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### LITERATURE AND LIFE: *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

A few years ago, after presenting a paper on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* at a Kalamazoo session, I received a question from an audience member that stumped me: "How has your viewpoint been affected by the fact that you write as a woman?" Blithely unaware then of the theoretical implications of that question, I manufactured some answer that divulged more personal information than I normally would share with a group of strangers, but the questioner seemed satisfied—or at least decided to let the matter rest.

Since then I have often pondered that question of how my research, my teaching, my overall view of life have been affected by my gender. Although this is certainly a vital question, it has led me to an even broader one: Why am I repeatedly drawn to teach and research particular texts? What causes me to "privilege" certain literary works above others? At this point the answer seems (at least for me) not so much an issue of gender as of the essence of being human, of dealing simultaneously with a personal and professional life. I now recognize that my personal circumstances have affected my teaching and research in surprising ways. I came to this recognition recently, as, preparing yet another conference paper on *Gawain*, my favorite medieval text, I realized that my teaching emphases and research interests in this work reveal a telltale track through about ten years of my life.

My first conference paper on *Gawain* grew out of my first semester of teaching it to a class of general education students. We were all struck by the discordant note in Fitt 4 when Gawain learns that his hostess was actually the vehicle for tests set up for the unsuspecting knight. Despite his often-touted reputation for courtesy, Gawain breaks into an uncharacteristically harsh, discourteous speech against women in general, a diatribe in sharp contradiction to his earlier speeches of exaggerated politeness.

My students and I pondered the incongruity of this speech. Was Gawain actually a closet misogynist, a product of his culture, or a man seeking an excuse for shameful behavior? Looking back now, years later, I realize that during this time my own marriage was on shaky grounds. In that most intimate of relationships a disturbing discrepancy between outward appearance and inner reality was

making itself felt. Conversations of careful civility often masked a raging anger beneath the surface, an anger which occasionally erupted in uncharacteristic speech or behavior. Without realizing it, I probably tackled this particular topic dealing with *Gawain* as a therapeutic exercise, a way to analyze my own situation from a safe, indirect stance.

My next conference paper on *Gawain*, a couple years later, revolved around Gawain's experiences in the castle: he must somehow keep intact his reputation for courtesy without falling into sin or incivility; his identity is questioned by the hostess because he is reluctant to reciprocate her passion; he is forced into a passive, even effeminate role as he lies in bed while the men of the castle pursue the vigorous, masculine sport of hunting. Research into the nature of his experiences, often characterized as a rite of passage since he confronts both his mortality and his imperfection, led me to the work of the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner. I borrowed his concept of "liminality"—a threshold period when one is between clearly defined stages of life—to help define Gawain's situation. But again, in retrospect, I can see that I was also defining the state of my own life at that point. I was undergoing my own liminal experience, struggling through a divorce (an unusually amicable one, just as Gawain's test was an unusually pleasant one) and not occupying a clearly defined niche, either socially or personally. My own reputation, identity, and established role were precariously in question, and no matter how well I weathered the experience, I would always be "marked" by it. Even though divorced women no longer carry much of a social stigma—at least not in my cultural setting—like Gawain, I felt I would always regret the imperfection inherent in my new status, no matter how forgiving and accepting my peers might be.

The conference paper I am currently working on grew out of my fascination with why students of the poem (myself included) almost invariably enjoy this work. Why does it seem so satisfying—for lack of a better word—when it deals with far-removed medieval culture and the text leaves itself open to unresolved questions? This time, a possible answer arose serendipitously from personal reading. Having remarried and having given birth to my first child within the past two years, I suddenly find myself interested in children's literature. A cursory overview of the history of this topic indicates that during the Middle Ages, there was practically no separate literature for children. Instead, literature was typically directed at an intergenerational audience; the larger questions of life were posed without apology for children as well as for their parents.

Thus I am now reading *Gawain* as a text embodying elements of children's literature: the young age of the court allows for an interest from a young audience; Gawain's experience as he passes from one stage of brash knighthood to a more realistic, mature one duplicate the turbulent experiences of adolescence; his encounters with

the hostess and with the old woman in the castle teach him to beware sexually alluring females and to reject the manipulative mother-figure; his belief in the magic of the green belt must be replaced by a more solid belief in himself and in his God. *Gawain*, like any good children's literature, speaks to the most profound of our experiences, yielding deeper insights as one continues to read at different ages. Yet without having a daughter as my incentive for learning about children's literature, I doubt that I would ever have seen *Gawain* from this perspective.

As I said earlier, I offer here no answer to the original question, "How has your viewpoint been affected by the fact that you write as a woman?" But pondering that question has led me to see traces of a parallel development between my own humanity—my psychological struggles, my transitions through various stages of personal history—and the *loci* of my interests in *Gawain*. I suspect that many of us can find the same tandem relationships between our lives and our teaching/research interests. Perhaps, if we are as honest about this with our students as feels comfortable, we can pass on to them the gift of using literature to help analyze and enhance our lives. As for myself, I wonder what aspect of *Gawain* I'll be investigating next.

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## **WOMEN IN THE VERNACULAR AND THE PERIODIZATION OF MEDIEVAL GERMAN LITERATURE**

The appearance of women in Old High German (OHG) literature is, by traditional accounts, infrequent and sporadic. A fresh look at the approximately ninety extant OHG texts<sup>1</sup> calls for a more differentiated and discerning estimation of the importance of textual references to women in OHG, and, at least in passing here, their relationship to references in Latin texts of the period, while considering subsequent developments in Middle High German (MHG). Recent research on the role of women in the production and dissemination of primarily Latin texts of the period has demonstrated that women did participate actively and productively, as readers and authors, patrons and owners, both inspiring and producing written records.<sup>2</sup> It appears, however, that the data on the role of women in OHG literature available within and surrounding the vernacular texts has largely been ignored. A similar state of affairs was recently attributed to the field of Old English studies, although it appears that more has been done in that area to remedy a lack of interest in female characters and the representation of women by returning to primary literary and historical source materials.<sup>3</sup>