Eros Abandoned: Chastity as Communal Preservation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
Jeremiah Webster – jeremiahdwebster@gmail.com

Of the four loves outlined by the Greeks, eros (at least in English Departments) reigns supreme. Questions of sexual identity, gendered spheres, and heteronormativity are dominant features within the Humanities today. Hopes and desires for self, for community, are offered daily upon Aphrodite's altar, usually to the detriment of storge, philia, and agape: loves of at least equal, if not greater significance. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* suggests a compelling alternative to this economy. Gawain's beheading game demonstrates that when eros is defined as a merely carnal pursuit it must be abandoned in service of ideals that transcend the erotic, the orgasm, and the near-salvific aspirations placed on sexual fulfillment. True eros is compromised when this expression of love is reduced to lust, desire, appetite, and nothing more. For the anonymous "Gawain Poet," the very stability and preservation of culture is at stake, with the microcosm of Gawain's conduct directly preserving the macrocosm of Camelot and the realm of King Bertilak. Chastity, and a life of Christian devotion, becomes a form of communal preservation, an aegis against the very desires that any student of Malory's myth knows will usher in the demise of Arthur's kingdom.

Our tale begins at Yuletide with the inhabitants of Camelot caroling and carousing, a scene that takes full advantage of the scop's propensity for alliteration and the bob and wheel. "The great and the good of the land had gathered, all the righteous lords of the ranks of the Round Table..." (Armitage 23). Readers are reminded that these are the descendants of Felix Brutus, Romulus, and Aeneas before him, heroes who trace their lineage to the siege of Troy: "...a bold race bred there, battle happy men / causing trouble and torment in turbulent times" (21). This association is, of course, intentional, for like Troy the "topless towers" of Camelot will also burn in the free indulgence of eros. Paris and Helen are precursors to Lancelot and Guinevere, Arthur and Morgause. In each of these affairs, death is the only offspring. Paris is fatally wounded, Lancelot becomes invalid unto death, and Arthur is assassinated by Mordred, his half-nephew son by incest. Such ends make the chastity of Gawain a cause célèbre. He is the rogue subversive, the man of morals in an immoral world.

Christmas is Camelot's high water mark, a season ripe for the lean months of Lent and eventual expulsion from the garden: "Each guest received his share / of bread or meat or broth; / a dozen plates per pair - / plus beer or wine, or both!" (29). Arthur is restless as he calls for "the tallest of tales, yet one ringing with truth, / like the action-packed epics of men-at-arms" (27). The son of Pendragon is all macho in his domesticity, full of high talk and waning talent. Adversity in Camelot is a Vegas spectacle, a pantomime of true conflict. Bloodless sport is met with the arrival of a Green Knight, whose beheading game is anything but.

Bearing a sprig of holly and an axe, an ever-green bloom and an instrument of death, "a knight of such kind - entirely emerald green" (31) rides his steed into the festive court. Arthur is no match for this giant. Lords and ladies cower. Like William Blake's *Tyger*, a symmetry of green invades a congregation of lambs. The verdant knight makes his challenge:

"Who has the gall? The gumption? The guts? / Who'll spring from his seat and snatch this weapon? / I offer the axe - who'll have it as his own? / I'll afford thee one free hit from
which I won't flinch, / and promise that twelve months will pass in peace, / then claim / the duty I deserve / in one year and one day." (39)

Arthur is "red-faced" (41) by these remarks, but ineffectual. Only Gawain confronts this wyrd with a spirit that reminds one of the Beatitudes, "I am the weakest of warriors and the feeblest of wit; loss of my life would be grieved the least...Such a foolish affair is unfitting for a king, / so, being first to come forward, it should fall to me" (43). The experience of Arthur, the obvious challenger, is eclipsed by Gawain's humility. His courage is born out of virtue rather than vanity, and it remains there, chaste, as Gawain survives the satyr wilderness and bedchambers of Bertilak's castle. In a world where nothing is as it seems, where identity is in a perpetual state of flux, only Gawain remains true to Christian faith and the code of chivalry. Arthur insists he is "head of this house" (37), but is "beheaded" before an axe is even swung. The Green Knight is an enigma, "a man of mystery,"(47) King Bertilak in disguise. His wife is a woman of savvy intelligence and grace, a guardian angel fronting as a Jezebel. Gawain is stalwart, dependable, "as good as the purest gold - / devoid of vices but virtuous, loyal / and kind... A prince who talked the truth. / A notable. A knight" (65). For Arthur, the Green Knight, and Lady Bertilak, exterior displays are deceptive. For Gawain, they are the clothing of righteousness explored by St. Paul in Colossians 3: internal character and external conduct are one and the same.

Gawain accepts the challenge, beheads the knight, and a fountain "gutters brightly against the green gown" (49). For the duration of Stave One, red is the dominant hue, suggesting a myriad of associations with blood. Arthur's hot blooded ego inspires a blood relative (Gawain is Arthur's cousin) to enact a gory beheading, causing the entire court full of guests to be "deadened now with dread" (49). Violence literally bleeds from the individual into the corporate, from thesis to antithesis. This same machination will be employed later on, but with redemptive ends, as Gawain's virtue will "runneth over" into this same community by enduring three blows from the Green Knight's axe. Green, a symbol for the life in death of Yuletide, the sprig of holly, of vitality and the natural world, appears forfeit. And yet, the tension between red and green, between death and immortality, runs with the seasons. Gawain's victory is short-lived at Christmas, but will be heralded in this same hall by future generations. A mere six lines after his decapitation, the Green Knight, "doesn't shudder or stagger or sink / but trudges towards them on those tree-trunk legs / and rummages around, reaches at their feet / and cops hold of his head..." (49). Reunited with his brain, the house of reason, the green guest declares:

"Sir Gawain, be wise enough to keep your word / and faithfully follow me until I'm found / as you vowed in this ball within hearing of these horsemen. / You're charged with getting to the Green Chapel, / to reap what you've sown. You'll rightfully receive / the justice you are due just as January dawns." (51)

And the knight is gone. Gawain must wait an entire year before his quest can begin. For a poem interested in the cultivation of virtue, the value of restraint, the reason for this interim is plain. The liturgical calendar is a training ground. It prepares Gawain, not for seasons of privation, but for moments when the allure of indulgence is most acute. Lent teaches Gawain the art of self-control in times of plenty. It is also a foretaste of the famine that awaits Camelot should he fail. What appears to be an intermission in Stave Two, is in fact a process of spiritual formation. In isolation, chastity is effortless. The true test lies in lavish sanctuary, where Bertilak cajoles
Gawain to, "Behave in my house as your heart pleases. / To whatever you want you are welcome, do what / you will" (77). Had Gawain neglected orthodoxy, had he disregarded Mass, and ignored the witness of the saints and Savior Christ, he certainly would have succumbed to lust with the Lady Bertilak, a woman, "fairest among them - her face, her flesh, / her complexion, her quality, her bearing, her body, / more glorious than Guinevere" (85).

Gawain is afforded every possible defense Camelot can offer. Twenty-seven lines\(^1\) are devoted to the process of arming Gawain, but the true source of protection is never in doubt: "Fastened in his armor he seemed fabulous, famous, / every link looking golden to the very last loop. Yet for all that metal he still made it to mass, / honored the Almighty before the high altar" (61). The poem does not hold Gnostic suspicions of the material, but it does insist that spirit inform the flesh. Gawain drinks "life to the lees" with the best of them, but also embraces a Thomistic vision of the world that finds order through hierarchy. Through the rigors of Christian piety, a balance is struck between the Apollonian and Dionysian. Disordered passion is the problem, not the material itself. Celibacy is not the model, wise abstention is. Like the pentangle shield he carries, the "token of fidelity" (63), Gawain's five exterior senses are guarded and guided by Christian devotion. An icon of the Holy Mother faces Gawain on the interior of his shield, "so by catching her eye his courage would not crack" (65). A vision (even peripheral) of Mary and her faithfulness to God, informs Gawain's vision of the world.

This tension between spiritus and terrestrial is pervasive. Gawain's initial aristeia, his confrontation with serpents and wolves, wodwos, bulls, bears and boars (69), is secondary to the trial that finds him in bed, naked, and stripped of all earthly defenses. In the presence of Bertilak's wife, only Gawain's virtue remains. The usual tropes of high adventure barely make final copy, so minor are they in relation to Gawain's efforts to remain chaste. Flesh wounds are not as grievous as deadly sins. Feats of valor for individual gain pale next to a defense of the commonwealth. Gawain is not completing Herculean labors to achieve demigod status, he is literally "risking his neck" for the integrity of Camelot. This explains much of Gawain's conduct, and why love of God informs how he loves those around him.

As Gawain travels to the Green Chapel, he finds sanctuary in the home of King Bertilak, an idyllic castle that appears "cut from paper" (75). Everything about Bertilak is a ruse: his identity, his haunts, his wife's flirtation, all the result of Morgan le Fey's sorcery and a conniving king. During an evening of revelry, Bertilak makes his pact: "what I win in the woods will be yours, and what you gain while I'm gone you will give me" (95). A fascinating juxtaposition is established between hunting in the field and the hunt of sexual conquest. No sooner does Bertilak subdue his horse, than his wife plots to, "playfully parley with the man I have pinned" (103). The disposition of Bertilak's game (the deer, boar, and fox) during the three day expedition, mirrors the Lady's stratagem: coy passivity turns aggressive and finally cunning in its method.

The bedroom game begins with an invitation. Gawain feigns sleep as Lady Bertilak enters his room and sits down at the side of his bed (101). She attempts to convince Gawain that every precaution has been taken: "..we are left alone, / with my husband and his huntsmen away in the hills / and the servants snoring and my maids asleep / and the door to this bedroom is barred with

\[^{1}\text{ln. 566-59}\]
Accommodations have been made for the flesh, but the Lady's confession does not anticipate Gawain's virtue. Doe-like pickup lines: "You're free to have my all, / do with me what you will. / I'll come just as you call / and swear to serve you well" (103), are no match for Gawain's pious humility: "I don't dare receive the respect you describe / and in no way warrant such worthy words" (105). As virtues, humility and chastity are interdisciplinary. By not thinking of himself more highly than he ought (Romans 12:3), Gawain avoids the seduction of flattery. A single kiss is all Lady Bertilak is afforded (107). Day one, and the plot is foiled.

Over the next two days, Lady Bertilak tries various tactics, calling Gawain's manhood and knighthood into question. The whole episode has the airs of a trial, and rightly so. Gawain is on the defensive, proving himself worthy of Bertilak's mercy, and a life after death once the Green Man's axe narrows on his nape. During her more assertive second attempt, Lady Bertilak climbs into Gawain's bed to rouse him. When he resists, she replies, "A knight so courteous and considerate in his service / really ought to be eager to offer this pupil / some lessons in love, and to lead by example... perform for me before my husband heads for home" (123). Lusty lyrics graft masculinity to the duties of chivalry, but Gawain will have none of it. With liturgy as his bulwark, Gawain relies on "Christ who preserves me," (125) and the second day ends with "no evil in either of them" (125). Had Arthur been Gawain's substitute, adultery seems certain. It is Gawain's innocence, his implied virginity, and a humility fostered by daily confession, that keeps him chaste. Two kisses are exchanged and nothing more.

By the third day, all bets are off. Lady Bertilak resorts to the subtlety of Victoria's Secret to see if Gawain will succumb. Like the fox Bertilak pursues, this final test is a cunning negotiation of wits. Clothing is the vehicle of seduction, with the Lady: "in a flowing robe... her face, her neck was naked, / and her shoulders were bare to both back and breast" (137). A "passionate heat" (137) takes hold of Gawain's heart, but a vision, a dream of death, keeps his loins in check. He "...dreams and mutters / like a mournful man with his mind on dark matters / how destiny might deal him a death blow on the day / when he grapples with the green knight in the chapel" (137). Death is the best argument against the folly of hedonism. Gawain's appointment with the Green Knight takes precedence over a strip tease. He abandons the eros of mere appetite, not once, but three times to preserve the temple of the body and the pillars of the State. Lady Bertilak yields and her final request is for Gawain to take her girdle: "the body which is bound in this green belt...will be safe against those who seek to strike him" (143). This talisman is to be kept secret from her husband, a clear indication that Lady Bertilak has not only rejected the role of seductress imposed upon her in this beheading game, but desires the knight errant to succeed as well. Three kisses seal Gawain's resolve to remain chaste. If he can be faulted, it is for placing his faith in the Lady's gift for protection rather than God. This negotiation will haunt Gawain for the rest of his life, even if it is a mere chink in the armor of his virtue. In the words of the Green Man himself, Gawain's has proven himself "...as polished and as pure as the day you were born, without blemish or blame" (181).

Readers are given a forecast of Gawain's fate had he failed the three day trial. The poem ends each bedroom encounter with a scene of brutal evisceration; King Bertilak returns from his hunt and the game is expertly butchered. The promise of redemption through eros alone is undermined by the reality of death. Procreative bliss is fettered by the finality of a carving knife. Here is what happens to the deer on the first day:
"Through the sliced-open throat they seized the stomach / and the butchered innards were bound in a bundle. Next the lopped off the legs and peeled back the pelt / and hooked out the bowels through the broken belly, but carefully, being cautious not to cleave the knot. / Then they clasped the throat, and clinically they cut / the gullet from the windpipe, then garbaged the guts. / Then the shoulder blades were severed with sharp knives / and slotted through a slit so the hide stayed whole." (111)

This excessive description is intentional. The poet holds the readers gaze on this scene to illustrate the potentially dire consequences of Gawain's conduct. There is every reason to believe that Gawain would have found himself at the mercy of this same butcher had he been receptive to the Lady's advances. King Bertilak is a menace of a man whose hunting ventures leave the natural world, "quivering with dread" (99). Had he gotten his hands on Gawain, Bertilak would have hollowed his body, and exposed Gawain's vice to the world. The butcher's table reinforces the interplay between sex and death, internal virtue and exterior conduct, and enhances the profundity of Gawain's temperance. It also offers a terrifying glimpse of the kind of man Gawain will face at the Green Chapel.

Gawain's confrontation with the Green Knight mirrors all that has come before it. The Green Knight appears, "a wildman, the worst in the world," (161) and issues these words:

"God guard you, Gawain. Welcome to my world after all your wandering, / You have timed your arrival like a true traveler / to begin this business which binds us together.... Pull your helmet from your head and take what you're owed. / Show no more struggle than I showed myself / when you severed my spine with a single smite." (171)

Gawain receives three blows from the Green Knight's axe: one for each of his encounters with the Lady. At the first swing, Gawain flinches, a symbol of the first night when, in the words of the Green Knight, "you honored my trust / and gave up your gains as a good man should" (177). At the second, the Green Knight intentionally misses, "for the morning / when you kissed my pretty wife...so twice you were truthful, therefore twice I left / no scar." It is the third swipe that nicks Gawain, "...just skimming the skin and finely sticking the fat of flesh / so that bright red blood shot from body to earth" (175). The Green Knight's reason for this wound, the only fault he can find in Gawain, is a lack of loyalty, "...not because you're wicked, or a womanizer, or worse, / but you loved your own life; so I blame you less" (179). Loyalty must be bound to something higher than one's own hide. Even for the Green Knight, there are virtues and ideals of greater importance than the body. Gawain survives precisely because he abandons the instant gratification of lust, and advocates the greater good: in this case, the sanctity of marriage, the preservation of kingdoms, the authority of kings, and the commands of God. He positions eros within the larger context of the four loves, and does not idolize (and thus undermine) it above the others.

It is here that the Green Knight reveals his true identity and the purpose of his beheading game. So much has been required of Gawain, and yet he receives a level of insight that none of his kinsmen have merited. He alone has journeyed to the Green Chapel. He alone has worked out his
convictions with fear and trembling, and thus, beholds a vision of true reality: the Green Knight unmasked, and the plot uncovered (185).

"Because the belt you are bound with belongs to me; / it was woven by my wife so I know it well. / And I know of your courtesies, and conduct, and kisses, and the wooing of my wife - of it was all my work! I sent her to test you - and in truth it turns out / you're by far the most faultless fellow on earth." (179)

It should be noted that the very community Gawain sought to uphold is blind to the implications of the girdle, which Gawain wears as "...a sad reminder / that the frailty of his flesh is man's biggest fault" (183). Camelot can only perceive Gawain's material gains (his survival), and remains ambivalent to the spiritual wounds Gawain will carry for the rest of his life. King Arthur decrees that "...every knight in the brotherhood - should bear such a belt...So that slanting green stripe was adopted as their sign" (189). The poet's use of situational irony apprehends what often happens when the deeds of a saint become institutionalized for mass consumption. Gawain's invisible, internal quest, his fight to remain godly, is impossible to commodify, and so an external object becomes the signifier of false celebrity and fame. Camelot refashions Gawain in its own image. What Gawain carries to remind him of his sin, the community recasts as a symbol of glorious victory.

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One final observation regarding the poem itself, and the relationship between form and function. The poetic rhythm of each stave reflects a life of Christian obedience. Church holidays (Christmas, Lent, St. Johns Day, Michaelmas Day, and daily contrition) are privileged, providing resolve and bearing in the face of temptation. The alliteration, the consistency of a syllabic voice that remains unchanged from the beginning of the line to the end, mirrors Gawain's unwavering integrity during the course of the narrative. Our knight "rides the path and prays, / dismayed by his misdeeds, / signs Christ's cross and says, / "Be near me in my need" (73). He consistently tries to inhabit immortal forms, as though an individual might render the Platonic visible.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight suggests that the aspirations of sexual revolution are misguided. Beneath the sheets, liberty gives way to license. Christopher Marlowe's doting lovers become jaded nihilists. Manuals and therapists reduce sex to a kind of mechanical yoga: Cirque du Soleil sans an audience. Viagra, Cialis, are modern oracles of Delphi, offering libidos to make Dionysius blush. Romance becomes a bore, courtship a bitch, leaving a generation caught in the whirlwind of Paola and Francesca: the condemned lovers of Dante's Inferno. No wonder Lancelot and Guinevere join them in the tempest of Canto V. In our time, obesity elicits ridicule, while sex addicts are envied. As Catholic social critic Mary Eberstandt explains it, the culture has gone, "laissez-faire about sex, thinking it is strictly a private matter between consenting adults — but we are simultaneously and increasingly morally censorious about food." Eberstandt likens this to a kind of "secular transubstantiation." Attempts to embrace the libertine remain wholly Puritan. The only innovation, the object of censure.
The Gawain poet sees no division between bodily restraint and the body politic. They are the indivisible realities of our shared life together. Gawain's quest inhabits Aristotle's golden mean, champions modesty, and reaffirms the balance between individual desire and a social covenant, between self-gratification and self-sacrifice. It is, in many ways, an embodiment of the counsel offered by Marcus Aurelius in *Meditations*: "that there is a proper dignity and proportion to be observed in the performance of every act of life." In a world where Ovid's lovers continue to experience perpetual metamorphosis, Sir Gawain demonstrates the proper expression and habitation of love. The four loves are not simply modes of desire or appetite, but dynamic ways in which we inhabit God's character.

**Works Cited**
