AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Of all King Arthur's knights, none has captured the fancy of Medieval English poets as has Arthur's nephew, Gawain, though none has received less justice from poets in recent centuries. Numerous surveys of Gawain's career have been written, but few have focused on analyzing Gawain as a member of the Round Table--his position, his contributions, his influence on its activities. The results of Gawain's adventures usually give the readers clues to and directly reflect the state of the Round Table at that particular point in time. The investigation will analyze this aspect of the Gawain-character in five early medieval romances which span the years from 1350-1400: Le Morte Arthure (stanzaic), Morte Arthure (alliterative), and the much studied Sir Gawain and the Green

Knight, and two lesser known works, Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlyle, and The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell.

In all but the Stanzaic Morte, Gawain is a model of purity, courtesy, and valor, and thus we see the court prosper due to his influence. In Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlyle, the Carl regains his faith in knightly courtesy, mends his evil ways, and is dubbed a knight by Arthur. Arthur's court is ennobled by the addition of another man converted solely through the representative behavior of Gawain. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Gawain's self-confessed shame for breaking his word to save his life gives him a new found grace, and the Round Table achieves a higher nobility by its act of compassionate fellowship.

In The Wedding and the Alliterative Morte, Gawain not only is a reflection of the court, but of the King himself. The numerous similarities in behavior, depiction, and action between Gawain and Arthur in the Alliterative Morte emphasize this reflection, but Gawain's depiction also foreshadows the major event of the poem--Arthur's death. In The Wedding, we behold a strangely insecure and covenant-breaking Arthur who must rely on a surrogate Gawain not only to save face for himself and his court but to save his life as well.

This investigation will conclude with a study of the Stanzaic Morte in which Gawain's character is debased, and he is made to bear most of the blame for the disintegration of the Round Table and for Arthur's death. An inconsistent Gawain-character reflects the turmoil and fragile workings of a court that no longer stands on the foundations of trust,

loyalty and brotherhood.

Even in the negative portrayals that many post-medieval authors like Malory and Tennyson chose to create, Gawain appears as Arthur's confidant and upon his death, Gawain is the subject of great lamentation by Arthur and even the traitor Mordred, who through their words of mourning, reinstate Gawain in his rightful position as one of the noblest men in the world.

SIR GAWAIN AND THE STATE OF THE ROUND TABLE

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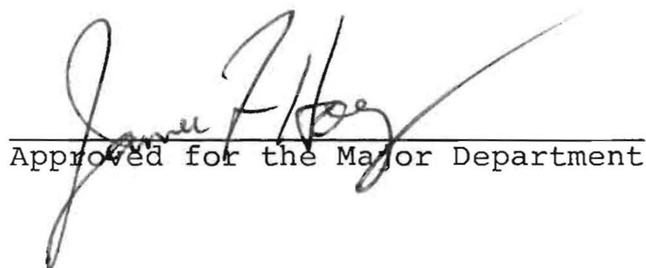

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Chapter One

Introduction: Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlyle

Of all the knights of King Arthur's Round Table, none has captured the fancy of Medieval English poets as has Arthur's nephew--the sage and courteous Gawain. His fame is attested to by the numerous romances in which he plays the central figure and by the fact that he is most always depicted as the epitome of knighthood. He is the only one of Arthur's knights about whom a cycle of poems was written in English, and he often upstages the most prominent heroes in works outside the cycle, especially when such poems contain situations that call for exhibitions of prowess and impeccable knightly behavior.

Still, it must be remembered that Gawain was only one member of the distinguished Round Table of King Arthur. Although there seems to be an extremely close connection between Gawain and Arthur, historically there was always a close association between the man armed and the man who armed him. To receive knighthood from a lord of particular standing associated the recipient with that lord's honor and dignity. A man of prowess famous for his outstanding deeds received more dignity by receiving his knighthood at the hands of one with an established name. Such a relationship was considered to reflect honor on both parties. For men whose social position was insecure, the service of the great had powerful psychological and economic

attractions as well because it associated them with the standing and reputation of the men and lineages that they served. One literary function of Arthur's Round Table was clearly to be an emblem of the equal terms on which all knights, great and humble, mixed at his board, once they had, by prowess or service, won their right to a place there (Keen, Chivalry 30). Thus the relationship of Gawain and Arthur was a special, yet traditional one.

In battle and in everyday chivalric orders, a knight was seen as a reflection of his king and court, one who could ennoble but also disgrace his kingdom and fellow knights. The rise and fall, successes and failures of a king and kingdom might be reflected in or caused by the actions of his knights. As is true for all of Arthur's knights, the court serves as the point of departure for many adventures and as the resting place to which they eventually return. Curiously, the results of Gawain's adventures usually lend the reader clues to or directly reflect the state of the Round Table at that particular point in time. Previous surveys of the Gawain-character have been devoted to discussions of his medieval courtesy, his miraculous strength and prowess in battle, and the origins of his character. Few pieces of published criticism have focused on analyzing Gawain as a member of the Round Table--his position, his contributions, his influence on its activities. The investigation will attempt to analyze this aspect of the Gawain character through a close study of five early medieval romances which span the years from 1350-1400: Three major works, Le Morte Arthure (stanzaic), Morte Arthure (alliterative), and the much studied Sir Gawain

and the Green Knight, and two lesser known works, Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlyle, and The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell.

In all but the Stanzaic Morte, Gawain is a model of purity, courtesy, and valor. In such depictions, we see Arthur's court prosper due to the influence of Gawain. In Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlyle, we witness the traditional contrast between the courteous Gawain and the rude Sir Kay as they encounter the horrible Carl. Because Gawain successfully completes a series of three tests, the Carl regains his faith in knightly courtesy and in the Round Table's reputation. The Carl mends his evil ways and is dubbed one of Arthur's knights. Thus, Arthur's court is ennobled by the addition of another man, converted solely through the representative behavior of Gawain. Similarly, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Gawain brings glory to the Round Table, but in a unique way, beyond the demonstration of polished knightly manners. Recognizing his role as a mirror of his court, Gawain manages to strengthen the court even his own defeat. His self-confessed shame for breaking his word to save his life gives him a new found grace, and the Round Table achieves a higher nobility by its act of compassionate fellowship.

In both The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell and the chronicle-like Alliterative Morte, Gawain's character represents the medieval notion that a knight reflects not only his fellow knights, but the king himself. In The Wedding, we behold a strangely insecure and covenant-breaking Arthur who must rely on a surrogate Gawain not only to save face for himself and his court but to save his life as well. The numerous similarities

in behavior, depiction, and actions between Gawain and Arthur in the Alliterative Morte do more than emphasize Gawain's position as a reflection of King Arthur and his court; more importantly, the depiction of Gawain serves to foreshadow the major event of the epic--the death of Arthur.

As mentioned previously, not just a knight's good deeds reflect his king and court. He might also bring shame to his kingdom through defeat, disgrace, or unloyalty. This investigation will conclude with a study of the Stanzaic Morte in which Lancelot is portrayed as heroic, while Gawain's character is debased, and he is made to bear most of the blame for the disintegration of the Round Table and for Arthur's death. Gawain's feud with and vengeance for Lancelot contribute as much to the deterioration of the court as does the treason of Mordred. An inconsistent Gawain-character reflects the turmoil and shaky workings within a court that no longer stands on concrete foundations of trust, loyalty, and brotherhood.

With the intention of demonstrating the various ways in which Gawain reflects and contributes to the state of Arthur's Round Table, I have chosen to begin this study with Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlyle because it illustrates the most straightforward way in which a knight can positively influence the state of his court--the exhibition of flawless knightly behavior. Carl of Carlyle contains the theme of the host who maltreats or slays all guests who do not implicitly obey his requests. The hero of the tale is the first one spared, and that because he does unquestioningly whatever his host bids him do. The obedience and courtesy that Gawain displays in this tale pay off

handsomely, not only confirming his own reputation for courtesy but advancing the reputation of Arthur's court as well. Gawain also increases the membership of the Round Table by turning the savage Carl into a gentle knight, who is then dubbed a member of the Round Table and renamed the Earl of Carlyle by King Arthur. Because of the many similarities to other Middle English romances, especially to the much acclaimed Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, this tale has often been deprived of individual critical attention. Although distinctly shorter in length (660 verses) than others in this study, this fourteenth-century North Midland tale is rich in detail and includes many motifs that are found in other works being considered, including hunt sequences, initiation and temptation trials, and confrontations between fellow knights. If for no other reason, this tale should be studied because it assists the understanding of other romances to which it may be related.

Before a textual analysis of this work, it might be best to refresh our memories of the duties and proper behavior of a knight and what it is that brings him, and hence his court, the most recognition and glory. As has already been mentioned, the relationship between a king and his knights is a unique one in that even though individual glory and honor may be won, eventually all honor returns to benefit the king and his kingdom. Loyalty and truth, hardiness, largesse, and humility are the principle qualities of character we ought to expect from a knight (Keen, Chivalry 10). From history, the romances have framed an ideal of this heroic character, combining invincible strength and valor, justice, modesty, loyalty to superiors, courtesy to equals,

compassion to weakness, and devotion to the Church; this is an ideal which if ever met with in real life, would be acknowledged by all as the highest model for emulation. Historically, honor was the temple at which the knights worshipped. It implied renown, good conduct, and the world's approval, perhaps meaning the respect of those in surrounding kingdoms. The 'word of honor' was the most solemn oath a knight knew, and he recognized that once given, this oath could never be retracted except by a lord's absolution. From this concept comes the frequency of compacts and the importance of "trawthe" in many romances such as the Carl, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell. In those romances, honor can be won in two basic ways: through success on the battle field, or through the exhibition of courtoisie. Courtoisie is the attainment of all worldly virtues and the keynote of literary chivalry. Much of courtoisie deals with the question of manners; as Richard Barber states, "hospitality, and a warm welcome, 'debonnairete,' or gaiety and openheartedness seemed to be as essential as loyalty, with generosity as vital as compassion" (Knight 155). This diligent search for glory seems to have been the only real obligation a knight of Arthurian legend had to recognize, beyond the slaying of dragons or saving of distressed damsels. A knight's day was spent either questing (looking for battles), fighting, or feasting (which provided the perfect settings for displays of courtoisie). Knights far preferred fighting to attain honor, so much so that when their kingdoms were at peace, they would travel to foreign realms in hopes of finding a worthy opponent because, as Tacitus speaks of German warriors, "inaction is

odious to their race and because they win renown more readily in the midst of peril" (716).

Pre-chivalric texts such as Tacitus' Germania can give us insight into the workings of medieval English society since he intended above all to depict a society which places the accent on the warrior rather than the cultivator. As he says, "They actually think it tame and stupid to acquire by the sweat of toil what they might win by their blood" (716). Although medieval English society was primarily agricultural, the society of Medieval literature was depicted typically as a military one. Tacitus' picture of the warrior band of youths who surround the German chief and who regard it as dishonor to survive him in battle, may just have laid the foundations for the conceptions of feudalism and chivalry in this literary English society whose preoccupation is war. Although German warriors were not considered knights, and despite the fact that the life of a twelfth-century knight may be far different from the idealized knight of romances, the similarities between the relationships of fighting man and leader remain. Tacitus illustrates this relationship by describing the means through which honor is attained in battle:

> When they go in battle, it is a disgrace for the chief to be surpassed in valour, a disgrace for his followers not to equal the valor of the chief. And it is an infamy and a reproach for life to have survived the chief and returned from the field. To defend, to protect him, to ascribe one's own brave deeds to his renown, is the height of loyalty. The chief fights for victory; his vassals fight for their chief. . .Nor are they as easily persuaded to plough the earth and to wait the year's produce as to challenge an enemy and earn the honor of wounds. (715-6)

Knowing that a knight should be courteous and victorious and that he should aggressively seek battles, we should not be surprised that Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlyle begins by telling us how perfectly Gawain fits this description. In the first stanza alone, we learn not only that "seche he would in war and pees," but that he is true, doughty in deed, bold, yet gentle. The author of this tale obviously wants us to believe that he has read other Arthurian romances and thus knows the ideal qualities of a hero of romance. This is apparent by the inclusion of such references to other romances (12, 51). If, indeed, this tale was written by a minstrel, such inclusions might contribute to his credibility with the audience and might remind us that he was aware of the many chivalric conventions found in them.

After the introduction of Gawain, who we now anticipate will play the role of hero and ideal knight, Arthur and his other knights gather for a day of deer hunting, complete with a traditional mass preceding the day's activities. Following this comes what many critics call an unnecessary, even inaccurate narrative interruption in which the narrator lists all of the knights that are present, in some cases including these knight's most noteworthy features. Rather than being a distraction from the story, the inclusion of such information, I would suggest, merely stresses the strength, brotherhood, and present success of the Round Table as well as provides a means to list all the qualities to be found in an ideal knight. Syr Yngeles is "genttyle," Syr Lot was "hardy and kene," while Syr Petty Pas was "nobull" and "stout was on a stede." Other knights are noted as skilled hunters, fighters, and dragon slayers. Each

knight possesses one outstanding trait that makes him essential to the whole and important enough to be mentioned separately, even if the forthcoming tale is to focus on Gawain and Kay. We will soon see that Gawain's successful visit to the Carl's castle will allow him to be added to this author's extensive list. The noble traits that will bring honor to Arthur's court in this tale are Gawain's obedience and courtesy. This particular tale allows Gawain to emerge victorious from a series of courtesy tests, while Kay acts as the standard for what the Carl has come to know as "euyll-tvaght knyghttus" who are now no more than souvenir bones in the Carl's vast collection. Despite great provocation, Gawain is consistently polite and deferential to his rude and violent host. We also come to recognize that if and when Gawain succeeds, he not only proves himself worthy of Arthur's court, but he shows the true worth of that court as well. Even with Sir Kay's contemptible behavior, we are reassured through Gawain's performance that Arthur's court is growing stronger every day.

The knights' visit to the Carl's castle takes place as a result of a mist that has descended upon Gawain, Kay, and bishop Baldwin, who have been chasing a reindeer and are now lost, tired, and hungry. The forest represents the world beyond the Round Table and anything that occurs here concerning these men will also have repercussions within their court because their behavior is being scrutinized by all as representatives of the Round Table, and word will spread quickly if it is not up to the level it should be. Gawain suggests they lodge beneath a tree, but Kay begins to whine and fuss, and we are given our first

clue as to the very opposite natures of these two men. Due to the complaints of Kay, the men decide to seek another shelter, prompting the bishop to mention the Carl's castle. But he warns that the Carl is one of those keepers of castles who prove no easy host for their guests: "If his guest escape with his life, he will have done well." The exclusion of any human from one's roof was improper according to the rules of medieval hospitality and chivalric largesse. After bravery and loyalty, nothing was so greatly admired as lavish spending and hospitality. To shower money and gifts upon one's guests increased one's own prestige and raised one's status (Rudorff 108). It mattered little if the recipient of such treatment were stranger or acquaintance. All hosts should receive their guests with a well furnished table and give the departing guest whatever he may ask for. Harder notes that not only a feast but also accommodations for guests could contribute to a king's magnificence (60). We will observe Arthur as the perfect host in the <u>Alliterative Morte</u>, lodging his Roman guests in rooms with individual fireplaces and giving freely of all that he possessed:

> That they fynd na fawte of fude to thiere horsez,
> Nowthire weyne, ne waxe, he welthe in this erthe;
> Spare for no spycerye, bot spende what the lykys,
> That there be largesce one lofte, and no lake foundene;
> (160-63)

Judging by this code of hospitality, Gawain, Kay, and the bishop should have no trouble being invited into the Carl's castle, but as long as the host offers meals and gifts, further guidelines as to how a host must treat his guests are few. Kay declares that he will go to the Carl's hold and true to his traditional

character, boasts of what he will do to the Carl:

> Be the Carle neuer so bolde,
> I count hym not worthe an har
> And yeyf he be neuer so stovte,
> We woll hym bette all abowt
> And make his beggyng bar.
> Suche as he brewythe, seche schall he drenke,
> He schall be bette that he schall stynke
> And ayenst his wyll be thar. (155-162)

Fortunately for Arthur's court, Gawain is accompanying Kay and Baldwin to the castle, lest the reputation of the court be diminished through Kay's boorish talk and churlish manners.

Following the bragging of Kay, Gawain reprimands him for his intentions to cause trouble and mentions that he certainly "woll not geystyn ther magre ys," (164) then graciously prays that they soon find lodging and food. We learn soon enough from the Carl's porter that "My lorde can no corttessye," (193) and that no one escapes without receiving some sort of indignity. Despite Gawain's warning, Kay continues to exhibit disgraceful knightly behavior as he threatens the porter with violence if the porter fails to allow them entrance into the castle: "But thou wolt on our message gon, / The kyngus keyis woll we tane / And draw hem doun cleyn" (202-4). The porter's response makes clear that it is this type of boastful behavior from knights that has caused his master to lose faith in common courtesy and to begin collecting souvenir bones of transgressors: "Wyst my lorde your wordys grete, / Some your lyvvs ye schold forlete / Or ellus full fast to flen" (208-10). It is only because of Gawain who is so "fayr" and "comly" that the porter agrees to ask permission of the Carl.

Once inside the castle, unbeknownst to the three visitors, the Carl's testing has already begun. We meet the Thor-like Carl,[1] in full command of the four beasts lying at his feet, large in stature and demeanor, one who tends to eat and drink in excess. Because of his prejudice against knights, who he feels have no common decency, the Carl is pleasantly surprised when he meets Gawain, who has fallen to his knees in a bow of respect. Delighted that he may have a "knyght wylle" to whom he may administer his series of tests, he grants lodging to the men and bids Gawain to rise at once and join him in drink (perhaps having fun with the common custom of sharing a drink to seal a covenant, even though Gawain's party is unaware of their involvement in such a covenant). We will witness Gawain in a similar situation in <u>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</u> when he again will unknowingly be tested by a seemingly cordial host and will even share holiday festivities in sealing another agreed upon compact. In spite of the Carl's show of hospitality, he warns them that the only courtesy they shall have is Carl's courtesy. He has been a model of hospitality to this point, permitting strangers to lodge and presenting them with a fine meal. It is not long before the first of the Carl's common courtesy tests is initiated, and we are made witnesses to a taste of the Carl's unique courtesy.

The Carl's first test concerns courtesy as it applies to the treatment of animals. He has placed a little horse that is eating more than its share of the available grain with those of his guests. How each of the visitors deals with the situation will determine the extent of their punishment or reward. Unfortunately, the behavior of the bishop and Sir Kay reinforces the

Carl's view that Arthur's knights are ill-taught, and he intends to discipline them. When the bishop ventures outside to check his horse, he shoves the little foal aside and justifies his actions by using his position as a clergyman: "Thow schalt not be fello wytt my palfray / Whyll I am beschope in londe" (305-6). For the bishop's discourtesy, the Carl delivers a blow to him that sends him tumbling to the ground, but all the while the bishop accuses the Carl of his own impoliteness. If one act of rudeness were not enough, Kay's performance will justify the Carl's conviction that Arthur's knights are discourteous. Upon finding the Carl's horse, Kay drives it out of the stable with a blow to its back. Seeing Kay's indiscretion, the Carl applies the same punishment and vows to teach these men some of his courtesy before their stay is over. We begin to wonder just what may happen to the three guests if their rude behavior continues.

In the midst of a cruel rainstorm, Gawain now arrives at the testing ground. He not only reverses Kay's mistake by bringing the horse back into the stable out of the rain, but covers him and bids him to eat, all the while displaying the utmost appreciation to his host:

> "Stond vpe, fooll, and eette thy mette;
> We spend her that thy master dothe gett,
> Whyll that we her byne." (349-51)

With his first test successfully completed, the Carl graciously thanks Gawain in contradiction to the severe reprimands he earlier delivered to his other guests.

The second of the courtesy trials comes at the dinner table in the company of the Carl's lovely wife, who unlike her husband,

is "perfette" of courtesy. Before the meal even begins, the sharp contrast between Kay and Gawain once again becomes obvious. Kay immediately longs for the Carl's beautiful wife and wonders what a lady like this is doing being wasted on a churl like the Carl. The Carl, sensing Kay's fantasy, again must scold Kay, bidding him to eat his food and to quit thinking more than he would ever dare speak. Meanwhile, the considerate Gawain is still standing, waiting for the Carl's permission to dine. Amazed at Gawain's continued obedience, the Carl presents him with yet another test, similar to the medieval beheading games. He bids Gawain to hit him in the face with an arrow. Without hesitation, Gawain obeys his host, who successfully dodges the arrow, which splinters on the wall behind him. In another gesture that suggests Gawain is having a definite effect on the Carl, he takes Gawain by the hand, earnestly admits, "Gentyll knyght, thou hast well doune" (401) and orders a chair to be brought for him. Machann believes that Gawain has just passed what critics traditionally call the beheading game, even if there is not an actual beheading:

> . . .the beheading scene actually appears in The Carle off Carlile while it does not in Syr Gawene and the Carl of Carelyle. However, Syre Gawene and the Carl of Carelyle includes an analogous scene which I recorded. . .as one of Gawain's "tests"; the one in which the Carl instructs Gawain to throw the spear at him with all his might. (633)

Now Gawain has only one test left to encounter--the chastity or temptation trial.

During the meal, Gawain, it seems, has already begun to fall in love with the Carl's wife, but unlike Sir Kay, he is ashamed

of his thoughts when the Carl reassures him that "synn ys swete," but that he should keep his mind on the food because "her thou schalt nott geytt" (414). The Carl's daughter is brought in to entertain the group with the music of her harp and in anticipation of the final temptation test, the Carl asks for songs "Of love and of Artorrus armus amonge, / How they togeydor mett" (437-8). When night falls, Gawain is led to the Carl's chamber where the Carl commands Gawain to embrace and kiss his wife in his presence. Even if it means that he will eventually be killed for having consented, Gawain agrees to do as his host requests:

> "Syr, thi byddynge schall be doune,
> Sertaynly in dede,
> Kyll or sley or laye adoune." (458-60)

However, Gawain finds himself enjoying the lady's favors so much that he attempts to make their relationship more intimate, where on the Carl quickly removes his wife from the bed and substitutes his daughter in appreciation for Gawain's obedience. The next morning, the Carl confesses his intentions to kill any visitor who would not obey his commands, and shows Gawain a room containing his collection of the bones of those who failed his tests. The Carl, having acquired great respect for Gawain through his compliance, acknowledges his transgressions and decides to amend them:

> Nowe wulle I forsake my wyckyd lawys;
> Ther schall no mo men her be slawe, iwys,
> As ferth forthe as I may.
> Gawen, for the love of the
> Al schal be welcome to me
> That comythe here by this way. (541-45)

In the later version of this tale, Carle off Carlyle, Gawain actually beheads the Carl and in an act of disenchantment breaks a spell which had hitherto been the cause of the Carl's brutal behavior. In both versions, Gawain's willingness to do his host's bidding has succeeded in converting a vindictive murderer into a decent, courteous man. Gawain will be involved in yet another conversion as he will release the hideous Dame Ragnell from a spell by his kiss and perfect response in The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell. At the end of Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlyle the Carl continues as the perfect host, presenting gifts to Kay and Baldwin and offering his daughter to Gawain. In typical fashion, their adventure now completed, Gawain, Kay, and Baldwin return to Arthur's court with an invitation from the Carl that Arthur soon be his dinner guest.

Arthur's arrival at the Carl's castle allow us our first glimpse of the "new" Carl. He graciously kneels to greet the King (in imitation of Gawain's initial greeting at his castle) and leads him to a lavishly set dinner table. Impressed by this show of courtesy, Arthur dubs the Carl a knight of the Round Table and makes him a lord of Carlyle. Later Gawain marries the Carl's daughter, and the Carl builds an abbey to commemorate Our Lady and the conversion of his old ways.

So it is through Gawain's exemplary behavior that the Round Table prospers. The Carl regains faith in the courtesy of men and the nobility of Arthur's court, so much so that he is honored to become one himself. Arthur's court is ennobled by the addition of another man who is so earnestly concerned with courtesy, and

Gawain continues to prove himself worthy of the Round Table and worthy of his reputation for "olde curteisye" which Chaucer in his Squire's Tale made so famous.

Chapter Two

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

After contributing to the Round Table's success by his exemplary behavior in Carl of Carlyle, Gawain will again mirror his court's prosperity in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. In this adventure, however, Gawain will actually substitute himself for his king in taking up a challenge from a green knight. This substitution is no new idea, as Clinton Machann points out. He notes the frequency with which Gawain functions as the agent of Arthur in medieval romances, especially when an antagonist from the outside world penetrates the world of Arthur's court. In such roles as Arthur's replacement, Gawain is usually able to meet the proposed challenge and in the end bring a new equilibrium to the two orders (631). He may even bring the original antagonist within the sphere of Arthur's court as we saw him do with the Carl and will see again in The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell.

Though criticism of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is plentiful, few critics have chosen to investigate the influence of Gawain's adventure with the Green Knight on the Round Table. In this romance, Gawain is a member of Arthur's court, but his adventures carry him away from it, and no matter how much a part of the Round Table is with him in spirit, Gawain is alone. John Stevens makes special mention of the loneliness of the hero

in general and how it differs between the heroes of romances and epics. A hero of romance, the individualist like Gawain in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, survives and returns to the community to which he belongs, while the epic hero (as we will witness in the Alliterative Morte) characteristically dies. But even when the epic hero is alone, the last fighter on the field, we feel the sense of community behind him (Stevens 72). The end of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight subtly demonstrates this loneliness. Just as he is alone at the times of his greatest hardships, the harsh wintry journey, his dealing in Bertilak's castle, and his encounter at the Green Chapel, so at the end of the poem will Gawain be alone with his shame. Through what I see as a misinterpretation of Gawain's wearing of the green, his fellow knights insist on wearing bands of green as representative badges of honor. As a result, Gawain, in uncharacteristic fashion, brings honor to the Round Table in defeat. Rather than through victory on the battlefield or through the exhibition of courteous behavior (which appear as early indicators of his success), Gawain's earnest expression of shame and honest humility saves Arthur's court from the dishonor intended by the scheming plot of Morgan le Fay and, in fact, furthers the court's reputation, which is so often in question throughout the poem. Furthermore, his safe return to the court sparks a renewed brotherhood within the Round Table through the knights' act of unity and compassion.

The first of four fitts opens with a declaration of the indestructability and perpetual strength of Arthur's court.

Arthur's kingdom is placed in history as one of the reincarnations of Troy. In Arthur's realm, happiness and hardship--like the seasons--have frequently alternated. One wonders which of the two this particular adventure will bring. We are assured, however, that despite the disparities, at the time of this adventure the pendulum has swung up, and Arthur's court is now experiencing a period of strength and renown:

> Bot of alle þat here bult, of Bretaygne kynges,
> Ay watz Arthur þe hendest, as I haf herde telle. (25-6)

It seems only appropriate, then, that following the inclusion of Arthur's court in the long, successful history of Britain, the author directs our attention to a scene in Arthur's court in which the merriment of the holiday season abounds and worries about defeat are few. According to Wells' Manual of Writings in Middle English, this scene emphasizes the joyous life indoors and so serves as a sharp contrast to the forthcoming bitter hardships of the lonely hero Gawain in his search for the Green Chapel (57). Because the knights are a reflection of their court, it is entirely suitable that some lines in the poem be devoted to a flattering description of these members of the powerful kingdom of Arthur:

> With mony luflych lorde, ledez of þe best,
> Rekenly of þe Rounde Table alle þo rich breþer,
> With rych reuel oryȝt and rechles merþes.
> Þer tournayed tulkes by tymez ful mony,
> Justed ful jolile þise gentyle kniȝtes. . .
>
> Þe most kyd knyȝtez vnder Krystes seluen,
> And þe louelokkest ladies þat euer lif haden,
> And he þe comlokest kyng þat þe court haldes;
> For al watz þis fayre folk in her first age,

on sille,
þe hapnest vnder heuen,
Kyng hyȝest mon of wylle;
Hit were now gret nye to neuen
So hardy a here on hille. (38-42, 51-59)

Now assured of the well-deserved reputation of the Round Table, we anticipate the impending events which will undoubtedly place the high repute of these knights on trial.

At the New Year's feast, Arthur waits until all are served before he will eat and even then refuses to commence eating until "sum mayn meruayle" occurs. At these words, in bursts a green horse upon which sits a huge green man who demands to speak to King Arthur, all the while perusing the members of the court that he has obviously heard so much about:

þe fyrst word þat he warp, 'Wher is,' he sayd,
þe gouernour of þis gyng? Gladly I wolde
Se þat segg in syȝt, and with hymself speke
raysoun.'
To knyȝtez he kest his yȝe,
And reled hym vp and doun;
He stemmed, and con studie
Quo walt þer most renoun. (224-231)

But the Round Table is still, whether from fear of this monstrous intruder or merely from amazement at the sight of such a marvel. The author does not make clear the cause of their "swoghe sylence," but, perhaps hoping to defend their reputation, suggests it might be partly due to the magic of it all and partly to courtesy, but certainly not to fear (246-7). Nevertheless, Arthur eventually introduces himself and courteously inquires about the Green Knight's intentions. He responds with a speech that not only stresses the Round Table's renown but which partially

reveals his involvement in Morgan le Fay's scheme to test the honor of this court and hopefully to diminish it:

> To wone any quyle in þis won, hit watz not myn ernde;
> Bot for þe los of þe, lede, is lyft vp so hyʒe,
> And þy burʒ and þy burnes best ar holden,
> Stifest vnder stel-gere on stedes to ryde,
> Þe wyʒtest and e 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. (257-264)

After proposing his Christmas challenge, the Green Knight then boasts of his superiority over the Round Table; "Here is no mon me to mach, for my tez so wayke" and insults them with names like "berdlez chylder." Worse yet, when no knights come forward to accept his proposal, he taunts them with cowardice and jokes that he certainly must be in the wrong castle, "What, is is Ar ures hous. . . at al e rous rennes of ur ryalmes so mony?" (309-10). He continues to badger the court (as he will heckle Gawain later), amazed that his words alone should overthrow such a mighty kingdom:

> Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
> Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?
> Now is þe reuel and þe renoun of þe Rounde Table
> Ouerwalt wyth a worde of on wyʒes speche. . . . (311-314)

Arthur is greatly offended by the Green Knight's harsh words and leaps forward to take up the challenge for himself, hoping to reassure the Green Knight that of his mute court he knows "no gome þat is gast of þy grete wordes" (325). Fortunately, Gawain intervenes to save face for the court and in doing so displays in his speech and manners all of the attributes of knightly courtesy. In accepting the challenge of the Green

Knight, from which all other knights shrank, Gawain does only what is expected of any hero of medieval romance, according to Roger Loomis (161). What is noteworthy is his manner of accepting it. Traditionally courteous in speech, Gawain is exaggeratedly so in his request to Arthur to be allowed to accept the challenge, for Arthur's prestige has suffered from the insulting behavior of the Green Knight. Gawain's first task is to substitute himself for Arthur as the Green Knight's opponent. As a surrogate for Arthur, he must uphold the same standards of chivalry expected from a king of Arthur's high standing. Only in this text and in The Wedding is Gawain's replacement of Arthur so obvious. He is not merely a reflection of his king, but a direct representative. Thus, such a substitution is an important and delicate matter, and he must complete it without offending anyone. He must not leave abruptly the Queen's side unless the King commands him to and the Queen is willing. So, Gawain begs the King to command him to rise: "Wolde ȝe, worþilych lorde. . . Bid me boȝe fro þis benche" (343-4) and does not merely ask permission of the Queen, but hopes that she will not be displeased if he rises: "And þat my legge lady lyked not ille" (346). Once on his feet, Gawain must (as mirror of his court) uphold the reputation of the Round Table without appearing to claim superiority over them, for he is but one of many great men. Even more delicately, he must not imply that the King needs help, nor allow it to appear that such a thought ever crossed his mind. Still conscious of his role as a reflection of the court, Gawain must leave the King a dignified way out of

an embarrassing situation, while attributing all of his merit to the King. Finally, he must apologize if his response has been anything but courteous, while absolving the rest of the court from any blame for his rude behavior. All this, Gawain successfully accomplishes in ten short lines:

> Þaȝ ȝe ȝourself be talenttyf, to take hit to yourseluen,
> Whil mony so bolde yow aboute vpon bench sytten,
> Þat vnder heuen I hope non haȝerer of wylle,
> Ne better bodyes on bent þer baret is rered.
> I am þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest,
> And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes þe soþe--
> Bot for as much as ȝe ar myn em I am only to prayse,
> No bounte bot your blod I in my bode knowe;
> And syþen þis note is so nys þat noȝt hit yow falles,
> And I haue frayned hit at yow fyrst, foldez hit to me;
> And if I carp not comlyly, let alle þis cort rych
> bout blame. (350-60)

Granted the opportunity to oppose the Green Knight, Gawain requests a restatement of the conditions of the agreement, the "Beheading Game," which calls for him to behead the Green Knight and one year later at the Green Chapel to be dealt a similar blow. Then, what seems to be nothing more than another chivalric game in keeping with the holiday merriment turns into an eerie version of the traditional Beheading Game. Gawain cleanly strikes off the Green Knight's head, and after the head is knocked about by feet as it rolls on the floor, the Green Knight picks it up, its eyes still glaring at the company, tugs at his reins, and rushes out of Arthur's court while all look on amazed.

At the beginning of this poem, we are led to expect just another one of Arthur's adventures (27-29), but with such an intriguing first fitt, this poem seems to be much more. _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ is, indeed, unique because in no

other Arthurian story is a knight defeated while still bringing such glory and unity to his kingdom. Gawain has already been given two chances to win glory for Arthur's court, once in battle and once in his presentation of courtesy. He does successfully rescue the King and court from humiliation at the hands of the Green Knight, but what appears to be a victorious beheading blow turns not to defeat but certainly not to triumph as a result of the Green Knight's magical powers. A year hence what glory will Gawain bring back to his court? Or will he bring glory at all? The author makes clear that Gawain will be passing into a mysterious and as yet unknown world, beyond the security of the Round Table in which the traditional means to glory, courtesy and valor in battle, may no longer be enough. In fact, these traditional virtues are used as weapons by Gawain's testers in hopes that his virtues may contribute to his demise.

The second fitt consists of Gawain's preparation for his journey, the actual trip, and his eventual arrival at the castle of Bertilak de Hautdesert, who Gawain will later find is the Green Knight himself. After a beautifully described passing of the seasons and a lengthy step-by-step arming of this hero, Gawain's journey is about to commence, but not before further adulation of his greatness and mournful salutations from the court. The court is obviously concerned that such a worthy knight should be made to suffer such a grievous blow, but their worries seem to go far beyond that. They, strangely, are already worried about how they will replace Gawain, seeming to have lost all faith in his abilities:

> Carande for þat comly: 'Bi Kryst, hit is scaþe
> þat þou, leude, schal be lost, þat art of lyf noble!
> To fynde hys fere vpon folde, in fayth, is not eþe. (674-6)

This visibly doubtful and fatalistic attitude of the court, however, causes overwhelming displays of love and respect for Gawain, seen most movingly by the passage in which Arthur is moved to tears at Gawain's departure, "Wel much watz þe warme water þat waltered of yȝen, / When þat semly syre soȝt fro þo wonez þad daye" (684-5).

With Gawain finally on the road and beyond the boundaries of Arthur's court, it is interesting to note which chivalric concepts are emphasized, which reduced in importance. If, indeed, valor in battle and courtesy will no longer serve to bring Gawain glory and to help him survive, it is only natural that descriptions of such acts be minimized. The author jests about the creatures Gawain encounters on his journey, including serpents, wood trolls, and giants; but it would be too "tore" (tedious) to tell a tenth of them. Besides, fighting with giants and trolls was not so bad as the brutal winter weather. Nearly frozen, Gawain prays to find lodging soon and just as in _Carl of Carlyle_ his prayers are immediately answered when he comes upon "a castel þe comlokest þat euer knyȝt aȝte" (767). The porter and those accompanying him instantly recognize Gawain and grant him lodging, while kneeling "doun on her knes vpon þe cold erþe / To welcum þis ilk wyȝ as worþy hom þoȝt" (818-9). If members of a court reflect their leader, it appears that Gawain is in for a delightful stay. Upon first meeting of his host, Gawain is graciously greeted and it seems for now that

this theory holds true: "And wel hym semed, for soþe, as þe segge þuȝt, / To lede a lortschyp in lee of leudez ful gode" (848-9). But this is no ordinary court and certainly no ordinary host, though Gawain is ignorant of any sort of wrongdoings. As it is again the holiday season, we are treated to further descriptions of feasting and merriment, all supervised by the seemingly perfect host. The court knows their guest is Gawain and while acknowledging his reputation, so reveal to us their expectations of the man they call "þat fyne fader of nurture" (919):

> Þat alle prys and prowes and pured þewes
> Apendes to hys persoun, and praysed is euer;
> Byfore alle men vpon molde his mensk is þe most. (912-914)

The court expects to learn much about knightly behavior, and in particular "luf-talkyng," but they act as if they are just grateful that God has granted them the privilege of being in Gawain's presence. Gawain does not have to do much to impress these people; they are already convinced of his greatness. But little does Gawain know that his courtesy and knightly behavior alone will not assure him victory.

Once again a court's behavior mirrors that of its leader as our host admits to his privileged position and the honor that will be gained by entertaining such a guest: "Iwysse sir, quyl I leue, me worþez þe better / Þat Gawayn hatz ben my gest at Goddez awen fest" (1035-6). Gawain again responds in the perfect manner, both as a knight and as a guest, vowing to do whatever the host requests while expressing the utmost appreciation:

Al þe honour is your awen--þe heȝe kyng yow ȝelde!
And I am wyȝe at your wylle to worch youre hest,
As I am halden þerto, in hyȝe and in loȝe,
bi riȝt. (1038-41)

Before excusing themselves for the night, especially before leaving the side of the host's wife, whom Gawain has already taken a liking to and who will play a major role in determining Gawain's fate, the host suggests an innocent compact, a three-day exchange of winnings. He will go out hunting, while Gawain stays inside the cozy castle, and at the end of each day anything that is won must be given to the other. Gawain unsuspectingly agrees, thus setting in motion the scheme of Morgan le Fay, which proposes to use Gawain's own virtues of courtesy, bravery, and valor in battle against him to bring about some misdeed or wrongdoing, ultimately resulting in the tarnished reputation of both Gawain and the Round Table.

The three temptation and hunting scenes of the following days appear to be merely extended digressions both for the reader and for Gawain who are anticipating his encounter at the Green Chapel. Although neither Gawain nor the audience find out until nearly the end of the poem, the seemingly lighthearted confrontations with the lady of the castle constitute an even greater test than the Beheading Game. What Gawain undergoes on the three mornings at the castle is an attack on his chivalric virtues, his glorified reputation, and his station as a member of the Round Table. The purpose of the elaborate description of Gawain's shield and of the even more elaborate explanation of the significance of the pentangle painted on his shield is

to emphasize his dedication to chivalric virtue. Though critics rarely ever totally agree on a subject, the symbolism of the shield and pentangle are much more universally accepted than what the lady's temptations are supposed to be testing. A. C. Spearing contends that the contest between Gawain and the lady is primarily a test of chastity (35). B. J. Whiting contests this, stating, "The test is not of Gawain's chastity, but of his honor and in Gawain's case, as in medieval romances generally, the two virtues are distinct" (203). In a more recent critical study, J. A. Burrow argues that the lady is not testing Gawain's chastity, but his fidelity to the pledged word, or trawþe. In Arthurian literature in general, Gawain's reputation is not for chastity. In fact, he more frequently is known for his promiscuity, most accurately summarized by Whiting:

> Gawain is the casual, good natured and well mannered wooer of almost any available girl. If she acquiesces, good; if not, there is sure to be another pavilion or castle not far ahead. (203)

What appears to be at stake is Gawain's reputation as the 'casual, good-natured and well mannered wooer,' not merely his courtly conversation but his courteous bedside manner as well. The scheme of the lady is to show how Gawain's virtue of courtesy can be used against him, a subtle parallel to the similar use made of Gawain's excellence in battle by the lady's husband.

When the lady visits Gawain in his bedroom the first morning while her husband is out hunting, Gawain hides his embarrassment and surprise by pretending to be asleep, all the while looking out from behind the bed curtain. It is important

to remember that Gawain has already met the lady and he, who "lappez her a lyttel in armes" when they first meet, finds her quite desirable. The lady seems to be at an advantage here because in addition to her looks and charm, she has already seen Gawain exhibit some emotional response towards her. The lady, like the Green Knight when he challenged Arthur's knights at the start of the poem, begins by flattering Gawain with a tribute to his grand reputation:

> Þat alle þe worlde worchipez quere-so ȝe ride;
> Your honour, your hendelayk is hendely praysed
> With lordez, wyth ladyes, with alle þat lyf bere.
> (1227-29)

She then offers him her "cors" (an ambiguous word that may mean her body or merely herself and her companionship) for his "awen won to wale" (1238), but Gawain replies that he is unworthy of such an offering. However, he will be more than glad to be at her service, to be her knight. Following the pattern of the Green Knight in his initial visit to Arthur's court, the lady then questions Gawain's true identity, "Bot þat ȝe be Gawen, hit gotz in mynde" (1293). He is quick to ask why, sincerely concerned that he has been discourteous in speech and has already tainted his reputation and thus the reputation of the Round Table. She praises his restraint, but suggests he must have at least desired a kiss. Gawain agrees to a kiss "as a knyȝt fallez" and upon meeting with the host to exchange winnings, promptly and graciously trades the kiss for a deer--the hunter's prize.

In the visit of the following morning, the lady includes much of the same speech, ever appealing to Gawain's sense of

pride and vanity. Upon entering the room, she unhesitantly sits on the edge of Gawain's bed, smiles, and continues her barrage of compliments. She also continues to question Gawain's knowledge of courtly behavior, probably hoping to cause a mistake through her repeated surprise interrogations. She reminds Gawain that he is ignoring knightly courtesy by not immediately begging a kiss from her, to which Gawain responds by feigning to fear rejection, "If I were werned, I were wrang, iwysse, ȝif I profered" (1494). With this, the lady gains her first kiss of the day and is eager to collect more. Once again she pays homage to his fame, but in a twist of strategy she expresses her expectations of Gawain (1512-17), primarily to let him know that if he does not fulfill them, she will be offended. She goes so far as to accuse Gawain of judging her too ignorant either to understand or to learn courtly conversation. But once again the lady's attempt to challenge Gawain's courtesy is foiled by Gawain himself, whose ability to speak courteously while defending himself is not to be denied. He grants her a farewell kiss and upon receipt of the host's captured boar, "hendely hym kysses, / And eftersones of þe same he serued hym þere" (1639-40). After dinner and fireside conversation, the host proposes the same terms for the third exchange of winnings and cleverly hints to the importance of this final day, not only in reference to the keeping of their compact but to Gawain's unrelenting courtesy, "For I haf fraysted þe twys, and faythful I fynde þe. / Now þrid tyme þrowe best. . ." (1679-80). This final day is crucial, for up until this point, the plot of Morgan le Fay has yet to diminish in any way the reputation of

Gawain and his court, but rather has attested to its greatness.

On the last day at the castle, we switch suddenly from a fox-hunting scene to a scene at the castle, where for the first time we see the lady not as she enters the room but as she prepares to go to Gawain. Much is made of her provocative dress and the restless night she has had. These details further emphasize the importance of this third visit. She wears a full-length robe trimmed in fur, an elegant "tressour" with "hir þrote þrowen al naked, / Her brest bare bifore, and bihinde eke" (1740-1). According to the poet, the lady has lost sleep worrying over this last visit: "Bot þe lady for luf let not to slepe, / Ne þe purpose to payre þat pyȝt in hir hert" (1733-4). Gawain, too, has had an uneasy night and as the lady dramatically enters the room is having a nightmare in anticipation of his meeting with the Green Knight. Thus when he awakes, he is pleased to find a lovely woman in his presence rather than the monstrous green man and reacts to her presence with more warmth than he had the previous two visits and much more than he ever intended. Taking advantage of Gawain's cordial reception, she presses so physically close to Gawain that he must quickly decide to "oþer lach þer hir luf, oþer lodly refuse" (1772). He decides that he must remain true to his host (in stark contrast to his advances with the Carl's wife) and must maintain his courtesy:

> He cared for cortaysye, lest craþayn he were,
> And more for his meschef ȝif he schulde make synne,
> And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde aȝt. (1773-75)

Such a decision did prevent his ruin temporarily, until the lady, playing the broken-hearted maiden, asks Gawain for some sort of remembrance or gift, a request that Gawain cannot fulfill since he has "no men wyth no malez with menskful þingez" (1809). Expecting a refusal, the lady, according to plan, offers both an elegant ring and a simple belt, knowing that this modest knight might be convinced to accept a thing "vnworti" (1835) over a magnificent piece of jewelry. The lady explains that the girdle is magical because when anyone wears it around his waist "þer is no haþel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myȝt" (1853). Haunted by the previous night's dreams and by his memories of the Green Knight, who miraculously survived his own beheading blow, Gawain decides that this belt is just what he needs to survive the task to which he has been assigned. Perhaps he can bring glory to the Round Table after all, despite already being considered dead by most of them.

Unmindful of the lady's intent, Gawain accepts the girdle on the condition that he will keep her gift a secret from her husband: ". . .þe leude hym acordez / þat neuer wyȝe schulde hit wyt, iwysse, bot þay twayne / for noȝte" (1863-65). He also accepts three kisses which he thinks will allow him adequately to fulfill the third day's exchange with the host. As yet unaware of and unconcerned about the significance of the day's events, Gawain searches for a priest who will hear his confession and "lern hym better / How his sawle schulde be saued when he schuld seye heþen" (1878-9). He believes that he has upheld his reputation for courtesy and that now his only task is to defend his reputation for bravery in battle. Since

he will be guarded from physical harm by the magic girdle, his only concern is for his spiritual safety. Once the host returns from his hunt, Gawain eagerly approaches him in order to complete their agreement so he can begin to concentrate on tomorrow's duty. He embraces the host and kisses him three times as best he knows how. He assures the host of the complete surrender of his winnings with a sentence that masks the secret he must not reveal: "As is pertly payed þe chepez þat I aȝte" (1941). The agreement having been concluded, the two men indulge in mirth, merriment, and celebration.

On retiring for the evening, Gawain is treated to a farewell that is curiously similar to the one he received when leaving his own court. He thanks every court member he comes in contact with for their hospitality while "þay bikende hym to Kryst with ful colde sykyngez" (1982). The host vows to assign a servant of his to put Gawain on the right road to the Green Chapel, and with that the company departs in preparation for the following day's activities. The next morning at daybreak Gawain rides forth and comes to the Green Chapel, which is more of a desolate cave or natural hollow than a sacred shrine. The Green Knight appears, armed with his axe, and bids Gawain kneel to receive his blow. He reminds Gawain that there is no one to interrupt or separate them, reaffirming that Gawain must fend for himself and that his own virtues of valor and bravery in battle are what are being used to test him. Conscious of this, Gawain must appear undaunted no matter how fearful he really is:

He lened with þe nek, and lutte
And schewed þat schyre al bare,
And lette as he noȝt dutte;
For drede he wolde not dare. (2255-2258)

As the axe descends, Gawain instinctively flinches and is rebuked for his cowardice by the Green Knight, who tells him he cannot be Gawain. It appears to be true that the knight reflects his court for this is exactly the occurrence we witnessed in the Green Knight's visit to Arthur's castle. In that scene, Arthur blushed for shame and embarrassment when none of his knights immediately stepped forward to accept the Green Knight's proposal. The Green Knight then questioned whether he was in the right castle, the castle of the powerful Arthur and his Round Table. Hence, if the Green Knight can cause Gawain to appear foolishly or cowardly, he will succeed in placing blame on the Round Table as well. Having learned from the first feint, Gawain stands still as a stone, but the axe does not strike him. He becomes angry with the Green Knight, and implores a quick ending to the whole affair. The third time, the knight strikes him, inflicting a slight cut on the neck, after which Gawain promptly springs to his feet, draws his sword, and announces that he has stood his blow and that the compact is now at an end. At this point, the Green Knight reveals himself as the host, fully cognizant of his wife's dealings and of Gawain's failure to hand over the green belt. He explains that his three strokes equalled the three trials of his guest's courtesy and obedience and that he has undertaken this test of Gawain's valor with the help of Morgan le Fay to vex Guinevere by shaming the knights of the Round Table. His

duty was to "assay þe surquidre" (2457) and "to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe" (2460). By showing the weaknesses of one of the Round Table's greatest knights, this plot would also reveal the frailities of that court.

Gawain's reaction to this revelation is in keeping with his role as a mirror of his king. Just as the King blushed in shame for the Green Knight's tauntings, Gawain does also: "Alle the blode of his brest blende in his face / þat al he schrank for schome þat þe schalk talked" (2371-2). Gawain, in perhaps his greatest test, curses the belt which he abruptly unties. More importantly, in an act of humility, Gawain admits his wrongdoing and confesses his fear of being associated with vice rather than virtue:

> For care of þy knokke cowardyse me taȝt
> To acorde me with couetyse, my kynde to forsake,
> þat is larges and lewte þat longez to knyȝtez.
> Now am I fawty and falce, and ferde haf bēn euer
> Of trecherye and untrawþe: boþe bityde sorȝe
> and care! (2379-84)

After Gawain curses himself for his cowardice and covetousness, the Green Knight says his full acknowledgement of his fault has absolved him. Thus, the Green Knight's judgment on Gawain is more lenient than Gawain's judgment on himself. Gawain feels not only shame, but anger and bitterness as well because he truly believes he has failed to uphold the chivalric standards that he accepted when he agreed to substitute himself for Arthur.

Contrary to Gawain's own thoughts of failure and despite failing a little in loyalty as the Green Knight says (2366), Gawain remains an exemplary figure and causes little, if any,

embarrassment to his court. By all human standards his bravery is unimpaired; so are his chastity, courtesy, and loyalty. We believe in Gawain's courtesy even more readily after his self-condemnation. We gain even more respect for Gawain because we see he is human as well as being a reputable knight. Laura Loomis notes that Gawain's confession of breaking his word in order to save his life reveals a deep sense of man's responsibility for his every act, no matter how deadly the betraying circumstances (298). Gawain emerges from the succession of tests as close to being the perfect knight as is humanly possible. Gawain is human, and human nature is imperfect. What human is not concerned with his own destruction and self-preservation?

Gawain henceforth returns to Arthur's court unlike other Arthurian heroes, not in conventional glory but in self-confessed shame. He appears wearing the green girdle as a baldric in memory of his transgression, telling the whole story, concealing nothing:

> Þe nirt in þe nek he naked hem schewed
> Þat he laȝt for his vnleute at þe leudes hondes
> for blame.
> He t ned quen he schulde telle,
> He groned for gref and grame,
> Þe blod in his face con melle,
> When he hit schulde schewe, for schame. (2498-2504)

He then explains the significance of the belt he is wearing:

> Of couardise and couetyse þat I haf caȝt þare;
> Þis is þe token of vntrawþe þat I am tan inne,
> And I mot hedez hit were wyle I may last; (2508-10)

The entire court decides that they will each wear a green lace, not to share in Gawain's shame, but to display their pride and

delight at Gawain's safe return. It does not seem that Arthur or his other knights realize how trying Gawain's journey has been. They are just glad he is back, and because he is back and the Green Knight has disappeared, they assume Gawain must have successfully defended their reputation and that he is merely being modest. The author does not question this, ending the poem as he began by placing Arthur's court in the company of the greats of Britain. Gawain, despite his defeat, still manages to bring honor to the Round Table. It is, however, Gawain's shame and humility, not courtesy or valor in battle, that permits his safe return and allows the court to achieve a higher nobility by their act of compassion and brotherhood in agreeing to wear the green laces.

Gawain has again proven that the victories and failures of a knight are reflected in the state of his kingdom and court, but in this case, he also shows that a sincere repentance can be even more virtuous than perfect obedience. Gawain not only makes an impression by foiling an attempt to diminish the Round Table's good standing, but he does so by substituting himself for the King, a truly enormous responsibility to sustain under such testing circumstances. Gawain will reappear in this role as Arthur's stand-in in The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell in which he will again be defending Arthur's reputation and will be protecting Arthur's life as well.

Chapter Three

The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell

Thus far, we have seen Gawain, in his role as a knight and member of the Round Table, have a definite effect on the state of that Round Table through the outcomes of his individual adventures. He has strengthened the position of Arthur's court not only by representing perfect knightly behavior in Carl of Carlyle, but also through his humility and shame as he experienced defeat at the hands of the Green Knight. Gawain will again act as a surrogate for Arthur rather than mirroring the court by his deeds as an individual knight. Contrary to Arthur's traditional portrayal as a strong, confident, leader of men, in The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell we witness a strangely insecure and convenant-breaking Arthur who confides in Gawain alone and who relies heavily on Gawain not only to save his life but to save the reputation of his court as well. In a story whose hero is really Gawain, it seems strange that the poet devotes the opening fifteen lines to avowing the greatness of Arthur, only to see him be shown up by one of his own knights, thus causing the King to appear foolish and weak. A modern reader may sense first that the poet has more respect for Gawain than for Arthur and that the King is selfish enough to foist his personal duties off on his nephew and best friend. However, if we look at Gawain as Arthur's surrogate or substitute, there

is in consequence nothing to demean or diminish the good name of Arthur, as Gawain is obedient, loyal, and trustworthy despite being involved in the same situation that puts Arthur on the verge of suicide. The Wedding relates how a huge stranger challenges Arthur and will have his life unless he can tell him in one year what women desire most. While searching for answers, the King meets a hag who will tell him the correct answer if Gawain agrees to marry her. Gawain consents, and the King escapes the penalty of death. Gawain is wed to the loathly hag who is then freed from enchantment by his kiss and his offer of sovereignty and thus becomes radiantly young and beautiful.

For a piece of literature that contains such interesting and, in my opinion, unique subject matter, this 855-line poem rarely receives critical attention. This may be due to its similarity to other greater known forms of this narrative, such as "The Wife of Bath's Tale" in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and Bower's "Tale of Florent" in his Confessio Amantis. Nevertheless, the unconventional portrayal of Arthur, the significance of typical chivalric concepts like trawthe and courtesy, and the role of Gawain as Arthur's replacement justify a critical evaluation.

As briefly mentioned in the preceeding paragraph, the opening lines of this poem are dedicated to the glory and honor of the great King Arthur as we are led to expect another exciting adventure and victory from the powerful king. We hardly expect from such a glorious introduction to see this exalted figure breaking vows of secrecy and questioning his own ability to solve problems. Though Arthur's reputation is the focus of

these initial lines, credence is also given to the excellence of his kingdom:

> Lithe and listenithe the lif of a lord riche,
> The while that he livid was none him liche,
> Nether in boure ne in halle;
> In the time of Arthoure this adventure betid,
> And of the great adventure that he himself did,
> That King curteis and royalle.
> Of alle kinges Arture berithe the flowir,
> And of alle knightod he bare away the honour,
> Where-so-evere he went.
> In his contrey was nothing but chivalry
> And knightes were belovid by that doughty,
> For cowardes were everemore shent. (1-12)

It will soon become apparent that although we will be witnessing one of Arthur's adventures, the person to appear 'curteis and royalle' will not be the King, but Gawain. And though more lines are devoted to the adoration of Arthur, the knights of his chivalric court prove that they deserve equal attention and admiration.

As in so many Arthurian tales, the action of Wedding opens with a hunting expedition by Arthur. He departs from his company to pursue a tremendous hart. After cleverly stalking the beast, Arthur, aided by the grace of God, fells him. Presently he meets a stranger named Sir Gromer Somer Joure who claims, "Thou hast gevin my landes in certain / With great wrong unto Sir Gawen" (58-9), and says he intends to kill Arthur unless he solves the dilemma which is to find out within a year what women desire most. Fearing for his life like Gawain in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Arthur threatens the knight with the consequences of such rash behavior:

If thou slee me nowe in this case,
Alle knightes wolle refuse thee in every place,
That shame shalle nevere thee fro; (67-69)

Perhaps such a reaction is merely instinctive, but we do not expect such defensiveness and insecurity from the great King Arthur, especially since he is alone with Sir Gromer and no mention has yet been made of the presence of any weaponry. This is hardly the bravery and valor in confrontation that we saw Gawain display while opposing the Green Knight. And a king is supposed to appear mightier than those in his court?

Arthur proceeds to seal a compact with the stranger. He will search for the answer to the question and at the end of twelve months will return alone, with "nouther frende ne freind" (96), only a correct answer saving his head. Lastly, Arthur promises not to deceive the stranger, and to keep the entire challenge a secret. Arthur's strong response to the stranger who dares to suggest that the King is capable of such a falsehood, emphasizes Arthur's eventual breaking of his vow:

. . .that may not be;
Untrewe knighte shalt thou nevere finde me;
To dye yet were me lever. (115-117)

The men depart after agreeing to meet on the appointed day, and Arthur quickly returns to his companions. It is evident to the others by Arthur's "hevy chere" that he has experienced some sort of disturbance, but he makes no mention of anything, choosing to maintain his melancholy mood.

The first appearance of Gawain is marked with the courtesy and loyalty that will prove to save the King and thus the court

from destruction. Gawain is genuinely concerned about the condition and welfare of his king, urging him to disclose his worries, while vowing the utmost confidence:

> Nay, drede you not, lord, by Mary flower,
> I am not that man that wold you dishonour
> Nother by evin ne by moron. (149-151)

Despite warning Gawain that he is forsworn to the stranger and must not betray him, Arthur unhesitantly breaks the vow of secrecy, showing the implicit trust he places in Gawain but raising questions in the audience's mind as to the priorities of Arthur. As the one who should set an example for his court, Arthur appears to be much more concerned about his own well-being than breaking his compact with the stranger. The importance of trawthe to chivalric society makes us wonder how Arthur can treat his promise so lightly. Arthur reenacts the situation for Gawain, overexaggerating the desparation of it all--having no armor with him and ultimately having no choice but to do as the stranger requested. Gawain agrees to help Arthur in his quest for the correct answer to the stranger's question. Both men depart in separate directions to enquire about women; they set down their data in books. They finally come together and compare notes, Gawain being sure that at least one of their answers will suffice. A dissatisfied Arthur (how he knows the answers are incorrect is not made clear) is still fearful--"I drede me sore"--and decides to look a little further. Returning to Ingleswood Forest, Arthur meets Dame Ragnell, a woman of unexampled hideousness, who promises to reveal to him the correct answer if he will consent to have her marry Gawain. Not only

has Arthur relied on Gawain to assist him in a search that should have been his alone, but he now sees his whole future dependent on the actions of his great knight, though the lady insists that Arthur's life lies in her hands:

> For thy life is in my hand, I warn thee so;
> That shalt thou finde, and I it not let. . .
> But thorowe mine answere thy lif savid be,
> Elles let my desire be in vaine. (256-7, 283-4)

When, in the course of Arthurian literature, have we seen Arthur so intimidated, so insecure, and so dependent on other people? Certainly this is a rarity.

Though the woman's answer will supposedly save Arthur's life, only an acceptance by Gawain of the match will assure Arthur of getting that life-saving answer. At first Arthur is shocked by the woman's request, but since he appears to love his life more than he loves Sir Gawain, he replies:

> But and it be so, I wolle do my labour
> In saving of my life to make it secour;
> To Gawen wolle I make my mone. (294-96)

Arthur knows that his loyal follower "woll be loth to saye naye" (305) and as we expect from the true and courteous Gawain, he agrees to the marriage without hesitation. Before Gawain's acceptance, however, we see yet another example of Arthur's instability, which contributes to his overall portrayal as a weak and frightened king. Upon meeting Gawain, who immediately inquires about his success, Arthur is barely able to face him and is on the verge of suicide, "I am in point myself to spille" (331). Just as he does in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,

Gawain plays the self-sacrificing hero who takes Arthur's place because of his devotion and loyalty as Arthur's nephew and as a member of the Round Table. In a passage that stresses a knight's function as his king's defender and reflection and a belief that Gawain frequently makes known, he states that he would rather lose his own life than see Arthur die:

> "Nay," said Gawen, "that may not be!"
> I had lever myself be dead, so mot I thee.
> This is ille tidand." (333-35)

He then agrees to the marriage with Dame Ragnell, literally becoming Arthur's savior. The modest Gawain sees his assent not as a sacrifice but merely as a way to show his allegiance to his lord:

> For ye ar my king withe honour
> And have worshipt me in many a stoure.
> Therfor shalle I not let.
> To save your life, lorde, it were my parte,
> Or were I false and a great coward;
> And my worship is the bet. (348-53)

With Gawain acting as a surrogate, Arthur is saved from having to diminish his reputation a second time by breaking yet another covenant. He returns to Dame Ragnell, who informs him that what women most desire is "To have the sovereinte, withoute lesing / Of alle, both highe and lowe" (422-3). With that, she begs Arthur to hasten to the knight with the answer and reminds him to "hold promise" because his life is no longer in danger. She says she will hold him to the bargain only if this is the correct answer. After arriving at the designated area and trying all other replies, Arthur finally gives Sir Gromer Somer Joure

the hag's response that women desire sovereignty which, much to the dismay of the knight, is indeed, correct. Arthur is free to depart and soon meets Dame Ragnell, who we have just learned is the sister of Sir Gromer. She demands a public wedding, to which Arthur reluctantly agrees, though he would prefer a private ceremony for shame of her ugliness and perhaps for his guilt in submitting Gawain to such a marriage.

As the wedding day nears, Gawain never alludes to the woman's ugliness and does not stray from the promise he has made to the king, "Sir, I am redy of that I you highte, / Alle forwardes to fulfille" (534-5). Much to the sorrow of members of the court who appear to have genuine sympathy for Gawain's plight, the wedding takes place and Dame Ragnell disgusts everyone by eating food enough for six men at the wedding feast.

In perhaps the greatest test ever of Gawain's bedside manner, the newlyweds are led to their bed chamber where Dame Ragnell requests a kiss from her new husband. Upon Gawain's positive response, she reveals herself to be as beautiful as she was previously repulsive, and gives her husband the choice whether he will have her beautiful by night and hideous by day, or the opposite. Gawain's decision to leave the choice to the woman, giving her sovereignty, provides an interesting supplement to his role as Arthur's substitute. We are never told that Gawain learned from Arthur the correct answer to what women desire most, yet almost as if Gawain and Arthur were one, Gawain responds with the perfect answer to Dame Ragnell. Acquisition of the ideal response might be seen as a gift from Arthur to Gawain for his willingness to marry the hag, though how he learns

of it is a mystery. Yes, Gawain is traditionally known for his courtesy and fine demeanor with women (as B. J. Whiting's study so thoroughly explains), but in giving the hag freedom of choice, Gawain stages a lengthy narrative which is nearly a perfect echo of Dame Ragnell's answer to what women desire most:

> "But do as ye list nowe, my lady gaye.
> The choise I put in your fist.
> Evin as ye wolle, I put it in your hand,
> Lose me when ye list, for I am bond.
> I put the choise in you.
> Bothe body and goodes, hart, and every dele,
> Is alle your own, for to by and selle--
> That make I God avowe!" (677-86)

Dame Ragnell then discloses that she had been laid under a spell to preserve her hideous form until she found a knight courteous enough to wed her and give her sovereignty. The spell now broken, she will remain beautiful both night and day. In a striking passage near the end of the *Wedding*, the author says that Gawain lived with the lady but five years, during which time he abandoned warlike pursuits, and that he afterwards cherished the memory of this love above all others. The poem ends giving slight recognition to all that Dame Ragnell and Gawain have done to save Arthur:

> Here endithe the wedding of
> Sir Gawen and Dame Ragnelle
> For helping of King Arthoure. (853-855)

Arthur was fortunate to have been "helped" by these two, lest he should have lost his life along with his reputation and that of his court. Even though Arthur breaks trawthe with Sir Gromer and exhibits an uncustomary lack of confidence, he and his

Round Table retain their reputation for strength and courtesy thanks to the actions of Sir Gawain. Two aspects of this poem suggest ideas that will become prominent in our next work, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. First, we will continue to see Arthur possessing negative qualities, which will eventually lead to his downfall and to his death. Second, the idea of Gawain as a substitute or surrogate for Arthur will become much more apparent, so much so that Gawain's behavior and actions will actually foreshadow those of the king.

Chapter Four

Morte Arthure (alliterative)

Until now, this investigation has examined Gawain in medieval romances which portray him as the victorious main character. The romance genre, in general, stresses the emotions and motivations of an individual, unlike the epic genre which focuses on comprehensive action. The next work in this study, the Alliterative Morte, lies outside what may be called the mainstream of fourteenth-century romance tradition and, in fact, has many qualities of the epic genre. This piece stands in sharp contrast to those works which have already been discussed, especially to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, which is perhaps the greatest alliterative romance ever written. The Alliterative Morte is, as Larry Benson states, "in many ways closer to Old English heroic verse than to romantic tales of Arthur by writers such as the author of the Stanzaic Morte" ("Morte" 76). Rather than the courtly chivalry of men and women in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, we will witness in the Alliterative Morte the chivalry of fighting men and their relationships with each other. For instance, Gawain's romantic modesty will be de-emphasized in favor of Arthur's epic boasting. Gawain actually retains much of his chivalric aura and is credited with the motivations of a knight of romance. He is little concerned with the conquests, glory, and benefits of imperial war, but is more inclined

to devote his traditional prowess to individual deeds of daring, benevolence, and compassion (Matthews 145). Arthur, on the other hand, makes it clear that honor and conquests are more important than courtesy. His responsibilities are almost always communal; he acts and decides not as an individual (except perhaps when he goes out alone to fight the giant), but as the warrior chief, the embodiment of Britain. The portrait of Arthur as the mighty conqueror, undaunted in defeat, sometimes downright cruel to his enemies in his quest for acquisitions, is not in the romantic mode, but such severity is quite in accord with that which is expected of and admired in a fourteenth-century leader. We might call the Alliterative Morte more realistic, as has frequently been implied by the many critics who have tagged it "chronicle-like." It is more concerned with actions than with the significance of those actions, as can be seen from the frequency of battles and the lack of accompanying commentary or judgments.

The evaluation of Gawain in the Alliterative Morte, then, will be different not only because we are examining another genre, but because Gawain is not the main character. The plot is implied by the title--the death of King Arthur. However, this poem is not merely focused on the king, but on the relationships he has with friends, foes, and those inhabitants he rules. As one of this king's warriors, Gawain again acts as advisor, messenger, and courageous, untarnished, and undefeated fighting man, and continues to reflect the state or condition of the Round Table. Just as in the Carl of Carlyle, Gawain continues his vocation of creating better knights as he tests the pride of

Priamus and causes the temporary repentance of Mordred through his own excellence and nobility. Although the focus is on Arthur and his conquests, Gawain's role is not, as many critics have chosen to argue, insignificant. Stevens sees Gawain as a subsidiary figure, as does Matthews, who believes Gawain plays a peculiarly small part. Upon closer examination, however, we see that the character of Gawain does much more than exemplify the typical knight of the Round Table. I agree with Helaine Newstead, who believes Gawain is the most prominent figure after the King. Perhaps because the Alliterative Morte is unlike most romances of the time, critical studies have tended to hold fast to thematic investigations concerning feasting, diplomacy, or justice, while ignoring evaluations of individual characters other than Arthur himself. Such attention to the Gawain-character, for example, might have revealed uncanny similarities in the descriptions, behavior, and actions of Gawain and the King. These likenesses do more than merely emphasize the medieval notion that a knight is a reflection of his king and court; more importantly, the Gawain character serves to foreshadow the major events of this work--including Arthur's consequent death. Their behavior at the death of a cherished comrade, their persistance to avenge that death, and their impatience on the battlefield to carry out this vengeance lead to the same conclusion--death. So although Gawain's depiction is characteristically a romantic one, Arthur dies in more of an epic fashion--just another casualty in one of a long string of battles.

Perhaps the reason we find a romanticized Gawain figure in this predominantly historical account of Arthur's life lies in

the nature of the work's sources. The main literary source of the Alliterative Morte is Geoffrey of Manmouth's History, but it merely provides a frame work to be filled out by the poet's imagination. Apparently, the poet was very independent in his handling of the originals. He seems to have adapted and developed his materials, sometimes combining matter from several sources and frequently adding from his own imagination. His own are some of the most notable bits in the piece, such as the grief of Guinevere at Arthur's departure, the elaboration of Arthur's dreams, and the fight with the Mont St. Michael giant. These independent sections are also where he develops his intriguing view of Gawain. As far as action is concerned, the poet stays fairly close to Geoffrey's outline, except after the point where Arthur learns of Mordred's treason where he departs especially far from the chronicles.

The Alliterative Morte begins with the claim for tribute from Lucius and with Arthur's scornful response, the gathering of forces and the entrusting of his kingdom to Mordred, the crossing to Barfleur, the single-handed killing of the giant of Mont St. Michael, and the victory over the Romans, which Arthur concludes with a stroke that cleaves the Emporer's breast. Then follows Arthur's invasion of Lorraine, his siege of Metz, and the advance into Italy and Viterbo. After Arthur's prophetic dream of Fortune's wheel, he hears of Mordred's treason and crosses to Britain, where Gawain dies in the landing. Mordred flees to Cornwall, followed by Arthur, who initiates a final confrontation which results in the deaths of both men.

Gawain's absence from the early portions of this text raises questions about the consistency of his portrayal. He appears briefly at the beginning as an escort of Guinevere but is curiously silent in the war council, and his activities border on insignificance in the battle with Lucius, though his intrusion into the Romans' feast creates an excellent point of contrast between the two kingdoms. However, when Arthur tries to save the victims of a giant's treachery by slaying the monster of Mont St. Michael, we receive our first clue as to Gawain's function. As Arthur climbs the crags in search of the villainous creature, he meets an old widow who warns him of the danger he is in and in doing so intimates his inferiority to Gawain while also predicting his death. She is unaware of Arthur's identity, but the message is clear nonetheless:

> I warne the fore wyrchipe, thou wylnez aftyr sorowe!
> Whedyre buskes thou berne? vnblysside thow semes!
> Wenez thow to brittene hyme with thy brande ryche?
> Ware thow wyghttere thane Wade or Wawayne owthire,
> Thow wynnys no wyrchipe, I warne the be-fore! . . .
> Thow arte frely and faire, and in they fyrste flourez,
> Bot thow arte fay be my faythe, and that me for-thynkkys!
> (961-65, 970-1)

This is merely the first of many indicators of Arthur's eventual death, which include his prophetic dreams and the parallels between the descriptions and actions of the King and Gawain. Gawain acts as a precurser to many similar situations that Arthur will experience as he nears his final battle with Mordred.

Before discussing the frequent parallels between Gawain and the King, we should remind ourselves of the fourteenth-century viewpoint on war and the very different attitudes about

war that Gawain and the King possess. The society of the Alliterative Morte was essentially a military one. War was, it has been said, the central unifying fact of political life. While royal princes and great lords fought for the rather academic honor of being called king of a realm, each noble raged war on his neighbors whenever he saw fit. Painter reminds us that arrogance, aggressiveness, hatred of restraint, and a love of battle were bred into the very bone of British nobility (2). If a king wished to increase his power of resources, he waged war on his neighbors. A successful raid was certain to produce either corn or cattle, the capture of horses, or even a baron who could easily make a fortune for the captor. Because noblemen were bred and trained for war, they fought not only for amusement and for their sense of duty, but for profit as well. A king's first priority, however, should be the protection and welfare of his kingdom and its inhabitants. It is when the quest for individual profit and gain begin to rule over the community good that war is seen as unjustified or evil. The distinction between a just and unjust war in the Middle Ages was determined by a law of arms, an 'international' law that bound men irrespective of their allegiance. Maurice Keen lists the aspects of war which this law regulated:

> The law of arms governed alike the conduct of soldiers towards enemies. . . the discipline of armies (military or martial law in our sense), rules concerning rights in spoil (which appeared to be modelled on the law of property), and armorial disputes (which would probably now be regarded as a branch or perrage law).
> ("Laws" 210)

In War in the Middle Ages, Phillippe Contamine notes that four conditions for the just war can be derived. He states:

> . . .it should be ordered by a prince; without the participation of clerics; for the defense of the country attacked or for the recovery of despoiled goods; free from violent, unlimited passion. (282)

Matthews defines a war as just if "its cause, intention, and conduct are righteous" (84). Of course, such terms are deemed just in relation to him who declares the war, him who fights it, and him against whom it is waged. In general, the wish to harm, the cruelty of vengeance, and implacable spirit, pride in victory, and a thirst for domination would be motivations rightly condemned. Medieval wars were warranted only by the justness of their causes, as when they were waged to avenge wrong, to punish wrongdoers, or to restore what had been wrongfully usurped (Matthews 84).

Judging by this background, an analysis of Gawain's inclinations toward war finds him displaying overall admirable intentions when in battle, and in fact, he dies as a result of his determination to fight for the rights of his king. On the otherhand, the conflict between the duties of kingship and the desire for conquest and domination contributes to Arthur's fall. In the first half of the poem, we see Arthur as the model ruler, primarily concerned with defending his lands, titles, and people from a usurper. As he is expected to do, Arthur concentrates on providing for the needs of his people, avenging their past wrongs, and protecting them from further harm. Nowhere is this more evident than in his single-handed killing of the giant of Mont St. Michael. Arthur emerges a savior after slaying the

monster who had been terrorizing his victims. Arthur divides the victory spoils among his people, making sure that no one is dissatisfied and keeping only the kirtle and club for himself:

> Alle the myche tresour that traytour had wonnene,
> To comouns of the contre, clergye and other,
> Luke it be done and delte to my dere pople,
> That none pleyne of theire parte, o peyne of our lyfez.
> (1214-1217)

However, such generosity turns to selfishness, for after Lucius and his army are overthrown, Arthur's motives become personal revenge and endless and complete conquest. He stops defending his homeland and willfully seeks possessions that are not his own. Revenge, as John Finlayson has noted, is not (according to chivalric manuals) a lawful or just reason for war. With these motivations, Arthur turns not on an enemy or foreign foe but on one of his own disloyal followers, beginning the siege of Metz. This battle contains crucial evidence of the very opposite nature of Gawain's and Arthur's views of war. Gawain is the one who fights against the remainder of Lucius' pagan army and who converts Priamus, while Arthur fights against his own kind--Christians. Arthur is also increasingly willing to engage in and agree to battles against overwhelming odds, flaunting his seeming invulnerability as a conqueror. All of Gawain's activities are marked by extremes of courtesy, modesty, and self-sacrifice in the causes of peace. Throughout the Alliterative Morte, Gawain vows his devotion not only to Arthur his king but to Christ and Mary as an exemplary knight should. Gawain is never out for the profits of imperial war, and only once is his motive selfish, when he avenges the death of Child Chastelayne.

Despite their contrasting objectives for battle, their pre-battle instructions and motivations to the troops sound strikingly similar. Perhaps Arthur's self-serving intentions can be covered by assuring his knights what it is they are fighting for and the legitimacy of it:

> I be-seke ȝow, sirs, for sake of oure Lorde,
> That ȝe doo wele to-daye, and dredis no wapene!
> ffighttes fersely nowe, and fendis ȝoure seluene,
> ffellis downe ȝone feye folke, the felde salle be owrs!
> (4084-4087)

Though Arthur is recognized as "governour under God" (1202) for slaying monsters and tyrants, fancy speeches can not cover the consequences of trying to combine kingship responsibilities and personal desires for power. Arthur's dream about the dragon makes clear that such selfishness will ultimately "drenchen thy pople" (816).

Gawain's encouraging words to his fellow knights, however, are full of his genuine desire as a Christian knight to defeat the devil and in doing so to uphold the reputation of Arthur's kingdom:

> To ȝone brode batayle that one ȝone banke houes;
> And I ensure ȝow sothe I salle ȝowe sewe aftyre;
> Loke ȝe blenke for no bronde, ne for no bryghte wapyne,
> Bot beris downe of the beste and bryng theme o-dawe!
> Bees noghte abayste of theire boste, abyde one the erthe;
> ȝe haue my baneres borne in batailles fulle hugge;
> We salle felle one false, the fende hafe theire saules!
> ffightes faste with the frape, the felde salle be owres;
> (3733-3740)

Such honesty of purpose makes up for the situations in which Gawain uncharacteristically lies and boasts, even though the

reasons for such behavior are sound. Interrupting a Roman feast, Gawain appears both brash and boastful, but by doing so is merely carrying out orders from his king and actually attesting to the superiority of Arthur's realm. In his capture of Priamus, Gawain lies about his identity, but succeeds in converting Priamus through his otherwise faultless behavior.

Despite his differences with Arthur, Gawain remains the obedient knight whose duty is to defend his king, to protect him, and to ascribe his own brave deeds to the king's renown. Being Arthur's kinsman and knight, Gawain is bound to espouse the feuds of Arthur as if they were his own. In no scene is this more apparent than in Gawain's intrusion into a feast of Emperor Lucius. Previous to Gawain's errand to the Roman emperor, Arthur had treated some Roman messengers to an elaborate banquet, the description of which occupies over eighty lines. This noble act of hospitality is intended to impress the Roman embassy, as great ceremonial feasts offered a splendid opportunity for displaying the magnificence of a court (Harder 57). The presence of a variety of lords and ladies was also an outward and visible display of the power of Arthur, newly expanded through his most recent triumphs. In this social situation, Arthur can be more intensely and ostentatiously what he is and what everyone wants a royal hero to be. Arthur gives specific orders to Gawain and his fellow knights about the message they are to present to the Emperor Lucius in response to his accusation that the Round Table is robbing Rome of well deserved rents:

> Saise to syr Lucius, to vn-lordly he wyrkez,
> Thus letherly agaynes law to lede my pople;
> I lette hyme or oghte lange, ȝif me the lyffe happene,
> Or many lyghte salle lawe, thát hyme ouere lande folowes.
> Comande hym kenely wyth crewelle wordez,
> Cayre owte of my kyngryke with his kydd knyghtez;
> In caase that he wille noghte, that cursede wreche,
> Come for his curtaisie, and countere me ones! (1267-1274)

Gawain's instructions, then, are to deliver Arthur's message harshly and "wyth crewelle wordez" to the emperor. Just as the Green Knight intruded to propose his Christmas game, Gawain and his knights barge in and with no hesitation insult and curse Lucius and the company of his feast:

> . . . vn-sawghte mott e wórthe!
> And the fals heretyke, that emperour hym callez,
> That ocupyes in erroure the empyre of Rome,
> Sir Arthure herytage, that honourable kynge,
> That alle his auncestres aughte bot Vtere hyme one,
> That ilke cursynge that Cayme kaghte for his brothyre,
> Cleffe one the, cukewalde, with croune ther thow lengez,
> for the vnlordlyeste lede that I on lukende euer!
> (1306-1313)

Gawain's conduct <u>is</u> discourteous and shows disregard for the feast of Lucius, but it also demonstrates his obedience to his king. His behavior also makes clear that the Roman emperor's magnificence is much less than Arthur's. When a Roman messenger appeared at Arthur's court, he was awed in the midst of Arthur's feast, and so crouching for fear, he presented his message in strictly ceremonial terms. As a knight, Gawain is also still playing his role as a reflection of his powerful king. Gawain's actions alone demonstrate contempt for the emperor's reputation and his words only reinforce Lucius' mediocrity. Unable to maintain kingly control, Lucius responds with bitter words of his own (1326-1340) as does Lucius' comrade, Sir Gayous, who accuses

Gawain of being a typical British braggart, a flashy dresser, and a boastful boy. Angered beyond control, Gawain beheads Gayous, displaying the impatience that will eventually lead to his own death.

This deviation from Gawain's traditional courteous mein is tempered by Gawain's conversion of Priamus on his foraging expedition. We once again see Gawain taking up his vocation of bettering the Round Table and knighthood in general. Traveling in enemy territory, Gawain goes off alone "wonders to seek" (2514), a normal occurrence in romances but one that poses many threats in this sober chronicle of vengeful armies and bloody siege. This particular duel draws our attention because, besides Arthur's bout with the giant, it is the only confrontation that occurs apart from a battle. Armed with a magic sword and healing waters, Priamus wanders into Gawain's romantic empire, and the two engage in fighting marked with all the chivalry and mutual admiration found in most romances. Both are seriously wounded, but Priamus promises to help stop Gawain's bleeding if he can be baptized. In preparation for Priamus' baptism, Gawain lies about his identity to test the pride of Priamus:

> "Be Criste," quod Sir Gawayne, "knyghte was I neuer!
> With the kydde conquerour a knafe of his chambyre
> Has wroghte in his wardrope wynters and ȝeres,
> One his longe armour that hym beste lykid; (2620-2623)

Priamus responds admirably, proclaiming the greatness of Arthur's court throughout all of British history, but questions the truth of Gawain's words:

> Giffe his knafes be syche, his knyghttez are noble!
> There es no kynge vndire Criste may kempe with hym one. . .
> Whethire thowe be knyghte or knaffe, knawe now the sothe.
> (2632-3, 2637)

Much relieved and delighted to learn of Gawain's true identity, Priamus warns Gawain about the proximity of the duke of Lorraine's forces, heals their battle wounds, and becomes yet another convert to Christianity because of Sir Gawain's exemplary behavior. So despite what seems to be a variation of Gawain's typical courteous portrayal, he still maintains his reputation for obedient and polite behavior, even though, as we will soon see, his impatience and impetuosity on the battlefield will tend to overshadow these admirable traits.

Having accounted for the literary and historical characterizations of Gawain and Arthur, we can now discuss how Gawain's actions actually mirror and foreshadow those of Arthur--especially those occurences connected with the deaths of each. Other tactics have been used by the poet to draw our attention to these similarities, including the use of many of the same epithets in reference to both characters. Though in some cases the commonality of these tag names is determined by alliteration, they are striking nevertheless. Arthur speaks "lordliche wordys" (3638) while Gawain "lordily lyghtter and laghte. . ." (2693). Both men are referred to as lionlike. Gawain "letande alls a lyone, he lawnches theme thorowe" (3831) just as Arthur "londis als a lyone with lordliche knyghtes" (3922). Though it is entirely appropriate for Arthur to be called kingly or kinglike, we don't expect such terms to be frequently used with a knight. These references not only tend to equate the two men and perhaps

even to confuse them, but these resemblances may also forecast Arthur's speech at Gawain's death when he admits that Gawain was just as worthy as he of being king and that all his wealth and renown was won through Gawain's deeds. Unintentionally, the poet has reinforced that a knight is truly a reflection of his king. Even as each man nears his death, the similarities continue. When out to avenge a death in battle, each begins to fight like a madman. Gawain appears as "vnwyse," "wodewyse" and "wode as a best" (3837) compared to Arthur who "loste had his myrthis" (4270). Their comparable frenzied states of mind in battle also reinforce a knight's role as his king's reflection and further emphasize the devotion between the two men and the parallel sequence of events that led to their ultimate ends.

Acknowledging the textual similarities in descriptions, we can now examine those series of events which best illustrate Gawain's function in the <u>Alliterative Morte</u>--as prophet of the impending death of Arthur. Gawain's actions and behavior, not Gawain himself, serve to predict the eventual outcome of Arthur's battle with Mordred the traitor. I will divide this series of events into two segments for purposes of discussion, first, reaction to the death of cherished comrade and the vow to avenge that death, and second, persistence and impatience on the battle field to carry out the promised vengeance.

It is not surprising in a poem that deals with a continuous series of battles to find characters mourning over the loss of friends or fellow soldiers. However, such scenes are few in the <u>Alliterative Morte</u>, which tends to concentrate on numbers lost and property overtaken rather than on human response. Thus

scenes that do develop the characters through mourning sequences stand out and add life to strictly factual battle sequences. The first major comparison between the actions and behavior of Gawain and Arthur concerns their reactions to the deaths of cherished friends. Their troubled, yet vengeful reactions mark the first in a series of happenings that will lead to their eventual demise. Gawain is featured in two of these grievous situations. The first occurs following the conversion of Priamus as they join forces to defeat the duke of Lorraine, when Gawain's ward, Child Chastelayne, is killed. In what becomes the usual progression of emotion, Gawain's tears and words of praise turn to lamentation and compassion, then finally to anger and revenge. Upon seeing the slain warrior, Gawain bursts into tears and praises the accomplishments of such a young lad:

> Than sir Gawayne gretes with his gray eghne;
> The guyte was a gude mane, be-gynnande of armes.
> ffore the charry childe so his chere chawngide,
> That the chillande watire one his chekes rynnyde!
> (2962-2965)

Gawain's sentiments turn them from anguish to revenge as he swears to make reprisal with the child's killer:

> "Woe es me," quod Gawayne, "that I ne wetene hade;
> I salle wage for that wye alle that I welde,
> Bot I be wrokene on that wye, that thus has hym wondyde!"
> (2966-2968)

With this, Gawain charges upon the enemy with fury, kills sixty or more men in avenging the child's death, and nearly achieves the victory single-handedly. This anger-driven, impetuous reply

will resurface in Gawain's later battle with Mordred's army, when he must again face the deaths of fellow comrades. Greatly outnumbered and surrounded by the troops of the relative who betrayed him, Gawain contemplates the many lives that have been lost and once again experiences the spectrum of emotions signaled by tears of frustration, an impatient frenzy, and finally a warning of vengeance:

> Thane sir Gawayne grette with his gray eghene,
> ffor grefe of his gud mene that he gyde schulde;
> He wyste that thay wondyde ware, and wery for foughttene;
> And what for wondire and woo, alle his witte faylede. . .
> Thare myghte no renke hym areste, his resone was passede!
> He felle in a fransye for fersenesse of herte,
> He feghttis and fellis downe that hyme be-fore standis. . .
> That wode alls a wylde beste he wente at the gayneste;
> Alle walewede one blode, thare he a-waye passede;
> Iche a wy may be warre, be wreke of an-other!
> (3790-93, 3825-7, 3837-9)

Acknowledging the deaths of men who had contributed so much to Arthur's court had, initiated Gawain's fanatic and impetuous behavior, much as Arthur is affected by Gawain's death. Gawain's death is unique in that three people actually respond to it including the poet, Mordred, and Arthur. For now let us limit ourselves to the reaction of Arthur alone. Hearing that Gawain has gone ashore to seek Mordred, Arthur hastens after him, but is too late. He finds Gawain's body among the day's many casualties. His initial reaction is one of woe and disbelief, as the poet explains: "Was neuer our semliche kynge so sorowfulle in herte, / Ne that sanke hyme so sade, bot that sighte one (3947-8). Weeping bitterly, Arthur kneels, takes up the hero in his arms and cries this tribute to his nephew:

> Here es the hope of my hele, my happynge of armes!
> My herte and my hardynes hale one hym legende!
> My concelle, my comforthe, that kepide myne herte!
> Of alle knyghtes the kynge that vndir Criste lifede,
> Thou was worthy to be kynge, thofe I the corowne bare!
> My wele and my wirchipe of alle this werlde riche
> Was wonnene thourghe sir Gawayne, and thoroughe his witt one!
> (3958-3964)

Arthur then confesses his guilt, attributing Gawain's death to his own sins. His guilt-laden conscience and anger at Mordred's army trigger him to denounce all pleasure until he has avenged the death of the knight who had been more worthy than himself of bearing the crown. He bears witness to God and Mary in the lengthiest of all the retaliation speeches in the Alliterative Morte:

> "Here I make myn avowe," quod the kynge thane,
> "To Messie, and to Marie, the mylde qwenne of heuene,
> I salle neuer ryvaye, ne racches vn-cowpylle
> Neuer grewhownde late glyde, ne gossehawk latt flye,
> At roo ne rayne-dere, that rynnes apponne erthe;
> Ne neuer fowle see fellide, that flieghes with wenge;
> ffawkone ne formaylle appone fiste handille,
> Ne ȝitt with gerefawcone rejoyse me in erthe;
> Ne regnne in my royaltez, ne halde my Rownde Table,
> Tille thi dede, my dere, be dewly reuengede!
> Bot euer droupe and dare, qwylles my lyfe lastez,
> Tille Drightene and derfe dede hafe done qwate theme likes."
> (3997-4008)

The poet accentuates the urgency of their quests, to vindicate the cruel deaths of close companions through two distinct techniques--Gawain through his uncharacteristic impetuous, almost barbaric advances, Arthur through repeated allusions to his task or direct restatements of his vow. The revenge of each becomes an obsession, both admitting that they would rather die than not see justice done--which is exactly

what happens. Gawain appears impatient, and is no longer the strategist who waits for just the right moment to strike. He is compelled by some inner force to do anything he must to kill Mordred, to the extent that he appears foolish, a madman. Twice in his search for Mordred we see evidence of Gawain's inability to hold back, to control himself, "Bot sir Gawayne for grefe myghte noghte agayne-stande, / Vmbegrippys a spere, and to a gome rynnys. . ." (3757-8). The poet's comment that had Gawain waited, he would have won high honor, reiterates the passion for revenge that possesses Gawain because we know how important it traditionally is for Gawain to win fame and renown for his King's honor, but in this passage, his heart rules his head:

> ffor had sir Gawayne hade grace to halde the grene hille,
> He had wirchipe i-wys wonnene for euer!
> Bot thane Sir Gawayne i-wysse, he waytes hym wele
> To wreke hyme on his werlaughe, that this werre mouede;
> And merkes to sir Modrede amonge alle his beryns. . . (3768-72)

Gawain goes so far as to admit that he will sacrifice his life in order to rid this world of the traitor, "Thow salle be dede and vndone for thy derfe dedys, / Or I salle dy this daye, ȝif destanye worthe" (3778-9). Destiny does will, and in this case, though justice is served, a price has to be paid. In his final joust with Mordred, we are repeatedly reminded of the frenzied mental state of Gawain and of the anger that has driven him out of control. Such is the case as Gawain receives his death blow:

> Than Gawayne gyrde to the gome, and one the groffe fallis;
> Alls his grefe was graythede, his grace was no bettyre!
> He schokkes owtte a schorte knyfe schethede with siluere,
> And scholde haue slottede hyme in, bot no slytte happenede;
> His hand sleppid and slode o slante one the mayles,

> And the tother slely slynges hym vndire:
> With a trenchande knyfe the traytoure hym hyttes,
> Thorowe the helme and the hede, one heyghe one the brayne:
> And thus sir Gawayne es gone. . . (3850-60)

Rather than the physical persistence of Gawain, Arthur shows his determination to avenge Gawain's death verbally, by repeated references to his original vow, often adding to and embellishing it. The first such exclamation implies the same do-or-die threat of Gawain's confession: "ffor blode," said the bolde kynge, "blyne salle I neuer, / Or my brayne to-briste, or my breste other!" (3981-2). The second comes as he gives orders for Gawain's burial, asking to delay the event until justice has been carried out: "A-byde of the beryenge tille they be broughte vndire, / That has wroghte vs this woo, and this werre mouede" (4023-4). Upon counsel from Sir Richer, who advises Arthur to restrain himself and rally his forces until the time is right, Arthur bursts into a moving narrative defending the immediacy of his task and his willingness to murder Mordred with or without his troops accompanying him:

> Hadde I no segge bot my selfe one vndir sone,
> And I may hym see with sighte, or one hym sette hondis,
> I salle evene amange his mene malle hym to dede,
> Are I of the stede styre halfe a stede lenghe!
> I salle [stryke] hym in his stowre, and stroye hyme foreuer,
> And thare-to make I myne avowe devottly to Cryste
> And to hys modyre Marie, the mylde qwene of heuene!
> I salle neuer soiourne sounde, ne sawghte at myne herte,
> In cete ne in subarbe sette appone erthe,
> Ne ȝitt slomyre ne slepe with my slawe eyghne,
> Tille he be slayne that hym slowghe, ȝif any sleghte happene:
> Bot euer pursue the payganys that my pople distroyede,
> Qwylls I may pare theme and pynne, in place thare me likes.
> (4035-47)

Thus, King Arthur "withe rewthe in this herte" forces his way to Mordred, who has disguised himself by changing weapons. But Arthur recognizes the sword as one he left under the care of the Queen, and so strikes Mordred, cutting through his shield and into his shoulder. But Mordred repays Arthur with a wound to his side, after which Arthur promptly cuts off Mordred's sword-hand, therein defeating the enemy. Thankful for the victory yet sorrowful over the loss of so many of his knights, Arthur is taken to Glastonbury where he dies of his battle wound.

And so the death of Arthur and the decline of his Round Table is foreshadowed by the death of Gawain and is promoted by the very same passion for revenge. Just as Gawain has reflected the strength and valor of Arthur's court in the previously discussed romances, he also reflects the weaknesses of his king and court which lead to the court's downfall. His zeal in defending the honor of Arthur and Child Chastelayne and atoning for their wrongdoings is admirable, but it has caused legitimate virtues like pride to turn sour. These same virtues-turned-vices have led King Arthur into battles against overwhelming odds and finally to his fatal encounter with Mordred. Gawain's connection with such frailities will become even more apparent in the forthcoming examination of the <u>Stanzaic Morte</u>, which depicts Gawain not as the courteous, romanticized hero of knighthood, but as an antagonistic and stubborn warrior who is as much to blame for the deterioration of Arthur's realm as Mordred's treason and the affair of Guinevere and Lancelot. Sadly, this is the image that most modern readers retain of Gawain as a result of the works of Malory and Tennyson, who based their

Gawain portraits on this account. Therefore, before we witness the degeneration of Gawain's image and reputation, let us examine the treatments of the deaths of Gawain and Arthur in the Alliterative Morte which will provide some interesting insights as to the romance-epic natures of their characters and presents the noblest, if only, tribute to the life of "Gawayne and gude."

If the concentration of the Alliterative Morte is supposed to be on King Arthur and the events that lead to his death, why does the poem end with no real tribute to the King nor elaborate description of his funeral and the accompanying lamentation? Furthermore, why is Gawain's death marked by three separate eulogies and the temporary conversion of the poem's villain? What might be the poet's intention in handling the passing of these characters as he does? Perhaps the answer lies in what appears to be a consistently romanticized Gawain-character and an epic Arthur figure. I have already mentioned Gawain's motivations as a knight of romance and his continued concern for the betterment of knighthood and Arthur's realm. It appears that this poet wished Gawain to depart from life with his noble, heralded reputation intact. Curiously, the death of so important and so exemplary a knight is normally glossed over, even in the romances that present his life in such favorable terms. In short, the Arthurian tradition left few traces of Gawain's death for the poet of the Alliterative Morte to develop and as Clark suggests probably did not even suggest the hero's last struggle as a topic worthy of poetic expansion (91).

On the other hand, Arthur has been developed as more of an epic figure, not clouded by what Larry Benson refers to as the "chivalric mist" that characterizes most romances. Arthur does not seem to know much about courtly love but rather is skilled in warfare and conquest. Unlike the negative modern-day view of Gawain, modern readers know of Arthur and his death from the accepted, romantic version of Malory and Tennyson in which three maidens accompany Arthur's body in a ship with the expectation that he will someday return again to rule his people. It seems obvious why Arthur's death is traditionally dramatic and fantastic. Arthur would lose prestige and status if his death was overshadowed by the death of one of his own knights.

The poet of the Alliterative Morte seems to have strong feelings for Gawain, because no other knight, let alone the king, receives such a fine farewell. Of the three laments over our dead hero, the poet himself claims the first:

> And thus sir Gawayne es gone, the gude man of armes,
> With-owttyne reschewe of renke, and rewghe es the more!
> Thus sir Gawaynne es gone, that gyede many othire;
> Ffrom Gowere to Gernesay, all the gret lordys
> Of Glamour, of Galys londe, this galyarde knyghtes,
> Ffor glent of gloppynyng glade be they neuer! (3858-3863)

The second follows almost immediately, and is uttered by the grief-striken Mordred. Mordred is, in effect, responding to Frederick of Frisia's observations of Gawain's excellence in battle and Frederick's query as to the identity of the slain soldier:

> He was makles one molde, mane, be my trowhe;
> This was sir Gawayne the gude, the gladdeste of othire,
> And the graciouseste gome that vndire God lyffede,

Mane hardyeste of hande, happyeste in armes,
And the hendeste in hawle vndire heuene riche;
The lordelieste of ledynge qwylles he lyffe myghte,
ffor he was lyone allossede in londes i-newe;
Had thow knawne hym, sir kynge, in kythe thare he lengede,
His konynge, his knyghthode, his kyndly werkes,
His doyng, his doughtynesse, his dedis of armes,
Thowe wolde hafe dole for his dede the dayes of thy lyfe!
(3875-3885)

The poet knows that one way to praise Gawain is by putting his eulogy into the mouth of his enemy, but this speech goes far beyond praise, expressing the deepfelt personal loss of brotherhood. Following this gracious tribute, Mordred rides away grieving and repents "hym off alle his rewthe werkes," reminding the reader of Gawain's other conversions, not only within the poem as with Priamus but in the romances with the Carl of Carlyle and even Dame Ragnell's brother. This knight has influenced the lives of so many individuals during his life and continues to do so even beyond the grave. If the reader is not yet convinced of the greatness and nobility of Gawain, the final eulogy by King Arthur himself settles any doubts we might have. Here he confesses that Gawain was equally worthy of bearing the crown and has brought Arthur all his renown through his wisdom and good deeds (3955-3963). Finally, Arthur gathers some of Gawain's blood in his helmet, raises it towards the heavens, and absolves Gawain of any wrongdoing:

O rightwis riche Gode, this rewthe thow be-holde!
This ryalle rede blode ryne appone erthe;
It ware worthy to be schrede and schrynede in golde,
ffor it es sakles of syne, sa helpe me oure Lorde!
(3989-3992)

With such a glorious memorial service in the name of Sir Gawain, we anticipate a similar, yet extended, eloquent tribute

to the leader of the Round Table when he passes from this earth. Instead, we witness Arthur completing his last will in preparation for death and then behold only scant details of the funeral day:

> Throly belles thay rynge, and Requiem syngys,
> Dosse messes and matyns with mournande notes:
> Relygeous reueste in theire riche copes,
> Pontyficalles and prelates in precyouse wedys,
> Dukes and dusszeperis in theire dule-cotes,
> Cowntasses knelande and claspande theire handes,
> Ladys languessande and lowrande to schewe;
> Alle was buskede in blake, birdes and othire,
> That schewede at the sepulture, with sylande teris;
> (4332-4340)

There follow no personal recollections of Arthur's greatness, nor reminders of his past and present accomplishments, but a rather matter-of-fact remark concerning Arthur's place in the lineage of British heroes:

> Thus endis kyng Arthure, as auctors alegges,
> That was of Ectores blude, the kynge sone of Troye,
> And of sir Pryamous, the prynce, praysede in erthe;
> ffro thethene broghte the Bretons alle his bolde eldyrs
> In-to Bretayne the brode, as the Bruytte tellys.
> (4342-4346)

Our poet makes no attempt to judge the actions of our King nor to console the audience with words of compassion. Arthur dies as an epic hero--the last fighter on the field, yet surrounded by the community to which he belongs. We are made to feel no sympathy for Arthur as we do in the romantic version of Arthur's death. Larry Benson notes the harshness and abruptness of the ending of the _Alliterative Morte_ as it compares to the _Stanzaic Morte_:

> In romances such as the stanzaic Morte Arthure or Malory's account of Arthur's death, the final scene is softened by the prospect of Arthur's return and the whole fall of the Round Table is enveloped with an air of repentance and forgiveness that makes the end more pathetic than tragic. At the end of our poem [Alliterative Morte], Arthur is dead and will not return; the Isle of Avalon is the monastery of Glastonbury, where he is not received by fairies, but by surgeons who attempt and fail to heal his wounds. And there is no repentance. Arthur has done what he must, and he has remained true to his ideals; his sorrow is not for his sin but for the good warriors that he has led to death. . . . ("Morte" 84)

Consequently, what should be the most memorable scene in the poem--Arthur's death--is overshadowed by the death of the King's nephew. This possibly misdirected attention is fitting if a knight is a reflection of his king because then both Gawain and Arthur are given honor. Throughout his life, Gawain devoted himself to the good of the Round Table and won fame through his courteous and valiant behavior, which constantly contributed to Arthur's positive image. So too does this tribute to Gawain contribute to Arthur's good standing. As we lament the deaths of these two heroes, it is comforting to think that perhaps unselfishness is another kingly quality, and Arthur has conceded to give some well-deserved recognition to a worthy recipient. The poet of the Alliterative Morte, in the absence of any accounts of Gawain's death, fortunately chose to create a piece of literature that reinstates Gawain in his rightful position as one of the noblest men in the world. Were it not for this unique tribute, our only memories of Gawain may have been the negative portrayal given him by Malory or the depiction of Gawain as a vindictive warrior as seen in the subsequent Stanzaic Morte.

Chapter Five

Le Morte Arthur (stanzaic)

From his lofty position as honored protagonist and exemplary knight, Gawain suffers a loss of status in the Stanzaic Morte Arthur which has unmistakably affected the works of more modern authors like Malory and Tennyson. The themes and character depictions of the Stanzaic Morte are, in modern times, among the widest known and most cherished of all Arthurian stories. This poem presents the last stage in the evolution of Gawain's development in Arthurian legend. In one of the great mysteries of romance, perceptions of Gawain's character degenerate from the unstinted admiration given him in the romances, to the less favorable view which finally prevailed. He is transformed from the respected hero of most medieval romances to a near villain in this drama.

The subject of the Stanzaic Morte is the fall of Arthur and his Round Table, with the affair of Lancelot and Guinevere providing a second, yet related story line. The love interest of Guinevere and Lancelot has established itself at the center of the poem and the interest of readers is directed not toward noble actions but toward introspective emotions (Scudder 164). The focus is shifted from conquests and adventures to the clash of loyalties and internal divisions within the Round Table itself; the poem is not dependent on knightly adventures with surprising

turns of plot, but relies on personality conflicts and opposing claims. The only significant "foreign" war is that between Arthur's forces and Lancelot's. Lancelot holds center stage as hero and charming gentleman, while Arthur appears as merely a figure head--colorless, seemingly powerless, and uninteresting until the final tragic moments of his life. As already stated, Gawain's character is shaded by corruption. He tries to beguile the Maid of Ascolot, lies about Lancelot to the Queen, and then is compelled to acknowledge his own guilt. And though he retains many of his noble qualities, such as his devotion to Arthur and the Queen, his persistent and vindictive attempts to avenge his brothers' deaths lessen the impact of any redeeming traits. Wertime further explains this dual portrait of Gawain, noting that Gawain first appears as a conciliator, a peacemaker in Arthur's court, and as Lancelot's steadfast friend (Wertime 1077). But Gawain undergoes an apparent role transformation, being converted from "ostensible placator and implicit aggressor to overt aggressor" (Wertime 1078). Unlike the Alliterative Morte, where the cause of Arthur's death and his court's downfall was Mordred's treason solely, Arthur's death is in the Stanzaic Morte due as much to the feud of Gawain and Lancelot as it is to Mordred's rebellion. The decline of Arthur's court begins with a tournament suggested by Guinevere in hopes of avoiding the downfall she fears is imminent, but rather than uniting the court as tourneys have historically proven to do (Barber, Knight 293), the tournament turns into a series of battles urged on by the conflict of one knight against another and finally one knight against the king. The inconsistent portrayal of Gawain,

then, reflects the turmoil and fragile workings of a court that no longer stands on the strong foundations of trust, loyalty, and camaraderie. So just as Gawain has reflected Arthur's court in times of prosperity and fame, so will his character mirror the deterioration and diminished reputation of the court to which he belongs.

Not more than three stanzas into the poem, the forthcoming downfall of Arthur's court is already suggested, by none other than the Queen herself, who expresses her concern about such an occurrence and who recommends to the King a preventative measure:

> Of a wondir thinge I wold you mene,
> How your courte by-gynnth to spill
> Off duoghty knightis all by-dene;
> Syr, your honour by-gynnys to fall,
> That wount was wide in world to sprede. . .
> yiff ye your honoure hold shalle,
> A turnement were best to bede. . .
> That knightis shall there worship wynne
> To dede of Armys for to Ryde.
> Sir, lettis thus youre courte no blynne
> But lyve in honour and in pride. (22-26, 31-32, 35-38)

Guinevere's suggestion is appropriate and shows that she obviously knows about the motives for and benefits of holding such a contest. Before examining if Arthur's Winchester tournament does affect his allegedly declining reputation, it might be helpful to look at the origins of the tournament and what history deems the most common intentions involved in hosting this type of medieval social gathering.

Tournaments began appearing in the eleventh century and were common by the middle of the twelfth century. An explanation for their appearance is not difficult to produce. Since war was the chief occupation and interest of the nobleman, he probably

spent much of his time in military exercise, especially when not in actual battle against foreign foes. When a prolonged period of peace made life grow dull and knights feel out of practice, some rich feudal prince might decide to hold a tourney. This type of contest would not only keep a lord's knights exercised but would also extend his fame and glory and that of his country. Reputation gained at the tourneying field was often more immediately significant than reputation won beyond the sea (Keen, Chivalry 100). A tournament had various other uses beyond being a training ground for war, including being run for profit (the object being to make as much as possible out of ransoms.) Such ransoms were usually a matter of war, but in a tournament, spoils could be won without the loss of lives or property that a kingdom risked when involved in actual battle. Other benefits of a tourney included the winning of individual renown or merely the social gathering of a certain kind of elite. Keen notes the social advancement that might be achieved just by being present at one of these events:

> The tournament was an exercise for the elite, and simply to appear there, armed and mounted, and with his own squire or squires in attendance, was in itself a demonstration of a man's right to mingle in an elite society, of his social identity. (Chivalry 90)

But perhaps the most significant reason for holding a tournament would be the effect it might have on the attitude of court members. The adventures of a tourney could easily be given political meaning redounding to the glory of a prince or ruling house but what occurs within the court is even more important, as Barber explains:

> Tournaments served a subtler design as well: the strengthening of the links between the lords and the crown through their vocation of knighthood. . . the chivalric vows and the idea of knighthood as an order were used to reinforce the feeling of brotherhood. (Knight 293)

With this in mind, it is evident that Guinevere's advice to Arthur was entirely appropriate. What better place to build strength and unity in a court than from within itself. A tournament would encourage the joining of forces and personalities and thus perpetuate an attitude of unselfish allegiance. Unfortunately, this renewed unity and brotherhood was not the result of the tournament which Arthur initiated for the sake of his Round Table. Instead, Lancelot stays behind to see the Queen, setting in motion rumors of suspicion. He then disguises himself so that he will not be recognized on his way to the tourney. But his horse stumbles and his riding expertise becomes apparent:

> The knight þan braundisshid yche a bone,
> As he the bridelle vp gan take;
> There-by wiste they bothe Anone
> That it was launcelott du lake. (117-120)

Before the tourney even begins, we see signs of impending deception and secrecy not only on Lancelot's part, but Arthur's knight Agravayne who lingers to spy on Lancelot and the Queen. Lancelot then journeys to the dwelling of the Lord of Ascolot where he once again dons a disguise, choosing to borrow a suit of armor from one of the lord's sons who is ill. The lord's daughter falls in love with Lancelot and though he vows his loyalty to the Queen, he agrees to wear her sleeve in the tourney as a sign of her affection:

> In Another stede myne hert is sette,
> It is not at myne owne wille. . .
> lady, thy sleve thou shalte of-shere,
> I wolle it take for the love of the; (203-4, 213-4)

When Lancelot and the lord's other son reach the tourney, they decide to aid the opposing side since Arthur's party includes the greatest knights. By doing this, they might win greater individual glory, but we wonder how a Lancelot victory might affect the reputation of Arthur's court and whether Lancelot is even concerned with the possibility of damaging the good name of Arthur's court. Wertime reminds us that Lancelot owes no binding allegiance to Arthur because he is a king's son in his own right (1702) and "mayster" of a powerful group of knights (673). And it appears that military glory shall be his as he quickly unhorses Evwayne, Boerte, and Lyonelle, while the rest look on, agreeing this must be Lancelot, yet puzzling at the sign he wears. Ector eventually wounds Lancelot, who retreats to the forest and to the hospitality of the Lord of Ascolot's castle. Presently, Arthur's decides to hold another tournament, but rather than being concerned with strengthening or uniting his court, Arthur wishes to draw forth the distinctive knight again. At first word of the new tourney, the wounded Lancelot is so eager to ride that he denounces his physician's advice that to ride will be his death and when rising to ready himself, breaks open his old wound. Arthur's messenger tells the court about this enthusiastic knight who he is sure is Lancelot and thus "there turnement was than no more" (416).

A group of knights visit the ailing knight and bring back good news of his recovery to the Queen and court. During their

visit, a strange foreshadowing occurs as Lancelot vows vengeance on the man who wounded him, only to find that his assailant was Hector, who stands before him in friendship. The two reconcile as Lancelot reassures Hector that he respects him even more since he has proven his strength. A similar impetuous vengeance between knights is what will spark the feud between Lancelot and Gawain though the result will not be reconciliation but discord. We receive our first glimpse of Gawain here, and as mentioned earlier, he first appears as Lancelot's steadfast friend. In this court scene, Gawain rejoices that Lancelot is alive and expresses his desire to see him:

> . . .certis, that was he
> That the rede armys bere;
> Bot, now he lyffis, welle is me. . .
> Was neuyr tithandis me so dere,
> Bot sore me longis lancelot to se. (537-39, 542-3)

Gawain leaves for Ascolot, not knowing that Lancelot has already departed, and meets the Maid of Ascolot, who is so love-struck with Lancelot. He hears the maid's confession of love and observes Lancelot's armor which he has left behind and which she cites as proof of his devotion to her. Upon his return to Arthur's court, Gawain innocently announces Lancelot's devotion to the Maid, and greatly upsets the Queen with this news of Lancelot's alleged disloyalty. Lancelot finally returns to the court, but ignores the Queen for three days and only after Arthur goes out hunting ventures to her chamber. Gawain's message of Lancelot's infidelity causes an outburst by the Queen, who abruptly informs Lancelot that "the loue þat hathe be vs by-twene / That it shall thus departed be!" (742-3). She then begs him to keep their

previous relations secret. Curiously, this affair between Lancelot and Guinevere is not condemned by the author, nor is it until the end seen as a contributing factor in Arthur's downfall. The author appears to accept this adulterous relationship as a fact whose origins he has no reason to inquire into and which it is futile to condemn. And as we will see later, it is only the Queen herself who finally implies any wrongdoing has been done.

As a result of their lover's spat, Lancelot has once again fled to the forest, much to the dismay of the Queen, but especially of the court, who blame her for the absence of their fellow knight. For the first time, there is a hint of the conflicting loyalties which will eventually bring about the disaster. In addition to being liable for Lancelot's disappearance, the Queen is then unjustifiably convicted of the murder of a Scottish knight. Following an extensive search for Lancelot, the court dines together. Though his intentions are not made clear, a young squire desires to poison Gawain by means of an apple. He gives it to the Queen, "For he thoughte the lady bright / Wold the beste to Gawayne bede" (848-90) but unaware of the poison, the Queen gives the apple to a visiting Scottish knight who dies shortly thereafter. All are convinced of the Queen's guilt, and court members even inscribe on the knight's tomb "That quene Genure with poyson slough" (879). When Sir Mador, the dead knight's brother, accuses the queen, Arthur is obliged to appoint a day when the queen shall be put to death, unless she finds a champion to defend her. Hearing the news of the court's affairs, Lancelot swears that he will avenge her.

Lancelot has rejected the Maid of Ascolot's love mainly

because of his intense loyalty toward the Queen. Gawain's report from Ascolot which he gives in good faith and without any intention of wronging Lancelot is the cause of the Queen's jealousy and Lancelot's latest departure. All this gives particular poignancy to the next scene, in which Arthur and Gawain meet the boat carrying the dead body of the Maid and a letter explaining the true nature of their affair, including the information that Lancelot had refused to be her lover. Once again we observe Gawain in a positive role as Arthur's advisor, "talkynge. . .To ordeyne how it beste myght be" (960-1). After viewing the boat from the tower, they decide to investigate, and Gawain immediately recognizes her as the Maid. Gawain apparently had earlier been rejected by the maid who claimed she would only settle for Lancelot:

> . . .he som tyme had wowyd faste
> his owne leman for to be,
> But she aunsweryd hym Ay in haste,
> "To none bot launcelot wold she te." (1012-1015)

Now she lies dead as a result of Lancelot's rejection. She admits to his greatness in the letter she wrote before her death, but accuses him of being "churlysshe of maners" (1078) because nothing she could do would make him change his mind. The King blames Lancelot for his uncourtly behavior, clearly betraying his ignorance of Guinevere's adultery. Gawain then admits he was wrong in having said Lancelot had taken the maid as his lover. He also acknowledges the fact that Lancelot would not waste his love on such a woman of low position, but rather would choose someone more noble and stately:

"I gabbyd on hym thys ȝendyr day,
that he longede whan I gon sayne
With lady other with som othyr maye;
bot sothe than sayde ye, is not to layne,
that he nolde nought hys loue laye
In so low A place in vayne,
But on a pryse lady and a gaye." (1105-1111)

Gawain continues to try to excuse Lancelot and is dismayed when he realizes what trouble his false report has caused. His anguish is evident by the immediacy with which he leaves the King to confess his fatal error to the Queen. Up to this point, it would seem unlikely that Gawain could become the villain of this romance; he has exhibited extreme loyalty to his king and even to Lancelot and only his candor has created this delicate predicament between the Queen and Lancelot. The first mention of Gawain's villainy comes from the Queen, who scolds Gawain for speaking before he knew the truth and who then proceeds to denounce his behavior, and thus his reputation as well:

I wende thou haddiste be stable and trewe
And full of All curtessye,
bot now me thynke thy maners newe,
thay bene All tournyd to vilanye,
now thou on knyghtis makeste thy glewe
to lye vppon hem for envye; (1160-1165)

With these accusations, Gawain departs, and the queen blames herself for ever having believed such a falsehood about Lancelot. Meanwhile, plans are being made for the Queen's burning, and she as yet has found no one who does not believe she is guilty of poisoning the Scottish knight. Bors finally agrees to defend her, but gives up his post on the appointed day when Lancelot appears disguised to defend the queen against Sir Mador. A tenacious fight ensues with both men being unhorsed at first.

But Mador is finally overcome by Lancelot and rejoices about his performance when he hears that Lancelot was his opponent. We later learn, when a squire confesses to the murder, that all rumors which threatened to divide this court were unjustified.

Gawain next appears as a peacemaker, one who tries to discourage his fellow knights from an act that will surely cause discord within the court. He refuses to join Agravayne and Mordred in their plans to reveal Guinevere's adultery to the king and advises them against their proposed action, stating that revealing the affair would only bring about a war. He then reinforces his loyalty and friendship for Lancelot by stating emphatically that he will never be hostile to Lancelot:

> And sythen myght I neuyr sayne
> The loue that has bene by-twene vs twoo;
> lancelot shalle I neuyr be-trayne
> By-hynde hys bake to be hys foo. (1700-1703)

Gawain's advice and declaration of loyalty will resound when he soon becomes Lancelot's foe. These explicit comments cause Gawain to appear foolish, but stress the dual nature of Gawain's portrayal. The transition from fiend to foe will be an abrupt one because it is not until his brothers are killed that Gawain's loyalty and generous fair-mindedness toward Lancelot cease. Despite Gawain's warning, Agravayne tells the king of the affair, and the king consents to a plan by which to catch the couple in the act. In an effort to capture Lancelot in the Queen's chamber, Agravayne is killed and Lancelot gathers his forces and returns to the court, where the queen is scheduled to be executed for her infidelity. Gawain refuses to attend the execution for he

"wolde neuyr be nere by-syde / There Any woman shuld be brente" (1938-9). But Gawain's brothers, Gaheris and Gareth, attend the execution against his will. In the confusion of Lancelot's rescue of the Queen, he inadvertantly kills the two brothers. Just as Gawain had tried to protect the king from news of the affair, so does Arthur try to keep the news of the deaths secret from Gawain. From the moment Gawain learns from a squire that it is truly Lancelot who kills them, he changes completely. His sole purpose in life becomes vengeance on Lancelot, and he never eases his pressure on the often reluctant king (Whiting 207). His vengeance is so strong that only the death of one of them will bring peace:

> Be-twixte me and launcelote du lake
> Nys man in erthe, for sothe to sayne,
> Shall trewes sette and pees make,
> Er outher of vs have other slayne. (2010-2013)

Hearing of the deaths he has caused, Lancelot realizes that a reconciliation between him and Gawain is now impossible and thus restates the inevitability of the court's downfall, because fellow knights have become foes:

> A sorye man is sir gawayne;
> A-cordement thar me neuyr wene,
> Tille eyther of vs haue other slayne. (2027-2029)

From this point on, Gawain becomes Lancelot's enemy and dramatic foil in his destructive pursuit of earthly justice. All attempts at a reconciliation are made impossible by Gawain's desire for revenge. His quest for vengeance is less personal than familial; thus his duty to avenge his brothers overrides

all claims of friendships. Among critics who have noted Gawain's traditional connection to intense loyalty is Vida Scudder, who writes, "Gawain, like Tristram and Galahad, has his one controlling passion: it is his fealty to his family and his king" (335). But Reid states that Gawain's loyalty, to his family especially, often takes on a negative connotation. She describes Gawain as, "brave, loyal, and warlike, though revengeful, particularly where the honour of his own family is concerned" (59). This passion for loyalty will constitute much of the motivation for Gawain's tenacious retaliation. It is an excess of virtues like loyalty and valor in battle which will eventually leave Gawain looking like a foolish, vindictive warrior, rather than the loyal, skilled fighting man that he is.

Just as Gawain's portrayal is shifting, so too is the king's. Merely a figurehead before this, the king's primary function becomes his part in the feud between Lancelot and Guinevere. He becomes a shifting adversary, first opposed to Lancelot and allied with Guinevere, subsequently changing until his position is the reverse (Wertime 1076). Even though the title suggests the story is Arthur's, we realize the theme is not only the death of Arthur, but the death of the strong foundations of his court, sparked by the internecine strife of knight against knight, and eventually knight against king.

This type of abrupt shift in character and action, with no visible signs of anguish nor internal conflicts within the characters, poses a problem for critics. We are asked to accept these sudden shifts of loyalty and action and to ignore the human emotions that cause them. With friend fighting friend now,

the poet barely hints at the painful inner struggles these characters must experience. Sherron Knopp attributes this absence of individual emotion to the poet's attempt to capture the general overview of a chivalric world, rather than to relate personal affliction:

> In keeping with his practice of emphasizing the general spirit of camaraderie rather than the private lives of individuals, the poet glosses over inner conflicts to dwell on outer results. We do not see, as we might have, a Gawain torn between friendship for Lancelot and revenge for his brothers; an Arthur torn between loyalty to friend and nephew. (575)

This lack of emotion makes the degeneration of the Gawain-character even harder to accept, since we are unprepared for this dramatic turn, having witnessed no progression of feelings that might make believable Gawain's final disposition. Despite these quick shifts of emotion and decision, one thing that remains constant is Gawain's role as a reflection of his court.

Gawain as peacemaker and advisor of Arthur mirrors a court that hopes to avoid anything that might threaten its harmony, including the affair of Lancelot and Guinevere. The king's decision to hold a tournament was one such endeavor that aspired to foster peace and harmony within the court itself. As Gawain has mirrored the fame and prosperity of Arthur's court, so will he emulate the disintegration of this court's inner being. Gawain's quest for retribution signals the beginning not only of his own degeneration as a character, but of the decay of the foundations of Arthur's court. His contemplation of suicide, "All-moste he wolde hym-selff sloo" (1989) is particularly appropriate, especially as a member of a court which will

ultimately kill itself off.

In the first stages of the Gawain and Lancelot feud, Arthur sides with Gawain, vehemently refusing the reconciliation Lancelot sent by messengers. It is "like king, like knight" as Gawain is the king's right hand man. Arthur and Lancelot each gather their forces, Arthur journeying to Joyous Gard as the agressor. But after seventeen weeks of siege with no response from Lancelot's corps, the king and Gawain challenge him to come forth. Arthur will also have to be the aggressor in his confrontation with Mordred just as Gawain must constantly provoke Lancelot to get him to fight. Thus, we see our first indication of the parallelism between the Gawain and Lancelot feud and Arthur's fight against Mordred. Both Arthur and Gawain see their mission as avenging a traitor, and for now they appear not as individuals but as one in purpose and mindset, as we have so frequently witnessed in the context of this study:

> Evir the kynge and Sir gawayne
> Calde hym fals Recreante Knyght,
> And sayde he had hys bretherne slayne
> And treytour was by day and nyght,
> Bad hym come And proue hys mayne. . . (2118-2122)

But Lancelot is reluctant to fight and is rebuked by one of his own for being so timid. Gawain wounds Lyonelle, while Bors unhorses the King, who is assisted back on his horse by Lancelot himself. He is impressed by the courtesy of Lancelot which was what he originally reprimanded him for. As the day's battle ends, Bors and Gawain meet and wound each other, "Bothe to grounde they Felle in fere, / There-fore were fele folke full woo" (2222-3). News of the war between Arthur and Lancelot has reached the pope,

who threatens an interdict if the fighting doesn't cease. Perhaps because of Lancelot's chivalric behavior in battle, Arthur agrees to the pope's commandmant to take back his wife. He states his reason to be so "noght that ynglonde were shente" (2273). But Gawain becomes so overbearing and inflexible that he at last stands alone in his craving for vengeance:

> . . .hym wolde he neuyr Assente
> To make A-corde hem by-twene,
> While Any lyffe were in hym lente. (2275-2277)

By this time, Arthur, moved by Lancelot's courtesy and refusal to fight, has at heart swung over to Lancelot's side, though compelled by circumstances to continue supporting Gawain. Lancelot finally returns the queen after the king agrees to a truce and a reconciliation is attempted. Gawain again accuses Lancelot of murder and refuses Lancelot's offer of peace, "Nay, cordement thar the neuyr wene / Tylle on of vs haue other slayne" (2426-7). In striking contrast to Lancelot, Gawain is wholly uncooperative, making repeatedly antagonistic statements and finally admitting his intent to pursue Lancelot and wage war despite the truce (Wertime 1079).

Following a safe return home, Lancelot divides his troops while Arthur's council agrees that Mordred shall govern the realm in Arthur's absence. Lancelot's superiority emerges as he once again tries to arrange a truce, desperately hoping to save the court from any further injury. Once again the king is willing, but an unforgiving Gawain refuses for the third time though this time his counsel prevails:

"Sertis, nay," sayd syr gawayne,
"he hathe wroght me wo I-noughe,
So traytourly he hathe my bredren slayne,
All for your loue, sir, that is treuthe,
To yngland will I not torne A-gayne
Tylle he be hangid on a boughe; (2676-2681)

The seriousness of this final decision is worth noting, for its consequences are far reaching. If not for Gawain's tainted vengeance on the traitor Lancelot, Arthur would never have had to deal with Mordred's emergence as a traitor, at least not until another war called Arthur away. But maybe it was best that this treason was revealed, rather than merely delaying the inevitable.

The war resumes as Arthur's forces besiege Lancelot's castle and Gawain lives up to his unheralded reputation in battle, unhorsing many of Lancelot's most talented knights and escaping injury for more than half a year. The drama is heightened by setting off Gawain and Lancelot in battle, representing the individual desires of each party. Gawain is driven only to repay this traitor for his brothers deaths, even if that means killing a longtime friend. Lancelot, on the other hand, is doing his best to keep a war from starting, thus emerging a hero for trying to save the Round Table from ruin. Just as Lancelot has thrice sought reconciliation, Gawain seeks three hand-to-hand contests with Lancelot. These prolonged fights illustrate the tragic futility of events, the nobility of Lancelot and implacable pride of Gawain (Mehl 193). More than anything else, they make abundantly clear the striking opposition between the two knights--Lancelot the considerate peacemaker and chivalric hero, and

Gawain, the desperate vindicator, who strives up until his death to complete his task. When Lancelot and Gawain finally meet in battle, Gawain's possession of a supernatural strength elevates Lancelot's prowess to an unprecedented level. Gawain's distinct characteristic is the waxing of his strength until noon and the waning of his strength after noon. Thus, Lancelot must fend off the powerful Gawain until after noon when he can more easily defeat him. Lancelot's courtesy, his reluctance to participate in battle, and the greatness of his opponent all combine to endow him with titanic stature (Wertime 1079). At the same time, Gawain makes himself look progressively worse, taunting Lancelot after each fight is over and drawing a well-deserved reprimand from Lancelot who implies he is acting like a madman:

> Gawayne, while thou myghtis styfflye stonde,
> many A stroke to-day of the I stode,
> And I for-bare the in euery londe
> For love and for the kyngis blode;
> Whan thou arte hole in herte and hond,
> I rede the torne and chaunge thy mode;
> Whyle I am launcelot and man levande,
> Gode sheld me frome werkys wode! (2834-2841)

After recovering from an illness, Gawain once more challenges Lancelot, who although hesitant, finally consents. He strikes Gawain on his old wound, drawing more insults from the pathetic Gawain. Lancelot again rebukes the fallen Gawain and begs the king to retreat from what he believes will be a futile effort on their part:

> Gawayne, me rewes in my mode,
> Men hald the so noble A knyght.
> Wenystow I were so wode

> Agaynste A feble man to fyght!
> I wyll not now, by cross on Rode
> Nor neuer yit dyd by day or nyght.
> But haue good day, my lord the kynge,
> And All youre douȝhty kynghtis by-dene,
> Wendyth home and leue your werrynge,
> For here ye shall no worshyppe wynne. (2924-2933)

Three months later, Gawain is eager for yet another confrontation with Lancelot, but word from England about Mordred's treason prevents this. Gawain's and Arthur's sights are set on another traitor now, "That fals traytour, sir Mordreid" (2954) who has apparently won popularity with the English people and has proclaimed that he will marry the queen. The queen flees to the tower of London and after threats from Mordred, the archbishop takes refuge in the wilderness. He sheds tears for the quickly declining state of England, "Often gan he wepe and wake / For yngland that had such sorowis sare" (3032-3). In the first battle with Mordred, Gawain dies unceremoniously, in sharp contrast to the Alliterative Morte where he is given three separate eulogies. Gawain is just another casualty of the day's battle here. The author's decision not to comment at length about Gawain's good deeds in life is suitable since Gawain's behavior in the last year has been anything but chivalric:

> One hytte hym vpon the olde wounde
> With a tronchon of An ore;
> There is good gawayne gone to grounde,
> That speche spake he neuyr more. (3070-3073)

We are, however, reminded of Gawain's previous reputation when Arthur finds his dead body and respectfully places it on a bier to be sent to a chapel. Even with Gawain's recent decline,

Arthur's affection for his friend has not lessened, as is made apparent by his reaction to the finding of Gawain's body:

> But whan he fand syr gawayne
> In A shyppe laye dede by A maste,
> Or euyr he coveryd myght or mayne,
> An C tymes hys hert nyghe braste. (3132-3135)

A sequence of Arthur's two dreams immediately follows, one foreshadowing the end we already realize is unavoidable--Arthur's death--and one in which Gawain returns begging the king to conclude a truce and perhaps hoping to repair some of the damage he has caused. Arthur first has the Wheel-of-Fortune dream in which he falls from the fated wheel to dragons who wait hungrily below. Just before daybreak he imagines Gawain, who, surrounded by angels as well as lords and ladies he aided in life, advises him to make peace. This is ironic advice from the man whose irrational "Sertis nay" excluded all possibility of amity during his life (Knopp 580). Gawain also warns Arthur that if he does not forsake tomorrow's battle, "ye shall be slayne" (3221). Gawain has returned in a dream to try to prevent the ultimate consequence of his feud with Lancelot. Arthur agrees to a truce, but Gawain's stubborn persistence with Lancelot is mirrored by Mordred, who rejects the proposal but does consent to a meeting to discuss terms. Distrust and deception now rule this court that had once flourished with strong ties of brotherhood and loyalty. It is distrust that will finally cause the deaths of both Mordred and Arthur. Arthur prepares for the meeting, while Mordred gathers twelve men for every one of Arthur's. Suspicious of each other, Arthur and Mordred both tell their troops to attack at the first sign of treachery. Ironically, an adder

sting on one of the knights instigates suspicion and eventual combat. Once again parallel to the Gawain-Lancelot sequence, the day's battle ends with Arthur and Mordred standing alone--and though Arthur slays Mordred, he too is sorely wounded. What began with a tournament to strengthen Arthur's court ends with the disintegration of it. The final meeting between Lancelot and Guinevere serves as a forceful reminder of their joint responsibility for the initial disharmony and suspicion in Arthur's court. Because we have grown so used to blaming the overbearing Gawain for perpetuating his feud with Lancelot and hence for the division of the court, we take notice when Guinevere reveals to her companions that her love affair with Lancelot was the cause of the general ruin:

> Abbes, to you I knowlache here
> That throw thys ylke man And me,
> For we to-gedyr han loved vs dere,
> All thys sorowfull werre hathe be;
> my lorde is slayne, that had ne pere,
> And many a doughty knyght And free;
> There-fore for sorowe I dyed nere,
> As sone as I euyr hym gan see. . .   (3638-3645)

Determining who is most to blame for the court's ruin is useless. What is important is that all conflicts grew from within the court, and the deaths of both Gawain and Arthur were a result of fighting against their own.

In no other work is the role of Gawain as reflection of the court more apparent than in the Stanzaic Morte. Gawain's inconsistent portrayal as peacemaker, vindictive aggressor, and peacemaker again in Arthur's dream, reflects the turmoil and fragile workings of a court that has lost its framework of camaraderie, trust, and loyalty. Such inconsistency of character

is also seen in Arthur, who although ineffectual and almost powerless throughout the poem, is honored as the hero of the story, while Lancelot fades into the background. Arthur is properly given his last respects and in the most memorable version of his death, the poet allows us to believe that Arthur will some day return to rule his people.

These five Middle English poems are a faithful mirror in which the triumph and fall of Gawain's own character defines the weal and woe of Arthur's court. The cycle of poems represents a progression of Gawain's effect first on the prosperity of the court and finally on its destruction. He contributes to the court's immediate standing in Medieval society through his actions as an individual or as a surrogate for Arthur.

In the first work examined, Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlyle, Gawain's flawless behavior as a guest of the Carl emphatically dismisses any belief the Carl might have that Arthur's knights are ill-taught and in doing so reinforces his own reputation for courtesy and obedience. He reflects such a positive image of the Round Table that the skeptical Carl repents and in a dramatic reversal becomes a member of Arthur's prestigious court. So Gawain not only represents his own court well but knighthood in general, exemplifying knightly courtesy while promoting the credibility of Arthur's good name.

Gawain mirrors the Round Table's success differently in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight than he does in Carl of Carlyle. First, Gawain is not acting as an individual, but rather as Arthur's substitute in opposing the Green Knight. Although Morgan le Fay's scheme to diminish Arthur's court tests Gawain's

traditional virtues of courtesy and valor in battle, Gawain takes on more responsibility than merely that of living up to his own distinguished reputation. He has to uphold Arthur's reputation as well. The second distinction is that even though Gawain brings glory to the Round Table, he does it not through victory, but through his behavior in defeat. His acknowledgement of and shame for his misdeed so impress his tester that Arthur's court is elevated, not diminished. Although he does not increase the membership of the court as he did in Carl of Carlyle, he strengthens the kinship of the existing Round Table by encouraging the wearing of the green lace as a reminder of his mistake.

In The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, Gawain again acts as Arthur's replacement but succeeds in saving Arthur's life and reputation because of his intense devotion to the king and because of his ability to respond admirably in every situation. Gawain's depiction as a confident, loyal knight compensates for Arthur's portrayal as a weak and insecure individual. When one of Arthur's enemies seeks vengeance for what he says is the wrongful usurpation of lands, Gawain rescues the king from embarrassment and death, winning, at the same time, the love of a beautiful woman, transformed by Gawain's perfect behavior from a hideous hag.

In the two works which focus on Arthur's death, the Alliterative Morte Arthure and the Stanzaic Morte Arthur, Gawain mirrors the king directly by foreshadowing his death. In the Stanzaic Morte, he foreshadows the downfall of the Round Table as well. The many similarities between Arthur and Gawain in the Alliterative Morte reach their culmination in the events

leading to Gawain's death, which foreshadow almost exactly what subsequently happens to Arthur. Although the pageantry and eulogizing that characterize Arthur's funeral are absent, at that of Gawain, three separate tributes reinforce the greatness of Arthur's court. In the *Stanzaic Morte*, rather than mirroring the court's greatness, Gawain reflects the vengeance and distrust of a Round Table that is slowly deteriorating. In perpetuating the feud with Lancelot, Gawain comes to bear most of the blame for the division of the court's strong bonds of loyalty and brotherhood. Post medieval authors like Malory, Morris, and Tennyson have strengthened this negative view of Gawain by their portrayals of him as a dishonest and vindictive knight. But despite his lessened status in recent centuries, Gawain continues to be studied in earnest by the critics. From the present investigation, the importance of Gawain's presence as a member of the Round Table should be clear. When the court prospered, Gawain inevitably had a part in it, and it is only appropriate that when the Round Table fell, Gawain fell with it. His role as a reflection of the court has for him one long-lasting advantage--as long as Arthurian legend lives, so too will the noble Sir Gawain.

NOTES

[1]The Carl possesses many similarities to the giant of Norse mythology, Thor. Besides being large in stature and having a great appetite for food and drink, the Carl relies on his strong right arm and simple weapons to coerce his beasts and guests into submission. The Carl is also involved in the same types of testing that the outspoken Thor undergoes.

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