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English 4110: Medieval Literature

Evolving Identity: Hellenistic Greece vs. Arthurian Legend

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English 4110: Medieval Literature

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Paper II

Evolving Identity: Hellenistic Greece vs. Arthurian Legend

Identity is a critical theme interwoven through several works of medieval literature although the defining characteristic of identity can vary between tales. Identity itself can be created from an individual's origin, environment, or religion. Especially in epic romances, the evolution of male identity is a defining feature, revolving around the epic hero who oftentimes is romanticized. In the stories of Arthurian legends, in particular *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the readers follow characters who are distinguished by their knightly identity. Sir Gawain, our titular knight follows the code of chivalry as the story unfolds in fourteenth-century England. With chivalry being vital to Sir Gawain, he can approach the chaos of the world ahead of him with the strength of his virtues. Sir Gawain adheres to such chivalric ideologies but does not neglect his mortality. Sir Gawain's remembrance of his mortality mirrors the character of Alexander the Great in *The Greek Alexander Romance*. This book gives a deep look into the evolution of one of the most famous generals in history written in Hellenistic times. His story traces his journey from birth to adulthood, and into the great general he would become making him an enduring paradigm to Gawain. From the moment Alexander was born, his identity remained in constant flux as he grew from a young boy training in his father's army to an emperor of the world. Alexander's identity is shaped by destiny itself along with political and supernatural forces. The primary characters of both stories use their fluctuating identity to connect to their ideas of justice, courtliness, honor, and shame. With identity being central to Alexander and Sir Gawain, one can trace how this theme can tie to the evolving understanding of service to their country and themselves. Analyzing the life and tale of Alexander the Great and

Sir Gawain, respectively, both adhered to traditional masculine values of their time, yet both provided an evolutionary shift in masculine expectations and thus, identity.

Sir Gawain's traditional and primary identity is tied to knighthood, with his virtues depicted in the first Fit, setting the stage for a closer examination of such an astute character. Knightly duty was a privilege Sir Gawain acquired in the court of King Arthur however, it represented the flaws of the quintessential Christian. The knights of Arthur's court are not flawless individuals but temperate and imperfect and reflect the court of Heaven. King Arthur takes on a Christ-like role as he is the worthy ruler of Camelot exemplified by his regal qualities. The knights of Camelot can be likened to his disciples. Though the knights are imperfect, they remain strong and resolute, and merciful, which reflects the qualities of their king. A principal element knights utilize to remain such disciple-like figures is the chivalric code. With the emergence and development of chivalry in the eleventh century, the archetypal knightly system drew from ideas of religion, morality, and social code. Chivalry is tied to Camelot where the knights dwell in space, power and identity as the poem firmly states, "With all delights on earth they housed there together, / Saving Christ's self, the most celebrated knights.../And the comeliest king ever to keep court. /For this fine fellowship was in its fair prime" (Stone 23). Identity from the start of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is tied to the physical and spiritual landscape of Camelot itself. Because of King Arthur's virtues and outstanding leadership, Camelot remains a haven for its citizens. This utopia is penetrated when the appearance of the Green Knight pits Camelot into chaos. When the Green Knight proclaimed his challenge, Gawain amongst countless knights chose to answer it. He said to the unnamed foe, "I am the weakest, the most wanting in wisdom.../And my life, if lost, would be least missed...And I first asked it of you, make it over to me" (Stone 34). With these initial lines, one begins to

comprehend Gawain's depth as a character. Even though he is the nephew of the king, his first lines indicate the humbleness and bravery that typically accompanies traditional depictions of chivalry.

Qualities of honor, humility, and dedication to service are elucidated as significant characteristics of identity, especially in connection with Sir Gawain. While his identity is initially introduced with knightly status, it evolves into much more. From his first appearance, Gawain shows an unfathomable drive to his service to his uncle and Camelot. Though he is related to nobility, he does not rely on his uncle to aid or protect him from harm. The construction of chivalric duty is a significant part of Sir Gawain. At the beginning of the poem, Gawain's identity takes on the classic start of a literary hero. He is an inexperienced young man looking to stake his worth in the quest to follow. If successful, he can truly embrace the knightly chivalric identity. However, it can be said this is no ordinary quest for our knightly character. While it is a journey of merit, it is also a path to self-discovery. "As a marvel in the world of men", an early description from the poem, sets the stage for the masculine expectations and identity of the time. To be regarded as a true knight, Gawain must submit to the standards for fear of shame and ridicule by his older comrades. Though he does submit to the stereotypical standards of knights, he does it in a way that is detrimental to his overall characterization.

Gawain is a near-perfect character at the cost of the lack of a plausible arc. When readers are first introduced to our titular character, it becomes apparent he will not suffer permanent consequences and will return to Camelot at the end of his quest. His near-perfect characteristics are centered on the five virtues of knighthood explicitly stated in the poem that make up overall his male identity. These five virtues are liberality, generosity, courtesy, mercy, and piety. As the story progresses, Gawain's qualities are unaltered, but his identity shifts with his experiences.

With his preparation for the quest ahead, he transforms into a knight ready to take charge of his providential destiny. He is motivated to pave his way as a reparable knight. In the second Fit, his temptations begin where he must stay true to his identifiable qualities. As an example, when he is lured into a debate of sexual and political negotiations with the Lady of the castle, he avoids the trap of committing adultery with her. His honor prevents him from falling victim to the trap of lust. In medieval culture, it would be disrespectful for him to take advantage of his host Bertilak who offered Gawain his home, his resources, and his wife to keep him occupied. Nonetheless, Bertilak's wife in all her sexualizing glory tests his masculine identity by inviting him to her bed. Gawain could partake in this illustrious affair as it was not unheard of for knights to lose their virginity to women. It was not a necessity to remain chaste as many knights, such as Sir Lancelot, have proven. Gawain's dedication to preserving his identifiable qualities is outstanding to see.

Towards the end of the tale, Gawain evolved into the definition of a knight by conquering his quest even when he fails in his showdown with the Green Knight. When the final confrontation occurs at the poem's end, Gawain bears the mark of his failure when he flinches when the knight swings at him. In the final stanza, Gawain addresses the mark saying,

This belt confirms the blame I bear on my neck, /

My bane and debasement, the burden I bear /

For being caught by cowardice and covetousness. This is the figure of the faithlessness found in me, /

Which I must needs wear while I live (Stone, 114)

The shame of his failure to remain resolute in the challenge with the Green Knight stays with Gawain becoming a part of his chivalric identity. Key elements of chivalry are honor, loyalty,

and courage, all which Gawain portrays. His honor prevents him from lying to his uncle and fellow knights when he returns home to Camelot while his courage and loyalty allowed him to even begin this journey. When he undertook the task, his identity evolved from a young man needing wisdom and experience to a man who becomes of the world and the trepidations outside of the haven of King Arthur's court.

A particularly striking part of Gawain's identity is his piety, which is apparent throughout the poem. Piety is a key element of Gawain, particularly in what possessions Gawain holds onto. The two essential objects of his symbolic identity and piety are the green girdle and the gold pentangle. These are symbols of a religious time when religion was used to provide peace for those who fear the tribulations ahead in their physical and next life. Scholar Richard Hamilton Green interpreted the pentangle as "... 'a token of inner virtue' as a master-stroke of ambiguity: 'the poet transforms a suspect magical sign into an emblem of perfection to achieve the simultaneous suggestion of greatness and potential failure'"¹ (Hardman 1). The appearance of the pentangle on Gawain's shield ties his identity together, which is defined by the five virtues. The pentangle is not the sole image on his shield, however.

To solidify how pious Gawain is, there is an image of the Virgin Mary depicted on his shield. The poet describes Gawain's religious devotion writing, "Accordingly the courteous knight had that queen's image / Etched on the inside of his armoured shield, / So that when he beheld her, his heart did not fail" (Stone 45). While the obvious interpretation is related to religious connotations, it displays his fivefold nature as a knight. The virgin Mary, a symbol of chasteness and holiness, is a reminder to Sir Gawain to remain true to his identity and not stumble in the face of future challenges.

¹ Taken from the journal article "Gawain's Practice of Piety in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight"

This visual depiction of Mary foreshadows the main tribulation he will face in the castle of Bertilak. His pentangle is there as a reminder in his troubled hours and “to signal Gawain’s complete Christian perfection [while] also hint[ing] at his human frailty; for it was the deep and fearful sense of ever-present danger from the devil” (Hardman 5). His weakness allows him to rely on figures who would center him in distressing times, especially devil-like figures that come to tempt him. Gawain is taking on a Jesus-like figure who does not allow the devil to possess any hold over him. Rather, he stays focused on holy figures and prayers to center himself through the pentangle. The girdle, a gift from the presumptuous Lady of the castle, is a gift of various associations. A well-known legend utilizes the girdle as a gift from Mary to revitalize a doubtful St Thomas, taking on a physical adaptation of the Virgin saint. Similarly, the girdle protects our knight from gaining critical harm from his foe, the Green Knight. While the girdle physically protects Gawain from harm, his shield would also give him religious hope which would help him succeed in his journey.

Contemporary adaptations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* unravel a different interpretation of the identity of such a legendary character. The BBC show *Merlin* traces the origin of a Camelot before the reign of King Arthur allowing the audience to witness beings such as Merlin, Arthur, Morgana, and Gwaine² develop into fabled legends. Gwaine’s identity diverges from his literary counterpart. Firstly, the differing birthrights between literature and contemporary literature showcase how interpretations change the character’s identity. Gwaine’s identifiable birthright is not tied to Arthur but to his deceased father who was a knight. With the deceased chivalric father, Gwaine already began to be shaped by honor and service. Though with the death of his father, he dedicates his life to being a vagabond throughout Camelot and its

² In the BBC series, Gawain’s name is altered to Gwaine

neighboring lands, these notable qualities do not fade. In his introductory scene of the series, Gwaine bearing witness to a bar fight involving the young Merlin and Prince Arthur automatically rushes to assist them. When told by Arthur to leave before he suffers any injuries by the notably angry brawlers, Gwaine replies, “You’re probably right” before throwing himself into the fight alongside Arthur and Merlin (*Gwaine*). His brave actions win the respect of Prince Arthur and the rest of Camelot. This is a great scene that depicts one of Gwaine’s key qualities: bravery.

Bravery is one such trait that has been transferrable from his literary counterpoint to his screen adaptation. Gwaine articulates to Merlin a profound quote when asked why he does not tell Uther, the current king of Camelot, his father was a knight, therefore, granting him the same privilege. Gwaine makes it clear by stating, “nobility is defined by what you do and not by who you are” (*Gawain*). Though noble blood runs through his contemporary blood, he channels Sir Gawain of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* through his acts of humility and chooses to instead define himself through the various quests he partakes in throughout the series. A key point to remember about his literary counterpart concerns his devotion to his chasteness, making it an extraordinarily important part of his knightly chivalry. The modernized interpretation of Gwaine steers away from archaic standards and instead chooses to focus on revamping the character into a playboy. There are countless incidents throughout the series where he throws himself at women hoping to woo them. For example, in his premier episode, Gwaine attempts to flirt and woo the future queen of Camelot herself, Guinevere, who much to his surprise rejects his advances. However, as the series advances, his character development grows from a headstrong vagabond to one of the greatest knights of the round table and a close friend of King Arthur. Both

contemporary adaptations attached honor, justice, courtliness, and the act of service to Gawain of past and present.

Though the two versions of Gawain differ in birthright, their qualities and knightly chivalry shift in accordance with the two interpretations. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain's identity shifts from his contemporary's birthright as the son of a knight to being the nephew of King Arthur. When the Green Knight invades Camelot at Yuletide and challenges the men of the court to an untrustworthy game, no knight is brave enough to take a stand against the fiendish foe. When Arthur takes upon the challenge, Gawain steps in with the words "...Before all, King, confide/This fight to me. May it be mine" (15). His valor allows Gawain to stand apart from other knights. And though, Gawain is a young knight whose wisdom pales in comparison to his older comrades, his dedication to King Arthur solidifies him as a man dedicated to service for Camelot.

When faced with the tempestuous offer by the Lady of the Castle, Gawain exercises chasteness to remain true to his pious identity. The unnamed Lady is classified as a foil for Gawain. Her defining feature falls under the social construct of identity. Her alluring words and actions are set to unravel Gawain's pious portion of his identity. The Lady replies, "How unsafety you sleep, that one may slip in here! Now you are taken in a trice. Unless a truce comes between us, I shall bind you to your bed—of that be sure" (Stone 49). Her seducing and playful words seek to unnerve Gawain in a way he has never been before. However, unlike his contemporary counterpart, Gawain remains true to his identity. He avoids the lure to sleep with his host's wife and instead rebukes her charming words with, "...I am proud of the precious price you put on me, /And solemnly as your servant say you are my sovereign. May Christ requite it you: I have become your knight" (51). Though Gawain had the opportunity to commit

sexual acts with the Lady, he refutes her advances with kindness and humility, both key qualities tied to Gawain's masculine identity. Sharon M. Rowley, author of "Textual Studies, Feminism, and Performance in "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," stated, "As the tests of the Green Knight and the Lady suggest, however, Gawain's identity lies not in some true self, but in his actions and reactions" (2). This quote is potent when analyzing our titular character's masculine identity. His action and reaction to arising temptation prove how this is a man not guided by society's standards but by the qualities determinant of the knightly chivalric code. He adheres easily to disrespectful commands like the Lady of the castle's proposition. While it can be inferred this sensuous affair could have occurred, Gawain's moral standards outweigh the possible sins. He holds to his chivalric masculine identity and rejects the promiscuous allure of the world around him. When referring to his contemporary version, it becomes clear his qualities remain transferrable from book to screen though origin and storylines may differ.

While Sir Gawain's identity fits in with the atypical knightly chivalry, Alexander the Great's identity can be defined as the classical hero-legend. Alexander the Great is a name cemented in the annals of history but also literature, namely *The Greek Alexander Romance*. Pseudo-Callisthenes gives readers a critical view into the life of a preternatural figure. Before commencing the analytical evolution of our main character, it is important to note the social construct behind manliness in the idealized classical world. To be considered masculine, one must be exceptional in the art of war. War dictated what made men heroes and ordinary. Therefore, *The Greek Alexander Romance* centers its narrative around this very idea: a man is exceptional through his militaristic actions and conquests. Scholar Jaakkojuhani Peltonen unravels the complexity of Alexander's identity citing, "...Alexander is a symbol of martial manhood. The close relationship between his *arete* and *virtus* strengthens his status as the

prototype for a chivalrous warrior-monarch propagated by historians of the Early Empire” (135). Arete and virtus are aspects relating to ethical and militaristic concepts through an individual. Masculinity is the prominent feature of Alexander’s story regardless of the author narrating it. However, Alexander does not let the masculine identity cloud his mind. In many parts throughout the story, Alexander ethically negotiates with his enemies. He does not rely on brutal tactics to be successful like Genghis Khan. Though he is the epitome of a strong leader, his respect and kindness toward others are what cemented him as one of the greatest generals to walk the Earth.

In the book, one can trace the shifting masculine identity of Alexander, who like Gawain, altered himself into the archetypal hero-legend. At the beginning of the book, when Olympias falls pregnant because of her affair with an Egyptian prince Nectanebo. Before he is even born, his identity is beginning to be shaped. The dream interpreter says, “And the seal portraying the sun, the lion’s head and the spear shows that the child will fight against all peoples like a lion, and make their cities captive even as far as the place where the sun rises” (Stoneman 41). The sun represents Alexander himself, who is physically described oftentimes with blond hair. The sun brings forth a new day when it rises which is what Alexander was destined to do. His divine birth will bring the dawning of a new era in Hellenistic times and one that can never be replicated. What little information of Alexander’s childhood was provided highlights the man he will grow up to be. A key part of his identity is remembering he was never destined to be a normal child. As he grew older and reached puberty, his identity was shaped by politics and providence. After completing his education, his thirst for battle became evident. When socializing with his fellow students, Alexander “used to draw them up in ranks for war and send them into battle. Whenever he saw one side being worsted by the other, he took the part of the

losing side and helped them until they were winning again. This made it clear that he himself was Victory³” (Stoneman 45). Great leadership and wisdom were apparent from the beginning. For someone so powerful, Alexander never boasted about himself, in similarity to Sir Gawain. Though he came centuries before Gawain, he demonstrated qualities that would echo the 14th century. These qualities become defining features of Alexander even in contemporary adaptations.

Alexander, like Sir Gawain, has been a source of inspiration and interpretation by many film directors. A notable one is the 2004 film *Alexander* by director Oliver Stone. From the beginning of the movie, it is apparent through the words of Plutarch, the legacy of Alexander is a critical part of his overall identity. Old Ptolemy sums up perfectly how special Alexander was by stating, “The truth is we did kill him... After all this time, to give away our wealth to Asian sycophants we despised? Mixing the races? Harmony? Oh, he talked of these things. I never believed in his dream. None of us did. That’s the truth of his life. The dreamers exhaust us. They must die before they kill us with their blasted dreams” (*Alexander*). This quote corroborates the idea of those who are such uniquely bold individuals are not permitted to live a life of ease. Alexander’s dreams were goals to him but foolishness to others. Such dreamers must die young to be immortalized in the way Alexander was. What is wonderful about this film is that it gives a contemporary insight into the personal identity of such a legendary figure. Pseudo-Callisthenes glosses over the childhood of Alexander but by doing so damages his identity as a person. Childhood is when a person’s identity begins developing but Pseudo-Callisthenes chose to remove that part of the story to focus more greatly on the war tales of Alexander. By doing so, Pseudo-Callisthenes reverts to the Hellenistic standard that war was what made a man rather than

³ Taken from *The Greek Alexander Romance*

the people and his life prior to it. However, the film spends time setting up the environment of Alexander's upbringing along with the more distinguished figures of his life: his mother Olympias, his father Philip II, Hephaestion, and Roxanne. The emotional aspects of the film transform a hollow character into an actual human being. When reading *The Greek Alexander Romance*, it does not feel as if you are reading a tale of an ordinary human being but that of a person who stands apart from the rest of humanity. Without the emotional ties, it can be challenging to support Alexander through complex decisions and actions. The book does not provide a first-person perspective but rather an omniscient perspective. While Alexander as a character does seem disconnected from the rest of humanity, there are moments in the story that bring him back to Earth. For instance, a common theme interwoven throughout the story is mortality. Alexander is forewarned he will die a premature death at the height of his greatness. Alexander knows his time is running out and wants to achieve as many of his goals as he can. There are many instances where Alexander mentions or asks about his future death in passing. For example, when talking with a God, he asks, "Lord, show me also, when and how I am going to die" (Stoneman 67). To die young when having done so much is truly a curse unavoidable for anyone no matter how many gods or oracles are asked. His unavoidable death adds a deeper character to Alexander's identity. He is not merely a great war hero and leader but someone we can all relate to. Ambition and drive allow people to unlock their greatest potential regardless of the fate in store for them.

Thus, the stories of Sir Gawain and Alexander are not stories created purely for our entertainment. Sir Gawain may be the archetype chivalric knight, but it does not mean he is not tempted. While Gawain's identity consists of chivalry, religion, and virtue, one can see how with experiences and challenges, a person's identity changes. There is a stark difference between

being a young and inexperienced man at the beginning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and growing into a man who makes errors but holds himself accountable. No longer is Gawain lacking in wisdom as this quest to find the Green Knight allowed him to learn more about himself and come out a stronger and better individual. Alexander, on the other hand, is a hero-legend, a perfect balance of both. *The Greek Alexander Romance* does provide valuable insights into the evolution from a young man to adulthood. From the moment Alexander was conceived, the future empire was coming to be. This Goliath of war, whether ruled simply by ambition or Providence, brought about a new unforeseen era. While their contemporary counterparts vary when being translated from book to film, a new layer is added to these stories which oftentimes were performed aloud. With film and television series, we can witness various performances and come away with different lessons and appreciation for the original stories. In short, both stories are incredible works of literature that clearly demonstrate that one's identity does not stay enduring but rather evolving from birth to the end of one's life.

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