Like Hester, she is an adulteress and has had a baby out of wedlock with an inappropriate partner. The name of Nina's daughter, Gemma, who died as an infant, is reminiscent of Hester's daughter, Pearl, a pearl being a type of gem. The city library is also a place where the narrator displays her inability to read people correctly. When Ernie, whom the narrator and Nina encounter at the city library, asks the young women to his house for hot chocolate, the narrator attributes his never having made such an invitation before to his sense of propriety: "One girl, no. Two girls, O.K." (84). She cannot see that Ernie is attracted to Nina. It is in the college library that the narrator finally apprehends the truth about her endeavours. She sees that Ernie and Nina — everybody but her, in fact — have always known what she has just learned about the irrelevance of a university education: "you had to get a footing somewhere else. This was only a game" (90). Her faulty reading of reality in the city library culminates in her deluded belief about being on an equal footing with Mr. Purvis in his personal library. These delusions are replaced by the vision of the truth about her own ignorance in the college library.

Just as Gawain's behaviour in each game determines what happens in the next, so the narrator's perceptions at each dinner inform what happens at the next. Gawain's acceptance of the beheading challenge by the Green Knight leads to his involvement in the games of the gift exchange and seduction; his acceptance of the girdle at the seduction and his withholding of it at the gift exchange result in his having his neck nicked by the Green Knight's axe when it is his turn to be beheaded. The arrogant perceptions of the narrator emerge during the opening description of her dinner with Ernie and, fuelled by her naïveté, inform her mistaken impression of her dinner with Mr. Purvis. Her private name for Ernie is "Earnest Bottom," and she is certain "that his idea of serious reading would be the Condensed Books of the *Reader's Digest*" (81). Her pride in her superior intellect is coupled with an embarrassment about what it implies — a lack of worldly experience and sophistication. This leads to the "shaky recklessness" (85) that compels her to remove her clothing when Mrs. Winner calls her a "bookworm." The shame that she suffers upon realizing the truth about her interactions with Mr. Purvis then transforms the nature of her perceptions. Her considerate attention to Ernie at their dinner near the end of the story is a reversal of the scorn she evinces for him at the dinner that opens it.

This change arises, in part, because she is made to occupy the uncomfortable position in which she had earlier placed Ernie. At the first dinner, steering the conversation away from her studies, which she feels Ernie inadequate to discuss, the narrator delivers an account of how her housemates Beverly and Kay leave their stockings strewn about the bathroom, upon hearing which Ernie "flushed" (81). His reaction parallels that of the narrator who "suffered waves of flushing" (86) upon trying to converse with Mr. Purvis. The narrator embarrasses Ernie by means of an inappropriate sexual reference while later she is the one embarrassed by the sexual impropriety of her situation with Mr. Purvis. During their dinner near the end of the story, she notices Ernie's eyes. The phrase "now that I looked into them" (91) emphasizes the effort of her doing so and indicates that this serious attention to him is something new. She notes that Nina's disappearance has given his eyes "a dry famished look" and that "the skin around them was dark and wrinkled" (91). She observes him "controlling a tremor" (91). Suffering the shame that she made Ernie suffer provides the narrator with a compassionate attentiveness — a transformation traceable through the three dinner

scenes. Her transformation further implies that wisdom springs from experience, not reading.

The narrator's various experiences in the dining rooms and libraries of the story show her maturing from arrogance into awareness. The opening dinner with Ernie and the narrator's initial trip to the city library reveal her inability to read reality correctly. The embedded encounter with Mr. Purvis in his dining room and library demonstrates the implications of this inability. Her third trip to the library, this time the college library, and the subsequent dinner with Ernie suggest that she has come to a much better understanding of herself and others.

During this same dinner, the narrator's integrity is nevertheless compromised by her violent disposal of Nina's undershirt, which Ernie gives her because he cannot bear to keep it. The undershirt stands as a token of her adventure at Mr. Purvis's house, just as the girdle does for Gawain (2398-99). They are both pieces of apparel and signs of betrayal — the undershirt is a sign of the narrator's betrayal of her promise to Nina as the girdle is of Gawain's betrayal of his word to Bertilak. In the bathroom of the Old Chelsea, the narrator throws the undershirt in with the used towels; this foreshadows — in terms of the overall narrative rather than chronological time — her treatment of Nina: she gets rid of Nina just as she does the undershirt. It also recalls Gawain's hurling the girdle at the Green Knight, calling it a "falssyng" ("false thing"; 2378). The narrator's *real* green girdle is poetry, which, like the "magic" belt, backfires as a guarantee of safety. Just as the girdle does not save Gawain but is instrumental in his downfall, so poetry does not save the narrator; it merely seduces her into a state of self-delusion. While the narrator can rid herself of Nina and her undershirt, she cannot rid the world of language. The reappearance of the word "Uricon" (91) in a historical and geographic rather than poetic context at the end of the story suggests the futility of her efforts to blot out reminders of her shame.

The real source of the narrator's shame is having misread the nature of her interactions with Mr. Purvis. This is a striking difference between the two protagonists. Gawain is ashamed of the "cowardice and covetousness" (2508) that beset him at Bertilak's castle but passes over his complete ignorance of what was really going on there. The narrator seems more humiliated by her misreading of Mr. Purvis than by her betrayal of Nina. She is especially bothered by having mistaken the command to undress as a "dare" (85) or a "challenge" (90). The com-

mand, however, is neither; rather, it is the prelude to a game. Overtaken by “waves of flushing” (86) when she tries to meet Mr. Purvis’s gaze, the narrator thinks she senses “his voice changing slightly, becoming more soothing and politely satisfied, as if he’d just made a winning move in a game” (86). Later, when overwhelmed by the familiar lines of the English country poets, she realizes that “he had got me, in spite of myself” (90). Her belief that she had undergone “a challenge with Mr. Purvis” and that she “had won, or come off equal” (90) is false. The painful insights continue: “I would always be reminded of what I had done. What I had agreed to do. Not been forced, not ordered, not even persuaded. Agreed to do” (90). Her shame is intensified by her complicity. Upon emerging out of the tunnel and into the light of the college library, she suffers another unpleasant thought: “What I was doing here did not really matter. Somehow I had not known that. . . . This was only a game. And I had thought it was the other way around” (90). She goes on to conclude that that which she had taken as exalting her, namely her superior intellect and success at university, counts for little. Her self-criticisms seem to invest her with a more profound honesty and self-awareness than achieved by Gawain, whose insistence on the magnitude of his failing, in spite of the unmitigated admiration of his peers, reveals the undiminished importance he attaches to the chivalric code and to himself.

Gawain’s trustworthiness is not sufficient to save him from committing an act of disloyalty, and the narrator’s intelligence is not sufficient to save her from misreading Mr. Purvis. The qualities that set Gawain and the narrator above their peers fail them at their moment of mid-story testing. The real question is not whether they succeed in passing their respective tests but how they respond to their failure to do so and to a consequent awareness, even if denied, of their inherent ordinariness.

It is unclear whether Gawain’s anguish reveals a hard-won humility or a continued arrogance.¹⁴ Likewise, it is unclear whether the narrator’s condemnation of herself as “wicked” is accurate or excessive. Gawain ends his explanation of his adventure to the members of Arthur’s court by accusing himself of having committed an unpardonable offence:

This is the token of untrawthe that I am tan inne,
 And I mot nedes hit were wyle I may last.
 For mon may hyden his harme bot unhap ne may hit,

For ther hit ones is tachched twynne wil hit never. (2509-12)

This is the symbol of the dishonour which I am taken in, and I must needs wear it as long as I live. For a man may hide his guilt but may not undo it, for once it is attached it will never be parted. (Anderson 276)¹⁵

The question is whether Gawain has become, as A.C. Spearing puts it, “both wiser and sadder” (*Criticism* 41) or, as he suggests in a later book, “sadder without becoming much wiser” (*Gawain-Poet* 235), or whether he retains the pride of his former self: “if he cannot be the perfect knight, he would rather be the worst of sinners” (*Criticism* 42). Gawain’s final words seem to set him apart as especially sinful, beyond the power of even Christ to redeem, and may transform his “cowardice and covetousness” (2508) into the much more serious sin of despair and pride.¹⁶ While the narrator acknowledges what Gawain cannot (namely, that her discreditable behaviour is common to most people), like Gawain, she may not have reached a balanced view of herself. She does come to apply to herself the ignorance that she attributes to Ernie, Nina, and her housemates (90), and she does liken herself to her fellow students in stating that the majority of them were “on a course, as I was, of getting to know the ways of their own wickedness” (91). Her acknowledgement of the ordinariness of her wicked deed seems more honest than Gawain’s insistence on the greatness of his and evokes Del Jordan’s assertion in Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women* that people’s lives are “deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum” (277). Every life is a mixture of the banal and majestic. Yet the use of the word *wickedness* stands out in a story that is narrated in an amoral fashion. It seems an overstatement that detracts from the acuity of the narrator’s previous insights, evoking the excessiveness, if that is how it is read, of Gawain’s self-blame and his unwillingness to accept that he is, when it comes right down to it, just like everybody else. The narrator’s attribution of such wickedness to the majority of her peers is also questionable. Would they betray a friend to save themselves the discomfort of being reminded of their own shame? Might they not have a better sense of humour about themselves? And is the narrator trying to excuse herself, although by downplaying rather than glorifying her offence, just as Gawain initially tries to excuse himself by comparing his fall to that of other great men? If Adam, Samson, Solomon, and David were beguiled by women, no wonder he was and so should be excused (2416-28). In comparison with Gawain’s later deter-

mination to humble himself, the narrator's simple acknowledgement may seem feeble, even self-indulgent. A tension between the suggested wisdom of her admission that she is ordinary and the implication that she is as misguided as Gawain raises questions about the integrity of her self-knowledge and about whether she has become any better at reading people than before.

Each work ends on a note that further complicates an understanding of the protagonists' self-criticisms. Just as the court's attempts to cheer up Gawain may be read as either trivializing or alleviating his anguish, the last lines of "Wenlock Edge" may be read as either trivializing or confirming the narrator's self-analysis. Upon Gawain's return, the king and court comfort him, laugh at the story of his adventure, and resolve to adopt the girdle as a sign of "the renoun of the Rounde Table" ("the renown of the Round Table"; 2519). As a response to his suffering, it may be that "the gaiety of Camelot has come to seem rather shallow" (Spearing, *Criticism* 41). However, the court's response may also be considered a healthy antidote to Gawain's distress, one that "brings to the fore the comic-realistic countercurrent of human warmth and Christian forgiveness" (Berkovitch 259).¹⁷ The final lines of Munro's story, "I kept on learning things. I learned that Uricon, the Roman camp, is now Wroxeter, a town on the Severn River" (91), create a similar discrepancy. The juxtaposition of the narrator's acknowledgement of her "wickedness" with this small fact seems to cast doubt on the integrity of her newly developed self-knowledge by trivializing it. At the same time, her having learned about the history and location of Uricon refers back to her dinner with Mr. Purvis and suggests that she did learn something significant from that humiliating encounter. Uricon represents the narrator herself, whose namelessness encourages this metaphoric substitution of place. Upon reading the final stanza of Housman's "On Wenlock Edge" to Mr. Purvis and feeling "somewhat remote and philosophical," she wonders, "Where was Uricon? Who knew?" (87). Her ignorance about Uricon signifies her self-delusion, and her learning about the place does not devalue her attainment of self-knowledge but links it back to her experience with Mr. Purvis.

The place names in "Wenlock Edge" set the story in a metaphoric *Shropshire-Lad-and-Gawain*-country and emphasize the precariousness of the narrator's situation. Mr. Purvis's house is her Wenlock Edge and recalls the lawless "Wyrle" through which Gawain travels. The

Wirral and Wenlock Edge are both wilderness places on the edges of civilization; the same may be said of Mr. Purvis's house, a place of concealed danger and disorder on the edge of the city. They are in counties — Cheshire and Shropshire, respectively — on the border between England and Wales.¹⁸ A small part of Cheshire became part of Wales in the Middle Ages, and Shropshire, though ruled by English lords, was in Welsh territory. Wenlock Edge and the Wirral are also places with a history of unstable boundaries. In seeking the Green Chapel and sojourning at Bertilak's castle, which are located somewhere to the north or east of the Wirral, Gawain traverses the edge of what is known.¹⁹ The same happens to the narrator of "Wenlock Edge" when she enters Mr. Purvis's house on Henfryn Street. Henfryn is a town in northeast Wales so, like the Wirral and Wenlock Edge, near the border. In Mr. Purvis's house, the narrator finds herself on the borders of what she knows. The other significant locale in the story is Ernie's house on Carlisle Street. Carlisle, in the county of Cumbria in the northwest of England, is ten miles from the border with Scotland. Like Cheshire and Shropshire, Cumbria was contested territory, changing hands between the English and, in this case, the Scottish. These places of shifting borders and boundaries correspond to sites of profound disorientation for Gawain and the narrator. Their experiences there put them on edge.

Readers of "Wenlock Edge" are likewise put "on edge" by Munro, who ends the story with a test of their hermeneutic skills. The story's title aligns the reader with the narrator, who herself is a reader of "On Wenlock Edge." The narrator misreads her situation vis-à-vis Mr. Purvis while reading Housman's poem to him. She goes from feeling on edge to feeling complacent. In doing so, she falls off the edge, so to speak, into new territories of humiliation and self-awareness. Complacent readers of "Wenlock Edge" will likely misread it too, for the final section of the story narrates an earlier event. This marks a significant departure from *Sir Gawain* in that the reader is put in a position of knowing less than the protagonist. The reader of *Sir Gawain* knows no more than Gawain does and no doubt suspects nothing is amiss until enlightened by the Green Knight along with Gawain. The epilogue of "Wenlock Edge," which extends beyond the *emboîtement* structure while referring to an episode within it, contains crucial information about why Nina disappears from Ernie's house. That it does so is not obvious, and the

chronological shift it contains has the potential to trap readers in an erroneous reading of the story. If readers do not catch the shift back in time they will fail to notice that, although narrated afterward, the section in which the narrator mails the letter occurs before her dinner with Ernie and before Nina's disappearance from Ernie's house. In addition to the shift in time, the significance of the narrator's actions in this final section is not readily apparent, and the reader is left to deduce that she has mailed Ernie's address to Mr. Purvis. Nina has not left Ernie, as the penultimate section of the story suggests; the narrator has betrayed her whereabouts to Mr. Purvis. Whether Mr. Purvis and Mrs. Winner then collect Nina because they now know where she is or because the "game" is now over depends on how the reader chooses to interpret the story. By rendering what has just occurred unclear, as well as chronologically tricky, Munro places the reader in danger of misreading the story, just as the narrator initially misreads her encounter with Mr. Purvis. The alert reader who catches the shift in time and who has the background knowledge to detect the story's allusions and references, however, is most likely a bookworm. Either way Munro traps her reader: to misread the story is to be caught out by it, much as the narrator is caught out by Mr. Purvis, while to read the story correctly is to be mocked by it as being a "bookworm" like the narrator.

A knowledge of the literature of the past enriches the reading of current works. This is especially obvious when the current work is a recasting of an earlier one. It is perhaps less obvious that these recastings of canonical works affect readings of those earlier works. "Wenlock Edge" poses questions to *Sir Gawain* that complicate matters in the medieval poem. The question of how complicit Gawain is in succumbing to Bertilak's machinations by misreading the situation at the castle is raised by the narrator's admission of her complicity in misreading the situation at Mr. Purvis's house. Gawain is certainly responsible for his downfall by not relinquishing the girdle to Bertilak, but should he not have suspected something? The narrator's retrospective question, "Why wasn't I more apprehensive?" (85), is one that Gawain might have asked of himself. Is Gawain, like the narrator, concentrating on the wrong thing? The narrator is not apprehensive because she cannot conceive of the elderly Mr. Purvis's capacity to overpower her in sexual ways that aren't physical. Gawain, too, makes the error of dismissing the mastermind behind the beheading game, Morgan le Fay, because

of her aged appearance. Instead, he directs his attentions to the comely Lady Bertilak. He also trusts Bertilak completely. Does Gawain's lack of apprehension, like that of the narrator, stem from an inability to read real-life signs and people? While a knowledge of *Sir Gawain* illuminates "Wenlock Edge," it does not resolve the story's ambiguities. Rather, the intertextual relationship produces a mutually informing uncertainty in which the ambiguous ending of each work reinforces that of the other.

NOTES

¹ To refresh the reader's memory of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, here is a summary of the poem. Sir Gawain accepts the Green Knight's challenge to Arthur's court of a beheading game. He chops off the Green Knight's head and then, because the Green Knight picks up his head and rides off, is obliged to suffer the same in return a year later. Gawain sets out to find the Green Chapel and stumbles upon a castle where he is welcomed by its lord, Bertilak, who, unbeknownst to Gawain and the reader, is also the Green Knight. To pass the time until Gawain's departure, Bertilak proposes a game. He will go out hunting each day while Gawain rests in the company of Lady Bertilak. In the evening, they will exchange their winnings. Again unbeknownst to Gawain, Bertilak has engineered this game to test the truth of the knight's reputation for virtue. Early the next morning, Bertilak and his men go hunting. The narrative switches to Gawain's bedroom and Lady Bertilak's attempted seduction of him. He avoids her advances but is cornered into exchanging a kiss with her. The poem returns to the hunt and Bertilak's killing of the deer. That night Bertilak gives Gawain the deer, and Gawain gives Bertilak a kiss, without revealing from whom he received it. This narrative pattern of hunt, seduction, hunt, gift exchange is repeated twice more. On the third day, Bertilak hunts and kills a fox, and Gawain accepts from the lady a gift of a green girdle (or belt), which, she tells him, has the power to save its wearer from being slain, and which, she says, must be concealed from her husband. Gawain does so, thus breaking the terms of his agreement with Bertilak. Gawain pays for this deception at the Green Chapel when, with the third stroke of his axe, the Green Knight nicks Gawain's neck. The Green Knight explains everything and absolves Gawain, but Gawain cannot forgive himself. Gawain arrives back at Arthur's court carrying the girdle as a badge of shame, full of self-blame for his "cowardice and covetousness" (2508). The members of Arthur's court comfort Gawain and determine to adopt the green girdle as a sign of solidarity and badge of honour.

² Munro draws on Arthurian romance in some of her other works as well. For instance, as Et observes in "Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You," the love triangle of Char, Arthur, and Blaikie evokes that of Guinevere, Arthur, and Lancelot (Struthers 106, Carscallen 3). A number of Munro's characters are named Arthur or Art. There is Arthur Doud in "Carried Away," Arthur Comber in "Something," and Art Chamberlin in *Lives of Girls and Women*. Carscallen and Beran note the irony inherent in the discrepancy between the nobility of the name "Arthur" and the banality of the surname that follows. Beran notes that the "Doud" of Arthur Doud suggests "the dowdiness of his life" (239). While Arthur Comber is chivalrous and his last name suggests "a wave" (49) and "someone who comes romantically from the deep"; it also "suggests an encumbrance," states Carscallen (198).

“Art Chamberlin” is another oxymoronic name, combining the name of a king with a term for a servant, albeit a high-ranking one (Carscallen 48). I am indebted to Melissa J. Ray for having drawn my attention to the Carscallen book and Struthers article.

³ There are, among others, four omissions from the later version that have a significant impact on an interpretation of the story and its relationship to *Sir Gawain*. First, Mrs. Winner does not call the narrator a “bookworm.” The irony of her being a sophisticated reader of literature but a naive reader of reality is diminished, as is the metaphorical intensity and humour of the connection between eating and reading. Second, the narrator’s associating the “game” at Mr. Purvis’s house with what she later thinks of as the “game” of university has been removed. This weakens the parallel with the games in *Sir Gawain*. Her belief that the “game” of university is made possible for her by moneyed men like Mr. Purvis has also been deleted. A sense of the interconnectedness of the “games” through the machinations of Mr. Purvis is lost. Third, the narrator’s realization that she had deluded herself is gone, as is her acknowledgement of her egregious misreading of the situation, thus obscuring the extent to which she, like Gawain, is complicit in her own humiliation. Fourth, the removal of the final lines of the story in which she extends her wickedness to her fellow students, as well as of the closing reference to Uricon, eradicates the ambiguity of the story’s ending, thus abolishing another link with *Sir Gawain*. The link back to the middle of the story created by the closing reference to Uricon disappears alongside the idea that she has learned something from her encounter with Mr. Purvis after all.

⁴ Munro also recasts well-known texts in “The Children Stay” and “Carried Away.” Carrington argues that “The Children Stay” is a “recasting” of the Orpheus myth as it appears in Jean Anouilh’s play *Eurydice*, suggesting that Munro “assigns her characters multiple functions that combine the roles of the French characters” (196). Beran observes that “Carried Away” is a story “remarkably like the one Hardy tells in ‘An Imaginative Woman’” (237). McCombs notes that in “The Love of a Good Woman” the stories of the characters “rework much older archetypes, in which the dismembered Grimm elements are brought to life again, reversed, and recombined” (330).

⁵ Quotations are taken from Burrow’s 1972 edition of the poem.

⁶ I am indebted to the anonymous first reader of the essay for this idea. I would also like to thank this reader for his or her criticisms, suggestions, and ideas throughout the revision process. They have greatly improved the essay.

⁷ Spearing states, “Everything about him is ambiguous” (*Gawain-Poet* 236). For a more detailed discussion of the multiple and contradictory readings of the Green Knight, see Cooper, “The Supernatural,” 287-89.

⁸ The Middle English word is *trauthe* or *trawthe* (626). *Trauthe* signifies more than the modern English *truth*. It may be understood as moral integrity and involves trustworthiness, fidelity, the quality of being generally “upright and virtuous” (Burrow 43), and faith in God (24, 43-44).

⁹ Speaking of later medieval romance, Patterson states that *emboïtement* has a thematic purpose and “may very well be the characteristic structure of romance” (671 n27). The presence in *Sir Gawain* of a significant narrative form has been of interest to other scholars. For a description of the *emboïtement* pattern in *Sir Gawain*, see Randall, “A Note on Structure,” and Barnet, “A Note on the Structure.” For an analysis of a different type of symmetrical patterning in *Sir Gawain*, whereby a sequence of events is repeated in the same order, see Howard, “Structure and Symmetry,” 167-73. In *The Gawain-Poet*, Spearing refers to the insertion of the temptation inside the hunt inside the beheading game as a “narrative metaphor” (218). He states that the meaning of *Sir Gawain* “is enacted by the shape of the narrative itself” (181), which represents “the link between the two plots” (218) as well as the simultaneity of the hunt and temptation (215).

¹⁰ The story is divided into a number of sections. The parts to which I refer do not always correspond to these narrative divisions.

¹¹ Anderson translates *roghe greve* as “rough thicket” (249).

¹² The practice of meditating upon verses of Scripture, especially when read aloud, is likened in the medieval world to eating, a repeated chewing to extract the spiritual nourishment that the verses contain. See Leclercq, *The Love of Learning*, 90. For a broader study of metaphors of eating in English within the last 150 years, including those of eating and reading, and eating and sex, see Newman, “Eating and Drinking,” 219-21.

¹³ I am indebted to Rhiannon Purdie and Kathy Cawsey for pointing this out to me (25 May 2009).

¹⁴ For a discussion of the numerous possible readings of the end of *Sir Gawain*, see Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet*, 222-36. He concludes, “The material does not fall of itself into a single pattern of organization and significance, but into a number of alternative patterns. The choice and the adjustment are ours” (236). For Benson, *Sir Gawain* is “so complex a poem that it lends itself to many different interpretations, and ultimately each reader must decide what particular meaning *Sir Gawain* has for him” (295).

¹⁵ I’ve used Anderson’s version and translation of these lines because I think it is more accurate than Burrow’s. The main difference is in line 2511 where Burrow has “For no-one can conceal his guilt without misfortune befalling” (124).

¹⁶ Gawain’s representation of himself as the greatest of sinners may be the flip side of his reputation as the greatest of knights. Ross Arthur suggests that “the despair of ever being whole again that Gawain displays at the end of the poem” is the “mirror image” of pride (151). Satan and those already damned are the only beings guilty of committing a sin that can never be forgiven, and Gawain’s belief that he has transgressed to the same extent is not only arrogant but “dangerously false” (Arthur 116, 118).

¹⁷ Ross Arthur considers the court’s response likewise to be shallow: “The court, however, seem to be treating his lapse as something trivial and his response to it as something far out of proportion” (157). Burrow states the opposite, “It is quite wrong, I think, to suppose that either [Bertilak or the court] is being crass or unperceptive” (158).

¹⁸ In 1974, the northern part of the Wirral changed its jurisdiction from Cheshire to Merseyside.

¹⁹ Gawain rides eastward from Wales toward England. Fry locates Hautdesert, Bertilak’s castle, and the Green Chapel north of the Wirral (202), while Elliott locates them east of the Wirral in the Midlands of northwest England (117).

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