

# Masculine Identity in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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## Masculine Identity in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Vern L. Bullough's article, "On Being a Male in the Middle Ages," addresses how vital it was for a man living in the middle ages to be sexually active in order to maintain a masculine identity by explaining:

Quite clearly, male sexual performance was a major key to being male. It was a man's sexual organs that made him different and superior to the woman. But maleness was somewhat fragile, and it was important for a man to keep demonstrating his maleness by action and thought, especially by sexual action. It was part of his duty to keep his female partners happy and satisfied, and unless he did so, he had failed as a man. (41)

If we are to use this reference to explain what constitutes maleness in the middle ages, then the question naturally arises as to how Gawain in Sir Gawain and the [Green](#) Knight retains his masculine [identity](#) while abstaining from sex. I believe the answer to this can be found by looking at the structure of the story, in which we will find that Gawain is surrounded by father figures who create a superego that requires Gawain to repress his sexual desires. At the same time, these parent figures are testing Gawain's ability to abstain from sexual intercourse to see if he is worthy of a courtly masculine title.

Therefore, the only way Gawain can achieve and maintain this masculine identity is to abstain from sex.

We should begin our observations into the question of how Sir Gawain's masculinity works by focusing on the Green Knight. The Green Knight, the first father figure introduced in the story, tests Gawain's masculinity. Before the Green Knight can test Gawain, though, he must prove that he is in a position to pass judgment. C...

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