

Gawain vs. Lancelot: A Contrast of Arthurian Heroes

Throughout the long and extensive history of the Arthurian legend, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on developing characters that exist as extensions of King Arthur, and are representative of the various themes, symbols and ideals associated within the Arthurian tradition. As a result, these various characters evolve as the legend itself does throughout time and haven taken on a life and legacy of their own. The popularity of some of these characters varies in relation to the time period in which they stemmed from, themselves becoming posits of the class of values and ideals held within those specific moments of literary history. Among this plethora of characters that vary from ally to adversary in King Arthur's world are his Round Table knights, characterized for their qualities of chivalry, honor and fairness that epitomize the values held within this world. Although there are many Round Table knights, the two most well-known Arthurian heroes are Sir Gawain and Sir Lancelot. Despite entering the Arthurian tradition at very different points in history, both Gawain and Lancelot are central to the legend, and to King Arthur, himself. They are often foiled against one another as Arthur's greatest knight and bravest hero, notwithstanding their entirely different characterizations and functions within the legend. What stems from this is a dichotomy between more than just the characters themselves, but the periods of culture and literary history that they were propped up in. With Gawain as a resurgence of the English tradition, and Lancelot characterized with many of the ideals of the French romance, it is interesting to explore how these differing literary cultures ebb and flow throughout the Middle Ages, and how these two Arthurian heroes are reflections of them. With an extensive focus on the development and progression of both Gawain and Lancelot in the Arthurian tradition, the following essay will explore how their popularity is dependent on the class of changing ideals held throughout the Middle Ages, and the way in which they are

fused together in more modern texts to determine which literary tradition prevailed, long after the medieval period was over.

In terms of chronology, it is Sir Gawain that is introduced first in early renditions of Arthurian texts. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Gawain's reputation for valor is given real substance when he is characterized as Arthur's nephew and greatest knight: "...". From here, Gawain is treated to two different extremes when he appears in French romances, and then reappears in English ones. In French stories, he was often portrayed as rude and blustering, with few morals and even fewer manners (Thompson and Busby 1). Although this can be attributed to the French tradition's focus on another hero, it is interesting to note that Gawain reflects the dichotomy between heroism and villainy in these texts. It is not until after the resurgence of the English language, and thus, ideals of English nationalism and sovereignty that Gawain truly shines in the legend. In the English tradition, Gawain is "golden-tongued, humorous and sturdy" (Reid 65). He is "the foremost exemplar of the fierce warriors whose valor wins victory after victory for their king" (Thompson and Busby 15). Although his popularity ebbs and flows throughout the Middle Ages, it is without a doubt that the English revered Gawain as the perfect Arthurian hero.

In what is considered an exemplar piece of English Arthurian Romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* depicts Gawain as a measure of heroism, renowned for his courtesy, chivalry, and loyalty to King Arthur. This can be seen in the text when he measures up to the Green Knight in challenge: "...". Throughout this text, Gawain is seen (insert more quotes). What this text seems to produce, as well as others similar to it in the English tradition, is a resurgence of English ideals, and English attitudes towards the legend. Gawain is loyal to Arthur by taking his place in battle: "...". In this, he is praised and revered as the most heroic and brave knight in

Arthur's court. In that he flinches and temporarily fears for his life, he is beautifully human, “”. Gawain is constantly put to the test throughout his journey. Throughout this text, he strives to be his best and most chivalrous knightly self, but his faults and failures remind everyone that he is still just human at the end of the day. The success of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* “is a tribute to the power, not only of a great work of literature, but of the virtues that have, throughout the ages, attached themselves to this hero” (Thompson and Busby 1-2).

What stems from this is the idealization of the perfect English Arthurian hero. Often portrayed as Arthur's kin, Gawain reflects a temperance of obligation and honor to his King that extends to and beyond his blood relation. Throughout most of the twelfth century, Gawain embodied all chivalric virtues (Thompson and Busby 173). He is the perfect gentleman, always wise, and practically invincible in battle, even victorious in beheading games like that of which was portrayed in *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*. An important distinction that sets Gawain apart from any other Arthurian hero, but specifically Lancelot, is that he is never portrayed with one singular love interest. It is in this that scholars often suggest that his lack of a single, true love provided him with the inspiration required of a true hero (Thompson and Busby 6). As a result of what is to come in the French tradition with Lancelot, Gawain is contrasted as the greatest Arthurian hero, and thus a solidified presence in the English tradition because he does not have a love that sways his obligation to his King. He is loyal to Arthur without fault or flaw, there is nothing that distracts him from his duty or honor. As a result, Gawain becomes much of a figure that the rest of the Arthurian knights are measured up to. Some suggest that it is in Gawain's repetitions throughout the legend that “we can trace the vitality of the English Arthurian legends” (Thompson and Busby 270). As a result, Gawain stands out as a

representation of the complexity of the Arthurian tradition for the English. He is representative of both the change in literary language, and a shift in the cultural values of the literary tradition.

Similarly, Lancelot appears in early renditions of the Arthurian legend, but he develops into something quite different than “the conception of the older English hero” (Reid 87) that is found in Gawain’s characterization. Although early origins of Lancelot’s character can be found in myth and folktale, he becomes a figure central to the Arthurian legend in the French tradition with Chrétien de Troyes’ *The Knight of the Cart*. It is here that Lancelot is first characterized as being the lover of Guinevere, and thus, endowed with honors in the code of the school of courtly love (Reid 89). Alike to the ideals of the French tradition, Lancelot rises as the perfect lover and the perfect fighter; made stronger in prowess and honor because of his love connection. In this literary tradition, Lancelot is “recognizable only for the extravagance of his feelings, but he is primarily the type, the example, the representative in its very extremity, of the good knight” (Walters 3). Lancelot becomes the picture-perfect portrait of chivalry in the French tradition: he is loyal, generous, idealized, and capable of both loving, and suffering for love.

Many of these qualities are first established in *The Knight of the Cart*, where the story of the love triangle between Lancelot, Guinevere and Arthur first takes place. However, it is also here that Lancelot becomes a chivalric knight and Arthur’s most faithful follower. As heavily established throughout the history of the legend, Arthur’s knights are eternally, both brave and modest. In *The Knight of the Cart*, Lancelot exhibits both of these traits when (reference and quote). According to the code of chivalry that the French tradition idealized, Lancelot also fulfills the rules of the perfect lover. He (reference and quote moments of his dedication to Guinevere). In this text, “Lancelot’s willingness to humiliate himself, to place prowess entirely at the service of love, redefines knightly success in terms that are beyond the capacity of

[characters like] Gawain to understand (Thompson and Busby 259), but they are fully indicative of the tradition in which they stemmed from. To the French, nothing was more important than this courtly love dynamic; that you were ready to do a lady a service no matter what the cost. Lancelot exhibits this in this text. He places love before duty, and for that, he is the Arthurian world's greatest hero.

Chretien de Troyes' *Knight of the Cart* establishes two traits that would come to characterize Lancelot throughout history: he is an exemplary Arthurian knight and an exemplary lover (Walters xvii). This dichotomy is something that comes to challenge and change versions of Lancelot as time goes on, for he is characterized as Arthur's greatest hero and most loyal knight, while also being the lover of his wife. However, what is most interesting in this, is how this romantic affair is celebrated throughout the French tradition. In the French prose, the love between Lancelot and Guinevere is a high and noble one (Reid 90). There is little-to-no emphasis placed on the fact that Lancelot is in love with his King's wife, nor is this seen as an act of betrayal or treason in any sense. Instead, it is this love that propels forth many of Lancelot's adventures in the French tradition, as he is always the first to come to Guinevere's rescue. What this inevitably puts forth is the idea that Lancelot becomes Arthur's most resourceful knight precisely *because* of his love for Arthur's wife. Here, Lancelot's love for the queen has not constituted a threat to the kingdom but has rather been a source of strength and an inspiration for success in every adventure (Walters 87). From this, it is evident that an entirely different class of ideals make up the characterizations of both Lancelot, and Gawain. In the way that they respectively reflect ideals of the literary traditions in which they stemmed from, they represent different sides of the Arthurian world which are fused together so well for the purpose of storytelling.

Because English audiences preferred Gawain to Lancelot, and the French devoted more space to the fostering of the image of a noble Lancelot, it was not often that both of these literary heroes appeared in the same text in any significant way. This thoroughly changed when Sir Thomas Malory wrote his *Le Morte Darthur*, a text that stood out as the longest, and most detailed account of Arthur's history. For the way in which he represents the relationship between knights, Malory's book stands out as the greatest landmark between the medieval and the modern in the history of the legend (Reid 6). Within this, there is a constant clash of the literary traditions that have been previously established. English Gawain and French Lancelot are fused together and torn apart by Malory in ways that fulfill the "values, obligations and commitments that mean the most to them" (Harrington 66). In this text, they are characterized in ways that honor the traditions in which they stemmed from, yet, their ultimate demise speaks highly to the values that dominated the literary history, and culture itself for the rest of time. For the most part, both characters support chivalric traditions, however, "the fall of the Round Table results mainly from indomitable passions growing out of their individual forms of chivalric idealism" (Harrington 66). What this then alludes to is the idea that both Gawain and Lancelot are destructive to Arthur's kingdom for the very reasons that they have been previously celebrated in their own traditions.

While it is often argued that Malory de-emphasized Gawain's role in this text in order to build up Lancelot's (Bartholomew 264), it can also be argued that Gawain is reflected in a poor light to his previous English-romantic counterparts. On search for the Grail, Gawain is told " ". This begins a sequence of unfortunate events for Gawain's character that reflect the downfall of Arthur's court, as well as the English tradition's representation of heroes. Throughout the text, Gawain is portrayed in a harsh light, as he is often found disappointing ladies and other members

of the court “”. He is most prominently critiqued for his insistence upon revenge against Lancelot for killing his brothers. In Gawain defining his honor in relation to his family and not to himself, he presents a typified image of heroism that, arguably, only the English tradition could appreciate. He remains fiercely loyal to Lancelot until the demise of his brothers, and then forth, does not stop until Lancelot pays for his treachery. It is through this that Gawain receives his characterization of being unable to control his appetite for vengeance (Harrington 65). It also leads to his ultimate demise, as he results in dying from a blow struck to him by Lancelot in battle “”. It is often argued that “Gawain is accorded highest praise and sharpest blame because he combines the best and worst to be found among Arthur’s knights. In him are focused the qualities which propel the Round Table to greatness and the qualities which plummet it to its ruin” (Bartholomew 265). Essentially, Gawain’s fierce loyalty to Arthur and his refusal to shy away from battle become his ruin; they are qualities which make him a picture-perfect portrait of English Arthurian knighthood, but they inevitably result in his end.

On the other hand, Malory’s Lancelot exceeds the reputation formed for him in his early French origins. Consistent to the legend’s history, Malory gives extended treatment to the love between Lancelot and Guinevere, however, in a way that portrays his qualities of self-control, rectitude and humaneness (Walters xxii). An example of this can be found in the way that the text portrays a non-sexual, honorable fidelity between the two: “”. Despite being told that he will never obtain the Grail because of his affair with Guinevere (maybe quote), he is still revered in this text as the best knight, lover, and friend. While it is impossible to ignore that “Lancelot contributes to the destruction of the fellowship he so desperately wants to serve and protect” (Haught 161) with his affair, it is interesting to explore just how this betrayal is characterized. Some attribute Lancelot’s affair to unrefuted success: “Sir Lancelot’s love [for Guinevere] drives

him into battle, or into a rescue, with an awesome force that all admire, and none can withstand. But his love and loyalty for the King are just as powerful” (Harrington 67). While it is true that he is often victorious in battle, the consequence of his actions results in total destruction for Arthur’s court. In that he inevitably defeats Gawain, it can be argued that he also defeats the culture of ideals that are associated with Gawain’s characterization. Both Gawain and Lancelot remain true to their heritage – Gawain as a fierce fighter and loyal to his kin, and Lancelot as the chivalric lover and idealized warrior – but in that Lancelot very much assumes the role of last-man-standing, it concludes a centuries-long debate of who the greatest Arthurian knight truly is.

Consequently, the Arthurian tradition’s extensive history has often foiled Gawain and Lancelot against each other. Arriving in the legend at different points in literary history and representing a class of ideals held in the time period from which they stemmed from resulted in a subtle contrast of characters, as well as culture at large. In that Gawain is often characterized as loyal to his King and court without fault or flaw, and Lancelot assumes the role of chivalric lover and warrior, each man represents different streams of heroism that were important to the Arthurian tradition throughout time. The ebb and flow of these specific themes have been categorized as belonging to the English and French traditions respectively, in which Gawain assumes the former, and Lancelot, the latter. This dichotomy is best reflected in later renditions of the Arthurian legend, where both these characters are fused together in interesting and complex ways. Although both of these characters are remembered fondly in the tradition as the best of the Round Table knights, it is evident that one supersedes the other in the modern world. As a result of Lancelot’s increasing recognition in popular culture, it can be argued that his character, and the class of ideals from which he belongs to dominates the literary history and the

Arthurian legend at large. Despite this, it is interesting to note how successfully each character reflects and transmits meaning throughout the Middle Ages. Where Gawain is representative of the English tradition, and Lancelot of the French, it is easy to note the changing class of ideals held throughout the medieval period, which establishes veracity in history and a glimpse into the complex world that operated throughout and within this Arthurian lens.

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