

# The connection of medieval romances to chivalry and society



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The romances *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, translated by Marie Borroff, and *Le Morte d'Arthur*, written by Sir Thomas Malory, tell of the heroic adventures and chivalrous deeds of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Through characterization, conflict, imagery, and diction, both works are able to express on a deeper level that every knight, no matter how great, struggles to fully exemplify the code of chivalry that medieval society values.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Sir Gawain's actions after accepting the Green Knight's challenge highlight the values of medieval society, reinforcing the importance of chivalry that dictates the ideal behavior of every knight. Gawain exemplifies a courageous, chivalrous knight by humbly requesting that King Arthur allow that "this melee may be mine" (Borroff 116), and accepts the Green Knight's challenge in the king's stead. In addition, Gawain's courtesy in asking Lady Guenevere if "my liege...misliked [his request] not" (120); his display of respect when he "bows low to his lord" (141); and his encounter with the Green Knight in which he "abashed not a whit" (149) all display examples of a knight who upholds the values of determination, respect to women, and loyalty to the king. The chivalrous acts of Sir Gawain add to his portrayal of an ideal and exemplary knight who reflects the values important to those in the medieval society.

The valiant deeds of Sir Lucan and Sir Bedivere in *Le Morte d'Arthur* reiterate the importance of a knight's duty to their king, reminding readers of the obligation of a knight to chivalry which was valued in medieval society. Sir Lucan, who helps carry the wounded King Arthur in the aftermath of the battle with Sir Mordred, dies after "his guts fell out of his body" which resulted in "the noble knight's heart [bursting]" (Malory 191). The diction

used in the vivid imagery of Sir Lucan's death emphasizes how much pain he went through to faithfully serve King Arthur. King Arthur also acknowledges Sir Lucan's selfless sacrifice with sorrow and gratitude, saying that " he would have helped me that had more need of help than I" (191). Arthur's lament further portrays Lucan as a chivalrous knight and commends the decisive sacrifice that he makes for his king. Sir Bedivere, despite betraying King Arthur " for the riches of [Excalibur]" (192), eventually redeems himself by fulfilling Arthur's dying request and remains at the chapel to pray for his deceased king for " all the days of [his] life" (194). Even beyond death, Sir Bedivere's loyalty to King Arthur inspires him to remain steadfast and honor him. The chivalry of Sir Lucan and Sir Bedivere portray how far the extent of loyalty to a king can be and how important it is to honor and uphold the relationship between knight and king.

The values in the code of chivalry and the theme redemption represent aspects that were important to medieval society, suggesting that the effort to become an ideal knight, despite shortcomings, was paramount. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight illustrates the struggle to become an ideal knight through Sir Gawain who is distraught from the " villainy and vice" (Borroff 465) of deceiving the Green Knight committed by his " cowardly and covetous heart" (464). Sir Gawain's resulting resolve to better himself as a knight despite his shortcoming inspires himself to work harder towards the goal of the medieval knight. Acknowledging Sir Gawain as " free of fault" (483) since birth, the Green Knight's redemption of Gawain highlights the Christian-influenced strive towards virtue and the obligation to forgive for Gawain making his " failings made known" (480). In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, King

Arthur tries to act in accord with chivalry by fighting the evil Sir Mordred and his army “ as a noble king should do” (Malory 187), but the anger and anguish brought to himself because of his routed army compel him to kill Mordred in aftermath which Arthur and his army only survives due to “ God of his great goodness” (189). King Arthur’s tragic death afterwards illustrates that even the legendary and mighty King Arthur is not infallible, and Christian-influenced chivalry pushes a knight to not only be loyal to the country, but to God as well. Both of these medieval romances praise the deeds of loyal warriors, but also portray the difficulties that they endure in becoming ideal, chivalrous knights. The romance perspective of fallibility through the strife of becoming an ideal, chivalrous knight gives insight to what was important to medieval society. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and *Le Morte d’Arthur* mirror the familiar struggle to achieve near perfection of a skill or principle regardless of the limitations of imperfection in people.