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The Chivalrous Sir Gawain

If a man does not open the door for a woman, she may think chivalry is dead or forget that it ever existed at all. Today's woman is not a damsel in distress, but rather stands on equal ground with her masculine counterpart. She has no need to acknowledge that there was ever a time when men lived and died for the sake of honor. However, around 1066 a.d. to 1485 a.d., that was exactly what European knights, and those around the world, did (Achlin). Of these brave soldiers, the most famous were the Knights of the Round Table, subjects of Camelot and King Arthur. Perhaps the most acclaimed knights are dubbed Sir Lancelot and Sir Gawain. Lancelot is still known as the greatest of all knights, the perfect knight, but based on Gawain's actions in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by the Pearl Poet and those of Lancelot in *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White, I've come to the conclusion that Gawain is a greater model of chivalry than Lancelot. Following the code of chivalry, Gawain is faithful to God, his King, and he is respectful to women. Lancelot is very talented, but he does not feel the need to follow the laws of knighthood, and ends up disregarding King Arthur, Queen Guinevere and even God because of it. "Two virtues above all else were held to mark the good knight and bring him honor. They were prowess and loyalty" (Mathew 358). Lancelot had the prowess, but not the loyalty. These are just a few of the reasons why Gawain is the paragon of chivalry.

To truly decide what makes a chivalrous man, one must first understand the code of chivalry that he adheres to. "The code of chivalry is a moral system that goes beyond the rules of combat and introduces the concept of chivalrous conduct—qualities idealized by knighthood"

(Achlin). It existed during medieval times all across the world, primarily in Europe. The original code of chivalry, as documented by Leon Gautier, had Ten Commandments:

thou shalt believe all that the Church teaches, and shalt observe all its directions; thou shalt defend the Church; thou shalt respect all weaknesses, and shalt constitute thyself the defender of them; thou shalt love the country in the which thou wast born; thou shalt not recoil before thine enemy; thou shalt make war against the Infidel without cessation, and without mercy; thou shalt perform scrupulously thy feudal duties, if they be not contrary to the laws of God; thou shalt never lie, and shall remain faithful to thy pledged word; thou shalt be generous, and give largess to everyone; and thou shalt be everywhere and always the champion of the Right and the Good against Injustice and Evil (Marshall 1).

However, the knight's code of chivalry that seems prevalent in Arthurian literature does not focus so extremely on religion. It declares knights must honor God; serve their liege lord faithfully; protect the weak and defenseless; give succor to widows and orphans; refrain from offending anyone without cause; live for honor and glory; despise monetary rewards; fight for the welfare of all; obey those placed in higher authority; guard the honor of fellow knights; dispel unfairness, cruelty and deceit; be truthful; be faithful; never give up; respect and honor women; never back down from a challenge; and never turn away from a foe (Achlin). That is the code that both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Once and Future King* display.

One way to judge a man's personality is through his beliefs, religious or otherwise. After the battle with the knight of the Green Chapel, both King Arthur and Sir Gawain laugh off his threats, to put their fellow nobles at ease, but Gawain still knows how much of a challenge the green knight represents. When he is ready to leave, Gawain says, "But soon after dawn I much search out onslaught and meet the green man: may God be my guide," which makes apparent just how much faith Gawain has in God, (Gawain 24). In fact, listed among his virtues is the fact

that, "All his faith in the world was in the five wounds that Christ carried on the cross," and, "When he fought his courage came from the five joys the high Queen of Heaven had of her child" (Gawain 28). Sir Gawain even has the image of the Virgin Mary painted on the inside of his shield, to offer him courage when all else fails. He credits God with saving him from certain death and prays often: "Good Mary, hear me well – and grant me grace to ride to realms where people dwell" (Gawain 31). After praying, "I beseech thee, Lord and Mary, the mildest, dearest of mothers: Help me to some haven where mass can be heard," he arrives at a strange castle where much of the plot takes place (Gawain 32). No one can deny Gawain's faith in God.

Sir Lancelot, however, is not nearly as devout. He is King Arthur's most well-known knight. Even those without much interest in Arthurian literature know of his famed and ill-fated affair with Guinevere, High Queen of Camelot. When Lancelot first meets Guinevere, as a boy younger than eighteen, he is jealous of the attention Arthur gives his wife. Soon, however, he and Guinevere spend time together while Arthur is away, and they both fall in love. But Lancelot doesn't initially worry about his feelings clouding his judgment, because he is a Christian. "His church, in which he had been brought up—directly forbade him to seduce his best friend's wife" (White 367). Because he is a knight of the Round Table, Lancelot wants to do the right thing, but what is wanted does not always correlate with what is had. Lancelot believes he can, "Balance between believing in God and breaking all the Commandments, without difficulty" (White 378). Despite his initial misgivings, Lancelot soon gives in to his lust and returns to the Queen's side and, "Guinevere was laughing or weeping, unfaithful to her husband, as she had always known she would be" (White 380). Sir Lancelot's oaths to God were not important enough to keep him from what he truly wanted.

Religion is not the only thing important to Sir Gawain. Not only does he serve God, he serves King Arthur and Camelot faithfully. "Hah! They call this King Arthur's house, a living legend in land after land? The glories and triumphs of the Round Table have toppled at the

touch of one man's words," the green knight mocks, when no one steps forward to accept his challenge (Gawain 14). Arthur, embarrassed, decides to take the risk himself. But Gawain faces the knight before he can, calming Arthur with, "My only honor is that you are my uncle; my only boast is that my body carries your blood," and, "My life is little enough to lose" (Gawain 16). Gawain believes that greatness courses through King Arthur's veins, and he also knows that his liege is a warrior, but Gawain is willing to face the supernatural danger posed by the knight of the Green Chapel in order to ensure Arthur's safety and defend the king's honor, even at the cost of his own. A great, if not the greatest, service you can provide someone is to risk your own life in their behalf, which Gawain does time and time again for his ruler.

Sir Lancelot is also fond of King Arthur, but that does not ensure his loyal service to him. Before he became a legend, Lancelot was just a Prince from Benwick, France. Because he was the oldest son, "He was bound to be knighted, but he would not call himself Sir Lancelot. He would call himself the Chevalier Mal Fet – the Ill-Made Knight" (White 317). He travels with his father, King Ban of Benwick, to Camelot and meets Arthur for the first time. Not long after that meeting, Lancelot reveals, "He was in love with King Arthur" (White 315). However, despite retaining this affection for his liege lord for years to come, Lancelot is not the faithful soldier that Gawain was, and he questions his lord constantly. Merlin warns Arthur about Lancelot and Guinevere's affair, but Arthur does not wish to doubt his best friend: "Your friend can hardly be your friend if he is also going to be your betrayer," he reasons (White 336). Therefore, in an attempt to prevent Merlin's warning from becoming a reality, Arthur decides to take Lancelot with him to battle in France, effectively separating him from Arthur's wife. His best friend is not very happy. In fact, "Lancelot was angry at being taken from Guinevere, because it implied a lack of trust" (White 337). Despite this anger, he knows that there are some roots of truth in Arthur's precautionary measures, so he leaves on a quest away from Guinevere after they arrive back to Camelot. This quest leads him to many adventures, one of which is rescuing the maiden Elaine,

who seduces him. While in Elaine's palace, her manservant gets Lancelot drunk, and while in this state he becomes truthful and bitter. "Jack is as good as his master," the manservant tells Lancelot, alluding to Arthur. Lancelot's reply is, "Certainly is. Better, in fact, eh, butler?" (White 374). Although he is drunk at the time, Lancelot isn't lying, so it's obvious that he doubts King Arthur and even deems himself superior to his liege, at times.

Sir Gawain would never consider disrespecting King Arthur, much less his wife, Queen Guinevere, despite having the leniency of being Arthur's family, and the Queen's nephew. He would never betray any other authority figures, either, as displayed by his determination to fight off the beautiful woman's advances in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Why? Because he believes in and fights for the virtue of women; he respects them too much to have an affair with them that he knows can only lead to disaster. "Gawain's character, well-known and fixed, would not permit him to take part in an illicit affair" (Whiting 203). All of this is plainly apparent in the almost reverential way he communicates with the women he meets. Gawain doesn't recklessly blunder down and face the green knight; he asks Guinevere's permission: "Grant leave, good lord to stir from my seat and stand by your side; that I may rise without rudeness from this table, without offending your fair Queen, and come before your court as a counselor should" (Gawain 16). Later, when Gawain leaves Camelot in search of the green knight, he comes upon a mysterious castle, where a jovial lord lives with his beautiful wife and elderly mother. Upon meeting the two women, "Gawain asked at once to be their faithful servant if it seemed fitting" (Gawain 40). To understand the significance of that declaration, Gawain's familial status must be acknowledged. He is the nephew of the High King of Britain, who rules all other petty kings, so his social standing is much higher than both of these women, but he pledges himself to their service. When the lord of the castle leaves on a hunting trip, the man's lovely wife seeks out Gawain. In this time, "Gawain and the gracious lady were perfect companions in their place together, and with such pleasantries passed in their private speech (which was fine and fair; also

free of sin)" (Gawain 41). When the woman crawls into his bed and compliments him by saying, "There's no finer fellow to be my first choice," he graciously replies, "Fair lady, I find your first choice was better, but I am proud to be prized so highly," referring to her husband as the first choice and insisting she should stay loyal to her first, even if her attraction to Gawain is flattering (Gawain 51). During this time, Gawain had been all alone on a journey for the better part of a year, facing many dangers and uncertain of whether he could survive against the green knight, but he manages to resist doing anything sinful with the beautiful wife of the lord who gave him shelter. "Gawain is sorely tempted by the wiles of his hostess, who, during her lord's absence, would fain take advantage of Gawain's well-known courtesy and fame as a lover, but he turns a deaf ear to her blandishments" (Weston 87). The honor of the host King, his wife and himself are more important to Gawain than the pleasure he could have attained through intimacy.

The honor of others is not among Lancelot's priorities, much less the virtue of women. When Lancelot is drunk, he sleeps with Elaine, the Princess of Corbin castle. Afterward, she delightedly exclaims, "I want to have your baby. I shall call him Galahad like your first name," and he rejects her with, "Elaine, if you have a baby, it is your baby. It is not fair to bind me with pity. I am going straight away now, and I hope I never see you again" (White 377). His hope is not realized, however. When Guinevere finds out about his dalliance with Elaine, she banishes Lancelot, who marries Elaine for his own shelter. Fifteen years later, he abandons Elaine again and drives her to suicide. "Elaine struck the only powerful blow of her life. She struck it unintentionally, by committing suicide" (White 493). Guinevere, whom he had returned to, flatly asks, "Why shouldn't you be respectful? I am a Queen, after all." Lancelot mockingly replies, "Do you seriously mean to tell me that I am supposed to treat you with respect? I am supposed to kneel on one knee all the time and kiss your hand?" (White 381). He calls the Queen selfish for asking that of him. Even if he claims to love Guinevere, Lancelot does not truly

respect any woman in his life, because if he did, he would respect them enough to ignore their advances, or would have had enough guts to remain with them, even when everything fell apart because of him. "He might simply have run away with his hero's wife, and then perhaps the tragedy of Arthur never would have happened" (White 389). The legend of King Arthur could have been one that ended in a happily-ever-after, if not for Sir Lancelot.

To be a chivalrous man, you must acknowledge that you are not above the law. You have to refrain from actions that will harm not only you, but also others, if possible. Sir Gawain of the Gawain Poet's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is worthy of the title paragon of chivalry. Gawain remains devout to God, devout to his King, and devout to his principals, which declared it wrong for him to seduce his kindly host's wife. Lancelot, from *The Once and Future King* by T.H. White, had no problem with doing these very acts, though he knew very well that they were wrong. So, based on the laws of the code of chivalry, Gawain is the perfect knight and Lancelot is unworthy of all the positive associations connected to him.

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