

FRACTURED SELVES, ALTERED EGOS: REDEFINING MASCULINITY IN HIGH
MEDIEVAL ROMANCE

by

MATTHEW DEAN O'DONNELL

(Under the Direction of Katharina M. Wilson)

ABSTRACT

Coinciding with the rise in population and sophistication of high medieval Europe, chivalric romances of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries attempted to settle a number of issues regarding the status of chivalry, nobility, and masculinity with regards to their function in society. Using both frameworks of feudal kinship relations and an overlay of Christian morality and sinfulness, poets constructed definitions of noble masculinity favoring attributes of prowess and conquest over moderation and self-sacrifice. The concept of chivalric masculinity conflicted with religious doctrine concerning pride, sexuality, and sin, resulting in a degradation of the individual knight in following chivalric over religious codes of conduct. Exile, vice, and shame became inexorably connected to chivalric excess, and religious morality displaced feudal honor as the primary belief system in medieval courtly literature.

INDEX WORDS: Masculinity, Chivalry, Courtly Love, Lyric, Romance, Knight, Male, Sexuality, Lady, Supernatural, Church, Nobility, Exile, Mortality

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BA, University of Georgia, 2005

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2009

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May 2009

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my mother: I am indebted to you for all that I have achieved, and for all that I aspire to be. I am blessed to have been able to learn the wonders of my trade from you. No matter what, you will always have a place to call your own with me.

To the many teachers who inspired me from such an early age: you are my role models, the giants of my childhood; to be a part of your company boggles my mind. I feel I have reached a major goal in my life—to dedicate myself to a life of study and to grasp with both hands my destiny and contribute what I can to the development of young minds like my own. I hope to make you proud, now and in the coming years, of what I have accomplished.

I am ever grateful for the inspirational direction of my master's committee: Dr. Katharina Wilson, who introduced me to the wonderful world of the Middle Ages; Dr. Jonathan Evans, who encouraged me to continue my studies into graduate school with his passion and his love of literature; and Dr. Catherine Jones, whose insightful instruction helped to inspire the writing of this paper. I would not be where I am today without the encouragement and support of my committee.

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INTRODUCTION

“Majestic power and erotic love / do not get on together very well.”

~ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book II

In recent years, studies of gender in the Middle Ages have shifted focus slightly from the deservedly popular study of femininity into the broader topic of medieval concepts of gender roles and their effects on the surrounding culture. Harry Brod first broached the subject of “men’s studies” as a qualitatively different arena of research than what was derided at the time by feminist scholars as “*history*,” namely the concept that men were already “the subject of virtually all research.” Brod, Thelma Fenster, Jacqueline Murray, Claire Lees and other notable scholars have begun research into the gendering of medieval masculinity, based upon a framework of feminist scholarship that views gender as a social construct rather than a biological given. For Murray and other scholars, instead of the modern concept of one hegemonic stronghold of masculinity, there are various competing medieval concepts of men in relation to their noble lords, men as figurations of Christ, and men competing for status with one another (Murray ix-x). Differences in these roles affect the gendered expectations of men put into these roles, straining their individuality and even their humanity. The pressure to conform to codes of honor, battle, loyalty to man or God, and even to one’s romantic partners has shaped—and in some ways, twisted—the definition of masculinity in Western culture.

This study will focus on the detrimental effect of conformity to strict codes of chivalry and courtly love on the concept of masculinity among the nobility of 12th-14th century Western Europe. As will be shown, the effect of chivalric values such as extreme prowess and perfection

of character alienate and even annihilate¹ human and masculine nature among the subjects that will be studied. In Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval, ou Le Conte du Graal*, the title character Perceval inherits a legacy of failure and emasculation in noble governance, as symbolized by the *terre-gaste* of the Grail Family's castle, lands, and even the castrated *seniores* of the family. In the lyrics of the troubadours and the marriage ceremonies of the *Nibelungenlied*, men's idolization of their relationships with women (real or imagined) destroys their understanding of themselves and their ability to think or act independently of the whims of others. Finally, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, chivalric perfection is placed at odds with Christian humility, such that no knight can reconcile the two opposing codes of behavior without failing to uphold one or the other. These discussions represent a particular moment in medieval history, after the consolidation of the West at the first millennium and ending with the social upheaval caused by the Great Mortality of 1347-51. The organization of the Gregorian reform movement of the early 1100's had created the initial "separation" that we recognize even today, between "ecclesia" and "mundus," between Church and State (Cantor 303). The result of this social contract of high medieval society would fundamentally alter the mission of the Church itself and the message it would preach, as well as the political influence of the growing sovereignties that would ultimately become our modern nation-states.

The interaction between Christian morality and feudal kinship structures in France, Germany, and England profoundly altered the social concept of masculinity, destabilizing men's self-identity and instituting cultures of perfection on the battlefield and in the bedroom, as well as punishment for failure to live up to an unreachable ideal. Earlier Anglo-Saxon writings like *Beowulf*, *The Wanderer*, and *The Seafarer* are prime representatives of the feudal devotion to kin

¹ Annihilation in the mystical sense of the word, as a loss of self-identity through privation or ecstatic vision (thanks to Jonathan Evans for this point).

and fealty to one's noble lord; the emotional climax of *The Battle of Maldon* is the point at which the survivors of the Viking assault crowd around the body of their slain lord Byrhtnoth and resolve to fight to the death rather than live on without their gold-giver; this stirring example of *ofermōd* ("over-heart," pride, or excessive courage) did not easily fit with the moral doctrine of non-violence offered by the early monastic orders that settled in the north.² The *chansons de geste* tradition had a similar concept of *ofermōd*—Roland is no less a man for losing the rearguard battle against the Saracens at Roncevaux than he is for crying over Oliver's dead body, and his pure martial prowess is undeniable as he hacks enemies limb from limb and cleaves shields, hauberks, and even horses in half. Even the classical tradition of Aeneas, Alexander the Great, and Julius Caesar in medieval Europe valorized the deeds of the men without ever analyzing who the men really were, nor what made them men; the feudal system of valor based on mercenary prowess and purely martial conquest in early Christian Europe did not have the resources nor the inclination to analyze from a theoretical viewpoint the nature and limitations of noble masculinity.

By the twelfth century, however, the consolidation of the Christian hegemony in the West and the standardization of the economic and legal system by Charlemagne had helped to grow a cosmopolitan countryside where internecine warfare was no longer attractive to long-term growth. Thus, war was conveniently exported to empire-building and expanding the reach of the Church, taking hosts of young knights with them. These young knights were often the second sons of their noble order, landless and bereft of hereditary title. In order to maintain their noble lifestyle, they were obliged to leave home and family to conquer and quite probably die in

² In fact, there remains substantial argument over the provenance of seemingly appended Christian flourishes at the end of certain sections of *Beowulf* and other poems attempting to reconcile contemporary 'pagan' and Christian influence.

foreign lands to win fame and fortune enough to buy or marry their way into seigniority. The concept of *aventure*, of the perilous quest which either results in the knight's growth and success or his untimely death, became the most requested literary theme for these same *juvenis milites* about to go off to war and the families that would miss them. The Arthurian legends of the pre-Christian Bretons were reworked into hybrid tales of Christian morality using the chivalric context of *aventure* and, more distantly, *ofermōd*; authors such as Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France used their position outside of the traditional culture of the Breton Celts to make larger arguments about the nature of manhood and its effect on the prevailing cultures of noble chivalry and monastic Christianity warring over the minds and bodies of young men. The Arthurian tradition of what Jean Bodel calls the "Matter of Britain" represents for this author the best representative of the two warring systems of thought on the Christian knight, especially the landless knight-errant whose livelihood would have been dependent on *aventure*.

Chapter One will explore the topic of the quest for the healing power of the *San Graal*—a supernatural artifact whose Christianization is late and incomplete. The Grail holds the dual power of condemning knights to impotence and insolvency as well as healing them of their injuries and restoring prosperity to the land. Connections to fecundity, nature, and martial prowess are all hallmarks of the pre-Christian Breton source material; for later medieval audiences, the source materials were stripped of their provenance and reworked into a Christian network of allusions and allegories. Michel de Certeau recognizes this as a "sacralizing" of a dead system of beliefs by using it to perform the functions of a different living system; however, the dead system always returns to "re-bite (*il re-mord*)" the living hegemony by undermining what it is used to promote. In later continuations of the grail cycle, the 'pagan' grail is revived in a Christian context as the Holy Grail, cup (not platter) that caught the blood of Christ. Yet for

Chrétien de Troyes, the legend surrounding the grail is one of failure and emasculation via battlefield castration and political exile. The imagery of the Grail Castle sequence (bleeding lance and *foible* sword) conceptualizes the grail mythology as a feudal curse attendant upon following the chivalric code of *aventure* to the exclusion of any alternative morality.

Chapter Two will highlight the function of *fin'amors* in troubadour poetry and the machinations of courtly love in opposition to marriage, as represented by the love triangles of Tristan, Iseut, and King Marc, as well as Siegfried, Brunhilde, and Gunther. The perceived attractiveness of the concept of courtly love belies the original impetus of Guillaume IX, duke of Aquitaine, in his deconstruction of courtly values around the indecorously termed *leis de con*, or “law of cunt.” Drawing from classical sources such as Ovid’s *Amores* and *Remedias Amores*, Guillaume and others delineate the nature of seduction and sexuality in masculine endeavors, as well as the pervasive lack of insight attendant upon single-minded adoration of and vexation by the impossibility of feminine perfection. This chase after impossible perfection so perverts the morals of the knight that he is willing to destroy his own noble lord’s marriage to attain the preferred symbol of perfection—the lord’s wife. The extent to which adoration of a *senior*’s wife seriously destabilizes the feudal kinship structure and the sanctity of marriage and trust between partners implicit in sacred union perpetuates even today as a laudable concept in the British tradition of the romance genre, as the resurgence of popular movies about Lancelot and Guinevere (not to mention Tristan and Iseut) can attest.

The final Chapter will bring these concepts together in the complex morality of Sir Gawain as he attempts to follow the rules of the Green Knight’s various games, cunningly designed to prove his moral imperfection at the cost of either his life or his reputation. Only the failure at one of the two moral codes can assure Gawain a chance at surviving a naked axe-blow

to the neck; while Gawain fails at representing the height of prowess by his retention of the green girdle of invulnerability, he succeeds in his sense of self-preservation and his willingness to abandon his pride to survive. As a result, he is only slightly dishonored, but tellingly all the other knights back at Camelot begin wearing similar sashes—presumably, to hide Gawain’s dishonor, but perhaps also to advertise their own personal failures through an acceptance of human imperfection. Also pertinent to the discussion are the *engins* of the Green Knight’s Wife, Lady Bertilak, and her premeditated seduction of Sir Gawain to prove his unsuitability as a knight of Camelot. Lady Bertilak’s actions do not receive the same laudatory treatment as the love-triangles of Chapter Two; the *Gawain* poet clearly believes in Christianity as the greater moral system for knights to follow, thus the Lady’s actions are an inversion of the chivalric practice of hunting that occupies Lord Bertilak during the Exchange of the Winnings contest, interweaving the Lady’s aggressively romantic demeanor with the Lord’s hunting, killing, and dressing scenes in order to make the comparison explicit.

CHAPTER 1

MASCULINITY AND EXILE

‘A Knight Without Armor in a Savage Land:’

The *Avanture Perilous* of Masculine Chivalric Exile

Vernacular romances representing the Arthurian cycle provide a useful starting point for the medieval conceit of masculine chivalry that would dominate the literary world from the twelfth century onwards until the end of the Renaissance. Beginning with the writings of Béroul and Chrétien de Troyes in the twelfth century, the romance genre emphasized the failures and the psychological toll of *avanture* (questing) that plagued the courtly knight in ways uncharacteristic of the *chansons de geste* of Charlemagne and the *romans d’antiquité* concerning Aeneas and Rome. The narrative of the solitary knight-errant losing his way, his mind, and even his manhood (and noble status) during his quest differentiated the Arthurian tradition from the Carolingian and Aenean narratives favoring external threats and political hegemony. The Arthurian tradition featured numerous internal psychological debates on the destructive nature of chivalry, the role of the knight in relation to the priestly order, and the excessive love of *fin’ amors*, the troubadour tradition emanating from the rebellious Provence region south of medieval France. This new emphasis on courtly love, especially the adulterous love of a lord’s wife, exacerbated the complex relationship between knights and lords—a concept that threatened the feudal kinship structure of the nobility as much as the religious authority of the Church. Authors during the twelfth to fourteenth century struggled with redefining chivalry when the consolidation of martial power and the rise of cosmopolitan culture were fast undermining the

traditional mercenary nature of knighthood and replacing it with a concept of loyalty to one's lord and lady and prowess in tournaments and in single combat. Embedded within the discussion of courtly chivalry in Arthurian romance are questions about the morality of extreme displays of prowess and their contrast with the moderation emphasized by the Church, whose influence grew dramatically during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries in western Europe. These debates on the nature and limits of masculinity pose questions about violence, seduction, and fealty as mutually exclusive characteristics of masculinity with the potential to destabilize the knight's ability to understand himself and recognize mercy and suffering in the world around him.

Chrétien de Troyes sought to combine the disparate elements of love poetry, *chanson de geste*, and Breton vernacular sources in a *molt bele conjointure* of the internal psychology of the knight-errant of the day. Each of Chrétien's works emphasizes a different aspect of courtly existence: For *Erec et Enide* the question remains controversial which 'arms' to choose—those of the battlefield where men are made or those of the bedroom where they are seemingly unmade;³ *Cligés* uses the amorous framework of Ovid to promote and parodize the relationship between Fenice and Cligés using psychological insight; *Lancelot* uses the inescapable *prison-forest* of Gorre to test Lancelot's worthiness to rescue Guinevere;⁴ and the very popular *Yvain* deconstructs the nobility of the knight in marriage using the Biblical analogy of Nebuchadnezzar by showing Yvain brought low by his failures, as Kibler asserts: "[Yvain] loses his wife, his reputation—even his name—and reverts to a state of nakedness, both physical and mental, in which he roams the primitive forest living on berries and game" (Kibler xix). Several other

³ "How can a knight, once married, maintain the prowess and glory that won him his bride? That is: can a knight serve both his honor (armes) and his love (amours)?" Kibler xvi.

⁴ Corinne Saunders, pp. 77-8. The supernatural representations of knighthood in the forest are designed to challenge and humble Lancelot, ironically, using the very implements he uses to define himself— crawling along the Sword Bridge and hesitating to sit in the peasant's cart.

works, including translations of classical works, have been attributed to Chrétien with varying degrees of success; but it is his final work, *Le Roman de Perceval, ou Le Conte du Graal*, that remains his most enigmatic. Unfinished at the time of his death, *Conte du Graal* is Chrétien's last look into the concept of masculine chivalry, and also his most puzzling. Perceval's story contains the first tentative representation of the *graal*, the platter that will ultimately be allegorized as the cup that held Christ's blood at the crucifixion. The *Roi Pescheor*, or Fisher King, keeps the grail along with a bleeding lance and a sword that will break upon going into battle, symbols which explode with allegorical inference concerning the morality of feasting and warfare. The Fisher King is also part of a whole Grail Family—inheritors of a family curse that will push Perceval on towards his destiny, even as it jeopardizes his life, his knighthood, and ultimately his very manhood in its unavoidable power.

From the beginning of *Conte du Graal*, it is clear that Chrétien is taking a different tone with chivalry than in his previous works: invoking the Parable of the Sower in his initial opening lines, Chrétien is signaling that allegories, such as the ones which Jesus threw upon the “fertile soil” of his followers, would sprout from his narrative and bear fruit for future audiences. Indeed, the Christian undertone of *Conte du Graal* is well-attested by future writers in the Grail tradition and modern scholarship; but instead of chivalry being a path to Christian morality, Perceval's story shows the destructive power of the chivalric martial ideal of *prouesse* taken to its extreme. Perceval starts out the story as a *niche*; he and his mother are living outside of the court in “la gaste forest,” the Barren Forest. The “barrenness” of the forest is not, as first glance would show, a physical waste, but a courtly exile:

“The term ‘gaste’ seems to refer to lack of civilization, or, possibly, to an area reclaimed by the wilderness, historically a phenomenon not unusual in France. The retreat of

Perceval's mother to this landscape becomes simultaneously a metaphor for her rejection of the chivalric world, and for the destructive element of the chivalric world in which lands are laid waste in battle." (Saunders 76)

Since both Perceval and his mother live on a bustling country villa with farms and a manor house, Perceval must also 'retreat' from even this civilized enclave into the wilderness. Perceval exalts the forest and excels there; unlike knights who retreat into the forest chasing after *aventure*, he pursues no manly expedition, but like a child he hurls javelins in all directions and lets his horse graze in the field. It is only when five fully-armed knights come tromping through the forest that Perceval begins his path towards knighthood and away from his imposed ignorance. According to Brigitte Cazelles, the choice of setting reinforces almost pre-lapsarian innocence:

"That Chrétien chose to tell his story through the eyes of an ignorant protagonist who has misperceptions and misapprehensions concerning the chivalric world he devoutly wishes to enter, implies something of the blindness and unawareness that, Chrétien seems to suggest, determine the deeply flawed character of traditional chivalry. (Cazelles 11)

The idea that the privileged use of violence can be a righteous action in defending the core values of chivalry and extreme masculinity was immediately at odds with the Christian invocation to love one's neighbors and to refrain from wanton violence; merging these two views became the chief concern of Chrétien and later writers in the Arthurian tradition.⁵ Richard Kaeuper analyzes this ambivalence towards violence that courtly knighthood had attained by the time of Chrétien's writing of romances:

⁵ For more detail on the relationship between violence and the Church, see René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (thanks to Jonathan Evans for this note).

“Yet even if we keep the importance of honour firmly in our minds, we should not forget that the prowess from which it springs is the fundamental quality of chivalry. Prowess was truly the demi-god in the quasi-religion of chivalric honour; knights were indeed the privileged practitioners of violence in their society.” (Kaeuper 130)

The very physical power of knights to unhorse, hew down, and run through their opponents in single combat or on the field of battle was necessary to the identity of the chivalric class in courtly literature, according to Kaeuper. Not only is tactical knowledge required for recognition of chivalric prowess, but also the ability to overpower others by sheer manual strength: Galahad, later considered the most perfect knight of the Arthurian tradition, chops Bors’ shield, lance, saddle, and horse in half with one sword-blow in Thomas Malory’s thirteenth century *Morte Darthur*. Regardless of the fact that he is fighting an honor bout with his own kinsman, the sword-blow is considered by onlookers to be the greatest blow ever dealt by a man, and therefore Galahad is deemed the better knight. Violence was so prized as the method to settle disputes of honor between knights that even inappropriately violent behavior could still add to a knight’s prowess: Kaeuper details how Malory valorizes Tristram’s “prowess” in killing his mother in childbirth: “A, my lytyll son, thou haste murderd thy modir! And therefore I suppose thou that arte a murtherer so yonge, thow arte full lykly to be a manly man in thyne ayge” (Kaeuper 149, footnote 106).

Kaeuper specifically points out the misappropriation of divinity Perceval initially places on the knights he sees tromping through the forest:

“Et quant il les vit en apert
Que du bois furent descovert
Et vit les haubers fremians

Et les elmes clers et luisans,

Et vit *le blanc et le vermeil*

Reluire contre le soleil...

Et dist: Ha! sir Diex, merci!

Ce sont angle que je voi chi.”

(But once they came into view, emerging from the forest that hid them, and he saw their gleaming mail shirts and bright, shining helmets, and saw *the red and the white* lit by the sun... And he said, ‘O God, forgive me! I see angels here in front of me!’)⁶

Kaeuper and Cazelles both note that the knights clearly do not fit into their natural surroundings; the noise they make and their “quest” of finding the other knights and ladies that had already passed by form a cognitive dissonance with the rustic adolescent Perceval in his hempen garments frolicking and hunting game. As Cazelles points out, “the hunt takes the form of aggression... [and] traditional chivalric culture as presented in the *Conte* reveals itself to be the locus of an obsessional vision of the Other as either pursuer or prey” (Cazelles 195-6). Thus it makes sense for Chrétien to confront the audience with the naked dissonance of mounted knights in highly polished battle gear clanging and crunching their way through the otherwise peaceful forest; whereas in previous works *aventure* was regularly to be found by exiting the walls of the courtly castle and entering the forest, this time that same forest sees the knightly presence as divine or alien, an imposition on the forest’s domain that is as unrecognizable as it is uninvited.

It should also be mentioned that this meeting between Perceval and the knights is the first appearance of the *blanc/vermeil* color series that become the signature device by which watershed moments of Perceval’s life happen; each moment is a point in time where the bounds

⁶ Roach, *Roman de Perceval*, ll. 127-138, my emphasis. Translations given are from Raffel, *Perceval*.

of chivalry conflict with the correct course of action, exposing the weaknesses of the chivalric code to respond to the consequences of martial excess. During his interrogation of the knights, Perceval is as yet untutored and does not answer the knights' questions properly, indicating his lack of courtly manners. But by the time he returns to his mother's manor, Perceval has already learned what a knight looks like, that King Arthur is residing at Carlisle, and that he makes knights there; all information that Perceval's mother had assiduously concealed from her son by living far beyond the pale of courtly society.

The results of this revelation are threefold, and Perceval: first, Perceval is given access to the knowledge of chivalry without having the wisdom to balance prowess with moderation; second, he is told about his family history and how his mother came to repudiate her courtly ties and live out in the middle of nowhere; and third, he is given a crash-course in knightly behavior by his mother, which he will use to disastrous effect in the episode of the pavilion. What is ironic about this first result is Perceval's questioning:

“Sire, sachiez tot par nature
 Plus fol que bestes en pasture;
 Cist est ausi come une beste.
 Fols est qui dalez lui s'arestes,
 S'a la muse ne velt muser
 Et le tans en folie user.”

(My lord, believe me, the Welsh can't help it; they're all born like that, crazy as cows in a pasture. And this one's dumb as an ox. It's silly to stop for him, letting him babble away, and wasting precious time.) (ll. 241-8)

Rather than recognizing the natural honesty and artless truth of Perceval's questions, the courtly knights devalue the beneficial traits in Perceval that do not coincide with the artifice of courtesy as they know it. Yet this very trait that the knights find obnoxious is the one trait that could have helped Perceval heal the Fisher King and bring fecundity back to his land. The Fisher King, we later find out, is actually Perceval's uncle; he, like Perceval's father, suffers from a very intimate wound that both realistically cripples his ability to ride a horse as a knight and symbolically destroys his ability to govern effectively. Perceval's mother describes her husband's injury as a groin wound that not only cripples the knight but also makes him impotent in upholding and protecting his estate:

“Vostre peres, si nel savez,
 Fu parmi la jambe navrez
 Si que il mehaigna del cors.
 Sa grant terre, ses grans tresors,
 Que il avoit come preudom,
 Ala tot a perdition,
 Si chaï en grant povreté.”

(‘Your father, let me tell you, was wounded between the legs and his whole body was crippled. All the lands, and the immense treasure his bravery had won began to fall away, and he died terribly poor.’) (ll. 436-41)

The “impotency” of the knights of Uther Pendragon's court is quite literal: “Apovri et deshiredé / Et escillié furent a tort / Li gentil home après la mort / Uterpendragon qui rois fu” (The best and bravest knights were all impoverished and deserted and exiled, after the death of Uther Pendragon, our king) (ll. 442-4). Thus, in exile, the Grail Family suffers an intimately symbolic

wound—not a shoulder or a leg wound, befitting manly combat, but one that makes chivalric, amorous, and even political pursuits impossible—an ironic “inheritance” of political impotence for the exiled nobility. Perceval’s two elder brothers, raised to be knights, are killed in combat just after receiving arms—the elder one is literally “blinded” by his desire to become a knight, as carrion birds are found feasting on the eyeballs of his corpse. Deprived of both land and heirs, Perceval’s mother takes refuge outside of courtly society to avoid losing another son to chivalry, but unsuccessfully: Perceval embraces wholeheartedly what he believes is to be his destiny (kighthood), not realizing that in doing so he will inherit the curse of the Grail Family.

Against the wishes of his mother Perceval rushes headlong into becoming a knight, for which she rightly points out he has no training or discipline; she spouts off a laundry list of concepts unfamiliar to the boy, attempting to instill chivalric values in her son whom she has hidden from him his whole life, including the artifice of Christian worship:

“ ‘Sor tote rien vos weil proier
 Que a l’eglise et al mostier
 Alez proier nostre Seignor
 Qu’en cest siecle vos doinst honor,
 Et si vos laist si contenir
 Qu’a bone fin puissiez venir.’
 ‘—Mere, fait il, que est eglise?’ ”

(“ ‘And above all else, I beg you, go to monasteries and churches and pray to our Lord that you will live this worldly life well, and are honored, until you reach the right end to your days.’ ‘Mother,’ he asked, ‘What’s a church?’ ”) (ll. 567-73)

Within this simple question, Chrétien has set up a very fruitful dialectic between chivalry and Christianity, as well as between masculinity and Christianity. Perceval embodies this dialectic in his growth from innocence to experience, and Chrétien shows this through the concept of Perceval's failure to recognize the destructive nature of chivalry on both men and women at court. Perceval's first two failures come as a result of his rushed training with his mother; in fact, he hasn't gone as far as a pebble's throw away to become a knight before his mother drops down dead before his eyes. Though Perceval sees this event, he is blinded by his desire to be a knight, and leaves her lying at her doorstep while he gallops off into the forest to follow his destiny.

Perceval's second failure, the assault on the girl at the pavilion, shows in detail the malevolence possible when chivalry is practiced in ignorance of morality. Chrétien does not shy away from describing Perceval's physical assault on the maiden, though he interrupts the narrative to remind the audience that the scene was not his invention, but was already in the Breton original. Perceval mistakes a richly-embroidered red-and-gold tent for a church, and finding the girl inside, greets her "com ma mere le m'aprist. / Ma mere m'ensaigna et dist / Que les puceles saluaise / En quel que liu que jes trovaisse" ("as my mother taught me I should. That's what she taught me: always greet a girl, no matter where you happen to find her") (ll. 683-6). This robotic parroting of maxims carries behind it no moral weight, so when the girl refuses to kiss Perceval, he forces her down on the bed and kisses her anyway. Perceval's prowess is on full display as

"Li vallés avoit les bras fors,
Si l'embracha molt nichement,
Car il nel sot fair austrement.

Mais desfense mestier n'i ot

Que li vallés en un randon

Le baisa, volsist ele ou non,

Set fois, si com li contes dit.”

(The boy clasped her in his strong arms, and lay full length above her, while she struggled as hard as she could, trying to get away. But her best defense was useless, because, as the story tells us, he kissed her seven times.) (ll. 700-9)

Displaying the barest minimum of understanding of the rules of chivalry, Perceval dishonors the unnamed girl so fully that when he meets her again during his quest for the Grail, she is unrecognizable due to the punishment she has endured at the hands of her “lover,” *li Orgueilleus*, the Proud Knight. Chrétien balances this violent ignorance of others’ wishes with Perceval’s valor in defending the laughing girl at Arthur’s court and his handy defeat of *le Chevalier Vermeil*, the Red Knight. Though Perceval seems in the beginning of the *Conte* to be the antithesis of chivalry, he nonetheless represents the embodiment of masculine prowess. The Proud Knight, the Red Knight, and Sir Kay echo these same extremes of violence and valor in their behavior, and their actions in the text will mirror Perceval’s chivalric juggernaut.

There is little doubt that Perceval is among the greatest of all knights: untutored, he kills the Red Knight, though he is unable to strip off the knight’s armor; he rides without direction, yet as if by magic manages to find Gornemant’s castle and the besieged castle of Blanchefleur, entering the next phases of his knighthood by crossing first the liminal threshold of the river, and then the *foible* bridge (Saunders 148). In each instance, Perceval naturally assumes the appearance and dignity of a knight, just as assuredly as when he has internalized the words, though not the meaning, of his mother’s final speech. Perceval hardly needs an afternoon’s

worth of training with Gornemant, so natural a knight is he, and begrudgingly accepts new *vermeil* clothes to replace his old hemp and oilskin garments. Thoroughly looking the part of a knight, he attracts the attention of the diaphanous Blanchefleur at Castle Biaurepaire. Prowess being the prime indicator of a knight's quality, Perceval almost single-handedly breaks the siege of Clamadeu and sends each of the enemy combatants back to Arthur's court to remind Kay of his oath to defend the Laughing Girl's honor. Chrétien's argument about chivalry is subtle here; as K.M. Wilson notes, there seem to be two contradictory forces shaping Perceval's growth—the gradual erosion of the “unlearned” natural state of Perceval the *niche* and the channeling of Perceval's latent violence into acceptable courtly avenues.⁷ Yet these are in fact both ways of indoctrinating and inculcating a systemic change in Perceval's value system: the imposition of the courtly artifice of love and prowess masks the two duties of noble knights at the time—to kill extremely well and rise in status, so as to produce healthy heirs and future knights. Perceval's success as a knight brings him closer to becoming like the alien and unnatural knights he first witnessed in the forest. In analyzing the steps required of a knight-errant of Arthur's court, self-identity becomes synonymous with martial, amorous, and political success. Failure, on the other hand, threatens to unmask Perceval's self-image as attendant to a wasted discipline, one that denies men self-identification within chivalric nobility if they do not succeed.

It is Perceval's third and greatest failure, the episode of the Grail, which fully exposes Chrétien's critique of chivalry. Leaving Biaurepaire, Perceval is treated almost as a Christ-like savior, as all the monks and nuns are wearing their fine Sunday robes and wimples and the narrator likens the crowd to a procession at Ascension, a reminder of the original image Perceval

⁷ Many thanks to Katharina Wilson for her assistance on this point.

had of knights as gods; Richard Kaeuper exposes a subtle accusation of the semi-divinity complex that Chrétien levels at his own chivalric audience:

“ ‘Are you God?’ (N’iestes vos Dieux?) Was this a question Chrétien wanted the knights of his society to consider? Were they, like the first sinners in Eden, setting themselves up in the place of divinity, arrogating to themselves God-like power?... It is hard not to read this passage as a telling criticism of the chivalry of Chrétien’s own day; his romances abound in trenchant social criticism and suggestions for an improved *chevalerie* that might truly stand alongside ideal *clergie* as a prop to civilized life.” (Kaeuper 124)

In navigating the twin towers of clerical and secular rule, Perceval becomes the anvil upon which Chrétien hammers out a new knightly armor: as Perceval wanders in search of his mother, “il n’encontra rien terriene / Ne crestien ne crestiene / Qui li seüst voie ensaigner” (“he did not encounter any earthly soul, neither man or woman who could help him find his way”) (ll. 2977-9). Interestingly, Raffel’s translation avoids assigning a religious identity to wayfarers along Perceval’s path, though it is evident in the original that he is traversing a land devoid not merely of humans, but of Christians—a pre-Christian site of pagan mythos, often known as *faerie*, the land of magic and the supernatural. This is important to note, because Perceval has already passed the first two liminal bounds of knighthood typical of courtly romance: education by an elder knight as a squire and love of a lady, both considered necessary stages of the adolescent’s training to become a knight.

Now Perceval comes to the final, transformative stage: encountering the supernatural. in his *Hero with a Thousand Faces* Joseph Campbell systematizes the ritualistic behavior of masculine maturation in western culture, complete with initiation rites, cyclical journeys, and the assessment of new knowledge that transforms the individual from a bystander to a hero, or from

a boy to a man. Perceval's journey leads him unwittingly to his own uncle, *le Roi Pescheor*, the Fisher King, whose injured body and land mirrors his own father's exile and impotence, providing a symbolic link to their scarred chivalric pasts. Perceval laments to God in the wilderness at being unable to ford a deep river to find his mother, when he spots two fishermen in a boat traversing this boundary who encourage him to seek lodging over the hill; in a symbolic sense, Perceval must not be seeking the Grail Castle in order to find it, as his cousin later tells him. Perceval initially cannot see the castle, and curses the Fisherman who he believes has told him lies; this symbolic repudiation echoes the earlier repudiation of Uther's vassals in the Arthurian mythos, and allegorically repeats the castigation of the Fisher King, allowing Perceval access to the waste-land. Bustling with attendants and most beautifully made, the Castle seems almost a dream vision to Perceval—indeed, with the added refrain of Perceval's being draped in a scarlet cloak, it is difficult not to allegorize the Castle as Chrétien's ultimate criticism of courtly chivalry: the land is barren, but the fields and castle are full; the food is sumptuous, but the procession of the Grail artifacts proceeds throughout; Perceval is invited to stay, eat, and ask anything he wishes, but out of dogmatic loyalty to Gornemant's teachings that a knight must say little, he refuses to ask the question that would heal his uncle, restoring his rightful rule.

The three Grail artifacts are the key to this interpretation, and critics have approached their symbolism from multiple angles: Kathryn Banks reads the white wood of the lance and the blood dripping from the iron point as a hermaphroditic combination of Gornemant's white garments and Blanchefleur's red; Peggy McCracken connects the bleeding lance with the goose blood on the snow that entrances Perceval, as well as the Christianization of these images in the *Perlesvaus*; and numerous modern commentators discuss the phallic imagery evoked by the sword that breaks upon being drawn in battle. For our discussion, it is most important to

remember Anne Wilson's admonition that this earliest Grail myth is still not Christian, even though later authors will gloss the artifacts with Christian symbolism. The Grail artifacts therefore are intimately connected with magic, *faerie*, and the Breton originals from which Chrétien took his work. This frees up commentary on the artifacts from the dogmatic Christian interpretation that they receive in later works, as well as allowing those concepts that were not as readily acknowledged by the Church—sexual fecundity, masculinity and warfare, and even genealogy. For even aside from the Freudian concepts of penile imagery, defloration, and erectile dysfunction, there remains an essential component of family relationships that make up the hidden polemic behind the quest for the Grail and for its healing properties—the ability to heal feudal legitimacy as well as bodily injury. R. S. Loomis, in a particularly forceful article, excoriates one of his colleagues for conflating the doctrines of the Church with the doctrines of the Church of Amor, as promoted by Andreas Capellanus and troubadour enclaves such as the courts of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Marie de Champagne. Nevertheless, the peculiar situation facing the nobility in the 12th and 13th centuries was what role the Church would play in government—whether, like in the Holy Roman Empire, the Church would hold a dual leadership role with the Emperor, or as in the case of the rebellious Provençal nobles, would become a violent overlord requiring religious fealty. Having consolidated the European continent under the authority of Christendom by the eleventh century, Church and State were to be inexorably drawn into conflict over the dwindling resources of ungoverned “waste” land and feudal seigniority. For the more orthodox Chrétien, the choice was simple, though difficult to mention: Feudal hubris, as exemplified by unrestrained prowess and martial ferocity, destroys what it presumes to defend—the nobility of chivalry. The unrestrained military ambitions of Uther's court have left their knights literally “unmanned;” Perceval's father and uncle are castrated both

physically and socially by the tripartite woes of bloody lance, broken sword, and conspicuous consumption as symbolized by the Grail (Kaeuper 124). Perceval, having received his own *foible* sword and having been unwittingly initiated into the martial cult of chivalric excess, seems doomed to repeat the failures of his forefathers.

Perceval's failure to question these symbols leads him to betray his family, ironically by following in their footsteps. It is immediately apparent after the dreamlike ritual of the Grail procession that the dream of Perceval's "success" as a knight has ended. The rest of Chrétien's story focuses on Perceval's self-doubt and obsessive questioning of his previous behavior, a trait that he has not shown prior to this point.⁸ Indeed, the following adventures of Perceval, while admitting just as much success (in defending the Laughing Girl's honor) as failure (finding the Grail Castle once again), portray a more realistic psychological picture of Perceval than at any other point in the poem. Perceval is immediately confronted by the evil results of chivalry, including his own wicked deeds: a young lady mourning her dead beloved; the Ruined Girl that Perceval had assaulted; and the Haughty Knight, whose misogynist diatribe presents a derisive picture of chivalric masculinity satirizing the anti-feminine discourse in noble society at the time. Perceval, in questioning the grieving lady, discovers for the first time his own name; Leo Braudy discusses the anthropological significance of initiation rituals and their concept of renaming the individual as being grouped into three stages: "a separation from former status, a liminal world of transition between stages, and a reassimilation into the group, when a new status is recognized" (Braudy 17). Having already been separated from his home and crossing the liminal

⁸ Being unfinished at the time of his death, it is unclear whether Chrétien would have taken Perceval's story back up at the end of the section on Sir Gauvain; nevertheless, the criticism of chivalry already apparent in both Perceval and Gauvain's narratives is sufficient for this analysis.

thresholds of bridges and rivers into supernatural enclaves of *gaste forest*, Perceval finds he knows his name, though he cannot rightly say from where:

“Et cil qui son non ne savoit
 Devine et dist que il avoit
 Perchevaux li Galois a non,
 Ne ne set s’il dist voir ou non;
 Mail il dist voir et si nel sot.”

(And then, not knowing his name, he somehow knew, and said he was Perceval from Wales, not knowing if he spoke the truth, but he did, though he knew it not.) (ll. 3573-7) Perceval’s cousin, after finding out that he had not put the question to the Fisher King, renames him “Perchevax li chaitis! / Ha! Perchevax maleürous” (“Perceval the Unhappy, the Miserable/Unfortunate”) and reveals to him the true fragility of the Fisher King’s gift of a sword, a potent symbolic inversion of the unbreakable sword of Roland, showing the difference in treatment of martial images between Chrétien’s romances and *chansons de geste* typified by the contemporary *Chanson de Roland* (ll. 3582-3).

Next, Perceval encounters the very lady he dishonored in the pavilion, now after she has been utterly ruined by the Haughty Knight. Again, Chrétien spares no detail as he describes the utter privation of the horse, which the dogs slavered after like walking carrion, as well as the girl, who is doubly dishonored by her thoroughly devastated appearance: her hair is matted, her face is torn and streaked with dirt and tears; her breasts are exposed through tears in the fabric of her dress, and Perceval is unable to cover her body from exposure to the elements. Perceval is moved by her misery to rectify the problem by challenging the knight to combat; but this is no

ordinary knight—the Haughty Knight, *Li Orgeuillieus*, spits such venomous misogyny about his supposed beloved as to fit better in Juvenal’s Sixth Satire or Jankyn’s Book of Wykked Wyves:

“Feme qui se bouche abandone
 Le surplus molt de legier done,
 S’est qui a certes i entende.
 Et bien soit qu’ele se desfende,
 Si set on bien sanz nul redout
 Ke feme velt vaintre par tot
 Fors qu’en cele mellee soule
 Quant ele tient l’ome a la gole,
 Et esgratine et mort et rue,
 Si volroit ele estre vencue.
 Si se desfent et si li tarde,
 Tant est de l’otroier coarde,
 Si velt qu’en a force li face;
 Puis si n’en a ne gre ne grace.”

(“A woman who’s willing to surrender her mouth will give away the rest, if it’s wanted. And who doesn’t know how women defend themselves? They always fight and win—except in that one desperate battle where she’s got a man by the throat, scratching and biting to the death, and all she wants is to lose. She fights, but she gets impatient; she can’t just say she wants to, she wants him to make her yield, so she won’t feel guilty, or grateful.”) (ll. 3864-77)

This expression of masculine prowess comes at the expense of humanity, healthy male sexuality, and female bodily privacy; like the Barren Forest, the woman is presented as merely another obstacle to be overcome, a foe to be vanquished. *Li Orgeuillieus* does not consider that no woman, including Brunhilde of the *Nibelungenlied*, can match the excessive prowess of the knights populating romances and epics; for those whose belief in the justified and privileged practice of violence allows them to settle such petty arguments as which neighboring lands have the greatest knights by violent combat, then certainly it would make sense that deciding whether or not the woman wanted to have sex could also be decided by violence. Even deciding whether or not *Li Orgeuillieus* was correct in his assumptions is decided by combat—he is handily defeated by Perceval, whose ambiguously violent role as a defender of femininity allows him a brief moment to repay the brutish Red and Haughty Knight, as well as Sir Kay, in kind for their mistreatment of women.

Nevertheless, Perceval is a changed knight: his reverie at watching Blanchefleur's image displayed on the snow cannot be broken by the warlike Sagremor and Sir Kay; even attempting to do so, Kay fulfills the prophecy that the Fool had given, exemplifying not only the predictable nature of the callous Kay, but also exposing the lack of courtly refinement evident in their speech and actions with respect to Gauvain. Sir Kay spills his greatest vitriol at Gauvain for courteously talking Perceval in off the snowy field, in direct contrivance to the traditional chivalric desire for submission by combat:

“Et Kex dist al roi son seignor:

‘Ore en la pris et l’onor

Mesire Gavains, vostre niez.

Molt fu or perilleuse et griés

La bataille, se je ne ment,
 Que tot ausi haïtiement
 S'en retorne come il i mut,
 C'onques d'autrui cop n'i rechut,
 N'autres de lui cop n'i senti,
 Ne il de mot nel desmenti;
 S'est drois que los et pris en ait
 Et que on die qu'il a fait
 Ce dont nous autres ne poïmes
 Venir a chief, et s'i meïsmes
 Toz nos pooirs et nos esfors.' ”

(“And Kay said to the king, ‘So now your nephew, my lord Gawain, has earned high honor and praise. What a hard battle he fought, in perfect safety, for here he comes marching back as blithe as when he went, having neither received nor given a single blow, nor suffered the slightest damage. ‘Oh how he deserves our praise!’ everyone will say, succeeding so well where those other fellows failed—no matter how hard we tried. Our efforts were useless.’ ”) (ll. 4518-32)

Whether jokingly or intentionally, Chrétien has put into Kay’s mouth the essence of the argument being waged in *Perceval*: what good is manual prowess and manly power in a diplomatic world? The consolidation of Christendom ended the wars against the *pagani*, if not the internecine struggles of feudalism; even here, at the very beginning of the Arthurian tradition, Chrétien is deconstructing the singular occupation and sole virtue of the military order of chivalry: violent prowess. The representation of Sir Gawain in his own English romance, *Sir*

Gawain and the Green Knight, makes it abundantly clear that questions of masculinity and knightly behavior do not end even for the most well-spoken of Arthur's knights.

For Perceval, however, diplomacy and courtesy are unable to cure his plight, as he is now a fully-grown and duly initiated member of the tragic Grail Family. For five years Perceval searches the wilderness for the Grail Castle, sending 50 beaten knights to Arthur's court, yet he never enters a church or a monastery. Chrétien tells us that Perceval loses his memory and all knowledge of God (ll. 6127-9), becoming something akin to a wild man, primal and savage, hunting other knights for sport and rejecting morality for the sheer vice of combat. It is only when Perceval comes across penitents on Good Friday that he realizes the depths of his self-imposed exile and the impotent adventuring which has brought him no closer to healing the Fisher King. Through the help of the penitents, Perceval finds the forest hermitage and there declares on his knees the hopelessness he feels in pursuing a purely chivalric code of conduct:

“Et del graal que je i vi
 Ne sai pas cui on en servi,
 Si ai puis eü si grant doel
 Que mors eüsse esté mon wel,
 Que Damedieu en oblïai,
 Ne puis merchi ne li crïai
 Ne ne fis rien, que je seüsse,
 Por coi jamais merchi eüsse”

(“And when I saw a holy grail, I had no idea for whom it was meant, and said nothing, and ever since I’ve felt such sadness that I wished to die; I forgot about God and never prayed for his grace and mercy or did what I should to deserve it.”) (ll. 6381-6)

It is then that the Hermit explains in full the ancestry of sin permeating Perceval's family. The physical wounds of his father and his uncle the Fisher King do not affect the Hermit (the third Grail Family brother), for he is bound to God's service, not knightly duties; thus Perceval learns also to overcome his "sin" of overweening chivalry when he is re-taught the meaning of Christ's sacrifice and takes the same communion that keeps the father of the Fisher King alive until the day the question of the lance and the grail can be answered—perhaps by spiritual, not chivalric, means. This late-stage mixing of Christian and chivalric ethos provides an orthodox, if problematic resolution to the tension between Perceval's chivalric and Christian duty; later authors will conflate the two, but it is Chrétien's initial exploration of the Grail quest that remains the most haunting. The emasculating, enraging, and ultimately impotent relationship that chivalry has with the Grail exposes some of the deeper flaws in the pursuit of martial masculinity as an ethical system. Though many knights hope that by questing they can become truly whole and successfully "virtuous," any attempt to define them through the violence of *aventure* risks employing a strategy of stultifying masculinity for the sake of prowess. The tragic consequence of the Grail quest ends up separating men from virtue by making virtuous behavior contingent upon the violent imposition of dominance upon the self and others, thereby undermining the very ethos martial virtue is presumed to support.⁹ Failure to achieve the objective of the quest results not only in the denigration of the knight-errant's reputation, but the loss of his status as both a nobleman and a man, making him impotent in terms of chivalric prowess and neutered in his physical body. Unlike Christianity's moral goal of *nec femina, nec vir*, being "unmanned" in the romance tradition is to be exiled from courtly society as well as privileged masculine self-identification.

⁹ Many thanks to Jonathan Evans for his assistance on this point.

CHAPTER 2

MASCULINITY AND LOVE

Sex, Lies, and Manuscripts: *Fin'Amors* and

The Annihilation of Feudal Masculinity in Courtly Love

This chapter will focus on the performative aspect of masculinity in the *fin' amors* tradition as begun by the first troubadour Guillaume, IX Duke of Aquitaine and VII Count of Poitiers, and which continued in both lyric and romance to present a courtly *ymage* of the masculine as both a narcissistic self-lover and as a fundamentally incomplete person. An anonymous 13th century *vita* describes Guillaume tellingly as both “one of the most courtly men in the world and one of the greatest deceivers of women. He was a fine knight at arms, liberal in his womanizing, and a fine composer and singer of songs. He traveled much through the world, seducing women” (Hadley 197). In true Ovidian fashion, Guillaume IX treated love in his poetry as a game of seduction and courtly conquest: in “Ben vuelh que sapchon li pluzor,” he calls himself the “maiestre certa” (grand master) because he plays at love like he plays at dice. When his lady believed him to be cheating at their “joc grossier” (indecent game), William raised the board on which they were playing to show that he was not cheating—yet the double meaning of their dice game is quite apparent in the closing lines:

“Et quant l’aic levat lo taulier,
 empeis los datz,
 e’ill duy foron cairat manier
 e’l terz plombatz.

E fi'ls fort ferir al taulier
e fon joguatz.”

(“And when I had raised the gaming table I threw the dice, and two of them rolled, and the third sank. And I made them strike that table hard, and it was played.”)¹⁰

The game of love operated according to what Guillaume called the “leis de con,” or the “law of cunt,” where “all actions have the status of accidents, for this ‘law’ allows no motive but instinctual appetite in the individual, and no other rule but chance in the world. Everyone wanders around till he or she bumps into someone else, and then lust astounds them with its possibilities.” An early concept of the festival or carnivalesque, the world of the troubadour appraised women like horses and valorized men who were bound by their sexual appetites. According to Mario Casella, true personal dignity and moral coherence are incompatible with the imaginary court that Guillaume creates in his poetry, since “Guillaume IX was not unaware that animal instinct or appetite contradicts itself. That which the appetite ardently desires soon reveals itself as empty of meaning: a nothing” (7-8). Frederick Goldin describes the predicament of the courtly bachelor succinctly:

“The lover has to love like a courtly man, and the setting is now so essential to his love, as the only means of its expression, that his unsuccess (sic) in love necessarily implies his failure as a courtly man. Love has become the enactment of courtliness: the way a man loves is the surest sign of his identity as a courtly man.” (10)

The main tension of the courtly bachelor was between his love of the beautiful lady and his status in the courtly hierarchy; whether or not the lady was of higher class, the man’s status was still dependent on his being a “lusty bachelor,” as full of promiscuity as prowess. Yet the

¹⁰ Goldin, *Troubadour*, pp. 35-7; poem 5: stanza IX-X, ll. 57-62. Translations by Goldin.

troubadour tradition grafted romantic love onto martial prowess, conflating the two in often confusing ways. Minnesinger Hartmann von Aue's *Kreuzlied* provides a salient example:

“Ez ist geminnet, der sich dur die Minne ellenden muoz:

nû seht wies mich ûz mîner zungen ziuhet über mer.

Und lebte mîn her, Salatîn und al sîn her,

dienbræhten mich von Vranken niemer einen fuoz.”

(“A man who must go into exile for love—there is a man who loves. Now behold how she draws me across the sea away from my native tongue. And if my lord were living, Saladin and all his army could not move me one foot away from home.”)¹¹

Here, Hartmann is comparing the “prodigal love” of minnesingers and troubadours to the more complete (and masculine) love that he shares with his lady; indeed, his participation in the crusade itself is predicated not on his desire for fame and conquest, but on the promise of love. This romantic devotion inverts the Anglo-Saxon tradition of feudal devotion as exemplified in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, as well as *The Battle of Maldon*; whereas in the Anglo-Saxon poems the focus of the vassal's devotion to his lord was considered a function of the feudal structure of loyalty, the politics of courtly love conflate romantic love with conquest, muddying the interpretive waters between a lady to be wooed and a battle to be won.

M. Chinca describes the interplay between masculine and feminine voices in medieval love lyrics as essential to the collective historical understanding of masculinity, providing useful insight into the construction of masculinity by contemporary poets:

“[L]iterary images of men can tell us something about the collective memories and

fantasies of medieval people concerning masculinity: their beliefs about what a man was

¹¹ Goldin, *German*, p. 69; 32:II, ll. 13-16.

or ought to be and, occasionally their uncertainties about the meaning of manhood. This is as much a part of the history of masculinity as hard facts about what men in the past characteristically did; it is part of the record of human subjects' attempts at making sense of the bodies they inhabit." (Hadley 199)

Embodying this ambiguity between masculine and feminine *démeseure* (excess) are the early German love lyrics of "der von Kürenberg." In the surviving copies of his poetry, Kürenberg adapts the courtly love tradition of neighboring France, highlighting the interplay between the sexes through imaginative strophes written from the perspective of both men and women. Chinca asserts that though a man wrote Kürenberg's verses, the performative context of the verses (whether in front of an all-male audience or to a mixed group) can either lend credence to a particularly misogynistic brand of masculinity or to a self-deprecating blend of misogyny, misandry, and ironic reversal. One such humorous example occurs in a particular set of lyrics called the *Frauenstrophien*, where the interrogative jest between the male lover and the female beloved becomes a source of parody:

"Jô stuonct ich nehtint spâte vor dînem bette,
dô getorste ich dich, vrouwe, niwet wecken.
'des gehazze got den dînen lîp!
jô enwas ich niht ein eber wilde', sô sprach daz wîp."

(Although I stood last night at your bedside late, I didn't wake you, Lady; I didn't dare.
'For that,' said she, 'may God forever hate your carcass!' (splendid girl!) 'I'm no wild bear.')

¹² <http://brindin.com/vcb3cove.htm>

The humorous difference in tone between the solemn male lover and the sarcastic realism of the female beloved questions the conventions of courtly love, especially in matters of sex. While it is possible that this poem was meant only as a jibe towards women's sexual insatiability and earthy attitude towards sex, Chinca goes further to recognize that "*minnegeselligkeit*" ("conviviality of love") debates were popular not only in Germany, but in France with Andreas Capellanus' *De Amore* and numerous other Continental poets, all debating the nature and quality of courtly seduction. Chinca brings in an anecdote from the *Kaiserchronik*, written in 1140-50 a.d., in which a lady of besieged Viterbo engages the Roman Totila in a debate over which is preferable to a man of honor: to make love to a courtly lady all night long, or to fight with a worthy knight the next morning. Totila tellingly responds that though martial prowess is the stated goal of the armed knight, "[w]ith love, however, it stands thus: nothing alive can resist it. If a man really feels the love of good women, he will become well if he is sick, and be rejuvenated if he is old. Ladies make a courtly and bold man of him; nothing can harm him" (Hadley 209). At stake here is *not* the status of the woman; indeed, throughout the *fin'amors* tradition, stereotypical representations of women undergo surprisingly little adjustment, though not for lack of trying by *trobairitz* and other female lyricists. Instead, we find that it is *men* who are changed by women, and it is this wavering disjunction between the realities of normal life and the fantasies of *fin'amors* that obfuscates the medieval definition of masculinity.

Potkay and Evitt, in their study on women in medieval men's literature, *Minding the Body*, discuss this disjunction in the works of troubadours and minnesingers debating the ideal of courtly love and seduction. The troubadour's image of a lover is fractured between his courtly ego (masculine prowess) and the *ymage* of his lady (upon whom he is supposedly dependent for life and health): "Desire... both sustains the lover and annihilates him. He must paradoxically

maintain a desire whose consummation will destroy him. To ensure the perpetuation of the paradox, lovers desire not a woman but the state of desire” (Potkay/Evitt 51). Love from afar, love of a liege-lord’s lady, and love unrecognized and unrequited are the primary means from which courtly love poets derive the unfulfilled cravings of the troubadour’s concept of a lover; consequently, the lady in question remains under-developed both as a character in the poem and as a concept for debate.¹³ This distance both from the personhood of the lady and from the lady’s advances tell us more about the character of the writers of courtly love poems and their intended audiences than about the fictitious women for which they were supposedly the inspiration—Bertran de Born even goes so far as to admit that he must imagine the ideal woman because he has not found enough of the right virtues or attributes in the women he has known thus far (Potkay/Evitt 51). The “ladies” Bertran de Born and other troubadour poets of the 12th and 13th century revered more accurately resembled Pygmalion’s statue, a projection of their own fantasies made flesh. In reality, these male poets were subsuming their own desire in imaginary ideals, much as contemporary Christian mystics subsumed their desires for the flesh in ecstatic visions of Christ, Mary, and the angelic retinue; even the trope of the “visual climax” of witnessing God’s beauty is mirrored in meeting the eyes of one’s beloved for the first time. Where the ritual abstention from sexual union within the Catholic Church served to intensify and even beatify the radical faith of the mystics, courtly love poets used the image of ideal femininity and beauty to whip themselves into ever-higher ecstasies of love even in the absence of actual women.

Most significant for our analysis is an underlying theme of narcissism that Potkay and Evitt detect in the language and emotions of the troubadour poets:

¹³ As the authors say on p. 51, “Bernard de Ventadorn’s evocation of his lady as ‘beautiful and white, fresh and gay and soft’ is as specific as any description gets.”

“In the troubadour lyric [the poet] constructs a feminine persona who, as a distinct other, renders a vision of himself as self-determined and whole. His integrity hinges on the existence of the lady; her willingness to, if only for a moment, meet the lover’s eyes with her own. But since the lady is just an idealized image of the lover, he can always count on her complicity. (54)

Guillaume de Lorris utilizes the Ovidian myth of Narcissus as an ambivalent critique of courtly love in his beginning to the *Roman de la Rose*. Echo, unrequited in her love for the asexual Narcissus, pleads to the God of Love to repay him in kind for his lack of courtly manners; Love condemns Narcissus to love his own *ymage*, his reflection in a mirror pool, and unable to accomplish his desire for himself, he dies. The narrator’s critical summation jars out of context with the original *Metamorphoses* account:

“Dames, cest essemple aprenez,
 Qui vers vos amis mesprenez,
 Car se vous les laissez morir,
 Dieus le vos saura bien merir.

(You ladies who behave badly to your lovers, learn from this example, for if you leave them to die, God will repay you.) (ll. 1505-8)

It is interesting to note the dialectic between gender-roles as they differ from Book III of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, where Echo’s love for Narcissus (like Salmacis for Hermaphroditus) leads her to commit a selfish act of violence on him, transforming him as rape transforms women. Echo’s lament to the God of Love is a break from Ovid’s original, which has Nemesis condemning Narcissus for spurning an unnamed male suitor instead. Rather than being just a narrative about a hard-hearted lover, Guillaume’s romance turns Echo’s lament into a negative exemplum

warning of the dangers of refusing to bow to the dictates of the God of love. Narcissus' self-love is ultimately ambiguous: Guillaume makes him both an inanimate monument of warning to stay away from the fountain of Narcissus and the gateway to the narrator's first vision of the Rose through the crystals at the bottom of the fountain, implying that sterility and courtly love-from-afar operate in concert with one another.

Finally, the narrator gives his own account of looking into *li mireor perilleus* (the perilous mirror) of the fountain of Narcissus, in which he sees two crystals¹⁴ that reflect the wall of roses containing perfect symbol of his lady's love, the budding Rose. Just like Narcissus, the narrator is "caught" by the perilous mirror; he must now undertake the arduous journey to retrieve the rosebud for himself. Yet it is not Echo's lament itself that causes death, but the vision of oneself in the pool that spells death for even the hardest of men:

“Qui enz ou mireor se mire,
 Ne puet avoir garant ne mire
 Que tel chose a ses ieulz ne voie
 Qui d'amors l'a tout mis an voie.
 Maint vaillant home a mis a glaive
 Cil mireors, car li plus saive,
 Li plus preu, li plus afaitie
 I sont tost pris et agaitie.”

(Whoever looks at himself in this mirror can have no help or remedy against seeing something which promptly causes him to fall in love. This mirror has caused the deaths

¹⁴ These crystals are famously glossed by C.S. Lewis in his *Allegory of Love* as the allegorical eyes of the lover's lady (125).

of many valiant men, for the wisest, the bravest, and the most experienced are all caught up and ensnared here.) (ll. 1572-9)

This ‘death’ is not necessarily a physical death, or even a spiritual one; rather, as the troubadour tradition upheld, valiant men face a metaphorical ‘death’ at the hands of the *leis de con*, or the “law of cunt.” According to Potkay and Evitt, Guillaume of Aquitaine “depicted the anticourtly world ruled not by the rules of *fin’amor* but by escalating lust.” The destructive influences of the earthly laws of lust enfeeble and emasculate the lover, causing him to lose both his mind and his personality in sinful lust. Potkay and Evitt note that Bernart de Ventadorn wrote in his most famous song “Can vei la lauzeta mover” (‘When I see the lark move’) that his personality and sense of self is annihilated in his lover, as Narcissus is annihilated by the magical spring:

“Anc non agui de me poder
ni no fui meus de l’or’ en sai
que·m laisset en sos olhs vezer
en un miralh que mout me plai.
Miralhs, pus me mirei en te,
m’an mort li sospir de preon,
c’aissi·m perdei com perdet se
lo bels Narcisus en la fon.”

(I have never had the power of myself, I have not been my own man since that moment when she let me look into her eyes, into a mirror that gives great pleasure, even now. Mirror, since I beheld myself in you, the sighs of my depths have slain me, and I have lost myself, as fair Narcissus lost himself in the fountain.)¹⁵

¹⁵ Potkay & Evitt, 50-1; *Troubadors* 26:3, ll. 17-24.

Thus, when the narrator looks into the crystals at the bottom of *li mireors perilleus*, he is both caught by the vision of the rosebud and caught in the trap set for Narcissus—destructive self-love:

“As a mental construct, a troubadour’s lady is a monument he erects to himself, the ideal image of his own mind. Whenever he sings her praises, he in effect sings his own, since whatever beauty and virtue she possesses has come from his imagination... The lover’s supreme communion with his lady, then, the moment he looks into her eyes, is simply the moment he admires himself... The canso thus provides the lover with the ultimate proof of his existence. This confirmation is what the lyric persona has always sought, for he has been unsure whether his identity is an integral part of himself or a construct of courtly values.” (Lewis 128)

The Narcissus scene is presented with all the familiar apparati of the courtly love tradition stripped of their superficial troubadour meaning in favor of the allegorical truths which they contain: the monument to Narcissus, standing tall and engraved like both a headstone and a statue, unable to respond or speak for itself (a replication of the initial sequence of entering the Garden of Love, ringed around by statues of Virtues and Vices); the perilous mirror, which ensnares all valiant men through self-love; and the two gleaming crystals, representative of eyes—either the lady’s gleaming orbs, fictitious representations of ideal eyes crafted by the poet, or, for the sake of our own discussion, the eyes of Narcissus’s own beloved: himself. If it is indeed true that the courtly love poet sings of his greatest love and idealizes the most virtuous and highest approximation of that love, even to the extent of creating a mosaic of courtly appropriations grafted into an idol of perfection, there can be no greater critique of the courtly love poet than to place Narcissus in the role of the poet, loving himself so much more than any

lady that his autoerotic passion simultaneously feeds his desires and consumes his identity; as both a self-fulfilling prophecy and an object of unfulfillable desire, the *ymage* of the courtly poet himself can be seen as the greatest love a poet can have.¹⁶ Whatever the interpretation, it is evident that Guillaume is signaling an allegorical relationship between the deadly self-love of Narcissus and the autoerotic self-annihilation in the poet's own manifestations. Instead of being a helpful or educative mirror for poets, as female *trobaritz* used for models of ideal femininity, the fountain of Narcissus represents the fatal desire to hinge one's own identity on the whims of an absent Other, a value system that Potkay and Evitt find almost exclusively within the male canon of courtly love poetry (58).

Georges Duby has already explained in great detail the sexual and spiritual dissociation noblewomen felt upon being married in the flesh to a man while attempting to remain faithful to the celestial husband, God, who had "absolute mastery" over the woman's soul. Yet Duby too remarks upon the strange absence of a similar dissociation among the noble husbands of the time, even though they too were forbidden to arouse their partners in carnal bliss:

"It was forbidden to imagine that, in the heavenly sphere, a man might have another companion to whom he remained... spiritually attached during the sexual act. For a man only ever has one wife. He had to take her as she was, frigid in the acquittal of her debt, and he was forbidden to arouse her." (*Love and Marriage* 29)

In fact, one courtly chronicler named Gislebert wrote derisively of thirteen year-old Baldwin VI, future emperor of Constantinople, who (though a lusty *juvenis miles*) refused to satisfy his amorous desires with his new wife Marie (aged twelve) because she did not want to disrupt her religious devotion. Apparently, respecting his *very* young bride's resistance to defloration was

¹⁶ For more information on self-fulfilling prophecies in the *Roman de la Rose*, see David Hult's *Self-Fulfilling Prophecies* (thanks to Catherine Jones for this note).

quite indecent, even scandalous: “People laughed at him because he had respected his wife’s wish to remain chaste, because he had not taken her by force; above all, people laughed at him because he did not transfer his desire elsewhere, because... he was content ‘with her alone’. In other words, he was an eccentric, a ridiculous man” (31). This is precisely because, as Duby intimates, men as well are “split in two” in marriage as women are, only their split is a different one: “whatever desire, passion, and love there was in men was not channeled, as female love must be, into sublimation, into spiritual feelings. [The husband] too escaped from the matrimonial yoke, but without leaving the earthly and carnal world.” He quite literally lost himself in “courtly pastimes and the wide open spaces of frivolous leisure... towards the *meretrix* (the harlot), or venal love, towards the *amica*, or free love, love as play” (31-2). This concept of “free love” was such a significant subject of debate among courtly circles in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that the elements of a knight’s self-dissociation in the throes of this venal ardor became both tragic and comedic tropes among the popular courtly literature of the time.

Reigning taboos of infidelity in marriage held a unique opportunity for medieval courtly romancers to not only entertain their noble audiences, but to critique the very institutions that these nobles used to justify their venality. Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur remain the most recognizable love triangle of the feudal canon, inspiring films, books, songs, and artwork detailing their twisted and fateful relations and their central importance to the Arthurian cycle. Yet their story was by no means unique—feudal complexities involving vassals and their liege-lord’s ladies abound in the romance genre. Three such notable relationships touch upon our theme of masculinity, impacting the way we view not only chivalric views towards sex and women, but also the feudal insecurity behind noblemen’s claim on the rights of their wives’ bodies: Tristan, Iseut, and Mark, whose relationship forces both Tristan and Mark to forswear

their chivalric and masculine roles in order to chase after the incomparably beautiful Iseut; Siegfried, Gunter, and Brünhilde, whose wildly disproportionate shares of strength and cunning undercut the very prowess that supposedly gives a knight his nobility; and Gawain, Lord Bertilak (the Green Knight) and his Lady, whose comely game of hunting and seduction plays slyly with expectations about knightly honor and masculine eroticism. Each tryst uses connotations of adultery, outlawry, rape and deception to undercut the precept of loyalty between a vassal and his liege-lord using the ultimate unattainable object of desire: the lord's wife.

Bérout's popular *Roman de Tristan* expands the idea of the inadequacy of chivalry by pitting amorous love in direct conflict with feudal and familial loyalty. Due to the misapplication of a love potion, the vassal Tristan falls madly in love with his uncle's new bride, Iseut, whom he has 'won' in combat with the Irish knight Morholt, and the two are punished repeatedly for their uncontrollable desire. Immediately the questioning of the rigid social order of the nobility is apparent, as Tristan appears to have greater prowess than his own uncle, King Marc; Iseut is stereotypically an object of desire whose true feelings towards Marc and Tristan are never analyzed in any detail; Marc is almost ignorantly innocent of his new wife's affections for a knight of inferior status, and he is shown swaying to the whims of his barons and dwarven counselors who are repeatedly decried by Bérout as giving "traïson / Et confaite seducion" to the king regarding proof of Tristan's indiscretion (ll. 643-4). That Bérout calls Frocin the Dwarf's advice *traïson* (treason), especially when Frocin is trying to uncover an adultery plot against the king, shows that Bérout is not concerned about treason against the royal line, nor the feudal bonds of chivalry and kinship; instead, the vilification of the counselors is a response to what can only be described as treason against love—Tristan and Iseut's love being greater than even that of chivalric nobility or even filial piety. Indeed, Bérout vociferously champions the love of

Tristan and Iseut, even praying that it is God's will that the lovers be able to be together; indeed, God does seem to concur, as Tristan is saved from death by an updraft while jumping out of a high chapel window, and is able to rescue Iseut from potential gang-rape by the mob of lepers. Yet all the same they are marooned in the forest of Morrois for several years, able to quench their physical desires but entirely devoid of their social ties and the luxurious lifestyle no longer available in their woodland exile. This, too, can be seen as a 'wasteland' of social devaluation; Bérout makes it a point to repeatedly mention that though Tristan can hunt, neither of the lovers can make bread (a staple of civilized life), so they must survive on venison. The couple is revealed to be completely subservient to their desires—they remain cognizant of the potion-affected excess of their love, yet they are resolutely unable to repent. Tristan even proclaims his willingness to beggar himself just to love Iseut—a clear sign that Tristan has neither his own chivalric interests nor his lady's noble honor at heart.¹⁷ When the potion finally wears off, Tristan and Iseut begin to feel the pain, both physical and moral, of their exile; Iseut recounts how they have lived for years off of meager fare when they could have been surrounded by attendants and loved unconditionally by the king; she is visibly relieved that Tristan also laments their indiscretion, saying "Jesu soit graciez, / Qant degerpir volez pechiez!" ('Sir, thanks be to God that you wish to repent for your sin!') (ll. 2263-4). The couple goes back to Brother Ogrin in order to freely repent of their sins, yet Ogrin has a better idea: "Por honte oster et mal covrir, / Doit on un poi par bel mentir" ('In order to escape shame and conceal evil, you have to be able to tell a few lies.') (ll. 2353-4). With little Christian sentiment and even less moral injunction, even the hermit advises Tristan and Iseut to simply lie to Marc's face, trusting that God will once

¹⁷ Lacy, ll. 1404-6: "Mex aim o li estre mendis / Et vivre d'erbes et de glan / Q'avoir le reigne au roi Otran." ('I would rather be a beggar with her and live on herbs and acorns than to have the kingdom of King Otrant.')

again safeguard their adulterous affair. Bérout, through the machinations of deft tricks and lucky circumstances, champions the love affair of a vassal and a queen over the values of chivalry and religion, simultaneously critiquing the efficacy of religious influence on courtly seduction and calling into question the destructive nature of the troubadour-inspired adulterous relationship on chivalrous nobles and virtuous young men and women.

Tristan's mental state is the page upon which Thomas d'Angleterre writes his courtly *Tristan*, and we see much of the inner strife of Tristan's physical and emotional distance from Iseut in Thomas' descriptions of Tristan's mercurial mindset:

“Sis corages mue sovent,
E pense molt diversement
Cum changer puisse sun voleir,
Quant sun desir ne puit avoir”.

(His mind was ever changing as he thought of the various ways he might redirect his body's desire, now he was unable to have the object of his longing). (Lacy ll. 54-57)

Tristan here is looking for other means to alleviate his desire for the Queen, who he is sure is taking her full privileges of love and pleasure with King Marc even as his love deceives him and causes him “grant dolor” (great pain) (ll. 64-9). Though Tristan has given up his claim to Iseut's body, depriving him of sexual satisfaction has made him literally of two minds (one that wishes for Iseut and another that wishes for sexual satisfaction); but Iseut has, in Tristan's mind, simply traded one lover for another and can satiate her lusts any time she wishes.¹⁸ Tristan repeatedly denigrates Iseut's love, saying that she has forgotten him, does not want to give him any comfort,

¹⁸ This difference between male and female desire can also be seen in the 13th century chantfable *Aucassin et Nicolette*, in which the lover Aucassin claims that his beloved cannot possibly love him more than he loves her, as woman's love is lodged within her eye, her toe, and her breast, while a man's is lodged within his heart.

and having forsaken their love. Yet his own answer to his bifurcated desires is to mimic her loveless marriage to Marc by marrying his own false Iseut: “Fors qu’assaier voldrai sa vie: / Jo voil espuser la meschine / Pur saveir l’estre a la reïne” (‘It is just that I wish to try the life she leads: I want to marry the maiden to discover what Yseut’s life must be like’). Tristan doesn’t wish to marry for love, but instead create a simulacrum of marriage to see if it “me pureit li faire oblier, / Si cum ele pur sun seignur / Ad entroblie nostre amur” (‘could make me forget her, in the way that she, through being with her lord, has forgotten about our love’) (ll. 225-31).

Tristan wishes to “share the experience” of what will ultimately prove to be a false and loveless marriage that Iseut has experienced with King Marc. Yet this replacement of Iseut with another woman of the same name exposes the impotent nature of these love affairs on the knights and ladies who continue them. Tristan marries Iseut aux Blanches in what Thomas calls a fit of “ire mellée a amur, / E amur mellée od ire... Cuntre desir a voler trait” (“animosity mingled with love, and love mingled with animosity... trusting to willpower in the absence of desire”) (ll. 409-10, 415). Now, on their wedding night, when the False Iseut is fully ready to consummate their relationship and validate their ‘love,’ Tristan is once again thrown into despondence and argues with himself on the merits of betraying his love to Iseut by taking sexual satisfaction in the False Iseut. He decides on a supremely impotent action: to do nothing.

“Si jo *m’astinc* de la faisance,

Dolur en avrai e pesance,

E ma *proeise* e ma *franchise*

Turnera a *recreantise*;

Ço qu’ai conquis par ma *valur*

Perdrai ore par cest amur.

L'amur quë ad vers mei eü
 Par *l'asténir* m'irt or tolu;
 Tuit mun *servise* e ma *franchise*
 M'irt tolu par *recreantise*."

(‘If I abstain from the act of lovemaking, grief and sorrow shall be my return, and all my valor and my noble fame shall result in my having a coward’s name; what I have won by valor will be lost through this new love. That love she had for me will now be withdrawn because of my abstention; all my knight’s service, and my noble fame, will be as naught through this act of shame.’) (ll. 578-87, my emphasis)

Especially important for this analysis is the repeated emphasis (heightened in my italics) on the connotation between sexual potency and social prowess; namely, Tristan’s valor, service, and fame are in some way dependent upon his consummating this loveless marriage to the noble maiden who shares a name with his true love. The fact that he willingly proceeds in deceiving the False Iseut into chaste wedlock (feigning an injury in ll. 676-97) at the cost of his fame and social standing shows again that in love, valor and nobility are replaced by concepts of sterility and derision, not to mention loss of social standing. Tristan’s sublimates his desire for Iseut away from the False Iseut and into two Pygmalionesque statues of Iseut and Brengain in order to mime his former relationship with Iseut and her handmaid, complete with kisses and suspicions of infidelity showered on the figure of Iseut and complaints directed at Brengain which she presumably would have fielded during the previous affair (ll. 945-991). Fortunately, Aphrodite does not bring these simulacra to life; instead, they serve as metaphors for the quagmire of emotions into which the foursome has plunged: as Pitts says, “Iseut desires Tristan but sleeps with Marc, Tristan sleeps alongside his wife but covets the queen. At the same time, Marc and

Iseut aux Blanches Mains have their spouses without possessing them” (793). The ‘statues’ in this story are actually Tristan and Iseut, whose desires have frozen them into inaction, doomed them to loveless marriages for the sake of social propriety, and left them unable to determine their own destinies without destroying the façade of their noble houses.

Women do not fare much better in the *Nibelungenlied*: Kriemhild, fair sister of the Burgundian kings Gunther, Gernot, and Giselher, weds the *übermenschlich* Siegfried only to expose his Achilles-heel weakness to Gunther’s vassal and future assassin, Hagen; a similar female luminary, the amazon Brünhild, is violently deceived into marriage with the vastly inferior Gunther through the magic and brute strength of Siegfried, only to be deflowered, dishonored, and demoted from her former valor and “masculine” prowess. Winder McConnell writes of the inept leadership of the three major rulers of the epic, Gunther, Siegemund, and Attila:

“Had the poet been intent on offering through them a categorical condemnation of kingship, or of demonstrating what kings must not be like, he could hardly have improved on his models. Confronted with situations that threaten to wreak havoc in their respective worlds, they show themselves to be either naive or impotent, or even unwitting collaborators in bringing about the destruction that follows.” (49)

Gunther in particular is almost a caricature of nobility, so far below even his own vassal Hagen does McConnell rank him; in fact, McConnell wistfully pines that had Gunther taken offense at Siegfried’s initial arrogance upon their meeting in Worms, “he might have lost his life then and there, but this, at least, would have spared him depiction as a royal incompetent, a king without answers, a monarch constantly overshadowed by others, including his liegemen.” Though a case can be made for both his prior bravery (which had won him leadership among his brothers in

Burgundian nobility), his heroism in the face of his sister Kriemhild's violent revenge and the destruction of her own countrymen, and even Gunther's unswerving loyalty to Hagen, whose cowardly murder of Siegfried is just the first of many tragedies of the tale. Yet Gunther is nonetheless set up as the butt of several jokes about sex and impotence, as his comical wedding-night hijinks with Brünhild show. In the Seventh Adventure, Siegfried and Gunther travel to Iceland to win Brünhild's hand in marriage, but they are immediately beset by the strange customs and topsy-turvy matrimonial ceremony instituted by Brünhild to expunge all lesser knights and suitors, presumably weeding out any competition not as strong as Siegfried, her sometime former lover. McConnell explains that this concept is still evident in the *Nibelungenlied*, borrowing as it is from earlier and contemporaneous Norse sources for the relationship between Siegfried and Brünhild, especially the *Volsungasaga*. Whatever the source, Brünhild initially believes Siegfried to be the leader of the party, and she never quite accepts that the befuddled Gunther is higher in station and prowess than mighty Siegfried.

The three tests that Brünhild sets for her potential suitors are entirely masculine, and Brünhild herself re-genders her persona in preparing for the challenges.¹⁹ The passage describing her arming ceremony is no different than for any of the male knights:

“do div chvneginne | sine rede vernam
 des spils bat si gahen | als ir do gezam
 si hiez ir gewinnen | ce strite gvt gewant
 eine prvnne rotes goldes | vnt einen gvoten schildes rant

¹⁹ Unfortunately for Brünhild, this re-gendering also sets her firmly within the crosshairs of this discussion on the instability of masculine prowess as a means of self-identification. Brünhild's prowess is the very reason why she is highly prized, and the reason why she fails to remain a virgin—her reliance on her own prowess is undercut by Siegfried's deception and strength. Many thanks to Katharina Wilson for her insight on this point.

ein waffenhemde siden | daz leit an div meit
 daz in deheinem strite | waffen nie versneit
 von pfellel vzer lybia | ez was vil wolgetan
 von porten lieht gewurhte | sach man schinen daran”

(Hearing what Gunther said, the queen directed that games be swiftly readied, which greatly pleased her. To help her change to proper battle costume, she ordered her maids to bring a red-gold armored breastplate and also a wonderfully sturdy shield. Beneath her armor, she wore a silken undershirt woven in far-off Libya, a garment never pierced in battle by the point of any weapon, wonderfully sewn, edges embroidered all around, catching the light and glowing.)²⁰

The magic undershirt, McConnell explains, is a counterbalance to Siegfried’s magic skin, strengthened by dragon’s blood; however, further use of prowess and deception will prove to be Brünhild’s undoing, as Siegfried intervenes on behalf of Gunther to defeat each of the tasks set to prove Brünhild’s strength over her male suitors. McConnell likens Brünhild to Kriemhild in this respect, because both women abjure suitors; but whereas Kriemhild passively cloisters herself against potential loves due to her dream of the eviscerated falcon, Brünhild uses manly (and somewhat pagan) tests of strength to emasculate and eliminate any male threat to her powerful Amazonian chastity (43-4).²¹ Hagen and Dancwart most certainly feel emasculated, as they are literally “naked” without their weapons, which by Isenstein’s custom cannot be worn in

²⁰ *Bibliotheca Augustana, strophen* 428-429. Translations are from Burton Raffel’s *Das Nibelungenlied*.

²¹ Brünhild’s castle sits at the edge of the known world in Iceland, with its own customs and rules which worry the Rhenish travelers; Brünhild’s mail-shirt is woven in Saracen Libya, and both she and the shirt are imbued with very un-Christian magical powers; the combatants fight in a ring not unlike the pre-Christian Germanic court system, or its divine counterpart—the Ring of Doom over which Odin and his fellow gods preside.

court; the stalwart Hagen and noble Dancwart falter under the jeers and insults being thrown at them by Brünhild's court, which they cannot defend through martial displays of prowess.

Somewhat mollified when Brünhild returns their weapons, Gunther's vassals are nevertheless terrified of her prowess, as she carries a huge shield that four strong men struggle to carry, spanning three feet in diameter and wrought with gold and steel; similarly, she carries a javelin wrought out of *half a ton* of iron, which can only be carried by three of her most stalwart stewards. Gunther's pride melts into his shoes at the sight of these weapons and her fierce armor:

“er dahte in sinem mvte | waz sol diz wesen
der tivel vz der helle | wi chvnd er davor genesen
wer ich ce bvirgenden | mit dem lebene min
si mvste hie lange | vri vor miner minne sin”

(He thought to himself, ‘Where is all this going to end? Who could survive it? Not the Devil out of Hell! If I were in Burgundy, still alive and well, she’d wait a very long time before I bother her again.’) (str. 442)

Indeed, Brünhild becomes emblematic for the male knights as a she-devil, a pre-Christian menace whose furious strength clearly outclasses the Rhenish warriors. Upon seeing the stone that Gunther was to throw, Hagen exclaims “waffen do sprach hagen | waz hat der kvnich ce trvt / ia sol si in der helle sin | des vebeln tivals brvt” (‘Dear Lord!’ Hagen exclaimed. ‘The king has chosen a wife! She ought to be down in Hell instead, wed to the Devil himself’) (str. 450).

Though Hagen and Dancwart are more concerned with their legacy of having died at the hands of women, Gunther is positively livid with fear, until Siegfried returns under his magic cloak of invisibility, allowing him to complete the tasks. This assistance, though Gunther rightly sees it

as a boon for his life expectancy, in fact is proof positive that Siegfried is the greater warrior, as everyone is amazed that Gunther can even lift Brünhild's javelin, let alone return it with enough force to cleave through her great shield and ram against her impenetrable mail-shirt, sending sparks flying. Even the narrator notes the deception with a critical eye, as Gunther was "triwen niemer getan", notably lacking the human strength to do these deeds; thus, the real suitor is revealed through manly deeds to be Siegfried, as the fight with the giant Irish knight Morholt proved Tristan the proper man for Iseut; but the deception involved gives both our narrator and Brünhild a growing anxiety that makes uncovering the truth behind the deception that much more dangerous for everyone involved.

When Siegfried succeeds in his aid to Gunther, Gunther takes "his" prize—Brünhild's hand in marriage. But this does not automatically equate to sexual rights to her; in fact, Brünhild, much like Baldwin the VI's wife, wishes to keep her chastity intact, though not because her chastity affords her such great strength and that epitome of "manly" virtue, prowess. In fact, she even gives the reason why she is remaining a virgin, and for how long:

si sprach ritter edele | ir svlt iz lazen stan

des ir da habet gedingen | ian mag es niht ergan

ich wil noch magt beliben | ir svlt wol merchen daz

vnz ich div maer erfinde | do wart ir gvnther gahaz

(She told him, 'Noble knight, you'd better forget all this. I know exactly what you want, but you will not get it. I plan to remain a virgin—pay attention: listen!—until I know what Sifried did.' Then Gunter got very angry.) (str. 635)

When Gunther attempts to force himself on Brünhild after she has come back with him to Worms, she leaves him hog-tied, dangling from a rafter until morning. In contrast to Siegfried's

obviously happy wedding night with Kriemhild, Gunther is totally emasculated and dejected, and so must enlist Siegfried's help, repeating his earlier mistakes. Instead of having Siegfried, the true hero, perform valiant deeds and win Brünhild's hand outright, Gunther must resort to deception to scheme his way into bed with the Amazon; he once again enlists Siegfried to physically master Brünhild so that Gunther may take full advantage of her. During the desperate battle, in which Siegfried laments his potential end at the hand of a mere "girl," he uses his manful strength to indoctrinate the virgin Amazon into wifehood:

do greif si hinz ir siten | da si den porten vant

vnt wolt in han gebvnden | do wert ez so sin hant

daz ir div lid ercrachten | vnt ovch al der lip

des wart der strit gescheiden | do wart si gyntheres wip

(He held her so hard that she tried to grope for the belt with which she'd meant to tie him, but her arms and legs wouldn't work, all the bones in her body began to crack. No longer fit for fighting, she gave it up. And at that moment a wife was born.) (str. 677)

Brünhild slackens, expressing her desire for Gunther as *meister* of her body; yet the narrator points out the belt and ring that Siegfried takes from Brünhild without Gunther seeing. As McConnell asserts, Siegfried's *übermuot* (excessive arrogance) leaves the audience with a metaphorical conundrum, symbolized by Siegfried's secret theft of Brünhild's ring and girdle, symbolizing Brünhild's vow of chastity and her maidenhead. When Brünhild sees these implements on Siegfried's wife, the depths of Gunther's deception and her own shame are impossible to ignore. Gunther has set in motion a series of intrigues that will inspire the *flyting* between Kriemhild and Brünhild, exposing Siegfried's lie about being Gunther's vassal. These revelations will throw into doubt the virginity of Brünhild at the time of her consummation of her

marriage to Gunther (thus, their children's paternity) and will set the stage for Siegfried's falling out of favor with the loyalist Hagen, who sees Kriemhild's assertion of Siegfried's superiority over Gunther as proof positive of a threat to the Burgundian kingdom that warrants elimination. In short, Gunther's notable lack of manly prowess and his talent for fomenting disasters using cunning and guile (some critics compare this to the feminine *engin* in the French romance tradition) will be the motivating factor for the unraveling of the Burgundian state and the tragic deaths of all the knights that will follow Kriemhild in revenge.

Ironically, by entering into the masculine enterprise of domination by physical prowess, Brünhild becomes subject to its inherent all-or-nothing extremity—losing both her physical strength and her independence through forced assimilation into feudal culture. In much the same way, Tristan loses both his status and his strength during his exile in the forest of Morrois with Iseut, just as he must feign impotence and injury in order to avoid consummating his marriage with the False Iseut. The topic of medieval marriage is a sensitive subject, since as Duby points out the husband is socially expected to “master” his wife, both socially and sexually. Gunther's hilarious night spent hanging from his own rafter showcases just how pervasive the concept of a husband's “lordship” over his wife was during this time. Courtly love, both within and outside of marriage, sought to substitute the inveterate bonds of holy matrimony with an easy *amicitia* of courtly seduction, only to see the deleterious effects of easy seduction coincide with the immorality of adultery to form the perfect storm of self-destructive masculinity unable to fall in love except with Pygmalion-esque counterfeit representations of women.

CHAPTER 3

MASCULINITY AND MORTALITY

Remaining Men: Masculine Self-Sacrifice

in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight provides an interesting final example of the divide between martial prowess and Christian morality. In Chrétien's *Conte du Graal*, Perceval's failure to ease the suffering of the Fisher King exiles him from both Christianity and any courtly moderation; similarly, Gawain's fear of death leads him to cheat in the Contest of Winnings and withhold his spoils from Lady Bertilak's "hunt." In the *Nibelungenlied* and the German lyrics, seeking the extremes of courtly love makes a mockery of the pursuing knights, exposing them as frauds with no insight into themselves; by contrast, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Gawain attempts a sort of courtly asceticism in avoiding the advances of Lady Bertilak, even to the point of demonstrating more passion in kissing Lord Bertilak than in kissing his deceptive wife. Gawain's chivalric ideals are constantly tested against his fallible human and masculine nature; but whereas the knights of other romances are challenged on the battlefield in positive tests of prowess, Gawain's courage is tested negatively—through continence in the face of bold temptation and through a willingness to be vulnerable to attack. In an inversion of the traditional 'mirror for princes' exemplifying the secular courtly ideal, Gawain's failures prove to be the method by which chivalry itself is criticized. Gawain's human and male limitations—including his fears of mortality, desire to avoid suffering, and vulnerability to sexual temptation—expose the cracks of chivalry's *trawthe* and the limitations of earthly moral codes.

The very beginning of *Gawain* sets up a multifaceted relationship between treachery and truth in the dual characters of Antenor and Aeneas, one the betrayer of his fellow Trojans; the other lauded in the Virgilian tradition for the founding of Rome. These two characters are mirror-images of each other, one being laudable and *athel*, or “of noble birth,” while the other “*was tried for his tricherie*”; yet both are in their own way “*the trewest on erthe*.” As Gerald Morgan points out, “the power of poetry depends on the effectiveness of allusion, and so differs from philosophy which aims at the explicitness of logical discourse... Such an identification enables the poet to develop a contrast between Antenor and the nobility of Aeneas and his kindred as founders of the kingdoms of the west” (Morgan 45). Indeed, without Antenor’s *tresoun*, Aeneas and his *highe kynde* would not have conquered abroad and subsequently given rise to Arthur’s reign in Camelot. These parallels become the thematic means by which the poet conveys his ultimate message about chivalry and righteousness, though care must be taken here to avoid simplifying the relations the poet provides into stark black-and-white categories. The *Gawain* poet emphasizes the dichotomy of treachery/truthfulness in the dual categories of the ‘adolescent’ knights of Camelot making merriment in celebration of Christmas, and the imposing, morose Green Knight, whose intimidating presence contests the courage of the court. Gawain’s humility and self-effacement in the midst of both the brash pride of Arthur and the swaggering menace of the Green Knight stand out as criticisms of both chivalric prowess and adolescent courtliness.

Both uncanny and attractive, the Green Knight is the supernatural embodiment of martial and chivalric prowess, magically constructed by Morgan le Fay to cause mischief among the Knights of the Round Table. Metaphorically, the *Gawain* poet uses elements from magical and pre-Christian source-texts to implicitly connect chivalry with a more rustic, *pagan* tradition in

opposition to the growing hegemony of the Church. The Knight's relationship to the Green Man and the vegetative mythology of early Britain, his "calculated ambiguity" in carrying both weapons of war (an axe) and peace (a holly branch), his "studied discourtesy" in callously rebuking Arthur and refusing to pay homage to his court, and his striking green features all combine to make him truly a "mervayle" such as Arthur had demanded of the Christmas celebration before he would eat. Gerald Morgan carries the justification of the artistic representation of the supernatural in chivalric romance in pre-Christian vegetative cults further, pointing out the structural necessity of the supernatural in literature:

"The presence of the marvellous in a romance does not in any event require the justification of a myth, for it is what the literary kind itself requires. Aristotle has observed that the marvellous is proper to the epic and tragic kinds, and so a source of the pleasure that such works give." (Morgan 64)

Nevertheless, the abundance of pre-Christian imagery in medieval Arthurian romances warrants a deeper discussion of the historical traditions informing numerous contemporary poets' works. Giants, ogres, were-wolves, and dwarves are common in romances dealing with elements from Celtic mythology and *faerie*; the very fancifulness of the Arthurian tradition itself belies a purely Classical or Christian interpretation, based as it is in a pseudo-historical rendition of an apocryphal fifth century warrior variously named Artur or Arcturus. Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, a compilation of pseudo-historical accounts surrounding the "matter of Britain," introduces many of the archetypes of Arthurian characters that remain popular to this day. The various Breton and Irish source-texts for Arthurian mythology (*Táin Bo Cúailnge*, *Mabinogion*, , etc.) do not survive the transition to contemporary France and England intact—yet

certain supernatural elements remain.²² For some modern critics, the Green Knight symbolizes the fundamental alien ‘Other’ that upsets contemporary chivalric tradition using pre-Christian cultural remnants.

Jesuit scholar Michel de Certeau describes this conscious abnegation of the literary foundations of previous cultures when reused and translated into the present society’s cultural paradigm; disparities between the two become a “residue” of former symbols, such as enigmatic emblems of the Green Man appearing without explanation in the sculpture and artwork of Christian churches. According to Certeau, these past elements resurface to upset and complicate the moral center of the culture that conquered them, exposing the hegemonic culture’s viciousness and rapacity through satirical mimicry:

“There is an ‘uncanniness’ about this past that a present occupant has expelled (or thinks it has) in an effort to take its place. The dead haunt the living. The past: it ‘rebites’ [*il re-mord*] (it is a secret and repeated biting). History is ‘cannibalistic,’ and memory becomes the closed arena of conflict between two contradictory operations: forgetting, which is not something passive, a loss, but an action directed against the past; and the mnemonic trace, the return of what was forgotten, in other words, an action by a past that is now forced to disguise itself.” (*Heterologies* 3-4)

The Green Knight is a figure full of deception—first, in his bet with the knights of the Round Table (lethal for the knights, but perfectly harmless for anyone wearing the Green Girdle); next, in his multiple figurations as both the Green Knight and Lord Bertilak, illustrating both the berserker extremes of martial savagery and the magnificence of feudal lordship; and finally, in his use of his wife’s feminine wiles against Gawain, an action which both disparages himself and

²² For instance, Marie de France’s *Lais* use various supernatural events to forward her arguments on equalized love, including magical hermaphroditic deer, fairy queens, and benign lycanthropy.

his wife in particular, but womanhood and feminine sexuality in general as being the cause of men's undoing. Far from being just a supernatural character, the Green Knight is a philosophical argument decrying the extremes of chivalric excess.

The Knight makes uncomfortable connections between ferocity and chivalry. Initially, the Green Knight is an ambiguous figure, exemplifying both beauty and strangeness in his well-proportioned body, inexplicably hued green (ll. 140-50). His clothes are extremely fine, but he is shoeless (l. 160); both his horse and his skin are green, showing that he is not just a rider *in* green but physiologically different from humans; and he carries both vegetative and pre-Christian symbols—a holly sprig and a finely worked axe, the former being a heraldry symbol of truth, the latter a weapon reminiscent of the Viking conquests Britain had endured as late as the eleventh century. Indeed, when Gawain meets the Green Knight at the Green Chapel in Fitt IV, he is sharpening another axe (the first still hanging in the hall at Camelot) which is explicitly describes as a “denes ax,” a Danish-style long-axe that would have been used by raiders to pillage and inspire terror (due to its huge haft size and the facility with which the Danes used it) up and down the coastlines and waterways of England and Wales. Images far worse than these would have likely been in the common lexicon of fear and otherworldliness in rural Britain, but it is noteworthy that even in a courtly romance of the fourteenth century the Green Knight treads the boundary between recognizable chivalry and shadows of a pagan past where warriors might have gone into battle barefoot or even nude, wielding cruel axes and painted in exotic colors. Lord Bertilak, the Green Knight's other guise, is the exact opposite of this berserker image: very refined, wearing the most luxurious fabrics and handsomely built, with a ruddy red beard and a mature demeanor, Lord Bertilak is categorically past the stage of *adolescentia* as a landed noble lord. This, too, sets him apart from both Gawain and chivalric knighthood: due in large part to

primogeniture, the vast majority of second sons and lesser nobility were landless and bereft of titular claims. Lord Bertilak exemplifies the goal towards which landless knights-errant were to strive; *aventure* was a kind metaphor for the often-fatal decision of a landless knight to journey to foreign lands to win fame on a Crusade or pillage from neighboring nobles until one could either take castles by force or win seigniorial tracts of land from an overlord. Georges Duby describes how lesser nobles began conscripting armies of mercenaries under castellans in order to pad their ranks, making the prospect of war with neighboring castles more resemble wars of attrition; as a result, large-scale emigrations of landless knights from their families' lands to fight for fame and titles became the only way to get ahead in the Middle Ages, creating an abiding sense of isolation and hardship such as Gawain encounters later on in search of the Green Chapel. To be favored by a landed lord raised the prospect of permanence and the possibility of feudal vassalage—as attractive to a young knight like Gawain as the beautiful Lady Bertilak (Duby 154-7). Lord Bertilak and his green alter ego represent the most prized aspects of chivalry: prowess and seigniorial influence. It is telling that the *Gawain* poet would pit such an attractive antagonist against Gawain, who by his own account is a lesser son of greater sires.

At the other end of the spectrum, the knights of the Round Table exemplify youthful vitality and gaiety, chief among them King Arthur himself:

“Bot Arthure wolde not ete til al were served,
 He was so joly of his joyfnes, and sumquat childgered:
 His lif liked him lyght, he lovied the lasse
 Auther to longe lye or to longe sitte,
 So bisied him his yonge blod and his brayn wylde.”

(But Arthur would not eat until all were served. He brimmed with ebullience, being almost boyish in his love of life, and what he liked the least was to sit still watching the seasons slip by. His blood was busy and he buzzed with thoughts.)²³

Founded in numerous medical and philosophical writings of earlier generations and the conventional figurations of chivalric duty, the *adolescencia* roughly equals the “period of man’s perfection and maturity,” wherein the morals and judgments of youth are strengthened through passion and experience into wisdom, encompassing knights up to in some cases twenty-five or thirty years of age (Morgan 52-3). In other words, both Arthur and his court are “sumquat childgered,” somewhat childish: though strong of arm and great of joy, none of the knights has passed into full maturity and lordliness as would befit the stature of the Green Knight and, later, Lord Bertilak. Also common in the category of *adolescencia* was the telling of tall tales, *mervayles* and epics, as well as competitions of manly prowess. Indeed, the jousting at Christmastide is the closest that the poet ever gets to detailing the martial exploits of the knights of Camelot; instead, we are treated to displays of continence, courtliness, and self-preservation; haphazardly hewing down one’s enemies is not a chivalric option for the *Gawain* poet. The *adolescencia* were also the primary practitioners of *fin’amors*, with the expectation of the young landless knights-errant that they would not only woo ladies at court but also fixate upon their feudal overlord’s wife—a practice which both inculcated a reliance on noble status for standards of female beauty and which implied a certain amount of acceptable Oedipal or homosocial affection between lord and vassal.²⁴

²³ ll. 85-9. Translations given are from Armitage, 2007.

²⁴ See M.J. Ailes’ “The Medieval Male Couple and the Language of Homosociality” for more examples from *chansons de geste* and romances, in *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, pp. 214-237.

As the throned King of Camelot, Arthur's actions should resemble one of the *seniores* or overlords in maturity and dignity, yet the Green Knight's rebuke of the court's cowardice reveals the difference in maturity level between the Knight and Arthur's court:

“‘What, is this Arthures hous,’ quoth the hathel thenne,

‘That al the rous rennes of thurgh ryalmes so mony?

Where is now your sourgquydrye and your conquestes,

Your gryndellayk and your greme and your grete wordes?

Now is the revel and the renoun of the Rounde Table

Overwalt wyth a worde of on wyyes speche,

For al dares for dred withoute dynt schewed!’”

(‘So here is the house of Arthur,’ he scoffed, ‘whose virtues reverberate across vast

realms. Where’s the fortitude and fearlessness you’re so famous for? And the

breathhtaking bravery and the big-mouth bragging? The towering reputation of the Round

Table, skittled and scuppered by a stranger—what a scandal! You flap and you flinch and

I’ve not raised a finger!’) (ll. 309-15)

Arthur takes the bait and attempts to complete the challenge himself, which is unseemly both for a feudal overlord (whose life is worth much more than his vassals) and for a courtly knight (to be stung with pride and shame into rash behavior). Thus Gawain’s very courtly interference, far from being “overly elegant, near paralyzed by etiquette, if not absolutely sissified,” becomes the only acceptable alternative that will appease the massive Knight. As Clare Kinney points out,

“[W]hen Gawain asks to replace Arthur as upholder of Camelot’s honor, he articulates a

different ideal of Arthurian manhood. If we initially see Arthur as a hyperactive and

‘somquat childgered’ (86) reveller who quickly forgets what is due to his own position in

grabbing the Green Knight's weapon, Gawain enters the narrative by way of a supremely controlled and tactful speech act (343-61)." (Kinney 48)

This speech act provides the only information by which we recognize Gawain—his courtly and restrained manner of speech and action. Unlike the Green Knight, next to nothing else about Gawain himself is described. This omission is underscored by the excellently detailed portraits of the Green Knight and his earthly guise, Lord Bertilak; the portrayal of adolescence in King Arthur, and the twin personifications of womanhood in the Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay as the ugly old matron. In comparison, Gawain is a *tabula rasa* on which chivalry can be rewritten, dismantled, and deconstructed as a philosophical concept. The standards of chivalry that Gawain upholds are exactly those that will serve to undermine his efforts in upholding the chivalric ideal.

These standards are enshrined within the relationship of values pictorially represented by the pentangle adorning Gawain's shield. Drawing on a long tradition of interrelated series of values pictorially represented in romances (roses, crowns, thorns, lions, and other heraldry being formulaic representations of nobility during the high and late Middle Ages), the *Gawain* poet interlocks Gawain's series of virtues by their hierarchy in relation to *trawthe*, what Morgan translates as "fidelity or 'loyalty' on the one hand... and 'righteousness or 'integrity' on the other" (Armitage, l. 626; Morgan 81, 84). Since both the Five Wounds of Christ and the Five Joys of Mary are also symbolically represented (as well as Mary's portrait on the inside of the shield), the majority of pentangular sets embody a hybrid of both chivalry and religion: his five senses, his five fingers, the five wounds, the five joys, and the five virtues exemplifying Gawain—"fraunchyse (friendship) and felawschyp (fraternity)... his clannes (purity) and his cortaysye (politeness)... and pité, that passes alle poyntes" (ll. 652-4). *Pité* is often incorrectly translated, Morgan asserts, because in the late fourteenth century it can be translated as both

“pity” and “piety;” for St. Thomas Aquinas, justice is the highest of the cardinal virtues, ranking above mercy or pity. *Piety*, however, “classified under justice, and furthermore... the highest of the virtues under justice,” is arguably the highest of the cardinal virtues and therefore the highest of Gawain’s virtues. None of this is lost on Morgan as he attempts to sum up these virtues of a quasi-religious morality at work in Gawain’s pentangle symbolism: “Righteousness is perhaps more suitable than integrity, since it signifies the distinctive religious orientation of the pentangle ideal, embracing as it does faith in Christ... courage derived from the Virgin Mary... and the supreme moral virtue of piety.” For Morgan, Gawain is a “perfect representative of Christian chivalry” (Morgan 87, 100-3). The fact that the poem then focuses on Gawain’s failure to uphold even his own *trawthe* with the Green Knight is both ironic with regards to Gawain’s seemingly “perfect... Christian chivalry” and illustrative of the fundamental disconnect between being a perfect knight and a fundamentally imperfect Christian man.

Gawain’s adventures outside the bounds of civilized England are never discussed in any detail; instead, we have a running commentary on Gawain’s privation during the adventures he encounters, whether about the dangers he encounters in the exilic wilderness or the pain he endures braving the elements of the supposedly pagan land he encounters:

“Sir Gauan, on Godes halve, thagh hym no gomen thoght.

Oft leudles alone he lenges on nyghtes,

Ther he fonde noght hym byfore the fare that he lyked...

Over at the Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk

In the wyldrenesse of Wyrle—wonde ther bot lyte

That auther God other gome wyth goud hert lovied...

The knyght tok gates straunge

In mony a bonk unbene;
 His cher ful oft con chaunge,
 That chapel er he myght sene.”

(Sir Gawain, God’s servant, on his grim quest, passing long dark nights unloved and alone, foraging to feed, finding little to call food... Crossing at Holy Head and coming ashore in the wilds of the Wirral, whose wayward people both God and men have quite given up on.) (ll. 692-712)

Gawain, like many heroes before him, has passed over the liminal boundary of the “real” world at Holy Head and has started his journey into the realm of *faerie*, that hotbed of mythic romance situated in uncultivated central England. In continental romances, the situation is similarly an uncultivated forest, such as the *forest gaste* or Waste-Forest of the Grail Castle. Both the specific geographical references and the realistic wintry weather that Gawain encounters offset the marvels that await Gawain: ogres, giants, wolves, enigmatic *wodwos* and other fantastic creatures, creating an incongruity that Corinne Saunders believes is unique to *Gawain* (Saunders 150). The circumstances of Gawain’s quest closely relate to our previous discussions of Perceval’s initial exploration of the Waste-Forest: both knights come upon the castle unawares; neither is cognizant of the importance of those around him; and each experiences a particular failure of character while in the marvelous castle. But specific differences change the equation for Gawain: while Perceval sees the Grail Castle after cursing the Fisher King’s bad directions, Gawain sees Castle Hautdesert after praying for a place to hear mass on Christmas; while Perceval uses his chivalric training to ill-effect in refusing to ask the pertinent question that would cure the Fisher King, Gawain must both rely on and abandon his chivalric training—escaping the clutches of the beautiful Lady Bertilak using courtly speech and protecting his own

neck by cheating in the Exchange of Winnings game with Lord Bertilak. The difference is clear: if Perceval had known who the Fisher King was and that questions could cure him, the outcome would have been vastly different and Perceval would never have been forced to exile himself in search of the Grail thereafter. On the other hand, for Gawain it is unclear what (if any) effect the knowledge of Bertilak's other identity could have done to ameliorate Gawain's crisis of chivalry—he is told by Lady Bertilak of the belt's power of invincibility, cognizant that he must receive his axe-stroke or be considered a coward, and bound by the chivalric code to provide any winnings gained by amorous jousting with his host's wife. The *Gawain* poet makes it thoroughly impossible for Gawain to simultaneously remain perfect in his knightly values and still be a man afraid for his own life, made imperfect by his realistic understanding of human physiology and his forced reliance on supernatural events and talismans.²⁵

The shifting and uncertain foundation of Castle Hautdesert becomes the stage upon which Gawain is played for the amusement of Lord and Lady Bertilak, Morgan le Fay, and perhaps even the audience. The name itself is ambiguous: the Middle English Dictionary defines *haut* uniformly as “proud, haughty, noble, excellent, loud, high-pitched,” from the Old French *hault*, *halt*. Yet there are two competing definitions for *desert*: first, “the fact of deserving a certain estimation or treatment for one's behavior; meritoriousness, worthiness, merit, virtue; also a meritorious or good deed” from the Old French *deserte*; but secondly, *desert* can also refer to “a barren area, wooded or arid, and hence uninhabitable or sparsely inhabited; wasteland, a wilderness, a desert; the wilderness as a retreat for religious contemplation” from the medieval

²⁵ As Saunders puts it on p. 154, “thus Gawain is himself at a loss: he attempts to follow the codes of love and chivalry, but discovers that he should have red events as potentially otherworldly, and thus as marvellous and perilous.”

Latin *desertum*.²⁶ Thus, at the same time that Castle Hautdesert can be read as the Castle of the Most Deserving, it can also be read as the Wasteland Castle; in much the same way, Gawain proves himself worthy only inasmuch as he proves himself impotent in harmonizing his fallible Christian humanity with his ideals of knighthood—once again, failure will be the method by which the knight will learn. But where Perceval’s failure was due to youthful ignorance—a failure of education as much as manners—Gawain’s failure is the result of the clash between his responsibilities and his temptations. This is the reason why Gawain’s main challenge is not physical competition, but amorous combat.

In Fitt III, Gawain is received into Lord Bertilak’s castle for the purpose of lodging. Bertilak convinces Gawain to remain, presumably for the Christmas holiday; however, Bertilak’s real goal is to ensnare Gawain and prove his idealistic chivalry less than worthy. Bertilak chooses a snare for which Gawain is particularly vulnerable—the beautiful Lady Bertilak, whose complicity with and proximity to the old matron-disguise of Morgan le Fay emphasizes her ambiguous relationship with her husband and her tendency to stray to other lovers.²⁷ For the *Gawain* poet, it will not suffice to have Bertilak alone testing the courage and valor of young Gawain; instead, Gawain must resist the same charge for which he is most well known—the seducing of ladies. Both Chaucer’s Squire and the Maidens of the Tent in the *Perlesvaus* mention Gawain’s proficiency in seduction with great admiration, the latter maidens even going so far as to disparage the actual Gawain in comparison with the almost lecherous reputation Gawain has in some sources received: Morgan states unequivocally, “There is no evidence, so far as I am aware, that Chrétien’s Gawain was unchaste. The courtesy and chastity of Gawain are

²⁶ <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>

²⁷ La Vielle in the *Roman de la Rose* and Chaucer’s Wife of Bath—both in Chaucer’s frame narrative and in her own tale of romance and the supernatural—embody this familiar trope of splitting of the feminine into the coarse and debauched old matron and the alluring young lady.

disparaged by the Maidens of the Tent in *Perlesvaus* much as they are by the lady in *Sir Gawain*" (114, note 7). The difference between the Gawain of reputation and Gawain himself becomes the impetus for the testing of Gawain's chivalry: sexual impropriety becomes the "joust" by which Gawain is measured, and courtly speech the "combat" that he must survive. Calling into question Gawain's sexual prowess, his "manhood," is by no means an accident: considered to be the oldest tale in the world, the Egyptian *Tale of Two Brothers* narrates an ancient form of the Joseph story involving perceived infidelity and the wicked cunning of another man's wife. In the *Tale*, Anpu's (the older brother) wife admires Bata (the younger brother) and offers to weave him wonderful garments if he will have sex with her; when he refuses, she beats and scratches herself to falsify an accusation of rape. Anpu seeks out his brother to kill him, and the only way Bata can convince Anpu of his innocence is castration, cutting off his penis and throwing it into the river. Bata's castration was very important to the priestly elite of ancient Egypt, who saw both Bata's renunciation of his sexual desire and the wife's wicked lechery as concomitant states of men and women.²⁸ The 3500-year old *Tale of Two Brothers* was so important to masculine self-definition that it was repeated in the Hebrew Tanakh, the Christian and Orthodox Old Testament, the Qur'an, and even into the twelfth century, where Marie de France's *Lanval* reworked it into the Arthurian mythos. Each of these texts expanded the influence of the lecherous woman and destabilized the moral stance of the man, to the point that Guinevere can assault Lanval's sexual preference and even her own husband's salvation because of his rejection of her clearly adulterous offer of sex:

"Lanval, fet ele, bien le quit,
Vus n'amez gueres cel deduit.

²⁸ http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/texts/anpu_and_bata.htm

Asez le m'ad hum dit sovent
 Que des femmes n'avez talent!
 Vallez avez bien afeitiez,
 Ensemble od eus vus deduiez.
 Vileins cüarz, mauveis failliz,
 Mut est mis maubailliz,
 Ki pres de lui vus ad suffert,
 Mun escient que Deu en pert.”

(‘Lanval,’ she said, ‘I well believe that you do not like this kind of pleasure. I have been told often enough that you have no desire for women. You have well-trained young men and enjoy yourself with them. Base coward, wicked recreant, my lord is extremely unfortunate to have suffered you near him. I think he may have lost his salvation because of it!’)²⁹

While Lady Bertilak can upend the rules of courtly behavior by appearing unannounced and inappropriately in Gawain’s bedchamber, the valiant knight must maintain his decorum while being “hunted” in much the same manner that Lord Bertilak hunts game out in the forest. In numerous instances the Lady is compared a wild animal stalking her prey (ll. 1191, 1210), an army besieging a castle (l. 1211), or even a valiant knight parleying with her pinned combatant on the field of “battle” (l. 1225). Numerous scholars have attempted to chill the heat off the very explicit lines where Lady Bertilak says “Ye ar welcom to my cors, / Yowre awen won to wale;” Armitage translates the lines as “You’re free to have my all, to do with what you will” (ll. 1237-8). But the Middle English Dictionary bears out that *cors*, from the Old French *cors* and Latin

²⁹ Rychner, ll. 277-86. Translation is from Burgess and Busby, p. 76.

corpus, refers primarily to the body, especially the body as distinct from the soul.³⁰

Unambiguously sexual, the young wife of Lord Bertilak uses all her wiles against Gawain in an attempt to draw him into violating his host's honor through adultery. The significance of this tactic cannot be overstated: adultery was considered a mortal sin by the Church, yet chivalric literature and culture valorized amorous interaction between a vassal and his lord's wife. The birth of the love-triangle of king, queen, and vassal became explosively popular in high medieval literature, even as it provided an exemplum of love affairs totally at odds with Church doctrine and Christian beliefs concerning adultery. Tristan and Iseut, Siegfried and Brunhilde, Lancelot and Guinevere—this theme in romance would have been well known to the *Gawain* poet, so it is thematically consistent that Gawain would be offered a religiously unacceptable yet socially attractive chivalric alternative—the goal being to separate Gawain's chivalric ideals from his religious ideals, setting one against the other. That Gawain consistently upholds his chivalric ideals and maintains a scrupulous religious morality in the face of Lady Bertilak's repeated assaults shows him to be an ideal specimen of courtly excellence, as Morgan repeatedly points out (Morgan 111-2).

On the other hand, it is categorically impossible for Gawain to be a perfect specimen of religious excellence, due to his status as a descendent of Adam and an inheritor of Original Sin. As Morgan asserts,

“We are not to be surprised if Gawain's excellence as the representative of [the chivalric] institution is measured by the extent of his imperfection (even though the values of the court have been presented initially in superlative terms). At the same time Gawain is the best of sinful knights... The Exchange of Winnings agreement as well as the Beheading

³⁰ <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>

Game... are designed to reveal to us a knowledge of human virtue and its limitation. And what we learn... is that Gawain deserves his reputation as the best, but that even the best remains fallible and imperfect.” (57, 59)

Morgan contemplates the initial mention of Antenor and Aeneas with regard to the scheming of Morgan le Fay, in that an initial *tricherie* provides a scenario where *trawthe* can be proven in a practical manner. However, the “tests” that Gawain must undergo are not of a chivalric nature, because they are tests of his vulnerability to temptation and his human mortality and fallibility—the *Gawain* poet undercuts Gawain’s chivalric impulses by giving him temptations that expose the cracks in the edifices of courtly behavior and secular morality. In the final Exchange of Winnings, Lord Bertilak is largely unsuccessful, returning with only a torn fox-pelt; Gawain, on the other hand, has been able to negotiate both three kisses and a magical green girdle that Lady Bertilak assures him will protect his body against all mortal assaults, presumably including beheading. Gawain, having already hidden the belt and gone off for his last confession, tellingly does not award the belt to his companion as he had earlier promised. According to Morgan, Gawain must choose between fear for his life and adherence to the courtly rules of the game. Gawain is forced between the extremes of two different social systems—his mutually exclusive pledges to Bertilak and his wife, as well as his ‘pledge’ of religious faith to Christ and the Church. This is, of course, an impossible situation for any knight to encounter: if he gives up the girdle, he is sure to die, even though such a death would be virtuous in the religious arena;³¹ if he retains the girdle, he breaks his *trawthe* to Lord Bertilak and, seemingly, to God; and if he attempts to make a claim for omitting the girdle from Lord Bertilak’s Contest of Winnings he is

³¹ Martyrdom is only an option for chivalric morality if it also results in the death of your opponents or the desire to avoid a life without your liege-lord. See *The Battle of Maldon*, *Chanson de Roland*, the second halves of the *Nibelungenlied* and *Beowulf* for examples of heroic martyrdom in the martial tradition.

doubly remiss for openly revealing the courtly and religious impropriety of accepting love tokens from a married lady. His only course of action left? In a word, impotence: he feels sorrow for his sins (*contritio*) and makes a confession of his sins in Church (*confessio*), but he does not fulfill the necessary third part of penance by positively correcting his sinful behavior (*satisfactio*). Morgan considers this formally a sin of cowardice and materially a sin of covetousness, in that Gawain covets his own life (134-5). Nevertheless, without an act of satisfaction to ameliorate his covetous behavior, it is hard to recognize Gawain as a perfect example of the religious ideal of *trawthe*—that is, unless chivalry and its code of ideals is to be considered subordinate to religious morality. Gawain technically breaks only his courtly *trawthe* to Lord Bertilak, so one possible way to assuage Gawain's sinfulness is to categorize misdeeds done in chivalry to an inherent defect in the chivalric code; this both rests the blame for Gawain's predicament on the fragility of the chivalric code and separates it from the more consistent morality of the Church. Gawain's act of cowardice can potentially be explained as the result not only of his human fallibility of love of self and his male fallibility of temptation to seduction, but also his courtly fallibility as an earthly knight bound by a secular code of morality which has led him to play a deadly serious game against an unscrupulous opponent, in which there is simply no way to win and still retain a perfect record of courtly chivalry.

These secular codes are the real object of assault for Morgan le Fay and the Green Knight; as the Knight himself admits, there is no sin applied to Gawain that could not equally be applied to any of the other knights, including the retention of the girdle—Gawain is truly the best representative of a limited and ultimately impotent organization. The Green Knight does this by parodying the dubbing ceremony of knights using his Danish axe: three strokes the Knight makes, each one closer to its mark, in order to prove Gawain's courage; the first Gawain shies

from, earning him rebuke; the second, a warning, which he ably withstands, and the third, exploding downward, misses Gawain almost entirely—he is barely nicked and several drops of blood spurt out onto the snow-covered ground. Reminiscent of Perceval’s delirium in the blood-droplets, the ceremony ends their game, with the result that Gawain has met the Green Knight’s expectations: by failing to submit himself to an unfought, unsought death, Gawain has met the standards of chivalry that reject the Christian notion of offering up oneself for martyrdom without resistance. Gawain has wholeheartedly bought into a political system whereby rituals and oaths to one’s noble lord were as sacred (or moreso) than religious oaths. According to Duby, knighthood and dubbing interwove pre-Christian oath-making tradition with the morality of the Church, often improperly, so that swordsmen and lesser nobility could erect new *ordines* whereby knights gird themselves with power, rather than having power bestowed upon them by bishops:

“With a ceremony created in the last decades of the eleventh century, on the strength of gestures and words, the functions and duties of kings were thus transferred to all sword-bearing men, to the entire body of knights. The specialists in war were, as a group, sacralized by rites of *consecratio*, which are clearly homologous with the rites of royal enthronement and sacerdotal ordination.” (298)

Duby goes on to note that John of Salisbury recognized the danger in allowing a peculiar secular ceremony to usurp the Church’s role in granting power—that some knights “are rather damned by malice [*malitia*] than consecrated in legitimate knighthood [*militia*]” (299).

The Church and the nobility became co-rulers of the medieval world, with the eternal question of primacy forever being fought over between them. In the Church’s eyes, the heavenly realm had ordained priests and nobles as holders of two very different swords—the ephemeral

sword of the Word, which Jesus claimed divides the faithful from the faithless; and the more tangible sword of the deed, with which kings and nobles enforced divine and earthly law. For the long-held lineage of warriors in feudal Europe, the sword and manual strength were the first and greatest emblems of power and prestige, as warrior traditions had valorized in early tales like *Beowulf* and the *Chanson de Roland*. Yet by the late fourteenth century, Europe had long ceased to be a wilderness sparsely populated by warring tribes and was fast growing into the cosmopolitan center of trade in the western world. Both the clerical pronouncements of the need for morality among the nobility and the reflective stance taken by poets and warriors alike on the knight's role in society had uncovered the dangerous passions of chivalric violence and excesses of carnality open to members of the aristocracy bold enough to embrace them. For a time during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, nobles like William of Aquitaine and writers like Chrétien de Troyes explored and debated the morality of knightly prowess and what moral restrictions ought to be placed on knights as a class; almost uniformly, masculine excesses in war and sex were targeted for the greatest possible moral opprobrium by the celibate priestly elite, leading to the denigration of virile masculinity in favor of a more sterile and sanitized Christian knight. In trying to curb the excesses of knights, the Church destabilized the gender role of noble men, leaving them reliant on an antiquated system of morals that threatened to endanger them politically and blight them with eternal damnation. In the war for moral dominance in medieval society, concepts of manhood and noble masculinity remain the shell-shocked survivors whose wounds continue to bleed.

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