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**Against the Five Virtues: A study of
Sir Gawain's discordant behaviour in
*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***

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1. INTRODUCTION

Heroes have been a vast source of inspiration for human beings since the first great epics were written in the ancient world. From the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to the recent *A Song of Ice and Fire*, humanity has woven an intricate tapestry of myths and tales which continues to unfold with every new published fiction up to the present day. These stories were originally created as a way of understanding and describing the world in which humans live – that is how they devised gods like Apollo, Cronos and Demeter to represent natural phenomena. Humans were exposed to a myriad of different stimuli and experiences for which they did not have an explanation yet, so they decided to come up with the closest thing to it. The sun, always rising and setting; the crops and seasons, constantly changing in a rhythmical pattern; time, a concept as old as the universe itself – divinities were the fine threads that run through all the primitive stories, weaving together the fabric of reality. In addition, Joseph Campbell, in the most recent edition to his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004), comes to the conclusion that myths “have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind”. In his interviews with the journalist Bill Moyers, gathered in the book *The Power of Myth* (1991, Ed. Anchor Books), Campbell defines myth as a means of experiencing the meaning of life, of understanding and interpreting symbols¹. They went from just explaining phenomena, to inspiring us to go even further beyond.

This is how, not satisfied with having grasped the cosmos, human beings started using these stories to teach and spread the values and lessons that the different communities had enshrined as their core beliefs. Gods became arbiters and we, feeble humans, were cast in the role of secondary, passive characters, with the main purpose of being judged for our actions. These divinities represented utmost perfection – the values and rules that human societies had deemed as the ideal to pursue; whereas humans were at the bottom of the ladder, for they were imperfect mortals who strived for perfection. And amid those legends, a new figure emerged to bridge the chasm that separated these two groups of characters: the hero. Heroes were born to lead as examples for the different audiences – to show human beings the path to perfection. By following the teachings and values of the community to the letter, heroes are always able to fulfil their quests, save the day and achieve everything that they have set their minds to. That is how the members of the

¹ Further information in relation with Campbell’s concept of myth and its connection to religion can be found in “The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion”, 1988.

various societies that form humanity find guides to what is right and wrong – stories instruct them.

Heroes have always been designed to be role models and sources of inspiration for everyone who read and listened. However, humans are not immutable entities – they change, adapt to their environment, and grow accordingly. In response to human evolution, heroes have also proven to be able to mutate in order to better suit the needs of the community and the people who form it. Thus, those classical perfect heroes who stand for justice and good, (and will never let any form of evil thrive); they gave way to more complex forms of protagonists who can fail, make morally ambiguous decisions so that they achieve their objectives, etc. This type of heroes has a great intrinsic complexity in regard to their character building and development and that turns them into deeply interesting characters. Furthermore, they have lately seen a rise in popularity partly thanks to their constant appearances in TV series and films, such as *Breaking Bad* (2008) or *Peaky Blinders* (2013). People have seemingly become more interested in this type of hero who deviates from the traditional righteous path and makes morally dubious choices. Traditional heroes, with their impeccable values and flawless moral compasses, have been relegated to a second position in popularity. Although people tend to assume that this is a rather recent event, these “anti-heroes” have been present in our fiction for a rather lengthy span of time. That is why I find this to be a remarkably compelling phenomenon: already in the early stages of their fiction, humans can find role models that stray away from the path.

English literature clearly exhibits an abundant and remarkable collection of heroes and heroines: from the mighty Beowulf to the sharp Sherlock Holmes, there are plenty of characters who have accompanied us through our various journeys in life. However, there is a group of heroes in this tradition that stands above the rest due to its profound influence over the course of centuries: King Arthur’s Round Table Knights. Characters such as Lancelot, Perceval, Tristan, or Galahad were, back then, absolute synonyms of chivalry and good will, and stood up for values that have lingered up to the contemporary age. Proof of this is the constant resurfacing that these characters and their stories periodically experience. The cultural significance that these knights have in our society already merits an analysis of its own. However, to avoid putting the cart before the horse, this thesis will strive to examine one single hero, Sir Gawain, and his nature as a character, in order to understand him.

Son of King Lot and Morgause, and nephew to none other than King Arthur himself, Sir Gawain is one of the most important knights in the court of Camelot. He appears already in the earliest accounts of Arthurian literature, both in the Matter of Britain and the Vulgate Cycle and is the protagonist of one of the most popular poems in medieval literature: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. He is, without a doubt, a character with enough appearances in stories to be analysed from many different points of view. In addition, with the recent screening of *The Green Knight* film (2021), Gawain is a character that seems to be enjoying a fair amount of popularity these days. This thesis will, however, use *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as source material in order to keep this analysis as straightforward and balanced as possible.

Nevertheless, the Sir Gawain that the reader is able to witness in this poem is radically different to the Sir Gawains that appear in other romances and works, such as Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. As many other scholars have pointed out before, the Gawain that the *Pearl* poet envisions does not fully play the role of a traditional hero. To a certain extent, Gawain fails to meet the set of Christian values that he is associated to at the beginning of the poem and makes a series of choices that, in the same manner as these modern "anti-heroes", might lead him astray of the faultless path that he was supposed to follow as a knight of the Round Table.

The objective of this thesis will therefore be to analyse this character from different points of view to further understand his nature as a hero. In order to do this, I will strive to gather proof that Gawain's behaviour might, at times, oppose those values that were originally set on him and vice versa. Furthermore, I will analyse these actions and interpret the possible consequences that they might have on the character both from the point of view of the medieval context in which this poem was written, and also from the point of view of the contemporary audience; for it is not only relevant to understand how this character might have failed or triumphed as a hero in his context, but also in the context of the readers who are experiencing the poem today. Heroes are figures made to shape the minds of the people who read and listen to their stories, and a better understanding of these figures could help us achieve a better understanding of ourselves, as individuals and as a group. Gawain, being the rich and profound character that he is, deserves to be brought to the spotlight and studied both through the author and readers' prism in order to determine how green is the light that shines through him.

2. METHODOLOGY

Considering that the objective of this study is to analyse the degree to which Sir Gawain's actions in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* could be considered faultless or not, the course of action that proved most profitable was to conduct a close reading of the aforementioned poem. The intention of this close reading was to perform a thorough examination of the text and study the overall behaviour and particular actions of Sir Gawain in the poem, especially the instances in which his behaviour matches or opposes the values that the poet so remarkably places on him. Furthermore, the source text employed in this thesis was Tolkien and Gordon's 1967 second edition of the poem, both for the close reading and the quotation process. In order to help me with the general understanding of the work, I also consulted Marie Boroff's 1967 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A New Verse Translation*.

As a previous (and parallel) activity, the first task was to perform a brief but comprehensive assemblage and analysis of the existing literature and critique regarding Sir Gawain and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. By doing it, this study would ensure a clear definition and understanding of the values and behaviour that Sir Gawain is supposed to display along the poem, so that I could ultimately arrive to a conclusion on why his actions may or may not have contradicted them. Once this literature review had been carried out, the next step was to execute the close reading, and an exhaustive account of the poem was conducted. I meticulously examined all the instances in which Sir Gawain's behaviour stood out for his faultlessness or his lack of coherence with the help of the selected bibliography. By incorporating previous analyses of the character to my personal judgement, I was finally able to draw the pertinent conclusions which answered the research question that I had previously raised.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gaston Paris, one of the most renowned scholars specialized in Medieval French literature, referred once to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as "the jewel of English literature during the Middle Ages". The fact that someone with his authority praises this work in such a way, should already be an indicative that this is one of the most, if not the most popular and important medieval romance in the English language. It might therefore be of little surprise that there is a remarkable amount of critique and analysis that has already been written on this literary work; and, while there are some common aspects

upon which scholars seem to generally agree (such as Gawain's failure in the second game, his sin of pride, or his verdict as a faultless knight despite having momentarily forsaken his values), there are some very interesting questions and ideas being contemplated in certain contemporary articles. These valid and compelling arguments transform what originally were straightforward and one-sided discussions into plural and lively debates that do justice to the richness and complexity with which the *Pearl* poet so skilfully infused his text and characters.

One of the most comprehensive analyses of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is *A Reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* written by J. A. Burrow in 1965. In this text he takes his time to carefully separate the wheat from the chaff and focus on the most important matters of the poem. He analyses step by step the most important scenes and motifs, such as the initial presentation of Camelot with its court and king, the so-called Beheading Game, Gawain's first presentation and arming scene, the Exchange-of-Winnings game and Lady Bertilak's temptation, and the final encounter in the Green Chapel, followed by the subsequent return to the Round Table.

Broadly speaking, Burrow determines that the Green Knight, rather than an antagonistic figure, is more of an ambiguous character that sets the premises of all the events that are to come. He identifies Camelot's court as the natural medieval noble class with Arthur as a renowned but "sumquat chilgered" king (l. 86). In addition, he gives a most accurate description of two concepts that will be crucial to understand Sir Gawain and his role as a Christian knight: the pentangle or pentalfa and "trawpe" (l. 626). Another noteworthy passage is his analysis of the Exchange-of-Winnings and how Gawain manages to stay true to himself until the very last moment, when Lady Bertilak offers Gawain the green girdle. Furthermore, he affirms that the confession that Gawain undergoes after that night is not valid at all due to him not acknowledging his failure to return the girdle to Lord Bertilak. What is more, in a 1959 article to which I will also refer ("The Two Confession Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*"), Burrow goes much more in detail in regard to the comparison between the confession that Gawain makes in Camelot and the Confession in Hautdesert.

Martin Stevens will return to this confession in his 1972 article, "Laughter and Game in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", where he opts for the opposite idea, that Sir Gawain fully confesses and therefore "leaves the confession a joyful, free man" (p. 77). He also

carries out a thorough analysis of the use of laughter and games in the poem, which proves to be mostly interesting in order to better understand Gawain's behaviour and actions all throughout the poem. I will attempt to address all these issues as well as to arrive at my own personal conclusions in the close reading section of this thesis.

Finally, Burrow (1965) examines the final encounter between protagonist and antagonist in the Green Chapel and Gawain's final judgement by three different parties in the following order: Bertilak, Gawain himself and the court in Camelot; how Bertilak deems him as a faultless knight ("On þe fautlest freke, þat euer on fote ȝede", l. 2363), despite his clear failure; the three main faults that Gawain finds in actions ("cowardise", "couetyse", and "vntrawþe"); and finally, the court's comic mercy, so to speak, with which they absolve Gawain.

In addition to Burrow's take on this work, there are many other voices which have rightfully addressed certain questions only in order to enrich the debate on the different readings of the poem. Victoria Weiss (1976) raised an important issue regarding the Beheading Game: Was the game explicitly designed to deliver a fatal blow? This question opens the door to consider the possibility that Gawain had already failed long before Lady Bertilak's temptation. David Farley Hills published an article that delved into the idea of Gawain's sin of covetousness (1963), and Stephanie Hollis (1981) explored in detail the idea that Gawain fails to become that "Pentangle Knight" described in the second fit and the sin of cowardice.

W. O. Evans literally "re-opens" Sir Gawain's debate in "The Case for Sir Gawain Re-Opened" (1973) and defends the idea that "the retention of the girdle did not constitute sinful matter" (p. 727). He also entertains the possibility that the "covetousness" that Gawain accuses himself of is indeed something material and not the desire to save his own life, as other scholars have highlighted. Richard Hamilton Green did execute a thorough analysis of Gawain's faultlessness and its relation to his shield in "Gawain's shield and the quest for perfection" (1962). He provided readers with a careful definition of the pentangle and its five virtues and similar references to perfection and the number five in literature. In addition, he addresses Gawain's sin of pride, as well as many others, but also in relation to King Arthur's court and the lesson to be learned.

Greg Walker's article "The Green Knight's Challenge: Heroism and Courtliness in Fitt I of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (1997) constitutes a high praise of Sir Gawain's courtesy and courtliness as well as a means to prove that the Green Knight's challenge is blatantly testing the Arthurian court. He examines in detail how Gawain faces, despite his failures, the different challenges with the utmost courtesy, and how the poet might have been cunningly adding a defence of the Arthurian court and values against the otherness that the Green Knight represents.

J. J. Anderson offered us a breath of fresh air in his "The Three Judgements and the Ethos of Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" (1990) where he develops his idea of how the poet had, in fact, left Sir Gawain's judgement open to interpretation. Anderson presents three main ideas: first of all, "Gawain has failed in part", secondly "Gawain has failed completely", and thirdly, "that Gawain has not failed at all". He assures that these all arguments "stand against each other and [the poet] gives no sign as to which one we should accept" (p. 339). Anderson then goes on to analyse the three judgements and how they resemble respectively Lord Bertilak, Arthur (and his court), and Sir Gawain's individual judgements.

Furthermore, William Woods (2002) utilises cognitive psychology and the theory of "the inner man" in order to look at Gawain through a different lens. He studies Sir Gawain's self-consciousness as a human and a hero, and the degree to which he is able to grasp the big picture, this is – the way that Gawain is capable of performing the different roles that have been assigned to him according to the situation and how that affects his behaviour and actions. In addition, Woods uses Gawain's comparison with the three animals that Lord Bertilak hunts throughout the third fit to address the "man: ape or angel?" debate and concludes that Sir Gawain could be considered one of the first examples of medieval individuality.

A very popular subject of debate is the part of Sir Gawain's final speech where he admits having been misled and tricked by women. When studying that particular extract that has been haunting Sir Gawain, Richard Godden (2016) identifies it as an "antifeminist outburst" that displays Gawain yielding "to his reputation as a misogynist" (p. 166). A reputation that has been supported by many other scholars over the years. On the other hand, there are other voices, such as Gerald Morgan (1979), who believes that this misogyny needs to be attributed to the mentality of the time. He states that Gawain is

not addressing “universal feminine nature, but invoking the fact of his personal experience” (p. 277) mixed by the “shock and disillusionment” provoked by the reveal. In addition, he observes that the blame is greatly directed to himself, rather than women, since he accuses “himself on three separate occasions of cowardice, infidelity, and covetousness” (p. 278). The close reading that follows this section will aim to examine the text along with the different critics to the passage and reach a conclusion.

Finally, Carl Grey Martin focuses on Camelot’s court and their conception of violence based on their reaction and behaviour during the first and last scenes of the poem. His article, “The Cipher of Chivalry: Violence as Courtly Play in the World of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” (2009), acknowledges the ability of the Green Knight (and Bertilak of Hautdesert) to outdo the court at their own game. Martin places Gawain and the Green Knight a step above the members of the court in regard to courtesy and courtly play, even if the Green Knight does not always behave in a courtly manner. While other scholars such as Burrow or Anderson recriminate the members of the court for the disloyalty shown (their disapproval of the court’s response to the proposal: “Hadet wyth an aluisch mon, for angardez pryde.// Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take // As kny3tez in cauelaciounz on Crystmasse gommez!” ll. 681-83), Martin interestingly attributes it to their lack of responsibility and failure “to recognize their own complicity” (p. 315).

Before initiating my analysis of Gawain’s behaviour and actions in the poem, I find it necessary to clarify certain notions and terms; for, in order to fully grasp these actions and behaviour, it is imperative to understand the concepts of the pentangle, the five virtues that appear assigned to it, and “trawþe”. If the readers are able to understand these ideas, which are in fact interconnected, it will be possible to have a clearer perception of the knight that Gawain is supposed to be. Once this has been achieved, it will be far more straightforward to judge Sir Gawain’s actions and evaluate his quality as a knight.

The first time that the pentangle is introduced in the poem is in the second fit, during the first arming scene. As soon as Gawain receives his shield, the audience is able to see the pentangle (also called pentalpha) engraved on it:

Then þay schewed hym þe schelde, þat was of schyr goulez

Wyth þe pentangel depaynt of pure golde hwez.

He braydez hit by þe bauderyk, aboute þe hals kestes,

þat bisemed þe segge semlyly fayre. (ll. 619-622).

A pure golden 5-edged star that shines bright over a red background is the emblem that has been bestowed upon the hero by his community. A symbol of integrity and balance that fits him better than anybody else, or so the poet tells the audience through this description:

In bytoknyng of trawþe, bi tytle þat hit habbez,
For-þy hit acorde3 to þis kny3t, & to his cler arme3,
For ay faythful in fyue & sere fyue syþe3,
Gawan wat3 for gode knawen, & as golde pured,
Voyded of vche vylany, wyth vertue3 ennoured
in mote;
For-þy þe pen-tangel nwe
He ber in schelde & cote,
As tulk of tale most trwe,
& gentylest kny3t of lote (ll. 626-639).

While Gawain was already introduced in the first fit, when he decided to intervene and accept the Green Knight's challenge, this scene constitutes the protagonist's true presentation, at least in respect to his values and principles. The poet starts this introduction by explaining the alleged history and original bearer of the symbol, the Old Testament Hebrew king Solomon ("Hit is a syngne þat Salamon set sum-quyle, // In bytoknyng of trawþe, bi tytle þat hit habbe3", ll. 625-6). There is, in fact, no strong evidence that the pentangle really is a symbol associated with King Solomon, as Green indicates (Burrow, p.131, 1965), but it is possible to locate references to the pentalpha and the number five in the Bible and many other sources. The association to this particular legendary Jewish figure carries a crucial implication that Burrow carefully developed in the first appendix of his work: the fact that, "as Solomon saw", the pentangle and "trawþe" are both "fivefold, interlocking, and endless" (p. 189). Therefore, this symbol serves as a sign of perfection, and anybody deemed as worthy of this symbol should also be flawless. However, it is worth mentioning that Solomon's figure is far from flawless in his biblical representation, as the poet himself observes at the end of the poem through Gawain's final outburst in the Green Chapel, even if it is just an argument to excuse Gawain's behaviour

(“For so watz Adam in erde with one bygyled, // And Salomon with fele sere, and Samson eftsoner” ll. 2416-17). Thus, I will take this into consideration and strive to analyse what implications it has for Gawain’s character and his principles.

It has already been shown that “Trawþe” is the first and foremost concept associated with the pentangle. Far from just including the modern meaning of “truth”, the Middle English Dictionary displays a wide range of definitions: from fidelity (to friends, one’s country, or kin) to conviction, passing through honour, integrity, honesty, or even a pledge/oath. It is therefore evident that it gravitates around the semantic field of righteousness and truth. So, one can conclude that the perfection that Sir Gawain aims to attain is related to being a pure, honourable man. Burrow defines it as “the most fundamental of all knightly virtues” (p. 23) and associates it to concepts such as “integrity” and “righteousness” (p. 42-48). On the other hand, Morgan goes even further beyond and links it to the idea of “*gentilezza*” or “*nobilitade*”, that Dante coins in his *Convivio* (p.773). He notices how both “trawþe” and “*nobilitade*” comprise not only moral virtues, but also religious faith and the operation of the senses (p.774). Thus, it is of utmost importance that we understand “trawþe” as a comprehensive term which alludes to all those qualities that a knight should aim to attain in this context.

Gordon and Tolkien (1925) add themselves in their edition’s notes a clarification regarding the different connotations that the pentangle could have had and its symbolism in the poem. They state that the “figure is said to have been used by the Pythagoreans as a symbol of health”, by “the neo-Platonists and Gnostics to signify perfection”, by the Jews, who called it “Solomon’s seal” and by Christian writers, who condemned its use as a magic sign (p. 93). Its clear relation to the Jewish six-pointed star is also acknowledged. However, they also note that the symbolism attributed to the star by the poet is not to be found in other coetaneous sources. Therefore, this would be the only medieval English text that connects the pentangle to perfection, to the term “the endless knot”, or to “trawþe” (p. 93). In any case, since this thesis strives to find whether Sir Gawain manages to achieve those ideals set by the poet in relation the aforementioned symbol, I will continue to assume that all these concepts are connected, as the author originally pretended.

Another relevant feature that this description includes is that of the use of the number five. Five are the edges of the pentangle, all entangled with “vche lyne vmbe-lappe3 &

louke3 in oþer, // & ay quere hit is endele3” (ll. 628-9). The poet develops five groups of five in order to enhance the image of perfection that Gawain embodies. The first one is the five senses (“Fyrst he wat3 funden fautle3 in his fyue wytte3,” l. 640), leading the audience to believe that Sir Gawain was incapable of erring or sinning; reason is always present in his judgement. Then come the five fingers (“And efte fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fynghes,” l. 641) which, in medieval imagery and according to the words of John of San Geminiano in Green’s article, were “necessary for man in order that his works should be perfect” (p. 134, 1962) and had specific values assigned to each one of them, such as justice, temperance, prudence, etc. The next set of fives was the five wounds that Christ had on the cross (“& alle his afaunce vpon folde wat3 in þe fyue wounde3 // Ðat Cryst ka3t on þe croys, as þe crede telle3;” ll. 642-643). These five wounds have been traditionally represented as a pentalpha or pentagon on their own, according to Green (p.134), and have always been as a symbol of salvation and redemption. The fourth set are the five joys of the Virgin Mary (“Ðat alle his forsnes he fong at þe fyue ioye3, // Ðat þe hende heuen quene had of hir chylde;” ll. 646-47), a figure intricately associated to Sir Gawain, since the poet refers to him as the Knight of the Virgin Mary. It is precisely from her that Gawain derives his courage.

Finally, the fifth set are the five virtues that will guide our protagonist throughout the poem and, ultimately, the five virtues that will compromise him. It is by the degree of his conformance to these five principal virtues that I will be measuring how well Gawain fulfils his destiny as the bearer of the pentangle.

Þe fyrst¹ fyue þat I finde þat þe frek vsed,
 Wat3 fraunchyse, & fela3schyp for-be² al þyng;
 His clannes & his cortaysye croked were neuer,
 & pite, þat passe3 alle poynte3, þyse pure fyue
 Were harder happed on þat hapel þen on any oþer.

The first two virtues are “fraunchyse” and “fela3schyp” which have been commonly translated as generosity or magnanimity and companionableness. Furthermore, both are pretty straightforward: generosity is the quality of being kind and generous (both materially and spiritually), and companionableness involves “the spirit that binds companions or friends together; charitable feeling for one’s fellows; charity, amity or

comradery” if one is to read the definition of “fela3schyp” in the MED. However, the following two virtues have proven to be more complex, “clannes” and “cortaysye”. Many scholars translate “clannes” as chastity, and most specifically, Burrow thinks that it is not “inconsistent with marriage or with trweluf (courtly love) outside marriage” (p.48). I would argue that while it is true that knightly love respects “clannes”, it is still too narrow, since it could have some other comprehensive meanings, such as purity or innocence. “Cortaysye”, on the other hand, is a word that, as Morgan rightfully indicates, has a considerable scope. In order to be precise, it should be sufficient to stand by a straightforward translation: politeness or courtesy². However, there are scholars such as Davis (in Gordon and Tolkien, 1967) who see it as “a word of great range and power at this time”, embracing “chivalrous” conduct of all kinds from courtly politeness to nobility of mind, and extending to divine grace”. Finally, there is “pité”, another ambiguous term, according to scholars, which produces our modern “pity”. Burrow associates it with charity and gentillesse, but it is Morgan who finds the most accurate translation for this context: compassion.

As I have already said, these five virtues, alongside the pentalpha and “trawþe” compose the moral compass that will guide Gawain during the journey to meet his fate in the Green Chapel. Therefore, during the next section of this thesis, I will be analysing Gawain’s actions throughout the poem from the point of view of these principles and determine whether our protagonist is really the man of truest fame and most pure among men or he fell behind the expectations set on him.

4. ANALYSIS

Every piece of literature needs a context; a set of places, characters, and circumstances that help create a *mise en scène* appropriate for the audience to delve into the journey on which they are about to set out. The *Pearl* poet employs the first lines of his work in order to establish a relationship between the legendary Aeneas’ bloodline and the court of King Arthur. Right after this, he introduces his audience to a Britain where people were born with a natural taste for war and fighting (“Bolde bredden þer-inne, baret þat lofden”, l.

² However, there is a certain degree of complexity to this matter. The fact that the author puts these two virtues together is precisely because they wanted to highlight that Sir Gawain’s courtesy did not delve into the immoral overtones that French “cortaysye” has (*fin d’amors*), meaning that Gawain’s actions during the poem, specifically during the third fit and his encounters with Lady Bertilak, would always be guided by these two specific senses of the virtues. For further information on the differences between the different ideas of “cortaysye”, see Olivares Merino (1998): *Del Amor, Los Caballeros y Las Damas*

21). Even though this is not something to be taken at face value, it is an important first impression that will later reflect on his depiction of the court or Gawain himself. Nevertheless, at first sight this liking for warfare is not exactly compatible with the concept of pity (“pitié”) that we have in the contemporary age. Pity is a synonym of mercy, and one cannot be pitiful or compassionate if, at the same time, they are yearning for war and combat in “mony turned tyme” (l. 22). Finally, the last remark that he makes in this introduction involves King Arthur, whom he deems the noblest king that Britain has ever had (“Bot of alle þat here bult of Bretaygne kynges // Ay wat3 Arthur þe hendest; as I haf herde telle;” ll. 25-26). By doing this, the poet is establishing Arthur as a perfect model to which everyone should look up, but it will not be long before this changes.

Christmas has arrived at Camelot, and readers are able to witness a representation of how this meaningful celebration might have been held back then, according naturally to the words of the poet. These days in particular (December 31st and January 1st) are time for joy and festivities, and we can see that Camelot is not refraining from anything: “With ryche reuel ory3t, & rechles merþes;” (l.40), “With alle þe mete & þe mirþe þat men coupe a-vyse;” (l. 45). To the contemporary reader, having all the food and pleasure that one could think about might seem a bit excessive, even by upper medieval class standards. It is true, as Burrow rightfully indicates it (p. 5), that this particular feast is ultimately right in the context that we are seeing. This type of sumptuous banquet was supposed to surpass all expectations in order to celebrate the birth of Christ; nevertheless, one cannot but wonder whether this opposes the material generosity principle that we have seen before. Naturally, in the eyes of Camelot’s court there is no sin to be confessed – they are just performing their roles as good Christian vassals and having a lot of fun in the process. However, if one looks at it from the point of view of the lower classes, these excesses constitute blatant injustice. Thus, I will not strictly consider this a fault to the five virtues because it could be argued that the court is just fulfilling a social duty. However, we should be aware that, by our modern standards, this is just blatant inequality and goes against any principle of generosity.

There is another relevant issue in this introductory scene, in regard to the idea of King Arthur being a model for every other knight. It is a common phenomenon in medieval romances to have a secondary character who deviates from the behaviour that is expected from him. This is done in order to enhance the brilliance of the main character and his respect for the values that the audience is supposed to adhere to. A common example of

this would be Sir Kay's performance in the romance *Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, where he behaves in an undignified way, violently even; and Gawain has to prove to the Carle that not all knights are "evyll-taught" and displays a conduct most befitting of a Round Table knight. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* this is not so blatant, but the readers are able to witness this description of King Arthur just before the arrival of the Green Knight:

He wat3 so Ioly of his Ioyfnes, & sum-quat child gered,

His lif liked hym ly3t, he louied þe lasse

Auþer to lenge lye, or to longe sitte,

So bi-sied him his 3onge blod & his brayn wylde; (ll. 86-89)

Being too active and having young blood, or a wild brain are not necessarily negative features; in fact, they could be regarded even as something positive. It is, however, the "sum-quat child gered" part that modulates this description, for no king should behave in a boyish, reckless manner. The King Arthur that the poet is describing is an Arthur that is flawed, so when he tells the audience that the king is standing in his place with proud bearing, this pride is closer to the capital sin of pride than the noble, satisfied attitude that kings are supposed to have. Burrow (1965) ascertains this and states that the poet "admires Arthur more than one may at first suspect, but he does not admire him unreservedly". It is, therefore, possible to assume that the poet could be trying to praise the knights of the Round Table at the same time that he is trying to construct a critique against certain issues on which he disagrees.

After this brief introduction to the king of the Britons, the readers are able to first get acquainted with the hero of this story. In a similar manner to King Arthur, the poet does not provide his audience with much information on Sir Gawain in this first fit:

There gode Gawan watz grayþed Gwenore bisyde,

And Agrauayn a la dure mayn on þat oþer syde sittes,

Boþe þe kynges sistersunes and ful siker kni3tes;

Bischoþ Bawdewyn abof biginez þe table,

And Ywan, Vryn son, ette with hymself.

þise were di3t on þe des and derworþly serued, (ll. 109-114)

There is no physical nor psychological description. However, with just a single adjective and a brief contextualization of the character's context readers will already know that "gode Gawain" is a noble and good knight that stands above the rest, since only him, Agravain and Ywain, along with bishop Baldwin, were able to sit in the king's table, next to Queen Guinevere herself. The fact that Gawain is sitting by the Queen's side marks a deep difference with the French romances, since in the Matter of France it is Sir Lancelot who has the role of being the Queen's Knight. This illustriousness is everything that the audience needs to know before his first encounter and comparison with the Green Knight and will only be endorsed by the in-depth description that develops Gawain's character in the second fit. On the other hand, this extremely high standard might be a double-edged sword for the hero of the story.

It is precisely right after that, that the Green Knight makes his entrance into Camelot's Hall, shocking everyone who was attending the feast. The poet's description of this man is completely ambivalent, since the first impression that both readers and members of the court have is that the Green Knight is a monstrous figure, something that does not belong in this world ("Half etayn in erde I hope þat he were", l. 140). However, the second part of his description goes through his clothing and lets the audience catch a glimpse of what might be the real Knight:

A strayte cote ful stre3t, þat stek on his sides,
A mere mantile abof, mensked withinne
With pelure pured apert, þe pane ful clene
With blyþe blaunner ful bry3t, and his hod boþe,
þat watz Ia3t fro his lokkez and layde on his schulderes;
Heme wel-haled hose of þat same,
þat spenet on his sparlyr, and clene spures vnder
Of bry3t golde, vpon silk bordes barred ful ryche, (ll. 152-159)

His clothes are elegant, embroidered in gold and silver. He is not fully dressed as a warrior or a monster; he is dressed as a noble man attending a feast. In addition, the author even precises that his proportions are adequate and similar to those of a normal human. It is

precisely the green colour permeating him that asserts the alien nature of the Knight. Because if it was not for the fact that he is green, he could just have the appearance of a huge, noble knight. This is extremely important, because this high-class appearance will be later partially matched by his manners. After he has arrived and everyone is shocked, the Green Knight addresses the court, overlooking them as if they were beneath him. He openly asks for the noblest person in the crowd in order to say what he has to say, and he does it in an extremely uncourteous manner, as if he was trying to purposefully upset the court (“Gladly I wolde Se þat segg in sy3t, and with hymself speke raysoun.”, ll. 226-27). However, he also enters the room bearing a bough of holly, a sign of peace, and reassures the room after speaking with King Arthur of his peaceful intentions (“3e may be seker bi þis braunch þat I bere here þat I passe as in pes, and no ply3t seche”, ll. 265-66). No matter however green he is, this characterization is not befitting of a monster, but of an adversary (Burrow describes him in fact as just a “hostile challenger”, p.18). He might be the antagonist, but he is not a violent figure; and while he behaves in an ill-mannered way, once the audience learns his whole nature and plan, one could think that it was just a strategy to force the court and Arthur to participate in the so-called Beheading Game. The Green Knight is secretly working with Morgan Le Fay, Arthur’s half-sister in order to put to test the pride and courtesy of Camelot’s court. Therefore, we should not rule out the possibility that the Green Knight is just trying to provoke King Arthur’s knights and taunt them into forgetting their values and courtesy. That is indeed the conclusion to which Walker (1997) arrives in his analysis of the Green Knight’s challenge. He resolves that what the intruder is doing here is “testing the collective resolve of Camelot” through his manner and speech (p. 114-15). In fact, once the reader meets the Green Knight’s alter ego, Lord Bertilak, they will see how he behaves in a courteous manner with Sir Gawain.

Nevertheless, the scene in the court hall continues, and the knight still behaves rather unmannerly by addressing all the knights and declaring that they are but adolescents, and that they have no pride (“Hit arn aboute on þis bench bot berdlez chylder.”, 280 – “Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes, Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?” 311-12). If one takes into account that he is a huge green man, that he has arrived Camelot suddenly (as if by magic), and that he is constantly provoking his audience; it is almost understandable that Arthur and his court fall for the stunt. There is even a moment in which the King ironically uses the word “cortays” to describe the knight and his behaviour (“Sir cortays kny3t, // If *pou* craue batayl bare, // Here faylez J?ou not

to fy3t.' ll. 276-78). Finally, King Arthur decides to answer the challenge and offers himself to participate in the strange exchange that the Green Knight has proposed to the court: the Beheading Game. Someone will be able to deliver a blow in the foreign knight's neck only if they agree to receive an equal stroke one year in the future. However, it would not be appropriate for the King to participate in such a game and so Gawain decides to step in and be the one to face the Knight.

This is the first instance in which Gawain's behaviour might be questioned by the audience. He offers himself to participate in the game since he believes it to be unfitting for the king to answer such an arrogant request, especially when there are so many knights willing to defend his honour. Gawain then proceeds to develop an explanation about how he is the least worthy knight of that room (ll. 354-59), in which some scholars (such as Barrow or Woods) see a marvellous display of courtesy and wit that puts him in a position of dominance to undertake the game:

I am þe wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feblest,

And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes þe soþe—

Bot for as much as 3e ar myn em I am only to prayse,

No bounte hot your blod I in my bode knowe;

And syþen þis note is so nys þat no3t hit yow failes,

And I haue frayned hit at yow fyrst, foldez hit to me; (ll. 354-59)

Be that as it may, it could also be argued that this humility is rather extreme, since, as we will learn over the course of the poem, Gawain's reputation is flawless. Everyone that he encounters recognizes him as one of the best (if not the very best) knights in the Round Table, and he is aware of it. Therefore, one cannot but wonder whether this is just false modesty and indirect criticism to the rest of the knights in the court, something that would directly go against the five virtues and the concept of "trawþe".

Advancing into the Beheading game, Burrow observes that the way in which the Green Knight lays out the terms of the exchange, and how he repeats them as soon as someone accepts his challenge, it resembles a "quasi-legal agreement": By striking a blow in the Knight's neck, Gawain is pledging himself to receive an equal blow in the future. In

addition, the objective of this contest would be to engage “the hero in a test of the most fundamental of all knightly virtues— ‘trawpe’ (truth) and the outcome of his adventure is made to depend on his fidelity to these contracts” (p. 23). Thus, the Green Knight (and ultimately, Morgan) is testing Gawain’s truth by forcing him to face the worst enemy that a mortal being could face, death. Nevertheless, the operating question here is: is the Green Knight really obligating Gawain to decapitate him and therefore sentencing the protagonist to die?

One of the most interesting theories about the Beheading Game was proposed by Victoria Weiss in her 1976 article: “Gawain’s First Failure: The Beheading Scene in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”. Does the Green Knight really want someone to chop his head off? Weiss believes that most scholars have misunderstood the real objective of the game:

If any so hardy in þis hous holdez hymseluen,
Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,
þat dar stifly strike a strok for an oþer,
I schal gif hym of my gyft þys giserne ryche,
þis ax, þat is heue innogh, to hondele as hym lykes,
And I schal bide þe fyrst bur as bare as I sitte. (ll. 285-290)

The word “strok” does not necessarily mean that the contender has to cut the opponent’s head, it could just mean that he has to strike a blow without killing him. Weiss reaches the conclusion that Gawain was free to “determine the kind of blow that he should deliver” (p. 362). This means that Gawain could have already failed his “trawpe” since the very beginning of the poem. The fifth virtue that he is ascribed to, “pity”, requires him to be always merciful, and cutting someone’s head is not exactly the definition of compassion, even if it is part of a challenge. On the other hand, since it was a game proposed by an enemy knight in the middle of Christmas celebrations, in front of the whole court, it can be argued that the “fatal” blow was delivered according to the court’s values and desires, and also to the readers’ expectations. It is necessary to consider that the Beheading Game is a firmly rooted trope in a long literary tradition, and its objective is to make the protagonist of the story face death so that he can ultimately overcome it, nothing else. Therefore, there would be no ill intention, nor desire to end a life.

Nevertheless, I still believe that, by our modern standards, this readiness to participate in the game and cut the Green Knight's head represents a behaviour improper for a merciful knight. Up to a certain extent, the protagonist of this poem is guilty of not finding another way to act, since he had still the possibility to strike a harmless blow which would only leave a scratch. In fact, as Grey Martin (2009) concludes, if the Green Knight had not been a "monster" and blessed with magical abilities, this game would have been just a "gruesome execution" (p. 317). This would therefore be an instance where the audience is able to behold the liking for war that the poet was already foreshadowing in the first lines of his poem.

In any case, Gawain decides to cut the Knight's head, and, to everyone's surprise, he survives the blow, sealing Gawain's fate. After inviting Gawain to his Green Chapel in a year's time, the Green Knight departs, leaving a dismayed court. The first reaction after his departure came from King Arthur and Gawain, who just laughed: "þe kyng and Gawen þare, // At þat grene þay laȝe and grenne," (ll. 463-64). This laugh could probably be attributed to the surreal situation that they have just experienced, as well as to the implications of what this challenge means to Sir Gawain. He has basically just signed his sentence to death by decapitating the Green Knight. It is probably just a defence mechanism against fear and uneasiness and to appear calm in front of the court. However, what if this laugh did not come from dread, but from pride? After all, they are the king and best knight in Camelot. This would mean that Gawain and Arthur are just belittling this foreign knight right after challenging them to a game, and that would be far from courteous.

The second fit commences, and the first information that we hear from Gawain is that just as Christmas approaches, he starts thinking about his quest. The image that we get from him is that he is cheerful, though ("Quat schuld I wonde? // Of destines derf and dere // What may mon do bot fonde?", ll. 563-65). However, knowing that his quest entails receiving a blow which will cut his head, one cannot avoid asking whether this is just a façade. He is precisely departing on All-Hallows' Day ("Ȝet quyl Al-hal-day with Arþer he lenges;" l. 536), which could already be an ominous anticipation of death. The ones that are not accepting it lightly are the members of the court. The audience is able to hear many different voices that regret Gawain's destiny "Knyȝtez ful cortays and comlych ladies // Al for luf of þat lede in longynge þay were" (ll. 539-540). Other nobles directly manifest that he should not have participated in the game:

Al þat se3 þat semly syked in hert,
 And sayde soþly al same segges til oþer,
 Carande for þat comly: 'Bi Kryst, hit is scape
 þat þou, leude, schal be lost, þat art of lyf noble!
 To fynde hys fere vpon folde, in fayth, is not eþe.
 Warloker to haf wro3t had more wyt bene,
 And haf dy3t 3onder dere a duk to haue worked;
 A lowande leder of ledez in londe hym wel semez,
 And so had better haf ben þen britned to no3t,
 Hadet wyth an aluisch mon, for angardez pryde.
 Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take
 As kny3tez in cauelaciounz on Crystmasse gomnez!' (ll. 672-683)

This is a crucial passage, because here the readers are able of fully grasping the ideals and true ethics of the court. While one would think, at first sight, that the court lives for and by the ideals of chivalry, these commentaries reveal a deep hypocrisy ingrained in their souls. They were the first to advice that “gode” Gawain faced the Beheading Game in order to defend Camelot’s righteousness and courtesy, even if that could end up entailing his death. If we assume that the court’s pressure coerced Gawain to deliver a fatal blow, it is just hypocrisy that they are now lamenting Gawain’s fate, especially due to the “angardez pryde” that could be said to be shared by the whole court (Soucy, 1978). They blame Arthur for making the decision on acting over a silly competition and that he should have acted with more caution. In fact, many other scholars have signalled this out: Burrow (1965) berates them for “recognizing Gawain’s knightly excellence, and not the obligations that it entails, and Anderson accuses them of “pretty private disloyalty”. In any case, they are directly contradicting the values that they say to represent, and this will have important consequences at the end of this journey, when Gawain finally faces the judgement of his King and his court.

The most significant fragment of the second fit, however, is the arming scene, where the promised description of Sir Gawain’s values fully develops his character in front of the audience. Here, Gawain is inextricably linked to the pentangle, a symbol apparently

devised by King Solomon. In the same fashion, the pentangle and its five virtues represent “trawþe”, therefore making Gawain the knight of perfection that everyone expects him to be. Generosity, companionableness, purity, courtesy, and compassion – these are the five virtues that are interlocked in this pentalpha called “trawþe”. It is notably significant that the figure selected to represent perfection was the pentangle, since it means that if the knight faltered in any of the five, he would have already broken the value of this symbol. Hamilton Green (1962) addresses this and the ambiguity of the patron of this sign, King Solomon, who is known in the Bible for both his righteousness and his flaws; someone “remarkably wise, but in the end guilty of follies that cost him his kingdom” (p. 130). One cannot but wonder whether this was made on purpose to tease Gawain’s final failure in the challenges proposed to him. Hamilton Green also notices this and ultimately describes the pentalpha as a “a suspect magical sign into an emblem of perfection to achieve the simultaneous suggestion of greatness and potential failure” (p. 132).

In any case, if we follow the text without anticipating the ending, this is who Gawain is supposed to be and needs to be if he is to overcome the journey that he has ahead of him, if he wants to meet all the expectations that are set on him: the ultimate expression of perfection – someone faultless in all five sense who never fails –. While at first sight one cannot know if he really is this knight or not, most readers (especially modern ones) will acknowledge the impossibility of this: the degree of perfection that is expected from Gawain is absolute, and our protagonist is aware of it.

After the arming scene, he sets forth on his journey facing several different foes and trials that are summarized in just a few lines. It could even be seen as logical that his spirit is faltering if one considers that death awaits at the end of his journey. In addition, there is a passage where he cries for all his sins (“And cryed for his mysdede,” l. 760), meaning that Gawain’s perception of himself might be not as close to perfection as his court considered. In fact, this opposition between Gawain’s own introspection and how other people see him will continue throughout all the poem.

When he gets to Lord Bertilak de Hautdesert’s castle, the first impression that the locals have of him is that of a prince without equal (“þat a comloker kny3t neuer Kryst made // hem þo3t.” ll. 869-70). And as soon as he reveals them his name, they all recognize him as one of the greatest knights in the kingdom; one whose name is synonymous with virtue, glory and fame (the same Gawain that had presented himself as worthy to participate in the challenge only because he was nephew of the king and nothing else):

And alle pe men in pat mote maden much joye

To apere in his presense prestly pat tyme,

þat alle prys and prowes and pured pewes

Apendes to hys persoun, and praysed is euer;

Byfore alle men vpon molde his mensk is pe most. (ll. 910-14)

This could mean that Gawain had manipulated indeed his speech before the Green Knight to match his courtesy, that he is being falsely modest, or that the narrator is not being entirely clear with respect to this in order to maintain this ambivalence around Gawain. Only the second situation would mean that he is failing to meet the five values.

After his introduction to Hautdesert Castle's court, he is invited to a feast in his honour by his host, Lord Bertilak, and the reader is led to believe that Gawain gets carried away by the situation: "þat mon much merþe con make, // For wyn in his hed þat wende." (ll. 899-900). Once again, this behaviour is not appropriate for a knight that is said to be the paragon of virtue. This could again mean that he is betraying the virtues of courtesy and purity. However, if one thinks about it logically, he has been wandering around, battling foes for a long time, knowing that death waits at the end of the road; therefore, this behaviour could also be considered as purely human. Another instance of attitude that needs to be evaluated is when he meets the two ladies of the castle: Lady Bertilak and the old lady. The first remark that he makes is that these two ladies are extremely different in appearance. The first one is young and beautiful, while the other one is old and withered: "Bot vnlyke on to loke þo ladyes were, // For if be 3onge watz 3ep, 3ol3e watz bat oþer;" (ll. 950-51). In addition, he stops to admire Lady Bertilak's breast and neck while from the old lady he comments that she is fat, short and ghastly to look at:

A mensk lady on molde mon may hir calle,

for Gode!

Hir body watz schort and þik,

Hir buttokez bal3 and brode,

More lykkerwys on to lyk

Watz þat scho hade on lode. (ll. 964-69)

Even if he does not say it out loud, thinking that the young lady is much nicer to look upon is not precisely courteous or innocent. Furthermore, while it may be alright according to the mentality of that age, taking time to admire the breast of a young, married woman is not proper for a respectful, well-mannered person nowadays. It is true that one could blame wine and the joy of the feast for that behaviour, but it would still be inadmissible for a knight of the pentalfa. It will be also during this first meeting that Gawain will have his first exchange of courtesy with Lady Bertilak, without knowing that these conversations would become something much more dangerous than his final duel with the Green Knight.

After the feast, another crucial moment in this story takes place: Lord Bertilak invites Gawain to participate in a game with him. While Gawain was determined to depart the next day to the Green Chapel and fulfil his initial challenge, his host insists firmly that he should stay for some days, since there was still time until the day of his meeting with the Green Knight. It is after Gawain decides to stay, thanks to Lord Bertilak promising our protagonist that he would tell him how to get to the Green Chapel, (but also probably motivated by the prospect of spending some days warm in the castle, enjoying everything that it implies – food, drink, and not thinking about his impending deathly meeting with fate) that Lord Bertilak challenges him to a second game. Each day, his host will go hunting and offer him his gains in exchange for whatever Gawain wins in the castle. The way in which Bertilak enunciates the game and how he repeats the terms of the game reminds us again of a legal agreement, and teases that the lord of the castle might be the alter ego of the Green Knight. At the same time that one could see here a lack of prudence in Gawain, it is necessary to take into account that he is obliged to participate in this second game out of courtesy towards his host.

The third fit starts with the first hunt in the woods, starred by Lord Bertilak and a deer. As many scholars have indicated, these hunting scenes are used by the author in order to create an analogy between the deer (plus the fox and the boar on the following days) and Sir Gawain himself. While the animals are being chased and trapped by Lord Bertilak and his men, Gawain is being restrained by a series of social and courtly conventions. The animals die at the end of the day; however, Gawain will ultimately flee and be able to preserve his life. This is the conclusion to which Hollis (1981) arrives, that Gawain survives thanks to the fact that he fails and “shrinks” in the face of danger like the fox (p. 222). However, I would like to introduce another possibility: what if the Gawain that set

out from Camelot does die there, in the green chapel, and the Gawain that finishes his journey is a completely different person? What if he has inevitably changed so much during the adventure that he will never be the same?

Back to the first morning in the castle, Sir Gawain wakes up to the noise that the lady of the castle makes when entering his room. At first, he pretends to be asleep, but as the lady gets closer, he decides to properly wake up and blesses himself as if he already knew that something was about to go wrong (ll. 1202-3). This initiates a dialectic exchange where both Gawain and Lady Bertilak try to establish their dominance; Lady Bertilak with the intention of making Gawain fail, following her husband's instructions, and Sir Gawain attempting to resist the advances that come from the lady of the castle. This is the most courteous and complex series of dialogues that can be found in the poem. While Gawain pledges his loyalty and servitude to the Lady, he needs to do so without crossing the line, since she is already married. He evades her constant pushing by declaring that he is not at all worthy of such attentions:

þa3 I be not now he þat 3e of speken;

To reche to such reuerence as 3e reherce here

I am wy3e vnworþy, I wot wel myseluen.”

“And oþer ful much of oþer folk fongen bi hor dedez,

Bot þe daynte þat þay delen, for my disert nys euen, (ll. 1242-44 / 1265-66)

This is very interesting, since it gives the audience further insight into how Gawain conceives himself. In any case, Lady Bertilak manages to force him to receive a kiss from her, but only as a form of courtesy.

This will happen twice, the first two days, and Gawain will be forced to be kissed by her only on the grounds that if he is not capable of that, then it must mean that he is not Sir Gawain (attacking directly his pride). This could be seen as a victory for both, since she is wearing down Gawain's defences, but he still manages to resist. On both occasions, Gawain exchanges the kisses that he has received for the preys that his host has managed to hunt during the day, but without revealing the person responsible for them. This way, he is fulfilling his promise to Lord Bertilak, but at the same time, he is protecting his and Lady Bertilak's honour.

On the third day, Lady Bertilak returns to Sir Gawain's room to have a last encounter, ready to give her all and finally make him lose the Exchanges Game. However, Sir Gawain resists, forcing the lady to use all her charms³. And indeed, she would have certainly won had the Virgin Mary not protected our protagonist (*Gret perile bitwene hem stod, //Nif Mare of hir kny3t mynne. Ll. 1768-9*). In any case, it is in this moment that Gawain has finally proven himself victorious; he has proven that he is courteous enough to never betray the courtesy and the hospitality of his host (not fully, at least). From this moment on, his fate is sealed, since the Green Knight, Lord Bertilak, will never cut his head in the Green Chapel. However, Gawain does not know this, and therefore fails to fully keep his word to the lord of the Castle.

Since the very beginning of his journey, Gawain had showed signs of being extremely distressed at the outcome of his adventure: "*In dre3 droupyng of dreme draueled þat noble, As mon þat watz in mornyng of mony þro þo3tes, How þat destine schulde þat day dele hym his wyrde*" (ll. 1750-53). He must have been continuously feeling how death was approaching him, knowing that the day of his encounter with the Green Knight was closer each minute.

That is why, when Lady Bertilak offers Sir Gawain a green girdle as a small token of victory, our protagonist will accept it. In fact, she offers him first a ring, which he rejects – for it is a material good, and that would be against the five virtues. However, she offers him next the green girdle. Again, he first rejects it, but this girdle was no common belt, it had the magical power of protecting its bearer from any damage that they might suffer. For a man who was literally waiting for death, this was an invaluable gift. He then accepts the girdle and promises Lady Bertilak that he will never tell her husband, finally breaking his agreement with the lord. This is Gawain's most flagrant failure in a sense, since he is failing to fulfil the two promises that he has done throughout the poem: He will not be able to receive an equivalent blow from the Green Knight since he is invulnerable thanks to the girdle, and he will not exchange his winnings with the lord of the castle for that

³ Even if for the purpose of my thesis, I summarize these encounters between Lady Bertilak and Sir Gawain in a few lines, they are extracts of a great interest, were they to be examined through the lens of fin amors/courtly love. For further information on the subject, see Olivares Merino (2019): "I be not now he that ye of speken: Middle English Romances and the Conventions of Fin'amors"

would mean that he is accepting his death. At that point it would be safe to state that the “trawþe” that Gawain was meant to uphold and represent was broken by then.

Nevertheless, his first reaction after obtaining the girdle is go into the chapel of the castle and confess his sins:

Syþen cheuely to þe chapel chosēs he þe waye,
Preuely aproched to a prest, and prayed hym þere
þat he wolde lyste his lyf and lern hym better
How his sawle schulde be saued when he schuld seye heþen.
þere he schrof hym schyrly and schewed his mysdedez,
Of þe more and þe mynne, and merci besechez,
And of absolucioun he on þe segge calles; (ll. 1876-82)

He is fully aware that he has sinned and, as a rightful Christian, he seeks absolution. The important question here would be: is he truly absolved of every sin? Scholars seem to differ. Stevens (1972), using the words of Norman Davies, argues that there is no room for interpretation in the poem. “Gawain leaves the confession a joyful, free man” and he “goes to declare not just his most recent transgression but all <<his mysdedez.>>. There is no indication anywhere what misdeeds in particular he confesses.” (p. 77). But precisely, if there is no indication of the precise misdeeds, we cannot know whether he has confessed not exchanging the girdle. On the other hand, Burrow argues that he has “no intention either of returning it to the lady or giving it up” and that “this fact is quite enough to invalidate a confession” (p. 75). Evans, for his part, adopts a neutral posture and writes that the confession is valid from a theological point of view, but that it does not only depend on God and the scriptures, but also the individual’s conscience (p. 728). If one takes into account this last part, it could be argued, due to his final encounter with the Green Knight and the final speech that he delivers, that Gawain’s conscience is not entirely clear. Be that as it may, the fact remains that Gawain is still in possession of the girdle by the time that he leaves Hautdesert’s Castle to reach the Green Chapel at the beginning of the fourth fit.

The first glimpse that the audience gets of Gawain’s feelings and state of mind are the following lines:

þe leude lystened ful wel þat Ie3 in his bedde,

þa3 he lowkez his liddez, ful lyttel he slepes;

Bi vch kok þat crue he knwe wel þe steuen (ll. 2006-8)

Still having difficulties to sleep, it seems that he is still afraid of the Green Knight and the blow that he owes. However, if he already has the protection of the girdle, there should be no need to be worried. Could it be possible that the remorse of lying and resorting to pagan magic is affecting him on the inside? Then again, it could simply be that he does not fully trust the girdle, so he is still anxious about the final encounter with his foe.

The next day Gawain is led by a servant to the Green Chapel and there, he has to overcome a final temptation: the servant invites him to leave while promising that he would never tell anyone that he fled. However, as the courteous knight that our protagonist is, Gawain knows that he needs to face this challenge – the right thing to do. At the same time, one could wonder whether he is not fearful of his fate anymore, since he has the magic girdle. In any case, Sir Gawain finally reaches the chapel and the Green Knight welcomes him. Gawain, feigning serenity, hides his dread and kneels in order to receive the blow. However, before the Green Knight strikes, Gawain flinches – finally showing that he is afraid of losing his life, even if he is wearing the magic girdle. The Green Knight then mocks the protagonist, since a man of his reputation should not be such a coward and feints once again. Gawain, furious, gathers the strength to kneel once more and, this time receive the blow, which thanks to having won the Exchanges Game in Hautdesert, does not kill him. The only mark that he gets is a small cut on his neck, due to having hidden the girdle from Lord Bertilak on the third day.

Ready to fight back now that the first strike has been repaid, Gawain jumps up and demands the Green Knight to stop or else he will counterattack. His opponent, however, has already fulfilled his objective and has no intention of fighting. In fact, he reveals his true identity, Bertilak of Hautdesert, and how he is aware of everything that has happened since it was a ruse in order to tempt him. This is the most significant part of the poem, since now that the trial has passed, it is only the final judgement that needs to be delivered. Has Gawain been true to the five virtues and values that he represented? Has he been the paragon of “trawþe” that his community believed him to be?

According to Anderson, there are three different judgements that are being passed in this final scene: Bertilak’s, Camelot’s and Gawain’s own judgement. He explains how the

three judgments are: “Gawain has failed in part,” “Gawain has failed completely,” and “Gawain has not failed at all,” (P. 339). What is more, he reaches the conclusion that the poet leaves it up to the audience to decide which one is the correct one, which is a sensible reading of the poem. The easy choice would be just choosing one of the three judgements passed on him, without delving deeper into the rest, and assuming that it was the poet’s only conclusion. However, this text deserves a proper and thorough analysis.

Gawain not having failed at all is the first judgment seen on the text, made by Lord Bertilak: “On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote 3ede;”, (l. 2363). For the Green Knight, Gawain is still the knight that we saw described on the arming scene. Someone who represents “trawþe” and the five values that make a person truly perfect. He recognizes that he might have fallen short in fidelity, but only because of his own desire to live, which does not constitute a sin (ll. 2366-68). Furthermore, he absolves Gawain of any guilt or sin that might linger in his soul, since he has already repaid for it.

Gawain, on the other hand, does not agree with him at all. In fact, he “schränk for schome” and started his own monologue on why he had failed on his task. According to him, he is “fawty and falce” (l. 2382), the person that he had always feared to become: the exact opposite of that paragon of “trawþe” idealized by everyone else. He compares himself to other famous men, like Solomon (the creator of his pentalpha) or Adam, who were misled by women. As mentioned before, this excerpt has been widely debated, since there are those who see it as an antifeminist discourse, and those who attribute it to the mentality of the age. There is a third possibility: it is indeed a discourse developed with the ideas of a specific age, where misogyny was taken for granted, and therefore containing such antifeminist ideas. In spite of this excuse for his behaviour, Gawain is still perfectly aware that he has failed, that he is sinful: “Bot in syngne of my surfet I schal se hit ofte,” 2433. He asks indeed for the girdle as a sign of that sinfulness, to remind him of the pride that led him to not exchange the girdle itself and also remember his failure.

Finally, he travels back to Camelot, where everyone is expecting him. He arrives bearing a healed wound, and the green girdle knotted around him. When he tells them the whole story, ashamed of his behaviour, instead of finding him as guilty as he had been feeling since the Chapel, they embrace him. They might consider that he has failed, but only partly, and finally laugh it off. There are two possible theories that explain this. In the first place, the members of the court are just rejoicing at the reappearance of their brother and any failure or mistake that helped him return should be celebrated as such – the reason

for which he is back. Secondly, it could be that Gawain's youth makes him see the world in a more serious tone than his brothers. He is too proud to admit yet that everyone makes mistakes, something that the members of the court already know, but are too proud to admit, since they too live by the code of chivalry and courteousness. In any case, the "token of vntrawþe" that Gawain finds ashaming becomes a symbol shared by all knights of the Round Table – a symbol of honour, solidarity, and the promise of being better men.

5. LINES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Before embarking on the conclusion of this thesis, I would like to emphasize the richness and relevance of this poem. What I have conducted here is only a small analysis of Sir Gawain's character and its relation to the five virtues that he was supposed to represent. However, it is only while doing so that one realizes the magnitude of possible subjects of research and analysis. Therefore, as lines for future research, I deeply recommend taking this analysis that I have humbly carried out and pushing it even further beyond.

In my opinion, human beings are creatures of habit, and deeply ingrained in their works, we will always find traits and tropes that will reappear over time. I believe that most of the characteristics that Sir Gawain, the knight of Camelot's Round Table, displays in this poem can be found in many other heroes and anti-heroes over the history of our fiction: comparisons between different heroic heroes might shed some light in the understanding of our nature as human beings. In addition, the character itself has been recently depicted in different series, games and films; a study of Sir Gawain's different depictions over different media could be interesting not only for philology and literature (by comparing the different characteristics that Sir Gawain has had during history), but maybe also for translation (by analysing the evolution of the translation of different terms belonging to Sir Gawain's myths and stories).

6. CONCLUSION

Sir Gawain and The Green Knight is a tale of humanity – of trying, failing, and continuing onwards, and that can be observed right through its main character and his behaviour all throughout the poem. As seen in the analysis, Sir Gawain is a character that is depicted in this work as the paragon of truth, "trawþe", and courtesy. However, there is a certain ambivalence in his character, present since the beginning in the form of certain irregularities in his actions. Since Gawain is the bearer of the pentangle and the man of

truest fame, he will stand for truth and the five values that are supposed to define him: generosity, companionableness, purity, courtesy, and pity. He needs to be the most perfect knight among the perfect knights. However, this is not how Gawain really sees himself. These are just the expectations that his fellow knights hold for him – it is how his community sees him. This means that, no matter how much Gawain wants to meet these expectations, he will never be able to fully do it. In fact, his greatest mistake and ultimate failure in his journey (hiding the girdle for himself) can be attributed to a mixture of fear and pride produced by those same expectations.

The first thing that we learn about Gawain is how noble he is – not only being able to sit next to the King and Queen, but also to sacrifice himself and participate in the duel against the Green Knight. He can be both extremely modest and proud, fruit of his nature as the truest knight. However, he is really forcing himself to be humble because people want him to be like that; that is why sometimes he is so quick to let himself go, because he cannot keep the same façade always. As soon as he gets to Hautdesert's castle, he starts drinking, eating, and wooing Lady Bertilak, as well as demeaning his own aunt, disguised as an old lady. Those same childish and impulsive features that were shown initially in King Arthur are also present in the protagonist of this story.

However, this does not mean that Gawain cannot be the knight that he is supposed to be, quite the opposite. It is necessary to consider that, since he cuts the Green Knight's head in the first fit, he already knows that at the end of his journey he will be meeting an equal blow – this is, death. He spends most of his journey afraid of that precise moment. Therefore, it should be understandable that he is not able to always maintain his role of the perfect knight. It is true that the initial confrontation could have been avoided, since what could have been a small, courteous cut in the neck of a foreign knight ended up being a gruesome execution. That is, in my opinion, the first mistake that Gawain makes: he lets himself get carried away by the situation and meets the expectations of the court – he forgets compassion and humility precisely when he should not have.

Naturally, the next fault regarding the five virtues would be the exchange game situation. It is true that he behaves as the perfect courteous knight whenever Lady Bertilak tries to woo him; nevertheless, he becomes blind by his desire to live and keeps the girdle to survive the duel with the Green Knight. In addition, I do not believe that he is free of sin or that the confession performed in the castle's chapel absolves him. The most relevant part of a confession is not whether God forgives you or not, it is whether you feel free of

sin or guilty; and in the case of Gawain, I think that he feels scarred, both physically and mentally. He knows that he has failed those who trusted him and leaves him flawed. Morgan Le Fay got what she wanted, since she managed to prove that even the purest knight of the Round Table can be tempted to sin. But despite all that, Gawain is still the hero of this story. He might have failed, sinned, and betrayed the person that his friends thought him to be. But did they blame him? No, they did not. The ideal Gawain that the court of Camelot had envisioned was just that, an ideal; and it is only at the end of the story that we learn that only Gawain took it at face value.

Even after surviving, he still blames himself for failing. Bertilak tells Gawain after the blow that he is still as faultless as he was before the journey had begun. That is not completely true, because Gawain knows that he has failed. Gawain's verdict is equally ambiguous in my opinion, since he only sees himself as a failure. The way I see it, it would be Camelot's judgement that fits reality the most, for they applaud their friend's fault, knowing that it is an opportunity to improve. However, this poem does not pretend to seriously judge Gawain, it is just a magnificent reminder to the IV century audiences that the values which they were supposed to achieve, and follow are not set in stone. A reminder that we, human beings, are not perfect; in fact, we are inherently weak. It is only when we accept that weakness as something natural that we can begin fighting it and improve as individuals; and heroes like Sir Gawain are there to remind us that the most important step is never the first, but the next one.

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