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The Chivalric Tradition in Sir Garwain and the Green Knight

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ABSTRACT

In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Sir Gawain continuously proves his knightly virtues and code of honor. Chivalry includes bravery, honor, and courtesy. He proves that he is in fact a "real" Knight. He shows his bravery by shying away from nothing and no one. He proves his honor and courtesy to everyone he meets by showing respect to all whether he receives it back or not. In this poem, romance is largely judged by itself. The poet allows the unfolding of the story to lead us to look beneath even the attractive surface of chivalry, a Chaucerian method. Comment from the poet-narrator is kept to a minimum, and one is not aware of a strong narratorial personality. If his few interventions have anything in common, it is that they direct the reader to serious implications, like the comment at the end of the first fitt (487-90). The poem may be thought of as focusing on three figures, each of whom represents a distinct thematic element: Gawain, Bertilak (and his household), and Arthur (and his court). Much of the poem's meaning is generated from the interrelation of these three elements, and they are the source of the three judgments offered on Gawain's conduct. I shall attempt an exploration of the chivalric qualities of this rich romantic poem.

1. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

This paper is underpinned theoretically by the literary theory of criticism. Literary criticism in simple terms is the reasoned consideration of literary works and issues. It applies, as a term, to any argumentation about literature, whether or not specific works are analyzed. Plato's cautions against the risky consequences of poetic inspiration in general in his *Republic* are often taken as the earliest important example of literary criticism.

More strictly construed, the term covers only what has been called "practical criticism," the interpretation of meaning and the judgment of quality. Criticism in this narrow sense can be distinguished not only from aesthetics (the philosophy of artistic value) but also from other matters that may concern the student of literature: biographical questions, bibliography, historical knowledge, sources and influences, and problems of method.

Criticism will here be taken to cover all phases of literary understanding, with particular emphasis on the evaluation of the Early English Romantic literary work *Sir Garwain and the Green Knight*.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This article is a critical study of the chivalric tradition which anchors the Early English Romantic poem *Sir Garwain and the Green Knight.* Knighthood in early English Romance is intensely manifested in chivalry and I seek to explore this theme from all angles. Sir Garwain's character, symbolism, the three judgments as well as the knighthood of Sir Garwain are the key angles in reference here.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW: THE PLEXUS OF CHIVALRY

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, written by an anonymous fourteenth-century poet in Northern dialect, combines two plots: "the beheading contest, in which two parties agree to an exchange of the blows with a sword or ax, and the temptation, an attempted seduction of the hero by a lady" (Norton p.200). The Green Knight, depicted as a green giant with supernatural powers, disrespectfully rides into King Arthur's court and challenges the king to a Christmas game -- a beheading contest. Sir Gawain, a young, brave and loyal knight of the Round Table, acting according to the chivalric code, takes over the challenge his lord has accepted. The contest states that Sir Gawain is to chop off the Green Knight's head, and in one year and a day, the antagonist is to do the same to the hero. The whole poem is constructed in a way that leads the reader through the challenges that Sir Gawain faces -- the tests for honesty, courtesy, truthfulness. Throughout, we see his inner strength to resist the temptations.

Lines 566 through 634 portray the hero as he dresses up and gets ready to go to find the Green Knight on November first, almost a year after the beheading contest in the king Arthur's court. Remembering the beheaded Green Knight on the horse with his head under his arm, King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table try to talk Sir Gawain out of going on this dangerous and, possibly last, mission, but the hero, keeping his part of the bargain, acts as the true and honorable knight should act: he goes to find the villain.

The first stanza depicts the protagonist who orders his armor to be brought to him. A rare and expensive carpet is brought and spread on the floor. Then the hero is dressed in the "coat of Turkestan silk"(Norton, p.214, l.571), "kingly cap-`ados … with a lustrous fur"(Norton, p.214, l.572-573), steel shoes, plates to protect the knees "affixed with fastening of the finest gold" (Norton, p.214, l.577), protective plates for the arms, gloves, "sharp spurs to prick with pride"(Norton, p.214, l.587) and "silk band to hold the broadsword"(Norton, p.214, l.588-589). The hero's helmet, "embellished with the best gems"(Norton, p.214, l.609) and "with diamonds richly set"(Norton, p.214, l.617), has been made by many women who had to work for seven years in order to create such beauty. Besides being very heavy, the knight's suit is also described as being composed and decorated with the most lavish and expensive materials such as silk, gold and diamonds. This strikes the reader as being odd. When we first meet him, Sir Gawain describes himself as poor, humble, insignificant and the weakest of all the knights, and, yet he has such goodly clothes and armor. This little detail could be overlooked (because, after all, the hero is King Arthur's nephew), but it makes the contemporary reader realize that the things in the King Arthur's court are not always what they appear.

Sir Gawain "heard the mass and honored God humbly" (Norton, p.214, l.593) before the long journey. The word that captures the reader's attention and has important meaning and significance in relation to this passage as well as to the poem as a whole is "humbly." The hero thinks of himself as being humble and courteous (and he is proud of it), but the development of the action brings the protagonist to realize that he might not have been as humble as he once thought himself to be. The testing of his honesty and truthfulness by the baron Bercilak reveals at the end the true nature of Sir Gawain: he is a human with the desire to preserve his life, and for that, he even hides the truth. At the time the hero sets out to leave the Camelot, he is sure of his strength. Parting with his uncle and his comrades, he courageously departs from his home.

The knight's relationship with his horse has always been a very special one. On his journey, Sir Gawain's horse, Gringolet, is his friend and comrade. To honor and to show respect to the horse, Gringolet is also dressed up in very expensive armor. Moreover, the horse is the only companion for the knight on his long trip and his only support in the battles with evil and mysterious forces.

Sir Gawain's shield has the greatest significance in this whole passage because of the hero's emblem, the pentangle, portrayed on it. In fourteenth-century England, the pentangle (or the five-pointed star) is also called the endless knot because it could be drawn without taking the pen from the paper. King Solomon devised this sign to be "a token of truth" (Norton, p.215, l. 626). As Brian Stone points out in his article "Gawain's Eternal Jewel," "truth in the sense of good faith remains the chief concern of the hero" throughout the entire poem. Therefore, the emblem is an essential part of Sir Gawain's apparel as truthfulness is an essence of his character. The pentangle's symbolic significance lies in the number five:

"It is worth emphasizing the 'fiveness'
of the multiple concept of 'truth':
the five wits and five fingers make up

the spiritual and physical human self
which can practice virtue or vice;
the five wounds of Christ and
the five joys of the Virgin
stand for the heaven's grace and
power in man's moral and spiritual life;
and the 'pure five' virtues
[liberality, brotherly love, purity of mind
and manners, courtesy and compassion]
make up the 'truth' of which the whole
pentangle … is the emblem" (Stone).

This truth is established as the knight's symbol immediately before he sets out on his quest.

Sir Gawain tries to live by high standards. When he shames himself by not telling the truth to the Green Knight, he faces the painful reality: he is not the courteous, truthful and humble knight he thought himself to be. The fact that his peers do not understand Gawain's desire to wear his baldrick as a mark of shame makes it even harder for him to bear his shame. The passage from lines 566 to 634 brings forth the idea of truth, from which the rest of the poem's action evolves; it remains the central concern of the adventures and of the poem itself. As Sir Gawain leaves Camelot to search for the Green Knight, he sets on the quest to "retain his self-respect as a virtuous and religious knight" (Stone), which gives the poem its "final and only discernible shape" (Stone).

4. ANALYSIS THE CHIVALRIC DIMENSIONS IN SIR GARWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Chivalric Tradition: The Character of Sir Gawain

In Sir Gawain and The Green Knight, the character of Sir Gawain is skillfully brought to life by the unknown author. Through the eyes of numerous characters in the poem, we see Gawain as a noble knight who is the epitome of chivalry; he is loyal, honest and above all, courteous. As the story progresses, Gawain is subjected to a number of tests of character, some known and some unknown. These tests tell us a great deal about Gawain's character and the struggles he faces internally. I will explore the various places in the poem where we learn about Gawain, either through others or through the tests he faces. By the end of the poem, we sense that we have come to know Gawain and have ventured a peek at his human side. However, we also realize that nothing short of perfection is acceptable to him.

Our first glimpse of Gawain occurs when the Green Knight suddenly appears at the New Year's celebration at Camelot. He offers a challenge for anyone to come forward and strike him with his ax.Twelve months and a day later, he will return the blow. No one steps forward to accept the dare. Embarrassed by his knights' lack of response, King Arthur accepts the challenge himself. At the fateful moment when Arthur is about to strike the blow, Gawain jumps up and says:

Would you grant me the grace,
To be gone from this bench and stand by you there,
If I without discourtesy might quit this board,...
I am the weakest, well I know, and of wit feeblest;
And the loss of my life would be least of any;
That I have you for uncle is my only praise;
My body, but for your blood, is barren of worth;
And for that this folly befits not a king,
And 'tis I that have asked it, it ought to be mine,
And if my claim be not comely let all this court judge,
in sight. Norton,209

In this first meeting, through Gawain's own words, we begin to see him as the noble knight he is. Gawain has cleverly chosen his most courteous words to release Arthur from this predicament and restore the reputation of the knights of the Round Table. We cannot imagine a more courageous action than Gawain offering his life for his king nor a more polite offer to take the game.

We are able to draw further clues about Gawain's character from the description of his armoring when he sets out a year later to meet the Green Knight. In this passage, we learn that Gawain's shield has gold pentangle on it. The author tells us the pentangle "is proper to that peerless prince" because it is a "token of truth," and he is most true to his word and a "most courteous knight." (Norton, 215) He goes on to say:

The fifth of the five fives followed by this knight
Were beneficence boundless and brotherly love
And pure mine and manners, that none might impeach,
And compassion most precious--these peerless five
Were forged and made fast in him, foremost of men.
Norton, 215-216

We have no reason to disbelieve the author nor his praise of Gawain.

Our next chance to understand Gawain occurs at Bercilak's castle where the household is overjoyed that the holiday guest is Gawain of King Arthur's court. They whisper to each other that Gawain has "courage ever-constant, and customs pure," he is "the father of fine manners," and his "displays of deportment" will dazzle their eyes. (Norton, 221) Through these words we see that Gawain is generally well respected for these characteristics; it is not just his fellow knights who feel this way. At this castle Gawain undergoes many tests of character, yet he is unaware that he is being tested. An unknown test is perhaps the best test there is, since the individual cannot prepare for it.

Bercilak's wife tries to seduce Gawain, but he is able to dodge her advances with clever defenses. On the first day after being told she would marry him if she could he says, "You are bound to a better man, yet I prize the praise you have proffered me here." (Norton, 228) On the second day, the author tells us "Thus she tested his temper and tried many a time, whatever her true intent, to entice him to sin, but so fair was his defense that no fault appeared." (Norton, 234) As the days progress, we see how increasingly difficult it becomes for Sir Gawain. We read:

So uncommonly kind and complaisant was she,
With sweet stolen glances, that stirred his stout heart,
That he was at his wits' end, and wondrous vexed;
But he could not rebuff her, for courtesy forbade.
Norton, 236

Throughout these tests, the author allows us to glimpse what Gawain is thinking, and we see that he sometimes works hard at being courteous and loyal. These scenes give us insight into how hard he tries to be as perfect as possible. A lesser man would have easily given in, yet Gawain holds himself to a higher standard. One the third day of the bargain, Gawain does not fare so well. We are told that Bercilak's wife:

Made so plain her meaning, the man must needs
Either take her tendered love or distastefully refuse.
His courtesy concerned him, lest crass he appear,
but more his soul's mischief, should he commit sin
and belie his loyal oath to the lord of that house. Norton, 238

He is successful at avoiding her continuing advances. However, Gawain is concentrating so hard on being courteous and remaining true to Bercilak that he is tricked into taking a girdle of green silk from her and thus betraying Bercilak. She persuades him to accept the girdle and keep it a secret by telling him that if he wears the girdle "no hand under heaven...could hew him down, for he could not be killed by any craft on earth." (Norton, 240) That night he does not tell Bercilak of the gift. With this simple omission, he has betrayed his host, lied to him, and compromised his own standards. On the way to the Green Chapel, there is yet another test, and Gawain passes it easily. His guide offers him a last chance to avoid his meeting with the Green Knight. Gawain answers that if he were a coward, he could not be excused. He must go to the Chapel to test his luck for "The Lord is strong to save: his servants trust in him." (Norton, 246). It is this never-ending quest to do what is right that enables us still to feel good about Gawain even after we know he has been untrue.

Finally Gawain arrives at the Green Chapel and faces the Green Knight for the return blow. The Green Knight explains that he is Bercilak, and he has been testing Gawain all along. Gawain is embarrassed and reacts uncharacteristically brusquely. The Green Knight says, "She made trial of a man most faultless by far of all that ever walked over the wide earth" and "Yet you lacked, sir, a little in loyalty there, but the cause was not cunning, nor courtship either, but that you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame. (Norton, 250) It doesn't matter to Gawain that the Green Knight forgives him or understands why he did what he did. In his own eyes, he has failed.

Chivalric Tradition: The Three Judgments

The first judgment, which is tolerant of Gawain's fault but not blind to it, comes from the Green Knight, who decides that Gawain "lakked a lyttel" in accepting the green girdle from his wife, but is nevertheless "on J3e fautlest freke {)at euer on fote 3ede" (2363).

The second judgment is that of Gawain, who is mercilessly hard on himself when he hears the Green Knight's explanations, accusing himself of throwing away all his knighthood in one weak moment. The third judgment, delivered implicitly by the court when Gawain rides home, appears to be diametrically opposed to Gawain's. The king and the court comfort the knight, laugh at his solemn explanations, and decide that they too will all wear green baldrics, not as a badge of shame, as Gawain wears the girdle, but out of respect for him and as a mark of honor (2519-20). It is difficult not to conclude that the court, whether it sees fault in Gawain or not, is determined to acknowledge only virtue. The poet lets the three judgments, that "Gawain has failed in part," "Gawain has failed completely," and "Gawain has not failed at all," stand against each other, and gives no sign as to which one we should accept. Critics have shown that any one of the three may be justified as the right one, depending on the way we read the poem.But the fact that the poet gives no guidance in the matter suggests that he does not intend us to see one of the judgments as carrying more weight than the others, but rather wants us to weigh the issues for ourselves: he presents alternatives for us to consider. By supplying, without comment, three different judgments, he avoids telling the reader what to think, and leads the reader to assess for himself the nature of Gawain's fault, the behavior which leads to it, and, ultimately, the whole romance world of which Gawain is a part. A provoking two-sidedness is already present in the two stanzas of introduction with which the poem begins. They establish its Arthurian credentials by sketching the traditional Arthurian history of Britain, in which Arthur's lineage is taken back to Brutus, legendary founder of Britain, and beyond him to Aeneas. There is a traditional romance emphasis on high nobility: "Ennias pe athel, and his highe kynde" (5), "riche Romulus" (8), "Jris burn rych" (20), "Ay watz Arthur f>e hendest" (26); on wonders (16, 23, 28); and on the high antiquity of the story: "with lei letteres loken, / In londe so hatz ben longe" (35- 36). These intimations of a noble tale to come are, however, somewhat undermined by other details. The poet chooses to remind us, in the very first lines, that "Ennias ?>e athel" was also a traitor, a not uncom mon medieval view of Aeneas.

Britain is described as a place not of heroic exploits only, but of "boJ)e blysse and blunder" (18). Some of the words used have at least a hint of negative implication. Romulus builds Rome "with gret bobbaunce" (9), but "bobbaunce" is usually derogatory, meaning "vanity" or "vain display."5 The story told in the poem is referred to first as "an aunter in erde" (27), where "in erde" probably has simple intensive force, "an outstanding adventure," but then as "an outtrage awenture" (29), where one cannot dismiss the derogatory coloring of the adjective.6 With these preliminary hints that all is not entirely well with Arthur's Britain, there is likely to be at least a mild disturbance of comfortable assumptions on the part of the reader. The story proper begins in the third stanza with an extended de scription of Arthur's court, one of the three component elements of the poem which I identified earlier. The court is in the middle of its Christmas revels, which last for fifteen days. The knights and ladies are young and well-favored, and the scene is a kind of epitome of the pleasures of courtly life: the knights joust, and with the ladies they sing and dance and play high-spirited games. The jollity is supremely civilized. The high point of the scene is the description of the meal, and here the emphasis is on splendor, ceremony, and order, with a detailed description of the richness of the high dais (75-80), the naming of those who sit there (106-13), and the description of the service of the food accompanied by extravagant musical flourishes on trumpets and pipes (116-20). The attractiveness of the picture is a matter for superlatives (50-59). There is one stanza, however, which is different, more penetrating, in which the superlatives applied to Arthur in the lines just quoted are qualified. The stanza explains why it is that Arthur does not signal the beginning of the feast by eating first himself. The first reason given is that he will not eat until all the others are served (85).

We would expect Arthur to be motivated by courtesy in this, but, surprisingly, the poet links it to his restlessness (85-89). It appears that Arthur does not wish to be seated at the table for any longer than necessary, and indeed a few lines later (107-08) we see him standing in front of the high table talking, while the others are already seated.

There is a hint of criticism in the poet's language: "childgered" may not mean precisely "childish," but there is nevertheless a derogatory implication that he is not yet fully adult in his ways, and "brayn wylde" suggests thoughts which are over-impulsive. These lines then color his second reason for not eating, which is that on great festival days he wants to hear of an outstanding feat of arms, or see one take place, before he eats. The poet assures us that this whim arises out of a noble nature (91), but it is hard not to connect it with "his brayn wylde" and to see at least a touch of noble folly here. We are reminded that lives may be at risk because of the king's whim (96-99).

In this stanza a negative side to the youthful exuberance of Arthur, and by implication the court and the romance ideals they represent, is indicated: a potentially damaging carelessness, a lack of stability and responsibility. This is not, however, the dominant tone of the scene. The hint of criticism is brushed aside as the serving of the food proceeds on its splendid way. When, as if in answer to Arthur's wish, the Green Knight rides into the hall and issues his challenge, it is understandable and in one sense admirable that Arthur should be so quick to respond, for he thinks that the honor of the court is at stake (316- 18). But the rashness of his action, even if it is admirable rashness, is manifest. The kind of adventure he had anticipated was a joust between two evenly-matched knights. He finds instead that the Green Knight, a frightening super natural figure, wants to play a deadly and one-sided game. There is at least the theoretical possibility of Arthur's declining such a challenge with honor. He recognizes the foolishness of the game he has under taken when he says to the Green Knight (323-24).

But anger at the Green Knight's insulting tone ("He wex as wroth as wynde" [319]) overrides any sense he may have that he is risking a lot for no good reason. Nevertheless, although he may be criticized from one point of view for his youthful impetuosity, he acts with directness and courage, and from the best motives. The rest of the court come less well out of the situation. They can hardly be blamed for being stunned into silence when the Green Knight first rides in, but, in a comment of Chaucerian two-edgedness, the poet draws attention to their fear and notes that they leave it to the king to speak (244-49). The comment leaves a large question mark, to say the least, over the courtiers' "cortaysye" as motive for their restraint. From now on, they seem to forget the courtly code of behavior and make little attempt to control their responses. They take their lead from others and give way to basic emotional reactions. When the king gets angry, so do they (319). When Gawain offers to take over from the king, the noble courtiers agree that this should be done (362-65).

When the Green Knight has been decapitated, courtiers kick the head so that it rolls along the ground (427-28), but they revert to fear, understandably, of course, when the trunk picks up the head again and remounts, and the head speaks. When the Green Knight has gone, Arthur and Gawain laugh and try to make the best of it (463-64), and Arthur conceals his amazement (467-68), but the court talks of what has happened as a wonder (465-66). When, ten months later, Gawain prepares to set out to keep his bargain with the Green Knight, the courtiers are sorrowful for him (540), and when he finally rides off they fall to criticizing the king for allowing Gawain to be placed in a situation where he is apparently facing certain death (682-83). Their words draw attention to the king's rashness, but they have the wisdom of hindsight, and they come inappropriately from people who were presumably present when the Green Knight issued his challenge and who did nothing to prevent Gawain becoming involved, if they did not actually encourage it. Clearly the courtiers, like Arthur, prefer their lives to be light, and are better at enjoying themselves than they are at coping with a hard situation. They behave true to form at the end of the poem, when, on Gawain's return from his ordeal, they welcome him joyfully, and make the green girdle into a mark of honor. But their cheerful response is also heedless. They laugh at his agonized account of his failure (2514) and appear to take very little interest in what happened to him. The suggestion is that the court's gaiety, attractive as it is, reflects only a shallow view of life, in which such things as pain and guilt are ignored. Strange as the figure of the green challenger is, he is nevertheless a knight. The poet entertains the idea that he is an ogre (136-40).

But then he comes down firmly on the side of humanity, seeing him as a man of formidable but (in spite of his greenness) pleasing appearance (141-46). The passage goes on to describe his dress, and the trappings of his horse, in terms of finery appropriate to a knight of the highest rank. At several points the description anticipates that of Gawain and Gryngolet at the beginning of the second fitt. In particular, the silk embroidery work, with its figures of birds and butterflies (164-66), is like Gawain's visor covering with its silk hems, embroidered with figures of birds and true love knots (608-12). Such details suggest courtly interests, and in this they look forward to the Green Knight's other guise, Sir Bertilak de Hautdesert, who is without obvious manifestations of other worldliness and whose court is evidently the equal of Arthur's for luxury and splendor. In some respects, the Green Knight/Bertilak and Arthur are of the same temper. Both are men of action. We are told that Arthur does not like "auer to longe lye or to longe sitte" (88), and Bertilak appears to be most in his element when out hunting. When they speak both are brisk and direct, with little interest in the niceties of polite speech.

The first words of the Green Knight to the court (224-25), and Arthur's reply, though courteous, is to the point and without flourish (252-55). Bertilak speaks in the same direct style. He welcomes Gawain to his castle (835-37). Gawain, in his reply, is more elaborate, taking two lines to say "thank you": "Graunt mercy," quoj? Gawayn, "Per Kryst hit yow for3elde." (838-39) The poet sets up a contrast between Arthur and the Green Knight/ Bertilak on the one hand, who favor actions rather than words, and Gawain on the other, who is more words than actions; part of the point of the contrast is to emphasize how devoted Gawain is to "cortaysye." But in one significant respect the chivalry of the Green Knight/ Bertilak is set against that of Arthur and Gawain. Arthur's court is young, but Bertilak is described as "of hyghe eldee" (844), which must mean "in the prime of life" (Davis, Cawley), or "of mature age" (Waldron).

The Green Knight refers to Arthur's knights as "berdlez chylder" (280), which, unless it is no more than an expression of contempt, indicates his consciousness of the difference between their ages and his. The difference has important implications. Bertilak is more authoritative than they are, more authoritative even than Arthur. In his castle, he is recognized at once by Gawain as one fitted to govern a large household (848-49). In John Burrow's words, "The castle of Hautdesert has, for all its fairy appearance, a solid reality as Bertilak's house and home: 'hys lef horne.' Here he figures very much as the 'chef de maison,' presiding as host over the Christmas festivities and as huntsman over the sport in his home woods." Bertilak has a maturity, stability, and control which Arthur and his court lack. This is not to say that he does not have the same taste for courtly pleasures. Christmas festivities are as lively at Hautdesert as they are at Camelot. The difference is that Bertilak pays more attention to rules and procedures; he embodies the idea of chivalry as a set of forms. Whereas Arthur's "brayn wylde" may take him off at any moment in an unpredictable direction, events at Hautdesert proceed in a well-ordered sequence. When Gawain arrives, his every need is impeccably attended to. Bertilak's concern with procedure is most obvious in the hunting scenes. One of the main points of the lengthy descriptions is to show that Bertilak observes all the rules of hunting and of cutting up the carcasses of the animals afterwards as they are set out in the hunting manuals.10 The hunts go so much according to the book that they amount almost to a paradigm of the art of hunting in the Middle Ages, with Bertilak the perfect hunter. The three hunts are carefully intertwined in the narrative with the three bedroom scenes, in which the lady of the castle, Bertilak's wife, comes to tempt Gawain, making it harder and harder for him to refuse her offer of sexual favors on each of the three successive days. The significance of this juxtapositioning is problematical, but one obvious point is that it draws attention to a parallel between the activity of Bertilak and that of his wife, suggesting that she too is a hunter, with Gawain the quarry. There are of course no rules to instruct a lady who wishes to provoke a young man to make love to her (Gawain's predicament is precisely that she has thrown the rule book away by taking the initiative11), and there is a clear contrast between the straightforward activity of the hunt and the subtle parry and thrust of the exchanges in the bedroom. But Bertilak and his wife are alike in that, despite flight or resistance from the hunted, they control their respective situations and gain their desired ends; faced with such singleness of purpose and calculated precision of action, the victim in forest or bedroom has little chance. Both the outdoor and indoor hunts are tied in to the exchange of winnings agreement made between Bertilak and Gawain at the end of the St. John's Day festivities, and renewed on the two following nights, whereby each is to hand over to the other everything he gains during the next day. This agreement in turn is tied in to the beheading agreement made between the Green Knight and Gawain in Arthur's court, though the link between the two agreements is not made manifest until near the end of the poem, when the Green Knight indicates to Gawain that the outcome of the beheading game depended on his performance in the exchange of winnings. Both of these agreements, with their formal, legalistic features, are proposed by the Green Knight/Bertilak. At the climax of the poem's action, the Green Knight carefully strikes three feinted blows at Gawain's neck, one for each of the three days in the castle, and equally carefully explains Gawain's fault to him, casting himself in the role of a priest confessing a penitent. Form and artifice lie at the heart of Bertilak's chivalry.

Many critics have noted the importance of games in the poem, and the Green Knight/Bertilak is the poem's game player par excellence. The knights and ladies of Arthur's Court also play games, such as their kissing game (if that is what it is [66-70]), but these are simply an expression of youthful high spirits. Their decision to wear the green baldric in honor of Gawain may also be seen in such terms, preceded as it is by laughter (2513-18). Bertilak's games, though equally zestful, are altogether less innocent, in that they all have a serious or potentially serious outcome. Physically, Bertilak is both attractive and alarming, the welcoming host and the supernatural challenger, a physical symbol of the two-sidedness of the chivalric code which, as seen preeminently in Malory, at once gives life and destroys. The actions of Bertilak and his household, that is, the games they play, convey this dichotomy sharply. In the most straightforward of these games, Bertilak's hunting, one can only respond positively to the qualities Bertilak displays his skill, his courage, above all his overwhelming delight in what he is doing (1174-77). Taken together, the descriptions seem both to define the art of hunting and to sum up its pleasures. It would be absurd to import into our judgment of these scenes any of the attitudes of the modern anti-hunting lobby. Nevertheless we may note that the poet does not shirk the fact that hunting leads to killing (an emphasis particularly evident in the account of the deer hunt), and that it accepts killing in an unemotional way, making it into a matter of ritual; the extended and minutely detailed descriptions of the cutting-up of the deer and the boar may be partly explained in terms of the poet's desire to bring out this aspect. In the parallel action in the bedroom, the lady is similarly unemotional as she pursues Gawain. It comes as no surprise when we learn later (2360-62) that she is acting under instructions. She talks of love, but gives no sign of being attracted to him; there is no equivalent in her of the "wi3t wallande joye" which warms Gawain's heart (1762). Her self-possession is what enables her to remain in command of the situation: she charms, banters, teases, and plays little games with a skill which has Gawain, famous though he is for "luf-talkyng," on the defensive from beginning to end. Gawain is in trouble because his feelings are engaged, and they pull him towards her at the same time as his sense of propriety holds him back. The lady shamelessly plays on his reputation for courtesy, which gives him another problem: how does he refuse her while still maintaining his reputation? The wooing scenes are amusing, but the lady is a slightly chilling figure nevertheless. It is significant that the Green Knight/Bertilak and his wife always initiate the games they play with Gawain and then keep the initiative. In addition, they know what is at stake, while Gawain does not, and there is an element of trickery and pretense in their behavior, evident for instance in the way that Bertilak first presents the exchange of winnings to Gawain. Gawain has courteously remarked that he is at his host's disposal for as long as he stays in the castle (1081-82), and Bertilak seizes on this to get Gawain to agree to his proposition in advance (1089- 92). He then suggests that, while he goes hunting, Gawain should rest the next day and be looked after by his wife, on the grounds that he needs to recover from the hardships of his journey (1093-1102). Only then does he suggest that they should exchange their day's winnings. Thus it seems that concern for Gawain's welfare is uppermost in his mind, and that the arrangement is no more than an amusing afterthought, which is the way Gawain takes it (1110-11). In reality, as we and Gawain learn later, the arrangement is what matters to Bertilak, and it is far from innocent. Bertilak's court represents another, soberer side of chivalry compared with Arthur's, one in which the spontaneity of youth is replaced by rationality and rules. It is a world in which everything is worked out, well suited to testing and judging. At the same time it conveys a sense of otherness, even when things seem to be normal. The Green Knight/Bertilak is a supernatural figure who inhabits a kind of never never land somewhere on the edge of reality. He rides into Arthur's court out of nowhere, his castle suddenly materializes out of nowhere, and, near the end of the poem, he rides off "whiderwarde-so-euer he wolde" (2478). There is a sense of aloofness about the inhabitants of this world. Their characteristic voices are without warmth, brisk, amused, teasing. Arthur's court is less well-ordered, but shows more feeling. Bertilak's judgment on Gawain, that he is not a perfect knight but an excellent one, seems fair, and seems as such to be an expression of Bertilak's mature outlook. The problem with it is that it is both easy and impersonal; it does not probe Gawain's failing, as Gawain himself does to excess, and it shows no understanding of him as one who has been through a shattering experience. The courtiers' judgment at Camelot may also be easy, but at least they welcome him back warmly, and their decision to wear the green baldric is a gesture of support for him. Whereas both Gawain and the court give the girdle a moral significance, in that for Gawain it is a sign of how badly he has done, and for the court a sign of how well he has done, Bertilak asks Gawain to regard it as no more than a souvenir of an adventure (2395-99). It is no wonder that Gawain refuses Bertilak's invitation to return to the castle with him, conscious as he is of being "koyntly bigyled" (2413) by people whom he had trusted.

The validity of Bertilak's position is further called in question by his revelation that the whole episode of the beheading game was instigated by Morgan le Fay, who sent Bertilak to Arthur's court to test the renown of the Round Table (2457-58), and also to shock the court and frighten Guinevere to death by the apparition of the green man speaking with his head in his hand (2459-61).Bertilak has evidently been carrying out Morgan's instructions just as his wife has carried out his, implying that neither has any real involvement in what they do; and their whole operation, apparently so rational, is seen to rest on arbitrariness and malice. Like Saturn in the Knight's Tale, Morgan is the malevolent genius in the background who gives the lie to any appearance of order in the lives of those who are under her sway. The poem therefore does not allow us to accept Bertilak's moderate judgment of Gawain as the right one without first leading us to weigh several significant negative factors, and as we do this, we are led to question the kind of chivalry which Bertilak represents. Ultimately the poet is asking us to consider the idea of chivalry as code or game. On the one hand, chivalry as such is polished and confident, on the other hand it is arbitrary and amoral. The poem seems to suggest that, just as Bertilak himself is not fully human, so codes of behavior, however apparently honorable, are likely to have a dehumanizing effect on those who practice them. When Gawain is first introduced he is merely a name in a list of names of those sitting at the high table (109). We are first aware of him, then, as part of the court. He too, no doubt, is young, and enjoys the festivities as much as anyone else. But from the moment he first speaks he is set apart from the court and he remains so; it is as an individual, not as a representative of the court, that he undergoes his trial and is judged. His first speech (341-61) shows him to have a courage and a feeling for the honor of the court which none of the other knights demonstrates. He is, it seems, made of sterner stuff than they are. This speech, with its elaborate attention to courtesy and tact, has an individual quality of expression; and the arming scene also, while it marks him out as a paragon of knighthood, draws particular attention to the personal and unusual symbol of the pentangle on his shield. The Green Knight makes the beheading game a matter between Gawain and himself, not the court and himself, and Gawain accepts it in these terms. Later the Green Knight passes judgment on Gawain, not on the court, and indeed draws attention to the superiority of Gawain over other knights (2364-65). Finally, Gawain blames himself for his failure, not the chivalric system, and when he returns to the court he finds himself out of sympathy with its easy optimism. Gawain is both the center of the poem and a distinct element in it. The fundamental quality which sets Gawain's chivalry apart from that of the court and Bertilak is his idealism. The pentangle passage points to his sense of chivalry as a kind of secular religion, offering as it does a way of perfection on earth. He takes religion itself less seriously than chivalry; like the courts of Arthur and Bertilak, he is rather perfunctory in his religious observance. As he rides through the forest on Christmas Eve he calls on Christ and Mary to direct him to some house where he might hear mass (753-62). There is an effective simplicity about his prayers, but this is because they are elementary prayers. He recites his pater, ave, and creed (757), all of which he would have learned as a child. He makes the sign of the cross, accompanying it with the phrase "Cros Kryst me spede," as a child would do in school before saying the alphabet. lD There is nothing here to suggest that his desire to hear mass arises out of anything other than the most elementary religious faith and a sense of custom and duty. When he does go to Christmas Eve mass, in the chapel of Bertilak's castle, he is more interested in the people who are there, especially Bertilak's wife, than in the religious service. The chapel becomes a venue for the exchange of courtly politenesses (970-76). Gawain's view of the relation between chivalry and religion is conveyed symbolically by the description of his shield. His devotion is particularly to Mary, who is called "quene of cortaysye" in Pearl. Her image is painted on the inside of his shield, but this is for practical reasons rather than religious ones, when he looks at it, his courage in battle is strengthened (644-50). The reference to the image of Mary is incorporated in the description of the pentangle, which, though there is overlap between the religious and the chivalric, is primarily a symbol of the ideals of knighthood?"trawf)e" (626) and the five chivalric virtues of "fraunchyse," "fela3schyp," "clannes," "cortaysye," and "pit?" (652-54). The pentangle passage is itself part of the lengthy description of Gawain's putting on of his armor, which symbolically establishes him as everything a knight should be, both inside and out.

The language strongly emphasizes the brightness of the armor: "glent" (569), "policed ful clene" (576), "bry3t stelrynges" (580), "wel bornyst brace" (582), "lerned of golde" (591), "glemed fulgayly" (598), "bry3t golde" (600), "tat al glytered and glent as glem of pe sunne" (604), "diamauntes . . . bry3t and broun" (618), "schyr goulez" (619). The effect is to give Gawain a new-minted quality; even the pentangle is "nwe" (636). Here is a knight, the whole description suggests, of still untarnished ideals, one who shares the court's youth, but who has the highest aspirations. Of course events prove Gawain's aspirations to have been impossibly high. This is brought home by the contrast between his confident behavior in the first scene in Arthur's court and his less assured performance with the lady in the bedroom. In both his intervention with Arthur and his conversations with the lady he has a problem of tact: in the first situation, how to offer himself in place of Arthur without running the risk of slighting king and court by implying that he is better able to meet the challenge than they are, and in the second, how to avoid being discourteous to the lady while at the same time putting aside her advances. In both situations his powers of courtesy, the virtue for which he is most renowned and which is at the center of his chivalry, are put to the test. He passes the first test without difficulty, remaining in perfect command of the situation, as, in a speech of extraordinary syntactical intricacy, he threads his way between the various pitfalls. But in the second test he is much less convincing. When the lady first enters his bedroom, he is immediately driven to feign sleep while he tries to work out what is going on. In conversation he manages for a long time to find resources of courtesy to enable him to keep the lady at bay, but it is she, not he, who is in command, and he is made to look a little ridiculous. In the end, his defense of courtesy fails him, as he succumbs to the temptation to take the offered green girdle. What has happened is that Gawain's ideal of courtesy has been brought up against two powerful physical drives. Against the first of these, sexual attraction, it survives with difficulty; but the second, fear of death, overcomes it. Now Gawain pays the price for the absoluteness of his idealism, so well conveyed by the pentangle figure. The pentangle stands for "trawjse," which may be translated as "integrity," implying perfect wholeness, and the poet emphasizes the fact that the figure is all of a piece (627-29). The poet goes on to list the five pentads which the pentangle symbolizes, and which, we are told, make up Gawain's knightly qualities. In a striking sentence, he refers to the pentads as linked together in Gawain just as they are in the pentangle (656-61). The implication of this is that, like the pentangle, Gawain's knight hood cannot be broken up into parts. If there is failure in any one area, the whole structure fails; it is not possible to have a partial integrity. In the story, the breach occurs when Gawain accepts the girdle from the lady with the thought that it might help save his life. Immediately his integrity is compromised in various hard-to-pin down ways. Should he, a Christian knight, put his faith in something which supposedly has magic properties? Is he guilty of cowardice and/ or covetousness, as he accuses himself later? In trying to protect himself by magic, is he breaking the terms of the beheading-game agreement? From this starting-point, the ambiguity of his moral situation continues to increase. Amongst other things, it is not made clear how far, if at all, he is aware of doing wrong. He promises the lady that he will not tell anyone else about the girdle (1865-66), and this implies that he intends to break the exchange-of-winnings agreement. Before he goes to the chapel to make his confession, he finds a place to hide the girdle, with the intention of reclaiming it later. Is this because he does not want to have it about his person when he confesses? We are told that he confesses fully and receives full absolution in return. This suggests that, for whatever reason, he does not confess to taking the girdle, for if he had done so we would expect the priest, before granting absolution, to ask him to make restitution by giving it back again. It is possible that he does confess the girdle, is asked to restore it, and then later fails to do so. Either way, there is a new dimension of ambiguity: if he has not confessed or not restored the girdle, he has now offended against a sacrament of the Church. Possibly, given the earlier evidence of the elementary nature of his faith, he does not understand his obligations in the confessional. When he fails to hand over the girdle to Bertilak that evening, he also completes his offense against the exchange-of-winnings agreement. Later, as he rides out towards the Green Chapel, the fact that he has the girdle with him casts a shadow over his brave protestations that he will not make himself "a kny3t kowarde" (2131) by accepting the guide's suggestion that he should slip away quietly and not keep his tryst with the Green Knight. It reflects on his courage again when he bows his head beneath the Green Knight's axe. The green girdle has thus thoroughly clouded Gawain's moral situation, which was formerly so clear; as the description of the pentangle implied, one mistake brings about a general diminishing of "trawjse." Gawain's reduced moral state is conveyed symbolically by the description of his dress at the beginning of the fourth fitt, which invites comparison with the earlier arming scene. The girdle, called "ladies gifte" and "drurye" (love-token) is extensively described, and one has the impression that it has taken over from the pentangle in Gawain's thoughts: "Pat [the girdle] forgat not Gawayn for gode of hymseluen" (2031). It is ironic that Gawain has compromised his knighthood for something which is, on the evidence, useless, for the girdle does not protect him from the nick in the neck, and presumably would not have protected him from more serious harm, had the Green Knight been so minded. The Green Knight's explanations devastate Gawain, and he falls to vehement self-accusation. Here we see the other side of his idealism. He has become a broken pentangle, without coherence. His own understanding is that he has failed totally, and to begin with he is speech less with mortification. When he speaks, his self-criticism divides into three parts.First he accuses himself of moral failings, principally "cowarddyse" and "couetyse," which have brought down all his knight hood (2374-88). In the second part he shifts the blame to some extent from himself to "wyles of wymmen," invoking the homiletic examples of Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David (2411-28). In the third part he takes a more religious view of his failure, seeing it in terms of the weakness of fallen man. He uses penitential language as he talks of wearing the girdle as a reminder to him in his pride of the frailty of the flesh (2429-38); the phrase "teches of fylj)e" is reminiscent of Cleanness.

For the first time his language suggests a sense of sin. Nevertheless it is his failure as a knight which most concerns him. The closest parallel I can find to the kind of dramatic reversal he under goes is that of Piers after he has torn God's pardon near the end of the visio section of Piers Plowman (A and B texts), when he states that henceforth he will not be so concerned about working for his living. Both Piers and Gawain are in a highly charged emotional state; Piers tears the pardon "for pure tene."19 But whereas Piers looks forward to a new way of life (20), Gawain does not get beyond his strong sense of failure; when he returns to the court, this is still all he communicates. He has paid the price of his idealistic philosophy of chivalry, which leaves no way out for failure. The poem thus gives us the materials for a thoroughgoing examination of the validity of the ethos of chivalry. The brilliant surface of chivalry is everywhere, and the poet describes it enthusiastically. Chivalry is high civilization. But we see that the social chivalry of Arthur's court leads to superficiality, that Bertilak's codified chivalry is inhumane, and that Gawain's moral idealism is unworkable. None of the three judgments of Gawain's failure is adequate because all are based on inadequate premises. In the end, the poem suggests, chivalry is a limited system, which achieves its brilliance only at the cost of a distortion of natural life. It is primarily a social and ethical system, and as such cannot cater for the whole range of human needs. In particular, it cannot cope with the fact of mortality. Chivalry does not properly confront time and death, and it largely ignores the deeper morality which is founded on a sense of human frailty. As such it is a castle built on sand. It is Gawain's sense of his mortal vulnerability which finally destroys his attempt to maintain a perfect chivalry in his duel with the lady. If death is present in the poem as the focal point of the main story line, time is presented more obliquely, in a way which suggests an ongoing process to which everything in the poem is subject. The famous passage on the passing of the seasons at the beginning of the second fitt is a warning especially for Gawain and the court (495-99).The passage describes the passing of a single year, but, as we read how one season merges imperceptibly with the next, we have a sense of an endlessness which makes the pleasure-centered lives of Arthur and his knights seem temporary and hollow. In the powerful image of the ugly old woman leading the beautiful young woman by the hand (941-69), the poet indicates that Bertilak's court, too, despite its seeming assurance, is at the mercy of time. For all her magic, Morgan le Fay cannot prevent time taking its toll on her, and in her we see what the younger woman will eventually become. The beginning and the end of the poem set Gawain's adventure in a great sweep of time, so that it becomes but one of many marvelous events which have taken place in Britain since the country was founded. Once again the effect is diminishing: time reduces and eventually annihilates individual works of chivalry, as it does all purely human endeavor. By its evocation of a sense of the passing of time, the poem places chivalry in a disturbing perspective. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is not a religious poem like Pearl, Cleanness, and Patience, but nevertheless the doctrines of Christianity loom behind the poem, and every reader knows that the Christian faith offers a means of understanding and coping with time, death, and human weakness in a way that chivalry can never hope to do. The last two lines may be meant as more than a closing formula (2529-30).

Chivalric Tradition: The role of Symbolism

The first symbol in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight that I will discuss is Sir Gawain's knightly shield. On Gawain's shield is a pentangle, the five points on this pentangle represent the five virtues of the perfect knight; piety, friendship, generosity, chastity and courtesy. Each of the five virtues is tested on Gawain throughout the poem creating an emphasised importance on the shield's representation and meaning. "Now alle þese fyue syþez, for soþe, were fetled on þis knyʒt, And vchone halched in oþer, þat non ende hade, And fyched vpon fyue poyntez, þat fayld neuer" (SGGK, 656-8). This quote tells of the pentangle's design, how each line of the pentangles composition is endlessly linked to one another, suggesting that each virtue depends on the other in an interrelated form. The sequence of the lines in this quote stresses the similar fashion in which each virtue continually flows to the next. Moreover, the pentangle's five points create a structure for the poem to follow as 'its five points fall at significant junctures of the poem" (Derrickson, 11). Therefore, Gawain's shield fashions an important symbol in the poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as the pentangles five virtues form the journey that Gawain embarks on in the poem. The use of the literary device of symbolism that is seen here, gives the poem its shape and a structure to follow, and assimilates the events in the poem.

Secondly, the colour *green* in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is another important symbol used in this poem. The colour green is evident in the character of the Green Knight and in the green girdle that Gawain accepted of Lady Bertilak. The connection between the colour of the Green Knight and of the green girdle can be seen as a symbol of the inevitable failure of Gawain. As Gawain accepted the girdle he failed to keep his word to Bertilak and the Green Knight and also failed two of his knightly virtues, chastity and courtesy. The colour green therefore can be seen as a symbol of Gawain's betrayal in the poem. "Þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne, And I mot nedez hit were wyle I may last; For mon may hyden his harme, bot vnhap ne may hit" (SGGK, 2509-11). This quote discusses the girdles meaning to Gawain once he arrives back to Arthurs court. It is described as a 'token' of dishonesty and Gawain believes he must now wear it forever as he cannot erase his misdeed.The wearing of the green girdle symbolically destroys Gawain's reputation as a knight. The manner, in which the green girdle is worn by Gawain, across his body, disrupts the colours of gold and red that was initially associated with Gawain. The colour green separating and interrupting the original colours of Gawain's uniform is 'emblematic of Gawain's broken word' (Derrickson, 12). Thus, the symbolic meaning of the colour green in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight adds depth and meaning to Gawain's ultimate failure in the poem. In addition, the antagonist of the poem, the Green Knight, has symbolic meaning in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The Green Knight proposes the challenge to Arthur's court and it is Gawain who accepts the challenge and creates an agreement with the Green Knight. It is this challenge and agreement between Gawain and the Green Knight that forms the plot for the poem, thus making the Green Knight an important symbolic figure. The Green Knight brings out the antagonist in Gawain and makes Gawain see his faults and therefore be a better person. "I may be funde vpon folde, and foch þe such wages, As þou deles me to-day bifore þis douþe ryche.'" (SGGK, 396-7). Here the Green Knight confirms to Gawain the covenant that he has now agreed to and must fulfil. The reference to this agreement as an exchange of payments, "wages", connects with the exchange of winnings game that is seen further on in the poem. Conversely, this agreement between Gawain and the Green Knight could be seen as unfair to Gawain as his "adversary was in effect invulnerable, because of magic" (Schmidt, 162). Seen as the Green Knight is the same person as Bertilak the notion of magic is involved, as this is impossible in the natural world. Therefore the Green Knight knew all along that Gawain was going to fail his test and break his agreement and receive punishment, all the while the Green Knight was untouchable and invulnerable. In this manner, the Green Knight serves as an important symbol in the poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as it is him who constructs the agreement in which the plot is centred around.

The third symbol is the exchange of winnings game/hunting. The exchange of winnings game is a new agreement between Bertilak and Gawain. The hunt and the characteristics of the three animals hunted mirrors the characteristics of Gawain towards Lady Bertilak on each day. "At þe last bi a littel dich he lepez ouer a spenne, Stelez out ful stilly bi a strothe rande, Went haf wylt of þe wode with wylez fro þe houndes;" (SGGK, 1709-11). This quote tells of the hunt of the fox on the last day. The fox is quick, cunning and difficult to catch; the fox is most aggressive of all the animals that were hunted. The fox’s attitude parallels Gawain’s on the final day. On the final meeting Lady Bertilak is more aggressive than ever with her attempts to seduce Gawain. Gawain refuses her seductive ways just as the fox refused to be prey. However, in the end the fox gets killed, this killing corresponds with Gawain’s acceptance of the girdle and his neglect of the agreement. Furthermore, the fox and Gawain share similar positions, “as the fox resorts to a bit of trickery, and that trickery is the very cause of his undoing” (Savage, 6). Similarly, Gawain’s acceptance of the girdle is the only cause of his knightly dishonour. Accordingly, the symbolism of the exchange of winnings game/the hunt is of significance to this poem as it brings about the definitive failure of Gawain. It is this betrayal that makes this poem different to other heroism poems of the past.

The three strokes of the axe is the fourth important symbol in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as it imitates Gawain’s behaviour in Lord Bertilak’s house. The two games between the Green Knight/Bertilak and Gawain are combined in this part of the poem. The first two strokes represent mock blows that cause no harm to Gawain, as on the first two days he was faithful and kept his word. However, “Trwe mon trwe restore, Þenne þar mon drede no waþe. At þe þrid þou fayled þore, And þerfor þat tappe ta þe” (SGGK, 2353-6). This quote explains how Gawain failed the Green Knight on the third night of his stay and therefore he strikes Gawain with his axe. The Green Knight does not behead Gawain as he states that “true men must pay back truly” and he leaves Gawain to serve his self-punishment of shame. Moreover, Gawain’s anticipation of death throughout the poem has caused Gawain to have “concern with ‘larges’ and ‘lewté’ and reveal a new respect for the life and well-being of others.” (Weiss, 366). Gawain’s new found respect for life was made possible from the three strokes of the axe making the axe an important symbol in the poem. And lastly, the wound/scar that Gawain wears at the end of the poem also has significant symbolic importance to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. The scar that Gawain bears on his neck serves as an imperfection on Gawain, similar to the imperfection or failure of Gawain in the poem. The scar serves as a symbol of the flaw in a knight, the flaw that perhaps lives in every human being. This quote explains of Gawain’s disappointment in himself, “Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer, Of trecherye and vntrawþe: boþe bityde sorȝe and care!” (SGGK, 2382-4). Gawain had high expectations of himself to be the faultless knight; however, his scar is now a reminder of his fault and unworthiness and therefore makes the scar an important symbol of Gawain’s failure. Additionally, Gawain’s scar can be seen as a representation of Gawain growing up, the journey of him going from a boy to a man. The scar that Gawain now has can be seen as an “experience of growing up” that he was inevitably going to face from the offset of the poem (Schmidt, 168). Thus, the wound/scar that Gawain displays on his neck is symbolic as it concludes the poem and confirms its status as being different to other knightly tales that end in perfectionism.

Chivalric Tradition : Sir Gawain as the True Knight

In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Sir Gawain continuously proves his knightly virtues and code of honor. Chivalry includes bravery, honor, and courtesy. He proves that he is in fact a "real" Knight. He shows his bravery by shying away from nothing and no one. He proves his honor and courtesy to everyone he meets by showing respect to all whether he receives it back or not. Sir Gawain shows his bravery the first moment he has the chance to, when the Green Knight enters King Arthur's Court. The Green Knight taunts with "Anyone with the nerve to try it, take this ax, here. Hurry, I'm waiting! Take it and keep it, my gift forever, And give me a well-aimed stroke, and agree to accept another in payment, when my turn arrives." (I, 292) Sir Gawain took this burden and took the ax from the king who was prepared to do this deed. Gawain knows full well that he would receive a blow in return and would have to find the Green Knight in order to receive his blow. He accepts these terms and gives the Green Knight his blow with no haste. Time passes and it eventually is time for Sir Gawain to start to look for his fate and find the Green Knight and his chapel. Starting his crusade, Gawain was given a feast and many thought he would never return again, as some of the knights would comment, "Better to have been more prudent, to have made him a duke before this could happen. He seemed a brilliant leader, and could have been." (II, 677) Gawain knows all of this that on his travel he would be put to death, he still went on this final crusade, to his death with utmost bravery. Sir Gawain also shows his honor often in accepting the Green Knight's challenge he shows his honor to the whole court. Now, set on his crusade Gawain was to prove his honor to the Green Knight. Though many adversities he faced, he still went on "In God: he could have died a dozen times over" (II, 725) All to fulfill his promise to the Green Knight. His honor and faith would lead him to a castle of splendorous qualities in an unknown wood. Gawain courteously asks for shelter and tells the castle's court of his crusade. The king of this court says that he knew of the Green Knight and his chapel and told Gawain it was very close. Gawain pleased, made merry with the king.

The king liked him very much and made an agreement with Gawain. Gawain would prove his honor to this agreement that the king proposed, " Whatever I earn in the woods will be yours, whatever you win in exchange will be mine." (II, 1106) While in the castle Gawain would receive kisses from the lady of the castle, the king's wife an in loyalty and honor to the king and the agreement he would give the king his kisses that he received in exchange. Sir Gawain is very courteous in all he does especially while in the company of the king. He is tempted daily by the king's wife. The lady would be aggressive for Gawain's love yet still giving all control of the situation to Gawain for him to make the mistakes. The lady flirtatiously says, " You're far too strong to accept a ‘ no'- if anyone were boorish enough to deny you." (III, 1496) Gawain shakes off the ladies temptations yet still gives her everything she asks for in a courteous polite manner. "And Gawain was so gracefully evasive that he seemed always polite, and nothing happened but happiness." (III, 1551). Everyday, when the king would come home Gawain would exchange what he received, kisses, for the king's earnings of his daily hunt. Everyday the king would be proud because the king knew of what his lady was doing to Gawain while he was away; it was all a test. Gawain passing it marvelously with his chivalric acts. Gawain is tested throughout the story on his chivalric qualities. Every Time passing without any trouble. He proves his honor to King Arthur, the court, and the Green Knight throughout the story. All the while being brave and courteous. Gawain is a true knight because he is human and he makes mistakes, but he doesn't deny these mistakes. He acknowledges them and learns from them. All the time chivalric, as almost a natural quality, not learned or taught, but natural. His honor is unmatched in the story, his bravery unsurmounted and his courtesy like no other.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through the Green Knight's tests, we see that Gawain is not the perfect knight he strives to be. Neither we, nor the Green Knight, nor his fellow knights of the Round Table hold him to this standard of perfection. We read about the turmoil Gawain experiences thinking about his impending death at the hands of the Green Knight, and we understand why he accepts the girdle. We know he remains true until his fear of death overcomes him. All this proves he is only human. Yet Gawain only sees that he has been inconsistent in upholding the chivalric code, and this means failure to him. This is an indication of the standard Gawain has set for himself, and we see why he has the reputation he has. Despite all that has happened, Gawain is still a loyal, noble, honest and courteous knight.

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