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CHIVALRY AS SIN IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Ruth Hamilton

In early criticism of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* it was a commonplace that the poem was the most perfect English example of romance, celebrating and lovingly detailing chivalry—even as chivalry was nearly dead in real life and in works by other, more sophisticated writers, like Chaucer. Perhaps not until Gordon Shedd's 1967 article "Knight in Tarnished Armour"[1] was the possibility raised that the poet's view of chivalry wasn't straightforward, wasn't simple. Yet Shedd's suggestion has largely been ignored. What I'd like to suggest is that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* contains a more wide-ranging, more serious criticism of chivalry than has heretofore been noticed. The poet consistently, though subtly, points out the shortcomings and the pitfalls of chivalric life. Chivalry's limitations are evidenced both in the person of Gawain and in the society as a whole, represented by Arthur's court and Bercilak's castle.

Gawain has made the mistake of confusing chivalry with religion, of treating chivalry and religion as one and the same. In other words, he idolizes chivalry. For the *Gawain*-poet, however, they are not the same, and the chivalric code is not enough by itself to live by. In addition, Gawain and everyone else in the poem confuse form with substance and trust the outward appearance of things to provide reality. These two confusions lead Gawain to his downfall. Furthermore, these confusions in the world of the poem only mirror the confused, degenerate state of fourteenth-century chivalry in the outside world.

The confusion of Christianity with chivalry in the Middle Ages is understandable. After all, chivalry is the offspring of Christianity and feudalism. The first orders of knights were monastic ones, who took vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity. The first duties the knights undertook, the Crusades, were for the Church. Virtues of a knight, like mercy, meekness, and pity, were Christian virtues, too. But Christianity and chivalry were not synonymous. A major reason for their difference was, of course, the new religion of love, which became an integral aspect of chivalry—but one at odds with chivalry's monastic, Christian origin. Love was part of chivalry, and chivalry was part of the Church, but the religion of love was definitely not the religion of the Church. The attempt to equate the two was made, however, as Raymond Kilgour notes in *The Decline of Chivalry:* "The love of God and the love of ladies were enjoined as a single duty. The knight who was faithful to his mistress was deemed sure of salvation in the theology of castles though not of cloisters."[2]

The grafting of romantic love onto chivalry is thought by some to mark the beginning of chivalry's end. Certainly love brought about a split between chivalry and the Church. Though they still shared many of the same ideals, the gap between the ideals chivalry professed and the reality of the behavior of its knights widened. In the fourteenth century, criticism of chivalry by both lay and clerical writers abounds, continuing and building in volume throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Interestingly enough, some of this criticism seems applicable to sections

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of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.*

The major criticism of the knights is that they don't live up to the ideals they profess to believe in, a criticism that is at least implicitly made of Arthur's knights, as we shall see. But lesser, though still telling, critiques are heard. The knights are accused of going "to war dressed for a wedding."[3] John of Salisbury writes: "too many think military glory consists in elegant dress" and goes on to decry the gilding of shields and armor.[4] The denunciations of the golded armor and flowered silk, symbols of the knights' love of luxury and display, shed a different light on Gawain's golden armor and his embroidered helmet encrusted with diamonds. Similarly, the knights' love of food and drink comes under scrutiny. One critic notes that some men think "that by bathing, by soft living, by pleasure-seeking, by constant concern over food, one becomes a brave knight . . . ."[5] The banquets and luxury at Arthur's court and Bercilak's castle come to mind. The aesthetics of being a knight, the outward form, have completely erased the substance, purpose and ideals of the fourteenth-century knight. And Bercilak thinks the same is true of the knights of Arthur's court, as he makes clear in his challenge.

Another parallel between the real world and the world of *Sir Gawain* can be seen in Kilgour's statement: "There was a passionate regard for formalities in the late Middle Ages. People would engage in ridiculous contests to see who could be the most polite. . . . The aesthetic value of formalities was strongly felt, even if their ethical value had disappeared. Chivalry had thus become a sort of game . . . ."[6] Kilgour's remark about contests to see who could be the most polite is relevant of the opening section (beginning at 1.343) of *Sir Gawain* where Gawain ever so courteously asks the king's permission to take up Bercilak's challenge and the queen's permission to leave her side, all the while protesting that he is the "*wakkest. . .and of wyt the feblest*" (1.354). And the notion of chivalry as game brings to mind the Beheading Game and the playful mood of the whole poem.

Beyond these resemblances, however, Kilgour's observation contains two ideas important for the poem: chivalry's concern with matters of form and appearance, and the lack of ethical substance behind chivalry's form. Because Gawain is so intent on the form of chivalry and because he fails to recognize the limitations of the chivalric code, he fails his test. He confuses—to return to my earlier formulation—chivalry with religion. One consequence of his confusion is Gawain's belief, as Shedd notes, that perfect adherence to the chivalric code will produce a perfect man. Chivalry, in other words, is salvation. From Gawain's misguided belief in this equation comes his rigid adherence to all the tenets of chivalry, particularly courtesy. His adherence to the tenets, the forms, causes him to forget more important, substantial Christian precepts.

That Gawain has confused chivalry with religion is clear in a number of places in the text. One important, unmistakable sign of his confusion is his personal emblem, the pentangle. Two of the points of the pentangle are Gawain's own five senses and the strength of his five fingers. Two more are the five joys of Mary and the five wounds of Christ. The fifth point is five virtues, including courtesy. Balanced in this way, all three aspects—Gawain, religion, and chivalry—are equivalent, all intertwined and interdependent, none more important than the other. Gawain has lost his sense of proportion, his perception of the proper hierarchy of values.

Gawain's confusion of religion and chivalry is again evident, significantly, on the

morning of his third temptation by Bercilak's wife. Of Gawain the poet says:

> He cared about his courtesy lest he act like a boor
> and even more about his plight if he should commit a sin
> And become a traitor to the man who owned that house.
> (11.1773–5)

The quotation reveals two things. The first is that Gawain's fear of being discourteous to the lady is only somewhat less than his fear of committing adultery with her. The second is the interesting way that such a sin is referred to: disloyalty to the lady's husband, his host. Gawain is so obsessed with chivalry that he thinks only in chivalric terms. He has lost sight of anything else—including principles of Christianity.

For Gawain is so intent on fulfilling his chivalric duties—keeping his word to the Green Knight, keeping his bargain with Bercilak, being courteous to the lady—and on fulfilling those duties by his own power that he forgets that he has other duties—to another Lord and another Lady (Mary)—and that they have power to aid him. In being so intent on saving himself, saving both his body and his soul, Gawain forgets the Biblical warning "He who seeks to save his life shall lose it," thus committing a sin. Instead of trusting to God for the salvation of his body in the meeting with the Green Knight (though he alludes to doing so in 11.2138–9), Gawain tries to save himself with the girdle. Even more seriously, Gawain has tried to achieve salvation on his own by being the perfect knight. But salvation is not in the realm of chivalry—as Gawain suddenly discovers. He can't achieve his own salvation—either bodily or spiritual. And the enormity of what he has attempted to do is revealed to him in the Green Knight's unveiling of his identity and his scheme. Gawain's sudden realization of his fault generates his bitter, heartfelt condemnation of himself. The gravity of his sin accounts for what seems to the Green Knight—and has seemed to many a reader—the excessive remorse of his confession.

When Gawain realizes that he cannot achieve perfection through chivalry, his immediate reaction is to dispense with courtesy, that chivalric value of which he is the paragon in this poem. For a moment he sees clearly how empty the forms of chivalry can be when they lack substance. Bercilak appeared to be, after all, the epitome of a courteous host, but Gawain can no longer stand such hollow courtesy. On no account will he return to Bercilak's castle; he refuses Bercilak's invitation and doesn't even worry about being courteous in doing so. His disgust with hollow courtesy, his awareness of the limitations of chivalry are no doubt also the cause of Gawain's sudden lapse into antifeminist tirade, in which he expresses sentiments completely foreign to a knight, though certainly not to many a Church father.

Still, Gawain's enlightenment is only partial. He has been trying to become perfect for so long that he cannot abandon the quest. Laying aside chivalry for the moment, he throws himself into the role of penitent, seeking to be perfectly humble. Even then he can't abandon his concern with form; he needs and wants the girdle as a constant outward token of his inner, substantial change. Yet in this need for a constant reminder, in his constant remorse, we sense that Gawain is still sinning. His quest for perfection hasn't ended—only taken a different route.

The route it has taken spurs the laughter but also the imitation of Arthur's court. Yet in their reactions we see just what Gawain has accomplished and what sets him apart from the others. Gawain has earned the right to wear the lady's lace; he undertook the trial, failed, but has come to at least a limited realization of the dangers

of trusting chivalry alone and of trusting appearance. The court, however, is only interested in the appearance, the form, the outer token. They adopt the outward badge without any of the inner change, without any recognition of the substance behind the form.

In this they are like the members of the Order of the Garter, founded in the fourteenth century, whose motto has been added in the manuscript to the end of the text of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The Order of the Garter was the first of the honorary, secular orders of knighthood. These orders, in contrast to the earlier ones, were, in the words of one historian, little more than "idle decorations," yet a decoration "more sought after than the honor of knighthood itself."[7] Being honorary orders, they were a way of achieving the outward form of knighthood without any of the substance.

The parallel with Arthur's court is clear. So Gawain may still be sinning at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—he is, after all, only a fallible man—but with the recognition of his sinfulness, however limited that recognition is, he is closer to redemption than the rest of the court with their continued reliance on the forms of chivalry.

The poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, then, far from being a romantic celebration of chivalry is actually a critique of it in both the literary realm and the outside world. The poet points out the danger of the forms of chivalry divorced from its substance and the danger of making chivalry a religion. Into what appears to be a traditional romance, then, the *Gawain* poet has inserted the substance of a homily, thus instructing as well as delighting his hearers. And his doing so shouldn't surprise us. Like Gawain himself, the readers of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* need to learn to look for reality beneath mere appearance.

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NOTES

[1] Gordon M. Shedd, "Knight in Tarnished Armor," *MLR* 62 (1967), 3–13.

[2] Raymond Lincoln Kilgour, *The Decline of Chivalry* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1937), p. xx.

[3] Richard Barber, *The Knight & Chivalry* (NY: Scribner's, 1970), p. 330.

[4] Mary Bateson, *Medieval England* (NY: Putnam's, 1904), pp. 166–7.

[5] Bateson, p. 173.

[6] Kilgour, p. 8.

[7] Kilgour, p. 33.

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