Knightly Conventions In "sir Gawain And The Green Knight.".

KNIGHTLY CONVENTIONS IN

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

by

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ABSTRACT

While literary critics have been quick to praise the beauty and richness of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, few have attempted to understand the poem in its fourteenth-century historical context. A close look at the status of chivalry in fourteenth-century England and at the prevailing cultural outlook of the knights of the time aids greatly in uncovering some of the deliberate ambiguity in the poem and in evaluating more precisely Gawain's behavior.

A knowledge of the military aspects of chivalry allows us to understand both the challenge which the Green Knight presents to Arthur's court and the response which the court might make to it. Familiarity with the conditions normally operating in chivalric duels allows us to see that the Green Knight's challenge is strange and foolish. By allowing his opponent to strike first while he remains passive, the Green Knight places himself at a distinct disadvantage. A fourteenth-century knight, aware of the value beginning to be placed on discretion as well as bravery, would have been considerably perplexed by the Green Knight's challenge.

Familiarity with the prevailing social conditions at the time--notably late medieval courtesy--also helps us to understand more clearly the difficulties Gawain faces at the host's castle. There he must ward off the beautiful

hostess's advances while still remaining the perfectly courteous knight. Knowing how women were expected to behave during this period helps us to see that the hostess's behavior, like the Green Knight's proposal for a duel, was very strange by fourteenth-century standards. Just as the directives of knighthood failed to offer precise information about how a knight ought to respond to a seemingly mad proposal for a duel, so the dictates of chivalry offered no guidance on how a knight was to deal with an aggressive noblewoman.

In the scene at the Green Chapel, the religious aspect of knighthood comes into focus as Gawain is confronted with his faults and his achievements. Gawain's willingness to submit to the Green Knight's blow--really a kind of knighting accolade--makes the hero worthy of being elevated. Though he has failed in some ways, he is ultimately judged to be an honorable man and is "knighted" by the Green Knight's tap. By displaying true humility at the end, Gawain demonstrates the paradoxical Christian lesson that only those who are truly humble are worthy of being exalted.

The unusual circumstances confronting Gawain point to a growing awareness in the late Middle Ages of the discrepancy between the actual conditions of medieval aristocratic life and the idealized concept of knighthood fostered by Edward III and fueled by medieval romances and courtesy books. The ambiguity in the poem results from the fact that the knightly code offered little guidance about how Gawain ought to behave.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is the work of a poet who is comfortable with paradox, a poet who recognizes the limitations of the flesh, but does not allow this recognition to destroy the nobility of aspiration characteristic of medieval chivalry.

Introduction: The Context for Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

In 1961, in an effort to provide an overview of the scholarship which had been done on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Morton W. Bloomfield wrote that there were several fields of inquiry dealing with milieu which had hardly yet been studied with regard to the poem. Among the questions which Bloomfield found unanswered were: "What did chivalry mean to the aristocracy of fourteenth-century England? . . . In short, what exactly is the meaning of Sir Gawain in terms of fourteenth-century culture?"[1] Eight years later, Donald Howard noted that these questions concerning historical milieu remained unanswered: "I do not find for example that anyone has taken up Bloomfield's suggestion of studying . . . the Arthurian and chivalric revivals of the fourteenth century."[2]

Such an omission may seem quite surprising when one considers the sheer volume of criticism which has emerged in recent years on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. This great surge of scholarly interest in the poem has resulted largely from the general recognition that this romance is distinctively different from the other romances of the Middle Ages. Unlike nearly every

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[1] Morton Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," PMLA, 76 (1961), 10.

[2] Donald R. Howard, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in Recent Middle English Scholarship and Criticism, ed., J. Burke Severs (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1971), p. 31.

other medieval romance, this poem does not end with the glorious affirmation of the hero's virtues or with the confirmation of the ideal he represents or upholds. Instead, this poem offers us a hero, the very flower of chivalry, who is not the perfect knight he professes himself to be, and who, as the knightly exemplar of King Arthur's court, also demonstrates that the best of knights is unable to live up to the magnificent code of chivalry.

Many scholarly efforts have been made to account for the changed outlook of this poem. Some have emphasized this change by placing the work within the literary tradition of romance;[3] others have accounted for the change by discussing its place in the literature dealing with the decline of the character of Gawain;[4] still others see the work as the result of a revived religious spirit which emerged in the romances of the later Middle Ages.[5] But Bloomfield's suggestion that an examination of the status of chivalry in this period might be a fruitful approach to an understanding of the poem has evoked little response.

There are, of course, reasons for this scholarly reluctance. The mystery which surrounds the poem's sources, its authorship,

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[3] Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1965).

[4] J. F. Kiteley, "The Knight Who Cared for His Life," Anglia, 79 (1962), 131-137.

[5] G. V. Smithers, "What Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is About," Medium Aevum, 32 (1963), 171-189.

and even its place of origin makes it difficult to discuss with complete accuracy the cultural milieu of the poem. The paucity of extant writings in the Northwest Midlands dialect raises several linguistic problems, and emphasizes the fact that the poem was written in a location remote from England's cultural center, London. Since most of our knowledge about life in fourteenth-century England is based on surviving records which were kept in the south, these features surely are recognizable obstacles to understanding the cultural context for Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

In spite of the many handicaps involved in attempting to relate history to the poem, however, our understanding can be enhanced by the examination of the status of knighthood in fourteenth-century England. Certainly the chief critical questions regarding the poem have been those dealing with Gawain's behavior as a knight. Has Gawain lived up to his reputation? What does the author think about him at the end, or want us to think about him at the end: is Gawain still the flower of chivalry at the end of the poem, or is he a seriously flawed representative of the code? A knowledge of what it meant to be a knight in the late fourteenth century, and of what the nobility of the time saw in the knights around them, can shed some new light on these questions. A significant portion of my study, therefore, will offer evidence to show that the way in which knights behaved in the fourteenth-century was at

variance with the idealized knightly code. The trappings and rituals of knighthood increased at this time as a knight's utility, privileges, and wealth decreased. It was during the latter half of the fourteenth century that a large number of secular knightly orders such as the Order of the Garter were initiated.[6] Heraldry became a thriving art,[7] and the rituals concerning knightly initiation became very elaborate.[8] Yet it was during this same period of knightly idealism that the mounted knight gradually lost his importance as a military force, and the middle class began to rise in wealth and prominence at the expense of knightly wealth and privilege. Many knights, having to live on incomes which were fixed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, found themselves unable to cope financially with the inflation of the fourteenth century. This financial difficulty was compounded by a loss of laborers as a result of frequent outbreaks of the Black Death. Rather

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[6] J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages (1924; rpt. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1954), pp. 85-93.

[7] J. A. Montagu, A Guide to the Study of Heraldry (London: William Pickering, 1840), p. 8.

[8] See Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, Vol. 2, trans. L. A. Manyon (1961; rpt. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), 313-314; also Robert W. Ackerman, "The Knighting Ceremonies in the Middle English Romances," Speculum, 19 (1944), 285-313; and Charles Mills, The History of Chivalry, Vol. I (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1825), 50-59.

than attempting to acclimate himself to the new conditions of a changing world, the knight clung even more passionately to the forms of chivalry which marked his status. An audience's awareness of the disparity between the prevailing chivalric idealism, and the unfavorable circumstances in which the knights of the fourteenth-century found themselves might offer explanation for the juxtaposition of ideal and comic elements in the poem, as well as the ambiguous portrayal of Arthur's court, the hero, and his challenger.

Other aspects of a knight's life in late fourteenth-century England can also offer us aid in understanding some of the individual episodes of the poem. Knighthood, we must remember, enjoyed its heyday during the period of the Crusades (ca. 1100-1300). The livelihood and prestige of knighthood, as we shall see, depended on an almost constant state of warfare for its existence. In examining the late fourteenth century, we shall note a number of factors which led English kings to hire mercenaries led by select knights to fight their wars. We shall also note the evolution of the wealthiest among the knights into a class of landed aristocracy, who, free from the demands of constant warfare, were able to devote their energies to sporting events, such as the tournament and the hunt. The comparative tranquillity which the wealthy knights enjoyed during this post-Crusades period not only accounts for the prominence given to

such peaceful knightly activities as hunting and "luf-talkying" in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, but also explains in part why Gawain's test is a test of inherent virtue, tried in a domestic setting, rather than a test of physical strength.

We shall also look closely at the conventions of gallantry and courtesy as these were expounded in the knightly code books of the period. There can be no doubt that Sir Gawain and the Green Knight owes many of its scenes between Gawain and the hostess to the romance convention of gallantry and to the prominence which this convention gives to courteous dialogue. We shall examine this convention in detail, as well as the courteous behavior of the English aristocracy as recounted in the chronicles of the fourteenth century. The overt, almost ostentatious, nature of courtesy as it is revealed in these sources helps to explain why Gawain places such a premium on his ability to escape the hostess's seduction without being rude, while he fails the more subtle tests of loyalty and bravery.

In examining the poet's presentation of the knightly qualities of prowess and strength as these are evinced particularly in the scenes at Arthur's court, we shall discuss the rise of English nationalism in the fourteenth century and the concomitant efforts of English kings to model themselves on heroes of romance. A qualifying note on prowess as a desirable knightly trait is

provided by the Christian emphasis in the poem itself. The controls which the medieval church endeavored to place on the use of strength are set forth in some of the pontificals for the dubbing ceremony and in the advice given to knights in the knightly code books of the Middle Ages. Scrutiny of these documents will enable us to see how a fourteenth-century aristocratic audience might have viewed both Gawain's behavior in the taking up and carrying out of the Green Knight's challenge and the behavior of Arthur's court throughout Gawain's adventure.

In short, understanding the decline and simultaneous idealization of chivalry in the late fourteenth century can explain to us the precarious balance which the poem maintains between the decadent and the ideal. The victories of Poitiers and Crecy were still within memory of those living at the end of the fourteenth century. This fact certainly explains the glorious presentation of Gawain, a knight who espouses the highest ideals of chivalry. The lofty aspirations of Edward III and the Black Prince were still capable of evoking feelings of pride in Englishmen, and knighthood was still an institution to be believed in. Yet the late fourteenth century was a time when the aristocrats could not help but notice the financial difficulties in which many knights found themselves. Their usefulness and their idealized exclusiveness declined as members of the middle class became able to purchase knighthood.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is not yet the idealized account of knights in shining armor from an age long past, such as Malory's was to be a century later when chivalry was but a distant memory. Nor is it, like the works of Chretien de Troyes, a romance rendering of a magnificent hero who ultimately succeeds in overcoming all of his obstacles. The real strength of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight lies in the fact that, in spite of supernatural elements in the poem, it is a work which draws attention to the qualities that a worthy man, a real knight of the fourteenth century, is expected to evince in his real-world dealings. Gawain's real test is not a test of super-human strength against a superhuman opponent. It is a test of loyalty, prudence, and bravery--qualities which fourteenth-century aristocrats still believed to be the special province of knights. It is the unique nature of knighthood in this period--the precarious balance struck between the ideal and the actual--that we shall examine in subsequent chapters.

As a member of the knightly class, Gawain shows his values to be those which all good knights espouse. The major events of the poem, which take place at three distinct locations, draw the reader's attention to distinct aspects of the knightly code--the military, the social, and the religious. At Arthur's court, the expressly military attributes of knighthood--bravery, prowess, and strength--are focused on. At Bercilak's castle, the

domestic or social aspects of knighthood--gallantry, courtesy, and loyalty--become the focus. At the Green Chapel, Gawain is alone. This final encounter appropriately takes place at a spot called the Green Chapel, and points up some of the flaws in Gawain's behavior, while also allowing the reader to witness, for the first time, Gawain's true humility. It is only fitting that the final encounter between Gawain and the Green Knight be an occasion on which Gawain is confronted with some of his shortcomings, at the same time that he acquires an understanding of the way a true Christian knight ought to behave.

These three major scenes encompass nearly all of the action in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and provide the reader with a view of Gawain's behavior in these three areas of knightly activity. They also allow for convenient demonstration of Gawain's failures, chastisement, and subsequent rebirth in a logical sequence which will highlight the hero's development.

Chapter 1: Gawain and King Arthur's Court: Knightly Behavior at Camelot

Part I: A History of Knighthood

Despite the difficulties involved in trying to determine the actual conditions under which knights lived six hundred years ago, critics writing on Sir Gawain and the Green Knight make frequent allusions to "the code of chivalry," and scarcely an article appears on the poem which doesn't at some point refer to the institution of knighthood. Critical commentary abounds with oblique references to "chivalric standards,"[1] "the virtues of chivalry,"[2] and "the high ideals of medieval knighthood,"[3] all invoked as though their respective authors were alluding to a clearly formulated system with a rigorous set of laws governing knightly behavior in every circumstance. That medieval chivalry was never a clear-cut "system" of this sort is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that these phrases are used by critics in arriving at very different conclusions about Gawain's behavior and the poem's meaning. The

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[1] Gordon M. Shedd, "Knight in Tarnished Armour: The Meaning of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" Modern Language Review, 62 (1967), 11.

[2] T. A. Shippey, "The Uses of Chivalry: 'Erec' and 'Gawain,'" Modern Language Review, 66 (1971), 247.

[3] Michael M. Foley, "Gawain's Two Confessions Reconsidered," The Chaucer Review, 9 (1974), 77.

determination that Gawain remains the perfect knight throughout his adventure, or that, on the contrary, he is a definitely flawed hero at the poem's conclusion, appears to be based in each case on an understanding of the conditions governing a knight's proper behavior in the Middle Ages. This bewildering circumstance points up the diffuse, often contradictory nature of the principles associated with medieval knighthood, not to mention the great gulf which often existed between theory, however confused, and practice.

An accurate understanding of knighthood and its principles requires that one have some notion of the function which chivalry was designed to serve in the Middle Ages, as well as knowledge of what the institution went through before it reached the state in which we find it in our poem. As F. J. C. Hearnshaw notes: "Chivalry was not an institution, but an ethical and religious association, shedding a ray of ideal beauty through a society corrupted by anarchy."[4] The concept of knighthood and its concomitant chivalry was an organic response to the chaotic conditions which continued to prevail in Europe for centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire.

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[4] F. J. C. Hearnshaw, "Chivalry and its Place in History" in Chivalry: A Series of Studies to Illustrate Its Historical Significance and Civilizing Influence, ed. Edgar Prestage (New York: Knopf, 1928), p. 2.

The Origins of Knighthood

The onslaught of barbarian tribes created a wave of terror across Western Europe after the fall of Rome. Those who survived these attacks did so by banding together for their mutual defense, the weak offering their services to the strong in return for protection. Meanwhile, the incessant movement of the barbarians led to their naturally grouping into close-knit tribes based on a personal bond. Long after these nomadic barbarian tribes had settled down to become farmers in Western Europe, their war-based organization remained appropriate as wars continued to be fought among the Germanic tribes themselves to secure more land. This petty warfare became widespread in the chaotic sixth and seventh centuries when a new wave of barbarian invasions began to plague Western Europe. This stepped-up aggression led more and more men to commend themselves to the strong, agreeing to become a powerful man's vassal in exchange for protection. This system of commendation owed its strength and popularity to the simple fact that it proffered loyalty at a time when loyalty was difficult to find.

Among the settled Germanic tribes which had to contend with these new barbarian aggressors were the Franks. During this period, their fighting man rose in prominence as his services were needed. His importance to a war-torn society led to the development of specialized fighting skills and techniques,

among which was the ability to fight on horseback. The warhorse and more sophisticated military accountrements meant greater expense in outfitting a knight for battle. In order to finance the new equipment, the Frankish leader Charles Martel took over the estates of the church in France and distributed them to the warriors as fiefs. By the time of Charlemagne (late eighth century), an incipient knighthood characterized by two distinct features--the ability to fight on horseback and the right to hold land by virtue of one's military service--was formed. In the land of the Franks, this new fighting man became known as a chevalier--one who fights a cheval, on horseback.[5]

Among the Anglo-Saxons, conditions were a bit different. Their term "cniht" at first merely meant "young man"; later it was used to indicate a young man who acted as a servant or attendant to a lord. Gradually, the term became more specialized to indicate one who rendered military service. By the time of the Norman Conquest, the "cnihtas" among the Anglo-Saxons were fighting men of the minor landholding class who had commended

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[5] For more detailed discussion of the origin of knighthood, see Richard Barber, The Knight and Chivalry (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), pp. 3-24; also F.J.C. Hearnshaw, pp. 1-35, and Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, Vol. 2, trans. L. A. Manyon (1961; rpt. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974).

themselves to some lord and fought under his banners. The "cnihtas" fought on foot, but under the influence of the Normans, who brought the war-horse with them, the Saxons learned to ride.

These "cnihtas" or knights of the eleventh century were certainly not those refined, gallant heroes in shining armor whom most of us associate with the word "knights." In fact, existing evidence indicates that the knights of the early Norman period were almost universally hated and feared. The king found them to be undisciplined and inefficient in war and unruly and rebellious in peacetime, while the clergy feared their aggression, greed, and violence. The common people, likewise, looked upon them as mere bandits. They were not figures to be admired: "They feared no foe . . . . They were contemptuous of danger and death, but at the same time, they were treacherous and disobedient to their kings, impious and profane in matters of religion, brutal and cruel in their dealings with common folk, and free from all respect for women."[6]

The protection of Europe from the various new-wave barbarian tribes (the factor which had led to the formation of the idea of knighthood in the first place) was largely achieved by the time the Normans conquered England. The Slavs, the Magyars, and the Danes had been driven back. The feudal knighthood which had

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[6] Hearnshaw, p.5.

been developed to meet the threat, however, remained, and in the absence of strong royal authority, knights continued to plague their landed tenants, attack religious houses at will, and wage almost constant war against each other. By the time of the Conquest, the band of men who had emerged to save Western Europe had become its scourge.

The Crusades

The solution to the pervasive anarchy which dominated Western Europe in the eleventh century came from a likely quarter: the Church. The solution which the Church posited, however, was a most unlikely one. While the Church's plan for the Crusades brilliantly provided Europe with a respite from constant fighting, allowed Christian control of the Holy Land for a time, and ushered in the civility and culture which was to mark a later age, it also introduced some of the ambiguity which was to remain characteristic of the chivalry of the later Middle Ages. The Crusades (ca. 1100-1300), the clever solution of the Church to Western Europe's difficulties, necessitated a compromise of one of the most basic principles of the Church--its message of peace.

Early Christianity had declared itself to be the cult of the Prince of Peace. One of the main reasons why the Roman Empire violated its usual policy of religious tolerance by

persecuting the Christians was that the Church's members refused military service and preached against war. However, when Constantine was converted to Christianity in the fourth century, a new spirit entered into the religion. Royal acceptance of Christianity meant that the arms of the Empire were now available for the defense and even extension of the newly-favored religion. With the collapse of the Roman Empire in the West (A.D. 476), the Church remained as the only stable institution, and its leaders began to take on political functions.[7] After the first wave of barbarian invasions was over, and the various Germanic tribes gave up their nomadic existence to settle in localized areas of Western Europe, intertribal wars continued, and the Church remained the only strong institution in the West. The conversion policy of the Church toward these new pagan tribes often made use of the sword as a means of persuasion, but war was still looked upon as evil and justifiable only in extreme cases.

It was only with the rise of Islam in the seventh century that the Church's attitude toward militancy took a marked

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[7] Note that it was Pope Leo I, rather than a representative of state, who went out to meet Attila the Hun to persuade him not to attack Rome in the fifth century. See C. Warren Hollister, Medieval Europe: A Short History, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968), p. 22.

turn. Islam was a religion of the sword; war was its means of spreading its creed. Christendom was forced to defend itself from a religion which taught its advocates that those who died while fighting to spread the faith were assured of immediate paradise. Naturally, it was not to be thought that a Christian should be less assured of the prospect of a speedy entrance to paradise than a infidel, so the Church began to preach war against the heathens.[8]

The Church, then, gradually changed its perspective on the question of war. Beginning as a religious cult which preached pacificism, the Church by the eleventh century was actively preaching holy war by sponsoring the Crusades. The ambiguity contained in the phrase "holy war" is perhaps best illustrated by the reaction of the peoples of both Eastern and Western Europe to those knights who marched to the Holy Land wearing God's livery, for the prospect of fighting under holy auspices did not suddenly transform these barbarous fighting men into gentlemen-knights. The whole body of eye-witness accounts of this two-hundred-year Christian endeavor testifies to the vice-ridden activities of these men. Their actions dismayed the Byzantines, whom they had come to aid, and shocked even their heathen Turkish enemies. The taverns which dotted the Crusade

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[8] Hearnshaw, p. 8.

trail were dens of vice, and the Crusaders' progression through the land of the Byzantines to the Holy Land was marked by orgies, murders, and debaucheries of all sorts. Most shocking of all was the way captives were treated by these cruel men from the West. Helpless prisoners were crucified in Edessa, and all the inhabitants in Jerusalem were pitilessly slaughtered at the taking of that city. Rapacious leaders like Bohemund of Antioch saw fit to proclaim their victories by sending the Greek emperor a whole cargo of sliced-off noses and thumbs.[9] Yet the Pope had promised a plenary indulgence (remission of total temporal punishment which is still due after absolution) to all Christian knights who lost their lives on the Crusades. To allow men to commit such atrocities and still to assure them eternal felicity in paradise is to compromise the very spirit of Christianity.

A comprehensive study of the attitude of the medieval church toward war or a full history of the Crusades need not concern us here. The important point is that the period of the Crusades, the period when knights as a class enjoyed their

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[9]Hearnshaw, p. 10; for other examples, see G. G. Coulton, Chaucer and His England (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 169-70; Austin Lane Poole, ed., Medieval England, Rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), II, 140-1.

greatest influence and power,[10] set up a rather uneasy alliance between Christianity, a creed which preached love for one's fellow man, and war. The peculiar morality which emerged from so unnatural a union was ambiguous and equivocal.

The difficulty of uniting proper Christian behavior with the behavior appropriate to the fighting man became even more obvious during the period which followed the Crusades. Two hundred years of battles against the heathens ended on a sour note which destroyed the initial harmony of the Church's notion of "holy war." The Crusaders who had settled in the Holy Land were factious; dissensions and rivalries were constant. The military leaders of the various countries competed with each other instead of cooperating. Near the end of the venture, the pope himself had begun to pit his forces against those of Emperor Frederick II, his former ally.[11]

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[10] There is some disagreement about when chivalry had its heyday. Some would place it as late as the fourteenth century (see Walter C. Meller, A Knyght's Life in the Days of Chivalry London: T. Werner Laurie, 1924, p. 286), while others would place it as early as the eleventh (see Leon Gautier, Chivalry, ed. Jacques Levron, trans., D.C. Dunning 1959; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968 , p. 9). The general consensus is that its real power was felt to be strongest during the period of the Crusades (see Hearnshaw, pp. 19-20).

[11] At this time, popes, in addition to being spiritual leaders, were also great landowners with interest in expanding their political sphere of influence as well as their spirital one.

While Christian fought Christian, the Turks recovered the Holy Land. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Church had been unable to do anything to prevent war among Christians except perhaps urge that their battles be waged according to some moral principles. The "moral principles" which defined ideal knightly behavior were themselves based on ambiguous, often contradictory notions. This fact becomes apparent if we examine the basic tenets of chivalry.

The ideal spirit of knighthood consisted of fearless strength and prowess combined with a sense of compassion, loyalty, and deep religious faith.[12] Other qualities, such as largess, moderation, self-sacrifice, and disdain of danger were additional outgrowths of this ideal spirit, and gave rise to a number of duties which the knight was expected to perform. Among the obligations most frequently laid upon knights in the Middle Ages were the following:

1.) to defend the faith.

2.) to be always and everywhere the champion of the Right and Good against Injustice and Evil.

3.) to refrain from the wanton giving of offense.

4.) to live for honor and glory, despising pecuniary reward.

5.) to shun unfairness, meanness and deceit.

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[12] G. G. Coulton, p. 168; see also Gautier, pp. 8-10 and Hearnshaw, p. 3.

6.) to speak the truth in all things.

7.) to persevere to the end in all enterprises begun.

8.) to refuse no challenge from an equal and never to turn your back upon a foe.

9.) to protect the weak and defenseless.

10.) to respect the honor of women.[13]

The combined list of virtues and duties in this ideal code reveals some noteworthy ambiguities in the spirit of knighthood. One wonders, for example, about the compatibility of prowess and moderation, as well as the compatibility of compassion toward others and perseverance to the end in all enterprises begun. The pontificals for the knighting ceremony itself extol "strength and daring," while also calling upon God to give the knight "good patience."[14] Such principles, even in their ideal states, reveal contradictory thrusts.

The very ideal of chivalry itself, then, was to a considerable extent an impracticable system; a knight bent on embodying all the ideal virtues and executing all the proper knightly duties with equal degrees of intensity would have found himself in a

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[13] This list is based upon the lists of knightly duties and obligations set forth in Gautier, Chivalry, p. 8; Hearnshaw, "Chivalry and Its Place in History," p. 3; and Walter Clifford Meller, A Knyght's Life in the Days of Chivalry, pp. 41-58.

[14] Michael Andrieu, ed., Le Pontifical Romain au Moyen Age, III: Le Pontifical de Guillaume Durand, Studi e Testi 88 (Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1940), p. 448.

dilemma at some point. Yet if the ideals of chivalry were ambiguous and contradictory, the practices of chivalry were even more so. The last centuries of the Middle Ages reveal the gulf which came to exist between the knightly ideal, however imperfect, and the actual behavior of knights.

Knighthood after the Crusades

After the Crusades, the knights of Western Europe returned to their own lands, and their lives of constant warfare were exchanged for quiet lives on their manors. Most of the more spirited among these knights spent their time engaged in licentious behavior diversified by the chase or the tournament. These intrigues and sports of the medieval court, along with the new taste for luxury which had been sparked by the Crusaders' contact with goods from the East, became marked features of aristocratic life in the next two centuries.

Knights who had been essentially petty rulers of their own domains--they had been subject to a king in name only before the Crusades--now found themselves dominated by strong rulers in several parts of Europe. In addition, the towns which had begun to appear in the eleventh century now supported an active class of merchants and craftsmen--a new middle class--which enjoyed considerable wealth and prosperity. These conditions were the result of a more peaceful society, one in which the professional fighting man no longer always held a place of prominence.

The Crusaders' return to a peaceful domain with which they were strangely out of touch spelled the beginning of the decline of knighthood. Many returned to find their domains in poor condition or complete disarray; others who had sold what they owned to pay the expenses of going on the Crusade in the hope that they would find fortune in the East returned disappointed. Others warred against their kings, at the same time that kings tried to retain some loyal knights to aid them in such domestic battles and to help them carry out the expanding administrative duties of government. By this time, knighthood had become hereditary; those from below could join its ranks only by royal prerogative. The dying out of some noble families, the rise of the merchant class, the precarious nature of agricultural endeavors (traditionally the knights' source of income), and the great cost of knightly equipment and feudal dues all led to a reduction in the number of knights in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Many who were eligible for knighthood were never actually knighted. In Henry II's day (twelfth century), there were 5,000 landowners who became knights. By the end of the fourteenth century, even when the greatest possible pressure was exerted by a chivalric king, such as Edward III, the total number of English knights was unlikely to exceed 1500, and only about 500 were capable of fighting.[15]

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[15] Barber, p. 20.

The Fourteenth Century

When Edward III, a strong king with an active interest in war and chivalry, ascended to the throne in England in 1327, he realized, as had several of his predecessors, that calling out the feudal levies produced only a small number of fighters, many of whom were reluctant, ill-trained, and ill-equipped. By learning to consult with Parliament as a representative taxing assembly and to rule with the advice of officers in whom the people had placed their trust, Edward was able to put aside the old conditions of the feudal levy and offer high wages and the tempting prospects of ransom and plunder to anyone willing and able to fight. With tax money granted by Parliament, Edward was able to raise an army by indentures (contracts by which a certain knight agreed to serve the king with a specified number of fighting men of a specified type over a period of time). In this way, Edward was able to amass an army of professionals far superior to any the French could put on the field, even though theirs was the richer and more populous country.[16]

Edward realized that war was a business requiring efficiency, planning, and discipline; as a result, he instituted many changes in the nature of warfare, most of which, as we shall see in a moment, led to the reduction of the knight's importance in battle.

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[16]Arthur Bryant, The Age of Chivalry (London: Collins, 1963), pp. 301-02.

In spite of this fact, Edward loved chivalry with all its pageantry, spirit, and sense of adventure. His love for chivalric exploits of all sorts marked a new stage in the history of knighthood. During his reign, a new chivalric awakening took place. This resurgence of spirited knighthood was based on a synthesis of ideas gleaned from three sources--the king's love for pageantry and display, the literary romances popular in the fourteenth century, and the vestigial Germanic virtue of fidelity to one's word. From these sources emerged the concept of honor which became the knight's special hallmark in the fourteenth century.

Edward III's reign was marked by a succession of elaborate tournaments, feasts, and knightly orders. The chronicles of the fourteenth century are filled with accounts of these, all of which testify to the elaborate provisions made for the knights of the realm. For example, on the feast of St. George at Windsor in 1344, Edward staged a huge festival at which "continuous joustings took place for three days; the best melody was made by the minstrels." [17] On the day after the festival had officially ended, the king, sumptuously dressed and elegantly proceeding to the place appointed for assembly, proudly announced that he was instituting a Round Table, modeled upon that of King Arthur. It was to be comprised of three hundred knights, and supported by barons and

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[17] English Historical Documents, 1327-1485, ed. A. R. Myers (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), IV, 74-75.

knights "whom uprightness and fame put forward to be worthy of praise."[18] Edward's subsequent founding of the Order of the Garter and Richard II's establishment of the Court of Chivalry later in the century did much to foster a sense of elite class pride and self-esteem in English knights of the fourteenth century.

Edward's founding of the Round Table points to another factor which contributed to the renewed spirit of chivalry in the fourteenth century--the popularity of medieval romances of the time. This literature aided the knights' prestige by portraying invincible knights who performed fantastic feats while on noble quests. Above all, these medieval romances taught knights that these magnificient feats and the love of a maiden ought to be achieved with a certain style or grace. (This feature of chivalry will be even more important to the discussion of love and gallantry in Chapter 2.) Every request, every statement in these tales of adventure, must be couched in courteous phrases. Note, for example, Arcite's behavior in Chaucer's Knight's Tale when he is discovered by Palamon in a grove. Palamon, though weaponless, wishes to fight Arcite, who is armed, in order to decide who is to have the love of Emily. Arcite postpones the battle, however, stating:

> 'But for as muche thou art a worthy knyght;
> And wilnest to darreyne hire by bataille,
> Have heer my trouthe, tomorwe I wol not failles,

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[18] Ibid.

Withoute wityng of any oother wight,
That here I wol be founden as a knyght,
And bryngen harneys right ynough for thee;
And ches the beste, and leef the worste for me.'[19]

The romance, then, did not simply entertain knights with a tale of rough and ready adventure; it acquainted them with a certain mode of behavior which was required of successful knights. Many knights were no doubt quite unfamiliar with medieval romances, but through contact with knights attached to royal houses, even those unfamiliar with literature became acquainted with refined manners.

The knight was also inspired by the old Germanic virtue of fidelity to one's word.[20] This had been a quality associated with knighthood from its earliest days, but in combination with the renewed sense of knightly pride fostered by Edward III, and the idealized view of knightly success set forth in the romances, it assumed a new importance.

The knight's awareness of himself as a member of an elite class, the notion of successfully accomplishing great feats with style and grace, and the importance of fidelity to one's word combined to convince the man of the sword that he was one who

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[19] Lines A 1608-1616. Quoted from F. N. Robinson's 2nd edition of The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1957).

[20] H. St. L. B. Moss, The Birth of the Middle Ages, 395-814 (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), p. 40.

could do whatever he said he would do. By the fourteenth century, honor had come to mean not just one's own private sense of personal integrity, as it is often thought of today, but virtue of a much more public nature. Honor, or the French term, gloire, meant one's fame, glory, and good repute. It also implied nobleness of character or manners along with graciousness and courtesy.[21] As one historian has put it: "Honour was the shrine at which the knight worshipped: it implied renown, good conduct, and the world's approval. The 'word of honour' was the most solemn oath the knight knew."[22] A knight's simple word in contractual agreements had the binding force of law, but it was not for this reason primarily that the knight kept his word. So closely allied did knighthood and honor become that a knight stuck to his word because to break his promise would mean that he had "taken his knighthood in vain, and shown that he was unworthy of his honourable station; he was a 'false knight' which was as good as no knight at all."[23] Legal historians tell us that "rules of honour impressed him in a way which the law of contract was never likely to, because the honour of the knight's

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[21] Middle English Dictionary, ed. Sherman M. Kuhn (Ann Arbor; Univ. of Michigan Press, 1965), pp. 925-26. Hereafter cited in the text as MED.

[22] Barber, p. 32.

[23] Maurice Keen, The Laws of War in the Late Middle Ages (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 20.

estate was something he had been brought to believe in."[24] Wise kings during the late Middle Ages, realizing the importance of honor to a knight, often required that indentures of war be guaranteed by oaths upon honor, knowing that such oaths exerted greater constraint than did the law itself.

This preoccupation with honor or gloire did not, of course, transform the medieval knight into the hero of medieval romance. As a matter of fact, it actually handicapped his performance as an efficient military man, particularly among the French knights. As one modern historian puts it, "a body of knights was, in fact, not an army at all, but a fortuitous concourse of individual adventurers, without coherence, discipline, or common aim. Nothing could have been more hopeless in its inefficiency for any rational purpose . . . than the chaotic incompetence of the masses of chivalric lunatics who were all seeking personal glory rather than common victory."[25] This preoccupation with honor was particularly noticeable among the French, who clung to their outdated chivalric fighting customs during the early years of the Hundred Years War. By contrast, the English, though also affected by chivalric idealism, were able to separate this sense of personal honor from their sense of practical military efficiency. While changes in medieval weaponry, especially the development of the long bow, were making fighting on horseback

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[24] Keen, p. 20.

[25] Hearnshaw, p. 25.

tantamount to suicide for the French, the English knights fought on foot in pitched battles and usually wound up fighting hand-to-hand against only those French knights who had managed to evade the onslaught of English arrows. The bowmen were the key to England's success and constituted the largest portion of Edward III's fighting force.[26] They enabled the English in these early years to defeat the French in a number of major battles.

While Edward III required a strong "chivalry" to adorn and lead his forces in battle and to give him prestige in foreign countries, he realized that success in battle required non-chivalric tactics and other military specialists, such as archers, engineers (for undermining castle walls), and common foot soldiers. Most historians regard Edward's use of lower-class men to perform essential military tasks as one of the major factors in the formation of English nationalism. By contrast, the French had nothing but contempt for the lower classes. They considered the presence of infantry on the field against them to be a grave insult, for the French knight believed that because he was superior to a peasant socially, he must also be superior to him militarily.[27] No more

[26] C. W. C. Oman, The Art of War in the Middle Ages, rev. and ed. John H. Beeler (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1960), p. 116. At the battle of Crecy, Edward had 2300 "men at arms" and 5200 archers. See W. P. Ker, ed., The Chronicle of Froissart, trans. John Bourchier, Lord Berners (New York: AMS Press, 1967), I, 294-95.

[27] Oman, p. 116.

graphic illustration of the error in this thinking can be provided than the French defeat by the English at Crecy in 1346, when King Philip of France was forced to fight the English one day sooner that he had intended. The English had taken up a defensive battle position and were awaiting the arrival of the French troops. The French had been on the march for some hours, and when they did arrive at the site it was clear that it would take several more hours to realign themselves in proper battle formation. Realizing the condition of his troop, King Philip had decided to defer battle until the next day. When the order to halt reached the vanguard, however, the nobles at the head believed that they would be deprived of the honor of opening the fight. Their chivalric ardor could not be restrained and in their characteristic fiery and undisciplined manner, the French front line attacked before many of their troops were even within sight of the enemy. As they bore down on the enemy, the English archers made short work of both men and horses.

The English knights, in spite of the discipline they displayed in pitched battles, were also infected by a strong sense of chivalry which manifested itself in frequent skirmishes. Most English knights seem to have been unconscious of the discrepancy between practical exigencies of warfare and the idealized demands of chivalry. As C. W. C. Oman, a war historian remarks:

> "It is certainly not the least curious part of the military history of the period that the commanders who made such good use of their archery had no

> conception of the tendencies of their actions. Edward the Black Prince and his father regarded themselves as the flower of chivalry, and would have been horrified had they realized that their own tactics were going far to make chivalrous warfare impossible."[28]

The English knights, whose influence in pitched battle was greatly diminished, nevertheless found Edward's love of chivalric display contagious. In raiding parties and skirmishes as well as in domestic or personal quarrels, they were capable of the same sort of rash behavior in the name of honor that characterized the French. In England, no less than in France, knightly self-consciousness led to grotesquely dangerous personal antics carried out in the name of chivalric honor.

The popularity of chivalric vows led to all sorts of dangerous escapades, and caused honor and renown to become inextricably tied to military prowess. As W. P. Ker aptly states,

> "Don Quixote, if he had lived in the time of Chaucer's Knight, would have been considered sound in his principles and not remarkably extravagant in his manner of expressing himself."[29]

The knights of England became more and more preoccupied with the forms of chivalry, both in battle and in the court. Froissart, for example, tells of a group of young English knights, who had gone abroad in 1337, each with "one of their eyen closedde with a piece of sylke: it was sayd, how they had made a voew among

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Froissart, I, lxx.

the ladyes of their contrey, that they wolde not se but with one eye, tyll they had done some dedes of armes in Fraunce."[30] A similar vow is recounted in Le Voeu du Heron as being made by the Earl of Salisbury as he sat at the feet of his lady.[31] Froissart also records the vow of Sir James Audeley, who at the battle of Poitiers (1356) revealed to the Black Prince a vow he had made:

> "I made ones a vow that the first batayle that other the kynge your father or any of his chyldren shulde be at, howe I wolde be one of the first setters on, or els to dye in the payne; therefore I requyre your grace, as in rewarde for any servyce that ever I dyde to the king your father or to you, that you woll gyve me lycence to depart fro you and to settle my selfe there as I may accomplysshe my voew."[32]

His grievous wounding is dutifully recorded.

The pomp and pageantry of chivalry as it was practiced in the late fourteenth century are further illustrated by the behavior of Sir John Chandos, one of the most renowned English knights of his day. Froissart tells of an angry dispute between Chandos and a French knight before the battle of Poitiers. The argument arose because "eche of theym bare one maner of devyce, a blewe lady enbraudred in a sone beame above on their apayrell."[33] Perhaps the most poignant example of the almost ridiculous extent

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[30] Froissart, I, 93.

[31] J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, (1924; rpt. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1954), p. 90.

[32] Froissart, I, 370.

[33] Froissart, I, 368.

to which the "image" of a proper knight was carried is offered by accounts of Chandos' death. The gallant English knight, in pursuit of the French with a band of his men, came upon the enemy near a bridge. Chandos dismounted and marched forward with a sword in hand, but he tripped on a long robe he was wearing over his armor. A French esquire struck him in the face with the point of his sword and killed him. The esquire was able to do so because Chandos' visor was up, as it always was according to his custom. Clearly, Chandos' choice of impractical battle garb and an unfortunate battle custom cost him his life.[34]

The history of the late fourteenth century abounds in accounts of vows involving great peril. No doubt this chivalric habit owed much to the literature of chivalry which proliferated at this time in England, and to King Edward's deliberate attempts to model himself on King Arthur by founding the Order of the Garter and sponsoring elaborate tournaments. Spurred on by early successes in the Hundred Years War, the English knights vigorously and courageously pursued every opportunity for renown and honor. The aggressive, often reckless way in which these men attacked their opponents became a standard for knightly behavior. The Chandos Herald, for example,

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[34] Froissart, I, 321-22; see also George Frederick Beltz, Memorials of the Most Noble Order of the Garter (London: Wm. Pickering, 1841), p. 72.

in his Life of the Black Prince records the events of the battle of Najera (1367) and tells his readers: "There was not in the Prince's following any man, however small, who was not as bold and as fierce as a lion."[35] The Chandos Herald elsewhere tells us of Sir Ralph Hastings, who did not value death at two cherries, and of Sir William Felton, who threw himself among the enemy like a man without sense and without counsel.[36] Gervase Mathew, in commenting upon this text and others, notes that " 'Outrageous,' rash, is used as a term of praise."[37] A disdain for danger and death was an important element of the chivalric ideal as it was understood and practiced by many in the late fourteenth century. The concern with prowess in battle as a means of increasing one's personal honor became more prominent as knighthood became more preoccupied with the forms of chivalry.

Such concern carried over into the knight's peace-time activities as well. Lengthy truces in the Hundred Years' War led to an increase in the frequency of the hunts, the tournaments, the duels, and the pageantry of the knight's life. Often an

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[35] Edith Rickert, comp., Chaucer's World, ed. Clair C. Olson and Martin M. Crow (1948; rpt. New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1964), p. 328.

[36] Gervase Mathew, "Ideals of Knighthood in Late Fourteenth-Centruy England" in Studies in Medieval History Presented to Frederick Maurice Powicke, ed. R. W. Hunt, W. A. Pantin, and R. W. Southern (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), p. 358.

[37] Ibid.

excessive concern for one's own honor culminated in tragedy in a domestic setting. In the last quarter of the fourteenth century, when Richard II's disdain for war and love of the tournament led to lengthy suspension of hostilities between England and France and the cultivation of the court of chivalry, men began to challenge each other in tournaments and duels.[38] A man's mild reproach of another's want of courtesy or an insult to one's prowess could lead one knight to kill another.[39] During Richard's reign, dire consequences resulted from a chivalric ideal which exalted rashness and indomitability and stipulated that knights should disdain death. Yet during the same period, medieval courtesy books, which set forth rules for knightly behavior, continually extolled the virtues of moderation and prudence. Honore Bonet, for example, in his L'Arbre des Batailles (1382) stated that knowing when to attack, to stand firm, or to fly is one of the cardinal virtues of a knight.[40] The Church also made a concerted effort to mitigate

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[38] Rickert, p. 217; see also George Neilson, Trial by Combat (Glasgow: Wm. Hodge and Co., 1890), p. 174.

[39] Beltz, pp. 214-15. The first incident alluded to is the murder of Ralph lord Stafford by Sir John Holland in 1385. For an example of an insult to one's prowess resulting in death, see Neilson, p. 151.

[40] A.T. Byles, "Medieval Courtesy Books and the Prose Romances of Chivalry," in Chivalry: A Series of Studies, ed. Edgar Prestage (New York: Knopf, 1928), p. 202.

the force of this excessive prowess by means of the pulpit. In a sermon by Master Robert Rypon of Durham, an English homilist who was a contemporary of the Gawain-poet, we find that prudence in action is listed among the steps by which a knight may ascend to heaven.[41]

The extent to which even the English clergy, however, were affected by the surge of nationalism during the Hundred Years War and by the prowess of Edward III can be seen in a sermon by one of the fourteenth century's most famous homilists, Ralph Fitzralph. In a sermon given in London in 1345, Fitzralph admonishes the people to pray for the king's success in his military campaigns. But he adds:

> "Wherefore men pray improvidently that he [the king] may overcome his enemies, and also slay in battle. . . . Those who pray thus, in their praying offend God, and hinder their lord the king. They offend God, in acting contrary to his command--'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself' (Matt., xxii). They hinder the king, withdrawing from him their spiritual petitions."

Fitzralph goes on to say that those who pray that God "pour out the blood of their adversaries" disobey the rule governing prayer which states

> "that each shall seek and pray for all men that which they would desire to be done to them by others. There is no one who would desire that others would pray for them in the aforesaid fashion. . . indeed less learned men often err greatly when they pray for the king and his nobles, demanding from God that he give them corporal triumph in battle over their foes."

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[41] G. R. Owst, Literature and the Pulpit in Medieval England (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), p. 552.

Our good preacher goes on to insist, however, that "the Law of Nature requires that we pray for the king, and also support our troops . . ., for he is the protector and defender of the people."[42] Clearly, Fitzralph is experiencing a conflict of loyalties which is not easily resolved.

The difficulty which Fitzralph's sermon implies has led at least one historian of chivalry to remark:

> "In a sense it [chivalry] had always been in decay, since it had never even approximately realized its ideal. To make a moral trinity out of a fusion of war with religion and religion with gallantry, as the three were understood and practiced in the late Middle Ages was so flagrant an impossibility that the decadence of chivalry can be discovered in its very idea."[43]

At the time the Gawain-poet was writing, Christian knighthood had a rather ambivalent cast to it. Christians battled each other with a rash, impulsive sense of prowess for the exaltation of their own personal honors, while many laymen and clergymen recognized the need for prudence and moderation in the behavior of any knight who would call himself Christian. The part that gallantry and the social forms played in the chivalric scheme of things is a point to be examined in detail in Chapter 2, when we look closely at Gawain in his expressly social role as a visiting knight at Bercilak's castle. The uneasy relationship between the Church's morality and the concept of war, however, affords a

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[42] Owst, p. 204.

[43] Hearnshaw, p. 25.

meaningful perspective on the behavior of Gawain and Arthur's court toward the mysterious Green Knight in the first eight hundred lines of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Part II: Gawain at Camelot: Pride or Proper Behavior?

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a rich, complex poem. A review of the action in the first section of the poem will help us to keep the important features of the narrative in mind as we consider the actions of the various major characters and the military aspects of knighthood which their behavior demonstrates:

> Arthur's court is celebrating the Christmas season at Camelot, with all the festivities appropriate to the season. Although a great feast has been prepared on New Year's Day, Arthur refuses to eat until he has heard of some adventure or until he has heard a knight request a joust with another knight
>
> Suddenly a large green knight, wearing green trappings adorned with gold and riding upon a green horse, enters Arthur's hall and rudely askes that a knight of the court participate in a Christmas game with him. Bearing a holly branch in one hand and a huge ax in the other, the Green Knight proposes that a knight at Camelot agree to use the huge ax to strike a blow at the challenger and then agree to receive a return blow a year and a day later. When none of the knights at Arthur's court move to take up the challenge, the Green Knight laughs and taunts the court for its lack of fierceness and its failure to live up to its reputation for prowess. In the face of these chidings, Arthur himself steps forward to take up the challenge, acknowledging as he does so that the Green Knight's proposal is foolish. As the king brandishes the ax in preparation for the blow, Gawain, his nephew, courteously asks if he may assume the challenge in order to spare his uncle a test which is unseemly for a king. Arthur agrees, the Green Knight states his joy in receiving the blow from as noble a knight as Sir Gawain, and the hero proceeds to chop off the challenger's head. When this is done, the Green Knight picks up his head, and turning the face toward Gawain, reminds the hero of his promise. He then tells Gawain to seek him at the Green Chapel and departs.
>
> After a year, which passes very quickly, Gawain prepares to leave on his mission. The arming and the

armor of Gawain are described at length. The scene ends with the members of Arthur's court watching the hero set out on November 2, tearfully bidding him good-bye, and sadly bemoaning the loss of so great a young man.

Knighthood and its Classical Heritage

This story of adventure at the court of King Arthur begins and ends with references to the fall of Troy, the journey of Brutus, and his founding of Britain. In the fuller account given at the beginning of the poem, more specific mention is made of treachery at Troy, the accomplishments of Aeneas, and the founding of kingdoms by such leaders as Romulus and Langaberde. This classical frame for the story points up one of the characteristic features of knighthood as it was understood in the fourteenth century: a preoccupation with form, which manifested itself in part through efforts to give knighthood a classical pedigree. The pride of noble families, the records of the heralds, and the researches of the lawyers all contributed to an understanding of knighthood as a "venerable, ancient institution."[44] The legal profession, which made great headway in this period, began looking back to classical texts for justification for existing law. In these texts the Latin word *miles* referred to soldiers in general, but the word was taken with increasing regularity in the late Middle Ages to refer to knights in particular. Thus

[44] Barber, p. 33.

in Honore Bonet's L'Arbre des Batailles, miles is translated "knight," and the obligations of a Roman legionary are made part of a knight's way of life.[45] The legal investigations, along with enhancement of a knight's role as a leader in battle, caused the knight to see himself as one being in a long, illustrious tradition. This tradition was made to seem even more glorious by association with classical heroes, who earlier had been linked with the founding of France and Britain. As J. Huizinga states:

> "All notions which might have enabled them to discern in history a social development were lacking to them. Yet they required a form for their political conceptions, and here the idea of chivalry came in. By this traditional fiction they succeeded in explaining to themselves, as well as they could, the motives and the course of history, which thus was reduced to a spectacle of the honour of princes and the virtue of knights, to a noble game with edifying and heroic rules . . . . History thus conceived becomes a summary of feats of arms and of ceremonies."[46]

A glorious pedigree was thus one means of aggrandizing the position of knights in the fourteenth century, while at the same time offering knights the opportunity to determine their place in

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[45] Barber, p. 33. Huizinga (p. 71) also notes: "In reviving chivalry the poets and princes imagined that they were returning to antiquity. In the minds of the fourteenth century, a vision of antiquity had hardly yet disengaged itself from the fairy-land sphere of the Round Table. Classical heroes were still tinged with the general colour of romance . . . . How could people have known that the word miles with Roman authors did not mean a miles in the sense of the medieval Latin, that is to say, a knight?"

[46] Huizinga, pp. 68-69.

history. Thus we would seem to have a satisfactory explanation for the classical "frame" which the Gawain-poet has provided for his tale. Close examination of the individual classical figures alluded to in the opening of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, however, reveals that these are heroes whose greatness has been compromised by the commission, in several cases, of treacherous acts.[47] If one takes the traitorous "tulk" of line three to be Aeneas,[48] the cast of ancient heroes mentioned includes those tainted with evil who were also founders of great kingdoms. Aeneas, according to medieval tradition, had betrayed Troy into the hands of the Greeks, but he was also the great-grandfather of Brutus, the founder of Britian. Romulus had ultimately been responsible for the death of his brother Remus, but he was also the founder of the great city of Rome. Brutus had supposedly caused in birth the death of his mother and later accidentally killed his father, yet he also founded the isle of Britain.[49] Allusions to "trammes of tresoun" and "tricherie" amidst the account of famous founders introduces at the very

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[47] This point is ably made and supported by Theodore Silverstein, "Sir Gawain, Dear Brutus, and Britain's Fortunate Founding: A Study in Comedy and Convention," Modern Philology, 62 (1965), 189-206.

[48] See Silverstein, p. 193; and Alfred David, "Gawain and Aeneas," English Studies, 49 (1968), 402-09.

[49] Silverstein, p. 198.

opening of the poem some of the ambiguity which is to be a marked feature of the entire work. The poet's reference to Brutus' land, Britain, in particular as a place where not just "blysse" has ensued, but "blunder" too, sets the stage for the ambiguous, real-life tale that Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is to be. Gone is the unlocalized never-never land of knightly bliss and felicity which had provided the setting for earlier medieval romances; in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the heroes of the past are fallible creatures, and their lands are those which could be readily identified by a medieval audience.

King Arthur at Camelot

Into such a world comes King Arthur, the mythical king of Britain, upon whom Edward III and other medieval monarchs sought so intently to model themselves. Arthur thus takes his place in a history which, however capable of illustrious acts, was also marked by treacherous ones.

Arthur's court at a holiday time, as it is presented in the poem, is a court of the fourteenth century, replete with the customs and trappings one could expect to find in the castle of a well-to-do noble. Of course, this is Arthur's court, and hence the greatest that has ever existed in Britain. As such, the knights who joust there are the "most kyd",[50] the ladies who dance

[50] J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, ed., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 3, l.51. Subsequent quotations refer to this edition, and references will appear parenthetically in the text.

there are the "louelokkest ladies þat euer lif haden" (1.52), and the king himself is "þe comlokest kyng þat þe court haldes" (1.53). The ambiguity arising from the earlier account of Britain's classical heritage seems to have given way to a traditional romantic description of typical Camelot felicity at the most joyous celebration of the year. Even the harsh weather conditions generally prevailing at Yuletide are not allowed to intrude upon the prevailing carefree spirit.

After providing a brief but panoramic view of the courtly inhabitants and their activities--the dancing, the merriment, the Church-going, the gift-giving--the poet returns to provide a fuller description of the king who presides at this court. He does so in terms which might accurately have been used to describe Edward III in his young days, or even Richard II, who shared with his grandfather a love for courtly pageantry and contest. Arthur's refusing to eat until he has heard of some adventurous thing or heard one knight request to joust with another is a convention occurring in several medieval romances.[51] What is neither a common feature of medieval romance nor an element in the historical discussions of England's fourteenth-century monarchs is the description we are

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51 Norman David, rev. ed., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed, J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), p. 76. Another medieval romance not mentioned by Davis is Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival, trans. H. M. Mustard and C. E. Passage (New York: Vintage, 1961), pp. 167, 341.

given of King Arthur:

> He watz so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered:
> His lif liked hym ly3t, he louied þe lasse
> Auþer to longe lye or to longe sitte,
> So bisied him his 3onge blod and his brayn wylde. (11.86-89)

The restless vigor of the king as it is presented in these lines compares favorably with the rash indomitability frequently displayed by such famous real knights as Sir Walter Manny, Sir John Chandos, and the Black Prince. But while many fourteenth-century prototypes can be found for King Arthur's youthful desire for adventure or report of adventure, the entire impression of a valiant man of action is undercut by the phrase "sumquat childgered" (1.86). While restlessness in youth was an important element associated with prowess among fourteenth-century knights, boyishness or childishness was most assuredly not, and scarcely bespeaks the responsible leadership which would be expected of a medieval king. In addition, the complete account of Arthur's refusal to eat reveals that his restlessness may lead him to desire only report of such action. This apparent desire to avoid actual danger himself may simply testify to the king's awareness of his responsibility to his subjects and therefore his need to avoid unnecessary exposure of himself to danger (although his later response to the Green Knight's challenge argues against such an interpretation). The composite effect of this description is an ambiguous portrait of King Arthur. He appears to be the embodiment of that rashness associated with the youthful prowess of the greatest knights of the fourteenth century,

and yet he is somewhat boyish and bent only on hearing, rather than performing valiant deeds.

The ambiguity associated with this portrait continues when the Green Knight appears on the scene. Arthur's delight in sportive combat, even when it involves human lives, emerges clearly when he is confronted by the Green Knight. When this mysterious challenger appears before Arthur's court, he tells the king "I passe as in pes," and "I wolde no were" (11. 266, 271), but Arthur, in spite of these assertions, responds:

> ". . . Sir cortays kny3t,
> If þou craue batayl bare,
> Here faylez þou not to fy3t" (11. 276-278).

The king makes this announcement even before he knows the Green Knight's mission.

The challenge which the Green Knight presents to Arthur's court has not been given the critical attention it deserves, largely because the "Beheading Game," as it is called, is such a popular folk-tale motif. Most literary critics have assumed, with Kittredge, that "the contrast between the rude savagery of the Irish saga [Fled Bricrend] and the refined romance is notable; but it is a difference of manners only."[52] It is unlikely, however, that a poet who has taken such pains to provide a realistic fourteenth-century court, behaving in the way that we know such courts did

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[52] George L. Kittredge, A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1916), p. 15.

behave at holiday time, would have incorporated a rude challenge into his work without considering the full chivalric implications of that challenge.

Several features of this folklore challenge make it distinctly different from the sort of challenges commonly rendered in the late fourteenth century when, under the influence of Richard II and his development of the court of chivalry (a judicial court designed to hear cases dealing with knighthood), there came a resurgence of the duel.[53] First of all, the test which the Green Knight proposes is not really one which allows warriors to pit their skill against one another to determine who is the superior fighter or whose cause is just (as the joust or the chivalric duel did). Instead, this challenge calls for a single blow by each contestant in sequence. One warrior, in other words, must remain passive, while the other strikes. Such a condition placed on the wielding of so dangerous a weapon as the Green Knight's ax clearly gives the advantage to the man who strikes the first blow. Whatever the sources for such a covenant might be, in the context of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, such a challenge could only have been looked upon as mad.

Secondly, in taking up the challenge after the Green Knight's taunts, Arthur seems unperturbed by the fact that the Green Knight obligingly bends to give the king a good shot. He does not voice the least protest over this suspicious behavior or over the certainty of taking the Green Knight's life. This behavior is in

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[53] Neilson, pp. 164-68.

marked contrast to Arthur's behavior elsewhere in medieval romance. For example, in The Anturs of Arther at the Tarnewathelan, a poem thematically linked with Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Gawain is ready to fight a challenger (in an actual combat situation, not a sequence of alternating blows) when King Arthur intervenes, stating that he does not wish to see Gawain's life lost.[54] Similarly, in Perlesvaus, another romance listed among the sources and analogues of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Lancelot, the knight who takes up the beheading challenge (here a sequence of alternating blows expressly aimed at beheading the opponent) takes up the challenge with great reluctance and only when it becomes clear that he will lose his own life if he fails to do so:

> "Sir," said Lancelot, "it would be very foolish for one who is in jeopardy not to take what is most to his advantage, but I shall be blamed if I slay you without a fault."
>
> "I assure you," said the knight, "unless you do, you cannot go away.
>
> "Good sir," said Lancelot, "you are so noble and trusty, how is it that you come so willingly to your death? You well know that I shall kill you before you can kill me since that is how it is."
>
> "All this I know to be true," said the knight, "but you must promise me before I die that you will return to this city in a year's time, and that you will put your head in the same jeopardy as I put mine now, without challenge."

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[54] Three Early Metrical Romances, ed. John Robson (London: Camden Society, 1842), p. 17; see also Hans Schnyder, "Aspects of Kingship in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" English Studies, 40 (1959), 290.

"By my own head," said Lancelot, "I need no more persuading to choose respite from death rather than to die immediately."[55]

These literary examples of a king and a knight both unwilling to allow the loss of a life points up another significant feature of the Green Knight's challenge and Arthur's acceptance. In contrast to the incident just recounted from the Perlesvaus and unlike the monster-fights of that great hero, Beowulf, Arthur's taking up of the Green Knight's challenge is utterly gratuitous. The Green Knight has not threatened Arthur or his court with any danger.[56] In fact, the Green Knight wears no armor and insists that he has not come to fight. Arthur apparently takes up the challenge simply because the Green Knight insults the valor of the court when no one agrees to the mad conditions which the challenger has proposed. Records indicate that insults to one's valor frequently were the basis for challenges to chivalric duels in the fourteenth century. In the middle of the century, Sir Thomas Colville achieved fame for killing a Frenchman who had said that no man in all the army of England dared to try his mettle.[57] In a duel of chivalry in 1390, a Scottish knight, Sir David de Lindsay, fought

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[55] Elizabeth Brewer, trans. and ed., From Cuchulainn to Gawain: Sources and Analogues of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, Ltd., 1973), p.23.

[56] John Burrow, A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), p. 21.

[57] Neilson, p. 151.

Lord Welles, English ambassador to the Scottish king, to decide an argument over the relative courage of the English and the Scots.[58] The king's behavior, then would seem to have plenty of precedent. Yet in responding to so ridiculous a challenge as this one, the king fails to be suspicious and hence, is led ultimately not only to endanger his life but also later, when Gawain asks to take Arthur's place, the life of his very best knight. The unnecessary risk to which Arthur exposes himself and his nephew is emphasized by the king's own awareness that the Green Knight's "askyng is nys" (1.323).

However, what about the rules of chivalry, noted earlier in the chapter, which state that a knight must "refuse no challenge from an equal and never . . . turn his back upon a foe"? Doesn't such a rule of knighthood indicate that Arthur was simply acting in the courageous manner expected of all knights and certainly a leader of knights? After all, chivalric duels became very popular in England under Edward III and Richard II, after these had ceased to be used to settle disputes under the first two Edwards. The English kings, for example, challenged their French counterparts to a duel, Edward challenging King Philip of Valois in 1340 and Richard making the same challenge to King Charles VI in 1383.[59] Critics'

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[58] Robert Baldick, The Duel: A History of Duelling (London: Chapman and Hall, 1965), p. 28.

[59] Neilson, p. 165-66, 178.

awareness of the importance of knightly valor, and the frequency of chivalric duels may explain their failure to discuss at length Arthur's behavior and subsequently Gawain's in the first fitt. The list of knightly duties, however, also calls upon the warrior to "shun unfairness, meanness, and deceit" and "to protect the defenseless." Both are conditions which apply in the unique case of Arthur and the Green Knight. The ideal sense of chivalry also calls upon a knight to be generous and altruistic. The Green Knight is clearly placing himself at a disadvantage by allowing Arthur (later Gawain) to strike first, and by being unarmed. Surely striking a man who places himself at such a disadvantage is not the type of action which enhances a knight's reputation for prowess. This fact goes a long way toward mitigating the knightly duty to refuse no challenge. Yet critics who bother to discuss Arthur's behavior at all call it courageous: "Arthur, in particular, although perhaps too hot-headed, has demonstrated admirable courage in confronting the Green Knight."[60] Entering into a pact with a green challenger who appears to be placing himself at a disadvantage is not courage, but "foly" (l. 324), as Arthur himself so properly recognizes. As an act of folly, it reflects one of the excesses of the chivalric ideal as it was practiced in the

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[60] John Martin, "The Knight Who Stayed Silent Through Courtesy," Archiv fur das Studium der Neureren Sprachen und Literaturen, 210 (1973), 56.

fourteenth century--the penchant for meaningless violent acts.

King Edward himself was not above making foolhardy promises and engaging in futile battles.[61] Froissart's Chronicle sets forth horror, atrocities, and devastation which some say surpassed that of the barbarian raids of the Dark Ages.[62] Yet Froissart begins his chronicle by stating that he is making his record of these deeds

> "to the extent that the honorable and noble aventures of featis of armes, done and achyved by the warres of France and Inglande shulde notably be in-registered and put in perpetuall memory whereby the prewe and hardy may have ensample to incourage them in theyr well doying."[63]

The forms of chivalry were maintained at all cost, so that the high ideals of chivalry and the actual practices of the age were definitely at variance. While Froissart dutifully records atrocities and regards them as "honorable and noble aventures," the Gawain-poet, instead, makes a point of letting the reader-listener know that Arthur himself, from the first, regarded the Green Knight's challenge as folly. Knowing the way that a knight of the fourteenth century was expected to respond to challenges, the Gawain-poet shows King Arthur to be a noble representative of the

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[61] See Froissart, II, 56; also Joseph R. Strayer and Dana C. Munro, The Middle Ages: 395-1500, 4th ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), p. 470.

[62] Strayer and Munro, p. 472.

[63] Froissart, I, 97.

age, a restless, active king of courtesy who acquiesces to the urgings of a churlish knight in order to defend the chivalric ideal of order, prowess, and courtesy. At the same time this pleasing account of knightly behavior is undercut by the poet's description of the king as "sumquat childgered" (l. 86), the king's own admission that the Green Knight's "askyng is nys" (l. 323), and the king's failure to express any reluctance over taking the Green Knight's life. The end result is a portrait of a king whose strengths are tempered by his weaknesses.

Gawain and the Green Knight's Challenge

The king's acceptance of the challenge creates difficulties and anxieties for the members of his court. When Gawain requests permission to take the king's place in carrying out the task, his speech indicates that such an act is not "semly" (l. 348) for a king when so many bold men sit idle around his table. Since the king has already entered into the compact urged by the Green Knight, chivalric honor demands that the task be pursued to its conclusion. Here again, Arthur's chivalry has fallen short of the ideal. He is the one who began the adventure, and to him belongs the duty of completing it. In handing over the ax to Gawain, Arthur again displays a weakness not to be tolerated in the

greatest heroes of the age.[64] Gawain, in taking up the challenge in place of his uncle shows himself to be the most courteous and the bravest of the knights of the Round Table.

Gawain properly waits at his place until the king grants him permission to come down, then kneels before the king to await his blessing. Such behavior conforms to the highest standards of chivalry. Yet Gawain's response to the challenge, which most critics view as merely a means of qualifying Gawain for the testing to take place elsewhere,[65] indicates that Gawain's temptation begins before he ever leaves Arthur's court.

In order to discuss accurately Gawain's behavior toward the Green Knight, I find it necessary to return once again to the Green Knight's challenge. Here is his proposal in its entirety:

> 'If any so hardy in þis hous holdez hymseluen,
> Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,
> Đat dar stifly strike a strok for an oþer,
> I schal gif hym of my gyft þys giserne ryche,

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[64] Nothing in the text supports the notion first set forth by D. E. Baughan ("The Role of Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," ELH, 17 [1950], 241-51) and later accepted by Charles Moorman (A Knyght There Was [Lexington, Ky.: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1967], p.63) that Arthur is incapable of striking. The subject is effectively set straight in Albert B. Friedman, "Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Speculum, 35 (1960), 260-74.

[65] For example, see Charles Moorman, The Pearl Poet (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), p. 108, George J. Engelhardt, "The Predicament of Gawain," Modern Language Quarterly 16 (1955), 223, n.10, and Shedd, p. 4.

Þis ax, þat is heué innogh, to hondele as hym lykes,
And I schal bide þe fyrst bur as bare as I sitte. . . .
And 3et gif hym respite
A twelmonyth and a day.' (11. 285-90, 297-98)

The Oxford English Dictionary reveals that in the fourteenth century, the word strok meant "an act of striking; a blow given or received." Strok also meant "a blow with the hand or a weapon (occasionally with the paw of an animal, the claws or beak of a bird, etc.) inflicted on or aimed at a living being." The MED reveals that the word bur meant "(a.) an armed assault or sally; a clash or encounter; (b.) a blow or a stroke." Hence, Gawain is told that he need only strike a blow; nothing is said of chopping off the Green Knight's head.

Many significant critics have misread the challenge. Larry Benson, for example, states "the Green Knight proposes that someone cut off his head now in exchange for a return-blow a year later."[66] Similarly, Albert B. Friedman notes: "he offers to allow any one of the knights present--not specifically Arthur--to chop off his head with the ax he carries, providing the knight will contract to seek him out a year hence to receive the same blow in return."[67] Alain Renoir, likewise, misreads the challenge:

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[66] Larry Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1965), p. 26.

[67] Friedman, p. 261.

"suddenly an almost gigantic green knight rides into the hall and dares anyone present to behead him and receive a return blow a year and a day later."[68] Whatever the source of the critics' confusion,[69] the Green Knight's rendition of the challenge leaves Gawain free to determine the kind of blow he should deliver--the ax is his "to hondele as hym lykes" (l. 289). It might be argued that no express mention is made of decapitation in the Green Knight's proposal because such a statement would immediately indicate to the court that the Green Knight is a supernatural being, capable of surviving a beheading.[70] If so, his presenting of his challenge merely as an exchange of blows tricks Arthur and Gawain into believing that a mighty whack can put an end to the reciprocal nature of the pact.

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68 Alain Renoir, "An Echo to the Sense: The Patterns of Sound in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" English Miscellany, 13 (1962), 10-11.

69 Part of the confusion with the terms of the challenge has probably resulted from the familiarity of most critics with the Irish saga, the Fled Bricrend, one of the poem's acknowledged sources. In this tale, Terror, son of Great Fear, attempts to settle a dispute by setting forth this challenge: "I have an axe, and the man into whose hands it shall be put is to cut off my head to-day, I to cut off his to-morrow" (Brewer, p. 9). Larry Benson has argued in favor of a recently edited "long version" of the French Le Livre de Caradoc as the immediate source of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

70 Gaston Paris, "Roman en vers du cycle de la table Ronde," Histoire Litteraire de la France, 30 (1888), 76-77.

The argument that a "strok" rather than a decapitation is simply there to tempt knights of the court to defend prowess might still be somewhat convincing if there were not hints in the poem to indicate that Gawain will receive the same kind of blow as he delivers. For example, when Gawain takes over for Arthur in fulfilling the terms of the challenge, the Green Knight feels it necessary to repeat the terms of the pact:

> '. . .þat þou schal siker me, segge, bi þi trawþe,
> Ðat þou schal seche me þiself, where-so þou hopes
> I may be funde vpon folde, and foch þe such wages
> As þou deles me to-day bifore þis douþe ryche.' (11. 394-397)

This statement that Gawain will "foch. . .such wages as [he] deles" should have caused Gawain to temper his blow, even if concern for the Green Knight's life did not. The suggestion of exact reciprocity in the exchange of blows was made even earlier when the Green Knight first made his proposal and in doing so used legal terminology (terms such as "quit-clayme" [1.293] with regard to giving up his ax, and his time stipulation, "a twelmonyth and a day" [1. 298], the legal term of agreement used to guarantee the passage of a complete year).[71]

Gawain seems to miss these cues, probably because from the moment when he first moves to accept the challenge in place of Arthur, he has already impulsively associated the rendering of the

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[71] See Davis' note to 1. 298 in the Tolkien and Gordon edition of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, p. 84.

blow with death:

> 'And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes þe soþe--
> Bot for as much as ȝe ar myn em I am only to prayse,
> No bounté bot your blod I in my bodé knowe; (11. 355-357)

This statement displays Gawain's humility, but it also demonstrates an excessive adherence to valor and a lack of concern for life. Gawain, the perfect Christian knight who wears the pentangle as a sign of his perfection, aggressively and impulsively wields the ax, failing to reflect on the fact that he is attempting to kill someone in the course of a "Crystemas gomen" (1. 283). Unlike some of the heroes in the analogues to the poem, Gawain (like Arthur before him) neither displays any hesitation nor voices any concern for this sportive, needless destruction of a life. The Green Knight has not asked for a death blow. Gawain, in his impetuous desire to demonstrate his knightly valor, and courteously rescue his uncle from a dangerous challenge, fails to see that he can fulfill the terms of the challenge and still spare lives.

His failure to see an alternative to his action is remarkable, not only because the Green Knight himself in the very terms of the challenge has hinted at an exact reciprocity, but also because others provide hints as well. One of these is a most unlikely source, King Arthur himself, who rather mysteriously states:

> 'Kepe þe, cosyn . . . þat þou on kyrf sette,
> And if þou redez hym ryȝt, redly I trowe
> Þat þou schal byden þe bur þat he schal bede after.'
> (11. 372-374)

A. C. Spearing takes these lines to mean that Gawain should "make sure of his opponent with his own axe-stroke, and then he will not need to worry about any return blow,"[72] yet this is not what the lines say. Arthur does not tell Gawain that if he does a good job, he can forget all about the Green Knight's blow; instead, Arthur's words reveal that if Gawain delivers the stroke properly--"redez hym ryȝt"--he will withstand the blow that he (the Green Knight) shall offer afterwards. Nothing is said about eliminating the need for a return blow. What, then, can such lines possibly mean? At the very least, they suggest that there may be more to the acceptance of the challenge than simply wielding the ax with all of one's strength.

This same point is reiterated by the Green Knight again when Gawain asks him who he is just prior to delivering the blow:

> 'ȝif I þe telle trwly, quen I þe tape haue
> And þou me smoþely hatz smyten, smartly I þe teche
> Of my hous and my home and myn owen nome,'
> (ll. 406-408)

At this point, Gawain could not have known that the Green Knight would be able to withstand the blow of this huge ax. The Green Knight does tell Gawain that if he (the Green Knight) does speak after the blow, Gawain need not follow through on their agreement. But the fact that the Green Knight promises to tell Gawain all after

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[72] A. C. Spearing, The Gawain-Poet (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), p. 183.

he "smoþely hatz smyten" should have caused Gawain to hesitate, even if concern for life did not.

The notion that Gawain will get the same sort of blow as he has dealt is repeated yet again before the Green Knight leaves Arthur's court. This time it is after Gawain has delivered his stroke, and the Green Knight is holding up his unattached head by the hair:

> 'Such a dunt as þou hatz dalt--disserued þou habbez
> To be ȝederly ȝolden on Nw ȝeres morn.' (11. 452-453)

Needless to say, for the court which has just witnessed the Green Knight's survival after decapitation, this statement has a greater impact than the earlier ones did. And--if I may anticipate a bit--another statement to the same effect is uttered by the Green Knight when Gawain arrives at the Green Chapel. The Green Knight reminds Gawain of the events at Arthur's court to reenforce the idea that what he is about to dole out is not meanness but justice:

> 'Busk no more debate þen I þe bede þenne
> When þou wypped of my hede at a wap one.'
> (11. 2248-2249)

Close examination of the text throughout this episode, then, reveals that there may be more to the Green Knight's challenge than simply wielding an ax with all of one's strength. But how is it that nearly all the literary critics dealing with the poem have ignored these suggestions and regarded Gawain's response to the

challenge as a fitting display of his prowess and courage?[73] Again, diverse attitudes toward the chivalric practices at the time offer perhaps the best explanation for their views. As we noted earlier in discussing the Chandos Herald's Life of the Black Prince, the renascence of the chivalric duel, and the dangerous vows uttered by knights going to battle, military prowess was the most highly valued trait of a knight. One can understand to a considerable extent Gawain's violent reaction to the Green Knight's taunts concerning valor of the court and his thus belittling the value of the court's deeds of arms. We have already noted Sir Thomas Colville's violent reaction to a challenge directed at his valor and the fame he achieved because of it. Likewise, we have referred to the celebrated chivalric duel between Sir David de Lindsay and Lord Welles. Still another example concerns Sir Peter Courtenay, a valiant English knight, who was being escorted to Calais by the French Sire de Clary after the former had defeated the celebrated Guy de la Tremouille in a joust. On their way, they stopped at the castle of King Richard's sister, who

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[73] This view is held by nearly every critic taking up a pen to deal with this poem; a comprehensive list of those holding this view is too long to give here. Some of the most succinct statements of this position are contained in the following: Alan W. Markman, "The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA, 72 (1957), 574-86; Jan Solomon, "The Lesson of Sir Gawain," Papers of the Michigan Academy, 48 (1963), 599-608; P. B. Taylor, "Gawain's Garland of Girdle and Name," English Studies, 55 (1974), 6-14; Spearing, p. 183 and Benson, pp. 101-09.

asked Courtenay if he had been well received by the French nobles. He replied that he was content with his reception, but added that if de Clary had visited England to seek jousting opponents, he would have found more than Courtenay had found in France. When the knights reached Calais, de Clary reminded Courtenay of his words and informed him that if he "would deign to accept the challenge of the least of that gallant band"--note the same sort of humility with which Gawain takes up the challenge--he would find de Clary ready to fight. In the joust which occurred the next day, de Clary struck with full force, and the Frenchman's sword penetrated deeply into Courtenay's shoulder.[74] Such was the reception likely to be given to one who attempted to belittle another's prowess.

One need only page at random through the Chronicle of Froissart to realize that a knight's courage and skill were the very source of his honor; his courtesy, his lineage, his emblem, his very knighthood meant nothing if he were not courageous. That the Gawain-poet himself was aware of this fact is evident from the Green Knight's praise of Gawain in the final fitt when Gawain has bravely come to the Green Chapel to take a stroke which he presumes will be his death. Gawain's bravery is enhanced at several times in the poem as the hero is exposed to physical hardship which might have tempted him to go back and to the temptings of

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[74] Beltz, pp. 328-30.

Bercilak's guide on the way to the Green Chapel. We must take care, therefore, to consider his great courage when assessing Gawain's behavior.

Yet an important qualifying note is struck if we pit one of Froissart's knights, consumed as most of them are with the desire to perform courageous deeds, against the idealized picture of a knight presented by Chaucer in the Canterbury Tales. Valor is no doubt essential, but the qualities Chaucer draws attention to are "trouthe, and honour, fredom and curteisie."[75] Chaucer's warrior has fought in a number of battles, but significantly these are not the battles of the Hundred Years War where Christian fought Christian, but battles against the heathen in far-away places.

I have already noted Honore Bonet's adage that the mark of a successful knight is knowing when to stand and when to flee. In Christine de Pisan's The Book of Fayttes of Armes of Chyualrye (1408-09),[76] a work used for practical guidance on the rules of war, manslaughter, even for self-defense, is specifically condemned. In the Courtenay-de Clary incident recounted above, de Clary, who had given in to Courtenay's taunts, was reproached for his conduct by

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[75] Line A 46. Quoted from F. N. Robinson, ed.

[76] A. T. P. Byles, ed., The Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyualrye, EETS 189 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932; reissued 1937), p. 212 (Caxton's translation, Westminster, 1489).

both his native Frenchmen and the English.[77] Whatever violent conduct was permitted against the heathen or even tolerated against the peasants, it was expected that a knight would treat another knight with respect if for no other reason than his own self-interest.[78]

Gawain's Shield and Pentangle

Gawain's failure to hesitate in lopping off the Green Knight's head, in addition to raising some serious questions of Christian morality and knightly ethics, also fits poorly with the description of Gawain which we are given during the presentation of his arms. As John F. Kitely has pointed out, the depictions of the character of Gawain in medieval literature are so varying that it is probably not safe to assume that there was anything approaching a truly "traditional" concept of his character.[79] Just what the poet had in mind by choosing Gawain as the hero for his romance is not known to us. What we do know is that the poet, for whatever reason, takes

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[77] Beltz, pp. 330-31. He was reproached by the English for having transgressed the rules of the joust by aiming a blow at the shoulder of his adversary, and he was reprimanded by the French for having challenged a knight whom he was escorting.

[78] Keen, pp. 243-44.

[79] John F. Kitely, "'The Endless Knot': Magical Aspects of the Pentangle in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Studies in the Literary Imagination, 4, ii (October, 1971), 42. Also see B. J. Whiting, "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy, and His Appearance in Chaucer's Squire's Tale," Mediaeval Studies, 9 (1947), 189-254.

pains to describe in detail for us those ideal qualities he wishes to associate with Gawain's character.

That this author should have chosen the emblem on Gawain's shield as his springboard for describing Gawain's character is certainly in keeping with the spirit of the age, for heraldry reached its peak in the fourteenth century. The right to bear a blazon was a mark of gentle birth. One's heraldic device had the same sort of significance that badges of rank have today.[80] In addition, its individualized nature allowed knights to draw attention to those aspects of themselves or their house which they wished to emphasize. It is no wonder, then, that the poet seized upon this ready-at-hand means of delineating his hero.

The pentangle that the poet chose as the symbol to represent Gawain has attracted a great deal of critical attention, partly because it is an armorial device not associated with Gawain in any other place, and partly because it is an ancient symbol, evoking many different associations. While the pentangle has a very ancient heritage, references to it in the Middle Ages are rare.[81] The poet himself associates the symbol with Solomon, an association which is not found in the Bible. Rather, it is associated with Solomon in

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[80] Keen, pp. 241-42.

[81] Richard Hamilton Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," ELH, 29 (1962), 130; also Davis, p. 93.

the books of magic, where it was believed to give power over evil spirits.[82]

The paucity of medieval references to the pentangle leaves open the question of what the poet's contemporaries associated with the symbol. Did they immediately associate it with magic? As a heraldic device, the pentangle was an emblem adopted by the astrologer, the atronomer, the alchemist, and the magician. [83] The magical associations of the device are certainly in keeping with the nature of Gawain's opponent--a mysterious green man who is able to survive decapitation. The arming scene leads us to believe that the pentangle is the blazon characteristic of Gawain, and hence, was his device even before the Green Knight appeared. Yet the poet describes the device only after we know about the Green Knight and we are aware of the difficulties Gawain faces. It is possible that the poet's presentation of the pentangle at this point indicates Gawain's need to employ some sort of magical device in his own defense, to pit magic against magic. We know, for example, that magic was more widely accepted in the fourteenth century and later than it had been before, and that there was a thorough belief in the efficacy of magical aids, particularly magical aids in duels. In Phillip the Fair's edict of 1306, and later

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[82] Green, p. 130; also see Brian Stone, trans., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964), p. 136.

[83] Julian Franklyn, Heraldry (South Brunswick, New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1968), p. 77; see also Stone, ed., p. 135.

in Thomas of Woodstock's Ordinance containing the rules for chivalric duels, the ceremony in the lists included each knight's swearing that he carried "neither upon himself nor upon his horse, words, stones, herbs, charms, carectes [characters], conjuration of devils, wherein he hoped for aid." Records indicate that on the continent, champions sometimes had characters of power traced on their shaven crowns. The extent to which forces of magic were believed to be effective in judicial duels is clear from a writ of right case in 1355, when a battle between two champions was delayed because a justice had found several rolls of prayers and charms in the coat of one of the fighters.[84]

Yet the question of why the pentangle was chosen as the symbol for Gawain has continued to raise questions because the poet makes no mention of its magical properties and takes great pains to give a detailed account of its moral aspects.[85] Also, while the symbol of the pentangle itself is ambiguous--seemingly embodying both magical and moral principles--its deviser, Solomon, is no less so.

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[84] Neilson, pp. 152-53; see also pp. 160-63 and 177-80; also Henry Charles Lea, The Duel and the Oath, ed. Edward Peters, with additional documents translated by Arthur C. Howland (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1974), p. 139.

[85] Green (pp. 121-39) assumes that the poet "transforms a suspect magical sign into an emblem of perfection to achieve the simultaneous suggestion of greatness and potential failure." Kitely (pp. 41-50) emphasizes the magical aspects of the device to show that these cannot save Gawain unless he puts his faith in the moral aspects of the pentangle. Most of the other critics who deal with the symbol at all play down the magical aspects and work from the moral explanation given by the poet.

Though Solomon was renowned throughout the world for his wisdom and for his power over demons, in the Bible and in exegetical tradition he is a flawed figure, wise, but in the end guilty of follies, particularly a weakness for women, which caused him to turn away from God.[86] (It is no doubt significant in this regard, [if I may leap ahead] that Gawain at the end of the poem, when he recognizes his fault, associates himself with Solomon, this time not with Solomon's "trawþe" but with his weakness.) Such symbolic ambiguity accords well with the complexities of characterization in the first fitt, and it may very well have been the poet's intention to use the device to signal to his audience the ambiguity of Gawain's character.

One thing about the poet's description of the pentangle emerges clearly: the virtues represented by the device are not obvious from the behavior of Gawain in the first fitt of the poem. These moral virtues are presented as a series of pentads. We are told that Gawain is faultless, first of all, in his use of five wits, or senses.[87] Secondly, we are told that he is perfect in his five fingers. This is a phrase not nearly so common as the first one,

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[86] Green, p. 130.

[87] R. W. Ackerman, "Gawain's Shield: Penetential Doctrine in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Anglia, 76 (1958), 254-65, observes that this phrase and the others which follow were frequently found in the works dealing with the sacrament of penance.

and critics have been at pains to determine exactly what the poet had in mind. R. W. Ackerman believes that the second "five" evolves naturally from the first, singling out the sense of touch for specific mention.[88] R. H. Green views the five fingers as a conventional figure for the five virtues which are necessary for perfection: justice (thumb), prudence (index finger), temperance (third finger), fortitude (ring finger), and obedience (little finger).[89] If Green is right in his interpretation, we can already see chinks in Gawain's protective device. While he earns a passing grade in fortitude and obedience, Gawain's behavior with regard to justice, prudence, and temperance is questionable.

As we have already noted, the Green Knight's proposal, replete with legal phrases, is based on a notion of exact reciprocity, yet Gawain responds against an unarmed opponent in a manner which he hoped will eliminate the need for a return blow. In so doing, he fails to display prudence, for he unhesitatingly takes a life in the course of a Christmas game. Temperance is not an obvious feature of Gawain's behavior, either; in fact, the poet even suggests, as Gawain prepares to leave Camelot, that an excessive amount of drinking at the Yule feast when the Green Knight appeared had led to the court's involvement in the adventure:

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[88] Ackerman, p. 263.

[89] Green, p. 134.

Gawan watz glad to begynne þose gommez in halle,
Bot þa3 þe ende be heuy haf 3e no wonder;
For þa3 men ben mery in mynde quen þay han mayn drynk,
A 3ere 3ernes ful 3erne, and 3eldez neuer lyke
(11. 495-498)

The third pentad concerns the five wounds of Christ, a frequent meditational subject in the Middle Ages.

And alle his afyaunce vpon folde watz in þe fyue woundez
Ðat Cryst ka3t on þe croys, as þe crede tellez;
(11. 642-643)

Christ's wounds are supposedly the source of Gawain's trust, yet, curiously, in the episode with the Green Knight, Gawain never once appeals to Christ for "help" in wielding the ax. Like the other knights of the Round Table, Gawain had been hesitant to come forward to take up the challenge, presumably struck by the strangeness of the offer as well as its potential danger. Yet once he comes forward in order to spare his king, his activities do not betray a Christian orientation at all. Rather lengthy dialogues between Arthur and Gawain and between the Green Knight and Gawain take place after Gawain's first request for the adventure, yet only four religious references are made--the Green Knight's oath in the name of "he þat on hy3e syttes (l. 256), Arthur's blessing of Gawain (l. 370), the Green Knight's exclamation, Bigog!" (l. 390), and Gawain's swearing "bi hym þat me wro3t" (l. 399). None of them reveals Gawain to be a knight whose actions are profoundly based on trust in Christ.

The fourth pentad, likewise, draws attention to a Christian source for Gawain's virtue:

And quere-so-euer þys mon in melly watz stad,
His þro þo3t watz in þat, þur3 alle oþer þyngez,
Þat alle his forsnes he feng at þe fyue joyez
Þat þe hende heuen-quene had of hir chylde;
(11. 644-647)

Surely Gawain's confrontation with the Green Knight qualifies as a contest or "melly," yet again any thoughts of or appeals to Mary from whom he supposedly derives his "forsnes" are curiously absent. If lopping off the Green Knight's head is a testament to Gawain's courage as most critics seem to feel it is, it is curious that this is one time when a glance at the image of the Virgin painted on the inside of his shield, or even evidence of a thought directed toward Christ's mother, was not necessary to insure that his courage not fail.

The same flaws in Gawain's character which we have noted with regard to the other pentads are reenforced in the fifth group of five. Here the qualities attributed to Gawain are those associated with an ideal sense of knighthood:

Þe fyft fyue þat I finde þat þe frek vsed
Watz fraunchyse and fela3schyp forbe al þyng,
His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer,
And pité, þat passez alle poyntez, þyse pure fyue
Were harder happed on þat haþel þen on any oþer.
(11. 651-655)

While most scholars who discuss the qualities set forth here have been content to refer the reader to medieval courtesy books[90] or to the "baronage of love" passage in the Roman de la Rose,[91] few have

[90] Ackerman, p. 264.

[91] See Israel Gollancz, ed., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, EETS 210 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1940), p. 106.

examined the qualities individually and related them to Gawain's behavior. Davis, who does consider the qualities mentioned, remarks in his notes to the poem that they do not seem to have been chosen with Gawain's adventure in mind, for they do not correspond to those virtues for which Gawain is praised at the end of poem.[92] What, however, about his actions before he leaves the court? The first of the qualities referred to is generosity. Gawain certainly shows himself to be generous in offering to rescue his king from a dangerous situation. "Felaȝschyp" or love of fellowman, while it is closely allied to generosity, does not seem to fit very well with Gawain's unhesitating decapitation of the Green Knight. "Clannes" and "cortayse" more properly come into play in the scenes at Bercilak's court, which I will examine in detail in the next chapter. "Pité," the fifth of the qualities mentioned, meant either "pity" or "piety" in fourteenth-century Middle English. Since it is used to mean one or the other at various times in the poet's writings, it is difficult to determine which he intended here.[93] Whatever the meaning the poet intended, neither quality seems to be conspicuously present in Gawain's character. He seems to evince little pity or compassion for anyone, unless perhaps for Arthur. The words Gawain uses, however, to request that the king surrender

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[92] Davis, p. 95.

[93] Gollancz opts for "piety;" Davis (p. 95) and Burrow (p. 50) favor "pity."

the ax to him seem more accurately to reveal his sense of what is "semly" or decorous rather than a true sense of compassion.

Gawain's behavior, then, when judged by the moral absolutes of the pentangle, comes off as less than perfect. This observation has a profound effect on our understanding of Gawain if we consider another feature of the poet's account of the pentangle. This is the poet's statement of the interrelationship of all of these virtues in the "endeles knot." The hint of interdependence has led several critics to suspect that Gawain's virtues are operative only so long as he is faultless; once he fails in one, he fails in the others. In other words, Gawain's virtues stand and fall together. This suggestion seems to be an outgrowth of the idea that a pentangle loses its magical properties once it is broken.[94]

Much has been written about the number symbolism of five, particularly its symbolism of incorruptibility and its perfection.[95] Little, however, has been said about the red background of Gawain's shield. Medieval color symbolism is a very tricky business--as we shall see when we consider the various critical opinions about the Green Knight, but it is worth noting that in heraldry, red

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[94] See Spearing, p. 198, and Burrow, p. 50.

[95] Vincent F. Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1938), pp. 120-25; Green, p. 133; Stone, pp. 135-37; Davis, p. 93.

signified cruelty and ferocity.[96] Knights who had seen battle, or who were familiar with the banners of war, would undoubtedly have recognized this symbolism, since the Oriflamme, the banner unfurled at battle to indicate war to the death, was red. The usual color for Gawain's shield in other romances is green,[97] and if the poet was familiar with this fact, it is obvious that he had to make a change in view of the color of Gawain's challenger. Was the poet hinting at Gawain's ferocity, or did he choose red for Gawain's arms for the sake of providing the two knights with complementary Yuletide colors?[98] The latter is certainly a reasonable explanation, but the poet may also be suggesting by means of this color the ferocious quality of Gawain's character.

The preceding discussion of Gawain's behavior and of the depiction of his virtues on the pentangle points to one of several ironies in the poem. While the poet seems to be giving us an account of exactly the sort of man Gawain is, after reading the description of the pentangle, we are struck by a number of ambiguities. Is any magic still associated with the pentangle? Has Gawain ever embodied all of the virtues depicted on his shield? Did the poet expect his audience to see that Gawain has already

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[96] Keen, p. 106.

[97] Davis, p. 92.

[98] Jean Louise Carriere, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as a Christmas Poem," Comitatus 1 (1970), 26, note 6.

shown signs of not being able to live up to the standard he bears? Was the poet even thinking about the opening adventure when he drew up plans for the pentangle? After what seems to be a straightforward and deliberate attempt to delineate a character, we are left with a host of ambiguous suggestions. The pentangle itself, with its rigorous geometric absolutism, seems to stand in strange contrast to the very human behavior of every member of the Round Table, including the restless King Arthur and the reluctant, then impetuous, Gawain.

The Mysterious Green Knight:

The masterful ironic touch of seeming to set forth all facets of Gawain's character through explanation of his blazon, while presenting a character in action very different from this explanation, creates an ambiguous image of the hero. The apparent discrepancies and ambiguities only begin here, however.

Whatever else we may think about Gawain, we know from the beginning that he is the hero, the "good guy" of this story, the romance hero whom we don't really expect to see lose his life. Even this sort of rudimentary determination, however, cannot be made with regard to the Green Knight, one of the strangest characters in medieval romance. His description is loaded with a richness and variety of expression which leave the reader every bit as confused about the nature of this challenger as the members of the Round Table are. The poet refrains from providing authorial comment which

would allow us to form a judgment about the Green Knight and his actions.

To further confuse our understanding of this mysterious figure, the description of the Green Knight seems in spots to contradict itself--almost as though the poet himself were continually seeing the character from changing perspectives. For example, the poet describes the Green Knight's mantle and hood (11. 153-155), but later tells us that the Green Knight has hair which fans out, reaching to his elbows (11. 181-185). Such long fanning hair would presumably prevent one from seeing his mantle and hood.[99] The poet's description of the Green Knight and his trappings seems to be set forth with a kind of relish and delight in such richness. From his first appearance the challenger is recognized as a "mayster," a "lord or a knight." The physical description which follows shows him to be a fine specimen of a noble warrior; he is squarely built with long, stout limbs, powerful-looking, with the requisite slender waist and paunch. His adornments include all the proper knightly attire--a close-fitting straight coat, a fur-trimmed mantle and hood, neat hose, bright golden spurs, a barred belt with precious stones, and embroidery decorating his clothing and his saddle skirts. He also has the proper war-horse, the distinctive mark of a knight. Perhaps most surprisingly of all, he even shares

[99] Benson also notes this point in Art and Tradition, pp 61-62.

with other heroes of romance the quality of lighting up the room when he enters.[100]

The overall impression of a normal, doughty, valiant knight is undercut, however, by the poet's mention, even before his description of the Green Knight's clothing, that both man and trappings are all green. From the moment that this fact is first mentioned, we are prepared for the unusual. Yet, as we have seen, the poet presents a description fit for the greatest of knights. This challenger certainly is far removed from the Irish bachlach of The Champion's Bargain and the fierce, ugly churls who offer similar challenges in Hunbaut or La Mule Sanz Frain.

What does it all mean? Are we to rank the Green Knight with other fierce knightly opponents, so prevalent in medieval romances, who oppose the men of the Round Table? Almost before we can do so, the poet tells us that this impressive warrior wears no armor and carries no shield. Instead, he carries a holly bob and tells the court: "ȝe may be seker bi þis braunch þat I bere here /Ðat I passe as in pes, and no plyȝt seche" (ll. 265-66). The Green Knight does,

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[100] See King Horn in Middle English Verse Romances, ed. Donald B. Sands (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 26, ll. 389-90: "Of his faire sighte/Alle the bur gan lighte." See also Havelok the Dane in Sands, ed., p. 107, ll. 2121-26:

> Ther Havelok lay, ut of the halle,
> So stood ut of his mouth a glem,
> Right all swilk so the sunnehem,
> That all so light was thare, by hevene,
> So ther brenden serges sevene
> And an hundred serges ok--

in addition to a holly bob, also bear a huge, highly ornate ax, a fact leading one critic to remark: "It is as if the Green Knight offers peace with one hand and war with the other."[101] The fierce impression created by the Green Knight's imposing stature, his strange hue, and his bearing of a huge battle-ax (a weapon associated with trade professions and, therefore, in romance usually reserved for a ferocious giant)[102] is reenforced by the rude manner in which he addresses the court. The poet draws attention to the fact that "Haylsed he neuer one, bot heȝe he ouer loked./Þe fyrst word þat he warp, 'Wher is,' he sayd,/'Þe gouernour of þis gyng?'" (ll. 223-24). The rudeness of the Green Knight is emphasized when Arthur, by contrast, replies courteously to the Green Knight's question. In addition, the Green Knight rolls his eyes up and down while waiting for a reply, and later, wags his beard. Suddenly we seem to be back in the world of the churls and bachlachs in the poem's sources and analogues.

The opinion one tries to form about the Green Knight is continually in need of amendment. The Green Knight is rude, but he says he comes in peace, and, as we noted earlier, he does not threaten the court or Arthur. The challenge which the Green Knight offers is a dangerous one, but the potential danger is played down by the Green Knight himself, who insists on merrily referring to

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101 Burrow, p. 17.

102 Charles Mills, The History of Chivalry, I (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1825), 70.

his challenge as a "gomen." Even this account, however, is not wholly accurate, for the Green Knight's manner and our impression of the adventure he proposes seem to change minute by minute as the story progresses. Suddenly the merry game is a legal agreement, couched in law terms and repeated several times. The Green Knight at one moment taunts and laughs at Arthur's court; at another moment, he is openly hostile, but neither thrashes nor threatens. His language is so natural and even understandable under the circumstances that the entire scene seems to hover between a sense of the supernatural and a sense of the very human.[103]

The Green Knight is neither a bachlach nor a churl, nor is he the courtly knight with the sword, such as we find in Le Livre de Caradoc and the Perlesvaus. There is ambiguity in his physical appearance: he is both the monstrous green man and the perfectly proportioned, elegantly attired knight. There is also ambiguity in his behavior: he displays bad manners, but he does not attack or threaten violence. His challenge posits danger, yet he calls it a game. He does not lie, yet he deceives.

It is this composite picture which makes the efforts of twentieth-century critics to find a single designation for the creature such a hopeless task.

Benson believes the Green Knight to be a combination of the literary Green Man, representing youth and vitality, and the

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[103] A similar point is made by Burrow, p. 10.

literary Wild Man, who was the typical vilain opposed to knighthood;[104] Burrow remarks "the Green Knight evokes suggestions of the otherworld, the afterworld, and the underworld, but the context does not seem to favor any one of them."[105] Randall,[106] Levy[107] and Robertson[108] equate the Green Knight with the devil, while Schnyder believes that he represents Christ.[109] To Speirs, the Green Knight is "Jack the Green . . . . the descendant of the Vegetation or Nature God";[110] similarly, Nitze believes that the challenger represents "the annual death and rebirth of the embodied vital principle."[111] Krappe[112] and Zimmer[113] associate

[104] Benson, pp. 58-95.

[105] Burrow, p. 14.

[106] Dale B. J. Randall, "Was the Green Knight a Fiend?" Studies in Philology, 57 (1960), 479.

[107] B. S. Levy, "Gawain's Spiritual Journey: Imitatio Christi in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Annuale Medievale, 6 (1965), 65-106.

[108] D. W. Robertson, "Why the Devil Wears Green," Modern Language Notes, 49 (1954), 470-72.

[109] Hans Schnyder, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Essay in Interpretation (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1961), p. 41.

[110] John Speirs, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Scrutiny, 16 (1949), 274-90.

[111] William A. Nitze, "Is the Green Knight Story a Vegetation Myth?" Modern Philology, 33 (1936), 358.

[112] A. H. Krappe, "Who Was the Green Knight?" Speculum, 13 (1938), 208.

[113] Heinrich Zimmer, The King and the Corpse: Tales of the Soul's Conquest of Evil, ed. Joseph Campbell, Bollingen Series XI (Washington: Pantheon Books, 1948), pp. 76-81.

the Green Knight with "Death itself."

Most of these theories seem to be based on the mysterious green color of the challenger. The multiplicity of interpretations based on the symbolism of this color attests to the difficulty in attempting to assign one specific meaning to it. While its true meaning in this poem may never be known, the explanation may be simpler than critics would have us believe. Historical sources indicate that green was the color of knight-errantry, and that it was the rule for a knight's horse to be caparisoned in the same color as its rider when the knight undertook a particular adventure.[114] The image of a knight-errant decked in this fashion may have inspired the poet's description of the Green Knight as a mysterious knight who is green all over. Furthermore, the notion of the Green Knight as a knight errant, a knight who leaves his manor and estate to seek adventures far away, is corroborated by the Green Knight's own behavior and his own statements. When Arthur invites the Green Knight to dismount and stay at Camelot, for example, the stranger responds that "'hit watz not myn ernde.'" (1.257). The Green Knight thus reveals a sense of mission consistent with the sense of knight-errantry.

Whatever the true meaning of the challenger's color, we must agree with Larry Benson and others who have noted that the plot

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[114] Meller, p. 103.

at this point requires that the Green Knight be mysterious. The audience is given a lengthy portrait of the challenger which complicates, rather than illuminates his character, just as the description of the pentangle complicates Gawain's character while seeming to explain it. His churlish aspects inspire fear, while his knightly trappings dictate that, because he is a knight, Gawain must act faithfully and honorably in his dealings with him. The account of a mysterious green knight who picks up his head and rides out of the court creates exactly the mixture of horror, suspense, wonder, and curiosity which can delight an audience in any age. While the ambiguities frustrate the efforts of the literary critic, they are the real source of delight and suspense for the poet's listeners and readers. The ambiguities in the long run are enriching. Whatever else we may say about this poet, we must recognize him as a masterful storyteller.

The suspense builds as Gawain leaves the warmth of the court for the cold reaches of the north, for battles with monsters, and for harsh treatment by the natural elements. While the Green Knight could earlier jokingly call his proposed adventure a "gomen," all is deadly earnest now. Gawain may be a comic butt in the events to take place at Bercilak's castle or at the Green Chapel, but at this point in the narrative Gawain's plight is grim. How did such a condition come to pass for so noble a knight? Somehow the fate of Gawain seems to have been spelled out too quickly; the Christmas

adventure of King Arthur has exacted too high a toll. At Arthur's court, the nobles cry: "Bi Kryst, hit is scaþe/Ðat þou, leude, schal be lost, þat art of lyf noble!/To fynde hys fere vpon folde, in fayth, is not eþe" (11. 674-676). With the ambiguity characteristic of every major character's behavior in the first fitt, the poet leaves out the subject of his infinitive in adding: "Warloker to haf wro3t had more wyt bene" (1. 677). Is it Arthur or Gawain who should "warloker . . . haf wro3t?" Is it both? Is this the poet's sentiment on the matter, or is this simply a sentimental reaction of the court whose concept of knightly honor has been temporarily blurred by their sense of loss?

Clearly the members of the court blame Arthur for the loss of Gawain (11. 681-683), and, as we have noted above, his actions betray real failings more clearly than do the actions of the other main characters. With Gawain, the case has not been so clear. Is he justified in decapitating the Green Knight? The answer to that question remains a difficult one, and it is meant to remain difficult in order to create in the poet's audience the feeling of perplexity which those at Arthur's court experience. The challenge which the Green Knight proposes is deliberately different from any sort of challenge a fourteenth-century knight could expect to face in his chivalric encounters. An insult to one's prowess could be grounds for a duel of chivalry, but hardly a game as grotesque in its conditions as the one which the Green Knight proposes. Yet

Gawain is ready to take what he has given, and for that he must be admired.

An understanding of knightly behavior and ideals in the late fourteenth-century enables us to examine more clearly the image of knightly prowess presented in the first fitt of the poem. There can be no doubt that the age placed a high premium on the valiant performance of deeds of arms, but by the end of the fourteenth century, as I have noted, a new spirit was in the air as well--a spirit which sought to limit the wanton destruction of knights' lives. Richard II negotiated lengthy truces in the Hundred Years War, and while his love for the tilt led him to invigorate the court of chivalry, the duels which ensued were frequently stopped by an arbitrary judgment rendered by the king.[115] It is perhaps no innocent layman's view which prompted Chaucer to designate his ideal knight a "parfit gentil knyght."

In any event, the ambiguities associated with the notion of impulsive knightly prowess in this age enhance, rather than detract from, our understanding of the events in the first fitt. Bewilderment, anxiety, regret, and fear are the elements the poet uses to

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[115] Neilson, p. 189. Note also that Theseus as judge of the duel between Palamon and Arcite in Chaucer's Knight's Tale states as one of the conditions of battle that no one is to be slain: "And he that is at meschief shal be take/And noght slayn, but be broght unto the stake/That shall ben ordeyned on either syde;" (I [A], 2551-53).

mold suspense. The remaining action of the poem follows logically, or, more precisely, seems to follow logically, from the act of physical prowess in the first fitt--the beheading. In describing Gawain's arms, his physical deprivations in Wirral, and his battles with fearful monsters along the way, the poet seems to be concentrating on physical tests. Gawain, the bravest, most capable, and most moral of fighters, will find a way to defeat this green man. By subtly predisposing his audience toward the physical, the poet has set the stage for the irony which will mark Gawain's experiences at Bercilak's castle.

Chapter 2: Gawain, Bercilak, and Lady Bercilak: Courtesy, Loyalty, and Bravery at Bercilak's Castle

Part I: A History of Medieval Courtesy

In examining the behavior of both Arthur and Gawain in the beheading scene at Arthur's court, we have seen that one of the difficulties in assessing the characters' behavior arose from the strange conditions of the Green Knight's challenge. These conditions were so unusual that, like Gawain and Arthur, the poet's audience had no guideposts pointing the way the knights ought to behave. The gratuitous exchange of blows in sequence proposed by the Green Knight differed so greatly from the usual conditions operating in chivalric duels that a proper response was not obvious to the hero. Gawain's reaction and the way it was ultimately regarded by the other members of Arthur's court demonstrated the clash between chivalric notions of martial prowess and the Christian knightly ideas of moderation, prudence, and charity. Thus, the language of valor uttered by Arthur and Gawain in the first fitt gave way to the poet's apparent admonishments:

> Gawan watz glad to begynne þose gomnez in halle,
> Bot þa3 þe ende be heuy haf 3e no wonder;
> For þa3 men ben mery in mynde quen þay han mayn drynk,
> A 3ere 3ernes ful 3erne, and 3eldez neuer lyke,
> Ðe forme to þe fynisment foldez ful selden.
> (11. 495-499)

While ambiguity results from the clash of Germanic and expressly Christian military ideals, an even more complex ambiguity is apparent

when we consider fourteenth-century courtesy and attitudes toward love. Military behavior and people's reaction to it were the very stuff of history to the chroniclers of the Middle Ages; the same cannot be said, however, with regard to the documentation of social behavior at this time. We have available to us several treatises on chivalry which outline a knight's ideal form of conduct, but few actual biographies survive letting us know to what extent this ideal was actually practiced by real knights. Even when such biographies have survived, they show signs of having been infused with the romance ideal of chivalry, a natural result in works probably written by someone in the knight's employ.[1] In the absence, then, of authentic accounts of the way knights actually behaved, we are forced to rely on the presentations of knightly behavior as these are set forth in romances, medieval code books, secular records, and religious writings.

These sources reveal an elitist world where knights and ladies graciously interact, free from contact with villeins or peasants. The behavior of these noble people toward one another is characterized by an urbane manner, an extremely polite mode of discourse, and an overwhelming desire to please. It rests on the assumption

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[1] See John Barnie, War in Medieval English Society: Social Values in the Hundred Years War, 1337-1399 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 56-88; also J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages (1924; rpt. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1954), p. 122.

that the outer man--his appearance as well as his behavior--is a reflection of the virtue contained in the inner man. This system of manners or ideal of behavior was referred to in the Middle Ages, and continues to be referred to today, as "courtesy." The word, however, appears in so many contexts and refers to the behavior of so many different characters that it is difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at a succinct definition. Henri Dupin, in a full-length study of the concept, concludes:

> Pour qu'un homme soit courtois, pour qu'une femme soit courtoise, il est necessaire qu'ils ne manquent pas a l'obligation du salut, du conge, du baiser, de l'accueil et de l'hospitalité qu'ils soient loyaux et fideles, bon et portes a la pitié, doux, liberaus et larges, joyeux, epris de bonne renommee, mesures, et qu'ils aiment, et que dans leur amour ils observent les grands principes de pitié, de joie, de douceur, de mesure. Mais il leur faut encore autre chose, un je ne sais quoi, que l'examen, même minutieux, des textes ne permet pas de preciser, qu'on sent dans ces textes plutot qu'on ne l'y trouve. La courtoisie est quelque chose de trop complexe et de trop subtil pour se laisser enfermer dans une definition.[2]
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> (In order that a man be courteous, in order that a woman be courteous, it is necessary that they not fail the obligation of salutation, of leave-taking, of kissing, of welcome, and of hospitality, that they be loyal and faithful, good and inclined to pity, sweet, generous, bountiful, joyous, eager for good name, and temperate, that they love, and that in their love they observe the grand principles of loyalty, of fidelity, of goodness, of pity, of joy, of sweetness, and of temperance. But another thing is still necessary to them, an I-don't-know-what, that the examination, very detailed, of the texts does not permit

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[2] Henri Dupin, La Courtoisie au Moyen Age (1931; rpt. Geneve: Slatkine Reprints, 1973), 127-28.

to specify, that one feels in these texts rather than finds there. Courtesy is something too complex and too subtle to let be contained in a definition.)

Besides this difficulty with definition, there seems to be much in this concept of courtesy which smacks of gamesmanship--a matching of wits in what appears to be a succession of artificial, impersonal encounters with members of both sexes. What makes this feature of courtesy all the more surprising is that social intercourse most often appears to have focused on love. The discussion of such an intimate, personal emotion in what appears to have been an exceedingly polite, almost formulaic framework raises some serious questions about knightly sincerity. In addition, it becomes clear, from the literature of the late fourteenth century particularly, that a knight's conduct in the court was as important a feature of his chivalry as his conduct on the battlefield. Yet, like the savagery and brutality which passed for valor and honor in battle, the whole concept of courtesy appears to have provided a gilded covering over the lascivious behavior of late medieval aristocrats. In fact, their sexual habits as recorded by many of the writers of the time reveal men who never let their concern for politeness, kindness, or generosity seriously encroach upon their primal instincts. The "outward sign of inward grace"[3] was a fine tenet to expouse when in courtly company, but when a

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[3] Joan Wildeblood and Peter Brinson, The Polite World (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 46.

knight was out on his own, he evidently felt free to behave in any fashion he wished without really considering himself guilty of hypocrisy.

This discrepancy between ideal theory and actual behavior has led many social historians to conclude that courtesy and courtly love as set forth in the romances, "were never corrected by contact with real life. They could unfold freely in aristocratic conversation; they could offer a literary amusement or a charming game but no more."[4] Other social historians believe that the chivalric code actually practiced by knights was "simpler and more eclectic" than the ideal of social behavior set forth in the romances.[5] The question of just how earnest a knight was about the courtesy he professed is a matter of speculation. It is certain, however, that courteous dialogue between the sexes, artificial thought it may appear now, assumed the greatest importance to the late medieval aristocrat. His ability to converse well was as important to him as his martial prowess and valor. No knight, however valorous, could be a true son of chivalry if he could not conduct himself courteously in all his conversational dealings.

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[4] Huizinga, p. 127. See also Raymond Lincoln Kilgour, The Decline of Chivalry as Shown in the French Literature of the Late Middle Ages (1937; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1966), p. 124.

[5] Barnie, p. 58.

Knowing that a knight's skill in polite discourse was often taken to be a reflection of a knight's inner goodness is central to an understanding of the scenes at Bercilak's castle in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. A consideration of this point will help us to understand both Gawain's behavior toward the host and the hostess's attempted seduction of Gawain. It will help us, finally, to evaluate Gawain's transgressions and his inherent virtue.

An understanding of the hostess's attempted seduction of Gawain and his refusal of her advances requires examination of the medieval knight's attitudes toward sex. By setting forth some of the prevailing medieval attitudes toward the sexual act, we may discover that Gawain's sexual temptation by the lady involves many concepts familiar to a medieval courtly audience but unfamiliar today.

These ideas concerning sex, the relationship of sex to love, and the relationship of both of these to the medieval concept of courtesy are tremendously complex. In addition, the scenes at the castle (the scenes with which I am primarily concerned here) are the most complex and involved scenes in the poem, encompassing the greatest amount of action and the greatest number of active principal characters. This complexity necessitates a rather artificial arrangement in presenting ideas. First, we shall examine the attitude of medieval people toward sex, love, and courtesy. With these ideas in mind, we shall then examine the behavior of the

various main characters at the castle, beginning with the host, moving on to the hostess, and concluding with a discussion of Gawain's behavior. By examining each main character's actions and apparent attitude toward courtesy, we can determine the extent to which they take Gawain's social obligations seriously. We shall then be better able to evaluate the true nature of Gawain's transgression.

Sexual Attitudes and Practices--Early Middle Ages

In order to understand the variety of attitudes toward sexual behavior which appear to have been familiar to the late medieval aristocracy, we must examine the status of women in medieval times. Nearly everyone who takes note of late medieval courtesy refers to the awakening of a new regard for women which emerged in eleventh-century Provence in a form of essentially spiritual love called courtly love. Unfortunately, the popular interest in this French phenomenon has overshadowed for modern critics the primitive Germanic notions about sexuality. An older, less-refined Germanic attitude toward women and sex continued to be a significant aspect of Western culture long after the advent of courtly love.

When the Roman Tacitus wrote his Germania in the first century A. D., he noted:

> They [the Germanic tribes] even believe that the sex [female] has a certain sanctity and prescience, and

they do not despise their counsels, or make light of their answers. [6]

Although Tacitus' statements generally reflect his view of the Germanic tribes as noble savages, his remarks on the ancient tribal attitude toward women have been corroborated by archeological findings and the work of folklorists. Apparently because women were able to bear and nurture new life, many of the ancient tribes associated women with magic. Among such tribes the chief deity was often a goddess, and it seems clear from what we know about these people that they attributed to their women "some mysterious insight and foresight."[7] Often the goddess who figured so prominently in their religion was "at once creator and destroyer, gentle and fierce."[8] She was a highly powerful figure, at times beautiful, at times ugly. In this way she was not unlike Morgan le Fay as she appears in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and elsewhere in Arthurian literature. Mortal Celtic women likewise were powerful figures, capable of achieving high social status and participating in war. In Germanic societies of the pre-Christian era, women often

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[6] Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, trans., The Complete Works of Tacitus, ed. Moses Hadas (New York: Modern Library, 1942), p. 713.

[7] G. G. Coulton, Medieval Panorama (1938; rpt. New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), p. 621.

[8] Anne Ross, "The Divine Hag of the Pagan Celts," in The Witch Figure, ed. Venetia Newall (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 140.

managed and worked the lands which supported the family. Women among the early Germans also appear to have enjoyed customs which were particularly favorable to them, such as the male dowry and a higher wergild or blood price.[9] It is doubtful that in the early centuries after Christ, a general regard for women was universal, but there does not appear to have been any special designation of them as inferior, evil beings.

The coming of Christianity, which marked the beginning of a cohesive Western culture, seems to have considerably altered the status of women. Whether the barbarian tribes were infected quite early with Church doctrine blaming Eve for the loss of paradise, or whether certain tribes had merely recognized men's physical superiority, the women of the Christian era came to be treated with general disregard, if not contempt. We know that many women from among these tribes were powerful and lustful creatures, but generally men looked upon women as workers and as a means of satisfying their own sexual desires.[10] Consumed with a love of warfare in which their women played no part, men bestowed their sentiment on their horses and swords rather than on their women.

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[9] Susan Mosher Stuard, ed. Women in Medieval Society (Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn. Press, 1976), p. 9.

[10] Amaury de Riencourt, Sex and Power in History (New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1974), pp. 220-22. See also Geoffrey May, Social Control of Sex Expression (New York: Wm. Morrow and Co., 1931), p. 134.

Perhaps because of the low regard for women, the prohibitions against sexual promiscuity promulgated by the Church failed to put significant restraints upon the free exercise of sexual passion. In fact, the ancient notion of sex as the source of physical vitality continued to be accepted by the people of western Europe throughout most of the medieval period. One expression of this idea can be found in the early medieval view of bastards. It was thought that because bastards were conceived in love and not out of a sense of duty, they were especially bold and powerful. We know that William the Conqueror took no offense at being called William the Bastard and often referred to himself this way. We also know of other real-life heroes who were reputed to have been bastards. Among them are Clothwig, founder of the Frankish kingdoms, Charles Martel, and possibly Charlemagne. Boldness resulting from illegitimacy is prominent in tales of the noblest heroes of the literature dating from the Dark Age period. The most notable of these are King Arthur, Roland, and King Conchobar of Ireland.[11]

A related idea based on the association of sex and vitality appears to have entered into medieval medical practices. Records indicate that, even in the late Middle Ages, intercourse was recommended as a cure for certain ill-humors. In fact, it was doctors' recommendations of greater use of sexual intercourse in treating

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[11] Bernard T. Murstein, Love, Sex, and Marriage through the Ages (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1974), p. 144.

some patients that caused the Church to demand and obtain the right to have a say in all appointments to the medical profession.[12]

Another medical opinion indicates that women of the Middle Ages must often have been willing participants in the sexual act. It was believed that both women and men were driven toward intercourse by their physiology. Women, it was thought, produced a seed (or menstruum) which collects in the womb and causes a woman's desire to increase as it accumulates. A woman's emission of seed was thought to be just as pleasurable as a man's; in fact, women were thought to enjoy twice as much pleasure in intercourse as men because they not only expelled seed but received it.[13] Bits of medical evidence such as these point to continued vigorous sexual activity in spite of the admonitions of the Church.

Frank expression of free sexual practices are rare in works surviving from the Middle Ages largely because literacy was almost exclusively restricted to those in the service of the Church. The writings of clergymen, however, are so vehement against the evils of sex throughout this period that we may safely assume that the

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[12] G. Rattray Taylor, Sex in History (London: Thames and Hudson, 1953), p. 20. See also May, who quotes the following statement from Archbishop Wetershed's Constitutions (1229): "Under pain of anathema, we forbid any physician to give advice for the health of the body which may prove perilous to the soul, which is much more precious than the body" (p. 135).

[13] John F. Benton, "Clio and Venus: An Historical View of Medieval Love," in The Meaning of Courtly Love, ed. F. X. Newman (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1968), p. 32.

Church was never able to impose successfully its strict sexual regulations. The unbridled passions which made the Normans and other Northern European tribes such effective fighting men apparently carried over into their sexual behavior as well.

About the time of the Crusades, when literacy among the nobility began to increase, a new attitude toward women appeared in the Provence region of southern France. Women were no longer regarded as serfs or mere possessions; rather they were treated as goddesses, sources of inspiration, founts of goodness worthy of the highest praise. Men were mere servants or prisoners whose sole hope in life was an opportunity to prove their love to a lady. The precise origins of this new attitude, the precise conditions applying to it, the extent to which it actually affected knightly behavior toward women, and the extent to which it was meant to be taken seriously, are all questions which subsequent generations have been unable to answer. One thing, however, is clear--this change had a profound effect upon the activities, behavior, and literature of the nobility. We refer to this phenomenon today as amour courtois or "courtly love." Because of its importance to the late medieval concept of courtesy, we do well to examine a few of those tenets which remained as a legacy for the knights and ladies of the High Middle Ages.

The Legacy of Courtly Love

A full treatment of courtly love lies beyond the scope of this study. The concept of late medieval courtesy with which we are

primarily concerned in this chapter owes little to such courtly love ideas as adulterous liasons, difficulty in the attainment of love, or jealousy. We are concerned, however, with the emphasis on correct manners, proper forms of speech, modesty, restraint, and benevolence, all of which can be traced back to the influence of courtly love.

Perhaps the most significant element in the legacy of courtly love is the class consciousness it fostered. The practice of courtly love, and later of courtesy, imposed an elite pattern of behavior on the relationship between the sexes, a pattern designed to disguise and embellish the basic features of human sexuality. Just as knights sought to distinguish themselves from the lower classes of fighting men by the special way they conducted themselves in battle, they sought to distinguish themselves from the lower classes in their love-making and domestic relationships.[14]

The idealized and refined personal relationship paradoxically became the grounds for an elaborate social code in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Its emphasis lay on the way a man could make himself pleasing to others. What distinguishes courtly love from the courtesy which is such a prominent feature of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are the essentially transcendental qualities of courtly love. The sense of personal, idealized frustration and

[14] E. S. Turner, A History of Courting (London: Michael Joseph, 1954), p. 31; C. S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), p. 2.

the belief that love could improve one morally and spiritually are both missing from the later concept of courtesy.

We really do not know the extent to which courtly love was practiced. Unfortunately, Andreas Capellanus's De Amore, or The Art of Courtly Love, the only comprehensive contemporary treatment of the subject, fails to set the record straight on this point. His use of Ovid's Art of Love with its obvious comic thrust, and his own emphasis on proper dialogue suggest that the cult may have been merely a literary fashion. Recent critical opinion concerning Andreas's work supports the view that the cleric never intended his work to be taken as a definitive treatise on the subject of courtly love. Some scholars feel that the book is simply a collection of things Andreas "had heard in sophisticated court circles."[15] Others believe the book is a mere demonstration of Andreas's casuistic talents.[16] Still others believe that Andreas's work was intended to be a "scholastic joke," written to be enjoyed by fellow clerics, who were not in danger of being morally affected by it, yet were intellectually alert enough to appreciate it.[17] The subject is a

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[15] W. T. H. Jackson, "The De Amore of Andreas Capellanus and the Practice of Love at Court," Romanic Review, 49 (1958), 250.

[16] Murstein, p. 162.

[17] E. Talbot Donaldson, "The Myth of Courtly Love," in Speaking of Chaucer (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), p. 161. See also John C. Moore, Love in Twelfth-Century France (Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn. Press, 1972), p. 124.

difficult one which defies easy solution.

In addition to the question of just how seriously courtly love was taken as a practical code of social behavior is the question of its mysterious sudden appearance in the eleventh century. How do we account for the sudden reversal in men's attitude toward women? Why did military men--accustomed to taking whatever sexual favors they wanted--suddenly begin writing love lyrics? How did it happen that they allowed such lyrics to be sung or recited before their women? Was courtly love a revolt against the ascetic regulations of the Church concerning sex? The theories on the provenance of courtly love continue to attract the attention of scholars, and, as at least one of them has recently commented, the evidence is not all in yet.[18]

Some believe that the new view of love and sexuality entered southern France from the Arab world, for Arab poets early in the eleventh century had already begun to extol the ennobling aspects of love and to place the lover in a position of slave to his lady.[19] Another theory is that courtly love poems are really esoteric forms

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[18] Theodore Silverstein, "Andreas, Plato, and the Arabs: Remarks on Some Recent Accounts of Courtly Love," Modern Philology, 47 (1949), 123.

[19] This is essentially the view of A. J. Denomy, The Heresy of Courtly Love (New York: D. X. McMullen, 1947). See also Murstein, pp. 150-51 and Silverstein, pp. 119-25.

of propaganda for the Cathar heretics who opposed sexual intercourse.[20] Some attribute this new attitude toward women to the growing cult of the Virgin Mary.[21] Others, recognizing that courtly love poetry seems at various times to see women as both angels and devils, relate this phenomenon to "unresolved Oedipal problems"[22] or to "the ambivalent state of all men, who see in women both the all-powerful, life-giving mother of their childhood and the small, weak dependent of their manhood."[23]

Some elements of courtly love, such as the rise in women's status, may have resulted from some practical developments of the time. I have already mentioned the elitism associated with courtly love as a pastime reserved for the nobility. Another contributing factor might have been the gradual expansion of wealth in western Europe at this time through trade and deforestation of land. The beginning of the Crusades, which removed many of the most recalcitrant and bellicose warriors from western Europe, meant increased

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[20] This theory is set forth by Denis de Rougemont, Love in the Western World, trans. Montgomery Belgion, rev. ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1956). For summary and refutation of the view, see Murstein, pp. 151-53.

[21] Walter Clifford Meller, A Knight's Life in the Days of Chivalry (London: T. Werner Laurie Ltd., 1924), p. 260, and Murstein, p. 153. See also Eileen Power, Medieval Women, ed. M. M. Postan (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 20.

[22] Murstein, p. 153.

[23] Moore, p. 86.

security of life and property. This circumstance allowed some women the leisure and freedom to develop their potential. [24] Also, the death in the Crusades of male members of families often left wives and daughters with huge possessions. It became extremely difficult for a man to assume superiority over a lady who had the control of strong castles and who could summon a thousand soldiers to her call.[25] There is also the matter of increased literacy among the knightly class at this time, a factor which appears to have brought with it a certain refinement in pleasures. As excellent a jouster and fighter as William Marshal (ca. 1146-1219), while on his deathbed, reportedly would not say goodbye to his daughters until they had sung a sweet song for him.[26] Of course, such suggestions fail to explain why at the Council of Clermont in 1095 when the First Crusade was proclaimed, a general injunction was issued commanding that every male of knightly birth over the age of twelve take a solemn oath that he would "defend to the uttermost the oppressed, the widow, and the orphan; and that women of noble birth should enjoy his special care."[27] Such evidence

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[24] Meller, p. 260; also Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, trans. L. A. Manyon, Vol. 2 (1961; rpt. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press 1974), p. 306.

[25] Meller, p. 260.

[26] Bloch, p. 308. See also John Fines, Who's Who in the Middle Ages (New York: Stein and Day, 1970), p. 161.

[27] Riencourt, p. 221.

suggests that even before the Crusades were proposed the attitude of the nobility had begun to change.

Although there is much we do not know about the sources of and influences on courtly love, we can note its humanizing effect on the literature and behavior of the nobility in the later Middle Ages. As courtly love moved northward, it became the force which spurred men on to perform valorous deeds of arms. Thus, instead of being an image to be worshipped, the lady became an active participant in the love relationship, requesting a knight to perform certain services for her.[28] As love became less spiritual,[29] men gradually developed a high-minded sense of love, which included refined manners, gentility, and a pleasant demeanor. This new sense of love eventually became one of the cornerstones of chivalry.

From Courtly Love to Courtesy

Courtly love, or love as practiced at court, definitely had a refining effect on the life of the knight. After the Crusades and long after the troubadours of Provence had been exterminated for their heretical religious beliefs, men's attention to formal behavior, politeness, and benevolence became the peacetime

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[28] Richard Barber, The Knight and Chivalry (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 59; Morton M. Hunt, The Natural History of Love (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 152.

[29] Meller, p. 288; Bloch, pp. 308-10.

equivalent of the feudal virtues sought in war.[30] The idea that a woman could inspire a knight to excel at deeds of arms added a new dimension to the code of chivalry. Suddenly it was no longer sufficient for a knight to be a great fighter; he had to be a great lover as well. Since love was looked upon as the source of all knightly achievement, no knight could be regarded as perfect who was not a lover. Of course, love in this context was not the sort of lascivious love of which knights had been guilty for centuries, but rather formalized, ritualized love. Once love became an element in the knightly code, its spiritual force took on a more public cast. No longer was it necessarily the discriminating, secret love of one man for one woman. With every knight expected to be a lover as well as a fighter, pleasing women through politeness, good manners, and kindness became the business of every knight. In the fifteenth-century biography of Bayart, Bayart challenges a knight of great reputation to battle so that he may "please the ladies"--not one lady but many ladies.[31] A man who hoped to earn the praise of his peers had to display qualities which indicated his respect for the female sex. Making special mention of the knight's abilities as a lover became part of the standard formulae which chroniclers and biographers employed in their accounts of great knights.

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[30]Barber, p. 83

[31]Barber, p. 144.

The importance attached to making oneself worthy of praise not only gained for one the favors of women but also ensured one's advancement in the world. Gentility, politeness, manners, and grace were to be learned at court. As the noble court came to be the center and leader in manners, children were sent there by their families so that they might learn a manner of behavior appropriate to their station. This courtly system, then, became the practical side of the nobility's desire for beauty, for escape from barbarity, and for distinction from the lower classes. A courtly attitude toward love and courtly behavior toward all members of one's class ultimately came to be looked upon as "the moral foundation of a good society."[32]

During the Hundred Years War, the attention paid to the formalities of love and courtesy reached its peak. By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, love had become largely a game of discourse. The elaborate forms of request, the obsequious behavior before one's peers or one's betters, and the extreme fear of giving offense led to insincerity. Love and respect became a matter of the head rather than the heart. Love had rigid rules, elaborate conventions, and a whole system of its own jurisprudence.[33] As another dimension of feudal man, courtly love had always expressed itself in terms which were familiar to the nobleman and

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[32] Wildeblood and Brinson, p. 46.

[33] Power, p. 26.

also drew attention to the binding force of his affection. Obligation in love took the form of a lord-vassal relationship in which the lady's wishes must, of necessity, be obeyed by her vassal, the knight. In a similar way, the obligations of the lover were expressed in terms of a warrior and his captor, a situation in which the warrior was totally dependent upon his captor's generosity. These early metaphors for the love relationahip became stock expressions of love in the later Middle Ages, assuming importance for their own sake.

The importance attached to elegant expressions of love combined with the medieval taste for disputation and allegory in the later Middle Ages to produce numerous games of love. Among these were games like "The King Who Does Not Lie," "Sales of Love," "Games for Sale," and "The Castle of Love." This last game, for example, consisted of a series of allegorical riddles to which the partner in the game was to furnish appropriate response:

> Of the Castle of love I ask you: Tell me the first foundation!
> --To love loyally.
> Now mention the principal wall/Which makes it fine, strong, and sure!
> --To conceal wisely
> Tell me what are its loopholes, the windows, and the stones!
> --Alluring looks
> Friends, mention the porter!
> --Ill-speaking danger
> Which is the key that can unlock it?
> --Courteous request.[34]

[34] Huizinga, pp. 120-21; Power, pp. 24-26.

Thus the same sort of civilizing instinct which had led to the formulation of jousts and the duel of chivalry as a regulated, ritualized, beautified expression of the war instinct applied to man's social behavior. Love was not a spontaneous, spiritual expression of feeling but rather a formalized expression of beauty.

Another specific example of the court's preoccupation with a beauty which found its expression in formalized love is the French Le Cour Amoureuse. In 1401, Charles VI of France was urged by his followers to institute a court of love at Paris. Le Cour Amoureuse was founded to glorify fidelity in love, "to the honour, praise, and commendation and service of all noble ladies." Its members (over 700 in number) had illustrious titles, and its functions appear to have been rhetorical in nature. The men debated in the manner of amorous lawyers defending different opinions about love. They composed refrains, ballads, songs, complaints, and other pieces. Such, then, was the extent to which love--an essentially objective, undiscriminating love--had been made a society amusement.[35]

Sexual Attitudes and Practices--Late Middle Ages

I have already referred to the medical opinion which placed faith in the efficacy of sexual intercourse as a cure for some maladies. This belief was still common in the late Middle Ages.

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[35] Huizinga, p. 116. See also Kilgour, pp. 124-26 and Larry D. Benson, Malory's Morte Darthur (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), p. 156.

In a world where even clergymen had difficulty obeying the strict censures of the Church concerning sex, it is not to be thought that a secular code dictating gentility and respect could put a stop to fornication. While manners and refinement, coupled with the formalized vision of love, became a part of the aristocratic way of life, they did not do away with the primitive forms of erotic love. The Crusades, which had allowed women an opportunity for considerable emancipation, had also acquainted them with the rich goods of the East. A new taste for luxuries was the result. Women began to pay more attention to their toilette; in fact, one churchman swore that women were using so much color on their faces that there was not enough paint available to color the holy images in Church.[36] By the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, women's clothing had become quite bold. Dresses were so low-cut and breasts were laced up so high that one could "balance a candlestick on them."[37]

The lascivious tendencies represented by fashion at this time had a counterpart in behavior. Life in the medieval castle put young men and women in constant contact, and indications are that girls were frequently in danger of being seduced.[38] Whether or not

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[36] Murstein, p. 133.

[37] Ibid.

[38] G. G. Coulton, Chaucer and His England, 8th ed. (1950; rpt. London: Methuen and Co., 1970), p. 194.

the young girls were willing victims is not clear, but in Robert de Blois' Chatiment des Dames (thirteenth century), Sir Robert urged his daughter not to let men kiss her on the mouth or put their hands on her breasts.[39] The code books of the late Middle Ages similarly warn young girls that they must not let their eyes rove about, nor behave in a frivolous way. They were instructed to be meek and courteous; they were cautioned to avoid displaying too much curiosity. A bold manner and free, uncontrolled laughter were considered to be indicative of low morals.[40] The Knight of La Tour-Landry, in his book written for the moral instruction of his daughters, paints the picture of a society of devious men who profess their love to women only to gain sexual favors from them:

> Y bethought and remembered me that my felawes comened with ladies and gentil women, the which praied hem of love, for there was none of them thai might finde, lady or gentillwoman, but thei wolde praie her; and yef that one wolde not entende to that, other wolde anone praie. And whethir thei had good ansuere or euell, thei raught neuer, for thei had in hem no shame nor drede by the cause thei were so used. And therto thei had faire langage and wordes, for in eueri place thei wolde haue hadd her sportes and thei might. And so thei dede bothe deseiue ladies and gentilwomen, and bere forthe diuerse langeges on hem, som true and some fals.[41]

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[39] Turner, pp. 38-39

[40] Sybylle Harksen, Women in the Middle Ages, trans. Marianne Herzfeld, rev. George A. Shepperson (New York: Abner Schram, 1975), p. 14; Wildeblood and Brinson, pp. 115-25. See also The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry, ed. Thomas Wright, EETS 33 (London: Trubner, 1868), 18.

[41] The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry, p. 2.

These statements indicate that the polite speech associated with courtesy was often used as mere tool of seduction which young knights learned to wield to their own advantage. In one of the most fascinating sections of the Knight's book, we find a dialogue between the Knight and his wife in which the Knight, in spite of his earlier statements about the duplicity of young men when professing love, argues in favor of a woman having paramours. He utters the familiar argument that a women's love makes a knight "more gay and ioly; and also the more encouraged to exercyse hymself more ofte in armes."[42] His wife replies that love for a man detracts from one's worship of God, since an amorous woman is tempted to think about her love while in church instead of concentrating on the service. She also argues that having a paramour detracts from the love and worship which should more properly be disposed upon one's husband.[43]

The lady's responses indicate that it was not uncommon for a married woman to accept the love-service of a knight. That such love-service should be extolled by the Knight of La Tour-Landry, who elsewhere in his volume shows himself to be morally conservative in his thinking, indicates that such love service was often proferred and accepted in a formal, ritualistic way. Such love

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[42] The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry, p. 171.

[43] The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry, p. 180.

appears to have been sought with merely honor and worship in mind rather than request for sexual favor. The acceptance seems to have meant nothing more than inspiring a knight to perform nobly and valiantly.

The Courteous Ideal vs. Practice

The absence of reliable historical accounts of the social behavior of the nobility during the late Middle Ages makes it extremely difficult to determine the extent to which the romantic ideals of love and heart-felt courtesy were practiced. Marriages continued to be based upon financial alliances as they had been since before the days of courtly love. Judging from the huge percentage of religious writings given over to diatribes against fornication and prominence given to the crime of adultery in the works of such secular writers as Gower and Hoccleve, we can determine that rape and adultery were common at this time.[44] In Le Cour Amoureuse, an organization founded to glorify fidelity in love and to honor ladies, we find members such as Regnault d'Azincourt, who was convicted of rape in 1405, Louis de Chalons, who repudiated his wife and carried off another woman, and three men, Jean de Montreuiul and Pierre and Gontier Col, who opposed Christine de Pisan in her defense of women.[45] Such evidence of

[44] May, p. 141; Margaret Adlum Gist, "Love and War in Middle English Romances," Diss. Univ. of Penn. 1947, p. 83.

[45] Kilgour, p. 124.

lofty romantic attitudes at odds with actual sexual behavior in the age points up once again the often contradictory bits of information to be found concerning actual medieval knights. It appears that the elaborately courteous forms of love and service existed side by side with the more primitive forces of love and war.[46] The fornication which appears to have characterized the age, however, may have resulted from more than just strength of passion or weakness of will. Evidence points to a lingering belief that sexual vitality was linked with the forces of victory. A sermon by Thomas Bradwardine, Archbishop of Canterbury and confessor of King Edward III, testifies to the currency of the belief. Bradwardine, in preaching to the King and his nobles after the English victories at Crecy and Neville's Cross in 1346, sets forth a number of erroneous views on the forces which guarantee victory. Thomas condemns those who attribute victory to the power of the stars, the whim of the blind goddess Fortuna, the wisdom of human counsel, and the effectiveness of human prowess. The last view which Bradwardine refutes is the notion that sexual prowess leads to victory. Bradwardine's mention of this point among reasons for victory which are familiar to his audience indicates that such a belief may have been commonly held by warriors at this time. Bradwardine vigorously attacks those who credit victory to sexual activity:

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[46] Huizinga, p. 110.

> Hii dee Veneris militantes, hii Af⟨f⟩rodisiis famulantes, hii milites Epicuri, hii animositati sue audacie imputant probitatem, victoriam seu triumphum. Set dicunt, quod nullus esse poterit animosus, nisi fuerit amorosus vel diligat amorose; quod nullus se poterit gerere strenue excessive, nisi diligat excessive. Set quam prophana hec vanitas, quam falsaet insania, et vesana! Quid enim est iste deus huius amoris, nisi sicud ceteri dii gencium, demonium demon luxurie, incentor luxurie et nutritor . . . . Constat, racione et auctoritate docente quod huius turpis amor nequaquam, ut dicunt, audaciam generat, set magis vecordiam adminstrat. Qui enim sic amat, querit ea per que sua valeat perse[e]qui voluptate, et prohibita atque contraria horum fugit. Hec autem sunt persecuta in agone, vulnera carceris et mors summe. Et qui isti immoderate timuerit, quomodo animosus, quomodo strenuus, aut quomodo probus erit? [47]
>
> (These soldiers of the goddess Venus, these servants of lust, these soldiers of Epicurus, these same ones credit goodness, victory, or triumph to their spirited and bold nature. Further, they say that no one could be spirited unless he should be lustful or love lustfully, that no one could behave strenuously or vigorously unless he loves excessively. But what profane vanity, what falsehood and madness, what lunacy! But what is that ridiculous god of this lust, unless, like the rest of the gods of people, it is the demonic demon of luxury . . . . But it is established by reason and authority that this base love in no way, as they say, produces bravery but rather insanity. The one who loves in this manner says that he pursues with his desire those things which make him strong and refrains from what is opposite and contrary to these. However, the shame of prison and a worse death pursue them in agony. And who would fear such a person? How could he be spirited or vigorous or upright?)

Bradwardine's comments obviously reflect the ascetic views of the Church, but the fact that he finds it necessary to combat formally

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[47] Heiko A. Oberman and James A. Weisheipl, "The Sermo Epinicius ascribed to Thomas Brandwardine (1346)," Archives d'histoire doctrinale et litteraire au moyen age, 25 (1958) 323, 324.

a belief in the power of sexual vitality indicates the existence and the force of such a belief outside the Church. Other indications of the value placed on sexual activities remain on record as well. In the first half of the fifteenth century, Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, was reproached for his sexual abstinence which was considered "unbecoming in a prince."[48] Froissart recounts in detail King Edward III's heated sexual pursuit of the Countess of Salisbury,[49] and records indicate that daughters of the nobility considered it an honor to parade naked in front of Charles V of France.[50]

Bradwardine's sermon also takes note of another prevailing attitude toward the relationship between sex and dangerous adventure. In the course of his diatribe, the good bishop quotes from the Book of Deuteronomy a section indicating that the man who avoids sexual intercourse before battle survives, whereas the man who has sexual contact before the fight never comes home.[51] Benson also records the notion of continence as a guarantee of survival, citing an example of its currency in the early fifteenth century from the memoirs of Aeneas Sylvius, Pope Pius II.[52]

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[48] Huizinga, p. 109.

[49] W. P. Ker, ed., The Chronicle of Froissart, trans, John Bourchier, Lord Berners (New York: AMS Press, 1967), I, lxii-lxxxv.

[50] Taylor, p. 22.

[51] Oberman and Weisheipl, p. 325.

[52] Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1965), p. 43.

These contradictory ideas--that sexual vitality is an aid to victory and that continence is a guarantee of survival--both offer insight into the temptation scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. They can aid us in understanding both Gawain and the hostess as she offers herself to the hero just a few days before Gawain's encounter at the Green Chapel.

We must appreciate, then, the rich complexity of social behavior in the late Middle Ages. The Church, with its anti-feminist views which were mitigated little by the cult of the Virgin, continued to urge that contact between the sexes be limited to simply what was necessary for procreation. This view, as we have seen, found support in the partly religious, partly superstitious belief that sexual abstention insured one's survival. On the other hand, many men associated sexual vitality with military prowess and the mysterious forces of victory. Coexisting with these in a way which cannot be totally clear to us in the present day was the gentility and refinement of manners which was called courtesy. This last system of social behavior is the one best known to us from the extant secular literature of the period. Courteous behavior assumed primary importance in the romances of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Neither the knight's feudal duties nor the necessity of fighting the infidel is the topic of central concern in English romances. The real emphasis lies on the social conduct of the knights--their behavior as they graciously move to accept a challenge

or politely display respect toward a knightly opponent or lover. These literary works make it clear that the ideal is no longer a matter simply of achieving victory in battle. Martial victories often seem to be taken for granted, and the real interest in many of these works focuses on the knight's social conduct--his grace, his benevolence, and his manners.

As we have seen, it is difficult to reconcile the courteous chivalric ideal with what we know about the actual behavior of the nobility. We do know that as lengthy truces began to occur in the Hundred Years War and as knights found themselves less and less employed in a decisive way in the military exploits of war, courtesy became the keynote of chivalry. As the joust and the duel of chivalry came to represent the ritualized form for the knight's military instincts, so courtesy became a ritualized version of a knight's social behavior. It is an axiom of chivalry that as a knight's usefulness in society began to wane, his concentration on form and ceremony increased.

The emphasis on elaborate etiquette, kindness, and polite speech eventually produced the Renaissance gentleman of the sixteenth century. Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529) and others would insist that manners are not something merely laid on but are actually an expression of the man himself--a gentle man whose claim to fame was no longer fortitude but discretion, who was motivated more by

the desire to do what is good than a desire to serve and please God.[53] The savage violence of the knight was to give way to the grace of the gentleman. The admired nobleman became one whose virtue lay in performing all actions, however difficult, with an air of apparent carelessness. Some of these qualities are already apparent in Gawain, but for the most part rules of nonchalance for the gentleman were to come later. The forms of late medieval chivalry became more and more exacting while the violence and moral permissiveness continued. By the beginning of the fifteenth century the respect accorded to women and the courtesy displayed toward one's peers had become a "solemn game" in which it was not easy to draw a line between earnest and play.[54] The ambivalent attitude toward love and courtesy--the primal erotic actions associated with vitality as opposed to the excessively polite forms of respect--appears to be a product of the rigor of medieval laws. Such laws, according to some social historians, caused medieval people to be "virtuous or vicious by fits and starts." Virtues were stressed one at a time and carried to exaggerated limits so that the "medieval nobleman often lacked both a well-balanced view of life and any deep sense of justice."[55] The classic illustration of this point is the

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[53] Ruth Kelso, "The Doctrine of the English Gentleman in the Sixteenth Century," Univ. of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, 14, (1929), 72-82.

[54] Benson, Malory's Morte Darthur, p. 156.

[55] Frederick B. Artz, The Mind of the Middle Ages, A. D. 200-1500 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), p. 344. See also Huizinga, pp. 9-31.

behavior of the Black Prince, who, having captured King John of France at the Battle of Poitiers (1356), waited on his captive at dinner with elaborate courtesy; just a few years' later, the same prince mercilessly ordered the indiscriminate slaughter of innocent women and children during the sack of Limoges. As courtesy came to be regarded more and more as the source of real chivalric virtue, governing a man's behavior in combat as well as in court, the qualities associated with courtesy--qualities such as polite manners, hospitality, gaiety, and benevolence--assumed equal importance with such virtues as loyalty, generosity, and compassion.[56]

The moral consequences of this elaborate and exaggerated courtesy were often lost amid the gilded trappings and the refined speech which came to assume great importance to the knight of the late fourteenth century. Keeping these points in mind, let us turn to a consideration of Gawain's behavior at Bercilak's castle in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

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[56] Barber, p. 148.

II. Gawain at the Castle: Game or Earnest?

After leaving Arthur's court, Gawain travels north toward the forest of Wirral. In addition to fighting battles with wild beasts and giants, Gawain is nearly overcome by the harsh snow, sleet, and exposure to cold. Alone and miserable on Christmas Eve, Gawain prays to Mary, asking her to direct him to some dwelling where he might hear mass to commemorate Christmas. As Gawain looks up from his prayer, he comes upon a beautiful castle. The host (later identified as Bercilak) is a huge man "of hyghe eldee" (l. 844). When Gawain identifies himself, the host laughs, and the other noblemen at court rejoice, stating joyfully that now they will learn of proper knightly conduct and "luf-talkying" (l. 927).

After dinner, Gawain is formally presented to the ladies of the castle--the young and beautiful wife of the host and an old dowager. Gawain bows to the old woman but kisses the younger one. After an evening of playing games, the company goes to bed.

Joyous celebration continues until several days after Christmas when many of the guests begin to depart. Gawain attempts to leave with them so as not to miss his appointment with the Green Knight, but the Host assures him that the Green Chapel he seeks "is not two myle henne" (l. 1078). In accordance with medieval courtesy, Gawain pledges to obey the will of his Host, in response to which the Host proposes that Gawain spend his days resting at the castle while the Host goes hunting. When Gawain agrees to this proposal, the Host further suggests "a forwarde" (l. 1105). The pact requires that both men exchange in the evening whatever they have won during that day. Gawain agrees to the bargain.

The next day the lord of the castle rises early and begins to hunt for deer. The detailed account of this hunt is interrupted at the point where many harts have been taken, and the scene then shifts back to the castle where Gawain is awakened from his sleep by the sound of the lady of the castle entering the room and closing the door behind her. Embarrassed, Gawain pretends to be asleep as he ponders what action would be most "seemly" under the circumstances. He finally decides that it is best to hear what the lady has to say.

When she tells him "ȝe ar welcum to my cors" (l. 1237) and informs him that he may do with her what he wills, Gawain responds by humbly denying that he is worthy of the praise she has accorded him. The lively repartee between the two continues. Finally the lady stands up to leave, telling him as she does so that he cannot really be Gawain, for Gawain would by now have requested a kiss from her. Gawain responds that a knight should do what he is commanded to do by a lady, and they kiss.

Back in the field, the host and his men dress the harts captured that day and reward the hounds. When the host returns, he presents the harts to Gawain, and the hero presents him with the kiss. The two men laugh heartily and agree to renew their pact for the next day.

The next morning, the host's hunt leads him to pursue an old, tenacious wild boar. The poet leaves the host still in pursuit of the boar to return to the castle where, once again, the lady has come to Gawain's room. This time, the knight greets her courteously, but the lady once again questions his identity because he has forgotten the lesson she had taught him the day before. Gawain responds that he dare not ask for a kiss for fear he be refused. Their lively exchange continues. Finally, the lady kisses him again and departs.

The poet returns to the hunt where the boar, having killed several more hounds, mades his stand on the bank of a stream. The lord dismounts and pursues the boar into the stream where he eventually succeeds in killing the animal. The cleaning and dressing of the boar are recorded in detail, and the company returns home. Once again, the host presents Gawain with the day's gain, and Gawain gives the host two kisses. The host proposes the same terms of exchange for the next day, but the hero explains that he wishes to leave for the Green Chapel. The lord pledges his word that Gawain will be at the Green Chapel "longe bifore pryme" on New Year's Day. He then urges that they continue their bargain for a third day, adding that "þrid tyme þrowe best" (l. 1680).

The next morning the lord rises early for the hunt, and his unleashed dogs quickly take off in pursuit of

a fox. Amid the denouncing cries of pursuers, the fox runs about, dodging the dogs and hunters and doubling back on his tracks. Meanwhile in Gawain's room at the castle, the lady again enters. The particulars concerning her appearance are noted in detail this day, and the apparent attention she has paid to her looks is not lost on Gawain. They quickly fall into merry speech, as gayly, yet courteously, Gawain puts aside her words of fondness. The lady, sad at heart, requests another kiss and turns to depart. As she rises to leave, however, she asks him for a gift, but Gawain answers that he has nothing to give her since he is on a knightly mission in a strange land. The lady then offers him a rich ring, but Gawain stalwartly refuses it. After offering Gawain a green girdle which he also refuses, the hostess finally tells the hero that whoever wears this girdle may not be slain. At the mention of this quality in connection with the gift, Gawain thinks ahead to his encounter at the Green Chapel and accepts the device. She asks that he conceal it from her lord and Gawain agrees to do so. After the lady leaves, Gawain rises and goes off to confession.

The poet returns once again to the field where the host has headed off the fox. When the fox arrives, the lord casts his sword at him, but the wily fox swerves. Just as "Renaud" is about to retreat, however, the hounds fall upon him. The body of the fox is picked up, stripped of its coat, and the company proceeds home. When the host arrives, Gawain moves quickly to be first in exchanging the winnings of the day. He bestows on his lord three kisses, and the lord of the castle offers him the fox skin. Mirth and joy mark the evening's festivities, and at bedtime, the host promises to provide Gawain with a guide to take him to the Green Chapel.

An important feature of this central episode of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is its emphasis on Gawain's courtesy, an element curiously absent from all of the analogues of the poem. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight clearly surpasses its analogues in sophistication because of its emphasis on courtesy, on a knight's proper

social conduct. As we have seen, the conventions which contributed to this pattern of behavior had become so elaborate and formal by the end of the fourteenth century that they had come to resemble a game.

Games are everywhere in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The members of Arthur's court are playing Christmas games before the Green Knight appears. The Green Knight himself repeatedly refers to his dangerous challenge as a game. Gawain's host at the castle proposes an exchange of winnings game, and initiates a "hood on a spear" game. His wife attempts to involve Gawain in a game of love. Gawain responds with varying degrees of seriousness to the games which are proposed to him, but as the courtly knight par excellence, he must respond cheerfully, even if such response does not accurately convey his feelings. The importance which Gawain attaches to this social virtue handicaps him in nearly every game he plays at the castle. These include those games he plays with his host.

The Host's Sense of Game

The Green Knight, in spite of the legal terms he uses in expressing his challenge and its conditions, frequently refers to his proposal as a game. Gawain, however, in taking up the challenge to spare his king, indicates that to him the proposal is not an invitation to jovial play but an invitation to death. Throughout his tauntings and his repeated statements of the challenge, the Green

Knight remains merry. This same jolly disposition marks the host's behavior in the scenes at his castle.

The host's character is delineated for the reader early in the scenes at the castle. When he discovers that his guest is Gawain, he greets the information with loud, hearty laughter, the exact nature of which is rather puzzling.[57] Nevertheless, this sign of mirth immediately points to the host's genial disposition. His humor sets him apart from the other knights of his court, who, upon discovering the identity of the guest, immediately turn their thoughts to the subject of courtesy in which Gawain is said to excel. They hope to learn something of these skills from him. The jocularity of Gawain's host accords well with the holiday spirit appropriate to Christmas.

In the festive spirit of the season and in accordance with his temperament, the host constantly proposes games. On the very evening of Gawain's arrival, the lord involves his knights in a

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[57] See T. McAlindon, "Comedy and Terror in Middle English Literature: The Diabolical Game," Modern Language Review, 60 (1965), 330-32, in which he discusses the Green Knight as a demon figure who "festoons terror with gaiety." See also Douglas R. Butturff, "Laughter and Discovered Aggression in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Literature and Psychology, 22 (1972), 139-47. Butturff points out that the poet's efforts to make us associate ourselves with Gawain lead us to associate essentially funny episodes with cruelty and aggression. R. H. Bowers in "Gawain and the Green Knight as Entertainment," Modern Language Quarterly, 24 (1963), 331-41, regards Bercilak's laughter as "the loud merriment of a practical joker" (p. 339), and sees the laughter in the poem as "good-natured and gay" (p. 340).

game in which he places his hood on the tip of a spear and urges his men "to wynne þe worchip þerof/Ðat most myrþe my3t meue þat Crystenmas whyle" (11. 984-85). The host promises to contend with the others for the hood "er me wont þe wede, with help of my frendez" (1.987).[58]

This playful spirit evinced by the host on the very first day of Gawain's visit prepares both Gawain and the poet's audience for the exchange of winnings game. After the other guests have gone at the conclusion of the Yule feast, the host again praises Gawain and expresses his gratitude at having had him for a guest. Gawain responds courteously that he is the host's man "to worch your hest/ As I am halden þerto, in hy3e and in lo3e" (11. 1039-40). This commitment, made as a matter of routine in accordance with the formal rules of courtesy, becomes then the first of a series of convenants between the two men. When Gawain asks the host if he knows the way to the Green Chapel, the host laughs before telling Gawain that the place he seeks is very close by. Gawain, upon receiving this news, "gomenly" laughs and once again swears that he will do whatever the host wishes. Gawain's statement of fealty offered freely and without any prompting from the host obligates Gawain to agree to the exchange of winnings game even before Gawain knows what his host's request will be.

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[58] This game is a subtle harbinger of a later one in which the host will lose one of his "wedez," the green girdle, to Gawain.

The terms of the exchange of winnings pact appear to be simply a courteous, benevolent expression of the host's concern for his guest. Bercilak shows regard for all that his guest has been through--the long journey, the lack of sustenance and sleep, and the reveling with the host and his guests during the holiday. The host's efforts to make Gawain agree to do his bidding must have seemed to Gawain simply an attempt to assure Gawain's ease. In the manner which is to become characteristic of both husband and wife in their games, the host adds to his initial request just one more thing. He calls for an agreement, a "forwarde", to which he asks Gawain to "sware with trawþe" (l. 1108). Following so closely upon the host's generous expression of concern for Gawain's physical condition, the agreement has the double effect of putting Gawain off his guard and also forcing him, as a knight of courtesy, to agree. The addition of this agreement to the host's original request seems to be a mere felicitous touch, perfectly consistent with the host's interest in sport and game. Gawain swears "with trawþe", already presuming as he does so that the "forwarde" is nothing more than a "layke" (l. 1111), or game.

To those of us familiar with the host's other identity as the Green Knight,[59] Gawain's reaction to this "forwarde" calls to

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[59] Benson believes that the "audience cannot fail to recognize in the host, the figure of the huge, bearded and fiery-eyed Green Knight" (Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, p. 73).

mind his reaction to the earlier one made by the Green Knight--the exchange of blows agreement. At that time, the agreement sought by the Green Knight was regarded quite seriously by Gawain and the other members of Arthur's court, even though the challenger referred to it frequently as a game. Here in a domestic setting, where it follows so closely upon the host's solicitous concern for Gawain's comfort, Gawain can only regard the proposed "forwarde" as a game. Gawain's quite understandable failure to take the exchange of winnings seriously sets the hero up for the dangers he is made to face when the host's wife appears to play her games.

The Hostess' Sense of Game

When the hostess first appears in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, she appears to be one of those stock figures so often met in medieval romance--the beautiful woman of the castle. Her perfection is emphasized by the comment that she is more beautiful than Guenevere. This comparison is especially worthy of interest because it is made by Gawain himself upon seeing the hostess for the first time. Her beauty is emphasized even further by the contrast between her and her companion, the old woman whose loathly

features are described alongside those of the host's wife.[60] After obtaining leave from his host to do so, Gawain bows low before the old woman, but he embraces and kisses the younger one. Gawain then asks to be their servant if it pleases them. The very terms of this polite "luf-talkyng"--the request to be their servant--assumes new importance when the host's wife begins to play her game.

As we have seen earlier in this chapter, there is doubt about just how seriously the social virtues were taken in the Middle Ages. In our own day, when we greet a new acquaintance with "How do you do?" we usually do not expect or want an account of the person's health or current disposition. In a similar way, Gawain's request to become the servant of these two ladies is probably simply part of the formal apparatus employed by a courteous knight. Curiously, however, he employs a phrase of the courtly lover, a statement which in an earlier time had been used by a knight who wished to offer all of his efforts to pleasing one particular loved one. The kind of love service which such a statement indicated in the twelfth century is obviously not the sort of service which is meant in this poem of

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[60] While the contrast between the two women obviously gives the poet opportunity to expound upon the hostess's beauty, the poet may also have intended the detailed comparison to call to mind other loathy hags of medieval literature. Loathly hags capable of transformation figure prominently in such romances as The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, The Marriage of Sir Gawaine, and Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale. An audience familiar with such stories might have looked upon the detailed description of the old woman at Bercilak's castle as a tip-off to enchantment, and indication that such women often are not really what they appear to be.

the fourteenth century. Here the question is directed to two women at the same time, and it is a request made upon first acquaintance. Hence, it is most unlikely that it was uttered as an expression of love.

This notion of "luf-talkyng" is a baffling one for the modern reader. The relationship between love as a game to be played and love as an emotion to be felt is confusing. We find Gawain on Christmas Day at Bercilak's castle seated next to his hostess engaged in what the poet calls "dere dalyaunce" (l. 1012). The Middle English Dictionary defines "daliaunce" as "polite, leisurely, intimate conversation or entertainment" or "amorous talk or to-do; flirting, coquetry." The poet is careful to tell us that Gawain's "dalyaunce" is "closed fro fylþe" (l. 1013), but the fact that he feels the need to inform us of this indicates that their talk was of love. In the next line, the poet refers to this "luf-talkyng" as "play" surpassing "prynce gomen", again indicating that their speech of love is not so much a sincere outpouring of emotion as it is simply the sort of exchange to be expected of a courteous knight and a beautiful lady at court.

The felicitous exchanges in the presence of others take on a different cast when they are initiated by the lady in the privacy of Gawain's bedroom. As several scholars have noted,[61] the

[61] See J. F. Kitely, "The De Arte Honeste Amandi of Andreas Capellanus and the Concept of Courtesy in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Anglia, 79 (1961), 7-16; Cecily Clark, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Its Artistry and Its Audience," Medium Aevum, 40 (1971), 16-19; Martin Stevens, "Laughter and Game in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Speculum, 47 (1972), 74.

traditional roles of the lovers have been reversed. It is the man who normally initiates the action; here it is the lady. In addition, felicitous exchanges between the hostess and Gawain in the bedroom point to a characteristic feature of her method of seduction. Once Gawain does not prove to be immediately responsive to her invitation, she begins repeated attempts to identify courtesy with love.[62] In order to obtain Gawain's consent for love, his hostess realizes that she must play on the hero's sense of courtesy and fear of giving offense. And play she does. Among the important features of courtesy as it was understood and practiced in the fourteenth century were "debonerté," a sense of gaiety, and "blybe semblaunt," a merry manner, both qualities for which the lady praises Gawain (l. 1273). Knowing Gawain to be the knight of perfect courtesy, she begins her seduction with the same sort of merry manner that is expected of courteous knights.

On the first day the hostess assumes the role of the male aggressor as she comes upon Gawain and jokingly claims to be his captor. Without exerting any physical force, she refuses to grant him permission to rise. In talking to her captive, she reminds him of his reputation for honor and courtliness, but she follows this with a statement about their privacy--the lord and his men are out

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[62] D. S. Brewer, "Courtesy and the Gawain-Poet," in Patterns of Love and Courtesy in Memory of C. S. Lewis, ed. John Lawlor (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1966), p. 75.

hunting, her ladies are still in their beds, and the door is bolted. She follows these statements with:

> 'ȝe ar welcum to my cors
> Yowre awen won to wale
> Me behouez of fyne force
> Your seruant be, and schale' (11. 1237-40)

This offer is puzzling on a number of counts, not the least of which is the apparently abrupt nature of it. It led Gollancz in his edition of the work to remark that "the lady's bluntness in coming to the point testifies to her inexperience in such a role."[63] Others have remarked that its apparent bluntness is matched by its impersonal nature. Cecily Clark compares the hostess's "You are welcome to my body" with the words of love uttered by Melior to her lover in William of Palerne: "Take me in your arms."[64] He notes that the latter example conveys much more sentiment and emotion than the cold, impersonal invitation of Gawain's hostess. Her blunt invitation thrust in the midst of more evasive statements has led many other critics to assume that her words mean simply, "You are welcome to me."[65] This reading seems to have literary precedent and is supported further by the fact that the word "cors" is rarely used in

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63 Israel Gollancz, ed., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, EETS 210 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1940), p. 113.

64 Clark, p. 18.

65 See Norman Davis's note to line 1237 in the J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon edition of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, rev. ed. Norman Davis (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 108-09. See also A. C. Cawley's note to the Everyman Edition of Pearl and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (London: Dent, 1968), p. 97.

erotic contexts. Yet Clark and others have noted that a literal reading of the line, "You are welcome to my body," is consistent with what follows, "Your own course to take."[66] The statement, of course, may have been intended to be ambiguous, allowing the lady to be suggestive while at the same time allowing her a "cover" meaning which could not possibly be taken as uncourtly.

The hostess follows up her offer with the statement that she may be made the servant of Gawain. In suddenly shifting from captor to servant, she demonstrates that courtesy in her hands is a mere tool, a game that one employs to suit one's purpose. In the dialogues of three days, the lady feels free to shift positions whenever she sees an opportunity to gain advantage.

Whatever the reasoning behind the lady's profession of admiration, and whatever the exact implications of her offer of her "cors," Gawain proves unreceptive. His refusal to take advantage of the offer, however, is couched in courteous, humble terms which make him worthy only of more praise. Realizing that Gawain values courtesy, she attempts to combat his initial reluctance by beating him at his own game. She seems concerned with eliciting amorous behavior from Gawain voluntarily, and for that reason, she cannot be compared with physically aggressive women of the temptation stories in the

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[66] Clark, p. 18; David Mills, "An Analysis of the Temptation Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 67 (1968), 616.

analogues. The lady of the German romance Yder, for example, physically pursues the hero, and he is able to put off his temptress only by kicking her in the stomach.[67] In an analogous temptation of Lancelot from the Vulgate cycle, the hero is forced to run away after managing to extricate himself from the lady's embraces.[68] The aggressiveness of Gawain's lady is, by contrast, "all talk." She does not even attempt to kiss Gawain without first soliciting his unequivocal assent. She praises him, speaks generally of his fame, and emphasizes how fortunate she is to have the idol of so many ladies with her. The overall effect is to put the onus on Gawain--he is the courteous knight who is forced to live up to his reputation for courteous perfection. Her praise of him merely reenforces Gawain's obligation to avoid offending the lady in any way. As we shall see, Gawain finds this obligation more difficult to fulfill with each day of temptation.

Near the end of the first day's encounter, the lady realizes that her direct approach has not worked, that Gawain is not willing to accept love when it is freely offered. Then, using a technique which we saw the host use earlier to his advantage, she asks for one more thing just as she is on the point of leaving. After doling out praise throughout their conversation, she suddenly tells the hero

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[67] Elizabeth Brewer, ed. and trans., From Cuchulainn to Gawain: Sources and Analogues of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, Ltd., 1973), p. 40.

[68] Brewer, pp. 52-53.

that she doubts that he is really Gawain, for if he were, he would have requested a kiss by now. This questioning of his identity, as Benson has shown,[69] horrifies Gawain who, in fear of having betrayed his honor, courteously complies with her request for a kiss. Thus in the course of playing the courtesy game on the first day, Lady Bercilak shifts from captor to servant, and then from praiser to maligner. The end result of her posturings is one kiss, and this she is able to elicit only by assuming or pretending that Gawain's courteous behavior is prompted by amorous instincts. Gawain is too courteous to set her straight.

The next day she begins her attack by again questioning Gawain's identity because he has apparently forgotten her lesson of the day before--that a knight should seek to kiss whenever he sees the slightest opportunity. The lady is quick to relate this forgetfulness to his "cortaysye," and Gawain is equally quick in courteously acknowledging his quilt. He attempts to escape this slander on his reputation for courtesy, however, by stating that he could not simply claim an embrace, for fear she might refuse him. The hostess tells Gawain that he could easily constrain by force any woman who would deny him. In taking this position, she completely reverses the position she had assumed the day before, when she had Gawain as prisoner, by hinting that she may be made prisoner instead. The

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[69] Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, pp. 206-48.

suggestion that he might use force is a singularly uncourtly one, but the lady's mention of it is simply one more indication of her gamesmanship. The conventions of courtesy have no intrinsic value in themselves; they are useful to her only as a means to an end. She uses them in this way to outwit, or at least outlast, the courteous Gawain.

When she directs her attention to new matters, the whole notion of love as a part of this courtesy game is given greater emphasis. She notes that love is the chief thing praised in knighthood, and she asks why he has not spoken of it with her. She alludes to knightly tales of adventure and to romance in which knights risked their lives for ladies. She begs to be taught something of this "game" (l. 1532) while her "lorde is fro hame" (l. 1534). Gawain's response--that she knows more about this game than he does--displays the proper courteous humility, and at the same time makes the lady aware that she will win no more than a kiss from him.

John Burrow has noted in commenting on these dialogues that the hostess seems to show a kind of "bookish knowledge about love."[70] That "bookish" quality illustrates something of the public, undiscriminating nature of medieval courtesy. She talks about love in the abstract, and Gawain's successful efforts to turn aside her praise of his expertise in love are equally abstract, for they might be directed

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[70] John Burrow, A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), p. 92.

at any noblewoman, not exclusively her. Gawain's hostess attempts to use the "art" (l. 1543) and "game" of love to achieve her goals, but she is unable to beat Gawain at the game. After obtaining a final parting kiss, she leaves.

On her first visit, as we have seen, the lady makes a bold unemotional offer. On the second day she directs her conversation to love, hoping to evoke a physical response by begging to be taught something about the game. On the third day the impersonal approach of the preceding days is replaced by a direct appeal to the physical--still without exerting physical force and still within a courtly context. The poet in his account of the activities in Gawain's room on this last day pays special attention to the lady's appearance. We are told of the mantle she is wearing, the precious stones set in the fret covering her hair, and finally, "hir þrote þrowen al naked,/Hir brest bare bifore, and bihinde eke" (ll. 1740-41). These lines, when they are commented upon at all by scholars, are usually taken to mean that the lady is wearing a very low-cut gown. Actually, given the state of fashion late in the Middle Ages, it is quite possible that the lines are to be taken quite literally. In addition to the low-necked, tightly-laced dresses referred to above,[71] topless dresses became fashionable at court early in the fifteenth century. Agnes Sorel, mistress of the French king Charles VII and said to be possessed of magnificent breasts,

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[71] See p. 109 above.

introduced a dress at court "which allowed the full charm of her left breast to be displayed while the right one remained modestly tucked away."[72] At any rate, the hostess's attention to her appearance is not wasted on Gawain. Rousing himself from a troubled dream of the Green Chapel, he responds in the desired way:

> He seȝ hir so glorious and gayly atyred,
> So fautles of hir fetures and of so fyne hewes,
> Wiȝt wallande joye warmed his hert.
> With smoþe smylyng and smolt þay smeten into merþe . . . .
> (ll. 1760-63)

The poet records for the third day much less of the dialogue than on the previous two days, and his synopsis is filled with words denoting joy: "merþe" (l. 1763), "blis" (l. 1764), "bonchef" (l. 1764), "wynne" (l. 1765), etc. Yet the poet interrupts his description of their merriment to tell us paradoxically that "Gret perile bitwene hem stod" (l. 1768). The poet also tells us that Gawain's hostess this day presses Gawain so that he is forced either to accept her or offensively to refuse her. Whether this dilemma comes about through the lady's ability to trap him in courteous dialogue or her ability to entice him physically is not made clear. The lack of dialogue and the special attention the poet pays to the lady's appearance, however, seem to indicate that the lady's efforts to make herself physically appealing to Gawain are having the desired effect.

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[72] Murstein, p. 133. Anyone wishing to decide for himself about Agnes Sorel's beauty is directed to a Jean Fouquet portrait of the Modonna and Child for which Agnes, breast exposed, is believed to have served as the model. A reproduction of the painting is contained in the unnumbered plates at the back of Sybylle Harksen's Women in the Middle Ages.

When Gawain still does not move to make love to the lady, she asks him if it is because he already has a lover (a motivation given in Yder to account for the hero's chastity). When Gawain replies that he has no other lover, the lady seems to have exhausted her techniques for seduction. Dejectedly she tells him "I may bot mourne vpon molde, as may þat much louyes" (l. 1795). Then, as she moves to depart, once again she pauses for one last request made almost as an afterthought. Again, as on the other occasions when this technique is used, Gawain's defenses are down. Her request for a love token after she has already bid Gawain good day, has the effect of catching Gawain off his guard. As several critics have noted, this letting down of his defenses elicits from Gawain his only use of the informal singular pronoun in speaking to his hostess.[73]

Unable to elicit a gift from Gawain, she offers him a rich ring. He refuses: "'I wil no giftes, for Gode, my gay, at þis tyme;/I haf none yow to norne, ne noȝt wyl I take'" (ll. 1822-23). Assuming that he rejects the ring because of its great value, she offers him the girdle which he likewise refuses. Once again, almost as an afterthought, she adds the additional information that the girdle can keep its wearer from being slain.

As Burrow has remarked, the poet handles the real feelings and motivations of both the hostess and her lord with "a certain general

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[73] William W. Evans, "Dramatic Use of the Second Person Singular Pronoun in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Studia Neophilogica, 39 (1967), 41. See also Benson, Art and Tradition, p. 225.

vagueness."[74] Yet by examining the lady's successes (limited though these may be) and the method she uses in obtaining these, we can see that she obtains her winnings--the initial kiss and Gawain's acceptance of her love token--by a sudden statement or request made after she has risen to leave him. We can well imagine Gawain's sense of relief at these points after having successfully put off the lady without abandoning his courtesy. It is precisely this relaxing of tension which makes him such a prime victim. The hostess' timing and pacing are perfect. Whether it is a sexual liason with Gawain which she seeks or a broader testing of all his chivalric virtues, she shows herself to be a real master of technique. While she does not succeed in the actual seduction, she does succeed in a symbolic love exchange by persuading Gawain to give a kiss and to accept and conceal the green lace.

Fourteenth-century attitudes toward love and courtesy illuminate to a certain extent the assumptions and the reasoning of this basically oblique hostess. If we recall Thomas Bradwardine's sermon and its revelation that some knights consider sexual vitality as the source of victory, we might view the lady's offer as an effort to meet the needs of a valiant knight errant on his way to a dangerous mission.

Once this tack fails, as we have seen, the hostess actively works to ally love with courtesy. Her efforts in doing so have

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[74] Burrow, p. 93.

fourteenth-century precedent. Attempting to reach the joys of sexual satisfaction through the practice of knightly courtesy was a ploy frequently used by young noblemen to lead young women astray, according to the Knight of La Tour-Landry.[75] It was in an effort to combat the success of these ploys as they might be used against his own daughters that led the Knight to write his book in the first place. As this book, late medieval courtesy books, and many literary works of the period all illustrate, love and its formalized conventions were very much a part of medieval courtesy. The politeness, merry manner, self-control, and fear of giving offense were all elements of courtesy which had originally been elements of behavior designed to enhance one's standing with one particular lady. Gradually, as we saw earlier, this love was viewed as a source of knightly success and chivalric virtue. Love began to effect changes in the knight which others could see--desirable changes which made the knight more acceptable to others. When the so-called "courtesy" books or books of manners began to appear as they did with greater and greater frequency in the fifteenth century, courtesy as the fount of all virtue was a belief to be found even in children's rhymes.[76]

In assuming the male role and then initiating "luf-talkyng" with a man she hardly knows, a man for whom she could not possibly

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[75] See p. 110 above.

[76] See The Lytylle Childrenes Lytil Boke in Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., Manners and Meals in Olden Time, EETS 32 (London: Trubner and Co., 1868), p. 16, lines 1-8.

have formed any sort of deep, personal affection, Gawain's hostess was assuming a kind of insincerity frequently found in the men of the late fourteenth century. One of the difficulties with the role reversal, however, is that nothing in Gawain's code of proper knightly behavior could possibly have prepared him to deal with it. Women had guide books, like that of the Knight of La Tour-Landry, to aid them in dealing with aggressive knights; no such code book existed for males having to deal with aggressive noblewomen. Women were taught to be meek and submissive, not aggressive and presumptuous. Gawain knows he must put off this lady's advances, but he cannot rely on any code to inform him of the acceptable means of doing it.

Gawain's Sense of Game

The lengthy and detailed dialogues between Gawain and his hostess indicate that the Gawain-poet's audience enjoyed for its own sake this sort of disputation on love. As Huizinga has noted, a scholastic interest in argumentation underlay many of the "games of love" which were prominent court activities late in the Middle Ages. In addition, elaborate speech patterns marked the courteous man in all his activities during this period; they were considered the absolutely essential companion to magnanimous or courageous acts. The importance which the formulation of this elaborately-wrought, extremely polite speech had assumed in the knightly

scheme of things by the end of the fourteenth century is evident from the amount of reproduced dialogue to be found in Froissart's chronicle. In some of the most famous passages in the work, the courteous behavior of the greatest knights is demonstrated, not simply by Froissart's account of their behavior, but also by the author's setting down of the actual words spoken by a knight on a particular occasion. Notice, for example, the courteous humility obvious in Froissart's account of the Black Prince's words to King John after the latter's capture at Poitiers:

> And alwayes the prince served before the king as humbly as he coude, and wolde nat syt at the kynges borde for any desyre that the kynge coulde make: but he sayd he was nat suffycient to syt at the table with so great a prince as the kyng was. But than he sayd to the kyng, Sir, for Goddessake made non yvell nor hevy chere, though God this day dyde nat consent to folowe your wyll: for sir, surely the kynge my father shall bere you as moche honour and amyte as he may do and shall acorde with yo so reasonably that ye shall ever by frendes toguyder after; and sir, methynke ye ought to rejoyse, though the journey be nat as ye wolde have had it, for this day ye have wonne the hygh renome of prowes and have past this day in valyantnesse all other of your partie: sir, I say natte this to mocke you, for all that be on our partie that sawe every mannes dedes, ar playnly acorded by true sentence to gyve you the price and chapelette.[77]

This incident was one for which the Black Prince was justifiably famed--not merely for his magnanimity toward his prisoner, but for his elaborate politeness. We in our own day tend to place great importance on such virtues of the heart as charity and sincerity.

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[77] The Chronicle of Froissart, I, p. 384.

The virtues of chivalry, however, included those which T. A. Shippey has termed "superficial" qualities, that is, which contained a certain amount of deception. Though the virtues of chivalry included those of the heart, they also included qualities of a public, even ostentatious nature. Shippey cites among these the medieval virtue of "largesse" which implied "an element of parade not present in modern generosity."[78] The qualities associated with "cortaysye" include many which can be allied with this "element of parade": blitheness or good cheer, politeness, and "luf-talkyng."

One of the most important features of courtesy is that in its most gracious aspects, such as its almost excessive humility and its emphasis on good cheer or merry manner in all circumstances, there is a great deal of submission. This submission ultimately has the paradoxical effect of exalting the reputation of the knight who practices it. Like the Black Prince who waited upon his captive after Poitiers, Gawain plays the humble, submissive role of the courteous knight at the castle. Before the exchange of winnings game is even proposed by his host, Gawain has already promised to be his man. Once Gawain finds out that the Green Chapel is close by, he again promises to obey his host in all things. Even though Gawain has sworn twice to do his host's bidding, the host at the time he suggests the exchange of winnings again asks

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[78] T. A. Shippey, "The Uses of Chivalry: 'Erec' and 'Gawain,'" Modern Language Review, 66 (1971), 247.

Gawain if he will hold to this promise. Besides drawing the audience's attention to the pact and to Gawain's promise, this repetition raises the question of knightly sincerity. Are Gawain's statements of fealty to Bercilak simply forms of politeness, or do they indicate a sense of real obligation? Does Gawain "sware with trawþe" out of a sense of chivalrous submission which one ought to show to his host? Is he really concerned with the obligation which the words express? These questions are complicated further by the apparently silly terms of the exchange of winnings agreement. Gawain has already promised to rest in his room while the lord is out hunting. To Gawain and to the poet's audience, it is clear that the terms of this earlier promise are such that he will not have much to exchange. The exchange of winnings thus appears to be a rather gratuitous pledge which allows the host to bestow his hunting rewards upon Gawain without placing the hero in the embarrassing position of being even further indebted to his host. The bargain is also consistent with the host's love of games. Gawain, as the perfect courteous knight, has no choice but to agree to the exchange and no reason not to. As he agrees, however, he makes it clear that he regards the bargain as a "layke" or game (l. 1111).

Once again, then, Gawain has entered into a pledge or "forwarde" (11. 378, 1105) with the Green Knight (this time in his role as host), but the elements surrounding this second agreement are significantly different. The Green Knight had referred to the

dangerous agreement he was seeking at Arthur's court as "game," while the host in suggesting this second seemingly safe, even silly, agreement at his own castle does not refer to it initially as anything other than a "forwarde" or a "bargayn" (l. 1112). Conversely, the hero obviously does not regard the invitation to behead the Green Knight as a game, but does immediately associate the exchange of winnings with a sense of play. As a guest, Gawain is under clear obligation to obey his host's behest; certainly the duty is greater here than it was at Arthur's court where the Green Knight's challenge was made indiscriminately to whichever knight would accept it. The first agreement, as a challenge of martial qualities of bravery and prowess, required an act of the will on Gawain's part--a voluntary acceptance. In this second agreement, a seemingly gratuitous bargain in a situation where Gawain is under a social obligation to his host, Gawain must submit. This early submission and Gawain's agreeable attitude toward it set up a pattern for the rest of the events at the castle.

Gawain's Courtesy and the Devices of the Hostess

In discussing Gawain's thwarting of the hostess's sexual advances, John Burrow has cautioned against taking too ascetic a view of Gawain's character. He points to the parrots, turtle-doves, and love knots which decorate Gawain's helmet and notes that these belong to "the iconography of love."[79] Indeed, these

[79] Burrow, pp. 40-41.

are similar to decorations on the robe worn by the God of Love in the Romaunt of the Rose.[80] In addition, it is clear that the hero does respond to the sexual allure of his hostess. It is he who deems her more beautiful than Guenevere, and the lengthy descriptions of both her and her elderly companion conclude with Gawain's assessment of the younger woman's beauty. When he greets the two ladies, he kisses only the younger woman, even though kissing was an accepted form of greeting anyone at this time.[81] At dinner on Christmas day, Gawain obtains "comfort of her compaynye" (l. 1011), and seems genuinely to enjoy his "dere dalyaunce" (l. 1012) with her.

Many critics rely heavily upon Gawain's reputation as a lover elsewhere in medieval romance to account for the hostess' apparent expectations when she confronts Gawain in his bedroom.[82] As we have seen in the first chapter, however, the poet's deliberate efforts to ally Gawain with Christian virtues, his silence with regard to Gawain's sexual exploits, and the absence of lascivious behavior on Gawain's part elsewhere in alliterative poetry all

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[80] F. N. Robinson, ed., The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1957), p. 573, lines 885ff.

[81] Wildeblood and Brinson, p. 157.

[82] Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, pp. 105-06; Robert G. Cook, "The Play-Element in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Tulane Studies in English, 13 (1963), 23-24; B. J. Whiting, "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer's Squire's Tale," Mediaeval Studies, 9 (1947), 226-36.

prevent us from relying too heavily on information about a reputation which exists outside of this poem. We are given enough information about Gawain's reaction to his hostess' beauty before her first intrusion into his boudoir, however, to note that Gawain is not above sexual enticement. In addition, the limited point of view through which the action in the bedroom scenes is presented to us makes it difficult to determine the lady's motive or even fully to understand her technique. Gawain's response of furtively peeking under his bed curtains and then feigning sleep when his hostess enters his room, however, indicates that a lady's sudden appearance alone in his bedroom was not an everyday occurrence. Gawain's reaction also does not appear to be the reaction of a knight with a presumed interest in sexual liasons. Interestingly, from the moment when his hostess first assumes the male role in the love game, Gawain assumes the courteously submissive role proper to a guest. He makes efforts to humble himself and exalt her. Fortunately for Gawain, her suit does not include overtly physical overtures, and he is able to avoid the sexual thrust of her statements while not giving offense.

The limited point of view[83] in the temptation scenes--limited for the most part to a simple reporting of events with few attempts

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[83] For discussion of point of view in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, see Marie Borroff, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study, (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1962), pp. 126-28, and Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, pp. 170-73; 185-97.

to enter the mind of either character--makes it almost impossible to determine Gawain's exact motives for refusing the lady's offers. The different reasons given by scholars for Gawain's turning her down seem to have spawned a variety of opinions about what exactly is being tested in these scenes. Does the lady's temptation constitute a chastity test, a courtesy test, or a loyalty test? This question is further complicated by the fact that, unlike the heroes in nearly all of the analogues to the temptation story, Gawain is not aware that he is being tested. The uncommon situation in which Gawain finds himself further confuses motive. Gawain is in a highly ambivalent situation, for he must remain a true Christian knight while not giving offense to this lady, and while also not betraying his pact with his host. The poet has devised tests for his hero for which his knightly code and training can provide few guideposts.

What restrains Gawain from having his way with a beautiful willing woman? Is it that Gawain is operating under the partly religious, partly superstitious belief mentioned by Bradwardine and others that a knight should remain chaste?[84] Is it, as indicated by the amount of space given over to dialogue between

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[84] One of the most recent spokesmen for this point of view is A. C. Spearing, The Gawain-Poet (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 191-219; see also: D. S. Brewer, p. 73; Charles Moorman, A Knyght There Was (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1967), pp. 61-73; and P. J. C. Field, "A Rereading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Studies in Philology, 68 (1971), 255-69.

Gawain and Lady Bercilak, that Gawain's test is chiefly one of courtesy and focuses primarily upon Gawain's ability to refrain from offending his hostess?[85] Or is it Gawain's loyalty that is being tested? Does Gawain not make love to his hostess because, as a guest in Bercilak's castle, he is in the relationship of a vassal to his lord,[86] or because he has made a binding agreement with his host?[87]

The difficulty is that very little about Gawain's attitude toward sex can be learned from the poet's objective recording of the dialogue. On the lady's first visit we learn only that Gawain, in feigning sleep, is concerned with what is "semly": "Bot 3et he sayde in hymself, 'More semly hit were/To aspye wyth my spelle in space quát ho wolde'" (11. 1198-99). This reflects a courteous concern with appearances which corresponds to Gawain's earlier statement to Arthur in taking up the Green Knight's challenge in

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[85] Chief spokesman for this point of view is Larry Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (see especially p. 105). See also Kitely, pp. 7-16.

[86] Spokesmen for this point of view are Burrow, pp. 84-99; Alan M. Markman, "The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA, 72 (1957), 574-86; Gordon M. Shedd, "Knight in Tarnished Armour: The Meaning of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" Modern Language Review, 62 (1967), 6.

[87] Cook, p. 24; Albert B. Friedman, "Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Speculum, 35 (1960), 260-74. Although few scholars actually mention the point, Gawain's dedication to loyalty also raises the question of how Gawain would manage to exchange the love-making with his host if he did decide to take up the lady's offer. Cook (p. 24) is one of the few to draw attention to this problem.

place of the king: "'For me þink hit not semly, as hit is soþ knawen,/Þer such an askyng is heuened so hyȝe in your sale/Þaȝ ȝourself be talenttyf, to take hit to yourseluen" (ll. 348-50; italics mine). Both instances demonstrate that when Gawain is confronted by the unusual and unexpected--events which the knightly code does not unequivocally prepare him to deal with--his first concern is with what is "seemly." No further account of what is going on inside Gawain's head is given to us, however, once the dialogue between the hero and the lady begins. The actual dialogue itself furnishes little in the way of clues, except for the suggestion that adultery is not an acceptable practice for this hero. When the hostess tells Gawain that even if she were to search all over the world, she could not find a better lord than Gawain, he responds: "'ȝe haf waled wel better'" (l. 1276). Is this statement an example of Gawain's skill at disputation, an example of his courteous humility, or a true statement of his feelings concerning adulterous love? Although Gollancz assumes it is this last option,[88] Gawain elsewhere shows himself to be excessively humble so that his placing her lord above him could be readily explained by his characteristic humility.

On the second day when the discussion focuses on love, Gawain's comments tell even less about his reasons for refusal. He simply states that she knows more about love than he does. On the final

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[88] Gollancz, ed., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, p. 113.

day when the poet tells us that the lady's love is being urged on him with greater assertiveness, the poet in one of his rare authorial intrusions tells us:

> He cared for his cortaysye, lest crabayn he were,
> And more for his meschef 3if he schulde make synne,
> And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde a3t. (11. 1773-75)

These three lines have set scholarly heads spinning. They obviously demonstrate Gawain's concern with courtesy and loyalty, although whether the sense of loyalty springs from his agreement with Bercilak or from the fact that Gawain as guest regards himself as his host's vassal is not made clear. The real crux is the word "synne" in line 1774. Is the "synne" the breaking of his "trawþe" as Burrow would have it,[89] or the sin of fornication?[90] The question of which virtue Gawain is most concerned with becomes even more complicated when the hero accepts the green girdle, goes off to confession, and then fails to turn the lace over to Bercilak.

The Green Girdle and Gawain's Confession

There are several perplexing questions about Gawain's acceptance of the green girdle, not the least of which is why he had rejected the gift just moments before with the statement that he would accept no gift whatsoever "er God hym grace sende/To acheue to þe chaunce þat he hade chosen þere" (11. 1837-38). The lines seem to indicate that Gawain's thoughts are on his coming

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[89] Burrow, A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, p. 23-25.

[90] Golancz, ed., p. 66; Spearing, p. 205.

encounter with the Green Knight, rather than on his obligation to his host in the exchange of winnings agreement. They also indicate that Gawain does not wish to accept any gifts prior to this meeting. The entire "gift" episode suggests that the acceptance of a love-token establishes a kind of spiritual love-union. Gawain in all sincerity cannot agree to this sort of love any more than he can agree to a physical union. Just when Gawain believes he has escaped the wiles of his hostess, she resorts once again to that effective device of adding just one more thing by telling Gawain that the man who wears this lace cannot be slain. With this bit of news, the poet takes us into Gawain's head for a brief and rather enigmatic look at what the hero is thinking at this instant:

> . . . . And hit come to his hert
> Hit were a juel for þe joparde þat hym iugged were:
> When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech,
> Myȝt he haf slypped to be vnslayn, þe sleȝt were noble.
> (11. 1855-8)

This brief thought, followed, by Gawain's sudden acquiescence to Lady Bercilak's request, comes as a surprise after Gawain's adamant refusal to display affection for the lady or to give or accept a gift. Recalling the dream Gawain was having that morning when the hostess walked in, we can easily recognize in Gawain's thoughts an instinctive urge to reach out for something which might save his life. As most critics have noted, Gawain accepts the garment not for its monetary value, but for its ability to

save his life. Technically Gawain has not "sinned" in accepting it. His hostess seems to regard the gift as a love-token, so to a limited extent, Gawain may be guilty of assenting to an alliance which he does not wish to establish. What does make Gawain guilty in accepting the girdle, however, is his obvious intention to keep it for his use at the Green Chapel in violation of his exchange of winnings agreement with his host.

Although there is nothing in the agreement with the Green Knight which expressly forbids Gawain from employing a talisman to save himself, historical evidence on fourteenth-century attitudes toward magic argues against those who would see nothing wrong with Gawain's reliance on the green girdle. Thomas of Woodstock's ordinance, setting forth rules for chivalric duels during the reign of Richard II, stipulated that each participant in the duel swear among other things that he bore "neither upon himself nor upon his horse, words, stones, herbs, charms, carectes [characters], conjuration of devils, wherein he hoped for aid." The knight also had to swear that he trusted in nothing else besides God, his own body, and his right cause in the quarrel.[91] This evidence argues against critics who believe that charms like the girdle were taken no more seriously than the modern "rabbit's-foot."[92] It also argues against those who believe

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[91] See pp. 67-8 above.

[92] Peter Christmas, "A Reading of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'," Neophilologus, 58 (1974), 240.

that there was nothing incompatible about a belief in the efficacy of precious objects and Christian belief.[93]

While we may be able to sympathize with Gawain's desire to protect his life by accepting the girdle, his sudden acceptance of the girdle does not fit well either with what went before or with what comes after. Earlier, he had adamantly refused to accept anything but a kiss; now suddenly he changes his mind and accepts the girdle. And this acceptance is difficult to reconcile with the events which follow--his confession, the feeling of uplift which he experiences after the confession, and his refusal to return this "prize" to his host.

Aside from the fact that Gawain thinks the girdle would be a useful device to have for his encounter with the Green Knight, we learn nothing about his thoughts on taking the girdle. He promises Lady Bercilak that he will keep the gift a secret, puts it away after she leaves, and then does off to confession where he is absolved of all his sins "þe more and þe mynne" (l. 1881). The poet, without mentioning the particulars of the absolution ceremony, makes it clear that Gawain's sins are all forgiven. He supports this fact with a corresponding sense of mirth and gaiety in Gawain. His merriment on this particular day is so great that others at the castle remark: "Iwysse,/Þus myry he watz neuer are,/ Syn he com hider, er þis" (ll. 1890-2).

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[93] W. O. Evans, "The Case for Sir Gawain Re-opened," Modern Language Review, 69 (1973), 724.

Most scholars agree with John Burrow that the confession to the priest is a false one, for Gawain fails to restore the girdle or to make a firm resolution to sin no more.[94] The corollary to this view is the belief that Gawain's true confession does not occur until the end of the poem when Gawain acknowledges his faults before the Green Knight, attempts to make restitution, and resolves to amend his life. Because Gawain from the first seems intent on keeping the green girdle for use at the Green Chapel, Burrow is right about Gawain's failure to promise that he will sin no more. Burrow's conclusion that the confession is invalid because he fails to restore the girdle, however, is unconvincing. The girdle was not stolen; it was given. To whom is he to return it? To restore the lace to the giver would be the height of discourtesy; to give it over to his host would be to break his pledge of secrecy to her. In addition, he might even have been telling himself that in the interests of knightly prudence, he ought to protect himself in any way possible. Gawain's sworn agreement to his host, his obligation to be courteous to the lady, and his

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[94] John Burrow, "The Two Confession Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Philology, 57 (1959), 73-79. The list of scholars who accept Burrow's reading and incorporate it into their own interpretations is too long to give here, but some of the most important ones are: Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, p. 225; Donald R. Howard, The Three Temptations: Medieval Man in Search of the World (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), p. 224; Cook, p. 29; Nicholas Jacobs, "Gawain's False Confession," English Studies, 51 (1970), 433-35.

promise to conceal the girdle place the hero in a dilemma. His situation is surely too complicated to be dealt with by referring, as Burrow does, to a general treatise on penance.

Still we are left with the fact that Gawain accepts the girdle with the intention of keeping it and that he places his faith in a talismanic object, rather than in the providence of God. Knowing that Gawain could not have made a firm resolution of amendment, we are left to wonder at his elevated spirits after being shriven, especially since the poet makes a special point of having others remark on Gawain's mirth. As Burrows notes, Gawain even shows possible evidence of a guilty conscience when he approaches the host on the third evening.[95] Whereas on the previous two nights it was Bercilak who had initiated the exchange of winnings, on this night, Gawain approaches his host first "inmyddez þe flore" (l. 1932) to award his three kisses. We are left with the question of how to reconcile his behavior with his image as the perfect Christian knight.

Scholars who have been troubled by the contrast between Gawain's behavior and that of the proper Christian have come up with other readings of the confession. Some, seeing a distinction between knightly virtues and Christian virtues, believe that Gawain views the retention of the girdle as merely an offense against the knightly code. As such, the offense requires

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[95] Burrow, "The Two Confession Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," p. 75.

confession only to the Green Knight, not to a priest.[96] Others, seeing the retention of the girdle as merely a venial sin, believe that it requires no confession.[97] Still others, refusing to take the confession matter seriously at all, believe that both the decapitation test and the temptation are "practical jokes" staged by the Green Knight for his own enjoyment.[98] The limited point of view conspires with the secrecy of the confessional to keep us from fully understanding Gawain's behavior.

Rather than devising elaborate theological arguments (not hinted at in the text) or rejecting the confession as unimportant, perhaps we can find a simple explanation for Gawain's behavior. We have already seen that Gawain changes quickly from the resolute knight who will accept no gift to the knight who hears of the girdle's powers, accepts it, and conceals it, and then goes off quickly to confession. The sudden change and the rapid movement suggests that Gawain may run off to confession before he realizes he has even committed a sin.[99] As Spearing notes, at the moment that Gawain decides to accept the girdle, "the poet gives a most

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[96] Michael Foley, "Gawain's Two Confessions Reconsidered," Chaucer Review, 9 (1974), 73-79.

[97] Field, pp. 255-69.

[98] Bowers, pp. 331-41.

[99] Shedd, p. 8; Spearing, p. 225.

delicate analysis of the thoughts and feelings that passed through Gawain's mind, . . . and the thought that he was about to commit a sin is not among them."[100] His failure to recognize the seriousness of what he has done is supported by several other points in the text. For example, it is clear from the moment that Bercilak first proposes the exchange of winnings that the hero never regards the exchange as anything more than a game, and a gratuitous one at that. Given this attitude, why would he recognize his acceptance of the girdle as serious enough to mention in his confession?

Even as Gawain enjoys the festivities at Bercilak's castle, the beheading game looms large to him. It portends his death, his own execution because of a magic circumstance he did not foresee, in spite of the challenger's unusual appearance. His honor, his sense of pride based on public expectation, will not allow an alternative to his fate. In the face of this life and death matter, in the midst of this sense of foreboding, the events at the castle furnish a brief interlude. The easy pact which Gawain courteously agrees to at the castle cannot assume for him the same importance as the beheading challenge.

Gawain's assumption that the exchange of winnings is a mere "layk" does not mean that he fails to take all of the events at the host's castle seriously. The spirit of chivalry which

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[100] Spearing, p. 225.

motivated Gawain to seek the Green Chapel is still very much a part of Gawain's behavior. He is courteous, and when he realizes that his reputation has preceded him, he is especially so. This "theme of renown" as Benson calls it[101] is such an important aspect of what happens at the castle because it indicates the public side of chivalry, the aspects of the knightly code which the world sees. It is precisely these elements which occupied so much of the time and energy of the nobility during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This was a world in which a nobleman frequently maintained his own confessor and his own paramour simultaneously, where primitive instincts of war and love masked themselves in the beautiful forms of the tournament and courtly games.

All of this is not to suggest that Gawain shows one side of his character to the world and another evil side when he thinks his actions cannot be found out. Such a view is ridiculous in light of what we know of Gawain's behavior in the privacy of the bed chamber and on his solitary search for the Green Chapel. What the importance of the social virtues of chivalry implies is a knight's belief in his own public image. The knight bears an image of himself which is based upon those qualities which others see in him. The age-old virtues of loyalty, prowess, and

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[101] Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, pp. 211-26.

perseverance, while certainly not abandoned, became just three virtues in a list which also included the more noticeable qualities of love, courtesy, and cleanliness.[102] When these social virtues came to assume the same importance as the virtues of the heart, conflicts inevitably arose within the knightly code. Gawain's excessive concern for his courtesy sets him up for a violation both of loyalty, and of bravery. His acceptance of the girdle has pleased the lady, and it is a prudent measure in saving his own life. Furthermore, taking the gift and concealing it cannot really harm the host in any way. It is easy for Gawain to convince himself that he has done nothing wrong. Thus Gawain's concern with defending his courtesy has left him with his defenses down when his lovely hostess tests--almost as an afterthought--his fidelity to other aspects of the knightly code.

Obviously, as we have seen, there are extenuating circumstances. Gawain's obligation to perform loyally is tested under the most severe conditions where his life is at stake. Also, Gawain's promise is made in a spirit of such mirth that it is difficult for the hero to distinguish between game and earnest. It is easy to understand that Gawain might prefer to regard the exchange of winnings with his host as no more than a game. This

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[102] Richard Barber (The Knight and Chivalry, p. 147) lists these qualities among the twelve virtues extolled by Alain Chartier in Le breviaire des nobles, a fifteenth-century treatise on chivalry.

is especially true since Gawain has no idea that he is being tested at the castle. His responsibilities to an amusing game wane quickly in the face of the terror Gawain will face at the Green Chapel.

The ceremony which characterized much of late medieval life makes it very difficult to distinguish the really important obligations one has from those which are merely games. In Master of Game, an early fifteenth-century treatise on hunting by Edward, the second Duke of York, we are told that those men who hunt well sleep soundly all night "without any evil thoughts of sin." Close adherence to the rules of hunting guarantees, according to Edward, "that hunters go into Paradise when they die."[103] The practice of real virtues was thus confused with simple adherence to prescribed rules. The difficulty of Gawain's situation is thus highlighted by juxtaposition of the temptation scenes (where Gawain's knightly code can offer him little aid) and the ritual of hunting

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103 Edith Rickert, comp., Chaucer's World, ed. Clair C. Olson and Martin M. Crow (1948; rpt. New York: Columbia Universtiy Press, 1964), p. 220.

(where the manner of behavior is prescribed).[104] In the bedroom scenes, Gawain discovers that his knightly code offers no more help on how to deal with an aggressive noblewoman than it did on how to react to a mad proposal for a duel in which the opponent seems to be placing himself at a distinct disadvantage.

Gawain may feel that he is justified in taking the green girdle because of the chance that it might save his life and also because the Green Knight failed to play fairly in their initial encounter. It is clear, however, despite these justifications, that Gawain's honor is not enhanced by his accepting the device. After a perfunctory confession in the course of which, it appears,

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[104] Numerous scholars have made efforts to draw detailed parallels between the hunting and the bedroom scenes. The first and most famous of these is Henry L. Savage, "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 27 (1928), 1-15. Savage draws a connection between the emblematic significance of each hunted animal and Gawain's behavior in the bedroom that day. Other studies since Savage's have been even less convincing. They include: Gerald Gallant, "The Three Beasts: Symbols of Temptation in Sir Gawain," Annuale Mediaevale, 11 (1970), 35-50; and John Gardner, ed., The Complete Works of the Gawain-Poet (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 76-78. The identification of detailed parallels between what happens in the field and what happens in the bower tends to be unconvincing. The best comments on the relationship between the hunting scenes and the temptations are to be found in Burrow, A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, pp. 84-8; Donald R. Howard, "Structure and Symmetry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Speculum, 39 (1964), 425-33; and Martin Stevens, "Laughter and Game in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Speculum, 47 (1972), 65-78.

he confessed neither to the taking of the girdle nor to his intention of keeping it, Gawain wears the girdle, never indicating that he has done anything wrong by accepting and concealing it. In the events which follow at the Green Chapel, Gawain recognizes his fault only when the Green Knight points it out to him, only that is, when his fault is finally made public.

Chapter 3: Gawain and the Green Knight: Chastisement and Rebirth at the Green Chapel

Part I: A History of the Knighting Ceremony

The two preceding chapters have examined Gawain in two of a knight's social contexts: the military or warlike context of the Green Knight's duel at Arthur's court and what might be called a domestic context provided by the host's court. In both cases we have seen that Gawain's behavior to a large extent emanates from a sense of what constitutes proper knightly behavior under the circumstances. In fact, the situations in which Gawain stumbles are precisely those for which the prescriptive dictates of knighthood offer no guidance--situations such as a mad proposition for a duel, and an invitation to love offered by a beautiful, aggressive woman of high social position.

In the scene at the Green Chapel, the social prescriptions of the code are gone. Gawain as a knight true to his word knows he must show up and must submit to the Green Knight's blow, but the manner in which he must carry out these duties is left up to him. For the first time there are no knights or ladies present to remind Gawain of his impeccable reputation or of how he should behave.

Though Gawain states that "ful wel con Dry3ten schape/His seruantez for to saue" (11. 2138-39), it is clear that he anticipates a blow far more severe than the slight nick he gets, a

blow signifying his single lapse of fidelity in failing to turn the green girdle over to his host. Rather than being a test of prowess, this concluding act of the "beheading game" emerges as a symbolic rendering of the Green Knight's verdict on Gawain's knightly behavior throughout the adventure. While the blow serves to make Gawain aware of his failings, it also awakens in him a new understanding of what it means to be a knight. No longer is Gawain's concept of knighthood restricted to those superficial virtues, such as prowess and courtesy, for which he is famed. From now on, Gawain's knighthood will be characterized by sincere "lewté þat longez to kny3tez" (l. 2381). Gawain adopts the green girdle as a reminder of his flaw, and the other members of Arthur's court wear a similar green girdle. This device denotes paradoxically both honorable behavior and common humanity. The green girdle, then, symbolizing both Gawain's failure and his achievement, supplants the pentangle, that sign of perfection which an untested Gawain had proudly worn as his armorial device. [1]

The meaning which comes to be attached to the green girdle and the significance which the Green Knight gives to his three strokes indicate the ease with which medieval man was able to think in symbolic terms. In the early Middle Ages pictorial representation, gesture, and ceremony had been the only means of

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[1] Richard H. Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," ELH, 29 (1962), 137; also Donald R. Howard, "Structure and Symmetry in Sir Gawain," Speculum, 39 (1964), 429.

representing an idea to an unlearned populace.[2] By the age of chivalry, knights--indeed, all members of society--had come to feel that any new relationship, any change in status, ought to be marked by symbolic gesture and ceremony.[3] This tendency is apparent in nearly every medieval institution--from the sacraments of the Church to the feudal rite of homage.

Interpretation of symbolic action, then, was natural to medieval man. The various medieval institutions had their distinctive gestures representing the special status being entered into, or the relationship being established. With this information in mind, let us take a close look at the Green Knight's tap, that gesture which brings about a change in Gawain's outlook on knighthood. Although the Green Knight explains the significance of the tap, the gesture itself is reminiscent of the accolade or neck blow (colée) which often served as the culminating act of the knighting ceremony. It has commonly been recognized that Gawain undergoes "a new initiation into life"[4] as a result of the events at the Green Chapel. In order to mark this change in Gawain, and to emphasize the fact that, after

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[2] F. Warre Cornish, Chivalry (New York: Macmillan, 1911), p. 184.

[3] Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, Vol. 2, trans. L. A. Manyon (1961; rpt. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), 313.

[4] Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1965), p. 235.

testing Gawain, the Green Knight has found him to be "þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote ȝede" (l. 2363), the Green Knight conducts a simple form of the knighting ceremony at the Green Chapel. Gawain's new understanding of knighthood at the end of the poem is thus signified by a ritual which welcomes him to a totally new concept of chivalry. The appropriateness, then, of the Green Knight's gesture, and the light which it sheds on the Green Knight's attitude toward Gawain and the hero's understanding of himself, will aid us in rendering a final judgment on Gawain's behavior and the poem's meaning. Because the ceremony of initiation is important to an understanding of Gawain's outlook and the outlook of others at the end of the poem, its origin and its meaning in the Middle Ages are worth examining in detail.

The Origins of the Knighting Ceremony

The dubbing ritual, which assumed great importance to the knightly class in the Middle Ages, was originally a Germanic initiation ceremony in which a youth old enough to participate in war was presented with arms. Since all free men were warriors, the ritual essentially denoted the Germanic youth's full membership in the group. The ceremony seems to have consisted principally of belting a sword around the young man's waist. Though the custom appears to have died out among the Anglo-Saxons and other Germanic tribes, it continued to be practiced sporadically in places where Frankish custom prevailed. The development of knighthood in the tenth century led to the adoption of the

maturity ritual as a means of marking the attainment of legal age.[5] As time went on those lords who held their land by virtue of their military service sought a means of distinguishing themselves from those who did not live the life of a warrior. Awareness of themselves as a distinct class meant that the maturity ceremony became the exclusive rite of entry into this warrior estate.[6] Not much is known about the exact nature of this early knighting ceremony. Although one panel of the Bayeux Tapestry, which depicts William the Conqueror arming King Harold, is said to portray the knighting of Harold, we cannot be sure that this is in fact what is being represented.[7] Latin chronicles of the period indicate, however, that the primary act of the ritual remained that early Germanic gesture of girding the sword around the waist of the candidate.

In the early years, then, knightly initiation simply marked one's entrance into the class of the military aristocracy. The idea of knights as a special division of society, worthy of special honor, was one which developed gradually and was fueled by the Church in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. With the assembling of knights for the Crusades and the consequent

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[5] Robert Ackerman, "The Knighting Ceremonies in the Middle English Romances," Speculum, 19 (1944), 288.

[6] Ibid., pp. 288-89; see also Bloch, p. 313.

[7] Ackerman, p. 289.

efforts of the Church to direct a knight's energies toward Christian purposes, the knighting ceremony became a kind of sacred consecration. Additional symbolic acts were added to the original gesture in order to foster in the fighting man a new sense of Christian purpose and a new dedication to moral values. Prayers and oaths were added to what had previously been a brief rite composed of a few brief gestures.

Changes made by the Church in the initiation ceremony reflect changes made in the outlook of this military aristocracy. Whereas previously the fighting nobleman had felt free to exercise his military prowess at will, this new form of the ceremony stressed a knight's responsibilities and his adherence to a certain ethical code of behavior. During the Crusades, knights under this new sense of discipline became a kind of secular order representing a special Christian way of life.[8]

In the Christian form of the ritual the gesture of girding the sword around the initiate's waist still remained central, but now the sword was blessed first, as were many of the other knightly accoutrements. Eventually all of the pieces of knightly garb were given symbolic significance, and elements such as a preceding all-night vigil, a ritualistic bath, and a kiss of peace were added. At some early time, even before the Church began to take

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[8] Richard Barber, The Knight and Chivalry (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), p. 39.

an active part in the knighting ceremony, the accolade or neck-blow, the only gesture of the dubbing ceremony to survive to the present day, became associated with the making of a knight. Because this act is considered one of the basic elements of the knighting ceremony and because it is the gesture of the ceremony which we find in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, it is worth examining in detail.

The Accolade: Submission and Elevation

Although not the original gesture of the knighting ceremony, the act of striking the candidate in the course of bestowing knighthood upon him appears to have been an important part of the knighting ritual as early as the eleventh century.[9] What the gesture was intended to signify, however, is not entirely clear, and records from the later Middle Ages indicate that the gesture was not always considered to be an essential feature of the ceremony. Before the Church began to take an active part in the making of knights, the blow seems to have been a cruel buffet, delivered with the flat of the hand or the fist to the young man's neck or cheek with such force that he sometimes reeled under it.[10] This circumstance has led some to conjecture that the blow was originally intended to be a test of strength.[11] It may also have been given

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9 Ackerman, p. 302.

10 Bloch, p. 312; see also Leon Gautier, Chivalry, ed., Jacques Levron, trans. D. C. Dunning (1959; rpt. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968), pp. 118-19.

11 Bloch, p. 312.

to remind the young man of his promise to perform valaintly in all endeavors.[12] Perhaps the blow is related to the obscure Germanic custom of striking the witnesses to legal act in order to make them remember the occasion.[13] Any or all of these ideas may have led to the incorporation of the act into the knighting ritual. Some of the accounts of the accolade reveal that it was a single harsh blow. For example, Sir Gilbert Hay (fifteenth century) in his translation of Ramon Lull's "Le Libre del Orde de Cauayleria" adds the following account of the accolade: " . . . and thare the Knycht suld outhir geve him a strake with his hand, or with a drawin suerd, in the nek, to think on the poyntis and defend his dewiteis,"[14] Others refer to the accolade as three strokes delivered to the neck. In an incident at the court of King Charles VI of France in the early fifteenth century, the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismunde reportedly dubbed a knight by conferring upon him an accolade which consisted of three blows with a sword on the neck.[15]

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Barber, p. 40.

[14] Sir Gilbert Hay, trans., The Buke of the Order of Knychthede (Edinburgh: Alex Laurie & Co., 1849), p. 36. William Caxton in his translation of Lull's work likewise refers to the accolade as a single blow: "The Knyght ought to kysse the squyer/ and to gyue to hym a palme" (The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry, ed., A. T. P. Byles, EETS 168, London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1926, p. 74).

[15] Walter Clifford Meller quotes this episode from Favine's Theatre d'Honeur. See Meller, A Knyght's Life in the Days of Chivalry (London: T. Werner Laurie, Ltd., 1924), p. 67. Cornish also describes the accolade as three strokes (p. 186), but he fails to note his medieval source.

One interesting feature of this early harsh form of the accolade emerges clearly from early accounts describing the act. In many texts emphasis is placed on the fact that it was the one stroke which a knight was expected to receive and not return. The young initiate sometimes asserted that he would have borne it from no one else or under no other conditions.[16] Apparently, then, a certain submissiveness was expected of the candidate. Such a quality is a bit paradoxical when one considers that the point of the entire ceremony was to mark the young man's elevation in status.

Long after the accolade had lost whatever significance it originally had and the knighting ceremony had become imbued with Christian sentiment, the idea of submission continued to be associated with knighthood. The submission now, however, became a matter of morals and ethics. A pontifical for the making of new knights written by William Durand, Bishop of Mende, at the end of the thirteenth century includes a prayer which refers to the newly-made knight as one "who has just recently placed his neck under the yoke of military service" ["qui noviter iugo militiae

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[16] To support this idea, Gautier cites the thirteenth-century French romance, Elie de Saint-Gilles, in which the youth Elias is knighted by his father with an accolade on the neck "like a blow from a hammer." The youth responds by stating: "'Alas! If only it were somebody else who had treated me thus! . . . . But this is my father and it is my duty to submit'" (Gautier, p. 119). Both Bloch (p. 312) and Cornish (p. 186) also note that the blow was often a severe one, which a knight could not return.

colla supponit"].[17] The same pontifical also makes clear the paradoxical elevation in the young man's status as a result of being willing to submit to this "yoke": "And just as he from a lower station is brought forth to the new honor of military service, having put aside his old life with his actions, may he become a new man" ["et sicut ipse de minori statu ad novum militie provehitur honorem, ita, veterem hominem deponens cum actibus suis, novum induat hominem"].[18]

Though the accolade may have originated as a test of strength or a severe reminder of the need for submission, under the influence of the Church in the later Middle Ages it became a gentle tap with the hand or sword to the candidate's neck. The tap symbolized the man's awakening into the new life of knighthood. In Bishop Durand's pontifical, for example, the tap is given to awaken the new knight from the "sleep of malice" ["sompno Malitie"] into the fullness for knighthood.[19] In William Caxton's The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry, a translation of Ramon Lull's thriteenth-century treatise on knighthood, the blow is given to the new knight so that "he be remembryng of that whiche he receyueth and promytteth."[20]

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[17] Michel Andrieu, ed., Le Pontifical Romain au Moyen-Age, III: Le Pontifical de Guillaume Durand, Studi e Testi, 88 (Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1940), 448.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., p. 449.

[20] William Caxton, trans., The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry, p. 74.

In L'Ordene de Chevalerie, a late twelfth-century French poem, the accolade is referred to as "a reminder of him who has dubbed him and ordained him."[21] Throughout all the individualized interpretations of the accolade and the various other elements in the dubbing ritual, the idea of simultaneous submission and elevation remained a basic characteristic of the ritual.

The Embellished Ceremony of the Later Middle Ages

A basic tenet established early in the days of the knighting ceremony was that any knight had the power to "make" other knights. The gestures performed by the knight conferring the honor were believed to communicate a special impulse to the new knight. As the Church became more and more involved in the ritual of making knights, clergymen began to take an active part in the dubbing ritual. Initially, this meant simply blessing the arms which were about to be bestowed upon the new knight. Gradually, as the Church and its ethical system began to exert greater and greater influence on knighthood, clergymen began to share with knights the power to confer the honor.

Up until the thirteenth century, the secular form of the dubbing ritual seems to have prevailed; after that time, the religious form of the ceremony seems to have come into greater use.[22] Organized participation by the Church in the knighting ritual combined

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[21] Barber, p. 40.

[22] Ackerman, p. 310.

with the increasing interest in form, symbolism, and pageantry on the part of the medieval aristocracy to produce a more elaborate knighting ceremony in the later Middle Ages. The crude, often vigorous, maturity rite of early times became a carefully pre-arranged pageant marked by stately pomp and graceful movements which assumed importance for the beauty and order they gave the ceremony. The elaborate symbolism attached to the later ceremony lent a profound and awe-inspiring quality to knightly investiture. The gestures and the newly-blessed knightly accoutrements became representative of a state of noble perfection, synonymous with duty and virtue. The formulaic character of the ceremony did much to foster that sense of rigorous absolutism which was associated with chivalry in the late Middle Ages.

Certain holidays, generally those for which noblemen normally gathered, became the appropriate times for conferring knighthood: Christmas, Easter, Ascensiontide, Pentecost, and the feast days of St. John the Baptist or St. George.[23] The ceremony customarily took place in a court or in a chapel, and the accounts of expenditures tell of ceremonies conducted with all the lavishness of a Hollywood musical. In the developed ceremony of the later Middle Ages it was customary, too, for the knight conferring the honor

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23 Gautier, p. 119; see also Walter Clifford Meller, A Knyght's Life in the Days of Chivalry (London: T. Werner Laurie, Ltd., 1924), p. 47.

to bestow upon the newly made knight a gift which seems often to have taken the form of some piece of knightly apparel.[24]

In spite of the symbolic import given to the various gestures of the knighting ceremony and the elaboration of the various steps involved in making a knight, rarely does one find an account of knightly investiture which includes all or even most of the steps we have been examining. The principal acts of the secular dubbing seem to have been the girding on of the sword, the investment with spurs, the accolade with the hand or the sword, the formula, and the concluding celebration.[25] The religious form of the ritual was characterized by the all-night vigil, the Mass, the placing of arms on the altar, the blessing of the sword, and the sermon accompanying the accolade.[26] Yet most of the documents describing knightings refer to only one or two of these elements.[27] Evidently the folk origins of the ritual and the personal customs of both knights and clergymen alike allowed for a great deal of freedom in

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[24] In the Auchinleck MS of Guy of Warwick, Reinbroun, son of Guy, is knighted by a king who gives him "hors and arms bri3t" (Julius Zupitza, ed., The Romance of Guy of Warwick, EETSES 42, 49, 59 [1883, 1887, 1891]; rpt. London: Oxford Univ. Press, [1966], p. 648). In Sir Beues of Hamtoun, we are told that King Ermin dubbed Beues "vn-to kni3te/And 3af him a scheld gode & sur" (Eugene Kolbing, ed., The Romance of Sir Beues of Hamtoun, Part I, EETSES 46 London: N. Trubner & Co., 1885 , p. 45, 11. 971-74).

[25] Ackerman, p. 306

[26] Gautier, p. 120.

[27] Ibid.

conducting the ceremony. By the fourteenth century, this freedom to elaborate or compress the essentials of the ritual was particularly apparent in the variety of ways in which knights were made.

Dubbings in the Fourteenth Century

Dubbings are frequently referred to in the fourteenth century, both in chronicles and romances. Curiously, however, the references provide relatively little information about the exact way in which knights were made during this period. Frequently dubbings are recorded with nothing more than a simple terse phrase, such as "there were made a thre-score new knyghtes, wherof the king had great joye."[28] Such vague phrases indicate that medieval writers expected their audiences to be totally familiar with what they were writing about and hence felt no need to go into detail. In many of these works, the simple word "dub" is used in various ways to suggest either the bestowal of the accolade, the arming of the knight, or the entire ceremony.[29] These circumstances make it very difficult to determine exactly what went on during the ceremony.

Though the records of knightings in the fourteenth century tend to be vague, indications are that the ceremonies ranged from

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[28] W. P. Ker, ed., The Chronicle of Froissart, trans. John Bourchier, Lord Berners (New York: AMS Press, 1967), IV, 188.

[29] The word "dub" is of hopelessly obscure origin; see Middle English Dictionary.

the long, highly symbolic procedures to simple rites taking place in a church, but involving a minimum addition to the basic acts of investment with the sword and the bestowal of the accolade.[30] That knightings frequently took place in churches during the fourteenth century is clear from the accounts of such ceremonies in Froissart's chronicle. One of his best descriptions of a church knighting is that of the dubbing of forty-six squires on the day before the coronation of Henry IV in 1399:

> And that night all such squyers as shulde be made knyghtes the nexte day, watched, who were to the numbre of xlvi.; every squier had his owne bayne by himselfe: and the next day the duke of Lancastre made theym all knyghtes at the masse tyme.[31]

In addition, the fourteenth century seems to have witnessed substantial growth in the number of knightings taking place on the battlefield. Historical documents from the period indicate that many famous men were dubbed on the battlefield, including King Pedro the Cruel of Spain. From early feudal times, a simplified form of the knighting ritual had been used to confer knighthood on the battlefield.[32] The increase in the number of battlefield dubbings in the fourteenth century probably resulted from military leaders' recognition that dubbing was a way of inspiring one's men to perform

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[30] Ackerman, p. 331.

[31] The Chronicle of Froissart, VI, 380.

[32] Ackerman, p. 293.

bravely in an upcoming battle, or served as an excellent reward for valor displayed in the field. In addition, knighthood received under such conditions conformed very well with the classic notion of chivalry which stipulated that knighthood was an honor to be earned through demonstrations of prowess and bravery. Historically, then, to be knighted on the field was a most coveted honor.[33] The Chandos Herald's account of the Battle of Najera tells of the dubbings of several famous Englishmen before the fighting began:

> The good knight Chandos knighted there without delay Curson, Prior, Eliton, William de Ferinton, Aimery de Rochechouart, Gaillard de la Motte, and Messire Robert Briquet. Many a knight was made who was full of valor and came of noble and puissant lineage.[34]

Similarly, Froissart tells of the valiant fighting done by a group of young men in besieging the castle of Folant after they had been knighted by Thomas, Earl of Buckingham:

> They came before Arde, and there rested them before the bastyde of Arde, to thentent to shewe themselfe before the men of armes, that were within the forteresse. And there was made newe knyghtes, in their newe knyghthod, envyroned about the towre of Folant, and began fiersly to assayle them within, and they within valiantly defended themselfe . . . . Than the erle of Dymestre spake a highe worde, as he stode on his dykes, his baner before hym, the whiche worde greatly encouraged his people, sayeng, Sirs, howe is it thus in oure newe knyghthode, that this pevysshe dovehouse holdeth agaynst us so longe?

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[33] Cornish, p. 38.

[34] Edith Rickert, comp., Chaucer's World, ed. Clair C. Olson and Martin C. Crow (1948; rpt. New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 327.

> The stronge places and fortresses that be in the realme of Fraunce shall holde longe agaynst us, sythe this small house endureth so longe; Sirs, on a fore, lette us shewe our new chivalry. They that herde these wordes noted it ryght well and adventured themselfe more largely than they dyde before, and entred into the dykes, and so came harde to the walles . . . . Thus the house of Folant was taken.[35]

The idea of "winning one's spurs" on the field of battle was an appealing one to the Middle Ages, and the simplified manner in which the ritual was performed meant that a man could attain this lofty status without having to incur all the expense usually entailed in the prearranged ceremony. While the idea of knighthood as a reward for demonstrated or anticipated valor seems to have been an operative principle of chivalry during the fourteenth century, the status of knight was still used to designate those of noble birth without considerations of merit or valor. In the more practical considerations of inheritance and in accordance with the archaic notions of feudal land tenure, knighthood was often rather perfunctorily conferred upon a young son of a mighty noble just to ensure that possessions would remain in the family if something should suddenly happen to the father.

In the fourteenth century, though, the best knights were still great military leaders who fostered the belief in others that knighthood was a status to be won by valiant performance in the field of battle, that a knight bore major responsibilities both to

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[35] The Chronicle of Froissart, III, 131-32.

his vassals at home and to the men he led in battle. The knighting ceremony during this time represented both to the nobility and to the lower classes of society the consecration and dedication of the knight to those qualities on which the order and stability of society rested. This ceremony was designed to make the individual knight personally aware of his obligations and the honor being bestowed upon him. Records of the ceremony throughout its history indicate that it was intended to leave a lasting impression on the knight. The various gestures and their symbolic value, as we have seen, were intended to linger in the knight's memory for as long as he lived. With these thoughts in mind, let us consider the fate of Gawain as he heads for the Green Chapel and a new understanding of knightly virtue.

Part II: Gawain at the Green Chapel: Reward or Atonement?

On the first morning of the New Year, Gawain awakens to a cold, stormy winter's day. He arms himself, quickly dons the green girdle, and departs with the guide who is to direct him to the Green Chapel. A bleak winter landscape surrounds them on their way: steep slopes, rocky cliffs, and turbulent streams. By the time the sun rises, the two men are on a hill. The guide stops Gawain in order to warn him about the evil deeds perpetrated by this Green Knight whom the hero seeks. Because this huge giant is known to destroy all those who come by the Green Chapel, the guide offers Gawain the opportunity to escape the promised encounter without anyone knowing about his evasion. Gawain declines the offer courteously and descends into a valley alone to find the Green Chapel.

When the hero reaches the designated spot, he sees no sign of a chapel. A little distance away, he sees a mound overgrown with grass and bearing holes on either side. The feeling that this might be the Green Chapel fills Gawain with fear that it is the devil who has lured him to this hideous spot. Suddenly Gawain hears the grinding sound of an ax being sharpened. The Green Knight appears and congratulates Gawain on showing up. Gawain prepares for the blow, but just as the Green Knight is bringing down the huge blade, Gawain flinches. At this, the Green Knight stops the stroke and questions the hero's identity, for the true Gawain would never be such a coward. At these words, the hero pledges that he will flinch no more. The Green Knight lifts his ax for another stroke, and though Gawain does not flinch, the Green Knight again halts his stroke. This time Gawain's adversary stops only to taunt Gawain. At this seemingly needless delay, Gawain becomes angry, accusing the Green Knight of carrying on his threats for too long. For the third time, the Green Knight lifts his weapon and this time brings it down on Gawain's neck, giving the hero just a nick with the blade.

When Gawain sees a drop of his blood on the snow, he quickly throws his shield into place, and prepares to fight. The Green Knight, amused, tells Gawain not to be so fierce and promptly acknowledges that Gawain has lived up to the terms of their agreement.

The Green Knight then identifies himself as the lord of the castle, explains the meaning of the three strokes, and identifies the girdle as his own. The Green Knight relates the two feints to Gawain's good behavior on the first two days of the exchange of winnings agreement. The third stroke, which nicked Gawain's neck, punished his single lapse of fidelity--his concealment of the green girdle. The Green Knight's wife was sent by him to tempt Gawain, and the erstwhile host assures Gawain that he finds him quite faultless, except for a slight flaw in loyalty which resulted only from Gawain's efforts to save his own life.

Such assurance has no effect on Gawain, however. The hero launches into a lengthy tirade, berating himself for his cowardice, covetousness, and perfidy. The Green Knight awards Gawain the green girdle, telling him to keep the device as a token of the events at the Green Chapel. He then invites the hero to return with him to his castle, where he may be reconciled with the host's wife. Gawain politely refuses the offer. In contemplating the lady's trick to which he succumbed, Gawain compares himself to Old Testament sinners like Adam, Samson, Solomon, and David, who were brought low through wiles of women. The hero agrees to keep the girdle, however, as a sign of his flaw. Just before the two men bid farewell to each other, Gawain asks the Green Knight to reveal his true identity. The Green Knight identifies himself as Bercilak de Hautdesert and the old lady at the castle as Morgan le Fay, who perpetrated the entire adventure to test the pride of Arthur's court and to frighten Guenevere to death.

The two men embrace, and Gawain goes on to Camelot. There, feeling, shame and dishonor, he recounts his entire adventure. The court laughs at Gawain's account, and all vow to wear a similar green baldric for Gawain's sake. The entire story is then made to recede into the past through closing references to Brutus and the Trojan War.

In this culminating episode of Gawain's adventure, we, like the hero, are made to scrutinize those military and social values which Gawain, as knightly exemplar, represents. Surrounded by his comrades in arms at Camelot, Gawain had stepped forward to protect

his king, and had believed he acted valiantly in chopping off the Green Knight's head. In the hospitable setting at the host's castle, Gawain leaped at an opportunity to save his own life, believing as he did so that he was pleasing his hostess and in no way injuring his host. As Gawain departs for the Green Chapel, he is naturally fearful at having to face death without being able to defend himself, but his fear seems to bear no tinges of guilt. The blow to which Gawain must now submit is essentially a heroic act, calling upon that noble sense of fidelity to be found only in the greatest of heroes. Gawain in no way suspects that his behavior at the host's castle will have an effect on the outcome of the adventure.

Gawain's Expectations on the Journey to the Green Chapel

Though Gawain dons the green girdle before leaving the castle for his promised encounter with the Green Knight, it becomes clear through the course of his journey that his thoughts are more on the power of God than the efficacy of the lace. This sudden reliance on God undoubtedly owes something to the eschatological scenery and the drawn out suspense of reaching the Green Chapel. By the time Gawain has reached his destination, he feels certain that it is the devil who has lured him to this hellish spot for the sole purpose of exterminating him.

As Gawain lies in his bed sleeplessly awaiting the hour of his departure, he hears the ominous sound of a cock crowing each

hour. Though Gawain arms himself fully in battle garb that is as "fresh as vpon fyrst" (l. 2019), and though he courteously commends the hospitality of his host and his people, the comfort provided by these familiar knightly acts is soon forgotten as Gawain confronts the hostile winter terrain. This journey is significantly different from his earlier rigorous winter journey through Wirral. Though there are no monsters to be fought along the way, and though the hero knows his destination to be close at hand, there is a sense of foreboding evil in the landscape surrounding him. Many features of this terrain resemble closely landscape features frequently associated with hell. From the moment when Gawain and his guide first leave the castle, they confront a bleak outdoor scene--bare tree boughs, icy cliffs, clinging mists, bubbling streams, and steep banks. When we consider these features in conjunction with their northern location, we come very close to the description of hell to be found in the Visio Pauli section of Blickling Homily number 17.[36] This sinister association intensifies the closer Gawain gets to the Green Chapel. It is encouraged, of course, by the guide's temptation. His description of the Green Knight as a ruthless executioner

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[36] See The Blickling Homilies of the Tenth Century, ed. and trans. R. Morris, EETS, 58, 63, 73 (London: Trubner, 1880), 208-11; and Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg, ed. Fr. Klaeber, 3rd ed. (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath & Co., 1950), pp. 51-2, ll. 1357 ff., and pp. 182-83. See also Hans Schnyder, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Essay in Interpretation (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1961), pp. 68-71.

residing in a bleak winter wasteland harmonizes so well with the hellish features of the terrain that it is no wonder Gawain seeks aid from God, the only force which can overcome the devil.

The sinister and suspenseful feeling evoked by the setting is aided by a slow-down in the pace of the narrative. As Benson notes, eight lines were sufficient to tell of the Trojan War and the founding of Britain at the beginning of the poem, but as Gawain prepares to leave the host's castle, eight lines serve to tell of just one winter's night.[37] By the time Gawain reaches the Green Chapel, the narrative has slowed to a near stop, and we, the poet's audience, are just as caught up in the suspense of Gawain's adventure as is the hero himself.

The suspense is maintained in other ways as well. Whereas Gawain expects to find a chapel, he finds himself confronted instead by a mound. Rather than a straightforward meeting with the Green Knight, Gawain is greeted by the grinding sound of an ax being sharpened, and his words of greeting are answered by a disembodied voice coming from a cliff above his head. When the Green Knight appears, he does so suddenly and mysteriously, "whirling" out of one of the holes in the mound and bearing a huge Danish ax.

All of these elements testify to the poet's masterful handling of suspense and also reenforce Gawain's sense of being a helpless

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[37] Benson, p. 193.

victim. How was Gawain to know that the Green Knight, whom he had decapitated in response to a rude challenge, would be able to restore his severed head? Now, as ill-luck would have it, Gawain must submit to a blow which he believes will mean his death. The devilish surroundings seem to indicate that the Christmas "gomen" of a year before was actually a trick of deadly entrapment.

The Green Knight's Tap and the Iconography of the Dubbing Ceremony

Though the guide fails to tempt Gawain from his course of action, and though Gawain acknowledges God's power and pledges to "let God worche" (l. 2208), it is clear that the hero fears the worst. There is a certain doughtiness and a certain amount of hope, however, in Gawain's submission to the terms of his pledge. While the Green Knight, for example, came to Arthur's court unarmed to receive his blow, Gawain is fully armed and holds his weapons in readiness as he goes out to meet the Green Knight for his blow. While the hero admits he must submit to the blow, he warms the Green Knight to limit himself to just one stroke. Gawain is prepared to yield only what he must.

Gawain's resourcefulness and sense of valor, however, are undercut by the nature of the blow he ultimately receives and by the Green Knight's explanation of it. Gawain's warning to the

Green Knight that he may take only one stroke without retaliation indicates that to Gawain the exchange is what it had appeared to him to be from the beginning--a test of strength and prowess. To the Green Knight, of course, the blow has no such significance. For him, it is a ceremonial tap which he relates to Gawain's slight flaw in keeping the green girdle and also to Gawain's good conduct in the tests at the castle.

We have already noted the ominous surroundings and the suspenseful build-up to this encounter. The conditions are such that Gawain has no choice but to be afraid. When Gawain flinches with the first stroke of the ax, the Green Knight interrupts his blow to taunt Gawain with the same statement of doubt used so effectively by the hostess in the earlier scenes at the castle:

> 'Þou art not Gawayn,' quoþ þe gome, þat is so goud halden,
> Þat neuer ar3ed for no here by hylle ne be vale.'
> (11. 2270-71)

The Green Knight also reminds the hero that he neither flinched nor fled when Gawain struck off his head, and so he, the Green Knight, should be called "þe better burne" (1. 2278). This questioning of his identity and the unfavorable comparison to the Green Knight produce the desired effect. Gawain pledges his "trawþe" that he will flinch no more. We are reminded that Gawain had earlier pledged his "trawþe" to the same man at the host's castle when he agreed to the conditions of the exchange of winnings game. Unlike the frivolous, playful conditions surrounding

that pledge, however, all is deadly earnest here. Here no one is laughing, and no one, including the poet's audience, doubts the seriousness of this pledging of "trawþe."

When the Green Knight stops his second stroke without Gawain's flinching, he ironically berates Gawain for his stalwart bravery--bravery which the hero can only muster once he has gained his composure and publicly made a pledge to be brave. This seemingly unnecessary delay and the insult to his knighthood provoke a discourteous response from Gawain. He angrily accuses the Green Knight of threatening too long. When, in response to this anger, the Green Knight deftly wields a third stroke which nicks Gawain's neck, the hero jumps up, grabs his helmet, throws his shield in place, and takes out his sword. Curiously, Gawain never questions why the Green Knight did not strike with more force; surely, given the size of the ax and Gawain's cooperative, submissive position, the Green Knight could hardly miss! In fact, it is difficult to imagine a better testament to the Green Knight's nimbleness than his ability to stop his stroke just before it reaches Gawain's neck or, at the third stroke, just before it cuts him seriously. What Gawain mistakes for ineptness and what the Green Knight himself teasingly refers to as such ("Iif I deliuer had þene, a boffet paraunter/I couþe wroþeloker haf waret" [11. 2343-44]), is really a brief ceremony ultimately welcoming Gawain to a new understanding of what it means to be a knight.

The effect that this totally unexpected tap has on Gawain's understanding of knighthood is profound. The courteous pride, the public sense of himself as a valiant knight on a vowed mission, and the doughtiness of the fully-armed warrior give way to a new sense of humility, loyalty, and generosity--though not immediately. The process whereby this change is wrought in Gawain only begins with this tap he receives from the Green Knight. While the Green Knight himself attributes a symbolic meaning to his two feigned strokes and to his final blow, those blows also call to mind the accolade of the knighting ceremony, for the accolade is sometimes a single blow, sometimes a series of three blows, to the candidate's neck. This similarity does much to reenforce our sense of a profound change in Gawain and to enable us to make the correct judgment on Gawain's behavior. By having the Green Knight employ a gesture which was similar to the knighting accolade and follow up the blow with words of counsel and praise, the poet is able to mark Gawain's error while simultaneously allowing for a favorable view of the hero at the end of the poem.

A comparison between the Green Knight's actions at the Green Chapel and the actions usually found in the medieval dubbing rituals yields a number of significant similarities. The tap which Gawain receives ultimately awakens in the hero a new sense of the qualities which a true knight ought to possess--loyalty, largess,

humility, and bravery. Though Gawain bears the title of knight and all the corresponding accoutrements prior to the Green Knight's blow, he has forsaken the true spirit of knighthood by accepting and concealing the green girdle. Gawain's previous concern with the "public" virtues of knighthood--that concern for valiant prowess at arms which prompted him to cut off the Green Knight's head and the concern for his courtesy which led to his rash promise to accept and conceal the green girdle--has caused him to abandon private virtues of the knightly code: generosity, loyalty, and contempt for death.[37] Even as commendable an action as Gawain's refusal of the guide's offer is based on what others expect of a perfect knight. The concealing of the green girdle, however, involves a private sense of loyalty tried under unusual circumstances. His violation involves a mere game, and concealing the girdle means he may please the lady while in no way harming his host. In the face of temptations to his public set of virtues, prowess and courtesy, Gawain performs well. It is the importance of those innate personal qualities, such as contempt for death and loyalty (even when to be disloyal will produce no harm), that Gawain learns at the hands of the Green Knight.

It is the Green Knight's blow which ultimately makes Gawain aware of his failings. When Gawain sees the drop of his blood on the snow, he prepares to fight, but the Green Knight offers

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[38] Bloch, p. 317.

no further blow, and Gawain can take no further action. We are reminded in this that the accolade was the only blow which a knight was expected to receive and not return. The buffet, as we have seen, was intended to make an impression on the knight so that he would remember his promise to uphold the ideals of knighthood for the rest of his life. Clearly, the cut Gawain receives at the Green Chapel is expected to leave him with the same sort of long-lasting impression.

The similarity between the knighting accolade and the Green Knight's stroke is further reenforced by close examination of some of the phrases in this section of the poem. Although neither the word "accolade" nor the word "dubbing" appears in the poem, the prominence given to Gawain's "nek" and to the bestowing of the stroke parallel phrases used elsewhere in Middle English romances to describe dubbings. For example, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, we read:

> He lened with þe nek, and lutte,
> And schewed þat schyre al bare . . . .
> Then þe gome in þe grene grayþed hym swyþe,
> Gederez vp hys grymme tole Gawayn to smyte.
> (11. 2255-56; 2259-60; italics mine)

In a description of the knighting of Sir Sagramore in Lovelich's Merlin (ca. 1425), we find: "Sethen jn the Nekke kyng Arthour him smot."[39] In as early a romance as King Horn (ca. 1225), we

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[39] Ernest Kock, ed., Lovelich's Merlin, Part 3, EETS 185 (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1932), 684, l. 25789. Italics here and in the next quotation are mine.

find the following description of the accolade: "He smot him a litel wight."[40] In the hands of the Green Knight, the sword, that noble weapon of chivalry which is normally used to bestow the accolade, has become an ax, a weapon associated with trade and usually wielded by "some rude and ferocious giant."[41] The poet has the Green Knight wield this huge ax in order to build up suspense and create maximum anxiety over Gawain's fate. The gesture itself, however, is the same emblematic act of the knighting ritual. In addition, the idea of a mock dubbing ceremony, a maturity rite which marks passage into the responsible behavior of knighthood, helps to explain the poet's reference to Gawain's youth (l. 1510). In submitting to the blow without taking retaliatory action, Gawain is conforming to that stipulation imposed upon young initiates that they must submit to the knighting accolade before they may fully participate in the rights and duties of knighthood.

The Green Knight's stroke makes Gawain aware of his failings and renews in him those knightly virtues of the heart in which he had proved lacking. But the Green Knight's stroke also

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[40] Donald B. Sands, ed., Middle English Verse Romances (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 29, l. 507.

[41] Charles Mills, The History of Chivalry, Vol. 1 (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1825), 70.

signals Gawain's good performance. It is clear from the Green Knight's behavior toward Gawain after the final blow has been delivered that, in his opinion, Gawain has passed the tests set up for him and is now worthy of the title of knight. The taunting and mocking which had characterized the Green Knight's behavior toward Gawain before and during the delivery of the strokes gives way to words of respect and praise. The Green Knight speaks highly of Gawain's fidelity in showing up for the return blow, and of his courtesy in avoiding giving offence to the lady of the castle, and of his virtue in not committing adultery and thus being disloyal to his host. Even Gawain's failure in concealing the green girdle is treated lightly by the Green Knight who sees that Gawain committed this transgression only to save his own life.

The process of initiation which begins with the tap to Gawain's neck continues as the challenger explains the meaning of the blow and the two feigned strokes. Here again, we note a similarity with the knighting ceremony, for the Green Knight's explanation corresponds to the "concluding formula" of the historical dubbing ritual, a formula which customarily took the form of "a little homily."[42] Though the Green Knight's explanation inspires a deep sense of shame in the hero, it is clear that the

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[42] Gautier, pp. 109-10; see also Ackerman, pp. 289-90 and Barber, pp. 26-27.

Green Knight considers Gawain now to be the tested knight worthy of being recognized as the flower of chivalry.

In addition, while the Green Knight does make snide references to Gawain's supposed knighthood during the course of delivering the three strokes, he does not refer to Gawain by his full, formal title, "Sir Gawain," until after he has delivered the final blow. The Green Knight uses this formal title in the act of returning the green girdle to the hero who had angrily flung it aside earlier. The Green Knight tells Gawain to keep it as a token reminding him of the events which took place at the Green Chapel:

> 'And I gif þe, sir, þe gurdel þat is golde-hemmed,
> For hit is grene as my goune. Sir Gawayne, ȝe maye
> Ðenk vpon þis ilke þrepe þer þou forth þryngez
> Among prynces of prys, and þis a pure token
> Of þe chaunce of þe grene chapel at cheualrous kny3tez.'
> (11. 2395-99)

This bestowal of the green girdle is reminiscent of the dubbing gifts often presented to the newly-made knight by the knight conferring the honor.[43] The choice of the girdle as a dubbing gift as well as talismanic object is itself a clue to the poet's intention to have the final episode parallel a knighting ceremony. It is known that dubbing gifts often took the form of some part of the knight's apparel.[44] The poet's skillful use of the girdle may even have been patterned upon a gift bestowed

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[43] Ackerman, p. 305.

[44] Ibid., p. 307.

in an actual dubbing ceremony. We know, for example, that in a famous event of 1388, the Duke of Bourbon knighted Regnaude de Montferrand and bestowed upon him "a goodly courser and a large golden girdle."[45]

The similarity between the action of the final fitt of the poem and the events of the knighting ceremony establishes more clearly the Green Knight's changed behavior toward Gawain and the profound change in the hero's attitude toward his knighthood. It makes Gawain's showing up in full armor to receive the Green Knight's return blow appropriate in a way Gawain could not have foreseen when he armed himself that morning. In addition, it explains one of the most difficult questions of the poem--the name "Green Chapel" assigned to the grassy knoll which the Green Knight designates as the location for his final encounter with Gawain. The explanations which have been offered so far are far from adequate. The most recent probing of the name itself comes from Mother Angela Carson, who explains the title "Green Chapel" by referring to a twelfth-century meaning of the word "chapel" as a "place of slaughter."[46] Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, however, is a poem of the fourteenth century, not the twelfth, and in the fourteenth century, "chapel" already had its current

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[45] Mills, p. 59.

[46] "The Green Chapel: Its Meaning and Its Function," Studies in Philology, 60 (1964), 600.

meaning. In addition, Gawain's remarks upon seeing the place indicate that his understanding of the word "chapel" is very close to our understanding of the word:

> 'We! Lorde,' quoþ þe gentyle kny3t,
> 'Wheþer þis be þe grene chapelle?
> Here my3t aboute mydny3t
> Þe dele his matynnes telle! . . . .
> Þis oritore is vgly, with erbez ouergrowen;
> Wel bisemez þe wy3e wruxled in grene
> Dele here his deuocioun on þe deuelez wyse.'
> (11. 2185-88; 2190-92)

It is clear from these statements that Gawain has understood "chapel" to be a "kirk." Other commentators on the Green Chapel devote their discussions to the topography and location of the site, rather than to the name "Green Chapel" itself.[47]

A knowledge of the conditions under which knightings were often performed during the later Middle Ages throws some light on the significance of this place name. We have already noted in the first part of this chapter that the Crusades and the new Christian outlook on the role of the warrior led to a number of innovations in the dubbing ritual. One of the most significant

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[47] See A. H. Krappe, "Who Was the Green Knight?" Speculum, 13 (1938), 213, and J. R. Hulbert, "Sir Gawayn and the Grene Kny3t," Modern Philology, 13 (1916), 690-91, for mythological interpretations of the Green Chapel; see Hans Schnyder, p. 71 for an exegetical interpretation; see Bertram Colgrave, "Sir Gawayne's Green Chapel," Antiquity, 12 (1938), 352, and Ralph V. W. Elliott, "Sir Gawain in Staffordshire: A Detective Essay in Literary Geography," London Times, May 21, 1958, p. 12, for speculation on the precise geographical location of the Green Chapel.

of these was the fact that the actual dubbing began to take place in churches or chapels.[48] We recognize in this new location for the ceremony an explanation of the title "Green Chapel." The fact that the event takes place at the "Green Chapel," coupled with the similarity between the Green Knight's blow and the knighting accolade, conveys the idea that the Green Knight is welcoming Gawain into the fullness of knighthood. In addition, the outdoor location for this ritual in the poem calls to mind the common fourteenth-century practice of dubbing knights out of doors on the battlefield, as well as in a church or a court. The outdoor ceremony was, of necessity, lacking in the pomp associated with the court or church ceremony. Oftentimes, it was restricted to the simple accolade, such as we find in this poem.[49]

These factors--the similarity of the Green Knight's strokes to the formal knighting accolade, the Green Knight's bestowal of praise in a manner reminiscent of the concluding formula of the knighting ceremony, the similarity between the gift of the green girdle and the traditional dubbing gifts, and the name "Green Chapel" assigned to the grassy knoll where the adversaries meet for their final enounter--collectively indicate that a knighting ceremony is taking place in the final fitt of the poem. Since Gawain technically is already a knight at the beginning of the

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[48] Mills, p. 50; Ackerman, p. 311; Caxton trans. The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry, p. 74; Cautier, p. 109.

[49] Mills, p. 53 n.

poem, the poet is forced to be subtle in his use of these devices as a conclusion to Gawain's adventure. It is clear from the Green Knight's gestures and his explanation of them that it is only after Gawain's performance at Camelot and at the host's castle that he considers the hero to be worthy of knightly status. Though from the beginning, Gawain shows himself to be concerned with his reputation as a knight and with performing in accordance with that reputation, it is clear that the Green Knight finds him worthy of noble life only after Gawain has behaved in a basically commendable way at the host's castle and after he has proven his bravery by appearing for the Green Knight's return blow.

This initiation ritual has a profound effect on Gawain, as well. He comes to see that there is more to being a worthy knight than simply performing in such a way as to be judged excellent by others. Gawain learns that true knightly performance depends on private adherence to the virtues of the heart as well as the public virtues. The lesson is a painful one for Gawain. That the hero does not view the Green Knight's blow as ennobling is part of the irony of the poem, and one of the reasons why Gawain's reentry into the community of the Round Table at the end of the poem is so essential. Though the Green Knight's accolade inspires excessive shame in Gawain, it also directs the hero's attention to humility, and to the "larges and lewté þat longez to kny3tez" (l. 2381). The nick which welcomes him to a new understanding of

knightly virtues is one which will linger in his memory, just as the knighting accolade was expected to remain in the new knight's memory for the rest of his life. Similarly, the green girdle reminds Gawain of his past faults and the danger of pride, just as the dubbing gifts and the various knightly accoutrements often served as reminders to knights of their past pledges and promises.

As it is Gawain's fate to be tested when he does not realize he is being tested, so, too, it is Gawain's fate to receive an accolade welcoming him to a new understanding of knighthood when he least expects any such event. Gawain's early pride in his perfection (symbolized by the pentangle) is supplanted by a set of virtues which more properly embody the true spirit of knighthood--loyalty, largess, honesty, and bravery. It is with these virtues in mind that a humble and wiser knight returns to Camelot.

The New Gawain

Before Gawain comes to realize the importance of these virtues of the heart at the end of the poem, he gives vent to anger and even defames women, all in violation of his famed courtesy. After the Green Knight's second feigned stroke, he accuses the Green Knight of threatening too long, and he also fails to recognize any guilt in himself until the Green Knight

reveals his own knowledge of Gawain's behavior. These are undoubtedly flaws in Gawain, flaws which might keep us from regarding the hero as worthy of the praise and honor the Green Knight bestows upon him. This is another situation where the traditions of knighthood leave Gawain without any precise directive. Chivalry is a system of absolutes. It provides no indication of how one is to deal with failure. But Gawain's failure and his reaction to it form a great part of that lesson which Gawain has forced upon him in this final fitt of the poem.

The lesson in humility which Gawain gains by submitting to the Green Knight's accolade helps the hero to see that chivalry is an institution not of supermen but of real men. The Green Knight's tolerant attitude demonstrates an awareness and acceptance of human limitation which Gawain himself has failed to acknowledge, even though his angry reactions at this point ironically illustrate the limits of human perfection. It is Gawain's nobility of aspiration, his willingness to submit to the test, and his commendable performance which make him worthy of the Green Knight's accolade. Yet though these qualities allow Gawain a place of prominence among men, the Green Knight's words of praise place Gawain firmly in a context which includes other knights:

> 'As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more,
> So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay kny3tez.'
> (11. 2364-65)

And:

> Þenk vpon þis ilke þrepe, þer þou forth þryngez
> Among prynces of prys,'
> (l. 2397-98)

What Gawain is forced to confront is the fact that he is simply one among men, a human being with human limitations. Throughout the poem, Gawain has been kept constantly aware of his reputation for excellence. The idea that Gawain is a knight who stands above all others is reenforced throughout by other members of the aristocratic community. As Gawain departs in search of the Green Chapel, for example, the hero's military community of the Round Table bemoans his loss because "to fynde his fere vpon folde, in fayth, is not eþe" (l. 676). When Gawain is greeted by other knights and ladies at the convivial, social scene of the host's castle, once again the emphasis is upon his superiority: "Byfore alle men vpon molde his mensk is þe most" (l. 914).

It is undoubtedly this tendency to see himself as superior to other knights--a tendency fostered in him by others--which causes Gawain to seek heroic precedence for his action. Thus, Gawain compares himself to Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David, failing to see "the absurdity of scaling his bedroom adventure against their cosmic tragedies."[50] In attempting to raise himself above the level of common humanity and to put himself on a level with these heroic figures, Gawain violates courtesy by

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[50] Benson, p. 240.

stating that a man should love women but not believe them (l. 2420). That Gawain, who elsewhere maintains his courtesy even under the most trying conditions, should here say such unflattering things about women is a bit puzzling.[51] While the lines do serve as another example of Gawain as human being responding in a very natural way to having been tricked, they also let us know that Gawain's remorse is not going to keep him from the active pursuit of knightly activity in the future. Though he realizes that he has stumbled, and though his shame and sorrow are genuine, his attempts to place himself in a community of other great men who have sinned indicate that he has no intention of forsaking knighthood in order to wallow in remorse.

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[51] John Burrow (A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight [New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966], p. 147) believes that the lines represent "a departure from the true course of the poem," and reads Gawain's antifeminist statements as the poet's attempt to make some allowance "for the immediate impact of Gawain's discoveries on his equanimity and judgment." Peter J. Lucas ("Gawain's Antifeminism," Notes and Queries, 15 [1968], 324-25) fails to consider Gawain's courtesy and remarks that the statements are "very much to the point, since Gawain's fault arises solely from the lady's success in persuading him to accept the gift of the green girdle." David Mills ("The Rhetorical Function of Gawain's Antifeminism," Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 71 [1970], 635-40) believes that the outburst is "semi-humorous," serving to balance or compensate for Gawain's earlier emotional outburst when he first discovered that his errors were known. A. C. Spearing (The Gawain-Poet [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970], p. 228) sees the lines as Gawain's attempt to ally himself with great sinners, for "the great sinner is a heroic figure of the stature he has aimed at."

In this way, then, Gawain's antifeminist remarks, like his earlier anger at the Green Knight, serve to make Gawain a real man rather than the usual romance hero who is always in control. A similar purpose is served by the Green Knight's revelation that the whole adventure was perpetrated by Morgan le Fay, Gawain's aunt, in order to test "þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table" and to "haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe" (11. 2458; 2460). Though Morgan's role hardly seems organic to the poem,[52] mention of her and her blood relationship to the hero does contribute to the humbling of Gawain. The hero is forced to confront the fact that he carries not only the blood of Arthur in him but also the blood of Morgan le Fay.[53] Thrust upon Gawain is the knowledge

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[52] For a convincing argument in support of Morgan as a deus ex machina in the poem, see Albert B. Friedman, "Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Speculum, 35 (1960), 260-74. For discussion of the need for Morgan as the motivating source in the poem, see George Lyman Kittredge, A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1916), pp. 131-36. Studies which attempt unconvincingly to defend Morgan's role in the poem include Douglas M. Moon, "The Role of Morgain La Fee in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 67 (1966), 31-57; J. Eadie, "Morgain la Fee and the Conclusion of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." Neophilologus, 52 (1968), 299-304; Denver Ewing Baughan, "The Role of Morgan le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," ELH, 17 (1950), 241-51; Mother Angela Carson, "Morgain La Fee as the Principle of Unity in Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Language Quarterly, 23 (1962), 3-16; Charles Moorman, "Myth and Medieval Literature: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Mediaeval Studies, 18 (1956), 158-72.

[53] P. B. Taylor, "Gawain's Garland of Girdle and Name," English Studies, 55 (1974), 13; Benson, p. 32.

that the good of this world has some evil in it. With this awareness, we find we have come back full circle to the "blysse and blunder" of the early lines of the poem and that basic notion of ambiguous behavior with which this study has been dealing.

The Reaction of Arthur's Court to Gawain's Adventure

The view of compromised goodness remains to the end of the poem. After Gawain, overcome with shame and grief, finishes telling the story of his adventure to the members of the Round Table, his comrades laugh and resolve to wear green baldrics similar to Gawain's as a mark of honor. Once again that point of view limited to what the eye can see and the ear can hear makes it difficult for us to determine exactly why the members of the court laugh. It appears that their laughter is intended to comfort the knight, to welcome him back to a community whose members recognize the limitations of human perfection.[54] At the same time, we are aware that they have not been tested as Gawain has been tested. Led by a king who is "sumquat childgered" (l. 86), this young court may not fully appreciate the difficulties Gawain has had to face. While we recognize that Gawain's self-accusations of cowardice, covetousness, and disloyalty are excessive, we wonder if the judgment rendered by Gawain's youthful, untried fellows can be taken as the judgment we are expected to make on Gawain.

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[54] See Edward Trostle Jones, "The Sound of Laughter in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Mediaeval Studies, 31 (1969), 343-45.

Yet given the poet's problem of how to bring the hero back into the society of knights and allow him once again to perform noble deeds, the ending provided for the poem is peculiarly appropriate. It allows Gawain to be humbled, yet ennobled; it allows him to be overcome with genuine remorse and yet determined to continue aiming at perfection. The knightly code which motivates Gawain's action is one which fails to take into account the limitations of the flesh. It demands uncompromising perfection. But in order that Gawain not be completely destroyed by the awareness that he is flawed, the court forces upon the hero the acceptance of human failings. If the rigor of Gawain's tests produces a slightly flawed hero, he is at least returned to a society which, rightly or wrongly, is cognizant of human limitation and is satisfied with the recognition that this is the best that their very best knight could do. Regardless of his failings in the past, Gawain must be brought to a state where he can once again put his knighthood to work.

It is for this reason that the court is made to wear Gawain's green baldric as a mark of honor, rather than shame. They thus reestablish a context in which Gawain may once again maintain knightly parage--"the high and noble pride of a gentleman, the foundation of honor, courtesy, and liberality"--without orgueil--"the mortal sin denounced by the Church," and chief of the

seven deadly sins.[55]

Gawain's return to the court assures, not Gawain's denial of knighthood or knightly goals, but the humbling of the knight and a new, more realistic view of chivalry. The founding of the brotherhood, a new order in which all knights wear Gawain's baldric of shame, forces Gawain to come to terms with human failings. But the court's wearing of the lace becomes a tribute to a Gawain who demonstrated a willingness to be tested. Though he stumbled a bit, he returned with the praise of the one who tested him. For this achievement, he is worthy of being elevated.

Thus the poem which began with reference to historical "blysse and blunder" ends with a paradox. Gawain has been shamed in order to be elevated. The Green Knight's blow which Gawain takes to be punitive is regarded by others as ennobling. This point in combination with the ambiguity surrounding Gawain's actions elsewhere in the poem indicate a poet who is comfortable with ambiguity--that combination of completeness and incompleteness, good and bad, which characterizes human institutions like chivalry and human beings like Gawain.

At the end of the poem, the Gawain-poet allows this ambiguity to function as Christian paradox. In finally having to come to terms with his own humanity, Gawain learns a very Christian lesson,

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[55] Raymond Lincoln Kilgour, The Decline of Chivalry as Shown in the French Literature of the Late Middle Ages (1937; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1966), p. 14.

and he significantly no longer makes grand claims about himself as the perfect Christian knight dedicated to Mary. His simple lesson becomes a demonstration of the fundamental Christian paradox that only the humbled are exalted. The basic pattern of submission and elevation which characterizes the knighting accolade likewise characterizes Gawain's fate in the poem. The Green Knight's blow has introduced Gawain to the meaning of true Christian knighthood.

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