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The Treatment of Sir Gawain in English Literature from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Twentieth Century

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THE TREATMENT OF SIR GAWAIN IN ENGLISH LITERATURE
FROM GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH TO
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by

BERTHA CRAVEN COOK

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
English Department
Butler University

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This paper is an attempt to trace the treatment of the character of Sir Gawain by English writers from the time of Geoffrey of Monmouth to the twentieth century, and to account, if possible, for the degradation it underwent. Since several of the French writers of that period had a marked influence on the portrayal of his character, some consideration has been given to their work.
One of the greatest sources for literary productions during the Middle Ages was the material which dealt with King Arthur and his followers. These heroes were very popular, and the fame of their exploits was wide spread. As early as the eleventh century, the Arthurian stories were current in Italy, and some of the episodes were carved in a cathedral in Modena in the early twelfth century. Many romances filled with the adventures of the knights were written in France, and some of the heroes were popular in Germany.

One of the most interesting knights connected with the Round Table was Sir Gawain. In the early literary productions, he was portrayed as a dominant personality famed for his honor, courtesy, loyalty, and prowess. However, he gradually lost these ideal characteristics and became untruthful, cowardly, and treacherous. This paper is an attempt to trace the treatment of his character by certain English writers from the time of Geoffrey of Monmouth to the twentieth century, and to account, if possible, for the degradation it underwent. Since several of the French writers of that period had a marked influence on the portrayal of his character, some consideration has been given to their work.

1. W. H. Schofield, English Literature from the Norman Conquest to Chaucer, p. 171.
THE TREATMENT OF SIR GAWAIN IN ENGLISH LITERATURE FROM GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

CHAPTER I

THE TREATMENT OF SIR GAWAIN IN THE POETICAL CHRONICLES

The mediaeval chronicles are a very valuable record of the early history of the Arthurian legend. There were several early chroniclers of note. Nennius, who lived in South Wales, produced his Historia Britonum (History of the Britons) in 826 and William of Malmesbury, a monk of Malmesbury Abbey, wrote Gesta Regum Anglorum (Exploits of the English Kings) in 1125, but the real father of the Arthurian legend was Geoffrey of Monmouth. Very little is known of his life. He was a Welshman who signed his name as a witness to the foundation charter of Osney Abbey in 1129, and was consecrated as a bishop of the small see of St. Asaph in 1152. He lived during the reign of Henry I when the Normans were taking a keen interest in the traditions of early Britain. Latin was the accepted language for all literary works and Geoffrey was an accomplished Latin scholar; so, in order to win fame for himself, he wrote the Historia Regum Britanniarum (History of the Kings of Britain) before 1149. No doubt in composing the work he

draw upon traditions and legends; hence, although he passed as a truthtul chronicler and styled "to translate an old unknown book", his work may be considered largely an invention. He was a poet and devoted a great deal of his life to his work. In a large way, he called the Arthurian legend. He surrounded it with a court that connected the Anglo-Norman life of the twelfth century with the Arthurian story. The Arthurian story was a chivalric ideal of a monach supported by many knights. Geoffrey of Monmouth was an accomplished Latin scholar; so, in order to win fame for himself, he wrote the Historia Regum Britanniarum (History of the Kings of Britain) before 1149. No doubt in composing the work he

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drew upon traditions and legends; hence, although he posed as a truthful chronicler and claimed to translate an old unknown book, his work may be considered largely one of fictitious history. He recognized in Arthur a large opportunity and devoted a great deal of space to him; therefore, he may, in a large way, be called the creator of the Arthurian legend. He surrounded Arthur with a court that reflected the Anglo-Norman life of the twelfth century and introduced into the Arthurian story some chivalric customs. He made Arthur a noted monarch supported by many knights of great prowess and renown.

One of these brave knights was Gawain. He was of royal birth for his mother was Arthur's own sister and his father 1 King Lot. His uncle took a deep interest in him, for, when he was a youth of twelve, he was sent to be brought up as a page in the service of Pope Sulpicius, and he must have shown promise of courage and valor for he received his arms from the pope. The king had great respect for Gawain's ability and judgment for he was one of the three envoys sent by Arthur to demand the Roman Emperor's withdrawal beyond the frontier of Gaul. His display of a fiery temper in smiting off the head of the emperor's nephew, Caius Quintilianus, when the hardihood and prowess of the Britons were challenged resulted from the desire of the young men of the court that he give occasion for a decisive fight with the Romans. In the hot contest that followed, Gawain proved himself a knight of cour-

1. Geoffrey of Monmouth, Histories of the Kings of Britain, p. 163.
2. Ibid., p. 182.
age and strength. He clove with his sword sheer through the helmet of Marcellus Mutius who wished to avenge the death of Caius Quintilianus; he counselled his comrades on the method of charging the enemy; and he and Hoel commanded the battalion of the Armorican Britons. When the two young leaders fell in with the bodyguard of the emperor, they proved that no better knights have been born in later ages. Hardy Gawain, who glowed with his former exploits, finally gained an opening to the emperor. Long did Gawain and the emperor fight and mighty blows were struck until the Romans came to their emperor's rescue. When the Romans were defeated and Arthur returned to defend his own land against Modred, Gawain again proved his loyalty to his king and fought until he was killed at Richborough haven. "For upon that day fell Angusel, King of Albany, and Gawain, the king's nephew, along with numberless others."

Thus in the *History of the Kings of Britain*, Geoffrey of Monmouth presented Gawain as a knight of royal birth, good education, and fearlessness. A man of prowess and valor, he was counted among the best of knights and showed unfailing loyalty to his king. He played an illustrious part in Arthur's wars on the continent.

The chronicles of Geoffrey were not only accepted by the Britons as an authority but were used by French chroniclers also. One of the most important of the French chronicles in verse was the *Roman de Brut* by Wace who lived from 1100 to 1175.

He was more than a mere translator of Geoffrey, for he impressed his own individuality on his work.

Wace was Norman born and Norman bred, and he inherited the possessions of his race—a love of fact, the power of clear thought, the appreciation of simplicity, the command of elegance in form.

He wrote under the patronage of Henry II and dedicated his production to Queen Eleanor, an advocate of courtly love, so he wove pronounced chivalric material into his verse. In fact, he refined the material of Geoffrey and dressed it in the costume of courtly life.

Arthur surrounded himself with the hardiest champions and, in order that none could boast that he was exalted above his companions, Arthur made the Round Table. When he was crowned king in Caerleon many nobles were bidden to the ceremony, among them the frank and gentle knight, Gawain. Some of the knights were drawn by the king's courtesy, others by his wealth, and some to learn of his power. They voyaged to his court in silken raiment, wearing jewels and riding on lusty horses with rich trappings. Arthur's court was the place to perfect one's self in courtesy. He was loved alike by rich and poor and many errant deeds were performed by his knights. Among his brave followers was Gawain, a hardy and famous knight who was wondrously praised:

This Gawain was a courteous champion, circumspect in word and deed, having no pride nor blemish in him. He did more than his boast, and gave more largely than he promised. His father had sent him to Rome that he might be schooled the more meetly. Gawain was dubbed knight in the same day as Wavain, and counted himself of Arthur's

1. Wace and Layamon, Arthurian Chronicles, Introduction, p. IX.
2. Ibid., p. 54.
household. Mightily he strove to do his devoirs in the
field, for the fairer service and honour of his lord.

When the embassy was received from Rome and Cador was in-
sistent upon war, for he felt soft living made a sluggard of
the hardiest knight, Gawain showed courage in answering him
and showed the position that court women held in France:

'Lord earl,' said he, 'by my faith be not fearful
because of the young men. Peace is very grateful after
war. The grass grows greener, and the harvest is more
plenteous. Merry tales, and songs, and ladies' love
are delectable to youth. By reason of bright eyes and
the worship of his friend, the bachelor becomes knight
and learns chivalry.'

Arthur chose for his embassy to Rome two lords of high
peerage whom he esteemed for fair and ready speech and Gawain
who was a good clerk, meetly schooled, and held in much praise
and honor by his friends in Rome. Gawain was open-minded for
he listened while the young men exhorted him to act in such
a fashion that the long threatened war would be declared, and
Gawain delivered the message to the emperor. In hot anger he
beheaded Quintilian when he condemned the Britons as a vain-
glorious people.

During the fierce battle which followed, Gawain proved
himself a splendid horseman, a wary fighter, and a knight of
great prowess. He bestowed buffet after buffet; he struck
mighty strokes with the sword; and he had great joy in battle.
He was a passing perilous knight whose force and manhood never
failed and whose hand was unwearied in battle. He fought so

2. Ibid., p. 73.
grimly that the Romans quailed before him.

When the Romans were conquered and peace and assurance given to the land, Arthur was called to Britain to avenge himself on Mordred. Ere the ships could be unloaded at port, Arthur suffered great loss. Gawain was slain and Arthur grieved sorely for him. He sorrowed heavily about his nephew, and gave him a seemly burial although no man knows where he was laid.

Thus in Wace, Gawain is presented as a frank knight filled with courage and prowess. He was held in high esteem by the king and was most loyal in his service. Although he fought valiantly, he was an advocate of peace. He was courteous and noble and was admired by the ladies. He realized that they exerted a great influence over the young knights. He was a powerful knight in a court that Wace softened by the French ideal of chivalry and courtly love.

Wace's Roman de Brut was used as the direct source of another great chronicle writer, Layamon, an English priest of the country parish of Lower Arnley in Worcestershire. Even though he was a pure German by race and tongue, he told of the noble deeds of Arthur's court in English verse for the benefit of his fellow-countrymen. His Brut was produced in the early part of the thirteenth century. Although a faithful translator, he added to the development of the legends. He wove about King Arthur a fairy lore, for he had the king wear a

1. Wace and Layamon, Arthurian Chronicles, p. 106.
2. Ibid., p. 111.
burny fashioned by an elvish smith and his sword, Caliburn, was wrought in Avalon with magic craft, and the splendor of Kaerlon was the work of fairies. Layamon was not attracted by the refinement of a Norman court but gloried in battles, so he filled the story with Saxon simplicity and force. Around the Round Table, a magic table built in four weeks' time and fashioned so that the king might carry it with him at will and large enough that he might seat sixteen hundred and more knights without fear of quarrels or murderous play over high lineage, many worthy followers gathered that revelled in the joys of battle. After one of their mighty battles, he gave to Loth who was dear to him the newly-won kingdom and promised to be his protector. At this time Loth's eldest son, Walwain, had just come from Rome where he had been brought up and made a knight. "Full well was it bestowed, that Walwain was born to be a man, for Walwain was full noble-minded, in each virtue he was good; he was liberal, and knight with the best. All Arthur's folk was greatly emboldened, for Walwain the keen, that was come to the host; and for his father Loth, who was chosen to be king."

When powerful Arthur sent Walwain to command the Romans to depart to their homes and pay homage to him after the giant Frolle was killed, he called his nephew the dearest of men.

2. Ibid., p. 223.
3. Ibid., p. 221.
4. Ibid., p. 214.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 221.
Gawain was included in the boldest and wisest folk in the land that served as councilors to the king in deciding what answer should be given to Luces, the emperor, when he demanded that he be considered king over Arthur's land. Walwain, the good, who had the interest of the people at heart, was angered at Cador's statement that peace was harmful to a country and made bold to reply that peace was good for a land for peace made a good man work good works and the land was made merrier. Yet when the council determined to defy the Romans, Gawain, who was the dearest relative of the king and understood British and "Romanish," was one of the embassy of three sent to deliver the answer to the Roman emperor. Many folks earnestly prayed Walwain to give cause for battle. When Walwain delivered Arthur's answer, he smote Quencelin because he called the Britons bold but worthless because they were boastful. Walwain the keen proved himself a powerful fighter in the mighty conflict that ensued. So deadly was the fighting that the earth trembled and the stones shivered and the slaughter was immense. Walwain and the emperor engaged in combat for the emperor wished to destroy Walwain that he might boast of it afterward.

When the Romans had been conquered, a brave man brought tidings from Modred, but before Arthur received the message, he had a dream that made him uneasy—a dream in which he overlooked all his lands and Walwain sat before him bearing his sword in his hand. When Modred approached, he began to hew

2. Ibid., p. 244.
3. Ibid., p. 256.
with his strong battle-axe and Walwain fell to the earth. The king took his sword and smote off Modred's head. When the treachery of Modred was learned, Walwain vowed to be avenged on his brother for the sin he had committed. As soon as the king's ships landed at Romney, Walwain killed many. He was finally slain and Arthur was very sorrowful.

Thus Layamon portrayed Gawain as a good keen knight that was held dear by Arthur. He was an adviser to the king and a trusted ambassador to the Roman emperor. A powerful fighter, he denounced his own brother and lost his life in loyal service to the king.

So, in the noted early poetical chronicles, Gawain fulfilled the prophecy that Merlin made at his birth:

And wite well thiat he shall be the truest knyght in all the worlde a-gein his lorde; als so he shall be one of the beste knyghtes of the worlde.

The chroniclers portrayed him as a well-trained knight of fine character—brave, courageous, and courteous. He was dearly loved by the king and served him as clerk, counselor, and ambassador. He was fearless and loyal in time of war and lost his life in battle and his untimely death caused the king great grief and anguish. He was a splendid example of knighthood.

CHAPTER II

THE TREATMENT OF SIR GAWAIN IN

THE POETICAL ROMANCES

No literary productions of the Middle Ages were so attractive as those that dealt romantically with heroes and heroines, and the romances of that time were dominated by the legends of Arthur and his knights. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Arthurian stories were at their height of popularity, and, since French was the dominant language of the period, they were popularized in that language. Foremost among the old French romantic poets is Chretien de Troyes. Very little is known of his life. He wrote in Champagne during the third quarter of the twelfth century, and between 1160 and 1172 he was perhaps herald-at-arms at Troyes where his patroness, Countess Marie de Champagne, held court. Her court fostered the ideals of French chivalry, and in Troyes Chretien wrote several of his romances. He was instrumental in making the legends and folk-lore of the Arthurian traditions express the ideals of the social conduct of the aristocratic class. He gave them a polish and elegance that is characteristic of the French.

Four of Chretien's best known romances are Erec and Enide.

Cligés, Yvain, and Lancelot. Gawain is not the hero of any of these poems; yet he played a prominent part in all of them. In *Erec* and *Enide* he is pictured as one deeply interested in the welfare of the court for he felt that the custom of celebrating the killing of the White Stag would create ill-will among the knights and warned the king that the kiss could not be awarded without disturbance and fight, for each knight thought his lady the fairest and the most beautiful. He trusted Gawain to escort the queen and Enide to the palace—seemed a great favorite with the queen for he waited with the other lords in her bower and stood beside her when she recognized Yder, the damsel, and the dwarf. He showed gentleness and courtesy in assisting the damsel to alight. He displayed great satisfaction at the safe return of Erec, and, among all the excellent knights of the Round Table who gathered to witness the bestowal of the kiss in keeping with the custom of the White Stag, Gawain ought to be named first, and second Erec, the son of Lac, and third Lancelot of the Lake.

In the tournament a month after Pentecost, Gawain did valiantly. "Gawain animated those who were on his side by his prowess... In the fight he unhorsed Guinel, and took Gaudin of the Mountain; he captured knights and horses alike: my lord Gawain did well." His shield was well known and Kay spoke of him as Gawain the Bold in whom dwelt the greatest prowess. The king prized his nephew Gawain the most of all his knights,

and sent him to influence the strange knight that had overthrown Kay with his truth, courtesy, and winsome way to appear at the king's pavilion. When his openness failed to move the knight, he showed judgment by advising the king to move his tents if he wished to show hospitality to the stranger. Thus, by his shrewdness and cunning, Gawain outwitted Erec and brought joy to the court. At the time of Erec's coronation, the king trusted Gawain to escort the queen and Guinevere to the palace—a service which Gawain performed courteously.

In the romance Cligés, the fame of Arthur's court had spread to distant Greece for Alexander, the bold and powerful son of the emperor, wished to join the court that was so renowned for courtesy and prowess. At court he made the acquaintance of many bold knights but lord Gawain was so fond of him that he chose him to be his friend and companion. Gawain was such an important personage at court that, after Alexander and Soredamore declared their love, the marriage was celebrated in great magnificence with the approval of lord Gawain and the king. Before Alexander's death he advised his fair son, Cligés, that he would never know his prowess and valor until he had tested them with the Bretons and French at King Arthur's court, and, if occasion arose, for him not to fear to measure his skill with his uncle, lord Gawain.

When the opportunity for the contest arose, Cligés com-

2. Ibid., p. 54.
3. Ibid., p. 96.
4. Ibid., p. 121.
5. Ibid., p. 125.
ducted himself in such a way that Gawain proclaimed he had
never seen such a champion and on the morrow he wished to be
first at the rally of the knights. Gawain was powerful and
described as no weakling either on foot or a horse and a man
whom no one would attack, yet he was not boastful of his abil-
ity but esteemed highly the prowess of his foe. He declared
that the stranger might not be his superior with the sword
(with the sword Gawain had no master) but he might have advan-
tage with the lance. The two knights fought long. Hauberks
were torn, shields cracked and hewed, and helmets crushed be-
fore the king stepped forward and established peace. Gawain
responded with joy to the king's request to invite the knight
to join the sports at the court for the king declared that
without resentment and hate it was not becoming for a gentle-
man to continue to fight and defy his foe. When Gawain learned
the identity of the knight, he was very cordial in his welcome,
and both Gawain and the king grieved when Cliges returned to
Greece.

In the romance Yvain, the great court of King Arthur
showed marks of degeneration. The goodly knights were aston-
ished to see their king quit a feast to seek his chamber, and
several knights, including lord Gawain, stood outside the door
listening to a discrediting story told by Cologrenant. He
alone jumped up quickly when the queen approached and finished

2. Ibid., p. 154.
3. Ibid., p. 157.
the story at her insistent request. Yvain, rather than have the king grant the request to avenge the defeat of Cologrenant to either Kay or Gawain, slipped away from court to seek the adventure of the spring. After his departure, Gawain was loyal in his friendship and reprimanded Kay when he called Yvain boastful and cowardly, for Gawain insisted that Kay should show mercy when he did not know what detained Yvain.

When the king and his followers found that Yvain had won great renown at the fountain, they rejoiced. The king was greatly gratified and lord Gawain was a hundred times more pleased than anyone else. The knights of the Round Table were welcomed gladly and honorably by Yvain and his lady, and Gawain, who was described as lord of the knights, was called the sun because he was renowned above them all. He was greatly amused at Lunette's cleverness and gave her his love as to his sweetheart because she had saved his companion from death and placed himself at her service. However, he felt that marriage had caused Yvain to degenerate because he had grown soft and ceased to win fame for himself so he urged him to fight and win glory and renown. Hence Yvain accompanied the knights when they departed from his castle.

During the time that Gawain and Yvain jousted, they both had great success; but Gawain strove to honor Yvain so much that he caused him to delay longer than the allotted year.

2. Ibid., p. 209.
4. Ibid., p. 211.
5. Ibid., p. 212.
so that Yvain forfeited his lady's love and, as a result, lost his senses. After much hardship and many deeds of courtesy and bravery, he and Gawain met as champions of two sisters who wished to settle a disagreement. Unknown to each other, they strove until almost exhausted and hammered each other so lustily that even the emerald sets in their helmets were crushed. When they discovered each other's identity, they were so honest and courteous that each proclaimed the other the victor and neither would accept the prize. Gawain was overwhelmed when he realized that Yvain and his lion had rescued his niece and nephews from the cruel giant.

In the romance Lancelot, Chrétien presented the ideals of courtly love at the command of his patroness. Although Gawain is not the main character in the poem, he does play an important part in it. On an Ascension Day when Arthur was holding a great court, the queen was allowed to go with Kay into the woods when he went to combat with a strange knight in order to free many captive knights and ladies. Although there was lament at their departure, no one concerned himself to follow them until Gawain manifested his anxiety for the queen's safety and announced courteously that he could not restrain himself from following them. He rode in advance of the rest of the knights and granted a strange knight's request to give him one of his extra horses either as a gift or a loan. When he again saw the knight, he was riding in the

2. Ibid., p. 263.
3. Ibid., p. 264.
4. Ibid., p. 273.
despised cart in order that he might learn news of the queen so Gawain followed him by horse. They were graciously entertained at a tower for the night, and, in the morning, Gawain prevented his companion from disgracing himself by leaping from the window when the queen was led past the tower.

The two knights learned that she had been carried off by Meleagant into a kingdom from which no foreigner could return but where he was forced to stay in servitude, and that the country could be entered by two perilous paths—the water bridge and the sword bridge. Gawain elected to attempt to enter the country by the water bridge while Lancelot, the knight of the cart, went uncomplainingly to the sword bridge. After Lancelot had overcome all difficulties and reached the queen, he determined to seek Gawain who had not appeared but the queen would not accompany him for she would not stir until she had news of Gawain. Although Gawain had endured great trials and overcome many perils, he had fallen from the bridge and had to be rescued by the followers of Lancelot for Lancelot had been taken captive. Gawain and Kay took the queen and her company back to Arthur's court when they received word that Lancelot was hale and hearty at court. The king was so fond of his nephew that he was happy and pleased that he had brought about the queen's safe return and when the knights and vassals rejoiced at her approach, Gawain in great frankness said:

2. Ibid., p. 279.
3. Ibid., p. 335.
Gentlemen, I do not deserve your praise. Do not trouble ever to say this again, for the compliment does not apply to me. This honor causes me only shame, for I did not reach the Queen in time; my detention made me late. But Lancelot reached there in time, and won such honor as was never won by any other knight.

When he learned that Lancelot was not at the court, he lamented and realized that Lancelot had been treacherously hidden away. He showed great distress and concern when Meleagant appeared at court and Lancelot was not there to battle with him and swore that Lancelot would be found before the year expired unless he were dead or in prison. So devoted was he to Lancelot that he promised to fight for him if he did not appear by the appointed time. Meleagant was willing to accept this substitution for, excepting only Lancelot, he knew no other knight with whom he would more gladly try his skill.

During his imprisonment, Lancelot grieved and felt his career was closed; he could not understand why Gawain did not release him:

Ah, Gawain, you who possess such worth, and whose goodness is unparalleled, surely I may well be amazed that you do not come to succour me. Surely you delay too long and are not showing courtesy. He ought indeed to receive your aid whom you used to love so devotedly!... I feel hurt, Gawain, that you have so long deserted me! But doubtless you know nothing of all this, and I have no ground for blaming you. Yes, when I think of it, this must be the case, and I was very wrong to imagine such a thing; for I am confident that not for all the world contains would you and your men have failed to release me from this trouble and distress, if you were aware of it. If for no other reason, you would be bound to do this out of love for me, your companion.

True to his word Gawain, the admired and most accomplished

2. Ibid., p. 348.
3. Ibid., p. 352.
Sir Gawain was very popular in Britain and had made the
knight upon whom the sign of the Cross was ever made, made ready
to combat with Meleagant at the appointed time. 1 He was over-
joyed when his dear companion, Lancelot, appeared for he loved
Lancelot so dearly that he would not wish to be chosen king un-
less he had Lancelot with him, and begged to fight in his stead.
Lancelot was determined to fight himself so Gawain completely
disarmed himself and Lancelot armed himself and brought great
joy to the court by his victory.

On the whole, Gawain is portrayed in a very favorable man-
ner in these romances of Chrétien. He was a great favorite of
the king and seemed devoted to the queen. Although he was very
popular, no one appeared envious of him. He was a loyal friend
who appreciated the kind acts of his companions. Gracious and
hospitalite to strangers, he advocated mercy, justice, and truth.
He was peerless in courage and courtesy. He was brave in bat-
tle but was not boastful of his accomplishments. He esteemed
the prowess of his opponents and was gratified by the renown
and honor won by his companions. Yet with all these outstanding
ideal traits, there were evidences of degeneration. He chose
the easier of the two perilous entrances to Meleagant's king-
dom and he was partly responsible for Yvain's failure to keep
his promise to his lady. No knight overcame him in combat, yet
in two instances he met his equal in strength and skill. How-
ever, in spite of these characteristics, his reputation was spot-
less and he was dearly loved by his companions.

2. Ibid., p. 356.
Sir Gawain was very popular in Britain, and was made the hero of a cycle of romantic poems written during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In them he appeared as a knight of par excellence; in fact, no other knight has ever gained so firm a hold on the English imagination. In these poems he had many strange adventures and displayed fine traits of character.

In *The Awntyre of Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne*, he was the devoted attendant of the queen. While the king and his party were hunting, he rode with the queen to rest under a laurel. During the terrible storm that followed, he showed no fear. Although dogs and birds were terrified at the terrible figure that appeared, he did not hesitate to demand her purpose. When he was overpowering a strange knight that came to regain lands that were taken in war and given to Gawain, he graciously obeyed the queen's request to cease fighting and asked the king to restore the lands to the knight.

His great might in arms was displayed in *Avowyenge of King Arthur, Sir Gawain, Sir Kaye, and Sir Bawedwyn of Bretain*. While Arthur hunted alone during the night to kill a wild boar, Gawain waited by Tarn Wadling. In the morning, by his great strength and skill, he freed Kay who had been taken captive during the night and sent the vanquished knight and his maid to the queen. He proved himself a knight of great valor and strength in the *Turke and Gowin*. He rebuked Kay for lack

2. Ibid., p. 64.
3. Ibid., p. 59.
of courtesy toward a huge Turke who entered the dining hall while Arthur was at table and then accepted the Turke's challenge to exchange buffets. The Turke conducted him to a castle where he was taunted by many giants, but he demonstrated his great strength by lifting a huge fireplace. Finally he obeyed the Turke's request to cut off his head, and, by so doing, he released the Turke and many captives from imprisonment.

He was a perfect guest in Syre Gawene and the Carle of Carelyle. He tended his host's steed by bringing it in from the storm and covering it with a green mantle; he acquiesced to his host's command that he sleep with his wife; and on the morrow he obeyed his host's directions to behead him, thus freeing the churl from enchantment. He displayed courtesy and gentleness in Galarus and Gawain. When Kay through boorishness failed to obtain food for King Arthur's army as the troops traveled to the Holy Land, Gawain by courtesy obtained food for the thirty thousand men.

He was a faithful and self-sacrificing follower of King Arthur in The Weddynge of Sir Gaween and Dame Ragnell. While the king was pursuing a great hart, he was accosted by a stalwart knight who threatened to kill him for giving land to Gawain. The king was allowed to depart unharmed if in twelve months he promised to appear to tell what women liked best. The king relied on Gawain and explained the situation to him. Their quest for the answer was in vain until the king

2. Ibid., p. 63.
3. Ibid., p. 68.
met hideous Dame Ragnell who promised to give the answer if she could wed Gawain. In order to save his king, Gawain married the ugly creature. When she wished to know whether Gawain would have her fair by day or by night, he generously let her decide. Thus she was freed from a wicked spell of enchantment and became beautiful at all times. Their five years of marriage were blissful and the lady bore a fair son, Gyngolyn.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the finest poem in the romantic cycle, Gawain proved himself chaste and truthful. When the Green Knight appeared at court, Gawain wished to accept his challenge and requested the king to grant his desire:

> I pray thee of thy grace,\(^1\)
> Be this adventure mine.\(^1\)

And when he departed to meet the Green Knight the court displayed anxiety and interest:

> They kissed the knight, his soul commending to Christ's care—
> Ready was Gringalet, girth with saddle fair.\(^2\)

When he was entertained at the castle on his way to meet the Green Knight at the Green Chapel, he had no suspicion that he was being tested by the lord and lady of the castle and his good qualities manifested themselves spontaneously. He kissed the lady as only a courteous knight should do, and, in the evening, gave to the lord all that he had received during the day except the bit of green silk that the lady had promised would protect him. However, when he met the Green Knight and

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2. Ibid., p. 27.
received a slight cut the Green Knight declared:

Thou art the truest knight that ever trode this earth!...
So do I hold Gawain above all other knights!
Didst thou a little lack, Sir Knight, in loyalty,
'Twas not for woman's love, or aught of villainy,
'Twas but for love of life, therefore I blame thee less,
I hold thee here absolved, and purged as clean this morn
As thou hadst ne'er done wrong since thou wert born.

When the Green Knight gave back the silk to Gawain, Gawain felt the piece of silk would make him more humble.

Thus, the unknown authors of the cycle of English poetical romances portrayed Gawain as a model knight. He was the mirror of courtesy. He proved himself mighty in arms and faithful to his duty. He possessed wisdom and courage and was pure of mind and body. He was self sacrificing and repentant. By strength and skill or kindness and charming speech or virtue, he overcame all difficulties. He was so famed for his graciousness that Chaucer compared a knight in The Squire's Tale to him:

This strange knight that came thus sodeynly,
All armed save his heed ful richely,
Saluted hath the kyng, and lordes alle
By ordre, as they seten in the halle.
With so high reverens and observaunce,
As weI in speche as in his countynaunce,
That Gawain with his olde curtesye,
Though he were come again out of fayrye,
Coulde not amende it, no not with a word.

There is little doubt that Gawain was the prototype which furnished Spenser the character of Sir Calidore in The Faerie

But amongst them all was none more courteous Knight
Than Calidore, beloved over-all,
In whom, it seems, that gentleness of spright
And manners mylde were planted naturall;
To which he adding comely guize withall
And gracious speach, did steale men's hearts away:
Nathlesse thereto he was full stout and tall,
And well approv'd in batailous affray,
That him did much renowne, and far his fame display.

1. Sir Frederic Madden, 
CHAPTER III
THE TREATMENT OF SIR GAWAIN
IN FRENCH LAYS

Another type of literature that preserves the stories of Arthur and his knights is the lay. Marie de France was a writer of lays and wrote during a period when literature was almost entirely in the hands of men. The place and date of her birth are very uncertain but it is generally accepted that she lived during the later half of the twelfth or early thirteenth century. She was probably born in the duchy of Normandy and was a subject of the king of England. She wrote in French but inserted some English words, and it is possible that she may have written at the court of Henry of England. Gawain is not prominent in her lays but he is mentioned in The Lay of Sir Launfal. About the time of the feast of St. John when a number of knights gathered in an orchard near the queen's tower for pastime, the goodly knight Gawain who was beloved by all was in the company and suggested that they should not slight their comrade, Launfal. He was the first to offer himself and his knights as a surety that Launfal would appear at the appointed day to be judged by his peers. He was eager to find Launfal's maiden in order to free his companion but was unsuc-

2. Ibid., p. 66.
cessful. No doubt he was in the court when Launfal rode away with the fairy maiden that he loved.

Although Gawain is not the hero in this lay, he showed ideal characteristics. He was a knight of some wealth with a fellowship of followers, and held lands that belonged to the Crown. He was considerate and gracious to his companions and very loyal in time of great stress. He was a good knight beloved by all when the court showed evidences of degeneration for Arthur failed to be fair in bestowing honors and lands, and the queen was jealous and untruthful.
CHAPTER IV

THE TREATMENT OF SIR GAWAIN IN THE PROSE ROMANCES

Many of the adventures of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table were written in prose romances. One of the interesting ones, written in French is The High History of the Holy Graal. The author of this work which was written undoubtedly during the early part of the thirteenth century is unknown, but his translator, Sebastian Evans, assigned him a foremost rank among the masters of mediaeval prose romance.

Although Gawain was not the hero of this romance, he held a very prominent place in the story.

For a number of years Arthur and his knights, the best knights in the world, set forth the Law of Jesus Christ, but, in due time, the king wearied in well-doing and thus grieved the queen. She urged him to seek the perilous chapel of Saint Augustine to ask counsel of God. He learned much from a hermit:

But a great sorrow is befallen in the land of late through a young knight that was harboured in the hostel of the rich King Fisherman, for that the most Holy Graal appeared to him and the Lance whereof the point runneth of blood, yet never asked he to whom was served thereof nor whence it came, and for that he asked it not are all the land commoved to war.

2. Ibid., p. 13.
A Voice in the forest bade the king to hold court so that fairest adventures might befall. When many of the knights came rejoicing to the court, Gawain and Lancelot were not there, but the three maidens who left a shield and bracket at the court for the good knight that should achieve the Graal met Gawain in the forest. He rejoiced that the king had taken up his well-doing. The maidens urged him because of his valor and courtesy to go to the land of King Fisherman, and, if the Graal appeared, to ask whom it served so that the land would rejoice and that their suffering might end. For one maiden was bald, one carried her arm in a sling and rested it on a pillow, and one was forced to walk and drive the steeds. Gawain in humility hoped he would have courage to perform the task so that he could win worship.

In endeavoring to fulfill this quest, Gawain suffered many hardships. In company with the maidens, he passed the hideous castle of the Black Hermit where many were imprisoned and would remain thus until freed by the Good Knight. He conquered a powerful knight and won his shield by felling him to the ground with many a buffet. When the vanquished knight asked for his shield in exchange, Gawain would have given it to him but the damsel on foot prevented him from doing so, for she said, had the defeated knight carried the shield into the castle he would have been called victorious and received great worship, for never had the shield of so good a knight entered the castle.

When the maidens advised him of his way, they told him he would

2. Ibid., p. 27.
3. Ibid., p. 30.
not be heedful when he reached the court of King Fisherman, for he had failed to ask why one maiden carried her arm in a sling and he felt abashed.

When Gawain spent the night with a hermit, he was again admonished to have grace and courage to ask the question if he reached King Fisherman's court and the Graal appeared to him. At the castle of the Widow Lady, Gawain was given a courteous welcome and the lady warned him to be mindful if he saw her brother, King Fisherman. He brought her great joy by defeating her enemies and restoring her castle to her. He had combat with Marin the Jealous and when Marin's wife was treacherously slain he carried her gently to a chapel, and learned why the maid carried her arm in a sling:

With this hand served she of the most Holy Graal the knight that was in the hostel of King Fisherman and would not ask whereof the Graal served; for that she held therein the precious vessel whereinto the glorious blood fell drop by drop from the point of the lance, so that none other thing is she minded to hold therein until such time as she shall come back to the holy place where it is.

At the castle of the Proud Maiden, he saw the tombs prepared by the maiden for the three best knights in the world—Gawain, Lancelot, and Perceval, for she hated them because she had never had joy of them during her life; and at another chapel he kindly promised succor and counsel to the child of Marvin's wife.

After many wanderings and adventures, he reached the en-

2. Ibid., p. 50.
3. Ibid., p. 53.
trance to King Fisherman's land where he was told he could not
enter save he brought the sword wherewith Saint John was be-
headed, and in humility he felt God would give him tidings of
the sword when it pleased Him. Because of his prowess, he
finally won the sword and presented it to King Fisherman and
was highly commended:

'Gracemercy,' said the King: 'Certes, I knew well
that you would bring it, for neither you nor other might
have come in hither without the sword, and if you had not
been of great valour you would not have conquered it....
This brightness of light that shineth there within com-
eth to us of God for love of you.'

At the castle, Gawain witnessed many marvels. Two dam-
sels issued forth from a chapel, one holding in her hands the
most Holy Grail and the other the Lance. They entered into
the hall when Gawain and the knights sat at meat and because
of the sweet holy smell the men did not eat. Gawain was so
thoughtful and so filled with joy that he thought only of God.
He was abashed at the three drops of blood and so filled with
pity that he forgot to ask the question. In the morning
after he heard the sweet service of joy that was made on ac-
count of the sword, he was sent from the castle. He was glad
for the great holiness he had seen but sorrowful and ashamed
that he had forgotten to ask the question that many had desired
him to ask.

After he left the court of King Fisherman, he did many
worthy deeds. He and Lancelot out of pity gave booty to the

2. Ibid., p. 87.
3. Ibid., p. 89.
Poor Knight and the damsels; he was joyously received at Arthur's court, and he and Lancelot searched for Perceval. In his quest he fought Perceval unknowingly, but finally the two brave knights were joyful together and aided Lancelot at the robber's den. Gawain and Lancelot were willing to serve King Arthur by attempting to drive from the land the Fiery Dragon that was killing the knights Arthur loved best and grieved because the king would not let them go. The king held Gawain in such high esteem that they accompanied him on his pilgrimage to the Graal. In their wanderings, Arthur and Gawain fought in a tournament and Gawain won the Golden Circlet and visited the castle of three names—Eden, Castle of Joy, and Castle of Souls. After many adventures, Gawain was rescued from the stake by the child he had promised to succor who had been knighted Meliot of Logres; and Gawain and Meliot lamented as they saw Perceval borne away on a ship beyond their aid.

Thus Gawain was one of the most prominent knights in The High History of the Holy Graal. He was a favorite of King Arthur and appreciated and rejoiced in his good works. He was religious, for he heard mass in the morning before he departed on his adventures, and felt God would reveal the sword of Saint John when it pleased Him to do so. He was always helpful to those in need, whether rich or poor, and was never churlish to
other knights. He was noted as a good knight and was so brave and courteous that many felt he might succeed in the quest of the Graal. Humble, yet hopeful and courageous, he showed great prowess in reaching King Fisherman's court. Although he failed to ask the necessary question when the Graal appeared, because he was not heedful to admonitions, he was filled with shame and regret. Even though he failed in this quest, he was a knight that showed mercy and gentleness and was acclaimed as one of the best knights by his fellow knights.

An important English prose romance is *Le Morte d'Arthur* written by Sir Thomas Malory. Very little is known of Malory except that he was a knight and a member of parliament. He represented himself as translating a French book, but he must have had recourse to many books so his work is in reality a compilation. It was completed in 1469 and published in 1484. In this romance, Malory brought together many scattered stories of many heroes of the Round Table. In his presentation of Sir Gawain, however, he did not harmonize the various sources he used, for he made many conflicting statements.

Gawain and his brothers were brought to Arthur's court by their mother at the time of the king's marriage. During the celebration Gawain was made knight by his uncle. At the feast, however, Gawain was filled with envy and jealousy because Pellinore was given greater honor than he was, and he swore to avenge his father's death by killing Pellinore but listened to his brother's counsel to wait and not cause trou-

ble at the high feast. In keeping with the custom, requests were granted and Sir Gawain was granted the first quest—to bring back the white hart.

On this quest, he had many experiences. In one instance he showed harshness, for he did not show mercy to a knight who yielded and cried for mercy. Gawain was reproved by Galahad who said:

This is fouly and shamefully done, that shame shall never from you; also ye should give mercy unto them that ask mercy, for a knight without mercy is without worship.

By misadventure, Gawain killed the knight’s lady and was taken prisoner. When he was released and reached court, he was reproved by the king and queen and judged by a court of ladies:

They judged him for ever while he lived to be with all ladies, and to fight their quarrels; and that ever he should be courteous, and never refuse mercy to him that asketh mercy.

Gawain was a powerful fighter and was loyal in Arthur’s service. At one time he defended the king against five kings and was called by Pellinore the best knight of his time. Sir Gawain was one of four brave knights that were sent as an embassy to Lucius to demand his removal from King Arthur’s land. In the great battles that followed Lucius’s refusal to quit the land, Gawain distinguished himself. With his good sword Galatine he followed Sir Bors and Sir Berel to rescue them, and he slew three admirals. In fact, he fought so val-

2. Ibid., p. 78.
3. Ibid., p. 80.
4. Ibid., p. 95.
5. Ibid., p. 139.
ianfly that he was sorely wounded and sent to Arthur for succor.

He engaged in many combats. Although grievously wounded and cured by marvelous salves, he overcame Friamus, the Saracen, who became a Christian and later aided Gawain in his wars with the Saracens. During the hard struggle with these enemies, Gawain comforted his knights and assured them victory. After the fierce struggle when Sir Florence and Sir Gawain returned to court, they took with them a great plenty of gold and silver, great treasure and riches, and prisoners. In loyalty Gawain accompanied Sir Uwaine when he was banished from court. As the two good knights rode together, Gawain engaged in combat with Sir Marhaus. In this struggle both knights were powerful:

But Sir Gawaine from it passed nine of the clock waxed ever stronger and stronger, for then it came to the hour of noon, and thrice his might was increased.... And then when it was past noon, and when it drew toward evensong, Sir Gawaine's strength feebled, and waxed passing faint that unnethes he might dure any longer. 3

However, in courtesy to each other, the two swore to love each other as brethern. Gawain took part in many tournaments. In some contests he was the victor, while in others he was overcome. He lost his great physical strength to such an extent that he was defeated by at least six knights--Sir Launcelot, Sir Tristram, Sir Bors, Sir Percevale, Sir Pelleas, and Sir Marhaus.

Gawain displayed both loyalty and disloyalty to his co-

1. Le Morte d'Arthur, ed. by Rhys, I, 147.
2. Ibid., p. 149.
3. Ibid., p. 114.
4. Ibid.
rades. He showed traits of degeneration in his attitude toward Pelleas. When Pelleas was overwhelmed with love for Ettard and was unsuccessful in winning her affection, Gawain promised to help him; but he was untruthful to both Pelleas and Ettard. When she realized that fact, she called him discourteous and false.

Although Gawain was prominent at the court and a favorite of the king, Arthur felt he was responsible for the breaking up of the order. At the time of the celebration of one Pentecost, the standing of the knights was tested by the marvel of the stone. The sword could not be pulled from the stone except by the best knight in the world and Gawain was not able to move it. Later, when the Holy Greal fed the knights with meat and drink, Gawain was the first to vow he would seek the Grail in order to see it more openly unless it were against God's will. When many knights followed Gawain's leadership, King Arthur was grieved and felt that through Gawain the fairest fellowship and truest knighthood in the world would be broken. Gawain did not succeed in the quest, for he was too light-hearted. At one abbey a monk told him he could not have the marvelous adventures Galahad experienced, for he was wicked and sinful, while Galahad was full blessed. Because he failed to have adventures, he wearied of the quest and was loth to follow into strange countries. In his wanderings, he slew good knights and one holy father called him an untrue knight.

2. Ibid., II, 166.
3. Ibid., p. 172.
4. Ibid., p. 185.
5. Ibid., p. 213.
and a murderer. At the end of the appointed time, he returned to court but the fellowship was much smaller.

Toward Lancelot he usually showed loyalty and fellowship. Although he was deceitful in his explanation of Lancelot's conduct and attitude toward Elaine, the fair maid of Astolat, and caused great anguish to both the queen and Lancelot, probably he displayed one of his noblest traits of character when he refused to join many of the knights in their plot to betray the love of Guinevere and Lancelot to the king. His devotion to the queen made him refuse the request of the king to bring her to the fire to be judged. However, his love for Lancelot was turned to hate and he was fired with a desire for revenge when Lancelot accidentally killed his brothers.

He was so vindictive that he prevented the king from making peace with Lancelot and a fierce war ensued. In this struggle Gawain's prowess was not as great as that of Lancelot and he was seriously wounded. In the fight that occurred when Arthur and the army landed in England to suppress the traitor, Modred, Gawain was mortally injured.

At the time of his death, the king cherished his nephew and made great sorrow. Gawain admitted his hastiness and wilfulness were responsible for the trouble with Lancelot, and he begged the king to cherish Lancelot. He wrote to Lancelot to urge him to aid the king and to visit his tomb. The king

2. Ibid., p. 340.
3. Ibid., p. 351.
4. Ibid., p. 373.
5. Ibid., p. 382.
gave honor to Gawain and buried him in a chapel in Dover Castle. In a dream, the ghost of Gawain surrounded by a number of fair ladies appeared to King Arthur and warned him not to fight with Modred. When Lancelot heard of the king's and Gawain's death, his loyalty to his former friends swayed him and he proved his devotion to Gawain. When he reached England he manifested great grief for him:

And that night he made a dole, and all they that would come had as much flesh, fish, wine and ale, and every man and woman had twelve pence, com who would. Thus with his own hand dealt he this money in a mourning gown; and ever he wept, and prayed them to pray for the soul of Sir Gawaine. And on the morn all the priests and clerks that might be gotten in the country were there, and sang mass of requiem, and there offered first Sir Launcelot, and he offered an hundred pound; and then the seven kings offered forty pound apiece; and also there was a thousand knights, and each of them offered a pound; and the offering dured from morn till night, and Sir Launcelot lay two nights on his tomb in prayer and weeping.

Thus, in Malory, Sir Gawain is portrayed under unfavorable aspects. However, his portrayal does not seem faithful to the earlier legends nor is it consistent. In Le Morte d'Arthur, he helped direct the king's policy concerning peace and war. He showed fidelity to his king and vindictive hatred toward his enemies. He was loyal to his queen, but deceitful and untruthful to Pelleas. He lacked mercy and destroyed good knights and was light in matters of love. He was impulsive in making vows, but admitted he was hasty and wilful. He lost his physical superiority, yet advised and comforted his fellowship and won great booty. He portrayed

1. Le Morte d'Arthur, ed. by Rhys, II, 393.
both good and bad characteristics, yet noble knights were loyal to him for the king and Lancelot grieved deeply when he died.
CHAPTER V

THE TREATMENT OF SIR GAWAIN IN

THE IDYLLS OF THE KING

One of the outstanding poets of the Victorian Age was Alfred, Lord Tennyson. He was born in Lincolnshire, August 6, 1809, and died in Surrey, October 6, 1892. He was a favorite of Queen Victoria and was made poet-laureate in 1850. During the period of his writing, he was deeply interested in the Arthurian story. As early as 1833 he wrote a sketch in prose called King Arthur; he also composed some notes for an epi­cal treatment of the story and a scenario probably for a mu­sical masque. His interest in the legend was also shown in some of his short poems. His long poem, Idylls of the King, was written over a period of half a century. His chief source for this poem was Malory's Le Morte d'Arthur. He unified and condensed the stories, leaving out whole episodes and alter­ing the sequences of events for the sake of his allegory. He omitted all that might have offended the sensibilities of Queen Victoria and her subjects. In the poem, which tells the story of the life and death of King Arthur and the life and death of the great chivalric order he founded, the tragic love of Lancelot and Guinevere was a great force. In fact,

1. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Idylls of the King, edited by Eliza­beth Nitchie, Introduction, p. XIII.
Lancelot was the real hero of the poem but Gawain was given some prominence.

In The Coming of Arthur, Gawain was pictured as a happy, gay child. When his mother sent him from her presence as she talked with Leodogran, he was obedient:

And Gawain went, and breaking into song
Sprang out, and follow'd by his flying hair
Ran like a colt, and leapt at all he saw.¹

In Gareth and Lynette he was a proven knight. He displayed courtesy and interest in young Gareth for he was willing to tilt with him for pastime. Although Gawain was very strong, he was staggered by Gareth. When Gareth came to Arthur's court and entered the king's great hall where hung the shields of the knights of the Round Table, he saw

The shield of Gawain blazon'd rich and bright,² while some shields were only carved or blank and bare.

In Lancelot and Elaine the king trusted Gawain and sent him on a mission. He was trusted to deliver the diamond to the winner at the tournament. Although he seemed willing to be of service, he was filled with anger:

Then from where he sat
At Arthur's right, with smiling face arose,
With smiling face and frowning heart, a prince
In the mid might and flourish of his May,
Gawain, surnamed the Courteous, fair and strong,...
Nor often loyal to his word, and now
Wroth that the King's command to sally forth
In quest of whom he knew not, made him leave
The banquet and concourse of knights and kings.³

He left the court in wrath and soon wearied of his quest.

2. Ibid., p. 33.
3. Ibid., II, 18.
When he reached Astolat, his false courtesy covered a traitor's heart. He gladly gave the diamond to Elaine to deliver and rode gaily back to court. His king realized his disloyalty and censured him:

Too courteous truly: ye shall go no more
On quest of mine, seeing that ye forget
Obedience is the courtesy due to kings.¹

Angry, yet filled with awe, he spread the gossip of the love of Lancelot and the maid of Astolat around the court, and his malicious tale brought grief and sorrow.

This same lack of stability of character was shown in The Holy Grail. When the Grail appeared at the court and many knights swore to seek the holy vessel, Gawain swore louder than all the rest. However, he soon wearied of the quest and spent the year in search of pleasure. The time passed quickly for him, and, except for the wind that blew down his tent as he sported with merry maidens, his days were very pleasant. Because he was reckless and irreverent, the king reproved him for his idle vows and declared he was too blind to have desire to see.

Gawain's disloyalty and light character were shown also in Pelleas and Atarre. While he was wandering upon a solitary adventure, he recognized a knight who was being bound and carried into a castle as one of the knights of the Round Table and offered his help. He promised to win the maiden's love for his friend but he was untruthful. He assured Atarre

¹. Idylls of the King, ed. by Rolfe, II, 23.
². Ibid., p. 73.
he had slain Pelleas and he made passionate love to her. When Pelleas laid his sword across their throats, she realized how false Gawain was and called him a liar and Pelleas realized that one of his brotherhood had been false.

Gawain's influence was felt in The Last Tournament. In this idyll, which was filled with gloom and foreboding, Dagonet, the fool, whom Gawain in one of his moods had made a mock knight, danced about before the hall. In The Passing of Arthur when the order was ruined, Gawain appeared in a dream to King Arthur and told Arthur that he was blown about because all delight was hollow but that there was an isle of rest for the king. When Sir Bedivere heard the dream, he comforted his king and described Gawain's character:

Light was Gawain in life, and light in death
Is Gawain, for the ghost is as the man;
And care not thou for dreams from him.

Thus Tennyson pictured Gawain as a degenerate knight.

The child who came to court as a happy, obedient boy and became a proven knight with an emblazoned shield developed into a degraded member of the order of the Round Table. He was disloyal to his king and friends. He was disobedient and false to vows. His courtesy hid a traitor's heart. He was moody and light in love. Reckless and irreverent, he sought pleasure and sport. He lacked physical prowess and moral courage and was not famed for noble deeds. He was not actuated by lofty ideals. In the Idyll of the King, he appeared as a wholly bad knight with no redeeming good qualities.

1. Idylls of the King, ed. by Rolfe, II, 143.
CHAPTER VI

SOME EXPLANATIONS FOR THE CHANGES IN

THE TREATMENT OF SIR GAWAIN

In the stories concerning King Arthur and his court, Sir Gawain was a knight of note. According to early traditions he was a fighter of great prowess whose strength was associated with the sun. He possessed a marvelous sword, and rode a wonderful steed, Gringalet, which he won from King Clarion in the struggle with the Saxons. In all the early writings, he was a perfect knight—courteous, merciful, truthful, and pure. He was a champion for all who needed help whether they were rich or poor, or knights or maidens. Gradually his character became degraded and he became disloyal, cruel, and deceitful. He even lost his great physical prowess.

Every writer reflected his own personality in his productions, and mirrored the age in which he wrote. Geoffrey was interested in history and depicted traditions and legends in that light. According to early stories, Gawain, the nephew of King Arthur, was ranked first in position at the time when Arthur was a great ruler. Wace softened the blunt, crude stories and made the Round Table a center for true courtesy. In this refinement, Gawain easily remained a noble knight of

high ideals and gracious manners. Layamon, who gloried in war, filled his chronicles with great battles. Under such conditions Gawain's courage and prowess were unequalled. This same interest and delight in prowess were shown by the early English poetical romance writers so Gawain remained a knight who was honored and beloved.

As the traditions developed and the ideals of the time changed, new heroes were introduced and Gawain lost his high position. During the time of Chrétien, courtly love was practiced. He did not approve of the rules that governed courtly love but his patroness did. He may have felt that Gawain as a relative and a knight of noble character who had displayed great devotion and loyalty to the queen could not be associated with her in practices of courtly love and made Lancelot more prominent. Without a doubt, as Lancelot grew in prominence, Gawain was pushed more and more into the background. Although in some early traditions, Gawain was closely associated with the Grail, Walter Map, an archdeacon of Oxford, created a new character, Galahad, who achieved the quest for the Grail. He also welded the Arthurian story and the Grail legend and gave the cycle its religious and moral character. As the Christian faith grew in its influence and the ideally pure knight, Galahad, became famous, he overshadowed Gawain who was at the height of his popularity when war was the delight of all.

Malory was responsible for the greatest degradation in Gawain’s character. He did not harmonize his various sources.

and made Gawain a very inconsistent person. Malory tried to soften the manners of his time and endeavored to curb strong passions. Hence, Gawain's early courteous deeds in the service of maidens were developed in such a way that he won the reputation for being a knight of loose morals. He lacked mercy and was untruthful and irreligious. With such characteristics, it was a foregone conclusion that he could not succeed in the quest of the holy Grail.

Sir Gawain's character was further debased by the treatment of Tennyson. Tennyson drew largely upon Malory but changed the traditions in order to develop his allegory. In the *Idylls of the King*, he set forth the ideas that he felt were at work in society. The religious life in England was decaying and political and social conditions were unsettled. He felt that the spiritual was at war with the material, and, because Tennyson had no firm conviction of the reality of the soul, the poem is full of doubt. Hence, Arthur's great order founded to reform society failed. In the downfall different characters portrayed various forces that corrupted society. Gawain was made light of character. He scorned truth and honesty. He followed his loose desires and flitted from one love to another. His lower nature seemed to overshadow any uplifting ideals. He vowed to follow unusual religious excitement rather than right wrongs at hand and failed because he had no inner vision of an ideal. Thus, Tennyson used Gawain to help express his belief that life seemed hopeless and evil would triumph over the good. He made of him a debased character that in no way resembled the
noble knight of the early traditions, and, unfortunately, the modern world knows him in this degraded portrayal.


New York, 1895.

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