A Tale of Two Knights

Two of the stories that were covered in the British Survey I course were *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, who’s author is unknown, and the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* from Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*. Both stories are based on the style of the Arthurian Romances. Both stories also defy the convention of an Arthurian Romance, however, and they each do it in a different way.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight starts out as a seemingly traditional Arthurian Romance. Sir Gawain is a character that has surfaced in other Arthurian Tales, as far as I know. In the beginning of this story, he is hailed as being a great knight. Sir Gawain’s behavior coincides with the ideal of what a true, chivalrous knight should be like. He takes Arthur’s place in the challenge against the green knight when Arthur answer’s the green knights initial visit during the Christmas celebration at the beginning of the story. Gawain insists that he would be a better candidate to fight because he is the least clever and least strong of the knights of the round table. When Gawain offers to take King Arthur’s place in the challenge, it is not out of disrespect for his lord, but out of fealty and humility. Gawain behaves as a proper knight should and selflessly risks his life for others. So right away as the story begins, Gawain establishes himself as a virtuous, ideal follower of chivalry. Throughout the story, Gawain proves himself to embody (at least partially) what an ideal chivalric knight should behave like.

Behavior is a key part of ideal chivalry. Gawain demonstrates his manners and social grace while he is a guest in the castle that grants him shelter while he seeks out the Green Chapel. He is unselfish and generous, such as when the three hunts yield magnificent kills and he chooses to let his hosts keep the magnificent feasts instead of
Another key component of chivalry that Gawain possesses is faith in God. The story emphasizes Gawain’s faithfulness repeatedly, such as when he prays to God for safe passage in his quest to find the Green Chapel. The story points out that Gawain encounters many dangers on his journey and overcomes many enemies (ogres and other monsters), and would not have survived most of them if he had not called on God for guidance and protection. A true knight is supposed to have doubtless fear in God, which Gawain possesses, at least until his faith wavers somewhat toward the end of the tale.

Once the time finally comes when Gawain must finally battle the Green Knight and receive his due blow (in exchange for lobbing the knight’s head off the year previous), Gawain briefly considers fleeing. In this consideration, he doubts God’s ability to save him and protect him. This temptation is also appealing to his fear, which only just kicks in once he realizes there’s no way around the upcoming battle. Since the day of reckoning for Gawain seemed so far away, he hadn’t thought about it until the point in the story when he is about to close in on the Green Chapel. This sequence of fear and the temptation for Gawain to run away from the conflict is one piece of the story that goes against the traditional ideal of an Arthurian Romance. This is where the author of the story begins to communicate his statement on the chivalric code. The author makes Gawain a more believable, human character by adding this imperfection to his character. Gawain is no longer a larger-than-life ideal, but a living, breathing, fallible character. Despite his strong will and adherence to the chivalric code, he isn’t perfect, which is why the Longman Anthology presents it as the greatest of the Arthurian romances.

Gawain displays fallibility on more than one occasion in the story, though. While
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he does remain technically chaste, as knights are supposed to be according to chivalric
code (this is Britain after all); he does give in to the romantic temptation of the ladies in
the court, most notably the woman who turns out to be the Green Knight’s wife. She
marks his imperfection by bequeathing her silk wrap to him, which Gawain wears to his
encounter with the Green Knight. Gawain does redeem himself by being honest with the
Green Knight about its origin and his own infidelity. Thankfully, in doing so he is
spared, and the joke is on him, as the Green Knight explains that all the past events and
temptations were a test by Morgan Le Fey to freak out Guenivere (who is for all intents
and purposes a whore). Again, Gawain shows to error is human, and it’s not a big deal.

Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Tale has a different message to convey about the ideal
of chivalry. While he makes it much quicker than the author of the Sir Gawain and the
Green Knight, his statement is more derogatory. Chaucer makes his point as soon as the
Wife of Bath finishes relating the setting to the other pilgrims. The Wife of Bath
indicates that her story takes place in the magical days of old, where King Arthur’s
knights had their adventures and when fairies were still in the world. Right afterwards,
she immediately starts out with a knight that defies the convention of the chivalric code
by being a rapist. While this is uncommon in an Arthurian romance (which the Wife’s
Tale is), it is not very uncommon at all according to history. During the heavily
romanticized medieval period where knights did battle for their lords, not many truly
adhered to the chivalric code. Even though they may have talked the talk in the royal
courts and some might have had spectacular manners, not many made an extremely
significant effort to follow the code of chivalry in its entirety. It’s no different than the
way cowboys are treated in the United States, where they are portrayed in novels and
movies as tough, lone heroes who went out of their way to do good and hunt down bad
guys, in actuality Cowboys just moved and looked after cattle for low pay. Knights
raping women that they encountered on their travels was something that occurred quite
regularly, though it’s hardly a Christian or chivalrous thing to do. Making the knight in
the Wife of Bath’s Tale was a proverbial “slap to the face” of the aristocracy at the time.

Both tales had a statement to make about chivalry. Chaucer pretty much
denounced any idea of chivalry as lofty and idealistic, and was much more cynical. Sir
Gawain and the Green Knight’s author, however, didn’t denounce chivalry as a joke of a
concept, but gave a more realistic standard for it to be held to. It also softly reminded
aristocrats that they are not perfect, as opposed to Chaucer’s blatant dismissal of chivalry
as nonsense.