

PASSION AND FELLOWSHIP:  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF MALORY'S GAWAIN

by

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To my Muse, Ashlyn, without whom I could not have accomplished this work.

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## INTRODUCTION

Within Arthurian legend, Sir Gawain is widely portrayed as one of Arthur's most prominent knights: the son of King Lot, brother to Mordred and Gaheris, the nephew of Arthur, and stalwart friend of Sir Lancelot. In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), the famous parody of Arthur's court, the Monty Python crew demonstrates their extensive knowledge of Arthurian legend—addressing lesser-known knights such as Sir Bedevere and discussing Joseph of Arimethea's importance in the Grail Quest. With this attention to detail, Monty Python's exclusion of Sir Gawain appears odd to the careful viewer. Rather than being directly cast in the film, Gawain is merely referenced. After suffering defeat by the Killer Rabbit, Arthur inquires, "How many did we lose?" Lancelot readily replies, "Gawain, Edgar, and Bors." Why did this well-informed film exclude one of Arthur's most prominent knights? In comparison with most Arthurian source texts, this exclusion of Sir Gawain seems bizarre, although it participates in various ambiguous portrayals of this famous knight. Gawain serves as the primary character in numerous important romances, for instance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*. Even when he is not the primary character, Gawain performs important functions, such as mentoring other knights in the romances of Chretien de Troyes. Most of the larger works feature Gawain as a vital character who is a respected member of Arthur's court, as in *The History of the Kings of Britain* and the *Suite du Merlin*. When these versions of Gawain are compared with that of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, the film's reference to Gawain seems trivially and degradingly out of place.

However, *Monty Python's* brief mention of Gawain gains significance when viewed in conjunction with Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, which is perhaps the most prominent source of Arthurian lore for English students and readers. While details of the *Morte's* author, Sir Thomas Malory, are scarce, the work serves as the most detailed English telling of Arthur's kingdom—beginning with Arthur's birth, relating numerous knightly adventures, and ending with Arthur's death. First printed in 1485 by William Caxton, the *Morte* is a compilation and retelling of numerous works depicting Arthur's fellowship. Alluding to his source material, Malory continually refers to a French book from which he worked. Scholarship has proved Malory used multiple sources, but, as Malory attested, these works are primarily French. For this thesis, the French sources of Malory's work are significant, because of Gawain's relationship with Lancelot. Lancelot and his company are French, while Gawain is English. The nationalities of these characters are important to Malory's understanding of them, particularly in late *Morte*.

Malory often does not portray Gawain as the stalwart knight found in other lore. Instead of properly honoring ladies, for instance, Malory's Gawain is known for disrespecting them, even accidentally beheading one on his first adventure. In other adventures, Gawain also acts notoriously, as in his treacherous treatment of Sir Pelleas and Lady Ettarde. He becomes Pelleas' lifelong enemy, and his behavior leads Lady Ettarde to die of sorrow. Ultimately, Gawain's behavior is implicated in the fall of Arthur's kingdom and the Round Table itself. Through the *Morte*, Malory establishes Gawain as a destabilizing force whose passions result in broken fellowship, but who eventually repents, seeking to restore fellowship.

In Chapter 1, I examine Malory's sources, to establish where Malory derived his material, and how he adapts and modifies it. Ralph Norris' work *Malory's Library: The Sources of the Morte Darthur* serves as a basis for understanding which Arthurian works Malory likely used. To properly assess Malory's portrayal of Gawain, Chapter 2 introduces the term anti-knight to refer to a knight who sows discord rather than constructs bonds of fellowship. Felicia Ackerman's *The Code of the Warrior* provides context for my discussion of the Pentecostal Oath to define the anti-knight and discuss how proper knights act. After Malory's sources and the concept of anti-knights is discussed, Chapter 3 examines Malory's establishment of Gawain's character in early *Morte*. Chapter 4 concerns Gawain's actions in late *Morte*—from the Grail Quest to the end of the *Morte*—revealing Gawain as a knight of penance.

## CHAPTER ONE: AN EXAMINATION OF MALORY'S SOURCES

As stated in the introduction, Malory depicts Sir Gawain as an anti-knight in *Le Morte D'arthur*, rather than the positive exemplar found in other texts. These differences do not result from Malory's unfamiliarity with Arthurian Legend. In his "Preface" to the *Morte*, Caxton wrote that "Thomas Malorye dyd take oute of certeyn bookes of Frensshe and reduced it into Englyshe" (xiv). This chapter focuses on distinguishing and discussing Malory's sources that pertain to this study to comprehend Malory's purpose behind his portrayal of Gawain.

According to Ralph Norris, certain important English Arthurian texts, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, were probably not among Malory's sources. Concerning Monmouth's text, which covers Gawain's origin and role in Arthur's court, Norris explains how Malory could have theoretically obtained the birth of Arthur from the *History*, but determines that Malory used John Hardyng's the *Chronicle* as his source for Arthur's origin (16). *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, another English source and one that portrays Gawain as a true knight, however, does not appear to have had any influence on Malory's work, receiving only a brief mention in Norris (110).

One of the sources Malory used to establish Gawain's character early in *Morte* is the *Suite du Merlin*. The *Suite* resides in the *Post-Vulgate Cycle*, a mid-thirteenth century revision of the early thirteenth century *Vulgate Cycle*, which brought together various versions of the Arthurian material (Corrie 273). While the *Vulgate Cycle* highlights the

love affair involving Lancelot and Guinevere, the Post-Vulgate Cycle emphasizes the Grail Quest, and thus the spiritual aspects of the material. In one adventure, Gawain, Ywain, and Marhalt meet three maidens and agree to each take a maiden and adventure along separate paths for one year. By the end of this journey, Gawain and Marhalt prove to be unworthy of these ladies for various reasons (although Gawain's lady eventually repents of this decision). Ywain's lady, alone, travels with her knight throughout the tale. The leaving of Gawain's lady is significant within the context of medieval romances: "Although knights assess the masculine code of martial excellence, it is the women who often comment on matters of behavior, breeding, and gentleness" (Jesmok 35). The ladies in this quest are not merely companions; they are guides. The knights are called to respect the wisdom possessed by these women and grow from the assistance given. Gawain and Marhalt are unworthy of these ladies, resulting in their isolation. Marhalt's failure results from his refusal to stop for King Pellinore, which leads to an encounter with the *Perron du Cerf* and the death of Marhalt's lady (Norris 46). Gawain's lady, in contrast, chooses to leave him. Here, Malory departs significantly from his source. In *Suite*, Gawain's lady repents of leaving him and unsuccessfully attempts to return to him. The lady in *Morte* leaves without remorse and does not attempt to return (46).

Andrew Lynch, in his *Malory's Book of Arms*, describes the proper manner to break fellowship, noting that "sudden acts are usually the sign of cowardice or treachery" (58). However, he points out, "Almost the only thing a good being is able to do suddenly without loss of worship is to part company" but only on the basis of "fear of guile, anticipation of a reappearance, or a rebuke of the place or company left behind" (58). Lynch describes two legitimate reasons to break fellowship. The first concerns one's

obligation to return to other duties, often expecting a reappearance or return to comrades. The second, which pertains to this tale, is the “fear of guile” (58). By leaving Gawain’s fellowship, the lady makes a statement about Gawain as a knight: he is flawed, and she desires to depart from his company because of those flaws. This lady leaves Gawain in an acceptable manner, despite the suddenness of the act, reaffirming the validity of her conduct. Through this direct leaving for appropriate reasons, the lady shows her superiority over Gawain, being capable of properly breaking fellowship and addressing Gawain’s faults.

While Gawain failed his companion in this adventure, his failure is somewhat lessened by Marhalt also failing his lady. If Gawain had been the only knight to return alone, the tale would have centered on the failure of Gawain among other knights. Although this does not excuse Gawain’s actions, Marhalt’s similar inadequacy proves that even great knights fail, serving to uplift Ywain rather than solely undermining Gawain (Norris 46).

After the departure of his lady in the *Suite* version, Gawain agrees to woo the maiden Arcade on behalf of Sir Pelleas. Instead of fulfilling his promise, Gawain takes Arcade for himself. Again, Gawain proves his failure with women. Eventually, Gawain admits his mistake, forgoing his love for Arcade and bringing the rightful couple (Pelleas and Arcade) together (44-45). Malory utilizes this tale of Gawain, Arcade, and Pelleas, but, instead of bringing Arcade and Pelleas together, Gawain drives them apart, leading to the death of Arcade and a rift between Gawain and Pelleas. From this adventure, the author of the *Suite* conveys the essence of his Gawain as a flawed character who repents of his sins, particularly in respect to women. These failings are not altogether singular, as

shown by Marhalt losing his lady during the quest. Ultimately, Gawain is a knight of penance; he confesses his sins and restores fellowship. Gawain unites Arcade and Pelleas, forming a wholesome marriage that could not have been accomplished otherwise, and further reinforces the unity of the Round Table. As Malory later demonstrates, Gawain's actions could have created a serious gap between himself and Pelleas if he had not mended the situation, thus weakening Arthur's court.

Another, yet far less benevolent, of Malory's sources for Gawain is the anonymous French romance *Perlesvaus* (Marshall 33). During this story, Gawain agrees to chase a giant, attempting to rescue a king's son. Gawain loses the fight with the giant, who slays the prince and carries off Gawain. Gawain only survives due to the giant stumbling, which gives Gawain an opportunity to slay the monster and return in shame to the court (Norris 48). This episode lowers Gawain's standing as a knight. In addition to failing in his duty to save the prince, Gawain is physically demeaned by losing the fight to the giant. Gawain, who, depending on the time of day, possesses the strength of at least two men, cannot defeat this monster. Further humiliating Gawain, the giant does not kill him. He carries Gawain off, showing not just victory but total domination over the knight. Gawain's utter helplessness in this episode is shown by his reliance on luck to slay the monster.

In addition to the *Suite* and *Perlesvaus*, Malory uses the earlier French *Vulgate Cycle*. This compilation of Arthurian tales was written in the early thirteenth-century. Although scholars debate the authorship of the work, the *Vulgate Cycle* serves as an important work due to its length and complexity (Dover xi). The forty-first chapter of the *Vulgate's* "Story of Merlin" recounts an important tale Malory took inspiration from.

During this adventure, Gawain, his brothers, and his father fight five Saxon kings and their armies (a theme Malory uses early in the *Morte*). Despite being grievously outnumbered, Gawain and his family cautiously fight the opposing forces, retreating when necessary. Gawain demonstrates his courage in this battle, arguably being the most eager to face the enemy, but the most significant aspect of the tale concerns Gawain's devotion to his family. This loyalty is shown when King Lot loses his horse:

Then Gawainet looked about and saw his father on foot, and he was so worried about him that he nearly went out of his mind. He struck his horse with his spurs so hard that the blood poured out of its sides, and he struck Monaclin so hard that he drove through his shield and hauberk into his side, through his ribs and out the other side, and he sent him to the ground dead. (356)

Gawain's fear for his father and the fury of his actions demonstrate his devotion to family. Gawain caused his horse to bleed from spur strikes, far exceeding the power necessary to ride a mount. The stroke Gawain dealt to Monaclin was also excessive, running the man through. Monaclin's status further affirms Gawain's loyalty. Since Monaclin was one of the five kings, Gawain could have hesitated, knowing he would fight a greater foe than a mere soldier. Monaclin's nobility did not intimidate Gawain. Without hesitation, Gawain cleaved through Moncalin to rescue his father.

Here it is beneficial to contrast the function of family in the *Morte* with its treatment in other Arthurian works, including those by Chretien de Troyes: "For Malory, families are the source of political and dramatic tension ... Chretien employs the idea of family on the aesthetic level as an alternative that undermines the foregrounded life of chivalric adventure the romance pretends to celebrate" (Mandel 97). For authors such as

Malory, a knight's ties to family are viewed as a weakness, a loyalty which creates political turmoil. However, Chretien and other writers view family as a significant part of knighthood. In *The Knight of Cart*, Chretien portrays family as a wholesome structure that assists knights in their endeavors. During the narrative, King Lac is portrayed as a wise leader, whose family welcomes and assists Lancelot. When Lac's son, Erec, suddenly departs from his father's house, harm befalls him, showing the importance of family. Because of this emphasis on the wholesomeness of family structure, Gawain's loyalty, for Chretien, is not a weakness but a strength (Mandel 97).

Chretien is arguably one of the most influential writers of Arthurian legend. During the latter half of the twelfth century, Chretien wrote five romances, introducing vital themes such as Lancelot's affair with Guinevere (Kibler 1). Although Gawain's loyalty to family is not a strong theme in *The Knight of the Cart*, this romance appears briefly in Malory's depiction of Lancelot. William Nitze, in his article "The Character of Gauvain in the Romances of Chretien de Troyes," explains Gawain's significance in *The Knight of the Cart* as well as in Chretien's other works. "Gauvain is held up as a model of what other knights should be... He plays a prominent role in *Erec*, *Cliges*, *Lancelot*, *Yvain*, and especially *Perceval*, but always as a contrasting figure with whom the title heroes are compared or associated" (Nitze 219). *The Knight of the Cart* portrays this relationship between Gawain and Lancelot, showing Gawain to be a faithful friend and a model knight throughout the adventure.

The romance begins with Guinevere being captured and Gawain seeking to rescue her. Gawain's greater wisdom becomes apparent when he first encounters Lancelot, who "approached slowly on a horse that was sore and tired" (Chretien 210). In his passion for

Guinevere and his desire to save her, Lancelot foolishly exhausts his horse, which would have ended Lancelot's attempt to save her had Gawain not given him his spare horse. Gawain, like Lancelot, shows no impatience, though he greatly desires to save Guinevere. Chretien informs his readers that "Gawain was riding well in advance of the others," proving his loyalty to Arthur by being the most eager—save Lancelot—to rescue the queen. Through this event, Gawain shows wisdom by balancing his haste and his need to preserve his steed. Gawain could have been overly cautious, as were most of his fellow knights, preventing him from adequately chasing the queen's captors, or he could have been rash and exhausted his horse.

Gawain's greater virtue is further supported by Lancelot's poor choice of mount. Gawain allows Lancelot to "choose whichever of the two [mounts] he preferred," but Lancelot, "in desperate need, did not take the time to choose the better, or the more handsome, or the larger, rather he leapt upon the one that was nearest to him, and rode off at full speed" (211). Lancelot's folly is realized when Gawain soon comes upon the mount, now slain amid other horses and broken weaponry. If Lancelot had assessed the horses, he would have chosen the mount best suited to save the queen. Instead, his hasty decision leads to his horse's death and the prolonged capture of Guinevere.

The final demonstration of Gawain's superior knighthood occurs when Lancelot agrees to ride in a cart due to his steed being slain. Chretien informs his readers of the disgracefulness of riding in a cart, mentioning, "that cart was for all criminals alike, for all traitors and murderers, for all those who had lost trials by combat, and for all those who had stolen another's possession by larceny or snatched them by force on the highways" (211). By riding in the cart, Lancelot associates himself with criminals,

dishonoring himself as a knight. Gawain does not dishonor himself, refusing to ride in the cart, because he realizes that “it was madness . . . to trade a horse for a cart” (212).

Lancelot, effectively, made this exchange; he hastily chose the weaker horse, forcing himself to ride in the cart shortly after. If Lancelot showed patience, he would have retained his dignity.

By the end of the romance, Lancelot overcomes his title “Knight of the Cart,” attaining the honor Gawain begins the romance with. As Nitze asserts in his article, Gawain serves as a model for Lancelot, showing Lancelot the virtue of knighthood and allowing Lancelot to achieve greatness at the end of the tale. Thus, Gawain serves as a type of mentor, not only to Lancelot, but to knights throughout Chretien’s works. Malory, in contrast, does not use Gawain in his version of *The Knight of the Cart*, leaving Lancelot without a mentor in his tale. Such an exclusion is significant for Malory, preventing Gawain from showing more virtue than Lancelot.

Lancelot’s role in the *Morte* drastically changes Gawain’s function in the narrative. In her book *Malory and his European Contemporaries*, Miriam Edlich-Muth discusses the significance of Lancelot’s prominence: “Of the three original counterparts to Arthur (Mordred, Kay, and Gawain), it is Gawain whose role is most strongly diminished by the introduction of Lancelot into the story” (139). Malory’s “Knight of the Cart” occurs in the portion of the *Morte* that focuses on Lancelot. Because of this emphasis, Gawain is not even mentioned; Malory completely excludes him from the tale. Due to Gawain’s absence, any virtue Lancelot gains through Malory’s retelling is not because of Gawain, nor does it point to Gawain as an exemplar.

Portrayals of Sir Gawain's brother Sir Gareth also serve important functions in Malory's depiction of Gawain. Sir Gareth serves as the *fair unknown*. Arriving at Arthur's court with a dwarf and becoming a kitchen knave, he later takes a quest to rescue a fair lady, is knighted by Lancelot, proving his prowess and gaining honor; however, as Norris points out, "'The Tale of Sir Gareth' is the only one of Malory's tales that does not have a surviving major source" (*Malory's Library* 81). Despite this lack of a major source for this episode, Malory's deviation from his other sources—and his choice to do so—has implications for the rest of the work. Norris points out that Malory's work parallels the French *Vulgate* and *Post-Vulgate* cycles, but expands their forms in the *Morte* (83). Malory provides Gawain's third brother with his own chapter rather than an episode, reflecting the pattern of his work with other major texts. The difference lies in the magnitude, and thus the importance, of the third brother within the work. Malory could have chosen to spend only a portion of a tale on Sir Gareth. Instead, he dedicated an entire book to the character.

Malory's changes again diminish Gawain in favor of Lancelot. Gareth becomes known as an honorable knight, granting mercy and honoring ladies. This desire for nobility causes Gareth to shun his brothers, due to their sins. Instead, he admires Lancelot. In addition to having Gareth favor Lancelot over Gawain, Malory honors Lancelot over Gawain by "taking Gawain's adventures and giving them to Lancelot," directly giving honor to Lancelot instead of Gawain (Norris 79). One instance stems from Malory's minor source *Escanor* by Girat d'Armien. In this text, Gawain is tricked by a sorceress to retrieve a goshawk and walks into an ambush. Despite this deception, Gawain defends himself against his two attackers. An almost identical tale is used in the

*Morte*, where a lady asks Lancelot to retrieve a hawk from a tree. Lancelot disarms himself to assist the lady, and the lady's husband assaults the unarmed Lancelot as he climbs down (Norris 79). To follow *Escanor*, Malory could have used Gawain as the hero of this story, yet such a tale would not be consistent with Malory's villainous Gawain. Because of this, Malory exchanged Lancelot for Gawain in this tale, once more honoring this French knight over Gawain.

Lancelot's relationship with Galahad also possesses implications for Malory's treatment of Gawain. For his Grail Quest, Malory chose to follow the Vulgate *Queste del Saint Graal* as his primary source. While Malory often takes liberties with his other sources, he follows *Queste* with great fidelity: "Malory's reworking of the *Quest* is ostensibly his most \*faithful\* redaction," affirming the importance of Galahad to Malory's Grail Quest and Lancelot's character (Batt 133). This faithfulness to the *Quest*, shows that Malory viewed the search for the Grail as a paramount element of Arthurian legend. In Malory's *Quest*, Galahad is the noblest knight and Gawain's foil. The sword that appears at the beginning of the *Quest* is meant for the noblest knight, warning other knights against attempting to draw it: "Never shall man take hem hense but only he by whos syde I ought to honge and he shall be the best knyght of the worlde" (*Morte* 517.24-25). Gawain, at Arthur's command, wrongfully attempts to draw the Grail-sword. His punishment is realized when he faces Galahad, the rightful wielder of the weapon, receiving a blow by that sword later in the narrative.

Despite portraying Gawain as a severely flawed knight, Malory does not completely disregard the virtues of other versions of Gawain. Discussing Gawain's perceptiveness in the *Morte*, Whetter remarks, "Gawain, in fact, reveals considerable

awareness of events and characters around him. On several occasions in the *Morte* Gawain—or Gawain and Arthur—alone see through Lancelot’s disguised attempts to win ‘worship.’” (“Characterization in Malory and Bonnie” 128). Such discernment is consistent with the wisdom Gawain shows in Chretien and other works. Malory’s Gawain also exhibits the motif central to Gawain’s character: Gawain as the repentant knight. Although his penance comes late, Gawain repents on his deathbed, forsaking his sins and making peace with Lancelot. By doing so, Gawain retains his repentant character. In regards to this late repentance, Norris examines Malory’s final words concerning Gawain, comparing Malory’s comments on Gawain’s death to the death of Christ. When Gawain dies, Malory states that he “yelded up the goste” (*Morte* 710.37). Norris argues that it is unlikely that Malory is making a direct parallel between Gawain and Christ here. Malory’s negative treatment of Gawain earlier in the text makes it improbable that he would give Gawain such a parting unless Gawain died a particularly noble death. Another reason Gawain’s death does not make him a type of Christ is Malory’s use of the phrase elsewhere, such as at the death of Uther. Because Uther was not a noble king in Malory, it can be concluded that the phrase is a common saying (148).

While this does not make Gawain a direct Christ figure, the phrasing does make an important point about Gawain’s status. Malory uses this phrase throughout *Morte* but does not use it at Mordred’s death. From this usage, it is apparent that, while not singular phrasing, it is reserved for those who die within the folds of society. True villains, such as Mordred, are excluded from the phrase. Throughout the work, Gawain is called a villain and is known as a thief and murderer: “ye bene an untrew knyght and a grete murtherar” (*Morte* 563.15). Gawain’s ignoble actions threaten to leave him spiritually destitute at the

end of the *Morte*, just as Mordred is, cut off from humans and without God's grace. Malory's use of this phrase assures his audience that Gawain is redeemed at the conclusion of the tale. His sins during life were numerous and great, but, at the end, he repented, made peace with Lancelot, and was accepted as a true knight into heaven.

When compiling the *Morte*, Malory had a variety of depictions of Gawain to choose from:

The earliest depictions of Gawain in Latin and French literature are almost wholly laudatory. The degradation begins in Chretien's poems and continues in the prose romances until in the prose *Tristan* and Post-Vulgate Grail quest Gawain is essentially a villain. On the other hand, Middle English authors generally depicted Gawain as Arthur's best knight. (Norris 45)

Malory took inspiration from several portrayals of Gawain—sometimes showing his foolishness, other times his wisdom. Ultimately, Malory forged a Gawain to fit the *Morte*, particularly allowing him to develop Lancelot and Galahad as ideal knights. While Malory did not choose to portray Gawain as the noble knight seen in Chretien's romances, his Gawain remains consistent with other positive portrayals of Gawain as a repentant knight. In works such as the *Suite*, Gawain fails by abusing knights and ladies. Though severe, these failures do not define him. He repents and repairs relationships. This Gawain serves as a more realistic model for knights to follow. He is not perfect, but he possesses humility, allowing him to repent of his sins. Malory chooses this penitent Gawain for the *Morte*. Throughout the work, Gawain consistently forgoes his knightly vows, willfully dishonoring maidens and fellow knights, alike. Despite his flaws, Gawain does repent, leading to a spiritual reunion with Arthur and Lancelot.

**CHAPTER TWO:**

**KNIGHTS AND ANTI-KNIGHTS: MALORY'S PENTECOSTAL**

**OATH**

During the examination of Malory's sources in the previous chapter, Gawain's nobility was examined in a general context. This chapter serves to solidify Malory's understanding of proper knighthood, establishing a basis to analyze Gawain's character in the following chapters. Malory's view of knighthood is set forth in the Pentecostal Oath, which is taken by all knights and retaken each year at the Feast of Pentecost:

never to do outrage northir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treason, and to gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture of worship and lordship of kynge Arthure for evirmore; and allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantil women and wydowes socour; strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payn of dethe. Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongfull quarell for no love, ne for no worldis goodis. (75.38-44)

Thomas Wright informs readers that Malory's Pentecostal Oath is likely of his own creation: "It is generally regarded as Malory's addition to the story, a sort of code expressing his conception of how knights ought to live" (qtd. Bedwell 36). Although no source is known for this oath, its role in Malory is paramount. In *The Code of the Warrior*, Felicia Ackerman examines the focus of this oath and its importance in Malory. Ackerman begins her discussion of the oath by mentioning that "the Round Table oath is not a code of human behavior in general. The Pentecostal Oath is a code of *knighthly* behavior, a code for Arthurian knights as warriors and as members of the king's political

body” (5-6). Other members of society are not bound to these values. By making a moral code specifically for knights, Malory creates an order set apart from general humanity, a group dedicated to a unique code.

Arthur’s choice to implement the Oath at Pentecost is significant. In the biblical book of *Acts*, Pentecost is an event of unification, binding people of various nationalities to a common creed. Arthur’s Pentecostal Oath attempts a similar act. English knights are welcome, as are French knights, such as Sir Lancelot and Sir Bors. The Oath calls these knights to a common fellowship, demanding loyalty to Arthur and the entirety of Arthur’s court. As such, it prioritizes knightly duty in terms of fellowship, thus providing context for understanding Malory’s treatment of Gawain.

Before examining the particulars of Malory’s knightly oath, Ackerman discusses the knights’ power as the warriors of their society; they are the ones dedicated to training their bodies, skilled in weapons, and are the mounted fighters. This power is easily misused, as is often shown in the *Morte*. Because of this misuse, the Oath commands knights to use their strength properly. The first line of the oath, “never to do outrage northir mourthir, and allwayes to fle treason,” may seem obvious, but it establishes the primary way knights fail Arthur, using their strength to murder other members of the court (75.38-39). It acknowledges that knights are often called to kill, but only for justice. This quote also reveals a connection between murder and treason in the *Morte*. Ackerman shows that, according to Malory, all murder is a form of treason. Such a connection reveals how murder undermines a knight’s duty to his community. Rightful killings certainly occur in the *Morte*, but these killings are for the sake of community, to aid weaker members and forge stronger bonds within the kingdom. Murders, however, harm

the community. When committing murder, a knight acts out of selfish desire rather than attempting to construct fellowship. Because of this ill intent, murders are considered treason, fundamentally destroying positive relationships within the realm.

The second portion of the vow concerns the knightly use of mercy: “gyff mercy unto hym that askith mercy, uppon payne of forfiture of worship and lordship of kyng Arthur for evirmore” (75.39-41). By calling on mercy, the oath shows the “religious underpinnings of Arthurian knighthood as embodying Christian virtue rather than resting on brute force” (Ackerman 128). This link to Christianity is shown by the Oath’s similarity to Christ’s command in the Gospel of Matthew: “Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy” (*Douay-Rheims*, Matthew 5:7). The first part of this Beatitude is an implicit command: be merciful. If this command is fulfilled, the follower shall be rewarded, as shown in the second portion of the Beatitude: “for they shall obtain mercy” (Matthew 5:7). By concluding with a promise of mercy, Christ reminds his followers they are sinners who need mercy. Such a statement is designed to encourage humility within Christians; their own acts of mercy are not from one superior being to another but acts of mercy from one sinner to another sinner.

The Oath’s command mirrors the structure of Christ’s command. It begins with a call: “gyve mercy unto hym that askith mercy” (39). This call is followed by the result of the person’s actions (shown through the negative, rather than the positive in Christ’s command): “uppon payne of forfiture of worship and lordship of kyng Arthur for evirmore” (75.39-41). This is one of two repercussions listed in Malory’s Pentecostal Oath. The second repercussion is listed after the call to honor gentlewomen and damsels: “uppon payn of dethe” (75.43). Of these two repercussions, the one pertaining to mercy is

the one directly correlated to spiritual devastation, rather than merely physical death. By threatening the “forfiture of worship,” such knights lose their honor before God and man (75.40). On a worldly level, this results in knights being stripped of their titles and positions in the world. However, this penalty also contains severe spiritual consequences. In Caxton’s “Preface” to the *Morte*, Caxton claims that Arthur was the first of the great Christian kings: “And sythe the sayd Incarnacyon have ben thre noble Crysten men stilled and admytted thorgh the unyversal world into the nombre of the nine beste and worthy ... there was never suche a king as Arthur” (xiii, xiv). Thus, the greatness of Arthur’s kingdom lies in its spiritual orientation. To forfeit the “lordship of kyngdom of Arthure for evirmore” not only results in the loss of membership in Arthur’s physical court, but also results in exclusion from a greater, spiritual court (75.40-41). (This connection is fully realized in the Grail Quest, where knights’ physical actions are divinely judged.) The spiritual significance of this call to mercy is mirrored in the Biblical book of James: “For judgment without mercy to him that hath not done mercy” (*Douay-Rheims*, James 2:13). In Arthur’s court, knights are called to remember they are flawed. They will be judged by both Arthur and God. If they use their power without mercy when mercy is asked for, they will receive no mercy in heaven or on earth.

Following this call to mercy, Arthur’s Pentecostal Oath instructs knights “allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantil women and wydowes socour; strengthe hem in hir ryghtes, and never to enforce them, uppon payn of dethe.” (75.41-43). Malory places this demand to defend women after the call to mercy because the two duties are related. Within the world of Malory, women are physically vulnerable, not possessing the strength or status of men. They are unable to fight for their rights in trials of combat and

are physically incapable of warding off knights' sexual advances. These women are at the mercy of knights, and knights are called to respect women. In *The Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, Jacqueline Murray adds another dimension to the male sexual role: "[In the Medieval world] men were seen as sexually active and women as sexually passive, dependent, and ultimately, subordinate" (131). While current scholarship illustrates notable exceptions to the portrayal of women as passive in Malory and other Arthurian texts, this aspect of the oath demonstrates an awareness that women were vulnerable because of knights' physical strength. The Oath calls knights to honor women through their own actions in addition to protecting them from lecherous knights.

The call to honor women reflects the destructive potential of male sexual desire, which presents severe difficulties throughout the *Morte*. As Kristina Hildebrand notes, "Male desire ... is also controlled by women in that it is moderated by the rules of courtly love" (18). A solution to the problem of male sexual desire, then, is courtly love, which directs male desire towards spiritual ends through processes involved in striving to prove oneself worthy of the courtly lover. Although courtly love allows knights to woo married women as spiritual ideals, this system often resulted in affairs if the lovers consummated their attraction outside of marriage. This situation is inconsistent with the Christian culture of Arthur's court for obvious reasons. Lancelot and Guinevere reflect the limit case in that their consummated love is both adulterous and treasonous. Guinevere is called to honor Arthur as her husband, but her affair ignores the bounds accepted by Christianity and ultimately results in treason against Arthur. This love affair, then, attests to the potentially destructive effects of sexual desire that the Oath attempted to mitigate through its demands that knights honor and succor women.

The final command in the Oath pertains to knights not using their power for evil gain: “Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongfull quarell for no love, ne for no worldis goodis” (75.43-44). It is important to note that versions of the *Morte* other than Vinaver’s chose the word “law” instead of “love.” The use of both these words depict the depth of this command. It acknowledges that knights can accept wrongful quarrels for the love of a lady, gaining sexual favors in exchange for ill deeds, but they can also perform evil actions for the love of kin or other lords (acts more directly tied to law). The command covers evil deeds committed for all types of loves, sexual or otherwise. The latter part of this section deals with a more direct reason for evil deeds. This command forbids specific practices, such as “knights being mercenaries or highway robbers” (Ackerman 131). The knights of King Arthur are bound to Arthur. They are not to use their strength for other lords as mercenaries; if Arthur’s knights act as mercenaries, they might be paid to fight against him.

Every aspect of the Oath focuses on one aspect of a knight’s life: the knight’s relationship with King Arthur. In addition to forbidding open treason, the Oath functions as a demand to serve Arthur’s court, honoring both knights and ladies. Even the more spiritual commands (“Also, that no man take no batayles in a wrongfull quarell for no love, ne for no worldis goodis”), pertain to aiding Arthur’s kingdom, because, as Caxton states in his preface, Arthur was the first of the great Christian kings (75.43-44). With this understanding, Malory’s Pentecostal Oath serves as a moral code for a kingdom beyond Arthur’s, one which is fully realized in the Grail Quest. The remainder of this chapter focuses on examining how this code is adhered to, or not adhered to, in the *Morte* and how it pertains to Gawain’s character in the following chapters.

Malory gives an example of a false knight in Book II through Sir Balin. Balin's quest begins when a damsel asks Arthur for assistance, presenting a sword that will choose her knight: "a knyght that hath all thes vertues (withoutre treson, trechory or felony) he may draw oute this swerde oute of the sheethe" (38.21-22). When Balin draws the sword, the damsel makes a significant remark: "Sertes ... thys ys a passynge good knyght and the beste that ever y founde, and moste of worship withoutre treson, trechory or felony. And many mervayles shall he do" (39.37-39). Her remarks bear similarities to the Pentecostal Oath; the reason she calls Balin a "good knyght" is that he must be "withoutre treson, trechory or felony" (39.38-39). Like the Oath, the damsel's remark follows a hierarchy: loyalty to the king, loyalty to the court, and loyalty to the law.

It is important to acknowledge that, at this point in the text, Arthur's Oath has not been established. Although this event predates the introduction of the Pentecostal Oath, it demonstrates that Arthur's court lived by these standards, as Balin's narrative demonstrates. The failures of knights such as Balin probably led to the development of the Pentecostal Oath, giving knights an explicit standard to adhere to.

Despite the damsel's positive analysis of Balin, the knight has already committed a serious crime. Before this encounter, Balin "had been presonere with Arthure half a yere for sleynge of a knyght which was cosyne unto kyng Arthure" (39.5-6). This action is close to treasonous, slaying the close kin of the king. However, Arthur gives mercy to Balin and chooses to imprison him rather than execute him, reaffirming his knightly duty to uphold the law over the duty to avenge his kin. This crime degrades Balin's status in the court. In addition to the social stigma associated with the crime, Balin also possessed poor raiment and arms, thus signifying his degraded moral character.

Balin demonstrates his lack of moral integrity when the damsel requests Balin to return the sword he drew. Balin refuses, stating, “thys swerde woll I kepe but hit be takyn fro me with force” (39.41-42). Balin’s insistence on keeping the sword neglects his knightly duty in two important ways. The first concerns helping damsels. Initially, Balin appears to honor the damsel, agreeing to aid her in this quest. However, knights are called to serve ladies without regard to rewards. Balin reveals his desire for gain by refusing to return the sword. As the damsel’s champion, Balin is bound to honor her wishes and relinquish the weapon. He wants to keep the sword against the damsel’s wishes replacing his own, poor armament to raise his status. However, this action violates the oath.

Balin’s second failure to honor the damsel concerns the second half of the command. His insistence to keep the sword is reinforced with a threat: “hit be takyn fro me with force” (39.41-42). Here Balin directly uses his strength to refuse the damsel’s rightful request. She cannot personally take the sword from him. If she wants to reacquire the weapon, she must find another champion to fight Balin. Balin reaffirms his stance again by threatening, “But the swerde ye shall nat have at thys tyme, by the feythe of my body!” (40.4-5). Unrepentant of his failure, Balin insists on keeping the sword, choosing to utilize his strength to undermine the damsel he agreed to serve. This threat of violence against a damsel ignores the nobility of sacrifice through combat that Balin is called to enact: “Each knight is like an equal half of a good fight, giving and receiving blows” (Lynch 59). When a knight engages in combat, he is called to accept danger for a noble cause. Threatening violence against a woman undoes this command; the damsel poses no threat to Balin, and she would need to find another champion to win back her sword.

Here Balin is portrayed as a false knight, using his strength to obtain the sword from a damsel. However, Balin actually pulls the sword from the sheath, which only a noble knight “without tresson, trechory or felony” can do (39.22). Elizabeth Edwards in “The Genesis of Narrative in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*” acknowledges similar dilemmas with “The Tale of Sir Balin”:

The lady’s quest is for vengeance on her brother for killing her lover; but why should she need one of the best knights to pull out the sword, and how does the sword-pulling further her quest? There is a profound discrepancy between the sword’s origin in malice and enchantment and the message it bears for Balin. (32)

As Edwards mentions, Balin’s quest contains several inconsistencies. For this study, Balin’s status as an anti-knight is used, and, while it is inconsistent with the damsel’s initial request, Balin’s fallen status is recognized both by critics and Arthur’s trial of Balin.

After Balin refuses to return the sword, his greatest dishonor occurs when the Lady of the Lake comes to Camelot, asking for the head of the damsel and the knight who received the blade as a result of their having killed members of her family and as payment for her giving Ex Caliber to Arthur. Enraged, Balin beheads her, exclaiming, “ye wolde have myne hede, and therefore ye shall loose yours!” (41.9-10). The act of beheading the Lady of the Lake is Balin’s greatest defiance to ladies and to Arthur’s court. Her demand is unreasonable, and Arthur agrees to repay her but not with their heads. Yet Balin kills her even though he is in no danger from her, again threatening combat without the possibility of personal danger. Even if Balin were forced to fight, he would have fought other knights and not the Lady of the Lake. His attack against her is

unwarranted, the slaying of a helpless woman. In no manner could this action aid him. Balin's quarrel against the Lady of the Lake arises out of pure anger, and he gives into his rage and commits murder.

When Balin commits this atrocity, Arthur's authority is threatened: "One of the primary concerns of the fifteenth century ... was the king's ability to be a strong administrator of justice in his realm, his ability to reward good service, and to maintain the integrity of the country" (Radulescu 38). These concerns are interwoven. By administering justice, a king solidifies the stability of his court. Through rewarding service, the king makes allies. During times of war, the stability of the court and the king's allies are necessary to preserve the country's borders. Balin's action threatens these aspects of Arthur's kingdom. He beheads someone who performed a service to the king and who should have been rewarded. If left unpunished, this action would ward off potential allies and destroy the justice of the court, weakening the country. Realizing the severity of the situation, Arthur punishes Balin: "Alas, for shame! Why have ye do so? Ye have shamed me and all my courte, for thys lady was a lady that I was much beholdyng to, and hyder she com undir my sauffconduyghte. Therefore I shall never forgyff you that trespasse" (41.13-16). Balin's slaying of the Lady of the Lake was an act of treason. She was dear to Arthur, having given him Excalibur. She was also in Arthur's court, under his protection. Because of this protection, Balin's act was in direct defiance of Arthur. This action is unforgivable, and Balin is banished because of it. From this banishment, Arthur shows that proper punishments must be dealt. If Arthur refused to punish Balin, he would have refused to uphold the code of his own court. As king, Arthur

must punish the failures of other knights. Refusal to discipline his court would undermine his entire kingdom.

Though Balin serves as an anti-knight in this passage, Arthur shows how a knight should respond in this situation. While he realizes the Lady of the Lake's request for the damsel's and Balin's heads is extreme, Arthur also acknowledges that he owes the Lady a gift in return for Excalibur. In response to the Lady's request, Arthur states, "I may nat graunte you nother of their hedys with my worship; therefore aske what ye woll els, and I shall fulfille youre desire" (41.1-3). Here Arthur demonstrates that knights must not fulfill every request made by a lady. If the request is unreasonable, it may be refused. Arthur's reaction to the request fulfills the requirement to honor the Lady; he treats the Lady of the Lake with dignity, keeping his promise of a noble gift, but refuses to wrongfully give the heads of the damsel and Balin.

Two important points from Balin's tale pertain to this study of Sir Gawain. First, Balin serves as an example of an anti-knight, showing readers how knights should not act. They must honor ladies and not allow their passions to overcome their fellowship. The other point concerns Arthur's actions against knights' failures. In the following chapters, Gawain's failures as a knight are examined. Though these failures are often severe, Arthur does not chasten Gawain. Probably due to their kinship, Arthur neglects his duty to his kingdom, encouraging unknighthly behavior. This failure on his part leads to discord within the court as Gawain's actions undermine the fellowship of the Round Table.

Sir Balin is an example of an anti-knight in the *Morte*, a knight who destroys fellowship to further his own desires. On the other hand, Sir Lancelot serves as an

example of a proper knight. As the most renowned of Arthur's fellowship, Lancelot is a knight of great character, honoring the court and fighting for noble causes. His failure is unlike the failure of knights such as Balin, whose misdeeds compromise multiple aspects of the Oath. Lancelot's affair with Guinevere fulfills the command to honor ladies, protecting the Queen and doing her bidding, but it ultimately ignores the duty to the king's marriage. While Lancelot's failure participates in the destruction of Arthur's realm, he otherwise acts always in accord with his love of and loyalty to Arthur and his kingdom, and his final acts are aimed at helping Arthur remain king.

Book VI "Sir Lancelot du Lake" informs readers of Lancelot's gallantry. A damsel asks for Lancelot's strength against Tarquin, a false knight, and Lancelot agrees to aid her: "All youre entente, damesell, and desyre I woll fulfyller, so ye woll brynge me unto this knyght" (157.5-6). Lancelot's duty to damsels in this situation is twofold. This damsel requests that he aid her, avenging wrongs done to her and her fellows. The damsel's request also implies Lancelot's duty to other damsels by mentioning, "go and helpe me and other damsels that ar dystressed dayly with a false knyght" (157.3-4). This knight's ill actions persist, creating a pattern of violence against damsels. Unless checked, he will continue to torment maidens, undermining the order of knighthood. By pledging himself to defeat this knight, Lancelot serves this damsel as well as others, countering the ill-used strength of this false knight and stabilizing Arthur's kingdom.

In addition to affirming his duties to ladies, this adventure binds Lancelot to his fellows of the Round Table, because the false knight "hath in his preson of Arthurs courte good knyghtes three score and four that he hath wonne with his owne hondys" (156.44-157.1). If Lancelot were to refuse to fight this knight, he would have failed Arthur and

the Knights of the Round Table, allowing their members to remain captured. The knight's threat to Arthur's court is further confirmed when Lancelot approaches Tarquin, who threatens, "Thou be of the Rounde Table. I defy the and all thy felyshyp!" (157.31-32). Not only is Tarquin a false knight who abuses damsels and captures true knights, he directly proclaims himself an enemy of the Round Table, specifically targeting Arthur's knights. In addition to his duty to free his fellows, Lancelot must stop Tarquin for the good of the entire Round Table, eliminating a threat dedicated to their destruction. The situation behind Tarquin's extreme hate is revealed after Lancelot introduces himself: "Sir Lancelot de Lake slowe my brothir sir Carados at the Dolerous Tower ... And for sir Launcelottis sake I have slayne an hondred good knyghtes, and as many have I maymed utterly, that they myght never aftir help themself, and many have dyed in preson" (158.18; 158.21-23). Tarquin's hatred stems from his desire to avenge his brother, a vendetta that has destroyed hundreds of good knights, making him a terrible threat to the Round Table and reinforcing Lancelot's duty to stop him.

Tarquin's hatred for Lancelot relates to Malory's understanding of family ties and knighthood: dedication to kinship must be secondary to knights' duty to the Oath if the realm is to survive. Nowhere in the Oath is a knight's duty to kin mentioned. Such matters are outside of the court. The Oath concerns the king, ladies, and fellow knights. If knights forego these obligations for the sake of kin, destruction results, as depicted by Tarquin. Tarquin destroyed many of Arthur's knights to avenge his brother. Personal vengeance undermines the unity of the court. The punishment for these murderous actions is death. Lancelot, bound by the Pentecostal Oath, is commanded to give mercy when it is asked for, but Tarquin does not desire mercy. Having killed hundreds of

knights in his quest for vengeance, Tarquin's hatred can only be resolved by the death of Lancelot or himself.

Through Tarquin, Malory foreshadows the feud that results in Gawain's demise, making Gawain's feud more tragic due to Lancelot's love for Gawain. When Lancelot sees Gaheris captured by Tarquin, "Than was he ware that hit was sir Gaherys, Gawaynes brothir, a kynght of the Table Rounde" (157.16-17). Gaheris is significant because of his ties to the Round Table and to Gawain. Lancelot desires to rescue Gaheris because of their common fellowship, but also because Gaheris is beloved by Gawain. When Lancelot addresses the damsel, he reaffirms the significance of Gaheris' relation to Gawain: "I se yondir a knyght faste ibounden that is a felow of myne, and brother he is unto sir Gawayne" (157.18-20). Here, Lancelot omits Gaheris' name. Lancelot desires to rescue the knight, not for Gaheris' sake, but for Gaheris' ties to Gawain. Lancelot realizes that the loss of Sir Gaheris would severely grieve Sir Gawain and wants to prevent that grief because of his love for Gawain.

Despite the nobility of Sir Lancelot, his greatest failure is his affair with Queen Guinevere. The Pentecostal Oath ultimately focuses on loyalty to Arthur and his court. By consorting with the Queen, Lancelot disregards both commands. Personally, Lancelot offends Arthur by sleeping with the Queen, and, in doing so, Lancelot disrupts the entire court, undermining the needed stability between the King and Queen when other knights see this action go unpunished. The sexual nature of the affair is clearly seen in Book XIX, *The Knight of the Cart*. After being captured by Meagant, Guinevere directs a child to "beare thys rynge unto sir Launcelot du Laake, and pray hym as he lyvythe me that he will se me and rescow me" (652). Guinevere's request is treasonous, directly appealing to

Lancelot's love for her and even threatening "if ever he woll have joy of me" (652). However, by obeying Guinevere, Lancelot fulfills an aspect of the Pentecostal Oath: "allwayes to do ladyes, damesels, and jantil women and wydowes socour" (75). In fact, Lancelot has been appointed by the king to protect his queen, and he would violate his oath if he should fail to honor Guinevere and defend her. In this passage, Lancelot also upholds his duty to fellow knights. Once his horse is slain by archers, Lancelot cries, "Alas, for shame that ever one knyght shulde betray another knight" (653). Lancelot does not seek to dishonor his fellow knights. He strives to uphold his duty to them in addition to his duty to Guinevere. Moreover, Lancelot loves Arthur and strives to serve him, as shown later by in his coming to assist Arthur against Mordred. Nevertheless, Lancelot's devotion to Guinevere undermines his duty to the Round Table, leading to the deaths of Gaheris and Gareth when he attempts to rescue her at the stake. Lancelot's failure, therefore, is not a lack of loyalty to the Oath but a disordered attachment to Guinevere. He is called to honor Guinevere, yet his primary duty is to Arthur. As Arthur demonstrates in his interaction with the Lady of the Lake, there are ways to refuse ladies' requests and still honor them. For Lancelot, the proper response to honor Guinevere and uphold the entirety of the Oath, would be to honor Guinevere as his Queen and not pursue an affair with her.

Because of his severe failure with Guinevere, it is important to ask why Lancelot is viewed as a model knight, while Gawain is not. Ultimately, Lancelot is a noble knight because he strives for the unity of the court, despite his failures. When Arthur arrives at Joyous Guard after Lancelot rescues Guinevere, Lancelot attempts to foster peace: "And therefore, my good and gracious lorde ... take youre quene unto youre good grace, for

she ys both tru and good” (688). Lancelot accepts his failures against Arthur and tries to correct them, attempting to return Guinevere and be reunited with Arthur. Gawain, however, desires not fellowship but revenge. Lancelot rightly recognizes this: “Ye, sire Gawayne, ar so myschevously sett. And if ye were nat, I wolde nat doute to have the good grace of my lorde kynge Arthure” (689). Gawain is outraged at Lancelot’s actions, and will not accept peace. Through this encounter, the core of Malory’s Pentecostal Oath is seen: true knights may fail, but they always strive to correct their failures and bring unity.

In this chapter, several vital points to understanding Gawain have been introduced. Malory’s Pentecostal Oath was established to guide the analysis of Gawain in the following chapters. Sir Balin serves as an example of an anti-knight, one who destroys fellowship. Through “The Tale of Sir Balin,” Arthur demonstrates that failure to comply demands punishment, lest the stability of the court is destroyed. Sir Lancelot’s nobility was established and his love for Gawain. Finally, Gawain’s desire for vengeance destroys fellowship, leading to his death in the *Morte*.

**CHAPTER THREE:  
THE FORMATION OF GAWAIN**

Malory's Pentecostal Oath presents concrete ideals for Arthur's knights. They are called to use their strength to serve their king and to honor ladies and their fellow knights. Fundamentally, this calls knights to always preserve the fellowship of Arthur's court. With this understanding, Malory's Gawain can be thoroughly discussed. This chapter examines Gawain's character pre-Grail Quest, analyzing Gawain's adherence to the Oath and Malory's general, early portrayal of him.

Before discussing the more complex issues with Gawain's treatment of the Knightly Oath, it would be beneficial to examine Malory's comparatively simpler portrayal of Gawain's martial prowess in early in the *Morte*. During Book IV, after Gawain loses a fight to Sir Marhalt, Malory lists the knights who bested Gawain in his career:

For, as the book rehersyth in Freynsch, there was this many knyghts that overmacched Sir Gawayn for all his threes double myghte that he had: sir Lancelot de Lake, sir Trystrams, sir Bors de Gaynes, sir Percivale, sir Pelleas, sir Marhaus, thes six knyghtes had the better of sir Gawayn.<sup>1</sup>

(97.3-7)

When read within the entirety of Book IV, this quote significantly impacts the *Morte's* portrayal of Gawain. The passage recounts Sir Gawain's first defeat, which already

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that this passage does not list all of Gawain's defeats. During the quest for the Holy Grail, Gawain loses to Sir Galahad, further undermining Gawain's martial prowess.

threatens to lower readers' view of Gawain's skill. Malory goes even further, listing the other defeats Gawain will suffer. Instead of portraying one defeat, Malory portrays all of his defeats at the same moment, informing readers that Gawain will fail multiple times throughout the work.

In addition to listing Gawain's defeats, Malory further undermines Gawain's skill in combat. Shortly after his loss to Marhalt, Gawain fights Sir Carados. Gawain does not win this fight, but "at laste they accorded both," accepting the battle as a draw (99.41-42). From the manner in which Malory lists Gawain's defeats earlier, it appears that Gawain won every fight besides his conflicts with the listed knights. This tale causes readers to question the meaning of Malory's list. Perhaps Gawain only lost to those six knights, but that does not mean that he won every other battle. How many battles did Gawain call a draw? This question is encouraged by the closeness of the two passages; in Vinaver's edition, it literally occurs two pages later. While suffering a draw does not result in the shame of defeat, it reflects a limitation rarely seen in great knights—further degrading Gawain.

Gawain's earlier appearance in Book IV, when Arthur and his host are camped in preparation to battle against five kings, also reflects his knightly shortcomings. Through this tale, Malory demonstrates Gawain's lack of knightly prudence—although Gawain is not alone in this fault. As the host prepares for sleep, Sir Kay warns Arthur that they should be armed: "Hit is nat beste we be unarmed" (78.19). Gawain and Gryflet disagree: "We shall have no nede" (78.20). Significantly, Arthur is silent on the matter. Kay's analysis is proved sound, as the five kings attack during the night. After Arthur's host is destroyed, Arthur, Guinevere, Kay, Gawain, and Gryflet flee, encountering the five kings.

Kay urges the group to fight: “Lette us go to them and macche hem” (78.40-41). Gawain, however, urges caution: “That wer foly ... for we ar but four, and they be fyve” (78.42-43). Unlike earlier, Gawain urges caution, proposing they avoid a fight because they are outnumbered. Gawain is not alone in this assessment. Sir Gryflet agrees—“That is trouth” (78.44)—and Arthur is, again, silent.

Despite the opinion of his fellows, Kay persists: “I woll undirtake for two of the best of hem, and than may ye three undertake for all the other three” (79.1-2). It should be noted that Gawain’s courage cannot be challenged in this passage. When Kay strikes down the first king, Gawain immediately enters the fray: “That sawe sir Gawayne and ran unto anothir kyng so harde that he smote hym downe and thorow the body with a spere, that he felle to the erthe dede” (79.6-8). Gawain’s fault in this passage is not a lack of courage, but an incorrect understanding of prudence. Kay’s assessment and actions, however, are correct. After the battle, Arthur compliments Kay: “That was well styken ... and worshipfully haste thou holde thy promise; therefore I shall honoure the whyle that I lyve” (79.14-16). Guinevere also honors Kay for his deeds: “allwayes quene Gwenvyvere prasyed sir Kay for his dedis” (79.18). Gawain’s age in this passage should be remembered in assessing his knightly behavior. He is a relatively young knight, only recently knighted. Kay is significantly older, being knighted long before Arthur. Gawain’s incorrect assessments are due to lack of experience, not vice. He mistakenly believed they should not arm themselves before bed, and incorrectly assumed they should not fight the five kings because they were outnumbered. Despite these faults, Gawain proved his courage by defending Guinevere.

Gawain's failures in this episode concern a misunderstanding of knightly prudence; he should have been armed—showing a lack of prudence—and he incorrectly believed they should not attack the five kings because they were outnumbered—showing himself to be overly cautious in this case. These are flaws, but they are not damning. Prudence, while seen as important in this passage, is not essential to the Pentecostal Oath. When combat began, Gawain performed his duty to Arthur by defending Guinevere, thus upholding his duty to the Oath. His flaws in this passage, therefore, do not undermine his knighthood.

While Gawain's actions in the "War with the Five Kings" are not those of an anti-knight, they do reveal that he is reluctant to fight at a disadvantage. Later, Malory reveals this as a terrible flaw; Gawain is more concerned with the outcome of a fight than with the justice behind his actions. The sinister nature of this flaw is also revealed later in a conversation with Gawain's brother, Sir Gaheris. When Gawain sees his father's slayer, Sir Pellinore, honored at Arthur's court, Gawain's first thought is to slay Pellinore: "Yondir knyght ys putte to grete worship, whych grevith me sore, for he slewe ourte fadir kyng Lot. Therefore I woll sle hym" (63.9-10). Gaheris advises Gawain to wait until they can both attack Pellinore together: "Ye shall nat so . . . at thys tyme, for as now I am youre squyre, and whan I am made knyght I woll be avenged on hym" (63.13-14). In addition to plotting the destruction of a member of Arthur's fellowship, Gawain is content to wait until they can outnumber Pellinore. Here Malory sets up Gawain as a future murderer by revealing Gawain's desire to slay a member of Arthur's court and preparing the audience for Gawain's role in the unlawful death of Sir Pellinore. Gawain's desire for victory in combat defies justice, as Pellinore's death later proves; Gawain does

not fight for chivalry and honor when outnumbered, but is content to wait until he possesses an unfair advantage.

Gawain's feud with Pellinore, while contrary to the values of the Round Table, reflects an understandable clash of old and new ideals. Discussing the transition to a unified kingship throughout England, Paul Hyams attests to Medieval feud culture: "Aggravated individuals continued to have options beyond the new remedies by the king" (158). Prior to Arthur's reign, Gawain's desire to avenge his father was seen as acceptable, if not laudable. With the coming of Arthur, a new, holier society is expected. Knights are now called to place bonds of courtly fellowship over bonds of kinship. Arthur realizes this development of moral standards. Shortly after the wedding feast, Arthur implements the Pentecostal Oath, giving his knights a new creed that clearly explains their duties to the court.

Gawain's plan with Gaheris inverts the events of Sir Kay's charge. In that fight, Gawain stands on the side of the outnumbered. Here, Gaheris asks Gawain to join the cowardly: "Ye shall nat so ... at thys tyme, for as now I am youre squyre, and whan I am made knyght I woll be avenged on hym" (63.13-14). The brothers make a pact, agreeing to wait until they can properly outnumber Pellinore and enact their desire for vengeance over justice. Paul Roving, in his work *Malory's Anatomy of Chivalry*, gives important insight on this passage: "the lack of success in exploits that dogs Gawain in his early career only intensifies as he becomes a habitual killer" (31). As previously examined, Gawain faces several important defeats early in his knighthood. Because of these defeats, cowardly attacking outnumbered opponents is more tempting to Gawain, giving him a

better chance to succeed. However, as Roving mentions, Gawain's career worsens after he becomes a notorious killer later in the *Morte*.

Gaheris also suggests that he and Gawain wait to enact their revenge until Pellinore leaves the court, so their vile deeds will go unseen: "hit ys beste to suffir tyll another tyme, that we may have hym oute of courte" (*Morte* 63.15-16). This statement reveals how cowardly and socially unacceptable their plan is. They are not willing to face their enemy in honest one-on-one combat, and Arthur's court would not accept such actions. They must wait until Pellinore leaves court, committing an unseen murder. The timing of Gaheris' comment is significant as well. Gaheris specifically mentions that they should wait because of the feast: "for and we dud so we shall trouble thys hyghe feste" (63.16-17). The feast Gaheris refers to is the wedding feast of Arthur and Guinevere and the beginning of the Round Table. Pellinore has just been accepted into Arthur's newly established fellowship, and Gawain immediately desires to destroy part of that fellowship. By having Gawain express his hatred of Pellinore at this moment, Malory portrays Gawain as a divider of the Round Table from its inception.

Gawain's failure in this passage contains several important facets. First, Gawain should have honored Pellinore as a new member of Arthur's court instead of causing division. Also, he should have forbidden Gaheris from outnumbering and ambushing a fellow knight, an arrangement that ignores the nobility of single combat. This could have been easily accomplished, because Gaheris is only Gawain's squire. In addition to allowing such sins to occur, Gawain eventually partakes in them, allowing himself to be persuaded to ambush another knight. From this tale, Gawain is seen as a character unwilling to go against his brothers, becoming involved in their evil deeds. Although he

is the knight and the older brother, Gawain refuses to rightly exercise his authority and prevent this schism in Arthur's court.

Later in the tale, Gaheris makes another significant comment pertaining to Gawain's character. When Gawain accidentally beheads a lady after refusing mercy to her knight, Gaheris berates him: "That ys fowle and shamefully done, for that shame shall never from you. Also ye sholde gyff mercy unto them that aske mercy, for a knyght withoute mercy ys withoute worship" (66.9-11). While the Pentecostal Oath has not yet been established (Malory places it in 75.38-44), Gawain's failure is clear: he slew a lady and refused mercy when it was asked for. The significance of this quote is that Gaheris reprimands Gawain, even though he had previously proposed they murder Pellinore in secret and in unequal odds. As the knight and the older brother, Gawain is responsible for instructing Gaheris in the duties of knighthood. Instead, their roles are inverted, with Gaheris demonstrating more fervor for honor than his knighted brother. Gawain's authority is compromised, showing him an unfit leader.

Another issue Gawain exhibits in Book IV is being unchivalrous to ladies. When Gawain, Uwain, and Marhalt each agree to travel with a separate maiden, Uwain and Marhalt choose first, leaving the last maiden to Gawain. To this, Gawain states, "I thank you, for ye have left me the youngest and fairest" (98.7-8). Although nothing sexual is mentioned, Gawain's attention to this lady is only to the physical. While Gawain is not given a choice about his guide, his reason for desiring to travel with this companion is flawed. Janet Jesmok in her article "Guiding Lights" discusses the significance of such guides: "Female guides, recurrent in medieval romance, are usually unnamed and generally do not play a leading role in a love plot. These minor characters lead knights to

adventure, judge their behavior, and give them instruction” (34). These companions are supposed to serve as guides, not as romantic interests. This does not mean that romance between a guide and her knight cannot occur (Jesmok mentions the guides “*generally* do not play a leading role in a love plot”), but romantic love should not be the knight’s focus (34). However, seeking wisdom and honoring the maiden is not Gawain’s primary concern. His comment does not suggest that Gawain would rape her, but that her role as an honorable, moral guide is not Gawain’s main intention.

In contrast, Uwain chooses his maiden for vastly different reasons: “I am the yongyst and waykest of you bothe, therefore lette me have the eldyst damesell, for she hath sene much and can beste helpe me whan I have nede” (98.1-3). When choosing a maiden, Uwain first looks inward; he sees his own weaknesses, admits them, and desires a maiden who will help him overcome those weaknesses. This reasoning reveals that Uwain did not act out of lust. He could have chosen any of the three maidens, but he chooses the oldest, because he was not concerned with carnal desires. Marhalt’s choice also shows deeper character: “I woll have the damsell of thirty wyntir age, for she fallyth best to me” (98.5-6). Like Uwain, Marhalt was not concerned with the physical attractiveness of the maidens. Of the two maidens remaining, he clearly chooses the older, less physically attractive, revealing a more fulfilling view of knighthood, focusing on developing himself rather than on the physical attractiveness of his companion. Gawain does not show the maturity of either of his companions; the qualities he values in his maiden are purely physical.

Gawain’s pleasure in his companion is quickly seen as rash. The maiden, while beautiful, does not possess the wisdom of her fellows since she is so young. When

Gawain and the damsel come upon a knight being attacked by ten other knights, the damsel asks Gawain to help him: “mesemyth hit were your worshyp to helpe that dolerouse knyght, for methynkes he is one of the beste knyghtes that ever I sawe” (99.3-5). The damsel’s remark appears consistent with the Pentecostal Oath and the duty to aid fellow knights. However, Gawain shows more prudence: “I wolde do for hym . . . but hit semyth he wolde have no helpe” (99.6-7). Gawain’s assessment is correct, as he later learns when he meets the knight, Pelleas, who has been rejected by Ettarde, whom he loves. The knight desired no aid since he was vying for Ettarde’s pity: “Hit semyth by the knyght that he sufferyth hem to bynde hym so, for he makyth no resistence” (98.43-44). Through this realization, Gawain shows that he possesses more wisdom than his guide. This makes his contentment with his guide foolish. Both Uwain and Marhalt favored their ladies, because they could provide wisdom during their quests. Gawain’s damsel cannot offer such advice; she is young. This trait, which Gawain overlooked at their meeting, causes her to leave him for another knight: “I may nat fynde in my herte to be with Gawain, for ryght now here was one knyght that scomfyted ten knyghtes, and at the laste he was cowardly ledde away” (99.37-39). Although the maiden’s departure does not mark a moral failure on Gawain’s part, it demonstrates his foolishness in preferring a young, attractive maiden to a damsel who could aid him in his adventures.

Gawain’s attention to the maiden’s beauty in this episode prepares readers for the lustful nature he demonstrates later in the book. After meeting Sir Pelleas, Gawain agrees to woo the Lady Ettarde on Sir Pelleas’ behalf. Wearing Sir Pelleas’ armor, Gawain rides to see Lady Ettarde, falsely claiming to have slain Sir Pelleas, whom Ettarde despises. After feasting at her table, Gawain claims, “hit is Ettarde that I love so well” (102.26).

Gawain's actions reveal this statement to be false. If he truly loved Ettarde, he would have been honest with her about Sir Pelleas being alive. Moreover, Gawain would have pursued Sir Pelleas, either slaying him or defeating him to please Lady Ettarde. This deception also endangers Ettarde's life. When Sir Pelleas walks into the pavilion where Gawain and Ettarde are sleeping, he leaves his sword across their necks. If Sir Pelleas had been less noble, he would have killed Gawain and Lady Ettarde in his rage. By letting his lust control the situation, Gawain demonstrates that he does not respect Ettarde's honor or her safety. Because of this lack of respect for her, Ettarde rightfully states, "ye have betrayde sir Pelleas and me ... all ladyes and damesels may beware you" (103.32;35-36). Gawain's actions against Ettarde serve as a warning to all other ladies; Gawain does not honor ladies and therefore should not be trusted by them. Here, Lady Ettarde pronounces a public warning against Gawain; never should any woman come near him, for evil shall befall the woman who becomes involved with Sir Gawain.

Noting the importance of sexual control in the *Morte*, Christina Hildebrand writes, "Sexuality is best when regulated, even in Malory's world of heroic lovers. A noble man or woman will love someone, but desire should be moderated" (18). Through his interactions with Lady Ettarde and Sir Pelleas, Gawain demonstrates how uncontrolled sexual drive harms all parties. Ettarde is aghast and humiliated by Gawain's actions, while Sir Pelleas is furious at being used. These actions reveal Gawain as a knight who respects neither women nor his fellow knights, using treacherous means to fulfill his lecherous desires.

As noted earlier, both these problems occur early on when Gawain disgraces himself by beheading a lady. In Book III, when Gawain strikes to slay a defeated knight,

“com the knyght’s lady oute of a chambir and felle over him, and so Gawain smote hir hede by myssefortune” (66.7-9). Before this interaction, there is no indication that Gawain knew of this lady’s existence. His failure lies in his disgraceful actions to other knights, which leads to his dishonoring a woman. The knight whom Gawain prepared to strike down had killed Gawain’s hounds, and Gawain desired revenge. This desire is inordinate. Gawain should have demanded retribution for his hounds, but he had no right to slay a knight for such an infringement. More importantly, the knight requested mercy. Gawain had beaten him, and he admitted defeat. Knightly honor demands Gawain to show mercy since it is requested, but Gawain refuses. Although the Pentecostal Oath has not yet been established, the culture understands the importance of mercy, expecting knights to honor pleas from defeated combatants. By not showing mercy, Gawain’s misdeeds increase, leading to the murder of a lady. Arriving on the scene, another knight tells Gawain, “Thou haste shamed thy knyghthood, for a knyght withoute mercy ys dishonoured. Also thou haste slayne a fayre lady to thy grete shame unto the worldys ende” (66.35-37). Through this action, Gawain is forever dishonored; he failed to give mercy when it was requested, and he beheaded a lady.

Gawain’s other failures to respect ladies are also tied to the failure of honoring fellow knights. He acquires Sir Pelleas’ armor by promising to win Lady Ettarde’s affection on Sir Pelleas’ behalf. Instead, Gawain acts out of lust, betraying Pelleas and taking Ettarde for himself. The extent of this betrayal becomes apparent when Pelleas goes to search for Gawain, because “Gawayne promysed hym by the feythe of his body to com to hym unto his pavylyon by the pryory within the space of a day and a night” (102.40-41). Gawain promises a quick return, but instead “lay with Ettarde in the

pavylyon two dayes and two nyghtes” (102.36-37). Although Gawain vows to return in under two days’ time, he spends two straight days sleeping with Ettarde. Despite this treachery, Pelleas remains chivalrous, refusing to slay Gawain in his sleep. Lady Ettarde states that “had Pelleas bene so uncurteyse unto Gawain as Gawain have bene to Pelleas, Gawain had bene a dede knyght” (103.34-35). Through this comparison, Malory shows another knight to be better than Gawain. Despite his fury over the double betrayal, Pelleas shows mercy, while Gawain acts out of his own base passions.

Commenting on the nobility of Sir Pelleas, Beverly Kennedy states, “As a friend and a lover, Pelleas has been a model of truthfulness, and his refusal to commit murder in order to have revenge is consistent with his character” (76). This quote reveals several important ways that Pelleas proves himself greater than Gawain. First, Pelleas is true, both as a friend and a lover. He remains honest with both Gawain and Lady Ettarde, while Gawain lies. Also, Pelleas does not stoop to murder, even though it could have been easily committed. Gawain possesses no such reservations; he eventually becomes a murderer, using unfair advantages to enact revenge against his foes. The final way that Sir Pelleas shows himself to be greater than Gawain is by giving mercy when he could have easily slain Gawain. In the hound episode, Gawain refuses to show such mercy, preferring to enact revenge rather than honor his knightly vows. It should also be mentioned that Gawain’s offense against Pelleas is far greater than the offense Gawain receives by the slaying of his hounds. In the case of the latter, no betrayal is committed, just the destruction of Gawain’s dogs. With Pelleas, Gawain lies with Lady Ettarde, committing betrayal.

Through this adventure, Gawain not only shows human flaws, but flaws unacceptable to society. Lady Ettarde trusts Gawain, showing her innocence, yet Gawain betrays that trust. Sir Pelleas proves himself to be a noble knight, far more noble than Gawain. Contrasting their actions, especially in the story of Gawain's slaying of the lady, Malory shows that Pelleas possesses the virtue of mercy, while Gawain does not. Gawain severely offends Sir Pelleas by lying to him and sleeping with Lady Ettarde. In contrast, the knight that offends Sir Gawain in the earlier tale merely slew Gawain's hounds. This is certainly a cause for offense, but not nearly to the extent of Gawain's actions. Through these two passages, Malory shows that Gawain does not possess any mercy, while other knights, such as Sir Pelleas, possess great mercy

In the conclusion of this tale, Malory shows how Gawain serves as a destroyer of unity rather than a facilitator of it. After Sir Pelleas and Lady Ettarde are deceived, Gawain, Marhalt, and Uwain reunite after their adventures: "Sir Marhalte and sir Uwayne brought their damesels with hem, but sir Gawayne had loste his damesel" (109.9-10). Part of the purpose behind their quest was fellowship; they found three maidens and chose to travel with those maidens rather than travel alone. Marhalt and Uwayne accomplish this by completing their adventures with their companions. Gawain, however, loses his maiden. Although through no fault of his own, his attention to physical attractiveness over wisdom is consistent with his eventual isolation. Similar isolation occurs with Lady Ettarde and Sir Pelleas. Gawain's falsehood destroys Lady Ettarde. Having fallen in love with Pelleas after Gawain's treachery, "lady Ettarde dyed for sorow" because he no longer loves her (104.36). Gawain also creates enmity with Sir Pelleas, and Pelleas despises Gawain for the remainder of their lives: "Pelleas loved never aftir sir Gawayne

but as he spared hym for the love of the kyng; but oftyntymes at justis and at turnements sir Pelleas quytte sir Gawain” (109.37-39). Through this passage, Malory shows how Gawain’s selfish desires affect the lives of those at court. His actions lead to the death of maidens and enmity within Arthur’s kingdom.

Despite these depictions of Gawain in the first four books of the *Morte*, Book V portrays Gawain as a courageous knight in his efforts against Emperor Lucius. At Arthur’s command, Gawain rides with Sir Bors to confront the Emperor:

For why occupyest thou with wronge the empyreship of Roome? This is kyng  
 Arthures herytage be kynde of his noble Elders: there lakked none but Uther, his  
 fadir. Therefore the kyng commaundyth the to ryde oute of his londys, other ellys  
 to fyght for all and knyghtly hit wyne. (123.44-124.4)

Through giving such a demand to Lucius, Gawain presents himself differently than in the *Morte*’s earlier books. By riding directly to the Emperor, Gawain puts himself in great danger. Although Gawain and Bors are not alone (Arthur instructed Bors to “take many good knights”), Gawain approaches Lucius with only a fraction of Arthur’s army (123.28). This courage shows a stark difference from Gawain’s actions in Book IV, where he refuses to fight when he and his companions are outnumbered by one. Here, Gawain does not hesitate at being outnumbered. He welcomes it, riding against Lucius, openly threatening the emperor’s authority.

The nature of Gawain’s statement also reveals his courage. He and Bors were not sent to parlay; they were sent to cast out the Romans. Their mission was not one of peace but of war. Because of this purpose, Gawain’s striking of the Emperor’s cousin, Gayus, is a rightful action. The slaying of Gayus starts a conflict: a conflict Gawain was instructed

to begin if the Romans refused to leave. By initiating the battle, Gawain proves himself as more than a messenger; he demonstrates his vigor and knightly ability to fight for Arthur.

This passage thus demonstrates Gawain's desire to serve Arthur despite his personal flaws. As mentioned earlier, when Sir Gaheris asks Gawain to avenge their father by slaying Sir Pellinore, Gaheris incites Gawain to act against Arthur. As a noble knight and a member of the Round Table, Pellinore is an important part of Arthur's kingdom. By choosing to murder Pellinore, Gawain chooses to destroy part of Arthur's society. Gawain's bravery in defiance of Lucius, however, shows his love for Arthur. In addition to the courage of approaching Lucius as Arthur's messenger, Gawain shows his loyalty to Arthur by striking Gayus, who mocks, "Loo! ho these Englyshe Bretouns be braggars of kynde, for ye may see how they boste and bragge as they durste bete all the world" (124.16-18). Gawain's reaction to this insult can be seen as a defense of his personal honor. However, to only read Gawain's strike as a response to personal insult ignores Gawain's earlier statement and his purpose for approaching Lucius. Gawain comes as Arthur's messenger and to defend the honor of Arthur's kingdom. Similarly, Gayus does not specifically insult Gawain, rather insulting the whole of Britain. Gawain's initiating blow, therefore, serves as a defense of Arthur's honor. The Britons will not surrender to Lucius; they will present a show of force and use that force when called upon.

During the ensuing battle, Gawain further demonstrates his love for Arthur when Sir Bors and Sir Berel are captured, by swearing, "I shall never se my lorde Arthure but yf I reskew hem that so lyghtly ar ledde us fro" (125.38-39). Bors and Berel are important

members of Arthur's court, and their loss would not only affect the kingdom but cause personal woe to Arthur. Gawain understands this importance, striving to rescue them for the good of the kingdom. The content of Gawain's oath also illustrates his loyalty; if he fails to rescue these knights, Gawain will never see Arthur again. The reasoning behind this oath is that Gawain would perceive his failure as a direct failure against Arthur. Since Arthur would grieve at the loss of Bors and Berel, Gawain could not face his king after such a failure, offering himself to exile or death should he fail.

Throughout the battle, Gawain fights valiantly, even slaying the marshal of Rome, Sir Feldenake: "Sir Gawain was ware and drew Galantyne, his swerd, and hyt hym such a buffette that he cleved hym to the breste" (124.40-41). Gawain's actions in this battle furthered Arthur's kingdom. After a span, Lucius' men report that thousands of Romans lay dead at the hands of the Britons lead by Gawain and Bors. Moreover, the Britons now "ar the brymmyst men that evir the Romans saw in felde" (125.11-12). By leading these men in battle, Gawain proves the honor of Englishmen, who are warriors capable of breaking even Rome's might.

After his encounter with Lucius, Gawain's next appearance is in Book VII, "The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney." Here Gawain displays the nobility seen in Book V. When the disguised Gareth arrives at the court, Sir Kay mocks him as a knave. Gergely Nagy discusses Kay's role in the tale: "The mocking Sir Kay seems to be a stereotype in Arthurian literature and criticism, connected to the romantic stock character of the bad steward and the slandering courtier" (66). By using Sir Kay as this negative stereotype, Malory chooses to uplift Gawain over Kay. Gawain is angered at such poor treatment and offers Gareth (without knowledge of their kinship) food and drink. Gawain also helps

provide for Gareth and “gyff hym gold to spende and clothis” (179.11-12). However, Gawain is not alone in his treatment of Gareth. Lancelot aids Gareth in every way that Gawain does:

sir Lanceot aftir mete bade Gareth com to his chambir, and there he sholde have mete and drynke inowe, and so ded sir Gawayne ... And ever sir Lancelot wolde gyff hym golde to spende and clothis, and so ded sir Gawayne. (178.43-44; 179.11-12)

From the order of these statements, it appears that Gawain mirrors Lancelot’s good deeds, rather than being naturally generous; Gawain only offers assistance to Gareth after Lancelot aids him. By mentioning Lancelot’s actions before Gawain’s, Malory encourages the reader to view Lancelot as the greater knight. Malory further supports Lancelot’s actions over Gawain’s by stating, “sir Gawayne had reson to proffer Gareth lodgyng, mete, and drynke, for that proffer com of his bloode, for he was nere kyn to hym than we wyste off; but that sir Launcelot ded was of his grete jantylnesse and curtesy” (179.3-5). Since Gareth was close kin to Gawain, Gawain is lawfully bound to aid Gareth (despite not knowing their kinship). Lancelot possessed no such ties. His actions are done without familial duty, out of his own virtue.

During the narrative, Gareth and Lancelot foster a strong friendship: Sir Lancelot knights Gareth, at Gareth’s request, and Lancelot is the first person to whom Gareth reveals his true identity. The strength of this bond is revealed in their battle at the conclusion of the book, where they refuse to fight each other out of respect. In her essay “‘The Vengeance of my Brethrine,’” Kate McClune examines the differences between Gareth’s relationship with Lancelot and his relationship with Gawain: “Gareth and

Lancelot recognize each other and refuse to strike ... This is in juxtaposition to his violent engagement with his brother Sir Gawain in the same battle” (95). This withholding of blows holds a deep significance. As mentioned previously, a knight is called to accept the possibility of injury in combat: “Even if the winner is not in fact hurt, his knowledge that he might be is critical. Real risk, understood in advance, can show a combatant’s commitment to a cause” (Hodges 16). While Gareth and Lancelot certainly understand and accept the possibility of injury to themselves, they have no desire to injure one another. Because of their love for each other, they end the fight, refusing to harm the other.

As shown with his interactions with Gaheris (and later with Mordred), Gawain fosters his relationships with his brothers. By associating himself with Lancelot over Gawain, Gareth places distance between himself and his kin. Practically, this distance prevents Gareth from associating with his brothers on a consistent level, but, more importantly, Malory uses the distance between Gareth and Gawain to illustrate Gareth’s superior morality. Gareth does not follow the sins of his brothers, such as the eventual slaying of Sir Pellinore. Gareth lives and dies as a truly loyal knight to Arthur, proving his nobility through his decision to ally himself with Lancelot over Gawain

With the exception of Books V and VII, then, the Gawain of the early *Morte* is riddled with flaws and defeats: he dishonors women, chooses his brethren over the king, and is disgraced in battle. “The Tale of Sir Gareth” furthers the importance of loyalty to court over loyalty to kin through Gareth’s fellowship with Lancelot. These passages establish Gawain’s character, preparing readers for Gawain’s trials in the Grail Quest and his role in the fall of Arthur.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### TEARS AND PRAYERS: THE END OF EARTHLY FELLOWSHIP

The early *Morte* establishes Gawain's character as a villainous knight who disrespects heroic combat and fails to honor ladies as well as his fellow knights. The Gawain of the later *Morte* is different. He still exhibits flaws, but shows significant moral development as he begins to learn repentance and matures spiritually. Continue with the following paragraph.

To better understand Gawain's role in the later *Morte*, particularly in the Grail Quest, it is helpful to review medieval theology and how it applies to the sacraments. Hans Boersma, in his book *Heavenly Participation*, informs readers that Western Medieval culture "looked at the world as a mystery ... 'Mystery' referred to realities behind the appearances that one could observe by means of the senses ... Even the most basic created realities that we observe as human beings carry an extra dimension" (21). Applying this concept to the *Morte*, every action performed by a knight holds spiritual significance: how he honors his king, respects his fellows, and upholds his oaths. The Grail Quest, like the Eucharist, "is an intensification" of this mystery (26). The result of this understanding is that all the successes and failures experienced in the Grail Quest are an intensification of the successes and failures throughout the work: Galahad ultimately succeeds in the Grail Quest, because his role as a knight is properly fulfilled, proclaiming him worthy of the Grail; Lancelot, although unworthy of the Grail, is recognized in the Grail Quest because of his noble deeds; Gawain, in contrast, fails in the Grail Quest, because he morally fails as a knight.

The Grail Quest's significance is apparent in the time it begins, "At the vigyl of Pentecoste" (*Morte* 515.1). Each year, Arthur's knights gather to retake the Pentecostal Oath, reminding themselves of their duties as knights and as Christians. It is in this context that the Grail Quest begins. At this Pentecost, Arthur's knights face the ultimate trial of their Oath. Not only are they called to adhere to the Pentecostal Oath, but their faithfulness will be tried through the Grail Quest. In Christianity, Pentecost is the feast celebrating the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the early Christians. Similarly, this Pentecost concerns a spiritual descending of the Grail to Arthur's court. This revelation of the Grail also harkens back to Caxton's "Preface," where he mentions that Arthur is the first of the great Christian kings. While for the majority of Malory's text, the Christian culture is more implicit than explicit, the Grail Quest draws the Christian themes to the forefront, testing the strength of Arthur's kingdom through challenging the spiritual worthiness of his knights.

Unlike other adventures, the Grail Quest calls for the entirety of Arthur's fellowship, taking place "whan all the felyship of the Table Rownde were com unto Camelot" (515.1-2). This quest calls all of Arthur's knights, and, like the event of Pentecost, the Grail Quest should, ideally, bring them closer. In the biblical book of *Acts*, the Holy Spirit descends on the day of Pentecost, allowing Christ's disciples to speak in tongues. This results in a unification of peoples, causing them to accept the same creed. The descending of the Grail should accomplish the same for Arthur's court, bringing them together to accomplish this holy quest. However, Malory has already shown that this unification is not possible due to strife within the fellowship. Arthur realizes that the Grail Quest will destroy his court and laments the departure of his knights: "I am sure at

this quest of the Sankegreall shall all ye of the Rownde Table departe, and nevyr shall I se you agayne hole togydirs” (520.39-41). Arthur’s court is flawed; the Quest for the Grail will reveal those flaws and lead to destruction.

One complication of the Grail Quest is that its nature is fundamentally different from previous quests; the physical prowess of Arthur’s knights cannot prevail in this quest of spirituality. Their physical deeds have been accomplished, and their moral character, developed through those deeds, is now tested. The Round Table is unprepared for this trial, and is undone in the process. This doom is first pronounced by the sword presented at the beginning of the Quest. When Arthur and his knights discover a great stone by a river, they find a sword embedded in it. The knights perceive words engraved in the pommel: “Never shall man take me hense but only he by whos syde I ought to honge and he shall be the best knyght of the worlde” (*Morte* 517.24-25). Throughout the Round Table, only Galahad is worthy to draw this sacred blade, revealing the unworthiness of Arthur’s court. Similar sword-drawing events occur in the *Morte* (the Sword in the Stone and the sword in “The Tale of Sir Balin”), but these weapons do not possess the warning presented by this sword. This warning places the sword in a different category than previous weaponry. For Arthur and Balin, their sword-drawing concerns the right to kingship or basic worthiness. By cautioning those who attempt to wield it, this sword serves as a holy relic (similar to the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament) that will harm those who approach it without merit.

Although Lancelot is the first presented with the sword, he respects the warning: “hit ys nat my swerde... for hit longith nat to hange be my syde” (517.30-31). After Lancelot’s refusal, Arthur beseeches Gawain to draw the sword: “Now, fayre newew ...

assay ye for my love” (517.36-37). Arthur’s choice of Gawain is significant. First, it shows Gawain’s place in the court, just below that of Lancelot. Also, it demonstrates Arthur’s respect for Gawain, believing that Gawain might be worthy to draw the blade. Gawain initially refuses, but agrees after Arthur commands him a second time to draw the sword: “Sir, youre commaundement I woll obey” (517.41). Gawain’s phrasing is significant here. He does not say he will attempt to draw the sword. Instead, he states that he will obey Arthur’s commands. Gawain realizes the action is foolish, but he will do it to please Arthur. After Gawain fails to draw the sword, Lancelot judges his action: “Now wete you well thys swerde shall touche you so sore that ye wolde nat ye had sette youre hond thereto for the beste castell of thys realme” (518.1-3). Lancelot’s statement, while judging Gawain, also judges Arthur as well. Gawain displays foolishness by obeying such a command, but does so out of a love for Arthur. Arthur’s actions have no excuse. The sword possesses a warning, and Arthur commands Gawain to ignore the warning. Indeed, Arthur’s foolishness persists, asking Sir Percival to draw the sword as well: “Sir, woll ye assay for my love?” (518.7).

Later, when the Grail is seen at the feast, Gawain is the first knight (after Arthur) to speak. Gawain begins his speech with an important commentary on the physical versus the spiritual: “We have bene servyd thys day of what metys and drynkes we thought on. But one thyng begyled us, that we myght nat se the Holy Grayle: hit was so preciously coverde” (522.10-12). Gawain begins by reminding his comrades that they have feasted—enjoying the best food and drink in the kingdom—but he states that such physical pleasures cannot compare with the holiness they have been shown. From this statement, Gawain demonstrates a longing for holiness unseen in the early *Morte*.

Gawain's desire is followed by immediate action, as he swears, "I shall laboure in the queste of the Sankgreall, and that I shall holde me oute a twelve-month and a day or more if nede be, and never shall I returne unto the courte agayne tylle I have sene hit more opynly than hit hath bene shewed here" (522.14-17). This quest for holiness marks a deep change in Gawain. In the early *Morte*, Gawain was ruled by his wrath and lust. Now, he reminds his fellows that the spiritual is far greater than the physical, resulting in the quest for the Grail.

Through his impassioned statements, Gawain thus demonstrates a continuation of his earlier flaws. Malory portrays Gawain as an extreme character. During the hound episode, Gawain displays inordinate wrath. In his encounter with Lady Ettarde, his passions command the situation, resulting in the destruction of fellowship. Through his statements at the feast, Gawain continues his excessive behavior without concern for the ultimate good. (Malory later reveals that Gawain neglects penance before embarking on the Grail Quest, displaying his concern for glory over true spirituality.)

Nonetheless, Arthur's court is moved by Gawain's fervor: "So whan they of the Table Rounde harde sir Gawayne sey so, they arose up the moste party and made such avowes as sir Gawayne hathe made" (522.19-21). The response of Gawain's fellows demonstrates his leadership. Now, Gawain provides spiritual leadership, inspiring his comrades to aspire spiritually. Arthur's reaction to Gawain's pledge, however, is woeful: "Ye have berauffte me the fayryst and the trewyst of knyghthode that ever was sene togydir in ony realme of the world. For whan they departe from hense I am sure they all shal never mete more togydir in thys worlde, for they shall dye many in the queste" (522.24-28). Arthur's foreboding comes true; the Round Table will never again be filled

after the Grail Quest. Nevertheless, the Grail Quest is vital to Arthur's court, demonstrating a desire for holiness. Arthur's statements here position Gawain's oath as an ironic inversion of his failed attempt to draw the Grail-sword. When Gawain attempted to draw the sword, he neglected his spiritual duty to abstain because of his love for Arthur. Now, Gawain begins the Grail Quest, despite Arthur's wishes, and reaffirms his desire for holiness.

Despite his vigor for the Grail Quest, Gawain's part in the quest contains serious repercussions. The first is the death of Sir Uwain. Initially, Uwain's death appears to be an unfortunate accident. Not realizing each other's identity, Uwain "profirde Gawayne and Ector to fyght and juste" (560.13). They only identify themselves after Gawain has dealt a mortal blow, grieving him sorely: "Alas ... that ever thys mysadventure befelle me" (561.3). When Gawain and Ector later consult a hermit, however, Gawain's sin is made clear: "As synfull as ever sir Launcelot hath byn, sith that he wente into the queste of the Skangreal he slew never man nother shall, tylle that he com to Comelot agayne" (563.16-19). Knights are called to combat, but the Grail Quest is different. While lawful deaths are often part of knights' quests, the Grail Quest forbids killing. Gawain fails to realize this, eagerly entering a joust with Uwain.

During his discussion with the hermit, Gawain is further instructed about the nature of the Grail Quest when he asks, "Now I pray you telle me why we mette nat with so many adventures as we were wonte to do?" (563.9-10). Gawain's question relates to his earlier eagerness to joust with Uwain: "For sitthyn I departed frome Camelot there was none that profirde me to juste but onys" (560). Gawain is eager for a more typical knightly adventure that includes physical combat, which often ends in death. For the

Grail Quest, this expectation is not merely incorrect, it is sinful. Despite the hermit's warning, it is important to note that combat is not forbidden in the Grail Quest, just killing. (Galahad partakes in combat during the Grail Quest, showing that such actions are not inherently sinful during the Quest.) Gawain's fault, therefore, lies in his overzealousness for combat that leads to Sir Uwain's death.

Another judgement Gawain receives during the Grail Quest is his vision: "There he saw a rake of bullis, an hundrith and fyffty, that were proude and black, save three of hem was all whyght, and one had a blacke spotte" (558.41-559.2). The hermit eventually explains this vision: "And by the bullys ys undirstonde the felyshyp of the Rounde Table whych for their synne and their wyckednesse bene blacke; blackenes ys as much to sey without good vertues or workes" (561.41-43). Gawain is among the black, sinful bulls, and the white bulls are Galahad, Percival, and Bors (5621-3). The hermit continues, relating the nature of the bulls' sin: "they were tho whych at Pentecoste at the hyghe feste toke uppon hem [to go] in the queste of the Snakgreall withoute confession" (562.8-10). The vast majority of the Round Table undertook the Grail Quest without confession and are judged for it. The hermit explains the significance of this: "they myght nat entir in the medow of humilite and paciens" (562.10-11). By embarking upon the Grail Quest without confession, these knights attempted to attain the Grail by their own strength, rather than spiritual strength provided by God. Gawain, as the instigator of the adventure, should have been the first to attend confession, purifying himself in preparation. Instead, he fails in this duty, leading his fellows to fail as well.

The final judgement Gawain receives during the Grail Quest occurs when Galahad "smote Sir Gawayne so sore that he clave hyse helme and the coyff of iron unto

the hede, that sir Gawayne felle to the erthe” (578.4-5). During this encounter, Galahad is wielding the Grail-sword, which Gawain wrongfully attempted to draw at Arthur’s insistence. After recovering from the blow, Gawain remembers Lancelot’s warning: “trew that was seyde of sir Launcelot, that the swerd which stake in the stone shulde gyff me such a buffette that I wold nat have hit for the best castell in the worlde” (578.15-18). In addition to leaving Gawain unconscious, this “stroke was so grete that hit slented downe and kutte the horse sholdir in too,” causing Gawain to realize that “never ar had he such a stroke of mannys honde” (578.5-6). Here, Gawain receives judgement for attempting to draw the sword. The holy relic was not his to draw, and he suffers for it, receiving a blow far greater than any he faced previously.

Gawain’s part in the Grail Quest is complicated. His failures are numerous, and the vision revealing him as a sinful knight reveals that he has fundamentally failed in his spiritual quest along with the other knights who neglected to cleanse themselves prior to the quest. Despite these failures, Gawain shows moral development. In addition to his speech expressing his desire for the spiritual over the physical, Gawain demonstrates a newfound respect for mercy. After Gawain defeats Uwain, Gawain exclaims, “Ye muste yelde you as an overcom man, other ellis I muste sle you!” (560.30). Through this demand, Gawain does more than respect a cry for mercy; he offers mercy before Uwain can ask for it. Such a statement shows substantial growth since the early *Morte*, where Gawain would not give mercy when it was requested.

After the Grail Quest, Gawain reenters the narrative in Book XX, “Slander and Strife,” and demonstrates his moral growth. At the beginning of the book, Gawain and his brothers discuss Arthur and Guinevere, with Agravain suggesting they ambush the Queen

and Lancelot. Within this passage, Gawain shows his loyalty to Lancelot: “I woll nat here of youre talis, nothir be of youre counceile” (674.11-12). As portrayed earlier, Gawain and his brothers (with the exception of Gareth) are known as murderous knights, harming Arthur’s court in their endeavors. Gawain’s refusal to partake in this crime has twofold significance. First, he values his friendship with Lancelot: “I woll never be ayenste sir Launcelot for one dayes dede, that was whan he rescowed me frome kynge Carados of the Dolerous Towre and slew hym and saved my lyff” (673.40-674.2). Lancelot has saved Gawain and proved himself a true friend on multiple occasions. If Gawain acts against Lancelot, this friendship will be broken. Moreover, Gawain encourages Agravain and Mordred to not ambush Lancelot for similar reasons: “in lyke wyse sir Launcelot rescowed you bothe and three score and two frome sir Tarquyne. And therefore, brothir, methynkis suche noble dedis and kyndes shulde be remembirde” (674.3-5). Lancelot has saved all of Gawain’s brethren (with the exception of Gareth), and they are indebted to him. Lancelot has also strivedn to build the fellowship of the Round Table, aiding his fellow knights whenever possible. For Agravaine and Mordred to attack Lancelot would destroy that fellowship at its core—not only attacking a fellow member, but one of the members essential in constructing and maintaining the fellowship. Gawain recognizes the destruction that will follow such an ambush: “Now ys thys realme holy destroyed and myscheved, and the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table shall be disparbeled” (674.17-19). To act against Lancelot and reveal his affair with Guinevere will destroy the Round Table. Gawain comprehends this destruction, having spent his youth as a sower of discord. Learning from his sins, Gawain attempts to encourage his brothers to avoid strife and preserve Arthur’s kingdom.

Despite Gawain's warning, Agravain and Mordred execute their plan to ambush Lancelot, gathering a group of followers: "So thes twelve knyghtes were with sir Mordred and sir Aggravayne, and all they were of Scotlonde, other ellis of sir Gawaynes kynne, other well-wyllers to hys brothir" (675.18-20). The list of Lancelot's attackers contains other members of Gawain's family—including Gawain's sons. The other conspirators, while not of Gawain's kin, are from Scotland. Discussing the significance of Gawain's homeland, Beverley Kennedy remarks, "The society of Arthur's kingdom is not organized on the basis of patrilineal clans, but Gawain and his brethren act as though it were just like their native Scottish highlands" (290). Agravain and Mordred's assault on Lancelot conforms more to values of clansmen of Scotland rather than those of knights of Arthur's court. By outnumbering and ambushing Lancelot, Agravain and his fellows refuse to adhere to knightly rules of engagement, because knights are called to accept the possibility of harm when facing one another in combat. By outnumbering and ambushing Lancelot, Agravain ignores these standards, attempting, unsuccessfully, to prevent the danger of facing Lancelot in combat.

Even after the failed ambush of Lancelot, Gawain urges Arthur to maintain fellowship: "I wolde counceyle you nat to be over hasty, but that ye wolde put hit in respite, thys jougemente of my lady the quene" (682.23-24). Gawain understands that his kinsmen have begun a feud, and seeks to stop it, hoping to dissuade Arthur from executing Guinevere. Arthur is surprised at Gawain's response, noting, "Lancelot slew youre brothir sir Aggravayne, a full good knyght, and allmoste he had slayne youre othir brother, sir Mordred, and also there he slew thirtene noble knyghtes. And also remembir you, sir Gawayne, he slew two sunnes of youres, sir Florens and sir Lovell" (683.6-10).

By urging Arthur to be cautious in his judgment, Gawain shows a maturity he lacked in early *Morte*. While in early *Morte* Gawain was willing to destroy the fellowship of the Round Table to avenge his father, he now strives to protect it, even after the death of his brother and his two sons. This loyalty to fellowship does not dull Gawain's sorrow, however: "I am sory of the deth of my brothir and of my two sunnes, but they ar the causars of their owne dethe" (683.17-18). Gawain mourns the loss of his kin, but he realizes that their deaths were the results of their attempts to destroy the Round Table, making their deaths warranted. Gawain "tolde hym of the perellis," but they did not heed his warning (683.19-20).

Gawain's devotion to Arthur's court is further shown when Arthur asks Gawain to lead Guinevere to her death: "Make you redy, I pray you, in youre beste armour, wyth youre brethirn, sir Gaherys and sir Gareth, to brynge my quene to the fyre and there to have her jougement" (683.22-24). Gawain refuses: "I woll never be in that place where so noble a quene as ys my lady dame Gwenyver shall take such a shamefull end" (683.26-27). Gawain understands that the death of the queen will result in the further degradation of Arthur's court, which occurs after Arthur gives the command for Guinevere to be executed: "Than was there wepyng and waylynge and wrygyng of hondis of many lordys and ladyes; but there were but feaw in comparison that wolde beare ony armoure for to strengthe the dethe of the quene" (684.6-9). Almost the entirety of Arthur's court is distraught at the execution of Queen Guinevere. By commanding this execution, Arthur undoes the fellowship of his own court. Because of this, Gawain will not partake, refusing to even be present when the execution occurs.

When Gawain hears of Lancelot's rescuing Guinevere, his reaction is multifaceted, demonstrating a rational awareness of Lancelot's action, but also his old rage when he hears of Gareth's death. Gawain does not blame Lancelot for rescuing Guinevere. To the contrary, he commends it: "He were nat of worshyp but if he had rescowed the quene" (686.1-2). Given Lancelot's ties to Guinevere, Gawain sees Lancelot's act of rescuing the queen as righteous, preventing Guinevere from the shame of execution, as he has in the past as her champion, so named by Arthur. Gawain's wrath stems from Lancelot's slaughter of Gareth. Gareth's death at the hand of Lancelot astounds Gawain: "That may I nat beleve ... that ever he slew my good brother sir Gareth, for I dare say my brothir loved hym bettir than me and all hys brethirn and the kyng bothe" (686.13-15). As mentioned in previous chapters, Gareth and Lancelot possessed great love for each other. Lancelot's breaking of this bond horrifies Gawain. Moreover, neither Gareth nor Gaheris bore arms when escorting the queen: "they beare none armys ayenst hym" (686.39-40). Gareth did not hinder Lancelot's attempt to rescue Guinevere, nor did he possess the means to do so. Lancelot's slaughter of Gareth is the unwarranted slaying of a dear friend who had no means to fight back. Although Lancelot does not intentionally slay Gareth—"sir Launcelot slew them in the thyk prees and knew tham nat"—his severing of that fellowship is terrible, a rash action that results in the death of a dear comrade (686.41-42). Through this action, Lancelot's flaws are most apparent. He is right to rescue Guinevere, but her conviction is the result of his affair with her. In his rage, he slays innocent comrades. This episode recalls the vision in the Grail Quest, where Lancelot was numbered among the black, sinful bulls. Despite his nobility,

Lancelot is ultimately flawed, listed among those who failed in the Quest for the Holy Grail.

It is with this anger that Gawain speaks with Lancelot outside of Dolorous Gard. Throughout the later *Morte*, Gawain shows himself as a knight dedicated to fellowship. However, Lancelot's actions break his fellowship with Gareth, resulting in Gawain's wrath. Lancelot, despite this enmity, desires peace: "And therefore, my good and gracious lorde . . . take youre quene unto youre good grace, for she ys both tru and good" (688.42-44). Kenneth Hodges, in his article "Haunting Pieties," comments on this passage, "The good characters repeatedly recognize the need for social healing but are unable to provide it . . . What could cure the war is personal penance, sincerely meant and publicly accepted, the kind Lancelot offers to Gawain" (43). Lancelot, again, proves himself to be a character who attempts to restore fellowship despite his flaws. He realizes his actions with Guinevere have caused a rift between himself and Arthur, and that his slaying of Gareth destroyed his fellowship with both Gareth and Gawain. Nevertheless, Lancelot desires to make peace and restore fellowship between himself and Arthur's kingdom, being willing to return Guinevere to Arthur as his lawful wife and make peace with Gawain.

During their exchange, Lancelot rightly accuses Gawain of causing his rift with Arthur: "Ye, sire Gawayne, ar so myschevously sett. And if ye were nat, I wolde nat doute to have the good grace of my lorde kynge Arthure" (689.24-26). Malory confirms this, "But the Freynsh booke seyth kynge Arthur wolde have takyn hys quene agayne and to have bene accorded with sir Launcelot, but sir Gawayne wolde nat suffir hym by no maner of meane" (689.44-690.2). Everything that happens after this exchange—Gawain's

death and the loss of Arthur's kingdom due to his absence—is a result of Gawain's hatred. Gawain could have prevented all of it, because Arthur was ready to welcome Lancelot back into his kingdom.

As with Lancelot's encounter with Tarquin, Gawain's feud is not completed but ends with his death. Unlike Tarquin, Gawain repents of his deeds, although his life cannot be saved. In his final letter to Lancelot, Gawain's repentance is complete: "I beseche the, sir Launcelot, to returne agayne unto thys realme and se my tounge and pray som prayer more other les for my soule" (710.12-14). Through this statement, Gawain attempts to reunite Lancelot with Arthur's fellowship. By requesting that Lancelot visit his tomb, Gawain, as Arthur's nephew, gives Lancelot permission to return to Arthur's kingdom under safe passage. Gawain's request for prayer also shows great humility. This letter places his soul, in part, at Lancelot's mercy, pleading to Lancelot as a greater knight whose prayers would give significant aid after Gawain's passing. Lancelot's actions had destroyed his fellowship with Gareth, but Gawain finally realizes that his quest for vengeance against Lancelot only continues the breaking of fellowship.

Gawain's letter also directly attempts to restore fellowship by commanding Lancelot to aid Arthur: "make no taryng, but com over the see in all goodly haste that ye may, wyth youre noble knyghtes, and rescow that noble kyng that made the knyght" (710.19-21). Arthur's feud with Lancelot, while partially due to Guinevere, is ultimately caused by Gawain's anger. Since Arthur's absence allows Mordred to take over the kingdom, Arthur's dethroning is a direct result of Gawain's feud. Through this letter, Gawain attempts to remedy his failure, sending Lancelot to aid Arthur. By exhorting Lancelot, Gawain accomplishes two acts of atonement. The first is to assist Arthur in

reclaiming the throne. The second is to reunite Arthur and Lancelot, because Lancelot's assistance against Mordred will rekindle the friendship that previously existed between himself and Arthur, closing the rift Gawain had encouraged.

Calling for parchment to write his final letter to Lancelot, Gawain makes a significant choice that demonstrates the extent of his repentance: to write "with his owne honde and subscriybed with parte of his harte blood" (710.30-31). During his life, Gawain often refused to honor the knightly necessity that combat means taking personal risk. Partaking in ambushes and outnumbering his opponents, Gawain attempted to avoid this risk. By using his own blood to sign his letter to Lancelot, Gawain acknowledges that combat requires the possibility of his own blood being spilled. This realization is his redemption: "The text acts consistently in a way that literalizes blood as the seat of goodness and nobility. Gawain signs his last letter with part of his heart blood" (Lynch 60). By signing the letter with his blood, Gawain takes upon himself the results of his actions, reenforcing his desire to make peace with Lancelot. Such a signature also strengthens Gawain's statement that his death is due to his own folly rather than Lancelot's: "I, sir Gawayne, knyght of the Table Rounde, soughte my dethe, and nat thorow thy deservynge, but myne owne sekyng" (*Morte* 710.10-12). Through this statement, Gawain absolves Lancelot of his death, and his blood-signature further illustrates this absolution. Lancelot has no part in the use of Gawain's blood in the signature; it is Gawain's choice, just as the responsibility of Gawain's death belongs to Gawain, alone.

After his death, Gawain reappears once in the *Morte*. After crying "Helpe! Helpe!" in his sleep, Arthur dreams that "cam sir Gawayne unto hym" (711.11; 711.34).

In light of Gawain's experience in the Grail Quest, this vision is extremely significant. As a false knight, the only vision Gawain received was of condemnation. Gawain now serves as a minister of God, coming as relief after Arthur cries out in distress. Since his repentance, Gawain's spirituality has changed. No longer is he a false knight; he is a messenger of God, sent to aid his king.

This vision further demonstrates the development of Gawain's character by his arrival "with a numbir fayre ladyes" (711.35). These ladies "ar tho that I ded batayle fore in ryghteous qurels ... I ded batayle for them for their ryght" (711). Although he beheaded a lady in his first adventure and ladies were advised to avoid his company—"all ladyes and damesels may beware be you"—Gawain also aided ladies during his lifetime (103.35-36). Through this vision, Malory reminds readers of the punishment Guinevere administered to Gawain after he beheaded a lady: "By ordynaunce of the queene there was sette a queste of ladyes uppon sir Gawayne, and they juged hym for ever whyle he lyved to be with all ladyes and to fyght for hir quarels" (67.36-38). Malory reveals the outcome of this lifelong punishment. These ladies judged Gawain in life as he served them; they now prove him innocent as they accompany him to comfort Arthur. These ladies also aid Gawain in his attempt to reestablish Arthur's kingdom: "God hath gyvyn hem that grace at their grete prayer ... that they shulde brynge me hydder unto Arthur" (711.42-44). Without their aid, Gawain could not have visited Arthur in this vision. In his early career, Gawain's deeds against ladies were severe, but, in his final appearance, Gawain's status as worthy of these ladies is ultimately affirmed; he fought many noble battles for various ladies, allowing him to visit Arthur beyond the grave.

In this final act, Gawain attempts to save Arthur's kingdom and reunite Arthur and Lancelot: "Within a moneth shall com sir Launcelot with all hys noble knyghtes, and rescow you worshypfully" (712.9-10). Although Arthur is ultimately slain by Mordred, Gawain's appearance attempts to prevent this end by bringing advice and hope. Having already exhorted Lancelot to aid Arthur, Gawain not only sends aid but informs Arthur that Lancelot was coming to bring aid: Lancelot will "rescow you worshypfully" (712.10). Lancelot's arrival will not be a third party intent on destroying the remaining forces and claiming the kingdom. It is a tiding of joy for Arthur, hope that his kingdom and his friendship with Lancelot shall be reestablished.

Gawain's character thus undergoes a remarkable transformation between the early and late *Morte*. In the early *Morte*, Gawain is shown as an anti-knight, a knight who destroys fellowship. Disregarding the Pentecostal Oath, Gawain uses his strength to dishonor ladies and wrongfully harm his fellow knights, resulting in disunity among Arthur's court. In late the *Morte*, Gawain is changed. While he still exhibits flaws and does not fulfill the Grail Quest, he demonstrates a far greater morality than in early *Morte*. In the fall of Arthur, Gawain attempts to preserve the fellowship of the Round Table, trying to discourage Agravain and Mordred from ambushing Lancelot and pleading with the king to not execute Guinevere. His final failure with Lancelot, while severe, marks a profound change through his repentance. Malory's final depiction of Gawain is one of redemption, a knight now fully dedicated to preserving bonds of fellowship. Gawain begs Lancelot's forgiveness, seeks peace, and visits Arthur in a vision surrounded by damsels testifying to Gawain's dedication.

Ultimately, Malory's Gawain, like the Gawains of other texts, is a Gawain of repentance. In the early *Morte* he serves as a knight that destroys fellowship for his own purposes. By the end of the *Morte*, Gawain strives to preserve bonds of wholesome fellowship, with ladies, his fellow knights, and his king. On a physical level, Gawain fails to reestablish this fellowship. Both he and Arthur are dead, unable to enjoy the fellowship of each other and of Lancelot. However, Gawain succeeds in preserving a spiritual bond of fellowship. After his death, Gawain visits Arthur, serving his lord beyond the grave. Arthur and Lancelot are also reunited through Gawain's efforts, although too late to save Arthur's life and kingdom. Gawain's spiritual reunion with Lancelot is realized when Lancelot visits Gawain's grave: "sir Launcelot kneled downe by the tumber and wepte, and prayde hartely for hys soule" (719.14-15). After mourning for two days, Lancelot arises, lamenting his inability to save Arthur: "We ar com to late" (719.33). Like Lancelot's host, Gawain's repentance arrives too late to save Arthur's kingdom. The physical world is destitute, devoid of the fellowship the kingdom formerly provided. All that is left of Gawain is a tomb; the only remaining fellowship is beyond the grave.

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