"Mony Prowde Wordez":
Pronominal Speech Acts, Identity, and Community in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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"words have consequences"[1]

T HE LATE MEDIEVAL alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* [hereafter *SGGK*][2] is a world built of words, itself obsessed with the force of words in the world. Organized in many ways around the outward appearance and social performance of its characters, the representational, verbal construct of *SGGK* might be understood as a heterocosm, a space that at once resembles lived reality and departs fantastically from it.[3] In this sense, the poem functions "as a constitutive act, a social praxis," because it imbues aesthetic diction with the power to invent and represent.[4] Within the poem, diction acts as both social bond and as separation; words are a way to connect knights and also to split them into isolated, shamed individuals. But words are also the stuff out of which the poem is made, and the precise, interwoven pattern of alliterative diction serves as proof of the *SGGK*-poet's aesthetic skill. This essay argues that *SGGK's* speech acts create a heterocosm in which knights rehearse the bloody, public intimacy of chivalry. Specifically, I examine moments of performative pronominal

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1. John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1995), 66.

2. All citations are taken from J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, eds., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967) and appear parenthetically by line number.

3. I take the term "heterocosm" from John D. Niles, "Reconceiving Beowulf: Poetry as Social Praxis," *College English* 61, no. 2 (1998): 143-66, at 154, doi: 10.2307/378876.

4. Ibid., 154.

speech in *SGGK* and argue that the second person familiar singular pronoun *thee* functions as a fulcrum upon which the poem's construction of chivalric masculinity is positioned and against which a vernacular audience is encouraged to project their own anxious desires.

SGGK is a poem "devoted to the surfaces of things," as Carolyn Dinshaw has argued, and as in other late medieval romances, these external surfaces cohere into a public reputation, a larger-than-life identity that makes an elite man socially legible as a knight.[5] Knightly identity rests on a strange tautology: a knight is a knight because he is a knight. Knighthood cannot be completely learned, because it is an identity conferred by lineage, but an elite man only becomes what Chaucer describes as a "verray parfit gentil knight" through repetitive, experiential practice (*GP* l. 73).[6] Chivalric masculinity, then, might be understood as a gender identity constituted at once by an elite man's blood and his inherited name, the clothes he wears, how others perceive him, and the language that he uses.[7] He cannot escape the social performance of his masculinity; it exists before and all around him in what Judith Butler has called "an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again."[8] The knights of *SGGK* must continually actualize and reproduce their

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5. Carolyn Dinshaw, "A Kiss Is Just a Kiss: Heterosexuality and Its Consolations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Diacritics* 24, no. 2/3 (1994): 204-26, at 205, doi: 10.2307/465173.

6. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson (Geneva, IL: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). The phrase is from the portrait of the Knight. For further contemporary discussion of chivalric masculinity, see also Geoffroi de Charny's guidebook *A Knight's Own Book of Chivalry*, trans. Elspeth Kennedy (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

7. See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and members of Interscripta, "The Armour of an Alienating Identity," *Arthuriana* 6, no. 4 (1996): 1-24, as well as Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002) 134-39.

8. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 272.

masculinity through a variety of chivalric social behaviors that crucially interpenetrate the public and the private. At once savage and polite, a knight must be as easily capable of decapitating a stranger as with making courteous small talk while naked in bed. He must exchange mortal axe-blows for kisses and speak to other knights as he would to a family member in a blurring confluence of rehearsed performative behaviors. Intimacy and violence might thus be understood as the twinned impulses at the heart of *SGGK*'s depiction of knighthood, and they are made manifest through the speech acts of the poem's characters.[9]

England in the later Middle Ages saw the emergence of a dynamic, urbane, profit-seeking, generative middle grouping of people concerned with the role of the individual within the broader community.[10] The late fourteenth-century audience addressed by the first person speaker of *SGGK* must be understood therefore as varied and diverse. Increasingly more powerful in its pursuit of its own interests and desires in terms of class, gender, identity, money, and marriage, this emerging group consisted of the non-ruling class, a heterogeneous majority that included lower gentry, literate merchants, and urban artisans as well as subsistence farmers.[11] This new community of women and men were people "whose experience cannot really be expressed through any of the traditional medieval socioeconomic discourses," according to Glenn Burger.[12] Identity for this class constantly moves; it is "anything but

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9. See Mark Miller, "The Ends of Excitement in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: Teleology, Ethics and the Death Drive," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 32 (2010): 215-56.

10. See, for instance, David Aers, *Community, Gender and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360-1430* (London: Routledge, 1988), particularly his "Introduction," 1-19, and his fourth chapter, "'In Arthurus Day': Community, Virtue and Individual Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," 153-78; M. J. Bennett, *Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

11. See Lynn Arner, *Chaucer, Gower and the Vernacular Rising: Poetry and the Problem of the Populace After 1381* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), specifically her "Early Readership Expanded," 17-45.

12. See Glenn Burger, *Chaucer's Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of

stable and authoritative," Burger argues, because it requires "a constant labor of self-definition that cannot be secured by recourse to foundational categories such as noble birth or clerical ordination."[13] For such a vernacular audience, themselves engaged in the perpetual labor of rehearsing new and fragile identities, Gawain's struggle to correctly perform chivalric masculinity might be understood therefore as both mirror and consolation.

Community, as Randy Schiff has noted, is "a central occupation" of *SGGK*.[14] Throughout the poem, characters address one another using a variety of second person pronouns, including the formal (*you*, *ye*) and the informal (*thou*, *thee*). They do so to indicate shifts in power, prestige, social skill, and affection—with *thee* used to signify intimacy, familiarity, social superiority—in ways immediately recognizable to a late medieval audience. Within the heterocosm of *SGGK*, use of the second person familiar pronoun *thee* might be understood as a performative speech act, legible to a late medieval audience carefully attuned to the proper deployment of social hierarchies. In all speech acts, according to J. L. Austin, "there is something which is at the moment of uttering being done by the person uttering,"[15] and the subtle differences between pronoun uses, in particular, are enough to create a threat or a bond, depending on the social valence of that usage. Performative speech uttered publicly in the spaces separated from the rest of daily life—at a royal court or on the battlefield, for instance—are both an action and an act of power. In being said, such words transfer a person from one state of being to another, so that a man moves from being an anonymous combatant to a named knight. Only a small phoneme, then, *thee* has the potential to unsettle the balance of power and to humiliate if used in the "wrong" way or the "wrong" context. When knights speak to one another as familiars, therefore, they become understood as knights. As I shall argue,

Minnesota Press, 2003), particularly his "Medieval Conjugality," 49-60.

13. Ibid., 54.

14. Randy P. Schiff, "Unstable Kinship: Trojanness, Treason and Community in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," College Literature* 40, no. 2 (2013): 81-102 at 95, doi: 10.1353/lit.2013.0014.

15. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 60.

between chivalric men the familiar pronoun *thee* can instantiate a martial homosociality fraught with threats of bloodshed and suggests just how fragile the poem's construction of chivalric masculine identity might be.

Thee is a component of direct speech, and thus depends upon both addressor and an addressee. The pronoun's use indicates discourse, however adversarial or intimate, at work. Jacques Derrida claims that for all theories of speech acts, "the outside penetrates and thus determines the inside."[16] That is to say, speech represents thinking, and thus can never quite live up to what we most want speech to be, to be simply expressive. The pragmatic, outside ways in which speech gets used cannot perfectly match the "pure" ideals and hopes of internal thoughts. We may tell the truth, but pure truth cannot ever totally be told; there is always a gap between what we say, what we think, and what is. One of the consequences of words, either spoken or written, is sense. But to claim that speech makes the world make sense, as Searle and Austin have posited, is perhaps also to claim that speech is the stuff out of which we make nonsense, as well.[17] The signifiers of speech rarely measure up to the signs they represent, and, as Derrida argues further, "the theoretician of speech acts will have to get used to the idea that, knowingly or not, willingly or not, both his treatment of things and the things themselves are marked in advance by the possibility of fiction, either as the iterability of acts or as the system of conventionality."[18] The possibility of fiction exists at the juncture between the word and what it means, and to make verse is to invent, to represent verbally a world in which men say they are one thing but actually mean something else entirely.

An intimately gendered pronoun used to establish rank and familiarity between men, *SGGK*'s *thee* might be understood as a kind of nonce taxonomy, what Eve Sedgwick has defined as a word that instantiates "the making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may

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16. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 152-53.

17. Searle and Austin have posited that speech acts—oaths, vows, pledges of allegiance—make social and institutional reality. See Searle, *Construction of Social Reality*, particularly chap. 3, "Language and Social Reality"; and Austin, *How to Do*.

18. Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 100.

take to make up a world."[19] While utterances of *thee* might slip by unnoticed, woven as they are into the poem's matrix of basic talk and narrative, the pronoun nonetheless functions as a charged speech act. Further, masculine uses of *thee* within *SGGK* exemplify both the familiarity and the alienness of knightly identity. Uttered at the apex of knightly hostility and bloodshed as frequently as it is used within the bedroom, *thee* acts as a classification "of desire, physicality, and subjectivity that attempt[s] to intervene in hegemonic processes of naming and defining," according to Jack Halberstam.[20] *Thee* creates a fellowship between masculine intimates, even as it separates adversaries and inflames hatred. Within the poem, *thee* is the word by which knights recognize each other as knights. The nonce taxonomy of *thee* simultaneously makes the world make sense even as it unsettles traditional categories of meaning. As Butler has noted, "If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts *as* discourse."[21] The public declaration of specific language binds people to each other, as in the case of marriage or feudal obligation; and binds people to larger communities, as in the case of oaths and pledges. It is important to note here that while current modes of performative speech often depend on a third party to officiate or make real its binding power, as in a marriage where a justice of the peace declares a couple to be "husband and wife," pre-modern habits of marriage were far more complex and varied and did not necessarily depend upon an authoritative third party to make a union binding.[22]

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19. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 23.

20. Judith Halberstam's discussion of nonce taxonomies appears in *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 8.

21. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 225.

22. For an overview of this variety, see Ruth Mazo Karras, *Unmarriages: Women, Men and Sexual Unions in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). It should be noted as well that contemporary Quaker marriage practice persists in uniting a couple by their own speech acts alone; there is no third party who makes the union official. See *Faith and Practice: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1998), 53, as well as ff. 49 below for further explication of this specific tradition.

This performative act of speaking and its binding, constitutive power is particularly true in late medieval communities where pledging one's troth was a public act that linked speaker and listener in a mutual bond, as many scholars have argued.[23] What mattered was the verbal stating of the words, not necessarily the power of those who witnessed the words. But, although institutional power buttresses many performative speech acts, not every speech act is so obvious.

A Brief History of *Thee*

Like many European languages, Old and Middle English used two forms of the second person pronoun. Distinctions between these pronouns in Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman were largely organized by case and number, where the nominative singular second person pronoun *thou* was used with familiars while the nominative plural second person pronoun *you* was used in more formal contexts. After the Norman Conquest however, the influence of French and Latin upon Middle English meant that *you* began to be used increasingly as a "singular pronoun of polite address" and had established itself by the end of the fourteenth century within English literature.[24] From the thirteenth century onwards, then, differences between *thou* and *you* were used to indicate status and rank as well as to indicate setting, relationship, and age, among other subtle distinctions. While distinctions between the second person pronouns *thou* and *you* [hereafter T/V[25]] are often fluid in late medieval and early modern literature, the accusative *thee* has a long pre-modern history

23. See David Aers, *Community*; Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); and Melvyn James, *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), particularly his "English Politics and the Concept of Honour, 1485-1642," 308-415.

24. Katie Wales, *Personal Pronouns in Present-Day English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), particularly chap. 3, "You and me, them and us: the politics of pronouns," 50-84, at 74.

25. I borrow this conventional linguistic usage from R. Brown and A. Gilman, "The Pronouns of Power and Solidarity," reprinted in John Laver and Sandy Hutcheson, eds., *Communication in Face to Face Interaction: Selected Readings* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1972).

of being used to convey or undo social hierarchies.[26] As linguist Katie Wales's useful chart below makes clear, T/V differences were dependent on social setting and status.

you		*thou*
address to social superiors	<——>	address to social inferiors
address to social equals	<——>	address of social equals
(upper class)		*(lower class)*
address in public	<——>	address in private
formal or neutral address	<——>	familiar or intimate address
respect, admiration	<——>	contempt, scorn[27]

For instance, *thee* might be used by parents when speaking to children but rarely by children to their parents. High-ranking speakers might use the informal *thee* or *thou* when addressing those of the lower ranks. Similarly, *thee* might be used privately between intimates who would otherwise use *you* when in public setting. Further, although *thee* has no meaning without an *I* to which it is subaltern, *thee* can also be used to establish a familiar, level intimacy between social equals.

In many late medieval English poems, *thee/thou* denotes intimate bonds and is often used between lovers. It is uttered by women when rousing sleeping men, as in *Piers Plowman* when a lovely lady wakes the dreaming speaker by using his name and the familiar. "Wille, slepestou?" (C.I.5) she asks.[28] Likewise, in *SGGK* Gawain is coaxed out of sleep by the Lady, who pulls away his bed curtains to say, "A, mon, how may þou slepe, / þis morning is so clere?" (1746-47). T/V differences are also used to productive effect in the eleventh chapter of Book One of *The Book of Margery Kempe,* when Margery and her husband negotiate the marital debt. She and her husband address one another as *you* in this section, even though they are discussing sex, the most intimate form

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26. See Friederike Braun, *Terms of Address: Problems of Patterns and Usage in Various Languages and Cultures* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1988).

27. Wales, *Personal Pronouns*, 75.

28. William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994).

of heterosexual married life (lines 519-81); Margery's husband tells her, "ye arn no good wife" (528) when she refuses to break her vow of chastity. Yet when Margery prays to Christ for insight into the matter, she addresses and is addressed by Christ using *thou* (552, 562).[29] Chaucer likewise capitalizes on these subtle distinctions in the *Clerk's Tale*, where Walter address Griselda using *thee* but Griselda pathetically and properly addresses him with the formal *you* (4.881-1063).[30]

By the early modern period, *thee* had become the pronoun of choice for intimates, while *you* increasingly was used to express hierarchical deference. This semantic split persisted in practice for several centuries afterward. English T/V distinctions had hardened by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the use of *thee* became not just a social but also a religious issue, as tracts demanding that English speakers adhere to using the familiar, singular form attest.[31] During the mid-seventeenth century, insistent and frequently socially inappropriate use of *thee* can be found within radical social movements such as the Quakers and the Levellers.[32] Among early Quakers, for instance, to use *thee* exclusively, especially in a social milieu in which such distinctions mattered, was to point out and to resist the hierarchy that exists between the formal and informal modes of address. Such speech acts, called "plain speech," were part of a broad spectrum of "plain" behaviors, such as the refusal to remove one's hat, the refusal to wear brightly colored clothes, and the refusal to take public oaths intended and widely perceived to be acts of resistance to ideological power.[33] Jessamyn West maintains that the

29. Lynn Staley, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996).

30. I take this observation from Seth Lerer*, Inventing English: A Portable History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007), 76.

31. See, for instance, George Fox's 1660 tract, *A Battle-Door for Teachers and Professors to Learn Singular and Plural; You to Many and Thou to One: Singular One, Thou; Plural Many, You* (London, 1660).

32. Wales, *Personal Pronouns*, 73-77; and Dick Leith and David Graddol, "Modernity and English as a Language," in David Graddol, Dick Leith, and Joann Swan, eds., *English: History, Diversity and Change* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 136-79. Wales indicates that thou was used as a way to signal social and religious distinctions by Lollard communities in the fifteenth century, *Personal Pronouns*, 76.

33. Jessamyn West, *The Quaker Reader* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill

use of "plain speech" among early Quakers was a refusal "to have one language which flattered and one which devalued."[34] It was an effort to be as true to one's word as possible, as if, through sheer linguistic force, a "plain" speaker could prevent herself from slipping into falsity, into ornament, and thus bind herself to saying only what she meant. George Fox recounts that he changed his social behaviors to better reflect his sense of the equality between all people.

> When the Lord sent me forth into the world, he forbade me to put off my hat to any, high or low; and I was required to "thee" and "thou" all men and women, without any respect to rich or poor, great or small. And as I traveled up and down, I was not to bid people "good morrow" or "good evening," neither might I bow or scrape with my leg to any one.[35]

The matter of using *thee* to indicate a belief in equality was important enough for Quakers to continue practicing this "plain" behavior in the face not simply of social opprobrium and the loss of capital, but of imprisonment and abuse.[36] Indeed, Thomas Ellwood, aide to the poet John Milton, recounts that after becoming a Quaker, he changed the way he spoke to his father to the elder's great offense. "Whenever I had occasion to speak to my father, though I had no hat now to offend him, yet my language did as much; for I durst not say 'you' to him, but 'thou' and 'thee,' as the occasion required, and then would he be sure to fall on me with his fists." Ellwood's sister feared that their father would kill him in his anger at being addressed so disrespectfully.[37]

I do not wish to imply that seventeenth century theological interrogations of the T/V system are equivalent to the way that *thee* might be used in the late fourteenth. The disturbing tendency of words to come unmoored from truth, from meaning, forms the heart of the use of early modern Quaker "plain speech." Moreover, later historical examples provide valuable evidence for the meaning and importance of the seemingly

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Publications, 1962), 5-8.

34. Ibid., 6.
35. Ibid., 54.
36. Ibid., 5-8.
37. Ibid., 160; 162.

minor modes of address that have their origins in the medieval period. The choice between using *thee* and *you* must be understood as a "highly conscious" and also "potentially controversial" one, made creatively and individually by Middle English poets.[38] Middle English *thee* is, according to Skeat's formulation, "the language of the lord to a servant, of an equal to an equal, and expresses also companionship, love, permission, defiance, scorn, threatening; whilst *ye* is the language of a servant to a lord, and of compliment, and further expresses honor, submission or entreaty."[39] In this sense, medieval uses of *thee* are polyvalent.[40] *Thee* can disturb and offend as easily as it can connote belonging or establish ease. The T/V system was flexible for Middle English speakers and writers, and shifts between the two modes of address were dependent on social context and emotional tenor.[41] Nonetheless, as the above examples indicate, T/V distinctions do exist in Middle English texts, and when these texts are presented in translation (as is most frequently the case for *SGGK*), meaning is lost when these distinctions are elided.

Distinctions between Middle English T/V are admittedly difficult to

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38. David Burnley, "The T/V Pronouns in Later Middle English Literature," in *Diachronic Perspectives on Address Term Systems*, ed. Irma Taavitsainen and Andreas Jucker, 27-46 (Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins, 2003), 36. See also Thomas Honegger, "Wyȝe welcum iwys to this place'—and never mind the alliteration: an inquiry into the use of forms of address in two alliterative Middle English romances," in *Rethinking Middle English: Linguistic and Literary Approaches*, ed. Nikolaus Ritt and Herbert Schendl, 169-78 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005).

39. Walter William Skeat, ed., *The Romance of William of Palerne*, Early English Texts Society. Extra series 1 (London, 1890), xlii.

40. Lerer observes that thee is used "to mark personal relationships of power, intimacy, age, social status and affection." *Inventing English*, 76.

41. Characters in both the *Canterbury Tales* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* readily switch between the two terms. As above, moments are often dependent on formulaic phrases or the constraints of rhyme; shifting between the terms can also signal more subtle moments in the text, such as when characters experience social pressures and internal conflicts. See Gabriele Knapp and Michael Schumann, "Thou and Ye: A Collocational-Phraseological Approach to Pronoun Change in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tale*s," *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 42 (2006): 213-38; and William W. Evans, "Dramatic Use of the Second-Person Singular Pronoun in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Studia Neophilologica* 39, no. 1 (1967): 38-45, doi:10.1080/00393276708587371.

render in translations, because the majority of Modern English speech communities exclusively use the second person formal pronoun *you*. Thus, even though T/V distinctions are used throughout *SGGK* to indicate social slights and to produce intimacy, none of the four major translations of the poem since 2002 address the matter of pronoun use. Instead, these translations uniformly translate *thee* as *you,* erasing any differences in meaning or context between the two terms.[42] Only James Winny's 1992 Broadview facing-page version of the poem contends with the problem of translating *thee* into a form of the language that no longer uses it. Even so, Winny also translates *thee* as *you* throughout the poem, despite acknowledging that one of the details he had to lose in his translation was the poet's context-specific use of T/V distinctions. He notes that translators must grapple with these distinctions because "the pronouns *thou*, *thee*, and *thine* are no longer in common use, and to reintroduce them would be false to the spirit of a modern translation."[43] But, as he argues, a falsity to the "spirit" of modern translation is not as bad as the more serious problem that "these terms of address had nuances of meaning that are now lost or obscure."[44] He solves this epistemological problem by declaring that while "modern readers may

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42. *SGGK* is not the only recent translation to elide the difference between the two pronouns. For instance, excerpts of the *Book of Margery Kempe* in translation in the eighth edition of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* translate thee as you throughout; earlier editions preserve the T/V distinction. For additional translations of *SGGK*, see, for instance, John Gardner, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in a Modern English Version with a Critical Introduction* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Marie Borroff, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Norton Critical Editions (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 2009). Simon Armitage, in his *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), merely says, "to the untrained eye, it is as if the poem is lying beneath a thin coat of ice, tantalizingly near yet frustratingly blurred" (vi-vii). He does not discuss the translation of pronouns. W. S. Merwin doesn't discuss the specificities of translation at all in his *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A New Verse Translation* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2002.)

43. James Winny, ed. and trans., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1992), 155-56. Winny's translation issues are obviously applicable to all translations from Middle into Modern English, because Middle English frequently uses the informal second person pronoun in quite subtle ways.

44. Ibid., 157.

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notice" the variations between *thee* and *you*, they "cannot be expected to recognize their significance."[45]

I sympathize with the translator's dilemma, as the use of the familiar second person pronoun *thee* is an often a minoritarian and regional practice.[46] Indeed, as David Graddow, Dick Leith, and Katie Wales have observed, *thee* is a nonstandard contemporary practice that is often associated with rural, old-fashioned dialects and as such lacks prestige.[47] However, as a member of a Modern English speech community that continues to use *thee* to denote familiarity and intimate community, I do not believe that all contemporary readers fail to notice the significance between *thee* and *you*.[48] Closer analysis of the *SGGK*-poet's deliberate and precise use of T/V distinctions indicates that *thee* is used between knights as a way of questioning an adversary's honor as well as during moments of intense physical violence. To ignore the semantic difference

45. Ibid.

46. For a discussion of twentieth- and twenty-first-century British uses of thee, see Katie Wales's "Second Person Pronouns in English: The End or Just the Beginning," http://cvc.cervantes.es/lengua/coloquio_paris/ponencias/pdf/cvc_wales.pdf.

47. Graddow and Leith 155-56, specifically their fig. 4.6 on 155. Wales in particular notes that thee survives among older generations speakers in Lancashire, the West Riding of Yorkshire, Hampshire, Somerset, Devon, and Cornwall, *Personal Pronouns*, 76.

48. *Thee* is still used in Modern English speech communities in the United States and Britain, particularly among orthodox members of the religious Society of Friends. *Thee* is used to indicate connection and familiarity; its use often persists within individual Quaker families. As a member of this speech community, I have been addressed as *thee* by other Friends and used *thee* in my own marriage vows. *Thee* is used traditionally by both American and British Quakers in the act of marriage, where the betrothed are required to address one another with the accusative *thee*: "Before these our Friends, I take *thee*." See *Faith and Practice: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1998), 53. For a historical overview of American Quaker speech practices, see Barbara Birch, "Quaker Plain Speech: A Policy of Linguistic Divergence," *The International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 116 (1995): 39-59; and Ezra Kempton Maxfield, "Quaker 'Thee' and Its History," *American Speech* 1, no. 12 (1926): 638-44, doi:10.2307/452011. For discussion of the continued British usage of *thee*, see Wales, "Second Person," and William Evans, "The Survival of the Second-Person Singular in the Southern Counties of England," *The South Central Bulletin* 30, no. 4 (1970): 182-86.

between T/V is to ignore the production of identity at work within the poem, for to call another knight *thee* is to bring him—and to be brought—into the fold of chivalric intimacy. Moreover, it is to ignore the intended reception of the poem amid late medieval audiences. The meaning of *thee* and its subtle social uses between knights and aristocratic elites was powerfully important to the late fourteenth-century group of listeners and readers who received *SGGK*. Moreover, this diverse and up-and-coming group might be particularly attuned to the social performance of T/V distinctions, as such distinctions were a marker of literate, urban courtly power and as such could be used by speakers to indicate their own status.[49]

Thee is only a syllable, and yet it acts as both hierarchical goad and as social leveler. In *SGGK thee* links margin and center, glittering exterior and uncertain interior.[50] Moreover, within the representation of the poem, the use of *thee* implies that although knights may present themselves to be fully in control of their behavior and of how others perceive them, such control may not actually be possible. Indeed, *thee* indicates the social production of identity, a production that may appear effortless but that is also laborious. *Thee* is the pivot upon which the poem's representation of chivalric masculinity as a construct, as a process, is positioned. For the late medieval vernacular audience listening to and/or reading SGGK, *thee* is a single word burdened by a wealth of hierarchical distinctions. *Thee* connects the brutal knight with the polite king; it binds monster and marauder in violent, intimate shame. *Thee* is the pronoun that works as armor and that punctures armor's steel protective surface. *Thee* keeps others at a distance. But *thee* also works like skin—it prevents the penetration of the body, but its protection is entirely liminal. Nick the surface and blood spurts out.

The T/V System: Transgression and Shock

SGGK's focus on the disjunction between the outward display and the internal desire suggests that identity is perpetually under construction

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49. Wales suggests that T/V distinctions were a later medieval invention likely influenced by courtly French practices, *Personal Pronouns* , 73-76.

50. Derrida, *Limited Inc.* 152-53.

and that chivalric masculinity is an aesthetic production where the outside and the inside never quite meet up, but is instead a carapace of embroidery, metal, and courtesy that knights struggle to maintain.[51] Throughout the poem, knights use performative speech acts to puncture that courtesy.[52] The Green Knight enters the poem—and the audience's consciousness—through such a violent puncture. When he enters Arthur's hall, he refuses to dismount from his green horse and brandishes weapons: he holds a huge holly branch in one hand and an "ax in his oþer, a hoge and vnmete" (208). Towering over everyone, the Green Knight rides directly to Arthur's dais and demands to see "þe gouernour of þis gyng" (225). The Green Knight is overtly hostile and very threatening—he carries multiple weapons and refuses to defer to the authority of the king. Moreover, he is the first to speak, and from a physical height.

Arthur attempts to restore order. As appropriate for his status, the king tries to create sense out of the Green Knight's very strangeness by using *thee*. "Ly3t luflych adoun and lenge, I þe praye, / And quat-so þy wylle is we schal wyt after," he says (254-55). Arthur's effort to control the situation by using the familiar second person pronoun, however, must be understood as a failed speech act. He hails the intruder as a subordinate, but this mode of address does not force the Green Knight to behave more appropriately. As the man with the highest status, Arthur can speak to whomever he likes using *thee*, but a new, uninvited guest should not address the king using the familiar pronoun, much less do so from the height of his horse. Instead, the Green Knight refuses to be domesticated. He will not conform, refusing to get down to the king's physical level, challenging the members of the hall to a macabre Christmas war game, and inappropriately addressing Arthur as an equal (254). When no one rises to his challenge, the Green Knight further insults Arthur and his court:

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51. Dinshaw, "A Kiss," 218.

52. W. R. J. Barron examines oaths, pledges, and troth-making in terms of their relationship to late medieval laws concerning treason in his *'Trawthe 'and Treason: The Sin of Gawain Reconsidered: A Thematic Study of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980).

"What, is þis Arthures hous?" quoth þe haþel þenne,
"þat al þe rous rennes of þurȝ ryalmes so mony?
Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquests,
Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?"
(309-12)

The Green Knight addresses the plural group of both male and female courtiers using the formal plural pronoun *you*.[53] The challenger mocks Arthur's fame—where is your arrogance, your conquest, he asks? Where too are your terribleness, your wrath, your boastful words? It is the last question that stings. Arthur's chivalric reputation, like Gawain's, is meant to precede him in the mouths and murmurings of other knights, other subjects. He himself has spoken great words, which have been themselves repeated. But the Green Knight's behavior renders everyone speechless, and he bullies the crowd by demanding to know why no one will respond.

Not to be outdone, Gawain verbally rescues the situation by drawing attention to his own careful and extremely courteous language. He begs the king for permission to take up the challenge. "I beseche yow with saȝez sene / þis melly mot be myne," Gawain politely asks (341-42). Winny translates the request as "I beg you in plain words / To let this task be mine." But Gawain's Middle English words are not plain; indeed, he falls all over himself in an effort to be effusively courteous, to address his uncle properly and formally. In so doing, his behavior and his acts of deferential speech provide a telling foil for the Green Knight's brusque incivility. Where the Green Knight refuses to dismount and uses the familiar form of address before a king he does not know, Gawain performatively uses the formal *you* to ask Arthur—his uncle and intimate—if he might have permission to stand up from his seat and leave the dais. The fact that Gawain follows T/V distinctions and uses *you* calls attention to his mannered performance. The one person in the court who, by familial connections, might address Arthur by rights using *thee*, Gawain insists on using the most formal locution he can, as

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53. As Modern English speakers of the American South will recognize, this might also be rendered in the colloquial "alla y'all."

if to offset the churlishness of his opponent by his good manners.[54] The Green Knight may be an ill-mannered brute who uses *thee* with people he does not know, but Gawain will properly use *you* with his own uncle. He performs, with exquisite care, the proper mode of polite address.

> "Wolde ye, worþilych lorde," quoþ Wawan to þe kyng,
> "Bid me boȝe fro þis benche, and stoned by yow þere,
> þat I wythoute vylanye myȝt voyde þis table."
> (343-45)

Gawain's courtesy is over the top. "I am the wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest," Gawain complains in an elaborate *apologia* (354). I am the weakest one, and my mind is feeble, he bemoans. "But for as much as ȝe are myn em I am only to prayse" he declares (356). It is only because he is nephew to a great king, Gawain claims, that he deserves any praise at all. In this gesture of deference, Gawain's performance appears intended for formal, public consumption, for although all eyes were first on the Green Knight's freakish dress and ornament, every ear has now turned to listen to Gawain's pretty speech. It is those ears that, pressed "ryche togeder," determine that indeed it is Gawain who should be the one to fight the Green Knight (362-65).

The ears of Arthur's court are carefully attuned to social slights, and they offer a way for the vernacular audience for *SGGK* to pay similarly close attention. To a late medieval audience attuned to T/V semantic differences, this early scene is studded with moments of impropriety and over-the-top displays of compensatory etiquette. The poet gives over an entire stanza to Gawain's courtly prostrations before Arthur and the court, his polite attempts to take up the Green Knight's challenge so that Arthur won't have to, and in so doing draws attention to the verbal jousting between the two knights. Just as Gawain and the Green Knight spar before Arthur's court, so too do they spar before a listening audience. The Green Knight demands to know Gawain's name in a brusque fashion: "I eþe þe, haþel, how þat þou hattes" (379). Gawain gives it; he is, after all, "þe goode knyȝt" to his adversary's bad in the first

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54. Cohen notes that "heroic masculinity is performative: a gendered identity that derives from feats of arms (or 'feats of arms and love')." "Armour," 15.

fitt (381). Conversely, the Green Knight never provides his own name in kind, instead withholding it as part of the larger battle-game that he uses to test Gawain.

> "ȝif I þe telle trwly quen I þe tape haue,
> And þou me soþely hatz smyten, smartly I þe teche
> Of my hous and my home and myn owene nome,
> þen may þou frayst my fare and forwardez holde;
> And if I spende no speche, þenne spedez þou þe better,
> For þou may leng in þy londe and layt no fyrre—
> <div align="right">bot slokes!"</div>

(406-12)

Where Gawain is a man of many diverse and artful words, his adversary is gruff and withholding. He cuts himself off with the interjection "bot slokes!," and he likens talk to commerce, to spending. To keep silent, in the Green Knight's idiolect, is to "spende no speche." Chivalric identity, traditionally structured around conspicuous consumption and material display, is rendered here as a kind of verbal commodity. The Green Knight's words are precious, not to be expended frivolously. The poem later presents an ideal exchange of gifts, a one-for-one equal trade between Gawain and Bertilak. But words, for the Green Knight, are not freely given gifts. They are instead carefully and parsimoniously doled out. Like a gruff medieval action hero, the Green Knight uses words only when necessary. *Thee* serves, for the Green Knight's introduction, as a way to cut through the overwrought, domesticated courtesies of Arthur's court.

Arthur only speaks sixteen lines in *SGGK*. But those lines are authoritative, direct, and forceful. It is this speech pattern that the Green Knight also uses: "whether he is in his own hall or in Arthur's he speaks in the same lordly tone, and by this he shows himself to stand outside the ordinary conventions of Arthurian society."[55] But because the Green Knight speaks first, he puts Arthur and Gawain on the defensive. The Green Knight's forms of address force Arthur and Gawain to behave in

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55. Cecily Clark, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Characterisation by Syntax," *Essays in Criticism: A Quarterly Journal of Literary Criticism* 16, no. 4 (1966): 361-76, at 366, doi: 10.1093/eic/XVI.4.361.

compensatory fashion. Thus Arthur and Gawain deploy formal speech as a way to bound courtly space around themselves, their courtly audience, and Guenevere, while the Green Knight snatches attention toward himself, demanding that everyone look and listen to his aggression. Arthur's and Gawain's masculinity is not organized around aggressive shouting and transgressive battle games, but is instead defined by an overly careful, public way of speaking. Gawain and Arthur are to be understood as skilled not simply in acts of chivalric violence but in propriety and civility as well. They speak in order to burnish the polished surfaces of their representation.

Conversely, the Green Knight uses *thee* as a means of distancing himself socially from Arthur and the court. While *thee* eliminates boundaries in its conjuring of familial intimacy, it also serves to highlight the Green Knight's very anonymity. He is the knight who knows other knights by the rights of battle and has thus earned the right to use *thee* the hard way. And he refuses to divulge the information that would make himself known, for although he knows Gawain and Arthur by name and stands in Arthur's court, he will not provide his audience with any of the means of properly addressing him, of ever fully knowing him. The Green Knight is a man of no address: no house, no home, no appellation. He is instead all boast, physical performance, and magical prowess. He is the charmed man who could survive his own public murder and manipulate that horror towards his own purposes. Nonchalantly, he picks up his own head, faces it towards the dais, and, lifting up his own eyelids, continues to address the court (446-48).

Compare this extreme discourtesy to Arthur's own verbal display of calm control in the face of supernatural horror. Although the poem's speaker tells us that the "kyng at hert hade wonder," Arthur allows "no semblaunt be sene" (467-68). Instead he addresses Guenevere in a public display of patriarchal power meant to be heard by all. "Wyth cortays speche," Arthur tells her not to be alarmed (469). "To-day demay yow never," he says, formally (470). Do not be dismayed by what has just happened, for "well bycommes such craft upon Cristmasse" (471). Arthur's formality of speech here heightens the sense of real unease and strangeness that pervades the hall. His imperative to the queen is not so much a reassurance as it is an explicit instruction. Everyone, Arthur

included, is disturbed by what has occurred, but by addressing the queen in formal tones of comfort—for she, being the embodiment of courtly femininity, is the only one with social license to express fear—the king can reclaim verbal control over his court. The Green Knight introduces the underbelly of chivalric terror into Arthur's well-mannered court, questioning whether chivalry is all that well-mannered after all, built as it is on bloodshed, war, and masculine posturing. Despite, or perhaps because of, his bad manners and direct modes of address, the Green Knight is the superlative representation, in the first fitt, of masculine courtly identity. His challenge to Arthur and Gawain is forceful enough that it threatens to divert attention away from the king.

The T/V System as a Means of Recognition

If chivalric identity is performative, forever in the process of being made meaningful, then such identities must also be understood as meant for public consumption. The poem's audience is intended to be as titillated and interested by the Green Knight's impropriety as it is reassured by Gawain's own formal rectitude. And, the audience is supposed to know these men, to recognize them. The fact that the poet refuses to give up the identity of the Green Knight is an *aporia* made meaningful by the fact that everybody seems to know Gawain as a noble, proper knight. When Gawain finally goes questing and stumbles upon Bertilak's lovely castle in the sky, chivalry is produced as an otiose ideal. Everything is arranged to be as luxurious and as effortless as possible. The castle's servants kneel on the ground when Gawain enters, and he is escorted into the hall by an entourage of knights and squires (816-24). The castle's lord comes down from his private chamber, "for to mete with menske þe mon on þe flor," to show his respect and calls out to Gawain using the formal *you*: "ȝe ar welcum to welde as yow lykez" (834-35). Gawain responds in kind, "graunt mercy," he says, "þer Kryst hit yow forȝelde" (838-39). This courteous interaction is clinched when "ayþer oþer in armez con felde" (841). The two knights, heretofore unknown to each other, embrace.

Within the walls of Haut Desert, Gawain is treated with formal care. He is politely questioned, after he has been gloriously fed, warmed, and

clothed, as to his identity. The speaker of the poem belabors this process, as he does Gawain's earlier production of politesse.

> þenne watz spyed and spured vpon spare wyse
> Bi preve poyntez of þat prynce, put to hymseluen,
> þat he biknew cortaysly of þe court þat he were
> þat aþel Arthure þe hende haldez hym one,
> þat is þe ryche ryal kyng of þe Rounde Table,
> And hit watz Wawen himself þat in þat won syttez.
> (901-6)

Ever delicately, correctly, "by preve poyntez," Gawain is asked about his identity. This performance of propriety is predicated on foreknowledge; the knights at Haut Desert are tactful because they already suspect who Gawain is. His behavior is matchless, as is their own. It is Gawain himself who, these nobles believe, will provide them with a template for chivalric courtly behavior—either a knight automatically has these skills, or he doesn't. And both the knights and Gawain indicate that they do possess the social skills that are the requisites of chivalry.

Even the lord of the castle, seemingly without being told, "couþely hym knowez and callez hym his nome" (937). This intimate, "couþely" knowledge sets off a subtle alarm in the back of the audience's heads—why should anybody know Gawain in the oddly depopulated geography that surrounds Haut Desert? But Gawain's chivalry heralds him, his "clannes and his cortaysye croked were never" (653). Gawain wears the right garments, the proper symbols, uses the most artfully proper modes of speech. Indeed, as Elizabeth Scala has noted, the social, public recognition of a knight depends on the precedent of honorable reputation and heraldic arms.[56] The force of Gawain's clean and straight courtesy, we are led to believe, is powerful enough to create an aura that precedes him right into this alien castle where he knows no one but everyone immediately knows him.

Throughout the time he spends in Bertilak's castle, Gawain uses the second person familiar pronoun *thee* primarily when he speaks with

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56. Elizabeth Scala, "Disarming Lancelot," *Studies in Philology* 99, no. 4 (2002): 380-403, at 385, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174740.

servants. He addresses the lord and the lady with proper formality, and the lady is the only aristocratic speaker who uses the familiar pronoun with Gawain. The fact that she does so speaks to her strangely intimate behavior and seductive dress. She comes into Gawain's bedchamber one morning with "hir þriven face and hir þrote þrowen al naked, / Hir brest bare before, and bihinde eke" (1740-41). She has her head uncovered—unusual for a married noblewoman—and has exposed her throat, chest and shoulders. And she calls out to him familiarly: "a, mon, how may þou slepe" (1746), like a mother calling out to a child. This performance is not so much for Gawain, who remains "in dreʒ droupying of dreme draueled," but for the audience (1750). It is we who are supposed to notice her lovely but skimpy clothing, her intimate behavior, and are meant perhaps to feel a hint of unease. The lady is not performing as a proper lady but as something else.[57] Like the Green Knight, she uses the familiar address even when those around her do not. She speaks forthrightly, familiarly, in situations where she does not exactly have the leeway to do so. And, like the Green Knight, she determines the terms of discourse; she knows who Gawain is, but neither he nor we ever learn her name.

The Lady's magic love token, her girdle, is a beautifully wrought surface, meant to decorate the interior intimacy of the body beneath a knight's metal carapace of armor.[58] Yet the girdle is described in a brief two lines: "gered watz with grene sylke and with golde schaped / Noʒt bot arounde brayden, beten with fyngrez" (1832-33). Compare this short couplet to the extensive descriptions in the second fitt of Gawain's garments embroidered with birds and flowers, or to the detailed catalogue

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57. On the role of the lady, see Ivo Kamps, "Magic, Women and Incest: The Real Challenges in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Exemplaria* 1, no. 2 (1989): 313-36, doi: 10.1179/exm.1989.1.2.313; Geraldine Heng, "A Woman Wants: The Lady, Gawain and the Forms of Seduction," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 5 (1992): 101-34; as well as Heng's earlier "Feminine Knots and the Other: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*" *PMLA* 106, no. 3 (1991): 500-514, doi:10.2307/462782. More recently, Sharon Rowley has examined the Lady's inscrutability and seemingly "natural," (and thereby unnatural) femininity. See her "Textual Studies, Feminism and Performance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*" *The Chaucer Review* 38, no. 2 (2003): 158-77, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25094243.

58. See R. A. Shoaf, *The Poem as Green Girdle: Commercium in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1984).

of all of his armorial ornaments. Imbued with magic and with illicit love, the girdle oddly has no depth. But like the fleeting syllables of *thee* or *ye*, the girdle means something other than it initially might seem.

T/V Distinctions and Martial Intimacy

SGGK depends throughout on verbal contracts and promises. The speaker will offer a tale to his audience; the Green Knight and Gawain will exchange blow for blow; Bertilak and Gawain will share their bounty in kind. Within the mouth of the Green Knight, pronominal speech acts are unequivocally familiar and direct methods of establishing contractual relations. Yet when the Green Knight appears as Bertilak, he is able to use a variety of pronouns, depending on the social tenor of the situation, to produce a contractual exchange. For instance, when Bertilak and Gawain first enter into that spoken bond together, they address one another in the plural first person *we*, an act of collegiality and togetherness. "Swete, swap we so, sware with trawþe, / Queþer, leude, so lymp, lere oþer better," Bertilak says to Gawain (1108-9). The gift-giving here is transparently reciprocal, an exchange between equals, and because the agreement is made by giving "trawþe," by making a verbal public oath, it is that much more meaningful. When he speaks as Bertilak, in a public and courteous effort at making a gift-giving agreement with Gawain, the Green Knight uses the second person formal pronoun *ye* as his mode of address. He encourages Gawain, "When ȝe wyl, with my wyf, þat wyth yow schal sitte /And comfort yow with company, til I to cort torne" (1098-9). Yet when he speaks as the Green Knight, Bertilak addresses other knights with the second person familiar pronoun, *thee*. The modes of address that Bertilak uses here are crucial: they create a social fabric of oaths, intimacy, and implied violence. His public *we* and *ye* stand in opposition to the way that the Green Knight speaks to Arthur's court, or to the way that Gawain and the Green Knight come to speak to one another on the battlefield.

Conversely, *thee* creates an uneasy martial intimacy, one that identifies knights as knights and that always threatens to do harm. *Thee* hearkens and it foreshadows, for just as the Green Knight addresses Gawain as a familiar during their first encounter, so too will the two knights

familiarly address each other when Gawain must receive his own decapitating blow. After approaching "þe corsedest kyrk that ever I com inne," Gawain bravely announces himself (2196). From above, the Green Knight addresses him: "þou schal haf al in hast that I þe hyght ones" (2218). The Green Knight uses the familiar as they ready for battle, saying, "þou hatz tymed þi travayl as treue mon schulde, / And þou knowez þe covenauntez kest vus bytwene" (2241-42). In this instance, *thee* makes a covenant, it is the oath-making word offered by the "treue mon" and levels the social status of men on the battlefield. The use of *thee* here points out the obviousness of Gawain and the Green Knight's shared status; it's akin to the reluctance of the very rich to discuss money. At this point in the poem, as well, *thee* is also an indication of the dangerous proximity of knights to one another and to their weapons—although engaged in a "game," Gawain has come to receive a deathblow, and the Green Knight's presence in the Green Chapel is presaged by the onomatopoetic noise of his battle axe being sharpened (2202). The two knights' use of the intimate pronoun is a testament to their intimacy, to how close enough they are to killing one another.

The outdoor battle between Gawain and the Green Knight revisits their original meeting, when they first spoke roughly and tested each other. Yet at the Green Chapel, Gawain need not impress with his courteous speech, but responds using the informal. Even so, the bravado of Gawain's brash speech does not match his cowardly, all-too-human behavior: he "schranke a lytel with þe schulderes for þe scharp yrne" (2267). Gawain here is described in the harsh consonants of Anglo-Saxon: his "schulderes" "schranke" from "scharp yrne." He is no Frenchified knight, adroit on the battlefield and well-versed in Gallic terminology. He shrinks from sharp iron. And he does so in a way that, onomatopoetically, whispers in a home-grown idiolect of secrecy and shame. It is that shrinking away which so infuriates his adversary. The Green Knight assaults Gawain "with mony prowde wordez," the most painful of which speak directly to Gawain's shameful flinching, his infelicitous splitting between brave, careless speech and frightened action (2269). Words here do, and undo, chivalric masculine identity:

"þou art not Gawayn," the Green Knight tells him (2270).[59] If Gawain flinches in the face of death, he is no true knight. And in this sense, he is not even worthy of the formal you.

When they meet at the Green Chapel as combatants, both the Green Knight and Gawain are ostensibly equal. Yet it is the Green Knight who demands and insults, who sets the rules of the game. His use of *thee* in the moment of Gawain's hesitation creates not only intimacy but embarrassment. He punctures Gawain's seemingly impermeable chivalric skin of identity, speaking to him as he would not only to a fellow knight but to a child, a servant, a dog. It is the Green Knight who determines who Gawain is and is not, and his use of *thou* points out his social supremacy. Where Bertilak knew Gawain "couþely" in the courteous setting of the hall, here the Green Knight declares that "such cowardice of þat knyȝt cowþe I never here" (2273). The Green Knight claims no longer to recognize Gawain because Gawain flinched. As Derek Pearsall has argued, Gawain thinks himself to be "the perfect knight, for his inner is his outer, just as he proclaims himself united in himself in the pentangle and equally in the inside and the outside of his shield."[60] The problem, here, is that Gawain's inner self has emerged in a moment of telling weakness. He is afraid. A fissure has erupted between his inner terror of death and his outward performance of bravado. Like a boy, he deserves perhaps the familiar appellation *thee*.

When the truth is revealed—that the magic girdle was given to Gawain with Bertilak's own knowledge—Gawain is stricken silent: "þat oþer stif mon in study stod a gret whyle, / So agreued for greme he gryed withinne" (2369-70). And it is Bertilak, now also revealed to be the Green Knight, who drops his brusque *thou's* and again uses the formal form of address. As such, the truth brings with it courtesy, although the courtesy feels like cold comfort to Gawain. Bertilak's deception drove

59. One of my former students, himself an Army veteran of the Iraq war, has inquired of this moment: by what rank or right does the Green Knight address Gawain so familiarly?

60. See Derek Pearsall, "Courtesy and Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: The Order of Shame and the Inventions of Embarrassment," in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, 351-61 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), at 358-59.

him and his wife to trick Gawain, he tells him, and Gawain's only sin, as he sees it, was in desiring the token of the deception, the girdle, a little too much.

> "Bot here yow lakked a little, sir, and lewte yow wonted;
> Bot þat watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowying nauþer,
> Bot for ȝe lufed your lyf; þe lasse I yow blame."
> (2366-68)

Gawain is now no longer *thee* but *sir* and *you*; the means of addressing him have shifted upwards considerably. Indicative of a reversed power structure, where now Bertilak confers authority and chivalric authenticity to Arthur's superlative knight, the use of the formal pronoun adds an ironic and multivalent register. Given that Gawain now believes himself to be "fawty and falce" as a consequence of his deception, while it is Bertilak and Morgan le Fay who have deceived, concealed, and tricked their way through the narrative, the formality of Bertilak's address is a considerable irony indeed (2382).

Later in this moment, Bertilak attempts to absolve Gawain of his guilt. Like a confessor, Bertilak tells Gawain:

> "þou art confessed so clene, beknowen of þy mysses,
> And hatz þe penaunce apert of þe point of myn egge,
> I halde polysed of þat plyȝt, and pured as clene
> As þou hadez neuer forfeted sythen þou watz first borne;
> And I gif þe, sir, þe gurdel þat is golde-hemmed;
> For hit is grene as my goune, Sir Gawayne, ȝe maye
> þenk vpon þis ilke þrepe, þer þou forth þryngez
> Among princes of prys, and þis a pure tokem
> Of the chaunce of þe grene chapel at chivalrous knyȝtez."
> (2391-99)

Here Bertilak acts like an intimate priest, but he is no priest at all. Rather, he is the epitome of knightly aggression. He has no authority to act as confessor, and the fact that he attempts to wield that power makes him slightly dangerous. To compare him, and his violent chivalric power, to that of a confessor is troubling. It raises questions: are priests like rapacious knights? Is confession something that could ravage the mind

as ferociously as a mercenary might sack the foreign countryside? More than this, Bertilak's speech here reveals the uneasiness of the private confession as a mechanism of the intimate production of a self.[61] He wavers between the two forms of address, at once an intimate confessor to Gawain and also a foe. He is both close, with his *thou*, and he is also public and appallingly distant, with his *sir* and *ye*. Where Bertilak stands, in terms of those around him, is never totally clear. Neither a human man nor a magical knight, his power seems limitless.

Gawain's worst sin seems to lie not in the blurring of identities—notice as well that Bertilak is not the one who pays penance for anything—but in not conforming more strictly to the conventional markers of masculine chivalric identity. As a character, Gawain is indisputably a knight. Yet his grappling with the constructed bounds of this identity runs parallel to a similar grappling at work within the emerging middle that may have comprised the audience for a vernacular alliterative romance. Gawain's chivalric masculine identity is in flux.[62] There is a perpetual conflict between the outer, performative manifestations of his chivalric self, seen in his heraldry, embroidered clothing, and well-wrought armor, and his private self, which flinches fearfully in the face of death. Indeed, Gawain's worst fault may be that he *has* a private self. It is that private self who is intimately addressed in the bedchamber by the Lady, when she asks whether he is sleeping, speaking to him as lovers do, as a mother might do to a child. His inner fear is made public when he shrinks in fear before the Green Knight's blade, and he is also publicly shamed by being tricked. And yet his anger is never directed towards the powerful one who tricked him, the knight who is never exactly who he

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61. On confession as a medieval technology that worked to control and also make possible the private, interiorized subject, see Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). On performativity and confession in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, see Andrew James Johnston, *Performing the Middle Ages from Beowulf to Othello* (Turnhout: Brepols 2008), particularly his section "Effacing the Subject of Confession in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," 124-64.

62. See Clare R. Kinney, "The Disembodied Hero and the Signs of Manhood in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages,* ed. Clare Lees, 47-60 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

says he is, but is instead directed towards women generally and towards himself. Gawain rails against "cowarddyse and covetyse boþe" (2274) and declares that it was "care of þy knokke" that taught him to be cowardly (2379). But that is the only *thy* Gawain allows himself, with Bertilak, and he quickly declares that "al fawty is my fare" (2386). His reputation has been sullied, he no longer completely knows himself, and that alienation is rendered in his shift to the formal form. He holds himself together enough to be correct, and he does so despite the fact that he has just been painfully deceived. Something strange has happened, internally, for Gawain, and yet that moment of private change is elided by his abrupt turn to public propriety. As at Arthur's court, Gawain could by rights use the informal, speak familiarly and assertively with a fellow knight who is not behaving all that chivalrously. But Gawain can't allow himself that much leeway. The result is an effusion of dulcet, formal *yow's* and *ye's* (2409-13). Bertilak's gift of the girdle is taken up as public penance, becoming "a syngne of my surfet" for Gawain, visible proof of flinching, of accepting the token offered in duplicity (2433).

If the outward, public display of courtesy is, for true knights, a mirror image of their inner nature, then Gawain has found himself in an awkward bind.[63] He has had private dealings with a strange woman, and he has secretly accepted her gift. And he has concealed the receipt of that gift from her husband, the man with whom he has made a public, spoken contract. More than this, even though her gift bestows on him invincibility, he somehow does not fully believe that he is invincible. He balks before accepting his due in a battle game. Somewhere within his inner self, he is afraid, and that fear has been made public in his hesitation in the face of death. Gawain's flinch is enough to make him unrecognizable to his foe, and perhaps, to the readers of the poem as well. And, although the Green Knight has determined the terms of the battle throughout and has played fast and loose with the boundaries of identity—is he magic knight or lord Bertilak? What kind of man can survive decapitation?—it is Gawain who must wear the girdle as a sign of duplicitous shame. "Trw mon trwe restore," the Green Knight tells him, just before he reveals his own "trw" identity (2354). But Gawain

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63. Pearsall, "Courtesy and Chivalry," 358.

has been the one knight in the poem who does most closely adhere to the conventions of public courtesy. Gawain is in many ways an exemplary "trwe mon": there is very little about himself that he must keep secret. He does not have a secret, magical identity as a green monster, after all. Constructed out of spoken circumlocutions, profusions, displays of excessive etiquette, Gawain is a perfect knight even as he lays bare the notion that chivalric masculinity might be all show and hollow at the core. The Green Knight indeed has something to hide, but he speaks as a man of certain authority, using the familiar whenever he—not the situation—determines that it is proper to do so. Gawain, conversely, refuses to use *thee* even when the situation would allow it.

Derek Pearsall argues that Gawain is "shocked to think that he may have failed in some courteous observance," and his shock is deeply connected to his own sense of who he is. "To fail in observance" of etiquette, "for a knight whose inner and outer are one is to cease to be."[64] Yet the question of inner and outer matters less for the Green Knight than it does for Gawain. The Green Knight is a complicated mess of multiple identities, some supernatural and some real. But penitence refuses to attach to him, and he speaks as a man supremely comfortable in his own authority. Chivalric identity, as a performance of etiquette that binds together one's inner and outer self, is something that concerns Gawain exclusively. Only he is shocked, only he scrambles to speak his anger correctly, and only he publicly dresses himself in a girdle of shame. If Gawain is a true knight, he can only be so because he stands in relation to his foil, that other representation of knightly masculinity. The Green Knight is ill-behaved, but compellingly attractive; we linger over him and somehow excuse his transgressions. The audience can accept his performance of chivalry even though he is clearly not polite or courteous. Gawain, on the other hand, cannot ever seem to occupy his own knighthood fully. He is always performing, always excessive, always on display. Being called out, hailed as inferior by the Green Knight is all it takes for Gawain's identity to waver. He is shamed in the public space created between two knights, a public space that is itself somewhat private, constructed as it is out of the familiar forms of address.

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64. Ibid., 359.

Community and Narration: The Contractual, Poetic *I*

Just as the relationship between Gawain and his adversary is created by a series of contractual obligations, so too does *SGGK* begin with a series of promises. The speaker offers felicity to an original story in exchange for an attentive audience. This promise depends upon the ostensibly stable relationship between words and meaning, for to make a vow or an oath is to separate the moment in which one must speak truthfully from all the other instances of daily speaking. It is upon this separation that contractual obligations rest, for if someone does not do what he says he will do, action can rightfully be taken against him. In the case of oaths, "accuracy and morality alike are on the side of the plain saying that *our word is our bond*" (italics original), according to J. L. Austin.[65] But to offer an oath is also to presume that there might be other times when one does not speak truthfully, when one's word is *not* one's bond. The efficacy of an oath depends, then, upon a community's sense that people might indeed lie. An oath, furthermore, depends on a coherent sense of subjectivity. An *I* must take the oath, must claim his words as true.

SGGK begins with a disquisition on Troy, followed closely by an if / then clause.[66] Via an exchange between addressor and addressee, a contract instantiated here by the poem's anonymous first person narrator directly addressing a communal group of listeners in a conceit of oral performativity; the speaking *I* of the poem beseeches his listening audience to come closer and to hear his story. If they will listen, then he will try to tell the tale as accurately as he first heard it.

> If ȝe wyl lysten þis laye bot on little quile
> I schal telle hit as-tit, as I in toun herde
>
>   wiþ tonge,
>
> As hit is stad and stoken
> In stori stif and stronge,

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65. Austin, *How To Do*, 10.

66. On the role of Troy in *SGGK*, see Schiff, "Unstable." He notes in particular that "the poem's ethnohistorical opening fuses two aspects of Trojan identity: an ordinary proclivity for treachery, followed by an impulse to found a new community" (83).

Wiþ lel lettres loken,
In londe so hatz ben longe.
(30-36)

The speaker of the poem asserts that he received the story by listening to someone else and that he is offering it up in a similar fashion to his listeners. He is an *I* speaking to recognizable others, people who've also been to "toun" and heard stories recited there "wiþ tonge." The audience who might wait "bot on litel quile" acts as a listening community organized around the shared experience of hearing the tale.[67]

By beginning with an oath, the first person speaker of *SGGK* calls attention to his own powers of verbal representation.[68] He will tell tales, but they may or may not be true tales. He might thus be understood as a kind of verbal craftsman, one who shapes his diction to construct linguistic fictions that include Arthurian characters and monsters as well as his own first person poetic persona. This speaking persona, an *I* who makes winking promises, is consonant with how other late medieval poems also represent the first-person speaker and can be understood as embodying what A. C. Spearing has called the "Ricardian 'I,'" that fragmented, often anonymous speaker who offers multiple narrative perspectives and who represents himself as both an individual and as an omniscient narrator.[69]

All that we have of the *SGGK*-poet now are his poems, manuscript

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67. Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 88-240.

68. I borrow the term "pointing" from J. A. Burrow, who uses "pointing" to describe the moments in late medieval poetry where the poet draws attention to himself via highly digressive details. See his *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the Gawain Poet* (London: Penguin, 1992; ©1971), 92 ff.

69. See A. C. Spearing, "A Ricardian 'I': The Narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde*," in *Essays on Ricardian Literature in Honor of J.A. Burrow*, ed. A .J. Minnis, Charlotte Morse, and Thorlac Turville-Petre, 1-21 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). Spearing argues that critics frequently present Chaucer as an innovator, because he represents himself so fluidly, so uncertainly, but that "this unstable first person, which recent criticism has valiantly attempted to turn into a stable persona, belongs to the Ricardian age not just to Chaucer," at 20.

folios that purport to be oral performances and that confect a "fiction of orality" from the page.[70] *SGGK* has been attributed to an alliterative poetic maker, a man who likely lived in or near Chester, and who may have also composed the other poems contained in the Cotton Nero Ax. manuscript.[71] Nothing is concretely known about this Ricardian *I*, although based on his dialect and his thematic preoccupations with courtliness and power, we may surmise that he may have been a clerical member of Richard II's Cheshire affinity.[72] Historicist readings persuasively attempt to situate the *SGGK*-poet's oeuvre within specific thematic discourses of law, political power, or courtliness, but it is difficult to reconcile such readings with the very fictive, representational quality of *SGGK's* first person narrator. While it makes sense to position the poet within the milieu of clerical literacy and low-level courtly striving, late medieval poetry does not and cannot provide us with proof of the poet's participation in ideology.[73] It is difficult to know exactly how or what a speaking voice might mean, or even to whom that voice might be speaking, for while a courtly poem may present the fiction of an elite audience, the poem itself is not necessarily the product of court culture. Particularly for poems that present moments of performative speech or minstrelsy, the extra-textual context that frames the performance of those voices "is only partly and speculatively recoverable from the written

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70. J. J. Anderson, *Language and Imagination in the Gawain-poems* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 165

71. Angus McIntosh argues that the poet's dialect belongs to "a very small area either in SE Cheshire or just over the border in NE Staffordshire." See his "A New Approach to Middle English Dialectology," *English Studies* 44 (1962): 1-11, at 5.

72. Michael Bennett believes that the Gawain-poet was a member of this Cheshire affinity, seeing that affinity as a loose congeries of yeomen, archers, clerics, knights, and servants. See his *Community*, 233-35; and his essay, "The Historical Background," in Brewer and Gibson, *A Companion to the Gawain-poet*, 71-90. See also John M. Bowers, *The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer). Robert W. Barrett, Jr., *Against all England: Regional Identity and Cheshire Writing, 1195-1656* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009) offers a more nuanced view.

73. See Mark Chinca, "'Women and Hunting Birds are Easy to Tame': Aristocratic Masculinity and the Early German Love Lyric," in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, ed. D. M. Hadley, 199-213 (London: Longman, 1999).

record of the manuscripts."[74] In its implicit call to be read aloud, then, a poem intends to reach a broad and diverse audience. The voices in the poem can be performed multiply and can be interpreted in similarly multiple ways.

The *I* who purports to tell the fantastic tale of *SGGK* is highly literate, but he is also stubbornly anonymous. He does not identify himself as a member of any social category, although his use of Cheshire dialect and his direct address to an audience imply his participation in a regional vernacular community of fellow dialect speakers. Only his formal composition of alliterative verse attests to his social or occupational identity. As a speaker of vernacular poetic language, the poem's *I* posits that identity—whether that of knights or that of anonymous poets—is not a stable certainty but is always in the process of being socially created and understood. Further, *SGGK*'s *I* presents himself not just as an individual but as a member of a heterogeneous whole, a grouping of West Midlands dialect-speakers receptive to his alliterative practice and quick to comprehend his knotty idiolect. Whatever "tonge" he is using, it is one that his audience understands; his language is their language, whose "lel letters loken" have been long intertwined with the land itself. The narrator's deictic move—calling out to a linguistic audience who might enjoy "þis laye"—is an imagining that Edouard Glissant usefully terms "the poetics of relation,"[75] or the interstitial quality and ambitious inventiveness of postcolonial poetry, an intimate togetherness instantiated by a poet calling out to a vernacular audience, joining the two together in a common linguistic experience. Glissant's focus is twentieth and twenty-first century postcolonial poets, but his notion that the "poetics of relation" are created by the necessities of composing in a hybrid language, one made of many dialects, pidgins, and creoles, is equally applicable to the context of late medieval vernacularity in which *SGGK* was composed. Glissant posits that a poet enacts a poetics of relation in the immediate moment of her own vernacular; when the poet speaks, she speaks in relation to a group who understands her, however marginal that group might be. Such marginality can be understood in

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74. Ibid., 205.

75. Edouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 32.

Glissant's sense as being political as well as linguistic, for the patois or creole spoken by twenty-first century French colonial subjects enacts a community out of which a homegrown poet can emerge.

The poetic speaking *I* depends on being heard by a gathered group of listeners, and Glissant's idea of relational poetics depends itself on an implied sense of linguistic community. The second person singular familiar pronoun *thee* highlights this sense of vernacular community. In all of its multiple valences, *thee* is a word used between English speakers to suggest equality and intimacy as well as subordination and distance. As such, *thee* makes sense only within the vernacular relationships in which it is used. If *thee* is the word of familiarity, then there is nothing more familiar than the mother tongue, the language that only one's fellow-speakers might know. The implied audience in *SGGK* might thus be understood as being comprised of those who understand the alliterative idiolect out of which the speaker crafts his romance.

Thee and You: Poet and Audience

There is no moniker we can fix to authorize, to know, the person who made *SGGK* other than words. These words strive towards intimate collectivity. The audience is formally beseeched as *ye*, a mixed group of plural listeners. And while the characters are usually discussed in the third person, there are startling narrative moments when the narrator addresses Gawain as *thee*. Gawain is both a name, a person who is discussed by others, and an intimate, a man known closely by his English-speaking audience. At the end of the first fitt, the narrator offers Gawain an imperative before the knight sets forth on his journey in search of the Green Knight, urging him to be brave as he leaves Arthur's court.

> Now þenk wel, Sir Gawan
> For wothe þat þou ne wonde
> þis aventure for to frayn
> þat þou hatz tan on honde.
> (487-90)

Gawain is initially addressed as a third-person character, the knight known by everyone, a good and stable name. But the narrator is on close

terms with this knight, a chivalric figure who is also a man, as evidenced by the fact that he speaks to Gawain with direct familiarity.[76] Do not let fear hold *thee* back, the narrator tells him, from leaving on the quest that *thee* has sworn to undertake. This narrative use of the second person familiar pronoun creates a dyad between the poet and his character, a tight circle of care. Yet the narrator here does not exclude his audience so much as extend his empathy towards a character everyone knows, bringing Gawain closer to him and to his listeners. Gawain's reputation is so great that the audience immediately knows who he is. By directly addressing him using the familiar pronoun, the narrator makes that knowledge considerably more intimate.

Hailing Gawain as his own and his audience's intimate, the speaker positions himself as a familiar go-between finessing the distance between his poetic representation and his audience. And, with repeated deictic emphases, he manifests a degree of personalized narrative that is immediate and subjective and that conjures up an explicitly vernacular English audience receptive to his tale.[77] He presents "þis laye" to his listeners, a poem that is always in the process of being told. To listen to "þis laye" is to listen perpetually, to repeat the meta-performance of orality every time one re-approaches the poem. *Deixis* implies a certain, almost pre-existing intimacy between speaker and audience. To use "þis" is to point out that which is closest, in a gesture of immediacy and recognizability. Claiming the surrounding geography as "þis Bretayn" (20) and Arthur as "þis kyng" (37) is also to claim that the audience's knowledge covers these important nouns. The land is familiar to everyone; the king is known to all. The narrator's maneuvers of address create an audience of people like himself, people close enough to him that they can follow his deictic gestures pointing out important places and leaders. "This" Britain must be understood as "our" Britain, a shared aggregation in which the poem's audience participates.

"This" Britain, furthermore, is a place obsessively concerned with

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76. Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman, *From Pearl to Gawain: Forme to Fynisment* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1995), 113.

77. As Spearing notes, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is "enormously rich" in deictics like *this, those, that, these*. See his "Poetic Identity," in Brewer and Gibson, *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, 35–52; at 45.

manners. It is thus little surprise that the turrets and chimneys of Ber-tilak's Haut Desert are so fantastic that they are initially described as "pared out of papure purely hit semed" (802). The castle's crenellations are like paper cutouts, a complex signifier of both luxury and imper-manence.[78] Symbolized as a paper sculpture, the castle seems delicate, easily destroyed—the opposite of what a military stronghold should emphasize to onlookers. Yet the use of the paper simile also indicates a late medieval obsession with luxury goods, with expensive displays of aristocratic wealth. Just as the Green Knight questions the innate violence of chivalry, so too does the poet, with his comparison of the castle's crenellations to paper cutouts, question the actual force of chi-valric identity. What if knights were also made of paper, inconsequential and easily swept away? What if the knight, and what he represents, is as ephemeral and precious as a rare model built to sit on a table and to be admired, but with little pragmatic use? The poetic rendering of chivalry might similarly be all speech, all hot air, as easily made and as easily ignored as a single pronoun.

Haut Desert is a castle made of paper, so "this" Britain must likewise be an imagined place. Whatever intimacy forged between speaker and audience, whatever mixed vernacular shape that audience is required to take, *SGGK* offers a powerful, representational fiction. The poem's emphasis on *deixis*, as well as its use of direct modes of address, requires its audience to consider more carefully the very constructedness of that fiction, however. Replete with delicate acts of courtesy and extravagant displays of material excess, the poem also leads its audience to critique chivalry's violent obsession with etiquette.[79] The narrator's very ano-nymity, combined with his reaching out to a receptive audience, means that the poem urges a critical reconsideration of how verbal meaning is actually produced. Nothing certain is offered, even though the audience is comforted with familiarity, with intimacy. Instead, the audience is required to think for itself, to wonder over what is being asked of it, and to wonder as well over what and how chivalry might mean.

SGGK and the chivalric masculine identity within it appears to be

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78. See Patrick Greig Scott, "A Note on the Paper Castle in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *Notes and Queries* 13, no. 4 (1966): 125-26, doi:10.1093/nq/13.4.125.

79. Anderson, *Language and Imagination*, 3.

a kind of impenetrable discursive garment, content to endlessly delay, to describe the fine embroidery, the sparkling armor, the polite conversation that clothes knights, and yet never admit to the labors of its own construction. But the language that makes the poem—*thee* and *you*—asks us to consider poetry not as a skin of discourse, but as a made thing, composed of small syllables and component parts. And *SGGK* also requires us to consider, if briefly, the existence of an individual poet, a nameless man addressing an audience of English speakers. The poet's delicate and persistent use of *thee* requires that we attend to his labor and to the very representation of his poem, for although Gawain may be an armored icon of beautiful dress and manners, the poet's production of identity is itself a labor. Like the poet, Gawain has to work at saying the right things, at following through with the "game," and his fear of death indicates that he may indeed fail at the production of "proper" masculinity. *Thee* exemplifies Gawain's carefully made, and terribly unmade, chivalric identity. And *thee*, therefore, is at the heart of the poem's mapping out of representation more generally. *Thee* encourages us to consider the work of producing identity through language, to see that production not as dematerialized but instead as deliberate and careful. And thereby, to consider the ways in which chivalric masculinity and poetic practice might be quite closely linked, in and through vernacular alliterative verse.

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