

THE ENIGMATIC CHARACTER OF SIR GAWAIN:
CHIVALRY AND THE HEROIC KNIGHT IN ARTHURIAN
TRADITION

by

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**Title: The Enigmatic Character of Sir Gawain: Chivalry and the Heroic Knight in
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This paper examines the role of Sir Gawain as a heroic knight in six texts from the medieval English Arthurian tradition: Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*, the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, *Awntyrs off Arthur*, and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. The character Sir Gawain varies significantly between traditions and medieval texts. The conflicting heroic and chivalric codes play a large role in his portrayal, particularly when considered in conjunction with King Arthur and Sir Lancelot. As Arthur's nephew, Gawain was a fundamental part of medieval texts, but this family relation did not always result in a positive portrayal. Lancelot appears in fewer of the English texts, but where he does appear, he does so as the paragon of chivalry and creates a dichotomy between his values and Gawain's. Gawain's frequent chivalric failings, particularly in Malory, and the modern preference of romantic love over homosocial bonds have resulted in Gawain's diminished and often antagonistic roles in modern Arthurian interpretations.

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Introduction

While *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* remains one of the most famous medieval romances, as a figure Gawain has largely been ignored in more modern retellings of the story of the court as a whole. He is also one of most inconsistent figures in all of Arthurian legend. Most modern filmic and literary interpretations derive from the extensive 15th century English text *Morte D'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory, which focuses on the chivalric knighthood of characters like Lancelot and romantic relationships, like his with Guinevere. Gawain's heroic values and lack of notable love interest have left him out of favor within these more current representations of Arthurian court. However, Sir Gawain was still a very prominent part of the 14th and 15th century Round Table when this shift was beginning to take place, resulting in vastly different representations of this character. In Beverly Kennedy's article "Gawain and Heroic Knighthood in Malory," she contrasts Gawain as a Heroic knight, with the old values of clan loyalty and prowess, to Arthur as a Worshipful knight, and Lancelot as a True knight. These divisions contribute significantly to villainous portrayals of Gawain and his diminished presence in modern interpretations. As what she calls the heroic values embodied by characters like Sir Gawain fell further out of favor, authors could adapt the characters to meet the current ideals or convert them into foils for more successful knights.

Although Malory's text presents the heroic ethos as inadequate, I contend that this view of Gawain as the paragon of heroic knighthood can be seen in other Arthurian texts, but whether the ideals he represents are seen as inadequate or as virtues depends on the traditions and values from which the text derives. In the early Latin chronicles,

he was a noteworthy warrior. In early Welsh legend, he was also promising, although not particularly active. Dutch and German traditions also tended to have a noble view of the hero, calling him the “father of adventure” (Thompson and Busby 11). However, the French tradition, which Malory drew on, gave a more sinister account, although even that varied from Gawain being “well-intentioned [but] ... inadequate” to being accused of murder and treason (Thompson and Busby 5). Thus, because of this treatment, he became a stock character, a collection of traits and faults, used as a foil for any number of other heroes. These departures seem to stem, at least partially, from differing values between nations and courts. The incongruent nature of these traditions becomes obvious in the medieval English tradition, which arises almost a hundred years after the French and draws from both the French and German (Ramsey 71). This combining of traditions results in a complicated, and at times contradictory, picture of Gawain in English literature, sometimes even within the same text.

In order to capture the range of representations in the English texts, I will be focusing my analysis on six texts from the English tradition. The texts can be divided into two basic genres. Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*, *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*, and the Stanzaic *Morte Arthur* are larger works containing the broader tale of the court as a whole. For convenience’s sake I will refer to these as epics—although Malory is prose rather than verse—based on McDonald’s definition of the genre: “a long narrative poem concerning events important to the history or mythology of a nation or race of people, featuring a hero or heroes of high position within that society” (McDonald 232). Each of these texts includes tales of multiple knights and various battles before concluding with the fall of the Round Table and Arthur’s more or less ambiguous death. Both

Malory and the Stanzaic *Morte* are also influenced by romance customs, but their scope has a far greater reach than most romances. The earliest of the three epics is the Stanzaic *Morte*, likely written well before 1400, although the only surviving manuscript is from around 1460-1480 (Windeatt 96). The text prioritizes romance tradition over historical narrative and draws heavily from French custom (Benson and Foster). This text is also one of the earliest English texts to prominently feature Lancelot, and it marks the first presence in English literature of his relationship with Guinevere (Windeatt 88, 96), which marks the text's inclination to the French Arthurian custom, which was still far more prominent than the English.

The Alliterative Morte Arthure likely appeared after the Stanzaic *Morte*, around 1380, but it emerges from a deeper historical past. As part of the "Alliterative Revival," which also gave rise to texts like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Alliterative Morte* focuses on realistic warfare and was directed at a more aristocratic audience, while the Stanzaic *Morte* had more popular appeal (Benson and Foster). Appearing in the middle of the Hundred Years War, 1337-1453, Arthurian legend was being repurposed as propaganda by various monarchs (Aberth 61, 71). While John Aberth does suggest that the propaganda directed to the aristocratic class tended to be milder than those for the lower classes, *The Alliterative Morte* clearly pushes against French tradition and values (72). More than either of the other epics, *The Alliterative Morte* exists in a distinctly English tradition; it embraces heroic deeds rather than the chivalry that was favored by French romance (Aronstein 41). While, as Aberth suggests, "chivalric camaraderie retained an international flair" (72), the Hundred Years War saw immense casualties, including an increasing amount of nobles killed, and major English

failures in France, which likely influenced *The Alliterative Morte's* resistance to the French tradition (68). *The Alliterative Morte* is a highly literary text by an unknown author, so while it is impossible to know if it was a part of war propaganda, it seems to be clearly influenced by the grisly conflict with the French.

Finally, Malory's *Morte Darthur*, published in 1485, was likely written between the latter end of the Hundred Years War and the beginnings of the War of the Roses, a time of extreme turmoil for England, which was on the brink of another conflict as Edward IV claimed the title of the French throne (Kelly 111). Malory drew on *The Alliterative Morte* and the *Stanzaic Morte*, as well as the French tradition to create his work, and Robert L. Kelly suggests that it also may have had a propagandistic purpose, although this time favoring peace with the French (133). Although Malory's work draws on both of these other texts, and even closely resembles much of the *Stanzaic Morte*, he is at an even greater temporal distance from the values that heroic characters like Gawain portray. A hundred years after the heroic *Alliterative Morte*, the fifteenth century saw a renewed interest in chivalric literature, likely as the population's means of "restoring England's former glory" (Armstrong 71, 75). The aristocratic Malory would likely have had ties to France, and the French Arthurian texts were still prominent, so Malory's view of English glory looked different than the image portrayed in *The Alliterative Morte*. This accounts for, in part, the jumbled portrait of Gawain in his work and the resulting largely negative view of the character in versions that followed him; Malory gives obvious preference to the chivalric values embodied in Lancelot, and, as Kennedy suggests, pits these varying types of knights against each other.

The other three texts I will be looking at, *King Arthur and King Cornwall*, *Awntyrs off Arthur*, and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, are romances. It is difficult to place these texts in a historical timeline because there is evidence of their existence preceding the dates of their manuscripts, but it is likely that they emerged around the same time as Malory's text. These texts emerge from a separate tradition from Malory, so that regardless of their relative publication, they are not drawing upon the Malory tradition as a source. Medieval romances tend to focus on a single knight or a single quest. Knights of romance are inherently unreal, embodying ideals of beauty and strength rather than human reality (Ramsey 35). While the epics are concerned with the larger actions and interactions of the court, romances are often tales of a knight being inspired by his love for a woman and focus on the ideals set forth by courtly love and chivalry.

Although these three texts obviously come from the romance tradition, which was greatly influenced by the French texts, they do not all condemn Gawain to his French interpretation. *Dame Ragnelle* and *Awntyrs* seem to strike a balance between presenting Gawain as an ideal heroic, truly British knight and the chivalric ideals of court. *Cornwall* provides a slightly divergent view of Gawain as the romance hero because this fragmented text does not revolve specifically around Gawain, although he is present. As in the French tradition and at times in Malory, we see a more sinister version of the character, although this text seems to criticize the court as a whole, including Arthur. While *Cornwall* is the largest departure from traditional romance, in general, Gawain romances differ from the basic romance format in that he never has a true love. Even in *Dame Ragnelle*, Gawain marries for the good of the court and Arthur,

only later coming to love his wife. Although there are notable knights that achieve greatness without the inspiration of a woman—like Percival and Galahad, both of whom had a spiritual or religious inspiration—Gawain’s lack of a beloved is a significant departure from the romance tradition. Erich Auerbach states that in the romance tradition a knight is only at his best when he is both completing “feats of arms” and when he is in love (140). These two aspects of a knight’s perfection were supposed to mutually inspire one another: his feats would inspire love in the lady and her love would, in turn, inspire her knight to prove himself. Gawain’s feats, without the inspiration of a woman or religion, are instead driven by his duty to his court and family. This loyalty demonstrates that even in his medieval chivalric romances, Gawain retains aspects of the older heroic knights.

Heroic values, found often in earlier medieval texts, are loyalty to family and clan, prowess and ferocity in battle, and the aim of earning an honorable reputation and praise (see, for instance, Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr.’s investigation in *Old English heroic literature*, 76). The idea of a “warrior-hero” is actually a closer description to how a historical Arthur would have been, if any such person existed (Passmore 189). While also rooted in a man’s ability and station as a warrior, the popular chivalric values emerged from a type of idealized nostalgia, rather than the more historic heroic tradition (Hahn 9); they emphasized a knight’s fluency in court behavior in addition to prowess on the battlefield. Court values included “mutual respect, refined manners, [and] service to women”; like the heroic values, they also included battle prowess and courage (Auerbach 137). Although etymologically the term “chivalry” refers to a knight’s behavior in battle while courtly love speaks to his relationships within court and with

women, for the purposes of this paper I will be using the definition proposed by Dorsey Armstrong, which looks at chivalry as “some combination of martial prowess and courteous behavior toward women” (73). While the overlap between the chivalric and heroic codes can lead the knights to be nearly indistinguishable at times, the basic focus has shifted. For instance, the heroic-leaning *Alliterative Morte* primarily takes place on battlefields in foreign lands, while the other texts frequently return to the court settings where manners are valued and Gawain often flounders.

Because the English Arthurian texts draw on so many previous traditions, the characters and the values they embody in each become tailored to the author’s and audience’s preferences. I argue that this picking and choosing has affected no character more than Sir Gawain. These six texts from the English tradition show the full range of interpretations of Gawain, from villain to hero worthy of the crown. Gawain’s honor and value are largely determined through his relationship with others in the court, whether through their interactions or notions of his preexisting reputation. Gawain’s value comes particularly from his associations with Arthur and Lancelot. Interactions with both men allow Gawain to either represent a failing heroic code or the ideal warrior-hero through examples of his loyalty, leadership, privilege, role as a protector of women, and ultimately his death. These categories place the heroic value system in opposition to the chivalric ideals, and demonstrate the way characters changed to suit shifting ideals, or were left behind as time progressed.

Gawain and Arthur

The Loyalty and Sacrifice of a Heroic Knight

While most modern Arthurian interpretations focus on romantic love over the brotherly love of the Round Table, the medieval versions show greater declarations of love between Arthur and Gawain than any romantic pairing. In medieval tales Gawain is the son of Arthur's sister—usually Anna or Morgause—and King Lot of Orkney, Lothian, and sometimes Norway; most modern interpretations ignore this familial relation. The relationship of a man to his sister's son was one of the most significant and valued of the time, which is evidenced through Arthur's treatment of Gawain (Kennedy 287). This love between kinsmen allows authors to portray Gawain honorably, by showing an earned love and respect, or to diminish his position with accusations of favoritism and special treatment. In *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, the title of which suggests a romantic relationship like that between Eric and Enide, the only real declaration of love comes from Arthur to his nephew, "O alle knyghtes thou berest the flower / That evere yet I fond. /.../ Therefore my love shalle nott frome the dyssevyr" (ll. 372-76). The language here is not that of duty, but of love and respect and an expression of a king's gratefulness to his knight. Arthur is represented as a king with a close, fraternal connection to his men, and specifically to this knight, his kinsman.

Arthur's love for Gawain in *Dame Ragnelle* is not unwarranted but is proven time and again by Gawain's service and loyalty to Arthur. In this romance, the villain Gromer threatens Arthur's life because the king had wrongly given lands belonging to Gromer to Gawain (ll. 57-59). Although Gromer's accusation directly involves Gawain,

when Arthur relates the event to Gawain he excludes the reason for Gromer's threat, stating only, "that knight fast dyd me threte" (l. 158). Because Gawain lacks the knowledge that his own interests are involved, he is able to act in his uncle's defense without an implication that his own self-interest is his motive. The nature of Gromer's challenge—Arthur was given a year to find out what women value most—would humiliate the king if he failed to produce the answer, as well as result in his death. Dame Ragnelle appears to Arthur in the woods and offers an answer to Gromer's riddle, but only if she is first granted a marriage to Sir Gawain (ll. 280-286). A marriage to the hideous Dame Ragnelle would damage Gawain's reputation, but, as Susan Aronstein suggests, Arthur knew that Gawain, "ever loyal to king, kin, and brotherhood, is sure to marry her to save Arthur's life" (127). In spite of the fact that Arthur ostensibly gives Gawain the choice whether to marry Dame Ragnelle or not, Arthur's reluctance to ask Gawain to sacrifice his reputation by marrying her seems to stem from a sense that he is still condemning Gawain to a loss of status, and Arthur's unwillingness is trumped only by his need to save himself and his court. Here both the text and Aronstein's commentary draw seemingly unconscious attention to Gawain's heroic values, particularly those of family loyalty. Arthur's reluctance to ask and Gawain's readiness to do anything to save his uncle demonstrate the loyalty that each man has to the other. Arthur refers to the task Dame Ragnelle has set as his "mone," and declares that he is "wo begon" (ll. 296, 340-42). Also significant is that Arthur maintains that the decision to marry "lyethe in [Gawain] alon," when as king, it seems plausible that he could compel Gawain to marry for his sake (l. 293). Gawain readily sacrifices his own interests by marrying Dame Ragnell, but in the process he saves his uncle's honor.

Gawain's response to Arthur's plight reaffirms this loyalty and proves his vast love for his uncle: "'Ys this alle?' then sayd Gawen; / 'I shalle wed her and wed her agayn, / Thowghe she were a fend'" (ll. 341-44). As Kennedy suggests, a heroic knight would define "honor in relation to his family not in relation to himself as an individual" (290); Gawain's sacrifice of his reputation in order to save Arthur's therefore aligns with his heroic values. Although heroic values are also largely concerned with reputation and fame of the individual—particularly in battle—this concern is superseded by the threat to his kin's reputation and safety.

Arthur demonstrates a similar high value for Gawain's life in *Awntyrs* when presented with another accusation of misappropriated lands. After Gawain quickly volunteers to defend the honor of the court and do battle with Sir Galaron, who demands a duel over lands belonging to Galaron that Arthur granted Gawain, Arthur responds: "But I nolde for no lordeshipp se thi life lorne" (l. 470). Again Gawain places himself in danger for the sake of his kin, but in this case Arthur places his nephew's life above his honor and that of the court. Prioritizing Gawain's life over lands and reputation is particularly important in this text, because Arthur is depicted as both covetous and great, as revealed by the ghost of Guinevere's mother earlier in the text, "Your King is to covetous, I warne the sir knight. / ... / Whan he is in his magesté, moost in the might, / He shal light full owe" (*Awntyrs* ll.265-68). By stating Arthur's covetousness, and therefore his focus on the lands and glory of his court, the text highlights Arthur's loyalty to Gawain, since Arthur places his nephew ahead of this glory. This demonstrates the closeness of the sister's son relationship, prioritizing it, although the heroic code values both kinship and reputation. Arthur's adherence to the

heroic code signals its presence in the text, although *Awntyrs* also embraces many chivalric ideals. Through the depiction of Gawain and Arthur's relationship, the text balances the two codes and is able to retain Gawain's position as the best of Arthur's court.

Gawain's role as Arthur's nephew guarantees him a place at court, but whether this place is honorable or not reflects each text's values. Clear examples of honors earned and received come in gifts of land in both *Dame Ragnelle* and *Awntyrs*. In each Arthur is accused of giving away lands owned by another knight or lord to Gawain. The threat in *Awntyrs* is less extreme than the one posed by Gromer in *Dame Ragnelle*. In *Awntyrs*, Galaron demands combat to determine the rightful owner: "[Gawain] shal hem never welde, / While I the hede may bere" (ll.425-26), but both texts show that the honor given to Gawain is at the expense of another. At the close of *Awntyrs* the lands are redistributed, but it falls to Gawain to ensure that Sir Galaron receives the appropriate lands. After Galaron concedes and Arthur bestows even more land to Gawain to reward him for his victory, Gawain returns many of the lands that originally belonged Galaron to the defeated knight. Besides demonstrating Gawain's power, this plays the dual role of showing his goodness. It would not be difficult to imagine Malory's Gawain as desirous to retain the lands as rightfully his as the champion of the battle with Galaron, but in *Awntyrs* he demonstrates a generosity reminiscent of the chivalric brotherhood between knights.

However, Gawain's generosity is not universal in the romances. The Gawain and Arthur of *Cornwall* are far less considerate and pursue conquest with little regard to their opponents. While conquest is present in much of *The Alliterative Morte*, the values

displayed in each text are clearly opposed to each other. *Cornwall* does not shy away from representing the Knights of the Round Table as largely petty and overly aggressive, whereas *The Alliterative Morte* focuses on the right and prowess of Arthur and his men. Contrasting the methods of dealing with the appropriation of lands in these three texts' helps reveal the different values embodied by each text. The chivalric *Awntyrs* shows an amendment for lands wrongly taken, whereas the heroic *Alliterative Morte* declares an unquestionable right through the trial of battle. *Cornwall*'s critical nature shows conquering spurred simply by envy.

Perhaps even more striking than the declarations of love between Arthur and Gawain in the romances, is Arthur's open display of emotion in *The Alliterative Morte*, a text primarily concerned with the grisly and violent pursuits of war. Larry D. Benson and Edward E. Foster point out in their online TEAMS introduction that the Arthur of *The Alliterative Morte* is "infuriated rather than heartbroken at [Guinevere's] betrayal," which is represented as a political act. If we then compare Arthur's reaction to the loss of Guinevere to his loss of Gawain, we see clearly the power of the sister's son relationship. In his eulogy for Gawain, Arthur declares: "Here is the hope of my hele, my happing in arnes, / My herte and my hardiness holly on him lenged! / My counsel, my comfort, that kepted mine herte!" and "It is full sib to myself; my sorrow is the more. / Was never so sorrowful a sight seen with mine eyen!" (ll. 3958-60, 3984-85). These lines from Arthur's extensive eulogy reaffirm both his love and Gawain's role in the court. Upon Gawain's death, Arthur recognizes that he has lost the war, which has a two-fold meaning: on a literal level, Gawain is Arthur's best knight, his "happing [good fortune] in arms," so he would have to continue the fight without his

best commander. In a heroic system based on the glorifying of warriors, this proves Gawain was the best. Arthur also recognizes that with Gawain he has lost much of his ability and will to rule. Gawain was a “counsel” to Arthur, as is seen throughout the text, but also the person Arthur loved the most.

A King’s Champion

There are also less explicit examples of the importance of Gawain’s relationship to Arthur, as he is often the king’s champion and trusted councilor. In each of the texts, no matter which opinion of Gawain they portray, he is one of Arthur’s close advisers. In the Stanzaic *Morte*, Arthur turns to counsel with Gawain during the dire times, such as when Guinevere is accused of attempting to murder Gawain: “Sir Gawain on the morn to counsel he tas, / And morned sore for the queen” (ll. 956-57). Arthur’s trust in Gawain’s advice in this moment is particularly telling because it signals his trust in Gawain’s judgment, despite his role in the conflict. Similar scenes of advice are seen throughout both the epics and romances. However, in *Cornwall*, which seems to hold a critical view of Arthur’s court as a whole, Gawain’s advice to turn back is dismissed: “Why if you be afraid, Sir Gawaine the gay, / Goe home, and drinke wine in thine owne country” (ll.145-46). As this text is fairly critical of even the king himself, who is covetous and greedy, this dismissal is not as significant as it may have been in another account. However, since Arthur’s knights consistently live up to their boasts in the text, Gawain’s suggestion to avoid the challenge of facing Cornwall and his supernaturally aided knights shows his weakness. By attempting to avoid battle, Gawain places his reputation and safety above that of Arthur. Although Arthur and Gawain’s close relation is referenced in the first lines of the work (ll. 1-2), Gawain’s advice is not valued by

Arthur or the text. Despite his failing in this text, Gawain's position as a counselor to Arthur is fundamental to medieval Arthurian works; its consistent presence demonstrates Arthur's dependence on Gawain, no matter how the two men are viewed. The absence of scenes of council from Gawain in modern interpretations, reiterates the now lost importance of a sister's son relationship.

Arthur's reliance on Gawain as a champion in *The Alliterative Morte* and *Awntyrs* has already been touched on, but this role also allows for a demonstration of Gawain as the epitome of a heroic knight, using his prowess and heroic ethos to further Arthur's cause. Both texts express this in the context of the larger court as well. In the ghost's prophecy in the first half of *Awntyrs*, the destruction of the Round Table by betrayal is predicted—this is an unusual move for a romance because it places the events in the full history of the court, while most romances are isolated in the early court (Burrow 72). Along with this prophesy comes a statement of Gawain's importance to the battle and his death: “Gete the, Sir Gawayn, / The boldest of Bretayne; / In a slake thou shal be slayne” (ll. 296-98). The prophecy gives Gawain significance beyond what a challenge from a visiting knight could because it reiterates his importance as warrior to Arthur and the court amidst far greater trials. Similarly, in *The Alliterative Morte* Gawain is instrumental in encouraging Arthur's troops, which he does by appealing to the heroic ethos, primarily, in appealing to their duty to Arthur—“I look never on my lord the dayes of my life / And we so litherly him help that him so well liked!”—and the desire for eternal glory—“Yif we fight today, the feld shall be ours, / ... / Priased with princes in presence of lords / ... / Ought never such honour none of our elders” (ll. 1447-48, 2859-67). Both of these appeals draw directly on the

heroic value system's ideals of glory even after death and loyalty to lords, as well as kinsmen. They also demonstrate Gawain's importance to Arthur's war effort by keeping the men motivated in even the darkest moments of battle.

The Alliterative Morte Arthure's removal from the court setting, allows Gawain to demonstrate his full ability as a heroic knight. In their introduction, Benson and Foster discuss explicitly the value difference between this chronicle-like text as opposed to romance: "Honor is more important than courtesy in his poem; Gawain is a great warrior, not a famous courtier" (Benson and Foster). Gawain clearly demonstrates this distinction during his council to the Romans; when one of the Romans insults Britain, Gawain responds by striking off the man's head: "graithes toward the gome with grouchand herte; / With his steelen brand he strikes off his heved" (ll. 1353-54). This action clearly abandons manners and propriety, but it is not faulted in *The Alliterative Morte*; Gawain has simply taken a bold action that initiates the inevitable battle between the Britons and the Romans and killed a high ranking official in the process.

The resulting battle includes several more examples that affirm Gawain as a heroic ideal. While there are several passages on Gawain's impressive feats of arms, it is significant that amidst the battle Gawain is also careful to look out for his men. Despite being surrounded by opposing soldiers, Gawain rescues Sir Bois from capture, "Wrothly on the wrong hand Sir Wawain he strikes, / With a wepen of war unwinly him hitted; / ... / And yet he brought forth Sir Bois for all their bale bernes" (ll. 1480-83). Later in the text, Gawain pursues revenge for the murder of his ward Chastelayne: "I shall wage for that wye all that I weld, / But I be wroken on that wye that thus has him wounded" (ll. 2968-69). Although this text is the most concerned with heroic values of

the six, Gawain's brothers—other than Mordred—are unmentioned, so it lacks the pursuit of a blood feud. These types of feuds had to do with the reclaiming of honor, as well as a family loyalty, and so played a large role in the heroic code (Þorláksson 94). The exact nature of Chastelayne's relationship to Gawain is unclear, but as his ward, Chastelayne was under Gawain's protection, whether this was a formal guardianship or not. Although it lacks a direct familial aspect, Chastelayne's death provides the same motivations of loyalty and revenge for the warrior-hero Gawain. Because Chastelayne is killed by a foreign army, this desire for revenge is even stronger than if he was killed by another knight of Arthur's court. Gawain's pursuit of revenge aligns with the strong heroic values of this text and does not create negative consequences for Gawain, as issues of revenge do in Malory and the Stanzaic *Morte*.

In *The Alliterative Morte*, Gawain is given several specific leadership positions to aid Arthur's war effort. These positions are an honor and an opportunity for a knight to display his ability and loyalty. Early in the text, Gawain is one of the five men sent in council to the Roman Emperor Lucius:

Take with thee Sir Berille and Bedvere the rich,
Sir Gawain and Sir Grime, these galiard knightes,
And graith you to yon green woodes and gos on thir needes;
Says to Sir Lucius to unlordly he workes
Thus litherly againes law to lede my pople. (ll. 1264-68)

Although listed in the midst of the other knights sent, Gawain takes a clear lead once in the meeting with the council. His appointment to this mission demonstrates Arthur's trust in his judgment, as well as his prowess in this highly volatile and potentially dangerous situation, which it quickly proves to be. Later in that text Gawain is charged with leading a hunt to provide for Arthur's men: "Us moste with some fresh

mete refresh our pople / That are fed in the firth with the fruit of the erthe. / There shall wend to this viage Sir Gawain himselven” (ll. 2491-93). This is not an isolated account of Gawain in a role of leadership over Arthur’s men. Gawain is also charged with leading a charge on Mordred in *The Alliterative Morte*, the only text where Gawain survives long enough to participate in this battle. Gawain’s ferocity in this battle is a clear moment of triumph for the heroic knight: “There might no renk him arrest; his resound was passed! / He fell in a frenzy for fersness of herte” (ll. 3825-26). Fierce battle was the opportunity for glory for a heroic knight, and here Gawain earns that fame. Similarly, in both Malory and the Stanzaic *Morte*, Gawain leads attacks on Lancelot and his men at Joyous Gard, which is expected because it is Gawain’s blood feud with Lancelot that necessitates the battle:

“Certes, nay!” said Sir Gawain,
“He hath wrought me wo ynow,
So traitourly he hath my brethern slain,
All for your love, sir; that is trouth!
To Yngland will I not turn again
Til he be hanged on a bough;
While me lasteth might or main,
There-to I shall find peple ynow” (Stanzaic *Morte* ll. 2676-83)

However, Arthur’s loyalty to Gawain in both texts, despite the danger to the court, shows Gawain’s value: “All they spake to have pees, / But himselfe, Sir Gawain; / To batail hath he made his hest, / Or elles never to turn again” (Stanzaic *Morte* ll. 2686-89). The account in Malory is nearly the same, although perhaps demonstrating a bit more force from Gawain in Arthur’s agreement to continue the battle, which implies a lesser legitimacy for his actions. Since Arthur knew the code that drove Gawain to revenge, by showing Arthur’s hesitation the text delegitimizes that heroic code in favor of the

chivalric brotherhood that Lancelot represents. Although the results of his leadership vary, Gawain's position as a champion and counselor to Arthur creates opportunity for him to obtain heroic glory.

The Privilege of Arthur's Sister's Son

Gawain's position as Arthur's nephew affects his relationship with others as well. He is defined by his uncle and their relationship in all six texts and often seems in a place of privilege for it. While texts like Malory and *Cornwall* suggest that this privilege allows Gawain to receive an unfair advantage and that he does not live up to standards of the court, others depict Gawain as an active participant in furthering Arthur's glory. In *The Alliterative Morte*, Gawain first hides his identity from Priamus, who he meets in single combat in a rare moment away from the battle, but he then defines himself by his relation to Arthur:

Cosin to the conquerour, he knowes it himselven,
Kidd in his kalender a knight of his chamber
And rolled the richest of all the Round Table!

I am the douspeer and duke he dubbed with his hands. (ll.2639-42)

Priamus responds that to be defeated by a soldier would bring disgrace, but that it is an honor to fall to one as great as Gawain. A declaration of identity focused on the relationship to Arthur, like this, often reflects the king's glory, with Gawain as a subset of that. However, this declaration and Priamus' response show Gawain's individual glory as well. Rather than resting on his uncle's reputation, Gawain is active in adding to that illustrious reputation. *The Alliterative Morte* also describes the two men similarly, which emphasizes the tie between them, and in the process, reveals Gawain's power and potential. Arthur is compared to a lion amidst a terrifying fit of anger after a

Roman messenger brings a demand for tribute: “the king with cruel lates / looked as a lion ... / ... / ‘By looking, withouten lees, a lion thee seemes’” (ll. 119-20, 139). His aggressiveness reaffirms his role as a warrior king, not the helpless Arthur that appears in other texts (Benson and Foster). Similarly, Gawain is compared to a lion when he is in the frenzy of battle against Mordred and his men, “letand as a lion [Gawain] launches them through” (l. 3831). These comparisons are a testament to Gawain’s greatness, as well as his equal worth to Arthur. However, the ferocity of this comparison is also worth considering as it draws on the heroic admiration of strength and prowess. Although Gawain features heavily in the text, Arthur is the hero, demonstrating all of the hallmarks of a great heroic figure. Through the comparison of Gawain at the end of the text to Arthur early in the text, *The Alliterative Morte* implies Gawain’s ability and potential to match Arthur’s greatness, a thought which Arthur reiterates in his eulogy for his nephew.

In texts that favor Gawain, he is often depicted as earning great honors; however, Malory shows that Gawain’s position as nephew of the king allows him to hold a prominent place at court despite his many failings. This advantage is less explicit in other texts, because Gawain makes fewer missteps, but in them it is also bolstered by the obvious love between the Arthur and Gawain. This love is not absent in Malory, but is made more complicated through Gawain’s frequent failings. After Gawain mistakenly kills a woman in “Torre and Pellinor,” he receives mercy from “four fayre ladyes” because he is “nevew unto the kyng” (Malory 67). He is still punished by wearing the dead lady’s head about his neck, but he is allowed to “go unto kyng Arthure for hys love” and to complete his quest (Malory 67). This mercy is the direct

result of others favoring Gawain because of his relation to Arthur. Family reputation is a key element of the heroic ethos, but, in contrast, Malory uses this familial connection to show a lack of personal ability, which he uses to undercut Gawain, even while it explains his important role at court.

Earlier in this same section, “yonge” Gawain requests to be knighted, and as Cory Rushton suggests, this is granted simply because he is Arthur’s kin (146). Arthur states that he must, “do unto [Gawain] all the worship that I may, for I muste be reson ye ar my newew, my sistirs son” (Malory 60-61). Although the word “muste” had a dual meaning at the time and could signify a compulsion or an allowance, either definition here suggests an expectation of preference for the sister’s son (Kurath, “muste”). Whether Arthur is obligated to knight his sister’s son, or if he is permitted to knight Gawain because they are kinsmen, the situation relies on the familial relation, rather than an established love. Gawain’s youth seems like it could also support the claim of unearned knighthood, if it is translated to a lack of experience. Rushton presents, by way of contrast, Gareth, Gawain’s younger brother, who in his own section, refuses family connection and chooses to earn his own knighthood. He takes on a fake name and only reveals his lineage when he must (Malory 194). However, even when Gareth attempts to hide his identity, he must constantly reveal himself in order to receive honor, such as his knighting by Lancelot. Although Rushton suggests that Gareth wants to earn his own reputation, it is not really possible, because for every deed he does, it is again related back to his family. Both Gareth and Gawain are ultimately defined by their kinsmen, particularly Arthur and Lott, rulers and men of power. Even when paired with the chivalric ideals that Malory embraces, knights of high birth cannot escape the

reputations of their family. Malory uses this dependence on family to demonstrate Gawain's unworthiness, but when paired with the account of Gareth, it seems to be an unavoidable aspect of court life. The focus placed on blood and family in court also has the potential to conflict with the construct of chivalric brotherhood, as can be seen in Gareth's increasing loyalty toward Lancelot and away from his blood, Gawain, which creates conflict within what is supposed to be a united body.

The Greatest Knight: Chivalric Values and Heroic Failure

Gawain's reputation is established almost entirely by his comparison to other knights. This is particularly true of any text that features Lancelot as a major character. While Gawain represents the northern heroic knight, Lancelot is a representative of the French tradition and chivalry. As they work to be the best of the court, their values are also necessarily placed in competition. This dichotomy also plays into the propaganda coming from both sides during the Hundred Years War, where Englishmen were viewed as "unkempt, uncouth, and insatiable" and the French were "cowardly and feminine" (Aberth 73). While these descriptions are obviously colored by tensions regarding the war, they do provide a simplified difference between the codes Lancelot and Gawain represent. Chivalry is closely tied to the protection of women and hence tied to femininity, whereas the heroic code could be seen as "uncouth, and insatiable" because of its ready acceptance of violence and conquest. Propaganda and horrific warfare fundamentally affects the way these knights interact with each other and the other's code.

At times—especially in texts that do not feature Lancelot—Gawain aligns temporarily with chivalric values or seems to be a synthesis of the two codes. In the romances like *Dame Ragnelle* this allows Gawain to be the paragon of knighthood, demonstrating both loyalty to his kinsmen and courtesy to women. However, in texts like Malory and the Stanzaic *Morte*, this can also reveal the extent of Gawain's failings as a knight who has temporary successes, but cannot quite adjust to the chivalric code. The fact that Lancelot is only mentioned briefly in *The Alliterative Morte*—when he does appear he is referred to as one of the "less men" and there is no indication of a

relationship with Guinevere—signals his lack of importance in the heroic value system. The heroic values and distinct British loyalties that are found in *The Alliterative Morte* result in this being the only text of the three epics where Gawain is portrayed as superior to Lancelot.

Sir Gawain: The Maidens' Knight

Texts like *The Alliterative Morte* that take place primarily on battlefields can more easily reach back to the historic heroic ideals because they are not concerned with court life or the comparatively insignificant quests of romance. While courtesy to women is a hallmark of the chivalric code, court life and women are largely excluded from the heroic code. The Gawain in the Stanzaic *Morte* falls somewhere in between these codes and his defense of women balances the more heroic aspects of his reputation. However, while some sections of Malory embrace this middle ground, generally Malory's depiction of Gawain's actions regarding women are less forgiving. The chivalric code is explicit in Malory's text, and as a part of it, Arthur declares that the knights must, "allwayes to do laydes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour:] strengthe hem in hir ryghts, and never to enforce them, upon payne of dethe" as part of a larger oath (75). In Malory's account, Gawain's ability to live up to this oath is mixed. In the section "Gawain, Ywain, and Marhalt," Gawain vows to help Sir Pellas finally achieve the love of Ettarde only to seduce her himself, "so she grained hym to fulfyllle all his desire" (102). While it is arguable that this is a greater offence to Pellas than to Ettarde—she admits that "of all men on lyve I hated [Pellas] moste" (102, 103) because of his persistent attempts to win her attention—Gawain has still deceived her by stating that he killed Pellas and slept with her while unwed. This, along with the

previous accidental beheading of a woman, are directly working against chivalric ideals, even though they are indirect reflections of heroic ethos, both ferocity in battle and claiming prizes of war.

After the beheading in “Torre and Pellinor,” Guinevere and a council of ladies declare that Gawain must “whyle he lyved to be with all ladyes and to fight for hir quarrels” (Malory 67), making Gawain a particular defender of women, although this is already stipulated in the Pentecostal Oath for all of the knights. While Gawain seems disregard this charge at times in Malory’s text, he does not fully abandon it. When Guinevere is on trial for her betrayal of Arthur, despite his love for the king, Gawain will not stand against her: “I woll never be in that place where so noble a queen as ys my lady dame Gwenyver shall take such a shamefull ende . . . my harte woll nat serve me for to se her dye, and hit shall never be seyde that ever I was of youre counceyle for her deth” (Malory 683). Considering Gawain’s well documented loyalty to Arthur, as well as Guinevere’s previous issues with Gawain like his testament of Lancelot’s love for Elaine (632), this is a bold step and purely chivalric. Besides creating a reason for Gawain to not be present for Guinevere’s execution, which is essential to the plot, this allows a moment of alignment between Gawain and Lancelot before their relationship is irreversibly damaged. Gawain does not prevent Arthur from executing Guinevere, but he has removed support for his kinsmen’s actions. It is also a moment of direct concern for reputation, where he specifically states that he will not be remembered as supporting his queen’s death. Gawain’s disapproval of Guinevere’s execution aligns him with Lancelot to a degree, which would seem to be favorable in Malory, but his lack of

action undercuts his position as either a heroic knight, a man of action, or chivalric knight, with a duty to women.

A nearly identical scene takes place in the Stanzaic *Morte*, but the text as a whole seems to uphold a more chivalrous version of Gawain throughout. Gawain and his brothers Gareth and Gahereys initially refuse to attend Guinevere's execution because "Of her they hadde grete pitee" (l. 1933). Even when Arthur calls them and his brothers are compelled to go, Gawain still refuses, "Gawain wolde never be ner beside / There any woman sholde be brent" (ll. 1938-39). This account allows for a more chivalric view of Gawain, as he stands by "any woman" as opposed to just one so great as his queen. Gawain's earlier encounters with Elaine, Maid of Astolat, support this. Gawain first meets Elaine while searching for Lancelot, who had previously resided with her family, and once Gawain learns of Elaine's love for Lancelot, he declares, "And I with all my might and main / Will be thy knight for his sake" (ll. 606-07). Although he states that he will serve Elaine for Lancelot's sake, Gawain still honors her specifically by naming her worthy to be Lancelot's beloved. While this is a misunderstanding of the situation—Lancelot does not return Elaine's love—the sentiment of Gawain's service to a worthy lady remains. This is reiterated when Arthur and Gawain discover Elaine's body. After the men sorrow over the loss of such a young and fair lady, Arthur turns to Gawain to know what they should do for her. Gawain advises:

Yif that ye will assent there-to,
Worshipfully we shull her lede
Into the palais and bury her so
As falles a dukes doughter in-deed. (ll. 1116-19)

Unlike his first encounter with Elaine, Gawain does not do this service for Lancelot, but for her alone. In Malory and the Stanzaic *Morte*, these encounters with Elaine and Guinevere create opportunities for Gawain to demonstrate his grasp of chivalric ideals and to momentarily escape the condemnation of being only a heroic knight. However, when Gawain ultimately fails to live up to these ideals, his momentary successes make his failure hold even greater significance. These moments of triumph show that Gawain knows the code of the court, so, in Malory, his actions cannot be explained solely by his heroic code. Malory's Gawain has a separate code, but is also simply incapable of living up to the court's chivalric ideals.

Dame Ragnelle provides perhaps the most obvious demonstration of Gawain's reputation in relation to women. The curse upon Dame Ragnelle doomed her to appear as a hag "[e]vyn tylle the best of Englonde / Had wedyd me verament, / And also he should geve me the sovereynté," which dictates two characteristics of the man who would break it (ll. 695-697). To be the "best of Englonde" implies skill and prowess, as well as honor, which are the attributes of both heroic and chivalric knights. However, within the values of the text and in order to give Dame Ragnelle the sovereignty she needs to break the spell, he would also need to be courteous, which is a hallmark of chivalry. These requirements allow Gawain to embrace chivalric values, without totally dismissing or working against those heroic ideals, becoming a type of synthesized knight. As Thomas Hahn points out in the introduction to *Dame Ragnelle*, "she provides Gawain with opportunities to place his spectacular courtesy on display, first towards Arthur, and then towards women," which again finds common ground between the two codes by showing loyalty to family and courtesy to women (42). These opportunities do

not go unseized. Dame Ragnelle chooses Gawain as her husband because she believes that he is the best in England, but she is still surprised by his goodness, “For thy sake I wold I were a fayre woman, / For thou art of so good wylle” (ll. 537-38). Since this text exists outside of the Malory tradition and likely has roots in Celtic tales (Caldwell 236), which are more sympathetic to Celtic knights like Gawain, it is able to portray a Gawain that synthesizes the power of his heroic image with the more contemporary chivalric values.

This tale is not the only one that shows Gawain’s honor through his role with women. In *The Alliterative Morte, Awntyrs*, and Malory, Gawain is seen accompanying or escorting Guinevere. Although in *Awntyrs* this means that Gawain is not participating in the hunt, it is an honor to be in the service of the queen and again demonstrates Arthur’s trust in him. It also allows Gawain to protect Guinevere from the perceived danger: “Agayn the grisly goost Sir Gawayn is gone; / He rayked oute at a res, for he was never drad,” and to be present for the prophesy from the ghost of Guinevere’s mother, which holds significant warnings for the court (*Awntyrs* ll. 111-12). These examples are not as explicit, but they reaffirm Gawain’s role as a protector of women, a role which much of the French tradition and *Cornwall* ignore. For example, one of the surviving scenes from *Cornwall* has Gawain declare his intention to “worke my will” on Cornwall’s daughter, in perhaps the lowest point for Gawain’s character in any of these six texts as it implies willful aggression against a woman and potentially rape (l. 156).

Because courtesy to women is so essential to chivalry, these interactions are able to reveal more about the values of characters like Gawain, who are not always attached

to chivalric values. In primarily chivalric texts, these moments of service to women are ones of success for Gawain, demonstrating that he is not completely lost to the code of the court. However, these instances also draw an implicit comparison to Lancelot, where he is present, which finds Gawain inferior in matters of chivalry.

“A Passing Hote Knight of Nature”

To negate these chivalric moments and to avoid too close of an alignment with Lancelot, Malory creates an image of Gawain as an aggressive and impetuous knight. This type of quick and violent action does not have the same value in Malory’s text, where they are at court as often as at battle, as it would heroic texts like *The Alliterative Morte*. Essentially in these final battles, Malory equates Gawain’s heroic values to evil will, while ignoring Gawain’s sense of duty to revenge his brothers. In the section “The Poisoned Apple,” another knight makes an attempt on Gawain’s life: “Gawayne was a passing hote knight of nature, and thys sir Pyonell hated sir Gawayne bycause of hys kynnesman sir Lamorakes dethe; and therefore, for pure envy and hate, sir Pyonell enpoysonde sertayn appylls for to enpoyson sir Gawayne” (Malory 613). Although Gawain is the intended victim in this scene, the motive for this attempted murder reveals Gawain’s past aggressions as well as his quick and violent temper. The phrase “hote knight of nature” suggests a man easily angered and this is proven by his killing of Lamorak. The mention of Pyonell’s “envy” is a curious addition, which suggests that this knight is not only attempting revenge for his kinsman, but also some sort of revenge for Gawain’s unjust privilege in court. There is a sentiment surrounding this scene that suggests that Gawain has escaped punishment for many impetuous acts that have alienated him from other members of the court. It is significant as well that the offences

Pyonell ascribes to Gawain would not be crimes in the heroic code—nor would Pyonell’s vengeance—but are shown as failures in the code that is prevalent in Malory’s court.

In contrast to this, in the same scene in the Stanzaic *Morte* no motive is given for an unnamed squire to attempt to murder Gawain “[w]ith a poison that he hath wrought / To slay Gawain, yif that he might” (ll. 842-43). This lack of explicit motive could be attributed to many things, but primarily it removes any blame from Gawain or his previous actions. The scene’s placement relatively early in the text contributes to this lack of blame, particularly when compared to Malory where it comes quite late and Gawain has been shown failing the court’s code repeatedly. The attempted murder in Malory serves to show Gawain’s alienation from other factions of the court through his differing code of behavior, which disrupts the brotherhood of the Round Table. The pursuit of revenge within the Knights of the Round Table creates divisions of loyalty between different groups of kinsmen and supporters, which ultimately contributes to the Round Table’s downfall. The repeated violence Gawain commits in Malory seems to derive from one of two sources: either his desire for revenge or from a blind rage, which results in an unintended victim. Gawain’s accidental killing of a maiden has already been mentioned, but this is not the only killing he commits through rash action. Just before Gawain’s knighting, he plans revenge on another knight, “Yondir knight ys putte to grete worship, which grevith me sore, for he slewe oure fadir kynge Lott. Therefore I woll sle hym” (Malory 63). This same type of family dedication and action in the battlefields of *The Alliterative Morte* would have been lauded, but here it shows the

perils of heroic action for Malory's world by signaling fractures in the fabric of the court throughout, which will eventually contribute to the fall of the Round Table.

Malory also turns Gawain's supernatural increase of strength with the sun against him, as another example of the failings of power without chivalry. Gawain's strength is present in many of the tales featuring Gawain, which may derive from his roots a Celtic hero with links to a sun god (Hahn 3). It is also mentioned in the Stanzaic *Morte*: "His strength sholde wax in such a space, / From the under-time til noon," although it is not dwelt on (ll. 2806-07). Malory refers to this ability earlier in the text: "sir Gawayne, fro hit was nine of the klok, wexed ever strengre and strengre, for by than hit came to the howre of no one he had three tymes his might encreded" (96), but as Gawain fights Lancelot, this strength become nefarious: "ever as sir Gawaynes might encreded, rygth so encreded hys wynde and hys evyll wyll" (706). This statement obviously condemns Gawain's pursuit of revenge, although his actions remain true to his heroic code by attempting to fulfill a blood feud. Kennedy suggests that the "only time Gawain betrays his Heroic code is when he fails to exact vengeance for the deaths of Aggravaine and his two sons, and even this failure can be explained as part of his attempt to save Arthur" (293). Kennedy's argument regarding the earlier deaths of Gawain's kinsmen reaffirms his actions here while attempting to avenge Gareth and Gahereys. Although Malory finds repeated faults in Gawain's code, he still "lives strictly according to his code of ethics, that is to say, that he acts consistently to safeguard the honour of his family" (Kennedy 292). Kennedy is here comparing Gawain to his brothers Mordred and Aggravaine, who pretend family honor is their motive, but his strict adherence explains many of Gawain's actions and missteps.

Gawain's Blame and Lancelot's Forgiveness

The revenge for the deaths of Gareth and Gahereys is the primary conflict between Gawain and Lancelot, but it is far from the only one. Lancelot appears prominently in both Malory and the Stanzaic *Morte*, and he is largely understood as the chivalric ideal, which necessarily places him in opposition to Gawain as the heroic ideal. Even as the heroic knight, Gawain is routinely defeated by Lancelot in feats of arms. Malory states that Lancelot is one of the six knights that have bested Gawain—“for all his thryse double myghte that he had ... thes six knyghts had the bettir of sir Gawayne” (Malory 97)—although throughout the text more than the six knights named are shown defeating Gawain, which further undercuts Gawain's value. It emerges later in the text that not only has Lancelot bested Gawain, but Gawain has never beaten Lancelot: “the kynge wold nat suffir sir Gawayne to go frome hym, for never had sir Gawayne the bettir and sir Lancelot were in the fylde” (624). It is also explicitly stated that Lancelot has succeeded where Gawain has previously failed, such as in the rescuing of the woman trapped in the scalding water; the observers of Lancelot's rescue state, “sir Gawayne was here, and he nyght nat helpe her, and so he leffte her in payne styllle' ... nevermyght she be delyverde oute of the paynes unto the tyme the beste knight of the worlde had takyn her by the honde” (478). Lancelot and Gawain are both so closely aligned with their respective codes in Malory's text that the failure of a knight must be read as the failure of his code as well. While Malory never explicitly states the superiority of chivalry to the heroic code, it is more than evident in Lancelot's repeated triumphs over Gawain.

Lancelot's greatness in the Stanzaic *Morte* comes less at the expense of Gawain, but still creates a hierarchy between the two knights. Early in the text Arthur declares Lancelot's greatness:

Of all the world the beste knight,
Of beautee and of bountee,
And sithe is none so much of might,
At every deede best is he. (ll.124-27)

Lancelot is so essential to life at court that there are several moments of Arthur and Gawain rejoicing at his return: "Launcelot when that they sigh / Were never men on molde so fain. /.../ Was never tidandes to them so light" (ll. 706-10). The sorrow at his absence is enough to lead to Gawain's ceaseless search for Lancelot in order to return him to court: "Til that he have Launcelot seen, / Night ne day ne will he bide" (ll. 550-51). Besides the implicit competition between knights to be the best, Aronstein suggests that the Stanzaic *Morte* portrays Lancelot as "absolutely crucial to [the court's] continued success" (49). Gawain's departures in order to find Lancelot reiterate this, by demonstrating that the court can spare Gawain if it means Lancelot's return. While the Stanzaic *Morte* is less explicit about Gawain's failings, the strength and value placed on Lancelot signal Gawain's inferiority in comparison.

These two texts also show a subtler version of preference toward Lancelot in the distribution of forgiveness and blame. While it has been mentioned that Malory's Gawain is unpunished for some trespasses due to his relationship with Arthur, Gawain seems to carry all of his faults and missteps with him, while Lancelot's are forgiven or overlooked. The most notable of these is Lancelot's relationship with Guinevere, which first appeared in the English tradition with the Stanzaic *Morte* (Windeatt 96). This text makes the relationship central by introducing it early: "Launcelot left with the queen, /

... / For love that was them between, / He made enchesoun for to abide” (ll. 53-56).

The text treats it as if the affair were an open secret in court (Aronstein 51). This openness and Gawain’s reluctance to have it exposed to Arthur by Aggravaine displays a type of forgiveness of Lancelot because, although it humiliates the king, if exposed the resulting division of the court would be equally harmful to his image:

That we are of the kinges kin,
And Launcelot is so mikel of main
That suche wordes were better blinne.
Well wot thou, brother Agravain,
Thereof sholde we but harmes win;
Yet were it better to hele and laine
Than war and wrake thus to begin. (ll. 1689-95)

The extent to which the court is aware of the relationship is less clear in Malory’s work. After Aggravaine proves Lancelot’s treachery, Arthur is still reluctant to acknowledge that it is true: “the kyng was full lothe that such a noyse shulde be upon sir Lancelot and his quene; for the kyng had a demyng of hit, but he wold nat here thereof, for sir Lancelot had done so much for hym and for the quene so many tymes that wyte you well the kyng loved him passing well” (Malory 674). Windeatt suggests that Malory avoids the sexualization of Guinevere and Lancelot’s relationship, only showing them together in bed when the plot demands, which allows him to primarily show the relationship more innocently, as one of loyalty, not lust (89-90). By avoiding an explicit treatment of their affair, Malory manages to retain a purity to Lancelot and Guinevere’s love, making them more sympathetic in the process. Lancelot’s loyalty to his love could then be seen as the ultimate fulfillment of a chivalric knight’s duty, as it is explicitly stated in the Pentecostal Oath that the Knights of the Round Table are supposed to live by.

Lancelot's transgression is one that brings major consequences for the whole court, but is not given the same emphasis as lesser offences by other knights. When Gawain initiates the quest for the Sangreal, Arthur mourns the dissolution of the Round Table and blames Gawain: "ye have nygh slayne me for the avow that ye have made, for thorow you ye have berauffte me the fayryst and the trewyst of knighthood ... Ye have betrayed me, for never shall my courte be amended by you. But ye woll never be so sory for me as I for you" (Malory 522-23). Gawain's decision to search for the Grail is one that would bring honor to Arthur's court—and does through the successes of Galahad and Percival, although they do not return to court—but it is treated as a betrayal, whereas Lancelot's actual betrayal seems to have significantly less effect on the king. It is also significant that Lancelot is never punished for this adultery in either text. Even when Lancelot retires in sorrow to a religious life, he is one of the only Knights of the Round Table left alive. When first accused he flees to Joyous Gard and so is not present while Guinevere is on trial, but even when Arthur and Gawain take war to Joyous Gard, it is primarily so that Gawain can avenge his brothers. In Malory, Gawain says the fight is for himself and Arthur: "I shulde do batayle with the myne owne hondis, body for body, and preve hit uppon the that thou hast ben both false unto myne uncle, kynge Arthur, and to me bothe" (697), but this is still ambiguous because Arthur lost good knights at the hands of Lancelot and his men. There is some acknowledgment of sorrow, if not guilt, at the end of the texts, but Gawain is still given a larger portion of the blame for the Round Table's final downfall. Arthur's general unconcern with bringing Lancelot to justice lessens the severity of his crime in a way that Gawain did not receive for lesser indiscretions.

The most significant interaction of Lancelot and Gawain comes in their battle at Joyous Gard, which Gawain initiates to revenge the deaths of Gareth and Gahereys. Both Malory and the Stanzaic *Morte* use this scene to juxtapose the knights' opposing values; Gawain privileges blood over the chivalric brotherhood, unlike Lancelot. While Gawain is driven by his loyalty and need to avenge his family, Lancelot maintains a reluctance to fight men still considered to be brothers of the Round Table: "In the feld let not my lord be, / Ne that thyself with me not fight" (Stanzaic *Morte* ll. 2148-49). In Malory, where Lancelot has an established connection to Gareth, the conflict between these two brotherhoods is obvious, but Lancelot's dedication to his code is still displayed in the Stanzaic *Morte* by his reluctance to fight Arthur and Arthur's commitment to stand by Gawain. Even once Lancelot is drawn into battle in the Stanzaic *Morte* he avoids fighting or harming Arthur:

The king was ever ner beside
 And hew on him with all his main,
 And he so courtais was that tide
 O dint that he nolde smite again. (ll. 2170-73)

Since these texts exist in worlds oriented toward chivalry, like the chivalry Lancelot demonstrates amidst the war, Gawain's pursuit is not explicitly justified as a heroic fulfillment of a blood feud. The only reason explicitly given is Gawain's immense sorrow because of his brothers' deaths: "So sore his herte began to colde, / Almost he wolde himselfe slo" (Stanzaic *Morte* ll. 1988-89). However, there is some expectation of Gawain's reaction, as, in both texts, it is advised to not tell Gawain of his brothers' deaths: "no man telle sir Gawayne of the deth of hys two brethirne, for I am sure ... he wyll go nygh oute of hys mynde" (Malory 685). While there is a sense of duty in Gawain's attempt at revenge, these scenes are charged with emotion uncharacteristic for

knights. This demonstrates both the intensity of his family loyalty and the betrayal that this loss came by the hands of his friend and brother-in-arms. Lancelot's ability to abstain from acting on the emotions surrounding his actions reveal his role as an inhuman ideal of chivalry, whereas Gawain comes from a tradition that embraced fierce tempers and sorrow for lost loved ones.

Lancelot's reluctance to fight his brothers-in-arms seems to lend to his depiction as morally superior; however, Gawain's actions reveal a desperation suitable for a man who has lost most of his family in a short time. After months of battle at Joyous Gard, when Gawain finally meets Lancelot in battle and lies at his mercy, Gawain asks Lancelot to kill him: "'Why wythdrawyst thou the?' seyde sir Gawayne. 'Turne agayne, false traytore knight, and sle me oute! For and thou leve me thus, anone as I am hole I shall do batayle with the agayne'" (Malory 704), which Lancelot refuses because he will not kill an unarmed man. This declaration recalls earlier moments in Malory's text when Gawain did wrongfully kill unarmed men rather than showing mercy. Gawain refused to give mercy where it was requested, which makes those killings shameful in the chivalric tradition. In his fight with Gawain, Lancelot appears to be showing mercy, but I contend that Gawain's request for death is a request for a different kind of mercy. Gawain has been consumed by revenge and has promised that one of them must die (Malory 695). In the Stanzaic *Morte* this is worded as "Nay, cordement thar thee never ween / Til one of us have other slain" (ll. 2426-27), which means literally that he will continue to fight until either he or Lancelot is dead, yet it also has the connotation that he cannot be at peace with himself. This is evidenced in his return to battle repeatedly despite being gravely injured, "On foot might he no ferther go; / But wightly his sword

about he waned, / For ever he was both keen and thro" (ll. 2821-23). Gawain's relentlessness is the type of effort valued by the heroic code—he retains his decision to pursue both battle and revenge to their conclusion, even if it means his own death—but in texts primarily concerned with chivalry it becomes his downfall.

Lancelot is not emotionless; he expresses sorrow for his treachery and the war: "The teres from his eyen ran; / He said, 'Alas,' with sighing sore, / 'That ever yet this war began!'" (Stanzaic *Morte* ll. 2203-05). However, he is removed from the cause of the court and his concerns are personal when he retreats to Joyous Gard, rather than social. Robert W. Hanning suggests that "[i]n a chivalric plot, our final concern should be ... private self-fulfillment" (59), which he contrasts with epics and the idea that the large context determines how actions are judged. Gawain's quest for vengeance, while largely personal, also holds implications for the court as a whole and can be justified by both the context and his code. The only thing that finally calls Gawain away from this war is the news of Mordred's treachery. Defending Arthur and his kingdom takes precedence; loyalty to living family and the lord's honor outweighs revenge for the dead. The return to fight Mordred provides another sense of obligation for Gawain, as well, because it is his half-brother that threatens the court. Upon Arthur's departure to fight Lancelot (or the Romans, in the case of *The Alliterative Morte*) Mordred is made steward to rule in his stead and begins an attempt to retain the kingdom as his own. While Gawain is not responsible for his brother's actions, he likely feels some amount of guilt in Malory and the Stanzaic *Morte* because he was the reason that Arthur left court to begin with (Kennedy 293). This culpability becomes evident in Malory in the moments the dying Gawain has to reflect on what has occurred.

A Hero's Death

The combination of these two conflicts, where both exist, results in Gawain's death, but the manner of his death varies, ultimately revealing each text's view of the character and his code. In Malory's account, Gawain and his heroic values fall to a superior chivalric code, making it clear that these archaic values cannot survive in the mythic chivalric world embraced by the 15th century. In this text Gawain never meets his half-brother in battle but dies after being hit on an old wound given to him by Lancelot. As he is dying, Gawain pens a letter to Lancelot in order to ask for forgiveness and laments, "but alas that I wolde nat accorde with hym" (709). While many critics view this last scene as Gawain's redemption, this repentance also demeans him as a heroic knight. By admitting fault in seeking revenge, Gawain and the text devalue his sense of honor and the code that led him to that point. Not only has Lancelot physically defeated Gawain, but chivalry has ultimately defeated heroism. The letter also requests that Lancelot assist in the defense of Arthur and his rightful place as king, "for all love that ever was betwyxte us, make no taryng, but com over the see in all the goodly haste that ye may, wyth youre noble knyghtes, and rescow that noble kyng that made the knyght" (710), which cements that Gawain has failed in his defense of Arthur, his king and kinsman, in the final failure of the heroic knight.

Each text features a eulogy by Arthur for his nephew, but in Malory this takes place before Gawain dies. Arthur is still able to mourn, but Gawain is present to refute Arthur's claims and to accept blame, cementing his failure to the court. As with the letter to Lancelot, this admission of fault negates some of the heroic values that Gawain lived by: "thorow my wyfulnes I was causer of myne owne dethe ... And thorow me

and (my) pryde ye have all thys shame and disease” (709). The presence of the word “shame” is particularly significant given the focus and importance placed on familial reputation and honor in the heroic code. Gawain accepts the blame for ruining his uncle and the kingdom, although it could just as easily be seen that Lancelot and Mordred had equal, if not greater, shares in the blame. Even in Arthur’s declaration of love to his dying nephew, Lancelot takes some of the praise: “here now thou lyghest, the man in the worlde that I loved moste ... in youre person and in sir Lancelot I moste had my joy and myne affyaunce. And now I have loste my joy of you bothe” (709). While it may be redeeming that Gawain admits his role in the troubles now surrounding the court, Malory uses this possible redemption to call attention to Gawain’s failings and Lancelot’s superiority.

The cause of Gawain’s death in the Stanzaic *Morte* closely resembles that of Malory, but the context surrounding it does not allow a letter of repentance or a forsaking of the heroic code. Again, Gawain dies from a hit to an old wound as he was about to enter battle with Mordred:

His woundes greved him full sore.
One hit him upon the olde wound
With a tronchon of an ore;
There is good Gawain gone to ground,
That speche spake he never more. (ll. 3069-73)

While this closely resembles his death in Malory, although with more specificity, here Gawain’s death is instant. The death is far from heroic, but some account to his strength and dedication is given by the fact that he would march into battle as severely injured as he was. The text does not dwell on Gawain’s death, only returning nearly a hundred lines later when Arthur discovers his body. This lack of attention acts, as much of the Stanzaic *Morte* does, as though Gawain is a means to an end. His death by a wound

from Lancelot shows Lancelot's superiority, as it does in Malory, but the focus here is instead on the effect Gawain's death has on Arthur:

Arthur then changed all his cheer;
What wonder though his herte was sore!
His soster son, that was him dere,
Of him sholde he here never more. (ll. 3140-44)

This moment is also only briefly dwelt on, but shows Arthur's sorrow and the significance of a sister's son. Benson and Foster point out that the Stanzaic *Morte* compressed its French source significantly, so while the emotions are present, they are not dwelt on as they may be in other texts. This compression may explain why Gawain's death receives so little attention, even though he was a more positive character in the Stanzaic *Morte* than in Malory. The Stanzaic *Morte* does retain Arthur's vision of Gawain after his death, a scene also present in Malory. Gawain offers advice to his uncle, but is also seen as surrounded by lords and ladies that "While I was man on life to lende, / Against their fon I fought them forn" (ll. 3210-11). This scene's presence in both this text and Malory allows a final testament of Gawain's goodness, as flawed as he may have been. In the dream Gawain provides information of Lancelot's eventual arrival, in an attempt to save Arthur's life. Although Mordred subverts these plans by refusing to delay the battle, the vision was also a last opportunity for the ever loyal heroic knight to protect his family.

The Alliterative Morte is the only of the three epics to give Gawain a truly heroic death. Since Lancelot is only a very minor figure in this text, Arthur and his men return from their campaigns in Europe to take back the kingdom from Mordred, who has married Guinevere and got her pregnant. Upon returning to Britain, Gawain leads a company in and hews down men in order to fight his half-brother, reaching the battle

even before Arthur: “And for wondrousome and will all his wit failed, / That wode als a wild beste he went at the gainest; / All wallowed on blood there he away passed” (ll. 3836-38). The ferocity of this battle is a prime example of power and ability that heroic ideals value. After Gawain reaches Mordred and they have an extended battle, Mordred kills Gawain: “With a trenchand knife the traitour him hitted / Through the helm and the hed on high on the brain; / And thus Sir Gawain is gone, the good man of armes” (ll. 3856-58). While in the other two texts Mordred is one of the many causes of the Round Table’s downfall, in *The Alliterative Morte* he is the sole cause and a far more complicated character. Where Mordred never mentions Gawain’s death in Malory or the Stanzaic *Morte*, immediately following his victory over Gawain in *The Alliterative Morte*, Mordred mourns the loss of his brother:

“He was makless on molde, man, by my trewth.
 This was Sir Gawain the good, the gladdest of other,
 And the graciosest gome that under God lived,”

.

Yet that traitour als tite teres let he fall. (ll. 3875-86)

This sorrow and momentary repentance is “unprecedented in Arthurian tradition” (Benson and Foster), but here serves to reiterate the importance of family loyalty to heroic knights; Mordred’s actions may not be heroic, but he comes from the same customs and codes as Gawain. Where deaths from old wounds revealed Gawain’s abilities and code to be weaker than Lancelot’s in Malory and the Stanzaic *Morte*, in *The Alliterative Morte*, Mordred’s sorrow confirms Gawain’s greatness. By dying in battle and in defense of his kinsman and king, even if that necessitates that he opposes another kinsman, Gawain is given the death of a hero.

The hero's end is given significantly more attention than in either of the other two epics; Gawain's death is the focus of over a hundred lines of eulogy after equal time spent on his final battle. Besides Mordred's eulogy for his brother, the narrator of the text provides one, as does Arthur. Bremmer speaks of the importance of tragedy in heroic narratives and the knowledge that either victory or defeat will lead to glory and fame for the true heroic knight (76). This posthumous glory is clear in the case of Gawain: "For he was lion aloved in lands ynow; / Had thou knowen him, Sir King, in kith there he lenged, / ... / Thou wolde have dole for his dede the dayes of thy life" (ll. 3881-885). Gawain has been compared to Arthur throughout the text, suggesting his potential, but here that reaches its culmination as Arthur declares, "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" (ll. 3962-64). This is the most explicit declaration of Gawain's worthiness in any of the texts. The text has previously defined and paralleled Gawain to his uncle, but here Arthur declares that Gawain surpasses him.

I have already mentioned how Gawain's death has a direct impact on the outcome of this final battle, but it also has a direct effect on how Arthur continues. Arthur is depicted throughout the text as a fearless and aggressive warrior king, but at the death of his sister's son, he is openly emotional and affected as he continues to fight. Although there is no vision of Gawain after death in this text—generally *The Alliterative Morte* avoids supernatural aspects that are common in other Arthurian traditions—Arthur still uses his nephew as inspiration. Both Malory and the Stanzaic *Morte* required posthumous reassurance of Gawain's goodness and worth, but his value

is clear throughout this text. Arthur also fulfills his duty to his kinsman by seeking vengeance for his death, “Ne regne in my royaltees, ne hold my Round Table / Til thy dede, my dere, be duly revenged” (ll. 4005-05). While this desire for revenge continues the heroic ethos of the text, it also provides a measurement of Gawain’s importance, because as previously mentioned, Arthur demonstrates no sorrow at Guinevere and Mordred’s betrayals, only anger.

Arthurian tradition, although remarkably consistent considering the extent of its reach, adapted to and was molded by the times and customs that produced it. Sir Gawain became a casualty to a shifting value system and to the French tradition, as chivalric knights like Lancelot became the heroes still seen in Arthurian tales today. Although some texts portray Gawain as both a heroic and chivalric knight, he largely serves as a beacon of a greater mythic past and of British values. His connection to Arthur made him a fundamental figure in medieval texts, although even that significance has faded recently. Malory’s place as the primary source text has left modern interpretations bereft of the full power and heroism that the Round Table could have embodied.

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