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The Chivalric Equilibrium: The Gawain Character in *Yvain; or, the Knight with the Lion* and *Sir Gawain and the Green*

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Oral Presentation 4.4

THE CHIVALRIC EQUILIBRIUM: THE GAWAIN CHARACTER IN YVAIN; OR,
THE KNIGHT WITH THE LION AND SIR GAWAIN
AND THE GREEN

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Many treatises and poems have been written on medieval chivalry. In the romances, poets take some artistic liberties and, often, well-known characters may or may not retain the same qualities from text to text. Two romances in particular illustrate this change in Gawain, a well-known medieval character, especially well. Readers will notice that Gawain's characteristics are portrayed differently in Chretien DeTroyes' *Yvain; or, the Knight with the Lion* and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

The greatest inconsistency occurs among the honorable qualities that all good knights are expected to have, specifically courtesy and prowess. These differences can be accounted for in two ways. Initially, both poets have taken artistic liberties in deciding whether Gawain will be a primary or secondary character. Second, textual evidence and background information prove that in *Yvain* the military aspect of chivalry is emphasized, while in *Sir Gwain and the Green Knight* the courtly aspect of chivalry is emphasized.

In the two texts, the approaches that each Gawain takes, whether militaristic or courtly, serves as a narrative device in how the poem will result. In *Yvain*, Gawain's aggressiveness allows for Yvain's heroic nature to emerge, and in *Sir Gawain*, Gawain's passivity allows change to occur in the main character. Reading these two romances comparatively suggests that some sort of balance between militant and courtly chivalry must be reached. The questioning Gawain undergoes points out the ethical problems underlying his actions and his lack of balance in both *Yvain; or, the Knight with the Lion* and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Medieval romances were instructive in nature and thus, a variety of romances must be considered in order for readers to develop an ideal form of chivalry.