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# Courtly Love in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and Modern Reflections

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**Courtly Love in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Modern  
Reflections**

by

**Alexa L. Keating**

A Proposal Submitted to the Honors Council  
For Honors in English Department

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Approved by:



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Adviser: Alfred Siewers



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Department Chairperson: Alfred Siewers

**Courtly Love in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Modern  
Reflections**

**By: Alexa Keating**

**English Honors Thesis, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2015**

**Jean Peterson**

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## Introduction

The fourteenth-century Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* presents a satiric view of "courtly love," subverting some of its practices and assumptions, by exposing the conflict between ideals of marriage and romance in late medieval England<sup>1</sup>. Yet the theme of courtly love in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has not often been explored in relation to larger scholarly paradigms that have sought to interpret the trajectory from medieval courtly love to modern romantic love and marriage, notably C.S. Lewis' influential view that the courtly love of the High Middle Ages had in English literature become melded into middle-class views of marriage by the time of the Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser.<sup>2</sup> The fourteenth century writer Christine de Pizan, close to the time of the anonymous *Gawain* poet, decried from what is sometimes called a proto-feminist standpoint the male-privileging adulterous tendencies of courtly love, despite arguments by some scholars that courtly love was merely Platonic or spiritual. This paper will analyze *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the context of such contemporary criticism and satire of adulterous tendencies in courtly love, while broadening historical and cultural understanding of the satire evident in the poem, to place it in a larger history of the sometimes problematic identification of romantic love with marriage. It will also explore other contemporary works that exhibit similar satire of courtly love themes, for example satire of the paradoxical coupling of idealization of

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<sup>1</sup> *Sir Gawain in the Green Knight* is in MS. Cotton Nero in the British Library. Quotations from the original text are from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, edited by Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Exeter, Devon: University of Exeter, 2007). Translations from modern English are by Paul Battles from *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis' study, *The Allegory of Love*, first appeared in 1936 (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1936). However, I am using the 2013 version, published by Cambridge University Press.

women with abusive male privilege, as seen in Chaucer's "Knight's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*, and in the slightly later Middle English prose of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, with its themes of the destructiveness of romantic love in the context of a violent male chivalry.

Context for such late medieval subversion in poetry and rhetoric of chivalric hierarchy, together with earlier notions of courtly love as aristocratic romance (whether spiritual, emotionally or physically adulterous), will be sought in the history of social disruption in England following the Black Death, the decline of French cultural colonialism in England, the sequence of the Peasants Rebellion, the deposition of Richard II, and the Wars of the Roses (Bennett 71-90). The accompanying rise of a commercial economy and middle class, together with the emergence of a proto-Protestantism focused on the nuclear family, help to explain the satire of courtly love found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and related works, as well as the merging of romantic love with marriage in an uneasy and often contentious relationship. Such factors, in changing form, have also contributed to the re-imagining of courtly love in Hollywood romantic comedies of the twentieth century, in which we can see a continuation of early English literary critiques and satires of romantic love, but focused sometimes uneasily on marriage as their ultimate outcome. As the medievalist Jennifer Wollock notes in her recent re-examination of chivalry and courtly love, tracing the direct links from medieval courtly love through Romanticism to modern cinema, "In domestic life as well as in popular culture, the descendant of courtly love, Western romantic love, continues to challenge the role of the family in arranging marriages and of social convention in understanding them" (13). Following Wollock's lead, I plan to examine a few select film

examples of this adaptive continuation in the final chapter of my thesis, specifically in terms of comparing and contrasting ways in which they include both satire of romantic love (often with specific nods to medieval courtly love) and an attempted melding of such romantic love with marriage, in ways similar to Middle English texts.

This study will draw on work on the Middle English text of the poem and the historiography of studies of courtly love in modern times. It will seek to apply both historicist-related and postcolonial contexts in understanding the poem's stance on courtly love, and also theoretical models for the formation of self in relation to symbolism developed by the French feminist psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva. Taking such an approach, combining historicist and semiotic-psychoanalytic analysis, will help position the critique of courtly love within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and related texts in relation to broader changes and reactions within Western culture during the transition from medieval to modern periods, as well as continuities across conventional categories of time periods. These trajectories include the increasing dominance of what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls the "buffered" self, especially privileging male individualism, seen by contrast in earlier fourteenth-century models of courtly love in the work of Dante and Petrarch, and subversion of the same in English texts during the social disruptions of the period following the Black Death and during the Wars of the Roses. In the emergence of foundational English literature during this period, there was a post-colonial aspect to the emergence of critiques of courtly love, which often identified with chivalric hierarchies associated with Norman French colonial rule of England. Kristeva has offered a model for understanding a strengthening sense of individualism, often at the expense of real interaction with the Other, during this period,

in relation to religious symbolism of the time, paralleling Taylor's model of the development of the "buffered" self from the "porous" self in a Western medieval trajectory toward modernity. Writings in the same era as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* will help provide context in this regard, on the relation between subversions of Scholastic hierarchy by mysticism, to contemporary literary critiques of courtly love.

The thesis will involve three chapters:

1. Examining the often contentious definition of courtly love, including arguments over the utility of the term, and controversy over its spiritual versus its sensual components. This chapter will also set up the theoretical approach of the study, by defining its combination of historicist, postcolonial, and semiotic-psychoanalytic approaches
2. A detailed examination of key scenes from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, analyzing the Middle English texts. Among the examples I would like to use from the text, I will be including scenes where Sir Gawain and Lady Bertilak are alone in the bedroom as a result of Lord Bertilak's hunting game. According to literary scholar, David Mills, this scene is particularly comedic in the way that Gawain's "...Innocence serves to amuse the reader by emphasizing just how little doubt there can be about the Lady's intentions under such circumstances...." He then furthers this point by explaining how scene is "inappropriate" in its conflict between marriage relation and "Gawain's position as a guest" (613).
3. In a final chapter I plan to reflect on how twentieth-century Hollywood romantic comedies relate to the critique and satire of courtly love seen in the Middle English texts. In doing so, I will rely on Wollock's demonstration of a genealogy of influence (albeit

continually re-imagined) from medieval courtly love to Romanticism and modern courtly love. But my specific focus will be on the phenomenon of critique of romantic love coupled with the celebration of its melding with marriage, and ask why similar central themes should be so significant both in Middle English texts and in modern cinema, in relation to love and sex. In making this comparison I will draw on the theoretical approaches developed in my study of the early texts, but adapted to twentieth-century American popular film culture. I will specifically focus on *How To Lose A Guy In 10 Days*, *Clueless*, and *A Knight's Tale*.



## Chapter 1: Examining Courtly Love

The notion of courtly love is linked to many works of medieval literature containing stories about noble knights embarking on dangerous missions while engaging with highly respected women along the way. Although the term is often used to describe a theme presented in ancient medieval literary works, scholars have debated its existence in reality as well. Based on historical evidence gathered from the twelfth century and all centuries afterwards, courtly love did exist outside of the literary realm and has, in fact, survived until today where we see traces of its fundamental qualities in our modern conception of marriage. According to popular belief, courtly love was a medieval practice that consisted of a highly respected, usually married lady and a lower-class knight who would participate in an adulterous affair. The lady would then become the object of affection for the knight, distracting him from the quest he originally planned to embark on. These details, however, remain under dispute. With that said, the first section of this thesis aims to examine the definition of courtly love, including arguments over the utility of the term, and the controversy surrounding its spiritual versus sensual components. This section will also include a combination of historicist, postcolonial, and psychoanalytic approaches.

The emergence of courtly love does not have a definite date of origin. However, traces of courtly love were seen earliest in the works written by Publius Ovidius Naso, better known as the Roman philosopher, Ovid, who was born in BC and died in AD (Parry 4). Ovid wrote about love, influencing the writings of many other literary scholars that succeeded him, one of them being Andreas Capellanus. The collection of Ovid's works deal with a multidimensional perspective on love, ranging from deep and

emotional declarations of devotion to erotic and promiscuous love (Parry 4). Another less-credited source of courtly love comes from poems written by the troubadours in the eleventh century. Eleanor of Aquitaine was said to have brought ideals of courtly love from Aquitaine to the court of France, and then to the court of England, where she was crowned the queen to two kings. Her daughter, the Countess of Champagne, then brought courtly love to the Count of Champagne's court. Eventually, the troubadours noticed the presence of courtly love and began to express these ideals in lyrical poems (Moore 624).

Eleanor of Aquitaine plays a prominent role in the works of Andreas Capellanus, who is most commonly associated with discussing the dynamics of courtly love in his twelfth century treatise titled *De amore*, which translates to "About Love." Today, it is known, quite deceptively as *The Art of Courtly Love*.<sup>3</sup> According to scholar John Moore, "The term *amour courtoise* does not appear in the original work, but John Jay Parry gave his translation the title *The Art of Courtly Love*" (626). Capellanus sheds light on a historical time period within his writing. According to Parry, "... "Andreas's book was almost certainly intended to portray the conditions at Queen Eleanor's court at Poitiers between 1170 and 1174, (but) the actual writing of it must have taken place some years later..." (21). The dates and historical figures shed light on the dimensions of society, specifically the upper-class and culture, at a time when courtly love was being exercised. Queen Eleanor of France was married to Henry II in the period that Andreas referenced in his work. Their relationship was uncharacteristic of the time period because Eleanor had an immense amount of power over Henry. She even managed England for a period of time, which was often unheard of for a woman of this historical time period (Turner 151).

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<sup>3</sup> I am drawing from John Jay Parry's translation of *The Art of Courtly Love*, by Andreas Capellanus (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960).

Moore emphasizes the importance of the historical background when he claims that, “formal courts of love defined and propagated the rules of courtly love.” Eleanor and her daughter, the Countess of Champagne, who is mentioned in Capellanus’s work, were represented as the “patrons of courtly love” (Moore 624). Although it has been highly debated whether or not *De amore* was satirical or serious, we can assume, because of the historical content in which Capellanus is referencing in his work, that it is serious.

In his writing, Capellanus breaks down the meaning of love to create a clearer understanding of his discussion:

For when a man sees some woman fit for love and shaped according to his taste, he begins at once to lust after her in his heart; then the more he thinks about her the more he burns with love, until he comes to further mediation. Presently he begins to think about the fashioning of the woman and to differentiate her limbs, to think about what she does, and to pry into the secrets of her body, and he desires to put each part of it to the fullest use. Then after he has come to this complete mediation, love cannot hold the reins, but he proceeds at once to action; straightway he strives to get a helper and to find an intermediary. He begins to plan how he may find favor with her... (29).

Capellanus is referencing the relationship between the man and woman involved in courtly love, which was practiced in years early than his writings, where the man becomes captured by his desire for the woman. Capellanus continues by discussing the origins of love’s name: “Love gets its name (*amor*) from the word for hook (*amus*), which means “to capture” or “to be captured,” for he who is in love is captured in the

chains of desire and wishes to capture someone else with his hook” (31). This explanation of the meaning of love grows out of the man’s reaction to the woman, which is to capture her in an attempt to retaliate against her for his overpowering love for her. Capellanus then describes the effect that love has on its victims, by stating: “Love causes a rough and uncouth man to be distinguished for his handsomeness; it can endow a man even of the humblest birth with nobility of character; it blesses the proud with humility; and the man in love becomes accustomed to performing many services gracefully for everyone” (31). Nobility is mentioned, which is a necessary factor in any instance of courtly love and used as a theme in many medieval literary works. The idea of a noble knight is linked to the ways in which love is acquired, especially in courtly love. “The teaching of some people is said to be that there are five means by which it may be acquired: a beautiful figure, excellence of character, extreme readiness of speech, great wealth, and the readiness in which one grants what which is sought” (33).

Finally, Capellanus discusses the foundation in which his argument relies on: adultery. He describes the affection between husband and wife as a nonexistent emotion, displayed through the Countess of Champagne, a symbol of historical background, who is the daughter of Queen Eleanor. In Book II of *De amore*, the Countess of Champagne is asked whether love is possible between a husband and a wife. The book states, “We dare not oppose the opinion of the Countess of Champagne, who ruled that love can exert no power between husband and wife” (175). Therefore, love ceases to exist between a husband and a wife. The evidence in support of this claim rests on the belief that jealousy is required for love, and jealousy is not present in a marriage. Thus, in the opinion of Capellanus, what distinguishes courtly love from other styles of love is the required

presence of adultery. However, the medievalist Larry Benson and others have argued this is not a real practice:

What distinguishes this style of love from the styles of other times and places is not only the theme of suffering, and certainly not the requirement of adultery, which is always with us and was never, except in Andreas's imagination, a necessary part of courtly love. The distinction lies rather in the conviction that this sort of love is admirable- that love is not only virtuous in itself but is the very source and cause of all the other virtues that indeed one cannot be virtuous unless he is a lover (240).

Neither of the two scholar's perspectives can be ruled out. However, it is more logical to believe, and there is evidence to prove, that adultery lies at the base of courtly love. Consistently in medieval literature, courtly love involves the adulterous acts or flirtations committed by a married woman.

Furthermore, Capellanus's writings helped the modern reader understand the origins and meaning of courtly love, which contributed to its long survival. According to Parry:

Andreas is not a great literary figure like his friend and fellow citizen Chrétien de Troyes, but perhaps for the very reason he brings us closer to the actual life of the time than does Chrétien. From his work we get a vivid picture of life in a medieval court like that of Troyes or Poitiers; to the student of medieval manners such a picture is especially valuable, because in these courts was taught, and probably also practiced, that

strange social system to which Gaston Paris has given the name of  
“courtly love” (3).

Capellanus’s recognition and analysis of courtly love allowed later scholars to evaluate the dynamics of courtly love. With that said, interpretation of Capellanus’s writing acts as the foundation for the study of courtly love. “Since then, nearly all the theories of courtly love have relied heavily on that curious work” (Moore 626).

Capellanus’s gesture towards an actual history of courtly love seems to preview a modern historicist approach toward understanding how history has defined our social and cultural beliefs about romantic love and marriage still witnessed today. Historian Herbert Moller furthers this point in “The Meaning of Courtly Love,” when he argues: “While (courtly love) had originally nothing to do with married life or its customary preliminaries, it greatly influenced the standard behavior of the upper classes, especially their conduct in the presence of ladies,” which explains why Capellanus’s attempt at a history of courtly love is necessary to its survival (39). Moller continues by saying:

The entire complex of sentiments and modes of behavior as well as the corresponding poetry was alive only in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries; much of it, however, finally entered the mainstream Western Civilization, such as the high evaluation of sentimental love and conspicuous politeness of gentlemen toward ladies, which became specific Western culture patterns (39).

In later centuries, the argument about the historiography marriage and Western cultural patterns is revisited and supported by C.S. Lewis in *The Allegory of Love*.

Despite Andreas Capellanus's foundational work, Gaston Paris has been credited for coining the term "courtly love," or what he called "*amour courtois*," in 1883 when he described the love that had existed between Guinevere and Lancelot in Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte de la Charrette*, an early French romance (Moore 621). Chrétien's work together with his companion piece *Yvain, or The Knight of the Lion*, also known for its French translation *le Chevalier au Lion*, provides a literary exemplum of courtly love<sup>4</sup>. The first celebrates the famous adulterous love of Lancelot and Guenivere. The second focuses on an enduring married love involving an otherworldly lady, in which, however, extra-marital male-female friendship proves central to the story, which to its end celebrates both the male knightly identity and consummated male-female love, unlike the later *Gawain* poem under study here.

During Paris's time, many people were aware of the existence of courtly love, as it had existed in earlier centuries and was written about by Capellanus. However, Paris is the one who popularized the term and established a definition for the phenomenon of what we now know today to be called courtly love. Moore writes: "It is not clear that Paris intended *amour courtois* to become a technical term having a precise definition, but after him that usage became common" (622). Paris theorizes about the historical origin of courtly love. He recognizes Ovid, but he also claims that the origins of courtly love existed prior to Capellanus's historical account. Paris argues that courtly love was seen in Henry I's court, prior to Henry II's court, providing earlier background to broaden future scholarly interpretations of courtly love. But many scholars have questioned Paris's work. Howard Bloch has argued that "the psychology of Gaston Paris and his circle"

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<sup>4</sup> For modern translation of Chrétien's original work see Joseph J. Duggan's version of *Yvain, the Knight of the Lion* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1987).

could have “affected their understanding of medieval love literature,” which suggests that Paris’s “own experience with unattainable ladies of the nineteenth century may have led him to stress the unattainability of the troubadours’ objects of affection” (Wollock 31).

Paris turned the notion of courtly love into a “social system” in his works (Moore 626). To Paris, courtly love was based around the idea of nobility and admiration. Fundamentally, his definition rested on the idea of the “lover’s worship of an idealized lady” (Wollock 31). Paris provided a list of four specific characteristics that he used to describe courtly love. Although he described four specific characteristics, they do not necessarily need to occur in unison for courtly love to exist. It is, however, possible for all to co-exist. Among these characteristics were: “1) It is illegitimate and furtive; 2) The lover is inferior and insecure; the beloved is elevated, haughty, even disdainful; 3) The lover must earn the lady’s affection by undergoing many tests of prowess, valor, and devotion; 4) The love is an art and a science, subject to many rules and regulations- like courtesy in general” (Moore 622). The love that Paris described was an “ennobling discipline, not necessarily consummated, but based on sexual attraction” (Wollock 31). Paris’s belief that courtly love was an “ennobling discipline” stems from the phenomenon in which the lover tries to make himself worthy enough for the lady by being a chivalrous knight acting both bravely and nobly, fulfilling her desires, and subjecting himself to danger as he tries to prove that he is worthy of her. In reference to “sexual attraction,” Paris’s scholarly work provides evidence that sexual satisfaction between the lovers may or may not have been the desired goal, but the love was not Platonic; it was neither pure nor nonsexual. In fact, according to Paris, the love was founded on sexual attraction between the lovers, in correlation with the ideals of knighthood and chivalric code.



Chivalry involved restrictions on fighting, as courtly love did on sex, in the sense that it involved an idealized system of communication between men and women. Neither, however, was entirely successful, and both shared a tension between physicality and ideal. The term romance became associated with both as a term for the literature that promoted them, poetries and stories written in non-Latin vernacular language called romance. The term for popular non-religious literature eventually became identified with a certain kind of passionate yet idealistic love, and was retrofitted to the Romantic movement by nineteenth-century writers.

Fifty-three years after Paris, C.S. Lewis published a book titled *The Allegory of Love*, which was published in 1936. Lewis's book has done the most to popularize the term courtly love and to communicate the notion that there was certainly a system of courtly love that existed in the medieval time period that we can still see traces of it in modern society. At the foremost part of his book, Lewis proposes a broad definition of courtly love in the Middle Ages when he asks: "...what have we to do with these medieval lovers - 'servants' or 'prisoners' they called themselves - who seem to be always weeping and always on their knees before ladies of inflexible cruelty?" (1). At this point in the reading, he suggests a broad definition of what most people, up until this point, have associated with courtly love. Lewis says:

Everyone has heard of courtly love, and everyone knows that it appears quite suddenly at the end of the eleventh century in Languedoc... The sentiment, of course, is love, but love of highly specialized sort, whose characteristics may be enumerated as Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love. The lover is always abject. Obedience to his lady's

lightest wish, however whimsical, and silent acquiescence in her rebukes, however unjust, are the only virtues he dares to claim (1).

These four themes have become well known, but Lewis rarely applies these four themes consistently. Moore has criticized Lewis for his failure to address that the themes do not need to coexist for courtly love to be present. When Lewis intends to show that courtly love is a rival religion, he refers to the character Aucassin from the early French work, *Aucassin and Nicolette*. However, Lewis fails to mention that in *Aucassin and Nicolette*, there is no adultery or humility from the hero, Aucassin. In addition, his beloved Nicolette is neither idealized nor remote (Moore 623). Therefore, the characteristics set forth by Lewis are simply common themes, not necessary themes, which must work together in order to produce courtly love. Moore claims: “There are in fact many examples of adulterous love, of knights humbling themselves before idealized ladies, of courteous lovers, of love talk using religious vocabulary. But to group these four themes together as essential traits of a new phenomenon called “courtly love” is to distort seriously the views which courtly people held about love” (624).

For Lewis, “politeness” lies at the center of courtly love (2). He also claims that the lover (or the man) is always obedient to the lady’s wishes. From Paris to Lewis, this seems to be an accepted concept associate with courtly love: the lover is submissive to the woman. Lewis then begins to talk in-depth about adultery in relation to courtly love. He claims: “If courtly love necessitates adultery, adultery hardly necessitates courtly love” (14). The struggle between romance and adultery leads Lewis to recall the story of Malecasta and Busirane: a story that was originally told by Spenser. Lewis argues that Spenser was unaware that he was ending a chapter of courtly love, or that he even

understood the term 'courtly love' (423). Lewis argues, using the story of Malecasta and Busirane, that the "ideal of married love grew out of courtly love" (426). Lewis believed that marriage was separate from love in feudal society, a claim that he supports by saying that the lady was often a little better than a piece of property to her husband (16). This illustrates that the need for love in marriage is a creation of modern society. When piecing Lewis's ideas together, we see that Lewis believes that courtly love expresses the chivalric code. The lover must show his noble actions to the lady through his bravery and humility. The lovers emotions do not fade at any point and, in fact, the lady encourages him to be a better knight than what he was before he met her (Lewis 17). Towards the end of his writing, Lewis addresses how the aristocracy, or the noble sense, has transformed over into a middle class theory that exists today in modern culture. Romantic love becomes associated with monogamous marriage through the idea of a love leading outside of one's self having a mystical dimension that became associated with marriage, especially in a middle-class Protestant context with a focus on the household (Lewis 402-3).

Although Capellanus, Paris, and Lewis are three of the most influential scholars associated with courtly love, they are not the only ones with compelling insight. The French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, addressed courtly love in many of his works as well. During the twentieth century, Lacan was able to shed new light on the practice of courtly love and show that courtly love has a connection to psychoanalytic theory. As a medievalist by training, he was interested in how "courtly love worked against the repressive effect of language on *jouissance*, thereby circumventing a structural non-rapport between the sexes and proving that an ethics of desire *can* govern social practice

if the admission of lack governs the debates and rituals in play” (Ragland 1). In other words, Lacan argued that courtly love was “the greatest admission in the history of Western love practices of the non-rapport at the heart of sexual relations,” which is the unobtainable aspect of sexual love as Lacan saw it (2). His psychoanalytic approach argued that the practice of courtly love melded desire as a sense of lack with love as an idealizing principle.

Lacan touches on many aspects of courtly love within his argument. One of the core factors in Lacan’s argument was that courtly love appeared when homosexual amusement began to decline. Knights, who were often described in the medieval time period as sharing homoerotic relationships with each other, were becoming increasingly enticed by the idea of “The Woman, a love that keeps alive an essence of the feminine” (Ragland 2). The relationship shared between the knight and “The Woman” in his view gave rise to a culture for the warrior realms of “barbarian” Western Europe, and that culture would help shape the future of the West. Another factor related to courtly love mentioned by Lacan in his psychoanalytic approach was the presence of nobility, honor, and chivalry. Lacan attributes the “invention of courtly love to a heroic effort-- an art, an artifice, he says-- to circumvent a necessary impasse between the sexes” (Ragland 4). The heroic aspect of courtly love was seen in the man’s attempt to please his lady.

Using the basic psychoanalytic principles of structure, *das Ding*, metaphor, and the real, Lacan considers courtly love a practice that combines the spiritual, the sexual, and the artistic, around the sexual non-rapport showing that “there is no ratio for a natural harmony between the sexes,” or in other words that it was in an effect a symbolic if disembodied integration of male and female (8). Essentially, the practice of courtly love,

as interpreted by Lacan, shows that sexual difference is at the heart of cultural practices, even continuing to this day. Ragland writes in explication Lacan's views:

From the 11<sup>th</sup> century to the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup>, an Ideal of *la belle dame* held sway as a principle of morality around which behavior, loyalty, and so on, was encoded. The pivot was not marriage, monogamy, or motherhood, but an Erotics. The poetry written to this *belle dame* concerned grief, unhappy love, dissatisfaction... Not surprisingly, the Lady's value often lay in her giving grace, clemency, mercy to a suffering (*i.e.*, desiring) lover (15).

Based on Regland's claim, our view of love is culturally embedded, which is why it has transformed over time. In the Middle Ages, also at the time in which a rise in courtly love was present, "this intellectual practice organized desire around the paradoxical object, an object constituted around its own disappearance, the object that psychoanalysis finds at the base of all material in the real: Woman" (19). The idealizing of sexual attraction in courtly love would, however, be transformed in part through otherworldly subversion, as seen in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and its mystical notions of marriage beyond knighthood, to live on in new forms, which is understandable in terms of Lacan's adapter, the feminist psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva, whose ideas will be applied to the poem in the next chapter.

As we enter the most recent time period, scholars still argue over the many aspects of courtly love. Some scholars say courtly love is based on sexuality; others say it is not. Some scholars say courtly love is simply a myth; others would argue that it is a reality. Some scholars claim that courtly love was adulterous; other scholars have argued that it was not. Some say its origins are found in Ovid; while others say it was not. These

different interpretations are useful when analyzing the controversy that surrounds courtly love. Two more modern and conflicting interpretations of courtly love are shown through Georges Duby and Alfred Jeanroy, who were writing at the end of the twentieth century. Both scholars have offered their ideas concerning courtly love in the centuries after Capellanus, Paris, and Lewis, by raising serious questions for thought when analyzing the notion of romantic love in medieval times.

Georges Duby published a book in 1988, as the twentieth century began to come to a close, titled *Love and Marriage in the Middle Ages*, in which he theorizes that courtly love was actually an “educational game.” He claims: "Courtly love was a game, an educational game. It was the exact counterpart of the tournament. As at the tournament, whose great popularity coincided with the flourishing of courtly eroticism, in this game the man of noble birth was risking his life and endangering his body" (57). The educational game he describes was a game that claimed courtly love primarily served the purpose of men, which signals how his views are much different from earlier scholars. In the onset of his chapter, *On Courtly Love*, Duby explains to his reader that he is “...reducing the initial model of so-called courtly love to its more schematic form, without taking into account the changes which distorted it in the course of the twelfth century” (57). Like many others, Duby analyzes courtly love from a literary standpoint at first in order to establish a stable definition for courtly love. Duby’s interpretation of courtly love is described as follows:

The protagonist is a man, a 'youth' in both sense of the word, in the technical sense that it had at that time (a man without a lawful wife) and in the literal sense, that is, a mean young in age, whose education is not yet complete. This man besieges and tries to

take a lady, that is to say a woman who is married and thus inaccessible, impregnable, a woman who is surrounded and protected by the strictest of prohibitions imposed by a liberal society- a society based on inheritances handed down through the male line, which therefore viewed a wife's adultery as the most dreadful subversion, and threatened her lover with terrible punishments (57).

Based on his description of courtly love, Duby believes that courtly love belonged to an upper-class woman and an average male who was inexperienced in society. He thought that courtly love acted as a model of behavior for young unmarried men in medieval society. These men, he claims, may have otherwise used their leisure time to commit crimes or other violent acts if courtly love did not exist. Duby claims:

At the heart of this model lies danger, and this is where it should be. For on the one hand, the whole spice of the affair came from the danger involved (the men of the period believed, with good reason, that it was more exciting to chase the she-wolf than the woodcock); on the other hand, it was a test in the course of a continuing education, and the more perilous the test, the more educational it was (57).

The game described by Duby targets the younger male part of medieval society. Duby argued that courtly love was a man's game because it catered to the man in the sense that it was helping him improve himself and his knighthood through a romantic relationship. "...The young man was risking his life in the hope of improving himself, of enhancing his worth, his price, and also of taking, taking his pleasure, capturing his adversary after breaking down her defenses, unseating her, knocking her down and toppling her" (Duby 57). The man was fulfilling the woman's desires, but at the same time helping himself grow into a man who would later act as functioning member of

society. Therefore, making this relationship two dimensional in purpose. Courtly love worked as a way to keep both men and women content in society.

The historical perspective behind Duby's thoughts is also compelling for the reader. Duby argued that the code of courtly love was meant to serve the prince. To support this, Duby supplies the evidence that: "princely patronage deliberately encouraged the institution of these secular liturgies" (60). As his writing progresses, Duby stresses the idea of knighthood and the knightly values that men were displaying in their quests for courtly love. "Courtly love taught men how to serve, and serving was the duty of the good vassal" (62). Duby concludes that courtly love purports to serve the male figure more than the female figure, deviating from any works that came before his time. His views towards courtly love are especially compelling when looking at his works next to those of Capellanus, Paris, and Lewis because of his disagreement with these earlier scholars.

Alfred Jeanroy, a French scholar, took a different approach in his analysis of courtly love. Jeanroy's definition of courtly love only applied to the troubadours of the "classic epoch," which, according to Moore, is something that he acknowledges in his writings (623). Jeanroy stressed the idea that essence of courtly love was found in the worship of an idealized lady, which contrasts against Duby's views. According to Jeanroy, the lady lies at the center of courtly love. In addition, Jeanroy does not make much of the unlawful characteristics of courtly love, leaving hardly any room for actual adultery to occur. Jeanroy claims: "Conscious of the distance which separates him from the beloved, he remains invariably respectful, humble, discreet, scarcely brave enough to present his love or express his desire: it is the attitude of the devotee in ecstasy before the



Madonna” (102). Jeanroy, like other scholars, emphasizes that the man should be humble, respectful, and brave. However, he fails to address the issue of adultery in the same way that earlier scholars, such as Capellanus, Paris, and Lewis, had. But he believed the medieval era established fundamental new ideas of love for the West.

So then what is the real definition of the term “courtly love”? According to many medieval literary works and based off of the interpretations provided by Capellanus, Paris, Lewis, Duby, and Jeanroy, courtly love can be described as the love between a noble knight and a married upper-class woman. The lover is submissive to the lady and exerts his bravery, nobility, and is honorable. He is faithful to the lady and continues to love her for the entirety of his existence and he learns to become a better knight through her. This timeless theme of courtly love relates back to the poem of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which courtly love is the central theme critiqued in comic poetry as it transitions from the ancient belief of romantic love into a more modern conception at the end of the Middle Ages.

## Chapter 2: A Detailed Examination of Scenes from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Knowing that the *Gawain*-poet was a contemporary of Geoffrey Chaucer, a well-known English poet who wrote in the Middle Ages and is referred to as the “Father of English Poetry,” we are able to draw connections and understand more about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from a societal perspective (Hales, 712). According to Lewis, “Chaucer is a poet of courtly love” as well (201). At the time that Chaucer was writing, the aftermath of the Black Death was setting in society. Chaucer was born in 1343 and died in 1400, which means that he survived the Black Death and experienced the horrific aftermath of the incident as well (Hales, 712). Assuming that the *Gawain*-poet is a contemporary of Chaucer, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written as England experienced the horrible repercussions. The Black Death, which took place in England from 1346 to 1353 and remained widespread afterward, wiped out an estimated one-third of the population (Noymer 616). The significance of an event that killed such a large proportion of Europe’s population goes without saying. The Black Death changed people’s views and made them rethink their values. The knowledge of knowing that the poet grew up exposed to the Black Death allows additional analysis to be made when interpreting *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in relation to courtly love. It is possible that the Black Death influenced the poet to write *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from a comedy standpoint in order to lighten the mood that was circulating around this time as well as to challenge the social order, especially since it (unlike Chaucer’s work) was written in a dialect from a marginal region outside the London metropolis and near the Welsh cultural zone of alternative Celtic traditions (Bennett 71-90).

The role that women play in the action of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight helps mock the medieval tradition of courtly love. Critics have argued about Morgan le Fay's intentions of humiliating King Arthur in front of his court, Gawain's quest, and Guenevere's reaction to the Green Knight. However, at the center of the poem is the Lady of Hautdesert, who tempts Gawain and questions the conventions of courtly love. Thelma Fenster has said: "...the centrality of the lady works to underline the poem's purpose" (83). By closely examining scenes in which Gawain is tempted by the Lady of Hautdesert and by analyzing the moral tension that is present in the text, we see the effect of comedy and are able to decipher the true meaning of the poem as a whole.

Before the Lady of Hautdesert ever confronts Gawain, he is tempted by her presence. The poem confirms that the Lady of Hautdesert is a married woman, fulfilling one of the qualifications for courtly love. The text explains that, *þe lorde loutes þerto, and þe lady als* ["the lord makes his way there, and his lady too"], showing a sense of ownership in that the Lady accompanies the man as if she belongs to him (933). We then get a description of the Lady from the poet: *Ho watz þe fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre, / And of compas and colour and costes, of alle oper, / And wener þen Wenore, as þe wyȝe þoȝt*, ["She was the loveliest on earth in complexion and features / In figure, in coloring and behavior above all others, / And more beautiful than Guenevere, it seemed to the knight"] (943-945). This describes the initial attraction that Gawain feels for the Lady of Hautdesert, drawing yet another parallel to courtly love through her beauty. The text also discusses Guenevere, who is both King Arthur's wife and known for her beauty in Camelot. At the time that this was being written, fans of Arthurian literature would know of Guenevere's beauty and be able to imagine a Lady so beautiful as to attract

Gawain. Guenevere is also symbolic to the women's central part in the poem. According to Thelma S. Fenster, "If the poem's revisionary agenda is evidence in the initial description of Arthur's court, the portrait of Guenevere in Fitt I both emphasizes this agenda and indicates the ways in which the positionings of women are central to it" (80).

As the poem continues, courtly love is being foreshadowed to the audience. The poet emphasizes the connection between Gawain and the Lady at the dinner table, where they were seated next to each other: *Bot zet I wot þat Wawen and þe wale burde / Such comfort of her compaynye caʒten togeder / Þurʒ her dere dalyaunce of her derne wordez, / Wyth clene cortays carp closed fro fylþe, / Þat hor play watz passande vche prynce gomen, / in vayres*, ["Yet I know that Gawain and his beautiful partner / Found such enjoyment in each other's company / Through a playful exchange of private remarks, / And well-mannered small-talk, unsullied by sin, That their pleasure surpassed every princely amusement for sure"] (1010-1015). The chemistry described between the two is growing tremendously over such a short period of time. Simultaneously, however, the Lord of the castle, Lord Bertilak, is very gracious towards Gawain. The mocking of courtly love here draws on an overall otherworld framework of the poem, with its inclusion of the "green world" element of the Green Knight and Morgan Le Faye. The poem draws on an otherworldly tradition going back to pre-Scholastic Celtic times that suggests a triadic view of relations and reality, rather than a binarized one. If courtly love involves a binary between male and female, subject to a male gaze even when the female is being adored, the otherworld adds a third element to mix up the binary, in effect.

The feminist psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva writes about the rise of cultural binaries in the West, which she relates to the Scholastic theology of the Trinity,

as a source of static hierarchy.<sup>5</sup> The latter flourished alongside the static hierarchies of feudalism from which courtly love emerged during the era of the Crusades. In this binarized view of reality, she argues that male identity was formed in a fusion of the Real and the Imaginary realms of psychoanalytic theory. That meld of imaginary individualistic identity then came into a binary relation with the Symbolic realm, related to nature and the feminine, tending to objectify it through a sense of desire as lack, as described by Lacan. However, Kristeva argued that an alternative kind of triadic dance between the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, in which identity is formed in relationship and not in opposition to the other, involves also an alternative sense of desire as relational. The mystical sense of hierarchy also lent itself to a sense of marriage as a mystical relationship between the male, the female, and the spiritual, drawing on earlier traditions. This could help explain how the mystical subversion of courtly love in the poem supports Lewis' idea of courtly love melding into marriage as the old feudal system crumbled.

Kristeva's model in effect supplements Lacan's, suggesting that his definition of desire as lack is culturally specific, and while that structure is typical of Western culture as it developed from Scholasticism, that an alternative mystical shaping of desire could be more relational. It was that relational approach that the melding of romantic love and marriage would draw on in emerging from the era of the Black Death and Wars of the

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<sup>5</sup> For discussion on Kristeva's model, relating Western binaries to a static sense of the Trinity, see Julia Kristeva, "Dostoevsky, the Writing of Suffering and Forgiveness" in *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 173-218. Also see Alfred K. Siewers, "Introduction – Song, Tree, and Spring: Environmental Meaning and Environmental Humanities" in *Re-Imagining Nature: Environmental Humanities and Ecosmiotics* (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 2013), 1-44.

Roses. However, as we shall see in Chapter 3, romantic marriage also ended up becoming further changed around by the development of modern individualistic consumer culture of the West. The latter would encourage the equation of marriage and romance again in more Lacanian terms of desire as lack--like courtly love a symbolic approach to what he called the non-rapport of the sexes in real terms, but still in a more individualistic monogamy, in the romantic-comedy film genre.

On each day after their initial encounter, the Lady goes to see Gawain in private quarters. She makes statements that are unacceptable in their current situation as a knight and a married woman, depicting the convention of courtly love.

And Gawayn þe god mon in gay bed lygez,  
Lurkkez quyl þe daylyzt lemed on þe woves,  
Vnder couertour ful clere, cortyned aboute;  
And as in slomeryng he slode, sleȝly he herde  
A littel dyn at his dor, and dernly vpon;  
And he heuez vp his hed out of þe cloþes,  
A corner of þe cortyn he caȝt vp a lyttel,  
And waytez warly þiderwarde quat hit be myȝt.  
Hit watz þe ladi, loflyest to beholde, (1179-1187).  
[And the good man Gawain lies in his fine bed,  
Lying snug while the daylight gleamed on the walls,  
Under a splendid coverlet, shut in by curtains.  
And as he lazily dozed, he heard slily made  
A little noise at his door and its stealthily open;

And he raised up his head from the bedclothes,  
Lifted a corner of the curtain a little,  
And takes a glimpse warily to see what it could be.  
It was the lady, looking her loveliest] (1179-1187).

The first day's actions and dialogue are very comical for the most part. They depend upon the idea that traditional idealistic words and themes from chivalric society are given a more embodied sexual significance when used in the context of the bedroom. They rely upon an embodied and incarnational sense of Nature, rather than an idealistic one, which possibly reflects the impact of the Black Death in weakening the constructed overlapping realms of feudalism and Scholasticism. Gawain's innocent behavior when the Lady of Hautdesert enters the bedroom sets the tone for what is going to come next. According to David Mills, Gawain's "...Innocence serves to amuse the reader by emphasizing just how little doubt there can be about the Lady's intentions under such circumstances" (613). The Lady continues to act in the same manner and continues by saying: *Your honour, your hendelayk is hendely praysed / With lordez, wyth ladyes, with alle þat lyf bere,* ["Your good name and courtesy are honorably praised/ By lords and by ladies and all folks alive"] (1228-1229). She also tries to lure him by mentioning that:

And now 3e ar here, iwysse, and we bot oure one;  
My lorde and his ledez ar on lenþe faren,  
Oþer burnez in her bedde, and my burdez als,  
þe dor drawen and dit with a derf haspe;  
And syþen I haue in þis hous hym þat al lykez,  
I schal ware my whyle wel, quyl hit lastez,

with tale.

Ȝe ar welcum to my cors,

Yowre awen won to wale,

Me behouez of fyne force

Your seruaunt be, and schale' (1230-1240).

[... and we two quire alone,

My husband and his men have gone far away,

Other servants are in bed, and my women too,

The door shut and locked with a powerful hasp;

And since I have under my roof the man everyone loves,

I shall spend my time well, while it lasts

with talk.

You are welcome to me indeed,

Take whatever you want;

Circumstances force me

To be your servant] (1230-1240).

The Lady is inviting Gawain to participate in a sexual affair with her behind her husband's back, which would be acting out themes from courtly love. According to Mills, this scene is particularly comedic in the way that it is "inappropriate of the marital image to Gawain's position as a guest" (613).

The next day the Lady returns. Only this time, she is attempting to lure Gawain in by attacking his behavior as a knight and his reputation for skill in the courtly arts including love. Again, this scene engages courtly love because the Lady is superior to the



man. According to Shadi Neimneh and Qusai Al-Thebyan, and in reference to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, “The lady’s authoritative stance” is equivalent to “...a master instructing a novice knight...” (241). In this sense, the Lady is trying to put Gawain down and tempt him using reverse psychology and is criticizing his behavior as both a person and a knight. The Lady says: *'Sir, 3if 3e be Wawen, wonder me bynkkez, / Wy3e þat is so wel wrast alway to god, / And connez not of compaynye þe costez vndertake, / And if mon kennes yow hom to knowe, 3e kest hom of your mynde,* [“Sir if you are Gawain, it astonishes me/ That a man always so strongly inclined to good, / Cannot grasp the rules of polite behavior, / And if someone instructs him, lets them drop out of mind”] (1481-1484). The Lady also brings up “courtesy,” a major component of courtly love, especially when looking closely at C.S. Lewis’s definition of the meaning of courtly love. The Lady says, in reference to Gawain, *So cortayse, so kny3tyly, as 3e ar knowen oute - / And of alle cheualry to chose, þe chef þyng alosed / Is þe lel layk of luf, þe lettrure of armes,* [“So courteous and chivalrous as you are known far and wide- / And of all of the aspects of chivalry, the thing most praised / Is the true practice of love, knighthood’s very lore; / For to speak of the endeavors of true knights”] (1511-1514). Her insult towards his knighthood is tended to wound his ego, but Gawain still does not engage in the act of courtly love. At this point, the scene is mocking courtly love for what it is: an adulterous affair, and a violation of both spiritual and social community, yet here without consummation, while subverting Gawain’s male identity as a knight in a way in which Chrétien’s poems did not do with their heroes.

However, the Lady has finally pushed him to the point where he gives her a kiss. As the poem continues, the relationship between Gawain and the Lady intensifies.

Gawain is finding it harder and harder to resist the temptations of courtly love presented by the Lady. He is constantly reminded of Lord Bertilak and does not want to commit the sin of betrayal against him, representing the traditional ideals of knighthood. Knighthood has also been seen as a homosocial behavior that men engaged in, symbolized here by Gawain's dilemma of having pledged to give Bertilak whatever he gets from his wife. Medievalist Dorsey Armstrong notes that,

Homosocial bonding balanced with heterosexual desire created and legitimized the knightly subcommunity... The heterosexualized knightly urge to serve one's lady, intersects with the homosocial desire to emulate and bond with one's fellows... The model of homosocial bonding made licit by heterosexual desire, the organizational scheme by which Arthur's realm was both maintained and destroyed (203).

The woman figure in an adulterous affair transforms the homosocial aspect of knighthood, helping to define further the bravery, nobility, and honor of knighthood as more masculine and desirable. By presenting the bedroom scenes in a social context in which Gawain can demonstrate his masculinity, the Lady criticizes the ideals of knighthood with hidden meanings in her words. She evokes a very strong sense of physical and sexual attraction through her dialogue. Although Gawain tries to resist, he does however, accept the girdle as a gift from the Lady before he goes to fight the Green Knight:

'If 3e renay my rynk, to ryche for hit semez,  
3e wolde not so hy3ly halden be to me,  
I schal gif yow my girdel, þat gaynes yow lasse.'

Ho laȝt a lace lyȝtly þat leke vmbe hir sydez,  
Knit vpon hir kyrtel vnder þe clere mantyle,  
Gered hit watz with grene sylke and with golde schaped,  
Noȝt bot arounde brayden, beten with fyn grez;  
And þat ho bede to þe burne, and blyþely bisoȝt,  
Þaȝ hit vnworþi were, þat he hit take wolde.  
[“If you reject my ring because you think it too precious,  
And wish not to be so deeply indebted to me,  
I shall give you my girdle that profits you less.”  
Quickly she unbuckled a belt clipped round her waist,  
Fastened over her kirtle beneath the fine mantle;  
It was woven of green silk and trimmed with gold,  
Embroidered at the edges and decorated by hand;  
And this she offered to the knight, and sweetly implored him  
That despite its slight value he would accept it] (1827-1835).

In this scene, the girdle is displayed as the physical representation of courtly love, referred to as a “love-token,” or “luf-lace” in Middle English (1874). Gawain does not tell the lord about his girdle, as he promised the Lady he would not, showing the reader a different side of Gawain than has been seen prior to this moment. Before the third day, Gawain was conflicted between the physical attraction to a married woman and engaging in an affair with her verses the purpose of his quest; to meet the Green Knight as he promised he would to receive his “blow.” The Lady, in this case, is distracting him from focusing on the purpose of his journey. This scene shows comedy through the double

meaning that it has.

When Gawain goes to meet the Green Knight and the truth is revealed, Gawain rants about how awful he is, as if his masculine identity as a knight has been deconstructed in the context of the courtly love comedy. But given that that masculine knightly identity is a key component of courtly love, the satiric effect is to bring into question whether courtly love, along with chivalry, really is natural or not, especially given the associations of the Green Knight with nature. When Gawain chose to keep the girdle from the lord, he broke his promise and honored the Lady instead. Although Gawain survived his journey, he was tempted by the Lady and failed to uphold his honor. When he realizes the Green Knight was his host, Gawain behaves similarly to a young child throwing a temper-tantrum. Gawain says the following:

Bot hit is no ferly þa3 a fole madde,  
And þur3 wyles of wymmen be wonen to sor3e,  
For so watz Adam in erde with one bygyled,  
And Salamon with fele sere, and Samson eftsonez-  
Dalyda dalt hym hys wyrde--and Dauyth þerafter  
Watz blended with Barsabe, þat much bale þoled (2414-2419).  
[But it is no wonder if a fool acts insanely  
And is brought to grief through womanly wiles;  
For so was Adam beguiled by one, here on earth,  
Solomon by several women, and Samson was another –  
Delilah was cause of his fate – and afterwards David  
Was deluded by Bathsheba, and suffered much grief] (2414-2419).

Gawain is comparing himself to many other men, famous figures from the Bible, who have failed because of women. This is a comic approach to courtly love because the figures that he mentions had done far worse than what Gawain had done. Each time he mentions one of these men, his argument becomes less meaningful. In addition, in terms of the poem's medieval audience, the failure of Adam to take responsibility for his own flaws, and to blame Eve as the Woman, would have been a familiar trope adding to the comedy.

Despite his dishonesty, Gawain gets to keep his head and suffers a minor battle wound. The fact that Gawain only suffered minor injuries because he fought off courtly love highlights how society looked at courtly love: as a violation of the religious ideals of knighthood but a necessary evil. Paradoxically, also supported knighthood as an identity. The ideas of courtly love seemed to distract a knight from following the chivalric code, even while being central to it. The uneasy tension between courtly love and chivalry parallels that between the warrior business of knights and their supposed ideals. The poem in many ways exposes those contradictions. It is also comic how Gawain is so hard on himself. Readers who are familiar with Arthurian literature know that Guenevere and Lancelot were engaging in a courtly love affair behind King Arthur's back. According to Thelma Fenster, "Guenevere and her betrayals of her king are, of course, notorious in the dissolution of the Round Table; she is most famous, in other words, for her association with the end," with *Le Morte Darthur* as Thomas Malory's book title famously focused the Arthurian legends (80). Fenster provides evidence that women were the downfall of men, chivalry, and knighthood in the medieval time period through her use of Guenevere. This is paralleled to the incident between Gawain and the Lady of Hautdesert that we see

in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. “At this early stage of the Round Table’s career, Gawain is a stronger knight than Lancelot will turn out to be” (86). If Fenster is correct, women are at fault, and Gawain appears to be a true knight for following the chivalric code much closer than others, and for feeling remorse for his actions. Yet he is revealed as ridiculous in doing so.

When Gawain finally returns to Arthur’s court, he is extremely ashamed of himself for accepting the girdle. Still, he is still more honorable than most other men in Arthur’s court. He displayed his strength when he volunteered to partake in this challenge, when no other knight would. He also respected Lord Bertilak enough to resist the temptation of courtly love. Upon entering Arthur’s court, Gawain says:

“See, my lord,” said the man, and held up the girdle,  
“This belt caused the scar that I bear on my neck;  
This is the injury and damage that I have suffered  
For the cowardice and covetousness that seized me there;  
This token of the dishonesty I was caught committing,  
And now I must wear it as long as I live.

While Gawain sees the girdle as his failure, brought upon him by a woman, the rest of the court continues to wear the girdle as a sign of honor:

þat lordes and ladis þat longed to þe Table,  
Vche burne of þe broþerhede, a bauderyk schulde haue,  
A bende abelef hym aboute of a bryzt grene,  
And þat, for sake of þat segge, in swete to were.  
For þat watz acorded þe renoun of þe Rounde Table,

And he honoured þat hit hade euermore after,  
As hit is breued in þe best boke of romaunce.  
[That lords and ladies who belong to the Table,  
Each member of the brotherhood, should wear such a belt,  
A baldric of bright green crosswise on the body,  
Similar to Gawain's and worn for his sake:  
And that became part of the renown of the Round Table,  
And whoever afterwards wore it was always honored,  
As it set down in the most reputable books of Romance] (2515-2521).

While the text notes that the girdle is worn as a symbol of honor, it is also being worn as a sign of mockery towards Gawain. It is ironic that the Knights of the Round Table wore the girdle after Gawain had explained the dishonesty of courtly love and the temptation of women that the girdle symbolized. While the text first assumes that knighthood is centralized around strength, it later reveals that knighthood requires courage and honesty as significant factors as well. While courage and honesty were characteristic of Gawain at the beginning of the poem, they began to dissipate as love made its way into the picture. Gawain's failure was largely due to courtly love, which discredited him as a knight, by exposing contradictions within the identity of male knighthood of the time. Thelma Fenster argues: "The lady of the girdle is reduced to the corruption of the flesh..."(90). Fenster purports to show that Gawain's only weakness was women, commenting on how ancient society perceived courtly love and women at the time. However, the ambiguous role of Morgan LeFaye in the poem, as "goddess" and ruler of Lord Bertilak, and the feminine associations of the natural world in the domain of

the Green Knight as a servant of Morgan, raises the question of whether Gawain's knighthood is also inadequate because it fails to take into account the natural life of human beings as embodied souls, relative to sexual and other issues.

The otherworldly element of the story reinforces symbolically Kristeva's model of the triadic overcoming the binary. The "cutting" of Gawain occurs on the Feast of the Circumcision, a time of medieval Christian commemoration of the proof of God's embodied presence within Creation. The proof of embodiedness in the cut that Gawain receives both releases Gawain from penalty and suggests a mystical alternative to knighthood and courtly love—in marriage, which mystically also was taken by medievals to symbolize the relation of God to the human community.

This effect of the poem can also be understood in terms of Timo Maran's model for reading the text as a nature-text (270-294). In Maran's model, both meaning and the identity of the reader immersed in a text emerge from a coming together of what he called the Environment, the Text, the Author, and the Reader. The contexts of the medieval poem include, as discussed earlier, the Environment of the social disruption of knighthood in the wake of the Black Death as well as the way in which the poem shapes a fantasy overlay of British geography. The Text draws on traditions of Celtic mythology and of Christian and biblical imagery, crafted into Middle English and a combination of native and French words and poetic technique. The Author is unknown but the satirical and mystical elements of the ethos of the poem are given to the reader in cues from the text. And the Reader as a context involves different temporalities mixing in the original post-Black Death audience, engaged with an emerging commercial economy and a search for alternatives to the Norman French colonial regime and static Scholastic Church



hierarchies. The combination of all these contexts shapes the reader's experience of identity within it, as a comedy about a knightly breakdown.

Thus, the poem can be seen as subverting idealistic rhetoric associated with courtly love, as a means of bringing into question masculine knightly identity. It offers a deep entwining of the perceived natural aspects of life (including embodied sex), in a way that challenges aristocratic knighthood with a more down-to-earth sense of life. The result is what Lewis noted in his early study: A trajectory of courtly love being merged into more of a partnership ideal of marriage as a middle class began to replace the only knightly and aristocratic elite in the wake of the Black Death and subsequently the Wars of the Roses. In this we can see a transition from the binary of knight and beloved to what Kristeva described as a more mystical triad – eventually of husband, wife, and a sense of the divine related to Nature. In the poem, we see that the scenes of courtly love are highly comical. Gawain, as the hero, is tested, tempted, and tricked by a woman who is desperate to trap him in courtly love, but who is also related to a realm of otherworldly and subversive Nature. He overcomes his journey, however, by living by the traditional and romantic ideals of knighthood, which nonetheless are shaken by his comic trials. The reader is made ready, in the laughter of the community at the end, for what Lewis described as a cultural transition into romantic love within marriage for a middle-class culture emerging from the ruins of feudalism.

### **Chapter 3: Courtly Love as Modern Comedy; The Evolution of a Romantic Ideal**

Courtly love has been transformed from its original medieval form and changed into marriage and the idea of monogamous committed relationship over many centuries. The medieval literary poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, foreshadows this transition through its comedic critique, because it sheds light on the connection of attraction and trust, which became embedded in marriage as a modern middle-class institution in the West. The comedy seen throughout the poem provides evidence that courtly love was looked upon negatively in its time following the Black Death, when the old aristocratic society entwined with it in Norman England was falling apart. In *The Allegory of Love*, C.S. Lewis explained the subsuming of courtly love into marriage, symbolized by Edmund Spenser's figure of Britomart in *The Faerie Queene*, as "the final struggle between the romance of adultery and the romance of marriage" (424), in which a chaste marriage won out in English culture. Lewis concluded his study by writing of courtly love in vestigial terms as it appears retrospectively to us moderns: "What once was platitude should now have for some the brave appeal of a cause nearly lost, and for others the interest of a highly specialized historical phenomenon – the peculiar flower of a peculiar civilization, important whether for good or ill and well worth our understanding" (449-50).

Modern society in new forms praises the idealization of a sustainable relationship, one characterized by honesty, loyalty, and fidelity, showing its transfiguration of concerns associated with love that existed in early centuries. This is evident in one of the most globally popular adaptations of medieval romance, the romantic comedy film genre of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Film expert, Tamar Jeffers McDonald, has

defined romantic comedy as "... a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion" (9). The melding of romantic love with marriage that Lewis described as exemplified in the 1590's poem *The Faerie Queene* was spurred in part by economic and social changes that eventually would support a more individualistic view of love and a more nuclear sense of the family, even as it retained a certain community ethos.

Today, modern attitudes seem different than the attitudes present in the Middle Ages. However, the same concerns still remain the same. Both men and women in modern society still desire a very physically attractive partner, as they did in medieval society. The male partner involved in a courtly love affair was often characterized as being an ideal knight, which has carried over today. Modern women often long for men who show that they are physically strong and physically fit for the needs of a woman. Often, the "ideal" image of a man for a woman in modern romantic comedy is one who is successful in his career while attentive to his partner. These characteristics are paralleled with the re-translation of knighthood and the chivalric code. In addition, the need for a sustainable relationship exists in today's society. The notion of infidelity is widely criticized by modern society in the same way that it was critiqued in the comical approach taken by *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and still is especially in the notion of cheating. In this romantic model, a man must be faithful to the lady that he loves for the entirety of his existence, regardless of their ups and downs. This is emphasized in modern society through marriage vows that are seen as a type of contractual obligation, even with more open divorce laws today. One must take a vow and uphold the vow that

he has taken, through the bad times and the good times. The emergence of a commercially based economy and society in the wake of the Black Death and Wars of the Roses may help explain these parallels, in the sense that this development helped shape the modern world (Bennett 71-90).

The following examples show how re-imagined themes of courtly love linger on in modern centuries, through films *How To Lose A Guy In 10 Days*, *A Knight's Tale*, and *Clueless*.

### **How To Lose A Guy In 10 Days**

Seeing that the media is such a prominent part of modern society, it is no surprise that it has become a resource as to how society treats social conventions, especially the conventions related to love. The 2003 romantic comedy, *How To Lose A Guy In 10 Days*, directed by Donald Petrie, depicts the concerns of today's society when dealing with romantic love. These ideas are rooted in the ancient medieval conception of courtly love as seen in the comedic treatment of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Many of the same themes present in courtly love are seen in the modern-day film depicting love, along with many of the critiques of courtly love that are used in the poem. *How to Lose A Guy In 10 Days* is a film that provides an outlet for analyzing the current social perception of romantic love as a long-term commitment, either within or outside of marriage.

Benjamin Barry, the male protagonist, is a successful and handsome advertising executive who is competing with two of his female co-workers for a campaign regarding diamonds. He bets them that he can make a woman of their choice fall in love with him in just 10 days. If he wins the bet, the women must forfeit their control over the campaign to him. Andie Anderson, the female protagonist, is a publicist for a magazine, who is

writing a “how to” story on “how to lose a guy in 10 days,” a bet with her boss that will allow her to write stories on more interesting and worldly topics, such as politics. When both Benjamin Berry and Andie Anderson attend the same convention, Ben’s competitors elect Andie for the bet. Andie, who is looking for a man for her “how to” video, decides that Ben could be the perfect guinea pig. Each protagonist’s hidden agenda ends in the ultimate fight for modern day romantic love seen in the climax of the film(*Petrie, 2003*).

The setting of the film takes place in New York City with the two main characters working for two separate high-profile fashion magazines. Both of their worlds rely on society’s dominant ideology of love, in relation to the culture of fashion. When Andie Anderson, played by Kate Hudson, the female protagonist, is introduced in the film, she is portrayed as the ideal woman in modern society. She is a typical beautiful blonde, drives a red convertible, and has a desirable job. As the opening credits are playing, we see many blonde and beautiful women on magazine covers and we understand Andie’s lifestyle through these women. From the start, it is obvious from her job and car that Andie is economically well off. She also resembles the many women on the magazine covers. Furthermore, when Ben’s female co-workers are deciding on what female to pick for the bet, they pick Andie, and refer to her as the woman with “the blonde hair” and “pretty smile” (0:17).<sup>6</sup> This suggests that Andie is society’s idea of the “perfect” woman. Andie is the equivalent to the noble woman in medieval society. We are then introduced to Ben, played by Matthew McConaughey, the male protagonist, who appears strong, attractive, and successful. He depicts the medieval idea of knighthood through the way he is presented. He is first shown wearing his “armor” when he rides his motorcycle to

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<sup>6</sup> I am citing the film, *How To Lose A Guy In 10 Days*, using an hour and minute format.

work, wearing his helmet and jacket, appearing tough. When he arrives at work, he takes off his shirt to change into other clothes (0:05-0:07). At this point, the audience is exposed to a true knight. His body depicts his strength and attraction. In both Andie and Ben, we see the ancient ideas of courtly love embedded in modern society.

Ben acts similarly to Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the way in which he volunteers his strength in the bet against his female co-workers, although he was not originally picked for the job (0:16-0:17). As with Morgan Le Faye in the poem, women seem to be catalysts of the plot. When his co-workers challenge him, they explain that he needs to find a woman who is inferior to him. One that is “giddy, desirous, adventurous, and desperate for love” (0:15). Ben’s co-workers also argue with him about the differences between a woman in love and a woman in lust. While it can be argued that courtly love in ancient times would be better titled as courtly lust, it was in fact courtly love because the woman was fulfilling the void that her husband could not fill for her. Her desire to be loved and to love was the sole purpose of her infidelity. As the film progresses, the tables quickly turn on Ben, and Andie is superior, depicting a medieval lady with her courtly lover. Although Andie has to be devoted to Ben and Ben has to be devoted to Andie, the idea of the lady having a superior position is still there, but in a roundabout way for modern times. Andie challenges Ben when she adds a feminine touch to Ben’s apartment by placing several stuffed animals around his bedroom and by decorating his bathroom with pink accessories (0:55-0:56). Similar to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *How To Lose A Guy In 10 Days* incorporates comedy to critique the ideas that surround courtly love. Ben is frightened by the use of feminine products and decorations in his apartment, which is overshadowed by humor when he notices the

transformation of his apartment and begins to scream. Similarly, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain throws a temper tantrum when he realizes that Lady Hautdesert has stripped away his knighthood by tricking him into keeping the green girdle from the Lord.

The biggest critique on courtly love is mentioned in the beginning of the film. Upon making the bet, Ben mentions that his female co-workers can pick any “single, available woman,” showing that modern society does not condone the idea of adultery (0:17-0:18). If Ben had not given these strict guidelines, his co-workers would have free range to pick any women they wanted to. However, they are forced to comply with modern society’s rules and regulations. In addition, when Andie is looking for a man for her “how to” article, she comes across a married man. Andie approaches him, unaware that he is married. When he mentions to her that he has a wife, her facial expression immediately changes as she becomes embarrassed at her approach (0:18-0:19). Her reaction shows that she acknowledges that dating a married man is wrong, which again critiques the idea of adultery present in courtly love. Combined, both Ben and Andie’s feelings towards adultery comment on modern society’s opinions towards being faithful and loyal to another.

Both of the main characters show that they have other allegiances besides a relationship. They have friends and professional careers pulling them away from each other, which displays a message about commitment in a comedic way. Andie, in particular, tries to explain to her boss that she is beginning to fall in love with Ben and does not want to go through with writing the “how to” article (1:22). However, her boss will not allow this to happen. This comments on the idea that one must uphold what

society wants. If Andie does not listen to her boss, she will lose her job. Yet, if she does listen to her boss, she will lose the man she loves. This dilemma references a knight involved in courtly love because the knight is torn between his courtly partner and upholding the chivalric code, but still in the modern monogamous context mentioned above, which adds to the satire.

The fact that both main characters are involved in a bet, criticizes courtly love as unsustainable because of the lack of commitment that is present in a courtly relationship. The intimate scene of the couple in the shower at Ben's parents house (1:17-1:19) parallels the revelation at the fundraiser of how both have been involved in a bet (1:29-1:31). The vehicle of the bet itself sets up a conflict between a commercialized and career-centered view of love and a more monogamously focused one, toward which the film moves. At the revelations, both characters are extremely disturbed by the other's actions because of the feelings they began to develop for each other. Comedy is present during a very serious matter when the two sing a duet in front of the people at the fundraiser because of the frustrations that arise due to the betrayal (1:32-1:36). The idea of the lack of commitment that comes from putting other things first, whether it is work or social status, is present at this very moment. Finally, when Andie leaves the fundraiser and the two are bickering outside of the venue, ideal love conquers all. The two realize that they are in love with each other and that their relationship was more than just a bet. We have reached a point in the twenty-first century where love has changed in popular culture, and the two characters show that, although not married, they are committed to each other and that romantic love is defined by fidelity, honesty, and sustainability. Courtly love is scrutinized here for being unsustainable due to the absence of



commitment that exposes it in current society to a potentially cheap commercialism symbolized by the bet. The use of comedy to support the idea of romantic love shows that there should be commitment in all relationships, which is encouraged by the film in the finale. Ben chases Andie on his motorcycle in an attempt to catch her cab before she leaves New York City to move away and start a new life. At this moment, he resembles a knight who is rescuing his lady so that he will never be without her, signifying that modern-day marriage or a long lasting relationship for love is the norm in today's society. Today, cheating is not accepted as a norm because it is seen as demoralizing for a modern contractual sense of relationship. The rejection of infidelity or cheating, as affirmed in modern romantic comedy films such as *How To Lose A Guy In 10 Days*, has roots in changes to courtly love evident as early as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, during the period of feudalism's demise.

### **A Knight's Tale**

A film saturated in the theme of courtly love is *A Knight's Tale*, directed by Brian Helgeland and released in 2001. Helgeland mocks the traditional notion of courtly love by taking a comedic approach to the film. The title is deceiving for the way that it entices those familiar with the medieval era, particularly medieval literature, to believe that it is replicating Geoffrey Chaucer's writing called "The Knightes Tale" from his collection of stories best known as *The Canterbury Tales*. Authors Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray have said, "...there is an echo of the *Canterbury Tales* in the film's title: a knight obviously replaces *the* knight, and in addition, the foregrounding of Wat and Roland (William's squires) alludes to - or perhaps "samples"- another of the *Tales*" (202). Although Chaucer does make an appearance in the film, *A Knight's Tale* is not centralized around

Chaucer or “The Knightes Tale”. Rather, the film features a peasant-born central character, William Thatcher, who is played by Heath Ledger, and his quest to win a series of jousting competitions. Along the way, he meets the love of his life, a noblewoman named Jocelyn, who is played by Shannyn Sossamon, shifting the central focus of the film towards courtly love. While the film does accurately depict aspects of courtly love, it simultaneously critiques the notion, to show that medieval conceptions of love are outdated and have been altered over time.

The knight’s attraction to the lady is imperative to the notion of courtly love. He will usually worship her from afar before he pursues his interest in her, which is due in part because he is of lower status than the lady. In *A Knight’s Tale*, William’s status as a peasant is declared at the beginning of the film when his master, Sir Ector, has died. William disguises himself as Sir Ector and jousts in his place, winning the battle and being crowned champion. While there are subtle hints that William is poor prior to this point, his peasant-born status is confirmed when William, and his two friends, Wat and Roland, disperse the coins they earned after selling the prize that William won from jousting. Realizing that he could win more competitions, William attempts to persuade his friends to use put their money towards “training and outfitting” so that William can continue to joust. He declares, “In one month we can be on our way to glory and riches none of us never dreamed of!”(0:09). As the men begin to be enticed by the idea, Roland reminds William “you are not of noble birth” and Wat continues by saying that, “we are the sons of peasants” (0:10). Regardless, the men agree to take their chances and head to another competition.

At the jousting competition, William notices Jocelyn and is immediately captivated by her beauty (0:20). He follows her on his horse and says, “Would you speak to me?” He continues by saying “I would hear you speak if it cost me my ears” (0:22). After he asks her name, she responds “Would you care if I was ugly?” (0:22). The dialogue shows that a main component of the courtly love criteria have been met; the man is attracted to a beautiful woman. It is not until William jousts, however, that her noble status is confirmed. Up until this point, Jocelyn has been shown surrounded by the lower class in the streets. She is dressed much different from them, as they all are covered in rags, while Jocelyn wears lavish dresses and head garments, showing her nobility. However, it is not until Jocelyn stands with the rest of the noble people in the stands, who comment that William is a peasant, that the audience receives confirmation of her status. Later in the film, the men refer to Jocelyn as Venus, goddess of love and beauty in Roman mythology, and this suggests her amatory power as “Venus severed from Cupid,” given that Cupid is “associated with courtly love,” as Lewis noted of the move toward marriage in *The Faerie Queene* (427).

Helgeland’s choice to name the noblewoman Jocelyn cannot be overlooked. Jocelyn was a man’s name during medieval times, and it can be interpreted as a form of mockery towards the homosocial behavior that many knights have been said to engage in during this time period, and to which courtly love may have created a boundary. Jocelyn serves as physical symbol of Helgeland’s mockery of courtly love and its components. Driver and Ray comment that *A Knight’s Tale* “...tilts too at ultramodern young women in a postfeminist age through the liberated (and yet annoyingly conventional) Jocelyn, who is William’s love interest... “ (199-200).

Helgeland portrays William in a way that shows he embodies knighthood. According to Driver and Ray, “the knightly code (in the movie) is clearly a masculinist one” (200). Themes of nobility and chivalry are constantly reinforced as William wins several jousts against his opponents. He sees the opportunity that Sir Ector left when he died and seizes it. He shows his honor, pride, and that he can actually fight like noble knights of medieval times were said to. In certain cases, he proves to be similar to Gawain from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. He goes on a quest to fight others, just as Gawain went on a quest to face the Green Knight. He also dresses in armor to show his Knighthood. There are marks on William’s armor that are similar to the pentangle that Gawain wore when he fought the Green Knight (0:34). The pentangle shows that Gawain is a true knight and that he is very virtuous. The five virtues are generosity, fellowship, chastity, courtesy, and charity. Likewise, the symbol on William’s armor shows that he is an ideal knight. Depicted on his armor are three fighting dragons, spreading their wings and colored in gold and red. Although it appears antique in appearance, William still has the power to win in competitions, emphasizing his strength.

Chivalry and romance combine when the relationship between Jocelyn and William intensifies. A more qualified suitor named Count Adhemar, who is played by Rufus Sewell, is challenging William. Usually, but not always, the lady involved in courtly love is married to a man of high prestige. However, Adhemar’s noble background, that courtly love model is not entirely mimicked because Adhemar only intends to marry Jocelyn. Regardless, William will not give up on Jocelyn, because his love for her is too strong. He asks her, “How may I prove my love for you?” and Jocelyn asks him to do his worst in the jousting (1:21). Essentially, she is asking him to lose.

Although he does not want to lose, he wants to prove to his love to her. In certain ways, this exemplifies the amount of power that women have today in relationships, that they did not have back in the Middle Ages. As discussed in chapter 1, it was certainly ironic that Eleanore of Aquitaine exercised as much power as she did. Martha W. Driver and Sid Ray have said:

Jocelyn retains some characteristics of Chrétien's Guinevere in the scene where she demands that William lose a series of jousts at the tournament in Paris in order to prove his love for her, just as Lancelot does at the tournament of the *Dame de Noauz* in the *Chevalier de la Charrette*. Her reasoning hearkens back to the code of courtly love and the total submission of the lover to the beloved but at the same time adds a modern spin to it that overlays the ethos of the imperious courtly lady (200).

To draw on this analysis, William is willing to lose the competition, what he has "waited his whole life for," just to prove his love for her, reflecting the aspect of courtly love that includes a submissive lover. In addition, the sacrifices that William makes for his lady can be considered heroic deeds of valor, again linking love and knighthood. After William purposely loses the competition to prove his love for her, Jocelyn is seen sneaking into his private quarters. However, it is not completely private, as Wat, William's squire, is waiting outside. The most compelling part of this scene, though, comes seconds later when Wat says, "Guinevere comes to Lancelot" (1:27) This is interesting in a two-dimensional way. First, the film is referring to Jocelyn and William as courtly lovers, like Guinevere and Lancelot. However, the second aspect of the dialogue does, in fact, critique courtly love for the concept that it is. Wat mentions that

Guinevere is going to Lancelot after the joust, showing that Jocelyn has submissive tendencies, which would nullify courtly love in this particular case. Helgeland indicates through his film that ideas from the time of Chaucer, a contemporary of the Gawain poet, are being questioned by a modern conception of what it means to be involved romantically.

While the criteria of courtly love are met in many ways, they are also blatantly mocked on several occasions. Courtly love is a consummation of secret love. Throughout the film, however, Jocelyn and William's love is publicized to everyone around them. Specifically, many others surround Jocelyn and William when they discuss how William can prove his love for Jocelyn. In addition, the couple is in a quiet environment, where many people are worshipping and praying, critiquing courtly love. It appears as if the public is an audience, watching the two argue over love. As the people stare, the couple gets angry and shouts at them, which is shocking given the nature of their secret love (1:20). Another instance in which Helgeland mocks courtly love is when the song "We Will Rock You" by Queen plays right before the joust, commenting on the unserious nature of the film. The song preference also suggests that the ideals of knighthood seen in the film are not traditional ideals, and are, in fact, mocking medieval knights from long ago. The song is comedic in the context in which it is used, undermining William's reputation as a true knight. With that said, it does, without a doubt, show a ludic aspect of chivalry.

The final scene of the film illustrates Helgeland's ultimate critique of courtly love, which also parallels the idea presented by C.S. Lewis that courtly love has transformed into our modern conception of marriage. As the last seconds of the film

begin to unfold, Jocelyn chooses William over Count Adhemar, which would be uncharacteristic of courtly love in the Middle Ages (2:08). Helgeland's choice to end the film in this way confirms that he is mocking courtly love as an outdated romantic love that no longer exists today. The ambiguity at the end of the film implies that Jocelyn and William will get married and live happily ever after. Driver and Ray have said, "The reduction of knightly proving to a series of sporting competitions crystallizes the pattern of *Bildungsroman*, but it is not this feature alone that recalls the narrative structure of classic romances and the ways in which modernity reinscribes and reperforms them to its own ideologically reflective ends" (201). The ending of this film reaffirms that we are currently living in the twenty-first century, where marriage is significant and cheating is socially unacceptable. Hence, courtly love is outdated, but modern marriage is keeping up with the times.

### **Clueless**

Amy Heckerling satirizes the theme of courtly love in the film *Clueless*, released in 1995. *Clueless*, another film belonging to the "romantic comedy genre," emphasizes comedy to highlight the importance of long-term commitment in modern-day society. The film has often been referred to as the modern adaptation of Jane Austen's 1816 classic novel, *Emma*, whose main male character significantly is titled Mr. Knightley. The film and novel have much resemblance in themes and characters, suggesting that Austen was aware that a transition of romantic love was taking place during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which is when she was writing her novels.

*Clueless* is centered around the female protagonist Cher, played by Alicia Silverstone, and her journey as she unexpectedly finds the perfect knight. The film

depicts Cher as the ideal noble lady. Specifically, the opening scenes of the film highlight Cher's wealth and beauty by depicting Cher and her father as members of the elite in society. The house in which they live is enormous and decorated with chandeliers, statues, and large portraits, complete with a maid. In addition, Cher's closet is overflowing with clothes, which are all accounted for in her fancy computerized system that helps her choose which clothes to wear for the day. As the audience is given a tour of the house, Cher says, "Daddy is a litigator, those are the scariest kind of lawyers; even Lucy, our maid, is terrified of him! Daddy is so good he gets paid 500 dollars an hour to fight with people, but he fights with me for free cause I'm his daughter" (0:02). While the dialogue in this scene suggests that Cher is very wealthy, it also shows the comedy that Heckerling is using to critique Cher as a rich girl living in modern society. Furthermore, Cher is striking with blond hair and blue eyes. She is also thin, which is characteristic of the ideal woman in modern-day society.

Shortly after, we are told that Cher has a former stepbrother named Josh, played by Paul Rudd, who will be visiting the family. When Josh appears, he looks disheveled; wearing a t-shirt covered by a flannel sweater and a pair of old jeans. Cher comments on his appearance by saying, "So the flannel shirt deal, is that a nod to the crispy, Seattle weather, or are just trying to stay warm in front of the refrigerator?" (0:08). Her sarcasm suggests that she is less than impressed with the way that Josh presents himself. Josh's appearance also implies that he is not of the same social status as Cher and her father. Besides his dress code, subtle hints suggest that Cher and Josh come from two different worlds. Cher is high maintenance and loves to go to the mall and hang out with friends,



while Josh prefers the simple things in life; he reads books and attends university.

Heckerling frames Cher and Josh to be the perfect courtly lovers.

Josh exemplifies knightly characteristics throughout the film. Similar to a knight in medieval times, Josh proves himself when he performs a series of heroic deeds to win over Cher. The initial deeds seem subtle, but as time progresses, the deeds intensify. The first instance in which Josh proves himself to Cher is when Cher wants to take the jeep out, but needs a licensed driver. She approaches Josh, and he hardly even hesitates to go for a drive with her (0:16). However, this is miniscule to the second time Josh rescues Cher. Cher becomes stranded in a parking lot outside of JR. Market after her ride ditches her. Moments later, a stranger holds a gun up to her head and demands her purse and her cell phone (0:42). Once he leaves, Cher immediately calls Josh, who drops what he is doing to run to her rescue, which is significant because he is on a date with another girl.

Josh admires Cher from afar, which shows the role of courtly love in the film, while simultaneously commenting on the modern aspects of romantic love. Cher walks down the steps in a skintight Calvin Klein, white dress, looking absolutely breathtaking, to go on a date with Christian, who is played by Justin Walker. She has a diamond necklace and purse to march. As she takes her first step, the music suddenly changes to play a classical song that stimulates a romantic vibe. The camera then shifts to show Josh's reaction as he sits there mesmerized by her beauty. He swallows hard and says to her dad, "You're not going to let her go out like that, are you?" (0:53). Josh decides to go to the party in order to look out for Claire, or in other words, to protect her from the boy she is with, exemplifying true knighthood. At the party, Josh continues to watch over

Cher. As he is talking to another adult at the party, he becomes mesmerized by Cher again (0:56). He continues to watch her the whole night.

The modern critique of courtly love plays its most pivotal role towards the end of the film. Cher's good friend, Tai, played by Brittany Murphy, confesses to Cher that she likes Josh. Cher is not happy about this and, in turn, she reflects on the emotions that she has for Josh. While she tries to convince herself that she does not love him, by saying "What does she want with Josh anyway? He dresses funny, he listens to complaint rock; he's not even cute in a conventional way!" (1:19), she cannot convince herself. This scene is a subtle play on the modern notion of cheating because Cher is trying to convince herself that she does not like Josh, so that it will not interfere with Josh and Tai's relationship. At the same time, however, she finally admits that she loves Josh. Cher exclaims, "Oh my gosh, I love Josh!" and the fountain that has been running water behind her suddenly produces a pink light. Subsequently, there is a flashback sequence to all of the times that Cher and Josh shared together, followed by a love song playing in the background. This scene is completely overdramatic in order to mock courtly love. It shows that romantic love in modern society is something that is treated as sacred and emotional, not hidden and covertly sexual.

Josh and Cher finally recognize that they love each other. He says to her "You're young and beautiful and...and..." and Cher responds by saying, "You think I'm beautiful?" and Josh says, "You know you're gorgeous." (1:30). They confess their love to each other and passionately kiss at the top of the steps. Cher's voice is then heard in a voice over saying "Well... you can guess what happened next!" as an image of a wedding ceremony takes over the screen, falsely leading the audience to believe that the

couple that was just seen kissing on the steps is about to get married. However, Cher interrupts and says, “As if! I am only sixteen and this is California, not Kentucky!” (1:30) Even though Cher and Josh are not married, the nature of the wedding suggests a connection of romantic love through comedy with marriage. Furthermore, the girls fight over the bouquet after it is thrown, but Cher ends up getting it, insinuating a long-term relationship between her and Josh. Society even with changing ideas about marriage is in a time where monogamy is essential to relationships. The final scenes of the film imply that marriage is for love (even if marriage is not so essential), and that the medieval concepts and that the medieval concepts that were once practiced are now outdated in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

While *Clueless* does depict certain aspects of courtly love, it like the other two romantic comedy films here, shows the transition that romantic love has been made over time. Beautiful ladies, as well as knights in shining armor, are ideal types of attraction, but long-term commitment and loyalty are far more important (at least in Hollywood romantic comedies) in modern times. In a neocolonial and neoliberal world of Hollywood media in the late 20<sup>th</sup>- and early 21<sup>st</sup>-centuries, perhaps we see partly a return to the old Scholastic binary of essentialized identity, and of desire as lack, despite the emphasis on “not cheating.” But the liminal mystical and comic questioning of romantic love in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight may yet help inform a more triadic postmodern sense of desire as relational to larger contexts of life than individual will, amid the echoes of the laughter of the Green Knight and the community of the Court.

## Conclusion

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* can be seen today as the beginning of a transition from the ideas of courtly love to the modern ideas of marriage, a process described decades ago by C.S. Lewis, who, however, like other earlier scholars, ignored this Middle English poem's place in the corpus of romantic love literature. Modern people tend to think that courtly love is a depiction of the type of love that was accepted in ancient medieval society. However, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* shows that courtly love was subverted and rejected in key points at least by the time of the emergency of Middle English literature in the wake of the Black Death. The poem's deconstruction of Gawain's knightly identity, by putting the hero in ludicrous situations, and its mixing up of embodied sexual meanings with courtly love's idealism, situate it in a satirical realm. The poem ends with neither an actual romance nor a tragic epic ending like the Arthurian stories as a whole with Guenivere and Lancelot, but with laughed by the court, at least partly at Gawain's expense as everyone dons a green girdle. The otherworldly aspect of the poem, partly drawn from Celtic sources, brings in a third element to the binary of male and female in courtly love. In the process, the satire helps set the stage for what became seen as a spiritual element in romantic love connected to marriage and a long-lasting relationship. In examining modern notions of romantic love as successors to courtly love, especially as seen in filmic storytelling, such as the romantic comedies we examine here, we can see the continuation of that trajectory with its roots in the late fourteenth century. Ideas of marriage and love continue to change in popular society but certain aspects of the early critique of courtly love, affirming the value of fidelity in long-term relationships, continue to be emphasized in modern-day

Anglo-American popular culture today. While many scholars debate whether courtly love was a social reality or a literary conception, it was an influential notion that likely will continue to echo in Western culture for a long time to come.

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