

## English 201 Chivalry Trial: Prosecutors and Defenders

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**Format:** Your main essay should be a full 3-4 pages long not counting the Works Cited page. It should be typed or word-processed on high quality paper. Optionally, you might wish to create a separate "legal brief," i.e., a one- or two-page, clearly bulleted, clearly numbered list of your major arguments or textual quotations. This will allow you and your partners to refer quickly to materials during the trial.

Aim for a professional appearance. Use the Modern Language Association format (MLA). You may find it useful to peruse the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th edition, or *Writing at Carson-Newman College* for a brief overview. Use no title page for this assignment. In the upper left-hand corner of the first page, please include the following material flush against the left margin: your name, your teacher's name, the course, and the due date (not necessarily the date you finished the work). Here is a generic example:

Jane Doe  
Professor Wheeler  
English 201-C  
23 January 2014

After typing such material in the upper left-hand side of the first page, you should double-space and center the title of your composition. Note that the title of your own unpublished essay need not be underlined, italicized, or placed within quotation marks. Follow normal MLA conventions for capitalization.

The body of your essay should be double-spaced and left-margin justified rather than fully justified (i.e., your right margin should be a "ragged right," with uneven edges.) Maintain one-inch margins all around the essay. On every page *including the first*, insert a header with your last name and the page number.

**Directions:** In medieval times, one common political model was the "three estates" system. This model divided society into three groups--peasants (*aratores*), priests (*oratores*), and knights (*bellatores*). Because knights were aristocratic fighters, their spheres of duty included much beyond simple combat. Their obligations included political duties (loyalty to a liege lord), spiritual duties (loyalty to God), and commitments to polite society (gentlemanly behavior towards women and civilized behavior at court). In

Romance literature, the knight also would be obligated to please "his lady," often a married woman he secretly loved, one who could demand favors from him. The knight is expected to keep his word and live up to all his various obligations. In literature, however, these duties sometimes came into conflict with each other or with the knight's own personal desires, as we will see in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

I am going to divide the class into groups, and we will hold a *court of chivalry*--a trial concerning knightly behavior to determine whether or not Sir Gawain should be praised as a virtuous knight or punished as a failure. The students who sign up for the "Chivalry Trial" slots should read through the assigned texts and find passages to use as evidence. They may also refer to biblical concordances to look up passages dealing with soldiers and combat, they should examine secondary evidence such as scholarly articles dealing with literature or historical documents dealing with chivalry. I will put on reserve at the library two useful resources, a modern historical book (*Chivalry* by Maurice Keen) and an early fifteenth-century treatise on knighthood (*The Book of Arms and Chivalry* by Christine de Pisan). Students may also refer to the handouts in class as evidence. The first group will be the prosecution. It is their job to find material indicating that Sir Gawain has not lived up to his chivalric duties. The prosecution should be very specific in their charges.

A second group will be the defense. It is their job to find material that shows Sir Gawain is largely a good knight--one who upholds the honor of King Arthur's court well and lives up to his duties. The rest of the class will be the jury. They will hear the arguments and then decide whether each woman is innocent or guilty. Unanimous agreement leads to a verdict. Dissension means the jury is hung.

### **The Trials:**

We will use a rather unorthodox approach to this trial to ensure class participation. During the first five minutes of class, the prosecution team and the defense team will be given time to consult with other members of their group. They can skim through each other's arguments and select the best ones to present to the jury. (The jury will be composed of the rest of the class.) The prosecution will present its arguments before the jury. The defense will be given a chance for rebuttal. A session will then be opened for members of the jury to ask questions. Each team will then make closing statements. The jury will then decide "guilty" or "not guilty" to each charge.

### Tips and Relevant Resources to Consult and Quote:

1. **Primary materials (i.e, the original texts):** Each team should look for "evidence" to use from both primary texts and secondary texts. Primary texts are the versions of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in our textbook and in our course-packet. Treat these two texts as witness testimony. The main part of your trial and your legal brief should focus on specific passages that you can quote to the jury and interpret for them. Prosecutors should seek passages in which they see Sir Gawain failing in his duties as a Christian knight. They should point to specific actions the knight takes or words he says that show his lack of chivalry. *Hint:* If the prosecution or defense never uses any primary evidence, they are failing in their job! The defense team should fashion arguments showing how Sir Gawain lives up to his duties, how his apparent failures are not really failures at all, etc.
2. **Secondary materials: encyclopedias.** Primary textual evidence should be supplemented by secondary materials. Available in the reference section of the library, encyclopedias will contain definitions for standard terminology such as "chivalry," "kighthood," and possibly entries for Sir Gawain himself or the Pearl Poet.
3. **Secondary materials: scholarly articles.** Critical discussions of the *Sir Gawain* poem can be found in JSTOR, InfoTrack, or the International Medieval Bibliography Online at U.T. (Talk to librarians like Alison Jones or Kelli Williams for help with locally available databases if necessary.) Treat such articles as "expert witnesses."
4. Of particular interest to the prosecution and defense may be the following questions dealing with the readings:
  1. What do we make of the Green Knight's assessment of Sir Gawain's performance? Is his verdict trustworthy?
  2. What do we make of Sir Gawain's own assessment of his performance? Should we trust their verdict?
  3. What do we make of King Arthur and the court's assessment of Sir Gawain's performance? Should we trust their verdict?
  4. What, if anything, did Sir Gawain fail to achieve? If he is not a good knight, what is his vice, sin, or flaw? Is he brave or cowardly? A loyal knight or a liar-knave? Humble or haughty? Chaste or lustful?

5. Is the test presented to Sir Gawain fair? Does the Green Knight have unfair advantages?
6. If Sir Gawain succeeded in the test of courage by keeping his word to appear at the Green Chapel, and if he avoided the host's seductive wife, does it matter whether or not he failed to pass along the "magic" girdle during the Christmas game?
7. Besides the obvious question of whether or not Sir Gawain will be brave enough to face the Green Knight, what other traits of Sir Gawain are being tested throughout the story? Does he pass all of them? None of them? Some of them? If he does fail, is that failure so heinous he should be chastised? If he does succeed in any of them, is that success so great it behooves us to overlook minor faults?



"Chivalry has been dead for years, but he's still taking it pretty hard."