

The complicated case of chivalry, christianity, and ethical dualism

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An exemplary knight of King Arthur's renowned court, Sir Gawain is guided by a complex set of ethos, a collection of principles symbolized by the mystical pentangle. A five-pointed star consisting of five interlocking lines, the figure represents a variety of guiding tenets, comprising both religious and knightly ideals. It also emblemizes the interdependent nature of those virtues; if one point or line is lost, then the whole is torn asunder- the values it represents, shredded. Working in a unified manner, all parts should hold fast; however, through the course of Gawain's epos with the Green Knight, knightly manners work against Christian principles, breaking the knot and resulting in moral dissolution. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight criticizes the fact that chivalric courtesy often displaces true Christian ethics, while at the same time expressing understanding and acceptance for the fact that humanity can only strive towards such prelapsarian perfection.

Throughout the poem, Gawain is led astray by knightly manners unassociated with Christian values, putting both his life and his morality in danger. In the first scene, the praising descriptions of King Arthur's court are based largely on the sumptuousness of their feast, which consists of "all the meat and mirth that men could devise" (line 45). When the actual people are honored it is because they are the "comeliest," "most courteous," or have "contended in tournaments many" (53, 26, 41). These commendations are based on the court's chivalry, not its true ethics, and as such, the knights are portrayed as puerile, "beardless children," who still have to prove the true tenets of knighthood (280). The Green Knight's challenge can thus be seen as a desire to see the court validate itself beyond jousting matches- in terms of their moral code- or even as a punishment for their impious, indulgent

splendor. The contest is truly an instance of poetic justice, indicating what will happen if one values earthly decorum over noble morals- a crime of which all the knights are guilty, but for which Gawain must pay the price.

In his interactions with the host's wife, Gawain again places knightly chivalry over Christian ethics and is met with similar castigation. The tradition of courtly love, in which knights and higher-class ladies pursued each other in flirtatious and adulterous relationships, though aligned with knights' tradition, is implicitly against the tenets of Christianity. When the host's wife corners him, saying " So good a knight Gawain is given out to be" that he should " have claimed a kiss, by his courtesy," Gawain acquiesces to courtly love (1297, 1300). And while the peck may seem harmless, it represents the sin of adultery and an affront to his host's generosity. But by allowing the illicit affair to continue, Gawain places himself in the position to commit even greater sins; when he places his faith in the woman's green girdle instead of in God and does not present the prize as a " winning" to his host, he falls prey to false idolatry and blatant dishonesty.

While chivalric courtesy places Gawain in mortal and moral peril, Christian principles repeatedly serve as his salvation. Towards the end of the year, Gawain faces greater adversity than ever before, nearly freezing to death while sleeping in his armor. Yet, just when it appears he can not go on, he prays for some house where he can go to Christmas mass, and " No sooner had Gawain signed himself thrice / Than he was ware, in the wood, of a wondrous dwelling" (763-764). Christian tenets save him once again when he finally reunites with the dreaded Green Knight. After all his wrongdoing,

Gawain is able to be freed from his covenant with Green Knight only after he admits to his sins and atones: " You are so fully confessed, your failings made known, / and bear the plain penance of the point of my blade, / I hold you as polished as a pearl" (2391-2393). By adhering to the Christian doctrines of prayer, confession, and penance, Gawain works to correct his faults, proving he is a true knight, not simply a master of games and courtesy.

Although Gawain falters in his ethics, wavering between senseless knightly chivalry and proper Christian ideals, his missteps are accepted as part of humanity's inherently flawed nature. The Green Knight attempts to assuage his shame, saying " you lacked, sir, a little in loyalty there / But that you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame" (2365-2367). King Arthur and his court hardly recognize the reason for Gawain's guilt; instead, they " Agree with gay laughter and gracious intent" to take up the green girdle as a sign of unity and brotherhood (2514). After all, valuing one's flesh over moral preservation is a sin of which all the knights are guilty; when the Green Knight issues the challenge none of them leap up to the task as they are supposed to do; and what motivates their eventual agreement " To give Gawain the game / And release the king outright" (364-365)? Is he the right choice because of his merits, or because it is the easiest way for the other knights to protect their own lives?

In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, chivalry inspires impious lavishness, sinful adultery, and false idols, leading to a disintegration of morality in Gawain that can only be fought by adopting Christian ethics. But the fact

that Gawain does not achieve the moral perfection symbolized by the pentangle speaks to faults beyond his own and to the greater imperfection of humanity. Humans can only strive towards such bliss. It is no accident that the only person who could fully complete the challenge is the Green Knight himself, a supernatural and superhuman being. As such, the journey does not symbolize a fall from grace so much as one man's realization of his own nature and path towards embracing a true Christian ethos unsullied by chivalry. As the final wheel suggests, it is a wholly respectable course that men have, and will continue, to trod:

Many such, ere we were born,

Have befallen here, ere this.

May He that was crowned with thorn

Bring all men to His bliss! Amen. (2527-2530)

What matters is not that men fall- for that happened long ago- but that, with the grace of God, they attempt to pull themselves up.