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The chivalric Gawain

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The Chivalric Gawain

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ABSTRACT

The principal objective of this paper is to analyze Sir Gawain's efforts to balance the conflicting requirements of the Code of Chivalry with the basic needs of human nature to develop insights into the Gawain's character. Using an amalgamated definition of chivalry as the standard, I will examine Gawain's attempts to achieve his goal of being the perfect chivalric knight, determine the nature of his obstacles, and analyze the development of his character. In trying to live up to perfection, Gawain discovers that he is not perfect.

Chivalry

In “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” Sir Gawain, a model of a chivalrous knight, must struggle to balance the varying and oft times conflicting requirements of the Code of Chivalry with the vagaries of human nature. How does Gawain follow the code? What motivates him—his desire to live or his desire to be a perfect knight? Not only must Gawain juggle the reality of living with the ideals of the code, at times the requirements of the code itself are incompatible. Gawain’s decisions as to which aspects of the code to value during such conflicts reveal insights into his character, growth, and, later, his concerns vis-à-vis the Code of Chivalry. However, before we can analyze Gawain’s interaction with the chivalric code, we must know what the code represents.

Chivalry is a concept with a long history and many interpretations. For the purposes of this paper, we will look mainly at data that has been generally accepted by scholars. We cannot speak of chivalry without speaking of knights, for knights were “the champions of chivalry” (SGGK 95). While there is considerable disagreement as to how and when chivalry began, many historians do agree that some germinating events did influence the creation of this concept.

Most scholars agree that the first event to have strongly influenced the development of today’s idea of chivalry occurred during the reign of Charlemagne. Under Charlemagne, Carolingian armies consisted mainly of mounted infantry. Because of the great expense of properly equipping a soldier, a new system evolved-- feudalism. Feudalism was the combination of two customs: commendation and vassalage (Barber

Reign 9). Using contracts called “commendations,” free men with few resources would place themselves under the authority of another. In exchange for an oath of loyalty and specified services (such as military service), the “free” men would receive continuance and protection” (Rudorff 24). Through vassalage, a king or affluent landowner would give a parcel of his land to a man of lesser status who would hold it in return for some “rent or... mutually agreed duties (Rudorff 24). Soon, armies consisted of semi-professional soldiers.

The Norman Conquest in 1066 spread feudalism through England. The Battle of Hastings pitted England’s soldiers against the Normans. The English stood on foot, shoulder to shoulder with their battle-axes, spears, and swords, whereas the Norman soldiers faced them with similar weapons, but mounted on horseback and supported by archers. It was an uneven match. William of Normandy’s victory familiarized England with the feudal system and the superficial representation of the chivalric knight—a “mailclad warrior on horseback with his lance and pennant, his long shield and his suite of mounted retainers” (Rudorff 15).

Sir Gawain is a salient example of this superficial representation. By right of lineage, as King Arthur’s nephew, Gawain is a member of the nobility. His clothing, described as “Turkestan silk...lavishly lined with lustrous fur” (SGGK 571-73), steed—“girt with a great saddle/ that was gaily agleam...and...bedecked all with gold (SGGK 597- 600), his elegant armor, and his diadem of diamonds all suggest great wealth, which are other signs of nobility. Although not stated, it can be speculated that Sir Gawain holds property for the king because of his wealthy accoutrement, his reference to Arthur as “liege lord of my life” (SGGK 545), and his position at the Round Table. Lineage,

wealth, nobility, and fealty to the king combine to convince the reader that Sir Gawain is King Arthur's vassal. In brief, Sir Gawain, with his steed, elegant armor, and position as vassal to the king, is another external form of the chivalric knight.

Once the outer picture of the chivalric knight was established, an inner reflection of his qualities followed. With the initiation of feudalism and mounted warfare, authors began to write epics, lyrics, folktales, poetry, and prose about knights. Slowly, an image of the internal structure of chivalry formed in their readers' minds. The first works, *Raol of Cambrai*, *The Song of Roland*, and *El Cid* (Rudorff 102), to name a few, glorified knights for their loyalty, courage, and ability on the battlefield. Later, as feudalism became more established and the Church became involved, court etiquette, morality, and religion became as vital to the idea of chivalry as daring feats of battle. Authors (many of whose names seem to be lost to history) wrote stories of knights, such as *Lancelot*, *Arthur*, and, of course, *Sir Gawain*, who lived for a code which defined their purpose and conduct. They called this knights' code chivalry. Writers such as Chretien de Troyes, writing of *Percival*, imbue the concept with certain qualities, like courtesy, loyalty, and generosity. Christine de Pisan, author of *Epitre d'Othea a Hector*, stresses justice, morality, and 'noblesse oblige'— a voluntary obligation of generosity (Bornstein 51). The creator of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" emphasizes good manners, religious devotion, compassion, and much more. In fact, our anonymous author gives us his account of a chivalric knight when he describes Sir Gawain and the pentangle suspended from Sir Gawain's neck:

It is a sign by Solomon sagely devised/ To be a token of truth...For ever
faithful five-fold in five-fold fashion/Was Gawain in good works...Devoid

of all villainy, with virtues adorned...to his word most true and in speech most courteous...founded on the five joys (according to footnote 7 of SGGK,these were usually the Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, Ascension, and assumption)...the fifth of the five joys followed by this knight were beneficence, boundless and brotherly love, and pure mind and manners... and compassion most precious. (SGGK 626-54)

In “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” we see examples of moral, social, and religious conduct melding to form an all-encompassing chivalric code. Moreover, as evident from the quote above and other publications of the era, the Church was becoming quite influential in the shaping of chivalry.

During this time, the onset of feudalism, knights, and tales thereof, the Church made an important reversal in its policy. Whereas earlier the Church had damned warfare as “evil and unjustifiable” (Rudorff 47), Charlemagne’s invasion and conversion of the Saxons made the Church rethink its attitude. Already an established power in England, the Church decided to include the knights within its authority. In the mid-tenth century, prayer was said over a knight’s sword immediately after he was knighted. In the eleventh century, bishops attended every knighting; however the knights did not receive any superior status in society from this action (Barber Knights 26). With the onset of the Crusades, the Church reworded the prayer over the knights’ swords to designate the knights as the worldly arm of the church:

O Lord who established three degrees of mankind after the fall in the whole world that thy faithful people might dwell in peace and secure from the onslaughts of evil hear our prayers and grant that thy servant

may use this sword, which by thy grace we bless and give to him and gird on him, to repel the hosts who besiege God's church and to defend himself with thy protection against all his foes (Barber Knights 112).

This new oath was an attempt by the Church to place itself as the knights' leader and allow the Church to establish its own rules of behavior for the knights. During the Crusades, the reality that armed Christians from different countries all acting as one gave the knights the awareness that they were members of a patrician warrior fraternity. Some knights became legendary champions regarded as "the perfect models of everything a knight should be" (Rudorff 50). These knights, the most devout and the most skilled in battle, returned from the Crusades with the greatest wealth. By the fourteenth century, the Church had turned knighting into an elaborate ceremonial procedure followed by an equally lavish feast. As the Church's authority grew, literature depicted increasingly devout knights as part of the chivalric ideal. For example, Sir Gawain hears mass, honors God humbly, and receives his lords' and ladies' commendations to Christ before leaving on his quest (SGGK 593-96).

However, significantly, while piety was emphasized as an important chivalric trait, the soldiers were more impressed with acts of bravery and skill. Knighting that took place in battle usually omitted the Church's blessing, yet soldiers knighted in battle received higher regard than their cohorts because they had earned the honor through their valor rather than through a religious ceremony.

Despite —or because of—the fact that the knights followed a code of combat, while the medieval romance authors created their own idealized system of chivalry, and the Church tried to direct the knights with their particular rules of moral conduct, the

three never quite coalesced into a uniform code of chivalry. However, in the late twelfth century, nobility's younger sons began to incorporate these ideals into action. The younger sons, with no land or responsibility, had little to do other than fight as mercenaries. This left them with plenty of leisure time for listening to minstrels and sharpening their battle skills with tournaments (Reign 19). It was the amalgamation of the codes of the soldiers, romantic authors, and the Church, followed by the younger sons' embodying the conventions that they perceived as valuable into action that gave birth to the image of "the armored knight on horseback with his pennants, retainers, codes, and tournaments (as an) idealized representation of the middle ages" (quoted in Reign).

So, what exactly was chivalry? According to Maurice Keen, author of Chivalry, many historians believe "chivalry really was no more than a polite veneer, a thing of forms and words and ceremonies which provided a means whereby the well-born could relieve the bloodiness of life by decking their activities with a tinsel gloss borrowed from romance" (Keen 3). Chivalry was an ambition, an alluring ideal to which young knights might aspire. While Chivalry definitely existed, there was no exact "Code of Chivalry." Like a lovely dream, it had many interpretations. Because of this, the definition of chivalry was, and continues to be, in a constant state of change. According to the Oxford English Reference Dictionary, chivalry is "the medieval knightly system with its religious, moral, and social code; the combination of qualities expected of an ideal knight, especially courage, honour, courtesy, justice, and readiness to help the weak" (OED 256). Between the years of 1375 and 1400, the author of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" described chivalric Knights of the Round Table as "true men (who) contended in tournaments many, joined there in jousting these gentle knights, then came

to the court for carol-dancing...The most noble knights known under Christ” (SGGK 4143). Like the aforementioned definitions, most explanations of chivalry include a code divided into three parts: religious, moral, and social. Since we know that there are three aspects of chivalry, let us describe each.

The first aspect of chivalry we will consider is its religious code. In the Christian culture, one could not become a knight without first being a Christian and baptized (Gautier 11). Therefore, the most basic tenet of chivalry was to believe in God. Notably, many British and French medieval chivalric romances, especially the Charlemagne romances, also refer to heathen warriors such as the Saracens as “knights.” By this, they mean men who, other than their misguided religious faiths, upheld all the other admirable characteristics of knighthood. The author of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” obviously agrees with the Christian belief, because the reader meets King Arthur and his “most noble knights known under Christ” celebrating “Christmastide” (SGGK 51, 36). Significantly, the Church also calls for complete obedience and trust in itself as an institution: “Thou shalt believe all that the Church teaches and shalt obey all her commandments” (Gautier 10). When knighted, the soldier is instructed to defend the Church. A thirteenth century poem, “L’ Ordene de Chevalerie,” underlines this requirement: “Tout votre sang devez esandre, Pour la sainte Eglise defendre” (Gautier 14). Translated, this phrase means: “All your blood you must shed in defense of Holy Church” (Gautier 14). Using the Crusades as an example, part of the code was to triumph over and convert heathens. Finally, the Church embellished the moral and social codes with the restrictions that they “be not contrary to the laws of God” (Gautier 10).

In “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” religion is the skeleton that supports the tale. It seems as if all the characters, with the exception of the Green Knight, are devout Christians. The characters that we meet in the beginning of the poem—the knights, ladies, and lords, including King Arthur—chant in chapel (SGGK 63) and commend Sir Gawain to Christ (SGGK 596). Lord Bertilak and his wife show their devotion to the Lord when they praise the “joys of St. John’s Day” (SGGK 1022), and when they celebrate Christmas. Their manor is described as having “chaplains in chapels and churches about” (SGGK 930). Sir Gawain, the hero of the story, goes to mass; has “all his fealty... fixed upon the five wounds that Christ got on the cross” (SGGK 642); prays often, offering thanks to Jesus and Saint Julian (SGGK 774); and constantly speaks in the name of, or calls upon God, his son, and/or heaven. Furthermore, the story begins and ends just after Christmas. Throughout the narrative, Sir Gawain is searching for a chapel in which to fulfill his promise. The narrator frequently speaks of faith, heaven, and the Lord. The writer of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” wants the reader to understand that devoted Christianity is an integral part of being chivalrous.

The second component of chivalry is its moral code. While the religious aspects refer to faith in God and Christ, the moral guidelines refer to character. The authors of “Erec et Enide,” “Chevalier de la Charrette,” “Yvain,” “Percival,” and several other famous works, all describe their diverse chivalric heroes as possessing extraordinary morality. Their traits range from chastity to charity to judging mercifully to avoiding envy. Leon Gautier, in his book *Chivalry*, lists the following commandments as part of a “Code of Chivalry.” Keeping in mind that these are not a formally agreed upon code,

these commandments seem to form a sort of umbrella under which most of the published tenets of moral chivalry fall:

Thou shalt respect all weakness and shalt constitute thyself a defender of them.

Thou shalt love the country into which thou was born.

Thou shalt not recoil before thine enemy.

Thou shalt perform scrupulously thy feudal duties, if they be not contrary to the laws of God.

Thou shalt never lie, and shalt remain faithful to thy pledged word.

Thou shalt be generous, and give largesse to everyone.

Thou shalt be everywhere and always the champion of the Right and the Good against Injustice and Evil (Gautier 10).

These canons include justice, mercy, courage, charity, honesty, honor, and just about every other trait associated with the chivalrous knight.

The third and last aspect of chivalry is its social code. This is the code of conduct that includes public behavior expected in upper-class society. Tomes were written to instruct young nobles in every facet of social life. Children began training at an early age in the proper demeanor for their stations. Young boys were even farmed out to other nobles' estates to learn the rites of chivalry. Pages and squires were taught serving, jousting, singing, dancing, and performing on musical instruments (Mirrors 73). Authors like Chaucer used chivalric tales to instruct readers/listeners on greeting, speech, cleanliness, appearance, table manners, carving, poise, and dignity (Mirrors 75). Treatises on household management include John Russell's Boke of Nurture, Urbanitatis, written

by a page, and Edward IV's Black Book. Instructions given are as specific as: do not pick your nose or chew on bones, trim your nails, and wear clothes that fit well (Mirrors 79). Along with these mundane procedures, there existed another aspect of social conduct—courtly love.

While there is a body of literature that claims courtly love existed only in books, I have a different perspective. It is unlikely that such a popular concept was never practiced. The rituals of courtly love are, perhaps, the best known of the social code. These procedures pertain to flirting, wooing, and speaking of love without acting upon it. There are many guidebooks for this complicated, yet pleasant aspect of the social code. Andrea Le Chapelain's book, The Art of Courtly Love offers an excellent example. According to Andre Le Chapelain (commonly known as Andreas Capellanus), there are some fundamental rules to the art of loving that include the following: fidelity, honesty, courtesy, obedience to ladies, and a visible display of one's adoration.

Thou shalt keep thyself chaste for the sake of her whom thou lovest.

Be mindful completely to avoid falsehood.

Being obedient in all things to the commands of ladies, thou shalt ever

Strive to ally thyself to the service of Love.

Thou shalt be in all things polite and courteous.

Every lover regularly turns pale in the presence of his beloved

(Le Chapelain 35).

While these basic principles present the heart of courtly love, the outward appearance of courtly love seems to consist of extravagant compliments, romantic deeds, and endless flirting.

Now that chivalry and its code have been defined and we have evidence of its overwhelming presence in “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” let us focus on Sir Gawain, chivalry “incarnate in a living person, modified by his individual character, so that we may see a man trying to work the ideal out, see its weaknesses (or man’s weaknesses)” (Tolkien 5). To simplify this analysis, “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” will be separated into nine parts: The Green Knight’s challenge, the year following the Sir Gawain’s acceptance of the challenge, Gawain’s search for the Green Chapel, Gawain’s arrival at Bertilak’s stronghold, day one of the Exchange of Winnings, day two of the Exchange of Winnings, day three of the Exchange, Gawain’s and the Green Knight’s rendezvous at the Green Chapel, and Gawain’s return to Camelot.

Offer of a Christmas Game

“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” opens with a challenge of a Christmas game. A monstrous magical being challenges King Arthur’s court to strike him with his humongous axe then wait one year for an answering blow. After a long silence, Arthur is forced to respond to the jolly green giant. Gawain then takes up the challenge to protect his lord.

For Gawain many aspects of chivalry come into play. I will describe the chivalric requirements and how Gawain meets them in the order that they appear in the tale. The motion of the plot begins with an instance of feudal duty. When the Green Knight’s challenge goes unanswered by all but King Arthur, feudal duty requires Gawain to speak up and face this fearsome supernatural giant. In a display of loyalty, Gawain steps up to protect his liege from injury to his pride as well as to his body. When the Green Knight makes his request, all of Arthur’s men, including Gawain, are silent. The knights are awed by the Green Knight’s extraordinary appearance. Gawain struggles between fear of the mystical, fear for his life, and feudal duty. Thus, he remains silent. Once Arthur speaks, the scale is weighted and Gawain’s need to fulfill his feudal duty becomes his most important concern. As a man he does not respond; as a knight he defends his lord. With his defense of his king, the youthful knight demonstrates humility, love of country, and feudal loyalty, as well as acting as a champion of good.

In the process of fulfilling his feudal duty, Gawain exemplifies another attribute of chivalry—courtesy. His “almost exaggerated courtesy of speech” (Tolkien 6) is

perfectly humble, gracious, and erudite. Gawain's tone and language show no sign of the fear he is feeling. He asks permission of his lord and lady to rise from his seat and stand with Arthur: "Would you grant me the grace...to be gone from this bench.../ If I without discourtesy might quit this board, / And if my liege lady misliked it not..." (Norton 165). Notice that Gawain has incorporated courtly love into his courteous words with his deference to Guinevere. Then, in another example of courtesy, Gawain compliments his fellow knights: "While so bold men about upon benches sit/That no host under heaven is hardier of will, / Nor better brothers-in-arms where battle is joined..." (Norton 165). Finally, Sir Gawain speaks in the most self-effacing terms: "I am the weakest...and of wit the feeblest; / And the loss of my life would be least of any" (Norton 165), thus demonstrating humility. It seems that Gawain faces no struggle vis-à-vis courtly language; it comes naturally to him. Then Gawain converses with the Green Knight, and the pattern of his language changes. Gone are the flowery phrases used when speaking to Arthur. Instead, Gawain's verbiage is short, yet civil: "Gawain am I whose buffet befalls you, what'er betide after" (Norton's 166). He practices courtesy without any extra flourishes.

Gawain's performance before the court reveals another chivalric trait—courage. For his lord, Gawain confronts a supernatural being. He recognizes that he may die, but the young knight steps forward anyway, since Gawain values his duty more than his life. In an even greater illustration of his courage, Gawain demonstrates several other characteristics of chivalry in the midst of his fear and awe. His courtly manners are outwardly unaffected by his perilous situation. Gawain's speech is the height of courtesy; his poise and dignity are so well practiced that Gawain continues to enjoy the Christmas

feast after Green Knight's departure. However unsettled he is by the day's events, Gawain carries on with his chivalric demeanor: "Then to a table they turned, those two lords together...and courtly men served them with all manner of meats and with minstrelsy too. With delight that day they led, till to the land came the night again" (Tolkien 41-42). It is possible that pride is responsible for his smooth tongue and smoother conduct; he is the center of attention. But pride alone could not carry it off. Without courage, Gawain would not have defended his lord. Without courage, Gawain would not have retained the poise to represent himself so gracefully. Courage allowed Gawain to confront the Green Knight. Courage enabled the young knight to return to the party and behave as though nothing extraordinary had occurred.

Gawain faces only one conflict at this point in the lay—fear versus chivalric duty. Fear initially makes him hesitate to answer the Green Knight's challenge. However, his duty to Arthur overcomes that fear. Chivalry and perhaps pride dictate Gawain's actions and speech. It is interesting to note that while Gawain's speech to Arthur is extravagant and ornate, his speech to the Green Knight is merely civil. The Green Knight is an opponent in a game, not a hated foe. Gawain's dialogue likely suffers due to his trepidation, but he still maintains the standards of chivalry. Following the Green Knight's gruesome exit, Gawain continues with his daily life merely contemplating the end of the game (and his life?) from time to time. At All Hallows Gawain announces his intention to meet his deadly obligation and departs from Camelot.

Awaiting and Beginning the Quest

Gawain spends the year following the challenge living up to his chivalric principles. During that year, Gawain continues to discharge his feudal duty by remaining at Arthur's side and following his will. The young knight subtly reveals his courage by living his life normally without showing fear or changing his habits as a result of his eerie encounter. Moreover, Sir Gawain demonstrates his honor when he requests permission to meet the Green Knight with all courtly courtesy: "Now liege-lord of my life, for leave I beg you. You know the quest and the compact...I must set forth to my fate without fail in the morning" (Tolkien 44). Courage and honor are apparent once again in Gawain's departure from Camelot. Gawain is so eager to keep his promise that he "spurned his steed with the spurs and sprang on his way" (Tolkien 49). He does not cower or try to escape his promise, but dresses well as befits a knight and says his goodbyes without whine or whimper.

The year after the challenge and Gawain's departure raises as many questions as it reveals insights into his character. Gawain follows the tenets of the code with an exaggerated flair. His humility as well as his appearance is not only perfect, it is over the top. An example is Gawain's reference to his leaving to be beheaded as a "trifling point" (Tolkien 44). Is this ego, earnestness, or extremism? Why does Gawain wait until the end of the year to begin his search for the chapel, since he has no idea of how long it will take him to find and reach the place, and he has thus put his promise in jeopardy? Honor demands he search, but does not dictate when. According to chivalry, all of his actions

are correct, but fear has caused him to wait until the last moment to get the information he needs.

The next section of “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” describes Gawain’s journey to the Green Chapel. Gawain goes on his quest alone, during which time he battles both nature and man; “Many a cliff must he climb in country wild; / Far off from all his friends, forlorn must he ride; / At each strand or stream where the stalwart passed / ’Twere a marvel if he met not some monstrous foe, / And that so fierce and forbidding that fight he must” (Norton’s 173). The young knight combats wolves, bulls, bears, boars, wood trolls, ogres, and men. On his own in a savage land, Gawain seeks the Green Chapel questioning those he comes across; he worries about missing mass at Christmas, and he prays.

Gawain’s journey provides him with ample opportunity to demonstrate several of the qualities of chivalry. Lack of companionship renders most of the social aspects of the code unnecessary, so the religious and moral requirements predominate. The major components of the code required here are courage, honor, championing right, and religious devotion. Gawain meets each of these obligations with ease. Gawain shows courage when he overcomes each of the ferocious obstacles in his path, as he continues his journey in the face of constant threats without seeking help. Further, he persists in this perilous quest knowing that an even greater threat is waiting for him at the end. Honor demands that Gawain keep his word; he must seek the Green Chapel regardless of the difficulty, and so he does. During this search Gawain encounters many men “so foul were they and fell that fight he must needs” (Tolkien 51). Gawain champions right by battling and beating these bad men. Finally, Gawain practices religious devotions almost daily.

God is Gawain's only companion: "Nor man to say his mind to but almighty God" (Norton's 173). Moreover, Gawain prays for the opportunity to hear mass: "I beseech of Thee, Lord, / And Mary, thou mildest of mother so dear, / Some harborage where haply I might hear mass / And Thy martins tomorrow" (Norton's 174). Upon seeing Bertilak's stronghold, Gawain thanks Jesus and Saint Julian. Gawain prays when he is alone; he prays when he wants something; he prays when something good takes place. Gawain is a devout Christian, an honorable knight, and a courageous man.

Gawain faces two kinds of conflicts during this passage: physical and emotional. His physical conflicts include the basic tasks of implementing the journey itself and facing and defeating his foes. The journey involves constant riding, climbing steep hills and cliffs, withstanding "the cold clear rains [and] sleet" (Norton's 173), as well as lack of shelter, clean clothes, and convenient food. His success in executing this trek shows that Gawain is healthy, hardy, and not discouraged by hardship. Despite the rugged living conditions, Gawain still manages to engage in several *mêlées* with opponents of varying size, strength, and intellect-- and wins them all. Gawain is not a pacifist by any means; when he is faced with an obstacle, he overcomes it. This knight does not give up, give in, or compromise. These skirmishes show that Gawain is strong in mind as well as body.

The other kind of conflict that Gawain experiences is emotional. He is alone, uncomfortable, constantly encountering opposition as he rides to finish a game that may well end with his death. Loneliness and fear are Gawain's enemies, and he prays to ease his loneliness. Gawain focuses just on the immediate goal of finding the chapel (rather than what will happen there) to ease his fear. Gawain does not waste his time lamenting his position; he does not turn and run, nor does he ask anyone to join him. A true

chivalric knight, stout of heart, strong of mind, Gawain uses his loneliness to make him more of a knight and focuses single-mindedly on his quest. He allows neither loneliness nor fear to stop or slow him down. Throughout his journey, Gawain reveals himself to be persistent, devout, and chivalrous. He encounters many obstacles and conquers them all while practicing the chivalric code he loves so well.

Bertilak's Stronghold and the Exchange of Winnings

Gawain's adventures at Bertilak's castle involve very different aspects of the chivalric code and reveal other aspects of Gawain's character. After weeks of traveling in discomfort, exposed to the harsh elements and harsher natives of varying lands, Gawain arrives at Lord Bertilak's stronghold. Enjoying this welcomed refuge, Gawain meets the residents of the castle, who greet him with gracious welcome, luxurious surroundings, clean clothes, a sumptuous feast, and a warm bed. There, he takes pleasure in his new found companionship and his much longed for mass.

This new state of affairs calls for the practice of the social and religious elements of the Code of Chivalry. As a chivalric knight, Gawain must exhibit courtesy, good manners, a lordly appearance, and courtly love; and he must continue to observe his sacred customs. Gawain meets these demands with varying success. Gawain follows his religious needs—religiously. Always keeping his Lord in mind, Gawain responds to his host's hearty reception with a prayerful hope: "May Christ your pains repay!" (Norton's 176). After a sumptuous meal, our young knight finally attends his long-awaited mass.

The social conventions are not carried out quite so uniformly. Gawain's appearance is given—literally: his host provides him with his lavish robes and water to clean himself. Gawain's manners are ideal. The knight's reputation for fine deportment precedes him; and though he is likely weary from his travels, Gawain lives up to them except for one possible imperfection—drinking a little too much. "The man much mirth did make, for wine to his head made way" (Tolkien 57). Gawain excels in cultured

conversation; he practices perfect table manners, and his dialogue drips with courtesy. Gawain constantly compliments the host and his staff, is appreciative of all offerings, and answers all questions asked of him. His conduct is so well approved that the praise from the other men of the household adds to his reputation:

Each said solemnly aside to his brother,
“Now displays of deportment shall dazzle our eyes
And the polished pearls of impeccable speech;
The high art of eloquence is ours to pursue
Since the father of fine manners is found in our midst.” (Norton’s 177)

Yet, it is Gawain’s version of courtly love that exceeds all expectations. Upon rising at the end of mass, Sir Gawain has an opportunity to approach Bertilak’s wife and her companion. Gawain not only pays court to the ladies, but he treats both the lovely young woman and hideous crone with the same courtesy and deference: “To the elder in homage he humbly bows; / The lovelier he salutes with a light embrace...and straightway he asks / To be received as their servant” (Norton’s 178). Courtly love demands courtesy and obedience to the ladies. Yet it is a difficult task to greet an ugly old woman and a young beautiful lady with a similar amount of warmth, and Gawain’s success in achieving this is a credit to his character. Overall, Gawain performs his social duties: some with assistance, some slightly flawed, and some superbly executed.

What does Gawain’s response to the demands of the code tell us about his disposition? The fact that Gawain’s manners were not affected by his intoxication, shows that his deportment is deeply ingrained. On the other hand, his mild intoxication suggests that either Gawain is extremely relieved at finding refuge, able to celebrate the holiday

properly—a symbol of his religious devotion—or has a tendency toward excess. Either way, he has demonstrated a slight loss of control. Gawain’s treatment of the crone reveals his concern for others, his desire to behave with faultless courtesy, and his depth of character.

The next sections of the lay involve the Exchange of Winnings. Bertilak thanks Gawain for his presence; Gawain returns his thanks and promises to do anything for him. Gawain relates his quest affirming that he “would fainer fall dead than fail in [his] errand” (Tolkien 64). Bertilak then offers Gawain a guide to the near-by Green Chapel on the condition that the young knight participate in a game. According to the rules of the game, each day [for the next three days] Bertilak will spend the day hunting and Gawain will spend the day resting in bed until mass, after which he will act as a companion to the lord’s lady. At the end of the day each man will give the other whatever he has gained that day. Gawain now reveals a verbal excess that will get him in trouble. His promise to do whatever Bertilak asks reveals either a naïve trust in his host or a lack of thinking ahead. Gawain has always spoken with words measured by courtly chivalry, proving that he thinks before he speaks. In this instance, he may be attempting to portray largesse with his words as he has not yet had an opportunity to display that aspect of chivalry.

On the first day of the exchange, Bertilak leaves for his hunt as promised. While he is gone, his wife slips into Gawain’s bedchamber. Gawain pretends to sleep, considers his next actions, feigns waking up, and greets the young woman. While Bertilak chases deer, his lady chases Gawain with equal persistence. Only the lord of the manor manages to capture his prey: Bertilak slays his deer; However, Gawain quicker than the deer,

manages to escape the forbidden lady with just a kiss for her efforts. The two men meet and exchange their winnings.

This one day requires a great deal of effort from Gawain. Gawain wants to follow the code of chivalry, but the conventions of his religious, moral, and social code are not completely compatible. He must perform his religious tasks. As a chivalrous knight, Gawain must also carry out his duties to his host, act with honor, and perform the rubrics of courtly love. Under normal circumstances Gawain has little difficulty following any of the protocols of the code; however, he has not had the wife of someone to whom he is pledged pursue him so diligently before. Although Gawain is trying to follow all the rules, it is now impossible. Courtly love demands that Gawain woo Lady Bertilak; Christianity demands Gawain not covet his neighbor's wife; loyalty to Bertilak demands that Gawain keep a respectful distance; in other words no cuckolding his host! Gawain juggles the needs of the various set of rules and emerges with his chivalry only slightly marred.

Courtly love involves a great deal of flirting and fawning, and Gawain is adept at this. He greets Bertilak's lady with complements and promise of his servitude: "Be it with me as you will...I surrender myself and sue for your grace" (Norton's 183). Gawain then begs the young lady in suitably admiring tones for permission to greet her in a less vulnerable position: "But if lovely lady you misliked it not / And were pleased to permit your prisoner to rise, / I should quit this couch and accouter me better" (Norton's 183). However, Lady Bertilak uses the very strictures Gawain follows so carefully against the young knight. She very prettily refuses his request, stating that she wants them to enjoy each other in the bedroom. What follows is a verbal sparring match couched in the most

dulcet words and tones. Gawain remains firm even though he is battling both his and the lady's desires: "With feat words and fair he framed his defense, / For were she never so winsome, the warrior had / The less will to woo, for the wound that his bane must be" (Norton's 185). The first round ends when the lady reproaches Gawain for not having perfect manners and demands a kiss. Gawain, stung at the idea of not being perfect, kisses her without a thought: "I will kiss at your command, as becometh a knight" (Tolkien 73). With one last jab, Lady Bertilak has struck the first blow. Gawain has performed perfectly the ideals of courtly love, but his other ideals are now flawed.

Although Gawain strictly follows his pledge to Bertilak, he is no longer the perfect guest. When Bertilak asks who gave Gawain the kiss, Gawain does not lie; he simply refuses to answer, maintaining his reputation for honor and chivalry by not embarrassing a woman. However, Gawain gives Bertilak all that is due him; he is still courteous, polite, and mannerly in his actions toward Bertilak and his household. Nonetheless, a truly chivalrous knight does not caress his host's wife without his host's permission. Regardless of Gawain's flawless social conduct, Gawain's moral conduct is now in jeopardy. Gawain's feelings are perfectly natural in his current situation—isolated with a beautiful alluring woman who pursues him. His religious doctrine dictates that Gawain should not desire Bertilak's wife; yet, Gawain does desire her; he kisses her; yet instead of seducing her, Gawain commends her to Christ and attends mass. His halo slightly tarnished, Gawain polishes it and moves on.

This first day reveals a great deal about Gawain's character. After weighing the possible problems of speaking with his host's wife while he is in bed, Gawain decides chivalry requires him to speak to the wife. Had he continued to fake sleep, it is possible

that the lady would have left and Gawain could have dressed and met her in less pregnable circumstances. Yet, he chooses to leave himself in a vulnerable position. Gawain believes that following the code of chivalry is more important than any possible perilous predicament that may result. Yet, would it have been breaking the code to fake sleep and see the wife later? The code requires deference, flirting, and honesty. Thus, it must be the requirement of honesty that motivates Gawain into “waking up.” Another interpretation suggests that Gawain is using the code as an excuse to surrender to temptation. It is not necessarily lying to pretend to be asleep—just a signal that one is not open to conversation. Plus, after thinking about what will happen if he “wakes up,” Gawain finds “to some surprise, he fancied [Lady Bertilak]” (Tolkien 69). Perhaps, the perfect chivalric knight is not so perfect when sex is involved. However, Gawain proves himself quick-witted in his dealings with Lord and Lady Bertilak. While the lady is throwing herself at him, Gawain “fenced with her featly, ever flawless in manner” (Tolkien 72). The young knight manages to parry every verbal thrust until the end, when Gawain gives Lady Bertilak a kiss supposedly to save his reputation “as a courteous knight” (Tolkien 73). I suggest that Gawain only acts on this patently false logic because he wants to kiss the lady; there is no thinking involved. If Gawain had truly believed kissing his host’s wife to be a chivalric duty important to his reputation, he would have admitted it to Lord Bertilak; instead he hides the details of his deed when he speaks with Lord Bertilak later that day. When Bertilak asks Gawain who kissed him, Gawain replies that answering that question is not part of the deal: ““would you but say where you won this same award?’ ... ‘That was no part of the pact; press me no further’” (Norton 187). Gawain is pretending that he is being noble and honorable—protecting the lady’s name

and fulfilling his pledge. However, Gawain's quick mind may be interpreting the code in a way that protects himself and allows him to enjoy some temptation. Day one of the exchange shows Gawain slightly weakened by Lady Bertilak's blatant interest; on day two Lady Bertilak redoubles her siege.

On the second day of the Exchange of Winnings, Bertilak leaves on his hunt and Gawain remains in his bed as he has promised. Soon both Bertilak and his lady have their prey in sight and the hunt begins in earnest. While Bertilak chases wild boar, his lady chases the gentle knight with equal diligence, and this day's hunt has greater intensity for both. Sir Gawain makes the opening gambit by greeting Bertilak's lovely lady as soon as she enters she enters his chamber. The lady is prepared and demands a kiss in greeting, which Gawain gives her, then diverts the determined woman with verbal rather than physical pleasures. The battle of wills ensues, but, with mild manners, Gawain stands his ground: "Thus she tested his temper and tried many a time, / Whatever her true I intent, to entice him to sin, But so fair was his defense that no fault appeared, / Nor evil on either hand, but only bliss / they knew" (Norton's 190). In the intervening time, Bertilak encounters a huge, murderous boar that engages him in a long hard chase. While Bertilak is busily tracking his boar, Gawain kisses Lady Bertilak goodbye, attends mass, and dallies with the ladies of the manor. At day's end, Bertilak has slaughtered the boar, and Arthur's young knight has been twice kissed. The men meet and exchange their prizes then celebrate with a Christmas feast, after which Gawain petitions the lord for permission to leave for the Green Chapel, but Bertilak refuses. Day two calls for the same chivalric skills as the first day of the exchange. First and foremost, Gawain must apply

the disciplines of courtly love; he must continue to perform his duty and live in honor; finally, Sir Gawain must continue to observe his religious practices.

Again, Gawain meets all of his obligations. Although he faces the same struggles as the previous day, Gawain continues using the same strategies, causing him to further jeopardize his moral position. Although he must surely expect what is coming, he offers no resistance to the kisses that frame his conversation with Lady Bertilak. Again, Gawain could feign sleep, but he does not. He could employ his nimble brain and skillful tongue to evade all of Lady Bertilak's machinations. Instead, he gives her his lips as well as his words. Awake, expecting Lady Bertilak's entrance, the eager knight flirts with the damsel and employs his courtly manners. The knight's conversation skills are so deft that he entertains her, rebuts most of her advances, and causes no insult. The morning is an echo of the day before with the same actions and even more unsuccessful results. Instead of one kiss, Gawain gives two. Later, during the feast, Gawain counters Lady Bertilak's charm with even more of his own. He knows he is losing ground, but continues to behave with courteous care:

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,
Yet took pains to please her, though the plan might
Go wrong (Norton's 192).

Here, Gawain values courtesy over the other obligations of the Code of Chivalry, and Gawain's duty to his lord becomes muddled. He copes with all of the rules of his pledge

to Lord Bertilak. Gawain remains in bed, though he knows temptation in the form of Lady Bertilak is on her way. At the end of the day, he gives Lord Bertilak the two kisses he has “won.” Gawain has done exactly what he is supposed to. However, Gawain has also received those kisses from Lord Bertilak’s wife, thereby crossing the line. Worse, his temptation to go even further is growing. Gawain’s duty to his host is diminished by his acting upon his desire for his host’s wife.

Just as Gawain’s duty to his host is beginning to fail, so is his duty to his God. Gawain carries out the physical functions of Christianity—he prays, attends mass, sings Christmas songs, and speaks in spiritual terms: “God love you, gracious lady!” (Norton’s 190). Yet Gawain is breaking one of the Ten Commandments; he is yearning for Bertilak’s wife. Gawain tries to save himself by asking to depart the stronghold, but he does not try very hard. Again, Gawain meets most of the religious requirements, but his success as a chivalric knight is fading.

Overall, Gawain is having difficulty performing his ideal code under far from ideal circumstances. Gawain faces two problems: the temptation of a woman and his final meeting with the monstrous mystical being awaiting him at the Green Chapel, eager to return his killing blow. Of the two, Gawain is more concerned with the more immediate danger of succumbing to Bertilak’s wife. He may not want to cuckold the lord, but he does not mind playing with temptation: “I am yours to command, to kiss when you please; / You may lay on as you like, and leave off at will” (Norton’s 189). Gawain follows the letter of chivalry, but not the intent. At the beginning of the tale, Gawain is outwardly the epitome of chivalry, but as the tale unwinds his character does not quite

measure up to the chivalric ideals. Gawain wants to be the perfect knight, but he is a man given to the temptations of all men.

Gawain's request to leave the next morn may be his attempt to remove himself from that temptation as well as his concern with fulfilling his promise as he struggles with his desire to meet the code. Yet, though Gawain manages quite skillfully to avoid losing more than kisses to his lord's lady, he does not attempt to use his verbal skills to change his host's mind. What motivates Gawain? Fear of death at the Green Chapel versus more temptation? Or desire to please his host/keep his pledge to Bertilak? Gawain is probably following the code to remain with the lady a little longer.

The dawning of the third and last day of the Exchange of Winnings changes Gawain's handling of his situation. With the end of the exchange in sight, Gawain becomes more concerned with the upcoming lethal reunion with the jolly green giant than with his tryst with Lady Bertilak. As on the preceding days, Bertilak leaves on his hunt and Gawain is visited by Bertilak's lady. This time, however, Lady Bertilak awakens Gawain from a nightmare, for he is dreaming "with many grim thoughts" (Norton's 194). Once again Bertilak pursues game, while his lady plays one—and Lady Bertilak is playing to win. She is dressed for success, "In a fair flowing mantle that fell to the earth...Her face and her fair throat freely displayed; / Her bosom all but bare; and her back as well" (Norton's 194). Her attitude matches her appearance as she "closes [the chamber door], throws wide a window—then waits no longer, / But hails him...with her artful words" (Norton's 194). Gawain awakens from his dark dreams to the lady's bright, wonderfully pleasing visage. Their verbal sparring now assumes greater intensity as Gawain struggles between desire and chivalry. Under her ceaseless verbal assault the

young knight fears he will fail to uphold his chivalric standards:

For that high-born beauty so hemmed him about,
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's 194).

Lady Bertilak persuades Gawain to kiss her, then requests a gift to remember him by. Sir Gawain refuses, saying he has nothing worthy of her, whereby Lady Bertilak offers Gawain a gift instead, first her ring, then her belt. Gawain refuses her tokens until the damsel explains the value of the belt—it will protect the wearer from death. After considering his impending confrontation at the Green Chapel, Gawain accepts the belt and promises to keep it secret. Lady Bertilak and Gawain exchange more kisses ere she departs. Gawain then goes to confession and the priest absolves him. While Gawain has played the fox to Lady Bertilak's hound, Lord Bertilak has been hunting a wily fox of his own; before evening arrives, he has caught him. The men meet for the exchange, and Bertilak gives Gawain his prize—the Reynard—while Gawain gives Bertilak three kisses. The day ends with feasting and good-byes, for Gawain must leave for the Green Chapel the next morn. Gawain is required to follow several aspects of the code throughout the Exchange of Winnings. Each day he has struggled over conflicting needs, and this last day is the most difficult. Each of the three days has required Gawain to demonstrate his abilities in courtly love, as well as the social and moral aspects of the code. Each day Gawain has managed to do well, but has struggled a little more, and each

day Gawain has fallen a little farther from his ideal standard. Whereas in the beginning, Gawain is presented as the superlative model of chivalry, on this day, the noblest knight of Christ falls short of chivalry's basic tenets.

In matters of courtly love, Gawain has reigned supreme, lavishly flirting and flowering the ladies with attention. Gawain courteously dances to Lady Bertilak's tune while keeping his honor (for the most part) intact. Until this third day, he refuses her nothing other than the full use of his body and that he manages to do graciously without insult. Moreover, Sir Gawain does give Bertilak's lady kisses, and these kisses do not affect his practice of courtly love, but rather his social and religious duties. Gawain courteously eludes Lady Bertilak until she chooses to pursue his material possessions. Gawain refuses to give her the token she requests though a knight is supposed to be obedient to a lady's command. Gawain's courtesy is wearing thin, and he does not soften his refusal well. The conventions of courtly love also include a knight wearing a lady's token into battle, and Gawain complies with this practice by accident. However, he accepts the girdle only when he realizes it may save his life. While Gawain's rejection of her body is veiled in honeyed words, compliments, and supplication to be her admirer, he does not exhibit similar artful courtesy and wit when the lady demands more.

Sir Gawain also fails to achieve his ideal in his dealings with Lord Bertilak. Gawain does not follow his own pledge—he cheats and lies, with one action, breaking his oath to Lord Bertilak. When the time comes for Gawain to give Lord Bertilak his winnings, he gives the lord three kisses, and no belt. Further, he brags that he has upheld the terms of their bargain! “Since all that I owe her is openly paid” (Norton's 198), he

claims without once mentioning his new belt. Concern for his life has outweighed Gawain's concern for his honor.

The religious aspects of Gawain's chivalry are more complicated still. Gawain kisses Bertilak's wife several times, but he attends confession and is forgiven by a priest, and his soul is clear. Religion is important to Gawain. He attends mass, seeks confession, and worries about his immortal soul when tempted by Lady Bertilak. Yet, Gawain, after being pardoned just that afternoon, sins again that evening when he lies to and cheats Lord Bertilak. His actions do not match the chivalric ideal. Gawain is afraid. His fear causes him to break his oath to Bertilak and not mention the girdle. He values survival before chivalry. Courtly love involves receiving a token from a lady and self preservation encourages the acceptance of the girdle and lying to Bertilak.

But the most interesting action is Gawain's refusal to surrender sexually to Bertilak's wife beyond exchanging kisses and his refusal of the request for a gift. If Gawain is strong enough to refuse her a gift, why does he yield the kisses? Had he maintained the flirting and his strength of purpose in both cases his chivalric conduct would have been faultless. Moreover, there is no real reason for Gawain's refusal to give a gift. His siren asks for a small token, yet Gawain replies, "it is not to your honor to have at this time a glove as a guerdon from Gawain's hand" (Norton's 195). Gawain claims that since he has nothing really valuable with him, he can give her nothing. She did not ask for anything valuable, only for a gesture. Chivalry requires a knight to display largess. Gawain has earlier proven that he highly values courtesy, but here Gawain shows that he values himself and his belongings more. On this day Gawain is so consumed with

the thought of his appointment with the Green Knight, that he gives more consideration to his future than to his ideal.

Rendezvous at the Green Chapel

The night after the Exchange of Winnings, Gawain is unable to sleep. At dawn he dresses his horse and himself in the best chivalric tradition, wearing Lady Bertilak's favor—the magical belt. Gawain takes his leave of Bertilak's fortress and follows a porter to an area near the Green Chapel. The porter warns young Gawain about the denizen of the Green Chapel telling him he is lost should he continue his journey: "There is a villain in yon valley...he gets his grim way at the Green Chapel...He has lived long in this land / And dealt out deadly bale; / Against his heavy hand / Your power cannot prevail" (Norton's 201). Bertilak's servant suggests that Gawain leave his quest, promising to say nothing of the day's events, but Gawain holds true, persisting in his quest and arriving at the Green Chapel. Once there, he notes his bleak surroundings and hears the sound of iron being honed. Gawain calls out to the Green Knight who comes forward carrying a menacing axe made ready for the day's purpose. With few words, the knights take their positions and the Green Knight hurtles the fierce blade toward Gawain's bare neck. Sir Gawain flinches, and the Green Knight rebukes him for his fear. The men retake their positions, and this time the Green Knight merely feints the strike. Insults fly fast between the two as the mystical green giant ridicules Gawain: "So now you have your nerve again...uphold the high knighthood that Arthur bestowed" (Norton's 205). In reply, Gawain resorts to name calling: "Why, thrash away tyrant, I tire of your threats...You make such a scene, you must frighten yourself" (Norton's 205). Once again the men return to their positions, the supernatural colossus with his potent axe poised

over Gawain's exposed and immobile neck. The axe plummets down, but merely scratches Gawain who jumps away and fiercely declares the game completed. The Green Knight agrees and explains his actions, revealing himself as Bertilak de Hautdesert and the Exchange of Winnings as a test that Gawain passed with the exception of the third night—when Gawain kept the girdle. At this confession, Gawain is shamed. Arthur's knight admits his failing, and receives forgiveness and more: the belt honestly given, Lord Bertilak's offer of friendship, and an invitation to revisit Bertilak, his lady wife, and the old woman who is actually Gawain's aunt, Morgan le Faye. Gawain rejects Bertilak's offer to visit and sets on his way back to Camelot.

Sir Gawain's rendezvous with the Green Knight offers Gawain an opportunity to achieve his chivalric ideals. Once again, Gawain takes special care that his appearance portrays all that a knight of Christ should be:

In his richest raiment he robed himself then:
His crested coat-armor, close-stitched with craft,
With stones of strange virtue on silk velvet set;
All bound with embroidery on borders and seams
And lined warmly and well with furs of the best.

Yet he left not his love-gift, the lady's girdle (Norton's 200).

He ends his quest as he began; Gawain and Gringolet are clean, combed, in freshly polished armor and fine clothes prepared to confront evil. Although outwardly perfect, Gawain must still display the inner merits of chivalry: honor, courage, courtesy, and spiritual faithfulness.

Gawain's courage should shine in his purposeful keeping of his pledge to the Green Knight, but it receives a black eye instead. Gawain arrives at the appointed place, at the appointed time, ready to receive the blow that he has earned. In fact, though he has been having nightmares and dreading this moment, Gawain rides off to face his doom at dawn. Listening as the porter tries to scare him away, Gawain refuses to flee; he remains steady in purpose. When he hears the Green Knight whetting his weapon's blade, Gawain walks right below the Green Knight and calls out to alert his opponent to his presence. His courage would be without question except for two blemishes. The first is negligible; he flinches. An enormous sharp blade is racing toward him as he watches unable to defend himself and he slightly shrugs his shoulders. He makes amends by holding perfectly still the next two times that the blade falls. The black eye appears in the form of the braided girdle. Gawain's possession of it violates his pledge. Instead of trusting in his honor or God, Gawain relies on a green supernatural article of clothing to defend himself from a green supernatural being. This act not only faults his courage, it stains his spiritual conduct as well. Gawain consistently prays and speaks with the words of a devout Christian. Gawain goes to the chapel. He verbally entrusts himself to God: "By God...I shall not give way to weeping; / God's will be done, amen! / I commend me to his keeping" (Norton's 202). However, despite his reverent demeanor, Gawain does not trust God to protect him from evil; instead, he uses magic. Gawain's wearing of the girdle reveals fear resulting from a lack of faith. Gawain's fear is not only displayed by his green braided belt; he reveals it in his deportment as well.

Throughout the lay, Gawain has consistently prized courtesy as one of his most conspicuous expressions of chivalry. He hones it and wields it as a conversational

weapon in resistance to Lady Bertilak's advances. Yet the closer he comes to the Green Knight's final blow, the more his courtesy wanes. Gawain expresses his appreciation to Bertilak's household before he leaves; Gawain thanks the porter quite nicely for his warning: "Many thanks...Fair fortune befall you for your friendly words!" (Norton's 202). However, upon losing his audience, Gawain's courtesy falters. An amusing and insightful incident occurs when Gawain is stomping about the Green Chapel searching for the Green Knight. As he walks about the ground Gawain starts insulting the chapel: "This prayer-house is hideous...Chapel of mischance" (Norton's 203). He turns fear to anger, scapegoating the chapel and the land. Gawain, the meek, the courteous, the lowly knight with the glib tongue, the knight who deftly acts the perfect chivalric lord, rants and insults a piece of ground! When he finds the Green Knight, Gawain rebukes him instead of greeting him: "Who has power in this place, high parley to hold? For none greets Sir Gawain, or gives him good day" (Norton's 203). After the Green Knight descends, Gawain exchanges no courteous conversation with the fiend, merely tells him to proceed! Earlier, when Gawain was the one swinging the axe, he was the model of courtesy, but now that he is receiving the blow, fear obliterates his courtly manners. He insults the Green Knight and calls him names. Even when the game is finished and Gawain has survived, his first words are a threat to the Green Knight: "If you make another move I shall meet it midway / And promptly, I promise you pay back each blow with brand" (Norton's 206). Only after the Green Knight explains to Gawain the young knight's transgressions does Gawain realize how far he has deviated from his principles. Gawain then repents and tries to regain lost standing through his favorite chivalric tool—courtesy:

“I confess, knight, in this place, / Most dire is my misdeed; / Let me gain back your good grace, / And thereafter I shall take heed” (Norton’s 207).

On this final day of Gawain’s quest, this representative of Arthur acts with honorable intent if not the utmost courtesy. He arrives at the Green Chapel intending to face a frightening peril in order to keep his pledge. He has traveled a long and difficult path to meet his fate at the hands of a frightening supernatural being without once turning away from his duty. Although Bertilak’s porter offers Gawain the opportunity to turn back without penalty to his reputation, Gawain continues, demanding of himself that he meet the mandates of honor and chivalry. He does not recognize that his honor is already impugned until the Green Knight clearly explains Gawain’s actions during the Exchange of Winnings in plain words that leave no room for hiding and renders his verdict. Gawain has wooed and kissed his wife, but has returned the kisses to her lord husband; therefore, Gawain earns the first two feints and passes the first two parts of the test of his chivalry; but Gawain, the flower of chivalry, has failed the third test by keeping and wearing the belt:

She made trial of a man most faultless by far
Of all that ever walked over the wide earth;
As pearls to white peas, more precious and prized,
So is Gawain, in good faith, to other gay knights.
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’s 206)

Gawain, forced to analyze his actions, recognizes how lenient the Green Knight has been

in his verdict. Angry and ashamed, he returns the belt and admits his failings. Gawain accuses himself of cowardice, covetousness, stinginess, and disloyalty. Although Gawain is as harsh as the Green Knight is lenient, he makes the first steps toward regaining his honor. He returns the belt and admits his mistakes.

Gawain's assignation with the Green Knight exposes new depths of his character. Gawain is afraid, but tries to hold to the ideal. Fear causes him to flinch, and he is impatient: "But go on, man, in God's name, and get to the point!" (Norton's 205). Gawain's courtesy suffers; he is rude to the Green Knight, at first because of fear, then because of pride. Later, Gawain candidly admits and accepts his faults, almost wallowing in his shame and embarrassment, as he realizes that he has failed to meet the ideal. However, instead of simply accepting the minor faults that are inherent in mortals—the desire for sex and the desire to live—Gawain exaggerates his flaws and allows himself no excuse for being human:

Accursed be a cowardly and covetous heart!
In you is villainy and vice and virtue laid low!
Your cut taught me cowardice, care for my life,
And coveting came after, contrary both
To largesse and loyalty belonging to knights.
Now am I faulty and false, that fearful was ever
Of disloyalty and lies...and greed.
I confess, knight, in this place,
Most dire is my misdeed (Norton's 207)

He further overreacts in his passionate self-reproach by swearing to wear the girdle as an emblem of shame.

Gawain's reactions reveal him to be passionate, proud, and unrealistic, and not the most introspective of knights. Gawain does not see his actions as falling short of his chivalric values until the Green Knight points them out to him. He constantly strives toward the chivalric ideal, but is not aware when he falls short. Once Sir Gawain realizes that he has not lived up to his ideal, he is filled with self reproach. It does not occur to him that it is impossible to achieve the ideal required of the chivalric code because he is human, not a saint. Instead of making allowances, as the Green Knight does, Gawain plunges into despair. Gawain's expectations of achieving the chivalric ideal are not only unrealistic, but the result of a surfeit of pride. Gawain mouths the words of humbleness, referring to himself as the weakest of knights and so forth, but really he believes that he should be the epitome of perfection. Regardless, of his beliefs, Gawain's outburst and his excessive remorse reveal his proud and passionate nature.

Return to Camelot

The lay ends with Sir Gawain's return to Camelot, and the knight has many adventures on his return. Although his scratch heals, the wound to his ego does not. At all times he wears his new baldric, the girdle, as an emblem of his fault. Soon Gawain arrives and is warmly welcomed at Camelot. Gawain tells his tale omitting nothing. He describes the Exchange of Winnings, the wooing of the lady, the girdle, and the meeting with the Green Knight, exposing the mark left by the Green Knight's third stroke for all to see. He ends his confession with an impassioned diatribe during which he wallows in excessive self censure and describes his self-imposed punishment:

This is the blazon of the blemish that I bear on my neck;

This is the sign of sore loss that I have suffered there

The cowardice and coveting that I came to there;

This is the badge of false faith that I was found in there,

And I must bear it on my body till I breathe my last. (Norton's 209)

Gawain's companions try to console their young friend. They do not see his actions as so calamitous and try to convince Gawain otherwise. Arthur and all those belonging to the Round Table decide to also wear the bright green baldric to honor their brother; they turn a symbol of failing into an icon of honor.

Although Gawain mourns the loss of his chivalry, he still follows his code. He returns directly to Arthur upon completion of his quest, thereby performing his feudal duty. In an act of honor and courtesy, Gawain entertains the court and regales them with

his story—openly, honestly, without excuses. Gawain’s character unfolds a little further during his speech in King Arthur’s court. His tendency for excess is clear in his self-revilement. But Gawain’s most penetrating insight into himself occurs at the end of his speech when Gawain observes: “For one may keep a deed dark, but undo it no whit, / For where a fault is made fast, it is fixed evermore” (Norton’s 209). With these two lines, Gawain acknowledges that not admitting to a fault does not make it go away. Yet, Gawain takes his discovery even further. Now he believes that his weaknesses cannot be overcome; he sees his flaws, accepts them, bitterly, and envisions no hope for self-improvement. The entire concept of chivalry is the idea of being the best that one can be. Here, Gawain accepts that he does not measure up to the standard, stating that he cannot strive for more. Is this then what Gawain has learned from his adventure? Gawain continues to claim that he is false for not attaining the ideal. While Arthur and the others understand that Gawain did not do anything unforgivable, the unknown author of the poem does not relate Gawain’s reaction to his companions’ conclusions. While Gawain’s response may be unconstructive and emotional, his habits are too deeply ingrained to ignore; they will sustain him through this depression and help him to maintain his chivalric standing.

In the final analysis, Gawain proves himself to be a man of good character. He is well-mannered, determined, courageous, passionate, and honorable. When pressed, Gawain will give in to temptation enough to compromise his principles, but not enough to totally abandon them. Gawain faces mundane dangers, such as those on the road, without fear; it is only the supernatural that makes his courage falter. Gawain truly desires to be the embodiment of chivalry. Although he tries, his humanness, does not let

him. Gawain can be tempted by his appreciation of the gentler sex; he has a strong will to live; and he experiences fear. At the same time, Gawain is brave and courteous and true, skilled in all the courtly manners, devout, and devoted, honorable, and just. In many ways, Gawain has succeeded in becoming the personification of chivalry; he is as close to the model as humanly possible. But the ideal is not humanly possible. Obligations to lord, lady, honor, and God sometimes conflict. One's most basic need—survival—is not included in the ideal and no allowance is made for fear or anger in the description of courtly courtesy. Gawain struggles to balance all these moral demands and when he learns that he cannot, he blames himself instead of the ideal. Gawain never considers why he failed to fulfill this ideal, other than to hold himself guilty. Unlike his fellowship, Gawain never thinks that the ideal may be too elevated to achieve. Is this egotism or naiveté? Considering Gawain's ability to rise above his baser instincts—he does accept the challenge; he does not cuckold Bertilak despite his wife's calculated seduction and his own sexual desires; he does meet the Green Knight and courageously bare his neck for the blow—considering his meekness of speech and willingness to give others tribute—witness his oratory when asking Arthur's permission to take the challenge—I conclude that Gawain is naïve enough to believe that the Code of Chivalry in all of its forms is possible to realize in the real world. However, in trying to live up to perfection, Gawain learns to accept that he is not perfect.

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