

# Leeds Studies in English

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# Leeds Studies in English

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Edited by

Alaric Hall

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## Supplication and Self-Reformation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Olga Burakov-Mongan

Until recently inspired by Michel Foucault's observations on the subject of medieval auricular confession in *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, studies of Gawain's spiritual metamorphosis in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* have predominantly focused on the romance's representations of its hero's confessional practices. For Foucault, confession constitutes 'the discourse of the self', a ritual which produces the self as subject by locating the penitent in a subordinate position to the figure of the confessor, and by providing him with the first-person speech that transforms him inwardly.<sup>1</sup> Considering *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in light of Foucault's remarks, past readers of the romance have suggested that Gawain is transformed internally as a result of a series of confessional exchanges he engages in during his journey in search of the Green Knight.<sup>2</sup> Karma Lochrie, for example, persuasively argues that in the course of the romance Gawain 'is like Foucault's hypothetical penitent, [a knight] who authenticates himself by proclaiming "the truth which he previously concealed"'.<sup>3</sup>

While Foucault's theory of confession offers a very effective prism for interpreting Gawain's transformation in the romance, I would like to extend the discussion of the role of language as an instrument of self-formation and self-expression in the text beyond the confessional, considering other verbal acts that may, like confession, offer, in Emile Benveniste's famous

<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), pp. 61–62.

<sup>2</sup> See Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 42–55; Gregory W. Gross, 'Secret Rules: Sex, Confession, and Truth in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Arthuriana*, 4 (1994), 146–74; Anthony Low, *Aspects of Subjectivity: Society and Individuality from the Middle Ages to Shakespeare and Milton* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2003), pp. 22–59; Andrew James Johnston, 'The Secret of the Sacred: Confession and the Self in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *Performances of the Sacred in Late Medieval England and Early Modern England*, ed. by Susanne Rupp and Tobias Döring, *Internationale Forschungen zur allgemeinen und vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft*, 86 (New York: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 45–63. For studies of confession in the romance which do not adopt the Foucauldian prism, see early studies by John Burrow: 'The Two Confession Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*' *Modern Philology* 57 (1959), 73–79; and *A Reading of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), pp. 106–110.

<sup>3</sup> Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, p. 43; the source of the quotation Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Lochrie's study also offers a critique of Foucault's theorizing of the medieval period. For details, see pp. 1–55. For other critiques of Foucault's treatment of the Middle Ages, see Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 191–206; Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 367–421.

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formulation, 'the possibility of subjectivity'. Benveniste focuses in particular on speech acts beginning with the first-person singular personal pronoun *I* as 'the most obvious' example of the way in which language produces the self. Benveniste writes that

it is in the instance of discourse in which *I* designates the speaker that the speaker proclaims himself as the 'subject' ... Language is ... the possibility of subjectivity because it contains the linguistic forms appropriate to the expression of subjectivity, and discourse provokes the emergence of subjectivity because it consists of discrete instances. In some way language puts forth 'empty forms' which each speaker, in the exercise of discourse, appropriates to himself and which he relates to his 'person', at the same time defining himself as *I* and a partner as *you*. The instance of discourse is thus constitutive of all the coordinates that define the subject.<sup>4</sup>

Taking a cue from Benveniste, whose theory of language allows for a consideration of the relationship between selfhood and all forms of language, I would like to consider the role that such first-person speech acts as praying and lying play in the production of Gawain's chivalric selfhood.<sup>5</sup> I propose that Gawain, at the outset of the romance, exemplifies a penitential ideal of a transparent and unified selfhood: a self structured inwardly around the virtue of humility and a desire for God, and expressed outwardly by his obedience to Christ and His Church. This ideal selfhood is manifested by means of the pentangled shield Gawain is armed with and the prayers he rehearses prior to entering Hautdesert, a castle where he finds shelter and celebrates Christmas during his quest in search of the Green Knight. Focusing specifically on Gawain's Pater Noster prayer — a prayer that occupies a uniquely authoritative position among all other prayers of the medieval Church — I suggest that, for Gawain, the Pater Noster is an effective instrument of self-expression and self-constitution. Unlike the Foucauldian process of subject-formation in which the subject is produced in relation to the priestly figure of a confessor, Gawain's Pater Noster stresses the knight's individual responsibility, at the same time establishing and articulating his inner and outer membership within the larger Christian community of Christ's followers. The second half of my discussion will focus on Gawain's internal transformation during and after his sojourn in the castle. To put it differently, I focus on the remaking of Gawain's virtuous inner man into an outwardly unreadable, deeply erotic interiority that, in addition to a secret libidinous desire, is also shaped by a hidden love of self.<sup>6</sup> As demonstrated by the knight's nameless interlocutors — the Lady of Hautdesert and a household member of Hautdesert who leads Gawain to the Green Chapel — it is a model of subjectivity that is both given voice to and brought into being by romance narratives, a point

<sup>4</sup> Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. by Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 227.

<sup>5</sup> My discussion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* owes a great intellectual debt to Katherine C. Little's recent discussion of medieval selfhood in *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self In Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), as well as to earlier studies of gender, sex, and chivalric identities in the romance by Carolyn Dinshaw, Geraldine Heng, Karma Lochrie, and Susan Crane. For details, see Dinshaw, 'A Kiss is Just a Kiss: Heterosexuality and Its Consolations in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Diacritics* (1994), 205–26; Lochrie, *Covert Operations*, pp. 42–55; and Heng, 'A Woman Wants: The Lady, Gawain, and the Forms of Seduction', *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 5 (1992), 101–34. See also Crane's *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity during the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), pp. 107–39. Throughout my discussion, I use the terms *self* and *selfhood* not to suggest that Gawain's identity is essentially permanent and unchangeable but in order to establish the difference between the processes of self-formation enacted in the romance by prayer and lying and the Foucauldian process of subject-formation.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the inner/outer distinction in medieval literature, see Stephen Medcalf, 'Inner and Outer', in *The Later Middle Ages* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), pp. 108–71.

to which I will return in the conclusion of this essay.

## The Pater Noster and Gawain

Before turning to examine the role praying plays in the shaping of Gawain's selfhood, it is first necessary to consider the knight's famous pentangled shield, whose symbolism anticipates the model of selfhood generated by the Pater Noster prayer the knight rehearses. Few studies of the romance fail to acknowledge the importance of the pentangled shield for understanding the narrative in general, and the figure of its bearer, in particular.<sup>7</sup> Ross G. Arthur's analysis of the pentangle in *Medieval Sign Theory and 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'* offers one of the most extensive discussions of the pentangle to date. For Arthur, the pentangle is a sign of absolute Truth, a beneficial religious icon, as well as a badge of faith or 'a sign for Truth as the object of religious faith and as the support for those who wish to maintain their faith'.<sup>8</sup> However, it is also possible to consider this pentangle not simply as a one-dimensional representation of its bearer's inner faith, but rather, if viewed in the light of traditional religious formulas for self-examination, as a blueprint for Gawain's inner man.<sup>9</sup>

This reading is first made possible when the *Gawain*-poet alerts his audience to the fact that the pentangle does not only correlate with Gawain's physical adroitness ('Fyrst he watz funden fautlez in his fyue wyttez, | And eft fe fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fyngres', lines 640–41); rather, the pentangle also represents Gawain's inner world, which the poet constructs around the doctrines of the Church and the traditional penitential formulas of Christ's wounds, Mary's joys, and Christian virtues:

And alle his afaunce vpon folde watz in þe fyue woundez  
þat Cryst kaȝt on þe croys, as þe crede tellez;  
And quere-so-euer þys mon in melly watz stad,  
His þro þoȝt watz in þat, þurȝ alle oþer þyngez,  
þat alle his forsnes he feng at þe fyue joyez  
þat þe hende heuen-quene had of hir chylde;  
At þis cause þe knyȝt comlyche hade  
In þe inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted,  
þat quen he blusched þerto his belde neuer payred.  
þe fyft fyue þat I finde þat þe frek vsed  
Watz fraunchyse and felaschyp forbe al þyng,  
His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer,

<sup>7</sup> For studies of the pentangle, see Catherine Batt, 'Gawain's Anti-Feminist Rant, the Pentangle, and Narrative Space', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992), 117–39; Ross G. Arthur, *Medieval Sign Theory and 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), and 'Gawain's Shield as *Signum*', in *Text and Matter: New Critical Perspectives on the Pearl-Poet*, ed by Robert J. Blanch, Miriam Youngerman Miller, and Julian N. Wasserman (Troy: Whitson, 1991), pp. 221–26. See also Michael Lacy, 'Armour I', and Derek Brewer, 'Armour II: The Arming Topos as Literature', in *A Companion to the 'Gawain'-Poet*, ed. by Derek Brewer, and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997), pp. 165–74; 175–80 [respectively].

<sup>8</sup> Arthur, pp. 104–5.

<sup>9</sup> Batt offers a rather different reading of the pentangle as an 'insufficient' sign of Gawain's 'perfect' knightly identity in 'Gawain's Anti-Feminist Rant', where she suggests that the pentangle both 'maps out a careful balance of Gawain's virtues' and creates 'a hierarchy of values', thus asking the reader 'to hold in play the possibility that Gawain's qualities might in practice be as mutually exclusive as they are potentially mutually informing' (pp. 124–25).

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And pité, þat passez alle poyntez, þyse pure fyue  
Were harder happed on þat habel þen on any oþer. (lines 642–55)<sup>10</sup>

Just as the portrait of the Virgin Mary painted on the inside of Gawain's shield constructs an interiority for Gawain, whose *þoʒts* on the battlefield, for instance, are generated by and grounded in this image, so does the fifth corner of the pentangle, representing the virtues of courtesy, pity, purity, friendship, and franchise, ground Gawain's inner man in these penitential virtues.

Critics have been divided for some time now on the value system behind the five virtues the poet attributes to Gawain, with many discussions focusing in particular on the ethos behind the virtue of *cortaysye*. Following an early study of the poem by J. A. Burrow, scholars such as Wendy Clein, Jonathan Nicholls, and Andrew James Johnston have championed Burrow's view that *cortaysye* represents a constellation of a number of specifically secular or courtly values.<sup>11</sup> Oddly enough, Burrow prefaces his argument that 'the virtues of Gawain's fifth five are, for the most part, distinctively secular or social in character',<sup>12</sup> by noting that courtesy is constructed as a specifically religious value by several authors contemporaneous with the *Gawain*-poet. Thus, for instance, Burrow quotes the poet of 'The Young Children's Book' who identifies the origins of courtesy with the Annunciation, linking this virtue to the events in the life of the Blessed Virgin:

Clerkys þat canne þe scyens seuene  
Seys þat curtasy came fro heuen  
When Gabryell owre lady grette,  
And Elyzabeth with here mette.  
All vertus be cloyde in curtasy  
And alle vyces in vilony.<sup>13</sup>

Even more striking is the treatment of courtesy as a specifically religious virtue in other poems attributed to the *Gawain*-poet himself, a fact over which Burrow passes quickly in his discussion of the pentangle. In *Patience* and *Cleanness*, for instance, the poet describes courtesy as a divine attribute, as well as an inner state of spiritual perfection God's priests often lack. Finally, like the author of 'The Young Children's Book', the *Gawain*-poet, too, associates courtesy with the Virgin, and calls Mary heaven's 'quen of cortasye' on five occasions in *Pearl*.<sup>14</sup>

Courtesy as an inner state of spiritual perfection one may achieve by means of Marian devotion seems, therefore, a more fitting interpretation of the *cortaysye* the poet attributes to Gawain in the passage describing the pentangle. If this understanding of *cortaysye* is taken into

<sup>10</sup> All quotations are taken from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2nd edn by Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

<sup>11</sup> Burrow, *A Reading of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'*, pp. 46–47; Wendy Clein, *Concepts of Chivalry in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'* (Norman: Pilgrim, 1987), pp. 92–93; Jonathan Nicholls, *The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet* (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1985); Andrew James Johnston, 'The Secret of the Sacred: Confession and the Self in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', in *Performances of the Sacred in Late Medieval England and Early Modern England*, ed. by Susanne Rupp and Tobias Döring, Internationale Forschungen zur allgemeinen und vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft, 86 (New York: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 45–63.

<sup>12</sup> *A Reading*, p. 47.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Young Children's Book', in *The Babees Book*, ed. by Frederick J. Furnivall, Early English Text Society, 32 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), pp. 17–25 (at p. 17).

<sup>14</sup> *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), pp. 74–76, lines 432–68. For references to courtesy in *Cleanness* see p. 112, line 13, and in *Patience* p. 202, line 417.

consideration, then both the inner side of the shield, upon which Mary's image is painted, and the outer, pentangle side of the shield encourage Gawain to identify himself, whether on or away from the battlefield, in relation to the life of Christ's mother, as well as in relation to the Church's doctrinal teachings such as, for instance, the creed, which the audience is reminded of in the opening lines of the passage. Like *cortaysye*, the remaining four values of the pentangle's fifth set of ideals, that is to say mercy (*pit e*), chastity (*clannes*), equity (*felaʒschyp*), and spiritual freedom (*fraunchyse*),<sup>15</sup> offer a psychological model that grounds Gawain's interior in traditional penitential categories of virtues (mercy, chastity) and divine gifts or rewards (equity, wisdom) that penitents seek to internalize when they model themselves on Christ and the Blessed Virgin. Like the gift of 'forsnes', or fortitude, that Gawain enjoys on the battlefield by contemplating Christ's wounds and Mary's joys, these virtues and gifts, too, necessitate thought and recollection. But this desired inner state may also be generated or internalized when one rehearses the Pater Noster, as Gawain does shortly before arriving at Hautdesert:

Be gome vpon Gryngolet glydez hem vnder,  
 Purʒ mony misy and myre, mon al hym one,  
 Carande for his costes, lest he ne keuer schude  
 To se þe seruyse of þat syre, þat on þat self nyʒt  
 Of a burde watz borne oure baret to quelle;  
 And þefore sykyng he sayde, 'I beseche þe, lorde,  
 And Mary, þat is myldest moder so dere,  
 Of sum herber þer heʒly I myʒt here masse,  
 And þy matynez to-morne, mekely I ask,  
 And þerto prestly I pray my pater and aue  
 and crede.'

*He rode in his prayere,  
 And cryed for his mysdede. (748–60, my italics)*

Due to its unique status among other medieval prayers, my analysis focuses exclusively on the Pater Noster prayer rehearsed by Gawain. The knight's other penitential utterances (the Creed, Ave Maria) are beyond the scope of my analysis here. As a prayer composed by Christ himself and recited by Him to the disciples, the Pater Noster prayer occupies a uniquely authoritative position among all other prayers of the medieval Church.<sup>16</sup> Translated into Old English by  lfric and praised by the Venerable Bede in his letter to the Archbishop Egbert of York as a remedy against temptation,<sup>17</sup> the Pater Noster was among the first prayers medieval children were taught, and all lay men and women were expected to be able to recite it by heart.<sup>18</sup> Surpassing other prayers 'in auctorite and in soteltee and in profit to all Christen men', in the words of one anonymous fourteenth-century homilist,<sup>19</sup> the Pater Noster prayer

<sup>15</sup> *Fraunchyse* has a variety of meanings, both secular ('generosity', or 'magnanimity'), and religious. In its religious sense, it refers both to the privileged state of Adam and Eve before the fall, as well as to spiritual freedom, in general. It is in this latter sense that Chaucer's Parson uses it in his tale in line 452: *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson et al. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), pp. 288–327 (p. 302). See also *Cursor Mundi*, ed. by Richard Morris, Early English Text Society, o. s. 57 (London: Tr ubner, 1874–93), p. 102, line 1637.

<sup>16</sup> For discussions of attitudes toward the Pater Noster throughout the Middle Ages, see F. G. A. M. Aarts, 'The Pater Noster in Medieval English Literature', *Papers on Language & Literature*, 5 (1969), 3–16; Maurice Hussey, 'The Petitions of the Pater Noster in Medieval English Literature', *Medium  evum*, 27 (1958), 8–16; Irma Taavitsainen, 'Pater Noster: A Meditation Connected with Richard Rolle in BL Royal MS. 17.C. XVII', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 92 (1991), 31–41.

<sup>17</sup> See Bede, *Epistola ad Eberctum Antistitem*, in *Baedae opera historica*, ed. by J. E. King, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1930), ii p. 456.

<sup>18</sup> *Middle English Sermons*, ed. by Woodburn O. Ross, Early English Text Society, o. s. 209 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 9–12.

<sup>19</sup> *Middle English Sermons*, p. 48.

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was thus an effective means of professing one's faith or, to put it differently, of articulating one's membership within the larger Christian community. In addition, medieval penitential writers such as John Mirk and the poet of *Speculum Vitae*, as well as anonymous writers of sermons and didactic expositions on the prayer, viewed the Pater Noster as an effective alternative to the confessional model of lay self-expression and self-reform. Unlike confession that brings into being and gives voice to the self as subject in the course of an exchange with a priest, an exchange which, as Katherine C. Little recently suggested, 'is a process that not only can be violent and invasive but leaves no choice to the speaker',<sup>20</sup> the Lord's Prayer stresses supplicants' direct relation to God and their individual responsibility for fashioning themselves as virtuous subjects, both inwardly and outwardly. In a widely popular late fourteenth-century didactic poem, *Speculum Vitae*, the poet for instance, theorizes the prayer's seven petitions as a method of initiating a psychological struggle within supplicants, comparing the petitions of the prayer to a sharp-edged 'picke' with which supplicants may 'grubbes and mynes [and] ... til ... withinne þe hert,'<sup>21</sup> and encouraging petitioners to assess their thoughts, their actions, and their speech in the course of reciting the prayer's petitions. To borrow from *Speculum Vitae*'s own vocabulary of interiority, a man may utter the prayer in order to make himself *haly*, cleansing his heart from the deadly vices and reshaping his inner world around a desire for Christ and the seven virtues:

[This bede] ... out of þe hert drawes  
þe seuen Hede-synnes þat within gnawes,  
And sette<s> seuen maner of vertus  
Instede of þam þat men suld vse [...]  
þise seuen askynges [...]  
mase a man here haly to be [...]  
Be clenched in þe Wille parfytely  
Of allekyns maner of fylynge,  
And lightend wele in þe Vndirstandyng,  
And parfytely confermed in þe Mynde  
In Godde and with Godde þat toke mankynde.<sup>22</sup>

Not unlike confession, the main purpose of which, as Thomas Tentler contends, is 'to get at sin',<sup>23</sup> the petitions of the Pater Noster ask supplicants to lay bare their sinful thoughts, deeds, and words; however, the self-scrutiny accomplished by the petitions of the Pater Noster extends beyond the recollection of sinful thoughts and deeds on the part of the supplicants. In addition to getting at sin, the Pater Noster petitions also encourage their speakers to shape their interiorities around the desire for Christ and the seven virtues, which replace the grid-system of sins as the major categories of the self for lay men and women. More specifically, in the course of their rehearsal of the petitions of the Pater Noster, the petitioners rid themselves of the seven vices (gluttony, lechery, avarice, sloth, anger, envy, pride), and internalize in their stead the seven virtues (sobriety, chastity, mercy, prowess, equity, friendship, humility) by means of the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost (wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, fear). As the author of the contemporaneous *Book of Vices and Virtues* concisely states in his exposition of the work of self-reformation that is accomplished by the prayer's petitions,

<sup>20</sup> *Confession and Resistance*, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Speculum Vitae: A Reading Edition*, ed. by Ralph Hanna, Early English Text Society, o. s. 331 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 87, lines 2549–51.

<sup>22</sup> *Speculum Vitae*, pp. 79–80, lines 2325–28, 2331–32, 2344–48.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 134.

'þe seuene biddynges [of the Pater Noster] ... purchasen þe seuene 3iftes of þe Holy Gost þ[at] destroien þe seuene heuede wikkednesses of herte and setten & noreschen þe seuene vertues, bi whiche a man comeþ to þe seuene blessednesses'.<sup>24</sup>

The prayer thus functions as a tool of self-examination and self-reform, a mechanism postlapsarian subjects may use in order to transcend their alienation from their divine maker by fashioning an interior structured around the orthodox Christian virtues and the desire for Christ. In Gawain's case, the prayer is elicited by his humble wish to participate in the religious services on one of the most important days in the liturgical calendar. In this way, the prayer clearly identifies Gawain as a member of the Christian collective of Christ's lovers. Interestingly, the poet's depiction of Gawain's recollection of the Lord's prayer omits the rehearsal of the actual words of the prayer's petitions. Instead, the poet replaces the words of these perhaps all-too-familiar supplicatory formulas with Gawain's own petitions, all of which begin with the first person singular pronoun *I*: 'I beseche', 'I my3t', 'I ask', 'I pray'. The first-person petitions communicate Gawain's own inner world, that is to say, his desire for a safe haven and human companionship. At the same time, since Gawain's petitions both express his inner humility and his intense desire for Christ, and enact the triumph of piety over preexistent sin ('He rode in his prayere, I And cryed for his mysdede', lines 759–60), his version of the prayer anchors his inner world within the conventional framework of penitential ideals or *costes* traditionally associated with the Pater Noster. Gawain's Pater Noster, then, fashions an inner world that is aligned with the penitential doctrines of the medieval Church and is perfectly consonant with the knight's public self-presentation. Gawain's struggle and eventual failure to preserve this correspondence between his inner world and his outward self occupies the rest of the narrative in which duplicitous supplication supplants the Pater Noster as the instrument of self-expression and self-production. It is to the examination of these acts of duplicitous supplication I turn now.

## Illicit Supplication and Gawain

Duplicitous supplication and love-making go together in many late medieval romances detailing the workings of desire and the power of language to make or unmake chivalric selves.<sup>25</sup> Famously, however, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, deceptive pleas fail to lead to love-making. During his stay at Hautdesert Gawain denies himself the pleasures of sex — albeit the opportunity presents itself to him on three separate occasions — exercising a great deal of self-restraint in response to his hostess' amorous petitions. Below is one of the more frequently cited passages from a speech the Lady makes on the first of the three mornings she visits Gawain in his bedroom:

'Nay for soþe, beau sir', sayd þat swete,  
 '3e schal not rise of your bedde, I rych yow better [...]  
 For I wene wel, iwysse, Sir Wowen, 3e are,  
 Pat alle þe worlde worchipez quere-so 3e ride [...]  
 And now 3e ar here, iwysse, and we bot oure one;

<sup>24</sup> *The Book of Vices and Virtues: A Fourteenth Century English Translation of the Somme Le Roi of Lorens D' Orleans*, ed. by W. Nelson Francis, Early English Text Society, o. s. 217 (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), pp. 98–104. See also sermons no. 2 and no. 9 in *Middle English Sermons*.

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson et. al. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), pp. 473–585 (p. 496), Book 2, line 503. See also *The Squire's Tale*, pp. 169–77 (p. 175), line 554.

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My lorde and his ledez ar on lenþe faren,  
Oþer burnez in her bedde, and my burdez als  
Pe dor drawen and dit with a derf haspe;  
And syþen I haue in þis hous hym þat al lykez,  
I schal ware my whyle wel, quyl hit lastez,  
with tale.  
þe ar welcum to my cors,  
Yowre awen won to wale,  
Me behouez of fyne force  
Your seruauant be, and schale.’ (lines 1222–40)

Readers disagree on the exact meaning of the Lady’s offer of her *cors*, with some praising it as a polite reversal of Gawain’s earlier offer to ‘be her seruauant’ (l. 976), while others view it as a full-scale sexual solicitation.<sup>26</sup> However, I would argue that the Lady’s offer of her *cors* identifies the Lady not only as a courteous hostess or as a would-be-adulteress. It also identifies her as a double or false speaker in the Augustinian sense: that is, someone who uses language in order to satisfy a hidden desire for deception or, to put it differently, someone whose words do not communicate her intention or meaning in any transparent manner. In two of his treatises on verbal dissimulation — ‘De Mendacio’ (c. 395) and ‘Contra Mendacium’ (c. 420) — Augustine condemns liars for their abuse of the signifying practices established by the divine maker.<sup>27</sup> For Augustine, liars are guilty of a defective love of self, since instead of using language to express their love for God — the only proper object of love and enjoyment — liars deploy speech to cultivate and satisfy their own passion for deception, in the process also jeopardizing their interlocutors’ spiritual well-being. This Augustinian view of lying as taking pleasure in deception was shared by late medieval moralists who also condemned lying as an expression of the liar’s defective love of self.<sup>28</sup>

Like Augustine, medieval writers on ‘the sins of the tongue’ warned against the inner corruption lying causes not only in liars themselves, but also in their listeners. But, unlike Augustine whose analysis sought to catalogue lies based on the circumstances of their telling, fourteenth-century writers on verbal sins classified sinful speech acts based on the identity

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Lindley, ‘Lady Bertilak’s *cors*: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 1237’, *Notes & Queries*, 42 (1995), 23–24. See also Monica Brzezinski Potkay, ‘The Violence of Courtly Exegesis in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’, in *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. by Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 97–124.

<sup>27</sup> See *Sancti Aureli Augustini De fide et symbolo: De fide et operibus; De agone christiano; De continentia; De bono conivgali; De sancta virginitate; De bono viduitatis; De adulterinis conivgiis lib. II; De mendacio; Contra mendacium; De opere monachorum; De divinatione daemonum; De cura pro mortuis gerenda; De patientia*, ed. by Joseph Zycha, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, 41 (Vienna: Tempsky, 1900). For studies of the Augustinian theories of lying, see Marcia L. Colish, ‘The Stoic Theory of Verbal Signification and the Problem of Lies and False Statements from Antiquity to St. Anselm’, in *Archéologie du Signe*, ed. by Lucie Brind’Amour and Eugene Vance (Toronto: Pontifical Institute, 1983), pp. 17–43; C. Jan Swearingen’s *Rhetoric and Irony: Western Literacy and Western Lies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 175–214; and Edwin D. Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Colish, ‘The Stoic Theory of Verbal Signification’, pp. 17–43, and Craun, *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity*, pp. 10–72.

of their tellers, in many cases associating deviant or sinful speech with women.<sup>29</sup> Citing St Paul's condemnation of disruptive female speech in his first letter to Timothy, fourteenth-century moralists commonly aligned women with verbal dissimulation, a linking that served to safeguard and re-inscribe the established gender hierarchies that the Lady's supplication for Gawain's love effectively reverses. By making an offer that may be interpreted as a sexual proposition, the Lady adopts a dominant stance typically associated with noble men in medieval romances,<sup>30</sup> later fashioning herself as an authority on chivalric selfhood. Articulated from this position of power, the Lady's duplicitous supplication seeks to produce a new Gawain, gradually unmaking the knight's penitential selfhood generated by his earlier prayer, just as he is stripped of his pentangled armor upon first entering Hautdesert.<sup>31</sup>

Ostensibly arriving in his bedroom in order to sway Gawain to commit adultery, the Lady hails 'Sir Wouwen' (line 1226) as a man who may be harboring a desire for sexual domination, inviting him to rape her: 'me behouez of fyne force | Your seruauant be, and schale'. Ironically, in the process of defending himself against this classification, Gawain subtly acknowledges that his self indeed may not be as stable, or as unified, as his pentangled shield and his Pater Noster would suggest, letting slip 'In god faith . . . gayn hit me þynkkez, | Þaȝ I be not *now* he þat ȝe of speken' (lines 1241–42, my italics).<sup>32</sup> Not one to acknowledge defeat, the lady appeals to the Virgin Mary to substantiate her view of Gawain, in the process substituting her own authority for that of Mary, and replacing the conventional penitential virtues with an alternative system of largely secular *costes*. The Lady constitutes these ideals as the chief categories of Gawain's selfhood:

'Bi Mary', quop þe menskful, 'me þynk hit an oþer . . .  
 For þe costes þat I haf knowen vpon þe, knyȝt, here,  
 Of bewté and debonerté and blyþe semblaunt,  
 And þat I haf er herkkened and halde hit here trwee,  
 Per schulde no freke vpon folde bifore yow be chosen.' (lines 1268–75)

By attributing to Gawain the virtues of 'bewté', 'blyþe semblaunt', and 'debonerté', the Lady appears to suggest that Gawain's outward behavior is in perfect conformity with his inward self; however, the poet's treatment of the traits the Lady assigns to Gawain makes clear that these are not categories of either a unified or stable selfhood.

*Bewté* is shown as a poignantly transitory virtue in the scene where Gawain first encounters the Lady in the company of an ancient dame who leads the younger woman by the hand. Thus physically connected, these women form a striking 'before and after' tableau, with the 'riche

<sup>29</sup> Women and lies are linked in such popular didactic fourteenth-century texts as *Speculum Vitae*, *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and Chaucer's *The Parson's Tale*, to name just a few. For recent discussions of women's relation to verbal sins in the late Middle Ages, see Sandy Bardsley, *Venomous Tongues: Speech and Gender in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); and Susan E. Phillips, *Transforming Talk: The Problem with Gossip in Late Medieval England* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> For discussions of the gender roles in the bedroom scenes, see David Mills, 'An Analysis of the Temptation Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 67 (1968), 612–30; Myra Stokes, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Fitt III as Debate', *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 25 (1981), 35–51; and Dinshaw, 'A Kiss is Just a Kiss', pp. 212–13.

<sup>31</sup> Batt offers a different assessment of the Lady's fashioning of Gawain in 'Gawain's Anti-Feminist Rant, the Pentangle, and Narrative Space', pp. 117–39, where she suggests that the Lady 'read[s]' and evaluate[s] [Gawain] within the frame of his established literary persona . . . the Lady teases her guest with regard to his reputation (fostered especially by French romance)' (p. 119).

<sup>32</sup> Focusing likewise on Gawain's response here, Heng suggests that 'the admission of a prior identity, now supposedly defunct, at once renders the prospect of future identities, further reconfigurations, less than improbable' ('A Woman Wants', p. 114). See also Dinshaw, p. 212.

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red' (line 952) complexion of the Lady sharply contrasting with the 'rugh [and] ronkled' face of the old woman, who, as the poet coolly remarks, is 'sour to se and sellyly blered' (lines 953, 963). *Blyþe* appearance as a marker of inner felicity proves equally unreliable.<sup>33</sup> As the poet notes at the beginning and the conclusion of the first bedroom scene, both Gawain and the Lady feign gaiety on that first morning they spend together. Gawain is pretending when he acts surprised and delighted to find the Lady in his bedroom ('Þen he wakenede, and wroth, and to hir warde torned, | And vnlouked his y3e-lyddez, and let as hym wondered', lines 1200–1), whereas the Lady, in her turn, conceals her knowledge of Gawain's future engagement with the Green Knight under the cover of pleasantries and love-talk:

'Þa3 I were burde bry3test', þe burde in mynde hade.  
Þe lasse luf in his lode for lur þat he so3t  
boute hone,  
Þe dunte þat schulde hym deue' (lines 1283–86).<sup>34</sup>

Similarly problematic is *debonerté* — a rather capacious term the Lady uses to define Gawain's interiority. According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, *debonerté* may denote 'mercy' and 'kindness', as well as 'gentleness' or 'courtesy'.<sup>35</sup> On the surface, then, *debonerté* encompasses inner traits similar to those generated by the Pater Noster and the pentangle; however, in a speech replete with wordplay and double meanings,<sup>36</sup> the Lady defines this virtue as a willingness to indulge one's libidinous desire. Thus, on the second day of their bedroom conversations, the Lady again raises the possibility that Gawain is not who he claims to be, appealing to Gawain's 'cortaysy' (line 1491) and asking him again to prove his 'Gawain-ness' ('Sir [...] if ye be Wawen, wonder me þynkkez', line 1481) by violating her or, at the very least, by forcefully kissing her:

'3et I kende yow of kyssyng', quop þe clere þenne,  
'Quere-so countenance is coupe quickly to clayme;  
Pat bicumes vche a kny3t þat cortaysy vses [...]  
3e ar stif innoghe to constrayne wyth strenkþe, if yow lykez [...]  
If any were so vilanous þat yow devaye wolde.' (lines 1489–98)

Although in his reply Gawain attempts to disassociate himself from the Lady's version of himself, his subsequent behavior displays what Geraldine Heng has diagnosed as a 'sensitivity to [the Lady's] hint of some lack or inadequacy in hi[m]'.<sup>37</sup> What Heng sees as 'sensitivity', I would suggest may be better understood as Gawain's gradual internalization of the illicit sexual desire the Lady attributes to him.

That Gawain is beginning to internalize, as well as to act out, the immoderate desire the Lady attributes to him in the course of her amorous pleas becomes evident later in the day when, while he dines with his hosts, Gawain experiences inner turmoil in the Lady's presence, feeling both anger and pleasure as a result of her amorous glances.<sup>38</sup> On the same evening

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of *blyþe* as an epithet for Gawain, see Mills, 'An Analysis of the Temptation Scenes', p. 614.

<sup>34</sup> As the editors' notes for these lines of the poem explain, it is unclear whether it is Gawain or the Lady who acknowledges in these lines Gawain's lack of interest in love. For details, see Tolkien and Gordon, p. 110. In my treatment of the passage, I follow the editors' attribution of the lines to the Lady.

<sup>35</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. by Hans Kurath and others, 20 vols (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001), accessed from <<http://ets.umdl.umich.edu>>.

<sup>36</sup> See Mills, pp. 612–23.

<sup>37</sup> Heng, 'A Woman Wants', p. 114.

<sup>38</sup> See lines 1659–63.

Gawain embraces and kisses his host 'hendely' (line 1659) just like the Lady.<sup>39</sup> He also adopts her words as his own in the course of a literary discussion on the value of romances he holds forth with the Lady earlier in the day. Authorizing her speech by identifying herself as a reader of romances, the Lady describes the ideal knight of her choice based on the romance stories she has read:

'I woled wyt at yow, wyȝe', þat worþy þer sayde,  
'And yow wrathed not þerwyth, what were þe skylle  
Þat so ȝong and so ȝepe as ȝe at þis tyme,  
So cortayse, so knyȝtyly, as ȝe ar knowen oute —  
And of alle cheualry to chose, þe chef þyng alosted  
Is þe lel layk of luf, þe lettrure of armes;  
For to telle of þis tytelet token and tyxt of her werkkeȝ,  
How ledes for her lele luf hor lyuez han auntered,  
Endured for her drury dulful stoundez,  
And after wenged with her walour and voyded her care,  
And broȝt blysse into boure with bountees how awen—  
And ȝe ar knyȝt comlokest kyd of your elde [...]  
Oghe to a ȝonke þynk ȝern to schewe  
And teche sum tokenez of trweluf craftes. (lines 1508–20; 1526–7)<sup>40</sup>

By establishing herself as an authority on chivalric romances, the Lady also constructs herself here as a mediator between Gawain and the larger chivalric institution, endowing her speech with what, in *Language and Symbolic Power*, Pierre Bourdieu has termed 'performative magic'. In his analysis of performative utterances, Bourdieu notes that successful or felicitous performative speech acts are products of a power dynamic existing between their originator, who claims to speak in the name of a larger institution, and his audience, who endows the speaker's utterances with symbolic efficacy by accepting him as an authorized speaker:

the symbolic efficacy of words is exercised only in so far as the person subjected to it recognizes the person who exercises it as authorized to do so or [...] only in so far as he fails to realize that, in submitting to it, he himself has contributed, through his recognition, to its establishment.<sup>41</sup>

As a reader of romances, the Lady seeks to subject Gawain, who resists her amorous advances, to her definition of chivalric selfhood which constructs the pursuit of love as both the title ('tytelet token') and the text of knightly selves. The Lady thus posits that a knight who is not a desiring subject is not a proper knight. Failing to challenge the Lady's authority as a spokesperson for chivalric knighthood, Gawain effectively invests the Lady with the power to call his selfhood into question; however, the Lady not only undermines Gawain's selfhood here, she also opens the possibility for future selves when she refers to the knight as 'ȝe at þis tyme'.

By suggesting that Gawain's present self may be inadequate and unstable, the Lady seeks to refashion him in her own, desiring image, substituting the desire for God as the chief category of the knight's inner man with a transgressive libidinous desire. It is not an accident that

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of Gawain's kissing habits, see Dinshaw, 'A Kiss is Just a Kiss', p. 215. See also Jane Gilbert, 'Gender and Sexual Transgression', in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: Brewer, 1997), pp. 53–69 (62–63).

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of the lady as a reader of romances, see Dinshaw, 'A Kiss is Just a Kiss', p. 213.

<sup>41</sup> *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, ed. by John B. Thomson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 107–16 (p. 116).

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the Lady's speech is an anacoluthon, a grammatical construction which may be described, in J. Hillis Miller's words, as a 'failure to follow a single syntactical track ... a narrative line that does not hang together. That shows, to anyone who notices it, that [what is being said] is ... a lie'.<sup>42</sup> In an early study of the Lady's rhetorical style, Cecily Clark speculated that the Lady's anacoluthonic speech may be 'a representation of the devious ways a mind has to work when it is not altogether frank'.<sup>43</sup> While I agree with Clark's assessment of the Lady's speech as reflecting her duplicity, to my mind it seems more appropriate to consider these lines as a reflection, instead, of the dissolution the Lady's duplicitous and erotically-charged pleas cause to Gawain's self since it is Gawain who is firstly and lastly the subject of the Lady's speech. Submitting to the Lady's definition of romance, Gawain dutifully repeats it ('trwlf expoun, | And towche þe temez of tyxt and talez of armez', lines 1540–41), at the same time experiencing for the first time a pleasurable erotic fervor or *blysse* ('þay wysten | bot blysse', line 1552) which, according to the Lady, constitutes the chief category of real knights: 'and broʒt blysse into boure'.

Gawain's inner transformation is completed on the morning of the third visit the Lady makes to his bedroom, when he no longer contemplates Mary's image or Her five joys. Rather, Gawain spends time enjoying the Lady's visage, exhibiting signs of the immoderate passion the Lady had implied he was concealing all along:

He seʒ hir so glorious and gayly atyred,  
So fautes of hir fetures and of so fyne hewes,  
Wiʒt wallande joye warmed his hert.  
With smoþe smylyng and smolt þay smeten into merþe,  
Pat al watz blis and bonchef þat breke hem bitwene,  
and wyne. (lines 1760–66)

Indeed at this point, the poet foregrounds the difficulty of differentiating between the Lady and Gawain, referring to the two simply as 'hem', and noting that both experience pleasurable sensations when they resume their love-talk one last time. In Gawain's case, the 'wiʒt wallande joye' he feels is both a form of sexual pleasure discursively produced by the Lady's duplicitous supplication for his love on all three mornings,<sup>44</sup> and a reflection of a new mode of desiring that Gawain internalizes, one that is radically different from the desires he expressed earlier in the narrative when he prayed the Pater Noster.

Outwardly, Gawain's inner metamorphosis is marked by his acceptance of the Lady's green girdle, whose material gives little indication of the hidden 'costes þat knit ar þerinne' (line 1849). The 'costes' of the girdle or its hidden powers are an extension of the inner traits of its owner — the Lady — which she reveals in the course of her interaction with Gawain, that is to say, a will to deceive, an ambition to dominate, and, finally, the desire for sexual pleasure.<sup>45</sup> Deceptively 'symple in hitself', the girdle is an object of 'slyʒt', an instrument of domination which makes its bearer invincible on the battle field, as well as a sexual token, a 'luf-lace' worn by the Lady on her body, carrying 'in its function and appearance, the impress

<sup>42</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'The Anacoluthonic Lie', in *Reading Narrative* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), p. 151. The specific lines where the Lady veers off the syntactical track are 1512–18.

<sup>43</sup> Cecily Clark, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Characterization by Syntax', *Essays in Criticism*, 16 (1966), 361–74 (p. 370).

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of the Lady's speech as 'a form of sexual enactment', see Heng, 'A Woman Wants', pp. 101–8.

<sup>45</sup> For a dazzling discussion of the girdle, see Heng, 'Feminine Knots and the Other: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', *PMLA* 106 (1991), 500–14.

and memory of the [Lady's] body'.<sup>46</sup> It is also an object she pretends to give to Gawain behind her husband's back, pleading with him to keep this transaction a secret. Promising to hide the girdle from the Lady's husband, Gawain becomes an accessory to an act of deception that may be construed as an act of adultery. As Heng puts it, 'the necessity of concealment entails a guilty conspiracy of silence that instates two persons [...] in an apparent transgression against a third, in effect producing a version [...] of triangulated, adulterous love'.<sup>47</sup>

Accepting the girdle from the Lady, Gawain also embraces the model of selfhood the girdle represents. It is highly appropriate that the poet affords the romance audience insight into Gawain's radically transformed inner world at the conclusion of the Lady's pleading offer of the girdle. Having manifested earlier a passionate sexual desire for the Lady, Gawain here exhibits self-love, perversely accepting deception as an honorable tactic to be used against his green opponent:

Pen kest þe knyzt, and hit come to his hert  
 Hit were a juel for þe jopardé þat hym iugged were:  
 When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech,  
 Myzt he haf slypped to be vnslayn, þe slezt were noble. (lines 1855–58)

As he departs from Hautdesert, Gawain ties the girdle around his waist in a manner that at once recalls the girdle's prior owner, the Lady, and subtly points to Gawain's own self-love since, as the poet dryly notes, Gawain is wearing the girdle 'for gode of himself' (line 2031). Before he reaches the Green Chapel, however, Gawain's self-love will also be exposed by one of Bertilak's servants, the so-called guide, who also uses duplicitous supplication in order to divert Gawain from his final destination.

Despite David Lawton's assertion that medieval scholars no longer focus exclusively on the noble and the empowered, but also analyze 'groups and activities [that are] not privileged [...] the poor, the [...] work[ing], the criminals',<sup>48</sup> the majority of critics have so far ignored this servile figure who stands among a very small number of people the poet affords the privilege of speaking at length in the romance. Those scholars who do address the servant in their discussions of the text predominantly analyze the man as a foil to Gawain,<sup>49</sup> maintaining that the servant's unscrupulous offer to help Gawain flee from the Green Knight forces the audience of the romance to consider Gawain's earlier acceptance of the girdle in a less negative light.<sup>50</sup> No matter what their approach to this figure, critics typically insist on referring to the man as 'the guide', even though neither Gawain nor Bertilak, nor the *Gawain*-poet for that matter, refer to him by this title. In fact, when Gawain asks Bertilak's help finding the Green Chapel, he asks for 'sum tolke to teche [...] [þe] gate to þe grene chapel' (line 1966). In response, Bertilak promises to assign him 'a seruaunt' (line 1971) who will show Gawain the way and who prefaces his speech to Gawain by addressing him as 'mayster' (line 2090). It is important to make this point for two reasons. Firstly, as a nameless servile member of Bertilak's household who seeks to instruct the knight, this man embodies the will to master characteristic of the amorous Lady who, too, begins her sexual tutelage of Gawain with an offer of servitude. Secondly, like the Lady, the nameless servant represents a group within late fourteenth-century society whose speech was frequently stigmatized by medieval moralists as

<sup>46</sup> Heng, 'Feminine Knots', p. 505.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 507.

<sup>48</sup> David Lawton, 'Analytical Survey I: Literary History and Cultural Study', in *New Medieval Literatures*, ed. by Wendy Scase, Rita Copeland, and David Lawton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 237–72 (p. 248).

<sup>49</sup> Burrow, p. 119; Clark, pp. 366–68; Clein, pp. 118–19.

<sup>50</sup> Clein, p. 118.

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deviant or false.

Throughout the period, also known as ‘the age of the household’,<sup>51</sup> domestic servants were increasingly figured as deceitful speakers both in fictional representations of servile characters and in household manuals written for and by household servants.<sup>52</sup> As in the case of women, the equating of servant’s speech, whether unauthorized or disruptive, with falsehood served to protect and re-inscribe hierarchies within the late medieval household whose servile members were expected to fashion their selves, both inwardly and outwardly, in the image of their lord.<sup>53</sup> By condemning illicit servile speech as false, authors of courtesy books and household manuals established the speech of the head of the household as the only legitimate speech within the domestic realm, at the same time, suppressing all other ways of speaking within the walls of the household. In light of the period’s equation of servile speech with deception or deviancy, it should not come as a surprise that, like the Lady, the servant resorts to duplicitous supplication in his exchange with Gawain.

Although he initially acknowledges Gawain’s chivalric superiority and proclaims his abject love for Gawain (‘And 3e ar a lede vpon lyue þat I wel louy’, line 2095), the servant later discourteously addresses Gawain as *þe* as he commands the knight to save himself, thus emerging as another figure in the romance intent on reshaping Gawain’s identity. Like the Lady, the servant uses textual authorities to authorize his speech, presenting himself as a reader of romances when he appeals to such famous romance heroes as Hector, the hero of the French *Roman de Troie*, to persuade Gawain to flee from the Green Knight:

And more he is þen any mon vpon myddelerde,  
And his body bigger þen þe best fowre  
Þat ar in Arþurez hous, Hestor, oþer oþer (lines 2100–3).<sup>54</sup>

Finally, displaying a penchant for the imperative, the servant pleads with Gawain to act in self-interest (‘3e worþed þe better’, line 2096), tempting him to commit an ignominious act of perjuring himself:<sup>55</sup>

‘Forþy I say þe [...] let þe gome one,  
And gotz away sum oþer gate, vpon Goddez halue! [...]  
And I schal swere bi God and alle his gode halʒez [...]  
Þat I schal lelly yow layne, and lance neuer tale

<sup>51</sup> David Starkey, ‘The Age of the Household: Politics, Society, and the Arts c. 1350–c. 1550’, in *The Later Middle Ages*, ed. by Stephen Medcalf (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), p. 225. See also Felicity Heal, ‘Reciprocity and Exchange in the Late Medieval Household’, in *Bodies and Disciplines*, eds. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 179–98.

<sup>52</sup> See ‘The Parson’s Tale’, *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 304 lines 505–10; *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. by Sanford Brown Meech and Hope Emily Allen, Early English Text Society, o. s. 212 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 113; ‘The Boke of Curtasye’, in *The Babees Book*, ed. by Frederick J. Furnivall, Early English Text Society, o. s. 32 (London: Trübner, 1868), pp. 299–327 (p. 316); *Patience*, in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, lines 49–55. Sinful servile speakers also abound in the *Fürstenspiegel* genre. For a discussion of servile speakers within the latter literary tradition, see Judith Fester, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

<sup>53</sup> Heal, ‘Reciprocity and Exchange’, p. 180.

<sup>54</sup> The textual notes in the Tolkien and Gordon edition of the poem point out that ‘Hestor appears to be a genuine variant, occurring in several French romances including the Vulgate Merlin and the Suite du Merlin’ (p. 125, n. to line 2102).

<sup>55</sup> See also Clark, pp. 366–67.

Pat euer 3e fondet to fle for freke þat I wyst.’ (lines 2110; 2118–19; 2122–25)<sup>56</sup>

Instead of encouraging him to become an adulterer, as the Lady did, the servant offers Gawain the possibility of adopting the subject position of a perjurer, whose interiority he structures around self-love and fear of death. This is the subject position the servant himself inhabits when, swearing by God and the saints, he first pledges to lie for Gawain, but then deserts him after Gawain rejects his offer to flee. On the surface, the servant fails to persuade Gawain to forswear himself. But, like the Lady’s pleas, the servant’s speech does effect a change in Gawain, forcing him to respond in a manner typical of false speakers: that is to say, in a manner that reveals little about their inner state.

Our first glimpse of Gawain as a false speaker whose inner world is outwardly unreadable comes after Gawain thanks the servant for his insulting offer, delivering his answer in a ‘gruchyng’ (line 2126) tone:

‘Grant merci’, quoth Gawain, and *gruchyng* he sayde:  
 ‘Wel worth þe, wy3e, þat woldez my gode,  
 And þat lelly me layne I leue wel þou woldez.  
 Bot helde þou hit neuer so holde, and I here passed,  
 Founded for ferde for to fle, in fourme þat þou tellez  
 I were a kny3t kowarde, I my3t not be excused.’ (lines 2126–31, my italics)

*Gruchyng* is condemned by late medieval penitential writers as one of the ten sins of the mouth. It is also conventionally associated by medieval moralists with disgruntled servants who grumble against their socially superior masters.<sup>57</sup> And, as Chaucer’s Parson reminds the Canterbury pilgrims, it is also a sin commonly known as ‘the Devil’s Pater Noster’:

servauntz that grucchen whan hir sovereyns bidden hem doon lewful thynges;/ and foras-  
 muche as they dar nat at openly withseye the comaundementz of hir sovereyns, yet wol  
 they seyn harm, and grucche [...] prively for verray despit;/ whiche wordes men clepen  
 the develes Pater noster.<sup>58</sup>

For Chaucer’s Parson, *gruchyng* speech voices the servants’ opposition to the authority of their masters, constituting the very antithesis of the Pater Noster prayer that enacts supplicants’ inner submission to and love for God. In a similar way to Chaucer’s Parson, when the *Gawain*-poet identifies Gawain’s superficially virtuous rejection of the servant’s offer as *gruchyng*, he constitutes the knight as a sinful double of his former virtuous self whose present selfhood is grounded in hiddenness or opacity. Gawain is no longer the knight whose outward behavior and language reflect his inner emotions. Instead, Gawain’s grudging words outwardly express his gratitude to the man who offers him an opportunity to become ‘a kny3t kowarde’, at the same time communicating little about his desire for self-preservation and his fear of death to his interlocutor (or to the audience of the romance). When Gawain does air his frustration, as he does at the Green Chapel in the concluding scenes of the romance, he does so like the typical grumbling subordinate: he directs his anger at his courtly mistress, the Lady of Hautdesert, delivering his so-called anti-feminist diatribe.

<sup>56</sup> The servant’s offer (‘lelly yow layne, and lance neuer tale’) is reminiscent of the Lady’s supplication to Gawain to conceal the love-token she gives him from Bertilak: ‘And biso3ht hym, for hir sake, disceuer hit neuer, I Bot to lelly layne fro hir lorde’ (l. 1862–63, my italics). I am grateful to the anonymous *Leeds Studies in English* reviewers for bringing this instance of repetition in the text to my attention.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, 65; *Speculum Vitae*, p. 485 lines 14, 637–68; Chaucer’s *The Parson’s Tale*, p. 304 lines 505–8.

<sup>58</sup> Chaucer, *The Parson’s Tale*, p. 304 lines 505–8.

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Gawain's 'anti-feminist' tirade follows on the heels of the Green Knight's revelation of his part in the testing of Gawain at Hautdesert. Revealing himself as Bertilak de Hautdesert, the Green Knight correctly identifies love of self as the motivating force behind Gawain's concealment of the girdle ('for 3e lufed your lyf', line 2368); however, Gawain rejects this diagnosis. Not grumbling but groaning with anger at this point, Gawain first curses the girdle itself as the seat of 'falssyng' that made him forsake his 'kynde', or his true self. Then, he accuses the girdle's original owner for his failure to return it to Bertilak in exchange for Bertilak's winnings as they had agreed, delivering a sermon against duplicitous women who lead virtuous men astray:

Bot hit is no ferly þa3 a fole madde,  
And þur3 wyles of wymmen be wonen to sor3e,  
For so watz Adam in erde with one bygyled,  
And Salamon with fele sere, and Samson eftsonez —  
Dalyda dalt hym hys wyrde — and Dauyth þerafter  
Watz blended with Barsabe, þat much bale þoled.  
Now þese were wrathed wyth her wyles, hit were a wynne huge  
To luf hom wel, and leue hem not, a leude þat coupe [...]  
And alle þay were biwyled  
With wymmen þat þay vsed.  
Þa3 I be now bigyled,  
Me þink me burde be excused. (lines 2414–28)

Gawain's tirade on the dangers of trusting women shifts the blame away from himself by aligning himself with the worthies of the Old and New Testaments and by transferring the responsibility for his failings onto women who devised and put into execution the adventure of the Green Knight. However, there is more to Gawain's sermon than its overt message to distrust women, no matter how lovable they may be. Although frowned upon by critics as unoriginal in its 'anti-feminist' sentiments or, alternatively, as self-indulgent,<sup>59</sup> Gawain's speech is a *tour-de-force* of false speaking.

Instead of focusing on his own transgressive behavior, Gawain publishes the transgressions of others, rehearsing the indiscretions committed by famous men (Adam, David, Solomon, and Samson) who were led astray by women. Nor is Gawain's choice of these specific biblical heroes as innocent or as random as it may first seem. All the men he mentions fall as a result of their sexual weakness, unable to resist the physical beauty of the women who deceive them. Gawain's own transgression compares favorably to the sexual failings of these men, who cause the downfall of kingdoms and nations, as in David's, Samson's, and Solomon's cases, as well as of all mankind, in that of Adam. At the same time, by putting the actions of the Lady on par with those of the biblical seductresses, Gawain encourages the identification between this woman and the morally corrupt, fallen women of the Bible, transforming the Lady's testing of his virtues into a tale of her own viciousness. Finally, a discerning medieval audience would recognize Gawain's diatribe as an instance of a literary borrowing from another fourteenth-century romance that tells the story of king Alexander and Queen Candace.<sup>60</sup> In the romance of *Kyng Alisaunder* (c. 1300), Alexander travels to the domain of Queen Candace where she

<sup>59</sup> See John Eadie, 'Sir Gawain and the Ladies of Ill-Repute', *Annuaire Mediaevale*, 20 (1980), pp. 52–66 (p. 55); S. L. Clark and Julian N. Wasserman, 'Gawain's "Anti-Feminism" Reconsidered,' *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association*, 6 (1985), 57–70; and Batt, 'Gawain's Anti-Feminist Rant'.

<sup>60</sup> I owe my awareness of this instance of literary borrowing to Eadie's 'Sir Gawain and the Ladies of Ill-Repute', p. 55.

manipulates him into becoming her lover. It is at the point when they become lovers that she speaks the lines about famous men being tricked by women, using the same sequence of names that appears in Gawain's speech in order to justify her illicit desire for Alexander.<sup>61</sup> Gawain's speech thus ventriloquizes a duplicitous woman who manipulates biblical examples to camouflage her own transgressive desires and conduct. It places Gawain on a par with the Lady and the servant who also exploit textual authorities to legitimize and give expression to their own illicit desires.

In putting into Gawain's mouth a speech on women's duplicity originally spoken by a duplicitous woman in another fourteenth-century romance, the *Gawain*-poet identifies Gawain's inner world — his self-love, fear of death, desire for the Lady, and anger at Bertilak and himself — with the world of romance where selves find expression who, like Queen Candace, desire differently or desire in ways that are transgressive.<sup>62</sup> It is highly appropriate, then, that when Gawain returns to Arthur's court, the knight's companions — those chief residents of the world of late medieval romances — dismiss Gawain's attempts to adopt the green girdle as an emblem of his moral failure, instead, choosing to wear it as a badge signifying their love for Gawain: 'for sake of þat segge, in swete to were' (line 2518). The courtiers' gesture of appropriation and revision may perhaps be regarded as an enactment of the symbolic work performed by many popular late medieval romances whose authors frequently borrow their story lines and characters from penitential sources. In the hands of romance authors these penitential materials are made to express new, sometimes deviant or transgressive desires.

It is this possibility for articulating non-orthodox ways of desiring, or non-orthodox selves, that may have provoked the condemnation of romances by such medieval moralists as the anonymous poets of *Cursor Mundi* and *Speculum Vitae*, or William Langland who in *Piers Plowman* contrasts selves produced by means of reading or reciting of romance tales with those fashioned by means of the Pater Noster prayer by having Sloth confess that

I kan noght parfitly my *Paternoster* as the preest it syngeth,  
But I kan rymes of Robyn Hood and Randolf Erl of Chestre  
Ac neither of Oure Lorde ne of Our Lady the leeste that evere was maked.<sup>63</sup>

Like the poets of *Cursor Mundi*, *Speculum Vitae*, and *Piers Plowman*, the *Gawain*-poet, whose works span the divide between romances and penitential poems, contrasts the rehearsal of the Lord's Prayer as an instrument of self-expression and self-reformation with the telling of tales or the telling of lies in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Constituting Gawain at the beginning of his quest as a virtuous penitent through his devotion to Christ and the Virgin, the poet contrasts Gawain's rehearsal of the Pater Noster with acts of duplicitous supplication performed by the Lady and the servant who accompanies Gawain to the Green Chapel, both of whom the poet identifies as readers of romances. But the poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does more than offer his audience a narrative documenting Gawain's internal transformation as a result of his encounter with readers of romances. As Sarah McNamer

<sup>61</sup> Eadie, p. 55. For the relevant passage in *Kyng Alisaunder*, see *Kyng Alisaunder*, ed. by G. V. Smithers, Early English Text Society, o. s. 227 (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 417–19 lines 7703–9.

<sup>62</sup> Nicola McDonald discusses popular medieval romances as vehicles for transgressive desire in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. by Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 1–21.

<sup>63</sup> William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A Parallel Text Edition of A, B, C and Z Versions*, ed. by A. V. C. Schmidt (London and New York: Longman, 1995), p. 230 lines 5.395–97. See also the opening lines of *Speculum Vitae*, p. 6 lines 35–48; and *Cursor Mundi*, ed. by Richard K. Morris, Early English Text Society, o. s. 57, 3 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1874–93), pp. 8–12 (lines 1–88).

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recently argued, the romance may mirror its own performance at a Yuletide feast, a setting which is conducive to dalliance and the reading of romances. Such mirroring, according to McNamer, allows the poet to blur the boundary between the fictional world of his narrative and the world inhabited by his aristocratic audience, as well as to enlist his audience as ‘extras’ in his narrative, and, finally, to lead them to imagine ‘a similar conversion experience’.<sup>64</sup> To this I would also add that, in composing a romance in which romance narratives are central to its hero’s process of self-expression and self-creation, the poet also offers members of his audience a potentially rich resource upon which they themselves may draw for the purpose of reforming or expressing themselves. In this, the *Gawain*-poet anticipates another medieval compiler of devotional matter and chivalric romances — William Caxton — who a century later justifies his publication of *Le Morte d’Arthur* by presenting it as a conduct manual for noble men and women interested in learning how to ‘doo after the good and leve the evyl [...] alle not to vyce ne synne, but t’exersyse and folowe vertu’.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Sarah McNamer, ‘Feeling’, in *Middle English: Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature*, ed. by Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 241–57 (pp. 254–56).

<sup>65</sup> William Caxton, ‘Preface’, in *Malory’s Works*, ed. by Eugène Vinaver, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. xv.