

**The Character of Gawain  
in Middle English Literature**

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis studies the character of Gawain as it occurs in a variety of Middle English romance and chronicle texts, both poetry and prose. For medieval authors, Gawain is a necessary element in any depiction of King Arthur's court, but his character is given widely divergent interpretations. Two extremes are represented in English literary history by *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (a nearly perfect Gawain) and Malory's *Morte Darthur* (a treacherous Gawain). Scholars have accepted a standard view of Gawain based upon the similarities and differences in his characterization in these two famous works, and have utilized other Middle English works only to confirm their *a priori* arguments. When these texts are examined on their own terms, a more accurate picture of the Middle English Gawain emerges, one which confirms some facets of the standard interpretation but denies others.

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## Abbreviations

<i>AMA</i>	<i>Alliterative Morte Arthur</i> (in Benson)
<i>Avowyng</i>	<i>The Avowyng of Arthur</i> (in Hahn)
<i>Awntyrs</i>	<i>The Awntyrs off Arthur</i> (in Hahn)
<i>CC1</i>	<i>Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle</i> (in Hahn)
<i>CC2</i>	<i>The Carle of Carlisle</i> (in Hahn)
<i>Cornwall</i>	<i>King Arthur and King Cornwall</i> (in Hahn)
<i>DOW</i>	<i>De ortu Waluanii (The Rise of Gawain)</i> (in Day)
<i>Gologras</i>	<i>The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain</i> (in Hahn)
<i>Greene</i>	<i>The Greene Knight</i> (in Hahn)
<i>HRB</i>	<i>Historia regum Britanniae</i> (Geoffrey of Monmouth)
<i>Jeaste</i>	<i>The Jeaste of Sir Gawain</i> (in Hahn)
<i>LD</i>	<i>Libeaus Desconus</i>
<i>LL</i>	<i>Lancelot of the Laik</i>
<i>Lovelich</i>	<i>Merlin, Henry Lovelich</i>
<i>Marriage</i>	<i>The Marriage of Sir Gawain</i> (in Hahn)
<i>Merlin</i>	<i>English Prose Merlin</i>
<i>Percyvell</i>	<i>Sir Percyvell of Gales</i> (in Mills)
<i>Ragnelle</i>	<i>The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle</i> (in Hahn)
<i>SGGK</i>	<i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> (in Andrew and Waldron)
<i>SMA</i>	<i>Stanzaic Morte Arthure</i> (in Benson)
<i>Turke</i>	<i>The Turke and Sir Gawain</i> (in Hahn)
<i>YG</i>	<i>Ywain and Gawain</i> (in Mills)

## Introduction

B. J. Whiting wrote many years ago that “no warrior of Arthur’s host is more deserving of a full-length portrait than is Gawain” (Whiting 189). His own paper on Gawain’s brief appearance in Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale* could do no more than “touch on certain facets of the subject.” Since then there have been some short assessments of Gawain’s character in Malory, and a few articles here and there which touch on the English romances in which Gawain figures. There have been more articles, and a full-length book by Keith Busby, on the French Gauvain.<sup>1</sup> Finally, and certainly not least, there has been a host of works, short and lengthy, on the admittedly superior English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, hereafter referred to as *SGGK*. Whiting himself had noticed this lack of attention to the English Gawain, pointing out that most readers, “if they know about Gawain at all,” found him in Malory, Tennyson, or *SGGK* (Whiting 193).

The present essay will attempt to address the failure of modern scholarship to fully contextualize both Malory and *SGGK* regarding the character of Gawain.<sup>2</sup> *SGGK* is a brilliant poem by any standard, modern or medieval, which has assured its popularity as an object of critical study. Nonetheless it is important to realize that it did not exist in a vacuum, nor was it the most popular Gawain poem of the Middle Ages, if the manuscript evidence is any

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<sup>1</sup> Arthurian nomenclature is a tricky business at best: French texts use Gauvain, while Latin texts and the Middle English and French chronicles derived from them tend to use Walwen. Walwen is also used by Middle English authors in an alliterative context if a “w” is preferred to a “g.” I have retained Gauvain to indicate the particular manifestation of this character in the French tradition, and also to differentiate between the two when discussing sources. All other spellings have been standardized to “Gawain” except in direct quotation from a text.

<sup>2</sup> As recently as 1990 Jeanne Mathewson could point out that no attempt had been made to fully examine *SGGK* “in relation to other English Gawain romances,” the first of “three specific recommendations” R. Ackerman had made in 1968 for the future of *SGGK* studies (Mathewson 211).

indication. *The Awntyrs off Arthur* survives in four transcriptions, and the story of the Carl of Carlisle in two distinct but related versions, as does the story of the wedding of Gawain. The inferior (to modern critical thinking) late-medieval analogue *The Greene Knight* is in many ways a more typical Arthurian poem: Sir Kay's mocking presence and the eventual inclusion of the Greene Knight into the Round Table are elements present in many Arthurian narratives but absent in *SGGK*.

Hahn writes, in his introduction to *The Greene Knight*, that *SGGK* "is by acclamation the most subtle, learned, and enjoyable of poems about this chivalric hero" and "one of the great narrative achievements in the English language" (Hahn 309). But he goes on to say that "there exists little evidence of its being read from the time of its composition in the later fourteenth century until the edition produced by Madden in 1839." When Benson wrote in 1965 that *SGGK* was "one of the few Middle English poems that have not slipped into the obscurity to which the passing of centuries and changes in taste and language have condemned most medieval literature," he implied a continuity of familiarity with *SGGK* that is simply not historically attested (L. Benson vii). *SGGK* did slip into obscurity, and was subsequently rescued and heralded by nineteenth- and twentieth-century editors like Madden. No claim can be made that medieval audiences valued *SGGK* as much as modern audiences do; Donald Howard wonders if *SGGK* was not popular with medieval readers because it was "too ironical for them, too encompassing and variegated, too skeptical; or, to say it differently, too humanistic and too modern" (Howard 45). In fact, as David Matthews has written, the "ramifications of the fact that *Sir Gawain* had no apparent literary influence on its time are never brought into calculation" when scholars turn their attention to the poem

(Matthews, “Shadow” 302). Given the range of theories advanced to explain *SGGK*, it sometimes seems that the poem belongs more to the twentieth century than the fourteenth.

Malory’s *Morte Darthur* is the lens through which the medieval Arthurian tradition was to be refracted for modern English-speaking audiences. The main line of development after Malory descends from him, through Tennyson and White to Marion Zimmer Bradley, John Boorman’s film *Excalibur*, and the comic book *Camelot 3000*. Those who work with the Arthurian tradition may admire Malory or contradict him, they may attempt to return to a more “historical” and less anachronistic vision of Arthur’s world, but the essentials of narrative and character remain largely what Malory thought them to be when he composed his *Arthuriad*. Even such an idiosyncratic work as Bernard Cornwell’s Arthurian *Warlord* trilogy (in which Mordred is the rightful king, Guinevere worships Isis, and the obscure Derfel becomes Arthur’s best friend) allows “romanticism to prevail over pedantry,” and gives Lancelot and his thoroughly Malorian protégé Lavain a place in his text, albeit as villains (Cornwell, *Enemy of God* 473). The point is not that Malory invented Lancelot, or the affair with Guinevere, or most of the other details in his book: such an argument would be absurd. What Malory did was preserve and exalt them over other, arguably more English, forms of the legend; and Caxton’s expert salesmanship ensured that Malory’s vision of the Arthurian moment became commonly accepted.

Malory’s Gawain, so different from the near-perfect knight found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is closer to the late French character. In the *Morte Darthur* Gawain is treacherous, hot-headed, murderous, avoided even by his own brother Gareth, one of Malory’s “good knights.” In those sections of his *Arthuriad* derived directly from Middle

English sources, Gawain's reputation is less black; the Roman War, based directly on the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, is one example. However, in the *Book of Tristram*, based on the French *Prose Tristan*, Gawain is fully a villain, protected from the righteous wrath of Tristram and other noble knights only by his relationship with his uncle Arthur. Malory's Gawain appears to the reader as either a complicated and conflicted character, capable of both nobility and treachery, or as a badly drawn and inconsistent character (Bogdanow 154). Much depends on the attitude of the reader towards Malory himself: later authors seem to find it safer to ignore Malory's Gawain, or to dismiss him as a minor character.

The project to examine the entire body of Middle English romances for any particular theme, especially for the reconstruction of a medieval literary character, is fraught with difficulty and uncertainty. First one must distinguish between romances written in Britain and romances written in English, a strategy which may at first seem indefensible: is there a particular personality Gawain evinces in English texts such as *SGGK*, Malory and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell* that he shares with the Gawain of the Percy Folio ballads or the Gawain of the late Scottish poem *Golagros and Gawain*? If so, is this personality appreciably different from the Gawain of the Scottish poem *Fergus of Galloway*, written in the British Isles but in French? What about the Gawain of *De Ortu Waluanii Nepotis Arturi*, a Latin text probably composed in England? For that matter, is the Gawain of *SGGK* or *The Awntyrs off Arthur* really very different from the French Gauvain of *L'Atre Périlleux* or any other French text?

This last question needs to be answered first. The Gauvain of Chrétien de Troyes and the Gawain of Malory are distinct characters whose personalities can be traced within a text

or a series of texts whose derivation from a particular author is widely accepted. They can be separated both from each other and from other literary Gauwains. Chrétien's Gauvain is light-hearted, eager for adventure, and not very constant in matters of the heart. The Gauvain of Chrétien's successors and the authors of the French prose cycles shares these characteristics even as he evolves. The Malorian Gawain is capable of military success, frequently treacherous or suspected of treachery, and not merely inconstant in love; he can be cruel and unthinking. His grudges motivate a great deal of Malory's narrative. When critics have a link between a known author and a substantial body of his or her work, aspects of "character" and personality become susceptible to analysis, even if they remain problematic. But can the same methods be applied to a series of texts written by different authors, about whom little or nothing is strictly known, which are spread out both geographically and chronologically, and which seem to share a particular language as their only certain commonality?

I am aware and respectful of these difficulties, and I have some concerns about differentiating too completely between Gauvain and Gawain simply along linguistic lines. My reasons for proceeding despite these concerns are twofold. First, Keith Busby has already written extensively on the French Gauvain, most obviously in *Gauvain in Old French Literature*, but also in subsequent articles. My interest is in providing a similar overview for Gawain in Middle English texts, perhaps less chronologically than Busby's given that the time period for Middle English Arthurian texts is somewhat shorter and the extant texts fewer. Second, after due study a recognizable and coherent "Gawain" has emerged from the Middle English texts, with a core group of traits and issues which perennially seem to surround him.

There are certainly inconsistencies from text to text; as well there are Middle English texts which share more with their French counterparts than with those in their own language. Still, an authorial consensus does seem to emerge from the Middle English and Scots texts, never more apparent than in those texts which are adaptations directly from the French such as *Ywain and Gawain* or *Lancelot of the Laik*, or in those texts which only reluctantly or half-heartedly incorporate continental trends in Arthurian literature, such as the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. Stephen Knight observes that the medieval English romances are “ugly ducklings” which “fall between the elaborate courtesy of their French ancestors and the blunt simplicity of their junior siblings, the British ballads” (Knight 99). The very simplicity and directness of the Middle English texts allow one to mine them for references to a single theme or character with relative ease; at the very least, their perceived simplicity balances the complications raised by the extreme intertextuality of both the romance and Arthurian genres.

In articulating the objectives of this essay, it will best serve my purposes to state the issues which I will not be pursuing. This essay will make no attempt to discuss the “origins” of *Gawain*, as Jessie Weston did over a century ago. There is little new evidence to examine one way or the other, and in my opinion little point in looking for it. As far as my central thesis is concerned, *Gawain* arrived on the literary scene full-blown as King Arthur’s nephew and a great warrior of the Round Table, as in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia Regum Britanniae*. I leave the theories of Weston and others to that pseudo-academic area where they percolate through the relevant fields and continue to inform (through their modern adherents, for good or ill) almost any discussion of their subjects. *Gawain* may be a solar hero humanized in a newly Christian context or a remembrance of the Irish Cuchulinn; but he

might not be. It does not concern my central arguments in any but the most indirect manner. Perhaps Whiting said it best when he wrote in his essay that “despite manifest temptation” he was not going to “treat of Gawain before Gawain” (Whiting 195).

In the English tradition, Gawain has come to be associated with certain key features. The first is his courteous nature; the entire structure of *SGGK* hangs on the reader’s knowledge of Gawain’s reputation as the knight of courtesy. Chaucer makes a single reference to Gawain in *The Squire’s Tale*, comparing the manners of a mysterious visitor to the Tartar king’s court with the “olde curteisye” of Gawain (*SqT* 95). This courtesy has come to be associated foremost with Gawain’s relationships with women, but the Middle English corpus has as many if not more examples of Gawain being courteous to men, especially foes. Second, and related to the first, is Gawain’s amorous reputation: Gawain’s propensity to engage in love affairs is seldom attested in Middle English texts, and where this trait does occur the text normally has a direct French antecedent. Third, Gawain is not merely the greatest of Arthur’s knights; he is Arthur’s most essential follower and the lynch-pin who holds the Round Table together. Gawain is single-handedly responsible for salvaging the Round Table’s honour in many of the English texts. The fourth feature is Gawain’s relationship with other knights, both Round Table knights and their opponents: Gawain is often seen as responsible for bringing new blood and talent into the Round Table. These traits make up the modern critical picture of the Middle English Gawain, and there is a tacit assumption that medieval English authors who wrote about Gawain had precisely this image in mind when they wrote. Barber writes that Gawain was, for the English, “the flower of all courtesy and gentleness, and the figure of every virtue” (Barber 107); Barron notes that

“English poets reject the idea of a degenerate Gawain; with them he remains the loyal lieutenant of dynastic romance, the embodiment of the basic knightly virtues” (Barron, *Romance* 159).

By and large this critical assumption is probably correct, but it is just that: an assumption. Critics have tended to look at *SGGK*, determine Gawain’s character in that poem, and project that image back into the other Gawain poems while looking for cognates: the result is a superficial assessment of Gawain’s character and function in Middle English narrative as a whole. A good example is Clinton Machann’s 1982 article on the structure of the English Gawain romances, which uses a Proppian analysis of various Gawain poems to establish the original “Gawain myth” (Machann 634). Machann’s work is made problematic by his declaration that certain poems (*SGGK* and *The Greene Knight*, the two Carle of Carlisle poems, *Weddyng* and *Marriage*, and *The Turke and Gawain*) can be classed together as texts which “deal with actions somewhat different from the usual deeds of knightly valor” (Machann 630). Ignoring the critical assumptions inherent in selecting these particular texts, some of which are redactions and should not be counted towards the total sample of seven, Machann’s analysis is organized around his desire to find a mythic level of meaning in *SGGK*, which again subordinates the other texts to *SGGK*’s superiority as a cultural and critical artifact. While Machann’s analysis does define “a sphere of action for the role which Gawain plays in certain Medieval English romances” (Machann 634), it does not reveal anything new, and it rejects the majority of English romances featuring Gawain in its quest for the proposed original mythic legend.

The development of *SGGK* studies has emphasized the poem’s isolation; early

scholars such as G. L. Kittredge postulated a lost French original, which allowed *SGGK* to stand as a unique artifact even when critics were forced to acknowledge the existence of *The Greene Knight*:

Criticism's negative judgement on *The Grene Knight* [sic] upholds the artistic originality and validity of *Sir Gawain*, for just as the absence of a source contributes to the originality of *Sir Gawain* – the spectre of derivativeness is raised only to be triumphantly dismissed as the possible French original remains “lost” – the “debasement” of the story in its later history confirms the unalloyed purity of the original. (Matthews, “Shadow” 302)

This is not true of *The Greene Knight* alone; *SGGK*, despite its apparent lack of influence between its composition and its publication by Madden, has come to be seen in isolation as a primary example of medieval poetry and of medieval romance, in practise if not in theory. The last thirty years have seen a growing consensus that the Gawain-poet had his sources and influences: but most scholars, like Ad Putter and Richard Griffith, have looked towards French models rather than English ones. Scholars have by and large accepted Pearsall’s statement that English romance as a rule “hardly prepares us” for *SGGK* (Pearsall 92).

In an effort to remedy this lack of attention, I intend to examine each of Gawain’s traditional traits, with reference to the widest range of English texts possible. My goal in this, to quote Matthews again, is “not to re-establish humanist-oriented notions of literary worth, nor to provide yet more evidence of the eminence of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Matthews, “Shadow” 302); similarly, I do not wish to praise Malory at the expense of other Middle English Arthurian texts. Both chronicle and romance texts will be used to paint the most complete picture of Gawain in Middle English literature yet undertaken. Malory and *SGGK* will be included, not as privileged objects of study, but equally with the other works;

only in the conclusion will I return to these two famous texts as the twin poles which have defined Gawain's post-medieval career.

## The Texts

As many of the Middle English Gawain romances are partially or entirely unfamiliar to most readers, it seems fitting to give brief synopses of the major works I will be examining; I have included a chronology of texts in Appendix 1, with a complete list of extant manuscripts in Appendix 2. I assume that *SGGK* and Malory need little introduction.

The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (4346 lines) and the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* (3969 lines) are two longer poems, each dealing with the destruction of the Arthurian world. However, there are fewer similarities than differences between them. The alliterative poem is based firmly on the chronicle tradition descending from Geoffrey of Monmouth; Arthur's death is thus the inevitable result of his own territorial ambitions, Mordred's treachery, and the mutability of Fortune. The emphasis is on Arthur's continental campaigns and his subsequent efforts to regain his throne, usurped by Mordred; Gawain's role is that of loyal lieutenant and chief warrior of the Round Table, and he dies in the otherwise successful attempt to drive Mordred's forces back from the English shore. The *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* is based closely, but not slavishly, on the French *La Mort Artu*; here, Arthur's death is the result of treachery from all sides: Lancelot and Guinevere's affair, Agravain's exposure of their treason, Mordred's opportunism. Gawain dies in the assault on the beach, but his death is brought on by an earlier wound at Lancelot's hands. The stanzaic poem is one of Malory's sources for his own final books, while the alliterative work is his main source for the Roman

War.

*The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, and its later redaction *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*, are poems dealing with the same story found in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*. However, because Chaucer's nameless knight has raped a maiden, his quest for the answer to the famous riddle ("What do women most desire?") and his marriage to the Loathly Lady are both punishment and rehabilitation for this crime. In more specifically Arthurian works, it is Arthur who is threatened but Gawain who must solve the riddle and marry the Lady; no rape has been committed, but Arthur's difficulties are linked to his own territorial aggression and imperial ambitions, which prompt a dispossessed lord (the Loathly Lady's brother) to set up the riddle quest.

Territorial ambitions also set up two other poems, *The Awntyrs off Arthur* and *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*. *Awntyrs* has a bipartite structure. The first half deals with Gawain and Guinevere meeting the ghost of the queen's mother, who warns them of the perils of vanity and military aggression: the second half is a combat and reconciliation between Sir Galeron, whose lands have been unjustly given to Gawain, and Gawain, forced by honour to defend his uncle's honour and his own entitlements. The poem ends with Galeron's lands restored to him, and new lands assigned to Gawain. *Gologras and Gawain* takes place during a continental campaign, in Tuscany: Arthur covets the land of a local lord after his request for shelter and provisions is denied. Gawain faces Gologras in combat, and once victory seems in his grasp he fakes his own defeat so that Gologras can save face before his people. Gawain's selfless and courteous act has the effect of first winning Gologras' allegiance for Arthur, and then prompting Arthur to give Gologras back his independence;

Gawain acquires an ally rather than a conquest.

The two *Carle of Carlisle* poems, as well as *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, deal with a lord cursed with a churlish appearance and manner; they follow the story pattern known as the Imperious Host. Gawain is asked to perform unexpected and dishonourable deeds at the request of the Carle, who is testing Gawain's courtesy; Gawain's success in these tests leads to a breaking of the curse upon the Carle, and to his re-entry into courtly society. In *Turke*, the strange churlish figure is not only monstrous but heathen; he accompanies Gawain on a series of adventures which culminate with his own beheading, which restores his human appearance and seems to convert him to Christianity. In all three cases, Gawain is asked to perform discourteous deeds in order to affirm, paradoxically, that his reputation for courtesy is deserved. *The Greene Knight*, the late redaction of SGGK, also shows some influence of this pattern; although considered clumsy by most scholars, *The Greene Knight* has more in common with other Middle English Arthurian poems than SGGK itself does.

*The Avowyng of Arthur* is another bipartite poem. The first half deals with a series of oaths undertaken by Arthur, Gawain, Kay and Baudwin (a character who, in other Arthurian works, is consistently considered an older knight and often called a bishop); the first three take typical chivalric vows while Baudwin's oaths "more resemble prohibitions than promises of achievement" (Hahn 113). Gawain swears to keep watch all night at the Tarn Wathelene, a lake with an Otherworldly aura: the adventure he finds is to rescue a damsel from a knight who has already defeated Kay. The traditional rivalry of Gawain and Kay has a central prominence here, as it does in the Carle poems.

The remaining texts to be discussed are all translations or adaptations of well-known

French works: *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain* (the First Continuation of Chrétien's *Perceval*). *Lybeaus Descornus* (*Le Bel Inconnu* or *Li Biaus Descouneus* by Renaut de Beaujeu, a version of the Fair Unknown story), *Lancelot of the Laik* (the French Prose *Lancelot* Cycle), *Sir Percyvell of Gales* (a very loose version of Chrétien's *Perceval*, possibly based on a common ancestor and not directly on Chrétien himself), *Ywain and Gawain* (Chrétien's *Yvain*), and *King Arthur and King Cornwall* (*Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*, a twelfth-century Old French burlesque concerning Charlemagne's visit to King Hugo of Constantinople).

### **The French Gauvain**

A brief overview of the French Gauvain, necessarily indebted to the work of Keith Busby and Fanni Bogdanow, might also prove useful. Busby believes that Gauvain's "origins as a literary figure" in the chronicle tradition dictated how he would appear in later romances (Busby, *Gauvain* 402). Unlike the titular heros of Chrétien's poems, Gauvain already possessed a preformed character and function, leading to a "lack of dynamism": Gauvain is "nearly always the same at the end of a romance as he is at the beginning" and he never emerges from a crisis as "a wiser and better knight" (Busby, *Gauvain* 386-87). Gauvain's adventures parallel those of the hero in *Perceval* and *Lancelot*, while he provides counsel and companionship in *Yvain*, *Cligés* and *Eric et Enide*. Often equalled but never beaten by other knights in Chrétien and his immediate successors, he rarely succeeds in the quests he undertakes, while his fellow knights usually fulfill their goals; Gauvain's failure is necessitated by the fact that the quests are usually intended not for Gauvain, but for the romance's eponymous hero, who has some special quality (e.g., devotion to a particular lady) which

allows him to succeed (Busby, *Gauvain* 388-89). Gauvain is “often almost the hero, but not quite” (Busby, *Gauvain* 392).

In the Vulgate *La Queste del Saint Graal*, Gauvain’s failure to have that “special something” has disastrous ramifications for his character: failure in the Grail Quest is indicative of a lack of devotion to God, a far more serious accusation than an inability to commit himself to a particular lady. Gauvain’s failure on the Grail Quest is not unique, but it has a singular effect on his reputation which no other knight of Arthur’s must suffer; however, Gauvain’s “position as the prime representative of ‘chevalerie terrienne’ effectively means that his decline is all the more noticeable” (Busby, *Gauvain* 401). Bogdanow examines the French tradition in an article focusing on the impact of Malory’s French sources on his text. She also points to the Vulgate cycle, and specifically to *La Queste del Saint Graal*, as the turning point in Gauvain’s (and thus Gawain’s) reputation. Following his failure to find the Grail, Gauvain begins to exhibit the trait of *démesure* when he turns against Lancelot: he is portrayed as a murderous and vindictive thug in the Prose *Tristan*, a work heavily influenced by the Vulgate *Lancelot* (Bogdanow 160-61).

However, Busby notes in a later article that the “efforts of the authors of *La Queste del Saint Graal* and the Prose *Tristan* to dispose of Gauvain as an admirable literary figure were, despite their vehemence, doomed to failure” (Busby, “Diverging” 95). Bogdanow, despite the declining reputation she traces for Gauvain between the *Queste* and Malory, includes a brief discussion of a minor text, the *Palamedes*, in which the author provides an explanation for Gauvain’s twin reputations: Gauvain had been a good knight until he was badly injured in Arthur’s war against Galeholt, after which he was never again the best of

Arthur's knights and grew increasingly bitter and treacherous (Bogdanow 161). The works examined by Busby in his later article include the first French texts to make Gauvain the central hero of his own adventures: the "total destruction of Gauvain in the prose *Tristan* was apparently counter-productive" (Busby, "Diverging" 109). As Bogdanow rightly points out, the efforts of hostile authors were not entirely counter-productive, as their version of Gauvain found his way into Malory's *Morte Darthur*. It is ironic that the treacherous Gauvain is resisted in French texts, but achieved near immortality in the English tradition despite Gawain's continuing popularity among medieval English-speaking audiences, a popularity attested by the number of Middle English and Scots texts in which Gawain is the central hero.

### The Geographical Gawain

Thomas Hahn has summed up the importance of locality in the Gawain corpus, pointing to the importance of Carlisle, a city in Cumbria on the border with Scotland, as the "indispensable endpoint" for most of Gawain's adventures. The border mentality of the texts Hahn discusses becomes their central theme:

Gawain's role as the hero who faces the unknown and renders it manageable for the rest of his society is repeatedly figured in geographical terms; in a showdown at the court, or through a journey to a far-off realm. Gawain brings the socially or exotically monstrous under lawful rule, makes the strange recognizable, returns the outlying to the center. Yet, as fantasies of limitless monarchical control, these poems do not take an undifferentiated view of conquered kingdoms, but instead offer a precise, undeviating agenda for just which lands require subduing and colonization: all are Celtic territories that make up the periphery of England – Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Ireland, the Isle of Man, Brittany. Their peripheral location defines a symbolic geography, and their conquest consequently enhances the myth of England's centrality and political domination. (Hahn 31)

This statement is largely but not entirely accurate; *Gologras and Gawain*, for example, takes place in or near Tuscany, and most of the *Alliterative Morte Arthur* takes place on the continent. Furthermore, not all of Gawain's foes are monstrous. Galeron and Gologras are both fully human and have genuine grievances against Arthur's court; Gromer Somer Joue in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* also shows little sign of being a monster, being described only briefly as a strange man ("a quaynt grome," *Ragnelle* 50).

The common occurrence of enchanted places such as Inglewood Forest and the Tarn Wathelene cannot be denied; but internal linguistic evidence indicating that many of the poems originate in those areas seems a more compelling explanation for the prominence of Carlisle and its environs in the Gawain corpus and related texts. Hahn's explanation also neglects Gawain's own connections with these marginal areas. If Gawain is to be seen as the defender of civilization against the marginal Otherworldly hordes, it must be acknowledged that he himself seems to have wandered into Arthur's court from that very margin: the Squire's reference to Gawain returning "out of Fairy[e]" implies that Chaucer, at least, saw Gawain's origins as Otherworldly (*SqT* 96).

Gawain's association with the border regions of Galloway and Scotland is early and well attested. William of Malmesbury in his *Gesta Regum Anglorum* records that "Walwen" was the exiled ruler of Walweitha, identified as Galloway by Maurice Delbouille and Paule le Rider, an identification accepted by Busby: although the story of Gawain's expulsion "disappears" in the tradition, it is worth noting that Gawain also loses Galloway in *The Awntyrs off Arthur* (Busby, *Gauvain* 31, 47n.5). Geoffrey of Monmouth associates Gawain with Lothian through his father King Loth (*HRB* 9.9, Thorpe 221), who was himself the

nephew of King Sichelm of Norway; Loth later inherits Norway (*HRB* 9.11, Thorpe 223); given the explicit connections between Norway and Lothian in this text, a reflection of the history of Norse conquest and settlement in the north of England and the islands, it is surprising that Gawain has come to be associated so fully with the Celtic world rather than the Norse.

Wace confirms Gawain's connection with Lothian and Loth's claims to the Norse throne, adding a brief reference to Gawain's good character just after Loth and Arthur reconquer Norway when the dead king's will is ignored by his vassals (Wace 9849-62). Lot is a northern king in Malory as well, and his son is (at least technically) a prince: "kynge Lott of Lowthean and of Orkenay thenne wedded Margawse that was Gaweyn's moder" (5/25-26). The association ran deep enough that later Scottish chroniclers, faced with English aggression from the reign of Edward I onwards, could begin claiming Gawain (and Mordred) as their own particular heroes, the legitimate heirs to the thrones of not only Lothian and the Orkneys, but England as well (Alexander 4-5). Gawain is thus a figure both essential and marginal. He defends the Arthurian world from the Celtic Otherworld from which he himself originates; he comes from the fringes of Arthur's world to take his place as near to the centre as possible without usurping the throne.

## Chapter 1

### Gawain in Camelot: The Loyal Lieutenant and Faithful Companion

Few texts depict Gawain's youth and early years in any detail, and those that do are seldom in agreement. Malory comments that Gawain had "suche a grace and a gyffte that an holy man had gyvyn hym, that every day in the yere, frome undern tyll hyghe noone. hys myght encresed tho three owres as much as thryse hys strength" (704/8-10). This is a compressed and modified form of the story found in the *Mort Artu* that Gawain would always recover his strength around noon despite any morning exertions, and that the hermit blessed Gawain with this gift shortly after the child's birth; furthermore the hermit named the child Gawain after himself (Cable 181-82). Henry Lovelich's *Merlin* also includes an explanation of Gawain's strength, combining the versions found in the *Mort Artu* and Malory, but giving no account of how he came to possess this unusual trait (Lovelich 12431-442).

The *Mort Artu* states that Gawain was born in a city called Nordelone, to the great delight of his father, Lot (Cable 181); in this case, Gawain is a legitimate son, and his mother is Morgause. Malory adopts this particular lineage. Only the *Historia Regum Britanniae* of Geoffrey agrees that Gawain is the legitimate issue of a marriage, in this case a union arranged between Lot and a sister of Ambrosius Aurelius (Thorpe 221, *HRB* 9.9).<sup>3</sup> The three romance texts which borrow most heavily from Geoffrey (*Les Enfances Gauvain. De ortu Waluuani*

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey states that Anna, daughter of Utherpendragon and Ygerna, marries Loth (Thorpe 209, *HRB* 8.21), but later contradicts himself by stating that Loth married the sister of Aurelius; Gawain and Mordred are mentioned in this context, making them Arthur's cousins and not his nephews. However, the main tradition derives from a conflation of the two references, and clearly Gawain is seen as Arthur's nephew.

and *Perlesvaus*) all pronounce Gawain illegitimate, and each makes a different narratorial decision regarding Gawain's mother. Gawain's mother in the French *Les Enfances Gauvain* has the name Morcades, a name similar to Malory's Morgause; in *Perlesvaus* she is unnamed; in *Arthour and Merlin* her name is Belicent. The Latin *De ortu Waluuanii*, a poem whose sole subject is Gawain's youth, names his father Loth and his mother Anna, a daughter of Uther; here Loth is not King of the Orkneys but the nephew of the King of Norway, a hostage in the court of the conqueror Uther (*DOW* 3). Out of fear of Uther the illegitimate child is sent away with wealthy merchants, who are charged with his care and rearing (*DOW* 5).

The *De ortu Waluuanii* is an unusual text in many ways, and seems linked to a very different tradition than that which later manifested itself in the French texts and thus found its way into Middle English. Gawain's education in Rome is developed from a hint given in Geoffrey's *Historia*, where the boy is sent to Rome to serve in the household of Pope Sulpicius (Thorpe 223, *HRB* 9.11); *Perlesvaus*, *Les Enfances Gauvain* and *DOW* all develop this tradition in different ways. There is no English equivalent to these tales of Gawain's youth, although the emperor's motivation for sending Gawain to Britannia is his hope that Gawain, his lineage as yet unknown to anyone but the emperor, will come to the British throne and bring the island back to the Empire (*DOW* 99); this is surely an oblique reference to the later tradition of the Empire's demand for tribute from Arthur, the political mistake which prompts Arthur's successful continental assault. Perhaps the only strong influence *DOW* had upon Middle English Arthuriana is the colour of Gawain's surcoat, bright red and gold as it is in *SGGK* but nowhere else (Day xxxiii-xxxiv).

Lovelich's *Merlin*, a verse translation of the Vulgate *Estoire de Merlin*, was written

around 1450, and includes an unusual scene between Gawain and his mother; the anonymous English Prose *Merlin* is extremely close to Lovelich, and composed around the same time. After naming Gawain and his brothers and recounting the conception of Mordred (Lovelich 12354-61), the text depicts Gawain returning from a hunt to find his unnamed mother sitting in a chamber, weeping because of Arthur's war with her husband (Lovelich 12413-18). Upon seeing Gawain, "the fairest schapen man / That jn his tyme ony knew" (Lovelich 12427), she begins to weep because he and his brothers are not yet knights and spend all their time playing games and are thus unable to help their uncle (Lovelich 12455-64). Once Gawain understands his relationship to Arthur, he immediately swears to aid him. Agravain also blames Gawain for not leading them out to war sooner, pointing to his position as the eldest brother, and declares that they should be defending Arthur's land against his external enemies (Lovelich 12543-70). The English Prose *Merlin* continually reiterates the youth of Gawain and his brothers, notably when the news of their exploits reach Uriens' kingdom:

... ther com tydinges how that Gawein, and Agrauain, and Gaheret, and Gaheries, and Galashin were departed from theire faders so yonge childeeren for to be made knyghtes with-oute takynge leve, and were goyng to logres [sic] for to take her armes of the kynge Arthur; but thei haue hym not founden, for he was gon in to the reame of Tamelide; and the childeeren were lefte at logres, and kepte right wele the marches, and seiden thei wolde neuer remewe thens till theire oncle were come home, and also how thei hadden gete the richest prise that euer was sein in her comynge. (English Prose *Merlin* 240)

In Lovelich, the citizens of London (Lovelich's home) praise Gawain for his actions and manners:

Ful mochel gaweyn they preiseden, j-wys,  
and hym they lovedyn with stedfast herte,  
For he was gentyl, debonewre, meek, & aperte. (Lovelich 13614-16)

Gawain's youth, and that of his brothers and cousins, does not prevent him from being an effective warrior and leader; his growing reputation is only enhanced by his youthful deeds.

Malory twice mentions Gawain as a young man, besides the compressed version of the origin of his unusual strength discussed above; the first occasion is the inclusion of Gawain and his brothers in Morgause's espionage mission to the young Arthur's court:

And thydir com unto hym kynge Lottis wyff of Orkeney in maner of a message, but she was sente thydir to aspye the courte of kynge Arthure, and she com rychely beseyne with hir four sonnes, Gawayne, Gaheris, Aggravayne and Gareth . . . (Malory 27/36-39)

Morgause and her sons next appear together at the burial of Lot (49/3-8). Gawain is clearly a youth, as he has not yet been knighted or achieved any renown of his own; he is simply the eldest of Morgause's sons, who accompanies his mother to his uncle's court. Various comments and prophecies concerning Gawain and his future battles with Pellinor (48/40-43, 51/22-24) and Lancelot (58/24-28) keep Gawain's name in sight before his next actual appearance, an audience with Arthur in which "yonge Gawayne" asks to be made a knight on the same day that Arthur weds Guinevere (60/39-41); Arthur makes it clear that Gawain, apparently now a member of Arthur's household rather than a newcomer to court, is to be dubbed solely on the basis of his blood relationship to Arthur himself:

"I woll do hit with a goode wylle," seyde kynge Arthure, "and do unto you all the worship that I may, for I muste be reson ye ar my nevew, my sistirs son." (60/44-61/1-2)

Unlike other knights who ask Arthur to knight them, Gawain does not link his request to a specific quest, although the appearance of Nimue and her subsequent abduction soon prompt Gawain's first adventure. Also unlike that of other knights (specifically Gareth), Gawain's

dubbing is interrupted and delayed by the knighting of Pellinor's son, Torre: "So the kynge made Gawayne knyght, but sir Torre was the firste he made at that feste" (62/39-40). Gawain's reaction to the honours bestowed upon Pellinor and his son is to declare his desire for vengeance, the first time Gawain speaks for himself on a subject already addressed by the various prophecies referred to above (63/7-18). Gawain's knighting is an occasion for dark foreshadowing, rather than adventure.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* consciously sets itself at the beginning of Gawain's career. Although the *Gawain*-poet does not provide a detailed *enfances* narrative of the kind provided by *De Ortu Waluuani*, the poem has been taken to refer to the early years of Arthur's court, with "no hint of the adultery, incest, and treachery that finally brought ruin to the Round Table" (Benson 98); Griffith has cleverly suggested that the poem is set just after Arthur's wedding and just before Lancelot is knighted, tying *SGGK* closely to the Vulgate and its various continuations (Griffith 258). If Griffith and Benson are correct, the *Gawain*-poet thus evokes a youthful Gawain, unsullied by his later reputation as a treacherous and lecherous knight, a portrait established in the French *Prose Tristan* and texts derived from it.<sup>4</sup> Although Gawain is sitting at the high table with Guinevere (*SGGK* 107-09), his initial request to take the adventure of the Green Knight is different from those texts in which he is automatically given any adventure which threatens the king:

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<sup>4</sup> An obvious objection is that the Lady in *SGGK* bases much of her temptations upon Gawain's reputation as a lover and a model of courtesy, a reputation he cannot have if he is in his first youth with no achievements to his credit. The Lady's invocation of Gawain's reputation and its intertextual ramifications will be discussed below; it is enough for now to state that I believe the *Gawain*-poet is using two mutually exclusive narrative strategies to rehabilitate Gawain. The first is the assertion that *SGGK* shows Gawain at the start of his career; the second is to juxtapose Gawain's various reputations, and modes of courtesy, in interesting ways.

“Bid me boȝe fro þis benche and stonde by yow þere.  
 Pat I wythoute wylanye myȝt voyde þis table. . . .” (*SGGK* 344-45)

In part Gawain’s courteous request is necessary if he is going to replace Arthur as the participant in the Green Knight’s game, as the king has already taken up the axe; Arthur himself is “sumquat childgered” (86). Arthur does not automatically turn to Gawain as he does in *Wedding*, and he does not rely almost exclusively on Gawain as in the *Alliterative Morte*.

In *Wedding*, when Gawain has agreed to marry the loathsome hag in order to save Arthur’s life, the king responds with an explosion of affectionate gratitude:

“Garamercy, gawen,” then sayd Kyng Arthor:  
 “Of alle knyghtes thou berest the flowre  
 That evere yett I fond.  
 My worshypp and my lyf thou savyst forevere:  
 Therefore my love shalle nott frome thee dyssevyr.  
 As I am Kyng in lond.” (*Wedding* 372-77)

Granted, the Arthur of *Wedding* and its later redaction is a pathetic figure incapable of defending himself, the very epitome of the *roi faineant* of medieval French romance. Yet even in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, a text descended directly from the chronicle tradition in which Arthur is a magnificent conqueror and a superb knight in his own right, the king still relies heavily on Gawain for military, feudal and even emotional support. Upon discovering Gawain’s body, the king delivers his famous lament:

“Dere cosin of kind in care am I leved.  
 For now my worship is went and my war ended!  
 Here is the hope of my hele, my happing in armes,  
 My herte and my hardiness holly on him lenged!  
 My counsel, my comfort, that keeped mine herte!  
 Of all the knyghtes the king that under Crist lived!  
 Thou was worthy to be king, though I the crown bare!

My wele and my worship of all this world rich  
 Was wonnen through Sir Gawain and through his wit one!  
 Alas," said Sir Arthur, "now eekes my sorrow!  
 I am utterly undone in mine owen landes!  
 A doutous, derf dede, thou dwelles too long!  
 Why drawes thou so on dregh? Thou drownes mine herte!" (*AMA* 3956-68)

Arthur's lament follows that of Mordred, who pronounces Gawain the "graciousest gome that under God lived" immediately after killing him (3875-85). In the Scottish poem *Lancelot of the Laik*, an adaptation of the war with Galeholt from the French *Prose Lancelot*, Arthur hears news of Gawain's serious injuries and declares that all of his "gladnes" and "delyt" will be forever gone if Gawain is killed (*LL* 2721-25). In *Awntyrs*, Arthur declares that Gawain is too quick to agree to a combat with Galeron, for the king "nolde for no lordeshipp se thi life lorne" (*Awntyrs* 469-70). In fact, only in *SGGK* does Arthur seem to think less of Gawain, accepting his offer to engage the Green Knight quickly, offering no laments or protestations, but only a little advice to strike a good blow to put an end to things (*SGGK* 372-73); the Arthur of *The Greene Knight* acts far more traditionally when he falls "sore sicke" and "made great mourning" for his nephew (*Greene* 214-16).

Other characters in the Middle English Gawain corpus agree with Arthur's assessment of Gawain as the lynch-pin that holds the Round Table, and Arthur's kingdom, together. The ghost of Guinevere's mother in *Awntyrs* tells Gawain that "the Rounde Table [will] lese the renoune" the day he dies (*Awntyrs* 293), and in *Gologras* the entire Round Table laments *en masse* when it appears that Gologras has defeated Gawain and led him to prison:

"The flour of knighthede is caught throu his craulté!  
 Now is the Round Tabil rebutit, richest of rent,  
 Quhen wourshipful Wawane, the wit of our were,  
 Is led to ane presoun;

Now failyeis gude fortoune!" (*Gologras* 1135-39)

In this passage, the king merely weeps “Grat mony salt tere” (*Gologras* 1141). Gawain is continually put forward as the pride and joy, the “renoun,” of the Round Table; his adventure with the Green Knight, says the *Gawain*-poet, was remembered by the court at Camelot as “þe renoun of þe Rounde Table.” an event which strengthened both Gawain’s and the court’s reputations for excellence, as problematic as that might seem given the ambivalence of the poem’s ending (*SGGK* 2519-20).

As early as Marie de France’s *Lanval*, Gawain was often seen acting as a friend, confidant and assistant to other, usually inexperienced, knights; Gawain appears in *Lanval* as the titular hero’s bail and surety during the latter’s trial for treason, and he has with him a host of companions who follow his lead (371-414). The study of an analogue to Marie’s poem, *Graelent* (where Gawain is not present), hints that she created this role for Gawain, building on Gawain’s role as a reasonable counsellor in Wace (E. Williams 131-32). The English translation of Marie’s *lai*, *Sir Landevale*, maintains Gawain’s intercessory role, even as the queen becomes a more vindictive and dangerous character (E. Williams 133). Around the time Marie was writing, Chrétien de Troyes completed his *Yvain*, in which Gawain is not only seen as Yvain’s friend, but his ally in a year of tourneying that proves profitable for them both (1563-76); this close relationship is expanded in the English analogue, *Ywain and Gawain*, the title itself clearly indicating a general medieval consensus concerning their friendship.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The title of *Ywain and Gawain*, unlike that of *SGGK*, is found in the manuscript, British Library, MS Cotton Galba E. ix; Friedman and Harrington, the text’s early editors, suggested that the inclusion of Gawain’s name in the title was a medieval advertising ploy, something “to help the popularity of the work” (108). It seems more plausible that the author or scribe felt that the relationship between Ywain and Gawain was the poem’s essential feature; to the English scribe, Gawain’s importance

Chrétien developed Gawain's reputation as chivalric companion further in his other poems, notably *Perceval*, where Gawain's parallel quests even came to dominate the various continuations written after Chrétien abandoned the initial work.

*Ywain and Gawain* and *Sir Percyvall of Gales*, both related to poems by Chrétien, emphasize Gawain's value as a companion. Although Gawain's disastrous role in nearly destroying Ywain's marriage is preserved in the English version, his successful tourneying partnership with Ywain is given more emphasis. Where Chrétien merely notes that a year passes and Yvain is the champion in their most recent tournament (*Yvain* 317), the English poet is far more effusive, twice stating that the two knights "wan the prise both fer and nere" (*YG* 1566) and "wan grete wirships als thai went" (*YG* 1572). Ywain/Ewain is one of the most common characters in the Arthurian roll calls which pepper romance texts, not only in adaptations directly from the French (*Lybeaus Desconus* 243-63; *Lancelot of the Laik* 2618ff; *Ywain and Gawain*), but in more original texts as well (*SGGK* 113, 551; *AMA* 337-42). In *Percyvall*, the English poet names the knights who find Perceval in the forest; in Chrétien they are unnamed, but in *Percyvall* they are Gawain, Kay and Ywain (*Percyvall* 259-64). Gawain takes the lead role in encouraging the boy to visit Arthur's court after rebuking Kay for answering Perceval's challenge with his customary rudeness (*Percyvall* 305-20). Although Gawain has no adventures in *Percyvall*, as he does in Chrétien's *Perceval*, the English poet has assigned him a role encouraging an apparently unpromising young man to become a

eclipses that of the lion (preserved in Chrétien's title, *Le Chevalier au Lion*) and Ywain's lady (emphasized at the end of the Welsh Red Book's cognate *Owein, Iarllies y Ffynnawn* or *The Lady of the Fountain*). The text might even have been seen as the explanation and origin of a relationship attested everywhere in Arthurian literature, from Marie's *Laaval* to the *Prose Lancelot*, where Ywain and Gawain are often seen together, Ywain as an almost inseparable adjunct to Gawain.

knight by suggesting that he visit Arthur, in effect acting as a gate-keeper to the Round Table with an impeccable sense of who belongs there and who does not.<sup>6</sup>

Gawain's great affection for his cousin Ywain is found in Malory as well, and when Arthur banishes Ywain from court following his mother Morgan's attempted *coup d'etat*, Gawain follows:

And whan Gawayne wiste that, he made hym redy to go with hym, 'for whoso banyshyth my cosyn jarmayne shall banysh me.' (94/16-19).

The court (described as "all the astatis") makes "grete sorowe" over Gawain's departure (94/21-23). Gawain's actions here can be seen as intercessory as they were in *Lanval*: despite the anger or opposition of Arthur, Gawain appears ready to assist and defend an innocent knight, even if his only weapon is his own reputation and standing, and the withdrawal of his love and support. His actions seem to provoke the expected response: at the end of their year of adventuring, Gawain and Ywain are met by "a messyngere that com from kynge Arthurs courte that had sought hem well-nyghe a twelve-month thorowoute all Ingelonde, Walis, and Scotlonde" and who had been charged to bring them back to Camelot (109/14-20); that is, Arthur had changed his mind concerning Ywain's exile almost immediately after Gawain's withdrawal.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A dark side of Gawain's friendship develops in the French tradition. By the time the *Queste del Saint Graal* is composed, Gawain is not only depicted rejecting the advice of a wise hermit because his "companion is making his way down the hill" and he needs to rejoin him (*Quest* 175), but his particular misadventures on the Grail Quest continually involve killing those who have been his friends and companions: Owain, for example (*Quest* 168). The knight of intercession and comradeship has become the knight of unwitting betrayal and murder, a theme adapted by Malory (560/41-561/7, his killing of Uwayne le Avoutres; 563/36-37, Gawain rushes off to join Ector).

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Arthur, said to be "passyng glad of their commyng," is immediately said to feel "grete joy" over the arrival of Marhalt and Pelleas, the latter Gawain's sworn enemy and the reminder of his failings as a companion (109/22, 36-38); see below for a discussion of Gawain's relationship with

Another knight frequently and directly linked with Gawain in multiple texts, English and French, is the acerbic seneschal Kay (Gowans 139-48). The example of *Sir Percyvell* cited above is but one of many in which Kay is reprimanded by Gawain for his sarcasm or courtesy. Kay is also often the knight chosen to fail where Gawain will eventually succeed: sent to seek permission from Gologras to enter his town and buy provisions, Kay instead enters the castle unannounced, attacks a servant, and pillages the kitchen (*Gologras* 53-83). When Kay is thrown out of the castle, he reports that Gologras has refused to aid Arthur, precipitating the conflict which Gawain must solve to everyone's satisfaction (*Gologras* 111-17). Kay behaves similarly towards the Carle of Carlisle, although here Bishop Baudwin shares some of the blame: again Gawain must make up for the courtesy of others. Gawain rescues Kay from his own foolishness in *Avowyng*; Kay has been defeated by Menealf, and tells the latter that Gawain is his companion and surety:

Thenne unsquarat Kay agayn  
And sayd, "Sir, atte Tarne Wathelan  
Bidus me Sir Gauan.  
  
Is derwurthe on dese:  
Wold ye thethur be bowne  
Or ye turnut to the towne,  
He wold pay my rawunsone  
Wythowtyn delees."      (*Avowyng* 337-44)

This curious friendship is also hinted at in *Marriage*, after Kay is typically cruel to the Loathly Lady:

"Whoever kisses this lady," he saies,  
"Of his kisse he stands in doubt." (*Marriage* 134-35)

Pelleas. Much as Gawain's knighting was overshadowed by the arrival of Torre, so his return to court, ostensibly an occasion for joy, is subverted by a recounting of his recent betrayal of a better knight than himself.

Gawain tells Kay to hold his peace, and after the transformation of the bride becomes public knowledge, Kay admits his error:

“Well, cozen Gawaine,” sayes Sir Kay.  
 “Thy chance is fallen arright.  
 For thou hast gotten one of the fairest maids  
 I ever saw with my sight.”                   (*Marriage* 194-97)

Gawain and Kay then take the lady by her arms and, as if “they were brother and brother,” they take her in to see King Arthur (*Marriage* 202-05).

Kay is absent in *SGGK*, but plays his traditional role in *The Greene Knight*, attempting to take the adventure first:

Upp stood Sir Kay, that crabbed knight.  
 Spake mighty words that were of height,  
 That were both loud and shrill:  
  
 “I shall strike his necke in tooe,  
 The head away the body froe!”  
 They bade him all be still.  
 Saith, “Kay, of thy dints make no rouse!  
 Thou wottest full little what thou does -  
 Noe good, but mickle ill.”                   (*Greene* 154-62)

Unlike in *SGGK*, here every knight in Arthur’s court “wold this deed have done” (163), but it is Gawain who takes the quest:

“Up start Sir Gawaine soone.  
 Upon his knees can kneele.  
 He said, “That were great villanye  
 Without you put this deede to me.  
 My Legee, as I have sayd.

“Remember, I am your sisters sonne.”                   (164-69)

Here Kay and Gawain play their traditional parts in romance, Kay demanding an adventure far more suited to Gawain; normally Kay would be allowed to try and fail, but the unique

nature of the Green Knight's challenge does not allow for failure. Gawain could hardly be expected to save Kay from the return blow as he saved him from Menealf. The author of *The Greene Knight* has modified *SGGK* by inserting a traditional element ignored by the *Gawain*-poet.

Gawain's closest relationships are with his family, with his cousin Ywain in both French and English texts, and with his various brothers in the French prose cycles, the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* and in Malory. The earliest sources, descending from Geoffrey of Monmouth, give Gawain one brother, Mordred; in the *Historia* Mordred is Lot's legitimate son (Thorpe 221, *HRB* 9.9). Most romance texts give Gawain three brothers (Agravain, Gaheris/Gaheries and Gareth/Gaheret) and some a half-brother, Mordred; these include Malory and his prose French sources. Gawain is considered the head of his kin-group, although he is not always very effective in controlling it: in Malory and his source, Agravain openly defies his elder brother when he chooses to inform Arthur of his queen's infidelity with Lancelot (Malory 673/28-32). Gawain's intercession for Gareth, a newcomer to Arthur's court, is explained by his unconscious knowledge of their blood tie, while Lancelot's is simple kindness and nobility:

But as towchynge sir Gawayne, he had reson to proffer hym lodgyng, mete, and drynke, for that profier com of his bloode, for he was nere kyn to hym than he wiste off; but that sir Launcelot ded was of his grete jantylnesse and courtesy. (179/3-6)

Malory's Gawain is uniquely concerned with kin, even when he is not aware of it.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In *Percyvell* as well, Gawain is related to Perceval, unknown to them both; in fact, the poet states that Kay, Ywain and Gawain were all kin to Perceval (261-64), through the marriage of Acheflour, Arthur's sister, to Perceval's father (21-32). This kinship link does not explain Gawain's courtesy to the

Compared with the great French prose cycles and their heir Malory, Middle English texts have little time for Gawain's brothers. *The Marriage of Sir Gawain* contains the line "Sir Garrett with them soe gay," most likely a reference to Malory's Gareth (*Marriage* 121). *SGGK* includes a single reference to Agravain:

There gode Gawan watz grayþed Gwenore bisyde.  
And Agrauayn a la Dure Mayn on þat oþer syde sittes – (*SGGK* 109-10)

Agravain's place is clearly one of honour, sitting two seats away from the king, with only Guinevere and Gawain in between. His epithet, meaning "of the hard hand," is also applied to him in the Old French *Lancelot* and the *Mort Artu*, where he plays a prominent role; he also appears in Lovelich and other Middle English works based on the Vulgate and the Post-Vulgate cycles. In the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, Agravain seems to be genuinely motivated by loyalty to Arthur when he informs the latter about his queen's infidelity with Lancelot:

"Alas!" then said Sir Agravain.  
"How false men shall we us make?  
How long shall we hele and laine  
The tresoun of Launcelot du Lake?"

"Well we wote, withouten ween.  
The king Arthur our eme sholde be.  
And Launcelot lies by the queen:  
Again the king traitour is he.  
And that wote all the court bydene,  
And iche day it here and see;  
To the king we sholde it mene.  
Yif ye will do by counsel of me." (*SMA* 1676-86)

Agravain's only other appearance in a Middle English romance is in *Lybeaus Desconus*.

boy here, as it does in Malory concerning Gawain's kindness to Gareth; in Malory the link is explicit, while in *Percyvell* Gawain's courtesy needs no explanation. It is simply an expected aspect of his character.

where he is introduced without epithet or description as one of the four knights (Gawain, Ywain and Percival are the others) who wish to arm the newly knighted hero; however, during the actual arming process, Agravain does not play any role, and Lancelot suddenly appears to give Lybeaus his spear (*LD* 217-40).

Just as Malory's Gawain withdrew from Arthur's side when the king exiled Ywain, he uses similar tactics on his own brothers when Agravain begins to openly slander Lancelot and Guinevere. His methods are curiously argumentative and ineffectual: "Brothir, sir Aggravayne. I pray you and charge you, meve no such maters no more afore me, for wyte you well. I woll nat be of youre cunceyle" (673/22-24); and again, "And I wolde that ye lefft [all thys,] and make you nat so bysy..." (673/29-30). When Arthur enters the room at the height of the quarrel, Gawain orders Agravain to "stynte [his] stryfe," but Agravain pointedly refuses; Gawain responds by leaving the room, contenting himself with "makynge grete dole" (674/9-16).<sup>9</sup> These are hardly effective demonstrations of his power as head of his clan. Gawain seems incapable of controlling his fractious younger brothers, and rather than standing his ground and providing Arthur with an immediate (and possibly more effective) counterpoint to Agravain's contention, he abandons the field to the slanderers, lamenting all the while. Gawain fails on two counts: he cannot control his own followers, and he fails to provide Arthur with "cunceyle" of any kind until the queen is already condemned to burn at the stake.

Medieval English audiences seem less interested in Gawain's immediate kin than in

<sup>9</sup> In the *SMA*, Gawain also responds by leaving the room: "Gawain to his chamber went; / Of this tale nolde he nought here" (1720-21). His only comment is that Agravain is beginning something that "beth not finished many a yere" (1725-26).

the knights for whom he interceded with Arthur, more often outsiders to Arthur's court than members such as Lanval. Earlier we saw Gawain invite Perceval to Arthur's court, providing his uncle with a knight destined to be one of the best. The Middle English Gawain poems include one adventure after another in which Gawain is responsible for first defeating an opponent, and then nominating him for a seat at the Round Table or otherwise drawing him into Arthur's orbit. If there is a combat scene (as in *The Awntyrs of Arthur* or *The Avowyng of Arthur*), the duel ends with Gawain's victory, some sign of his courtesy and generosity towards his vanquished foe, and an invitation to join the Round Table (or Arthur's court in a wider sense, as in *Golagros*). Just as often there is no combat, and Gawain undergoes a series of challenges meant to test his courtesy; having passed the tests, Gawain brings his challenger to court under the same conditions and for the same reasons as those he has physically defeated.

One example of this combat/reconciliation narrative is Gawain's encounter with Galleron of Galway in *Awntyrs*; here Galleron comes to court to win back his lands, which Arthur has given away to Gawain. After a ferocious battle, Gawain is victorious and Guenevere urges her husband to "Make thes knightes accorde" (*Awntyrs* 634-37). The poem's end, despite the earlier denunciation of Arthur's warlike ways by the ghost of Guinevere's mother, is joyous: Galleron weds his lady and becomes a knight of the Round Table "To his lyves ende," and lands are handed out by Arthur to both Galleron and Gawain (690-702). Another good example is found in *Avowyng*, where Gawain defeats a troublesome knight and would-be rapist named Menealfe, whom he then recommends for inclusion in the Round Table:

Gawayn sayd, “Medame, as God me spede.  
 He is dughti of dede,  
 A blithe burne on a stede,  
 And grayth in his gere.” (561-64)

As one might expect, Gawain’s advocacy is enough for the court, and they immediately “fochet furth a boke” on which Menealfe can swear his allegiance to the Round Table (565-72).

In the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* Gawain defeats a knight named Priamus, who expresses joy that his opponent is the great Gawain and leaves the service of the Romans to join “the real rout of the Round Table” (*AMA* 2916-19). His arrival at Arthur’s camp is never detailed, nor does he appear again in the poem. Fichte’s insistence that only Priamus’ intervention in Gawain’s battle against the Duke of Lorraine enables Gawain’s men to win the victory is not directly supported by the text (Fichte, “Figure” 110); Priamus and his mercenaries do not fight against their former lord but merely abandon him (2925-33). As Priamus’ men switch sides, they urge the Duke to “trete of a trewe [truce] and troufle no lenger” (2932), and no more is heard from Priamus or his men again. The disappearance of Priamus is partly the result of the narrative sweep of the *Alliterative Morte Arthur* itself; there is little time to show Priamus’ acceptance into the Round Table, and little point in affirming the expansive status quo of Arthur’s world in a poem detailing its destruction.

Why, then, is the battle with Priamus present at all? Fichte’s insistence that Gawain’s adventure with Priamus is a “ludicrous” example of a knight “taking time off from the war” is clearly misguided on some level when seen in the context of other Gawain poems (Fichte, “Figure” 116). To convict Gawain of foolishly wasting time at knight-errantry and then

praise the wisdom of Priamus is contradictory when Priamus appears to be engaged in knight-errantry as well. Priamus is “wonder well armed,” his spear in his hand as he stands beside a river with only one servant to attend him (2515-24); the stance is that of any standard foe guarding a ford whom a knight-errant might meet on an adventure. Gawain has not interrupted the martial narrative of the *AMA* with a foolish adventure from the world of romance; the romantic world has interrupted the chronicle story on its own, much as the battle between Arthur and the giant on Mont St. Michel had done earlier. A typical Gawain adventure inserted in the narrative reminds the reader of all that Gawain means to the Round Table; the laments (both those by other characters and by the author) which follow his death draw some of their power from this reminder (3858-63, the narrator: 3874-85, Mordred: 3955-68, Arthur). Fichte fails to consider that it is exactly this sort of battle, and this sort of resolution, which Gawain is expected to engage in; his *sapientia*, which Fichte narrowly (and anachronistically) associates solely with moderation in battle, is better expressed in his willingness to make peace on equitable terms with a defeated opponent and thereby strengthen his own fellowship.

The case of Malory’s Sir Priamus is especially interesting, since he is the only knight Gawain ever brings to the Round Table, something which the Lancelot of the *Morte Darthur* does time and again. The Malorian interest in fellowship is apparent when he writes that Arthur dubs Priamus “knyght of the Table Rounde” with his own hands (143/14-16). It is also evidence that Malory was aware of the tradition of Gawain’s role in bringing knights he has defeated to Arthur’s attention. Gawain makes an eloquent case for Priamus’ election to the Round Table:

"Sir," seyde sir Gawayne. "this is a good man of armys: he macched me sore this day in the mournyng, and had nat his helpe bene [dethe] had I founden. And now is he yolden unto God and to me, sir kyng, for to becom Crysten and on good beleve. And whan he is crystynde and in fayth belevys, there lyvyth nat a bettir knyght nor a nobler of his hondis." (143/8-13)

For one moment in Malory's text we see the traditional Middle English Gawain: a courteous advocate for a foe he has defeated, a supplier of knights for the Round Table, and an effector of reconciliation between Arthur and at least one of the king's enemies. It is all the more startling that Malory has created this speech and Gawain's role in Priamus' joining the Round Table. In *AM4* Gawain provides an example that leads Priamus to Arthur's camp; in Malory he leads Priamus directly to the Table.

Malory normally shows Lancelot and other knights in the traditional role of gate-keeper to the Round Table, in the sense that their foes often join the Round Table subsequent to their defeat; Gawain is rarely given this function within Malory's text. However, Lancelot and Gareth have a very different strategy for presenting their foes to the Round Table. While the Gawain of the Middle English poems generally accompanies his defeated opponent, argues for his essential nobility and advocates his acceptance and inclusion, Lancelot and Gareth send their defeated foes back to Arthur's court to tell their tale on their own: Gawain's son Gyngalyn, in the English *Lybeaus Desconus*, sends back his defeated foes unaccompanied as well. The difference seems to be one of intent as much as method: the Middle English Gawain constantly works to bolster his uncle's reputation and the strength of his court, while Lancelot and Gareth are primarily concerned with their own glory. Only indirectly do their actions benefit the Round Table society.

Further proof that Malory knew this tradition can be found in the list of Agravain's

allies, those knights who attempt to trap Lancelot and Guinevere: the twelve knights were all “of Scotlonde, other ellis of sir Gawaynes kynne, other [well]-wyllers to hys brothir” (675/19-20). Among them we find some familiar names: Gromersome Erioure (Gromer Somer Joure), Galleron of Galway, Melyon de la Mountayne (Meanealf of the Mountayne. *Avowing*) and Collgrevaunce (*Yvain* and its English adaptation). None of these knights have their stories included in Malory’s text. Malory merely alludes to their stories by pronouncing them all “well-wyllers” to Gawain; the Middle English *Gawain* corpus here acts as a source for Gawain’s faction in Malory’s splintered Camelot. The allusions, and the poems and ballads they evoke, act intertextually to create a depth for Gawain’s party without Malory having to do the work of rewriting Gawain’s career (especially the successful parts).<sup>10</sup>

A number of texts in the *Gawain* corpus are concerned with some difficult situation or a test of knightly courtesy: Gawain must either fulfill a foolish or churlish oath (CC1) or break a curse which magically forces a nobleman either to act churlishly or to have the physical appearance of a churl (CC2, *Turke*). In CC1, the Carle has taken a vow to test the chivalry of all knights who come his way. Typically, Kay and Baudwin fail before Gawain is successful; because of Gawain’s courteous behaviour, the Carle agrees to “forsake [his] wyckyd lawys” (540-46). The Carle is then brought to court, where Arthur makes him a “knyght of the Table Rownde” (631-33). In the later *Carle of Carlisle* (CC2), the Carle’s rude and aggressive behaviour is caused by “nigromancé;” the curse will be lifted only when

<sup>10</sup> P. J. C. Field has written an interesting article (“Malory”) arguing that *Ragnelle* is an early and clumsy work by Malory himself, on the basis of Sir Gromer’s appearance in both texts, and certain linguistic similarities between the poem and the *Morte Darthur*. I do not accept the argument for Malory’s authorship, but find considerable support for my theory in Field’s argument for Malory’s knowledge of the text.

he can convince a knight of the Round Table to “smitten of [his] head” (401-08). The Turk, too, labours under a similar curse, although the manuscript is so badly damaged that the exact nature of the curse, and the motivations for it, are missing. The theme has been often evoked, with Gawain seen as the effector of reconciliation between the centre (Arthur’s court) and the periphery or marginal (the barely assimilated Celtic lands to the west and north which seem to perform as the backdrop to most of these texts, and from which angry knights and nobles cursed with churlishness seem to venture forth with some regularity).<sup>11</sup> Gawain’s role here is as defender of civilization itself, responsible for taming the strange and unsettling elements which inhabit the fringes of the Arthurian world.<sup>12</sup>

Sir Gromer appears twice as a major character in the Gawain corpus.<sup>13</sup> Most famously he is the man behind the plot to capture and shame Arthur in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*; but he is also the Turk in *The Turke and Sir Gawain*, a cursed figure much like the Carle in the two Carle poems. In *Turke*, Gawain’s role is straight-

<sup>11</sup> See Thomas Hahn’s introduction to *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales* for further discussion.

<sup>12</sup> It is never Arthur himself who solves the problems which confront his court; the king is not only ineffective at solving these problems but he is often responsible for creating them in the first place. Both Galleron of Galway (*Awntyrs*) and Gromer (*Ragnelle*) claim that their lands were taken by Arthur unlawfully: Galeron claims that Arthur took his lands away “with a wrange wile,” a deceitful trick (*Awntyrs* 421). While Gromer’s claims are hardly examined, Galeron’s carry some weight; as Gillian Rogers writes, “Arthur tacitly acknowledges the justice of Galeron’s charge by failing to rebut it” (“Illuminat” 96). In *Golagros*, too, Gawain is defending an implicitly unjust cause; Arthur has no authority for warring on Golagros’s independent lands, and even Arthur’s counsellor Spynagros argues against it. In the cases of both Galeron and Golagros, Gawain personally faces each knight in armed combat, defeats them, and brings them into Arthur’s sphere. Here the pattern works as it should, although Gawain has to resort to some interesting strategems to bring about a (more or less) peaceful resolution to Arthur’s imperialist aggression. The *Alliterative Morte Arthure* and *Awntyrs* both assert that Arthur’s territorial aggression allows Mordred to usurp power at home and bring about the fall of the Arthurian world.

<sup>13</sup> He appears many times as one of a company of knights, and also has a minor role in Malory.

forward: the Turk needs to be beheaded in order for the curse to be broken, and his noble status to be restored. Afterwards Gromer joins the Round Table. In *Ragnelle*, Gromer does not join the Table. Instead, the last we hear of him is his fervent wish that his sister be burned to death for betraying him, followed by a renewed vow of enmity towards Arthur (*Ragnelle* 473-76, 479-84). This may be the result of the poem's structure: Gawain's true test of courtesy is in the bedchamber with the hideous Ragnell and her curse, and he never directly interacts with Gromer in battle or otherwise. Gromer is Arthur's particular problem in this poem, and one wonders whether Gawain would have been better at effecting a more complete reconciliation if he and Gromer had met face to face.

In the later ballad version of the tale, the loathly bride continues her explanation of the curse placed on her with a curious reference to a curse on her brother, curious in part because the manuscript unfortunately breaks off at just this point:

“Shee witched me, being a faire young lady.  
To the Greene forrest to dwell.  
And there I must walke in womans liknesse.  
Most like a feind of hell.

“She witched my brother to a carlish B....” (*Marriage* 179-83)

The curse on the brother is not present in *Ragnelle*, where Gromer seems to be acting on his own to avenge the loss (rightly or wrongly) of his lands. What seems possible here is that the author of *Marriage* is not only aware of the Imperious Host tradition (wherein a noble is cursed to act churlishly), but that in at least one poem (*Turke*, found in the same manuscript, the Percy Folio) a character named Gromer is so cursed. Has the compiler of the Percy Folio deliberately arranged these texts to provide a two-part story of Sir Gromer's interactions with

the Round Table? If so, the Percy Folio (which in addition to *Turke* and *Marriage* includes *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, *The Greene Knight*, *Lybeaus Desconus* and *The Carle of Carlisle*) might be seen as an attempt at an English Gawain cycle, somewhat like Chantilly 472 for the French Gauvain, although not to the same extent.<sup>14</sup> The inclusion of the cursed churl theme is pregnant with possibility; but any creative link between the two poems is unprovable with a mutilated text that does not specifically name either brother or sister.

Just as interesting is the resolution of *The Greene Knight*, the ballad retelling of SGGK considered inferior by all critics. In SGGK nobody joins the Round Table at the end of the poem and nobody marries into Arthur's court. *The Greene Knight* drains SGGK of all its subtlety, but it also gives Sir Bredbeddle (this poem's Bertilak) a new role. Apparently the knowing tool of his mother-in-law, who wants to fulfill her daughter's desire to sleep with Gawain. Bredbeddle asserts that he knew Gawain would perform honourably:

“I wist it well my wiffe loved thee:  
Thou wold doe me no villanye.  
But nicked her with nay.  
But wilt thou doe as I bidd thee –  
Take me to Arthurs court with thee –  
Then were all to my pay.” (486-91)

Gillian Rogers notes that “the motif of Gawain taking his opponent back to court with him ... is a common one,” and laments that “Bredbeddle is reduced to the status of procurer for his own wife, apparently in full knowledge of what he is doing” (“Greene” 369); David

<sup>14</sup> There are, of course, a great many other works in the Percy Folio, a veritable treasure trove of medieval and Renaissance ballads. While the Arthurian texts are rarely contiguous within the manuscript, *Marriage* (46-52) immediately follows *Turke* (38-46), implying that the compiler knew or suspected either a narrative connection, a thematic similarity, or even a common author. Lori Walters has discussed Chantilly 472 as a Gawain compilation: “The Formation of a Gauvain Cycle in Chantilly 472.” *Neophilologus* 78 (1994): 29-44.

Matthews agrees that *The Greene Knight* is “more of a paradigm romance” than *SGGK* (“Shadow” 304). Matthews argues that Bredbeddle’s mother-in-law arranges the plot “without Bredbeddle’s being aware” of its adulterous implications (“Shadow” 303); he later contradicts himself by noting that Bredbeddle is aware of his wife’s love for Gawain, but knew he could trust his fellow knight implicitly (“Shadow” 304). Matthews creates further difficulties for his argument when he pronounces Bredbeddle’s awareness of his wife’s gift (here a piece of white lace) to Gawain as one of several “awkward elements and contradictions”; this because “there is no conspiracy” and the wife’s gift is made out of genuine concern for Gawain’s life (“Shadow” 304-05). Neither Rogers nor Matthews makes the essential connection: there is a conspiracy, Bredbeddle knows about it, and the poet is writing a parody in which the characters are aware of their own textuality.

Bredbeddle and his wife also know the traditional rewards given to Gawain’s foes. Bredbeddle is willing to risk the dangerous and very real possibility that his wife would betray him with another man (especially one with Gawain’s amorous reputation) solely for the opportunity to be brought to Arthur’s court by Gawain, whose reputation as gate-keeper to the Round Table seems to precede him even within the texts. The poet has turned *SGGK*’s complex web of moral and ethical issues onto its head, incompetently to our way of thinking, but according to his understanding of Gawain’s narrative function in the sort of poem he is composing. Instead of the cerebral complexity of *SGGK* we are given a dysfunctional family manipulating Gawain’s reputation as lover and gate-keeper to the Round Table in order to create for themselves a story in which they are Gawain’s antagonists, ambitiously gambling that their efforts will be rewarded in the traditional way. Bredbeddle is not disappointed:

Thorrow Sir Gawaines desiringe  
 The King granted him [Bredbeddle] his boone. (508-09)

Perhaps this is a sign of the “redactors’s lack of comprehension” (Rogers, “Greene” 371), but it is more likely a case of a medieval reader simply not being interested in *SGGK*’s atypical concerns and unorthodox ending.<sup>15</sup> At the end of *SGGK* many medieval readers and listeners may have been stunned at their hero’s critical self-evaluation, the poem’s lack of battle scenes or duels, unresolved elements such as Morgan le Fay’s involvement, and Gawain’s failure to bring Bertilak back to court and into the fellowship of the Round Table.

Middle English romance, as a rule, tends to tell a single story with only passing reference to the greater Arthurian cycle. Even the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* deals only with the end of Arthur’s reign, with no mention of Merlin, Uther or Arthur’s assumption of power. *Golagros and Gawain* begins with Arthur turning towards Tuscany in the middle of a war about which we know nothing beyond what other Arthurian texts might tell us:

In the tyme of Arthur, as trew men me tald.  
 The King turnit on ane tyde towart Tuskane.... (*Gologras* 1-2)

No explanation is given or seems to be needed. Other Middle English texts also plunge the reader straight into the action, with only a brief acknowledgement that the poem takes place in the time of Arthur to set the scene.<sup>16</sup> *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, on the other hand, shows an intense interest in the cyclical nature of history. The poem begins with a history of

<sup>15</sup> A further complication to our understanding of Sir Bredbeddle is that, like Sir Gromer before him, Bredbeddle appears twice in the Percy Folio, once in *The Greene Knight* but also as the most prominent character in the parodic *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, where he eclipses even Gawain by providing the magical means to defeat Cornwall’s demon familiar, Burlow Beanie.

<sup>16</sup> One exception is *The Awntyrs off Arthur*, in which the ghost of Guinevere’s mother foretells the events of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*; for further discussion, see below (52-3).

the British people stretching back to their mythical origins in Troy, and ends with another mention of Brutus, the Trojan founder of Britain. The plot itself is cyclical, with its Christmas-to-Christmas structure and the turning of the seasons. The inclusion of Morgan le Fay and her desire to scare Guinevere to death reminds readers of a rivalry first found in the Vulgate cycle, and thus the reader can never escape the sense of a plot going on before and after this particular poem; recognition of Morgan and her traditional enmity towards Guinevere would be likely only if the reader had some knowledge of French sources, as she appears only infrequently in English sources. Gawain's reluctance to take any praise for the adventure, and his failure to bring Bertilak back to Camelot, become symptomatic of the poem's resolute irresolution: the status quo has not, strictly speaking, been restored; nothing has been solved; and the Round Table has not been expanded due to Gawain's efforts. It is an empty ending, for a romance. If *SGGK* is to be properly contextualized within its medieval English setting, it must be remembered that it is not simply a better poem than its counterparts. It may deliberately set itself up against them as an alternative model, belonging fully to neither the English or French traditions, but situating itself somewhere between the two and staking out its own textual identity, a strategy that has served it very well in terms of modern literary canon formation.

Malory's Gawain retains his status as Arthur's most loyal follower, especially in the final books. Gawain, Mordred, Gareth and Gaheris are all demonstrably present when Arthur makes his decision to burn Guinevere; Gareth and Gaheris are ordered to attend the execution after Gawain refuses, and they do not have to be summoned to receive their orders (683/21-42). Malory excises reference to other councillors such as the Vulgate's Yon in favour of

repeated emphasis on the Orkney clan as Arthur's primary counsel-givers; as the Orkney faction begins to lose members to the conflict, Malory's Arthur becomes both increasingly isolated and far too dependent on Gawain. All but one of Gawain's brothers and sons are dead by the time Lancelot brings Guinevere to Joyous Garde. Gawain thus has a powerful hold over Arthur, and not merely an emotional hold: without Gawain and his remaining "frendis," Arthur's political position is tenuous at best.

The "cunceyle" of the Orkney brothers usually turns out to be bad advice. Agravain and Mordred's "prevy hate unto the quene" (673/11-12), masquerading as concern for Arthur's reputation, leads inexorably to the utter destruction of Arthur's realm and, presumably, a great deal of suffering throughout his kingdom. The brothers continually agitate for conflict, Agravain and Mordred because of their "prevy hate" and Gawain because of his overwhelming grief following the deaths of Gareth and Gaheris. Gawain's advice, ironically rejected when good but heeded when bad, or "over hasty," to borrow his own phrase (682/23). Arthur follows Gawain's advice to pursue the war in Benwick against his own best judgement: "I woll do as ye advyse me: and yet mesemyth," says Arthur, that "hys fayre proffers were nat so good to be reffused" (701/40-42). When Lancelot tells Arthur that "lyars ye have lystened, and that hath caused grete debate betwyxte you and me" (694/26-27), Malory is invoking the reputation of kings as fair and benevolent but often led astray by bad or evil advice. Good counsel can prevail over a reluctant lord, but a good lord cannot prevail over evil counsel.

The king who follows evil advice is a recurrent *topos* in medieval English literature, as Dan Embree has shown in connection with complaint poems such as *Richard the Redeless*.

Embree calls the *topos* “The King’s Ignorance” and finds it wherever poets need to blame someone for the corruption and despair around them: since the king as God’s representative must be innocent, he is rhetorically considered “a victim of his own court’s machinations and deceptions” and blame is ascribed to a variety of officials, but “especially those popular and enduring targets of medieval satire, corrupt and frivolous courtiers” (Embree 123). Embree writes that the *topos* of the King’s Ignorance is usually found in the poetry of the middle or upper middle class, people with “property or position to protect and therefore with interests vested in civil order, in incorruptible legal proceedings”; furthermore, these classes exhibit “a fear of unchecked or capricious royal power only a little less than its fear of the unchecked or capricious power of the mob” (Embree 125). Malory’s famous passage lamenting “the greate defaughte of us Englysshemen,” the tendency to continually reject the familiar in favour of the new, is evidence enough of his interest in the capricious power of the people (708/34-41).

Gawain and his brothers are often shown misleading the king, deliberately or otherwise. The Malorian emphasis on Agravain’s envy, as opposed to the apparently genuine concern felt by his Vulgate equivalent, makes Agravain far more culpable in the fall of Arthur; Malory overtly states at the end of *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Guinevere* that Aggravyne “caused” the “morte Arthur” (669/33-34), whereas the Vulgate’s Agravain has to be threatened with physical violence by Arthur before disobeying Gawain’s order to keep silent (*Death* 109-10). It is Agravain’s deliberate machinations that lead to the fall of Arthur; his advice and counsel prompt the entire situation. Constantly the reader is reminded that Agravain and Mordred are trouble-makers: Lancelot’s last comment before leaving England

in exile is a prediction that “Mordred woll make trouble, for he ys passyng envyous and applyeth hym muche to trouble” (699/11-13). Gawain himself declares that Agravain will agree “unto all unhappynes” (673/28-29). Gawain’s own inability to counsel Arthur effectively allows the situation to run its course. After the death of Gareth, Gawain gives up counselling and begins forcing his opinions upon king and court:

“My kynge, my lorde, and myne uncle.” seyde sir Gawayne, “wyte you well, now I shall make you a promyse whych I shall holde be my knyghthode, that from thys day forewarde I shall never fayle sir Launcelot untyll that one of us have slayne the othir. And therefore I requyre you, my lorde and kynge, dresse you unto the warres, for wyte you well, I woll be revenged uppon sir Launcelot; and therefore, as ye woll have my servyse and my love, now haste you thereto and assay youre frendis.” (686/44-687/7)

The formality of Gawain’s “promyse” limits his king’s political options by threatening Arthur with the loss of his loyal service. The course of the following conflict is one of Arthur considering a truce and Gawain refusing to allow it; the king is firmly under the control of “evil counseyle.”

Malory’s stress is constantly placed less on Gawain’s prowess in matters military and diplomatic than on the blood ties between them as uncle and nephew. Arthur makes it clear that he knights Gawain on the basis of their relationship (61/1-2), and his lament for the dying Gawain is similarly predicated:

“Alas! Sir Gawayne, my syster son, here now thou lyghest, the man in the worlde that I loved moste. And now is my joy gone! For now, my nevew, sir Gawayne, I woll discover me unto you, tha<t> in youre person and in sir Launcelot I moste had my joy and myne affyance. And now have I lost my joy of you bothe, wherefore all myne erthely joy ys gone fro me!” (709/24-29)

The constant reiteration of their relationship in lieu of any other reason for his grief makes it

clear that Arthur loves Gawain primarily as his nephew, not first and foremost as a knight or a vassal. Gone is any reference to Gawain as the pillar that upholds the Round Table society; further, Arthur's insistence on mentioning Lancelot as many times as Gawain undercuts the force of his lament. Gawain's death, like everything else in the *Morte Darthur*, is an occasion for the praise of Lancelot.

Malory's insistence that Gawain and Lancelot share the responsibility for upholding Arthur's kingdom is in direct contrast with the mainstream Middle English tradition; nowhere in Malory is the impression given that Gawain, in the absence of any legitimate children, might be next in line to the Arthur's throne. In 1974, Raymond Thompson published an article arguing that certain episodes in the *De ortu Waluanii* (and its French counterparts, *Les Enfances Gauvain* and *Perlesvans*) bore traces of a "mythological pattern" in which the hero, a product of an incestuous union, is prophesied to be a danger to his father; he is sent away, usually by sea, and eventually returns unrecognized to exact vengeance ("Gawain" 113-14). The pattern is familiar to readers of the Arthurian legend, of course, in the later development of the Mordred story. Thompson finds the pattern in the youthful adventures of Gawain, although he describes the mythological tradition as generally "alien to the regular development of the cycle in the Middle Ages" (114). Thompson discusses an episode of the *De ortu Walwanii* in which Gawain (or the Knight of the Surcoat, as he does not yet know his true identity) rescues an unnamed queen from a king who has abducted her and (mysteriously) placed her in charge of his kingdom; Gawain kills the king with his own weapons. Thompson proclaims that the story is actually the (displaced) story of the abduction of Guinevere, and the apparent hostility between Arthur and Gawain later in the text is a

remnant of the hostility between a father guilty of incest and attempted infanticide, and a justly usurping son (119-20). In *DOW* Gawain's birth must be hidden despite the lack of incest between his parents, the expressed reason being fear of Uther, perhaps because Loth is a hostage at court; the French versions offer no reason at all (115). Arthur's battle with Gawain is a test of the latter's valour: "For it was his [Arthur's] custom that whenever he heard of any strong man presenting himself, he would challenge that man, so that by single combat he could display the greater worth" (*DOW* 103.14-17). Gawain is victorious. Arthur comically attempts to sneak back into his queen's bed without alerting her, and the queen (here named Gwendoloena) sends a messenger to ascertain the truth about her husband's encounter with the mysterious young knight. It is difficult not to agree with Thompson to some extent: there does seem to be some memory of an older pattern working here, an "antipathy" between uncle and nephew that "cannot be entirely suppressed" (Thompson, "Gawain" 121).

Thompson feels that these elements are "alien" to the tradition in which Gawain is generally Arthur's "stauncest supporter," where if any conflict arises between uncle and nephew it is generally accidental, as in *Claris et Laris*, a typical episode of disguised knights in combat, and easily laid to rest, as in *Le Livre d'Artus*, where Arthur erroneously supports Kay in a dispute against Gawain and Sagremor (Thompson, "Gawain" 113-14). Gawain is as much Arthur's right arm as Tristram is King Mark's, and no one will need to be reminded of the potential subversion such a parallel might indicate. The plot of *DOW* hinges on the Roman emperor's belief that Gawain could bring Britannia back into the Empire, possibly through influence on his uncle but perhaps more directly (*DOW* 99). One Scottish chronicle

(the *Chronica Gentis Scotorum* by Johannes de Fordun, c. 1385) openly states that Gawain (and Mordred) had a better claim to the British throne than Arthur (Alexander 20; W. Matthews, *Tragedy* 170). Arthur lends Excalibur itself to Gawain in the First Continuation of Chrétien's *Perceval* (6169-70). Is there any indication in the Middle English texts that Gawain should be seen as a potential heir? There is one episode in the Vulgate *Lancelot*, discussed by Keith Busby, in which Gauvain reluctantly agrees to take the throne after Arthur disappears for an extended period of time: he expresses great reluctance, only being convinced when Galehaut reminds him that the courtiers who urged Gauvain to take the crown were "destructive elements who counted on his refusal" (Busby, *Gauvain* 331). As in the Middle English texts described below, Gauvain here has little interest in kingship, and has to be convinced to take the throne for the good of the realm.

During his lament for Gawain in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Arthur pronounces Gawain "Of all knighting the king" and further states that he was "worthy to be king, though I the crown bare" (3961-62). The admission is intriguing, but it is not an unproblematic statement; in a poem which to some extent finds fault with Arthur's increasingly erratic and violent policies, to name Gawain a worthy successor is to make him Arthur's "deputy or proxy," a character who "mirrors Arthur's faults" (Fichte, "Figure" 114). Whether one interprets Arthur's praise of Gawain as positive or negative is not the issue here: Arthur considers Gawain not merely a potential "successor," as Fichte implies, but possibly a worthier candidate for the throne than Arthur himself: "though I the crown bare" could imply that it is somehow unjust, or at least lamentable, that Gawain is not a king through some accident of birth. At the very least, Arthur is drawing attention to Gawain's essential

worthiness.

Other Middle English poems (and other characters within them) seem to agree with Arthur's assessment in the *AMA*. In *Golagras and Gawain*, Gawain agrees to trick his own king in order to preserve the dignity of Golagras, whom Arthur has unjustly attacked. Once Golagras has brought Gawain back to his castle, he swears allegiance to the latter:

"Now wil I be obeyand.  
And make the manrent with hand,  
As right is. and skill."      (*Golagras* 1217-19)

The allegiance is later transferred to Arthur (1315-23), and later still Arthur releases Golagras from his allegiance entirely (1354-62). The point is still made that Gawain receives this allegiance first by right of "conquest" (1214ff.), and that Arthur only receives anything through Gawain's courtesy and grace: "wourschipfull Wawane has wonnyn to your handis / The senyory in governyng" (1319-20). It is the opposite of the outcome of *Awyntrs*, where Arthur can bestow lands upon Gawain and take them away again at a moment's notice (*Awyntrs* 664-76; Rogers, "Illuminat" 96). Most alarming perhaps, in a poem in which Arthur is so often called "Conqueror," Arthur's own response to Golagras' story is to pronounce Gawain's willingness to place himself "in sic perell" a "soveraneful thing" (*Golagras* 1304-05): twice in the next forty lines Arthur is called "Soverane" (1331, 1337). Gawain has shown Arthur how to behave like a sovereign, and thus redeemed Arthur's royal reputation. In response, Arthur not only shows an "acceptance of Gawain's lesson," as Gillian Rogers notes ("Illuminat" 110); he pronounces Gawain sovereign-like.

There is further evidence that Gawain was seen as a potential but reluctant king, again put into Arthur's mouth. *The Turke and Sir Gawain* ends with Sir Gromer, on bended knee,

pleading with Arthur to “Crowne Gawaine King of Man” (*Turke* 320-22). Gawain’s subsequent plea makes his own thoughts clear:

Sir Gawaine kneeld downe by.  
And said “Lord, nay, not I;  
Give it him, for he it wan.

“For I never purposed to be noe King,  
Never in all my livinge.  
Whilst I am a living man.”              (*Turke* 323-28)

The king shrugs his shoulders and responds in a way that implies that the topic has come up before: “Gawaine will never King bee / For no craft that I can” (329-31). The statement implies that Gawain’s reputation included a resistance to being granted royal power, a resistance necessary because offers were always being made.

In *Awntyrs* Arthur comes closest to actually naming Gawain as his heir: in return for Gawain’s restoration of Galloway to Galeron, Arthur gives his nephew (among other lands) “the worship of Wales at wil and at wolde” (*Awntyrs* 666). As Hahn rightly points out in a note, the “eldest son of the king was created Prince of Wales by the monarch to signify his status as heir to the throne” from the time of Edward III (Hahn 224); Edward of Carnarvon (Edward II) had been named Prince of Wales in a conciliatory gesture by his estranged father Edward I soon after the Welsh conquest in 1283, almost a century before the widely accepted date for the composition of *Awntyrs* (c. 1375-1400). There are thus two intertwining interpretations of Arthur’s gift. First, Gawain is being placated for the loss of the lands Arthur had given him earlier, and now must take away for diplomatic reasons; reconciliation and restoration are the major themes of *Awntyrs*. Second, Arthur is tacitly acknowledging that Gawain is, to borrow a phrase, the rock upon which his kingdom’s stability depends. The

medieval reader could hardly fail to notice the echo of contemporary royal practice concerning the succession.

Galleron's battle with Gawain only occupies the second half of *Awntyrs*, the first half concentrating on the appearance of the ghost of Guinevere's mother before Gawain and the queen. Her warning to her daughter revolves around pride in one's appearance and love of splendour, both of which lead to suffering in the after-life (137-246). The ghost's warning to Gawain is concerned with Arthur's "covetous" nature and his military pride, predicting the war with the Romans and Mordred's usurpation, as well as Gawain's own death (265-312). Twice she counsels Gawain to take heed of her warnings (283, 296), telling him openly that Arthur's incessant lust for military conquest (the "undirected nature of the Round Table's acquisitiveness" in Ralph Hanna's phrase) will be the ruin of the Round Table and the death of Gawain himself (Hanna 292). Following their return to court, Guinevere arranges for masses to be sung for her mother's ghost, and Gawain is caught up in his battle with Galleron.

The twin plots are concluded nicely by Guinevere's religious and filial devotion and by the new feudal arrangements ordered by Arthur. Arthur's gift of Wales is far more than compensation for the lands Gawain was given and which are now being returned to Galeron. Just as the masses are meant to redeem and restore the soul of Guinevere's mother, and eventually translate her from suffering to paradise, so too is Arthur's gift of Wales meant to stabilize the political situation. It is clear that Arthur is aware of the ghost's prophecies, since Guinevere "sayes hem the selcouthes [wonders] that thei hadde ther seen" (*Awntyrs* 333); Arthur's actions provide a suitable response to the dire warnings of the ghost. First, his desire to conquer new lands is alleviated by his present willingness to restore Galeron's lands;

even though he immediately wins back the knight's allegiance. Arthur has been magnanimous rather than "covetous." Second, even as Guinevere's Masses imply the possibility of redemption after death and the notion that it is never too late to amend one's ways, so too the ghost's warnings to Gawain imply that he can, if he is on his guard, avoid the prophesied fate and stabilize the realm either by ameliorating the worst of Arthur's excesses or by surviving the fall of the Round Table and becoming king. Arthur's nomination of Gawain to the "worship of Wales" is an astute attempt at establishing a political continuity, and helps to provide a satisfactory ending to the poem, even if the knowledgeable reader knows that the prophecies of the ghost are fated to eventually come true despite any efforts to the contrary.

## Chapter 2

### Gawain in Love: Damsels, Sons and Weddings

In the late ballad *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, King Cornwall's insulting behaviour towards Arthur and the Round Table leads to a series of oaths, the fulfillment of which will avenge the dishonour brought upon Arthur's court. Arthur vows to be "the bane of Cornwall Kinge" (135), but Gawain promises only to kidnap the daughter of King Cornwall and bring her back to "Little Brittaine" for his pleasure: "'Ile hose her homly to my hurt, / And with her Ile worke my will'" (155-56). The poem's most recent editor, Thomas Hahn, writes that Gawain's "vow, unfulfilled in the surviving text ... recalls his rakish character in the later French romances" (Hahn 420); the implication is that Gawain fulfilled his oath, by narrative necessity, in the missing portions of the incomplete poem. This is an unquestionable conclusion, but more interesting are the tacit assumptions about Gawain's character that the poem's sub-plot raises. The best defense of the Round Table that Gawain can muster is to abduct the daughter of Arthur's enemy, leaving the trickier business of actually defeating Cornwall to Bredbeddle, Gawain's antagonist from *The Greene Knight*. Of course there is no question that Gawain can win the lady's heart, or at the very least, her body; it is what audiences, medieval or modern, popular or academic, have come to expect of him by the close of the Middle Ages.

Gawain's reputation precedes him, even pursues him; the best known example is the comment of Bertilak's Lady in *SGGK*, whose disbelief that the famous Gawain could be alone with her and not crave a kiss is notorious (*SGGK* 1292-1301). Critics have pointed out time

and again that the lady has every reason to believe that Gawain's reputation is well-deserved, at least according to French texts. Gawain's amorous reputation is first attested in Wace, when Gawain responds to the Arthurian court's enthusiasm for war with the Romans with an eloquent if brief defense of the courtly life:

"Peace is good after war and the land is the better and lovelier for it. Jokes are excellent and so are love affairs. It's for love and their beloved that knights do knightly deeds." (Wace 10767-70)

Gawain is still a valorous and effective fighter, but his affection for love affairs took on a life of its own in the French tradition; particularly important is that Gawain emphasizes multiple love affairs, and does not mention any special lady of his own. As early as Chrétien's *Yvain*, the Gauvain of the French texts was considered, at the very least, light in love. His promises to Lunette (*Yvain* 313), unfulfilled when she is herself in danger and Gauvain does not appear to rescue her (*Yvain* 339-42), heralded a French tradition of a Gauvain untouched by courtly love's excesses and unencumbered with any lasting *amour*.

The motif of Gawain as a special champion of ladies is well attested in Middle English, but only in those texts directly derived from French sources. In the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*, the poet states that Gawain does not attend the burning of the queen because he would never be present when "any woman sholde be brent" (SMA 1938-39). In Malory, Gawain is particularly devoted to women by royal command: after he accidentally beheads the lady of Blamoure of the Maryse (66/12-27), Gawain returns to Arthur's court and tells the story:

Than the kynge and quene were gretely displeased with sir Gawayne for the sleynge of the lady, and there by ordynaunce of the queene there was sette a queste of ladys uppon sir Gawayne, and they juged hym for ever whyle he lyved to be with all ladys and to fyght for hir quarels; and ever that he sholde

be curteyse, and never refuse mercy to hym that askith mercy. Thus was sir Gawayne sworne upon the four Evaungelystis that he sholde never be ayenste lady ne jantillwoman but if he fyght for a lady and hys adversary fyghtith for another. (67/34-42)

This is a far cry from his modern reputation as a master of courteous seduction; Malory's Gawain must not only be ordered by Guinevere to serve ladies, she has to tell him to be courteous. Gawain champions his own reputation as a lover, both in the field and in the bedroom, almost as often as he defends the ladies themselves.

In discussing the French sources of *SGGK*, Benson points to *Le Chevalier à l'épée*, where Gauvain risks his life to preserve his reputation as a lover, and Putter cites the Pucelle de Lis episode in the *First Continuation of Perceval* and a scene from Gerbert de Montreuil's *Fourth Continuation*, in which Gauvain rapes a woman who has tried to kill him, as examples of the French Gauvain's sexual escapades (L. Benson 104-05, Putter 109-14). In the Pucelle de Lis episode Gauvain meets a girl who already loves him from afar: she carries an embroidered image of Gauvain, made by a Saracen woman who knew him at court. Gauvain willingly responds to the girl's advances; nature follows its course and Gauvain leaves, promising to return for her. In the meantime, her father (whose brother Gauvain killed) is informed of the affair by his daughter, challenges Gauvain, is killed; the whole process is then repeated by the girl's brother, Bran de Lis, whose battle with Gauvain ends in a draw. Bran de Lis becomes a regular character in Middle English texts, including an adaptation of this episode usually called *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*.

Benson and Putter also find interesting parallels between the amorous Lady of *SGGK* and an episode from the fifth branch of the *Perlesvaus*, in which two ladies offer him their

favours solely on the basis of his reputation for love-making: if this were Gauvain, they say, if “we would have wanted to stay awake for three nights, he would have added a fourth” (Putter 101). His refusal, based on his awareness that his self-control is being tested, leads the ladies to suspect a “Gavains contrefez” (*Perlesvaus* 1816).<sup>17</sup> The Lady in *SGGK* uses the same device against Gawain, saying at the beginning of the second day, “Sir, ȝif ȝe be Wawen, wonder me þynkkez. . . .” (*SGGK* 1481); already the day before he had tried, unsuccessfully, to play down his reputation, pronouncing himself unworthy to “reche such reverence” (1243).

The rape scene from Gerbert de Montreuil’s *Continuation* also has interesting ramifications for a reading of *SGGK*. Gerbert’s lady, in order to avenge the death of one of her brothers, entices Gauvain into bed, where she has a knife hidden. Gauvain finds the knife, hides it, and rapes her:

Weille ou non, sosfri li estuet  
Le ju de mon seignor Gavain. (*Fourth Continuation* 12638-39)

“Like it or not, she has to submit to Sir Gawain’s game” is Putter’s translation (Putter 113). Strangely enough, she now decides that she is in love with Gauvain after all, and attempts to save him from her equally vengeful cousins and brothers; in what is becoming typical behaviour for Gauvain, he goes back to bed with the lady between killing the cousins and fleeing from the brothers. As Putter indicates, the tactics used by Gerbert’s vengeful lady to seduce Gawain and those used by Bertilak’s wife are very similar, “almost like a handbook of seduction” (Putter 113). The fact remains that Bertilak’s wife, unlike the vengeful lady,

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<sup>17</sup> See the brief discussions in L. Benson 221, and Putter 101-02 (substantially based on Benson).

is largely unsuccessful.

In works directly based on French texts, such as *Jeaste*, Gawain is still frivolous in matters of the heart:

And in hys armes he gan her brace,  
With kyssynge of mowthes sweete.

There Syr Gawayne made suche chere,  
That greate frendeshyp he founde there.  
With that fayre lady so gaye;  
Suche chere he made, and suche semblaunce  
That longed to love, he had her countenance  
Withoute any more delaye. (*Jeaste* 5-10)

The poem goes on to relate that Gawain is not able to stay very long before the girl's father arrives, initiating a sequence of combats between the father (Sir Gylbert) and his sons. Gyamoure, Terrye, and Brandles. Gawain defeats the first three in short succession, but has considerably more trouble with Brandles. Unlike in the French source, where an old wound of Gawain's opens and he requests a cessation, here the two knights agree to resume another day because they "wante lyght of the daye" (459-69). The English poem also relates that "after that tyme they never mette more" to the intense relief of both Gawain and Brandles (533-34), in direct contrast to the source's final combat and reconciliation scene, brought about by the sudden arrival of Gawain's son by Bran de Lis' sister.

While the *Jeaste* preserves the amorous French Gauvain in an English setting, the emphasis of the text is on the battles with the girl's kin, not on the relationship of the girl with Gawain. If any conclusions can be drawn, the poem's insistence on Gawain's inability to defeat Brandles even when unwounded hints that the English poet disapproves of Gawain's behaviour; Gawain returns home shamed:

On foote he went full werylye.  
Tyll he to the courte came home. (528-29)

The girl is beaten by her brother and runs away from home:

They sawe her never after that daye:  
She went wandrynge to and fro. (525-26)

Presumably Gawain also never sees her “after that daye.” Her suffering and homeless wanderings are atypical of romance; she and Gawain are both punished within the text for their actions, and no happy ending seems to be forthcoming.

Malory does utilize the amorously opportunistic Gawain of the French poets in the story of Pelleas and Ettarde. After promising Pelleas to help him “have the love of hir” (101/41), Gawain proceeds into Ettarde’s castle and announces that he has slain Pelleas, hoping to provoke some sympathy in her on Pelleas’ behalf (102/6). Any good intentions Gawain has are quickly lost when she responds that, since he rid her of Pelleas, she will “be [his] woman and to do onythyng that may please [him]” (102/16-17). Gawain then makes Ettarde promise to do whatever she can to win the love of his lady for him, just for good measure; when he reveals that his lady is Ettarde herself, she responds, “I may not chese ... but if I sholde be forsworne” (102/23-29). Cunning and charming by turn, Malory’s Gawain has “all his desyre” (102/30), betraying a fellow knight in order to take advantage of the sudden opportunity. Malory’s refusal to follow his source and allow a reconciliation between Pelleas and Gawain furthers the decline of Gawain’s reputation, and helped confirm for later generations of English Arthurian writers the portrait of Gawain as over-amorous and treacherous in matters of the heart.

Benson cites *Sir Gawain and The Carle of Carlisle* as an English example of

Gawain's inability to resist a sexual opportunity, making no distinction between the daring Gauvain of *La Chevalier à l'épée* and the Gawain who is ordered to kiss the Carle's wife and is then restrained from taking matters farther; certainly the poet tells us that Gawain's "love was on her lyght," and he attempts to "doun the prevey far [the private act]" (*CC1* 454-68). Yet there is a fundamental distinction in that the English Gawain is obeying his host as part of a courtesy test, while the French Gauvain is taking advantage of a situation which has arisen beyond the control of the girl's patriarchal authority figures, her father and brothers. Gawain only goes to bed with the Carle's wife when ordered to do so by the Carle, and only proceeds until ordered to stop: he is then given the Carle's daughter as a reward for being such a good guest. The daughter is never asked if she wishes to make love to Gawain; but the poet assures us that he thinks she was happy enough to do so:

A glad man was Syr Gawen  
 Sertenly, as I yowe sayne,  
     Of this lady bryght.  
 Serten, sothely for to say.  
 So, I hope, was that feyr maye  
     Of that gentyll knyght.     (*CC1* 487-92)

The daughter herself notes that of all the knights "that her hathe benne" none have matched Gawain (*CC1* 494-95); whether she means in courtesy or sexual skill is uncertain. Whichever is the case, she prays to Mary wondering when she "schall se enny mor this knyght" (*CC1* 508-10). In both *Carle* poems, Gawain weds the daughter of the Carle (*CC1* 634-36; *CC2* 427-28); the marriage also heralds the nomination of the Carle to the Round Table (*CC1* 631-33; *CC2* 484-86). The Middle English Gawain, despite Benson's allusion to the Carle of Carlisle story, is generally not a figure interested in romance; as in the Carle story, Gawain's

relationships with women in the Middle English texts are the result of the machinations and manipulations of others.

Gawain is often associated with marriage in Middle English literature, not just in the Carle stories, but also in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and its later redaction, *The Marriage of Sir Gawain*. The poet who composed *Ragnelle* declared that “Gawen was weddyd oft in his days” but that he never loved another woman so much as he loved Ragnelle (*Ragnelle* 832-34). Yet here, too, Gawain’s marriage is not a conscious choice on his part; his participation in the wedding is the price Arthur pays for the information he needs to save his life from Gromer Somer Joure. “I shall wed her and wed her agayn,” Gawain declares, in order to save Arthur’s life (*Ragnelle* 343-52). Although the Arthur of *Wedding* asks Gawain if he will marry the hag, the Arthur of *Marriage* is far more blunt, promising that the woman will “have gentle Gawaine, my cozen, / and marry him with a ring” (*Marriage* 79-80); no consultation seems to be necessary.

Much has been made of Gawain’s courtesy towards the Loathly Lady in both poems: Ragnelle pronounces him the most courteous of “alle ertly knyghtes” after he gives her the famous choice and thus breaks the curse (*Wedding* 685-86); the damsel in *Marriage* concurs, calling him “gentle Gawain” (*Marriage* 171). The rapist-knight who replaces Gawain in Chaucer’s version of the Loathly Lady story receives no such accolade or blessing; the lady merely tells him to kiss her and states that “we be no lenger wrothe” (*WBT* 1239). The essential difference is that Chaucer’s knight is being directly tested as a result of his crime.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Corinne J. Saunders rightly points out that Chaucer’s is the only version of this story which involves a rape, “suggesting the particular importance of the detail here” (“Woman” 124). In *Wedding* the story is initiated by Ragnelle’s brother, who claims his lands were stolen by Arthur, as discussed

The “we” the lady refers to is not the newly married couple but women in general: the raped maid, the queen, the damsels of the court, and the bride. In the Gawain tales, Gawain is not being tested, but his courtesy is essential to breaking a curse, as the lady makes clear in both versions: Ragnelle says she was “shapen by nygramancy” by her stepmother (*Wedding* 691-93). The lady in *Marriage* adds the further detail that her stepmother was “a younge lady” who married her aging father (*Marriage* 175-78). Although Gawain says he gives the choice to his bride because “thou art my owne lady” (*Marriage* 169), his real motivation is his courtesy; not any particular courtesy towards women, but the same courtesy that causes him to obey the Carle and pretend to surrender to Gologras. The effect is also the same: an enchantment is broken, a monstrous threat is tamed and brought back into courtly society, and Arthur’s life and crown are saved for another day. Even in those texts most concerned with love and women, Gawain’s primary interests are maintaining his courtesy and preserving Arthur’s throne.

The marriage of Gawain and Ragnelle proves a fruitful one, resulting in a son:

Syr Gawen gatt on her Gyngolyn  
 That was a good knyght of strengthe and kynn  
 And of the Table Round. (799-801)

Gyngalyn is the most commonly accepted name for Gawain’s son in both Old French and Middle English texts, regardless of the conflicting accounts of the young knight’s early career or the identity of his mother. Gyngalyn (Guinglain in French) is the son of Floree in the

above; in *Marriage* the brother’s motivations are lost due to the damaged state of the manuscript. In Gower’s Tale of Florent, the knight is being tested by the relatives of a man he has killed, who wish to send him on an impossible quest because his relationship with the emperor makes it impossible to kill him openly (*CA* I.1425-52).

French Vulgate; in *Le Bel Inconnu* he is the son of Blanchemal la Fée. In the First Continuation of Chrétien's *Perceval* Guinglain is the result of an encounter with the unnamed sister of Bran de Lys, who later fights Gauvain over the dishonour; when the mother produces the son a reconciliation is brought about. Gyngalyn also appears in the French Prose *Tristan*, from which Malory derives Gyngalyn's first appearance in his book:

And evyn at the gate he mette with sir Gyngalyn. Gawaynes sonne, and anone sir Gyngalyn put hys speare in the reste and ran uppon sir Trystram and brake hys speare. And sir Trystram at that tyme had but a swerde, and gaff hym such a buffet uppon the helme that he fylle downe frome hys sadill, and hys swerde slode adowne and carued asundir his horse necke. (303/41-304/2)

Gyngalyn appears as the hero of a widely-disseminated Middle English poem: *Lybeaus Desconus* is an English adaptation of *Le Bel Inconnu* and a version of the Fair Unknown story, a *topos* which would eventually find its way into Malory as the story of Gareth Beaumains. In *Lybeaus* Gyngalyn is the result of a chance encounter with a woman met "be a forest syde" (9), and the Lambeth version of the poem is entitled, "A trety of one Gyngelayne ... that was Bastard son to sir Gawayne" (Hahn 79, n.799). Gyngalyn is mentioned in at least two other Middle English texts, appearing as "Syr Lebyus Dyskonus" in the Arthurian roll call in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* (55); his birth (legitimate, in this case) is recorded in *Wedding*, as noted above.

The hero of *Lybeaus Desconus* inherits both the martial prowess and lusty behaviour associated with his father, and takes on some of Gawain's narrative functions. Lybeaus not only wins every combat, he sleeps with three separate women. As in the French source, he dallies with the enchantress of the Ile d'Or (1473-75) and marries the lady of Synadowne

(2179-80). He also sleeps with his guide, Elene:

He and þat mayde bryȝt  
To-gydere made all nyȝt  
Game and greet solas.  
(LD 445-47)

He refers to Elene as his *leman* (805). Mills argues rightly that the romantic connection between Lybeaus and his guide is predicated on the author's conflation of the guide-figure with the Dame d'Amore, the heroine of the beauty contest episode, a figure quite distinct in the poem's cognates (Mills, "Introduction" 58-59). Gyngalyn also has the habit of sending his defeated human foes back to Camelot to report on his prowess and progress, much as Gareth does in Malory.

Another interesting parallel between Gawain and Gyngalyn is the latter's relationship with the huntsman-knight, Otys de Lyle. After Gyngalyn calls Otys a churl, the latter defends himself, stating, "Chorle was neuer my name" and claiming the "countesse of Carlehill" (Karlyle in the Cotton manuscript) as his mother and an earl for his father (1088-94). After he is defeated by Lybeaus, Otys is sent back to Arthur's court (the fate of most of Lybeaus' human foes), where Arthur finds him "prophytable" and makes him a knight of the Round Table (1257-68). The inclusion of knights defeated by the hero and inducted into the Round Table is a *topos* strongly associated with Gawain in Middle English texts, although it occurs with other knights as well; the reference to Carlisle, the site of one of Gawain's great adventures with a churl who eventually joins the Round Table, is suggestive.

Malory heavily modifies Gyngalyn's story before he assigns it to Gareth. Gareth is only romantically involved with Lyonsse, although at one point he thinks he has fallen in love

with another woman (204/20-26, 205/9-18). There is never any question of a liaison between Gareth and Lynette (as there is between Lybeaus and Elene), and the sorceress from the Ile d'Or is almost non-existent, reduced in status to an unnamed lady both distant and absent, who has constrained the Red Knight to avenge the deaths of her brothers (199/38-43). Gareth's challenges are also placed into a pattern, unlike those Lybeaus faces: the brothers and their colour scheme replace the almost random assortment of giants, enchanters and hostile knights of *Lybeaus Desconus*.

One motive for replacing Gyngalyn with Gareth could be the very popularity of Gyngalyn's tale, and his strong resemblance to Gawain; rather than trying to repaint Gyngalyn as a monogamous protégé of Lancelot, Malory simply assigned the tale to a brother whose traditional role was both essential and lightly sketched. Malory's substitution of Gareth for Gyngalyn shows exactly why the Arthurian court, Gawain and Lancelot in particular, will later find Gareth's death so lamentable, and why his death fractures the Arthurian world so completely. Gareth, a brother, can stand between Gawain and Lancelot at the beginning of his tale in a way Gawain's son never could; furthermore, Gareth's abandonment of fraternal fellowship based upon blood ties for the larger fellowship of shared idealism, a fraternity of choice, has different (generally less negative) connotations than a son's abandonment of his father. Gareth can thus come to represent a higher ideal of "fraternity" as a union chosen by noble knights rather than one thrust upon them by mere kinship.

Parallels could arise between Gawain/Gyngalyn and Lancelot/Galahad, parallels which would serve to place Gawain and Lancelot back onto that nearly equal footing they share in the Vulgate *Lancelot* and the *Mort Artu*. Having Gyngalyn serve in his traditional role,

especially embedded in Malory's text where Gareth's story is now, would associate Gawain and his son with the glory days of Arthur's court in a manner inimical to Malory's purpose. This would seriously detract from the role Malory envisions for his Gawain. This role is one that consistently degrades Gawain at this point in the text: Bonnie Wheeler rightly points out that there is a strong juxtaposition in *The Tale of Gareth* between Gareth's "warm approval" of his younger brother (and his generous actions towards Gareth) and the narrator's insistence on his ignobility, his "condicions" (224/20-23). Gareth observes a propensity for vengeful violence in Gawain which has so far only been prophetically hinted at in the narrative, and which is increasingly Gareth's rationale for avoiding his older brother's company (Wheeler, "Romance" 129). Gareth can cleave to Lancelot's chivalric "felyship" and renounce Gawain's fraternal fellowship, thus cementing the respective roles of Lancelot (flower of Arthurian chivalry) and Gawain (murderer of good knights); the transference of Gyngalyn's story to Gareth strengthens Malory's narrative structure, and Gyngalyn never achieves any real importance in the *Morte Darthur*.

Gyngalyn is among the "well-wyllers" to Gawayne who attempt to trap Lancelot in the queen's chambers; he has with him two brothers, Florence and Lovell. They are also among the knights who attempt to heal Sir Urré: "Than cam in sir Gawayne wyt hys three sunnes, sir Gyngalyn, sir Florence, and sir Lovell (thes two were begotyn uppon sir Braundeles syster)" (665/16-18). With the rest of Agravain's band of twelve they are killed, but their deaths have curiously little effect on their father. When Arthur is trying to rouse Gawain's anger against Lancelot he reminds his nephew of the deaths of Agravain and the near-death of Mordred, and concludes, "And also remembir you, sir Gawayne, he slew two

sunnes of youres, sir Florens and sir Lovell" (683/5-10). Gawain merely responds that he had warned them and that "they ar the causars of their owne dethe" (683/12-20). It takes the later death of Gareth, the beloved brother, to bring about Gawain's final obsession with Lancelot's death; his two sons are relegated to "also-ran" status with Agravain for their father's affections.

If the reader feels any sympathy at all for Florence and Lovell, about whose death Gawain has to be reminded by Arthur, how much more should be felt for Gyngalyn? Malory names him as the first of Gawain's "three sunnes," but although he too dies at Lancelot's hands, not even Arthur sees fit to mention him when he is trying raise Gawain's wrath against Lancelot. This is an interesting omission, given that two of Malory's three references to Gyngalyn come within these last two books of the *Morte Darthur*, a section which has consistently been called "a discrete unit" in Malory criticism (C. D. Benson, "Ending" 222).<sup>19</sup> A mistake such as Bagdemagus' appearance in Lancelot's retinue after dying on the Grail Quest is not uncommon when Malory has switched sources. However, Malory has deliberately included Gyngalyn among the knights attempting to heal Urré and those allied with Agravain. A reader unfamiliar with medieval Arthuriana, French or English, might be tempted to pronounce him one of Malory's many Arthurian nobodies, such as the unknown Ascamore who also dies outside the Queen's bedchambers.

Florence and Lovell appear more often than Gyngalyn in the Winchester text, for they each have a role to play in Arthur's war against Lucius: "And sir Gawain, sir Gaherys, sir

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<sup>19</sup> Many critics from Lumiansky on have considered the last two books as so connected by theme and narrative that they can only have been composed together; the editorial tradition, which often isolates these two books from the rest of the *Morte Darthur*, reflects this view.

Lovell and sir Florens, his brother that was gotyn of sir Braundyles systir uppon a mountayne, all these knyghtes russhed forth" into battle (134.19-22).<sup>20</sup> Both of Gawain's sons perform feats of valour: not only does Lovell kill "a kynge and a deuke," he helps Lancelot rescue Bedwere from death, the latter's fate at this point in the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* (133.35-41).<sup>21</sup> Lovell appears to be more or less sourceless, although the *First Continuation* of Chrétien's *Perceval* names one of Gauvain's sons Lionel; scribal error or a desire on Malory's part to avoid confusion between Gawain's son and Lancelot's half-brother could both be advanced as possible explanations for his (textual) existence, although neither is satisfactory in accounting for Lovell's presence during the Roman campaign. Florence can be seen to have similar origins, but as he has a much larger function within Malory's book and a more certain intertextual derivation, his case must be examined with greater care.

Florence's role is adapted almost directly from the *AMA*, where he is apparently a young knight of Gawain's party whom Arthur entrusts with a foraging mission (2483-2500), to be supervised by Sir Gawain himself. In *AMA* Florence is called "that flowr of knyghtes" (2483), although he later describes himself as "but a fauntekin, unfraisted in armes" (2736).

<sup>20</sup> A thorough examination of Caxton's heavily abbreviated Book V reveals that among the textual casualties are all of the references to Gawain's heroic sons: Florence is merely called "a knight" (184), and Lovell does not appear at all. Only the ward Chestelaine makes it into Caxton's text as "a child and ward of sir Gawain" (189), a peculiar emendation given that the Winchester MS describes "Chastelayne" as a "chylde of kyng Arthurs chambr" as well as a "warde of sir Gavains of the Weste marchis" (142.7-8), almost identical to his description in *AMA* (2952-53). Gawain's grief for Chastelayne is much abbreviated in both the Winchester and Caxton, with his entire lament omitted.

<sup>21</sup> See Linda Gowans' *Cei and the Arthurian Legend* for a discussion of Malory's strategies for keeping both Bedwere and Kay alive for the later parts of his story. Malory not only changes their fates in *AMA* but draws attention to his actions: for instance, Kay makes a speech commending himself to the Queen and preparing for death only to be healed by Arthur himself (133.10-21). The use of Lovell (a character absent from *AMA*) and Lancelot (a relatively unimportant character in *AMA*) to rescue Bedwere without detailing that rescue is a good method for drawing attention to Lancelot without undue disruption of the traditional narrative as found in his source.

Malory also hints at this untested nature, inserting a scene in which Florence questions Arthur's wisdom in besieging a Tuscan city:

“Sir,” seyde sir Florence, “foly thou workeste for to nyghe so naked this perleouse cité.”

“And thou be aferde,” seyde kyng Arthure. “I rede the faste fle. . . .”  
(136/4-6)

Florence does not flee, instead becoming embroiled in a pitched battle from which Gawain refuses to extract him: “the gre [reward] is there owne, for they mowe have gyffys full grete igmaunted of my lorde. Therefore lette them fyght ... I woll nat styrre wyth my stale half my steede length but yf they be stadde wyth more stuff than I se hem agaynste” (141/4-9). There is something reminiscent here of Gawain's words following the deaths of his sons: Malory's Gawain seems intent on a policy of allowing his kinsmen get themselves out of those dangerous situations in which they find themselves.

Florence's mission in the *Alliterative Morte* is clearly a training mission: he is to take some men and, under the watchful eye of Gawain himself, he is to gather supplies for the army. That Gawain is more than nominally in charge of the mission is shown when he encourages Florence to engage in combat: “Ye are our warden.” Florence says, leaving the decision to encounter with the enemy to Gawain (2740). In Malory, Gawain's suggestion that the younger knight engage with the enemy is put in much stronger terms:

“Now, fayre sonne,” sayde sir Gawain unto Florens, “woll ye take youre felyshyp of the beste provyd men to the numbir of a hondred knyghtes and prestly prove yourself and yonder pray wynne?”

“I assent me with good hert,” seyde Florence. (140/11-15)

Interestingly in the *AMA*, a text that does not generally indicate a blood relationship between

Florence and Gawain, the younger knight here addresses Gawain as “Fader” (2735); despite what must be manifest temptation, Benson glosses this in his edition as “Sir,” a standard honorific from an untried knight to a more experienced mentor. Fichte repeats the gloss, defining “Fadyre” as “senior officer.” who “should render wise council” (“Figure” 110); William Matthews notices the word but declares that Gawain is “an *arbiter pugnarum.*” a more Latinate way of saying “mentor” (*Tragedy* 145). The emphasis on Florence as the “flowr of Fraunce” (2730) and his association with French knights (Arthur at 2484; Florence himself at 2738) perhaps lies behind Benson’s reluctance to ascribe Florence’s paternity to Gawain. It is still a curious gloss, and it is not surprising that Malory apparently chose to read “Fadyr” as “Father,” not an honorific title or a military office, but an admission of paternity. Malory then greatly expanded the relationship between Gawain and Florence on precisely these lines, inventing dialogue and pointing out the relationship whenever possible. Malory’s constant insistence on the patrilineal relationship between Gawain and Florence, only vaguely and not unproblematically hinted at in *AM*, becomes something of a sub-plot in his version of the Roman war.

There are two possible explanations. The first is that Malory was aware of a now lost source in which Florence was acknowledged as Gawain’s son (and the name of Guinglain’s mother in the Vulgate, Floree, is similar enough to Florence to suggest a connection).<sup>22</sup> The

<sup>22</sup> There is another connection, again difficult to trace, between Gawain and the name Florent/Florence. Gower’s version of the Loathly Lady story, associated by Chaucer with the Arthurian world and by *Ragnelle* with Gawain specifically, has as its hero a knight named Florent. “Nevoeu to themperour” of an unnamed empire (*Confessio Amantis* I.1409). Although much about the story has changed in Gower’s hands, the central elements remain, and the refusal to localise much of the action ensures that the “Tale of Florent” partakes of an otherworldly quality without referring to a specifically Arthurian milieu. Yet the Loathly Lady story in most of its appearances is Arthurian, and Gawain is often the hero; in Gower’s version, the hero is a knight whose name is also strongly associated with Gawain in

second is that Malory is here caught in a misreading of the *AMA*. With this misreading or interpretation, Malory creates something unique and unjustly ignored in criticism of the *Morte Darthur*: a healthy father-son relationship. At most, critics point out that Gawain's sons are an indication of the passage of time between Books I and II (McCarthy, *Reading* 17); more often they are ignored or dismissed as irrelevant to a critic's argument (Wheeler 130). In a work dominated by knights who lose their fathers when they are very young or even unborn (Lancelot, Tristram, Alexander the Orphan, Arthur himself) and fathers who first meet their sons as young adults (Lancelot and Galahad, Arthur and Mordred), Gawain and Florence (as well as the less important Lovell) stand out as relatively blessed.<sup>23</sup>

By creating a strong father-son relationship between Gawain and Florence and Lovell, Malory further effaces Gyngalyn's historic role as Gawain's son, even going so far as to steal Gyngalyn's origin and give it to Florence: according to Malory, Florence was conceived "upon a mountayne" (134/20-21), a wilderness setting much like the forest beside which Gyngalyn is engendered in *Libeaus Descomes*. That this effacement is deliberate seems likely: if Malory could insert Florence and Lovell into the texts of both the Urré and the Queen's

at least two Middle English texts.

<sup>23</sup> Gawain is perhaps not the only famous knight to have a child fight by his side in the Roman War: Sir Ider is said to be the son of "Sir Uwain" in Caxton (169), based on the clear genealogy of the *AMA*: "Sir Ewain fitz Urien" is named early in the poem and called Arthur's "cosin" (337), and "Sir Idrus fitz Ewain" appears later (1490, 1498). The Winchester manuscript tends to solidify the father-son relationship between Gawain and Florence but obscures the paternity of Ider/Idrus: "Than sir Ewayne and his son Ider that were nere cosyns unto the Conquerour, yet were they cosyns bothe twayne, and they helde Irelonde and Argayle and all the Oute Iles" (115.6-8). It is impossible to say what Malory intended here, but it can be said that any relationship between Uwayne and Idrus was not as important to Malory as that he found between Gawain and Florence. Caxton complicates the issue by dropping most of the references to Gawain's relationship with Florence and Lovell, according to some critics because of the time-frame; Gawain, a young knight, should not have grown sons near the beginning of Arthur's reign. However, this should apply equally to Ywain, Gawain's cousin and the product of a marriage consummated after Lot's marriage to Morgause (5/25-31).

chamber episodes, while drawing attention to their relationship to Gawain, he could certainly have insisted on Gyngalyn's presence in the Roman War. There are issues of internal chronology which bear on the issue of Gawain's sons and their presence or non-presence in the Roman War, depending on which version of Malory's text one reads. McCarthy notes that the presence of knighted children of original Round Table knights such as Gawain hints at a long chronological gap between the quests which follow Arthur's wedding and the Roman War, a gap that seems less desirable once the *Morte Darthur* is viewed in its entirety. The abandonment of the Winchester manuscript's chronology may indicate a change in Malory's conception of his work: the early tales as they were recorded in the Winchester version may have been written well before Malory decided that his Arthuriad would be such a long and heavily interconnected work. Furthermore, Malory's own sense of the Arthurian chronology may have precluded Gyngalyn's presence; if Malory felt that Gawain's marriage with Ragnelle took place at a later time, then by necessity Gyngalyn could not participate in the Roman War. It may have been Caxton, rather than Malory, who made the changes; if so, similar motivations can be postulated.

English authors seem keenly interested in establishing kinship ties for Gawain, whether through marriage or heirs. Gawain emerges from the Middle English texts as something of a family man, not just in relation to his brothers, as in the standard reading of Malory's vengeful, kin-obsessed Gawain. Generally the Middle English Gawain tends to marry as often as he has meaningless affairs, and he tends to father children. In fact, Gawain's sons grew in number just as his brothers did; in Geoffrey of Monmouth, Gawain has one brother, Mordred, and no sons. In Malory's text he is credited with three brothers, a half brother, and three

sons. Compared to Lancelot or Bors, with one son each, or Tristram, who has none, Gawain is prolific indeed.

## Conclusion

### Gawain in the Twentieth Century: *SGGK* and the Rediscovery of Gawain

Gawain's reputation in the modern world has been largely determined by two great medieval texts. Malory's *Morte Darthur* and the rediscovered masterpiece, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Prior to Madden's publication of *SGGK* in 1839, the Gawain most commonly known by authors and Arthurian aficionados was Malory's Gawain, light in love, violent, treacherous, a murderer. Madden held Malory's source for this Gawain, the *Prose Tristan* (as well as the other French prose Arthurian works), largely responsible for "the calumny" and "misrepresentation" (Madden xxviii-xxxv) of Gawain's career. Madden made it clear that his purpose in publishing the adventures of "our hero Syr Gawayne" was to rehabilitate the knight's sullied reputation: he noted that as late as the sixteenth century, Gawain's "reputation in the popular estimation continued to retain its hold, in spite of the misrepresentations" (xxxvii).<sup>24</sup> David Matthews observes:

Madden writes as if at some level he believed in the reality of his central figure, whom he describes as if he were a real person, a single unified figure whose life can be traced 'from his birth to his burial place.'

("Deadly Poison" 41).

Ackerman writes that the Gawain of the poems was a screen behind which "Madden was inclined to see the towering eminence of the chronicle warrior, battle-scarred and valiant to the end in the service of his king" ("Madden" 10). Over a century and a half after Madden's

<sup>24</sup> David Matthews notes that *SGGK* might have been a comforting text in the mid-nineteenth century for an upper class feeling threatened by threats from the lower classes who were increasingly agitated, as at Birmingham when rioters clashed with police three months before Madden published *Syr Gawayne*; Gawain's triumph over the forces of disruption and his restoration of the peace of the courtly world could be seen to mirror the bravery of the police in suppressing working-class insurrections ("Deadly Poison" 19-22).

attempt to redeem Gawain, his work has been more successful than he might have reasonably expected; Gawain's adventure with the mysterious Green Knight, and Gawain's reputation within that story, have provided a modern alternative to the disreputable Gawain of Malory and his successors.

Unlike *SGGK*, Malory's *Morte Darthur* was only briefly unchampioned. After Caxton's first edition in 1485, Malory's text was published eight times between 1498 and 1817, with a gap of two centuries between 1634 and 1816 in which no new editions were printed: in 1816-17 three new editions were published, and interest in Malory was revived (Carlson 234). It is known that Malory was in continual, if limited, circulation, even in the years when no new edition was being produced. Samuel Johnson, Thomas Wharton, Sir Walter Scott and A. Joseph Ritson all have some knowledge of Malory's work (Parins 61-82). The three new editions in 1816-17, and the many editions which followed, seem to have brought Malory further into the public eye but not to have created interest from nothing as Madden's edition of *SGGK* would.

It is therefore not surprising that it was the Malorian Gawain who found his way into Tennyson's monumental and popular *Idylls of the King* (1859), where Bedevere declares, "Light was Gawain in life, and light in death" ("Passing of Arthur" 56); Bedevere is responding to Arthur's vision of Gawain's afterlife, in which Gawain's shade is driven onwards by "a wandering wind" ("Passing of Arthur" 36). Gawain's only adventure in Tennyson is to steal Ettarde from Pelleas, an act which not only provokes enmity between the two men as in Malory, but is a harbinger of the fall of Camelot itself; soon after the betrayal Pelleas has a vision of Gawain firing the hall which Merlin built (507-09). A similarly

negative depiction of Gawain is found in William Morris' *The Defense of Guinevere*, in which Gawain is named as her chief accuser by the Queen.

The American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson had a similar view of Gawain's light-hearted attitude, but was far more forgiving. In his *Tristram* (1927), Robinson creates a scene in which Isolt of Brittany and Gawain meet and discuss Tristram, modelled upon Gawain's meeting with Elaine of Astolet in Malory. Robinson has his Gawain declare the essential difference between himself and Tristram: Tristram is passionate, eager to engage in impossible struggles (he is said to have "a fervor to slice whales") while Gawain himself "from childhood. / [Has] always liked this world" (Robinson, *Tristram* 104). Isolt, for her part, notes that Gawain's "fame is everywhere alike for lightness," but that she suspects that within his lightness there "lives a troubled wonder for a few / You care for" (104-05). Robinson's earlier poem, *Merlin* (1917), included the following observation from Arthur:

"Gawaine, I fear, makes light of everything."  
 The King said, looking down. "Sometimes I wish  
 I had a full Round Table of Gawaines." (Robinson, *Merlin* 670-72)

The view of Gawain which emerges from Robinson's poems is of a light-hearted man whose very inability to take anything seriously is part of what makes him essential to the Round Table; were there a "full Round Table of Gawaines" Camelot might not have fallen into doom and despair. Similarly, the American cartoonist Hal Foster in his *Prince Valiant* comic strip made Gawain a light-hearted lover, but also nodded to the earlier tradition of Gawain as mentor to younger knights newly arrived at Arthur's court.

Many minor Arthurian poems of the Victorian age are concerned with Gawain's reputation as a fickle lover, most drawing a heavy moral conclusion. Richard Hovey's two

short lyrics, “Launcelot and Gawaine” (1888) and “The Last Love of Gawaine” (1898), depict a Gawain who is “Sleek, lying, treacherous, golden-tongued” (“Launcelot” 13); in the 1898 poem, Gawain has learned his lesson, albeit too late, and laments to a lover about to leave him as he has left so many others:

You will betray me – oh, deny it not!  
 What right have I, alas, to say you nay?  
 I, traitor of ten loves, what shall I say  
 To plead with you that I be not forgot? (“Last Love” 1-4)

Oscar Fay Adams’ “Gawain and Marjorie” (1906) tells a story of

Gawain, in far-off days of striplinghood, –  
 Before men call’d him “false” or “light of love.”  
 And yet the same, for as the boy, the man. . . . (Adams 2-4)

Gawain meets and falls in love with a girl named Marjorie, but leaves her to pursue honour at Arthur’s court, where he becomes “fam’d / As much for conquest in the court of Love” as in the “field of tournament” (125-30). In this poem, even Arthur is dismayed by Gawain’s behaviour, and conspires with Guinevere to arrange Gawain’s marriage to Marjorie (170-75). Marjorie eventually seeks him out and, accompanied by Bors, finds her love just as she is dying; although Bors pronounces her death Gawain’s “work,” the latter is so enamoured of his latest pursuit, Vivien, that “he departed leaving all to Bors” (214-37). The love-lorn death of Marjorie is ironically pronounced the “honour” which “Gawain did to Arthur’s court” (254), his thoughtlessness eclipsing all other martial contributions.

The third volume of Bernard Cornwell’s Warlord Trilogy, *Excalibur*, includes a fifteen-year old Gawain in painted white armour, recruited by the Druid Merlin to guard the Treasures of Britain and help bring about the return of the Briton Gods; what Merlin does not

tell Gawain is that he is to be ritually sacrificed at the ceremony summoning the Gods, which fails despite Gawain's murder (106). Gawain rides into history when Merlin sends his withered corpse, fully armoured, on a magnificent horse to reinforce Arthur's troops in a battle against the Saxons at Badon (270-71); Gawain's charge, in the song of the bard Taliesin, becomes a "chilling account of how the wraith-souls of our dead spearmen came from the bridge of swords to assail the enemy's flank" (311). Merlin dismisses Gawain as a "tedious boy" who was foolishly "trying to change the world" (287). Cornwell's Gawain is a glittering accretion who has no real place in the original Arthurian saga, an illusory phenomenon created by Merlin's theatricality and Taliesin's creative story-telling. One can only imagine what Madden might think of Cornwell's treatment of England's greatest hero.

However, Madden's anthology, and especially his discovery of *SGGK*, has made the Middle English Gawain increasingly difficult to ignore. If the thirteenth-century *Prose Tristan* was Gawain's low point, since 1839 his fortunes have again been on the rise. Ignored in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and of very minor importance in the Elizabethan play *The Misfortunes of Arthur*, Gawain has once again come to be considered essential to most new versions of the Arthurian legend. Furthermore, wide exposure to and familiarity with *SGGK* (read by far more students today than any other Arthurian text) have ensured that, for the first time in centuries, the majority of English-speaking readers are introduced to the traditional Middle English Gawain, although in a sophisticated and unusual form, before they meet the lecherous and murderous Gawain of the *Morte Darthur*.

At the turn of the century Madden's rediscovered masterpiece was only beginning to make its influence felt. Charlton Miner Lewis wrote a version of the *SGGK* story in 1903 in

which he made a number of changes, foremost among them being the addition of Gawain's love, Lady Elfinhart; Elfinhart replaces Morgan le Fay as the impetus behind the Green Knight's challenge and his wife's temptations, and the quest becomes a test of Gawain's fidelity to Elfinhart, as the Green Knight cryptically explains:

Quoth Gawayne drily, "Thanks, Lord Potiphar!  
But may I ask why you played this part?"  
The other said, "Ask Lady Elfinhart!" (Lewis 1334-36)

Gone is the ambivalence of *SGGK*'s ending, lost amid the "tribute paid to knightly glory" (1369) and "the mutual covenant of love's mystery" (1379) between Gawain and Elfinhart; also lost is Gawain's sudden burst of anti-feminism in *SGGK*. The test, given Gawain's intertextual reputation, is not cruel but fair, and even necessary: Gawain is tested not only to prove his worth to Elfinhart, but also to an audience accustomed to the lecherous Gawain of other, more familiar texts.

Vera Chapman, in her 1975 novel *The Green Knight*, reacted to the split-personality of Gawain by simply dividing him in two. She introduces her version of *SGGK* by informing the reader that she has seen Malory's Gawain, and found him wanting:

The story [SGGK] is not to be found in Malory, though he has many tales of Sir Gawain of Orkney, a character who does not at all fit the present story, so that I have taken the liberty of supposing a younger Gawain. (Chapman 5)

This new Gawain, called alternately the "little" Gawain or Gawain le Jeune, is the son of Gareth, further distancing him from his famous uncle. "great, rough, irascible, terrifying, sometimes lovable Gawain" (43). A better description of the Malorian Gawain may not be possible. Despite her claim that *SGGK* "seems on the face of it unfinished," she does relatively little with the story beyond extending it to a final confrontation between Merlin and

Morgan le Fay at Stonehenge, and postulating that Bertilak's wife (here named Vivian, Morgan's niece) and Gawain le Jeune were destined to be together. The perceived discrepancy between *SGGK*'s youthful and unsullied Gawain, and the reputation Bertilak's wife assigns him, could have been fruitfully developed as a true case of mistaken identity: Gawain le Jeune challenged to live up to another Gawain's reputation. Chapman is content to have solved the problem of Gawain's twin reputations without having any interest in exploring the consequences of her solution.

Thomas Berger's *Arthur Rex* (1978), a parodic retelling of Malory, is the most complete grafting of *SGGK* into the mainstream tradition, and also includes a version of the Loathly Lady story. Gawain is the only character who grows as a human being in the course of the novel, "who though beginning as a lecher had grown ever more virtuous in the company of the Round Table" (217); his growth is prompted by his unrequited love for Elaine of Astolet and her subsequent fate, placed by Berger very early in his narrative (185), and by the testing of the Lady of the Lake, who disguises herself first as the lady whom Gawain appears to accidentally behead (123), and later as both the Green Knight and his wife (241). The Lady of the Lake, while disguised as the Green Knight, pronounces Gawain the best of the fellowship:

"Sir Gawain," said the Green Knight, raising his axe high over his head. "You are the most humane of all the company of the Round Table, and therefore, unlike the others, you are never immodest. To be greater than you is to be tragic; to be less, farcical." (240)

By the time Gawain finds himself forced to marry the hideous hag Ragnelle, he accepts the sentence as just:

But Sir Gawain made an effort towards good cheer. “‘Tis little enough, Uncle, and perhaps God would have me atone for mine old ways, when comeliness was all I sought in a woman. No doubt this mine intended wife hath a strength of soul, a richness of spirit, for doth not God distribute human gifts so as to maintain a balance in the world?’” (353)

Berger uses the earlier English Gawain stories, absent from Malory, as a counterpoint to the Malorian narrative. Landon notes that in “embedding ‘The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle’ in his Arthur story, Berger most clearly rejects Malory’s depiction of Gawain” (Landon 252); the same holds true for Berger’s use of *SGGK*. He invokes Gawain’s treacherous and lecherous reputation, only to temper it with the modified reputation which emerged from Madden’s efforts in order to make Gawain the “most humane” character in his book, “a kind of golden mean” between an over-prudish Tennysonian Arthur and a Lancelot divided between high-minded asceticism and a fanatical misogyny which is the root of his passion for Guinevere (Landon 254).

It is perhaps this idea of the imperfect Gawain, the “golden mean” of Berger’s novel, that appeals most strongly to modern audiences. In *SGGK* Gawain is tested and apparently found wanting, but the test and its results are ambivalent, ambiguous, difficult to read. As Howard said, *SGGK* may have been too “skeptical” about Gawain, about Arthur, about romance itself for a medieval English audience; but it is precisely those qualities which make it a cornerstone in the study of English literature, medieval and modern. Busby’s observation that the French Gauvain was a static character who never learned from his adventures has been completely reversed; in Berger’s novel he is the only character capable of changing, a dynamic character who grows through continual testing. It is now the Arthurian world that

is static and unbending. Madden's poem heralded Gawain's resurgence and ensured that the knight's reputation would become a constant challenge to those who would contribute to the tradition. Anyone wishing to create something new from Arthurian materials must deal with Gawain, perhaps forever poised between Malory and *SGGK*, the knight of courtesy and the silver-tongued knight of treachery. In his mutability, his moments of grandeur and his moral lapses, Gawain is ultimately very much like ourselves. Gawain is the great Arthurian rediscovery of the nineteenth century, the perfect knight for the morally ambivalent and imperfect twentieth century; it remains to be seen whether his new-found popularity will grow into the twenty-first.

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### Appendix 1: Chronology of relevant texts

The following brief chronology is based substantially upon that of Richard Barber in *King Arthur in Legend and History* (London: Cardinal, 1973), 175-80. The dating of the Gawain corpus in Thomas Hahn's *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales* (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 1995) agrees with Barber's list; Skeat in his edition, however, dates *Lancelot of the Laik* a decade later than Barber (London: Oxford UP, 1865; EETS o.s. 6). Barber's chronology ends in 1958 with the publication of T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*; all subsequent entries are my own, as are the entries for the minor Victorian lyrics. Entries in bold indicate that the text in question is given close examination within this thesis.

1136	Geoffrey of Monmouth, <i>Historia Regum Britanniae</i>
1155	Wace, <i>Roman de Brut</i>
c. 1160-80	Marie de France, <i>Lais</i>
c. 1170	Chrétien de Troyes, <i>Erec</i>
c. 1176	Chrétien de Troyes, <i>Cligès</i>
c. 1180	Chrétien de Troyes, <i>Lancelot</i>
	Chrétien de Troyes, <i>Yvain</i>
c. 1185-90	Renaut de Beaujeu, <i>Le Bel Inconnu</i>
c. 1190	Layamon, <i>Brut</i>
	Chrétien de Troyes, <i>Perceval</i>
c. 1190-1210	<i>Perlesvaus</i>
c. 1200	<i>First and Second Continuations of Perceval</i>
c. 1210	<i>Le Chevalier à l'Epée</i>
c. 1215-30	Vulgate Cycle ( <i>Lancelot</i> , <i>La Queste del Saint Graal</i> , <i>Mort Artu</i> )
c. 1230	Gerbert de Montreuil, <i>Fourth Continuation of Perceval</i>
c. 1225-35	<i>Prose Tristan</i>
c. 1235-40	<i>Palamedes</i>
c. 1250-1300	<i>Arthour and Merlin</i>
c. 1280	<i>De ortu Walwanii</i>
c. 1320-40	<i>Libeaus Desconus</i> <b><i>Sir Percyvell of Gales</i></b> <b><i>Sir Launfal</i></b>
c. 1350	<b><i>Ywain and Gawain</i></b>
c. 1360	<b>Alliterative <i>Morte Arthure</i></b>
c. 1375-1400	<b><i>The Awntyrs off Arthur</i></b>
c. 1390	<b><i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i></b>
c. 1400	<b><i>Stanzaic Morte Arthure</i></b>
	<b><i>Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle</i></b>
c. 1425	<b><i>The Awowyng of Arthur</i></b>
c. 1430	Henry Lovelich, <i>Holy Grail</i> and <i>Merlin</i>
c. 1450	<b><i>The Jeaste of Sir Gawain</i></b>

	<i>The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle</i>
c. 1450-1460	English Prose <i>Merlin</i>
1470	<i>Sir Thomas Malory, Morte Darthur</i>
c. 1480-90	<i>The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain</i>
1485	Caxton's edition of Malory
c. 1490-1500	<i>Lancelot of the Laik</i>
c. 1500	The Percy Folio Ballads: <i>The Greene Knight</i> <i>The Turke and Sir Gawain</i> <i>The Marriage of Sir Gawain</i> <i>The Carle of Carlisle</i> <i>King Arthur and King Cornwall</i>
c. 1650	Composition of the Percy Folio (British Library Additional MS 27879)
1839	Sir Frederic Madden, <i>Syr Gawayne: An Anthology</i>
1858	William Morris, <i>The Defence of Guinevere</i> and other poems
1859-85	Alfred Lord Tennyson, <i>Idylls of the King</i>
1888	Richard Hovey, "Launcelot and Gawaine"
1898	Richard Hovey, "The Last Love of Gawaine"
1903	Charlton Miner Lewis, "Gawayne and the Green Knight: A Fairy Tale"
1906	Oscar Fay Adams, "Gawain and Marjorie"
1917	E. A. Robinson, <i>Merlin</i>
1927	E. A. Robinson, <i>Tristram</i>
1958	T. H. White, <i>The Once and Future King</i>
1975	Vera Chapman, <i>The Green Knight</i>
1978	Thomas Berger, <i>Arthur Rex</i>
1997	Bernard Cornwell, <i>Excalibur</i>

**Appendix 2:**  
**Manuscripts of the major Gawain texts**

*Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Lincoln Cathedral 91, the Thornton Manuscript)

*Avowyng of Arthur* (Ireland Blackburn MS, Robert H. Taylor Collection. Princeton)

*Awntyrs off Arthur* (1 Bodleian Library, MS 21898, formerly MS Douce 324; 2 Lambeth Palace Library, MS 491.B; 3 Lincoln Cathedral 91, the Thornton MS; 4 Ireland Blackburn MS, Robert H. Taylor Collection. Princeton)

*Carle of Carlisle* (British Library Additional MS 27879)

*De ortu Waluanii* (British Library MS Cotton Faustina B.vi)

*Greene Knight, The* (British Library Additional MS 27879)

*Jeaste of Sir Gawain* (1 Bodleian Library MS 21835, formerly Douce 261; 2 British Library MS Harley 5927 Arts 32)

*King Arthur and King Cornwall* (British Library Additional MS 27879)

*Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* (National Library of Scotland Advocates Library H.30.a)

*Lancelot of the Laik* (Cambridge University Kk.1.5)

*Lybeaus Desconus* (1 British Museum MS Cotton Caligula A.II; 2 Lambeth Palace MS 306; 3 Lincoln's Inn MS Hale 150; 4 Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61; 5 Naples Biblioteca Nazionale MS XIII B.29; 6 British Library Additional MS 27879)

*Marriage of Sir Gawain* (British Library Additional MS 27879)

*Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* (National Library of Wales Porkington MS 10, also known as Harlech MS 10 or Brogyntyn MS)

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x)

*Sir Percyvell of Gales* (Lincoln Cathedral 91, the Thornton MS)

*Stanzaic Morte Arthur* (British Library Harley 2252)

*Turke and Sir Gawain* (British Library Additional MS 27879)

*Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* (Bodleian Library MS 11951, formerly Rawlinson C.86)

*Ywain and Gawain* (British Library MS Cotton Galba E.ix)