ABSTRACT

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Gawain in the Cloud: Apophatic Theology and Contemplative Chivalry in
_Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_
(Under the direction of Professor Jim Knowles.)

Throughout the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, literary scholars have analyzed Sir Gawain’s confessions in _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ (1375-1400). The reason why Gawain’s confessions have gained so much attention recently is because these scenes, along with the whole Arthurian text for that matter, wrestle with the question of whether or not Christianity and the knightly chivalric code fuse harmoniously, especially since the code of chivalry did not originally adopt the teachings of the Christian tradition. Two schools of thought exist when examining Gawain’s confession scenes. Some scholars find Gawain’s confessions to be valid, thereby affirming the fusion of Christianity and chivalry. Others, however, find Gawain’s confessions to be insincere and, therefore, reject the combination of Christianity and chivalry. Yet, one commonality that exists between the two opposing sides is that, when they analyze Gawain’s confessions from a theological lens, they do so from the vantage of the cataphatic tradition (or the _via positiva_), which is the ordinary theological disposition of the late medieval Catholic Church.

However, while the cataphatic readings of Gawain’s confessions are invaluable to the field, this essay argues that reading these scenes from the perspective of the apophatic theology (the _via negativa_) provides a different interpretation. _The Cloud of Unknowing_ is an apophatic mystical text of the late fourteenth century, written in Middle English. By reading Gawain’s confessions through the lens of _The Cloud of Unknowing_, I argue that _Sir Gawain and the Green Knight_ converses with apophatic teachings and, through these teachings, successfully synthesizes the precepts of chivalry and Christianity.