The Silliness of Chivalry

In the Middle Ages social relationships were ruled by feudalism, a complex system in which classes would exchange goods and services to ensure survival; kings offered land ownership in exchange for military assistance, knights offered protection in exchange for food, and so on. In Layman’s terms: they scratched each other’s backs. This social glue allowed for peasants and Kings alike to co-exist, seeking to collectively forge a better way of life by relying on one another. At the center of this co-dependence was the notion of chivalry, a set of ideals that guided knights in their pursuit of pure and holy service to their physical and spiritual lords. A chivalrous knight was expected to be devout in his everyday life, true to his word, and courteous above all. While many knights were chivalrous to a certain extent, legends of Sir Gawain define him as the epitome of all things chivalrous, the true poster child of knighthood. Unfortunately Gawain was still human, and thus vulnerable to sins of the flesh including lust, dishonesty, and a chilling fear of death. The tale of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* describes how Gawain was forced to compromise his immense devotion to chivalry in order to keep his life, and underhandedly questions the merits of chivalrous service given that often, these acts of service result may in an otherwise avoidable death.

Gawain displays his courteousness early on, rising in defense of his lord, King Arthur, when a particularly green stranger begins to mock the company of the court. The Green Knight begs:

Where now is your arrogance and your awesome deeds,

your valor and your victories and your vaunting words?

Now are the revel and renown of the Round Table

Overwhelmed with a word of one man’s speech (311-314)

The knights have been boisterously celebrating the Christmas holiday, and are indeed struck dumb by this oddity of a man. Arthur is particularly enraged at the Green Knight’s jokes, and agrees to play a “beheading game” with the stranger in order to shut him up. However, Gawain realizes that a beheading game is probably less-than-safe, and humbly volunteers himself to save not only Arthur’s social face, but his literal face as well. He chooses his words delicately:

My body, but for your blood, is barren of worth;

And for that this folly befits not a king

And tis that I have asked it, it ought to be mine” (358-360)

First, Gawain suggests his utter worthlessness without King Arthur, depicting once more the power of the feudal ties between king and knight. He then makes an excuse as to why his glorious king should be spared from the potentially humiliating encounter, and demands the challenge be his own; as Arthur’s loyal servant, he *should* be allowed the chance to protect his king from any embarrassment or defeat. Though Gawain’s courage and selflessness are inspiring, he essentially walks away with a raincheck for his own beheading, and a year to ponder this impending event. While his chivalrous instincts caused him to react in defense of King Arthur, and potentially saved the kingdom, he is then forced to brave certain death - a task that proves difficult for even Sir Gawain.

The audience is reminded of Gawain’s near-perfection as he prepares for his quest, donning the shining armor for which knights are so well known. Specific attention is paid to the symbol on his shield, a pentangle that represents the noble qualities for which Gawain is revered. It is described as a “token of truth” (626), not in reference to the familiar definition of “truth” but the medieval concept of “troth”, which specifically refers to how “true” one is in the service pledged and owed to his lord. Of course, Gawain is the perfect bearer of this symbol:

And well may he wear it on his worthy arms

For ever faithful five-fold in five-fold fashion

Was Gawain in good works (631-633)

And thus the perfect knight is armoured and protected not only by his helm and shield, but the chivalrous virtues which define his very existence. Despite all of the positivity that accompanies this preparation, the poet ominously foreshadows the difficulties ahead, warning Sir Gawain that his “courage wax not cold” (487) during the upcoming events. While Gawain begins his quest dripping in chivalry, the poet suggests this may not be enough to guarantee a safe journey.

Of course, Gawain *is* incredibly successful on the outset of his quest. He struggles against starvation, freezing temperatures, and the occasional monster, but these trials are nothing when compared to his sheer greatness. After praying for some form of deliverance, and stumbling upon a dazzling castle, Gawain is temporarily taken in by the kind and generous Bertilak. The host’s only request is that Gawain play an odd game with him: each of men must exchange their daily findings at dinnertime. Gawain accepts this condition gleefully, and thus enters into his second pact of the tale. Though this oath to Bertilak is not nearly as important as his oath to Arthur, Gawain explicitly gives his word that he will obey the rules, and is entirely accountable for this agreement, however strange it may seem. This timing is rather unfortunate, as Gawain is beginning to have second thoughts about his quest; the threads of chivalrousness are beginning to unravel.

The game Bertilak proposes is simply meant to be a test of Gawain’s merits. The knight fares excellently for days one and two, and only has to share a kiss or two that he receives from Bertilak’s seemingly unfaithful wife, who does her best to tempt Sir Gawain into sleeping with her. However, Gawain has started to become rather preoccupied with his whole impending death thing, and is less than interested in her womanly charms. That is, of course, until the third day, in which Bertilak’s wife offers Gawain a magical sash which is said to prevent any and all physical harm, beheadings included. He accepts the sash after brief hesitation, and immediately sets about atoning for the deception that accompanies this sash. He seeks a priest in private and prays to be more pure in mind and spirit before, “shamefaced at shrift he showed his misdeeds, from the largest to the least, and asked the Lord’s mercy (1881-1882). Gawain already knows he isn’t going to share the sash with Bertilak - he needs it to survive the upcoming task - and attempts to mitigate the sinfulness of his actions immediately. While Gawain takes steps to atone for this action, his beliefs are not powerful enough to prevent him from accepting the sash in the first place. When the time comes for the men to exchange winnings, Gawain quickly kisses Bertilak thrice. After Bertilak cheers at Gawain’s continued success in smooch-gathering, the knight nervously replies, “Never trouble about the terms / Since all that I owe here is openly paid (1940-1941). Gawain’s conscious is clearly troubled, and his nerves betray the secret he attempts to hide from his host. For the rest of the day Gawain’s normally pouty attitude is replaced by utter jubilation:

He delighted all around him,

and all agreed, that day,

that never before had found him

so gracious and so gay. (1889-1892)

Despite having just violated his oath, and therefore broken the fidelity that defined him as a legend, Gawain is utterly radiant with his newfound hope for life, unable to contest the genuine happiness that springs from his acquisition of the sash. This suggests a fundamental problem with Gawain’s chivalrous service - though the man has just lied to his generous host, his lust for life outweighs the burden of guilt that he is to shoulder for this act.

Sash in hand, or rather, tucked neatly across his shoulder, Gawain sets forth to fulfill his agreement with the Green Knight. When he arrives at the Green Chapel the Green Knight sits in wait, sharpening his massive axe in preparation for some head-chopping action. After some name-calling and taunting the two set about fulfilling their bargain - though the Green Knight feints two blows, the third lands, nicking Gawain in the neck ever so gently. At this Gawain leaps to safety and arms himself, claiming that he has kept his word and endured a single blow, and intends to defend himself from that point on. While Gawain is ready to fight to the death, the Green Knight simply laughs. He reveals himself as Bertilak, and claims that Gawain has kept his word to the Green Knight, but acknowledges that Gawain did not share the sash with him on the third day of his stay. Despite this he does not seem to mind that Gawain has broken his oath, a most heinous of acts for a chivalrous knight. Instead he says:

You lacked, sir, a little in loyalty there,

but the cause was not cunning, nor courtship either,

but that you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame.” (2366-2368)

As it turns out, the Green Knight has been playing games from the beginning; the entire intent of his quest to Camelot was to prove to the Knights of the Round Table, and perhaps Sir Gawain specifically, that no man is fearless in the face of death. The Green Knight never intended to kill Gawain, and simply wanted him to take a closer look at the belief system that so governed his life so strictly. In his utter dedication to King Arthur, Gawain was ready to put his neck on the line, but when the time came for him to follow through on this deal, not even the *most* chivalrous of knights could turn away a chance at survival. After the reveal, Gawain finds himself struggling to accept the circumstances before him - he still feels utter shame for his actions, and dons the sash to remember his lesson:

But a sign of excess it shall seem oftentimes

when I ride in renown, and remember with shame

the faults and the frailty of the flesh perverse (2433-2435)

Though Gawain adopts the sash as a permanent reminder of Bertilak’s wisdom, he still struggles with his failure to adhere to the perfection of chivalry. However, by comparison, the knights of Camelot seem to learn nothing from Gawain’s experience. Gawain wears the sash as a reminder of his meekness - he says, “A look at this love-lace will lower my pride” (2438) - but upon his return, his fellow knights hop on the bandwagon, and each creates a green girdle of their own to wear in honor of their brother’s victory. What they do not realize is that Gawain was far from victorious, and by assimilating the very symbol of his defeat and humility as a testament to the greatness of the Knights of the Round Table, they miss the point entirely. As such, the poet implies that Gawain’s entire journey may have been somewhat pointless - the Knights of the Round Table are even more prideful than before, and will be unlikely to question their feudal ties of service as Gawain might. While Gawain’s loyal service almost costs him his head, his journey conveys that notion that while chivalrous feudalism is easy to stereotype as purely good, noble, or honorable, it remains an imperfect system that can cause one to - literally or metaphorically - lose their head.