

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: THE GAWAIN-CHARACTER IN FOUR MIDDLE ENGLISH

ROMANCES: A STUDY IN MEDIEVAL COURTESY AND COURTLY LOVE

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This investigation is concerned with an analysis of the Gawain-character as it occurs in four early medieval romances covering the time span, 1350-1450: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle, The Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, and The Jeaste of Sir Gawain. These four poems out of an extant eleven in which Gawain figures as a main character consistently depict him as a model, virtuous knight, the exemplar of chivalric courtesy and courtly love. A close analysis of this character, in the light of the medieval conventions of courtesy and courtly love, reveals that the anonymous authors of these four poems were working with a common source of conventions, namely those established by Eleanor of Aquitaine in her celebrated court of love at Poitiers, and those inherent to chivalric courtesy.

This study is prefaced with a brief review of the history of courtly love from the time of Ovid to Eleanor of

Aquitaine and includes a discussion of the rules of courtly love as devised by Andreas Capellanus.

A summary account considers the roles of the women characters whom Gawain encounters in these romances and the part they played in shaping the literature of courtly love.

THE GAWAIN-CHARACTER IN FOUR MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCES:
A STUDY IN MEDIEVAL COURTESY AND COURTLY LOVE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
PREFACE	ii
Chapter	
1. MEDIEVAL COURTESY AND THE COURTS OF LOVE	1
2. THE INTERNAL EVIDENCE	21
3. THE WOMEN AND THE GAWAIN-CHARACTER: A SUMMARY STATEMENT	56
BIBLIOGRAPHY	61

PREFACE

The character of Sir Gawain has been one of infinite fascination for literary scholars. If one were to trace the history of this character from the time of its English debut through its depiction in Sir Thomas Malory's La Morte d'Arthur to its presentation in Alfred Lord Tennyson's Idylls of the King, he would observe a wide pendulum-like sweep of characterization that occurred in the space of some five hundred years. Uniquely, Sir Gawain seems to have been the one knight in the Arthurian cycle to have endured an unbridled hero worship during the fourteenth century and a cruel character assassination in the Victorian period, nevertheless always retaining his popularity. It became for me a source of curiosity to discover, if possible, why such a literary character could have survived for so many centuries, even, at times, overshadowing his more well known lord, King Arthur.

Before I attempted to unravel the mystery, I had to reach a decision on whether to study Gawain's reputation in the fourteenth century or to investigate the reasons for his later so-called fall from grace in the works of Malory and Tennyson. It would have been simple enough to have chronicled Gawain's misdeeds and downfall; however, it seemed to me that, in our own age of mistrust when the maligning of political figures is common practice, when the

private lives of former heroes are salaciously made a matter of public knowledge, when there appear to be few people left whom to emulate and revere, it was only fitting and proper that I concentrate on the more exalting aspects of the Gawain-character.

After reaching this decision, I came to believe that there undoubtedly was a common source for the Gawain-character as he is presented in the early anonymous romances. Each of eleven poems composed between 1370 and 1500 in which Gawain figures as a main character show him exemplifying the same virtuous qualities. Moreover, the dates of these poems point to the work of more than one author who chronicled Gawain's adventures. I concluded, therefore that, if the same type of character were depicted consistently for the better part of two centuries, these various authors must have been working with a common source of conventions in delineating the character.

For the purposes of this present investigation, I have chosen to consider four early Gawain romances: the much studied Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and the lesser known Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle, The Jeaste of Sir Gawain, and The Weddynge of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell. Of invaluable help to me in the preparation of this study were Larry Benson's Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Frederich Heer's The Medieval

World, and John Wells' A Manual of the Writings in Middle English 1050-1400.

Finally, I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Charles E. Walton, who directed my thesis; and to Dr. James Hoy, who graciously served as my second reader.

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Chapter 1

MEDIEVAL COURTESY AND THE COURTS OF LOVE

Unlike many contemporary writers seeking fame and fortune, the greater number of authors in the medieval period did not affix their names to their literary compositions, a practice that was not the result of any carelessness or indifference. The medievalist simply believed that it was unnecessary to sign a work of literature, the idea being that since all knowledge was the province of God, no man could possess anything of this nature on an individual basis. Nevertheless, an age of individualism was emerging. Unfortunately, at the time of Gawain's greatest popularity as a character in countless romances, the individual was still a nonentity, making it difficult for the modern scholar to assess every aspect of an author's work, being unable to identify individual authors or to compare skills. However, there is some encouragement to be taken in the fact that the anonymous Gawain chroniclers, in depicting their hero, drew upon commonly accepted medieval traditions and conventions so essential to an understanding of the so-called Gawain-character.

It becomes at once obvious that the first of the Gawain-poets and those who followed were well acquainted with the prevalent customs of courtesy and courtly love.

In all probability, the author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was a member of a courtly society that existed during the 1300's.¹ It has even been speculated that he may have had as a patron a wealthy aristocrat.² The internal evidence of the poem reveals that, at least, this poet was well-read, knowledgeable about English sports, and well-versed in the traditions of courtly life.³ Moreover, the same kind of evidence suggests that the authors of the other extant Gawain poems that are considered in this present investigation were privy to similar experiences.

The time-honored tradition of courtliness or courtesy is probably readily understood by modern readers. Conversely, the concept of courtly love, often confused with courtliness, is not so familiarly known. Courtly love, as practiced some two centuries before the date of the first Gawain poem to be considered, has been defined as an organized system of theories about love and courtly etiquette that dominated the aristocratic ideal of sex in medieval literature from 1300-1500.⁴ Denomy explains that courtly

¹A. C. Spearing, The Gawain Poet, p. 6.

²Henry L. Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 12.

³Ibid.

⁴Sarah F. Barrow, Medieval Society Romances, p. 6; see also, Alexander J. Denomy, "Courtly Love and Courtliness," Speculum, XXVIII (January, 1953), 44.

love ". . . is a synthesis of borrowings and adaptations made from several sources."⁵ Interestingly, although courtly love reached its highest literary expression in medieval England, its presence is also to be found in more exotic lands in a different time span.

The earliest treatment of courtly love was written by the poet Ovid during the reign of Emperor Augustus.⁶ Little, however, is known about this author except for that which may be gleaned from his three poems, The Art of Love, The Cure for Love, and The Amours, works that reflect his concepts on the sensuality of love.⁷ Ovid advocated love affairs with the wives of other men, multiple love affairs, the deceiving of women by men, and the arousing of a lover's jealousy by both men and women.⁸ His works were well known to the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europeans.⁹ For example, it has been proved that the troubadours of England and France were highly influenced by his poems, even though they tended to overlook some of the blatant sexuality found

⁵Ibid., p. 45.

⁶Andreas Capellanus, The Art of Courtly Love, p. 5.

⁷Ibid. See also, Theodore Silverstein, "Guenevere, or the Uses of Courtly Love," in The Meaning of Courtly Love, ed. F. X. Newman, p. 81.

⁸Capellanus, p. 5.

⁹Ibid., p. 6.

therein.¹⁰ However, Ovid is not, it is now believed, the only major influence on courtly love in Europe. In 1022, Ibn Hazm, admittedly influenced by Ovid, wrote a love treatise entitled The Dove's Neck Ring.¹¹ A member of the Moslem Society, in theory he differs in his attitudes only slightly from Ovid, his most obvious departure from Ovid's concepts being his belief that Moslems should not have affairs with married women.¹² This singular difference, however, does not alter the widely-held concept that courtly love originated as a blend of both Roman and Moslem cultures.

During later Christian times, the man who continued to write about love in the Roman and Moslem tradition was the grandfather of Eleanor of Aquitaine, the greatest proponent of medieval courtly love. Guillame IX was a many-faceted individual--a Crusader and a writer of secular literature.¹³ In a lifetime that spanned fifty-eight years, he was responsible for the first troubadour poems that have been preserved.¹⁴ Although he was highly criticized by the

¹⁰Ibid. See also, Amy Kelly, "Eleanor of Aquitaine and Her Courts of Love," Speculum, XII (January, 1937), 11.

¹¹Capellanus, p. 6.

¹²Ibid., p. 12.

¹³Frederich Heer, The Medieval World, p. 124.

¹⁴Marion Meade, Eleanor of Aquitaine, p. 13.

clergy for the writing of what was considered to be obscene poetry, his works, nevertheless, mirror his own deep-felt Christian beliefs.¹⁵ There were three distinct thematic periods of his authorship that had an impact upon courtly love as it was later practiced by his granddaughter and which are pertinent to this present study. The first concerns a tug-of-war between knights and clerks for the love of a beautiful woman.¹⁶ In his second period, he transfers to his love songs the vocabulary traditionally employed in the praise of God, now used in the praise of women.¹⁷ Finally, in his third period, he merely reiterates the same feelings which he expressed during his first period, now, however, with a pessimism of defeat and a growing sense of old age.¹⁸

Eleanor of Aquitaine, true to her heritage, was the likely person to further her grandfather's basic tenets. She was a beautiful, shrewd, and calculating woman. Her marriage to two kings of major power and her influence over two ruling sons are unprecedented in early European history. This fascinating woman left an impression on a particular

¹⁵Heer, p. 124.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Meade, p. 13.

¹⁸Heer, p. 125.

segment of society and fostered a popular literary genre, but she was also influential in shaping the lives of four monarchs of medieval times. The subject of courtly love and its concomitant literature cannot be considered without a brief account of her life.

She was born in 1122 in a kingdom rich in splendor and luxury for the time.¹⁹ She married Louis VII of France at the age of fifteen.²⁰ Whereas she was full of energy and the love of life, Louis was shy and retiring. Whereas she was a patron of the arts, he was interested in joining the Second Crusade.²¹ Although only one year her senior, he was more interested in pursuing intellectual and religious studies than in keeping a young wife happy.²² He did nothing to help Eleanor adjust to a life in Paris.²³ The two, whose marriage had been politically arranged, were totally unsuited to each other. Eleanor was more accustomed to well-kept, luxurious buildings and a soft, relatively comfortable life. Instead, in Paris of the twelfth century, she was forced to endure a rotting, dirty city with none of

¹⁹Ibid., 126.

²⁰Charles Wood, The Age of Chivalry, p. 125.

²¹Ibid.

²²Heer, p. 126.

²³Ibid.

the beauty that has since made it a famous metropolis of the world. Understandably, therefore, when the opportunity arose for her to go on a Crusade, she was happy to be leaving. Her subsequent journey to the exotic lands of the East in 1147 served not only to alter the course of her life, but also to alter the lives of many whom she would influence in her lifetime.

Although it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify the precise experiences in the East which convinced her that she had been wasting her time in Paris, it is known that she was very much impressed with the culture which she had encountered there.²⁴ During her visits to Byzantium, Baghdad, Antioch, and Jerusalem, she was exposed to the kind of life that she believed she should be living. Reared as she had been in the lap of luxury in the cities of Aquitaine, she was receptive to the idea that her life must change. Consequently, when her Eastern sojourn ended, she vowed that she would seek a more exciting life without the help of the monastically trained Louis. In fact, she has often been credited with the statement, perhaps made to her future father-in-law, Geoffrey of Anjou, "I thought to have married a king, but found that I am wed to a monk."²⁵

²⁴Amy Kelly, "Eleanor of Aquitaine and Her Courts of Love," Speculum, XII (January, 1937), 6.

²⁵Heer, p. 128.

When the royal couple returned to France, she sought an annulment on the grounds of consanguinity.²⁶ It was quickly processed because Louis' advisors did not wish to have their king embarrassed. Although Eleanor had borne him two daughters, the royal assemblage was concerned because there had been no son. Thus, just six weeks after the annulment, Eleanor, now almost thirty, married Henry Plantagenet.²⁷ She and Henry were, in the eyes of the medieval world, the perfect match, and two years after their celebrated nuptials, Henry became king, and she later provided him with male heirs, giving birth to eight children between 1153-1166, five boys and three girls.²⁸

After her first unsuccessful marriage, Eleanor was, at last, able to fashion a court according to her own preferences. Immediately, she convinced her new husband-king that he should become a patron of the arts,²⁹ and thereafter a succession of troubadours, writers of literary romances, mimes, and dancers were frequent visitors in her lively court.³⁰ Although many churchmen expressed a genuine shock, even to suggesting the excommunication of these entertainers,

²⁶Kelly, p. 7.

²⁷Heer, p. 128.

²⁸Ibid., p. 130.

²⁹Kelly, p. 7.

³⁰Ibid.

Eleanor was, nevertheless, successful in introducing to the English court the more exotic traditions of Byzantium and Antioch.³¹ Thus, the most productive years of this marriage, from 1154 to 1170, were those which saw a flowering of culture heretofore unknown to England of the twelfth century. But this paradise was not long lasting. Although she had been aware for many years of her husband's infidelity, his affair with Rosemund Clifford finally became unbearable to her.³² It posed an open threat to her sovereignty and prompted her to take drastic measures. Certainly her fear for the loss of royal power and for her control over her husband was influential in motivating her next decisive move.

In 1170, she retired to Poitiers, her family possession, and established there one of Europe's most unusual courts.³³ She proclaimed Richard, her favorite son, the ruling noble.³⁴ At last, she possessed what she had always wanted--complete dominion and sovereignty without the necessity of answering to anyone. Her court, thus, became one of the most celebrated in Europe, widely renowned for its teaching of the rules of courtesy to young, brash nobles.³⁵

³¹Ibid., p. 8.

³²Meade, p. 233.

³³Heer, p. 134.

³⁴Kelly, p. 10.

³⁵Ibid., p. 11.

To this court came future royalty and lesser nobles dedicated to patterning themselves after the code of behavior promoted by this unusual woman. Surprisingly, the children of both of her marriages were also frequent visitors.³⁶ She was also fortunate in having the daughter of her first marriage, Marie de Champagne, close at her side as a permanent member and vibrant leader in the court of love, as it came to be known.³⁷ Marie had inherited from her mother an affinity for romantic literature and the system known as the amour courtois which dealt with love affairs controlled by a set of complicated rules.³⁸ In her attempts to refine the "rabble" of the noble class, she imported a learned clerk from Paris, Andreas Capellanus, who worked diligently, developing a code of love.³⁹ In his De Arte Honeste Amandi, reportedly executed without much enthusiasm, he established a basis for the ideal l'amour courtois.⁴⁰ Marie herself admitted that this code was borrowed directly from the code of chivalry as practiced some six hundred years earlier by King Arthur and his most chivalric knight, Gawain.⁴¹

³⁶Heer, p. 135.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., p. 136.

³⁹Kelly, p. 14.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 15.

This highly successful court with its code of love exalted the position of women and began to alter the lowly social position to which women had been relegated by the Church. The idea that women were not necessarily inferior to men quickly spread throughout Europe, even in a time when mass communications did not exist, and it was Eleanor and her female associates who destroyed the ancient concept that women were incapable of ruling or of making state decisions. When lovers brought their numerous complaints to this court of love, Eleanor and her judges supplied the answers in keeping with the code devised by Capellanus.⁴² Women were now on the verge of freeing themselves from a stereotyped concept that had prevailed since the earliest of times.

The court itself was exactly what the term implied. Its judges, all women, sat above the visitors gathered for an evening's entertainment, the dais often holding such dignitaries as Eleanor, Marie de Champagne, Isabella, Countess of Flanders, Emma of Anjou, and many others.⁴³ On a typical evening, after hearing the night's romance, the jury would then convene to hear the problems of some noble, young knight. All judgments handed down were consistent with Capellanus's rules for courtly love. A consideration of

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Heer, p. 137.

these thirty-one rules is pertinent to an understanding of their impact upon courtly love literature and to an analysis of the early Gawain poems included in this investigation.

The rules were the following:

- I. Marriage is no real excuse for not loving.
- II. He who is not jealous cannot love.
- III. No one can be bound by a double love.
- IV. That which a love takes against the will of his beloved has no relish.
- V. It is all known that love is always increasing or decreasing.
- VI. Boys do not love until they arrive at the age of maturity.
- VII. When the lover dies, a widowhood of two years is required of survivor.
- VIII. No one should be deprived of love without the very best of reasons.
- IX. No one can love unless impelled by the persuasion of love.
- X. Love is a stranger in the home of avarice.
- XI. It is not proper to love any woman whom one would be ashamed to marry.
- XII. A true love does not desire to embrace in love anyone except the beloved.
- XIII. When made public, love rarely endures.
- XIV. The easy attainment of love makes it of little value; difficulty of attainment makes it prized.
- XV. Every lover regularly turns pale in the presence of his beloved.
- XVI. When a lover suddenly catches sight of his beloved, his heart palpitates.
- XVII. New love puts to flight an old one.
- XVIII. Good character alone makes any man worthy of love.
- XIX. If love diminishes, it quickly fails and rarely revives.
- XX. A man in love is always apprehensive.
- XXI. Real jealousy always increases the feeling of love.
- XXII. Jealousy, and therefore love, are increased when one suspects his beloved.
- XXIII. He whom love vexes eats and sleeps very little.
- XXIV. Every act of a lover ends in the thought of his beloved.
- XXV. A true lover considers nothing good except what he thinks will please his lover.

- XXVI. Love can deny nothing to love.
 XXVII. A lover can never have enough of the solaces of his beloved.
 XXVIII. A slight presumption causes a lover to suspect his beloved.
 XXIX. A man who is vexed by too much passion usually does not love.
 XXX. A true lover is constantly and without intermission possessed by the thought of his beloved.
 XXXI. Nothing forbids one woman from being loved by two men, or one man by two women.⁴⁴

The very first rule, "Marriage is no real excuse for not loving," condones the practice of adultery.⁴⁵ In this instance, love, of course, refers to sexual love. True Platonic love was not a viable part of the courtly love system. The greater the beauty of the beloved, the more quickly inspired was the lover. Illicit love was the order of the day, not the exception, as Rule VIII makes clear. Moreover, neither marriage nor betrothal was a barrier if two people were physically attracted to one another. A lover, as well, must realize that the desires of the woman were to be considered before all else. Sovereignty, that quality which Eleanor attained in her court at Poitiers, is probably the inspiration behind Rule XXV. The final rule establishes a system of equality for both sexes. Although, in the modern sense, there seems to have been provided no double standard for loving, the lack of such a standard is understandable

⁴⁴Capellanus, pp. 184-186.

⁴⁵Ibid.

when one recalls that these rules were enforced by women and intended to be followed by men.

The true nature of this court may best be observed in some of the decisions handed down by the women judges when they were petitioned by troubled lovers. Some of these decisions, it will be seen, support the time-worn statement that there is little new under the sun, since many of the cases heard in this court resemble those of a twentieth-century man or woman. For example, one age-old question was put to Eleanor, concerning preferences: e.g., which is preferred, the love of a young man, or that of an older man?⁴⁶ Eleanor declares that the best lover is he who is known by his knowledge, character, and manners, not by his age, believing that a young man would rather love an older woman, and that an older man would prefer the love of a younger woman. Moreover, she states that women, young and old, enjoy the solaces of a young man better than those of an older man. Thus, she craftily concludes that the solution to the problem is merely physiological.⁴⁷

Another case heard in this court involves the judgment of Lady Ermengarde of Narbonne. In this instance, a man petitions her to make clear the distinction between the

⁴⁶Ibid. See also, Elizabeth Jenkins, The Mystery of King Arthur, p. 65.

⁴⁷Capellanus, p. 184.

course of greater affection: e.g., the love of lovers, or the love of married people.⁴⁸ She reasons that the love between lovers and the affection of the marital union possess totally different qualities, concluding that there is no possible comparison to be drawn between the two because the ambiguity negates the comparison: "It is no true comparison to say that a name is simpler than a body or that the outline of a speech is better arranged than the delivery."⁴⁹

The Countess of Flanders also sat in judgment on a case brought before her by a woman. In this instance, a man with a first love sought the love of another, as if the first love did not exist.⁵⁰ The answer which the Countess gives holds no mercy for the offending male. In her decision, the man should not receive the love of either woman, nor the love of any honorable woman in the future! She concludes, then, for her time and all future time:

But the woman should not consider it any reflection on her reputation, since any woman who wants to have the praise of the world must indulge in love, and it is not easy for anybody to examine a man's innermost faith and the secrets of his heart, and so we often find wisdom deceived under the cloak of many words.⁵¹

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 184.

⁵¹Ibid.

Finally, the Countess of Champagne responded to a man who wanted to know what gifts were proper for women to accept, by stating that love-tokens were customarily given and, indeed, expected. She explains that women, furthermore, may accept such specific items as a handkerchief, a mirror, a girdle, a purse, a comb, sleeves, gloves, a compact, a ring, a wash basin, or little dishes.⁵² In general, a woman may accept almost any gift from a lover ". . . if it is clear that in accepting the gift that she is free from all avarice."⁵³

These court decisions were directly advantageous to women of noble birth in the twelfth century, and they were meant to be. Although this experiment was to have but fleeting success, it influenced, nonetheless, the course of literary romance through the ages. Nowhere is this influence more evident than in the tales about Gawain, composed some two hundred years after the dissolution of this court of love.

At the same time, one must take into consideration the medieval tradition of courtesy in conjunction with the conventions of courtly love, both oftentimes confused, since their relative terms are frequently used synonymously. It is true that there is a fine line of distinction between

⁵²Ibid., p. 176.

⁵³Ibid.

these two practices. As Denomy points out, courtly has the essential meaning of "belonging to, emanating from, for, and in a court."⁵⁴ Actually, it is a literature of courts, dealing with courtliness and embodying all of its ethical and social ideals. However, when this term is applied to love, as it often is, courtly has quite another meaning designating a species of love defined by the troubadours in their lyrics, "that sort of love that is accounted the origin and font of man's natural excellence, the novel conception that sexual love is the ennobling force in man."⁵⁵ Hence, it resembles the code devised by Capellanus and is the courtly love literature of medieval romances. Moreover, it is true that the precepts expounded in the court of love grew out of the virtue of courtesy, even though courtesy is a separate and distinct character trait inherent in the teaching of the medieval period. Unlike the term, "courtly love," "courtesy" or courtoise has a recorded use from 1175-1200 in Northern France.⁵⁶ On the other hand, "courtly love" was not employed to describe a species of behavior (such as that which existed in Eleanor's court) until the nineteenth century.⁵⁷ The term, "courtesy," at once

⁵⁴Alexander Denomy, "Courtly Love and Courtliness," Speculum, XXVIII (January, 1953), 44.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 48.

⁵⁷John Stevens, Medieval Romance, p. 29.

conjures up the picture of bold knights rescuing fair damsels in distress, undertaking dangerous exploits in the aid of a companion, and slaying menacing animals. It is synonymous with the social and moral ideal of the Middle Ages. Moreover, the courtly and chivalric knight could be nothing but courteous. Although the code of courtesy was not as specific as that devised by Capellanus for courtly love, it was expected to be followed to the letter.

Various studies of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries detail numerous theories about the nature of courtesy. One such undertaking which embraces the whole corpus of knowledge on the subject is the book by S. M. Galpin entitled Cortois and Vilain: A Study of the Distinctions Made between Them by the French and Provençal Poets of the 12th, 13th, and 14th Centuries. In this work, the cortois is depicted as an individual of

. . . polished manners, gentle and courteous in speech, always taking the middle course, humble, considerate in his relations with his fellows and helpful to others, upright in character, loyal, generous, wearing fine garments, courageous, a perfect lover, of a merry disposition, of fine personal appearance, possessing a high order of intelligence, and of a religious turn of mind; wherefore he is an object of admiration to the opposite sex and was held in high esteem by his friends. His morals might be either loose or strict.⁵⁸

This all-encompassing definition serves accurately to describe the character of the many model knights like Sir

⁵⁸Denomy, p. 48.

Gawain who inspired the medieval noble class to accept the precepts governing the actions of the courteous individual. Certainly, those who studied at Eleanor's court could not fully understand the meaning of courtly love unless they first understood the meaning of courtesy. In other words, as practiced, courtly love was nothing without courtesy. Capellanus's rules would have had no foundation without the medieval tradition of courtesy. Indeed, there is a symbiotic relationship between the two. Courtly love needed courtesy in order to survive, both in literature and in reality. The troubadours of the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries understood this concept and realized its importance in their love poems.

Although Eleanor's court lasted only four years during the twelfth century, its impact upon courtly literature was so profound that the decisions and rules promoted at her court at Poitiers influenced three centuries of troubadour writing. Moreover, the French and English concepts of courtesy have remained noble attributes of character since the twelfth century. It may be assumed, as well, that the writers of medieval romances were intimately acquainted with these views. Certainly, as it will be seen, the anonymous authors of the four early Gawain romances investigated in this present study freely made use of these concepts. They understood what their audiences needed to know, wanted to hear, and expected to have in the way of

entertainment. The early Gawain-character is explicitly fashioned from these medieval sources of courtesy and courtly love. When the two themes are missing in the Gawain poems written after the fifteenth century, the character of this great knight is completely altered, indeed often maligned. Gawain is only the same, virtuous man in the romances written about him between 1350-1500. The internal evidence in these poems suggests that the authors drew from a source of common knowledge about courtesy and courtly love in delineating the character of this chivalric knight.

Chapter 2

THE INTERNAL EVIDENCE

In each of ten extant medieval poems in which Gawain emerges as a hero, this "gentyll Knyght" retains the same character traits. However, this Gawain-character, defined in terms of the previously discussed traditions of courtly love and courtesy, is most consistently presented in four of the poems within the cycle of ten which chronicle his exploits. The remaining six poems, Ywain and Gawain (c. 1300), The Awntyrs of Arthure (c. 1350), The Avowyng of King Arthur (c. 1400), The Grene Knight (c. 1400), The Turke and Gawain (c. 1400), and Golagrus and Gawain (c. 1450), either relate the adventures of other knights or do not emphasize the themes of courtly love and courtesy. It is the four poems hereafter considered, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, (c. 1370), Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle (c. 1400), The Jeaste of Sir Gawain (c. 1400), and The Weddynge of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell (c. 1450), which most clearly embody these themes.⁵⁹

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, probably the best known of the Gawain poems, is also the most adventurous and the best written. Many critics have concerned themselves

⁵⁹John Wells, A Manual of Writing in Middle English 1050-1400, p. 51.

with the intricacies of the hunting and beheading sequences, but few have paid much attention to the temptation love scenes to determine their relationship to the rules of courtly love.

The plot of this romance is relatively simple. During the Christmas season at Camelot, King Arthur refuses to begin the festivities until he has witnessed a "marvel." Suddenly, a Green Knight, clad in green and mounted upon a green horse, rides into the Great Hall. Promptly, this strange knight issues a challenge to anyone of the members of the Round Table to strike him a blow with an axe, his one condition being that he will be permitted to return the blow in a year's time. When no one, at first, responds, the Green Knight is amused, an attitude which at once angers King Arthur, who reaches for the axe, but Gawain intercedes and asks that he be allowed to deliver the blow. He strikes, and the Green Knight's head falls to the floor. However, the decapitated knight picks up the severed head and commands Gawain to meet him in a year-and-a-day at the Green Chapel. Time passes, and following All Saint's Day, Gawain departs from Camelot to search for the mysterious Green Chapel. For almost two months, he endures the hardships of winter and is unsuccessful in his venture, but on Christmas Eve, he comes upon a castle in a forest and asks for lodging. Here, he is recognized and entertained royally by the lord and lady of the castle. On December 27, when he tries to continue on

his journey, the lord of the castle confides that the Green Chapel is nearby and persuades him to remain until New Year's Day. In the manner of a jest, the lord strikes up a bargain to the effect that the two men should exchange, each evening, that which they have received, each day. Each morning, the lord goes on the hunt, and Gawain remains at home in bed. On each of the following three mornings, Gawain is visited in his bed chamber by the comely lady of the castle, who offers him her love. Although he manages subtly to refuse her offers, he accepts her kiss each time. He faithfully gives these kisses to the lord who, in turn, gives Gawain the kill of the day. On the third day, however, the lady also offers Gawain her silk girdle which she claims has mysterious powers to protect him from harm. Gawain accepts this gift, but does not give it to the lord at the close of that day. On the next morning, Gawain departs from the castle in search of the Green Chapel. What he finds is a mere hollow mound out of which emerges the Green Knight, and Gawain prepares to accept the blow. The Green Knight strikes at him three times, but only with the third blow does he nick Gawain's neck. When Gawain becomes angry and offers to fight, the Green Knight leans on his axe and smiles. Gawain is then surprised to learn that his adversary knows about the temptations of the lady of the castle and is none other than the lord of the castle himself, who has missed Gawain two times with the axe as a reward for

the two days that Gawain had resisted the lady's temptations; but he has wounded Gawain in the neck as a punishment for concealing the girdle. He, then, identifies himself as Bercilak de Hautdessert, who has conspired with Morgan la Fay in a scheme to frighten Guinevere and shame King Arthur. He admits that Gawain's true qualities have spoiled this game. Gawain, however, ashamed for not having resisted temptation when his life was at stake, vows to wear the green girdle for life as a token of his disgrace. At Camelot, the lords and ladies of the Round Table also agree to wear forever a green girdle as a symbol of the honor of the loyal Sir Gawain.

By means of brief allusions to Gawain's courteous behavior, liberally scattered throughout the poem, the author constantly reminds the reader of this trait-- indeed, imprints it firmly on the mind. The following examples are representative of this device: "gode Gawan," "Wat3 fraunchyse and fela3schyp forbe al byng," "His clannes and his cortayse croked were neuer," "Gawayn þe gode," "Gawan þe hende," "Your heude layk is hendely praysed," "Ðat alle þe worlde worschipe3 quere-so ride," "So god as Gawayne gaynly is holden," "And cortayse is closed so clene in hymself," "And gentylest knyght of lote," "Sir Hawayne the gode," "Gawayne þe noble," and "Ðen haysled he

ful hendly þo hapele3 vchone."⁶⁰

The first illustration of Gawain's courtesy occurs in the opening Christmas scene at Arthur's court. While the merry-makers are awaiting a "marvel," suddenly the Green Knight appears. Although Arthur is prepared to accept the stranger's challenge, it is "Gawain the gode" who prevents the king from doing so. He explains that he does not wish to risk his king's life and asks that he be the one to accept the challenge, first courteously requesting permission from Arthur and Guinevere to be excused from table:

"Wolde 3e, worpilych lorde," quop Wawan to þe kyng,
 "Bid me bo3e fro þis benche, and stonde by yow þere
 Ðat I wythoute vylanye my3t voyde þis table,
 And þat my legge lady lyked not ille,
 I wolde com to your counseyl bifore your cort ryche."
 (343-347)

The beheading occurs, and Gawain agrees to seek the Green Knight in a year's time.

When a year has almost passed, Gawain prepares to depart on his "anious" voyage to the Green Chapel, and Arthur's entire court is grieved to think "Ðat so worthe as Wawan schulde wende on þat ernde. . . ." (559) Much attention is, then, given to the business of preparing him for the journey, particularly to explaining the significance of the pentangel which symbolizes the purity of this knight

⁶⁰Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, eds. Future references to this poem are from this edition.

of the luxuries that a man of his high station would expect.
 (850-853) At this point, the narrator pauses to reiterate
 that Gawain's reputation is well known:

Wheþen in worlde he were,
 Hit semed as he mo3t
 Be prynce withouten pere
 In felde þer felle men fo3t.
 (871-874)

The accumulative effect of all of these comments emphasizes
 that Gawain is versed in the ways of the courtly knight.
 Later, when the lord of the castle introduces Gawain to the
 company, he indicates that he is delighted to have such a
 gifted knight under his roof:

Now schal we semlych se sle3te3 of þewe3
 And þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble,
 Wich spede is in speche vnspurd may we lerne,
 Syn we haf fonged þat fyne fader of nurture.
 (916-919)

Identifying Gawan as one who "talks nobly" and who is the
 father of "good breeding," the host again calls attention
 to the courtly background of the hero. Finally, he states:

In menyng of mannere3 mere
 þis burne now schal vus bryng,
 I hope þat may hym here
 Schal lerne of luf-talkyng.
 (924-927)

Here, in addition to his ability to engage in noble talk,
 Gawain is also described as one who is gifted in the art of
 "love-talking."

It is clear that Gawain and the lady of the castle
 are immediately attracted to each other. The narrator calls
 this fact to the reader's attention, as follows:

Compast in his concience to quat þat cace my3t
 Meue oþer amount--to meruayle hym þo3t,
 Bot 3et he sayde in hymself, "More semly hit were
 To aspye with my spelle in space quat ho wolde."
 (1196-1199)

His decision, here, recalls Capellanus's rule XX: A man in love is always apprehensive.

The lady continues to taunt him, saying:

"Your honour, your hendelayk is hendely praysed
 With lorde3, wyth ladyes, with alle þat lyf bere.
 And now 3e ar here, iwysse, and we bot oure one . . .
 3e ar welcum to my cors,
 Yowre awen won to wale,
 Me þehoue3 of fyne force
 Your seruant be, and schale."
 (1228-1240)

Obviously, she is making use of Capellanus's rule which states that good character alone makes any man worthy of love (XVIII). The passage also contains further expressions of the code of courtly love, as understood and practiced by the lady of the castle. For example, she first praises the knight for his hendelayk (courtliness) and then offers him her cors (body), "Yowre awen won to wale" (your own pleasure to take), confessing herself to be his servant because it behooves her of necessity to do so. Again, her propositioning of Gawain recalls two additional rules by Capellanus: (I) Marriage is no real excuse for not loving; and (IX) No one can love unless impelled by the persuasion of love. Although Gawain readily comprehends her motives, he is, nevertheless, reluctant to take advantage of his host and, with a display of humility, denies that he is a knight

worthy of such a charming woman:

"In god fayth," quop Gawayn, "gayn hit me þynkke3,
 Ða3 I be not now he þat 3e of speken."
 (1241-1242)

"In good faith," he says, "it is flattering, but I am not the person of whom you speak," insisting that he is a "wy3e vnworþy." She has now intentionally succeeded in confusing the two main issues of courtly love and courtesy and has breached decorum, thus causing Gawain's great concern. None of his arguments dissuades her from this course of action, however, and she replies,

Bot hit ar ladyes inno3e þat leuer wer nowþe
 Haf þe, hende, in hor holde, as I þe habbe here,
 To daly with derely your daynte worde3,
 Keuer hem comfort and colen her care3,
 Ðen much of þe farysoun oþer golde þat þay hauen."
 (1251-1255)

She is pointing out to Gawain that she has in her sovereign power that which all of the ladies of the castle covet more than any of the riches they possess. Furthermore, she adds that, through grace, she herself has in her grasp everything the world desires. Try as hard as he can, Gawain cannot dominate the conversation, as the narrator emphasizes:

Scho made hym so gret chere,
 Ðat wat3 so fayr of face,
 Ðe kny3t with speches skere
 Answared to vche cace.
 (1259-1262)

However, when Gawain does not succumb immediately to her charms, his reticence reminds one of Capellanus's rule XIV:

The easy attainment of love makes it of little value; difficulty of attainment makes it prized. When eventually he accepts her attentions, he vows that he will be her servant, that she is his sovereign:

"Bot I am proude of þe prys pat 3e put on me,
 And, soberly your seruant, my souerayn I hold yow,
 And yowre kny3t I becom, and Krust you for3elde."
 (1277-1279)

Thus, ends the first day's temptation.

On the second day, the lady begins by chiding Gawain for his apparent lack of interest, saying, "If it be that you are Gawain, it is a wonder to me that a man so well disposed to do good knows not how to receive the manners of polite society." When he admits that he may be culpable, she reminds him that she has taught him the art of kissing, an act that becomes each knight "þat cortaysy vses" (who practices courtesy). (1491) At this point, Gawain explains that he has not asked her for a kiss because he was afraid of being refused, and if refused, of committing a social error. His reply suggests Capellanus's rule XXVIII: A slight presumption causes a lover to suspect his beloved. Slyly, she counters by informing him that he could, if he liked, take a kiss by force, to which he replies that "þrete is vþryaunde in þede þer I lende" (force does not thrive in the country in which I dwell), (1499) recalling rule IV: That which a love takes against the will of his beloved has no relish. Instead, he grants her the sovereignty which

she so obviously desires, saying, "I am at your comaunde-
ment, to kysse quen yo lykke3." (1501-1502) Immediately,
the lady bends ". . . adoun, / And comlyly kysses his face."
(1504-1505) In so doing, she demonstrates the meaning of
Capellanus's rule XXVI: Love can deny nothing to love.

Next, she criticizes Gawain for not indulging in
"worde3 / Ðat euer longed to luf, lasse ne more." (1524)
Moreover, she casts aspersions upon his reputation as a
lover, "And 3e, þat ar so cortays and coynt of your hetes,
/ Oghe to a 3onk þynk 3ern to schewe / And teche sum tokene3
of trweluf craftes." (And you who are so courtly and polite
in your vows, ought to an inexperienced person yearn to show
and teach some tokens of the crafts of true love). (1525-
1527) She also tells him she is convinced that he is either
lewed (ignorant) or that he considers her too foolish to
listen to his dalyaunce (love talk). Here, she stresses
Capellanus's rule VIII: No one should be deprived of love
without the very best of reasons. Gawain hastens to con-
fess that her presence brings him great pleasure but admits
that the thought of taking upon himself the task of expound-
ing true love to one so obviously well acquainted with the
subject would be a folé' felefolde (a manifold folly). (1545)
Once again, he concludes by telling her that he is willing
evermore to be her servant, granting her the sovereignty
which she desires. The lady at once kisses him and departs.
Thus, ends the second day's temptation.

On the third day, she boldly enters the bed chamber, throws open a window, and kisses Gawain. He "welcume³ her worpily with a wale chere" (welcomes her courteously with a fair behavior). (1759) At this point, the narrator warns that this encounter is to be more serious than the previous two:

Gret perile bitwene hem stod,
Nif Mare of hir kny³t mynne.
(1768-1769)

In other words, their love play will bring them close to intimacies, unless the Virgin Mary protects the knight. Here, Gawain is very much concerned for cortaysye (his reputation for courtly behavior), fearing that he may commit a sin and prove himself a traitor to the lord in whose castle he is a guest. Again, the lady has confused the two main issues of courtesy and courtly love. Realizing that she has done so, Gawain begins to parry "Alle þe speche³ of specialté¹ þat sprange of her mouthe." (1777) The phrase, speche³ of specialté¹, is a direct allusion to the highly sophisticated dialogue of love which the lady has been employing, again reflecting her more than adequate knowledge of courtly love.⁶¹

Continuing to display this knowledge, she blames Gawain for not reciprocating her love, however with one

⁶¹Arthur Heiserman. "Gawain's Clean Courtesy, or the Task of Telling of True Love," Modern Language Quarterly, XXVII (December, 1966), 450.

condition: "Bot if 3e haf a lemman, a leuer, þat yow lykke3 better" (Unless you have a true love, a lover, whom you cherish better). (1782) Here, she may be alluding to Capellanus's rule III: No one can be bound by a double love. With much craft she is offering Gawain an excuse for not returning her affections. She may also be mindful of Capellanus's rule XII: A true love does not desire to embrace in love anyone except the beloved. When she states that she believes him betrothed, Gawain is directly forced into telling the truth, courteous knight that he is, and he confesses, "In fayth I welde ri3t non, / Ne non wil welde þe quile" (In faith, I truly possess none, nor none will possess at the present). (1790-1791) At the same time, in confessing this truth, he is also subtly telling the lady that he will not accept her as his lemman. She listens attentively to his explanation, kisses him, and then offers him, as a gift, a silken girdle that has the power to preserve its wearer from all harm. Once again, she has placed Gawain in the position of having to defend his great reputation for courtesy, and he refuses her offer on the grounds that he has no gift to exchange with her. However, when she describes the mysterious powers of the girdle, he speculates, "Hit wer a juel for þe jeoparde þat him iugged were" (It would be a marvelous thing for the jeopardy for which I am destined) (1856), and he finally accepts the gift, promising the lady not to disclose the fact that she has given it to

him. Thus, once again, she triumphs by asserting her full sovereignty over Gawain, testing both his sense of courtesy and his respect for courtly love.

These three temptation episodes demonstrate clearly that the sophisticated author of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was well acquainted with the code of courtly love as created by Capellanus for Eleanor's court. All of the action is designed to test Gawain's reputation for courtesy. By means of her rather churlish interpretations of some of Capellanus's rules, the lady cleverly breaches Gawain's sense of decorum in scenes of serious yet comic action. Significant, as well, is the fact that the three days of temptation are ironically juxtaposed to the elaborately conceived hunting episodes involving the lord of the castle, scenes that reflect the complex conventions of the medieval hunt, a highly organized operation that parallels in its complexities those established for courtly love.

Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle (c. 1400) is a romance that puts Gawain's reputation for courtesy to severe tests. As the narrative opens, King Arthur is hunting with some of his men. Pursuing a deer into a forest, three members of the group, Sir Gawain, Sir Kay, and Bishop Baldwin, suddenly become lost. Sir Kay suggests that they spend the night at a nearby castle, occupied by the Carl of Carlisle. Although Bishop Baldwin, who knows about the Carl's evil

reputation, advises against doing so, the others refuse to take the advice and ride to the castle, where they are immediately confronted by a boar, a bull, a lion, and a bear. The Carl appears, restrains his beasts, and invites the three to be his guests at dinner. Before the banquet is served, Bishop Baldwin retires to the stables to check on his horse and discovers a small horse eating with his courser. When he cruelly kicks the small horse, the Carl emerges from the castle and kicks the Bishop. Unaware of what has occurred, Sir Kay comes to the stables to check on his mount and sees the small horse eating with his own steed. He, too, kicks the animal, and the Carl promptly knocks Sir Kay to the ground. Sir Gawain, not knowing what has taken place, comes to the stables and, seeing the small horse, feeds and covers it. The Carl is impressed with this display of courtesy and tells Gawain that he is pleased. Later, at dinner, the Carl, first, remonstrates with Sir Kay for having lascivious thoughts about the lady of the castle. Secondly, he insists that Sir Gawain cast a spear in his direction, and although reluctant to harm his host, Sir Gawain obeys. The spear, however, strikes the wall when the Carl dodges. Again, the Carl is impressed and thanks Gawain for obeying his command.

Gawain, next, falls in love with the Carl's wife and, when the Carl insists, allows her to come to his bed. When the Carl commands them to kiss, Gawain, at first,

refuses, but finally consents to kiss the lady and finds himself enjoying her favors so much that he attempts to make their relationship more intimate. The Carl, at the last moment, removes his wife from the bed, substituting his daughter for the night. On the following morning, the Carl confesses that he once had vowed to kill any man who spent the night under his roof and who would not obey his commands, showing Gawain the bones of many dead men. He confesses that Gawain's courteous behavior in obeying all of his commands has made him decide to change his ways. Ultimately, Arthur makes the Carl a knight of the Table Round and names him Lord of the country of Carlisle. Gawain marries the Carl's daughter, and the Carl builds an abbey that becomes a bishop's seat.

In this romance, Sir Gawain is again the prototype of the courteous knight. This author similarly establishes Gawain's reputation for courtesy by means of numerous tag descriptions inserted throughout the poem, as the following examples demonstrate: "On that was sekor and sounde and doughty in his dede," "He was as meke as mayde in bour," "And hardy he was and wyghte," "That worthy knyght of Bryttayne," "the gentyll knight Sir Gawen," "then sayd Gawen curttesly," "Answered Gawen full curttesly."⁶²

⁶²Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle in Middle English Verse Romances, Donald B. Sands, ed. pp. 348-371. Future references to this poem are from this edition.

Moreover, this is a tale of courtesy and courtly love. Although examples of Gawain's courteous behavior are rather obvious, they may not be ignored. First, he is shown consistently to be a considerate man, helpful to others. His initial display of this trait occurs when Sir Kay insists upon their staying at the castle to which they have no invitation and in which they may not be welcome. Gawain replies:

"So have I blysse,
 I wol not geystyn ther magre ys,
 Thow I myght neuer so well,
 Yefe anny fayr wordus may vs gayn
 To make the larde of vs full fayn
 In his own castell."

(163-168)

He asserts that he will not be a guest there in spite of anything, even though he may never fare so well, unless any fair words may gain for all of them the lord's willingness to have them as guests in the castle. Moreover, when they arrive at the castle, he is the only one of the three men who properly asks for a night's lodging:

"We beseche the lorde of herbory,
 The good lorde of this holde."

(185-186)

After they receive permission to spend the night and have been introduced to the Carl, Gawain kneels before his host in a display of respect; however, the Carl insists that he rise and dispense with such courteous actions for the one night that he is a guest in the castle. Later, it is revealed that the Carl is really hoping that Gawain will be discourteous.

When Sir Kay and the Bishop are cruel to the Carl's foal, he vows that he will teach them some of his own brand of courtesy. He stands aside, then, to give Gawain an opportunity to commit a similar error, but Gawain surprises him:

Wyttout the stabul dor the foll gan stond,
 Gawen put hyme in agayn wytt his hond;
 He was all wett, I wene,
 As the foll had stond in rayne.
 Then keueryd he hym, Sir Gawene,
 Wytt his manttell of grene.
 "Stond vpe, fooll, and eette thy mette;
 We spend her that they master dothe gett,
 Whyll that we her byne."
 (343-351)

Finding the foal wet from the rain, Gawain covers the small animal and commands it to eat, since they are using, while they are the Carl's guests, that which the host has earned. The Carl, unaccustomed to viewing this kind of compassionate behavior, graciously thanks Gawain for the courteous act.

Later, in the dining hall at table, when the Carl commands Gawain to hit him with a spear, Gawain again displays his courteous nature:

Syr Gawen was a glade mann wytt that;
 At the bothe-dor a sper he gatt
 And in his honde hit hente.
 Syr Gawen came wytt a gret ire
 Doun he helde his hede, that syre,
 Tyll he hade geue his dentte.
 He yafe the ston wall seche a rappe
 That the goode sper all tobrake;
 The fver flewe out of the flente.
 (391-399)

Here, although reluctant to strike his host, Gawain, nevertheless, obeys the unusual command and with pretensions

of anger throws a spear at the Carl, who dodges the weapon. Pleased, the Carl thanks Gawain for doing his bidding so courteously.

Gawain's final test of courtesy involves his affair with the Carl's wife. When the Carl insists that Gawain kiss the woman in his presence, Gawain courteously replies,

"Syr, thi byddyngge schall be doune,
Sertaynly in dede,
Kyll or sley or lay adoune."
(458-460)

Finally, after much persuasion on the part of the Carl, Gawain agrees to do as his host commands, even if it means that he will eventually be killed for having consented.

At the conclusion of the tale, having achieved a great respect for Gawain, the true model of courtesy, the Carl sees the error of his ways and vows to change:

"For sothe, as I the say,
Nowe wulle I forsake my wyckyð 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."
(540-546)

Thus, Gawain, alone of the three, through his willingness to do his host's bidding, has succeeded in converting a vindictive murderer into a decent courteous man, one who now discovers that there is peace of mind in serving God.

Although the episodes involving the conventions of courtly love are not as numerous as those that exploit the theme of courtesy in this romance, they reflect, neverthe-

the Carl's wife and daughter reflects, in practice, some of the rules devised by Capellanus for Eleanor's celebrated court of love.

The Jeaste of Syr Gawayne (c. 1400) is a tale of romance and challenge. In the narrative, Gawain discovers a beautiful lady in a pavilion and makes love to her. Her father, Sir Gilbert, suddenly appears and challenges Gawain to combat, convinced that his daughter has been deprived of her honor. Reluctantly, Gawain fights and overcomes the father. Defeated, Sir Gilbert retires with little more than bruised pride. His son, Syr Gyamoure, who happens to ride by, sees his father in pain. Upon learning the cause of his father's anguish, Syr Gyamoure vows to avenge both father and sister. In the meantime, Gawain and the young lady have resumed their love-play. When the brother arrives on the scene, he challenges Gawain to combat and is soundly defeated. A second son, Syr Tyrry, happens to ride by and discovers his father and brother bloody and despairing. He rides to the pavilion, determined to overcome Gawain, issues a challenge to combat, and for the third time that day, Gawain defeats his challenger. Another brother, Sir Brandles, rides by and sees his father and two brothers sitting by the roadside and also vows to challenge Gawain. When he comes upon the scene of love-making, the lady, who is his sister, warns Gawain that this third brother will not be

easily overcome. The challenge to combat is made, and the two men fight until sunset, with neither the victor, and the battle ends because of the fading light. Both men vow, however, that, on their next encounter, they will fight until one is triumphant. Gawain leaves the scene, not knowing that Syr Brandles intends to beat the sister. She is roughly treated and wanders aimlessly about the countryside, never to return to her home. Gawain, back in Arthur's court, recounts his adventure, and Syr Brandles and he are destined never to meet, again.

Gawain's inherent sense of courtesy is tested frequently throughout this poem. Again, by means of the now familiar device of short tag descriptions, the author emphasizes the courteous nature of this knight: "He ys a stronge knyght, bolde and hardye," "I call thee the best knyght and none other," "Of knyght hode thoue haste no felowe," "Of knyght hode thou hast no peere."⁶³

In the first episode of combat, Gawain courteously begs the pardon of Syr Gyamour for having loved the man's daughter. At the moment when he is first discovered with the lady, Gawain, again with courteous speech, tells the father that he wishes to make amends:

⁶³The Jeaste of Gawain in An Edition of Ten Poems from the Gawain Cycle, H. Peyton, ed. pp. 253-272. Future references to this poem are from this edition.

"I suppose I haue the loue of the mayde,
 Suche grace on her haue I founde,
 But any youe be her father deere,
 Syr, amendes nowe wyll I make here,
 As I am to knyght hode bounde.
 Nowe all forewardes I wyll fulfyll,
 And make amendes you vntyll,
 And lette me passe quyte."
 (30-37)

Syr Gyamour, however, does not allow Gawain to ignore the challenge, although it is not made clear whether the man wishes to fight for his daughter's honor or for the chance to encounter such a famous knight. Nevertheless, he insists, and Gawain courteously consents. As a matter of fact, each time that Gawain is subsequently challenged in the narrative, he first refuses, as he does here, but when his challenger insists, Gawain, with a show of reluctance, acquiesces. Moreover, his replies are couched in the form of his first such statement to Syr Gyamour, as follows:

"I graunte yt the,
 Sythe yt none other wise wyll be,
 Nedes must that nedes shall."
 (41-43)

The two men clash, and Gawain draws blood from the older man. When Syr Gyamour pleads with Gawain to stop, the young knight agrees to do so, but with conditions:

"On thys couenaunte," Syr Gawayne sayde,
 "That you do not harme vnto the mayde,
 I am a greed that yt so be.
 Also ye shall swere on my swerde here,
 That none armes agaynst me ye shall beare,
 Nayther to daye nor to nyght.
 And then take your horse, and wende your waye,
 And I shall do the best that I maye,
 As I am a trewe knyght."
 (62-70)

Gawain maintains his courteous patience throughout the subsequent encounters with his successive challengers, desiring to please his fellow man and to appease the wishes of others in accepting the call to battle. As such, he is a model of the true and courteous knight.

In the passages concerned with courtly love, Gawain is an able and passionate lover. When he discovers the young woman in the pavilion, he is immediately attracted to her and proceeds to make love without indulging in any of the preliminaries of a courtly conversation. It is possible, however, that the lady has already conversed with him before their intimacies, since the opening lines of the poem are missing,⁶⁴ the first lines of the present text merely indicating that Gawain is true to his courtly reputation:

And sayde, "I dreede no threte,
 I haue founde youe here in my chase."
 And in hys armes he can her brace,
 With kyssynge of mowthes sweete.
 There Syr Gawayne made much chere,
 That greate frendeshyp he found there,
 With that fayre lady so gaye.
 Suche chere he made and such semblaunce,
 That longed to loue he had her countenaunce,
 With oute any more delaye.
 (1-10)

Capellanus's rule XV is represented in this scene: When a lover catches sight of his beloved, his heart palpitates. The lady, as well, is similarly attracted to him and does

⁶⁴Wells, p. 67.

not resist his advances. Their love is secret, sensual, and illicit, reflecting the characteristics of courtly love. It becomes clear, moreover, that Gawain does not feel bound by any moral code, convinced as he is that no one has been wronged by his actions:

Then sayde Gawayne, "though yt be so,
Amendes I wyll make or that I goo,
Yf that I haue mysdone."
(131-133)

Any knight with a knowledge of the conventions of courtly love would have had the highest respect for all women, inasmuch as the code exalted the position of all women. It is clear that Gawain does not think that their love-play was immoral, his respect for the lady extending to his asking Syr Brandles not to punish her:

"Syr Knight, be frende to that gentle woman,
As ye be gentle Knyght."
(486-487)

Gawain hopes to prevent any possible severe consequences, understanding that the lady's rights must be recognized and, indeed, upheld so that she may have an opportunity to love the man of her choice.

This, the shortest of the four romances considered in this investigation, consistently emphasizes the courteous and courtly love aspects of the Gawain-character. Here, Gawain is the model knight who is always willing to placate his adversaries; he is an able lover; and, above all, as courtly love precepts dictate, he expresses a sincere concern for the welfare of the lady whom he embraces.

The Weddynge of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell

(c. 1450) also illustrates certain precepts of courtly love. Although the narrative concerns an adventure of King Arthur, Gawain figures prominently in its denouement and is, ultimately, the hero of the romance. Once again, Gawain's reputation as a courteous knight is emphasized frequently throughout the poem by means of short tag descriptions similar to those employed in the previously discussed romances, as follows: "Gawen the good," "Of all the knights thou bearst the flowre that evere yet I found," "A, Sir Gawen, sin I have you wed, / Shewe me your courtesy in bed," "Grammercy, corteis Knighte," "And thou, Sir Knighte, curteis Gawen," "gentille Gawen Knighte," "fulle gentille knighte," "Curteis knighte and hende Gawen."⁶⁵

The simple narrative, which also appears in another form as "The Wife of Bath's Tale" in The Canterbury Tales, opens with Arthur's hunting in Ingleswood Forest, where he wounds a great hart. As the animal dies, Sir Gromer Somer Joure, a gruesome knight, appears and threatens to kill Arthur for once having given to Sir Gawain lands that belong to Sir Gromer Somer. When Arthur admits that he has done so, Sir Gromer Somer grants the king a twelve-month's reprieve, in which time he is to discover the answer to the

⁶⁵The Weddynge of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell in Middle English Verse Romances, Donald B. Sands, ed. pp. 323-347. Future references to this poem are from this edition.

question: what do women most desire? Should Arthur fail to obtain the answer within a year's time, he will be put to death. Although Arthur is warned not to reveal what has taken place between them, he eventually confides in loyal Sir Gawain. The two men, then, separately travel into the country to discover what women most desire, supplied with notebooks in which to record the exact words of all whom they interview. When they have not found the answer after eleven months have passed, Gawain insists that Arthur return to the forest in which he had killed the hart. Once there, he meets the ugly and hideous Dame Ragnell, who promises to reveal to him the correct answer, if he will convince Sir Gawain to marry her. When he recovers from the shock of her proposal, Arthur finally agrees to arrange the marriage, because he loves his life more than he loves Sir Gawain. With reluctance, he asks Gawain to consent to the marriage, and without hesitation the young knight agrees to do so. When Arthur returns to the forest and reports on his success to Dame Ragnell, she tells him that women most desire sovereignty. Arthur conveys this answer to Sir Gromer Somer, who, although angry to think that his sister Ragnell has disclosed the secret, keeps his word, allowing Arthur to depart. Gawain, then, marries Dame Ragnell in a ceremony that takes place before the entire court, all of the members of which express pity for the Knight wedded to such a foul wife. In their wedding chamber, however, Ragnell is

transformed into a beautiful young woman after Gawain's first kiss. She tells him, then, about a curse imposed upon her by her stepmother, resulting in her former ugliness. When she asks Gawain if he would have her fair by day and foul by night, he wisely allows her to make the choice. Because he has given her the sovereignty which she desires, she chooses always to be fair. Their subsequent happy marriage produces a son, Gyngolyn. During their years together, Gawain forsakes his former knightly pursuits, but the union is eventually interrupted by Ragnell's death, some five years later. Although Gawain married many times thereafter, his life with Ragnell comprised the happiest years of his existence.

Gawain's courteous behavior is revealed mainly in the episodes involving Arthur and Dame Ragnell. In the first such sequence, after meeting Sir Gromer Somer Joure, Arthur is greatly depressed when he rejoins Gawain. Genuinely concerned for the welfare of his king, Gawain urges him to talk about the problem, vowing to keep his confidences:

"Nay, drede you not, lord, by Mary flower,
I am no that man that wold you dishonour
Nother by evin ne by moron."
(149-151)

Arthur shows that he implicitly trusts this young knight who so courteously places the thoughts of others before his own, referring to him as "gentille Gawen knighte." When the king

Returning to Gawain, he does not have the strength of character to face his knight and even threatens suicide ("I am in point myself to spille"), but Gawain hastens to assure his king 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."
(333-335)

Arthur can afford, now, to reveal the marriage proposal to Gawain, who expresses much relief upon learning that there is nothing more serious that threatens his king:

"Is that alle?" then said Gawen;
"I shall wed her and wed her again,
Thoughe she were a fend,
Thoughe she were as foulle as Belsabub,
Her shalle I wed, by the rood,
Or elles were not I your frende;
For ye ar my king withe honour
And have worshipt me in many a stoure.
Therefor shalle I not let.
To save your life, lorde, it were my parte,
Or I were false and a great coward;
And my worship is the bet."
(342-353)

Arthur, without doubt, is fully aware of Gawain's great trust when the young knight asserts that his allegiance to the king surpasses any deed that he might be asked to perform. Moreover, Gawain further states,

"As for this," said Gawen, "it shalle not let.
I wolle wed her at whate time ye wolle set;
I pray you make no care."
(366-368)

Comforting, as well, to Arthur are Gawain's words, "For your love I wolle not spare." (371)

As the wedding day approaches, Gawain never alludes to the ugliness of the lady and keeps his word to his king, "Sir, I am redy of that I you highte, / Alle forwardes to fulfille." (534-535) The very theme of the wedding recalls the life of Eleanor of Aquitaine, whose happiest years were those in which she enjoyed complete sovereignty. Dame Ragnell, by no mere coincidence, also knows what women most desire, as she earlier clearly reveals to Arthur:

"But there is one thing is alle our fantayse,
 And that nowe shalle ye knowe.
 We desiren of men above alle manner thing
 To have the sovereinte, withoute lesing,
 Of alle, bothe highe and lowe.
 For where we have sovereinte alle is ouris,
 Thoughe a knyghte be nevere so feris,
 And evere the mastery winne;
 Of the most manliest is oure desire:
 To have the sovereinte of such a sire;
 Suche is oure craftte and ginne."
 (420-430)

In this speech, Dame Ragnell not only argues as did Eleanor, but also in behalf of the many women of the Middle Ages who lived restricted, uneventful lives, who probably yearned for the time when they would hold sway over the judgments affecting their lives. Few, however, were ever to become that independent in the medieval world, and few ever gained the sovereignty which Eleanor so successfully maintained in her court and which Dame Ragnell will soon enjoy. The very nature of the code of courtly love demands that women become the center of the society in which they move and that they be allowed, moreover, to lead that society in ways that most benefit them. It is perhaps significant, as the author

observes, that Gawain is destined "as a coward" to lie by Dame Ragnell "bothe day and night." (808)

When Dame Ragnell makes her "fair by day, foul by night" proposition, Gawain knows immediately what his answer must be if he is to maintain his courtly reputation and physical welfare:

"But do as ye list nowe, my lady gaye.
 The choise I put in your fist.
 Evin as you 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!"
 (677-684)

When Dame Ragnell is granted the sovereignty that she desires, she generously rewards her young husband by becoming physically attractive, both day and night. In the courtly love tradition, a comely lover was a requisite to a successful love match. However, since, according to the code, true love cannot flourish in the marriage state, she will not enjoy an everlasting happiness. Because a knight cannot be shackled to a wife to whom he has granted sovereignty, Dame Ragnell must die after five short years of married bliss. Thus, her sovereignty lasts only a little longer than Eleanor's.

The authors of these four medieval romances were obviously familiar with the Capellanus principles governing courtly love and with the nature of the courtois, elements of which they utilize in delineating the Gawain-character.

Although Gawain is closely associated with the Knights of Arthur's Round Table, a kinsman and member of the royal household, he is, nevertheless, consistently depicted as a singular knight in each of these early poems, one whose virtues label him a paragon of Arthurian chivalry, a model of courtesy, and a lively proponent of courtly love. That this consistent concept predominates in these early romances is probably no mere coincidence, when one considers the common source with which these anonymous poets worked in fashioning this character.

Chapter 3

THE WOMEN AND THE GAWAIN-CHARACTER: A SUMMARY STATEMENT

The early Gawain-character and the women who dominate the tales are firmly rooted in time-honored traditions of courtly love and chivalric courtesy. Particularly the women, without whom there would have been no courtly love, played a significant role in reshaping the basic tenets of love and marriage in the twelfth century. It has been noted previously that Eleanor of Aquitaine and her daughter, Marie de Champagne, did more than anyone else to free the medieval age from its antiquated theories concerning women. Thus, the belief in women's inferiority to men gradually lost its credence in the succeeding years.⁶⁶ Unquestionably, the dominating influence of Eleanor's Poitevan court brought about a much-needed change in the relationship of men and women, both in literature and in reality, and for the first time in the medieval world, heterosexual love was exalted in literature.⁶⁷ When the female-inspired troubadours of southern France began to sing of the splendid virtues of noble, unattainable women, life came to mirror art, and

⁶⁶Kelly, p. 14.

⁶⁷Frederick Goldin, The Mirror of Narcissus in the Courtly Love Lyrics, p. 2; see also Roger Loomis, Medieval Romance, p. 324.

women became, for the first time in this period, perfect beings created solely for the praise and adoration of the enamored male.

Each of the major female characters in these four early romances illustrates important aspects of the courtly love tradition. In the later Gawain tales, not included in this present investigation, the women characters do not have significant roles, the poems being merely a chronicling of the more adventurous exploits of Gawain, such as hunting and jousting, with no elements of courtly love present. Hence, there is obviously a symbiotic relationship not to be denied between Gawain and his lady loves in these earlier romances.

Of all of these early poems, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight contains the most eloquent statement of the role of women in the literature of courtly love. Certainly, the lady of the castle has all of the furtive traits and conversational abilities essential to the concept. Although it has been argued that she is not an exponent of courtly love, the internal evidence suggests that she is, indeed, operating fully within the conventions. When her husband first leaves for the hunt, she slips stealthily into Gawain's bed chamber, and the episode that follows illustrates the idea that courtly love was enhanced by secrecy. Moreover, she thereafter demonstrates that she is adept at the art of courtly conversation, engaging Gawain at once in a bold dialogue which she maintains throughout the three days

of temptation.

Lady Bercilak, however, is not the only irresistible woman whom Gawain encounters in these tales. The wife of the Carl of Carlisle is another beautiful, unattainable female character with whom Gawain falls in love at first sight, and the poet explains why Gawain and his dinner companions find her so enchanting:

Her armus small, her mydll gent
 Her yghen grey, her browus bent;
 Of curttesy sche was perfette.
 Her roode was reede, her chekus rounde;
 A feyrror myght not goo on grounde,
 Ne lowelyur of syghte.
 (364-369)

Although Gawain knows that she is the Carl's wife, he cannot avoid falling in love with her. Obviously, he is as smitten as a young schoolboy, and her presence causes him to lose his appetite for food:

So moche his love was on her lyght
 Of all the soper leve myght
 Nodyr drynke nor ette.
 (406-408)

His reaction to the lady recalls Capellanus's rule XXIII: He whom love vexes eats and sleeps very little. Moreover, like the nobles at Eleanor's court, he, too, desires the love of a beautiful, high born woman, the wife of another man--in this case, his host--thus suggesting another of Capellanus's rules (XXXI): Nothing forbids one woman from being loved by two men, or one man by two women. He also realizes that his love for this fair lady cannot be

consummated, nor does he expect it to be. The solution, however, is a happy one, because, since his love for the woman is so ennobling, he is to be rewarded with the gift of another fair creature, the Carl's own daughter, a situation that recalls Capellanus's rule XVII: New love puts to flight an old one.

Gawain's lady in The Jeaste of Syr Gawayne remains unnamed and speaks few lines of dialogue, except for her words in which she warns him of the treachery of her brother, Sir Brandles. Nevertheless, the author makes it clear that she is very beautiful and, unlike the Carl's wife, attainable. Although her character is not fully developed, her love is passionate and in keeping with the rules of courtly love, and Gawain preserves his own well-known reputation as a chivalric lover.

Dame Ragnell in The Weddyng of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, like Eleanor of Poitiers, realizes that her sovereignty as a woman is all important. As the tale reveals, her evil stepmother who practiced necromancy had transformed her into an ugly creature whom no man would ever desire. However, the stepmother had not reckoned with the model courteous knight, Sir Gawain, who breaks the curse, thereby granting Ragnell the sovereignty which she needs. (700-702)

Lord Bercilak's lady, the Carl's wife, and Dame Ragnell, representing some of the most important tenets of courtly love, are viable, unexpendable characters in these

early romances which, without their presence, could not be categorized as the literature of courtly love. Gawain, similarly, is the male exemplar of courtly love in each of these tales. Without the consistent presentation of the conventions of courtly love and courtesy within these poems, he would have become an entirely different character. The son of Arthur's sister, he shows, early in his life, an undying loyalty to his uncle-king. In many of the romances, he even surpasses Arthur in acts of bravery, courtesy, and physical endurance. Indeed, he wears the pentangel, symbolizing his fidelity in five ways, and five times each way, the five points of the star standing for the virtues which he consistently exemplifies--those of generosity, of love for his fellow man, of cleanness, pity, and, above all, courtesy.⁶⁸ He is the epitome of chivalric behavior. He is also skilled in the art of courtly conversation. He is aware of the rules of courtly love and faithfully adheres to them. In short, he is a much-loved knight, a valiant individual who possesses all of the virtues of the perfect man. As B. J. Whiting states, "He is the ideal warrior, the highest type of marital prowess, loyal, courteous, untarnished, and undefeated."⁶⁹

⁶⁸Roger Loomis, Medieval Romance, p. 325.

⁶⁹B. J. Whiting, "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy and His Appearance in Chaucer's *The Squire's Tale*," Mediaeval Studies, IX (1947), 195.

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