# ASPECTS OF THE CHIVALRIC CODE, COURTLY LOVE, AND THE CULT OF THE VIRGIN IN SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT



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## PREFACE

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight has always posed problems of interpretation for scholars. Some see it as pure romance; others as a vegetation myth; still others as a religious allegory. This paper supports the position of those who read the poems as a parody of romance with comic highlights and serious undercurrents of thought. I have attempted to explain this comic seriousness in terms of four forces peculiar to the medieval society: the code of chivalry, the convention of courtly love, the conception of woman, and the Cult of the Virgin.

I wish to thank all who have helped me in the writing of this paper; particularly, Dr. Charles Walton and Dr. June Morgan. I would especially like to thank Dr. Walton for his critical suggestions on the content and structure of the work.

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# CHAPTER I

## THE INSTITUTION OF CHIVALRY: ITS CREATION, CHARACTER, AND LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE, AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, an English alliterative romance of the fourteenth century, enjoys an auspicious position in the genre of romance literature as the result of the many literary problems which it poses.[1] Not only are the author and the exact date of this poem unknown (a fact which has prompted a great deal of scholarly research arriving at diverse conclusions) but also is the tale surrounded by much speculation concerning the sources of the story, the influences affecting the author's interpretation and usage of the sources, and the actual meaning of his finished creation. There are no simple solutions to these problems, for SGGK is of a unique character; marked by a sense of sophistication, refinement, and narrative unity not common in Arthurian romance, as well as by the traditional elements of medieval romance such as wondrous

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[1] Hereafter in this present study, the abbreviation, SGGK, will be used in reference to the work.

adventure, the supernatural, courtly life, and chivalric love.[2] Much of this sense of sophistication and refinement, which is especially prominent in the scenes depicting the manners of the court and the courteous--even amorous--exchanges between Gawain and his host's wife, was created by the Gawain poet through a blend of elements peculiar to medieval society: namely, the institution of chivalry, the code of fin' amor commonly known as courtly love, the position and conception of the medieval woman, and the Cult of the Blessed Virgin. It is through an examination of these elements and of the effect of these elements upon the poem and upon each other that a clearer understanding of the nature and the meaning of SGGK may be gained.

In the Middle Ages, an influential force was the institution of chivalry. The civilization of medieval Europe was a rough and brutal one, involved with constant warfare and general social disorder leading to unstable ethical conduct. Also, the knights--an inevitable creation of the militant society--craved recognition and prestige.[3] Thus, was conceived the ideal of chivalry, one which promised to soften the manners of society and to enable the knights

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[2]J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (eds.), Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, p. x.

[3]Maurice Valency, In Praise of Love, p. 42.

to achieve prestige through prowess, loyalty, honor, high standards, and personal worth.

An exact definition of chivalry encompasses much learning. Huizinga describes the conception of chivalry as " . . . an aesthetic ideal assuming the appearance of an ethical ideal, " with heroic fancy and romantic sentiment forming its basis.[4] Cornish defines it as " . . . the moral and social law and custom of the noble and gentle class in Western Europe during the later Middle Ages, and the results of that law and custom in action."[5] It is especially significant that Cornish specifies the noble and gentle class as that facet of society affected by the chivalric ideal, for, although courtly persons tended to believe that chivalry dominated the entire world, the conception which flourished in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries seems to have influenced the thoughts and actions of only the persons connected with courts. Chivalry was, therefore, a characteristic of the aristocratic class, binding men by mutual interest and participation in a spiritual ideal.[6]

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[4]J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, p. 58.

[5]F. Warre Cornish, Chivalry, p. 13.

[6]William Henry Schofield, Chivalry in English Literature, p. 3.

The four elements of chivalry were adulthood, religion, war, and love; the principles which supported these elements were the ideals of duty, devotion, and service in all aspects.[7] The true knight defended the four elements through noble deeds; he undertook these deeds because he was noble, generous, courteous, faithful, honest, loyal to vows, and ready always to right the wrongs of society.

Adulthood was an important element of chivalry, because much effort was devoted to teaching noble lads the knowledge they would need in order to become knights. Youth who joined the order of chivalry (and the typical youth began his instruction at the age of seven) were taught to be gentle-mannered, truthful, generous to equals, fearless, and honorable.[8] Probably, the most important ceremony a knight ever attended was his own coming-of-age ceremony when, in the terms of the chivalric order, he achieved adulthood and knighthood.

Although the ideal of knighthood was conceived and nourished outside the Church, religion was a necessary component of chivalry, because medieval thought demanded that the ideals of noble life be

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[7]Frederick B. Artz, The Mind of the Middle Ages, p. 343.

[8]Ibid., p. 344.

linked with those of religion.[9] In fact, in establishing precepts quite similar to those of medieval Christianity, chivalry even served to strengthen Christian ethics. This chivalric ideal reminded its knight that he was to serve and to support his God and his Church. This reminder became even more powerful after the Church, recognizing chivalric ideals as being compatible with Christian ethics, began to take an active part in the instruction and the rituals of the order. The wars of the Crusades are an excellent example of the integration of the Church and knighthood.[10]

Perhaps, the most important element in the early chivalric order was that of warfare. It was through fighting that a knight could achieve the most prestige, for it afforded him an opportunity to demonstrate his prowess, his courage, and his personal worth. Naturally, warfare had been the central feature of knightly life prior to the conception of chivalry, but through the ideal, honor was promised for those who demonstrated other virtues, besides pure brute strength. "Playing fair" became as much of the game as playing to win.

Proof of the supreme importance of warfare in the chivalric order may also be seen in the fact that the knight's first and foremost

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[9]Huizinga, op. cit., p. 58.

[10]A. R. Hope Moncrieff, Romance and Legend of Chivalry, p. 5.

duty was to his superior, his comrades, and his cause.[11] All else was subordinated to this view. The second most important knightly virtue was that of courage, another necessity on the battlefield.[12] The knight was also encouraged to be true to his promises, generous in battle, and thoughtless of material gain for himself.[13] Still, he was to have the self-respect and inner strength to stand on his rights as a man. Chivalric knights often went to great lengths to prove themselves, imposing stiff regulations upon their own behavior. Quite often, in making a vow, the medieval knight imposed some form of denial upon himself as a motivation for the fulfillment of his vow. The most frequent restriction involved his eating habits.[14] History tells of a Bertrand du Guesclin who vowed not to eat until he had encountered the English in battle, and of yet another knight, a member of Philippe di Mezieres' order of the Chivalry of the Passion, who stood whenever eating or drinking during a period of at least nine years.[15]

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[11]Philip Van Ness Myers, History as Past Ethics, p. 306.

[12]Ibid., p. 307.

[13]Schofield, op. cit., p. 4.

[14]Huizinga, op. cit., p. 79.

[15]Loc. cit.

The relative importance of the love element of chivalry has probably been overstressed. Though love did grow to be the central theme of chivalry in its later stages, love was not the primary concern in the chivalric ideal as first conceived. A study of the Urbain le Courtois, a thirteenth-century treatise on matters of concern to persons aspiring to the chivalric order, revealed that love was a part of chivalric life--but not life itself.[16] It was an important duty of the chivalric knight to protect women, but not necessarily to serve them; he was expected to be courteous and gentle toward women, but not necessarily constantly to adore them.[17] The knight was to guard the honor of his lady's name (in the early days of chivalry, his lady being the wife of his lord), but a more important duty was that of guarding her from physical harm. Nor was such protection unneeded. The ruthless, violent nature of men on the battlefield carried over into their conduct elsewhere; they often took advantage of the circumstances which made it easy to seduce (or rape) a woman--the physical weakness of women, the frequent absences of the men of the family, the fear and shame of the compromised women which made them wary

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[16]H. Rosamond Parsons, "Anglo-Saxon Books of Courtesy and Nuture," PMLA, XLIV (June, 1929), 395.

[17]Pierce Butler, "Women of Medieval France," Woman in All Ages and in All Countries, V, 230.

of admitting the seduction.[18] Men were dominated by lust and desire rather than by restraint, and rape was so common in Europe during the Middle Ages that harsh laws, as well as other protective measures, were enacted.[19] Thus, the idea of protecting women was practical, as well as admirable. The knights were also pledged to defend all weak and defenseless persons.

Gradually, the love element in chivalry underwent a change which seriously affected the whole of the chivalric institution. A courtly style of love was introduced into the ideal, probably through the Provençal troubadours and their lovesick lyrics or possibly through the very nature of the medieval court; and approximately from 1250 to 1350, the love and service of ladies became the strongest theme in chivalry.[20] Love became the source of life and spirit to the chivalric ideal; it became the medieval knights' main object in life.[21] Whereas before, the knight had dreamed of heroism through war, he now dreamed of heroism through love--through

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[18]Margaret Adlum Gist, Love and War in the Middle English Romances, p. 79.

[19]Ibid., p. 75.

[20]C. S. Lewis, The Allegory of Love, p. 16.

[21]Edward Westermarck, The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas, II, 433.

suffering for, or even saving, his beloved.[22] Naturally, women, as the recipients of this knightly amor, became more important in courtly life. The courtly knights became especially desirous of the ladies' approval and of their attentions. Furthermore, women began to be celebrated as the knight's inspiration and as his chance for worth. Louis de Bourbon, in establishing the Order of the Golden Shield in 1363, enjoined the knights

> . . . to abstain from swearing and blaspheming the name of God; above all . . . to honor dames et damoiselles, not submitting to hear ill spoken of them, because from them, after God, comes the honor men receive, so that speaking ill of women, who from the weakness of their sex have no means of defending themselves, is losing all sense of honor, and shaming and dishonoring oneself.[23]

A later version of the Urbain le Courtois (fourteenth century) commands boys especially to honor women, citing women as the source of all good things: prowess, honors, dignities, wealth, favors; only a fool infuriates a woman.[24] Ste. Palaye in The Lowdone of Babylon states it more succinctly: "He were never a good warrior that could not love aright."[25]

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[22]Huizinga, op. cit., p. 67.

[23]Butler, op. cit., p. 230.

[24]Parsons, op. cit., p. 394.

[25]Cornish, op. cit., p. 19.

By right of their exalted position, women became more influential in the actual practices and rituals of chivalry. It was customary for a squire to attach himself to a lady (usually one older than himself) in order to learn of gallantry. In return for her kind encouragement and instruction, the squire was, thereafter, pledged to serve the lady, constantly to strive to please her, and to seek to bring honor to her name. The squire was to be careful that he did not become presumptuous in her service; long and faithful devotion was required of him before he would even venture to ask a favor from his lady, and usually he had to prove his worth in the field before doing so.[26] Neither could the squire (who was usually a knight by this stage) be assured of a reward for his efforts; it was clearly the lady's prerogative to withhold her rewards if she chose. Even if he did gain her reward (which was usually some token of love or, at least, of affection), he had to be ever cautious not to displease her in any way.[27] The knight's first devotion was always to be to the lady who had fostered him in his knightly endeavors, even after he married another. Yet, it should be understood that in the chivalric ideal the knight's love of the lady was a chaste one, at least in theory.[28]

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[26] Ibid., p. 300.

[27] Loc. cit.

[28] Westermarck, op. cit., p. 432.

The knight was to love only the virtues, talents, and graces of his lady. True to human nature, however, the love of the knight and his lady sometimes became more amorous than the code decreed, but the fact remains that chastity was a commandment of pure chivalry.

The tournaments were a ritual of chivalry in which the ladies actively participated. The tournaments were an important part of a knight's life, and the customs of the tournaments were closely connected with the love of ladies.[29] Full of pomp, ceremony, and heroic fancy, the staging of the tournaments was strongly romantic.[30] A Queen of Love and Beauty usually reigned over the festivities, conferring the trophies upon the victors; the ladies themselves assisted in the arming of their devoted knights and gave love tokens for the knights to wear in their honor.[31] As the Middle Ages progressed, the tournaments became more elaborate and frivolous, with the ladies joining in the frivolity, and the actual contest even became obscured by the emphasis placed on its dramatic, erotic elements.[32]

The metamorphosis of the medieval tournament is actually comparable to that of the code of chivalry which, despite all its

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[29]Cornish, op. cit., p. 16.

[30]Huizinga, op. cit., p. 72.

[31]Cornish, op. cit., p. 101.

[32]Huizinga, op. cit., p. 69.

glorious intentions, was more an ideal than a reality. The knights were charged to be loyal, courageous, truthful, just, generous, and courteous; too often they were quarrelsome, brutal, dishonest, contemptuous of the masses, grossly superstitious, adulterous, absurdly desirous of glory, and overly self-conscious of their personal honor and reputation.[33] The main defects of the chivalric ideal stemmed from its essentially military spirit, which was borrowed from pagan ideals and in antithesis with Christian spirit, and its rule that only a person of noble birth could enter its ranks.[34] Consequently, chivalry was attempting to govern behavior in a field when a chivalric attitude was not always profitable, and it was limited in its scope. Courteous treatment of a woman captured through war, for example, was not included in the tenets of chivalry; nor was the knight expected to practice his virtues in his dealings with the masses, his inferiors. In addition, the chastity promoted by the chivalric code was not always taken seriously; squires and their ladies often became passionate lovers.[35] Sexual purity was rare in reality, and romantic, exalted sentiments co-existed with low moral standards.

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[33]Artz, op. cit., p. 344.

[34]Myers, op. cit., p. 30.

[35]Cornish, op. cit., p. 300.

In theory, chivalry was an ennobling force; in reality, it was often a false ideal.

Actually, the Age of Chivalry was largely an artistic creation, finding its truest expression more in legend and literature than in reality.[36] Medieval writers seized upon it as a literary innovation and made good use of it in their works.[37] Two diverse poetic traditions resulted from this chivalric ideal: one in the North of France; the other in the South of France.[38] The poetic tradition which developed in the North of France and was based largely upon the earlier forms of chivalry, depicted the knight as a man whose nobility rests in manly virtues--prowess, loyalty, and honor; the poetic tradition of the South of France, more closely related to the later forms of chivalry, depicted the knight as a man whose nobility is based upon courtly virtues--courtesy, love and the service of ladies.[39] The former tradition produced tales of the fighting man whose main object was to please his lord; the second, tales of a courtly man whose object was the acquisition of worth through love.

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[36]Valency, op. cit., p. 52.

[37]Schofield, op. cit., p. 6.

[38]The chivalric tradition influenced French literature much earlier than it affected the literature of England.

[39]Valency, op. cit., p. 50.

The chanson de geste was the literary contribution of the North of France. This literary form, developed around the eleventh century, is narrative and warlike in nature, rather than lyrical and amorous like the songs of southern France.[40] The hero of chanson de geste is a man at arms, noted for his prowess; the qualities of courage, strength, loyalty, Christian zeal, and the desire for fame are emphasized.[41] He is pictured essentially as a warrior, with love and a gentle heart being the least of his knightly virtues. He is admonished to

> . . . be cruel to thine enemies, kind to thy friends, humble to the weak, and aim always to sustain the right and confound those who do wrong to widows, poor ladies, maidens, and orphans; and love the poor always with all thy might, and withal love always the holy church.[42]

In the chanson de geste, the knight's first loyalty is to his feudal overlord, while the lady's natural duty is to serve the knight.[43] In the chivalric system based upon prowess, she could hardly do more. She is often depicted as a nuisance or as a source of trouble, and the knight seldom wastes much time on her. However, the lady of

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[40]Ibid., p. 39.

[41]Loc. cit.

[42]Moncrieff, op. cit., p. 10.

[43]Denis De Rougemont, Love in the Western World, p. 33.

the chanson de geste is usually quite dazzled by the beauty and strength of the knight and is even shameless in making sexual overtures to him.[44] It is characteristic in the chanson for the woman to be desirous and inclined to do evil, while the knight remains temperate and businesslike, love being the natural tribute of woman to man.[45] Yet, in the chanson, if the knight desires a lady and the lady is unwilling, he does not hesitate to take her by force.[46] However, the chanson de geste is not centered around scenes but around the glories attained by men in battling for their ideals.

In the literary works of the South of France, during a little later period, the battle scenes of the chansons are replaced with love scenes, and the only battles are those of love and its ordeals. These southern love-lyrics present the knight in love, whose knightly qualities of courage, strength, loyalty, Christian zeal, and desire for fame and glory are qualities which recommend him to his lady.[47] This adoration of the fair was fostered by the Provençal troubadours in poetry which demanded a lady for the knight to serve, worship, and

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[44]Valency, op. cit., p. 53

[45]Ibid., p. 54.

[46]Ibid., p. 57.

[47]Loc. cit.

protect. In their poetry, love is refined and sophisticated, and the literary impact of their art form and its central theme is still experienced, today.[48]

There are many elements of the earlier and, perhaps, truer conception of chivalry to be found in SGGK.[49] Perhaps the most significant of these occurs in the avowed cause of Gawain's quest, for Gawain undertakes the challenge of the Green Knight in the behalf of his lord, King Arthur, rather than in the behalf of a lady-love:

> Bot fro as much as 3e 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 no3t hit yow falles,
> And I have frayned hit at yow fryst, folde3 hit to me,
> And if I carp not comlyly, let all þis cort rych
> bout blame.
>
> (II. 356-61)

The very cause of Gawain's undertaking is, then, more surely chivalric than courtly; Gawain is in the service of the chivalric ideal rather than in the service of ladies. Another element of chivalry in the poem is that of courage, an element particularly evident in

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[48] A more detailed description of troubadour poetry is to be found in Chapter II.

[49] The courtly love elements in SGGK are examined in depth in Chapter II.

[50] Tolkien and Gordon, op. cit. All further references to SGGK are from the Tolkien and Gordon edition and will be noted within the text.

Gawain. All of Arthur's knights were famous for their valor, but Gawain especially excelled.[51] He is described as " . . . prynce withouten pere/ In felde þer felle men foȝt" (II. 873-4). He is also an able knight, famed for his prowess; the author declares that Gawain " . . . fayled neuer . . . in his fyue fyngres" (I. 641). Gawain's valor (as well as his faith in his own ability) prompts him to accept the challenge of the Green Knight and to carry through his promise to the Green Knight.[52] Realizing that his reputation for courage will be marred forever if he does not appear at the Green Chapel as he has promised, Gawain faces the blows awaiting him there. As Gawain forsaw only disaster at the Green Chapel, his loyalty to his pledge was, indeed, courageous.

This very same loyalty to a pledge was another chivalric element characteristic of Gawain. He demonstrates vividly his loyalty to a promise--even an extravagant one--in searching out the Green Knight. Gawain is also quite solicitous of his vow to Bercilak in the game of the exchange of winnings; he carefully seeks to be true to his vow. Unfortunately, he also makes a vow to the lady which forces him either to dishonor his promise to her or break his pledge

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[51] George J. Engelhardt, "The Predicament of Gawain," MLQ, XVI (September, 1955), 219.

[52] Ibid., p. 220.

to Bercilak. Gawain, caught in an impossible situation, is forced to compromise his chivalry, but his extreme guilt in doing so demonstrates his true concern in faithfully fulfilling his vows.

Gawain's faithfulness in religious observance is another mark of chivalry in the poem. Gawain is constantly going to Mass or offering his praise or complaint to Heaven. He does not neglect to thank the Divine for guidance to Bercilak's castle: "Þenne hatȝ he hendly of his helme, and heȝly he þonkeȝ / Jesus and sayn Gilyan . . ." (II. 773-4); he is attentive during religious services: "And seten soberly samen þe seruise quyle" (I. 940); he goes faithfully to Mass after being tempted by the lady: "Boȝeȝ forth, quen he watȝ boun, / blyþely to masse . . ." (II. 1311). Gawain also carefully seeks absolution before leaving to meet the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. Gawain is the knight of the Pentangle, who places all his trust " . . . in þe fyue woundeȝ / Þat Christ kaȝt on þe croys, as þe crede telleȝ . . ." (II. 642-3). Gawain's sincere religious faith is a factor in his dilemma in the temptation scenes, for he is caught not only between concern for his loyalty to his host and for his courteous reputation but also between the concern for the awkwardness of his present situation and for the awkward position awaiting the man who dies in mortal sin.[53] Gawain wishes to avoid sin as he is facing

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[53]Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, p. 43.

death, well aware that hell is the reward for the man who dies in sin: "He cared for his cortaysye . . . , / And more for his meschef, 3if he schulde make synne . . . " (II. 1774-5).

Another requirement of the early chivalric code was that of chastity: a requirement which Gawain strictly fulfills. Although Gawain compromises many of his other knightly virtues before the poem's end, his chastity remains intact. Gawain carefully guards his chastity with not only the future implications in mind but also the present ones, for he realizes that, if he yields to the lady, he will commit the treacherous sin of disloyalty to his host.[54] Gawain is concerned that he might " . . . make synne, / And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde a3t" (II. 1774-5).

The Gawain-poet obviously had the lady of the chanson de geste, the song of essentially masculine chivalry, in mind when he created Bercilak's lady for, although the lady talks much of chivalric love and courtliness, her actions are certainly not in accordance with the customs of courtly behavior. Like the lady of the chanson and unlike the lady of the courtly lyrics, she boldly offers herself to Gawain: "3e ar welcum to my cors, / Yowre awen won to wale" (II. 1237-8). The passion she affects and the manner in which

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[54]Robert Max Garrett, "The Lay of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," JEGP, XXIV (January, 1925), 128.

she offers herself to Gawain make Bercilak's wife a far more primitive creature than the haughty, inaccessible lady of courtly love.[55] As the lady of the chanson, she is depicted as a source of trouble. The cause to which she ascribes her passion is also in the nature of the chanson; she pretends that she loves Gawain for his reputation, and she excuses her own lack of restraint with her admiration of the famous Gawain. Coyly, she reveals to Gawain her knowledge of his identity and of his reputation: "For I wene wel, iwysse, Sir Wowen ȝe are, / Ðat alle þe worlde worchipeȝ quere-so ȝe ride" (II. 1226-7); just as coyly, she reveals her intense admiration for him:

> Bot hit ar ladyes innoȝe þat leuer wer nowþe
> Haf þe, hende, in hor holde, as I þe habbe here.
> To daly with derely your daynte wordeȝ,
> Keuer hem comfort and colen her careȝ,
> Ðen much of þe garysoun oþer golde þat þay hauen.
> (II. 1251-55).

Quite in the tradition of the chanson, she subjects herself to Gawain, promising to serve him: "Me behoueȝ of fyne force / Your seruaunt be, and schale" (II. 1239-40). In response to her advances, Gawain acts courteously but not necessarily courtly. His primary concern is simply not love, and, although he wishes to maintain his reputation as a man worthy of a lady's admiration, he does not go to any lengths

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[55] Engelhardt, op. cit., p. 221.

to serve actively in the love of ladies. He is courtly, but not amorous. He treats the lady with courtesy, but does not become emotionally involved. Gawain has no intentions of being pale and wan in the service of his ladylove; rather, he eats heartily, dances late into the night, and mixes joyfully with the entire company.[56]

Another purely chivalric element may be seen in the tale: Arthur's noble announcement that " . . . he wolde neuer ete / Vpon such a dere day, er hym deuised were/ Of sum auenturus þyng an vncouþe tale . . ." (II. 91-3) seems a frivolous gesture derived from the chivalric practice of imposing some form of privation upon oneself until some certain event or deed is accomplished. The care of Arthur's court in seating themselves in strict accordance with rank, " . . . þay wenten to sete, / Þe best burne ay abot, as hit best semed . . ." (II. 72-3), is surely the result of the poet's knowledge of the reverence for rank characteristic of the chivalric order. Yet, the purely chivalric elements in this poem, although they do exist, do not constitute the entire framework of the story. Instead, the chivalric elements in this poem, as in feudal France, co-exist with the motifs of the courtly love cult, reacting both against, and in

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[56]B. J. Whiting, "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy, His Appearance in Chaucer's Squire's Tale," Mediaeval Studies, IX (1947), 203.

accordance with, these motifs. The chivalric elements are not necessarily modified; they are simply combined with courtly elements to produce a more complex creation than either separate element is capable of evoking.

## CHAPTER II

## COURTLY LOVE: ITS ORIGINS, MOTIFS, AND INFLUENCE, AND ITS EFFECT UPON SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Love as an ennobling passion was a new concept in the Middle Ages, one which stood in direct antithesis to the classical conception of love as "frank sensuality, tragic madness, or resistless passion."[57] The chivalric type of love which placed women on a pedestal as the object of man's highest aspiration and as an earthly symbol of divine love was unknown to Aristotle, Virgil, St. Paul, or the author of Beowulf.[58] Despite its contrast to classicism, however, the idea of the adoration of women and of man's ennoblement through love gained popularity in France during the latter part of the eleventh century, reaching its height of popularity in continental Europe in the twelfth century, and somewhat later in Britain.[59]

Courtly love[60] grew as a somewhat natural result of the chivalric code; the cult of court love might well have had deep roots

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[57]Barbara Seward, The Symbolic Rose, p. 28.

[58]H. L. Creek, "Love in Medieval Literature," Sewanee Review, XXIV (January, 1916), 94.

[59]Lewis, op. cit., p. 2.

[60]The term "courtly love" was not in usage in medieval times; it was coined by Gaston Paris in 1883.

in the situation of the knightly class; in its "excessive masculinity, its Christian ideals of love and gentleness, its frustrations, and its lack of real work and real rewards."[61] The cult served as a refinement of the knightly world, bringing a new diversion for the monotonous days spent in the castle and the promise of both tangible and intangible rewards.

Nor were the character and composition of the medieval courts adverse to the development of such an ideal. The typical court of the Middle Ages, a virtual haven of luxury and leisure in comparison to the outside world, was composed of the lord, his lady, and their men and damsels--the men far outnumbering the women.[62] The men of the courts included inferior nobles, landless knights, squires, and pages, all of whom were inferior to both the lord and his lady.[63] The lady occupied a high position in court, second only to the lord; consequently, the veneration of the vassals for their lord was also extended to their lady.[64] The exalted position of the lady and the

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[61]Crane Brinton, A History of Western Morals, p. 186.

[62]Lewis, op. cit., p. 12.

[63]Loc. cit.

[64]D. W. Robertson, Jr., A Preface to Chaucer, p. 453.

honor accorded her by virtue of this position did much to exalt the conception of the service and adoration of women in general. Still, the love and esteem of the vassal for his noble lady was not based merely upon his image of the lady as his superior but also upon his image of the lady as the source of beauty and courtesy. All courtesy in the medieval castle stemmed from the lady; through her social and feudal position, she served as the "scourge of villainy" and the source of proper behavior.[65]

The simplicity of the vassal's loyalty to his lady changed into a more rigorous and complex form of adoration through the influence of a changing mode of life in the courts and, particularly, in those courts of the South of France. In this region, as in the entire European world during the last part of the eleventh century, wealth increased, display became more popular, simple manners became more formal and complex, and luxury was of great importance.[66] The courts of the nobility were the center of culture; court poets and minstrels gained higher status as the desire for entertainment became of paramount importance in this more leisurely age.[67] Since the

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[65]Lewis, op. cit., p. 13.

[66]Creek, op. cit., p. 94.

[67]Loc. cit.

wives of the nobles were really the ones with the leisure, it was they who were primarily concerned with the entertainment; as the result of their concern, the songs and tales of the court troubadours became feminized, idealizing and catering to women.[68] In the creation of this more romantic, lyrical literature, the troubadours drew upon elements not native to French literary thought and combined these elements with existing ones to produce a courtly conception of the love and service of ladies. Although the exact origins of courtly love have never been established to the entire satisfaction of all scholars, the most general belief is that courtly love was developed as a combination of Latin and Moorish elements, with traces of ecstatic mysticism and the Neo-Platonic.

Possibly the greatest part of the courtly love convention may be traced to Ovid, the Roman poet who lived in the time of Emperor Augustus. Ovid was well-known to the poets and scholars of medieval Europe; his name appears in the library catalogues from the ninth century on.[69] The poets probably based many of the tenets of courtly love (especially those of the unpure or "mixed" courtly love) on Ovid's Art of Love, a treatise of rules and examples for the proper conduct

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[68] Loc. cit.

[69] Jessie Crosland, "Ovid's Contribution to the Conception of Love Known as L'Amour Courtois," MLR, XLII (April, 1947), 199.

of illicit lovers.[70] Ovid treats illicit love and lovers with irony and humor, but the conduct which he ironically recommends was taken seriously in the courtly love tradition.[71]

The love which Ovid describes is "frankly sensual" with little trace of "romantic affection."[72] It is extra-marital, with no thought of matrimony. The woman is not restricted to one affair at a time; however, more than one is not recommended in view of the complications which may arise. Ovid points out that secrecy in the affair is desirable, as it is extremely useful in avoiding angry scenes with the husband and can actually make the affair more intriguing and pleasant. These ideas were all incorporated into the concept of courtly love, along with other influential ideas of Ovid, such as (1) love is a kind of warfare in which all are serving in the army of Amor, the god of love, under the Cupid, the general, and in which woman has absolute power over man; (2) man may deceive the woman, if possible, but must never appear to do so; (3) man should undergo all kinds of hardships for his beloved, to the extent of becoming pale, wan, and sickly; (4) man must make all his actions appear to

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[70] Lewis, op. cit., p. 6.

[71] R. J. Schoeck, "Andreas Capellanus and St. Bernard of Clairvaux," MLN, LXVI (May, 1951), 298.

[72] Andreas Capellanus, The Art of Courtly Love, p. 4.

be for the beloved's sake, despite the motive; (5) jealousy may be used to arouse the beloved's interest.[73] The courtly picture of the haughty, cruel mistress was probably another result of Ovidian influence.[74] Ovid may also have influenced the troubadour's vocabulary, for many of the terms used by trouveres echo Latin terms and have Latin counterparts.[75]

Modifications of Ovid's influence upon courtly love conventions, particularly those pertaining to love on a more elevated level, have been traced to the Arab influence as found in Moslem Spain.[76] Similarities of the metrical forms of the lyric, love poetry of the French troubadours and of the Moorish poets have been noted, and it has been suggested that the trouvere custom of addressing the lady as midons (a term meaning "my lord") stemmed from the custom in Arabic poetry where ladies were addressed in the masculine case because it was considered indecent to address verses of love to women.[77] It is highly probable that the literature of Moslem Spain

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[73]Ibid., p. 5.

[74]Creek, op. cit., p. 104.

[75]Crosland, op. cit., p. 201.

[76]Capellanus, op. cit., p. 7.

[77]Roger Sherman Loomis, The Development of Arthurian Romance, p. 53.

affected the literature of southern France and, consequently, of the entire western Christendom, for intellectual relations between the two areas were furthered through warfare, trade, pilgrimages, and the Crusades, and Arabic learning was also of early and growing importance at the university in Chartres.[78] Duke William of Aquitaine, one of the poets who was of extreme influence in the development of courtliness, was acquainted with Moslem Spain.[79]

The Arabic attitude toward love was both sensual, as found in native tradition, and spiritual, as found in the Arabic scholars who discovered a spiritual love concept in the works of Plato.[80] The Dove's Neck-Ring, written in 1022 by the Andalusian scholar and poet Ibn Hazm, has been discovered to be similar in many points to the idealistic doctrine of fin' amor (pure courtly love), the most notable difference being that Hazm states that the beloved one must not be married.[81] The following attitudes toward love are shown in Hazm's work: (1) lover should become pale and wan over love, and tremble in beloved's presence; (2) secrecy pleasant and jealousy necessary;

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[78]Theodore Silverstein, "Andreas, Plato, and the Arabs: Remarks on Some Recent Accounts of Courtly Love," MP, XLVII (November, 1949), 120.

[79]Henry Seidel Canby, "The Myths of Mary," Poet Lore, XX (March-April, 1909), 146.

[80]Capellanus, op. cit., p. 8.

[81]R. S. Loomis, op. cit., p. 54.

(3) love is the reunion of parts of the soul separated in the creation; (4) spiritual love can only be felt for one person, while other loves are passionate or fleshly; (5) true love has a physical side, but the spiritual side is greater; (6) true love is not forbidden by religious law and can ennoble the lover; (7) love knows no rank--one can love queen or slave; (8) the lover is always abject before the beloved.[82]

It is believed that the incorporation of spiritual elements into Arabic poetry resulted from the familiarity of the Arabic poet with the Neo-Platonic ideas expressed by Plotinus.[83] Medieval Neo-Platonism was marked by the basic assumption that all good in the world is derived from the divine good, and that all evil in the world is lacking in divine character and is essentially earthly.[84] All earthly beauty, then, is a reflection of divine beauty; divine perfection can only be known truly through mystic contemplation and love (this love resembling the character of ideal human love).[85] Interpreting these basic assumptions of Neo-Platonism in regard to human love, the Arab poets arrived at the conclusion that the love of earthly

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[82]Capellanus, op. cit., p. 9.

[83]Silverstein, op. cit., p. 118.

[84]Creek, op. cit., p. 102.

[85]Ibid., p. 103.

beauty in a woman may enable lovers to see divine beauty, and that in worshipping the beautiful woman a lover is reaching toward the divine.[86] The Arabs also described love as a union of hearts and minds which ennobles and stimulates desire, another tenet based upon Neo-Platonic thought. In this way, Neo-Platonic thought may have been the source of the idea of love as an ennobling force as expressed in Arabic poetry and in the later troubadour poetry.

Some scholars have chosen to ignore the ideas of either Ovid or the Neo-Platonic Arab poets as the source of courtly love traditions and have sought, instead, to prove that the courtly love conventions arose from religious mysticism. Efforts have been made to establish either the mysticism of St. Bernard of Clairvaux or the religion of the Cathars as the origin of the courtly code.

Many parallels occur between the mystical love of God and the sexual love of a human, and the fact that this parallelism is especially prominent in chivalric literature developed in a period in which mysticism greatly influenced the Church and the world has led some scholars to believe that the human passion of the courtly lore may have been borrowed from divine.[87] Underhill describes the mystic outlook as " . . . the lover's outlook. It has the same

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[86]Silverstein, op. cit., p. 121.

[87]Seward, op. cit., p. 38.

element of wildness, the same quality of selfless and quixotic devotion, the same combination of rapture and humility."[88] A mystical, contemplative quality is present in both sexual and divine love; the religious reflect upon divine things, and the lover reflects on his beloved--and this contemplation may lead to an ecstasy which shuts out reality in both types of love.[89] The qualities of mystic, divine love which may have affected the human love of the romances are (1) the necessity of humility; (2) the submission of the lover to the beloved; (3) the pursuit of something unattainable; (4) the mystic, contemplative quality.[90] Similarities in the terms used by the religious mystics and the troubadours and in the emphasis of the troubadours upon faith, hope, love, worship, service, and suffering have been seen as other evidences of the influence of mysticism upon the troubadour songs.[91]

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the foremost Christian authority from 1125 to 1153 and the founder of the Cistercian religious order, was the person most responsible for the mystic religious ideas of the

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[88]Quoted in Creek, op. cit., p. 96.

[89]Ibid., p. 99.

[90]Ibid., p. 98.

[91]James J. Wilhelm, The Cruelest Month, p. 84.

Middle Ages; consequently, some scholars have seen in his divine mystic theories the beginnings of the idea of sexual love as an ennobling force.[92] However, the object of Bernard's love and desire is clearly divine, not earthly; nor can Cistercian love as conceived by Bernard be assimilated into the ideals of courtly love and still retain its original character.[93] The two--courtly love and Bernardine mystical love--are basically dissimilar.[94]

Furthermore, mysticism surrounding the Cathar religion is seen as the source of certain courtly practices of love tradition by Denis De Rougement. He contends that Provençal poetry was affected by the religious atmosphere which determined formal behavior and social usages of the environment.[95] Catharism, a heretic religion in the eyes of the Catholic church, arose simultaneously with the literary surge of courtly love, in the same provinces in the South of France and among the same classes.[96] The Cathars enjoyed freedom of

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[92]Dana Carleton Munro and George Clark Sellery, Medieval Civilization, p. 406.

[93]Etienne H. Gilson, The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard, p. 197.

[94]Silverstein, op. cit., p. 118.

[95]Rougemont, op. cit., p. 78.

[96]Loc. cit.

religion in the casually tolerant southern provinces, and their religion became so popular that, in 1177, Raymon V, count of Toulouse, wrote that Catharism

> . . . has penetrated everywhere. It has brought discord into every family, dividing husband from wife, son from father, daughter-in-law from mother-in-law. The priests themselves yield to the contagion . . . The most important personages in my land have suffered themselves to be corrupted. The crowd has followed their example and has abandoned the faith, so that I neither dare nor can repress the evil.[97]

The dogmas of Catharism (styled the "Church of Love" by its followers, and the "Albigensian heresy" by faithful Catholics) were based upon a dualistic belief. The Cathars believed that good and evil exist, that two worlds--the spiritual world and the earthly world--exist, and that there were two creations--a spiritual creation and a material creation.[98] Because God is love and the world is evil, the Cathars did not believe that God created this world, but that this world was made manifest through a rebellion of souls led by the Rebel Angel, all of whom lived in God's spiritual world.[99] The Rebel Angel and the Rebel Souls forsook God's Heaven for earth and took on

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[97]Quoted in Munro and Sellery, op. cit., p. 432.

[98]Rougemont, op. cit., p. 79.

[99]Loc. cit.

physical bodies; though their souls became trapped in their bodies and, therefore, subject to death and reproduction, their spirits remained in Heaven.[100] The struggle of the Cathar, then, was to reunite his soul with his spirit.

The Cathars were divided into two groups: the Believers, who merely believed and were allowed to marry and live normally in the world, and the Perfects, who had received the rite of consolamentum.[101] In this rite, the Perfects renounced the world and devoted themselves to God, vowing never to lie, take an oath, kill or eat of animals, or indulge in sexual contacts.[102]

Rougement bases his theory of Catharism as the source of courtly love upon two basic points: (1) the parallels found in Catharism and courtly love; (2) texual evidence of Cathar beliefs in the troubadour poetry. Rougement notes that both Catharism and the courtly love convention exalted chastity (but did not always practice it); that in both is a rejection of the marriage bond; that a single kiss of initiation is found in both thoughts; that the pure lovers and the mixed lovers correspond to the Perfects and the Believers of

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[100] Ibid., p. 80.

[101] Loc. cit.

[102] Loc. cit.

Catharism; and that the troubadours preserve the secrecy of their beloved as the Cathar preserves the secrecy of his religious passion.[103] Rougement, also, finds evidences of Catharistic longing for reunion with his spirit in poems in which the poet declares death preferable to earthly awards or longs for reunion with his absent beloved.[104] Perhaps, the most worthy criticism of Rougemont's theory shows that even though the poetry of the Middle Ages becomes somewhat mystical in expression, it is never entirely removed from reality and from sensual communication, such as a kiss; thus, this poetry is not an expression of an ascetic religion such as Catharism.[105]

Just as scholars have never been able to agree upon the origins of courtly love traditions, neither have they been able to agree entirely as to the exact nature of courtly love. It is generally described as a sensual love of which the formal object is the growth of the lover (the knight) in merit, worth, and goodness.[106] The medieval courtly persons asserted that love is the origin of man's excellence,

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[103] Ibid., p. 83.

[104] Ibid., p. 87.

[105] Wilhelm, op. cit., p. 142.

[106] Alexander J. Denomy, "Courtly Love and Courtliness," Speculum, XXVIII (January, 1953), 44.

and of his ennoblement on earth. Through love, "the haughty become humble, the base are ennobled, the lazy become skilled, and the foolish wise."[107] Because love is the source of goodness and worth, all courtly deeds arise from love, and man is worthy only when he acts in love's name; thus, no man can be excused from service in love.[108] Any act undertaken in love's name can not be sinful or immoral, but virtuous and right.[109]

In the practical application of the theory of ennobling love, the knight was to choose a noble lady to reign as his source of inspiration and as his object of worship. Ideally, the lady chosen would possess beauty, ability in conversation, manners, and an understanding of courtly love, and the knight was encouraged to be discriminating in his choice as the high degree of perfection and worth of the lady would reflect upon himself, especially if his love was returned.[110] Although the knights usually chose ladies of the courts in which they served, sometimes they chose to serve ladies they had

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[107]R. S. Loomis, op. cit., p. 52.

[108]Denomy, op. cit., p. 45.

[109]Loc. cit.

[110]L. T. Topsfield, "Raimon De Miraval and the Art of Courtly Love," MLR, LI (January, 1956), 36.

never even seen but knew of only through reports or through pictures or visions.[111]

The lady's duty to the knight was to help him obtain more dignity and worth through the performance of noble deeds.[112] The true knight was to serve his lady as lover, vassal, champion, and poet; he was obligated to courtship and secrecy.[113] The lover's highest claim to virtue was his obedience to the commands and wishes of the lady, and he was bound to seek esteem and reputation to increase the social worth of both himself and his lady. Through love, he could gain the highest honor and respect; without love, he could not protect himself against lowliness and loss of virtue.[114]

From the basic ideal of the ennobling power of love and from the practical application of this love emerged a courtly love convention marked by the themes of humility, courtesy, sensuality, and erotic religion.[115]

The "feudalization of love" is an apt description for courtly love, for the lover served his lady much in the same way the vassal

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[111]Robertson, op. cit., p. 454.

[112]Valency, op. cit., p. 49.

[113]Ibid., p. 169.

[114]Denomy, op. cit., p. 51.

[115]Lewis, op. cit., p. 2.

served his lord.[116] Because love was considered a source of ennoblement, the love of the knight was usually directed to a lady who was socially superior to himself and, thus, more capable of ennobling through her love and worth.[117] Because she was socially superior, the man quite naturally assumed the subserviant attitude in the presence of his lady. Yet, the same fealty was due to beloved ladies who were not necessarily socially superior to their lovers. The absolute allegiance of the lover to his lady was the important fusing idea of the entire cult. Medieval lovers called themselves "prisoners" or "servants."[118] The typical pose of the lover was that of his kneeling at the feet of a haughty, cruel lady, weeping piteously about her indifferent treatment of him. The lover's worst fear was that of being rejected or being regarded as unworthy by the lady; even if he were rejected or neglected, he could not cease to love her, nor could he speak ill of her, or replace her in his affections.[119] The only virtue of the lover was that of his show of obedience through heroic action. The adoration of womanhood was at its peak.

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[116] Loc. cit.

[117] Denomy, op. cit., p. 12.

[118] Lewis, op. cit., p. 1.

[119] Herbert Noller, "The Meaning of Courtly Love," JAF, LXXIII (January, 1960), 46.

before drinking from the common goblet; (7) not wipe eyes, nose, or mouth on the tablecloth; (8) always wash the hands before meals and avoid touching the body during meals; and (9) not dunk food into the salt cellar.[126] Courtly love was a refining element at the dinner table as well as in the boudoir!

Possibly, the most fascinating and the most unique motif of courtly love was that pertaining to its sensuality. There were two types of courtly love: the pure love (fin' amors) and mixed love (amor mixtus).[127] Fin' amors, the love most frequently celebrated by the troubadours, is vastly different from any other known type of sexual love, for it presents the paradox of love aspiring to the highest conception of beauty, goodness, and joy, even though it arises through sexual desire.[128] It is, at once, sensual and innocent; carnal and pure.

Although the object of the courtly lover's adoration was another man's wife, the relationship of the courtier and his lady was regarded as highly moral under the conventions of fin' amor. The purity of the relationship was based upon the fact that the conception

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[126] Loc. cit.

[127] Ibid., p. 40.

[128] Seward, op. cit., p. 28.

under which this relationship was established was one of love as a spiritual rather than physical union. In fin' amors, love is primarily a union of hearts and minds, ennobling the lover and making him desire every carnal satisfaction, except that represented by sexual union.[129] The pure courtly lover strongly desired physical and emotional fulfillment, yet he realized that, ideally, this fulfillment in reality could never be reached; he realized that actual sexual intercourse would destroy the purity of the love.[130] Still, the desire he had for sexual satisfaction was not unpure, but rather the very source of his ennoblement.[131] And, if the love were physically consummated, the very source of his ennoblement would wither and die, for it was believed that physical desire increased when it was unconsummated, and decreased when consummated.[132] Neither could the courtly lover risk decreasing the fullness of his love through consummation, for it was through desire that he could obtain joy, the "ideal feeling state" of the courtly person.[133] The true apostles of courtly love believed in the following principles:

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[129]Silverstein, op. cit., p. 120.

[130]Rougemont, op. cit., p. 34.

[131]Denomy, op. cit., p. 44.

[132]Loc. cit.

[133]Moller, op. cit., p. 47.

1. Even though I do not gain what I wish, my sorrow is sweeter than any other worldly pleasure.

2. I suffer not because my desire in itself is gratifying.

3. Joy comes through great sorrow.[134]

Pure love, although it was innocent of total sexual relationship, was not Platonic, for it encouraged kissing, embracing, seeing the beloved's nudity, and touching and lying beside the beloved's nude body.[135] These practices were encouraged, because they provoked desire, and desire was the purifying force, the medium through which joy could be attained. This pure love of the courtly persons also became extremely sensual through small events, such as a glance or a touch of the hand, magnified into moments of passion and desire.[136]

Beset by the problem of unfulfilled desire or the loss of the beloved to another, the lover often experienced mental depression and lovesickness, characterized by sleeplessness, loss of appetite, confusion, paleness, trembling, and even (in extreme cases) death.[137]

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[134] Ibid., p. 46.

[135] Ibid., p. 41.

[136] Valency, op. cit., p. 28.

[137] Sarah Michie, "The Lover's Malady in Early Irish Romance," Speculum, XII (July, 1937), 304.

In Lilium Medicinae (a popular medical book of the fourteenth century) the physician, Bernard of Gordon, described lovesickness as "melancholy solicitude arising from the love of a woman" caused by the corruption of reason through contemplation of the beloved wherein the lover is so overcome with love that he idealizes the woman in every respect, desires her madly, and believes that fulfillment of this desire would be the ultimate joy.[138] He noted that affected courtiers seem to live outside reality, to neglect normal operations, to indulge in continual meditation, and to be willing to suffer all sorts of unpleasant things, regarding them as pleasant as compared to what they had in mind.[139] Bernard recommended various cures for the illness: the relation of very joyful or very sorrowful news to the afflicted one, the avoidance of idleness by the lovesick courtier, the possibility of the lover's finding a new beloved, or (in extreme cases) the slander and defamation of the woman by old women.[140]

Lovesickness was, also, a characteristic of mixed love, a less idealistic type of courtly love which was a compromise between pure love and sexual fulfillment.[141] Both types of courtly love are

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[138]Robertson, op. cit., p. 458.

[139]Loc. cit.

[140]Ibid., p. 459.

[141]Moller, op. cit., p. 40.

dishonorable by most Western standards, because here the lover was adoring another man's wife, but mixed love was more than the adoration of a married woman; it was an adulterous union with that woman. The code of mixed love implied that love and marriage were not compatible and that a woman of high degree needed both a lover and a husband. Under this code, a man violated the rules of love if he loved and desired his own wife; chastity applied only to the loyalty of lovers, and love between husband and wife was considered adulterous.[142] Accordingly, it was this period in medieval life in which relations between men and women were ". . . more passionate and more conventional, more licentious and more controlled by rule" than at any other time.[143] This licentiousness was manifest in the personality of the courts: women talked freely among themselves of their sexual conquests (omitting names); the language used in mixed company was uncensored; the stories told in mixed company were often gross; the knights and squires had free access to ladies' chambers.[144] The courts influenced by these courtly love conventions were also generally shameless in sexual relations.[145]

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[142]Rougemont, op. cit., p. 76.

[143]Cornish, op. cit., p. 283.

[144]Ibid., p. 301

[145]Huizinga, op. cit., p. 97.

The adultery of the courtly love code resulted not only from the precarious position in which the lovers placed themselves, but also from the fact that men did not associate romantic and passionate ideals of love with marriage. This disassociation of love with marriage was the result of two causes: (1) the nature of the medieval marriage; (2) the sexology of the medieval Church.[146] The marriages of medieval Europe were convenience matches, planned for gains in wealth and status. Love--or even affection--was not always present in these marriages, a fact which often led men and women to wander outside marriage for emotional satisfaction.[147] The marriage bond made women and love unimportant. The courtly love code attempted to replace these unattractive features of the typical medieval marriage with the affirmation that woman and the love of woman are ennobling forces, and with the denial of marriage as conducive to love by virtue of the fact that lovers must love freely while spouses love through duty.[148]

The sexology of the medieval Church affected the adulterous nature of mixed love in quite a different way by labeling all passionate love as an evil, even when experienced with the marriage

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[146] Lewis, op. cit., p. 13.

[147] Gist, op. cit., p. 25.

[148] Valency, op. cit., p. 64.

partner.[149] The Church did not consider sexual passion a refining or ennobling experience.[150] Sexual intercourse was justified only when its purpose was to produce children or to keep one's spouse from illicit relationships; sexual passion and desire were never justified.[151] Thus, one was just as guility of sin when experiencing sexual passion with his spouse as with another person. Courtly lovers quickly seized upon this theological quirk to rationalize that sexual relationships with a lover were no more adulterous than were sexual relationships with one's spouse.

The type of situation spawned by the conventions of mixed love necessitated secrecy and furtiveness and was marked by jealousy.[152] The courtly lover had to be cautious to preserve the secrecy of the love affair, distrusting even his best friends in this one concern. The courtly lover was also plagued with jealousy, fearful that some other courtier would gain his lady's attention.[153] The lover's real enemies were the rival and those who might try to ruin

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[149]Lewis, op. cit., p. 13.

[150]Gist, op. cit., p. 11.

[151]Loc. cit.

[152]Moller, op. cit., p. 44.

[153]Ibid., p. 45.

the love relationship, but not the husband, who was merely an inconvenience to the courtly lover.[154] Indeed, the husband was of minor importance in the love affair, and was usually not even mentioned by the court poets in their songs of amor.[155] Some husbands did not care about their wives' love affairs, because they were engaged in love affairs of their own, but other husbands were more possessive, like Philip, Count of Flanders, who hanged his wife's lover.[156] Although obviously more essential in mixed love, secrecy and jealousy were also elements of pure love.

The elements of courtly love--pure or mixed--formed a religion of love, an inheritance of Ovid's humorous blasphemy.[157] This erotic religion was centered about the god Amor, whose chief function was to assist the faithful, despairing lovers in their worship of ladies. Courtly love was a worldly conception of love; it was addressed to women rather than to God, but its adoration of the woman was not unlike the adoration of the Virgin.[158] In fact, the

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[154] Lewis, op. cit., p. 2.

[155] Moller, op. cit., p. 41.

[156] Cornish, op. cit., p. 300.

[157] Lewis, op. cit., p. 18.

[158] Ibid., p. 21.

religion of Amor seems to be a parody of the Christian religion, with the adoration of the lady often expressed in religious phraseology including the elements of (1) the Paradise, Purgatorio, and Inferno of lovers, (2) love visions as doctrinal inspiration and (3) confessions, paternosters, credos, masses, pilgrimages, and cloisters of love.[159] In this erotic religion, Venus and her son Cupid are glorified as divine. Poems of the Middle Ages reveal the parody of the Christian religion in the love religion of Amor. A twelfth century poem in the Monte Romarici entitled Concilium shows the influence of Ovid's mock religion,closely parodying practices of the Church through a gospel and through a picture of the god of love functioning similarly to a cardinal with the power of excommunication.[160] In a thirteenth-century manuscript, containing a collection of poems now known as the Carmina Burana, there occurs a poem in which Amor appears to the poet in a vision and passes judgment on the Burana concept of love; then speaks with Godlike authority on the doctrine of secular love versus brotherly love.[161] Another poem in the Carmina, written as a

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[159]Creek, op. cit., p. 97.

[160]Lewis, op. cit., p. 19.

[161]Wilhelm, op. cit., p. 123.

marching song for Venus, resembles a hymn of the Church militant and parodies Christian virtues.[162]

Humility, courtesy, sensuality, and erotic religion were, then, the themes of courtly love; themes which were systematically codified into specific rules for lovers and ladies to follow in their affairs by Andreas Capellanus in his book Tractatus de Amore et de Amoris Remedio. The Tractatus, a thirteenth-century book written in Latin phrase, is a book on the science of love exploring the definition of the principles of love, love's effect upon lovers, disciplines of the lovers, and the code and etiquette of courtly love. The conception of love, here, is that of illicit passion. Andreas stresses that the lady has freedom of choice in the acceptance or rejection of a lover, but cautions that she must be careful to choose only a worthy lover. Unmarried women may also have lovers. The lover must be truthful, modest, a good Catholic, clean in speech, hospitable, forgiving, courageous in war, generous in gifts, courteous and completely loyal. Andreas further tells how love may be acquired and gives examples of courtly dialogues for the wooing of members of different classes. In two different places in the book, he lists the rules of love, citing Amor as his source. His first set includes the following twelve rules:

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[162]Ibid., p. 110.

I. Thou shalt avoid avarice like the deadly pestilence and shalt embrace its opposite.
II. Thou shalt keep thyself chaste for the sake of her whom thou lovest.
III. Thou shalt not knowingly strive to break up a correct love affair that someone else is engaged in.
IV. Thou shalt not choose for thy love anyone whom a natural sense of shame forbids thee to marry.
V. Be mindful completely to avoid falsehood.
VI. Thou shalt not have many who know of thy love affair.
VII. Being obedient in all things to the commands of ladies, thou shalt ever strive to ally thyself to the service of love.
VIII. In giving and receiving love's solaces let modesty be ever present.
IX. Thou shalt speak no evil.
X. Thou shalt not be a revealer of love affairs.
XI. Thou shalt be in all things polite and courteous.
XII. In practicing the solaces of love thou shalt not exceed the desires of thy lover.[163]

The second set of rules numbers thirty-one:

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. It is well known that love is always increasing or decreasing.
V. That which a lover takes against the will of his beloved has no relish.
VI. Boys do not love until they arrive at the age of maturity.
VII. When one lover dies, a widowhood of two years is required of the survivor.
VIII. No one should be deprived of love without the very best of reasons.
IX. No one can love unless he is impelled by the persuasion of love.
X. Love is always a stranger in the home of avarice.
XI. It is not proper to love any woman who one would be ashamed to seek to marry.
XII. A true lover does not desire to embrace in love anyone except his beloved.

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[163]Capellanus, op. cit., p. 81.

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. Good character alone makes any man worthy of love.
XIX. If love diminishes, it quickly fails and rarely revives.
XX. Real jealousy always increases the feeling of love.
XXII. Jealousy, and therefore love, are increased when one suspects his beloved.
XXIII. He whom the thought of 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 beloved.
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 being loved by two men or one man by two women.[164]

Actually, the full intention in Andreas' work was to portray the Court of Love which Queen Eleanor of England, wife of Henry II, established at Poitiers between 1170 and 1174.[165] As his book is the only

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[164] Ibid., p. 184-6.

[165] Amy Kelly describes Eleanor's court at Poitiers in detail in "Eleanor of Aquitaine and Her Courts of Love," Speculum, XII (January, 1937), 3-19. A related work is Frank McMinn Chamber's "Some Legends Concerning Eleanor of Aquitaine," Speculum, XVI (October, 1941), 459-68, which recounts famous legends about Eleanor, including an account of the Poitiers' court. A description

contemporary record of the conduct of Eleanor's court, the authenticity of Andreas' report has been questioned; however, if such a court did actually exist, it was a rare example of the tenets of courtly love practiced in reality for courtly love, like chivalry, was more important as a literary rather than a social ideal.[166] Courtly love was the love of the troubadours--not necessarily in their loves of reality but in the loves that they celebrated in their chansons d' amour.[167] The convention was spread by means of these songs, gradually becoming an integral part of medieval literature and affecting the literary thought of the greatest poets of the time. Among these poets was the famous Chretien de Troyes.

Chretien was the main literary of Troyes, the court of the husband of Marie, Countess of Champagne. It is possible that he became acquainted with Andreas Capellananus at Marie's court, for she directed Andreas in the writing of his Tractalus during the period

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of the court of Marie of Champagne, a historical figure who has been associated with Eleanor and her love court, is found in John F. Benton, "The Court of Champagne as a Literary Center," Speculum, XXXVI (October, 1961), 551-591.

[166]Eileen Power, "The Position of Women," The Legacy of the Middle Ages, p. 406.

[167]Friedrich Heer, The Medieval Mind, p. 140.

of 1182 to 1186, when Andreas served as her chaplain.[168] Chretien was among the first poets in northern France to use romantic love as the theme of a serious poem, entitled Erec.[169] It is obvious, however, that he was yet to come under the influence of the Provençal formulas, for the poem is about married love and totally inconsistent with the known rules of love and courtesy.[170] In it, lovers are married, and the hero retains the dominant role, while the lady remains submissive and passive. Clearly, the poet, here, is not writing of courtly love. In Lancelot, a later work, Chretien's approach changes. Two reasons may account for the change: (1) he had come into contact with the courtly love formula; (2) he was writing under the direction of the Countess of Champagne.[171] In this poem, Chretien combined courtly love traditions and Arthurian legend to produce an essentially courtly romance, marked by the motifs of secret, adulterous love, humility, courtesy, and erotic religion.

Much in the way that Chretien was influenced, the poets of Western Europe came under the influence of courtly love traditions,

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[168] Louis-Andre Vigneras, "Chretien De Troyes Rediscovered," MP, XXXII (May, 1935), 342.

[169] Lewis, op. cit., p. 23.

[170] Ibid., p. 24.

[171] Loc. cit.

incorporating elements of the tradition into their romances.[172] The author of SGGK was surely among these.

The conventions of courtly love are frequently alluded to in the temptation scenes. The polished manners and skilled, courtly conversation of the poem are evidence of a poet well versed in the socially sophisticated arts of courtliness.[173] In the tone of light social badinage, temptation is offered to and refused by Gawain; Gawain's conflict stems from his struggle to ally courtly behavior with Christian morality. Gawain is more the perfect courtier than the ambitious warrior; his battles are not emphasized, but his courtly deeds of courtesy are mentioned numerous times.[174] The poet states directly that Gawain possesses the courtly virtues of " . . . fraunchyse and felaȝschyp forbe al þyng/ His clannes and his cortaysye croked were neuer, / And pite, þat þasseȝ alle poynteȝ" (II. 652-4).

When Gawain arrives at the court of Bercilak and his identity is made known, the court members speculate that now they shall observe, not the skills of arms, but those of courtly manners and

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[172]Gist, op. cit., p. 106.

[173]R. S. Loomis, op. cit., p. 539.

[174]Benson, op. cit., p. 108.

conversation: "Now shall we semlych se sleȝteȝ of þeweȝ / And þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble, / Syn we haf fonged þat fyne fader of nurture" (II. 916-19). They rejoice that Gawain has come to their court and hope that, through him, they too may learn of the polished art of the conversation of love: "I hope þat may hym here/ Schal lerne of luf-talkyng" (II. 926-7).

The court members, then, picture Gawain as the epitome of perfect courtliness, versed in the art of conversation d'amor. In the second temptation, the lady implies that Gawain has the ability to ". . . teche sum tokeȝ of trweluf craftes" (I. 1527) to a young lady. In the same scene, the lady notes that Gawain is reputed to be courteous and knightly, knowledgeable of the science of love: "So cortayse, so kynȝtly, as ȝe ar knowen oute/ And of alle cheualry to chose, þe chef þyng alosed/ Is þe lel layk of luf, þe lettrure of armes . . ." (II. 1511-13). Gawain's reputation, then, is more that of a courtly lover than that of a warrior. Gawain demonstrates the basis for his reputation of courtliness throughout the poem in his strict attention to the conventions of courtly behavior. His humility (especially in his treatment of Bercilak's wife) is never compromised. In the first fitt, when Gawain asks Arthur to grant him the privilege of answering the Green Knight's challenge, Gawain bases his plea on the humble premise that the loss of his own life would be less

sacrifice than the loss of Arthur's: "I am þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest/ And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes þ soþe, / Bot for as much as 3e ar myn em I am only to prayse, / No bounte bot your blod I in my bode knowe . . ." (II. 354-7). Gawain also seems anxious to put himself into the service of ladies, for, when he first acquaints himself with the two noble ladies of Bercilak's castle, he " . . . quyk aske3/ To be her seruaunt sothly, if hemself lyked" (II. 975-6).

It is in the temptation scenes that Gawain's actions within the realm of courtly humility become the most artful; he uses his humility to compliment the lady, all the while protecting his own courtesy and chastity through his humble declarations. When Gawain first addresses Bercilak's lady in the first temptation scene, he places himself at her command. Gaily, he states, "Me schal worþe at your wille, and þat me wel lyke3, / For I 3elde me 3ederly, and 3e3e after grace, / And þat is þe best, be my dome, for me byhoue3 nede" (II. 1214-6). In line 1219, he refers to himself as the lady's prisoner. He parries the lady's blunt offer of sexual privileges with a humble speech, pointing out his own lowliness and his desire to be worthy of such a privilege:

> Ða3 I be not now þat 3e of speken;
> To reche to such reuerence as 3e reherce here
> I am wy3e vnworþy, I wot wel myseluen.
> Bi God, I were glad, and yow god þo3t,
> At sa3e oþer at seruyce þat I sette my3t
> To þe pleusaunce of your p·rys--hit were a pure ioye.
> (II. 1242-7)

He implies that the lady's speeches of praise stem only from her generosity (II. 1264-7). When she presses him, he declares his pride in being so worthily considered and re-pledges his service: "Bot I am proude of þe prys þat 3e put on me, / And, soberly your seruaunt, my souerayn I holde yow, / And yowre kny3t I becom, and Kryst yow for3elde" (II. 1277-9). When the lady craves a kiss, he answers obediently, "I schal kysse at your comaundement, as a kny3t falle3, / And fire, lest he displese yow, so plede hit no more" (II. 1303-4).

Gawain employs the virtue of humility in a similar manner during the episode of the second temptation. When the lady rebukes him for not offering to take a kiss, he replies that he cannot do so, by the tenets of courtesy, but explains that he is at her command to " . . . kysse quen yow lyke3, / 3e may lach quen yow lyst, and leue quen yow þynkke3, / in space" (II. 1501-3). In a lengthy speech in the same scene, he again affirms inferiority to the lady and his position as her servant (II. 1534-48).

Gawain uses his humility as an excuse in denying the lady's request for a love-token, stating that he has nothing worthy of giving her: "Now iwysse . . . I wolde I hade here/ Þe leuest þing for þy I in londe welde, / For 3e haf deserued, for soþe, sellyly ofte/ More rewarde bi resoun þen I reche my3t . . ." (II. 1801-4). In the same scene, he again promises " . . . ever in hot and colde/ To be your trwe seruant" (II. 1844-5).

The element of courtesy is yet another courtly love tradition found in SGGK, one which permeates the entire work. Both Arthur's court and Bercilak's court are havens of gentle courtesy; the Green Knight declares that he has heard that in Arthur's court is "kydde cortaysye" (I. 263); and the welcome that Bercilak extends to the Gawain is truly gracious and generous (II. 835-7). Gawain is especially mindful of courtesy, having acquired a reputation for his courtly behavior: " . . . alle prys and prowes and pured þewes / Apendes to hys persoun, and praysed is ever . . ." (II. 912-13).

Gawain is meticulously concerned with the task of preserving his courtesy in all situations. When he rises to ask Arthur for the right to meet the Green Knight's challenge, he is careful to ask permission of both Arthur and Guinevere before doing so: "Bid me boȝe fro þis benche, and stonde by yow þere, / Ðat I wythoute vylanye myȝt voyde þis table, / And þat my legge lady lyked not ille . . ." (II. 344-6). Gawain especially proves the truth of his courteous reputation in the temptation scenes in which he strives to protect his chastity and his courtesy at the same time. Ever reminded by the lady of his reputation for courtliness (II. 1228-30; 1298; 1511), he can not defend his purity by rudeness without impairing his virtue of courtesy.[175] For the most part, he relies upon a humble attitude as

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[175]M. Mills, "Christian Significance and Romance Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MLR, LX (October, 1965), 492.

his one means of courteously removing himself from the embarrassing position in which he finds himself, and he is ever wary, lest he fail in courtliness. During the first temptation, he fears that his courtesy has failed when the lady questions his identity: "Ferde lest he hade fayled in fourme of his castes . . ." (I. 1295). In the second temptation, he excuses his lack of agressiveness as an attempt never to be discourteous toward the lady: "For þat durst I not do, lest I denayed were;/ If I were werned, I were wrang, iwysse, ȝif I profered" (II. 1493-4). When the lady becomes rather forward during the festivities of the night before the third temptation, Gawain deals with her attentions, graciously (II. 1656-63). In the third temptation, Gawain's sense of courtesy is especially challenged, for he is caught in the dilemma of being loyal to the lord or courteous to the lady.[176] In rejecting the lady, he must be careful not to seem unmanly or irresponsive and must maintain his humility, tact, and delicacy. As he is honored for his courtesy, he dares not prove a "caitiff" in the boudoir; as he is honored for his chivalry, he dares not dishonor his host. "He cared for his 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" (II. 1773-5).

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[176] Arthur Heiserman, "Gawain's Clean Courtesy, or, the Task of Telling True Love," MLQ, XXVII (December, 1966), 453.

The sensuality implicit in the courtly love tradition is also used by the Gawain-poet to shape his narrative, since the conflict of the story revolves around the sexual temptation of Gawain. Gawain would appear to be seeking an affair on the fin' amor level, one in which "clene cortays carp" is "closed fro fylþe" (I. 1013).[177] He desires courtly conversation with no sexual bonds. The lady, on the other hand, clearly has more than love-talk in mind. She tells Gawain that she expects him, as a famous courtier, to ". . . teche sum tokene3 of trweluf craftes" (I. 1527), rebuking him for not taking advantage of the absence of her husband to practice this art of love:

> For schame!
> I com hider sengel, and sitte
> To lerne at yow sum game;
> Dos, teche3 me of your wytte,
> Whil my lord is fro hame.
> (II. 1530-4)

In the third temptation, she becomes so aggressive that Gawain finds his chastity and courtesy in dire danger: "For þat pryncece of pris depresed hym as þikke, / Nurned hym so ne3e þe þred, þat nede hym bihoued/ Oþer lach þer hir luf, oþer lodly refuse" (II. 1770-2).

The secrecy of courtly love seems to be present in SGGK, although later events expose the entire sequence as a mere trick. When the lady gives Gawain the girdle, she begs him to " . . . disceuer

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[177] Benson, op. cit., p. 45.

hit neuer, / Bot to lelly layne fro hir lorde . . . " (II. 1862-3). Gawain agrees to this stipulation, much to his future despair.

Although her aim is more than a pleasant liaison as found in the courtly love code, the lady relies on the code to conceal her true motive and to further that motive. In rebuking Gawain for not seeking at least a kiss as a love token (II. 1297-1301), she employs the tradition of love which declares that " . . . a lover can never have enough of the solaces of his beloved."[178] Gawain also uses the courtly code to his advantage: i.e., when the lady scolds him for not making romantic advances toward her, even if he feels he would need to use force, he courteously reminds her that the code of courtly love forbids a love to take anything against the will of his beloved: "Bot þrete is vnþryuande in þede þer I lende, / And vche gift þat is geuen not with goud wylle" (II. 1499-1500). The lady seems to know that under courtly convention no one can be bound by two loves, for she states that

> . . . Blame ȝe disserue,
> ȝif ȝe luf not þat lyf þat ȝe lye nexte,
> Bifore alle þe wyȝeȝ in þe worlde wounded in hert,
> Bot if ȝe haf a lemman, a leuer, þat you lyke better,
> And folden fayth to þat fre, festned so harde
> Ðat yow lausen ne lyst--and þat I leue nouþe;
> (II. 1779-1784)

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[178]Capellanus, op. cit., p. 185.

When Gawain reacts too passionately to the sight of the lady on the third morning of the temptation (II. 1759-1865), his actions are in accordance with that which courtly convention demands.

There are other lesser marks of the courtly love convention in SGGK. The nobility and beauty of the major characters agree with courtly standards, as does the constant attention to gracious, leisurely living. Another detail is that of cleanliness; in two separate places, the poet notes that the nobles wash before eating (I. 72 and I. 887). Also, the gifts of the ring and the girdle which the lady offers to Gawain are suitable gifts by all courtly standards.[179] The characteristic which most distinguishes SGGK from the typical courtly romance is that which reverses the normal roles of courtly love, however, with Gawain as the beloved and the lady as the lover. Gawain's coyness when he acknowledges the presence of the lady in his bedroom in the first temptation seems more suitable to a woman than to a man: "Ðen he wakenede, and wroth, and to hir warde torned, / And vnlouked his y3e-lydde, and let as hym wondered . . ." (II. 1200-1). The lady's offer of her body to Gawain is clearly in antithesis with the normal, aloofness of the courtly lady (II. 1237-8). The lady's mournful reaction to Gawain's statement that he wishes no ties with anyone is

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[179] Ibid., p. 76.

similar to the melancholy of the courtier's lovesick complaints (II. 1792-5).

The strange thing about the poem is that the lady demands that Gawain act according to the conventions of courtly love, but chooses to ignore the rules in her own actions; on the other hand Gawain is not in accord with the conventions, yet manages to act within their limits. At first, this paradox may seem to be the result of careless workmanship on the part of the poet; instead, it is the unique creation of a combination of diverse forces through which the poet reveals the thematic significance of his work: those forces of chivalry and courtly love united with those pertaining to the medieval conception of woman and the Cult of the Blessed Virgin.

## CHAPTER III

## THE MEDIEVAL CONCEPTION OF WOMAN AND THE CULT OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN: THEIR HISTORY, THEIR IMPACT, AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

In the Middle Ages, the theological concept of woman was not flattering, for she was considered an inferior, subservient, and innately evil being. Woman was regarded as responsible for the fall of man and as the cause of his failures and shortcomings thereafter. She was represented as shunning salvation through her yearning for evil (as seen in Lot's wife); she was regarded suspiciously as a storehouse of feminine evils (as demonstrated by Rebecca and Esther); she was considered essentially as seducer (such as Delilah or Judith).[180] Womanhood was so lacking in esteem that in his morning prayer, the orthodox Jew thanked God for not creating him as a woman.[181] She was also considered incapable of moral or spiritual growth.[182]

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[180]Edwin Honig, Dark Conceit, p. 31.

[181]Ibid., p. 32.

[182]Gist, op. cit., p. 17.

The major defect of woman was her erotic nature: she was looked upon as an "evil temptress" determined to destroy man.[183] The theological attitude, formulated and expressed by the early Church was that she was the Devil's instrument, the ianua diaboli (supreme temptress), and the most dangerous obstacle in the road of salvation.[184] Men were warned to avoid the company of women in order to avoid the temptation of sexual passion, while women were accused of turning men from the sober, pure holy life. The body of woman itself was considered the vilest of all objects, as shown by different statements from S. Odonis Abbatis Cluniacenses Collationum (tenth century) which refer to it as a "sack of dung" and as "foul, rotten, and stinking"; and by the remark of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (twelfth century) referring to it as a "covering for . . . inward filth and ugliness" which lures men into deepest misery.[185]

Nor could the medieval women gain respectability through marriage. Marriage, in the eyes of the Church, was a state inferior to virginity and an escape for the weak who would not control their

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[183]Ibid., p. 13.

[184]Power, op. cit., p. 402.

[185]Gist, op. cit., p. 14.

passions spiritually.[186] A few early Church fathers even proclaimed that marriage was no better than fornication.[187] Man was given the authority in marriage, while woman was totally subordinated to him on the concept that her sinfulness, which originated in Eden, could not be erased.[188] Men were also warned by the clergy against the wisdom of marrying the creatures. In a letter concerning the subject of marriage, the priest, Jerome, advised that a wise man will not marry because a wife will only plague him with her material desires and complaints, as well as being a burden to his business, quarrelsome, and distrustful.[189] He also stated that: "Whether she be wrathful, foolish, deformed, proud, unsavory--whatever be her faults, we learn them first when we have married her."[190] Jerome did not believe a woman could remain loyal to her husband if tempted:

> It is hard to keep a thing that many men
> covet; it is burdensome to possess that which
> no man deigneth to have. Yet it is less
> misery to possess the unshapely; for nothing is

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[186]Doris Mary Stenton, The English Woman in History, p. 45.

[187]Gist, op. cit., p. 11.

[188]Ibid., p. 12.

[189]G. G. Coulton, Life in the Middle Ages, p. 22.

[190]Ibid., p. 23.

> safe when all men sigh after it. One man woos with his comely person, another with his understanding, a third with his wit, a fourth with his liberality. In one way or another, when a fortress is so wholly beset, it must at last be taken by storm.[191]

Jerome's position seems compatible with that of the poet, Gautier de Coincy, who declared " . . . if a woman be chaste it is for lack of opportunity."[192]

This theological concept of women, however, little affected men's daily lives. Men still married and gave their daughters in marriage, and the Church blessed the marriages.[193] It was generally accepted by the laymen, however, that men were superior to women and that women should, therefore, be subject to men.[194] Married women were advised to be obedient, submissive, meek, humble, and silent in their relationships with their husbands.

Women were handicapped not only by the medieval concept of their role in marriage but also in the reality of civil and domestic affairs. In the practical realm, women seemed to share equality with man: they managed large estates and households in their husbands'

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[191] Ibid., p. 24.

[192] Gist, op. cit., p. 25.

[193] Powers, op. cit., p. 403.

[194] Stenton, op. cit., p. 30.

absences by acting as guardians of manors, regents of state, or even by signing deeds and waging war; yet, they could legally be treated almost like slaves. Legislation permitted corporal punishment of the woman by her husband if she committed adultery or if she bore an idiot child.[195] Women's legal rights were few; the husband retained authority over all property and over the children.[196] Indeed, the woman in the feudal marriage was often little better than a piece of property to her husband.

The nature of the medieval marriage kept alive this subjection of women. Marriage in feudal society had little to do with love, but was a match designed for political, military and economic reasons.[197] It was regarded as a means of increasing wealth and power.[198] Although Church leaders, such as St. Augustine and St. Chrysostom, objected to the idea of these marriages of convenience, believing they defiled the sacrament of marriage, most Church fathers did not worry about the ethics invoked in the marriage customs of the Middle Ages. Neither were such marriages strong. An annulment

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[195]Leon Gautier, Chivalry, p. 139.

[196]Gist, op. cit., p. 16.

[197]Lewis, op. cit., p. 13.

[198]Stenton, op. cit., p. 45.

was easily obtained if the spouse did not measure up to political, military, or economic expectations. The women were in especially precarious positions, for it was the husband who most often demanded freedom from marriage. Annulments were obtained through claims of precontract or consanguinity, and it was not difficult to prove either.[199]

The medieval society was not entirely ignorant of the evils of marriages of convenience and did take steps to vanquish them. Reforms were made through the granting of privilege of choice in a marriage partner (by the Church and by law), through laws attempting to regulate the marriage age (children were often married in their cradles in order to assure the fact of the marriage), through a law decreeing marriages invalid when either partner entered into it under compulsion, and through the simple implication that trouble in marriage stemmed mainly from the fact that it was a loveless match.[200] However, the feudal society often ignored these laws in the interest of personal gain so that the marriage customs did not undergo significant changes.

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[199] Loc. cit.

[200] Gist, op. cit., p. 47.

Medieval woman, then, both in theory and in reality, was regarded with little respect or tenderness. Both secular literature and religious and didactic works of the Middle Ages echo this point of view in making the condemnation and mockery of women a favorite subject.[201] Nor were women always presented favorably in the romances, for romancers of the twelfth century often used the situation of the wooing of a reluctant young man in bed by a lovely lady (found, for example, in Ulrich von Zatzikhoven's translation of Lanzelet from from Anglo Norman after 1194).[202] A similar situation, also, occurs in SGGK wherein Gawain is wooed by his lovely hostess on three successive mornings. The lady, here, is certainly bent on seducing Gawain or--at least--on inducing him to sin, and her seemingly inappropriate behavior in a poem of courtly behavior may be explained by the idea that the Gawain-poet was modifying the courtly atmosphere of the poem with a portrayal of woman in her traditional role as an evil temptress. The lady is also quite bold and blunt in her temptations of Gawain, and her aggressive nature is quite in conflict with the courtly rules of love. In the first temptation she bluntly offers him her body:

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[201] Ibid., p. 14.

[202] Laura Hibbard Loomis, "Gawain and the Green Knight," Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages, p. 533.

"ȝe ar welcum to my cors, / Yowre awen won to wale," (II. 1237-28). Her action is neither refined nor courtly. In this poem of courtly behavior and courteous persons, from where did the Gawain-poet draw his model for the actions of the hostess in the temptation scenes if not from the traditional conception of woman?

The most dramatic illustration of the Gawain-poet's incorporation of the medieval conception of woman into his work occurs in the last fitt in which Gawain delivers a tirade against women, conjuring up past examples to stress their evilness:

> Bot hit is no ferly þeȝ a fole madde,
> And þurȝ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorȝe,
> For so watȝ Adam in erde with one bygyled,
> And Salamon with fele sere, and Samson eftsone--
> Dalyda Dalt hym hys wyrde--and Dauyth þerafter
> WatȝBlended with Barsabe, þat much bale þaled.
> (II. 2414-19)

This tirade, picturing woman in her traditional role as a seducer of men, is clearly drawn from the theological conception of woman.

It may also be noted that, had Gawain failed in the temptation test and had he eventually yielded to the lady, he would have failed in the meeting at the Green Chapel. The relative success (not complete, but human) of Gawain in the temptation scene might be compared to the idea of salvation--not in a religious but in a chivalric sense. In his success, Gawain is the salvation of chivalry, the living proof that the ideal of chivalry, though incapable of perfection, is at

least nearly attainable. Thus, it becomes not an empty, superfluous ideal, but a slightly tainted and quite human reality. In attempting to block Gawain's success at the Green Chapel, the wife of Bercilak stands as an obstacle in the path of salvation, in accordance with the medieval view of woman as an obstacle to man's salvation.

Still another evidence of the medieval influence of woman's traditional position may be found in SGGK in the fact that a woman, not a man, is chosen to lead, or attempt to lead, Gawain to his downfall. Although the lady is under the spell of magic, it is still significant that only she can test Gawain. Bercilak can set the situation for the test, and he can judge the results of the test, but only the woman can directly participate in an attempt to undermine Gawain's character. Bercilak can only wait. Still more significant is the fact that the originator of the entire scheme was, of course, Morgan--a woman.

Morgan may also function in another sense in SGGK. She is traditionally depicted as a fairy mistress who was repeatedly involved in sexual relations with men. Definitely unchaste, her manner can hardly be described as courtly, but rather as being purely aggressive. Perhaps, Morgan's extreme ugliness in SGGK is consistent with the idea of the essential vulgarity of woman's body. Perhaps, here, the poet is using Morgan as the symbol and as a

warning of the true baseness and inner filth that lies within the tempting features of a woman's body.

Despite evidences of an emphasis upon the degradation of women in SGGK, however, this theme is not the dominant one of the poem. Rather, evidences of the glorification of women and of the sexual attributes of the womanly body are seen in the poet's description of the appearance and general behavior of both Guinevere and Bercilak's wife. The two women are depicted as the epitome of courteous, not evil, behavior. In this poem, the poet is merely using the medieval conception of woman to modify his portrait of the courtly heroine, thus, rendering her more comic and, perhaps, more human. Nevertheless, the poem further shows evidence of the influence of another medieval convention which elevated the position of the woman in the spiritual, rather than in the worldly, realm. This additional force--represented in the Cult of the Blessed Virgin--contributes to the underlying seriousness of the poem in much the same way as the medieval conception of woman contributes to the humor in the work.

At the beginning of the eleventh century in Western Europe, attitudes toward women were becoming more humanized in theological, secular, and literary circles. An influential factor in this change may have been the Cult of the Virgin, an idealization of Mary in direct antithesis to the idea of woman's spiritual inferiority. Although the

Cult of the Blessed Virgin began in the fourth or fifth centuries, it did not reach prominence until the twelfth or thirteenth centuries and, thus, did not become a major institution until that time.[203]

The first historical mention of the direct worship of Mary is found in the works of St. Epiphanuis (d. 403) in which are enumerated eighty-four heresies, including references to a group of women whose worship of Mary resembled that of the ancient worship of Ceres.[204] Found in churches east of the Jordan and assigned to the fourth century, mosaics depicting Mary-worship have been cited as evidence for the placing of the beginnings of that worship in the fourth century.[205] It is also in fourth century literature that the first instance in written history of invocation to Mary is found; the source being a history of the life of St. Justina, related by Gregory Nazianzen.[206] However, for the most part, the Cult of the Virgin was not a very flourishing one in the fourth century, for the Church sought to suppress the Cult and most fourth century art does not depict Mary as an individual of veneration.[207]

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[203]Canby, op. cit., p. 148.

[204]Mrs. Jameson, Legends of the Madonna, p. 24.

[205]Canby, op. cit., p. 148.

[206]Jameson, op. cit., p. 24.

[207]Loc. cit.

The Cult of the Virgin was greatly advanced by an action of the Council of Ephesus in 431. At this time, the Council declared Mary, the Mother of God, to be endowed with saving power.[208] This action was taken in opposition to a group led by a man called Nestorius who sought to establish that Mary was the Mother of man, not of God.[209] This view led the Council to establish Mary as the Mother of God and led to the representation, thereafter, of Mary as royally clothed, throned, and attended by saints and angels.[210] Nestorius and his group were branded as heretics, and the image of the Madonna and child became, from that time on, an expression of orthodox faith.[211]

From the fifth century through the Middle Ages, the worship of the Virgin became increasingly extensive and popular. In the centuries directly following the acknowledgement of Mary as the Mother of God, her image in one art form or another appeared more and more frequently. By the end of the tenth century, the custom of adding an Ave Maria to the end of the Lord's Prayer had been introduced, and the custom was adopted by the offices of the Church by the end of the eleventh century in an attempt to remind Christians of the

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[208] Valency, op. cit., p. 24.

[209] Jameson, op. cit., p. 23.

[210] Valency, op. cit., p. 24.

[211] Jameson, op. cit., p. 23.

mystery of Incarnation.[212] The Cult of the Virgin reached its highest peak in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Mary was honored by festivals, by pilgrimages to her shrines, by cathedrals erected in her glory, and by stories telling of her miraculous powers.[213] Great manuscript collections of her miracles, dated during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and found in many languages, lend proof of the prominence of her worship in that period. As her worship continued, she became more human and personal to her adorers, and, now, she was referred to as "Our Lady" by the masses who felt closer and easier with her than with the farther removed Trinity.[214] It was, in fact, this personal element in the Virgin which greatly attributed to her growth in popularity. Actually, her popularity stemmed from three causes: (1) the need of man for an intercessor more interested in mercy than justice; (2) the need for a new Eve to equate with Christ as the new Adam; and (3) the tendency to conceive and worship the ideal woman.[215]

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[212] Ibid., p. 29.

[213] Butler, op. cit., p. 235.

[214] Brinton, op. cit., p. 31.

[215] Hope Traver, "The Four Daughters of God: A Mirror of Changing Doctrine," PMLA, XL (March, 1925), 61.

Perhaps, it was Mary's image as a merciful intercessor between man and the Trinity which contributed the most to her popularity as an object of religious worship.[216] This tradition of Mary's power as a defender of mankind developed along two different paths: (1) the influence of Irenaeus, and (2) the influence of the apocalypses.[217] Irenaeus saw Mary, first, as a counterpart of Eve; second, as an advocate for Eve; third, as an advocate for all humanity which Eve represented; fourth, as the feminine element in the Trinity.[218] It is in the Contra Haeresia of Irenaeus that the earliest known reference to Mary, the mediator, is found: "Mary was persuaded to obey God that the Virgin Mary might become the advocate of the virgin Eve."[219] Furthermore, in the apocalypses Mary was developed as a merciful intercessor, first developing Michael as the supreme defender of man and the guardian of man's soul and, later, replacing him with Mary.[220] Thus, assuming the role that Michael previously had fulfilled, the Virgin became an intercessor

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[216] Honig, op. cit., p. 32.

[217] Traver, op. cit., p. 64.

[218] Loc. cit.

[219] Loc. cit.

[220] Loc. cit.

between God and man; through the comforting help she then rendered in this role, she became an object of worship. Mary, also, seemed to balance the role of Eve for, just as Eve had her part in man's downfall, Mary had had her part in his salvation. A comment on this parallel also occurs in the Contra Haeresia of Irenaeus:

> . . . and as the human race was bound to death through a virgin, it was saved through a Virgin; the scales being equally balanced--virginal disobedience by Virginal obedience.[221]

Thus, because in her was represented a union of God and of flesh, through formal decree, the Nicene Council established her as an equal with Eve and with Eve's part in salvation.[222] Through these changes in doctrine, then, Mary came to be worshipped as the feminine element in the Trinity and as the Queen of Heaven. Mary did, indeed, fulfill the need for an ideal woman to worship. Since her position was sublimated through her roles as the intercessor for man and as the Queen of Heaven, the atmosphere surrounding her became "mystical and dreamlike".[223] As the object of religious awe and as the epitome of perfect Christian womanhood without the staining guilt

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[221] Ibid., p. 61.

[222] Loc. cit.

[223] Honig, op. cit., p. 33.

of sexuality, she became a natural object of adoration for those who sought to find and to worship a perfect woman. She became known, also, in other religious aspects as "Mother, Lover, Muse, and judicial principle."[224]

Although the Virgin was the most popular object of devotion in medieval times, even above the Trinity, there is no reason to believe that the people of medieval Europe confused her powers with those of the Trinity. In the collections of the plays of her miracles (Les Miracles de Nostre Dame and Miracles of Oure Lady) she functions primarily as a merciful intercessor.[225] She is not represented as the ultimate source of salvation, but as being dependent upon the decisions of the Trinity. Thus, although these plays were intended to glorify the Virgin, they did not confuse her role, however, with God's power. As the plays represented the medieval point of view regarding her, it is logical to assume that medieval people were equally aware of her powers in contrast to God's powers.

The worship of Mary, then, was promoted in both religious and secular realms. This veneration of the Virgin by the Church

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[224]Ibid., p. 34.

[225]Yvette Marie Fallandy, "A Reexamination of the Role of the Blessed Virgin in the Miracles de Nostre Dame par personnages," PQ, XLIII (January, 1964), 25.

is often considered to be the beginning of the refined ideal of woman and, consequently, of a more generous attitude toward women. In The History of European Morals, Lecky observes that

> . . . there can be little doubt that the Catholic reverence for the Virgin has done much to elevate and purify the ideal of women, and to soften the manners of men. It has had an influence which the worship of the pagan goddess could never possess, for these had been almost destitute of moral beauty, and especially of that kind of moral beauty which is peculiarly feminine. It supplied in great measure the redeeming and ennobling element in that strange amalgam of religious, licentious, and military feeling which was formed around women in the age of chivalry, and which no succeeding change of habit or belief has wholly destroyed.[226]

Agreeing with Lecky's view of the Cult as an important influence on the position of the medieval woman, Schmidt stated that the regard for woman " . . . would not have become what it was but for the veneration accorded to the Virgin Mary."[227] Other scholars insist that the Cult indirectly influenced sexual love and the sanctity of the body.[228]

Yet, there is strong division in the scholarly ranks on the actual influence of the Cult of the Virgin upon the position of the

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[226]Quoted in Butler, op. cit., p. 232.

[227]Quoted in Myers, op. cit., p. 311.

[228]Lewis, op. cit., p. 8.

medieval woman and all thought concerning her. For example, some scholars believe that the worship of Mary did not apply to other women; that it exalted only one woman--not all women.[229] Others point out that Mary belonged to the religious realm, not the earthly.[230] Still others suggest that in the doctrine of the conception of Jesus, sexuality is denied; thus, Mary's very link with womanhood and the nature of mankind seems denied.[231] The influence of the Cult is also restricted by the idea that Mary may have symbolized the ideal woman to the medieval man, while Eve probably symbolized the real woman.[232] Gist feels that the Cult, as an influence, may be over-emphasized and shows that in certain literature of the time of the "heyday of Mary-worship," the beating of women is generally accepted as a matter of course.[233] Neither does the evidence show that the medieval Church insisted on reverence for all women in their insistence for reverence for Mary; in fact, the converse seems to be true. True, also, is the fact that the Cult was begun many centuries before women's position was radically changed.

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[229]Honig, op. cit., p. 32.

[230]Gist, op. cit., p. 25.

[231]Honig, op. cit., p. 32.

[232]Wilhelm, op. cit., p. 203.

[233]Gist, op. cit., p. 25.

If the impact of the Cult on the treatment of medieval women in daily life is indiscernible, its effect upon literature is not, for Mary became the subject of a vast amount of literature. Because very few facts were known about her and because people craved to know more about her, the existing few facts were supplemented by many legends.[234] She lent herself easily to myth, because she did not demand perfection and was, therefore, a humanized element of Heaven. In these legends, Mary is drawn as a beautiful intercessor between the Trinity and the poor sinners; she is glorified with a spirit of personal loyalty, of chivalry, and of feudual devotion to the "Mayden, Modur, and comely Queen."[235]

The impact of Mary-worship on literature is not quite so obvious when studied exclusive of the miracles which are directly concerned with her adoration. Although medieval romances and love lyrics do not demonstrate any significant influence of the Cult of the Virgin upon the treatment of women in these secular works, instances of Mary-worship are, nevertheless, an integral part of these works; indeed, almost a literary fixture. The Virgin is mentioned often in

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[234] Butler, op. cit., p. 233.

[235] Canby, op. cit., p. 148.

the Arthurian romances, though more often as a protectress and intercessor than as the epitome of perfect womanhood.

SGGK furnishes excellent examples of the influence of the Cult of the Virgin upon the romances, for in the poem several references are made to the Virgin as a guide, as a protectress, and as the Queen of Heaven. Mary is important to Gawain, and he does not neglect to call upon her when he needs assistance, nor does she hesitate to help him; in fact, her readiness in doing so is quite consistent with Mary's character as depicted in the many stories of her miracles.

Gawain finds in Mary a source of courage, for her image is painted on the inside of his shield where he might see it readily when his courage fails him: " . . .at þis cause þe kny3t comlyche hade/ In þe more half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted, / Ðat quen he blusched þerte his belde neuer payred" (ll. 648-50). Gawain also turns to Mary when he needs guidance, as when he calls upon her on Christmas Eve to lead him to some shelter: "þe kny3t wel tyde/ To Mary made his mone, / þat ho hym red to ryde/ And wysse hym to sum wone"(ll. 736-39). Fearful of missing the religious services celebrating the birth of Christ, he repeats his prayer on the next day: "I beseche þe, lorde, / And Mary, þat is myldest moder so dere, / Of sum herber þer he3ly I my3t here masse . . ." (ll. 753-55).

Gawain also echoes the conception of Mary as the Queen of Heaven, the feminine element in the Trinity. Once, he refers directly to her as the Queen of Heaven: " . . . þat þe hende heuen quene had of hir chylde;" (I. 647). In yet another instance he calls upon Mary, saying, "Mary youe 3elde . . ." (I. 1962), suggesting that Mary holds the position of a queen capable of rewarding virtues and generosity.

An interesting possibility in regard to the connection of the Cult of the Virgin with this poem, but a possibility which cannot be proved, may be found in the passage in which it is noted that all of Gawain's pride or high courage is lodged in the five joys: "Ðat alle his fersnes he feng at þe fyue joye3" (I. 646). In the original Vernon manuscript, the largest collection of the miracles of Mary in Middle English verse, there occurred a miracle entitled "Five Joys."[236] However, this miracle was destroyed, and there is no other evidence of an existing similar account of the miracle. Perhaps, then, the Gawain-poet had this miracle of Mary in mind as he wrote his poem. If so, it would be an example of a direct influence of the Cult of the Virgin upon the poem. Unfortunately, however, this theory cannot be substantiated.

The main role of Mary in SGGK is as the protector of Gawain's chastity. It is through her aid that Gawain is able to perserve his

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[236]Ruth Wilson Tryon, "Miracles of Our Lady in Middle English Verse," PMLA, XXXVIII (June, 1923), 333.

chastity during the third temptation: "Gret perile bitwene hem stod, / Nif Mare of hir kny3t mynne" (II. 1768-9). In this situation, then, Mary is acting as a protectress, in direct antithesis to a temptress. Her success and, subsequently, Gawain's success in the temptation is a vital point in the poem and of importance in the total plot. It is certain, then, that not only did the Gawain-poet know of the Cult of the Virgin but also that his art was affected by it. Yet, although the Cult definitely marks this poem, it does not seem to affect seriously the position of the women in the poem, but rather stands removed from all earthliness. One concludes, then, that the Cult of the Virgin figures only in its spirituality in SGGK.

## CHAPTER IV

## THE FOUR FORCES: THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO COMEDY AND SERIOUSNESS IN SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

In conceiving SGGK, the Gawain-poet was most certainly influenced by the forces of the medieval conception of women, the Cult of the Blessed Virgin, the code of chivalry, and the conventions of courtly love. Yet, these forces do not dominate the work; rather, they are skillfully blended into a meaningful whole in such a way that their inherent qualities become a medium for the essentially comic seriousness of the poem. The poem emerges, then, as a basically comic creation with underlying seriousness.[237]

To understand more fully the basis of the poet's creation, it is helpful to note the times in which he wrote. Fourteenth century England was seething with political, religious, and domestic unrest, beset with the problems of a faltering economy, the degeneration of ethical standards,[238] the unenlightened treatment of the peasantry,

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[237]Theodore Silverstein, "Sir Gawain, Dear Brutus, and Britain's Fortunate Founding: A Study in Comedy and Convention," MP, LXII (February, 1965), 192.

[238]Kenneth Sisam (ed.). Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose, p. xxvii.

and a generally pessimistic attitude.[239] Against the unencouraging national backdrop, Edward III, the King of England, sought to rehabilitate knighthood and to reaffirm aristocratic ideals through the founding of an order of chivalry.[240] In SGGK, the Gawain poet presents the comic and the serious aspects of this chivalry, providing both a good-humored comment on its pretensions and a subtle recognition of its worth.[241] Through the dilemmas of Gawain in terms of his valor, his piety, and his courtesy, the Gawain-poet both praises and belittles the chivalric society which the knight represents.

The high comedy of SGGK becomes evident almost immediately in the first fitt. As traditional in medieval romances, the poem begins with a short summation of the glorious history of Britain. In this introduction, the poet points out the violence and the ruggedness of the English heritage, in a choice of words which convey man's brutal, lusty undertakings: "sege . . . assaut" (I. 1), "borȝ" (I. 2), "tresoun" (I. 3), "depreced" (I. 6), "werre and wrake" (I. 16). He reminds the reader that, after Brutus had founded and built Britain,

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[239] Ibid., p. 78.

[240] Morton W. Bloomfield, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: An Appraisal," PMLA, LXXVI (March, 1961), 19.

[241] Loc. cit.

bold men and lusty battles abounded: "Bolde bredden þerinne, baret þat lofden, / In mony turned tyme tene þat wro3teb." (II. 21-2). He also states that he has heard that Arthur was the highest in honor of all the British kings (II. 24-5). After such an introduction, one rather expects Arthur to be depicted as a chivalric, courageous king, striving to maintain the high standards of the chivalric code in an essentially lusty civilization. However, the poet--after leading his reader to this deduction--humorously presents him with quite a different situation.

The poet describes Arthur's court at Camelot during the Christmas season. Rather than of dignified sobriety and dedicated religiousness, the mood prevailing there is a gay one, marked by "mirþe" (I. 45) and "glaum and gle" (I. 46). Rather than a fierce, warrior king, Arthur is " . . . þe comlokest kyng at þe court haldes" (I. 53). The knights, rather than engaging in fierce duels or conversations concerning war and battle, merely play at battle, jousting " . . . ful jolile" (I. 41), for they are 'gentyle kni3tes" (I. 41). Arthur's honorable, noble court seems frivolous and feminine in comparison to its virile, bold predecessors. And, indeed, through this contrast between the two societies, the poet is humorously, but not unkindly, laughing a little at his characters and at his audience. In this first contrast, the whole tone of the poem is established: what seems to be will not be, and what is ideal is also comical.

Camelot, then, is presented as an ideal court of youth, beauty, gaiety, courtliness, and opulence.[242] Its knights are inspired in their adventures, not by the need to conquer, but by the very love of the sport and of ladies (II. 1512-19). Indeed, Camelot is removed from worldly realities--from the winter's cold, from age, from illness and death, from misery and poverty; it implies a chivalry of manners, rather than a chivalry of war. It is static; it plays at life and, because it is merely playing, does not move.[243]

Obviously, if the poem is to progress, change and movement must enter into the court at Camelot. The entrance of the Green Knight provides the change. Here, again, the poet brings humor into the poem, for the renowned, valiant knights can only stare and gape at the green man. Although the poet condescends to note that some of the knights were silent because of courtesy (I. 247), one cannot help chuckling when imagining the sight of the dauntless knights of Arthur gaping at a green man. Nor does it seem that the poet wishes for his audience to overlook the humor of the situation, for he devotes an entire eighteen lines to the court's reaction (II. 232-49). Neither does the humor of the situation escape the Green Knight. Solemnly, he

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[242]Benson, op. cit., p. 99.

[243]R. H. Bowers, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as Entertainment," MLQ, XXIV (December, 1965), 340.

reminds Arthur of the great fame which his knights have attained, dwelling upon their excellence in battle and their chivalry (II. 258-64). After the lulling of them with his flattering words, he then laughs at them, referring to them as "berdle$_3$ chylder" (I. 280) and (when no one offers to give him his Christmas game) taunting them for their very lack of the virtues which he has ascribed to them (II. 309-15). Furthermore, he emphasizes his ironic wit by bursting into laughter immediately after finishing his speech (I. 316).

Blasted by the irony of the Green Knight's words, Arthur finds that chivalric precepts desert him in this essentially unchivalric situation. He is a comical figure as he grasps the axe and swings it about in a threatening manner, much like a small boy who has accepted a dare and who hopes that his threat of action will frighten the challenger into rescinding the dare. Gawain's intervention is equally comical. Caught in this tense, suspenseful moment, Gawain loses not one bit of the courtesy for which he is so famous, but very formally and calmly asks to be given the game. With strict adherence to courtly behavior, he also begs the privilege of Guinevere (I. 346). Speaking in a properly humble fashion, he defers the matter to the court, and they (none of whom were willing to accept the challenge) graciously concur that Gawain should be given the game. Arthur not only allows him the game but also renders some wise advice as to how

Gawain should play the game. One cannot fail to see the humorous aspects of this royal court where the not-so-brave knights quail at the sight of adversary, then attempt to hide their fear behind a false shield of extreme courtesy and chivalric pomp.

For all its seriousness, the beheading, too, is a mockery.[244] What has been forseen as a terrible, inhuman moment turns out to be a practical joke--at least for the moment. With due sobriety, Gawain strikes the head of the Green Knight from the body, only to see the Green Knight rise, pluck his rolling head from the floor, and show it to Guinevere. Then, equally wondrously, the head speaks, directing Gawain in his part in the conclusion of the game. Finally, head in hand, the Green Knight leaves. The whole incident is quite like those one expects to encounter in an Arthurian romance, but in this poem, Gawain and the king actually laugh. Their laughter suggests that some things of their world are laughable.

All is serious again, however, about a year later when Gawain prepares to leave for his meeting with the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. Carefully, he prepares to leave, donning his knightly armour. The shield is of special significance, and the poet takes

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[244]Sacvan Bercovitch, "Romance and Anti-Romance in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PQ, XLIV (January, 1965), 32.

great pains in describing the virtues of Gawain as the knight of the Pentangle. What is easily overlooked is the irony of the entire emblem, for the poet states that the symbol was invented by Solomon (I. 625), and Solomon was tricked into sin by a woman's wiles just as Gawain will be tricked.[245] Nor is it likely that the poet overlooked the connection, for Gawain, in his tirade against women, specifically names Solomon as a man who was tricked by women (II. 2417-28).

Another aspect of the poem is suggested in Gawain's departure; one that is serious rather than humorous. As Gawain rides away, the knights bemoan his fate, assuming for a certainty that Gawain cannot survive the Green Knight's return blow (II. 647-681). Here, the knights reveal a lack of faith in a fellow knight, in chivalry, and, above all, in God. Surely, they realized that the Beheading Game was touched by diabolical magic. Gawain and Arthur had acknowledged it to be " . . . A meruayl among þo menne" (I. 466). Surely, they also realized that Christ or Mary often protected those virtuous ones whom the devil sought to overthrow. Yet, the knights display a great lack of faith--a lack of pious humility. Furthermore, they express doubts of Arthur's wisdom in the matter (II. 682-3), betraying, for a moment, the loyalty to their leader that the chivalric

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[245]Benson, op. cit., p. 102.

code demands. These failures of knights become significant to an interpretation of the poem; they point to the weaknesses inherent in any code which is based on man's fidelity. This moment in the poem is a serious one.

Gawain's journey to Bercilak's castle is touched with both seriousness and humor. In his journey, Gawain leaves the warm, protective world of Camelot and enters the real world, a world of the heathen and of bitter wintry cold. Gawain is hard put to survive in that world. The dragons, bears, and satyrs of this world--creatures not unknown in the romantic world of Camelot--are easily dealt with by Gawain (II. 720-3), but the sleet--characteristic of the real, not the romantic world--nearly conquers him (II. 726-32).[246] Yet, he survives because, as the poet points out, he is " . . . du3ty and dry3e, and dry3ten had serued" (I. 724). Unlike the other knights, then, Gawain is faithful to chivalry; that is why he is the knight of the Pentangle.

It seems ironic that, after such a long, arduous journey, Gawain should come to an elaborate castle such as Bercilak's.[247] Still, despite its richness and courtliness, Bercilak's castle provides

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[246]Bowers, op. cit., p. 335.

[247]Silverstein, "A Study in Comedy and Convention," p. 191.

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[246]Bowers, op. cit., p. 355.

[247]Silverstein, "A Study in Comedy and Convention," p. 191.

an essential contrast to Arthur's court. In Camelot, one is removed from the world's harshness; in Bercilak's castle, the contradictions of life are present: youth and age, beauty and ugliness, warmth and chill.[248] Bercilak's world is dynamic, and vital. Men hunt and encounter life outside the castle rather than remaining inside, waiting to hear a tale of adventure. Furthermore, Bercilak's world is pious as well as courtly, perhaps even more pious than Arthur's. The poet devotes only one line to religious observance during Arthur's holiday celebrations (I. 62), while he gives many more of the details of Bercilak's religious behavior (II. 929-940; I. 1036).[249] The poet seems to be emphasizing the stronger religious habits in this more real world; perhaps with reason. This strict observance seems to imply the strong recognition of a need for piety and faith by imperfect man. In contrast, Arthur's court, through acknowledging God, seems often to forget its faith in its desire for courtliness.

Gawain, too, although he does not realize it, will be found lacking in faith. He takes the first step toward his own downfall

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[248]Benson, op. cit., p. 100.

[249]Charles Moorman, "Myth and Medieval Literature: SGGK," Mediaeval Studies, XVIII (1956), 171.

almost immediately after reaching Bercilak's castle. There, he sheds his knightly armor and dons courtly, luxurious robes (II. 860-6). In this action, he leaves himself vunerable; he sheds the symbol of his knightly perfection and puts on soft unprotective garments.[250] Thus, Gawain himself takes the first step that leads to the high comedy of the temptation scenes.

Nowhere else in the poem is the poet's talent for comedy so skillfully demonstrated as in the temptation scenes. Within the framework of courtly behavior, Gawain is the unknowing and unwilling subject of a humorous and ironic picture of chivalry. Both the tension and the wit of the temptations are centered on his chivalric and courtly qualities: his courage, his honor, his loyalty, his piety, and his courtesy.[251]

Gawain's pretense and coyness in the first temptation is an especially humorous part of the scenes. Gawain, hearing a suspicious sound at the door, peeps warily through the bed hangings to see what it is and, discovering it is the lady, immediately becomes so flustered and embarrassed that he hides, childlike, in the pretense of sleep: "And layde hym doun lystyly, and let as he slepte" (I. 1190).

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[250] Benson, op. cit., p. 96.

[251] Bercovitch, op. cit., p. 34.

When he decides that the lady fully intends to remain until he awakens, he acts as though he is just awakening and, turning toward her and seeing her, " . . . let as him wondered" (I. 1201). His genuflection is yet another half-humorous pretense.[252]

Gawain's initial embarrassment seems to subside somewhat as he laughs and jests with the lady in a courtly fashion. Still, he finds himself feeling uneasy in the awkward situation of being held captive in bed by a courtly lady (II. 1220-1). His discomforture is considerably increased when the lady bluntly offers him her body, providing an unexpected break in the courtly atmosphere and rhetoric which permeates the entire poem.[253]

The contradiction of the lady's courtly appearance and the lady's unconventional behavior poses a problem for Gawain which will continue to plague him in each, successive temptation. He is concerned for both his chastity and his courtesy, and the lady's advances place him in an extremely awkward situation: "Bot he nolde not for his nurture nurne his a3ayne3, / Bot dalt with hir al in daynte, how-se-euer þe dede turned/ towrast" (II. 1661-3). If the lady were simply an evil temptress, Gawain could easily deal with her. Here, however,

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[252]Mills, op. cit., p. 488.

[253]Benson, op. cit., p. 53.

the lady is cast in the role of a traditional romance heroine: one whom a knight cannot treat rudely without appearing discourteous. Each advance of the lady must be met tactfully and graciously, with no sign of impatience or ill-will, if Gawain is to preserve his courtesy and chastity.

Nor is the lady unaware of Gawain's predicament. Because she need not regard the forms of courtesy as Gawain must, the lady merely uses courtly conventions to her own ends. Realizing that Gawain is bound to courtesy, she places him in the ridiculous position of striving for courtliness in an essentially uncourtly situation. She lectures Gawain on the rules of courtliness; then proceeds to ignore them herself. Here the lady is "making merry" with courtly conventions, revealing their ridiculous inapplicability beyond the range of the chivalric world.

The test becomes, then, not merely one of Gawain's continence, but one of Gawain's courtesy. The major sins which Gawain must face in the temptations are not against the code of Christian behavior but against the code of courteous behavior and the virtues of loyalty, courtesy, piety and valor implicit in that code.[254] Once the

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[254]Gordon M. Shedd, "Knight in Tarnished Armour: The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MLR, LXII (January, 1967), 6.

lady realizes Gawain's reluctance to sin, she uses sex as an instrument to test Gawain's loyalty to his host and courtesy toward herself.

During the first temptation when the lady changes the nature of the test, she also changes the nature of her attitude toward Gawain, exposing his chivalry and courtesy to irony and doubt. Testing Gawain's chivalry by her own standards, she implies that she finds it lacking.[255] Up to this point the lady has praised Gawain's fame; suddenly she expresses disbelief and uncertainty regarding that fame: "Bot þat 3e be Gawan, hit got3 in mynde" (I. 1293). Gawain, fearing that his identity is in question as the result of some discourtesy (I. 1295), is quick to ask the reason. Here, Gawain's obsession with courtly behavior proves to be his Achille's heel, for the lady takes quick advantage to his vunerability to gain a kiss for herself. She employs the same technique the second day. (I. 1481), again receiving a kiss quickly. She further capitalizes in this show of pride in Gawain in seeking to draw him into either the adulterous union or the discourteous act which he so conscientiously works to avoid, taunting him with what she deems his ignorance or his snobbery in that for which he is famed.[256] "Why! are 3e lewed, þat all þe los welde3? / Oþer elles

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[255]Moorman, op. cit., p. 168.

[256]Henry L. Savage, "The Significance of the Hunting Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," JEGP, XXVII (January, 1928), 11.

ȝe demen me to dille your dalyaunce to herken?" (II. 1528-9). Although Gawain manages to extricate himself gracefully from this awkward situation, he does so only through a show of subjugation to the lady--a comical position for a brave knight of the Round Table.

The kisses that Gawain renders the lady are as ridiculous as the situation which prompts them. The kisses are dutiful; not passionate, as one might expect in a courtly romance.[257] In kissing the lady, Gawain seems more like a small, obedient child, dutifully kissing an ugly, spinster aunt, than a gallant, courtly knight, kissing his lady-fair.

The underlying merriment and humor of the temptations is further amplified by the gaiety which follows each temptation.[258] Each temptation is followed by laughter and merry-making; through this relaxation, the temptation becomes something of a game where the opponents meet in fixed competition, confined to a limited arena.

Although Gawain's mirth is not one bit abated after the third temptation, an event within that temptation proves to be the source of his eventual failure at the Green Chapel. At the end of her visits, the

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[257]Albert B. Friedman, "Morgan Le Fay in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Speculum, XXXV (April, 1960), 266.

[258]Bercovitch, op. cit., p. 31.

lady begs for a gift from Gawain, as some token of remembrance for her. When he replies that he has nothing worthy to give, she presses him to accept a gift from her--a costly ring or a green girdle. Gawain is adamant in refusing either of the gifts until she informs him of a magical quality of the green girdle:

> Bot who-so knew þe costes þat knit ar þerinne,
> He wolde hit prayse at more prys, parauenture;
> For quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace,
> While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,
> Ðer is no haþel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myȝt,
> For he myȝt not be slayn for slyȝt vpon erþe.
> (II. 1849-54)

Gawain, thinking only of the protection which this lace will afford him when he meets the Green Knight at the Green Chapel, readily accepts the girdle from the lady, thanking her:"Full þro with hert and þoȝt" (I. 1867). Gawain's only motive in the acceptance of the girdle is his desire to avoid death; he does not seem to realize that through the use of the girdle, he is resorting to the trickery which will be the sole cause of his disgrace.[259] As the fox whose false turn in avoiding Bercilak's sword sends him into the jaws of his enemies, Gawain's "false turn" in accepting the girdle leads him into a trap.[260] He appeases the lady and preserves his reputation for courtesy toward

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[259] Henry L. Savage, The Gawain-Poet, p. 37.

[260] Loc. cit.

ladies in taking the lace, but he also fails in chivalric courtesy, piety, and valor.

Gawain seems to forget his pledge to Bercilak when he takes the lace from the lady, promising to conceal it from her husband; nor does he seem to realize that in taking it he is putting himself in the position of not being able to fulfill one contract without breaking the other.[261] Gawain takes the girdle simply through an instinct of self-preservation; an instance which leads him to fail Bercilak in courtesy and loyalty.[262] The only evidence which shows any trace of Gawain's shame in his betrayal of his host is the fact that Gawain hurriedly gives Bercilak the three kisses he has received before Bercilak can present him his gains, in contrast to the procedure on the preceding days.

An even more serious failure in taking the girdle is Gawain's failure in piety. It is clear that Gawain accepts the gift for its magical powers rather than for its richness. In putting his faith in the girdle's magic, Gawain deserts his faith in his religion, failing to realize--like all medieval characters who put their trust in magic--that he is losing instead of winning.[263]

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[261] Engelhardt, op. cit., p. 222.

[262] Donald R. Howard, "Structure and Symmetry in Sir Gawain," Speculum, XXXIX (July, 1964), 429.

[263] T. McAlindon, "Magic, Fate, and Providence in Medieval Narrative and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Review of English Studies, XVI (May, 1965), 127.

Gawain does not seem to realize that his action has compro-
ised his chivalric and religious ideals: even after taking the girdle, he
professes submission to God and his will.[264]

Full wel con dry3tyn schape
His seruaunte3 for to saue.
(II. 2138-39)

To Godde3 wylle I am ful bayn,
And to hym I haf me tone.
(II. 2157-59)

Let God worche! "We loo"--
Hit helppe3 me not a mote.
My lif þa3 I forgoo,
Drede dot3 me no lote.
(II. 2208-11).

The fact that he has the magic girdle wrapped snugly about him even as he makes these statements of trust in God's will seem to point out that Gawain does not realize the extent of his failure.

Moreover, immediately after taking the girdle, Gawain goes to confession (after the first two temptations, he only attended Mass). The fact that he obviously does not admit his possession of the girdle renders the absolution he receives invalid, yet Gawain appears to be spiritually uplifted.[265] A religious man such as Gawain should surely

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[264]Engelhardt, op. cit., p. 222.

[265]John Burrow, "The Two Confession Scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," MP, LVII (November, 1959), 75.

have recognized the falseness of his confession, yet he does not seem to realize his wrongs until the Green Knight points them out to him.[266] His piety, then, fails him; his refuge becomes superstition and false conscience.[267]

Moreover, Gawain also abandons his faith in the Virgin Mary. As it has been pointed out, Gawain is "Mary's knight," whose shield has Mary's image painted on the inner side so that Gawain might gain courage from her visage. When Gawain accepts the girdle, he rejects the shield; thus, he rejects Mary as his intercessor and helper. A medieval audience, familiar with the legends of the Virgin, would have realized at once that Gawain is baiting trouble by deserting the sweet, merciful Mary for a diabolical magic girdle. Here, qualities inherent in the Cult of the Virgin are artfully interwoven into the poem to suggest spiritual failure.

Finally, in accepting the girdle, Gawain fails in chivalric courage. Clearly, it is his fear of death which prompts him to take the girdle. Furthermore, he is also guilty of using a worldly thing in a selfish way, in disobedience to the chivalric tenet which paradoxically demanded that a knight use worldly goods for worldly ends yet

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[266] Shedd, op. cit., p. 9.

[267] Engelhardt, op. cit., p. 222.

adopt the virtues which keep one from loving the world.[268] Therefore, Gawain's use of the girdle is wrong because it is a worldly, self-centered means of preservation.

Thus, Gawain's acceptance of the girdle is of vital importance in the poem as the symbol of Gawain's fear and failure. It is also significant because it becomes a substitute for the shield. Gawain's shield with the pentangle on it symbolizes his inner moral perfection and knightly virtue; the girdle symbolizes Gawain's worldliness and imperfection.[269] When viewed in relation to each other, the two symbols suggest the necessary, inevitable conflict between the demands of Christianity and of chivalry.[270] The shield is Gawain's spiritual aspect; the aspect through which he remains pure. The girdle reflects Gawain's courtliness and selfness. When Gawain deserts the shield for the girdle, he falters.

Irony and comedy reappear in the poem as Gawain meets with the Green Knight at the Green Chapel. When the servant suggests that Gawain flee from the encounter, Gawain declines, declaring that

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[268]Howard, op. cit., p. 427.

[269]Stoddard Malarkey and J. Barre Toelken, "Gawain and the Green Girdle," JEGP, LVIII (January, 1964), 18.

[270]Howard, op. cit., p. 433.

if he should: "I were a kny3t kowarde, I my3t not be excused" (I. 2131). Ironically, Gawain fails to see his cowardice in wearing the green girdle. Further irony is shown in Gawain's constant declarations that his fate is in God's hands (II. 2157-59; II. 2208-11), even as he denies his declarations through wearing the green girdle. The Green Knight makes satirical thrusts at Gawain when Gawain flinches from the axe:

> "Þou art not Gawayne;" quoþ þe gome, "þat is so goud halden,
> Þat neuer ar3ed for no here by hylle ne be vale,
> And now þou fles for ferde er þou fele harme3!
> Such cowardise of þat kny3t cowþe I neuer here.
> Nawþer fyked I ne fla3e, freke, quen þou myntest,
> Ne kest no kauelacion in kynge3 hous Arthor."
> (II. 2270-75)

Gawain's answer is also not lacking in humor, especially when his circumstances are considered: "Bot þa3 my hede falle on þe stone3, / I con not hit restore" (II. 2282-3).

The Green Knight's good humor remains as he points out Gawain's faults to him after delivering only a nick in lieu of the promised blow to Gawain's neck. While pointing out Gawain's failures to him, he also points Gawain's relative purity and worth, dismissing the rigorous demands of the chivalric code by which Gawain would judge himself.[271] In laughing at Gawain's sense of

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[271] Shedd, op. cit., p. 11.

guilt, the Green Knight further serves to reintroduce the mirth and gaiety of the other fitts, re-establishing their essentially comic aspects.[272] His mock absolution of Gawain (II. 2390-4) also occurs in ironic, comic context, the Green Knight rather gently suggesting that Gawain is merely a human who takes himself too seriously.[273]

Gawain, realizing the true significance of the girdle, bitterly reproaches himself for his cowardice, his covetousness, and his treachery. He bemoans that his covetousness--his inordinate love for himself which has superseded his love for truth and for God--has led him to fail in chivalric liberality and loyalty.[274] Even more, he wails in that new knowledge that the code which he has accepted as an end in itself and as the road to perfection is, after all, a falliable, human creation.[275] Furthermore, he deserts one of his last fully intact virtues--that of courtesy to women--and berates women as the cause of all men's failures (II. 2413-28). This humorous tirade, which probably sounded quite familiar to a medieval audience aware of the

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[272]Burrow, op. cit., p. 78.

[273]Bowers, op. cit., p. 339.

[274]David Farley Hills, "Gawain's Fault in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Review of English Studies, XIV (May, 1963), 129.

[275]Shedd, op. cit., p. 11.

medieval theological conception of women, completes Gawain's humanization through failure, rendering him at once comic and pathetic.

The revelation of Morgan, the old crone of Bercilak's castle, as the instigator of the initial Beheading Game is a facet of the poem which has caused critics a great deal of disagreement. Some see it as an intrusion, a flaw in the poem's structure. Yet, the prolonged concealment of the antagonist's identity and motive is typical of the "rash--covenant tradition" common in medieval literature and present in SGGK.[276] In view of the humorous aspects of the story and of the implicit meaning, it seems that Morgan's intentions must not have been fully evil. It seems possible that Morgan forsaw in Guinevere the future disruption of the Round Table and sought, through the Beheading Test, to remove the source of that evil which brought this disruption. Nor is it inconsistent with Morgan's character for her to attempt to purge the court, for Morgan is not always portrayed as adverse to the ideals of Camelot in the medieval romances. Furthermore, in SGGK, Morgan is referred to as the lover of Merlin (I. 2448) and Merlin was especially active in the creation of the Round Table. By association, then, it might seem that Morgan is attempting to help

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[276]McAlindon, op. cit., p. 135.

Arthur through her respect for Merlin's love of the king. Failing the death of Guinevere, the plot was then conceived by Bercilak to give the members of the Round Table an insight into their own vulnerability, in order that they might recognize and acknowledge the limitations of their order. It is significant that only Gawain realizes the full implications of the knowledge he has gained, for the good-natured and superficial acceptance of Gawain as a fine example of a truly Christian and courtly knight indicates that the court is not overly concerned with self-knowledge. This lack on their part possibly will have much to do with their eventual downfall. It is through pride in Gawain and, by association, in themselves, that the knights adopt the wearing of the green baldric which serves Gawain as a reminder of the truth about the nature of man.

SGGK, then, is a "greatly satiric anti-romance . . . at once a brilliant affirmation and a comic rejection of the life that was romantic."[277] It reveals that life is a bunch of contradictions, even in an idealized form, and that that which is worthy is also often ridiculous. Unmasking the silliness of the pretensions of courtesy and courtly love, it yet applauds the noble aims of these conventions.[278]

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[277] Heiserman, op. cit., p. 452.

[278] Bloomfield, op. cit., p. 11.

The entire aspect of chivalry is regarded with good-natured understanding, showing that chivalry is a means but not an end to the ideal state. In the poem, Sir Gawain, bringing the society he represents, comes to terms with the real world.

The underlying theme of SGGK is Gawain's journey from innocence to humility through self-knowledge.[279] Gawain comes into a complete understanding of himself and his values, gaining through this understanding the understanding of the nature of true chivalry. He discovers that pure courtesy is trivial in comparison to the finer ideals of chivalry, for it derives from a worldly and courtly obsession for fame while the finer ideals derive from a Christian attitude.[280] The poem assumes the importance of loyalty, bravery, and faith; through a new perspective of these qualities, Gawain seeks to strive even harder for perfection. "What may mon do bot fonde?" (I. 565) is Gawain's answer to man's position in the world.[281]

The forces which have been explored in this paper, then, are not only present in SGGK but also serve as a medium for its serious

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[279]Engelhardt, op. cit., p. 224.

[280]Heiserman, op. cit., p. 453.

[281]Alan M. Markham, "The Meaning of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA, LXXII (September, 1957), 579.

and comic aspects. The most important of these, undeniably, are the institution of chivalry and the conventions of courtly love, both of which are exposed to ironic comment on their shortcomings. The medieval conception of women serves as a humorous aspect of the poem which more fully identifies the world of Bercilak with the real medieval world; the Cult of the Virgin brings the poem within the religious mind of its audience. Throughout the work, these forces interact to furnish a comment on the state of chivalric, aristocratic ideals in the real world.

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