

QUESTIONING CHIVALRY IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH GAWAIN ROMANCES

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Abstract

SARAH LINDSAY: Questioning Chivalry in the Middle English Gawain Romances
(Under the direction of Edward Donald Kennedy)

My dissertation argues that the romance genre, and in particular the character of Gawain, allowed English authors and audiences of the late middle ages (1350-1500) to negotiate new chivalric ideologies in response to broad social changes. In the midst of two major wars and a rapidly growing and upwardly mobile merchant class, the role of the knight in England shifted from the battlefield to the court. I examine the ways in which five Middle English romances, all of which feature Gawain, respond to these cultural changes. These romances date from the mid-fourteenth through the end of the fifteenth centuries and range from literary to popular, providing a broad overview of the many ways in which romance approaches the question of the role of prowess in chivalry. My examination reveals that the romances have a conflicted response to the loss of martial violence as the defining characteristic of a knight: the chivalry exercised primarily in courtly rather than military situations becomes a useful tool in building social relationships, but it also threatens to emasculate the male nobility and destabilize traditional social structures. By contrasting new cultural practices of chivalry with old literary ideals, the Gawain romances provide an ideal medium through which English society can explore the implications of adopting new chivalric ideologies and ultimately reformulate conceptions of chivalry that better reflect the changing role of the knight in late medieval society.

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Introduction

At the beginning of Chaucer's *The Squire's Tale*, the Squire mentions Gawain "with his olde curteisye" as a standard to which the characters of his tale aspire.¹ Although Chaucer generally avoids Arthurian material, this casual reference indicates the reputation and renown of Gawain in England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. As Arthur's nephew, he has had a role in written Arthurian narratives since (at least) the tales of the *Mabinogion* and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*; but while he was quickly overshadowed in French romance by Lancelot, in English chronicle and romance he remained the best and, judging by the number of extant romances in which he features as a main character, the most popular of Arthur's knights through the sixteenth century². As Chaucer's allusion demonstrates, Gawain's key characteristic in English romance is his courtesy, his adherence to the codes of conduct encompassed by chivalry. Yet curiously, this chivalry embodied by Gawain is seldom the same from romance to romance. Instead, precisely because Gawain always represents chivalry in its broadest sense of the behavior proper to a knight, he becomes a character through whom the writers of English romance can explore different formulations of chivalry. Gawain thus becomes an anchoring figure in discussions of what chivalry is and should be in the shifting social realities of late fourteenth and fifteenth century England. In particular,

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), l. 95.

² For a discussion of Gawain's popularity in England, see Thomas Hahn, "Introduction," in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS, 1995), 1-7.

through Gawain authors and audiences of these romances explore the relationship between chivalry and violence as the real-world role of the knight began to shift away from the battlefield and the social role of chivalry began to slowly morph into the courtesy of the Renaissance courtier.

Two distinct attitudes towards chivalry emerge in the romances that use Gawain to negotiate new formulations of chivalry amid shifting social realities. The first is optimistic: it acknowledges the changing role and nature of chivalry as martial qualities such as prowess and courage become less important, seeing in courteous behaviors apart from the battlefield, and even in legal processes, the ability to form and maintain beneficial social relationships. In romances of this nature, Gawain's words and non-violent actions have the potential to benefit his society. Yet the second trend, often present in the same romance as the first, questions the extent of the social good brought about by non-violent chivalry. This response fears that chivalry divorced from violence is emasculating and ultimately harmful to social structures and order, threatening specifically to make men like women. Without the prowess, the traditional chivalric feats of strength and courage, displayed on the battlefield, tournament or the hunt, are chivalrous men truly men? The romances ultimately have no answer to this question, and certainly prowess and bravery in combat remained central chivalric virtues throughout the period. But the way in which English romances of the late fourteenth and fifteenth century, especially romances featuring Gawain, question the relationship between chivalry and violence is significant. It points to a broad interest in defining chivalry in an age of shifting social values and also to an awareness of the problematic nature of violence even if controlled by the codes of chivalry and balanced by an emphasis on the

courtesy appropriate to the court or the non-militarized gentry.

Historians of chivalry in the Middle Ages have repeatedly shown that violence resides at the heart of chivalry. Richard Kaeuper's recent *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* thoroughly explores the often complex role of chivalry in regulating and legitimizing violence in medieval Europe. He explains the relationship between violence and chivalry thus: "Knights worshipped at the shrine of the demi-god prowess and practised violence as an esteemed and defining entitlement. The primary constituent in chivalry was prowess which wins honour, weapons in hand."³ Kaeuper certainly examines the ways in which medieval writers sought to contain and channel violence; he notes that "most medieval writing about chivalry will show a tendency to social criticism or even a reformist cast."⁴ Yet in his view, violence remains the defining, central element of chivalry. Other historians accept and bolster this view; for example, Stephen Jaeger defines the civilizing process, which he identifies as beginning in tenth-century Germany, as one that subjugates the desires of the warrior to the strategy of the statesman. He writes, "Civilized man at his best emerges when the warrior tendency in his soul, alive, energetic, and able when necessary to break through the brittle shell of civility that contains it, willingly subjects itself to the ethos of the statesman."⁵ Although unlike Kaeuper he does not focus on the control of violence, Jaeger's conception of courtliness similarly implies that part of its function is to guide the expression of violence. Ruth

³ Richard Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 126.

⁴ Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence*, 35.

⁵ C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals, 939-1210* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 13.

Karras in her study of medieval masculinity also accepts this equation of prowess and chivalry, arguing that medieval noblemen related to one another through chivalric violence. As she points out, “In the late Middle Ages, violence was the mode of masculine expression within knighthood.”⁶ Despite, or perhaps because of, the ubiquity of violence among the knightly class, the code of chivalry was not always successful in containing violence; as Maurice Keen notes, the glorification of prowess often achieved the opposite result: “Chivalry, with its idealization of the freelance fighting man, could not be a force effective in limiting the horrors of war: by prompting men to seek wars and praising those who did so, its tendency, for all its idealism and because of it, was rather to help to make those horrors endemic.”⁷ Chivalry thus legitimizes as much as it contains the practice of war. As these historians show, chivalry and violence are nearly inextricably related in the Middle Ages, whatever the success or failure of chivalric values to contain or civilize the violent behavior of knights on (and off) the battlefield.

Yet despite the central place of violence within medieval chivalry, guidelines for knights in combat form only part of the concerns of chivalry. Keen’s foundational *Chivalry* presents an overview of the many aspects of life influenced by chivalry, from love to Christian piety; as he examines the complex nature of the idea of chivalry, he identifies three primary aspects: “Chivalry . . . is a way of life in which we can discern these three essential facets, the military, the noble, and the religious.”⁸ While the military

⁶ Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 21.

⁷ Maurice Keen, “Chivalry, Nobility, and the Man-at-Arms,” in *War, Literature, and Politics in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. C.T. Allmand (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976), 45.

⁸ Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 17.

aspect was certainly important, and stressed in chivalric manuals such as Ramon Lull's incredibly popular *Book of the Order of Chivalry* and Geoffroi de Charny's *Book of Chivalry*, courtesy manuals containing guidelines for the noble aspect of chivalry also proliferated.⁹ One such manual is *Stans Puer ad Mensam*, attributed to John Lydgate; like other such manuals, this treatise focuses on topics like courteous forms of speech and correct table manners, the skills necessary for successful social relationships. Courtesy treatises often ignore warfare altogether; John Gillingham writes of one such manual, Daniel of Beccles' *Liber Urbani*, "It is an awkward text for those who think that the life of the secular elite was dominated by war since there are only a dozen lines on soldierly activity (less than 0.5 per cent of the total number). As a genre, indeed, courtesy books of all periods have little to say about war."¹⁰ These courtesy manuals existed side-by-side with manuals more focused on knightly behavior in combat; for example, William Caxton in the later fifteenth century published both an English translation of Lull's *Book of the Order of Chivalry* and *The Book of Curtesye*, which discusses social etiquette.¹¹ Both aspects of knightly conduct are clearly considered important. Yet in the fifteenth century, a shift begins to take place in English society towards valuing courtesy over prowess as military service becomes a less essential part of knighthood and as a growing group of wealthy, non-noble merchant and landed gentry families begin to imitate the

⁹ The only monograph-length general study of the role of these courtesy manuals in medieval English society to date is Diane Bornstein, *Mirrors of Courtesy* (Hamden, CT: Archon Press, 1975); Nicholas Orme extensively discusses the role of courtesy manuals in the education of the English aristocracy (*From Childhood to Chivalry* [London and New York: Methuen, 1984]), while J.W. Nicholls examines the Gawain-poet's use of courtesy manuals in his four works (*The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet* [Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1985]).

¹⁰ John Gillingham, "From *Civilitas* to Civility: Codes of Manners in Medieval and Early Modern England," *Transactions for the Royal Historical Society* 12 (2002): 267-89.

¹¹ On *The Book of Courtesy*, see Bornstein, *Mirrors of Courtesy*, 79-80.

manners of the nobility.

This is not to say that, during the fifteenth century, military service became unimportant or social mobility was common. The Hundred Years' War with France and later the civil Wars of the Roses gave members of the nobility nearly constant opportunities to participate in war from the later part of the fourteenth century until nearly the end of the fifteenth. And while some notable families such as the Pastons certainly did achieve upward social mobility as they moved from the merchant class to the landed gentry in the space of a few generations, some historians remain skeptical that this was common; after examining several cases that show potential upward mobility, Madder concludes that "for the vast majority of people social *immobility* remained the norm."¹² Yet simultaneously, young noblemen and the sons of knights were choosing to pursue non-military careers. Keen discusses the tendency of fifteenth-century noblemen to send their sons to study law;¹³ in *The Boke of Noblesse*, a work addressed to Edward IV, William Worcestre notes and laments the same tendency:

But now of late daies, the grettir pite is, many one that ben descendid of noble bloode and borne to armes, as knightis sonnies, esquiers, and of othir gentille bloode, set hem silfe to singuler practik, straunge faculteez frome that fet, as to lerne the practicum of law or custom of lande, or of civile matier, and so wastyn gretlie theire tyme in suche nedelese besinesse, as to occupie courtis halding, to kepe and bere out a proude countenance at sessions and shiris halding, also there to embrace and rule among youre pore and simple comyns of bestially continuance that lust to lyve in rest.¹⁴

This passage shows the tension in English society between the traditional military path of

¹² Philippa C. Madder, "Social Mobility," in *A Social History of England, 1200-1500*, eds. Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 133; emphasis in original.

¹³ Maurice Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2003), 264.

¹⁴ William Worcestre, *The Boke of Noblesse*, ed. John Gough Nichols (London: Roxburghe Club, 1860; rpt. New York: Burt Franklin, 1972), 77.

the knight and the new career options available for knights and nobles that required a different set of social values centered on the type of behavior appropriate to the court instead of the battlefield. And even if members of the merchant class did not routinely move into the nobility, domestic values of courteous speech, proper dress and appropriate table manners were more easily imitated than martial values such as prowess.

As is evident from the above discussion, two strands of chivalry existed and overlapped in medieval England (and indeed medieval Europe): I refer to them throughout as “martial,” that pertaining to the battlefield, and “courtly,” that appropriate for a household setting. I also occasionally refer to this second form of chivalry as “courtesy,” the term commonly applied to appropriate knightly behavior in court; however, I primarily use “courtly chivalry” to emphasize its continuity with martial chivalry. A third, religious, strand of chivalry was also present, evident in large-scale movements such as the Crusades, in the religious bent of romances about the Grail, in the quasi-sacramental nature of the knighting ceremony and in the personal piety expected of knights. However influential it may be, this strand of chivalry falls outside the scope of my dissertation; aside from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain’s piety is seldom a major concern in English romances.¹⁵ He instead more often stands at the intersection between martial and courtly chivalry. In order to better understand these sets of chivalric values, it will be instructive to look at two influential chivalric manuals and a short courtesy text. Ramon Lull’s thirteenth-century *Book of the Order of Chivalry* and Geoffroi de Charny’s fourteenth-century *Book of Chivalry* represent martial chivalry; the short *Stans Puer ad Mensam*, attributed to John Lydgate, similarly offers a representation

¹⁵ Even in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is difficult to discern whether Gawain’s piety is, or ought to be, more than that typical of a medieval knight.

of the court chivalry that ought to be learned by young noblemen.

Ramon Lull's *Book of the Order of Chivalry* was written in Catalan in the late thirteenth century; although Lull had by this point in his life experienced a religious conversion that led to a mission among Muslims in Spain, his martial experience as a young man takes precedence over overtly Christian concerns in this work. The *Order of Chivalry* became widely popular as its many translations and extant manuscripts attest; although Caxton's English translation was not published until 1485, French manuscripts circulated in England and the authors of romance would have been familiar with Lull's chivalric values, if not the text itself.¹⁶ As the manual opens, a squire meets an old hermit-knight in the woods, and the hermit proceeds to instruct the young man in the ideals of chivalry. Keen notes that "It is a rambling work, and in its wanderings says more than can be condensed into a short space"; Lull broadly covers many aspects of knighthood, and describes the ideal knight as one who possesses those qualities we most associate with chivalry — as Keen summarizes, "Loyalty and truth, hardiness, *largesse* and humility will be the principal qualities of character that we ought to expect in him [the knight]."¹⁷ Although Lull's knightly ideals are broad-ranging, it is important to note that the origin and purpose of the knight is firmly martial. Knights arose from the need to choose the best men to govern; as Caxton translates, one man was chosen out of every thousand who was "moost loyal most stronger and of most noble courage & better

¹⁶ See A.T.P. Byles' edition of Caxton's translation for a thorough discussion of the extant manuscripts and translations: *The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry*, trans. William Caxton, ed. A.T.P. Byles, EETS o.s. 168 (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), xi-xlii. Keen affirms that this work "became the classic account of knighthood" (Keen, *Chivalry*, 11).

¹⁷ Keen, *Chivalry*, 9, 10.

ensygned and manerd than al the other.”¹⁸ To such a man arms were given “such as ben most noble and most countable to batayll and defender the man fro dethe.”¹⁹ In Lull’s account, then, while noble manners are important, the duty of the knight has always involved military service in defense of those he rules.

Similarly, Geoffroi de Charny’s *Book of Chivalry* emphasizes the military role of the knight. Although this book was not nearly as influential as Lull’s, as the most recent editors and translators of his work acknowledge, it dates to mid-fourteenth century and the Hundred Years’ War, thus providing a context for the martial values of the period.²⁰ Charny’s ideal knight is one who seeks out war, rather than simply tournaments, to better display his prowess, but who is also a man of worth or honorable reputation and wisdom.²¹ As with Lull’s ideal chivalry, the best knight must display qualities aside from courage and prowess; yet Charny’s ideal knight is without doubt one who takes an active role in military engagements. In fact, the worth and wisdom that belong to the best knight are gained and displayed in battle; as Keen notes in his summary of this text, Charny’s knight is always striving to achieve more and thus become more honorable.²² Martial and courtly chivalry are not necessarily at odds for either Lull or Charny, as they are for the writer of *The Boke of Noblesse*, but for both authors military service is a, if not the, foundational aspect of chivalry.

¹⁸ Byles, ed., *The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry*, 15.

¹⁹ Byles, ed., *The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry*, 16.

²⁰ Richard W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy, ed. and trans., *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny: Text, Context, and Translation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 63-4.

²¹ Kaeuper and Kennedy, eds., *Book of Chivalry*, 155-67.

²² Keen, *Chivalry*, 12-15.

In contrast to the chivalric manuals of Lull and Charny, the short *Stans Puer ad Mensam* exemplifies the emphasis on courtesy. This poem is attributed to John Lydgate and thus dates between Charny's *Book of Chivalry* and Caxton's translation of *The Book of the Order of Chivalry*; it is one of many fifteenth-century manuals on the manners appropriate to the nobility.²³ This text has no mention of tournaments or war; it contains pieces of advice such as "Pike not þi nose" and "Pare clene þi nailis; þin hondis waische also / to-fore þi mete."²⁴ Aside from such practical advice, Lydgate also writes, "Reuerence þi felawis; bigynne with hem no strijf; / To þi power kepe pees al þi lijf. / Intrippe no man where so þat þou wende, / No man in his tale, til he haue maade an eende."²⁵ Keeping the peace and presenting oneself well through social graces are important goals of such behavior, in contrast to gaining honor through prowess. This is the other side of the martial chivalry described by Lull and Charny: the manners required of the upper class while in a domestic setting. These behaviors lack, perhaps, the glamour of prowess, yet they appear to have been equally important aspects of the education of the young knight or nobleman. Thus we see two types of conduct encompassed within the chivalric world: the military and the courtly, that based on prowess and that found in appropriate manners and modes of speech. Both are important for the English knight of the fourteenth and fifteenth century, and both are interrogated in the Middle English

²³ For a discussion of several of these manuals and their roles, see Bornstein, *Mirrors of Courtesy*, 63-84. *Stans Puer ad Mensam* also appears in the same manuscript, Rawlinson C.86, as *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*, indicating the overlap between audiences of popular romances and courtesy manuals. For a discussion of this manuscript, see Julia Boffey and Carol M. Meale, "Selecting the Text: Rawlinson C.86 and Some Other Books for London Readers," in *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts*, ed. Felicity Riddy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), 143-69.

²⁴ Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *Early English Meals and Manners*, EETS o.s. 32 (London: Kegan Paul, 1868), pp. 27, 29; ll. 12, 22-3.

²⁵ Furnivall, ed., *Early English Meals and Manners*, p. 31; ll. 67-70.

Gawain romances.

The conduct literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth century thus establishes two axes of chivalric behavior: that fitting for the battlefield, and that appropriate for the court or the household. While the conduct manuals separate these two areas, in reality they were deeply interrelated. For the militarized nobility, moving between the battlefield and the court was a fact of life, and knowing the conduct appropriate to each was vital. For the growing non-militarized gentry and merchant classes who were gaining the resources and the leisure to imitate the nobility, as well as those nobles who were increasingly engaged in non-martial pursuits, it was important to establish courtly chivalry as the equal of martial chivalry. The genre of romance, with its simultaneous reflection and shaping of its social context, provides an ideal medium for both of these groups to navigate between martial and courtly forms of chivalry. The romances I consider in this dissertation incorporate the values set forth in chivalric and conduct manuals, placing them in settings that allow the characters to work through questions of how these two aspects of chivalric ideals fit together. As the embodiment of the best of Arthurian chivalry, Gawain exhibits both ideal prowess on the battlefield and ideal behavior in the court; he thus can represent new formulations of chivalry that remain connected to traditional chivalric ideals.

This dissertation examines five works in which Gawain appears as either a prominent or the main character. In each of these works, Gawain's chivalry displays the complex relationship between the values appropriate to the battlefield, such as those described by Lull or Charny, and the social values of courteous speech, courtly social

interaction and even recourse to appropriate legal strategies rather than personal vengeance. These texts date from the mid-fourteenth century to the late fifteenth century; while they do not present a simplistic evolution of Gawain from military hero to courtly figure, the later romances more actively imagine alternate forms of chivalry, although they come to varying conclusions about the desirability and social role of non-violent chivalry. It is important to note that all of these English works present Gawain in a primarily favorable light; his French reputation as a seducer and even dishonorable knight was not a part of his English reputation until the stanzaic *Morte Arthur* (c. 1400) and Malory's *Morte Darthur* (1469-70), and even in these works Gawain is not as unchivalric as he can be in later French romances.²⁶ As Phillip C. Boardman notes in an article on Gawain's English reputation, "In the Middle English romances, Arthur is not the usual standard of courtesy. That role falls to Gawain, and it is in Gawain, I think, that we find the vital center of English Arthurian romance"; he continues, "The Gawain romances tend to be relatively short and they come into increasing prominence late in the period, so we can say that Gawain himself, while always centrally present in the Arthurian materials, gains stature as an individual English hero as the English romances establish an

²⁶ For an overview of Gawain's degeneration as a character in French romance, from his mainly positive portrayal in Chrétien de Troyes' romances to his much more negative portrayal in the later prose romances, see Fanni Bogdanow, "The Character of Gauvain in the Thirteenth-Century Prose Romances," *Medium Aevum* 27 (1958): 154-61; Gawain's character over a larger span of time is analyzed in Keith Busby, *Gauvain in Old French Literature* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1980). B.J. Whiting's article broadly overviews Gawain in both French and English romances: "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy, and His Appearance in Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*," *Mediaeval Studies* 9 (1947): 189-234. Despite his more positive characterization in England, English writers and probably many audience members would have been aware of his character in French romance. One Scottish and two English Gawain romances are adaptations of French romances (the Middle English *Yvain and Gawain* adapts Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*, and the Middle English *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain* and the Middle Scots *Gologras and Gawain* both draw from the *First Continuation* of Chrétien's *Percival*), while *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* slyly pits Gawain's differing reputations against each other in the bedroom temptations.

identity separate from the French cycle.”²⁷ Gawain’s constancy as an exemplar of chivalry, regardless of the form that chivalry takes, allows the authors and audiences of these English works to explore the implications of various forms of chivalry for society as a whole through a character who constantly represents the very best of English chivalry.

The first two works I consider date to the mid- to late-fourteenth century: the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Although the Alliterative *Morte* most was most likely composed after *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I turn to this work first to consider a portrayal of Gawain that focuses almost exclusively on his martial chivalry. This text, which is not easily classified as either a chronicle history or a romance, draws from the English chronicle tradition for its primary narrative of Arthur’s war against the Roman emperor Lucius and subsequent return to England only to be defeated by his usurping nephew Mordred. Although Arthur is the primary character in this work, the author significantly increases the role of Gawain from the role he plays in other chronicles, making him easily the most important character aside from Arthur. In the Alliterative *Morte*, Gawain is notable for his military prowess and his propensity to rush into battle with little thought beyond the increase of his own personal honor. I argue, however, that even as the alliterative poet portrays Gawain’s chivalry as admirable, the poet also subtly undermines its efficacy and ultimately questions its sustainability outside the world of romance. In the three episodes that feature Gawain, his chivalry achieves honor for both himself and the knights he leads into battle, but it never achieves the reconciliation between Arthur and an outsider that it often

²⁷ Boardman, “Middle English Arthurian Romance: The Repetition and Reputation of Gawain,” in *The Vitality of the Arthurian Legend*, ed. Mette Pors (Odense: Odense University Press, 1988), 73.

does in romance; additionally, Gawain's quest for personal honor leads directly to his death. Faced with treachery and overwhelming odds against its success in battle, martial chivalry falters and dies. Thus, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* is not so much nostalgic for a golden age of chivalry as it is realistic about the inability of ideal chivalry to exist for long in the contemporary world of the fourteenth century.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight initially seems to stand in stark contrast to the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, as most of its action takes place in a court and the only notable violence between men occurs in the early, surprisingly non-fatal, beheading of the Green Knight. Yet I argue that in this romance, as in the Alliterative *Morte*, Gawain's sense of personal chivalric honor is rooted primarily in his prowess. He understands the exchange of blows game proposed by the Green Knight as a test of his prowess and courage; even when he learns that his failure comes from his lack of honesty in the later exchange of winnings game, he still primarily blames himself for the fault of cowardice. Through the tests, the *Gawain*-poet constantly questions the value of Gawain's prowess in relation to his other chivalric virtues. Violence constantly disappears in the romance, as Gawain's battles as he seeks the Green Chapel are judged to be not as bad as the weather, as he remains in bed resting instead of hunting with his host, and as the return blow he receives truly ends the game instead of leading to the fight that he clearly expects. And finally, although he judges himself harshly for a lack of bravery, neither the Green Knight nor Arthur's court find this a serious flaw, or even a flaw at all. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, while it does not deny the importance of martial chivalry, thus questions whether Gawain is right to see his chivalric honor as resting primarily in his

courage and prowess, rather than equally in his other courtly and religious chivalric values.

The next three romances I consider date to the fifteenth century, and all qualify as “popular” romances — that is, romances that seem to have circulated widely but that typically lack what have been judged as the more literary qualities of works like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.²⁸ These romances also typically make use of the tail-rhyme stanza so thoroughly mocked by Chaucer in his *Tale of Sir Thopas*. Although the earliest surviving manuscripts or prints of these romances range from the early to the late fifteenth century, it is likely that these three romances circulated more or less simultaneously from at least the mid-fifteenth century forward. Two of them, *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain*, have ballad versions that survive in the Percy Folio, which dates to the mid-seventeenth century; fragments of prints of the third, *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, date to the first half of the sixteenth century. Unlike the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which interrogate the role of martial chivalry without either explicitly questioning its value or offering a replacement, these three popular romances actively seek to replace prowess-centered chivalry with more courtly forms of chivalry, exploring the consequences of this replacement.

Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle falls into the optimistic category of romances mentioned above: in this romance, Gawain eschews the expected martial violence against

²⁸ For recent discussions of English popular romances, see the introductions and collected essays in *The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance*, eds. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (Harlow: Longman, 2000); *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2004); and *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*, ed. Raluca Radulescu and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009).

a monstrous Carl and instead behaves as an ideal guest of this gigantic, lower-class character. The romance does not necessarily idealize Gawain's choice to behave courteously in a situation that seems to invite chivalric violence; indeed, while behaving as a perfectly courteous guest Gawain is required to perform distinctly discourteous acts such as attacking his host and seducing his host's wife. Yet Gawain's courtesy leads directly to a beneficial ending for all the characters involved: the Carl transforms from an enemy to a member of Arthur's court, benefiting both himself and Arthur, and Gawain marries the Carl's beautiful and courtly daughter, thus again benefiting both himself and the Carl. In this romance, chivalry is primarily a performance: it can be performed well or badly, depending on one's adeptness at adapting to certain situations, but it can be performed by anyone with the resources and the desire to become a member of chivalrous society. Thus the romance exposes the artificiality and even absurdity of chivalry, yet preserves it as a valuable social tool that, when used well, provides benefits to those who practice it.

Similarly, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain* acknowledges the potential social benefits of domestic chivalry, and particularly forms of courtesy that can be practiced by men or women. In this romance, Gawain's courtesy causes him to essentially switch roles with the main female character, Dame Ragnell, as he becomes the object of exchange that cements a beneficial relationship between Arthur and Ragnell, formed to save Arthur's life. Yet even as the romance portrays the good that comes from this role reversal, it is also uneasy with the implication that domestic courtesy threatens to make men indistinguishable from women. In the end, the romance must have Ragnell die in order to return Gawain to traditional chivalric activities such as the joust; yet even then it remains

unsure that this form of chivalry, involving in play instead of real violence, is adequate to maintain knightly masculinity. While Gawain's chivalry is never directly questioned in the romance, even when it leads to role reversals, the way that Ragnell's initially beneficial role slowly becomes socially detrimental points to a fear that domesticating chivalry will lead to the emasculation of its male practitioners and the disruption of traditional courtly society.

The final romance, *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, takes the opposite approach from *The Wedding of Sir Gawain*: in this romance, Gawain participates in almost unremitting battles after he seduces (or rapes) a woman he meets in the woods. Yet this violent chivalry of personal vengeance, a chivalry that relegates the woman to a nameless and nearly voiceless role, is unsuccessful in building the mutually beneficial relationships characteristic of the previous two (and many other) Gawain romances. In the *Jeaste*, the author parallels the way the men Gawain battles ignore the woman with their rejection of Gawain's offer of amends, presumably legal and financial, for his wrong in taking the woman's virginity. Thus, the domestic values of courtly speech and appropriate legal recourse that the woman represents are shown to have the potential to be a much better means in forming beneficial relationships than the violence exercised by the men. The ending of the romance, in which none of the men achieve victory or establish relationships and the woman goes into exile, suggests a pessimism about the ability of courtesy to overcome violence, although it also suggests the social goods that could arise from an increased emphasis on courtly chivalry.

These works, from the Alliterative *Morte* to *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, thus show the range of ways in which authors and audiences approached the issues raised by the

often competing martial and courtly chivalries. Yet it is clear from all of these romances that, central as violence may be to the exercise of chivalry, it was seldom accepted as an unproblematic good. Even the positive portrayal in the Alliterative *Morte* ends in the death of all the main characters, and the *Jeaste* shows the problems that arise from the confidence that chivalric violence can address all social problems. As Kaeuper notes, much writing about chivalry has a reformist cast, and these romances prove no exception.²⁹ Indeed, they provide a valuable counterpart to the view that violence was a necessary part of chivalry: while no one of these romances succeeds in divorcing violence and chivalry entirely, the fifteenth-century popular romances in particular envision a chivalry that does not need to be violent and that can still achieve significant social good. The study of these romances thus provides valuable insight into the conception of chivalry in late medieval England.

²⁹ Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence*, 35.

Chapter 1

The Pursuit of Individual Honor in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*

Beginning a project that focuses on the ways in which late medieval English romance renegotiates the role of violence in chivalry with a text that is not clearly a romance and that features violence may seem counterintuitive. Although the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* was influenced by romances, it falls primarily into the tradition of the Arthurian chronicles begun by Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. As such, it primarily focuses on the military excellence of Arthur and his knights. The story in the Alliterative *Morte* begins with Arthur's successful war against the Roman emperor Lucius, and concludes with his tragic defeat at the hands of his treacherous nephew Mordred; the interim is filled with battles and individual combats, remarkably few women and very little romantic love.¹ Yet for all its focus on warfare and the chivalry displayed on the battlefield, the Alliterative *Morte* is not, in the end, a celebration of this form of chivalry. Both Arthur and Gawain, the two main characters and representatives of chivalry in the poem, end up dead, along with the rest of Arthur's knights. Even renowned historical models of martial chivalry cannot prevail against Mordred and the non-chivalric political maneuvering he represents. The Alliterative *Morte* thus, while it celebrates the battlefield chivalric ethos displayed by Arthur and Gawain, finally

¹ As Dorsey Armstrong notes, "War is the defining activity of the Arthurian community in this poem" (Armstrong, "Rewriting the Chronicle Tradition: The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Arthur's Sword of Peace," *Parergon*, new series 25.1 [2008]: 89).

recognizes that this form of chivalry is unsustainable, particularly in the contemporary world. Although this poem, unlike the romances of the fifteenth century I will consider, does not actively critique or replace the violence of martial chivalry with alternate chivalric values, it does show the failure of martial chivalry to prevent death and destruction. Even in its celebration of the historic prowess and chivalry of Gawain and Arthur, the Alliterative *Morte* is aware of the limitations of such chivalry inevitably faced by martial violence in the changing social world of the fourteenth century.²

Critics have consistently recognized Gawain's importance in the Alliterative *Morte*: although Arthur is the titular character and focus of much of the poem, Gawain is easily the next most important character, receiving nearly as much space in the poem for his own adventures as Arthur does. In addition, the alliterative poet significantly adapted, changed and expanded his sources in order to emphasize Gawain's role in the poem. Through these adaptations, the poem closely links Gawain to Arthur, leading Christopher Dean to note, "The significance of Gawain's character rests, not in what he is, but in how he relates to the king."³ This statement represents the way most critics have approached Gawain in the poem: while all acknowledge Gawain's key role, the majority of scholars examine him primarily in relation to Arthur, and in particular to the issue of Arthur's morality over the course of the poem. Thus, for critics like Dean who see Gawain as good

² Juliet Vale intriguingly suggests that the author of the Alliterative *Morte* was well-versed in law and diplomacy; although I focus on the poem's portrayal of chivalry and its failure, if Vale's argument is correct it may suggest that the Alliterative *Morte* indeed does offer an alternative to warfare and militaristic chivalry. However, diplomatic or legal alternatives to war are never fully developed nor successful in the text; the poem focuses primarily on the destructiveness of war even when conducted by exemplars of chivalry and not on potential alternatives to war. See Vale, "Law and Diplomacy in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 23 (1979): 31-46.

³ Christopher Dean, "Sir Gawain in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 22.2 (1986): 115.

and chivalrous throughout, Gawain confirms his view that, although Arthur may be flawed, he is not ultimately criticized in the poem.⁴ And for critics who see Arthur as flawed in the poem, Gawain confirms that view: for example, Jorg Fichte argues that Arthur at the mid-point of the poem sinks to Gawain's level of rashness and *desmesure*, qualities wholly unsuitable for a king.⁵ Despite his clear connections to Arthur, however, the character of Gawain represents the alliterative poet's greatest modifications to his chronicle sources and thus deserves careful consideration as an important character in his own right, separate from his association with the titular main character, Arthur.

While it is impossible to disentangle Gawain from Arthur in the Alliterative *Morte*, this chapter argues that Gawain represents a different, although complementary, type of chivalry from that which Arthur represents. Gawain and Arthur display two sides of chivalry, the individual and the communal, both of which relate to each other but function in different ways in the poem. Thus, examining Gawain apart from Arthur better reveals what the alliterative poet has to say about the role of chivalry, and in particular the chivalry of the battlefield, in his society. Most critics of the poem have examined and dissected Arthur in relation to chivalry, war, and the duties of a king and knight, but have not looked closely at the complementary view of these issues offered in the character of Gawain.⁶ Gawain represents individualistic chivalry, the chivalry of a knight primarily

⁴ Dean, "Sir Gawain," 115-25.

⁵ Jorg O. Fichte, "The Figure of Sir Gawain," in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment of the Poem*, edited by Karl Heinz Goller (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1981), 106-16; see also John Finlayson, "The Concept of the Hero in the *Morte Arthure*," in *Chaucer und seine Zeit: Symposium fur Walter F. Schirmer*, edited by Arno Esch (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 1968), 249-74.

⁶ Numerous articles on Arthur in the Alliterative *Morte* exist, although there is only one monograph-length study of the poem: William Matthews, *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Study of the Alliterative 'Morte Arthure,'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

concerned with his personal reputation for valor and with the accumulation of personal glory. By contrast, Arthur's chivalry in the Alliterative *Morte* is always focused on the community, on the behaviors that have the potential to benefit both the smaller community of Arthur's knights and the larger community of his entire kingdom. Neither type of chivalry is wholly separate from the other; in the pursuit of the good of his community, Arthur gains personal glory, while Gawain provides benefits to his fellow knights and to Arthur's kingdom as he achieves personal glory. But these are distinct forms of chivalry in the poem, both represented by the character who, in English romance, portrays the best of his respective type of chivalry: Arthur, the greatest king of his people, and Gawain, the greatest English knight. However, in the Alliterative *Morte*, even represented by the best possible characters, both types of chivalry ultimately fail. Gawain falls on the battlefield, achieving the height of personal glory only in his death. Arthur's kingdom fails even as he strives to achieve the most benefit for it, and he too dies on the field of battle. The Alliterative *Morte* thus portrays both the successes and the ultimate failures of two distinct types of martial chivalry, leaving the reader with the impression that, while these chivalries may be glorious at times, neither is sustainable within society. The alliterative poet provides no overt commentary on the chivalries that he portrays. Yet the audience is left with the death of the two greatest examples of chivalry and the disintegration of the chivalric society they head, suggesting that the poet means to critique contemporary forms of chivalry. This study of Gawain will illuminate some of the ways in which the alliterative poet evaluates and challenges the chivalric values of his time, particularly those relating to the violence of war.

Importantly, however, the alliterative poet refuses throughout the poem to comment directly on the ways in which his characters represent chivalry, kingship, or knighthood. The poet never overtly criticizes any of these institutions. Rather, he achieves his criticism through changing his source material, manipulating audience expectations, and juxtaposing events in the poem. Although the poet adheres in the main to his chronicle sources in tracing Arthur's path to Rome and disastrous return to England to confront Mordred's betrayal, he takes large liberties with regard to the sections about Gawain⁷. He completely removes Gawain's presence in the story as Arthur contemplates war with Lucius in order to emphasize and expand Gawain's first appearance in the Alliterative *Morte*; he transplants and reworks an episode from the Alexander romances; and he gives Gawain a leading role in the final battle against Mordred. These three additions, the main changes that the poet makes to his sources, indicate the significance of Gawain in the romance. In these additions, the alliterative poet draws on characteristics of Gawain from other Middle English romances in order to hold certain aspects of his chivalry up to scrutiny. Moreover, the way that the poet structures these additions to his *Morte* provides key insights into how the poet conceives of chivalry. The new material both separates the chivalry represented in the poem into two distinct types and allows the poet, through his juxtapositions of both individual and communal chivalry, to have a fuller and more contemporarily relevant evaluation of the values of chivalry. The Alliterative *Morte* concludes with the view that individualistic chivalry as represented by Gawain, while admirable and potentially beneficial to both the individual and the community, can never in reality accomplish all that it can in romance. Moreover,

⁷ For a thorough discussion of the alliterative poet's sources, see Mary Hamel, "Introduction," in *Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition*, ed. Mary Hamel (New York: Garland, 1984), 34-58.

however admirable it may be, the type of chivalry exhibited by Gawain is unsustainable: it cannot exist for long amidst the harsh realities of war and politics.

Historical Context of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*

To evaluate how the alliterative poet uses Gawain to come to this conclusion about chivalry, an understanding of the poet's historical period is key. This topic is slightly complicated by debate over the date of the Alliterative *Morte*. Early critics dated the poem to the reign of Edward III, in about the third quarter of the fourteenth century; more recently, Larry Benson and Mary Hamel place the date of the poem at the turn of the century and the beginning of Henry IV's reign, while P.J.C. Field argues for a date of 1375-85.⁸ Regardless of the exact date of the poem, however, England was engaged through the range of potential dates in the Hundred Years' War with France, and during this engagement saw the beginnings of substantial social shifts involving the role of knights in both war and society. The author of Alliterative *Morte Arthure* is aware of these shifts, and his presentation of chivalry certainly addresses the general social change in progress, whether or not he addresses a specific political situation. While Arthur represents the role of a king in a chivalric society, Gawain represents the individual knight in his quest for honor and glory.⁹ But in the context of shifting roles in chivalric

⁸ Benson, Larry D, "The Date of the Alliterative Morte Arthure," in *Contradictions: From Beowulf to Chaucer*, Ed. Theodore M. Andersson and Stephen A. Barney (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1995), 155-74; Hamel, "Introduction," 53-8; Field, P.J.C., "Morte Arthure, the Montagus, and Milan," *Medium Aevum* 78.1 (2009): 98-117. Patricia DeMarco overviews debates on the dating in "An Arthur for the Ricardian Age: Crown, Nobility, and the Alliterative Morte Arthure," *Speculum* 80.2 (2005): 464-93.

⁹ DeMarco, "An Arthur for the Ricardian Age," 464-93. See also Lesley Johnson, "King Arthur at the Crossroads to Rome," in *Noble and Joyous Histories: English Romances 1375-1650*, edited by Eiléan Ní Cuilleánáin and J. D. Pheifer (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1993), 87-112, and Kateryna A. Rudnytzky Schray, "The Plot in Miniature: Arthur's Battle on Mont St. Michel in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Studies in Philology* 101.1 (2004): 1-19.

society, both Arthur and Gawain come up against the difficulty, or even impossibility, of exercising ideal prowess-based chivalry in a non-ideal, changing world.

The primary martial values in the Alliterative *Morte* are courage and loyalty. These values rest on the mounted knight, who displays the virtues of loyalty to his lord and courage in combat; these two chivalric traits are among those praised in romance, taught in the chivalric manuals, and apparently prized in noble individuals. Chivalry of course also includes social values, as among other characteristics a good knight is pious and generous to the Church, a faithful lover and a wise statesman. But the Alliterative *Morte* focuses almost exclusively on martial chivalry and as such prizes most highly courage and loyalty. Both Arthur and Gawain exhibit these two virtues of loyalty and courage above all others: Arthur's courage is firmly established early in the Alliterative *Morte* when he defeats the Giant of Mont St. Michel in single combat, and his loyalty to his knights is displayed repeatedly as he considers the safety of his men and mourns the death of every knight. Similarly, Gawain's courage and loyalty are also emphasized. His loyalty to Arthur is unquestioned, as he fights for Arthur and ultimately dies in an attempt to defeat Mordred, not only Arthur's usurper but Gawain's own brother. And Gawain's courage is certainly never in doubt; as mentioned above, critics have described it as rash and as passing into the realm of *desmesure*, but no reader of the poem could doubt Gawain's courage even if they question the wisdom of the ways in which he displays that courage. Thus, the alliterative poet ascribes to the greatest representatives of English chivalry the greatest attributes of militaristic and prowess-based chivalry, making his pessimism about the possibility of ideal chivalry all the more potent. If even the best examples of chivalry cannot sustain it, its loss is a true tragedy.

The unsustainable nature of martial chivalry in the Alliterative *Morte* has its roots in the changing role of chivalry in combat in the fourteenth century. At the end of the fourteenth century, the noble classes still greatly prized military service; moreover, distinguished military service could serve as an entry to the ranks of the nobility.¹⁰ Chronicles and chivalric biographies of the period, such as the one written by the Herald Chandos about Edward the Black Prince, focused on the military exploits of their subjects;¹¹ Henry IV was initially much more popular than Richard II in large part because of his successes in battle;¹² and, while it was becoming more common for the sons of nobles to be sent to study law rather than serve in the military, contemporary sources lamented this tendency.¹³ Yet even as military service remained important, the role of the knight in the military was undergoing a shift that would lead to the eclipse of the knight in warfare and the growing societal acceptance during the fifteenth century of non-military careers for nobles.¹⁴ During the fourteenth century, fighting on foot became the typical mode of battle;¹⁵ without a warhorse or a significantly different role from a non-noble foot soldier or archer, a knight was no longer distinct or even strictly necessary in military service. Andrew Ayton argues that the link between the role of the knight in

¹⁰ Maurice Keen, "Chivalry," in *Gentry Culture in Late Medieval England*, edited by Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005): 35-49.

¹¹ For a discussion of these chivalric biographies, see Sumner Ferris, "Chronicle, Chivalric Biography, and Family Tradition in Fourteenth-Century England," in *Chivalric Literature*, edited by Larry D Benson and John Leyrerle (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publication, 1980): 25-38.

¹² Maurice Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2003): 244-5.

¹³ Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*, 264.

¹⁴ Keen, "Chivalry," 35-49.

¹⁵ Keen, "Chivalry," 20.

battle and the social standing of the knight comes as battlefield tactics and technologies make the knight no more valuable in battle than a non-noble archer. This change becomes “a challenge to the aristocracy's social identity as the military class” as “the battlefield was no longer the arena which set the minor aristocrat apart from his social inferiors.”¹⁶ With few distinguishing tactics between noble and non-noble fighters in real-world battles, little opportunity remained to nobles to display traditional martial chivalry on the battlefield, leading to a gradual erosion of the value of such chivalry.

But the loss of the ability to conduct the feats of arms on horseback typical of a knight in an earlier era, or in a romance, did not lead to an immediate loss of chivalric military values for knights. Rather, these values began to be expressed primarily in the tournament. Ayton argues, “a clear distinction emerged between deeds of chivalry, which were most appropriately performed on horseback amongst their peers – on the tournament field and, on campaign, in individual combats and small-scale encounters – and the practical business of battlefield fighting which was most effectively done on foot in disciplined tactical formations, often in association with archers.”¹⁷ Thus, even as knights adjusted to their shifting role on the battlefield, they expressed the traditional values of chivalric knighthood through the tournament. As Ayton continues, tournaments “remained the violent and prestigious pastime of the traditional military class . . . the display offered could only serve to re-affirm society’s vision of the knight as an elite mounted warrior.”¹⁸ Despite the retention of martial, prowess-oriented chivalry, however,

¹⁶ Andrew Ayton, *Knights and Warhorses: Military Service and the English Aristocracy under Edward III* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1994): 22.

¹⁷ Ayton, *Knights and Warhorses*, 20.

¹⁸ Ayton, *Knights and Warhorses*, 34.

the gap between the real and the ideal became more pronounced.¹⁹ While romance chivalry may never have consistently, or often, appeared on medieval battlefields, now even the possibility of a knight performing this chivalry in reality was disappearing, and thus the ability to practice this form of chivalry becomes less important for members of the nobility.

In the context of this simultaneous shift in actual military practice and retention of a code that set the noble knight apart from non-noble fighters, much of the literature of the period emphasizes military chivalry. For example, chivalric biographies narrate the events of their subjects' lives through the lens of chivalry, heightening and even recasting potentially chivalric events to fit into the values of militaristic chivalry; Ayton writes, "Froissart and Chandos Herald, whilst aware of prevailing tactical developments, delight in drawing attention to feats of arms of a traditional kind."²⁰ Straddling the line between chronicle and romance, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, with its focus on warfare, engages in a similar project. Critics have often remarked upon the realistic portrayal of war in the poem, Göller among others noting "In the *AMA* the reality of war in all its gruesomeness and the contemporaneity of the fourteenth century clash heavily with the world of romance."²¹ However, the reality presented in the Alliterative *Morte* is strongly influenced by chivalric traditions. Although the alliterative poet was most likely aware of tactical developments in warfare, he still presents his battles as if they were formal

¹⁹ For a discussion of this gap and its consequences, see Arthur B. Ferguson, *The Indian Summer of English Chivalry*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1960).

²⁰ Ayton, *Knights and Warhorses*, 30. See also Ferris, "Chronicle, Chivalric Biography," 25-38.

²¹ Karl Heinz Göller, "Reality versus Romance: A Reassessment of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," in *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Reassessment of the Poem*, edited by Karl Heinz Göller (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1981): 16.

tournaments; Ayton notes that the battles in the Alliterative *Morte* contain “a projection of the methods of the tournament (i.e., the melee, in which the traditional forms of mounted combat were still employed) onto a broader canvas.”²² By this juxtaposition of war and tournament, the poet suggests that the values practiced by his fictional knights on the battlefield are not real; that is, they are not values that can be practiced on a real battlefield, but only on the “battlefield” of the tournament or the fantastic battlefield of history and romance. If true chivalry did exist in true battle, then it did so in an irretrievable age, and it died on that battlefield with Gawain and Arthur. Thus in the Alliterative *Morte*, chivalry, while admirable, is not ultimately sustainable.

Arthur and Chivalry

Before reaching this conclusion about the unsustainable nature of chivalry, however, the poet is careful to examine what he presents as the main manifestations of martial chivalry: community-focused chivalry and individualistic chivalry. Although this chapter focuses on the individual chivalry Gawain displays, a brief overview of the communal chivalry represented by Arthur will provide a basis for comparisons between these two forms of chivalry. Throughout the Alliterative *Morte*, Arthur’s chivalry causes him to display concern both for his knights individually and for his kingdom as a whole; a few key events highlight Arthur’s communal concerns. When the Alliterative *Morte* begins, Arthur is holding a Christmas feast for his people (ll. 64-77).²³ Immediately, the poem places Arthur in the context of his community: the audience sees him not as a

²² Ayton, *Knights and Warhorses*, 29-30.

²³ *Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition*, ed. Mary Hamel (New York: Garland, 1984).

solitary figure, but as the center of his court. And when faced with Lucius' challenge to his kingly authority, Arthur's first response is to take counsel with his knights: "þus schall I take avisement of valiante beryns, / Wyrke aftyre the wytte of my wyes knyghttes" (ll. 48-9). This scene does not present Arthur as a weak king; his facial expression alone causes the Roman messengers to cower in fear.²⁴ Nor is Arthur dependent on his men to make his decisions for him; rather, he is the leader of a kingdom whose role as the center of a community makes it imperative that he consider the opinions of that community before making any final decision that may lead to war.²⁵ Arthur's firm control over his community is reiterated once more in this section of the poem when he promises the Roman messengers safe conduct out of his kingdom. Although the promise that they would be unmolested "þoghe thy cofers ware full cramede with syluer" is a literary trope, it nonetheless displays the power and control Arthur exercises over his kingdom, and his absolute trust that his people will respect the safe conduct he promises (l. 477).

These opening scenes establish Arthur as a powerful king within the community of his kingdom. The next major episode in the poem, however, seems at first glance to celebrate Arthur's prowess as an individual knight as he fights and defeats the Giant of Mont St. Michel in single combat. But while this episode undeniably establishes Arthur's individual strength and courage, a closer reading of the encounter displays that Arthur's primary concern when he fights the giant is not his own personal glory, but rather the good of his people. The giant has been ravaging Arthur's lands in Brittany and has most

²⁴ " 'Sir' sais þe senatour 'so Crist mott me helpe, / þe voute of thi vesage has woundyde vs all!' (ll. 136-7).

²⁵ For a consideration of how Arthur's relationship with his knights reflects Richard II's relationships with his nobility, see DeMarco, 464-93.

recently kidnapped, raped and murdered Guinevere's cousin, the Duchess of Brittany; the knight who informs Arthur of the giant charges him, "As thow arte ryghtwise kynge, rewe on thy pople, / And fande to revenge them that thus are rebuykyde" (l. 864, 866-7). Arthur quickly responds to this plea for help: first, he mourns for his people: "Thane romyeze the ryche kynge for rewthe of þe pople," pacing around his tent until he decides what to do (l. 888). Then, he takes it upon himself to defeat this giant, going in secret to the giant's abode and killing him single-handedly. While this episode certainly establishes Arthur's personal prowess, it firmly places that prowess in service to the community, not personal glory. In support of this link between Arthur's hardiness in battle and his concern for his kingdom, the fight with the giant mirrors Arthur's later battles with Lucius; several critics have examined the episode in this light, and find that it reflects Arthur's communal concerns as evidenced throughout the poem.²⁶ Thus, although the battle with the giant displays Arthur's individual prowess in battle, it primarily shows Arthur's concern for the well-being of those whom he rules.

Building on this concern for those whom he rules, the poem further establishes Arthur's interest in his community by showing his care for his knights. Repeatedly, Arthur displays worry about knights who are wounded and grief for knights who are killed, culminating in his nearly debilitating grief over the death of Gawain. When a messenger brings Arthur news of the Britons' great success in their first encounter with the Romans, having only one knight wounded in the battle, Arthur rewards the messenger

²⁶ See, for example, John Finlayson, "Arthur and the Giant of St. Michael's Mount," *Medium Aevum* 33.2 (1964): 112-120; Kateryna A. Rudnytsky Schray, "The Plot in Miniature: Arthur's Battle on Mont St. Michel in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Studies in Philology* 101.1 (2004): 1-19; and Robert Warm, "Arthur and the Giant of Mont St. Michel: The Politics of Empire Building in the Later Middle Ages," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 41 (1997): 57-71.

with all of Toulouse; further, Arthur promises the captured Roman senator, Senator Peter, “Thare sall no siluer hym saue bot Ewayne [the wounded knight] recouere,” emphasizing that Arthur’s primary concern is the health and safety of his knights, not the significant financial gain Senator Peter’s ransom could bring (l. 1573). After the next encounter with the Romans in the poem, Arthur chastises Sir Cador for risking a battle in which fourteen knights are killed (ll. 1912-45). And in the greatest display of concern for his knights, Arthur swoons with grief over the body of Gawain on the battlefield, mourning him in extravagant terms, nearly dying from his heartbreak before another of his knights intervenes (ll. 3949-4008). While Arthur’s grief may be unnecessarily extravagant in this situation, it fits his character in the Alliterative *Morte*. His constant concern for his kingdom and his knights, his community, is obvious throughout the poem. While his courage is never in doubt, Arthur’s defining chivalric characteristic is loyalty to his community, both the people of his kingdom and the smaller group of his knights.

As a counterpoint to Arthur’s focus on his community, Gawain displays chivalry that focuses on individual glory. While his loyalty to Arthur is never in question, and he does display loyalty to the men under his command, the Alliterative *Morte* primarily displays Gawain’s courage and prowess. This attention to Gawain is unique to the alliterative poet; all of the episodes in the poem that feature Gawain as a main character are either significantly expanded from or simply added to the poet’s chronicle sources. Structurally, these additions correspond to episodes featuring Arthur, contrasting the types of chivalry that the two men represent. Gawain’s first appearance in the Alliterative *Morte*, in which he is part of a group of emissaries sent by Arthur to Lucius, parallels Arthur’s reception of Lucius’ messengers at the opening of the poem. Gawain’s second

episode, the romance-inspired encounter with Priamus, has links both with Arthur's fight against the Giant of Mont St. Michel and with Arthur's actions as he and his men besiege the city of Metz. And Gawain's third appearance, in which he dies fighting against Mordred, foreshadows Arthur's coming death, also in battle with Mordred. A careful examination of both the chivalry displayed by Gawain in these episodes and the chivalry of Arthur that parallels it reveals the ways in which the alliterative poet examines and critiques contemporary chivalry.

Gawain as Emissary

Gawain's first major appearance in the Alliterative *Morte* comes more than 1200 lines into the poem, when Arthur appoints him as one of his messengers to the Roman emperor Lucius and Gawain proceeds to start (and win) a battle. This late appearance, however, is surprising given Gawain's prominence in the remainder of the poem. Even more surprisingly, the alliterative poet changes his chronicle sources to diminish Gawain's role in the poem until this point. In the Alliterative *Morte*, before his first major role as messenger, Gawain appears briefly in the opening feast scene, where he escorts Guinevere in to dinner: "Sir Wawayne þe worthye dame Waynour he ledys" (l. 233). The descriptor "worthye" is typical of Gawain in English chronicles and romance, and as it alliterates with "Wawayne" it most likely functions here as a poetic tag, although it also alerts the audience that Gawain will fall into his normal position in English Arthurian writings as one of Arthur's best knights. But this brief appearance of Gawain is all the audience sees of him until over a thousand lines later in the poem. This delay in presenting Gawain until Arthur and his men are out of his court and in the battlefield is

indicative of the way in which the alliterative poet intends to characterize Gawain as a knight whose primary aim is to achieve and maintain personal honor on the battlefield.

In the alliterative poet's chronicle sources, Gawain first appears soon after Lucius' messengers arrive at Arthur's court; as discussed above, he briefly appears at this point in the Alliterative *Morte* as well. In both Wace and Lazamon's *Bruts*, two of the alliterative poet's main sources, Gawain's appearance is significantly more substantial than simply escorting Guinevere to dinner. In these *Bruts*, Gawain speaks just before Arthur begins the council at which he and his men determine the proper response to the Roman messengers; in both the French and the English accounts, Gawain responds to Cador who laments that peace has made the English men soft. Unlike Cador who views peace as harmful to chivalric prowess, Gawain speaks in praise of the peace that England has been enjoying.²⁷ Although Gawain makes no objection to war in the following council (his words on peace are his only contribution), his speech on the benefits of peace indicates an awareness and appreciation of chivalric values apart from the battlefield. In Wace's *Brut*, those values are explicitly courteous or courtly: the young man can enjoy songs, stories and the love of a woman in a time of peace, thus learning how to be a knight.²⁸ Lazamon's *Brut* is less courtly, as Gawain only says "for grið [peace] madeð

²⁷ In Lazamon's account, Gawain says:

Cador þu ært a riche mon; þine ræddes ne beo[ð] noht idon.
for god is grið; and god is frið; þe freoliche þer haldeð wið.
and Godd sulf hit makede; þurh his Godd-cunde.
for grið makeð godne mon; gode workes wurchen.
for alle monnen bið þa bet; þat lond bið þa murgre.

Quote from G. L. Brook and R. F. Leslie, eds, *Layamon: Brut*, Early English Text Society o.s. 250, 277, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963-1978): lines 12454-8.

²⁸ Judith Weiss, ed. and trans., *Wace's Roman de Brut A History of the British: Text and Translation* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999): 271.

godne mon;” but in both of these accounts, Gawain clearly speaks in praise of non-martial activities, although he has no objections to the impending war.²⁹

However, the alliterative poet excises Gawain’s words on peace. Cadur still speaks, as the council begins, of how peace has made the Britons live as “losels,” as those who waste resources, but Arthur, not Gawain, answers him (ll. 252, 259-87). Like Gawain in the chronicle versions, Arthur gently chides Cadur for his wholehearted endorsement of war: “‘Sir Cadour,’ quod þe king, ‘thy concell es noble; / But þou arte a meruailous man with thi mery wordez, / For thow countez no caas, ne castes no forthire, / But hurles furthe appon heued as thi herte thynkes’” (ll. 259-62). But instead of praising peace, Arthur redirects the conversation to the issue of rights, and the rest of the council revolves around the question of whether Arthur should pursue his right to rule in Rome.³⁰ The removal of any mention of peace underscores the alliterative poet’s interest in war, as the Alliterative *Morte* from this point forward focuses unrelentingly on war and its consequences; this leads into the Alliterative *Morte*’s focus on martial chivalry. In addition, the removal of Gawain specifically points towards the way in which he will be characterized in the remainder of the poem. In this work, Gawain does not appear as an advocate for peace or even as a character who advises the king; rather, Gawain embodies an almost exclusively martial form of chivalry that he exercises not in community but alone. Thus, even the removal of Gawain from a part of the Alliterative *Morte* develops Gawain into the representative of individualistic chivalry.

²⁹ Lazamon’s *Brut*, line 12457.

³⁰ Two recent articles deal with issues of peace and war in the Alliterative *Morte*: see Andrew Lynch, “‘Peace is good after war’: The Narrative Seasons of English Arthurian Tradition,” in *Writing War: Medieval Literary Responses to Warfare*, ed. Corinne Saunders, Neil Thomas, and Françoise Le Saux (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004): 127-46; and Dorsey Armstrong, “Rewriting the Chronicle Tradition: The Alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Arthur’s Sword of Peace,” *Parergon* 25.1 (2008): 81-101.

The actual appearance of Gawain in the narrative underscores his interest in his own personal glory above the communal concerns of the court. The poet introduces Gawain after Arthur's battle with the giant of Mont St. Michel as one of the knights sent as a messenger to Lucius; these messengers are to request that Lucius either leave Arthur's lands in France or meet Arthur in single combat to determine "whatt ryghte þat he claymes, / Thus to ryot þis rewme and raunsone the pople!" (ll. 1275-6). Significantly, Gawain is not put in charge of this mission in the Alliterative *Morte*, although by the end of the episode he becomes the default leader of Arthur's knights. The poet carefully sets up the arrival of Arthur's group of messengers to Lucius' field headquarters to parallel the arrival of Lucius' messengers at Arthur's court: both groups arrive just as the king is about to sit down to a feast;³¹ both begin by insulting the king as they present their message, although Gawain is much harsher than his Roman counterpart; and neither Lucius nor Arthur responds particularly favorably to the message presented. But the events after this point diverge in a striking way. While Arthur cows Lucius' messengers by his anger initially and later by his aggressive and intimidating display of hospitality, Gawain takes offence at the words of Lucius' uncle Gayous and proceeds to abruptly cut off Gayous' head.³² Understandably, this ends the polite interaction between Arthur's men and Lucius; Gawain and the rest of Arthur's knights leave swiftly to prepare for the impending retaliatory battle, which occurs as soon as the Romans can arm themselves and pursue Gawain and the other knights.

³¹ Arthur is beginning an actual feast on Christmas day; although it is not a holiday, Lucius is dining with sixteen kings upon "full selcouthe metez" (l. 1298).

³² Thanks to Elizabeth Harper for the term "aggressive hospitality." Christine Chism also notes the parallel between Arthur's initial anger and his later hospitality: "The feast substitutes for the king's scorching gaze and works only a slightly more circumspect dazzlement on the messengers" (Chism, *Alliterative Revivals* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002]: 215).

This scene presents a few striking characteristics of Gawain, characteristics that persist through the rest of the poem. First is Gawain's usurpation of leadership, originally assigned by Arthur to Boice. Gawain is not initially the leader of the embassy to Lucius, simply appearing among the other knights that Arthur sends with Boice to deliver the message with no indication that he will be the main character in this episode: "The kynge biddis sir Boice, 'Buske the belyfe: / Take with the sir Berill and Bedwere the ryche, / Sir Gawayne and sir Geryne, these galyarde knyghtez'" (ll. 1263-6). Yet when Arthur's men arrive at Lucius' headquarters, Gawain immediately asserts himself as the leader of his group and begins speaking: "Sir Wawayne þe worthethy vnwynly he spekes" (l. 1302). As in Gawain's brief initial appearance at Arthur's court, the poet again uses the descriptor "worthy" of Gawain, indicating his status as a respected knight, even as he takes the role assigned to another knight and proceeds to deliver the message Boice was supposed to give to Lucius. Further, Gawain gives the rest of Arthur's men no opportunity to speak. This indicates that Gawain has little regard for the niceties of court procedures, ignoring the roles established by his own sovereign; it also indicates that the rest of Arthur's men are not upset by this usurpation, as none of them, not even Boice, who was originally entrusted with the embassy, attempt to reinsert themselves into the proceedings. By the time Gawain and the other knights leave Lucius' tent, the group is referred to as Gawain's "stale," his group of warriors (l. 1355). Although Gawain does assume a leadership role of sorts here, acting at least as spokesman for the other knights, his casual disregard of the assignments given by Arthur plus his clear concern for his own personal honor emphasize his individualistic conception of chivalry.

Gawain's assumption of the role of spokesperson for and leader of Arthur's knights is not out of character; after all, Gawain is Arthur's nephew, and consistently in English and early French romances he is Arthur's key knight. But Gawain's lack of an official position allows him to focus on the personal insult he receives in this encounter, since as an individual knight rather than the official representative of Arthur's court Gawain is not bound to observe the niceties of court behavior. This sets him apart from Arthur, who is obligated as king to show courtesy even to those who insult him. When Lucius' messengers arrive at Arthur's court, in the section of the poem that parallels this episode, Arthur is so upset by the Romans' insults and demands that he "Luked as a lyon and on his lyppe bytes," with the result that "The Romaynes for radnesse ruschte to þe erthe" and proceed to beg Arthur to "Misdoo no messangere" (ll. 119, 120, 126). When he sees the Roman messengers' fear, Arthur calls them cowards, but excuses their conduct and promises to consult his nobles and return to them with a reply for Lucius (l. 133). Arthur says:

"To warpe wordez in waste no wyrchipe it were,
Ne wilfully in þis wrethe to wreken my seluen.
Forþy sall þou lenge here and lugge wyth þise lordes
This seuenyghte in solace to suggourne þour horses,
To see whatte lyfe þat wee leede in thees lawe lanndes." (ll. 150-54)

Despite his anger over the message the Romans bring, Arthur exhibits qualities of a good king by curbing his anger, taking counsel from his nobles, showing hospitality to the Romans as guests in his court, and providing safe conduct for them as they leave England. The hospitality is meant to intimidate the messengers and convey Arthur's superiority to Lucius, and the messengers are certainly impressed, but in this and in the safe conduct he promises Arthur is still observing the niceties of courtly behavior by

showing courtesy to his enemies even when his anger (and his subsequent war) indicates that he may prefer a more violent response to those who oppose and insult him. In treating the Roman messengers this way, Arthur upholds the honor of his entire kingdom, displaying the riches and civility of his life. The military defense of his kingdom will come, but at this point in the poem Arthur's duty to his kingdom lies in displaying his courtly, not military, chivalry.

Gawain, however, is unrestricted by the obligations of a king or an appointed leader; this frees him to respond to personal insults with personal violence, not courtesy. Unlike Arthur, whose response to the Roman messengers stands for the response of an entire kingdom, Gawain can be primarily concerned with himself and his own honor. Gawain's precipitous beheading of Gayous shows that his lack of a leadership role allows him to act in a way that would normally be inappropriate in a court setting. Gawain is not interested in the qualities that a knight ought to display in a court as opposed to on a battlefield; he treats Gayous as a military opponent to be silenced by prowess, and the fact that they are in a court setting and not a battlefield makes little difference to Gawain. Where Arthur uses the more subtle technique of aggressive hospitality to show his disdain for Lucius' messengers, Gawain is and can be much more direct. He seems to agree with Arthur's earlier assertion that "To warpe wordez in waste no wyrchipe it were," although he does not follow Arthur's subsequent advice, "Ne wilfully in þis wrethe to wreken my seluen." As an individual instead of the anchor of a community, concerned above all with his own honor, Gawain has no reason not to avenge himself immediately, even in anger.

The impetus for Gawain's defense of his honor comes after Lucius asserts that he

will not abandon his war in France or defend his right to his throne in Rome. Lucius' uncle Gayous speaks to insult the Britons broadly and Gawain specifically: "Euere ware þes Bretouns braggers of olde. / Loo! how he brawles hym for hys bryghte wedes, / As he myghte bryttyn vs all with his brande ryche! / 3itt he berkes myche boste, 3one boy þere he standes" (ll. 1348-51). As Lucius' uncle, Gayous apparently occupies a position in the Roman court analogous to Gawain's position as Arthur's nephew, and like Gawain, Gayous exhibits a tendency to speak in a situation where he has no official role. The two men are equals, then, and Gayous' insults to Gawain implying that he is a "boy" warrant a response from Gawain.³³ Gawain's response of beheading Gayous, however, seems disproportionate, not the behavior expected from the standard of chivalry. Yet the poet presents the beheading so abruptly and casually that it is difficult to discern any criticism for Gawain's actions; he has been badly insulted by his counterpart in Lucius' court, and he responds as an individual concerned with his own honor. The poet places the beheading immediately after Gayous' insults, with no intervening words from Gawain: "Than greuyde Sir Gawayne at his grett wordes, / Graythes towarde þe gome with grucchande herte; / With hys stelyn brande he strykes of hys heuede, / And sterttes owtte to hys stede and with his stale wendes" (ll. 1352-5). This scene underscores Gawain's tendency towards immediate action: he sees no reason to delay his response to Gayous' boast, and his lack of an official position allows him to act without considering whether such action would be appropriate to his role. Gawain's individualistic chivalry leaves him free to respond to a personal insult with immediate personal violence.

³³ The MED defines the term "boie" as referring to "A servant, attendant, underling, churl (applied to a cook's helper, butcher's boy, messenger, gate keeper, more often young than not)" or "A person of low birth or rank, a commoner; a foot soldier; also, a person lacking refinement, an ordinary fellow" (MED s.v. "boie").

In addition to showing the effects of Gawain's concern with individualistic chivalry and honor, this scene also both raises and dashes certain audience expectations of Gawain. With the beheading of Gayous, the alliterative poet introduces into his poem a trope found in several other Gawain romances in English: the beheading game.³⁴ In these romances, Gawain must behead an outsider who poses a threat to Arthur's court, but the beheading is never fatal: instead, the beheading allows for the hostile outsider to be transformed into a member of Arthur's court.³⁵ As Hahn points out, one of Gawain's main roles in the English romances is to bring outsiders into the community of Arthur's court; the beheading game is one way in which Gawain achieves this reconciliation between Arthur and potentially hostile outsiders.³⁶ Given this context, the setting of the Alliterative *Morte*'s beheading scene seems ideal for this type of reconciliation. Gawain and the other knights have approached Lucius and his men, who are undeniably hostile to Arthur and his court, and Gawain proceeds to behead one of these hostile members of

³⁴ Most famous, of course, is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, another alliterative poem written nearly contemporaneously with the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. The beheading game also appears in other Gawain romances: *Gawain and the Grene Knight*, a late fifteenth-century derivative of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; *The Carle of Carlisle*, probably composed around 1400 and thus also nearly contemporaneous with the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*; and *The Turke and Gowin*, a ballad dating to about 1500. While the beheading game is a recurring feature in romance (see Elisabeth Brewer, ed., *From Cuchulainn to Gawain: Sources and Analogues of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* [Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973], for an overview of the beheading game in European romance and folklore), it must be noted that the alliterative poet takes this beheading from his chronicle sources (for an overview of this beheading in the chronicles, see Moll, Richard J., "Frustrated Readers and Conventional Decapitation in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" *The Modern Language Review* 97.4 [2002]: 793-802). Thus, Gawain's decapitation of Gayous resonates with both the chronicle and the romance tradition.

³⁵ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* does not follow this pattern exactly, but Gawain's involvement in the game does initially prevent the Green Knight from harming any in Arthur's court, and later reveals certain flaws in chivalry itself that threaten Arthur's court. Thus, while Bertilak is never incorporated into the Arthurian world as the Turk and the Carl are, the conclusion of the beheading game reveals that his intentions are to benefit Gawain directly and thus Arthur's court indirectly; in other words, Bertilak is at least revealed as a non-hostile entity.

³⁶ Thomas Hahn, "Introduction," in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, edited by Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS, 1995): 24-5.

Lucius' court. Yet almost as soon as audience expectations of reconciliation are raised, the alliterative poet dashes them. Gawain leaves immediately after beheading Gayous, and the beheaded Roman remains beheaded: he neither picks up his own head nor transforms into a person more friendly to Arthur and his knights. This stems partly from the alliterative poet's chronicle-like realism, as the marvels common to romance seldom appear in the Alliterative *Morte*. But beyond that, the raising and dashing of this expectation of reconciliation solidifies the character of Gawain in the Alliterative *Morte* as a warrior, not a courtier: he may still exemplify and adhere to standards of chivalry, but the standard is one that privileges the battlefield, not the court. In addition, the failure of this romance trope draws attention to the shortcomings of Gawain's martial chivalry. He can, through his prowess, avenge an insult, but his prowess cannot achieve a miraculous reconciliation. Chivalry in reality cannot accomplish all that it promises in the world of romance.

Despite the failure of Gawain's chivalry to achieve reconciliation, and the brutality of Gawain's actions, the Alliterative *Morte* does not criticize Gawain. In the poem, he goes directly from beheading Gayous into battle against the Romans; this battle concludes successfully and moreover seems to have been an (if not the) anticipated outcome of the embassy to Lucius. Apparently prior to the departure of the messengers, a group of Bretons had been sent to wait in ambush for the Romans, who leave their camp in pursuit of Gawain and his men (ll. 1403-18). Although Arthur's knights have a few tense moments when it appears that they may lose to the Romans, Sir Idrus arrives with his company of men to turn the tide of the battle, gaining glory for himself by capturing Senator Peter and allowing Gawain to rescue the captured Bois (ll. 1431-48, 1498-1514,

1457-83). The battle concludes successfully for Arthur's men; as the messenger relays to Arthur, of the enemy "Fyfty thosannde on felde of ferse men of armez / Wythin a furlange of waye fay ere bylefede," while "All 3our [Arthur's] sekyre men, forsothe, sounde are byleuyde, / Saue sir Ewayne fytz Henry es in þe side wonddede" (ll. 1537-8, 1557-8). And once the knights themselves return, Arthur honors them:

Thane sir Arthure, on erthe atheliste of opere,
 At euen at his awne borde auantid his lordez:
 "Me aughte to honour them in erthe ouer all oper thynges,
 Pat þus in mine absens awnters þem selfen;
 I sall them luffe whylez I lyffe, so me our Lorde helpe,
 And gyfe þem landys full large whare them beste lykes.
 Thay sall noghte losse on þis layke, 3if me lyfe happen,
 Pat þus are lamede for my lufe be þis lythe strandez." (ll. 1593-1600)

Although Fichte characterizes Gawain in this episode as arrogant and irascible, and these adjectives are not entirely wrong, Fichte must turn to sources outside the poem to criticize Gawain's behavior.³⁷ The Alliterative *Morte* itself offers no comment on Gawain's behavior aside from Arthur's praise of the successful military engagement with the Romans, and while Arthur does not mention Gawain specifically, this encounter was spurred by Gawain's beheading of Gayous. That Arthur praises the result of Gawain's rash action without censuring the action itself indicates that the poem does not condemn Gawain's chivalry here, even if it points out the failure of that chivalry to accomplish the reconciliation it promises in romance.

³⁷ Fichte, "The Figure of Sir Gawain," 108; he measures Gawain against the ideal of *fortitudo et sapientia*, concluding that he falls short of this ideal in displaying prudence. Fichte uses medieval moral works, such as the *Ayebite of Inwyrt* and the writings of Thomas Aquinas, to critique Gawain's displays of anger and lack of wisdom. While medieval audiences would have been aware, for example, of the sin of anger and the danger of rash action, the Alliterative *Morte* itself does not suggest that Gawain is being measured against an ideal such as *fortitudo et sapientia*. It is thus problematic to critique Gawain's behavior based on moral ideals not present in the text.

The contrast between Gawain's behavior as Arthur's unofficial ambassador and Arthur's behavior as king to the Roman messengers serves to highlight the different types of chivalric behavior that each man adheres to. This episode shows that unlike Arthur, Gawain can respond to personal insults with violence and incite a battle without engaging in the formalities of ambassadors and challenges. His standard of behavior is personal; he can respond to a pointed insult with violence to avenge himself. And when the battle turns against him for a few moments, he thinks not of the potential loss of his men, but of how a loss in battle would cause him to fail his king: "I luke neuer on my lorde þe dayes of my lyfe / And we so lytherly hym help þat hym so wele lykede" (ll. 1447-8). With an individualistic standard of chivalry, Gawain can engage in actions in the Alliterative *Morte* that are beyond Arthur, who must consider not only his own honor but also the good of his kingdom. Gawain's actions do in this instance ultimately benefit his larger community, since they lead to a victory in battle; individual chivalry is not opposed to communal chivalry. Rather, these priorities determine the type of actions a character can take. Through Gawain and Arthur, the Alliterative *Morte* balances these two forms of action, showing how these chivalries can support each other in an ideal world. But with the allusion to the beheading game, the alliterative poet suggests that chivalry exists not in an ideal world, but in a real world where beheaded men remain dead; this reduces the effectiveness of a chivalry focused on prowess and personal honor and begins to call its usefulness into question.

Gawain and Priamus at the Siege of Metz

Although Gawain appears briefly in Arthur's battle against Lucius, the next episode to feature Gawain prominently is the Siege and Foray at Metz (ll. 2218-25). Unlike the previous Gawain episode, which has roots in the chronicle tradition, this episode comes from the Alexander romances, a source entirely outside the English Arthurian chronicles and thus a striking addition to the Alliterative *Morte*.³⁸ After defeating Lucius, Arthur decides to attack the duchy of Lorraine, beginning with a siege of the town of Metz. On a Sunday during the siege, Arthur sends a group of knights under the charge of Florent to hunt in surrounding countryside, because "Vs moste with some fresche mette refresche oure pople" (l. 2491). With this request for fresh food, Arthur sends his knights on a hunt, giving them a respite from the battles that have followed each other unrelentingly for most of the Alliterative *Morte*. The poet spends several lines describing the idyllic countryside, a rarity in this poem that delights in describing warfare; in this setting, the knights relax: "Thare vnbrydills theis bolde and baytes peire horses / To þe grygyng of þe daye, þat byrdez gon synge / Whylls the surs of þe sunne, þat sonde es of Cryste, / That solaces all synfull þat syghte has in erthe" (ll. 2509-12). As Arthur's knights enjoy the countryside and their break from the harshness of war, the poet turns his attention to Gawain, who rides out "wondyrs to seke" (l. 2514). In the space of a few lines, the poet has changed the tone of his poem from chronicle to romance and the focus from the community of Arthur's knights, led by Florent, to the individual knight Gawain. Unsurprisingly, Gawain quickly finds a "wondyr" in the person of the knight Priamus, and the two knights meet in an individual combat

³⁸ Mary Hamel, "Introduction" in *Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition*, edited by Mary Hamel (New York: Garland, 1984): 39-42.

beginning with amazing feats of arms and ending with magical healing waters from the four rivers of Paradise. This fight then segues into a larger battle that ultimately wins the town of Metz for Arthur. While this episode primarily centers on Gawain's pursuit of personal glory, the closing battle places this individual chivalry firmly in the service of the larger community. Although in this episode the poem continues to question the effectiveness of individualistic chivalry and the pursuit of personal honor, it also shows how this pursuit can in turn benefit the knight's companions.

Despite the setting that resembles a romance more than an epic, this episode begins very similarly to the embassy to Lucius. Arthur appoints a group of knights to go out and perform a specific action; here, they are to go hunting and bring back food. Arthur places Sir Florent in charge of the hunt, then lists Gawain among several other knights who are to accompany Florent. The only indication that Gawain might have particular significance is that he alone of the accompanying knights gets an additional line of description: "Thare sall weende to þis viage sir Wawayne hym selfen, / Wardayne full wyrchipfull, and so hym wele seems" (ll. 2493-4). The phrase "sir Wawayne hym selfen" grants Gawain a certain significance by emphasizing that the great knight will grace the hunting party with his presence. As in the embassy to Lucius, Gawain is not placed in charge of the foray, despite his high status. Yet just as in the embassy, the poet quickly discards the other knights in order to focus on Gawain alone. In line 2512, the poet writes about all of the hunting knights, or even more broadly all humanity, as he describes the pleasant morning sunshine that greets the hunters, which "solaces all synfull þat syghte has in erthe." But in the very next line, the poet singles out Gawain: "Than weendes owtt the wardayne, sir Wawayne hym selfen, / Alls he þat weysse was and

wyghte, wondyrs to seke” (ll. 2513-4). Florent and the knights under his command are left behind as the poet turns to Gawain, and Gawain alone; the phrase “hym selfen” in this line echoes its earlier use that signaled Gawain’s status, but here it also subtly emphasizes that Gawain is by himself, alone in the forest. The focus shifts to Gawain the individual, not Gawain in community, even though as the episode begins he is situated as a member of Arthur’s community of knights.

This shift in focus is significant in two interconnected ways. First, it emphasizes Gawain as an individual, and an individual in a romance setting; second, as in the previous episode of the embassy to Lucius, it frees Gawain from the constraints of leadership and again separates him from Arthur (although this is complicated when, after his battle with Priamus, Gawain does lead Arthur’s men in battle). Thus, once again, the poet is able to juxtapose two different forms of chivalry and through this juxtaposition show both the flaws and the attractions of the chivalries displayed by Arthur and Gawain. In this episode in particular, Gawain represents all the adventure and individual glory that a romantically inclined fourteenth-century knight could aspire. Yet the alliterative poet persistently undermines the ideals that Gawain represents. Even he, Arthur’s greatest knight, fails to convert his foe, needs supernatural rescue from death, and does not avoid communal duties. He may achieve individual glory in this episode, but that glory is limited and, as in the embassy episode earlier, leaves the reader with questions about the appropriateness of Gawain’s pursuit of glory in this particular situation, although as before his actions are never explicitly censured and again benefit Arthur and his men.

Gawain’s romance adventure proceeds as follows: after riding out on his own, he quickly finds a “wondyr” in the person of Sir Priamus, a knight “wondyre wele armyde”

who, like Gawain, is out by himself, “Withoutene ony berne bot a boye one,” although also like Gawain, Priamus is part of a much larger force (ll. 2515, 2519). After a brief exchange of insults, the two men begin to fight, and the equality of the two combatant quickly becomes apparent as both are wounded in the initial encounter: “Thorowe scheldys þey schotte and scherde thorowe mailles: / Bothe schere thorowe schoulders a schaftmonde large. / Thus worthylye þes wyes wondede ere bothen; / Or they wreke þem of wrethe, away will þey neuer!” (ll. 2545-8). Priamus’ ability to wound Gawain puts him on a even plane with Gawain in terms of prowess. The two men continue to fight and wound each other until Priamus touches Gawain with a poisoned sword, and explains to Gawain, “For all þe barbours of Bretayne sall noghte thy blode stawnche, / For he þat es blemeste with þis brande, blyne schall he neuer” (ll. 2577-8). Although Gawain initially disbelieves Priamus, Priamus convinces him that he is indeed poisoned. The two men then begin an elaborate exchange of name and rank, in which Priamus reveals that he is a prince and descended from Alexander, Hector, Judas Maccabeus, and Joshua, four of the nine worthies, again showing that he is certainly Gawain’s equal (ll. 2595-2619). Gawain initially claims that he is no knight, “Bot with þe kydde Conquerour [Arthur] a knafe of his chambyre,” although after Priamus presses him, Gawain admits to his identity and his relationship to Arthur (“Cosyn to þe Conquerour” [ll. 2621, 2639]). Priamus then warns Gawain that the Duke of Lorraine is nearby with a large army, and Gawain takes Priamus back to his men as his prisoner. When they reach Arthur’s men, Priamus produces a potion made from “þe flour of þe four well / þat flowes owte of Paradice when þe flode ryces” that, when applied to wounds, will heal them so quickly that “The freke schalle be fische-halle within fowre howres” (ll. 2705-6, 2709). Once healed, Gawain and Priamus

along with the rest of Arthur's men begin to strategize about how to deal with the Duke of Lorraine and his armies; Priamus brings his men over to Arthur's side, deserting the Duke who had been retaining him and his army (although failing to pay them for their services). Gawain and Priamus proceed to defeat the Duke and his men, bringing him back as a prisoner to Arthur.

A few points stand out in this episode that undermine its expected romance conventions. While the poet never directly calls Gawain's chivalry into question, as the events unfold it never accomplishes as much as it purports to. Most crucially, Gawain neither wholly defeats nor truly converts Priamus. In many Middle English romances featuring Gawain, the knight effects an often, though not necessarily, magical transformation that brings a character who was outside the civilized circuit of the Arthurian court into that circuit.³⁹ An English audience familiar with other Gawain romances could reasonably expect the Priamus episode in the Alliterative *Morte* to follow a similar pattern, in which Gawain encounters Priamus, converts him to Christianity and chivalry, and brings him into Arthur's court. And at first glance, the Priamus episode follows exactly this pattern. But a second look reveals that Gawain need not convert Priamus to either Christianity or chivalry, that Priamus is ready to serve a new lord, and that Gawain's capture of Priamus happens through Priamus' generosity, not Gawain's prowess in single combat.

³⁹ See, for example, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Carl of Carlisle*, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain, Gollogras and Gawain*, or *The Turke and Sir Gawain*. Some of these romances use beheading as the means of transformation, as discussed above; in others, Gawain achieves transformation and reconciliation by alternate means. For a discussion of Gawain's transformative role in Middle English romance, see Thomas Hahn, "Introduction," in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS, 1995), 1-35.

Given the pattern of Gawain's encounters in English romances, it would seem typical for Priamus to be a pagan. When Malory adapts this episode in his *Morte Darthur*, he does make Priamus explicitly a pagan, not a Christian, so that Gawain can display the transformative power audiences expect of his chivalry.⁴⁰ Mary Hamel, however, has convincingly argued that Priamus is most likely a Greek Orthodox Christian; foreign without a doubt, but still a member of Christendom.⁴¹ In support of Hamel's argument, conversion does not explicitly take place in the Alliterative *Morte*: although Priamus asks that he be allowed to confess before his death, "To schewe schortly my schrifte and schape for myn ende," no confession or other Christian ritual takes place in the remainder of the episode (l. 2588). Pagan or not, Priamus has not been converted to Christianity by Gawain, making Gawain's chivalry less efficacious. And not only is Priamus not converted to Christianity, he also needs no conversion to chivalry, as proven by his lineage. Unlike the transformations Gawain works in other Gawain romances in which he converts a menacing, unchivalric figure into a knight of Arthur's court, here no such transformation need occur. Priamus counts four of the Nine Worthies among his ancestors; this ancestry combined with his courteous behavior indicate that in Priamus Gawain has met his equal in chivalry. Thus his chivalry still brings Gawain personal glory, and makes a friend of a man who would otherwise be an enemy of Arthur, but it loses its transformative power.

⁴⁰ Thomas Malory, *Works*, edited by Eugene Vinaver, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 137.

⁴¹ Mary Hamel, "The 'Christening' of Sir Priamus in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Viator* 13 (1982): 295-307.

In addition to the absence of transformative power in Gawain's chivalry in this episode, it is never entirely clear that Gawain even defeats Priamus. The fight between the two men ends when Priamus cuts Gawain with a venomous sword:

With þe venymous swerde a vayne has he [Priamus] towchede,
That voydes so violently þat all his [Gawain's] witte changede –
The vesere, the aventaille, his vesturis ryche
With the valyant blode was verrede all ouer!
Thane this tyrante tite turnes þe brydill,
Talkes vntendirly and sais “þow arte towchede!
Vs bus haue a blode-bande or thi ble change,
For all þe barbours of Bretayne sall noghte thy blode stawnche,
For he þat is blemest with þis brande, blyne schall he neuer.”
(ll. 2570-8).

Gawain is skeptical at first that Priamus speaks the truth: ““Ya’ quod sir Gawayne, ‘thow greues me bot lyttill; / Thowe wenys to glopyne me with thy gret wordez – / Thow trowes, with thy talkynge, þat my harte talmes!’” (ll. 2579-81). But Priamus convinces Gawain of his honesty, and the fight ends. As the two men subsequently exchange identities, Priamus laments that his pride has made him Gawain's prisoner: “And I am for cyrqwitarye schamely supprisede, / And be aw[n]tire of armes owtrayed fore euere” (ll. 2616-7). Here Priamus assumes that he is defeated and a prisoner; however, the poem does not explicitly show that Gawain defeats Priamus – rather, it shows Gawain receiving a potentially mortal wound from Priamus. Gawain's emergence as the victor in the battle occurs by subtle authorial fiat, as Priamus asserts his defeat and Gawain later announces Priamus as his prisoner, calling him on his return to Arthur's men “This prissonere sir Priamus” (l. 2690). The poem thus undermines Gawain's prowess just as it removes Gawain's transformative chivalric ability. Given the romance setting, audiences expect Gawain's victory in combat; by subverting that expectation, the Alliterative *Morte* again calls the effectiveness of chivalry into question. The poem questions the transformative

abilities of Gawain's chivalry by giving him a foe who needs no conversion and who desires to fight on Arthur's side. Yet Gawain still emerges the victor in combat (even if only by Priamus' forfeiture), receives miraculous healing, and brings Priamus into the Arthurian fold. Gawain's chivalry is effective, although not in the ways typical of English chivalric literature featuring Gawain. This episode thus highlights the simultaneous nostalgia for chivalry and awareness of the unreality of that chivalry that underlies the previous episode, and indeed the entire Alliterative *Morte*.

As this above discussion shows, in this episode the Alliterative *Morte* questions the value of individualistic chivalry. Despite his participation in an individual, romance encounter, that very encounter forces Gawain to assume leadership in an impending battle. Just as Gawain led Arthur's men into battle after the antagonistic mission to Lucius, so he must lead a battle again, but in this section the poet draws greater attention to Gawain's leadership. Priamus has informed Gawain that the Duke of Lorraine's forces are nearby, and Arthur's men face the choice of whether to fight as they are, with a reduced force that intended only to hunt, or to return to Arthur and stage the battle at a more suitable time. In the fashion of a knight mostly interested in his own individual glory and not the business of leading other knights, Gawain turns this decision to Florent who is, as Gawain reminds the audience, the knight Arthur has placed in charge of the hunting expedition:

We are with sir Florente as to-daye falles,
That es floure of Fraunce, for he fleede neuer;
He was chosen and chargegide in chambire of þe kynge
Chiftayne of þis journee with cheualrye noble.
Whethire he fyghte or he flee, we sall folowe aftyre;
Fore all þe fere of 3one folke, forsake sall I neuer! (ll. 2729-34)

Despite his effort to allow Florent to lead the knights, Florent passes responsibility back to Gawain: “My witte es bot symple; / 3e are owre wardayne, iwysse– wyrke as 3owe lykes” (ll. 2739-40). Although Gawain attempts to remain simply the knight who seeks individual glory apart from his larger community, he finds himself by virtue of his chivalric abilities leading a group of knights. This occurred in the previous episode, but by authorial sleight-of-hand: the poet casually refers to the group of knights as Gawain’s “stale,” his group of knights, after Gawain has taken control of the mission and cut off Gayous’ head (l. 1355). In this episode, the focus falls on how Gawain by acting on his own initiative achieves what Arthur cannot, demonstrating how individualistic chivalry complements a chivalry more focused on the needs of an entire community. The Priamus episode’s explicit transfer of leadership to Gawain emphasizes another way in which individualistic chivalry complements communal chivalry: the man who has achieved personal glory must also be a man capable of leading others to achieve similar glory.⁴²

The remainder of the episode emphasizes the connection between personal and communal chivalry in two further ways. First, the only knight killed in the battle is one Chastelayne, who “Was warde to sir Wawayn” (l. 2953). Gawain’s response to the death of his ward echoes Arthur’s response to the deaths of his knights in earlier battles. When Gawain sees that Chastelayne has been killed, he mourns: “Pan sir Gawayn gretes with his gray eghne – / The guyte was a gude man, begynnande of armes – / Fore the charry

⁴² This move from individual combat to actual warfare echoes the sentiment expressed by Geoffroi de Charny in his fourteenth-century *Book of Chivalry* that “one should value and honor men-at-arms engaged in war more highly than any other men-at-arms;” Charny praises war as the arena that best allows knights to engage in “all the three different kinds of military art, that is jousting, tourneying, and waging war” (*The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny: Text, Context and Translation*, eds. Richard W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996], p. 89. In light of this valuation of individual combat and warfare, Gawain’s move from an individual fight to directing a battle reflects his surpassing chivalric virtue.

childe so his chere chawngide / That the chillande watire on his chekes rynnyde” (ll. 2962-5). Gawain’s weeping recalls Arthur’s weeping earlier in the Alliterative *Morte*, when he hears of the death of several of his knights in an encounter led by Cador: “Thane the worthy kynge wrythes and wepede with his eghne;” Gawain’s subsequent killing spree to avenge Chastelayne corresponds to Arthur’s battle-rage after the death of Kay (ll. 1920, 2977-8, 2197-2217). Gawain’s care for a member of his household mirrors Arthur’s concern for his knights, showing that despite his interest in personal glory, Gawain’s chivalry at its best does consider a broader community. He is able to act in ways that may not be appropriate for a ruler, or a knight whose primary concern must be the benefit of his community, but his reaction to Chastelayne’s death demonstrates that even individualistic chivalry considers community.

The second connection between the personal and communal occurs when, despite Florent’s transfer of leadership to Gawain and Gawain’s capture of the Duke, the victory is attributed to Florent: “sir Florent be fyghte had þe felde wonen” (l. 3001). This occurs after the poem has widened its focus back to the whole group of Arthur’s knights: once the poem has finished describing Gawain’s exploits avenging the death of Chastelayne, the narrative returns to the deeds of “oure cheualrous men” (l. 2989). Similarly, the messenger to Arthur also attributes the victory to Florent primarily: “Sir Florent and sir Floridas and all thy ferse knyghtez – / Thay hafe forrayede and foghten with full gret nowmbyre, / And fele of thy foomen has broughte owt of lyffe” (ll. 3018-20). The messenger does describe Gawain’s exploits, but he does not mention Gawain’s role in guiding the battle (ll. 3021-6). Despite his acceptance of leadership in this episode, Gawain’s glory still rests on his individual exploits, not his leadership role. Yet by

accepting the leadership role from Florent, Gawain shows that his personal chivalry and pursuit of individual glory are capable of benefitting a much larger community – and not only benefitting the community, but also benefitting Florent in particular, since the victory is credited to him, not Gawain.

While this episode demonstrates the ways in which the pursuit of individual glory can be good for an entire community, even if it is less than effective in meeting the expectations of romance, its position in the Alliterative *Morte* also highlights the ways in which individualistic chivalry diverges from communal chivalry. Through once again contrasting Arthur and Gawain, the alliterative poet shows Gawain's freedom to pursue personal glory and take on personal risk, a freedom that Arthur lacks. Just as Arthur cannot directly avenge the insults of the Roman messengers, so he as king also cannot risk himself unnecessarily. Arthur in the Alliterative *Morte* is not the unengaged king he is in many other romances, the center of the action who himself does not participate; on the contrary, Arthur both goes into battle alone, as when he fights the Giant of Mont St. Michel, and with his knights, as when Arthur kills both Lucius and Mordred. But when Arthur risks injury or death, he does so when the good of the community is at stake. As mentioned above, critics have noted that Arthur's battle against the giant establishes not simply Arthur's personal valor but also his position as enemy of all that is evil; to indicate this, in Arthur's dream of a dragon battling a bear, the bear is interpreted to "Betakyns the tyrauntez þat tourmentez thy pople; / Or ells with somme gyaunt some journee sall happyn / In syngulere batell by 3oure selfe one, / And þow sall hafe þe victorye, thurgh he helpe of oure Lorde" (l. 824-7). And in the battle against Lucius, since

Arthur is fighting to establish his right to kingship, it is right that he defeat the ruler who opposes him.

While the Alliterative *Morte* thus establishes Arthur's prowess, the poem also makes clear that Arthur ought not to risk himself unnecessarily. When he rides with a few of his knights to survey the town of Metz, he shows himself to the archers on the city walls, drawing their attacks (ll. 2420-31). One of his companions, Ferrer, rebukes him:

“Sir” said sir Ferrere, “a foly thowe wirkkes,
Thus nakede in thy noblaye to neghe to þe walles
Sengely in thy surcotte this ceté to reche
And schewe þe within, there to schende vs all!
Hye vs hastylle heyne, or we mon full happen,
For hitt they the or thy horse, it harmes for euer!” (ll. 2432-7)

Although Arthur replies, “Sall neuer harlotte haue happe, thorowe helpe of my Lorde, / To kyll a corownde kynge with krysom enoyntede,” the poem never makes clear who is right in this situation: Arthur with his confidence in the divine protection of kings or Ferrar with his caution (ll. 2446-7). Historical context, however, may side with Ferrar; bowmen were not considered chivalrous because they could kill a person above them in the social order, even a king, from a safe distance and anonymously. Thus these archers pose a threat to the entire chivalric order Arthur stands for, and will cause great shame, as Ferrar points out, if they hit Arthur. For Arthur to risk harm in single combat or battle with social equals for the benefit of his community is acceptable; however, for him to risk himself out of confidence in his invulnerability as king is foolish. Ferrar's rebuke reminds the audience that Arthur's duty is to his community, not to himself or his own glory.

Arthur's carelessness of the risk of death before the walls of Metz comes just before Gawain's battle with Priamus, drawing a connection between these two events. Gawain's companions even echo Ferrar's concerns after Gawain returns, severely

wounded: “Be all þe welthe of þe werlde, so woo was þem [Gawain’s companions] neuer – / ‘For all oure wirchiþe, iwysse, awaye es in erthe!’” (ll. 2684-5). Like Ferrar, they fear a loss of honor if Gawain dies while with them. But unlike Arthur who can rely only on a theoretical divine protection of kings, Gawain has Priamus’ literal divine protection, the supernatural healing waters from the rivers of paradise. Gawain as an individual knight without communal responsibilities can risk himself in a way that Arthur cannot; however, the need for supernatural healing suggests that such a risk may not be wise outside the world of romance. Beyond the world of romance, an encounter such as that between Priamus and Gawain could end in disaster, neither effecting conversions nor benefitting the participants. Despite these limitations, as discussed above the Alliterative *Morte* shows this combat as ultimately successful. Thus, the poem does not condemn an individual knight risking himself in order to gain individual glory. The romance setting draws attention to the unrealistic nature of the pursuit of this type of chivalric honor; however, the poem in the subsequent battle shows how personal chivalry can benefit the larger community. Yet outside of the romance setting – in the “real world” of archers and sieges – individual combat becomes risky.

Given Gawain’s tendency to take risks in pursuit of personal glory in the Alliterative *Morte*, several critics have argued that he exhibits *desmesure* in his actions, especially in the Priamus episode.⁴³ Their arguments imply that, particularly in the Priamus episode with its romance setting and reliance on supernatural healing, Gawain’s

⁴³ See, for example, Fichte, “The Figure of Sir Gawain,” 106-16, and John Finlayson, “The Concept of the Hero in *Morte Arthure*,” in *Chaucer und seine Zeit: Symposium für Walter F. Schirmer*, edited by Arno Esch (Tubingen: Niemeyer, 1968): 249-74.

pursuit of chivalric glory is out of place. The middle of a siege, they suggest, is no place for a romance interlude; thus, the alliterative poet must be holding Gawain up as an example of chivalric excess. As discussed above, the poem does look at Gawain's chivalry critically in this episode, revealing how it cannot accomplish the type of conversions it seems to achieve; however, the poem also shows how Gawain's pursuit of glory serves his community. What this episode reveals, then, is not that Gawain is foolish, suffering from *desmesure* in his chivalric actions. Rather, two things about chivalry become clear: realistically, chivalry does not have the power to convert and transform those it encounters; it is not as effective in reality as it may be in romance, and inglorious death is an ever-present possibility. However, chivalry is still important: Gawain does gain a powerful ally in Priamus, an ally who helps him to win a battle for Arthur and gain glory for both himself and other knights, such as Florent. Gawain's pursuit of individual glory segues naturally into his pursuit of Arthur's glory and communal good. The individualistic romance setting of the Priamus episode signals that communal good is not of key importance to Gawain, but the conclusion of this episode demonstrates that the pursuit of individual glory is not mutually exclusive to the pursuit of communal glory. The alliterative poet tears down romantic notions of the effectiveness of individual chivalry, and with the magical healing potion warns of the dangers involved in the pursuit of honor, only to replace romantic ideas with a more realistic portrait of the ways that individuals interested in chivalric glory can channel those interests to serve a larger community.

Gawain in the Final Battle

We now arrive at the final appearance of Gawain in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, an appearance like the earlier ones significantly expanded from the poet's chronicle sources. In this final appearance, Gawain dies in the battle against Mordred. In the *Brut* tradition, as in the Alliterative *Morte*, Gawain dies in Arthur's final fight against the usurper Mordred. The chronicle sources, however, do not describe Gawain's death in any great detail, nor do they focus on his exploits in combat. But the author of the Alliterative *Morte* devotes more than 200 lines to Gawain's actions in battle, his death, and both Mordred and Arthur's subsequent mourning.⁴⁴ As in the previous two additions of Gawain-centered episodes to the source material, this section sets up Gawain's individualistic chivalry in contrast to Arthur's communal chivalry and balances Gawain's impulsive actions against extended praise of his chivalry. Gawain's actions, as in the previous sections, seem impulsive, rash or even foolish and unlike his previous battles are ultimately unsuccessful. Yet the poem's extended posthumous praise of Gawain suggests, as his successes suggested earlier, that his chivalry is admirable. Thus, the juxtaposition of the praise of Gawain's chivalry and its final failure demonstrates the final unsustainable nature of his martial, prowess-oriented chivalry. Despite the disappearance of this chivalry with Gawain's death, in light of the praise heaped on Gawain the poem's final attitude towards his individualistic, glory-seeking chivalry is one of nostalgia, not of censure; an attitude aware of both the potential shortcomings of this chivalry and the glory it can produce, of its admirableness yet unsuitability in the contemporary world.

⁴⁴ For a suggestion that Gawain's death in the Alliterative *Morte* echoes an Anglo-Saxon literary convention of a hero dying on a beach, see James D. Johnson, "'The Hero on the Beach' in the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76.2 (1975): 271-81.

Turning to the details of Gawain's final appearance, as in both of the previous episodes, Gawain here acts on his own impulses apart from the structure of Arthur's community. After a sea battle with Mordred's forces, Arthur and his men are temporarily stranded in the English channel, waiting for high tide so they can land: "Thanne was it slyke aslowde, in slakkes full hugge / That let þe kyng for to lande, and the lawe watyre. / Forthy he lendgede one laye, for lesynng of horsesyss" (ll. 3719-21). Arthur must consider the size of his force and the impossibility of landing all of his troops until he can come closer to the shore, and he must wait for the best time to move all of his forces into place for his land battle against Mordred. But Mordred is waiting on the shore, taunting Arthur's army with his simultaneous proximity and inability to be reached: "He ne schownttes for no schame, bot schewes full heghe!" (l. 3715). And while Arthur is constrained by the logistics of moving his entire force, Gawain is not. He chooses to land with a small force: "Than sir Gawayn þe gude a galaye he takys / And glides vp at a gole with gud men of armes" (ll. 3724-5). In the notes to this passage, Hamel indicates that these men of arms are Gawain's "personal retinue of 140 men;" Gawain leads these men against Mordred's "sexty thosandez of men" (l. 3717).⁴⁵ Once more, Gawain can disregard the needs of a larger community and pursue an individual chivalric endeavor in a way that Arthur cannot. But for the first time, the poet includes an authorial note on this endeavor: "my sorowe es the more!" (l. 3729). This warns the audience that Gawain's impulsive pursuit of individual chivalric glory and vengeance may not end well.

⁴⁵ Hamel, ed, *Morte Arthure*, 377n3729-30.

Critics of the poem have noted Gawain's tendency to impulsive action; Fichte sees this impulsiveness as part of Gawain's *desmesure*, his lack of wisdom.⁴⁶ The Priamus episode demonstrates that Gawain is aware that his actions often go against the most prudent course of action: in regard to engaging with the Duke of Lorraine's forces, Priamus advises, "I rede 3e wyrke aftyre witte as wyesse men of armes, / And warpes wylily awaye as wirchipfull knyghtes" (ll. 2745-6). Gawain immediately acknowledges the wisdom of this advice, saying "'I grawnte' quod sir Gawayne, 'so me Gode helpe'" (l. 2747). But as discussed above, he decides to stage a battle regardless of the wisdom – and lack of dishonor – in a strategic delay of battle. Thus Gawain does not lack wisdom, or at least the ability to hear wise advice; rather, he values the more dangerous and potentially more honorable action above the safer one. Up to this point in the Alliterative *Morte*, Gawain's impulsive pursuit of glory has both increased his honor and benefitted Arthur's men. The poet's comment, however, on this particular impulsive action indicates that Gawain's choice of impulse over prudence has finally caught up with him.

At the beginning of his attack, Gawain confidently asserts to his men that "We sall fell 3one false – þe fende hafe theire saules! – / Fichtes faste with þe frape; þe felde sall be owres" (ll. 3739-40). Gawain believes that his plunge into battle will result in the success that followed his previous impetuous rushes into conflict, as when he wins the skirmish against Lucius' men after beheading Gayous, and when he defeats the Duke of Lorraine after encountering Priamus. The odds of Gawain's 140 men against Mordred's 60,000 do not deter Gawain, or even enter into his exhortation of the men before they begin the battle (ll. 3732-44). And at first, Gawain's confidence in himself and his men

⁴⁶ Fichte, "The Figure of Sir Gawain," 111.

appears justified. The poem describes the deeds of these men as they defeat many of Mordred's men; Gawain's knights kill many men, "One þe danke of þe dewe many dede lyggys, / Dukes and duszeperis and dubbide knyghttys," while Gawain himself slays the "Kynge of Gutlande . . . a gude man of armes" (ll. 3750-1, 3763). But as soon as the alliterative poet has described the exploits of Gawain and his men, he again inserts an authorial comment foreshadowing Gawain's death. As Gawain and his men move towards the guard around Mordred, the poet comments: "Oure men merkes them [Mordred's guard] to, as them myshappenede; / For had sir Gawayne had grace to halde þe grene hill, / He had wirchipe, iwys, wonnen for euer!" (ll. 3767-9). The phrase "as them myshappenede" signals that this battle will not end well for Gawain and his men. Fichte interprets this authorial comment as a comment on Gawain's rashness and *desmesure*, arguing, "Had he [Gawain] concentrated his efforts 'to halde the grene hill' (3768) – a strategically important position – 'He had wirchipe, iwys, wonnen for euer' (3769). His obsession, however, to make his way through the hostile army in order to pursue the traitor Mordred gets the better of him."⁴⁷ But the poem does not make it clear that Gawain realized the strategic importance of the "grene hill" at the time, and the use of "myshappenede," which the MED defines as having bad luck, suggests that misfortune, not *desmesure* or undue obsession, causes the failure of Gawain's impetuous attack against Mordred.⁴⁸ Also indicative of Gawain's chivalry rather than suggestive of *desmesure* is the line "He had wirchipe, iwys, wonnen for euer." Although on the surface the line suggests that Gawain would have had greater honor had he been able to hold his

⁴⁷ Fichte, "The Figure of Sir Gawain," 111.

⁴⁸ MED, s.v. "mishappen."

position, in the context of the poem, Gawain does win “wirchipe . . . for euer” despite the failure of his charge against Mordred. The Alliterative *Morte* itself lavishly praises Gawain after his death, and the existence of the poem testifies to Gawain’s enduring “wirchipe.” Thus, even failure in battle does not tarnish Gawain’s reputation for chivalry.

Once Gawain realizes his mistake, however, he does plunge into what could be termed *desmesure*: he becomes nearly suicidal, and the poem characterizes him in this section as a wild animal and a madman. When Gawain sees that he and his men are trapped by the sea, “Thane sir Gawayne grette with his gray eghen / For grefe of his gud men that he gyde schulde; / He wyste that þay wondyde ware and wery forfoughtten, / And, what for wondire and woo, all his witte faylede” (ll. 3790-3). After a speech to inspire his men and assure them that for their work in battle they will “Souppe with oure Saueoure solemply in heuen,” Gawain rushes back into battle, and the poet describes his charge with language that indicates madness and even bestiality (l. 3795). Gawain is “alls vnwyse wodewyse,” “his reson was passede. / He fell in a fransye for fersenesse of herte;” he is described as “Letande alls a lyon” and “wode alls a wylde beste,” and finally as suicidal, “Alls he þat wold wilfully wasten hym selfen” (ll. 3817, 3825-6, 3831, 3837, 3835). However, only after it becomes clear that Gawain and his men cannot win the battle does he descend into an irrational battle frenzy; before this point, his deeds are not described any differently than in his other battles, aside from the authorial insertions foreshadowing his death. Gawain’s lack of control at this point in the battle suggests that he previously did have control of his actions, and that his eagerness to join battle with Mordred is no more rash than any of his other actions in the Alliterative *Morte*. Thus, although Christine Chism argues that, “It is precisely because the poem has just shown

Gawain's devolution into a figure of pure, untrammled, and ultimately suicidal fury that it selects him for a fantasy of chivalric canonization," it is not Gawain's descent into battle-madness that defines his chivalry.⁴⁹ Rather, his madness comes from the realization that he and his men will perish without accomplishing their goal of defeating Mordred; in this way, Gawain's great grief foreshadows Arthur's grief over Gawain's death, a grief that causes Arthur to swoon and display excessive sadness (ll. 3949-74). Gawain's grief and subsequent battle rage does not, therefore, epitomize his chivalry; instead, it is his response to both a personal failure and a communal failure, as he neither wins glory for himself, allows his men to win glory, nor benefits Arthur. The failure of chivalry in the face of Mordred's treachery causes Gawain's insanity, and narratively demonstrates the tenuous nature of chivalry. Even the greatest of Arthur's knights cannot maintain ideal chivalry in this situation.

If Gawain's perception of the failure of his chivalry drives him to madness, the alliterative poet turns this perception of failure on its head after Gawain's death. After Mordred kills Gawain ("With a trenchande knyfe the traytoure hym hyttes / thorowe þe helme and þe hede, one heyghe one þe brayne"), one of Mordred's companions, a King Frederick, asks who Gawain was (ll. 3856-7). This question spurs Mordred's lament over Gawain, which begins with ever-expanding praise of Gawain's characteristics both in war and in court and ends with Mordred weeping and repenting of his treachery as he rides away from the battlefield: "When þat renayede renke remembirde hym seluen / Of [þe] reuerence and ryotes of þe Rownde Table, / He remyd and repent hym of all his rewthe werkes" (ll. 3892-4). Despite his death, Gawain has through his chivalry at last effected a

⁴⁹ Chism, *Alliterative Revivals*, 225.

transformation. Gawain's previous motions towards transformation left Gayous dead and found in Priamus an equal in chivalry who needed no transformation, showing that his chivalry cannot in reality accomplish all that it claims to in the world of romance. But in this episode, Mordred's eulogizing of Gawain's chivalry causes a transformation to occur as Mordred repents of his actions. Gawain's chivalry still does fall short of romance ideals, since Mordred's repentance does not lead to reconciliation with Arthur. However, even this limited success points to the value of Gawain's chivalry. His pursuit of individual glory not only achieves that glory, but also moves beyond individual honor to social transformation. His chivalry has the power to win personal honor and effect change for the better in those who witness the achievement of that honor. Yet still, despite the final power of Gawain's chivalry to affect Mordred, neither Gawain nor Arthur's chivalry can achieve reconciliation with Mordred. This lack of reconciliation leads to the battle in which Arthur dies; thus, when individualistic chivalry fails, it contributes to harm for an entire community. In the end, the Alliterative *Morte* links the failure of individualistic chivalry to the failure of communal chivalry, and the final demise of a chivalric ideal in the deaths of Arthur and Gawain.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the poem leaves its audience with the impression that Gawain's chivalry, with its insistent focus on individual glory at all costs, may be admirable and even effective for achieving more than personal glory, but in the end is unsustainable. Of course, Arthur's chivalry is also unsustainable; his kingdom falls despite the concern he shows for his men and the prowess he displays when protecting his kingdom. With the

deaths of Gawain and Arthur, the Alliterative *Morte* ends with the death of chivalry in both of its forms at the hands of the harsh realities of war and politics. The poem thus looks with nostalgia at the chivalry of Arthur's kingdom, but this nostalgia is informed by a sense of the final unreality of the chivalry it admires. Chism writes of this simultaneous nostalgia and criticism, "Imbued by this late century consciousness of change, the *Morte Arthure* looks backward to propose a critique at once brutal and wistful. . . . it pushes the languages of war – as they constitute armor, body, blood, and loyalty – to theatrical extremes to show them for the wonderful, savage, and ultimately fatal beguilements that they are."⁵⁰ The true tragedy of the Alliterative *Morte* is that the chivalry exhibited by Gawain and Arthur can only exist in the world of romance or the world of the past.

The alliterative poet with his careful balancing of individual and communal chivalry, and his rejection of the romance excesses that assign great transformative power to chivalry, does gesture towards the way in which such chivalry can exist in the real world. These gestures lead Dean to assert that, "Together, in a world otherwise filled with tragedy and treachery, they [Gawain and Arthur] show that the ideals of medieval nobility exist and can be followed, whatever the consequences of doing so may be."⁵¹ But when the Alliterative *Morte* ends, the exemplars of chivalric ideals are dead. The contemporary world, with its shifting battle strategies and changing chivalric values, cannot sustain the ideal chivalry of the battlefield. This is not to say that such chivalry is worthless; indeed, the Alliterative *Morte* suggests that there is much to be admired and perhaps even emulated in chivalry. But if the greatest representatives of martial chivalry

⁵⁰ Chism, *Alliterative Revivals*, 208.

⁵¹ Dean, "Sir Gawain," 125.

in the romanticized past cannot sustain it, there is little hope for the existence of this form of chivalry in the contemporary world.

Chapter 2

Honor and Prowess in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

From the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, I now turn to another, but very different, mid- to late-fourteenth century work: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.¹ Unlike the Alliterative *Morte* which focuses on martial chivalry and the qualities appropriate to the knight on the battlefield, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a courtly romance that explores the aftermath of a Christmas game. Most of the romance takes place in a court, either Arthur's or Bertilak's, and Gawain primarily faces a test of his courtesy, not his prowess or bravery, although the poem presents such martial values as uneasily coexisting with courtly and religious virtues. The language of the poem is rich, and the dilemmas it raises remain compelling to modern audiences and provide seemingly endless interpretive possibilities to the modern critic. Reflecting these possibilities, a

¹ For an overview of the debates over the date of the poem and the evidence used for dating, see G.W. Cooke, "'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight': A Restored Dating," *Medium Aevum* 58 (1989): 34-48. Many critics see the romance as belonging to the reign of Richard II and thus a critique of Ricardian chivalry (see, for example, Sylvia Frederico "The Place of Chivalry in the New Trojan Court: Gawain, Troilus, and Richard II," in *Place, Space and Landscape in Medieval Narrative*, ed. Laura L. Howes [Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007], 171-9; Setsuko Haruta, "The End of an Adventure: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*," in *Literary Aspects of Courtly Culture*, eds. Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox [Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994], 353-60; and Winthrop Wetherbee, "Chivalry under Siege in Ricardian Romance," in *The Medieval City under Siege*, eds. Ivy A. Corfis and Michael Wolfe [Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1995], 207-23. In the comprehensive *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet* edited by Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson, the editors and contributors assume a late-fourteenth century Ricardian date (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997). Cooke argues for an earlier date for the poem, and in a separate article suggests that it can be dated c. 1353-61 (G.W. Cooke and D'A. J.D. Boulton, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: A Poem for Henry of Grosmont?" *Medium Aevum* 68 [1999]: 42-54). Francis Ingledew suggests that the poem is Edwardian and not Ricardian, thus probably dating to the mid-fourteenth century (Ingledew, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Order of the Garter*, [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006], 6-13). While being able to identify specific contextual events certainly could add to a discussion of chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as with the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* for the purpose of my argument the general context of shifting social values for chivalry in the mid- to late-fourteenth century makes the questions raised in this text relevant regardless of the exact date of composition.

quick search in the International Medieval Bibliography turns up nearly 500 books and articles on the poem, a daunting amount of criticism on a work of barely more than 2500 lines (and significantly more articles than exist for all the other romances discussed in this dissertation combined). It is thus with some amount of trepidation that I contribute to this body of scholarship, as it seems that little remains to be said of the romance, and decisive insight leading to critical consensus on the meaning of nearly any aspect of the poem is most likely impossible. Yet I will argue in this chapter that, although the *Gawain*-poet probably could not have envisioned the academic debates of the last century over his work, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by deliberate indeterminacies invites exactly this sort of consideration of the issues at stake in the poem from a medieval audience deeply invested in determining the most useful social expressions of chivalry.² While chivalry is a large and complex topic in the poem, ranging from religious idealism to courtly love, from prowess and courage to courteous speech, I focus specifically on the role of prowess in Gawain's perception of his personal honor. With this focus, I primarily consider the exchange of blows game initiated by the Green Knight as the poem begins and concluded at the end of the romance by the revelation of Gawain's failure in the subsequent exchange of winnings game. The challenge of the exchange of blows most clearly reveals the tension surrounding the role of chivalric prowess in a courtly society.

Before turning to the specific issues of chivalry in the text, it is important to address the recent critics who have read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a romance that calls attention to the blurred lines between play and reality in the "real world" of medieval

² I am certainly not the first or only critic to focus on the indeterminacy of the poem as regards chivalry; see, for example, Wendy Clein, *Concepts of Chivalry in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Norman, OK: Pilgram Books, 1987); A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); and Haruta, "The End of an Adventure," 358.

chivalry.³ In these readings, the Green Knight's potentially deadly challenge is packaged as a game, highlighting the way in which the "play" of chivalry — the social posturing — has real-life, and possibly detrimental or even fatal, consequences. Chivalry thus becomes a social veneer that functions well in the world of the court, but has little value outside of it where the real business of fighting, governing and living takes place. But this discounts the very real medieval concerns about the value of chivalry to society. Certainly chivalry in fourteenth-century England has aspects of play and pageantry, such as the Christmas games that happen at Arthur's court in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that allow knights and ladies to demonstrate courtly behavior of the kind that generates a pleasant party.⁴ But historical evidence in the form of chivalric manuals and courtesy books suggest that there was also real interest in the ways in which chivalry and courtesy could shape society, both by governing individual behavior and by forging social bonds.⁵ That is, while chivalry is sometimes play, it is more often part of the serious business of living as a member of the nobility in medieval England.

I therefore argue that it is problematic to view *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as critical of the entirety of the chivalric ideal. Critical of parts, certainly; as I will argue, the romance holds the virtues of prowess and courage, and with them the role of chivalric

³ Carl Grey Martin, "The Cipher of Chivalry: Violence as Courtly Play in the World of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *The Chaucer Review* 43.3 (2009): 311-29; Victoria L. Weiss, "The Play World and the Real World: Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Philological Quarterly* 72.4 (1993), 403-18.

⁴ Weiss has an extensive discussion of real fourteenth-century chivalric games in her article, "The Play World and the Real World," 403-18.

⁵ For the role of medieval courtesy manuals in the works of the *Gawain*-poet, see J.W. Nicholls, *The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1985). For analyses of the role of courtesy in society, see John Gillingham, "From *Civilitas* to Civility: Codes of Manners and Mores in Medieval and Early Modern England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 12 (2002), 267-89; and Mark D. Johnston, "The Treatment of Speech in Medieval Ethical and Courtesy Literature," *Rhetorica* 4.1 (1986), 21-46.

violence, up to scrutiny. But the romance does not suggest that chivalry as a general ideal fails Gawain or that Gawain should abandon the game of chivalry; like any critique of a social institution in which it is enmeshed, the romance lacks the perspective of a modern critic who can clearly see the social failures of chivalric ideals (and project them back into medieval texts). Thus, I approach this text as one that questions aspects of chivalry, and invites its audience to participate in that questioning, but also as a text invested in molding chivalric ideals to best serve society. Perhaps the best way to approach this question of play and chivalry in the romance is to see *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* itself as play: the chivalry displayed by the characters in the romance ultimately has no impact on the real world of the fourteenth century. Yet the romance in its chivalric play becomes a staging-ground for discussions about chivalry outside of romance. By scrutinizing chivalric ideologies in a play world, the romance allows its audience to better formulate useful manifestations of chivalric identities within their real social context.

One of the primary aspects of chivalry interrogated by the *Gawain*-poet is that of reputation and personal honor, and specifically the link between prowess and honor. In a discussion of chivalric honor in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, D. S. Brewer observes the close relationship between prowess and honor: "How is honour obtained in this fierce, masculine, aristocratic society? Primarily . . . by fighting bravely in battle or tournament; specifically, by defeating the enemy, or by helping friends who are in difficulty, and by fighting fairly."⁶ This connection between honor and prowess is developed in great detail in Geoffroi de Charny's fourteenth-century *Book of Chivalry*, a chivalric manual

⁶ "Introduction," in *Malory: The Morte Darthur*, ed. D.S. Brewer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 25. The classic essay on honor, from which Brewer draws, is Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," in *The Nature of Human Society: Honour and Shame*, ed. J. G. Peristiany (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 19-78.

contemporaneous with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Charny describes an increasing scale of chivalric honor in which the knight who seeks out warfare is more honorable than the one content with tournaments; the ability to wisely direct battles and a reputation for wisdom and prowess complete Charny's ideal knight.⁷ Although the *Gawain*-poet takes pains to balance Gawain's reputation for prowess against his other chivalric virtues, using the image of the pentangle to equate the three primary chivalric qualities of prowess, piety and courtesy, Gawain himself like Charny's knight continually values prowess above his other characteristics. His concern for the martial reputation of Arthur's court prompts him to participate in the Green Knight's game of exchanged blows, and his concern for his own reputation as a brave and honest knight prompts him to seek out the Green Knight and receive his return blow. Yet even as Gawain roots his chivalric reputation in his prowess and bravery, his knightly response to violence, the romance questions whether Gawain is right to value prowess so highly.

One way in which *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* raises this question is through a constant pattern in which the threat of violence is raised only to be dismissed or dissipated. The romance opens with a martial reference to the Trojan war, but immediately brings the audience not to the war itself but to its end: "Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye" (l. 1).⁸ From this ending, the poem moves on to the nation-building that occurred through Aeneas and his descendants, and then to Britain itself and the youthful days of Arthur's court. From a beginning that echoes the tradition of English

⁷ Richard W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy, ed. and trans., *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny: Text, Context, and Translation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

⁸ All quotes taken from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 4th edition, eds. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002).

Bruts, with their focus on the military history of England, the poem denies expectations of a history of war and turns instead to a romance setting with Arthur's court enjoying a Christmas feast. Yet this peaceful setting also becomes threatened by violence when the Green Knight arrives: although he insists that he comes in peace, wearing no armor and bearing a holly branch as a token of Christmas goodwill, he goads Arthur's court about their lack of prowess and challenges them to a game in which blows given by a giant axe are exchanged. Gawain responds to the Green Knight's challenge with careful and courteous speech, then violently hacks off the knight's head, maintaining the quick alteration between peace and violence. As the romance progresses, it undercuts Gawain's many violent adventures in seeking the Green Knight by making them less troublesome than the weather. And Gawain, because he is so focused on the courage required to face his return blow, is nearly oblivious to the tests of his courtesy and loyalty that occur during his stay at Hautdesert. Finally, after receiving his return blow and learning that the Green Knight is the same Bertilak who has been his host and whom he cheated in the exchange of winnings game by retaining the green girdle, Gawain passionately accuses himself of cowardice. Yet the romance continues to question the association between honor, prowess and bravery through the judgments of the Green Knight and Arthur's court, who even if they acknowledge a flaw do not identify it as a lack of courage or a stain on Gawain's chivalric reputation.

With these three judgments, the *Gawain*-poet leaves his audience with three distinct perceptions of Gawain's character and his failings, and as J. J. Anderson argues, "gives no sign as to which one we should accept."⁹ The romance does not resolve the questions

⁹ J. J. Anderson, "The Three Judgments and the Ethos of Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *The Chaucer Review* 24 (1989/90): 339

it raises about Gawain's courage or cowardice, or the importance of prowess as compared to courtesy. But the very fact that these questions are central to the formation of chivalry in the romance suggests that the relationship between chivalric prowess and chivalric courtesy needs to be carefully considered. There is thus in the text an implicit criticism of a formulation of chivalric honor that rests primarily on the values of prowess and bravery. But it is not clear that a chivalry of only courtly values, such as courteous speech and adeptness in the games of courtly love, is superior to martial values; after all, it is Gawain's indulgence in courtly activities at Hautdesert that leads to his (in his own words) cowardly acceptance of the green girdle with its life-saving potential. And the three judgments of Gawain's behavior at the end of the poem offer little guidance: is his acceptance of the green girdle a complete betrayal of his chivalric ideals, and principally of the ideals of bravery, generosity and loyalty, as Gawain himself claims? Is it only a small fault in bravery, due to an understandable fear of death, as Bertilak says? Or is it no fault at all, as Arthur's court concludes when they adopt Gawain's badge of shame as a mark of honor? By constantly raising the possibility of violence and the necessity of courage and prowess, then undercutting the importance of these values, the *Gawain*-poet raises the question of how much of a role martial chivalry should play in the formation of knightly honor and reputation.

The Setting: Balancing Prowess and Courtesy

As it both presents and undercuts violence, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* begins, strikingly, with an ending: "Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye" (l. 1). The end of the Trojan war, of course, leads to the beginning of many other nations;

the *Gawain*-poet after this opening lists the descendants of Aeneas who gave their names to the lands of Europe, from “riche Romulus” who founded Rome to “Felix” Brutus who conquered Britain (ll. 8-15). But it is significant that the poem opens with the end of war and the foundation (and peaceful foundation, as far as the opening lines of the poem suggest) of nations. This frame not only gives the audience in brief the history of Britain, a history much more thoroughly developed in the tradition of the *Brut* chronicles, but also sets the tone for a peaceful adventure: this is not going to be a story of war, but a story of beginnings. The *Gawain*-poet does not, of course, deny the presence of war in Britain’s history; the wheel at the end of the first stanza reminds the audience of the conflict dismissed in the opening line of the poem, describing Britain as a place “Where werre and wrake and wonder / Bi syþez hatz wont þerinne / And oft boþe blysse and blunder / Ful skete hatz skyfted synne” (ll. 16-19).¹⁰ This turn at the end of the opening stanza indicates that war and wonders, turmoil and happiness come by turns even to Britain. Yet in the next stanza, as the poem moves to Arthur specifically, the poet sets his audience firmly in a time of wonders: “Forþi an aunter in erde I attle to schawe, / Þat a selly in siȝt summe men hit holden / And an outrage awenture of Arthurez wonderez” (ll. 27-9). The repetition of the word “wonder” from the wheel of the previous stanza tells the audience that this poem falls not in a time of “werre and wrake” but a time of peace, when “Arthur þe hendest” and his knights can pursue the marvelous adventures that sometimes abound in Britain (l. 26).

The romance thus opens with Arthur’s court in its early days, presumably past the wars that marked the beginning of Arthur’s own rule; that is, war lies behind Arthur in

¹⁰ Particularly in the first fitt of the poem, the bob and wheel and the end of each stanza present a different or even conflicting view on what the stanza proper has described.

both the distant and the immediate past, freeing him to engage in feasting and games at Christmas. But despite its opening at the end of war, and the following descriptions of Arthur's Christmas court with its joyful jousting, feasting, dancing and games that root this romance in wonders rather than war, the opening stanza leaves the threat of war hovering behind the romance activities. Particularly with the "Ful skete" — very swift — potential alternation between "blysse and blunder" — joy and strife — the importance of the martial values of prowess and bravery in Arthur's court is understandable. In other words, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* may open in a time of peace, when war has ceased and wondrous adventures are possible, but the very real threat of war lingers and influences their perception of what is essential to knightly honor and reputation.¹¹ Thus the chivalry of Arthur's court must remain poised between practicing the courtesies appropriate to peacetime such as jousting, feasting and interacting with women, and being prepared to exercise their martial prowess and bravery in the face of a threat. The Green Knight's recounting of what he has heard about the reputation of Arthur's court shows this balance between the court's renown for "kydde cortaysye" and for being "Stifest vnder stel-gere on stedes to ryde" (ll. 263, 260). This reputation demonstrates that the honor of Arthur's knights rests in both aspects of their chivalry. Yet the way the *Gawain*-poet juxtaposes these two sides of chivalric honor and reputation, aspects that

¹¹ Violence also lies in the future of Arthur's court, as the audiences of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* would have been well aware; especially with the allusions to the chronicle histories in the opening stanza, audiences would have been reminded of the war that ended Arthur's kingdom. Moreover, a number of the characters alluded to in the first and second parts of the romance have a significant role in the later destruction of Arthur's kingdom in the French Vulgate romance *La Mort le Roi Artu*, and these allusions could remind the audience of trouble to come. See Edward Donald Kennedy, "Gawain's Family and Friends: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Its Allusions to French Prose Romances," in *People and Texts*, ed. Thea Summerfield and Keith Busby (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 143-60.

alternate rather than coexist, suggests that it is difficult to determine which, if either, value should be the primary basis of chivalric reputation.

As the narrative of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* gets underway, Arthur's court displays both prowess and courtesy. The knights present at the Christmas celebration engage in displays of prowess, as "Þer tournayed tulkes by tyme ful mony, / Justed ful jolilé þise gentyle kniȝtes," then move into the court for "daunsyng on nyȝtes" (ll. 41-2, 47). The knights engage in chivalrous activities that range from war games to kissing games, moving seamlessly between licit knightly violence (in the world of romance, unlike the world of reality, knightly violence is free from attempts by the church to ban tournaments) and proper courtly behavior.¹² Yet the *Gawain*-poet begins to weave in notes of uncertainty about the apparent balance between prowess and courtesy through the character of Arthur. When the king and his court sit down to eat on New Years Day, the poem describes Arthur's habit of waiting to begin until

hym deuised were
Of sum auenturus þyng, an vncouþe tale
Of sum mayn meruayle þat he myȝt trawe,
Of alderes, of armes, of oþer auenturus;
Oþer sum segg hym bisoȝt of sum siker knyȝt
To joyne wyth hym in justyng, in jopardé to lay,
Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchon oþer,
As fortune wolde fulsun hom, þe fayrer to haue. (ll. 92-99)

At the beginning of the above description, this habit seems an innocent indication of the high spirits of the Arthurian court and Arthur's own thirst for adventure.¹³ Even the inclusion of jousting seems to fit with the court as described previously; after all, this is

¹² For the reference to kissing games, see Andrew and Waldron's note to l. 66ff, *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, 210.

¹³ It is also one of Arthur's conventional romance habits, and not unique to this romance.

the activity that the knights have engaged in all day. But the last two lines are jarring: Arthur not only seeks novelty, but he is willing to risk his life in its pursuit. This sudden insertion of a battle to the death is at odds with the preceding descriptions of holiday games, and it indicates that the valuation of prowess in Arthur's court is off-balance. The poet's description of Arthur seems to further this imbalance, as he is described almost like a hyper-active child: "His lif liked hym lyzt; he louied þe lasse / Auþer to longe lye or to longe sitte, / So bisied him his zonge blod and his brayn wylde" (ll. 87-9). He is a young and enthusiastic ruler, but these lines question whether these are the best qualities for a king and knight, particularly with the term "wylde," which suggests a dangerous lack of restraint. Arthur's ritual of waiting for some pre-meal excitement shows exactly this lack of restraint: waiting for a tale or a guest is one thing, but venturing one's life for amusement is another. Here we see that the violence required by a high valuation of prowess constantly threatens to disrupt the peace of Arthur's court.

One potential reading of Arthur's seeming inability to distinguish between chivalric amusement and foolish risk-taking can be found in the previously discussed analysis of violence as play in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Martin argues that, for the knights in the poem, chivalry is a game divorced from reality; for example, he characterizes the Green Knight thus: "Happy to fight and indifferent to injury, he consistently ignores the imposition of concrete reality. . . . Most impressive is his radical rejection of physical law, which he abrogates by remaining alive and fully functional despite the brutal splitting of his body."¹⁴ Following Martin's logic, then, Arthur's attitude towards risking himself for the sake of amusement is nothing but a feature of chivalry. But this argument

¹⁴ Martin, "The Cipher of Chivalry," 313

depends upon a too-simplistic equation of chivalry and violence. Although historians such as Richard Kaeuper and Stephen Jaeger argue that chivalry and violence are inextricably related and that chivalry functions to both contain and legitimize that violence, the ideal of chivalry has always been concerned with behavior both on the battlefield and in the court.¹⁵ The rituals of formal social interaction are meant to establish bonds and relationships among members of and visitors to a society. The large number of surviving medieval courtesy books that deal primarily with social rather than martial behavior demonstrates that medieval society was interested not simply in the way courtesy could contain violence but also in the ability of courteous behavior to function as a social lubricant.¹⁶ While clearly part of the function of chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is to contain and legitimize violence, as the elaborate agreement between the Green Knight and Gawain shows, to insist that it is the whole function of chivalry in the poem is to ignore or minimize the ways in which the poem questions the place of violence in chivalric society and the relationship between courtesy and violence in conceptions of honor.

In his reading of the poem, Martin does complicate this notion of chivalry as a game divorced from reality by arguing that what Gawain learns when he keeps the girdle

¹⁵ Richard Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals, 939-1210* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985). See the Introduction for a fuller discussion of their views on chivalry.

¹⁶ See, for example, Nicholls, *The Matter of Courtesy*, in which he discusses the influence of courtesy books (rather than chivalric manuals) in the works of the *Gawain*-poet; see also John Gillingham, "From *Civilitas* to Civility," 267-89. Gillingham points out the large amount of advice in these books for members of noble households that is unrelated to war; he argues, speaking of Daniel of Beccles' *Liber Urbani*, that "It is an awkward text for those who think that the life of the secular elite was dominated by war since there are only a dozen lines on soldierly activity (less than 0.5 per cent of the total number). As a genre, indeed, courtesy books of all periods have little to say about war" (275).

is that violence, no matter what the chivalrous trappings that cloak it, has real-world consequences; keeping the girdle thus represents not a fault but a necessary realization.¹⁷ Yet I argue that the way in which the *Gawain*-poet presents both Britain in general and Arthur's court in particular as places where violence and peace constantly alternate demonstrates a more complicated view of chivalry than that presented by Martin or the historians who view chivalry as primarily concerned with violence. Arthur's willingness to mingle peace and violence in his pre-feast ritual shows not an ideological inability to understand the consequences of violence but instead demonstrates the tenuous relationship between prowess and courtesy in constructions of chivalric reputation. In this, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* displays a concern that chivalry be not merely a colorful gloss on violence but also a code of behavior appropriate to peace-time and to social rituals such as the feast. Which is not to say that the poem is not concerned with prowess as a knightly virtue; indeed, Arthur's youth and hot-headedness have not prevented him from successfully guiding his kingdom through war to the period of peace and marvels that opens the poem, as a medieval English audience would recognize. But the initial setting of the poem, with its references to the end of the Trojan war, the foundation of Britain, and the peaceful youth of Arthur's court, immediately raises the issue of how the knightly qualities appropriate to war are to be valued in relation to those appropriate to peace.

In analyzing the Green Knight's challenge to Arthur's court in this first fitt of the poem, Greg Walker argues convincingly that the challenge is one that "seeks to provoke

¹⁷ Martin "Cipher of Chivalry," 319; see also Victoria Weiss, "The Play World and the Real World," 403-19, in which she presents an argument about violence similar to Martin's, but observes, "medievals show every sign of having been able to distinguish play from real life" (404).

Camelot and its king out of their playful civility by reminding them of their martial origins: exposing the warband lying barely submerged beneath the surface of the Court.”¹⁸ Yet from the opening stanzas, it is not so clear the war band is submerged at all. When the Green Knight comes into the court, the knights have just returned from a day on the tournament field, not fighting in earnest perhaps but certainly using the same skills necessary on the battlefield. And Arthur’s willingness to risk his life in a joust displays the courage of a warlord before his men. Civility and violence already mingle in Arthur’s court; the Green Knight provokes the court to both acknowledge and analyze this situation. Thus, while Walker’s point that the Green Knight’s challenge tests the balance between chivalric violence and chivalric courtesy in Arthur’s court is compelling, I argue further that the *Gawain*-poet presents Arthur and his court as ripe for just such a challenge. Despite its outward civility and treatment of chivalry as a pleasant game, like Britain itself Arthur and his court are poised to plunge into violence at a moment’s notice. This makes the Green Knight’s challenge to Arthur’s court and subsequent skepticism about their reputation, to which I turn next, all the more complex.

Testing Courtesy and Prowess: The Green Knight’s Challenge

If the setting of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* raises questions about how Arthur’s knights should value prowess and courtesy, the Green Knight himself embodies the tensions between violence and courtliness. Although he is not clearly a supernatural creature, he is not clearly a man either; he comes to Arthur’s court dressed for feasting rather than combat and carries a holly branch in one hand, yet his other hand carries a

¹⁸ Greg Walker, “The Green Knight’s Challenge: Heroism and Courtliness in Fitt 1 of ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,’” *The Chaucer Review* 32.2 (1997): 118

menacing axe and he threateningly rides his horse into Arthur's hall. Although his initial speech seems unexceptional, he addresses Arthur with the informal and potentially insulting "thou" rather than the formal "you." Despite his claim that he wishes to see for himself Arthur's renowned court and engage them in a Christmas game, he quickly turns to baldly insulting Arthur's knights as "berdlez chylder" (l. 280) and his game is a potential death sentence for whoever accepts unlike a more conventional joust or quest. Although even the nature of the game itself is unclear: not until the Green Knight bares his neck to receive Gawain's blow is it obvious that the exchange of blows is a beheading game. The complex nature of the Green Knight himself and of his challenge requires a careful response from Arthur and Gawain. Gawain in particular matches the Green Knight's challenge by responding both with exquisite courtesy in accepting the proposed game and with striking prowess as he cleanly severs the Green Knight's head from his body. Yet the Green Knight's miraculous survival undermines Gawain's display of prowess. He may have saved the reputation of Arthur's court, but only through participating in the game, not through successfully beheading the Green Knight. Thus, while Gawain's prowess serves an important function, even this first test reveals that it alone is not an adequate basis for chivalric honor and reputation.

The first notable feature of the Green Knight's challenge is, of course, the Green Knight himself. The *Gawain*-poet never settles on what sort of man or creature he is, except for one who is green; given the significance of the ambiguities the Green Knight embodies, it is worth quoting this opening description at length:

Per hales in at þe halle dor an aghlich mayster,
On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe;
Fro þe swyre to þe swange so sware and so þik,
And his lyndes and his lymes so longe and so grete,

Half-etayn in erde I hope þat he were,
 Bot man most I algate mynn hym to bene,
 And þat þe myriest in his muckel þat myzt ride;
 For of bak and of brest al were his bodi sturne,
 Both his wombe and his wast were worthily smale,
 And all his fetures folzande in forme, þat he hade,
 Ful clene.
 For wonder of his hwe men hade,
 Set in his semblaunt sene;
 He ferde as freke were fade,
 And oueral enker grene. (ll. 136-50)

The most striking feature of this description is that the poet, and consequently the audience, is never quite clear on whether or not this being is a human. The first lines of description imply not; while he is initially described as an “aghlich mayster,” a fearsome lord, the following lines suggest that he is a giant: he is tall and muscular (“sware” and “þik”), with long limbs, and the narrator himself says that, due to his size, he thinks this being is at least a half-giant. The knight is so large and so fearsome that it hardly seems possible that he could be human. Yet, almost reluctantly it seems, the narrator must also acknowledge that he is “man,” and not only human but in possession of the sort of strength and beauty that would indicate not just a human but a nobleman. And then in the wheel, the poet places this knight back in the realm of at least the marvelous, if not the grotesque: he is entirely green. So the poet has shifted his description of the knight in these fifteen lines from monstrous to comely to supernatural, with no final indication of to which category the Green Knight belongs. This indeterminacy about whether or not this knight is a human is deeply significant for the challenge that follows. If the knight is indeed a giant, then violence is an appropriate response; but if he is a man, then courtesy is necessary. Yet with his indeterminate form, the appropriate response is unclear. The poet dramatizes this when the Green Knight first speaks, and the entire court responds

with silence: “þerfore to answere watz arȝe mony apol freke / And al stouned at his steuen and ston-stil seten / In a swoghe sylence þurȝ þe ale riche” (ll. 241-3). Because they do not know what he is, other than perhaps a phantom or supernatural being (“Forþi for fantoum and fayryȝe þe folk þere hit demed”), Arthur’s knights do not know how to treat him (l. 240). In their inability to determine whether he is a man, supernatural creature or illusion, they are unable to determine whether his entrance calls for a display of prowess or courtesy.

This ambiguity extends to the intentions of the Green Knight as the romance describes his appearance, beginning with his clothing and elaborating on his rich furs and silks, beautifully embroidered and expensively decorated with gems and gold, indicating that he is a nobleman (ll. 151-72).¹⁹ Yet the wheel of this stanza informs the audience that he is also riding a horse into the hall:

þe sole þat he ferkkes on fyn of þat ilke,
 Sertayn:
 A grene hors gret and þikke,
 A stede ful stif to strayne,
 In brawdren brydel quik;
 To þe gome he watz ful gayn. (ll. 173-8)

That the wheel comes back to the horse after a full stanza describing the knight's elaborate and noble clothing is significant for two reasons: first, it reminds the audience again of the Green Knight's fearsome size and color, as the horse is (necessarily) well suited, "ful gayn," to the knight, large and strong enough to carry him and a matching supernatural color.²⁰ Secondly, the revelation that the knight has entered the hall riding a

¹⁹ For an analysis of the Green Knight's clothing and his noble status, see Suzanne Craymer, "Signifying Chivalric Identities: Armor and Clothing in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Medieval Perspectives* 14 (1999), 50-60.

²⁰For “gayn” as “suitable,” see MED s.v. “gein,” 2(c).

horse calls into question the connection previously made between his fine body, his expensive clothes, and his place in the world of courtesy. As Jonathan Nicholls points out, remaining mounted in a hall is discourteous; he notes, “To remain on horseback indicates mobility and the capability of attack. It also gives the mounted person a height advantage which emphasizes his challenge for superiority.”²¹ The romance thus constantly calls into question who this knight is and what his intentions may be, and this ambiguity continues in the next stanza (ll. 179-202). These lines principally describes the Green Knight and his horses’ hair; the man’s hair is long and luxurious, surrounding his shoulders “in þe wyse / Of a kyngez capados,” like a cape worn by royalty, and the horses’ mane and tail are braided with gold wires and decorated with gems and bells (ll. 185-6, 187-95). The poet ends the main part of the stanza by reiterating his awe at the knight’s appearance and steed: “Such a fole vpon folde, ne freke þat hym rydes, / Watz neuer sene in þat sale wyth syzt er þat tyme / With yze” (ll. 196-8). Yet once again, the wheel brings back the menace of this knight: “Hit semed as no mon myzt / Vnder his dynttez dryze” (ll. 201-2). After nearly twenty lines of describing the Green Knight’s hair, hardly the most threatening aspect of his appearance, the poem returns to the threat of violence, and unmatched violence, that the knight presents.²² Every aspect of the Green Knight thus far presents an interpretive challenge to Arthur and his court: is he a threat to be met with prowess or a noble guest deserving of courtesy?

²¹ Nicholls, *The Matter of Courtesy*, 119.

²² In this context, the Green Knight’s hair may also carry connotations of the biblical figure Samson, whose great (indeed, supernatural) strength depended upon his hair remaining uncut. In his diatribe against women after his meeting with the Green Knight at the Green Chapel, Gawain mentions Samson as a famous figure tricked by a woman (ll. 2417-8); the presence of Samson later in the poem may support a possible connection between the Green Knight’s hair and his supernatural appearance and strength in this passage. But even if an allusion to Samson is present in the text here, it remains true that beautiful hair is an unlikely feature to inspire awe for someone’s prowess.

The next stanza, and final description of the Green Knight's appearance, suggests that the Knight calls forth both responses from Arthur's court. Immediately following the assessment of the Green Knight's prowess, the poem takes pains to emphasize that he wears no armor: "Wheþer, had he no helme ne hawbergh nauþer / Ne no pysan ne no plate þat pented to armes / Ne no schafte ne no schelde to schwue ne to smyte" (ll. 203-5). The repetition of "ne" and "no" and the list of all the armorial elements he is not wearing or carrying swings the audience back to viewing this man as a courteous knight rather than a threat: his appearance in general may be menacing, yet he seems to offer no specific threat to Arthur's court. In fact, he carries a holly branch, apparently the Yuletide equivalent to the peace-indicating olive branch. But finally, the poet reveals that although the Green Knight may wear no armor and carry a symbol of peace, he also carries huge axe, "with a brod egge / As wel scharpen to schere as scharp rasores" (ll. 212-3). The relentless ambiguity surrounding the Green Knight's physical appearance and intentions ultimately parallels Arthur's court's reputation for both prowess and courtesy. His appearance as both a courteous nobleman and a supernatural threat allows the Green Knight to test the dual aspects on which the praise of Arthur and his court are based.

The Green Knight himself affirms this purpose as he explains to Arthur why he has come to the court:

Bot for þe los of þe, lede [Arthur], is lyft vp so hyze
 And þy burȝ and þy burnes best ar holden,
 Stifest vnder stel-gere on stedes to ryde,
 Þe wyȝtest and þe worþyest of þe worldes kynde,
 Preue for to play wyth in oþer pure laykez,
 And here is kydde cortaysye, as I haf herd carp—
 And þat hatz wayned me hider, iwyis, at þis tyme. (ll. 258-64)

In this speech, the Green Knight explicitly discusses the dual foundations of the reputation of Arthur and his knights: they are considered the best because of both their prowess in military activities and their courtly behavior. The Green Knight's purpose is thus to test this reputation, as the rest of his opening speech shows. After explaining what has drawn him to Arthur's court, he explains more clearly his intentions. He draws attention to the fact that he is not wearing armor, listing all the pieces of armor he has left at home; he explains the meaning of the holly branch he carries in one hand as a guarantee that "I passe as in pes and no plyzt seche;" and finally he ends his speech with an explicit denial that he desires war: "Bot for I wolde no were" (ll. 268-70, 266, 271). Instead, he says, he wishes to propose a Christmas game: "Bot if þou be so bold as alle burnez tellen, / þou wyl grant me godly þe gomen þat I ask / Bi ryzt" (ll. 272-4). Based on this declaration of his intent, the Green Knight seeks to make a friendly test of the renown of Arthur and his court; his stated intent is not to have a war or even "plyzt," danger or strife, but a game.²³

However, faced with the ambiguity of the Green Knight, Arthur's response reveals his tendency to value prowess above courtesy. His reply in the wheel of this stanza indicates that he still expects a violent game: "Sir cortays knyzt, / If þou craue batayl bare, / Here faylez þou not to fyzt" (ll. 276-8). Despite the Green Knight's lack of armor and explicit declaration of peaceful intent, Arthur seems unable to conceive of a Christmas game offered by such a figure that does not involve violence.²⁴ Initially, it seems that the Green Knight is insulted by Arthur's (mis)interpretation of his

²³ MED s.v. "plight," 1(b).

²⁴ See also Walker, who points out, "the court, and perhaps the reader too, is in some difficulty as to how to read the symbols which the Knight presents" ("The Green Knight's Challenge," 115)

proclamation of peace as a desire for violence: after this response, the Knight becomes insulting, dismissing the ability of Arthur or any of his men to stand against him in combat by calling them “berdlez chylde” and explicitly stating what the poem earlier implied: “If I were hasped in armes on a heze stede, / Here is no mon me to mach, for myztez so wayke” (ll. 280, 281-2). The Green Knight’s insults imply that a test of prowess would be unfair, given his size, strength and association with the supernatural. Yet the game turns out to be a test of prowess and courage after all, as the Knight explains what he seeks: “If any so hardy in þis hous holdez hymself, / Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in his hede, / Pat dar stifly strike a strok for anoþer / . . . / And I schal bide þe fyrst bur as bare as I sitte”(ll. 285-90). The Green Knight does not propose the “batayl bare” Arthur expects, but he does nonetheless request an exchange of violent blows. Walker argues that the challenge is one that “seeks to provoke Camelot and its king out of their playful civility by reminding them of their martial origins.”²⁵ But as Walker’s article elaborates, the Green Knight’s challenge forces Gawain at least to attempt to reconcile “playful civility” with prowess; thus, the test is never one simply of courtesy or prowess, and the Knight’s constant alternation between peace and violence, playfulness and menace, underscores the dual nature of his challenge.

Significantly, Arthur and Gawain reflect this duality as they respond differently to the challenge: Arthur with violence and Gawain initially with courtesy. Arthur is the first to respond, and he both returns the Green Knight’s insults (“And as þou folý hatz frayst, fynde þe behoues”) and seizes the axe in order to strike the requested blow (l. 324). Gawain, however, responds to the situation with elaborate courtesy. Walker has

²⁵ Walker, “The Green Knight’s Challenge,” 118

thoroughly discussed the ways in which Gawain's words to both Arthur and the Green Knight establish courtesy as an alternative to violence; he argues that Gawain exhibits a courtesy "based less upon manly courage and puissant prowess (which he treats as almost irrelevant) and more upon correct behavior and attitudes."²⁶ This argument that Gawain responds to the violence inherent in the Green Knight's Christmas game with courtesy is valuable and compelling, and it offers a useful perspective on the test being set before Arthur's court. Yet, even if his courtesy redefines the test of prowess as "a challenge of so little consequence that it is best dealt with by the court's least worthy and able member," Gawain still must respond to the situation with prowess in addition to courtesy.²⁷ And, as Richard Moll points out, the original audience of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* probably expected a violent response — more specifically, a beheading — from Gawain. While the poem's connection with French romances has been well established, Moll explores the connections between this opening scene and an episode during the war between Arthur and Roman emperor Lucius in the English *Brut* tradition.²⁸ In this historical Arthurian tradition, as exemplified by Wace's *Roman de Brut*, Lazamon's *Brut* and the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, Gawain unhesitatingly beheads one of Lucius' relatives after he insults the prowess of Arthur and his men. Given the popularity of the *Brut* tradition, Moll argues, "We may well imagine a fourteenth-century audience listening to these lines (they are, of course, [insults] spoken by the Green

²⁶ Walker "The Green Knight's Challenge," 121

²⁷ Walker "The Green Knight's Challenge," 121

²⁸ For recent discussions of the French associations, see Ad Putter, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and French Arthurian Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), and Kennedy, "Gawain's Family and Friends," 143-60.

Knight), smugly assured that Gawain will eventually behead the insolent intruder. That is, after all, what the Gawain of history does.”²⁹ That Gawain agrees to participate in the test of prowess and courage is thus not surprising; the speech with which he delicately takes the challenge from Arthur demonstrates his courtesy and then frees him to display his prowess in the exchange of blows with the Knight. In his response, Gawain vindicates the Arthurian court’s reputation for both courtesy and prowess.

Yet even as Gawain must respond to the Green Knight’s challenge as he does with a mix of courtesy and violence, the game itself and its outcome casts doubt on the usefulness of chivalric prowess. As a few critics have noted, the exchange of blows game proposed by the Green Knight does not explicitly mention beheading.³⁰ In the scene, the specific type of blow is never mentioned; it is called a “strok” initially by the Green Knight, then a “kyrf,” “buffet,” “dint” and “tape” by Arthur, Gawain and the Knight with no affected body part mentioned (ll. 287, 372, 382, 389, 406). This is not to say that beheading is not implied; as Strite notes, “explicit in the terms of the challenge in each analogue [of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*] is a stipulation that the hero decapitate his challenger.”³¹ Additionally, given Moll’s argument discussed above that this scene is connected to accounts in the *Brut* tradition of Gawain beheading a knight who insults the

²⁹ Moll, “Frustrated Readers and Conventional Decapitation in ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,’” *The Modern Language Review* 97.4 (2002): 800.

³⁰ Sheri Strite, “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: To Behead or not to Behead -- That is a Question,” *Philological Quarterly* 70.1 (1991), 1-12; Victoria L. Weiss, “Gawain’s First Failure: The Beheading Scene in ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,’” *The Chaucer Review* 10.4 (1976), 361-6. I disagree with Weiss, who argues that beheading the Green Knight is Gawain’s first failure; while the poem suggests that Gawain need not behead the Green Knight, it also presents beheading as an almost inevitable outcome of his proposed exchange of blows. This ambiguity makes a definitive statement on Gawain’s rightness in decapitating the Green Knight difficult if not impossible (Weiss, “Gawain’s First Failure,” 361-6).

³¹ Strite, “To Behead or Not to Behead,” 1.

Arthurian court, beheading becomes an obvious response to the Knight's proposed game. Thus, while no one explicitly mentions beheading while the terms of the game are being discussed, audiences familiar with either the analogues or other Arthurian material may legitimately have assumed that the game would lead to a beheading. Arthur's words to Gawain as he relinquishes the challenge subtly suggest beheading as the surest option to win the game: "And if þou redez hym ryȝt, redly I trowe / þat þou schal byden þe bur þat he schal bede after" (ll. 373-4). That is, if Gawain properly exercises his prowess and strikes the right kind of blow — a fatal one — he will be in no danger of receiving a fatal wound himself when the return blow is due; given that the weapon Gawain must use is a huge axe, beheading seems an obvious choice for such a blow. And finally, the Green Knight himself by his actions indicates that he, too, expects a beheading. When Gawain takes the axe, the Knight kneels on the ground, and "His longe louelych lokkez he layd ouer his croun, / Let þe naked nec to þe note schewe" (ll. 419-20). Although he has never asked to be beheaded, by baring his neck the Knight invites exactly this kind of stroke.

Because of these indications in favor of beheading, most critics have assumed that the exchange of blows proposed by the Green Knight is indeed a beheading game. And given the background of the romance and the way in which the characters in the romance respond, this assumption makes sense. Yet the lack of any verbal indication from any of the characters that the exchange of blows must necessarily involve beheading remains significant, particularly in a discussion of the role of prowess in formulations of chivalric honor. The exchange of blows is, by its nature, a violent game; it is also, in Arthur's words, a foolish game for precisely the reason he insinuates to Gawain: if the right initial blow is given, there will be no possibility for an exchange to happen. But even if Gawain

could not have conceivably responded in any other way in order to maintain his, and the court's, reputation for prowess, as proposed by the Green Knight the exchange of blows does not require the extreme violence with which Gawain responds. And even more significantly, Gawain's prowess does not win the game for him and Arthur's court. Instead, the Green Knight picks up his head, apparently unaffected by the blow: "And nawþer faltered ne fel þe freke neuer þe helder / Bot styþly he start forth vpon styf schonkes / And runyschly he razt out þereas renkkez stoden, / Laȝt to his lufly hed and lyft hit vp sone" (ll. 430-33). While the test did require a display of prowess, the surprising outcome makes Gawain's prowess appear irrelevant. Thus, the exchange of blows game while testing the dual aspects of Arthurian reputation also both reveals the way that Arthur over-values prowess and further questions the very importance of prowess in the construction of chivalric honor and reputation.

The Tests at Hautdesert

In moving to Gawain's arrival at Bertilak's castle of Hautdesert, we must pause to consider one of the more analyzed passages explicitly about chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: the arming scene before Gawain's departure in which the symbol of the pentangle is described. The pentangle symbolizes Gawain's perfection: "Forþy hit [the pentangle] acordez to þis knyȝt and to his cler armez, / For ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue syþez, / Gawan watz for gode knawen and, as golde pured, / Voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertuez ennoured / In mote" (ll. 631-5). That the pentangle virtues are chivalric ideals is, perhaps, all that can be said with any certainty; despite the poem's insistence in this passage that Gawain's reputation for chivalric honor rests in these

virtues and that they are themselves inseparably intertwined — the poet reminds the audience that the pentangle is also called “þe endeles knot” — the romance consistently questions Gawain’s ability to embody all of these values, and even the ability of these values to coexist.³² The pentangle is thus significant in Gawain’s conception of himself as a knight (and Arthur’s court’s conception of Gawain), yet in the face of the various dilemmas posed by Bertilak’s wife, the exchange of winnings game with Bertilak, and Gawain’s looming obligation to receive a return stroke from the Green Knight, the ideals of pentangle chivalry become not simply endlessly connected but hopelessly tangled. Despite the suggestion that the pentangle virtues, roughly corresponding to knightly strength, Christian devotion and courtesy, are all equal, Gawain is constantly faced with choices about which value is appropriate or most important in a situation.³³ While the opening scene and exchange of blows game require Gawain to balance courtesy and prowess while also undermining prowess, the subsequent events before, during and after Gawain’s stay at Hautdesert more clearly show Gawain’s problematic elevation of the value of prowess over other chivalric virtues.

The pentangle passage establishes that, among his many chivalric qualities, Gawain is noted for his strength: “Fyrst he watz funden fautlez in his fyue wittez. / And efte fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fyngres” (ll. 640-1). The five wits and five fingers

³² For a reading of the impossibility of the perfection represented by the pentangle, see Thomas J. Farrell, “Life and Art, Chivalry and Geometry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Arthurian Interpretations* 2.2 (1988): 17-33.

³³ The five sets of five virtues represented by the pentangle are Gawain’s “fyue wyttez” and “fyue fyngres” (l. 640, 641), corresponding to his physical qualities; the five wounds of Christ and the five joys of Mary (ll. 642-3, 646-7), representing his religious devotion; and finally the “fyft fyue,” which is a catch-all category of courtly virtues: “fraunchyse and felazschyp forbe al þyng, / His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer, / And pité, þat passez all poyntez” (ll. 651-4).

correspond to Gawain's physical attributes,³⁴ and as the first part of the poem has shown, Arthur and Gawain value strength, prowess and courage as chivalric virtues. Given the importance of prowess in the Arthurian court, Gawain and the court presume that the exchange of blows probes not only his ability to keep his word but also his courage in facing a return stroke that will, in all likelihood, kill him. However, even as Gawain feels that he must honor the challenge of the Green Knight's game regardless of the probable outcome, the court questions whether Gawain should ride to his death in the service of a Christmas game, and thus indirectly questions a chivalry that insists on displaying courage and prowess regardless of the cost (ll. 674-86). The poet never comments on the court's lament upon Gawain's departure, leaving unresolved the question of whether the members of Arthur's court are right to question the appropriateness of Gawain's devotion to maintaining his reputation for loyalty and courage. Although their fears prove groundless at the conclusion of the romance, the romance raises the question of whether it is better to pursue a display of prowess and courage or to prudently retreat in the face of almost-certain death. And even if the court understands that Gawain is now obligated to seek the Green Chapel and receive his return blow, they explicitly question whether he should have engaged in the game to begin with, stating, "Warloker to haf wrozt had more wyt bene / And haf dyzt zonder dere a duke to have worped;" a few lines later, they move beyond lamenting the lack of caution to openly questioning Arthur's wisdom in letting Gawain participate in the exchange of blows: "Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take / As kyztez in cauelaciounz on Crystmasse gomnez?" (ll. 677-8, 682-3). Thus, the

³⁴ See, however, Whiteford for a compelling reading of Gawain's five wits as internal virtues which govern the rest of the pentangle qualities: Peter Whiteford, "Rereading Gawain's Five Wits," *Medieval Aevum* 73.2 (2004): 225-34.

romance while not denying Gawain's obligation to receive the return blow begins to question the wisdom of participating in such games, and thus the place of prowess in chivalric reputation.

Returning to Gawain, however, the romance describes him as doggedly pursuing his obligation to find the Green Chapel despite the wildness of the land through which he travels alone (ll. 691-712). Yet for a journey that is to culminate in the ultimate test of Gawain's courage in the face of death, its description curiously avoids or downplays violence, again raising questions about the role of prowess. It is worth quoting the passage detailing Gawain's adventures en route in full:

At vche warpe oþer water þer þe wyȝe passed
He fonde a foo hym byfore, bot ferly hit were,
And þat so foule and so felle þat feȝt hym byhode.
So mony meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndez
Hit were to tore for to telle of þe tenþe dole.
Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez and with wolues als,
Sumwhyle wyth wodwos þat woned in þe knarrez,
Bope wyth bullez and berez, and borez oþerquyle,
And etaynez þat hym aneledede of þe hyȝe felle.
Nade he ben duȝty and dryȝe and Dryȝtyn had serued,
Douteles he hade ben ded and dreped ful ofte.
For werre wrathed hym not so much þat wynter nas wors,
When þe colde cler water fro þe cloudez schadde
And fres er hit fall myȝt to þe fale erpe. (ll. 715-28)

This list of foes is substantial, ranging from the natural (bears and boars) to the fantastic (dragons and giants); while knights on a quest in a romance typically must face numerous such obstacles, Gawain's travels seem to present him with an greater than usual number of opportunities to display his prowess — and display it he does, as he survives all of these encounters, regardless of the foe he faces. And more striking than his survival is the implication that, extreme as this list of obstacles is, the *weather* is even worse. Gawain's

prowess is necessary to his survival, but no more necessary than his ability to endure winter storms and bitter cold.

The use of the terms “ferly” and “meruayl” in the above passage bring the audience back to the land described in the opening stanzas, a land of marvelous creatures and adventures. What Gawain meets are menacing marvels that must, as the romance makes clear, be met with warfare; in other words, in his travels Gawain meets situations that seem to unambiguously call for a violent response. Yet *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* finds these displays of prowess unworthy of elaboration, and in fact no more impressive than Gawain’s ability to withstand the brutally cold and icy December weather. This passage continues to minimize the impact of Gawain’s prowess, already shown to be ineffective when his powerful stroke fails to kill the Green Knight. Thus, as Gawain rides to what in his perception began as a test of his prowess and will end as a test of his bravery, the poet reinforces the already-raised possibility that prowess and bravery are not, in actuality, key qualities in the romance. Paired with the court’s questioning of the value of engaging in the Green Knight’s game, the poet’s pointed movement away from violence prepares the audience for the tests that are to occur when Gawain arrives at Hautdesert. Although his own experiences of constant battles and horrendous weather leave Gawain off-balance when he enters the peace and luxury of Bertilak’s castle, the way the romance presents Gawain’s travels suggests that Gawain misunderstands the nature (and even the fact of) of his subsequent testing at Hautdesert and consequently the chivalric values necessary to meet these tests.

The very arrival of Gawain at Hautdesert suggests that this location calls upon Gawain’s other pentangle virtues, his piety and his courtesy. The castle itself only

appears when Gawain exercises his piety, praying for a place in which he can hear a Christmas mass:

I beseche þe, Lorde,
And Mary, þat is myldest moder so dere,
Of sum herber þer heȝly I myȝt here masse
Ande þy matyneȝ tomorne, mekely I ask,
And þerto prestly I pray my Pater and Aue
And Crede. (ll. 753-8)

As soon as he has finished praying, Gawain happens upon a castle: “Nade he sayned hymself, segge, bot þrye / Er he watz war in þe wod of a won in a mote” (ll. 763-4). This nearly miraculous appearance of the castle, with his subsequent switch to courteous speech and his generous welcome into this court, signal that Gawain’s journey has shifted from war to peace, from marvels demanding a violent response to the marvel of a court whose courtesy rivals Camelot. Additionally, the appearance of Hautdesert as if in response to Gawain’s prayer, and the poem’s description of the castle as one cut out of paper (“Pat pared out of papure purely hit semed,” l. 802) suggest that the castle itself hovers in the realm of the supernatural; as in the description of the Green Knight, these descriptions of the appearance of the castle subtly raise doubt about whether it belongs to the realm of the everyday or the miraculous. Thus the romance sets up an inversion of the supernatural appearance of the Green Knight at Arthur’s court: here, a normal knight appears at a potentially supernatural location, and this inversion may in turn suggest an inversion of the type of challenge Gawain will face. While the Green Knight’s challenge at Arthur’s court clearly tested Gawain’s prowess and courage, other knightly virtues will be more actively tried in this location.

To Gawain, then, this Christmas sojourn at Hautdesert is primarily a welcome respite from the physical discomforts of his journey and an equally welcome rest before

the physical challenge of meeting the Green Knight's return blow. Only in hindsight can Gawain and the audience understand that the exchange of winnings game and the bedroom seductions also test Gawain's knightly reputation. He treats the Green Knight's Christmas game, with its initial violence and potentially fatal outcome, with a seriousness that may be unnecessary. But he cheats at the exchange of winnings game he plays with Bertilak with apparently no regret, and no signs of an awareness that he is cheating, in failing to give him the girdle; while he refuses the sexual advances of Bertilak's wife, after his initial surprise at her appearance he seems to enjoy their flirtation. What in retrospect are serious, even potentially fatal, tests of courtesy appear to Gawain at the time to be mere diversions as he recovers from battles and prepares to face his return blow from the Green Knight. He understands the challenge to his bravery and his ability to keep his word even in the face of death, and resultant stain on his knighthood if he fails in this test. The challenges Bertilak and his wife present to his other chivalric virtues, his honesty in the exchange of winnings game and his simultaneous ability to be a good guest (and not sleep with his host's wife) while still engaging in the courteous love-talk expected of a courteous knight, seem to be of secondary importance to Gawain. Yet the way in which the poem glosses over the physical challenges that Gawain faces to his knightly prowess suggests that he over-values his physical chivalric virtues of courage and prowess and under-values his courtly virtues.

It should be noted that, particularly in the bedroom scenes, Gawain is keenly aware of the fine line he walks between displaying his courtesy to the Lady and not harming his host by engaging in a sexual relationship with his wife. The poet makes this explicit as Gawain faces the Lady's advances on the third day: "He cared for his courtaysye, lest

craþayn he were, / And more for his meschef ȝif he schulde make synne / And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde aȝt” (ll. 1773-5). Gawain thus does understand that he faces a dual challenge that requires him to live up to his reputation for facility in courteous speech and his reputation for loyalty, although he is as of yet unaware that this test is a part of the larger challenge of the exchange of blows. But it is significant that they only point at which he falters in both the bedroom test and the exchange of winnings game is when he is offered the green girdle, which he sees as a way to make his prowess and bravery match that of the supernatural Green Knight. When he is offered the girdle with its life-saving properties, its usefulness in his coming encounter immediately occurs to him, as he thinks: “Hit were a juel for þe jopardé þat hym jugged were: / When he acheued to þe chapel his chek for to fech, / Myȝt he haf sypped to be vnslayn þe sleȝt were noble” (ll. 1856-8). And although he offers Bertilak the three kisses he won that day, the girdle remains safely hidden.³⁵ While Gawain may be demonstrating courtesy to the Lady by concealing her gift as she requests (“And [she] bisoȝt hym for hir sake disceuer hit neuer / Bot to lelly layne fro hir lorde” [ll. 1862-3]), he still both accepts the gift and keeps it for himself not because of any sentimental attachment but because of the advantage it can offer him in his coming encounter, an advantage that may match that of the Green Knight’s enchantment. Gawain’s desire to fulfill his reputation for bravery thus supersedes any concern he may have for misleading the Lady by accepting her love-token or failing to present all of his winnings to Bertilak.³⁶ Yet as he and the audience will

³⁵ Gawain hides the girdle before he meets Bertilak in the hall that evening (ll. 1874-5), although he does wear it openly when he departs for the Green Chapel early the next morning (ll. 2030-41).

³⁶ Gawain’s understanding that he wrongly withholds the girdle from his host is demonstrated in the exchange on the third night: on this night only, Gawain offers his winnings first (ll. 1932-41). This

discover in his meeting with the Green Knight, it was exactly this willingness to ignore courteous behavior in order to succeed in the exchange of blows that causes Gawain's failure. Valuing bravery and prowess above other chivalric virtues is shown to be inappropriate and as harmful to an honorable reputation as cowardice.

The Judgments of Gawain

As the narrative of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* reaches the conclusion of the Green Knight's beheading game, the poet has repeatedly placed Gawain in situations that test the values that comprise his chivalric reputation. The romance has shown that, despite Gawain's own high valuation of his chivalric prowess and bravery, these qualities are of dubious value in the initial exchange of blows challenge and unimportant in the exchange of winnings game. And the conclusion of the exchange of blows, in which the Green Knight reveals that he is Bertilak and that Gawain's retention of the Lady's gift of the green girdle is his failing, requires again an evaluation of the role of prowess in Gawain's perception of his chivalric honor. For after this revelation, the *Gawain*-poet presents three different evaluations of Gawain's performance from the point of view of Gawain himself, Bertilak and Arthur's court. Gawain's is the harshest judgment, as he sees himself as irredeemably shamed by his failure, while the court's is the mildest; they are so happy that Gawain has survived that they brush off his story of moral failing and adopt the girdle as a badge of honor. Bertilak's judgment falls in the middle, as unlike the court he acknowledges that Gawain did fail a little. However, he still sees Gawain as a surpassingly chivalric knight, not one forever marked by his failure. Much of the

forwardness, in contrast to Gawain's reluctance to bestow his kisses on the previous two knights, suggests that he wishes to hide his deception by making a show of bestowing his other winnings.

criticism on this poem reflects the challenges of these three judgments: how severely did Gawain sin, or fail in his chivalric duties? Whose judgment is correct? This has also led to the question of what, exactly, Gawain's fault is: the "Cowarddyse and couetyse boþe" of which he accuses himself or as Bertilak says that "lewté yow wonted" (ll. 2374, 2366). These judgments reflect varying perceptions of the role of courage in maintaining chivalric honor, leaving the audience with a final question of what role physical, martial values ought to play in a knight's reputation.

In addressing these judgments, it will be helpful to briefly survey how recent scholars have interpreted the ending of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Many have read Gawain as learning humility, as he realizes that he can never live up to the ideals represented by the pentangle; in this reading, Gawain's reaction shows his shame while the Green Knight's response that Gawain has failed only a little bit (in his words, Gawain is still "On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote ȝede" [l. 2362]) makes this fault one common to all sinful humanity. As J. A. Burrow notes, Gawain repents of his fault of "untrawþe" in failing to give the girdle to Bertilak; he then adopts the girdle as his symbol in order to remind himself of the sinfulness of humanity and himself.³⁷ Similarly, Farrell argues, "What Gawain sees as a humiliation, the Green Knight sees as a lesson in humility; and the latter is surely more correct. In adopting the girdle as his emblem, Gawain in fact turns humiliation into a lesson in humility: it is a better emblem of his status than the pentangle, with the latter's overweening symbolism of perfection."³⁸ In

³⁷ J.A. Burrow, *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), 152. For a critique of Burrow's reading of Gawain's flaw, see P.J.C. Field, "A Rereading of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" *Studies in Philology* 68.3 (1971): 255-69.

³⁸ Farrell, "Life and Art," 27.

this argument, the failure inherent in the symbol of the green girdle makes it superior to the pentangle, as it shows Gawain's own recognition of his inability to live up to ideal chivalry. These themes of the unattainable nature of chivalric ideals, despite the admirableness of striving for chivalric perfection, underlie Victoria Weiss' analysis of the scene at the Green Chapel as analogous to medieval knighting ceremonies. She reads this re-knighting of Gawain as his initiation into a different, more realistic form of chivalry; she writes, "The lesson in humility which Gawain gains by submitting to the Green Knight's accolade is an effort to make the hero see that chivalry is an institution of men — not supermen but real men."³⁹ These arguments rightly acknowledge that the romance questions the ability of any knight, even the finest, to live up to the values of ideal chivalry. However, what is less clear is whether Gawain himself realizes the impossibility of attaining ideal chivalry, or even correctly identifies where his failing lies. His final words in the romance seem to represent despair at the everlasting shame that follows from his failure, as he explains why he will always wear the green girdle: "For mon may hyden his harme bot vnhap ne may hit, / For þer hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit neuer" (ll. 2511-12). Perhaps Gawain has learned humility; yet these lines emphasize not an understanding of the sinfulness of humanity, but rather an unhappiness at the lasting shame of having failed to be an ideal knight.⁴⁰

³⁹ Weiss, "Medieval Knighting Ceremony in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,'" *The Chaucer Review* 12.3 (1978), 187.

⁴⁰ An interesting strand of current criticism looks at Gawain's shame at his failure as a function of the interplay between public and private worlds in the romance; for an example (and overview) of this approach, see Derek Pearsall, "Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment," in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 352-62. This argument is separate from the one I am making about the roles of prowess and honor in the text, but complements my argument by examining Gawain's shame at the public revelation that he needed a crutch (the girdle) for his courage.

Because of the difficulty in saying that Gawain has certainly learned a lesson in humility, other critics have suggested that Gawain does not learn any lesson from his adventure. A.C. Spearing views Gawain's extreme reaction to the revelation of his fault as in itself a form of pride; he writes, "Gawain seems to be behaving as though he were the only person in the world who had ever done wrong and been found out, or as if he were such a special person that in him human imperfection was especially remarkable."⁴¹ Winthrop Wetherbee similarly writes, "He [Gawain] is chronically incapable of accepting his situation as an ordinary sinful human being, or recognizing that his failure in the face of a superhuman challenge is a function of his having presumed to embody a more than human perfection."⁴² C. David Benson echoes Spearing in suggesting that Gawain does not learn a lesson, although the audience may.⁴³ These views recognize that the complexity of the questions the romance poses about the nature of chivalry cannot be easily summed up in a single lesson; as Andrew and Waldron, editors of the poem, point out, "The mixture of evidence and attitude which is built into the poem presents the reader with a group of interconnected moral problems to contemplate, rather than a simple moral verdict on the nature and degree of Gawain's fault. There is perhaps no indubitably correct view of Gawain's culpability, only a series of further questions."⁴⁴

⁴¹ A.C. Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 230.

⁴² Wetherbee, "Chivalry Under Siege," 215.

⁴³ C. David Benson, "The Lost Honor of Sir Gawain," in *De Gustibus: Essays for Alain Renoir*, ed. John Miles Foley (New York: Garland, 1992), 30-39; Spearing, *The Gawain-Poet*, 235.

⁴⁴ Andrew and Waldron, "Introduction," in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, eds. Andrew and Waldron, 42.

Through the complex set of tests that Gawain navigates and the equally complex nature of those tests, the romance resists assigning a clear-cut moral to its story.

Despite its lack of a clear lesson, however, several elements stand out in the three judgments on Gawain's behavior. The first striking element is, as noted above, that Gawain's self-accusation differs from the Green Knight's assessment of his faults. When the Green Knight reveals that he is Bertilak and that he knows about the green girdle, Gawain responds with the following self-accusation:

For care of þy knokke, cowardyse me tagt
To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake:
þat is larges and lewté, þat longez to knyȝtez.
Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf ben euer
Of trecherye and vntrawþe. (ll. 2379-83)

Significantly, in this speech Gawain identifies his primary failing as "cowardyse." His fear of the return blow teaches him to act in a manner contrary to his "kynde,"⁴⁵ to his nature as a knight; this departure from his nature in turn leads to a lack in generosity and loyalty and a descent to the vices of treachery and "untrawþe." What begins this chain of non-chivalrous action, according to Gawain, is cowardice. In support of this evaluation, Gawain's actions before and during the scene at the Green Chapel emphasize his continuing assumption that the test is one of prowess and courage: he not only comes armed to receive his return blow, but is also prepared to battle the Green Knight further after the third blow fails to decapitate him. While arriving at the Green Chapel in armor may occur simply because it would raise too many questions to leave his armor behind at Hautdesert, it also puts Gawain in a definitively combative role, especially compared to the Green Knight's more ambiguous appearance at Arthur's court. Even more tellingly,

⁴⁵ MED, s.v. "kinde" (n.).

after the unsuccessful third blow, Gawain rapidly resumes his helm and takes out his shield and sword: “Hent heterly his helme and on his hed cast, / Schot with his schulderez his fayre schelde vnder, / Braydez out a bryzt sworde” (ll. 2317-19). As his actions show, Gawain expects that further violence will follow this exchange of blows, especially since the Green Knight has failed in what Gawain must presume to be his objective of a return beheading. Yet no such battle follows, in the clearest undermining in the romance of the value of Gawain’s prowess. But Gawain continues to view the games as tests of courage; thus in his view cowardice must cause his failure because he was not brave enough to face the return blow without the magical aid of the girdle.

Yet equally significantly, despite Gawain’s insistence that cowardice led to his other chivalric failures, Bertilak frames Gawain’s fault as one of a slight lack in loyalty. He says to Gawain,

Sothly me þynkkez
On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote zede.
As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more,
So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay knyghtez.
Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewté yow wonted;
Bot þat watz for no wylde werke, ne wowyng nauþer,
Bot for ȝe lufed your lyf — þe lasse I yow blame. (ll. 2362-68)

Bertilak identifies Gawain’s fault as one of “lewté,” of failing to keep his word in the exchange of winnings game, but precisely because it was motivated by what Gawain calls cowardice and Bertilak calls a natural love of life, he sees it as a minor fault. In his judgment, Gawain remains one of the most faultless of men, a pearl among white peas. Bertilak values Gawain’s physical prowess little, as evident in the first proposal of the exchange of blows when he informs Arthur’s court that none of them could withstand a battle with him. This conclusion to the exchange shows that Gawain’s courage is of

equally little value; the wish to continue living is, after all, normal to humankind. Thus, between Bertilak and Gawain's judgments, the audience is presented with the question of whether courage is indeed the foundational quality of a knight, or whether a little fear in the face of death is so natural that it excuses a graver lack of faithfulness and leaves no stain on chivalric honor.

The judgment of Arthur's court provides no way out of this dilemma. The members of the court are simply overjoyed that Gawain has returned alive with a marvelous story to tell (ll. 2490-94). Despite Gawain's repetition of his failures "Of couardise and couetyse" and his display of the girdle as a "token of vntrawþe," the court laughs at his tale and proceeds to adopt the girdle as their own symbol (ll. 2508, 2509, 2514-21). That is, with no explanation, they take what Gawain views as a reminder of his failures and turn it into a marker of the fame of the Round Table: a symbol of shameful cowardice now represents knightly honor:

þe kyng comfortez þe knyzt, and alle þe court als
Lazen loude þerat and luflyly acorden
þat lordes and ledes þat longed to þe Table,
Vche burne of þe broþerhede, a bauderyk schulde haue,
A bende abelef hym aboute, of a bryzt grene,
And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were.
For þat watz acorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table
And he honoured þat hit hade, euermore after,
As hit is breued in þe best boke of romaunce. (ll. 2513-21)

Gawain's failure, whether large or small or in courage or loyalty, does not stain his reputation at all in Arthur's court. In fact, as Burrow argues, by this adoption of the girdle as a mark of honor Gawain's shame "would appear to be converted into honour for evermore after."⁴⁶ He succeeds in his adventure and therefore deserves to be celebrated

⁴⁶ J. A. Burrow, "Honour and Shame in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in *Essays on Medieval Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 128.

without reservation because he returned alive. In its response, the court seems to view Gawain's seriousness about the interlocking Christmas games of exchanged blows and winnings as excessive, or at least unnecessary.

In evaluating these three judgments of Gawain's fault (or lack thereof), it is tempting to side with Bertilak, who presents the balanced view of Gawain's actions as somewhat but not fatally flawed. It seems that accepting either Gawain's own judgment or that of the court requires an interpretation of events that either over- or under-emphasizes the fact that Gawain did err when he kept the green girdle. Bertilak's judgment is compelling, as it allows Gawain to remain if not a perfect knight, at least the best of knights; his judgment also confirms the underlying suggestion that the perfection of the pentangle virtues is unattainable, if admirable to pursue. Yet even if the audience is meant to side with Bertilak in his final analysis of Gawain's character, the question of the role of prowess and courage in chivalric honor remains. Bertilak's view excuses Gawain's cowardice, but does not entirely deny it; the court's adoption of the green girdle as its symbol acknowledges the courage that Gawain displayed in seeking out the Green Knight to receive his return blow. From this perspective, Gawain's elevation of courage above his other chivalric qualities (and cowardice above his other failings) still seems extreme, but so too does Bertilak's dismissal of the virtue of courage and its opposite vice of cowardice. By continuing to honor Gawain, the court suggests that prowess and courage are important insofar as they are able to preserve Gawain's life, but not important enough to be the centerpiece of Gawain's reputation. Ultimately, then, despite lingering ambiguity both the court and Bertilak are more successful at seeing the need for balance among the elements of ideal chivalry than is Gawain.

Conclusion

In writing on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, David Aers argues that the *Gawain*-poet ultimately chose not to question the chivalric and feudalistic conventions that held his society together. Instead, after presenting the audience with a failed test and contradictory judgments on that failure, he contends that the *Gawain*-poet abandons any attempt at criticizing contemporary chivalric values; he writes, “One sympathizes with readers’ reluctance to accept that the poet abandoned such profound issues in courtly laughter and his own non-judgemental silence. Still, this is what he did, leaving the issues not only unresolved but unexamined.”⁴⁷ The lack of a clear resolution can be frustrating to modern readers who, especially with the advantage of several hundred years’ perspective on the flaws of medieval chivalry, perhaps unconsciously want such an excellent poet to reflect our own views on his society. Aers is right in seeing the *Gawain*-poet as enmeshed in his own culture, and the romance does not offer the sort of re-envisioning of chivalry that occurs in the *Gawain*-romances of the next century. Yet even if he does leave the serious questions he raises about the nature of chivalry in the non-committal laughter of Arthur’s court at Gawain’s perception of his failure, the *Gawain*-poet has raised important questions about chivalry, and about the ways in which the military, courtly and religious aspects of chivalry ought to relate to one another. And he does this not through direct criticism but through questions posed to his audience: what does it mean that the enigmatic symbol of the green girdle, knotted across Gawain’s body, has replaced the neat (if impossibly perfect) symbolism of the pentangle on Gawain’s shield? Whose judgment of Gawain’s adventure is right? What is the role of

⁴⁷ David Aers, *Community, Gender and Individual Identity* (London: Routledge, 1988), 177.

martial prowess and courage in a larger chivalric reputation? Even without answers, these are valuable questions to raise about chivalry in fourteenth-century England.

Thus, the indeterminacy of the romance is not indicative of a reluctance to question contemporary chivalric mores. Rather, it shows the deftness with which the *Gawain*-poet directs his audience to specific questions about chivalry in society.⁴⁸ In particular, the avoidance of violence in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, given its prevalence in the romance genre, raises questions about the role of prowess and bravery in formulations of chivalric honor. By setting the story in a nation that, since its founding, alternates without warning between war and peace, then presenting the Arthurian court with the Green Knight who tests both Arthurian prowess and courtesy while raising the question of how important prowess is, the *Gawain*-poet acknowledges the difficulty knights face in determining the place of violence in chivalry. Although this romance pre-dates the large tactical shifts away from the use of the mounted knight in warfare by at least a generation, like the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* it represents uncertainty that prowess and bravery, the chivalric virtues of the battlefield, are a vital part of contemporary chivalry. Through the exchange of blows game that frames the romance, the *Gawain*-poet sets up a test not primarily of Gawain's prowess and bravery but of his ability to maintain balance among the physical, religious and courtly aspects of chivalry.

This deep-seated uncertainty in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* about the role of the martial qualities included in the perfect pentangle adds to the conflicts the poem

⁴⁸ Haruta compellingly observes that in both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, "The ambiguity and seeming lack of confidence, the haunting sense of disillusionment and the multiple points of view about their outcome all seem to indicate a state of mind which no longer feels secure of the ground it stands upon and which, while it is keenly aware of the radical changes which are taking place, cannot yet define the new principles which are to replace the old ones" ("The End of an Adventure," 358).

establishes between the ideal and the real nature of chivalry. The interlocking nature of the pentangle becomes ominous rather than soothing: the virtues represented do not relate to one another in seamless harmony, but instead are engaged in a never-ending struggle, a struggle further complicated (not resolved) by the green slash of Gawain's girdle. And by returning, in the final lines of the poem, to the historical context of the fall of Troy and Brutus' founding of Britain, the *Gawain*-poet suggests that not only has this struggle occurred since the beginning of Britain, but in the cyclic nature of history will continue to do so. The poem ends:

þus in Arthurus day þis aunter bitidde—
þe Brutus bokez þerof beres wytteneſse.
Syþen Brutus, þe bolde burne, bozed hider fyrst,
After þe ſegge and þe aſaute watz ſeſed at Troye,
Iwysse,
Mony aunterez herbiforne
Haf fallen ſuche er þis. (ll. 2522-28)

Although the poem again emphasizes the end of the Trojan war, in these closing lines Brutus gains the adjective “bolde,” highlighting the very quality of courage Gawain accuses himself of lacking. The audience is thus deliberately left with the same ambiguity that opened the poem. Prowess undoubtedly plays a significant and necessary role in chivalric society, but how this value ought to be balanced with other qualities as knights strive to achieve chivalric honor and reputation remains open to question.

Chapter 3

Performing Chivalry in *The Carle of Carlisle*

The Carle of Carlisle is a 650-line popular romance in which Gawain, by his exemplary chivalry, neutralizes the threat posed to the Arthurian court by the monstrous giant Carl.¹ As the only unfailingly courteous guest the Carl has ever hosted, Gawain frees the Carl from his vow to kill any guest of his “But he did as I hym bad” (l. 522).² Once released from this vow by Gawain’s obedience to his commands, the Carl further benefits from his association with Gawain as Gawain successfully integrates the Carl into the Arthurian world. By the end of the romance he becomes Gawain’s father-in-law, and Arthur himself knights the Carl. As often occurs in the Gawain romances, through his unfailing chivalry Gawain brings the outsider within the circuit of Arthur’s court, to the benefit of both court and newcomer. Yet as is also typical of the Gawain romances, his chivalry is presented in complex ways. Like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Carl of Carlisle* focuses primarily on courtly chivalry or courtesy, and not on the martial chivalry of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* (although also like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the *Carl* also questions the relationship between violence and courtesy). Within this broad category of courtly chivalry, the *Carl* hones in on two interrelated questions:

¹ According to the MED, “carl” can range in meaning from a “man (usually of low estate)” (1.a), a “serf, servant, slave” (2.a) or “a peasant, a rustic” (2.b) to “a contemptuous term of address: fellow, knave, rascal” (1.b). In this romance, “carl” takes on both meanings, as the host is apparently a man of low estate and also a man who often embodies the antithesis of courtly values (MED s.v. “carl”).

² All quotes taken from Thomas Hahn, ed., *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS, 1995), 81-112.

what is chivalry, and who may possess it? In exploring these questions, the romance redefines chivalry as not martial prowess or the inherent quality of the noble class, but as a performance that a member of even a non-noble class can imitate in order to move into the nobility. This redefinition of chivalry reveals certain flaws in the chivalric order, but the romance ends with an affirmation of the social value of chivalry in both aiding upward mobility and cementing social bonds. Chivalry is useful, even if it is only a social fiction embraced by the nobility and aspirants to the nobility.

The Carl of Carlisle survives in two versions in Middle English, one in stanza form dating to c. 1400, and the other a ballad preserved in the Percy Folio.³ The two versions differ little in their details, except at one interesting junction: the ballad version has Gawain disenchant the monstrous Carl by beheading him, which restores his original, human form. The earlier stanzaic romance lacks any such hint of the supernatural; in this version, Gawain transforms the Carl's behavior, not his form, and the romance never suggests that the Carl is enchanted. This final lack of transformation is the culmination of the stanzaic version's continual questioning of what constitutes chivalric behavior, and of who can behave chivalrously. The excised beheading and transformation is also the end of a series of subversions in this version of the romance, in which the author repeatedly presents a model of chivalric behavior that corresponds to a traditional understanding of chivalry, only to discard that model and replace it with a new form of chivalry. The cumulative effect of these reversals answers the questions about chivalry at the heart of

³ The stanzaic romance survives in National Library of Wales Aberystwyth Porkington MS 10, which dates to c. 1460; the later ballad form was probably composed around 1500 and is preserved in the Percy Folio, which dates to the mid-seventeenth century. For a discussion of the manuscripts, see Hahn, *Carle of Carlisle*: Introduction, 83-4; also Gillian Rogers, "Syre Gawene and the Carle of Carelyle and The Carle off Carlile" in *The Arthur of the English*, ed. W. R. J. Barron (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), 204.

the romance: chivalry is a performance, and anyone who cares to learn it, even if he is a monstrous giant, may engage in the performance. This new formulation of chivalry also displaces chivalric violence; outside of highly regulated activities such as the hunt, violence in the romance threatens the socially beneficial aspect of chivalry.

The reversals in the romance that build up a new conception of chivalry rely on conventional notions of chivalry as the provenance of the nobility, consisting of martial enthusiasm and a strong sense of social class, in addition to more traditional qualities like hospitality, loyalty, honesty and generosity. These conventional chivalric qualities and their close link to noble status are fully articulated in Ramon Lull's *Book of the Order of Chivalry*, a chivalric manual written in Catalan in the late thirteenth century and widely translated and disseminated across Europe, primarily in French translations. Although not available in English until 1484, when Caxton printed his translation, English audiences would most likely have been familiar with at least the ideas present in Lull's text, if not the manual itself.⁴ Lull narrates the foundation of the knightly class, in which in an ancient time of lawlessness, "alle the peple was deuyded by thousandes And of eche thousand was chosen a man moost loyal most stronge and of most noble courage and better enseyned and manerd than al the other."⁵ These men became knights because of their superior nature, their innate chivalry, and Lull's manual calls upon contemporary knights to maintain this natural superiority. Lull writes to a fictional squire receiving instruction on knighthood, instructing him that "For of soo moche as thou hast more

⁴ In Byles' introduction to his edition of Caxton's translation, he lists extant manuscripts of French translations, at least three of which have English provenance. (Alfred Byles, ed., *The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry*, trans. William Caxton, Early English Text Society o.s. 168 [London: Oxford University Press, 1926], xvi-xix.)

⁵ *Order of Chyvalry*, 15.

noble begynnynge and hast more honour of soo moche arte thow more bonde and bounden to be good and agreable to god and also to the peple And yf thow be wycked thow arte enemy of chyualry and arte contrary to his commaundements and honours.”⁶ Chivalry may not be completely innate to the nobility, since Lull saw a need for knights to be instructed in appropriate behavior; however, this conception of chivalry inextricably links it to noble heritage, making chivalry both the privilege and the duty of the man born into knighthood. It is precisely this notion of chivalry that *The Carl of Carlisle* challenges. By systematically undercutting the specific duties of the chivalrous knight, the romance builds up to an overthrow of Lull’s order of chivalry that confines it to an exclusively noble class. *The Carl of Carlisle* concludes with the idea that it is not just the noble-born squire who can aspire to chivalric knighthood; any person with the desire (and, it should be noted, the material means) can also join the chivalrous nobility.⁷

Recent studies of the *Carl* have emphasized the issues of chivalry and class that arise in the romance. Critical opinion ranges from viewing Gawain as unproblematically chivalrous to clearly unchivalrous; Hahn views the romance as establishing “the ineluctable rightness of chivalric values as practiced by a true knight,” while Raymond Thompson argues that “Gawain’s conduct is hardly exemplary.”⁸ On the topic of class relations, the critics are more agreed that Gawain shows a remarkable courtesy to the lower-class Carl; as Sean Pollack notes, “Gawain’s courtesy . . . is an asymmetrical kind

⁶ *Order of Chyvalry*, 18.

⁷ The proliferation of courtesy manuals in the fifteenth century that teach the manners appropriate to the noble class supports this idea that behavior rather than birthright can mark one as noble; for a discussion of these manuals, see Diane Bornstein, *Mirrors of Courtesy* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1975), 63-84.

⁸ Hahn, “The Carle of Carlisle: Introduction,” 82; Raymond H. Thompson, “‘Muse on thi Mirrour. . .’: The Challenge of the Outlandish Stranger in the English Arthurian Verse Romances,” *Folklore* 87.2 (1976): 203.

of courtesy, the deferral of sovereignty by a member of the nobility to another who occupies a different social, economic, or gender position. . . . The deferral is always temporary, however, as it results in a recuperation of power for the nobility.”⁹ As Pollack rightly points out, chivalry in this romance does remain the province of the nobility; Gawain’s chivalry is subversive not in that it treats members of lower social classes as equals, but in that it allows for social mobility.¹⁰ My argument about the social aspect of Gawain’s courtesy follows in this vein, but also draws from Glenn Wright’s work on the romance. Wright argues that, “Gawain’s excellence consists not in any superior fidelity to an ideal code, but – quite the reverse – in his Odyssean ethical relativism, his ability to recognize and adopt whatever code of conduct best suits the circumstances.”¹¹ This relativism that Wright identifies fits well within the context of a redefinition of chivalry as performance rather than innate quality; it also explains the wide range of reactions to Gawain’s behavior. If chivalry is a performance, it involves choices and a certain degree of flexibility and can even appear to be not chivalric at all.

Thus, the *Carl* presents a model of domestic chivalry that is capable of raising up those of lower social status and even of redeeming the monstrous, the typical object of chivalric violence; yet as this positive picture of an inclusive domestic chivalry emerges,

⁹ Sean Pollack, “Border States: Parody, Sovereignty, and Hybrid Identity in *The Carl of Carlisle*,” *Arthuriana* 19.2 (2009): 17.

¹⁰ This is in contrast to Brandsen’s view, in which Gawain’s behavior reconciles noble to carl without changing the carl’s lower-class status. See T. Brandsen, “Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle,” *Neophilologus* 81 (1997): 299-307.

¹¹ Glenn Wright, “Churl’s Courtesy: *Rauf Coilyear* and its English Analogues,” *Neophilologus* 85 (2001): 657. In a slightly different context, Cohen similarly sees Gawain’s chivalry lying in his ability to adapt to circumstances: “[Gawain’s] willingness to suspend judgment of unfamiliar rules while following them without hesitation ultimately redeems the carl” (Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999], 161).

it is undercut by the sheer absurdity of what can be considered acceptable chivalric behavior under the rubric of courtesy in this romance.¹² The clearest picture of chivalry that emerges is one that involves complex choices about which chivalric value to adhere to most strongly, as this choice guides each character's subsequent actions. Characters must choose among chivalric values such as violence against the monstrous, adherence to a vow, courtesy as a guest, or loyalty to a friend; these values then, for good or ill, control the subsequent actions of the characters. Thus, Gawain's chivalric success in this romance, his ability to change the Carl's behavior and achieve a beneficial conclusion for all the characters in the *Carl*, is based not on some intrinsic set of chivalric values but on his ability to choose the proper guiding value for the situation he finds himself in as a guest in the Carl's castle. In short, chivalry does indeed consist of the "Odyssean relativism" Wright sees, but that relativism instead of rejecting the ideals of chivalry exists in a sophisticated relationship with those ideals, recognizing the potentially contradictory nature of competing chivalric values and identifying the most chivalrous knight as the one who is best able to negotiate among these conceptions of chivalry.

First Reversal: Sir Ironside's Martial Chivalry

The Carl of Carlisle does not delay in setting up competing ideals of chivalry that Gawain must choose between. The romance begins by describing an ideal of martial chivalry, only to reverse this ideal when Gawain rejects it in favor of courtly chivalry. After a brief introduction establishing that this narrative focuses on Gawain, on "on that was sekor and sounde / And doughgty in his ded / ... / His name was Syr Gawene" (ll. 2-

¹² The idea of Gawain's chivalry as redemptive stems from Douglas Moffat, "Fearful Villainy," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 11 (1994): 131-2.

3, 13), the romance proceeds to spend more than 70 lines listing the knights who, along with Gawain, are hunting with Arthur near Cardiff (ll. 34-103). While this begins as a typical list of knights, it quickly turns to focus on one knight in particular: not Gawain, although the audience already knows he will be the protagonist of the romance, but one Sir Ironside (ll. 67-102). Ironside's family, arms and deeds are all described, and these descriptions link him closely to Gawain; yet he is not the protagonist, nor does he appear again in the romance. This extended description of a non-essential character primarily establishes Ironside, with his close ties to Gawain, as a foil for Gawain. In describing Ironside, the romance sets forth a model of chivalry which Gawain may reasonably follow, or alternatively which may be modeled on Gawain himself. The romance thus establishes the grounds for the first chivalric reversal, in which Gawain's choice to exercise courtesy subverts the traditional expression of martial chivalry.

In order to establish Ironside's activity as a potential template for Gawain's chivalric behavior, the romance draws many connections between this knight and Gawain, binding the two men together in a web of romance allusions. These allusions rest on details about Gawain not present in the *Carl* and thus assume that the audience is familiar with other Gawain romances; while little direct evidence exists that this would have been true, the author of the *Carl* presumably did expect that his audience would understand the connections. The description begins by naming Ironside as the father of "the Knyght of Armus Grene" (l. 68). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the later ballad *The Greene Knight*, the Green Knight is associated with Gawain.¹³ Moreover, in

¹³ Although *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* survives in only one manuscript and apparently was not itself well known in medieval England, as Thomas Hahn notes in his introduction to the related, later ballad *The Greene Knight*, "The kernel story, of a monstrous Green Knight who visits Arthur's court and tests Sir Gawain as the pearl of chivalry, seems to have been popular before its absorption into *Sir Gawain and the*

Malory's *Tale of Sir Gareth*, the last knight Gareth (Gawain's brother) encounters is Sir Ironside, who is related to the knights known only by the color of their armor, including a Green Knight, defeated by Gareth in the romance.¹⁴ Ironside and his family are thus tied to Gawain and his family in English romance. In addition to this relational association, in his notes to the romance Thomas Hahn points out the similarities between Ironside's arms and those carried by Gawain: Ironside's arms as described in the *Carl* are a gold griffin on an azure field, while Gawain's traditionally are either "three golden lions' heads on an azure field, or, alternatively, three golden griffiths on a green field."¹⁵ The similarities in arms again recall the familial associations and link the two men. With these connections in family and arms, the romance has set Ironside up as a knight whose actions as well can be reasonably expected to mirror Gawain's. And Ironside's knightly activities focus on one particular interest: he seeks out and fights the monstrous. He hunts wild animals, "Brennyng dragons hade he slayn, / And wylde bullus mony won / That gresely wer iholde;" but most significantly, he also seeks out giants to fight: "In wyntter he wolde armus bere; / Gyanttus and he wer ever at were / And allway at the debate" (ll. 88-90, 76-8). Here we come to the crux of the description of Ironside: he wars with giants. His chivalric prowess exhibits itself not only in the hunt and on the battlefield, but

Green Knight, and there is every reason to think it would have continued as a great favorite in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries" (Hahn, "The Greene Knight: Introduction," in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn [Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS, 1995], 309. Thus, while audience of the *Carl* would probably not have been familiar with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* itself, Gawain's encounter with a Green Knight seems to have been a widely circulated narrative, and audiences could be reasonably expected to connect Gawain and the father of a green knight.

¹⁴ Hahn, *Carle*, note to l. 64, p. 107; see also Arnold Sanders for a discussion of Malory's use of Gawain romances in composing *The Tale of Sir Gareth*: Sanders, "Sir Gareth and the 'Unfair Unknown': Malory's Use of the Gawain Romances," *Arthuriana* 16.1 (2006): 34-46.

¹⁵ Hahn, *Carle*, note to ll. 80ff, p. 107.

in actively seeking out giants to fight against. Ironside thus represents a specific model of chivalrous behavior that emphasizes martial violence against the beastly and monstrous. And the careful parallels that the romance sets up between Ironside and Gawain suggest that Gawain, also described as a brave warrior at the opening of the romance (“Was non so doughtty in dede. / Dedus of armus wyttout lese / Seche he wolde in war and pees / In mony a stronge lede” [ll. 6-9]), will follow a similar model of chivalry.

Yet this is not the case. From Bishop Baldwin’s first mention of the Carl and his practice of ill-treating his guests (ll. 139-50), Gawain advocates engaging the Carl not with chivalric violence but with courteous words: in response to Kaye’s boast that “We woll hym bette all abowt / And make his beggyng bar” (ll. 158-9), Gawain asserts,

I woll not geystyn ther magre ys,
Thow I myght never so well,
Yefe anny fayr wordus may us gayn
To make the larde of us full fayn
In his own castell. (ll. 154-8)

Based on the parallels between Gawain and Ironside, it would be no surprise for Gawain to also advocate chivalric violence. But from the beginning he insists on meeting the Carl not with chivalric prowess but with verbal courtesy. And in a significant move that casts doubt on the presumably positive portrayal of Ironside, the romance associates Ironside’s chivalric violence not with Gawain but with Kay. Kay is never an ideal figure; once he embraces Ironside’s model of chivalry, it becomes clear that the romance is not praising chivalric violence, but questioning its value in contrast to other forms of chivalrous behavior. It may, of course, be argued that Gawain at this point in the narrative assumes that he will be acting courteously to a carl, not a giant; a carl would certainly be below him in terms of social rank but still human and deserving of courtesy. But when Gawain

actually sees the monstrous giant Carl surrounded by his four beastly “whelpys” (a full-grown lion, boar, bull and bear), his commitment to courtesy does not change; he immediately honors his host by kneeling before him: “Then Syr Gawen began to cnele” (l. 270). Gawain, met by not only a giant but also four great beasts – a situation like those sought by Ironside – reacts in exactly the opposite manner from that knight. Rather than confront the monstrous with chivalric violence, he turns to courteous behavior in order to effect his own conquest of the giant Carl within a different chivalric paradigm.

Through this reversal in chivalric paradigms from violence to courtesy in a situation involving a giant and his attendant beasts, the *Carl of Carlisle* raises the question of what constitutes chivalry. Is it martial prowess that bravely seeks out monsters to battle? Or is it a courtesy so confident that it can assume that even the monstrous outsiders to the chivalric world will recognize and respond to the words and actions of a courteous knight? It is important to note that both forms of chivalry effectively subdue and render safe the monstrous; however, the second form presumes that the monstrous outsider can successfully become an insider and may not ultimately be an outsider at all. And that Gawain chooses the paradigm of courteous, not prowess-based, behavior suggests that, at least in this particular situation, chivalric violence is not the right choice. As the romance progresses, it becomes more clear that violence has a questionable relationship with chivalry. This first reversal, then, begins to establish an alternative to martial chivalry. The *Carl* thus goes far beyond the only slightly earlier Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, which views martial chivalry as admirable but ultimately unsustainable, and questions the value of chivalric violence. Such questioning fits with the changing social structures of the early fifteenth century, in which the role of the knight shifted away from the battlefield

and toward the courtly sphere; while the romance certainly touches upon issues of sovereignty and class, it also addresses a shift in the focus of the chivalric paradigm away from the battlefield and into the court.¹⁶ Gawain's choice of this paradigm over that of violence legitimizes courtesy as the chivalric equal of military prowess. As the romance progresses, this courtesy is also closely examined and challenged; but at this point, the romance has succeeded in not only establishing a chivalric alternative to violence, but also in showing that violence may not have a role in the most chivalrous paradigm.

In addition to establishing this reversal of the audience expectation that Gawain will, like Ironside would, embrace chivalric violence in dealing with the monstrous Carl, the romance also begins to develop the importance of rightly choosing a guiding chivalric value in a given situation. As the description of Ironside, and the suggestion of Kay regarding how to interact with the Carl, show, Gawain has available to him several potential chivalric paradigms. He can choose to make violence against the monstrous his primary ideal, or he can choose to assert his natural knightly superiority to the non-noble Carl, as Kay and Bishop Baldwin seem to do (discussed below). Gawain, however, seems to recognize that the paradigm of courtesy, even when shown to a monstrous and lower-class outsider to Arthur's court, is the appropriate paradigm to adopt. And his choice is vindicated by the conclusion of the romance, in which every character benefits from the results of Gawain's courtesy. Yet it is important to recognize Gawain's choice: courtesy is not the natural, inevitable response of the nobly-born knight. Gawain's innate chivalry

¹⁶ There is a growing body of work on this topic; for a discussion of the disappearance of the knight from the battlefield, see Andrew Ayton, *Knights and Warhorses: Military Service and the English Aristocracy under Edward III* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press), 1994; for a more general discussion of the social change within the knightly class, Keen's article provides a good starting point: Maurice Keen, "Chivalry," in *Gentry Culture in Late Medieval England*, ed. Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 35-49. See also my fuller discussion of these changes in the Introduction.

thus resides not in a particular set of values, but in his ability to choose the appropriate value for the situation. His chivalry in the *Carl* can be a learned behavior, and his ability to choose between ideals shows that the most chivalrous man is not the most innately noble, but the best able to make this choice among the paradigms available. Chivalry is thus a performance, not a character trait. In this first chivalric reversal, the romance has successfully brought into question both the role of violence within chivalry and the innate connection between nobility and chivalry.

Second Reversal: The Courteous Carl

If in the first reversal the romance begins to establish chivalry as a performance, not an innate noble character trait, the second chivalric reversal attacks this issue with a vengeance through the character of the Carl. As Gawain, Kay and Baldwin approach the Carl to request his hospitality, the romance constantly asserts his lack of courtesy. When Baldwin first suggests to his companions that they should seek harbor with the Carl, he describes the Carl as a terrible host: “Was ther nevyr barnn so bolde / That ever myght gaystyn in his holde / But evyll harbrowe he fonde” (145-7). When Arthur’s knights come to the Carl’s gate, the Carl’s porter affirms Baldwin’s assessment of this potential host; he tells Gawain, “My lorde can no cortessye; / Ye schappyth notte wyttout a vellony, / Truly trow ye mee” (193-5). The porter’s use of the word “vellony” to describe how his master treats his guests confirms Baldwin’s implication that the Carl is neither chivalrous nor a member of the class of people who consider the qualities of chivalry essential; he is, in fact, so far removed from the world of chivalry that he openly flaunts conventions of hospitality, notoriously treating his guests badly. And the first appearance

of the Carl himself cements his distance from the chivalrous world as the romance describes him as a monstrous giant surrounded by wild animals, the opposite of a gentle knight in both behavior and appearance.

In establishing the Carl's distance from chivalrous society, the romance first describes the Carl's beasts. As Gawain, Kay and Baldwin enter the castle,

They fond four whelpus lay about his fyer
That gresly was for to see:
A wyld bole and a fellon boor,
A lyon that wold bytte sor —
Therof they had grete ferly.
A bege ber lay louse unbounde. (ll. 224-9)

That the Carl surrounds himself with wild animals as pets sets him apart from both the Ironside model of chivalry, in which the proper relationship between noble and beast is adversarial, and the traditional hospitality of chivalry, as the presence of these animals makes the Carl's castle initially both inimical and alien to his guests. And Arthur's knights seem justified in their fear of the beasts as the animals begin to act menacingly towards the men; however, at a word from the Carl, the beasts "fell adoun for fer of hyme, / So sor they gan hyme drede" (ll. 241-2). Somehow, this is not comforting to Arthur's knights, but rather a presaging of the description of the Carl to follow. A man who has such power over wild animals, a power expressed in the description of these beasts as "whelpus," a term that implies that they are young, small and easily controlled, must himself be fearsome. And indeed he is: once Gawain and his companions are distracted from the four animals, they notice that the Carl himself "semyd a dredfull man" (l. 249). He has a hideous face but more importantly, he is a giant: "Nine taylloris yerdus he was hyghtht / And therto leggus longe and wyghtht, / Or ellus wondor hit wer"

(ll. 259-61). As soon as he speaks, he confirms to his guests that he is, indeed, outside of the world of chivalry, lacking knowledge about courteous behavior. He says to them,

Thow logost wytt a carll tonyght,
I swer, by Sennt Johnn.
For her no corttessy thou shcalt have,
But carllus corttessy, so God me save —
For serttus I can non. (ll. 275-9)

If Gawain, Kay and Baldwin need any further confirmation of the Carl's non-participation in the chivalrous world, the Carl himself explicitly denies any such connection. Between his reputation, his beastly companions, his monstrous appearance, and his repudiation of knowing courtesy, Arthur's knights have no reason to expect anything other than discourtesy from the Carl.

Yet even as it emphatically removes the Carl from the realm of chivalry, the romance subtly undermines this removal, insinuating that the Carl is not, in fact, as ignorant of courtesy as he claims to be. Not only does he understand courtesy, but he surrounds himself with the trappings of the courtly world, further belying his claim to know no chivalry.¹⁷ To begin with, of course, the Carl inhabits a castle (l. 140). That he

¹⁷ Critics have come to varying conclusions about the Carl's courtesy; Moffet argues that the Carl is in no way chivalrous, writing, "The Carl's assertion that he lacks *corttesy* proves to be no idle boast. He obviously lacks the courtly demeanor and style, . . . The Carl's castle then represents a place where the violent and destructive nature of the villain holds sway; *carllus corttesy* is force and violence and it is antithetical to the social intercourse of courtly society" ("Fearful Villainy," 131). However, most other critics see the Carl in a more complex relationship with the courteous world of his guests. Cohen views the Carl's behavior, while not courteous in the conventional sense, as still embedded in the world of chivalry, the reverse of the same coin: "The Carl's 'wyckyd lawys' are not exterior to chivalric masculinity but wholly contained within its identity system" (*Of Giants*, 163). Wright sees the Carl as outside the chivalric world, but hardly ignorant of it, arguing, "When the Carl of Carlisle touts his 'carllus corttessy,' he does so ironically. He knows that beating one's guests, or slaying them when they are not robotically obedient to one's arbitrary demands, is by ordinary standards anything but courteous. His job, thematically speaking, is to draw into view the hypocrisy and weakness not of the chivalric code per se, but of the individuals who are supposed to exemplify it." ("Churl's Courtesy," 658). In her survey of the *Carle* in *The Arthur of the English*, Gillian Rogers argues that the Carl views courtesy as reciprocal: "As long as his [the Carl's] guests perform their proper function as guests, they receive the courtesy due to guests. This is true courtesy as the Carl sees it" (205). As these perspectives make clear, the Carl's relationship to courtesy is much more complicated than his initial claim to ignorance of courteous behavior.

dwells in the traditional abode of a member of the knightly, noble class argues that he is already implicated in the world of courtesy, even if only to embody its antithesis. But as the trappings of courteous life continue to accrue around the Carl in the romance, it becomes more and more difficult to believe that the Carl is indeed ignorant of chivalry, or even opposed to it. As the Carl initially welcomes his guests, he treats them to a display of lavish wealth. He calls for a cup a wine, which is brought “in gold so der; / Anon hit cam in coppus cler — / As anny sonn hit schon” (ll. 280-2). Yet since this cup holds only four gallons of wine, the Carl sends it back to be replaced with his nine-gallon gold cup (ll. 283, 293). While the size of the cup certainly draws attention to the Carl’s monstrous form, as only a giant would need such a large drinking vessel, its material also draws attention to the Carl’s riches: he must be wealthy to have such huge cups made from precious metal. Also, this welcoming episode undercuts both the porter’s warning about the Carl’s non-chivalrous nature and the initial menace of the Carl’s “whelpus” by showing the Carl engaged in a traditional welcoming ceremony. And the displays of wealth continue as the evening progresses and the Carl serves his guests a lavish feast. The romance describes Baldwin as very pleased by the feast: “The Besschope gan the tabull begynne / Wytt a gret delytte” (ll. 359-60). Baldwin’s enjoyment of the feast indicates that it does not differ from the meals served in more courtly venues; while the Carl may or may not “can” courtesy, the romance indicates that his wealth allows him to imitate courtly life, both its external trappings and its rituals of hospitality.¹⁸

¹⁸ For discussions of hospitality in medieval society, see Felicity Heal, “Hospitality and Honor in Early Modern England,” *Food and Foodways* 1.4 (1987): 321-50; Julie Kerr, “The Open Door: Hospitality and Honour in Twelfth/Early Thirteenth-Century England,” *History* 87 (2002): 322-35; Julie Kerr, “‘Welcome the coming and speed the parting guest’: Hospitality in Twelfth-Century England,” *Journal of Medieval History* 33 (2007): 130-46; and Julie Kerr, “Food, Drink and Lodging: Hospitality in Twelfth-Century England,” *Haskins Society Journal* 18 (2007): 72-92.

Another trapping of the courtly life in the Carl's castle comes in the presence of the Carl's beautiful wife and romance-reciting daughter. Again, Arthur's knights find that the Carl's castle is not so far removed from their own courtly world; like theirs, it is inhabited by beautiful and explicitly courteous women who are worthy of a knight's love. If Baldwin is delighted by the food, Kay is enamored with the Carl's wife, described as beautiful and courteous: she is "so feyr and whytte: / Her armus small, her mydyll gent, / Her yghen grey, her browus bente; / Of curttesy sche was perfette" (ll. 363-6). The Carl's wife is later joined by his daughter, equally beautiful and described in courtly terms that link wealth and courtesy:

[She] was so feyr and bryght.
 As gold wyre schynyde her here.
 Hit cost a thousand pound and mar,
 Her aparrell pertly pyghte.
 Wytte ryche stonnus her clothus wer sett,
 Wytt ryche perllus about her frete,
 So semly was that syghte. (ll. 417-23)

"Semly" here suggests the appropriateness of pairing beauty and wealth, as is common in romance; the Carl's beautiful daughter is dressed in such a way that her outer costly adornment matches her inner, courteous, nature. And she is not only dressed well, but she also displays her other courtly attainments as she performs for her father's guests. After her harp is fetched, "Furst sche harpyd, and sethe songe / Of love and of Artorrus armus amonge, / How they togedor mett" (ll. 436-8). The Carl's wife and daughter with their apparel and manners again undermine his assertion that he knows no courtesy. For even if the Carl is as ignorant as he claims, he is surrounded by women who far from being ignorant of the courtly world actively participate in it, looking, dressing and performing the part of courtly women, even if they belong by marriage and birth to a non-noble class.

Thus, the romance invalidates the Carl's protestations of ignorance regarding chivalry, and through this begins to question the notion that his monstrous form automatically excludes him from the world of Arthurian chivalry.

The romance furthers its probing into the nature of chivalry by showing that Kay and Baldwin, despite being normal-sized, clearly human members of Arthur's court, lack in actuality the courtesy the Carl only claims ignorance of. Two events show this clearly: first, the episode with the Carl's colt, followed by the feast itself. Both of these situations show the discourtesy of Kay and Baldwin, while setting Gawain apart from his companions as the only truly chivalrous knight. The colt episode is the first of the chivalric tests that the Carl sets for his guests, and both Baldwin and Kay fail miserably. After drinking (from the nine-gallon gold cup) with their host, Arthur's men, one at a time, go out to check on their horses. The men all find a "lyttyll folle" beside their own horse; Baldwin proceeds to put the foal out of the stable, saying, "Thow schalt not be fello wytt my palfray / Whyll I am beschope in londe" (ll. 302, 305-6). Likewise, Kay also wants his own horse free from the possibly degrading association with the Carl's foal: "Out att the dor he [Kay] drof hym [the foal] out / And on the back yafe hym a clout" (ll. 322-3). Through their actions, these knights show that their chivalric paradigm is one that emphasizes their own superiority to those outside the realm of chivalry. Although they are the Carl's guests, they assume that his stables should be reserved for their horses alone; as Baldwin makes clear, he sees his position as guaranteeing even his horse a high status not to be sullied by association with the horse of a carl. Baldwin and Kay view their chivalry, here simply equivalent to their membership in Arthur's court

and their social rank, as giving them the right to assert their innate worthiness of special treatment by those of lower social rank.

The romance quickly rejects this paradigm of chivalry that centers on self-aggrandizement rather than truly courteous behavior to others. The Carl, catching Baldwin and Kay putting his foal out of the stable, beats both of them until “I sonynghe he gann lyghe” (l. 318).¹⁹ But significantly, the Carl explains to the knights why he treats them so: to Baldwin, despite his protestations that he is a cleric and thus ought not to receive physical punishment, the Carl says, “Yett cannyst thou noght of cortessyghe, / I swer, so mott I trye!” (ll. 314-5). Similarly, he says to Kay, “Evyll-taught knyghttus . . . / I schall teche the or thou wend away / Sum of my cortessye” (328-30). Within 50 lines of disavowing any knowledge of courtesy, the Carl demonstrates that he does, indeed, understand courtesy, and understand it better than the knights he hosts.²⁰ The Carl’s speech to Baldwin indicates that he knows enough of courtesy to see that Baldwin is not as courteous as he thinks himself to be; his speech to Kay cements that the Carl does indeed possess a form of courtesy, one that he thinks Kay will benefit from learning. But despite the Carl’s lesson, enforced by his physical blows, Baldwin and Kay persist in their attitudes of chivalric entitlement as they go in to the feast. Baldwin takes the first place uninvited and begins the feast; Kay lusts after the Carl’s beautiful wife and laments that she is married to him: “‘Alas,’ thought Key, ‘thou Lady fre, / That thou schuldyst

¹⁹ See also line 327.

²⁰ It could be argued that the Carl’s use of the familiar forms “the” and “thou,” rather than the more formal and polite form “you,” indicates his continued discourteous behavior – and obviously, beating ones’ guests is far from courteous. However, his actions and speech could as easily be read as confirmation of his judgment that neither Kay nor Baldwin are chivalrous, and that neither thus deserves to be treated with courtesy. This completely reverses Ironsides’ paradigm of violence: the monstrous Carl represents courtesy and practices violence against the churlish members of Arthur’s court.

this ipereschde be / Wytt seche a foulle weghtgt!’” (ll. 373-5). Baldwin’s assumption that he is the guest of honor and Kay’s assumption that the Carl’s wife should be greatly pitied again display their attitude of entitlement, their uncritical presumption that, as Arthur’s knights, they are superior to the Carl. Kay’s thoughts in particular show this: to Kay, the Carl’s beautiful and courteous wife is not a clue to the Carl’s real status, but a potential lover for Kay who would doubtless be grateful to be rescued from the monstrous Carl. In all of their actions, Baldwin and Kay use their nobility and affiliation with Arthur’s court to establish their superiority to non-nobles, a superiority that the romance collapses as their actions show that they do not understand what courteous behavior truly is, but rather that they need instruction in courtesy from one who appears to be outside of their world.

While Kay and Baldwin prove poor representatives of Arthurian chivalry, Gawain stands apart. Like the other two knights, he is also involved in these two initial courtesy tests of the foal and the feast; unlike Kay and Baldwin, he passes these tests. Gawain brings the Carl’s foal in out of the rain, dries it with his own cloak, and feeds it, saying, “Stond upe, fooll, and eette thy mette; / We spend her that thy master dothe gett, / Whyll that we her byne” (ll. 349-51). Gawain recognizes that he is the guest, dependent upon the generosity of his host; in this scene, Gawain’s treatment of the horse represents his respect for his host, despite the Carl’s form and social status. That Gawain acknowledges the expense of the hospitality he receives indicates his appreciation of the Carl’s willingness to host them. In contrast to the other knights who view this expense as their right, what the Carl owes to them as his social superiors, Gawain displays gratitude and humility. This humility continues at dinner, as Gawain, lacking an invitation to sit, stands

in the hall rather than assuming a seat for himself (ll. 379-81).²¹ The Carl approves of this humility, and he proceeds to seat Gawain next to his wife, a position more suited to his social status (ll. 403-5). Once in this position, Gawain like Kay becomes enchanted by the lady's beauty. But unlike Kay, when rebuked by the Carl for his lustful thoughts, "Syr Gawan was aschemmyde in his thowght" (l. 415). He has the grace to be ashamed of his desire for another man's wife, even if she seems better suited to his social rank.

While Kay and Baldwin take the Carl's words and appearance at face value and use them as reasons for treating the Carl badly, Gawain treats the Carl as a chivalrous equal. Through these courtesy tests, the romance shows the outworking of Gawain's initial insistence on meeting the Carl with courtesy instead of violence. Courteous words become considerate actions, and the romance begins to make clear that the chivalry embodied by Gawain is both superior to chivalric violence and to the assumption that noble status replaces the need for chivalrous behavior. Through this juxtaposition of Gawain and the Carl's courtesy with Kay and Baldwin's discourtesy, the *Carl* inescapably raises the question of what nobility and courtesy truly are: are they traits that anyone, regardless of birth, can acquire, or are they restricted to the noble class? *The Carl of Carlisle* hints that the former is true. Gawain demonstrates that courtesy can be a natural fit with nobility, but he must choose to avoid violence and entitlement. And the Carl demonstrates that true courtesy can reside in the most unlikely places. Taken

²¹ Generally speaking, the highest-ranking guest was seated closest to the host (significantly, this is the position that Baldwin assumes). Gawain does not take a seat at the Carl's table, or even at the servants' table, but instead stands in the hall rather than presume that he outranks other members of the Carl's household. For a discussion of seating arrangements at medieval meals, see Kerr, "Food, Drink and Lodging" p. 80-3.

together, these characters suggest that chivalry resides not in the nobility exclusively, but in those who choose to follow its principles.

Third Reversal: Courtesy Gone Awry

Given the reversals discussed above, it seems that the *Carl* is sharply critiquing the self-importance, violence and exclusion found in the chivalry practiced by Arthur's court, setting up in its place a chivalry that locates true courtesy, consisting of humility and respect for others, in behavior and not status. The Carl shames Arthur's knights, demonstrating that despite his monstrous form and low social status he possesses the courtesy they lack. Yet the *Carl* quickly makes this simple reversal much more problematic. Although the romance undermines the Carl's claim to not know courtesy, it soon becomes clear that "carllus corttesy" is rather different from noble courtesy after all. Once Gawain has passed the tests of the foal and the feast, as discussed above, the Carl sets Gawain two more tests: he must attack the Carl with a spear and kiss the Carl's wife (ll. 382-402, 445-68). While Gawain's previous actions in passing the courtesy tests the Carl has set are unimpeachable, these two new actions, ones that Gawain performs willingly, are the antitheses of courteous behavior for a guest. Attacking one's host and sleeping with his wife are serious offenses, far surpassing the petty discourtesies of Kay and Baldwin. The very courtesy that was admirable before now allows Gawain to behave discourteously. As Moffet notes, "Gawain employs the power of courtesy, that hallmark of the aristocrat. But courtesy, in fact, turns out to sanction both violence against a rival, the Carl, and sexual acquisitiveness."²² Crucially, in this reversal the absence of chivalric

²² Moffet, "Fearful Villainy," 131.

violence becomes problematic, as the courtly chivalry which takes its place becomes increasingly absurd. What initially seems to be a straightforward critique of the chivalric violence and superiority practiced by many of Arthur's knights becomes more complicated as the romance progresses. Gawain's courtesy that appears to prize appropriate behavior as a guest regardless of the host begins to look like simply a more subtle, and effective, means of attacking the Carl and sleeping with his wife; in encouraging Gawain in these actions, the Carl's courtesy, which seemed to match the ideal of Arthurian chivalry, begins to look as barbaric as the Carl himself. While chivalric violence and superiority are not admirable, Gawain's chivalric humility and the Carl's courtly chivalry at this point in the romance appear to be poor substitutes.

With this new twist in the chivalry represented by Gawain and the Carl, the romance turns to criticize yet another chivalric paradigm, one more subtle than violence or superiority. In this paradigm, the Carl and Gawain each establish a guiding principle of chivalry, and adhere to that principle regardless of the behavior it may require. The Carl's chivalric paradigm involves unquestioning obedience from his guests, but this is not his guiding paradigm. His behavior stems from a vow he once made, a vow that "Ther schulde never man logge in my wonys / But he scholde be slayne, iwys, / But he did as I hym bad" (ll. 520-2). The romance leaves murky the motivations for this vow, but the implications are clear: the Carl believes himself obligated to uphold the vow he has made. Honoring a vow is certainly chivalrous behavior, and the Carl has made this aspect of chivalry his guiding principle. But this vow leads to unchivalrous behavior, both in the tests he puts to his guests and in the fact that it has obligated him to kill ten cart-loads worth of men (ll. 533-7). The Carl's chivalric failure and exclusion from Arthurian

chivalry thus stems not from his monstrous form but from his misuse of chivalry to legitimize monstrous violence. If chivalry is a performance, the Carl gets much of it right. But he errs in his inability to choose a more appropriate guiding principle.

The Carl's guiding principle of upholding his vow calls forth in Gawain an equal dedication to acting the part of the good guest. While acting courteously to one's host and eschewing the superiority and entitlement displayed by Baldwin and Kay is clearly a positive chivalric value, like his host Gawain takes this value to its logical extreme. Under the guise of being a good guest, Gawain attacks his host, performing the very violence he emphatically rejected earlier in the romance. When the Carl commands, "Go take a sper in thy [Gawain's] honde / And at the bottredor goo take thy passe / And hitt me evyn in the face; / Do as I the commande," Gawain readily assents: "Syr Gawenn was a glade mann wytt that; / . . . / Syr Gawen came wytt a gret ire" (ll. 384-7, 391-4). When commanded, Gawain enthusiastically participates in the chivalric violence that he earlier avoided. Likewise, the Carl's second command to Gawain reveals again the problems inherent in Gawain's relativistic chivalry. The Carl says to Gawain, "Syr Gawene, / Go take my wife in thi armus tweyne / And kys her in my syghte" (ll. 454-6). Earlier in the evening, Gawain nearly fell in love with the Carl's wife; rebuked by the Carl, he was ashamed of his thoughts. This interaction shows Gawain's performance of courtesy slipping, but at a gentle reminder he is able to remember his proper role as a good guest. Thus, the Carl's command to Gawain is an order to do what was earlier considered discourteous to even consider. But as when he attacks the Carl, Gawain assents to this test with enthusiasm: "Therof Gawen toke the Carle goode hede. / When Gawen wolde have doun the prevey far, / Then seyde the Carle, 'Whoo ther! / That game I the forbede'"

(ll. 465-8). Gawain participates so enthusiastically in this test that he nearly oversteps his bounds and comes close to having intercourse with the Carl's wife; but rather than remind Gawain again that "Sche ys myn thou wouldyst wer thynn" (l. 412), the Carl seems to find humor in the situation, and he rewards Gawain for passing this test by giving Gawain his daughter as a companion for the night.²³ Thus, at Gawain's earlier decisions to reject chivalric violence and discourtesy did not represent an innate commitment to peacefulness or devotion to domestic courtesy; rather, Gawain's ready assent to the Carl's commands shows that his earlier insistence on courteous speech and behavior was a performance of chivalry. That is, Gawain chooses what appears to be the most effective approach to the Carl, regardless of what that approach requires.

What the Carl and Gawain make evident is that even the best of chivalric principles, such as keeping an oath or behaving well as a guest, can legitimize the types of behavior typically deemed unchivalric. Thus Gawain can attack his host and seduce his host's wife with no stain of discourtesy, since his courtesy actually necessitated these actions. There are certain bounds; the Carl's position in relation to the chivalric world is unclear, as the violence his oath necessitates is so excessive as to bar him from truly participating in Arthurian chivalry. The romance seems to indicate that violence is seldom chivalric, and the Carl's violence appears to arise from his monstrous nature. In this, he is Sir Ironside's counterpart, a giant who is always at war with Arthur's knights in a cycle of chivalric violence. But every chivalric value also becomes questionable, since

²³ Like attacking the host or seducing his wife, sleeping with the daughter of one's host would typically be considered discourteous behavior for a guest. Again, the Carl's actions represent courtesy gone awry and Gawain's response confirms that he is guided not by abstract ideals but by a commitment to obey his host in everything (and as with the previous two obedience tests, this is hardly an onerous task for Gawain to undertake). It should be noted that Gawain does marry this girl at the end of the romance, perhaps redeeming the dishonor he has done to her at her father's command.

pushed to extremes each can legitimize the very behavior it was intended to censure. Yet courteous behavior remains beneficial: despite the ridiculous extremes, Gawain's courtesy successfully ends the Carl's violence and brings him fully into the Arthurian world, to the benefit of every character involved. In the end, chivalry is not some innate virtue of the noble class, or even an unproblematic set of ideals to which a man may aspire; rather, chivalry is a social game, one that when performed well, under the right guiding principle, forms beneficial social relationships. When performed badly, it is at best ridiculous (Kay and Baldwin) and at worst destructive (the Carl). But despite this utilitarian and decidedly unromantic view of chivalry, the *Carl* still affirms the value of these chivalric principles, when coupled with the ability to discern the appropriate principle for each situation. For Gawain's consummate ability to perform chivalry in exactly this way is ultimately beneficial to all the characters in the romance. Gawain gains a wife; Arthur gains a new subject; the Carl gains not only admittance into the Arthurian world but close ties to Arthur's greatest knight; even Kay and Baldwin are given gifts as they depart from the Carl's castle. Thus, even as the romance demolishes the ideal of chivalry on the one hand, on the other it builds chivalry back up as a necessary ingredient for beneficial social interactions. This new chivalry can, like traditional chivalry, contain certain absurdities and contradictions, but it remains a useful social tool worth learning to perform well.

Fourth Reversal: The Carl Keeps His Head

Nowhere in the romance is the sense that chivalry is a social performance rather than an innate quality more obvious than in the final reversal, in which the romance

withholds a transformation of the Carl from his monstrous to a human form. After relentlessly questioning what chivalry is, the romance turns to the question, already hovering beneath the surface, of who can possess chivalry. As discussed above, neither belonging to Arthur's court nor having military prowess guarantees that a knight will possess a beneficial form of chivalry; additionally, the monstrous Carl shows that chivalry can be found in unlikely places. By ending the romance with the Carl, in his original, giant form, integrated into the Arthurian court, the romance presents chivalry as a performance in which any member of society with the desire and the resources can participate. For what allows the Carl to enter Arthurian chivalry is indeed his choice: his vow fulfilled, the Carl now sets up loyalty to Gawain as his guiding chivalric principle. He says to Gawain, after revealing to him the ten cartloads of men's bones,

Nowe wulle I forsake my wyckyd lawys;
Ther schall no mo men her be slawe, iwys,
As ferthforthe as I may.
Gawen, for the love of the
Al schal be welcome to me
That comythe here by this way. (ll. 541-6)

Because Gawain has fulfilled the conditions of the Carl's vow, and because Gawain in this romance stands for domestic courtesy rather than chivalric violence, in making Gawain his guiding principle the Carl chooses to give up the violence against Arthurian chivalry that kept him separate from it. This choice makes clear that it has been the Carl's violent actions against his guests, not his monstrous appearance, that have placed him apart from the courteous world.

This conclusion, that the Carl must change his ways but not his form, stands in stark contrast to most other Gawain romances that include a monstrous outsider to Arthur's court. Unlike the later ballad version, or similar transformation romances such

as *The Turke and Gawain* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain*,²⁴ the Carl in this romance does not go through a physical transformation (beheading is the traditional means of transformation, although courteous treatment alone effects a physical transformation in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain*). Physical transformation is even a feature in the more complex *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, although in this romance the Green Knight seems to freely shift between appearing normally human and supernaturally green without the intervention of Gawain's courtesy. Given this prevalence of physical transformation in the Gawain romances, many modern readers view the lack of transformation as a defect in the *Carl of Carlisle*; for example, Hahn in his introduction to the romance calls it "the most important of these episodes [of testing Gawain as a guest]" and a "crucial scene" that "is missing."²⁵ It seems safe to say that, like modern critics, medieval audiences would also have expected a physical transformation from the monstrous to the normal. Yet the romance withholds such a transformation; the Carl does change his behavior, once Gawain releases him from his vow, but there is no mention of enchantment and no hint that the Carl's form changes from that of a giant. This lack of a physical transformation, rather than being a mistake or an oversight, is the final chivalric subversion in the romance. Seeing the monstrous Carl become a knight of Arthur's court and Gawain's father-in-law brings to the forefront the question of who is able to possess chivalry. If a giant can also be a chivalrous knight, whose protestation that he possesses no courtesy is finally brushed off as a mere modesty topos by Arthur himself (ll. 619-27),

²⁴ Although *The Wedding of Sir Gawain* dates to the 1450s, it has earlier analogues dating to the fourteenth century; thus, the story of a hideous outsider transformed by the chivalry of a member of Arthur's court would have been familiar to an audience c. 1400.

²⁵ Hahn, *Carl of Carlisle*, 81.

is there anyone who cannot possess chivalry? And if a giant can be chivalrous, what sort of chivalry does he possess?

Once again, the romances forces its audience back to the idea of chivalry as a social performance. Both violence and chivalric superiority hinder this performance: Ironside's chivalric violence would not provide the benefits of Gawain's facile courtly chivalry, and the Carl's monstrous violence is what ultimately bars him from full participation in the chivalrous world to which he aspires. Kay and Baldwin's easy assumption of their superiority is also shown to be false, as their concern for themselves prevents them from achieving the social lubrication at which Gawain's courtesy excels. But when the actors in the courtly scene choose the appropriate guiding principles, the rest of the chivalrous trappings fall into place. And with the lack of a transformation of the Carl from monster to human, the romance highlights the idea that anyone can participate in this performance of chivalry. The *Carl* also displays the questionable underside of this conception of chivalry: the proper guiding principle can legitimize the very violence and immorality it is supposed to curb; additionally, that the Carl remains a monstrous giant hints not simply at a positive inclusiveness in chivalry but also at an untamed and potentially destructive force embraced in the heart of chivalry. Ultimately, this final chivalric reversal is the greatest subversion of chivalry. The previous reversals, in which the romance often humorously considers what constitutes chivalry, still hold out chivalry as an ideal worth aspiring towards: it may not require violence, it may call for humility rather than entitlement, and it may even engender certain absurdities. But chivalry remains a worthy ideal. And the final reversal, in which the romance withholds a transformation, does not necessarily invalidate that ideal. Yet ultimately, chivalry in the *Carl* is a game that can be

played by anyone with the right resources, with the castle, the golden cups, and most importantly the ability to choose the most appropriate behavioral paradigm for a given situation. Such a democratization of chivalry reveals the absurdities and monstrosities that it embraces, even as it reaffirms the social value of chivalry.

Conclusion

While the final reversal has succeeded in revealing the problems inherent in chivalry itself, the romance does not reject courtesy; rather, it provides a way to reevaluate the fundamental questions of what chivalry is, and who may possess it. Sean Pollack points out that “The *Carl of Carlisle*, although broadly parodic in form, uses its comic energy to show how imitation of nobility, supported by immense wealth, becomes the real thing, or perhaps something better.”²⁶ His observation shows that one clear answer to the question of who may possess chivalry is provided as the Carl by both his imitation of the material trappings of domestic courtesy and by his willingness to reconsider his chivalric paradigm ascends into the class of chivalric nobility.²⁷ But as Pollack again points out, the behavior that leads to the Carl’s upward social mobility is highly questionable; he argues that *The Carl of Carlisle* “exposes some of the (by now) trite literary notions of chivalry and nobility as mere fictions and seems implicitly to ask

²⁶ Pollack “Border States” 19.

²⁷ Pollack also describes the Carl as having “social ambiguity” which “makes him a likely candidate for social mobility,” (18). It is also important to note Moffet’s observation that the Carl was never truly removed from the chivalrous world; he concludes that “Courtesy is more redemptive than transformatory. It works on those to whom it comes ‘naturally’” (“Fearful Villainy” 131-2). These views are in contrast to Brandsen’s conclusion that the romance is meant to be didactic, warning the nobility that they must treat lower classes well (Brandsen, “Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle,” 305-6).

its audience: is this really who you want to emulate, or your daughters to marry?”²⁸

Indeed, the romance leaves this question unresolved; when chivalry incorporates both absurdities and the monstrous and becomes a performance in which anyone with the desire and the resources can participate, it is difficult to see it as an ideal. Yet despite the unease that lingers beneath the surface of the romance, the romance does end well.

Gawain marries, Kay and Bishop Baldwin depart with gifts, the Carl is knighted by Arthur, who in turn gains a new subject, and even the knights killed by the Carl have a chapel erected in their memory, complete with ten priests praying for their souls (ll. 547-9). Thus, while there is clearly a problematic side to Gawain’s courtly chivalry, its effects are both far-reaching and beneficial.

The key to the romance’s positive portrayal of chivalry lies in the first of the chivalric reversals, the reversal that contrasts chivalric violence with courtesy. Gawain’s courtesy as a guest has broken a cycle of violence, even if it has not fundamentally changed the nature of the Carl, who simply substitutes a new chivalric value of loyalty to Gawain for his now-fulfilled vow. But crucially, the Carl’s new guiding chivalric principle is about courtesy, not violence. Gawain’s actions have shown that the performance of courteous behavior engenders more courtesy, even in those whose monstrous appearance seemingly sets them apart from the chivalrous world. This courtesy stands in stark contrast to Ironside’s violence, which when replicated causes only further harm and exclusion, not reconciliation and inclusion in Arthurian chivalry. In this romance, violence is monstrous and destructive, not chivalric. This conclusion of the romance, one that leads to peace and the end of at least one cycle of chivalric and

²⁸ Pollack, “Border States,” 22.

monstrous violence, maps neatly onto the changing social role of the knight in England. No longer as necessary in battle as they once were, with their ranks swelled by newly socially-mobile aspirants to knighthood and nobility, English knights needed a new model of chivalry, one that showed how chivalry could continue even divorced from the violence that so long constituted a major aspect of it.²⁹ And although it clearly shows the problematic nature of this form of chivalry, *The Carl of Carlisle* describes a chivalry that remains courteous, as exemplified by Gawain, even as it eschews violence and embraces the paradoxes it can engender.

²⁹ See Ayton, *Knights and Warhorses*.

Chapter 4

Exchange and Emasculation: Gawain's Embodiment of Chivalric Fears in

The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell

The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, composed half a century after *The Carl of Carlisle*, is a romance that, like the *Carl*, involves a monstrous outsider who threatens Arthur's court and is neutralized by Gawain.¹ Yet unlike the *Carl*, the *Wedding* is ultimately suspicious of non-traditional forms of chivalry, forms that involve a potentially feminizing courtly chivalry that threatens to usurp a robustly masculine martial chivalry. While it attempts to reinstate this traditional form of chivalry, the romance remains ambiguous about even the value of this martial chivalry. Although the monstrous outsider in the romance, the loathly Dame Ragnell, brings with her the threat of emasculation, she also spurs a display of chivalry from Gawain that benefits both herself and Arthur in a way that would not have been possible without her disruption of chivalric violence. I argue that the romance's ambiguity about the relative values of martial chivalry and courtesy comments on the social changes in the role of the English

¹ The *Wedding* survives in one manuscript dating to c. 1500, Rawlinson C.86/Bodleian 11951, although it was probably composed c. 1450; its close ballad analogue, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, survives in fragmentary form in the Percy Folio, compiled in the seventeenth century (for manuscript details, see John Withrington, "The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell and The Marriage of Sir Gawaine" in *The Arthur of the English*, ed. W.R.J. Barron [Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001], 207-10). Although as with the rest of the Gawain romances the author is anonymous, in a 1982 article P.J.C. Field argues that Sir Thomas Malory wrote the *Wedding*, on the basis of an authorial interjection that indicates the poet was in prison while composing the romance ("Malory and *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*," *Archiv für das Studium der Neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 218 [1982]: 374-81). Recently, Field's student Ralph Norris argued in support of this thesis in "Sir Thomas Malory and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* Reconsidered" (*Arthuriana* 19.2 [2009]: 82-102); however, this position has not received general support among scholars.

knight. The *Wedding* sets forth fears that the shift of the knight's role from battlefield to court will emasculate knights and make them indistinguishable from women; yet even as it attempts to reinstate traditional martial chivalry, it acknowledges both that chivalric violence may not be socially beneficial and that the stylized violence of the hunt and the joust may have already emasculated chivalry.²

The *Wedding* is a variation on the Loathly Lady tale; its closest analogues in English are found in a later, fragmentary ballad version called *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, as well as the earlier *Wife of Bath's Tale* in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and *The Tale of Florent*, part of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Although *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is set in the time of Arthur, the *Wedding* and the *Marriage* are the only versions in which a traditional member of Arthur's court, Gawain, is a main character; in these romances, the action is also spurred not by a rape, as in Chaucer's account, but by a land dispute.³ Significantly, the land dispute is settled between individuals, while the rape is judged by the women of the court. This lack of a legal framework, coupled with the Arthurian setting, places the emphasis in the *Wedding* on the individual exercise of chivalry.

Highlighting the focus on the individual, the *Wedding* begins with Arthur hunting alone;

² While hunting as an activity spread across social classes, for the noble classes it was connected to martial chivalry. Nicholas Orme notes that hunting involved "horsemanship, the management of weapons, knowledge of terrain, woodcraft and strategy – techniques which are very close to those of war" (*From Childhood to Chivalry: The education of English Kings and Aristocracy 1066-1530* [London: Methuen, 1984], 191).

³ For comparisons between the versions found in Chaucer, Gower and the *Wedding*, see John K. Bollard, "Sovereignty and the Loathly Lady in English, Welsh and Irish," *Leeds Studies in English* n.s. 17 (1986): 41-59; for several recent articles on the history of the Loathly Lady story, and its connections particularly to the issue of sovereignty, see the collection of essays edited by S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter, *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007). The definitive article on the relationship between the *Wedding* and its ballad analogue, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, is Thomas Garbaty, "Rhyme, Romance, Ballad, Burlesque and the Confluence of Form," in *Fifteenth-Century Studies: Recent Essays*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1984), 283-301.

in the woods, he meets Sir Gromer Somer Joure, who threatens to kill Arthur because he has taken Sir Gromer's lands and given them to Gawain. But after Arthur points out the shame that Sir Gromer will incur if he kills the unarmored Arthur, Sir Gromer sets Arthur the task of returning in one year with an answer to the question of what women desire most. If Arthur fails to return or provide the correct answer, Sir Gromer will kill him. Arthur agrees, then returns to his court. Distraught, he enlists Gawain's help, and the two each compile a large book full of potential answers; however, before he returns to Sir Gromer with these answers, Arthur encounters the loathly lady, Dame Ragnell, who in this romance is described in exuberantly hideous terms: the description begins, "Her face was red, her nose snotyd withalle, / Her mowithe wyde, her tethe yalowe overe alle, / With bleryd eyen gretter then a balle," and only becomes more grotesque (ll. 231-3).⁴ Yet despite her threatening appearance, she promises Arthur the correct answer to Sir Gromer's question if he in turn will give her Gawain as a husband. Arthur and Gawain both agree to this exchange, and after Ragnell's answer that women desire sovereignty proves correct, she publically marries Gawain to the sorrow of Arthur's court. On their wedding night, Ragnell poses Gawain with a dilemma: does he want her beautiful by day or by night?⁵ Gawain leaves the decision up to her, showing that he has learned the lesson of what women desire; she then sheds her loathly form entirely and becomes a beautiful young woman, revealing that she was enchanted to be hideous until the best knight would grant her sovereignty. Thus, Arthur's life is saved and Gawain is rewarded with a

⁴ All quotations from the *Wedding* are taken from Thomas Hahn, ed., *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS, 1995), 41-80.

⁵ Gower's *Tale of Florent* repeats this dilemma of beautiful by night or day, but Chaucer's version adds a twist as the dilemma for the knight becomes choosing between a beautiful and unfaithful or ugly and faithful wife.

beautiful and faithful wife, whom he loves above all others for the rest of his life; in fact, he loves her so much that he cuts off his male relationships and abandons his knightly pursuits, much to the surprise and dismay of Arthur. Yet this situation in which Ragnell asserts such power over Gawain does not last long. The romance concludes with Ragnell's death only five years after their marriage and Gawain's subsequent return to knightly activities.

Like *The Carl of Carlisle*, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* presents an unfailingly chivalrous Gawain whose very courtesy leads him into positions, such as granting a woman sovereignty, that are problematic for chivalry; despite its similarly humorous story, the *Wedding* is more deeply uneasy than the *Carl* about the reversals, particularly in gender roles, that occur throughout the romance. In contrast to the *Carl*, in which chivalry accommodates both the monstrous and the paradoxical, chivalry in the *Wedding* requires a transformation from the threateningly grotesque to the human. Yet even this transformation of the loathly lady, Ragnell, back into her beautiful form does not undo the threat to chivalry posed by the hideous Ragnell: the Arthurian court does not return to normal until Ragnell is dead. Some critics have read this romance through the lens of the Bakhtinian conception of carnival, in which the grotesque and the subverted are allowed to emerge temporarily before once more becoming submerged in normal social structures. As Edward Vasta explains, "medieval grotesquery and laughter, operating together on occasions of public carnival, persistently preserve and give full vent to the unofficial culture's freedom from the serious, ruling ideology sustained and enforced by the official culture."⁶ In Vasta's reading of the *Wedding*, the eruption of the

⁶ Edward Vasta, "Chaucer, Gower and the Unknown Minstrel: The Literary Liberation of the Loathly Lady," *Exemplaria* 7.2 (1995): 398.

carnavalesque indicates that the “romance expresses a yearning toward democratic respect for commoners; it calls for a more noble regard for women than granted by its own culture.”⁷ Yet given the ending of the romance, in which the subversions are erased, it is not clear that this eruption of the carnivalesque in the disruptive presence of Ragnell actually achieves the vision of social transformation that Vasta describes. It seems more likely that, as John Perry points out in the context of the *Wedding*’s portrayal of medieval marriage, “the genre’s conventions are so firmly in place that they can actually withstand and be strengthened by this kind of carnivalesque inversion.”⁸ That is, after the inversions of the romance have been righted, the world depicted in the romance goes on as it had before, unchanged by the temporary disruption brought by the loathly lady. Yet this lack of change is, itself, uneasy. The romance does not reevaluate traditional social structures and chivalric values, although the benefit of saving Arthur’s life, brought about by Ragnell’s inversions of social order, is undeniable. Additionally, the ease with which Ragnell does invert the chivalric order suggests that the chivalry embraced by Arthur may already be flawed.

This lingering ambiguity about Ragnell’s challenges to chivalry cements the romance’s uneasiness with shifts in social ideals of chivalry. By the mid-fifteenth century, when the *Wedding* was composed, the role of the knight had shifted away from the battlefield; this shift separated the practice of chivalry from the martial violence that

⁷ Vasta, “Chaucer, Gower,” 417.

⁸ John H. Perry, “Opening the Secret: Marriage, Narration and Nascent Subjectivity in Middle English Romance,” *Philological Quarterly* 76 (1997): 151.

had traditionally played a large role in the activities of chivalric knights. Like the other Middle English Gawain romances discussed in this dissertation, the *Wedding* reflects an attempt to define an ideology of chivalry for knights who have been relocated from the battlefield to the court. The *Wedding*, as it kills off Ragnell and returns Gawain to male relationships and masculine activities like the hunt and the joust, seems to assert that chivalry still does center on male relationships and violent activities. Yet throughout the romance, these activities are curiously inert, and the very ease with which Ragnell inserts herself into male homosocial relationships brings the vigor of this traditional chivalry into question. At its core, the *Wedding* is a deeply conflicted romance: it does not embrace Gawain's courtly chivalry, revealing such an ideology as conducive to threatening gender reversals and thus potentially emasculating; yet the alternative chivalry of the joust and the hunt both lacks the beneficial aspect of Gawain's courtesy and pales before the pleasures of romantic love. Examining the way that the *Wedding* uses Gawain's character to explore ideologies of chivalry reveals both its unease with the restriction of chivalry to the behaviors expected in the court and its inability to present a compelling alternative.

Gawain's Role in the *Wedding*

Gawain is a curiously elusive character in the *Wedding*. Undoubtedly, he is both the hero and the central character around whom the action revolves. He possesses the land that Sir Gromer claims in the initial conflict of the romance; he is the one to whom Arthur unburdens himself after encountering Sir Gromer; he aids Arthur, both in compiling a list of what women desire most and, crucially, in agreeing to marry Dame Ragnell; and most importantly Gawain enables Ragnell's transformation and the

subsequent beneficial ending for all the characters involved. Yet despite his centrality, he is oddly difficult to analyze as a character in this text. Criticism of the romance reflects this slipperiness, as discussions of the *Wedding* tend to mention Gawain only in passing and in relation to his courtesy or his bond with Arthur; scholars focus instead on Ragnell, Arthur, and even Sir Gromer Somer Joure, but never Gawain himself.⁹ The ease with which discussions of the romance, and indeed the romance itself, glide over Gawain is worthy of examination. Why does the romance simultaneously make Gawain the central character and efface him so thoroughly behind his loyalty to Arthur and submission to his wife? The answer to this question lies, I argue, in the typical role of women in medieval romance as objects in the exchanges that establish male relationships.¹⁰ But in this romance, Ragnell's assumption of a masculine role places Gawain in a woman's role, so that his exchange can build beneficial relationships for those around him.¹¹ Gawain is thus central; without him and his willingness to step into this role, no bonds would be established, and Arthur's life would be in danger. Yet just as the women who typically

⁹ Critics who focus on Ragnell and Arthur are discussed below; the article that analyzes Sir Gromer Somer Joure is Karen Hunter Trimmell, "'And shold have been oderwyse understond': The Disenchanting of Sir Gromer Somer Joure," *Medium Aevum* 71.2 (2002): 294-301.

¹⁰ The foundational text on the exchange of women in literature is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1985; for a discussion of women as objects of exchange in medieval romance, see Roberta L. Krueger, "Love, Honor, and the Exchange of Women in *Yvain*: Some Remarks on the Female Reader," in *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster (New York and London: Garland, 1996), 3-18.

¹¹ In his article, Perry notes Gawain's role: "His [Gawain's] status as the medium for Ragnell and Arthur's exchange points again to the texts' play with gender roles: Gawain is delivered like bride and dower to Ragnell" ("Opening the Secret" 152). Perry, however, does not pursue the implications of Gawain's position, as his article is concerned with the institution of marriage as presented in this romance. In light of role reversals, Ellen M. Caldwell also notes that "rather than the woman being the point of rivalry [between Arthur and Sir Gromer], it seems to be land, or Gawain himself, the possessor of Sir Gromer's lands" ("Brains or Beauty," in *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, ed. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter [Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007], 246.); she reads the *Wedding* as substantially concerned with male homosocial bonds, although she does not pursue the implications of Gawain taking a potentially feminine role.

fill such a role are effaced by their very willingness to participate in male exchange, so Gawain disappears into his very centrality in the romance. The larger ambiguity the romance has over the proper function of chivalry is thus made manifest in the character of Gawain. His devotion to courtesy in domestic spaces not only causes him to absent himself from violent activities such as the joust, but also places him in a woman's role. The avoidance of violence, while socially beneficial in this romance, threatens to make men like women, as displayed in Gawain's dual role as essential and effaced.

To uncover how Gawain's function in this romance relates to chivalric ideologies, we must examine the relationships that he enables in the text. First, and most obviously, his exchange marks the formation of a mutually beneficial partnership between Arthur and Ragnell, in which Ragnell saves Arthur's life in return for being given Gawain as a husband, and through him receives the benefits from his status in Arthur's court. Second, and in a slightly more complex way, Gawain allows for the possibility of restored relationships between Ragnell and her brother, Sir Gromer Somer Joure and through that relationship a reconciliation between Arthur and Sir Gromer. As Sheryl Forste-Grupp notes, through her marriage to Gawain Ragnell "successfully acquires authority of her family's lands"; once she is in this position, she can benefit her brother.¹² Yet she does not seek to build a relationship with her brother by herself; rather, she asks Arthur "To be good lord to Sir Gromer, iwysse, / Of that to you he hath offendyd" (ll. 812-3). In this example, Ragnell uses her status as Gawain's wife and her control over his lands to attempt to benefit her brother, but she does so by making herself the mediator of a relationship between Arthur and Sir Gromer. But Ragnell's instability in her role in this

¹² Sheryl L. Forste-Grupp, "A Woman Circumvents the Laws of Primogeniture in *The Weddyngs of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*," *Studies in Philology* 99.2 (2002): 118.

potential relationship between herself, Arthur and Sir Gromer, her shift between a primary and a subordinate role, prevents her from successfully creating a relationship that benefits Sir Gromer. Thus, despite Ragnell's earlier success in helping both herself and Arthur, the romance begins to reveal its uneasiness with Ragnell's role reversals; while her attempt to help her brother causes no harm, it also brings no benefit, as Sir Gromer is never heard from again in the romance.

The third relationship Gawain enables is that between himself and Ragnell, and this is the most problematic in the romance because of the relationship it disrupts. Building on the ambiguous result of Ragnell's attempt at building a male relationship between Arthur and Sir Gromer, the *Wedding* ends with another male relationship fully disrupted because of Ragnell. Because of the role reversal that results in Gawain's marriage, he loses his relationship with Arthur. As his marriage to Ragnell strengthens the bonds between her and Arthur, it concurrently loosens the bonds between Gawain and Arthur, and indeed loosens his ties to the entire world of chivalry. Gawain loves Ragnell so much that he gives up the knightly life: "Nevere wold he haunt justyng aryghte; / Theratt mervaylyd Arthoure the Kyng" (ll. 809-10). Unlike the marriage between Gawain and the Carl's daughter, which serves to formalize the bonds of chivalric friendship between the two men and to closely tie the Carl to Arthur's court, this marriage takes Gawain away from the court and its male pursuits. Love does this occasionally in romance; to name a well-known example, Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec et Enide* deals with a similar situation, in which Erec gives up his knightly pursuits to enjoy a life of leisure with his wife, Enide. The *Wedding* lacks *Erec et Enide*'s complex treatment of this topic, as Gawain's departure from his normal chivalrous activities occupies only the last 50 lines of the

romance and ends when Ragnell dies. But the weakening of Gawain's bond with Arthur, even if swiftly remedied, is striking given his total, unquestioning loyalty to Arthur through the rest of the romance. That is, in the *Wedding* Gawain's chivalry is unremarkable in its steadfastness, until his very willingness to obey Arthur in everything undermines his relationship with his lord.

With Gawain's role in Ragnell's gender inversions and the *Wedding*'s simultaneous desire and inability to fully return Gawain to traditional chivalry, the romance set forth a new, non-martial chivalry and displays the problems that arise from that ideal. Many articles already examine how Ragnell's defiance of female roles challenges traditional chivalry, and these studies will be useful in considering how Gawain's role fits with the subversions of order that Ragnell threatens. But my argument goes beyond an examination of the gender inversions in the romance to consider what the implications of these inversions are for the ideal of chivalry. I argue that, while the romance in some senses presents an idealistic vision of a chivalric world freed from roles delineated by gender, in which women can have sovereignty and men can be the nexus of exchange, the *Wedding* also displays deep unease with the threats to the social order such a vision presents. This unease consists of the worry that a courtesy divorced from male friendships and masculine violence is not actually chivalry; this worry leads to a fear of emasculation and a lurking suspicion that even traditional chivalry offers no sure protection from this emasculation. As it concludes, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* rights the reversals and subversions of the chivalric order by first having Ragnell establish a male-male relationship for Gawain in bearing his son, then by killing off Ragnell and returning Gawain to his interrupted male bonds within Arthurian chivalry

and with Arthur in particular. Gawain returns to traditional chivalry, yet his uncriticized participation in gender reversals and his subsequent elevation of love for Ragnell over friendship with Arthur leaves open the question of what contemporary chivalry is, and what the relationship should be between courtly chivalric values like love and loyalty and the masculine bonds and activities of martial chivalry.

Ragnell and Arthur

We turn now to a closer examination of the relationships that Gawain facilitates, between Ragnell and Arthur and between Ragnell and her brother, Sir Gromer, as well as the relationship between Gawain and Arthur that Ragnell disrupts. The nature of these three relationships illuminates not only Gawain's role, but also shows the implications for chivalry that underlie Ragnell's inversion of gender roles in the romance. In this first relationship, Ragnell upsets traditional gender roles by establishing a bond with Arthur that mimics a chivalric, homosocial bond. Critics have long noted that Ragnell, in her assertiveness, reverses gender roles as she assumes a masculine role in this relationship.¹³ As these scholars observe, Ragnell is a strikingly forceful character, particularly in comparison with the other Loathly Ladies in English romance. Forste-Grupp note that among the analogous loathly ladies in Chaucer, Gower and the ballad's renditions, only Ragnell is named. She argues, "By naming the hag 'Ragnell' and bestowing upon her the

¹³ For discussions of Ragnell's gender subversions, see: Forste-Grupp, "A Woman Circumvents the Laws of Primogeniture in *The Weddyngs of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*," 105-22, which discusses Ragnell's maneuverings to recover her family lands; Mary Leech, "Why Dame Ragnell Had to Die," in *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, ed. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 213-34, which examines Ragnell's power over the men in Arthur's court; and Russell A. Peck, "Folklore and Powerful Women in Gower's 'Tale of Florent,'" in *The English "Loathly Lady" Tales: Boundaries, Traditions, Motifs*, ed. S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 100-145, which argues that women assume a great deal of power due to Arthur's ineptness as a ruler.

honorific title ‘dame,’ the poet of *The Weddynge* refuses to allow the reader or audience to consign her to the faceless group of other unnamed heiresses married for their dowers and family connections instead of themselves.”¹⁴ Ragnell in this romance erupts out of a namelessness that indicates male control, confidently asserting herself in the chivalric world. And while her very name begins to free Ragnell from male control, her grotesque, non-feminine appearance cements the process: as Forste-Grupp continues, “her [Ragnell’s] appearance frees her from medieval strictures regarding female behavior — silence, modesty, humility — and female enclosures — hearth, hall, garden.”¹⁵ Loosed from the traditional boundaries of female behavior, Ragnell can exercise a significant amount of power in the romance, power traditionally found in male spheres. She insists on her own way to such an extent that, as Mary Leech writes, “At no point is Dame Ragnell subject to the will of the court: she rides in as she wishes, she is married when and where she wishes, she marries whom she wishes, she is dressed as she wishes, and she eats where and how she wishes.”¹⁶ Although Ragnell’s disruption of chivalric society is not allowed to continue, as the romance reabsorbs Ragnell into typical gender structures through her transformation and death, her ability to subvert gender roles gives her significant power in the first part of the romance. But beyond her general reversal of gender roles, I argue more specifically that Ragnell imitates male homosocial bonds. She not only approaches Arthur and bargains with him as her equal, gaining a husband (and, as the romance later reveals, her disenchantment) while giving Arthur his life; she also

¹⁴ Forste-Grupp, “A Woman Circumvents,” 106.

¹⁵ Forste-Grupp, “A Woman Circumvents,” 116.

¹⁶ Leech, “Why Dame Ragnell Had to Die,” 219.

uses the mechanism of binding male relationships by insisting that Arthur give her Gawain to cement their agreement. This element of Ragnell's gender-bending is the most significant for chivalry in the romance: not only does she insert herself into male roles, which is threatening enough, but she uses that power to place men in this romance in female roles.

While Gawain is the character most affected by this aspect of Ragnell's subversions, Arthur is also affected by his relationship with Ragnell. In order to form a balanced relationship with the masculine Ragnell, he must be feminized. As many critics conclude, he is at least presented negatively and potentially feminized in his encounters with both Sir Gromer and Dame Ragnell. Leech lists several ways in which Arthur is presented far from admirably in the romance, ranging from his insistence on hunting alone at the beginning of the romance to his taking of Sir Gromer's land; she concludes that, in this encounter, "Arthur does not act with any kingly authority or with any of the qualities one might expect in an honorable and noble knight."¹⁷ Similarly, Russell Peck argues that Arthur is presented as a careless ruler; Ragnell, Sir Gromer and even Gawain by their actions bring his carelessness to light.¹⁸ And as Colleen Donnelly contends, when the unarmed Arthur meets Sir Gromer, he "has seized on chivalric convention: one does not attack an unarmed knight. . . . But all this sounds too much like a game, in which Arthur conveniently trots out the rule book to find a clause that will offer him momentary protection. The result is that the chivalric code sounds hollow."¹⁹ In line with these

¹⁷ Leech, "Why Dame Ragnell Had to Die," 221.

¹⁸ Peck, "Folklore and Powerful Women," 122-3.

¹⁹ Colleen Donnelly, "Aristocratic Veneer and the Substance of Verbal Bonds in *The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell*," *Studies in Philology* 94.3 (1997): 326.

arguments about Arthur's weakness and lack of chivalry, Ellen Caldwell argues for Arthur's explicit feminization in the romance: "Arthur's position becomes gradually feminized in this romance, beginning with his subordination to Sir Gromer, his reliance on assistance from his nephew Gawain, and his final indebtedness and submission to the will of Dame Ragnelle."²⁰ While Caldwell argues that the romance eventually rights this inversion of roles and reestablishes male bonds and roles, Arthur's encounter with a woman who challenges gender roles leaves him neither particularly knightly nor masculine, a state that points to the doubt I have been tracing in the *Wedding* about the nature of traditional chivalry as represented by Arthur.²¹ That is, if he is so easily feminized, is his traditional chivalry a viable ideology? Indeed, Arthur's position in relationship to Ragnell arises because of his inability to engage in chivalric violence with Sir Gromer. Arthur's participation in activities like the hunt is not the same as the traditional chivalric violence that would frame the encounter between Arthur and Sir Gromer as a physical fight rather than a verbal contest. This avoidance of violence coupled with the very ease with which Arthur and Ragnell can form a relationship points to the feminization already inherent in Arthur's chivalry.

At this point in the romance, Gawain becomes the character who completes these subversions of gender roles by acting as the object of exchange between the two hybridized characters of Arthur and Ragnell. He makes no claim, as Arthur does, to a traditional chivalry; rather, his chivalry consists of his loyalty to Arthur and his courtesy to Ragnell, impeccable characteristics that in the *Wedding* necessitate his agreement to

²⁰ Caldwell, "Brains or Beauty," 244.

²¹ Caldwell, "Brains or Beauty," 250

become the object of exchange. His exchange is a key moment in the text, one that guarantees the mutually beneficial relationship negotiated between the masculine Ragnell and partially feminized Arthur. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that in much of western literature the relationships between men are negotiated through women; Roberta Kreuger explores the importance of the exchange of women in male relationships specifically in Chrétien's *Yvain*, but her argument about the importance of women in chivalric male relationships applies more broadly to medieval romance as a whole.²² This use of women to cement male bonds is well-established, making the gender inversions in the *Wedding* all the more pronounced. For Ragnell, despite being the woman, is decidedly not the exchanged but one of the exchangers. She advances not male chivalric relationships but her own agenda. Ragnell in fact disrupts a male relationship between Arthur and Sir Gromer by establishing a bond with Arthur that mimics a male, homosocial, chivalric relationship. And this new relationship requires the cementing exchange of a body. Gawain, of course, is that body.²³ As the body of exchange, Gawain graphically demonstrates the threatened emasculation of non-violent chivalry, and of a chivalry that allows itself to be disrupted by a woman. While the romance does not at this point question Gawain's devotion to chivalry, as it does not explicitly question the value of Arthur's version of chivalry, it has shown the threat to masculinity inherent in avoiding violence. But the romance also maintains the benefits of Ragnell's inversions, for as

²² Sedgwick, *Between Men*; Krueger, "Love, Honor and the Exchange of Women in *Yvain*," 3-18.

²³ This is in contrast to the relationship between Laudine and Yvain in Chrétien's *Yvain*; here again a woman is one of the exchangers, but she promises to win her mistress' love for Yvain. Thus, while Chrétien's romance does present a gender inversion, it is not as complete of a disruption of the system of exchange as the *Wedding* presents. Likewise, in Malory's *Tale of Sir Gareth*, the first sister wins the other sister for Gareth; clearly, then, it is sometimes acceptable for women to participate in the exchange system as exchangers, but outside of the *Wedding* they are exchanging another woman, never a man.

Arthur makes clear in his discussion with Sir Gromer, violence has the potential to cause only harm, while its avoidance can benefit all involved.

Ragnell and Sir Gromer

In addition to her socially disruptive relationship with Arthur, Ragnell also violates gender expectations in her relationship with her brother, Sir Gromer. Ragnell steps into the antagonistic relationship between her brother, Sir Gromer, and Arthur, not to serve as a peacemaker between the two men, a typical position for a woman in medieval romance, but to disrupt that relationship and build one for herself with Arthur. The relationship with Arthur in turn gives Ragnell the power to negotiate a mutually beneficial relationship between herself and her brother, and to attempt to reconcile Arthur and Sir Gromer. Yet here, much more so than in her relationship with Arthur, the romance shows the strain of Ragnell's disruption of normal male roles and bonds. Not only is a potentially beneficial relationship between Ragnell and Sir Gromer never realized, but Ragnell is unable either to wield the masculine assertiveness she had in her loathly form or to fulfill her role as feminine reconciler once her form conforms to societal standards. Although Ragnell has gained a certain amount of power within the court by saving Arthur's life and negotiating her marriage to Gawain, her new power is not socially beneficial, as the failure of this second set of relationships shows. The gender inversions required in the first set of relationships between Ragnell, Arthur and Gawain may have been useful; but now the romance begins to reveal the negative effects of Ragnell's assertion of her power and insertion of herself into the masculine business of building chivalric relationships. Because she can neither inhabit a wholly feminine role nor

maintain the masculine assertiveness she had in her loathly form, Ragnell begins to falter in her attempts to benefit those around her.

The romance establishes the web of relationships between Arthur, Ragnell and Sir Gromer on an ambiguous note, as Ragnell disrupts the relationship between Arthur and Sir Gromer, but in such a way that she creates more social good than could arise from the continuation of that relationship. And not only does she benefit Arthur by disrupting his interaction with Sir Gromer in order to form a bond with Arthur herself, by so doing Ragnell also positions herself in a way that allows her to also establish a beneficial relationship between herself and her brother. The key to this relationship is, once again, Gawain. His importance in interactions with Sir Gromer first appears when the knight accuses Arthur of having given his lands to Gawain; as Forste-Grupp explains, the difficulty here is that Arthur cannot simply take those lands back from Gawain and bestow them again on Sir Gromer (ll. 58-9).²⁴ Gawain thus has no potential role in a relationship between Arthur and Sir Gromer, other than as a secondary locus of hostility for Sir Gromer. Yet once Ragnell appears on the scene and becomes Gawain's wife, it becomes possible that Ragnell can benefit Sir Gromer through Gawain by reconciling him with chivalrous society and restoring to him his own lands. Forste-Grupp analyzes the way in which Ragnell disrupts the laws of primogeniture, arguing that, under English law, were Arthur to reinstate Sir Gromer to his lands, he would have no legal obligation to provide for his sister.²⁵ This situation motivates Ragnell to intervene and secure the lands for herself; as Forste-Grupp writes, "She successfully acquires authority of her

²⁴ Forste-Grupp, "A Woman Circumvents," 112.

²⁵ Forste-Grupp, "A Woman Circumvents," 118.

family's lands and a preeminent position in Arthur's court."²⁶ Ragnell intervenes to benefit herself, but she also understands that her relationship with Arthur and with Gawain, her position in court and her access to Gawain's property, will allow her to benefit her brother. Thus, despite her ominous disruption of a male relationship, the romance implies that good may come of this subversion. Yet Ragnell is unable, in the end, to either mend the relationships between men or her own relationship with her brother, suggesting that her power is not as beneficial as it originally appears to be.

As she locates herself to both better her own position and benefit those around her, Ragnell uses Gawain to secure a place for herself in Arthur's court. She first leverages her power in her loathly form to insist on all the chivalric courtesies that would be due to a less socially disruptive and more conventionally beautiful woman. She refuses to be married secretly, despite Arthur and Guinevere's pleas; she dresses as if she were beautiful; in short, she insists upon the sovereignty that she claims women most desire (ll. 503-14, 569-86, 590-7). Yet all this insistence only garners disgust from the court, whose members lament Gawain's fate: at his betrothal, the romance records their reactions thus:

"Alas!" then sayd Dame Gaynour;
So sayd alle the ladyes in her bower,
And wept for Sir Gawen.
"Alas!" then sayd both King and knyght,
That evere he shold wed such a wyghte. (ll. 542-6)

Despite her insistence on her place in the court in her loathly form, it is only after she transforms into a beautiful young woman that the court truly accepts her. Ragnell's failure to accrue social power in her loathly form demonstrates the limits that society begins to place on her influence. For only when her appearance conforms to traditional

²⁶ Forste-Grupp, "A Woman Circumvents," 118.

chivalric standards, when “She is a fayre wyghte,” does Arthur reveal the way in which she saved his life and Guinevere proceed to promise, “My love, Lady, ye shalle have evere / For that ye savid my Lord Arthoure, / As I am a gentilwoman” (ll. 759, 760-2, 796-8). Ragnell has successfully used her relationships with Gawain and with Arthur to make a place for herself in Arthurian society, but she also begins to conform to social expectations. Yet she has not fully lost the power she had in her loathly form.

The power that Ragnell maintains stems directly from her relationship with Gawain. For on their wedding night, Gawain gives control of all his property to Ragnell: he says, “Bothe body and goodes, hartt, and every dele, / Ys all your oun, for to by and selle — / That make I God avowe!” (ll. 682-4). Although Gawain makes this promise to Ragnell in her loathly, and more explicitly powerful, form, the beautiful and seemingly more compliant Ragnell makes no move to restore this sovereignty to Gawain, even as she later promises to be an obedient wife (discussed below). Since Gawain has given Ragnell his “every dele,” she has power over him and his possessions, and her role in saving Arthur’s life gives her power over him as well. Thus, as Leech argues, Ragnell’s “sphere of influence goes beyond Gawain, as she exerts power over her brother, Sir Gromer, and even Arthur, and this power does not disappear when she becomes beautiful.”²⁷ Ragnell’s continued power over the men in the romance now comes from her social position and her possession of Gawain’s property. She can thus potentially form a relationship with her brother cemented by the exchange of Gawain’s lands.

Despite the power that Ragnell retains, however, the romance prevents Ragnell from stepping into the role of giver of land and restorer of position for her brother, Sir

²⁷ Leech, “Why Dame Ragnell Had to Die,” p. 225.

Gromer. The romance begins to mitigate Ragnell's power after her wedding night, as she swears obedience to Gawain. In the presence of Arthur and the rest of the court, the transformed Ragnell makes the following vow to Gawain:

Therefore, curteys Knyght and hend Gawen,
Shalle I nevere wrathe the serteyn,
That promyse nowe here I make.
Whilles that I lyve I shal be obaysaunt;
To God above I shalle itt warraunt,
And nevere with you to debate. (ll. 781-6)

With this speech, Ragnell relocates herself from a challenger and disrupter of male rituals and bonds to a compliant, obedient woman. Her promise does not explicitly reverse Gawain's promise that she can control all of his possessions, yet it removes some of the threat of a powerful woman who controls Gawain's wealth. Similarly, the romance mitigates Ragnell's power over Arthur by having her plead with the king to pardon and reinstate her brother: "She prayd the Kyng for his gentilnes, / 'To be good lord to Sir Gromer, iwysse, / Of that to you he hathe offendyd.' / 'Yes, Lady, that shalle I nowe for your sake'" (ll. 811-14). While Ragnell still has power over Arthur after her transformation, she expresses this power in a more typically feminine way, by pleading with Arthur to be good to her brother. Post-transformation, she moves from the role of exchanger to exchanged in this male relationship: through her, Sir Gromer has the opportunity of a restored relationship with Arthur, an opportunity that will greatly benefit Sir Gromer. This is a key moment. Ragnell's power now comes from her adherence to a feminine model of behavior, from her deference to Arthur; this exchange is far different from their earlier bargain, in which Ragnell controlled their bargain. Now she has yielded her sovereignty to Arthur. Despite the power that she still retains in theory, once her appearance is no longer disruptive by itself Ragnell begins to relinquish her power and

assume the role of feminine deference. Her disruption of the initial relationship between Arthur and Sir Gromer, while beneficial at the time, sets a chain of events in motion that shows the threat of a woman uncontained by social norms. And even as Ragnell attempts to reintegrate herself into chivalrous society, through her transformation and marriage to Arthur, this causes her to lose her ability to negotiate beneficial relationships.

The *Wedding* underscores Ragnell's inability to build relationships with Sir Gromer's evident desire to have nothing to do with his sister. He guesses immediately that it is Ragnell who has thwarted his plan to kill Arthur; upon Arthur's correct answer to his question, Sir Gromer says, "And she that told the nowe, Sir Arthoure, / I pray to God, I maye se her bren on a fyre; / For that was my suster, Dame Ragnelle, / That old scott, God geve her shame" (ll. 473-6).²⁸ Sir Gromer's reaction reveals the unease in the romance over the power that Ragnell wields. Ragnell has, by inserting herself into the situation, spoiled Sir Gromer's plans and instead secured both land and position for herself. And while Ragnell at least gestures towards sharing her new position and wealth with her brother through her request that Arthur be a good lord to Sir Gromer, he never again appears in the romance. Ragnell has demonstrated her power over Sir Gromer, both by disrupting his plot against Arthur and by attempting to reinstate him into Arthurian society. And Sir Gromer responds to that power by fleeing from it. He refuses to acknowledge the influence that Ragnell has over his situation, and thus he must remove

²⁸ According to the MED, "scott" is a misspelling of "stot," which refers to a steer or horse but is also a disparaging term for a woman (s.v. "stot"). In line 476, Hahn reads "scott," like Madden (*Syr Gawayne: A Collection of Ancient Romance-Poems*, ed. Frederic Madden [London: Richard and John E. Taylor, 1839]), Sumner ("The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell," ed. Laura Sumner, *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages* 5.4 [1924]), and Sands (*Middle English Verse Romances*, ed. Donald B. Sands [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966]). The most recent editor of the poem, Shephard, reads "stott" and glosses it as "cow," presumably to echo the modern English use of "old cow" rather than "old nag" as an insult (*Middle English Romances*, ed. Stephen H. A. Shepherd [New York: Norton, 1995]).

himself from her sphere of influence in order to continue to avoid her power. Because of the threat that the loathly Ragnell poses to her brother, she cannot benefit him even when she makes herself a non-threatening, obedient and subservient woman.

Ragnell's complex relationship (or lack of a relationship) with Sir Gromer shows, again, the ambiguity in the romance about the potential social benefits of subversions of the chivalric order. When Ragnell interrupts the mutually detrimental interaction between Arthur and Sir Gromer, the romance not only shows the benefit to Arthur and Ragnell herself, but also uses Ragnell's maneuverings to place her in a position to reconcile Sir Gromer with Arthurian society. Without her intervention, little good could have come out of the encounter between Arthur and Sir Gromer. Yet Ragnell fails to build socially useful relationships with or for her brother. And it is not, finally, clear whether this failure stems from Ragnell's initial assertion of herself in the world of male chivalry or from her attempted compliance with the social structures of Arthur's court, from her disruption of chivalric society or from her reintegration into that society. The *Wedding* cannot deny the usefulness of Ragnell's subversions, but it mitigates them by showing her power as threatening to the bonds of chivalric order. Her hybridity, useful in forming a relationship with Arthur, now prevents her from building another successful relationship. The romance thus makes Ragnell a threat to chivalric order so that the gender inversions she represents will not be allowed to proliferate.

Gawain and Arthur

The above discussions of the relationships that Ragnell disrupts and forms through Gawain display the slipperiness of Gawain's character in this romance, as he disappears

behind Ragnell's actions. But we now turn to a closer examination of Gawain himself, and through an analysis of his bond with Arthur his role in the other relationships and his position in the chivalric order of Arthur's court become more clear. If the second, failed, set of relationships discussed above begins to show the threat that Ragnell represents to masculine chivalry, the third relationship, between Gawain and Arthur, decisively reveals the dangers Ragnell poses to chivalric male bonds, and by extension to male chivalry as a whole. This relationship is wholly disrupted by Ragnell when she marries Gawain. Unlike her relationships with Arthur and Sir Gromer, the bond Ragnell forms with Gawain is not one that mimics or replaces a homosocial relationship. Gawain's abdication of sovereignty to Ragnell and her continued power over him after their marriage ultimately result in a rupture in the apparently unshakable bond between Gawain and Arthur. Because Ragnell removed herself from the normal female role of a builder and cementer of male relationships, she has no power to strengthen the bond between the king and his nephew. Gawain, as the object of exchange binding Ragnell and Arthur, theoretically cements their relationship; but the strain of this gender inversion and the impossibility of Ragnell and Arthur either maintaining a homosocial-like relationship (as Ragnell's deference to Arthur shows) or of having an opposite-sex relationship (since Arthur and Ragnell are both married) cause a rupture among the characters. And as her failed attempt to reconcile Arthur and Sir Gromer shows, Ragnell cannot successfully build male relationships. Thus, rather than a relational triangle between Arthur, Gawain and Ragnell, there is a dyad of Gawain and Ragnell which preempts the Gawain and Arthur dyad until Ragnell's death.

Before the appearance of Ragnell in the romance, the *Wedding* builds up a portrait of a solid relationship between Arthur and Gawain. In his overview of the romance in *The Arthur of the English*, John Withrington describes Gawain as Arthur's "cheerfully courteous and loyal friend."²⁹ No critic has disagreed with this description, as Gawain's most remarkable qualities in the *Wedding* are his loyalty to his king and his courtesy to Ragnell even when she is most loathsome. A brief overview of how the romance characterizes Gawain in relationship to Arthur shows his intense loyalty and willingness to carry whatever burden is necessary to serve his lord. After Arthur's demoralizing encounter with Sir Gromer, Gawain coaxes the story out of Arthur, first by noticing Arthur's depression and saying: "Syr, me marvaylythe ryghte sore / Whate thyng that thou sorowyst fore" (ll. 139-140). He then pushes Arthur to reveal the details of his encounter with Sir Gromer, despite Arthur's statement that Sir Gromer has charged him with secrecy, "Or els I am forswore;" Gawain assures Arthur that, "By Mary flower, / I am nott that man that wold you dishonour / Nother by evyn ne by moron" (ll. 148, 149-51). While it is possible to read Gawain's speech as enabling Arthur's vow-breaking, if Arthur has not already broken his vow by alluding to his encounter with Sir Gromer, Gawain's words also indicate that his bond with Arthur is so close that Gawain will keep Arthur's secret as if it were his own. Thus, Arthur hardly breaks his word by revealing his task to Gawain; the relationship between the two men is so strong that Arthur risks nothing by telling his tale to Gawain, since Gawain will keep Arthur's honor intact as if it were his own. And Gawain alone among Arthur's court merits this level of trust; no one else, not even Guinevere, is aware of Arthur's task.

²⁹ John Withrington, "The Weddyng of Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnell and The Marriage of Sir Gawaine," in *The Arthur of the English*, ed. W.R.J. Barron (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), 208.

Gawain's bond with Arthur goes beyond that of secret-keeper, as after learning of Arthur's situation he proceeds to direct the actions that Arthur takes. While Arthur must undertake the task of answering Sir Gromer's question and, later, must forge a relationship with Ragnell, Gawain is always in the background encouraging Arthur's actions. The romance first reveals this when Gawain proposes a plan for Arthur to find the answer to the question of what women most desire. After hearing Arthur's tale, Gawain immediately suggests taking action:

Ye, Sir, make good chere.
Lett make your hors redy
To ryde into straunge contrey;
And evere wheras ye mete owther man or woman, in faye,
Ask of theym what thay therto saye,
And I shalle also ryde anoder waye
And enquire of every man and woman and gett whatt I may
Of every man and womans answere;
And in a boke I shal theym wryte. (ll. 182-90)

Arthur accepts this advice, and the two men promptly ride out to gather their books of answers. Despite the practicality of this advice, this endeavor is doomed to failure; but their failure to find what women most desire leads to yet another opportunity for Gawain to show his loyalty to Arthur. Despite Gawain's confidence that their books must contain the answer to Sir Gromer's question ("Doute you nott, Lord, ye shalle welle spede; / Sume of your sawes shalle helpe att nede, / Els itt were ylle lykyng"), Arthur is not so sure, and with a month remaining before his date with Sir Gromer, he decides to "seke a lytelle more / In Yngleswod Forest" (ll. 222-4, 214-5). On this trip into Inglewood Forest Arthur encounters Ragnell, who promises to give him the answer to the question on the condition that "Thou must graunt me a knyght to wed: / His name is Sir Gawen" (ll. 280-1). Arthur flatly refuses to speak for Gawain and laments Ragnell's request, but he knows

that Gawain will marry the loathly Ragnell to save Arthur's life. Arthur tells Ragnell, "Alas!" he say; 'Nowe woo is me / That I shold cause Gawen to wed the, / For he wol be lothe to saye naye" (ll. 303-5). Arthur is so certain of the strength of the bond between himself and Gawain that he assumes Gawain will perform any action necessary to save Arthur's life, however much Arthur may wish to save Gawain from the humiliation of being linked to such a hideous woman. Arthur's sorrow arises not from any uncertainty about Gawain but from his certainty that Gawain will agree to Ragnell's condition.

This, of course, proves to be the case; Gawain displays no hesitation in agreeing to marry Ragnell. He reassures Arthur of his willingness no fewer than three times within the space of 50 lines: after Arthur reveals to Gawain that his trip to Inglewood has left him "in poynt myself to spylle" (l. 331) because Ragnell wishes to marry Gawain, he brushes off Arthur's despair saying,

"Ys this alle?" then sayd Gawan;
"I shalle wed her and wed her agayn,
Thowghe she were a fend;
Thowghe she were as foulle as Belsabub,
Her shall I wed, by the Rood,
Or elles were nott I your frende." (ll. 342-7)

He continues to explain his willingness:

For ye ar my Kyng with honour
And have worshypt me in many a stowre;
Therfor shalle I nott lett.
To save your lyfe, Lorde, itt were my parte,
Or were I false and a greatt coward;
And my worshypp is the bett. (ll. 348-53)

And finally, after Arthur reiterates Ragnell's conditions, Gawain again assures Arthur of his willingness to fulfill Ragnell's request: "As for this," sayd Gawen, 'itt shalle nott lett; / I wolle wed her att whate tyme ye wolle sett. / I pray you, make no care. / ... / For your

love I wolde nott spare” (ll. 366-71). Gawain’s repeated assurance to Arthur that marrying Ragnell is a small price to pay to save Arthur’s life reveals that Gawain feels obliged as both knight and friend to agree to Ragnell’s terms. His loyalty to Arthur is such that he will disregard any personal cost that may arise from the obligations of this chivalric bond. For it is above all else a chivalric bond: because Arthur has honored Gawain (“And have worshypt me in many a stowre”), he would lose his chivalric honor were he to fail Arthur at this critical juncture. Thus, Gawain will bear any personal cost so long as his honor and his chivalric relationship with Arthur remain intact.

After this overview of Gawain’s actions in support of Arthur, his devotion to his king becomes obvious, but another trend emerges as well. Just as Arthur’s interactions with Sir Gromer and Ragnell draw attention to the potentially feminizing nature of his chivalry, Gawain’s actions confirm the curiously inert nature of traditional chivalry in the *Wedding*. His actions, while framed in terms of chivalric honor, avoid violence: his aid to Arthur comes in conducting interviews and marrying Ragnell. He frames his marriage in particular in terms of chivalric honor, speaking of his obligation to Arthur in terms of cowardice and “worship” and thus analogizing marriage to combat. In this, Gawain presents his courtly chivalry as the equivalent of martial chivalry, equally demanding of bravery and capable of maintaining honor. Yet the fact remains that Gawain is not battling for Arthur, but compiling a book and marrying for him; these actions require no special training and are not limited to one gender. Even as Gawain’s devotion to Arthur and willingness to do whatever is necessary to save his life are held up as ideal chivalric qualities, the *Wedding* presents Gawain’s chivalry as particularly susceptible to feminization: none of his actions in aid of Arthur are particular to masculine, prowess-

oriented chivalry. Yet until the end of the romance, the *Wedding* gives no reason to see Gawain as anything other than chivalrous, despite his avoidance of violent solutions to Arthur's problems.

It remains surprising, then, given Gawain's unswerving devotion to Arthur until his marriage to Ragnell, that after his wedding Gawain's bond with Arthur is ruptured. But this is the case: "As a coward he [Gawain] lay by her [Ragnell] bothe day and nyghte. / Nevere wold he haunt justyng aryghte; / Theratt mervaylyd Arthoure the Kyng" (ll. 808-10). The same Gawain who saw refusing marriage with Ragnell as a cowardly act now embraces a life of leisure and love, not honor. Through her avoidance of the traditional female role as an enabler of male relationships, Ragnell has disrupted Arthur's bond with Gawain, despite its earlier portrayal as unshakably strong and full of mutually maintained chivalric honor. The *Wedding* has no comment, or even discussion, on Gawain's abandonment of knightly pursuits after his marriage. Yet despite the *Wedding*'s lack of explicit censure of Gawain for this abrupt embracing of cowardice, the very strength of the male bond that Ragnell succeeds in disrupting points to a deep uneasiness in the romance about the power that Ragnell exerts. For although Ragnell at this point in the romance is beautiful and obedient, no longer the hideous, masculine threat to chivalric order that she is in the earlier part of the romance, the consequences of her subversion of gender roles now become clear. Gawain and Ragnell essentially reversed roles, with Ragnell negotiating a marriage and Gawain, obedient to Arthur, agreeing to it. And while this reversal is righted on the surface, at a deeper level it has caused Gawain to take on the role of a woman, content to stay at home and unconcerned with maintaining either

masculine chivalric honor or his relationship with Arthur.³⁰ Ragnell's insistence on inserting herself into male society has thus resulted in the apparently permanent disruption of a previously unshakable male relationship. Coupled with this disruption is the disturbing fact that Gawain's very chivalry, his loyal friendship to Arthur, leads directly to this unchivalric behavior. Ragnell thus represents a disruption in chivalry itself, both in the relationships between chivalrous men and in the ability of a knight to participate in chivalrous activities that increase masculine honor.

The *Wedding*, however, does not leave Gawain in his cowardly state; the romance ends with the death of Ragnell and, presumably, the reunion of Arthur and Gawain as Gawain returns to traditional chivalric pursuits. Significantly, the *Wedding* must kill Ragnell in order to right the situation. Even when beautiful and obedient, she represents too great of a threat to Arthurian manhood to continue to live. Leech argues that only through Ragnell's death can the men in the romance regain the control they lost to her; she uses the idea of the creation of icons to understand the way that Gawain and Arthur regain control after Ragnell dies. She writes, "As an icon, she [Ragnell] is reduced to her orthodox exterior that can be resignified into a more acceptable role by those she once dominated. Her interior motives, power, and control are gone, and only the conventional outer shell remains."³¹ Once dead, Ragnell can be relegated to the entirely feminine role that she resisted in her life, remembered as a beautiful woman who once saved Arthur's

³⁰ Although, as mentioned above, this situation is similar to that in Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*, it should be noted that the *Wedding* frames Gawain's actions as the result of inversions of the social order caused by his own chivalric values, not as the result of Ragnell's disruptive sexual power over Gawain. This reinforces the point, discussed below, that while the *Wedding* uses a woman to reveal the flaws in chivalry, the true problem lies not in her disruptive power but in chivalry itself.

³¹ Leech, "Why Dame Ragnell Had to Die," 227.

life, not a disruptive influence on male chivalry. Indeed, Gawain even seems to have learned his lesson about falling too much under the spell of a woman: the romance ends Gawain's tale by saying of him, "Gawen was weddyd oft in his days; / Butt so welle he nevere lovyd woman always, / As I have hard men sayn" (ll. 832-4). While this is, in one sense, a tribute to Gawain's love for Ragnell, it also carries a sense of relief: never again is Gawain caught by a woman who so threatens his masculinity and his chivalry. With Ragnell's death, the romance restores the male relationships and the masculine chivalry that she had challenged and disrupted throughout the *Wedding*. But it does so with a lingering note of loss, once again expressing doubt about the potential benefits and dangers of Gawain's courtesy and Ragnell's social subversions, and about the ability of contemporary chivalry to overcome the threat that courtly chivalry may cause men to assume female roles. Thus the romance agrees with men like William Worcester, who in his mid-fifteenth century *Boke of Noblesse* laments the tendency of young noblemen to study law instead of pursuing martial careers, although the romance also questions whether the quasi-martial chivalry of the joust and hunt expressed by Gawain and Arthur is itself superior to clearly non-violent pursuits.³²

Implications for Chivalry

After examining the ways in which Ragnell uses Gawain to form relationships for herself that mimic male homosocial relationships, and the way that Ragnell disrupts Gawain's own male relationships and indeed his reputation for chivalry, we must consider how, in light of this, the romance presents chivalry. Without question, Gawain is

³² Worcester, *The Boke of Noblesse*, ed. J.G. Nichols (New York: B. Franklin, 1972; rpt. from London: Roxburghe Club, 1860), 77-8.

the chivalric center of the romance. His unshakable devotion to Arthur is a clearly admirable quality, and his unfailing courtesy to Ragnell at her loathliest shows his perfect service to women and brings about her transformation. After he has given back to her the choice of whether to appear lovely by day or by night, Ragnell explains that this is what lifts her enchantment: she must remain loathly “Evyn tylle the best of England / Had wedyd me verament, / And also he shold geve me the sovereynté / Of alle his body and goodes, sycurly” (ll. 695-8). Since he succeeds in disenchanting Ragnell, Gawain must indeed be the “best of England.” And yet it is also Gawain’s very devotion to chivalry that enables the gender subversions that occur in the romance. Were Gawain less devoted to Arthur, he would be less willing to act as the object of exchange binding Ragnell and Arthur; were he less courteous to Ragnell, he would not have made the promise that even as it frees her from enchantment sets him in a subordinate position that leads to his abandonment of chivalric pursuits. As in *The Carl of Carlisle*, Gawain’s very adherence to the qualities of chivalry enables the events that undermine that chivalry. Yet unlike the *Carl*, which leaves its audience with a new social vision of chivalry, the *Wedding* ends with the reestablishment of traditional chivalry. Chivalry in the *Wedding* cannot tolerate assertive women and gender reversals; the problem that Ragnell represents to chivalry manifests itself most clearly when she saps Gawain’s desire to engage in chivalrous activities. In *The Wedding of Sir Gawain*, chivalry cannot encompass or even respond to a disruptive force; rather, traditional chivalry falters in the face of Ragnell’s gender subversions but reemerges when she is eliminated from the romance.

The inflexibility of chivalry in this romance in the face of a disruptive force points to an unease about the proper balance between courtesy and the more exclusively

masculine, more violent, forms of chivalry in the romance, such as hunting and jousting. The romance does portray Gawain in positive light, at least until his marriage to Ragnell separates him from traditional masculine activities; even then, the romance refrains from direct comment on Gawain's behavior. Gawain is loyal and courteous without hesitation, the paragon of chivalrous behavior in a courtly setting. Gawain's courtesy succeeds in both saving Arthur's life and disenchanting Ragnell, both beneficial accomplishments within the romance. Yet Gawain's chivalry also enables the disruptions that Ragnell poses to the chivalric order; underneath the success of Gawain's courtesy is the fear that this courtesy may be detrimental to male relationships and masculine chivalry. Gawain's willingness to become the (feminine) object of exchange and to abandon traditional gender roles in his marriage are hallmarks of his courtesy, but detrimental to his pursuit of other chivalric activities like the hunt, the joust and male friendships. His courtesy is unimpeachable, but that perhaps is exactly the problem: divorced from the violent activities traditionally associated with chivalry, can a knight be truly chivalrous, or does this lack of violence lead to emasculation? And even more, are the war-like activities of the hunt and the joust enough to maintain traditional, masculine chivalry? While the *Wedding* returns Gawain to these violent activities, they still form the same chivalry that was vulnerable to Ragnell's subversions. Thus, while the romance uses Ragnell as the scapegoat, the unruly woman who threatens chivalric order, the real problem lies not in her subversions of social conventions but in chivalry itself. Ragnell does not threaten chivalric order; she reveals its already-present flaws.

In this, we see that the *Wedding* is a deeply divided romance. It presents a brash Ragnell who confidently inserts herself into the male world of Arthur's court and saves

its king, yet who must be killed off at the end of the romance to reassert traditional chivalry. It presents a Gawain whose very chivalry is ambiguous: it is beneficial to all around him, but also emasculates Gawain. With these ambiguities, the romance uses its narrative to work through contemporary challenges to chivalry. Thus, the ease with which Ragnell inserts herself into masculine chivalric relationships, mimicking the role of a man and placing Gawain in the role of a woman, shows the vulnerability not only of Gawain specifically, but of chivalry generally in the face of social challenges. And chivalry by itself cannot withstand these challenges, brought by Ragnell in the romance; instead, the narrator must intervene to remove the challenger and restore chivalry to its previous state. Yet even without the threatening presence of Ragnell, it is not clear that the masculine relationships and activities that Gawain rejects comprise a more admirable, or less emasculating, form of chivalry. That is, while the romance is uncomfortable with Ragnell and the threat her gender inversions pose to chivalry, the chivalry restored at the end of the romance is not presented as a clearly superior alternative. Scholars, beginning with Johan Huizinga, have examined the fifteenth century as an era of nostalgia for a golden age of chivalry, coupled with an extravagant, even decadent display of chivalry. While this view has its challengers, the *Wedding* does seem to tap this nostalgia for an era when knights met challenges with violence, not courtesy. Yet it is significant that his love for Ragnell prevents Gawain from participating the joust, a stylized performance of chivalric violence that by this period in English history is markedly different from the tactics of military engagements.³³ The chivalry Ragnell disrupts is not a golden age

³³ For a discussion of the emerging distinctions between the tournament and the battlefield from the late fourteenth century onward, see Andrew Ayton, *Knights and Warhorses: Military Service and the English Aristocracy under Edward III* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1994), 35-6.

chivalry, but the chivalry of the contemporary era already separated from the battlefield violence of older martial ideologies celebrated in works like the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*. Thus, despite its unease over Gawain's rejection of male relationships and the activities of the fifteenth-century chivalric knight, the *Wedding* does not unequivocally show that Arthur's idea of chivalry is superior to Gawain's courtesy.

In this reading of the romance, Ragnell does not simply represent the threat an assertive woman can present to male chivalric relationships; more complexly, she represents the changing social structures that disrupt the bonds between warriors, between king and knight, even between a knight and chivalric activities. And although chivalry can transform the threat, it does not eliminate it. Chivalry that confines itself to the realm of courtesy, of the court, is emasculated; yet Arthur's feminization throughout the romance indicates that a chivalry of the joust and the hunt is already emasculated. And the character of Gawain, that paragon of chivalry in the romance, demonstrates that perfect courtesy ironically becomes a threat to chivalry. For Gawain's willingness to be an object of exchange, willingness to become subordinate to his wife, allows the threat to manifest itself. Were he or Arthur more war-like, less willing to play Sir Gromer's game, there would be no disruption to the chivalric order. Yet conversely, were Gawain less chivalrous, Ragnell would remain loathly and Sir Gromer would be forever excluded from Arthur's court; the romance would end with only Arthur ultimately benefitting, instead of the multitude of characters who gain from Gawain's chivalry. The threatened emasculation in Gawain's total rejection of chivalric violence, even in such confined forms as the joust and the hunt, is balanced by the social good that comes about from his embrace of courtly chivalry. This ambiguity about Gawain's chivalry thus exemplifies a

larger social anxiety about the changing role of chivalry in England as members of the noble class increasingly pursued careers in non-military arenas, such as the law courts, and as the pageantry of chivalry became separated from an older chivalry of the battlefield.

Chapter 5

Chivalric Failure in *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*

The Jeaste of Sir Gawain, probably composed in the South Midlands in the mid-fifteenth century, is one of the group of popular English romances that feature Gawain and, like other romances of this type, it focuses on questions of what constitutes chivalric behavior. The *Jeaste* survives in three incomplete versions: two printed editions from the sixteenth century and one manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, SC 21835 (Douce 261).¹ The latter, dating to 1564, is the fullest version.² As established by R. E. Bennett, the romance is based on two episodes of the Old French *First Continuation* of Chrétien's *Percival*; the story is told twice in the French romance and the *Jeaste* seems to draw from both versions.³ This romance has received little critical attention; aside from Bennet's

¹ The two printed fragments are: London, British Library MS Harley 5927 Arts 32 (date unknown), which contains the final page from an edition printed by Thomas Petyt; and a print by John Butler of London, dating to about 1528, currently located in the Lambeth Palace Library and containing approximately the last 250 lines of the romance. According to Rhiannon Purdie, Westminster Abbey also currently holds two leaves from a reprint of the Butler edition dating to c. 1530-2; I have not been able to ascertain where in the poem these fragments fall (*Anglicising Romance: Tail-Rhyme and Genre in Medieval English Literature* [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008], 206.)

² The two modern editions of the romance, edited by Thomas Hahn (*Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales* [Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS, 1995]) and by Frederick Madden (*Syr Gawayne: A Collection of Ancient Romance-Poems* [London: Richard and John E. Taylor, 1839]), are based on this manuscript. Hahn, echoing Madden, speculates that this manuscript transcribes "a now-lost print issued by John Kynge in 1557 or 1558" (*Eleven Romances*, 395; see also *Syr Gawayne*, 348-9). Both Hahn and Madden use Harley 5927 to supplement the final 53 lines of their editions; neither editor seems aware of the Butler edition in the Lambeth Palace Library, which contains nearly the last half of the romance. For the place and date of composition, see Hahn, "*The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*: Introduction," in *Eleven Romances*, 395.

³ R.E. Bennett, "Sources of the *Jeaste of Syr Gawayne*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 33 (1934): 63. In a move typical of early criticism of popular romances, Bennett comments, "That he omitted many of the best features of the larger and better *Rape* version, and even the bit about the girl's refusal to answer to 'pucele' from *The Seduction* (which would have fitted the tone of *The Jeaste* nicely) can only be explained by supposing that the English author, or whoever recited the story to him, or both, had a bad

1934 article, Thomas Hahn's introduction to the romance in his 1995 TEAMS edition and three articles by Maldwyn Mills on the main manuscript containing the *Jeaste* form the whole of the sustained critical attention this romance has received.⁴ Yet the way in which the *Jeaste* holds formulations of chivalry up to brutal criticism is certainly worthy of analysis: in a striking conclusion, the *Jeaste* narrates indisputable chivalric failure, not chivalric success. In this romance, Gawain seduces an unnamed young woman, after which her father Gilbert and three brothers Gyamoure, Terry and Brandles arrive one by one to challenge Gawain to combat in order to avenge their lost honor. The story concludes with Gawain fighting to a draw with the fourth challenger, Brandles, and returning to Arthur on foot, not defeated but hardly triumphant, failing in his typical role as a reconciler who increases not only his own honor but also the honor of others whom he encounters. This version of the story, with its inconclusive and narratively unsatisfying ending, differs sharply from the French source for the romance, in which Gawain successfully reconciles with the seduced woman's brother and then both marries the woman and brings her brother into Arthur's court. These changes to the source allow the *Jeaste* to present and criticize a form of martial chivalry that relies exclusively on

memory and bad literary taste" (62), and continues, "For there is no plan or purpose about the way the two versions are combined" (63). As will become evident, I do not accept Bennett's assessment of the romance (or its author).

⁴ Hahn, "Introduction," 393-6; Maldwyn Mills, "Generic Titles in Bodleian Library MS Douce 261 and British Library MS Egerton 3132A," in *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance*, ed. Philippa Hardman (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 125-138; Maldwyn Mills, "The Lost Beginning of *The Jeaste of Syr Gaweyne* and the Collation of Bodleian Library MS Douce 261," in *Arthurian Studies in Honour of P.J.C. Field*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler, *Arthurian Studies* 57 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 133-41; and Maldwyn Mills, "The Illustrations of British Library MS Egerton 3132A and Bodleian Library MS Douce 261," in *Essays and Poems Presented to Daniel Huws*, ed. Tegwyn Jones and E. B. Fryde (Aberystwyth: National Library of Wales, 1994), 307-27.

masculine prowess to negotiate and maintain relationships among the characters.⁵ The failure of chivalric prowess in the *Jeaste* thus calls into question constructions of male and female roles, suggesting that a chivalry that insists on separating the two harms the establishment of social ties by preventing characters from accessing certain relational strategies.

At first glance, the story in the *Jeaste* seems easily categorized as one of the innumerable variations on the theme of the exchange of women: Gawain encounters a woman alone in the woods, seduces (or possibly rapes) her, and subsequently attempts to reconcile with her male kinsmen, who view the loss of their kinswoman's virginity as a loss of their honor. Negotiating the exchange of the woman, or at least of the woman's virginity, brings the men in the romance together; the woman's role thus seems to be to form the center of the male relationships that develop around her.⁶ In his introduction to the romance, Hahn reads the woman's role in the *Jeaste* as having exactly this purpose: "Yet the least active figure – the nameless sister/daughter/lover – turns out to be the pivotal character, through whom male relations of power and honor receive definition"; he continues, "the *Jeaste* dramatizes the signal function of Woman as the medium by which men establish relations among themselves."⁷ If this is true, however, the way in which the men use the woman as a medium in the *Jeaste* fails miserably, since no lasting

⁵ Throughout this chapter, I refer to this martial chivalry as prowess-based to emphasize the way it relies on masculine strength as exhibited in single combat.

⁶ See Roberta L. Krueger, "Love, Honor, and the Exchange of Women in Yvain: Some Remarks on the Female Reader," *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster (New York and London: Garland, 1996): 3-18, for a discussion of how women in medieval romance are used as objects of exchange to establish male relationships.

⁷ Hahn, *Eleven Romances*, 394.

or beneficial relationships are formed among the men in the romance. The exchange fails: she does not move between the men or by that movement create social bonds among the men, and the men are unable to settle upon a value for her virginity that leads to beneficial social ties among the characters. But I argue that what truly fails is not the woman nor this particular exchange of a woman, but more broadly a definition of chivalric behavior that relegates the woman to the role of passive object of exchange. This relegation prevents the men from accessing non-violent (and thus potentially feminizing) verbal and legal means of reconciliation. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler identify this codification of male and female roles in exchange systems in their introduction to *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*: “The kinds of masculinity and femininity that the exchange matrix constructs pass themselves off as inevitable, as universal, but as we have begun to see, they might be culturally contingent, limited, and local.”⁸ The author of the *Jeaste* likewise recognizes the limitations of certain constructions of male and female roles in the exchange system, criticizing a chivalry that uses women to build relationships without acknowledging the benefit of the non-violent relational strategies they often represent. This is not, of course, the same criticism a modern reader may impose; the author of the *Jeaste* ultimately argues for the participation of women in their own exchange, not the abolishment of the system of exchange itself with its use of women as objects. But the *Jeaste* remains a striking examination of the problems inherent in a chivalric system that simultaneously uses women to form relationships between men and excludes women from actively participating in establishing those social ties.

⁸ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, “Becoming and Unbecoming,” in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1997), vii-xx.

However, even as it shows the dangers of adhering to a chivalric model that separates masculine from feminine behavior in establishing relationships, the *Jeaste* offers a different means of forming social connections through the character of Gawain. While the other male characters in the romance define chivalry as synonymous with masculine prowess in combat, Gawain holds a view of chivalry that encompasses not only prowess but also the ability to create lasting relationships and effect reconciliation through verbal and legal means. In the romance, prowess in battle is sharply demarcated from “amends,” these non-prowess based forms of reconciliation. This division between acceptable and non-acceptable forms of masculine interaction is mirrored in the romance by an equally sharp physical division between the men and the woman. Throughout the romance, the woman remains in her pavilion, completely separated from the men as they fight over her lost virginity; although she is both figuratively and literally the center of male interaction, the pavilion effectively walls her off from the actual interaction between the men. The woman remains in her space until the end of the romance when she is forcefully removed and abandoned by her brother, while her kinsmen remain in the outside world without entering the woman’s space. This spatial separation represents the division the woman’s kinsmen see between masculine and feminine roles and behavior. Despite the insistence on separation, however, the pavilion is located on the battlefield where the men fight, suggesting that the two spaces are not as separate as they appear. By the end of the romance, the woman’s father begins to acknowledge the potential value of non-violent forms of reconciliation between men. And significantly, Gawain moves freely between the two spaces, staying with the woman in the pavilion between battles while the other men remain outside. His ability to move between the physical spaces

mirrors his ability to move between prowess-based and verbal modes of reconciliation and relationship formation, modes that the other men wish to separate in order to elevate prowess as the only proper, masculine way of forming relationships. But as Gawain, Arthur's greatest knight, moves between spaces coded in this romance as masculine (the battlefield) and feminine (the pavilion) and between relational modes similarly coded, he suggests that late medieval English society benefits from a chivalry that integrates previously gendered roles, thereby checking a detrimental reliance on masculine prowess.

The *Jeaste* and the *First Continuation*

Since the *Jeaste*, unlike most other Middle English Gawain romances, has a French source, a comparison of the *Jeaste* with its source helps to illuminate the ways in which the English author examines and criticizes the gender roles present in the romance and the system of the exchange of women.⁹ As Bennett established, the *Jeaste* draws from two versions of the same story narrated in the *First Continuation*.¹⁰ In the first version of the story, the *Seduction*,¹¹ Gawain leaves Arthur's court while he recovers from a dangerous wound. He comes upon an unnamed woman, conventionally known as the Pucelle de Lis, in a tent in the woods and, with her full consent, only leaves "Tant qu'a perdu non de pucele" ["When she had lost the name of virgin"].¹² Upon discovering

⁹ The Middle Scots *Gologras and Gawain* (c. 1500) is the only other Gawain romance in English that has a direct French source; like the *Jeaste*, it draws from the *First Continuation*.

¹⁰ According to Bennett, the *Jeaste* "represents the work of someone who was familiar with both *The Rape* and *The Seduction*." Bennett, "Sources of the *Jeaste of Syr Gawayne*," 63.

¹¹ *First Continuation*, ed. William Roach, *The Continuations of the Old French Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949 –), volume 1, ll. 2546-2987.

¹² *First Continuation*, l. 2715. All translations are my own.

his deflowered daughter, the woman's father pursues Gawain, challenges him, and is killed in the ensuing combat. The woman's brother, Bran de Lis, repeats the process, finding his deflowered sister and dying father. Bran fights with Gawain, but when it becomes clear that Gawain's wound hampers his fighting ability, the two agree to postpone their fight until they meet again. However, despite the immediate impetus of the deflowered kinswoman, in the *Seduction* this is not Gawain's only offense against the men: prior to the events narrated here, Gawain had killed the girl's uncle. When the girl's father meets Gawain, he names this offense first: "Je vos ferai chier comperer / Mon frere que vos oceïstes; / Et puis tel honte me feïstes, / Ma fille avez despucelee." ["I will make you pay dearly for my brother whom you have killed; and then for the shame you have caused me, for you have deflowered my daughter."] ¹³ Likewise, when Bran de Lis encounters Gawain, he lists the deaths before the deflowering: "La mort mon oncle comperrez / Que m'oceïstes par grant tort; / Et mon pere ravez hui mort / Et ma seror despucelee." [You shall pay for the death of my uncle whom you have wrongfully killed; and for my father carried off today by death and for my deflowered sister.] ¹⁴ The seduction of the Pucelle de Lis thus becomes only one of the many points of contention between Bran de Lis and Gawain, and the last that Bran lists.

The second version of the story, the *Rape*, picks up the account when Arthur and his men come, by chance, to Bran de Lis' castle, several thousand lines and five years after the first encounter between Gawain and the family de Lis. ¹⁵ Gawain tells the story

¹³ *First Continuation*, ll. 2754-7.

¹⁴ *First Continuation*, ll. 2834-7.

¹⁵ *First Continuation* ll. 9496-11205.

of his postponed battle to Arthur, but this version of the tale differs significantly from the first version. In his telling, when the wounded Gawain finds the Pucelle de Lis, he is so overcome by desire that he rapes her: “Sire, si grant oltrage fis / Qu’a force la despuelai, / Ainc por son plorer nel laissai” [“Lord, I did such a great outrage, for I deflowered the girl by force, and I did not stop despite her cries”].¹⁶ After this, an unnamed brother arrives on the scene, challenges Gawain, and is killed by him; the woman’s father (here named Meliant) repeats his son’s actions. Bran de Lis arrives to find his raped sister and dead brother and father, and as in the *Seduction* he and Gawain fight until Bran postpones the battle due to Gawain’s wound. Also as in the *Seduction*, however, the emphasis moves from the wrong Gawain has done in raping the Pucelle to the wrong he has done by killing her kinsmen. In the *Rape*, the emphasis on Gawain’s sexual misconduct decreases as his body count rises, and the gradual disappearance of the Pucelle de Lis’ voice highlights the shifting emphasis. When the first brother finds Gawain and his raped sister, the Pucelle de Lis describes the events; when Meliant arrives to find his raped daughter and dead son, the Pucelle also speaks, but the romance records it indirectly.¹⁷ And when Bran arrives, finding two dead bodies and his ravished sister, she essentially disappears from the scene. To further emphasize the deaths, Bran indicates that he would have accepted Gawain’s offer to marry the Pucelle de Lis had he arrived first, but the deaths of his father and brother prevent the possibility of reconciliation.¹⁸ The disappearance of the Pucelle’s voice corresponds with the inability of the characters at

¹⁶ *First Continuation*, ll. 10042-4.

¹⁷ “La damoisele s’espera / Maintenant que son pere oï, / Et lués tot le voir li conta / De l’affaire come il ala.” [“The girl awakens now that her father hears, and tells him all the truth of the affair as it occurred.”] *First Continuation*, ll. 10243-6.

¹⁸ *First Continuation*, ll. 10349-64.

this point in the romance to build relationships through her, given the deaths Gawain has caused. Thus, in both versions of the story in the *First Continuation*, the barrier to reconciliation between Gawain and the de Lis family is not primarily Gawain's sexual misconduct and the loss of the woman's virginity (forced or not), but the number of de Lis men killed by Gawain.

The *Jeaste* reverses this focus by removing any deaths caused by Gawain, either prior to the episode, as in the *Seduction*, or during the events themselves, as in the *Rape*. As a result, emphasis shifts to Gawain's sexual misconduct. Gilbert, the woman's father, makes this clear when his son Gyamoure finds him wounded in the forest. After answering Gyamoure's query about who injured him thus, Gilbert adds, "Also he hath layne by thy syster, by the Rode! / That greveth me more than shedynge of my blode" (ll. 101-2).¹⁹ Gilbert views the loss of his daughter's virginity as the more serious harm done to him. As happens in the *Rape*, however, the men in the *Jeaste* do lose sight of their sister's deflowering as Gawain's successes in battle continue. When Gyamoure, the first brother to fight Gawain, speaks, his outrage seems equally balanced between the dishonor of his father's defeat and the dishonor of his sister's deflowering. When they meet, Gyamoure says to Gawain: "Thou hast hurte my father todaye, / And layne by my syster, that fayre may: / Therefore thy deathe ys dyght" (ll. 128-30). The second brother, Terry, shows less concern for his sister, perhaps spurred by Gilbert himself. When Terry arrives to find his battered father and brother, Gilbert lists the wrongs done to them: "He [Gawain] hath me wounded passynge soore, / And I trowe thy brother he hathe well more, / And by thy syster he hathe layne;" he then charges Terry to "avenge the shedynge

¹⁹ Quotations from *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications for TEAMS, 1995).

of thy fathers blood” (ll. 218-20, 222). Upon encountering Gawain, Terry declines to even say why he wishes to fight until he has been defeated, at which point he praises Gawain’s prowess in defeating himself and his two kinsmen (ll. 281-3). And Brandles, the final brother to battle Gawain, focuses explicitly on the shame of defeat in battle: “My father and my brethren thou hast beaten bothe. / To accorde with the I were therof lothe, / My worshippe to fullfyll” (ll. 434-6). From this progression, the *Jeaste* appears to shift away from the woman to the male relationships formed through combat.

A closer examination, however, reveals that this is not the case. Gilbert never loses sight of his daughter’s deflowering, telling each son that this is one of Gawain’s wrongs against the family. And although Brandles’ initial words to Gawain, as he says “Thou haste done me dysworship greate, / And mayst not nowe amendement gette” (ll. 419-20), do not refer to his sister, they do echo Gilbert’s first speech to Gawain, in which the seduction of his daughter causes the dishonor.²⁰ Most significantly, however, the woman speaks for the only time in the romance as extant immediately before Brandles arrives, reminding the audience of her presence and of the reason for the conflict between Gawain and her kinsmen. Although the men in the romance seem to forget their kinswoman in the shame of defeat in combat, the romance does not allow the audience to forget the woman. By reinserting her at the very point where, in the *Seduction* and the *Rape*, she has disappeared from view, the author of the *Jeaste* suggests the woman still has a central role in the romance. The *Jeaste* thus establishes a situation in which the men, with their focus on prowess and chivalric violence, overlook a crucial element in the romance: the woman and the potential for reconciled relationships she represents. Instead

²⁰ Gilbert says, “Those hast done me great villainy” and “Thou hast done me much dishonored” (ll. 18, 26).

of becoming the medium for beneficial relationships, she is the passive object of exchange while the men negotiate that exchange not through potentially feminizing verbal or legal agreements, but through masculine prowess in combat.

The passivity of the woman in the *Jeaste* comes into sharp relief when she is compared with her French counterpart, the Pucelle de Lis. As the first part of the *Jeaste* is not extant,²¹ it is not entirely clear whether the English romance relies on the *Seduction* or the *Rape* at the beginning, although as in the *Rape* the woman appears to have warned Gawain about her kinsmen just before the text of the *Jeaste* begins.²² In both versions of the story in the *First Continuation*, however, the woman is an active character in the story. In the *Seduction*, the Pucelle de Lis refuses to answer to any term she does not believe properly describes her. Thus, when Gawain greets her as “ma dolce amie chiere” [“my dear sweet friend”], she does not respond because she refuses to be called “amie” by any man but Gawain.²³ After that issue is successfully resolved, she refuses to answer to either her father or her brother’s greeting of “pucele,” which in this context means virgin, telling them, “Mais pucele ne sui je pas” [“But I am not a virgin”].²⁴ She herself informs her kinsmen of her lost virginity, which emphasizes her consent in the situation. Similarly, in the *Rape*, the Pucelle de Lis does not remain silent about her violation, informing her first brother and Meliant about what has occurred when they arrive at her

²¹ Maldwyn Mills speculates that 74 lines are lost from the beginning the manuscript. See “The Lost Beginning,” in *Arthurian Studies in Honor of P.J.C. Field*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 133-41.

²² *First Continuation*, ll. 10003-14; the *Jeaste* begins with Gawain’s reaction to a similar warning (ll 1-2).

²³ *First Continuation*, l. 2621.

²⁴ *First Continuation*, ll. 2726, 2797, 2736, 2805.

pavilion, although as discussed above her voice disappears as the episode progresses.²⁵ Even with this disappearance, however, the audience can clearly see the Pucelle de Lis' consent or lack thereof, as she makes this issue clear to her kinsmen in the romance. In addition to this active participation, the Pucelle de Lis plays a key role in the conclusion of the episode in the *First Continuation*. Bran de Lis and Gawain are about to engage in a combat to the death when the Pucelle de Lis appears with her son, physically steps between the fighting men to disrupt their battle and verbally pleads with them to end their battle.²⁶ The other women present in the scene then all take up the Pucelle's cause, asking Arthur to end the fight:

Adont les oïssiez crier
 Par toute la sale a un bruit:
 “Bons rois, ja t’aiderons nos tuit.
 Va la bataille departir;
 Nus hom ne le doit plus soffrir.”
 [Now the women cry out all at once throughout all the court: “Good king, you
 have always aided us. Go end the battle; neither man ought to suffer further.”]²⁷

Far from being passive in the situation, the Pucelle through her actions accomplishes the reconciliation that the men cannot achieve on their own through chivalric combat.

By contrast, the woman's consent or lack thereof does not arise in the *Jeaste*, as she speaks only to Gawain and is ignored by her kinsmen; more, she goes into exile at the end of the romance and has no opportunity to become a means of reconciliation. The English author has removed almost all traces of the woman's presence in the *Jeaste*; where she speaks frequently and makes her desires and position known in the *First*

²⁵ *First Continuation*, ll. 10060-76, 10223-46.

²⁶ *First Continuation*, ll. 10888-11074.

²⁷ *First Continuation*, ll. 11080-4.

Continuation, she speaks only once in the English romance as extant, and that speech serves to introduce Brandles, not reveal her thoughts or feelings about her encounter with Gawain. Although she is the reason for the events of the romance, the male characters barely acknowledge her presence, if they acknowledge it at all. She may bring the men together, but she has no way to ensure any continuing, beneficial relationship amongst them. She has no name, no voice, no active role in the romance.²⁸ Chivalric prowess in the *Jeaste* leaves no room for her presence. Although she forms the object of the male interactions, her inability to participate in the prowess-based chivalry that Gawain and her kinsmen use excludes her from any active agency in the romance. And when prowess fails to establish an agreement among the men, the woman is literally discarded by the men, abandoned by Gawain and by her brother. The men, although they ostensibly want to protect or avenge her through their chivalry, have no place for the woman in their version of chivalry, and thus their chivalry fails to protect her.

The failure of this exchange draws attention to the inability of prowess alone to establish chivalric bonds among men. Further complicating this failure is the social context of the romance: both English law and custom by the fifteenth century had developed methods of addressing such sexual offenses that typically involved verbal negotiations and financial recompense for lost virginity. By highlighting Gawain's sexual misconduct, the English poet shows that a reliance on combat among men, rather than an involvement of the woman or an acceptance of verbal and legal means of resolution, cannot succeed in addressing such a situation. In a stark ending that emphasizes the

²⁸ She also lacks a name in the First Continuation. But significantly in the *Jeaste*, she is the only character who remains unnamed; while the father is nameless in the *Seduction* and the first brother unnamed in the *Rape*, the woman is the only unnamed character in the *Jeaste*. Her lack of a name is therefore all the more obvious in the English romance, and her presence obscured even further.

inability of prowess to address this situation, the English author rejects the happy ending that concludes the *Rape* version in the *First Continuation*. There, the Pucelle de Lis uses her voice to achieve the reconciliation that she cannot accomplish earlier. Thus beneficial relationships form among all the characters: Bran joins Arthur's retinue, Gawain gains a friend and a son, and the woman redeems her lost virginity through the production of a male child for Gawain and the prevention of further death.²⁹ In contrast, the English poet clearly forecloses the possibility of reconciliation, concluding the romance thus: "And after that tyme they never mette more; / Full gladde were those knightes therfore. / So there was made the ende" (ll. 533-5). This lack of a conclusion also means that the woman has no further role to play; instead of bearing Gawain's child, Brandles beats her, after which, "Than the lady gate her awaye – / They sawe her never after that daye; / She went wandrynge to and fro" (ll. 524-6). She wanders alone, outside of and unprotected by the structures of chivalric society. The type of chivalry practiced by the men in the romance has not only failed to benefit any of them, but it has failed to protect the woman.

Combat and Amends

This prowess-oriented chivalry appears from the beginning of the *Jeaste*. When the woman's kinsmen find the couple, they make it clear that Gawain's offense is an offense against their honor that must be settled through combat. The first man to find Gawain and the woman is Gilbert, the woman's father. He sets the precedent for the woman's kinsmen to ignore her, speaking exclusively to Gawain and only obliquely acknowledging his daughter's presence. Immediately he makes the loss of his daughter's

²⁹ The Pucelle de Lis is often identified as the mother of Gawain's son Gingalain, or Le Bel Inconnu, who becomes the hero in the English romance *Lybeaus Desconus*.

virginity an issue to be resolved by men, and from the beginning Gilbert makes it clear that he values virginity in terms of chivalric honor. Thus, the only proper response to its loss is an exchange of chivalric honor in combat. His first words to Gawain establish this understanding of virginity and honor: “Yt ys my doughter that thou lvest by. / Thowe hast done me great vyllanye - / Amende yt mayst thou nought / ... / But hastily unto harnes nowe thou wynde” (ll. 17-19, 24). Gilbert emphasizes that Gawain has done him “great vyllanye” and “much dyshonoure” (l. 26), indicating that Gawain’s success with his daughter does not dishonor the woman, but Gilbert himself. Because he cannot regain the honor of having a virgin daughter, he emphasizes that Gawain cannot “amende” the harm he has done. But even as he asserts that Gawain has permanently damaged his honor, he tells Gawain to prepare himself for battle. Although Gilbert does not want amends from Gawain, he does want to regain his lost honor by defeating the knight who deflowered his daughter. Therefore, for Gilbert, the only adequate compensation for the wrong Gawain has done must be measured in terms of honor, and here specifically chivalric honor gained in combat, with the joust as the medium for this exchange. Although Gawain does attempt to offer amends to Gilbert, emphasizing their honorable nature by saying, “Syr, amendes nowe wyll I make here, / As I am to knyghthode bounde,” he ultimately agrees to participate in combat: “Sythe yt none otherwise wyll be: / Nedes must that nedes shall” (ll. 33-4, 42-3). Although the woman has brought the men together, their subsequent relationship is to be worked out in the realm of masculine prowess without the further involvement of the woman.

As the above lines show, although Gawain and the other men are never explicitly called “chivalrous” in the romance, they do adhere to a certain ideal of knighthood. That

ideal of knighthood, however, is very specifically designated in the *Jeaste* as reliant on physical prowess, indicated through the frequent use of the term “manne” to describe the male participants in the romance. Although the term in the *Jeaste* does sometimes simply mean a man, it often suggests specifically knightly characteristics: for example, Gilbert says of Gawain after Gawain’s defeat of Terry, “I dare well saye he ys a manne” (l. 315); the narrator describes Gawain once as “a worthy man” (l. 252); and Brandles wishes to fight Gawain to determine “yf he be a manne” (l. 390).³⁰ In these instances, the term “manne” clearly means more than simply gender; the term denotes physical prowess, and in these lines shows Gawain’s ability to defeat his opponent and Brandles’ desire to test that ability. Gawain himself uses the term “manne” to indicate prowess: he says, upon seeing Brandles,

“By God!” sayde Gawayne, “he ys full lyke
To abyde a buffette and to stryke,
And of hys handes a man.
I saw not or nowe thys yeares thre,
A man more lyke a man to be.” (ll. 407-11)

Here Gawain judges Brandles’ fighting ability and proclaims him a “man,” focusing on prowess rather than other knightly qualities. As “manne” is the term of highest praise that any of the knights use, the importance of chivalric prowess in the *Jeaste* becomes clear.

The author of the *Jeaste* also highlights prowess in combat through the repetition of battle scenes. The *Jeaste* is an exceedingly repetitive romance, even in a genre full of paralleled and duplicated episodes. All of the encounters between Gawain and the woman’s kinsmen begin according to the same pattern: the man challenges Gawain, Gawain offers amends, the man refuses, and he and Gawain fight. The first three

³⁰ One of the definitions in the MED for “man” is “A fighting man, soldier, knight,” supporting the idea that “man” in the *Jeaste* carries connotations of military prowess. MED, s.v. “man.”

encounters end with Gawain defeating the men and releasing them on variations of the promise “That none armes agaynst me ye shall beare, / Neyther todaye nor tonyght” (ll. 66-7); the men leave on foot, their horses gone or killed.³¹ The last three encounters, with Gilbert’s sons, are all preceded by the son coming upon the wounded Gilbert (and eventually wounded brothers) and learning of Gawain’s actions. The *Jeaste* packs these battles into just over five hundred lines, devoting a little more than a hundred lines to each encounter, which only serves to further emphasize the repetition. This emphasis quickly becomes an emphasis on failure, as four battles in quick succession cannot resolve the discord between Gawain and the other men. And the English poet deliberately emphasizes the repetition: he adds a fourth combatant not present in either version of the *First Continuation*, and suppresses the differences in the encounters that make them less repetitive in the French romance.³² Only the encounter with Brandles breaks the pattern of events, but in the *Jeaste* it does not break the pattern of the failure of combat to achieve a beneficial conclusion to the encounter.

While the men in the romance attempt to use prowess to settle the issue of Gawain’s sexual misconduct, Gawain differs from the others in his (always rejected) offers of amends, presumably financial, to provide recompense for the woman’s lost virginity. In response to Gilbert’s challenge to Gawain and insistence on combat when he first comes upon Gawain with his deflowered daughter, Gawain says:

Syr, amendes nowe wyll I make here.
As I am to knyghthode bounde.
Nowe all forewardes I wyll fullfyll,
And make amendes youe untyll,

³¹ See also ll. 65-70, 167-70 and 294-5.

³² Gawain fights two men in the *Seduction* and three in the *Rape*.

And lette me passe quyte. (ll. 33-7)

Despite Gilbert's repeated assertion when he comes upon Gawain with his deflowered daughter that no amends are possible, Gawain still offers amends, ignoring Gilbert's requests that he prepare for combat. Gawain's use of the noun "amendes" as opposed to Gilbert's verb "amende" displays the different ways in which the two men perceive Gawain's wrong and the possibility of recompense. The first definition for the verb "amenden" in the MED is "To remedy (a lack, a fault, a bad situation); correct, rectify, right (a wrong, an injustice, an error);" not until the fifth definition in the MED does the word mean amends in terms of a payment: "To make amends for (an offense, injuries, etc.); make restitution."³³ By contrast, Gawain uses the noun form, the first two definitions of which in the MED have to do with repayment for an injury: "1. (a) Reparation, retribution, amends (as for an offense or crime, or for harm done); (b) reparation demanded by, or owing to, the person injured; 2. A fine."³⁴ Although clearly the words have similar meanings, Gawain's noun form shows that he views amends as possible, and appropriate in this situation. Gilbert's use of the verb, however, suggests that Gawain has done irreparable harm to him by deflowering his daughter, an action that cannot be remedied or corrected, although it can perhaps be compensated for by the honor gained by defeating Gawain in battle.

Notably, Gawain cannot give Gilbert or his sons this type of recompense; they must forcibly take it from him, which means that this solution relies on physical aggression. In contrast, Gawain's offer of "amendes" suggests that he can compensate for

³³ MED, s.v. "amenden."

³⁴ MED, s.v. "amende(s)."

the girl's virginity, and Gilbert's subsequent dishonor, in a manner that does not involve prowess but instead relies on verbal agreements and precedents in English law. In this offer of amends, Gawain indicates his willingness either to pay for what he damaged, or possibly to marry the woman, an offer he makes explicitly in the *First Continuation*.³⁵ These contrasting solutions to Gawain's sexual misconduct emphasize that multiple forms of chivalry are available to the men in order to reach a reconciliation in this situation, suggesting that a chivalric solution that does not rely on prowess does exist. Of course, despite his efforts to distance himself from combat, Gawain ultimately fails to do so, as he is unable to convince the other men that verbal or legal amends could be a chivalrous alternative to combat in this situation. Gawain himself realizes this as he prepares for his last battle with Brandles, acknowledging "For my worde shall do none advauntage" (l. 440). Thus, even a knight willing to consider alternate modes of settlement cannot easily escape a form of chivalry that may not, in the end, be successful in forming chivalrous relationships. But the existence of this alternate form of chivalry highlights the *Jeaste*'s critique of exclusively masculine, prowess-based chivalry, even as it shows the pull of prowess on even the best of knights.

By insisting on combat, Gilbert not only rejects Gawain's offer of amends; he also rejects the contemporary legal framework for addressing sexual misconduct. Gawain, in his offered amends, recognizes Gilbert's right to demand compensation from his daughter's seducer; Gawain does not attempt to defend himself or protest his innocence, but immediately begins the process of addressing the wrong he has done. The English

³⁵ Gawain, in the *Rape* version of the tale in the *First Continuation*, does explicitly offer to marry the Pucelle de Lis (*First Continuation*, ll. 10139-42, 10251-4, 10346-8); given that Gawain marries in two other romances (*The Weddyng of Sir Gawain* and *The Carle of Carlisle*), it would not be unusual for Gawain to marry this woman.

laws governing *raptus* provide a context for Gawain's offer of amends for his sexual misconduct, even though Gawain may not actually rape the woman in the *Jeaste*. The term *raptus* or *ravere* (*ravir* in Anglo-Norman, "ravish" in English) is a notoriously difficult one in medieval legal studies, since it encompasses both rape in the modern sense of sexual violence and abduction of either men or women. Because of this fluidity of the term *raptus*, by the fifteenth century such a charge always meant abduction, and sometimes included rape. Most scholars place the near-total conflation of rape and abduction in the statutes of Westminster I (1275) and II (1285).³⁶ These statutes make no distinction between *raptus* as simple abduction, typically the abduction of a ward for the financial benefit of the would-be guardian, and *raptus* for the purposes of sexual violence. As a result, rape shifts from a violent crime against women to a crime against property: Cannon argues, "This change in procedure had the implicit result of converting rapes from crimes that harmed a woman victim into trespassory wrongs that damaged property. In this new form, of course, *women* were the property in question."³⁷ In this,

³⁶ See, for example, Christopher Cannon, "The Rights of Medieval English Women: Crime and the Issue of Representation," in *Medieval Crime and Social Control*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 173; and J.B. Post, "Ravishment of Women and the Statutes of Westminster," in *Legal Records and the Historian*, ed. J. H. Baker (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978), 158. H.A. Kelly views Westminster I and II as dealing mainly with abduction, not rape, but he does point out that contemporary legal theorists applied the statutes to cases of rape ("Statutes of Rapes and Alleged Ravishers of Wives: A Context for Charges Against Thomas Malory, Knight," *Viator* 8 [1997]: 380-91). Anglo-Saxon law clearly differentiated between rape in the modern sense and abduction; a violated woman brought the charge of rape herself, and she would receive financial compensation equal to the fine levied for the killing of a young man (Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, 40-1). English law after the Conquest, however, gradually lost a clear differentiation between rape and abduction; see Saunders for a brief overview of this combination of the crimes into *raptus*, which came to always mean abduction, even when it included rape (*Rape and Ravishment*, 48-75). For a recent reconsideration of the distinction between rape and abduction in English law, see Caroline Dunn, "The Language of Ravishment in Medieval England," *Speculum* 86 (2011): 79-116.

³⁷ Canon, "Rights of Medieval English Women," 173. Post offers a similar comment: "This paper is intended simply to highlight the Statutes of Westminster and their function, both as symptoms and as causes, in the strange process whereby the ordinary and straightforward remedies framed for a crude and shameful crime were effectively taken away from the victim, and put at the disposal of secondary, and sometimes opposing, interests" ("Ravishment of Women," 150).

these statutes give the precedent for Gilbert's sense of harm, even though Gawain has not abducted the woman,³⁸ and their encounter may be consensual.

Significantly, Westminster I and II did distinguish between consenting and non-consenting women, provided that they are "of full age."³⁹ That is, a consenting woman of legal age could not be ravished – raped or abducted – in the eyes of the law. But this changed with a 1382 statute, 6 Richard II, ch. 6. This statute gives the male relatives of a ravished woman the right to sue her ravisher regardless of the woman's consent or lack thereof in the situation.⁴⁰ The 1382 statute seems to have been inspired by the case of Eleanor West, and the unhappiness of her father, Sir Thomas West, over her determination to choose her own husband.⁴¹ Sir Thomas claimed that his daughter was abducted and raped by Nicholas Clifton, and he wished to prosecute Nicholas for these crimes. However, while some details are unclear, Eleanor seems to have been fully complicit in her abduction, and the couple was either already married or planned to marry shortly, eliminating the charge of rape. Thus, under Westminster I and II, Nicholas Clifton could not be prosecuted as a ravisher. But under Sir Thomas' influence, the 1382 statute did give him the right to sue Nicholas for taking Eleanor from Sir Thomas'

³⁸ Gawain's statement "I have founde youe here in my chase" does not indicate abduction, and the ease with which the woman's kinsmen find her suggests that she has not been removed from her original location (l. 2). In the *First Continuation*, no abduction takes place.

³⁹ Kelly, "Statutes of Rapes," 364.

⁴⁰ Cannon, "Rights of Medieval English Women," 173: "the Statute of Rapes of 1382 continued to erode the appeal of rape by a similar strategy [to Westminster I and II]: provisions in this statute essentially transferred the 'right' of the appeal of rape itself from a woman to her family, and thus most probably to her father or male guardian." And Kelly, "Statutes of Rapes," 372: the statute "gives the right of appeal to the husbands or next of kin *even though* there is consent."

⁴¹ I am grateful to Elizabeth Robertson for directing me the Eleanor West case as a useful counterpart to the woman in the *Jeaste*. For a fuller treatment of the case, see J.B. Post, "Sir Thomas West and the Statute of Rapes, 1382," *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 53 (1980): 24-30.

household, regardless of Eleanor's wishes in the matter. Although Nicholas was eventually pardoned, the law remained in effect, allowing male kinsmen to disregard the wishes of women who may have staged a ravishment in order to assert their choice of a marriage partner.⁴² Thus, in the context of Thomas West and the 1382 statute, Gilbert's anger over his deflowered daughter without consideration of her consent is normal. Gawain has violated, essentially, Gilbert's property, giving Gilbert the right to demand recompense for that property without the need to reference the issue of his daughter's consent, or lack thereof, in the situation.

If these statutes governing ravishment illuminate Gilbert's assertion, and Gawain's agreement to that assertion, that he is the one wronged in the situation, Gawain's response echoes the typical punishments for ravishers. Although Anglo-Norman law theoretically punished rape with castration, only one instance of this punishment was recorded in England, in 1222.⁴³ Most charges of rape were concluded by either "material settlements" or by a marriage between the ravisher and the woman.⁴⁴ Convicted abductors typically faced fines; only those unable to pay spent time in prison.⁴⁵

⁴² It should be noted that an easier and less legally fraught way did exist for women to exercise free choice of a marriage partner: clandestine marriage. Since canon law recognized such unions as valid, a woman need only exchange vows with her intended husband; although such clandestine marriages could lead to family difficulties and even lawsuits, they did not leave the couple open to charges of ravishment. Sue Sheridan Walker points out the high legal cost to couples who chose ravishment as a means to assert their choice of spouse ("Common Law Juries and Feudal Marriage Customs in Medieval England: The Pleas of Ravishment," *University of Illinois Law Review* 3 [1984]: 711).

⁴³ Post, "Ravishment of Women," 152, and Corinne Saunders, "A Matter of Consent: Middle English Romance and the Law of *Raptus*," in *Medieval Women and the Law*, ed. Noel J. Menuge (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), 108.

⁴⁴ Post, "Ravishment of Women," 152.

⁴⁵ Walker, "Punishing Convicted Ravishers: Statutory Strictures and Actual Practice in Thirteenth and Fourteenth-century England," *Journal of Medieval History* 13 (1987): 240.

Thus, monetary settlements were typical in cases that came to the courts.⁴⁶ But even more common than settlements decided by courts were settlements reached out of court, indicated in part by the failure of women to appear in court.⁴⁷ These types of settlements remain, for the most part, obscure; Phillips argues that “Financial compensation to women for premarital loss of virginity is a matter, if not hidden, at least veiled from medieval English history. It belongs less to the legal than to the more informal realm of familial or community policing of sexual behavior.”⁴⁸ But a few records of such settlements exist, including one record of an Isabella who, in 1453, received 20 marks from Robert Chow for her deflowering, which seems to have been consensual and not rape.⁴⁹ Based on what the records reveal about settlements for cases of ravishment and sexual misconduct, financial compensation seems to have been viewed as proper, and while obviously not able to restore lost virginity, able to prevent the financial loss that may come to a family trying to marry a non-virgin daughter.

In this context of penalties for ravishers and private settlements for various forms of sexual misconduct, Gawain’s offer of amends to Gilbert seems perfectly ordinary, a

⁴⁶ The church even urged such settlements: Kim M. Phillips discusses Robert Mannyng’s confessional manual (c.1300), which promotes financial compensation for defloration: “Mannyng leaves no doubt about the money/body nexus of virginity; a maiden’s virginity was not only a spiritual but also a firmly material treasure” (“Four Virgins’ Tales: Sex and Power in Medieval Law,” in *Medieval Virginity*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans and Sarah Salih [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003], 88).

⁴⁷ “The notable failure of victims to appear before justices to pursue appeals of rape was due in part to the practice of settling the matter out of court through private reparations” (Phillips, “Four Virgins’ Tales,” 87). For more general examinations of the prevalence and reasons behind arbitration and out-of-court settlements in late medieval England, see Edward Powell, “Arbitration and the Law in England in the Late Middle Ages,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 33 (1983): 49-67; and Barbara Hanawalt, “The Power of Word and Symbol: Conflict Resolution in Late Medieval London,” in *“Of Good and Ill Repute:” Gender and Social Control in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 35-52.

⁴⁸ Phillips, “Four Virgins’ Tales,” 87.

⁴⁹ The fact arose in a case concerning Robert’s marriage to another woman. Phillips argues the financial compensation offered to Isabella would “make up for the damage to the young woman’s eligibility for respectable marriage by providing her with an attractive dowry” (“Four Virgins’ Tales,” 86-7).

typical solution to the situation. Thus, by insisting on combat, Gilbert and his sons reject the language-based legal system of assessing crime and punishment. In doing so, they not only disregard English law, but break it: the 1382 Statute of Rapes specifically forbade trial by combat for cases of ravishment.⁵⁰ The existence of this prohibition suggests that such combat did occur, and may have still been occurring when the *Jeaste* was composed. But Gilbert's insistence on combat remains an unusual response to the sexual misconduct of his daughter and Gawain, thereby highlighting the role of chivalric prowess in the *Jeaste*. And the failure of this form of chivalry becomes even more pronounced in light of a widespread alternative form of recompense for the misconduct described in the romance. Thus, the juxtaposition of these two methods of addressing sexual misconduct, and the persistent failure of prowess to reach an agreeable solution, allows the *Jeaste* to examine the flaws of this particular form of chivalry.

Failure of Prowess

Although Gawain is the only man in the romance who consistently offers amends and seems to consider them equal to prowess as a means to chivalrously amend his misconduct, by the end of the *Jeaste* Gilbert begins to see the shortcomings of prowess and the possibilities of verbal and legal amends. Gilbert considers these alternatives after he and his first two sons are defeated, and his son Brandles discovers the three of them wounded in the forest. In a departure from his words of encouragement to his other sons, Gilbert attempts to dissuade Brandles from pursuing combat with Gawain: "Thoughe he

⁵⁰ 1382 Statute of 6 Richard II, ch. 6. See Kelly, "Statutes of Rapes," 371-2.

have done wronge, lett hym goo. / The knyght ys passynge sure” (ll. 378-9).⁵¹ Gilbert then presents his reasons for avoiding combat:

The knyght [Gawain] ys stronge, and well fight can,
And when he hathe at hande a man,
He wyll do hym none yll.
But gentle wordes speake agayne,
And do hym no harme ne mayne,
Thus gentyll he ys in skylle. (ll. 383-8)

In these lines, Gilbert makes two related points. First, he acknowledges that in the face of Gawain’s prowess, combat is unlikely to succeed even in punishing wrongdoing. Second, he notes Gawain’s courtesy, how “gentyll he ys in skylle.” Hahn’s note on these lines reads, “Sir Gilbert seems to say that Gawain defeats and treats honorably all those that approach him violently; but if one speaks courteously to him from the outset, Gawain shows nothing but courtesy.”⁵² The romance shows that Gilbert reaches the conclusion that combat is not the only chivalrous way for the men in the *Jeaste* to resolve the harm caused by Gawain’s sexual misconduct: “gentleness” may achieve the reconciliation that eludes prowess. Gilbert no longer desires Gawain’s defeat in combat, but instead acknowledges the possibility of verbal or legal amends and thus accord.

While Gawain’s prowess has not itself formed relationships among the men, it has paved the way for chivalric reconciliation: since Gawain has proven that he possesses both prowess and courtesy, Gilbert no longer views himself as dishonored. While Gawain’s conduct with his daughter was regrettable, combat has proven Gawain’s

⁵¹ *Jeaste*, ll. 113-8, 221-6. Gilbert warns Gyamoure of Gawain’s prowess and warns him against boasting of his own prowess, but does not try to stop him from attempting the battle; Gilbert explicitly encourages Terry to “avenge the shedynge of thy fathers blood” (l. 222).

⁵² Hahn, *Eleven Romances*, 416.

worthiness.⁵³ Gilbert can therefore accept that Gawain's verbal mode of reconciliation may indeed be chivalrous and produce honor, not shame. Thus, Gilbert wishes to end his encounter with Gawain, abandoning combat to reach an alternative reconciliation through a verbal accord with Gawain, and probably an acceptance of Gawain's amends. However, Brandles does not accept Gilbert's advice, preferring to test Gawain's strength himself and thereby continuing the conflict between the two modes of resolution (ll. 389-91). Like Gilbert earlier, Brandles views a verbal or legal accord with Gawain as dishonorable, saying to Gawain, "To accorde with the I were therof lothe, / My worshippe to fullfyll" (ll. 435-6). However, this final battle between Gawain and the woman's kinsmen ends inconclusively, as neither party decisively defeats the other, leaving the men permanently unable to achieve reconciliation.⁵⁴ This inconclusive ending effectively demonstrates the failure of prowess alone to reach a solution to Gawain's misconduct that increases honor among the participants in the romance, a failure that "gentle wordes" may avoid.

Gilbert's realization that there may be a type of chivalry not reliant on masculine prowess is also significant structurally: his speech appears only six lines before the woman's one speech during the combats (and only surviving speech in the romance as extant). Placed here, Gilbert's realization allows the woman to speak, as if by acknowledging other forms of chivalry Gilbert gives the woman a voice, even if he

⁵³ Gilbert says to Gyamoure and Terry, after Terry's defeat, that Gawain "hath clene wanne" his daughter's love, taking Gawain's prowess as proof of his honor. While the romance presents prowess as problematic, for Gilbert it makes non-violent forms of chivalry more palatable.

⁵⁴ The *Jeaste* further emphasizes the failure of combat by spending nearly 40 lines introducing Brandles, primarily describing his chivalric accoutrements such as his horse, his armor and his weapons (ll. 317-53). But setting Brandles up as an opponent worthy of Gawain, the romance draws greater attention to the inability of these men to come to any definite conclusion, either total defeat or beneficial relationship.

cannot hear her speak. This is significant, as throughout the romance the men have ignored the woman; thus, in Gilbert's realization and the subsequent reintroduction of the woman, the *Jeaste* begins to relate the woman and "gentle" relational strategies, and to show the consequences of removing the woman from chivalric interactions among men. The marginalization of the woman by the men occurs from the very first lines of the romance, which presents the encounter between the woman and Gawain exclusively from Gawain's point of view:

And in hys armes he gan her brace,
With kyssynge of mowthes sweete.
There Syr Gawayne made suche chere,
That grete frendeshyp he founde there,
With that fayre lady so gaye;
Suche chere he made, and suche semblaunce
That longed to love, he had her countenaunce
Withoute any more delaye. (ll. 3-10)

The true difficulty in determining how Gawain "had her countenaunce," through rape or seduction, lies in the absence of the woman's perspective. Unlike either the French *Seduction* or *Rape*, the *Jeaste* eliminates the woman's point of view on this initial encounter. Moreover, the woman's kinsmen in the *Jeaste* never speak to her, giving her no opportunity to make her perspective on the encounter known. This lack of specificity about the way in which Gawain "had her countenaunce" reinforces that the issue in this romance is about male honor and thus masculine prowess; the woman's role is to bring the men together, not play a part in the initial encounter or the ensuing negotiations.

The lost opening lines of the romance may, of course, contain interaction between Gawain and the woman that considered her wishes in the situation. Indeed, the first extant lines apparently contain Gawain's response to the woman's concerns about her family's potential reaction to the situation, which indicates that Gawain may not have entirely

disregarded the woman's wishes in the situation: "And sayde, 'I dreede no threte; / I have founde youe here in my chase'" (ll. 1-2). These opening lines indicate that the woman in the *Jeaste* had reservations about accepting Gawain as a lover that he brushes aside. Even if these objections relate to his safety, not her own, he has set the narrative pattern of ignoring the woman. Despite Gawain's initial adherence to this narrative pattern that disregards the woman's concerns, however, he seems exceedingly concerned with the woman compared to Gilbert and his sons. When Gilbert arrives on the scene, he does not even address his daughter or pause to ascertain whether wrong was actually done to the woman, as discussed above. Gilbert thus pushes the woman into the background, placing the issue of sexual misconduct squarely in the masculine realm, an issue that the men can resolve through combat without reference to the woman. The woman's brothers continue this pattern as they too speak and interact only with Gawain, with the exception of Brandles who chastises, beats and leaves her alone in the woods at the end of the romance. With the literal exclusion of the woman from male negotiation in the English romance comes the concurrent exclusion of verbal modes of reconciliation. Gawain in the *Jeaste* attempts to take on this role himself by offering alternate verbal and legal forms of settlement, but just as the other men refuse to acknowledge the woman, so too they refuse to consider Gawain's non-prowess based mode of reconciliation. While Gawain has resources, such as his ability to fight, that the woman lacks, the romance relates the marginalization of the woman with the marginalization of Gawain's amends. By linking Gilbert's growing willingness to accept amends with the woman's speech, the romance indicates that chivalry benefits from including modes of relationship formation that avoid chivalric violence.

Despite this indication that the characters in the *Jeaste* are becoming aware of the benefits of verbal and legal relational strategies, just as Brandles rejects Gilbert's advice, the woman's words prove ineffective. They are ineffective not because no one listens, but because they echo her kinsmen's valuation of prowess instead of presenting a different option. The woman's speech describes Brandles as he approaches the pavilion (ll. 393-408). The woman warns Gawain of Brandles' strength, saying, "Yt wyl be harde hym to overgone" (l. 396); she proceeds to call Brandles one who "wyll dure in fyght," who "ys in warre full slye" and "passynge lyke a knyght" (l. 398, 402, 404). Significantly, through this description of her brother the woman participates in the masculine emphasis on prowess. Rather than asserting herself, as the Pucelle de Lis does in the *First Continuation*, she effaces herself by engaging in the prowess-oriented language that the other male characters use. However, although the woman's words echo those of her father and brothers, they remain her words; it is significant that she speaks these words at this point in the romance. The reappearance of the woman reminds the audience that she has been marginalized throughout the romance, despite being the reason for all of the combat. Thus, her speech shows the audience that even when she speaks, she has no real presence in the romance or in a chivalric system that relies on male combat. Her words, which have the potential to be effective at reconciling the men in the romance as her counterpart's words do in the *First Continuation*, instead participate in a prowess-based exchange of masculine honor that is ultimately detrimental to the woman herself. In this passage, the *Jeaste* ties together the woman and language, showing how both are ineffectual in this romance, when they should have the power to provide a beneficial ending to all the characters involved.

Despite the characters' adherence to gender-segregated roles of combat and silence in the *Jeaste*, prowess-based chivalry ultimately fails not only to benefit the men but also fails to benefit the woman. Gawain attempts to use his prowess to protect her, forcing the defeated Gilbert to promise, "That ye do no harme unto the mayde" (l. 63). Gawain here shows confidence that his prowess in battle can protect the woman from any punishment from her family, since victory in combat allows him to impose certain terms upon his defeated foe. Yet Gawain does not make the brothers Gyamoure and Terry repeat Gilbert's promise not to harm the woman, already showing that prowess may not have much concern for establishing relationships that ensure the woman's protection. However, after his final battle with Brandles, Gawain attempts to extract from him the same promise he gained from Gilbert not to harm the woman: "Syr Gawayne put up hys swerde than: / 'Syr knight, be frende to that gentle woman, / As ye be gentle knyght'" (ll. 485-7). Brandles, however, refuses: "'As for that,' sayde Brandles than, / 'She hathe caused today, pardye, much shame. / Yt ys pyttye she hathe her syght'" (ll. 488-90). By failing to defeat Brandles in combat, Gawain loses his ability to protect the woman. Significantly, when combat fails to resolve the situation, Gawain appeals to Brandles' non-prowess based chivalry, "As ye be gentle knyght." He attempts, one final time, to achieve a beneficial result without combat, but Brandles rejects this appeal to his "gentleness" as he earlier rejected the proffered amends. In refusing Gawain's request, Brandles transfers the blame for the failure of prowess-based chivalry to his sister, identifying her as the cause of "much shame," the center not of beneficial male relationships but of lost male honor. In contrast to Brandles' assertion, however, the *Jeaste* indicates that the shame of repeated defeat stems from an insistence on combat and

the failure of that type of chivalry. Thus, Brandles' insistence on combat leads to both Gawain's inability to protect the woman he seduced and Brandles' rejection of his sister as he insults, beats and abandons her.

Gawain's prowess fails to protect the woman; furthermore, when the battles are over, he seems to lose any concern over the woman, turning to the difficulties he faces in returning to Arthur without his horse, wounded and weary (ll. 491-6). This leaves the woman vulnerable to whatever punishment Brandles may wish to inflict. And Brandles, since his chivalry has failed to regain the value of his sister's lost virginity through establishing beneficial male relationships, no longer has any use for her. Thus the prowess that was supposed to redeem his sister's lost honor fails in this goal, and fails to even protect the woman. And with the final disappearance of the woman from the poem, "Than the lady gate her awaye - / They sawe her never after that daye; / She went wandrynge to and fro," the final hope of a reconciliation also disappears from the *Jeaste* (ll. 524-6). The *Jeaste* makes this consequence clear only a few lines later: "And after that tyme they never mette more; / Full gladde were those knightes therfore. / So there was made the ende" (ll. 533-5). The failure of prowess-based chivalry to provide a place for the woman is the failure of this chivalry to produce a beneficial reconciliation; Gawain's embrace of prowess and subsequent inability to protect the woman means that he fails in his usual role in the English romances as reconciler, the one who builds relationships and increases the honor of all involved in a situation.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ For a discussion of Gawain as reconciler, see Hahn, "Introduction," in *Eleven Romances*, 1-40. Hahn observes, "Gawain's role in the romances works therefore to effect the reconciliation or reappropriation, rather than the destruction, of the strange or alien, and this happy resolution in turn secures the audience's identification with the hero, and with the naturalness of the social order he represents" (25). In my reading, the *Jeaste* clearly and intentionally works against this portrayal of Gawain.

Because the men involved cannot reach a conclusion, the author must intervene to devise an end to the episode. Unlike the conclusion of the encounter between Gawain and the woman's kinsmen in the *Seduction* and the *Rape*, the *Jeaste* forecloses any future developments in this tale, ending with no agreement or possibility of reconciliation between Gawain, the woman and her family. At the end of the romance, all of the knights have been deprived both of intangible victory and their more tangible knightly possessions, their horses and armor. Beyond the financial value, horse and armor symbolize knighthood and chivalry, those ideals of chivalry that go beyond the mere ability to purchase such items. By losing horse and armor, then, the men all suffer both a financial loss and a loss of chivalric honor. Chivalry that relies on prowess and combat has failed to reach a solution that increases the honor of any of the knights involved. Equally significant, where prowess fails, language succeeds: the author's words, describing the subsequent actions of the characters and the fact that they never meet again, supply the conclusion that prowess does not achieve, again hinting that Gawain's offered verbal amends, or the ability of the woman to participate in the chivalric realm, would have provided a more effective means of reconciliation.

Conclusion

As the woman's one speech shows, she is unable in the *Jeaste* to insert herself into the masculine realm of combat; when she speaks, she uses the language of the men, and does so from the shelter of her pavilion.⁵⁶ The pavilion serves as a spatial reminder

⁵⁶ The woman "stode" and saw Brandles, but it is not clear whether she stands within or outside of the pavilion (l. 393). However, Brandles says to Gawain "'Come forthe in haste,'" which implies that upon Brandles' arrival Gawain is still inside the pavilion; if Gawain is inside, the woman has probably remained inside or at least returned inside (l. 416).

that she is separated from the outside male realm of combat. Unlike the *Pucelle de Lis*, who at the end of the *Rape* physically enters the realm of male combat in order to stop it and by her actions forces Arthur to negotiate a reconciliation, the woman in the *Jeaste* never leaves the enclosed feminine realm of her pavilion. The enclosure has failed to protect her virginity, but the woman remains within, separated from the men who fight just outside the walls of her pavilion.⁵⁷ The illustrations in the most complete manuscript of the *Jeaste* graphically illustrate this fact: although the combats take place in the same location as the pavilion, none of the four illustrations of the combats contain either the pavilion or the woman.⁵⁸ The one illustration that contains both is a picture of Brandles beating the woman; while the romance itself does not specify where this beating took place, in the illustration the woman seems to be just inside the pavilion, while Brandles holds her arm with one hand and a stick with the other. Thus, the pavilion effectively separates the woman's space from the male space outside where the jousting takes place, shutting the woman out of the male sphere of chivalric prowess.

Although the woman does not leave the pavilion to intrude into male space, Gawain spends the course of the romance moving between the two spaces, emerging from the pavilion to fight the woman's kinsmen, then returning after each battle to be with the woman herself. Gawain's ability to move unimpeded between the two spaces underscores his willingness to use such non-prowess-based forms of resolution as

⁵⁷ Significantly, in the *Rape* the woman inserts herself into male negotiations only after she has lost her virginity, first when she urges her first brother to accept Gawain's offer of marriage, and later when she holds her son between the battling Gawain and Brandles. This may indicate that a virgin cannot easily place herself in the male realm.

⁵⁸ Oxford, Bodley ms 21835 (Douce 261) contains six simple line drawings. Four depict the battles between the men; one is a portrait of Brandles when he comes upon his wounded father and brother; the remaining picture shows Brandles beating his sister. The *Jeaste* probably also began with a portrait of Gawain, as the one romance in the collection that retains its opening (*Sir Isumbras*) begins with a portrait of the hero.

amends, and shows that chivalry can exist apart from prowess. Unlike the woman's father and brothers, who keep themselves entirely outside of the pavilion and do not even speak to the woman, with the exception of Brandles at the end, Gawain occupies both spaces. He does not limit himself to the masculine sphere of combat, as the other four men do. Just as he shows greater awareness of the woman than the other men, he is more comfortable in her space; these factors in combination with Gawain's continued prowess show that he need not exclude women in order to prove his chivalry. Feminine influence thus does not weaken or threaten chivalry, since it does neither to Gawain; rather, it provides a model of reconciliation that, if embraced by the men, would prove more successful than prowess without diminishing chivalry.

The *Jeaste* thus criticizes a conception of chivalry that relies on prowess in battle, a primarily masculine endeavor, to the exclusion of any other form of chivalry. Gawain in the *Jeaste* represents an alternative type of chivalry, chivalry that relies on language and, to a lesser extent, English law. But the other men in the romance repeatedly reject this form of chivalry while they also marginalize the woman in the romance, the never-named reason for the conflict between the men. That the woman's kinsmen reject both the woman herself and Gawain's amends suggests a correspondence between the two: the amends do not partake in the hyper-masculine realm of combat, and therefore must represent an at least potentially feminine form of chivalry. However, prowess-based chivalry fails to provide the honor-increasing resolution typical of Gawain romances. This chivalry accomplishes only losses of honor amongst the men, and loss of home and protection for the woman. Prowess fails so badly that the narrator must intervene, using the words that Gawain could not, in order to provide a conclusion. The English author

adapts his French source to emphasize the failure of a form of chivalry that both rejects language and excludes women. This deeply unsettling romance calls attention to the way chivalry fails when it does not consider language and law, and above all when it fails to allow women a space to participate in the chivalric world.

Conclusion

Thanks to Malory's compelling vision of the Arthurian legend in his *Morte Darthur*, Gawain has been eclipsed by Lancelot in most modern English versions of Arthurian stories. Malory's Gawain is more like the French Gawain, a fighter and a womanizer who represents, particularly in the Grail quest, an earthly, violent, self-gratifying form of chivalry. In Malory's telling of the downfall of Arthur and his kingdom, Gawain's insistence on both his own personal vengeance against Lancelot for the death of Gareth and on Arthur's communal vengeance (via war) for Lancelot's affair with Guinevere looms large among the complex factors that lead to Arthur's downfall. That is, Malory's Gawain in the end represents unreflective violence in response to harm. Although his Lancelot finally embraces a life of religious non-violence, and Malory himself seems to have turned to writing romance because as a prisoner he was literally removed from the world of chivalric violence, he does not continue the English tradition of using Gawain as a figure through whom chivalric ideologies can be navigated. But perhaps Gawain had served his purpose: while he continued to be a popular figure through the sixteenth century, when the Arthurian legend was revived in the nineteenth century interest had shifted from questions of chivalry and prowess to the enduring love story of Lancelot and Guinevere.

Since the nineteenth century, versions of the Arthurian legend have followed Malory's lead in demoting Gawain and promoting Lancelot. In Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Gawain is a boorish character, more akin to Kay in medieval romance; T.H.

White's Gawain in his *Once and Future King* is more nuanced, the product of a dismal childhood, but still overshadowed by Lancelot and hardly the exemplar of chivalry. Even e-mail chain letter versions of the Loathly Lady story have replaced Gawain with Lancelot (although the moral that women desire sovereignty seems to hold as true today as in the fourteenth century). Despite his modern eclipse in Arthurian material, however, this dissertation has demonstrated the important role Gawain played in Middle English romance. His character formed an ideal means through which questions of chivalry could be considered: as a close relative of Arthur, he is undoubtedly noble; as the chief of Arthur's chivalry, his prowess is unquestioned; and as a perpetually single character (despite several marriages), he can be used to explore the intersections of chivalry and gender. Although his culturally-bound popularity has led even scholars of English romance to overlook his role in negotiating chivalric ideologies and identities, this study has shown that Gawain and the romances that feature him played important social roles as formulations of and priorities within chivalry shifted.

While all of the romances considered in this project use Gawain in different ways to explore diverse manifestations of chivalry, one constant thread through all of them is the relationship between prowess and chivalry. Although violence was undoubtedly a central aspect of medieval chivalry, these romances demonstrate that, at least in England in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, medieval authors and audiences did not unthinkingly accept violence and the qualities of prowess and courage it calls forth as essential to chivalry. Even the author of the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, while he admired Gawain's deeds in battles, was uncertain about whether such chivalry could exist for long in the contemporary world of the fourteenth century. More than half a century later, the

author of *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain* is certain that martial chivalry is unsustainable, and in fact detrimental to society, but pessimistic about the ability of knights to give up the exercise of violence. Between these two extremes lie the other three romances. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* interrogates the place of prowess in the formation of knightly honor and reputation, suggesting that it should be no more important than piety and courtesy although like the *Jeaste* not particularly optimistic about the ability of knights to remember this. *The Carl of Carlisle* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain* both show the social benefits that can accrue when knights avoid violence and instead build communal relationships by other means, but the *Carl* genially shows the absurdities to which such a form of chivalry can descend while the *Wedding* more fearfully worries that an absence of violence will ultimately disrupt social order.

Despite a lack of consensus about the place of violence and prowess in the exercise of chivalry, these romances clearly show that authors and audiences in late medieval England were interested in this question. Although the shift to a social code that emphasized courtesy and civility may not have occurred fully until the sixteenth century, as most social historians argue, the interest these romances have in formulating a chivalry that is not primarily based on military prowess is clear.¹ My study thus demonstrates not only the versatility of the character of Gawain for considering chivalric ideologies, but also the widespread social concern that chivalry be a code beneficial to society. This concern necessitates a careful examination of the most socially useful relationship between prowess and other chivalrous qualities, and Gawain with his constant but ever-

¹ For a consideration of this shift to courtesy in the early modern period, see Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978); his work on social mores is foundational if often challenged by modern scholars. See also Anna Bryson, *From Courtesy to Civility: Changing Codes of Conduct in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

malleable chivalry allows the authors and audiences of Middle English romance to effectively address this concern and explore the implications of different formulations of chivalric ideology.

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