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GAWAIN'S AMBIVALENT CHRISTIANITY

E. L. Risden

Readers have long called attention to several interesting aspects of the ubiquitous Gawain's character: we note him, with his strength rising toward noon and falling thereafter, as a remnant Celtic sun god; we find authors praising his courtesy above that of all other knights, so he fits a courtly ideal; as Arthur's sister's son, he holds a special position at court, one of honor and favor, so he exemplifies a significant relationship that stands for stability and continuity; he eagerly engages in battles and quests, embodying martial courage. In this essay, using several different Middle English Romances, I would like to consider Gawain's character with respect to Christianity and to suggest that, despite the praise he receives from the nominally Christian Arthurian court and from explicitly Christian authors, his character remains courteous largely in the secular sphere, and his function as a Christian character remains ambivalent. We can observe these patterns in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and through most of his medieval literary incarnations, of which I will treat only a few here. I make this point not to malign Gawain as character, but to try to come to a better understanding of the function he serves in medieval texts: to show both an idealized courtliness and its limitations. Gawain, of course, got supplanted as Arthur's chief knight through the French influence—Lancelot appears in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (c. 1385), but briefly and to no real effect—but he remains a major point of interest for criticism because he resists simple interpretations.

In taking his king's place in the beheading game, Gawain shows an appropriate filial piety, but in willingly striking the blow, does he show Arthur's court and the Green Knight courtly honor (and fearlessness), or does he fail to show proper Christian restraint? Outside of seeing the blow as a willing and seemingly thoughtless attempt to "murder" an adversary who does no more than taunt, we may see it also as a function of Gawain's and the Green Knight's metaphorical nature as pagan deities: Gawain's blow potentially brings
“night” to the Green Knight, as darkness at the end of day falls on the Greenwood—each character serves his function in the cycle of existence, and we may tune ourselves to nature or at least understand it by observing or even participating in their exchange. Gawain's famous shield has not only on its outside the endless knot with its various and specific Christian referents (plus the traditional pagan interpretations of the Pentangle and its Old Testament allusion to Solomon), but also the image of Mary facing him as a reminder of his first duty: the poet even refers to him as Mary's knight. But later we hear no more of that image, and when he accepts the green sash from the lady and wears it in his encounter with the Green Knight, he proffers his allegiance to magic rather than to God. Gawain has turned from exceptional and salvable Christian knight to “anyone” caught in the dangerous cycle of life and death. Even in flinching from the knight's blow, which Bercilak willingly forgives, suggesting that the desire to preserve one's life is only natural, Gawain fails to offer his life to God's mercy—understandable, but less than ideally Christian. Further, at the Green Chapel and again at Arthur's court, Gawain, having been discovered wayward, readily confesses his sin. But has he done so fully and properly to a priest, as he should to be shriven before the blow that he has good reason to believe will kill him? And if he has confessed, has he either failed to confess fully his withholding of the sash or has he confessed and then sinned anyway, hoping to use every opportunity to save himself? While Gawain commits no atrocities and seems to follow the proper rituals and even asks God's blessing on his hosts, whether to support a thematic purpose or because of cultural ambiguities, he falls short of an ideal that an audience may expect. Gawain serves as more than an allegorical figure; he comprises rather a complex mix of pagan features and Christian longings.

In Malory (Morte Darthur, 1485) we find a Gawain whose breaches against Christian practice emerge even less ambiguously. Though Gawain and Lancelot have professed undying friendship, Gawain, agreeing to accompany the knights who seek to make explicitly public Lancelot and Gwenevere's affair, betrays both his friend and his king: what good could possibly come of this choice? And Gawain pursues vengeance for his brothers despite Christian proscription and his own knowledge that he has chosen an evil course: he forgives Lancelot at last and urges Arthur to forgive him as well.

Gawain, the first of the knights to commit to the Grail quest, sunders the fellowship of the Round Table, bringing Arthur to tears,
and for a quest he must admit he can't achieve: only sinless knights can succeed, and Gawain, despite the pride he shows in undertaking the quest, at least knows himself unworthy of fulfilling it. While the impulse to do good and be holy may drive his commitment, Gawain again and again fails to understand that the Grail doesn't reward martial deeds, but spiritual ones, and his quest ends earlier than that of any of the other knights who survive it when he refuses to follow the behest of a hermit who would guide him from earthly to spiritual concerns. As Gawain's natural strength waxes with the sun, then wanes with the darkness, so his value to Arthur as a knight grows in just and honorable battle, but wanes when one needs instead Christian virtues (beyond those gifts of nature) such as faith, chastity, and forgiveness. Malory's Gawain, far from emerging as Arthur's greatest soldier, also fails as a soldier of God, never until his death learning to distinguish sustaining virtue from destructive impulse.

The *Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* (MS. c. 1500, poem fifteenth century) would on its surface seem to support our image of a Gawain who willingly, even cheerfully sacrifices himself to preserve the life of his king. He shares Arthur's responsibility, questing as does the king, and when Arthur actually finds, through the help of the lady, the answer to the question of "whate wemen love best in feld and town" (line 91), Gawain agrees sight unseen to marry her: "Thowgh she were as foulle as Belsabub,/ Her shalle I wed, by the Rood,/ Or elles were nott I your frende" (ll. 345-47). Arthur promises the lady, "And your desyre nowe shalle ye have,/ Bothe in bowre and in bed" (400-401). Even readers unfamiliar with this particular tale will know its upshot from Chaucer's more famous Wife of Bath's Tale, but this one raises an interesting question that Chaucer's version doesn't: in the Christian sense does Gawain err, submitting to the sacrament of marriage where he has no love? Does Arthur in a sense prostitute Gawain, and having been committed by his king to "bowre and bed," does Gawain sin again in at first rejecting the lady's proper marital advances? In a medieval Christian sense does Gawain sin and allow his wife to sin by allowing her the "sovereynte" in marriage? After her transformation she pledges obedience to God, but does she retain sovereignty over Gawain? Does Gawain sin again in pondering the fact that if the lady appears beautiful at night but loathly during the day, he will lose honor at court: why should he lose honor, especially in Christian terms, if they both remain faithful? And when Gawain does take time to thank God, he does so for the lady's beauty, which returns
with his submission. Because of her beauty, he may then properly make love to his wife, another point for which he may have had to give account had he failed.

The poem also has an odd ending. The lady lives but five years after the wedding. In closing comments the poet notes that "In her lyfe she grevyd hym nevere;/ Therefor was nevere woman to hym lever" (ll. 823-24); he adds, "Gawen was weddyd oft in his days;/ butt so welle he nevere lovdyd woman always "(ll. 832-33), and then, "Nowe God, as thou were in Bethleme born,/ Suffer nevere her souldes be forlorne/ In he brynyng fyre of helle!" (ll. 838-40). Chaucer hints that the Wife of Bath sins in marrying again, and again, and again and again and perhaps again, but Gawain does so as well, at least according to this poet, and he marries women whom he loves less than his wife: does he offend against sacrament thereby? And for what sin does the poet ask that Arthur's court be spared hellfire: for those parts of the story we know but that the poet doesn't tell, or for something in the poem, and if for something in the poem, then what? for their actions or for their reliance on magic and countermagic rather than on prayer and Scripture?

Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle (c. 1400) provides some additional interesting problems. Hunting with Sir Kay, ever the pig-headed snob, and Bishop Baldwin, the knightly cleric, Gawain, in this tale "stewarde of the hall" and "master of them all" (lines 46-47), gets lost on a misty moor, till Baldwin finds them lodging at the castle of a Carl of evil reputation. Again Gawain emerges as the soul of courtesy, begging Kay to avoid troublesome boasting, humbly beseeching the porter's aid, should the Carl be willing to board them, and bowing humbly to the Carl upon their meeting. But, in exchange for board, the Carl requires tests, and, adhering to a vow, for twenty years he has killed guests who failed those tests; Gawain, however, passes the tests of "carl's courtesy." When Kay and Baldwin push away a foal who wanders near their horses, the Carl strikes them; when Gawain finds the foal in the rain, he cares for it, covering it with his own cloak, and the Carl praises him. Next the Carl requires that Gawain strike him as hard as he can in the face with a spear; Gawain blithely obliges. Then he asks Gawain to kiss and bed down with his beautiful wife, but stops him short of intercourse; again, Gawain abides by his host's wishes. Having passed the Carl's three tests, Gawain receives as reward freedom to spend the night and take his pleasure with the Carl's even more beautiful daughter, a gift he heartily accepts.
The poem concludes happily with Gawain marrying the girl, the Carl becoming Arthur's vassal, committing to a proper Christian life, building a cathedral, and having masses sung in perpetuity for the souls of those visitors he killed—apparently sufficient penance. That end comes about through Gawain's courtesy and willing service to the Carl, not because of any Christian teaching he offers or because of any specifically Christian act he performs. The author may have aimed to teach that proper knightly courtesy (or nightly courtesy) leads to a proper Christian life; the Carl seems to need to believe in the model before he can commit to the practice. Readers might have expected Christian word and act to produce temporal courtesy as an afterthought, not the reverse. Gawain's acts, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, seem to contradict Christian expectations—one may even call them sinful, as they involve both lust and violence—though they occur in a nominally Christian world and produce at least nominally Christian results. Both the Carl and Arthur swear by St. Michael, and the Carl, though he has magic at his bidding, holds mass before breakfast, offers Gawain's friends generous parting gifts, and has taught the daughter he gives to a stranger to pray to St. Mary.

In *The Turk and Sir Gawain* (c. 1500) we see the triumph of those who have access to Christian power and who use courtly manners over those who depend alone on magic and physical stature, but Gawain appears not so much as the knight of Christ as the knight of temporal courtesy. He rather supports than rescues the "Turk," who turns out to be a proper Christian knight altered by enchantment to seem foreign.

As in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain finds himself obligated to strike a blow that his provoker never fully returns, and he must then go on an adventure that requires he pass several tests. The Turk, according to the text, becomes essentially Gawain's "boy," that is, his servant, and he accomplishes most of the difficult tasks for Gawain: while Gawain endures a frightening storm and verbal insults, defeats some giants at tennis, and against his own wishes agrees to behead the Turk, the Turk actually physically subdues a dangerous giant, lifts a hot chimney and twirls it thrice above his head, then—clad in a garment of invisibility—flings another giant and the evil King of the Isle of Man into a cauldron of molten lead meant for Gawain, and finally with Gawain's help releases the dead king's prisoners. The Turk, returned to his proper shape as Sir Gromer, Christian knight, requests that Arthur install Gawain as King of Man, but Gawain insists that he
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has no right to that office and argues instead for Gromer's precedence: "Lord, nay, not I; / Give it him, for he it wan" (lines 324-25).

Gromer rather than Gawain seems to represent Christian perspective in the poem. Though he enters the poem in an exotic, saracenish shape, he brings Gawain to help release the evil king's prisoners. The king, "heathen soldan" (line 130) as the poet calls him, not only threatens Gawain and spits on him, but expresses his anger particularly at the "spirituality" rather than at the "temporality" of England, expresses spite at Bishop Bodwine's appropriation of his goods, and threatens to "brenn their clergy in a fire / And punish them to my pay" (ll. 164-65). To be freed of his enchantment, Gromer must induce Gawain to behead him so that his blood may flow into a basin. He asserts to Gawain that then "thou shalt see a new play, / With helpe of Mary that mild mayd / That saved us from all dread" (ll. 283-85). After Gawain strikes off his head, Gromer arises, renewed, and sings a "Te Deum," praising Jesus Christ and blessing Gawain. Gromer serves as an essential Christ figure, perhaps even in Gawain's final test, turning down a kingship proper to another, showing his humility, accepting his place as Arthur's knight.

Gawain does, in a sense, "convert" the Turk, but the Turk converts a kingdom, the Isle of Man, from heathendom to Christendom. Gawain, Thomas Hahn argues, must remain "free of the constraints of leadership . . . not at the center of the court, [so] he can journey to the most remote and fabulous places without threatening social integrity in his absence"; he "typifies popular notions of chivalric virtues, but he is able to test these, to show their nature and durability"—significantly he fulfills the desire for adventure without the constraints of a Christian official. Gawain realizes himself not as the agent of Christian activity, but as its servant, not as its conveyor, but as its student, and he often learns—or at least accepts the lesson—not from traditional sources within the church—priests and hermits—but from unlikely sources: a rustic knight, a Saracen, a Green Knight, Morgan le Fay.

Those points account, I think, for Gawain's shifting or ambivalent Christianity, whether or not we see him as a clearly Christian knight or as a holdover from the pre-Christian world dubiously christianized or as a placeholder for "courteous knight." In *The Awntyrs off Arthur* (fifteenth century), Gawain, attending Queen Gaynour as the king and other knights hunt, sees along with the queen a ghost or apparition of Gaynour's mother, who shrieks the woes she now suffers for having led a sinful life. Gawain calls her in the name of Christ to tell her story, and
so she admonishes her daughter to have pity on the poor, since she has power and wealth to do so, to avoid excesses of sexual and other pleasures, and to avoid pride and prideful public displays. She also urges Gaynour to warn the king, predicts evil events to come, asks him to remember her with prayers and masses said in her honor, and summarily sermonizes the virtues of meekness, mercy, chastity, and almsgiving. In the second half of the poem, a Scottish knight, Sir Galaron, arrives at court to fight for the lands Arthur has confiscated from him and assigned to Gawain. Gawain accepts the challenge and defeats his foe, but Gaynour, at the request of Galaron’s lady, intervenes and asks Gawain to spare him. The king and Gawain agree, and Galaron willingly gives up his claims, but Arthur assigns Gawain new lands, and Gawain happily returns to Galaron what the challenger had remitted. The first half of the poem encourages charity, and the second half exhibits how it can apply even within noble quarrels. Gawain in both halves represents the “good knight”: in the first part he makes his request in the name of God, and in the second he acts generously. But he commits the generous act with no appearance of Christian charity, rather as an act of chivalry toward a defeated challenger, and the knowledge that Gawain and Gaynour gain from the troubled spirit does nothing to mitigate the ultimate and symbolically apocalyptic destruction of Camelot. While in this romance, unlike the others, one may guess that Gawain’s motivation derives from his Christian faith, the actions may arise as much from his social position and the dictates of the moment as from a devoted Christian soul.

Christian authors and audiences notwithstanding, Gawain as character fills a significant need in the chivalric story. A good tale must have adventure; to have adventure, we must have a seeker; a seeker must have imperfections, or he or she would have nothing to seek; imperfections allow for learning, in the Christian sphere or otherwise—both, ideally, in the Arthurian world, where Christ and magic coexist. If Gawain adhered fully to Christian tenets and limits, he would be Galahad, not Gawain, and how many of us feel akin to Galahad, however much we may admire knightly perfection? Gawain’s complexity and ambivalence leave him precariously balanced between the Old world and the New, the pagan and the Christian, the Saved and the Lost—his presence inevitably adds emotional and intellectual depth to a story. We tend to suffer just as much from our own ambivalence as Gawain does from his. Like Gawain we feel our strength rise and fall; our commitments enter our hearts, and then they fall from our memory;
we pass some tests, and we fail others. But temporal courtesy also serves its purpose for those of us who stand and wait, and Gawain's greenworld, sinful but replete with possibilities, points to what we perhaps should be, allows us to imagine what we may be, and forgives us what we fail to become.

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Notes


3 In *Roots and Branches* Tom Shippey observes, "I see Tolkien's fiction as in several senses a 'meditation' [and I would add mediation] between a Christian world and a heroic pagan one... so Tolkien sees the Gawain-poet as understanding and drawing on both those worlds... [sometimes] 'subordinating' one to the other," i.e., pagan motifs to his Christian theme (page 74).

4 Several scholars have argued that while Gawain is saved, Camelot is not. See for instance: S. L. Clark and Julian N. Wasserman, "The Passing of the Seasons and the Apocalyptic in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *South Central Review* 3 (1986): 5-22; Martin B. Shichtman, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: A Lesson in the Terror of History," *Papers on Language and Literature* 22 (1986): 3-15; Ruth Hamilton, "Chivalry as Sin in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *University of Dayton Review* 18 (1987) 113-17. But as Andrea Hopkins observes (*The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1990, page 205), "Gawain's fault is not treated as a sin (i.e., as an offense against God), and he does not formally undertake penance with a view to being reconciled with God." One wonders exactly what sins Gawain confesses (and to whom) when he attends chapel after accepting the sash from the lady.
Robert Kindrick aptly argues ("Gawain's Ethics: Shame and Guilt in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 20, 1981, 5-32) that some of the ambiguities of the poem derive from its birth at the cusp of two values systems, a shame-honor society where social status determines ethical responsibility and a guilt-innocence society where an "internalized sense of ethics" (8) guides actions: the poem "demonstrates the tension between these two sets of social values" (8), and "where judgments are made . . . in terms of Christian values" (14), "Gawain is left with a strong sense of anguish over his failure" (6). It combines the comedy of Romance with the "heavier tone of religious anti-romances" (27), "values have been inverted when renown counts for more than integrity" (31)—yet Gawain succeeds as much as a person can hope to do and learns integrity. Gawain comes to represent in the poem, as Bob Kindrick did to our profession, serving with integrity.

Gawain's battles on his way to the Green Chapel may call to mind those of another pagan hero from a nominally Christian context: Beowulf's ridding the seas of dangerous monsters during his youthful contest with Breca.


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Works Cited


