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Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:
A female knot and the interconnectedness of the female voice
in a medieval romance



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vlastnoruční podpis

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Preface

*“Now take care, Sir Gawain,
That your courage wax not cold
When you must turn again
To your enterprise foretold.”¹*

I heard about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for the first time about four years ago when I was facing in horror the compulsory reading list for the class of the English Literature and Culture of the Middle Ages. This was, however, a piece I was actually looking forward to. A historical romance, despite the lack of a unified definition, raises certain expectations; a story of adventure and love featuring brave knights and ladies in distress, a rather predictable happy ending and a touch of high moral ideals into which the whole story is wrapped. This romance was, however, different. It took me some time to formulate what seemed to be out of place, what seemed as if not to fit into the traditional pattern but then it occurred to me; it was the character of Gawain that did not convince me. A story of adventure, for sure, but a knight whose only amorous exploit is to feign sleep when a most beautiful lady is around, a knight who is constantly degrading himself, who seems to be indecisive all the time, who is unable to stand his ground for once in the poem and who volunteers to set out on the journey only because he considers himself to be the weakest link at the Round Table; how does that fit into a heroic pattern? I felt rather sorry for Gawain. He is put through such an elaborate cobweb of tests only to end up feeling ashamed and consequently displacing all the blame for his own fall on the female sex. I did the reading on the historical background and even as a reader from the twenty-first century, I tried to understand Gawain's predicament, his anger and its consequent displacement on women, but it still did not seem right. Then another question popped up. If Gawain is not the hero of the poem, who is? And that was when my interest in Morgan began. There was just one problem with Morgan being the central figure of the poem; she does not appear until its very end.

I started to read various interpretations, trying to find those that focus on Morgan and her role in SGGK, but it is not that easy to find at least some of these. Not being granted enough space in the poem, Morgan is mostly ignored or only touched in passing and it did not take a lot of time to realize that she is not the only one. Guenevere, the Virgin Mary and Lady Bertilak have all been given similar treatment; SGGK is mostly considered a story of Gawain.

¹ *Sir Gawain the Green Knight, The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Middle Ages*. Ed. M. H. Abrams, Alfred Davis, and Stephen Greenblatt. 8th ed. Vol. A. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005) ll. 487-490.

Without any feminist pretext whatsoever, I made it my aim to restore the balance a little bit and to show that in a story where one woman conceives of a highly complex plan directed towards another woman, carried out by a third and counter-balanced by a fourth, female characters should deserve more spotlight or, at least, they should deserve more attention than they have been given so far.

I was thinking about analyzing one character after another, about approaching the text from a historical, social, even linguistic point of view, but these ideas always reached a dead end. I was missing the whole picture, the one idea that would somehow connect all the small inputs I wanted to include in this paper. Moreover, how to prove the importance of a character when such a character is textually marginalized to such an extent that not even thirty lines out of 2,531 are dedicated to its characterization? Then I laid my hands on an article by Geraldine Heng who approaches the female characters in *SGGK* not individually, but as a collective. In her ten page article, she introduces the concept of a female knot where she argues that the female characters are somehow linked to each other, just like the five points of Gawain's pentangle. Heng, however, does not go any further in that argumentation. For me, though, it was more than enough. A parallel comparison between the female characters, their interconnectedness and their relationship seemed to work as the framework I was looking for, a framework within which I tried to formulate my ideas and my interpretation of one of the most beautiful and unique romances of the English literature.

It would not have been possible to write this thesis were it not for the opportunity to collect the necessary literature at the universities I have been lucky enough to study at, namely Moravian College in the USA, Georg-August Universität in Germany and Palacký University in Olomouc.

My thanks go, however, to Mgr. David Livingstone who was patient enough to read my paper and to provide me with valuable suggestions and ideas as well as supplementary tips for the list of Bibliography.

Introduction

Gawain by Guenevere
Toward the king doth now incline:
“I beseech, before all here,
That this melee may be mine.”²

“It is easy to read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a romantic celebration of chivalry, but this romance contains a more wide-ranging, more serious criticism of chivalry than has heretofore been noticed.”³ It is, indeed, easy to approach SGGK as a story of adventure, entertainment and surprise; it is easy to approach it as a story of Gawain who voluntarily undergoes a series of ordeals and tests in order to uphold Camelot’s reputation. However, as Mrs. Liu rightly mentions, there are many more aspects of the story that should merit our attention. Various literary critics and scholars have noticed that as well and they have proposed other interpretations, those that can be found outside the story itself, in between the lines, in the literary and historical context or in the few facts that we know about the poet himself. Nowadays, scholars would be hard put to find as much as a single motif of the poem that has not been touched upon yet. Even though the range of interpretations has substantially widened in the past couple of decades, it is surprising to see that the biggest body of the available literature still approaches SGGK primarily as a story of Gawain and Arthur.

Hen Derek Brewer, a medievalist and one of the founding figures in the post-war study of Chaucer, once affirmed: “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is self-evidently the story of Gawain: Morgan and Guinevere are marginal, whatever their significance to Gawain.”⁴ This thesis has been written with the intention to challenge the misleading understanding of SGGK as an all-powerful masculine narrative. Such an effort has been driven by a simple conviction that SGGK is a story whose female characters play a more important role than has been assigned to them so far and than might be evident at the first sight. What story would there be without a woman carefully fabricating a plan that is directed at another woman, is carried out by a third and is counter-balanced by a fourth? What story would there be for the hero then? Not much of a story at all. The roles of Morgan le Fay, Guenevere, Lady Bertilak

² *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ll.339-342.

³ Cecilia H.C. Liu, “La Belle Dame Sans Merci?: Gawain’s Knightly Identity and the Role of Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” Home page 1, 1 July 2010 <<http://www.svd.fju.edu.tw/fl/medieval/papers/3a.pdf>>.

⁴ Geraldine Heng, “Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *PMLA* 106.3 (1991): 500. *JSTOR*. Moravian College Library, Bethlehem, USA. 12 Dec. 2006 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

and the Virgin Mary have been mostly described as subordinate, inferior or marginal to the main significance of the poem. This paper offers a different reading of SGGK, one in which the above mentioned characters are seen as a binding element of the whole story, a kind of a cobweb which, even though made visible only towards the end of the romance, should not lose any of its potential significance. *The female characters in SGGK present a parallel to the endless knot that Gawain's pentangle represents by forming a knot of their own; one in which the construction of each woman entails a point of anchoring in another.*⁵ *The female pillars of such a knot influence the actions of each other, they are interconnected by both conspiratory and conflicting forces in the midst of which we can find Gawain himself, unable to decide whose allegiance to keep and whose codes to follow, whether those of the Virgin Mary, those of Lord Bertilak or those of the lady. The knot of the female characters is a strong one and even though a certain degree of their in-textual marginalization might be easily agreed on, the female voice in SGGK resonates very strongly, both individually and collectively.*

In line with that hypothesis, the main research question and its sub-questions of this paper are as follows: *What is the importance of the female characters in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight? Does their textual marginalization automatically result in their secondary importance in terms of the story's interpretation? Is there any interconnectedness between the female characters and if so, how important are those relations for the story as well as for the message which the poet intended to pass on to his audience?* The primary aim of this paper is then to answer the research question and its sub-questions. The secondary aim is to contribute to the field of the existing literature on the topic, ideally by bringing new insights, views and thoughts that might help to re-evaluate the existing understanding of the female voice in the story, too often disregarded. By stating that, the relevance of the chosen topic should be adequately justified.

Quite understandably, this paper is not the first one to deal with female characters in the Arthuriana on the whole and in SGGK more specifically; its methodological approach and a critical evaluation of the existing literature and of the most important sources should, therefore, follow. The research was carried out in four university libraries (at Moravian College, Pennsylvania, the USA; at Palacký University, Olomouc, the Czech Republic; at Masaryk University, Brno, the Czech Republic; at Georg-August Universität, Göttingen, Germany) as well as on the Internet. The bibliography menu consequently consists of books, internet databasis (books online, university databasis and scholarly articles and journals,

⁵ Heng 503.

especially *JSTOR*) and articles in scholarly magazines focusing on the Middle Ages, for example *Speculum* or *The Chaucer Review*. The methods that have been used are rooted in the historical-cultural and analytical-descriptive approaches and include therefore methods of analysis of a given historical and cultural background as well as methods of its description and practical application in the chosen literary work with the aim to present a thorough descriptive literary analysis.

Before dealing with the topic itself, it was necessary to cover the cultural, historical and political backgrounds and the position and role of women at the time of the poem's composition, the second half of the fourteenth century. Out of the seventeen sources that have been consulted for that purpose, the oldest ones were published in the 1970s, the most recent materials then come from the year 2007. Robert Ackerman's *Backgrounds to Medieval English Literature* proved to be of high value as it tackles the social, political and cultural background and explains the events that directly or indirectly influenced the literary output of the Middle Ages. Maurois's book entitled *Dějiny Anglie* offers, on the other hand, a more historical approach focusing on the known facts, devoid of any significant relation to literature. There is also an abundant number of sources focusing directly on the role and position of women in the Middle Ages, Eileen Power's *Medieval Women*, Mavis Mate's *Women in Medieval English Society* or Marty W. Newman's and Ann Echols's book *Between Pit and Pedestal: Women in the Middle Ages* all approach this field, distributing the interest as they see fit between the attitude of the Church and the ordinary life of women of all social classes. From other names, Carole Rawcliffe's article "Women, Childbirth, and Religion in Later Medieval England" brings very interesting insights into the sphere of the role of women within the Christian doctrine. *The Bible* has been researched to assess the traditional approach to women in a time when Christianity was the most dominant political, social and cultural force. Muriel Whitaker, Georges Duby, Cordelia Beattie or Rowena E. Archer are yet another names whose work has been consulted and much appreciated during the research. Almost all of these discuss the role of women from the general point of view, which is very useful for the purposes of understanding the general situation. More concrete examples of the position of women and on the way they were and were not supposed to behave has been found directly in the literary output of that time. *Ancrene Riwe* was written as a guidebook to young women, to instruct them in various areas of life; *The Book of the Knight of the Tower: Manners for Young Medieval Women* is yet another example that has been consulted to understand more what was expected of young women.

After the historical and cultural backgrounds, the attention was then turned to the existing literature on the female characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Of those articles that address the women in SGGK as a collective rather than individuals that have nothing in common, only few have been found. Geraldine Heng obviously provoked a number of reactions by her ten-page article entitled “Feminine knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.” She is being repeatedly referred to in other publications as she was among the first ones who came up with the idea of a certain degree of interconnectedness between the female characters in SGGK. It is also her influence that gave the impetus for this thesis to research that area more in detail. Lili Arkin, on the other hand, presents in her article, “The Role of Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”, a different set of ideas, more of a historical origin. She tries to prove that SGGK should be read mainly as a reaction to the changes taking place in the fourteenth century and that the role of women presents a very important part of such a reading. Cecilia H.C. Liu sees SGGK as a cautionary tale containing an explicit examples of how dangerous power in the hands of women is. Along the same lines, Cindy L. Vitto published in 1999 an article called “Controlling the Feminine Voice in *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” by which she defends the position of marginalization of women in this romance.

The most prominent sources discussing the female characters individually are, on the other hand, manifold. Guenevere, Morgan le Fay, the Virgin Mary and the typical temptress in the form of Lady Bertilak have been, from different points of view, addressed by many. An attempt has been made to follow those characters in their literary lives till the time of SGGK’s estimated publication in order to assess what connotations, images and meanings they carried with themselves and how these could have got projected in the text itself. Even if the literature on these figures might be now called abundant, interest in their characterization or literary conception awakened only slowly. Guenevere herself did not receive any attention until 1930s. One of the most concise books bearing witness to that is Ulrike Bethlehem’s *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle. Images of Arthur’s Queen in the Medieval Literature*, published in 2001. It is much more than a detailed account of the development and appearance of Guenevere in the medieval literary output. Even though Guenevere’s character seems to erupt into a multitude of images during that time, Bethlehem gives us a very clear picture of what these have looked like and what forms they have taken, as if bringing the character of Guenevere to life. Peter Korrel also treats the origin and the development of Guenevere, focusing more on her first appearance in the Welsh tradition. Maureen Fries presents in her article her own definition of heroes, heroines and counter-heroes of the

Arthurian tradition and tries to apply those to concrete examples. Jennifer Ward dedicated a chapter in her book *Women in England in the Middle Ages* to queens in their framework of chivalry and precious information on their role, function or duties can be extracted from there. Webster's *Guinevere*'s only fault is that it was published in 1951 and we can find some inconsistencies or misinformation compared to later publications, but this book has been also consulted to learn more about the early literary history of the character of Guenevere. Contributions by Carole Silver or Martin Nejedlý can also be mentioned.

In 1950, D.E. Baughan published an article in which he revived the function of Morgan le Fay in SGGK, arguing that her role has been misunderstood, that she was only helping Arthur to purge the court of corruptedness. In 1960, Albert Friedman literally shred these assumptions into pieces in his article "Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" where he comments on Baughan's "dangerous unfamiliarity with romance conventions in general and Arthurian romance in particular."⁶ This only goes to show that the picture really depends on who paints it and we can find countless examples of contradictory readings of the same passage. The role of Morgan le Fay in SGGK definitely belongs to this category. In her historical appearance, Morgan has been addressed most profoundly by Carolyne Larrington; what Ulrike Bethlehem has done for the character of Guenevere, Larrington has done for Morgan, tracing her appearance to the first Arthurian texts, commenting on the development of the character and Morgan's relationship with Arthur and other knights, as well as discussing her role in SGGK. Sheila Fisher's inspiring article "Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History, and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" can be also mentioned here as well as Martin Nejedlý, who sees Morgan in a bigger framework of other etheric beings.

Lady Bertilak has been discussed individually by Harvey De Roo in an article called "Undressing Lady Bertilak: Guilt and Denial in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*" that examines the motives of her actions as well as the lady's relations with Gawain. Sharon M. Rowley published in *The Chaucer Review* an intriguing article on the motivations of the lady from the linguistic point of view, by analysing the text itself and by focusing on different interpretations mirrored in distinctive translations. She reaches a very interesting conclusion that will be addressed more in detail later on in this paper. Since the lady is not lucky enough

⁶ Albert B. Friedman, "Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Speculum* 35.2 (1960): 261. JSTOR. Moravian College Library, Bethlehem, USA. 26 Apr. 2007 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

to have her own name, her character is very often put into a more general framework of other medieval ladies; that is also how most of the other sources treat her.

The analysis of the last female character in SGGK, the Virgin Mary, has been tackled by Ronald Tamplin in his general article on “The Saints in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”. Mary Clayton published in 1990 a book entitled *The Cult of The Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* whose value lies in the detailed analysis of the origin and development of the Marian cult. Barry Spurr is yet another name whose work addresses the Virgin Mary, this time specifically in the English poetry. The works of Briffault, Newman, Echols or Power on the Virgin Mary and her cult have also been brought to bear.

The list of literature is by far not complete, a single thesis could be written only on the topic of one of these characters, but keeping in mind the interest of this paper – the importance and the interconnectedness of the female characters in SGGK – such a background reading has been thought of as sufficient. It should also be mentioned that complementary reading was done on other topics either directly or indirectly related to the female voice in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; all of them are mentioned in the Further Reading part of the Bibliography section.

To answer the research question, the paper follows the subsequent division. Chapter one focuses on the historical background of the Middle Ages, especially its later part when SGGK was most probably written. In order to assess the role of women, it is necessary to assess the sources from which the most important ideas spread. Attention is therefore paid to the crucial historical events, to the intellectual reactions to these events and to their reflections in the literary output of that time. Special focus falls on the role of the Church and aristocracy in defining the main theoretical views based on which women came to be understood and judged.

The second chapter presents a general overview of the female characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The first appearances of Guenevere, the Virgin Mary, Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay and their textual references are commented upon and an attempt is made to determine whether the story of Gawain is really an all-powerful masculine narrative, as it is often called and approached. Analysing the assumed marginalization of the female characters, the first notion of their interconnectedness and of the concept of the female knot is introduced and explained.

The third chapter then turns to the pillars of such a knot, in other words to the four archetypes that the four female characters represent; the queen on earth, the Queen in heaven, the prototypical Biblical temptress and the witch or the ugly evil force pulling the strings from

behind. The historical connotations and the contextual knowledge on the part of the audience and the readers are referred to in order to clarify the connotations that such archetypes automatically evoke; connotations that the poet's audience must have been aware of. This chapter therefore analyzes the female voice separately, trying to assess its individual force and strength.

The fourth chapter turns to the full scheme of Morgan's plan and to the conflicting and conspiratory forces by which the four pillars are connected. Relations between the female characters are explained and clarified in the framework of the female knot proposed in the second chapter. The interactions and clashes of Morgan and Guenevere, the Virgin Mary and the Lady, Morgan and Lady or Guenevere and the Virgin Mary are in this way addressed, Morgan's brilliant plan is followed step by step and the whole story is interpreted more as a story of Morgan than that of Gawain.

The Conclusion sums up all the sub-conclusions reached in distinctive chapters and fully answers the research question. There is, indeed, yet another kind of knot in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It is a female knot, so often unjustly judged as marginal and subordinate to the main plot. It is a knot in its original meaning since the actions of one of its parts influence the actions and reactions of all others. In that way, such a knot creates a binding element of the whole poem; without Morgan's plan, there would not have been a challenge for Gawain to undergo in the first place, without Guenevere, Morgan would not have had a reason to fabricate such a plan, without Lady Bertilak, there would have not been anyone to carry that plan out and without the Virgin Mary, there would have not been enough good spiritual force, one that is counter-balancing Morgan's scheme, clashing with it and posing crucial questions that Gawain and, by extension, all humans have to face.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight can be, indeed, read and understood in many ways. Most generally, it is a beautifully crafted multi-layered story of adventure, chivalry, loyalty, betrayal, temptation and love, even though not in the form that we might expect in a traditional Arthurian romance. Let us now turn to the aspects that this thesis is interested in so that yet another possible reading of the poem can be presented, one in which the female characters are given more space and more importance than they have been assigned so far.

1 Historical background

*For these were proud princes, most prosperous of old,
Past all lovers lucky, that languished under heaven,
bemused.
And one and all fell prey
To women that they had used.*⁷

1.1 Introduction to chapter one

Writing about medieval ideas about women, it is necessary to bring to light the sources from which these ideas spread. These sources include the given political situation with the important historical events, the intellectual reactions to these events and the reflections of the most prominent currents of thought in the literary output of the given time. The framework of the first chapter is trying to assess such sources, having in mind the intention to correctly interpret the role and the position that women held in society, especially towards the end of the Middle Ages. Such an assessment should serve as a theoretical springboard for further interpretation and understanding of the female characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

1.2 Political situation in the 14th century

The Norman conquest built an understandable gulf of distrust, hate and language barrier between the Norman ruling class and the local Anglo-Saxon population. These two cultures, however, soon started to mingle and by the time Edward I (1272 – 1307) succeeded to the throne, a new cultural amalgamation had been almost complete. Edward himself was both a descendant of Guillaume le Conquérant and a respected English king bearing the title of Confessor and speaking fluently both English and French languages.⁸ He was the one who took the first steps to make sure that the English language leaves its socially inferior position it had occupied in respect to Latin and French, and re-emerges as an undisputed victor towards the end of the fourteenth century. His prime intention, however, was to unify England with Scotland and Wales; a mission that was fulfilled only partially since Robert Bruce managed to organize the Scottish resistance and Scotland did not officially become part of the Kingdom of Great Britain until 1707. Exhausted by the neverending battles against Scotland, Edward I died on the battlefield, passing the throne on to his son. Edward II, however, ceased

⁷ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 2422-2426.

⁸ see André Maurois, *Dějiny Anglie* (Praha: NLN, 2000) 119.

immediately all the attempts to conquer Scotland. He was not half the ruler his father had been and he did not care much about the kingdom either. His wife, Isabella of France, and her lover, Roger Mortimer, succeeded in weakening his position; Edward II was consequently deposed and killed. Trying to restore royal authority after his father's disastrous rule, Edward III (1312 – 1377) remained in power for over fifty years and proved to be one of the most successful monarchs on the English throne during the Middle Ages.

“No other ruler could have been more feudal than Edward III. He loved the rides of his knights, was fond of knightly courtesies, was pining for fair ladies, swore to re-create Arthur's Round Table, for that purpose had built the round Windsor Tower, and last but not least established the famous Order of the Garter, (...).”⁹ It is an interesting coincidence that around the same time, a romance featuring knightly courtesies, fair ladies and the adventure of one of the knights of the Round Table appears. Moreover a romance whose very last line reads: “Honi Soit Qui Mal Pense,”¹⁰ a line which stands for nothing else but the very motto of the Order of the Garter itself. It seems as if the Gawain poet was trying to please the king by choosing the topic he did and by closing off the poem with an unmistakable reference to the noble order that the king himself established. Because of the lack of information, it is impossible to prove any links, but these coincidences are intriguing. Most scholars are, indeed, persuaded that the Gawain poet must have been writing for an aristocratic audience. Consequently, he must have been familiar with the events at the royal court that happened during the time of Edward III's father; a ruler deposed by his own wife and her lover; by a woman with much more power on her hands than might have been thinkable for a woman of that time and of that position. It is again an intriguing coincidence that in SGGK, we can also trace unusual power in the hands of a woman, power used to undermine the royal authority of the Round Table by subjecting one of its knights to a physical and mental ordeal.

Apart from the vicissitudes connected to the royal succession to the English throne, the fourteenth century was a century that saw an unprecedented increase in trading and economic activities; it was the time when England acquired the complex production techniques of wool and slowly made it its most prominent industry. It was not necessary any more to ship wool abroad so that the final product, cloth, could be shipped back to England. A new type of production came slowly into existence, one where the manufacturer buys the raw material and delivers the final product. This change proved to have unprecedented consequences for

⁹ Maurois 135. Transl. by the author, the original text: “Žádný panovník nemohl být feudálnější než Eduard III., který miloval slavnostní jízdy svých rytířů, zakládal si na rytířské zdvořilosti, trápil se pro krásné ženy, přísahal, že obnoví Artušův “kulatý stůl”, vystavěl proto kulatou windsorskou věž a založil známý podvazkový řád, (...).”

¹⁰ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* l. 2531.

England since, as Maurois says, very soon people started to be interested more in business than in warfare and knight rides.¹¹

It was also the time by which universities had already been established in Oxford and Cambridge, it was the time when cities started to be more autonomous than before and when England was getting richer day by day because of Edward III's plundering ventures in France during the first phase of the One Hundred Years' War. In 1348, however, the first of four visitations of the bubonic plague, called the Black Death, swept through Europe. The ramifications were horrifying. Both Ackerman and Maurois estimate that the epidemy reduced the population of the kingdom by at least one third.¹² The scarcity of labor made the wages rise and by consequence, farmers started to leave their homes to migrate by thousands to towns where the new Middle Class, out of which Chaucer was born, came into being. The scarcity of labor also made it necessary for women to be employed in fields and professions previously reserved to men.

The outline of the changes happening towards the end of the Middle Ages could not, however, be complete without mentioning the controversies related to the critique of the Church of that time. We read both in Langland and in Chaucer that by the end of the fourteenth century, the Church had strayed away from its original mission on earth – taking care of the spiritual well-being of people – and that it became corrupted to such an extent that people were buying indulgences on the basis of a yearly subscription so that they would not be bothered by the summoners for the next year to come.¹³ Village priests had little to live on while the high Church officials were becoming small kings. One of the most influential people protesting against this order of things was a theologian and an Oxford scholar John Wicliffe, 1320 – 1384. With his followers, the Lollards, he was preaching about the necessity to return to the original teaching of the Bible as the only source of truth; it was also from his impetus that the Bible, which had existed only in its Latin and French versions until then, was translated into English and consequently reached a much wider audience. The ordinary people could now read the Bible on their own. They did not, however, find there any noblemen. John Ball, a Lollard priest, opened one of his sermons with the following phrase: “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?”¹⁴ The general knowledge of the criticism coming from *Piers Plowman* combined with the ubiquitous injustice and the teaching of

¹¹ see Maurois 141.

¹² Robert Ackerman, *Backgrounds to Medieval English Literature* (New York: Random House, 1966) 27., Maurois 137. According to Ackerman, the appalling death rate reduced the population from 3,700,000 to 2,200,000. Maurois gives the numbers of 2,500,000 people surviving out of 4,000,000.

¹³ see Maurois 145.

¹⁴ Eileen Power, *Medieval Women* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975) 4.

John Ball and other priests spreading the notions of equality among men, resulted in an uprising called the Peasants' Revolt. Ordinary people, the representatives of lower classes, stormed London with the intention to confront the king, Richard II, and to discuss the issues at hand. The unsuccessful result of the negotiations lead to massive executions followed by decrees that were, for example, prohibiting the sons of rebels to enter university.¹⁵

Putting all these social and economic changes of the fourteenth century together, we get an equation at the end of which we find the feudal system with its offspring, chivalry, in decline. The vicissitudes at the royal court, the unprecedented growth of towns and trade, the first capitalists in England, the emergence of the new Middle Class, the wars and plagues with their devastating death tolls and the inadequate response of the Church to these events... The time of fighting in the name of God or in the name of a lady was, indeed, drawing to a close. In line with that argument, Lili Arkin approaches *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* both as “(...) a nostalgic support of the feudal hierarchies and an implicit criticism of changes, which, if left unchecked will lead to its ultimate destruction”¹⁶ and goes on to claim that the role of women is the poet's primary instrument in this critique. Arkin is not the only one who views SGGK as a direct response to the changes that have been described; Cecilia H.C. Liu is also persuaded that the romance contains profound criticism of the time and that, more importantly, the mistrust of women is an inherent part of that criticism.

1.3 Medieval ideas about women

Eileen Power reminds us that: “The expressed opinion of any age depends on the persons and the classes that happen to articulate it.”¹⁷ In the Middle Ages, what passed for contemporary opinion, came basically from two sources – the Church and the aristocracy; therefore two minorities whose life had often very little to do with the life of ordinary people. Nevertheless, these two classes articulated the theoretical views that came to be accepted and that spread well into the modern age. Even though they often found themselves at odds, both the Church and the aristocratic class defined woman as subordinate and subjected to man. Understandably, the roots of this notion can be found in the old Church fathers' Catholic teachings, but it should be stated right away that, for the reasons of convenience, aristocracy was more than willing to take over the concept of woman's subordination; having no power and a few rights, women were treated mostly as a chattel, serving the needs of a given family

¹⁵ see Maurois 150-153.

¹⁶ Lili Arkin, “The Role of Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” Home page, 14 Jun. 2010 <<http://www.chss.montclair.edu/english/furr/arkin.html>>.

¹⁷ Power 1.

by marrying a suitable husband. The practice of arranged marriages, still current in some Asian and Middle East countries, can be traced back to the Middle Ages where it was the most prevalent type of marriage on the European continent and as such, it continued well into the nineteenth century. To sum up, it is possible to state that the most dominant classes of the Middle Ages, the Church and the ruling classes, agreed and pushed forward the notion of woman being placed in subjection to man.

Interestingly enough, the same two classes developed a counter-doctrine of woman's superiority, her adoration and worship. Within the realm of the Church, the cult of the Virgin Mary gained its prominence in the eleventh century and its popularity continued to grow until the end of the Middle Ages. People went on pilgrimages, shrines were being built, books and manuscripts written and consequently, the Virgin Mary was soon presented as the unattainable ideal all women should be aspiring to. A romantic counterpart to the cult of the Virgin Mary was created during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when the aristocracy took over the concept of a woman's perfection and adoration and, in its chivalric background, turned it into the image of a beautiful and virtuous lady whose heart the knights are trying to conquer by fighting for her and by worshipping her.

In other words, there were two theoretical extremes that women were associated with; a woman in the pit of hell and a woman on a pedestal. Eileen Power agrees with this notion when she affirms that: "In both the ecclesiastic and aristocratic traffic of ideas the position of women was perpetually shunted between pit and throne."¹⁸ We might ask how such a contradictory line of ideas could come into being in the first place. Julia Kristeva, who started as a linguist in the 1960s, but who was also interested in the field of psychoanalysis and feminism, provides a very plausible answer in the framework of her theory of marginality. This theory allows us to view the repression of the feminine in terms of positionality; it affirms that whatever is marginal always works on both sides – either on the verge of chaos or on the verge of purity. "If patriarchy sees women as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order, then it can construct them as the limit or borderline of that order."¹⁹ Interestingly enough, the prevalent ideas and currents of thoughts as defined by both the Church and the aristocracy, did, indeed, first establish the position of women as subjected to men and later on placed women at the bordelines of the known world; either to heaven or to hell.

¹⁸ Power 8.

¹⁹ Toril Moi, *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Clays Ltd, 1985) 167.

1.3.1 The Catholic doctrine

“From at least late Old English times through the fifteenth century, then, English society at all levels was subjected to religious influences to a degree for which no modern parallel exists.”²⁰ There were two main reasons that allowed such a dominance of the Church; firstly, the Church provided answers – in the times of diseases and plagues, in the times of wars, poverty, and suffering, the Catholic Church offered to the ordinary people hope for future happiness and reward in heaven. Secondly, literacy and education were by nature restricted to the realm of the Church and this power of knowledge was used to advance the currents of thoughts held within; the popular understanding of the universe, the explanation of the origin of the world and its laws and rules. The Church was very often adamant about its doctrines and theories, which can be seen from the fact that it often punished those brave enough to question or contradict these doctrines. The condemnation of heliocentrism by the Church and the persecution of Copernicus, Galileo and Kepler is just one out of many examples. It was also the Church that advanced the theoretical views on men and women and their role in God’s great design.

Etymologically, man, in Latin *vir*, comes from the word *vis*, standing for force. Woman, *mulier*, on the other hand, traces its original meaning to softness.²¹ Correspondingly, since all male animal species were found faster, stronger and more agile than their female counterparts, it was the predominant opinion that it is simply the will of nature and, by extension, the will of God to have it that way. Such a will should not be and cannot be altered since there are no laws that would stand above that will. As equality was not an issue back then, ordinary people were hard put to find any other reasons at all to undermine these notions in the first place. From the time of Aristotle, people generally took the force of a man and the weakness of a woman as a given fact. The first Church fathers, however, enlarged this concept from being simply different to being superior. “One of the basic assumptions of the classical writings on anatomy and physiology was that the male was not only different from the female, but superior to her.”²² This superiority found its justifications in the teachings of the Bible.

²⁰ Ackerman 51.

²¹ Vern L. Bullough, “On Being a Male in the Middle Ages” *Medieval Masculinities: Reading Men in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Clare A. Lees, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) 32.

²² Bullough 31.

“For the man is not of the woman: but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man.” **Cor 11:8**²³

The Biblical interpretations established strict rules for gender by assigning each its duties and expectations. Woman was the weaker and emotional part, her role was to bring forth children and to be a faithful and obedient companion to her husband. Man was the stronger and rational part, his role was to protect his family and to live in the name of God as well as he could. Apart from their subordination, women in medieval Christendom bore another, much worse burden, that of the “(...) guilt of having, through disobedience, lost Paradise and condemned the race to pain, sin, and death.”²⁴ Many a medieval treatise points out to women as to the daughters of Eve who have to suffer for her sin and carry on that mark forever. As we know, both Adam and Eve were punished by God for their respective disobedience. It should be emphasized, however, that Eve was viewed as the one who tempted Adam into disobeying God in the first place; an image of a woman as temptress can be thus unmistakably traced to these origins.

“I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception;
in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children;
and thy desire shall be to thy husband,
and he shall rule over thee.”

Gen 3:16²⁵

Quite understandably, this section of Genesis proved to have a longstanding influence on the way women were regarded for centuries on. It was truly believed in the late Middle Ages that miscarriages, stillbirths and maternal mortality were a collective punishment for the original sin. It should be, however, mentioned that despite the obvious risks to carrying a baby, not having a living heir was a much worse option. Although Carole Rawcliffe admits it is impossible to generalize, she also says that as late as in 1847, both some patients and doctors objected to the use of anaesthesia in labor on the grounds that this was in

²³*The Holy Bible*, King James Version (New York: American Bible Society: 1999) 18 Oct. 2010
<www.bartleby.com/108/>.

²⁴Muriel Whitaker, “Introduction: Roles of Women in Middle English Literature,” *Sovereign Lady: Essays on Women in Middle English Literature* (London: Garland Publishing, 1995) 11.

²⁵*The Holy Bible*

contradiction to the Book of Genesis; it is the fate of women to bear the mark of Eve in the form of pain during childbirth.²⁶

It was not, however, the disobedience to God that was considered the biggest sin, it was rather the fact that Eve opened up Pandora's box of sexual passion. As a result, theologians projected sexual guilt onto Eve and, by extension, to all women.²⁷ The Church has always distrusted bodily passions since they weaken reason and will. They make people do what they would not normally do, they make people break allegiances and disobey the rules that they had sworn to follow. This being perceived as dangerous, the Church did not hesitate to extend its philosophy into actual practice, by forbidding sexual intimacy outside marriage or by fabricating scary and ridiculous laws related to sexual practices. It was not thinkable, for example, that people have sex on a Sunday. In the sixth century, Gregory of Tours, a theologian and a historian, wrote a cautionary tale of a woman whose baby was monstrously deformed because it had been conceived on a Sunday. Procreation was welcomed, carnal desires of whatever kind were considered a sin and clerics were using various tactics to persuade people that their rules came directly from God. As Georges Duby says: "Society was divided into two groups, namely those who had chosen continence and served God in the Church, and the married people who served Him in the world, and who formed the core of the conjugal cell, the house that encompassed, regulated, and restrained those laymen who remained celibate by necessity rather than by choice."²⁸ The Church saw sexuality as the principal means by which the Devil secured his hold on the mankind and, as stated before, very often blamed women since being a temptress is an innate part of the female heritage. Marriage as such was primarily thought of as a tolerated remedy to the natural inclinations of the human nature.

"But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn."

Cor 7:9²⁹

²⁶ see Carole Rawcliffe, "Women, Childbirth, and Religion in Later Medieval England," *Women and Religion in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2003) 91.

²⁷ see Marty Newman Williams, and Anne Echols, *Between Pit and Pedestal: Women in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1994) 106.

²⁸ Georges Duby, *Medieval Marriage: Two models from Twelfth-Century France* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978) 20.

²⁹ *The Holy Bible*

Needless to say that the parts of the Bible, both in the Old and the New Testament, had proved to have immense influence on the general understanding of the role of women. For that reason, other crucial passages have been chosen to demonstrate more clearly what the rhetorics of the Church supported itself with.

“Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.”

Cor 14:34³⁰

“Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.”

Eph 5:22³¹

“Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety.”

Tim 2:11³²

Being born with a gender disadvantage and placed directly under the guidance, authority and decision-making of her father and brothers, not standing a chance of any further education and having for her goal in life the provision of a male heir, women did not, indeed, had a lot of options of how to make themselves visible and it was, by all means, a tough going to be a woman in the Middle Ages. However, there was a way, in the Catholic doctrine, to overcome the defect of feminine gender; one could serve God by becoming a nun. It was believed that, for example, food deprivation and an isolated way of life would lead to a closer contact and more personal connection with God. These notions will be touched upon more in detail in the literary output of that time, where both Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe

³⁰ *The Holy Bible*

³¹ *The Holy Bible*

³² *The Holy Bible*

rose above the standard position of women by cutting their ties with the secular world and by experiencing such a divine connection that they managed to describe, or to have described, in writing. These women were guided by the counterpart to the Biblical archetype of Eve; someone that every man should have worshipped and every woman should have aspired to, the Virgin Mary. “She is the model of female behavior representing humility and obedience to God in her role as the Mother of God. She is a virgin, untainted by sexuality, which is considered the root of all evil in the early Christian church.”³³ The Virgin Mary is undoubtedly unique among the women of Christianity. She is the unattainable model, a mother and a virgin at the same time, pure and chaste. The popularity of her cult as well as the number of followers that kept on rising ever since the 11th century, proved that many a woman decided to embrace that way of life in order to escape from the depravity that the Church prescribed for them.

To sum up, women in the Catholic doctrine were put either into the pit of hell or on a pedestal. There were also stories that showed how easy it is to slip from one to the other, the story of Mary of Egypt, a former prostitute who mended her ways and became a Saint is just one example. Ordinary women, however, were all marked by the original sin, they were the daughters of Eve, susceptible to weakness and emotionality. Their biggest virtue was their virginity which was supposed to be given to the man who becomes their husband so that the family can make sure the offspring is really his. Even though subjected and subordinated to man, a woman could have been considered a good Christian by following the teachings of the Bible and by living a pious and virtuous life, following the example of the Virgin Mary; this was the core of the Christian doctrine. As stated before though, the doctrine of the Church was not the only intellectual source which formulated opinions on the role and position of women in the Middle Ages. The aristocratic doctrine, however, was rooted in different principles and, as it will be pointed out, these two doctrines were very often prone to clash and to contradict each other.³⁴

³³ Arkin 2.

³⁴ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a beautiful example of such a clash.

1.3.2 The concept of *l'amour courtois*

The cult of the lady, a romantic counterpart of the cult of the Virgin Mary, came into existence in southern France in the twelfth century. The life and the literature of that time were influenced by the so called “esprit courtois” in which both lyrical poetry, which was supposed to be sung, and verse novels, which were supposed to be read aloud, addressed the aristocratic audiences and presented them with a new kind of knight; one that does not fight any more for his God or his lord, but for the lady of his heart. These currents of thoughts proved to change substantially the original understanding of the role and importance of women as presented by the first Church fathers. By modifying the system of chivalry in elevating woman above man and by recognizing the lady as an earthborn carrier of both beauty and virtues, the concept of *l'amour courtois*, or courtly love, changed the way in which women were perceived. Gaston Paris used this term *amour courtois* for the first time in 1883 in order to describe the love between Lancelot and Guenevere in Chrétien de Troyes’s *Conte de la Charrette*. In Paris’s definition: “It was a special form of love in which the courtly lover idealized his beloved lady and spoke to her or about her in the exalted language usually reserved for a deity.”³⁵ This specific relationship was not, however, limited to the terms of endearment. There were given rules to be followed, the most important ones are the following:

- love between lovers is illegitimate and furtive,
- the lover is inferior and insecure about his reception,
- the beloved lady is elevated, haughty, even disdainful,
- the lover must earn the lady’s affection by undergoing tests of his prowess, valor, and devotion to her,
- love is an art and a science, subject to many rules and regulations – like courtesy in general³⁶

Gaston Paris probably did not intend for courtly love to become a technical term but it did and, unfortunately, each scholar writing about courtly love modifies its meaning to fit his or her purposes. Some say it is adulterous, some say it is not, some argue it is spiritual and pure, others that it is mainly sensual and erotic. Eileen Power says that the most important

³⁵ John C. Moore “Courtly Love: A Problem of Terminology,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40.4 (1979): 621. *JSTOR*. Moravian College Library, Bethlehem, USA. 12 Nov. 2006 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

³⁶ Moore 622.

rule of the courtly love was that such love was impossible to occur between a husband and a wife.³⁷ As stated before, marriages were almost exclusively social arrangements beneficial to both parties. Since it is usually hard to look for love in these artificial arrangements, love must be sought after outside marriage. Consequently, it must be kept secret from the whole world. Another important rule was that love goes hand in hand with poetry and music. A worthy lover must be a good speaker, flatterer and musician at the same time. Courtly love was after perfection and love itself was understood as the direct route leading to it. Since not many husbands would like their wives being recited to by secret lovers, courtly love took, not always but very often, the form of a platonic attachment. In these cases, men from lower classes claimed to be in love with a married woman from upper classes and for her, they were composing love poems exalting the lady as the most beautiful creature there is. At the same time, such a poet was often presenting himself as the most deplorable creature since he cannot be with the woman of his heart. As such, courtly love imitated the social situation of that time by presenting the poet as a serf to the lady; a knight vows to be a lady's slave, he vows to worship her as both a goddess and his queen. The important thing is that there is no higher authority than this *fin'amor* – free love, superior to any other obligations one might have, love that is not subject to rules or laws, but whose maintainance is the supreme law of its own.

The concept quickly spread to other countries and was presented by poets at the most important royal courts of that time. Kings used to host poets and had them compete at their courts; *Dolce stil nuovo* in Italy, the Minnesingers in Germany, the troubadours and trouvères in France - the royal courts at Blois, Champagne, Flanders, Brittany, those of Henry II of England or Pedro II of Aragon,³⁸ the concept of courtly love was everywhere putting women on a pedestal on earth. In France in particular, the concept of courtly love was even more prominent than in other countries; apart from enlarging the existing scope of literary genres, competitions were repeatedly organized in the name of so called “casuistique amoureuse” – a topic was chosen, for example, *should a lady be loved for her looks or for her character?*, and two poets were asked to answer by composing a poem. Never before had there been such an attention paid to the concept of idealized beauty and virtue that met in the concept of a courtly lady and her adoration.

³⁷ Power 15.

³⁸ Power 15.

At the end of the twelfth century, the concept of courtly love shifted from poetry to prose. Chivalric novels started to appear, lots of them telling the stories of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table and it is within these stories that courtly love becomes fully engraved into the code of chivalry. However, an interesting observation has been formulated by Vern L. Bullough who makes sure that such an exaltation is not mistaken with an improvement of the position of the female. In his article “On Being a Male in the Middle Ages,” Bullough reminds us that in the framework of chivalry, men were constantly asked to prove their superiority over women.³⁹ In other words, according to Bullough, the courtly novels turned what used to be thought of as God’s great design into a constant competition of the knights who were trying to demonstrate and to prove their male identity. “Failing at these tasks leads not only to challenges to one’s masculinity, but also to fear of being labelled as showing feminine weakness, however a society defines that.”⁴⁰ To demonstrate one’s maleness simply became a criterium by which a man was judged. In line with that, the concept of courtly love simply added a few more criteria to the equation. Quite clearly, male sexual performance was also a major key to such a demonstration. Interestingly enough, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* touches upon all these issues; Lady Bertilak is very outspoken in what she wants and since Gawain does not seem to be willing to comply with her wishes, she immediately starts to question his maleness, his identity and by that, she strikes a terrifying blow to his ego.

The concept of courtly love had many faces; it was both platonic and physical, it was about male prowess and its demonstration, it was also about the women themselves, beautiful and inspirational driving forces. We know that this concept played a very important role in the centuries to follow, in both those that criticised it as artificial and those that repeatedly returned to the roots of courtly love, looking for inspiration. We have seen that during the Middle Ages, both the Church and the aristocracy developed a doctrine of woman’s subordination but that both classes developed also a counter-doctrine of her exaltation; the Church and the aristocracy of the later Middle Ages were at odds with each other and with itself as for the role that women should have. To outline a more precise picture, there is one more source, apart from the historical events and the currents of thoughts, that can still be addressed; the literary output of the Middle Ages, more importantly the portrayal of women in this literary output.

³⁹ see Bullough 30.

⁴⁰ Bullough 34.

1.4 Women in the literary output of the Middle Ages

Before attempting to point out the ideas about the role of women, as they were presented in the literary output of the Middle Ages, it is important to emphasize two aspects of this task. Firstly, it is impossible to comment on every single work that treats women, their role or their position in the medieval England; consequently, only the most important and useful sources have been chosen. Secondly, it is of the same importance to emphasize the fact that the literary output does not necessarily reflect reality and there is no way for us to tell if what is being described corresponds to the real situation and if so, to what an extent. Even with these deficiencies taken into account, it is still beneficial for the purpose of this paper to pinpoint the most crucial literary works since these, either directly or indirectly, reflect the prevailing thoughts that were, as legacy, handed over to the future generations, thoughts that must have become influential for the Gawain poet in the second half of the fourteenth century. The literature of the Middle Ages is traditionally divided into three periods; the Anglo-Saxon literature of 500-1066, the Anglo-Norman literature of 1066-13th century and the Middle English literature of the 14th and 15th centuries. Each period was specific in its historical, political and cultural background and the treatment of women in the literary output of each period clearly demonstrates that.

1.4.1 The Anglo-Saxon period

From the whole literary output of the pre-Conquest time, only a small proportion has been preserved to the day; 30 000 lines of the Old English poetry and fewer than 1000 pages of prose of all kinds.⁴¹ From these, two sources commenting on the role of women should, in particular, merit out attention; the Anglo-Saxon poetry and the lives of the Saints. The poems *Judith*, *The Wife's Lament* and *The Husband's Message* as well as the story of Mary of Egypt have been consequently chosen as the most illustrious representatives. *The Book of Judith* was translated from its Latin original into the Old English around the tenth century by an unknown writer. His motives remain obscure but we know that Biblical narratives inspired Anglo-Saxon poetry to such an extent that they create up to one third of the surviving Anglo-Saxon poetical texts.⁴² The story of Judith is a story of a woman who stops general Holofernes from plundering her hometown of Bethulia by pretending to seduce him. She dresses up sumptuously, presents herself as someone who will help the general to conquer the town, but when they are lying in Holofernes's tent, she cuts his throat and saves the city.

⁴¹ see Ackerman xii.

⁴² see *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 100.

“Then the Creator’s maiden,
with her braided locks, took a sharp sword,
a hard weapon in the storms of battle, and drew it from the sheath
with her right hand. She began to call the Guardian of heaven
by name, ...”⁴³

Judith is one of the few women of power in the Anglo-Saxon literature and history, she is a God’s warrior, one that is fighting with the weapons her sex has been given. She wins her battle and saves her town because of a simple ruse; because of her beauty and her power of persuasion, she makes Holofernes let her into his tent and unwillingly give her the opportunity no one had been given before. In any case, Judith plays the part of a seductress; she is the temptress that leads men astray, makes them weak and lures them into where she wants them to be. She is the Biblical she-devil that the Catholic Church was warning against, even though Judith’s actions are fully justified by the author since she fights for God. In the poem, Judith is presented as the most pious and courageous woman whose only resources are her faith in God and her wits.

“..., because she possessed true
faith
in the Almighty. Indeed, at the end she did not doubt
in the reward which she had long yearned for.”⁴⁴

Trying to seduce Holofernes and consequently killing him in what might be called a very brutal way, Judith, seen as a faithful warrior of God, is promised by the poet a rightful place in heaven for what she had done. This might raise a lot of moral questions, but it also gives a very clear example of an ordinary woman who rises above others by using the weapons of her feeble sex to bring about the peace and happiness for her people. Judith did, indeed, have in mind the collective good of her countrymen and more importantly, she claims to be acting in the name of God; that is why her ruse is given full justification. The danger obviously comes when such a supreme goal is missing and women use the same weapons as Judith did for their own petty wars and personal benefits.

⁴³ *Judith, The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ll. 77-81.

⁴⁴ *Judith* ll. 345-348.

Both *The Wife's Lament* and *The Husband's Message* deal with the topic of unwanted separation of husband and wife, the former from the point of view of the wife, the latter from the point of view of the husband. The speaker of *The Wife's Lament* is most probably a peace-weaver, a woman married off to make peace between warring tribes.⁴⁵ This very fact only supports the notion that women in the Middle Ages were often part of profitable marriage agreements supposed to lead to political truce. In this case, the interpretation of the text remains ambiguous, but for some reasons, both the husband and his wife suffer exile and separation from each other. "First my lord went away from his people here across the storm-tossed sea. (...)"⁴⁶ The poem presents a combination of sadness over the loss of the woman's husband leading to the subsequent sadness over the loss of her own identity. She does not belong to anyone, she does not belong anywhere; the only thing she has left are the good memories of the things past. There are no names in this poem, which may result in a more general implications, valid for every woman who loses her husband and who finds herself in the same situation. There is no advice though, no consolation in the poem since very probably, there might be no consolation at all to a woman in such a situation, a woman whose identity has disappeared with her husband.

The Husband's Message is describing the very same separation, only from the point of view of the husband. He was forced to leave his home because of a feud and now that the feud is over, he is sending his wife a message, bidding her to join him overseas, in his new home. The message is delivered on a tablet of wood that is supposed to speak and convey the feelings of the husband for his wife, telling her that he has managed to establish a nice, prosperous home and that he is not lacking in anything except for her.

"Past are his woes, he has won through his perils,
He lives in plenty, no pleasure he lacks;
Nor horses nor goods nor gold of the mead-hall;
All the wealth of earls upon earth
Belongs to my lord, he lack but thee."⁴⁷

⁴⁵ see *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 114.

⁴⁶ *The Wife's Lament*, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 114.

⁴⁷ *The Husband's Message*, 4 Oct. 2010, ll. 41-45 <<http://www.elfinspell.com/EarlyEnglishHusband.htm>>.

The Wife's Lament and *The Husband's Message* present the same situations, yet, in the first example, when the woman finds herself in a different country without her husband, she feels that her life is over and that there is no hope for her in this unfortunate situation. In the second example, on the other hand, the husband who finds himself in a different country has managed to build a new life, he is now rich and does not need anything in his new household. Since his feelings for his wife are strong, he invites her to join him in this new life he has established. To sum up, women of higher social position were not supposed to know how to take care of themselves and they were not asked to know, they were supposed to be taken care of by their husbands. If a woman did not have the family background to support her, she had to, however, gain her bread in other ways. The following literary example was supposed to both discourage women from embracing that path as well as to provide them with necessary spiritual guidance of how to mend one's ways.

From the point of view of the Church, women were by nature depraved beings unless they followed the path of God. The story of St. Mary of Egypt is a story of a prostitute who mended her ways and through her repentance found God's forgiveness. Mary fled to the city of Alexandria when she was twelve and there, she led a depraved life. "I was greatly excited with the heat of sinful lust, so that I desired that they would come to me in greater numbers without any price, to the end that I might the more easily satisfy my culpable desires for wicked living."⁴⁸ One day, she joined a group of people on their pilgrimage to Jerusalem but found herself unable to enter a church there, almost as if some force was preventing her. She started to pray to the Virgin Mary so that she would take her under her protection and after that, Mary experienced a personal conversion and knowledge of salvation after which she decided to abandon her current way of life and to go to the desert. In the desert she lived for forty-seven years, having no food and no clothes. She could not read nor write, yet she knew the Scripture by heart. Before her death, there were some miracles performed on her part and St. Mary of Egypt became the role model for penitents and for people who lose their way and are struggling to find it. She was the role model saying that even though women can be depraved by nature, it is never too late to turn to the path of God that is offering salvation. The examples chosen from the Anglo-Saxon times show the direction that women were supposed to follow; either devote one's life to God by leading a solitary life or by fighting in His name, or lead a pious life here on earth always in union with one's husband because a woman cannot be defined without a husband, a person who provides her with identity.

⁴⁸ Walter W. Skeat, *St. Mary of Egypt. Aelfric's Lives of Saints* (London: Oxford UP, 1881) 23.

1.4.2 The Anglo-Norman period

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there was a clear shift towards a more solitary religious life and a more personal encounter with God. In line with that, manuscripts were written in the form of instructions on how to lead such a life. *Ancrene Riwe*, ca. 1215, was originally written as an educational manual for three sisters. It was thought of as a guide on how to live a virtuous life as well as an instruction manual helping to understand the teaching of the Bible and its application in life. In this literary achievement, it is easy to observe the influence of romances on religion since Christ is represented as a knight, fighting for his lady. Even though the knight is trying to prove his affection, the lady does not listen and she does not understand until his fight is over, until the knight is dead. He sacrifices his life even though she refuses his help and even though she does not love him back. “For your love I am willing to take on that fight, and rescue you from those who are seeking your death. But I know for certain that in fighting them I shall receive a mortal wound; and I will accept it gladly in order to win your heart.”⁴⁹ This example might be considered one of the rare literary cases of a peaceful co-existence of two usually contradictory concepts; those of spiritual and courtly love. The lady in *Ancrene Riwe* is proud, arrogant and stubborn, refusing to let the knight even talk to her. She is wrong in doing so and she does not see her mistakes until it is too late. There are also other examples of religious prose aimed at women of that time; the *Ancrene Wisse* is yet another manual of instruction written at the request of three sisters who chose to live a life of religious recluses; *Holy Maidenhead* paints the woes of marriage from the point of view of the wife.

During the Anglo-Norman period, the concept of *l'amour courtois*, embraced in the genre of romance, where women were elevated to an imaginary pedestal, had been introduced to the minds and lives of people. This genre, as well as the most prevalent Anglo-Norman literature, was greatly indebted in its content to the Celtic influences, more precisely to the legends about King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. This is true for Geoffrey of Monmouth who, with his Latin *History of the Kings of Britain* brought Arthur to England, this is true for its free Anglo-Norman translation *Le Roman de Brut* by a Norman cleric Wace, and it is also true for Wace's adaptation into the Middle English alliterative verse *Brut* by Laymon. Chrétien de Troyes, a French writer and the principal creator of the romance of chivalry, presented the ideal of courtly love in *Lancelot ou le Chevalier à la charrette*,

⁴⁹ *Ancrene Riwe*, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 158.

ca. 1168, and developed it further in *Yvain ou le Chevalier au lion* or in *Perceval ou le Conte du graal*. Marie de France, the first French female poet who was working probably for the court of Henry II of England, contributed to the Arthurian theme with her lais. In *Chevrefoil*, she tells the story of Tristran who leaves a secret note for the queen since she, as the only one will be able to recognize it. It is a tale of a brief encounter between the lovers and a painful separation that must follow. In *Lanval*, Queen Guenevere herself offers to be the knight's mistress.

“Lanval, I’ve honored you sincerely,
Have cherished you and loved you dearly.
All my love is at your disposal.
What do you say to my proposal?
Your mistress I consent to be;”⁵⁰

When Lanval refuses, he is accused by the queen of having tried to seduce her and he has to prove his innocence. Marie de France explores in her lais both male and female desires and portrays different kinds of love, both happy and tragic. The fact remains that in most of these examples, women play a major role, one that profoundly shaped the literature of that time. They are not silent and passive observers but rather active participants who inspire their lovers to overcome difficulties or who use their powers to get their revenge on lovers who had refused them.

⁵⁰ Marie de France, *Lanval*, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* II. 261-265.

1.4.3 Middle English literature of the 14th and 15th centuries

The tradition of *Ancrene Riwe* continued to the late Middle Ages as we can see in *The Book of the Knight of the Tower* that The Knight of La Tour-Landry wrote to his three daughters in 1372. A widower having in mind the moral well-being of his daughters, he takes examples from both Old and New Testaments to show to his daughters how a virtuous woman should behave and live. He also provides examples from his own time and from the lives of the Saints when he mentions, for example, St. Elizabeth, a woman who experienced the Cinderella story in reverse⁵¹. His focus, though, remains on the Seven Virtues (faith, hope, charity, justice, prudence, temperance, fortitude⁵²) and on the way these can make women noble, reverent and obedient. Sir Geoffrey evidently chose to pinpoint the good and virtuous sides of women from the history and he wanted to pass this teaching on to his daughters.

A few years later, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote his *Canterbury Tales* and among these, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*. It opens with a statement radical enough to provoke more than just an enraged reaction on the part of most of the clerics.

“Experience, though noon auctoritee
Were in this world, is right ynough for me
To speke of wo that is in mariage.”⁵³

Throughout the Middle Ages, the only authority on these issues was the Church that codified its teachings in books and manuscripts laboriously copied, spread and taught to people. By claiming that experience alone gives her right to speak about and express her opinions on marriage is in itself a revolutionary idea. In her speech, the wife is well aware of the antifeminist and antimatrimonial literature and currents of thoughts since she quotes some of these sources, for example the well-spread notion that it is better to marry than to burn.⁵⁴ Against these, however, she asserts her own experience and puts to the fore ideas that virginity is not necessary to be a good person or that our reproductory organs have been,

⁵¹ Rebecca Barnhouse, *The Book of the Knight of the Tower: Manners for Young Medieval Women* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 196. St. Elizabeth was born a princess in 1207, she was beautiful, wise and generous, she was married happily and had three children. When her husband died, her property was taken from her and she embraced a life of poverty and modesty, taking care of the people in need. She died when she was only twenty-four years old.

⁵² see Barnhouse 195.

⁵³ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* ll. 1-3.

⁵⁴ see Chaucer ll. 57-58. “He saide that to be wedded is no sinne: Bet is to be wedded than to brinne.” Marriage was seen as a necessary evil, if people cannot abstain from sinning, they should, at least, confine those needs within marriage.

indeed, created for reproduction and there is no shame in putting them to that use. In her speech, Chaucer was drawing upon a centuries-old tradition of ascertaining the subordination of women to men based on their supposedly feeble physical construction and emotional and irrational mental character. He also goes against the first Church fathers who were exalting celibacy and virginity as the most important assets of a woman. The wife of Bath justifies her life as a five-times married woman and directly and indirectly attacks the stereotypical notions about women. She also mentions her fifth husband reading to her a long list of women who have betrayed their husbands, tricked them or even deprived them of their life. This list consists of a long enumeration of wicked women in the history of mankind, starting with Eve and mentioning, for example, Deianira, Xantippe, Clytemnestra or Livia.⁵⁵ *The Wife of Bath's Tale* then debunks the myth of what women really want, touching upon the issues of equality and sovereignty over men.

“Wommen desire to have sovereynetee
As wel over hir housbonde as hir love,
And for to been in maistrye him above.”⁵⁶

As stated before, a lot of women have chosen to live as recluses, looking for a more personal contact with God. In the Middle Ages, it was believed that fasting and starvation or other kinds of physical deprivation are necessary steps leading to that experience. There were women who claimed to have received visions or to have entered into a close contact with God. They are usually described as mystics and as for the end of the Middle Ages, two names seem to be more prominent than all the rest; Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe. Julian, an anchoress, describes in her *Showings* that she experienced her first vision when she thought she was dying. In the fifteen visions that followed she is introducing her interpretation of various religious concepts. She touches upon sin as something necessary, even substantial, since it enables us to realize all the goodness there is. She sees God as her mother, gives her explanation of the holy Trinity or re-lives Christ's Passion. As a woman writer, something quite unusual as it is, she is able to describe her spiritual unity with God with enormous tact and shrewdness. Margery Kempe was, on the other hand, an ordinary woman, quite illiterate, moreover a mother of fourteen children. In her spiritual autobiography *The Book of Margery Kempe*, she describes her first vision after a traumatic delivery of her first child. She is much

⁵⁵ see Chaucer ll. 720-780. We can notice that the very same device is used in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

⁵⁶ Chaucer ll. 1044-1046.

more emotional in her narrative, she even went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land where she claimed to have experienced other visions of Christ's Passion and of the suffering of the Virgin Mary. Her religious convictions went to such an extent that she believed to be a bride of Christ and sharing bed with her husband suddenly felt adulterous. Margery reached an agreement with her husband by her negotiating a vow of celibacy. "Then said her husband again to her, As free may your body be to God as it hath been to me."⁵⁷ The mystics, having claimed what they did, appeared to be of a very strong and persistent character. Their experience, strengthened by their spiritual convictions, was given as an example to follow and in this respect, these women played a very important role.

Towards the end of the 14th century, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was composed by an unknown poet. This poet was also very concerned with spirituality and like the mystics, he was looking for answers in the realm of religion. The four poems that are now preserved in the Cotton Nero A.x. manuscript and that are believed to have been written by this unknown poet, do, indeed, support this opinion. They are *Pearl*, *Patience*, *Purity* (or *Cleanness*) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. *Purity* describes the virtues and joys of marital love by taking three examples from the Bible; the Flood, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and the fall of Belshazzar. *Pearl*, on the other hand, is more of a dream vision of a man who falls asleep and in his dream encounters a fair maid with whom he starts discussing some religious and philosophical issues. The dreamer eventually wakes up, comforted and reassured in his faith in God. The tone of *Patience* is very similar to that of a sermon since it presents the story of Jonah, disobedient and ill-natured, who has to learn his lesson. It is in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that we might return to the role of women and the poet's treatment of the female voice. A passage that might immediately come to mind in this respect is Gawain's final diatribe against women who have misguided and tricked many a man.

"And through the wiles of a woman be wooed into sorrow,
For so was Adam by one, when the world began,
And Solomon by many more, and Samson the mighty –
Delilah was his doom, and David thereafter
Was beguiled by Bathsheba, and bore much distress,"⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* 386.

⁵⁸ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 2415-2419.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, does, indeed, close off with a speech against women and the wiles they use to outwit men. But this does not necessarily mean that a conclusion that all women are depraved and trecherous should be taken as the poem's message; that would lead to an underestimation of the Gawain poet's genius as well as to an unnecessary reduction of the poem's complexity.

1.5 Conclusion to chapter one

In the early Middle Ages, "(...) women were subject to male authority and regarded not as individual entities in law but as part of the identity of both their kindred and their husband."⁵⁹ The introduction of Christianity brought about some changes, the most important for the position of women was the fact they they were given the option to join the Church and to become a nun; the twelfth century consequently saw an expansion of the female religious institutions and the establishment of enclosures inhabited by anchoresses. It is safe to say, however, that the rights and the status of women did not change much during the Middle Ages; neither was there at any moment a time when they would be on the political agenda as a priority.

This chapter focused on the sources from which the position and the treatment of women came to be understood and articulated; attention was paid to the historical events, to the social and economic changes, to the intellectual reactions to these changes on the part of those powerful enough to formulate the current opinion, and last but not least, to the reflection of such an opinion in the literary output of the Middle Ages. The Church developed the Catholic doctrine of woman's subordination, both physical and intellectual, to men. Withing the same doctrine, there was, however, the ever popular cult of the Virgin Mary, a unique woman in Christianity and a role model inspiring women to lead a virtuous life. The ruling class took over these two extremes and adjusted them within the framework of chivalry and its rules. A neverending dilemma of how to reconcile these two extremes thus came into existence and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is one of the literary works that deal with this dilemma.

⁵⁹ Mavis E. Mate, *Women in medieval English society* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999) 17.

2 Female characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

*Good were their words of greeting;
Each joyed in other's sight;
Great peril attends that meeting
Should Mary forget her knight.*⁶⁰

2.1 Introduction to chapter two

After the historical and intellectual backgrounds discussed in the first chapter, the scope of the second chapter turns directly to the female characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. It evaluates and analyzes four main points. Firstly, the four female characters in the story, their appearance in the text and the scope that they have been given are commented upon. Secondly, the assumed marginalization of the female voice in the text is being discussed, such a discussion consequently raises questions related to the central character of the poem. In line with that, the third point challenges the notion that Gawain is the only possible hero and that all the other characters should be understood and interpreted in relation to him. The fourth point finally proposes an alternative reading, one in which Morgan is the subject of the whole action. A diagram referred to as a female knot is presented as a parallel to the endless knot with an intention to support such an interpretation.

2.2 General overview of the female characters

Apart from the nameless ladies of the court and the shadow of Helen of Sparta that might loom over the opening description of Troy at the beginning of the poem,⁶¹ there are four female characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; Queen Guenevere, the Virgin Mary, Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay, being mentioned by names in the given order. Their appearance and the allusions to them cover all four fitts of the poem. In the first fitt, the character of Guenevere is introduced. In the second fitt, the Virgin Mary, Lady Bertilak and an old ugly lady who turns out to be Morgan le Fay are described, the third fitt is then dominated by the lady and her attempts to seduce Gawain, the Virgin Mary is addressed in this fitt as well. Finally, in the fourth fitt, Lady Bertilak, Morgan le Fay, and Queen Guenevere are all part of an unexpected revelation brought about by Lord Bertilak.

⁶⁰ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 1766-1769.

⁶¹ Helen of Troy might come to mind since her elopement with Paris, the prince of Troy, provided King Menelaos with a pretext to join his forces with his brother, Agamemnon, to attack Troy and to bring about its final destruction.

Table 1: An overview of the in-textual references to the female characters in SGGK

Fitt	Female characters
I	Guenevere
II	The Virgin Mary Lady Bertilak an old and ugly lady (turns out to be Morgan le Fay)
III	Lady Bertilak the Virgin Mary
IV	Lady Bertilak Morgan le Fay Guenevere

Guenevere is introduced roughly in the middle of the poet's portrayal of Arthur's court. Her introduction can be divided into two parts; one describing the environment where she is seated, the other one commenting briefly on her character. As far as the former is concerned, the environment into which she has been placed is nothing short of luxurious since she is sitting:

“On a dais well-decked and duly arrayed
With costly silk curtains, a canopy over,
Of Toulouse and Turkestan tapestries rich,
All broidered and bordered with the best gems
Ever brought into Britain, with bright pennies
to pay.”⁶²

The exquisity and sumptousness of the material and the jewels that she is surrounded by clearly correspond to and demonstrate her importance. She is the visual representation of Arthur's court, the comely queen whose king can afford to and does, indeed, endow her with the best materials there are in the world; Guenevere is introduced as a representative queen sitting on a pedestal, above all others, surrounded by the finest clothes and jewels in plain

⁶² *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 75-80.

view of everybody. As for her character and her looks, readers are given the following information:

“Fair queen, without a flaw,
She glanced with eyes of grey.
A seemlier that once he saw,
In truth, no man could say.”⁶³

A person without a single fault in character who is, moreover, very beautiful; it should be stated, however, that such a perfection is described in only twelve lines. In a poem of more than 2,500 lines, only twelve lines are devoted to the introduction of the second most important person in Arthur’s kingdom. The Gawain poet prefers to pay more attention to all the other details, such as King Arthur’s particular habits, rather than to a more detailed presentation of the queen’s character. For example, full eighteen lines are made use of to describe the simple fact that Arthur does not eat until all his knights are served. The queen, on the other hand, does not speak, does not react, does not even move; she is left a motionless figure. Another reference to her does not appear until Gawain is mentioned for the first time in line 109: “There Gawain the good knight by Guenevere sits.”⁶⁴ Mentioning Guenevere in this context should clearly indicate Gawain’s importance since *he* is the one granted the privilege to sit next to the the queen herself. This imperceptible hint is repeated for the second time further away in the text, in line 339.

When Gawain chops off the Green Knight’s head, Guenevere is addressed by the king:

“Dear dame, on this day dismay you no whit;
Such crafts are becoming at Christmastide,
Laughing at interludes, light songs and mirth,
Amid dancing of damsels with doughty knights.”⁶⁵

Arthur is obviously trying to calm Guenevere when such an occurrence left even the most courageous knights speechless. The king does not talk to his wife as he would to his equals, though. He talks to her as if to a child that he is trying to protect while the knights take over

⁶³ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 81-84.

⁶⁴ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* l. 109.

⁶⁵ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 470-473.

the important business. Arthur is asking her to laugh and to dance with other damsels without worrying even though, just a few minutes ago, a beheaded knight picked up his head and repeated the terms of the contract he had suggested.

In the second and third fitts, the queen is not present, nor is she alluded to. She does not appear until the last fitt, until the very end when Morgan's plan and her goals are fully revealed. At this point, Guenevere is branded as the recipient of Morgan's design; readers learn that it is the queen who was supposed to be afflicted and frightened to death by the presence of the Green Knight and the game he had set up with Gawain.⁶⁶ The very last reference to Guenevere in the poem is when the court hears that Gawain is coming back safe and sound. The poem reads that: "The king kisses the knight, and the queen as well, (...)." ⁶⁷

To conclude, the textual reference that mentions Guenevere, not even twenty-five lines out of more than 2,500, definitely does not correspond to the historical importance of her character and to the role that this character is about to play in the future of the Round Table. In the poem, Guenevere remains a motionless and speechless representative figure that is not displaying any kinds of emotions, not even in the most frightening situations; she is given neither the space nor the ability to act otherwise. Guenevere is simply depicted as a faultless queen of endless beauty without feelings and opinions of her own.

The Virgin Mary first appears during the description of the pentangle whose symbolic properties are supposed to guide Gawain on his way; to be faultless in his five senses, never to fail in his five fingers, to have all his fealty fixed upon the five wounds of Christ, to have all his force founded on the five joys of the Virgin Mary and to stand for beneficence, brotherly love, good manners and compassion - those are the five points of the endless knot that Gawain pledges his allegiance to.⁶⁸ The Virgin Mary is both symbolically present in the pentangle, but she is also visually represented on the inner part of the shield. When Gawain gets lost in the wilderness, he immediately addresses the Virgin Mary in his prayer.

"And at that holy tide
He prays with all his might
That Mary may be his guide
Till a dwelling comes in sight."⁶⁹

⁶⁶ see *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* l. 2460.

⁶⁷ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* l. 2493.

⁶⁸ see *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 640-655.

⁶⁹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 736-739.

Being both a guide and a spiritual leader, Mary is called upon three more times, once in Gawain's prayer and twice during the seduction game in which Lady Bertilak is trying to turn Gawain's mind her way. During that encounter, Gawain faces two contradictory forces; one being the lady and her pressing demands on Gawain to abide by the rules of courtly love, the other being the Virgin Mary and the loyalty that Gawain had pledged to her. The knight is supposed to choose. Instead, he is trying to counter-balance or reconcile these antagonistic forces by placing the Virgin Mary side by side to the ideals of the lady; he seems to believe that a choice will not be necessary and that he can manage to combine both of his pledges.

“Madame, said the merry man, Mary reward you!
For in good faith, I find your beneficence noble.”⁷⁰

The lady is very outspoken in what she expects Gawain to do, yet, he addresses her adulterous demands as “beneficence” – the very quality that is represented on his pentangle together with the Virgin Mary. He misplaces the lady's intentions to the realm where he wishes they belonged. Gawain is hoping to reconcile two forces that are by nature antagonistic and at this moment, he obviously believes that he might succeed; it is not until the third morning where he realizes he really has to choose. The lady, being aware of that, takes up the same language and makes him believe that her intentions go hand in hand with his spiritual rules. She thus defends what she wants in the name of “(...) the hight Queen of heaven”⁷¹ as well. She plays along Gawain's naive conviction that he can combine both pledges, trying to persuade him that it is, indeed, correct behavior to embrace what she is offering so eagerly.

Apart from the occasional invocations, the Virgin Mary is not directly mentioned in the text any more. Her role and her symbolism are well established when the pentangle is described. Whenever Gawain is put to a test, the Virgin Mary is the spiritual guiding force, she is Gawain's denominator for all the virtues and behavior he should stand for and when he faces the lady, whose virtues and behavior substantially depart from Gawain's set of values, the Virgin Mary is implicitly present. It is up to the knight, however, which allegiance he intends to keep. As for the textual reference, the Virgin Mary has been given about the same amount of space as Queen Guenevere. As a Saint and as a symbol rather than a real character,

⁷⁰ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 1263-1264.

⁷¹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* l. 1268.

it can be concluded that the Virgin Mary, like Guenevere, is also speechless and motionless, it is rather the symbolism of what she represents that speaks for her.

Lady Bertilak, on the other hand, is very skillful at articulating her wishes, or those of Morgan to be more precise. She is the only female character that speaks and visibly moves the action of the story. She is mentioned for the first time towards the end of fitt II as being confined to a comely closet, secluded from everybody else.⁷² She is seated next to her lord, like Guenevere at the beginning, and as soon as the lady leaves her closet, the poet let the readers peek into Gawain's mind where they can discover that Lady Bertilak's beauty even exceeds that of the queen.

“Then the lady, that longed to look on the knight,
Came forth from her closet with her comely maids.
The fair hues of her flesh, her face and her hair
And her body and her bearing were beyond praise,
And excelled the queen herself, as Sir Gawain thought.”⁷³

Both Guenevere and Lady Bertilak are placed in a sumptuous and luxurious environment, both of them represent their lords and both of them are being described in a very similar way. Their roles in the story, however, differ diametrically.

Textually, it is the third fitt that Lady Bertilak dominates. On three mornings, she comes to Gawain's bedroom, each morning more persistent and with new arguments at hand, trying to convince Gawain to become her lover. Each morning, it is also the lady who speaks more than Gawain; at their first encounter, she utters 49 lines as opposed to 28 uttered by Gawain.⁷⁴ She definitely does not waste time with unnecessary words. Right on the first morning, she clarifies the purpose of her visit as follows:

“My body is here at hand,
Your each wish to fulfill;
Your servant to command
I am, and shall be still.”⁷⁵

⁷² see *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* l. 934.

⁷³ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 941-945.

⁷⁴ see Cindy L. Vitto “Controlling the Feminine Voice in *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” 1 July 2010 <<http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/medess.htm>> 13.

⁷⁵ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 1237-1240.

Then, the lady and Gawain indulge in a gallant conversation that is sealed with a courteous kiss. On the second day, Lady Bertilak repeats her intentions in other 39 lines, as opposed to Gawain's 24 and the lady remains more eloquent even on the third day with 33 lines compared to Gawain's 22.⁷⁶ The kisses that Gawain grants increase in number reflecting the stronger intensity of the discourse as well as the lady's power of persuasion. She is using different techniques to change his mind, but her attempts remain in the field of flirtation since she is waiting for him to make a move. When she is certain that Gawain will not succumb to her wishes, she tempts him at least to accept a girdle that is supposed to protect his life; Gawain voluntarily accepts and agrees to keep this a secret.

“(…) and gladly she gave him the belt,
And besought him for her sake to conceal it well,
Lest the noble lord should know – and, the knight agrees”⁷⁷

Vitto correctly mentions that: “The same way in which Eve tempted Adam with the gift of knowledge, Lady Bertilak finally tempts Gawain with the gift of survival.”⁷⁸ The lady is being directly referred to as a “temptress” by the poet in l. 1874. By juxtaposing her actions with the most notorious temptress in the human history, Eve, the role of the lady is, therefore, clearly defined. She is the active element that is leading Gawain astray with all her might and like Adam, Gawain is not able to resist. Lady Bertilak represents the ultimate trial that Gawain must undergo without even being aware of it. As opposed to both Guenevere and the Virgin Mary, Lady Bertilak has a very active part in the story even though it might be argued that her actions are not entirely hers since she plays the role of a secret agent to both Morgan le Fay and Lord Bertilak.

The appearance of Morgan le Fay is distributed between fitt II and fitt IV. She is introduced as an old and withered lady accompanying Lady Bertilak. These two are contrasted but the old ugly woman does not have a name and it is not until the very end that the readers learn that they have been deceived by appearances as for which lady is the most powerful one. Gawain meets Morgan, he bows to her but only out of courtesy. He has no idea who she is and he is not interested in finding out. The readers, however, are being given some

⁷⁶ see Vitto 13.

⁷⁷ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 1861-1863.

⁷⁸ Vitto 13.

hints. For one thing, it is noteworthy that an old withered lady is sitting higher than everybody else, just like Queen Guenevere at the beginning of the poem.

“The old ancient lady, highest she sits;
The lord at her left hand leaned, as I hear;
Sir Gawain in the center, beside the gay lady,”⁷⁹

Gawain, however, does not pay attention since he is talking to Lady Bertilak and consequently, the readers are inclined to overlook this fact as well. The next reference to Morgan le Fay does not come until the end of fitt IV when Lord Bertilak reveals who that old ugly lady was and what she had in mind by putting Gawain through this test. It was Morgan who changed Bertilak into the Green Knight and it was her who most plausibly instructed Bertilak and his wife on what kind of test Gawain should be put through. The in-textual reference does not, however, correspond to such an importance since the lines dedicated to Morgan’s description or references to her do not exceed 40 out of 2,531. Quite understandably, the fact that the characters of Guenevere, the Virgin Mary and Morgan le Fay have not been given half the textual space that their importance should deserve, has led a lot of critics and scholars to interpret the story by putting forward a notion of an intentional marginalization of the female characters in SGGK.

2.3 The assumed marginalization of the female characters

Various critics have come up with the idea of the female characters in SGGK being marginalized and they have tried to support their views why such a marginalization takes place. The articles by Sheila Fisher, Lili Arkin and Cindy L. Vitto belong definitely to the most intriguing ones and they are, therefore, addressed here more in detail. The purpose of Sheila Fisher’s article “Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History, and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” is to suggest a reading in which the Gawain poet tries to accomplish a certain revision of the Arthurian legend. “The purpose of the revisionary agenda is nothing less than to demonstrate how the Round Table might have averted its own destruction by adhering to the expectations of masculine behavior inherent in Christian

⁷⁹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 1001-1003.

chivalry.”⁸⁰ Fisher argues that the female characters in the poem are marginalized either directly, like Guenevere and Morgan, or that they are marginalized by being confined to their own domains, like the Virgin Mary and Lady Bertilak. More importantly, she says that such a marginalization has its reasons since it is supposed to provide both a cure for the Arthurian history and a warning to future generations that should avoid the same mistakes. In Fisher’s opinion, women play a crucial role in such a revisionary agenda.⁸¹ Three of the female characters are, indeed, textually marginalized. Morgan does not appear until the very end of the poem, Guenevere is practically mentioned in passing, and the Virgin Mary is confined to her spiritual realm. That is all true. It is, however, crucial to distinguish between textual marginalization and the actual marginalization in which the importance of a character is reduced to the minimum. Does the former automatically suggest the latter? Not at all.

Fisher insists that: “If women could be placed on the periphery, as Morgan is in this poem, then the Round Table might not have fallen.”⁸² How can a woman who is the mastermind behind the whole story be considered to stay on the periphery of that story? Textually, it might be so, but since the character of Morgan is several times described as a goddess whose art cannot be surpassed,⁸³ is it not probable that she stays hidden because she wants to? In the wider context, when all the sub-plots are put together and Morgan’s role is revealed, it is impossible to place Morgan le Fay’s importance on the periphery. She was able to change Bertilak into the Green Knight, driven by a double motif she had planned the whole test with all its sub-layers, and she carried it out with the help of her agents without being recognized until the very end. Without her, there would not have been a story in the first place.

Fisher’s reading of the marginalization of Guenevere and Morgan is in any case intriguing and original, but how can we talk about a marginalization of Lady Bertilak whose actions, even though agreed upon beforehand, dominate the whole third fitt and, by extension, the whole plot? Fisher argues that: “(...) a containment that, while it places her [Lady Bertilak] at the centre, simultaneously underlines her marginalization.”⁸⁴ What character in the poem, male or female, is not confined to his or her own realm? When we think about it, all characters are. They are bound to and by their environment and they are continuously asked to

⁸⁰ Sheila Fisher, “Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History, and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *The Passing of Arthur: New Essays in Arthurian Tradition*. Ed. Christopher Baswell, and William Sharpe (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988) 129.

⁸¹ see Fisher 129-131.

⁸² Fisher 131.

⁸³ See *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* l. 2452.

⁸⁴ Fisher 137.

comply with the rules of that environment. For example, it is unthinkable for the knights to ignore the challenge of the Green Knight; that would question the code of chivalry they live by. It is unthinkable for Arthur to be anything less than a wise ruler, it is unthinkable for Gawain to back out once he accepts the challenge and it is unthinkable for Guenevere not to work as a representative token to her husband. It is a duty of a woman to obey her husband and that is precisely what Lady Bertilak is doing. She is forced to be confined to her environment and to obey its rules, but that does not present any departure from the behavior of other characters. If there is a character in the poem that does not seem to be bound by any rules whatsoever, it would be, ironically, Morgan le Fay.

Lili Arkin, even though approaching SGGK from a more historical point of view, agrees with Fisher that the Gawain poet was trying to convey a message to his audience and that women play a very important part in that message. Arkin is persuaded that for a world grappling with all the political and social changes described in the first chapter, the poet was suggesting a cure in the form of a more profound adherence to Christian values and less profound adherence to whatever bonds go against it, the tradition of courtly love being the prime example.⁸⁵ The treatment of women in the poem, especially the lady's dominant behavior in the third fitt has, according to Arkin, warning purposes that serve to point out the dangers inherently present in the realm outside Christianity. More than being marginal in the poem, Arkin presents a reading in which women should be made so in real life, at least within the tradition of courtly love.

Cindy L. Vitto tries, in an article called "Controlling the Feminine voice in *Cleanness* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," to explain the textual marginalization from the point of view of the dangers inherently present in the feminine voice. She takes examples from the Bible and contrasts them with the stories of the two poems. According to Vitto: "Eve's willingness to talk showed the devil her weakness and opened the way to the loss of Paradise."⁸⁶ She goes on to say that, on the other hand, the Virgin Mary was spare of words since the Bible records her speech on only four occasions (to Gabriel, to Elizabeth, to her son in the temple and at a wedding in Cana). A female voice is, therefore, viewed as eventually leading to the disruption of a given social order, as Eve's story clearly demonstrates. Women should be, in Vitto's interpretation of SGGK, first and foremost silent since the female voice resonates only with danger. That is why, according to her, both Guenevere and the Virgin Mary, two perfect queens, are silent throughout the whole story. Women, by nature, have

⁸⁵ Arkin 6.

⁸⁶ Vitto 4.

deceiving tongues and very often use them to accomplish their personal petty goals, as the behaviour of Lady Bertilak demonstrates.

Three possible interpretations of the textual marginalization of female characters have been demonstrated here; the first going in line with a revisionary agenda of the Arthurian legend, the second proposing an upholding of Christian values and a relinquishment of the values of courtly love, and the third bringing a warning against deceiving female tongues. In all of these interpretations, however, only the textual evidence has been taken into account. None of the mentioned authors looked at the contextual importance of the characters or at their real meaning for the plot. No matter for what purpose the female voice resonates or does not resonate, textual marginalization should not automatically be equalled with the importance that the characters have in a wider context, one that the Gawain poet and his audience must have been aware of. Having said that, it is time to turn the focus to the story of SGGK and to ask whose story it really is.

2.4 An all-powerful masculine narrative or a story of Morgan?

Even though the poem has been praised for various aspects of its mastery structure, for the beauty of its poetical language or for different facets of the topic itself, there is no doubt that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has been approached and analyzed mainly from the point of view of Gawain. In the late 1970s, Derek Brewer was persuaded that: “*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is self-evidently the story of Gawain: Morgan and Guinevere are marginal, whatever their significance to Gawain.”⁸⁷ Such a reading is understandable since who else’s story should it be than Gawain’s? In the years that followed, many critics have, however, noticed that Gawain seems to fall far from the traditional heroes of other Arthurian romances. Some of these critics went as far as to claim that SGGK should not, indeed, be even classified as a romance since: “It is rather striking that two essential ingredients of chivalric literature, love and fighting, are only touched on in passing.”⁸⁸ It is not the purpose of this paper to decide whether such opinions are justified; it is, however, the purpose of this paper to offer a different reading of SGGK, one that departs from the usual Gawain-centrism and approaches the poem from the point of view of the female characters instead, Morgan le Fay being in the centre. In order to achieve that, a more thorough assessment and a consequent challenge of the notion that Gawain is the only hero of the poem follows.

⁸⁷ Heng 500.

⁸⁸ Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (New York: BN, 1969) 202.

2.4.1 Gawain's story

As far as the textual evidence is concerned, Gawain is definitely the central figure of the narrative. W.A. Davenport sums up this fact by pointing out that: "Once he [Gawain] enters the action in the fifteenth stanza, he is present in every stanza except six scattered verses describing the hunts."⁸⁹ Throughout the poem, Gawain is associated with high ideals and moral standards that he is trying to uphold by, for example, volunteering to take up the challenge in the first place. Taking up the challenge, he thus becomes an official representative of Arthur's court and Gawain's success in keeping his promise is sure to have an impact on how Camelot will be perceived from then on. Even though Gawain is aware of that, he is excessively humble and modest, the best example is his assertion that if it were not for Arthur's blood, his life would have not been worth a dime.

"I am the weakest, well I know, and of wit feeblest;
And the loss of my life would be the least of any;
That I have you for my uncle is my only praise;
My body, but for your blood, is barren of worth (...)"⁹⁰

It is true that Gawain's journey and its distinctive episodes follow the heroic pattern that we know from other romances. Before Gawain departs from the castle in search of the Green Knight, he is being prepared for a battle in the most elaborate way. Lines are dedicated to the exhaustive description of Gawain's armour, including the significance and the importance of the pentangle he carries on his shield, and a number of details is provided on the equipment of Gawain's horse, Gringolet. The poet plays with colors and object symbolism in order to show what an elaborate ritual takes place before Gawain sets out on this potentially lethal mission. Gawain is consequently presented in the traditional heroic situation of leaving for a battle in which he fights for his lord and from which there is a very high chance he will never return.

Moreover, Gawain is, as a real knight would be, persistent in keeping his promise and he is desperate when obstacles occur in the way and jeopardize his mission. He prays to the Virgin Mary to find a shelter where he could stay overnight so that the next day he continues in his search for a creature that will most probably cut his head off anyway. Later in the story,

⁸⁹ W.A. Davenport, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: The Poet's Treatment of the Hero and His Adventure*," *Gawain: A Casebook*. Ed. Raymond H. Thompson, and Keith Busby (New York: Routledge, 2006) 274.

⁹⁰ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 354-357.

Gawain finds himself in the very same situations that only the most valiant knights do; he is accepted with flying colors, he is honored by the continuous presence of a lady who is described to be even more beautiful than the Queen Guenevere herself, a lady who keeps offering her advances and continuously praises Gawain's reputation and courage. Last but not least, it is Gawain who faces the Green Knight at the end of the story and it is Gawain who experiences and brings about the epiphany of his trial, one he has learned the hard way. Thus, both from the textual evidence and from the prototypical roles that the heroes in romances usually have, Gawain definitely seems to be one. It is, therefore, a bit surprising that he ends up with none of the traditional hero's triumphs; he is ashamed of his failure related to the acceptance of the girdle and he does not end up being in love with a beautiful lady either.

Indeed, there is a knight whose only amorous exploit is to refuse a lady, a knight who is lying in bed pretending to be asleep in order to avoid that lady, a knight who is doing so all day long while other men are hunting, and last but not least, a knight who thinks of himself and his value only in terms of being Arthur's nephew. Notwithstanding the textual evidence, Gawain's role of the hero of the story does not feel to be convincing to such an extent that he could be put into the same class as, for example, Lancelot. Gawain's environment, a task to fulfil, a lady to court... there is definitely a heroic pattern set by the poet, a heroic pattern that requires a certain form of behavior, but as readers, we might feel that Gawain somehow does not deliver the performance that is expected of him in those situations.

By writing a romance about a knight of the Round Table and by making Gawain a knight who values his life enough to give preference to it over his duties, the poet challenges the concept of a traditional knight cut out of the heroic adventures that the very genre of romance has become known for. Gawain's human concerns for his life are in sharp contrast with what is required of him. Davenport supports this notion when he claims that: "Although Gawain fulfils a hero's role, the hero himself is continually being diminished. He is shown repeatedly as subordinate, and therefore being obliged to be deferential, and passive."⁹¹ Passivity is, indeed, a huge part of what Gawain's mission requires. He volunteers to go in search of the Green Knight, obviously a supernatural being, and even though prepared for a battle in the traditional sense of the word, it is clear that Gawain is not going to be involved in one since his task is to passively suffer a death return blow.

⁹¹ Davenport 275.

Even the active part of searching for the Green Knight seems to be made way too easy for Gawain. He gets lost in a forest, prays to the Virgin Mary, immediately spots a castle and in the castle he learns that the Green Chapel is not even two miles away.

“Then smiling said the lord, “Your search, sir, is done,
For we shall see you to that site by the set time.
Let Gawain grieve no more over the Green Chapel;
You shall be in your own bed, in blissful ease (...)”⁹²

Gawain’s passivity, however, extends even further. When all the men are hunting, Gawain remains in his chamber, sleeping and resting. He is confined to a different space than all the other men; while all the knights actively participate in the hunt, Gawain is passively lying in his bed. He is deprived of the opportunity to show his courage and strength in the field and to prove his reputation. A sharp contrast is, therefore, put between Bertilak and Gawain; between a true leader and a late sleeper. When Gawain is given, at least in the realm of courtly love, the opportunity to change his inactive role he had been reduced to, the knight pretends to be asleep instead.

“The fair knight lay feigning for a long while,
Conning in his conscience what his case might
Mean or amount to – a marvel he thought it.
But yet he said within himself, “More seemly it were
To try her intent by talking a little.”⁹³

What knight fakes sleep when a most beautiful lady enters his room? Moreover, Gawain evidently wakes up only because he thinks waking up and speaking to the lady is the most reasonable way to learn about her intentions. Davenport affirms an even greater push to passivity when he claims that: “Then he [Gawain] is further placed in a false position and further imprisoned by the Lady, who takes on the lover’s role, captures him naked and flat on his back, disarmed in every sense of the word.”⁹⁴

⁹² *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 1068-1071.

⁹³ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 1195-1198.

⁹⁴ Davenport 279.

It could be correctly argued that Gawain's journey should be read as an inward search, a journey leading to a recognition of one's limitations within the framework of knighthood and one's humanity and in line with this reading, it might be even irrelevant to discuss Gawain's active or passive roles prescribed to heroes in similar situations. Richard Hamilton Green says that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is primarily a poem about a moral search for perfection in the framework of the Christian doctrine.⁹⁵ He sees Gawain as a soldier of Christ who carries all his armor only metaphorically and is never supposed to fight in the field in the first place, nor is he ever supposed to be a Lancelot-kind lover. The fact remains though that however Gawain's role might be interpreted, there is a number of aspects in the story that irreversibly question the very presumption that Gawain is the only hero of the poem and that all action should be interpreted from his point of view.

2.4.2 Morgan's story

As far as the textual evidence is concerned, no one can call Morgan le Fay the main hero of the story. What kind of hero is mentioned by name for the first time some eighty-five lines before the end of the poem? What kind of hero does not utter a single word during the whole time, is repulsive in looks and moreover leaves his or her brilliant plan to be explained by somebody else? Indeed, Morgan is first mentioned by name when Bertilak reveals his true nature to Gawain, towards the end of the poem.

“Bertilak de Hautdesert, this barony I hold.

Through the might of Morgan le Faye, that lodges at my house,

By subtleties of science and sorcerers' arts,

The mistress of Merlin, she has caught many a man (...)⁹⁶

To be more precise though, Morgan appears in the story earlier than only a couple of pages before the poem's end; the readers just do not have a clue it is her. How could they when their attention, as well as the attention of Gawain, is directed to a lady more beautiful than Queen Guenevere? The readers meet in passing an old ugly lady, but leave the sight of her as soon as Gawain does. There is no hint that might give away the fact that the withered and powerless lady accompanying Lady Bertilak is Morgan le Fay.

⁹⁵ see Richard Hamilton Green, “Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection,” *ELH* 29.2 (1962): 121-139. *JSTOR*. Moravian College Library, Bethlehem, USA. 28 Oct. 2006 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

⁹⁶ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 2445-2448.

As far as her importance in the story goes, Morgan le Fay is the agent who comes up with one of the most complex and elaborate tests any man in literature has ever been subject to. The poet himself acknowledges this by letting Bertilak describe her as follows:

“Morgan the Goddess, she,
So styled by title true;
None holds so high degree
That her arts cannot subdue.”⁹⁷

Morgan is explicitly given more power than anybody else; there is no one who could escape her art, whatever that might be. The readers can deduct that her art, indeed, is of great power since Morgan was able to transform Bertilak into the Green Knight possessing supernatural powers in the first place. The readers can also deduct that Morgan is quite insolent and bold since who would have even dared to do what she had done; to address the Round Table with the intention to put it to a test and to frighten the queen just for the sake of it. She must feel superior when she wants to grant a lesson to the Round Table, to Arthur himself. Powerful, magical, self-confident, audacious and even arrogant, that is the nature of Morgan’s art and obviously, no one is better at that.

Morgan’s motivations to carry out such a plan as well as her role have been widely discussed. One of the first scholars who opened the chapter on Morgan’s function in SGGK was Denver Ewing Baughan, who wrote in 1950 an article entitled “The Role of Morgan Le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.” He correctly argues that: “It would be hard to find in all English literature a character so obviously the moving cause of an entire plot and at the same time so misunderstood and neglected as Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.”⁹⁸ Baughan’s purpose is to show that Morgan’s plan not only succeeds, but that it creates an organic part of both the theme and the action. He interprets Morgan as Arthur’s sister who wants: “To purge and heal the court of its moral corruptnes.”⁹⁹ According to Baughan, she should be, therefore, seen as a helping hand trying to purify Arthur’s court. Such a reading might be challenged right at the beginning since, based on the poem, there should not be anything to purge, at least not yet. Arthur’s court is in its prime state, Arthur is a young, strong and fair king surrounded by the best knights his kingdom has to offer. He does

⁹⁷ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 2451-2455.

⁹⁸ Denver Ewing Baughan, “The Role of Morgan Le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” *ELH* 17.4 (1950): 241. *JSTOR*. Moravian College Library, Bethlehem, USA. 26 Apr. 2007 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

⁹⁹ Baughan 251.

not eat until all his men have been served, he does not panic when everybody else would have, moreover, he has the most beautiful and representative queen by his side. What is there to purge in a court that had apparently never been stronger? The only logical way of how to understand Baughan's interpretation is that Morgan is trying to prevent the *future* moral corruptness of the court that is sure to come, but there is no textual evidence and the other romances known to us do not support the concept of Morgan/helper either.

Ten years later, in 1960, Albert B. Friedman noticed "Baughan's (...) dangerous unfamiliarity with romance conventions in general and Arthurian romance in particular (...)" and went on to affirm that Baughan badly misinterpreted the poem.¹⁰⁰ Friedman points out the fact that if Arthur's court were corrupt, Morgan would be, given the background that her character had acquired in previous romances, probably the last agent to fix it. He also says that the symbolism used by the poet which is related to Morgan's appearance does not, in any way, seem to be a disguise; the ugly looks she bears must be, therefore, working as a clear indication of her evil nature.¹⁰¹

The fact remains that, despite Morgan's marginalization in the text, her role is much bigger than has been noticed up to now since it is clear that without her, there would not have been a story in the first place. It depends on everyone as for how far to go and whether to call Morgan the hero of the poem instead of Gawain, this is a problem of terminology.¹⁰² It is enough for the purpose of this paper to challenge the very notion that Gawain is the sole hero and that the action should be interpreted from his point of view only. It is a possible reading, but not the only one. Gawain disposes only with a limited number of choices even though he thinks matters are in his hands. They are not and his task is only to prove what Morgan knew all along, that being human and wanting to stay alive has always been a stronger impulse than any other artificially created ideal orders of knighthood.

¹⁰⁰ Friedman 261.

¹⁰¹ see Friedman 267.

¹⁰² see Maureen Fries, in her article "Female heroes, heroines, and counter-heroes: Images of women in Arthurian tradition" she provides her own definitions of women in Arthurian romances and gives concrete examples to point out the role that these women have. She calls Morgan a female counter-hero (a person who is in possession of powerful magic and uses it for wrongful purposes).

2.4.3 The actantial model

In 1966, one of the most influential French linguists, A.J. Greimas, proposed the so-called actantial model (le modèle actantiel). It is a very useful tool which is often brought to bear in order to analyze any real or thematized actions, especially those depicted in literary texts. It enables us to break the action of a story down into six distinctive components, called actants. Such a division into various components of a story is useful for two reasons. Firstly, different actants are put into a network within which their relations are more easily analyzed and secondly, it is possible to see the action from the point of view of different elements. “In theory, any real or thematized action may be described by at least one actantial model. Strictly speaking, *the* actantial model for a text does not exist. For one thing, there are as many models as there are actions; for another, the same action can often be seen from several different perspectives.”¹⁰³ The fact that there are more actantial models of the same story enables critics to come up with different points of view for analysis; in other words, it enables them to move the focus from one character, in this example Gawain, to another, Morgan le Fay.

The six actants of a story are subject, object, receiver, sender, helper and opponent. Their characteristics can be found in the following table.

Table 2: Typology of the six actantial classes and their characteristics

Actant (French name)	Its characteristics and role in the story
subject (le sujet)	is the WHO of a story, its action is directed towards an object
object (l'objet)	is the WHAT of a story, it receives the action
helper (l'adjuvant)	is the what/who HELPS the subject to achieve the action
opponent (l'opposant)	is the what/who PREVENTS the subject from achieving the action
sender (le destinateur)	is the what/who INSTIGATES the action
receiver (le destinataire)	is the what/who BENEFITS from the action

¹⁰³ Louis Hébert, *Tools for Text and Image Analysis: An Introduction to Applied Semiotics*. Translated by Julie Tabler (2007) 31 Oct. 2010 <http://www.revue-texto.net/Parutions/Livres-E/Hebert_AS/Hebert_Tools.html>.

Based on the above mentioned table, an attempt is made here to break the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* down into the given actantial classes. Firstly, the story is approached from the point of view of Gawain, who therefore becomes the subject of the story. His object is the character of the Green Knight whom he needs to find in order to keep his promise and to uphold the reputation of the Round Table. The sender might be, therefore, his motives; to defend his reputation as Arthur's knight and to prove that he can keep his word and his promise. The receiver of such an action would be Gawain himself and since he, metaphorically, stands for the whole court of King Arthur and Gawain's result will influence the way people regard the court, King Arthur would also benefit from Gawain's potential success. The Virgin Mary is the spiritual force that is helping Gawain to pass the ordeal, she is, therefore, his helper. Lady Bertilak, Lord Bertilak and Morgan le Fay, on the other hand, are trying to prevent Gawain from achieving his goals by putting all kinds of obstacles and tests in his way.

Actantial Model 1: Gawain's story

Sender

defence of the court's reputation
proof of Gawain's worth
keeping the promise

Receiver

King Arthur
Gawain himself

Subject

Gawain



Object

the Green Knight

Helper

the Virgin Mary

Opponent

Lady Bertilak
Lord Bertilak
Morgan le Fay

If, instead of Gawain, Morgan is thought of as the subject, a different actantial model unveils.

Actantial Model 2: Morgan's story

Sender

wish to put Arthur's court to a test

wish to afflict the queen

Receiver

pride

power

Subject

Morgan le Fay



Object

Guenevere

the Round Table

Helper

the Green Knight

Lady Bertilak

Lord Bertilak

Opponent

the Virgin Mary

Morgan's object is twofold; she wants to afflict the queen and to put the Round Table to a test of its values, which becomes also her motivation. She has her helpers along the way, the Green Knight, Lady Bertilak and Lord Bertilak; her success is on the contrary threatened by the spiritual force represented by the Virgin Mary and Morgan is most probably undertaking such a venture for no other reason but for herself. Surprisingly enough, Gawain does not have his actantial role when we look at the story from Morgan's point of view; he is just a puppet on whom Morgan is trying to prove her point.

2.5 The female knot

Putting Morgan le Fay in the center, the interpretation of the story is best summed up by Geraldine Heng as follows: “Plans initiated by one woman are directed at another, performed by a third, and modulated by the actions of a fourth.”¹⁰⁴ Heng is not the first one who has given serious thoughts to the fact that female characters in *SGGK* deserve more importance than they had been previously given. She is, however, probably the only one who has tried to see the female characters as being interconnected. Talking about the female characters, Heng uses a parallel with the already existing knot in the poem, with the pentangle, and she argues that both of these knots are very similar in nature since: “Each woman, (...), even the most shadowy, (...), is intricately elaborated in multiple identifications with every other woman.”¹⁰⁵ Indeed, like the pentangle, each female character is somehow bound to the other. Before an attempted visual representation of what Heng has just insinuated, there is one more aspect that might be worth addressing, the general concept of a knot in the poem.

It is, indeed, interesting how many times the Gawain poet mentions a knot. A knot binds the band that the Green Knight is wearing when he appears in Arthur’s castle and a knot binds his lace. Love-knots are present on Gawain’s horse, another knot is drawn on Gawain’s shield, and yet another knot is mentioned when Lady Bertilak offers Gawain the girdle. The last mention comes as Gawain unties the knot by which he gladly bound the girdle to his body.

“Then he grasps the green girdle and lets go the knot,
Hands it over in haste, and hotly he says:
Behold there my falsehood, ill hap betide it”¹⁰⁶

A knot is a symbol of stability, it should hold things together, it should keep Gawain’s integrity and spiritual force bound to his body and his mind. The female knot in the poem seems to work just like that. It has its pillars, connected and related to each other, with contradictory and conspiratory forces holding it strongly together. The following diagram captures this idea visually.

¹⁰⁴ Heng 501.

¹⁰⁵ Heng 501.

¹⁰⁶ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 2376-2378.

and spiritual love. Guenevere and Morgan have been antagonized by a personal grudge that is not explained in the poem but that Gawain's audience must have been aware of. The Virgin Mary and Morgan le Fay as well as Guenevere and Lady Bertilak also stand in sharp contrast due to their very different nature and goals. Whatever the forces, the fact still remains that one could not act without the other; Morgan comes up with a plan in which she intends to harm Guenevere on the basis of a long-lasting personal grudge. She uses the services of Lady Bertilak and her evil nature is cleverly counter-balanced by the spiritual power of the Virgin Mary who becomes a protective emblem. The female characters are, indeed, interconnected and an action of one influences the action of another more than has been noticed until now.

2.6 Conclusion to chapter two

There are four female characters in SGGK. Three of them are, as regards the textual evidence, marginalized by the poet. Guenevere is not given the possibility to speak, react, she does not even move and her appearance in the story reminds us of a motionless statue. The Virgin Mary is a highly idealized spiritual token and symbolizes the values that Gawain aspires to and is supposed to follow. Not even her character moves or acts in any way. Morgan le Fay, even though the initiator of the whole plan, does not appear until the very end of the story. She does not explain her reasons or her motives, they are explained for her instead. The fourth female character is the only one who is not textually marginalized; Lady Bertilak actively plays a very important role of a seductress and a temptress, she is the only female to speak, to move and to express her opinions, even though it is highly probable that her opinions are those of Morgan le Fay. This chapter tried to show, however, that textual marginalization of characters does not necessarily mean marginalization of their importance for the story. In line with that, it presented an alternative reading in which Morgan le Fay is being properly acknowledged as the generator of the story. In the framework of the actantial model, she is given the role of the subject, a role that has been mostly prescribed to Gawain, and an attempt is made to show how the understanding of the story consequently changes. A diagram of the female knot was presented to facilitate such an understanding. To untie the knot, it is, however, necessary to focus first on its pillars and their individual importance for the story; the next chapter takes for its purpose just that.

3 Pillars of the female knot

*Since the siege and the assault was ceased at Troy,
The walls breached and burnt down to brands and ashes,
The knight that had knotted the nets of deceit
Was impeached for his perfidy, proved most true,
It was high-born Aeneas and his haughty race
That since prevailed over provinces, and proudly reigned
Over well-nigh all the wealth of the West Isles.¹⁰⁷*

3.1 Introduction to chapter three

The framework of the third chapter explores in detail the notion that textual marginalization of a character should not be, at least in the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, equalled with the marginalization of that character's importance and that even the most textually marginalized characters can be understood as crucial for the interpretation of the story. Only certain conditions, however, make that argument true; first and foremost, such a character must be firmly rooted in a given culture within which it carries strong connotations that are immediately called forth at the first mention of that character's name. In other words, such a character must be speaking for itself without uttering a single word; it must be speaking outside the lines written by the author. This chapter turns to all the female characters in SGGK, one by one, and takes it for its purpose to show that each of these characters does, indeed, evoke very strong historical, cultural, religious or social connotations that today's readers might easily disregard and incorrectly place these characters on the periphery of the story.

3.2 The Arthurian literature in general

The European literature featuring a sixth-century hero and his knights is remarkable for its unprecedented scope and for the breathtaking speed of its dissemination across Europe. Jennifer R. Goodman affirms that: "Almost no European literature is without its Arthurian romances. They exist in Old Norse, Hebrew, Yiddish, Greek, and of course Spanish and Catalan, Portuguese, Provençal, Italian, and Serbo-Croatian."¹⁰⁸ The Arthurian topic started to appear in the twelfth century and continued to do so until the sixteenth century, although its peak unmistakably falls into the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. For the first hundred

¹⁰⁷ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 1-7.

¹⁰⁸ Jennifer R. Goodman, *The Legend of Arthur in British and American Literature* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988) 36.

years, the Arthurian matter was adopted by the French, or Anglo-Norman literary scene, with the sole exception of Laymon and his *Brut*. Only towards the end of the thirteenth century does the Middle English literature gain ground as French production gradually abates.¹⁰⁹ Interestingly enough, while the French corpus is equally divided into prose and poetic texts, the Middle English Arthuriana are almost exclusively composed in verse. There are twenty-seven known English Arthurian romances, as Jennifer Goodman affirms.¹¹⁰ Even though most of them are inspired by and go back to their French predecessors, there are remarkable differences in the choices of topic, in its treatment, in the treatment of the very same characters or in the main focus on the same story. For example, the topic of the Holy Grail is treated almost exclusively by the French romances which, at the same time, demonstrate a much deeper interest in the adulterous affair between Guenevere and Lancelot than their English counterparts.

The string of English romances has a clearly-defined beginning and end; Geoffrey of Monmouth is, with his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (ca. 1136-1138), considered to be the chief architect of the story of King Arthur; Thomas Malory and his *Morte Darthur* (1470) then brings the adventures to a close with the symbolical destruction of the Round Table followed by Arthur's death. The continuum in between these two writers, however, encompasses an entire spectrum of characters and stories related to King Arthur and the Round Table, stories whose relationship to one another and whose chronology are not always clear-cut and straightforward. Thematically, some romances focus on particular characters, hence there are romances about characters such as Lanval, Gawain, Merlin; others focus on particular events, hence there are several *Mortes*. Stylistically, the English Arthuriana is traditionally divided into three distinctive groups: the rhyming, the alliterative and the prose versions. The alliterative texts are invariably of Northern origin and they have Sir Gawain in the centre of their action (*Alliterative Morte*, *Avowinge*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*); the prose texts are then exclusively of southern origin (*Prose Merlin*, *Morte Darthur*). However, as Ulrike Bethlehem mentions, not all Northern pieces are automatically alliterative. The two earliest *Yvain and Gawain* and the stanzaic *Morte* are rhyming poems, as is the latest, the *Weddyng of Sir Gawen*.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ see Ulrike Bethlehem, *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle: Images of Arthur's Queen in the Medieval Literature of England and France* (Heidelberg: Universität Bochum, 2001) 31.

¹¹⁰ see Goodman 27.

¹¹¹ Bethlehem 395.

Most of the surviving romances have unknown authorship and different scholars argue about who a literary piece should be ascribed to. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is also anonymous. It survives only in one copy, preserved in the British National Library, together with three other poems of religious character that are ascribed to the same author – *Pearl*, *Patience* and *Purity* (or *Cleanness*). So far, scholars have managed to place SGGK geographically to the northwest Midlands area, more specifically to the area around Cheshire or towards the border of northeast Staffordshire. Based on its language particularities, the geographical and historical hints (for example the mention of the Order of the Garter), the scholars have been able to suggest the possibility of the same authorship with the other three poems, but these, for a big part, do not go beyond speculations.

Given the wide range of various sources and the broad background of inspiration, it is not uncommon that a given character manifests inconsistent forms of behavior throughout the Arthurian romances. Thus, while established by Chrétien de Troyes as a knight against whom other knights' value should be measured, Gawain is also commonly portrayed as a self-centred and vengeful villain or, as a matter of fact, as a master of courtesy known for his sexual prowess.¹¹² In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, he is definitely not a self-centred villain, nor is he the “knight of the ladies”, even though it is precisely this reputation that the lady alludes to and expects on his part – an ironical hint that a modern reader might easily overlook. It seems that the authors took pleasure in playing with the audience by assigning incongruent and surprising roles to the already well-established characters.

A similar pattern of inconsistent behavior applies to other characters in the Arthuriana as well, the female character of SGGK being no exception. All together, however, they present a very intriguing assemblage; there is the ideal queen on earth, the beautiful, virtuous and representative Guenevere and there is the Queen of heaven as a spiritual leader, perfection and virtue personified. There is also a villain in the form of a legendary enemy of Arthur's court and last but not least, there is a courtly lady for whom the ideals of courtly love represent sufficient laws to live by. These characters put together build up a huge part of the medieval society of the late fourteenth century; they represent the right spiritual path and its implementation in real life as well as the dangers and contradictory forces that threaten this path; they represent both power and submission to power, they represent generally valid codes of behavior, those that benefit many and those that benefit individuals. Guenevere, Morgan le Fay, the Virgin Mary and Lady Bertilak belong, indeed, to the same world and each of them

¹¹² see Goodman 36.

takes up a dominant part of it. In this sense, they might even remind of archetypes of that world; perfect queen on earth, perfect Queen in heaven, villain trying to disrupt the given order and a lady of a court. This is not, however, the first time that these characters meet. They had accompanied each other in many romances written before SGGK; they had been friends, enemies, allies or opponents. Whatever the relation, however, their destinies had been tied together in the same framework ever since Geoffrey of Monmouth introduced Guenevere and Morgan le Fay to the English literature in the *History of the Kings of Britain*. It is a fact that an audience's reading and understanding of any character depends on the previous knowledge of that character and the connotations that this character carries; an attempt is made here to bring precisely that knowledge to light.

3.3 Guenevere

Since for a long time research was interested mainly in the historicity and historical validity of Arthurian personnel, the characterisation or the literary conception of characters awakened only slowly. Guenevere herself did not receive any attention before Cross and Nitze pinpointed her at the origins of courtly love in 1930.¹¹³ It is a fact now that little can be learned about the native Welsh or pre-Geoffrey conception of the queen. From the pieces that have remained, however, "she [Guenevere] is presented as an admirable woman, as a shining example and a source of inspiration, willing to encourage the best in anybody."¹¹⁴ From a shining example, her character somehow shifts into an image of an abducted queen. There is an old Welsh poem, a sculpture on an archivold (11th/12th century) and a short account found in the *Vita Gildae*, a Saint's life written in Latin by a Welshman, that document this. The motif of an abducted queen caught on, it remained popular in the post-Geoffrey romances and continued to do so up to our age.¹¹⁵ What changes, however, are the roles of kidnapers and rescuers. In *Vita Gildae*, the rescuers are Arthur and Saint Gildas, in Geoffrey of Monmouth it is Arthur only who rescues Guenevere from the faithless nephew Mordred,¹¹⁶ and last but not least, in *Conte de la Charette*, it is Lancelot who saves the abducted queen. It is safe to say that in the pre-Geoffrey Welsh literature that has been preserved, there is no trace of

¹¹³ see Bethlehem 6. The book in question: Cross, Tom Peete, and Nitze A. William. *Lancelot and Guenevere. A Study on the Origins of Courtly Love*. New York: Phaeton Press, 1930.

¹¹⁴ Peter Korrel, *An Arthurian Triangle: A Study of the Origin, Development and Characterization of Arthur, Guinevere and Mordred* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1984) 84.

¹¹⁵ Jerry Zucker's romantic movie *First Knight*, 1995, demonstrates that. The queen is kidnapped and saved by Lancelot who brings her safely to Arthur.

¹¹⁶ see Robert Briffault *The Mothers: A Study of the Origins of Sentiments and Institutions*. Vol. III. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1927) 437.

Guenevere being anything else but a shining example of a queen. As Korrel says himself: “There [are] no flagrant inconsistencies in her characterization.”¹¹⁷ No guilt stemming from an adulterous relationship with one her husband’s knights is implied.

The post-Geoffrey romances, however, allow the character of Guenevere to erupt into a multitude of images none of which can be considered generally valid; there is not one Guenevere, there are many. The following table presents an overview of the most important literary pieces in which Guenevere appears; they are divided into Latin, Middle-English and Anglo-Norman sources.

Table 3: Sources relevant for the characterization of Guenevere up to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

DATE	LATIN	MIDDLE-ENGLISH	ANGLO-NORMAN
1136	Geoffrey of Monmouth <i>Historia Regum Britanniae</i>		
c. 1150 - 75			Robert Biket <i>Lai du Cor</i>
1155			Wace <i>Roman de Brut</i>
c. 1160 - 80			Marie de France <i>Lanval</i>
c. 1170 - 90			Chrétien de Troyes <i>Erec et Enide</i> <i>Cligès</i> <i>Yvain</i> <i>Charrette</i> <i>Perceval</i>
After 1191			<i>Perlesvaus</i>
			Berne <i>Folie Tristan</i>
After 1204		Laymon <i>Brut</i>	
c. 1210			<i>Le Chevalier à l'Épée</i>

¹¹⁷ Korrel 81.

c. 1210 - 20			Didot <i>Perceval</i>
c. 1215 - 30			Vulgate Cycle <i>Estoire de Merlin</i> <i>Lancelot du Lac</i> <i>Queste del Saint Graal</i> <i>Mort Artu</i>
c. 1225	Wendover <i>Flores Historiarum</i>		
c. 1225 - 35			<i>Prose Tristan</i>
c. 1230 - 40			Roman du Graal <i>Estoire del Saint Graal</i> <i>Suite du Merlin</i> <i>Queste del Saint Graal</i> <i>Mort Artu</i>
c. 1250 - 1275			<i>Prose Tristan</i> (2 nd version)
			<i>Floriant et Florete</i>
		<i>Of Arthour and of Merlin</i>	
c. 1290		Gloucester, Chronicle	
c. 1300 - 10		<i>Landevale</i>	
Before 1307			Pierre de Langtoft: <i>Chronicle</i>
c. 1315		<i>Short Metrical Chronicle</i>	
c. 1300 - 25		Castleford, Chronicle	
c. 1338		Mannyng, Chronicle	
c. 1350		<i>Ywain and Gawain</i>	
c. 1350 - 1400		<i>Arthur</i>	
c. 1360		<i>Stanzaic Morte Arthur</i>	
1374			Jean des Preis <i>Ly Myreur des Histoires</i>
c. 1372 - 85		<i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i>	

Source: Ulrike Bethlehem 29-30.

Before SGGK was written, Guenevere had been appearing in literature for more than two hundred and forty years. During that time, her character became firmly rooted in the Arthurian legends, it changed, developed and acquired specific connotations. When she appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History*, she is a passive representative figure whose sole function is to reflect the wealth of Arthur's court. With time, she becomes more and more eloquent and in control and, at one point, she even becomes the moving figure of the entire plot. As Bethlehem says: "Guinevere's dominance in the *Morte* plots can hardly be overlooked."¹¹⁸ From a passive queen, she becomes one that speaks and from speech, there is only a small step towards action. Guenevere undergoes all three stages, even though it is not a linear development since in SGGK, her representation is central, but inanimate; she does not speak, nor does she even move. As opposed to Geoffrey of Monmouth, the Norman cleric Wace was much more interested in the atmosphere and the rules of courtliness. Within this framework, Queen Guenevere was given a new scope which enabled a more romantic interpretation. Marie de France makes the queen even more prominent, but not in a good sense of the word. In her *Lanval*, the queen unjustly accuses Lanval of highly inappropriate behavior towards her and he is chased away from the kingdom. Fortunately, Lanval manages to prove his innocence and the queen is labelled a liar. It is, however, Chrétien de Troyes who substantially changes the way the queen is seen ever since, as it is him who makes the queen and Lancelot, one of Arthur's knights, lovers; the French Arthurian tradition consequently makes this motif a recurrent one, even though different romances assign inconsistent levels of guilt to the queen. As opposed to the French romances, the English texts are, surprisingly, much more lenient and even more consistent. Most of the English romances insist on an intact relationship between Arthur and his wife and if mentioned at all, Lancelot is relegated to a marginal role among the other knights. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* can be stated as an example of that. Lancelot is mentioned here only once and his importance does not come to the fore in any way; his name simply occurs in the midst of an enumeration of other knights of the Round Table.

"Yvain and Eric and others of note,
 Sir Dodinal le Sauvage, the Duke of Clarence,
 Lionel and Lancelot and Lucan the good,
 Sir Bors and Sir Bedivere, big men both."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Bethlehem 400.

¹¹⁹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 551-554.

The most logical explanation of the commonly omitted incrimination of the queen in the English romances is that Guenevere, just like Arthur, is thought of as a national realization of the perfect queen; she is the national representative character of the highest importance. Bethlehem affirms: “The interest in an impeccable queen – and king – is most likely no more than a natural endeavour to clear the national heritage, especially in view of its rediscovery by contemporary rulers.”¹²⁰ From the historical point of view, it is in a nation’s interest to present a queen that would equal her king and since King Arthur is considered to be the greatest king that the country has ever had, he needs by his side no less than the greatest queen. In line with that, most of the English romances do, indeed, either omit the queen’s promiscuity or treat it as nothing more than a rumour (for example *Landevale*).¹²¹

To sum up, in the Welsh tradition, Guenevere is mostly portrayed as an impeccable example of a queen. She is being abducted, fought for, returned only to be abducted again, this time by another scoundrel. She is beautiful and she is representative. This highly stable image bursts into thousands of pieces after she is officially introduced by Geoffrey of Monmouth as Arthur’s wife. Since then, she is being treated differently, once as a promiscuous queen trying to seduce a knight, once as a woman in love that is torn between what she should do and what she would like to do, once as a motionless statue and once as a moving plot of an entire story. The important thing is to distinguish between the romances of Anglo-Norman origin and those of Middle-English one. Surprisingly, the English romances avoid the motif of a guilty queen since it is in the best interest of the nation to present such an important character in the best light. That thought being applied to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, does the Gawain poet really write about a Guenevere that will be engaged in an adulterous relationship or does he describe the perfect queen to the best king Britain has ever had? The historical background dealt with in the first chapter suggests the high probability that the Gawain poet was writing for the court of Edward III and his audience; a king who loved King Arthur and who swore to reconstitute the Round Table. Would he like to have an adulterous queen in that story? He would not. The arguments of Sheila Fisher related to a revisionary agenda that the poet is trying to accomplish lose relevance in this light. It is possible and indeed intriguing to suggest that had Guenevere stayed a passive representative figure the Round Table would have not fallen, but it is more plausible to suggest that Guenevere is simply what she is described to be; the comely and representative companion that King Arthur had had in most of the previous Middle-English romances. The connotations

¹²⁰ Bethlehem 398.

¹²¹ Bethlehem 405.

that her name carries in the Middle-English romances written before SGGK as well as the historical background of that time support this notion. The role of a queen was never to exercise political power; she was subordinated to the king and she was supposed to behave like that. Her role was ceremonial, representative and supportive. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* she fulfills this role perfectly and her textual marginalization should not diminish or distort this importance.

Table 4: Connotations acquired by the character of Guenevere in the pre-SGGK romances

The Welsh traditon	Geoffrey of Monmouth	Post-Geoffrey literature (multitude of inconsistent images)
an admirable queen	a passive representative figure	a passive representative figure
a shining example		an eloquent speaker with power of persuasion
a source of inspiration		a queen in love
an abducted queen		an adulterous queen
a retrieveed queen		a repentent queen
		an innocent queen
		a vengeful and selfish queen

3.4 The Virgin Mary

Saints are traditionally defined as: “Exceptionally holy individuals who displayed miraculous signs of God’s favor.”¹²² As such, they were given a crucial role and a prominent place in the medieval society. They were icons providing guidance and example to ordinary people, they were protectors and spiritual leaders with different functions and last but not least, they were a constant source of imagination and entertainment (various feasts and holidays in their honor were organized). As for the saints in SGGK, Ronald Tamplin argues in his article “The Saints in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” that the poet’s choice of the five

¹²² Marty Newman Williams, and Ann Echols, *Between Pit and Pedestal: Women in the Middle Ages*. (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1994) 117.

saints in the story is not a casual one, but had been carefully thought about. It is, indeed, an intriguing coincidence that the porter who opens the door of the castle in which Gawain is looking for shelter, is called Peter. He is given the name of *the* porter of heaven, the guardian of the keys to a place of the last judgment. “Are we meant to think of judgement, of Bertilak’s castle as a place of “binding and loosing”?”¹²³ The hint is definitely there, such as it is with all the other saints: St Giles, St Julian, St John and the Virgin Mary. All of them carry with themselves associations not directly mentioned in the story, but ones that must have been brought forth immediately in the mind of a medieval reader. For example, St Julian is a patron of travellers because of his hospitality.¹²⁴ Hospitality and its true nature has its prominence in the story since Bertilak’s place, instead of being a safe place for Gawain to rest, turns out to be the place where Gawain’s allegiance and loyalty are tested. St John and the Virgin Mary, on the other hand, are very often associated rather than thought of individually. As Tamplin observes: “This association derives from Christ’s words to them from the cross, their presence at His death, from the manner of their own deaths and from their exemplary chastity.”¹²⁵ They are both supposed to work as Gawain’s protective emblems, but the emphasis in the poem regarding this function definitely falls more on the Virgin Mary.

Out of the five saints mentioned in the poem, it is her who is given the biggest importance since it is her whose visual and symbolic representation Gawain carries on his shield. The Virgin Mary is absolutely unique in Christianity mainly for two qualities; she is the Mother of God and at the same time, she is a virgin. Interest in her started to spread already in the second century and continued to do so through the whole Middle Ages; she was present in both private and public liturgican prayers, monasteries and churches were built in her name, guilds organized under her patronage, pilgrimages were undertaken and feasts established to honor the historical Mother of God. The main impression that one can get from the Bible is that of “a betrothed virgin, who conceived through the Holy Ghost without loss of her virginity and was prominent in the story of her son’s infancy, but who had little to do with his public ministry.”¹²⁶ Since no facts were known about Mary’s life before the Annunciation or after her death, treatises were written already in the second half of the second century in an attempt to fill the empty spaces. Ignatius of Antioch or Irenaus of Lyons were two of the early

¹²³ Ronald Tamplin, “The Saints in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” *Speculum* 44.3 (1969): 405. *JSTOR*. Moravian College Library, Bethlehem, USA. 25 Apr. 2007 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

¹²⁴ Tamplin 406.

¹²⁵ Tamplin 414.

¹²⁶ Mary Clayton *The Cult of The Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990) 3.

Church fathers responsible for the spreading devotion and veneration to the Mother of Christ. Mary Clayton mentions in her book on the cult of the Virgin Mary a controversial historical event that led, in its final result, to an even bigger popularity of the Virgin. In 429-431, there was a theological crisis that culminated with the Council of Ephesus. There, a certain Nestorius made a speech in which he intended to reduce the importance of Mary as ‘God-bearer’. The answer came in the form of long-lasting processions only affirming an even greater importance and popularity of the Virgin.¹²⁷ St Augustine, St Jerome or St Ambrose all continued in this tradition, encouraging women to immitate the Virgin Mary; she thus became perceived as a role model whose leading example is to be followed.

The Virgin Mary represents perfection in many ways; she gave birth to her son without sexual sin and she remained pure, chaste and virtuous till the end of her life. Gawain could have chosen anybody else, any other saint, but he chose Mary. He has her image painted on his shield, he prays to her and he thinks of himself as Mary’s knight – Gawain aspires to that perfection that she represents. These connotations, therefore, should not be disregarded as marginal since it is precisely from these connotations of perfection that Gawain learns his lesson; he learns that confronting the chivalric and spiritual ideals, one necessarily needs to confront one’s humanity and no matter how much Gawain aspires to be perfect, no shield can protect him from the imperfection that human nature is, by definition, susceptible to. The Virgin Mary, in this sense, brings about that revelation and her importance for the story, even though textually marginalized, should not be in any way diminished.

Table 5: Connotations of the character of the Virgin Mary

The Virgin Mary
Mother of God
a virgin, untained by sexual sin
a spiritual leader
a role model – source of inspiration, admiration, and immitation
the Queen of heaven
spare of words, pure, chaste, virtuous

¹²⁷ Clayton 7.

3.5 Lady Bertilak

Lady Bertilak is not textually marginalized. As noted before, she is the most depicted female character, the only one that speaks and visibly moves the entire plot. As Morgan's main instrument testing Gawain's allegiance and his loyalty on the three consecutive mornings, her presence covers the whole third fitt in the poem and she is mentioned in the second and the fourth fitts as well. Notwithstanding the lady's frequent appearances and her role, Sheila Fisher claims that: "She [Lady Bertilak] is placed at the center in order to be displaced from it."¹²⁸ Fisher then goes on to claim that it is also with the lady's character that the poem can be linked to the historical background of the Middle Ages. "For like her [Lady Bertilak's] historical counterpart, the medieval noblewomen, the Lady is contained within the castle in order, finally, to be marginalized within aristocratic society."¹²⁹ First, let us discuss the former assertion. Lady Bertilak is, indeed, somewhere in the centre. As a common denominator between Morgan and Guenevere, the lady receives orders from the former so that she could harm the latter with whom she is at the same time heavily juxtaposed in terms of appearance and beauty. There is, however, no sign of Lady Bertilak's displacement from this central role as she manages to keep the position in between two textually marginalized female characters all along, without being moved to the periphery. Gawain asserts that himself when he says:

"And commend me to that comely one, your courteous wife,
Both herself and that other, my honoured ladies,
That have trapped their true knight in their trammels so quaint."¹³⁰

That other lady is Morgan, even though neither Gawain nor the reader know about the full extent of her role yet. With the final revelation, readers learn about Morgan's motifs and the lady's place as a mediator is further strengthened.

There is, however, something that supports Fisher's interpretation of the lady's marginalization. As opposed to both Morgan and Guenevere, the lady does not have an identity, she does not have a name and is being referred to by her husband's name. A short bridge to the oldest of the long poems written in English shows how important it was to possess an identity. A character in *Beowulf* is not introduced by his name, but by the name of

¹²⁸ Fisher 137.

¹²⁹ Fisher 137-138.

¹³⁰ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 2411-2413.

his father so that the important blood genealogy is fully established. Thus, before Beowulf says who he is, he introduces his father and the people he comes from first:

“We belong by birth to the Geat people
and owe allegiance to Lord Hygelac.
In his day, my father was a famous man,
a noble warrior-lord named Ecgtheow.”¹³¹

Beowulf, even though most probably composed in the first half of the eighth century, does not deal with the native inhabitants but with their Germanic forebears, supposedly from around the middle of the fifth century. King Arthur is, as a character, placed into the sixth century – therefore roughly the same time. The Gawain poet was aware of how important it is to possess an identity at the time he was writing about judging from the extensive history of Camelot and its deserved prestige linked to the Trojan Brutus that the poet provides us with; even Gawain thinks of himself in terms of his blood relation to King Arthur – that is where Gawain’s identity stems from. The poet establishes a firmly rooted identity for King Arthur, Gawain, and even Bertilak; Guenevere’s and Morgan’s identities are also well understood by the connotations their characters carry. The lady, on the other hand, had not been granted such a privilege and her namelessness has led to her character being interpreted as marginal. The poet’s reasons for that namelessness, however, might have been totally different, his aim might have not been a marginal character, but, on the contrary, a universal one. The lady’s lack of a name does, indeed, very well contribute to her universality; she is simply *a* lady of the court whose obedience to her husband is practically demonstrated by her bearing his name. In line with this reading, such a universality does not, at any rate, displace the lady from the central position she holds and keeps on holding the whole poem; it merely states that her behavior might be classified as generally valid for the rules of the day - which brings us directly to Fisher’s second argument.

The first chapter shows that the cult of the lady developed as a romantic counterepart of the cult of the Virgin. Even though more often antagonistic rather than allies, the two cults have something in common; the core of both of them is based on a leap of faith rather than on something tangible and real. “The lady of chivalry was indeed a beautiful, artificial figure, but never perhaps, save in the indolence of courts and great lords’ castles, the figure of a real

¹³¹ *Beowulf*, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* II. 260-263.

person.”¹³² Indeed, her strength resides in what she represents rather than in what she really is or would be. It has been stated in the first chapter that a lady was perceived in a somewhat dual representation in the Middle Ages. In the framework of courtly love, a lady was an earthborn carrier of beauty and of various virtues, a source of inspiration for men who vow to be her servants. In the framework of the Catholic doctrine, on the other hand, a lady was viewed as a daughter of Eve, marked forever by the original sin, being susceptible to all kinds of unnecessary emotions much more than men and consequently, as an instrument of devil leading men from the right path directly on the highway to hell. The Gawain poet plays with both of these stereotypical images since Gawain, and the audience, do not know which one Lady Bertilak represents. Is she the courtly lady for whom the rules of courtly love mean everything? She does, indeed, honor its laws, looking for passion outside marriage since, such as most of the other marriages of that time, hers might have been an arranged social contract as well. Or is she the latter, a temptation personified that is leading Gawain astray for the reasons of her own satisfaction? Even though the Gawain poet does provide some hints, he is never explicit, beautifully playing with both notions at the same time. Whatever the case and whatever the interpretation of Lady Bertilak’s behavior, she is not marginal and neither was her historical counterpart.

Table 6: Connotations of the character of Lady Bertilak

Lady Bertilak
universality
a ‘femme fatale’ – a temptress, a seductress
a daughter of Eve – original sin and sexual passion
a noblewoman – beautiful and virtuous
pure embodiment of the laws of courtly love, in the name of which she is putting demands on the knight to comply with
uncertainty as for which she is (Gawain has to decide for himself)

¹³² Power 22.

3.6 Morgan le Fay

Morgan le Fay is mostly known as Arthur's wicked sister and a mother of the man who eventually brings about the destruction of Camelot. Surprisingly enough, when she appears for the first time in literature, she is neither wicked, nor Arthur's sister, nor is she Mordred's mother.¹³³ Her first appearance in literature can be traced back to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*, 1148, which survives only in one manuscript preserved in the British National Library. Her character does not appear until the end of the poem and her realm, as well as the realm of all fairies, is situated on the mythical island of Avalon where Morgan lives and rules together with her nine sisters. She is the most beautiful one though, she is very skillful, intelligent and well-trained in the art of magic, she knows how to heal wounds and how to mix potions; that is how the character of Morgan is presented to the readers in the middle of the twelfth century.

Her epithet, le Fay, comes from French *la fée – a fairy*. This denotation was coined out of pure necessity to label creatures that evolved in the framework of the French literature after 1100, creatures unknown to the Latin culture up to that time. In the twelfth century, fairies enter the world of mortals and, having various forms, continue to change their destinies. They are healers, mothers, lovers, fairy godmothers, protectors, guides, but they are also vengeful, selfish and powerful. The original use of the word was, however, related to creatures “endowed with supernatural and magical powers”¹³⁴ and was used primarily for Merlin's father. According to most medieval texts of the 12th – 13th centuries, Merlin's mother was raped by devil with special powers that were passed on to Merlin himself. Since Morgan was Merlin's student who acquired his art, the epithet was granted to her as well. The world of the fairies proved in any case to be an endless source of inspiration for the medieval world. Martin Nejedlý gets into this world step by step in his book *Středověký mýtus o Meluzině a rodová pověst Lucemburků*. Here, he focuses on one of the most known fairy, Melusine, the alleged founder of the Luxembourg dynasty and also Morgan's aunt. Nejedlý renarrates the almost forgotten, yet breathtaking stories about the world of fairies that still remain preserved in proverbs, legends or chronicles and he beautifully demonstrates the elaborate efforts that people in the Middle Ages took to keep the world of fairies alive. This is true for the character of Morgan as well.

¹³³ see Carolyne Larrington *Kind Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006) 1.

¹³⁴ see Martin Nejedlý, *Středověký mýtus o Meluzině a rodová pověst Lucemburků* (Praha: Scriptorium, 2007) 124.

Chrétien de Troyes makes Morgan in his *Erec et Enide*, 1160, Arthur's sister and from the end of the twelfth century on, no one doubts the brother-sister relationship between Morgan and Arthur anymore.¹³⁵ It is also in this romance where Morgan falls in love with Guiomar, Guenevere's cousin, and the whole secret affair consequently becomes the springboard for the animosity between Morgan and Guenevere. In *Livre d'Arthur*, Morgan uses her magical powers to keep Guiomar close to her, trapping other knights and trying to bring shame to the Round Table. Another step towards a darker side of her character is taken in *Suite du Merlin* where Morgan acquires permanent ugliness, clearly corresponding to her evil nature. Even when she is married, Morgan always has values and rules of her own and she hardly ever complies with the world around her. It is a world that does not give strong women the opportunities to exercise their powers so Morgan decides to go against the given order represented by the Round Table, trying to impose her own values and in doing so, she acquires yet another epithet, that of an enchantress. As Larrington asserts: "They [enchantresses] often work at an interesting tangent to the courtly world, challenging or unsettling its norms, making opportunities for other voices, particularly those of women."¹³⁶ Morgan is clearly the queen of that art.

The more her character develops, the more negative aspects it acquires. From her first appearance, indeed, Morgan has been subject to an intriguing shift in character for which there is almost no explanation and scholars are still at a loss as for why such a shift occurred. Two romances in particular are prominent in Morgan's character's devalorization, *Lancelot-Grail* and *Tristan*; the former presenting a unique example of Morgan plotting against her brother by showing him the paintings in which Lancelot professes his love for Queen Guenevere, the latter presenting Morgan herself as jealous, selfish and arrogant femme fatale. The fact remains that both romances establish Morgan as a purely negative character. Ever since, the pattern of her appearance in a romance remains very similar; Arthur's court, ensuring stability of the aristocratic world and of the values related to courtly love, is unsettled by Morgan's attempts to challenge these values.¹³⁷ In this role, Morgan is classified by Maureen Fries as a counter-hero of the Arthurian romances. "While the hero proper transcends and yet respects the norms of the patriarchy, the counter-hero violates them in some way. For the male Arthurian counter-hero, such violation usually entails wrongful force;

¹³⁵ see Larrington 11.

¹³⁶ Larrington 2.

¹³⁷ see Nejedlý 169.

for the female, usually powers of magic.”¹³⁸ This is precisely what Morgan does in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The grudge against Guenevere is well established in the Arthurian romances. Its origins can be traced to the already mentioned love affair with Guiomar with whom Guenevere surprises Morgan at the least appropriate moment. Guiomar is ashamed and leaves Morgan heartbroken. What better way for Morgan to get her revenge than to return the same favor? Morgan uses magic and various magical objects to make the secret relationship between the queen and Lancelot public and she eventually succeeds. There are, however, other grudges that inspire Morgan to pursue the adventures in Arthurian romances, one of the most powerful ones is against her own brother, King Arthur and against the values encoded in the Round Table. This is quite understandable and it beautifully mirrors the historical situation of that time. Women, no matter how intelligent, could not wield power the same way men did. They were left with their beauty, their charm and the power to use right words to, for example, extract a promise from men. This is a very typical motif, one that we can also find in SGGK where Morgan, through the Green Knight, extracts a rash promise from the flabbergasted Arthurian knights – a promise of a knight to come in one year to receive a blow in return. Morgan does the same thing in other romances written before SGGK. For example, in *Val sans Retour* or *Val des Faux Amants* or even more obviously in *La Joie de la Court* where, as a result of a rash promise given to his lady, “the knight Maboagrain is obliged to remain in a magical garden where he must fight against all comers until someone defeats him.”¹³⁹

In real life, men had power over women. Magic enables to reverse this order, but there is a price to pay. Morgan is unable to keep any social contacts with the outside world and she has no family. She had to cut all familial ties to become who she wanted to be. Nevertheless, for Morgan, it is worth it and, based on her character, it is possible to deduce that already in the Middle Ages, there were voices expressing the discontent with the given social order resting on artificial values of chivalry created by men. These voices found in Morgan their ideal embodiment. Her character does, indeed, carry very particular connotations that immediately resonate when her name is mentioned. These connotations are overviewed in the following table.

¹³⁸ Fries 61.

¹³⁹ Larrington 52.

Table 7: Connotations of the character of Morgan le Fay

Original connotation	Connotations after the devalorization of her character
a good fairy	a powerful sorcerer
healing powers	vengeful, jealous
dilligent and intelligent student of Merlin	a grudge against Guenevere and Arthur
beautiful	ugly
	a constant need to challenge the values, laws and rules represented by her brother, King Arthur, and the knights of the Round Table

“Her gradual change from a connector of life with healing, as mistress of Avalon, into a connector of death with illicit sex indicates the inability of male Arthurian authors to cope with the image of a woman of power in positive terms.”¹⁴⁰ It was, indeed, agreed on that power in the hands of women is a dangerous weapon and Morgan was put forth by many a moralist to prove how women use power in order to pursue their selfish wars and how they only threaten the established systems. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Morgan challenges, once again, the values of the knights of the Round Table by trying to prove that humanity and human passions are always more than one’s loyalties and allegiances. At the same time, she manifests her long-lasting grudge against the queen and King Arthur while proving what a powerful enchantress she really is. The medieval audience for which the Gawain poet was writing was most possibly well aware of these connotations and if Morgan’s name was mentioned earlier in the poem, the ending might have been simply spoilt. Many a scholar has been puzzled by an inadequate motif on Morgan’s part to put forth such a complicated plan of so many layers. This is, however, what her character did dozens of times in the previous romances and it does not need to be explained further if the audience possesses that knowledge. There is no way that, carrying the connotations of the most powerful agent in the poem, Morgan’s importance can be marginalized. The detailed analysis of her whole scheme in the following chapter is about to prove that.

¹⁴⁰ Fries 70.

3.7 Conclusion to chapter three

Textual marginalization of a character does not automatically equal an interpretation of that character as marginal for the importance of the story since a literary work always depends on a certain degree of contextual knowledge on the part of the audience. If such a character is deeply rooted in a given culture, associations and connotations are immediately called forth and there is no need for further descriptions within the text. Three out of four female characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are textually marginalized; all of the female characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, carry important historical, social, cultural and religious connotations that enable us to read the characters in a slightly different way. The Arthurian literature on the whole treats its characters in a very unstable and inconsistent way for us to make any generally valid conclusions in the first place, but there are trends and developments that the characters of Guenevere, the Virgin Mary, Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay have pursued. This chapter commented on their first appearances in literature and assessed the shifts in the development of their characters. In the case of Guenevere and Morgan le Fay, there was a clear shift towards a certain degree of devalorization of their characters, that being a shift towards an adulterous queen or towards a vengeful and ugly sworn enemy of the Arthurian court. The Virgin Mary, on the other hand, only gained in prominence during the Middle Ages and continued to function as a role model for other women to follow. The lady also presents an unreal idealization that, however, works as a double agent – either a femme fatale or a real lady living for the rules of courtesy. A conclusion can be reached that in the context of the Middle-English Arthurian romances, none of the above mentioned characters should be considered marginal, whatever story they appear in.

4 Interconnectedness of the female knot

*And each line is linked and locked with the next
For ever and ever, and hence it is called
In all England, as I hear, the endless knot.*¹⁴¹

4.1 Introduction to chapter four

The third chapter pointed out the necessity of the contextual knowledge on the part of the audience, knowledge that proves to be helpful in order to interpret and to understand the female characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In line with the basic premise of the thesis, the framework of the fourth chapter tries to interpret the story more as a story of Morgan rather than Gawain, paying attention to the commonly disregarded and overlooked female characters, their importance and their interconnectedness in such an interpretation. Coming back to the diagram of the female knot presented in this paper, its underlying conflicting and conspiratory forces are first commented upon before the attention is turned to the full extent of Morgan's brilliant scheme. This scheme with all its layers is assessed step by step, its possible meanings are suggested and the potential message of the poem proposed, while all the time bearing in mind the role of Morgan as the original architect and mastermind of the entire plot.

4.2 The complexity of Morgan's plan

The role of Morgan, as has been seen, is not a clear-cut one and each scholar faces the same difficulties in interpreting her. Whatever her motivations and their sufficient or insufficient justifications, whatever her reasons are and whatever ramifications thus unveil, the structure of Morgan's scheme is crafted in a well-defined and straightforward way. It starts as a simple challenge with a given purpose – to frighten the queen and to put the values of the Round Table to a test - but revolves into an interconnected series of tests in the midst of which Gawain finds himself, thinking all the time that the real test has yet to come. In reality, there are four main layers of Morgan's scheme, each crucially affecting the course of the other as well as the final outcome of the whole test. Morgan's control and her supervision in each step of the way are demonstrated by the fact that in each of these episodes, she has an agent, someone who carries out her commands and gives her the possibility to stay hidden and unrecognized. The following table presents an overview of the complexity of the test that Gawain is, in reality, subject to as well as of the agents Morgan makes use of.

¹⁴¹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 628-630.

Table 8: An overview of the complexity of Morgan's plan

Episode	Morgan's Agent	Nature of the test
Beheading game I (challenge)	The Green Knight	test of courage
the journey to the Castle of Hautdesert	nature: wilderness, animals, cold, exhaustion, savage people, loneliness	test of physical strength and perseverance
Exchange of winnings - day 1 - day 2 - day 3	Bertilak	test of the ability to keep one's word
Temptation game - day 1 - day 2 - day 3	Lady Bertilak	- test of the ability to keep one's allegiance - not to succumb to the desires of the body
Beheading game II (revelation)	Bertilak	test of bravery

Before all the levels of this multilayered test are scrutinized, a small detour is taken to comment on the forces that cut through all of these layers, forces that form the connections between the pillars of the female knot; it is in the midst of these forces that Gawain finds himself, unable to decide in which direction he should let himself be pulled.

4.3 Conflicting and conspiratory forces

None of the events or adventures that Gawain encounters happen by chance. He is not, however, aware of this fact and all the time, Gawain is persuaded that the real purpose of his venture is to stand up to what he, and the whole court by extension, believe in; Gawain thinks that his ordeal is about courage of a physical nature since he comes to offer his life in order to keep the promise he had given to the Green Knight. The truth is, however, that Gawain does not have matters in his hands as much as he believes. The real ordeal resides in other spheres than the physical ones; the real ordeal is presented in the forces around him, forces from which he is obliged to choose only one. Generally speaking, these forces can be divided into

two groups, those that can be considered antagonistic and consequently clashing – they are referred to as conflicting forces – and those that work together in order to achieve the same goal – those are called conspiratory forces.

Quite understandably, Gawain has to both decide between contradictory forces fighting for his allegiance and sort out the good conspiratory forces around him from the bad ones. Within the female knot, drafted on page 52, the conspiratory forces can be found in all horizontal directions, the conflicting forces, on the other hand, can be traced in all other directions. Hence we get the following table.

Table 9: Conflicting and conspiratory forces within the female knot

Conflicting forces (all directions except from the horizontal ones)	Conspiratory forces (horizontal directions: ↔)
the Virgin Mary x Lady Bertilak	the Virgin Mary + Guenevere
Guenevere x Morgan le Fay	Lady Bertilak + Morgan le Fay
the Virgin Mary x Morgan le Fay	
Guenevere x Lady Bertilak	

4.3.1 Opponents

The basis of all conflicting forces between two female characters is created, by definition, by a conflict, such a conflict and its nature being rooted in what the given characters stand for. The forces between Lady Bertilak and the Virgin Mary clash because each of them represents contradictory values; those of courtly and spiritual love in particular. Gawain is then forced to decide to which he would give preference. From the chapter on historical background, it is clear that the world of courtly love and the world of spiritual love simply do not go hand in hand and they cannot be combined as Gawain would like them to be. The lady, who is the embodiment of the the principles of courtesy and pleasure that override all other morality, challenges Gawain’s reputation as a man, his very indentity of what being a knight also amounts to. The Virgin Mary, on the other hand, represents the highest moral principles that Gawain should aspire to; as a role model and a spiritual leader, as the Queen of

heaven, pure, chaste and virtuous, as a woman unattained by sexual sin - she goes against everything that the lady stands for. Consequently, these two characters inherently clash.

The conflict between Guenevere and Morgan le Fay is built on a different premise; it is rooted in the long-lasting and well-documented personal grudge between the two characters, a grudge that was born out of an inappropriate relationship between Morgan and Guenevere's cousin, Guiomar, a grudge that the medieval audience enjoyed very much and continued to nurture for hundreds of years to come. The poet builds on this well-known animosity and presents it as a reason enough for Morgan to conceive of her plan in the first place.

A combination of both inherent differences in character and personal resentment can then apply to the remaining conflicting forces represented by the Virgin Mary and Morgan le Fay as well as by Lady Bertilak and Queen Guenevere. Even though they are never given space to interact, it is clear that their very natures clash. Morgan le Fay and her behavior contradicts everything the Virgin Mary stands for. Morgan does not believe in spirituality, nor does she believe in a submission to a higher power. Morgan does not want to obey and to be virtuous; she wants to lead, she wants to dictate the rules and she acts in whatever way she sees fit to achieve her goals. The poet states himself that Morgan acquired all knowledge about the knights of the Round Table from Merlin and there is a clear hint that it was in an exchange for her favours.

“The mistress of Merlin, she has caught many a man,
For sweet love in secret she shared sometimes
With that wizard, that knows well each one of your knights
and you.”¹⁴²

Similarly, Guenevere and Lady Bertilak have not been given a well-defined space to interact either. Even though both ladies are beautiful and representative figures who mirror the wealth and the prosperity of their husbands, from Gawain's position only one can win. Guenevere means Arthur and Gawain's promise to the court, Lady Bertilak means Lord Bertilak and Gawain's promise to him; and Gawain has to choose.

¹⁴² *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 2448-2451.

4.3.2 Allies

There are two horizontal lines in the female knot, both of them reflect a relationship whose basis is formed rather by conspiratory forces. This is true for both the Virgin Mary and Guenevere as well as for Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak. One of the poem's main concerns is search for perfection and the limitations that humans face in the process. In the poem, there are two role models that should facilitate such a search, these two role models being the two queens; the perfect Queen of heaven and the perfect queen on earth. One of them is supposed to be the incarnation of the other and this complementary relationship was something well-established since it can be traced back to the Anglo-Saxon times. "Like Mary, the queen was regarded as virgin and mother; she arrived at her coronation as a virgin, symbolized by her loose hair, and she was expected to bear the king's children."¹⁴³ There has been, therefore, a historical connection of the two figures whose basis is imitation rather than clash. Gawain is a knight of the Virgin Mary, but he is also his queen's knight.

"Would you grant me the grace, said Gawain to the king,
To be gone from this bench and stand by you there,
If I without discourtesy might quit this board,
And if my liege lady misliked it not,
I would come to your counsel before your court noble."¹⁴⁴

Gawain addresses Queen Guenevere as his liege lady, he also swears his allegiance to the Virgin Mary and nowhere in the poem these two forces cause Gawain any trouble; the implication thus might be that the search for *both* spiritual *and* earthly perfection that the two figures represent goes hand in hand as ideal allies.

The second couple of conspiratory forces in the female knot is represented by Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak. Carolyne Larrington affirms that: "Most scholars, (...), accept the Lady as a manifestation of Morgan."¹⁴⁵ They are, however, so much more than that. Geraldine Heng goes as far as to claim that: "As nonidentical doubles, they are awarded diametrically contrasting, virtually symmetrical qualities at their first appearance, each establishing a specular surface for the other as its near opposite, and being thoroughly constituted therefore

¹⁴³ Jennifer Ward *Women in England in the Middle Ages* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006) 122.

¹⁴⁴ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 343-347.

¹⁴⁵ Larrington 66.

as the other's reference."¹⁴⁶ By calling Morgan and the lady nonidentical doubles, Heng must be pointing both to the fact that when they are introduced, they could hardly be more different; one old and withered, the other one beautiful and charming, and to the fact that the lady, in reality, articulates exactly what Morgan wants her to. Their relationship is that of a planner and of an agent who carries the tasks out. The poet's ruse of making them look strikingly different might be considered as yet another literary treat that should rule out as much suspicion of their interconnectedness as possible. Voluntarily or not, Lady Bertilak is Morgan's ally, she is accountable to her and she obviously obeys her commands; both of them work to achieve the same goal.

4.4 Untangling the knot – an analysis of Morgan's plan

The concept of the female knot, as has been already pointed out, is based on the interconnectedness of the female characters who function as reference points to each other since the actions of one influence the actions of another. The knot has, however, a point of origin where the whole story begins and from which it should be, therefore, interpreted; this point of origin being Morgan le Fay. To untangle the knot consequently means to follow her steps as they unfold in the story, in other words, to follow her plan in all its layers and sub-layers and to see how these steps really connect in what seems to be one of the most complex tests any man in literature has been ever subject to.

4.4.1 Beheading game I (challenge)

Everything starts at Christmastime when Arthur's court is feasting and celebrating the occasion until the king and his entourage are disturbed by the arrival of a knight dressed all in green. The Green Knight is not, however, acting on his own accord, but only the most attentive readers can get suspicious of this fact during the first reading. The poet, indeed, tosses his readers some hints to deduce this from. King Arthur invites the Green Knight to take a seat and relax first after the journey and then communicate his tidings. The Green Knight, however, refuses outright, saying:

“Nay, so help me,” said the other, “He that on high sits,
To tarry here any time, ’twas not mine errand (...)”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Heng 503.

¹⁴⁷ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 256-257.

It is obvious that the knight has an errand to run, a mission to accomplish or a task that has been formulated for him and it is not in his powers to act otherwise than he has been instructed to. He is not supposed to tarry because this was not his errand; it was not, indeed. Morgan instructed him very carefully what he should and should not do and the behavior of the Green Knight only shows his obedience to her. Morgan's commands and her instructions can be actually seen in every single move that the knight makes, starting with his spectacular appearance and ending with the knight's departure. When the Green Knight enters the hall, he is introduced as follows:

“Half a giant on earth I hold him to be,
But believe him no less than the largest of men,
And that the seemliest in his stature to see, as he rides,
For in back and in breast though his body was grim,
His waist in its width was worthily small,
And formed with every feature in fair accord
was he.”¹⁴⁸

The meaning of such an introduction can be summed up in one word - a threat. The Green Knight's appearance is supposed to seem threatening and dangerous to the people present and he fulfills this task quite successfully. After the full 114 lines dedicated to his description, the whole hall, including King Arthur, is left flabbergasted. From this description, other aspects of subordination to Morgan can be deduced. The Green Knight is a noble knight, wearing clothes of the highest quality, everything well-fashioned and color-coordinated as well as practical.

“Of furs cut and fitted – the fabric was noble,
Embellished all with ermine, and his hood beside,
That was loosed from his locks, and laid on his shoulders.”¹⁴⁹

The Green Knight does, indeed, appear superior and this is true also for his behavior. Ever since he enters Arthur's court, he is quite arrogant in his comportment. To start with, he does not greet anybody, he pays attention neither to Arthur's sumptuous hall, nor to his

¹⁴⁸ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 140-146.

¹⁴⁹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 154-156.

knights or the queen; he just wants to speak with Arthur as if no one else was worthy of his words.

“Not a greeting he gave as the guests he o’erlooked,
Nor wasted his words, but “Where is,” he said,
“The captain of this crowd? Keenly I wish
To see that sire with sight, and to himself say
my say.”¹⁵⁰

Later on, the Green Knight adds to this arrogant behavior also a number of insults addressed at the knights of the Round Table.

“Nay, to fight, in good faith, is far from my thought;
There are about on these benches but beardless children,
Were I here in full arms on a haughty steed,
For measured against mine, their might is puny.”¹⁵¹

He calls Arthur’s knights beardless children and he says as such, none of them would even stand a chance against him in a real fight. After the spectacular introduction and his arrogant and obvious disdain for the court, the Green Knight names the terms of his challenge. It is quite noticeable that he is a good speaker, very straightforward and clear in his expressions. At no point of his speech does he give in to the common habit of speechifying and shallow flattery, his words are plain, explicit and well-aimed; the Green Knight simply wants to know if there is anybody brave enough to take up the challenge he proposes. This way of communication has a well-intended impact – all the hall is astonished and speechless, for some time, there is no reaction at all. The Green Knight uses this moment of surprise and insults Arthur for the second time:

“Whose fame is so fair in far realms and wide?
Where is now your arrogance and your awesome deeds,
Your valor and your victories and your vaunting words?”¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 223-227.

¹⁵¹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 279-282.

¹⁵² *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 310-312.

Is this really the Green Knight speaking though? It is him, indeed, but he speaks for somebody else. It is Morgan and her hatred for the court and its supposed invincibility that is hidden behind his speech; it is Morgan who put these words into her agent's mouth since it is her who is convinced of the validity and truthfulness of such claims. It is her, through the mouth of the Green Knight, who calls Arthur arrogant and boastful.

At the moment when Arthur wants to take up the challenge himself, Gawain volunteers in the midst of his well-known speech full of false modesty and self-derogation. The Beheading game reaches its climax when Gawain strikes the blow, he cuts off the Green Knight's head who, consequently, picks it up, repeats the terms of the covenant and leaves. To all the qualities that the Green Knight has, the quality of supernatural power is thus added, making him even more scary. The first in the line of Morgan's tests is, therefore, a simple test of courage carried out to see if, in Arthur's court, there is someone brave enough to keep the word given and to face a man with supernatural powers the full extent of which remains unknown.

To conclude, the Green Knight's behavior can be, indeed, tracked to the original mastermind of the challenge, Morgan le Fay. He is dangerous, threatening, yet of noble origin; a very good speaker, straightforward in what he wants, arrogant and disdainful towards the well-established values of the Round Table which he does not share and ironically mocks. He consequently goes against these values, using all the powers he can, including the power of magic. This characteristics, however, does not refer to a temporarily created agent with a mission to carry out, it refers to Morgan le Fay herself; the Green Knight is her personification, nothing more than a disguise allowing her to stay unrecognized. She can be read in every move he makes and every step he takes; Morgan le Fay is, indeed, speaking and acting through the Green Knight. It is her who wants to scare Guenevere to death and it is her who wants to put the Round Table and its alleged fame through a test. Aiming at her enemies, Queen Guenevere and King Arthur, Morgan thus comes up with the perfect springboard for the following tests to unveil.

After the first test, Gawain sets out on the journey thinking that his ordeal is about keeping the promise he had given; in line with that, he is determined to find the Green Chapel and to confront the Green Knight. The degree of his determination is being tested during his journey. He does not have any companionship and very soon, he starts to feel lonely. He does not have enough food, he is cold and loses his way. Moreover, he is in a constant danger because of all the wild animals and savage beings around him. Gawain finds himself in a hostile environment that seems to be nowhere close to where he should be heading.

“Now with serpents he wars, now with savage wolves,
Now with wild men of the woods, that watched from the rocks,
Both with bulls and with bears, and with boars besides,
And giants that came gibbering from the jagged steeps.”¹⁵³

Gawain, however, never gives up. He does not even consider abandoning this place and going back home. There is not enough evidence to suggest that this all is an inherent part of Morgan’s plan as well, but it is definitely one of the plausible and logical interpretations. Gawain promised to seek the Green Knight in one year to the day and what a better way to test his perseverance but to make him travel through wilderness, moreover in winter. It might be reasonably deduced that this is, indeed, part of Morgan’s plan in which she cleverly uses natural elements to test the man’s inner strength and persistency. When Gawain is lost, he turns to the Virgin Mary, his patron, and he asks her for a safe harbor where he can attend a mass. Out of the blue, Gawain spots a castle, one that is too good to be true.

“A castle as comely as a knight could own,
On grounds fair and green, in a goodly park
With a palisade of palings planted about
For two miles and more, round many a fair tree.”¹⁵⁴

The castle is, indeed, beautiful. It is sumptuously decorated both from the inside and from the outside and the knight feels very lucky, the more when he finds out that his search is over since the Green Chapel is no more than two miles from the castle. Ironically, Gawain has just reached the place of his ultimate trial. This trial is presented in parallel scenes taking place outside the castle, where Lord Bertilak is hunting, and inside the castle, where Lady Bertilak is trying to seduce Gawain. These scenes complete each other and their meaning is interrelated, yet, since both of them present two different tests, they are addressed here separately.

¹⁵³ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 720-723.

¹⁵⁴ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 767-770.

4.4.2 Exchange of winnings

When Gawain is clothed and fed, the lord of the castle takes advantage of Gawain's merry disposition and proposes a game to play. On three consecutive days, Gawain would rest inside the castle while Bertilak goes hunting. In the evening, they should then both exchange the possessions that they acquire during that particular day. Gawain gladly accepts the terms of this game.

“And your man to command I account myself here
As I am bound and beholden, and shall be, come
what may.”¹⁵⁵

Gawain feels that this is what he, as a knight, should do for the service that is being provided for him. By pledging his allegiance to Bertilak, by going along with the lines of a seemingly innocent game, Gawain pledges yet another allegiance that will cause him some problems later on. So far, he has given his word to the Green Knight, to Arthur and the queen, to the Virgin Mary and now to Lord Bertilak; it is precisely this multitude of allegiances which Gawain too eagerly provides within whose forces he will find himself trapped, unable to decide which to keep and which to discard. The following table presents an overview of the results of the game.

Table 10: An overview of the Exchange of winnings game

	day 1	day 2	day 3
Bertilak's winnings	game	boar	fox
Gawain's winnings	one kiss	two kisses	three kisses girdle
Successful exchange	√	√	x

¹⁵⁵ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 1039-1041.

All three days are based on the same principle. Lord Bertilak, together with other knights, leave the castle and go hunting. Gawain, on the other hand, stays inside the castle, confined to his private room where he is visited by Lady Bertilak. Consequently, both men fight their own battles and in line with Bertilak's rules, they should exchange their winnings at the end of the day. The difference is that Bertilak takes up the role of a hunter whereas Gawain finds himself in the position of a prey. The first two days, Gawain gives Lord Bertilak the exact number of kisses he receives even though he insists on concealing the identity of the person who kissed him. On the third day, Gawain breaks his word as he decides to keep the girdle, which is supposed to protect his life, for himself. After an inner struggle, Gawain gives preference to what he sees as his priority – a wish to preserve life. This wish is obviously stronger than the other pledges Gawain has made, even though in the spirit of a game. The chivalric society, however, did not distinguish in what spirit vows are taken, once a word is given, a knight must keep it. Gawain, unaware of the fact that he is being tested, proves in this part of the scheme that he values his life a little bit more than these chivalric values; and that was one of Morgan's aims all along. By instructing Bertilak to propose precisely this kind of game and to make Gawain stay inside the castle instead of going out hunting with all the other knights, by instructing Lady Bertilak to make advances to Gawain at the same time and to force him to embrace the reputation of a real knight, Morgan le Fay wants to prove all along that the ideal chivalric values the whole Round Table is admired for stand no chance compared to human passions and basic instincts.

4.4.3 Temptation game

As noted before, there is a clear parallel between the scenes of the hunt and those happening within the castle, in Gawain's room. This parallel, widely discussed by critics, usually centers on the comparison of Gawain to the animals that Lord Bertilak is hunting.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, on the three consecutive days, Gawain is trapped and surrounded by a determined hunter that Lady Bertilak proves to be. Like the hunted animals, Gawain is taken by surprise and he has to use all his skills to survive. When the moment of surprise is over, though, Lady Bertilak makes sure that there is no misunderstanding as for the purpose of her visit:

¹⁵⁶ see Piotr Sadowski *The Knight on His Quest: Symbolic Patterns of Transition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Associated UP, 1996) 169-183.

“My body is here at hand,
Your each wish to fulfill;”¹⁵⁷

This being uttered, the lady puts Gawain in a very difficult position. Abiding by her wishes, he would dishonor Lord Bertilak, King Arthur and the Virgin Mary; refusing the lady, on the other hand, would be a direct insult to her and also a blow to Gawain’s reputation as a courtly lover. Not surprisingly, when Gawain realizes that it is, indeed, the beautiful lady sitting on his bedside and that this actually might be her intentions, he pretends to be asleep at first, wishing that she might leave if he keeps on feigning sleep; his initial reaction is, therefore, to handle the unpleasant situation by pretending that it does not exist in the first place. Gawain does not want to offend anybody, nor does he want to break his promises, but he is well aware of the reputation that goes hand in hand with the situation he finds himself in and he has no idea how to balance his behavior so that nobody, not even his reputation, gets hurt. In the meantime, Lord Bertilak is dissecting the animals and the readers are given a very detailed description of the whole procedure. Piotr Sadowski aptly sums up: “The uncovering of Gawain’s hidden instincts and bringing them up to the level of consciousness are rendered symbolically in the parallel forest scenes by means of the great accumulation of verbs that have to do with cutting, slitting, hacking, cleaving, breaking up of the flesh, and pulling out of the entrails.”¹⁵⁸

Indeed, Gawain’s hidden instincts are precisely what the Lady is after. Instructed by Morgan, she wants him to give in to the basic physical instincts devoid of any sense of obligation, morality and responsibility that the code of chivalry dictates. The best way to achieve that is to persuade Gawain that they are alone and that she would never tell her husband about their amorous adventures. Gawain knows very well that they are alone, yet, his sense of morality, or rather his fear of the upcoming events, make him reluctant and he takes up a defensive position in which he tries to mediate between the two options he faces. He even takes recourse to his degrading speech again:

“To arrive at such reverence as you recount here
I am one all unworthy, and well do I know it.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 1237-1238.

¹⁵⁸ Piotr Sadowski *The Knight on His Quest: Symbolic Patterns of Transition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (London: Associated UP, 1996) 173.

¹⁵⁹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 1243-1244.

Gawain is persuaded that he can balance everything but with each new day, he is more and more aware of the fact that he is trapped. On the second day, the lady puts into question his reputation and urges him even more strongly to behave as courtesy binds. She brings up the topic of love and tries to challenge Gawain's male identity. When this does not work, she pretends that she needs to be instructed in the art of love that Gawain is said to master so well.

“And you, that with sweet vows sway women's hearts,
Should show your winsome ways, and woo a yound thing,
And teach by some tokens the craft of true love.”¹⁶⁰

When this does not work either, she starts to assume that Gawain must have a lover, otherwise why else would he not become hers. The lady tries everything she can think of to lead Gawain into giving in to her wishes.

On the whole, it is, indeed, a genius plan based primarily on a reversal of genders. Gawain is not admitted to the male realm of hunting, instead he is confined to the feminine realm of a bedroom where it is much easier for Lady Bertilak to achieve what she wants or, more precisely, what Morgan wants her to achieve. Sharon M. Rowley discusses the lady's motivations and she tries to provide the possible interpretations for her behavior. Rowley reaches the conclusion that since Lady Bertilak's motivations are extremely ambiguous and unclear, she has been viewed by so many critics as the prototypical temptress simply trying to lead Gawain astray.¹⁶¹ How does, however, Lady Bertilak's behavior differ from that of the Green Knight or Bertilak himself? The lady resides in a castle that is under the direct command of Morgan le Fay. The lord of the castle himself has already taken on two roles in order to carry out Morgan's wishes and he has carried them out very convincingly. Isn't it reasonable to assume that the lady plays just about the same role as anybody else in the castle? Is it really more plausible that she acts on her own accord, out of her own desire? Bertilak himself later on admits that:

“And the wooing of my wife – it was all my scheme!”¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 1525-1527.

¹⁶¹ see Rowley 159-161.

¹⁶² *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* l. 2361.

He does not, however, forget to mention that there is one more agent above both him and his wife – Morgan le Fay. Morgan, therefore, instructed Bertilak who, in turn, instructed his wife to test Gawain in terms of inappropriate courtly advances. Lady Bertilak does, indeed, behave as if she had a task to fulfil as well. Gawain, even though in the most polite terms, refuses her advances, yet, she never gives up. She comes on the second and on the third day, her arguments even stronger, better prepared and more convincing, her tactics altered and her body more adapted to what she intends to accomplish. The intensity of her power of persuasion is also mirrored in the number of kisses she manages to receive from Gawain; one on the first day, two on the second day and three on the third day.

When she understands that Gawain will not give in, pretending disappointment the lady at least insists on a gift that she would keep as a present and suggests Gawain's glove. When Gawain refuses, she wants to reverse the roles once again by making herself the giver; she is offering Gawain a love-token in the form of a ring. Since Gawain has nothing to offer back to her, this token is not accepted either. When the lady sees that none of her ruses make Gawain renounce his allegiance to the lord, she offers to present him with a girdle whose properties she is more than ready to explain:

“For the man that possesses this piece of silk,
If he bore it on his body, belted about,
There is no hand under heaven that could hew him down,
For he could not be killed by any craft of earth.”¹⁶³

Gawain immediately accepts the gift and agrees to keep it from the lord. By this simple act, he is obviously willing to believe that the girdle is powerful enough to protect his life at his meeting with the Green Knight and this alleged property to save his life becomes more important than the promise he gave to Lord Bertilak or to the Virgin Mary.

Jessica Cooke explores in her article “The Lady's Blushing Ring in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” the significance of the lady's keepsakes more in detail. She comments on the poet's fascination with symbolism of numbers, colors and objects through the whole

¹⁶³ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll.1851-1854.

poem, but more importantly, Cooke argues that the three keepsakes can be placed on a certain scale of temptation and that the girdle is the only object whose acceptance can be excused.¹⁶⁴ It is true that both the glove and the ring are objects of some worth and they also work as love-tokens; especially rings have always been considered to represent the romantic link between a lady and her knight. Since Gawain never gives in to the lady but somehow manages to balance his word to the lord and his obligation to courtesy, he does not want to accept any token that would say otherwise. The girdle, on the other hand, has nothing to do with love, but everything to do with the simple wish to preserve Gawain's life. Gawain knows that it is not right to accept it, which can be seen from the fact that he attends a confession right after he does accept it, but self-preservation face to face death seems to be a stronger call for him. Gawain's morality is without doubt very high, the problem is that he lives by a set of shoulds and should nots prescribed by the chivalric code of the knights of the Round Table. He forgets that a quest for perfection, even though a noble task, is nevertheless an impossible task for humans. No one is perfect, not even Gawain and his acceptance of the girdle only goes on to prove something that Morgan knows all along.

4.4.4 Beheading game II (revelation) and Gawain's displacement of the blame

When the day comes, Gawain sets out to the Green Chapel to face the Green Knight. By right, the Green Knight asks Gawain to pay his debt. This part of Morgan's plan is more of a one-sided game since only the Green Knight knows the rules. The purpose is, however, to teach Gawain a lesson and to reveal the full extent of the test Gawain underwent in the preceding days. To do that, the Green Knight administers three blows corresponding to the three days of the double-testing that Gawain was subject to. The first two blows are fully feigned since Gawain kept the terms of his promise and repaid Bertilak with what he had received. The third blow, however, leaves a mark on Gawain's neck – one that reflects Gawain's failure and ill behavior in keeping the girdle and in hiding it from the lord.

“Yet you lacked, sir, a little in loyalty there,
But the cause was not cunning, nor courtship either,
But that you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame.”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Jessica Cooke “The Lady's ‘Blushing’ Ring in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” *The Review of English Studies, New Series*, Vol. 49, No. 193 (Feb., 1998): 1-8. JSTOR Palacky University, Olomouc, CZ, 3 Nov. 2010 <<http://www.jstor.org>>.

¹⁶⁵ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* ll. 2366-2368.

Table 11: An overview of the Beheading game II (revelation)

Number of blow	Way of administering it	Gawain's behaviour
first blow	feigned	Gawain flinched - cowardice
second blow	feigned	anger
third blow	slight wound	acceptance

When Gawain realizes the full extent of what was in store for him and when he understands his mistake, he immediately displays shame and embarrassment. These feelings change into anger aimed at his own fallibility and lead to the subsequent confession. In this confession, he willingly accepts his sin and it is this penitence that makes him virtuous in the eyes of the lord and Arthur's court that willingly decides to wear the girdle as a token of the lesson learned. There is, however, a disagreement about the lesson Gawain has learned. After a while, when everything has time to fully sink in, Gawain realizes that he has been tricked and tempted into accepting the girdle by the lady. He also realizes that the lady did not, indeed, behave on her own accord but had it as her task to lead Gawain astray. After the initial awareness of his own mistakes, Gawain starts to shift the blame away from him and towards another target, this other target being the female sex and what follows is then commonly referred to as Gawain's diatribe against women. Harvey De Roo rightly asks: "What so stings him [Gawain] that for the first time in the poem he loses a hitherto superbly maintained control toward women?"¹⁶⁶ Indeed, how come that Gawain suddenly turns to the well-established hatred towards women as the source of all evil and totally forgets about what he confessed a few minutes ago?

De Roo argues that during the time of the full awareness of what actually happened, Gawain realized one more thing: "While he [Gawain] had been playing a game behind which lay no intention to have sex with her [Lady Bertilak], it now appears that she was playing a similar game, and had no such intentions either. (...) All untrue! What a blow to his male ego!"¹⁶⁷ In other words, De Roo suggests that blaming the female sex for being corruptive, deceptive and treacherous simply derives from Gawain's injured male vanity. The lady was just carrying out orders of another woman who, in her turn, wanted to get her revenge on a third woman and at the same time prove that the ideal order of chivalry that her brother

¹⁶⁶ Harvey De Roo, "Undressing Lady Bertilak: Guilt and Denial in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *The Chaucer Review* 27.3 (1993): 305.

¹⁶⁷ De Roo 312.

represents is actually far from being ideal since its components are men – human and susceptible to wishes and passions, the wish of preservation of life being even stronger than all of the rest. And she uses Gawain to do so.

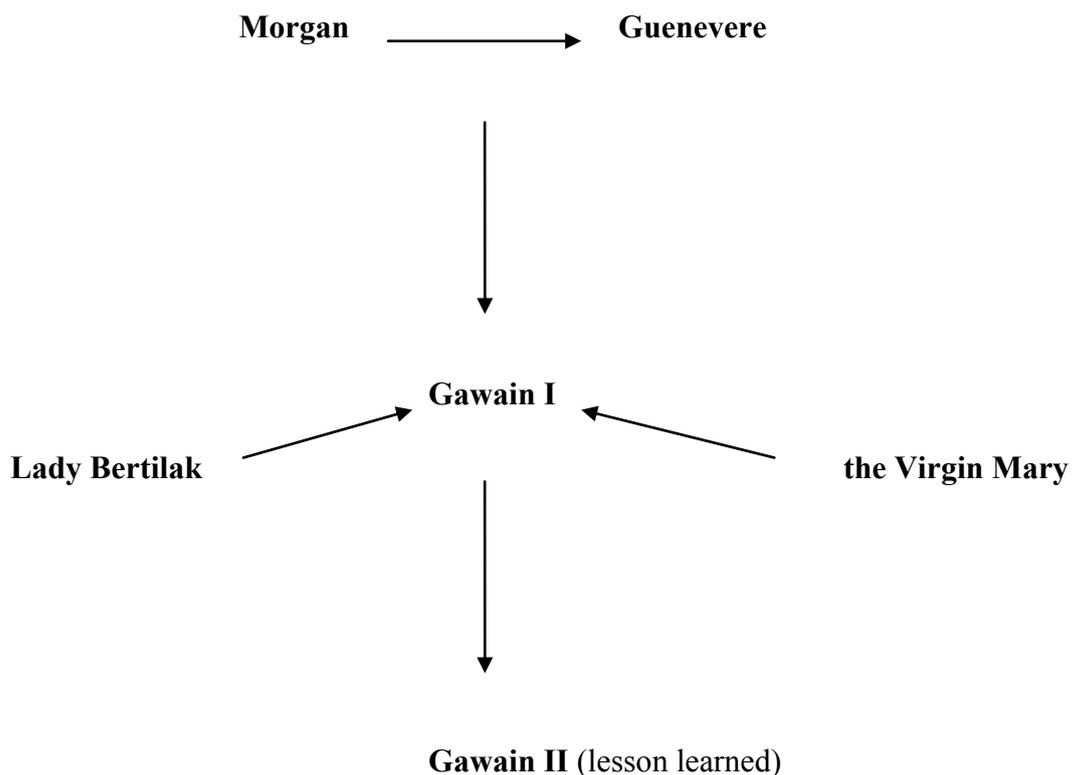
The search for perfection, embodied by Gawain does, indeed, contain a journey towards a certain discovery; one that makes him being aware of the limitations that humans must be willing to live with. Such a search for perfection within the chivalric society raises up a lot of questions. There is the social pressure that such a society puts on its members, there are the codes that the knights should abide by, there are rules to follow, allegiances to pledge, forms of behavior to agree to, reputations to uphold... it is not in the power of men to be perfect in all of these areas. Morgan knows this and she is angry with her brother for pretending otherwise and for putting his Round Table on the pedestal of all goodness and perfection. Morgan knows better. She knows that rules in the public sphere are necessary, but there is also the private sphere of our life, one where we follow our own desires and our own rules and these do not necessarily go hand in hand with the rules prescribed by the society. Moreover, it is not an uncommon thing that the society puts on the individuals exaggerated demands that clash by nature. The chivalric code of behavior and the code of courtly love do not, indeed, go hand in hand and only one has to be given preference. Gawain finds himself in the middle of this mess of forces and demands that society has piled up on him. He strives for perfection and when he fails, he prefers to displace the blame on the common foe of that time – on women.

Consequently, a lot of critics, many of whom have been already quoted in this paper, interpret and approach the story as a cautionary tale aimed against women who, if given power, use it for its petty wars and dull ventures. They should be silent, obedient and representative, virtuous and chaste and, if possible, spare of words. What if the poet's critique, however, should have fallen someplace else? What if he wanted to point out more at the unjust social order that is, in the name of greater good, eliminating the private sphere of life and putting all emphasis on the common ideals of perfection that are impossible to achieve in the first place? Morgan, the bad agent and a well-established enemy of King Arthur, is the epitome of the private sphere of life. She knows that basic instincts and needs will always guide our behavior and she does not agree with the hypocritical presentation of Arthur's court claiming otherwise. She does not use her magical powers for petty wars, she uses them to create one of the most elaborate and complex tests ever found in literature, a test with a clear structure and purpose. Consequently, she is a crucial part of the story that Gawain takes credit for way too often. She is not, however, the only female character to do so.

Although marginalized textually, Guenevere, the Virgin Mary, and Lady Bertilak all create an integral part of the story. They are bound to each other by both conflicting and conspiratory forces, they help each other or hate each other, but in any case, Morgan's actions against Guenevere sends Gawain on his mission during which he pledges his allegiance to the Virgin Mary only to be tested by Lady Bertilak so that Morgan can prove that her critique of the Round Table is justified.

The whole poem ends as it started, in laughter, but Gawain has learned his lesson and the court honors his initial acceptance of guilt by wearing the girdle. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not, however, a cautionary tale aimed against women. It presents the most extreme test of masculinity, for sure, but such a test can only be achieved by engaging with and resisting the female, not by ignoring it.¹⁶⁸

Table 12: Gawain's journey seen from the point of view of the female characters



¹⁶⁸ see Larrington 64.

As can be seen from the diagram, Gawain's journey is shaped by female characters even though he thinks he has everything in his hands. Gawain leaves a different man, but the nature of the change must be decided by the reader. The interpretation that this paper puts forward is that Gawain should not be considered a hero of the poem; he has no opinions of his own, he is not passionate about anything, he volunteers only because he thinks that his death would be lesser evil, he lives by a code of dos and don'ts and when he gets trapped in between two of them which actually contradict each other, he is unable to decide and to say outright what he wants. Gawain is trying as long as he can not to insult the lady while at the same time not giving in to her demands only to learn that he is human and values his life like anybody else. When he realizes that, he prefers to displace the blame on the common scapegoat of the Middle Ages. No, Gawain does not display any heroic qualities apart from those that the readers only hear about in the poem. But that does not define who Gawain is, his actions do that and he acts more as a dysfunctional part of a supposedly perfect system; and it is the female characters and their interplay that help to bring about this message.

4.6 Conclusion to chapter four

This chapter opened up with an overview of the complexity of Morgan's plan. Though complex, it is a clearly structured plan composed of four main levels at which different parts of Gawain's character are tested. In the Beheading game, the Exchange of winnings game, the Temptation game and in the final revelation, Morgan makes use of an agent who carries out her orders while enabling her to stay hidden. The Green Knight's behavior and his arrogant comportment directly personify Morgan, Lord Bertilak and the lady also appear to be carrying out Morgan's wishes as well as they can. There are conflicting and conspiratory forces that can be found in the plan, forces that either antagonize the female characters or, on the other hand, make them allies.

The remaining part of the chapter provided space for an interpretation of the story from Morgan's point of view rather than from Gawain's. Her plan in all its layers has been explained bearing in mind Morgan's possible motivations and an attempt has been made to show that the female characters in the story are more interconnected than it might seem. They shape Gawain's journey from the beginning to the end, they are either the helping or the testing forces and together, they bring about one of the possible messages of the poem.

Conclusion

*Now the New Year draws near, and the night passes,
The day dispels the dark, by the Lord's decree;
But wild weather awoke in the world without:
The clouds in the cold sky cast down their snow
With great gusts from the north, grievous to bear.*¹⁶⁹

“A text is really many texts in the same body and to select among them for significance is to draw attention to the programmatic of choice.”¹⁷⁰ An analysis of a literary piece of work is, as Geraldine Heng correctly affirms, invariably partial. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* can be, and indeed has been, seen from different angles, all of which provide various possibilities for interpretation and such an ambiguity should be definitely considered as one of the indicators of the poem's greatness. The literary criticism has, however, approached *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* mainly from the point of view of the male characters. All the female characters have been mostly seen as subordinate, marginal or unimportant, at least until very recently; a loophole, therefore, opened up for this paper to approach the story from this commonly disregarded direction. The programmatic of choice has been consequently assigned to the re-evaluation of the importance of the female characters in SGGK.

This paper has been built on the hypothesis affirming that: *The female characters in SGGK present a parallel to the endless knot that Gawain's pentangle represents by forming a knot of their own; one in which the construction of each woman entails a point of anchoring in another.*¹⁷¹ *The female pillars of such a knot influence the actions of each other, they are interconnected by both conspiratory and conflicting forces in the midst of which we can find Gawain himself, unable to decide whose allegiance to keep and whose codes to follow, whether those of the Virgin Mary, those of Lord Bertilak or those of the lady. The knot of female characters is a strong one and even though a certain degree of their in-textual marginalization might be easily agreed on, the female voice in SGGK resonates very strongly, both individually and collectively.* In line with this declaration, the following research question with its sub-questions has been formulated. *What is the importance of the female characters in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight? Does their textual marginalization automatically result in their secondary importance in terms of the story's interpretation?*

¹⁶⁹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* II. 1998-2002.

¹⁷⁰ Heng 500.

¹⁷¹ Heng 503.

Is there any interconnectedness among the female characters and if so, how important are those relations for the story as well as for the message which the poet intended to pass on to his audience? To fully answer the research question, several sub-conclusions have been reached in four distinctive chapters.

The first chapter anchored the topic theoretically by focusing on the role and on the importance of women in the Middle Ages, especially towards its latter part. The most important political, social and cultural events have been assessed since these were the events that gave rise to the the most prominent currents of thoughts. Attention was paid to the vicissitudes at the English court at the time of Edward I, Edward II, and Edward III; it was during Edward III's reign when SGGK was most probably written and there are, indeed, hints in the poem that might be considered as direct links to one of the most feudal rulers ever on the English throne. Medieval ideas about women spread from and were disseminated by two sources; the Church and the aristocracy. Both of them formulated a doctrine of subordination of women based on their supposed feeble physical construction and their inclination towards a higher degree of emotionality that was considered dangerous. Both the Church and the aristocracy rooted this conviction in their upbringing and neither of them liked to be opposed in their views. Interestingly enough, both classes developed also a counter-doctrine of woman's exaltation and adoration; the Virgin Mary was the main role model in the realm of Christianity, a lady of the court was the role model within aristocracy. Both of these were more of idealized role figures rather than real characters. Consequently, the Middle Ages put women at two opposite extremes; they were perceived either as idealized personifications of beauty and virtues or as demonic temptresses leading men astray. The real position of women, of course, oscillated in between these two extremes; it was a neverending dispute and a matter of constant entertainment and interest to argue about where women actually belong and how they should be treated. This was also demonstrated by the literary output of the Middle Ages discussed in this paper, such as *The Wife's Lament*, *The Husband's Message*, *Judith*, *Ancrene Riwle*, *Lanval*, *Cantebury Tales*, *Showings* or the *Book of Margery Kempe*.

After the theoretical introduction, the second chapter turned directly to the female characters in SGGK, namely to Queen Guenevere, the Virgin Mary, Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay. It focused on their in-textual references and reached the conclusion that three, out of the four characters, are textually marginalized. In other words, the number of lines dedicated to their description or to their characterization represents only an insignificant part of the poem; for both Guenevere, the Virgin Mary and Morgan, the number of line does not exceed twenty in a poem of 2,531 lines. The poet pays attention to all kinds of other details

such as to the description of Arthur's court and its habits, to the feast itself or to the armor Gawain is wearing. The self-evident notion of marginalization of the female characters was then challenged, arguing that textual marginalization does not automatically correspond to marginalization of a character's importance. Such an argument was supported by the re-evaluation of Gawain as the only hero of the poem. It has been shown that notwithstanding a certain heroic pattern that the poet describes, Gawain does not deliver what a knight-hero should in the given situation; he is mostly passive, confined to a highly feminized space where he faces the attacks of the lady without being able to firmly stand his ground, and last but not least, he ends up neither with triumph nor with a beautiful lady by his side. He is ashamed and angry with himself, choosing to displace the blame on the female sex instead.

Gawain can definitely be considered a hero of the poem, but there are tangible inconsistencies with the heroic knight figure and these inconsistencies leave some space for other characters to fill in. Using the actantial model, Morgan, even though textually marginalized, was put into the center as the subject of the plot. All six actants were clearly defined, Morgan's possible motifs suggested and the interpretation of the story from Morgan's point of view was hence justified. With Morgan being at the center from which the story can also be approached, this paper went even further and suggested an interconnectedness among other female characters, such an interconnectedness was graphically presented in the form of the female knot. It is created by four pillars represented by the four female characters who are bound to each other by either conspiratory or conflicting forces, the former making them allies, the latter making them opponents or enemies of different kinds, based on the different conflicts. Morgan's importance for the story having thus been justified, it was necessary to assess the importance of the other female characters within the knot and to see how their textual marginalization influences their importance for the story.

The third chapter, therefore, put forward the notion that if a textually marginalized character is supposed to be considered crucial in the interpretation of a story, it has to be firmly rooted in a given culture within which it carries strong connotations of, for example, historical, religious or social significance. A conclusion was reached that even for the other female characters, their textual marginalization does not equal them being marginal for the importance of the story since SGGK as a literary work depends on a certain degree of contextual knowledge on the part of the audience. In case of the Virgin Mary, Guenevere, Morgan and even Lady Bertilak, different associations and connotations are immediately called forth if one is aware of such contextual knowledge. Even if the Arthurian literature

treats its characters in a very inconsistent way, the third chapter traced the development of these characters, their potential devalorization and its possible reasons, and also assessed the shifts in their significance in order to prove that all of them do, indeed, speak for themselves without uttering a single word. It has been concluded that had Morgan's name been revealed at the beginning, the whole story and its ending would have been revealed since the literature had already very well established the personal grudge that Morgan held towards Queen Guenevere and towards King Arthur. A final conclusion has been reached, one stating that in the context of the Middle-English Arthurian romances, none of the female characters in SGGK should be considered marginal in their importance for the interpretation of the story.

The fourth chapter finally presented the alternative interpretation of the poem, all the time bearing in mind that Morgan le Fay was the mastermind and the architect of the tests Gawain was subjected to. Retelling the story, step by step, it was proved that Morgan's significance for the poem is, indeed, fundamental. She is present from the very first page, in the Beheading game proposed by the Green Knight, in the Exchange of winnings game and the Temptation game as well as in the second Beheading game where her role is fully revealed. It was her who planned everything from the first to the last day, it was her who instructed her agents to carry out her orders and it was her who did all this so that she can teach Gawain, Arthur, Camelot and the entire audience a lesson. The whole time, however, she was not acting alone as the whole net of interconnected female relations unveils behind Morgan's steps. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is, indeed, a story originated by Morgan le Fay, directed at Queen Guenevere, carried out by Lady Bertilak and counter-balanced, as for the good spiritual force, by the Virgin Mary. Gawain is a puppet inside this maze of one of the most elaborate tests any man in literature has ever been subjected to. He is there to bring about the lesson he learned the hard way himself, but it is Morgan le Fay who is granting it.

The hypothesis of this paper has been proved right; another knot might be seen in the poem, one created by the four female characters that influence each other and present both conflicting and conspiratory forces that are crucial for the understanding of the poem. The research question has been also fully answered; the textual marginalization of the female characters does not, in any way, diminish the character's importance since all of them represent strong cultural archetypes. They are interconnected by the forces described above, such an interconnectedness leading to yet another possible interpretation of the poem as for its message.

A quest for perfection, however noble, is always subject to who is carrying it out. Humans will always be only human and by definition, they are susceptible to imperfections; to pretend otherwise is arrogant. The real challenge is not to aspire to perfection, like Gawain does, it is rather to get to know the imperfections that the human race is prone to, that we are prone to, and to learn how to live with them.

Czech Summary

Tato literárně zaměřená práce soustředí svou pozornost na anglicky psanou středověkou romanci *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, jejíž datum vzniku časově zapadá do druhé poloviny 14. století. Hlavní náplní práce je přehodnocení obecně prosazovaného názoru, podle kterého se jedná především o příběh rytíře Gawaina a všechny ostatní postavy by měly být interpretovány pouze ve vztahu k němu. Hypotéza, na které je tato práce vystavěna, a která má k takovému přehodnocení pomoci, zní následovně: *textově opomíjené ženské postavy v díle Sir Gawain and the Green Knight mají ve skutečnosti daleko větší význam pro interpretaci díla, než bylo doposud připuštěno. Všechny čtyři postavy reprezentují velmi silné středověké archetypy, které samy o sobě evokují množství konotací a asociací, navíc je jejich jednání propojeno do té míry, že chování jedné postavy přímo i nepřímo ovlivňuje chování druhé postavy. Navzájem je spojují jak stejné, tak protichůdné záměry uprostřed kterých se nicnetušící Gawain ocitá. Společně tedy ženské postavy vytvářejí jakousi paralelu k obrazci, který má Gawain vyobrazen na svém štítu, a na který je v básni odkazováno jako na „endless knot“.*

Hlavní výzkumná otázka a její podotázky byly tedy orientovány na roli, důležitost a propojenost ženských postav v díle *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* a na jejich následný odraz v další možné interpretaci díla, právě z pohledu těchto postav. Primární záměr práce byl zodpovědět výzkumnou otázku a dokázat pravost její hypotézy, sekundární záměr si potom kladl za cíl přispět do oblasti odborné literatury, která se zabývá podobnou problematikou, novými úhly pohledu, které by ideálně podnítily další reakce a také zájem o jednu z nejkrásnějších anglicky psaných středověkých romancí.

Hledání literatury potřebné k zodpovězení výzkumné otázky proběhlo na čtyřech univerzitách; nejdříve ve Spojených státech (Moravian College, Pennsylvania), poté v České republice (Univerzita Palackého, Olomouc a Masarykova Univerzita, Brno) a nakonec v Německu (Georg-August Universität, Göttingen). Přehled použité literatury se tudíž skládá především z knih, internetových databází a univerzitních článků a časopisů, především *JSTOR* a *Speculum*. Metodologický přístup spočíval především v historicko-kulturním a analyticko-deskriptivním přístupu k dané literatuře a jejím vyhodnocení. Byly také využity metody praktické aplikace teoretických konceptů z literární teorie, jako např. aktantní schéma.

Předtím, než se mohla práce věnovat tématu samotnému, bylo nezbytné uvést celou problematiku v teoretickém rámci postavení žen ve středověku, zvláště ve 14. století. Za tímto účelem bylo konzultováno 17 zdrojů, nejstarší z nich byl vydán v 70. letech dvacátého století,

nejaktuálnější potom pochází z roku 2007. Za zmínku rozhodně stojí Robert Ackerman a jeho dílo *Backgrounds to Medieval English Literature*, stejně tak, jako André Maurois a jeho *Dějiny Anglie*. Z knih, které se zaměřují přímo na roli žen ve středověké společnosti, nutno zmínit Eileen Power a její knihu *Medieval Women*, popřípadě Mavis Mate, která se stejnou problematikou zabývá v díle *Women in Medieval English Society*. Jelikož středověká společnost a její názory byly z valné většiny ovlivňovány rolí církve, bylo taktéž velice zajímavé zjistit, jakou roli ženy zastávají v samotné Bibli. Z ostatních autorů, jejichž díla pomohla objasnit roli žen ve středověku zmiňme alespoň Carole Rawcliff, Muriel Whitaker, Georges Duby, Cordelia Beattie, nebo Rowena E. Archer. Ze samotných děl středověku, která mohou problematiku dále objasnit byla konzultována tato díla: *Judith, the Husband's Message, the Wife's Lament, the Life of Mary of Egypt, Ancrene Riwe, The Book of the Knight of the Tower: Manners for Young Medieval Women, Lanval, nebo Canterbury Tales*.

Co se týče literární kritiky, která se obrací na ženské postavy v SGGK, největším přínosem byla bezesporu Geraldine Heng a její článek "Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", společně s články Sheily Fisher, Cindy L. Vitto a Lili Arkin. Všechny čtyři autorky se jako snad jediné snaží nahlížet, i když z různých pohledů, na ženské postavy jako na celek, neanalyzují je individuálně, ale navrhují určitý stupeň propojení postav. Valná většina knih potom přináší cenné informace o ženských postavách právě jako o jednotlivcích. Ulrike Bethlehem se zabývá postavou královny Guenevere ve své publikaci *Guinevere – A Medieval Puzzle. Images of Arthur's Queen in the Medieval Literature*. Carlyne Larrington se ve své publikaci *King Arthur's Enchantresses: Morgan and Her Sisters in Arthurian Tradition* na druhou stranu věnuje postavě Morgan le Fay. Mary Clayton se ve svém výzkumu věnovala Panně Marii, a to v publikaci *The Cult of The Virgin Mary in Anglo-Saxon England*, Sharon M. Rowly byla potom jedna z těch, jejíž práce pomohla osvětlit roli Lady Bertilak.

Celá práce je dělena na čtyři kapitoly, každá z nich obsahuje svůj úvod a závěr a každá z nich má zhruba dvacet stran. První kapitola se zaměřuje na historické pozadí a pojednává o roli žen ve středověku obecně. Jelikož se práce celkově věnuje tématu ženských postav, je důležité zmínit zdroje, ze kterých se názory na postavení žen šířily. Ve středověku tuto roli plnila především církev a šlechta. Oba dva stavy formulovaly nejdříve postavení ženy jako podřadné, a to na základě jak fyzických vlastností, tak většího stupně emocionality, který byl ženám přisuzován. Katolická doktrína našla opodstatnění těchto názorů v Bibli, aristokracie velmi ráda dané myšlenky převzala a upravila je v rámci svého působení. Zároveň ovšem oba dva stavy začaly prosazovat postavení ženy jako vysoce idealizovaného objektu, který

mužská společnost uctívala a ochraňovala. V katolické doktríně byla jako vzor dávána Panna Marie, šlechta potom v rámci konceptu *l'amour courtois*, neboli dvorské lásky, představila světu ideál dámy. Prakticky celý středověk byly tudíž ženy kladeny mezi dva extrémy, buď to byly potomci Evy, svůdkyně a pokušitelky, nebo to byly andělské bohyně krásy a ctností. Tento fakt vedl k nikdy nekončícím sporům o pravý charakter ženy a tato skutečnost se krásně odráží v literární tvorbě té doby, například v romanci SGGK.

Po teoretickém úvodu se druhá kapitola zaměřuje přímo na ženské postavy v SGGK, konkrétně na královnu Guenevere, Pannu Marii, Lady Bertilak a na Morgan le Fay. Zaměřuje se zvláště na jejich výskyt v samotném textu a dochází k závěru, že až na postavu Lady Bertilak jsou všechny ženské postavy textově opomíjené. Z celkového počtu 2 531 řádků není královně Guenevere věnováno ani dvacet; postavy Panny Marie a Morgan le Fay jsou na tom velice podobně. Zdánlivě logický závěr nedůležitosti jejich postav je následně přehodnocen pomocí aktantního schématu, které ukazuje, že Gawain nemusí být automaticky považován za jediného hrdinu básně. Existuje další výklad, a to ten, v jehož čele stojí postava Morgan le Fay. Druhá kapitola jde ovšem ještě dále když navrhne schéma, zde pracovně označované jako „female knot“, ve kterém se snaží uvést ostatní ženské postavy díla do souvislostí. Vznikne tak diagram, jehož čtyři rohy jsou tvořeny čtyřmi až téměř archetypálními postavami, mezi kterými se rýsují různé vztahy, ať už spiklenecké, nebo antagonistické.

Třetí kapitola se věnuje těmto čtyřem pilířům individuálně. Cílem je prokázat, že pokud určitá postava tvoří neodmyslitelnou součást dané kultury, je automatické, že při její první zmínce vystane na mysl celá řada asociací a konotací. Při interpretaci jakéhokoli díla je tudíž nezbytná, nebo přinejmenším velmi užitečná, určitá znalost kontextu, jak už politického, kulturního, tak např. náboženského. I když literatura zabývající se králem Arturem velmi často zachází se svými postavami při nejmenším nejednotně, je možné pozorovat určitý vývoj či posun, a to pro každou ženskou postavu v SGGK. Třetí kapitola se tedy snaží určit a definovat konotace, které každá postava za dobu své existence získala a snaží se vše aplikovat na vybranou romanci. Samotná zmínka jména Morgan le Fay na začátku básně by velice pravděpodobně prozradila její celý průběh, nebo přinejmenším pravděpodobný konec. Charakter Morgan pojí s královnou Guenevere pradávna zášť sahající ke královninu bratranci, který Morgan právě na žádost královny opustil. Morgan to zlomilo srdce a od té doby se motiv pomsty stal neoddělitelnou součástí Artušovských románů. Ukryvání jejího jména a jeho překvapivé odhalení na úplný konec básně by ovšem nemělo být považováno za známku nedůležitosti postavy Morgan le Fay. Spíše naopak, takové rozuzlení se dá považovat za literární lahůdku adresovanou čtenářům. Konec třetí kapitoly dochází k závěru, že žádná ze

ženských postav vyskytujících se v SGGK by neměla být opomíjena co se týče jejího významu, jelikož každá z nich nese velice silné historicko kulturní konotace, které, pokud si je jich čtenář vědom, radikálně pozmění možnou interpretaci díla.

Poslední kapitola nabízí takovou interpretaci. Příběh je sledován krok za krokem s tím, že se celou dobu soustředí na svého skutečného autora, Morgan le Fay. Všechny úrovně Morganina plánu jsou analyzovány, od úvodní výzvy na dvoře krále Artuše až do posledního testu, který Gawain musí podstoupit. Byla to skutečně Morgan, kdo naplánoval veškerý děj příběhu, byla to Morgan kdo zadal příkazy svým agentům a byla to Morgan kdo měl dost seběvědomí na to, aby ušetřil králi Artušovi a jeho rytířům lekci. Celou dobu ovšem nejednala sama, ale měla své pomocníky, hlavně Lady Bertilak a jejího muže. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* skutečně je příběh, který zorganizuje Morgan le Fay, když chce vystrašit královnu Guenevere a zároveň ušetřit lekci svému bratrovi, k tomu využívá služeb Lady Bertilak a celé její úsilí je vyvažováno spirituální silou Panny Marie, které Gawain přísahal svou věrnost. I když v celé básni existuje určitý vzor patrný z ostatních romancí, Gawain nepůsobí jako rytířancelovského typu. Sám má o sobě velice nízké mínění, je nerozhodný, snaží se zalíbit se všem stranám aniž by si kohokoli znepřátelil, slepě žije podle daných morálních zásad, které nikdy sám nezpochybňuje, i když se nakonec sám přesvědčí, že lidská nedokonalost je něco, s čím jako lidé musíme žít. V každém případě je to Morgan le Fay, která se díky svému spletitému plánu postará o to, že si Gawain něco takového vůbec uvědomí.

Samotná báseň nabízí spoustu úskalí, ve kterých muži mohou díky ženám sejít z cesty. To ovšem nemůže vést k závěru, že ženské postavy ve vybrané romanci nepředstavují zajímavou sféru k analýze. Královna Guenevere, Panna Marie, Lady Bertilak a Morgan le Fay samy o sobě představují fascinující kombinaci charakterů. Je velice zajímavé sledovat, jak se jejich postavy vyvíjely před tím, než byl *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* vůbec napsán a je zajímavé pozorovat, jak se v básni jejich osudy a asociace proplétají, aniž by se většina z nich vůbec potkala. Někdy může postava mluvit, aniž by vyřkla jediné slovo a to je případ ženských postav v této středověké romanci, která představuje jednu z nejpromyšlenějších a nejsložitějších zkoušek, kterým byl jakýkoli smrtelník kdy vystaven. Gawain může být považován za hrdinu básně, k takovému tvrzení jistě existuje řada opodstatnění. Stejně tak ale existuje řada argumentů, proč by Gawain neměl být považován za jediný výchozí bod pro interpretaci díla, jak tomu bohužel velice často bývalo. Tato diplomová práce se snažila dokázat, že existuje řada dalších pohledů a přiklonila se k tomu, který vychází ze spletité sítě ženských postav, ve které činy jedné postavy ovlivňují činy další. *Sir Gawain and the Green*

Knight nikdy nebyl považován za dílo, které může být vysvětleno a pochopeno jednostranně, tato práce to naznačila mnohokrát. Taková mnohvrstevnost by se ovšem měla chápat jako jedna ze známek geniality této básně; tato práce snad k podobnému závěru přispěla.

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Annotation

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Název práce:	Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A female knot and the interconnectedness of the female voice in a medieval romance.
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Klíčová slova:	<i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> , Guenevere, Morgan le Fay, the Virgin Mary, Lady Bertilak, role žen ve středověké společnosti, textové opomíjení postav, propojenost a důležitost ženských postav, koncept „female knot“, aktantní schéma