The ideals of chivalry and the conventions of the medieval romance are upheld in the classic 14th century Arthurian romance “Sir Gawayne & the Green Knight.” Although Gawayne proves human and capable of mistakes, he is clearly a knight who strives for perfection. Monty Python & the Holy Grail is a film that affectionately but expertly parodies the chivalric ideals and literary conventions that Master Anonymous portrays in his much earlier work. “Sir Gawayne & the Green Knight” stays true to the medieval convention that a hero’s triumphs should benefit his nation, while portraying Arthur’s courteous nephew showing unwavering loyalty to his liege lord. Monty Python & the Holy Grail hilariously parodies this convention while finding clever ways to poke fun of the chivalric ideals that the Gawayne poet upholds.

A knight should be courteous at all times. It probably wasn’t always that way in real life, but the knights of the poem “Sir Gawayne & the Green Knight” strive to hold true to this chivalric ideal. Think of the warm reception Sir Gawayne receives from his host, Sir Bertilac. He is welcomed with a bounteous meal, entertained with a Christmas game, and provided with a guide to his destination. Monty Python takes this same ideal to hilarious extremes. Sir Lancelot, a bloodthirsty killing machine once he is set in motion, apologizes profusely after his rampage through Swamp Castle. His words express sincere regret as he tells those who survived his assault: “Sorry! Sorry! I get carried away.” What a great parody of knighthood! In an effort to perform a good deed, Lancelot caused suffering, fear, and the loss of many lives. That’s not a bad summary of the Crusades.

Loyalty to one’s liege lord is a core tenet of the chivalric ideal. Gawayne observes it dutifully as he insists that King Arthur step aside and allow him to take his place in the contest against the Green Knight. Gawayne is putting himself in harm’s way to protect his king. In Monty Python & the Holy Grail, Arthur has a difficult time getting others to accept his authority. Even peasants challenge his claim to power, saying quite reasonably: “strange women in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government.” Although these words ring true to us, we cannot help but feel sorry for Arthur. After all, don’t we all wish things were that simple? Of course, Monty Python is suggesting to us that things in the real world seldom are.

Arthurian legends and other medieval romances tended to feature heroes whose triumphs benefitted their nations. This convention is upheld by Gawayne, who is brave in the face of death, loyal to the woman he loves, and most importantly in this story, someone who upholds the high standards of the court of Camelot. We quickly realize that the reputation of Arthur’s knights is on the line in this story, and it is Gawayne who proves the Knights of the Round Table are worthy of their exalted reputation. He successfully fulfills his obligation to the Green Knight and proves worthy of Elfinhart. In Monty Python & the Holy Grail, Arthur and his knights consistently fall short in this regard. Their great quest for the Holy Grail proves a failure as they are ignominiously arrested and carried away by the authorities at the end of the film.

Monty Python leaves us wondering if these men were even knights at all. Of course, their parody works at another level, suggesting that if we did still have the heroic figures of Arthurian legend walking among us, they would probably find themselves running afoul of the legal system in no time at all.