

# Sir gawain and the green knight: the role of women



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Sir

## Gawain and the Green Knight: The Role of Women

In the fourteenth century, chivalry was

in decline due to drastic social and economic changes. Although feudalism-  
along

with chivalry-would eventually fall for other reasons, including a decrease

in cheap human resources due to a drop in population caused by plague  
epidemics

and the emergence of a mercantile middle class, the Gawain author  
perceived

a loss of religious values as the cause of its decline. Gawain and the

Green Knight presents both a support of the old feudal hierarchies and

an implicit criticism of changes by recalling chivalry in its idealized

state in the court of King Arthur. The women in the story are the poet's

primary instruments in this critique and reinforcement of feudalism. The

poet uses the contrast between the Virgin Mary with Lady Bertilak's wife

to point out the conflict between courtly and spiritual love that he felt

had weakened the religious values behind chivalry. The poem warns that

a loss of the religious values behind chivalry would lead to its ultimate destruction.

Although superficially Sir Gawain and the

Green Knight appears to be a romantic celebration of chivalry, it contains wide-ranging serious criticism of the system. The poet is showing Gawain's reliance on chivalry's outside form and substance at the expense of the original values of the Christian religion from which it sprang. The first knights were monastic ones, vowing chastity, poverty and service to God, and undertaking crusades for the good of their faith. The divergence between

this early model and the fourteenth century knight came with the rise of courtly love in which the knights were led to their great deeds by devotion to a mistress rather than God. The discrepancy between this and the church's

mistrust of women and desires of the flesh is obvious, and the poet uses women in the story to deliver this message. In contrast to reality at the time, women in the story are given great power: Mary, when properly worshiped,

gives Gawain his power, Lady Bertilak operates alone in the bedroom and singlehandedly taints the chevalier, and Morgan the Fay instigates the entire plot, wielding enough power. The author is using them as a metaphor for other anti-social forces and dangers outside the control of feudalism and chivalry, drawing upon biblical and classical examples in his audience's minds of where femininity is linked with subversiveness. Lady Bertilak is clearly seen in the Biblical role of the temptress, the Eve who led Adam astray—in Gawain, she represents the traditional female archetypes of courtly love, disobedience, lust and death. Eve's antithesis is the Virgin Mary, who is the only women who achieves motherhood while maintaining her chastity; she represents spiritual love, obedience, chastity, and life. That Gawain is Mary's Knight is made clear as he is robed for battle; the pentangle represents the five joys of Mary, and he has "that queen's image / Etched on the inside of his armored shield"

(648-649). As long as he is solely focused on his quest for the Green Knight, he derives his prowess and courage from his special relationship with Mary.

On his journey to look for the Green Knight he is beset by a number of hardships, and is finally brought to the point of despair. Alone and freezing in the forest, he prays to Mary for shelter and a place to say mass on Christmas Eve. She answers his prayers and leads him to Bertilak's castle; however, his arrival at Bertilak's court throws him into a totally different world. Here, Gawain impresses courtiers of Bertilak's castle with his prowess in the field of courtly love rather than the feats of daring or his upholding of his honor, traits that would draw compliments in Arthur's court. Camelot is portrayed in its youth, long before it too is tainted by Lancelot and courtly love; Arthur is young, "child-like (86)" and the "fine fellowship of Camelot was in its fair prime." The analogy is obvious: Arthur's court embodies chivalry's pure roots, where martial exploits were the primary subject of interest, whereas Bertilak's castle represents the low point of the degeneration the poet perceives chivalry to have undergone.

The Lady's association with courtly love

also ties this aspect of chivalry with degeneration and sin. Immediately upon his arrival in Bertilak's court, the separation between courtly love

religion is clear: Gawain at Mass is “ in serious mood the whole service through”(940). This serious mood is immediately forgotten with the sight of the Lady, whom he immediately focuses on at the expense of Christmas’ meaning. Instead of finding solace in the meaning of Christmas, Gawain and the Lady “ found such solace and satisfaction seated together, in the discrete confidences of their courtly dalliance” (1011-12). When Gawain was alone in the forest, fearing death, he could only think of one thing, that Mary should lead him to a place to say mass on Christmas. Now, instead, the Lady has drawn him away from Mary and made him forget the significance of the day.

The bedroom, however, is the true testing ground. From the first day of their bedroom sessions, the Lady subtly establishes a bargain of her own with Gawain; one based on his prowess in courtly love. By becoming her knight Gawain has entered into another bargain, but now Gawain’s bargain is with a woman rather than a man, and his ability to

please her with his talk is being tested rather than a “ true” chivalric

value such as loyalty, valor or truthfulness. This bargain, compared with

Gawain’s exchange of winning bargain with Bertilak and beheading game

Bargain

with the Green Knight, highlight the conflict of values in chivalry. In

contrast to Arthur’s classic values, the Lady believes that “ the choicest

thing in Chivalry, the chief thing praised, / is the loyal sport of love”

(1512-13). This points out a serious conflict; in the game of courtly love,

a man is forced outside of the traditional male hierarchies, placed on

equal footing with a woman, and not subject to the feudal loyalty system.

Above all, unlike the other contests established by men where the rules

are clearly defined, the Lady’s game is ambiguous.

It is meaningful that the bedroom scenes

are juxtaposed with scenes from Bertilak’s hunts. It seems as if this is

what the Gawain poet intended to suggest when he positioned the bedroom

scenes within the hunt scenes. The hunt scenes show an unambiguous world

of men and an appropriate venue for male chivalric action. The men are

outside, in vigorous, heroic, manly pursuit, training for what is really

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the purpose of chivalry—the defense of the land and the service of the Church. Clear hierarchies and rules are meticulously explained; the lord is in the lead, the boldest and most active, and detail is spent in each hunting scene describing the rules of carving and distributing the days spoils. While the hunt is going on Gawain is lying in bed, and this is mentioned in each hunting scene to emphasize the contrast. In contrast to the hunt scenes, Gawain's situation seems too pleasurable, bordering on the sin of luxury and representing a private world outside of the traditional hierarchies, rules and loyalties. The Lady is not just suggesting certain moral associations to the reader; she is a real temptress testing his chastity and a real object of courtly love, testing his courtesy. As she presses him more and more aggressively as each day passes, the conflict between his spiritual love and courtly love becomes apparent, for he is “concerned for his courtesy, lest he be called caitiff, But more especially for his evil plight if he should plunge into sin, and dishonor the owner of the house treacherously” (1773-75). While he is able to see that his chastity is more important than his courtesy, he is still desperately trying to

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balance the two. It is this inability to make a clear and unambiguous choice between the two that leads him to accept the girdle. Despite Mary's credit in saving him from sin, for "peril would have impended Had Mary not minded

her knight" (1768-9), Gawain still disavows her. When the Lady directly asks him if he has another love, Gawain, instead of citing his devotion to Mary, answers, " ' I owe my oath to none, nor wish to yet a while'" (1790-1). His devotion has been lost in his bargaining.

This loss of devotion and faith is his

undoing for it was his faith in Mary, through the contemplation of her five joys and her symbol on the back of her shield, which gave him his prowess and courage. With a weakening of his faith in her, which we can read as a weakening of his spiritual faith as well, he is prey to the Lady's offer of another token to protect him, the girdle. In this way he becomes guilty of the sin of cowardice, as Gawain himself names it when his failings are revealed to him by the Green Knight. Gawain has traded the protection of a holy figure and his patron, the Virgin Mary, for a sorceress' protection.

Viewed in the ultra-Christian perspective of the author, Gawain is trading

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divine protection for small comfort under the protection of black magic, in effect making a deal with the devil.

In addition to this, Gawain's acceptance

of the girdle weakens the feudal system by forcing him to conceal it from

his host and in the process break his agreement with Bertilak. While he

has upheld his bargain with the Lady, and performed with spotless courtesy

in the game of courtly love, he has had to break his word and disobey the

Lord to do it, in a sense choosing Eve's disobedience over the obedience

of Mary. Here the poet most strongly criticizes the changing face of chivalry;

in his opinion the game of courtly love will ultimately break the male

social bonds which hold feudalism together. Only the traditional Christian

hierarchies, from which chivalry was born, can provide the framework with

which chivalry can survive. This is reinforced by the final exchange between

Gawain and the Green Knight where the poet shows the way he feels

feudalism

should work-by banishing courtly love and women from the code of chivalry.

The men re-appropriate the power the women seemed to hold in order to

support

the male social order. First we see that the outcome of the beheading game rests on his performance of the exchange of winnings game. Second, the Green Knight reveals that the Lady acted at his behest and thereby appropriates

the power she seemed to hold. Later in the scene, he reveals that Morgan sent him to Arthur's castle in the guise of the Green Knight; however, by the time he reveals this, he has already appropriated the plan for his own purposes. It is also possible that the exchange of winnings game, which becomes the basis for the judgment, is his own invention since he does not attribute this to Morgan. This enables him to then turn her plan, which was hatched for destructive purposes, to a noble and elevating test which serves the high moral purpose of teaching Gawain a lesson—hold true to the ideals of the Christian doctrine as a support for the chivalric code.

Gawain, in his confession and absolution,

goes through a similar shifting of power and blame. When the Green Knight first reveals Gawain's failure of "cowardice and covetousness" (2374),

Gawain shows deep shame in his own actions. However, upon his absolution

he shifts the blame from himself to women, becoming one more man unwittingly

duped by women and led into sin. In this way he displaces the blame and

is able to regain his power within the story by returning not as a failure

but as a fully reinstated knight of honor. As he is shifting the blame

to women, he comes to the realization that chivalry does not hold the path

to perfection and therefore discards courtesy and renounces women. He

concerns

himself instead with his sins of cowardice and covetousness. He refuses

to return to the castle to make peace with Bertilak's wife and Morgan,

despite his kinship with latter, effectively banishing them and eliminating

the internal conflict generated, are eliminated. Power is back in the hands

of the appropriate authority, and Gawain's loyalties are redefined.

This shift in blame can be traced by the

girdle's changing symbolism. First, as a symbol of female sexuality, the

lady offers it as a love token under the pretense of its life saving powers.

In this way it undergoes its first transformation, from love token to token

endowed with the magic to protect his life. When the confession and absolution

scene occur, it becomes a possession of the Green Knight, who then redefines

it as a token “ of the great adventure at the Green chapel” (2399); at this point Gawain takes it up as a symbol of his shame. Thus courtly love turns is revealed to be dark sorcery, which to accept is shameful. However, with its conquest comes absolution and honor.

The message being sent by the author goes

deeper still. Upon his return to the round table, the girdle is adopted by he entire court. Although this appears to be a symbol of Camelot’s solidarity,

it is also symbolic of how Arthur does not take Gawain’s lesson to heart.

The poet’s audience was familiar with the legend of Camelot’s fall, and knew its destiny to be degeneration at the hands of Guinevere, Morgan and Lancelot, emblems of courtly love. The poet’s allusions to Troy reinforce the similarity between the two emblems of civilization torn apart by the discord caused when men covet women. Women and feminine symbols are the

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author's scapegoats in assigning blame for the end of the feudal economy and way of life, a simple, tangible, recognizable enemy that he blames for the end of an era, which, in reality, was brought to a close by sweeping socioeconomic factors beyond the control of men.