

SIR GAWAIN AND  
THE GREEN KNIGHT

Middle English Text  
with facing Translation

*edited and translated by James Winny*



broadview literary texts

© 1992 James Winny  
Reprinted 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007  
2008, 2009, 2011

All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, or stored in a retrieval system, without prior written consent of the publisher — or in the case of photocopying, a licence from CANCOPY (Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency) 6 Adelaide Street East, Suite 900, Toronto, Ontario M5C 1H6 — is an infringement of the copyright law.

### Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

Gawain and the Grene Knight  
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

#### Poems

ISBN 13 : 978-0-921149-92-7

ISBN 0-921149-94-8 (bound) ISBN 0-921149-92-1 (pbk.)

1. Gawain (Legendary character) — Romances.
2. Arthurian romances. 3. Arthur, King — (Romances, etc.).
- I. Winny, James. II. Title: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

PR2065.G3 1992 821'.1 C92-094073-0

Broadview Press

Post Office Box 1243, Peterborough, Ontario, Canada K9J 7H5

in the United States of America:

3576 California Road, Orchard Park, NY 14127

in the United Kingdom:

B.R.A.D. Book Representation & Distribution Ltd.,  
244A, London Road, Hadleigh, Essex. SS7 2DE

Broadview Press gratefully acknowledges the support of the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Ministry of Canadian Heritage.

PRINTED IN CANADA

## SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

When the siege and the assault were ended at Troy,  
The city laid waste and burnt into ashes,  
The man who had plotted the treacherous scheme  
Was tried for the wickedest trickery ever.  
It was princely Aeneas and his noble kin 5  
Who then subdued kingdoms, and came to be lords  
Of almost all the riches of the western isles.  
Afterwards noble Romulus hastened to Rome,  
With great pride he gave that city its beginnings,  
And calls it by his own name, which it still has. 10  
Tirius goes to Tuscany and sets up houses,  
Langobard in Lombardy establishes homes,  
And far over the French sea Felix Brutus  
On many broad hillsides settles Britain  
with delight; 15  
Where war and grief and wonder  
Have visited by turns,  
And often joy and turmoil  
Have alternated since.

And when Britain had been founded by this noble lord, 20  
Valiant men bred there, who thrived on battle.  
In many an age bygone they brought about trouble.  
More wondrous events have occurred in this country  
Than in any other I know of, since that same time.  
But of all those who dwelt there, of the British kings 25  
Arthur was always judged noblest, as I have heard tell.  
And so an actual adventure I mean to relate  
Which some men consider a marvellous event,  
And a prodigious happening among tales about Arthur.  
If you will listen to this story just a little while 30  
I will tell it at once, as I heard it told

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

in court.  
As it is written down  
In story brave and strong,  
Made fast in truthful words, 35  
That has endured long.

The king spent that Christmas at Camelot  
With many gracious lords, men of great worth,  
Noble brothers-in-arms worthy of the Round Table,  
With rich revelry and carefree amusement, as was right. 40  
There knights fought in tournament again and again,  
Jousting most gallantly, these valiant men,  
Then rode to the court for dancing and song.  
For there the festival lasted the whole fifteen days  
With all the feasting and merry-making that could be devised: 45  
Such sounds of revelry splendid to hear,  
Days full of uproar, dancing at night.  
Everywhere joy resounded in chambers and halls  
Among lords and ladies, whatever pleased them most.  
With all of life's best they spent that time together, 50  
The most famous warriors in Christendom,  
And the loveliest ladies who ever drew breath,  
And he the finest king who rules the court.  
For these fair people were then in the flower of youth  
in the hall. 55  
Luckiest under heaven,  
King of loftiest mind  
Hard it would be  
Bolder men to find

When New Year was so fresh that it had hardly begun, 60  
Double helpings of food were served on the dais that day.  
By the time the king with his knights entered the hall  
When the service in the chapel came to an end,  
Loud cries were uttered by the clergy and others,  
'Nowel' repeated again, constantly spoken; 65  
And then the nobles hurried to hand out New Year's gifts,  
Cried their wares noisily, gave them by hand,  
And argued excitedly over those gifts.  
Ladies laughed out loud, even though they had lost,  
And the winner was not angry, you may be sure. 70

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

All this merry-making went on until feasting time.  
When they had washed as was fit they took their places,  
The noblest knight in a higher seat, as seemed proper;  
Queen Guenevere gaily dressed and placed in the middle,  
Seated on the upper level, adorned all about; 75  
Fine silk surrounding her, a canopy overhead  
Of costly French fabric, silk carpets underfoot  
That were embroidered and studded with the finest gems  
That money could buy at the highest price

anywhere. 80  
The loveliest to see  
Glanced round with eyes blue-grey;  
That he had seen a fairer one  
Truly could no man say.

But Arthur would not eat until everyone was served, 85  
He was so lively in his youth, and a little boyish.  
He hankered after an active life, and cared very little  
To spend time either lying or sitting,  
His young blood and restless mind stirred him so much.  
And another habit influenced him too, 90  
Which he had made a point of honour: he would never eat  
On such a special day until he had been told  
A curious tale about some perilous thing,  
Of some great wonder that he could believe, 95  
Of princes, of battles, or other marvels;  
Or some knight begged him for a trustworthy foe  
To oppose him in jousting, in hazard to set  
His life against his opponent's, each letting the other,  
As luck would assist him, gain the upper hand.  
This was the king's custom when he was in court, 100  
At each splendid feast with his noble company  
in hall.

Therefore with proud face  
He stands there, masterful,  
Valiant in that New Year, 105  
Joking with them all.

So there the bold king himself keeps on his feet,  
Chatting before the high table of charming trifles.  
There good Gawain was seated beside Guenevere,

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

And Agravain à la Dure Main on the other side; 110  
Both the king's nephews and outstanding knights.  
Bishop Baldwin heads the table in the highest seat,  
And Ywain, son of Urien, dined as his partner.  
These knights were set on the dais and sumptuously served,  
And after them many a true man at the side tables. 115  
Then the first course was brought in with trumpets blaring,  
Many colourful banners hanging from them.  
The novel sound of kettledrums with the splendid pipes  
Waked echoes with shrill and tremulous notes,  
That many hearts leapt at the outburst of music. 120  
At the same time servings of such exquisite food,  
Abundance of fresh meat, in so many dishes  
That space could hardly be found in front of the guests  
To set down the silverware holding various stews  
on the board. 125  
Each man who loved himself  
Took ungrudged, pair by pair,  
From a dozen tasty dishes,  
And drank good wine or beer.

Now I will say nothing more about how they were served, 130  
For everyone can guess that no shortage was there.  
Another noise, quite different, quickly drew near,  
So that the king might have leave to swallow some food.  
For hardly had the music stopped for a moment,  
And the first course been properly served to the court, 135  
When there bursts in at the hall door a terrible figure,  
In his stature the very tallest on earth.  
From the waist to the neck so thick-set and square,  
And his loins and his limbs so massive and long,  
In truth half a giant I believe he was, 140  
But anyway of all men I judge him the largest,  
And the most attractive of his size who could sit on a horse.  
For while in back and chest his body was forbidding,  
Both his belly and waist were becomingly trim,  
And every part of his body equally elegant 145  
in shape.  
His hue astounded them,  
Set in his looks so keen;  
For boldly he rode in,

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Completely emerald green. 150

And all arrayed in green this man and his clothes:  
A straight close-fitting coat that clung to his body,  
A pleasant mantle over that, adorned within  
With plain trimmed fur, the facing made bright  
With gay shining ermine, and his hood of the same 155  
Thrown back from his hair and laid over his shoulders.

Neat tightly-drawn stockings coloured to match  
Clinging to his calf, and shining spurs below  
Of bright gold, over embroidered and richly striped silk;  
And without shoes on his feet there the man rides. 160

And truly all his clothing was brilliant green,  
Both the bars on his belt and other gay gems  
That were lavishly set in his shining array  
Round himself and his saddle, on embroidered silk.  
It would be hard to describe even half the fine work 165

That was embroidered upon it, the butterflies and birds,  
With lovely beadwork of green, always centred upon gold.  
The pendants on the breast-trappings, the splendid crupper,  
The bosses on the bit, and all the metal enamelled.  
The stirrups he stood in were coloured the same, 170

And his saddlebow behind him and his splendid skirts  
That constantly glittered and shone, all of green gems;  
The horse that he rides entirely of that colour,  
in truth.

A green horse huge and strong, 175  
A proud steed to restrain,  
Spirited under bridle,  
But obedient to the man.

Most attractive was this man attired in green,  
With the hair of his head matching his horse. 180

Fine outspreading locks cover his shoulders;  
A great beard hangs down over his chest like a bush,  
That like the splendid hair that falls from his head  
Was clipped all around above his elbows,  
So that his upper arms were hidden, in the fashion 185

Of a royal capados that covers the neck.  
That great horse's mane was treated much the same,  
Well curled and combed, with numerous knots

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Plaited with gold thread around the fine green,  
Always a strand of his hair with another of gold. 190  
His tail and his forelock were braided to match,  
Both tied with a ribbon of brilliant green,  
Studded with costly gems to the end of the tail,  
Then tightly bound with a thong to an intricate knot  
Where many bright bells of burnished gold rang. 195  
No such horse upon earth, nor such a rider indeed,  
Had any man in that hall before thought to see  
    with his eyes.  
    His glance was lightning swift,  
    All said who saw him there; 200  
    It seemed that no one could  
    His massive blows endure.

Yet he had no helmet nor hauberk either,  
No neck-armor or plate belonging to arms,  
No spear and no shield to push or to strike; 205  
But in one hand he carried a holly-branch  
That is brilliantly green when forests are bare,  
And an axe in the other, monstrously huge;  
A cruel battle-axe to tell of in words, if one could.  
The great head was as broad as a measuring-rod, 210  
The spike made entirely of green and gold steel,  
Its blade brightly burnished, with a long cutting-edge  
As well fashioned to shear as the keenest razor.  
The grim man gripped the handle, a powerful staff,  
That was wound with iron to the end of the haft 215  
And all engraved in green with craftsmanly work.  
It had a thong wrapped about it, fastened to the head,  
And then looped round the handle several times,  
With many splendid tassels attached to it  
With buttons of bright green, richly embroidered. 220  
This giant bursts in and rides through the hall,  
Approaching the high dais, disdainful of peril,  
Greeting none, but haughtily looking over their heads.  
The first words he spoke, 'Where is,' he demanded,  
'The governor of this crowd? Glad should I be 225  
To clap eyes on the man, and exchange with him  
    a few words.'  
    He looked down at the knights,

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

As he rode up and down,  
Then paused, waiting to see  
Who had the most renown. 230

For long there was only staring at the man,  
For everyone marvelled what it could mean  
That a knight and a horse might take such a colour  
And become green as grass, and greener it seemed 235  
Than green enamel shining brightly on gold.  
All those standing there gazed, and warily crept closer,  
Bursting with wonder to see what he would do;  
For many marvels they had known, but such a one never;  
So the folk there judged it phantasm or magic. 240  
For this reason many noble knights feared to answer:  
And stunned by his words they sat there stock-still,  
While dead silence spread throughout the rich hall  
As though everyone fell asleep, so was their talk stilled  
at a word. 245

Not just for fear, I think,  
But some for courtesy;  
Letting him whom all revere  
To that man reply.

Then Arthur confronts that wonder before the high table, 250  
And saluted him politely, for afraid was he never,  
And said, 'Sir, welcome indeed to this place;  
I am master of this house, my name is Arthur.  
Be pleased to dismount and spend some time here, I beg,  
And what you have come for we shall learn later.' 255  
'No, by heaven,' said the knight, 'and him who sits there,  
To spend time in this house was not the cause of my coming.  
But because your name, sir, is so highly regarded,  
And your city and your warriors reputed the best,  
Dauntless in armour and on horseback afield, 260  
The most valiant and excellent of all living men,  
Courageous as players in other noble sports,  
And here courtesy is displayed, as I have heard tell,  
And that has brought me here, truly, on this day.  
You may be assured by this branch that I carry 265  
That I approach you in peace, seeking no battle.  
For had I travelled in fighting dress, in warlike manner,

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

I have a hauberk at home and a helmet too,  
A shield and a keen spear, shining bright,  
And other weapons to brandish, I assure you, as well; 270  
But since I look for no combat I am not dressed for battle.  
But if you are as courageous as everyone says,  
You will graciously grant me the game that I ask for  
by right.'

In answer Arthur said, 275  
'If you seek, courteous knight,  
A combat without armour,  
You will not lack a fight.'

'No, I seek no battle, I assure you truly,  
Those about me in this hall are but beardless children. 280  
If I were locked in my armour on a great horse,  
No one here could match me with their feeble powers.  
Therefore I ask of the court a Christmas game,  
For it is Yule and New Year, and here are brave men in plenty.  
If anyone in this hall thinks himself bold enough, 285  
So doughty in body and reckless in mind  
As to strike a blow fearlessly and take one in return,  
I shall give him this marvellous battle-axe as a gift,  
This ponderous axe, to use as he pleases;  
And I shall stand the first blow, unarmed as I am. 290  
If anyone is fierce enough to take up my challenge,  
Run to me quickly and seize this weapon,  
I renounce all claim to it, let him keep it as his own,  
And I shall stand his blow unflinching on this floor,  
Provided you assign me the right to deal such a one 295  
in return.

And yet grant him respite  
A twelvemonth and a day.  
Now hurry, and let's see  
What any here dare say.' 300

If he petrified them at first, even stiller were then  
All the courtiers in that place, the great and the small.  
The man on the horse turned himself in his saddle,  
Ferociously rolling his red eyes about,  
Bunched up his eyebrows, bristling with green, 305  
Swung his beard this way and that to see whoever would rise.

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

When no one would answer he cried out aloud,  
Drew himself up grandly and started to speak.  
'What, is this Arthur's house?' said the man then,  
'That everyone talks of in so many kingdoms? 310  
Where are now your arrogance and your victories,  
Your fierceness and wrath and your great speeches?  
Now the revelry and repute of the Round Table  
Are overthrown with a word from one man's mouth,  
For you all cower in fear before a blow has been struck!' 315  
Then he laughs so uproariously that the king took offence;  
The blood rushed into his fair face and cheek  
for shame.

Arthur grew red with rage,  
As all the others did. 320  
The king, by nature bold,  
Approached that man and said,

'Sir, by heaven, what you demand is absurd,  
And since you have asked for folly, that you deserve.  
No man known to me fears your boastful words; 325  
Hand over your battle-axe, in God's name,  
And I shall grant the wish that you have requested.'  
He quickly goes to him and took the axe from his hand.  
Then proudly the other dismounts and stands there.  
Now Arthur has the axe, grips it by the shaft, 330  
And grimly swings it about, as preparing to strike.  
Towering before him stood the bold man,  
Taller than anyone in the court by more than a head.  
Standing there grim-faced he stroked his beard,  
And with an unmoved expression then pulled down his coat, 335  
No more daunted or dismayed by those powerful strokes  
Than if any knight in the hall had brought him a measure  
of wine.

Seated by Guenevere  
Then bowed the good Gawain: 340  
'I beg you in plain words  
To let this task be mine.'

Said Gawain to the king, 'If you would, noble lord,  
Bid me rise from my seat and stand at your side,  
If without discourtesy I might leave the table, 345

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

And that my liege lady were not displeased,  
I would offer you counsel before your royal court.  
For it seems to me unfitting, if the truth be admitted,  
When so arrogant a request is put forward in hall,  
Even if you are desirous, to undertake it yourself 350  
While so many brave men sit about you in their places  
Who, I think, are unrivalled in temper of mind,  
And without equal as warriors on field of battle.  
I am the weakest of them, I know, and the dullest-minded,  
So my death would be least loss, if truth should be told; 355  
Only because you are my uncle am I to be praised,  
No virtue I know in myself but your blood;  
And since this affair is so foolish and unfitting for you,  
And I have asked you for it first, it should fall to me.  
And if my request is improper, let not this royal court 360  
bear the blame.'

Nobles whispered together  
And agreed on their advice,  
That Arthur should withdraw  
And Gawain take his place. 365

Then the king commanded Gawain to stand up,  
And he did so promptly, and moved forward with grace,  
Kneeled down before the king and laid hold of the weapon;  
And Arthur gave it up graciously, and lifting his hand  
Gave Gawain God's blessing, and cheerfully bids 370  
That he bring a strong heart and firm hand to the task.  
'Take care, nephew,' said the king, 'that you strike one blow,  
And if you deal it aright, truly I believe  
You will wait a long time for his stroke in return.'  
Gawain approaches the man with battle-axe in hand, 375  
And he waits for him boldly, with no sign of alarm.  
Then the knight in the green addresses Gawain,  
'Let us repeat our agreement before going further.  
First I entreat you, sir, that what is your name  
You shall tell me truly, that I may believe you.' 380  
'In good faith,' said that virtuous knight, 'I am called Gawain,  
Who deals you this blow, whatever happens after,  
On this day next year to accept another from you  
With what weapon you choose, and from no other person  
on earth.' 385

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

The other man replied,  
'Sir Gawain, as I live,  
I am extremely glad  
This blow is yours to give.

By God,' said the Green Knight, 'Sir Gawain, I am pleased 390  
That I shall get from your hands what I have asked for here.

And you have fully repeated, in exact terms,  
Without omission the whole covenant I put to the king;  
Except that you shall assure me, sir, on your word,  
That you will seek me yourself, wherever you think 395

I may be found upon earth, to accept such payment  
As you deal me today before this noble gathering.'  
'Where shall I find you?' said Gawain, 'Where is your dwelling?

I have no idea where you live, by him who made me;  
Nor do I know you, sir, your court nor your name. 400

Just tell me truly these things, and what you are called,  
And I shall use all my wits to get myself there,  
And that I swear to you honestly, by my pledged word.'

'That is enough for the moment, it needs nothing more,'  
Said the man in green to the courteous Gawain, 405

'If I answer you truly after taking the blow,  
And you have dextrously struck me, I will tell you at once  
Of my house and my home and my proper name,  
Then you can pay me a visit and keep your pledged word;  
And if I say nothing, then you will fare better, 410  
For you may stay in your country and seek no further —  
but enough!

Take up your fearsome weapon  
And let's see how you smite.'  
Said Gawain, 'Gladly, indeed,' 415  
Whetting the metal bit.

The Green Knight readily takes up his position,  
Bowed his head a little, uncovering the flesh,  
His long lovely hair he swept over his head,  
In readiness letting the naked neck show. 420  
Gawain grasped the axe and lifts it up high,  
Setting his left foot before him on the ground,  
Brought it down swiftly on the bare flesh  
So that the bright blade slashed through the man's spine

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

And cut through the white flesh, severing it in two, 425  
So that the shining steel blade bit into the floor.  
The handsome head flew from the neck to the ground,  
And many courtiers kicked at it as it rolled past.  
Blood spurted from the trunk, gleamed on the green dress,  
Yet the man neither staggered nor fell a whit for all that, 430  
But sprang forward vigorously on powerful legs,  
And fiercely reached out where knights were standing,  
Grabbed at his fine head and snatched it up quickly,  
And then strides to his horse, seizes the bridle,  
Puts foot into stirrup and swings into his seat, 435  
His other hand clutching his head by the hair;  
And the man seated himself on horseback as firmly  
As if he had suffered no injury, though headless he sat  
in his place.  
He turned his body round, 440  
That gruesome trunk that bled;  
Many were struck by fear  
When all his words were said.

For he holds up the head in his hand, truly,  
Turns its face towards the noblest on the dais, 445  
And it lifted its eyelids and glared with wide eyes,  
And the mouth uttered these words, which you shall now hear:  
'See, Gawain, that you carry out your promise exactly,  
And search for me truly, sir, until I am found,  
As you have sworn in this hall in the hearing of these knights. 450  
Make your way to the Green Chapel, I charge you, to get  
Such a blow as you have dealt, rightfully given,  
To be readily returned on New Year's Day.  
As the Knight of the Green Chapel I am widely known,  
So if you make search to find me you cannot possibly fail. 455  
Therefore come, or merit the name of craven coward.'  
With a fierce jerk of the reins he turns his horse  
And hurtled out of the hall door, his head in his hand,  
So fast that flint-fire sparked from the hoofs.  
What land he returned to no one there knew, 460  
Any more than they guessed where he had come from.  
What then?  
Seeing that green man go,  
The king and Gawain grin;

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Yet they both agreed 465  
They had a wonder seen.

Although inwardly Arthur was deeply astonished,  
He let no sign of this appear, but loudly remarked  
To the beautiful queen with courteous speech,  
'Dear lady, let nothing distress you today. 470  
Such strange goings-on are fitting at Christmas,  
Putting on interludes, laughing and singing,  
Mixed with courtly dances of ladies and knights.  
None the less, I can certainly go to my food,  
For I have seen something wondrous, I cannot deny.' 475  
He glanced at Sir Gawain, and aptly he said,  
'Now sir, hang your axe up, for it has severed enough.'  
And it was hung above the dais, on a piece of tapestry,  
Where everyone might gaze on it as a wonder,  
And the living proof of this marvellous tale. 480  
Then these two men together walked to a table,  
The king and the good knight, and were dutifully served  
With delicious double helpings befitting their rank.  
With every kind of food and minstrelsy  
They spent that day joyfully, until daylight ended 485  
on earth.  
Now take good care, Gawain,  
Lest fear hold you back  
From leaving on the quest  
You have sworn to undertake. 490

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

So that the whole glittered and shone like the sun.  
Then Gawain seizes his helmet and kisses it quickly, 605  
That was strongly stapled and padded inside.  
It stood high on his head, fastened at the back  
With a shining silk band over the mailed neck-guard,  
Embroidered and studded with the finest gems  
On a broad border of silk with birds covering the seams - 610  
Popinjays depicted between periwinkles,  
Turtledoves and true-love flowers embroidered so thick  
As if many women had worked on it seven years  
in town.  
A circlet still more precious 615  
Was ringed about his head,  
Made with perfect diamonds  
Of every brilliant shade.

Then they brought out the shield of shining gules,  
With the pentangle painted on it in pure gold. 620  
He swings it over his baldric, throws it round his neck,  
Where it suited the knight extremely well.  
And why the pentangle should befit that noble prince  
I intend to explain, even should that delay me.  
It is a symbol that Solomon designed long ago 625  
As an emblem of fidelity, and justly so;  
For it is a figure consisting of five points,  
Where each line overlaps and locks into another,  
And the whole design is continuous, and in England is called  
Everywhere, I am told, the endless knot. 630  
Therefore it suits this knight and his shining arms,  
For always faithful in five ways, and five times in each case,  
Gawain was reputed as virtuous, like refined gold,  
Devoid of all vice, and with all courtly virtues  
adorned. 635  
So this new-painted sign  
He bore on shield and coat,  
As man most true of speech  
And fairest-spoken knight.

First he was judged perfect in his five senses, 640  
And next his five fingers never lost their dexterity;  
And all his earthly faith was in the five wounds

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

That Christ suffered on the cross, as the creed declares.  
And wherever this man found himself in battle  
His fixed thought was that, above all other things, 645  
All his fortitude should come from the five joys  
That the mild Queen of Heaven found in her child.  
For this reason the gracious knight had  
Her image depicted on the inside of his shield,  
So that when he glanced at it his heart never quailed. 650  
The fifth group of five the man respected, I hear,  
Was generosity and love of fellow-men above all;  
His purity and courtesy were never lacking,  
And surpassing the others, compassion: these noble five  
Were more deepy implanted in that man than any other. 655  
Now truly, all these five groups were embodied in that knight,  
Each one linked to the others in an endless design,  
Based upon five points that was never unfinished,  
Not uniting in one line nor separating either;  
Without ending anywhere at any point that I find, 660  
No matter where the line began or ran to an end.  
Therefore the knot was fashioned on his bright shield  
Royally with red gold upon red gules,  
That is called the true pentangle by learned people  
who know. 665  
Now Gawain, lance in hand,  
Is ready to depart;  
He bade them all farewell,  
Not to return, he thought.

He set spurs to his horse and sprang on his way 670  
So vigorously that sparks flew up from the stones.  
All who watched that fair knight leave sighed from the heart,  
And together whispered one to another,  
Distressed for that handsome one, 'What a pity indeed  
That your life must be squandered, noble as you are! 675  
To find his equal on earth is not easy, in faith.  
To have acted more cautiously would have been much wiser,  
And have appointed that dear man to become a duke:  
To be a brilliant leader of men, as he is well suited,  
And would better have been so than battered to nothing, 680  
Beheaded by an ogrish man out of excessive pride.  
Whoever knew a king to take such foolish advice

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Then they beat on the bushes and called him to come out;  
And he broke cover ferociously through a line of men.  
An incredible wild boar charged out there,  
Which long since had left the herd through his age, 1440  
For he was massive and broad, greatest of all boars,  
Terrible when he snorted. Then many were dismayed,  
For three men in one rush he threw on their backs,  
And made away fast without doing more harm.  
The others shouted 'hi!' and 'hay, hay!' at the tops of their voices, 1445  
Put horns to mouth and loudly sounded recall.  
Many hunters and hounds joyfully gave tongue,  
Hurrying after this boar with outcry and clamour  
to kill.

Often he stands at bay, 1450  
And maims the circling pack,  
Wounding many hounds  
That piteously yelp and bark.

Men press forward to shoot at him then,  
Loosed their arrows at him, hit him many times; 1455  
But those that struck his shoulders were foiled by their toughness,  
And none of them could pierce through the bristles on his brow.  
Although the polished shaft shivered into pieces,  
The head rebounded away wherever it struck.  
But when the hits hurt him with their constant blows, 1460  
Frenzied with fighting he turns headlong on the men,  
And injures them savagely when he charges out,  
So that many grew fearful and drew back further.  
But the lord on a lively horse races after him,  
Like a valiant hunter, blowing his horn. 1465  
He urged the hounds on, and through dense thickets rode  
Following this wild boar until the sun went down.  
So they spent the day in this manner, in this wild chase,  
While our gracious knight lies in his bed:  
Gawain, happily at home amid bright-coloured bedding 1470  
so rich.

Nor did the lady fail  
To wish her guest good day;  
Early she was there  
His mood to mollify. 1475

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

She comes to the curtain and peeps in at the knight.  
Sir Gawain welcomes her politely at once,  
And she returns his greeting with eager speech,  
Seats herself gently at his side and quickly laughs,  
And with a charming glance at him uttered these words: 1480  
'Sir, if you are Gawain, it astonishes me  
That a man always so strongly inclined to good,  
Cannot grasp the rules of polite behaviour,  
And if someone instructs him, lets them drop out of mind.  
You have quickly forgotten what I taught you yesterday, 1485  
By the very truest lesson I could put into words.'  
'What was that?' said the knight, 'Indeed, I don't know at all.  
If what you say is true, the blame is all mine.'  
'Yet I told you about kissing,' the fair lady replied,  
'To act quickly wherever a glance of favour is seen; 1490  
That befits every knight who practises courtesy.'  
'Dear lady, enough of such talk,' said that brave man,  
'For I dare not do that, lest I were refused.  
If repulsed, I should be at fault for having presumed.'  
'Ma foi,' said the gay lady, 'you could not be refused; 1495  
You are strong enough to force your will if you wish,  
If any woman were so ill-mannered as to reject you.'  
'Yes, indeed,' said Gawain, 'what you say is quite true;  
But in my country force is considered ignoble,  
And so is each gift that is not freely given. 1500  
I am at your disposal, to kiss when it pleases you,  
You may take one when you like, and stop as seems good,  
in a while.'  
She bends down over him  
And gives the knight a kiss; 1505  
For long they then discuss  
Love's misery and bliss.

'I would learn from you, sir,' said that gentle lady,  
If the question was not irksome, what the reason was  
That someone as young and valiant as yourself, 1510  
So courteous and chivalrous as you are known far and wide —  
And of all the aspects of chivalry, the thing most praised  
Is the true practice of love, knighthood's very lore;  
For to speak of the endeavours of true knights,  
The written heading and text of their deeds is that: 1515

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

How knights have ventured their lives for true love,  
Suffered for their love-longings dismal times,  
And later taken revenge on their misery through valour,  
Bringing joy to their ladies through their personal merits.  
And you are the outstanding knight of your time, 1520  
Your fame and your honour are known everywhere,  
And I have sat by you here on two separate occasions  
Yet never heard from your mouth a solitary word  
Referring to love, of any kind at all.  
And you, who make such courteous and elegant vows, 1525  
Should be eager to instruct a youthful creature,  
And teach her some elements of skill in true love.  
What, are you ignorant, who enjoy such great fame?  
Or do you think me too silly to take in courtly chat?  
For shame! 1530  
I come here alone, and sit  
To learn your special play;  
Show me your expertise  
While my husband is away.'

'In good faith,' said Gawain, 'may God reward you! 1535  
It gives me great gladness and pleases me hugely  
That one as noble as yourself should make your way here,  
And trouble yourself with a nobody, trifling with your knight  
With any kind of favour: it gives me delight.  
But to take the task on myself of explaining true love, 1540  
And treat the matter of romance and chivalric tales  
To you whom — I know well — have more expertise  
In that subject by half than a hundred such men  
As myself ever can, however long I may live,  
Would be absolute folly, noble lady, on my word. 1545  
I will carry out your desires with all my power,  
As I am in all duty bound, and always will be  
The servant of your wishes, may God preserve me!  
Thus that lady made trial of him, tempting him many times  
To have led him into mischief, whatever her purpose; 1550  
But he defended himself so skilfully that no fault appeared,  
Nor evil on either side, nor anything did they feel  
but delight.  
They laughed and bantered long;  
Then she kissed her guest; 1555

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Charmingly took her leave,  
And went her way at last.

Then Gawain rouses himself and dresses for mass,  
And afterwards dinner was cooked and splendidly served.  
The knight diverted himself with the ladies all day, 1560  
But the lord raced ceaselessly over the countryside,  
After his menacing boar, that scurries over the hills,  
And bit the backs of his bravest hounds asunder  
Where he stood at bay, until archers broke it,  
And forced him unwillingly to move into the open; 1565  
So thickly the arrows flew when the hunters gathered.  
But yet he made the bravest of them flinch at times,  
Until at last he was so tired that he could run no more,  
And as fast as he can he makes his way to a hole  
By a rocky ledge overlooking the stream. 1570  
He gets the river-bank at his back, begins to scrape —  
The froth foamed hideously at the corners of his mouth —  
And whets his white tusks. Then it grew irksome  
For all the bold men who surrounded him trying  
To wound him from afar, but for the danger none dared 1575  
to get close;  
So many had been hurt  
That no one wished to risk  
To be more savaged by  
A maddened boar's tusk. 1580

Until the lord himself came, spurring his horse,  
Saw the boar standing at bay, ringed by his men;  
He nimbly dismounts, leaving his courser,  
Unsheathes a bright sword and mightily strides,  
Hastens quickly through the stream towards the waiting boar. 1585  
The beast saw the man with his weapon in hand,  
Raised his bristles erect, and so fiercely snorted  
That many feared for the man, lest he got the worst of it.  
The boar charged out, straight at the man,  
So that he and the beast were both in a heap 1590  
Where the water was swiftest. The other had the worse;  
For the man takes aim carefully as the two met,  
And thrust the sword firmly straight into his throat,  
Drove it up to the hilt, so that the heart burst open,

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

And squawling he gave up, and was swept through the water  
downstream. 1595

Seized by a hundred hounds  
Fierce and sharp of tooth,  
Men dragged him to the bank,  
And dogs do him to death. 1600

There was sounding of capture from many brave horns,  
Proud shouting by knights as loud as they could,  
Hounds bayed at that beast, as bidden by the masters  
Who were the chief huntsmen of that wearisome chase.  
Then a man who was expert in hunting practice 1605  
Skilfully begins to dismember this boar.

First he cuts off the head and sets it on high,  
And then roughly opens him along the spine,  
Throws out the entrails, grills them over embers,  
And rewards his hounds with them, mixed with bread. 1610

Next he cuts out the boar's-meat in broad glistening slabs,  
And takes out the haslets, as properly follows;  
Yet he fastens the two sides together unbroken,  
And then proudly hangs them on a strong pole. 1615  
Now with this very boar they gallop towards home;  
Carrying the boar's head before the same man  
Who had killed it in the stream by force of his own  
strong hand.

Until he saw Gawain  
It seemed a tedious time,  
He gladly came when called, 1620  
His due reward to claim.

The lord, noisy with speech and merry laughter,  
Joyfully exclaims at the sight of Sir Gawain.  
The good ladies were brought down and the household assembled; 1625  
He shows them the sides of meat, and gives an account  
Of the boar's huge size and the ferocity

Of the fight with the beast in the wood where he fled.  
The other knight warmly commended his deeds,  
And praised his action as proof of his excellence, 1630  
For such boar's-meat, the brave knight declared,  
And such sides of wild boar he had never seen before.  
Then they picked up the huge head, the polite man praised it

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

And pretended to feel horror, to honour the lord.  
'Now, Gawain,' said his host, 'this quarry is all yours, 1635  
By fully ratified covenant, as you well know.'  
'That is so,' said the knight, 'and just as truly indeed  
I shall give you all I gained in return, by my pledged word.'  
He grasped the lord round the neck and graciously kisses him,  
And then a second time treated him in the same way. 1640  
'Now we are quit,' said Gawain, 'at the end of the day,  
Of all the agreements we have made since I came here,  
in due form.'  
The lord said, 'By St Giles,  
You're the best man I know! 1645  
You'll be a rich one soon  
If you keep on trading so.'

Then tables were set up on top of trestles,  
And tablecloths spread on them: bright light then  
Glittered on the walls from waxen torches. 1650  
Attendants laid table and served throughout hall.  
A great noise of merry-making and joking arose  
Round the fire in the centre; and of many kinds,  
At supper and afterwards, noble songs were sung,  
Such as Christmas carols and the newest dances, 1655  
With all the fitting amusement that could be thought;  
Our courteous knight sitting with the lady throughout.  
Such a loving demeanour she displayed to that man,  
Through furtive looks of affection to give him delight,  
That he was utterly astonished and angry inside; 1660  
But he could not in courtesy rebuff her advances,  
But treated her politely, even though his actions might be  
misconstrued.  
When the revelry in hall  
Had lasted long enough, 1665  
To the fireside in his room  
The lord took Gawain off.

And there they drank and chatted, and spoke once again  
To repeat the arrangement on New Year's Eve;  
But the knight begged leave to depart the next day, 1670  
For it was near time for the appointment that he had to keep.  
The lord held him back, begging him to remain,

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

'That remark,' said the lady, 'is the worst you could make,  
But I am answered indeed, and painfully, I feel.  
Kiss me now lovingly, and I will hasten from here,  
I must spend my life grieving, as a woman deeply in love.' 1795  
Sighing she stooped down and kissed him sweetly,  
And then moves away from him and says, standing there,  
'Now, dear sir, do me this kindness at parting,  
Give me something as a present, for instance your glove,  
That I may remember you by, to lessen my sorrow.' 1800  
'Now truly,' said that man, 'I wish I had here  
The dearest thing in the world I possess for your love,  
For you have truly deserved, wonderfully often,  
More recompense by right than I could repay.  
But to give you as love-token something worth little 1805  
Would do you no honour, or to have at this time  
A glove for a keepsake, as Gawain's gift.  
I am here on a mission in unknown country,  
And have no servants with bags full of precious things,  
That grieves me, lady, for your sake at this time, 1810  
But each man must do as conditions allow; take no offence  
or pain.'  
'No, most honoured sir,'  
Then said that lady free,  
'Though I get no gift from you, 1815  
You shall have one from me.'

She held out a precious ring of finely worked gold  
With a sparkling jewel standing up high,  
Its facets flashing as bright as the sun:  
Take my word, it was worth an enormous sum. 1820  
But the knight would not accept it, and straightaway said,  
'I want no gifts, I swear, dear lady, at this time;  
I have nothing to offer you, and nothing will I take.'  
She pressed him insistently, and he declines her request,  
Swearing quickly on his word that he would never touch it, 1825  
And she was grieved that he refused it, and said to him then,  
'If you reject my ring because you think it too precious,  
And wish not to be so deeply indebted to me,  
I shall give you my girdle, that profits you less.'  
Quickly she unbuckled a belt clipped round her waist, 1830

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Fastened over her kirtle beneath the fine mantle;  
It was woven of green silk and trimmed with gold,  
Embroidered at the edges and decorated by hand;  
And this she offered to the knight, and sweetly implored him  
That despite its slight value he would accept it. 1835

And he declared absolutely that he would never agree  
To take either gold or keepsake before God gave him grace  
To finish the task he had undertaken.  
'And therefore I beg you, do not be displeased,  
And cease your insisting, for I shall never be brought  
to consent. 1840

I am deeply in your debt  
Because of your kind favour,  
And will through thick and thin  
Remain your servant ever.' 1845

'Now, do you refuse this belt,' the lady said then,  
'Because it is worth little? and so truly it appears.  
See, it is indeed a trifle, and its worth even less;  
But anyone who knew the power woven into it  
Would put a much higher price on it, perhaps. 1850

For whoever is buckled into this green belt,  
As long as it is tightly fastened about him  
There is no man on earth who can strike him down,  
For he cannot be killed by any trick in the world.'  
Then the knight reflected, and it flashed into his mind 1855

This would be a godsend for the hazard he must face  
When he reached the chapel to receive his deserts;  
Could he escape being killed, the trick would be splendid.  
Then he suffered her pleading and allowed her to speak,  
And she pressed the belt on him, offering it at once — 1860

And he consented and gave way with good grace —  
And she begged him for her sake never to reveal it,  
But loyally hide it from her husband. Gawain gives his word  
That no one should ever know of it, not for anything,  
but themselves. 1865

He gave her heartfelt thanks  
With earnest mind and sense;  
By then she has three times  
Kissed that valiant prince.

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

Hunters hurried towards him with many horns blowing, 1910  
Sounding rally in proper fashion until they saw the lord.  
When his noble company was all assembled,  
Everyone carrying a bugle blew it at once,  
And the others, without horns, raised a great shout.  
It was the most glorious baying that man ever heard, 1915  
The noble clamour set up there for Reynard's soul  
with din.

Hunters reward their hounds,  
Heads they rub and pat;  
And then they took Reynard 1920  
And stripped him of his coat.

And then they set off for home, for it was nearly night,  
Stridently sounding their mighty horns.  
At last the lord dismounts at his well-loved home,  
Finds a fire burning in hall, the knight waiting beside, 1925  
Sir Gawain the good, completely content,  
Taking great pleasure from the ladies' affection.

He wore a blue mantle of rich stuff reaching the ground;  
His softly furred surcoat suited him well,  
And his hood of the same stuff hung on his shoulder, 1930  
Both trimmed with ermine along the edges.

He meets his host in the middle of the hall,  
Laughingly greeted him, and courteously said,  
'Now I shall first carry out the terms of our covenant,  
Which we readily agreed on when wine was not spared.' 1935

Then he embraces the lord and gives him three kisses,  
With as much relish and gravity as he could contrive.  
'By God,' said that other knight, 'you had much luck  
In winning this merchandise, if the price was right.'

'Oh, never mind the price,' replied the other quickly, 1940  
'So long as the goods I got have been honestly paid.'  
'Marry,' said the other man, 'mine don't compare,  
For I have hunted all day, and yet have caught nothing

But this stinking fox pelt — the devil take the goods!  
And that is a meagre return for such precious things 1945  
As you have warmly pressed on me, three such kisses  
so good.'

'Enough,' said Gawain,  
'I thank you, by the Rood';

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

And how the fox was killed  
He heard as there they stood. 1950

With mirth and minstrelsy, and all the food they would wish,  
They made as much merriment as any men could  
With laughter of ladies and jesting remarks.  
Both Gawain and the lord were ravished with joy 1955  
As if the company had gone crazy or taken much drink.  
Both the lord and his retainers played many tricks  
Until the time came round when they must separate:  
Folk to their beds must betake them at last.

Then humbly this noble knight first takes leave 1960  
Of the lord, and graciously gives him thanks:  
'For such a wonderful stay as I have had here,  
Honoured by you at this holy feast, may God repay you!  
I offer myself as your servant, if you agree,

For I am compelled, as you know, to leave tomorrow, 1965  
If you will assign someone to show me, as you promised,  
The road to the Green Chapel, as God will allow me,  
To get what fate ordains for me on New Year's Day.'  
'In good faith,' said the lord, 'very willingly,  
Everything I ever promised you I shall readily give.' 1970

There he appoints a servant to put Gawain on the road  
And guide him over the fells, so that he would not be delayed,  
To ride through the woods and take the shortest path  
in the trees.

Gawain thanked the lord 1975  
Paying him great respect;  
Then from those noble ladies  
Took leave, as was correct.

With tears and with kisses he addresses them both,  
And begged them to accept many profuse thanks, 1980  
And they immediately returned the same words to him.  
They commended him to Christ with many deep sighs.

Then from the household he takes courteous leave;  
To each man whom he met he expressed his thanks  
For his service and kindness and the personal pains 1985  
They had taken in busying themselves for his sake;  
And each man was as sorry to part from him there  
As if they had honourably lived with that nobleman ever.

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Now the New Year approaches and the night wears away,  
The dawn presses against the darkness, as the Creator bids,  
But rough weather blows up in the country outside, 2000  
Clouds empty their bitter cold contents on the earth,  
With enough malice from the north to torment the ill-clad.  
Snow pelted down spitefully, stinging the wild creatures;  
The wind shrilly whistled down from the fells,  
Choking the valleys with enormous drifts. 2005  
The knight lay in bed listening intently,  
Although his eyelids are shut very little he sleeps;  
Each cock-crow reminded him of his undertaking.  
He got up quickly before the day dawned,  
For there was light from a lamp burning in his room; 2010  
He called to his chamberlain, who answered him promptly,  
Bade him bring his mail-shirt and saddle his horse.  
The man leaps out of bed and fetches him his clothes,  
And gets Gawain ready in splendid attire.  
First he puts clothing on him to keep out the cold, 2015  
And then the rest of his gear, that had been well looked after,  
His body-armour and his plate, all polished clean,  
The rings of his fine mail-shirt rocked free of rust;  
Everything unstained as at first, for which he gladly  
gave thanks. 2020  
    Wearing each metal piece  
    Rubbed clean of stain and spot,  
    The best-dressed man on earth  
    Ordered his horse be brought.

While he dressed himself in his noblest clothes — 2025  
His coat with its finely embroidered badge  
Set upon velvet, with stones of magical power  
Inlaid and clasped round it, with embroidered seams,  
And richly lined on the inside with beautiful furs —  
He did not leave out the belt, the lady's present: 2030  
For his own good Gawain did not forget that.

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

When he had buckled his sword on his curving hips,  
That noble knight bound his love-token twice  
Closely wrapped round his middle, with delight;  
The girdle of green silk, whose colour went well 2035  
Against that splendid red surcote that showed so fine.  
But the knight did not wear the belt for its costliness,  
Or for pride in its pendants, however they shone,  
Or because its edges gleamed with glittering gold,  
But to safeguard himself when he had to submit, 2040  
To await death without sword to defend himself  
or blade.

When he was fully dressed  
The knight hurries outside,  
And pays that noble household 2045  
His debt of gratitude.

Then Gringolet was ready, that great horse and huge,  
Who had been stabled securely, keeping him safe;  
In such fine condition that he was eager to gallop.  
The knight walks up to him and examines his coat, 2050  
And said gravely to himself, swearing by his true word,  
'There is a company in the castle that keeps courtesy in mind;  
And a lord who supports them, may he have joy,  
And may the dear lady be loved all her life!  
If out of kindness they cherish a guest 2055  
And dispense hospitality, may the noble lord  
Who holds up heaven repay them, and reward you all!  
And were I to live any long time on earth  
I would gladly recompense you, if I could.'  
Then he sets foot in stirrup and vaults on to his horse, 2060  
His servant gave him his shield, he slung it on his shoulder,  
Strikes spurs into Gringolet with his gilt heels,  
And he leaps forward on the paving, he waited no longer  
to prance.

His man was mounted then, 2065  
Carrying his spear and lance.  
'I commend this house to God,  
May it never meet mischance.'

The drawbridge was lowered, and the broad gates  
Unbarred and pushed open upon both sides. 2070

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

The knight blessed himself quickly and rode over the planks,  
Praises the porter who knelt before him  
Commending Gawain to God, that he should the knight save,  
And went on his way with his single guide,  
Who would show him the way to that perilous place 2075  
Where he must submit to a fearful stroke.  
They struggled up hillsides where branches are bare,  
They climbed up past rock-faces gripped by the cold.  
The clouds were high up, but murky beneath them,  
Mist shrouded the moors, melted on the hills. 2080  
Each summit wore a hat, a huge cloak of mist.  
Streams foamed and splashed down the slopes around them,  
Breaking white against the banks as they rushed downhill.  
Very wandering was the way they must take to the wood,  
Until soon it was time for sunrise at that point 2085  
of the year.  
They were high up in the hills,  
By snow surrounded then;  
The servant at his side  
Bade Gawain draw rein. 2090

'For I have guided you here, sir, on this day,  
And now you are not far from that notorious place  
That you have searched and enquired for so specially.  
But I shall tell you truly — since I know who you are,  
And you are a man whom I love dearly — 2095  
If you would follow my advice, it would be better for you.  
The place you are going to is extremely dangerous;  
There lives a man in that wilderness, the worst in the world,  
For he is powerful and grim, and loves dealing blows,  
And is bigger than any other man upon earth: 2100  
His body is mightier than the four strongest men  
In Arthur's household, Hector or any other.  
He so brings it about at the Green Chapel  
That no one passes that place, however valiant in arms,  
Who is not battered to death by force of his hand; 2105  
For he is a pitiless man who never shows mercy.  
For whether peasant or churchman passes his chapel,  
Monk or mass-priest, or whatever man else,  
To him killing seems as pleasant as enjoying his own life.  
Therefore I tell you, as sure as you sit in your saddle, 2110

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

If you go there you'll be killed, I warn you, sir knight,  
Believe that for certain, though you had twenty lives  
to lose.

He has dwelt there long,  
And brought about much strife; 2115  
Against his brutal blows  
Nothing can save your life.

'Therefore, good Sir Gawain, let the man be,  
And for God's sake get away from here by some other road!  
Ride through some other country, where Christ be your help, 2120  
And I will make my way home again, and further I vow  
That I shall swear by God and all his virtuous saints —  
As help me God and the holy thing, and many more oaths —  
That I shall keep your secret truly, and never reveal  
That ever you took flight from a man that I knew.' 2125  
'Many thanks,' replied Gawain, and grudgingly he spoke,  
'Good luck to you, man, who wishes my good,  
And that you would loyally keep my secret I truly believe.  
But however closely you kept it, if I avoided this place,  
Took to my heels in fright, in the way you propose, 2130  
I should be a cowardly knight, and could not be excused.  
But I will go to the chapel, whatever may chance,  
And discuss with that man whatever matter I please,  
Whether good or ill come of it, as destiny  
decides. 2135

Though an opponent grim  
To deal with, club in hand,  
His faithful servants God  
Knows well how to defend.'

'Marry!' said the other man, 'since your words make it clear 2140  
That you will deliberately bring harm on yourself,  
And lose your life by your own wish, I won't hinder you.  
Put your helmet on your head, take your spear in your hand,  
And ride down this track beside the rock over there  
Until it brings you to the bottom of the wild valley; 2145  
Then look to your left, some way off in the glade,  
And you will see in that dale the chapel itself,  
And the giant of a man who inhabits the place.  
Now in God's name, noble Gawain, farewell!

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

For all the wealth in the world I would not go with you, 2150  
Nor keep you company through this wood one further step.  
With that the man at his side tugs at his bridle,  
Struck his horse with his heels as hard as he could,  
Gallops over the hillside and leaves the knight there  
alone. 2155

Said Gawain, 'By God himself,  
I shall not moan or cry;  
My life is in his hands,  
His will I shall obey'.

Then he sets spurs to Gringolet and picks up the path, 2160  
Makes his way down a slope at the edge of a wood,  
Rides down the rugged hillside right to the valley,  
And then looked about him, and it seemed a wild place,  
And saw no sign of a building anywhere near,  
But high and steep hillsides upon both sides, 2165  
And rough rocky crags of jagged stones:

The clouds grazing the jutting rocks, as it seemed.  
Then he halted, and checked his horse for a while,  
Often turning his face to look for the chapel.

He saw nothing of the kind anywhere, which he thought strange, 2170  
Except a way off in a glade, something like a mound;  
A rounded hillock on the bank of a stream,  
Near the bed of a torrent that tumbled there;  
The water foamed in its course as though it had boiled.

The knight urges his horse and comes to the mound, 2175  
Alights nimbly, and makes fast to a tree  
The reins and his noble steed with a rough branch.  
Then he goes to the mound and walks around it,  
Wondering to himself what it could be.

It had a hole at the end and on either side, 2180  
And was covered all over with patches of grass,  
And was all hollow inside; nothing but an old cave,  
Or a fissure in an old rock: what to call it he hardly  
could tell.

'Good lord!' said the noble knight, 2185  
'Can the Green Chapel be this place?  
Here probably at midnight  
The devil his matins says!'

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

'Now truly,' said Gawain, 'this is a desolate place;  
This chapel looks evil, with grass overgrown; 2190  
Here fittingly might the man dressed in green  
Perform his devotions, in devilish ways.  
Now all my senses tell me that the devil himself  
Has forced this agreement on me, to destroy me here!  
This is a chapel of disaster, may ill-luck befall it! 2195  
It is the most damnable church I was ever inside.'  
With tall helmet on head, his lance in his hand,  
He climbs to the top of that primitive dwelling.  
Then he heard up the hillside, from behind a great rock,  
On the slope across the stream, a deafening noise: 2200  
What! it echoed in the cliffs, as though they would split,  
As if someone with a grindstone were sharpening a scythe.  
What! it whirred and sang, like water at a mill;  
What! it rasped and it rang, terrible to hear.  
Then said Gawain, 'By God, these doings, I suppose, 2205  
Are a welcoming ceremony, arranged in my honour  
as a knight.  
God's will be done: "Alas"  
Helps me no whit here.  
Although my life be lost, 2210  
Noise cannot make me fear.'

Then the knight shouted at the top of his voice,  
'Who is master of this place, to keep tryst with me?  
For now is good Gawain waiting right here.  
If anyone wants something, let him hurry here fast, 2215  
Either now or never, to settle his affairs.'  
'Wait,' said someone on the hillside above,  
'And you shall quickly have all that I promised you once.'  
Yet he kept making that whirring noise for a while,  
And turned back to his whetting before he would come down; 2220  
And then makes his way among the rocks, bursting out of a hole,  
Whirling out of a nook with a fearsome weapon —  
A Danish axe newly made — for dealing the blow,  
With a massive blade curving back on the shaft,  
Honed with a whetstone, four feet across — 2225  
No less than that, despite the gleaming green girdle —  
And the man in the green, dressed as at first,  
Both his flesh and his legs, hair and beard,

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Except that grandly on foot he stalked on the earth,  
Set the handle to the ground and walked beside it. 2230  
When he came to the stream he refused to wade:  
He hopped over on his axe and forcefully strides,  
Fiercely grim on a clearing that stretched wide about,  
under snow.

Sir Gawain met the knight, 2235  
Made him a frosty bow;  
The other said, 'Good sir,  
'A man may trust your vow.

'Gawain,' said that green man, 'may God protect you!  
You are indeed welcome, sir, to my place; 2240

You have timed your journey as a true man should,  
And you know the agreement settled between us:  
A twelvemonth ago you took what fell to your lot,  
And I was to repay you promptly at this New Year.  
And we are in this valley truly by ourselves, 2245

With no knights to separate us, so we can fight as we please.  
Take your helmet off your head, and here get your pay.  
Make no more argument than I offered you then,  
When you slashed off my head with a single stroke.'

'No, by God,' said Gawain, 'who gave me a soul, 2250  
I shall bear you no grudge at all, whatever hurt comes about.  
Just limit yourself to one blow, and I will stand still  
And not resist whatever it pleases you to do  
at all.'

He bent his neck and bowed, 2255  
Showing the flesh all bare,  
And seeming unafraid;  
He would not shrink in fear.

Then the man dressed in green quickly got ready.  
Raised his terrible axe to give Gawain the blow; 2260

With all the strength in his body he heaved it in the air,  
Swung it as fiercely as if meaning to mangle him.  
Had he brought the axe down as forcibly as he acted,  
That courageous knight would have been killed by the blow;  
But Gawain glanced sideways at that battle-axe 2265  
As it came sweeping down to destroy him there,  
And hunched his shoulders a little to resist the sharp blade.

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

The other man checked the bright steel with a jerk,  
And then rebuked the prince with arrogant words:  
'You're not Gawain,' said the man, 'who is reputed so good, 2270  
Who never quailed from an army, on valley or on hill,  
And now flinches for fear before he feels any hurt!  
I never heard of such cowardice shown by that knight.  
I neither flinched nor fled, sir, when you aimed one at me,  
Nor raised any objections in King Arthur's house. 2275  
My head fell to the floor, yet I gave no ground;  
But you, though not wounded, are trembling at heart,  
So I deserve to be reckoned the better man  
for that.'

Gawain said, 'I flinched once, 2280  
But won't twice hunch my neck,  
Though if my head should fall  
I cannot put it back.

'But hurry up, man, by your faith, and come to the point.  
Deal out my fate to me, and do it out of hand, 2285  
For I shall let you strike a blow, and not move again  
Until your axe has hit me, take my true word.'  
'Have at you then!' said the other, and raises it up,  
Contorting his face as though he were enraged.  
He swings the axe at him savagely, without harming the man, 2290  
Checked his blow suddenly before it could inflict hurt.  
Gawain awaits it submissively, not moving a limb,  
But stood as still as a stone, or the stump of a tree  
Anchored in rocky ground by hundreds of roots.  
Then the man in green spoke mockingly again, 2295  
'So, now you have found courage it is time for the blow.  
Now may the order of knighthood given you by Arthur  
Preserve you and your neck this time, if it has power!'  
Then Gawain replied angrily, mortified deeply,  
'Why, strike away, you fierce man, you waste time in threats; 2300  
I think you have frightened yourself with your words.'  
'Indeed,' said that other man, 'you speak so aggressively  
That I will no longer delay or hinder your business  
at all.'

He takes his stance to strike, 2305  
Puckering mouth and brow;  
No wonder if Gawain feels

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

No hope of rescue now.

He swiftly raises his weapon, and brings it down straight  
With the cutting edge of the blade over Gawain's bare neck; 2310  
Although he struck fiercely, he hurt him no more  
Than to slash the back of his neck, laying open the skin.  
The blade cut into the body through the fair flesh  
So that bright blood shot over his shoulders to the ground.  
And when the knight saw his blood spatter the snow 2315  
He leapt forward with both feet more than a spear's length,  
Snatched up his helmet and crammed it on his head,  
Jerked his shoulders to bring his splendid shield down,  
Drew out a gleaming sword and fiercely he speaks —  
Never since that man was born of his mother 2320  
Had he ever in the world felt half so relieved —  
'Hold your attack, sir, don't try it again!  
I have passively taken a blow in this place,  
And if you offer me another I shall repay it promptly  
And return it at once — be certain of that — 2325  
with force.  
One single blow is due;  
The contract is my proof,  
Witnessed in Arthur's hall;  
And therefore, sir, enough!' 2330

The knight kept his distance, and rested on his axe,  
Set the shaft on the ground and leant on the blade,  
Contemplating the man before him in the glade;  
Seeing how valiant, fearlessly bold he stood there  
Armed and undaunted, he admired him much. 2335  
Then he spoke to him pleasantly in a loud voice,  
And said to the knight in a resounding tone,  
'Brave sir, don't act so wrathfully in this place.  
No one has discourteously mistreated you here,  
Or acted contrary to the covenant sworn at the king's court. 2340  
I promised you a blow and you have it; think yourself well paid;  
I free you from the rest of all other obligations.  
Had I been more dextrous, maybe I could  
Have dealt you more spiteful blow, to have roused your anger.  
First I threatened you playfully with a pretence, 2345  
And avoided giving you a gash, doing so rightly

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Because of the agreement we made on the first night,  
When you faithfully and truly kept your pledged word,  
Gave me all your winnings, as an honest man should.  
That other feint, sir, I gave you for the next day, 2350  
When you kissed my lovely wife and gave me those kisses.  
For both occasions I aimed at you two mere mock blows  
without harm.  
True man must pay back truly,  
Then he need nothing fear; 2355  
You failed me the third time  
And took that blow therefore.

'For it is my belt you are wearing, that same woven girdle,  
My own wife gave it to you, I know well in truth.  
I know all about your kisses, and your courteous manners, 2360  
And my wife's wooing of you: I arranged it myself.  
I sent her to test you, and to me truly you seem  
One of the most perfect men who ever walked on the earth.  
As pearls are more valuable than the white peas,  
So is Gawain, in all truth, before other fair knights. 2365  
Only here you fell short a little, sir, and lacked fidelity,  
But that was not for fine craftsmanship, nor wooing either,  
But because you wanted to live: so I blame you the less.'  
That other brave man stood speechless a long while,  
So mortified and crushed that he inwardly squirmed; 2370  
All the blood in his body burned in his face,  
So that he winced with shame at what the man said.  
The first words that the knight uttered there  
Were, 'A curse upon cowardice and covetousness!  
You breed boorishness and vice that ruin virtue.' 2375  
Then he took hold of the knot and looses the buckle,  
Flung the belt violently towards that man:  
'There it is, the false thing, may the devil take it!  
For fear of your blow taught me cowardice,  
To give way to covetousness, be false to my nature, 2380  
The generosity and fidelity expected of knights.  
Now I am false and unworthy, and have always dreaded  
Treachery and deceit: may misfortune and grief  
befall both!  
Sir, humbly I confess 2385  
My good name is marred.

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Let me regain your trust,  
Next time I'll be on guard.'

Then the other man laughed, and graciously said,  
'The wrong you did me I consider wiped out. 2390  
You have so cleanly confessed yourself, admitted your fault,  
And done honest penance on the edge of my blade.  
I declare you absolved of that offence, and washed as clean  
As if you had never transgressed since the day you were born.  
And I make you a gift, sir, of my gold-bordered belt; 2395  
Since it is green like my gown, Sir Gawain, you may  
Remember this meeting in the world where you mingle  
With princes of rank: it will be a true token  
Of the exploit of the Green Chapel among chivalrous knights.  
And you shall come back to my castle at this New Year, 2400  
And we will see out the revelry of this high feast  
with joy.'

He pressed him earnestly  
And said, 'We shall, I know,  
Reconcile you with my wife, 2405  
Who was your cunning foe.'

'No, indeed,' said the knight, and seizing his helmet  
Takes it off politely and gives the lord thanks;  
'I have stayed long enough: good fortune attend you,  
And may he who gives all honours soon send you reward! 2410  
And commend me to that gracious one, your lovely wife,  
Both the one and the other of those honourable ladies  
Who have so cleverly deluded their knight with their game.  
But it is no wonder if a fool acts insanely  
And is brought to grief through womanly wiles; 2415  
For so was Adam beguiled by one, here on earth,  
Solomon by several women, and Samson was another —  
Delilah was cause of his fate — and afterwards David  
Was deluded by Bathsheba, and suffered much grief.  
Since these were ruined by their wiles, it would be a great gain 2420  
To love women and not trust them, if a man knew how.  
For these were the noblest of old, whom fortune favoured  
Above all others on earth, or who dwelt  
under heaven.  
Beguiled were they all 2425

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

By women they thought kind.  
Since I too have been tricked  
Then I should pardon find.

'But for your belt,' said Gawain, 'God repay you for that!  
I accept it gratefully, not for its wonderful gold, 2430  
Nor for the girdle itself nor its silk, nor its long pendants,  
Nor its value nor the honour it confers, nor its fine workmanship,  
But I shall look at it often as a sign of my failing,  
And when I ride in triumph, recall with remorse  
The corruption and frailty of the perverse flesh, 2435  
How quick it is to pick up blotches of sin.  
And so, when pride in my knightly valour stirs me,  
A glance at this girdle will humble my heart.  
Just one thing I would ask, if it would not offend you,  
Since you are the lord of the country that I have dwelt in, 2440  
Honourably treated in your house — may he reward you  
Who holds up the heavens and sits upon high! —  
What do you call yourself rightly, and then no more demands?'  
'I will tell you that truthfully,' replied that other man,  
'Bertilak of Hautdesert I am called in this land. 2445  
Through the power of Morgan le Fay, who lives under my roof,  
And her skill in learning, well taught in magic arts,  
She has acquired many of Merlin's occult powers —  
For she had love-dealings at an earlier time  
With that accomplished scholar, as all your knights know 2450  
at home.  
Morgan the goddess  
Therefore is her name;  
No one, however haughty  
Or proud she cannot tame. 2455

'She sent me in this shape to your splendid hall  
To make trial of your pride, and to judge the truth  
Of the great reputation attached to the Round Table.  
She sent me to drive you demented with this marvel, 2460  
To have terrified Guenevere and caused her to die  
With horror at that figure who spoke like a spectre  
With his head in his hand before the high table.  
That is she who is in my castle, the very old lady,  
Who is actually your aunt, Arthur's half-sister,

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

The duchess of Tintagel's daughter, whom noble Uther  
Afterwards begot Arthur upon, who now is king. 2465  
So I entreat you, good sir, to visit your aunt  
And make merry in my house: my servants all love you,  
And so will I too, sir, on my honour,  
As much as any man on earth for your great truth.' 2470  
But Gawain told him no, not for any persuasion.  
They embrace and kiss, and commend each other  
To the prince of paradise, and separate there  
    in the cold;  
    On his great horse Gawain 2475  
    To the king's court quickly goes,  
    And the knight in emerald green  
    Went wheresoever he chose.

Over wild country Gawain now makes his way  
On Gringolet, after his life had been mercifully spared. 2480  
Sometimes he lodged in a house and often out of doors,  
And was vanquisher often in many encounters  
Which at this time I do not intend to relate.  
The injury he had received in his neck was healed,  
And over it he wore the gleaming belt 2485  
Across his body like a baldric, fastened at his side,  
And this girdle tied under his left arm with a knot,  
To signify he had been dishonoured by a slip.  
And so safe and sound he arrives at the court.  
Joy spread through the castle when the nobles learnt 2490  
That good Gawain had returned: they thought it a wonder.  
The king kisses the knight, and the queen too,  
And then many true knights who came to embrace him,  
Asking how he had fared; he tells a marvellous story,  
Describes all the hardships he had endured, 2495  
What happened at the chapel, the Green Knight's behaviour,  
The lady's wooing, and finally the belt.  
He showed them the scar on his bare neck  
That he received for his dishonesty at the lord's hands  
    in rebuke. 2500  
    Tormented by his tale  
    He groaned for grief and hurt;  
    The blood burned in his face  
    When he showed the shameful cut.

*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

'See, my lord,' said the man, and held up the girdle, 2505  
'This belt caused the scar that I bear on my neck;  
This is the injury and damage that I have suffered  
For the cowardice and covetousness that seized me there;  
This is the token of the dishonesty I was caught committing,  
And now I must wear it as long as I live. 2510  
For a man may hide his misdeed, but never erase it,  
For where once it takes root the stain can never be lifted.'  
The king consoles the knight, and the whole court  
Laughs loudly about it, and courteously agrees  
That lords and ladies who belong to the Table, 2515  
Each member of the brotherhood, should wear such a belt,  
A baldric of bright green crosswise on the body,  
Similar to Sir Gawain's and worn for his sake:  
And that became part of the renown of the Round Table,  
And whoever afterwards wore it was always honoured, 2520  
As is set down in the most reputable books of romance.  
So in the time of Arthur this adventure happened,  
And the chronicles of Britain bear witness to it;  
After the brave hero Brutus first arrived here,  
When the siege and the assault were ended at Troy, 2525  
indeed.  
Many exploits before now  
Have happened much like this.  
Now may the thorn-crowned God  
Bring us to his bliss! AMEN. 2530

*HONI SOIT QUI MAL Y PENSE.*