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“Ye May Not Be Werned!”: Gawain’s Cost of Conformity in *Le Morte Darthur* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

INTRODUCTION

In Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, knights of the Round Table must swear the Pentecostal Oath, which embodies all the traditional chivalric traits, among which include “to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy” and “never to do outrage nother mourthir” (Malory 77). It is called the Pentecostal Oath because it is sworn yearly on the Christian Pentecost by the various knights of the Round Table. Its presence or absence in the knight’s actions is therefore continually reinforced as time passes, throughout the text. Not only does the Oath embody all these chivalric traits, but, as Dorsey Armstrong writes, “the institution of the Oath defines and sharpens specific ideals of masculine and feminine gender identities in the Arthurian community” (1). The Oath, as noted by editor Stephen H.A. Shepherd in the Norton edition, “does not have a match in the known sources, it does reflect the oaths of actual chivalric orders in Malory’s day” (Malory 77). Therefore, the Oath, although a fictional creation, and reflecting the literary conventions of chivalry in Medieval Romance, nonetheless reflects entirely real ideals of gender and social hierarchy in Medieval England. Armstrong notes that during the time that Malory’s text was being written, “Traditional medieval concepts of

hierarchical class structure and social order were undergoing transformation in this period” (5).

Perhaps the most notable part of the Oath, is when it takes a turn, and includes a clause which attempts to enforce on the knights, “uppon payne of dethe,” the rights of women: “allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes [socour], strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them” (77).¹ The Oath therefore establishes a set of conventions regarding the importance of women’s consent. Consequently, the Oath can be seen as a method of “testing” the knights or gauging the degree to which they can follow the Oath, or in other words, stick to the conventions. It is in the moments where characters are for some reason incapable of following the Oath, that conflicts within the institution of knighthood and ideas of chivalry can be seen.

Into this set of conventions, comes Gawain. In Malory, the swearing of the Oath comes right after an episode in which Sir Gawain accidentally kills a lady because he was attempting to unmercifully execute a knight. During this scene, Gawain’s brother Gaherys exclaims that, “that shame shall never frome you” (Malory 68). This shows that the disregarding of the Oath’s conventions has a much deeper effect than simply knightly status: it is a deeply personal violation that effects Gawain’s entire masculinity. The Oath can thus be seen as a conventional, both masculine and chivalric reaction, to unconventional behaviour, not just of Gawain’s, although he is probably the biggest offender at this point in Malory. However, in *Knighthood in the Morte Darthur*, Beverly Kennedy

¹ While superficially, this seems like a really good thing: a way to check the toxic masculine worldview embodied by the knights. In actuality, as Dorsey Armstrong writes, the Oath is really just “co-opting the feminine to enhance knightly endeavor” (70). It quickly becomes clear that the status of being a knight is inherently misogynistic, and that women in Malory’s world need protection because the knights can never properly uphold this Oath in the first place (Armstrong 65-70). Armstrong argues further that the Oath is Malory’s “react[ion] to the trouble of his day”, the aforementioned social transformation, “by creating a code of conduct—the Pentecostal Oath” (7).

attempts to reconcile the differences between knightly behaviour by introducing three “Types” of knights. She notes that “each type has its own distinct ethos, determined by its own particular world view,” among these being the Heroic Knight, who is motivated not by knighthood itself or God, but by old ideas of heroism, and into which Gawain falls (Kennedy 57). Importantly, the Heroic Knight is a knight who relies much more on masculine dominance, because he strives to obtain honour primarily from female submission. But he is also a knight that must first learn how to be honourable before he can be a good knight, and is therefore prone, like Gawain in Malory, to making unconventional mistakes.

Gawain’s ideas of heroism predate, and consequently conflict with, these contemporary conventions of chivalry and Romance espoused by the Pentecostal Oath. In other words, he is constantly in conflict with the world around him, as it is one that is built around the continual repetition and testing of these conventions, which do not accommodate his personal ethos of knighthood. This conflict frequently harms himself and others, but in particular, it harms women. Women in the *Morte*, aware of the danger his non-conformity represents to a system which (at least superficially) attempts to protect them, try to force Gawain into conformity, which often only exacerbates the harm to both of them. However, what is crucial about Heroic Knighthood’s non-conformity is that it opens the way for new, potentially less harmful, conventions.

In the long Arthurian poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (SGGK), the Pentecostal Oath itself does not exist, but the conventions it details were nonetheless present around 100 years earlier, when the poem was being written. This shared set of conventions presents a striking similarity, in the form of the “consent clause.” In the poem, when Gawain is conversing with the charming Lady

Bertilak, she admits that “ye may not be werned! / Ye are stiff inogh to constryne with strenthe if yow likes, / If any were so vilainous that yow devaye wolde” (*Sir Gawain*.351.1495-7). Indeed, although there is no formal Oath, Gawain nonetheless acknowledges that “good is your speche, / Bot thret is unthryvande in thede there I lende, / And uch gift that is geven not with good wille. / I am at your comaundement to kysse when yow likes; / Ye may leche when yow lyst” (352.1498-1502). Here, Gawain presents a clause that shares the conventions of consent exactly with the Pentecostal Oath. In the poem, Gawain is no longer the Heroic Knight of Malory, who has just killed a lady. He fully conforms to the conventions, and openly acknowledges them. Consequently, the women of the poem, and in particular Lady Bertilak, never feel genuinely threatened by Gawain’s status as a knight or his masculine presence. However, his conformity comes at a cost: the women use his conformity to manipulate him into doing what they want.

The way both texts portray gender hierarchies and conventions with respect to knighthood and courtesy, means they engage with hegemonic masculinity. Masculine Studies scholars Connell and Messerschmidt argue “that masculinities are not simply different but also subject to change. Challenges to hegemony are common, and so are adjustments in the face of these challenges” (835). These earlier definitions of hegemonic masculinity are “abstract rather than descriptive” (832) and do not reflect the instances in these texts in which women do have agency and can overpower the patriarchy, or when knights subvert their own hegemony. Connell and Messerschmidt add a new clause to these older definitions, writing that “Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting” (836). This, for example, is shown in the way in which Malory’s Gawain is uneasy about

displeasing a lady and is “Ferde lest he had failed in forme of his castes” and must “ferde with defence and feted ful fayre” (340). Perhaps most importantly, the two write that,

there could be a struggle for hegemony, and older forms of masculinity might be displaced by new ones. This was the element of optimism in an otherwise rather bleak theory. It was perhaps possible that a more humane, less oppressive, means of being a man might become hegemonic, as part of a process leading toward an abolition of gender hierarchies. (833)

The possibility that new ways of being masculine, ways that do not subordinate women, can be present in these texts is central to how they present hegemonic masculinity, a worldview and social practice that is not static, but is capable of change.

Even in Malory’s time, tradition was being suborned by new, unconventional conceptions of social hierarchy. This is because, as Maurice Hugh Keen writes, “it was traditional wisdom that society was composed of three orders, functionarily defined in their relation to one another: ... the clergy ... the warriors ... and the laborers” (Keen 1). Armstrong notes that “by the later Middle Ages the three estates model was no longer an intact, functioning social system” (215). A critical part of this changing social system was the deterioration of the institution of knighthood. By Malory’s time in the late Fifteenth century, “both the practical and idealized aspects of knighthood had been compromised ... This was due in part to the steady development of advances in warfare from the late thirteenth century on ... which rendered the armored knight on horseback inessential and obsolete” (Armstrong 6). Richard Kaeuper elaborates that, in England (during Malory’s time), “one of the greatest threats to the peace of the realm came from the day to day conduct of the knightly classes whose violent self-help was often proudly proclaimed and recognized as a right rather than condemned as a crime” (185). A

picture of a changing England is starting to form; one in which the chivalric ideals whose standards knights could be held to follow a hundred years previously, as in the time of the composition of *SGGK*, could no longer be held with confidence among the people of England. The idea of changing social conventions of masculinity were thus surrounding and informing these texts, in addition to literary conventions.

I argue that we see two different forms of hegemonic masculinity between *SGGK* and Malory. In *SGGK*, Gawain is the conforming knight. The things he does reinforce women's subjugation in conventional ways, with the woman's consent. However, this conformity is used to manipulate him. In Malory, he is the non-conforming knight, but all-the-same subjugates women. He is not being manipulated, but he is morally questionable. The effect of these competing masculine conventions on Gawain is that he is not given a clear model for how to act, despite seeking one. Gawain is punished either way for following or not following convention. What remains between both texts is his effort of trying to do what he feels is right, or what he has been led to believe is right. In this light, Gawain is due for a moral reevaluation: rather than merely a bad or immoral knight (although he still retains these qualities at times), Gawain also becomes a character who simply attempts to do the best he can in every situation, which is the ideal position for learning and growth beyond these subjugating masculinities. Moreover, *Le Morte Darthur* is the text that presents a more viable "new masculinity" which can be used to move toward potentially less harmful gender relations. Although Gawain's non-conformity in the *Morte* comes with dangerous baggage, it nonetheless leaves room open for alternatives, rather than closing the door completely, like *SGGK*'s Gawain.

GAWAIN'S FORCED CONFORMITY IN *LE MORTE DARTHUR*

In Malory's *Morte Darthur*, Gawain is a Heroic Knight. Because of his non-conventional ethos, he often is forced to conform to the traditions and ideals of masculinity and chivalry outlined by the Pentecostal Oath, primarily by the women of the book, to whom he presents a particular threat. However, this same non-conformity allows him room to learn and grow beyond the conventions.

One of the quintessential moments of forced conformity for Gawain is during the first of many of the infamous triple quests, in which three knights embark on a heroic quest, to varying degrees of success, and are judged on their performance when they return to court. Beverly Kennedy notes that, if "we judge these ... knights' performances by their ability to adhere to the standards of conduct spelled out in Arthur's pentecostal oath ... then Gawain is the worst" (67). In this first triple quest, Gawain's "fyrst batayle ... after he was made knyght," (Malory 66), he encounters two brother knights arguing about who will capture the head of a white hart that was reputedly seen in the woods. Gawain cautions "for uncouth men ye sholde debate withall, and no brothir with brothir" (67), and resolves to capture the hart for them, as part of his quest. But another knight has beaten Gawain to it, and kills Gawain's hunting dogs. Gawain beats the knight to the ground, as he "cryed mercy" but "Gawain wolde no mercy have" and as the sword is descending, in an attempt to save him, the knight's lady jumps in front of his body, and her head is struck off instead, while Gawain's brother Gaherys exclaims, "that ys fowle and shamefully done! For that shame shall never frome you" (68). Gawain, ashamed, offers the knight mercy, which he initially refuses, then agrees to go and see King Arthur and tell him what has happened. This section demonstrates the conflict that is at the center of Gawain's heroic knighthood non-conformity: he does not intend any wrong-doing, nor does he intend to go

against the conventions. He simply attempts to be the best knight he can, and unfortunately, fails miserably, through a combination of youthful inexperience, but also by subscribing to a set of ideals completely at odds with the world around him.

The quest is essentially a performative spectacle, in which knights are supposed to embody certain conventional qualities in order to succeed, while observers watch on and judge. In this case, not only is Gaherys an observer but so is the grieving knight, and both offer judgement on Gawain for his actions. There is also the presence of the audience, or spectators, which only makes Gawain's failure harsher, and emphasizes his role as a performer in this triple quest. The observers of this triple quest are not a comfort to its participants, or a means of support, but rather a way to condemn masculine dominance, and violence against women. Their goal is to enforce correctional measures. A group of ladies appear and decree that, as punishment and public recognition for Gawain's actions he

sholde bere the dede lady with hym on thys maner: the hede of her was hanged about hys necke, and the hole body of hir before hym on hys horse mane ... Ryght so he rode forthe unto Camelot ... and there by ordynaunce of the Queene there was sette a queste of ladies upon Sir Gawayne, and they juged hym for ever whyle he lyved to be with all ladies and to fight for hir quarels, and ever that he be curteyse, and never to refuse mercy to hym that asquith mercy.

(Malory 68-69)

Gawain's gruesome act of carrying the head of the slain lady about his neck is a clear attempt at penance, but it is also a uniquely performative action; it draws to attention to itself. It is an act that is meant for the spectators as much as it is for Gawain himself. Moreover, this Oath the ladies make Gawain swear contains many of the same clauses that are found in the Pentecostal Oath. The

difference is that, instead of being instigated by the king, it is a court of ladies that make Gawain swear this oath. This is a moment when the women take the dominant masculine power into their own hands, while Gawain is forced into a submissive role. But, unlike in *SGGK*, there is no manipulation involved. The performative nature of Gawain's act of penance serves as a punishment specifically meant to shame him into conformity. It is doubtful if Gawain could have picked a more fitting way to redress his own failure to conform than to force himself to return to court with the severed head of the lady he killed in pursuit of heroism. But Gawain's actions were not the result of malicious intent, but rather a compound error of youthful inexperience and Heroic Knighthood. His act of penance is therefore a sign of self-awareness and growth, rather than merely a punishment. At the same time, it is also a harsh symbol of non-conformity, and female subjugation; an open acknowledgement by Gawain that he is different and more harmful than other knights, specifically to women. Gawain is therefore presented with a way he can yield to conformity but still retain some measure of agency.

In this scene, the ladies are therefore both the observers and dictators of convention, in the same way that Gawain is the actor of non-convention. They regulate convention's presence or absence, and it is they who judge and spectate this performance. Catherine Batt, in "Malory and Rape," clarifies this by arguing that "Women's heroism then appears to relate to their consent to the use of their bodies in the service of particular institutions (often to the great convenience of the narrative)" (Malory 809). When the power is later taken out of the ladies' hands by Arthur in the form of the royally mandated Pentecostal Oath, their power as agents and spectators is not only undercut, but outright suborned by the knights, for the purpose of uplifting their own traditional ideals. Batt continues: "but while the Pentecostal oath defines women's integrity and identity in terms of their

rapeability and the defence of their bodies by others, such a definition by no means accounts for or delimits their function in the *Morte*" (809). What the Oath does is cement the conventions established in protest to Gawain's actions in place, so that every subsequent instance of non-conventionality on the part of the knights can be regulated. But this also leaves room for laxity. By reducing the women's previous actions to a set of words, the ability for the women to confront each and every situation to their satisfaction is removed entirely. However, this does not mean that women do not retain a strand of power and agency in the text. The Oath diminishes them but it does not delete them. Rather, it reemphasizes their role in traditional masculine ideals. The fact that the Oath is based on the actions of women reacting to the failure of knightly ideals partly reduces them to objects to be used by other institutions, but it also highlights how these other institutions, i.e., knighthood, are completely reliant on them for defining their own ideals. This points to a central paradox within all gender hierarchies: a position of authority is irrelevant without a subordinate with which to contrast it. The *Morte* tries to reconcile feminine independence within a social framework that requires them to be dependent on a set of masculine ideals. Importantly in this triple quest, non-conformity results in a situation that allows women's voices to be heard, and allows them real power over Gawain, in a way that is not reflected by just the consent clause in the Pentecostal Oath. This scene presents an element of optimism, but more of a hesitant optimism. The potential is there for a collaboration of gender roles, but not yet fully realized. Non-conformity does at times, like when he kills the lady, make Gawain a bad person and a bad knight, but it can also function as a doorway for new, less harmful conventions to enter, as seen in this act of penance.

GAWAIN'S SUBMISSIVE CONFORMITY IN *SGGK*

As a contrast to the *Morte Darthur*, *SGGK*'s Gawain is one that conforms to the knightly and masculine conventions, especially the consent clause, but to the detriment of his agency. Among the most subversive and intriguing parts of *SGGK* is the crucial "bedroom" scene, from Fitt 3. In the poem, rather than being motivated by fear of, or aversion to, punishment, knights are bound by convention because of an increasing emphasis on spectatorship, but it is more of a hidden spectatorship, unlike that in Malory, in which the visibility of the spectators is what adds to Gawain's shame. In this scene, while Bertilak is out hunting, "Gawan the good man in gay bedde lygges" (333.1179), when suddenly "the lady, loveliest on lyve to beholde, / That drow the dor after her ful dernely and stille, / And bowed toward the bed" (1187-89). This scene echoes both Foucault's argument that power "is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (973), as well as Connell and Messerschmidt's claim that "Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting." In this bedroom scene, where the conforming Gawain is forced to acknowledge that, while he is "stiff inogh to constryne with strenthe if [he] likes," he must instead follow the convention that "thret is unthryvande in thede there I lende." Therefore, Gawain is finally conforming, but what is the result? He has no more agency, including any consent, and is being strategically manipulated by a woman. She comes to Gawain at a vulnerable moment, when he is "Under converter" (333.1181), and proceeds to undermine his masculinity by using the power afforded her by the social situation, as Foucault outlines. In a situation that was not initiated by Lady Bertilak, occurring in a personal space in which Gawain is unprepared and vulnerable, these

conventions are manipulated into being a method of controlling Gawain, rather than a set of mutually beneficial mannerisms.

Throughout the scene, there are constant references to Gawain's shame and embarrassment, as he struggles to maintain his reputation with the reality of the situation, and Gawain ultimately becomes nothing but a pawn in the Lady's manipulations, and his emotions things to be exploited. Caroline Dinshaw notes that "In the bedroom Gawain is the hunted, the object of a feminine gaze" (211). The Lady does this through a combination of subtle verbal and physical impressions that threaten Gawain with the suggestion that his courteous reputation is in fact a sham. Only by treating his courteous reputation as a rigid obligation and not as a product of his natural charisma, can Gawain escape from the social setting without causing any insult to himself or the Lady. Even so, the Lady emerges the victor of this particular encounter, because she leaves the same way she entered: by leaving Gawain to sleep in her house, and forcing him into a physical intimacy: their kiss. While this particular scene is an example of "submissive masculinity" (Connell 832) instigated by a woman, it is not an example, as Connell and Messerschmidt write, of "the element of optimism" that new masculinities can potentially point us toward. Rather, it is a scene in which Gawain's obligations of masculine conformity are taken to the extreme and become tools that can be manipulated by women. This scene illustrates a scenario in which hegemonic masculinity emphasizes masculine dominance to the point where any deviation from that conception is merely sublimated by the same dominance. As Judith Butler writes, "gender ... is a compulsory performance in the sense that acting out of line with heterosexual norms brings with it ostracism, [and] punishment" (1038). We can easily apply the same argument to this scene, replacing heterosexual norms with masculine and feminine gender norms more

broadly. Both characters perform and conform to their gender roles to such an extent that the harmful implications of each become fully clear; they no longer seem normal. Gawain becomes a slave to the Lady's manipulations and the Lady a conniving controller. Using Butler's argument, the performance of both characters becomes exaggerated to the point where it is impossible not to notice that it is a performance.

Following from Butler's argument, amid this closely intimate scene between Gawain and the Lady, there is a constant attention drawn to the outside world, and the expectation placed on both characters that pressures them to act in certain ways: the aforementioned unseen spectators. The poet gives the detail that "The daylight lemed on the woves" (333.1180). Also, in the pivotal moment of the aforementioned kiss, the Lady exclaims "courtayse is closed so clene in himselven, / Couth not lyghtly have lenged so long with a lady. / Bot he had craved a cosse by his courtayse" (341.1298-1300). These two textual details give reference to the world outside of the bedroom, but in different ways. The daylight is a literal detail, an instance when the outside world illuminates the seemingly private bedroom, much like lighting the scene in a performance; making the atmosphere perfect for observers, and not just a scene between two people in privacy; while the Lady's surprised exclamation that a courteous Gawain should not yet have kissed her is a detail referencing the observer's expectations. Dinshaw writes that "The reversal of courtly roles here couldn't be clearer" (212). An observer familiar with traditional ideals of knightly behaviour in Medieval Romance would be anticipating a kiss in this scene, but not intimated by the woman. The Lady takes the sexual tension underlying the encounter into her own hands, in defiance of masculine convention. Additionally, the Lady's word choice makes generalities about Gawain's character and hypothetical "lady" that are incongruous after what is

seemingly her one and only time having a private encounter with him, indicating that she is aware of Gawain's reputation and attempts to force him to live up to it. Larry Benson writes that, "at Bertilak's castle his conventional character as a lover is repeatedly stressed," and eventually "he is passionately involved" (Benson 104), and "Gawain, responding to the lady's challenge to his identity as Gawain, indeed allows her a kiss, as if he is attempting to reconfirm his status as Gawain, the one who kisses" (Dinshaw 212). The expectation to conform pervades this scene, in a way that emphasizes how both characters are playing roles in a performance. As Dinshaw argues,

The behavior that makes a knight is intensely rule-governed; it proceeds either as game or in the form of game-tournaments, quests, courtship ... Knighthood is a performance—is indeed a performative, conventional and iterable, not freely chosen but constrained by birth, class status, and other structures of the normative—and Gawain is always in production in this poem: his reputation has preceded him to Bertilak's castle; he is thus a constant living-up-to that reputation. (213)

Gawain is thus always being observed. Any slip-up in conventionally "Gawain" behaviour is noted and taken as evidence against his own identity. As a result, Gawain feels a need to constantly reinforce his own identity to the world, and Lady Bertilak's reversal of gender roles only makes his performance more emphasized. Indeed, Gawain's anxiety is already seen as an un-knightly trait, especially when he himself had previously acknowledged that "[Lady Bertilak's] comaundement to kysse when yow likes; / Ye may leche when yow lyst." When the characters themselves identify the conventions, the resulting awareness of attempts at conformity only makes it more difficult for the characters to conform: a type of performance anxiety. Instead of conformity being the act of subconsciously following the

established regulations as a result of a collective, societal unawareness of their specifics, Gawain and the Lady are both completely aware of how they should be acting; they have to consciously make the decision to conform, which only makes it the more difficult. Except in this scene, the Lady uses this awareness, this collective subconscious or outside gaze, as way of pressuring Gawain into acting how she wants. Gawain is also aware of this pressure, which is exactly why he cannot fight it, yield to it, or even acknowledge it. In the words of Caroline Dinshaw, “Gawain is time and time again through the course of the poem told, when he is not acting like the reputed Gawain, that he is not, after all, Gawain. When his active role is usurped by the lady here, when he is not doing, he has no proper, courtly masculine identity” (Dinshaw 213). For Gawain, the price of conformity, therefore, is a manipulation by the Lady, and a lack of not only agency but also his very sense of self. Instead of genuine mistakes that can serve as possible learning experiences, as seen in Malory, Gawain makes engineered mistakes, fabricated by the Lady in order to subjugate him and his identity as a masculine character. In addition, the “hidden” spectators of conventional behaviour add to this lack of agency, in that his behaviour is being dictated by unseen forces that should not be able to control him to this extent. This is a contrast with Malory, wherein Gawain is shamed by the visible spectators, but ultimately uses visibility and performance in both the judgement and punishment as a way of reinforcing the lesson he must learn about female subjugation.

Thus, in the bedroom scene, the effect of non-conformity by the Lady is only an attempt at conformity on the other side of the binary. Instead of acting according to knightly, masculine conventions Gawain simply subsumes the feminine ones. Any subversion or manipulation of roles is merely another series of performances, with the actors/characters never becoming anything more than

pre-set objects, ordained to act in a certain way. Masculine dominance and other forms of gender hierarchy that emphasize gender binary in this way, take away our agency to act and think in genuine ways, with the result being Gawain must slavishly do what the Lady asks for “Ferde lest he had fayled” (340.1295) of properly conforming. Merely switching the roles of feminine and masculine, is not enough. Gawain is, once again, presented with no feasible options. But at least in Malory there is a possibility for learning and growth through non-conformity. In *SGGK*’s bedroom scene, there is a possibility for neither growth nor non-conformity.

GAWAIN AND THE “GOSTE” OF OLD MASCULINITIES

Although Gawain’s Heroic Knighthood is problematic on many levels, it presents a potential alternative where none can be found in *SGGK*. The question remains, however, that, is this alternative better than the conformity we have seen, and if so, better for whom? I argue potential answers can be found in the last section of *Le Morte Darthur*.

In this last section of the book, Gawain has been slain in a duel with Lancelot and Arthur struggles to rally his loyalists in a final battle against Mordred. Arthur takes a moment to sleep, and eventually, after receiving a prophetic dream-vision, he enters a state of “nat slepynge nor thorowly wakyng.” In this state, “the Kyng semed verryly that there cam Sir Gawayne unto hym with a number of fayre ladyes wyth hym” (683). This sudden appearance of Gawain’s ghost accompanied by women is a contrast to how he has been presented previously in the text, especially the triple quest. Here, instead of presenting himself to Arthur and the women of the court with a grotesque image of a dead woman’s head, he presents himself to Arthur alongside the women, and although they are all dead,

there is no grotesqueness or a sense of Gawain's failure. Indeed, there is instead, explicit self-improvement:

whan Kyng Arthur saw [Gawain's ghost], he seyde, 'Wellcom, my systers sonne! I wende ye had bene dede ... A, fayre newew, what bene thes ladyes that hyder com with you?' 'Sir,' seyde Sir Gawayne, 'all thes be ladyes for whom I have foughten for, whan I was man lvyng, and all thes art ho that I ded batayle fore in ryghteous quarrels; and God hath gyvyn hem that grace at their grete prayer, bycause I ded batayle for them for their right, that they shulde bring me hydder unto you (683-84).

The women accompanying Gawain are directly acknowledged to be the reason he is able to present himself to Arthur. Not only that, but God and the ladies feel he deserves this for the way he fought for the ladies' rights in his battles. This scene can be thus taken as a reaffirmation of Gawain's Heroic Knighthood. Gawain and the ladies appearing as ghosts is a metaphor for new, less harmful masculinities that could appear, but which are at this moment inaccessible to the "real" world. In addition, this scene presents a reversal of Batt's argument that "Women's heroism then appears to relate to their consent to the use of their bodies in the service of particular institutions (often to the great convenience of the narrative)." Neither Gawain nor the women are constrained by the use of their bodies, but Gawain is there to serve the incredibly convenient narrative purpose, "to warne [Arthur] of [his] dethe" (684), by the consent of the women. It is literally a complete reversal of how things had gone previously in the text, and a pointing to a potential future in which conventional body images and masculine dominance no longer exist.

Arthur can only access this hint of new gender relations when he is in between the waking and dreaming world: a place outside temporal concerns, with hints of potential newness—or that could suddenly snap back to the reality of how things are. Malory could have simply had Arthur dream the encounter, but the fact that he does not and keeps this hint of the waking world present throughout this scene, gives it more substantiality and legitimacy, and thus real potentiality and for how things could be. Importantly, it is Gawain's actions as a knight that are cited as being the reason he is here as a ghost accompanied by these women: a reaffirmation that, despite Gawain's frequently problematic actions, some of them clearly had a positive effect on women.

What is striking in this scene is the finality of Gawain appearing as a ghost. In the deterioration of the final section, no other knight is shown to be accompanied by women in their final appearance, except for Arthur himself. As Arthur departs for Avalon, first “a lytyll barge wyth many fayre ladyes in hit; and amonge hem all was a quene, and all they had black hoodis ... there reseceyved hym three ladyes” (688). Arthur's “death” scene while surrounded by women follows Gawain's appearance as a ghost surrounded by women. While the two scenes differ in that Arthur is not yet dead, they nonetheless share symbolic similarities. They are both indications of old ways coming to an end, and new beginnings starting. Gawain is literally dead, and the Heroic Knighthood ethos he represents is gone from the text (at least, in any prominent fashion), as reflected by his ghostliness. At the same time, his ghost also represents a new ethos. Arthur is not literally dead, but dying. Nonetheless, he is departing from the “real” world in the same way that Gawain did, as if he is actually dead. His conventional knightly ethos is more tangible and more accepted in the “real” world, and so he does not become a ghost, but instead drifts away, technically still living. But though he does not die, he leaves all

the same, and like Gawain, accompanied by women. Arthur's death represents the shifting of the more conventional knightly ethos. The women "wepte and shryked" and had "grete mournyng" not just because Arthur is dying, but because as he partially leaves the waking world, the traditional conventions of knighthood partially leave with him. This not just the case for Arthur, but Lancelot, who for Malory is held up as the singular best knight, and who is "hede of all Crysten knyghtes" (696). Even so, Lancelot dies in sorrow and we only get a second-hand account of his death. According to the Bishop, there were around Lancelot's body, "mo angellis than I ever sawe men in one day. And I sawe the angellys heve up Syr Lancelot unto heven, and the yates of heven opened ayenste hym" (696). This is an even more explicit departure than the two previous scenes: there is no sense of a potentiality for return, and due to Lancelot's history with Guinevere (the reason he is in such sorrow), no sense that with him lies any hope for improving the status of women. The end result is a shift, where Gawain is the only one who returns to the living as a ghost accompanied by women, while Arthur partially departs, and Lancelot fully departs. Heroic knighthood then, is the ethos shown to have the potential to push forward into new ways of repairing harmful gender relations, while more conventional typologies wistfully disappear or fade into the background.

GAWAIN AND POWERLESSNESS: TRAPPED IN OLD MASCULINITIES

Continuing with the contrast of Gawain's Heroic Knighthood in *Le Morte Darthur* and his conformity with convention in *SGGK*: as the ending of the *Morte* hints at a future with equality between men and women, the ending of *SGGK*, suggests the opposite. After the fruition of Bertilak's challenge, Gawain delivers his "attack on women," an anti-feminist speech. This speech is shocking in

a poem in which Gawain is always so exceedingly careful with his speech and mannerisms, and indeed, hyper-aware of any potential faults in courtesy. He mentions several biblical figures who were “bigyled” by women: “For so was Adam in erde with one bigyled, / And Samson eftsones - / Dalyda dalt him his wyrde – and David thereafter / Was blended with Barsabe, that much bale tholed, / Now these were wrathed with her wyles, / hit were a wyne huge / To love hem wel and leve hem not, a lede that couthe” (400.2416-22). David Mills argues that this ‘attack on women’ is a “more serious vein” (Mills 639) than his earlier speech in which he throws down his girdle (*Sir Gawain*.399.2370-2388), and that “the marshalling of Biblical examples - attests a degree of intellectual control” than Gawain’s previous speech (Mills 640). In this light, Mills argues, his “attack on women” is a “balance” with his previous speech, signifying that Gawain has “progressed to self-knowledge,” and has reassert[ed] the moral element and now claim[s] his guilt and his responsibility” (640). While I agree that his speech on some level constitutes a balance, I also think, given the ultimate ending of the poem which is soon to come, and the fact that this speech comes last, that it provides a crucial glimpse into Gawain’s parting mindset, and thus, the harms of his conformity.

It is after Gawain’s “attack on women” that it is revealed the entire beheading game was orchestrated by Morgan le Faye, giving his earlier hesitations and awareness of unseen observers in the bedroom scene a new light, and also serving as a way to reinforce his “attack.” Bertilak reveals to Gawain that “Thurgh myght of Morgue la Faye that in my house lenges / And quoyntyse of clergie, by craftes wel lerned, / The maystres of Merlin, mony has taken; / For ho has dalt drury ful dere sumtyme / With that conable clerk: That knowes all your knightes / At hame” (402.2446-51). The emphasis on spectatorship that occurs throughout the poem, but especially in the bedroom scene, is

here given a sort of credence. Gawain has been manipulated and observed this entire time according to how he is playing into Morgan's plan, even at home in Camelot, Gawain has connections with another sorcerer with similar skills, Merlin, who "knowes all your knightes / At hame." Additionally, this revelation of an elaborate plot by women seems to play right into Gawain's anti-feminist speech. Gawain takes a moment to self-reflect and seemingly complete the "balance" and acknowledge that "in synyne of my surfet I schal see [the girdle] ofte," and that "when pryde schal me prik for prowes of armes, / The loke to this luf-lace schal lethe my herte" (401.2433-35). This self-reflection is a sign of improvement but it is also immediately offset by the imminent revelation that the entire circumstances that created this need for self-reflection in the first place are the result of his being played like a puppet in some larger plan of which he had no knowledge. It is yet another gesture of conformity and courtesy, to reclaim the girdle, this time a better, more honest knight. But is also the ultimate robbing of agency, to have this final moment of self-reflection be the result of yet another engineered mistake.

The effect on Gawain of all this manipulation is soon shown to take its toll, as he refuses the company of the women who manipulated him. Bertilak says to Gawain: "Therefore I ethe thee hathel, to come to thyn aunte; / Make mery in my house: my meyny thee loves, And I wil thee as wel, wye, by me faythe, / As any gome under God, for thy grete trauthe! And he nikked him nay, he nolde by no wayes," and the knights promptly part from each other (403.2466-71). Gawain, who has thus far characterized himself in this poem as somebody who does not refuse invitations to do things, very bluntly refuses this invitation, and gives no clear reason. While in this particular instance, separating himself from this plan and its orchestrators as much as possible is probably good for him, it has certain implications that Gawain is leaving less courteous and more wary of conforming in the future, than he

arrived. With Gawain's triple quest in Malory, there was never any sense that Gawain respected the women less for using their power to judge him. In that text, there were no engineered mistakes and Gawain had no reason not to be anything but complicit, and his final appearance suggests an acceptance or equality with women. In this text, Gawain's conformity reaches a breaking point where he can no longer pretend that he can keep being courteous and still retain his agency, so he makes a decision as an agent and leaves without seeing the women. This scene points to a central conflict in Gawain's conformity and manipulation. If Gawain were to ever realize, as he does, that he is being manipulated through his conformity, his resulting non-conformity will be purely reactionary in nature and not as the result of some natural inclination toward a non-conforming ethos. Gawain leaves for Arthur's court "On colde" (403.2474), rather than with the warmth and festivity convention dictates he would have had in Bertilak's house with Morgan and the rest of the women. This means that the gender binary is more firmly cemented, rather than broken down, and he "To the kynges burgh buskez bolde," while "the knyght in the enker-grene / Whiderwarde-so-ever he wolde" (403.2476-8). Gawain, at the end of the poem, is contrasted with the errant Green Knight as a figure who continues in a straight line towards Camelot, and the conventions of court and knighthood. Even though Gawain was manipulated, his conformity goes beyond Morgan's plan. It continues into the future even as he resents the role it plays in taking away his agency.

CONCLUSION

Both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, contain reactions against traditional forms of masculinity including hegemonic masculinity. Applying this terminology to the two texts, it is clear that both of them are investigating new ways to rebel against hegemonic

masculinity, and at the same time, traditional methods of affirming it. Although neither text offers a clear path forward outside of hegemonic masculinity, they both offer indications of how things could be. In *Le Morte Darthur*, there is a persistent attempt to involve women characters in powerful positions as judges and spectators, who wield influence over the actions of the knights. However, Gawain the Heroic Knight pushes against this, in ways both problematic but also indicative of a capacity to learn from and push back against hegemonic masculinities. In *SGGK*, there is a presentation of women in positions of power that do not become suborned by men, and the end result is a reverse scenario in which the women enjoy a comparatively hegemonic role but at the expense of masculine agency. Gawain in both texts struggles with a confusion of finding the proper way to act. In the end, the proper way can be seen as not just a single, straight path to conformity like in the *SGGK*, but a divergent path that is not clear, but nonetheless has the potential for less harmful gender hierarchies, as seen in *Le Morte Darthur*.

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