

Camelot's Reaction to Sir Gawain's Failure

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In examining the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the reaction of the court at Camelot to Gawain departing to keep his tryst with the Green Knight is an important detail. The court is quite distressed when a year has passed after Gawain answered the Green Knight's challenge. Gawain prepares to ride off on his epic adventure, one that all assume will be fatal. The court's dialogue at this point calls into question the masculine and heroic code under which it operates by its contemplative reactions to Gawain leaving:

When they saw him set forth they were sore aggrieved, / And all sighed softly, and said to each other / Fearing for their fellow, "Ill fortune it is/ That you, man, must be marred, that most worthy are! / His equal on earth can hardly be found; / To have dealt more discreetly had done less harm. (15)

This significant passage can be read as Arthur's court questioning their heroic code. The court goes on to speak in even more clear judgment of its own masculine chivalric ideals, stating why they are concerned to lose Gawain: "A great leader of lords he was like to become, / And better so to have been than battered to bits, / Beheaded by an elf-man, for empty pride!" (15). Those judgments by the court on chivalric action and pride deserve close attention in regards to the evolution that Gawain's masculinity will undergo through his testing. The court's reintegration of Gawain into their society upon his return from his adventure confirms his evolution is accepted and embraced.

It is important to see how the story leads up to the court's nervousness about losing Gawain and the questioning of its masculine chivalric code. The Green Knight has ridden into Camelot and the corporate challenge to their honor has been issued. Gawain

now stands with the monstrous green axe firmly gripped in his hands. He has just defended the honor of his King and the court, and with deft speech has stepped in for Arthur to take this peculiar and frightening challenge. Gawain is alone now, elevated from the rest but his fate is entwined with all the court around him. Before Gawain the massive Green Knight bends over offering his bare neck. Gawain steadily raises the huge weapon comes down squarely where he aims. The giant's head rolls around the floor, "Many found it at their feet, as forth it rolled; / The blood gushed from the body, bright on the green" (10). He has struck. He has killed. But he has not won. The Green Knight picks up his head in his hand, opens his eyelids and explains to Gawain where to meet him to receive his own blow a year later.

Answering this challenge with such bravery and eagerness as was expected by the realm of Arthur has gotten Gawain into what would seem to be a fatal confrontation a year later. Gawain has just been drawn into being tested in a way he could not have imagined. He has accepted the challenge to his manhood as well as the challenge of the honor of his court, and answers it in the traditional way expected by his society. It is significant that this traditional answer was not victorious against the Green Knight, as he menaces the court by speaking to Gawain while holding his head in his hands. Victoria Weiss shows how the Gawain-poet has given some hint of the traditional expectations in the chivalric code at Camelot. In the opening stanza of the poem she finds; "The poet early in the poem provides a clue to the great importance placed on knightly valor, aggressiveness, and their resulting pride in Arthur's court by alluding to their Trojan forefather "Ennias" and "his highe kynde" (363). Gawain's masculinity here, with its aggressiveness and pride, becomes the symbol of what needs to change in order for this society to survive, just as the Green Knight is a symbol of why it must

change. This sobering experience for the court at being both awed and silenced by such an outrageous challenger opens the door for them to question their own heroic code. A lot of criticism has looked into the test of Gawain and the court at Camelot, but a further examination of Gawain's masculinity is needed in terms of how his failure and his evolution become an answer for the court's questions about its chivalric code.

To get more clarity about the masculine ideal at Camelot, we can look to the Green Knight's reaction to Gawain after he gives two feint blows with the axe at the Green Chapel. At the first feint Gawain's shoulders shrank just a little, and the Green Knight chides him about his character, saying, "You are not Gawain...that never fell back on field in the face of a foe / And now you flee for fear, and have felt no harm" (47). He first makes fun of Gawain for not living up to the reputation of bravery at all cost in the face of foes. With the second feint, Gawain finally does not move a muscle. The Green Knight says, "So now you have nerve again, I needs must strike, / Uphold the high knighthood that Arthur bestowed, / And keep your neck-bone clear, if this cut allows!" (48). In this assessment by the Green Knight, we learn of the value placed on self-sacrifice at Camelot, since Gawain is being brave in a situation that will mean a loss of his life. This shows the unimportance of one's life compared to upholding the extreme chivalric ideals for a knight of Camelot. That is the old masculine code which we will see has evolved through Gawain by the end of the tale.

There is a lot of scholarship about the test of Camelot by the Green Knight. Most believe this test comes from outside the court in the form of either Morgan le Fay's direction or of the Green Knight. Little research has looked into the court's reaction to this testing before Gawain leaves to keep his word. Richard Hamilton Green relates the general idea about the test: "The Green Knight has come to test the great fame of the

court and its knight's" (124). Green goes on to explain how Gawain's symbol represents the court as well, "The heraldic charge signifies the character of the hero about to undertake the "anious viage" which will test his right to the device as it will test the right of the court he represents to its reputation for perfection" (135). Green sees that the court is being tested through the individual of Gawain, and believes this test comes because of their reputation. Greg Walker noted the corporate aspect of the testing theme, writing, "It is not new to suggest that the (Green) Knight's challenge initiates a fundamental test of the nature of the Arthurian court" (111). This is a common understanding of the test, which is that the court needs to live up to its nature or reputation. Walker goes on to assert this about the Green Knight: "His speech and manner issue a deliberate challenge to the court. As with all the Knight's actions, they are carefully designed to provoke his hearers to an angry response. Already he is testing the collective resolve of Camelot" (114). Walker sees that the court is tested in its resolve together at the moment of the challenge. Claire R. Kinney examined the embodiment of manhood in the Green Knight, and how he challenges Arthur's knights as being only boys. Kinney writes, "The Green Knight invokes similarly essentialist, corporeal criteria when he dismisses Arthur's knights as "berdlez chylde", and invites them to prove their manhood by proving their physical recklessness" (48). The challenge here is seen as needing to measure up to a new level of manhood. All of these views don't take into account the court's questioning nature of how it feels about Gawain leaving to finish this test with the Green Knight.

The way that Arthur leads his knight's is already a test of their quality. Mary Mumbach saw the challenge as possibly being invited by Arthur himself. This relates to Arthur refusing to eat until he has seen a marvel at the Christmas meal at the beginning

of the poem. She writes, “Arthur’s court at Camelot has become well established, but its very success could tempt its knights to forget valor” (104). The atmosphere while Arthur waits to see a marvel seems to portray a court where your knighthood must be ready to be tested at all times. Other critics flush out the relationship of the challenge to the court in relation to the heroic masculine code. William Paris noted, “How can Gawain possibly forget his appointment with death, even for a moment? The heroic code of knighthood binds him to honor his promise regardless of the consequences” (148). Paris also finds Gawain’s action to accept the test is motivated by his social pressure, “The young knight had to prove himself worthy of honor and respect in order to maintain his status in the knighthood, and Gawain accepted the challenge as a test of his heroism” (147). This social pressure is part of what helps the court to question losing Gawain, because they know their heroic ideals created the situation he is in. William F. Woods related how the masculine code of chivalry at Camelot constrained Gawain in his test like the animals in the hunting scenes. He explains:

Unlike the deer, boar and fox, he is not trapped by hunters, but by the social and ethical constraints belonging to his courtly persona -- in other words, his promise to the green man, his chivalric vows, and his Arthurian identity--which will not allow him to flee” (222).

The pressure of the court and its corporate ideals are an important factor in how Gawain accepts the challenge and performs during it. Camelot’s knights have to live up to their reputation within the society itself.

Some interesting themes develop when we see that this frightening challenge by the Green Knight was first a corporate experience for the court. The court is invested in the individual outcome of who accepts it, which is Gawain, because it is implicated in

the outcome. Related to that point is the fear the court felt at the challenge, which will be discussed more in depth later, and how that fear opens up the possibility that the corporate body had the chance to be confronted with its own masculine heroism failing and thus could question the qualities they were being tested on. So we find many scholars relating the challenge of the court as a corporate test of their resolve and reputation coming from outside of itself. But little research has allowed the court a self-reflexivity that saw a chance to improve on these masculine ideals of chivalry through this test by the Green Knight.

We can now examine the corporate testing of the court at the Green Knight's first visit, and their initial failure to answer his challenge. The reason the Green Knight comes to Arthur's court is quickly made clear when he first speaks:

Since thy praises, prince, so proud are uplifted, / and thy castle and thy
 courtiers are accounted the best, / the stoutest in steel-gear that on steeds
 may ride, / most eager and honourable of the earth's people/and here is
 knighthood renowned, as is noised in my ears: / 'tis that that has fetched
 me hither, by my faith at this time...Yet if thou be so bold, as abroad is
 published, / thou wilt grant of thy goodness the game that I ask for by
 right. (6)

It is the reputation for 'knighthood,' or manhood that has brought the challenge of the Green Knight to Arthur and his court. If they are accounted the 'best' and 'stoutest', the Green Knight wants them to prove it against his strength. So what do we learn from this challenge? It brings home a problem for Gawain and his masculine society based on extreme chivalry: if your survival is based on your strength and your bravery you may meet an opponent who is simply stronger and braver than you and your society could

lose its bravest and strongest Knights to defend that code of honor. This reality is represented in the sheer size and wonder of the Green Knight, and how the court was not equipped to deal with his challenge, no matter how brave they were supposed to be.

The Gawain-poet makes clear that no one in the court was eager to accept the Green Knight's challenge when he writes, "If he astounded them at first, yet stiller were then / all the household in the hall, both high men and low" (7). This can be seen as the first failure of the masculine chivalric code at Camelot on a corporate level. Catherine Batt notes this possibility as well, finding, "The Knight's initially unanswered challenge to the court to participate in his 'gomen' threatens to destroy its reputation" (128). The Gawain-poet makes this point abundantly clear with the dialogue of the Green Knight, as he wonders, "What, is this Arthur's house," said that horseman then, / "Whose fame is so fair in far realms and wide? / Where now is your arrogance and your awesome deeds / Your valor and your victories and your vaunting words" (7). It is clear that the reputation of the court is on the line for honor's sake, even in this silly and scary Christmas game. Green wrote of this quiet reaction by the court, "The Green Man wants a Christmas game, a test of mortality, but when he describes its rules he is again met by silence and fear" (125). Now it must be admitted it would take a bold and brave man to accept a challenge in the face of such brute strength as the Gawain-poet describes the Green Knight possessed. We read, "His loins and his limbs so long and so huge, / that half a troll upon the earth I trow that he was, / but the largest man alive at least I declare him" (4). He is clearly bigger and stronger than any man at the court of Camelot. Who would enter into such a challenge? This brings about the symbolic problem with the courts masculine honor at all cost. It might take an outdated idea of masculinity to heroically answer such a challenge when it is not absolutely necessary. Indeed, the

Green Knight has made clear he is there for a *game* and *not* for battle. Batt picks up on the court's opportunity to question their masculine chivalric ideal through this game.

She writes:

When Gawain leaves Camelot in search of the Green Chapel, many voice the feeling that 'Crystmasse gomnez' do not perhaps call for such serious response. Gawain's life-threatening situation is, viewed from one perspective, a challenge to keep a covenant, a matter of honour, and from another, to keep such a bargain is simply indicative of a dangerous pride. (128)

To exchange blows in a game to test honor and bravery with such a creature could seem suicidal. But that is the mode that we see Gawain act in the beginning of this tale, after Arthur has lead the court in that direction. Mumbach noted the danger in Camelot's masculine code, stating, "When the company allows Sir Gawain, the youngest knight, to accept, they jeopardize the very future of the Round Table" (104). Mumbach's statement echoes what the court will say itself when Gawain rides away a year later. Valerie Allen notes this questioning of the court when she writes, "As he leaves Camelot, the courtier's regret that he should perish needlessly on account of 'angardez pryde'. The implied criticism is difficult to square with the court's earlier support of his quest" (186). This contradiction by the court seems to be a hint that they are beginning to criticize their own masculine pride and chivalric ideals.

In analyzing Gawain and his acceptance of this frightening challenge, it is good to remember the example set by his society's leader. King Arthur is the true representative who illustrates the masculine ideal of Camelot. It is Arthur who bravely accepts the challenge first with reasons honorable and fitting, yet also dangerous. We read of

Arthur's reaction to the courts failure to respond to the Green Knight's challenge: "With this he (the Green Knight) laughs so loud that the lord grieved; / The blood for sheer shame shot to his face, and pride. / With rage his face flushed red" (7). Arthur goes on to rashly accept the dangerous challenge to the manhood and pride of his court, apparently out of shame and rage. Scholars have noted the foolishness in this manly act. Greg Walker finds:

A challenge rashly accepted could have the direst consequences, and it could well appear to be a sign of his "childgered" nature that Arthur forgets his responsibilities as king and governor in the heat of the moment and places the kingdom in jeopardy for the sake of his personal sense of shame. (116)

In fulfilling his masculine role and leading by example, Arthur could actually be endangering his whole realm. While it is imperative in any society that its leaders be ready to defend it from all enemies, the Gawain-poet makes clear the Green Knight does not come as an enemy, only as one seeking game. The Green Knight says to Arthur, "Nay, to fight, in good faith, is far from my thought" (7). This shows that Arthur could have let this challenge go because of its foolish and dangerous nature without anyone in his realm being harmed.

After Arthur's acceptance, Gawain steps in to receive the challenge for his king's sake. We then find Gawain acting under the pressure of Arthur's idea of masculine action. In regards to the axe blow, Arthur says to Gawain, "If you rule it aright, then readily, I know, / You shall stand the stroke it will strike after" (8). Gawain promptly delivers what would normally be a fatal blow by chopping off the head of the Green Knight. William Paris noted this in Gawain's thinking; "Because Gawain is permitted to

strike the first blow, he assumes that this will be the end of it, but his impetuous act results in something he had not bargained for” (147). The traditional and aggressive masculine action of Camelot will not suffice in this testing. This is a surprising and profound event for Gawain and the court.

The scholar Victoria Weiss has picked up on an interesting fact about the Green Knight’s challenge. She notes, “Gawain is told that he need only strike a blow; nothing is said of chopping off the Green Knight’s head” (362). Gawain obviously responds to the challenge in the most aggressive way possible, hoping that he will not have to receive the “strike after,” by killing the Green Knight as Arthur suggested. Yet this expected aggressive response does nothing to claim victory for Arthur’s court. The fact that the Green Knight rides away leaves the court stunned. We read, “The king and Gawain gay / Make game of the the Green Knight there, / Yet all who saw it say / ’Twas a wonder past compare” (10). It seems the narrator is letting us know that even though Arthur and Gawain try to make light of the challenge of the Green Knight, the court is definitely impacted by this event.

This corporate response to the Green Knight will move into the individual once Gawain rides away from Camelot a year later to find the Green Knight. When looking at Gawain’s evolution, it is important to note that when he leaves Camelot he is still acting under the self-sacrificing heroic code of Arthur’s realm, telling Arthur, “Now, liege lord of my life, my leave I take; / The terms of this task too well you know- / To count the cost over concerns me nothing” (12). He has clearly not evolved in his masculinity at this point of the poem. He is absolutely willing to lose his life for the sake of the court’s honor. He is alone and responsible for his own choices in this testing now, to live up to the ideals of his society. Green writes of Gawain setting out, “With this action we move

from the wider sphere of institutional virtue to the test of the individual knight” (125). JJ Anderson saw this individuation begin as soon as Gawain accepted the challenge, writing, “From the moment he first speaks he is set apart from the court and he remains so; it is as an individual, not as a representative of the court, that he undergoes his trial and is judged” (347). Gawain becomes the epic figure at this point in the poem. He will go on this epic quest, and his individual action will give his community the chance to come together around Gawain’s “successful” completion of his quest. He will come back with a changed expression of his masculinity, one that has embraced the wisdom of the feminine along the way. When he returns, the corporate institution, the court, will embrace the way that he has changed.

Gawain’s failure in his test and his evolution through this failure has interested many scholars. Like many critics, Green finds Gawain’s failure to be the significant action in the poem, “Gawain’s most notable action in the course of his trial, the one which breaks the pattern of our easiest expectations, is a failure” (128). The meanings of Gawain’s fault or failures are an open-ended issue that has been debated ever since the poem was first critiqued. A.V.C. Schmidt sums up the problem, writing “It has often been observed that Gawain is not lacking in courage, or he would never have kept the tryst with the Green Knight, and the precise nature of his blame, the fault for which he deserves to feel guilt, has seemed rather puzzling” (151). One angle to look at the testing is seeing that Gawain’s individual reputation is being tested, as Catherine Batt found. She writes, “The Lady teases her guest with regard to his reputation as a knight of ‘courtaisy,’ later the Green Knight humiliates Gawain, when he flinches from his blade, by calling to mind his knightly reputation” (117). Both of these failures by Gawain are related to his reputation as a perfect knight of Camelot. Kinney relates of Gawain,

“Having acknowledged the vulnerability of his flesh and privileged his hunger to live over his pledged word, Gawain is no longer “tulke of tale most trwe,” (53). She argues that Gawain’s failure shows he is not worthy of his reputation that he previously held.

However it is possible to see Gawain’s failure as a positive for his character as he evolves. William Paris looks at the testing and sees the failure of Gawain bring growth for him as an individual, stating “He learns what he is made of and is able to transcend his failure and become a more realized, individuated, complete person, a man among men and hero among heroes” (152). Schmidt saw a maturing process for Gawain, stating, “Strange as it may sound put like this, Gawain’s loss of innocence is the result of lack of maturity” (164). This process of maturation also suggest finding a better way to behave as an adult, rather than the rash behavior we find Arthur and Gawain engaging in by accepting the crazy game of the Green Knight. Many critics have found that this individual testing of Gawain is still about a test of his knightly virtues. Catherine Batt again clarifies, “The conversations with the Lady turn out to have been a test of the knight’s lewte, plotted and controlled by the Green Knight/Bertilak” (136). JJ Anderson sees, “The lady shamelessly plays on his reputation for courtesy, which gives him another problem: how does he refuse her while still maintaining his reputation?” (347). Both of these assessments focus on living up to the masculine performance of the Knightly code. Mumbach notes that a knight of Camelot, “Must do penance for his failure to achieve perfection” (106). She believes Gawain has failed to live up to the expectations of his society. This is unsupported in the text where both Bertilak and the court are gracious about Gawain’s failure.

All of this research on Gawain’s evolution and failures culminates in the symbols of the pentangle, his personal symbol as a knight, and the girdle. The symbols help to

illustrate the evolution that Gawain has undergone through his testing, as they represent completely different ideals. Albert Friedman and Richard Osberg wrote of the symbols, “The pentangle, the “endless knot,” diagrams Gawain’s virtuous perfection; the girdle, employed first as a magical prop, becomes in the final scene a token of the knight’s lapse from that perfection” (301). There is a beautiful relationship of symbolism created by the poet in the wearing of these two symbols. The pentangle is often believed to represent Gawain’s perfection as a knight, and the girdle comes to represent to his faults. Batt writes about Gawain’s identity with the pentangle as, “A construction of Gawain’s knightly identity. Five is a ‘perfect’ number: it is emblematic of incorruptibility, as it reproduces itself in the last digit when raised to its powers” (123). JJ Anderson found the description of the pentangle important in the poem, “The pentangle passage is itself part of the lengthy description of Gawain’s putting on of his armor, which symbolically establishes him as everything a knight should be, both inside and out” (349). Kinney believed the court was creating a perfect representative of itself in the pentangle passage, stating, “It is my contention that Camelot itself is “speaking Gawain” in these stanzas, conferring upon him (and, by extension, upon the community he represents) an exemplary character and exemplary history” (50). If the court is indeed creating Gawain’s persona, then it is all the more possible they could learn from his failure. Geraldine Heng saw in the relationship of the pentangle and the girdle the changing aspects of Gawain’s identity. She writes, “As the sign for Gawain and his perfect knighthood, the “perfect” knot is glossed as that which is permanently in place, whole...With the substitution of an imperfect knot, the Lady’s lace, for the pentangle, a signifier is produced that situates identity as more tenuous and incomplete” (504). The

pentangle is Gawain's identity as a knight, yet it is replaced by the girdle at the end of the poem.

The girdle is noted by most scholars to be the most important symbol in the poem of the two. The girdle encompasses Gawain's old identity as well as his evolving through his test. Friedman and Osberg assert, "Rightly called "the thematic and symbolic nexus of the poem," the girdle is the tangible object upon which the vital action focuses in the climax of the Temptation section, in the encounter at the Green Chapel and in the return scene at Camelot" (302). Another scholar, Trevor Dodman, believed the girdle represented the changing of a unified masculine ideal of Camelot to a more open-ended identity. He writes, "The poem shifts, in other words, from an impossibly unified Maleness, to the entanglements of green girdle masculinities" (421). Dodman's point fits right into the idea of Camelot questioning its own masculine ideals and allowing an evolution of chivalry through Gawain. Schmidt describes Gawain's wearing of the two symbols as he rides to the Green Chapel, "The new emblem (girdle) is being worn heraldically, from right shoulder to left side, as a bend vert athwart the pentangle (or, on a ground gules). The result is to generate a powerful tension between the two contrasted emblems" (149). Once again this highlights the contrast of identity in the two symbols. Green looks at how taking the girdle destroys the symbolism of the pentangle:

He accepts the magic girdle because he thinks it can preserve him from death, he breaks his faith as a knight to his host, to his fearful antagonist, and most of all to himself. The pentangle is shattered and in its place taken by a new sign...which he will later call "a token of untruth." (137)

But most readers of the poem will find, along with the Green Knight and the court of Camelot, that they have empathy for Gawain's choice to take the girdle. Catherine Cox

identifies this sense well, writing, “Not surprisingly, perhaps, Gawain chooses to avail himself of a survival option in anticipation of the Green Knight’s deadly blow” (384). This act to preserve his life is understood by the reader and Bertilak as a small failure on Gawain’s part. Allen finds in the girdle Gawain’s weakness, stating, “The circumstances in which he receives the girdle are significantly compromising. In accepting it, he recants his previous refusal and capitulates to a woman who has been consistently tempting him to defect from virtue” (188). Most of this research focuses on the pentangle as Gawain’s perfect identity and the girdle as the failure of that perfection. But if you incorporate the courts reaction to the girdle it is difficult to assert it stands for failure. I believe the court accepts this failure as a needed change in its masculine chivalric code, as we shall see.

The evolution of Gawain’s own masculinity does not begin until his testing at the hands of the Lady in Bertilak’s castle. The Lady reveals a problem for Gawain trying to live as the perfect Knight. This testing by the Lady would be easier if he just refused her and sent her out of his room. Since he is so concerned for his courtesy, as the Gawain-poet tells us, he prolongs the test of it by the Lady. We read of Gawain’s predicament on the last day of her testing, “The man must needs / Either take her tendered love or distastefully refuse. / His courtesy concerned him, lest crass he appear” (37). He is trapped by his attempt to be perfect in all the knightly virtues. M. Mills saw this pattern, saying “Gawain, trapped by the two-edged quality of cortaysye, cannot defend his purity by simple rudeness, since to do this would impair the very quality that the lady is menacing in a more obvious way” (492). Eventually Gawain learns through this part of his testing that his courtesy can only go so far without becoming hypocritical. When he finally refuses her advances and offer of a love-token, Gawain tries to stay courteous. We

read, “And be not offended, fair lady, I beg / And give over your offer, for ever I must decline” (39). At last Gawain will risk being rude to refuse the Lady.

This rejection of the Lady’s offer by Gawain can be read as a refusal to live up to his reputation for courtesy. It also sets up a situation where Gawain learns from the wisdom of the feminine. The Lady goes on to explain to him about the girdle, “The man that possesses this piece of silk / If he bore it on his body, belted about, / There is no hand under heaven that could hew him down” (39). Gawain is intrigued. The narrator notes of Gawain’s thought, “Could he escape unscathed, the scheme were noble! / Then he bore with her words and withstood them no more” (39). In his choice to try and preserve his life Gawain is evolving from the masculine code of Camelot that pushes for heroic bravery in the face of certain death. Gawain is trying to still be the perfect knight he is supposed to be while being true to his word, yet to also somehow preserve his life in keeping his tryst with the Green Knight. Both Bertilak, in his judgment of Gawain, and the court itself, will not condemn him for this choice. And again, many readers have a hard time judging Gawain as a failure for this choice. This is a great irony in the poem, because this moment of accepting the girdle is also Gawain’s most obvious failure, since he hides it from Bertilak and breaks his word in the Exchange of Winnings. It is also a failure from the masculine code we found Gawain and Camelot acting under in the beginning of the poem, which is willing to defend honor with no regard to one’s own survival. But these failures come while Gawain makes a choice that Camelot will later embrace. It is a choice for survival. This wisdom of the feminine is similar to what another epic character receives in his adventure. In that tale he chooses to ignore the advice, leading to his death. Achilles’ mother warns him not to go back into the fight at Troy, but rather to go home and wait for another time to do engage in battle. But

Achilles chooses to fight for glory and honor. The wisdom of the feminine could have preserved his life for another battle, but instead the Greeks lost their greatest warrior. Cox helps to us to get a better understanding of what is meant by the wisdom of the feminine. She writes, “In terms of cultural norms governing chivalric codes, cowardice is culturally marked as feminine” (381). Any behavior motivated more by a desire to save your life than defend honor can be designated as feminine in this context. It has a negative connotation, but it brings Gawain back alive to his society and they embrace him.

We need to examine Bertilak’s judgment of Gawain’s failure to see the full picture of Gawain and the court’s evolution. It is necessary to also examine Gawain’s own harsh judgment of himself, and finally to see how the court interprets his failure after that. Bertilak says to Gawain of his failure in hiding the girdle, “Yet you lacked, sir, a little in loyalty there, / But the cause was not cunning, nor courtship either, / But that you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame” (49). This is the first obvious sign of a positive evolution of the heroic ideal in Camelot through Gawain’s failure. He is still alive, which the Green Knight believes is a good thing. Many critics have seen this positive affirmation of Gawain’s choice in the text. Kinney writes about the Green Knight, “His sympathetic adversary has already suggested that to be only human, to love one’s life a little too much, is not incompatible with being a pearl among knights” (54). Allen finds grace in the Green Knight’s reaction to Gawain’s fault: “As he suggests, Gawain’s fear of death is hardly unnatural” (190). Bertilak’s positive view is the first that the reader must contend with when judging Gawain’s fault.

Then we encounter Gawain’s own harsh judgment of himself. What we find in the text is that Gawain believes he is guilty of being a coward and also of covetousness. The

first thing he says when he is confronted with his fault by the Green Knight is, “Accursed be a cowardly and covetous heart! / In you is villainy and vice, and virtue laid low!” (50). The cowardly accusation is easy for modern readers to interpret. Valerie Allen writes, “Worldly fear is important because it qualifies Gawain’s cowardise...It is also the sin that compromises a virtue central to knighthood-courage” (182). However, covetousness is a little less clear for modern readers to understand in this context. David Farley Hills offers some help by defining what covetousness meant in the medieval mind from Augustinian thought. He writes, “According to this ‘Augustinian’ tradition, cupiditas is a state of inordinate love for oneself, and it is just such a disposition that Gawain has shown in accepting the girdle to save his life” (129). This definition helps us to understand Gawain’s confusing declaration that he is guilty of covetousness. He finds that he has chosen to love his own life more than his masculine code of honor and perfect ideal of knighthood. Weiss notes of this evolution, “Confronted with the temptation to save his own life and still retain his reputation as a knight, Gawain commits his greatest sin by accepting the green girdle and failing to give it to Bertilak” (365). JJ Anderson sums up Gawain’s reaction to the truth of his failure well, stating, “The Green Knight’s explanations devastate Gawain, and he falls to vehement self-accusation. Here we see the other side of his idealism. He has become a broken pentangle, without coherence” (352). All of these critics jump on the assumption that Gawain has failed in taking the girdle. But this is based on Gawain’s self-judgment which is very harsh, not on the reality expressed by the Green Knight and the court.

Gawain does end up going through multiple stages of his self judging, including the so called anti-feminist diatribe. Stephanie Hollis notes, “The very variety of Gawain’s explanations, the fact that they do not tally with what the poet tells us elsewhere, is

surely meant to alert us to the fact that Gawain is having difficulties providing a satisfactory explanation for his action” (272). But it is clear Gawain’s judgments show he feels he hasn’t lived up to the heroic masculine ideals of his society. He says to the Green Knight, “Your cut taught me cowardice, care for my life, / And coveting came after, contrary both / To largesse and loyalty belonging to knights” (50). This statement shows how Gawain perceived the difference between desiring to save his own life versus living for the honor of a society like Camelot required. Gawain articulates his failure on a corporate level, which is that he let his society down and is devastated by it. Hollis realizes this point as well, writing, “Gawain’s difficulties in coming to terms with his action spring from his attempt to maintain the original integrity of his knightly virtues” (272). This difficulty for Gawain is what makes the court’s reaction to his failure such a striking point.

The final response to Gawain is of course from the court itself. The way the court integrates the girdle into their society reveals to us how it sees the need for an evolution of its heroic masculine code. When Gawain surprisingly arrives home we read, “Bliss abounded in hall when the high-born heard / That good Gawain was come; glad tidings they thought it” (52). As Gawain recounts his adventure, the narrator reveals that he was pained to share his failure with the court. When Gawain shows the court the girdle, the poet writes, “With rage in heart he speaks, / And grieves with many a groan; / The blood burns in his cheeks / For shame at what must be shown” (52). This section helps illustrate that he is expecting rejection for not living up to the masculine action and chivalric code of his society. But instead, after Gawain recounts his painful failure, we read:

The king comforts his knight, and the court altogether / Agree with gay
 laughter and gracious intent / That the lords and the ladies belonging to
 the Table, / Each brother of that band, a baldric should have, / A belt
 borne with oblique, of a bright green, / To be worn with one accord for
 that worthy's sake. (52)

This is the significant turn at the end of the story that puts all of the judgments of the Green Knight, Bertilak, and even the reader into a different light. Gawain's symbol for failure is being worn as a sign of honor! How do we make sense of the court praising a knight who showed cowardice and covetousness by trying to save his own life?

Mumbach felt that the court was sympathizing with Gawain's failure. She writes, "Upon his return to Camelot, his fellow knights share willingly in his humiliation, adopting green sashes as part of their official garb" (105). But how does that accord with the poem itself, where we read of the girdle, "So that (the girdle) was taken as a token by the Round Table, / And he honored that had it, evermore after" (52). Batt sees the problem of Gawain insisting on his guilt as a negative for the court. She explains:

His 'penitential' declaration of guilt upon his return to court, for example, would seem to violate the decorum of that environment, but his attitude also causes unease, as it seems implicitly to demand a reassessment of Arthurian values. (127)

It might be that in their reaction we find the court wanted a reassessment of those Arthurian values. Remember, it is the court itself which has said in judgment of Arthur and Gawain's reaction to the challenge of the Green Knight, "A great leader of lords he was like to become, / And better so to have been than battered to bits, / Beheaded by an elf-man, for empty pride!" (15). The court wants to reassess its Arthurian values so it is

not living to heroic yet vain pride. When Gawain return alive it gives such joy to the nobles it proves to them their values need to be changed. They see that if Gawain had followed the old masculine pride of their society they would not have expected him to survive the test at all.

The court recognized a need for evolution in its masculine code of chivalry to preserve its best and brightest future leaders. Reading the poem with this in mind explains why they had a positive reaction to Gawain's failure. The court and Gawain evolve in their masculine ideal through his personal testing that began as a corporate test of Camelot. Their identity is not set in the constant and perfect pentangle and masculine only, but they now embrace the wisdom of the feminine in relation to acting out their chivalric code. Camelot will not condemn its knights for wanting to preserve their lives, even if they cannot live to a perfect heroic ideal in the midst of that choice for survival. Gawain's choices in his adventure display this reality in action, and the court's acceptance of him condones his evolution of their chivalric code.

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