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Layers of Pursuit and the Sound of Victory

Two simultaneous and intricately paralleled hunts occur at the center of the poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: Lord Bertilak engaging in the gentlemanly sport of hunting wild game, and a corollary hunt, his lady wife's indecent and unrelenting seduction of courteous Sir Gawain. Lord and Lady Bertilak's separate but related pursuits correspond especially strongly in their third and final episodes. As Lord Bertilak sets out on a last hunting excursion his hunting party rides into fields that are "dazzling, fixed with frost," where "the crown of a sunrise rose scarlet and crimson" (1694, 1695). In turn the description of Lady Bertilak's appearance as she enters Sir Gawain's chamber, her own hunting ground of sorts, is subtly evocative of the fields and sunrise her husband encounters. "Her head went unhooded, but heavenly gems / were entwined in her tresses in clusters of twenty. / She wore nothing on her face; her neck was naked" (1738-40). Lady Bertilak's "heavenly gems" undoubtedly glitter in a way that recalls the "dazzling" fields of Lord Bertilak's own hunt. And the Lord's "crown of a sunrise" where the word "crown" so strongly connotes the head, is reflected in the deliberate attention Lady Bertilak's own head is given. This special regard for her head and its adornment (or lack thereof) works in two ways: It draws a connection between the "crown of a sunrise" in Lord Bertilak's hunt and "head", "tresses", and "face" in Lady Bertilak's corresponding pursuit, while also implying the deep sensuality of the Lady's chase, for her head is not covered but rather "unhooded" and she wears "nothing on her face" in fact, "her neck [is] naked".

When Lady Bertilak's hair is compared to the fields of Lord Bertilak's hunt it would follow that the Lady's body is akin to the Lord's hunting grounds. But this new correlation complicates the idea that there are solely two parallel hunts described by this poem. Certainly Lord Bertilak's hunt for wild animals and Lady Bertilak as huntress of Sir Gawain are the primary and most obvious pursuits, but closer examination of the language suggests a set of secondary hunters and their prey. The end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reveals that Lord Bertilak has in fact instructed his wife to tempt Sir Gawain, and with this understanding it is not Lady Bertilak chasing Sir Gawain but rather, Lord Bertilak using his wife's body as both a vessel and a hunting ground in which to trap and implicate Sir Gawain. According to this insight Lord Bertilak is hunting two types of prey: wild game, and good Sir Gawain. Yet the confusion between hunter and prey grows even more convoluted. Sir Gawain is on a quest for the mysterious Green Chapel Knight so in one sense Gawain is the hunter and the Green Knight the hunted. However, the conclusion of Gawain's search must inevitably end in the loss of his life as dictated by the rules of the game played in King Arthur's court, and loss of life is a definitive characteristic of prey, so from this angle roles are reversed and the Green Knight plays hunter with Sir Gawain as prey. When Sir Gawain finally accepts Lady Bertilak's girdle he does so hoping that "With luck, it might let him escape with his life," here reinforcing his position as the hunted (1858). The circular nature of the interlocking hunts detailed in this poem is made clear in that while Sir Gawain searches for the Green Knight, he also recognizes that he will be soon be endangered by the same man he seeks. And so the hunter and the hunted seem to chase one another's tales.

Just as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight simultaneously hunt and are hunted by one another, Sir Gawain and Lady Bertilak have a similar, although less immediately obvious

circular pursuit. Lady Bertilak's hunt of Sir Gawain is played purely in temptation. She wants Sir Gawain to give in to his sexual desire for her, and she is not meek in her advances. Lady Bertilak "...pushed him and pressed him, / nudged him ever nearer to a limit where he needed / to allow her love or impolitely reject it" (1770-73). She is insistent and unrelenting, "pushing", "pressing", and "nudging" poor Sir Gawain closer and closer to the line between chivalrous behavior toward noble ladies—giving her what she desires, and courteous behavior toward fellow nobleman—not sleeping with another's wife. The word limit, beyond describing the boundaries of medieval social codes, also carries connotations of Sir Gawain's personal limits. How much temptation can he stand before he succumbs to this lovely lady's advances? And yet, even as Lady Bertilak chases Sir Gawain, the nature of her chase suggests another reversal of roles in the hunt. Lady Bertilak doggedly pursues Sir Gawain, but her ultimate aim, if he indeed relents and agrees to sleep with her, is to succumb to Sir Gawain sexually. Traditionally in heterosexual relations the male is portrayed as chasing, dominating or otherwise overpowering the female. So in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* it would follow that although Lady Bertilak "pushes", "presses" and "nudges" Sir Gawain in her insistent pursuit of him, she is actually trying to entice him to prey on her. And Sir Gawain, in turn, as he "fence[s] and deflect[s]" the lady's advances is trying with all of his might to resist preying, as it were, on Lady Bertilak (1777).

Of the separate and commutable hunts underway in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the two principle pursuits are identifiable and united by common lingual themes. Lord Bertilak's hunt on his estate and Lady Bertilak's hunt in Sir Gawain's bedroom are relayed in urgent, forceful vocabulary. The Lord's hunt begins as his dogs "...fall on the scent of a fox, and follow, / turning and twisting as they sniff out the trail" (1699-1700). And continues with descriptors like

tenderness / and pride, and yet their plight / is perilous unless / sweet Mary minds her knight” (1766-69). The Lady’s aim is not “tenderness and pride”, but victory, this is a hunt after all. And the words “plight” and “perilous” sound sinister truth against a background of hollow gentility.

The moment of absolute triumph for both Lord and Lady Bertilak is expressed, in keeping with a common thread, audibly. Lady Bertilak’s comes first in line 1859: “So relenting at last [Sir Gawain] let her speak.” Here Sir Gawain’s act of forfeit is quite simply to let Lady Bertilak speak. This is the ultimate surrender of power, and underscores the importance of words and speech in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Both similar and different from his Lady’s triumph, Lord Bertilak’s moment of final victory is not set apart in language so much as it is in decibels. To announce the end of the hunt “the bugler blew with one mighty blast, / and the others hallooed with open throats” (1913-14). While a “mighty blast” and hallooing with “open throats” creates a full and raucous victory soundtrack, the role of sound in triumph is further emphasized in succeeding lines: “It was the merriest music ever heard by men, / that rapturous roar for which Reynard’s soul / was raised (1915-17). Victory here is not communicated in how the hunting party looked or felt at the moment of the kill, but rather by how they sounded.

The final episodes of Lord and Lady Bertilak’s respective hunts go beyond descriptions of the chase leading to eventual victory. They reference one another, parallel each other, and offer insight into the myriad relationships of pursuit that lie just beneath the surface of the language of the poem. Nearly every pairing of hunter and prey can be reversed such that the prey becomes the hunter and the hunter the prey, and this fluidity of roles gives rise to many interlinked and potentially contradictory interpretations. Throughout the poem sound is associated with triumph, and spoken words bestow power on their speakers. This is especially interesting when taken in the context of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a written work

composed in an alliterative style. Alliteration, with its repetition of sounds fairly begs to be read aloud. But what sort of power did the anonymous author of this poem wish to wield? Given the intricacies uncovered solely in these two hundred lines, it may be impossible to ever fully know.