Master's Theses   Graduate School

Spring 5-2023

A Model Knight: Sir Gawain, Chivalric Contradictions, and Grief in Medieval Literature

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A MODEL KNIGHT:

SIR GAWAIN, CHIVALRIC CONTRADICTIONS,

AND GRIEF IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

by

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A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of the Degree
Master of Arts

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS
LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

March 2023

LOUISIANA TECH UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL

March 22, 2023

Date of thesis defense

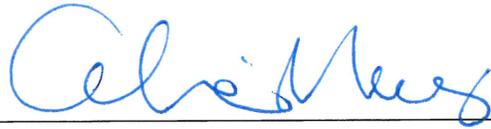We hereby recommend that the thesis prepared by

Kennis Jobe

entitled   **A MODEL KNIGHT: SIR GAWAIN, CHIVALRIC**

CONTRADICTIONS, AND GRIEF IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

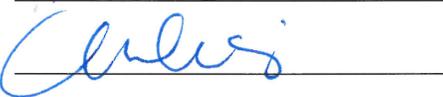**Master of Arts in English, Literature Concentration**

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship on medieval and Arthurian chivalry in recent decades has focused largely on the Gawain Poet's 1375 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Sir Thomas Malory's 1470 *Le Morte D'Arthur*. These two romances seem to offer more critical looks at the chivalric system than the glorification of knightly life provided by romances from the previous centuries of the high medieval period. In past works such as *L'atre Périlleux* and *Claris et Laris,* Sir Gawain is depicted as the ideal knight—in these poems he is humble, strong, noble, and always perfectly in accord with the chivalric code. In *Sir Gawain* and *Morte,* however, Gawain comes to represent the inconsistencies within chivalry and its conflicts with medieval Christian principles. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain makes a crucial mistake that suggests he, as a human being, cannot achieve perfect chivalry, and that the chivalric expectations to which knights are held contradict the instinct of self-preservation as well as Christian values of life and mercy. Meanwhile, Gawain's vengeful reaction to the death of a loved one in *Morte D'Arthur* demonstrates how the chivalric ethos can allow for a knight to handle complex emotions in a destructive and violent manner as opposed to the Church-endorsed route of penitence and peaceful resolution. In discussing the complexities of medieval chivalry and the consistent use of Gawain's character as its representative, this analysis will consider medieval writings on chivalry, grief, and Christianity as well as recent scholarship on *Sir Gawain, Morte,* and minor French romances involving Gawain. Research for this project will explore the way that Sir Gawain's character transformed

from being the symbol of the model knight to emblematic of the conflicting qualities of

the chivalric code and its opposition to Christian principles.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the canon of British literature, "Gawain" is a familiar name. Although not quite as prominent as Arthur, Guinevere, Merlin, and Sir Lancelot, Gawain appears repeatedly as a major character in Arthurian legend. Originating from a figure in Celtic mythology (Whiting 50), he quickly became associated with King Arthur, existing as a supporting figure before the introduction of Lancelot. Gawain is a complex figure: he is characterized in pre-Norman British writing by his martial prowess and in medieval romance by his knightly courtesy. In *Morte D'Arthur* and a small handful of other later works, he is depicted as a hot-blooded knight, given to violence.

This thesis posits that while Sir Gawain is emblematic of chivalry in nearly all its iterations throughout the Middle Ages, medieval authors begin to treat his character in a more nuanced fashion during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Specifically, the character of Sir Gawain becomes symbolic of the inconsistent nature of chivalry and its conflicts with the Christian faith in two major works from the late medieval period: in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* Gawain's knightly character and quest to find the Green Knight foreground the contradictions between chivalry and Christianity. In *Morte D'Arthur,* Gawain's refusal to handle negative emotions like grief and anger according to the constructive path of penance and reconciliation provided by the Church in favor of violent revenge highlights the ways in which chivalric culture allows Christian knights to ignore principles of mercy and restraint in their martial conflicts.

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The character of Sir Gawain evolved over the medieval period—c. 1100-1500—during which Arthurian legend came into popularity. Early depictions of Gawain portray a good-hearted knight, with whom the term "courtesy" is frequently associated. In these tales he is loyal to his lord and uncle King Arthur, modest, and chaste. B.J. Whiting notes that French romances like *L'atre Périlleux* would later cast him as a ladies' man, but even then, he appears in such works and in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* as a protector of women. In these medieval poems, where Gawain is represented as a lover of ladies, he places so high a value on a woman's consent and happiness that he threatens Mordred's life when the latter attempts rape in the late thirteenth century French romance *Claris et Laris* (Whiting 53).

It must be noted that Gawain is not always a sympathetic character in later medieval works. The *Prose Tristan,* published around the year 1230, makes him outright villainous. Keith Busby cites the *Prose Tristan* Gauvain's "disagreeable habit of gratuitously killing unarmed or exhausted knights" (Busby 195). The anonymous *Prose* author depicts Gawain as violent and crude, and dishonorable in the way he approaches battle. Around the same time, as noted by Bellis and Leitch, medieval authors were becoming more critical of the chivalric system, and especially of knights who were, in fact, violent and dishonorable (242). The name "Gawain" had evidently begun to serve as a symbol of chivalry, and authors who expressed cynicism toward the knightly class might reasonably associate famous fictional knights with martial excess.

Even so, later medieval works in general still cast Gawain in a positive light. In the famous fourteenth century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* which this thesis will explore in detail, Gawain is a noble, honest, and chivalrous figure overall. He is not

faultless in this poem, but his flaws seem to stem from zealous attempts to perfectly

adhere to chivalric expectations rather than from self-interest. For example, Gawain

curses his own failure to achieve faultless knighthood when his human sense of self-

preservation overcomes his previous adherence to the rules of the Green Knight's

beheading game. The poem represents Gawain as imperfect, not above temptation, nor

the fear of death, but even the Green Knight finds his weaknesses understandable and

forgivable. Gawain, however, holds himself to chivalry's impossible standard, and

condemns himself to such an extent that the rest of Arthur's court teases him for it (*Sir

Gawain and the Green Knight* IV.2514).

The Gawain Poet seems to focus his critique more on the chivalric system than on

the character he chooses to represent it. More specifically, the Green Knight insists to

Gawain, who acts dishonestly in concealing a girdle he accepts from his host's wife, that

because his motivation is the protection of his own life, he is "the less to blame" (line

2368). In this "absolution" of Gawain, the Green Knight echoes Christian sentiments of

the day. His words are reminiscent of the musings of St. Thomas Aquinas, who insists in

his thirteenth-century *Summa Theologica* that the love of one's own life is natural and

God-given, and that valuing human life is a Christian principle *(Summa Theologica*

II.II.Q.64. Art.5). The Gawain Poet uses the Green Knight, an outsider to the Arthurian

court, to subtly point out the violence inherent to chivalry and how this violent ethos

opposes Christian principles.

Conflicts between Christianity and chivalry, as well as contradictions within the

chivalric code itself, are explored on a larger scale in Sir Thomas Malory's c. 1470 *Morte

D'Arthur*, written during what is generally considered to be the last century of the Middle

Ages. In Malory's work, Gawain is a loyal knight to his king but given to violence and outbursts of emotion. His quest of vengeance against Sir Lancelot for the accidental slaying of his younger brother Sir Gareth drives the kingdom into a civil war which ultimately results in his own death and Arthur's. A primary difference between Gawain in earlier romance and in *Morte D'Arthur* is that in Malory's late fifteenth century work, the Christian element of chivalry is no longer the unquestioned priority in Gawain's personal moral code. Rather, Malory's Gawain, while he often tries to live up to the chivalric expectations of knighthood, is ultimately driven in his actions by his inability to overcome the grief of loss, especially when it comes to the death of his younger brother, Sir Gareth. Gawain responds to his grief with anger and violence rather than by handling his complex emotions through less destructive, Christian avenues provided by the Church. His attitude offers a significant contrast with other figures in the text who contend with grief in a more constructive, peaceful manner.

Discussing grief in medieval literature requires us to contextualize grief as it was understood during the Middle Ages. Cecilia A. Hatt's article "Pearl: The Jeweller's Dream" offers insight into this issue through an analysis of the way grief is portrayed in *Pearl,* a poem written by the Gawain Poet roughly a century before *Morte D'Arthur.* In *Pearl,* the Poet depicts sorrow over the loss of a loved one in vivid detail, opening and closing the poem with an expression of grief. The poem's speaker, also referred to as "the dreamer," mourns the loss of his young daughter, whom he calls his "pearl," lamenting that he is "wholly overcome by the coldness of sorrow/ A desolating sorrow gripped my heart…/ My wretched desire writhed in despair" *(Pearl* I.5.50-56).

The dreamer falls into a vision or dream in which he reunites with his daughter, who is now grown and abides in heaven where she serves as a handmaiden of Mary. At the end of the poem, when the vision fades, the dreamer returns to his grief: "Nothing mattered to me more than being near her/ I wanted to join her over the water" (XX.97.1155-56). He can no longer see his pearl, cannot reach out and hold her to him, and in response to this devastating realization, his "heart labored with a heavy longing" (1180). While the dreamer, through his Christian faith, has the assurance of his daughter's salvation and happiness in the afterlife, he nonetheless cannot fully come to terms with the physical barrier between himself and his daughter. The Poet acknowledges the wrenching despair of grief: though the dreamer is offered glimpses of paradise through his vision, he cannot see or reach his daughter in heaven while he lives, and so the separation from her is still painful.

Pearl's religious overtones may seem to offer a comforting resolution, but the dreamer is never fully consoled. Hatt argues that the reunion between the dreamer and the maiden is not in fact a vision, but simply a dream experienced by a grieving father. She points out that "[t]o consider death and loss in the light of Christian faith calls for a strenuous emotional and intellectual effort… An allegorical treatment of loss would not engender such a compelling effect of sorrow" (Hatt 17). Thus, the poem, though offering Christian comforts of salvation and the possibility of reunion in Paradise, does not end with the dreamer's grief healed. Rather, as Hatt asserts, *Pearl* "tells us that there is no emotional consolation to be had for the fact of death" (43). Even in the rigidly Christian world of fourteenth-century Europe, it was implied–at least by the Pearl Poet–that nothing in this life can remove the pain that comes with the loss of a loved one.

Grief is a topic that scholars and theologians alike examined extensively throughout the medieval period. In her article "Grief, Grieving, and Loss in High Medieval Historical Thought," Emily A. Winkler reviews literature throughout the Middle Ages which focused on grief and loss. Her research has observed that grief, in the Western medieval world, was often "analyzed as a political performance or theological problem: a phase in a sequence of feelings meant to be consoled and resolved" (Winkler 130). Still, medieval authors recognized that this notion was unrealistic when facing great loss. Gerald of Wales, a priest and historian who lived in Britain and France from 1146 to 1223, equated grief to a severe wound, one whose "scar may never finish forming because the damage is so great" (Winkler 164). Winkler notes a "strong and consistent sense across Gerald's works that grief does not go away, and cannot be healed" (164-165). Even Gerald, revered for his theological works and position in the Church, did not see grief as something which could be fully healed simply by Christian faith, at least not while the afflicted soul still lived.

In consideration of the scholarship of Hatt and Winkler, the fourth chapter of this thesis will explore Gawain's expressions of and responses to loss in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur,* particularly where his inability to overcome grief leads to destructive actions. Keeping in mind the context of medieval understandings of grief and loss in general, Chapter Four will specifically focus on Malory's depictions of grief, analyzing the way various characters, particularly Gawain, respond to the emotion. While many characters in Malory's work face loss and sorrow, processing these feelings in a variety of ways, Gawain's response to personal loss will be analyzed with respect to 1) his inability to

take the prescribed Christian route in dealing with complex emotions such as grief, and 2)
his knightly identity and his failures in chivalry.

In the early medieval period, chivalry itself was a somewhat new phenomenon.
While the word "knight" comes from "cniht," the Saxon term for "bondsman" or "vassal"
("Knight"), the concept of chivalry was French in origin. In the year 1066, William of
Normandy conquered Britain by defeating King Harold at Hastings. Following the
Norman Conquest, a new, French style of warfare and society took root in England. In his
book *Chivalry,* Maurice Keen notes that the style of fighting used in recreational jousts in
the twelfth century and onward could be seen in European warfare after the Norman
Conquest. The increased spread of siege warfare had led to the building of castles, and
these fortresses changed the way that battles were fought, necessitating a larger cavalry
force. The invention of the stirrup, Keen claims, made warfare with a couched lance
possible; he describes the method which mimics jousting, in which the lance is "... tucked
tightly under the right armpit, so that it remains steady, and gripped further back, with the
left arm free to handle reins and shield" (Keen 24). Both iconographic and literary
evidence suggests that this style of fighting only appeared throughout Europe in the latter
half of the eleventh century, thus corresponding roughly with the Norman conquest (24).

With this new style of warfare also came a new social structure across Europe.
Warriors were trained and equipped in noble Frankish households, brought up
specifically for armed horsemanship. By the twelfth century, examples of knights like
William Marshal (1146-1219) prove this had become standard in Britain as well. The
French *chevalier* was a horseback warrior, and from this title comes the word "chivalry"

(Keen 1). Chivalry and knighthood, then, became inextricably linked, for chivalry itself was the ideal of perfect knighthood.

Chivalry also became linked, early on, with the Christian religion. The Catholic Church was perhaps the most prominent force in medieval Western Europe, and the Church-backed Crusades wove together the concepts of knighthood and the Christian man's duty. Keen writes that, "In the preaching and propaganda of the crusade itself the concept of the Christian knighthood as an order emerges with absolute clarity" (48). The English knight William Marshal, already considered a real-life example of near-perfect knighthood, made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in his forties, an act that honored his Christian duties alongside his military ones (20). The medieval West was a Christian world, and its literature reflects this. Every work of Arthurian literature cited in this thesis incorporates Christianity in at least some small way. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* stresses Gawain's devotion to Mary and the setting of the Christmas feast, though the poem's Christian aspects are distinct from and sometimes opposed to its themes of chivalry and knighthood. Chapter Three will examine how the poem also depicts conflicts between chivalry and Christianity.

Taking a different view of the religiosity of medieval writers, Raluca L. Radulescu argues in her 2010 article "How Christian is Chivalry?" that chivalry itself was not an explicitly Christian ideal. She notes that, "Modern audiences make assumptions about the link between chivalry and Christian duties, but the context… does not seem to support a smooth connection between the ideals of the warrior/knightly code and the Christian one" (Radulescu 70). Malory retells the Grail quest in a more critical light than writers like Chretien de Troyes, one in which Arthur's knights are more

focused on chivalric than on spiritual pursuits (75). Chivalry and Christianity are specifically contrasted, as Marco Nievergelt observes, in Malory's desire "to reintegrate [the Grail quest] within the wider totality of the chivalric accomplishments of the Knights of the Round Table… to sacramentalize earthly chivalry rather than displace it" (Nievergelt 468-469). Malory's integrating the Grail quest into his work while stripping it of its most spiritual and celestial elements, Radulescu argues, enables the author to reestablish chivalry as an earthly concept, removing its Christian trappings.

Although chivalry was ultimately a secular ideal, it is nonetheless impossible to completely divorce it from medieval Christianity. Richard Kaeuper suggests that, rather than chivalry having been first established as a Christian creation, "knights largely appropriated religion" (47). Of course, it could also be argued that in adopting the language of chivalry to encourage crusade, the medieval Church largely appropriated knighthood. Some scholars argue that it was the religious motivations of the First Crusade that brought knighthood under the realm of the Church (Barber 6). Still, the driving principle of chivalry remained a knight's relationship to a secular, reigning lord (3). Chivalry was a secular, martial system which, when useful, adopted the language of the Church.

By the latter half of the twelfth century, chivalry was well-cemented as a European cultural ideal. Etienne de Fougères, Bishop of Lisieux, defined early chivalry the treatise *Livre de Manières* in the 1170s. In this work, de Fougères contextualizes chivalry as the social order of knights and describes an oath that a knight ought to take upon being dubbed (Keen 4). Three different treatises on chivalry defined set rules and expectations for knighthood in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but by the

fourteenth century many works satirized the concept rather than upheld or attempted to define it. The article "Chivalric Literature" by Joann Bellis and Megan G. Leitch notes that during this time there were three prominent types of works on chivalry: "… chronicles, vitae and political poetry… to romance and chanson de geste, the heartland of chivalric writing. Finally… pastiches that poked fun at or more seriously satirised the chivalric *modus operandi"* (242). Some medieval authors had become cynical in their views regarding chivalry following the failed Crusades and exploits of mercenary knights. Keen notes that Malory, in his *Morte D'Arthur,* implies that chivalry itself is responsible for these social problems (Keen 230). Chivalry, after all, was a code of conduct for armed and mounted warriors, and thus it necessitated the continuance of violence and bloodshed. Knights themselves existed because war existed, and romances which promoted the seeking out of adventure often promoted the seeking of armed combat. Thus, chivalry was a faulty and incoherent system to begin with for its inherent reliance on warfare and its insistence that Christian knights commit acts of violence.

That the end of the age of chivalry coincided with the increasingly widespread popularity of gunpowder is no coincidence. While the advent of guns in battle did not immediately eradicate swords and lances from warfare as guns and cannons became more prominent, knighthood as a profession fell by the wayside. Men were still knighted, and jousting tournaments still occurred, but as Richard Kaeuper observes in *Chivalry and Violence,* the social order of knights adhering to a monarch-written code of chivalry and jousting for anything other than occasional nostalgic popular entertainment slowly but surely became a thing of the past in the early modern era (Kauper 320).

Arthurian literature rose and fell in popularity on roughly the same timeline as did chivalry. Arthur's first extant mention is in the ninth century text *Historia Brittonum.* Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* was published in 1135, and by then Arthur was already the subject of myth and fable, according to William of Malmesbury. Chrétien de Troyes wrote his romances in the latter half of the century, contemporaneous with chivalry becoming a cemented ideal of medieval Europe (Fulton 4). Maurice Keen insists that only in Britain were chivalry and knighthood two separate, distinguished concepts, and Arthur, though initially popularized in France, was nonetheless a figure of British nationalistic pride. Initially, Arthurian legend was first the stuff of chroniclers in praise of great kings, idealized leaders, and conquerors. The romances which followed upheld the virtues of Arthur's knights as the representatives of courtesy, battlefield excellence, and the defense of women. These works' narratives were stories of heroism, of moral virtue, and of chivalry. With the decline of knighthood as it was in the past, Arthurian literature itself lost popularity beginning in the seventeenth century (6).

Chivalry, though not an exclusively Arthurian concept so much as it was a medieval one, has nonetheless been associated with Arthur from the beginning. Chivalry was an evolving idea, changing with the values of the centuries, and it had its detractors from the outset, but nonetheless it clearly had a powerful narrative hold on medieval European culture, particularly that of France and Britain. It is the same with stories of Arthur. Like his king, Sir Gawain has a strong association with chivalric virtues. In the earliest chronicles, such as Monmouth's *History* and Malmesbury's *Gesta,* he is Arthur's strong, skillful companion who is instrumental to many of his victories. In early

romances like *Claris et Laris*, he is most known for his humble and courteous nature. Even in later romances that cast him in a villainous light, such as the *Prose Tristan*, it must be noted that he epitomizes the behaviors which some more satirical writers at the time called out in chivalric culture, especially unrestrained violence.

The two primary sources for this thesis are the Norton Critical Edition of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* and Marie Borroff's scholarly translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* Not only are these two medieval romances among the longest in the literary canon that heavily involve Gawain, but Malory's *Morte* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* have endured as the most famous portrayals of the character.

Secondary sources for this project include books and articles on Arthurian legend, Sir Gawain, and chivalry in both the Arthurian and more general medieval sense. Maurice Keen's *Chivalry,* Keith Busby and Raymond Thompson's *Gawain: A Casebook,* Helen Fulton's *A Companion to Arthurian Literature,* Richard Kaeuper's *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe,* and the *Arthurian Studies* scholarly series, including Ralph Norris' *Malory's Library,* have been particularly helpful. Apart from Keen's *Chivalry* (1984), and Kaeuper's *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (1999), all secondary sources are relatively recent publications. Specific articles of interest include Carl Grey Martin's "The Cipher of Chivalry" (2009), Bellis and Leitch's "Chivalric Literature" (2019), Kate McClune's "The Vengeaunce of My Brethirne" (2011), and C. David Benson's older but informative "Gawain's Defence of Lancelot in Malory's "Death of Arthur"" (1983).

The first chapter of this thesis introduces and contextualizes the topic of Sir Gawain as a representative of Arthurian chivalry and its inherent weaknesses. The second chapter aims to define "chivalry" to provide a foundation for this project's central argument. Historically, chivalry was never a static concept; it evolved with the times and the broader cultural context that contained it. Chivalry in Arthurian legend is typically defined more strictly, often within the confines of a code of conduct drafted by who attributes the invention to Arthur, and cemented in the oath which all his knights swear to uphold. That said, even the Arthurian understanding of chivalry was influenced by its cultural definition at the time any given work was being written. Obviously, different Arthurian writers had different understandings of chivalry, depictions of which vary across all Arthurian works. Thus, Chapter Two seeks to explore chivalry from both a historical and literary standpoint, tracing the institution's evolution in both contexts. Ultimately, this research project will draw together the "common denominators" in medieval iterations of chivalry in a contextually comprehensive definition on which to build this thesis.

The latter half of this thesis will focus on Gawain specifically. Chapter Three will examine Sir Gawain's primary role as a knight. It will discuss his martial prowess—one of his most consistent characteristics in every portrayal—and how he conducts himself in battle in different Arthurian works, particularly as represented in this thesis' primary sources. This analysis will explore how medieval authors represented Gawain's understanding of a knight's duties, his relationship with women, and his struggles with the chivalric code in relation to his own knightly identity. The core of this chapter will be

a study of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight's* exploration of the contradictions between Gawain's knightly and Christian duties.

Chapter Four will discuss Gawain's role in Malory's *Morte D'Arthur,* a later British romance in which Gawain is no longer an ideal representative of chivalry, but instead a flawed knight who, rather than taking a constructive path to handling complex emotions, refuses to grant mercy and instead seeks revenge in compensation for the death of a loved one. This chapter will explore Gawain's refusal to deal with grief and loss through the channels provided by the Church and Christian faith, and how this differentiates him from other characters in *Morte* who handle their own feelings of grief in less destructive ways. Ultimately, the conclusion to this thesis will offer an overview of the impact of Gawain as a character, both in the Middle Ages and in the modern day, and suggest reasons for his continued relevance to postmodern, contemporary culture and readers in both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

CHAPTER 2

CHIVALRY: DEFINING AND REPRESENTING THE KNIGHTLY CODE IN

MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

The concept of medieval chivalry is something of a moving target. In the twelfth century, the military code of honor for armed horsemen focused on serving their king and distinguishing themselves through feats of combat became the ideals of courtly virtue. Around the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it became the concept of pledging loyalty to a liege lord and representing him well–until, perhaps, according to Sir Thomas Malory's tempestuous history, it no longer benefited a knight to limit himself to the employ of a single lord. Chivalry, at the very least, Maurice Keen posits, "cannot be divorced from the martial world of the mounted warrior; it cannot be divorced from aristocracy, because knights commonly were men of high lineage: and from the middle of the twelfth century on it very frequently carries ethical or religious overtones" (2). As Keen notes, chivalry evolved with the age in which it came about, but ultimately the concept may be defined as a code of conduct for horsed warriors, mostly revolving around politics and warfare, which requires them to serve their king loyally, represent him well, honor and protect ladies and other vulnerable classes of people, live a disciplined life, and demonstrate consistent martial prowess.

The History of Chivalry

In the eleventh century, Keen records, the Norman conquest of Britain heralded the introduction of the threefold feudal society (kings, soldiers, clergy, to say nothing of

peasants). The words used for cavalrymen translated more often to "warriors" than

"knights," and a chivalric class, so to speak, had not yet been firmly established. It is not

until the twelfth century that we truly begin to see the emergence of a chivalric culture

(Keen 41-42). Court romances extolled the virtues of knights like Sir Gawain and Sir

Lancelot, likely thanks to Eleanor of Aquitaine, Queen of France and later England until

her death in 1204. Eleanor's famous (and rumored) Court of Love, as well as her affinity

for chivalric literature, prompted an interest in knightly virtues for young men. Her oldest

daughter, Marie of Champagne, was the patroness of the famous Chrétien de Troyes

(Weir 131).

Finally, the 1170s saw Etienne de Fougères' *Livre de Manières.* He defined the

warrior class as the *chevalrie,* specifically referencing knights as *cheval* is the French

word for "horse." He wrote in the vernacular of the day to instruct knights on the virtues

they ought to exemplify, what their background ought to be to even be eligible for

knighthood (a knight, he believed, must be a freeman), and the oath a knight must take to

become part of the "order" that was chivalry (Keen 4). It was de Fougères, with help from

Eleanor and Chrétien, perhaps, who first attempted to define chivalry. For him, it was a

code of conduct for the emerging class of horsed warriors, serving God, king, and those

in need of defending. Etienne de Fougères' understanding of chivalry is a simple concept

likely the most reminiscent of our current, pithy understanding.

Richard Barber's book *The Knight and Chivalry* (2000) examines chivalry

through the examples of knights both real and legendary. The tournament field and the

court romance, Barber writes, both equally contributed to the creation of the knightly

identity: "The primacy of the individual over the concept of the order of knighthood," he

claims, "is probably the defining moment of chivalry, making it possible for the anonymous knight to become the named hero, and thus to join the ranks of those celebrated in literature" (Barber 4). Knighthood introduced a form of individuality to European culture and literature not formerly available to those not of royal birth, emphasizing the notion that a man could earn his own reputation through noble and impressive acts, though to qualify for knighthood he still had to possess at least some social rank.

The anonymously written *Ordene de Chevalerie,* penned in the first half of the thirteenth century, gives a set of four "commandments" to the newly made knight following a specifically Christian ritual (ironically, the knight offered as an example in this case was Muslim Sultan Saladin). A knight must not be "a party in any way to treason" (7), must honor and defend women, must attend Mass every possible day, and must fast in honor of Christ's death each Friday. The anonymous work portrays stricter ties between knighthood and the Church than any other text reviewed in this project. Its Christian focus defines with more precision the moral standards that a knight must live up to. Meanwhile, Ramon Lull's *Libre del Ordre de Cavayleria,* written in the latter half of the century, defines chivalry in much more secular terms, though Lull himself was quite devout (8). For Lull, it is not enough to be skilled in riding and warfare and courageous in battle. A good knight should be instructed in ethics and science as well. He also must be a good diplomat, able to judge the disputes of those under him, and supervise newer warriors (9-10).

In both Lull's work and the anonymous *Ordene* we see a specific example of another tenet of chivalry that has not, thus far, been elaborated. A knight must be able to

represent his king well. While a knight can advance as an individual, and while he should be just, generous, and strong for his own sake, he must be all these things mostly because the character of a knight will reflect on his liege lord. A king whose knights are boorish, rapacious, and reckless is far less likely to be respected as a man or be taken seriously as a ruler. On the other hand, if a knight knows well how to deliberate among his king's subjects and train other knights, those qualities suggest that he serves a strong and wise lord. A knight often would be an envoy in foreign courts, and consequently act as the mouthpiece of his king to those around him. Therefore, chivalry in the early fourteenth century was not merely about what made a good knight, but equally about making sure that those around a knight would respect his liege lord.

Written in roughly the early 1350s, Geoffrey de Charny's *Livre de Chevalerie* is the most detailed of all extant treatises on chivalry. According to Keen, "Geoffrey de Charny's view of chivalry is a thoroughly humane one, and attractive for that reason" (13). He advises music, dancing, fine wine, and good spirits in general, while insisting upon discipline and moderation. He impresses upon his readers the importance of learning from one's elders, respecting and defending ladies, and achieving greatness in the tournament as well as on the battlefield. While still religious, emphasizing every man's duty to God and the Virgin Mary, from whom all their prowess and wisdom stems, his construction of chivalry is, again, largely a secular one, built on a code of ethics which puts a knight in good standing with the society around him.

De Charny, as Keen notes, sees chivalry as a code of conduct which extends beyond the more specific strictures of knighthood. Victory in the tournament (which includes sword fighting) is to be even more highly praised than victory in the joust (13).

Essentially, as with Lull, chivalry for de Charny was not just about a knight's behavior on the battlefield or at court, but also his skill in a variety of martial arts and his overall lifestyle. Nonetheless, Keen also notes the notion of chivalry as a protector of the status quo: "Geoffrey's method of judging prowess," he writes, "is firmly anchored to the appearances of this world" (15). Not only does de Charny's work help the reader to identify a chivalrous individual via their achievements, but it demonstrates that what had become the order of knighthood brought glory not only to individuals but also to the concept itself, and to the lord or king whom any given knight served.

Chivalry began as a simple concept and, upon being integrated into European society as a social system, grew progressively more complex. The increasing prevalence of the horsed warrior thanks to the Norman conquest required new practices and regulations for warfare. To protect and serve the interests of kingdoms, duchies, and countries, a vaguely defined system was introduced to unite the armed horsemen of the various lands under one general mode of operation. Thus, throughout the medieval period, the definition of chivalry first expanded to add other principles and then diverged into various paths, spawning different opinions on just what chivalry meant.

European nations had mostly, by the mid-thirteenth century, adopted the general concept of chivalry. Such a system was perceived as strengthening a kingdom, creating some measure of societal order, and reflecting well on both a king/overlord and his knights. It established a common ground between Christian kingdoms which previously may have had little in common culturally. Chivalry *had* to continue to expand and adapt to remain a facet of medieval society and its ever-changing nature. Once this social order was created, knights existed to protect it, but they were bound (at least in theory) to do so

within the confines of chivalric dictates. Therefore, in both theory and practice, chivalry necessitated its own defense.

Of course, the requirement for the virtues of chivalry to change according to military needs at any given time is largely thanks to the fact that chivalry is inherently reliant on warfare. Richard Kaeuper devotes an entire book–*Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*–to this fact. Chivalry was created as a set of virtues for cavalrymen to follow, and therefore it never would have existed had it not been preceded well in advance by the existence of war. However much its proponents might preach about aiding the defenseless, showing restraint, and acting honorably in all situations, chivalry would neither exist nor enable its adherents to gain power without continued bloodshed.

It is worth noting that treatises on chivalry such as *Livre des Manières, Ordene de Chevalerie, Libre del Ordre de Cavayleria,* and *Livre de Chevalerie* were all written before the fifteenth century. In fact, they all precede both primary sources for this thesis, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Morte D'Arthur.* Even by de Charny's time, fewer men were vying to be officially dubbed a knight (14), and as the centuries progressed, this trend would only continue. As previously mentioned, by Malory's day the Crusades had already done a great deal to stain the image of knighthood and the Church. Additionally, by 1455 England was plunged into the War of the Roses, the infamous civil war between the houses of York and Lancaster, who were both vying for the kingship. Malory himself fought for both sides at different points in his life, dying in captivity as a prisoner of war (Shepherd xvii-xix). The documented experiences of knights, as well as the literary sources for this analysis, including Malory's work, suggest that by the 1450s,

the supposedly stable social order provided by chivalry was decaying, and with it, so were medieval European societies.

Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* is notably cynical, regarding both chivalry and the unstable socio-political rule of kings and aristocracy. In her article "The Flower of Kings: A Study of the Arthurian Legend in England between 1485 and 1835," Rachel Bromwich establishes the importance of *Morte D'Arthur* in the Arthurian literary canon, writing that "Malory… revealed the organic unity of his theme as the portrayal of the growth, flowering, and decay… of that ideal and timeless world of Arthurian chivalry" (Bromwich 328). Malory walks his reader through the history of chivalry, in a fictional world in which Arthur is credited as the code's creator. Its beginnings are well-intentioned, perhaps, or at least neutral, with Arthur's aim being to create order in the kingdom through the actions of his knights. But what becomes idealized quickly becomes more complex, until all its opposing qualities bring it to a crashing halt, and the kingdom built upon these principles falls with them.

Chivalry and the Medieval Church

Malory's work brings up another important point about chivalry: its religious aspects, and, in *Morte's* case, the conflicts between Christianity or chivalry. In his 2016 article "Writing the 'Hoole Book' of King Arthur," Marco Nievergelt explores Malory's treatment of the Grail quest in contrast to the anonymously published *Queste del Saint Graal,* a thirteenth-century work which arguably glorifies knightly quests in general as holy in its portrayal of the search for the sacred cup. He observes that Malory, on the other hand, "seems to secularize the *Queste,* attempting to transform it into an apotheosis

of earthly chivalry rather than its negation, and using it to initiate Lancelot's redemption"
(Nievergelt 468). Malory's Grail quest does not lack religious elements; it contains, for
instance, many accounts of monks and hermits rebuking knights—including Gawain—for
their sins of martial excess (Malory 543). Yet, the search for the Grail itself becomes
more of a secular adventure overall, a typical knightly quest which happens to revolve
around a holy object. Malory's refusal to sanctify the Grail quest to the extent which the
Queste author did may come from the same place as his cynicism toward chivalric
culture. By the mid-1400s, the Crusades were already documented history, and it was
easier to recognize the bloodshed and corruption that defined them. Malory, perhaps, was
disillusioned with the glorification of knighthood as holy when he, as a knight himself,
had surely seen evidence to the contrary.

The Crusades, lasting from 1096-1291, had been a particular source of frustration
for those who saw chivalry as antithetical to Christian values, for this series of wars was
in fact sponsored by the Church. Richard Barber writes that "[c]hivalry itself was of
course a primarily secular movement" (3) assert that was initially "viewed with alarm by
the Church" (5), but that "whatever way the movement began, the First Crusade brought
the Church and knighthood together in a fashion which neither had foreseen" (Barber 6).
The Crusades, perhaps, are essential to understanding whether chivalry can accurately be
termed as Christian or not. Seen as a holy quest by those who embarked upon this series
of four major wars, the Crusades in hindsight were rife with murder, rape, and looting in
the name of Christ and the Church. Nonetheless, its soldiers had been promised favor
with God, and the Church could channel knighthood into a "holier" direction (Ramm 71).

According to Ben Ramm, the *Quest del Saint Graal*, as opposed to Malory's Grail section, is deeply religious and has echoes of the Crusades, with the concept of a holy pilgrimage and knightly undertaking wrapped into a singular adventure. He argues in his 2007 article "Falling out with God: The Discursive Inconsistency of La Queste Del Saint Graal" that what "we encounter in the specious distinction between earthly and celestial chivalry peddled by the Queste," he argues, "is in fact an identity of opposites, in the Hegelian sense" (67). In the worldview of the *Queste,* Christian and secular chivalry are essentially two sides of the same chivalric coin. Chivalry is inherently a martial system, but the spiritual (read: higher) side of chivalry is a crucial part of the whole.

While Chrétien's Grail quest and the *Queste del Saint Graal* portray chivalric undertakings as sacred Christian journeys, some later works point out the un-Christian elements within chivalry. At first glance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* written around 1375, seems to romanticize chivalric pursuits. Nevertheless, while it is an earnestly Christian work, *Sir Gawain* points out problematic aspects of the chivalric code rather than conflates its principles with Christian ideals. The poem does feature some pagan trappings such as the "green man" trope. Still, Laura L. Howes' introduction to Marie Boroff's scholarly translation notes, "Studies that seek to establish the persistence of a pre-Christian "green man" myth, for example, must note that greenness is also associated with the devil in medieval literature"; thus, even the green man aspect of *Sir Gawain* echoes the Christianity of the day (Howes x). And yet, the Green Knight is arguably a positive character in that he counters Gawain's obsessive striving for knightly perfection with the idea that loving one's own life is no sin. In this case, then, perhaps the Green Knight's coloring is suggestive of life and rebirth, and with these, redemption.

A notable theme of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the poem's exploration of the conflicts between the Christian faith and the chivalric code. The Gawain Poet's *Pearl,* a poem about loss and the comfort offered through faith, demonstrates his own religiosity and theological bent. Notably, the Poet's admonition of Gawain's idolization of the chivalric code comes from the Green Knight when the two meet at the Green Chapel near the poem's end. The Green Knight acts as a priest in this section of the poem, both hearing Gawain's confession that he has concealed Lady Bercilak's girdle, and, in a sense, absolving him. Gawain is ashamed when he finally confesses this sin, believing himself to be cowardly, but the Green Knight insists that "…you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame…/ You are so fully confessed, your failings made known/ And bear the plain penance of the point of my blade…/ I hold you polished as a pearl" (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight IV.2368-93). The Green Knight's counter to Gawain's perfectionistic tendencies is wrapped in language of confession and penance, thus at once absolving him and gently rebuking the knight, and perhaps, by extension, the chivalric ethos of Arthur's court, from a Christian perspective. The two men are alone in a sacred space, with the Green Knight serving a priestly role, suggesting that, especially according to the devout Gawain Poet, the Green Knight is correct on this issue.

The Green Knight's insistence on the value of life demonstrates perhaps the greatest disconnect between chivalry and Christianity. The core issue in Gawain's pursuit of perfect chivalry is the code's inherent violence. Carl Grey Martin discusses this problem in "The Cipher of Chivalry," defining chivalry as "violence disguised as courtly play" (Martin 311). Martin writes that chivalry "allowed aristocratic brutality to assume rarified forms (honor, prowess, fealty), and the man-at-arms sublimated the horrors of

physical destruction, especially the mutilation and ruin in combat of the human body—including his own" (311). In chivalry, the violence inherent to knighthood is recast as virtue, and both the dishonesty of this whitewashing as well as the seeking of bloodshed and glory are against Christian principles of peace, humility, and the value of life, even if the Church condones chivalric excesses when convenient.

For the Gawain Poet, though Gawain's concealing of the girdle is deception and therefore wrong according to Christianity and chivalry alike, his desire to live is not only natural but God-given and distinctly Christian. This idea is examined in Cecilia A. Hatt's chapter *"Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:* An Alternative Romance?" from her book *God and the Gawain-Poet,* which considers the poet's theological aims in writing the poem. She asserts that the Gawain poet in fact presents "a consciousness of the world as God's gift" (223), and that life and creation ought to be celebrated. Thus, the taking of life through violence is ungodly and un-Christian. Hatt additionally points out that the focus of the plot is exactly that, for while *"SGGK* does not depict a war or even a single human death," nonetheless, "it is *about* the expectation of a violent conflict, a conflict that turns out not to happen" (177). When the Green Knight presents his challenge to Arthur's court, not one knight considers any other interpretation than that they must attempt to kill, or at the very least wound, this stranger (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight I.301-2).

While an attitude which assumes the necessity of violence certainly runs counter Christian principles upheld by the Gawain Poet, in 1375 the assumption is that it is chivalric. The knightly challenge always demands acceptance, no matter how absurd or violent the terms. This contradiction with Christian thought exists because chivalry itself

is a system that is secular in origin. In her article "How Christian is Chivalry?", Raluca L. Radulescu concludes that "chivalry does not always mean strict adherence to Christian morality; similarly, one can admire chivalric displays–*prowess in arms,* recognized by many medieval authors *as the core of chivalry*–irrespective of a warrior's non-Christian background" (83, emphasis added). Overall, it is safe to say that chivalry was a secular system that was inevitably dressed in Christian trappings because of the devout society in which it came to be.

The Values of Chivalry

Chivalric literature written throughout the Middle Ages reflects all these societal aspects. For Bellis and Leitch, "If 'chivalry' was a set of expectations and practices, a value system or even a culture, it was also a body of writing" (241). They go on to say that "[c]hivalric literature reinforced patterns of conduct and the proper structure of society: restraint and obeisance, exercising and recognising authority, muscularity moral and literal, when to stand and when to bend" (242). Chivalry was a system of values set into place by writing, whether through treatises, romances, or epics, and at the forefront of chivalric literature are Arthurian works.

During the twelfth to fourteenth centuries when knightly romances flourished, chivalric literature focused on sexual purity, devotion to the king, religious piety, and the defense of ladies. For instance, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* "For Gawain to succeed (and survive), his piety and chastity are as important as his honour and prowess" (Bellis & Leitch 258). Gawain is admired for his loyalty to Arthur and refusal of Lady Bercilak's sexual advances, though he graciously accepts her hospitality. The model

knight always maintains his purity, of course. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain is perfectly courteous while preserving his own chastity. Gawain's mistake is in not revealing the gift of Lady Bercilak's girdle to Bercilak–it is here that, for the first and only time throughout the poem, Gawain fails to perfectly adhere to chivalric values and the rules of the beheading game. His mistake, however, is one even the Green Knight finds understandable (IV.2368). He is not perfectly chivalrous, but he is forgiven for his humanity, suggesting that perhaps no one can achieve a state of perfect chivalry.

Chivalry and Medieval Women

The defense of the vulnerable, especially women, remains the tenet of chivalry which is, perhaps, the sole definition commonly used today. Barber writes of chivalric romances that "[t]he driving force behind the stories is clear, a kind of Darwinian selection which matches the most accomplished (and handsome) knight with the most courtly (and beautiful) lady" (4). In some sense, a lady was a knight's reward for his chivalry—in turn, this promoted the breeding of future knights. While ladies were certainly objects and plot devices in romance, the charge to protect them was taken seriously. In *Le Morte D'Arthur,* after accidentally killing a lady when she leaps in front of her husband at the last moment, Gawain is tasked by Guinevere to be the protector of all women in the land. This episode is likely inspired by his long-time reputation as a lady's knight (Kissick 112). Dorsey Armstrong, in her article "Malory and Character," discusses the Oath of Pentecost in Malory's *Morte,* the closest we have to a written code of chivalry in that text. She notes that "good knights are characterized more emphatically by service to the feminine and loyalty to one another in *Le Morte D'Arthur* than they are

in the source texts" (Armstrong 153). Respect for and defense of women is key to chivalry, and this aspect, along with fair play in battle and good representation of one's lord in other courts, can be summed up in the word "cortaysye" (Anderson 344), as it is spelled in *Sir Gawain*.

At the same time, it is noteworthy that the romanticized ideal of respecting and protecting women is not fully accurate to medieval chivalry. Rather, Malory always specifies that a good knight is sworn to protect "ladyes and jantylwomen" (96) and elsewhere "damesell[s]" (107) and "maydyn[s]" (561). In other words, the women that knights champion are always of noble birth and/or are virgins. When questing for the Holy Grail, Sir Galahad is led by a mystical lady, representative of faith, onto a ship to join Sir Bors and Sir Percival. Aboard the ship the knights find a sword which neither Bors nor Percival can lift. The scabbard is inscribed with the message that whoever is worthy of the sword, when he bears it, can receive no injury. It can only be given by a "KYNGIS DOUGHTER AND A QUENYS," the inscription specifies, and continues that: "SHE MUST BE A MAYDE ALL THE DAYES OF HIR LYFF… AND IF SHE BREAK HIR VIRGINITÉ, SHE SHALL DY THE MOSTE VYLANES DETH THAT EVER DUD ONY WOMAN" (562). A wealthy lady and a "pure" virgin are worth protecting, but a woman who is low born is less so, and one who has been "tainted" by premarital or extramarital relations is not only unworthy of defending, but deserving, according to the standards set by the socio-religious context of *Morte*, of death and damnation. While Malory is possibly using this episode to criticize such harsh beliefs, the example of this inscription still provides insight into the social problems of the medieval world and the contradictions inherent to chivalry.

In his Oath of Pentecost, Malory defines chivalry this way: "... never to do outrageousity nor murder, and always to flee treason; also, by no mean to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy, upon pain of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of King Arthur for evermore; and always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen succor upon pain of death. Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no law, ne for no world's goods" (Malory 77). All these tenets are familiar to historical understandings of chivalry and can be boiled down to three principles: 1) aid and honor women, 2) act honorably in battle, and 3) remain loyal to one's lord (in this case, King Arthur).

Unfortunately, these principles contradict in practice, and not just in the final tragedies that bring about Arthur's death. Much earlier in *Morte,* for instance, Arthur's court is presented with the problem of King Pellynor. This a conflict of which Gawain is a crucial part, as he eventually slays Pellynor in revenge for killing his father, King Lot. Pellynor's specific failure in chivalry though, is not Lot's death, but his unwillingness to save a lady in distress and her injured champion. Pellynor sees the lady and acknowledges her with a salute, but when "she cryed on lowde and seyde, "Helpe me, knyght, for Jesuys sake!"", he ignores her, too eager in his current quest, even though Pellynor himself acknowledges that she cries "an hondred tymes aftir helpe" (73).

Later, after ironically saving another lady because he promised King Arthur her safety, Pellynor returns to the place where the first lady sat with her wounded knight and finds that they have been eaten by lions. Upon his return to court, Guinevere rebukes him, and Merlin reveals that the lady Pellynor failed to save was his own daughter (77). Even so, Pellynor continues to be a trusted member of Arthur's court, beloved by all but

Guinevere and the Orkney brothers, and most characters generally seem to agree that his rescuing of one lady outweighs his callous disregard for the other. Because Pellynor is a man of "prouesse" (51), his ignoring of a distressed lady is accepted and glossed over. Ultimately, it is skill in combat that matters the most in the chivalric world because chivalry, more than anything else, is about warfare.

Another glaring example of chivalry's inconsistencies in terms of the ethos of mercy and protection of ladies is Arthur's willingness to have Guinevere burned for adultery. Even with his faith that Lancelot will rescue her, he exposes her to public shame and the potential of a long, painful death simply because his own honor demands it. Though Guinevere is considered an adulteress, she is still a lady and Arthur's queen. Nonetheless, the chivalric culture of *Morte D'Arthur* is not opposed to the degrading and even killing of a queen, so long as it keeps Arthur's reign and reputation secure. Of course, this action of Arthur's leads to Lancelot's accidental slaying of Sir Gareth, sending Gawain down a path of vengeance that will eventually destroy them all.

Even so, Arthur is adhering to chivalric values; chivalry protects "virtuous" women, but those with any moral failing, even a lady as powerful as a queen, can be publicly humiliated and executed. Yet in rescuing Guinevere from the stake and remaining her true defender, Lancelot is chivalrous as well. After all, as Lancelot insists after helping to clear Guinevere from charges of treason, a knight must defend his lady "in ryght othir in wronge" (597). In the case of Guinevere's alleged crime of adultery, Lancelot is a part of the wrong, and consequently he cannot consider himself above her in any way. Lancelot's returning of Guinevere to Arthur later in the work for the purpose of reconciliation positions Lancelot as more chivalrous still, for Arthur has the right to

demand his queen back, even disgraced, and Lancelot must serve his liege lord over all others. Every conflicting action made by Arthur and Lancelot in this case can be read as chivalrous.

For the purpose of this project, chivalry will be defined, for the purpose of this project, in this way: an ethical code for knights revolving around the rules of warfare, the protection of ladies, and loyalty to one's liege lord. Some of these aspects were prioritized over others in various ages, but as core tenets the above definition remained central. Chivalry was a secular system, though it certainly interacted with the Church to the benefit of both institutions. This system also demonstrably contradicted Christian virtues of humility, contrition, and valuing life. Chivalry as a social construct was self-perpetuating by nature, continuing to protect what it had established. Because chivalric principles could be inconsistent, strict adherence to these principles lead, through the series of events following the discovery of Lancelot and Guinevere's romance, to the downfall of Arthur's kingdom and his house.

CHAPTER 3

SIR GAWAIN, THE MODEL KNIGHT

As a knight–a warrior and protector of the vulnerable–Sir Gawain can be seen as emblematic of the chivalric code. Gawain in Sir Thomas Malory's 1470 romance *Le Morte D'Arthur* is a mercurial force, noble and sensible at times and, at others, refusing mercy to his enemies and swearing vengeance for his fallen kin. Although Malory's Gawain is considerably more flawed than earlier iterations of his character, he is devoted to Arthur, defends Lancelot and Guinevere, refuses to take part in the queen's execution (Malory 656), and is a renowned and successful warrior. Malory's Gawain often acts on his own set of principles, an aspect of his character which will be further discussed in Chapter Four. Convsersely, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* published anonymously in 1375*,* depicts a Gawain who certainly seems to represent the more "idealized" version of chivalry at first glance; he is humble, devout, and highly critical of his own weaknesses. Yet, the Gawain of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight's* unquestioning devotion to the knightly ethic is presented as problematic and the poem does not blindly praise the chivalric code. Rather, the Gawain Poet's work uses the character of Sir Gawain to depict a clear contrast between chivalry and Christian virtues.

The Gawain of earlier romances, in addition—and, at times, contrast—to his portrayal by the Gawain Poet and Malory, is depicted as a shining example of knighthood. Though some romance cycles like the *Prose Tristan* represent Gawain as violent and rapacious (Busby 195), poems such as *L'atre Périlleux* and "The Weddynge of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell" depict a similar Sir Gawain to the version portrayed by

the Gawain Poet, albeit far less nuanced. While Gawain's depiction in later works is more multifaceted and, at times, at odds with chivalric virtues, several versions of Gawain leading up to the ones depicted in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Morte D'Arthur* embody the ideal of chivalry as it is represented throughout the Middle Ages. The Gawain Poet is the first among the authors surveyed who takes the time to treat Gawain's character with nuance and complexity, employing the oft-used example of the model knight to examine chivalry and violence and the way in which they go together.

The Gawain Poet's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:* A Crisis of Character

The violence inherent to the chivalric code is demonstrated from the start of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Before beginning the story itself, the Gawain Poet details the mythic discovery of Britain following the Trojan War: "And far over the French sea, Felix Brutus/ On many broad hills and high Britain he sets/ most fair…/ And since this Britain was built by this baron great/ Bold boys bred there, in broils delighting" (I.13-22). The poem's opening lauds military conquest and the seeking of violent encounters in pre-medieval figures who existed before the concept of knighthood, suggesting that violent conquest is perhaps the virtue most celebrated by Arthur's court. In an analysis of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* Cecilia Hatt, in her book *God and the Gawain-Poet: Theology and Genre in Pearl, Cleanness, Patience and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* focuses a chapter on *Sir Gawain* and the Poet's religious objections to chivalric culture. Of the poem's opening reference to the fall of Troy Hatt writes, "I suggest also that the poet is evoking the traditions of Aenas and Brutus to point to a specific and inalienable feature of the rise and fall of empires, namely violence. Military violence was

a constant, and arguably necessary, part of medieval life, but Christianity had always

taught that it was an evil, and the poet of *Cleanness* argues very forcefully that those who

use violence will perish by it" (Hatt 176). The Gawain Poet demonstrates in the first lines

of his work how Arthur's Christian court continues the ancient tradition of conquest and

the glorification of violence, though these problematic values are dressed in the

decorated, courtly language of chivalry.

There is no clear indication among the knights of Arthur's court, including

Gawain, that the apparent contradictions between violence and Christianity within their

kingdom's values ought to be questioned, or indeed that they recognize these

contradictions at all. Arguably, Gawain shows no hesitation in beheading the Green

Knight. In fact, he manifests no indication of fear until much later in the poem, when he

accepts the supposedly enchanted girdle from Lady Bercilak because he is told it will

preserve his life. Even so, the knights and ladies who bid Gawain farewell as he leaves

Camelot bemoan what they assume is his fated demise. While Gawain himself does not

mourn, and only speaks "soberly" (II.543) to Arthur before taking his leave, his comrades

weep and declare, ""'Ill fortune it is/ That you, man, must be marred, that are most

worthy!'"" (674-5). Their praise of his courage and prowess contrasts with Gawain's

humble, self-effacing representation, suggesting that he is a better knight than he believes

and proving that he is well-loved. While the court community's sad reaction to Gawain's

departure calls into question whether he is valued for his usefulness as a knight or for his

character as an individual, it suggests that Arthur's court loves and fears for Gawain.

The members of Arthur's court do, nonetheless, see his quest as necessary. In this,

a crucial aspect of Arthurian knighthood is implied here that Gawain takes all too

seriously: if a challenge is accepted, a knight must not back down or refuse any of the terms issued, no matter how deadly the quest. A modern reader might question why Gawain does not refuse the Green Knight's challenge when he realizes that his opponent, unlike any mortal being, can survive with his head chopped off. Yet Gawain, Arthur, and the other knights treat the Green Knight's challenge and Gawain's subsequent quest as an inevitability, a bargain from which Gawain has no possible way of withdrawing.

The Gawain Poet's hero-knight eventually displays fear for his life. During his stay in the home of Lord Bercilak (later revealed, of course, to be the Green Knight), he accepts a girdle from Lord Bercilak's lady which she claims will magically protect him from harm. Gawain, as Lord Bercilak's guest, agrees to take part in a hunting game in which Bercilak gives Gawain whatever he kills each day, and Gawain replies that "[w]hatever I worthily have won within these fair walls/ Herewith I as willingly award it to you" (III.1386-7). When Bercilak brings home his quarry each day, Gawain in turn gives him a kiss in exchange for those he receives from Lady Bercilak. He conceals the girdle; however, later when he meets Bercilak/the Green Knight in the Green Chapel, he confesses this dishonesty.

This scene presents a challenge to chivalric expectations. The Green Knight himself tells Gawain that his motive of self-preservation is "the less… to blame" (IV.2368). The instinct to value life and no not walk willingly into certain death is understandable to the Green Knight and is in fact a positive sign of character growth. An outsider to the Arthurian world, the Green Knight offers an alternate set of values, in which a knight might avoid unnecessary violence with no harm to his reputation. While Gawain is embarrassed and seems to view his fear—which led him to accept the lady's

girdle—as sinful, the Green Knight declares that he sees him as "polished as a pearl" (2393). The only mistake Gawain makes throughout the text is accepting the girdle and dishonestly concealing it from Lord Bercilak and, therefore, the Green Knight; nonetheless, his impulse to value life itself is affirmed.

The Green Knight acts as priest in the Green Chapel, meeting privately with Gawain in a Christian place of worship, hearing his confession, and offering a form of absolution. Hatt, in discussing Gawain and the Green Knight's final encounter, outlines the process of confession and absolution during the fourteenth century when the Gawain Poet lived. She writes that the

> … emphasis on penance was also urged by Peter the Chanter, who elaborated the importance of the priest's role in confession. Besides analysing the state of mind in which an act was committed, the confessor encouraged a sense of shame, which was an important part of sorrow for sin, a sign of deep contrition of the heart, the one necessary element of all true penance. (Hatt 186-7)

Gawain acts accordingly in confessing that he has concealed the girdle, though at first he lays the blame partially on the Green Knight, exclaiming, "Your cut taught me cowardice, care for my life" (IV.2379). Yet, he quickly acknowledges his own fault, adding, "Now I am faulty and false… I confess, knight, in this place/ My faults are grave indeed" (2382-86). He is distressed by his sin, though perhaps less by the deed itself than by its broader implications that he is incapable of moral and chivalric perfection. At the beginning of his confession, Gawain is reluctant to admit that the fault lies with him, though he does eventually do so.

The encounter at the Green Chapel demonstrates to Gawain that he is not, in fact, perfect, nor is he capable of perfection. Early in the poem, Gawain had been depicted as a knight of great moral, Christian virtue. When he arms himself to leave in search of the Green Chapel, we are given a detailed description of his shield. On the inside, facing Gawain, is an image of the Virgin Mary, believing he will continue to receive her protection so long as he properly honors her. On the outer face of the shield is a pentangle, outlining the five sets of five virtues which define Gawain's image. According to the Gawain Poet:

> … he was faultless in his five senses
>
> Nor found ever to fail in his five fingers
>
> And all his fealty was fixed upon the five wounds
>
> That Christ got on the cross (II.632-54)

Yet, "all [Gawain's] fealty" cannot truly be said to be fixed upon Christ and his five wounds. Gawain's identity as both a Christian and a knight are important to him, yet ultimately he prioritizes his chivalric duties over his Christian ones. Gawain's theological mistake is in placing more faith in his own virtues than in the grace and protection of God. Hatt posits that, "All in all, although Gawain swears, 'Bi Goddez self', it is his own self that he seems to believe in and it is his own self that is going to be put to the test by the blow that the Green Knight will inflict" (185). She goes on to suggest that "Gawain acts less in accordance with the objective righteousness of his choices than with the degree to which they harmonise with his own self-image" (188). Indeed, the virtues on his pentangle are *his* virtues, displayed for all to see, and Gawain is sure of himself as a good knight, both in a moral and skillful sense. He is humble and self-deprecating, as is

stressed in his speech to Arthur when he accepts the Green Knight's challenge, yet readers may assume his confidence in accepting the quest comes from his self-assurance that he is a good knight and a good man.

Gawain's default fealty instead seems to lie with a system which privileges, and indeed necessitates, violence. Granted, Gawain's knighthood requires him to prioritize his chivalric duties above all, and the same is true for every other knight in Arthur's court. Gawain simply must grapple with the knightly and Christian aspects of his identity because he, in his loyalty to Arthur, cannot abide the thought that his king's life could be in jeopardy, while the other knights of Arthur's court do at least value their own lives enough from the beginning to refuse the Green Knight's challenge. Unlike these other knights, who are notably older and more experienced, Gawain does not seem to consider his own safety until later in the text.

When the Green Knight insists Gawain is "the less to blame" for wishing to preserve his own life, he acknowledges the conflict between chivalry and Christianity. Christian principles emphasize the value of life, and chivalry, though it is supposedly includes mercy among its virtues, is represented in the Gawain Poet's work as an inherently violent ideal which rewards knights with glory for killing powerful enemies. Carl Grey Martin, in his 2009 article "The Cipher of Chivalry," argues that chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is "violence disguised as courtly play" (Martin 311), giving aristocratic abuses of power the ability to hide under the trappings of "honor" and "prowess" (211). Chivalry in this context also encourages the individual knight to risk his own life and body not necessarily for the rescue of others—though this can be the case— but for the achievement of material prizes and public recognition as a knight. Thus,

Gawain's theft of the girdle may be unchivalrous, and his dishonesty a sin, but his motive, the Green Knight argues, is worthy, and more in line with Christian virtues and the God-given instinct to live.

The Green Knight's view reflects medieval Christian teachings, particularly those of St. Thomas Aquinas (b.1225-d.1274), whose writings were still greatly influential in the clerical community of the fourteenth century. Aquinas argues in his *Summa Theologica* that the love and preservation of one's own life, as well as respect for the lives of others, is natural and Christian. In a discussion of the sin of suicide, Aquinas insists that, "It is altogether unlawful to kill oneself, for three reasons. First, because everything naturally loves itself, the result being that everything naturally keeps itself in being, and resists corruptions so far as it can" *(Summa Theologica* II.II.Q 64.Art.5). Going on to explain the sinfulness of murder, he muses, "If we consider a man in himself, it is unlawful to kill any man, since in every man though he be sinful, we ought to love the nature which God has made, and which is destroyed by slaying him" (II.II.Q 64.Art.6).

These passages suggest not only Aquinas' influence on the Gawain Poet's work, but also a prominent medieval Christian view that violence is sinful, whether committed against onself or others. Yet, chivalry as represented in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* encourages, or at least sustains, both. Though Gawain does not attempt suicide, he embarks upon a quest which he likely believes will end in his own violent death, one that began because he accepted a challenge that required needless violence against another, all for the purpose of what is purportedly a game. Gawain's dishonesty about taking the girdle may be a Christian "sin", but the Green Knight's insistence that the love of one's

life is natural challenges the violence inherent in chivalry from a Christian, Aquinian perspective, encouraging Gawain to prioritize heavenly values over earthly ones.

Of course, the idea that Gawain's concealing of the girdle is a breach of chivalry has not gone unchallenged. Martin argues in "The Cipher of Chivalry" that Gawain is not wrong or even necessarily unchivalrous in his taking of the girdle. "His "unfair advantage,"" Martin points out, only "insures his chance to deliver a similar blow, equalizing the game's inherent imbalance—without which Gawain would have perpetrated no more than a gruesome execution" (317). The Green Knight's challenge is itself unchivalrous, according to Martin, as it presents a fight which no one else could possibly win. Gawain's "internalization of the courtly code" (319), as Martin puts it, loosens its hold on him when he comes to understand what his comrades perceived when they wept as he left in search of the Green Chapel: strict adherence to chivalric virtues, or "courtesy" as Martin specifies, can be a dangerous thing. Martin thus asserts that "Gawain's retention of the prophylactic girdle in knowing violation of the compact is a positive sign of growth" (319). Gawain leaves behind his previous blind faith in the knightly code to preserve his own life, and the Poet, like the Green Knight, sees this as no great sin. In fact, Bercilak rebukes Gawain more for concealing the girdle than for putting his faith in its supposed protection.

In Martin's view, Gawain remains chivalrous despite having chosen to wear the girdle in an attempt to sustain his life. It is, at least in theory, an equalizing factor. Gawain may not perfectly live up to the terms of Bercilak's hunting game or the Green Knight's challenge, but he adheres as closely to chivalric principles as humanly possible. Gawain, even when he realizes the dangers toward the end, never backs down from his

challenge, and embodies chivalric acceptance of duty, though he succumbs to the temptation to preserve life for its own sake.

If Martin's assertion is accurate, then even though Gawain attempts to protect himself within the confines he is given, he still does not challenge or eschew chivalry directly. Rather, he remains a proponent of the code despite the Green Knight pointing out its flaws. The poem itself criticizes chivalry with this episode, but readers must either accept that Gawain is a knight who fails by taking and concealing the girdle, or that he does not experience a significant moment of character growth as Martin asserts. It is noteworthy that Gawain repents for hiding the girdle and lying, and confesses to the Green Knight within the chapel as he might to a priest. Though his "sin" of dishonesty is minor, it is something which he comes to regret. Gawain does not act in a perfectly chivalrous manner in this instance, nor in a perfectly Christian one. The Green Knight offers him a more critical look at the chivalric system which he follows, though the narrative ends without Gawain pondering the Green Knight's words in the chapel.

Sir Gawain in Malory: The Ladies' Knight

While the *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* explores the vulnerability of a Christian individual who is held to the fundamentally violent chivalric system, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur,* written roughly a hundred years later after the War of the Roses had left its destructive mark on English history, examines the vulnerability of chivalry itself to its own inherent contradictions. Again, the character of Gawain is one figure used to explore these inconsistencies, in ways that will be addressed in Chapter

Four. Even so, Malory's Gawain also embodies some of the nobler, more idealized tenets of chivalry, particularly the protection and honoring of ladies.

The version of Sir Gawain portrayed by Malory, though certainly far from being a perfect knight, often demonstrates chivalrous behavior. After the public exposing of the romance between Lancelot and Guinevere, Gawain reasons with Arthur himself not to sentence Guinevere to the stake. He insists to Arthur, "Nay, my moste noble Kynge… wyte you well I woll never be in that place where so noble a quene as Dame Gwenyver shall take such a shamefull ende" (656). Gawain is chivalrous in his protection of Guinevere, even against her own husband and his liege-lord. While Gawain fails to persuade Arthur, he nonetheless refuses to bend to his will by taking part in the would-be execution: he protects ladies even when it means risk to his own reputation or position in speaking against the king. He also does his best, until the moment he learns of his brother Gareth's death at Lancelot's hands, to uphold the integrity of Arthur's house.

Gawain's defense of women as a feature of his chivalrous nature is explored even after his death. In the final book of *Morte,* "The Death of Arthur," Arthur has a vision of Gawain "with a numbir of fayre ladyes wyth hym" (683), all of whom he had rescued and looked after during his lifetime. With these ladies, Gawain warns Arthur not to engage Mordred in battle the following morning, or he will be killed. According to Erin Kissick, "The special quest… has allowed him not only to practise greater deeds of chivalry by serving ladies, but to indirectly participate in battle even after his death. He is allowed to cross the boundary of life and death due to events set in motion by the corpse of the lady" (112). Gawain's post-mortem warning to Arthur is perhaps his greatest act of chivalry in *Morte*. He redeems himself from his accidental slaying of a lady during the early

"Weddyng of Kynge Arthur" by not only protecting women throughout the rest of his life and career, but also by preserving, for some time, the life and rule of his lord. He evidently has provided succor to many ladies throughout his lifetime, and they join him in the afterlife to give aid to Arthur.

Gawain, admittedly, is not just the ladies' knight in Malory. Raymond H. Thompson discusses Gawain's distinct respect for female autonomy in the fifteenth century story of "The Weddynge of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell." The poem is a play on the popular "loathly lady" stories of the Middle Ages, such as "The Wife of Bath's Tale" in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales.* Gawain agrees to marry a hideous woman to free her from the curse that disfigured her, and she offers that she can either be beautiful during the day when he is out in public with her, or during the night when they share a bed. Gawain leaves the choice to her, and the curse is lifted. Gawain's courtesy and prioritizing of Ragnell's agency is the moral of the tale (Thompson 203). Gawain here epitomizes chivalry and knightly courtesy; he respects the will of the cursed lady, and he is rewarded for it.

Gawain as the Model Knight in Medieval Romance

Modesty, too, is highly stressed as a chivalric virtue. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* Gawain's speech to King Arthur, his request to take the Green Knight's challenge, shows him to be a humble knight, eager to earn his place at Arthur's table. "I am the weakest, and the feeblest of wit," he declares, "And the loss of my life would be the least of any" (I.354-355). Though Gawain's seat beside Queen Guinevere indicates his privileged position as Arthur's nephew, Gawain displays no belief in his own

superiority. Rather, the Gawain Poet represents him as a modest knight seated among a hall full of knights older and more accomplished than himself. As far as Gawain is concerned, he is the least valuable member of Arthur's court, and therefore the most expendable. Humility is the first aspect of his character highlighted in this poem.

Gawain's humility is also accentuated in other romances from the period. David S. King's article "Identity, Dismemberment, and Illusion in "L'Atre périlleux"" explores his role in the thirteenth-century French romance *L'Atre périlleux.* Here Gawain shares more similarities with the version presented in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* including his humility and oft-referenced courtesy; he notably refuses to share his name with anyone he meets, as he does not wish to be showered with praise on account of his reputation (King 127). This poem details an adventure in which Gawain goes to rescue a lady taken from Arthur's court and is distracted on the way by three women lamenting his death. Gawain meets several other figures throughout the text and never reveals his name to them, but all those who mistakenly mourn Gawain laud his skill and virtue as a knight. For Gawain, however, "courtesy requires modesty" (127). He must not boast of his own greatness; he prefers, King suggests, to demonstrate his own ability (127). A true chivalric warrior, Gawain will only accept praise on his own merit, not even on his own well-earned reputation. Once again, Gawain's humble character is underscored, as is his martial prowess, highlighting two integral features of chivalry in the mid-to-late medieval period.

Another facet of Gawain's knighthood is his physical strength and skill in fighting. In Malory's *Morte* and other works such as the French *Morte Artu*, Gawain's strength waxes and wanes according to the position of the sun, and only a small handful

of knights can defeat him in this state. According to Malory, "fro hit was nyne of the clok, weexed ever strenger and strenger, for by than hit cam to the howre of noone he had three tymes his myght encresed" (Malory 98). This aspect of Gawain's physicality comes from an older version of the character, the Welsh figure Gwalchmei (Bromwich 95) who himself is associated with an ancient Celtic sun deity (Whiting 50). In the chivalric, Christianized stories of King Arthur and his court, Gawain's waxing and waning strength is no longer associated with pagan gods but still has a symbolic significance. Gawain's power corresponds with the light of day, a force commonly associated with God and with goodness. Of course, Gawain is not always a chivalrous figure in *Morte D'Arthur,* and in Malory's work his weakening with the fall of night may speak to the darker, more flawed attributes of his character. In earlier romances, on the other hand, his courtesy is highlighted alongside his strength and martial abilities, and perhaps his sunlight-driven power is representative of his knightly character in these tales. Gawain is a shining symbol of the model knight in these stories, and therefore, his ability on the battlefield corresponds with the height of the sun.

The two primary sources on which this thesis will focus represent a Gawain who is chivalrous, but never perfectly so. In both works, the unexpected actions of the otherwise model knights highlight not only their own complexity as characters, but systemic flaws in the chivalric system itself. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain's actions in combat with the Green Knight are morally upstanding and almost perfectly in line with chivalric dictates. He is not excessive in his violence, does exactly as the Green Knight instructs him when cutting off his head, and only shies away from complete honesty when preserving his own life. Yet, he participates in and is arguably

compelled to privilege a system built on violence over the Christian virtues which he claims to follow, one which the Green Knight encourages him to evaluate more critically. In *Morte D'Arthur,* Gawain is chivalrous in his defense of ladies and his king, yet often forgets both Christian and knightly virtues and becomes excessively violent in instances of grief and anger. Gawain in *Morte D'Arthur,* as will be explored in Chapter Four, is unable to deal with grief and the anger which follows in a manner that is not destructive due to his refusal to take the "proper" Christian path of penance, forgiveness, and healing through prayer.

A broad survey of medieval literature before Gawain's portrayals in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Morte D'Arthur* upholds Gawain as a perfect example of the chivalric ideal. Throughout the Middle Ages, chivalry's definition and specifications evolved, but Gawain's depictions across the centuries evolved along with it. He is a strong and skillful warrior, a defender of ladies, and a brave and noble individual—no matter the specific traits valued at the time, Gawain, in these medieval romances, embodies each one. He acts, almost always, in exactly the manner that a good knight should, whether these portrayals of knighthood are accurate or not. In later works, such as *Sir Gawain* and *Morte,* his character is instead used to evaluate the problems inherent to chivalry and the contradictions between the chivalric ethos and Christianity.

CHAPTER 4

SIR GAWAIN, GRIEF, AND PENANCE IN MALORY

Sir Gawain, as portrayed in *Le Morte D'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory, is a

literary conundrum. He is neither pure like his brother Gareth, nor cruel and violent like

his brothers Agravain and Mordred. Rather, in Sir Gawain we are given an imperfect

knight, one who tries but ultimately falls short of the expectations set by Arthur's court.

Notably, like Lancelot, he is denied the chance to see the Holy Grail on account of his

often violent and dishonest ways (Malory 543). Gawain is not among Arthur's noblest

warriors, yet he is nonetheless difficult to classify in a narrative of otherwise "good" and

"bad" knights. While Malory's knights of the Round Table are all flawed in some way,

one of Gawain's most significant and problematic imperfections is his lack of emotional

control, particularly when it comes to loss and grief. After all, it is Gawain's quest for

vengeance against Sir Lancelot for the accidental death of his brother Sir Gareth that

drives the kingdom into a civil war which ends in both Gawain's own death and Arthur's.

The mishandling of grief is a common factor behind many of Gawain's knightly

mistakes. From early in *Morte D'Arthur* to the final book, heartbreak over personal losses

is what propels him, time and time again, to act against the principles of Christian

society. More specifically, *Morte* represents Gawain as being driven by grief to seek

revenge and refuse mercy to his enemies; he fails to take the proper Christian channels,

according to the society depicted by Malory, to deal with his emotional distress.

Gawain's spiritual failure in this area suggests that while chivalry and Christianity share

common principles such as the virtue of mercy, chivalry could arguably be used to justify

violent revenge rather than forgiveness and reconciliation, in a method of satisfying emotions like sorrow and anger that directly contradicts Christian teachings.

Research and Scholarship

Recent scholarship on Malory's Sir Gawain reviews the *Morte* author's various portrayals of emotion, revenge, and kinship. In her 2015 article "Tears and Lies: Emotions and the Ideals of Malory's Arthurian World," Raluca L. Radulescu explores the conflicts between emotionality and chivalry, including Gawain's own contribution to the destruction of Arthur's kingdom through his refusal to reconcile with Lancelot. Andrew Lynch's 2019 article "Emotion and Malory" analyzes the way emotions are represented and cause conflict in *Morte D'Arthur.* Lynch gives a thorough analysis of the Gawain-Lancelot conflict and the damage it causes, focusing on the emotions that Lancelot experiences throughout the war. His 2015 article "'What cheer?' Emotion and Action in the Arthurian World" demonstrates how, for every character in *Morte,* emotion facilitates action. Characters are distinguished by the specific actions they take in response to the emotions they experience.

Other scholars focus more specifically on the feud between Gawain and Lancelot. Robert L. Kelly, in his 1994 article "Penitence as a Remedy for War in Malory's "Tale of the Death of Arthur,"" evaluates Lancelot's generous offer to establish chantries across England for the souls of Gareth and Gaheris. Kelly's analysis details how Lancelot essentially offers to bankrupt himself to end the war between himself and Arthur/Gawain in the final book of *Morte,* and examininng the consequences, both physical and spiritual, of Gawain's refusal. In her more recent article ""The Vengeaunce of My Brethirne":

Blood Ties in *Morte Darthur"* (2011), Kate McClune observes Gawain and his Scottish Orkney brothers' shared penchant for revenge and connects their tendency to the Scottish notion of blood ties and kinship violence. McClune's article offers a different interpretation as to Gawain's vindictive character, suggesting that he and his brothers share a belief in the importance of kinship above all else. Thus, in McClune's view, the Orkney brothers' actions are driven by a loyalty to family rather than Arthur specifically and/or the chivalric code. Despite the varied perspectives offered by the above scholars and their works, their collective focuses on emotion and vengeance in relation to Gawain offer valuable insight to this chapter's argument, which ultimately concludes that the violent mishandling of grief is the basis of many of the complexities or inconsistencies in Gawain's character.

Chivalry and Grief in Malory

A crucial aspect to Malory's characterization of Gawain is his failures in chivalry, while in previous poems such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* he adheres to the chivalric code almost perfectly. To explore this point further, it is necessary to review the code of chivalry as defined by Malory. Arthur's tenets of knighthood, drawn up at the Oath at Pentecost, are:

> ... never to do outrageousity nor murder, and always to flee treason; also, by no mean to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy, upon pain of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of King Arthur for evermore; and always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen succor upon pain of death. Also, that no

man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no law, ne for no world's goods.

(77)

Here, Arthur clearly lays out the primary duties of his knights. Actions that are considered explicitly unchivalrous include murder and treason, refusal to grant mercy, and ignoring the plights of ladies. The code of chivalry as presented in *Morte* specifically dictates a knight's behavior in battle, his relationship to noblewomen, and his relationship to his lord. Chivalry was historically a system of warfare for armed horsemen, and was, more than anything, composed of the rules of combat and fealty to one's king or liege lord. This aligns with Malory's Oath, with the understanding that the definition is quite simplified (Keen 16).

Gawain's departure from the chivalric ethos is a complex issue, and the variety of scholarship on the subject offers various potential explanations. While Gawain sometimes acts in unethical ways driven by lust or impulse, not all his questionable actions are unchivalrous. His specific mistake in chivalry, occurring multiple times within the text, is in his refusal, when his opponent has caused him heartache, to grant mercy in battle, something which a knight must always give according to the oath quoted above (Malory 77). Malory scholars such as McClune and Radulescu have speculated on Gawain's often merciless nature, offering different ideas to explain or justify his unchivalrous or otherwise immoral acts.

This chapter focuses on Gawain's inability to handle grief in a way that is not violent and destructive. To contextualize this analysis, it is important to revisit Chapter One's exploration of grief in late medieval thought. Gerald of Wales, a historian, theologian, and royal clerk to King Henry II during the late twelfth century, wrote

extensively on the human experience of grief from a clergyman's perspective. He likened anguish over personal loss to a serious wound whose "scar may never finish forming because the damage is so great" (Winkler 164). Even as a Christian who strongly stressed that emotional comfort was to be found in faith, Gerald still held that grief could not be fully healed in this life.

Gerald of Wales was not the only medieval author to hold this belief on loss and faith. The Gawain poet's fourteenth century poem *Pearl,* which depicts the heartbreak of a speaker known as "the dreamer" over the loss of his young daughter, comes to a similar conclusion. Cecilia A. Hatt, in her discussion of *Pearl,* asserts that the poem "tells us that there is no emotional consolation to be had for the fact of death" (43). Indeed, the dreamer, much like Gawain after the death of Gareth, never stops mourning the death of his "pearl." Rather, though the poem itself is quite religious, and the dreamer eventually takes comfort in the notion of his daughter's salvation, the poem's ending still depicts the dreamer's anguish. Deeply Christian writers during the medieval period acknowledged that grief is not something which is miraculously cured by having faith. It seems that Christian faith and ritual for these authors exists instead as a less destructive outlet for grappling with feelings of grief and loss.

Malory, too, was not one to shy away from exploring grief and loss in his writing; his *Morte D'Arthur* is vivid in its portrayal of emotions in various characters. Malory's depictions of grief and mourning begin early in the text, starting with the first book of *Morte,* "How Uther Pendragon Gate Kyng Arthur." The author introduces the expression of private grief first: Igraine, the mother of Arthur, discovers that her husband has been killed and she has lain with someone else instead. Before learning that the man whose

child she carries is in fact the disguised King Uther, Igraine "merveilled who that myghte be that laye wythe her in lykenes of her lord. So she mourned pryvely and held hir pees" (Malory 5). That Malory chose first to display private grief before depicting more public expressions of sorrow and loss is significant. Though public weeping and wailing is typically the primary indicator of grief in *Morte,* Malory often first sets up a private space in which a character's experience of sorrow or "grete dole" (44) can be his or her own.

Public grief plays an equally important role in Malory's narrative. Weeping among the court or the masses is used to demonstrate how well-loved a character is or was in their community. When Guinevere is sentenced to be burnt at the stake for her affair with Sir Lancelot, Malory writes that "there was wepyng and waylynge and wryngyng of hondis of many lordys and ladyes" (656). The communal display of sorrow for Guinevere when she has yet to die illustrates her beloved status as Arthur's queen. Similarly, when Gareth is killed, it is not only Gawain who mourns. Arthur weeps and falls into a faint when Gawain informs him of the news (658), and Lancelot struggles with the guilt and pain of having accidentally slain the young man who "loved me aboven all other knyghtes" (661), as he recalls to Gawain. The death of Sir Gareth is an emotional experience for all three men, though they are differentiated in how they respond to the tragedy.

In Malory's narrative, emotion facilitates and justifies unexpected actions. Responses to grief include a wide gamut of actions from weeping and fainting to prayer to anger/violence to illness and even suicide. Elaine of Astolat famously dies of sorrow due to her unrequited love of Sir Lancelot (616); when Gawain's young ward Chastelayne, is killed in battle, Gawain first "wepte wyth all his herte and inwardly he

brente for sorow" (146). He later finds the knight responsible for the youth's death and exacts swift revenge upon him, reacting to grief, as he often does, with anger and violence. While Elaine responds to sorrow by taking her death into her own hands, Gawain responds to his own mourning with vengeance. Though the two characters handle their grief quite differently, both respond by taking extreme action.

When it comes to the sorrow caused by the death of Sir Gareth, resulting actions ultimately lead to the cataclysmic final battle which results in Arthur's death. Andrew Lynch observes in his article "Emotion in Malory" that in the context of Sir Gareth's accidental death, "Gawain's brotherly 'bloode' and Lancelot's 'jantylnesse and curtesy' have the same informative functions (1. 295), through the mystical cognition of noble kinship or affinity that sets up an emotion-action cycle. How you feel in such cases makes you act in a way that reflects and shows who you are" (54). Indeed, both knights' response to Gareth's death is indicative of their characters: Lancelot offers penance for his actions (Malory 668), and Gawain falls into a rage that demands vengeance for his slain brother. While both Lancelot and Gawain suffer emotionally from Gareth's death, Lancelot goes about his own grief and guilt in the sanctioned Christian way, whereas Gawain processes his sorrow through anger and violence.

Anger and Violence: Gawain's Response to Grief

An early episode that may hint at the later destruction which results from Gawain's mishandling of his own emotions occurs during "The Weddyng of Kyng Arthur." Gawain and his brother Sir Gaheris ride into the forest in search of a rare white hart. Gawain is challenged by Sir Blamore, the knight charged with protecting the hart.

Blamore kills Gawain's hunting hounds, and the two knights engage in combat. Just as Gawain is about to kill him, Blamore's lady comes out of hiding and leaps in front of him. Gawain is unable to stop the motion of his sword in time and accidentally beheads the lady. While the lady's death is a sobering incident, Gawain's immediate reaction to the slaying of his hounds is an arguably more pivotal moment in establishing Gawain's character, particularly his tendency to seek revenge.

The slaying of Blamore's lady is, at the very least, accidental. Where Gawain is problematic in his *intended* actions is when Sir Blamore asks for mercy and Gawain refuses, insisting, "Thou shalt dey… for sleynge of my howndis!" (Malory 68). Though Blamore's killing of Gawain's hounds may seem a trivial thing to execute someone for, we should perhaps consider that dogs have for centuries more than simple hunting tools. Deep affection for pets is no modern phenomenon. Pet canines were so highly valued in the thirteenth century that the scholar Albertus Magnus wrote an entire book on how to care for different dog breeds, from puppyhood to old age (Walker-Meikle 21-43) and, according to *Medieval Pets,* dogs were highly regarded in the medieval period for their loyal nature (Walker-Meikle 8).

Given mankind's deep fondness for dogs, including during the Middle Ages, it is believable that Gawain could be grieved and traumatized at the sight of his pets slain before his eyes. When confronting Blamore, he demands, "Why have ye slayne my howndys? I wolde that ye had wrokyn youre angir uppon me rather than uppon a dome beste" (68). Gawain's intense reaction to Blamore's killing of his dogs suggests not only anger, but that he was attached to his pets and is deeply saddened at their deaths.

In the incident of the slaying of Gawain's hounds, the pattern of his grief inspiring him to anger, vengeance, and an unchivalrous refusal to grant mercy is established early on in the text. Of course, the killing of his dogs is the least of the losses Gawain experiences, but it is a loss, nonetheless. B.J. Whiting notes that Gawain's distressed response to the incident is "expressed but not excessive" (56); although he is remorseful, Gawain still sends the wounded Blamore to Camelot to let Arthur know that Gawain has succeeded in killing the white hart, thus protecting his own reputation. Gawain carries the beheaded lady back to Camelot as punishment, where he reports the tragedy to Arthur and Guinevere. There he is made to swear an oath to never kill ladies or those—such as Blamore—who beg for mercy (Malory 70).

One particular phrase in Malory's depiction of Gawain's homocidal reaction merits close analysis, as it is key to understanding Gawain's reaction to the death of the lady. Malory relays that after killing Blamore's lady, Gawain initially "was sore astoned of the deth of this fayre lady, that he wyst nat what he dud" (68). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "astoned" has been used since the fourteenth century, and the definition which seems most applicable in this case is: "4. To strike mute with amazement, overwhelm one's presence of mind; to confound, astound; to astonish" ("Astone"). In other words, Gawain is in shock. The use of the word "astoned" in this instance suggests Gawain is so stunned by his own actions that at first he does not even register what has happened. In modern terms, we might assert that his callous response occurs while he is still processing the fact that he has lost his beloved hounds. He barely has time to recover his presence of mind; only after the incident is over does he have the chance to reflect on his actions and fully comprehend what he has done. Though Blamore

and his lady have clearly suffered more than Gawain, Gawain is completely taken aback by the and perhaps for that reason does not react in a manner rational or proportionate to the tragedy which occurs. The incident demonstrates Gawain's tendency to be driven by grief in actions that lead to violence.

The Orkney Brothers, Blood Ties, and Revenge

Gawain is not unique among his brothers in his pattern of seeking revenge. He and his brother Gaheris act together in avenging the death of their father, King Lot of Orkney. Sir Pellynor, a member of the Round Table, kills Lot in battle, and the young Gawain swears that he will avenge his father. Thus, when Pellynor comes to Camelot and joins the Round Table, Gawain "revenged the deth of his fadir… and slew Kynge Pellynor hys owne hondis" (Malory 51), notably accompanied by Gaheris. Kate McClune's "'The Vengeaunce of Mine Brethirne'" mentions this episode in passing, claiming that it establishes a pattern of how the Orkney brothers—*sans* Gareth—have their own code of ethics which for them supersedes chivalry, one which "prioritizes familial bonds" (McClune 91) and demands blood for the killing of a kinsman or the dishonoring of one's family. This episode particularly reinforces "Gawayne's… stubborn adherence to their personal ethical code" (92), McClune argues. In McClune's point of view, Gawain's vengeful nature comes from the Orkney adherence to blood ties and is shared by Agravain, Gaheris, and Mordred.

Gawain is differentiated from his brothers, however, in the killing of Sir Lamorak. Lamorak, Pellynor's son, is generally considered a noble knight and among the best of the Round Table. However, after Lamorak becomes their widowed mother's lover,

Gawain joins his brothers to ambush Lamorak, who Mordred literally stabs in the back. On the surface, Gawain's participation in Lamorak's murder seems to contradict the thesis of this chapter that grief rather than prioritization of family ties is the driving factor in Gawain's tendency to respond to loss with violence. In the murder of Lamorak, however, he is notably contrasted with his brothers, particularly Gaheris. Upon finding the couple in bed together, Gaheris slays his mother but allows Lamorak to escape, for which Gawain scolds him. McClune suggests that for Gaheris, "to allow his mother to live would heap more shame upon the family" (98). Gaheris' sole motivation seems to be avoiding shame at all costs; in contrast, Gawain's regard for his mother, and his family in general, leaves him furious with his brother's actions; Malory states that Gawain is "wrothe that Sir Gaherys had slayne his modir" (Malory 369). It would seem that for Gawain, Lamorak should die for bringing shame to the family and disrespecting his father King Lot's memory by sleeping with his wife. Nonetheless, to kill not only a woman but one's own mother is an act that Gawain's personal morals cannot abide.

While the motivation for Lamorak's murder suggests that Gawain's participation does not stem from grief, it does set him apart as morally distinct from his brothers, contrasting with McClune's notion that Gawain's vindictive streak is merely a product of the Orkney family's obsession with blood ties. Although Lamorak's cuckolding of Gawain's mother seems to be Gawain's motivation for killing Lamorak, Gawain's reaction to Gaheris' killing of Morgawse clearly demonstrates that he will not go to the extent to which his more brutal brothers will in order to protect the honor of the family name. Gawain values family ties, perhaps more than he values his chivalric connections

and responsibilities, but he will not condone an act as distasteful as the slaying of his own mother merely to protect the Orkney clan from shame.

Later, in the "Death of Arthur" book, Gawain demonstrates that he values some family members above others, for he does not grieve for Agravain. Of Agravain's death he remarks, "oftyntymes I warned my brothir Sir Aggravayne, and I tolde hym of the perellis" (656), concluding that he is responsible for his own downfall. Gawain, after seeing the effect of Agravain's discord-sowing ways, distances himself from his cruel and violent brother, but cannot do the same with Gareth. He is not "the causar" (656) of his death like Agravain is. Gawain can accept Agravain's death, for after seeing this brother's true nature, Gawain is no longer bonded to him emotionally. Gawain's ambivalence toward Agravain's death supports the notion that his vengeance for Gareth's death is driven not merely by family ties, but by a strong sense of personal grief.

Gawain's Relationship with Gareth

Gawain's relationship with Gareth is complex and, admittedly, one-sided. Even so, it serves two important purposes. Along with establishing a basis for Gawain's anguish at Gareth's death, the brothers' dynamic sets Gareth apart as morally distinct from the rest of the Orkney clan and contrasts Gawain early on with a less destructive individual. While Gawain adores his younger brother, Gareth becomes cynical in his view of Gawain, hardly looking up to him as any sort of role model. Instead, observing Gawain's temper and penchant for violence, Gareth distances himself from his oldest brother, as well as from the others. Malory relays that "evir aftir Sir Gareth had aspyed Sir Gawaynes conducions, he wythdrewe hymself fro his brother Sir Gawaynes felyship;

for he was evir vengeable" (225). Due to his distrust of his brothers and his admiration of

Sir Lancelot in contrast, when Gareth becomes a member of Arthur's court, he requests

that Lancelot knight him (195), as he admires the latter and views him as a mentor, a

relationship that makes his death at Lancelot's hands even more tragic. Gareth's choice of

a sponsor for his knighthood might reasonably be his uncle and king, Arthur. His

selection of Lancelot for that role indicates that he admires the older knight for the

nobility of his character, something which Malory's readers may assume Gareth realizes

Gawain and his other brothers lack.

Gawain holds a significantly more positive view of his brother than Gareth, and

never acknowledges Gareth's assessment that he is no different from their brothers

Agravain and Mordred (225). Instead, Gawain recognizes Gareth's noble character

throughout Malory's text. In "The Book of Sir Gareth," Gareth arrives at Arthur's court

in disguise, and takes on multiple identities, such as Beaumains the kitchen boy.

Sometime after his arrival, when Gareth is disguised as a nameless knight whom Gawain

does not recognize, the two brothers engage in battle. They are interrupted by Lady

Lyonet's declaration that Gawain is fighting with his own brother. Malory writes that "…

whan he herde hir sey so, [Gawain] threwe away his shylde and his swerde, and ran to Sir

Gareth and toke him in his armys, and sytthen kneled downe and asked hym mercy"

(222). When Gareth, in turn, recognizes his brother, he mirrors Gawain's actions, and the

two "brace eythir othir in there armys, and wepte a grete whyle or they myght speke"

(223). This emotive display shows deep affection between them both, but Gawain is the

more expressive of the two, throwing his arms aside first and unashamed to kneel before

his younger brother. The brothers' weeping suggests a joyful reunion after many years apart, at a time when Gareth still holds an observably favorable view of his brother.

While Gareth later becomes disillusioned with Gawain's character, citing his violence and similarity to their other brothers (416), Gawain, seemingly blissfully ignorant of the way his brother views him, remains constant in his affection for Gareth. He defends Gareth when Arthur forces him to stand guard during Guinevere's near-execution (656). Gawain refuses to stand by, complicit, as a noble queen is publicly killed, but Gareth, he points out to Arthur, "wyll be lothe to be there present… but they"—Gaheris is included here as well—"ar yonge and full unable to say you nay" (656). Gawain displays full faith that his brother's character is too noble to participate willingly in the execution of Guinevere; he looks out for Gareth's interests. The brothers' relationship, though complex and imbalanced, lays a strong foundation for Gawain's intense grief at Gareth's death.

Gawain's Response to the Death of Gareth

As soon as Gawain hears of Lancelot's rescue of Guinevere from the stake, his first concern is for his younger brothers. "A, Jesu, save me my two brethirn" (658), he declares, and when he hears that twenty-four knights have been slain in the ensuing fight, immediately asks, "But where ar my brethirn?" (658). Right away, we see Gawain asking after the location and wellbeing of Gareth and Gaheris, foreshadowing the weight of his future sorrow at their deaths. The messenger who delivers the news about the twenty-four slain knights then informs Gawain that his brothers were among them. Since they are required by Arthur to stand by during Guinevere's would-be burning, Gareth and Gaheris

had not worn their family arms or crests so that they would not be identified with the event. Not recognizing the brother knights, Lancelot kills them in the fight to rescue Guinevere. Gareth's demise in particular is a heartbreakingly ironic twist of events, given the two knights' mentor-student relationship (657).

Gawain, naturally, is devastated. Malory highlights Gawain's grief through his intense, emotional response to the news:

> "Alas," seyde Sir Gawayne, "now ys my joy gone!" And than he felle downe and sowned, and longe he lay there as he had abeen dede. And whan he arose oute of hys swoughe he cryed oute sorrowfully and seyde, "Alas!" And forthwith he ran unto the Kynge, criyng and wepyng, and seyde, "A, myne uncle Kynge Arthur, my good brother Sir Gareth ys slayne, and so ys my brother Sir Gaherys, whych were two noble knights." Than the Kynge wepte and he bothe, and so they felle on sownynge. (658)

In the above depiction of private mourning, Gawain gives his clearest expression of grief. While a messenger comes to report the news of Gareth's death, the messenger disappears from the narrative after answering all of Gawain's questions (656) and it is unclear whether he leaves the room or not. Gawain does not seem to notice him, left to his own weeping and swooning. The messenger, who does not aid Gawain by offering words of comfort or trying to wake him from his faint, presumably leaves the knight to his mourning. Readers may assume that Gawain has been left alone in his grief for a time, free to wallow in his sorrow and express it to the fullest extent.

Gawain's grief transforms into anger, an emotion that is channeled into violence. Notably, the chivalric ethos supports this emotional transference into destructive action.

In Gawain's manipulation of Arthur to start the war, Malory demonstrates the importance of motivation versus justification, a crucial distinction for the purpose of this chapter. On the surface, Gawain's reasoning for wanting to slay Lancelot seems to agree with McClune's consensus that he is driven by an adherence to or justification of blood ties rather than by personal grief. He addresses Arthur as "(m)y kynge, my lorde, and myne uncle" (Malory 659), emphasizing his connection to the king through both his knightly service and his blood. Gawain appeals to both Arthur's familial and chivalric obligations as Gareth's king and uncle. McClune notes that Gawain's statement "manipulates Arthur's appreciation" of his kinship and filial duty to Gareth, thus driving him to action (103). In other words, Gawain reminds Arthur of his blood relation to Gareth, exploiting their familial connection and implying that Arthur, as Gareth's uncle and lord, must be responsible for avenging Gareth.

While Gawain does invoke blood ties, he nevertheless emphasizes the sentiments of lordship and kingship twice, while stating "myne uncle" (Malory 659) only once. He declares to Arthur that, "frome thys day forwarde I shall never fayle Sir Launcelot untyll that one of us have slayne that othir. And therefore I requyre you, my lorde and kynge, dress you unto the warres… I woll be revenged upon Sir Launcelot" (659). This phraseology suggests that Gawain's justification for seeking vengeance on Lancelot relies more heavily on chivalric principles to persuade Arthur to his side than on family ties, highlighting the way that chivalry could be used to offer validation for channeling grief into violence and destruction.

Whether Arthur's agreement to Gawain's demand that he and his knights pursue Lancelot in battle comes from his sense of kingly or familial duties, it cannot be assumed

that Arthur's feudal reasoning is in line with Gawain's personal motivations. When

Gawain is apart from Arthur, in spaces where he may freely express his grief, he never

cites the concept of blood ties and kinship violence as his reason for desiring revenge.

Instead, when he learns of Gareth's (and Gaheris') death, Gawain laments, "... for all the

world I would not that they were slain, and in especial my *good* brother, Sir Gareth"

(658, emphasis added). Gawain's private grief over Gareth specifically is evidence that

he does not, in fact, value family indiscriminately above all else, but specifically loves

and mourns for Gareth because of his kind and noble character—after all, he calls only

Gareth, not Gaheris, his "good" brother.

Gawain's mention of family ties as well as chivalric liege-lord obligations

provides King Arthur with a valid familial and political basis for launching a civil war

against Lancelot, his most beloved knight. Gawain's personal reasons for vengeance are

personal indeed, based in raw pain and anger, but to gain the needed support of his king,

he must offer a political rationalization for wishing to kill Lancelot. Gawain's outward

reasoning seems in line with the values of family honor and blood feuds, as well as

chivalric obligations, but his motivation for revenge is the loss of Gareth.

Several scholars have taken notice of the role that emotion, in general, plays in

Gawain's desire to avenge Gareth. Raluca L. Radulescu, in "Tears and Lies," explores

the interaction between emotionality and chivalry in a broader sense as it pertains to

Morte D'Arthur. Though she primarily focuses on the emotions both experienced and

elicited by Lancelot during the final book, she also analyzes Gawain and his quest for

vengeance, writing, "... the excessive emotions that guide Gawain's response to Lancelot

in this scene are to be blamed for what follows" (Radulescu 110). Radulescu recognizes

Gawain's emotionality as responsible for his actions which doom the Round Table, but never specifies the emotion by naming grief. Additionally, since her focus is on the final book of *Morte,* her analysis does not note the pattern of anguish behind Gawain's past habit of abandoning of chivalric virtues in the heat of emotions. Nonetheless, this aspect of his character is apparent early in *Morte D'arthur*, in the episode with Sir Blamore and the slaying of Gawain's hounds, in which Gawain's grief-driven violence foreshadows his later fatal quest of vengeance against Lancelot.

Similarly, although Andrew Lynch never names grief specifically in his analysis, he suggests that emotions in Malory lead to societal clashes and failings of chivalry. He posits that "the *Morte's* emotions… prove to be incompatible and excessive forces" (Lynch 177). In his commentary, Lynch turns his attentions not to Gawain but to Lancelot, focusing on the latter's sorrow at having to do battle against his liege lord, Arthur. Lynch's article, while stressing the importance of emotions as contrasting forces driving multiple characters to opposing actions (i.e. Lancelot and Gawain), ignores almost entirely the specific emotions that drive so many of Gawain's less chivalrous actions. Although both Radulescu and Lynch recognize the significance of Malory's depiction of his characters' emotions, the scope of their focus results in their analyses narrowly missing grief as a root cause of Gawain's desire to kill Lancelot.

Unlike Radulescu and Lynch, C. David Benson disagrees with the notion that Gawain is an inconsistent and unchivalrous character. In his article "Gawain's Defence of Lancelot in Malory's 'Death of Arthur,'" he explores Gawain's initial defense of Lancelot's rescue of Guinevere and focuses on Gawain's change of heart after he learns that Gareth was killed in the fight which followed. He notes that "Gawain cries that both

his brothers were unarmed against Lancelot" (Benson 268), demonstrating that Gawain's first complaint is against unchivalrous behavior. Benson also examines Gawain's prior insistence that in rescuing Guinevere, Lancelot has "done but knyghtly," suggesting that Gawain also "must take vengeance in his own *worshyp* and to act knightly" (269). He argues for a Gawain who is consistent not only in character, but in his adherence to chivalric values, for in pursuing revenge for his unarmed and slain brother, he has acted according to what he believes to be his knightly duty in response to his brother's death. Therefore, Benson argues, Gawain brings about the fall of Arthur's house by acting on the virtues which built it.

Gawain's Rejection of the Christian Path

If we consider Benson's analysis correct, then the chivalric response to Gareth's death is directly opposed to the Christian response, which demands mercy and offers healing through prayer and spiritual community. It could be argued, of course, that Gawain does break his chivalric oath in his war with Lancelot by refusing to agree to Lancelot's offers for peace. Specifically, he does not grant Lancelot, a fellow knight, mercy by agreeing to stop the war, despite Lancelot begging for an end to the fighting. Whether Gawain's behavior can be considered a lapse in chivalry in this instance, however, is secondary to his arguably more serious fault here: Gawain's refusal to accept Lancelot's offer highlights a broader incapacity to deal with his grief through the appropriate, Church-sanctioned channels. Lancelot, in his attempt to end the war between himself and Arthur/Gawain, details a penance he will undertake in Gareth's name that

will, according to Robert L. Kelly, quite literally render him penniless if Gawain would just grant him mercy and end the civil war (125). Specifically, Lancelot declares,

> I shall firste begin at Sandwyche, and there I shall go in my shearte, bare-foote, and at every ten myles ende I shall founde and gar make an house of relygion, of what order that ye woll assygne me, with an hole covente, to syng and reade day and nyght in especiall for Sir Gareth sake and Sir Gaherys (Malory 668).

Lancelot's offer here is not only one of great financial generosity, but more importantly one of significant spiritual weight. Kelly maintains that Lancelot's offer would win "intercessory merit in remission of the sins of Gareth and Gaherys, who are presumed to be in purgatory" (116). In other words, Lancelot's establishing of religious rites for Gareth's (and Gaheris') soul would literally expedite the late knight's trip to Paradise. Michelle M. Sauer, in her 2017 article "In aniversaries of ower leoveste freond seggeth alle nihene': Anchorites, Chantries and Purgatorial Patronage in Medieval England," explains the significance of chantries and purgatory. She writes that "medieval people were generally taught that purgatory was a period in which the soul passed from death to salvation, and a place where sins were expunged by every kind of physical torment before final redemption" (101-102). Chantries, Sauer goes on to say, offered "strategies to escape purgatory, using spiritual tactics to defeat time and death through perpetual intercession" (102).

Not only does Lancelot's offer aim to end the war between himself and Arthur—as well as atone for his sin of killing Gareth—but it also gives a chance for Gareth's salvation to be assured, and for Gawain to be assured of it as well. Unfortunately, Lancelot's offers of material and spiritual compensation do nothing to pacify Gawain, as

the latter's priority is the violent satisfaction of revenge in the physical world rather than assurances of spiritual satisfaction in Gareth's afterlife. Lancelot's proposed actions might secure Gareth's eternal salvation, but they will not bring him back to life on earth, in the present, and thus even the offer of the chantries cannot heal Gawain's sense of loss. Lancelot here speaks in terms of the spiritual, but Gawain appears to think in terms of the physical: in the physical realm, there is nothing that can be done to restore Gareth's bodily life to him. Therefore, Gawain refuses Lancelot's terms, still determined to avenge his brother.

Gawain most clearly demonstrates his lack of concern with spirituality when he urges Arthur to disobey direct orders from the Pope himself. The Pope sends a bishop to demand that Lancelot return Guinevere to Arthur and that Arthur and his party end the civil war, threatening excommunication for those who do not follow through (664). Lancelot does as he is commanded, once again considering his own soul and what is right and Christian over his personal desires (666). Gawain, on the other hand, is aware of the spiritual consequences and chooses to ignore them, still focused only on revenge. He tells Lancelot, "[T]he Kynge may do as he wyll… but wyte thou well, Sir Launcelot, thou and I shall never be accorded whyle we lyve" (668). In committing himself to a path of ceaseless vengeance until he dies, Gawain rejects the Christian route to penance, forgiveness, and healing twice, demonstrating his priorities in dealing with his grief and anger.

Initially, even after learning that it was Lancelot who slew Gareth and Gaheris, Gawain's initial reactions had not been indicative of anger. No violent language or desire for bloodshed is expressed until after Gawain has cried and fainted until he presumably

has no tears left to shed. Only once he has completely broken down does he begin to speak of vengeance. Even so, Gawain ceases after this moment to weep or express sorrow in any other manner. Instead, he falls into rage, letting his emotions guide him down a path of vengeance.

While Gawain does not outwardly express grief during the war itself, nearly everybody else involved sheds tears. When Lancelot makes his way back to his castle Joyous Gard, Malory writes that "there was nother kynge, duke, erle, barowne, nor knyght, lady nor jantyllwoman, but all they wepte as people oute of mynde, *except Sir Gawayne"* (670, emphasis added). After Lancelot fails to convince Gawain to make amends, and "therewith the tearys felle on hys chekys" (670). Lancelot's openly displayed sorrow suggests that he is deeply affected by his feud with Gawain as well as his alienation from Arthur and his court. At the same moment in the text, grief is expressed even by seemingly out of place spectators—ladies, notably, would not have been present on the battlefield—yet Malory's depiction of a weeping court community highlights the emotional weight the failed reconciliation carries for them all. *Morte's* various depictions of weeping in the last book of *Morte* demonstrate that Gawain is not the only character who grieves*,* and vividly illustrate the cycle of grief to anger and violence which only leads to further sorrow and loss.

Gawain's "Old Wound" and Proper Christian Death

When Gawain is on his deathbed, he weeps again. Gawain eventually succumbs to a wound he receives from Lancelot in the war between them; before his death, he sends a letter to Lancelot which asks the other knight for forgiveness. After composing

the letter, "than [Gawain] wepte and Kynge Arthur both, and sowned" (682). Gawain, facing the end of his life, displays a different type of grief from his previous sorrow over Gareth's death. Now, rather than grieving his loss, Gawain mourns the effects of his violence and stubborn insistence on continuing the war—his "sins," in other words—thus exhibiting contrition. Malory writes that at the point of death, Gawain confesses his sins to a priest and receives his last rites (682). No longer able to pursue vengeance for his brother's death, Gawain recognizes the harmful effects of his actions and repents. At long last, he follows the "right" course in coping with his grief and his guilt and dies a proper Christian death.

In Gawain's letter to Lancelot, acknowledges the pain that he suffers after Gareth's death. In informing the other knight of his declining state, Gawain writes, "I was smytthen upon the olde wound that thou gaff me afore the cité of Benwyke, and thorowe that wounde I am com to my dethe-day… I was hurte to the dethe, whych wounde was fyrste gyffyn of thyn honde, Sir Launcelot" (682). Gawain's words here reflect the musings of Gerald of Wales, who compares grief to a wound which never fully heals and continues to cause pain throughout one's entire life (Winkler 164). Though Gawain directly references the physical injury Lancelot gave him in battle, he could be alluding to the emotional wound he received at Gareth's death, which, like the physical wound, was dealt by Lancelot.

Gawain, like Gerald of Wales and the dreamer in the Gawain poet's *Pearl* express, may still feel the loss of Gareth keenly. After all, his earlier focus on the loss of Gareth's physical presence echoes the words of *Pearl's* dreamer: "Nothing mattered to me more than being near her/ I wanted to join her over the water" *(Pearl* XX.97.1155-

56). This lament, notably, comes after the dream-vision in which the dreamer is reunited with the Pearl-Maiden. Similarly, Gawain has, at least ideally, obtained his spiritual comfort through confession and receiving of his last rites. Even so, this does not erase the loss he experiences. Still, Gawain is no longer angry and vengeful, but instead contrite, and at long last accepts the Christian path to healing, redemption, and reconciliation.

Morte D'Arthur's representation of Sir Gawain is as a knight who is neither nearly perfect like his brother Gareth, nor inherently violent or evil. Gawain, at times, demonstrates great integrity, such as in his refusal to take part in Guinevere's execution and his insistence that it is unfair to ask Gareth and Gaheris to do so because, as younger knights, they cannot refuse Arthur's command (656). Gawain is capable of great good, as we see when he distances himself from his villainous brothers Agravain and Mordred, who wish to expose Lancelot and Guinevere as lovers. Gawain strongly rebukes his brothers, recognizing that they aim to both destroy the lives of a good queen and knight and undermine Arthur's rule as King. He insists that they "meve no such maters no more afore me; for wyte you well, I woll nat be of youre counceyle" (Malory 646). In response, Agravaine declares, "Here ys I and my brothir Sir Mordred brake unto my brothir Sir Gawayne, Sir Gaherys, and to Sir Gareth" (647). The brothers part company into two groups: those who wish to cause trouble for Lancelot and Guinevere and those who do not. Notably, this scene places Gawain and Gareth on the same moral plane, at least when it comes to the issue of Lancelot and Guinevere, contrasting Gareth's notion that Gawain is no different from their other, more devious brothers. Instead, Gawain is in many ways an upstanding, honorable character.

Where Gawain differs from Lancelot is in his inability to move past personal loss and process his grief in a way that is not violent and harmful. Lancelot obeys the Pope's orders to return Guinevere to Arthur, despite his desire to keep her by his side. He repents for his accidental slaying of Gareth and Gaheris and retires to a life of religious service after the war and the deaths of Arthur and Guinevere (693). Lancelot fulfills not only his chivalric responsibilities, but his Christian duties as well, and at the end of his life gives priority to the latter, giving up knightly pursuits and other worldly passions.

In contrast to Lancelot's Christian response to his own shortcomings, Gawain fails to acknowledge the harmful effects of his anger and make a full confession until he is on his deathbed. Addressing Arthur in his final moments, Gawain attributes his own death to the sin of "wylfulnesse" (681) and acknowledges his fault in demanding that Arthur prioritize his feudal obligation to avenge Gareth's death over the Pope's prior command to reconcile with Lancelot (664). Malory's representation of Gawain's incapacity to respond to grief in a constructive way offers readers the depiction of a character who—when faced with devastating sorrow—defaults to anger, despite Christian expectations for reconciliation.

In his characterization of Gawain, Malory portrays a good knight who is nonetheless unable to process sorrow in a way that is productive, and who lives in a culture that allows and perhaps encourages him to handle the emotions surrounding loss in a violent and destructive manner. Just as Hatt notes in her analysis of the dreamer's grief in *Pearl,* Gawain's journey with bereavement in *Le Morte D'Arthur* suggests that there is "no emotional comfort" (43) for the loss of a loved one. Rather, individuals can take different routes in handling grief and learning to live with its presence. However,

Pearl was written in the fourteenth century and depicts only the effects of grief on an individual. *Morte,* meanwhile, was composed a century later with the context of the War of the Roses to draw from: the historical background of the civil war between the houses of York and Lancaster provided real-life examples of devastation on a socio-political level. Malory's text creates a case of individual grief and demonstrates the way that powerful but conflicting social institutions can transform the inherently personal, emotional experiences of human beings into large-scale conflicts which affect entire communities.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Sir Gawain is among the first of King Arthur's companions to feature heavily in British literature, appearing at least as early as William of Malmesbury's chronicle *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, published in roughly the year 1125 (Fulton 4). It is likely that Gawain's identity as Arthur's right-hand man prior to the introduction of Sir Lancelot may have aided his initial popularity, along with his familial relation to Arthur. Yet even after Lancelot superseded Gawain in fame, Gawain remained the figure used by medieval authors to explore the discrepancies between Christian and chivalric principles and the contradictory nature of chivalry itself. It is Gawain, in British chronicles, who helps Arthur conquer and defend his claims with the might of his sword. Gawain in medieval romance becomes the ladies' knight, the honorable and virtuous hero who never strays from the chivalric code. In earlier medieval Arthurian works (c. 1100-1300) which featured Gawain as a character, he became synonymous with chivalry and perfect knighthood as these concepts were defined during the height of medieval romance. Understandably, because Gawain's character is firmly identified with knighthood and chivalry by the high medieval period, he becomes the ideal candidate for authors of the 1300s and 1400s who wish to question knightly principles and the violence inherent to the chivalric system.

Gawain is the perfect representation, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* of the inconsistencies intrinsic to the chivalric code in the fourteenth century. His journey to the Green Chapel and interactions with the Green Knight highlight the stark contradictions between the violence that is dressed as "courtly play" (Martin 311) and Christian values of

peace, life, and mercy. Chivalry is represented in the Gawain Poet's work as a system which praises and depends upon violence, ignores the Christian commands to show mercy and value human life, and promotes the seeking of worldly acclaim rather than the favor of God. While some of the poem's readers, both in the fourteenth century and the modern day, may be able to ascertain these themes, Gawain, in his chivalric zeal, never seems to grasp the lesson which his encounter with the Green Knight aims to teach him, that valuing life is "the less to blame" (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* IV.2368).

It is unlikely that Sir Thomas Malory was ever aware of the Gawain Poet and his epic, but a full century later, he once again used the character of Gawain to analyze inconsistencies between chivalry and Christianity. Malory's background almost certainly contributed to his cynicism regarding the chivalric code: during the War of the Roses (1455-1487), in which the houses of York and Lancaster battled for the English throne, Malory was imprisoned after fighting for both sides at some point in the war. *Le Morte D'Arthur* was composed during his imprisonment and produced in 1470, a year before his death (Shepherd xxviii). During the final book of *Morte*, Malory breaks from the narrative to address his fellow Englishmen directly: "Lo, ye, all Englysshemen, se ye nat what a myschyff here was? For he that was the moste kynge and nobelyst knight of the worlde, and moste loved the felyshyp of noble knyghtes… and yet nat thes Englyshemen holde them contente wyth hym" (Malory 680). Having witnessed the destructive effects of civil war and knightly violence firsthand, Malory may have seized the war between Arthur and Lancelot in "The Deth of Arthur" to illustrate the physical, political, and emotional turmoil caused by these conflicts. The War of the Roses tore English chivalric communities apart

as Christian knights fought and slew one another on their own land, and Malory does not excuse or laud such behavior in his narrative.

Instead, Malory's narrative represents Gawain's dismissal of the Church-approved path to healing and his insistence upon revenge to demonstrate the way that knightly clashes such as the one Gawain sets into motion oppose Christian principles of mercy and reconciliation. Of course, Malory cites the "Freynshe booke" (645) as his source, and indeed the earlier French *Morte Artu* also depicts Gawain as driven by Gareth's death to seek revenge against Lancelot (McClune 89). Even so, Malory exclusively gives us a private look at Gawain's mourning for his brother and demonstrates the way grief, transformed into anger, can spur a human into violent action. Throughout the Middle Ages, Gawain had already served as a symbol of ideal knighthood. Malory, writing during what was arguably the beginning of the end for the chivalric period, depicts Gawain as a character that exposes the tragic contradictions between the feudal ethos and medieval Christianity, which together reflect the inconsistent nature of chivalry itself.

In contrast to many prior depictions of Gawain, Malory adds another important factor to his character. As is the case with Malory's most vivid characters, Gawain in *Morte* is an emotionally complex individual. His intense expression of grief at the news of a loved one's death and his rage against Lancelot may not differentiate him from other figures in the text, but the way in which he handles his emotions is significant: Gawain's emotion-response cycle as a method of characterization is integral to his role in and the denouement of Malory's text. In portraying Gawain's rejection of the Church-authorized, religious method of dealing with grief and anger in favor of his destructive pursuit of Lancelot, Malory underscores the devastation caused by conflicting socio-religious value systems

which may lead to wars and gestures at the need for alternative, more peaceful routes to take in settling similar conflicts.

Remarkably, the centuries-old narrative of Gawain's failure to handle his emotions in a constructive way in *Morte* still holds weight for modern readers. Though chivalric conflicts and a monolithic Roman Catholic society offering the only "right" way to approach grief may be things of the past, modern readers still witness constructive and destructive responses to grief and anger. Though many post-modern people still find comfort in religion, those who contend with strong, negative emotions in today's world may choose to speak with a therapist, while others may respond with despair, addiction, suicide ("Suicide Data and Statistics"), or violence. According to Boelen et al. (2016), those bereaved through the killing of a loved one are particularly likely to experience extreme anger and express a desire for revenge (177). Although Lancelot's killing of Gareth in *Morte D'Arthur* is accidental and therefore could not technically be considered homicide, Gawain as a result essentially suffers the same type of grief and responds in a violent way consistent with our current understanding of grief psychology. While Gawain's actions may be frowned upon by a modern reader, one may still sympathize with his incapability to peacefully deal with his emotions when considering the significant and violent loss he has experienced. The traumatic reality of the death of a loved one, including at the hands of another person, is one which still exists in the modern world.

Gawain's experience with loss, vengeance, and reconciliation in Malory is not the only aspect of his character that makes him attractive to a modern audience. His struggle with his own identity as a Christian knight and his inability to attain perfection in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* while perhaps not translating directly into today's world,

nonetheless may speak to the experiences of present-day readers who grapple with societal pressures which may contradict their personal standards and/or sense of self-preservation. That *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* remains widely read in literature classes today attests to its cultural relevance even centuries after its composition. Beyond providing a hero's journey and abundant symbolism for the analyses of burgeoning scholars, the poem offers a look into the knightly world which many still romanticize, ultimately suggesting that socially sanctioned violence ought to be questioned. In turn, those who read the epic in the modern day may begin to question the systems in place in their own lives.

Arthurian stories, and with them, Sir Gawain, have remained a beloved part of popular culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* depicts a Gawain similar to Malory's version: he is a well-meaning but hot-headed knight, and notably speaks with a Scottish accent. His characterization here reflects Kate McClune's research on medieval Scottish values of kinship violence and the idea that Malory referenced troublesome Scottish invaders during his own lifetime in his portrayal of the mercurial Orkney brothers (McClune 104). White's novel, originally published as a series of four, is relatively faithful to Malory's narrative, and inspired several films in the following decades. While not all films based on *The Once and Future King* depict Gawain, his depiction in the book itself is memorable and brings new life to Malory's representation of the character.

Gawain has also been a recurring figure in television and cinema, especially moving into the twenty-first century. The BBC's popular series *Merlin,* which ran from 2008-2012 for a total of five seasons, portrays a Gawain–spelled "Gwaine" in the show–

who is noble and brave but equally impetuous and a ladies' knight. Though not as given to violence as Malory's and White's versions of the character, *Merlin's* Gawain reflects the idea of an imperfect knight. Most recently, A24 Studios adapted *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* into a feature-length movie in 2021. The film strays far from the source material at many points, focusing more on feats of cinematography and Gawain's mental state throughout his journey to and from Lord Bercilak's castle than on medieval chivalry and Christianity. Nonetheless, Gawain's representation in *The Green Knight* as well as in *Merlin* and *The Once and Future King* speaks to his relevance as a compelling protagonist even in the modern day.

That Gawain has remained in the public eye along with names like Merlin and Lancelot suggests that his character still speaks to the sensibilities of a modern audience. Obviously, the Gawains of *Merlin* and *The Green Knight* hardly serve as vehicles to explore different methods of dealing with grief and anger, or to analyze the disparities between Christianity and the chivalric code. Even so, Gawain's characterization in *The Once and Future King* includes his grief and rage at the death of Gareth, and his violent pursuit of Lancelot that follows: White's depiction of Gawain is arguably among the most famous and influential in the modern era. Thus, it may still be the age-old conflicts Gawain embodies that maintain his relevance in the Arthurian canon to this day. His grappling with his own knightly identity speaks to the struggles of many modern individuals who may question their socially dictated sense of self in relation to forced social identities.

Ultimately, Sir Gawain is more than a chivalrous, devout, or violent literary figure. He stands out in the canon of Arthurian literature as emblematic of knighthood's

romanticized glory, insurmountable contradictions, and moral dilemmas. Moreover, Gawain exemplifies the side of knightly existence which involves a human being—thus, the aspects of chivalric life which are violent, uncomfortable, and emotionally distressing prompt serious social and moral/theological questions. To the extent that Gawain is represented as a human forced to live his life within a social context with moral contradictions, he exemplifies all that is problematic and contradictory within the chivalric system, and the ways in which that system conflicted with the Christian principles of its day.

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