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Who's to Blame?: Chivalric Projection and the Gender of Guilt

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Abstract

To what extent did chivalry promote a power difference between the sexes? In romantic works of medieval English literature, knights are commonly seen to project their values onto a female counterpart, which consequently leads them to pin their narrative successes or failures onto that person. This article examines "Le Roman de Tristan" and "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" under the framework Stephen Ahern presents in "Listening to Guinevere". The chivalric Tristan idolizes his beloved Ysolt to the point of delusion, causing him to condemn her when she fails to meet his unrealistic expectations, and thus to illustrate the temperamental nature of the relationship between knight and lady. "Sir Gawain" complicates the issue, as Gawain lacks the expected devotion to a lady. Using Amy S. Kaufman and Michelle Sweeney's models of the configuration of power as lenses, I analyze Lady Bertilack's manipulation of Sir Gawain's chivalric values, and his resulting display of frustration towards himself, as a critique of gendered morals. By comparing these knights and their respective treatments of failure, I argue that the chivalric code's inconstant values ultimately encourage its followers to see any female-encoded morals, whether external or internal, as the cause of knightly failure. Faculty Sponsor: Elizabeth Tavares

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Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Abstract

To what extent did chivalry promote a power difference between the sexes? In romantic works of medieval English literature, knights are commonly seen to project their values onto a female counterpart, which consequently leads them to pin their narrative successes or failures onto that person. This article examines “Le Roman de Tristan” and “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” under the framework Stephen Ahern presents in “Listening to Guinevere”. The chivalric Tristan idolizes his beloved Ysolt to the point of delusion, causing him to condemn her when she fails to meet his unrealistic expectations, and thus to illustrate the temperamental nature of the relationship between knight and lady. “Sir Gawain” complicates the issue, as Gawain lacks the expected devotion to a lady. Using Amy S. Kaufman and Michelle Sweeney’s models of the configuration of power as lenses, I analyze Lady Bertilack’s manipulation of Sir Gawain’s chivalric values, and his resulting display of frustration towards himself, as a critique of gendered morals. By comparing these knights and their respective treatments of failure, I argue that the chivalric code’s inconstant values ultimately encourage its followers to see any female-encoded morals, whether external or internal, as the cause of knightly failure.

Keywords

medieval English literature, medieval poetry, chivalry, gender, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Tristan and Ysolt, Arthuriana

Whether they appear in traditional or contemporary stories, knights stereotypically represent a righteous force, fighting with a profound devotion to their lady over their own safety. This romantic picture of the knight's role and the concept of chivalric love is invoked in many medieval poems, such as in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" when Bertilak's wife describes the chivalric position by saying, "lords have laid down their lives for love, endured for many days love's dreadful ordeal, then vented their feelings in great bliss to a lady's bedroom" (1516–19). Are those ladies they seek to defend truly ladies, or at least seen as such by their respective knights?

An inherent element of the chivalric possession of a lady is using her as a blank slate onto which one can project their morals and needs, using the dehumanized lady as a "figure for the fulfillment of desire" rather than honorable interest in her well-being (Ahern 90). This chivalric projection is a double-edged sword: the victories of knights stand as proof of their lady's moral righteousness, as the driving force behind their actions, but in their failures, the same distant woman becomes the one at fault for not embodying someone else's values. The tale of "Le Roman de Tristan" illustrates this problematic projection through Tristan's longing for his lady Ysolt to arrive at his death bed and heal him. "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" similarly follows this flawed perspective but complicates the trend through the knight's ultimate lack of a lady. In their differing displays of perspective and the circumstances leading to the downfall of a chivalric figure, the respective knightly behaviors of Tristan and Sir Gawain expose the harmful impact of chivalric projection and its dehumanization of women on both sides of chivalric love.

"Le Roman de Tristan": A Saving Grace, or a Desperate Hope

Throughout "Le Roman de Tristan," Tristan longs for his love Ysolt to come to his side in his dying state. This intense longing exposes a false perception of Ysolt as having immense power over natural forces—a perception he holds her to desperately. His state of yearning for Ysolt's arrival is initially described in terms of his health: "[m]edicine cannot avail him . . . He longs for the coming of Ysolt, desiring nothing else . . . He has high hopes that she will come and heal his malady, and believes that he will not leave without her" ("Le Roman" 140). He hopes that with her presence he will be cured, but there is no reason or evidence proposed as to how Ysolt would have any curing ability. In fact, the speaker specifies his "high hopes" and belief in this solution, distancing it from a sense of truth. In a state where no medicine can help him, Tristan has nothing else to turn to other than his dominating desire to see Ysolt, so he relies on her for a sense of security.

Further descriptions of his desperate longing sprinkled throughout the tale strengthen the idea that Ysolt's arrival will somehow stop his death: "Thus Tristan is wretched and sorrowful, he often laments and sighs for Ysolt, whom he so much desires. The tears flow from his eyes, he writhes about, he all but dies from longing" ("Le Roman" 142). "He all but dies from longing" associates a typically pleasant concept with torment. Even though Tristan is dying from poison, his desire for Ysolt is so closely tied to his suffering that it seems like her absence is the true cause of his near-death condition, thus linking Ysolt with death. Ysolt's absence leaves Tristan miserable and on death's door, and as the thought of her alone has already been described as the reason he holds on ("it is because of her that he lives so long"), her presence *must* cure him ("Le Roman" 140).

Tristan's idea of Ysolt as protection against death stems from a chivalric impulse to envision one's lady in terms of whatever they need most, argues Stephen Ahern. Ahern asserts that chivalric stories commonly envision femininity as an extension of the "overwhelming forces of nature," links through which men hope to influence concepts such as life and death that otherwise remain outside their control (91). Tristan takes this chivalric idea of women as extensions of natural forces and shifts his image of his lady to fit what he most greatly needs, which, in this moment, is a hope to cease his

suffering with a cure for death. Consequently, Tristan projects all responsibility for his own fate, his survival or his death, fully onto Ysolt.

With his life staked on Ysolt's arrival or absence, Tristan's hope of Ysolt serving as a cure quickly transforms into resentment when it seems as though she will not reach him in time. Tristan is told that her ship cannot move forward, and in response he "turns his face to the wall and says: . . . 'since you will not come to me I must die for your love. I can hold on to life no longer . . . You have no pity for my sufferings'" ("Le Roman" 142). By facing away from the sea and verbally affronting Ysolt's feelings for him, Tristan both physically and emotionally turns against Ysolt. He again invokes the idea of Ysolt holding power over death—"I die for you, Ysolt"—seeming infinitely more distraught by her absence than from the poison that is actually to blame for his failing health ("Le Roman" 142). Tristan still assumes that Ysolt's supposed "feminine" nature will overcome any force between them, even the lack of wind holding her at bay, if only she cared enough about his well-being. The sudden turn of Tristan's intense emotion toward Ysolt follows another common trend in medieval literature, where "the knight idealizes his female counterpart, and when the woman does not live up to the demands such a role dictates, she is blamed for his failure to succeed in the world" (Ahern 90). Tristan first idolizes Ysolt and wishes for her presence, then damns her for letting his death occur, seemingly forgetting the poison that put him in such a state. Tristan's fabrication of Ysolt as this righteous, healing force has blinded his view of her as a human being so greatly that he continues to place the blame for his decay on the absent woman.

Tristan's dying rant reveals a complicated internal understanding of slander. His disappointment in his final moment is so great that he announces contentment in knowing his death will torment Ysolt, saying "It is a great solace to me that you will have pity for my death" ("Le Roman" 142). Such a strong desire to inflict emotional harm seems neither chivalric nor fair, but Tristan's initial intense moral view of her is twisted in bitterness. His sureness that his passing will cause Ysolt pain is an odd contrast to the earlier assertion that she holds "no pity for [his] sufferings" ("Le Roman" 142). This hints that, in truth, Tristan knows that Ysolt is not at fault for his situation. Instead, his sudden loathing stands as an attempt to cover his own fault in twisting the image of his love so much that he lost all sense of her as an actual, individual person (Ahern 91). He projected such high stakes onto his lady through the need for a greater power over life and death, but in an instance of unfortunate weather, Ysolt proves that she does not possess that romanticized concept of feminine influence over nature. Ysolt has failed to live up to his unreasonable expectations of her, and with no further use for his chivalric beliefs, Tristan takes to scorning her.

While Tristan's view is biased by his own chivalry-fueled ideals, Ysolt's perspective reflects things in a morally based and consistent way. When her ship is thrown about in the storm with the possibility of drowning, Ysolt says, "it is a sweet comfort to me, my darling, that you will not know of my death . . . if it pleases God you may be healed—that is what I most desire. I long for your recovery more than that I should come ashore" ("Le Roman" 141). Ysolt's perspective stands in opposition to Tristan. Ysolt invokes God's name multiple times in lamenting her situation, indicating that, unlike Tristan's faith in the idea of her, she recognizes the true power at play. Ysolt knows that she cannot escape the force of God's will, but, unlike Tristan, she continues to place her hopes in that force rather than blindly scorn it. Her phrasing of "it is a sweet comfort to me . . . that you will not know of my death" is a direct contrast to Tristan's declaration, "It is a great solace to me that you will have pity in my death" ("Le Roman" 141–42). Both characters have their lover at the forefront of their mind in their near-death states, but unlike Tristan, Ysolt holds her beloved's interests and safety held above her own. Their sources of comfort reflection the function one perceives of the other: while Tristan sees Ysolt as upholding his own ideals, scorning her when she doesn't neatly align with them, his counterpart's view is unclouded by personal desires. Ysolt only has Tristan's best interests in mind;

by placing Tristan's well-being above her own, she stays true to her personal moral values even at death's door.

Tristan's perspective, of Ysolt and of his fate, is so warped by the chivalric concepts he follows that he cannot see the truth of their situation. Meanwhile, Ysolt's selfless love and recognition of God's influence in a similar position is in fact nearer the religious values expected of knights. Ysolt is more of an object than an agent in the eyes of chivalry, yet through her Christian devotion, her character argues against the corruptive chivalric principles responsible for female objectification.

“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”: When One Lacks a Fair Lady

As Sir Gawain strives to uphold his role as a knight in the tale “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” he falls into the same chivalric model of blame placement and gender relations so perfectly displayed by Tristan's chivalric projection. Similar to Tristan's desperate hope turning to blame, Gawain's instinct upon discovering he has failed the Green Knight's test is to push the guilt for his failure onto womankind, specifically onto the ladies of the castle. Gawain says to the knight, ““And mind you commend me to your fair wife, / both to her and the other, those honorable ladies / who kidded me so cleverly with their cunning tricks”” (“Sir Gawain” 2411–13). The phrasing choices of “kidding” and “cunning tricks” sound as if the women's involvement in this moral test was for the purpose of making a joke out of Sir Gawain. This bitter sentiment is not extended to his host, the Green Knight, who was truly at the head of the trial of Gawain's morals.

The “cunning tricks” comment is very likely driven by the closeness Gawain had with the two ladies in his days at the castle while Bertilak left to hunt, but the rest of his rant is undeniably fueled by gender bias. He goes on to project his situation onto a larger scale:

But no wonder if a fool finds his way into folly
and be wiped of his wits by womanly guile—
it's the way of the world
. . . if only
we could love our ladies without believing their lies. (“Sir Gawain” 2414–21)

Gawain's anger might have seemed justified, but his accusation generalizes his negative feelings to place the entirety of womankind at fault. His words paint a very cruel picture of women, building on biblical examples of men's righteous falls and his need to place the blame for his situation elsewhere to claim that woman-based deceit and betrayal is an unavoidable, universal truth. The Biblical comparisons to his own situation, on the surface, put Sir Gawain in a position of religious innocence and moral tragedy. What sheds doubt on Gawain's attempt to justify himself are the women betrayers he cites, most of whom could be argued as not at the center of the wrongs that occur at all: Bathsheba did not force David to set her husband up to die after he fell in love with her, and Adam caved easily to Eve's encouragement to eat the apple despite his previous warning from God. These distinctly chosen allusions provide exterior examples of blame resting on a female counterpart, and imply a much larger, historical basis to the need to scapegoat women in Christianity-fueled chivalry. The roots of gender-based blame run deep.

While vitriolic toward women, very little of Gawain's rant is directed at the two women who accompanied him during his stay; after his trickery comment, he does not mention either the lady of the castle or the old woman again. This variation from the typical structure of chivalric blame stems from Sir Gawain's lack of a lady. The fact that Gawain has no love to fight in the name of, as chivalric figures such as Tristan are usually known for, is alluded to throughout the story, such as when Lady Bertilak outlines the romantic image of knights:

lords have laid down their lives for love

. . . how can it follow
 that twice I have taken this seat at your side
 yet you have not spoken the smallest syllable
 which belongs to love or anything like it. (“Sir Gawain” 1516–24)

Gawain is otherwise seen as the perfect knight, “a champion in chivalry,” so his deviation from the structure of chivalric love is striking (“Sir Gawain” 1511). While he may seek to place Lady Bertilak at fault for his downfall, she is not *his* lady. As such, unlike Tristan’s blinding projection on Ysolt, Gawain lacks the chivalric basis needed to hold the imagined right to blame her for his shortcomings, as someone obligated to uphold his personal values. The urge to turn the blame against some female force is still rooted within his status as a knight, but as Sir Gawain falls outside the chivalric model, he has nowhere to place blame for his failure besides on a generalized idea of womankind.

Tristan and Sir Gawain have differing relationships with feminine blame due to their personal lives. How do their female counterparts compare in appealing to each knight’s ideologies? While Ysolt’s powerlessness and loyalty is what ultimately disproves Tristan’s faulty idealization of her, Lady Bertilak displays a complex agency in the ways through which she manipulates Sir Gawain’s knighthood. The lady approaches Gawain three times and asks him for some act of love with the purpose of testing his loyalty to Bertilak, and no matter how he tries to courteously deny her advances, he caves into her attempts in the pursuit of proving his devotion as a knight. In her first effort, the lady responds to Sir Gawain’s denial of a kiss by challenging his identity:

A good man like Gawain, so greatly regarded,
 the embodiment of courtliness to the bones of his being,
 could never have lingered so long with a lady
 without craving a kiss, as politeness requires (“Sir Gawain” 1297–1300)

She first compliments his good character, coaxing him to prove that righteous morality as she paints his current behavior as dismissive of the values he seeks to uphold. She refers to the knight as the “embodiment of courtliness,” evoking the driving idea of chivalry and thus bringing Gawain’s knightliness into question. In order to defend himself as a knight and a moral man, Gawain gives in to her argument and kisses her, “as becomes a knight” (“Sir Gawain” 1303).

The lady again puts his knighthood on trial as she calls Sir Gawain a “champion in chivalry across the country— / and in chivalry, the chiefmost aspect to choose, / as all knights acknowledge, is loyalty in love,” and poses the question of why he has expressed no sentiment of love to her (“Sir Gawain” 1511–13). The concepts of chivalry and love have undoubtedly been evoked and tied together here, and in doing so, the lady draws on Gawain’s lack of chivalric love to challenge how well he really fits the typical knightly image. The romanticized knight, as she outlines following her remark, endures any onslaught of hardships in the name of his love, so that he may bring her honor. Gawain, meanwhile, has no lady to fulfil this role for, no one else to uphold his moral virtues, leaving him alone to bear the significance of his five-pointed code of honor. This conflict with Gawain’s identity places him in an exposed position, making him more susceptible to the lady’s advances in the interest of “proving” his knightly commitment. While Gawain doesn’t express the chivalric love associated with the role of a lady toward Lady Bertilak, he announces himself as “bound” to her, to honor and serve her. Solely by challenging his ego as a knight, the lady has successfully led him to declare a loyalty conflicting with the one already sworn to Bertilak, leading to the ultimate failure of the values he sought to uphold.

Lady Bertilak is so successful in her approach to corrupting Gawain’s chivalric code because of her gender. Michelle Sweeney sums up the relationship between Lady Bertilak and Sir Gawain: “everything in the romance, including who has power, has been reconfigured” (171). The women

knights encounter on their adventures are stereotypically helpless, objects through which the knight may prove himself by saving, an image which the agency and blatant forwardness that Lady Bertilak displays openly contradicts. Thus, Gawain's knightly ideas of women are rendered false, and he is left to piece together a way to handle the lady's advances from the chivalric pieces left. Gawain is so desperate to prove himself to what is presented to him as truly chivalrous, in part driven from the anxiety of falling outside the chivalric model and in part to find a way to still prove himself through this lady, that he turns against his own moral code and moves his sworn loyalty onto unstable ground. Lady Bertilak's skillful pressing is reminiscent of the Arthurian character of Nynyve, according to Amy Kaufman. Nynyve's quests challenge Arthur's knights to rethink their behavior in their treatment of women; she plays the victim in order to "highlight, and then rectify, [chivalry's] shortcomings" (Kaufman 59). Similarly, Lady Bertilak feigns innocence with love while she twists Gawain's concepts of societal expectations to act against what morality demands, thus revealing his faults as a knight. Lady Bertilak uses her femininity and cunningness to effectively expose chivalry as an outward performance, and to point out the flaws that can arise in striving after such a shallow structure over one's personal values.

With Gawain's place outside of common chivalric standards, the deep emphasis placed in his final and failed test—the girdle Gawain accepts from the lady—is particularly interesting. The girdle is the last in a series of three offers from Lady Bertilak, with each symbolizing a different position in the chivalric love triangle: she asks for a glove as a token, as a lady would offer a knight; she suggests giving him a ring, a symbol of marriage; she hands him the girdle around her waist, an undergarment that would relate to a mistress. All are notably offered to Gawain as if he were the woman in the relationship—for example, she asks *him* for the glove, flipping the typical mode of a lady gifting a similar chivalric token to her knight. Gawain turns down each item and the subsequent feminine role Lady Bertilak propose, and ultimately accepts the girdle at the lady's insistence only for its value of protection.

Contrary to his initial expression of scorn for womankind, Gawain does ultimately place all guilt and shame for his failure onto himself by physically bearing the feminine girdle. On his return to King Arthur and his fellow knights, he expresses his shame of what occurred by bearing the girdle and referring to it as "a sign of my faults and offence and failure, / of the cowardice and covetousness I came to commit. / . . . man's crimes can be covered but never made clean" ("Sir Gawain" 2507–11). He makes no effort to hide the humbling symbol or the evidence of his personal shortcomings, instead taking full responsibility without pushing off any of the blame as he broadcasts his mistake to his peers, a brave and seemingly unusual action in the realm of knights. In the acceptance of guilt, Gawain has again created a rift between him and the common practices of chivalry.

Gawain so heavily bears responsibility because of his complicated connections to chivalry and gender. As has been repeatedly emphasized throughout his tale, Gawain has no lady, so the chivalric projection of his blame takes hold of the inherently feminine girdle, the object with which he failed his loyalty. He alone embodies the morals he wishes to uphold, and in marking himself with the guilt-infused—and gendered—object, Gawain feminizes his failings and marks himself as the only one responsible for his actions.

Conclusion: The Fault Toward Femininity

While the central idea of striving to be something better than yourself is noble in nature, chivalric projection perverts that drive into a damaging force, as both "Le Roman de Tristan" and "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" reveal. In these poems, fault is feminized through forcing responsibility solely onto some external female person or gendered trait, providing men a scapegoat through women they once sought to honor. Their symbols and sources of a feminine counterpart vary, but the suddenness

with which both chivalric figures turn on the embodiment of their own moral code illuminates a performative and sexist nature at the core of chivalry, one that Lady Bertilak proved in her manipulation of Sir Gawain. This is clearly not a stable structure of thought. Tristan dies believing the person he loved had forsaken him as his unrealistic image of her crumbles, while in reality Ysolt does everything in her power to reach him. Sir Gawain's relations to femininity and chivalric love confound his feelings of guilt and drive him to project his crushing shame inward. The placement of guilt has very permanent consequences in these stories, leaving the characters involved with poisoning emotions they can't escape; no one wins when this toxic element of chivalry is employed. Whether it's used to shove fault off of oneself completely as Tristan does or to heavily internalize that fault as Sir Gawain does, chivalric projection dehumanizes women in the pursuit of defending men and consequently creates an unhealthy relation to guilt in everyone involved.

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