Ben McCabe

Sir Gawain and Scholasticism

Department of English

The University of Sydney
Introduction

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is perhaps today the best-known and widely-read Middle English romance, even if it is most often known and read in modern translation. The appeal of the poem lies in the anonymous poet’s skill in creating the poem’s Romance world, that mixes magical effect with the performance of the chivalric ideal, and the playful laxity of courteous morality with the earnestness of the Christian ethic. The conventions of the Arthurian tradition and characterizations are recast with disarming originality, drawing the reader into the texts complexities in a way that can be compared to the confused perceptions of Gawain himself. The richness *SGGK* offers modern readers many ways into the poem’s ideas, but I will argue in this thesis that the thought-world in which the poet lived should not be left behind in modern approaches to the romance. My focus will be on a central question of the poem—the problem of facing death—contextualized in a discussion of medieval ways of thinking about the ethical dilemmas that the poem creates for its central character, Sir Gawain.

In the following thesis, I will offer a reading of the Middle English romance of *SGGK* that contextualises the poem within the framework of Scholastic thought, focusing in particular on the influence of the Scholastic discussions of moral philosophy, in order to better understand the poem’s treatment of moral indeterminacy. In the opening preface I outline my reasons for adopting this approach, while also acknowledging that such a methodology is not entirely new in the scholarship surrounding *SGGK*. My approach to the poem is one that focuses on a historical understanding of ethics that prevailed in the poet’s time, and so is historicist in a broad sense, but focused particularly on the history of ideas. Rather than trying to read the poem through the lens of later modern philosophical and critical understandings, I explore how the moral issues addressed within the poem would have been framed in the late fourteenth-century. Before embarking on my analysis of the text, I briefly consider the limitations of an emblematic, though influential school

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1 In this thesis ‘*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’ is abbreviated to ‘*SGGK*’.

of criticism that developed in the later twentieth century, and impacted criticism in various ways. I contrast my approach with this alternative mode of literary criticism, one that focuses more on the reader’s context as a mode of finding the idea of a text, and less on the author (however anonymous) and his historical milieu. To this end, I briefly outline some of the principal arguments of Michel Foucault, interrogating his argument that the author is not in fact that deep source of knowledge that he is often thought to be. I summarise his reasons for arguing that it is the reader and not the author who imparts the greater meaning to a text, a loaded approach when delving into early texts, written in an intellectual environment far removed from our own. I then examine some results of this subjective method of literary criticism in modern scholarship surrounding SGGK. After outlining the limitations of some of these recent interpretations of the text, I suggest that these readings of the poem reveal more of the critic’s mind and thought world, and less of the author’s. At this juncture I reassert the value of familiarising oneself with the world-view of the author, in an attempt to better appreciate some of the principal themes developed within the text.

My thesis centres on the argument that a familiarity with the Scholastic approach to moral philosophy is indispensable to an authentic reading of SGGK. The poem’s plot focuses clearly on the moral dilemmas that Gawain is faced with, and wraps these in a complex of moral quandaries, making an understanding of these in fourteenth-century terms imperative. From this premise, I argue that it is therefore of great importance to appreciate how these ethical issues were conceived of in the fourteenth-century. A danger exists for the modern reader making evaluations of the ethical issues within the poem, employing assumptions about even the most straightforward questions of what is right or wrong. Because discussion of ideals such as chastity, prudence and fortitude remain significant in scholarship on SGGK, there exists a danger that we might unwittingly impose modern (or even “timeless”) conceptions of these virtues on readings of the poem. It is for this reason that I argue the necessity of appreciating the meaning of these virtues as they were likely to have been conceived of by a fourteenth-century poet, who was, on the evidence of his other works, strongly influenced by Scholastic thought. His interest in virtue and moral questions is less obvious in SGGK than the poet’s more overtly religious works, but these interests unsurprisingly pervade his Arthurian romance nevertheless. In making this argument I draw on some of the now unfashionable arguments and criticism of C.S. Lewis, who restates the value of understanding these kinds of social issues
within literature as they were initially conceived. In contextualising the moral ideas discussed by the poet I often refer to the works of Thomas Aquinas, and in the conclusion of my preface I briefly explain why he may be considered a preeminent representative of the Scholastic school of thought.

At the beginning of my first chapter, I discuss the significance of the poet’s choice to open with Aeneas’ flight from the burning city of Troy, noting how this opening reflects the his interest in probing attitudes the experience and awareness of mortality. I argue that the poet began by portraying Aeneas’ escaping certain death in his doomed city, in order to frame Gawain’s own story, who, instead of fleeing from death, feels morally bound to seek it out. By commencing the narrative in this way the poet shows that his interest is not limited to a discussion of the human struggle with concupiscence, but also in a deeper interest the general human will to live. In the section ‘The youthfulness of Arthur’, I draw a connection between the childish depiction of Arthur and the poem’s wider interest in mortality. The Trojan hero presents an example of an honourable flight from death, while Arthur in his reckless childishness needlessly imperils his life by his rash response to the Green Knight; this response is then later contrasted with Gawain’s conduct, who also endangers his life for a ‘noble’ cause. This important and implicit comparison between Arthur’s and Gawain’s responses to the Green Knight’s challenge can only be validated if Arthur’s behaviour is viewed as unbecoming of his age and station. There are, however, a number of scholars who question a critical reading of Arthur’s youthfulness, maintaining that no censure was intended by the poet’s description of his "childgered" attitude. It is necessary in this context to address the various critical arguments that favour a positive reading of Arthur here, beside negative appraisals of his character. It is essential to understand the poet’s reasons for presenting Arthur’s behaviour as an example of rashness, for it is this conduct that serves as a foil to Gawain’s, highlighting the inherent contrasts presented by Gawain’s considered willingness to face death.

Gawain’s willingness to die, and the properness of this attitude only become apparent when the poem is viewed within a contemporary ethical framework. When the prominence of religious themes, implicit and explicit throughout the poem, are downplayed, the poem’s structural integrity suffers. Gawain’s willingness to die is
rendered absurd without due consideration of his religious sentiment. In the third part of my first chapter I identify Gawain’s legitimate fear of death: only his faith in higher good allows him to move beyond this fear. In making this argument I refer to the cultural authority of Thomas Aquinas in his concise definition of fortitude and recklessness. In the fourth part of my first chapter I further clarify the distinct difference between Arthur’s and Gawain’s acceptance of the Green Knight’s challenge. I do this by outlining Aquinas’ criteria for an authentic act of courage, explaining how that ‘good’ for which one faces death must be a ‘rational good’, that is it must be a good worth dying for. It is for this reason that Arthur’s acceptance of the Green Knight’s challenge cannot be deemed courageous or virtuous. I will argue that when he took up the challenge Arthur did so out of wounded pride, unlike Gawain, who endangers his life not for the sake of the court’s reputation but to preserve the life of his uncle King Arthur.

Discussion of Gawain’s motives in accepting the Green Knight’s challenge leads into reflection on his adherence to his promise to seek out the green chapel. This promise can be described as a ‘blind promise’ because Gawain made it when he was not aware of essential information regarding the person he was binding his word to, or the situation he is in. Susanne Thomas points out that Gawain’s oath should not have been considered legally binding, with reference to Aquinas’ on the binding nature of oaths. While it is true that in reality one would not be morally bound to such a blind promise, also significant is the fact that Gawain did in fact consider himself bound to uphold his promise. For it is through Gawain’s commitment to honouring his word, despite the pessimism expressed at Camelot, that the poet presents the problematic importance of justice for its own sake. This exposition of justice can be compared with Plato’s in The Republic, as both writers use similar devices to explore the ideal of justice in its purest form.

With Gawain’s acceptance of the Green Knight’s challenge and his departure for the Green Chapel the first three cardinal virtues, prudence, justice and fortitude are explored in their various dimensions. However, it is not until he is visited by Lady Bertilak that his temperance is tested. In this context we discover the poet’s intention to explore the tensions between the various virtues that Gawain strives to uphold. Derek Pearsall has argued that the contrivance of the story reveals the contradictions within the chivalric code. I discuss how the image of the pentangle on Gawain’s shield reflects Aquinas’ understanding of the interconnectedness of each of its virtues,
showing that no virtue can stand alone, but must always be informed by prudence, reaffirming the idea the Gawain’s shield reflects a Thomistic analysis of virtue.

The primary focus of chapter one is an exploration of the various ways that the Scholastically influenced poet conceptualised the four cardinal virtues, and how this may be seen within the narrative structure of the poem. My first chapter concludes by addressing the broader theme of the poem that pervades the entire text, that is Gawain’s attitude towards his own death. He struggles to live out the ideals of moral perfection emblazoned on his shield. But his greatest challenge is in assuming a fitting attitude towards his own death. My chapter concludes by looking at how Boethius’ ideas in *The Consolation of Philosophy* may have influenced the thought of the poet and his treatment of death within the poem.

In the first part of my second chapter, I address the poet’s depiction of Gawain’s temperance, showing how his behaviour exemplifies a Scholastic understanding of temperance. I begin by addressing the possible narrative reasons for Gawain’s restraint towards Lady Bertilak’s sexual advances. Carol Dinshaw suggests that his restraint is due to the wager with Lord Bertilak, whereby anything Gawain wins he must extend to his host. While this playful situation is crafted by the poet, on analysis it is unlikely that this is the chief motivation for Gawain’s chaste response. To support this claim I refer to the poet’s observably serious intention of exploring the perfection of virtues, emphasized by Gawain’s shield. Lady Bertilak also suggests reasons for Gawain’s abstinence, but these can be discounted as revealing his true motive, as Gawain himself does when she questions him. The situation requires an understanding of the Scholastic understanding of temperance (I draw on Aquinas’ classic definition), showing how restraint must be directed towards a noble and worthy good if the act is to be called truly temperate. With this definition of temperance I explain why it was so important that the poet show that Gawain refused the lady for nothing but the highest motives. I compare this use of narrative structure, making explicit the nuanced understanding of temperance, with the poet’s depiction of fortitude in the first fitt, by means of contrasting Gawain’s and Arthur’s acceptance of the Green Knight’s challenge. The Lady’s proffered reasons for Gawain’s continence contrast significantly with his higher motive, providing a clearer understanding of authentic temperance.

This method of contrasting virtue with vice is further played out in the poet’s portrayal of Gawain’s humility. In the second part of my second chapter I discuss
Gawain’s progression from false humility to an authentic estimation of himself. Bernard of Clairvaux teaches that true humility is the virtue that allows one to have an exact knowledge of oneself. It is my argument that the self-deprecating arguments that Gawain makes in order to navigate the difficult situations with the Green Knight and Lady Bertilak are not meant to epitomise authentic humility. I refer to Aquinas’ and Bonaventure’s definitions of humility, explaining that they both agree that humility lay not in the self-abasement that Gawain demonstrated, but rather in possessing a true self-knowledge, and this proves to be the very quality Gawain lacks. It is this same defect that the poet wishes to highlight in his characterisation. One of the essential aspects of Gawain’s character development is the framing of his departure from and return to court: he leaves embracing the shield that emblemizes his sense of his own perfection, while upon his return he wears the green girdle, symbolizing his own sense of failure. The poet’s use of these symbols of the shield and girdle contrasts false and true humility, echoing the contrast of true courage and temperance revealed by initially showing what they were not.

In the third part of my second chapter I return to the poet’s treatment of temperance as shown through Gawain’s final visit from Lady Bertilak. It is in this final episode with the lady that the poet captures the essence of authentic temperance. The Lady suggests that Gawain’s restraint is motived by his fidelity to another woman. It is of great significance that Gawain denies this claim. It is essential to the poet’s treatment of temperance that Gawain’s chastity be motived by nothing other than a love of virtue for its own sake and ordered disdain towards that which is immoral. Scholastic thinkers argued that an act of restraint for any lesser reason cannot be accurately defined as temperate. The poet reasserts this view in Gawain’s final refusal of Lady Bertilak. Derek Pearsall asserts that Gawain’s faith is not an integral aspect of poet’s focus, but merely a convention of his age. In response to this curiously ahistorical view, I reread the climactic point in the story, as Gawain is close to wavering in his chaste resolve. The poet notes the evil it would bring upon his soul, should he succumb to the temptation. In this context, we see that Gawain’s faith is in fact the motivating logic behind each of his virtuous acts throughout the story.

The second chapter concludes with discussion of the ambiguous ending of the poem. I offer an argument towards understanding why the poet leaves off the narrative with such a morally indeterminate conclusion. Throughout the story the poet shows such clear distinctions between virtue and vice, and yet at the end of the
narrative it is unclear how seriously his fault of retaining the girdle should be interpreted. J.R.R. Tolkien maintains that this indefinite conclusion is intentionally created by the poet, and is in fact central to the poem’s general interest in morality. The poet’s didactic intention is expanded rather than reduced by the ambiguous ending. By it he shows the complexities of the morality, revealing that though there is a concrete moral reality, our ability to evaluate our own conduct or those of others can never be perfect. Tolkien is not arguing for moral relativism reading of the poem, but he does show the poet’s multifaceted understanding of morality. I summarise Tolkien’s argument of the three systems of rules that Gawain attempts to live by. The rules of morality, the rules of courtesy and the rules of the game prescribed by the Green Knight. The central tension of the poem lies in Gawain’s attempt to adhere to these often-conflicting set of rules. The conclusion of this reading of SGGK refers to the authority of Aquinas to resolve the ambiguity of the poem’s ending. Thomas makes the distinction between worldly fear and godly fear, and explains why any misconduct performed out of worldly fear is a fault. Aquinas’ ethics clarify the different moral plains that Gawain and his fellow Knights operate on, and this difference clarifies some of the seeming ambiguities of the poem’s end, revealing a reasonableness in Gawain’s self-condemnation. The harshness of his self-evaluation reflects the uncompromising ideal of moral perfection that is so much a part of Aquinas’ thought.
Chapter 1

Preface

In the following chapter, I will offer a reading of *SGGK* which locates my literary approach in a school of criticism that is neither new nor currently fashionable. The approach I take incorporates aspects of historicism—not unusual in medieval literary criticism—and I also embrace the belief that it is possible, through close and careful reading of the poem, to understand not only something of what the author intended to convey in meaning to his contemporary readers, but also the ideals that underpin his approach. This, I will argue, is grounded on the thought of Scholastic philosophy, applied to questions of moral conduct. The suggestion that the moral hermeneutic of the poem emerges within a Scholastic frame is not new,\(^3\) nor is the suggestion that the poet is deeply interested in the tension between human weakness and Christian ideals.\(^4\) But before I turn to the question of what might be characterized as the poem’s ethic, I wish to consider, in an emblematic way, some challenges to this kind of approach presented by ways of approaching the poem in some recent influential studies. These might generally be understood as embracing the style of criticism that has grown out of the marriage of Marx and Freud,\(^5\) and perhaps most clearly and popularly articulated by Michel Foucault.

Michel Foucault can represent the epitome, and he was certainly a most influential proponent, of what could be called the “subjective” interpretation of literature. In his work *What is an Author?*, he argues that any purpose or intention that readers ascribe to the author is in fact a projection of their own viewpoints and biases. The attempt to uncover an understanding of the author’s beliefs through contextualising the period that he wrote in, is a method of literary analysis that Foucault seeks to discredit:


Critics doubtless try to give this being of reason a realistic status, by discerning, in the individual, a "deep" motive, a "creative" power, or a "design," the milieu in which writing originates. Nevertheless, these aspects of an individual which we designate as making him an author are only a projection, in more or less psychologizing terms, of the operations we force texts to undergo, the connections we make, the traits we establish as pertinent, the continuities we recognize, or the exclusions we practice.6

While I would reject the assertion that understanding a literary work is simple a study in self-analysis, Foucault’s argument does serve as an important warning against Romantic notions of regarding canonical authors as inspired geniuses—a flaw, as we will see, can be found in some criticism of SGGK.7 The attempt to uncover the deeper motives of the author is one that Foucault sees as dispensable, if not impossible, it is the work and not the author that the critic should seek to understand. Foucault launches his attack on the “author” with the weapons of structuralism, as the “author” is hidden by the voice of the “narrator”, a textual layering that relegates the reader to an insuperable distance from the text’s originating voice. The author’s importance is minimised by explaining that the voice of the “author” inscribed as the “narrator” of the story should be regarded as quite distinct in identity from the actual person who wrote the text. The person writing may assume a set of beliefs as the author, that he as a person might not personally maintain. For instance the authorial voice of Les Miserables might seem to offer sanctimonious reverence towards the virtue of purity, and yet it is quite likely that Victor Hugo himself personally revered purity to a much lesser extent.8 Because of this disconnect between the voice of the author and an historical person’s actual beliefs, Foucault asserts that it is far less important, as well as futile, to attempt to discern the true meaning of the author.9 It is unclear what such an approach could mean when reading the works of an anonymous author such as the Gawain-poet, though undoubtedly some critics have made the mistake of believing they know even this author’s deeper thoughts. That is not my intention, I will attempt to stay close to the text of the poem.

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9 Ibid., 299.
Foucault departs from the popular, and clearly naive, opinion that meaning is only inherent in the text; rather, it is the work of the critic to uncover any meaning that might inhere. He attests rather that a text’s ideas are already in their form within the reader and the story is a kind of canvas that allows the reader to give matter to that form. Foucault discourages the school of thought that views the author as a source of “deep knowledge” that might speak in general to the human condition, with a meaning that can endure across time and place, wherever the text might be read. The author, he suggests, should not be assumed to have any profound degree of depth that is so often ascribed to the great writers. Instead, the author should only be thought of as the mediator of ideas that are already available to all people, and any prolonged focus on the author, rather than just the work itself, will limit and constrain the discussion of ideas:

The author is the principal of thrift in the proliferation of meaning. As a result, we must entirely reverse the traditional idea of the author. We are accustomed, as we have seen earlier, to saying that the author is the genial creator of a work in which he deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations. We are used to thinking that the author is so different from all other men, and so transcendent with regard to all languages that, as soon as he speaks, meaning begins to proliferate, to proliferate indefinitely. The truth is quite the contrary: the author is not an indefinite source of significations that fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principal by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction.10

It may then be said that the truths of the literary text are whatever the critic succeeds in drawing from it. Foucault speaks of his hope that literary scholarship will focus less and less on the author, and more on the reader’s own experience. By appropriating such an approach he suggests that critics will be moved to ask the more meaningful and enlightening questions.

We would no longer hear the questions that have been rehearsed for so long: Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse? Instead, there would be other questions, like these: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where

10 Ibid., 313.
there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking?"11

Some of the questions Foucault places in the mouths of his contemporaries evoke for us an earlier, mid-twentieth-century age of literary criticism, that had become preoccupied with textual criticism to the extent that it replaced any attempt at meaningful engagement with literature as literary. However, the danger inherent in a wholesale relegation of historicising questions about medieval texts is that, uncoupled from any determinative sense of their own time and place, critical readings of them can render them as authorless receptacles of critical fancy.

Taken to its illogical extreme, the kind of approach outlined by Foucault can leave us with an abundance of modern ideals and social interests being superimposed upon the ambivalent text. For example, Carolyn Dinshaw argues for a reading of SGKG that sees in it not only the examination of homosocial bonds, but homosexual eroticism. She accepts that such a reading may not have been directly intended by the poet, yet affirms that such a reading remains valid.

When, then, Gawain kisses Bertilak we ought not allow the heterosexual ideology of the poem to render unintelligible to us the fulfilment of their exchange bargain, a fulfilment that is right before our eyes: two men kissing feelingly, solemnly, seriously.12

Catherine S. Cox also uses the poem to inform her thoughts on gender theory.13 This is not to say that all of modern society’s interests are absent from the poem’s thought-world, however differently conceived. Jill Mann, with a more convincing historical approach, argues for a political reading of the poem, showing how the decadence described in Arthur and Bertilak’s court reflects the extravagance of Richard II’s own court.14 Joseph Taylor sees in the poem a discussion on the legal indeterminacy of

11 Ibid., 314.
verbal contracts, Lynn Arner offers a colonialist reading of the poem, while Derek Pearsall, less convincingly, attempts a completely secular reading of SGGK that ignores the pervasive, obvious and totally unsurprising influence of Christianity on the poem’s conceptions.

These forms of more subjective literary analysis reveal much of the critic’s own thoughts and world view, but generally less of the author’s, at times sacrificing historical plausibility on the altar of contemporary relevance. It must, however, be freely admitted that it is difficult to wholly remove one’s biases, and make a completely objective reading of the poem. Oscar Wilde recognises this truth when he says that all literary criticism is a form of autobiography. However, in a world where people are in fact capable of meaningful communicating with each other through writing, some objectivity may still be hoped for in criticism and the process of reflecting upon the literary form in which a writer chose to convey ideas, as well as the context in which medieval texts were written. The broad range of themes that literary texts address makes it difficult to ascertain, with any certitude, the full intentions of any author. The historians will vary in their conclusions, but they are united by their focus on human action, philosophers similarly concern themselves with ideas, and theologians with divinity. The challenge that arises in analysing literature, in particular medieval literature, is that the poets are often concerned with all three. If any objectivity is to be hoped for then, in studying medieval literature the critic can benefit from familiarising him- or herself with the theologies, philosophies and social ideas of that era. To this end I have titled the following thesis Scholasticism in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; not because the Gawain-poet was himself a Scholastic, but rather because I believe that in understanding the influence of Scholasticism, one may better appreciate the moral thought of the poem. No


18 Oscar Wilde, preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray (Oxford University Press, 2008), 1.

reading can ever recapture the fullness of a deep historical moment, but this does not mean that all efforts in this direction are either futile or meaningless.

The danger that presents itself in a critical approach focused on the “ideal” in a text remains that of ironing out or ignoring historical difference. Such an approach might suggest that in studying a text such as SGGK that explores concepts of moral virtue, one need only familiarise oneself with a general understanding of ethics, rather than a detailed study of moral philosophy as it was understood in the middle ages. C.S. Lewis comments on the dangers inherent to a methodological approach that looks only at those parts of a text that resonate with our own time and values:

According to this method the things which separate one age from another are superficial. Just as, if we stripped the armour off a medieval knight or the lace of a Caroline courtier, we should find beneath them an anatomy identical with our own, so, it is held, if we strip off from Virgil his Roman imperialism, from Sidney his code of honour, from Lucretius his Epicurean philosophy, and from all who have it their religion, we shall find the Unchanging Human Heart, and on this we are to concentrate.20

Lewis says that by disregarding the ideals and philosophies of a former age, and focusing only on the similitudes, one misses a significant aspect of literary criticism. The richness of a text is reduced if we focus only on that which resounds with modern thought. This selective approach stands in danger of highlighting that which was perhaps not the main intention of the poem. To counter this danger Lewis offers another method of reading literature:

Instead of stripping the knight of his armour you can try to put his armour on yourself: instead of seeing how the courter would look without his lace, you can try to see how you would feel with his lace…21

Rather than ignoring the dissimilarities dividing two ages, and resigning ourselves to belief that an essential otherness in medieval texts, I am interested in trying the experiment advocated by Lewis. That is, I will attempt an understanding of some of those particularities that delineate a former world-view from our own. It is for this reason that the discussion of this thesis will focus closely on the influence of Scholastic thought on the moral framework of SGGK. The reader, I suggest, cannot


21 Ibid., 62.
properly evaluate this kind of medieval poem, that treats ideas of virtue and vice so explicitly, without first recovering an awareness of how its late fourteenth-century poet, undoubtedly formed in the theological questions and methods of his age, understood moral theology.22

The following discussion of Scholastic thought includes a particular focus on the works of Thomas Aquinas, not because other medieval theologians deserve less attention, but because Aquinas’ pre-eminence and universal influence allows us to treat him as the most influential representative of that school of thought.23 In seeking a clearer understanding of the Gawain-poet’s world-view it might seem curious to consult a theologian who lived a century earlier, though as C.S. Lewis has argued, this school of thought and its ideas took time to impact other cultural forms, like literature.24 I will argue that a close analysis of the moral conflict in SGGK reveals this influence of the broad outlines of Aquinas’ formulations of moral philosophy. Before making a close analysis, however, it is worth noting more general points of connection that reflect this Scholastic influence on the poem. A common theme in any discussion of Scholasticism is the unification of faith and reason,25 that Aquinas championed; he affirmed that the tenets of the Christian faith never could or would never oppose what reason showed to be true.26 He was a firm proponent of the idea that faith and reason together will lead a person to truth. It is not coincidental that in SGGK fides (faith) is often brought into an apparent tension with ratio (reason). Gawain’s faith impels him to be ever loyal to his trouthe, this loyalty is problematized by his reason that tells him to do whatever will preserve his self. Reason inclines him to stay in the safety of Camelot, while faith suggests he should honour his word and seek out the Green Chapel. Faith tells him to trust in God, rather than a magical girdle, given as a love token by a married woman, reason tells him to accept anything that might save him from the Green Knight’s axe. The poet draws faith and reason into play, with questions of virtue, honour, courtesy and chivalry, showing how the tensions among them intersect.

22 G.K. Chesterton, Chaucer (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), 158.  
This critical approach of looking at the moral dimensions SGGK through a Thomistic lens in order to better understand how the poet’s moral anthropology and especially his characterisation of the hero, is an established one that has received recent new attention. David N. Beauregard offers a Thomistic reading of the poem in, showing how Aquinas’ definition of fortitude influenced the poet’s depiction of that virtue. In an earlier study, Gerald Morgan also drew on Thomistic thought in his *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Idea of Righteousness*. In his preface to the book he explains the reasons why he considers the works of Aquinas so significant towards a correct understanding of SGGK:

> All texts have been shaped by their historical context, so that at some point it is necessary to go beyond the text to the larger context of ideas that have informed it. I have gone to the context of medieval scholasticism, and especially to the thought of its most distinguished representative, Aquinas, in order to grasp the ideas that are imaginatively significant in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.  

The intention of this thesis will be to analyse the poem, with the view of better understanding how it would have originally been read in the fourteenth-century, rather than imposing ahistorical readings on the text. It is the less likely that the poet’s ideas will be misconstrued, if the literary critic attempts to approach the text from the world view that prevailed at the time of the poem’s composition. With this view in mind, I will develop, extend and consolidate aspects of Gerald Morgan’s approach to SGGK, with an examination, through a Thomistic lens, of the tensions inherent in the prudential practice of courage and chastity.

### 1.1 Aeneas

It is not an unfair characterisation to suggest that the many critics of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* have struggled to find any deep meaning in the poem’s opening allusion to the siege at Troy, and especially the significance of the reference to

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Aeneas, the first hero mentioned in the poem. The myth of Trojan origin is undoubtedly of great importance for the history of chivalry as understood in the Middle Ages, but Aeneas himself emerges as a deeply problematic character, and one who offers important insights into the moral crises faced across the poem by Gawain himself. The implicit logic of introducing Aeneas at the poem’s opening connects the chivalric deeds of Arthur’s court with the glory of Troy, through Aeneas’ descendant Brutus:

\[
\text{Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz at Troye,} \\
\text{þe borȝ brittened and brent to bodndez and askez,} \\
\text{þe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wroȝt} \\
\text{Watz tried for his tricherie, þe trewest on erthe:} \\
\text{Hit watz Ennias þe athel, and his highe kynde,} \\
\text{þat siþen depreced prouinces, and patrounes bcome} \\
\text{Welneȝe of al þe wele in þe west ûles. (1- 7)}
\]

As the story progresses, however, more subtle and significant reasons for the introduction of Aeneas present themselves. George Sanderlin notes that both heroes must rebuff the enticement of a lady in order to fulfil their quest. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, and unlike the *Aeneid*, the “lovers” and the hunt are separated out into two temporally interwoven sets of episodes, and the encounter in the “cave” is reserved for Gawain alone in the Green Chapel.

This kind of structural parallel is developed across the poem, an aspect of the poet’s technique observed by Pamela Gradon:

The Challenge is made on New Year’s Day; 
the requital is given on New Year’s Day. 
Life at the Green Knight’s court is equally symmetrical. We have three evening parties, 
three temptation scenes, three hunting scenes. Moreover, each hunting scene is used as a kind of frame for the equivalent temptation scene.

The parallels between the hunting and temptation scenes reveal the nature of the game Gawain finds himself in. He is not the master of the situation; he is rather the one

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being hunted. The deer reflects the quick and nimble thinking Gawain requires to respond to the lady’s rhetorical tricks, the boar shows the strength of will required in refusing her, and the fox the cunningness needed to escape her final attempts of seduction. These implicit parallels between Gawain and the animals, involved in the hunt, suggest the possibility of other parallels that the poet wishes his readers to draw between Gawain and Aeneas. If the poem’s introduction is to be considered more than an arbitrary reference Virgil’s epic, then it should be assumed that the poet intends an important parallel between his Trojan and Arthurian heroes.

Sanderlin argues that the basis of the poet’s comparison is the trials that Aeneas faced in his love for Dido, beside Gawain’s temptation from Lady Bertilak. The focus, in this light, is their struggle with sexual appetite. However, if this aspect of the comparison were the poet’s main interest, it would seem more appropriate that the poet should have begun his narrative with Aeneas fleeing Carthage. But he begins carefully and hardly accidentally with Aeneas’ flight from the burning city of Troy, where he chooses to escape death—he is fleeing no seduction here. The choice to commence his narrative with this scene—one of the most famous in history—suggests that the poet’s main interest in Aeneas is focused on his choice of flight over certain death, a blend of destiny with prudence that cuts to the heart of Gawain’s own dilemma. Undoubtedly Gawain struggles against desires of the flesh, but the context in which these arise is his profound awareness of his impending death, and his flesh’s strongest desire for life. By recognising his fear of death, and the impact of this on his self-understanding as a knight, Gawain discovers a deeper self-awareness. Gerald Morgan comments:

> The opening lines of the poem are thus not only logical and clear, but also reveal a complexity that we shall find to be characteristic of the poet’s moral thinking in general.

Morgan argues that the trials Aeneas faced with the loss of his city, eventuate in the glory of founding Rome, and so in a similar way, Gawain is faced with the prospect of

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33 Morgan, Idea of Righteousness, 46.
losing his life, instead discovers a deeper self-realization.\textsuperscript{34} Morgan’s reading of poem presents a credible argument for considering why the poet decided to begin his poem with the fall of Troy.

However, a more telling comparison is to be drawn between Gawain and Aeneas, focused on the particular historical circumstance and its inherent moral struggle, that the poet highlights. Aeneas has the choice to live, but he must abandon the city he loves, in superficial terms choosing the coward’s path away from battle and the burning city. Likewise, Gawain is also presented with a chance to live in the shape of the girdle. His departure from Arthur’s court and city to face his destiny seems courageous, but the real departure that will challenge him is from his own sense \textit{trouthe}, if he is to live. The contrast in the heroes’ responses to death is not intended to vilify Aeneas. It could hardly be thought cowardly to flee a doomed city already in flames. Indeed, the poet describes Aeneas as ‘the trewest on erthe’ (3). In Gawain’s situation he is, however, bound, by his blind promise, to refrain from fleeing death. The danger that besets both heroes is similar, yet the differing circumstances necessitate alternative responses. It may then be seen, that by commencing his narrative with Aeneas’ flight from death, the poet gives his story a \textit{memento mori} framework. And it is this theme, Morgan says, that reflects the poet’s moral thought throughout the poem. In this light, the ethics of facing death move to the centre of the poem, and with it the tension between prudential caution and courage.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{1.2 The youthfulness of Arthur}

This tension is further played out in the character of Arthur at the banquet when he impulsively accepts the Green Knight’s challenge. This lack of caution and discretion furthers the poet’s exposition on attitudes towards death. The entire poem centres around death and the differing attitudes towards it. In the description of Aeneas “\textit{Pe trewest on erthe}” (4) fleeing Troy, the poet presents one significant example showing that in some circumstances it might be fitting to flee from death. Arthur’s character reveals the inherent flaw of treating death too lightly, and not practicing due caution. And in Gawain’s acceptance of the Green Knight’s game and eventual departure for the Green Chapel, the poet shows that in particular circumstances it is perhaps more

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 46.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 46.
fitting deliberately to imperil one’s own life, if it means the attaining of a higher good such as preserving another. The poet’s way of bringing these three contrasting attitudes towards death is rooted in his handling of Arthur’s conduct in the context of the game, which is carefully described. The poet’s vocabulary allows the reader enough freedom to weigh up Arthur’s conduct and compare it with Gawain’s, without creating a simplistic opposition between virtue and vice. If it was in fact the intention of the poet to reflect in the character of Arthur an example of recklessness, then it is worth noting the way in which he does this. Arthur is described as acting very youthful, and it is this youthfulness that the poet invites us to evaluate. Arthur demonstrates his boyishness by insisting on being entertained before enjoying his meal:

He wolde neuer ete
Vpon such a dere day er hym deuised were
Of sum auenturus þyng an vncoþe tale,
of sum mayn meuayle, þat he myȝt trawe…(91 – 94)

Arthur’s behaviour is entirely conventional within the literary tradition, but here it is inflected and problematised by the poet. The king’s custom was an established part of the tradition within the corpus of Arthurian tales. The thirteenth-century German poet Der Stricker describes Arthur’s custom:

He vowed, for the sake of his comrades’ good name,
that he would each and every day refrain from food until such time as he should hear of — or else witness himself — a new tale of some deed worth recounting.36

Similarly, Jaufre’s twelfth-century Occitan poem also presents Arthur declaring:

You know full well, for you have seen it many times,
that I will not eat for anything, no matter how long I must hold court, until an adventure comes, or some strange news of a knight or maiden.37

In all three narratives the king insists that he be entertained before he breaks his fast. However, a more significant commonality across them is the form of entertainment that Arthur demands. All three poets describe Arthur as wishing to hear a story or witness some marvel. It is significant that in SGGK the poet emphasizes a new

condition: that the story or marvel must be trawe ("true", "truthful"). The poet’s playful irony is in evidence as a character within a Romance narrative full of marvels should demand to hear a story that is true, but there is also a deeper significance in Arthur’s demand for a trawe story. For Trawþe is the theme upon which the whole narrative centers. The conflict is generated by Gawain’s struggle to remain true to his word. It is important to note that, though Arthur stipulated that the marvel or story be one of truth, what he finds is far removed from it, as the court and the reader are drawn into an elaborate game where nothing is at seems—the Green Knight’s Christmas game rests on both magic and deception. The court cannot know that the challenge is a plot orchestrated by Morgen le Fay, targeted against Guinevere. Nor can the court or reader know that there would be further levels of deception within the game. It is this pervasive untruthfulness of the game, when revealed at the end of the story, that serves to highlight the Gawain’s own self-deception.

The Gawain-poet describes Arthur and his court as youthful and spirited, “he þe comlokest kyng þat þe court haldes; for al watz þis fayre folk in her first age…” (53) The story is set in the early days of Arthur’s rule when “he watz so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered…” (86) J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon gloss childgered as ‘boyish merriment’ or ‘youthfulness’. And yet though the joyful vitality of youth would seem a positive quality, J. J. Anderson argues that the word is used by the poet with a tone of censure:

"childgered" may not mean precisely "childish," but there is nevertheless a derogatory implication that he is not yet fully adult in his ways, and "brayn wylde" suggests thoughts which are over-impulsive.

Anderson further argues that Arthur demonstrates his childishness in wilfully allowing his knights to endanger their lives for the sake of entertainment:

To joyne wyth hym in iustyng, in joparde to lay,
Lede, lif for lyf, leue vchon oþer,
As fortune wolde fulsun hom, þe fayrer to haue.
(97 – 99)

It is true that as early as 1139 Pope Innocent III, at the Second Lateran Council, had condemned the practice of jousting:

We entirely forbid, moreover, those abominable jousts and tournaments in which knights come together by agreement and rashly engage in showing off their physical prowess and daring, and which often result in human deaths and danger to souls.\(^{42}\)

This edict was, however, to a large extent ignored throughout the Middle Ages\(^{43}\), and when the poet mentions the chivalric games, there is no obvious or overt censure. The poet’s description of the jousting offers little evidence to suggest that he was moralizing against such dangerous sport in the way that Pope Innocent III had. If Arthur’s youthfulness was a fault, it was not because he permitted his knights to endanger themselves through games of prowess. Anderson’s critique of Arthur’s childgered nature nevertheless warrants further evaluation. The term invites a wide range of possible interpretations, and in evaluating the portrayal of Arthur’s character, it is necessary to explore the sense in which the poet used it. There is also undoubtedly an intentional ambiguity in the poet’s description of Arthur’s youthful nature. Enough remains unsaid that the reader must think carefully about Arthur’s maturity and conduct.

Questions of propriety, fittingness and conduct constitute a central theme of the poem.\(^{44}\) The prominence of ideal conduct as a concern in the poem is demonstrated by Gawain’s first speech. Before seeking to dissuade Arthur from the Green Knight’s game he asks permission of Guinevere to rise from the table, and permission from Arthur to stand by his side. And when he makes his argument, his first appeal is to the impropriety and un-fittingness of the challenge. This opening speech demonstrates the poet’s interest in exploring ideas of acting in a way that is fitting to one’s state. J. A. Burrow affirms the centrality of this theme, noting the


frequent use of such adjectives as ‘becoming’, ‘meet’, ‘kind’, ‘seemly’ etc.\textsuperscript{45} Fittingness is an essential quality of propriety, that in turn is fundamental to the chivalric virtue of courtesy, and it is this virtue of courtesy that is so central to the theme of the poem. Burrow defines the criteria for fittingness or seemliness, noting:

For a man’s dress, speech or conduct to be praiseworthy, it must be appropriate – appropriate, that is, to such a variable factors as his age and social position, the occasion and his part in it, and the season of the year.\textsuperscript{46}

The question must then be asked whether Arthur’s behaviour was fitting to his age state in life. He is described with a youthful restlessness and an unconstrained vitality of spirit:

He watz so joly of his joyfulness, and sumquat childgered:
His lif liked hym lyȝt, he louied þe lasse
Auper to longe lye or to longe sitte,
So bisied him his ȝonge blod and his brayn wylde. (86 - 89)

Gerald Morgan consistently—almost apologetically—favours a positive reading of Arthur’s character, and is at pains to show that there is nothing imprudent or improper about Arthur’s character or conduct. He argues that because the court is described with such ideal praise, it should be thought of as the noble embodiment of courtly virtue.\textsuperscript{47}

Morgan’s argument does not, however, take into consideration the fact that the Green Knight himself questions the authenticity of the court’s reputation. The skepticism of the Green Knight does not dissuade Morgan from arguing that there was no censure intended by the poet when he described Arthur as \textit{childgered}:

The word is carefully qualified by the poet – sumquat childgered – so as to ensure that the king’s conduct cannot be taken to exceed the bounds proper to adolescence. The phrase suggests boyish energy rather than merriment. The pejorative force of modern English ‘childish’ is certainly ruled out by the context.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{47} Morgan, \textit{Idea of Righteousness}, 54.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 53.
Morgan argues that the emphasis on Arthur’s youthful restlessness was not intended as a point of criticism. He suggests further that it was rather meant to be a “celebration of the period of adolescence in the king”.\textsuperscript{49} In arguing for such reading of the king as carefree and merry, he proposes that the poet’s intention is to remind the readers that the story is set in the first age of Arthur’s reign, before Guinevere’s infidelity causes a rift in the court. Jonathan Nicholls continues Morgan’s argument, stating that the king’s mirth was fitting to his state:

Any note of disapprobation that may be imagined in the phrase ‘rechles merpès’ should be dissipated by the same line when the poet talks of ‘rych reuel oryȝt’, a qualifying statement that seems to approve of the fun and games as being appropriate to a celebration of Christmas.\textsuperscript{50}

In the same way he disagrees with the negative interpretations of the phrase ‘sumquat childgered’, viewing it instead as a fitting quality for a young king. Burrow takes a different line of argument to that of Morgan and Nicholls. He concedes that in principal there is nothing wrong with a young king being merry at a Christmas feast,\textsuperscript{51} but he nonetheless affirms that the prefacing of childgered with the phrase sumquat, suggests that Arthur’s Yuletide revelries were bordering on excess.\textsuperscript{52} Burrow offers a significantly different interpretation of the line “With rych reuel oryȝt and rechles merpès.” (40) While Nichols sees in the phrase ‘rych reuel oryȝ’, a note of approbation, Burrow interprets it as condemnatory. Tolkien and Gordon gloss ‘rechles’ as ‘care-free’ or ‘joyous’, Burrow, however, notes that the word can also be taken to mean ‘reckless’, ‘heedless’ or ‘rash’.\textsuperscript{53} Burrow interprets the terms ‘sumquat childgered’ and ‘rechles’ to suggest that Arthur’s youthfulness was not fitting to his age or rank. The fittingness of Arthur’s youthful behaviour cannot be appropriately judged without some knowledge of his actual age. If he were a still a young boy, there would be nothing to criticize in his boyish behaviour, and the court is described as being in its first age, so Arthur could not have been very old. In a story that does not focus on

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 52.

\textsuperscript{50} Nicholls, \textit{Courtesy}, 116.

\textsuperscript{51} Burrow, \textit{A Reading}, 5.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 10.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 8.
realism, it is difficult to understand the significance of the relative ages of the characters with Arthur perhaps still in his boyhood, and Gawain his nephew already old enough to be a knight.

If such terms are meant to convey age, it is then reasonable for us to infer that Arthur would have been a young man in the time that the poem is set. If then Arthur was a young man and not a boy, it seems unlikely that the reader is intended to view his boyish behaviour with approval. Arthur does not seem to have matured into adulthood, and he seems to still retain the impatient energy of boyhood. His inability to remain still, while understandable in a young boy, is probably to be read as unfitting for one of his age. He further demonstrates his immaturity when he rashly responds to the provoking taunts of the Green Knight. Aquinas speaks of the need to perfect one’s character with a coming with age. He comments that the truth of human nature will be only fully realized in adolescence, for in childhood the humors have not yet reached their ultimate disposition. Arthur seems to have failed so far to have made this progression into an adolescent character. His behaviour suggests that he is still governed by the humours of a child. Modern critical disagreements point to an ambivalence that is probably ingrained in the text and its vocabulary, and that the problematic question of the propriety of Arthur’s conduct—and that of his court—invites the reader into reflection on the question of correct conduct as the poem progresses. The poem is about games within games, and riddles within deceptions. These draw the reader in, but also draw Gawain out, taking him from the playful culture of Camelot into the earnestness (or so it seems) of the wild places of nature. What happens to him, and his experience of his ordeal, returns him to court with a more serious demeanor, that contrasts with the mirth at Camelot that greets the conclusion of the Green Knight’s game. It is a journey on which he is accompanied by the reader, but not by his fellow knights.

1.3 The Green Knight’s challenge

54 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III,81,1, co
All subsequent footnotes from the *Summa Theologica* will be in the following format:
The initial Roman numeral denotes the part of the Summa (‘I’ indicates the first part, ‘I-II’ indicates the first part of the second part, II-I indicates the second part of the second part II, ‘III’ indicates the third part.) The second number in the citation denotes the question being referred to, and the third number refers to the article in reference, the final number/letter indicates which part of the article is being cited (s.c. – “on the contrary”, co. - “I answer that”, ad - replies to objections). The following citation: ‘III, 81, co’ does then refer to: third book, question 81, article 1, “I answer that”.

The question of un-fittingness and impropriety in conduct are further precipitated and demonstrated in and by the context of the Green Knight’s discourteous entrance into the court. Without an introduction he abruptly demands to know which of the men is Arthur, and then proceeds to reject Arthur’s hospitality, stating that he comes only to test the court’s reputation. He bluntly insults the knights by declaring that none would be a match against him in combat:

Nay, frayst I no fyt, in feyth I þe telle,
Hit am aboute on þis bench bot berdleze chyller.
If I were hasped in armes on a heȝe stede,
Here is no mon me to mach, for myȝtez so wayke. (279 – 282)

After insulting the court, the Green Knight lays down the rules of his Christmas game, and when none rise to the challenge, he insults them further:

Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquests,
Your gryndellayk and your greme, an dyour grete words? (311 – 312)

It is at this point, while the Green Knight laughs at the court, that Arthur himself is provoked into breeching the rules of courtesy: “Þe blod schot for scham into his schyre face and lere; he wex wroth as wynde …” (317); rashly, the king accepts the challenge. Despite this description of his conduct, Gerald Morgan does not accept that Arthur has acted discourteously in his heated response. He argues that courtesy is the appropriate and fitting response to circumstances, and in this moment, when Arthur and his court had been publicly insulted, Morgan states that he was justified in his anger:

The subsequent anger that Arthur shows is not to be interpreted as a falling-off in courtesy. The virtue of courtesy is essentially one of fitness. And this meaning of courtesy is to be taken strictly; courtesy is matter of fit words and not fair words.

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57 Morgan, Idea of Righteousness, 55.

58 Ibid., 55.
He compares Arthur’s response to the righteous anger of Christ in the Temple.\(^{59}\) He also refers to Aquinas’ statement “to be angry in accord with right reason is praiseworthy.”\(^{60}\) Morgan’s reading, however, strains credulity in the light of the poet’s own comments, and reminds us of the value of Foucault’s critique of the “cult of the author,” or at least of the “poet,” to be found in some types of criticism. Arthur’s anger is neither praised nor praiseworthy, for it is not in accord with right reason. Aquinas qualifies his definition of ‘right reason’, stating that anger is evil when “it withdraws reason from its rectitude.”\(^{61}\) That is to say, anger is only praiseworthy when it is used as a corrective to another’s fault. Christ’s anger against the moneylenders was an instance of correction, the anger of Arthur against the Green Knight was not, however, a corrective. He is merely responding the provocations of the Green Knight, who wishes to incite him into a rash act. Prudence dictates that Arthur ought not to have accepted the challenge. Wilfully endangering his life, for the sake of an insult against his court’s reputation is not an act of righteous anger. Gawain subtly suggests the impropriety of Arthur’s actions when he says:

\[
\text{For me þink hit not semly, as hit is sōþ knawen,}
\text{þer such an asking s heuened so hyʒe in your sale,}
\text{þaʒ þye þyourself be talenttyf, to take hit to yourselyn… (348 - 350)}
\]

Arthur’s acceptance of the Christmas game was an act of recklessness, which Aquinas defines as a grave sin. “Fearlessness is a vice, either through lack of due love, or on account of pride, or by reason of folly.”\(^{62}\) Recklessness is equally opposed to the virtue of fortitude as the vice of timidity. Aquinas states: “Fearlessness by its specific nature corrupts the mean of fortitude, wherefore it is opposed to fortitude directly.”\(^{63}\) Arthur’s acceptance of the Green Knight’s challenge is, by Aquinas' definition, an act of recklessness. For it was on account of both his pride and folly that he accepted the challenge. In general terms, Arthur’s recklessness serves as a foil to Gawain’s

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\(^{59}\) Ibid., 56. (The section he refers to can be found in John 2: 13-17 The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic edition, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2006.)

\(^{60}\) Aquinas, ST, II-II, 158,1 co,

\(^{61}\) Aquinas, ST, II-II, 158,1 ad. 2.

\(^{62}\) Aquinas, ST, II-II, 126, 2 ad. 2.

\(^{63}\) Aquinas, ST, II-II, 126, 2, ad 2.
prudence. Arthur’s own meeting with the Green Knight leads into action that is firmly rooted in injured pride—an affliction that may well overtake Gawain in his encounter in the Green Chapel (2369 – 2388).

1.4 Gawain’s speech

Gawain’s acceptance of the rules and terms of the Christmas game has the qualities of an authentic act of fortitude that can be seen with a close analysis of his speech. The different states that Arthur and Gawain are in when they accepted the challenge are important. The poet makes it clear that when Arthur accepts the challenge it is an act of impulsive rage, “Pe blod schot for scham into his schyre face and lere; he wex as wroth as wynde”(219).

Aquinas condemns such rashness as sinful:

“To act quickly before taking counsel is not praiseworthy but sinful; for this would be to act rashly, which is a vice contrary to prudence”. It is often necessary and virtuous to act swiftly and without taking counsel from others, but the counsel Aquinas speaks of here is the counsel of one’s own prudence, for to act without prudence is always to act wrongly. Gawain, on the other hand, is in a more composed state when he intervenes, and this may be noted by the decorum he shows when asking permission to rise from table:

Wolde þe, worþilych lorde,’ qouþ Wawan to þe kyng,
‘Bid me boþe fro þis benche, and stonde by yow þere,
þat I wythoute vylanye myt voyde þis table,
And þat my legge lady liked not ille. (343 - 346)

After asking permission to rise, Gawain suggests, with subtle tact, that Arthur had acted amiss. He offers him his ‘counsyl’ and says that it was not ‘semly’ for him to accept the challenge. It would be discourteous to accuse Arthur of acting rashly, yet somehow Gawain must dissuade him from recklessly jeopardizing his life. The reason he gives is an ostensible one:

For me þink hit not semly, as hit is sop knawen,
þer such an asking is heuened so hyþe in your sale,
þat þe þyourself be talenttyf, to take hit to yourseluuen,


65 Aquinas, ST, II-II, 126, 1, ad. 2.
Whil monu so bolde yow aboute vpon bench sytten (348 - 351)

The Christmas game is, as both characters and readers discover later, one great deception. It is then significant, and ironically appropriate, that Gawain’s first argument to dissuade Arthur is an appeal to truth: “as hit is soþ knawen” (348). Gawain argues that the unseemliness of Arthur accepting the challenge self-evident, it is a known truth. Arthur’s valour is already proven; accordingly the other knights have a stronger claim to the challenge. Gawain argues that the king should allow him this opportunity to prove himself. But even in this argument, where Gawain appeals to a supposedly self-evident truth, there is a lack of truthfulness.

Gawain’s reasons given for dissuading Arthur seem disingenuous. Gawain’s courteous manner suggest more than his words, inviting the reader to reflect that the king’s acceptance of the challenge of a rash and foolhardy game would be unseemly, rather than simply offering an opportunity for the other knights to prove themselves.66 The text does not suggest that Arthur himself thought it a noble challenge, indeed when the challenge is first made he remains silent—this is not the kind of game he was looking for. It is only when Arthur is further provoked by the taunts of the Green Knight that he succumbs, and when he does so he is motivated by wrath and not reason. The subtlety of Gawain’s speech suggests a sensitivity to this fault, but courtesy must prevent him from openly condemning Arthur’s actions. He must put forward an ostensible reason for Arthur not accepting the challenge, so he suggests that the challenge is an apt opportunity for a knight to further his renown, and by this reasoning he asserts that of all the court, he is most entitled to the challenge:

Bot for as much as þe ar myn em I am only to prayse,
No boute bot your blod I n my bode knowe;
And syþen þis note is so sys þat noþ hit yow falles,
And I haue frayne hit at yow first, foldeþ hit to me (356 – 359)

The poet does not present Gawain with a low sense of his own self-worth, with only his kinship with Arthur to boast of, and across the poem he remains the knight who is the archetype of chivalric excellence and courtesy.67 More plausible is the understanding that his self-deprecating words are a strategy for taking the challenge


67 Barlett J. Whiting, Gawain: His Reputation, His courtesy, and His Appearance in Chaucer’s Squire’s Tale (New York: St Edmundsberry Press, 1947), 189.
off the king, for whom it is entirely inappropriate. Gawain cannot vaunt this chivalric superiority as an argument entitling him to the challenge, for such hubris would be contrary to rules of courtesy, and so instead he humbles himself to advance his claim, though this self-deprecation should not be thought to reflect his true self-understanding (354 – 355). Gawain’s shield, with the perfections it symbolizes, reflects more accurately the high opinion he has of himself, just as his position of rank sitting by the side of the queen, reveals that he is highly esteemed at court. It is evident that he accepts the Green Knight’s challenge not to further his own renown, but rather to protect Arthur from danger. It is because of this distinction between their motives that Gawain’s acceptance of the Green Knight’s challenge can be read as virtuous, while Arthur’s cannot. Gawain shows both prudence and fortitude while Arthur showed anger and rashness.

It should not be thought that Gawain’s actions were courageous while Arthur’s were not, simply because Arthur acts with less calculation than Gawain. It is their different motivations that so distinguished their acts. Arthur endangers his life for the sake of his court’s reputation, while Gawain’s motive is the preservation of Arthur’s life. Only the later motive qualifies as a brave act in medieval moral thought. Aquinas comments: “It is for the sake of the good that the brave man exposes himself to the danger of death.” That is to say, life is a good in itself, and an act of fortitude is only authentic when you risk that good for a higher good. The reputation of Camelot is a good, but it is not a good higher than life; the preservation of another’s life is, however, worth dying for. At the heart of the distinction is the reasonableness of the good itself: “In overcoming danger, fortitude seeks not danger itself, but the realization of a rational good.” It is absence of any ‘rational good’ is the clause that makes Arthur vain and justifies Gawain. Aquinas adds: “To take death upon oneself is not in itself praiseworthy, but solely because of its subordination to good.” Gawain’s readiness to die is virtuous only because it is for the sake of another life, the same cannot be said of Arthur’s impulsiveness and injured pride.

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68 Nicholls, *Courtesy*, 94.


70 Aquinas, ST, II-II, 125, 2, ad. 2.

71 Aquinas, ST, II-II, 123, 1, ad 2.

72 Aquinas, ST, II-II, 123,5, ad 2.
1.5 The Gawain tradition

The poet’s choice to give Gawain the answer to the Green Knight’s Christmas challenge is not accidental, and is informed by and contributes to a deep literary tradition around his character. This literary deliberation is made apparent by the Green Knight’s meaningful remark to Gawain when he steps forward:

‘Sir Gawan, so mot i þryue
as i am ferly fayn
þis dint þat þou shal dryue.(387 – 389)

His is ‘ferly fauyn’ or ‘exceeding glad’ not because his Christmas game has been accepted, but rather because it was Gawain in particular who volunteered. The Green Knight further emphasizes these sentiments with an oath:

‘bigog,’ quoþ þe grene knyȝt, ‘Sir Gawan, me lykes
þat i schal fange at þy fust þat i haf frayst here. (390 – 391)

This unexplained preference invites the reader to consider why it is so significant Gawain should now take up the challenge. Already at this stage of the story there are hints the challenge is more than a mere ‘Crystemas gomen’(283). The Green Knight’s intention to test the reputation of Arthur’s court is already suggested when he tauntingly remarks that such a group of beardless young men were not worthy of their high reputation. If, then, his game is a test of the chivalric excellence of Arthur’s court, the question must be asked why he is so glad that Gawain in particular should be the court’s representative. The answer to this question is informed by the reader’s familiarity with the diverse literary tradition around Gawain’s character.

Twelfth-century Arthurian literature initiated a tradition of Gawain as a master of courtesy and decorum, though the later stories often depict him as a philanderer, and others even as lecherous.\textsuperscript{73} It is far easier to define characters such as Tristan or Troilus, for though their stories have been retold many times, it is the same story that is retold, each rendition of the story has slight alterations in their behaviour, but their general character is constrained by the plot and their actions within it. The character of Gawain is not, however, limited in this way, stories of his deeds and misdeeds are disseminated over a wide range of literature; there is no one Gawain story, and

\textsuperscript{73} Authors such as Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France describe a virtuous Gawain, while later accounts such as Chaucer’s The Wife of Bath’s tale show a less estimable portrayal of Gawain.
therefore no fixed Gawain. Anecdotes that point to defining attributes of his received character must be gathered from the various romances he features in, but this does not leave the reader with a fully coherent character.

Jessie Weston invites some optimism about the possibility of forming a coherent understanding of Sir Gawain’s dynamic character. She says:

It ought not to be impossible to single out from among the various versions of Gawain’s adventures certain features which, by their frequent recurrence in the romances devoted to him, and their analogy to ancient Celtic tradition, seem as if they might with probability be regarded as forming part of his original story. It is scarcely to be hoped that we can ever construct a coherent account on which we may lay our finger and say ‘This, and no other, was the original Gawain story’; but we may, I think, be able to specify certain incidents, saying, ‘This belongs to Gawain and to no other of king Arthur’s knights.’

Typically Gawain is portrayed as the knight of perfect courtesy, tactfulness and prudence. In the story of *Eric and Enide*, Chrétien de Troyes describes him as Arthur’s chief advisor. He warns him against hunting the white stag, and when Arthur does not listen, and his knights begin to quarrel, he turns to Gawain saying “my good nephew, advise me how to keep my honour and my rights, for I have no wish for quarrelling.” The confidence he puts in Gawain’s discretion reflects the prudence and good judgment of the knight. Chrétien frequently describes him in terms of superlative praise. “For in the whole of [Arthur’s] court there was no better or more gallant knight [than] Gawain his beloved nephew, whom no one could match.” Marie de France portrays Gawain in similarly favourable manner. In *Lanval* she describes him as “Gawain the noble, the brave, who was loved by all.” Indeed he is the only knight who acts nobly in the story, the rest of Arthur’s court are shown in an unfavourable light through their mistreatment of Lanval. When Lanval’s life is in danger, Gawain is the only knight concerned with helping him. Not all medieval poets depict Gawain in so favorable a light, but it is evident throughout that in the story of

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74 Weston, *The Legend of Sir Gawain*, 12.
76 Ibid., 31.
the poet is drawing on and developing the virtuous tradition of Gawain’s character. If not, it is hard to see where the Green Knight’s words approval of Gawain accepting the challenge could come from. If a lesser knight, such as Sir Kay, failed to prove himself it would prove little, but if the best knight fell short, all of Arthur’s court would be dishonored. The Green Knight is certainly not taken in by Gawain’s self-deprecating words to Arthur, he seems instead to be informed by background knowledge of Gawain’s high reputation, and so is glad of the opportunity to test it. In this way, he can be seen as a proxy for the poet, and the poet’s playful intrusion into the Gawain tradition. He stands beside the poet—knowing the full story and its tricks as they unfold—and in a real way the Green Knight is the author of the poem’s unfolding events. Both test Gawain, and both, in the end, are far gentler towards the character who is the butt of their games, than he is towards himself.

1.6 Blind promises

The two promises of Gawain are pivotal points of the poem, and all the tension of the narrative is centred upon his adherence to their terms. The blind promises that Gawain makes to the Green Knight and Bertilak constantly place him into trying situations where both his honour and chastity are probed in the context of his truthfulness to his word and the code he believes that he lives by. The promises of Gawain are necessary for the narrative progression, but their function is more significant than that of plot devices. Susanne Sara Thomas notes that “the Gawain-poet challenges the reader to question the nature and validity of all oaths and promises.” The reader is invited to deliberate over whether all promises should indeed be kept, as the poet rebukes a moral fundamentalism that treats all oaths as equal in value. Susanne Thomas notes the distinct lack of attention given by critics

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towards the “essential treachery and legal insubstantiality of the oaths.” In support of her argument she cites Aquinas: “if a man has promised something evidently unlawful, because he sinned in promise, then he did well to change his mind.” The absurdity of the oath is already evident in the game: it is self-evidently unlawful to arbitrarily behead a person as Christmas fun. Susanne Thomas substantiates this claim by referring to the nature of legal agreements in the fourteenth-century to further show the nature of Gawain’s promises rendered them not binding. She puts forward an argument showing that Gawain was under no legal or moral obligation to fulfil either of his promises. This view of the poem shows the effects of the changing legal systems of the Middle Ages, suggesting a nostalgia for a former age of England, when agreements where all promises of truth, rather than written up legal agreements. Enlightening as this approach is, the narrative as a whole reflects more of an interest in morality than in legality. The poet has a vested interest in showing how different virtues operate under particular circumstances, and the main function of the agreements between Gawain and the Green Knight is to facilitate the creation of those circumstances.

Susanne Thomas’ observation, that the promises were perhaps not understood by contemporary readers as morally or legally binding, is certainly a significant point to be aware of, but it is without doubt equally significant that Gawain’s character, in his superlative world of Romance, believes the oaths to be binding. A legal and ethical examination of the binding nature of the promises is not unimportant. In the fourteenth-century perhaps an unwritten agreement with an anonymous man would not have been considered binding, but it must not be forgotten that the story is a Romance narrative filled with magic; the question remains as to what extent the poet is balancing his serious themes with his fantastic setting. It is most important to note the fact that Gawain did believe himself bound to keep his promise, for in making this the central focus, the discussion is orientated towards evaluating his response to this ‘obligation’. And it is within the framework of this perceived obligation that the poet comments upon human nature and in particular the role of the conscience.

83 Ibid., 2.
84 Aquinas, ST, II-II,110,3 ad. 2.
85 Thomas, Promise, Joke or Wager, 305.
Geoffrey Chaucer also used blind promises to facilitate scenarios wherein their characters must weigh up the importance of their word. Gawain’s contract with the Green Knight is similar in characterization and outcome to Dorigen’s oath to Aurelius in The Franklin’s Tale, in that neither expects that they will have to fulfil their end of the bargain, and neither would have had occasion to if the antagonists had not used magical deception. The blind promises and intrusion of magic enable both poets to create scenarios wherein their characters’ truth is weighed against another good. Dorigen must forgo her fidelity to her husband, or break her truth. Similarly Gawain must seek out his own execution, or break his truth. The decision of both protagonists reflects the priority of truth in medieval ethical and moral thought. Dorigen considers ending her life to avoid fulfilling her end of the bargain, but like Gawain she does not consider breaking her trouthe to be an option:

"Allas," quod she, " on thee, Fortune, I pleyne,
That unwar wrapped hast me in thy cheyne,
Fro which t'escape woot I no socour,
Save oonly deeth or elles dishonour;
Bihoveth me to chese.
But nathelees, yet have I levere to lese
My lif than of my body to have a shame,
Or knowe myselven fals, or lese my name."

(1355-1362)

When her husband returns, he reiterates the same viewpoint, advising her to keep her promise: “But if ye sholde youre trouthe kepe and save. Trouthe is the hysete thing that man may kepe.” (770 – 771) In a similar way the Gawain-poet suggests that Gawain should, above all keep his trouthe. He does this in an emphatic way when he addresses Gawain directly:

Now þenk wel, sir gawan,
for woþe þat þou ne wonde
þis auenture for to frayn
þat þou hatz tan on honed. (487 – 490)

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The poet breaks from his role as a distant narrator, and addresses Gawain directly. This dramatic narrative technique highlights the tension of the internal conflict that also confronts Gawain. When the poet, who orchestrates the entire plot, momentarily extricates himself from this role, he then offers the reader a moment of suspended belief, and the chance to think of Gawain as an autonomous individual. In this moment he warns Gawain against ‘wonde’ (488), a word that Tolkien and Gordon define as ‘to shrink from or neglect something due to fear’. The danger or ‘woþe’ that might prompt him to neglect the keeping of his word is a very real fear of death. Gawain knows that he lacks the Green Knight’s miraculous ability to survive the blow of the axe, seeking out the Green Chapel is then effectually seeking out his own death. Nonetheless the poet exhorts him to keep his word, regardless of the cost.

The Green Knight also reiterates the gravity of Gawain’s oath before departing from the court:

’Loke, Gawan, þou be grayþe to fo as þou hettez,
And latye as lelly til þou me, lude, fynde,
As þou hatz hette in þis halle, herande þise knyþtes’ (448 - 450)

He allows Gawain no opportunity to dismiss the whole affair as a foolish Christmas game: ‘þerfore com, oþer recreaunt be calde þe behoues’ (456). Arthur’s knights do not seem to share the same moral conviction that he should keep his word. Rather than commending him for his loyalty to his word, they lament the threatened loss of such a good knight:

For to counsēyl þe knyȝt, with care at her hert.
þere watþ much derue doel driuen in þe sale
þat so worþe as Wawan schulde wende on þat ernde,
To dryȝ a delful dynt, and dele no more
Wyth bronde. (556 - 560)

The poet reasserts the moral preeminence of Gawain in his almost nonchalant response:

þhe kniȝt mad ay god chere,
And sayde, ‘quot schuld I wonde?
Of destines derf and dere
What may mon do bot fonde?’ (562 - 565)

89 The Medieval Romance is a superlative genre that typically deals with high ideals. The poet problematizes these ideals with extreme scenarios, and highlights the importance of such moments by addressing Gawain directly. This intrusion of the narrator’s voice proves problematic to Foucault’s argument towards minimizing the significance of the author’s voice.

His cheerfully phrased rhetorical questions suggest a distinct absence of fear on his part, as he seems to have risen to the detached level of a Stoic.

The relationship between ideal words and conduct in the courtly context are challenged later in the poem, and collapse under the weight of human emotion. The events of fitts three and four will reveal his deep fear of death, and yet this natural fear does not detract from his character in the eyes of others in the poem, and certainly gives it real depth for the reader. His decision to seek out the Green Chapel would in fact not be an act of true courage if he had no fear of death. It is necessary that Gawain retain the natural fear of death, for the poet exemplifies in him an authentic figure of courage. Josef Pieper speaks of this necessity of fear in any act of courage, building upon the Thomistic understanding of virtue:

“Fortitude presupposes in a certain sense that man is afraid of evil; its essence lies not in knowing no fear, but in not allowing oneself to be forced into evil by fear, or to be kept by fear from the realization of good.”

Gawain fulfils these conditions when he goes in search of the Green Chapel. His natural fear of death prompts him to break his truth, and yet he overcomes this impulse in an act of authentic fortitude. The framework of blind promise enables the poet to create a scenario wherein Gawain must weigh up his life beside his truth. Other Arthurian romances recount tales of knights setting off on perilous quests, but they have a hope of surviving and winning glory, while Gawain seems to have no reason to hope for either. Readers of the poem, along with Gawain, are put in the situation where they must ask if one ought always do the honourable thing, regardless of the implications. There is no material motivation for Gawain to keep his promise other than his simple adherence to righteousness and justice. By the discouragement of his fellow knights, and the seeming certitude of death, the Gawain-poet shows the dignity in acting for virtue’s own sake. The poet gives little reason for the reader to suppose that Gawain sought out the chapel for any other reason. Gawain’s search for the Green Chapel does then become emblematic of the man who seeks justice for its own sake.

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92 Chrétien de Troyes: Yvain, Lancelot, Erec and Enide etc.
Gawain’s search for justice for its own sake evokes a pervasive concern of Western literature, and parallels that of the man described in *The Republic*, who seeks justice though it costs him his life. Plato is unlikely to be a direct source, but his exposition of moral philosophy lies at the foundation of Western tradition, and his ideas were mediated through the works of philosophers like Aquinas. Plato says that when justice is praised, it is often only the appearance of justice that is being considered. For, in discussing the desirability of justice, one often only hears of its effects. He says “No one has ever censured injustice or commended justice otherwise than in respect of the repute, the honors, and the gifts that accrue from each.”  

He goes on to note that none have yet written on the true essence of justice, explaining why it is a good that one should strive after, even if no good seems to come from it. Plato argues why justice is a good in and of itself, irrespective of the effects that may, or may not, come from the practice of it:

…”but what each one of them [justice and injustice] is in itself, by its own inherent force, when it is within the soul of the possessor and escapes the eyes of both gods and men, no one has ever adequately set forth in poetry or prose — the proof that the one is the greatest of all evils that the soul contains within itself, while justice is the greatest good.”

This is the very task that the *Gawain*-poet sets out to fulfil: to show that justice is worthwhile for its own sake. Like Plato the purifies his argument and character by removing any discussion of gain. Plato says that the person who is whipped, put on the rack, branded with hot irons and crucified for justice’s sake is still better off than the unjust man who enjoys every kind of comfort. The *Gawain*-Poet suggests that it is better for Gawain to leave the comfort of court life and seek out Green Chapel, not because he will merit anything by it, but because of justice.

Plato comments that when discussing justice, you must speak of a just man who does not have the reputation of justice. “Unless you take away the true repute and attach the false, we shall say that it is not justice that you are praising but the

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95 Ibid., 367a.

semblance.” Plato holds that it is only when we speak of a just man, who is not 
thought to be so, that the intrinsic worth of justice can be explored with clarity. He notes:

We must, indeed, not allow him to seem good, for if he does he will have all the rewards and honors 
paid to the man who has a reputation for justice, and we shall not be able to tell whether his 
motive is love of justice of love or the rewards and honors.

Gawain does not suffer the scorn and derision of the just man in Plato’s example. It is 
enough, however, that the knights were disapproving of his quest. Their lack of praise 
reveals that it is not out of vainglory that Gawain seeks out the Green Chapel. If the 
other knights had suggested that he was bound to keep his word, it might reasonably 
be inferred that his departure was prompted by the desire to maintain his reputation. 
The poet however makes it clear that he would suffer no censure if he remained. He is 
in fact criticized by his fellow knights for departing. “Bi Kryst, hit is scae þat þou, 
leude, schal be lost, þat art of lyf noble!” (674) This point is stressed again at the end 
of the poem when Gawain is nearly at the Green Chapel and Bertilak’s messenger 
tells him that if he turns back, none will know of it. Throughout the story readers are 
reminded that Gawain kept his truth for its own sake, and not to avoid the censure or 
calumnies of Arthur’s court.

1.7 The pentangle shield

The themes of justice and truth are explored throughout the poem, but they are not the 
only virtues that the poet makes a study of, for no virtue can stand alone, but must be 
balanced out and complemented by others. The poet extrapolates on this interwoven 
nature of virtues through his image of the pentangle upon Gawain’s shield. The 
poet’s description of Gawain’s shield and its placement in the narrative are greatly

Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1992): 287-305.
100 W.O Evans “The Five Virtues of Gawayn’s Shield and their contemporary equivalents” (B. Litt. 
significant for the poem’s wider interest in the problem of virtue. The poet emphasizes the importance of the shield, telling the reader he will explain its symbolism, though it should delay his story. “I am intent yow to telle, þof tar hyt me schulde” (624). The emblem upon Gawain’s shield denotes the five virtues that he excelled most in, and the poet comments that he possessed them more perfectly than any other (655). Gawain shows his fraunchyse and felaȝschyp when he dissuades Arthur from accepting the Green Knight’s challenge, and volunteers himself. His magnanimity and love for his fellow man are shown through these deeds, furthermore his clannes, cortayse and pité are tested in his encounters with Lady Bertilak. Her three visitations are trials of his purity courtesy and piety. It is significant that the poet describes him as perfect in these five virtues, for it is a moment of self-realization when Gawain discovers that courtesy and purity cannot always be practiced in perfect accordance.101 Lady Bertilak attempts to force Gawain into compromising one of these ideals, and prudently he gives precedence to clannes (1770). His encounters with Lady Bertilak and the Green Knight lead Gawain into an increasing awareness of the complexity of the chivalric code. He discovers that the tenets of chivalry, in certain situations, are in tension with one another. Courtesy cannot always be practiced in perfect accord with chastity, and gentility cannot be maintained when violence is required. Derek Pearsall notes the poet’s implicit commentary on the tension inherent in chivalric system:

The contrivance of the story allows the contradictions within the system to emerge, reveals the fragility of the weave, the manner in which a multiplicity of different impulses and ideals, appetites and codes of restraint, are held in precarious orbit.102

The ‘precarious orbit’ of the virtues is a central theme explored in the poem. One virtue is always interconnected with another and none stands in isolation. The poet makes this truth apparent in the unending knot of the pentangle:

And vchone halched in oþer, þat non ende hade,  
And fyched vpon fyue poiynites, þat fayled neuer,  
Withouten ende at any noke I oquere fynde,  
Whereeuer þe gomen bygan, or golden to an ende. (657 - 660)


102 Pearsall, Courtesy and Chivalry, 351.
The image of the pentangle reflects the interconnectedness of each virtue, showing how one cannot stand without the other. Just as the pentangle retains its shape only when all its lines are connected, so too a man only remains truly virtuous when all the principal virtues are harmoniously present and connected. Aquinas similarly distinguishes and unites the cardinal virtues, showing how each has its own definition, yet each still is contingent upon the others:

Discretion belongs to prudence, rectitude to justice, moderation to temperance, and strength of mind to fortitude…. In this way the reason for connection is evident: for strength of mind is not commended as virtuous, if it be without moderation or rectitude of discretion: and so forth…

How and to what degree each virtue should be practiced is largely dependent upon the circumstances, and it is in both the success and failure of Gawain that this point is illustrated. When he gives precedence to purity over courtesy he shows discretion, ordering the higher good above the lower. But when he accepts the girdle he lacks rectitude, judging his life of higher importance than his trouthe. Through this success and failure the poet interrogates the pre-eminence of prudence as the foundation underpinning all other virtues.

Prudence can be seen to guide all Gawain’s virtuous acts to some degree. When he seeks out the Green Chapel it is prudence that orientates him towards the good of keeping his trouthe and when he refuses the lady it is prudence that prompts his steadfast attachment to clannes. It is again prudence that allows Gawain to make the right choice, esteeming one good above another, purity over courtesy, and it is ultimately his lack of perfect prudence that causes him to break his trouthe in loving his own life too dearly. The poet explores the pre-eminence of prudence as the foundation of every virtuous act. Aquinas affirms this moral truth: ‘no moral virtue can be without prudence; since it is proper to moral virtue to make a right choice.’ Aquinas demonstrates that it is prudence that unites all virtues and moderates them to their mean, for each virtue is united by prudence, and when an act is no longer guided

103 Aquinas, I-II,65,1, c.o
106 Aquinas, ST I-II,65,1, s.c
by prudence it ceases to be virtuous.\textsuperscript{107} Just as the pentangle ceases to be a star when one line is broken. David Beauregard notes this Thomistic influence on the poet’s thought:

If the pentangle is understood to represent the perfection of the connected virtues, the question then becomes a matter of which virtues are dealt with in the poem. I suggest that fortitude or courage in its Thomistic dimensions is represented in its various aspects of fear and daring, aggression and endurance, moderation and restraint.\textsuperscript{108}

Beauregard also argues that the pentangle as a whole should be understood as an emblem of truthfulness. The entire poem centres on Gawain’s pursuit of \textit{trouthe}, and it is no accident that his shield should reflects this focus.\textsuperscript{109} Solomon’s pentangle was an emblem of his truthfulness: “Hit is a syngne þat Salamon set sumquyle in byтокnyng of trawþe” (626). Gawain’s truthfulness is not, however, perfect, as the end of the narrative makes clear. Gawain, a fallen man, fails to live up the excellence symbolized in his shield. It should not, however, be thought that the imperfect truthfulness of Gawain reflects an untruthfulness of the poet, in describing his hero as other than he was. For when he describes the symbolism of the shield, he is not describing Gawain as he is, but rather how he was thought of by others and himself. The shield speaks more of Gawain’s reputation than it does of his actual character. The poet says that “Gawan watz for gode knawen.” (633) The use of the word ‘knawen’ implies that one should understand the shield to reflect what he was known for, rather than any “reality”.\textsuperscript{110}

In an age when characters’ interiority was seldom explored by authors, the shield presents us with Gawain’s idealised version of himself. In a period so steeped in the use of symbolism it is natural that the \textit{Gawain}-poet used the emblem on Gawain’s shield to reflect the knight’s own self-understanding. C.S. Lewis discusses this rich symbolism of medieval thought in his work \textit{The Discarded Image}.\textsuperscript{111} He


\textsuperscript{108} Beauregard, \textit{Moral Theology}, 7.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 145 – 162.


\textsuperscript{111} Lewis, \textit{The Discarded Image}, 13.
explains the meaning of the pentangle that the reader may comprehend not how Gawain was, but how he thought himself to be. A.C. Spearing comments on this subjective mode of symbolism:

> It is not only that an elaborated code makes it relatively easy for the user to express his inner states and purposes; it also encourages him to be aware of his own subjectivity, to conceive of and reflect on his personal identity, his selfhood. \(^{112}\)

Gawain’s belief in his own perfection proves false, though he was not deceiving himself intentionally. The character gets caught up in his own fictional reputation in a playful irony on the poet’s part. To a large extent, he lives up to the ideals in his shield, he showed himself to be chaste, courteous and pious throughout the story, and, with the exception of the green girdle, he kept his truth also. It is furthermore significant that Gawain was himself aware of his good reputation, and, what is more, believed it to be true. It is possible for a man to have a high reputation without being fully aware of it, or if it was made known to him, it is possible for him to disbelieve it authenticity. But it is certain that Gawain both knew his reputation and believed it to be true, and this is made apparent by his willingness to wear his shield.\(^{113}\)

Gawain’s chief imperfection is the perfect confidence he has of his own perfection. He lacks an awareness of his own weakness, and his sense of his moral superiority leaves him susceptible to deception.\(^{114}\) If he had been self-aware he would have perceived his fear of death, and perhaps noted the inclination to act deceptively because of it. Gawain’s belief in his own perfection is an act of self-deception.\(^{115}\) He is deceived by the Lady and the Green Knight, but the greatest deception is by himself. When he enters into the Christmas game he does not know of the Green Knight’s ability to survive the blow of the axe, when he agrees to the game of exchanges with Bertilak he is ignorant of the premeditated test that will be made against his chastity by the lady, and when he is tempted, he is unaware that his response to the lady will dictate how he will be judged by the Green Knight. When


\(^{114}\) John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*.

these many levels of deception are revealed to him he is stunned into momentary silence. He “stod a gret whyle, so agreuéd for greme he gryed withine; alle þe blode of his brest blende in his face.” (2369) He is angered at being so deceived by them both, and he is angered still further and ashamed on seeing how he has deceived himself. “Pat al he schank for schome þat þe shalk talked” (2372). The events of the story all forward the poet’s intention of bringing Gawain to this moment of self-discovery.116 The poet’s laconic summary of Gawain’s trials in the wild, and lengthier description of his encounters with the lady, further show that the poet is interested in focusing on those events that lead Gawain closer towards a clearer self-knowledge.117 He does not delay his narrative with elaborate descriptions of Gawain battling against the dragons, wolves, trolls, bulls, bears, boars and ogres. Unlike the Beowulf-Poet, he is not interested in showing the prowess of his hero.118 He says it would be tedious to speak of such events. “So mony meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndez, hit were to tore for to telle of þe tenþe dole.” (718) The poet’s interest is in those conflicts that will test Gawain’s virtue more than those that will test his strength.119

1.8 Boethius and the Gawain-Poet

The conclusion of SGGK reveals a deep interest in the attitude the hero adopts towards death.120 Gawain’s fault partly lies in his attitude towards death. The problem of death is universal, but in addition to Christian reflections on death, the medieval mind was offered a series of reflections on death by the widely popular work of the sixth-century writer Boethius.121 His Consolation of Philosophy is devoted to

116 Tolkien, Monsters and Critics, 17.


118 Tolkien, Monsters and Critics, 88.


exploring the proper attitude one should have towards death. The work was translated into Middle English during the lifetime of the Gawain-poet by Geoffrey Chaucer. Lady Bertilak’s visitations, like those of Lady Philosophy in Boethius’ work, ironically prove to be instructive. They allow Gawain to realize how his fear of death misguided his judgement. Lady Philosophy teaches Boethius, by means of careful arguments that his present unhappiness stems from an inordinate view of death and excessive attachment to temporal goods. While Lady Bertilak convinces Gawain to accept and Green girdle, and in doing so allows him to discover that he loved his own life too dearly. He realizes the imbalance of his value system when he shamefully recognizes that he compromised his virtuous ideal out of fear for death. The lady’s trial of Gawain’s virtue indirectly guides him to a moment of self-realization that alters his worldview, and in a similar manner Lady Philosophy guides Boethius towards the same goal. She explains that his happiness is completely determined by his perception of circumstances. Though imprisoned with a death sentence, she tells him he still has occasion to be glad. So long as he is alive, he has things for which he may find occasion to be thankful for. She even scorces his discontentment at being imprisoned, arguing that incarceration is only a cause of grief because he thinks it so:

Nothing is miserable unless you think it so; and on the other hand, nothing brings happiness unless you are content with it. No one is so completely happy that he would not choose to change his condition if he let himself think about it impatiently… Why then do men look outside themselves for happiness which is within?

Though he is confronted with the prospect of his own death at the end of the first fitt, Gawain succeeds in remaining recollected, even happy for most of the poem. He has the appearance of mirth at both Arthur’s court and Bertilak’s. Despite the

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126 Boethius, *Consolation*, 29.
knowledge of his impending death, Gawain exhibits a high degree of self-mastery, in not allowing this knowledge to destroy his happiness. He jokes affably with Bertilak, agrees to his game of exchanges, and acts most agreeably and courteously towards his wife. It would seem that Gawain was a good practitioner of Boethius’s philosophy towards death; for he stolidly refuses that his fate should affect his happiness. The end of the poem does, however, reveal that he was deeply affected by the prospect of his death. Though his outward actions betrayed little anxiety, his acceptance of the green girdle reflect his interior state. He willingness to accept the girdle, in order to avoid death shows that he loved life too dearly. This fault is what Gawain discovers in his moment of self-realization in the final fitt of the poem. This theme corresponds closely with the argument that is central to Boethius’ work, as he affirms that it is detrimental to love life so dearly that one’s happiness depends on a knowledge of its prolonged continuance.

As a Christian Platonist, Boethius argues that immortality of the soul allows man to find a source of happiness that does not perish at the at the prospect of death. And because of this, Boethius says that man should have an imperishable happiness, that cannot be affected even by the possibility of death:

It is clear, then, that if transitory happiness ends with the death of the body, and if this means an end of all happiness, the whole human race would be plunged into misery by death. But if we know that many men have sought the enjoyment of happiness in death, how can this present life make us happy when its end cannot make us unhappy?

Boethius’ argument reveals why Gawain was misguided in loving his life too dearly. The Christian is bound to revere life, but he should not reverence it as his highest good. It is the peculiar quality of both works that they point towards higher goods than this temporal world, and yet neither fall into a discussion on eschatology. Boethius wrote a number of explicitly theological works before composing The

128 Blenkner, Sin, Psychology, 354-87.
129 Boethius, Consolation, 19.
130 Boethius, Consolation, 30.
Consolation,\textsuperscript{131} and likewise the Gawain-poet also wrote a number other works that are overtly theological.\textsuperscript{132} The narratives of SGGK and The Consolation are however, stories are far more pragmatic, interested more in ethics than doctrine. These more ‘secular’ works reflect the deep interest both men had in the practicalities of virtuous living. Michael D. Cherniss notes this quality in Boethius:

The purpose of the Consolation is essentially practical; it attempts to resolve philosophical problems pertaining to life in this world. The little theological material present - discussions of the nature of God and his Providence - is limited to that which provides a necessary foundation for inquiry into Boethius’s existential problems, and it is discovered by rational, philosophical methodology.\textsuperscript{133}

SGGK is likewise interested in practical theology, that is the ethics of right living. The poet focuses on showing Gawain’s journey towards a correct attitude to his own mortality.\textsuperscript{134}

\textbf{Chapter 2}

\textsuperscript{131} - De Trinitate
- Utrum Pater et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus de divinitate substantialiter praedicentur
- Quomodo substantiae in eo quod sint bonae sint cum non sint substantialia bona
- De fide Catholica
- Contra Eutychen et Nestorium

\textsuperscript{132} The works of Pearl, Cleanness and Patience are all attributed to the authorship of the Gawain poet, and they all treat more explicitly religious themes.


\textsuperscript{134} Morgan, Idea of Righteousness, 11.
2.1 Temperance

SGGK is a complex poem deeply engaged with many of the themes found across late fourteenth-century literature. Key among these, often relegated in contemporary scholarship, is that of moral conduct, both public and private. Each fitt of the Romance places Gawain in a new moral dilemma, each of which is constructed in a way that offers the reader an insight into the poem’s moral framework. Gawain’s successes and failures in the course of navigating these situations are built on the poet’s understanding of the fundamental principals of each of the moral dilemmas presented, and the related virtues they require. The first chapter of this thesis addressed the poet’s reflections on the nature of fortitude by contrasting Arthur and Gawain’s acceptance of the Green Knight’s challenge. It showed that underpinning the poem’s interest in the problem of facing death, is the idea that a willingness to die may only be counted as authentically courageous if it is for a worthy cause. Arthur’s willingness to risk death in order to defend the reputation of his court from a stranger’s taunts is shown to be an act of recklessness. In accepting the Green Knight’s challenge, the king betrays his impulsive and imprudent character. Gawain’s actions, by contrast, are shown to be an example of authentic fortitude, being prompted to risk his life, not from a desire for glory, but because he deems it the only way of preserving Arthur from harm. It is at this point of divergence and by contrasting the conduct of Gawain and Arthur that the poet conveys the moral truth, that a willingness to die may only be considered courageous if the intended object is deserving of the risk.

By a similar method the poet incorporates an analysis on the nature of temperance in the second and third fitts of the poem, showing that just as a willingness to risk one’s life may only be judged courageous if the intended good is deserving of the risk, so also an act of restraint can only be considered as an instance of temperance if it is directed towards an authentic moral good. If Gawain were to show restraint for reasons that were themselves not of great moral weight, then the merit of the act would significantly diminish. From this perspective on Gawain’s interaction with Lady Bertilak the poet offers the reader a clarification of the important role prudence in action in tension with the chivalric code.135 When Gawain

seeks the refuge of Lord Bertilak’s castle as an escape from the trials of his difficult winter journey, he finds himself troubled by a greater ordeal manifest in the sexual advances of his host’s wife. On three consecutive mornings Gawain guards his chastity by refusing her increasingly overt, and tempting, offers of a sexual encounter. A large section of the poem is devoted to these interactions, and these are grounded in the poet’s understanding of the nature of temperance, woven playfully into the predicament in which he has placed his hero.\(^{136}\) Just as Gawain’s true motives in accepting the Green Knight’s challenge revealed the validity of his courage, so too an analysis of Gawain’s motives for refusing the lady will reveal the complex character of the virtue temperance that he possesses.

In evaluating Gawain’s motives for acting chastely, Carolyn Dinshaw looks to the initial agreement made between Gawain and his host. At his Christmas banquet Sir Bertilak proposes a bargain with Gawain, wherein anything won in the following three days by either party must be forfeited to the other (1105 – 1123). On each morning of the three days Bertilak goes on successful hunting expeditions. He presents to Gawain the game that he catches, and Gawain, who wins nothing more than kisses from the wife of his host, renders them to Bertilak. Dinshaw looks to this bargain as the reason for Gawain’s restraint, for if he had accepted anything more than a kiss from the lady he would have been bound by his promise to give that to his host also.\(^{137}\) It is likely that the poet intended this bawdy joke, yet the seriousness of the poem suggests that there are more earnest questions that the poet wishes to address, however playfully.

It is clear that Gawain is sorely tempted by the advances of Lady Bertilak. When she presses upon him so persistently the poet says that he is in great danger of succumbing:

\[
\text{For þat prynce of pris depressed hum so þikke,} \\
\text{Nurned hym so neþe þe þred, þat need hyn bihoued} \\
\text{Oþer lach þer hir luf, oþer lodly refuse. (1770 - 1773)}
\]

The poet was in no way required by convention to have his knight refuse the lady. The literary culture in which he wrote did not expect or require a hero to be chaste—


indeed the opposite is more often the case in medieval romance. The medieval tradition of courtly love frequently develops adulterous relations between knights and noble ladies. The stories of *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Tristan and Isolde* are two noteworthy examples among many in a long literary tradition that overtly idealised such relationships, and advanced concepts of both masculinity and femininity within them. In the poem, the character of Gawain himself is aware of the courtly love tradition, and the lady goes so far as to remind him of it:

Sir, ȝif ȝe be Wawen, woner me þunkkez,  
Wyȝe þat is so wel wrast always to god,  
And conneþ not of companye þee costez undertake,  
And if mon kennes yow hom to knowe, ȝe kest hom of your mind…  
(1481 - 14)

Dinshaw makes sense of his abstinence by noting the aversion he would have to extending any sexual favours, received by the lady, towards Sir Bertilak. Dinshaw’s argument suggests that, were there no promise of exchanged winnings, he would have had no occasion to refuse the lady. This interpretation does not, however, seem to take into serious consideration Gawain’s interest the perfection of virtues that his shield denotes. Furthermore, it present a less than realistic depiction of human nature. If Gawain was willing to commit, from the moral view point, as grave a sin as adultery with Lady Bertilak, it would seem unlikely that he would have scruples about deceiving his host, the conventions of hospitality notwithstanding. It seems unreasonable to suggest that wrapped in his complex of morality and courtesy, Gawain might be willing to commit such a serious sin against morality, only to be held back by the rules of a game.

While Dinshaw’s arguments present helpful insights for making sense of Gawain’s chaste behaviour, she does not take into account the broader presentation of his character by the poet, who it is generally agreed sought to portray Gawain as a man who “exemplifies both religious and social virtues.” Gawain emerges in *SGGK* as an archetypal figure of a natural man with genuine sexual urges, and who must, and does, struggle against concupiscence. The suggestion that his prime reason for refusing the lady was something less than a commitment to the virtue of chastity— even if this is a moral stance informed by Gawain’s knowledge of his impending

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139 Ibid., 37.
140 Nicholls, *Courtesy*, 138.
death—diminishes or ignores the poet’s careful presentation Gawain’s example of heroic temperance.\textsuperscript{141} The poet’s playful irony is implied in his very choice of Gawain as his hero in a story focused on one man’s struggle against concupiscence. Gawain’s literary character was underwent profound changes throughout the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{142} In the early Arthurian tales of Chrétien de Troyes, he is the example of restraint and propriety, by the fourteenth-century, however, he is frequently depicted as a licentious knight governed by his passions.\textsuperscript{143} There is a deliberate aptness in the poet’s reinvention of Gawain in his exploration of the virtue of temperance. He takes a knight who originally enjoyed high literary repute, but who latter fell into moral decline, and in Gawain the poet explores man’s inclination towards sin as well as his ability to rise above it.

The poet probes the nature and psychology of temperance through the particular manner and structure of Gawain’s temptation scenes.\textsuperscript{144} When Lady Bertilak attempts to overcome Gawain’s virtue, she is checked by his restraint, and upon each occasion she suggests reasons other than a simple commitment to chastity. She implies that he refuses her either because he has another lover or because he does not consider her worthy of him (1529). There are two points that are made manifestly clear by Lady’s Bertilak’s suggestions. The first is that they were clearly not his reasons for refusing her, and secondly, that were they the actual reasons, his restraint could in no way be lauded as an example of true moral temperance. When placing these suggestions in Lady Bertilak’s mouth, the poet draws a clear distinction between restraint (in the given situation) and the wider virtue of temperance. By contrasting the base motives that the Lady suggests with Gawain’s actual chaste intentions the poet, with a light touch, introduces the more serious question of the role of a clearly articulated intentionality in the moral life.\textsuperscript{145} Gawain’s restraint towards the lady can only be considered an act of true temperance because he had a moral purpose guiding him—rather than one of relative virtue within the code of courtly love. In the same

\textsuperscript{141} Richard Hamilton Green, \textit{Gawain’s Shield and the quest for perfection} (New York: The John Hopkins University Press), 125.

\textsuperscript{142} Morgan, \textit{Idea of Righteousness}, 114.

\textsuperscript{143} In \textit{The Squire’s tale}, and \textit{The Wife of Bath’s tale} he is depicted by Chaucer as a philanderer and rapist.

\textsuperscript{144} Gail Ashton, “The Perverse Dynamics of \textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight},” \textit{Arthuriana} 15, no. 3 (2005): 51-74.

way, his acceptance of the Green Knight’s challenge only qualifies as courageous because his intention had been to divert Arthur from danger. The poet’s great success in exploring the intersection between polite social convention among the aristocracy and weighty moral issues should not detract from our appreciation of the importance of the latter to the success of the poem’s complex resolution of the inherent tensions between these sets of values.

By exploring the ways in which comparable courses of action might have different moral or ethical implications the poet again incorporates the influence of the school of thought directly or indirectly derived from Thomas Aquinas’ thought. Morgan rearticulates Aquinas’ view on virtue, noting: “An act that is grudging cannot for that reason be described as morally good. Virtue requires not only that we do what is good, but that we do it by reason of its goodness.” In determining the virtue of any moral act Aquinas frequently stresses the importance not only of the action, but more significantly the object of that action:

…the primary goodness of a moral action is derived from its suitable object … so to the primary evil in moral actions is that which is from the object…

This focus on determining the moral value of an act grounded in an individual’s intention clarifies the distinction between restraint and temperance, and in turn reveals why it was so important to the Gawain-poet that he probe, by contrast, Gawain’s reasons for refusing Lady Bertilak. Aquinas says that the miser who practices restraint in his enjoyment of food and drink, because of his frugal disposition, should not be called temperate. He must look to the good of his soul if he is to show temperance in avoiding drunkenness and gluttony. If he avoids excess in food and drink only out of a concern for his finance his moderation can only be called restraint, and restraint alone cannot be counted virtuous, for a man may exercise restraint to achieve a bad end, but a man acting with temperance is always directed towards the good. Aquinas affirms this when he states the inseparability of temperance from prudence. A man

147 Gerald Morgan, Idea of Righteousness, 127.
148 Aquinas, ST, I-II,18,2, ad. 1
149 Aquinas, ST, II-II,23, 7, c.o
150 Aquinas, ST, II-II,23, 7, ad. 1
may cannot possess temperance independently from prudence, for it is prudence that
directs the temperance towards man’s proper end. This inseparability should not,
however, blur the necessary distinction between prudence and temperance. Josef
Pieper provides a helpful explanation of their distinctness:

*Temperantia* is distinguished from the other
cardinal virtues by the fact that it refers exclusively
to the active man himself. Prudence looks to all
existent reality; justice to the fellow man; the man
of fortitude relinquishes, in self-forgetfulness, his
own possessions and his life. Temperance, on the
other hand, aims at each man himself. Temperance
implies that man should look to himself and his
condition, that his vision and his will should be
focused on himself.¹⁵¹

Pieper’s definition of temperance builds upon Aquinas’ understanding of the virtue,
that, to a large extent reflects the assumptions beneath the late medieval moral thought
of the poem. The influence on the poet of Scholastic thinking about temperance as the
virtue that looks to the interest of one’s own soul, provides an important context for
the lengths he goes to when clarifying Gawain’s reasons for refusing the lady. Though
little is known about the *Gawain*-poet’s personal biography it may safely be inferred
that an such an educated late-fourteenth-century writer, whose moral interest is more
overtly on show in *Cleanness* and *Patience*, would have enjoyed a degree of
familiarity with the thought of Aquinas, or even direct knowledge of his more popular
works. As Larry S. Champion notes, such a conclusion should be uncontroversial:

>[SGGK] is deeply imbued with Christian moral
values and matters of contemporary Christian
concern. So pervasive is this quality that critics
now conclude that the author read considerably in
the *Summa Theologia* of St. Thomas Aquinas, and
throughout the theological treatises of the patristic
writers.¹⁵²

When the lady makes her first trial of Gawain’s temperance, she believes him
disinterested because he is too preoccupied with his approaching death:

‘Paȝ I were burde bryȝtest’ þe burde in myne hade.
Þe lasse luf in his lode for lur þa he soȝt


¹⁵² Larry S. Champion, *Grace Versus Merit in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New York, Duke of
University Press), 413.
Boute hone,
Pe dunte pat schulde hum deue,
And nedes hitmost be done. (1283 - 1287)

She does not attribute his restraint to a moral objection to adultery, but rather believes the imminence of his death is too great a distraction. It is less easy to say whether the lady’s sexual offers were ineffectual because Gawain was so taken up with thoughts of death. Though if his thoughts were focused only on his looming death, to such a degree that his concupiscible desires were not felt, it is unlikely that the poet would have presented him with such presence of mind to discourse with the lady so courteously. His behaviour points to a full presence of mind. He has a calm and jocund demeanour towards the lady, but this is only an appearance. He appears more aware of the peril his soul is in, and this deep awareness is reflected by the militaristic description of his tactful navigation of the situation: “pe freke ferde with defence, and feted ful fayre” (1282).

When the lady’s enticements fail, she questions Gawain’s very identity, not just as a Romance character, but as a full-blooded man, with an authoritative tone that startles the knight. She uses this doubt as leverage to request a kiss, hoping by this last ploy to overcome his virtue. But Gawain remains steadfast and offers her only a chaste parting kiss:

Pen quoþ Wowe: ‘Iwissey, worþ as yow lykez;
I schal kysse at your comaundement, as knyþt fallez, (1302 – 1303)

The lady’s skepticism mirrors that of the Green Knight during his testing of Arthur’s court, questioning their reputation to provoke them to a reckless folly. The stated incredulity of both these antagonists—so closely aligned in the poem’s over-arching story—is an important element of the poet’s exploration of the nature of Gawain’s virtue. The Green Knight tests the fortitude of Arthur’s court by questioning their renown. If the knights show a willingness to die only for a noble cause, their fortitude might be deemed authentic, but if, on the other hand, they are willing to die for an ignoble cause, like a Christmas game, their readiness to die would not be courage, but rather recklessness. Aquinas clarifies this by stating that any willingness to die for a cause is only noble, if the cause itself is noble.153 Similarly Lady Bertilak makes a trial of Gawain’s temperance to discover what moves him to respond chastely. For just as the knights’ readiness to die would only be courageous if it was for a noble cause, so too Gawain’s restraint would only qualify as temperance if it were for a

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153 Aquinas, ST, II-II,124, 3. ad.2
noble cause. Aquinas articulates the need for this clarification by enumerating the un-virtuous motives that might prompt a man to act with restraint.\textsuperscript{154} The attitudes and words of the Green Knight and the lady facilitate a deeper understanding of fortitude and temperance by pointing to the deeper values at stake in their encounters: when one should have a willingness to risk life, and what reasons should motive restraint.

The virtue of temperance is explored further in the second and third encounters between the lady and Gawain. Lady Bertilak continues to probe the nature of his temperance by suggesting a variety of reasons for Gawain’s restraint. In context, it is probably unsurprising that she never once suggests that it is love of virtue that motivates his refusal of her, though this studied silence on her part serves to draw attention to the question. When she enters his chamber the second time she again questions Gawain, and in a manner similar to the Green Knight’s, using the ploy of the false dilemma. She asks why he does not speak to her of love, he who is so renowned for love speech. Either his reputation is falsely founded, and he has no understanding, or else he deems her too stupid to understand:

\begin{quote}
Why! Ar ȝe lewed, þat alle þe los weldez? Õþer elles ȝe demen me to dille your dalyaunce to herken? (1528 - 1529)
\end{quote}

In confronting Gawain in this way, she is not only testing his temperance but his courtesy too. He must refuse her but without causing offence: that is, he must show temperance but also courtesy, at the point of tension and intersection between two codes of conduct. He accomplishes this by suggesting that she in fact knows more than he does in the matter of love speech, and he claims this as the reason for his reticence. He is forbidden by the rules of courtesy to condemn the lady for any impropriety, and so in refusing her he must not suggest that in any way she has acted amiss. When she offers him her body, he cannot condemn the immorality of the suggestion without impoliteness, or indeed sanctimonious hypocrisy. To spurn her offer would be discourteous, yet to accept it would be intemperate. Being loyal to both ideals he avoids the dilemma by saying he is unworthy of her love, and in this way he corrects her intemperance while maintaining his courtesy. The artful way he navigates this socially problematic scenario is not dissimilar to his behaviour in the first fitt of the poem, when he dissuades Arthur from his recklessness without condemning the fault. He does this by another courteous abnegation of his self,
asserting that such a lowly knight as himself might profit more by the Christmas game. In these two episodes, the poet constructs scenarios wherein Gawain’s attempts to act courageously and temperately are problematized by his adherence to courtesy, and resolved by his ‘humility’.

### 2.2 Gawain’s humility

Gawain’s success in navigating these dilemmas, by arguments of self-deprecation, might suggest that the poet was holding Gawain up as the embodiment of another moral virtue, that of exemplary humility. A close analysis of the poem beside the medieval conception of humility does, however, point away from such a simplistic reading. As in the case of his exploration of fortitude and temperance, the poet invites a critique of the essential properties of the virtue of humility. In the Green Knight’s challenge, fortitude is shown to consist of a willingness to die, but he clarifies that it must be for a higher rational good. By the lady’s temptations the poet offers the view that temperance consists of restraining one’s desire for pleasure, while again including the element that it must be for the right reason that the restraint is practiced. And, in a like manner, it is through Gawain’s self-deprecating arguments that the poet evaluates the constituent parts of humility, and distinguishes it from false humility. The poet’s exploration of the virtue humility again reflects the deep impression of Scholastic moral thought on this question had on his construction of these encounters in his poem.  

Since the time of Chrétien de Troyes, Gawain’s character had been firmly established as the knight of perfect courtesy and humility, providing a deep literary context for the self-depreciating way in which Gawain speaks at Arthur’s court. The subsequent events of the poem, however, call into question the depth of this humility in Gawain’s present incarnation. Gawain describes himself as the lowest of knights in Camelot, a claim that medieval readers would have recognized as exaggerated. Aquinas condemns such insincerity: “Humility, in so far as it is a virtue, conveys the notion of a praiseworthy self-abasement to the lowest place. Now this is sometimes done merely as outward signs and pretenses: wherefore this is false humility.”

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156 Aquinas, ST, II-II, 161,1, ad. 3
shallowness of Gawain’s humility is evinced by his subsequent donning of the shield, which suggests that his self-abasement was mostly outward show. His actions imply that he possesses the perfections epitomized in his shield, though this self-belief is discovered to be problematic by the end of the poem. This lack of self-knowledge reflects Aquinas’ view that humility lies not in outward words but rather in an authentic knowledge and proper view of oneself. “[the humble man] restrains the impetuosity of his soul, from tending inordinately to great things: yet its rule is in the cognitive faculty, in that we should not deem ourselves to be above what we are.”\textsuperscript{157} This is the fault that Gawain proves guilty of, and it is this discovery of his own imperfection that is so significant to the narrative thrust and character development across the poem. Gawain’s transition in outward symbol from the shield of perfection to the girdle of imperfection reflects his acquisition of self-knowledge, a pre-condition of authentic humility.\textsuperscript{158} Gawain is not truly humble at the beginning of the poem, because he is not aware of his limitations. The transition rests on a movement in the poem from the humility required as part of courteous speech, to a deeper humility of character.

Gawain’s mistaken view of himself, embodied in his shield, is reformed by the end of the poem, as he returns to court wearing the green girdle. This need for self-realization evokes an understanding of humility like that outlined by Bonaventure’s in his \textit{Holiness of Life}:

\begin{quote}
To see personal defects aright a man must feel himself humbled under the mighty hand of God…I admonish you, therefore, the moment you realize your failings to humble yourself in abject humility and acknowledge to yourself your utter worthlessness.\textsuperscript{159}
\end{quote}

Bonaventure quotes St. Bernard of Clairvaux’s description humility: “the virtue which prompts a man possessing an exact knowledge of himself.”\textsuperscript{160} The end of the poem makes it evident that Gawain had not earlier possessed this knowledge, when he painfully recognizes that he has deceived himself, thinking himself to be more virtuous than he was. Gawain displays fortitude and temperance throughout the poem,

\textsuperscript{157} Aquinas, ST, II,II, 161, 6. c.o


\textsuperscript{159} St Bonaventure, \textit{Holiness of life} \url{http://www.lectionarycentral.com/trinity03/Bonaventure.html}

\textsuperscript{160} S. Bernard of Clairvaux, “Degrees of Humility”, quoted in Bonaventure’s \textit{Holiness of life}. 
but it is not until this narrative moment of self-realization that he shows enduring humility.

### 2.3 The Lady’s final visit

The final visitation of the lady in *SGGK* completes the evaluation of Gawain’s temperance (1750). She makes a last trial of his virtue, and when again she is rebuffed, she asks him if he has a lover. “Bot if þe haf a lemmman, a leuer, þat yow lykez better and folden faith to þat fre” (1782 - 1783). Fidelity to another woman is the final possible reason which Lady Bertilak offers for Gawain’s restraint; as has been noted, she never allows the possibility that his restraint is motivated by a simple adherence to virtue. In this final encounter, the poet stresses how affected Gawain is by the lady’s advances, “wiȝt wallande joye warmed his hert.” The knight’s cause is so desperate that he is said to be lost without Mary’s intercession, “Gret perile bitwene hem stod, nif Mare of hir knyȝt mynne” (1766). In describing the scene so desperately, the poet imbues the moment with a dramatic tension, inviting the reader to wonder, like the lady, what motive has so strengthened his resolve.

At this climactic point in the narrative, the poet gives a brief glimpse of Gawain’s interior dialogue to explain his reasons:

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For þat prynces of pris depressed hum so þikke,
Nurned hym so neȝe þe þred, þat need hym bhoued
Oper lach þer hir luf, oper lodly refuse.
He cared for his cortaysye, lest craȝayn he were,
And more for his meschef þif he schulde make synne,
And be traytor to þat tolke þat þat telde aȝt. (1770 - 1776)
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The reasons for Gawain’s course of action are here made explicit: it was for love of virtue that he abstained from the lady’s offers, and at this climactic moment the poet suggests his abstinence reflects authentic temperance, rather than simple self-restraint. The precedence he gives to chastity over courtesy reveals his faithfulness to his Christian religion. Derek Pearsall, however, rejects this understanding, even in the
voice of the poet, in a reading of the poem that relegates its Christian themes. Pearsall suggests that Gawain simply practices the tenets of his faith, as every other Christian of that time would have. His attendance at mass and confession to the priest, Pearsall insists, should be read as nothing more than an adherence to the conventions of his time:

[Gawain’s faith] provides the rituals that structure the day and year, a range of mantras and charms that gives reassurance in times of danger, and opportunities for a strictly codified versions of the inner life to be hauled to the surface for inspection and dismissal.  

Pearsall’s argument downplays the importance of deeper Christian themes that pervade the entire poem, which, are essentially dismissed, from a modern secular critic’s viewpoint, as part of the poem’s undifferentiated and uncritical medieval cultural baggage. Such a dismissal undoubtedly does the poet and his poem a disservice, and obscures the poet’s own careful treatment of the nuances of moral conduct in his own time. I would argue, however, that the particular, rather than general, nature of Gawain’s faith is the driving impetus behind each of his virtuous acts. Gawain’s temperance can only be made sense of in light of his own faith and his practice of it: “And more for his meschef ȝȝ if he schulde make synne” (1774). This comment suggests that Gawain’s fear of falling into sin was the predominant motivation for his temperance towards the lady, yet such a comment on the affects that the knight’s actions might have upon his soul make no sense from Pearsall’s point of view. However, the most straightforward way of explaining Gawain’s fear of falling into sin is to accept that he is presented with a genuine concern for his salvation, and that his faith was something integral to his characterization, guiding his moral decisions.

2.4 The poet’s unity of purpose

The temptation scenes test the strength of Gawain’s temperance, and his response to these tests directly determines his fate when he meets with the Green Knight. Rather than testing his patience, generosity, kindness or any other virtue, the poet instead

161 Pearsall, Courtesy, 353.
chooses to test Gawain’s temperance, just as he purposefully had chosen to test his fortitude in the beheading game. This decision to prioritise trials that would explore the cardinal virtues, presents another and more complex instance of the influence of Scholastic thought upon the poet’s construction of Gawain’s character. Scholastic theologians were greatly interested in the cardinal virtues, exploring how they could open new approaches to moral theology. Rather than simply delineating the duties of man in commandments and obligations, the Scholastics treatment of moral philosophy gave definition to a more comprehensive knowledge of man’s nature through showing what his perfect state should look like. The influence of Scholasticism upon the moral thought of the poet is shown not only in his structuring of the temptation scenes (and Gawain’s dilemma in them), but also in the events in the Green Chapel that the seduction game precipitates.

Gawain receives a small nick upon his neck by the Green Knight’s axe, rather than losing his head, as he had expected. The reason the Green Knight gives for affording him this leniency is the smallness of Gawain’s fault (2309 – 2315). He has remained chaste towards the lady, but has broken his truth with Bertilak. Gawain discovers himself not to be a triumphant hero even in the moral sphere. He has succeeded in avoiding the deadly sin of adultery, but, as the nick upon his neck signifies, he is guilty of a lesser sin in breaking his “truth” in relation to his host’s game. The poet’s intention to highlight the distinction between mortal and venial sins further emphasises his influence by Scholastic thought, though such a distinction had existed long before the Scholastics explored it. Aquinas provides a detailed discussion of the gradation of sin, and affirms that, because actions differ in their object, sins must also differ in their species, according to their object. This nuanced understanding of sin become embedded in the complex intricacies of medieval moral theology; the poet conveys an appreciation of this complexity at the end of the poem, when Gawain and the knights of Camelot disagree on the degree of Gawain’s culpability (2513 – 2516). The poet reveals his sophisticated interest in this kind of problem. Gawain could have either passed the test and proved his excellence, or failed the test and lost his head, but instead the poet leaves the reader with an ambiguous ending that seems superficially inconclusive.

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163 Aquinas, ST, I-II,72,1 ad. 3

At the poem’s conclusion, it is not easily evident whether Gawain should be viewed as an exemplar of virtue or as an imperfect knight, and it is in this ambiguous ending that the influence of the paradigms of Scholastic moral thinking become most apparent. The pre-eminent Scholastics of the high Middle Ages had a keen interest in exploring the nuances of moral theology: understanding the distinction between sins of commission and omission, sins against oneself or one’s neighbour, sins that are venial and those that are mortal. It is towards a deeper understanding of these distinctions that the ambiguous ending of the poem is directed. Tolkien writes on the poet’s intention of exploring these distinctions:

The temptation was to this poet the raison d’être of his poem; all else was to him scenery, background, or else machinery: a device for getting Sir Gawain into the situation which he wished to study.

The situation itself is, however, a particularly unique one. Tolkien observes that it is not without reason that Gawain is tempted within the context of game. In Marie de France’s Arthurian Lay, Guinevere approaches the knight Lanval to make him her lover, and in such a forward way that it was difficult for him to refuse her without causing offence. The situation is similar to Gawain’s predicament in SGGK, but with two significant differences. The most evident distinction is that Lanval failed where Gawain succeeds. Gawain maintains his courtesy without compromising his chastity, while Lanval caused bitter offence to Guinevere by his refusal, and in any case does not remain chaste. The second difference is, however, no less significant. In Marie de France’s Lay, Guinevere in fact wishes Lanval to be her lover, whereas in SGGK the lady only acts the part of a temptress, in order to test Gawain’s virtue. The fact that Gawain is being deliberately tested in these moments through an elaborate hoax emphasizes the significance of the test and makes the reader scrutinize and reassess his behaviour.

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167 Tolkien, Monsters and Critics, 60.
168 Marie de France, The Lais of Marie de France, 83.
Chaucer achieves a similar effect at the end of The Clerk’s Tale, in his version of the story of the king Walter who takes the peasant Griselda as his wife. The condition he makes for their marriage is that she would obey and respect him in everything unquestioningly. After their marriage, he proceeds to take away each of their children, leading Griselda to believe that they have been put to death. He then dismisses his wife and makes plans to wed another, all this he does in order to test her fidelity towards him and see how she responds under such adversity. This ploy is only revealed to her and the reader at the end of the story, the knowledge of which prompts the reader to reassess her behaviour and reflect further on how she responded to each situation. In both SGGK and The Clerk’s Tale the contrivance of a test is used in order to focus the reader’s attention on reassessing the protagonists’ behaviour, and critiquing their moral integrity. Griselda emerges blameless—at least on the surface—while Walter appears as some kind of emotional and moral monster.

The reader of Marie’s Lanval is, on the other hand, less inclined to reassess the discourtesy of Lanval because his encounter with Guinevere was not framed as a test; for she did in fact wish to seduce him. The framing of Gawain’s temptations within a test shows the importance of his response and the poet’s interest in eliciting the reader’s critique of that response. Furthermore, it should be recognised that Gawain’s ignorance that he was being tested itself dictates aspects of his response. The testing of Gawain’s virtue may be summarized in three temptations. The first is his temptation to preserve his life through breaking his promise with the Green Knight by not seeking out the Green Chapel; his second temptation is the sexual advances of Lady Bertilak; and finally he is tempted to conceal the gift of the green girdle from Sir Bertilak. It is significant that of these three temptations the last is the only one that he gives in to, for though all three temptations were contrivances to test his virtue, it is only in the case of the last (the exchange of winnings) that he knew himself constrained by the rules of a game. In each test a different matter is also at stake; in keeping his word with the Green Knight it is his life that is in jeopardy, with the test of his chastity towards Lady Bertilak it is his soul that stands in danger, and with his promise of exchanged winnings with Sir Bertilak it is only his integrity in maintaining the rules of a game that are at stake when he decides to retain the girdle. Each of the


three tests may, however, can be reduced to Gawain’s struggle to adhere to the rules he is bound by, and it is this struggle that constitutes the central tension of the poem. Each system of rules is in itself not easy to easy to adhere to, but what complicates the plot of *SGGK* is the fact that the rules Gawain strives to keep often are so often in tension with one another; by maintaining one set, he can easily meant breaking another.

Tolkien divides these “rules” into three categories. The rules of morality that Gawain must keep as a Christian, the rules of courtesy he must maintain as a knight and rules of the game as prescribed by Bertilak. It is by understanding the distinction of these rules and the poet’s intention for bringing them into conflict the reader is at a greater advantage in discerning the poem’s general theme. The distinction between breaking rules of morality, or simply the rules of a game is a discussion that the poet invites the reader to reflect upon, and he does this quite deliberately by through his inclusion of the confessional scene. Upon the first reading of the poem the reader may think that Gawain’s confession to the priest is recounted simply in order to show how certain he was of his own death (1902 -1912). And though this effect is certainly conveyed, the poet is intending to achieve much more. The timing of the confession signifies the response that the poet wishes to produce in the reader. Soon after breaking the rules of the game with Sir Bertilak, Gawain visits the priest in the confessional. This sequence of events leaves the reader wondering whether Gawain’s misdemeanour qualifies as a moral transgression, deserving of mention in the confessional. What he discloses (or neglects to disclose) is, however, not revealed, the confessional seal remains unbroken. The reason for this omission is clearly not out of respect for a fictitious character’s privacy. It might seem strange that a poem that is so preoccupied with morality should neglect to detail so pivotal a point in the story. Gawain’s retention of the green girdle was understood to be a fault, but the severity of that fault is disputed by Gawain and the other knights at the end of the story, and their disagreement has in led to a wipe scope of interpretations by critics seeking to evaluate the poem. It might be thought that the poet made a significant oversight in failing to divulge the details of the confession, and that the didactic merit of the narrative diminished significantly by his silence. A moral evaluation of Gawain’s behaviour would surely have been simpler had the reader known the details of the confessional; but the poet does not offer this. The poet develops a clear model

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of what virtues such as fortitude and temperance should look like, but in no way does
he suggest that the interior aspect of moral behaviour is an easy matter to understand.

The poem’s discourse of morality is comprehensive, differentiating courage and
recesslessness, temperance and restraint, and yet at the end of the poem the poet
frustrates any desire on the reader’s part for a concrete evaluation on Gawain’s
culpability in retaining the girdle. The poet achieves this by his silence towards
Gawain’s confession and the laughter of the knights at Gawain’s scruples. Throughout
the story, Gawain is led into compromising situations, and in each instance he
demonstrates his virtue by the nature of his responses. He acts commendably in
honouring his word with the Green Knight, he showed his integrity in refusing Lady
Bertilak and in all but the green girdle he kept his word with Sir Bertilak. The poem is
not about moral ambiguity, it is rather instead interested in the ambiguity of
understanding the workings of another’s conscience. It is not clear whether the poet
intends Gawain’s final fault to be viewed as a condonable foible, or a serious offence,
inviting the contrition that Gawain shows. If the poet had admitted the reader into the
confessional it would likely have resolved much of the poem’s ambiguity on this
point. But one of the central themes of the poem would have been lost in such a
clarification: if the reader fully understood Gawain’s fault, the ambiguity and
confusion that the poet works so artfully to achieve would be lost.¹⁷² The reader is not
left doubting the poet’s belief in the existence of objective morality, but he is left with
a degree of doubtfulness on the ability to arrive at concretely accurate evaluations of
all human actions.

An example of the ambiguity that is created by Gawain’s unknowable
confession emerges in the contrasting (and speculative) interpretations of Tolkien and
Gollancz. The two agree that it is unlikely that Gawain mentioned the girdle in his
confession, for if he had, the priest would have required him to return it. As Claudius
asserts in Hamlet, one cannot ask for forgiveness while retaining the possessing you
are contrite for obtaining. “May one be pardon’d and retain the offence?”¹⁷³ Though
Tolkien and Gollancz agree on the likelihood that Gawain omitted the girdle from his
confession of sins, their evaluations of his silence could not be more different.
Gollancz is of the opinion that Gawain’s failure to acknowledge the fault of the girdle
would have invalidated his entire confession. He adds furthermore that this was an

¹⁷² Tolkien, Monsters and Critics, 71.
oversight of the poet. He believes that the poet recounts Gawain’s confession to show his preparation for the possibility of death. Gollancz maintains that the poet made a neglectful oversight by failing to notice that Gawain had already accepted the girdle when he went to confession. “Though the poet does not notice it Gawain makes a sacrilegious confession. For he conceals the fact that he has accepted the girdle with the intention of retaining it.”

Tolkien on the other hand argues that the poet intentionally inserts the confessional scene at this point in the narrative so that the reader might give thought to the immorality or amorality of Gawain’s actions. Tolkien concedes that nothing can verifiably be asserted about what was said in the confession, he does, however, note that, regardless of what was said, the poet makes it clear the confession was valid:

Since the author does not specify what Gawain confessed, we cannot say what he omitted, and it is therefore gratuitously silly to assert that he concealed anything. We are told, however, that he *schewed his mysdedez, of pe more and pe mynne*, that is, that he confessed all his sins (sc. All that it was necessary to confess) both great and small.

Tolkien maintains this argument on the grounds that when Gawain leaves the confessional it is expressly clear the that confession was valid:

There he cleanly confessed him and declared his misdeeds, both the more and less, and for mercy he begged, to absolve him of them all he besought the good man; and he assoiled him and made him as sage and as clean as for Doom’s day indeed, were t due on the morrow. (1880 - 1884)

The validity of Gawain’s confession is emphasised in order to make more apparent the distinction between a moral transgression and breaking the rule of a game. Tolkien observes that it is at this point in the story that both Gawain and the reader are forced to realize the difference:

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174 Sir Israel Gollancz ed., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Early English Text Society 1940), 123.


176 There is another option which Tolkien does not mention. At the time of the confession, Gawain might not have deemed the girdle a moral offence, and not knowing it to be a sin, he would be excused for omitting it in his confession. The girdle might still be a moral offence, and one that Gawain only realizes at the end of the poem when the Green Knight brings to light his partial failure of the test.
Gawain’s confession is represented as a good one, then. Yet the girdle is retained. This cannot be accidental or inadvertent. We are obliged therefore to come to terms with the situation deliberately contrived by the author; we are driven to consider the relation of all these rules of behaviour, these games and courtesies, to sin, morals, the saving of souls, to what the author would have held to be eternal and universal values. And that, surely, is precisely why the confession is introduced, and at this point. Gawain in his last perilous extremity was obliged to tear his ‘code’ in two, and distinguish its components of good manners and good morals.\textsuperscript{177}

Even before his confession Gawain suffers the realization that his code of courtesy cannot always be perfectly practiced in accordance with chastity. When he is confronted by the lady, he seems to retain his courtesy, but it is really only the semblance of it. Courtesy, in the medieval understanding of the word, required the knight subservience to the wishes of his lady.\textsuperscript{178}

Gawain uses tact to navigate the predicament, and not give offence to the lady. But the tact cannot be properly described as courtesy, for he refused the wishes of the lady, which, is contrary to the practice of authentic courtesy. Tolkien notes Gawain’s departure from the requirements of courtesy:

\begin{quote}
[He] has in reality abandoned from the outset ‘services’, the absolute submission of the ‘true servant’ to the will and wishes of the lady; though he strives throughout to maintain the verbal shadow of it, the gentleness of polite speech and manners.\textsuperscript{179}
\end{quote}

It cannot be doubted that he chose rightly when preferring rules of morality over those over courtesy. The poem develops in a way that makes it clear that the moral law rightly has precedence over social law of courtesy. When Gawain is presented with the green girdle he is again confronted with a choice, though this time it is not a matter of courtesy and morality, but simply the rules of a game contrived by his host. The girdle seems to promise Gawain an escape from his fate at the green chapel, and for this reason he is quite naturally inclined to accept the gift. The lady had previously been tempting him to what he knew to be clearly sinful, but in offering the girdle she

\textsuperscript{177} Tolkien, \textit{Monsters and Critics}, 89.

\textsuperscript{178} Nicholls, \textit{Courtesy}, 137.

\textsuperscript{179} Tolkien, \textit{Monsters and Critics}, 91.
did not ask him to break any rules of morality, only the rules of her husband’s game. Accepting the girdle did not seem to contravene his conscience and so he accepts the girdle, at which point the lady immediately demands that he tells no one of it, but keeps it hidden. To keep the girdle hidden from his host would break the rules of the game they had agreed upon, and Gawain does this with little compunction. The decision, to preserve his life at the cost of breaking the rule of a game, seems justifiable, not only excusable but even reasonable. It would have been very different had the lady offered him protection under the condition that he take her as his lover.

Gawain’s desire to live would need to have been weighed against the desire to preserve his virtue. This is, however, not the dilemma that the poet places Gawain in. He has to decide, rather, if he is more committed to maintaining the rules of a game than he is his own life. This, Tolkien observes, is the peculiar crux of the poem upon which the narrative centres, and through it the poet manifests a keen interest in exploring the particularities of moral action:

Nothing in his handling of his tale suggests that he thought moral conduct a simple and painless thing in practice. And anyway he was, as we might say, a gentleman and a sportsman, and was intrigued by the minor issue. Indeed the moralitas of his poem, if complicated, is yet also enriched by this exhibition of a clash of rules on a lower plane.180

There seems nothing gravely wrong in accepting the girdle, and yet by the end of the poem Gawain shows deep remorse for the action. His chief fault is not, however, the accepting of the girdle. Tolkien suggests that because the Green Knight used magic in the first beheading scene, it cannot be thought unjust for Gawain to resort to it too.181 It was not then the initial accepting of the girdle for which Gawain is at fault. It is rather his wilful deception of Bertilak, when he retains the girdle, that is the fault of which he later repents. Tolkien’s problematizes a simple reading of this fault, however, by noting that Gawain gave his promise that he would tell no one of the girdle. This means that he either had to break his courtesy to the lady by going back upon his oath, or else break the rules of the game with Bertilak. Tolkien goes on to

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181 Ibid., 94.
affirm that when two laws are in conflict, it is the higher one that should be obeyed.\(^{182}\) Gawain deemed courtesy towards the lady the higher law and chose to break the rules of the game. It is, however, made evident by the end of the poem that this was a fault, for his failure to keep his promise was ultimately a failure to maintain a balance between the competing rules that he had bound himself by. The artificial rules of courtesy that demand deference, do not mitigate Gawain from his offence. Tolkien notes that the laws of morality have a ‘universal overriding validity’.\(^{183}\) That is to say, it is right to give them precedence, and in doing so one is excused from trespasses upon lower laws. But the laws of courtesy are distinct from those of morality.\(^{184}\) They are not so high as to excuse one from breaking the rules of a game.

The laws of morality are higher than social laws, and for this reason Gawain rightly prefers chastity over courtesy in his encounters with the lady. And he likewise would have been excused for breaking the rules of the game if they had in any way demanded a compromise of virtue, but there was nothing immoral in surrendering the girdle to Bertilak. He retained the girdle to avoid death, not sin. At this point it is natural to question whether in fact it is reasonable to die rather than break the rules of a game. For this it is necessary to understand an important element of the poet’s world view. Gawain’s shield reflects his commitment to trought, not only in the moral sphere but within the context of courtesy also and games.\(^{185}\) The image of the pentangle is one of all-embracing perfection. All the points of the pentangle are connected, and if one is broken, the unending knot is broken. Consequently, Gawain binds himself through this emblem to maintain his trought in all situations. Fear of death does not excuse him from abiding by the truth. Pieper affirms that true fortitude consists in “not allowing oneself to be forced into evil by fear, or to be kept by fear from the realization of good.”\(^{186}\) Mark Miller sees Gawain’s fortitude as a fruit of his commitment to twawthe:

What makes Gawain an icon of knightly trawthe is that he refuses to be compelled by the most compelling forces at

\(^{182}\) Ibid., 95.

\(^{183}\) Ibid., 96.

\(^{184}\) Whiting, Gawain: His Reputation, 102.

\(^{185}\) Evans The Five Virtues, 88.

\(^{186}\) Pieper, Cardinal Virtues, 126.
work in him—here, his natural desire for self-preservation; earlier in the poem, his equally natural desire for sexual pleasure.  

Gawain shows a commitment to *trouthe* in seeking out the green chapel, but the real trial of his *trouthe* is in his dealings with the lady. The Green Knight explains the correspondence between the three swings of the axe with the three times he resists the lady, and the nick on his neck as a result of his small fault of retaining the girdle. Ad Putter observes that he makes no comment upon Gawain keeping his word by seeking out the Green Chapel. This significant omission is not meant to suggest that it was not an act of heroic virtue, maintaining his truth, but rather to emphasise that this was not the significant trial. The poet allows the reader to think that the climax of the story was when Gawain stoops to receive the blow, but the Green Knight reveals to both Gawain and the readers that the real climax, the real test lay in his dealings with the lady. Putter discusses the centrality of Gawain’s trial with the lady:

> In a startling reversal of expectation, the *Gawain*-poet reduces the Beheading Game to an adventure of secondary importance, while elevating an apparently minor digression at the Castle Hautdesert to the pivotal scene...Gawain’s crucial test, then, takes place in mundane circumstances, circumstances so utterly unportentous that their importance is never properly recognized by Gawain or the reader until after the fact. 

Tolkien had also affirmed that Gawain’s temptation with the lady as the central theme of the poem, arguing that everything else in the plot acts only to frame those temptation scenes. It must be observed though that there were two distinct temptations that Gawain was beset by. The lady first offered him her body, and when he refused that, she offered her girdle. These two temptations are significant because by them Gawain’s commitment to *trouthe* is fully tested, and the test is all the more perfect because of Gawain’s ignorance. Gawain and the reader are both led to believe...

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189 Ibid., 43.

that his true test is in his dealings with the Green Knight, and that his stay at the castle is a moment’s respite from the challenge.

The lady tempts him with her body on three mornings, and when on the third day she is refused she offers her girdle instead. In these two distinct temptations Gawain learns two truths. Tolkien affirms that by his success in the former trail he learns the potential discordance between courtesy and virtue:

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\text{The author is chiefly interested in the competition between ‘courtesy’ and virtue (purity and loyalty); he shows us their increasing divergence, and shows us Gawain at the crisis of the temptation recognising this, and choosing virtue rather than courtesy…}^{191}\]

Gawain realizes the moral imperative he is under to deny the lady, even at the risk of discourtesy. But in his failure to deny the girdle also, he does not immediately see his fault.\(^{192}\) The realization of that fault is only reached when the Green Knight explains it to Gawain. If these two temptations are the central theme of the poem it is useful exploring what truths the poet was intending to convey by them. Tolkien observed that the first trial emphasized the potential divergence of the moral and social code, and the imperative to preference the former. In tempting Gawain with the green girdle, the poet makes a trial of his honesty, deliberately framing it in the context of a game, and a game with highest of stakes. For in such a setting it seems most excusable to break one’s truth. Tolkien, however, notes that though it might have been excusable for him to practice imperfect courtesy towards the lady, if it avoided a compromise of his virtue, a compromise of *trouthe* should never permitted. Putter notes this medieval preoccupation with truth:

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\text{This deep moral concern with} \textit{trawpe} \text{is not in itself exceptional. It occupied many of the Gawain-poet’s contemporaries. Chaucer explored it in, for example,} \textit{The Franklin’s Tale} \text{and} \textit{Troilus and Criseyde}; \text{Langland did so in} \textit{Piers Plowman}; \text{and Gower wrote in his} \textit{Confession Amantis} \text{that: “Among the virtues on is chief, and that is trouthe….”}^{193}\]

\(^{191}\) Tolkien, \textit{Monsters and Critics}, 95.

\(^{192}\) Gawain’s chief fault was not in accepting the green girdle, but in breaking his truth with Bertilak by retaining it. But it might be presumed that when he accepted it, he thought to conceal it, else he would have little reason to accept it. Accordingly, we may speak of his fault in accepting it.

\(^{193}\) Putter, \textit{Introduction}, 44.
Putter makes the argument that it was the historical events surrounding these medieval poet’s that prompted them to all focus so intently upon the theme of truthfulness. He affirms that the peasants revolt of 1381 and general decay of the feudalistic structure was what led the poets to treat so intently of the need for truth:

For the need for *know* – whether it means keeping promises or honouring the rules of a contract – becomes especially pressing or a society which has lost confidence in its immutability, and which is discovering that, without human truthfulness, social relations are as volatile as the changeable human needs and desires that bring these relations into being.

Putter’s historic argument is pertinent, but seems to ignore the fact that in every age there is a clear need for truth. One could look at the events from any period of history to explain why that age in particular prized truth so highly. Every age for one reason or another has a particular need for prizing the virtue. Truth transcends history, its necessity is felt by every age. There may be reason to doubt Putter’s argument as to why this virtue was so prevalent in medieval literature, but that fact that “truth” was a popular topic among medieval poets cannot be denied.

Aquinas affirms that all lies, in one sense or another, are an offence to God who is truth itself. Aquinas makes no exceptions, even in the situation that confronts Gawain, already wrapped in lies and deceit, when a lie could perhaps save his life. “Therefore it is not lawful to tell a lie in order to deliver another from any danger whatever.” Aquinas divides lies into three categories; the officious lie that is intended towards a good end, the jocose lie that is not intended to be believed, and the mischievous lie that is directed towards an ill purpose. The lie that Gawain is guilty of could be categorized as an “officious” lie because it was intended towards the good of self-preservation, and intended no ill to others. Aquinas suggests that this motivation reduces the nature of the offence, but the lie still remains unlawful. Aquinas, with an eye on perfection, affirms that there is never an occasion that justifies the telling of a lie. The prudent omission of a truth is often necessary, but to speak a lie is always a sin of some degree. In the strictest sense, though, Gawain does not speak a lie, but

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195 Ibid., 21.
196 Aquinas, ST, II- II, 110, 2. ad. 1
197 Aquinas, ST, II-II, 110, 4. c.o
rather fails to fulfil a promise. Aquinas assimilates the breaking of a promise to lying, saying that the two are almost synonymous. The only distinction he makes is that there are two cases that make the breaking of a promise permissible. The first is when the speaker has promised to do that which is evil. Aquinas cites to Isidore: “Break your faith when you have promised ill.” Evidently, it would be wrong to maintain a promise to perform an evil act, out of a steadfast commitment to truth.

From this perspective, in the Franklin's Tale, Dorigen would be excused from her promise to commit adultery, because it was wrong to make such a vow. Gawain, however, could not be excused with an analogous line of argument, because he did not commit to something sinful when he promised to exchange winnings with Bertilak, despite the blind nature of the promise. The second ground Aquinas offers for a promise to be lawfully broken is if the essential circumstances have altered since making the promise. If the changed circumstances are such that it is now impossible or unlawful to maintain the promise, then it there is not sin in breaking the promise. Aquinas draws on Seneca in support of this argument:

> For a man to be bound to keep a promise it is necessary for everything to remain unchanged: otherwise neither did he lie in promising—since he promised what he had in his mind, due circumstances being taken for granted—nor was he faithless in not keeping his promise, because circumstances are no longer the same.

However, this second condition Aquinas allows for breaking “truth” might not excuse Gawain any more than the first. Being offered a girdle, even one that might save his life, does not alter the circumstances of his initial promise with Bertilak. Gawain’s crime can be diminished from the Thomistic point of view, however: “Now it is evident that the greater the good intended, the more is the sin of lying diminished in gravity.”

Aquinas classes as a mortal sin all those lies told against one’s neighbour that have the intention of injury. He considers less grave those that are made with no evil intent:

> But if the end intended be not contrary to charity, neither will the lie, considered under this aspect, be a mortal sin, as in the case of a jocose lie, where some little pleasure is

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199 Aquinas, ST, II-II, 110, 3. s.c

200 Aquinas, ST, II-II, 110, 2. ad.2
From this viewpoint, Gawain’s retention of the green girdle would not constitute a grave offence. But while not a deadly sin, it still remains an imperfect action, a sin against *twawfe* and a blemish on the perfection claimed by his shield. That the *Gawain*-poet shares this perspective is evident in the final fitt of the poem, when the Green Knight chastises Gawain for breaking his truth (2366). Gawain’s judge knows the reason that prompted Gawain to accept the girdle (love of life), but does not consider it enough to excuse him fully. By the slight wound delivered to Gawain’s neck, the poet’s moral code accords with Aquinas’ view that all broken promises are failings in the moral life. But the size of the wound is important: instead of beheading Gawain, the poet agrees with Aquinas that the officious lie is less severe than the mischievous lie. It is unlikely that the poet’s ethics are accidentally congruent with the dominant understanding of moral theology in the late Middle Ages. Even if the *Gawain*-poet had not read Aquinas’ works, he nevertheless places himself in the Scholastic and Thomistic tradition of thought.

The same perspective is evident in the poet’s presentation of Gawain’s desires. His desire for the good is often compromised by the desire for lesser goods. Gawain’s will desires the good of the virtue depicted on his shield, yet his flesh is tempted by the sensual good that the lady presents. Again, his desire for truth and integrity is compromised by his desire to sustain his life, which entails a degree of deceit. Aquinas reflects at length on the movements of the will, and is likely that the influence of such ideas affected the poet’s representation to explore the passions of Gawain. Aquinas’ treatment of the complex question of man’s will helps to explain Gawain’s response to the temptations of the lady. Aquinas uses the terms ‘concupiscible’ and ‘irascible’ to denote the two kinds of appetite that man’s will can tend towards:

There is a passion through which the soul is simply inclined to seek what is suitable according to the senses, and to fly from what is hurtful, and this is called the concupiscible: and another whereby an animal resists the attacks of any agents that hinder what is suitable and inflict harm; and this is called the irascible, whence we say that its object is

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201 Aquinas, ST, II,II, 110, 4. ad. 1

something arduous, because its tendency is to overcome and rise above obstacles. Now these two are not to be reduced to one principal: for sometimes the soul busies itself with unpleasant things against the inclination of the concupiscible appetite in order that, following the impulse of the irascible appetite, it may fight against obstacles... This is clear also from the fact that the irascible is, as it were, the champion and defender of the concupiscible, when it rises up against what hinders the acquisition of the suitable things which the concupiscible desires, or against what inflicts harm, from which the concupiscible flies. Aquinas’ evocation of the hunted animal is perhaps telling, and certainly offers a striking coincidence with the poem’s employment of the same kind of questions. The concupiscible appetite refers then to the simple inclination towards a sensible object, a tangible good that is easily attained. When the desired good is absent the concupiscible appetite gives rise to desire, and when it is present joy results. In turn when an evil thing is present sorrow is the result and when it is absent one feels aversion. When Gawain wanders through the forest suffering the hardships of the weather he experiences a concupiscible appetite towards the simple good of food and shelter, this good is absent, which gives rise to desire, which is shown when he prays for shelter. (754 – 762)

The irascible appetite is distinct from the concupiscible, in that it accounts for the human response to those good things that are difficult to attain and those evils that are difficult to avoid. When there is a possibility of enjoying that difficult good, a person experiences hope; when, however, the good seems impossible to grasp, one will experience despair. Furthermore, when there is an evil that is difficult to avoid one will show courage if the threatening evil seems conquerable, and fear if the threatened evil seems unconquerable. Aquinas uses this exposition of man’s passions to explain what moves man to feel desire, joy, sorrow, aversion, hope, despair, courage and fear.

This codified understanding the passions, ultimately derived from the Stoics, is embedded in the medieval understanding of human nature, composed of will and the capacity for action, experienced in a fallen nature and a world of temptation. The medieval person sought to make sense of moral action by formulating complex systems that explained the cause for each passion. The poet’s interest in exploring the dilemma of the green girdle risks seeming trivial to the modern reader, unaware of the

Aquinas, ST, I,81,2, ad. 4
medieval ordering of the passions and the rigid moral system that grew from it. C.S. Lewis explains the influence of this way of thinking in his discussion of the medieval impulse to codify their moral systems:

At his most characteristic, medieval man was not a dreamer nor a wanderer. He was an organiser, a codifier, a builder of systems. He wanted ‘a place for everything and everything in the right place’. Distinction, definition, tabulation were his delight. Though full of turbulent activities, he was equally full of the impulse to formalise them. War was (in intention) formalised by the art of heraldry and rules of chivalry; sexual passion (in intention), by the elaborate code of love.204

This medieval impulse to codify and systemise an understanding of human nature is shown explicitly in their medieval theology, and also poetry.

When Gawain strives to remain chaste in the face of the lady’s seduction he experiences the struggle of the irascible passions. This temptation might seem initially an instance of the concupiscible passions, because it deals with something sensible, an apparent good that is easily attained. It is, however, an irascible passion that Gawain contends with, for it is made manifestly clear that the sin of un-chastity, that Gawain is so desirous of avoiding, is a difficult thing to attain. The persistence of the lady’s suit, her charming manner and appearance, Gawain’s natural inclination to sensual pleasure, and his adherence to the standards of courtesy, all contribute towards making the good of chastity a difficult good. Consequently, his passions towards that good must be understood as irascible. Aquinas suggests that a person is contending with an irascible passion when the good is difficult to attain or the evil difficult to avoid.205 And when the evil it difficult to avoid, but not impossible, a person shows courage in seeking to avoid it. Gawain’s response to the lady’s temptations exemplifies this understanding of the irascible passions, as he shows courage in remaining chaste, even though it proves difficult to do so. He shows courage because he had hope that he could succeed in attaining the difficult good of remaining chaste. In doing so he passes the primary test of virtue that Morgan le Fay had contrived. However, Gawain fails in the second test, when he is offered the girdle, when he breaks his “truth” out of fear for his life. It is, furthermore, in this failure that the poet reflects Scholastic thinking about the passions. Gawain accepts the green girdle

204 Lewis, The Discarded Image, 10.
205 Aquinas, ST, I-II,25,1, c.o
because he is in despair for his life; Aquinas teaches that the irascible passion of despair arises when a man is confronted with an evil that seems impossible to avoid. Gawain suffers this despair because he sees no possibility of avoiding his death, so that this despair prompts him to the misdeed of accepting the girdle and keeping it secret.

The courage and despair that Gawain shows when tempted by the lady, are both congruent with Aquinas’ explanation of the passions. When presented with a difficult but not impossible good he shows courage, and in the face of a seemingly impossible good he feels despair. The poet does not, however, limit himself to simply explaining the causes for the passions, he also evaluates the fittingness of each passion, showing when one ought to show courage, and when despair is permitted. This is shown at the end of the story when Gawain’s conduct is critiqued, first by the Green Knight and then more sternly by Gawain’s own conscience. Gawain is praised by the Green Knight for showing courage in the face of the lady’s temptations:

Now know I wel þy cosses, and þy costes als,  
And þe wowing of wyf: I wroȝt hit myseluen.  
I sende hir to asay þe, and sothly me þynkkez  
On þe faultlest freke þat euer on fote ȝede… (2360 - 2363)

Gawain shows courage against the temptations of the flesh, but fear at the prospect of death of that same flesh. And though it seems reasonable that he should have been moved by fear to accept the girdle, the Green Knight identifies it as failing. Rather than limiting his exploration to the cause of the passions, the poet also seeks to evaluate the actions that result from them. The Green Knight recognises that Gawain did not take the green girdle out of covetousness or because he meant to woo the lady, but because feared to die, and for this reason he blames him less and only deals him a small nick on his neck as punishment:

Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wonted;  
Bot þat watz for no wylde wrke, ne wowying nauþer,  
Bot for þe lufed your lyf; the lasse I yow blame. (2365)

Gawain chastises himself with far greater severity than the Green Knight. Believing the fault deserving of more than a small nick upon the neck he assumes the penance of returning to Camelot wearing the girdle for all to see as a token of his failing. At court Gawain uses the strongest language to condemn his own fault:
Furthermore, he says that he will wear this mark of his untruth for the rest of his days.

The poet deliberately highlights the divergent views of Gawain and the Green Knight, and in doing so he leaves his readers with an enigmatic conclusion. It is not immediately clear which attitude the poet sympathises with, and what he intends to achieve by creating this disagreement. The final fitts of the poem relate Gawain’s return to court, where Arthur’s knights laugh at the severe attitude that Gawain takes towards his offence. If the laugh and condolence of the court had caused Gawain to throw off the girdle and laugh with the other knights, then the poem could be read as a warning against scrupulosity. But the poet does not conclude the narrative in this manner, and Gawain refuses to reconcile himself with the court’s morality. By concluding the poem with this unreconciled tension, the poet invites his readers to make sense of the disparity of opinions and determine which viewpoint is correct. The Green Knight acknowledges that it was not out of lust or covetousness that Gawain accepted the girdle, but only out of fear for his own life:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wonted;} \\
&\text{Bot } \hat{p} \text{at watz for no wylyde werke, ne wowing nau}\p \\
&\text{Bot for } 3e \text{ lufed your lyf; the lasse I yow blame. (2366-2368)}
\end{align*}
\]

And while it can be easily believed that Gawain should condemn his own lack of restraint if he had succumbed to the lady’s temptations, it is not immediately obvious why he vilifies himself so severely for acting out of fear of death. For while it is an intrinsic moral wrong to desire another man’s wife, there is nothing objectively evil in the wish to continue living. And if it was his love for life that moved him to break his truth by accepting the girdle, then the offence should not be considered a grave sin. This is the viewpoint of all the knights in the story that laughed at Gawain’s ‘scruples’.206 Gawain’s inability to adopt their viewpoint only makes sense when contextualised within the moral framework that the poet was writing in. Without such contextualising, the critic stands in danger of projecting contemporary ethics into the medieval poem.

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In order to understand how the fault of Gawain should be evaluated, the species of the fault must be understood. The Green Knight suggest that Gawain’s sin was his untruthfulness when he broke the promise to his host. If the fault was nothing more than this small deviation from the truth, than it would be difficult to view Gawain’s remorse as anything but excessive scrupulosity. But Gawain is portrayed as a man who is deeply self-aware, and he could not have failed to see that it was fear that prompted his untruthfulness. He gave into fear and let it govern him, and it was because of this that he showed such grief. The untruthfulness that he committed in retaining the girdle was the fruit of him succumbing to the fear of death, but it is in the act of being overcome by fear itself, that the essence of his offence lay. It is necessary to stress the importance of this distinction in order to make sense of Gawain’s remorse. He is grieved by his subservience to fear, rather than the particular offence that resulted from it. If the lady had told him that he would be preserved from harm if he stole an apple from an orchard, the offence might be considered as petty as breaking the rule of a game, but no doubt if Gawain had done it, he would have returned to Camelot with an apple hung on his neck. For he recognised the sinfulness of the smallest transgression that resulted from a submission to fear. It was the fault of his interior disposition that was his chief fault, rather than the particular falsehood he committed. Aquinas notes the importance of identifying the object of the sin, that is to say, what moves a person to sin:

Now voluntary acts differ in species according to their objects. Therefore it follows that sins are properly distinguished in species by their objects….The aspect of good is found chiefly in the end: and therefore the end stands in the relation of object to the act of the will which is at the root of every sin. 207

Fear itself might, however, be considered an inoffensive disposition, considering that scripture itself frequently speaks of holy men fearing God. Aquinas, however, distinguishes between godly and worldly fear, identifies the former as good because it reflects a fitting disposition of the creature towards the creator. God is man’s final end, and accordingly ought to be given due fear and reverence. Worldly fear on the other hand is the fruit of worldliness. The man that is governed by worldly fear places an inordinate value upon his temporal life:

207 Aquinas, ST I-II,72, 4. ad. 2.
Accordingly worldly love is, properly speaking, the love whereby a man trusts in the world as his ends, so that worldly love is always evil. Now fear is born of love, since man fears the loss of what he loves. Hence worldly fear is that which arises from worldly love as from an evil root, for which reason worldly fear is always evil.  

It is this worldly love that the Green Knight condones when he says “Bot for þe lufed your lyf; the lasse I yow blame” (2366). The disparity between the two opinions of the fault may then be understood to reflect the different moral plains of the knights. The Green Knight conveys a secular view point or morality, showing that without God Gawain’s worldly fear, and the untruthfulness that follows from it, would be of very minor significance. Indeed any scruples over such a small offence would be worthy of the laughter he is met with at the end of the poem by the other knights. By exploring Aquinas’ view towards worldly fear, one does, however, begin to make better sense of Gawain’s view point and catch a glimpse of the moral plane to which he was aspiring.

It could hardly be expected that piety should abolish this natural response of fear to death. This is not though the opinion that either Aquinas or the Gawain-poet proposed. When fear prompts Gawain to commit a misdeed he holds himself at fault, but when he flinches beneath the Green Knight’s axe, he does not remonstrate himself for such an involuntary response. In this he again reflects the influence of Aquinas who states:

> It is natural for man to shrink from detriment to his body and loss of worldly goods, but to forsake justice on that account is contrary to natural reason. Hence the Philosopher says that there are certain things, viz., sinful deeds, which no fear should drive us to do, since to do such things is worse than to suffer any punishment whatever.  

If his anxiety towards death had caused him to only flinch beneath the blade, he would have had no occasion to criticize himself, but because he allowed his fear to drive him to the breaking of his truth, he realized that it was a moral failing. Aquinas states that it is not permissible to avoid death if the manner of avoidance is sinful. One might perhaps argue that breaking the rules in a mere game could should not be considered gravely sinful. And this may be true, yet Aquinas did not state that an

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208 Aquinas, ST, II-II,19,3. ad. 1

209 Aquinas, ST, II-II,19, 3 s.c

210 Aquinas, ST, II-II, 19, 3. ad. 2.
offense done out of fear is only wrong if the offense is of a serious nature. He states, rather, that any action done out of fear, that contravenes the moral law in the smallest way, is worse than any physical evil that the person fear. And this is the moral standpoint that Gawain adopts at the end of the poem. Both Aquinas and the Gawain-poet’s unbending attitude also accord with Christ’s command “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Instead, fear the one who can destroy both the soul and body in hell.” It is ultimately within this Christian moral framework, that commands fearlessness of the faithful, that the most sense can be made of Gawain’s attitude. It must be understood, however, that this ‘fearlessness’ does not mean a believer is expected have a stoical indifference to death, but rather that, despite any fear he might experience, he would not allow himself to fall into sin. Christ himself foresaw the pain of his Passion and experienced fear when he said “Father, if You are willing, take this cup away from me.” Yet despite such fear he continued in the Father’s will. The poet must have understood this to be the perfect expression of persevering towards the good in the face of death, for he concludes his narrative by reminding his readers of the salvation that Christ’s fortitude bought mankind. Now pat bere pe croun of borne, he bring vus to his blysse! (2529)

This need for endurance in that face of death is the central theme of the poem, and though Gawain fails the test, it is by his steadfast refusal to undervalue this offence that the imperative nature of fortitude is most clearly shown. By allowing Gawain to fail and, what is equally significant, to recognize his failure, the poet creates a clear contrast between worldly morality and the more rigidly defined morality taught by the Scholastics. When the knights of Camelot laugh at his ‘scruples' he remains silent, and it is in this silence that Aquinas' thought is most apparent:

If a man through fear of danger of death or of any other temporal evil is so disposed as to do what is forbidden, or to omit what is commanded by the Divine law, such fear is a mortal sin.

211 Matthew 10:24
212 Luke 22:42
213 Soucy, Gawain's Fault, 166-76.
214 Aquinas, ST, II-II, 125, 1. C.o
Gawain did not prove a perfect practitioner of the law, but in admitting his fault he at least showed a clear understanding of the law. His retention of the girdle was an omission of what the divine law commanded. Finally it must be stressed that every action that is a response to fear should not be viewed as immoral, but only those acts that are themselves contrary to virtue. If Gawain had found himself unable to overcome all the wild beasts that he contended with in the woods, he would have committed no sin in fleeing from them. For when fear prompts you towards that which reason also dictates as the proper course of action, there is not sin in adhering to such a prompting. Aquinas reaffirms that it is in fact only sinful to act out of fear when the fear itself is one that urges a person towards a course of action that the reason apprehends as sinful:

> When the appetite shuns what the reason dictates that we should endure rather than forfeit, fear is inordinate and sinful. On the other hand, when the appetite fears so as to shun what reason requires to be shunned, the appetite is neither inordinate nor sinful.

Aquinas’ delineation between those responses to fear that are sinful, and those that are not, closely accord with the view point of the poet, for Gawain does not condemn the fear that caused him to flinch beneath the Green Knight’s axe, yet he does condemn the fear that prompted him to break faith with his host. It is only by the end of the poem that he comes to the full realization of this truth. And the force of this realization is made the more apparent because he is the only one in the story that realizes the moral truth. It is this ‘indeterminate’ ending that the most sense can be drawn from the poem. If Gawain’s self-admonishing is looked at from too narrow a perspective than the poem would seem a tragedy, ending in the recognition of Gawain’s moral failure through compromising his truth.

The poem, when read in this way, is anything but tragedy. It does not conclude with a failure but rather a moral triumph. Such a reading of the poem does in no way trivialise his initial compromise, but does rather stress the moral progress he made by

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215 Christian theology demands truthfulness even in the smallest matters. Omitting the truth even in a matter as small as a Christmas game was still understood to be something for which one would be held morally culpable. Such rigid viewpoints doubtlessly had their influence from such scripture passages as Luke 16:10. “Whoever is faithful with very little will also be faithful with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much.”

216 Aquinas, ST, II-II,125, 1. ad.1

217 Tolkien, Monsters and Critics, 18.
not making another compromise in conceding to the view point of the other knights who wished to trivialise his fault. The poem would indeed have been a tragedy had Gawain conformed with the other knights’ morally lax view point, but instead his moral growth is made apparent by contrasting it with the other knights. Those that fail to see the necessity of this final contrast miss the central argument of the poem. Joseph A. Longo comments upon this frequent misinterpretation of the poem’s ending:

This impression of dissonance has been advanced by those who interpret Gawain’s final vision as something akin to defeat rather than to an ethical and emotional victory.\(^{218}\)

Longo asserts that the ending shows a triumphant Gawain that rose to a higher moral plane than his peers. There is, however, another way of interpreting the ending of the poem that resolves the discrepancies of opinion. Though the two views seem initially disparate to one another, J. A. Burrow puts forward an argument that reconciles them both:

We may recognise a degree of extravagance in Gawain’s assessment his failure, and still feel that he is reacting just as he should- grandly. As Bercilak is right to temper justice with mercy, so Gawain is right not to. The behaviour of each is exemplary, because each fulfils the demands of his particular role\(^{219}\)

Burrow’s argument resonates with the Catholic moral thought of the middle ages, when there lived such saints as Francis and Dominic who were known for their extreme mercy towards others and severity towards themselves. They showed the greatest tenderness towards every social outcast, yet called themselves the greatest of sinners.\(^{220}\) That one ought to show mercy and forbearance towards the faults of others but not oneself was a particularly prevalent view among the Scholastic theologians of the high middle ages,\(^{221}\) and the influence of this ethical view is practically apparent in the conclusion of the poem. This ‘double standard’ does much to explain the

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\(^{219}\) Burrow, A Reading, 144.


\(^{221}\) Aquinas, ST, II-II, 30,3
discrepancy between Gawain’s severe attitude towards his fault leniency of the other knights. Their merciful attitude need not reflect a moral inferiority. It might be argued that they were in fact simply showing that mercy which is fitting for a Christian to show to another who has sinned.\textsuperscript{222}

**Conclusion**

This disparity of thought between modern and medieval ethics shows once more the need for uncovering a deeper understanding of the world view that influenced the Gawain poet. It is evident that the complex treatment of morality that \textit{SGGK} offers cannot hope to be properly understood and evaluated unless the modern reader first becomes familiar with ethical views that influenced the \textit{Gawain}-poet. The poem offers a glimpse into the medieval worldview, and yet that glimpse remains enigmatic until the broader context and moral framework, within which the poem operates, is more perfectly understood. It is only then that the moral complexities and the seemingly indeterminate ending begin to make sense to the reader. For instance, in discovering the precision with which the virtues of fortitude and temperance were defined by medieval thinkers, one begins to understand how the poet used his narrative to make explicit these moral distinctions. Furthermore the fidelity that Gawain maintains towards his Christmas game promises, assume a less ridiculous light when the poet’s intention is made apparent to highlight the moral imperative of maintaining your word irrespective of circumstances. These, and the many other points addressed in my thesis, highlight the need for uncovering a deeper understanding of the moral thought of the poet, and this understanding may not hope to be achieved without reference to the preeminent thinkers of that medieval period, that is to say the Scholastics. The frequent references made throughout this thesis to Thomas Aquinas’ moral theology have not been inserted in order to lend credibility to this argument, they have rather been looked to because they offer the most coherent explanation for analysing the poem of \textit{SGGK}.

His detailed analysis of moral philosophy provides the framework necessary for understanding the poems underlying themes.
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