

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Abstract approved: 

The entertaining stories of King Arthur and his knights regularly relate the adventures of a hero as he attempts to win his battle, retain his honor, or help a lady in distress. However, the male hero is not the only important character in the romance, for it is often a woman who influences his actions as he struggles toward his goal. In several medieval romances, the female tests the hero, teaching him his faults (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight) or rewarding him for his faithfulness or for his obedience (Sir Launfal and Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle). Often, the women in these romances test Arthur's court as a whole, a test that too frequently is failed (Sir Launfal, The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight). The Stanzaic Morte Arthur is the only poem in this study of

fourteenth- and fifteenth-century romances that does not appear to include the theme of testing of man by woman. However, the actions of the female characters are influential in this romance because they set in motion the events that end in the destruction of Camelot and the death of Arthur.

Thus, the female characters, whether magical or mortal, are important to the medieval romances cited here, both through their function as testers and through their influence on the movement of the stories. Not only are these women necessary to the plots, but their presence in each romance adds to an entertaining story richness and depth.

MAGICAL AND MORTAL WOMEN IN FIVE MEDIEVAL ROMANCES

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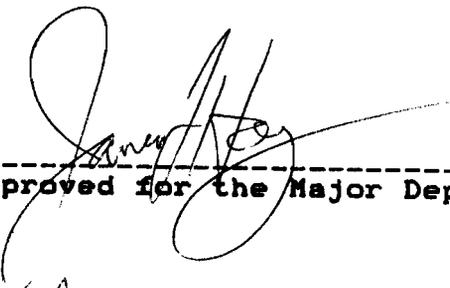
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Chapter One

Sir Launfal

The late fourteenth century romance entitled Sir Launfal is the story of a good knight who falls into poverty through his own generosity and is then rescued and brought to the peak of love and nobility by a beautiful female fairy. However, when Launfal disobeys his rescuer's commands he returns to his low estate, only this time he is not merely poor and dishonored, his life is also in danger in the king's court. After the knight suffers greatly for his misdeeds, the fairy returns to him at the last moment and saves his life. Launfal and his lady then go to fairyland to dwell happily forever.

A. J. Bliss states in his 1960 edition of Sir Launfal that the romance is classified as a Breton lay, a poem which is known to be or claims to be a translation of a lost Celtic tale of love and magic (1). According to Bliss, the fourteenth-century version of Sir Launfal, written by Thomas Chestre, is a composite of three earlier poems: a Middle English romance entitled Sir Landevale, an anonymous Breton lay entitled Graelent, and another romance that has been lost to modern scholars but whose existence can be deduced from Old French literature. Bliss notes that Sir Landevale is itself an adaptation of Marie de France's Breton lay entitled Lanval; thus, the interrelation of Sir Launfal and its sources is intricate (2). Chestre's borrowing from various sources probably plays a major role in the discovery of any

discrepancies in the plot.

Aside from the fact that Sir Launfal is an entertaining fairy tale, this romance is an example of a Middle English work in which the two major female characters, in this case one mortal and one immortal, act the part of testers of both the central hero and the entire court. While Queen Gwennere tests the knightly qualities of the hero and the moral limits of the other members of Arthur's court, Tryamour tests the courtly qualities of Launfal and also the moral abilities of both the queen and king. Launfal, like Gawain in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, must compromise himself during the ordeal, but in the end he succeeds as well as humanly possible. On the other hand, the members of Arthur's court, including the king and queen, fail their tests.

Even though Tryamour and Gwennere are similarly beautiful and both function as testers in this romance, their individual characters are dissimilar. The magical Tryamour loves only one knight, Sir Launfal, and she gives him everything he could desire in the way of material wealth, military prowess, and never-ending love. Even her name, which means "choice love," sets her above the other characters in the romance. Queen Gwennere, on the other hand, betrays King Arthur in her love affairs, acts in a niggardly fashion towards Launfal, accuses Sir Launfal of being unmanly when he refuses to be a traitor to the king, then lies to her husband as a means of getting revenge for her rejection.

Although the actions of both female figures appear quite contrary on the surface, a close reading of the text indicates their underlying motives to be very similar. Both of these

characters function as testers: Tryamour tests Launfal's honor, loyalty, and obedience to his lover while Gwennere tries these same qualities in Launfal's duty as knight to the king; Tryamour tests the morals of the king and queen while Gwennere tests the limits of her own power over other members of the court, including her husband. Both of these characters possess power, not only because of their noble positions in society, but also because they are testers. However, while Tryamour employs her magical abilities as a means of rewarding honorable behavior and punishing faithlessness, Gwennere uses her political power as queen for only destructive reasons. In the end, Tryamour must also try her fellow tester, and though Gwennere seems to fail the test, there is hope that she learns how to be noble from her own personal ordeal.

Tryamour's nobility is apparent to anyone who views her or anything associated with her. After Launfal leaves Arthur's court and falls into poverty and disgrace, he rides into the forest in order to escape his problems. It is while he rests under a tree that Launfal first comes into contact with two of Tryamour's maidens. Immediately he notices the loveliness of their silk gowns, the richness of their fur-and gold-trimmed velvet mantles, and the value of their jeweled coronets. However, the beauty of the two damsels is such that their faces outshine even the precious gems in their hair. The narrator is also amazed by their snow-white faces, their rosy complexions, and their brown eyes as he exclaims, "I sawe neuer non swyche." (243). And not only are these two lovely women dressed exquisitely, one is carrying a

golden basin and the other a white silk towel. When these ladies of such noble appearance ask the knight to accompany them to speak with Tryamour he courteously assents.

Upon reaching his destination, Launfal sees even greater riches as he looks upon a pitched pavilion which has been wrought by Saracen hands. The pole knobs are crystal, and a burnished gold eagle with jeweled eyes adorns the top. According to the narrator, the pavilion is so rich that neither Alexander the Conqueror nor King Arthur at the height of his power possessed a "juell" (276) like it.

When Launfal enters the pavilion he sees a noble bed canopied in purple linen which contains the gentle lady who has sent for him. Her name is Tryamour, and she is the daughter of Olyroun, king of the Fairies of Occient. Tryamour is naked to the waist (because of the heat, as the poet says), and her skin is as white as a lily in May or snow on a winter's day, her complexion is more lovely than the freshest red rose, and her hair shines as gold wire. When she speaks, Tryamour calls Launfal her "lemman swete" and her "Sweting paramour" and tells him that she loves no man, neither king nor emperor, as much as she loves him. Launfal loves her at first sight and tells her he is at her service. Tryamour responds that if he will truly love her and forsake all other women she will give him a purse of gold and silk which will never be empty, her loyal horse Blaunchard, her knave Gyfre, and a banner portraying the three ermines of her arms. Also, her magic will protect Launfal from the blow of any knight in war or tournament. Launfal accepts her gracious offer and the two have

dinner and go to bed.

Tryamour's physical appearance is a good example of the medieval poet's ideal of beauty. According to Adelaide Evans Harris, beautiful women described in medieval romances usually possessed similar, generalized features. Harris states that the literary ideal of vague, feminine beauty consisted of the qualities of slenderness, the blending of a white and red complexion (the lily and the rose) to give a "bright" appearance, gray eyes, and noble dress to give the effect of richness (15). As we will see, these conventional descriptions were used time after time to describe beautiful women in medieval romances.

The next morning Tryamour tells Launfal to arise, after which she sets several guidelines for their affair: if Launfal wishes to speak with her at any time, he must go to a secret place and she will come to him quietly. Also, he must not boast of her for any reason or else he will lose all her love and the advantages that accompany it. Tryamour then warns him:

"But of o þyng, Syr Knyzt, J warne þe,
 þat þou make no bost of me
 For no kennes medel
 And yf þou doost (y warny þe before)
 All my loue þou hast forlore!" (361-65)

Launfal agrees to the conditions and he departs with Gyfre.

In the preceding scenes, it may be seen that Tryamour is, above all, a magical being. Her two maidens know Launfal's name and where to find him in the forest, and they bring him water and a towel so that he may refresh himself from his fall into the mud. It is noteworthy that Launfal is lying under a tree when he first sees the approaching maidens. According to A. J. Bliss in his

introduction to Sir Orfeo, it is commonplace in the narrative lais that those who sleep, or even lie down under a tree place themselves in the power of the fairies (xxxv). In Sir Orfeo the magical tree which transports Orfeo to the Other World is called an "ympe-tre," and Bliss states that in Breton lays, whenever the nature of the magical tree is specified, it is either a 'grafted tree', such as an orchard tree, or a chestnut, which is also a cultivated fruit tree (lvi). Chaucer himself called his Franklin's Tale a Breton lay, so it is possible that Chestre added Launfal's sojourn under the tree as a way to connect his tale with other stories of his time and also as a conventional way to introduce supernatural beings into the romance. Although no mention is made of an "ympe-tre" in Sir Launfal, the medieval audience familiar with other magical tales would recognize Launfal's action of sitting under a tree as inviting magic, and they would not be unprepared for the arrival of Tryamour's maidens.

The fairy maidens appear and escort Launfal to Tryamour, the daughter of Olyroun, king of the Fairies. (Notably, Olyroun is also the name of the isle to which Tryamour and Launfal return at the end of the poem.) Roger S. Loomis states, in an article entitled "Morgan La Fee and the Celtic Goddesses," that "Kittredge proved that Olyroun was simply a substitution for Avalon. The famous faery isle was therefore the home of Launfal's mistress. . ." (189). Loomis then argues that because Morgan la Fee is tied to Avalon through various early Celtic literary traditions (190), Tryamour may be viewed as acting the part of

Morgan la Fee with Launfal taking the role of Lancelot, Morgan's traditional consort (186). Loomis also says that Morgan la Fee often gave gifts of white horses to her lovers, an action which is echoed by Tryamour's gift of Blanchard in Sir Launfal (190).

Whether or not these similarities between Tryamour and Morgan may be connected through literary tradition, in Sir Launfal Tryamour proves she has magical abilities when she gives Launfal an extraordinary purse, her invisible knave, Gyfre, and her magical protection in both battle and tournament. Tryamour, herself, will even be invisible to other men when she visits Launfal.

Besides being a magician, Tryamour is also a stage director; every move she makes has been carefully orchestrated in order to have the greatest effect on Launfal. For instance, the sudden appearance of Tryamour's two lovely, well-dressed maidens carrying refreshment to Launfal, an impoverished, tired, dirty knight, can only be met with welcome relief and great thanks by the discouraged man. After the knight receives such attention, it is hardly surprising that he should be intrigued and grateful enough to follow these maidens anywhere. Tryamour has also designed her own appearance to give the best possible outcome to her plan; what man could refuse the company of a half-naked lady reclining on purple sheets? There seems to be some conflict in criticism, however, as to the reason for Tryamour's state of deshabelle. Donald B. Sands states that "Tryamour's seduction of Launfal via semi-nudity is an uncommon thing in Middle English romance" (203). However, Bliss, in his edition of Sir Launfal, says that "in the romances women are always less modest than men" (90n), a statement

which he supports by citing Chaucer's description of Venus in the Parliament of Fowls as an example:

Hyre gilte heris with a goldene threde
 Ibunden were, vntressede as sche lay,
 And nakyd from the brest vp to the hede
 Men my; the hyre sen, & sothly for to say,
 The remenaunt was wel keuered to myn pay
 Ryght with a subtyl couerchief of valence;
 Ther was no thikkere cloth of no defense.
 (267-73)

Another example of a seduction scene in which the lady is naked to the waist may be found in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight when Gawain is tempted by Lady Bertilak on the third day. She visits his chamber with "Hir ryuen face and hir prote prown al naked, / Hir brest bare bifore, and bihinde eke" (1740-41).

Earl R. Anderson discusses another aspect of Tryamour's physical appearance. Anderson argues that Tryamour is a maid who is depicted with images conventionally associated with virginity, as when she is described as being "white as a lily in May or snow on a winter's day." Anderson uses the idea of Tryamour's innocence in order to contrast the seduction scenes of Tryamour and Gwennere, stating that while Tryamour appears to be a virgin, she manages her seduction of Launfal with elegance and refinement, whereas Gwennere, who is supposedly practiced in the art of adultery, behaves more like an immature maiden (119).

In addition to the nobility of Tryamour's manner, her entire behavior concerning the seduction of Launfal is noteworthy because her actions are a reversal of the traditional courtly love role of the knight seducing the woman. This role reversal also appears in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, where Lady Bertilak, another possibly magical being, tries to seduce Gawain into behaving

dishonorably towards his host. However, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the physical seduction is not successful, perhaps because it is not attempted for noble reasons. At any rate, Tryamour's nakedness in Sir Launfal is surely significant in contributing to the immediacy of Launfal's falling in love.

Tryamour also carefully times the demands she makes of Launfal so that he will gladly abide by her rules. She sets her first guideline (that Launfal will forsake all other women) after she has shown him the great riches he will possess as her lover. Then Tryamour waits until Launfal is relaxed and satiated from a good meal and a night of pleasure before she speaks of her desire to keep their affair secret. According to Andreas Capellanus in his treatise The Art of Courtly Love, this secrecy that Tryamour desires is necessary for retaining love. Capellanus states that the man who wants to keep his love affair untroubled should keep it hidden from everyone (151). Whether Launfal agrees with the necessity of keeping love a secret, by the time Tryamour makes her proposal, he is ensnared too firmly to refuse her anything.

It is curious that Tryamour so carefully plans every aspect of the affair in order to keep Launfal loyal to her since she has supernatural powers great enough to hold any mortal forever. Perhaps, however, she is not so much concerned with Launfal's loyalty as with restoring his pride in his manhood. Tryamour's love and her magical gifts cause Launfal to become a more confident, more honorable knight. Perhaps the knowledge that she has created a noble knight is Tryamour's gift to herself.

One may wonder, however, what Tryamour's motive is for

choosing Launfal. Why does she shower her lavish love upon a mortal man who is a merely a steward of the hall when she can love kings and emperors? Everything that Launfal possesses, including his pride, is a gift from his "lemman." Does she really love him so much?

There is no one reason stated in Sir Launfal for Tryamour's choice of sweethearts, although one may certainly guess at the possible motives which the fairy princess has for loving the knight. Launfal loves her at first sight because of her beautiful appearance; perhaps he himself is so handsome that she cannot fail to love him. There is no evidence given in the romance to support this hypothesis, however, because there is little description at all concerning Launfal's appearance. Also, no other woman seems to be attempting to gain Launfal's attention unless one considers the mayor's daughter, who kindly lends Launfal her saddle and bridle in his poverty so that he may ride his horse. (Gwennere professes her love for him only after he is rich and successful.) Thus, Launfal's appearance does not seem to be a major reason for Tryamour's love for him.

Other motives, although never expressly stated in the romance, are also possible for the fairy's choice of lovers: Tryamour may be a lusty woman who loves Launfal for his ability to satisfy her sexually, or she may actually be a very compassionate supernatural being who desires to aid a poor knight in distress (another example of role reversal in the courtly love tradition). On the other hand, perhaps Tryamour's love follows the tenets of courtly love as she attempts to ennoble Launfal through his love

of a woman so far above his own mortal position. To take it one step further, Tryamour may even see herself as Launfal's salvation; she is protecting him from death in battle or from possible punishment if he should act desperately in order to relieve his poverty, and possibly her love is making Launfal strong enough to withstand Gwennere's traitorous attempted seduction. Perhaps Tryamour is merely keeping a good knight from becoming a bad knight.

The idea of the rescue of a knight by a supernatural woman is not unheard of in other Middle English Arthurian romances. In The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, the ugly hag who is under a magic spell saves King Arthur's life by telling him what women most desire to possess in all the world. Unlike Tryamour's hidden motive for choosing Launfal, Dame Ragnelle's motive for saving the king is straightforward: she desires to wed Sir Gawain and break the enchantment cast on her by her stepmother. Another example of the salvation of not only one man but of an entire court may be found in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, according to Denver Baughan. Baughan argues that in Sir Gawain, Morgan sends the Green Knight to Arthur's court in order to test the courage, faithfulness, and chastity of Gawain, since the king is not virtuous enough to merit participation in this test. Baughan concludes that just as Arthur would one day travel to Avalon to be healed by Morgan's magic, "so here that same Morgan would send Bercilak to purge and heal the court of its moral corruptness" (251).

Although nothing about Tryamour's underlying purpose for

loving Launfal is certain after her seduction of him, what may be seen in Sir Launfal is the ability of Tryamour to control both the actions and reactions of Launfal to the situations which she creates. When she wishes to see the knight, he comes at once; when she sets guidelines for his part of their affair, Launfal agrees to abide by them; when she bids him to get out of bed and take his leave, once again Launfal obeys. Whatever else Tryamour gains from this affair, power is certainly one part of it.

Queen Gwennere is likewise a complex female tester in Sir Launfal in that her character can be viewed by the audience in a variety of ways. She appears to be a mixture of promiscuous woman, vindictive schemer, liar, and misunderstood lover. Although some of Gwennere's actions may be construed as being performed for "good" reasons, most critics, (including myself and several alert characters in Sir Launfal), tend to distrust the character of the queen. Bliss argues that the discrepancy in Gwennere's expressed emotions, especially between her hateful reaction to Launfal at the beginning of the romance and her lovesick appearance at the end, arises because her first attitude is taken over from Graelent and the second from Landevale (28).

Gwennere first appears near the beginning of Sir Launfal when Arthur, on Merlin's advice, goes to King Ryon of Ireland in order to wed his daughter. The poet describes Arthur's journey and also Gwennere's reception at Arthur's court:

So hyt befyll, yn þe tenpe 3er
 Marlyn was Artours counsalere,
 He radde hym forto wende
 To Kyng Ryon of Jrlond, ry3t,
 And fette hym þer a lady bryzt,
 Gwennere, hys douztyr hende.

So he dede, & hom her brouzt:
 But Syr Launfal lykede her nozt,
 Ne oþer knyztas þat wer hende,
 For þe lady bar los of swych word
 þat sche hadde lemmanys vnþer her lord,
 So fele þer nas noon ende. (37-48)

The poet indicates in only twelve lines of description the contradictory nature of Gwennere's character. Although the poet depicts her as a "lady bright" and a "doughtir hende," in the next sentence he describes her poor reputation. Bliss argues that the word "hende" which is employed to describe Gwennere is here used automatically and inappropriately by the poet because throughout the remainder of the poem the queen is presented in a highly unfavorable light (84n). Bliss translates the phrase, "bar los of swych word" to mean "had the reputation that it was said that" (84n). And, when Gwennere first arrives in Glastonbury, Launfal and the other knights immediately "lykede her nocht." This use of the word "lykede" adds to the ambiguous characterization of the queen. Bliss notes that the Middle English word "lykede" may have two interpretations: "lykede" may mean either "liked" or "pleased" (84n). If the former meaning is adopted, then it appears as if Launfal and the other knights immediately dislike Gwennere merely from rumors of her promiscuous behavior. On the other hand, if the latter meaning of the word "lykede" is followed, and Sir Launfal "pleased her nought" because he would not cooperate with her scandalous activities, then Gwennere's dishonorable reputation is evidently all too true. Thus, depending upon one's reading of the text, Gwennere may be viewed as either a woman who is unjustly accused of scandalous behavior, or as a woman who lives up to her promiscuous reputation.

The king evidently does not know of Gwennere's poor reputation, or if he knows he does not care, for he and Gwennere are married and hold the wedding feast. Afterward, the queen passes out gifts of gold and silver and precious stones to show her courtesy to the members of Arthur's court; she gives a brooch and a ring to every knight except Launfal, to whom she gives nothing. This omission greatly upsets the knight.

Bliss points out that this gift-giving scene is based on a similar passage in Graelent (151-62) "in which the queen advises the king not to pay Graelent what is due to him for his services, so that he will not be able to depart and take service elsewhere" (85n). If Chestre had this idea in mind when he wrote Sir Launfal, then perhaps it is possible that Gwennere refuses to give Launfal a gift out of love for him so that he will remain at the court. If this is the case, then Launfal is probably not grieved by the queen's action so much as by his lack of funds.

On the other hand, Donald Sands argues that Gwennere's "niggardliness toward Launfal at her bridal" causes her malicious character to appear more human (203). Sands' view, that Gwennere refuses to give a gift to Launfal out of spite rather than love, seems more appropriate to the portrayal of her character throughout the romance. It is highly probable that a knight who dislikes the queen or is disliked by her would not merit receiving a gift from her. And, by the queen's churlish action, Launfal is uniquely and conspicuously humiliated before the entire court. In this light, Gwennere's action is not planned to keep Launfal at court, but rather to drive him away.

The queen's spiteful action does indeed drive the knight away, for Launfal leaves the court the next day on the pretense that he has received a letter informing him of his father's death. Launfal soon becomes impoverished and dishonored, and when he can no longer support the two knights who have accompanied him from Arthur's court, he allows them to return to the king. When the knights arrive in Glastonbury, Arthur and Gwennere eagerly ask how Launfal fares. The knights, as they had promised, do not betray the plight of Launfal, but instead lie to the royal couple and describe how well Launfal fares. The king and queen react differently to this news:

Glad was Artour þe kyng
 þat Launfal was yn good lyking--
 þe quene hyt rew well sore,
 For sche wold wyth all her myȝt
 þat he hadde be bope day & nyȝt
 Jn paynys mor & more. (175-80)

If one believes from the reading of the text that Gwennere is deeply in love with Launfal at this point in the romance, then it is possible that Gwennere wishes Launfal to be "In paynys mor & more" because of the love they share and the great distance between them. If Gwennere truly loves the knight as she says later in lines 676-81, she herself may be "In paynys" because of their separation, and she may want Launfal to be sharing her loneliness.

On the other hand, an understanding of the passage to mean that Gwennere dislikes Launfal and wishes him to be in pain seems to be more appropriate to her character. If the queen has disliked Launfal from the beginning, and in order to dishonor him, has refused to give him a gift, then it only follows that she

ould want him to suffer as many "paynys" as possible. This reading of the passage also agrees with the description of Gwennere in line 157: " an seyde Quene Gwenore, þat was fel," where the word "fel" may be translated as "cruel" or "wicked" or "spiteful." If the queen possesses these hateful characteristics, then it is certainly not her noble, loving nature that causes her to wish Launfal to feel pain.

In the meantime, Launfal loves Tryamour and becomes famous through his ability to defeat any knight in a tournament. Arthur hears this news and sends for the noble knight to return to Wastonbury and assume his position again as steward of the hall. Launfal agrees, and on his arrival the court feasts for forty days, after which the knights go outside and dance on the lawn near the tower where Gwennere resides with her ladies. The queen watches the noble Launfal dance and decides to join him. She describes her reasons:

"Of alle þe knyȝtes þat y se þere
 He ys þe fayreste bachelere--
 He ne hadde neuer no wyf;
 Tyde me good oþer ylle,
 J wyll go & wyte hys wyllle:
 Y loue hym as my lyf." (649-54)

Gwennere mentions that Launfal is a bachelor who has never had a wife, a fact which might mean several things to the queen: she may hope that Launfal will agree to have an affair with her because he has no wife with whom to be concerned; or perhaps Gwennere thinks the bachelor knight will be inexperienced in love and will be glad to learn the art of lovemaking from the queen. Whatever Gwennere thinks, she expresses her love for Launfal aloud, as if trying to convince herself or her company of ladies

that what she is about to do is for the noble purpose of love and not for some baser reason such as physical desire or an ambitious wish to be associated with a man of such military prowess.

Gwennere and her ladies descend to the green where the knights and ladies dance until it is nearly dark. Then the queen speaks privately with Launfal and tells him she has loved him for more than seven years, and unless he returns her love she will die. Launfal rejects her invitation because he will not be a traitor to the king. Gwennere reacts strongly and belittles the knight:

Sche seyde, "Fy on þe, þou coward!
 Anhongeþ worþ þou, hye & hard!
 Þat þou euer were ybore,
 Þat þou lyuest, hyt ys pyte!
 Þou louyst no woman, ne no woman þe:
 Þow wer worþy forlore!" (685-90)

Launfal cannot keep from replying to this accusation, and he answers that for the past seven years he has loved a fairer woman than Gwennere has ever seen, and that his sweetheart's ugliest maiden might better be a queen than Gwennere. The queen becomes furious and quickly returns to her tower.

It is noteworthy that Gwennere's professed love for Launfal changes abruptly when the knight, because he will not be traitor to his king, not only rejects her advances, but insults her as well. Gwennere's response is not to praise the knight for his loyalty, nor to become saddened by his lack of love for her, but rather to call Launfal a coward as if the suggestion of an affair with the queen is only a test and nothing more. However, it is ironic that when Launfal passes Gwennere's test, he reveals his love for Tryamour and thus fails the fairy princess's test. When

the queen vows vengeance for her rejection, she does not know that she has already played a major part in destroying Launfal's noble life.

Peter J. Lucas also offers discussion of Launfal's refusal to be a traitor. Lucas argues that Launfal rejects Gwennere's honourous suggestion because he will not be a traitor either to his king, or more importantly to his mistress. Lucas also argues that Launfal's reply to the queen in line 683, "J nell be traytour, pay ne nyzt," contains no explicit reference to remaining loyal only to the king (295). Thus, Lucas adds, a second interpretation is possible: when Launfal refuses to be a traitor, he not only refers to dishonoring his king, but also to showing disloyalty to his mistress. Lucas states that by loving the queen, Launfal would be bound by "double love," a tie which Andreas Capellanus firmly warns against in his treatise on love (296). Lucas's arguments seem sound, for it can be seen that Gwennere's ability to control men through her prominent social position fails before Launfal because he is strong enough to ignore the possible consequences of refusing the queen's desire. Launfal's rejection of Gwennere in lines 683-684 shows where his strength lies when he informs her that he will be no traitor, day nor night. It is noteworthy that the poetic tag, "pay ne nyzt," which is used casually in many medieval romances, holds great meaning in this instance. Launfal will neither be a traitor to King Arthur and his duties as loyal knight by day, nor will he be a traitor to Tryamour and his duties as lover by night. Even if Gwennere sincerely loves Sir Launfal, the weight of her emotion is nothing compared with the love and

loyalty Launfal already feels toward his king and his "lemman." The mortal queen has no chance of succeeding against such formidable opponents, and because she recognizes this fact, she belittles Launfal's manhood in an attempt to pierce the protective armor of his heart. Bliss argues that when Gwennere taunts Launfal that he loves no woman and that no woman loves him, "he takes her insult not as a reflection on his virility but as a denigration of his ability to secure himself a beautiful mistress," an important element of success for a knight. Bliss then argues that Launfal desires to appear a worthy knight, so he boasts that he not only has a lover, but that her humblest maiden is more beautiful than the queen (44).

Launfal's response to the queen's scornful accusation is notable because he does not quite tell the truth when he says in lines 694-96, "'J haue loued a fayryr woman / þan þou euer leydest syn ey vpon, / þys seuen yer & more!'" However, in human terms, Tryamour is not really a woman, but a supernatural being; she is not a "fayryr woman" but a "fairy woman." In truth, Launfal does not actually break his promise to his lover not to boast of her--he just bends the truth slightly. His pride causes him to boast of the beauty of his sweetheart, but Launfal never once betrays her identity or even hints at the marvelous powers she possesses. Perhaps the fact that he does not entirely disobey Tryamour's command to keep their love secret is one reason that she returns to Launfal in the end and saves his life. Perhaps Launfal's pride is one reason why she takes the knight to fairyland where he can no longer be tempted to boast of her to any mortal.

Gwennere's reaction to Launfal's rejection is typical of her "kicked" and "spiteful" character. She returns to her tower, makes herself ill with anger, and swears that her vengeance will be so great that everyone will speak of it within five days. When Arthur returns later from a hunting expedition, Gwennere changes her cheerful mood to one of anger when she lies about the incident with Launfal: Anoon the quene on hym gan crye,

"But y be awreke, y schall dye!
 Myn herte wyll breke aþre!
 J spak to Launfal, yn my game,
 And he besofte me of schame,
 My lemman forto be;
 And of a lemman hys yelp he made,
 þat þe lodlokest mayde þat sche hadde
 Myzt be a quene aboue me!" (712-20)

After he hears this accusation against Launfal, Arthur becomes furious and swears an oath that the knight will be slain.

This scene is a revealing portrait of the characters of the royal couple; after Gwennere tells lies that make no sense, Arthur reacts impetuously, or, as Bliss suggests, "Arthur's . . . thirst for vengeance even before he knows that Launfal is really guilty makes him both distasteful and ridiculous" (37).

The queen's character appears just as ridiculous when she tells her twisted story to Arthur. She first describes how Launfal wanted her to be his "lemman," but in the next breath she tells of the boast he made about his sweetheart. However, if Launfal already had a lover, why would he attempt to seduce the queen? Gwennere's lie makes no sense in a time when faithfulness was so important to all relationships. And the fact that Arthur believes such a poor excuse discredits him also, especially when the queen admits that she had been merely playing a "game" with

Launfal. What Gwennere does not realize, however, is that she has lost the game.

When Launfal is called before the king he finds himself in "double woe" because not only has he lost his lady love and all his magical gifts, but he is accused of being a traitor to the king. It is ironic that what Launfal has tried so hard to prevent happens anyway when he loses both Tryamour and the respect of Arthur. However, even with the knowledge of his losses, Launfal defends himself against his charges of treason:

"Sethe þat y euer was yborn,
 J besofte her herebeforn
 Neuer of no folye!--
 But sche seyde y nas no man,
 Ne þat me louede no woman,
 Ne no womannes companye;
 And J answerede her, & sayde
 þat my lemmannes loklekest mayde
 To be a queene was better wordye. (772-80)

Twelve knights are then "dryue to boke" (786), and they all agree that Launfal should be acquitted of the charge of attempting to seduce the queen. Sands translates the phrase "dryue to boke" to mean twelve knights "had to consult books" because the knights seem to be adjudicators rather than witnesses (225n). Bliss, on the other hand, translates the phrase to mean twelve knights were "compelled to swear a Bible-oath" to judge truly what the position was in all respects (98n). Whether the knights testify in the trial or not, they all agree that in view of the queen's poor reputation, Launfal must be telling the truth concerning the attempted seduction. They inform the knight that if he will bring his sweetheart to court and prove that she is fairer than the queen, then Launfal will be found innocent of all charges. It

It should be noted that the poet does not describe Arthur reacting to the announcement of Gwennere's promiscuous reputation when the barons decide to let Launfal go free. Perhaps Arthur already knows of her poor reputation, or perhaps he does not believe it, or perhaps he will discuss it with her later, but in any case, the king never addresses the fact that his wife has lied about the incident with Launfal.

Although Launfal says his lover would be better worthy to be seen, it is notable that the other members of the court link worthiness to physical beauty rather than to moral goodness. As a result of this connection between worthiness and appearance, Launfal is not truly acquitted until he can produce this worthy (i.e. beautiful) woman. Gwennere does not think such a woman exists, and she vows that they can put out her gray eyes if Launfal brings a fairer woman than she to Glastonbury. What Gwennere does not realize, however, is that she is not merely competing with an ordinary woman, but with a magical fairy princess.

The focus on the two major female characters of Sir Launfal now shifts from Gwennere to Tryamour once again as Launfal's "year and a fortnight" draws to a close without any appearance by his lover. As the barons argue over Launfal's fate on his last day of freedom, ten fair maidens ride into court and order the king to prepare a fair chamber for the arrival of a noble lady. The members of the court all think that ". . . þey wer so bryzt & schene / þat þe lodlokest, wythout wene, / Har quene þan myzte be" (850-52), but Launfal says that none of the maidens is his

sweetheart. As the barons continue to argue among themselves, ten more maidens arrive at the court. Because these women are even more beautiful than the first ten, their appearances are quickly described; each woman rides a mule from Spain, each has a saddle and bridle from Champagne with a brightly gleaming harness; and each woman is clothed in rich samite attire. Everyone in the hall strains to get a good view of these fair maidens, but Launfal remains discouraged because he does not know who these women are.

As the second set of arrivals mingles with the first group, Gwennere becomes concerned that Launfal's sweetheart will arrive to set him free. Once again she plays upon Arthur's courtesy and honor in an attempt to punish Launfal for his rejection of the previous year. She says to the king:

"Syre, curtays yf [poul] were,
 Of yf pou louedest Pyn honour,
 J schuld be awareke of þat traytour
 þat doþ me changy chere--
 To Launfal þou schuldest not spare:
 þy barouns dryue þe to bysmare--
 He ys hem lef & dere." (918-24)

However, Gwennere is not actually concerned with the truth of the matter because she fears the truth will not bring her favor. Instead, she appeals to Arthur's "manliness" just as she once scorned Launfal's masculinity in an attempt to cause his pride to overcome the truth. Gwennere implies that if Arthur does not punish Launfal for being a traitor, then the king is not courteous, nor does he love his honor. She then accuses the barons of humiliating Arthur because Launfal is dear to them, an accusation which implies that no one is truthful in Arthur's court if even the judges will set a man free because he is liked.

Gwennere's scheme to have Launfal punished fails this time, however, because Tryamour arrives as Gwennere speaks. Once again, the poet describes Tryamour's entrance in great detail; however, it is the description of Tryamour's clothing, horse, falcon, and greyhounds which is elaborate while the description of Tryamour herself is vague. This artistic technique is a medieval literary convention in which Bliss notes that the human features described, and the terms in which the features are described, are usually vague and stereotyped. Bliss says this convention was used so that the medieval audience could easily identify with the characters in the romance. Thus, Bliss notes that the physical description of Tryamour is indistinct so that members of the audience may "fill in" any physical features they wish (45).

Tryamour aids in the barons' decision by slowing the pace of her white steed and by removing her mantle in the hall so that the members of Arthur's court may better view her. The queen even arises to see this woman, and everyone notices that Gwennere's appearance compares to Tryamour's "As ys þe mone ayen þe sonne, / And day whan hyt ys lyzt" (989-90).

When she has the court's attention, Tryamour tells Arthur that she is present to acquit Launfal of all his charges: the knight never attempted to seduce the queen, but was, in fact, the victim of Gwennere's amorous advances. Tryamour then repeats the court's version of Launfal's boast (that his sweetheart's humblest maiden was fairer than the queen), and Arthur agrees that Launfal's boast was indeed true. Tryamour then blinds Gwennere with her breath, tells them all to have a good day, and departs with Launfal and

the other members of her procession.

Just as she seduced Launfal at the beginning of the romance, Tryamour once again impresses an audience with her grand production. Rather than merely appearing alone at Arthur's court to testify on Launfal's behalf, she first sends fair maidens, then even lovelier maidens, to prepare Arthur for her imminent arrival. When the first group of maidens arrives, the members of the court agree that from their physical appearance any of these young ladies could be a queen; however, when the second group approaches, the first set of beautiful maidens pales in comparison to the later arrivals. In this manner Launfal's boast is proved true when the "humblest maiden" who visits Glastonbury is lovely enough to be queen. Tryamour's majestic appearance is therefore unnecessary except to show that the maidens were sent by her. Nevertheless, her grand entrance adds to the respect she receives and to the willingness of Arthur to take her word for the incident involving Gwennere and Launfal. It is interesting that Tryamour uses the court's wording of Launfal's boast in her proof of Launfal's innocence; perhaps she realizes that she must appeal to the humans in their own terms, or perhaps she does not wish to waste time proving her moral "worthiness" over Gwennere because physical beauty is much simpler to prove.

Tryamour's blinding of the queen is a notable action because, according to Bliss, Gwennere's rash oath and her consequent blinding in Sir Launfal have no parallel in Arthurian literature (38). Anderson states that Gwennere may be seen as a parody of the courtly love heroine because of her courtly love role reversal

and also her aggressive yet unsuccessful seduction of Launfal, and her blindness at the end of the romance reminds the audience of Andreas Capellanus's dictum that a blind person is incapable of "fin amour" (118). More importantly, it is possible that the reason for the inclusion of this incident may be found in the function of Tryamour as the principal tester in this romance. Tryamour's blinding of Gwennere may be seen as a punishment for the unfaithfulness of the queen, not only in her attempt to seduce Launfal, but also for her traitorous seductions in the past. The last sight which Gwennere sees is the beautiful face of Tryamour blowing her breath towards the queen; this is the image which Gwennere will have to remember for the rest of her life, and since she can no longer be swayed by the physical appearance of any man, Gwennere will have much time to reflect on her previous actions and the awful result of her traitorous activities. Tryamour, as the ultimate tester in this romance, finds Gwennere's behavior lacking in honor and punishes her accordingly.

One may wonder about the worthiness of Tryamour's honor when she returns to save Launfal and breaks her vow never to see him again if he boasts of her. However, there are a number of ways in which her action of returning to Launfal may be justified: as discussed previously in this chapter, perhaps she wishes only to punish Launfal for nearly betraying their secret love, so she waits until the last moment to save his life. Also, the possibility exists that Tryamour was merely testing Launfal's qualities of faithfulness and loyalty as a knight and was pleased enough with his actions to spare his life. This theme of the

honorab!e hero passing a test is also found in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight when Gawain's life is spared by the Green Knight, and ultimately by the supernatural Morgan la Fee, because of his human mixture of honor, chastity, loyalty, and courtesy. Whatever the reason for Tryamour's return to Launfal, she does indeed, as Gawain says to Launfal in line 894, bring his "salvation." Tryamour returns Launfal's "dream world" to him, but rather than make him keep their love a secret any longer, she takes him to fairyland where he can live and love forever.

Sir Launfal is the story of a knight and his changing fortunes, but it is also the story of two women and how they affect the other characters in the romance. Gwennere and Tryamour both perform as testers, and through their actions the nature of the other characters is revealed: Gwennere tries Launfal and he passes the test, for the knight refuses to be traitor either to his king or to his mistress. Arthur, however, fails his wife's test because he impetuously acts on her lies without allowing Launfal a chance to defend himself before he goes to trial. Likewise, the judges fail in their responsibilities and Gwennere accuses them of stretching the truth to suit their own purposes. In the end, however, even Gwennere, one of the testers, falls to the superior power of the fairy princess who blinds her as punishment for her rash oath and promiscuous behavior. Only Launfal behaves nobly enough to pass the test of Tryamour, and like Gawain in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Launfal learns a valuable lesson about honor and love through the testing of a woman.

Chapter Two

The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell

The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, a verse romance composed about 1450 by an anonymous poet, is the story of an ugly hag who saves King Arthoure's life, marries Sir Gawen, and returns to her beautiful shape when Gawen gives her sovereignty over his body and his possessions. This "Loathly Lady" theme was a popular poetic subject in the Middle Ages, and several medieval romances were produced which possess similar plot structures. These romances include such works as The Marriage of Sir Gawain, an anonymous work in verse of which only a fragment remains today, Lover's "Tale of Florent" in the Confessio Amantis, and Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale."

Very few scholars have written about The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, perhaps because of its similarity to Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale." Granted, Chaucer's literary quality may be much superior to that of the unknown poet, but, nevertheless, The Wedding offers countless intriguing challenges to the literary critic.

The female characters in The Wedding are especially curious. Throughout most of the romance, Dame Ragnelle is depicted as an ugly, ignoble hag. Because of her horrible appearance, the members of Arthour's court, including the king himself, treat her with contempt. Queen Gaynor, though attempting to appear polite to the newest member of Carlylle, feels shame at the lowness of

men's future wife. Only Gawen, the best knight in England, behaves toward Dame Ragnelle with careful respect. However, when the enchantment is broken and Dame Ragnelle becomes more beautiful than the queen, all of the "nobles" of Arthoure's court adore the lovely lady.

Although Dame Ragnelle's purpose for joining Arthoure's court and marrying Gawen is to attempt to break the evil spell which holds her, she also acts as an unwitting tester of the king and the honor of his court. Throughout The Wedding, Dame Ragnelle's demeanor does not change: when she is an ugly hag she feels compassion for Gawen, saves Arthoure's life, and exhibits pride in herself; when she becomes beautiful she loves Gawen, feels compassion for her brother, and behaves kindly toward everyone. Nevertheless, although her manner remains consistently noble throughout the story, other characters treat her disdainfully when she is foul-looking and respectfully when she is beautiful.

From these varying behaviors exhibited by the people of Carlylle, it can be seen that the members of Arthoure's court are shallow characters who believe that appearance is everything. Even though Dame Ragnelle conducts herself with dignity at all times (except at the dinner table), and even hints at her nobility with her material possessions, the other characters fail her unintentional testing because they refuse to look beyond her horrid appearance.

Like Tryamour in Sir Launfal, and Morgan la Fee in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Dame Ragnelle is associated with magic. However, Dame Ragnelle is merely a victim of her stepmother's

enchantment while both Tryamour and Morgan are instigators of magic. Dame Ragnelle's function as tester is incidental to her attempt to rid herself of her evil enchantment; Tryamour and Morgan, on the other hand, use their supernatural abilities to aid in their testing.

The women in The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell are important to the plot, as well as to many of the themes found in the romance. Dame Ragnelle is not only an entertaining character because of her sudden change from beastliness to being the "fairest in the hall," but she saves Arthoure's life and proves even once again the most honorable knight of the Round Table. Gaynor is also necessary to the romance because her reactions to Dame Ragnelle's changing appearance indicate how important members of the nobility regard physical appearance; the queen feels shame and fear for Gawen when his bride is loathsome, yet when Dame Ragnelle is young and fair, Gaynor loves her for saving Arthoure's life, even though it was the ugly woman who rescued the king.

Like Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, The Wedding begins with the extolling of the virtues of Arthoure, who "Of alle kynges Arture berythe the flowyr, / And of alle knyghtod he bare away the honour" (7-8). This grand praise is ironic because of Arthoure's later discourteous actions, but perhaps the poet did not consider the shameful behavior of the king when composing the introduction and merely wished to tie The Wedding more closely to Arthurian tradition. For whatever reason the poet emphasizes Arthoure's greatness in the introduction to The Wedding, the result is that Sir Gawen, the more courteous character of the two, appears

inally to be even greater than the renowned king.

The tale begins in Ingleswood forest where the king and his knights are hunting. Arthoure alone follows a huge hart and meets the grim Sir Gromer Somer Joure. The armed knight threatens to slay Arthoure for giving Sir Gromer's land to Sir Gaven, but he will spare the king's life if Arthoure promises to return in one year and divulge the answer to the question of what women desire most in the world. Armed with only a bow, Arthoure agrees to the quest, and gloomily returns to the court.

It is noteworthy that Arthoure is hunting in a forest when he meets Sir Gromer. As I discussed in the chapter concerning Sir Launfal, trees often serve as a bridge between the "real" world and the Other World in romances. Likewise, characters participating in a hunt often leave the real world and travel to the world of the supernatural. In The Wedding, Arthoure increases the likelihood of confronting a magical being by hunting in a forest.

Although the poet of The Wedding never explicitly endows Sir Gromer with supernatural powers, some critics believe that the knight, like his sister, is a victim of enchantment. George Lyman Kittredge argues that if the complete romance were available, (one page of the manuscript is now lost), the missing portion would contain the disenchantment of Sir Gromer and his joining with Arthoure's company of knights (270). Even without the inclusion of the missing manuscript page, the very name Sir Gromer Somer Joure, "The Man Of The Summer's Day," adds a fleetingly magical cast to the encounter.

When Arthoure returns to Carlylle, he breaks his promise to keep the matter secret, and enlists Gawen's aid in the task of discovering what women want most. As the end of the year approaches, Arthoure meets an ugly woman in the same forest where he encountered Sir Gromer, and the hag promises to save the king's life if he will allow her to marry Sir Gawen. Arthoure agrees to discuss her offer with Gawen and returns to court.

This hag is so "ungoodly a creature" that Arthoure marvels at her ugliness. The poet graphically describes the appearance of the lady:

Her face was red, her nose snotyde withalle,
 Her mowithe wyde, her tethe yalowe ouere alle,
 Withe bleryd eyen gretter then a balle;
 Her mowithe was nott to lak;
 Her tethe hyng ouere her lyppes;
 Her chekys syde as wemens hyppes;
 A lute she bare vpon her bak.
 Her nek long and therto greatt;
 Her here cloteryd on an hepe,
 In the sholders she was a yard brode,
 Hangyng pappys to be an hors lode;
 And lyke a barelle she was made;
 And to reherse the fowlness of that lady,
 Ther is no tung may telle, securly,
 Of lothinesse inowghe she had. (231-45)

It must be noted that this detailed description of Dame Ragnelle's appearance is in direct contrast to the vague descriptions of beautiful women usually found in numerous medieval romances. Indeed, many more lines are here employed portraying the foulness of the hag than are later spent detailing the loveliness of the fair Dame Ragnelle. As I have mentioned in the discussion of Sir Launfal, the physical appearance of a beautiful woman in a medieval romance is usually described in vague, general terms so that the members of the audience may imagine the features

any lady they like. When the woman is ugly, however, the listeners would seem to be interested in the extent of her foulness, evidently wanting as many details of her appearance as possible. This literary practice of detailing ugliness may also be found in several medieval lyrics, one of which is an early fifteenth-century work by Thomas Hoccleve describing an ugly lady:

Hir bowgy cheekes been as softe as clay,
 With large jowes and substancial.
 Hir nose a pentice is that it ne shal
 Reine in hir mouth thogh she uprightes lay.
 Hir mouth is nothing scant with lippes gray;
 Hir chin unnethe may be seen at al.
 Hir comly body shape as a footbal,
 And she singeth full like a papejay.

(5-12)

High-class members of the audience may well have been acquainted with such ugliness, and even the lower class audience members presumably were unaccustomed with any female as lowborn and foul as either the woman described above or Dame Ragnelle. However, this extreme foulness adds to the audience's entertainment when the woman finally becomes beautiful for Sir Iwan.

The fact that the hag carries a lute on her back must be mentioned as a possible clue that Dame Ragnelle is not as low socially as her appearance suggests. According to The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, it was not until the reign of Henry VII that a wealthy middle class appeared which possessed enough idle time to engage in such leisurely activities as playing

gn of Henry VII, and the fact that Dame Ragnelle carries a lute
 alert the lowborn medieval listener who is unable to play a
 te, or the noble listener who is familiar with the instrument,
 at Dame Ragnelle comes from a noble house rather than a hovel.

Dame Ragnelle's appearance is even more intriguing because
 she rides a fair horse whose trappings are adorned with precious
 stones. The poet describes his (and possibly Arthoure's) reaction
 to this scene:

She satt on a palfray was gay begon,
 Withe gold besett and many a precious stone,
 Ther was an vnsemely syghte;
 So fowulle a creature withe-oute mesure
 To ryde so gayly, I you ensure,
 Ytt was no reason ne ryghte. (246-51)

According to Beryl Rowland, references to horses frequently
 illustrate character (125). As we see in Sir Launfal, when the
 beautiful and noble Tryamour appears to save Launfal's life, she
 rides "Vpoon a whyt comely palfrey" (928). Several lines later
 the poet painstakingly describes her saddle set with precious
 gems, the green velvet saddle-cloths bordered by gold bells, the
 valuable saddle-bows set with stones from India, and the
 breast-trappings of her palfrey which were worth the best earldom
 in Lumbardy.

Several lines are also devoted to the description of Gawain's
 horse in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as Arthoure's best knight
 prepares himself for the journey to the Green Chapel:

Bi that watz Gryngolet grayth, and gurde with a sadel
 That glemed ful gayly with mony gold frenges,
 Ayquere naylet ful nwe, for that note ryched;
 The brydel barred aboute, with bryght golde bounden;
 The apparayl of the paytture and of the proude skyrtez,
 The cropore and the couertor, accorded wyth the
 arsounez;

And all watz rayled on red ryche golde naylez,
 That al glytered and glent as glem of the sunne.
 (597-604)

Because the nobility of the horse in medieval romance seems correspond to the nobility of its rider, the depiction of the lady Dame Ragnelle on a fair horse in The Wedding causes the audience to disregard momentarily the physical appearance of the man and ponder the internal character of Dame Ragnelle. The fact that Dame Ragnelle rides a "palfrey" is notable, because according to Rowland, the palfrey was "le cheval de parade," and is very popular with knights and ladies (113). To Arthoure, however, Dame Ragnelle does not appear to be a member of the nobility. The description of the grand horse is another clue that Dame Ragnelle is not all that she appears.

Dame Ragnelle advises the king to speak with her because she holds his life in her hand; she informs him that all his answers to the question of what women desire most are worthless and that he will lose his head unless she helps him. Arthoure discourteously derides her words and says he has no need of her aid, but then asks what she means by her speech and says if she can help him he will grant her anything she desires. The hag replies that if her answer saves the king's life, then she must have his promise that she may marry Gawen. She then urges Arthoure to decide quickly, and he replies that although Gawen must speak for himself, Arthoure will make every effort to guarantee her marriage to the noble knight in order to save his own life. The king then mourns that he will be the cause of Gawen's marriage to such a foul woman, but Dame Ragnelle replies

even an owl has a mate and she will not settle for less than
 on. She tells Arthoure to meet her in the same place when he
 ready for her answer, and if the king does not come, she will
 he is lost. Before they part, Arthoure asks her name, and
 replies that she is called Dame Ragnelle, who never yet
 quiled a man.

The name "Ragnelle" seems to be unique to this romance; even
 the fragmentary tale of The Marriage of Sir Gawain, the Loathly
 who corresponds to the character of Dame Ragnelle is not
 even a name. According to the Middle English Dictionary, the
 word "ragge" in the Middle Ages had several meanings, one of which
 corresponds to the modern definition of the word "rag" as a scrap
 of cloth or tattered or ragged clothing. This definition seems to
 describe the character of the ugly hag who is depicted, to be
 sure, as a ragged scrap of humanity. In addition, the Middle
English Dictionary defines the word "ragnel" (or ragenel,
 rag(e)nelle, ragnail, ranel, reinel) to mean a devil (for example,
 see Patience) or a woman's name (of which The Wedding is the only
 source cited.) However, the notion that the Middle English word
 "ragnel" could refer to a devil causes one to wonder whether or
 not the poet intended this meaning to illuminate the character of
 Dame Ragnelle. Certainly she does not appear to be an evil
 character; she saves the king's life and seems truly to love
 Gaven. Possibly, the fact that she is enchanted may be a reason
 for a connection between Dame Ragnelle and a devil. More likely,
 her appearance is awful enough to merit the poet's possible
 coupling of her with a fiend. The court certainly views her as a

will, for after the wedding night, Arthoure fears that Gawen is
 late to dinner because "the fend haue hym slain" (725).

Dame Ragnelle's speech that she has never yet beguiled a man
 is notable because, according to the Middle English Dictionary,
 the medieval word "beguile" not only means to deceive or delude,
 to mislead, to lead false to or betray, but also may be defined as "to be deceptive
 to the eye." Although Dame Ragnelle is undoubtedly trying to
 convince the king to trust her, it is ironic that she is actually
 "beguiling" him with her foul appearance as she speaks. Of
 course, it must be remembered that Dame Ragnelle is under a magic
 spell and is not purposely deceiving anyone around her. It could
 even be argued that the woman is not being deceptive, for though
 Dame Ragnelle is physically ugly, her inner self remains as
 beautiful now as it will be when she regains her lovely
 appearance. Dame Ragnelle continues to be proud, patient, and
 compassionate, even when others disdain her displeasing features.

Arthoure, on the other hand, shows an enormous disregard for
 proper behavior in his meeting with Dame Ragnelle. When the hag
 first speaks to the king, he responds, "'Whate mean you, lady,
 telle me tyghte, / For of thy wordes I haue great dispyte; / To
 you I haue no nede'" (270-72). However, the king contradicts his
 own speech as he waits to hear what the lady will say. When
 Arthoure understands the bargain Dame Ragnelle wishes to make--the
 saving of his life in exchange for her marriage to Gawen--the king
 exclaims aloud: "Alas!" he sayd, "nowe woo is me,

That I shold cause Gawen to wed the,
 For he wol be lothe to saye naye.
 So foulle a lady as ye ar nowe one

Sawe I neuere in my lyfe on ground gone,
I not whate I do may." (303-08)

Luckily for Arthoure, Dame Ragnelle does not leave him for his cruel speech, but compares herself to the lowly owl looking for a mate. In Blind Beasts, Rowland states that in the Middle Ages the owl symbolized the deadly sin of Sloth (19), and was also regarded as a bird of ill-omen (37). On a less symbolic level, Rowland notes in Animals With Human Faces, that in the Middle Ages owls were also considered to be lazy, ugly birds who slept during the day and only appeared at night (12). Chaucer also refers to the owl in the "Wife of Bath's Tale" when the newly married knight accuses "like an owl" all day from his ugly bride (1081).

Even though Dame Ragnelle refers to herself as an owl, Arthoure insists on calling her "lady," although he may be speaking with irony. Dame Ragnelle's speech hints that she is not what she seems when she muses, "'Ye Sir,' she said, 'ther is a byrd men calle an owile, / And yett a lady I am'" (316-17). The word "byrd" here has a double meaning, for not only has Dame Ragnelle previously likened herself to an owl, a member of the feathered species, but the medieval word "bird" may also refer to a female member of the human species. Donald Sands argues that the lady's remark implies that even an ugly bird like an owl has its day and so must she (334n). Be that as it may, I believe that Dame Ragnelle is hinting at the idea that there is more to her than her horrible physical appearance, and though she may be compared to the ugly owl she is nevertheless a lady. Perhaps in her speech, Dame Ragnelle is gently reproaching Arthoure for his discourteous behavior toward her and reminding him that it is his

ly to honor all women, no matter how hideous they appear.

When Arthoure returns to court he tells Gawen of his encounter with Dame Ragnelle. Gawen replies that he will marry this ugly hag as many times as necessary in order to save the life of his friend and king. Thus, when Arthoure departs several days later to honor his promise to Sir Gromer, he leaves with the knowledge that Gawen has helped to save his life.

On the journey to his confrontation with Sir Gromer Somerure, Arthoure encounters Dame Ragnelle. He informs her that Gawen will marry her if her answer saves the king's life, so she must hurry and tell him the correct response to what women most desire in the world. Dame Ragnelle replies that some men say women want to be fair, or to be lusty in bed, or to wed often, or to be flirted with, but the real answer to what women want most is, in fact, the following:

We desyren of men aboue alle maner thyng,
 To haue the souereynte, withoute lesing,
 Of alle, bothe hyghe and lowe.
 For where we haue souereynte alle is ourys,
 Thoughe a knyghte be neuere so ferys,
 And euere the mastry wyne;
 Of the moste manlyest is oure desyre,
 To haue the souereynte of suche a syre,
 Suche is oure crafte and gynne. (422-30)

Dame Ragnelle tells Arthoure to give this answer to Sir Gromer, but she warns him that the knight will become angry and bitter because all his labor is lost and will curse the woman who taught the correct answer to the king.

Arthoure quickly departs for his meeting with Sir Gromer, and when he arrives at the assigned place he shows the knight the two books filled with the replies which Arthoure and Gawen have

lected. Sir Gromer looks at every response, but the answer he seeks is not included. Arthoure then gives the knight Dame Ragnelle's reply, that women desire sovereignty more than any other thing. Just as the hag foretold, Sir Gromer curses Dame Ragnelle, his sister, because all his effort is lost. Arthoure then promises that Sir Gromer will never find him in such a vulnerable position again, and the two men part.

To a modern, sophisticated audience, the idea that all women secretly desire the same thing may seem slightly ridiculous, but the characters in this story appear to believe that there is only one answer to Sir Gromer's question. Realistically, it would seem that each woman would desire the one thing that would most improve her life: the poor woman would wish to be rich, the low woman would wish to be noble, and so forth. Dame Ragnelle disdains the notion that men think they know what women want: to be fair, to have lusty bedpartners, to wed often, to behave flirtatiously, but when Arthoure and Gawen travel the countryside asking the question "What do women desire most?" they fill two huge books with the answers they receive from both men and, significantly, women. Obviously, the numerous women they question have a corresponding variety of answers. It is evident that none of them mentions sovereignty over men, because Sir Gromer does not find that answer in either of Arthoure's books.

Although it is never stated in The Wedding, there are a number of possibilities concerning why Arthoure's and Gawen's survey received such a multitude of answers. Perhaps all the women who were questioned did not think to give the answer of

reignty, but if prompted, they would all agree that to rule was their greatest desire. Or perhaps these women failed to reveal the true answer so that men would not learn of their greatest desire. However, does it not seem suspicious that Dame Ragnelle's answer to what women desire most in the world is the very thing she needs to break her enchanted state? Isn't her desire similar to the poor woman who desires to be rich or the low man who desires to be noble? Is Dame Ragnelle really speaking for all women, or merely for herself?

Another puzzling element of the story is the character of Sir Gromer Somer Joure, who is revealed to be the brother of Dame Ragnelle. When this character is first introduced he is described as "A knyghte fulle strong and of great mighte," and he fiercely threatens Arthoure's life for giving away Sir Gromer's land. However, like the Green Knight in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Sir Gromer makes a covenant with a member of Arthoure's court, in this case the king himself, that Arthoure will return at a later date to complete a task which could possibly result in his own death.

As stated previously, Kittredge offers the opinion that just as Dame Ragnelle was the victim of her evil step-mother, her brother, Sir Gromer, was also enchanted. Likewise, G. H. Maynard compares Sir Gromer to the fierce Carl in The Carl of Carlisle, who possesses a fearful appearance and who, in the later version of the romance, is also enchanted. This possibility that Sir Gromer is connected with some type of supernatural power which is greater than normal human ability also explains why Sir Gromer,

le, is able to act as judge of the answer to what women want in the world.

If this double enchantment of brother and sister is true, it is conceivable that the two characters are working together to break the magic spell. One may even believe that Dame Ragnelle and her brother contrived the meeting between Arthoure and Sir Gromer in order to put a plan into motion. Sir Gromer's motives appear to be to get back his land and to slay Arthoure.

says:

"Welle i-mett, Kyng Arthour!
 Thou hast me done wrong many a yere,
 And wofully I shalle quytte the here;
 I hold thy lyfe days nyghe done;
 Thou hast gevyn my landes in certayn,
 Withe greatt wrong vnto Sir Gawen." (54-59)

However, the necessary requirement to end Dame Ragnelle's enchantment, (marriage to Sir Gawen) makes Sir Gromer's desire to get his land back impossible to fulfill, for Arthoure must correctly answer the question in order for the wedding of Dame Ragnelle and Gawen to take place. However, this conflict is acceptable, because if Dame Ragnelle's enchantment is broken when she receives sovereignty over the "best in England," then she is also sovereign over all others. Also, if the woman is sovereign, then Sir Gromer's desire to acquire his land is unimportant compared to the overriding desire of the woman. The noble Dame Ragnelle does not forget those who help her, however, and she later begs Arthoure's forgiveness for her brother, not only out of the greatness of her heart, but because Sir Gromer's offensive actions were committed for his sister's sake.

Whether Dame Ragnelle's reply to the question of what women

most is universally accepted or not, it is noteworthy that by giving her aid to King Arthoure, she gains sovereignty over the man who should be the greatest man in the world. Arthoure is dependent upon her help in order to save his life; when he first meets the hag he asks "Whate is your desyre, fayre lady?" (273). However, the rule that Dame Ragnelle must have sovereignty over the "best of England" before her evil spell will be broken only emphasizes Arthoure's ignobleness in this romance. Dame Ragnelle possesses sovereignty over Arthoure, but this power is not enough to break the enchantment because he is not the greatest man in England even though he is the king. It is only by marrying Sir Lancelot that Dame Ragnelle has a chance to return to her beautiful state.

The theme of woman's sovereignty over a man, while not usually explicitly described, may be found in several medieval romances. For example, in Sir Launfal, the supernatural Tryamour is sovereign over Launfal; it is she who gives him nobility and a wife, and later her presence is necessary to save his life. Likewise, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Morgan la Fee is the impetus behind the entire plot. It is her plan to test the honor of Camelot by bringing Gawain to Hautdesert, and the Green Knight is a mere underling used by the enchantress to make the test possible. On another level in Sir Gawain, Lady Bertilak uses her sovereignty as a lady in the courtly love tradition to test Gawain's courtesy, chastity, and loyalty to his host and his king. It must be noted that in all three of these romances the woman who holds the power of sovereignty over the man is either enchanted or

possesses supernatural powers. Perhaps to the medieval (male) mind, the use of magic was one of the few ways in which a woman could rule a man.

After Arthoure's adventure with Sir Gromer ends, he meets Dame Ragnelle on his return to court. She reminds the king of his promise that she will wed Sir Gawen, and Arthoure replies that he will not break his word if she will be "ruled by his counsel." Dame Ragnelle, believing this speech to mean the king wants her to marry Gawen in a private ceremony, refuses his wish and replies that she will be wedded openly or else she will depart immediately and the king will be shamed. She then commands him to ride ahead so that she may follow, and to remember that she has saved his life and does not intend to disgrace anyone. Nevertheless, Arthoure feels great shame while he leads such an ugly woman to court. All the members of the court stare at the woman because "They sawe neuere of so fowlle a thyng." (523).

As soon as the couple reaches Carlylle, Dame Ragnelle demands that Sir Gawen be summoned immediately so that their troth may be sighted before the entire company. (She may act in such haste to prevent Arthoure from finding a way to break his promise to her.) When Gawen arrives and expresses his willingness to fulfill his part of the agreement, to which Dame Ragnelle replies:

"Godhauemercy," sayd Dame Ragnelle then,
 "Ffor thy sake I wold I were a fayre woman,
 Ffor thou art of so good wylle." (536-38)

Gawen's actions here are in direct contrast to Arthoure's behavior when he realizes that he must keep his part of the bargain; Arthoure complains and tries to change the terms of the

ment, but Gawen willingly accepts the sacrifice he must make
 his king, and he treats the lady with kindness and respect.
 noble behavior is another reason why Gawen is loved by all
 and is shown to be "the best of England" (695).

When Gawen publicly accepts the hag for his future wife,
 Gaynor is introduced as she and all her ladies cry for Sir
 on's fate. As the day of the wedding approaches, Gaynor echoes
 Arthoure's wish and urges Dame Ragnelle to be married early in the
 morning, "As pryvaly as we may" (571), so that the bride may be
 highly honored. Dame Ragnelle refuses the queen's entreaty
 and says that she will be married at "highe masse time" (578) in
 the midst of "alle the route" (580), for her wedding day will
 provide her all the honor she desires. Gaynor may mean well, but
 she seems not so much concerned with the honor of Dame Ragnelle
 (who has always been ugly, as far as anyone knows) as with the
 honor of Arthoure and herself.

As the time for the wedding ceremony nears, Dame Ragnelle
 prepares herself to go to church. Unfortunately, her lovely dress
 cannot hide her hideous appearance:

She was arayd in the richest maner,
 More fressher than Dame Gaynour,
 Her arayment was worthe iij mlle. mark,
 Of good red nobles styff and stark,
 So rychely she was begon.
 Ffor alle her rayment she bare the belle
 Of fowlnesse that euere I hard telle,
 So fowlle a sowe save neuere man. . . (590-597)

The poet's remark that Dame Ragnelle's dress is richer than
 that of Queen Gaynor seems to be another hint that the woman is
 more than just an ugly hag. The dress must be assumed to be
 Ragnelle's own, for it is unlikely that the queen would give Dame

elle a dress superior to any she would wear herself. Thus, the poet's concern with the monetary value of the clothing seems to indicate that Dame Ragnelle is not a poor woman. (It also shows the poet's concept of what constitutes noble dress.) However, the dress does not help Dame Ragnelle's appearance, for soon as the ceremony ends, the royal couple hurries Gawen and the new bride to court, presumably in order to avoid further embarrassment. However, because Dame Ragnelle has never shown any attitude of shame concerning her own appearance, and Gawen seems to have accepted the fact that she will always be his wife, it must be the king and queen who feel dishonored by the presence of Dame Ragnelle in the court.

After the wedding party returns to Carlylle, the wedding feast begins. Dame Ragnelle takes the place of honor at the table, but everyone is soon disgusted by her revolting table manners:

She was fulle foughe and nott curteys,
 So sayd they alle verament.
 When the seruyce cam her before,
 She ete as moche as vij. that ther wore,
 That mervaylyd many a man;
 Her nayles were long ynchys iiij,
 Therwithe she breke her mete vngoodly,
 Therefore she ete alone. (602-09)

Her actions are so vile that high and low alike, are repulsed, and "Bad the deville her bonys gnawe" (617). It can easily be assumed that such disgusting behavior in a woman probably delighted medieval listeners, however, and the poet of The Wedding seems to have realized this fact, for Dame Ragnelle's hideous table manners, like her appearance, are described in great detail.

After the feast is concluded, Gawen and his new bride retire to the bridal chamber where Dame Ragnelle claims the rights due her as a wife. When she asks Gawen to kiss her, for Arthoure's sake, her mention of Arthoure reminds the knight of his duty to his king, and he once more shows his courtesy and willingness to do his part of the bargain: "Sir Gawen sayd, 'I wolle do more / than for to kyssse, and God before!'" (638-39). However, when he comes around to perform his duty as a husband and a knight, Gawen finds in the place of his ugly wife, "the fayrest creature" (641) he has ever seen. When this lovely lady asks Gawen what he desires, the knight is so amazed that for the first time in the romance he behaves discourteously, asking, "Whate are ye?" (644). When the lady replies that she is his wife, certainly, and asks Gawen why he is being so unkind, the knight immediately apologizes and explains that her change in appearance from an ugly creature to a beautiful lady has momentarily bereft him of his wits. Fortunately, Gawen quickly recovers his courtesy, "And brasyd her in his armys and gan her kisse, / And made greatt joye, sycurly" (654-55).

The lady ends Gawen's joy, however, when she informs him that her beauty will not last and that he must choose between having her fair at night and foul by day, or fair during the day and the foulest woman he ever saw at night. Gawen's choice here is slightly different than that of the knight in Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale", who must decide between having his bride fair and promiscuous or ugly and faithful. In both works the man refuses to choose, and allows the woman to make whatever choice she

lady. In The Wedding, Gawen cannot decide whether he would rather have dishonor during the day and pleasure at night, or honor during the day and "simple repayr" (674) at night. Thus, he allows the lady to make the choice, not only as to how she will appear, but also how she will treat Gawen and all his possessions:

"Butt do as ye lyst nowe, my lady gaye,
 The choyse I putt in your fyst.
 Euyne as ye wolle I putt itt in your hand,
 Lose me when ye lyst, for I am bond;
 I putt the choyse in you;
 Bothe body and goodes, hart, and euery dele,
 Ys alle your own, for to by and selle, --
 That make I God avowe!" (677-84)

In this speech, Gawen appears to give his wife complete power over him, and one wonders why he feels he must allow her such freedom of choice. There is no mention in the romance that Arthur has told Gawen the answer to what women desire most, so it must be assumed that Gawen gives his wife complete control for some other reason. Perhaps he is trying to make up for his discourteous response to Dame Ragnelle's beauty when he first discovers it, or perhaps he is merely attempting to please his new wife. It must also be remembered that Gawen is the most courtly knight and a favorite of all the ladies, so perhaps he is merely following the courtly love tradition of letting the woman rule the man. Whatever the reason for Gawen's lengthy response, he fortunately makes the correct choice and breaks Dame Ragnelle's magic spell. She then tells Gawen that her stepmother made her ugly, and that she had to remain so until "the best of England" married her and gave her sovereignty over all his body and his goods. Dame Ragnelle then promises never to anger Gawen at any time, and the two thank God and Mary and the Savior for their good

one. They enjoy so much pleasure during the night that when the lady attempts to arise the next morning Gawen takes control and informs her that they will lie in bed and sleep until late morning. Dame Ragnelle agrees to his plan and returns to bed.

When Gawen does not appear by midday, Arthoure becomes convinced that the knight has been slain by his "fiend" of a wife. The members of the court go to the bridal chamber and ask Gawen if he remains in bed. Gawen opens the door and the company sees his beautiful wife with her lovely red hair flowing to her knees. Gawen then tells them how Dame Ragnelle changed from an ugly woman to so beautiful a wife, and Gaynor admits that she had been convinced that Dame Ragnelle would harm the knight. The queen's confession shows the importance she places on appearance, because ever since her arrival at court has Dame Ragnelle treated everyone in a fierce or threatening manner. Rather, she has conducted herself with great dignity and compassion for her husband to be, and as previously mentioned, has behaved in a nobler manner (except at the table) than either the king or queen. However, because of her foul appearance, Dame Ragnelle's consistently noble behavior has been ignored by Gaynor. It appears that the queen believed that Dame Ragnelle's inner self necessarily matched the ugliness of her outer self, and perhaps it did, for what the queen did not know is that the physical appearance of Dame Ragnelle was falsely created by evil magic.

This concept of a correlation between the quality of the inner self and the appearance of the outer self is an important element of medieval philosophy, which was concerned with the difference

been "substance and accident," or reality and its appearance. When Dame Ragnelle becomes beautiful, she turns her noble "substance" into noble appearance. And it is only just that the man who showed more pride and nobility in her behavior towards others should be more beautiful than the queen who was more concerned with her own honor than with the honor of another.

After the members of the court view Dame Ragnelle, and following much revelry and praise of the beauty of Gawen's wife, Arthur tells his story of his meeting with Sir Gromer and how Dame Ragnelle saved his life "Alle for the love of Gawen" (771). Arthur then explains the circumstances of his wife's enchantment, and Dame Ragnelle tells the company of the choice Gawen was given and how he gave her sovereignty in all matters. She then promises never to anger Gawen nor to argue with him, and to be obedient to him as long as she lives. Gawen thanks the lady and replies that he is content with his wife and will give her all the love she needs. Gaynor graciously says that Dame Ragnelle is the fairest woman in the hall, and the queen gives her love to the woman for saving Arthur's life. Notably, Gaynor does not refer to Ragnelle's enchantment or the issue of sovereignty at all, although in The Wife of Bath's Tale it is the queen and all her ladies who know what women desire most in the world and who act as judges of the offending knight. In The Wedding, though, after Dame Ragnelle tells of Gawen's choice and how he gave his wife sovereignty, the matter is dropped completely. It would be interesting to know Gaynor's reaction to the answer to Sir Gromer's question, for then one might discover whether sovereignty

a universal desire of all women or merely the desire of one man. However, perhaps the lack of reaction on the part of the other ladies indicates they are hiding their true feelings.

The final lines of the romance summarize the short relationship of Dame Ragnelle and Gawen, who beget Gyngolyn, a future knight of the Round Table. Dame Ragnelle takes the prize of beauty at every feast, (no one wants the devil to gnaw her bones now), and Gawen loves her so much that he stays with her day and night and even gives up jousting to be with her. Arthoure also falls prey to her charms and agrees to be good to Sir Gromer for her sake.

Unfortunately, Dame Ragnelle only lives five years after her marriage to Gawen and in all that time she never once grieves him. According to Arthoure, Dame Ragnelle is the fairest lady of all England while she is alive, and though Gawen marries often in his remaining years, he never loves a woman as much as this gentle wife.

The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell concludes with a prayer by the author asking for deliverance from the danger of prison and from the pain he feels. This conclusion is all that is known of the life of the author of this romance, and it is a bitter ending to an otherwise entertaining tale.

The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell is an enjoyable romance because of the interaction among the various characters. Although Gawen may be called the hero of the story because he is willing to risk his future happiness in order to save the king's life, the central character of the romance is actually Dame

nelle. It is this ugly woman who truly saves Arthoure's life when she divulges the answer to the question of what women desire more than anything in the world; nevertheless, the king continues to be ashamed of her horrible appearance. Dame Ragnelle's ugliness disgusts the other members of Arthoure's court, including the queen, but the ugly woman continues to behave in a noble manner. However, a change occurs in the attitude of the court when the evil spell is broken and Dame Ragnelle becomes even more beautiful than Queen Gaynor; Dame Ragnelle is then treated with love and respect even though her honorable actions are no different than when she was ugly. Dame Ragnelle succeeds in her endeavor to break her enchantment, but she also unwittingly tests Arthoure's court and reveals the shallowness of its nobility. Like Tryamour in Sir Launfal, and Morgan la Fee in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Dame Ragnelle does not consciously test the honor of the other characters, but it may be seen that she functions as a tester when her change in appearance nonetheless exposes the lack of gentility of those acquainted with her.

Chapter Three

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, one of the most well-written well-known of the Middle English alliterative romances, is the story of the testing of Gawain, one of the noblest knights of the Round Table. As in Sir Launfal and The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, it is a woman who functions as tester; in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Lady Bertilak possesses the difficult task of causing Gawain to act in a dishonorable manner. Lady Bertilak and her husband work together to test the honor and chastity of the noble knight, but it is actually the magical Morgan la Fee who is cited in the poem as the impetus behind the testing of Gawain and Arthur's court. Before Gawain leaves Camelot to keep his covenant with the Green Knight he is "funden fautlez," but when he accepts the green girdle from the lady, he fails all his tests and becomes "fawty and falce." However, Gawain learns a lesson from his trials, and he keeps the green girdle as a reminder that he is not the perfect knight of courtesy, but merely an imperfect man.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was composed in the mid-fourteenth century, and was later discovered in a manuscript which also contained the poems Pearl, Purity (or Cleanness), and Patience. Modern scholars believe these poems to be the work of the same anonymous author, although another alliterative work entitled St. Erkenwald, which is also included in the manuscript, is thought to be the work of a different anonymous poet.

Numerous literary critics have discussed various aspects of the poems since the discovery of the manuscript, but scholars have been especially attracted to studying Sir Gawain and the Green Knight because of its timeless plot, its mysterious author, and the richness of its artistic design. The majority of literary critics, it seems, have scrutinized the characters of Gawain and the Green Knight, while relatively few scholars have closely examined the function of the female characters in this romance. In this chapter I intend to focus on the function of the women in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and show how Lady Bertilak and Morgan la Fee test the honor of both Gawain and Arthur's court.

As in The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight begins with a brief history of Arthur's famous ancestors in order to establish the noble heritage of the king and the distinction of all the members of his court. This summary also establishes the fame of Camelot so that the audience may see the worthiness of Arthur's knights as recipients of the Green Knight's challenge. When Gawain accepts the Green Knight's challenge, however, he does not act arrogantly, but behaves in a very humble fashion. He first asks permission from the king and queen to leave his seat at the table, and then modestly describes himself as the weakest knight with the feeblest wit whose only right to fame is the blood tie he shares with his uncle the king. However, Gawain's brave actions betray his modest words for he is the first (and only) knight to volunteer to take Arthur's place in the beheading challenge with the fierce Green Knight.

During the scene of the Christmas feast and the Green

ight's extraordinary challenge, the character of the queen is
 y briefly described. She is called the most beautiful woman in
 hall, but like her counterparts in the other romances
 cussed in this thesis, her beauty will fall to second best
 ore the superior loveliness of another woman. At this point in
Gawain and the Green Knight, however, Guenore is honored by
 as she sits under a silken canopy which is embroidered and set
 h precious gems. Gawain defers to her nobility before he
 ases from the table to meet the Green Knight's challenge, and
 ter the stranger has departed with his head in his hand, Arthur
 mforts his wife and tells her not to be dismayed at the dramatic
 eplay she has just witnessed. Guenore's response to Arthur's
 ntle words is not described by the poet, but the fact that the
 ng takes the time to soothe his wife shows the high esteem with
 hich he regards her and also implies her distress.

After Gawain makes his bargain with the Green Knight the next
 ar passes swiftly and the time approaches when he must leave for
 is meeting at the Green Chapel. Gawain dresses himself and his
 orse in a rich manner befitting his noble station as one of
 rthur's knights, and he carries his shield which signifies
 arious virtues including his strong Christian belief. As Gawain
 eaves, the other members of Camelot view his departure with
 orrow because they fear he will not return. The people lament
 the loss of such a good knight:

Al þat seþ þat semly syked in hert,
 And sayde sobly al same segges til oþer,
 Carande for þat comly: 'Bi Kryst, hit is scape
 þat þou, leude, schal be lost, þat art of lyf noble!
 To fynde hys fere vpon folde, in fayth, is not eþe.
 (672-76)

The noble Gawain searches diligently for the Green Chapel until it is Christmas Eve; then he prays that he might temporarily quit his quest and find some dwelling in which to hear mass and celebrate the birth of Christ. No sooner has the knight blessed himself three times than he notices a beautiful castle that "hemered and schon" (772) through the massive trees. Gawain thanks gentle Jesus and Saint Gillian for hearing his cry as he approaches the fortress.

Mother Angela Carson argues that Gawain is approaching the Other World when he spies the beautiful castle through the trees. She cites the sudden appearance of Hautdesert, and also the significance of the various trees which the Gawain-Poet mentions (43-44), in the description of the surrounding wilderness: "The hawthorn is often thought to be the haunt of fairies, the roots of the oak supposedly reach to the Other World, and hazel, sometimes associated with preternatural wisdom, is also considered a charm against enchantment (11). Gawain's journey through the forest also recalls the scene of Sir Launfal's introduction to the fairy princess (a forest), and also the place where King Arthur not only meets Sir Gromer Somer Joure, but also the enchanted Dame Ragnelle (another forest). Thus, in medieval romances where the hero crosses to the Other World, his bridge between the mortal and immortal worlds is often a forest.

When Gawain reaches the front gate of the castle, he calls out and a porter answers and welcomes Gawain to the dwelling. After the drawbridge is lowered, all the members of the court behave as if Gawain were known to them, and they rush outside and

el down "To welcum þis ilk wyȝ as worpy hom poȝt" (819). As
 main greets everyone, the lord of the castle joins the others
 he says: "ȝe ar welcum to welde as yow lykez / þat here is; al
 yowre awen, to haue at yowre wylle and welde" (835-36).

omically, at this point in the romance Gawain has no idea of the
 uth of his host's speech with regard to the lady of the castle.

After Gawain removes his armor and makes himself more
 comfortable, his host discreetly questions him about his home.
 on the lord learns that Gawain is a knight of Arthur's Round
 ble he laughs merrily. The other men in the castle are also
 ad because they know of Gawain's reputation for courtesy and
 ay hope to see some examples of his refined manners:

"Now schal we semlych se sleȝtez of þewez
 And þe teccheles termes of talkyng noble,
 Wich spede is in speche vnsurd may we lerne,
 Syn we haf fonged þat fyne fader of nurture."
 (916-19)

ese words are also ironic because Gawain's fine manners and
 ble speech will soon be tested like never before.

After vespers are concluded, Gawain meets the lord's wife for
 he first time. She is beautiful in both appearance and nature,
 nd Gawain thinks the lady is even more lovely than Queen Guenore.
 he fair young woman is accompanied by an "auncian," (whom we
 ater discover to be Morgan la Fee) who is very unlike her young
 ounterpart; the fair lady has fresh skin and a rosy complexion,
 nd her breast and bright throat are displayed, while the older
 reature has yellow skin, rough, wrinkled cheeks, and wears
 "chalkquyte vayles" which cover her to her chin. Like Dame
 agnelle on her wedding day, this old woman wears rich clothing

on cannot fail to help the plan to test the noble knight, for
 in's first view of his future temptress must make her lovely
 appearance even more beautiful when set against the "rough and
 wrinkled" guise of the old woman.

Some critics believe that the old and young women are, in
 fact, two parts of the same supernatural person. For example,
 Angela Carson argues that the old woman and Bertilak's wife
 are merely dual aspects of one character which is Morgan la Fee
 (4). Carson argues that the old woman's action of leading the
 younger woman by the hand when they are introduced to Gawain gives
 the audience the first indication that the two women are, in fact,
 two parts of one character (6). Carson cites Lady Bertilak's
 attempt to give Gawain a ring, and also her endeavor to detain the
 reluctant knight with her unwelcome attentions, as traditions
 connected with Morgan la Fee in her early mythological role as a
 beautiful seductress (6). Likewise, Laura Hibbard Loomis
 discusses the splitting of Morgan's personality in the Vulgate
ancelot, a text which was possibly familiar to the Gawain-Poet
 and which he may have used to contrast the old woman with the
 young lady who is at the same time Morgan's other self and her
 agent (535).

However, besides contrasting physical appearance, there is
 another difference between the two women which is noted at their
 introduction: the younger lady is followed by many fair maids
 while the older woman is "he ly honowred with ha elez aboute"
 (1949). This detail is an immediate clue to the function these
 women will perform in the romance: the beautiful woman who is

followed by lovely maidens will test Gawain's chastity and courtly
 behavior toward members of the female sex while the ugly woman who
 is surrounded by knights will test Gawain's overall honor,
 bravery, and loyalty. Technically, of course, Morgan la Fee is
 the force behind all of Gawain's trials, but the beautiful lady is
 the necessary agent of the testing of Gawain's courtliness. Between
 the two women, Gawain will be tried in all areas of knighthood,
 and he must do his best to pass every test because it is not only
 his reputation, nor even his life, that is at stake, but the honor
 of the entire Round Table and even the feudal system as a whole.
 If Gawain fails any part of his test, he fails not only as a man,
 but also as a Christian knight who has sworn to obey his king and
 his God. This knowledge is a heavy burden for any man to carry.

When Gawain sees the ladies approaching, he takes leave of
 his host so that he may greet the two women. He bows low before
 the older woman and embraces and kisses the prettier. In the
 correct courtly manner Gawain quickly asks to be their servant,
 and the two women lead him to a chamber where they may speak with
 him and offer him precious spices and wine. While the ladies
 entertain Gawain, the lord, with great mirth, hangs his hood on a
 spear and challenges the other men to try to take it. He says,
 "And I schal fonde, bi my fayth, to fylder wyth þe best / Er me
 wylt þe vede, with help of my frendez'" (986-87). This seemingly
 innocent statement takes on great significance because it helps to
 unite the action of the entire romance. When the lord says he
 will contend with the best, he not only speaks of the game he
 plays with the hood, but also of the beheading challenge which he

ered the previous year in Arthur's court. And when he mentions
 of the "wede," he refers not only to his hood, but also to
 ain's future temptation where the knight will seize another
 "me," the green girdle, in order to contend with the Green
 knight, the owner of the garment.

After Gavain spends an entertaining evening with both ladies,
 awakens the next morning to participate in the Christmas
 celebration. During the Christmas feast, the old woman takes the
 place of highest honor with the host beside her, and Gavain sits
 beside the lovely lady. Gavain and his hostess enjoy their time
 together, and, "þurȝ her dere dalyaunce of here derne wordez, /
 with clene cortays carp closed fro fylpe" (1013-14), they speak
 together during the meal.

The preceding scene, if carefully regarded, intimates the
 relationships among the various characters in the romance. The
 old woman is seated above the host at the table, but he sits
 beside her during the meal as her companion or partner. This
 seating arrangement shows the power which the old woman possesses
 over the great lord of the castle, but the two are still connected
 in some manner. The conversation between Gavain and the lovely
 lady, on the other hand, is an introduction to the temptation
 scenes where the two characters will do little but converse, but
 their power struggles will be as exciting to view as the fiercest
 jousting contest. In this first conversation, however, Gavain and
 the lady enjoyably flirt in a completely innocent fashion,
 although the mention of their "derne wordez" immediately brings to
 mind the courtly love concept of "derne love." It is this secrecy

which will later lead to Gawain's downfall when he accepts the
 the girdle from his hostess.

When the Christmas festivities are concluded, Gawain
 discovers that the Green Chapel is very near his present location,
 and he agrees to remain at the castle until the day of his
 appointment with the Green Knight. Once more the lord makes an
 ambiguous statement when he asks Gawain to remain for several more
 days. Gawain's consent adds another weight to his already heavy
 burden of responsibility to Arthur, the Green Knight, and all his
 chivalric and Christian ideals. In lines 1089-90 the lord says
 "I han demed to do þe dede þat I bidde; / Wyl 3e halde pis hes
 þe at þys onez?" to which Gawain responds in the next two
 lines, "'3e, sir, for soþe,' sayd þe segge trwe, / 'Whyl I byde in
 þere bor3e, be bayn to 3owre hest.'" Gawain has now promised to
 honor the host's requests while he dwells in the castle, and it
 will be this promise which will add to his distress when Gawain is
 later tested by the lord's beautiful wife. The two men then make
 their covenant to exchange their winnings at the end of the next
 day.

The following morning the lord arises with his men and they
 journey to the forest to hunt deer. The gentle deer have no
 chance for survival because they are trapped between the men at
 the hunting stations, the dogs, and the armed men on horseback.
 Many deer are killed, and the host's hunt is very successful.

While the lord chases deer, Gawain is also involved in a
 hunt, but he plays the part of the hunted rather than of the
 hunter. As Gawain sleeps, the lord's beautiful lady slips quietly

to his room and sits on his bed. When Gawain becomes aware of his actions he feels ashamed to be caught in such an awkward situation, so he feigns sleep in the hope that the lady will depart. When she continues to sit patiently beside him, Gawain decides it would be more seemly to ask her what she desires, so he pretends to awaken and show surprise at her presence on his bed. The lady laughs at his actions and tells Gawain that he is an heavy sleeper who does not awaken when a person sneaks into his chamber, and because she has surprised him with her stealth, he is now her prisoner. Gawain returns her lighthearted jest and says he will yield to her promptly and cry for grace, but he asks that she allow him to get dressed so that he may speak with her in more comfort. The lady refuses his request, however, and replies that she would rather keep him prisoner because she wishes to speak with the famous knight whose honor and courtliness are praised by all. Gawain responds humbly to her praise and replies that he will be happy to say or do anything which will please her. The lady answers that her words of commendation are sincere and she knows many women who would gladly give away all the treasure they possess in order to trade places with her at that moment. The lady concludes that being in the presence of the noble Gawain fulfills all her desires. Gawain returns her compliments and says her noble worthiness perceives only the good in others, but the lady disagrees and replies that if she could choose any man in the world for her lord, she would select Gawain. The knight responds modestly once again and says he is proud of the value she places upon him, and he will be glad to be her servant and her knight and

hold her sovereign over himself. The remainder of the morning passes in a similar manner as the lady continually expresses her love for the knight while Gavain attempts to present a courteous response to the lady's ardent speeches.

In this first temptation scene, Gavain's attempts to preserve his virtue resemble the actions of the gentle deer as they attempt to evade the hunters' well-placed traps. However, like the mild doe which cannot escape the hunters in the forest because "At the vende vnder vande wrapped a flone" (1161), neither can Gavain evade the loving words which shower him during the lady's speech. Gerald Gallant, in an article which discusses the symbols of the three hunted beasts in Sir Gavain and the Green Knight, also notes the similarity between Gavain's cry for mercy (1215) and the pitiful cries of the deer as they are shot (1163). Gallant also mentions the correspondence between Gavain's "imprisonment" (1224) and the "stabiye" who capture the fleeing deer (1152). However, Gallant does not mention the parallelism between the gentle deer and the lady who functions as a hunter, but whose "pursuit" of Gavain is nevertheless careful and decorous. Compared to the forcefully seductive tactics she will later employ, the actions of the lady in this first temptation scene are very mild.

Throughout the temptation scenes, the lady will use every emotional tactic possible to cause Gavain to sin, and in this first scene she woos him with laughter and flattery. Gallant notes that as Gavain continually turns the lady's praises back on herself, her declarations begin to take on a curiously possessive and romantic tone as she informs the worthy knight of the many

man who would trade their treasure in order to spend time with (40). Even the hostess herself chooses Gawain before treasure, and she tells the knight she would choose him before any other man on earth for his "beute and debonerte and blye blaunt" (1273). The lady's choice is noteworthy for several reasons: it calls into question the relationship between the lord and a wife who would choose a relative stranger before her own husband. Even more importantly, the lady's statement indicates her independence in the plot to dishonor Gawain; her speech shows that she is free to use whatever means necessary to make Gawain suffer, for it is doubtful that the lord would instruct his wife to dishonor Gawain by loving him before her own husband. The lady also tells Gawain "Ye ar welcum to my cors" (1236), a controversial speech which many critics argue is too blatantly sexual to fit the character of the hostess. Her offer is ambiguous because the word "cors" may refer either to her body, as in "You are welcome to my body", or her "person," (as in "You are welcome to my presence as companion"). The lady then presents herself as Gawain's servant, an offer which Gallant states is significant because it is a reversal of the courtly love tradition where the knight vows his service to the lady (40). After the lady makes her ardent speeches, Gawain evades her suggestive advances by offering to be her servant in love. However, Gawain's acceptance of the lady as his sovereign recalls the speech made by Dame Ragnelle in The Wedding where she states that women desire to have sovereignty over all men, because when women have sovereignty, they have everything. The trap is closing around

in; he must honor promises to Arthur, the Green Knight, his ideals, his host, and now the host's wife; however, as Gawain discover, no human can possibly keep such contradictory vows. When the lady arises to wish Gawain a good day at the end of her morning of courtly speech, she surprises the knight by changing her strategy of flattery to one of "stor wordez" (1291). She tells him that she doubts if he is truly the renowned Gawain, the knight, fearful that he has been discourteous in some manner of speech, asks why she doubts his identity. The hostess replies that if he were the courteous Gawain, he could not linger long with a lady without asking for a kiss or some other trifle before allowing her to depart. This strategy succeeds, for Gawain replies that he will kiss at her commandment. He allows the lady to take him in her arms and kiss him, another action which indicates the reversal of courtly roles between these two characters. The lady leaves Gawain's chamber, and after he dresses and attends mass, he spends the remainder of the day in the delightful company of both the young and the old woman.

That evening, the lord and his men return to the castle with their load of venison, and the host gives the meat to Gawain as their agreement requires. Gawain accepts the gift and fulfills his part of the bargain by grasping the lord in his arms and kissing him "as comlyly as he couþe awyse" (1389). Pleased with the game, Gawain and the host agree to exchange their next day's winnings on the following evening.

Early the next morning, the lord and his men arise and prepare themselves for another hunting expedition. When they

ve at a marsh, they pick up the trail of a wild boar. The
ers and their dogs track the animal to its rocky hiding place
re the fierce swine rushes out and injures both dogs and men as
ries to escape. The hunters' arrows bounce off of the boar's
sk skin, but the lord continues to follow the beast through the
derness.

While the lord chases the wild boar through the marsh, Gawain
eives another visit in his chamber from the lovely lady. On
s day, however, she spends little time in idle speech, but
mediately accuses the knight of not being the noble Gawain who
famous for his courtesy. When Gawain replies that he does not
ow what she is speaking of, the lady reminds the knight that he
s not yet kissed her. Gawain defends himself with the excuse
at he did not offer to kiss her because he did not want to be
fused for being in the wrong. The lady laughs and replies that
e would not have refused his attentions, but that Gawain, even
she had, is strong enough to force himself upon any woman so
ll-bred as to rebuff the knight's advances. Gawain rejects the
dea of force as unworthy, but once again he places himself under
he lady's command to kiss or not however she pleases. Needless
o say, the lady leans down and kisses the courteous knight.

Gawain's testing is far from complete, however, for the fair
ady next raises the subject of the importance of love to
ighthood. She aggressively questions Gawain as to why so young
and bold and courteous a knight never attempts to teach her the
skills of true love. After all, she reasons, the art of risking
one's life for love or suffering through grievous times for the

of the beloved is inscribed in the books of knighthood. The lady then shows anger and asks Gawain if he is ignorant of all knightly learning, or if he thinks she is too foolish to listen to his lesson. She then scolds Gawain for treating her so discourteously after she has come to him while her husband is away in order to learn about the art of love. Gawain flatters her into good humor again when he responds that he is very glad she spends her time "playing" with him, but that the reason he never tries to teach her of his knightly learning is he knows that she possesses more skill in the craft of love than he ever will in his life. The lady accepts Gawain's argument, and she kisses him one more time before she departs.

In this second temptation of Gawain, the scene moves with the furious pace of the boar hunt because, as Gallant mentions, the "itches" of the lady are as sudden and changeable as the thrusts of the boar (43), and Gawain has to think swiftly in order to defend his virtue. The lady first scolds Gawain as a teacher would a student for forgetting his previous lesson in love, and then she simultaneously disdains his great reputation as a courtly lover and accuses him of mistreating a lady. The lady's taunting speech is an attempt to wear down the defenses of the knight, just as the sharp arrows released by the hunters in the wilderness serve to tire the angry boar so that he may finally be captured. It is true, as Gallant notes, that the lady's suggestion of lust and violence is significant in this scene because she not only encourages kisses and love talk, but also ravishment:

'Ma fay,' quo the mere wyf, 'Ze may not be werned,
Ze are stif innoghe to constrayne wyth strenkpe, Zif

yow lykez,
 3if any were so vilanous þat yow devaye wolde.'
 (1495-97)

speech, as Gallant states, is an "undisguised appeal to lust through the agency of malice," with both lust and malice being "lower appetites" characteristic of the boar (44). In addition to the lower appetites which connect the boar hunt and the second temptation, the reference to Gawain's strength recalls the description of the strong boar who surrenders only after a fierce battle.

When Gawain rejects this suggestion of force, the lady changes tactics yet again and behaves as if Gawain has acted discourteously towards his hostess. However, as J. F. Kiteley states in his article on the concept of courtesy in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, there is ample evidence of Gawain's courteous behavior in the lady's presence in other situations throughout the poem, so it would appear that the lady is giving a specialized meaning to the word "courtesy" (7). Kiteley then argues that the lady's notions of courtesy most nearly coincide with the ideas of courtly love found in De Arte Honeste Amandi by Andreas Capellanus (8) while Gawain's courtesy, which manifests itself as good manners and considerate behavior, depends upon many virtues, (the symbol of the endless knot), and especially upon a Christian virtue of courtesy, in order to remain intact (13). Thus, according to Kiteley's concept of courtesy in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, it would appear that the lady's plan to seduce the knight must fail because she and Gawain are working toward opposite goals; whereas the lady desires to destroy Gawain's

due with her dishonorable love, Gawain's objective is to achieve perfect virtue through courtesy. Neither character attains his goal, however, for Gawain accepts the girdle and discovers he is an imperfect man, but the majority of his virtue remains intact during the lady's testing.

The lady changes her strategy and accuses Gawain of not behaving in the manner of "trwe knyȝtez" (1514) in the books on chivalry. Maureen Fries discusses the irony of the lady's lecture concerning the proper activities of a knight. Fries notes that while the hostess reminds Gawain of the various duties which a knight must perform for love, she actually hinders his ability to act in a knightly fashion when she restrains him with her welcome advances (35). Gawain is unable to join the other men on the hunt because he must remain behind and courteously entertain his host's wife.

David Mills also offers discussion of the lady's lecture to Gawain. Mills describes her speech as marking a reversal of the lady's role from teacher of etiquette to pupil in love (625):

And ze, pat ar so cortays and coynt of your hetes,
Oghe to a zonke bynk zern to schewe
And teche sum tokenez of trweluf craftes.
(1525-27)

However, as Mills notes, the lady fails to realize that Gawain's quest is not like those which occur in the books, nor can his love for the hostess resemble the love affairs described in the romances because Gawain refuses to show disloyalty to his host. Instead, Mills argues that the knight refuses to accept the lady's role of innocent pupil in love (625), as is illustrated in the passage in which Gawain replies to her accusations with an

ment which is filled with double meaning:

And towche þe temez of tyxt and talez of armez
 To yow þat, I wot wel, weldez more slyzt
 Of þat art, bi þe half, or a hundreth of seche
 As I am, oþer euer schal, in erde þer I leue,
 Hit were a fole felefolde, my fre, by my trawþe.
 (1541-45)

le states that Gawain's use of the word "slyght" to refer to
 art of love may suggest not merely an "acquired skill," but
 to the "skill to deceive" in an ambiguous "art" (626). Gawain's
 uttering reply certainly seems to contain a hint of suspicion.

Unlike the boar, however, Gawain is able to defend himself so
 all against all the lady's various strategies that neither he nor
 his hostess feels anything but joy at the game. When Gawain
 refers to the lady's superior knowledge of love, the hostess
 realizes that her plan of playing the innocent maiden is not
 succeeding, and she ceases to test Gawain for the time being.

After the hostess departs, Gawain arises and attends mass,
 then spends the rest of the day in the company of the ladies.
 While the knight is thus employed, the lord passes the afternoon
 pursuing the fierce boar, but after a long battle, the boar is
 killed and carried to the castle where the host fulfills his side
 of the bargain by giving slabs of meat and the great boar's head
 to Gawain. Gawain presents the host his day's winnings in the
 form of two kisses, and the company sits down to a feast. During
 the meal, the lady discomfits Gawain by sitting beside him and
 making sly suggestions in an attempt to earn his favor. Rather
 than feeling flattered, however, Gawain feels angry, but his good
 breeding does not allow him to turn against a lady, no matter how
 the lord may interpret their actions. It is noteworthy that this

he contrasts with Gawain's first meal in the lord's castle where the knight and his hostess enjoyed such "comfort of her paynye" through their "dere dalyaunce of her derne wordez" (11-12). It is possible that after spending two mornings alone with Gawain in his bedchamber, the hostess feels she has some claim on the noble knight. However, it is also possible that Gawain feels uncomfortable in the presence of the lady now that he knows what she wants from him, and perhaps he does not trust her to keep her "luf" for him a secret. Nevertheless, Gawain continues to behave towards her "al in daynte, how-se-euer þe dede turned towrast" (1662), a decision which foreshadows Gawain's rationalization when he accepts the lady's gift of the green girdle.

After the feast is concluded, Gawain and the host agree to keep the same covenant one more time. The lord hints again at what lies ahead for Gawain:

"For I haf fraysted þe twys, and faythful I fynde þe.
 Now 'þrid tyme þrowe best' þenk on the morne,
 Make we mery quyl we may and mynne vpon joye,
 For þe lur may mon lach when-so mon lykez."
 (1679-83)

Gawain agrees with his host, and the two men part.

During the hunt the next morning a small dog discovers a fox trail, and the lord and his men chase the wily fox through the forest. Everywhere the fox turns he is met by yelping dogs or shouting men, and he continues slyly to dodge and swerve from his pursuers until mid-afternoon.

While the fox hunt takes place in the forest, the lady prepares herself to meet Gawain in his chamber for the third

temptation scene. Gawain continues to slumber, "Bot the lady for
 if let not to slepe, / Ne þe purpose to payre þat pyzt in hir
 hert" (1733-34). George Sanderlin states that the lady's "luf" is
 the result of the sympathy and affection she feels for Gawain, and
 that her inability to sleep may be the effect of her anticipation
 of their final encounter. Sanderlin then says that the lady
 wishes both to succeed and not to succeed in her task of testing
 Gawain's virtue; she wants to succeed so that she may fulfill her
 purpose in the plan to shame Arthur's court, but she also does not
 want to succeed because of the affection which she feels for the
 knight (18). However, the lady never explicitly expresses her
 true feelings for Gawain in the romance; thus, Sanderlin's reason
 for the lady's sleeplessness must be regarded as pure conjecture.

The lady dresses herself carefully in a long robe made of
 furs, but her breast and her back are bare so that she may appear
 as seductive as possible. Gallant notes that the description of
 her outfit is curious as well as provocative because it is the
 first time in the three temptation scenes that the poet describes
 the lady's dress. Gallant then suggests that the lady, dressed in
 furs with her white chest exposed, is arrayed like a fox in order
 to catch a fox (47). Gallant equates Gawain with the fox because
 the knight accepts a magic talisman which shows his lack of faith
 in Divine Providence (45). Gallant argues that throughout the
 romance the fox is described in words that convey a Christian
 indignation with the devil, although Gawain's association with the
 fox does not indicate that he is becoming "devil-like," but merely
 reflects the lapse in his Christian faith when he accepts the

ical girdle (46). On the other hand, although Gallant does not
 so, the parallel equation of lady with fox could lead to the
 tentative connection of the lady with the devil, a suggestion not
 befitting her role as tempter in the romance.

Kiteley also notes the appropriateness of the lady's dress,
 though not for her resemblance to a fox, but because of her
 seductive appearance. Kiteley states that the lady finally
 resorts to using physical charms to gain her ends, but her
 approach is legitimate within the principles of Courtly Love, for
 Andreas Capellanus states that beauty is one of the three ways of
 acquiring love (11).

The lady awakens Gawain from a troubled sleep, and the knight
 welcomes her joyfully and notices her lovely appearance.
 According to the poet, Gawain is so attracted to the lady and so
 careful of his courteous behavior before her ardent love that his
 virtue is in danger of collapsing if the Virgin Mary does not help
 her knight. Gawain realizes his predicament: "He cared for his
 portaysye, lest crapayn he were, / And more for his meschef 3if he
 schulde make synne, / And be traytor to pat tolke pat pat telde
 pat" (1773-75). However, the knight declares that he shall not
 allow himself to break any of his vows.

When the lady realizes that neither her appearance nor her
 love speeches are having the desired effect upon Gawain she tries
 a new tactic to cause the knight to dishonor himself: she
 reproaches Gawain for not informing her that he has a sweetheart.
 Gawain replies that he has no lover, nor will he take one. When
 she realizes the finality of Gawain's statement, the lady sadly

esses the knight and prepares to take leave of him. Gallant states that the lady's sadness is not merely a product of wounded feminine pride at the knight's rejection of her, but it is also the result of her failure to lure Gawain closer to deceit (48). This idea may be true, but it is also possible that the lady displays melancholy as merely another emotional tactic to cause Gawain's downfall. It is probable that the lady has no intention of leaving the bedchamber until she gets what she wants: Gawain's defeat.

With a mournful expression the lady then asks the knight for a gift so that she may think upon him and lessen her sadness, but Gawain responds that he has no gift which is worthy enough to honor her noble love. The lady does not argue, but replies that Gawain must take something of hers. She offers him a precious ring, but the knight refuses her gift because he has nothing of value to give her in return. The lady then offers him her green girdle because it is less valuable than the ring, but Gawain refuses once again and says that he is already beholden to her for her kindness. The lady continues to urge Gawain to accept the silk garment, and finally she informs him of the value of the gift which magically protects the wearer from being slain by any means on earth. Gawain ponders this statement and realizes the usefulness of the girdle in his upcoming confrontation with the Green Knight. When the lady continues to press him to take the gift, Gawain graciously accepts. He also agrees to her request that he not tell the lord of this gift. The lady kisses him for the third time and departs with the knowledge that her task as the

ater of Gawain is now finished: "For more myrþe of þat mon mozt
not gete" (1871). Gawain dresses and goes to confession, after
which he passes the remainder of the day merrily with the noble
adies.

Gawain's acceptance of the girdle has been studied by
merous critics, and as a result, suggestions abound concerning
e nature of the knight's downfall. Gallant argues that on a
rely psychological level, the lady's request for a glove and her
ffer of a ring and of the girdle, (which she initially declares
o be worthless), wear down Gawain's resistance to accepting a
ift and set him off guard just before the lady makes the only
oductive offer of the lot--an object which will insure the safety
f his life. Gallant then states that in this scene there is a
lear-cut parallelism between the action of the fox which swerves
ay from the host's blade and into the hound's teeth, and
awain's "false turn" away from the glove and the ring and into
ishonorable acceptance of the girdle (48).

George Engelhardt, like Gallant, discusses Gawain's
predicament from the point of view that the knight's acceptance of
the girdle, which Gawain believes will not only save his life but
appease the aggressive lady as well, only adds to the knight's
dilemma. Engelhardt states that when Gawain takes the lady's
gift, he not only breaks his previous pact with the host, but also
ains against piety. Engelhardt notes that ironically, Gawain's
"semi-noble" reason for accepting the lady's gift only makes his
predicament that much worse (222).

Mills notes another ironic result of Gawain's taking the

girdle from the lady: when the knight discovers the protective quality of the green garment it becomes a "juel" (1856) to him rather than a worthless piece of cloth. Mills argues that Gawain rejects the precious material of the valuable ring because he does not wish to be beholden to the lady. However, as Mills states, Gawain accepts the girdle, and because the girdle is worth more than anything to the knight, he is actually in more debt to his hostess (629).

Laila Gross discusses another noteworthy idea concerning Gawain's acceptance of the girdle. Gross notes that during the Middle Ages the law forbade a knight to carry any magical object on his person, and he had to take an oath affirming his nonpossession of charms and his disbelief in them before he could engage in single combat. Thus, Gross concludes that Gawain not only broke the moral code of the time, but the historically documented chivalric code as well when he tied the magical sash around his waist (155).

While Gawain accepts the girdle and falls into the lady's trap, the fox in the forest swerves to avoid the lord's axe and is captured by a hound. After the fox's fur is removed, the hunters return merrily to the castle where Gawain greets the lord with the three kisses he received during the day. However, Gawain makes no mention of the green girdle and thus fails to fulfill his part of the bargain with the host. Gallant notes the irony of this exchange scene, in which Gawain's attire symbolizes his state of mind; he wears a blue robe (a color which symbolizes the Virgin), but the garment is trimmed in fur (like the dress of the

mpress). Gallant observes that the moment Gawain fails to meet the agreement, the host hands over the fox skin and complains, "for I haf hunted al pis day, and nozt haf I geten / Bot pis foule felle--pe fende haf pe godez!" (1943-44). Gallant argues that the host's speech is deliberately humorous because he knows the inappropriateness of his gift to Gawain, who is playing the part of the foxy "fende" with his lies and deceit (48-49).

After Gawain and the lord exchange gifts, the members of the court eat and rejoice until it is time to retire. Gawain thanks the host for his hospitality and reminds him that he will need a guide to lead the way to the Green Chapel. The lord agrees and replies with evident irony, "Al pat euer I yow hyzt halde schal I fede" (1970). Gawain does not realize the truth of the host's words as he thanks the noble ladies and all the members of the court for their kindness to him.

The next morning Gawain arises and dresses in his noblest clothes, his polished armor, and his magical girdle. The knight then mounts his horse, blesses the members of the court, and begins his grim journey to the Green Chapel. When the accompanying guide tries to persuade Gawain to flee from his upcoming trial, Gawain thanks him for his concern but continues on his journey. The guide departs quickly and the knight comes upon the rugged chapel alone. When the Green Knight appears, the two men prepare to conclude the pact made the previous year, but as the Green Knight's axe descends, Gawain flinches in fear. The Green Knight stays his stroke and rebukes Gawain for his cowardice. The magical knight feigns a second blow to test

Gawain's reaction, but this time the hero does not move. Gawain angrily tells his opponent to complete the bargain, and when his neck is nicked on the third stroke, Gawain leaps up and informs the Green Knight that their agreement is finished and that he will passively await another blow. The Green Knight agrees and explains that the three blows correspond to the three exchanges made between Gawain and the host, for the Green Knight and the host are one and the same. Thus, the green girdle which Gawain wears actually belongs to the Green Knight. However, because Gawain kept the girdle secret to save his own life rather than to increase his material wealth, he is only nicked as a punishment. Nevertheless, the shame which Gawain feels at his failure is more than punishment enough. The Green Knight hears Gawain's confession and absolves him of all guilt, then asks the knight to return to the castle so that he may make his peace with the lord's wife. Gawain refuses the invitation but excuses the lady for her treachery because she is merely one in a long line of women who have beguiled men.

Gawain's harangue on the "wyles of wymmen" is surprising in that he seems to blame the lady for his own surrender to temptation. S. L. Clark and Julian N. Wasserman state that Gawain's anti-feminist tirade probably stems from Gawain's anger at himself. Nevertheless, they note that he places the blame on women, despite the fact that it is no more a woman's fault that he succumbs to temptation than it is the Green Knight's fault that Gawain flinches (63). Engelhardt similarly notes that it is ironic that the one virtue which had remained intact during the

temptation scenes, Gawain's courtesy to women, vanishes during his bargain on the wiles of the female sex (223). Thus, we might conclude, the knight who is "funden fautlez" at the beginning of the romance fails every test: he dishonors his king, his court, and his God when he accepts the girdle, he breaks his vow to his host when he conceals his winnings, and he speaks discourteously of women when he discovers the true nature of his trial. However, the Green Knight forgives Gawain for being an imperfect human in a world of turmoil.

When Gawain discovers the connections among the beheading challenge, the exchange bargain, and the temptations, he asks to keep the green girdle as a reminder of his transgression. Gawain then asks the Green Knight his name, and the man replies that he is called Bertilak de Hautdesert. Bertilak explains that it was Morgan la Fee, the old woman, who sent him to Camelot in order to test the fine reputation of Arthur's court and scare Guenore to death with his fierce appearance. Bertilak urges Gawain to return to Hautdesert to speak with his aunt Morgan, who is Arthur's half-sister, but once again Gawain refuses and returns instead to Camelot.

Many critics react with incredulity when the Green Knight reveals Morgan's controlling role in the romance because of the unexpectedness of the Green Knight's revelation; numerous scholars argue that the Gawain-Poet does not adequately prepare the audience for the importance of the old woman, Morgan la Fee, to the story. However, because the Gawain-Poet included, for whatever reasons, the character of Morgan in Sir Gawain and the

Green Knight, the present investigation focuses only upon the function of the enchantress as the major tester of Arthur's court.

When the Green Knight reveals Morgan la Fee as the force behind the testing, he links her skill in enchantment with the magical arts of Merlin, Arthur's famous magician:

þurȝ myȝt of Morgne la Faye, þat in my hous lenges,
 And koyntyse of clergye, bi craftes wel lerned,
 þe maystres of Merlyn mony hatz taken--
 For ho hatz dalt drwry ful dere sumtyme
 With þat conable klerk, þat knowes alle your knyȝtez at
 hame. . . . (2446-50)

Lynn Staley Johnson argues that the Green Knight speaks ambiguously of the relationship between Morgan la Fee and Merlin so that the newly "reborn" Gawain will carefully regard the ideals of Camelot after suffering from the treachery at Hautdesert. Johnson also suggests that the connection between Merlin and Morgan in the romance suggests a bond between Camelot and Hautdesert (80).

The Green Knight tells Gawain that Morgan sent him to Camelot to test the honor of Arthur's knights and to frighten Guenore with his sinister appearance. Bertilak then reminds Gawain that Morgan is his aunt, and he asks Gawain to return to Hautdesert and "make merry" with the other members of Bertilak's court, and invitation which, as we have seen, Gawain refuses.

Larry D. Benson, in Art and Tradition in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight", discusses Gawain's reluctance to return to Hautdesert after he discovers the role of Morgan in his adventures. Benson argues that at the end of Sir Gawain, the hero not only learns of his own unworthiness, but he is forcibly reminded of his relationship with the noble Arthur and also with

the evil Morgan. Benson states that Morgan "is the symbol of the evil that Gawain discovers in his flesh, a discovery that angers and shames him. . ." (32). A. C. Spearing agrees with Benson's argument, and he adds that Gawain's refusal to return to the desert may also stem from his inability to reconcile his aspirations and his conduct (228).

When Gawain arrives in Camelot, all the members of Arthur's court are overjoyed to see him alive. The knight relates the story of what he characterizes as his dishonorable failure of the various tests, but while he suffers great shame during the telling of his adventures, his listeners merely laugh at the entertaining tale. The members of Camelot all agree that, for Gawain's sake, each noble knight of the Round Table should wear a green band. Clark and Wasserman state that the court's amused reaction to Gawain's shameful story demonstrates the defect of debilitating pride which exists in Camelot. Because the audience of the poem recognizes the prideful nature of Arthur's court, Clark and Wasserman argue that Morgan's intent to take away the court's "wyttez" may be viewed more positively (64).

After the poet describes the court's reaction to Gawain's adventures, he ends the romance with a brief summary of Arthur's noble lineage. This technique links the beginning and the ending of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight to present a cohesive and artistically excellent alliterative romance. The final two lines of the poem comprise a conventional prayer to Christ.

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In conclusion, it may be seen that the female characters in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight play an important role in the

testing of Gawain and of Arthur's court. Although the Gawain-Poet only briefly mentions the character of Queen Guenore in the romance, the Green Knight cites her as one of the major reasons for the testing of Camelot: Morgan sends the Green Knight to Arthur's court not only to test the knights of the Round Table, but also to frighten Guenore. After Gawain accepts the Green Knight's challenge and travels to Hautdesert, Lady Bertilak, the central testing figure, employs various psychological strategies in her attempts to cause Gawain to dishonor himself. However, she is unsuccessful until she offers Gawain his life rather than her love. After the Green Knight nicks Gawain with the axe for being disloyal, Gawain discovers that the lady's temptations were tests of his virtue, and that the true creator of the various tests was his aunt, Morgan la Fee. From his trials, so carefully planned and executed by the women in the romance, Gawain learns that he is not the faultless knight everyone believes him to be, and he continues to wear the green girdle as a reminder of his imperfection. Through these same tests, the modern audience not only becomes acquainted with medieval ideas of knightly honor, but also comes to recognize the impossibility of remaining true to contradictory ideals.

Chapter Four

Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle

Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle, an anonymous work composed in the last half of the fifteenth century, is the story of the courteous Gawain and his noble obedience to a churlish Carle. The Carle devises several tasks so that he may test the compliance of the visiting knight, but Gawain passes every test, thus helping to bring about a change for the better in his host. Arthur knights the newly-changed man, thus elevating him from a churlish Carle to a noble knight of the Round Table.

Two versions exist which describe the adventures of Gawain and the Carle. The earlier romance exists in the MS Porkington 10 and is the version which will be discussed in this chapter. The later version of the story, entitled The Carle off Carlyle, was written in the mid-seventeenth century. This rendition of the tale exists in the Bishop Percy Folio.

Although the forms differ between the two works, their respective plots are remarkably similar. The major difference is that in the Percy manuscript, Gawain decapitates the Carle, a beheading scene which does not occur in the Porkington manuscript. The Carle then returns to normal human size and becomes a noble person. The Porkington manuscript does not contain this beheading scene; nevertheless, the Carle manages to change from a churlish character to a nobleman through the obedience of Gawain. Henry Peyton argues that the early Porkington manuscript was copied by

two scribes, and where the first scribe's handwriting ends and the second scribe's begins there is a leaf missing which could possibly include a beheading scene (125). However, because the Porkington text was composed during approximately the same period as the other works discussed in this investigation, this thesis will not address the beheading scene in the Percy manuscript, but will follow the story of the early Porkington text.

There has been relatively little criticism written over the years concerning The Carl of Carlisle, and much of what has been produced has been concerned with sources and analogues to the tale rather than with the romance itself. Donald Sands argues that The Carl of Carlisle has lacked scholarly attention because it contains several motifs, such as a temptation scene, a hunting scene, and a variation of a beheading scene, which are all events strongly reminiscent of the more artistic Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (348).

However, The Carl of Carlisle does contain a notable distinction from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: the functions of the female characters differ in the two romances. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Lady Bertilak and Morgan la Fee act as autonomous testers of the knights of the Round Table. On the other hand, the women in The Carl of Carlisle act as tester and reward for the visiting men because it is the will of the Carle that they behave in such a manner. The Carle's daughter is too afraid to disobey her fierce father, and even the Carle's beautiful wife allows her husband to direct her actions. Unlike the Lady Bertilak who merely fills the role of tempter, the women

in the Carle's household function as both the tester and the reward. The fact that the poet does not name either the Carle's wife or the daughter may suggest that, to a degree, the women are merely mechanical participants in the Carle's game.

Peyton argues that the obvious intent of the poet of The Carl is to present Sir Gawain as a model of knightly courtesy, especially as his nobility compares with the behavior of Sir Kay and Bishop Baldwin (122). The poet certainly extolls the virtues of Gawain in the opening stanza of the poem:

Lystonnyth, lordyngus, a lyttyll stonde
 Of on that was sekor and sounde
 And doughty in his dede.
 He was as meke as mayde in bour
 And therto styfe in euery stour,
 Was non so doughtty in dede.
 Dedus of armus wyttout lese
 Seche he wolde in war and pees
 In mony a stronge lede. (1-9)

Like the beginning of The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, the opening of The Carl of Carlisle establishes the nobility of Gawain but hardly touches upon the merits of King Arthur. This grand praise of Gawain suggests to the audience that the courteous knight is to be the hero of the story.

The story begins with the king's suggestion that he and his men hunt deer. The poet interrupts the action to insert a long catalogue which describes Arthur's knights. When the poet finally returns to the subject of the hunt, he describes the actions of Gawain, Sir Kay, and Bishop Baldwin as they chase a "raynder" until a mist arises and the men find themselves cut off from their hunting party. True to his petulant nature, Sir Kay begins to complain about their predicament. Fortunately, the Bishop knows

of a fierce Carle who lives nearby who might give them lodging for the night. Kay threatens to fight the Carle, but Gawain warns him to act with care and says that he himself will behave politely toward his host.

Once again, as in The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, magical events occur when romance characters go hunting in a forest. In this case, a mist is added to give an even more unearthly quality to Gawain's adventure. G. H. Maynadier remarks that the mist in The Carl of Carlisle may well be supernatural like other mists of popular stories (153). Even though there is no evident magic which occurs in the Porckington version of The Carl of Carlisle, one may suggest that the adventure with the Carle is a little too strange to be totally unconnected with magic, and the atmospheric presence of the mist may strengthen that possibility.

When the Gawain and his companions arrive at the Carle's castle the porter warns them to leave while they are still able, but when Kay threatens to break down the doors, the guard, after seeking permission from the Carle, allows them to enter. Arthur's men find themselves in a room with a gigantic man and his four "whelps": a bull, a boar, a lion, and a bear, but the savage animals obey the command of the Carle to leave the visitors alone. The men stare at the fearsome appearance of their host:

The Carle the knyghttus can beholde,
Wytt a stout vesage and a bolde;

Hys moght moch, his berd graye
 Ouer his brest his lockus lay
 As brod as anny fane;
 Betwen his schuldors, whos ryght can rede,
 He was ij tayllors yardus a brede.
 (247-57)

The poet then describes the Carle's long and powerful legs which are thicker than any post in the hall, and his great arms and fingers which can deliver a strong blow.

Gawain remembers his manners and kneels to his host, but the Carle immediately tells him to arise:

"Lett be thy knellynge, gentyll knyght;
 Thow logost wytt a Carll to-nyght,
 I swer, by Sennt Iohnn.
 For her no corttesy thou schalt have,
 But carllus corttesy, so God me save,
 For serttus I can non."
 (274-79)

The Carl's speech warns the visitors what type of courtesy they may expect, for in the Middle Ages, the word "carl" referred to a man of low estate and was often used as a synonym for knave or rascal. Robert W. Ackerman also adds that when the Carle addresses the kneeling Gawain, the host, apparently in a jesting spirit, utters part of the formula speech used to create a knight (29n). The Carle now begins his testing.

The bishop and Sir Kay both fail the first test when they mistreat the Carle's horse for eating their horses' food. For their misconduct, the Carle gives both men a "boffett." Gawain, however, after asking his host's leave, not only takes the Carle's horse out of the rain, but covers it with his green mantle (a color favored by hunters) and allows the foal to eat with his own horse. The Carle praises Gawain's courteous action many times.

The next test begins at dinner when the Carle's lovely wife

appears. She is the perfect example of vague, medieval literary beauty with her fair complexion, her small arms and slender waist, her gray eyes and arched brows, and her noble attire too glorious to describe. It is obvious that the poet of The Carle was aware of the medieval literary technique for describing a beautiful female, for the only aspect of her vague, stereotyped appearance which he fails to mention is the color of her hair. The poet states:

Of curttesy sche was perfette.
 Her roode was reede, her chekus rounde,
 A feyrror myght not goo on grounde,
 Ne lowelyur of syghte. (366-69)

In fact, the lady is so lovely that Sir Kay thinks her beauty is wasted on such a foul man as the Carle, but his host, apparently reading Kay's thoughts, rebukes the knight for thinking what he dares not speak.

During the dinner, Gawain politely remains standing because the Carle has not yet given him leave to sit and eat. Sir Kay and the Bishop, on the other hand, appear to have no qualms about helping themselves to the food. Gawain's careful courtesy here recalls the opening scene of Arthur's Christmas feast in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, in which Gawain first asks permission from the queen to leave the table, and then asks leave of the king to cut off the Green Knight's head. Gawain's polite behavior in The Carle is merely another example of his noble manner.

When the Carle notices the standing knight he orders Gawain to take a spear and use it to hit him in the face. However, the Carle tells Gawain not to worry because he will not be harmed while he is "gyaunt in londe" (390), a phrase which Sands translates to mean "strong man here" (363n). Gawain obeys his

host's command and hurls the spear so hard that sparks fly when the weapon contacts the stone wall. Similarly, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the poet describes the burning sparks which result from the striking of the Green Knight's horse's hooves against the stone floor of Arthur's court. In The Carle of Carlisle, Gawain must once again confront a fearsome challenger, and sparks are emitted at the contact. Gawain passes his host's test, and the Carle praises him for his obedience as he leads the knight to the chair beside the Carle's wife and bids Gawain to sit and eat. For the first time, however, the knight disobeys his host's command, for Gawain feels so much love for the beautiful woman that he can neither drink nor eat. The Carle gently rebukes the knight and tells him to leave such thoughts and drink some wine, for the lady is married to the Carle and Gawain shall not have her. Gawain then feels shame at his thoughts.

The Carle's daughter soon comes into the room, and if anything, her appearance is even more radiant than that of her lovely mother:

As gold wyre schynnyde her here.
 Hit cost a M li and mar,
 Her aparrell pertly pyghte.
 Wytt ryche stonnus her clothus wer sett,
 Uytt ryche perllus about her frete,
 So semly was that syghte.
 Duyr all the hall gann sche leme
 As hit were a sonbeme--
 That stonnus schone so bryght. (418-26)

The description of the physical features of the Carle's daughter is even more generalized than that of her mother. The audience knows only that the girl has golden hair and is arrayed in an expensive dress covered with precious stones. There is a

great contrast, however, between the appearance of this young lady in her dress which cost one thousand pounds, and Dame Ragnelle in her wedding dress which cost three thousand gold marks. The dress worn by the Carle's daughter makes her appear still more beautiful, but Dame Ragnelle continues to resemble an ugly hag even in an expensive dress.

The brilliant appearance of the Carle's young daughter and the description of the white stones and pearls which adorn her garment indicate the innocence and purity of this maiden. A maple wood harp is brought to her and she sits before her father and sings songs of the love and feats of arms found in Arthur's court.

Like Dame Ragnell, there seems to be more to the Carle's character than his churlish appearance suggests. The evident beauty and nobility of his wife and daughter contrast with the low manners exhibited by the Carle, and one may wonder, like Sir Kay, why such lovely women are involved with such a churl. The value of the daughter's dress is also noteworthy; the Carle certainly appears to have money even if he has no manners.

The Carle's wife is so lovely that her beauty causes Gawain to fall immediately in love, an action which recalls the episode in Sir Launfal where Launfal appears to fall in love with the beautiful Tryamour at first sight. The importance of a beautiful appearance is also a theme in The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell, where the beautiful Dame Ragnelle is loved and respected more than the ugly hag. Of course, in order for Gawain's upcoming bedroom scene in The Carl of Carlisle to be as difficult a test as possible, he must first have the most beautiful bedmate in the

and, a role which the Carle's wife seems to fill admirably. However, although the lady is lovely to look at, the poet makes no mention of her behavior or manner. She is not like Lady Bertilak in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, who engages Gawain in flirtatious conversation and independently creates her own strategies for seduction. Rather, the function of the Carle's wife seems to be merely to tempt Gawain physically but not emotionally. Consequently, her character appears very flat and dull, but it is questionable whether this result is due to lack of poetic talent, or whether the woman was not meant to have any importance except her beauty.

One thing is certain, however, and that is the Carle's possessiveness of his lovely wife. There is a great deal of difference between the Carle, who rebukes a silent, love-stricken Gawain for his desirous thoughts, and Lord Bertilak in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, who promotes the relationship between Gawain and his wife by leaving them alone together for many hours at a time. Both men are testing the courtesy and obedience of Gawain, but where the Gawain-Poet builds suspense by not allowing the host to judge the actions of Gawain until the beheading challenge is concluded, the Carle is always present to pass immediate judgment on the outcome of Gawain's tests. Perhaps this difference between the two hosts is not surprising, for it is evident that Lord Bertilak possesses supernatural powers and thus may be aware of all Gawain's actions even when the host is hunting in the forest at the time of Gawain's testing. The Carle, on the other hand, makes no mention in this version of the text of being enchanted,

and so he must be present at the testing in order to know the actions of Gawain, even though Gawain's last test with the Carle's wife would be more challenging if the husband were to leave the bedroom. But, perhaps one reason the host is a "carl" is that he does not trust his wife to follow his instructions.

Unlike the Carle's wife, his daughter plays a more active role in the romance. During dinner, the daughter strums her harp and sings songs of Arthur's court and the love and battles which take place there. Many possible motives exist for her choice of these songs. Perhaps she chooses songs of this nature because the visitors have come from Arthur's court and she merely wishes to entertain them with tales of their own deeds. She could, on the other hand, be dreamily singing of a place where love and honor exist and men are knights rather than discourteous churls. It is also possible, if Kittredge is correct and the Carle must be beheaded by a knight of the Round Table in order to be disenchanted (89), that the daughter may be aware of this fact. She may realize that she will never escape from her horrid father, and that he will not escape from his horrid enchantment, until a knight of the Round Table appears. She sits in front of her father when she sings, but whether she is merely obeying his commands, or whether she is, in fact, singing songs of hope to the Carle is not made clear in the poem.

After dinner is concluded, Kay and Bishop Baldwin go to their rooms, but Gawain is taken to the Carle's chamber where he is ordered by his host to get into bed with his lovely wife. A servant helps Gawain to undress, after which the knight obeys the

Carle's command and takes the woman in his arms and kisses her. Gawain so much enjoys the "softnis of that lady's eyde" (463), a pleasure which the Carle notices, that "Uhen Gawen wolde haue doun the prevey far" (466), the Carle puts a quick end to the testing. However, as a reward for Gawain's obedience, the Carle promises that the knight will have as beautiful a woman to "play" (473) with all night. The host orders his daughter to go to Gawain's room and warns her not to reject the knight's attentions. "Sche dorst not ayenst his byddyng doun" (478), but goes to Gawain and quietly lies down by his side. The knight informs his host that he is satisfied with the presence of the daughter, and the Carle gives them his blessing and commands them to "play togedor" (486) all night. This is another order which Gawain is only too happy to obey, and the poet interjects his hope that the fair maiden is also as glad to be with "that genttyll knyght" (492). She seems pleased with the situation when she thinks,

"Mary, mercy," thought that lady bryghte,
 "Her come neuer suche a knyght
 Of all that her hathe benne." (493-95)

This statement is noteworthy because one wonders in what way the daughter is comparing Gawain to the other knights who have come before him. She should not be comparing Gawain's sexual prowess with that of other knights, even though she makes her speech while the couple is in bed, for the Carle says in a later scene that no other visiting knight has ever obeyed his commands to the Carle's satisfaction. Thus, if the daughter is the "reward" for passing the Carle's tests, then it follows that she has not yet been given to any man. Also, the poet's description of her as a "maye" (491)

implies innocent virginity rather than sexual experience.

It is possible that the daughter is merely commenting on the fact that Gawain has succeeded in winning her, whereas no other man has ever earned the prize of being her bed partner. If Gawain is truly the first knight to obey all of the Carle's commands, and the daughter is aware of the testing of all visitors, then the fact that Gawain has survived at all is probably a surprise to the young woman.

Another possible meaning for her ambiguous statement may be that the daughter is comparing some unspoken element of Gawain's courteous behavior when she comments on his difference from all other knights. It is obvious, of course, that Gawain's courtesy and loyalty to his host are above reproach, but one can only wonder if the maiden is referring to other knightly qualities she sees in Gawain which are hidden to the audience.

The fact that the daughter dares not disobey her father is also a notable element of this romance. According to Harris, in romances obedience was as natural to a medieval daughter as that of command to a father, and "this customary submissiveness of the maiden may have rested largely upon her recognition that her father was the best and often the only means of procuring a desired husband" (25). This statement certainly applies in the case of The Carl of Carlisle, for it appears that the Carle's daughter must remain in the castle so that she may be rewarded to any knight who passes the tests of obedience. It is fortunate that the daughter is young enough to appeal to any visiting knight; perhaps the beauty of her appearance hints at the use of

magic to keep the daughter and her mother fresh and attractive so that they may function as the temptation and the reward. After all, the Carle has been testing his visitors for twenty years (517), and without any supernatural aid the mother, at least, would now appear much older and more wrinkled than when the testing first began.

Kurvinen perceives a different view of Gawain's bedroom scene with the Carle's daughter. Kurvinen argues that sleeping with the daughter is not Gawain's reward, but his final test. Kurvinen argues that the "byddyng" (503) which the Carle finds done the following morning refers to the young couple. Thus, Kurvinen concludes that "the episode with the daughter appears to be as much of a test as that with the wife. . ." (99).

Kurvinen also observes that the Porkington text does not explain what happened to the Carle's wife when his daughter joins Gawain in bed. Kurvinen argues that "this apparent oversight strongly suggests that the tests with the wife and the daughter represent the beginning and ending of one scene" (100). Kurvinen concludes that the Carle's wife and daughter seem to stand for one woman, whose role is to be partner in the last of the obedience tests (100).

The Carle's wife is also intriguing simply because so little of her character is portrayed in the romance. One wonders what the Carle's wife truly feels about her part in the testing, just as one may question the feelings of Lady Bertilak at the conclusion of the temptation scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. This question especially applies to the wife because she

has had to act as a tempter on a fairly regular basis (for the Carle to have killed ten cartloads of men), and she has had to take an active part in the testing itself. In all likelihood, the majority of the visiting knights did not reach the final test of embracing the Carle's wife in bed, (or sleeping with the Carle's daughter, if one accepts Kurvinen's argument), but conceivably the Carle's wife might have had to submit to the embraces of every man who has ever entered the castle. Unfortunately, the poet did not describe the emotions of the Carle's wife in this romance, but if he had, it would be intriguing to know how she feels about Gawain's attentions, and whether she is as impressed by the knight as her daughter appears to be.

After a night of pleasure with the Carle's daughter, Gawain prepares to take his leave of the young lady. When he kisses her she says,

"Mare, marce," seyde that lady bryght,
 "Uher I schall se enny more this knyght
 That hath ley my body so ner?" (508-10)

The knight makes no reply to this question, and it appears that neither of them plans to have a permanent relationship at this point. Obviously, the Carle has not shown much interest in his daughter's feelings if she believes she is to be used merely as a "payment" (481) and nothing more. It is also possible that her speech indicates that she is worrying about her future marriageability now that she is no longer the innocent maiden of the previous night. And, of course, the girl has probably enjoyed Gawain's company so much that she wishes to see him again.

When Gawain meets the Carle that morning, the fierce man

reveals the vow he made twenty years previously: no man or boy would lodge in the Carle's castle and survive unless he did everything the Carle commanded. Gawain is the first man in twenty years to pass all the tests, and the Carle is "fulle glade" (528) that his vow has been fulfilled. The Carle then takes Gawain to the place where the bones of the dead men are kept, and the host promises to forsake his wicked ways and never again kill any visitor who lodges with him. He also vows to have a chapel built so that ten priests may sing daily for the souls of all the men killed in the Carle's castle. All this the Carle promises to do for love of Gawain.

This scene of the Carle's confession to Gawain is a reversal of the final scene at the Green Chapel in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in which the tester absolves the one who has been tested. In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the Green Knight is portrayed as a priestly figure who listens to Gawain's confession and then absolves him of all sin. The Green Knight, who has tested Gawain's ideals through the exchange bargain, not only teaches the young knight about his own strengths and weaknesses, but also proves that Gawain is only human and not a god. In Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle, on the other hand, the Carle, who has acted as the tester throughout the romance, confesses his evil deeds to Gawain and vows to atone for his sins.

After the Carle confesses his sins to Gawain, the host's family members and their guests sit down to dinner, where Gawain and the young lady continue to enjoy each other's merry company. The Carle then passes out gifts, and he gives Sir Gawain his

daughter, a white palfrey, and a pack horse laden with gold. The host then tells Gawain to depart with his blessing and to invite King Arthur to dine in Carlyle the following day. Gawain agrees, and he and the young woman ride "syngynge away" (577).

When Gawain and his companions arrive at Arthur's court, they tell their extraordinary story. Arthur is glad they escaped with their lives, and he accepts the Carle's invitation to dine the following day.

The next morning, as Arthur and his group of knights arrive at the Carle's castle, their greeting is very different from Gawain's previous reception. Instead of being led into the castle by a grim porter who utters dire warnings, the party is accompanied into the hall by the notes from a variety of musical instruments. The Carle kneels and humbly welcomes the king to his castle, and the group sits down for a grand feast. The Carle says to Arthur, "Dothe gladly. / Here get ye no nothir curtesy, / As I vndirstonde" (619-21). This courteous speech is very different from the Carle's previous warning to Gawain and his fellow knights that they would receive nothing but "carllus cortessy." The king enjoys his visit, and the next morning he knights the Carle and makes him lord of the country of Carlyle. That same morning Gawain and the young lady marry, and the Carle is so pleased he holds a feast for a fortnight. After everyone departs, he founds an abbey in the town of Carlyle where monks may sing for the souls of all the men the Carle has killed in the past. The poet then ends the romance with a short prayer.

Just as the theme of testing plays a major role in the

preceding romances I have discussed, it may be seen that the theme of testing is also an integral part of Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle. However, in contrast, in this romance a male character plans and carries out the testing of Gawain. The Carle's wife and daughter are only secondary testers, and because they must do exactly as the Carle demands, they have no liberty to create their own tests of Gawain's honor. Unlike Lady Bertilak, who follows her husband's instructions but still has the independence to shape her test to fit Gawain's character, the Carle's wife does not utter one word throughout her part of the trial. Rather, she behaves like a mechanical being who knows only how to follow directions.

Because the testing of Gawain is the Carle's own invention, he necessarily directs all stages of the process. Thus, the women become only peripheral to the testing of Gawain's obedience. Gawain is the central hero, the Carle is the ultimate tester, and the nameless women function merely as tools to help the male characters attain their objectives.

Chapter Five

Le Morte Arthur (stanzaic)

The Stanzaic Morte Arthur, a metrical romance written in the latter half of the fourteenth century, follows the traditional Arthurian story of the love affair between Launcelot and Gaynor, the treachery of Arthur's bastard son Mordred, and finally the death of Arthur. The traitorous love between Launcelot and Gaynor is one major cause of the destruction of Camelot and the Round Table; knowledge of the treasonous affair pits knight against knight, with the result that Arthur's noble court quickly disintegrates. The anonymous author of the Stanzaic Morte borrowed his material from the French La Mort Artu and condensed it to create a fast-moving narrative which, according to Larry Benson in the introduction to King Arthur's Death, also centered upon the feelings of the characters. Benson observes that this focus on the emotions of the characters also occurs in other literature of the late fourteenth century (xvi).

Although the story is concerned with the life and death of King Arthur, the major female characters are necessary elements of the romance. Queen Gaynor's affair with Arthur's best knight helps to influence the direction of the tragic plot, but the Maid of Ascolot is also important to the romance because it is her involvement which sets many of the disastrous events in motion. The actions of these two women have a similarly profound effect on every character in the Stanzaic Morte.

The romance begins with a conventional address to the audience and a brief reference to the subject of the story, namely, the adventures of Arthur. The poet then moves immediately into the action of the poem, and the first scene depicts Arthur and his queen discussing past adventures while lying in bed. Gaynor notes that many of the "doughty knightes" (24) are leaving Camelot in search of adventure, and she suggests that Arthur hold a tournament so that the knights will be able to earn honor and admiration for their skill in arms without having to leave Arthur's court. Arthur agrees to her suggestion, and he later announces that a tournament will be held at Winchester. Two of the king's knights, however, do not attend the tournament with the others; Launcelot excuses himself so that he may remain near his queen, and Agravain stays behind so that he may catch the lovers "with the deed" (63). However, when Launcelot visits the queen's chamber, she only worries that they will be discovered by Agravain. As a result, Launcelot appears to change his mind about remaining at Camelot, and he arms himself and departs quickly for Winchester.

In less than one hundred lines, the poet convincingly demonstrates the power which Gaynor possesses over the men in her life. It is the queen who notices the lack of spirit in Arthur's knights and suggests the tournament as a remedy for their boredom. At first glance, her intentions appear completely honorable, yet the matter may not actually be so simple.

Gaynor voices concern over Arthur's "honour [that] beginnes to fall" (25), but one wonders if her desire for a tournament does

not stem from personal reasons as well as from queenly concerns. The poet makes no explicit mention of any personal reason which Gaynor might have for suggesting the tournament, but nevertheless, several possible motives do exist. The most obvious reason Gaynor might suggest a tournament is that it would allow her time to be alone with Launcelot. This reasoning does seem to play a part in the romance, for Launcelot remains home because he is sick "For love that was them between" (55). However, as soon as everyone departs for the tournament, Launcelot miraculously recovers and goes immediately to the queen's bedchamber. His presence is not met with joy, however, because the queen knows that Sir Agravaine has also remained at Camelot in order to trap the traitorous lovers.

Another possible motive Gaynor might have for proposing the tournament is that she may actually want Launcelot to go to Winchester so that his fame and honor will be increased. Launcelot is the best warrior at Camelot, and he would have little trouble defeating the other knights at the contest. Notably, any honor which Launcelot receives not only adds to the fame of Camelot, but to the glory of his lover as well.

When Launcelot arrives at the tournament, he asks permission to lodge with the Lord of Ascolot. The knight conceals his true identity from his host and asks to borrow the armor which belongs to the earl's ill son. The Lord of Ascolot agrees, and while the men discuss the tournament, the earl's beautiful daughter falls in love with the visiting knight. She loves him so much that all she can do is weep, and her heart nearly breaks in two for love of the

knight. Launcelot realizes that he is the cause of her deep emotion, and he asks her brother to accompany him to the lady's bedroom so that he may comfort her. When he sits on the bed beside the maid so that he may speak courteously with her, the girl takes Launcelot in her arms and tells him that unless he loves her in return, no physician will be able to save her life. Launcelot replies that because his heart has already been given to another, he is unable to love anyone else. However, Launcelot attempts to comfort the maid by adding that there is nothing to prevent him from being her knight. The maid requests that Launcelot bear her token in the tournament, and the knight responds that he will wear her sleeve "for the love of thee" (214). This is a service which he has never performed for anyone except Gaynor.

It is notable that this verbal exchange between Launcelot and the Maid of Ascolot is similar in several ways to the temptation scenes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. As does Lady Bertilak, the Maid of Ascolot behaves aggressively when "In her armes she gan him take" (197) in order better to persuade the reluctant knight to love her. And like Gawain, Launcelot does not surrender to the lady but remains true to his love for the queen. However, the knight does accept a gift from the lady, an action which echoes Gawain's acceptance of the green girdle, and the receipt of Launcelot's gift will contribute ultimately to the loss of his honor and the downfall of Camelot. Launcelot's display of the lady's love token will help to convince Gawain of the truth of the love that exists between Launcelot and the Maid of Ascolot, and

Gawain's erroneous belief will not only destroy the trust between the queen and her lover, but will also increase the ill-feeling between Gaynor and the other knights of the Round Table.

Launcelot's acceptance of the lady's sleeve, though only a small addition to the increasing trouble in Camelot, is just as disastrous in the long run to the ideals of the Round Table as the acceptance of the magical girdle is to Gawain's honor and ideals of perfection.

The Maid of Ascolot plays her next part in the downfall of Camelot when Launcelot returns to her father's castle after being wounded in the Winchester tournament. When Bors, Lionel, and Ector arrive and disclose the identity of their wounded kinsman, the maid is even happier, knowing that the man she loves is so famous. (Apparently, the maid has not yet heard the rumors "told in many a thede" (61) concerning Launcelot's affair with the queen.)

After three days, Launcelot's cousins return to Camelot with orders to tell the queen that Launcelot will return when he can. When Gaynor hears the good news, she is glad to hear that Launcelot is alive, and she sends the knights to Arthur to give him the joyful message. Gawain is also happy when he hears the tidings, and he hurridly departs for Ascolot so that he may visit his friend.

In the meantime, Launcelot prepares to leave for Camelot. The maiden weeps for sorrow and begs that Launcelot leave some remembrance that she might look at when she yearns for him. Just as Lady Bertilak in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight asks Gawain to

"Gif me sumquat of thy gifte, thi gloue if hit were, / That I may
 mynne on the, mon, my mourning to lassen" (1799-1800), the Maid of
 Ascolot begs Launcelot that "Some thing ye wolde beleve me here, /
 To look on when me longeth sore" (558-59). Launcelot courteously
 replies that he will leave his own armor for her and will travel
 in her brother's armor instead. Like Gawain, Launcelot's
 acquiescence will trouble him later.

After Launcelot leaves Ascolot, Gawain arrives at the castle
 in search of his friend. The earl and his family welcome the
 knight, and while they are eating together Gawain learns of the
 maiden's great love for Launcelot. She tells Gawain that
 Launcelot has chosen her for his "leman" and that she possesses
 his armor to prove it. Gawain replies that he is happy for her
 because she has the best sweetheart in the world. Gawain adds
 that,

"There is no lady of flesh ne bone
 In this worlde so thrive or thro,
 Though her herte were steel or stone,
 That might her love holde him fro."
 (588-91)

This speech is noteworthy because it suggests that Launcelot
 possesses an almost irresistible quality in his attraction for
 women. This suggestion makes sense, for though the queen loves
 Launcelot for all his famed knightly excellence, the Maid of
 Ascolot loves him deeply even before she knows his identity. Of
 course, it is possible that women love Launcelot at first sight
 because the same qualities which make him a noble knight are
 evident irrespective of the title of knighthood.

After Gawain views Launcelot's discarded armor, the knight

expresses his pleasure at the relationship between the beautiful maiden and the noble Launcelot. Gawain then pledges to be the lady's knight for Launcelot's sake, takes his leave of his host and hostess, and begins his journey to Camelot. One can only wonder why the maid concocts such a tale. The poet offers little in the way of psychological analysis, but one can, nevertheless, make some conjectures. Perhaps she boasts of ties with Launcelot to prevent Gawain from making unwelcome advances. Perhaps the maid merely expresses aloud her dreams of an intimate relationship with the noble Launcelot to make up, in part, for any loneliness she may feel. Perhaps, on the other hand, the maid may tell lies to make herself appear more noble and desirable to other men who hear of her "affair" with Launcelot. Perhaps she even hopes that Launcelot's real lover will hear of her story and discard the knight for his unfaithfulness.

The following morning, Gawain departs for Camelot, and when he arrives at Arthur's court he discovers that Launcelot has not yet returned and that both the king and queen are suffering because of his continued absence. Either Arthur or Gwynn--the text is ambiguous as to speaker--says that if Launcelot were alive he would not remain away from court for so long. Gawain, quick to console the unidentified speaker, replies that he is not surprised at Launcelot's continued absence because the knight has chosen the fairest woman alive to be his sweetheart. King Arthur is overjoyed at this news, and he asks Gawain the name of the maiden whom Launcelot has chosen. Gawain replies it is the daughter of the Earl of Ascolot who now possesses Launcelot's shield.

After hearing this joyful exchange between the two men, Gaynor silently returns to her chamber and nearly goes mad:

"Alas," she said, "and wele-a-wo,
That ever I ought life in lede!
The beste body is lost me fro
That ever in stour bestrode steed."
(652-55)

In this passage, Gaynor not only bewails her birth, but also laments her loss of Launcelot. Gaynor's concern for "the best body" who ever "bestrode steed" is noteworthy because it appears in her speech that she mourns the loss of Launcelot's esteemed military prowess rather than mourning his "infidelity." However, throughout the Stanzaic Morte, Gaynor nearly always expresses more concern for Launcelot's quality as a fighter than as a lover. Of course, a noblewoman during the Middle Ages needed a great deal of knightly protection, and no one more so than Gaynor because of her high station. Also, protection is important to her because of the problems that arise due to her traitorous affair with Launcelot. It is fortunate for Gaynor that Launcelot is one of England's greatest fighters, for she shows a constant need to be rescued. Gaynor's earlier suggestion to the king of a tournament clearly demonstrates her concern with battles and the glory of the knights of Camelot, but it is ironic that this same woman who believes that fighting ability is so important will later cause the military prowess of the knights of the Round Table to be tested upon each other.

However, nothing but Launcelot's betrayal matters to the queen as she remains in her bed, sick with sorrow over her supposed loss of Launcelot. It is notable that the queen

resembles the Maid of Ascolot; both women make themselves ill from the thought of Launcelot's love for another. The poet even uses the same phrase to refer to both women: "Weeping was her moste cheer" describes the Maid of Ascolot in line 183 and Queen Gaynor in line 726.

Launcelot finally returns to Camelot, and three days after his arrival he visits his queen. He kisses her and salutes all her ladies, and immediately Gaynor accuses Launcelot of loving the Maid of Ascolot and performing his bold deeds for her sake. Gaynor then asks Launcelot not to reveal the love that has been between them, and she also requests that he continue to perform great deeds of arms, for she would like to hear of his great prowess during her lonely suffering. Launcelot does not defend himself against these accusations except to say that he knows nothing of the rumors. However, he continues, because it appears that Gaynor does not wish to see him he will go away forever. As soon as Launcelot leaves, the queen swoons three times and nearly kills herself.

Because it appears that neither Launcelot nor Gaynor is interested in solving the evident problems in their affair, one may question the type of relationship which exists between them. Rather than attempting to justify their words, both characters retreat into hurt silence as a consequence of their erroneous conclusions. This unwillingness to discuss their problems shows what a shallow relationship exists between the queen and her knight, but one finds it possible to feel sympathy for two

characters who experience so much stress as a result of their traitorous relationship. As we have seen in both Sir Launfal and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, the necessity for secrecy in a relationship often results in the dishonoring of at least one character involved in the affair.

When the other knights discover that Launcelot has gone away again, they evidently assume that Gaynor is responsible for his departure and they curse the queen and the love that exists between the two nobles. Because the knights are angry at the queen, when they discover her swooning figure none of them comforts her. The anger of the knights is still present in the incident in which Gaynor gives the poisoned apple to the Scottish knight. Thus, none of Arthur's knights will defend the queen in a fight against Sir Mador, the brother of the dead knight. Once again Gaynor complains about the problems in her life, saying, "Lord, such sites me have sought! / Why ne may I never be blithe?" (870-71). Even Arthur fears that the queen will be found guilty, for "Though Arthur were king the land to weld, / He might not be again the right" (920-21). Because he must do what is legally right, Arthur sets a date for Gaynor's trial. Launcelot hears of the accusations against Gaynor and vows to save his queen if he is still alive on the day of the trial.

Meanwhile, Arthur and Gawain are discussing the upcoming trial when they notice a beautiful boat floating down the river below them. The king notices the richness of its appearance, and he says with more meaning than he knows,

"Such one saw I never ere;
 Thider I rede now that we go;
 Some adventures shall we see there,
 And yif it be within dight so
 As without, or gayer more,
 I dare savely say there-to
 Begin will auntere ere ought yare."

(977-83)

The "adventure" which Arthur and Gawain discover inside the boat is the body of the most beautiful woman on earth, whom Gawain recognizes as the Maid of Ascolot,

Which he some time had wooed fast
 His owne leman for to be,
 But she answerd him ay in haste
 To none but Launcelot wolde she te.

(1012-15)

Gawain tells the king that this is the woman he believed to be Launcelot's sweetheart, and the king replies that because he believes she died of sorrow, he would like to know her story.

Gawain finds a letter near the dead woman, and Arthur reads the note which is addressed to the king and all the knights of the Round Table. In the letter, the Maid of Ascolot tells her sad story to the knights of the Round Table because they are the most noble men in the world. In the letter the maid says that she has died,

For the noblest knight that may go;
 Is none so doughty dintes to dele,
 So real ne so fair there-to;
 But so churlish of manners in feld ne hall,
 Ne know I none of frend ne fo.

(1075-79)

Near the end of the letter the Maid of Ascolot reveals that it was Launcelot du Lak who caused her unhappiness, and for whom she "took to herte grete sorrow and care" (1089). She also says in the letter that this "noblest knight" refused to be her "leman"

even when she kneeled before him and wept.

Once again the Maid of Ascolot causes trouble as a result of her love for Launcelot. Earlier, she "proved" that she was Launcelot's sweetheart by exhibiting his armor to Gawain. Now she fails to include in her letter Launcelot's full response to her proposal of love: he cannot love her because his heart is already set in another place. Her failure to include Launcelot's complete argument causes the knight to appear as a hard-hearted creature rather than the faithful lover he actually is. The maid also charges Launcelot with being "churlish of manners in feld [and] hall" (1078), a noteworthy accusation because it calls into question Launcelot's knightly behavior. It is ironic that the maid's complaint concerning Launcelot's manners is more true than she probably realizes: because of Launcelot's traitorous affair with the queen, he not only fails his duty as Arthur's noblest knight in the "feld," but his treasonous love also causes him to behave "churlishly" in the "hall" when he refuses to return the love that the Maid of Ascolat offers. Of course, because of her past false actions, one must question the truth of any accusation the maid makes. Nevertheless, it is notable that the man who is loved by everyone for being the greatest knight is now accused of behaving dishonorably in all aspects of his life.

After he reads the letter, King Arthur berates Launcelot for his "wicked fame" (1101) and relates the sorry tale to the barons and other men of the court. Gawain, however, realizes that he has unknowingly lied about Launcelot's affair with the Maid of Ascolot, and goes immediately to the queen so that he may tell her

the truth of the matter. When Gawain explains the circumstances to Gaynor, the queen's first reaction is not joy that Launcelot has been faithful, but rather anger that Gawain has lied to her. Gaynor's fury is so great that she accuses Gawain of lying about Launcelot out of envy. Certainly, in human terms, Gaynor's tongue-lashing is not unexpected because she has needlessly sent away the one knight who could save her from the wrath of Sir Mador. Gaynor seems to have an inkling of the disaster that may result from her indefensible actions, for she tells Gawain, "And, sir, thou ne wost not right wiselich / What harm hath falle ther-of and might" (1158-59).

The queen sends a chastened Gawain away and then complains about her wretched life and berates herself for believing that Launcelot would be unfaithful to her. It appears that the queen blames herself for sending Launcelot away, and perhaps her tirade against Gawain, like Gawain's harangue against women in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, actually hides the seat of the true blame, which is Gaynor herself.

As the day of Gaynor's trial approaches, the queen pleads with the knights to defend her from Sir Mador. Gawain refuses because he saw her give the poisoned apple to the Scottish knight, and he will not defend the person he believes to be guilty. Launcelot's companions refuse because they will not defend the woman who has driven away their most beloved knight. Ector goes so far as to curse anyone who would attempt to save the queen's life. However, when Gaynor swoons in distress before Bors, the gentle knight pities her and promises to fight for her if no

better knight arrives. However, when he tells his fellow knights of his promise to the queen, they speak angrily with Bors for betraying the woman:

*She hath Launcelot du Lake
Brought out of over company.
Nis none that nolde this batail take
Ere she had any vilainy,
But we will not so glad her make,
Before we ne suffer her to be sorry.

(1453-58)

The knights blame Gaynor for Launcelot's departure, and though they are willing to defend her, they wish to make her suffer as long as possible for her heartless actions.

The day of the trial arrives, and the members of the court sit down to eat before facing the ordeal which lies ahead. Sir Mador grows tired of waiting, and just as he begins to accuse the queen of treason, Sir Launcelot arrives. (It is ironic that although the queen is innocent of Sir Mador's charge of treason she is guilty of treason with the knight who arrives to defend her against Sir Mador's accusation.) Launcelot chastises the other knights for not defending their queen, then challenges Sir Mador to a fight. After the battle is concluded and Sir Mador discovers the identity of his opponent, the visiting knight is proud to have survived the sword of the famous Launcelot du Lake. All the other members of Arthur's court are overjoyed at the return of their best knight.

As time passes, several of the knights, led by Mordred and Agravain, begin to complain about the treasonous activities of Gaynor and Launcelot. Gawain advises the knights not to tell Arthur about the traitors because trouble will undoubtedly result.

Gawain also reminds the others of the military prowess which Launcelot possesses as well as the numerous allies who would support him in a battle against Camelot. Agravain, however, is too angry to keep his peace, and when Arthur wishes to know of their conversation, the knight tells the king of the love between Launcelot and Gaynor. Gawain does not stay to hear the tale for he realizes the result of revealing the affair can only be disastrous. Gawain regrets that the king must now take some action against the traitorous couple. He says, "Here now is made a comsement / That beth not finished many a yere" (1726-27).

After Agravain concludes his tale of treachery, Arthur's first response is sorrow, not for the actions of his wife, but for the treasonous actions of such a noble knight as Launcelot. However, the king evidently realizes the truth of Agravain's accusation, for rather than confronting Launcelot with the story, Arthur agrees to participate in a plan to catch Launcelot in a compromising position. Although Bors warns Launcelot against visiting the queen after Arthur leaves the castle, Launcelot ignores his advice and falls neatly into the trap. When the knights discover Launcelot in the queen's bed, Gaynor laments the ending of their great love while Launcelot searches frantically for a weapon with which to defend himself. Once armed, Launcelot kills all his attackers except Mordred, and then escapes with his followers to the woods to await news of Gaynor's fate. When they hear that the queen is to be burned, Launcelot and his men save Gaynor, but during the rescue attempt many of Arthur's knights, including Gawain's unarmed brothers, are killed. The language of

the text is ambiguous here as to who actually kills Gawain's brothers; although Gawain never believes him, Launcelot later denies having any part in their deaths. Because Gawain is angry about the loss of his brothers, he vows that he will make no truce with Launcelot, but will continue to fight him until one of them dies.

Launcelot and his followers travel to Joyous Gard, and the knight sends a message to King Arthur in which he offers to engage in combat so that he might prove his innocence. Arthur rejects the offer and instead gathers an army to attack Launcelot. After Launcelot endures more than four months of siege, Arthur and Gawain finally taunt him into doing battle. However, the noble knight refuses to harm either his king or his one-time friend. After the siege has continued at length, the Pope finally commands that the king stop fighting and that Launcelot return the queen to Camelot. Once Launcelot is assured that Gaynor's life is safe, he obeys the command and returns her to Arthur. Launcelot again offers to do battle with any man who believes the queen to be "not clene" (2386), and then rebukes the king for listening to liars. Of course, because Launcelot has committed treason with the queen, his entire life as a knight is a lie. However, Launcelot does remain true to Gaynor as he attempts to defend her virtue; Launcelot never admits to any human that his love for Gaynor is wrong. Gawain, however, cares little for Gaynor's honor, but only desires to avenge the deaths of his brothers. He vows to follow Launcelot into Wales and do battle until one of them is dead.

After Launcelot leaves Carlisle, Arthur appoints Mordred as

steward of the realm, and the king's army follows Launcelot to Wales. During the long battle which follows, Gawain is injured twice by Launcelot. Fortunately for Gawain, news of Mordred's treachery and of his plan to marry Gaynor interrupts the battle, and Arthur and his men return quickly to Camelot. Before Arthur can return, Gaynor tricks Mordred into allowing her to go to London to choose clothing for the wedding. Once she reaches London Gaynor locks herself in the tower so that Mordred cannot marry her. Fortunately, Arthur soon arrives in England and prepares to do battle with Mordred. The night before his battle, however, the king is beset by terrible dreams of Fortune's wheel and a dead Gawain.

The next day, Arthur tries to make a truce with Mordred, but an innocently drawn sword ruins the attempt. Many men on both sides die before Arthur finally kills his own son, Mordred. Arthur also receives a fatal wound, and after having Sir Bedivere return Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake, the king travels to Aveloun in a boat with beautiful women. His body is later enclosed in a tomb which is guarded by a hermit. When Gaynor learns of Arthur's death and the terrible circumstances surrounding it, she travels to Amsbury to become a nun and live a holy life.

When Launcelot hears of Mordred's treachery, he leaves for England, but when he finally arrives he is too late to be of any help. The knight then wanders through the land until he happens upon the convent where Gaynor resides. When she sees Sir Launcelot, she swoons three times and nearly dies from the memory

of the destruction which their disastrous love has caused. Gaynor tells the other nuns

That through this ilke man and me,
 For we togeder han loved us dere,
 All this sorrowful war hath be;
 My lord is slain, that hath no peer,
 And many a doughty knight and free. . .
 (3639-43)

Gaynor's speech shows that she feels responsible for the destruction of Camelot and the deaths of so many good men. However, Gaynor appears to have learned a hard lesson, and she continues to pray for forgiveness as long as she lives. She tells Launcelot that if he truly loves her, he will return to his home, marry, and spend the rest of his life happily with his wife. Of course, Launcelot replies that he will never be untrue to Gaynor, but that he too will lead a holy life so that he may do penance and atone for his past life of sinful pleasure. The knight then asks for a final kiss, but Gaynore replies that they must abstain so that they might please God rather than themselves. Launcelot departs as both characters cry for their loss.

Launcelot's closest companions finally discover his whereabouts, and the few knights who have survived the great battle between Arthur and Mordred join Launcelot in becoming monks. Launcelot lives a pious life for seven years before he finally sickens and dies. His friends bury him at Joyous Gard, and on their return to the monastery find that Gaynor has just died at Aumsbury. The monks take her to Glastonbury Chapel where they bury her beside the body of Arthur. The romance then concludes with the poet's description of the monks who pray and sing over the tombs of Arthur and Gaynor.

The Stanzaic Morte Arthur is a complex romance in which the ties among the various characters continually intertwine. Although the romance is the story of Arthur's famed life and unfortunate death, it is also the story of the characters who influence the king's actions. The roles of the two major female characters in the Stanzaic Morte are very important to the romance because it is through the women's dishonorable actions that Camelot's nobility begins to crumble. The lies invented by the Maid of Ascolot create problems among the members of Arthur's court, and even her death does not resolve the conflict she has created. Gaynor, on the other hand, does not merely tell lies--she lives them. Her treasonous affair with Arthur's best knight causes discord among the other knights of the Round Table, and it is possible to trace the path leading from Arthur's death and the destruction of Camelot to the feet of the queen. Although it is Mordred's treachery that actually kills the king, the deceit of both the Maid of Ascolot and Queen Gaynor leaves Arthur vulnerable to Mordred's attack.

Contrary to the works discussed in previous chapters, the Stanzaic Morte does not appear to contain the character of a tester. Perhaps the testing figure is unnecessary in this romance, for it seems inevitable from the beginning of the Stanzaic Morte that Camelot will fall. The characters in this romance have no need of a tester, for when the poem commences, it is already too late to save them from destroying each other.

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