

Distressing Damsels:  
*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a Loathly Lady Tale

By

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### Abstract

At the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, when Bertilak de Hautdesert reveals Morgan le Fay's involvement in Gawain's quest, the *Pearl* Poet introduces a difficult problem for scholars and students of the text. Morgan appears out of nowhere, and it is difficult to understand the poet's intentions for including her so late in his narrative. The premise for this thesis is that the loathly lady motif helps explain Morgan's appearance and Gawain's symbolic importance in the poem. Through a study of the loathly lady motif, I argue it is possible that the *Pearl* Poet was using certain aspects of the motif to inform his story.

Chapter one of this thesis will focus on the origins of the loathly lady motif and the literary origins of Morgan le Fay. In order to understand the connotations of the loathly lady stories, it is important to study both the Irish tales and the later English versions of the motif. My study of Morgan will trace her beginnings as a pagan healer goddess to her later variations in French and Middle English literature. The second chapter will discuss the influential women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and their specific importance to the text. It will examine Queen Guinevere, Bertilak's lady and Morgan le Fay. This chapter will also analyze three contemporary Middle English texts: John Gower's *The Tale of Florent*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and "The Weddyng of Syr Gawen to Dame Ragnell." The loathly lady motif was popular at the end of the fourteenth century, which lends evidence to the argument that the *Pearl* Poet was familiar with the motif. Finally, the third chapter will provide an exploration of Gawain's role as the loathly lady's knight and the symbolism of Gawain's shield and green girdle, the setting of Hautdesert and the Green Chapel, and the *Pearl* Poet's emphasis on family relations. Ultimately, I argue that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an untraditional loathly lady story that uses the motif's themes and symbolism to emphasize the poem's feminine landscape and the importance of Morgan le Fay.

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My sister Rachel, who holds the distinction of being my favorite.

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## Introduction

At the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Bertilak de Hautdesert introduces a difficult problem for scholars and students of the text by revealing Morgan le Fay's involvement in Gawain's quest. Morgan appears out of nowhere, and it is difficult to understand the poet's intentions for naming her so late in his narrative. In 1916 George Lyman Kittredge described Morgan's sudden appearance at the end of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as, "the one weak spot of the superb English romance" (Kittredge 136). Bertilak's unexpected revelation that Morgan is the cause of action, as opposed to her Green Knight, has confounded scholars for many years. Kittredge's opinion seems dismissive of the *Pearl* Poet's ability as a writer and storyteller. Unlike many Arthurian romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an extraordinarily focused piece of writing. Chrétien de Troyes, the influential French writer of the thirteenth century, rarely centers his stories on one knight. For example, his tale of Sir Yvain, "The Knight of the Lion," follows the journey of Yvain *and* Gawain, and often describes in great detail numerous quests and long searches for the oft kidnapped Guinevere or the Holy Grail. With the exception of *fit* one, which takes place at Arthur's court, the *Pearl* Poet focuses the entire poem on Sir Gawain's quest to meet the Green Knight. The poet, rather than take a detour, summarizes Gawain's adventures along the way, stating, "So mony meruayl bi mount Þer Þe mon fyndez/ Hit were to tore for to telle of Þe tenÞe dole" (718-709).<sup>1</sup> Why would a poet so committed to concision add Morgan at the end of the poem if her presence is superfluous? This thesis argues that

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations are from the Andrew and Waldron edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, unless otherwise noted.

Morgan is not a marginal character in the text, but, rather, a crucial figure in Gawain's world. The loathly lady motif provides one plausible reason for Morgan le Fay's presence in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

I argue that the Morgan of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not an original character created by the Pearl Poet, but, rather, an amalgamation of numerous representations found in earlier Arthurian texts. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is infused with meaning by the traditional loathly lady stories, which illuminate the narrative's feminine subtext. By combining aspects of the loathly lady motif with traditional Arthurian texts, the Pearl Poet creates a gendered power struggle set within the Arthurian universe.

The first chapter of this thesis will discuss the origins of the loathly lady motif as well as the literary origins of Morgan le Fay. The first loathly lady stories come from the Irish tradition, and rely heavily on themes of sovereignty and kingship. Traditionally, an Irish prince meets an aged hag who challenges him (usually this challenge is of a sexual nature). The prince who accepts the hag's challenge proves his bravery and is deemed worthy of the Irish crown. The hag transforms into a beautiful woman, the literal embodiment of Ireland. This transformation is indicative of the challenges of kingship and the ever-shifting hardships faced by the king of Ireland. The English loathly lady tales are also concerned with sovereignty, yet they are centered on sovereignty between a husband and wife. The English stories feature wayward knights and ugly hags who transform into beautiful women. These hags offer their knights a chance for marital happiness in exchange for sovereignty. This study details the varied aspects of the motif and how these aspects apply to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This includes an

examination of the hag, her magical transformation, the loathly lady's knight, and the focus on sovereignty in kingship and in marital relations. This discussion of the motif influences my reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a poem; Morgan's physical appearance, her test for Camelot, and Gawain's journey are all linked to the loathly lady tradition.

The origins of Morgan le Fay begin with Celtic war goddesses. She is first named by Geoffrey of Monmouth in *Vita Merlini*, and initially identified as a healer priestess. Chapter one pays specific attention to the works of Chrétien de Troyes, who, for the first time in literary history, makes Morgan Arthur's sister. My work is most influenced by the French *Vulgate Cycle*, which features Morgan as a dangerous sorceress living in exile. Because the Arthurian legend is a patchwork of many texts and narratives, the examination of Morgan's origins helps establish which representation of Arthur's sister may be present in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I believe the *Pearl* Poet has combined the French aspects of her character, with the older Celtic origins, in order to create a powerful female figure, versed in magic, and deeply concerned with the life of Arthur's court.

This discussion of Morgan's origins leads directly into chapter two. The loathly lady motif traditionally features two important female figures: the hag and her later incarnation as a beautiful woman. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* also incorporates a third female figure, often found in Arthurian loathly lady stories: Arthur's queen. The *Pearl* Poet's early description of Morgan's appearance further enhances the connection between the loathly women and the poet's version of Morgan. Morgan plays the role of the loathly hag in that she presents the knight (in this case, Gawain) with his challenge.

Morgan's intentions for sending the Green Knight to Camelot are to kill Guinevere and test the reputation of the Round Table. The transformation of the loathly lady is the climactic moment of both the Irish and English stories. Here, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the *Pearl* Poet creates an inverted transformation sequence, where the figure of the hag and the figure of the enchantress are represented in two separate bodies. Bertilak's wife provides the temptation for Gawain, inhabiting the role of the sexualized seductress from the loathly lady stories. The Lady's overt sexuality, her promiscuity, and her willingness to trap Gawain, connect her with both the loathly lady tradition and traditional representations of Morgan le Fay.

Guinevere is the third female figure I will discuss in chapter two. The *Pearl* Poet's Guinevere remains silent throughout the text. In Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and "The Weddyng of Dame Ragnell to Syr Gawen," Guinevere is an active figure in Arthur's court. Chaucer does not name her, yet his reference to "Arthur's queen" is no doubt Guinevere. In Chaucer's story, King Arthur grants Guinevere sovereignty, allowing her to wield judgment over the raping knight. In "The Weddyng of Syr Gawen," Guinevere is vocal in her dislike of Dame Ragnell, and her subsequent acceptance of the former loathly lady into Arthur's court. Guinevere's presence in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is particularly important in terms of her connection to Morgan le Fay. This desire for the queen's death suggests that Morgan may be aware of Guinevere's disloyalty to Arthur, or, in the context of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the potential for disloyalty. Guinevere represents the future fragmentation of Camelot, and Morgan's gaze falls heavily upon her. If Gawain is the symbol of Camelot's hope for redemption, Guinevere is the *Pearl* Poet's reminder that the court is in grave danger. In chapter two I

will also look at three contemporary Middle English texts that feature the loathly lady motif: John Gower's *Tale of Florent*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and the anonymous "The Weddyng of Syr Gawen to dame Ragnell." These texts emphasize the popularity of the motif at the end of the fourteenth century and provide additional evidence to the *Pearl* Poet's familiarity with the motif.

The third and final chapter of this thesis focuses on Gawain's journey. Gawain does not initially seem like the typical knight from the loathly lady stories. Unlike Chaucer's raping knight, or Gower's Florent, Gawain has committed no discernible crime. He is the epitome of knightly chivalry, and eager to prove himself. It is possible that the *Pearl* Poet purposely chose an English version of Gawain in his characterization of Arthur's nephew. The French Gawain is a figure of moral ambiguities, who would fit the criteria of a questing knight in the loathly lady tales. By making Gawain the quintessential English knight, the *Pearl* Poet challenges the expectations of his audience and the parameters of the loathly lady motif. Gawain's national identity redeems the French Gawain's moral failings and emphasizes the worthiness of Arthur's nephew in the poem. The *Pearl* Poet situates Gawain in a court system based on familial ties. Gawain is Arthur's most loyal knight, and through his journey to Hautdesert, he opens himself to the influence of Morgan le Fay. This is not to say that Gawain shifts loyalties, but, rather, through Morgan's teaching Gawain is able to elevate himself from the position of Arthur's knight to possible savior of Camelot. The Round Table test relies solely on Gawain's abilities as a knight. This challenge, then, is reminiscent of the Irish sovereignty tales, as Gawain metaphorically represents the future of the court and Arthur's kingdom when he faces Morgan's Green Knight. Gawain experiences a type of

transformation throughout his journey, from boyish knight of Arthur's court, to a man gifted and cursed with the foresight of the Round Table's destruction.

Ultimately, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a complicated, untraditional loathly lady tale. The poem strays from certain conventions associated with the motif, yet this does not disprove the theory that the *Pearl* Poet was aware of the motif and used some of its symbolic suggestions in his Arthurian tale. The *Pearl* Poet has constructed an intricate power struggle between Arthur and Morgan, a patriarchal court at Camelot and Morgan's more ambiguous feminine control at Hautdesert. Through an examination of the poem as a loathly lady tale, this thesis will argue that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a sovereignty story; it is not the tale of Gawain attempting to gain sovereignty, but, rather, a narrative concerning Arthur's inability to maintain sovereignty in his kingdom.

**Chapter I**  
**Raising Morgan:**  
**The Influential Origins of Morgan le Fay and the**  
**Loathly Lady Motif in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***

This chapter discusses the literary origins of Morgan le Fay, the origins of the loathly lady motif, and how these origins have influenced *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. My study of Morgan le Fay's origins will illuminate the *Pearl* Poet's knowledge of her literary history, as well as possible links between the Morgan found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the Morgan le Fay of the Latin and French romance traditions. Morgan's transition from priestess to seductress begins in the French romances of the twelfth century, and continues into the Middle English tradition. I will focus specifically on the works of Chrétien de Troyes, the French *Vulgate Cycle* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in my discussion of the French Arthurian canon. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a poem rich in symbolism and allegorical meaning. Through an examination of the loathly lady motif, it is possible to garner further understanding of the *Pearl* Poet's focus on the politics of Arthur's court and the politics of gender at play within the poem. Morgan's role in the *Pearl* poet's exploration of gender and politics in the Arthurian world can be supplemented through an examination of the loathly lady motif. The loathly lady motif finds its origins in Irish mythology. These tales feature hags who represent the sovereignty of Ireland, and the transformation of these hags is representative of a metaphorical marriage between the kings of Ireland and the land itself. Alternatively, the English loathly lady stories are concerned with marriage and gender. Elements of both the Irish and English motifs are present in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In this study

of origins, I will explore traditional themes and symbols associated with the motif and how these themes affect the *Pearl* Poet's narrative and characterization of Morgan le Fay.

The revelation of Morgan le Fay's involvement in the plot of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is one of many mysteries surrounding Arthur's sister in the text. The Green Knight describes her as both a goddess and a magician, juxtaposing a divine feminine figure and a potentially dangerous woman steeped in Merlin's teaching. She is focused on the reputation of Camelot and the death of Arthur's Queen, but it is unclear why the Round Table concerns her, or what Guinevere has done to deserve death at the Green Knight's hands. Morgan lives apart from the court, yet Hautdesert, her forest dwelling, resembles Camelot with its feasts and social hierarchy. The *Pearl* Poet does not dwell on Morgan's past, or why this past could potentially be the catalyst of her test for Camelot. These mysteries concerning her dual goddess/magician persona, her forest dwelling, and her relationship with Arthur and Guinevere may be solved by tracing her literary origins. Through an examination of this history, it becomes evident that the *Pearl* Poet infused his poem with references to the early work of Geoffrey of Monmouth and the later French romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in order to create his distinctly fourteenth century version of Morgan le Fay.

The Morgan Le Fay of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not a character invented by the *Pearl* Poet. She is the result of a literary evolution. She is an amalgamation of previous incarnations and Celtic mythology. As Michael W. Twomey remarks in his essay "Morgan La Fée in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: From Troy to Camelot,"

Allegiance to the view of *SGGK* prompted by source study has encouraged scholars to disparage Morgain's deployment at the conclusion of the poem as an

aesthetic flaw. Bertilak's revelation that Morgain is the only begetter of Gawain's adventure, which comes three stanzas before the end of the poem, is for many readers a *dea ex machina* – unmotivated in the plot, unforeshadowed, and insufficient to explain the action of the story. For these readers of the poem, the narrative concerns nothing but Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, as if the editorial title were an authorial title, and Bertilak's revelation about Morgain is simply an adjunct to the authentic tale of the two male figures. (Twomey 93)

The notion of Morgan as a *dea ex machina* is particularly compelling given the effect of her sudden appearance. For the modern reader, gifted with literary hindsight, as well as for the original audience of the poem, Morgan is always associated with magic, potential danger, and questionable motivation. She is at times a healer, while, in other literary manifestations, she is a wicked sexual temptress, obsessed with revenge and the destruction of Arthur's court. Although the *Pearl* Poet may not have provided hints of Morgan's presence before Bertilak's revelation, Morgan's literary reputation precedes her. When Bertilak tells Gawain that Morgan le Fay lives at Hautdesert, the narrative suddenly becomes unstable because Morgan is historically a character whose presence has ambiguous implications. Her attempts to infiltrate Camelot with the enchanted Green Knight become increasingly problematic, as her motivations and intentions are never fully explained by the poet. For the critic, then, it becomes necessary to trace Morgan's literary origins in order to shed light on the ramifications of her presence in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The first appearance of a woman named Morgan in Arthurian literature is found in Geoffrey of Monmouth's mid twelfth-century work, *Vita Merlini*. This is not to say that female characters like Morgan did not exist before the twelfth century, but Geoffrey gives her a local habitation and a name in the Arthurian world. Geoffrey writes:

The *Island of Apples* gets its name "The Fortunate Island" from the fact that it produces all manner of plants spontaneously. [...] That is the place

where nine sisters exercise a kindly rule over those who come to them from our land. The one who is first among them has greater skill in healing, as her beauty surpasses that of her sisters. Her name is Morgen, and she has learned the uses of all plants in curing the ills of the body. She knows too, the art of changing her shape, of flying through the air, like Daedalus, on strange wings. At will, she is now at Brest, now at Chartres, now at Pavia; and at will she glides down from the sky to your shores.

They say she had taught astrology to her sisters [...]

It was there we took Arthur after the battle of Camlan, where he had been wounded. Barinthus was the steersman because of his knowledge of the seas and stars of heaven. With him at the tiller of the ship, we arrived there with the prince; and Morgen received us with due honour. She put the king in her chamber on a golden bed, uncovered his wound with her noble hand and looked long at it. At length she said he could be cured if only he stayed with her a long while and accepted her treatment. We therefore happily committed the king to her care and spread our sails to favorable winds on our return journey. (Geoffrey 102-103)

This first description of Morgan creates the basis for all future characterizations. It is important to note that she is a healer, and, at this early stage, not yet identified as Arthur's half-sister. Maureen Fries writes in "From the Lady to the Tramp: The Decline of Morgan le Fay in Medieval Romance,"

This initial portrait of Morgan and her realm is a positive and even an androgynous one, combining quintessentially feminine values [...] with surprisingly male-linked ones. Morgan is a teacher [...] and she rules by herself, with no sign of even a male consort, over her kingdom. Her ability to fly and to shape shift was, even in the Middle Ages, not necessarily gender-linked, although classical figures such as Medea had already implicated the potentially harmful magic in women. But such evil is not yet connected to Morgan in this, Taliesin's speech, the moment of her literary birth. (Fries 2)

Morgan's physical appearance is also of note, for her beauty marks her as trustworthy and pure. The Morgan of *Vita Merlini* is considered a noble Lady by Arthur's men, who leave their king in her care. She is the ruler of a matriarchal society, allied with King Arthur and imperative to his survival and, by extension, the survival of his kingdom. In the *Vita*

*Merlini*, Morgan's ability to shape-shift is also associated with the ability to travel great distances. She can be anywhere and everywhere, yet, as Fries notes, this is not necessarily an evil trait. She treats the king with great kindness, giving him her bed and vowing to heal him. Her goodness is intrinsically connected to her healing power as her magic renews life and ensures future health. Despite these positive character traits, Morgan notably separates Arthur from his men, choosing to heal him in her own territory. Later in her history, Morgan's exile from court forces her to lure men away from the safety and protection of society in order to enslave them through her magic.

The difficulty of tracing Morgan's literary past lies in what scholars like Margaret Jennings and Maureen Fries term Morgan's downfall from goddess figure to castle hag. In "Heavens Defend Me From That Welsh Fairy.' The Metamorphosis of Morgain La Fee in the Romances," Margaret Jennings traces Morgan to the goddesses of Celtic and Welsh mythology:

The Irish Morrigan, who combed battlefields for the wounded and incited the combatants to slaughter, was also noted for her shape-shifting powers. In several of her exploits she was joined by her mythological companion, the Amazon Macha [...]. But the main stimulus to Morgain's creation lay in the myths surrounding the Goddess Matrona, worshipped by the Celts from Cisalpine Gaul to the lower Rhine and called in Wales Modron. [...] Like Celtic Macha and her alter-ego the Morrigan, Welsh Modron had a dual nature: she brought her husband wealth and beautiful children yet she was also "a fearful hag, haunting pools and foreboding death and gloom." But the twofold mythological posture is not enough to explain why Morgain plummets to such depths in the romances. (Jennings 197)

Indeed, Morgan's first appearance in the *Vita Merlini* is also her last appearance as a wholly good goddess figure. Although she retains the healer aspect of her persona, her magic, motives and beauty all come into question in subsequent Arthurian stories. As Jennings notes, "Modron might sometimes be a hag – yet she was a hag of immense

grandeur. The Morrigan might have waged battles – yet she did so with all the power myth could bestow and with an unclouded conviction of right and majesty. Such is not the Morgain of the romances where degeneration is a function of literary activity, not of mythology” (Jennings 197-198). Morgan’s healing power becomes dark magic and she is constantly associated with potions and magical objects that cause grievous harm. Her physical appearance is suddenly an outward manifestation of her potential evil. Her beauty becomes a symbol of lust rather than purity, and she is at times described as ugly, often when performing evil tasks or seeking revenge on Camelot. Finally, Morgan’s early alliance with Arthur is all but forgotten and she is now a figure obsessed with revenge and mayhem.

Morgan is often described as leaving Arthur’s court to retreat into the wilderness, and as Jennings notes, the author of the *Vulgate Cycle* claims that only fools refer to Morgan as “the goddess” (Jennings 198). Jennings further explains, “Though only fools thought Morgain a goddess in later years, the earlier imaginative treatments of her in the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Layamon, and Chrétien de Troyes were created in a climate favorable to the influence of mythology and thus concerned with a conception of Morgain as a supernatural female” (Jennings 198). By the thirteenth century, this desire for a supernatural female figure was replaced with the very human villainess Morgan. French writers, like Chrétien de Troyes and the author of the *Vulgate Cycle*, emphasize her obsession with the court’s destruction as a manifestation of her sense of Otherness. It is as if Morgan is aware of her own power, of her past, yet the court has moved on from mythology. The Christianization of the Arthurian mythos erases the need for a supernatural female figure. “Morgan the Goddess” is replaced by Arthur’s mortal sister

Morgan le Fay. Although she is always associated with magic, her motivations in the later tales centre on seduction and lust. She is removed from court, living in her own sylvan kingdom, wooing errant knights and trapping them in her castle. It is this Morgan that would have been most familiar to the late fourteenth century writer of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The later French romances often find Morgan le Fay scorned by the men she loves and this humiliation often leads to her desire for revenge and destruction. This familiar trope, reflected in Lady Bertilak's seduction games with Gawain, finds its origins in the twelfth century. In "Morgain La Fee in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: From Troy to Camelot," Michael W. Twomey discusses the Old French *Roman de Troie* (1160), by Benoit de Sainte-Maure, which briefly mentions Morgan in connection with Hector, the famous prince of Troy. Morgan gives Hector a horse, but he rejects her, and her obsessive love turns to obsessive hate (Twomey 100-102). Twomey argues that the appearance of Morgan in a narrative focused on Troy indicates what Wolfgang Muller terms "interfiguralty" (Twomey 103). Although the *Roman de Troie* is a relatively early work in terms of Morgan's presence in the Arthurian canon, she is already an established literary figure. Twomey further argues that although Benoit de Sainte-Maure does not provide a physical description or a history for Morgan, the medieval audience of *Roman de Troie* would recognize Morgan and understand her based on previous incarnations. Morgan also exhibits here what will become traditional markers of her characterization: she loves the gallant Hector (just as she will love Lancelot, Guigemar, Accollon and sometimes even Arthur); she bestows on him the most beautiful horse in the world (reminiscent of Excalibur, the great sword of Arthur); and she is rejected by the knight,

which turns her love into hatred. As Maureen Fries notes, “If already scaled down from the goddess-like personage of the *Vita Merlini* into this-worldly rather than an Otherworldly figure, Morgan does not as yet in the twelfth century evince the evil which is to besmirch her character from the thirteenth on” (Fries 3). The Morgan of *Roman de Troie* is a scorned lover, not yet a vengeful sorceress.

Despite the important influence of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s early description of Morgan, it is the French romances that most heavily inspire the *Pearl Poet*’s characterization of Morgan in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Morgan le Fay becomes an important figure in French Arthurian literature during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and the most influential works of Arthuriana from the eleventh century are the romances of Chrétien de Troyes. *Erec and Enide* is especially crucial to the history of Morgan as here, for the first time in Chrétien’s work, she is given a lover and, more importantly, Chrétien makes her King Arthur’s sister. Morgan is a shadowy figure in *Erec and Enide*, and never physically present. Yet from the few references to her deeds, a portrait of a mortal but magical woman emerges. Chrétien relates a long list of Arthur’s vassals who return at Pentecost to Camelot: “Greslemuef of Finisterre brought twenty companions. And his brother Guinguemar came too, who was Lord of the Isle of Avalon. We have heard it said of him that he was a lover of Morgan le Fay, and that had been proven true” (Chrétien 25). Morgan’s lover is the ruler of Avalon, the magical isle, and, traditionally, the final resting place of King Arthur. Later, Morgan is associated with an embroidered chasuble: “It was a proven fact that Morgan le Fay had devoted all her skills to designing it at her home in the Perilous Vale. Made of gold and Almerian silk, it was not designed by le Fay to serve as a chasuble for singing the mass; not at all, for she

wished to give it to her lover to make a splendid garment, since it was marvelously becoming” (Chrétien 30). The chasuble is acquired by Queen Guinevere, who keeps it in a chapel until finally giving it as a gift to Enide, Erec’s betrothed.

These passages highlight two important facets of Morgan’s identity: Morgan lives away from court, separate from order and society, and she possesses powerful knowledge of magic and sorcery. Her dwelling in the Perilous Vale, and her association with Avalon, retain an air of mythological mystery. Chrétien also dissociates Morgan’s actions from Christianity. The chasuble is an object to be used for love and lust, not for the sacred mass. Guinevere, “with great cleverness” (Chrétien 3), places the chasuble in church, symbolically rescuing the garment and converting it from its sinful purpose. Morgan is not a Christian figure in Chrétien’s work, nor does she dwell amongst Christian people. She is still, in the words of Fries, “Otherworldly,” separate but present at Arthur’s court. Guinevere’s actions also foreshadow the future literary war between the two women. In thirteenth and fourteenth century Arthurian literature, Morgan and Guinevere are usually enemies, battling over Lancelot’s and Arthur’s attentions.

Morgan’s healing powers are also featured in Chrétien’s *Erec and Enide* and *Yvaine: The Knight with the Lion*. In the first, Erec returns to Arthur’s court wounded, and Arthur immediately grows alarmed: “The king then had an ointment brought out that had been made by Morgan, his sister. The ointment, which Morgan had given to Arthur, was so strong that within a week it would completely cure and heal the wound being treated, whether in the ligaments or joints, provided the ointment was applied daily” (Chrétien 53). In the second work, Yvain, who has also been gravely injured, is healed by a lady who happens to be in possession of Morgan’s healing ointments. The lady tells

Yvain, “I remember an ointment Morgan the Wise gave me, and she told me it would remove from the mind any grave illness” (Chrétien 292). These two short passages highlight Morgan’s reputation and importance at this point in her literary evolution. She is certainly a healer, and a very powerful potion master. Chrétien writes of her blood relation to Arthur, making Morgan a member of the royal family as opposed to an anonymous sorceress dwelling outside of Arthur’s kingdom. Her presence is felt constantly by the characters inhabiting Chrétien’s Arthurian world, for although she never appears, her potions suggest that she, at the very least, makes occasional contact with Arthur’s court. Yet, this does not necessarily indicate that she is still seen as a goddess figure. Although Yvain’s Lady refers to her as “Morgan the Wise,” her healing ointments may not be as powerful as the court suspects. After all, as Jennings remarks, “Even the efficacy of her wondrous healing is called into question [...], when Erec is only partially cured by Morgain and fully restored by Enide, the one who loves him” (Jennings 199). Jennings continues, “Chrétien’s placing of Morgain within the human parameters of family may have been the harbinger of her degeneration which can be detected in the poems of the Vulgate Cycle, through the Merlin romances, and in the lays of the later centuries of the Middle Ages” (Jennings 199). Once Morgan is no longer a deity, she exhibits human emotions and behaviors. Her magic is unquestionably powerful, yet she is unable to heal Erec completely because she is not his true love. The Arthurian tradition is found in courtly romance,<sup>2</sup> and Morgan is never able to assimilate

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<sup>2</sup> Courtly romance is defined as, “An elaborately formalized sexual relationship in which a knight worships his lady, enduring torment and performing great deeds in hopes of gaining her love” (Smith 80). Courtly love became a popular literary genre in France during the eleventh century. The forbidden relationship between Lancelot and Guinivere, as invented by Chretien de Troyes, is a prime example of this genre as it features a

successfully into this environment. She has numerous lovers, but never a “true love” or a knightly protector.

Thus, the passage of literary time has been unkind to Morgan le Fay. The work of Chrétien de Troyes paints her in a mostly positive light. She has a lover in Guiomar, but she is also an ally of the court, passing out healing ointment to the King and his knights. She is also, for the first time, Arthur’s sister, enhancing her social status despite her connections with pagan goddess figures and the Perilous Vale, her forest home. She is human – the product of a mortal father and mother – not a mythical goddess. Yet, her initial foray into the mortal world leads to what will eventually be a permanent aspect of her character. Maureen Fries explains the shift from ally of Arthur to plotting seductress: “[Morgan’s] lover, Guimoar, for instance, whom Chrétien had urbanely mentioned in passing, becomes in the thirteenth-century French prose romances Guinevere’s (or Arthur’s) nephew (or cousin) and his affair with Morgan a source of shame to them both – and to Arthur, since Morgan is from the time of Chrétien (rather mysteriously and inexplicably) his sister” (Fries 4). The family structure only expands in later tales, as does Arthur and Morgan’s family tree. Many of Arthur’s knights are also nephews and sons of these nephews. The Round Table and its members not only represent the court, but also Arthur’s potential heirs.

Although the French romances of Chrétien de Troyes inspired later Arthurian literature, the French *Vulgate Cycle*<sup>3</sup> is, arguably, the most influential work in relation to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Pearl Poet’s depiction of Morgan le Fay. The

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forbidden love affair between a knight, a noble lady, and a Christian court setting (Smith 81).

<sup>3</sup> Also referred to as *Lancelot-Grail* or *Prose Lancelot*

*Vulgate Cycle* contains many familiar elements found in the *Pearl* Poet's text. Many of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'s recurring themes are found in the pages of the *Vulgate Cycle* including: Morgan's exile from court, the Val sanz Retour, Morgan's hatred for Guinivere and Lancelot, and Arthur's deep familial bond with his sister. Michael Twomey warns, however, "Although *SGGK* could very well have been conceived as an episode from the Prose *Lancelot*, as soon as we begin thinking of the *Lancelot* as the source for *SGGK*, we must certainly be frustrated because, as an earlier generation of scholars found, the fit is far from neat" (Twomey 98). The *Vulgate Cycle* is divided into five sections, each covering different aspects of the Arthurian mythos. The first two sections examine the early history of the Holy Grail and the relationship between Merlin and a young Arthur. The third and longest section is devoted to Lancelot and his affair with the Queen. The search for the Holy Grail is detailed in the fourth section, and the final section, *Morte Artu*, retells the death of Arthur and the battle against Mordred. I do not propose that the *Vulgate Cycle* is a direct source for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Rather, perhaps the *Pearl* Poet was inspired by the Morgan of the *Vulgate Cycle*, and borrowed certain aspects of her characterization including her forest dwelling, her feud with the Queen, and her close relationship with Arthur. The Morgan le Fay of the *Vulgate Cycle* learns her magic from Merlin and is associated with magical objects and heightened sexual prowess. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Morgan remains a silent figure in the background, yet the Green Knight does inform Gawain that Morgan was once Merlin's lover. These similarities, as well as similarities between the courtly settings of the French *Vulgate Cycle* and the English *Sir Gawain*, emphasize the connection between the *Vulgate Cycle* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. At the very

least, the *Pearl* Poet was familiar with the *Vulgate Cycle* and the French romances of Chrétien de Troyes.

At the beginning of the *Vulgate Cycle*, Morgan's love affair with Guyamor becomes a point of shame for Arthur and Guinevere. When Arthur and Guinevere are first married, Morgan lives at court as one of the Queen's ladies in waiting. Her affair with Guyamor is discovered by the Queen, and Guinevere immediately tells Guyamor to end his romance, lest the king be shamed by Morgan's unchaste behavior. Guyamor's reaction, however, is surprising to the young Morgan. Upon learning of the affair, Guinevere,

Came to Guyamor and said that he was as good as dead if the king learned of the affair, and with pleas and threats she succeeded in making him give up the young woman. *In fact, he did so easily, since he was hardly so in love with her that he could not get by without her.* When Morgan saw they had given her up because of the queen, she was sorely distressed, and all the more, she was pregnant. Seeing that she had failed utterly with him, she decided to run away to Merlin; she would search everywhere till she found him, for she believed she could find no help in her plight from any other man.

She sought him and at last found him, bringing great wealth and many horses with her. She came to know Merlin well, and he loved her more than anything else. He taught her all the spells and bewitchments that she knew later on, and she stayed with him for a long time. [...]

That explains the hatred she felt for Queen Guinevere throughout the days of her life. (*Vulgate Cycle* 174, my emphasis)

The anonymous author of the *Vulgate Cycle* begins Morgan's story with a very human portrait of a young girl in love with one of Arthur's knights. Guyamor's easy dismissal of Morgan is the catalyst for her future antagonism with men. Her search for Merlin exposes her ruthless determination as she seeks him in order to gain power through magic, rather than to find a second lover. Merlin loves her, but Morgan has grown bitter and is no

longer one of the Queen's naïve young ladies. Her pregnancy forces her exile from court and, "Exiled from court and set on revenge against Guinevere, Morgain takes up residence in the Val sans Retour – the "valley of no return" – where she builds a chapel that traps all knights who have been faithless in love" (Twomey 96). The great irony of Morgan's exile from Camelot is, of course, that it is Guinevere who will ultimately cause Arthur the most humiliation and loss. Although his sister is sent into the wilderness for the possible embarrassment she may cause, Arthur eventually turns to her when his wife betrays him.

Throughout the *Vulgate Cycle*, Morgan is obsessed with capturing Sir Lancelot because she knows this will hurt Guinevere. Each time Lancelot enters the valley, Morgan deploys her magical arsenal to capture Guinevere's favorite knight, and keep him locked away. On one of these occasions, Lancelot paints his prison cell with portraits of the Queen and their great love. Ironically, this is how Arthur discovers the affair between them. Arthur is oblivious to Morgan's seemingly lifelong obsession with destroying Guinevere, and towards the end of the *Vulgate*, relies solely on her guidance and sanctuary. He vows to punish Lancelot and Guinevere, and Morgan says, "if you don't do so, you'll be disgraced before God and everyone, for no king or any other man would tolerate being shamed that way" (*Vulgate Cycle Lancelot* 370). Arthur agrees, and "The king and his sister discussed this matter in detail during the morning, and Morgan repeatedly urged him to avenge his shame quickly, and he swore to her that as king he would do it so cruelly that people would never stop talking about it, if he managed to surprise [Lancelot and Guinevere] together" (*Vulgate Cycle Lancelot* 370). Morgan's influence on Arthur is arguably negative: "The king stayed with his sister that day and the

next and the entire week. She hated Lancelot more than anyone in the world, because she knew the queen loved him. And while the king was there with her, she did not stop urging him to avenge his shame when he returned to Camelot, if he had the opportunity” (370). This hatred for Lancelot, born of her hatred of Guinevere, feeds Arthur’s own insecurities. Throughout this passage, Arthur is depicted as deeply humiliated, embarrassed and fearful of public exposure. He repeatedly worries about “his shame” becoming public knowledge. Morgan reminds Arthur to seek revenge repeatedly, and when the king asks her to describe the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, Morgan does so in great detail, leaving very little to the king’s imagination. Her own magic and attempted sabotage have failed to bring an end to Guinevere, and now her own brother may be her ultimate weapon of revenge.

Arthur’s trust of Morgan may also stem from their familial connection. She is not a sorceress, but his “fair sister.” They share the same mother, and Morgan certainly steps into a maternal role throughout these scenes. Although her motivations are selfish, she does provide sanctuary and distraction for her grieving brother as he temporarily allows Morgan to act as a mother figure. After all:

The king stayed there for the full week, for the place was beautiful and pleasant and full of game, which he spent his time and effort hunting. But now the story ceases speaking of him and of Morgan, except to say that he did not want anyone other than Morgan to enter the room as long as he was there, because of the paintings that so openly depicted his shame; and he certainly did not want anyone other than himself to know the truth, for he greatly feared dishonor and was afraid that news of it might be spread everywhere. (370-371)

Morgan is the only person privy to Arthur’s inner shame. Morgan is a figure of comfort for Arthur, a far cry from her position as seductress of, and sorceress to, the knights of the Round Table. It is difficult to argue with certainty that Morgan’s behavior is a sign of her

deep love for Arthur. Arthur's vow to punish Guinevere is certainly the fulfillment of Morgan's darkest desires. Yet, this is not the last time in the *Vulgate Cycle* that Arthur turns to Morgan in his hour of need. Nor is it the last time Morgan willingly provides comfort to her wounded brother.

The deep familial connection between Morgan and Arthur continues up until his death at the end of the *Vulgate Cycle*. Arthur is gravely wounded at the Battle of Salisbury Plain and, knowing he will soon die, commands his knight Girflet<sup>4</sup> to leave him on the battlefield. With much hesitation, Griflet obeys and Arthur's death is witnessed from afar by the mourning knight. Griflet rides away from Arthur but turns back: "[Griflet] saw coming across the water a ship with many ladies on board, and when the ship neared the shore where the king was, they gathered on that side of the ship. The first among them held Morgan, the sister of Arthur, by the hand and began to beckon the king. And the king, *as soon as he saw his sister Morgan, immediately rose from the ground where he was sitting and went aboard the ship*, leading his horse after him and taking his arms and armor with him" (396, my emphasis). Brother and sister leave the mortal world together, stepping from the battlefield into the mythological Avalon. Arthur's unequivocal trust in Morgan leads him to an Otherworldly afterlife; despite his wounds, he walks off the battlefield and into the boat a living man. Although Morgan begins the *Vulgate Cycle* as a young, scorned woman, she ends the tale in much the same manner as her first literary appearance begins. Just as the Morgan of *Vita Merlini* appears on an enchanted island amongst a group of magical sisters, the *Vulgate* finds her leaving the world of men surrounded by mystical ladies, sailing away from the blood and death of

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<sup>4</sup> In the English romances, Girflet becomes Bedevere.

battle. Throughout the *Vulgate Cycle*, Morgan is an outsider, her Val sanz Retour an “Otherworldly” dwelling away from the judgmental eyes of the court. In death, she becomes once more the goddess figure, her plots of revenge and scheming all but forgotten. Arthur and Morgan depart, leaving the world of Camelot in ruin.

The process of connecting Morgan le Fay’s origins with the *Pearl* Poet’s version of Morgan is not without its challenges. It is impossible to say with certainty what sources the Poet based his work on, or whether he was indeed familiar with the works of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, or the anonymous author of the *Vulgate Cycle*. Yet, it seems likely that the *Pearl* Poet had knowledge of the early Latin works and the later French romances. He describes Morgan as both a goddess and a lover of Merlin, combining two aspects of her previous literary incarnations. He gives her a forest dwelling, reflective of the French Val sanz Retour, and fills the narrative with courtly settings and chivalry. The *Pearl* Poet’s Morgan is the legacy of many traditions, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a reflection of the widespread longevity and popularity of the French Arthurian romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Although Morgan’s presence is arguably the most surprising moment of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the poem contains many problematic elements in need of further study and explanation. Morgan’s hag-like appearance is of interest because, traditionally, Morgan’s physical appearance connotes a deeper symbolic meaning pertaining to her motives and desires in relation to Camelot. The politics of Arthur’s court focus heavily on the King and his nephews, and the *Pearl* Poet devotes many lines in Fitt one to a discussion of Gawain’s worthiness as a knight. Furthermore, Hautdesert is not only a place of mystery and confusion as it is the centre of Morgan’s power, but also a

reflection of Arthur's corrupt courtly world at Camelot. Many of these confusing points in the poem gain meaning and clarity when one looks at *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a loathly lady tale. The *Pearl* Poet has combined aspects of both the Irish loathly lady stories and the English tales in order to create a system of symbolic meaning throughout his text. The Irish stories focus on sovereignty and kingship and this is especially relevant to Arthur's Round Table and Gawain's quest in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Ultimately, Gawain spends the entirety of the poem proving the Round Table's worthiness, thereby maintaining Arthur's delicate right to the kingship. The English loathly lady tales, concerned with sovereignty in marriage, rely heavily on matters of gender politics, often in a courtly setting. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a poem that features three important female characters, and through Morgan's magic and Lady Bertilak's ministrations, Gawain finds himself in an unstable, feminine universe where his nobility and chivalry are constantly in danger. The English loathly lady motif saw a rise in popularity during the fourteenth century, as both Chaucer and Gower produced a loathly lady tale in their respective works. The *Pearl* Poet was likely familiar with both the Irish stories and the more contemporary English tales. Through examining the origins of the loathly lady motif, it becomes apparent that the *Pearl* Poet has amalgamated both the Irish and English traditions in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, infusing his poem with the motif's rich symbolism and meaning.

Despite its Middle English origin, *Sir Gawain* shares certain similarities with the Irish stories. Gawain is the representative of King Arthur throughout the poem, and his quest is integral to the survival of Arthur's kingdom. Like the Irish princes, Gawain is tasked with protecting Arthur's legacy. Arthur has no sons, and the *Pearl* Poet surrounds

Arthur with potential heirs in the form of his kinsmen: Gawain, Agravain and Yvain.

Gawain may be Arthur's heir and his familial connection to the king provides a strong link between Arthur's position on the throne and the future of Camelot. Likewise, Gawain's meeting with Morgan and the Lady is reminiscent of the Irish princes and their challenges with the hags. The hags test the princes, forcing them to see beyond physical appearances. Gawain's inability to see/recognize Morgan at Hautdesert or the Green Knight's true identity is telling of his ability to represent and protect Arthur's kingdom.

Like Morgan le Fay, the Irish loathly lady tales are heavily tied to Celtic goddess figures, whose mythology predates the written stories of Ireland's origins. Anne Ross elaborates on these divine women in her article "The Divine Hag of the Pagan Celts," noting that Irish goddesses were deeply connected to magic and the physical landscape. As Ross explains, "The goddess, for her part, is at once creator and destroyer, gentle and fierce, mother and nurturer. She may slay by means of her magical powers, or by her invincible weapons; she often claims the severed heads of those killed in battle as her just portion" (Ross 140). This violent, contradictory female figure haunts roadsides and caves, waiting to test the potential heirs of the kingdom of Ireland. The goddesses are associated with transformation, often using their sexual prowess to test the questing hero.

Acceptance of the hag's hideous form leads to victory, while the heroes who shun the roadside crone find themselves bereft of crown and kingdom. Ross elaborates on the goddess figures: "There can, however, be little doubt that the goddesses whose powers would seem to have been especially great and enduring did possess this fundamental duality of personality and function, even if their *physical* appearance did not always alter to suit it" (Ross 142). These early iterations of the loathly lady tales describe women

capable of great feats of magic, while they maintain a close connection to the very soil of Ireland. This magical ability, coupled with their physical transformations, make them a living manifestation of the country. They are the goddesses of Ireland, and their motivations and actions stem from the desire to protect the crown and country.

The multiple goddess imagery found in Celtic mythology speaks to the shifting representations of Ireland found in the goddess stories. The various aspects of the goddess coincide with the challenges of ruling a country. Ross provides a list of the different aspects of the Celtic goddesses: “The beautiful goddess, luring men to death, or to her Otherworld dwelling; the sinister, invincible triple war-goddess, with her strong sexuality, her hideous hag or bird transformation and her capacity to prognosticate disaster and preside over the dead and dying on the field of battle; the territorial goddess, unique in beauty, unrivalled in ugliness when she goes in hag-form to test the powers of endurance of the king-elect [...]” (Ross 162). The Irish origins illuminate a world where women held divine power and, perhaps more importantly, could *withhold* power from kings and princes. These Celtic goddesses act as gateways to the kingship, and the testing of the knight exposes the difficulties of ruling a kingdom.

Despite the obvious influence of the *Vulgate Cycle* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the *Pearl* Poet has also relied on a second tradition to create his version of Morgan le Fay. Morgan’s forest dwelling, her hatred of Guinevere, and her potential promiscuity are all a legacy of the French romances. Yet Bertilak’s reference to Morgan as a goddess links her to an older, Celtic tradition. As I discussed earlier in the chapter, the earliest examples of women like Morgan are found in the Celtic and Irish goddesses. The Welsh Madron (or the Irish Morrigan and Macha) is a powerful female goddess with

two distinct personas. Margaret Jennings notes Madron's dual identity as a loyal wife with the ability to give her husband gifts and children, as well as a terrifying war goddess who appears in the guise of a hag. This dual nature may be at play in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as Morgan's ugly appearance and silence push her to the margins of the narrative, but, ultimately, she is at the very centre of Gawain's quest.

Madron's ability to find happiness in marriage is also reflective of Morgan's relationship with Arthur and, to some extent, Gawain. In the *Vulgate Cycle*, Morgan cares for Arthur while he grieves his wife's indiscretions. She also escorts him to Avalon, guiding the wounded king into the afterlife. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Morgan's ambiguous motivations may be an aspect of her maternal persona. Arguably, if Guinevere dies because of the Green Knight, the affair with Lancelot will never occur and the Round Table will remain intact. Although Morgan's desire for Guinevere's death may stem from selfish desires, without Guinevere, Arthur's kingdom is less likely to crumble. By removing Guinevere, Morgan could potentially rescue her brother's precarious hold on sovereignty in Camelot.

This dual identity, the dangerous hag and the beautiful, maternal woman, also links Morgan to the loathly lady tradition. The *Pearl* Poet's familiarity with the motif is evident in his depiction of Morgan as both a hag and a symbol of potential salvation for Camelot. She is literally loathly, which allows her to disguise her true nature from Gawain, thus ensuring Gawain's focus on his task. Yet her test for Gawain forces a reexamination of Arthur's court and Arthur's queen. Without Morgan's guidance, the Round Table will certainly disband. Because Morgan offers this opportunity for survival through introspection, she has the ability to bestow rewards for bravery and nobility, like

the Irish sovereignty hags. The *Pearl* Poet's Morgan is an amalgamation of the mortal French romance Morgan, a woman scorned by Camelot and powerful in magic, and the more mythical Irish goddess tradition, disguised by her physical ugliness, but capable of granting sovereignty and political power.

The English loathly lady tales are direct descendents of these Irish myths and legends. Sigmund Eisner, in his book *A Tale of Wonder* (1957), traces the loathly lady tales from their Irish origins, through Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, and further into the Gawain romances of the fifteenth century. Eisner notes that the earliest manuscripts containing loathly lady tales can be dated to the eleventh century; however, these stories descend from an oral tradition far older than the surviving manuscripts (Eisner 17). According to Eisner, "Nine extant tales of Irish mythology and rationalized history are relevant to the loathly lady theme" (Eisner 17). I have chosen two of Eisner's translated tales to illustrate the basic plot elements of early Irish loathly lady stories, and to emphasize certain aspects of these hag figures in relation to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The first of these stories, *The Adventures of the Sons of King Daire*, provides an examination of nobility, knightly worthiness, and the importance of kingship. These three themes are repeatedly emphasized in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as the Green Knight calls Arthur's authority and sovereignty into question. Gawain, acting as the king's representative, is wholly responsible for the King's reputation. *The Adventures of the Sons of King Daire* begins with a prophecy: one of King Daire's five sons, he who catches a golden fawn, will be the King of Ireland. The five sons set out on their hunt. During a snowstorm, they happen upon a hut and a hideous hag. Each son enters the hut

and asks the hag for shelter. The hag promises shelter if the son will share her bed. Each son refuses her request until the son known as Mac Niad catches the golden fawn and then enters the hut. The hag asks him to sleep with her and he agrees. When she takes him to her bed, she transforms into a beautiful maiden and reveals herself as the embodiment of Irish sovereignty. Mac Niad thus obtains the kingship of Ireland (Eisner 18).

The tale of Mac Niad's meeting with Sovereignty is exemplary of the typical structure of Irish loathly lady tales. The hag's enchanted body represents the shifting challenges of kingship. At times she is ugly, and later she is beautiful, and both forms are reflective of the hardships of controlling a kingdom. The sexual encounter between the prince and Sovereignty is a metaphorical marriage between the future king and his land. The sons that refuse the hag's advances are not prepared for the challenges and sacrifices required of the king. The son who agrees to the hag's sexual request is seen as the brave son, and this is an indication of his ability to weather harsh trials as king. Gawain has much in common with the Irish Mac Niad. Just as Mac Niad must face the hag and accept her challenge, Gawain must blindly accept the Green Knight's test in order to prove his worth. Both men exhibit great bravery in the face of potential death and both are rewarded for their sacrifice. Mac Niad becomes the rightful heir to the Irish throne while Gawain is given the opportunity to save his beloved Round Table from destruction.

The second tale is *The Prophetic Ecstasy of the Phantom*. According to Eisner, King Conn steps on a stone and the stone begins to scream. The king asks his druids to explain why the stone is screaming, and, after much deliberation, the druids explain that each scream of the stone represents the number of kings who will descend from his

bloodline. Suddenly, a fog appears and with it a horseman who invites Conn and his druids to his home. Inside the horseman's palace sits a beautiful princess holding "a silver vat full of red ale, and a golden ladle and a golden cup before her" (Eisner 26). Once Conn has been fed, the horseman reveals himself to be Lugh and proceeds to tell Conn the future. Lugh prophesizes the length of Conn's reign and the names of his future kingly descendents. When the last name is called, Lugh disappears, along with Sovereignty and the Palace, leaving Conn with only the drinking utensils left behind by Sovereignty (Eisner 25-26). Although Sovereignty does not appear as a hag, and is, therefore, not the loathly lady, the story still bears important connections to future Loathly Lady tales, especially the silent, but powerful, Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

*The Prophetic Ecstasy of the Phantom* is concerned with kingship and bloodlines. Conn is the rightful king of Ireland, but he also represents the future of the Irish monarchy. The sudden appearance of Lugh and Sovereignty in the story is reminiscent of Gawain's discovery of Castle Hautdesert in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Lugh appears to Conn, just as Bertilak appears to Gawain. Both Conn and Gawain are led into magical spaces and provided with sustenance. Sovereignty's role is maternal in this story. She is the silent source of nourishment and health. Lugh, on the other hand, plays the important role of prophet, insuring the sovereignty of Conn through his prophecy. Sovereignty, however, does her own part in protecting Conn's kingship. The food metaphorically gives him life and when Lugh and the Lady disappear, Conn is left clutching her gift: immortality through the kingship of Ireland. Gawain does not travel to Hautdesert in order to claim the kingdom, yet the objects he receives while under Morgan

le Fay's care play a crucial part in his own survival. The enchanted palace is a place of uncanny familiarity, filled with food and song, but, simultaneously, empty and nonexistent. Morgan's silent, but powerful, presence in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is reflective of Sovereignty's role in *the Prophetic Ecstasy of the Phantom*. Both women remain largely in the background but provide the proverbial hero with shelter, sustenance, and magical tools to ensure survival and longevity. Sovereignty's maternal role in the story is reminiscent of Morgan's dual identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. She is a loathsome hag with potentially dangerous intentions, yet she is also part of a family unit and her actions reflect her desire to protect her brother, Arthur, and her nephew, Gawain.

The primary themes of the Irish loathly lady stories are kingship, succession, sovereignty and heroic sacrifice. Although the loathly lady plays an important part in these stories, it is really the male hero who accelerates the plot. The acceptance or rejection of the hag is crucial to the moral make up of these questing heroes. A clear definition of the Irish tales is given by J.K. Bollard in his essay "Sovereignty and the Loathly Lady in English, Welsh and Irish":

In these Irish tales the hero who is to become king is tested for certain qualities which we might characterize as courtesy and humility, and perhaps also for the ability to recognize that things may not always be what they seem. By implication, therefore, these qualities are also desirable in a king; the result in each case is that the hero gains the kingship ([...] *flaithius*) of Ireland. It is in this sense that it is significant for the hero to submit to the will of *in Flaithius* in the person of the ugly hag. (Bollard 48)

Bollard's remarks concerning kingship and the ability to recognize "that things many not always be what they seem" are helpful for my discussion of the Irish loathly lady tales and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* contains many elements of the English loathly lady tales. Because the English stories focus on marital relations and gender, Gawain's comical relationship with Bertilak's lady is reminiscent of the bedroom meetings between the typical loathly lady and her knight. Morgan's position away from court is also similar to the mysterious English hags who appear in forest glens. She is a woman detached from society, seeking Gawain in order to gain power in Arthur's court. Her intentions for Camelot are mysterious, and I will discuss these in further detail throughout chapters two and three. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* features aspects of both the Irish and English loathly lady stories, and this is clearly depicted in the *Pearl* Poet's focus on political sovereignty, knightly ideals, and problematic, powerful women.

The English loathly lady tales present a different model of both hag and hero. In the Irish renditions, the character "Sovereignty" is a physical representation of kingship: her body is the physical country and the hero must "win" this body in order to gain the crown. The English tales focus on sovereignty as it pertains to women and marriage. The English heroes are no longer princes seeking kingship, but, rather, questing knights with no royal aspirations. J.K. Bollard notes the distinction between Irish and English loathly lady tales: "The Irish and English tales in which a loathly lady appears fall into two distinct groups. In the Irish stories the hero (or his descendants) wins the kingship of Ireland, and in the English romances the hero marries the loathly lady and grants her sovereignty in their marriage" (Bollard 45). The focus shifts from the Irish preoccupation with land and kingship, to the more intimate landscape of the marital bedchamber.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Marriages during the medieval period, especially aristocratic marriages, were often akin to political contracts between two opposing forces. Marriages created alliances between political powers and could heavily affect hierarchies and aristocratic bloodlines. For

Bollard continues: “in the Irish tales the *Flaithius* [kingship] is external to the hero, it is something which he receives, whereas in the English tales sovereignty is something which resides in the male and which, in these tales at least, he can choose to grant to his wife” (Bollard 56). The transformation of Sovereignty in the Irish tales plays a climactic part in understanding the physical representation of the country. The hierarchal power structure of the monarchy is controlled by Sovereignty, always a female figure steeped in magic and ancient power. The ability to shape shift allows the hero to experience literally the challenges of kingship. Alternatively, the English loathly lady tales are concerned with sovereignty within marriage. They focus on the more domestic issues of knightly behavior and female independence, rather than monarchical bloodlines and land ownership.

In order to place *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* within the context of the loathly lady motif, it is important to mark the differences and similarities between the Irish tales and their analogous English counterparts. In “Chaucer, Gower, and the Unknown Minstrel: The Literary Liberation of the Loathly Lady,” Edward Vasta provides an excellent definition of the English loathly lady:

The Loathly Lady of the English romances [...] neither possesses personal sovereignty nor serves as the agency of a sovereignty officially recognized. She has no place within the official culture. She is rather an individual woman who lives outside the court’s official culture and who can be brought to beauty and happiness only when personal sovereignty is bestowed upon her from within that culture by a man. She has a degree of personal power and knowledge, but she cannot act with sovereign independence and the court’s approval unless she wins male-bestowed sovereignty by saving the life of a troubled man. (Vasta 397)

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example, Richard II, presumably king during the *Pearl* Poet’s lifetime, married Anne of Bohemia, daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor. Thus this marriage created an alliance between England and Bohemia, two major centers of power in western Europe during the late fourteenth century.

This definition highlights the two crucial aspects of both the English loathly lady tales and Morgan le Fay's French characterization: the English loathly lady is an outsider from court and she is someone who possesses magical power and knowledge. The similarity between the traditional depiction of the loathly lady and Morgan le Fay marks the most important link between Morgan and the loathly lady motif. Throughout her literary history, but especially in the French and later Middle English stories, Morgan's behavior reflects the loathly lady. She lives in exile and is a powerful figure of potentially dangerous magic and mayhem. Arguably, Morgan always functions as a loathly lady character in the French romances, a fact that further enforces *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight's* connection to the loathly lady motif.

Tropes similar to the loathly lady matter in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are found in three other Middle English sources of the late fourteenth century. John Gower's "Tale of Florent," from the *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1390), tells the story of Florent, the emperor's nephew. Florent kills Branchus, a great knight, in a duel, which leads to Branchus's family seeking revenge on Florent. Because Florent is the Emperor's nephew, Branchus's family cannot simply kill him, but must find a more subtle method to avenge Branchus's death. Branchus's grandmother devises a plan and calls for Florent. She tells him that he must find the answer to the question "what alle wommen most desire," (Gower *Confessio Amantis* 1.1481) and if he cannot find the correct answer, he will be put to death. Florent asks many different men and women, but receives contradictory answers. He meets a hag who tells him that in exchange for his hand in marriage, she will provide him with the answer he seeks. Florent initially refuses the offer, but upon realizing that the hag is old and will most likely die in the near future, he accepts her

proposal. The hag explains that all women desire sovereignty in marriage, and when Florent gives Branchus's grandmother this answer, she sets him free. Florent marries the hag, but that night she transforms into a beautiful woman and explains to Florent that she can either be beautiful during the day and ugly at night, or beautiful by night and ugly during the day. Florent allows her to decide, thus granting her sovereignty, and Florent is rewarded with a beautiful wife. She explains that her stepmother had placed a curse upon her, transforming her into the ugly crone until the kingdom's greatest knight married her. Thus the loathly lady shifts back into her original beautiful form, and Florent is granted a wife, and his life.

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, tells the tale of a raping knight brought before King Arthur's court for punishment. Arthur's queen<sup>6</sup> demands that he answer the question "what do women most desire," or else be put to death. The knight sets forth on his quest and finds a forest glen full of dancing fairy women. Suddenly the women disappear, leaving one loathly lady in their wake. The old hag provides the knight with his answer, and they ride back to Camelot where the knight presents Guinevere with the hag's lesson: "Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee/ As wel over hir housbond as hir love,/ And for to been in maistrie hym above" (Chaucer 1038-1040). The knight and the hag wed, and later, in their bedchamber, the knight expresses his distaste for both the hag's appearance and her low social standing. The hag, taking a page from the Wife of Bath (not so ironically, the teller of the tale), presents her ideology, which "[...] dismisses material poverty, ugliness, age, and low birth in favor of their spiritual counterparts [...]"

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<sup>6</sup> Chaucer does not provide Arthur's queen with a name, but considering the popularity of the French Arthurian legends during the late fourteenth century, Chaucer's queen is no doubt Guinevere.

(Vasta 405). She then asks him to choose whether he would like her ugly and faithful, or beautiful and possibly unfaithful. This complicates the question Gower puts to Florent, as Chaucer's knight must choose between being humiliated by his wife's physical appearance, or possibly being made a cuckold by a physically beautiful woman. The knight tells his wife to make the decision, and because he grants her sovereignty, she transforms into a beautiful, loyal wife, and remains that way until the end of their days.

The Wife of Bath ends her tale saying: "and Jhesu Crist us sende/ Housbondes meeke, yonge, and fresh abedde,/ And grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde; And eek I praye Jhesu shorte hir lyves/ That noght wol be governed by hir wyves;/ And olde and angry nygardes of dispence,/ God sende hem soone verray pestilence!" (Chaucer *Wife of Bath's Tale* 1258-1264). Although the Wife of Bath is not a loathly lady herself, her behavior and gender ideology make her an example of the "loathly woman" functioning outside of a literary text.<sup>7</sup> Chaucer's frame for the tale, a story within a story, allows the Wife to describe her true feeling through the fictional hag, yet, for the Wife, no physical transformation need take place. Rather, her last lines call for a transformation of men.

The final Middle English story to be discussed is "The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell for Helpyng of Kyng Arthoure." The anonymous poem is preserved in MS Rawlinson C. 86 held in the Bodleian Library. The manuscript is dated to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, and the poem is thought to have a similar date of composition (Shepherd 243). Although the poem postdates *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is an important loathly lady tale featuring Gawain, his loyalty to King Arthur,

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, the Wife of Bath is a literary character, but Chaucer's framework for the *Canterbury Tales* allows the teller of the tale to exist in "reality," while the tale is a work of fiction.

and a loathly lady who has much in common with both Morgan le Fay and Bertilak's Lady. The story begins with Arthur riding into the forest. There he meets an enraged Sir Gromer Somer, who claims that the king has stolen his land and granted it to Sir Gawain. Sir Gromer Somer strikes a deal with Arthur: if the king answers the question "whate wemen love best" (91), Sir Gromer Somer will allow the King to live. After a year of searching for the answer, King Arthur meets Dame Ragnell in the forest. She is a loathsome creature, and the poet repeatedly describes her hideous appearance and, curiously, her rich dress and beautiful horse. Dame Ragnell promises to answer the King's question if he allows her to marry Sir Gawain. Deeply troubled, the King brings his dilemma to Gawain who, in a show of absolute loyalty, promises to marry Dame Ragnell. Dame Ragnell tells Arthur that all women desire sovereignty. The King gives this answer to Sir Gromer Somer and the angry knight has no choice but to allow the king freedom. Sir Gromer Somer is even more furious once he finds out that the answer came from Dame Ragnell, his sister.

Ragnell leaves the forest and accompanies Gawain to Camelot. The wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell takes place at court. As Dame Ragnell approaches Camelot, she becomes increasingly ugly. Her behavior, especially her table manners, is animalistic, and the entire court is horrified by her. Finally, alone in their bedchamber, Dame Ragnell tells Gawain to kiss her. Arthur's most loyal knight exclaims, "I woll do more/ Then for to kysse, and God before!" (638-639). With those words, Dame Ragnell transforms into a beautiful maiden. She tells Gawain that her transformation is not permanent and he must choose, "Wheder ye woll have me fayre on nyghtes/ And as foull on days, to alle men sightes;/ Or els to have me fayre on days/ And on nyghtes on the

fowlyst wyse” (659-662). Gawain allows her to make the decision, thus granting her sovereignty, and Dame Ragnell remains permanently beautiful. She explains to her husband that her stepmother transformed her, and the spell could only be broken after she had married England’s most noble knight. Gawain is completely devoted to his new bride, refusing to leave her bed (and thus ignoring the court and, more importantly, King Arthur). Through Dame Ragnell’s ministrations, the King forgives Sir Gromer Somer. Eventually, Ragnell bears Gawain a son, Gyngolyn (who will become a knight of the Round Table). After five years of wedded bliss, Dame Ragnell dies. It is said that Sir Gawain mourns her for the rest of his life and that she remains the favorite of his many subsequent wives.

Arguably then, the loathly lady motif was popular at the end of the fourteenth century. The fact that both Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower produced a loathly lady tale in English between 1350 and 1400 is a testament to this popularity. Its themes and symbolism emphasize feminine power, marital relations and the use of magic by female figures. The *Pearl* Poet would have likely been familiar with the motif, as his description of Morgan’s ugliness is common to the loathly lady genre, as is his depiction of the Lady’s overt sexuality. “The Weddyng of Syr Gawen to Dame Ragnell” is a prime example of a later loathly lady tales that combines aspects of Chaucer’s and Gower’s work, as well as the *Pearl* Poet’s characterizations. The Gawain of “The Weddyng” behaves much like the Gawain found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. He is chivalrous and loyal to Arthur. Dame Ragnell’s dual hideous appearance and subsequent role as Gawain’s beautiful wife is reflective of Morgan’s hag appearance, and Lady Bertilak’s ministrations in Gawain’s bedchamber. Dame Ragnell’s wicked stepmother is

reflective of Gower's loathly lady, who was also a victim of her stepmother's magic. These stories overlap in their commonality, further emphasizing the genre's longevity and popularity with medieval audiences.

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an amalgamation of the Irish and English loathly lady traditions. Gawain's dual quest, to defend the honor of the Round Table and to uphold his chivalric oath, reflects the Irish heroes and English knights in the loathly lady motif. The loathly hag, symbolic of sovereignty and political control, is reflected in Morgan le Fay's appearance and the sexual promiscuity of Bertilak's lady. Because the poet combines aspects of the Irish and English stories, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* becomes a uniquely untraditional loathly lady tale. By using this motif, the *Pearl* Poet is able to discuss questions pertaining to gender politics and the difficulties of kingship in a framework familiar to audiences of the late fourteenth century.

**Chapter II**  
**“Þurȝ wyles of wymmen be wonen to sorȝe”:**  
**The Loathly Lady Motif as it Applies to the**  
**Women of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***

Chapter two focuses on the women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, their function within the text, and their importance in contemporary Middle English loathly lady tales. Here, the English loathly lady motif's focus on gender is of particular importance, as is the Irish tradition's examination of shape-shifting women as a symbol of national sovereignty. I begin the chapter with a close reading of Morgan le Fay's role in the text as it relates to the loathly lady motif. This includes a study of her hag-like appearance at Hautdesert, her motivations for sending the Green Knight to Camelot, and her intentions for Gawain's test. I further explore Guinevere's role in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. She remains silent throughout the narrative, yet her presence at Camelot suggests corruption and future destruction for Arthur's kingdom. Finally, I examine the role of Bertilak's Lady. The Lady is responsible for seducing Gawain and tempting him with the green girdle. My discussion includes an examination of her connection to Morgan, and the similarities between her and the hags of the loathly lady stories. Throughout the chapter, I allude to three contemporary Middle English loathly lady tales already noted: John Gower's *The Tale of Florent*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and “The Weddyng of Syr Gawen to Dame Ragnell.”<sup>8</sup> By tracing the similarities and differences between the loathly lady tales and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, I illuminate the symbolism and meaning of the *Pearl* Poet's female characters.

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<sup>8</sup> See chapter I for a summary of these three tales.

Although the goal of this thesis is to discuss *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a loathly lady tale, I am not intent on forcing the poem to fit every aspect of the motif. My goal is to highlight similar characteristics and potential symbolic connections between the poem and the motif. Because *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an untraditional loathly lady tale, the role of women is of obvious importance. The motif is greatly concerned with the role of women in society and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* certainly features three such figures of potential feminine power. In Gower's "Tale of Florent," and Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale," it is a woman who poses the question "what do women most desire?" This question, meant to save or doom the questing knight, emphasizes the great disparity between the masculine world of Arthur's court and the feminine sphere of marriage. The loathly lady motif implies that if a man can successfully discover the innermost desire of women, he will be greatly rewarded.

The reward in the English loathly lady tales is always the promise of physical beauty. Chaucer adds fidelity to this reward, and his raping knight, who violates a woman at the beginning of the narrative, is honored with a beautiful, eternally loyal, wife at the end. Order is restored to the courtly setting because the knight has properly repented and the ugly hag is transformed into a beautiful woman. The feminine emphasis of the motif is important, because often the ugly hags have been placed under a spell by a stepmother figure.<sup>9</sup> The prominence of feminine power is of note in these texts, as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* attempts to balance Camelot, a patriarchal court, and Hautdesert, Morgan's seat of power. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a hybrid text, divided

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<sup>9</sup> This is seen in certain Irish tales, Gower's "Tale of Florent," and "The Weddyng of Syr Gawen to Dame Ragnell"

between the very masculine world of Gawain and the Green Knight, and the feminine sphere of Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak.

The ultimate function of the loathly lady, in both the Irish and English tradition, is to impart important lessons to a knight. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain is faced with three female figures, each crucial to the survival of Arthur and Camelot.

Morgan, who has the most in common with the traditional depiction of the loathly lady, hides behind her appearance in order to test Gawain's reputation. Lady Bertilak further tests Gawain's chivalry when she attempts to seduce him on Morgan's behalf.

Guinevere's silent presence in the texts serves as a reminder of Camelot's eventual downfall. The loathly lady's challenge hinges on the knight's ability to understand her test and internalize her crucial lessons. The loathly lady tradition grants clarity to the purpose and symbolism of each woman in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

When Gawain first stumbles upon Castle Hautdesert, he is introduced to the court and, unbeknownst to him, his aunt, Morgan le Fay. Morgan's entrance into the poem is subtle, so much so, in fact, that she remains anonymous until the Green Knight reveals her identity at the end of the text. This first appearance, however, is important in tracing Morgan's loathly lady origins, and, also, her position of power in Bertilak's court. At the dinner feast, once Gawain has eaten with Bertilak de Hautdesert, Bertilak's Lady enters the hall:

And wener þen Wenore, as þe wyȝe þoȝt.  
 Ho ches þurȝ þe chaunsel to cheryche þat hende.  
 An oþer lady hir lad bi þe lyft honed  
 þat watz alder þen ho, an auncian hit semed,  
 And heȝly honowred with haþeleȝ aboute.  
 Bot vnlyke on to loke þo ladyes were:  
 For if þe ȝonge watz ȝep, ȝolȝe watz þat oþer;  
 Riche red on þat on rayled ayquere,

Rugh rankled chekez Ðat oÐer on rolled;  
 Kerhofes of Ðat on with mony cler perlez;  
 Hir brest and her bryȝt Prote, bare diplayed,  
 Schon schyrer Ðen snawe Ðat shedes on hillez;  
 Ðat oÐer wyth a gorger watz gered ouer Ðe swyre,  
 Chybled ouer hir blake chyn with chalk-quyte vayles,  
 Hir frount folden in sylk, enfoubled ayquere,  
 Toret and treleted with tryfleȝ aboute,  
 Ðat noȝy watz bare of Ðat burde bot Ðe blake broȝes,  
 Ðe tweyne yȝen and Ðe nase, Ðe naked lyppez,  
 And Ðose were soure to se and sellyly blered,  
 A mensk lady on molde mon may hir calle,  
 For Gode!  
 Hir body watz schort and Ðik,  
 Hir buttokez balȝ and brode;  
 More lykkerwys on to lyk  
 Watz Ðat scho hade on lode. (945-969)

The specificity of the *Pearl* Poet's description ties Morgan to the common physical traits attributed to the loathly lady. Morgan is old and wrinkled, her skin hangs from her cheeks and her lips are repulsive. Both Chaucer and Gower describe their hags as old and ugly. The anonymous author of "The Weddyng of Syr Gawen" provides an elaborately detailed description of the loathly Dame Ragnell, a description that bears striking similarities to Morgan's grotesque appearance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Dame Ragnell is described as follows: "Her face was red, her nose snotyd withal,/ Her mowith wyde, her teth yalowe over all, With bleryd eyen gretter then a ball; Her mowith was nott to lak" (231-234). Although "The Weddyng of Syr Gawen" is a later loathly lady tale, the influence of Chaucer, Gower and the earlier Irish hags is clearly present. The hags of the loathly lady motif, in both the Irish and English traditions, share two commonalities: they are old and they are ugly.

The importance of this description lies not only in Morgan's physical attributes, but also her dress. She is covered from head to toe in gorget and veils, so that only her

face is exposed. Yet, despite being able to see her eyes, nose and lips, Gawain does not recognize his own aunt. Her clothing is richly embroidered, and speaks of her high station within Bertilak's castle. At this first meeting, Gawain is unaware that Morgan is the old woman standing before him; however, her power is displayed as she is "highly honwred with hathelz aboute" (949). Despite her ugliness, the old woman appears to be wealthy and well-treated in the home of Bertilak. After all, the Lady of the castle personally attends her, behaving as a lady in waiting. Morgan is disguised both by her physical ugliness, and the richness of her garments. Rather than call attention to herself, Morgan's appearance deflects Gawain's unobservant eye. He notes her entrance, her dress, and her face yet he is unable to recognize her true identity. It is the Lady who provides Morgan's best disguise of all, for her beauty conceals Morgan's very existence from Gawain. The Lady, described as "wener Þen Wenore," immediately creates the diversion necessary for Morgan to remain invisible.

Gawain is distracted by the Lady's beauty, as "Þe alder he haylsey, heldande ful lowe" (972), and then quickly turns his full attention from the ugly old woman. Gawain "loueloker he lappez a lyttel in armez/ He kisses hir comlyly and knyȝtly he melez" (973-974), and proceeds to spend the evening in joyous feast and revelry with the Lady and Bertilak's court. Despite Gawain's inability to recognize Morgan or her position of power, the poet provides clues to Morgan's importance in Bertilak's court. When the court gathers for their meal, "Þe olde auncian wyf heȝest ho syttez;/ Þe lorde lufly her by lent as I trowe./ Gawan and Þe gay burde togeder Þay semed,/ Euen immyddez, as Þe messe metely come" (1001-1004). Morgan sits at the high table, next to Bertilak, traditionally the place of the Lord's lady. The Lady in question, however, is seated beside

Gawain, allowing Morgan the place of honor at the table, and, conveniently, distracting him.

The question of Gawain's inability to recognize Morgan may have a simple answer. It is possible that Gawain has never laid eyes on his aunt, for the text fails to provide detailed biographies of its characters. If the *Pearl* Poet is relying on the French *Vulgate Cycle* as his source, perhaps Morgan has already been exiled from court during her youth, before Gawain came to court (or perhaps before Gawain was born). An exiled Morgan would make narrative sense in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, because she never physically leaves Hautdesert. Just as Gawain is Arthur's representative outside of Camelot, the Green Knight is Morgan's messenger outside of the confines of her forest castle. Ultimately, the *Pearl* Poet focuses on Morgan's appearance, and Gawain's blindness to the true meaning of this appearance. As Mary Leech writes, "The Loathly Lady is not just ugly; she is deformed. Since she cannot be a viable commodity for marriage, she is not marketable. Because she is disgusting, she is not subject to the same regulatory standards as beautiful women. The Loathly Lady is therefore accorded a certain amount of freedom not otherwise permitted to women" (Leech 215). Because the Lady is so beautiful, Morgan is able to hide from Gawain and test his reputation with the help of her minions. She is able to move within the court in secret, so although Gawain bows to her and she sits beside Bertilak, the attention remains on the Lady and the seduction attempts. Of course, Morgan is busy in the background, the grand puppet master of Hautdesert, yet she is never a suspect until the Green Knight speaks her existence into the poem. Until this revelation, she is simply the old "auncian" in the castle, harmless because of her age, and undesirable because of her ugliness.

Morgan's physical appearance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* not only connects her to the loathly lady tradition, but also exposes questions about her intentions and motivations. After Gawain battles the Green Knight at the end of the poem, the Green knight reveals his own true identity and the source of this magic. He explains to Gawain that Morgan le Fay dwells in his home and that she is responsible for his transformation. Bertilak also provides an interesting summation of Morgan, "Morgne þe goddes/ Þerfore hit is hir name;/ Weldez non so hyȝe hawtesse/ Þat ho ne con make ful tame" (2453-2456). In this short but telling stanza, Bertilak provides a list of Morgan's distinct attributes: she is a goddess, and she is capable of humbling those with excessive pride. As Albert B. Friedman notes in "Morgan Le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", "By speaking of her as a goddess, the poet deepens the sinister gloom about her: a pagan goddess becomes automatically a Christian demon" (Friedman 267). In labeling Morgan a goddess, Bertilak links her to the Irish war goddess tradition. Morgan's goddess persona is as dangerous as her talent for magic. These Celtic war goddesses, capable of great violence and destruction, were also known for their shape-shifting abilities and their overt sexuality. "Morgne þe goddes" is a creature tied to pagan Irish mythology, far removed from Arthur's Christian world.

Although it is tempting to classify Morgan as a demonic sorceress, she is more than a symbol of witchcraft. Of course, her position as a goddess is problematic within the Christian narrative of *Sir Gawain*; however, the poet provides further information as to Morgan's past and her position as Bertilak's guest (if she is, indeed, only a guest). Bertilak tells Gawain, "And koyntyse of clergye, bi craftes wel lerned - / Þe maystrés of Merlyn mony ho hatz taken,/ For ho hatz dalt drwry ful dere sumtyme/ With þat conable

klerk; Pat knowes alle your knyȝtez/ At hame” (2447-2451). Not only is Morgan a goddess, she is also a magician, taught by the most famous magician in Arthur’s realm, Merlin. This binds her to a non-Christian world of magic and sorcery. Morgan’s love affair with Merlin also ties the *Pearl* Poet’s work to the Morgan of the French romances. In the *Vulgate Cycle*, Morgan’s exile from Camelot leads her to Merlin. She learns her magic from the great magician and, in the process, he falls in love with her. Her magic is a weapon, and her connection to Merlin makes this weapon even more powerful. Not only does she have political sovereignty within Bertilak’s court, her magic enhances her social standing as a woman of power. Despite her gender, her dual nature, the Irish goddess and the French sorceress, makes her a formidable threat to her enemies.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Morgan’s reasons for sending the Green Knight are specific and quite telling of the state of Camelot. The Green Knight tells Sir Gawain that Morgan had two motives for sending him to Arthur’s court. Her first is “For to assay þe surquidré, ȝif hit soth were/ Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table” (2457-2458); the second, “For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe/ With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked/ With his hede in his honed bifore þe hyȝe table” (2459-2461). Once again, the influence of the Irish loathly lady motif and the French romances are present in the *Pearl* Poet’s narrative. Like the Irish focus on sovereignty and kingship, Morgan’s test of the Round Table’s reputation is the catalyst for Gawain’s quest to prove Arthur’s right to the throne and the Round Table’s chivalry. Morgan’s focus on Guinevere is very much in keeping with her behavior in the French *Vulgate Cycle*. I discuss Morgan’s desire to test the chivalry of the Round Table in

chapter three, but in exploring Morgan's role in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, it is imperative to look at Guinevere's place in the poem and in the greater Arthurian story.

When the Green Knight tells Gawain that Morgan desires Guinevere's death, the immediate question is this: why would Morgan want to kill her brother's wife? Indeed, a literal reading of the text indicates that Morgan wants Guinevere to die, to be frightened to death by the Green Knight's ghastly appearance. As Sheila Fisher remarks in her article "Taken Men and Token Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," other than the initial description of her beauty,

Guinevere is mentioned only four other times in the poem: when we are told that she sits near Gawain at the Yuletide feast; when Arthur bids her not to be bothered by the Green Knight's talking head; when she suffers by comparison to the Lady and her beauty; and last, but not least, when she is named as one of the motivations for Morgan's scheme. (Fisher 73)

Despite her few appearance in the poem, Guinevere plays a crucial role in providing the stimulus for Morgan's plot. The question of the Round Table's chivalry is suitable for a quest for Gawain, yet the idea that Morgan enchants Bertilak for the purpose of killing the queen is far more confusing. Because *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has a circular narrative pattern<sup>10</sup>, it is impossible to understand with certainty Morgan's motives.

Morgan's history with Guinevere, in both the French romances and the later English works, is always tumultuous: "The significance of this uneasy alliance, whose ambiguities bear silent witness to the existence of a prior relationship of undecidable tension between the two women, finally escapes the text and perhaps Arthurian tradition

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<sup>10</sup> The poem begins and ends with a historical overview of Troy, and its relation to England. This structure also encloses Arthur's universe within the narrative. It starts when the King is young, but never provides background information to explain how he became king, why Morgan lives away from court, or what will happen after Gawain returns. Of course, these facts are implied within the text.

altogether” (Heng 502). As I explained in the first chapter, in the French stories, Guinevere desires that Morgan leave court, and Morgan’s overt sexuality and potentially dark magic make her exile from Camelot a common theme throughout Arthurian literature.

If Morgan has been exiled, she cannot return to her brother’s court. Her desire for Guinevere’s death may be connected to her desire to return. Without Guinevere, perhaps Arthur will allow Morgan a pardon for her unnamed past offenses. Guinevere is Arthur’s queen, and, therefore, the most powerful female figure within the patriarchal hierarchy of Camelot. Although Guinevere is a minor character in the poem, Morgan’s gaze remains fixed upon her. She is simultaneously a victim and a threat, because Morgan sends the Green Knight with the intention of testing the Round Table *and* killing Guinevere. This test may be deeply connected to Guinevere’s own behavior or actions, as perhaps Morgan is aware of the potential danger Guinevere holds for the future of Camelot.

In the *Vulgate Cycle*, the root of Guinevere’s destructive behavior is her great love for Sir Lancelot. The infamous affair between Lancelot and Guinevere is never directly noted in *Sir Gawain*, although Morgan’s desire for Guinevere’s death is a signal that all is not well with Arthur’s queen. Considering that Lancelot and Guinevere were first introduced to the Arthurian narrative in the thirteenth century by Chrétien de Troyes, and given the *Pearl* Poet’s likely familiarity with Chrétien’s work and the narrative of the *Vulgate Cycle*, the *Pearl* Poet was probably aware of this plotline. Just because it is not overtly mentioned in the poem does not mean that the affair is not implied. The text calls attention to Lancelot’s absence by having Gawain take his place. It is Gawain, not Lancelot, that is King Arthur’s champion. Gawain is the heroic protagonist, protector of

Arthur's realm, and the Queen's honor. Gawain is, after all, an *English* knight, and his inherent connection to the country of Arthur's birth makes him suitable to act as the King's favorite.

Guinevere is a silent, passive figure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. She sits demurely in her place at Arthur's court, and even when the Green Knight enters, challenges Arthur, and is subsequently beheaded, the poet offers no clue as to Guinevere's reaction. Rather, once the Green Knight picks up his bloody head, Arthur's "hert hade wonder" (467). Arthur turns, "To þe comlych quene wyth cortays speche,/ 'Dere dame, today demay yow neuer./ Wel bycommes such craft vpon Christmase'" (469-471). Arthur continues: "Neuerþelece to my mete I may me wel dres,/ For I haf sen a selly I may not forsake" (474-475). The King is suitably pleased with the Green Knight's festive "performance," and Guinevere seemingly has no response to the wonders seen in her husband's court. She does not utter a word throughout the entire poem, in contrast to her appearances in subsequent Arthurian texts, and two of the three contemporary loathly lady tales, to which I now turn.

Guinevere is featured in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and "The Weddyng of Syr Gawen." In both stories she is depicted as an active member of Arthur's court, concerned with its reputation and security. Unlike the *Pearl* Poet's silent version of Guinevere, Chaucer's Arthurian queen plays an integral role in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Despite the fantasy aspects of *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the plot explores the dark side of masculine power through the character of the raping knight. Chaucer begins his tale, "In th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour, Of which that Britons speken greet honour,/ Al was this land fulfild of fayereye./ The elf-queene, with hir joly compaignye,/ Daunced ful ofte in many

a grene mede” (Chaucer 857-861). The setting of the poem, the ancient Arthurian past, is steeped in feminine magic. A fairy queen dances in the green glen of the forests, and fairies fill the country. *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* is, of course, a fairy story, but one of the Wife’s careful design. The fantasy element lies not in the abundance of magic, but, rather, in the powerful women scattered throughout the tale. The questing knight, a common character in the loathly lady motif, is a rapist, something not found in any other loathly lady stories. The Wife, like Morgan le Fay, is an overtly sexual being, one who believes that men must submit to their wives in marriage, and the marriage bed.

Guinevere plays an integral part in the raping knight’s punishment. The knight is sentenced to death for his crime but, “[...] the queene and other laydes mo/ So longe preyeden the kyng of grace/ Til he his lyf hym graunted in the place,/ And yaf hym to the queene, al at hir wille,/ To chese whether she woldey hym save or spille” (Chaucer 894-898). Arthur grants Guinevere the power to decide the knight’s fate, “al at hir wille.” He grants her sovereignty, and is, therefore, in the Wife’s estimation, an ideal husband and man. Guinevere challenges the raping knight, saying, “I grante thee lyf, if thou kanst tellen me/ What thing is it that wommen moost desiren” (Chaucer 904-905). The knight’s quest, the traditional aspect for a loathly lady tale, is to discover what women most desire. This knight, who has violated a woman, must now surrender to his Queen’s command, or lose his head. This, coupled with the Wife’s final call for God to punish men who do not do their wife’s bidding, creates a portrait of a man learning to treat women well and to grant sovereignty in marriage. His violation of the young woman is forgotten as he relinquishes his masculine power to his wife.

Guinevere's position as an active member of Arthur's court continues in "The Weddyng of Syr Gawen and Dame Ragnell." Here Guinevere plays a minor, yet vocal, role. When Gawain marries the hideous Dame Ragnell, the court is appalled, especially Guinevere. As Gawain pledges himself to the hag, the anonymous poet writes, "'Alas!' then sayd Dame Gaynour-/ So sayd alle the ladyes in her bower - / And wept for Syr Gawen" (542-544). On the day of the wedding, "The Queen prayd Dame Ragnell sekerly/ To be maryed in the morning, erly -" (569-570), so that it can remain a private affair. Dame Ragnell, always the show-woman, refuses, and appears at the church, "More fresher than Dame Gaynour" (591). After Dame Ragnell's transformation, Arthur and Guinevere arrive at Gawain's bedchamber and find him with a beautiful, auburn haired woman. Guinevere says, "I thank God [...]/ I wenyd, Syr Gawen, she wold the have myscaaryd;/ Therefore in my hart I was sore agrevyd - / Butt the contrary is here seen" (773-776). The Queen obviously loves Sir Gawain because he is her husband's most loyal and trusted knight. Her fear for his safety in the bedchamber is rather amusing: despite Dame Ragnell's physical ugliness, her only weapon is her overt sexuality. Guinevere is quite pious in the poem, and Dame Ragnell's promiscuity would certainly be shocking for the queen. In an interesting final statement, the Queen speaks of Dame Ragnell and says, "She is the fairest nowe in this halle,/ I swere by Seynt John!/ My love, lady, ye shall have ever,/ For that ye savid my lord Arthoure,/ As I am a gentilwoman" (794-798). Guinevere concedes that her own beauty pales in comparison to Dame Ragnell, and also expresses her love for the woman who saved King Arthur. Dame Ragnell becomes the most powerful female at court because of her beauty, and her ability to get that which she most desires. Indeed, Arthur agrees to pardon her brother, the wily

Sir Gromer Somer, because Ragnell asks him to. She also keeps Gawain away from his duties to the king, employing her sexuality to keep her husband in bed instead of on Arthur's hunt. Once Dame Ragnell transforms, Guinevere becomes silent and passive.

The Guinevere of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has no power other than her beauty, and even that pales in comparison with Bertilak's wife. Her silence and Morgan's specific desire for her death reveal a destabilized universe where nothing is as it seems. Morgan is certainly more powerful than Guinevere when it comes to magic and manipulation, but Guinevere's actions will have far more dire consequences. Unlike Chaucer's loathly lady story, where Guinevere asks the raping knight the question "what do women most desire," the *Pearl* Poet leaves the questioning to Morgan. Morgan fails to kill the queen, yet it is the question of the Round Table's chivalry that will ultimately expose both Arthur's potential for failure, and Guinevere's dangerous affair. Guinevere serves as a symbol of warning in the poem. Her passivity only emphasizes Arthur's inability to recognize the problems in his kingdom.

The third female character in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is Bertilak's wife, a woman who plays a large role in Morgan's plot, yet remains nameless. She is described as being more beautiful than Guinevere and seems to be sexually promiscuous. The Lady, more so than the Green Knight, propels Morgan's plot while Gawain is at Hautdesert. Although Bertilak spends his days hunting, the Lady is busy at work, testing the "surquidré" of the Round Table through the sexual temptation of Sir Gawain. Where Guinevere has little power as Queen in a political setting, Bertilak's Lady arguably wields the most power within the confines of Gawain's bedroom. Like Dame Ragnell, Bertilak's lady usurps Guinevere's most important characteristic in the poem, her beauty.

As Heng explains in her essay “Feminine Knots and the Other in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” “the Lady’s bodily beauty is caught and communicated through the body of Guinevere’s name, itself the embodiment of beauty in the Arthurian universe” (Heng 502). Here, Heng refers to the power of Guinevere’s reputation. The Lady is more beautiful than Guinevere, and she is thus elevated in the feminine hierarchy of the text. Her sexuality heightens her beauty, yet it also removes her from social norms and aligns her with Morgan and the enchantresses of the loathly lady motif.

Upon arriving at Hautdesert, Gawain meets the hag and the lady, two women who are described in terms of their physical appearance. Here, the role of the hag and the beautiful woman are inverted. It is the beautiful woman who tests and, ultimately, teaches Gawain what he must learn. The hag remains in the background until Bertilak reveals her true identity. At the end of the poem, once Bertilak has revealed his own identity, he invites Gawain back to the castle in order to meet with Morgan, yet he makes no mention of his wife, the woman who supposedly was deeply involved in Gawain’s test. The lady disappears from the text, her presence taken over by the mention of Morgan’s name. Just as Guinevere disappears from “The Weddyng of Syr Gawen” once Dame Ragnell usurps her beauty, Bertilak’s lady vanishes once her power over Gawain is revealed to be an extension of Morgan’s magic.

There is no textual evidence to support the position that Morgan and the lady may be one and the same. The two women even appear simultaneously, and the poet’s description of them is achieved through comparison. The lady is as beautiful as the hag is ugly. The ability to shape-shift, however, is crucial to understanding the allegorical

foundation of the loathly lady motif.<sup>11</sup> Susan Carter notes in the essay, “A Hymenation of Hags,” “... that the earliest extant versions are found in medieval Irish literature, where the Loathly Lady’s unstable body stands for the kingdom, or more specifically, the experience of kingship” (Carter 84). The instability of Arthur’s kingdom is represented in Morgan’s physical body. The possibility that her body, like the kingdom, is capable of sudden shifts only emphasizes the approaching doom of Camelot. If Morgan and the lady are one and the same, the narrative becomes that much more treacherous because, “Although the motif is centrally concerned with political power, masculine ideals, and the right rule, through the allegory of the sovereignty hag all this is predicated on the gratification of female sexuality at its most grotesque. A good king must please the shape-shifter whose monstrous desire destabilizes gender stereotypes” (Carter 86). Regardless of Morgan’s ability to shape-shift, the Lady’s role in the text links her to the dangerous hags of the loathly lady tradition. The beautiful lady, traditionally associated with a reward for granting female sovereignty, becomes the catalyst for Gawain’s failure. She is a temptress, sexually promiscuous and wanton. If the beautiful lady is Morgan, her presence serves to prove that Camelot is fractured.

Yet, Bertilak’s Lady is not simply a sexual being intent on destroying Gawain through the use of her often scantily clad body. Certainly, her nakedness provides an

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<sup>11</sup> In the Irish loathly lady tales, the hag’s shifting body is representative of the difficult responsibility of kingship and the changing challenges of sovereignty and political control. The loathly ladies of the Irish tradition are also known to request sexual favors from the knight in order to test his bravery. If Morgan is Lady Bertilak, her physical transformation serves as Gawain’s test of bravery. If he can recognize the danger and survives Morgan’s test he is worthy of the Round Table’s great reputation and, by extension, Arthur is a worthy king.

appropriate test for Gawain's chastity; however, the seduction has far more meaning than a simple sex game. Mary Leech, in "The Weddyng of Syr Gawen,"<sup>12</sup> explores the sexual nature of the loathly lady: "The transgressive act of the Loathly Lady, while sexual in part, transcends sex and points instead towards social functions of gender roles" (Leech 217). Bertilak's Lady is performing a task on behalf of the two people who outrank her in Hautdesert's social hierarchy: Bertilak and Morgan le Fay. The lady uses sex as both a weapon against Gawain and protection from societal norms. She is allowed to behave in a promiscuous manner because Hautdesert does not ascribe to any courtly rulebook. The Lady's test is a complete reversal of typical gender roles at Camelot. Because Morgan is ultimately in control, and because Hautdesert is a non-Christian, morally ambiguous setting, the Lady is granted freedom to use her body as she sees fit. Despite her beauty, her overt sexuality aligns her with the loathly lady figure, as her inappropriate promiscuity tests Gawain and endangers his mission.

As discussed earlier, Lady Bertilak's center of power is the bedchamber. Leech writes, "Normally, after a woman marries in a romance, her identity is all but erased. She is taken out of the public realm and relegated to a private sphere within the home" (Leech 216). It is within this "private sphere" that the Lady is able to perform Morgan's test, and perhaps take her own pleasure from Gawain. There is something sinister about Lady Bertilak's seduction game as Gawain is often presented as disturbed or frightened by her presence. In their first meeting, when the Lady steps into his bedchamber, Gawain fakes sleep, and when he wakes, the poet writes he "sayned hym, as bi his saȝe þe sauer to worthe,/ With hande" (1202-1203). Gawain desires divine protection from the Virgin

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<sup>12</sup> "Why Dame Ragnell Had to Die: Feminine Usurpation of Masculine Authority in "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell"

Mary, but, at this initial meeting, the Lady has yet to utter a word. Her very appearance is enough to alert Gawain that his reputation is at risk. Indeed, the Lady uses hunting terminology to describe her actions. When she approaches the bed, she tells Gawain, “I schal bynde yow in your bedde – Þat be Ʒe trayst” (1211). Later she explains, “Ʒe schal not rise of your bedde. I rych yow better:/ I schal happe yow here Þat oþer half als/ And syþen karp wyth my knyȝt Þat I kaȝt haue” (1223-1225). Just as Bertilak spends his days hunting game in the forest, the Lady catches Gawain in his bed, and will not let him escape from her clutches.

While Lady Bertilak is trapped in the private sphere of Hautdesert, Dame Ragnell thrives in the more public setting of Camelot. In “The Weddyng of Syr Gawen,” Dame Ragnell is able to step outside the private sphere and wield power in Arthur’s court. Leech writes, “At no point is Dame Ragnell subject to the will of the court: she rides in as she wishes, she is married when and where she wishes, she marries whom she wishes, she is dressed as she wishes, and she eats where and how she wishes” (Leech 219). Within the public sphere, the Lady is subject to Bertilak and Morgan;<sup>13</sup> within the bedroom, however, she is granted sovereignty over her own words and actions. She tells Gawain that if she were able, “I schulde chepen and chose to cheue me a lorde,/ For Þe costes Þat I haf knowen vpon Þe, knyȝt, here/ Of bewte and debonerte and blyþe semblaunt - / And Þat I haf er herkkened and halde hit here trwee - / Per schulde no freke vpon folde bifore yow be chosen” (1271-1275). In a surprising confession, she tells Gawain that if she had

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<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to ponder whether Lady Bertilak would be subject to Guinevere. Certainly Arthur should hold the utmost power in the narrative, yet Morgan’s plot proves that the king is not aware, or in charge, of all those within the kingdom. Lady Bertilak is more beautiful than Guinevere, and perhaps this grants her more power than Arthur’s queen. Through an examination of her actions and words, she obviously has an immediate effect on Gawain and, by extension, Arthur.

the power she would choose him for a husband. Before leaving, “Ho comes nerre with Þat and cachez hym in armez,/ Loutez luflych adoun and Þe leude kyssez” (1305-1306). The Lady behaves in a traditionally masculine manner, forcibly taking Gawain and kissing him.

The Lady explains that Gawain is being courteous and knightly by granting her a kiss, yet, in each subsequent meeting, she initiates and forcefully takes Gawain’s kisses. The Lady is very aware of this gender game she is playing, as she tells Gawain, “Þe ar stif innoghe to constrayne wyth strenkþe, 3if yow lykez,/ 3if any were so vilanous Þat yow devaye wolde” (1496-1497). Gawain’s response to the Lady’s comment is of interest in relation to Chaucer’s raping knight. Gawain says, “Þe, be God [...] good is your speche;/ Bot Þrete is vnÞryuande in Þede Þer I lende,/ And vche gift Þat is geuen not with goud wylle” (1498-1500). What the Lady says is true, but Gawain explains that, in his country, such things (rape) are seen as “ignoble,” as is taking a gift that is not freely offered. Chaucer’s knight does exactly this, and because his knight could be Gawain, it is interesting to compare Chaucer’s potential version of Gawain with the *Pearl* Poet’s Gawain. Here, Gawain is concerned with keeping his vows of knighthood, and avoiding any risk to the Lady’s reputation. The Lady, in contrast, puts Gawain in a precarious position, using her entire sexual arsenal against him. As a woman, the Lady is aware that she is taking a great risk with her safety, or, to be more specific, playing with a man who is fully capable of rape. Yet she changes the game and shifts gender roles, something Morgan does exceedingly well. Just as Morgan is able to control Bertilak and make him the Green Knight, the Lady manipulates Gawain and tests his code of knighthood, and, in this moment, his potential for committing violent acts against women.

Throughout her three visitations to Gawain's bed, the Lady claims that she is in love with him. The text does not indicate whether she is truly in love with Gawain or if this is all a part of Morgan's game, although it is likely that the Lady is simply doing as Morgan commands. Indeed, the Lady is aware that her husband is away and that she is in complete control of what goes on in the bedchamber. She tells Gawain, "I com hider sengel and sitte/ To lerne at yow sum game;/ Dos techez me of your wytte,/ Whil my lorde is from hame" (1531-1534). The third visit sees Gawain accept her gift of the girdle, thus tainting his reputation. This meeting also marks a shift in her appearance. Although she has previously used her body physically to block Gawain from leaving his bed, now she appears nearly naked, exuding sexual power over the knight. She appears, "Hir Pryuen face hir Prote Prowen al naked,/ Hir brest bare bifore, and bihinde eke" (1740-1741). She also begins to play on Gawain's emotions, saying, "I may bot mourne vpon molde, as may Pat much louyes'/ Skywande ho sweze doun and semly hym kyssed" (1795-1796). The Lady's words and scant dress can be interpreted as humorous, especially in light of the fact that Gawain is taking part in an exchange game with Bertilak. For everything Bertilak obtains on his hunting excursions, Gawain must give Bertilak all that he gains in the castle – and what Gawain gains is an abundance of kisses from Bertilak's wife. When the poet writes of Gawain, "Gret perile bitwene hem stod, Nif Mare of hir knyȝt mynne" (1768-1769), it could be this humor at play. Alternatively, this could be a sign of problems for Gawain. He needs divine protection from the Lady's ministrations, and indeed he does take her "magical" girdle in the following lines. The Lady's seduction works, not because Gawain engages in sex with her, but, rather, because she is able to trick him. She plays on his fear of the Green Knight, and, ultimately,

Gawain takes the girdle, because he does not want to die. Although Gawain survives his duel with the Green Knight, the Lady defeats him with the promise of magical protection, reinforcing her power, and, by extension, Morgan's power, in the feminine private sphere of the bedchamber.

At the heart of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the question of the chivalry of the Round Table. This question challenges the reputation of the Round Table Camelot and exposes the potential danger the court finds itself in. Nowhere in the poem does the *Pearl* Poet write about the trouble in Arthur's court, yet, through the presence of Guinevere, trouble is certainly on the horizon. The question of the Round Table's reputation is just as crucial as the question of "what do women most desire?" Like the women of subsequent loathly lady tales, Morgan's use of the Green Knight to present this question is her attempt to gain sovereignty. Of course, this forces the question: sovereignty for whom? The answer to this question can be traced to the French *Vulgate Cycle*, a possible source for the *Pearl* Poet's characterizations as Morgan's relationship to Arthur is complicated because of her feud with Guinevere, and the possibility that Morgan is living in exile. If Morgan is loyal to Arthur, her test for Gawain will lead to sovereignty for Arthur within his court, because he will be forewarned of the possible destruction of Camelot. If Morgan is not loyal to Arthur, but still succeeds in warning her brother, she has gained sovereignty in Camelot. It would be through her test, and her lesson, that Arthur's court survives. Although she remains hidden for most of the poem, her quest for sovereignty is made transparent by the Green Knight's specific tasks: test the chivalry of the Round Table, and kill Guinevere, traditionally Morgan's arch nemesis.

In the three contemporary Middle English poems discussed in this chapter, the sexual power of the hag is heavily emphasized. The importance of female sexuality is constantly illuminated in the loathly lady motif. Loathly ladies use their hideous bodies to test men, and obtain that which they most desire, be it sovereignty in marriage or an heir to Ireland's throne. The transformation scene nearly always takes place in bed once the knight has married the hag. She transforms in the moments before consummation, often right after requesting a kiss from her husband. Gower's and Chaucer's knights are both horrified by this prospect, but Sir Gawain of "The Weddyng of Syr Gawen," and the Irish princes willingly submit to the request. Bertilak's Lady is an overtly sexual being; her actions and motivations stem from the powerful ability to use her beauty in order to seduce Gawain. She appears semi-nude in front of him, and, throughout their three visits, kisses him and forcibly takes him in her arms. Although she uses her feminine body, her behaviors are quite masculine, and this gender reversal is found in many loathly lady tales. Dame Ragnell enters court and proceeds to dismantle the gender hierarchy. Lady Bertilak's use of sexuality is in keeping with the behaviors of the loathly lady motif. The Lady is an inversion of the hag. She is beautiful, but wanton, while the hag remains silent and passive. The Lady presents a threat to Gawain's reputation, and, by extension, her seduction attempts put the reputation of the entire Round Table at risk. She wields the power to destroy Gawain, or save him, just like the hag figures of the loathly lady tales. Ultimately, it is Morgan behind this game, and with the combination of her physical ugliness, and the Lady's sexuality, she has a full arsenal to use in order to test Gawain, Arthur and Camelot.

**Chapter III**  
**There and Back Again:**  
**Gawain's Journey as the Loathly Lady's Knight,**  
**From Camelot to the Green Chapel**

The third chapter of my thesis follows Gawain's journey to Hautdesert, and his subsequent return to Camelot. In all loathly lady stories, there is a questing knight figure. Gawain plays this role in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, yet he is unlike any knight found in the loathly lady motif. Gawain has not committed a crime. Nor does Gawain wish to gain a kingdom, like the Irish princes of the loathly lady tales. Despite these differences, Gawain's role in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* bears similarities to the questing knight in the loathly lady tradition. Gawain's acceptance of the quest transforms the knight from merely Arthur's nephew to the living embodiment of Arthur's kingdom. This chapter pays specific attention to the importance of magical symbols and objects in the third and fourth fitts of the poem. Gawain's final meeting with the Green Knight is also discussed in detail because it is here, at Hautdesert, that Gawain's position as Arthur's representative and Morgan's nephew is of great importance. Ultimately, chapter three is an exploration of Gawain as he relates to the loathly lady motif, Morgan le Fay, and the Arthurian universe in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

According to Norris J. Lacy, it is difficult to trace Gawain's origins because he, like Morgan, is from the ancient Celtic tradition. Gawain also appears in the Welsh romances under the name "Gwalchmei," but, as Lacy argues, his most important moment of origin is found in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the King of Britain* (Lacy 178). In *History of the Kings of Britain*, Gawain and his brother, Mordred, are the sons of King Lot and Arthur's sister Anna. Gawain is knighted by the Pope, and dies with Arthur at the

final battle against Mordred. His kinship to Arthur makes him an important knight in the Arthurian mythos, but the French romances are unkind to Gawain, and Chrétien de Troyes presents him in a mocking light. Lacy writes, “Chrétien seems particularly concerned with Gawain’s blind adherence to custom and frivolous attachment to the opposite sex. Even though *Perceval* is unfinished, it seems clear that Gawain is bound to fail where Perceval will succeed” (Lacy 178). In the French romances, Gawain is morally ambiguous, prone to acts of hubris and misogyny. This changes with the Middle English Arthurian romances, where Gawain reclaims his original status as a respected member of Arthur’s Round Table.

In the essay “Middle English Arthurian Romance: The Repetition and Reputation of Gawain,” Phillip C. Boardman writes, “The Gawain romances tend to be relatively short and they come into increasing prominence late in the period, so we can say 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 257). Lacy expands Boardman’s argument, stating,

There is in Middle English a marked reluctance to take over any of the negative features of the French Gawain, and Middle English romance in many ways restores Gawain to a position of respect and dignity. [...] One possible explanation for this is that English authors and audiences regarded Gawain as a British hero and that it was considered unseemly to show such a figure in a poor light. (Lacy 178)

The *Pearl* Poet’s characterization of Gawain certainly fits the portrait of an English hero. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain is the best knight for the Green Knight’s challenge, not only because he exemplifies knightly chivalry, but, unlike Lancelot, Gawain is symbolic of English nationalism. Unlike Morgan, whose reputation is forever

stained by the French romances, Gawain reclaims his early importance as a chivalrous, noble knight of the Round Table.

Forcing the *Pearl* Poet's English Gawain into a loathly lady story is understandably difficult, as the English Gawain is a shining example of knightly ideals and behaviors. Yet, perhaps the *Pearl* Poet is purposely calling attention to this problematic characterization of Arthur's nephew. Rosalind Field notes in her essay "Romance in England:" "[...] in the courtly romance of the Middle Ages, in Chretien as in the *Gawain*-poet, the tension between ideals of behavior and the actuality of medieval court life is recognized and manipulated" (Field 159-160). The *Pearl* Poet shows his reliance on the French romance tradition in his depiction of Hautdesert, Lancelot, Morgan le Fay and, as I will discuss later in the chapter, Morgan's forest dwelling. He would have been familiar with the French version of a morally ambiguous Gawain. It seems more than likely that once again the *Pearl* Poet is playing with these nationalistic identities in order to emphasize Gawain's worthiness as a questing knight. It seems he has made a conscious decision to adopt an English variant of Sir Gawain.

In fact, even Arthur is marginalized in the English romances, because Sir Gawain's character is more representative of the ideals of the Round Table. Phillip C. Boardman writes: "In the Middle English romances, Arthur is not the usual standard of courtesy. That role falls to Gawain, and it is in Gawain [...] that we can find the vital center of English Arthurian romance" (Boardman 257). Boardman continues, "Through all the romances in the early Arthurian tradition, Gawain filled a structural role as foil or standard against which other knights could be measured. This was, indeed, part of his

character, implicit in his heroism in the chronicle tradition (Geoffrey of Monmouth), and carried over into the structure of contrast in the earliest romances” (Boardman 258).

It would seem an obvious choice to place the French Gawain into the loathly lady motif. The knights of the loathly lady tales are prone to criminal behavior. Chaucer’s raping knight or Gower’s Florent are prime examples of these men in need of redemption through the aid of magical women. Rosalind Field continues:

The teasing penumbra of intertextual reference is particularly effective in its exploitation of the dual character of Gawain, by which the English Gawain is confronted by the seductress who appeals to his French reputation. Such a comic crisis of identity, together with the virtuoso manipulation of Romance structures, shows a close knowledge of French romance, while the presence of insular traditions can be felt in the choice of Gawain as protagonist, and the strong depiction. (Field 171)

Gawain’s “crisis of identity” is especially relevant during his time at Hautdesert, as he is placed in an arguably French setting and tempted by a Lady exhibiting the personality of a French Morgan le Fay. Even the Lady seems surprised by Gawain’s courtesy as, once they are alone in his bedchamber, she says, “Bot þat ȝe be Gawan hit gotz in mynde!” (1293). The Lady expects the French Gawain, a man who would find her seduction attempts nearly impossible to resist. The resistance that the English Gawain puts up defies her expectations as well as those of the audience. Because the *Pearl* Poet’s Gawain is the very model of knightly chivalry, his lack of moral ambiguity is emphasized by the poet’s use of the loathly lady motif. Gawain, according to the typical character traits of the loathly lady knight, *should* be a problematic, sinful man. By defying this expectation, the poet further enforces Gawain’s heroic reputation.

The first fitt of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* offers a revealing depiction of Arthur’s court during Christmas festivities. As Sheila Fisher notes, “the poem presents a

youthful, almost prelapsarian Camelot. While Arthur's youthfulness makes him "sumquat childegred" and "wylde" of "brayn" [...], his queen's youthfulness means that she is still "unfallen," and therefore still a fit symbol of her king" (Fisher 73). Arthur desires Christmas games before he eats, and this "game" arrives in the form of the Green Knight. The Green Knight's entrance and challenge begin Gawain's quest, and signal a shift in narrative focus from Arthur to Gawain. Arthur's reaction to the Green Knight is of interest because it signifies the type of king he is. As Fisher argues, Arthur is in the early days of his reign. He is young, distracted by games and merry making. When the Green Knight enters the hall, he says, "Hit arn aboute on Dis bench bot berdlez chylder" (280). Later, when the Green Knight mocks the bravery of Arthur's court, the *Pearl Poet* describes Arthur's fury: "Þe blod schot for scham into his schyre face/ And lere;/ He wex as wroth as wynde" (317-319). Arthur's anger at the Green Knight's taunt is reckless, and the Green Knight mocks the renown of the Round Table to further emphasize the court's initial cowardice. The Green Knight says, "'What, is Dis ArÞures hous,' quoÞ Þe haÞel Penne./ 'Pat al Þe rous rennes of Þurȝ ryalmes so mony?'" (309-310). When the Green Knight challenges Camelot's reputation, Arthur's initial silence is translated as cowardice, and the chivalry of Arthur's knights is immediately questioned. Gawain's acceptance of the Green Knight's challenge transforms *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from a story of Arthur's court to a knightly quest.

Gawain's position as Arthur's greatest knight is solidified when he requests the queen's permission and the king's acquiescence to take up the Green Knight's challenge. He is, without a doubt, the most worthy knight because he exhibits his loyalty to the king in the face of grave danger and certain death. Gawain is the only knight to stand and take

Arthur's place, saving the king from the Green Knight's axe. This behavior is synonymous with the medieval notion of knightly chivalry. Maurice Keen defines the typical chivalrous knight as follows: "[...] a man of aristocratic standing and probably of noble ancestry, who is capable, if called upon, of equipping himself with a war horse and the arms of a heavy cavalryman, and who has been through certain rituals that make him what he is – who has been dubbed to knighthood" (Keen 1-2). Gawain is certainly all of these things, and his connection to the chivalric code of knighthood is repeatedly indicated in the text. His shield, bearing the symbol of the pentangle, is also indicative of Gawain's strong connection to the chivalric code.<sup>14</sup> Gawain's actions echo the victory of Mac Niad in the Irish loathly lady tale *The Adventure of the Sons of Daire*. Mac Niad willingly accepts the loathly lady's challenge, thus proving his bravery and ability to rule Ireland as king. Gawain's fearless acceptance of the Green Knight's challenge solidifies his position as Arthur's greatest knight and kinsman.

Although Gawain is the essential knight, it is his "noble ancestry" that makes him uniquely suitable for the Green Knight's challenge. Bonds of kinship are prominent in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, especially the bond of the "sister's son." In his article "The Sister's Son in Early Irish Literature," Tomás Ó Cathasaigh traces the significance of the sister son relationship to the biblical connection between Mary, Jesus and the Jews. According to Ó Cathasaigh, "A significant relationship between mother's brother and sister's son, known as the *avunculate*, is a feature of many societies" (133). The kinship bond between a king and his sister's son is of the utmost importance, because it dictates bloodline and succession. To use the Arthurian universe as an example, Gawain's blood

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<sup>14</sup> This will be discussed later in the chapter.

relation to Arthur cannot be contested because Gawain is Arthur's sister's son. There can never be doubt concerning Gawain's legitimacy in connection to Arthur, because of the direct bloodline between Arthur, Arthur's sister, and her son, Gawain. Alternatively, applying this logic to the "brother's son" would raise difficulties. If the brother's wife were unfaithful, it is possible that the offspring are not the legitimate heirs to the ruler in question. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* features at least two "sister son" relationships,<sup>15</sup> while a third example can be potentially seen in Yvain.<sup>16</sup>

Like the Irish Sovereignty tales, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is focused on the king's descendants. When Gawain is first introduced, the poet writes, "There gode Gawan watz grayPed Gwenore bisyde,/ And Agrauayn a la Dure Mayn on Pat oPer side sittes-/ *BoPe Be kynges sister-sunes and ful siker kniȝtes*" (109-111, my emphasis). The order of Gawain's description is of interest, because the *Pearl* Poet emphasizes Gawain's relation to Arthur before adding that Gawain is also a good knight. Gawain's familial tie to Arthur also plays a crucial role once the Green Knight has issued his beheading game challenge. When Gawain volunteers, he must explain why he desires to take on such dangerous work: "I am Be wakkest, I wot, and of wyt feeblest,/ And lest lur of my lyf, quo laytes Be soPe./ Bot for as much as ȝe ar myn em I am only to prayse;/ No bounte but your blod I in my bode knowe" (354-356). It is because of his kinship to Arthur that Gawain feels he must prove himself amongst the knights of the Round Table. He fears that his only asset as a knight is that he is a descendent of Arthur's bloodline. Of course, this is far from true, and through this claim Gawain is exemplifying the knightly quality of humility, the quality that later shall be the basis of Morgan Le Fay's test. The focus on

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<sup>15</sup> Gawain and Agravain.

<sup>16</sup> In the *Vulgate Cycle*, Yvain (Uwain) is the son of King Urien and Morgan le Fay.

*kinship*, as opposed to the Irish focus on *kingship* allows Gawain to inhabit simultaneously the roles of Irish hero and English knight, typical of the loathly lady motif. He is a blood relative to Arthur and, therefore, worthy to take up the challenge. Yet, he is also a knight of the Round Table, who has no ambition to usurp the kingship and always shows the utmost loyalty to Arthur. When Arthur allows Gawain to accept the Green Knight's challenge, he says, "Kepe þe, cosyn" (371), further emphasizing his relation to Gawain. Arthur's concern is not simply for one of his knights, but rather for his sister's son, the "bounte" of his "blod."

The question of Gawain's worthiness and ability to take on the task has its origins in the loathly lady motif. He is worthy and able because Arthur (the king) and Morgan (the hag) deem it so. The familial connection also comes into play once Gawain "battles" the Green Knight. When Bertilak reveals that Morgan Le Fay is behind the magic of the Green Knight, he tells Gawain, "Þat is ho þat is at home, þe auncian lady;/ *Ho is euen Pyn aunt, ArPurez half-suster,/ þe duches doȝter of Tyntagelle, þat dere Vter after/Hade ArPur vpon, þat aþel is nowþe*" (2463-2466, my emphasis). Bertilak carefully traces Morgan's genealogy, emphasizing Gawain's relation to both Morgan and Arthur. This genealogical reminder is reminiscent of Sovereignty and Lugh prophesizing King Conn's descendants in *The Prophetic Ecstasy of the Phantom*. Gawain is connected by blood to Ygraine, the Duchess of Cornwall<sup>17</sup>, and, therefore, worthy of Morgan's test, teachings and lessons. When Bertilak says, "Þerefore I eþe þe, haþel, to com to Pyn aunt," (2466) the words indicate a family reunion, as opposed to a meeting between Arthur's greatest

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<sup>17</sup> Ygraine, mother of Arthur and Morgan. Morgan's father, Gorlois, Duke of Cornwall, is killed in battle while Uther Pendragon, with the help of Merlin's magic, seduces Ygrain and she conceives Arthur. (As recounted in *History of the King's of Britain* by Geoffrey of Monmouth)

knight and a goddess figure. This is also very different from Bertilak's invitation for Gawain to make peace with the Lady, "Þat watz your enemy kene" (2407). Morgan offers a different form of sovereignty, not found in the Irish Sovereignty hag stories or in the later English marital hag tales. Morgan offers sovereignty over the future, a potential escape from doom, and a warning of lurking danger in Arthur's court.

The question of Camelot's future is part of Morgan's ultimate objective. Her test, after all, aims directly at the heart of the kingdom: Arthur and his knights. The future of Camelot hinges on the reputation of the Round Table and, more specifically, the ability of Arthur's men to exemplify the ideals of chivalry. Obviously, this becomes problematic when considering Lancelot and Guinevere's affair in the context of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Lancelot, in contrast to Gawain, is a deeply flawed *French* knight, perhaps deemed morally unfit for Gawain's task in the poem.<sup>18</sup> He is mentioned in passing in a list of Arthur's knights gathered to see Gawain off on his quest to the Green Chapel. The poet writes, "Þenne Þe best of Þe burȝ boȝed togeder,/ Aywan and Errik<sup>19</sup> and oÞer ful mony - / Sir Doddinaual de Sauage, Þe Duk of Clarence<sup>20</sup>,/ *Launcelot*, and Lyonel<sup>21</sup>, and

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<sup>18</sup> In the French romances, Lancelot is Arthur's most beloved knight. It seems that Lancelot's unworthiness as Arthur's representative may also stem from his French origins.

<sup>19</sup> Yvaine and Eric. Both Yvaine and Eric feature prominently in the works of Chrétien de Troyes. Yvaine is the main character in Chrétien's *The Knight and the Lion*, and Eric is the protagonist of *Eric and Enide*. The Middle English translation of *The Knight and the Lion* is entitled "Ywaine and Gawain" (mid fourteenth century). Yvaine (or Ywaine/Iwaine) appears twice in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: at Arthur's table seated beside Bishop Baldwin, and then in the list of knights present to bid Gawain farewell. Yvaine is the son of Urien, according to the *Pearl* Poet.

<sup>20</sup> Sir Dodinal the Savage and the Duke of Clarence. Sir Dodinal the Savage may be an invention of the *Pearl* Poet. The Duke of Clarence is mentioned in Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

Lucan þe gode<sup>22</sup>,/ Sir Boos and Sir Bydeuer<sup>23</sup>, big men boþe,/ And mony oþer menskful,  
with Mador de la Port<sup>24</sup>” (550-555, my emphasis). Malcolm Andrew and Ronald  
Waldron, editors of the University of Exeter Press edition of *The Poems of the Pearl  
Manuscript*, provide a footnote for this seemingly random list of knights. They argue that  
the names, “[...] are introduced in order to invest the story with authenticity for readers  
conversant with Arthurian backgrounds” (Andrew and Waldron 228). This seems too  
simple an answer; the *Pearl* Poet is a very economical writer who does not add  
superfluous information to his narrative. He has also shown extensive knowledge of  
Arthurian literature, especially in the French romances, imbuing his text with common  
themes, settings and characterizations. The presence of these particular knights in  
Arthur’s court speaks to the importance of loyalty and friendship within Camelot. The  
majority of the knights named are traditionally loyal to Arthur or Lancelot. The poet is  
revealing the possible schism that will eventually occur when Lancelot betrays the king.

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<sup>21</sup> Lionel. The brother of Sir Bors, and son of King Bors. When Lancelot’s affair with Guinevere is revealed, Lionel leaves Camelot with Lancelot. He dies in the final battle between Arthur and Mordred (Lacy 280).

<sup>22</sup> Sir Lucan the Good. Traditionally, Lucan is Arthur’s butler. He is also the brother of Bedevere. Lucan is one of Arthur’s last surviving knights, and, in the *Vulgate Cycle*, Arthur embraces him with such force that Lucan dies of wounds sustained during the final battle. In *Le Morte D’Arthur*, Lucan attempts to help Bedevere carry a wounded Arthur from the battlefield, but his injuries are grave and his intestines fall out from the exertion of carrying the king (Lacy 285).

<sup>23</sup> Sir Bors and Sir Bedevere. Sir Bors, brother of Lionel, joins Galahad and Perceval on their grail quest. He is the only knight to return from this quest. In the *Vulgate Cycle*, Bors sides with Lancelot once the affair is exposed, but returns to help Arthur in his fight against Mordred. He survives the battle and becomes a hermit (Lacy 48). Sir Bedevere, likely of Welsh origin, is a one handed knight. In the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, he is Arthur’s last remaining companion on the battlefield. Bedevere takes Excalibur from Arthur and returns it to the Lake (Lacy 34).

<sup>24</sup> Sir Mador “the door keeper.” In both the *Vulgate Cycle* and the stanzaic *Morte Arthur*, Sir Mador is one of the twelve knights to catch Lancelot and Guinevere in bed together.

The *Pearl* Poet mentions two other knights (and Gawain, of course) in connection to the high table of Arthur's court: "There gode Gawan watz grayþed Gwenore bisyde,/ And Agrauayn a la Dure Mayn on þat oþer side sitted - / Boþe þe kynges sister-sunes and ful siker kniþtes;/ Bischoþ Bawdewyn abof biginez þe table,/ And Ywan, Vryn son, ette with hymself" (109-113). Guinevere, Gawain, and his brother Agravain, sit on the King's left. On his right, Sir Ywain (son of Urien), and Bishop Baldwin occupy the table, and share a plate of food. Arthur would surround himself with his best and most trusted knights.<sup>25</sup> In the context of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, these include his two nephews, the Bishop, and a knight with historic ties to Morgan le Fay<sup>26</sup>, his half sister. The knights present at the high table allude to Guinevere's crucial role in the downfall of Camelot. They are Arthur's most trusted men, his kinsmen, and loyal above all others at court. Their extreme loyalty further emphasizes Guinevere's future betrayal. Traditionally, Sir Agravain discovers the affair between Lancelot and the Queen. It is Agravain who alerts Arthur, thus beginning the final civil war in which many of Arthur's knights, including Gawain, perish. Agravain is an important character because of his close familial relation to Arthur and Gawain. Yet, because he is the knight who reveals Guinevere's affair, and because the *Pearl* Poet places him at the table within close proximity to the Queen, there is an indication that all the pieces needed for the fall of the Round Table are in place.

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<sup>25</sup> The importance of table seating is also noticeable at Hautdesert where Morgan occupies the seat of honor beside Bertilak.

<sup>26</sup> Urien. In the *Vulgate Cycle*, Urien is married to Morgan le Fay. Malory makes her both Urien's wife, and Uwain's mother. Although the *Pearl* Poet does not indicate whether Urien is married to Morgan, or who Uwain's mother is, it would be in keeping with the three knights seated at Arthur's table, each a nephew to the king. Agravain and Gawain are Arthur's sister's sons. Uwain may also be Arthur's sister son.

In the Middle English *Stanzaic Morte Arthur*<sup>27</sup>, based on the French *Mort Artu*<sup>28</sup>, and inspiration for the final two chapters of Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Agravain informs Arthur of the great betrayal. Agravain desperately wants to tell the king and takes his news directly to Gawain and their brothers Gareth and Gareheis. He tells his brothers, "Wele we wote, with-outen wene,/ The kyng arthur oure eme sholde be,/ And launcelote lyes by the quene;/ A-geyne the kyng traytor is he" (*Morte* 1680-1683). Agravain's emphasis is specifically on the kinship bond to Arthur, as he refers to the king as "our eme," "our uncle." Agravain's concern is directly connected to Arthur's reputation as king, but, more importantly, the familial bond between the brothers and their uncle. Lancelot's betrayal is a betrayal of Arthur's family, and Agravain feels this keenly.

If Agravain is the aggressor in this discussion among brothers, Gawain plays a very different role. Gawain is saddened by Lancelot's actions, but he sees the potential disaster in revealing this secret to Arthur:

"Wele wote we," sayd syr gawayne,  
That we are of the kyngis kynne,  
And launcelot is so mykyll of mayne  
That suche wordys were better blynne.  
Welle wote thou, brothyr agrawayne,  
There-of shulde we bot harmys wynne;  
Yit were it better to hele and layne  
Than *werre and wrake*<sup>29</sup> thus to be-gynne." (*Morte* 1690-95, my emphasis)

Gawain immediately explains that telling Arthur about the affair would be detrimental to the stability of Arthur's kingdom. He acknowledges that he and his brothers are Arthur's

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<sup>27</sup> London, British Library, MS Harley 2252

<sup>28</sup> The final book of the *Vulgate Cycle*

<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, these lines reflect the *Pearl* Poet's description of Felix Brutus landing on the island of Britain. The poet writes, "Where were and warke and wonder/ Bi syPez hatz wont Þerinne" (16-17).

kin, but argues that Lancelot is a noble knight who has played a crucial role in the defense of Camelot. He also understands that once Arthur knows about the affair, war will break out and the Round Table will disband. When Agravain leaves to tell Arthur, and Gawain retreats to his bedchamber with his brothers, Gawain says, “here now is made A comsemente/ That bethe not fynysshyd many A yere (*Morte* 1725-1726). Gawain emphasizes Arthur’s *kingship* over *kinship*. He does not take the affair as a personal offense, but, rather, a dangerous action that must be silenced in order to save the kingdom.

Gawain behaves similarly in Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, providing further evidence for Gawain’s deep loyalty to Camelot.<sup>30</sup> Once again, Agravain wishes to expose the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere immediately, while Gawain says, “Brothir, Sir Aggravayne, I pray you and charge you, meve no such maters no more afore me; for wyte you well, I woll nat be of youre counceyle” (Malory 23-25 646). Gawain is aware that Lancelot is an especially powerful knight with many political allies. Although Gawain is loyal to Arthur, he feels that exposing the affair will only lead to the immediate destruction of the Round Table. In Malory’s text, Gawain does not want to be privy to information regarding the affair. He wishes for Agravain to forget Lancelot’s actions in order to spare the kingdom from harm. Upon leaving Agravaine, Gawain and his brother Gareth say, “now ys thys realme holy destroyed and myscheved, and the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table shall be disparbeled” (Malroy 20-22 647). Gawain understands the repercussions of Agravain’s speech, and acknowledges the coming end of the Round

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<sup>30</sup> This similarity is not surprising as *Le Morte D’Arthur* is heavily influenced by the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* (as previously mentioned). Malory’s wording, however, is somewhat different and, therefore, of interest as it reaffirms the roles of Gawain and Agravain in the Arthurian tradition.

Table. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is set before these events, yet Gawain is very similar in loyalties and actions. He protects Arthur's kingship, defends the reputation of the Round Table, and refuses to rely on his blood ties to the king in order to advance his status.<sup>31</sup> Gawain is Arthur's ideal knight, because, unlike Lancelot, or even Agravain, Gawain's deepest wish is for Arthur's kingship to survive and thrive.<sup>32</sup>

Gawain's departure from Camelot and his subsequent journey towards the Green Chapel mark a shift in the narrative setting from Arthur's Christian kingdom into a world of unknown magic, danger and deception. Gawain's transformation has already begun at this early time, as he leaves Camelot a loyal member of Arthur's house, and returns as a changed man. Upon leaving, the court laments the loss of this great knight, for they believe that the Green Knight will certainly kill Sir Gawain. The courtiers remark, "A lowande leder to ledez in londe hum wel semez,/ And so had better haf ben Þen britned to noȝt,/ Hadet wyth an aluisch mon, for angardez pryde./ Whe knew euer any kyng such counsel to take/ As knyȝtez in cauelaciounz on Crystmasse gomnez." (679-684).

Interestingly, the blame for Gawain's mission falls on Arthur. The courtiers cannot understand why the king would allow Gawain to partake in such a foolhardy quest. They frown on Christmas games and wish Gawain had been spared such an unfortunate fate.

This attack against Arthur's judgment is ironically appropriate on the eve of Gawain's

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<sup>31</sup> It should be noted that although *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is set early in the Arthurian narrative, Arthur is childless. Arthur's three kinsmen, Gawain, Agravain and Yvain, represent his potential heirs. Although Gawain exhibits no ambition to be king, he is an important political figure at court. Like the Irish princes, he represents the future longevity and survival of Arthur's bloodline and kingship.

<sup>32</sup> Both *Morte Arthure* and *Le Morte D'Arthur* are Middle English texts. Although both works rely on the French *Vulgate Cycle*, Gawain's reaction to Agravain's news is in keeping with the English Gawain tradition. He remains focused on the well-being of the court and Arthur's reputation.

departure. He leaves to prove the reputation of the Round Table, while the court is already starting to show signs of trouble. The courtiers question Arthur's ability as king, just as Gawain sets out to protect the king's tarnished reputation.

Gawain's quest towards the Green Chapel sees him depart the courtly world of Arthur's kingdom and cross over into the realm of fairy. In the article "Morgain La Fée as the Principle of Unity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," Mother Angela Carson posits that the journey to the Green Chapel, and the appearance of Castle Hautdesert, is representative of the Celtic Other World. Carson writes, "The description of this journey and its difficulties suggests that, although Gawain did not realize it, he was traveling to the Other World" (Carson 10). The Other World was a fairyland, a realm of magic. Carson explains, "Modern scholarship offers considerable evidence for the belief that the Other World was a dwelling place of the heroes and fees of myth and romance; and although it is represented under various aspects, it is consistently far removed from the land of the dead" (Carson 11). Carson cites Roger Loomis's book *Wales and the Arthurian Legend* for details concerning the Celtic Other World:

The Celtic Other World depicted in the Irish literature up to 1200 offers but the slenderest support for the notion that it is a land of the dead; medieval Welsh literature offers none whatsoever. Kings might visit it, heroes might wage warfare within its borders, and raids might be made on its treasures. [...] the Other World of the insular Celts contains no mortals among its inhabitants. Those who go there do not pass through any experience suggestive of death. For the most part they return.<sup>33</sup> (Loomis 143-144)

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<sup>33</sup> King Conn steps into the Otherworld in the Irish loathly lady tale *The Prophetic Ecstasy of the Phantom*. For a discussion of this story as it relates to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, see chapter one.

Despite the concern of the courtiers, if Gawain is indeed entering a Celtic Other World, he is not journeying into a land of death. Rather, he is given the opportunity to “wage war” against the Round Table’s enemy, and gain glory for Camelot. The Other World is a place of magic, and Gawain’s quest from Camelot towards the Green Chapel is fraught with mythical creatures and monstrous beings. The *Pearl* Poet writes, “And þat so foule and so felle þat feȝt hym byhode./ So mony meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndez/ Hit were to tore for to telle of þe tenþe dole” (717-719). Along the way, Gawain battles “wormez” and “wolues.” He also encounters “wodwos,” defined by the Middle English Dictionary as, “a wild creature of woods and wasteland, human or semihuman in form and savage in appearance” (Kurath Vol. 24) He encounters extreme shifts in weather conditions and difficult terrain. All of these signs are indicative of a journey to the enchanted Other World.<sup>34</sup>

Carson provides a detailed list of clues identifying Hautdesert as a fairy Other World:

In support of the theory that Bercilak’s castle is, in reality, the Other World, we may note: the sudden appearance of the castle; the proximity of trees associated with the land of faery; the passing of a water barrier; the richness of the appointments of the castle; the beauty of its inhabitants, especially of Morgain who is fairer than Guinevere; and above all, [...]

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<sup>34</sup> These encounters with fairy creatures are not unique to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In the anonymous poem *Sir Orfeo* (a retelling of the Greek myth *Orpheus*, mid thirteenth century to early fourteenth century), the titular character Sir Orfeo abandons civilization and lives as a traveling minstrel in the forest for ten years following the capture of his wife by a fairy king. The grieving Orfeo observes numerous fairy creatures during his exile. His hair grows and his appearance is that of a wild man, or one of Gawain’s “wodwos.” After ten years, Orfeo follows a group of women into the fairy kingdom where he wins his wife back from the fairy king. Together, Orfeo and his wife depart the sylvan fairy world and return to civilization.

that it was here that Morgain exercised her traditional role of seductress.<sup>35</sup>  
(Carson 13)

The castle's sudden appearance is indeed surprising, as the *Pearl* Poet writes: "Nade [Gawain] sayned himself, segge, bot Prye/ er he watz war in Pe wod of a won in a mote,/ [...] A castel Pe comlokest Pat euer knyzt aʒte/[...]As hit schemered and schon þurʒ Pe schyre okez" (763-764, 767, 772). Obviously, Gawain cannot know that Morgan dwells inside the castle, nor has he made the connection between the Green Knight and Hautdesert.

The theme of Gawain's inability to recognize the true nature of his surroundings continues as he approaches Hautdesert. Just as Gawain does not recognize Morgan, he never questions the connection between Hautdesert and the Green Chapel. Bertilak tells him, "Now leng Pe byhoues./ For I schal teche yow to Pat terme bi Pe tymeze ende./ Pe Grene Chapayle vpon grounde greue yow no more/ Bot ʒe schal be in yowre bed, burne, at Pyn ese/ Quyle forth dayez and ferk on Pe fyrst of Pe ʒere/ And cum to Pat merk at mydmorn, to make quat yow likez/ In spenne" (1068-1075). It would seem suspect that the Green Chapel is only a half-day ride from Hautdesert. Gawain travels a far distance from Camelot, and yet no one has heard of the chapel until he meets Bertilak, who seemingly lives in close proximity to the Green Knight's lair. Gawain is not suspicious of the connection, nor does he suspect Bertilak's true identity at this point in the poem.

Gawain's location, as well as the truth behind Hautdesert, is possibly tied to the French narratives common to Morgan le Fay. The physical setting of Hautdesert may be related to Morgan's place in the French Arthurian tradition. As discussed in chapter one,

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<sup>35</sup> Here Carson subscribes to the theory that Morgan and Lady Bertilak and one in the same. Regardless of this, Morgan's involvement at Hautdesert is enough to tie the castle with a mystical Other World.

Morgan traditionally lives away from Arthur's court in the *Val Sans Retour*. In the book *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition*, Carolyne Larrington discusses the Val at length, noting that Morgan's forest dwelling is found in the French *Vulgate Cycle*, and would have been familiar to audiences from the twelfth century onward (Larrington 52). Larrington writes, "Morgan's most spectacular and provocative feat of magic is the *Val sans Retour* or *Val des Faux Amants* (the Valley of No Return or Valley of False Lovers), an enchanted valley from which no knight who has ever been unfaithful to his lady in any way, 'even in desire alone,' can escape, a paradise that rapidly palls on its inhabitants" (Larrington 51). Of course, this description is troubling in the context of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Gawain is not an adulterous knight, nor does the poet indicate that Gawain has a lover. If anything, Gawain is the prime example of knightly chastity, as throughout the poem he fights diligently to avoid Lady Bertilak's advances in order to protect his reputation. Interestingly, the French variant of Gawain would be at home in this world of scantily clad damsels. He would also likely fail in any test of knightly chastity, as the French Gawain is fraught with moral ambiguities concerning the proper treatment of women. The question of reputation, however, does provide an interesting argument regarding Hautdesert's location within the *Val sans Retour*. Despite Gawain's innocence and "Englishness," he carries the reputation of Arthur's court. The sins of the court, therefore, are metaphorically Gawain's sins, and the fate of Camelot's reputation rests on Gawain's ability to survive Morgan's test. Larrington argues that, "The *Val sans Retour* is motivated by erotic betrayal" (Larrington 53). If Gawain is the bodily representation of Camelot's reputation, the

troubles of Arthur's kingdom must be seen as his own, a fact that furthers connects him with the questing knight of the loathly lady motif.

On Christmas day, Gawain rides "Into a forest ful dep,/ Pat ferly watz wyld,/ Hiȝe hillez on vche a halue and holtwodez vnder/ Of hore okez ful hoge, a hundreth togeder" (741-743). This sylvan description seems to match Larrinton's depiction of Morgan's Val: "Enclosed by a kind of air curtain, which can be crossed only in an inward direction, the valley contains a spring which waters its thick green grass. It is a comfortable place; the knights can hear mass in a chapel, which lies on its border [...]. All the trappings of courtly leisure are available: food and drink, backgammon and chess, dancing and music" (Larrington 53-54). Gawain's passage through the forest leads him to Hautdesert, a castle whose very purpose seems to be "courtly leisure." Gawain takes part in feasts, while Bertilak endlessly hunts. The forest setting, high slopes on either side of the trees, and the ever-festive castle seem to indicate that the English Gawain has wandered directly into the French Morgan's Val Sans Retour.

The problem with identifying Hautdesert as the Val sans Retour is its geographical location. The Val is a creation of French Arthurian literature, and, therefore, the Val Sans Retour is located in the Brocéliande forest, of Brittany, France. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is, without a doubt, set in England, as the *Pearl* Poet provides specific English place names to mark Gawain's journey. The specificity of the poet's locations may prove yet another source for Hautdesert's identity. The *Pearl* Poet describes Gawain riding to "ȝe Norȝe Walez" (697). He then travels adjacent to the islands of Anglesey where he "[...] farez ouer ȝe fordez by ȝe forlondez; Ouer at ȝe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk/ In ȝe wyldrenesse of Wyrle" (699-701). According to

Andrew and Waldron, the Wilderness of Wirral was “a notorious refuge for outlaws in the fourteenth century” (234). Yet, the decision to set Gawain in the Wirral may have deeper historical and political connotations. In his study of Wales and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Ordelle G. Hill writes,

Geographically the Wirral is a relatively small area, a comparatively flat peninsula, twelve miles by seven miles, between the estuaries of the Mersey and the Dee. Up until the last part of the fourteenth century, it was one of three forests in Cheshire under forest law, i.e., not necessarily tree covered but an area reserved for the chase, with both animals and trees under the protection of the king. (Hill 67)

During the early part of the fourteenth century, the Principality of Chester<sup>36</sup> was owned by Edward the Black Prince<sup>37</sup>, who did not visit the region until 1353 (Hill 68). The Wirral forest was a place of heavy political contention, as, “Historically, for 250 years, until 1376, the residents of the Wirral had been subject to a system, imposed by the English monarchy, that limited or forbade hunting or use of the forest products – including even the tree deadfall – which were under the protection of the king” (Hill 69-70). Presumably, audiences of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* would recognize this geographical landscape, as well as its connection to the English crown.

Gawain, therefore, is a representative of an English king, riding into politically unstable territory. The heavy emphasis on hunting scenes seems to indicate the *Pearl*

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<sup>36</sup> Located in the Wirral

<sup>37</sup> The connection between Edward the Black Prince and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not exclusive to the question of Hautdesert’s geographical location. The manuscript Cotton Nero A.x. includes a bizarre addition to the final leaf of *Sir Gawain*, the Latin motto of the Most Noble Order of the Garter. King Edward III created this Order in the mid fourteenth century. One of the first members of the order was Edward the Black Prince, Edward III’s favorite son. Edward III died in 1377 and his grandson Richard II inherited the throne. Richard II, son of Edward the Black Prince, would have been king during the composition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Poet's familiarity with the Wirral and the importance of this land for the crown.

Interestingly, the Wirral is a forbidden place, barred from public hunting. Yet, the *Pearl* Poet gives this land to Bertilak, and, by extension, Morgan. If Hautdesert is located in the Wirral forest, a location historically owned by the English monarchy, then Morgan once again usurps the societal hierarchy to take power of a piece of land that should, by historical convention, belong to Arthur. Bertilak's hunt indicates that he is allowed to use the land as he sees fit. Arthur has no power at Hautdesert, and Gawain arrives without understanding where he is, or to whom he is now subject. Setting Hautdesert in the Wirral allows the *Pearl* Poet to expose the potential political chaos present in the poem, as reflected in the realities of fourteenth-century land laws.

Although it is tempting to connect Hautdesert's sudden appearance with a magical Other World, it must also be noted that the castle appears to Gawain seconds after he prays for divine aid. The *Pearl* Poet shows Gawain's devout connection with the Virgin Mary when he writes that her image was painted on the inside of his shield: "His Bro Þoȝt watz in Þat, Þurȝ alle oþer Þyngez,/ Þat alle his forsnes he fong at Þe fyue joyez/Þat Þe hende Heuen Quene had of hir Chylde./ (At Þis cause Þe knyȝt comlyche hade/ In Þe inore half of his shelde hir ymage depaynted,/Þat quen he blusched Þerto his belde neuer payred)" (646-650). The Virgin is Gawain's source of courage, the symbol he looks to for strength and guidance. While he wanders the wilderness, he prays to God and the Virgin for aid and shelter. On Christmas Eve, as Gawain journeys alone in the bitter cold, "Þe knyȝt wel Þat tyde/ To Mary made his mone/ Þat ho hym red to ryde/ And wysse hym to sum wonde" (736-739). He continues to ride throughout the night, and on Christmas he once again cries out for divine help: "I beseche Þe, Lorde,/ And Mary, Þat is mildest

moder so dere,/ Of sum herber Þer meȝly I myȝt here masse/ Ande Þy matynez tomorne,  
 meekly I ask,/ And Þerto prestly I pray my Pater and Aue/ And Crede” (753-758). The  
*Pearl* Poet continues: “Nade he sayned himself, segge, bot Þrye/ Er he watz war in Þe  
 wod of a won in a mote” (763-764). As soon as Gawain crosses himself, the castle seems  
 to appear from thin air. It is as if Gawain’s prayers and acts of devotion summon  
 Hautdesert. Once Gawain sees this miraculous castle, “Þenne hatz he hendly of his helme  
 and heȝly he Þonkez/ Jesus and Sayn Gilyan<sup>38</sup>, Þat gentyle are boÞe/ Þat cortaysly hade  
 hym kydde and his cry herkened” (773-775). Gawain believes his prayers have been  
 answered and rides towards the castle. He thanks Jesus and the saints for this miracle, and  
 continues to exhibit his great faith and religious courtesy.

The symbolic importance of Hautdesert is linked to the loathly lady stories.  
 Gawain’s journey is that of an archetypal knight found in the loathly lady tales. He rides  
 from court in order to perform a task, and will, presumably, be tested along the way.  
 Traditionally, the knight discovers a hag in a forest setting. In fact, in all three  
 contemporary tales discussed in this thesis, the hero meets the loathly lady in a sylvan  
 landscape. In Gower’s *Tale of Florent*, Florent rides in search of an answer to the Lady’s  
 question: “And as he rod al one so,/ And cam nyh ther he wolde be,/ In a forest under a  
 tre/ He syh wher sat a creature,/ A lothly wommannysch figure [...]” (Gower 1.1526-  
 1530). Likewise, Chaucer writes of his raping knight, “[...] it happed hym to ryde,/ In all  
 this care, under a forest side,/ Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go/ Of ladyes foure and  
 twenty, and yet mo;/[...] er he cam fully there,/ Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste  
 where./ No creature saugh he that bar lyf,/ Save on the grene he saugh sittynge a wyf”

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<sup>38</sup> St Julian is the Patron Saint of Travelers.

(Chaucer *Wife of Bath's Tale* 989-992, 995-998). In "The Weddyng of Syr Gawen," Arthur plays the role traditionally associated with the knight. The poet writes, "Kyng Arthoure rode forth on the other day/ Into Yngleswod<sup>39</sup>, as hys gate laye - / And ther he mett with a lady; She was as ungodly a creature/ As ever man sawe, withoute mesure" (Weddyng 225-229). The Irish motif also features a hag figure dwelling in the wilderness. In *The Adventures of the Sons of King Dare*, the Irish princes discover the loathly lady living in a hut in the forest. Forests are associated with magical beings and moments of transition or change. The knight of the loathly lady motif discovers the magic hag, and, through her power, succeeds in his quest. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the loathly lady does not appear in the forest; the castle replaces her presence at this moment in Gawain's journey.

In all of her varied appearances in Arthurian literature, Morgan is closely connected to magical objects. These objects are unremarkable on their own, a ring or a sword sheath, but through her magic, Morgan is able to create items imbued with dangerous power. On his quest, Gawain encounters two important, magical symbols: the pentangle on his shield, and the Lady's green girdle. The pentangle shield has been a point of great debate, as its symbolic meaning in connection with Gawain influences the text. The pentangle, as described by the *Pearl* Poet, is a symbol of religious morality. The symbol is so important to the poem that the Poet explains, "And quy Pe pentangle apendez to Pat prynce noble/ I am in tent yow to telle, Pof tary hyt me schulde" (623-624). The poet goes on to say that the pentangle was a symbol of King Solomon (625), and was "bytoknyng of trawþe" (626). Following this description, the poet provides a

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<sup>39</sup> Yngleswood forest.

lengthy study of the pentangle's numerological significance. He writes, "Fyrst he watz funden faultlez in his fyue wyttez./ And efte fayled neuer þe freke in his fyue fyngres./And alle his afyaunce vpon folde watz in þe fyue woundez/ Pat Cryst kaþt on þe croys" (640-644). The poet also describes the Five Joys of Mary, and the five virtues of chivalry. The *Pearl* Poet writes that the five virtues of chivalry are, "fraunchyse<sup>40</sup>," "felaþschyp<sup>41</sup>," "clannes<sup>42</sup>," "cortaysye<sup>43</sup>" and "pit  .<sup>44</sup>" Gawain exemplifies each of these virtues. The long description ends with, "þat is þe pure 'pentaungel' wyth þe peple called/ With lore" (664-665). According to the Middle English Dictionary, "lore" is connected to learning or teaching (Kurath Vol. 10). Here, the poet indicates that learned people will recognize the symbolic importance of the pentangle. The symbol on Gawain's shield is meant to indicate the knight's connection to his faith, and his devotion to the chivalric code. Yet, the choice of the pentangle is rather curious, as it is also connected to magic and the supernatural.

In " 'The Endless Knot:' Magical Aspects of the Pentangle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," John F. Kiteley asks why the *Pearl* Poet focuses on the moral symbolism of the pentangle, while seemingly ignoring its magical connotations. Kiteley notes that, "nowhere else is the Pentangle used as a heraldic device for Gawain" (42). Yet, as

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<sup>40</sup> Defined by the Middle English Dictionary, in reference to both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Cleanness* as "Nobility of character, magnanimity; liberality, generosity; a noble or generous act" (Kurath Vol. 6).

<sup>41</sup> "The spirit that binds companions or friends together; charitable feeling for one's fellows; charity, amity, camaraderie" (Kurath Vol. 6).

<sup>42</sup> "Moral purity, sinlessness, innocence; uprightness, integrity; (b) chastity, continence; celibacy, virginity; also, self-restraint in marital relations; (c) modesty, propriety" (Kurath Vol. 3).

<sup>43</sup> "Refinement of manners; gentlemanly or courteous conduct; courtesy, politeness, etiquette" (Kurath Vol. 3).

<sup>44</sup> "Godliness, reverent and devout obedience to God, righteousness; devotion (to duty); piety; pl. deeds of righteousness" (Kurath Vol. 14).

Kiteley explains, “[...] the “other” side of the Pentangle – the magical defense against evil spirits [...]” (43) would seem appropriate to the ambiguous setting of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. After all, Gawain’s quest is wholly centered on the magical apparition of the Green Knight, as opposed to a divine journey towards enlightenment and religious learning. Gawain is not on a crusade, nor does he seek a holy relic like the Sangreal. Rather, he is meeting with a magical man in a magical forest glade. The pentangle is an important symbol for religious philosophy and chivalric order; however, it is also understood as a magical emblem. Gawain leaves Camelot believing that he will die at the hands of the Green Knight and, “[...] therefore leaves armed with the dual moral-magical defense of the Pentangle. Superstition and philosophy are equally satisfied” (Kiteley 47). This explanation is appealing, and the image of the pentangle on his shield is fitting, as he is in need of protection from the Green Knight’s axe, or, more accurately, Morgan’s magic.

The connection between Gawain’s pentangle shield and the Lady’s green girdle may hold the key to understanding the symbolism behind both objects. When he chooses to take the Lady’s girdle,

[...] Gawain, ironically, fails when he tries to combat what to him is a malignant magic with magic; when he places reliance on the magical qualities of the girdle rather than on the integration of moral virtue signified by the Pentangle. Granted that the reason dictating his initial favorable frame of mind was fear of his life, he nevertheless accepted the possibility of magical release rather than the intercession of Mary. (Kiteley 48)

Gawain’s acceptance of the green girdle is curious, as throughout the poem he is seen solely relying on the aforementioned “intercession of Mary.” By taking the girdle, Gawain unknowingly fails his test. For the first time, he shows cowardice, a trait out of

character for Arthur's bravest knight. Why does he take the girdle if it will put his reputation, and the reputation of the Round Table, at stake? Furthermore, why would Morgan use this particular object to tempt her nephew?

The girdle's importance is summarized by Albert B. Friedman and Richard H. Osberg in their article, "Gawain's Girdle as Traditional Symbol": "[...] the girdle is a tangible object upon which the vital action focuses in the climax of the Temptation section, in the encounter at the Green Chapel and in the return scene at Camelot. Also of course the girdle unites the poem's two major narrative strands, the Temptation and the Beheading Game" (Friedman and Osberg 302). Despite the crucial role the girdle plays in the poem's narrative, the *Pearl* Poet is silent about the object's symbolic significance, in comparison with his long explanation of the pentangle (Friedman and Osberg 301). The girdle, a common piece of clothing, is a popular garment throughout history, beginning with numerous biblical examples. Lawrence Besserman provides an exhaustive list of biblical references to girdles in his essay "Gawain's Green Girdle." Beginning with Adam and Eve, the girdle is worn by numerous Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles, including Christ, who is described as wearing a golden girdle in the Book of Revelations (Besserman 89). The *Pearl* Poet would most likely be aware of these biblical connections, yet the green girdle of Lady Bertilak is not a Christian symbol. Its very color aligns it with the Green Knight, and the potential for magical protection. Gawain's pentangle is a symbol of both Christian and pagan protection, but the girdle, coming directly from the hand of the Lady, is an object strictly associated with magic.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> This is not to say that the girdle is necessarily magical. Indeed, the significance of the girdle lies with Gawain's decision to accept it as a gift, not whether the promised magical object is, in fact, magical.

Like Gawain, the green girdle transitions throughout *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, “from private article of lady’s costume, to ill-gotten amulet, to mark of shame, to chivalric emblem” (Besserman 85). Women’s girdles were functional, yet tended to be used for fashion. As Friedman and Osberg elaborate:

[...] in the fourteenth century, women’s surcoats were slashed at the sides to allow the richly worked girdles to be occasionally glimpsed. The noblewoman’s girdle was usually silk, often intricately embroidered with gold or silver thread, perhaps studded with patterned plates of enamel or metal or jewels, and either encircled the waist once, or circled the waist and went around again across the hips, the cincture being suggestively hooked or tied with a symbolic knot in front, just over the lower abdomen. (Friedman and Osberg 306)

These fashion girdles, worn by noblewomen with a suggestive knot, match the *Pearl* Poet’s description of the Lady’s garment. The poet provides two lines of description for the girdle, and it is indeed a fine object, despite the Lady’s claim that it is worth very little. The poet writes, “Gered hit watz with grene sylke and with golde schaped,/ Noȝt bot arounde brayden, beten with fyn grez” (1832-1833). Lady Bertilak removes the girdle from her waist and hands it to Gawain, only after he initially refuses her offer. The girdle is, at this point in the text, the symbol of Gawain’s failure and weakness. The Lady begs Gawain to keep their exchange a secret from her husband, thereby further tainting the girdle with dark connotations.

In discussing Gawain’s girdle, it is imperative to note that the garment was not the first object offered to Gawain by the Lady. Knowing that it will be her last chance to tempt Gawain, the Lady offers the knight her glove: “Hit is not your honour to haf at Dis tyme/ A gloue for a garysoun of Gawaynez giftez” (1806-1807). Gawain, ever chivalrous, despite the Lady’s promiscuous advances, kindly refuses, claiming he has nothing to give her in exchange. The Lady is adamant that Gawain accept a love-token and offers him a

ring. The ring is quite impressive, and the poet notes, “Ho raȝt hym a riche rynk of red golde werkez,/ Wyth a starande ston stondande alofte,/ Þat bere busschande bemez as Þe bryȝt sunne;/ Wyt ȝe wel, hit watz worth wele ful hoge” (1817-1820). A ring has particular significance because, according to Roger Loomis and Angela Carson, Morgan le Fay traditionally gives magical rings as gifts (Carson 6). Morgan’s influence is keenly felt in this scene, as the Lady not only offers Gawain a ring, but also finds Gawain’s weakness in the promise of magical protection. As discussed in chapter one, Morgan is nearly always associated with magical powers and heightened sexuality, especially in the French romances. In this scene of exchange, the Lady uses both to her advantage. The girdle, suggestively tied about the Lady’s waist and abdomen, encompasses both of these traits. It is a sexual garment because of its position on the Lady’s body, and the clandestine way in which Gawain swears secrecy after accepting the object. Yet, it also represents the promise of supernatural powers and safety. Ironically, as Gawain transfers the object to his own body, he literally traps himself within Morgan’s trick, at last falling prey to her secret meddling.

Despite Gawain’s promise of secrecy, on the morning of his ride to the Green Chapel, he chooses to wear the green girdle over his armor, rather than under his surcoat.

As he dresses,

ȝet laft he not Þe lace, Þe ladies gifte;  
 Þat forȝat not Gawayn, for gode of hymself.  
 Bi he hade belted Þe bronde vpon his balȝe haunches,  
 Þenn dressed he his drurye double hym aboute,  
 Swyþe sweþled vmbe he swange, swetely, Þat knyȝt;  
 Þe gordel of Þe grene silke Þat gay wel bisemed,  
 Vpon Þat ryol red cloþe, Þat ryche watz to schewe. (2030-2037)

Gawain does not forget to wear the green girdle, because it has become an emblem of his safety and survival. The imagery of the green girdle against Gawain's red surcoat is especially effective, because as Andrew and Waldron note, Gawain's shield is also painted red. The golden pentangle adorns his shield, so the green girdle not only contrasts with Gawain's clothing, but also the pentangle (Andrew and Waldron 281). Friedman and Osberg argue that Gawain's choice to wear the girdle over his armor is indicative of the knight's belief that the garment is magical. They write, "On going forth to the Green Chapel, he brings the girdle's magical influence into play by prominently displaying it, the commonest means of activating an amulet [...]. That Gawain does take pains to wear the girdle openly indicates that he does have some faith in the girdle's magical power" (Friedman and Osberg 313). Gawain chooses the girdle's magic over the pentangle's theological symbolism. He relies on an alternative supernatural, discounting the religious and moral connotations held within the dual images of the pentangle and Mary on his shield. Despite his prowess as a knight, and his deep faith, in the moment of battle, Gawain chooses magic over faith.

In order to comprehend fully the girdle's significance in the final fitt of the poem, it is imperative to explore the symbolism of the Green Chapel. If Hautdesert is a familiar, yet probably Other World, castle setting, the Green Chapel is a place entirely beyond Gawain's comprehension. By entering the world of the Green Chapel, Gawain unknowingly steps further into Morgan's realm. The Green Chapel is the place of Gawain's final test and, by extension, the setting of Camelot's ultimate success or failure.

Gawain leaves Hautdesert with a guide and, before reaching the Green Chapel, the guide refuses to carry on. For thirty-four lines the guide warns Gawain of the Green

Chapel's horrors and the Green Knight's blood lust. He tells Gawain, "For I haf wonnen yow hider, whyȝe at Þis tyme/ And now nar ȝe not fer fro Þat note place/ Þat ȝe han spied and spryed so specially after" (2091-2093). He continues, saying, "Þe place Þat ȝe prece to ful perilous is halden:/ Þer wonez a wyȝe in Þat waste, Þe worst vpon erÞe,/ For he is stiffe and sturne and to strike louies,/ And more he is Þen any mon vpon myddelerde" (2097-2100). The guide's description is dire, and he gives Gawain a terrifying description of the murderous Green Knight:

He cheuez Þat chauce at Þe Chapel Grene,  
 Þer passes non bi Þat place so proude in his armes  
 Þat he ne dynges hym to deÞe with dynt of his honde;  
 For he is a mon methles and mercy non vses.  
 For be hit chorle oÞer chaplayn Þat bi Þe chapel rydes,  
 Monk oÞer masseprest, oÞer any mon elles,  
 Hym Þynk as queme hym to quelle as quyk go hymself. (2104-2109)

The guide concludes this portrait by asserting, "Com ȝe Þere, ȝe be kylled" (2111). This hyperbolic depiction of the Green Chapel and the Green Knight only serves to heighten the mystique surrounding the Green Knight's lair. By telling Gawain that the Green Knight will kill clergymen, he depicts a ruthless, *non-Christian*, heathen. Therefore, the Green Knight is a creature without morals or religion; he is a hellion bent on revenge and blood sport.

The *Pearl* Poet's description of the Green Chapel provides further proof of the Chapel's relationship to a Celtic Other World or the Fairy kingdom. As Angela Carson notes,

[...] on New Year's morning, when Gawain left the castle of the hospitable Bercilak and crossed the drawbridge, he departed from the Other World and traveled for a time in the land of mortals, returning through the same mist and desolation through which he had come. But as he approached the meeting place, he saw that a stream, a conventional barrier between the land of men and the land of faery, lay between him

and the Green Chapel. [...] the author places so great an emphasis on the Green Chapel, the primary implication of the stream is that it indicates the barrier to the Other World.<sup>46</sup> (Carson 13)

The forest landscape grows increasingly desolate as Gawain nears the Green Chapel, as if the knight is venturing further and further into the fairy world.

In his approach to the Chapel, Gawain continuously searches for a physical church, a building to mark his meeting place. He believes that the Green Chapel is literally a green kirk, and the poet describes Gawain's confusion at the natural scenery. As he rides on "[...] Þenne he wayted hym aboute, and wylde hit hym þoʒt,/ And seʒe no syngne of resette bisydez nowhere,/ Bot hy3e bonkkez and brent vpon boþe halue/ And ruʒe knokled knarrez with knorned stonez" (2163-2166). Lorraine Kochanske Stock writes in "The Hag of Castle Hautdesert: The Celtic Sheela-na-gig and the *Auncian* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," "To the surprise of the literal-minded Gawain, the site to which he has been directed by Bertilak's guide is hardly the 'chapel' or architectural edifice he has been expecting. All along, the goal of Gawain's search has been a physical 'kyrk' or ecclesiastical structure, rather than the metaphorical 'chapel grene' that awaits him in the midst of a 'wylde' landscape full of steep hills, jagged rocks, roiling streams, and overgrown foliage" (Stock 133). Stock's description of Gawain's "literal mindedness" is apt, as throughout the text he cannot see the truth of his surroundings.

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<sup>46</sup> This is not the first reference to streams as barriers in the works of the *Pearl* Poet. In *Pearl*, the dreamer wakes to find himself in a forest setting. He stands on one side of a stream while the Pearl Maiden stands on the other. Later in the poem, the Dreamer observes New Jerusalem from his side of the stream. In *Pearl*, this barrier is representative of the barrier between the mortal world and the divine, indescribable landscape of heaven. The Dreamer must stay on his side of the stream because he is mortal and cannot cross into Heaven. Gawain's water barrier signifies a crossing into an unknown and unfamiliar landscape, similar to the Dreamer's distant view of New Jerusalem.

When he finally discovers the chapel's location, he reacts with disbelief. Gawain, "[...] seȝ non such in no side – and selly hym þoȝt - /Saue, a lyttel on a launde, a lawe as hit were,/ A balȝ berȝ bi a bonke þe brymme bysyde" (2170-2172). The knight crosses the stream and approaches the mound: "Hit hade a hole on þe ende and on ayþer side,/ And ouergrowen with gresse in glodes anywhere,/ And al watz holȝ inwith, nobot an olde caue" (2180-2182). Gawain is caught off guard by this "olde caue," and immediately associates it with the Devil. He claims, "Here myȝt aboute mydnyȝt/ þe Dele his matynnes telle!" (2187-2188). Gawain repeatedly references the Devil in his exclamations, converting his fight with the Green Knight into a battle with Satan himself. He approaches "þe coredest kyrk" (2196) and prepares to face the Green "Fende" (2193).

Gawain's final test, his meeting with the Green Knight, is a wonderfully tense battle of wits. However, to borrow a phrase from the *Pearl* Poet, "þat I ne tyȝt at þis tyme in tale to remene" (2483). Ultimately, it is Gawain, not the Green Knight, who becomes Morgan's means of teaching humility to the arrogant, prideful Camelot. In the loathly lady motif, the knight must pass the hag's final test in order to determine his fate. Chaucer's hag provides her raping knight with an ultimatum, and the knight chooses wisely when he allows his wife to decide his destiny, an act that grants him a joyful marriage. The sovereignty hags of the Irish tradition test their knights in order to find the rightful heir to Ireland. Gawain's test is not presented by a hag, nor must he decide the fate of his marital/political happiness. Rather, the Green Knight provides Gawain the opportunity to face his faults, thereby exposing the deficiencies, real and potential, of the Round Table. As Gerald Morgan notes, "It falls to the Green Knight to disclose to

Gawain the nature of his sin, and, in doing so, the part the lady has played in his moral downfall. Gawain is not only humiliated by this realization of his sinfulness but also frustrated and embittered by the thought that his own virtues have made their contribution to that downfall” (Morgan 275). Although Gawain has avoided the seductive temptation of Bertilak’s lady, by accepting her girdle he stains his ultimate success. Like the knights of the loathly lady stories, Gawain identifies his weakness, gains important insight into his faults, and is prepared to pass on these lessons. He has learned humility, and the revelation of Morgan’s involvement prompts Gawain’s immediate return to Camelot.

The symbol of the girdle plays a necessary role in the Green Knight’s revelation, and Gawain’s subsequent return to court. After the Green Knight swings his blade, the true purpose of Gawain’s quest is revealed. The Green Knight explains that he is Bertilak de Hautdesert, and, interestingly, uses the girdle to prove his identity. He tells Gawain, “For hit is my wede Þat Þou werez, Þat ilke wouen girdle./ Myn owen wyf hit Þe weued, I wot wel forsoþe./ Now know I wel Þy cosses and Þy costes als,/ And Þe wowing of my wyf. I wroȝt hit myseluen” (2358-2361). The Green Knight claims responsibility for the Game of Exchange between Gawain, the Lady and Bertilak. The girdle, presumably, is part of this arranged seduction game and the Green Knight seems far more amused than disappointed in Gawain’s behavior. Once again, the Green Knight points to the green girdle and explains, “Bot here yow lakked a lyttel, sir, and lewte yow wanted;/ Bot Þat watz for no wylde werke, ne wowing nauþer,/ Bot for ȝe lufed your lyf – Þe lasse I yow blame” (2366-2368). Despite the Green Knight’s assurance that Gawain has only “lakked a lyttel,” Gawain is mortified. “Alle Þe blode of his brest blende in his face” (2372) and he cries, “Corsed worth cowarddyse and couetyse boþe!/ In yow is vylany and

vyse, Ðat vertue disstryez.’ Penne he kaȝt to Ðe knot and Ðe kest lawsez,/ Brayde broþely Ðe belt to Ðe burne seluen” (2375-2378). Here the girdle’s meaning shifts once more, from love token, to magical protection, to emblem of shame. Gawain is horrified by his own weakness, and despite the Green Knight’s assurance that all is forgiven, Gawain is literally scarred by his cowardice. The girdle will forever symbolize his failure and shame, as will the scar on his neck.

Gawain centers his anger on the girdle, and, by extension, the girdle’s original owner, the Lady. Bertilak tells Gawain to take the girdle, so that the knight can remember Hautdesert when he leaves for Camelot. The girdle suddenly becomes a teaching tool, a method for Gawain to transfer literally the lesson of humility to Camelot. Eventually, Gawain accepts the gift of the girdle in order to remember his great failure. He says, “Bot in syngne of my surfet I schal se hit ofte,/ When I ride in renoun remorde to myseluen/ Ðe faut and Ðe fayntyse of Ðe flesche crabbed,/ How tender hit is to entyse teches of fylþe” (2433-2436). In the English loathly lady tales, the knight must return to court in order to answer the question “what do women most desire.” Once this question is correctly answered at court and the knight proves his acceptance of the lady’s desire in his bedchamber, the question is officially complete. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain literally returns to Camelot with a physical answer to Morgan’s question concerning the reputation of the Round Table. Before Bertilak even mentions Morgan, Gawain understands that the Beheading Game has been created for the purpose of teaching *him* humility. Once Bertilak explains Morgan’s involvement, the meaning of the game changes. Bertilak tells Gawain that Morgan’s wish to test the Round Table and kill Guinevere was the catalyst for the Green Knight’s arrival in Camelot and Gawain’s

subsequent test. Gawain's journey has not been one of *self*-discovery, rather, he has learned a lesson that must be passed on to all of Arthur's kingdom.

Gawain's reaction to Morgan's involvement is curious, as he remains silent on the subject once Bertilak exposes the true identity of the Hag of Hautdesert. Bertilak asks Gawain if he would like to visit his aunt, and Gawain says "no," before riding to Camelot. In her essay "Taken Men and Token Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," Sheila Fisher provides an interesting explanation for Morgan's presence in the text and connection to Gawain's green girdle. Fisher writes:

Gawain has been punished for yielding to the Morgan within himself. In other words, he has been punished at the Green Chapel for yielding to the private self and to private desires, the privacy associated with the female in the figurations of the poem. In his pricing, he has been taught the cost of bearing Morgan within him. And, because Morgan is in Gawain, just as women will always be lurking somewhere within or around the aristocratic court, the threat of the woman's power is always there. (97)

While Fisher believes that Morgan's presence connotes a threat to courtly life, I believe her role in the poem is of far greater importance. She is the conduit through which Gawain sees truth. Despite Gawain's perceived failure, he has ultimately succeeded at Morgan's test. He has proven the reputation of the Round Table through his own worth, and must now, metaphorically, bring Morgan to court through her teachings and her symbol, the green girdle. Perhaps Gawain does not react to his aunt's presence because he finally understands the true purpose of his task. He can leave Hautdesert, because his quest has only just begun.

Upon returning to Court, Gawain "groned for gref and game./ ðe blod in his face con melle,/ When he hit schulde schewe, for schame" (2502-2504). Gawain is deeply shamed by his actions and although his story is entertaining and full of adventure, it is

clear that his intentions in recalling his quest are not to entertain the Court, but, rather, to pass on an important lesson. He says to Arthur:

Þis is Þe bende of Þis blame I bere in my nek.  
 Þis is Þe laÞe and Þe losse Þat I laȝt haue/  
 Of couardise and couetyse, Þat I haf caȝt Þare;  
 Þis is Þe token of vntrawÞe Þat I am tan inne./  
 And I mot nedeȝ hit were wyle I may last. (2506-2510)

The girdle and the scar represent, for Gawain, an eternal symbol of his perceived failure. He brings these symbols back to Camelot as a warning, and perhaps this is Morgan's true intention all along. She does not physically journey to Arthur's court, yet both of her messengers, first the Green Knight and then Gawain, arrive with specific lessons to extend to the Round Table. Gawain's understanding of this lesson is emphasized when the court responds with laughter. Robert Longworth writes, "Thus the story ends on a note of interpretive ambiguity. Gawain's remorse and Arthur's effort at consolation are overwhelmed by the social laughter that surrounds them" (Longworth 146). The youthfulness of the court prevents the gravity of Gawain's words from making a lasting impression. Yet, Morgan's specific focus on both the pride and arrogance of the Round Table and Guinevere's presence indicate that the youthful ignorance of Arthur's court blinds the knights to danger within their midst. Morgan's warning is not prophetic, but, rather, a signal that something sinister is *already* in motion.

Once Gawain returns to court, he maintains his silence in regard to Morgan's involvement with his test. If he tells the court of her participation, the *Pearl* Poet does not describe these words. Arthur does not mention his sister, nor is it revealed whether Gawain tells his king that Morgan wishes for the Queen's death. Rather, the poet brings the narrative to a close, focusing on the court's laughter, and providing an ominous

reminder to the fall of Troy.<sup>47</sup> Yet, Morgan does not disappear from the text; if anything, she is forever intertwined with Arthur's court in the form of the girdle. As Sheila Fisher explains,

Regardless of the inversions and the redefinitions that the girdle has undergone, regardless of the marginalization of women in the poem, Morgan is still Arthur's half-sister and Gawain's aunt. Her blood is still current in the court, just as the girdle cannot ever entirely escape its association with the Lady. And now that the girdle is *de rigeur* courtly attire, women's presence in the court is even more obvious, even if its meaning has been diminished by appropriation. Morgan is in the court, much as the court would like to ignore it. And if the now reintegrated court blithely wears the green girdle as a sign of its own honor, the poem may well be lamenting its youthful shortsightedness. (Fisher 98-99)

Morgan and Arthur are forever connected, just as Gawain will never forget his aunt's difficult lessons. Morgan's possible desire for sovereignty has, in many ways, been granted, because, although the court fails to understand Gawain's teachings, they wear Morgan's emblem on their bodies. Morgan's presence through the girdle is a physical reminder of the doomed future of the court, and also a reminder of Morgan's place in this narrative. Just as the hag of the loathly lady tales transforms and disappears from the text once the knight understands her message of equality and sovereignty, Morgan can disappear from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* because she leaves a trace of herself behind. Gawain, once Arthur's most loyal knight, returns to court a transformed man, a figure of dual loyalties. This dual loyalty is typical of the loathly lady motif. The hag saves the knight's life through her teachings and this exchange of information leads to

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<sup>47</sup> The poem ends with the same words found at the beginning of the poem in *fitt one*. The poem begins with the phrase, "Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye" (1) and ends with the lines, "After þe segge and þe assaute watz sesed at Troye" (2525). This reference serves as a chilling reminder that even great kingdoms collapse because of internal treachery and betrayal.

marriage. Despite loyalties to his king, the loathly lady's knight is forever in her debt. The *Pearl* Poet's Gawain is still Arthur's man, yet he has learned humility, and swears to always remember Morgan's teachings by wearing the girdle. Gawain is devoted both to his uncle *and* his aunt.

This familial bond extends beyond the confines of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and into the Arthurian tradition. In the French *Vulgate Cycle*, the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, Morgan accompanies Arthur to the fairy Other World. She departs the land of mortals with her brother, and together they disappear from the Arthurian narrative. Morgan leaves her impression on the young court in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and more importantly on Gawain. Her nephew is forever tied to her powers, through the symbol of the girdle, and her painful forewarning of the dark future ahead.

## Conclusion

My study of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as an untraditional loathly lady story is not without complications. The poem, at its most basic, is the story of Gawain's journey to meet and defeat the Green Knight. The final revelation of Morgan's involvement transforms the poem from a typical Arthurian quest into something far more ambiguous and confusing for scholars. I have argued throughout this thesis that the *Pearl* Poet knowingly combined aspects of the English and Irish loathly lady traditions to imbue his poem with important and intended meaning and symbolism. Indeed, the loathly lady motif brings with it distinct plot points and symbolic representations that are, in my opinion, crucial to understanding the *Pearl* Poet's text. Ultimately, I believe that the *Pearl* Poet has constructed his poem using three distinct literary traditions: the French Arthurian romance tradition, the English loathly lady tradition, and the Irish loathly lady tradition. These three traditions give meaning to Morgan's sudden appearance at the end of the poem and provide clarity to the complicated plot structure of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which is focused on gender politics and Arthur's sovereignty over his kingdom.

As I discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, the *Pearl* Poet's reliance on the French romance tradition provides context for the poet's characterizations and settings. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* begins abruptly, without any indication of when or where in the Arthurian narrative the tale is set. Yet, the influence of the French romances greatly illuminates the poet's characterizations of Arthur, Guinevere, Camelot, and, most importantly for this dissertation, Sir Gawain and Morgan le Fay. By using the French romances, the *Pearl* Poet implies that Guinevere will have her destructive affair with

Lancelot, and that Morgan is a figure of potential danger and chaos. Furthermore, the French romances often feature a sexually promiscuous Morgan, a role that Bertilak's Lady plays in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The French concern with courtly love and female sexuality overlaps with the English loathly lady tales, which focus on gender in the private sphere of marriage.

When I first began my research for this thesis, the most obvious point of commonality between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the loathly lady motif was Morgan's ugly appearance in the poem. The poet purposely describes her using traditional loathly lady language, and this connection provides the clearest link between the Morgan of the French tradition, and the loathly figure Morgan portrays in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Lady Bertilak, for all intents and purposes, is the embodiment of the French Morgan le Fay. The hag of the loathly lady tales, alternatively, is a far more complex creature. Both the English and Irish loathly lady traditions feature hags, and the Morgan of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is an amalgamation of this figure. It has been my intention to expose Morgan's dual nature within the context of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* through a detailed analysis of the English and Irish hags and their individual symbolism. The English loathly lady is a figure whose power is relegated to the private sphere of marriage, or, quite literally, the private marital bedchamber. Although Morgan appears to be a marginal figure in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain's bedchamber is the setting of his test, the place where the Round Table's chivalry is defended by Gawain's devotion to his vows of chastity. Unlike the knights in traditional English loathly lady tales, Gawain is not tasked with finding an answer to the question "what do women most desire;" rather, Morgan's bedroom temptation provides a

far more important method of evaluation. The traditional English bedchamber scene is transformed into a place of potential danger for Gawain and his success or failure is to have dire consequences.

To find a link between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Irish loathly lady stories, I initially attempted to discern similarities between the Irish princes and Sir Gawain, which seemed an obvious place to start, given the Irish focus on sovereignty and monarchical politics. This approach proved to be problematic because, unlike the Irish princes, Gawain never desires Arthur's kingdom, nor is his quest an attempt to prove his worthiness as a potential heir to Arthur's throne. Morgan's own desires for sovereignty are ambiguous, as her intentions for the Round Table do not suggest a wish to usurp the crown from her brother. It is not Gawain's similarity (or, in this case, dissimilarity) to the Irish princes that connects the Irish loathly lady tales and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Rather, it is the poet's focus on an *English* Gawain that highlights the national themes and importance of the poem. As noted earlier, the *Pearl* Poet's characterizations are overwhelmingly French, but Gawain is presented as an English knight. This surprising choice by the *Pearl* Poet calls attention to Gawain's place in the Arthurian narrative. Because he is English, he is a chivalrous, noble knight, replacing the French Lancelot as Arthur's most worthy man of arms. This characterization of an English Gawain is not unique to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Squire's Tale*, Gawain is said to have "olde curteisye" (Chaucer 95). Chaucer's Gawain also dwells in "Fairye" (Chaucer 95), not unlike the *Pearl* Poet's Gawain who ventures into "Fairye" in order to test his "olde curteisye." Through an exploration of Gawain's national identity in the poem, it became apparent that the *Pearl* Poet's choice to use an

English Gawain provided the necessary connection to examine the Irish loathly lady stories in the context of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The question of sovereignty does not, at first glance, seem pertinent to a discussion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The influence of the English loathly lady motif seems obvious, as does the poet's use of the French romantic themes and characterizations. Gawain's journey to Hautdesert and his interactions with the Lady and Bertilak represent the English loathly lady's traditional test. It is the Green Knight's challenge that ties each of these three traditions to a single narrative, a proverbial endless knot represented by Gawain's pentangle shield and the Lady's green girdle. In the Irish tales, the most worthy prince wins sovereignty over Ireland, symbolically tying himself to the land through his relationship with the sovereignty hag. Gawain is tasked with protecting the reputation of Camelot, but it is not merely the court's reputation that is at stake. The Irish stories inform Gawain's attempt to rescue Camelot from certain destruction. Morgan's role shifts from the typical French depiction of an evil sorceress to the more mythological figure of the sovereignty hag. Gawain's test takes on the symbolic connotations of the Irish loathly lady's enchanted gift of sovereignty over Ireland. As the chosen protector of Arthur's court, Gawain's journey to meet the Green Knight is only one part of the larger quest designed by Morgan. I have argued that Gawain's national identity makes him Arthur's worthiest knight, but this title comes with further difficulties and challenges. The question of the Round Table's reputation haunts the text and in the closing stanzas, the true meaning of Gawain's test is revealed. I believe that Morgan's ultimate goal in testing the Round Table was to provide her brother's court with the opportunity for salvation from certain destruction. This gift further links Morgan to the

Irish sovereignty hags as, through her magic, she bestows upon Gawain the knowledge required to save Camelot, hence ensuring the strength of Arthur's claim to the throne. Morgan's test does not literally grant Gawain sovereignty, but, more intriguingly, allows him the possibility to maintain Arthur's sovereignty through the lesson of humility.

The *Pearl* Poet begins and ends his text with a reference to the fall of Troy, a reminder that the greatest kingdoms fall because of internal treachery and strife. The Camelot of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is youthful and merry. Even Gawain's message of humility is lost in the court's laughter. Morgan's test, the most important link between the poem and the loathly lady motif, grants Gawain the gift of foresight. Her power, as represented by Gawain's shameful green girdle, has the ability to change the future. Although my goal has been to examine the poem as a loathly lady story, the three distinct narrative traditions discussed throughout this thesis provide a layered, intertextual plot, transforming the poem from a Middle English Gawain story into a tale examining Arthurian characters, the role of women at court, the dangers of powerful female figures, and Gawain's importance as an English literary hero. Morgan's involvement in the narrative is not superfluous, nor does Gawain's quest end with the Green Knight's axe. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* examines an Arthurian world before treachery threatens to destroy Arthur's Round Table. The loathly lady motif, combined with the French romances, make *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* a unique chapter in the Arthurian mythos. Here, in the *Pearl* Poet's text, Camelot is allowed the chance for redemption through the figures of Gawain, England's worthiest knight, and Morgan le Fay, the *Pearl* Poet's loathly lady.

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