

Module 3: Exploring Good, Evil, and Noble Sacrifice
Topic 4 Content: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – Fytte Four Excerpt
Translated by Kenneth G. T. Webster and W. A. Neilson

On the last night of Sir Gawain's stay in the castle, the lord and lady throw a large party in his honor. The next morning, he prepares for battle by putting on his armor, and he ties the lady's girdle to his waist. Sir Gawain leaves to seek out the Green Knight, along with a guide from the castle. On the way to the Green Chapel, the guide tells Sir Gawain that the Green Knight is always victorious. The guide goes on to encourage Sir Gawain to flee, telling him that he will keep it a secret. Sir Gawain refuses to flee, and the guide leaves. Sir Gawain finds the Green Chapel, which is nothing more than a cave in a hillside. He hears the Green Knight inside sharpening his weapon and Sir Gawain lets him know that he is there to fulfill his end of the agreement.

Sir Gawain met the knight and bowed to him,
not at all low. The other said, "Now, sweet, sir,
in a covenant a man can trust thee."
"Gawain," quoth the green warrior,
"may God preserve thee.
Indeed thou art welcome,
hero, to my place;
and thou hast timed thy travel as a true man should.
And thou knowest the covenants made between us;
at this time twelve month,
thou tookest what fell to thee, —
and I at this New Year was to repay you handsomely.
And now we are in this valley entirely alone;
here are no men to part us, however we may behave.
Have thy helm off thy head, and have here thy pay.
Make no more debate than I offered thee then,
when thou whipped off my head at one blow."
"Nay," quoth Gawain, "by God that lent me life,
I shall grudge thee not a whit whatever misfortune falls.
But arrange thee for thy one stroke,
and I shall stand still and hinder thee not the least
from doing the work as you like."
He bent the neck and bowed down,
showing the flesh all bare;
and behaved as it he cared not.
For no dread would he flinch.
Then the man in green got ready quickly,
gathered up his grim tool to smite Gawain.
With all the might in his body he bare it aloft,
and aimed a savage blow as though he wished to kill him.
Had it driven down as earnestly as he feinted,
the ever doughty one would have been dead of his dint.
But Gawain glanced to one side on the gisarm
as it came gliding down to slay him there in the glade,

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and shrank a little with the shoulders from the sharp iron.
The other warrior with a quick motion withheld the bright weapon,
and then he reproved the prince with many proud words.
“Thou art not Gawain,” said the man, “who is held so good,
who never flinched for any army by hill nor by vale;
and now thou fleest for fear before thou feelest any harm.
Such cowardice I never heard of that knight.
I neither winced nor fled, sir, when thou didst strike,
nor tried any tricks in King Arthur’s house.
My head flew to my foot, and yet I never budged;
and thou, ere any harm taken, art fearful in heart.
Wherefore the better man I ought to be called for it.”
“I flinched once,” quoth Gawain, “and will do so no more.
Yet if my head should fall on the stones,
I cannot restore it.”
“But make ready, sir, by thy faith,
and bring me to the point.
Deal to me my destiny, and do it promptly;
for I shall stand thee a stroke,
and not start again till thine axe has hit me —
have here my troth.”
“Have at thee then!” quoth the other,
and heaves it aloft,
and aims as savagely as if he were mad.
He strikes at him mightily,
but touches the man not;
for he withheld his hand cleverly ere it could hurt.
Gawain awaits it properly and flinches with no member,
but stands as a stone,
or a stump that is twisted
into the rocky ground with a hundred roots.
Then merrily spoke the man in the green:
“So, now thou hast thy heart whole it behoves me to hit.
Now keep back the fine hood that Arthur gave thee,
and see if thou canst keep thy neck whole from this stroke.”
Said Gawain in great anger: “Why, thrash on,
thou wild man! Thou threatenest too long.
I guess that thine own heart is timid!”
“Forsooth,” quoth the other warrior,
“thou speakest so fiercely that
I will not delay thine errand a bit longer.”
Then he takes his stride to strike and knits both brow and lip.
No wonder Gawain dislikes it and gives up all thought of escape.

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Lightly he lifts his axe and lets
the edge come down fairly on the bare neck.
Yet though he smote rudely,
it hurt him but little;
only cut him on one side so that it severed the skin.
The sharp bit reached the flesh through the fair fat,
so that the bright blood shot over his shoulders to the earth.
And when the hero saw the blood glint on the snow,
he leaped forth more than a spear's length,
eagerly seized his helm, cast it on his head,
threw his shoulders under his fair shield,
pulled out a bright sword and fiercely spoke.
Never in this world since he was born of his mother
was he half so blithe. "Cease, sir,
of thy blow! Offer me no more.
I have without strife taken a stroke in this place;
and if thou givest me more,
I shall promptly repay and yield quickly again,
trust thou that! Only one stroke falls to me here.
The covenant which we made in Arthur's halls provided just that;
and therefore, courteous sir, now hold!"
The warrior turned from him and rested on his axe.
He set the shaft on the ground, leaned on the head,
and beheld how the doughty hero stood his ground grimly,
fully armed and devoid of fear.
In his heart it pleased him. Then with a great voice,
and a huge laugh, he spoke merrily to the hero:
"Bold sir, in this place be not so savage.
Nobody has here unmannerly mishandled thee,
nor done but according to the covenant made at the king's court.
I promised thee a stroke and thou hast it; hold thee well paid.
I release thee of the remnant, of all other rights.
If I had been skilful peradventure I could have given you a worse buffet.
First I menaced you merrily with a pure feint,
and gave thee no blow; which was but justice,
considering the covenant we made on the first night,
and which thou held with me trustily;
for truly all the gain thou gave me as a good man should.
The second feint this morning, sir, I proffered thee,
because thou didst kiss my fair wife and didst hand the kisses over to me;
for these two occasions I gave thee here but two bare feints without harm.
A true man truly restores; such an one need dread no harm.
At the third time thou didst fail; and so take thee that tap.

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“For it is my weed that thou wearest,
that same woven girdle.
Mine own wife gave it thee,
I know well, forsooth.
Now know I well thy kisses,
and thy virtues also.
And as for the wooing of my wife,
I managed it myself.
I sent her to try thee,
and truly it seems to me
thou art the most faultless hero
that ever went on foot.
As a pearl is of greater price than white peas,
so is Gawain, in good faith,
compared with other gay knights.
But in this case, sir,
you lacked a little,
and loyalty failed you.
But that was for no amorous work,
nor wooing either,
but because ye loved your life, —
the less I blame you.”

That other brave man stood a great while in a study;
so stricken was he for grief that he groaned within.
All the blood of his breast rushed to his face;
and he shrank for shame when the warrior talked.
This was the first word that the man spoke —
“Cursed be cowardice and covetousness both!
In you is villainy and vice, that destroy virtue.”
Then he caught at the knot and loosed the fastening;
fiercely reached the belt to the warrior himself.
“Lo! there is the deception, foul may it fall!
For fear of thy knock cowardice taught me
to make a truce with covetousness,
to forsake my nature,
which is generosity and loyalty,
that belong to knights.
Now am I faulty and false,
and a coward have ever been.
From treachery and untruth ever come sorrow and care.
Here I confess to you, knight,
that my conduct is all faulty.

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Let me but please you now,
and after I shall beware.”
Then the other laughed and said courteously:
“I hold it quite remedied,
the harm that I had.
Thou hast made a clean confession,
acknowledging all thy misdeeds,
and hast received the penance openly
from the point of my edge.
I hold thee quit of that plight,
and purified as clean as if thou hadst
never forfeited since thou wast first born.
And I give thee, sir,
the girdle that is gold hemmed.
Since it is green, as is my gown,
Sir Gawain, ye may think upon this same adventure
where thou goest forth among great princes;
and this shall be a genuine token among chivalrous knights
of the adventure of the green chapel,
and ye shall come again this New Year to my dwelling,
and we shall revel the remnant of this rich feast full well.”
The lord pressed the invitation and said,
“With my wife, who was your great enemy,
I think we shall reconcile you.”
“Nay, forsooth,” quoth the hero;
and seizing his helm,
he took it off quickly and thanked the warrior.
“I have had a good visit, bliss betide you;
and may He pay you well who directs all mercies.
Commend me to that courteous one,
your comely mate;
both the one and the other, my honoured ladies,
who have thus with their craft quaintly beguiled their knight.
But it is no wonder that a fool should rave,
and through wiles of women be won to sorrow.
For so was Adam beguiled by one,
and Solomon by many, indeed;
and Samson also, Delilah dealt him his weird;
and David thereafter was deceived by Bathsheba,
who suffered much sorrow.
Since these men were plagued by their wiles,
it were a huge gain to love them well and believe them not —
if a person but could;

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for these men were of old the best,
and the most fortunate,
excellent above all others under the heavens;
and all they were beguiled by women whom they had to do with.⁹²
If I be now deceived, meseems I might be excused.
“But your girdle,” quoth Gawain,
“God reward you for it!
That will I keep with good will;
not for the precious gold,
nor the samite nor the silk,
nor the wide pendants,
for its wealth nor for its beauty
nor for its fine work;
but in sign of my fault I shall behold it oft;
when I ride in renown I shall lament to myself
the fault and the deceit of the crabbed flesh,
how tender it is to catch stains of filth;
and thus when pride shall prick me for prowess of arms,
a look on this love-lace shall moderate my heart.
But one thing I would pray you —
may it displease you not —
since ye are lord of the land yonder
where I have stayed worshipfully with you —
may the Being who upholds the heaven
and sits on high repay you for it! —
how name ye your right name? and then no more.”
“That shall I tell thee truly,” quoth the other then.
“Bernlak de Hautdesert I am called in this land,
through the might of Morgen la Fay,
who dwells in my house.
She has acquired deep learning, hard-won skill,
many of the masteries of Merlin;
— for she has at times dealt in rare magic with that renowned clerk,
who knows all your knights at home.
Morgan the Goddess is therefore her name;
no person is so haughty but she can tame him.
“She sent me in this wise to your rich hall
to assay its pride and try if it were true
that circulates about the great renown
of the Round Table.
She prepared for me this wonder to take away your wits,
to have grieved Guinevere and caused her to die
through fright of that same man,

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that ghostly speaker with his head in his hand
before the high table. That is she,
the ancient lady at home.
She is even thine aunt,
Arthur's half-sister,
the daughter of that Duchess of Tintagel
upon whom dear Uther afterwards begot Arthur,
that is now king.
Therefore, I beg you, sir,
to come to thine aunt; make merry in my house;
my people love thee, and I like thee as well,
sir, by my faith, as I do any man under God
for thy great truth.”
But he answered him nay, he would in no wise.
They embraced and kissed, each entrusted other
to the Prince of Paradise,
and they parted right there in the cold.
Gawain on horse full fair rides boldly to the king's court,
and the knight all in green whithersoever he would.
Wild ways in the world Gawain now rides on Gringolet,
he who had got the boon of his life.
Oft he harboured in houses, and oft without;
and many an adventure in vale he had, and won oft;
but that I care not at this time to mention in my tale.
The hurt was whole that he had got in his neck;
and he bare the glistening belt about him,
crossed obliquely like a baldric,
the lace fastened under his left arm with a knot,
in token that he was taken in a fault.
And thus he comes to the court,
the knight all sound.
There wakened joy in that dwelling when the great ones knew
that good Gawain had come;
joyous it seemed to them.
The king kisses the knight,
and the queen also;
and afterwards many a sure knight,
who sought to embrace him and asked him of his journey.
And wondrously he tells it,
confessing all the trials that he had,
the adventure of the chapel,
the behavior of the knight,
the love of the lady —

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and, at the last, the lace.
He showed them the nick in his neck that he caught
at the lord's hands for his unloyalty.
He grieved when he had to tell it;
he groaned for sorrow,
and the blood rushed to his face
for shame when he declared it.
"Lo! lord," quoth the hero,
as he handled the lace,
"this that I bear in my neck is the badge of this blame.
This is the evil and the loss that I have got
from the cowardice and covetousness that I showed there.
This is the token of untruth that I am taken in,
and I must needs wear it while I may last;
for none may hide his shame without mishap,
for where it once is incurred,
depart it will never."
The king and all the court comfort the knight.
They laugh loud at his tale,
and lovingly agree that the lords and the ladies
that belong to the Table,
each knight of the brotherhood,
should have a baldric,
an oblique band about him of a bright green,
and wear that for the sake of the hero.
And that emblem was accorded the renown of the Round Table,
and he was ever after honoured that had it.
As it is told in the best book of romance,
thus in Arthur's day this adventure betid,
which the Brutus books bear witness of.
After Brutus the bold hero first came hither,
when the siege and the assault had ceased at Troy,
many adventures of this sort happened.
Now may He that bore the crown of thorns bring us to his bliss.