Noble Games and Lethal Contracts:

Redefining Chivalric Honor in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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Abstract

Paradoxically, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is often considered by its readers both as easy to approach, because it tells a great story with magnificent mastery, and vexingly enigmatic. While many interesting things have been said on many aspects of the romance, it seems that, no matter what approach critics choose, *Sir Gawain* retains its essential elusiveness.

In this paper, I use new research (Richard Firth Green's <u>Crisis of Truth</u>, 1999) that fills an important gap in our understanding of late fourteenth-century English culture, to attempt to make sense of the ambiguity in *Sir Gawain*. According to Green, in late fourteenth-century England *trouthe/trawthe*/loyalty, the central ethical/legal concept of feudal society (also the central concept in the poem), was undergoing a semantic shift related to major social changes. It was emptying of its meaning of "loyalty" (loyalty to social obligation through one's word of honor) and acquiring the new meaning of "factual." The emergence of a new legal tool, the written contract, and of the new social relationships of bastard feudalism was slowly undermining the cultural value of the feudal oral oath as a legal tool and as the dominant moral imperative. In this paper, I argue that, in *Sir Gawain*, the poet engages in an inquiry of the feudal ideal of absolute loyalty, embodied in Gawain's chivalric identity, which results in a change of attitude toward that ideal. I make sense of the ambiguities of the poem in terms of this process of change.

To pursue my argument, I divide the paper into four main sections. In the first section, I examine the socio-cultural shift that in late fourteenth-century England underlay the ambiguity of meaning of "loyalty." I argue that the decrease in loyalty's cultural value resulted in an ideological difficulty for the feudal landowning class and its notion of chivalric identity. In the second section, I show that *Sir Gawain* is concerned with that ideological difficulty, and questions the ideal of absolute loyalty. In the third section, I argue that, in the episode of the castle of Hautdesert, the feudal ideology of loyalty represented by Sir Gawain is subverted by different notions of chivalric identity, some of which are more akin to the bastard feudal outlook. Finally, in the last section, I show how the ambiguities in the poem are best understood as resulting from the representation of different versions of chivalric identity.

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Introduction

After finishing the last lines of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the alert

contemporary reader often sits in puzzlement. He feels that he just read a medieval romance

filled with arcane forms and values while, at the same time, he is unsettled by the distinctively

modern way in which the poem concludes. On the one hand, Sir Gawain is bound to fulfill a

strange and, to our view, unnaturally harsh legal agreement, which was, however, made in a

game. In order to sustain its interest a contemporary mind must treat the seeming narrative

incoherence as a function of the medieval provenance of the text. Yet, on the other hand, at

the end of the poem, where in a medieval text one would expect to find the authoritative and

moral presence of the author, *Sir Gawain*'s poet is nowhere to be read. As any Modernist

writer might, he abandons his reader in the midst of complex and contradictory moral

judgments made by his characters about a sash of green silk.

Hardly better off, most professional readers of the poem have found its ambiguities an

endless challenge for interpretation. David Aers[1] argues that the ending of the poem

emphasizes a disjunction between the knight's private self and the identity of his community.

If one recognizes, he says, that "chivalric culture and a neo-feudal way of thought [were] no

merely superstructural decoration but crucial 'cement' in countering potentially dangerous

divisions in landowning society during the fourteenth century," then the disjunction in question

can be seen in its full significance. It "both prefigures and contributes" to a long process of

historical transitions that led to the disintegration of the chivalric community. According to

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[1] David Aers, "'In Arthurus Day': Community, Virtue, and Individual Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430 (London; New York: Routledge, 1988); see especially 176-78 (quotation, 177).

Aers, the poem uncovers profound historical issues the poet leaves unresolved and unexamined: "He closed his poem and walked away, leaving it to the history it could not control."[2]

Ralph Hanna, on the other hand, analyzes four possible meanings for the problematic green girdle and deems them all inadequate when read back into the narrative as a whole. He concludes that the major point of the ambiguity is to draw attention to the difficulty of asserting meaning in the first place: "the multitude of interpretations to which characters subject a green silk belt adorned with gold thread suggests both the difficulty of knowing a simple physical object and the potential caprice involved in all human claims to knowledge."[3] While Aers attempts to historicize *Sir Gawain* within too broad a historical frame and finds no substantial meaning in the ambiguities of its ending, Hanna finds the ambiguities themselves to be the intended meaning, but one of a universal kind about the human condition.

Too often, readings of the poem have shied away from attempting to answer questions that link the poem closely to the issues of its era and to its geopolitical location, producing, as

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[2] Aers, 177-178. To make this analysis, Aers uses Mervyn James's study Society, Politics, and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). James's argument, however, concerns the 15th century. In addition, Aers seems to assume that in traditional societies, such as the European feudal one, individuals do not always have private feelings and desires separate from public identity. He assumes that the disjunction between these feelings and a public identity emerges over time. In the world of romance, traditionally the rift between individual desire and public need is bridged with endings that artificially bond the differences. In the real world, ideological contradictions have a way of living on for centuries until harsh realities such as technological and economic changes might finally disintegrate a community. According to Maurice Keen, radical changes in chivalric society only occurred at the beginning of the 16th century, when new war technology and new royal fiscality transformed the business of making war. The fundamental coherence of the chivalric class and of its identity turned on its war-making activity, not on the coherence of private and public feelings about the virtues that justify it. For more on changes in chivalric society see Maurice Keen, Chivalry (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1984), 239-49.

[3] Ralph Hanna III, "Unlocking what's Locked: Gawain's Green Girdle," Viator 14 (1983): 289-302. (302). Hanna does allude to the possibility of a connection between the idea of difficulty in signification and fourteenth-century philosophy, but briefly in a footnote, 302, n. 17.

a result, interpretations that require the wholesale suppression of major aspects of *Sir Gawain*. To make his argument that the poet does not attend to the historical issue he uncovers, Aers must ignore both the ambiguities that precede the ending, and the comedy of the poem. To make his argument that the poem has a universal meaning, Hanna must ignore the poet's own historicizations.[4] In this paper, I will combine Aers's impulse to connect the poem to its socio-historical context with Hanna's insight that the poem's ambiguities are part of the substance of its meaning.

In his influential 1965 study of the poem, John Burrow wrote that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* "is a poem about truth, in the medieval sense of the word."[5] Until Richard Firth Green's recent study on the meaning of truth in late fourteenth-century England,[6] however, the scholarly community had only an imprecise sense of what truth in the medieval sense might be. According to Green, the difficulty stemmed from the shift of the concept during that period—a

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[4] For reviews of scholarship see Morton W. Bloomfield, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: An Appraisal," PMLA 76 (March 1961): 7-19, and Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman, "The Current State of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Criticism," The Chaucer Review 27 (June 1993): 401-12. Both articles, written 30 years apart, call for studies that connect the poem to the social history of its context. There are many readings that connect the poem to its intellectual context, however, especially theological. Two notable examples are Arthur Ross's Medieval Sign Theory and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), which interprets the poem within its broad intellectual context; and Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman's From Pearl to Gawain: Forme to Fynisment (Miami: University Press of Florida,1995), which attends to the Christianity of the four poems in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript (the only extant manuscript containing *Sir Gawain, Pearl, Cleanness and Patience*). Although most scholars have assumed for a long time that these four poems were written by the same anonymous author, this last study is part of a recent trend in criticism that interprets the poems in relation to each other rather than in isolation. That criticism tends toward theological or semiotic readings that "Christianize" or universalize the meaning of the poem. I have chosen to summarize Aers and Hanna's arguments because they are representative of major trends in the romance's criticism, and of its problems. What seems to unify that criticism is its difficulty in dealing with the ambiguities of the poem. In addition, as I believe that *Sir Gawain*'s secular aspects are the most significant, I ignore the three "religious poems" (*Pearl, Cleanness and Patience*) and rather relate *Sir Gawain* to the romance tradition.

[5] John A. Burrow, A Reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), vii. Hereafter cited in the text.

[6] Richard Firth Green, A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvani a Press, 1999). Hereafter cited in the text.

shift that was part and symptom of a larger social movement. I would suggest that to attempt to understand the ambiguities of *Sir Gawain*, one needs to understand how the poem positions itself in relation to that semantic and social movement of truth.

In the late fourteenth century, a social malaise--centered around a changing feudal social structure, its legal system, and "truth," its key moral ideal of loyalty--pervaded English society and much of the literary production of the era. In this essay, I argue that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* engages its audience in an inquiry into the ideal of truth/loyalty, as embodied in chivalric identity, which results in a change of attitude toward that ideal within the poem. The literary chivalric identity that emerges from the inquiry can separate itself from absolute fidelity to the feudal oath, while retaining its chivalric honor. By this argument, the ambiguities of judgment on Gawain's ethical conduct at the end of the poem are functions of differing positions on the value of the ethical ideal of perfect loyalty.

In the first section of this paper, "Shifting Truth in Late Fourteenth-Century England," I discuss the socio-cultural phenomena that underlay the conceptual and, thus, semantic shift of truth/loyalty. I argue that this shift, accompanied as it was by a decrease in the cultural value of the ideal of loyalty, contributed to an ideological difficulty for a landowning class that had equated loyalty with the essence of its identity. In the second section, "The Green Knight as Cultural Critique," I show that *Sir Gawain* concerns itself directly with that ideological

problem.[7] I argue that in the Green Knight episode, the poet questions the chivalric ideology of perfect truth/loyalty as represented by the Knights of the Round Table, through the use of ambiguities and ironies. In the third section, "Hautdesert: An Idealist's Wasteland," I show that in the episode of the castle of Hautdesert the ideal of *trawthe* is confronted with practical aspects of knightly endeavors mystified in the ideology of *trawthe*. In the last section, "Reconstructing Chivalric Honor," I argue that the blatant ambiguity of the end of the poem is best understood as resulting from the representation of different notions of chivalry.

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[7] I am using the term "concern" in the same sense as Donald R. Howard in The Three Temptations.:Medieval Man in Search of the World (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966). It is "something that *happens* in the relationship between the poet, his culture, and his work. Unlike 'intention,' it does not suggest an understood purpose . . . . The poet's consciousness of his concern is a matter of degree: he may be oblivious to it or wholly conscious of it, or he may be unaware of the psychological forces working upon him which bring him toward awareness of it . . . . The concern of the poem is the central dialectical force; it is historically and culturally determined. It is the area of struggle, of 'tension' or 'paradox,' in which particular cultural elements converge within a formal structure and become a whole," 31-32. As in this view the poet and the poem are historically inextricably determined, I use them interchangeably.

Shifting Truth in Late Fourteenth-Century England

In late fourteenth-century English culture, the word truth (*trouthe* in Chaucer's Southeast Midlands, *trawthe* in the *Gawain*-poet's Northwest Midlands), the central concept in my argument on *Sir Gawain*, is consistently used by poets such as Chaucer, Langland, and the *Gawain*-poet, and by legal writers such as notaries and lawyers. This frequency of use, as well as the significance of the contexts in which it appears, makes it the "archetypal keyword" and the "dominant characterizing concern" of the period (Green, 1-4).[8] During these few decades, the meaning of the word *trouthe/trawthe* shifted ambiguously from "loyalty" to the modern meaning of "conformity to fact." According to Green, loyalty--the central moral ideal of the Middle Ages--was at this time in the process of losing cultural force as an ethical and legal instrument (Green, 1-8). The change was often viewed in the late Middle Ages as a process of moral decay that threatened social order, and was expressed in the fourteenth century's obsessive literary and legal wrestling with *trouthe/trawthe*.

What socio-cultural phenomena might underlie this semantic shift of the concept of *trawthe*, so central in *Sir Gawain*, and why is it seen as a threat to social order?[9] The social

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[8] Green uses Raymond Williams' concept, "keyword," which Williams expounded in <u>Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society</u> (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 9-24. What Williams calls a keyword is a culturally significant term that is in the process of shifting in meaning because it is shifting in conceptualization. These kinds of terms relate to the practices and institutions of a culture, and are "keywords in two connected senses: they are significant, binding words in certain activities [practices] and their interpretations, and significant, indicative words in certain forms of thought [ideology]" (13). In Williams' view, to understand these "difficult words" one needs to figure out to what complex of practices the words belong--one needs a "historical shape" to understand the complexity of the changing semantics and its associated cultural forms. Here Green calls *trouthe/trawthe* an "archetypal keyword" since it is not just one keyword among others but the most central term of feudal society. His study attempts to achieve a historical shape of understanding for the changing conceptualization behind the semantic shift of *trouthe/trawthe* in late fourteenth-century England.

[9] I am not thinking in terms of causal relationships but rather in terms of symptoms and organic interactions among a variety of factors. For a more complete view of factors of change specifically in fourteenth-century England see Maurice Keen, <u>English Society in the Later Middle Ages 1348-1500</u> (London: Penguin Press, 1990). According to Keen, crucial factors of change included the Hundred Years War with France, which increased the

roots of this "crisis of truth" reach back much earlier in the Middle Ages, to the genesis of the feudal structure of society. After the collapse of the Roman Empire and the central authority it provided, a need arose for mutual help in promoting social order. The relationships of personal dependence that emerged were mapped onto those of domestic loyalty, creating a psychic bond of emotional intensity between lord and vassal. At the same time, these relationships included economic arrangements. They consisted of exchange of land (in hereditary tenure) for military service, which attached a family to the soil and created ancestral relationships. These relationships and their arrangements became the central feature of feudalism at the base of a new social structure and social forms that expanded between the tenth and the twelfth centuries.[10]

While economic arrangements were the foundation of these feudal relationships, the ideology[11] that evolved (and underlay the identity of the landowning class) focused on the virtue of loyalty. Especially early on, the exchange of land was presented as symbolic of the relationship of loyalty between vassal and lord rather than as central to it (Bloch, 252). Later (starting in the eleventh century), the hereditary nature of the arrangements made it possible to ignore the reality that any vassal/lord relationships always started as an economic exchange. Loyalty could be imagined as an abstract ideal pursued for its own sake. For the secular

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need for military service; the plague of 1348, which created a population shortage that destabilized the absolute dominance of the landowning class; and an increase in literacy in the population at large, which allowed writing to become a significant instrument in society.

[10] Marc Bloch, Feudal Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 187-8. In the West of Europe, local conditions varied in the adoption of feudal practices. The period of expansion mentioned above concerns France. In England, transmission and expansion of French feudal practices occurred after the Norman Conquest.

[11] By ideology I mean the beliefs and cultural forms that inform a way of life and validate it as its participants attempt to create and maintain their position in society.

landowning class, loyalty belonged to them. They had generated it and they embodied it. As such, they imagined an ideal identity that equated honor with loyalty to social obligation; this loyalty was constructed as disinterested and free of pragmatic motivation.[12]

The economic exchange of land for military service was legalized through a ritual ceremony of homage that made loyalty the central feature of the bond between vassal and lord. Starting in the Carolingian period, a formal oath of fealty was added to the ceremony and sacralized by the church, "raising the ritual and filial sentiment for war chiefs and war companions above the human sphere--human fealty [was] blended with fealty to God."[13] Thus, loyalty was made a sacred virtue as well as a social one.

Oathworthiness (*trawthe* in legal terms--the ability to keep one's word), understood as the cohesive virtue that kept the system working, became the dominant virtue of the feudal age. Trothplight (pledging one's word) became the only legal form for making agreements, and one of the most important social practices that embodied the idea of truth/loyalty. All social intercourse depended on the trustworthiness of the sworn word since, in an oral society, there was no other legal instrument available. To emphasize this point, Green mentions King

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[12]Since loyalty was instrumental in feudal society at large as an ideological system, it was part of the broad political, religious and cultural formations of the whole society. As we will see, there was a need to develop an ideology of perfect respect of the oath because of the specific problems of an oral culture. But the secular landowning class developed its own views of loyalty for its own purposes. Their chivalric system was a coherent social code, and the identity it codified was expressed in many ways, including through literary expression. The cult of honor as loyalty had been first enshrined in the *chanson de geste* and then became the stuff of Arthurian romances (Keen, 1984:156). "What the Arthurian story taught was that glory was to be associated with high courage and loyal service" (Keen, 1984:199). In romance after romance, the knight maintains unwavering loyalty in spite of the prospect of certain death. Loyalty was represented as the ultimate essence of nobility, as its specific virtue.

[13] This discussion is summarized from Marc Bloch, Feudal Society, and Henry Osborn Taylor, The Medieval Mind, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co, 1930), vol. I, 540. The idea of order and cohesion are not meant to imply that the feudal age was a particularly orderly period--it was not--but that it had a specific principle of order on which social structure was organized.

Alfred's very first law (9th century), "first, it is most necessary that we should instruct each man to keep faithfully his oath and compact"; and his grandson Aethelstan's intent to take action against offenders, "because [their] oaths and compacts and guarantees are all overturned and broken . . . and we know of nothing else to trust in, except this" (Green, 62). In the feudal social arrangement, since life and property depended on a mutual aid that could only be insured by the respect for verbal promises, breaking an oath meant nothing less than undermining the social order (and compromising one's ultimate salvation).

In literature, romances told stories in which the hero undergoes drastic tests that require him to set aside all other moral imperatives in order to uphold his word. In *Amis and Amiloun*, for example, it is shown to be more ethical to kill children than to break a promise; this is an instance of what Green calls "the tyranny of the oath" (Green, 293-335). Loyalty, the crucial feature of the hero's noble identity, is worshiped for its own sake as a sacred virtue.

Over time, in the real world, however, fealty became so unstable that Bloch wonders whether it still deserves the name. A process through which vassals could acquire fiefs from several lords--always forbidden in feudal Japan, notes Bloch--[14] created multiple fealty and became "the primary solvent of feudal society" (Bloch, 213). In fourteenth-century England, "the feudal system of tenure continues to provide the basis for real property," but lords had lost control over the military service of tenants and new social forms were needed to ensure that service (Keen, 1990:137). As a result of these developments, the significance of the virtue of loyalty was diminished.

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[14] In Japan the notion of fealty to a lord and the practices that embodied it retained their cultural power centuries after the feudal system had been destroyed in Europe. To this day a brand of loyalty and its practices occupy a central role in Japanese society.

In parallel developments, an increase of literacy in society at large and the introduction of written proof in courts of law (which often showed the traditional oath to be unreliable) created a "shift from communally authenticated trothplight to the judicially enforceable written contract . . . from a truth that resides in people to a truth that resides in documents" (Green, 39). The new legal form (the written contract), together with an increase of money in the economy, opened the way to new voluntary and temporary types of relationship that allowed a more flexible agreement of exchange of military service for wages--an agreement that did not require sole reliance on a pledged oath. The oath, in fact, became an adjunct to a written contract or was simply skipped (Keen, 1990: 137). In these circumstances, the legal instrumentality of trothplight and of *trouthe/trawthe* became increasingly restricted.

Since fealty was now for sale, fostering careerism and upward mobility, it was no longer possible (or even desirable) to ignore the economic basis of vassal/lord relationships. In spirit at least, the new contractual relationships were closer to modern employer/employee relationships than to the paternalistic and sacralized traditional relationships of high feudalism. The economic element, always present, had moved to the fore. Slowly, the traditional social structure was being replaced by one that was more modern, allowing greater social movement and variety of opportunity. Consequently, what historians have named "bastard feudalism" included a shift in ideological emphasis from an idealization of loyalty for its own sake to the valuation of a pragmatic outlook more convenient for making rationalized agreements. And while the ideal of loyalty endured, emerging as it did from the social structure, its instrumental

value and significance lost social force and meaning.[15] In the ideological sphere, the influence of the new type of feudal relationship and the social changes that attended it slowly reduced the cultural value of the moral ideal of perfect loyalty.

In late fourteenth-century England, the decline in the value of *trouthe/trawthe* provoked intense concerns that morality was in decay and that, as a result, society was changing in dangerous ways. In the subculture of chivalry, the ideal of chivalric identity, founded as it was on *trouthe/trawthe*, was consistently challenged. Various responses emerged from the ideological difficulty.[16] On the one hand, more often than not, knights were thought of as merely mercenaries or precious courtiers. On the other hand, powerfully resisting the trend, some knights made desperate assertions of their sense of knightly identity. In her study on romance, Susan Crane mentions that "in 1352, eighty-nine knights of the new Order of the Star were massacred only because they held to an oath of the Order that they would never retreat in battle."[17] Probably taking their belief system further then it had ever been taken before, they attempted to live and die by the romantic ideals of knightly identity as expounded in Arthurian

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[15] The two systems, contractual agreements and loyalty agreements, ran alongside each other for several centuries. In the late fourteenth century keeping one's word did not become irrelevant because of the new social developments. To have a reputation for oathworthiness continued to be important, but what was changing was that the oath was losing its dominance legally and ideologically.

[16] Since its inception, as the executive agent of authority, knighthood had been the intense focus of ideological construction, and as an evolving institution over many centuries had meant different things at different times. In late fourteenth-century England, there were many factors that contributed to a decline in faith in the institution of knighthood (at least in some circles), such as mercenary fighting in the Hundred Years War with France. For a view of the transformations of knighthood in England see Peter Coss, The Knight in Medieval England 1000-1400.

[17] Susan Crane. Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 178.

romances.[18] The coexistence of both challenge and reaffirmation of chivalric identity resulted in a great deal of moral ambiguity in the meaning and significance of this identity.

Some writers, like the *Gawain*-poet, well aware of and concerned with this cultural malaise, used the conventions of romance to investigate an older legal past and its ideal of chivalric loyalty. Most lamented or denied the decline of that ideal by recreating its imagined perfection. In *Sir Gawain*, however, it is my contention that the poet's central concern is the ideological difficulty that plagued chivalric identity. The *Gawain*-poet puts the ideal of perfect loyalty under scrutiny, and allows chivalric identity to maintain its honor while distancing itself from absolute fidelity to the feudal oath. In his romance, the ideal of absolute loyalty, *trawthe*, is desacralized, and ideal chivalric identity is, thus, redefined.

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[18] For a discussion on the connection between literature and knightly behavior see Keen's Chivalry, especially chapters six and ten. From Johan Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages, trans. F. Hopman (London: Edward Arnold, 1924) to Maurice Keen, Chivalry, debates over chivalry's character have wondered whether there was ever a period when the institution of chivalry lived by its ideals. For Huizinga, chivalry had always been fraudulent. The fraudulence just became worse in the later Middle Ages. For Keen, the ideals of chivalry had always been credible and remained so in the 14th century. In this paper, I am not concerned with actual behavior but solely with ideal culture.

The Green Knight as Cultural Critique

With some understanding of the social background that underlies the Middle English concept of *trawthe*, especially as embodied in chivalric identity, it is now possible to examine *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* within a new framework. As a whole, the narrative of the poem is focused on the nature of chivalric identity. In the episode of the Green Knight, the poet questions the ideology of chivalric identity represented by the Knights of the Round Table, and defined as perfect *trawthe*. The Green Knight functions as the major agent through which ambiguities, ironies and a presentation of the feudal legal system destabilize the ideology of *trawthe*.

The prologue of the poem introduces its first ambiguities with a contrasting description of noble identity.[19] According to the prologue, Arthurian chivalric heritage descends from the line of Aeneas, who was both a traitor and "the trewest on erthe."[20] Truth and treason (loyalty and its betrayal), the exact antonyms of late fourteenth-century England, are both embodied in Aeneas, the direct ancestor of King Arthur. Noble life is described as creating both *wrake* (destruction/suffering) and *wonder* (marvelous act), *blysse* (kindness/joy) and *blunder* (gross mistake) (16-17). Aeneas and his kinsmen love battle and become rich by fighting. They are both destroyers and builders of cities and civilizations: "Hit watz Ennias the athel, and his

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[19] For a detailed analysis of the ambiguities of the prologue see Tony Hunt, "Irony and Ambiguity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," Forum for Modern Language Studies 12 (January 1976): 2-16. Hunt, like so many critics, understands the ambiguities of the poem in terms of the human condition ("the vicissitudes of human life"). "The implication is that human judgements are not unitary and absolute, nor are they comprehensive enough to cover the complexities of the human condition," 2.

[20] Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon. Second edition revised by Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), ll. 1-25. Hereafter all quotations will be in the text and from this edition. Contrary to practice, in most cases I provide my own translations since, like all translations, they are an integral part of the interpretations.

highe kynde, / That sithen depreced prouinces, and patrounes bicome / Welneghe of al the wele in the west iles" (It was the noble Aeneas and his lofty kinsmen, / Who beat down provinces and became possessors / Of almost all the wealth of the west iles, 5-7). Through these balanced oppositions, the prologue anticipates the ambivalence that accompanies chivalric identity throughout the poem, and sets itself in contrast to the one-dimensional and superlative description of King Arthur's court at Camelot.

The court is described in dense superlatives that run for 47 lines (37-84). The Knights of the Round Table are the most beautiful, perfect knights on earth, next only to Christ himself (51). There are no signs here of flaws or even explicit ambivalence of lexicon and identity. As if to forewarn the reader that the description may be more ironic than reliable, however, the very intensity of the hyperbole undermines its claims, as do ironies in the diction. Arthur is said to be *joly* (*joli* is Old French and Middle English for pretty) and *chidgered* (childish) while his knights are *luflych* (lovely, gracious) (86) and equally pretty in the phrase "justed ful jolilé thise gentyle knightes" (38-42). As Hunt remarks, the emphasis in the description is on "frivolity rather than dignity" (Hunt, 3).

Arthur and his knights are in the midst of their annual Christmas feast when an extremely large knight rides in. His extraordinary appearance--for he is green all over--brings on complete silence (242-6). The knight is both appealing and repellent, beautifully shaped and dressed in a rich aristocratic costume with a branch of holly in one hand, but also fearsomely strong and hairy with a huge battle-axe in the other hand. His appearance echoes the oppositions of the prologue, which are excluded from the one-dimensional Arthurian

representation of perfectly courteous chivalric identity,[21] and, thereby, it brings the ideas of

aristocratic treachery and violence into the Camelot hall.

As he enters, the Green Knight immediately declares his interest in the renown of the

Round Table, that is, in its reputation as the best, most courteous order of chivalry:

'Bot for the los of the, lede, is lyft up so hyghe,

And thy burgh and thy burnes best ar holden,

Stifest under stel-gere on stedes to ryde,

The wyghtest and the worthyest of the worldes kynde,

Preve for to play wyth in other pure laykez,

And here is kydde cortaysye, as I haf herd carp,

And that hatz wayned me hider, iwyis, at this tyme.'

('Because of your renown, Sir, that is lifted up so high, / And your city and your knights are
held the best, / Strongest in their steel equipment as they ride on steeds, / The fiercest and
worthiest in the world, / Proved best to play with in noble entertainment, / And here is known
courtesy, as I have heard say, / All this, indeed, drew me here at this time,' 258-666).

As the episode unfolds, it becomes clear that the Green Knight, by his appearance as well as

his words, has come to challenge the vaunted Arthurian renown. He does so by manipulating

the court to enter into a legal agreement that puts its *trawthe*, the loyalty of its knights, on trial.

Since the practice of trothplight directly and concretely activates the idea of loyalty, the

essence of chivalric identity, as such it is the social practice that can best open the question of

the worth of the Round Table's reputation.

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[21] In Art and Tradition in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1965),
58-95, Larry Benson gives one of the most in depth studies of the ambiguous appearance and behavior of the
Green Knight.

The knight introduces himself as a peaceful traveler, assuring Arthur that he "may be seker bi this braunch that I bere here / That I passe as in pes, and no plyght seche" (may be sure by this [holly] branch that I carry here that I pass by in peace, and not in hostility, 264-5). In this statement, the knight ignores the "spetos sparthe" (cruel battle-axe, 209) he carries and the aggression it implies, suggesting that he, in fact, does hide a hostile purpose. All he wants, he says, is a "Crystemas gomen" (Christmas game, 283).

The game he proposes is a simple one--an exchange of undefended blows. He will take the first blow and his axe will be used to play the game. After that blow, the axe will belong to the knight who accepts the challenge and delivers the blow. In twelve months and a day, that knight will have to take a blow in return. Interestingly, within the diction of game-- *gomen, gyft, barlay*--he mingles a few legal terms--*dom, quit-claim, dight* (285-300).[22] His proposal, coming after his barbs to the proud Knights of the Round Table--"berdlez chylder . . . for myghtez so wayke" (beardless children . . . whose might is so weak, 280-2)--contains what seems designed as bait. The knights are clearly too weak to fight him. But are they bold enough to play this game (285-6)? In addition, he follows his proposal with a telling assertion: "let se tite / Dar any herinne oght to say" (let's see quickly / Who here has anything to say, 299-300). Except for Arthur, who welcomed him, the court has kept completely silent since the Green Knight's entrance. If he is after a legal agreement and not just a game, as his diction indicates, then he needs them to speak and pledge an oath.

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[22] For a discussion of the legal diction in *Sir Gawain* see W. R. J. Barron, "The Ambivalence of Adventure: Verbal Ambiguity in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,' Fitt I," in <u>The Legend of Arthur in the Middle Ages</u> (New Jersey: D.S. Brewer, 1983). For a discussion of the legal tradition behind the diction see Robert J. Blanch and Julian N. Wasserman, "Medieval Contracts and Covenants: The Legal Coloring of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," <u>Neophilologus</u> 68 (October 1984): 598-610. For the socio-cultural background of that tradition, see Green.

In the feudal world represented in this romance, only words can legally bind. In the oral law of feudal society, "words are the *matière* out of which contracts are created" (Blanch and Wasserman, 1995:28). But, to be binding, an oath has to be expressed in precise legal formulae, since it is the only concrete act that can legally compel the performance of a promise: "in an oral society, the precise words of the oath at the moment they are spoken bind speaker and listener by virtue of an inherent performative power which resists paraphrase" (Green, 60). The Green Knight has introduced legal language, but to exact a legal agreement he needs not just a response but a precise response.

Since no one speaks up, he increases the pressure, heaving a direct challenge to the honor and identity of the Round Table:

> 'What, is this Arthures hous,' quoth the athel thenne,
>
> 'That al the rous rennes of thurgh ryalmes so mony?
>
> Where is now your sourquydrye and your conqueste,
>
> Your gryndelayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?
>
> Now is the revel and the renoun of the Round Table
>
> Ouerwalt wyth a worde of on wyghes speche
>
> For al dares for drede withoute dynt schewed!'
>
> Wyth this he laghes so loude that the lorde greved;

('What is this Arthur's house,' said the knight, / 'Of which much talk runs through so many realms? / Where is your pride and your conquest, / Your fierceness and your grimness, your great words? / Now is the revelry and the renown of the Round Table / Overthrown with the word of one man speaking / For all cower for dread without a blow given!' / With this he laughs so loud that the lord is afflicted, 309-15)

In an honor society, these are words that cannot be ignored, and Arthur, whose "blot schot for scham into his schyre face / and lere" (blood shot for shame into his fair cheeks / and face,

316),[23] takes the bait. He leaps, picks up the axe, and speaks, potentially committing the court to engage in the Green Knight's game. Part of the machinery of feudal trothplight is the use of tokens, since the passing of property is necessary to establish an obligation. As "things need to happen visibly and audibly" (Green, 55), tokens are objects used as concrete symbols of the agreement being made. The Green Knight has presented his axe as a gift for anyone willing to play his game. Because in this legal tradition, any object exchanged between two people has the potential to represent an agreement (Green, 305), the knight moves one step closer toward his goal of a legal agreement when Arthur picks up the axe.

It is Sir Gawain, traditionally the perfect knight of courtesy in the world of romance and, therefore, the knight who best embodies the values of his culture and reproduces its forms, who takes over the game from the crowned king (343-361). The court agrees to the switch because it is unfitting for the head of its community to expose himself to potential harm. When Arthur passes the axe to Gawain, however, it is evident from the king's ironic comment that he understands the game as impossible to fulfill: "If thou redez hym ryght, redly I trowe / That thou schal byden the bur that he schal bede after" (If you handle him right, I readily believe / That you will face the blow that he deals you after, 373-4). Gawain need not worry, for the Green Knight will no doubt die from a blow with that axe. Presumably, Gawain would not enter the game knowing that its conditions are possible to fulfill--that the Green Knight can actually survive the blow and return it. In the same way, Dorigen in the "Franklin's Tale" would not make her promise to Aurelius if she knew he could find a way to perform magic on

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[23] To appreciate the intensity of the challenge raised against Arthur and his Round Table one needs to keep in mind that it is a world not only sanctioned by Christianity but also by a traditional sense of honor and shame. For a discussion of the workings of honor and shame in *Sir Gawain* see John A. Burrow, "Honor and Shame in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in <u>Essays on Medieval Literature</u> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

the rocks. However, the legal system of the oral feudal age could not consider the intention of the pactor. What bound was the oral performance.

To bind Gawain to a legal obligation, the Green Knight verbally leads him from the rituals of game into the rituals of trothplight. From l. 393 to l. 403, the language becomes purely legalistic and Gawain finally makes a formal promise by his *trawthe* : "that I swere the for soth, and by my seker trawthe" (I swear so to you in truth, on my certain loyalty, 403). At that precise moment, the chivalric identity of the Knights of the Round table, represented by Gawain and understood in terms of the value of its *trawthe*, is caught in the Green Knight's "game."

When the Green Knight picks up his head after Gawain has cut it off, the feudal web of legal obligation ensnares its prey (430-33). Until that moment, the knight speaks deferentially to Gawain; but having achieved his purpose, he speaks now in tones both curt and commanding. He repeats the agreement for the third time, foregoing any charade of a game:

Loke, Gawan, thou be graythe to go as thou hettez,

And layte as lelly til thou me, lude, fynde,

As thou hatz hette in this halle, herande thise knyghtes;

To the grene chapel thou chose, I charge the, to fotte

Such a dunt as thou hatz dalt--disserved thou habbez . . .

Therfore com, other recreaunt be calde the behoues.

(Look, Gawain, be ready to go as you promised, / And loyally seek for me, Sir, till you find me, / As you have promised in this hall, in hearing of these knights; / To the green chapel go, I charge you, to get / Such a blow as you dealt--you have deserved it . . . / Therefore come, or be fit to be called a recreant, 448-56)

These words--*hettez* (promised), *lelly* (loyally), *hette* (promised), *herande thise knyghtes* (in

hearing of these knights), and especially *recreaunt* (faint-hearted; the exact opposite of the loyalty unto death knights are supposed to uphold and represent)--resonate violently in the hall as they punctuate the powerful necessity of obedience to the formal oath. Gawain promises his loyalty in the presence of witnesses, an essential element to the traditional agreement; if he breaks that promise he will incur the punishment that awaits a lack of compliance to the social obligation to which he is now bound--that is, he will incur social death. To achieve his purpose, the Green Knight uses a formalized legal ritual "that mirrors in form and content the judicial agreements outlined in English common law," the ancient ritual of trothplight of feudal society (Blanch and Wasserman, 1995: 28). However, it is through manipulation that Gawain is bound to an agreement of which he did not know all the claims and, therefore, which he could not intend to make. Nevertheless, to prove the value of his knighthood as a fulfillment of *trawthe*, and, thus, to maintain the honor and reputation of the Round Table, he has to give up his life.

For the judicial system of troth and trothplight, it is irrelevant that Gawain never thought that he would have to fulfill the promise. What matters is that he takes the axe and says the appropriate words. In the absence of written proof for agreements, the highly conventional oral form served to make agreements unambiguous: if the oral performance took place, there was a legal agreement to fulfill, regardless of circumstances. Since agreements could be extracted under a variety of ploys (only to be discovered later), it was a "clumsy instrument for dealing with fraud" (Green, 316). The trap into which Gawain falls relies on that pervasive weakness of English common law. In the romance, the problem created by the use of magic metaphorically evokes the real problem of informed consent and intention in a

system that was incapable of taking misrepresentation and unforeseen circumstances into account.

Canon law and continental law, as early as the thirteenth century, agreed that the intention of the parties had to be taken into account, that is, that their full knowledge of the nature of the agreement should be required. The validity of contracts depended on informed consent and not primarily on formal acts. In this view of law, the Green Knight's agreement, which hides major clauses, is invalid and need not be fulfilled. However, in late fourteenth-century England, common law still wrestled with these more modern notions of contract (Green, 321). In the episode of the Green Knight, the poet dramatizes a feudal world unable to deal with intention and consent and, therefore, a world that still needs to promote an ideology of perfect loyalty to form. At a time when the legal system of trothplight was losing ground every day in courtrooms, he evokes the weaknesses of that system for a medieval audience aware of and concerned with those weaknesses.

Through his use of the game/trothplight conceit, which turns a game into a deadly and ludicrous agreement that cannot be refused within the ideology of *trawthe*, the author evokes the sense of a certain degeneration of that ideology within the romance. He takes it to an absurd level. For here, unlike in most other romances, there is no people, queen, maiden, or even heritage to be saved from some evil. Sir Gawain must give up his life for the sake of the ideology itself. In this romance, the ideology of *trawthe* has no other instrumentality than to maintain itself. For a medieval audience, already sensitive to the problems of oral law and of its practices, the game/trothplight conceit serves to emphasize the absurdity of the respect of form at any cost.

As critics have observed (Blanch and Wasserman, 1995, for example) our modern sensibility leads contemporary readers to wonder at the end of the first section why Gawain intends to seek out the Green Knight to keep a promise that was extracted deceptively and that can only lead to his death. Surely, the Green Knight's misrepresentation of the nature of the agreement should leave Gawain an easy way out. The power of law that impels Gawain to accept the game and its outcome in deadly earnest is for us meaningless. Most critics have also assumed that, like Gawain, a late medieval audience would have understood the agreement without questioning it. In opposition to this general line of criticism, I am suggesting here that, while a late medieval audience would have felt the pull of the power of oral law, at the very least that audience would have also felt the sting of the absurdity of this contract. The effect of the game easily turned into a deadly trothplight would have called up all the ambivalence that surrounded oral law in late fourteenth-century England.

Interestingly, the court, an audience within the romance, reacts ambivalently toward Gawain's agreement and the quest he undertakes to fulfill it (674-83). On the one hand, like Gawain, the knights assume that he is under a serious obligation. None of them thinks he should not go. But, on the other hand, they think the agreement made by Gawain ought not to have long-term consequences. A game should be just that: a game. They criticize the king, thinking that

> Warloker to haf wroght had more wyt bene,
>
> And haf dyght yonder dere a duke to have worthed;
>
> A lowande leder of ledez in londe hym wel semez,
>
> And so had better haf ben then britned to noght.

(It would have been more prudent to go more carefully, / And to have appointed that noble man a duke, / Who seems such a brilliant leader of men in the land, / And this would have been better than being broken to nothing, 677-680).

The outlook expressed here, that it is better to keep a good man for service than to waste him on proving one's honor, belies the feudal ideal that loyalty to a promise is an absolute imperative. This is a new voice in the romance and its effect on the ideal is inherently disruptive since an ideal is, by definition, supposed to be the only right way one should do things--at least in a homogeneous group with shared ideals. The mere suggestion that there can be another way, not wasting Sir Gawain on what after all started as just a game, is in itself disruptive since it relativizes what is supposed to be transcendent and absolute.

The tension in the court's opinion opens a gap in the romance between the traditional attitude of the unquestioned veneration of *trawthe* and trothplight, and a more pragmatic attitude that values the military service of a man independently of his *trawthe*. This gap suggests that Gawain and the court do not share ideals completely. Like today's readers, the court sees the quest as somewhat silly—a waste. In this romance, the presentation of the feudal legal system as a game turned into a trothplight encourages dissension about its value, and introduces an outlook quite at odds with traditional romance ideology. The practical takes precedence, for a moment of contestation, over the romantically virtuous at all cost. As such, the presentation of the feudal legal system in this light is part of the poet's strategy to question the ideal of perfect loyalty to the pledged word, and to reassess chivalric honor.

Whatever the court's doubts, for Gawain, the perfect knight who best expresses the

forms of the chivalric code,[24] there is never a question that the game is a serious agreement. As the best knight of the best order of chivalry, he is the ideal trope for chivalry itself. His conventional heraldic family sign is the griffin or the eagle; however, when he is armed to go on his quest for the Green Knight a year later as promised, a new coat-of-arms is painted on his shield--a pentangle[25] "in bytoknyng of trawthe, bi tytle" (as a symbol of loyalty by title, 626). Because for this test he is a representative of the identity of chivalry at large (its most fitting representative, 655), he is given, as the external sign of his identity, the new heraldic device that represents its values and practices.

Through this poetic symbol, the poet is able to define the meaning of *trawthe* both explicitly and connotatively. The Green Knight obtained the pledge of an oath, which links the ideal of loyalty to the social practices that embody it. These practices are the knight's social obligations and the substance of his identity. The poet uses the pentangle as a device to expand the meaning of chivalric *trawthe*, making clear all that is at stake in the quest. *Trawthe* is here

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[24] For an overview of Gawain's representation in romance see B. J. Whiting, "Gawain: His Reputation, His Courtesy," Mediaeval Studies 9 (1947): 193-230. Whiting found that Gawain's representations fall into three main stages, corresponding to the three main stages of development of Arthurian romance. First, there were the chronicle accounts of the life and death of Arthur, where Arthur is the central figure and Gawain his chief knight, the ideal warrior, loyal and honorable. Second, came the verse romances, of which the poems of Chrétien de Troyes are the most prominent. Arthur's court is the place of departure and return, but the interest is in the adventures of many knights. Gawain is still prominent, and usually the perfect knight against whom all others are measured. In these romances, he is a man of arms and a lover of women. He is brave, charming, and promiscuous (this last quality only in French romances). For him a love affair is an exchange of verbal as well as physical courtesies. In the third stage, when the verse romances were turned into prose, especially those of the Grail-legend which made virginity the crucial value, Gawain's character is defiled as too secular. The *Gawain*-poet's portrayal of his exemplary knight draws mostly on the first stage of the development of the figure. The emphasis is on his perfect loyalty. At the same time, aspects of the second stage are used to attempt to compromise the more restrained and stern earlier figure. I am referring to the lady's strategy to try sexually to tempt Gawain to break his *trawthe* at the castle of Hautedesert.

[25] A pentangle is a five-pointed star of Bethlehem, each of the points of the star connecting internally in a continuous design.

defined as the unambiguous feudal concept of perfect loyalty embodied in Christian chivalric identity, in all the social complexities of its practices.

After fitting the chivalric practices onto the five points of the pentangle figure, the poet lists genealogically the specific knightly virtues that help in the performance of those practices. Gawain is loyal in five ways, each of which is a multiple of five. He is faultless in his five senses and his five fingers, that is, in his physical ability as a warrior who fulfills the martial requirements of knighthood; as a Christian knight who fulfills his obligations to the church, he has faith in the five wounds of Christ and gets strength from the five joys of Mary; and he practices the five social virtues most important for a knight to fulfill his obligations: *Fraunchyse* and *felaghchyp* (generosity and fellowship), which emerged from the necessity of companionship between warriors; *clannes* and *pité* (chastity and pity), which were imposed later on the warrior code by Christianity; and *cortaysye* (courtesy), the newest and most complex virtue, a mixture of secular values that emerged from the requirements of living in courts, and from Christian values such as protecting the weak (651-61) (Taylor, 537-73). Thus represented, *trawthe* is a selfless compliance with norms--the web of obligations of a feudal society based on the principle of loyalty to lord and to church.

In addition to this explicit meaning of *trawthe*, the pentangle carries the significance of absolute infinite truth in medieval intellectual tradition. Medieval sign theory allows for a "natural" type of signification, which posits a close connection of referent with signifier through similar qualities. Natural signification is the idea that a word as a sign is the consequence of the thing it represents (*nomina sunt consequentia rerum*), and as such it has the tendency to naturalize meaning. As a geometrical figure, the pentangle represents endlessness, since its lines can go on infinitely from one point to the next without ever being broken: "For

hit is a figure that haldez fyve poyntez, / And uche lyne umbelappez and loukez in other, / And ayquere hit is endelez" (For it is a figure that has five points, / And each line overlaps and locks in the other, / And so it is endless, 627-9). For that reason, it was traditionally used as a sign for God as an endless indivisible substance and, by extension, for God as absolute *Veritas* (Ross, 1987:55-60). By choosing the pentangle as a symbol for *trawthe*, the poet gives chivalric *Trawthe* absolute and sacred connotations. The interlocked and continuous lines of the figure resemble the ideal of unbroken perfection of the ancestral feudal relations mentioned earlier. The utter coherence of the figure and its connection to the abstract virtues of chivalry give these virtues an aura of inevitability. In the terms of natural signification, it represents what chivalric ideology looks like from the point of view of the landowning class's belief system: it depicts the perfect loyalty and virtue of feudal Christian chivalry as the natural state of things. The endless connectivity and the relation to absolute Truth of the figure, however, obscure the human choice that made the symbol.

The author signals this manufacture of meaning by mentioning that the pentangle was first set forth as a sign for Truth by Salomon, and by attracting attention to his own efforts to make it signify, explicitly stopping the narrative to do so "thof tary hyt [him] schulde" (even though it will delay [him], 624). With these moves, he challenges the naturalizing effect of the geometrical figure. He suggests that all signification, natural or not, is also *ad placitum* or conventional signification. What seems natural, given as a set part of the universe, is always already the result of social agreement. This play with the signification of the pentangle

foreshadows a break in the perfect coherence of the system of virtue that makes up *trawthe*.[26]

In the episode of the Green Knight, the *Gawain*-poet engages the reader's scrutiny of the ideal of chivalric identity of perfect *trawthe* represented by the Arthurian knights and embedded in the pentangle. He questions that identity by contrasting the Arthurian ideology of perfect respect for selfless social obligations with a presentation of the ancestors of chivalry as aggressive battle-lovers who are as liable to be treacherous as to be loyal, to destroy societies for personal gain as to build and maintain them; he confronts the perfect model of chivalry with a crisis that casts its ideology in absurd terms; he introduces an emergent opinion that destabilizes that ideology; and he undermines the naturalization of perfect chivalric *trawthe* through his handling of the pentangle's signification. The episode presents perfect *trawthe* and its best proponents, while already shedding doubt on the value of that presentation through a play of ambiguities and ironies. When Gawain goes on his quest it is with an identity already pervaded by ambiguity.

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[26] Arthur Ross gives a most complete view of the intellectual tradition that was available to the *Gawain*-poet. The poet's sophistication is recognized by all critics and would have no doubt included such basic knowledge of sign theory. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas (and Aristotle), while theorizing natural signification, already recognized fully the social construction of meaning (*ad placitum* is Aquinas' term for conventional signification).

Hautdesert: An Idealist's Wasteland

At the castle of Hautdesert, the poet continues his inquiry into chivalric identity with a test of Gawain's *trawthe* that brings into the open less selfless and more pragmatic aspects of chivalric behavior: economic purpose and sexual desire. The perfect coherence of the system of virtues outlined in the pentangle depends, in part, on a suppression of these aspects. The testing of Gawain, therefore, is designed to put pressure on the pentangle's virtues that more specifically mystify these aspects: courtesy, chastity, and loyalty. In addition, as in the Green Knight episode, the poet evokes the problem created by the unshakable respect for forms and blindness to the intentions that lurk behind them.[27]

After a cold and lonely journey on his way to find the Green Knight, Gawain receives hospitality in the castle of Hautdesert. There he is challenged by views of chivalric identity that ignore or go counter to his complex and high-minded chivalry. The romance conventions of hospitality provide the author with the tools for creating a situation in which the idealized view of feudal chivalric identity clashes with the newer worldview of bastard feudalism. In the romance tradition,[28] if the hero is to be sheltered, he finds refuge in the castle of a knight who shares his chivalric values. If he is to be tested, he finds refuge in the castle of a knight who hates chivalric values and betrays the obligations of hospitality and fair dealing. In *Sir Gawain*, the kind of hospitality Gawain receives is positioned between these two extremes. Although the knights of Hautdesert abide by and admire chivalry, they reject its idealized version. They respect the forms of hospitality that are a part of the chivalric code, but use

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[27] Here I don't mean intention in a technical legal sense but rather more loosely as people's intentions behind codified behavior.

[28] W.R.J. Barron, *Trawthe and Treason* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 43.

those forms to appear to share Gawain's values when their true intention is to subvert the idealism of those values, and to test him on it.[29]

The confrontation between differing notions of chivalry begins with the courtiers' welcome of Gawain. While they are exhilarated that a knight of such renown has come to their castle, they show no interest in the lofty qualities of that renown. What interests them is the *sleghtez* (artfulness) of knightly conduct and the *spede* (profit) that comes from courtly speech:

'Now schal we semlych se sleghtez of thewez

And the teccheles termes of talkyng noble,

Wich speded is in speche unspurd may we lerne,

Syn we haf fonged that fyne fader of nurture.

God hatz geven vus his grace godly for sothe, . . .

In menyng of manerez mere

This burne now schal vus bryng,

I hope that may hym here

Schal lerne of luf-talkyng.'

('Now we shall surely see artful knightly conduct / And the irreproachable terms of noble talk, / What profit is in speech we may learn without asking / Since we have received that father of fine breeding. / God has given us his grace indeed, . . . / This man will bring understanding of manners / I expect that we will learn of love-talking,' 914-27).

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[29] In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and French Arthurian Romance (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), Ad Putter expands on the treatment of the code of hospitality in Chrétien de Troyes and the *Gawain*-poet (chapter 2, 51-84). The art of hosting strangers and acting fittingly as a guest was an important part of being a knight. As Putter suggests, however, "behaviour based on codified etiquette can be consciously acted and dissembled. Guests and host may follow the rules of hospitality but who is to tell what feelings or what intentions the studied observance of etiquette hides?" (52).

At Camelot, courtesy had been represented as the external and natural manifestation of nobility of mind. It was perfectly blended in Gawain's speech and behavior when he exposed himself to harm by taking over the Christmas game to protect the king (343-61). The knights at Hautdesert, however, are unapologetically interested in the external and utilitarian aspects of courtesy, bringing out into the open the fact that courtesy is also used by a knight to advance his position and seduce ladies. For them, courtesy is instrumental rather than ideal.

The contrast between Gawain's earnestness and the good-natured frivolity of the courtiers strikes a comic note and puts into perspective the lofty claims of the pentangle.[30] During the episode at Hautdesert, comedy and irony are a part of most of the exchanges, functioning to shed light on the more self-serving aspects of chivalric behavior, and to deflate Gawain's stature and all that it represents. The pragmatic values suggested at Hautdesert are more akin to the careerists' values of bastard feudalism. Presumably careerist knights, possibly the *Gawain*-poet's audience, needed to accept and prize a chivalric identity that allowed them to understand in an honorable fashion the commercial contracts they made with lords when selling their military services. By subverting the idealism of Gawain's feudal chivalry, the irony and comedy in the episode insinuate that chivalry was pragmatic all along

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[30] In addition, it is ironic that the courtiers call Gawain "fader of nurture" as he is called in the alliterative Morte Arthure. In that poem, Gawain also represents high-minded noble conduct, but he dies in a battle that he knows to be suicidal in order to achieve greater honor. In *Sir Gawain*, on the other hand, Gawain chooses to break his oath of loyalty in order to attempt to save his life.

anyway,[31] that there never was such a thing as disinterested chivalry.

After the courtiers have implicitly challenged Gawain's idealized view of knightly behavior, he twice reasserts the high-mindedness of his knighthood. He would rather keep his promise to the Green Knight than acquire all the land in Logres ("I nolde bot if I hit negh myght on Nw Yeres morne / For alle the londe inwyth Logres, so me oure lorde help!," 1054-5) or come by any property ("And I wolde loke on that lede, if God me let wolde, / Gladloker, bi Goddez sun, then any god welde!," 1063-4). As the underpinnings of Gawain's ideal are evoked, he reacts with words that specifically distance chivalry from its economic purpose, asserting that loyalty is pursued for its own sake. The lines resonate with the hereditary feudal landowning class's idealized view of its identity, which ignores the centrality of economic purpose in fealty relations.

Following his courtiers' lead, the host of the castle of Hautdesert puts pressure on the feudal worldview by imposing on Gawain a game that metaphorically turns their relationship into a commercial deal. As a guest, Gawain must operate within the obligations of the code of hospitality. According to the rules of medieval hospitality, it is ill-mannered for a guest not to obey the host's every command (Barron, 44). Consequently, as Barron suggests, when he meets his host, Gawain formally "acknowledges his duty to him in terms suggestive of the oath of a feudal dependent" (Barron, 45): "And I wyghe at your wylle to worch youre hest, / As I

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[31] In "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Late Medieval Aristocratic Culture," MidHudson Language Studies 12 (1989): 13-23, Walter Srebnick makes one of the very few attempts in the poem's criticism to connect it to its social context. I am indebted to his article for attracting my attention to the commercialism that emerges at Hautdesert. Srebnick sees a relationship between the depiction of Camelot and fourteenth-century chronicle accounts of Edward III who emulated Arthurian ideals, and he identifies the Green Knight with the provincial magnates of the older hereditary nobility. According to Michael Bennett's detailed historical study, however, there were no great magnates in Cheshire. The county was dominated by careerists and the new type of bastard feudal relationships. Michael J. Bennett, Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancaster Society in the Age of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

am halden therto, in hyghe and in lowe, / bi right" (And I am ready at your will, to act on

your wishes, / As I beholden to you, in high and in low, / by right, 1039-40). The situation,

therefore, allows a game to be played with the idealized view of feudal relationships.

After Gawain acknowledges his service, the host immediately requests an agreement.

He wants Gawain to pledge his *trawthe* to exchange their daily winnings every night for three

nights. The lord will give him the gains from his day-hunt and Gawain will give whatever may

come his way:

'Yet firre,' quoth the freke, 'a forwarde we make:

Quat-so-ever I wynne in the wod hit worthez to yourez,

And quat chek so ye acheve chaunge me therforne.

Swete, swap we so, sware with trawthe,

Quether, leude, so lymp, lere other better.'

'Bi God,' quoth Gawayn the gode, 'I grant thertylle,

And that yow lyst for to layke, lef hit me thynkes.'

'Who bryngez uus this beverage, this bargayn is maked:'

So sayde the lorde of that lede; they laghed uchone.

('And further,' said the host, 'we'll form an agreement: / Whatever I win in the woods will be
yours, / And what you achieve here, exchange with me. / Dear Sir, we shall swap, swear with
truth, / Whatever fall to our lot worthless or better.'/ By God,' Said good Gawain, 'I grant all
this, / And your desire for amusement seems to me delightful.'/ 'Bring us beverage, this
bargain is made:' / So said the lord of that company; they all laughed, 1105-13)

Like the first trothplight made with the Green Knight, this one is made under the guise of a

game and has hidden clauses that put Gawain in a dangerous position. But unlike the first

agreement, which was designed to create a test of loyalty for its own sake, this one mimics a

commercial agreement--a *bargayn*. The exchange-of-winnings game functions to compare

metaphorically the relationship of vassal and lord to a business deal. In this way, the host reasserts the real connection between chivalry and profit, subtly subverting Gawain's previous declaration of loyalty free of pragmatic concerns.

What Gawain contributes to the deal are kisses he receives during the day from his hostess. She comes to his bedroom to attempt to seduce him while her husband is hunting. Although Gawain shows remarkable restraint and succeeds in deflecting all but a few kisses, the tension created suggests the thin line a knight often had to walk between his obligation to provide feudal service to a lord and amatory service to a lord's wife. Gawain is part of the high nobility but, in this instance, he finds himself in the position of a household knight who has to maneuver between his obligation to his lord and to his lord's wife. According to Maurice Keen (1984: 30-1), those knights depended on the mistress's acceptance of their amorous service (which usually did not include admission to her bed) to have access to the security of a court. Likewise, Gawain, who earlier desperately needed the shelter of this court, is now squeezed between his host and hostess in a play of "gifts" that echoes the way of life of many knights who survived solely on a household's generosity. In this uncomfortable triangle of relationship, Gawain's idealized view of chivalric life is again brought down to the level of the practical.

Among the various subversions of Gawain's identity, however, it is his private interaction with the Lady (his hostess), that puts the most pressure on his Christian feudal chivalry. Operating in the private space of Gawain's bedroom, the Lady can be more blunt about the economic purpose of knights than can her husband and his courtiers. On her first visit, she simply and overtly puts a price on him: "And al the wele of the worlde were in my honde, / And I schulde chepen and chose to cheve me a lorde / . . . Ther schulde no freke

upon folde bifore yow be chosen (If all the wealth of the world was in my hand / And I could bargain and choose to acquire a lord / No knight should be chosen before you, 1270-5). Here, the materialistic aspect of chivalry is strongly suggested. The idea that a knight can be bought destabilizes the idealized feudal legal/ethical concept of loyalty and evokes the new kind of social relationships of bastard feudalism in which fealty, having lost its ancestral significance, is for sale.

Not content just to undermine Gawain's view of fealty, however, the Lady also attempts to seduce him into breaking his *trawthe*--specifically his loyalty to his host and his chastity as a Christian knight. First, she bluntly offers her body to him ("Ye ar welcum to my cors," 1237); then, as that strategy fails, she highlights the sexual aspect of knightly behavior mystified in the pentangle through the combination of *courtasye* with *clannes* (courtesy with chastity). She distorts the chaste chivalric identity, inscribed in the pentangle, by appealing to the love service practiced by the knights of French romance, in which knights can hardly be said to abide by Christian chastity (no sex outside of marriage):

> How ledes for her lele lufe hor lyvez han auntered,
>
> Endured for her drury dulful stoundez,
>
> And after wenged with her walour and voyded her care,
>
> And broght blysse into boure with bountees hor awen.

(How knights for true love have ventured their lives, / Have endured for love's sake doleful times, / And after having avenged with their valor and gotten rid of their trouble, / Have brought bliss into bedrooms with their own virtues, 1515-18).

Through this stratagem, she evokes Gawain's promiscuous reputation of French romance (a man who will have any maiden who will have him) that challenges his chastity through his famed courtesy with women. If he really were Gawain, she tells him, clearly he would make

love to her (1235-1304). The Lady is attempting to unravel the code of behavior of the

pentangle by breaking the fragile connection it creates between chastity, courtesy, and loyalty.

If he refuses her, he is discourteous and disloyal (to the courtly code of "lele lufe," loyal love);

but if he accepts her, he commits treason against his host, and sins against the church.[32]

Showing great skill at retreating behind the knight's conventional role of servant to a lady,

Gawain, in this instance, succeeds in maintaining his ideal chaste identity.[33]

That chaste identity is challenged not only by the evocation of the external texts of

French romance, but also within this romance as well. During Gawain's arming at Camelot,

the poet mentioned the *vrysoun* (silk band) that holds his helmet, signaling an unacknowledged

side of Gawain's sexuality:

> Enbrawden and bounden wyth the best gemmez
>
> On brode sylkyn borde, and bryddez on semez,
>
> As papiayez paynted peruyng bitwene,
>
> Tortors and trulofez entayled so thyk
>
> As mony burde theraboute had ben seven wynter
>
> > in toune.

(Embroidered and bound with the best gems, / On broad silk borders with birds on the seams, / Such as parrots painted between periwinkles, / Turtledoves and true-love-knots depicted so thick / As if many maidens had made it for seven winters / at court, 609-614).

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[32] For a study of the interlace design of the three hunting and wooing scenes see W.R.J. Barron's *Trawthe* and *Treason.* Barron argues that the parallel between the scenes suggests the kind of penalty Gawain would pay were he to commit treason to his host. The hunt metaphor indicates that the Lady's pursuit of Gawain may end in his death. Treason as the direct antonym of *trawthe* is the fundamental breach of the feudal bond between lord and vassal. As such, it is represented as the characteristic crime of feudal society.

[33] The dialogue in the bedroom scenes is designed to bring out the moral significance of the struggle that pits one virtue of the chivalric code against another, suggesting the contradictions that exist in that code. For a detailed analysis of these scenes, see Burrow, 1965: 71-112.

The parrots, periwinkles, turtledoves and loveknots are all emblems of love in medieval iconography. In the poem, they are love tokens that are embroidered for Gawain by the young women of Camelot. Just before describing Gawain's perfect fit with the virtues of the pentangle, a much less ascetic part of him is introduced that creates an implicit incongruity with the chastity claimed in the pentangle.[34] And when the Lady presses Gawain sexually, she re-evokes this shady sexuality. Her assumption that a knight is not chaste openly raises the question of just what "chastity" might mean for knighthood, and suggests how ill-fitted knights might be to Christian chastity.

To press her point, on her second visit to Gawain's bedroom, the Lady goes one step further in her attack on the image of chaste knighthood. She confronts Gawain with an even harsher view of knightly sexuality: rape. "'My fay,' quoth the meré wyf, 'ye may not be werned, / Ye ar stif innoghe to constrayne wyth strenkthe, yif yow lykez'" ('Ma foi,' said the gay woman, 'you could not be refused, / You are strong enough to constrain with strength, if you like,' 1495-6). Her remark suggests the contradictions between ideology and the actual sexual behavior of many knights. A medieval audience, aware of knights' reputation for sexual excess, would be here confronted with the discrepancy between romance ideology, that is aristocratic ideology, and reality.[35] In the bedroom scenes, the bluntness of the Lady and the

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[34] In Reading (1965), John Burrow attracts attention and analyzes this feature while making a different claim. 40-1.

[35] John Burrow, in Reading, inaugurated the idea that in *Sir Gawain* the poet smuggles a newer "realistic" mode into the older "romantic" one, which functions as a counterpoint to it (171-182). Using Northrop Frye's classification of literature into five fictional modes, Burrow suggests that by using this realistic mode, especially when he allows his superlative hero to fail his test in part, the author levels him with the rest of humanity. According to Burrow, he does this to present the Christian cycle of the experience of "righteousness, sin, penance and absolution in a generously wide human context"—that is the author presents the universal Christian experience (186). My contention is that the author utilizes realisms specifically to sharpen his play with aristocratic ideology.

realism of some of her assertions function to deconstruct the pentangle ideology of chaste behavior with flickering images of lusty and predatory knights—some of which are of Gawain himself in his lustier incarnation of French romance. And while, in the first two bedroom scenes, Gawain successfully parries the Lady's suggestions and advances, eventually she does find a crack through which she succeeds in breaking his resolve to protect his notion of chivalric identity.

In their last interaction, the Lady comes into his bedroom looking more beautiful than ever, and bare breasted. This is her last chance to push him to break his *trawthe*, and she is especially intent on success (1733-41). The scene recapitulates the two-pronged attack made on Gawain's idealized view of his chivalry during the whole episode: sexual desire and economic purpose. First, she bids him to relinquish chastity by claiming true love. Her seductiveness nearly succeeds. Aroused, he has recourse to an appeal to God for help in constraining his vulnerability (1765-75). Soon, she realizes that she cannot seduce him. She then changes her strategy to asking for a love token in order, she says, to quench her mourning at his retreat from her (1795-9). Aware, of course, of the love compact such a token can represent,[36] Gawain deftly avoids giving her anything (1801-11). He evades this temptation successfully.

Unable to bring out his sexuality and, thereby, to begin unraveling the coherence of virtues in the pentangle, the Lady now tries to activate his greed by engaging in a play on the economic worth of love tokens: "Ho raght hym a riche rynk of red golde werkez, / . . . / Wyt

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[36] As mentioned earlier, in an oral culture any token exchanged between two people might always imply a compact. As Green suggests, Gawain is reacting to that problem when he refuses to exchange gifts with the Lady. An exchange between them, could presumably be construed as treason to his host.

ye wel, hit watz worth wele ful hoge," (She held out a precious ring of red gold work, / . . . / Be sure that it was worth a huge amount of wealth, 1816-20). But still Gawain refuses to be a knight for sale, he declines her gift. If the ring is too rich, the Lady speculates, then maybe Gawain will take something of lesser value: "'If ye renay my rynk, to ryche for hit semez, / Ye wolde not so hyghly halden be to me, / I schal gif yow my girdel, that gaynes you lasse'" (If you refuse my ring because it is too valuable it seems, / And you do not want to be so indebted to me, / I shall give you my girdle, that profits you less, 1827-9). Gawain refuses again, showing a certain amount of annoyance with her: "Lettez be your bisinesse, for I baythe hit yow neuer to graunte," (Cease your mischievous/impertinent activity, for I will never consent to grant this, 1840). Undeterred, the Lady wonders whether the reason for his refusal is the girdle's too little value: "'Now forsake ye this silke,' sayde the burde thenne, / 'For hit is symple in hitself? And so wel hit semez,'" (Now do you forsake this silk, said the Lady then, / Because it is so simple? So it seems, 1846-9). She is still unwilling to accept the idea of Gawain's absolute disenterestedness, suggesting rather that the reason for his refusals is that, first, she offered too much with the ring, and, then, too little with the girdle. Her only problem, she seems to think, is that she has not yet found the right price. On this, she proves to be right.

When the Lady puts his life in the economic balance, Gawain flinches for the first time. She declares the girdle to have the magic power to protect from harm any knight who wears it. Tempted with the possibility of escaping death if he accepts and keeps her green girdle (1853-4), he finally reveals the pragmatic side that she has been baiting all along. With this last temptation she succeeds in moving him away from his idealized view of himself:

Then kest the knyght, and hit come to his hert

Hit were a juel for the jopardé that hym jugged were:

When he acheved to the chapel his chek for to fech,

Myght he haf slypped to be unslayn, the sleght were noble.

(Then the knight pondered, and it came into his heart / [the girdle] would be a jewel in the jeopardy ahead: / When he reached the chapel to face his blow, / Might he slip from being slain, the trick would be noble, 1855-8).

Instead of rejecting her offer, this time he thinks to himself that the girdle's life saving qualities are worth a great deal to him. Following this decision, his next thought consists in no less than the climactic moment of the whole romance: "Myght he haf slypped to be unslayn, the sleght were noble" (see above for translation). In the privacy of his mind, he slides out of the hold of the pentangle's ideology. The ideal presented in the episode of the Green Knight, embodied in Gawain and his pentangle, and tested at Hautdesert, deteriorates with this thought. His diction, especially *slypped* and *sleght*, reveals his fall from the idealized standard of absolute, perfect *trawthe*. The words connote both stealth and trickery, and his use of them reveals his consciousness that he is treading on unworthy ground. Keeping the Lady's green girdle is a clear breach of his oath to the host to exchange daily winnings.

Throughout his scenes with the Lady, however, Gawain has shown little preoccupation with the intention that might operate behind the form of his courtesy. That lack of concern allows him to fall easily into the *sleghtez* (artfulness) of knightly conduct—into yet less lofty behavior. Unaware that the Lady knows his predicament, he dissembles his real purpose and pretends to engage in her courtly love game by accepting her lace as a love token. He has already made up his mind that he wants the girdle, but coyly he lets seem to himself be convinced:

Thenne he thulged with her threpe and tholed hir to speke,

And ho bere on hym the belt and bede him hit swythe--

And he granted and hym gafe with a goud wylle--

(Then he was patient with her pleading and let her speak, / And she pressed on him the belt and bade him take it, / And he consented and she gave it to him with good will, 1859-61).

After he takes the girdle, Gawain squarely puts his refined courtly skills to the service of disloyalty by promising "to lelly layne fro hir lorde," (to faithfully hide [the girdle] from her lord, 1863). The split infinitive reinforces the irony of an assertion that promises to faithfully be unfaithful. A complete break has occurred between Gawain's external courtesy (his smooth pretense to act within the form of courtly love) and his actual intention to be disloyal to the host. He is using his courtly skills in the pragmatic manner suggested by the courtiers who welcomed him at the beginning of the episode--to the point of utilizing the same vocabulary as they did (*sleghtez*, 914 / *sleght*, 1858).[37] The pentangle's coherent *trawthe* is now unraveled.

At this point, the green girdle becomes the visible proof that even Gawain, the best knight of the best order of chivalry, is not entirely selfless. Despite the claim of the pentangle, his *trawthe* is neither perfect nor absolute. At Hautdesert, Gawain is confronted with notions of chivalry that subvert his idealism, and he jeopardizes what he understands to be his honor by ignoring the pragmatic intention that emerges behind the perfect form of his courtesy. In spite of his resolve, Gawain succumbs to the same pragmatic argument suggested by the court of Camelot: it is better to avoid wasting a good knight by placing his survival above the absolute imperative of respect for the oath. Accepting and keeping the girdle goes to the heart

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[37] The artfulness displayed by Gawain is compared to the fox's cunning through the hunting scene that parallels this bedroom scene (Barron, 1983). Throughout this section, I have been making a parallel between the fourteenth-century careerist knights of bastard feudalism and the outlook prevalent at Hautdesert. I want to make clear, however, that I do not mean to say that these careerists knights were cunning or disloyal or lusty. Rather the episode at Hautdesert presents many different ways of being a knight to undermine Gawain's too lofty view of chivalry, as well as uncovers in him an affinity with the more pragmatic outlook of the careerist knight.

of the careerist position. This position does not give the oath dominance, and, therefore, places itself in contrast to the ideology upheld by Susan Crane's Knights of the Order of the Star and represented in traditional Arthurian romance. From the point of view of that ideology, a knight must choose to die for his absolute commitment to an oath. Here, the author breaks with that tradition to show the limit of that ideology's power within the privacy of the mind of the best knight of the Arthurian order of chivalry.

Redefining Chivalric Honor

Wearing the girdle conspicuously across his red coat-of-arms (the pentangle), Gawain leaves Hautdesert to find the Green Chapel. In this episode, the green girdle becomes the symbol of a changing attitude toward the absolute imperative of feudal *trawthe* represented by the pentangle. Breaking with the romance tradition that requires its hero to set aside all other moral imperatives in order to uphold his word, the author has let his hero fail his test by breaking his word in an attempt to save his life. In this final episode, when Gawain's breach of *trawthe* is put to public judgment, he permits the other characters of his romance to make light of the failure, thereby creating a distance from the sacred virtue of feudal *trawthe*, and subtly shifting the definition of chivalric honor.

While on his way to the Green Chapel, Gawain is put yet to another test. This test is designed to refine a definition of Gawain's actual chivalry. Through it, we find out what Gawain is willing to do to save his life, and what he is not. On the way to the Green Chapel, his guide tries to convince him to turn back by creating as much fear as he can:

> The place that ye prece to ful perelous is halden;
>
> Ther wonez a wyghe in that waste, the worst upon erthe,
>
> For he is stiffe and sturne, and to strike lovies,
>
> And more he is then any mon upon myddelerde,
>
> And his body bigger then the best fowre
>
> That ar in Arthurez hous, Hestor, other other.
>
> He Chevez that chaunce at the chapel grene,
>
> Ther passes non bi that place so proude in his armes
>
> That he ne dyngez hym to dethe with dynt of his honde;

For he is a mon methles, and mercy non uses,

For he hit chorle other chaplayn that bi the chapel rydes,

Monk other masseprest, other any mon elles,

Hym thynk as queme hym to quelle as quyk go hymselven.

Forthy I say the, as sothe as ye in sadel sitte,

Com ye there, ye be kylled, I may the knyght rede;

(The place that you press toward is held to be perilous; / A man lives in that waste, the worst in the world, / For he is strong and stern, and loves to strike out, / And he is huger than any man on earth, / With a body bigger than the best four men / In Arthur's house, Hector or any other. / He brings it about at the Green Chapel / That no one passes that place, however proud in arms, / That he does not strike to death with a blow of his hand; / For he is a pitiless man who shows no mercy, / For whether it be a churl or a chaplain who rides by the chapel, / Monk or mass-priest, or any man else, / He is as pleased to kill them as he is to be alive himself. / Therefore I tell you, as sure as you sit in your saddle, / If you go there you will be killed, I warn you the knight will, 2097-2111).

The guide warns Gawain that nothing will help him. The man to be faced at the Green Chapel has no respect for anything, not even churchmen—he simply loves to kill. If Gawain goes, he surely will die. As it turns out, this is a lie (the Green Knight does show mercy) that aims at testing Gawain's chivalric courage. The guide, in a replay of Gawain's shady promise to the Lady ("To lelly layne for her lorde," To faithfully conceal from her lord, 1863), uses the same diction in promising to conceal Gawain's retreat were he to decide to turn back: "I schal lelly yow layne." (I will swear to faithfully conceal your secret, 2124). But, this time Gawain refuses to be involved in a perverted oath.

What seems to differentiate the two scenes is the degree of privacy Gawain experiences, as well as the chivalric forms involved. In the scene with the Lady, Gawain operates under the impression that no one but himself is aware that his life will soon be at great risk. The situation allows him to hide his intent to save his life by manipulating the forms of courtly love

(the love token and his service to a Lady that are a part of the chivalric code). The intricacies of the obligations of a knight, triggered in his scenes with the Lady, permit this sleight of hand. But in the scene with the guide, he is operating less privately. The guide knows what Gawain is facing. In this case, accepting to let the guide "lelly layne" would mean openly breaking with the "fourme of his kynde" (the form of his kindred). Gawain tells him that "founded for ferde for to flee, in fourme that thou tellez, / I were a knyght kowarde" (to be found to flee in fear, in the manner that you suggest, / I would be a coward knight, 2129-30). The behavior suggested by the guide flies in the face of everything a knight is supposed to be— it breaks with any possible aspect of the chivalric code. In his interchange with the guide, Gawain reasserts knightly honor by a show of courage—squarely keeping within the code.

The juxtaposition of the two scenes is revealing of the distinction Gawain makes between form and intention. He follows the forms of the chivalric code in the face of inevitable death, unless he can break form (his oath to the host) by using a trick (*sleght*)-- provided the appearances of keeping form (courtly service to a Lady) are saved. Gawain will utilize the complicated obligations of a knight to his advantage privately, but would rather die than break with form openly. As suggested many times in the romance, Gawain abides by forms while giving little purchase to intentions.

Two other scenes, when juxtaposed, also stress this aspect in Gawain's behavior: his confession to a priest at Hautdesert (1875-83) and his confession to the Green Knight at the Green Chapel (2369-93). John Burrow saw similarities between these two scenes that lead him to conclude that they were meant as contrasting pairs in the poet's mind.[38] In the thirteenth and

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[38] John Burrow, "The Two Confession scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," Modern Philology 57 (January 1959): 76. In the discussion that follows, I use Burrow's article extensively to make my own argument.

fourteenth centuries, a debate raged on the correct use of the sacrament of Penance. The controversy centered around the relative importance of the external forms (the objective, forensic view of the sacramentalists) and of the inner "disposition"(the subjective, ethical view of the contritionists) in the sacrament of Penance (Burrow, 1959:77). The debate led to a proliferation of writings that, according to Burrow, would have made a medieval audience aware of the issues involved. That audience would have recognized that, for some (the contritionists that focus on the intentions of sinners), Gawain's confession at Hautdesert is invalid, while his confession at the Green Chapel would bring absolution.

In the Hautdesert confession, performed immediately after Gawain takes the girdle, we are meant to see that Gawain takes part in the "sacramentum exterius" (the verbal forms of confession with a priest) but does not fulfill the requirements of contrition and restitution (Burrow, 1959:74). On the contrary, Gawain's intention to keep and conceal the girdle from the host is never in doubt. Therefore, from the point of view of a contritionist, who emphasizes remorseful intentions, Gawain's confession to the priest could not bring absolution. Although Gawain shows some signs of guilt toward his host (his eagerness to get the exchange-of-winnings over with quickly, his shying away from the host's jokes, his wearing the color blue that ironically connotes loyalty; all happening only on that third night, 1921-50), he also shows more joy after his confession than he has shown since he arrived at Hautdesert ("Bus myry he watz neuer are, Syn he com hider, er this" (He has shown no merrier since he came, till now, 1890-1)--suggesting that he thinks himself absolved.

Gawain's second confession during the Green Chapel episode, shows the reverse emphasis. The scene informally follows the pattern of the confessional (contrition, confession, absolution), but Gawain is confessed by a lay man and the emphasis is on "vera dispositio."

Gawain expresses intense guilt and remorse, and returns the green girdle (2369-77). From a formalist's (sacramentalist) point of view, this confession could not bring forgiveness as it does not respect appropriate forms. And while Gawain is forgiven by Bertilak and later on by the Camelot court, he continues to perceive his mistake as unredeemed. Once his break of an oath is made public, in his mind no amount of inner contrition and forgiveness can erase it. His own feudal worldview, that puts the respect of forms above all, cannot sense the power of right intention.

What is striking about the last episode of the romance is the differing judgments on Gawain's mistake. At the Green Chapel, Gawain receives three blows from the Green Knight's axe, one for each day of the exchange-of-winnings game/agreement, each as judgment of his performance on that agreement. Only the last blow slightly wounds him, because on the last day he "lakked a lyttel" in loyalty, says the Green Knight/Bertilak (2366).[39] (The Green Knight is referring to the fact that Gawain kept the green girdle he received from the Lady instead of giving it to his host.) From the point of view of feudal society, Gawain's break of troth is the most serious fault anyone can commit since, as we have seen earlier, respect for trothplight is the primary social duty (Green, 62). By breaking his oath to the host, he does not just 'lack a little' but fails to fulfill the highest moral imperative of feudal society.

In keeping with that point of view, Gawain's reaction, when he is exposed as an oath-breaker by Bertilak, is extremely intense: "So agreved for greme he gryed withinne; / Alle the blode of his brest blende in his face, / That al he schrank fro schome that the schalk talked"

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[39] The Green Knight is Bertilak de Hautdesert, Gawain's host, under a spell from Morgan le Fay (Gawain's aunt and Arthur's half sister). She is the agency behind the testing of the Round Table's *trawthe*. Most critics (including Burrow, Spearing, and Putter) view her and Bertilak/Green Knight as devices.

(So grievously ashamed that he grieved within; / All the blood of his heart streamed together in his face, / That he shrank for shame while the man talked, 2370-72). And when he goes back to Camelot to tell his adventure, although he has been forgiven by Bertilak, he sees himself for ever stained:

> The token of untrawthe that I am tan inne,
>
> And I mot nedez hit were wyle I may last;
>
> For mon may hyden his harme, bot unhap me may hit,
>
> For ther hit onez is tachched twynne wil hit never.

(The token of untruth in which I was taken, / And I must wear it as long as I may live; / For one may hide his harm, but unfasten it he may not, / For once it is attached it can never be removed, 2509-12).

His excessively self-incriminating response has usually been a matter of critical puzzlement. Some critics have interpreted it in Christian terms, as a condition of sinful despair. The hero, they argue, is unable to accept forgiveness and absolution because, out of pride, he sees his fault as so large that even God could not forgive it. I believe that Gawain's response is better understood in secular terms. In a feudal social context, any hint of bad faith "compromised one's standing in the community" and the ability to participate in any kind of social intercourse for the rest of one's life (often, burial was refused in sanctified ground to those who perjured their oath). Once an individual's *trawthe* was blemished it could never be made fully trustworthy again (Green, 63). In such a society, physical mutilation, which left obvious marks, was not uncommon--both for punishment and for the practical purpose of protecting communities against oath breakers by making them conspicuous. Gawain asserts that he is marked for life because, within a feudal worldview, socially he is. Although he chose to break his promise in order to save his life, he remains within the feudal ideology of the pentangle.

He understands and reacts to his mistake in terms of the ideology of absolute and perfect *trawthe*.

But the court of Camelot and Bertilak both disagree with Gawain's outlook, and share with each other similar judgments and reactions to his failure. Bertilak laughs at Gawain's intense response, and admires his courage for standing three blows of his axe with only a little shrug. He calls him "on the fautlest freke that ever on fote yede" (the most faultless knight who ever walked the earth, 2363). At Hautdesert, Gawain's high-minded view of disinterested loyalty was a source of comedy and irony. In that castle, much earthier chivalric identities (some of which were in affinity with the social relations of bastard feudalism and what they imply) were evoked. Bertilak, therefore, judges Gawain's behavior from a point of view that does not recognize *trawthe* as an absolute moral imperative and can, therefore, easily be forgiving.

In the same way, the court at Camelot laughs heartily at Gawain's misgivings and admires him greatly for going to the Green Chapel to face the Green Knight (2514-18). Clearly, the knights do not attach the same significance to Gawain's mistake that he does. Their earlier ambivalent reaction to Gawain's quest had already expressed some dissent from a purely feudal ideology. Now they sustain that reaction by accepting a shift in the meaning of the pentangle and making the green girdle the symbol of a new kind of chivalric identity:

> Uche burne of the brotherheded, a bauderyk schulde haue,
>
> A bende abelef hym aboute of a bryght grene,
>
> And that, for sake of that segge, in swete to were.
>
> For that watz acorded the renoun of the Rounde Table,
>
> And he honoured that hit hade euermore after.

(Each knight of the brotherhood, a baldric should wear, / A band of bright green across his body, / Similar to [Gawain's] and worn for his sake: / And that was given the renoun of the Round Table, / And who had it was honored ever after, 2516-9).

The green girdle evokes a chivalric identity that allows a certain flexibility toward the feudal legal/ethical system of *trawthe* and trothplight. *Trawthe*, at least for most of the characters, is no longer a sacred virtue and dominant ethical imperative to be upheld under any circumstances. The version of chivalry represented by the green girdle and underwritten by the Camelot court is leavened with a pragmatic commitment to value the survival of a knight above his *trawthe*. The court rejects the shame and punishment attached to the ideology represented by the Gawain-pentangle complex and, therefore, it separates itself from that ideology. The laughter that punctuates Gawain's remorse functions to deflate and distance the intensity of the moral imperative, and to signal the decreased significance of the ideal Gawain represents. It suggests a refusal to be intimidated by the "tyranny of the oath."

At the end of the poem, the multiple and divergent judgments made by the characters are a representation of differing positions on the status of the waning legal and ethical system of feudal society. Gawain understands his experience from a high feudal perspective and, therefore, cannot accept his breach of conduct. He does not see any honor in what he did. In contrast, the court and Bertilak understand it from the perspective of the later social developments of bastard feudalism in which *trawthe* has lost dominance; and therefore they can laugh at the breach and refocus honor on Gawain's great courage. For many centuries during the Middle Ages, breaking an oath meant nothing less than undermining the social order, and was represented in romance as the unforgivable crime. In a radical departure from that tradition, the Knights of the Round Table in *Sir Gawain* laugh at a broken oath, making light of the most sacred virtue of the feudal age.

Conclusion

The concept of *trawthe*, understood as loyalty to one's given word, that dominates both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and late fourteenth-century English culture, was on the wane. The social forms that had brought this concept into dominance and maintained it were being subverted by new "emergent" forms.[40] As I haveargued, the new legal forms of the written contract and of written proof in courtrooms, as well as the new social relationships of bastard feudalism, were undermining the cultural power of the feudal oral oath as a legal and ethical instrument. Consequently, the cultural dominance of absolute loyalty to one's oath, as a moral imperative above all others, was decreasing. Many argue, Green among them, that the fourteenth century was a "milestone on the route to the modern state" (Green, 51)—the historical moment when the feudal social structure and its cultural values began to disintegrate and be replaced by more modern forms.

In this essay, I have argued that the ambiguities that pervade *Sir Gawain* can be understood in terms of this socio-cultural shift. The poet confronts the conventions of an older literary form with a contemporary voice. The conventions of romance evolved in the twelfth century to "affirm and preserve the ideals and values of the ruling class" of feudal society (Barron, 1980:36). In the romance, those ideals were represented in chivalric action and identity that ubiquitously stressed the virtue of absolute fidelity to the given word (Green, 63). The

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[40] In the following discussion, I use Raymond Williams' concepts of dominant versus emergent cultural elements from <u>Marxism and Literature</u>, (Oxford; New York: Oxford university Press, 1977), 121-127. According to Williams, "the complexity of a culture is to be found in the dynamic interrelations, at any point in the process, of historically varied and variable elements," 121. He theorizes these "varied and variable" elements as "dominant," "residual," and "emergent" cultural forms. Dominant elements are those that "effectively seize the ruling definition of the social," that is, they are the elements that direct the core cultural practices. Emergent elements

Camelot court, in *Sir Gawain*, is the new voice that suggests the possibility of doing things differently. As Gawain leaves on his quest, they question the wisdom of the enterprise and, pragmatically, think that he should not be wasted on it. At the end of the romance, when they learn that Gawain has broken his word to his host, they reject his feudal understanding of his failure, and recast the meaning of the green girdle in honorific terms. In addition, their laughter at the intensity of his self-incrimination reflects on Gawain's position by diminishing its validity. In a society in the midst of a transition between a waning dominant feudal worldview and an emerging more modern outlook, the *Gawain*-poet writes a romance that desacralizes the feudal view of loyalty and allows the emergent to win. In his romance, the author possibly aimed at presenting an ideology in accordance with the prevalent chivalric identity of the knights of his Cheshire County.

In this paper, as I pursued my main argument, I repetitively encountered the secondary theme of varying valuations of fixed ritual formulae (such as the form of the oath) and of the intentions behind them. Gawain is repeatedly incapable of taking intention into account, while the court is ready to question the value of formalism. One of the main transitional aspects of fourteenth-century England, was a rise of literacy in society at large that undermined the older oral forms. As we have seen, this rise allowed written proof and written contracts to be part of the emergent forms that undermined the feudal oral worldview. In the culture, there was a running debate, legal as well as religious, concerning the value of accounting for the intentions behind the fixed forms. As I found out, this debate is evoked in *Sir Gawain*. I think, therefore, that a promising area for further research would be to investigate the poem with

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are the "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kind of relationships [that] are being created," 123. Real emergent elements are oppositional to dominant culture, 123.

questions of literacy and orality in mind and with an understanding of the nature the

fourteenth-century debate between formalism and intentionalism.

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