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Gender and Sexual Transgression

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In this essay, anthropologically inspired methods are applied to the study of gender and sexuality in three of the Cotton Nero poems: *Cleanness*, *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*Gawain*). The argument is that all three poems use the same basic idea of what constitutes 'transgressive' and (as a corollary) 'proper' gender and sexuality; this essay sets out to study both that basic schema and the varying uses made of it in the different texts (so far as I can determine, *Patience* does not fall into the same pattern). This, then, is an investigation of 'gender' in a very broad sense: as a system of classification of sexual relations. The principal focus will be on the male characters; nevertheless, a debt is owed by anyone writing on gender and sexuality in the *Gawain*-poet's works to those who have focused more on the female characters: Stanbury 1993 on *Pearl*; Fisher 1989; Heng 1991, 1992; Kamps 1989 on *Gawain*. (I have not been able to consult Dinshaw 1994.)

Cleanness

Cleanness contains a clear depiction of gender and sexual transgression, and an equally clear condemnation of that transgression. Two main sexual sins are described in the poem. The first is committed by those who live immediately before the Flood:

> Þer watz no law to hem layd bot loke to kynde,
> And kepe to hit, and alle hit cors clanly fulfylle.
> And þenne founden þay fylþe in fleschlych dedez,
> And controeued agayn kynde contraré werkez,
> And vsed hem vnþryftyly vchon on oþer,
> And als with oþer, wylsfully, upon a wrange wyse:
> So ferly fowled her flesch þat þe fende loked
> How þe deȝter of the douþe wern derelych fayre,
> And fallen in felaȝschyp with hem on folken wyse,
> And engendered on hem jeauntez with her japez ille. (263–72[1])

[1] References to both *Cleanness* and *Pearl* are taken from Andrew and Waldron 1987.

Apart from the vague description of the first part of this quotation, the most obvious sexual act is the fornication of humans with devils. These unnatural acts cause God to wipe out almost the entire human race. A second sort of sexual act which offends God is specified later in the poem: it is the homosexuality of the men of Sodom. To quote God himself,

> 'Þay han lerned a lyst þat lykez me ille,
> Þat þay han founden in her flesch of fautez þe werst:
> Vch male matz his mach a man as hymseluen,
> And fylter folyly in fere on femmalez wyse.' (693–96)

The poet emphasizes that he is not putting forward a general condemnation of sexuality by having God eulogize the joys of 'natural' sexuality, the *kynde crafte* (697–710). Disapproval is directed exclusively towards the sexual modes designated as differing from this 'natural' and 'clean' version.

Spearing (1987, 181–82) sums up what the two main instances of 'unclean' sexuality in *Cleanness* have in common:

> The offences of mankind that provoke the Flood are defined precisely as offences against the universal system of categories that depend on separation and appropriateness – the integrity of the human species as against other species, and the integrity of the basic binary classification that assigns appropriate roles to the two sexes. As Mary Douglas puts it, 'Holiness means keeping distinct the categories of creation' (p. 53). When sexual intercourse takes place within the same sex, or between one race and another (in this case between human females and the fallen angels), these categories begin to blur, and the whole system is threatened.

Transgressive sexual desire in *Cleanness* is that which adopts an object forbidden because it falls into what, in the ordered taxonomy of the universe, is defined as an impermissible category. Ideal and unclean sexuality, then, are defined categorially.

If we adopt the terms which anthropology uses to categorize human sexuality, the two 'unclean' cases in *Cleanness* can be seen to be complementary. They correspond to two forms, endogamy and exogamy, which in anthropological discourse are more commonly framed in exclusively heterosexual terms.[2] In the majority of societies, the universe of people is divided into three categories, which determine sexual availability. Firstly, there is the category which is 'too similar', or 'too close' to the subject. In anthropological literature, this is usually discussed as incest, with the subject and the object

2 Furthermore, these terms are generally used for kinship structures: that is, they are not about who can sleep with whom, but about who can form an alliance by marriage with whom. In the case of medieval Christianity, however, sex outside marriage being strictly prohibited, permissible sexual relations and kinship structures can be treated as broadly the same thing.

belonging to the same basic kingroup; but the category of the 'too similar' could equally well be applied to gender, thus disqualifying homosexuality. In the second place, there are those people with whom sexual relations are permitted. These people are defined by a certain kind of distance from the subject: for example, a particular degree of kin – or sexual difference. These people, however, also share a degree of similarity or closeness to the subject; and this distinguishes them from the third category of people, those who are 'too different', or 'too distant' from the subject. These people are considered to belong to a different order of being altogether: the boundary which separates them from the subject is sacrosanct. Both the mating of human with devil and that of man (in the sense of 'male human') with man in *Cleanness* represent couplings which are unacceptable according to these criteria: the former because subjects mate across categories that are considered too different from each other, the latter because mating takes place within a single category, between those considered too similar. I shall call the former type of sexual relation 'extreme exogamy', and the latter, 'extreme endogamy'.[3]

What defines these categories, though? Do the definitions of 'too-similar' and 'too distant' remain the same, in every text, in every culture? Clearly, the answer is no. The form taken in *Cleanness* by overly endogamous relationships makes them relatively easy for us nowadays to see as transgressive; the God of *Cleanness*'s condemnation of homosexuality as 'unnatural' represents an attitude still available and, indeed, deeply entrenched within our culture. Scholarship has shown, however, that there is nothing 'natural' about the ways in which different cultures construct the categories which underlie the regulation of sexuality (in an anthropological context, see Moore 1988; in a historical context, Foucault 1981). The notion of 'natural' sexuality is a powerful political device, which functions to place certain, ideologically highly charged ideas outside the bounds of discourse: to make them, that is, almost impossible to question (Foucault 1981). As such, what is meant by sexual 'nature' varies according to the particular culture using it. Furthermore, it is an inconsistent category even within a 'single' culture: in the Middle Ages, 'natural' sexuality was invoked both to support and to condemn homosexuality (Boswell 1980, 145–56, 303–32). Other categories which similarly use the terminology of the 'natural' also vary between cultures. For example, it is known that the degrees of kinship within which the Church has permitted marriage have shifted hugely over time (a major change was made at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215: see Brundage 1987, 356): hence, the definition of incest, a sexual transgression which depends on categories of kinship, has varied. Just because the version of acceptable sexuality put

3 I should emphasize that the object of analysis here is not homosexuality but homophobia. That is, I am not suggesting that the representation of homosexual desire as desire for someone extremely (or overly) similar to oneself is in any sense an adequate or accurate one; in *Cleanness* at least, it simultaneously is produced by and justifies anti-gay prejudice.

forward in *Cleanness* appears to accord largely with that which conservative brands of present-day Western culture designate as 'natural', then, is no reason to accept it without analysis; on the contrary, it is a very good reason for analyzing it with some care.

While extreme endogamy is easy for modern readers to spot in *Cleanness*, things are rather different when it comes to the poem's definition of overly exogamous relationships. No very strong feeling of transgression is attached today to the idea of humans mating with angels or with devils. Nevertheless, as Spearing makes clear in the passage quoted above, another form of extreme exogamy is miscegenation, or sexual intercourse between people of different races; the act carried the death penalty in many medieval societies (Brundage 1987, 461–62, 518), and the political issue is still very much alive today (for instance in issues of 'ethnic cleansing'). In the case of the *Gawain*-poet's works, it is important to appreciate the power attached to such overly exogamous relationships. Indeed, while there is a formal distinction between extreme exogamy and endogamy, in effect the two modes are associated, even identified. Lévi-Strauss noted the same association in some of the cultures he studied: 'incest [. . .] even combines in some countries with its direct opposite [son antithèse], inter-racial sexual relations, an extreme form of exogamy, as the two most powerful inducements to horror and collective vengeance' (1969, 10). Throughout, this combination has been associated with Sodom: recent critical work has shown how the sexual category called 'sodomy' cannot simply be taken to mean (male) homosexuality, but merges inextricably ideas of homosexuality and of foreignness (Goldberg 1994, 1–22; see also the other essays in this volume. Patton 1994 contains an especially pertinent application to representations of Aids). The association of extreme endogamy with extreme exogamy is found in *Cleanness* in exemplary form with the presentation of the sin of Sodom, in which confusion of gender is combined with confusion of ontological category. The description of the angels shows two beautiful creatures of indeterminate status:

> [Loth] syȝe þer swey in asent swete men tweyne;
> Bolde burnez wer þay boþe with berdles chynnez,
> Ryol rollande fax to raw sylk lyke,
> Of ble as þe brere-flour whereso þe bare scheweed.
> Ful clene watz þe countenaunce of her cler yȝen;
> Wlonk whit watz her wede and wel hit hem semed.
> Of alle feturez ful fyn and fautlez boþe;
> Watz non aucly in ouþer, for aungels hit wern,
> And þat þe ȝep vnderȝede þat in þe ȝate syttez. (788–96)

According to God (692–96, quoted above), the sin of the men of Sodom is to take other men and treat them as if they were women. The angels are beardless and beautiful, with silken hair, fair complexions and clear eyes: these details are standard in portraits of romance heroes, but also in those of

romance heroines (Colby 1965, 25–72; esp. 68–69). In many such romances, characters described like this cross-dress: youths successfully disguise themselves as girls, and vice versa.[4] Although designated in the poem as both unnatural and unholy, then, the men of Sodom's reading of the angels as 'feminine' falls well within the guidelines produced by medieval literature.

This 'unclean' interpretation of the portraits is countered by a 'proper' one. As Lot recognizes, the beings' beauty actually indicates their otherworldly status: they are not humans at all, but angels. As such, of course, they are no less sexually taboo than human males would be. The sin of Sodom is thus double, at once overly endogamous and overly exogamous. Lot, trying to save both the angels and the men of Sodom from the imminent breaking of this double sexual taboo, offers his daughters in place of the angels. As Spearing (1987, 182) points out, these daughters function as representatives of heterosexuality, the legitimate alternative to the overly endogamous relations of homosexuality. The girls also, however, represent a correction to overly exogamous desire, since they, as humans, belong to the same order of being as the men. In *Cleanness*, Sodom is a site at which extreme endogamy and extreme exogamy are one; and this pairing of the two modes of sexual transgression will reappear with significance in *Pearl* and *Gawain*.

Sexuality, the cultural reading of the direction which sexual desire takes and the mode it adopts, cannot be separated conceptually from gender (Rubin 1991). When the poem claims that the men of Sodom's sin is to treat men as if they were women, this interpretation in some sense allows for no true 'homosexuality' at all. The sin is presented as a form of heterosexuality, with a person considered to be masculine having intercourse with a person considered to be feminine.[5] The discrepancy between God's view and that of the men of Sodom here turns on the interpretation of the proper relationship between two terms which modern theory calls 'sex' and 'gender'. 'Sex' is considered to be a quality of the body, and is defined by genital anatomy: by

[4] Examples of boys being mistaken for or disguising themselves as girls are *Floire et Blancheflor* and *Floris et Liriope*; there is also the fabliau *Trubert*. Girls disguise themselves as youths in, among others, *Aucassin et Nicolette* and *Le Roman de Silence*.

[5] Boswell (1980, 23–26, 156–58) notes that this construction of male homosexuality (which, historically, is by no means the only one) occurs in cultures which combine anti-gay prejudice with misogyny: since femininity is considered absolutely inferior to masculinity, it is degrading for a man to do anything 'feminine'. Boswell argues that 'the anxieties [of many Church fathers] about homosexual acts were largely responses to violations of gender expectations rather than the outgrowth of a systematic approach to sexual morality' (1980, 157–58): a reading supported by the virtual absence of condemnation of female homosexuality in these writings. Boswell includes a translation of the twelfth-century Latin debate between Ganymede and Helen (a text which survives in translations in a variety of languages), in which it is interesting that Helen, the proponent of heterosexuality and anti-gay prejudice, describes the objects of male homosexual desire as effeminate, while Ganymede, exemplary object of that desire, argues strongly that he does not, nor wants to resemble a woman (1980, 381–89; e.g., ll. 185–92).

that which determines which of the two possible roles in biological sexual reproduction the person can take. 'Gender' is the name given to the complex of roles which the person can play in society, culture and sexuality. Distinguishing these two concepts allows for what Butler (1990, 6) calls 'a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders': since 'if gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way'. In modern terms, then, the God of *Cleanness*, who sees the objects of sodomitic desire as properly masculine, supports a continuum between sex and gender; the men of Sodom, who see these objects as legitimately feminine, promote discontinuity between sex and gender. In God's eyes, the 'feminine' man, object of desire in Sodom, is a monster of perversity.[6] *Cleanness* makes it clear that God is to be believed: that, as the omniscient creator of all things, his judgement on the categories involved is correct. The only benchmarks of improper gender and unclean sexuality are failure to perceive these *clane* classifications (Glenn 1983–84; Johnson 1984, 120, remarks that 'the *Glossa Ordinaria*, quoting Isidore, says that Sodom means blindness'), or dissent from them. There are no perverse desires in *Cleanness*, then; there are only perverse interpretations.

Through the figure of God, *Cleanness* operates a powerfully authorized enforcement of a particular brand of sexuality, and a corresponding condemnation of other versions, represented here by the dual sin which is extreme endogamy and exogamy. For the rest of my analysis, I shall continue to use the definitions of normative and transgressive sexuality outlined in *Cleanness* as a touchstone, in order to demonstrate how the other two poems create a more complex and nuanced picture while nevertheless retaining the same basic model.

Pearl

In *Cleanness*, the privileged form of sexuality – that associated with God – is all-human heterosexuality. To it are opposed any desires defined by God as overly endogamous and exogamous: these are designated transgressive. As a literary homily, *Cleanness* is wedded to the idea of compulsory heterosexuality, in a way which is quite foreign to the courtly and mystical

6 Butler (1990, 7) has recently challenged the sex/gender distinction: 'gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive", prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts' (Butler's italics). She discusses (1990, 106–11) recent work on chromosomes, supposedly the ultimate determinants of 'natural' sex, and shows how strenuously scientists have attempted to tidy up the empirical evidence by forcing it into a binary gender classification which, in fact, radically misrepresents it. In *Cleanness*, God's endorsement lends even stronger ideological support to the categories designated as 'natural'.

discourses used by both *Pearl* and *Gawain*. In the heavenly context depicted by *Pearl*, the distinction between 'ideal' and 'transgressive' desire is erased: all-human heterosexuality is shown to be as inappropriate as are extreme endogamy and exogamy. Having discredited all these forms of sexuality, the poem ultimately provides a new form of ideal desire: one which breaks down altogether the preceding distinctions.

As is universally recognized, the Dreamer's desire for the pearl he has lost, and for the Maiden who represents it for much of the poem, is phrased in terms borrowed for the most part from the courtly love lyric; its expression is erotic. As a form of desire, it partakes of both endogamous and exogamous extremities. On the one hand, the Dreamer's desire for the Maiden is apparently incestuous: as he himself says, 'Ho wat3 me nerre þen aunte or nece' (233). Critics usually start from the assumption that the Maiden represents a real-life dead baby daughter; her presence thus needs no explanation. It would be more helpful, however, to ask why the poet makes the object of sexual desire in this poem a daughter. This girl is obviously far too close kin to the Dreamer for her to be a licit object of desire. The same questioning can be extended to the issue of the Maiden's age. Again, critics have generally asked why a two-year-old should be represented as grown up (the usual answer is that she represents a version of the *puella senex* topos; see, for instance, Levine 1977) but one can equally well ask why a baby should be there at all. The child's age works to strengthen the impression of transgressive and inappropriate sexuality: sexual desire for a child only two years old was no less taboo in the Middle Ages than it would be now. The Dreamer's love thus combines sexual and paternal affection.

His language continues this ambiguity. When the pearl itself is first introduced, it is described in womanly terms:

> Perle plesaunte, to prynces paye
> To clanly clos in golde so clere:
> Oute of oryent, I hardyly saye,
> Ne proued I neuer her precios pere.
> So rounde, so reken in vche araye,
> So smal, so smoþe her sydez were. (1–6)

The emphasis here on smallness, which is so typical of portraits of courtly ladies (Colby 1965, 65), will later be seen to express the small size of the baby girl. Roundness and smoothness similarly occupy a semantic space which combines childishness with femininity. Feminist critics have long (Greer 1971) complained that women are infantilized in Western culture – that the features which are considered to constitute their sexual attractiveness are in many cases those of the child: small size, slight figure, large eyes, smooth skin, lack of body hair. In *Pearl*, this combination works powerfully to emphasize the idea of incest with a very young daughter, and thus to render the desire the Dreamer expresses disturbing.

On the other hand, the Dreamer's desire for the Maiden is also presented as overly exogamous. She herself points out the distance between them, objectified by the river which separates their respective banks. He may not come over the river to her, because he is still alive. Furthermore, he will never be allowed to take part in the procession of the virgins following and adoring the Lamb: these are special souls, quite different from those of people who have died in adult life, and who are not 'saf by ry3t'. The Dreamer is in every way ontologically too different from the Maiden for his desire for her to be legitimate.

The Dreamer's desire for the Maiden is thus doubly disqualified by the poem: like the desire of the men of Sodom for the angelic youths, it is at once too endogamous and too exogamous. In *Pearl*, however, this desire is not contrasted to all-human heterosexuality. On the contrary, the forms designated in *Cleanness* as 'normative' and 'transgressive' respectively are here collapsed into each other: the Dreamer expresses his transgressive wishes in the dominant medieval discourse of heterosexual human desire – that of *fin'amors*, or courtly love. *Fin'amors* appears in *Pearl* with two power configurations, both entirely conventional; and they are discredited together, as a matching pair. The poem opens with an image of a male subject controlling a female object. The Dreamer describes himself, the lover, as the Jeweller; the woman he loves is denied any subjectivity by being reduced to a piece of jewellery, an object made by him. More even than a figure of her death, this image renders her inanimate, as if she had never truly been alive. There is no question of her operating independently of the Jeweller. The relation between the lover-maker and the beloved-made recalls Pygmalion, whose story is told at length in the *Roman de la Rose* (the direct echoes of the *Rose* in *Pearl* have often been documented; see, for example, Gordon 1953; Pilch 1964; Vantuono 1984). The power-relations at this point represent one strand of the courtly tradition: that in which the male is dominant. They are also those which give the father authority over his child. This expression of courtly sexual desire is thus associated in the poem with the Dreamer's incestuous desire for his baby daughter: in other words, with the overly endogamous version of his desire.

In the vision, by contrast, the Maiden is granted the dominant subjectivity. Critics have noted the extent to which the Dreamer sees her as the power-source in the world of the vision: for instance, after she has told him that God will be the judge who decides whether or not he will be allowed to cross the stream, he accuses her of condemning him to remain on the other side (Gross 1991, 84):

> 'Þur3 drwry deth boz vch man dreue,
> Er ouer þys dam hym Dry3tyn deme.'
>
> 'Demez þou me,' quoþ I, 'my swete,
> To dol agayn? Þenne I dowyne.' (323–26)

In the vision, she is said to be beyond the power of earthly makers such as

Pygmalion (745–55). The Maiden is now a *domna*, a stock figure of courtly lyric, the lady of higher social rank and stronger will than the poet-lover, and who is accorded masculine gender (Kay 1990, 84–131). Being more powerful and active than the Dreamer, she occupies the 'masculine' position, while he plays the 'feminine' role of passivity and submission. This gender-reversal is an entirely standard part of *fin'amors*; and in *Pearl*, it does not substantially change the nature of the Dreamer's desire for the Maiden. At most, it may confirm the perversity of that desire: the 'feminine' man may attract disapproval here, as in *Cleanness*. The etiology of the Dreamer's feminization is, however, quite different from that in Sodom: there, men were feminized by becoming objects of homosexual desire, while here, a man is feminized by the subjective experience of heterosexual desire. Barthes (1979, 14) phrased the principle: 'a man is feminized not because he is inverted but because he is in love'. *Fin'amors* with this gender configuration is associated with the Dreamer's desire for the Maiden as heavenly queen, and therefore as a creature who belongs to a different category of being: that is, it is identified with the overly exogamous side of his desire.

Instead of all-human heterosexuality being opposed to extreme endogamy and exogamy as in *Cleanness*, then, in *Pearl* it is divided into two forms, each of which is identified with one of the openly transgressive modes. The inversion which *Pearl* operates on *Cleanness* is radical. It is not just that, in directing this sort of desire towards the Maiden, the Dreamer shows the same failure of perception as the men of Sodom manifested with regard to the angels. The sexual mode which in *Cleanness* occupied the ideal ground is itself discredited.

There is, nevertheless, a representation of ideal sexuality in *Pearl*: it is the desire directed towards the Lamb at the end of the poem, and which unites Maiden and Dreamer. It is noticeable that this desire is presented as ambiguous: it oscillates between 'normative' and 'transgressive' forms. On the one hand, it is represented as a marriage, an image which recalls institutional heterosexuality and gender hierarchy. On the other, the creature at its centre is the Lamb: at once a heavenly creature and an animal, above and below the human, and therefore doubly exogamous. With the vision of the New Jerusalem, *Pearl* moves into mysticism: a genre in which normative, bridal and conjugal imagery is commonly combined with polymorphous sexuality and fluid gender. This combination becomes ideal – so long as the object of desire is Christ. Lochrie (1991, esp. 38–47) shows how the desire for redemption in late medieval mysticism is expressed as an erotic focus on the fissured and fragmented body of Christ, and particularly on the bleeding wound in his side (an addition made by the *Pearl*-poet to the Apocalypse texts that formed his main source: Field 1986, 11–14). This wound, as Bynum (1982; 1991, 151–79) demonstrates, was considered to add to Christ's body an element of feminine gender: it is, therefore, the precise site of this ambiguous bigendering or crossgendering which becomes the locus of redemption. It is important

to realize that the elevation of 'unclean' sexuality and gender-configurations in mysticism does not mean that they cease to be considered transgressive; rather, it is that impurity becomes the royal road to holiness. Lochrie sums up this paradoxical mechanism succinctly: mysticism 'introduces fissures as tokens of perfection and defilement as its means' (1991, 41). Mystical glorying in transgression and impurity, sexual and otherwise, is found over and over in medieval writings. (According to Kristeva (1982, esp. 90–132), its principal theorist, this glorying in what she calls 'abjection' is a distinguishing characteristic of Christianity as opposed to Judaism, a distinction perhaps relevant to the contrast between *Cleanness* and *Pearl*). The Dreamer's much-derided attempt to cross the river can be seen in the light of Lochrie's description of the mystic's actions: 'through excess of desire, the transgression which leads to knowledge and union is produced, but it requires defilement and risks culture' (1991, 41). In this context, although his act may remain a failure, it is not just a failure. His refusal to respect the boundary which separates him from the Maiden, far from being a result of perverse misinterpretation (analogous to the sin of Sodom), becomes a sign of his salvation. He takes the risk that every mystic takes. His immersion in the river testifies to that desire for fusion with the divine which characterizes visionaries such as Julian of Norwich. Similarly, his desire for his child-bride, precisely because of its transgressive nature, becomes the symbol of his desire for the sacred (on child-brides in mysticism, see Bynum 1991, 151, 165). Those things normatively considered to be transgressive remain so: but this transgression, in leading the visionary beyond the confines of the world below, becomes the means and the sign of transcendence, and therefore of access to the divine.

In both *Pearl* and *Cleanness*, the divine view of gender and sexuality must prevail. The models themselves are, however, quite different. Whereas *Cleanness* takes seriously the obligations of the literary homily genre to enforce compulsory heterosexuality through a discourse of the 'natural', *Pearl* cleaves to mysticism, and thus portrays the divine order as one of fluid, ambiguous gender and undecidable sexuality. It is an order which would be anathema to *Cleanness*.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

In *Gawain*, the basic framework worked out in *Cleanness* is complicated by a new sort of sexual transgression, one absent from the other two poems. The presence of adultery alters the value of the other terms in the sexual taxonomy.

When the Green Knight reveals Morgan le Faye's plot to Gawain, the hero reacts violently:

> 'Corsed worth cowarddyse and couetyse boþe!
> In yow is vylany and vyse þat vertue disstryez. [. . .]

> For care of þy knokke cowardyse me ta3t
> To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake,
> Þat is larges and lewté þat longez to kny3tez.'
> (2375–76, 2379–81)

This self-accusation, and particularly the allegation of covetousness, has puzzled critics. It is at least possible, however, that Gawain is here arraigning himself for a sexual sin. The second of the three meanings given in the *MED* for *coveitise* is 'strong sexual desire; concupiscence, lust'.[7] It may be a surprise to learn that the hero thinks that he has committed such a transgression when, in a poem pervaded with sexuality, he has tried so hard to keep himself pure. Where and how has the transgression occurred? The framework established in *Cleanness* provides one way of approaching this question in *Gawain*.

In *Cleanness*'s terms, the most obvious example of a transgressive sexual act occurs when Gawain kisses Bertilak:

> He metez me þis godmon inmyddez þe flore,
> And al with gomen he hym gret, and goudly he sayde,
> 'I schal fylle vpon fyrst oure forwardez nouþe,
> Þat we spedly han spoken, þer spared watz no drynk.'
> Þen acoles he þe kny3t and kysses hym þryes,
> As sauerly and sadly as he hem sette couþe. (1932–37)

In kissing Bertilak, Gawain mimics the Lady, reproducing the style of her kisses to him. This scene thus shows precisely the same definition of male homosexuality as was found in *Cleanness*: it involves a change of gender, in which an anatomical man is regendered as sexually feminine. Gawain's kisses are, then, extremely endogamous; in *Cleanness*, they would be transgressive.

A key to the value of this extreme endogamy in *Gawain* is found in the paired sexual form which inevitably accompanies it. Extreme exogamy is less evident in this than in the other two poems. Here, it consists in Gawain's relation to the Virgin Mary. The Virgin, a being of an altogether different order from Gawain, plays the part of his courtly lady. It is her image that he bears on the inside of his shield, where the sight of her revives his courage, should it flag (648–50): a role conventionally given to the knight's secular lady (Hanning describes this as the 'chivalry topos' (1977, esp. 54–60)). It is said that Gawain is the Virgin's own knight (1769). She is invoked to protect him from the Lady's blandishments: the potential sexual relationship with the

7 Two interesting examples are given from the earlier version of the Wyclifite Bible, c.1384. Eph 4.19: 'Thei bitoken hem wilf to vnchastite, in to worchinge of al vnclennesse in coueityse [L. *avaritiam*]'. Dan 13.8: 'Susanne . . . walkide in the gardyne . . . And the eldre men . . . brennyden in the coueitise [L. *concupiscentiam*] of hir eius'. Johnson (1984, 120) further notes Augustine's argument that 'what appears as simple lust may be more complex and have avarice as its primary impetus.'

Lady and the more abstract one with the Virgin are thus put forward as alternatives. In every way, the Virgin replaces the flesh and blood lady who is the typical romance knight's inspiration; the relationship with her is carefully constructed as a parallel to the usual sexual love. The Virgin belongs, however, to a different ontological order, and Gawain's 'sexual' relationship with her therefore echoes the transgressively exogamous desire of the *Pearl* Dreamer for the Maiden, or of the men of Sodom for the angels.[8]

Gawain's acts, then, fit clearly into the structure of transgressive sexual relationships as they are delineated in *Cleanness*. There is in this poem, however, a complicating factor present in neither of the others: all-human heterosexuality, insofar as it is available to Gawain, is identified with adultery, itself a sexual sin. The 'normative' form of sexuality is thus rendered illicit.[9]

The Lady of Hautdesert represents the principal focus of human heterosexuality in the poem. It is her beauty that inspires in Gawain the only explicitly erotic feelings he is given in the poem. He responds to her on their first meeting; but on her final visit to his bedside, this desire comes near to overwhelming his resistance:

> He se3 her so glorious and gayly atyred,
> So fautles of hir fetures and of so fyne hewes,
> Wi3t wallande joye warmed his hert. (1760–62)

The only object which the poem offers Gawain that is consistent with the normative form of all-human heterosexual desire makes such desire adulterous.[10] In his efforts to evade this adultery, the most ingenious strategies are his 'transgressive' sexual acts. His attachment to the Virgin Mary is set up as a protection against adultery. Indeed, it is the knight's last bastion of defence:

> Gret perile bitwene hem stod,
> Nif Maré of hir kny3t mynne. (1768–69)

In Gawain's moment of greatest danger, Mary is invoked to prevent his seduction. Gawain's courtly relation to the Virgin is thus part of his armour against adultery. The same is true of his relation with Bertilak. The feminine style Gawain adopts when kissing the lord has a significance beyond mere mockery. In his mimicry of the Lady, Gawain is not just playing any woman,

8 This is not, of course, to argue that courtly desires addressed to the Virgin are invariably transgressive in medieval literature. On the contrary, they are often ideal.

9 There was in *Cleanness* a suggestion that not all forms of all-human heterosexuality were licit: in his speech to Abraham, God qualifies the 'kynde crafte', stating that its pleasures must be enjoyed within marriage and in secret. These opinions, like many of the *Gawain*-poet's ideas about proper and improper sexuality, owe much to Augustine. For Augustine's opinion that marriage 'made something good out of the evil of sex', and for his strictures about privacy, see Brundage 1987, 89, 81, respectively.

10 Critics have argued that the aim of the poem itself is to contain the sexuality of its other women, Gwenore and Morgan la Faye: Fisher 1989; Kamps 1989.

he is playing this woman: he is actually masquerading as the Lady. By thus taking on her persona, Gawain is enabled to redirect her adulterous kisses towards their proper owner, her husband. Gawain's extreme endogamy, like his extreme exogamy, is thus performed with the aim of avoiding the sin of adultery. Paradoxically, he employs these supposedly transgressive forms as a means of enforcing marital fidelity, an idealized version of all-human heterosexuality.

The paradox is less striking from Gawain's own point of view, since he himself sees no transgression in extreme endogamy and exogamy. Apart from their correction of the Lady's desire, Gawain's extremely endogamous kisses also have a further significance: in his own person, Gawain kisses Bertilak to express his preference for the lord over the Lady. Although he chooses an erotic format, the preference Gawain here intends to express is not, I would argue, a homosexual one. It is, rather, 'homosocial': a term which designates 'social bonds between persons of the same sex' (Sedgwick 1985, 1).[11] In Gawain's case, he wishes to show Bertilak that he feels greater allegiance to such homosocial bonds than to heterosexual ones; in practice, that his sexual desire for the Lady will not cause him to commit adultery, because another man – her husband – would be harmed thereby. In the process of establishing this inter-male solidarity, Gawain ironically shows a disregard for gender, feminizing himself by his mimicry of the Lady. The emphasis for Gawain here, then, is less on the distinction between the 'homo' and the 'hetero' – less on gender – than on the opposition between the 'social' and the 'sexual'. He does not see his kisses to Bertilak as representing any sort of sexuality, much less a transgressive one. This can only work because nothing of his feelings for Bertilak appears to Gawain to constitute sexual desire. The only sexual transgression Gawain recognizes – adultery – falls within the realm of all-human heterosexuality, because this is the only form of 'sexuality' that he recognizes as such.[12] Not only does Gawain acknowledge no transgression in extreme endogamy and exogamy: he believes that, precisely because of

11 Sedgwick emphasizes that the expression in erotic terms of affection between men may not 'mean' genital homosexual desire, but may rather constitute a declaration of homosocial bonding in a way considered to be elegant and sophisticated. Such expressions may therefore coexist with violent anti-gay prejudice. Sedgwick's exemplary reading (1985, 28–48) of Shakespeare's Sonnets shows how these early modern English texts combine an insistence on the value of institutionalized heterosexuality (the exhortations to the Friend to marry) with the homoerotic expression of affection and desire between men; an affection which may or may not include genital sexual activity, but, on the Poet's part at least, certainly expresses greater allegiance to the Friend than to the Dark Lady.

12 I am not here disagreeing with Heng (1991, 1992), who argues that the *luf-talkyng* between hero and Lady itself constitutes a seduction. The poem is pervaded with eroticism: but Gawain himself has an extremely reductive definition of sexuality, which leads him to discount the vast majority of the desires circulating in the text. Sedgwick comments on the variability even within a single culture of 'what *counts* as sexuality' (1985, 2). For an incisive commentary on modern constructions and their politics, see Weeks 1985, 3–14.

their absolute opposition to all-human heterosexuality, practising these forms will protect him from adultery, and therefore from sexual sin.

Gawain, then, keeps his *cortaysye clane* by refusing altogether to take part in heterosexuality. He supports it for others: there is never any suggestion that Bertilak should give up his would-be unfaithful wife. This form of sexuality, then, retains its normative status. Gawain tries to regulate human heterosexuality: to make it conform to the highest state of which it is capable. At the same time, he himself aspires to the spiritually still higher state of celibacy: which is signified by extreme endogamy and exogamy, since for Gawain these relations are non-sexual, and indeed represent the abjuration of sexual activity altogether. Gawain pursues an ideal of asexual chivalry, similar to that found in the *Queste del Saint Graal* and Malory's *Sankgreal*. There is in *Gawain*, then, an inversion of the order of *Cleanness* not dissimilar to that with which *Pearl* ends up: all-human heterosexuality is felt to be inappropriate to the protagonist's situation, while the ideal and the sacred are aligned with extremely endogamous and exogamous forms. The situation is, nevertheless, quite different: whereas in *Pearl*, the overly endogamous and exogamous modes retained their value of transgression even as they became sacred, in *Gawain*, the hero sees no sexuality, and therefore no transgression in these modes.

It would appear, then, that extreme endogamy and exogamy are not the sexual sins of which Gawain accuses himself at the Green Chapel. On the contrary, he adopts these forms precisely as protection against the only sexual transgression he recognizes, which is adultery. And yet it seems that they fail to safeguard his chastity. The sin of which Gawain ultimately arraigns himself is an all-human, heterosexual one:

> 'And comaundez me to þat cortays, your comlych fere,
> Boþe þat on and þat oþer, myn honoured ladyez,
> Þat þus hor kny3t wyth hor kest han koyntly bigyled.
> Bot hit is no ferly tha3 a fole madde,
> And þur3 wyles of wymmen be wonen to sor3e,
> For so watz Adam in erde with one bigyled,
> 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 couþe.
> For þes wer forne þe freest, þat fol3ed alle þe sele
> Excellently of alle þyse oþer, vnder heuenryche þat mused;
> And alle þay were biwyled
> With wymmen þat þay vsed.
> Þa3 I be now bigyled,
> Me þink me burde be excused'. (2411–28)

Gawain's error, like those of the paragons he lists, has lain in the *use* of women: the term denotes sexual intercourse (see e.g. *Cleanness*, 267, quoted above). He sees his relation with the Lady as no different from that of David with Bathsheba, or of Samson with Delilah. It appears that all his precautions have been useless. His careful avoidance of sleeping with, or even admitting to, desire for the Lady gains him nothing. His devotion, expressed as extreme exogamy, to the Virgin Mary does not preserve him. Similarly, his preference for Bertilak over the Lady, a preference manifested as extreme endogamy, fails to guarantee his purity.

Where and when, though, has the sin taken place? The Green Knight claims (and Gawain accepts) that his failure centrally involves the last day of the exchange of winnings contract. Certainly, there is evidence here to support Gawain's own theory that he has been seduced by the Lady. His concealment of the girdle from Bertilak can be read as an adulterous act. The fact that, as the Green Knight says, he does not conceal it for *wowyng* (2367), as a sign of his own lust for the Lady, is important; nevertheless, Gawain's are not the only intentions in question. Because he has taken it upon himself to correct the Lady's adulterous sexuality in his own person by returning to her husband the kisses wrongly alienated, he should obviously do the same with the green girdle which he believes she gave him as a love-token (a name it retains in the rest of the poem: e.g. 1874, 2033, 2438). By concealing a gift that, in his eyes, is a sign of her adulterous passion, he is effectively aiding and abetting her supposed infidelity.

Is this, then, Gawain's sexual sin? It is striking that, in his vituperative diatribe, there is no mention of adultery, and that not all the examples of fallen men cited are adulterers. Gawain seems to see his failure as due, not specifically to adultery, but generally to a masculine brand of all-human heterosexuality. More noticeable still, although it is cited as the cause of sin, this sexuality also becomes the source of pardon: Gawain's similarity to the heroes of concupiscence is given as a reason for him to be excused. A single cause is identified by the knight for his downfall: women. According to his diatribe, it is not so much masculine sexuality which is at fault, as the female sex. Although this is its strongest formulation in the poem, this attitude can be seen to underlie the hero's behaviour earlier in the poem, particularly in the bedroom scenes. Gawain's typical strategy in evading the Lady's adulterous propositions is to ascribe all the desire in the situation to her:

> 'Bot to take þe toruayle to myself to trwluf expoun,
> And towche þe temez of tyxt and talez of armez
> To yow þat, I wot wel, weldez more sly3t
> Of þat art, bi þe half, or a hundreth of seche
> As I am, oþer euer schal, in erde þer I leue,
> Hit were a folé felefolde, my fre, by my trawþe.' (1540–45)

The aggressive implication is that what is in question here is not theoretical knowledge of the art of love, but actual experience of desire: Gawain is

effectively ascribing to the Lady far more sexual desire than he himself feels. He thus echoes the common medieval view of women as creatures of excessive sexual desire.[13] In this context, the Lady's forward sexuality in the bedroom scenes, while at one level it genders her as masculine, is simultaneously the sign of excessive femininity (Heng 1992 argues for the same gender combination; for other 'wooing women' in romances, see Weiss 1991). In his misogynistic diatribe, then, Gawain reaffirms views which he has evidently held throughout the poem: that women are deceptive, and that their effect on the men they seduce is invariably morally, spiritually and practically detrimental. The hero sees sexuality as the source and root of all sin, and women as the source and root of all sexuality. Extreme endogamy and exogamy thus appear asexual to the hero because they represent a mode of desire untainted by feminine sexuality. Bertilak as a man and the Virgin Mary as a woman devoid of sexuality are, for Gawain, the ideal objects of desire. The opposition between extreme endogamy and exogamy on the one hand and all-human heterosexuality on the other means that these two figures jointly represent the abjuration of relations with sexual women. Hence, to cleave to them is to avoid sin. And yet, at the end of the poem this scheme has not worked. Gawain has apparently sinned, somehow, somewhere. He himself can only perceive this sin as a sexual relationship – which, in his definition, means an all-human, heterosexual relationship. Sin, for Gawain, is exclusively the result of contact with a sexual woman, and the inevitable consequence of such contact: 'to luf hom wel and leve hem not' is, as he says, not a feasible option.

Gawain himself, then, never sees that there might have been any problem with his adoption of extremely endogamous and exogamous modes: that they might have spilled over into sexual sin. Nevertheless, there is a reading in which his extreme endogamy, at least, contributes to his sin. On the last day of the exchange of winnings, it is noticeable that Gawain exerts himself to make the delivery of the kisses particularly seductive (1932–37, quoted above). On this last day, the kisses become a blind, intended to distract Bertilak from seeking for any further gifts. In his misogynistic diatribe, Gawain describes deceit as the result of sexual relations; from this point of view, he himself 'seduces' the lord with his final set of kisses. The kisses that Gawain delivers up to Bertilak, kisses that he believes to be pure because extremely endogamous, thus become the symbols of his own deception of the lord.

When he conceals the girdle, Gawain conspires in the betrayal of the lord; when he kisses him, he himself deceives him. Previous to this act, *Gawain*

[13] It is, nevertheless, clear that Gawain does feel desire for the Lady: the 'wi3t wallande joye' described at 1762. Ferrante (1975, 2) describes the mechanism in action here perfectly: 'Woman, as the most obvious object of male concupiscence, is made to represent lust and thus is held responsible for it; the object of temptation becomes the cause.'

inverts *Cleanness*'s values in such a way that normative sexuality, identified with adultery, becomes transgressive, while extreme endogamy and exogamy become the marks of an ideal (a)sexuality. Due to Gawain's behaviour in the last exchange, however, this new hierarchy is no longer tenable: the forms of ideal sexuality cease to be separable from those of sexual transgression. It appears that the hero's belief in the wholesale asexuality – the *clannes* – of extremely endogamous and exogamous forms is not only reductive but inaccurate; Gawain ignores the existence of polymorphous sexuality at his peril. *Gawain* thus endorses the powerful, apparently inevitable association of extreme endogamy and exogamy with transgression found in the other two poems. There are links with genre here: romances, although they enjoy gender and sexual play, typically end up enforcing heterosexuality as an ideal. It may be that the Lady's definition of chivalry as properly rooted in all-human heterosexual desire (1512–27) is the one the audience is supposed to accept as 'correct': such sexuality, after all, does not have to be adulterous, whatever Gawain thinks.

In three of the Cotton Nero poems, then, sexual transgression and inappropriate gender are important themes, causing major concern both to the characters and to the poet. The definition of transgression can in each case be analysed in terms of the categories of 'too-similar' and 'too-different', with their correlative designation of forms of sexuality as extremely endogamous or exogamous; these two forms of transgressive sexuality are generally associated. Despite these basic similarities, however, the value given to any one sexual act or gender configuration, varies across the three poems. *Cleanness* is relatively straightforward in its espousal of normative, all-human heterosexuality and the sex-gender continuum. *Pearl* is more complex, relying on a paradox by which sexual and gender transgression ultimately become the mark of the sacred. *Gawain*, more convoluted still, leaves us in doubt about which of two interpretations we are to consider superior. The hero can be seen as a paragon of (a)sexual virtue, whose perceptions are mistaken only when he believes himself to have sinned; alternatively, the romance can be read as a ringing endorsement of all-human heterosexuality, in which Gawain's paranoid gynophobia causes him to conflate this perfectly acceptable, indeed ideal sexual form with the undoubted sin which is adultery.

ARTHURIAN STUDIES

ISSN 0261–9814

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A COMPANION TO THE *GAWAIN*-POET

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First published 1997
D.S. Brewer, Cambridge
Reprinted in hardback and paperback 1999
Reprinted in paperback 2002, 2007

Transferred to digital printing

ISBN 978-0-85991-529-8

D. S. Brewer is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mt Hope Avenue, Rochester, NY 14620, USA
website: www.boydellandbrewer.com

A CiP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 96-32104

This publication is printed on acid-free paper

Printed in Great Britain by
Cpod, Trowbridge, Wiltshire

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