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Reflections on the Catholic Church and Knighthood as Told Through *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight tells the story of a knight of the highest virtue who is called to uphold his honor in opposition to temptation. In the fourteenth century, the Knighthood was renowned for military excellence and members of great integrity. However, it became impossible for knights to live up to the standard of an unflawed, ideal knight; imperfect members equate to an imperfect institution. Likewise, the Catholic Church was an institution that proclaimed itself to embody the high ideals of Christianity and morality. In the fourteenth century, they developed a growing desire for money and power. This contrasts heavily with the stated mission of the Church, which was to develop members of good faith and high virtue. The problem facing these two institutions was a divine-like aim for perfection positioned against the impediment of human greed. Sir Gawain, the poem's titular character, acts as a representation of the quintessential knight. He is devout to the Knighthood and to his leader, King Arthur. Though Gawain seems like the picture-perfect knight, he falls victim to human desire and selfish interests. Sir Gawain's externally honorable character, but self-interested motivations, may be references to the well-intentioned but increasingly flawed institutions of his time, specifically the Knighthood and the Catholic Church. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* acts as an allegory for corruption in the fourteenth-century Knighthood and Catholic Church in order to convey the

poet's view that noble ambitions alone are not enough, as true heroism comes from meeting the mission's obligations.

In a restless chase to uphold his honor, Sir Gawain loses sight of the values of the Knighthood. The poem begins with Sir Gawain offering himself to protect King Arthur from a mysterious foe, the Green Knight. The Green Knight then challenges Gawain in a beheading game, which Sir Gawain wins. In the ultimate test of knightly honor, the Green Knight challenges Gawain to locate him in a year and a day's time to be beheaded in return. Gawain accepts the task in order to maintain his position as a knight of great virtue, thus beginning the tale. Gawain embarks on a quest in which he will be confronted with temptation in order to prove that his status as a knight does not align with high morality. The Green Knight's second test given to Sir Gawain is in the form of an exchange game, in which the Knight (disguised as a nobleman named Lord Bertilak) offers gifts to Gawain that he must exchange an equal amount for. He is first confronted by Lady Bertilak, who attempts to have relations with Gawain repeatedly despite his vow of chastity, as it was expected of knights to "conduct themselves in accordance with a set of virtues known as the chivalric code" ("Knights"). Gawain declines her advances; however, he only does so because he would be forced to have relations with Lord Bertilak in exchange. In fact, he is so repulsed by Lord Bertilak that he deceives him by refusing to exchange the final gift. It is then that Lord Bertilak reveals himself as the Green Knight, and has come to take vengeance upon Sir Gawain; he then chops at the head of Gawain only to leave a small gash behind to remind him of his dishonor. Ultimately, even Sir Gawain, who is considered the ideal knight, fails in his quest due to human imperfection:

> There, there's my fault! The foul fiend vex it!
>
> Foolish cowardice taught me, from fear of your stroke,

To bargain, covetous, and abandon my kind,

The selflessness and loyalty suitable in knights;

Here I stand, faulty and false, much as I've feared them,

Both of them, untruth and treachery; may they see sorrow and care! (356-361)

Though he strives for goodness and to dedicate himself to the Knighthood, his ulterior motives lead to the corruption of his character. Sir Gawain's pure intent and contrasting impure behavior establish a parallel between himself and the greater institutions of the fourteenth century.

Sir Gawain's status in The Knighthood was considered the epitome of honorable character, military strength, as well as religious devotion. Knights were held to the utmost standard of perfection and were expected to follow a code of chivalry that expressed a knight's devotion to their leader through action. What qualified as an ideal of Knighthood in fourteenth-century England took great inspiration from the teachings of the Church; these ideals included "respect for the church, protection of the poor and the weak, loyalty to one's feudal or military superiors, and preservation of personal honor" ("Knights"). The influence of morality in a military setting lends itself to the Catholic Church's growing influence in fourteenth-century England. As an added effect of growing influence, the hierarchy of Knighthood followed a similar structure to that of the Church, with a military leader acting as a pope-like figurehead and the knights as clergymen. The clergymen, like knights, are subject to vows that verbalize their devotion to serving God. The common denominator between the members of the Church and The Knighthood is a flawed human state, specifically a tendency toward imperfection. In the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Sir Gawain becomes detached from his quest in favor of his own desires and succumbs to the Green Knight: "I can't deny my guilt;/ My works shine none too fair!/ Give me your goodwill/ And henceforth I'll beware" (362-365). Despite the high

expectation placed on Gawain, he admits defeat. Though knights and clergymen are both expected to achieve excellence and devote themselves to a life of service, faltering from the intentions of their vows will contribute to the demise of their institutions.

Similarly, while members of the fourteenth-century Church sought the highest graces, they became so singularly focused on the chase for God's grace that the importance of their values fell to the wayside; they were left with an eternal mark of disgrace, much like the scar that Sir Gawain is left with to remind him of his shortcomings as a knight. The flawed behavior of Sir Gawain, as well as his disgraceful mark, parallels itself to the Church was the buying and selling of indulgences, or, "the remission of the temporal punishment due to God for sin" (Bird). The Church sold indulgences to members of the church with the promise that they were to spend less time in Purgatory. The issuing of indulgences was not the problem, it was the Church's motivation for money and willingness to benefit from the fear of their members that goes against Catholic values. The Catholic Church was forever left with a mark to remember their dishonor in the wake of the Reformation. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, this mark is symbolized by the scar left on Gawain's neck after his final battle with the Green Knight. Gawain is left to bravely turn to the future, despite his mark of dishonor, and to become a better knight:

Sir Gawain turned again

To Camelot and his lord;

And as for the man green,

He went wherever he would (389-392). Like Sir Gawain's mark calls him to change for the better, criticisms of the Church's morality lead the Catholic Church to reform. Reformers believed that the Church was "spiritually bankrupt through the practices of selling indulgences, relics, and through the corruption of the clergy" (Blackwell). Sir Gawain's inability to resist

temptation and the simultaneous need to be an honorable knight is symbolic of both a “corrupt clergyman” (Blackwell) and a necessity for reform, parallel to that of the Church.

Institutions that strive for perfection ultimately can only be as strong as those called to serve their purpose. Though both the Catholic Church and the Knighthood share the similarity of imperfect human members, the overarching motivation for righteousness in these institutions trumps the flaws of their members. In the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain’s incentive to move forward, despite his dishonorable past, reveals that his character holds a perpetual intention for honor; thus referencing the new beginnings founded in the Reformation of the Church. Though both Sir Gawain and greater institutions of the fourteenth-century were heavily flawed, their everlasting mission for morality leads to the development of a forward-looking future.

Works Cited

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