Falling Knights: Sir Gawain in Pre and Post Malory Arthurian Tradition

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Abstract

The present study traces the development of Sir Gawain's traits in the Arthurian legend through an analysis of Arthurian literature in early medieval works, in transition, and in modern cycle. It aims to show what makes Sir Gawain a multiple character and how his plastic character has appealed to the literary, political, and social taste of the time of his creation and recreation. The focus will be upon the roles that the new characteristics of Sir Gawain should fulfil and the reasons which stand behind this transition in his character.

The study examines the representation of Sir Gawain as a heroic knight in mainly three texts from the medieval and modern English Arthurian tradition: Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* Sir Thomas Malory's *De Morte Arthur*, Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Some references are made to other contemporary texts. These texts range from literary to history, providing a broad overview of the many ways in which history and romance approaches the question of the roles of knighthood and chivalry through the figure of Sir Gawain.

By exploring these narratives in their historical and social contexts, the present study explains why Sir Gawain maintains certain characteristics across a particularly eventful period in English history, as well as why certain characteristics change drastically. It will also offer new insights about public perception of medieval notions of knighthood and chivalry.

All translated quotations from *Historia Regum Britanniae* are taken from Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of Kings of Britain*, translated by Sebastian Evans (London: Dent, 1963). All Latin quotations from *Wace's Roman de Brut: A History of the British* are taken from Wace, *Wace's Roman de Brut: A History of the British*, edited by Judith Weiss (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002). All quotations from *the Arthurian Section of Layamon's Brut* are taken from Layamon, Layamon's Arthur: the Arthurian Section of Layamon's Brut, edited by W.R.J. Barron and S.C. Weinberg (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001). All quotations from *Idylls of the King* are taken from Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls of the king*, edited by J. M. Gray (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).

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1. Introduction

Found at the heart of the Arthurian stories is the significant figure of Sir Gawain. He is one of the oldest and most important characters of Arthurian legends that it would be difficult to recall one Arthurian work in which Gawain does not appear. As most of the characters of the Arthurian cycle, Gawain's reputation has persistently been subject to fluctuation over the course of time. While most of the early medieval English Arthurian saga showed Gawain in the most chivalric light as a model of all knightly virtues; namely courage and loyalty, modern writers such as Tennyson have projected his heroic image in a negative fashion and depicted him as a barbarous villain and a murderer. Some scholars do believe that the development of a gloomy false Gawain in post medieval Arthurian stories is due largely to Sir Thomas Malory's *De Morte Arthur* (1485) where the emphasis, as we shall see later, tended to shift from Gawain himself to other knights and figures in the Arthurian traditions. Careful textual reading and analysis of the selected works show how the authors engage profoundly with the social and ideological discourse of their worlds.

1.1 Methodology and Modern Trends in Literary Criticism

The main objective of the present study is to examine and trace the progression of the character of Sir Gawain from the ideal state to the less ideal state in the most widely Arthurian Legends in pre and post Malory Arthurian tradition. At the first stage, the study explores the historical and social context of the eras in which Gawain was shaped and reshaped in order to discern whether there were any voices calling for a reform. At the second stage, the selected works themselves which feature Gawain were closely inspected for any signs of representation of knighthood and the chivalric code. The study can be framed as interdisciplinary research, combining elements from the field of literature, as it is based on literary analysis of the works themselves, and sociology, as knighthood and chivalry are inherently

social and artificially created phenomena.

1.2 Scope and Research Problem

The present study begins with an exploration of the original image of Sir Gawain in chivalric sources, and how chivalric ideologies have evolved from the medieval to the Victorian era. This study offers a reconsideration of Gawain's reputation in late medieval and Victorian Arthurian literature. It investigates the ways in which medieval and Victorian histories and romances, all of which feature Gawain, respond to these cultural changes. It also suggests that there is a parallel between the figure of King Arthur and Sir Gawain found within these literary works which has been previously overlooked in Arthurian scholarship. The investigation starts with Geoffrey of Monmouth's heroic Gawain and moves toward Tennyson's contributions in the creation of a 'flawed' Gawain, demonstrating how these Arthurian texts played different roles in each culture and how they were shaped by their environments.

The major Arthurian legend representatives of each era are examined in order to explore and compare the varying portrayals of Gawain in that particular era, but also to trace the development of this portraying. This examination of the multiple literary identities of Gawain offers new insights into the recent literary construction of Gawain, as well as the conception of knighthood.

In order to capture the range of representations in the English texts, three main works from the Arthurian tradition will be analysed. The works can be divided into two basic genres; literary history and romance. It is hoped that the selected texts show the full range of interpretations of Sir Gawain, from an ideal Christian hero to a flawed villain.

2. Background Literature

The present study contributes to current debates about the ways in which the character of Gawain was fashioned and reshaped in pre and post Malory Arthurian Tradition. It traces the progression of the literary identity of Gawain from the ideal state to the less ideal state, focusing primarily on the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Thomas Malory, and Alfred Lord Tennyson. The present study offers a historical as well as a literary analysis: it explores this material in its historical context.

A number of recent studies and current approaches have investigated the adaptations and transformation of King Arthur in different historical and romance accounts. Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr.'s *Old English Heroic Literature* (2005) argues that Sir Gawain plays a particularly important role in defining both the nature of Arthur's kingship and the themes of national identity. The focus of early medieval English literature, Bremmer argues, is on the relationship between Gawain and Arthur, and on the heroic values they both acquire (Bremmer, 2005, p. 76). Prowess, generosity, loyalty, and leadership, the essay concludes, allow King Arthur and Sir Gawain the opportunity to fulfil certain national obligations.

Roger Dalrymple's *Sir Gawain in Middle English Romance* (2009) provides a general introduction to the main themes of medieval romances, focusing primarily on the works of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Alliterative *Morte Arthure*, and *Morte Darthur*. The essay offers an examination of romantic version of the image of Gawain in various medieval romances. The primary assumption is that early medieval romances highlight Gawain's "heroic role as Arthur's esteemed nephew, chief retainer, and most cherished warrior, while another shows him in a diminished role, eclipsed by the figure of Sir Lancelot" (Dalrymple, 2009, p. 265).

Beverly Kennedy's *Gawain and Heroic Knighthood in Malory* (2006) offers an examination of the heroic code Malory depicted in the figure of Sir Gawain. Her influential essay triggers off many questions about Malory's characterization process of Sir Gawain. She argues that "Malory seems to have concluded that this native English romance tradition erred by making Gawain much too good to be true" (Kennedy, 2006, p. 289).

Phillip Boardman's *Middle English Arthurian Romance: The Repetition and Reputation of Gawain* (2006) is an attempt to explain the Arthurian legends in terms of chivalric medieval culture. The study hypothesizes that the heroic value system is not always and necessarily in opposition to the chivalric ideals. The heroic Gawain has changed to suit shifting chivalric ideals. In this light, Boardman argues that "Gawain himself, while always centrally present in the Arthurian materials, gains stature as an individual English hero as the English romances establish an identity separate from the French cycle" (Boardman, 2006, p. 257).

3. Sir Gawain in Early Medieval Literature

The first historical appearance of Gawain by name as the son of King Arthur's sister was in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (1136) and its adaptations by Wace of Jersey and the English La3amon. Gawain is King Arthur's nephew where "…Loth, who in the days of Aurelius Ambrosius had married Arthur's own sister, who had borne unto him Gawain and Modred…" (Geoffrey of Monmouth, Book IX, Sc 9, p. 193). In Geoffrey's *Historia*, Gawain is the son of King Lot and Anna, Arthur's sister. As Arthur's nephew, he is granted the important position as the "companion, and defender of the great king" (Hahn, 2004, p. 218). Always connected with Arthur; a characteristic in which he differs from all other knights in the Arthurian legend, Gawain is found in the historical as well as the romance accounts of King Arthur. Geoffrey of Monmouth, in order to present Gawain as worthy to be King Arthur's nephew, praised Gawain mainly for soundness of blood, vigour of body and courage of heart. This caused Gawain to look at as worthy to be the exemplar of ideal knight and to enjoy very long popularity. By adapting a major historical theme of the Middle Ages, Geoffrey of Monmouth places special emphasis on the noble origins that both Gawain and his uncle enjoy. He testifies and presents the noble state of Gawain and his uncle in history by providing them with ancient and venerable origins as well as with heroic knights equal to that of Greece, Rome and France. Geoffrey chose the figures of Arthur and Gawain, who were already popular between the Welsh themselves, to create his heroes, giving them distinguished Trojan origins and noble heroic qualities. Roger Loomis claims:

the French, the Normans, and the Saxons had theirs[heroic history], but the Welsh and the Britons had only the meagre scrape provided by Nennuis and hostile narratives of the Anglo-Saxons and the Romans, before whom there was only a blank. Here was an opportunity with a man with Geoffrey's gift-and lack of historical conscious- could hardly miss (Parry and Caldwell, 1959, p. 86).

The second quality that Geoffrey of Monmouth praises in his Gawain is his courage and strength. Gawain, like Arthur himself, appears as a tough fighting man with indigenous origins.

And now Gawain, still glowing with the fire kindled by his former exploits, endeavoured to cleave an opening, whereby he might come at the emperor himself and forgather with him. Like a right hardy knight as he was, he made a dash upon the enemy, bearing some to the ground and slaying them in the fall… (Geoffrey of Monmouth, Book X, p. 228).

In Geoffrey's writing about national history, much emphasis had been placed on warfare, on the associated activities of single combats, on their role in politics and on the idea and practice of religion. Geoffrey exalts his people by showing them as European if not world conquerors; a nation of great military force. It was believed at that time that the Britons were softened by the Romans civilisation and so they lost their military skills. This, in its role, disgraced the military reputation of the Britons as brave soldiers all over the Continent and Britain became easy target of many foreign invasions.

The knighthood presented in Geoffrey's *Historia* in general and in sir Gawain in particular finds its roots in the military past and is well presented in early epics such as *Beowulf*. In this respect, a knight had to be brave, strong of body and skilled in the use of arms. Again, Gawain, King Arthur's nephew, was for Geoffrey the best exemplar of this kind of knighthood. In the first place, he was young and courageous. Second, Gawain shows no interest in women that he was chiefly absorbed in war and the chase. Since wars and politics, as Tatlock suggests, were Geoffrey's main interests, he hardly mentions Gawain's activities at peace that "as conveying any idea of day-by-day of human life, this never entered his [Geoffrey] head" (Tatlock, 1974, p. 345). Therefore, Geoffrey cut the love scene in order to serve both his political purpose of complimenting the Norman and his literary intention of creating an idealised historical account. The supreme function of the noble at that time was war, and women could not fight and occupied a low place in the society. Since warfare was the main occupation of noblemen in the eleventh century, Gawain is bound to value the traits which made him an effective soldier.

R. R. Bolgar has found that the heroic accounts of the early Middle Ages "paid little attention to problems of sex and love" pointing to the change of the Arthurian heroic legend and the appearance of illicit passions in later Arthurian romances (Bolgar, 1976, p. 120). Honour, in Geoffrey's *Historia*, is more important than courtesy and therefore Gawain is a great warrior and not a famous courtier. Times of peace are often ignored in Geoffrey's *Historia*. Though Geoffrey mentions two periods of peace, he does not describe them fully. He succeeded in establishing his Gawain and King Arthur as great warriors that his *Historia*was readily accepted by the majority of historians who followed him (Dean, 1987, p. 5).

Gawain's heroism had, by the twelfth century, become increasingly well known. In Wace, Geoffrey's quick-tempered Gawain has yielded to some changes. These changes don't directly affect the original conception of Gawain's character already establish in Geoffrey's *Historia*. His courage, for instance, is still emphasised but accompanied by gentler virtues. Wace also expands the qualities which are admired by the heroic type of knights who are expected to spend most of their life fighting. Judith Weiss argues:

In the martial portions of his chronicle (and they are considerable) Wace is, then, still firmly in the world of the epic but, as has long been recognised, in other respects of his work provides a bridge to the newer world twelfth-century romance. The words *curteis*, *curteisie*, *curteisement* are attached to his characters as they were not in Geoffrey (Weiss, 2002, p. XXIII).

Wace first strengthens the bond between Gawain and Arthur: not only does he note in one manuscript how the former strives to serve his uncle, but in all versions he comments upon the latter's grief over his nephew's death when "La fudociswalwein sis nies; / Arthur ot de lui duel mult grant/ Kariln'amotnulhumetant" (Wace, p. 328, ll. 13100-13103).

Beside the soundness of blood and courage, Wace praises Gawain's humility and courtesy that his Gawain is moderated, loyal and generous.

De saint soplice, l'apostoire,

La kiaumeait repos e gloire,

ErtWalwennuvelmentvenuz,

Chevaliers pruz e cuneuz.

Cil li aveitarmes dunes,

Mult I furentbienaluees.

Plus fu e de mult grant mesure,

D'orguil ne de surfeit n'out cure;

Plus volt faire queil ne dist

E plus dunerqu'il ne pramist (Wace, p. 248, ll. 9853- 9862).

It is important to notice that there is no contradiction between what Gawain originally has and Wace's addition to his character. As we can see, Gawain views peace as a positive thing which, in its role, allows for the development of chivalry and courtly living. This no doubt reflects to some extent the France of Wace's time, when the upper class became more educated and interested in the pursuits that increased leisure time allowed them. As the ideals of courtly behaviour became popular, it was natural they should be expressed in the tales of the time, and for Wace, Gawain was the first candidate to voice those ideals.

Since "England both before and after the Conquest was ruled by a warrior aristocracy", the development of knighthood code was in rapid progress (Coss, 1993, p. 27). La3amon wrote his *Brut* in the first half of twelfth century which is an extremely important period in the history of knighthood in England. During this period, the effects of the crusade, the church and the process of national identity making played the major role in shaping the picture of knighthood in the literary world. First, the English church in the early eleventh century started to control the profession of arms. In addition to the qualities that the traditional English knight should possess, essential Christianity became another necessary adoption of knighthood that "the influence of the religious conception of chivalry can only be demonstrated by showing that noble went crusading because they believed that their reputation as good knights demand it" (Painter, 1964, p. 86). The qualities which La3amon considered requisite for a knight were a combination of martial and Christian virtues. The chief interest in La3amon's description of Gawain lies in his obligation to god and the church. This was made clear through Gawain's speeches:

> AEldrihtenGodd, domes waldend,
>
> Al middle-aerdesmund, whi is hit iwurthen
>
> That mi brother Modred this morthhafuethitimbred?
>
> Ah, todael, ichatsakehine, here, biuorenthissere du3ethe;
>
> And ichhinefordemenwulle mid Drihteneswille,
>
> Miseolfichwullehineanhonhaxstalrewarien.
>
> Tha queen ichwulle mid Goddes la3e al mid horsen todra3e (Layamon, ll. 14077- 14083).

The passage carries the suggestion that Gawain's loyalty is first to God and then to his uncle. This loyalty is partly because of the strong blood bond between Gawain and king Arthur, and partly because of Gawain's goodness. Gawain wants to punish Modred and Guinevere firstly in order to apply the law of God and secondly to avenge his uncle in chivalric manner. As no one could serve a prince loyally who did not obey God and the church, this obligation was implied in the oath. These aspects are typical of contemporary writings about war that they are presented in epic language and crusading ethos.

All wars that Gawain fights in La3amon are seen as those of Christianity against paganism. This view indicates that a knight to be good if he is courageous and skilful in arms and loyal to his lord. With the introduction of Christianity, God has become the lord of all knights and, therefore, the good knight must have religious virtues and humility. The crusades are clear evidence of the influence of church ideas of chivalry on the mind of noblemen in the eleventh century. The would-be-audience to whom La3amon wrote his *Brut* was enthralled with holy wars against the Turks.

What all these works have in common is a tendency to stress the practical details of a knight's career either as a military soldier in the field or a monk knight with humility. They all show that Gawain maintains all kind of characteristics required to be a great knight in the Arthurian world. Courage, nobility, goodness and loyalty are always recognized in Gawain's chivalrous behaviour. Since the nature of virtues and faults of knighthood that Geoffrey, Wace and La3amon admired and deplored are governed by various cultural traditions, environment and exposure to alien influences, their representation of Gawain, as we shall see, has undergone a large transformation in later ages.

4. Sir Gawain in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*

During the Alliterative Revival, particularly in the English traditions of the Arthurian Legend, Gawain is the principal hero and the exemplar of nobility and chivalry. His courage, loyalty to his uncle and indifference to women are still the most original and striking characteristics of Gawain. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for instance, Gawain is to rise up and protect King Arthur's honour. Gawain also paid all his attention to his battle with the green knight and avoided the advances of Bercilak's wife. His lack of interest in matters of love and courtly manners is clear that he is again a warrior rather than a womanizing knight like others from King Arthur's court. Gawain's character remains faithful to his warrior image by rushing into the battle with the green knight. Mary Leech argues that:

> Unlike other knights in the Loathly Lady tales, Gawain has no obvious flaw. Gawain never acts unchivalrously; he is never discourteous to anyone, not even the hideous Dame Ragnell; he never argues with Arthur, nor does he sway from his duty to his king" (Leech, 2008, p. 213).

It also demonstrates loyalty by avoiding any sexual relationship with Bercilak's wife. Another account in which Gawain's original characteristics dominate is *The Alliterative Morte Arthure*; a historical chronicle which stems ultimately from Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *Historia*. The chronicle "embraces heroic deeds rather than the chivalry that was favored by French romance" (Aronstein, 2012, p. 41). The chronicle praises Gawain's great courage and loyalty, while the love theme is being less idealized, Richard James Moll argues:

> The growth of Arthurian romance narratives throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, most significantly the French

prose Vulgate cycle, meant that an alternate account of Arthur's reign coexisted with that found in twelfth-century chronicles and histories (Moll, 2003, p. 17).

In spite of the fact that romances were composed in the late twelfth- century England, French romances were circulated in England for long time. In French romance, however, Gawain's supremacy is increasingly challenged by the younger heroes who are attracted to Arthur's court such as Lancelot, Tristan. The reasons for such unjust representation of Gawain are various. One, for instance, can consider the French Gawain a response to Gawain's reputation in the English tradition. It might be that the French authors tend to see Gawain as a knight with a past that back to the barbarous Vikings. For this reason, he was doomed to remain in French romance a major part of the Arthurian backdrop.

As the code of chivalry changed in the fifteenth century to include romantic elements, Gawain's character had to change too. Helen Cooper argues that, typically, romances show,

> a concern less with the communal good than with the individual hero's inward thoughts, feelings, and aspirations, and, frequently, those of the heroine too; and a happy ending as normative, that ending often incorporating a return from an encounter with death – a symbolic resurrection (Cooper, 2004, p. 10).

Until the first half of fifteenth century, glory was the chief object in both battle and tourney, and it could be won by both courtesy and prowess. They used to exhort the knight to relate to his foes on the battlefield with fairness and compassion, but they did not do that in fifteenth century wars. There was a "gradual decrease both in the practice of courtesy in war and in the importance of desire for glory as a motive for fighting" (Painter, 1964, p. 60). Moreover, the nature of war and the fighting in it had changed too. As war was fought in new ways; medieval chivalry was forced to give way to modern artillery in the first phase of a military revolution. The impact of such changes was not only in terms of battles, but also in the character of the nobility in a brave new world where mounted knights were defeated by infantrymen and archers. This, in its role, led to a decrease in the practise of courtesy in wars where "military tactics and the composition of armies were changing to the detriment of chivalry" (Painter, 1964, p. 60). Moreover, women in the fifteenth century effectively created new conception of the ideal knight. This indicates that "a knight was no longer merely a warrior; he was a practitioner of courtly culture, of courteoisie" (Coss, 1993, p. 51). While prowess and courage must be shown in the field of battle, courtesy and love are usually practised in peaceful surroundings. Generally speaking, the increased power accorded the female characters has repercussions on the male figures including, as we shall see, Gawain.

In such a situation, Sir Thomas Malory wrote his *Le Morte d'Arthur* which is based mainly on French works from the Vulgate and Post-Vulgate Cycles and Geoffrey's *Historia*. Malory's interest in the Arthurian legend is not historical. His interest can be related to the cultural and political situation in which he lived and wrote. His *Morte* speaks of "the gap between such a past and contemporary English political reality" (Archibald and Edwards, 1996, p. xiv). He, therefore, put an end to the historical Gawain and his heroic glowing portraits. But the question arises is how and why Malory stopped the historical Gawain.

Gawain's heroic achievements and character on a large scale did not naturally furnish the fifteenth medieval romancers with such attractive material as the private adventures of love and the quest for the Grail, partly because his understanding of the mutual relationship between knighthood and love is deficient, and partly because he fails to "adapt to the courtly code of knighthood spelled out in his uncle's Pentecostal oath" (Kennedy, 1992, p. 85). For these reasons, the emphasis tended to shift toward other knights with great love adventures. Gawain's warrior image was overshadowed by such "courtly" knights as Lancelot and Galahad, who epitomize these romantic notions of chivalry. To transform his Gawain to a false knight, and therefore create space for Lancelot and Galahad, Malory did not elevate Gawain to the level of the ideal, emphasising Gawain's uncommon characteristics. While Malory acknowledges the basic nobility and courage in Gawain's character, he focuses upon Gawain's flaws in the events that unfold. Malory's Gawain is still a great warrior in the heroic mould, but it is not enough for him to be the principal hero. Some other uncommon characteristics colour Gawain and overwhelm his original ones, notably in his betrayal of Pelleas, his murder of Pellinor and Lamorak, and his insistence upon revenge against Lancelot for the death of Gareth.

Moreover, the figure of Gawain systematically begins to subordinate to that of Lancelot, as he must for purposes of overall unity. In this respect, Malory reduces Gawain's role, assigning many of his deeds to Lancelot. It is Lancelot, and not Gawain, who protects King Arthur and represents his court. Lancelot, for instance, rescued Elaine while Gawain refused to do so. In this respect, Gawain has to give up some of his original characteristics such as bravery.

Malory's Gawain is generally the result of two influences; the literary taste of the fifteenth century and the various sources that Malory used. The idea of combining Geoffrey's historical Gawain with the incestuous monarch of romance must have appeared perfect to a writer like Malory who intended to present his own world. The mingling of traditions, however, led to radical reinterpretations of Gawain. Since there was no attempt to harmonize his sources, Malory then emerged with a polyglot picture of Gawain, the "bad" and the "good" that Gawain is accorded highest praise and sharpest blame because he combines the best and the worst to be found among Arthur's knights.

In order to build up Lancelot as the principal hero, Malory de-emphasizes Gawain's original characteristics. He first weakened the link which binds Gawain to his uncle and the Round Table. Secondly, Gawain is always presented as a member of a group and never in individual exploits. Finally, Gawain's courage and goodness is not emphasized enough to usurp attention from the principals. He is unforgiving when Lancelot accidentally kills Gareth, and he refuses to allow Arthur to make peace with him.

Gawain would never have become a figure of romance if he were not first a figure of legend. Prowess and loyalty were the basic qualities a knight had to possess, courtesy or the ability of a knight to please the ladies seems to have grown directly out of these qualities. His heroic characteristics are still the most striking single features that he is a character of extremes. It clear that that Malory went far beyond what is needed to enhance the status of Lancelot, making Gawain a far less attractive figure than is found everywhere else in Middle English literature. This suggests that Malory ultimately chose to reject the early readings of Gawain and followed instead the more critical and dismissive French tradition. In Malory's Arthurian account, Gawain can still be the hero, but just in the real world of Arthur.

5. Sir Gawain in the Victorian Age

Jumping forward so many years, we see the negative view of Gawain gradually becomes more pronounced. Gawain appears, consistently, as Jane H.M. Taylor argues, "as a flirt if not an outright seducer, offering enthusiastic kisses (but never love or marriage) to passing ladies, escaping irate husbands by a hair's breadth" (Taylor, 2009, p. 65). The nineteenth century was a period of changing perceptions about the nature, place and value of the human being. The evolutionary theories of Darwin had made people question the value of man, his relation to his fellow human beings and to God and humanity's distinction from the animal nature. All of this distressed Alfred Lord Tennyson and his *Idylls of the King*; twelve poems in blank verse which were published between 1859 and 1885, show his dissatisfaction with his world. For Tennyson the Arthurian legend was, as it had been to Malory, "a story which could be brought from an old world both to confront and obscure the fears of the present" (Stephen Knight, 1983, p. 147). Tennyson found that most of Arthur's tests and challenges which appear in the Arthurian legend emphasize his own idea that belief and commitment must provide the centre for human life if it is to rise above the bestial.

Tennyson discusses the nature and effects of the problems he identifies in the culture, such as poverty, and encourages the members of the society to remain hopeful of finding a solution. Because of such problems which affected nineteenth century Britain, people suffered a deep depression and loss of faith. His first account was of King Arthur's last moments before his passing to the Isle of Avalon, in which the promise of the legendary king's return was set up as a sort of substitute to the Christian promise of Christ's return.   In his *Idylls*, the poet traces the birth of a King, the building of the Round Table, its existence, its disintegration and the final passing of the King. Tennyson actually elevates the moral response to human relationships by focusing on the Christian elements of the story, such as the quest for the Holy Grail. This is clear in the *Idylls* where each of the knights sees according to his moral state and judgement. While Malory presents chivalrous masculinity as an impossible ideal in his Arthurian account, Tennyson's Victorian approach is tempered with a great deal of expectation that ideal manhood could be achieved. Tennyson believed that real chivalrous masculinity can be achieved through faith and loyalty, and he reflects this evolution, as we shall see, in many of the ways he presents problems, passions, and strife.

In Tennyson's Arthurian account, it is easy to notice that Gawain becomes a character in the background, thus a negative or evil character that works against the main hero. As the audience of the Arthurian Legends changes from a society enthralled with war, to a society obsessed with superimposing values on themselves, Gawain's character becomes less popular. Gawain does not even maintain many of his original ideals of honour and loyalty; he is less noticed and presented in a strikingly different character.   Tennyson's stories of Gawain do not emphasize his achievements; they focus instead upon the chastening lesson learned by a flawed hero. In Tennyson's *Idylls*, we learn that the tragic end of Arthur's kingdom is seen as resulting from irresolvable conflicts generated by the kind of values Gawain represents.

Gawain is unable to stand up for chivalric code that he was torn between his duty as a heroic knight and his own personal quest. His bad advice leads Arthur further astray and prevents the king from reconciling with Lancelet. Moreover, Gawain is corrupted by anger, as he Even our hero of these later tales, However, it is notable that Tennyson's Gawain often seems more like an individual than a type. Tennyson's details only embellish upon what we already expect from such an Arthurian romance. To the story, too, he adds an emotional and psychological depth that was lacking in earlier versions.

Throughout the *Idylls*, Gawain represents those who try neither to be loyal nor to keep faith. It was appropriate for Tennyson to use Gawain to represent those who break loyalty in the hierarchy and brotherhood king Arthur created. In *Pelleas and Ettarre*, for instance, Gawain is courage with a touch of treachery. Gawain swears not to betray Pelleas and to help him to win Ettarre's heart. He is not able to keep his promise and misuses the trust Pelleas and Ettarre give to him. In this case, Gawain is used as a constant against Pelleas who represents the perfect embodiment of good qualities, more an actual person than a symbol of perfection. Pelleas refuses to kill the traitor Gawain because brotherhood forces him to be loyal.

> And so [Pelleas] went back, and seeing them yet in sleep
>
> Said, 'Ye, that so dishallow the holy sleep,
>
> Your sleep is death,' and drew the sword, and thought,
>
> 'What! Slay a sleeping knight? The knight hath bound
>
> And sworn me to this brotherhood;' again,
>
> 'Alas that ever a knight should be so false.' (Tennyson, Pelleas and Ettarre, ll. 436 – 441)

Gawain also appears to be disobedient to his king and, therefore, to his God. In *Lancelot and Elaine*, Gawain disobeys Arthur by giving the jewels won at the disastrous tourney to Elaine, rather than seeking out the victorious knight, and Arthur angrily tells him he has acted

with false courtesy to the young maid where "Too courteous truly! ye shall go no more/ On quest of mine, seeing that ye forget/ Obedience is the courtesy due to kings" (Tennyson, Lancelot and Elaine, ll).In *the Passing of Arthur*, Tennyson Gawain's appearance in Arthur's dream serves to emphasize the Tennysonian concern with the human need to have faith and keep it. Being faithless and disobedient, Gawain is and will be forever blown along by the wandering wind of his passions during his second life. Compared with the King, who had remained true to himself, his people and his God, Arthur is promised a place of rest and peace.

> There came on Arthur sleeping, Gawain kill'd
>
> In Lancelot's war, the ghost of Gawain blown
>
> Along a wandering wind, and past his ear
>
> Went shrilling, 'Hollow, hollow all delight!
>
> Hail, King! to-morrow thou shalt pass away.
>
> Farewell! there is an isle of rest for thee.
>
> And I am blown along a wandering wind,
>
> And hollow, hollow, hollow all delight.' (Tennyson, the passing of Arthur, ll. 30-37).

Such a result is particularly important that it reflects on how the people in that society understand themselves and their value system. If there is a clash between what the society believes about its own values and faith and someone who, like Gawain, come to new understanding of those virtues through his personal experience. The King has maintained the highest-level men can reach, for he has firm faith and keeps faith with all. Gawain never has faith in his leader, his fellow knights and the society as a whole.

It remains to mention that Tennyson's representation of Gawain is not strongly influenced by the source, Malory's *Morte*in this case*,* that his Gawain was clearly aimed at the Victorian audience who has different tastes from fifteenth century audience. This is reflected in what Arthurian material Tennyson included and what he left out. While Malory attacked the declining values of the Church and the nobility in his *Le MorteDarthur*, Tennyson used the legend in his *Idylls* to discuss issues of nationalism, colonization, and moral values. The *Idylls* is intended as a public poetry and treatment of the "Matter of Britain" where the personal rather than epic level is emphasised. Victorians were much more hopeful that the ideal of proper behaviour would work if the chivalric code and Christian values that the decoration of Parliament vaunted but also contains a profound, contemporary understanding of human psychology that was recognized by its various critics.

6. Conclusion

The present study establishes that Arthur's nephew Gawain, due to his plastic character, has played a significant role in the Arthurian legend. Gawain is many things to many people; he is at one time a figure of ideal chivalric and at another a symbol of shame and sin. As a recurring figure representative of the institution of knighthood, Sir Gawain presents a unique rhetorical opportunity to examine socio-political anxieties of different historical contexts. His contradictory depictions provide a glimpse into the importance of his figure to discussions of the notions of knighthood and national identity in late medieval and Victorian England.

What Geoffrey of Monmouth presents in his *Historia* through the figure of Sir Gawain is an ideal image of English ideal hero. Gawain, equipped with courage, generosity, and goodness, can always be presented in accordance with the best contemporary characterisation of great warriors. In battlefields, Gawain's loyalty, courage, faith, humility, and chastity are significantly demonstrated. His treatment in the Arthurian legend reflects the influence of the conflicting traditions that authors inherited, as well as their own creative needs.

While most writers who draw upon the historical chronicles usually portray him as a valiant and loyal follower of Arthur, writers who adapt material from the verse romances begin to wonder how he ever gained a reputation for prowess in the first place. The wide fluctuations in the treatment of Gawain offer us a figure that appears full of contradictions. Though Gawain in most of the Arthurian stories maintains some of his original characteristics, it is interesting to see how his flexible character evolved over time to fit the needs of writers, and indeed of the people as a whole. Its flexibility has attracted many talent historians and romancers to use Gawain with certain elements emphasised above the rest. Gawain will keep riding in the Arthurian stories and whenever there is evolution in the stories, there will be an evolution in Sir Gawain's characterization.

The present study also demonstrates that while the representation of Sir Gawain in *Le Morted'Arthur* was influenced by the Catholic spirit of Malory's literary era, Gawain of the *Idylls* was influenced by the religious doubt and of materialism of the Victorian age. It demonstrates that Malory, in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, engages frequently and seriously with religion and with a specific manifestation of fifteenth-century chivalric Christianity.

Tennyson's *Idylls*, on the other hand, does not provide an authentic interpretation of the Arthurian characters in as much as Tennyson failed to emphasize the religious spirit of Sir Gawain, a unique character of Gawain in the original Arthurian legend.

The present study concludes that post Malory Arthurian literature is fundamentally different from earlier manifestations of the legend. The medieval and Victorian traditions were characterised by a series of literary revolutions, beginning with the creation of influential texts which served the ideological needs of their social contexts. By contrasting modern cultural practices of chivalry with medieval literary ideals, the figure of Sir Gawain provides an ideal medium through which themes of nationality and regionalism are constructed in these narratives.

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