

SIR GAWAIN & THE GREEN KNIGHT



Classical Poets Publishing

Mount Hope, New York

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Original Middle English text that forms the basis of this translation is from the 14th century and in the public domain.

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*Dedicated to Falun Dafa practitioners
who face persecution today in communist China.*

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A depiction of the self-proclaimed knight Don Quixote, by Gustave Doré.

Introduction

It's the Christmas season at King Arthur's court in Camelot, and all is merry during the holiday festivities... that is until a strange visitor—a half-giant knight all in green—shows up and issues a deadly challenge that will change the Knights of the Round Table forever.

This 14th century tale, written in both alliterative and rhyming poetry, is arguably the peak of all Arthurian literature. Though it is a self-contained, stand alone episode, it tells its tiny tale from start to finish with such ecstatic and ornate splendor and with such an eye to those true virtues that define the very essence of the noble knight that this relatively short work is elevated to a thing of monumental brilliance. This is why you will find an endless stream of translations and movie adaptations of it over the years.

In the broader scope of English literature and Western literature, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* represents an artistic fountainhead, a Springtime in which archetypes and themes are in full bloom—vibrant, pure, and untainted; so good as to define goodness itself. For instance, the vivid descriptions of Sir Gawain's splendid armor, weapons, and horse stand in stark contrast to what we might consider the Autumn of literature: the old, mismatched, and decayed armor, weapons, and horse of the humorously senile knight Don Quixote, in Miguel Cervantes' early 17th century work. If we continue further in the timeline and metaphor, we find the Winter of literature in the early 19th century with Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, in which the Saxon knight has no armor, horse, nor king, and must depend on a Jewish banker and his daughter for all of them. Without Sir Gawain, the delightfulness of these classic characters, Don Quixote and Ivanhoe, simply would not exist.

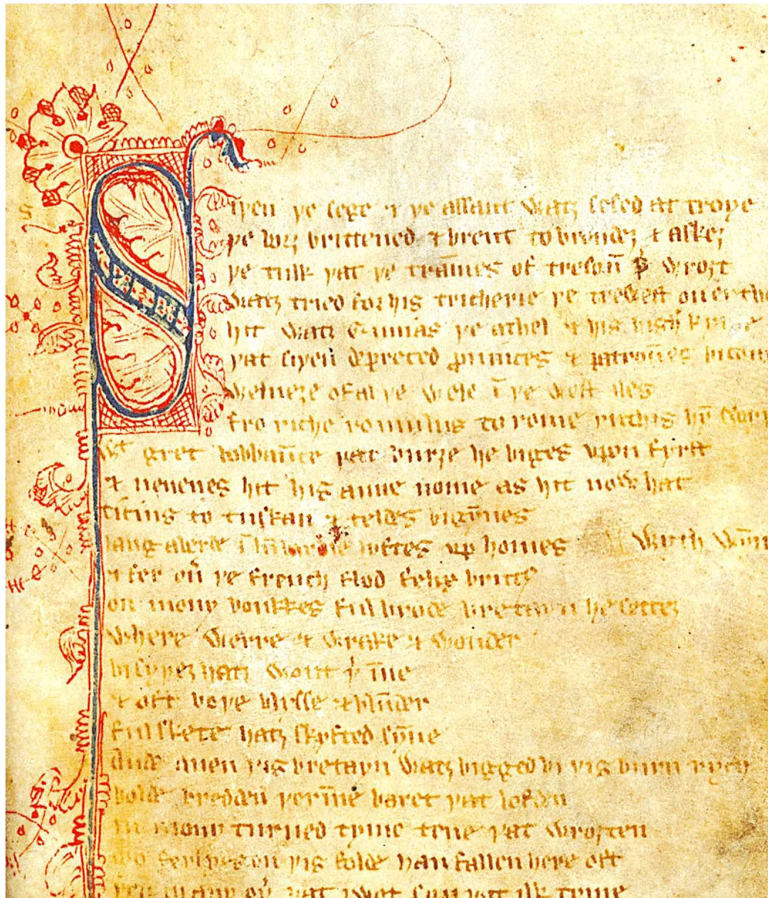
Amidst today's cynicism for tradition, Sir Gawain transcends social, cultural, or economic narratives, and succeeds in convincingly correlating great wealth and high social status, both of which he has, with traditional virtue. The story does this so well perhaps because it has such a clear handle on what traditional virtue is, matching five principles—generosity, fellowship, courtesy, chastity, and piety—to the five points on the knight's symbol and putting those virtues to the test with an unflinching realism that makes for first-rate storytelling.



A scene from Ivanhoe in which the Jewess Rebecca takes care of the injured knight Sir Ivanhoe. (Illustration by C.E. Brock)

Who was the author of this great work? We do not know. However, we do know for certain that the phrase written in a different language at the end of the poem “Hony Soyt Qui Mal Pence” (“Shame on him who thinks evil of it”) is the motto of an order of knights, known as the Order of the Garter, who each wear a sash across his chest, a practice that this tale seems to allude to in its last moments. Thus, it is likely that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written for the founding of the Order in 1348 or in the order's honor. The Order of the Garter still exists today and includes members of the British royal family, though their sash is usually blue, not green.

This version of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* translates the original Middle English (which is of a particular Northern dialect distinct from the dialect of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*) into readable plain English while staying true to each original line's meaning, as well as keeping the style of alliterative lines and short metered and rhyming poems at the end of each paragraph.



The first page of the original 14th century manuscript of *Sir Gawain*

To give you some idea of the difference between the Middle English of *Sir Gawain* and our English today, here is an example of the two:

Pis kyng lay at Camylot vpon Krystmasse
With mony luflych lorde, ledez of þe best

This king sat at Camelot at Christmas time
with many lovely lords, lieges most noble

As in the above, in many cases the difference isn't too far to discern for yourself the original lines. If you are interested in reading more of the original Middle English, you can find at least several versions of it for free online viewing offered by Gutenberg.org and my alma mater, the University of Michigan.

Now, let the tale begin!

—Evan Mantyk, Translator & Editor
November, 2021

Key Locations



PART I

When the siege and the assault had ceased at Troy,
 and the fortress fell in flames to logs and ashes,
 there was a Trojan who the charge of treason was used on
 and was tried for his treachery, though he was truest on earth—
 it was Æneas* the noble and his renowned brother 5
 who then took over lands, and became lords
 of nearly all the wealth in the Western Isles.
 Then royal Romulus took a road to Rome,
 with great pomp and pride. He populated it first,
 and named it with his own name, which it still bears; 10
 Tirus went to Tuscany and founded towns,
 Langaberde in Lombardy laid out halls,
 and far over the French sea Felix Brutus
 on many a broad bank and bay settled Britain
 so fair† 15
 and strange; for strife and sadness
 have given this land its share
 and both great grief and gladness
 often are found there.

And when fair Britain was founded by this famous lord, 20
 bold men were bred there who enjoyed to battle,
 and many times these men aroused much mischief.
 In this domain more marvels have been seen by men
 than in any other that I know of since those olden days;

* Æneas was a Trojan prince believed in some legends to have betrayed his fellow Trojans to the attacking Greeks and fled West where he founded a new empire in Italy ("Western Isles"). Treason is normally a terrible crime, but the people in England would have viewed the Greeks as generally the good guys in the war and Æneas as "truest" in his heart for aiding them. The areas that are mentioned afterwards (Rome, Tuscany, and Lombardy) are all specific areas of Italy.

† Fair: beautiful. Also means generally good or light-skinned.

but of all the kings who have commanded Britain 25
 Arthur was most honored, as I have heard men say.
 Therefore a marvel among men I shall recall,
 a sight strange to see some men have said,
 one of the wildest adventures of the wonders of Arthur.
 If you will listen to these words but a little while now, 30
 I will tell it at once as in town I have heard
 it told,
 as written in binding treasured
 in stories brave and bold,
 cursive linked and lettered, 35
 as loved in lands of old.

This king sat at Camelot at Christmas time
 with many lovely lords, lieges most noble,
 indeed at the Round Table all those trusted brothers sat
 amid merriment unmatched and laughter without care. 40
 There the trusty knights held tournaments
 and jousted so joyously as gentlemen;
 then to the court they came to sing Christmas carols.
 There the feast continued for fifteen days,
 with all meats and all merriment that men could devise, 45
 such gladness and good fun as was glorious to hear,
 people talking by day and dancing by night;
 all happiness at the highest of halls, and in the rooms
 there were the lords and the ladies, who they loved most dearly.
 With all the bliss of this world they were together, 50
 the knights most well known, second only to Christ,
 and the loveliest ladies who ever enjoyed life,
 and he, the most courteous king who that court ever had.
 For all these fair folk still in their youth
 reside. 55
 'Neath heaven first in fame,
 their king most high in pride;
 and it would be hard to name
 knights better exemplified.

While New Year was yet young and barely arrived,
that day double delicacies on the dais* were served,
after the king had come with his courtiers,
and the choir's chanting in the chapel had ended.
With loud clamor and cries both clerics and laymen
greeted each other with "Noel"† repeating it often;
then nobles ran up soon with New Year's gifts.
"The gifts, the gifts!" they shouted, and gave them out,
competing for those presents in playful guessing games;
ladies laughed loudly, though they lost the game,
and the winner was not sad, as you may well have guessed.
All this merriment they made, till their meat was served;
then they washed, and in orderly fashion went to their seats,
always the highest seat for the worthiest and noblest of guests.
Queen Guinevere sat happily with grace in the midst
of the adorned dais. Dashing was the display:
finest silk at her sides, a ceiling above her
of true fabric of Tolouse, and tapestries of Tharsia
that were embroidered and bound with the brightest gems
one might find, appraise, and purchase for coin
one day.

That loveliest lady there
who glanced with eyes of gray;
that there was one more fair
in truth no man could say.

But Arthur would not eat until all were served;
his youth made him so merry with the moods of a boy;
he liked lighthearted life, and he loved less
either long to be lying or long to be seated:
thus his young blood and brain did their work on him.
And another reason moreover was a rule

* dais: raised platform for royalty and the most honored guests.

† Noel: Christmas or "Merry Christmas!"

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"King Arthur" by Charles Ernest Butler

that in pride he had made: he preferred not to eat at a festival so fair before he first was told of some strange story or stirring adventure, or some moving marvel that he might believe in of noble men, knighthood, or new adventures; or a challenger should seek a champion to join him in jousting, putting himself in jeopardy setting life against life, each yielding to the other if fortune favors him over the other. This was the king's custom, wherever his court was held, at each famous feast among his fair company in that hall.

His face so proudly appears;
he stands up strong and tall;
a youth in the New Year;
enjoying it with all.

Thus the stern king himself stands up straight,
and talks to the high table of courtly matters.
There good Gawain sat at Guinevere's side,
with Agravain a la Dure Main on the other side seated,
both their lord's nephews and his loyal knights.
Bishop Baldwin sat at the Head of the Table,
and Iwain Urien's son ate beside him.
These were seated on the dais all ready to eat,
while many a loyal lord below sat at the long tables.
Then came forth the first course with a fanfare of trumpets,
on which many bright banners boldly were hanging;
the noise of the drums came and the noble pipes,
whistling wild and sharp, wakening them with music,
so that many hearts rose high hearing their playing.
Then a feast was brought forth, the finest of food,
multitudes of fresh meats on so many dishes
that there were few free places in front of the people
to set the silver bowls full of soups, on cloth
so white.

Each lord to his liking there
took food with full delight:
twelve plates to every pair,
the wine was glistening bright.

Now of their meal I will say nothing more,
for you are all well aware that no one went hungry there.
Another noise that was new drew near all of a sudden,
so that their lord might be allowed at last to eat food.
For hardly had the music but a moment ended,
and the first course in the court, as was custom, been served,
when there passed through the portals a perilous horseman,
the mightiest on earth in measure of height,
from his throat to his stomach so great and so square,
and his loins and his limbs so long and so huge,
that a half-giant still on this earth I believe that he was,
but the largest man alive at least I will call him;
and yet the hugest for his size that could sit on a horse,
for though in back and in chest his body was broad,
both his stomach and his waist were properly slim,
and all his facial features fit the same fashion
as he rode:
the men all gaped aghast
at the face and form that showed;
this creature striding past
green all over glowed.
Both garments and the guy were green all over:
his coat was tight, so close it clung to his sides;
a rich robe on top was all arranged and within was
fur finely trimmed, showing fair fringes
of handsome ermine as was his hood as well
that was lifted from his long hair and laid on his shoulders;
and trim pants tight-drawn of tint alike
that clung to his calves; and clear spurs below
of glimmering gold on silk that was striped most richly,
though unshod were his shins, for shoeless he rode.

And truly all this clothing was of verdure in color,
both the bars on his belt, and shining stones next to them
that were richly arranged in the outfit he wore,
set on himself and on his saddle upon silk fabrics:
it would be too hard to recall one half of the trifles 165
that were embroidered on them, what with birds and butterflies
in a glad glory of green, and always within gold.
The pendants of his horse's breast plate and the saddle
and all the metal and more on the horse, were enameled,
even the stirrups that he stood in were colored the same; 170
and his saddlebows the same, and their sumptuous skirts,
which always glimmered and gleamed all with green jewels;
even the horse that upheld him in hue was the same;
I tell you:
a green horse great and thick, 175
a stallion stronger than you,
that wore a bridle slick
and matched his master too.

Very happy was this great man matching all in green,
and the hair on his head looked like his horse's hair:
fair flapping locks enshrouding his shoulders,
a big beard like a bush over his chest
hanging along with the handsome hair from his head,
falling to a sharp edge just short of his elbows,
so that half his arms under it were hid, as it is 185
in a king's head piece that encloses his neck.
The hair of that mighty horse was of much the same sort,
well curled and all combed, with many curious knots
woven in with gold wire around the wondrous green,
always a strand of the hair and a string of the gold; 190
the tail and the top-lock were twined all to match
and both bound with a band of a brilliant green:
with precious jewels adorning the tail's ending,
and twisted then on top was a tight-knotted knot
on which many polished bells of bright gold jingled. 195

Such a horse on the earth, or man to ride him,
was never beheld with eyes in that hall before that time;
for there
his glance was sharp as lightning,
all those that saw did swear; 200
a man would find it frightening
such heavy armor to bear.

And yet he had not a helmet, nor a hauberk* either,
not an upper breastplate, not a proper plate for his arms,
not a shield, not an arrow's shaft, for attack or defense, 205
but in his one hand he held a branch of holly,
that is greatest in greenery when groves are leafless,
and an axe in the other, ugly and monstrous,
a ruthless weapon alright for one to describe:
the head was as large and as long as half a yard, 210
the spike at the top was of green steel and gold;
the blade was polished bright and broad at the edge,
as well shaped for slicing as sharp razors;
the stem was a strong staff, by which he sternly gripped,
all bound with iron around down to the base of the handle, 215
and engraved in green in graceful patterns,
lapped around with a lanyard that was lashed to the head
and down the length of the handle was looped many times;
and tassels of high price were tied there aplenty
to studs of the bright green, braided most richly. 220
That was his appearance as he hastened in, entering the hall,
pressing forward to the dais—fearing no danger.
He gave greetings to no one, gazing above them,
and the first word: "Now where is," he said,
"the governor of this gathering? For gladly I would 225
set my sight on the sir, and have talk with him
in this town."
On the courtiers he cast his eye,
and rolled it up and down;

* hauberk: suit of chain mail armor



A branch of holly

he tried to find the guy 230
who had the most renown.

Then they looked for a long while, on that lord gazing;
for every man marveled and thought what could it mean
that horseman and horse such a color should come
as if grass grown from the ground, and greener it seemed 235
than green enamel on gold, glowing far brighter.
All stared that stood there and came up nearer,
watching him and wondering what in the world he would do.
For many marvels they had seen, but none to match this;
thus folks there thought it a phantom with fairy magic, 240
and so all of those knights there weren't eager to answer,
and astounded at his stern voice stone-still they sat there
in a stupefied silence through that solemn setting,
as if all had drifted into a dream, so died their voices
away. 245

I think it wasn't all dread;
For some 'twas their courteous way
to allow their lord and head
to be first to have a say.

Then Arthur on the high dais beheld this wonder, 250
and freely with his words, for he was always fearless,
saluted him, saying: "Lord, to this lodging you're welcome!
The head of this household—Arthur is my name.
Dismount, if you respect me, and please stay a while;
and what you may wish for in a while we shall learn." 255
"Nay, so help me He* that sits on high," said the horseman,
"to spend any time in this place was not my purpose.
But since your praises, prince, so proudly are pronounced,
and your castle and courtiers are called the best,
the strongest in steel that on steeds may ride, 260
most eager and honorable of the earth's people,
valiant when vying in virtuous sports,
and here is knighthood renowned, as has entered my ears:
That's what brought me here, by my faith, at this time.
You may believe by this branch that I am bearing here 265
that I am present as one in peace, seeking no peril.
For had I set forth to fight in the form of war,
I'd have a hauberk at your home, and a helmet also,
a shield, and a sharp spear shining splendidly,
and other weapons to wield as well, I think; 270
but since I crave for no combat, my clothes are softer.
Yet if you be so bold, as it is said around the land,
you will grant out of your goodness the game that I ask for,
by right."

Then Arthur answered there, 275
and said: "Sir, noble knight,
if of battle you seek a share,
here you'll find a fight."

"Nay, I wish for no warfare, on my word I tell you!
Sitting around on these benches are but beardless children. 280

* References to "he" and "lord" that are capitalized refer to God. As this was a feudal society, any land owner, including knights, could be called a lord. King Arthur would be the lord in Britain with the largest amount of land and God would be Lord of all.

Were I dressed in armor on a high horse,
 there is no man here to match me—their might is so feeble.
 And so I crave in this court only a Christmas game
 since it's the holidays, and you here are young and merry.
 If any in this house here holds that he is brave, 285
 if so bold be his blood or his brain be so wild
 that he sternly dares to trade one strike for one strike,
 then I will give him as my gift this costly weapon,
 this axe—it's heavy enough to handle as he pleases;
 and I'll bear the first strike, here baring my neck as I kneel. 290
 If any fellow be so fierce as to try it,
 let him hasten to me and take hold of this weapon—
 I hand it over and he can have it as his own—
 and I will take a hit from him, stone-still on this floor,
 provided you agree to this pact: that I may give a hit to him, 295
 so says I!
 Yet a rest I will allow,
 till a year and a day go by.
 Come quick, and let's see now
 if any dare reply!" 300

If he astounded them at first, yet still more now astounded
 were all the household in the hall, both high men and low.
 The man on his mount moved in his saddle,
 and rudely he rolled his red eyes around, 305
 bent his bristling eyebrows all brilliantly green,
 and swept around his bearded head to see who would rise.
 When none would talk to him, he hacked his throat loudly,
 stretched his arms out arrogantly and clearly exclaimed:
 "What! Is this Arthur's house?" he hollered,
 "The renown of which runs through countless countries? 310
 Where now is your haughtiness, and your high conquests,
 your fierceness and your fine boasting?
 Now are the revels and the royalty of the Round Table
 overwhelmed by a word whispered by one man,
 for all turn white in fear when I said you can hit me first!" 315
 With that he laughed so loud that their lord was angered;

the blood shown for shame in his cheeks
 and face.
 Enraged as wind he grew,
 so all did in that place. 320
 Then near to the strong man drew
 the king with fearless pace,

 And said: "My Good man! You ask for madness,
 and since foolishness you seek, you deserve to find it.
 I know no lord that is alarmed by your loud words here. 325
 Give me now your axe, in God's name, sir,
 and I will bring you the blessing you are begging for."
 Quick then he came to him and took it from his hand.
 Then the large man lumbered off his horse onto foot.
 Now Arthur holds his axe, and the handle grasping tightly, 330
 he stirs it around, considering his swing.
 The strong man in front of him stood his full height,
 higher than any in that house by a head and more.
 He stood there with a stern face as he stroked his beard,
 and with an expression unmoved he pulled off his coat, 335
 no more distressed at the strength of Arthur's swings
 than if he were relaxing and someone served him a drink
 of wine.
 From beside the queen Gawain
 to the king spoke out this line: 340
 "I ask with question plain
 could this match instead be mine?"

 "Would you, my worthy lord," said Gawain to the king,
 "let me leave this seat and stand by you there,
 so that I without discourtesy might be excused from the table, 345
 and were my lord's lady willing to permit me,
 I would come to your side by your courtiers.
 For I find it unfitting, as in fact it is held,
 when a challenge in your chamber is made for you to accept,
 though you yourself would like to accept it, 350
 while many bold men around you are seated:

on earth there are, I hold, none more honest,
 none fairer on fields of fighting than them.
 I am the weakest, I am aware, and in wit feeblest,
 and would be least loss if I don't live, to tell you the truth. 355
 Only because you are my uncle is this honor given to me:
 other than your blood in my body I have no virtue;
 and since this affair is so foolish that it in no way befits you,
 and I have requested it first, grant it then to me!
 If my claim is uncalled for let it be judged by all of you, 360
 this court."
 To consult, the knights draw near;
 this plan they all support:
 the king from danger cleared
 by giving Gawain the sport. 365

The king then commanded that he quickly should rise,
 and he readily rose and directly approached,
 kneeling humbly to his highness and putting his hand on the axe;
 and the king kindly relinquished it, and lifting his hand
 gave him God's blessing, and graciously told him 370
 that his hand and his heart should both be brave.
 "Take care, nephew," said the king, "one cut to settle it,
 and if you teach him his lesson well, I believe
 that you will bear any blow that he gives back later."
 Gawain goes to the great man with axe in hand, 375
 and he boldly waits there—not turning white at all.
 Then next the knight all in green said to Gawain:
 "Let's repeat our agreement, before we go any further.
 Tell me first, sir knight, your name; I request you
 to tell me truly, that I may trust you in your word." 380
 "In good faith," said the good knight, "I am called Gawain
 who brings you this blow, whatever may follow;
 and at this time in twelve months it's your turn to have a blow
 with whatever weapon you wish, and in all the world at no one else
 but me." 385
 The other man spoke again:
 "I am quite pleased, it's true,

upon my life, Sir Gawain,
 that I'll be hit by you."

"Indeed," continued the green knight, "Sir Gawain, 390
 I am pleased to find from your fist the favor I asked for!
 And you have promptly repeated and plainly have stated
 without error the bargain I begged of the king here;
 except that you must assure me, sir, on your honor
 that you'll seek me yourself, search where you think 395
 I may be found near or far, and fetch me for payment
 just as you deliver to me today before these noble people."
 "Where can I find you," asked Gawain, "or look for you home?
 I have never learned where you live, by the Lord that made me,
 and I know you not, knight, your name nor your court. 400
 But tell me truly the way, and tell me what men call you,
 and I will make my whole purpose to find the path;
 and that I swear to you with certain and solemn promise."
 "That is enough in the New Year, there is need of no more!"
 said the great man in green to Gawain the courteous. 405
 "I will tell you the truth of it, after I have received your swing,
 and you handily have hit me; then in haste I'll announce
 my house and my home and my title,
 then you can call and inquire and keep the agreement.
 And if I whisper not a word, then you're all the more lucky, 410
 for you may linger in your land and look no further—
 okay!
 Of your grim tool take heed, sir!
 Let's see your swing today!
 "Gladly," said he, "indeed, sir!" 415
 and the axe now made its way.

The green knight on the ground now gets himself ready,
 leaning his head a little forward he lays bare the flesh,
 and his long and lovely locks of hair he lifts over his head,
 letting the naked neck, as was needed, appear. 420
 He placed his left foot in front of him on the floor,
 Gawain gripped on his axe, gathered and raised it,



An illustration of the green knight beheaded from the original 14th century manuscript.

and from aloft let it swiftly land where there was skin,
 so that the edge of his blade separated the bones,
 and sank clean through the flesh and cut it in two, 425
 the blade of the bright steel then biting into the ground.
 The fine head fell from the shoulders to the floor,
 and people kicked it with their feet as around it went rolling;
 the blood burst from the body, bright on the greenness,
 and yet the fierce man neither faltered at all nor fell, 430
 but strongly he strode forth, still strong on his legs,
 and roughly he reached out among the rows that stood there,
 picked up his handsome head and quickly raised it,
 and then hastened to his horse, laid hold of the bridle,
 stepped into stirrup-iron, and swung himself up, 435
 his hand holding his head by the hair;
 and he settled himself then in the saddle as firmly
 as if unharmed, though as all in the hall could see he had
 no head.
 His trunk he twisted round, 440
 that gruesome body that bled,
 and gasps of fear resound
 once they heard what he said.

He held straight up the head in his hand,
 towards the noblest at the table he twisted his face, 445
 and it lifted up its eyelids and looked at them all,
 and made words with its mouth that they could understand:
 “Get ready, Gawain, to go as you vowed,
 and faithfully seek until you find me, good sir,
 as you have promised in this place in the presence of these knights. 450
 To the Green Chapel go, and get there, I command you,
 such a hit as you have dealt—indeed you have earned
 a swift swing in return on New Year’s morning!
 As the Knight of the Green Chapel I am known by many,
 so if you endeavor to find me, you will not fail. 455
 Therefore come! Or you deserve to be called a coward.”
 With a rude roar, he rushed to pull his reins,

and hastened out through the hall door with his head in his hand,
 and his horse's ironshod hooves created sparks as he sped away.
 To what country he went to from court no man knew,
 no more than they'd learned from what land he'd journeyed from. 460

Meanwhile,
 the king and Sir Gawain
 at the green man laugh and smile;
 to all men it seemed plain: 465
 "A marvel beyond denial!"

Though Arthur the high king in his heart marveled,
 he let no sign of it be seen, but said then aloud
 to the queen so kindly with courteous words:
 "Dear Lady, today be not downcast at all! 470
 Such cunning games well suit the Christmas season,
 performances, and the like, and laughter and singing,
 amid these noble dances of knights and of dames.
 Moreover, now I may enjoy my meal,
 for a marvel I have met, and I cannot deny it." 475
 He glanced at Sir Gawain and with good humor he said:
 "Come, hang up your axe, sir! It has hacked enough for now."
 And over the table they hung it on the tapestry behind them,
 where all men might remark at it, a marvel to see,
 and as a true token it could tell of that adventure. 480
 Then to a table they turned, those two lords together,
 the king and his good relatives, and men served them
 with all delicacies doubled, the most delicious there might be,
 with all manner of meats and with more music too.
 With delight that day they spent, till to the land came the night 485
 again.

Sir Gawain don't relax;
 if fear becomes too deep,
 it may divert your tracks
 from the vow that you must keep. 490

ir Gawaine the Son of Lot, King of Orkney:



Illustration by Howard Pyle. It depicts Sir Gawain, but from a different legend, hence no pentangle.

PART II

With this high adventure Arthur thus began
the young year, and for more brave vows he yearned.
Though such words were nowhere when they went to feast,
and now fierce hard work filled their hands.
Gawain was glad when he began those games in the hall, 495
but if he was unhappy when it was over, then it's no wonder!
For though men be merry when they have mightily drunk,
a year slips by swiftly, never again returning;
the feelings at the outset and the ending are seldom in sync.
And so this Christmas season passed and the year came after, 500
and several seasons ensued each taking its turn:
after Christmas there came the sullen Lent*
that tests the flesh with fish and food more meager;
but then the weather in the world makes war on the winter,
cold creeps back into the earth, clouds are uplifted, 505
shining rain is shed in showers that warm
and fall on the fair fields, where flowers open;
on grounds and on groves, the earth's clothing is green,
birds are busy building and boldly are singing
for the sweetness of the soft summer that will soon be on 510
the way;
and blossoms shimmer and show
in bushes bright as day;
their colors like melodies flow
through woods in grand display. 515

After the season of summer with its soft breezes,
when Zephyr† goes sighing through seeds and herbs,
so glad is the grass that grows in the open,

* Lent: A Christian season of fasting before Easter, which celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ. During part of Lent, people eat only fish instead of other meat. They see this as suffering.

† Zephyr: Greek god of the wind.

when the damp dewdrops are dripping from the leaves
to greet a glowing glance of the glistening sun. 520
But when Harvest hurries in, he hardens the ground quickly,
warning it to reach ripeness before winter comes.
He drives the dust with his drought, till the dust rises
from the face of the land and flies up aloft;
wild wind in the sky makes war on the sun, 525
the leaves loosened from the linden trees land on the ground,
and grass that was green before all turns gray :
all things ripen and rot that rose up at first,
and so the year runs away in yesterdays,
and here winter comes again, as in the ways of the world, 530
it ought,
until the Michaelmas* moon
has winter's brooding brought;
Sir Gawain then too soon
of his grim journey thought. 535

And yet till All Hallows† with Arthur he lingered,
who on that festival gave a feast for the knight
with much royal revelry at the Round Table.
The knights of renown and noble ladies
who loved that lord were all hurting at heart, 540
but nevertheless with light laughter they spoke:
many were joyless who jested for his sake.
For after their meal he mournfully reminded his uncle
that his departure was near, and plainly he said:
“Now my liege, for permission to leave I beg you. 545
You know the quest and the pact; I don't care
to trouble you with telling it again, except a trifling point:

* Michaelmas: A holiday celebrating the archangel Michael on Sept. 29.

† All Hallows: A celebration of all the Christian saints on Nov. 1. (The day before, All Hallows Eve, is the origin of the modern holiday Halloween.)



illustration of a medieval knight

I must set forth to my fate without fail in the morning,
as God will guide me, to seek the green man.”
Those most respected in the castle then came together, 550
Iwain and Erric and others not a few,
Sir Doddinel le Savage, the Duke of Clarence,
Lancelot, and Lionel, and Lucan the Good,
Sir Bors and Sir Bedivere, who were both men of might,
and many others of worth with Mador de la Porte. 555
All this company of the court the king now approached
to comfort the knight with the care in their hearts.
Many mournful words were said in the hall
that one so worthy as Gawain should commence that quest,
To endure a brutal swing but not swing back with his 560
own blade.
The knight made joyful cheer,
said, “Why are you dismayed?”

By the fair or what we fear—
A man’s refined this way.” 565

He remained there that day, and in the morning got ready,
asked early for his weapons, and all were brought to him.
First a carpet of red silk was spread on the floor,
and then plenty of gilded gear there glittered upon it.
The stern man stepped on it and handled the steel, 570
dressed in a jacket of damask from Tharsia,
and over it a crafted head piece that was closed at the throat
and with fair fur, ermine, was all lined.
Then foot armor first he set on his feet,
his legs surrounded in steel and his shins, 575
then the knee armor they placed, polished and shining
and knit upon his knees with knots of gold;
then the handsome thigh armor that craftily clasped
the thick muscles of his thighs they tied on him with straps;
and next the chain mail shirt woven of bright steel rings 580
upon costly quilting, enclosed around him;
and armlets well polished upon both of his arms,
with shining elbow-pieces and gloves of plate metal,
and all the good gear to guard him for whatever came
on his ride; 585
coat-armor richly made,
gold spurs on heels in pride;
strapped with a trusty blade,
silk belt around his side.

When he was covered in his armor his harness was splendid: 590
each little latch or loop was all lit with gold.
Thus harnessed as he was he heard now his Mass*
that was offered and honored at the high altar;
and then he came to the king and his court-companions,
and with honor he left the lords and ladies; 595

* Mass: Christian religious ceremony.

and they kissed him,* escorted him, and commended him to Christ.
 Now his horse Gringolet stood groomed, and strapped
 with a saddle gleaming with many gold fringes,
 and all new for the occasion and perfectly it fit him;
 his bridle was adorned with bars, and striped with bright gold; 600
 the appareling included a horse's breast plate and skirts;
 back strap, cloth, and saddle all had style matching:
 all was displayed in red with rich gold studded,
 so that it glittered and glared like a gleaming ray of the sun.
 Then he took in his hand the helmet and in haste kissed it: 605
 it was sturdily made and cushioned within;
 it sat high upon his head and was clasped at the back,
 and a light scarf was laid over the visor
 all braided and bound with the brightest gems
 with broad silken embroidery, with birds on the seams 610
 like parrots painted here preening, and there
 turtle doves and true-love knots, entwined as thickly
 as if many seamstresses had sewn it for seven winters
 in town.

A head band of high price 615
 was worn just like a crown—
 a diamond-covered device
 that was a polished brown.

Then they brought him his shield that was of brilliant red
 with the pentangle depicted in pure golden color. 620
 By the strap he caught it and flung it over his neck:
 quite well it went with the knight's appearance.
 And why the pentangle is proper to that prince so noble
 I intend now to tell you, though it may delay my story.
 It is a symbol that Solomon† once upon a time set 625
 as a token of Virtue, as it properly is;
 for it is a figure that has five points,
 and each line overlaps and is linked with another,

* kissing on the cheek was a common form of greeting at the time.

† Solomon: ancient Jewish king.

and in every direction it is endless; and the English, I hear,
 everywhere call it by the name the Endless Knot. 630
 So it suits well this knight and his pristine arms;
 forever faithful in five points, and five times in each point,
 Gawain was acknowledged as good as gold refined,
 devoid of every vice and with virtues adorned.

So there 635
 the pentangle painted new
 his shield and armor wear,
 as one of word most true,
 this knight of bearing fair.



First he was found faultless in his five senses, 640
 and next in the five fingers he never failed with,
 and firmly he held faith in the Five Wounds
 that Christ received on the cross, as the Creed* tells us;
 and wherever the brave man went into battle,

* The Creed: A list of the Christian beliefs that is regularly repeated.

he sincerely reflected on this beyond all other things: 645
 that he always gained his courage from the Five Joys*
 that Heaven's courteous Queen received from her Child.
 For this reason, the knight had, in handsome design
 on the inner side of his shield, Mary's image painted,
 so when he cast his eyes on it his courage never failed. 650
 The fifth five that was used, I find, by this knight
 was generosity† and fellowship first before all,
 and chastity‡ and courtesy ever changeless and straight,
 and piety surpassing all points: these perfect five
 he held to harder than any other man. 655
 Now this series of fives, in truth, were stuck on this knight,
 and each was knit with the others and had no ending,
 but was fixed at five points that never failed,
 colliding at no point nor breaking apart,
 not ending in any corner anywhere, as I comprehend it; 660
 nowhere does it start and nowhere does it end.
 Therefore, on his shiny shield, there was this shape of the knot,
 royally colored with red upon gold:
 this is the pure pentangle as educated people
 have taught. 665
 Now Gawain in brave display
 to him his lance was brought.
 He said to them "Good day,"
 the last time, so he thought.

He spurred his steed and he sprang on his way 670
 so fiercely that the flint-sparks flashed out behind him.
 All who held him to be honorable were sighing in their hearts,
 and agreeing in truth one said to another,

* The Five Joys: Joyous moments in the life of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as mentioned in the Christian Bible. Mary is also referred to as the Queen of Heaven.

† Generosity: The original Middle English term is literally closer to "enfranchisement" and implies the generous giving of rights to others.

‡ Chastity: The original Middle English term is literally closer to "cleanness."

grieving for that good man: "Before God, it's a shame
 that you, lord, must be lost, who are in life so noble! 675
 To meet his fatal match among men—oh, it is hard!
 To behave with more caution would have suited one of sense,
 and that dear lord could have one day been a duke,
 illustrious leader of loyal men in this land as befits him;
 and that would have been better than to be butchered to death, 680
 beheaded by an elvish man for an arrogant boast.
 Who can recall any king that ever took such a challenge
 when knights were at court for their Christmas games!"
 Many warm tears went out of their watery eyes,
 when that lord so beloved left the castle 685
 that day.
 No longer at his home,
 but swiftly went his way;
 into wilderness to roam,
 as the book I read does say. 690

Now suited up, he rode through Arthur's realm,
 Sir Gawain in God's care, and found this game was not fun.
 Often forlorn and alone he stayed a night
 where he found no food to feed himself.
 He had no friend except his horse in the forests and hills, 695
 no man on his quest to converse with except God,
 till soon he drew near to Northern Wales.
 He keeps to the right of all the Isles of Angelsey,
 and rides over shallow water near the sea,
 and then over by Holyhead to high land again 700
 in the wilderness of Wirral: there wandered few
 who respected either God or mortal with goodwill.
 And as he went on he always asked all whom he met
 if they had heard any news of a knight who was green
 from anywhere around, or of the Green Chapel. 705
 And all said nay, and that never in their lives
 a single man had they seen of such a color
 as he.

The knight took pathways strange
 by many a field and tree
 and though the scene would change
 the chapel he never could see.

Many a cliff he climbed over in lands unknown,
 far away from his friends without fellowship he rode.
 At every wading or water on the way that he passed
 he found a foe who attacked him, except for a few;
 and so foul were they and fierce that he had to fight.
 So many marvels in the mountains he met in those lands
 that it would be tedious to tell you one tenth of it.
 For awhile he battles with dragons, and with wolves also,
 awhile with wood trolls that wandered in the rocks,
 and with bulls and with bears and boars, too, at times;
 and with giants that hounded him from the high cliffs.
 Had he not been stalwart and stern and steadfast in God,
 he undoubtedly would have died for he faced danger often;
 though fighting fatigued him much the winter was worse,
 when the cold clear water from the clouds spills out,
 freezing before it has fallen upon the faded earth.
 Nearly slain by the sleet he slept in iron armor
 more than enough nights in the rigid rocks,
 where cascading from the mountains cold streams came,
 and hung high over his head in hard icicles.
 Thus in peril and pain and his plight's hardship
 till Christmas Eve he crossed that country all alone and
 in need.

The knight paused on his ride
 his words to Mary plead,
 in hopes she'd be his guide
 and to some lodging lead.

By a mountain in the morning merrily he was riding
 into a forest that was deep and fearsomely wild,
 with high hills on each side, and ancient woods beneath
 of huge old oaks by the hundred together;

710

715

720

725

730

735

740



*A painting of the 4th century Roman Christian Roman soldier today known as Saint George, who slew a dragon that demanded human sacrifices.
 (15th century depiction by Rogier van der Weyden)*
 the hazel and the hawthorn were huddled and tangled

with rough ragged moss around them trailing,
 with many birds bleakly on the bare twigs sitting
 that pitifully piped there because of pain from the cold.
 The good man on Gringolet goes now beneath them
 through many marshes and mires, a man all alone,
 troubled that he would appear a coward at that time
 in the service of the sweet Lord, who on that same night
 was born to a human mother to conquer men's mourning.
 And therefore sighing he said, "I beg you, oh Lord,
 and Mary, who is the mildest and dearest mother,
 for some home where I might have the honor to hear
 the Mass and your Matins* tomorrow. This I humbly ask,
 and I promptly pray with Pater and Ave
 and Creed."

In prayer he now did ride,
 lamenting his failing deed;
 he sought a blessing and cried,
 "Oh Christ please give me speed!"

He made the sign on himself† three times,
 and then in the forest came to a castle within a moat,
 on a low mound above a lawn, under the branches
 of many tree trunks and surrounded by ditches:
 the castle was the most handsome a king ever had.
 Placed pleasantly there with a park all around it,
 within a wall of pointed spears set closely
 that surrounded the trees for two miles or more.
 From the one side, Gawain gazed on the stronghold
 as it shimmered and shone through the oak trees,
 and then humbly removed his helmet, and with honor he thanked
 Jesus and Saint Julian‡, who are both generous,
 and who had courteously responded to his cries.

* Matins: Evening prayers. Pater and Ave are also forms of prayers.

† Sign on himself: This is a Christian religious ritual that involves making a gesture that resembles a cross.

‡ Saint Julian: A patron saint of travelers and hospitality.

745

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760

765

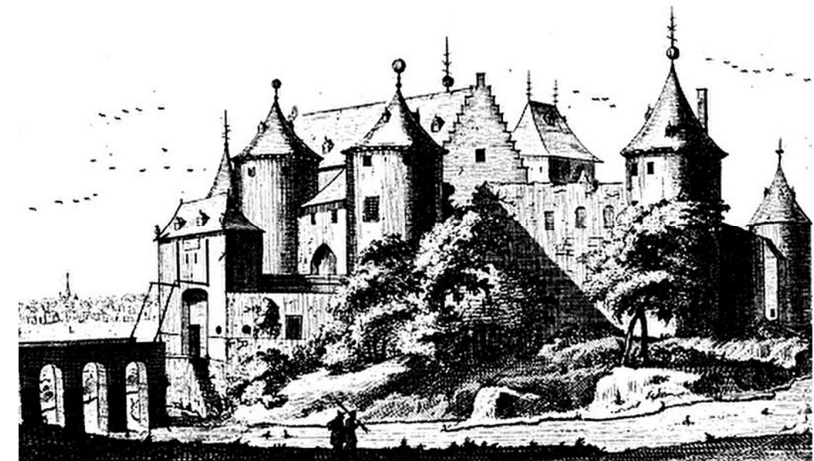
770

775

"Now, a good night's rest," said the knight, "I beg you!"
 Then he goaded Gringolet with his gilded heels,
 and by good luck the horse chose the perfect path
 to brilliantly bring him to the bridge's end
 at last.

780

That bridge was raised upright,
 the bolted gates none passed;
 the castle was walled up tight,
 and feared no windy blast.



A medieval castle with a moat.

Then he stopped his steed on the water's bank
 where the deep moat angled around the place.
 The wall went partly into the deep water,
 and up again to a huge height in the air,
 of all hard hewn stone to the high cornice,
 fortified under the battlement in the best fashion
 and topped with turrets spread along the top
 with many graceful loopholes that made good lookouts:
 that knight had never seen a better built base for a lord.
 And inside the walls he beheld a hall,

785

790

tall towers set in a pattern, and cone-shaped roofs
 with splendid spires, joined neatly, so fine and long
 their capstones all cleverly crafted with skill.
 Many chalk-white chimneys he happened to see
 upon the roofs of towers all radiant white;
 so many a painted pinnacle were everywhere
 among the roof folds of the castle clustered so thickly
 that it all appeared to have been crafted out of paper.
 The gallant knight on his great horse thought it was good,
 and looked from end to end where he could enter,
 to stay in that home while the holy day lasted would be
 a delight.
 He called, and then with speed
 a servant smiling bright
 asked him what was his need
 and greeted the traveling knight.
 795
 800
 805
 810
 “Good sir,” said Gawain, “will you go with my message
 to the high lord of this house and ask for a place to pray?”
 “Yes, by Peter*!” said the servant, “and I promise indeed
 that you will, sir, be welcome while you wish to stay here.”
 Then quickly the man went and came back soon,
 bringing servants there to rightly receive the knight.
 They lowered down the great drawbridge, and came forth,
 and on the cold earth on their knees in courtesy knelt
 to welcome this traveler as courteously as they could.
 They took him through the gates and left them wide open,
 and he told them to rise as he rode over the bridge.
 Several servants then seized the saddle as he dismounted,
 and many strong men led his steed to a stable,
 while knights and squires soon descended,
 gladly guiding this guest into the hall.
 When he raised up his helmet many ran there
 in haste to have it from his hand, to serve his highness;
 both his blade and his outer cloth they helped remove.
 815
 820
 825

* Peter: One of Jesus’s twelve disciples and the first pope to lead Christians.

Then he graciously greeted all those good men,
 and many were proud to approach him, to honor that prince.
 They brought him, still in his armor, to the hall,
 where a fair blaze in the fireplace fiercely was burning.
 Then the lord of that land left his chamber and came
 with manners to meet the man on the floor.
 He said: “You are welcome as you wish to stay here.
 Treat all that is here as your own, to have at will while
 you stay.”
 “Greatest of thanks!” said Gawain,
 “To you, may Christ repay!”
 As men whose hearts were plain
 they both embraced that day.
 830
 835
 840
 Gawain gazed at the good man who had greeted him kindly,
 and he thought this lord of the castle looked bold and brave,
 his body was very large and slim, in the prime of his life:
 his beard was broad and all beaver-hued,
 stern, strong in his stance upon stalwart legs,
 his face fierce as fire, and frank in his speech
 and well it suited him, in truth, as it seemed to the knight
 he was a lord who could easily lead many loyal men.
 The lord took him to a chamber, and ordered men at once
 to assign him a squire to serve and obey him;
 and there to wait on his words were many worthy men,
 who brought him to a brightly lit room with splendid bedding:
 there were curtains of costly silk with clear-golden hems,
 and covers cleverly crafted with quilts most lovely
 of bright ermine above, embroidered on the sides,
 curtains running on ropes with red-gold rings,
 carpets of costly damask that covered the walls,
 and the floor under foot fairly matched them.
 There they removed his armor, speaking to him happily,
 while taking his chain mail armor and his bright armor plates.
 Men ran in with rich robes ready for him
 to change into, and they had chosen for him the best.
 As soon as he had one robe and had dressed in it,
 845
 850
 855
 860

it fit him handsomely with a flowing skirt. 865
Then truly to each man there, he seemed
a vision of spring and in marvelous hues
bright and beautiful was all his body beneath.
A knight more noble was never made by Christ,
they thought. 870
He came but from where?
It seemed his horse had brought
a knight beyond compare
from battles where fierce men fought.

A chair by the chimney where charcoal was burning
 was made ready in his room, all arranged and covered
 with cushions upon quilted cloths that were cleverly crafted.
 Then a handsome cloak was hung around him
 of bright silk brocade, richly embroidered
 and fairly filled inside with the finest of furs
 and all edged with ermine, and its hood was matching;
 and he sat in that seat seeming proper and noble
 and warmed himself well, so his aches were alleviated.
 Soon, up on long legs a table was raised
 and spread with a clean cloth that looked a pure white;
 there were a tablecloth, a salt shaker, and silver spoons.
 He then washed himself well and went at his food,
 and many worthy men in service waited upon him;
 soups they served of many sorts, seasoned most savory,
 in double helpings, as was due, and a variety of fish*—
 some baked in bread, some broiled on the coals,
 some seared, some in gravy with spices,
 and all with condiments so clever that it caused him delight.
 A “fair feast” he called out frankly and often,

graciously, when all the good men together there said: 895
 “Now please,
 This meatless food partake;
 Tomorrow it will cease!”
 The laughter makes him shake
 As the wine increased. 900

Then inquiry and questions were carefully put
to Gawain himself, touching on personal points,
till he courteously declared that he belonged
to the court that high Arthur in honor held under his hand,
who was the righteous royal King of the Round Table, 905
and it was Gawain himself that as their guest now sat,
and, as it turned out, had come to visit for Christmas.
When the lord had learned whom luck had brought him,
he loudly laughed, feeling such delight,
and they celebrated very merrily, all the men in that castle 910
pressing eagerly nearer to appear in his presence
for he was known as one of perfect mind and manners
and powerful skill, and always was praised;
of all men on earth he was most admired.
Softly each said then in secret to his friend: 915
“Now closely we shall catch the fine points of his manners,
and the perfect expressions of elegant conversation.
How speech is well spent will be expounded without our asking
since we have found here this father of fine breeding.
God has given us some of His goodness and grace now indeed, 920
for such a guest as Gawain He has granted us to have!
These blissful men in the season of His birth sing carefree
at heart,
“What high manners may mean
this knight will now impart. 925

* They are eating only fish, which they don't view as meat, in order to fast because it is a holy day (also known as a holiday).

It shall be heard and seen
what makes the love-speech* art.”

When his dinner was done and he duly had risen,
it now had drawn very near to nighttime.
The chaplains† then made their way to the chapel 930
and rang the bells resoundingly, as rightly they should,
for the solemn evening prayers of the high season.
The lord leads the way, and his lady with him;
into the good chapel she gracefully enters.
Gawain follows gladly, and goes there at once 935
and the lord seizes him by the sleeve and leads him to a seat,
kindly acknowledging him and calling him by his name,
saying that he was most welcome of all guests in the world.
And he gratefully gave thanks as each greeted the other,
and they sat together soberly while the prayer service lasted. 940
Then the lady longed to look at this knight;
and from her room she came with many pretty maidens.
She was fairer in face, in her flesh and her skin,
her proportions, complexion, and demeanor than all others,
and, to Gawain, more lovely than Guinevere she looked. 945
He came through the chapel to courteously bow to her;
another lady was there leading her by the left hand
who was older than she, indeed ancient she seemed,
and held in high honor by all men around her.
But those ladies appeared unlike in their looks, 950
for if the younger was fair, the elder was foul;
the one face was richly wearing a rose hue,
the other wore rolls of rough wrinkled cheeks;
on the scarf of the one were many clear pearls,

*love-speech: At this time, the concept of “love” was relatively more pure and it signified not only love between man and woman but, more typically, respect and devotion toward others of high status, such as one’s king or queen, or a lord or lady that one served. The language of love was the way to properly and stylishly express this in a royal or noble court.

† Chaplain: a kind of priest assigned to a specific location, such as a chapel.

her dress was low cut and left her bright throat bare, 955
fairer than white snow that falls on the hills;
the other was wearing a cloth that enclosed her whole neck,
her black chin was enveloped with chalk-white veils,
her forehead enfolded in skin and so all bunched up, 960
so covered in trinkets and trifling accessories
that nothing was bare of that lady but black eyebrows,
her two eyes and her nose and her naked lips,
and those were hideous to behold and horribly gray;
that she was a worthy dame, it could well
be said! 965
Short body and thick waist,
with buttocks heavy as lead;
to he with any taste
the younger turned his head.

When Gawain glimpsed that lovely young lady, 970
with permission from the lord he went towards the ladies;
the elder he saluted, bowing low to her,
on the lovelier one he lightly laid his arms,
kissed her as was proper in court, and spoke courteous words.
They asked him who he was, and quickly he begged 975
to be their servant, if they so desired.
They took him between them, and talking they led him
to a fireside in a fair room, and first of all called
for spices, which men spared no speed to bring them,
and with much wine that was well to their liking. 980
The lord for their delight leaped up quite often,
many times he would make them play merry games;
he took off his hat and hung it high on a spear,
offering it as a prize for any to win
who could devise the most fun at that Christmas feast— 985
“And I shall try, by my faith, to contend with the best,
with the help of my friends, before I forfeit this hat!”
Thus with laughter and joyfulness the lord made his jests
to gladden Sir Gawain with games that night in
the hall. 990

At last the time was due;
the lord gave the “lights out” call;
Sir Gawain now withdrew
to bed just like them all.



depiction of a medieval feast with dais on the right.

On the morning when every man remembers
the time when our dear Lord, doomed to die, was born,
and every home wakes in happiness on earth for His sake,
so it was there on that day with the dearest delights:
at each meal and at dinner, men set marvelous dishes
on the dais including the most delicious of meats.
The ancient woman was highest at the table,
and the master took him properly to her side;
Gawain and the glad lady together were seated
in the center, where as seemed right, dinner service began,
and so on throughout the hall, in honor they followed.
When each good man in his position had been served,
there was food, there was festivity, there was fullness of joy;
and to tell the whole tale I would find it tedious

for the pains I would take in pointing out every detail.
Yet I will say that Gawain and that woman, who was so fine
in companionship, took such pleasure together
in sweet society speaking soft words,
their courteous conversation clean and clear of all evil,
so with their pleasant pastime no pure prince’s sport
compares.

Drums beat, and trumpets blow,
The pipers play their airs;
each man his own mind knows,
and they two minded theirs.

Much feasting followed the first and the next day,
and the healthy third came hastening after:
the joyfulness of Saint John’s day was glorious to hear;
and that finished their revels, as had been arranged,
for there were guests who had to go in the gray morning.
So a wondrous celebration they held and wine they drank,
and they danced and danced, and delightfully they caroled.

At last when it was late they sought permission to leave
to go on their way, each one a stranger of status.
“Good night” then said Gawain, but the good man stopped him,
and led him to his own chamber to the chimney corner,
and there he delayed him, and lovingly thanked him,
for the pride and pleasure his presence had brought,
for so honoring his house at that high season
and deciding to adorn his dwelling with his presence.

“Believe me, sir, while I live I shall thank my luck
that Gawain was my guest at God’s own feast.”
“Great thanks, sir,” said Gawain, “but the goodness is yours,
all the honor is your own—may the High King repay you!
And I am under your roof; what you ask I must perform.
I am bound now to be, for better or worse,
by right.”

Wanting to employ Gawain,
the lord now pressed the knight;

But he said he can't be retained
and turned down the invite. 1045

Then with courteous question he inquired of Gawain
what dire need had driven him on that holiday date
with such focus from the king's court, to come forth alone
before the holidays from men's homes had wholly finished.
"Indeed, sir," he said, "you say the plain truth: 1050
a high and urgent mission brought me out of that house;
for I have set out on a quest to seek a place,
though I wonder where in the world I must wander to find it.
I would not miss finding it by New Year's morning
for all the land in Arthur's kingdom, so our Lord help me! 1055
And so, sir, this question I inquire of you here:
can you tell me in truth if you've ever heard
of the Green Chapel, on what grounds it may stand,
or of the great knight that guards it, all green in color?
For terms were established between us 1060
for me to meet that man at that place, if I remained alive,
and the named New Year's Day is now nearly upon me,
and I would find that lord, if God will allow me,
more gladly, by God's son, than gain any treasure.
So indeed, if you please, I must depart now. 1065
For my business I have now but barely three days,
and I would willingly fall dead than fail in my mission."
Then laughing, the lord said, "Now linger you must;
for when it's time for that meeting I will show you the road.
On what ground is the Green Chapel—let it grieve you no more! 1070
In your bed you shall be, sir, till the daylight is broad,
without fear, and then we'll travel on the first of the year,
and come to the spot at mid-morning, there to complete what
you know.
Remain till New Year's Day, 1075
then rise and we will go!
I'll set you on your way,
It's only two miles or so."

Then Gawain was delighted, and he gladly laughed:
"Now I thank you a thousand times for this most of all! 1080
Now my quest will be accomplished; so as you like,
I will dwell a few days here, and do whatever you order."
The lord then seized him and set him in a seat beside him,
and let the ladies be sent for to delight them more,
for their sweet pleasure there in peace by themselves. 1085
For love of him, that lord was as loud in his joy
as one nearly out of his mind who scarcely made sense.
Then he called to the knight, calling out loudly:
"You have promised to do whatever deed I propose.
Will you hold to my request here, at this moment?" 1090
"Yes, certainly, sir," then said the true knight,
"while I remain in your manor, I'll obey your command."
"Well," he replied, "you have traveled far and are tired out,
and then I've kept you awake: you're not well yet;
it is certain you need both food and sleep. 1095
Upstairs you shall stay, sir, and sleep there in comfort
till Mass-time tomorrow, and then go to a meal
when you wish with my wife, who shall sit with you
and comfort you with her company until I return to court.
You stay, 1100
and I shall early rouse,
and for hunting make my way."
Gawain gracefully bows:
"Your wish I will obey."
"One thing more," said the master, "we'll make an agreement: 1105
whatever I win in the woods at once shall be yours,
and whatever you may gain here you shall give in exchange.
We shall swap then, sweet man—come, say what you think!—
whether one's life turns out lucky or lacking, we must trade?"
"By God," said Gawain, "I agree to it all, 1110
and whatever game you propose seems pleasant to me."
"Done! It's a bargain! Who'll bring us a drink?"
So said the lord of that land. They laughed one and all;
they drank and they talked, and they did as they pleased,

these lords and ladies, as long as they wished,
and then with French customs and many courteous
phrases they stood in sweet debate and soft words exchanged,
and lovingly they kissed, and then exited.
With trusty attendants and torches gleaming
they were brought at last to their beds so soft, one
and all.
Yet before to bed they came,
the agreement his thoughts recall;
he knew how to play a game,
the old lord of that hall.

1115

1120

1125



Ruins of a medieval chapel.

PART III

Before the first daylight the folks woke up;
 the guests that were to go called for their horses;
 they hurried up and sought to saddle them in haste,
 to stow all their stuff and strap up their bags.
 The men of rank arranged themselves, got ready for riding; 1130
 on the saddle they swiftly leaped, then seized their bridles,
 and went off on the ways where they wished to go.
 The lord of the land was not last of them all
 to be ready to ride with a retinue of his men;
 he ate a hurried mouthful after hearing Mass, 1135
 and with his horn he hastened at once to the hunting field.
 When daylight came dimly upon the earth,
 he and his huntsmen were upon their high horses.
 Then the leaders of the hounds leashed them in couples,
 opened the kennel door and cried to them "out!" 1140
 and boldly blew on bugles, three full length blasts.
 Beagles barked, making a boisterous noise;
 and they whipped at those that wandered off on a scent;
 a hundred hunting dogs, I have heard, among the best
 were they. 1145
 To their stations hunters go;
 the leashes were cast away,
 and many a bugle blow
 waking the woods that day.

At the first burst of the barking all beasts trembled; 1150
 deer dashed through the valley bewildered by dread,
 and hastened to the heights, but they hotly were greeted,
 and turned back by huntsmen, who boldly shouted.
 They let the harts* go past with their high antlers,
 and the brave bucks also with their branching horns; 1155

* Harts and bucks are types of male deer. Hinds and does (singular: doe) are types of female deer.

for the castle's lord had decided at the close of the season
 that no man should attack the male deer.
 The hinds were held back with *hey!* and *halt!*,
 the does driven with great noise to the deep valleys:
 the hunters released a sleet of arrows; 1160
 at each turn under the trees went a twanging shaft
 that bit hard into a brown beast with its barbed head.
Oh! they bellowed and they bled, and on the banks they died;
 and the hounds in haste always hotly pursued them,
 and hunters with high horns hurried behind them 1165
 with such a clamor and cry as if cliffs had split open.
 If any beast broke away from the bows shooting there,
 it was shot down and slain at the receiving station;
 when they had been hurried from the height and hustled to the waters
 the men were so wise in their craft as they watched below, 1170
 and their gray hounds were so great that they got them at once,
 and flung them down in a flash, as fast as can be in
 men's sight.
 The lord then like a boy
 often roared or stood upright, 1175
 and was in blissful joy
 until the dark of night.

Thus the lord leads the game below the linden trees,
 and Gawain the bold lies in a good bed,
 being lazy till the walls are lit by the light of day, 1180
 under a costly quilt with curtains around him.
 And he stayed almost sleeping until he heard stealthily come
 a soft sound at his door as it secretly opened;
 and from under the quilt he craned his head,
 a corner of the curtain he caught and pulled up a little, 1185
 and looked that way warily to learn what it was.
 It was the lady herself, most lovely to see,
 that cautiously closed the door quietly behind her,
 and drew near to his bed. Then the knight was embarrassed,
 and lay down swiftly to look as if he slept; 1190
 and she stepped silently, approaching his bed.

She cast back the curtain, and crept within,
 and sat herself down softly on the side of his bed,
 and there lingered very long to look at him awakening.
 He lay there waiting a long while and wondered, 1195
 and mused in his mind how the matter would go,
 to what point—perhaps to some surprise, he thought.
 Yet he said to himself: “It would be more proper
 to inquire in due course and ask what she wishes.”
 Then rousing he rolled over, and turning around to her 1200
 he lifted his eyelids with a look of wonder,
 and made the sign of the cross, thus safeguarding himself with
 what’s right.
 With chin and cheeks so sweet,
 of blended red and white, 1205
 with grace she brought to greet
 thin lips and laughter light.

 “Good morning, Sir Gawain!” said that gracious lady.
 “You are a careless sleeper if one can creep up on you so!
 How easily you are caught! If we don’t make a truce,
 I shall bind you in your bed, you may be assured.” 1210
 With laughter the lady thus lightly jested.
 “Good morning to your grace!” said Gawain gladly.
 “You shall work on me your will, and I’ll be well pleased;
 for I submit immediately, and for mercy I cry— 1215
 and that is best, as I see it, for I have no other choice.”
 Thus he jested in return with much gentle laughter:
 “But if you would, gracious lady, grant me permission to leave,
 and release your prisoner and request him to rise,
 I would abandon this bed and better arrange myself; 1220
 it would then prove more pleasant to chat with you.”
 “Nay, in truth, fair sir,” said the sweet lady,
 “you shall not go from your bed! I will control you better here:
 I shall tightly tuck you in, on the other side also,
 and then talk with my true knight who I’ve taken prisoner. 1225
 For I know well indeed that you are Sir Gawain,
 to whom all men pay homage wherever you ride;

your honor and your courtesy by the courteous are praised,
 by lords, by ladies, by all living people.
 And right here you now are, and we all by ourselves; 1230
 my husband and his huntsmen have ridden far away,
 other men are in bed, and my maids also,
 the door is closed and secured with a lock that is strong;
 and since I have in this house the one who all delight in,
 I will now take my turn while I have a chance for a talk 1235
 yet still.
 To me you’ll welcome be
 to delight and take your fill;
 for duty requires of me
 to serve you, and I will.” 1240

 “Upon my word,” said Gawain, “that is well, I guess;
 though I am not now he of whom you are speaking—
 to attain such an honor as here you speak of
 I am a knight unworthy, and this indeed I know— 1245
 by God, I would be glad, if I seemed good to you
 in whatever I could say or could offer in service
 to the pleasure of your excellence—it would be pure delight.”
 “In good faith, Sir Gawain,” said the gracious lady,
 “the prowess and the perfection that please all others,
 if I lacked in my words, it would show little respect. 1250
 But there are numerous ladies who would now
 have you in their hold, sir, as I have you here,
 pleasantly to play with in polished conversation,
 to seek their solace and to soothe their sorrows,
 more so than from the goods or gold that they own. 1255
 But I thank Him who on high Heaven is Lord
 that I have what all desire here wholly in my hands,
 by grace.”
 None were as warm and sure
 as that lady with fair face; 1260
 the knight with answers pure
 replied in every case.

“Madam” said he merrily, “Mary reward you!
 For I have enjoyed, in good faith, your generous favor,
 and much honor have received because of others’ kind words; 1265
 but as for the courtesy they give me, since my claim is not equal,
 the honor is your own, who always mean well.”
 “Nay, by Mary!” the lady demurred, “as for me, I deny it.
 For were I worth all the legion of women alive,
 and all the wealth in the world at my will possessed, 1270
 if I should exchange at my choice and choose a husband,
 for the noble nature I know in you, Sir Knight,
 in beauty and blessings and bearing so good—
 of which earlier I have heard, and hold it now true—
 then no lord alive would I select before you.” 1275
 “In truth, lady,” he returned, “you took a husband far better.
 But I am proud of the praise you are pleased to give me,
 and as your servant I sincerely regard you as my sovereign,
 and I am your knight; may Christ reward you.”
 Thus of many matters they spoke till mid-morning passed, 1280
 and always the lady held herself as one who loved him much,
 and he countered her courteously, ever careful in his manner.
 “Even if I were the most lovely lady,” thought the lady to herself,
 “his love would be lacking” since his quest is all he seems
 to know 1285
 and how he soon shall grieve
 and how it must be so.
 The lady asked to leave
 and at once he let her go.

Then she gave him a “good day” and with a glance she laughed, 1290
 and as she stood she astonished him with the strength of her words:
 “May He that praises the sport of speech reward you!
 But since you are Gawain, it gives me much to think over.”
 “Why so?” the knight then eagerly asked her,
 afraid that he had failed in the form of his conversation. 1295
 But “God bless you! For this reason,” carefreely she replied,
 “that one so good as Gawain the gracious,
 who encompasses all courtesy within himself,

they grasped the throat, skillfully disengaging it, 1335
the gullet from the windpipe, and did away with the guts.
Then they sheared the shoulders with their sharpened knives,
pulling the sinews through a small cut to keep the sides whole;
next they burst open the breast, and broke it apart,
and again they were there at the throat where they began, 1340
cutting up quickly till they came to the fork
and extracted the entrails; and then entering after,
they tore away quickly all the tissue along the ribs.
Then they broke off with skill the bones of the back,
down even to the hip, all that hung there together, 1345
and hoisted it up all whole and hacked it off there:
and that is what they call by name "the numbles," or so
I find.

Along the seams of the thigh,
the flaps they fold behind; 1350
to split them knives now fly;
the back they now unbind.

Both the head and the neck they hack off after,
and next swiftly they split the sides from the spine,
and that bone they throw into the forest for the crows. 1355
Then, by the rib, they thrust a thong through both thick sides,
and then by the ankle of the legs they hang them both up:
all the huntsmen were paid their proper wages.
Upon the scraps of the fair beasts they then fed their hounds,
on the liver and the lungs and the leather of the bellies 1360
with bread bathed in blood blended amongst them.
Boldly horns announced the prize amidst the barking of dogs,
and then taking up their venison they traveled homeward,
striking up strongly many a stirring horn-call.
When daylight was done they all duly came 1365
into the noble castle, where quietly the knights
unload.

In bliss the fire was set.
And in the lord now strode;

Gawain with him now met, 1370
and freely pleasure flowed.

Then the master commanded his men to meet in that hall,
and both dames to come down with their damsels also;
before all the folk on that floor he ordered fine men
to fetch forth his venison and place it before him, 1375
and gracious in his game he called to Gawain,
announced the number by tally of the nimble beasts,
and showed him the shining fat all shorn from the ribs.
"How does this performance please you? Do I deserve praise?
Has my skill earned me the most eager of thanks?" 1380
"Yes in deed," the other said, "here is venison the fairest
that I've seen in seven years in the season of winter!"
"And I give it all to you, Gawain," said the good man at once,
"for as you agreed you may claim it as your own."
"That is true," he replied, "and I tell you the same: 1385
what of worth within these walls I have won also
with as good a will, I think, is awarded to you."
His fair neck he held closely in his arms,
and kissed him with all the kindness that his courtesy knew.
"There take all my gains, sir! I got nothing more. 1390
I would give it up gladly even if it were greater."
"That's a good one!" said the good man. "Greatly I thank you.
Perhaps, since yours is better, you briefly could tell me
where you won this wealth by the wits you possess."
"That was not the agreement," he said. "Question me no more! 1395
For you have what's due to you and so your yearning
may cease."

Their laughs and voices grow,
their carefree joys increase,
to supper soon they go 1400
for many delicacies.

Later by the chimney in the chamber they were seated,
the best wine was abundant while brought to them often,
and again they agreed on a game for tomorrow

to keep the same agreement as they had made before: they'd have no choice with their chances by exchanging whatever new thing they got when they gathered at night. They concluded this agreement before all of the courtiers; the drink for the deal was brought forth in jest; then they asked permission to leave and at last left, and away then at once each went to his bed. When the cock had crowed and cackled just three times, the lord leaped from his bed, as did each of his loyal men; so that their meal had been made, and the Mass was over, and folks ran for the forest, before the first daybreak, to chase.

Loud sounds of hunters and horns
as over the plains they race,
and let loose among the thorns
the dogs with quicker pace.

Soon the dogs cried for a chase in a thicket by a marsh;
the huntsman who first found the scent hollered;
he spoke stirring words to his dog with a daring voice.
The hounds that heard it hastened forward swiftly,
and fell fast on the scent, some forty at once.
Then such a barking and bellowing of bloodhounds
together arose that the rocks rang all around them.
Hunters encouraged them with horns and with hollers,
and then all in a line rushed on together
between a pond in that forest and formidable rock.
In a tangle under a tall cliff at the pond's edges,
where the rough rock ruggedly in ruins was fallen,
they went forward to find it, followed by hunters
who made a circle around the cliff and the clutter of stones,
till they were well aware that it waited within:
the very beast that the barking bloodhounds had spoken of.
Then they beat on the bushes and forced him out,
and he came bringing peril to people on his path.
It was a boar without rival that burst out upon them;
That aged and lone beast had long left its herd,



a wild boar

for he was savage and the biggest of all boars,
grim indeed when he grunted. Then aghast were many;
for three at the first thrust he threw to the ground,
and sprang off with great speed, sparing the others;
and they hollered with high voices, and shouted “*Ha! ha!*”
and held horn to mouth, blowing hard as they rallied.
Many were the wild mumblings of men and of dogs,
as they raced after this boar, with blaring noise you’d want to
expel.

At times he turns their way,
and comes to give them hell;
the hounds get hurt, and they
in pain all yowl and yell.

Hunters then hurried up eager to shoot him,
aiming their arrows at him and often hitting;
but the arrow points were too poor, bouncing off his body,
and the arrowheads had no harm on his hide at all;

when the wood-shaven shaft shattered in pieces,
 his head came back hopping after it hit him.
 But when the heavier hits came and he started to really hurt,
 1460 then with a brain wild for battle he burst out upon them,
 ruthlessly he roughed them up as he rushed forward,
 and many cried at his coming and quickly withdrew.
 But the lord on a light horse went leaping after him;
 1465 a bold man on the battlefield, he blew on his bugle
 the rally-call as he rode through the rough thickets,
 pursuing this wild boar till the sunbeams became slanted.
 Thus, in such deeds they properly passed this day,
 while our brave knight beloved there lies in his bed
 1470 at home in good happiness and hospitality with rich
 display.
 The lady didn't forget:
 she came to say "good day";
 early on all set
 1480 to wear his will away.

She crept to the curtain and peeped at the knight.
 Sir Gawain graciously then welcomed her first,
 and she answered him likewise, eagerly speaking,
 and sat softly by his side; and suddenly she laughed,
 and with a look full of love delivered these words:
 1475 "Sir, if you are Gawain, I think it strange that a man
 so well-meaning and ever mindful of good,
 cannot comprehend the customs of gentlemen;
 and if one teaches you them, you do not keep them in mind:
 you have forgotten altogether what a day ago I taught
 1485 by the plainest points I could put into words!"
 "What is that?" he said at once. "I am not aware of it at all.
 But if you are telling the truth, I must take all the blame."
 "And yet as to kisses," she advised, "I gave you this advice:
 wherever favor is found, don't delay to claim them:
 1490 that is proper for all who care for courteous manners."
 "Take back," said the true knight, "that teaching, my dear!
 For I dared not do that, fearing your refusal.



Sir Gawain is visited by the Lady, from the original 14th century manuscript.

Were I rebuffed, I should be to blame for so bold an offer."
 "In faith!" said the fair lady, "you may not be refused;
 1495 you are strong enough to constrain someone by strength,
 if you like, if any were so ill bred as to answer you 'Nay.'"
 "Indeed, by God," said Gawain, "you graciously speak;
 but force finds no favor among the folks where I live,
 and there is no gift that is not given gladly and freely.
 1500 I am at your call and command to kiss when you please.

You may receive as you desire, or stop me since this is
your place.”
Then down the lady bent,
and sweetly kissed his face. 1505
Much speech they both then spent
on life, from grief to grace.

“I would learn from you, lord,” the lady then said,
“if you would not mind my asking, what is the meaning of this:
that one so young as you are in years, and so joyful, 1510
so well known for knighthood and good breeding,
yet in all chivalry, the chief thing chosen to praise
in the literature of knighthood is the loyal practice of love —
for, talking of the tribulations that these true knights suffer,
it is the title and content and text of their works: 1515
how lovers for their true love risked their lives,
have endured for their dear ones dangerous trials,
until avenged by their valor, their adversity overcome,
they have brought bliss to her by their own brave virtues—
and you are the knight of noblest renown in our times, 1520
and your fame and fine name afar are published,
and I have sat by you now for the second time,
yet your mouth has never made any remark I’ve heard that ever,
more or less, belonged to the language of love.
Surely, you who are so accomplished and so courtly in your vows 1525
should be prompt to expound to a young pupil
by signs and examples the science of lovers.
Why? Are you, who has been so honored, ignorant?
Or else you think me too stupid to understand your courtship?
But nay! 1530
Alone I’ll come and sit,
a pupil for your play;
come, teach me of your wit
while my lord is far away.”

“In good faith,” said Gawain, “may God reward you!
I gain great delight, and am glad beyond measure 1535

that one so worthy as you should be willing to come here
and take pains with so poor a man. Playing this game with me,
showing favor in any form, it fills me with joy.
But for me to take up the task of lecturing on true love, 1540
to comment on the texts and tales of knighthood to you,
who I am certain possess far more skill in that art,
double what a hundred of me would have,
or shall ever have while I remain on earth,
it would be manifold foolishness, in faith, my lady! 1545
I wish to work to fulfill your will, if I am able,
being so indebted in honor, and Lord so help me,
desiring always to remain your servant.”
Thus she tested and teased him, tempting him often,
so as to lure him to love and whatever lay in her heart. 1550
But his defense was so fair that no fault could be seen,
nor any evil upon either side nor anything but joy did their actions
consist.

They laughed and long they played;
at last she stopped and kissed;
her farewell gracefully made, 1555
she went wherever she wished.

Then rousing from his rest he rose to hear Mass,
and then their delicious dinner was laid and served.
In delight he spent the long day with the ladies, 1560
but the lord over the lands leaped back and forth,
pursuing his fierce boar that hurtled over the hills
and bit into the backs of the best of his hounds
whenever surrounded, until bowmen’s arrows battered him,
and made him release his teeth and move again onward— 1565
that’s how fierce the arrows flew when they fired together.
And yet the boar still pushed aside the strongest of them
till at last he was so spent he could speed no further,
but in what haste he still had left he ran for a hole
beside a rock where the river was flowing. 1570
He put the bank to his back and began to dig;
fearfully the froth of his mouth foamed from the corners;

he wielded his white tusks. Then weary were all
the brave men who were bold enough to stand by him
after attacking from afar, yet the danger made them not come 1575
too near.

He'd hurt so many before,
that all of them had fear
of facing the tusks once more
of a beast whose rage was clear. 1580

Finally the lord himself came, spurring his horse,
and saw the boar brought there, and his men all around him.
Fearing nothing, he dismounted his horse,
brandishing a bright blade and boldly advanced,
strongly striding through the stream to where stood the fugitive. 1585
The wild beast was aware of him with his weapon in hand,
and his hair rose high and with such hate he snorted
that folks feared for the lord that his foe would finish him.
Out came the boar and set on him at once,
and the boar and the brave man were both in a match 1590
in the wildest of the water. The beast was soon beaten,
for the man watched him well, and as they met he at once struck
his point straight steadily in the boar's neck,
and hit him up to the hilt, so that his heart was burst,
and with a snarl he succumbed, and was swept down the water 1595
away.

By a hundred hounds he was caught;
they fiercely bit their prey;
to the bank dogs dragged and brought
the body to where it lay. 1600

There men blew blaring horns for the prize,
and the hunters who still could loudly hoorayed;
the hounds barked at the beast, as told to by their masters,
who of that hard-fought chase were the chief huntsmen.
Then one that was well learned in woodmen's wisdom 1605
with clever carefulness began to carve up this boar.
First he hacked off his head and set it on high,

then he ripped him roughly down the ridge of the back,
brought out the bowels, burned them on embers,
and with them, blended with blood, the hounds were rewarded. 1610
Next he broke up the boar flesh in broad slabs,
and pulled out the organs in order as is proper,
and he sewed the halves together to make one whole,
and tied it up tightly on a thick pole.

Now with this boar they hastened homeward, 1615
and the boar's head was borne in front of the brave lord
himself who struck him in the stream with strength of his hand
so great.

Until he saw Gawain
he felt he couldn't wait. 1620
Unsure of what he'd gain,
the other came there straight.

The lord with his loud voice and merry laughter
gladly greeted Sir Gawain when he saw him.
The fair ladies were fetched and the folks all assembled, 1625
and he showed them the shorn slabs, and reported
of the wild boar's width and wondrous length, and his wickedness
in warring with them when he fled through the woods.
With fair words his friend then applauded the feat,
and praised the great prowess he had proved in his deeds; 1630
for such strength in a beast, the brave lord declared,
or such size in a boar he had never seen before.
They then handled the huge head, and he praised it highly,
showing horror at the hideous thing to honor the lord.
"Now, Gawain," said the good man, "this game is yours 1635
by our agreement we concluded, as clearly you know."
"That is true," he replied, "and I promise you all my winnings
that I think now I shall award you in exchange."
He grabbed his neck, and courteously gave him a kiss
and swiftly he served him a second kiss on the spot. 1640
"Now we are done," he said, "and clear for this evening of all
agreements we made since I came to this house, I've paid all
that's due."

The lord said: "By Saint Gile,
your match I never knew!
You'll be wealthy in a while,
if more such trades you do." 1645

Then they laid the table boards on top of the wooden legs,
tossed the tablecloth on, and then bright light
awakened along the walls when men put waxen torches there, 1650
and servants went swiftly around the hall.
Much gladness and joy began then to spring
around the fire on the hearth, and freely and often
at supper and later there were many songs of delight,
such as old hymns of Christmas, and new carols with dances, 1655
amid all the well-mannered merriment that men can tell of;
and always our noble knight was next to the lady.
Such glances she gave him of her gracious favor,
secretly sending sweet looks to charm that strong man
that he was completely perplexed, and felt unpleasant at heart. 1660
Yet he lost none of his courtesy by coldly refusing her,
so he graciously engaged her, going against the grain of proper
play.

They all enjoyed the hall
as long as they wished to stay; 1665
The lord put out a call:
"To the room now make your way."

There amid merry words and wine they had a mind once more
to talk the same talk about tomorrow—New Year's Eve.
But Gawain said, "Grant me permission to leave tomorrow!
For the appointment approaches that I pledged myself to." 1670
The lord loathed to allow it, and wanted to keep him longer,
but said, "As I am a true man I swear on my virtue
that the Green Chapel you shall have, and go to your business
in the dawn of New Year's Day, sir, before daytime begins. 1675
Tonight you'll lie down upstairs and be at ease,
and tomorrow I shall hunt in the woods, and hold to my terms
treating you truly, so when I return, we'll trade all our gains.

For I have tested you twice, and I find you trustworthy.
Now 'third time pays for all'; remember that tomorrow! 1680
Let us make merry while we may and jump for joy,
for worries one may win whenever one wishes!"
Gawain graciously agreed, and lingered there.
Then a joyful drink is served and off to beds they go each with
a light. 1685

Sir Gawain now lies and sleeps
soundly through the night;
his host out of bed leaps,
equipped for hunting's fight.

After Mass, he and his men munched on a quick morsel. 1690
Merry was the morning. He called for his horse.
All the huntsmen on horses who would follow behind him
were ready to ride, mounted and equipped at the gates.
Wondrously fair were the fields, for the frost clung there;
in red rose hue over rows of clouds arises the sun, 1695
sailing clear along the coasts of the cloudy heavens.
The hunters let loose the hounds by the forest border;
at the roar of their horns, the rocks rang in the woods.
Some fell right on the trail to where the fox was lying,
crossing and re-crossing it as is the cunning of their craft. 1700
A hound then gives a bark and the huntsman calls his name,
around him press his companions in a pack all snuffling,
running forth in a rabble right in his path.

The fox flits before them. They find him at once,
and when they catch sight of him they hotly pursue, 1705
crying out clearly with a clamor of their anger.
He dodges and doubles back through many dense patches,
and looping back often he lurks and listens under fences.
At last at a little ditch he leaps over a thorn hedge,
sneaks out secretly by the side of a thicket; 1710
he figures he is out of the woods and away from pursuit.
Thus he went unaware to a lookout spot of huntsmen,
where at once he was chased by three fierce hounds,
all gray.

He swiftly runs again,
and makes them go astray;
in fear and in great pain,
in woods, he speeds away. 1715

Then the hounds were hollering to their heart's delight,
and all the pack came upon him, there pressing together. 1720
Once in view, their barking called out such a curse
that the clusters of cliffs might have clattered into ruin.
Here he was hollered at when hunters came on him,
and there he was assailed with snarling tongues;
there he was threatened and often called a thief, 1725
with hunters at his tail he could never take a break on the trail.
Often he was chased if he rushed onwards;
Often he swerved back again, so subtle was Foxy.
Yes! he led the lord and his hunters till they lagged behind him
and thus it went by mountain and by hill till mid-afternoon. 1730
Meanwhile the courteous knight in the castle in comfort slumbered
behind the fine curtains in the cold morning.
But the lady in love-seeking had no liking to sleep
nor wanted to fail in the purpose she had planned in her heart;
so rising up swiftly she sought out his room now 1735
in a fine gown that to the ground was measured
and was fur-lined most fairly with the hem well trimmed,
with no close-fitting cap on her head, only the clear jewels
that were twined around her headdress by twenties in clusters;
her noble face and her neck all were laid naked, 1740
her gown was low cut in front and at the back also.
She came through the bedroom door and closed it behind her,
opened a window wide, and called to awake him,
thus greeting him gladly with her gracious words
of cheer: 1745
"Man! how can you sleep,
the morning sky is clear!"
He lay in darkness deep,
When those words hit his ear.

In heavy darkness drowsing, he muttered words from dreams, 1750
as a man whose mind was beset with many mournful thoughts
of how destiny would bring him his doom on the day
at the Green Chapel, when he must play the game
and be obliged to bear a blow without debate at all.
But when she came so beautifully, he recalled then his wits, 1755
swept aside his slumber, and swiftly answered.
The lady in lovely gown came laughing sweetly,
bent down over his dear face, and deftly kissed him.
He greeted her graciously with a glad welcome,
seeing her so glorious and gorgeously attired, 1760
so faultless in her features and so fine in her colors
that at once joy welled up and went warmly into his heart.
With smiles sweet and soft they turned swiftly to merriment,
and in the talk between them all was blissful
and bright. 1765
They spoke with speeches good,
and words that felt so right;
great danger between them stood,
if Mary forgot her knight.

For she, queen-like and peerless, pressed him so closely, 1770
led him so near the line, that at last he needed
either to offend her by refusing her or accept her.
He cared for his courtesy and not being called by her a coward,
yet more so in his sad case, if he should commit a sin 1775
against the owner of the house, to his host, he'd be a traitor.
"God help me!" he said to himself. "That shall not happen!"
Smiling sweetly he started to turn away
all the friendly words that fell from her lips.
She then said to the knight, "Now shame you deserve,
if you love not one that lies alone here beside you, 1780
who beyond all women in the world is wounded in her heart,
unless you have a lover, more beloved, whom you like better,
and have tied yourself to that fair one so tightly and truly
that you cannot release your desire—that's what I believe now;
do tell me if it truly is so, I beg you. 1785

For all that men swear by, conceal not this truth
in guile.”
The knight said: “By Saint John!”
and softly gave a smile,
“In faith, I haven’t one, 1790
and none will have meanwhile.”

“Your words,” said the woman, “are the worst there could be.
But I am answered indeed, and it’s hard to endure.”
Kiss me now kindly, and I will quickly depart.
I may but mourn while I live as one so much in love.” 1795
Sighing, she sank down and sweetly kissed him;
then soon she left his side, and said as she stood there,
“Now, my dear, at this parting do me this pleasure,
give me something as your gift, your glove it might be,
that I may remember you, dear man, lessening my mourning.” 1800
“Now on my word,” he then said, “I wish I had here
the loveliest thing that in my land I possess for your delight;
for worthily and wondrously often you have earned
more reward by rights than what is now within my reach to give,
except to give you as love-token a thing of little value. 1805
It would be beneath your honor to have here and now
a glove given as a gift from Sir Gawain:
and I am here on a quest in unknown lands,
and have no servant-bearers with baggage and beautiful things
(unluckily, dear lady) for your delight at this time. 1810
A man must do as he must, please don’t be pained,” he tried
this line.
“Nay, noble knight, you’re free,”
She said while looking fine:
“though you have nothing for me, 1815
Here’s something for you that’s mine.”

She offered him a rich ring made of red gold,
with a stone like a star standing up clear
that bore brilliant beams as bright as the sun:
I will tell you it was worth wealth beyond measure. 1820

But the knight said “Nay” to it, and announced then at once:
“I will have no gifts, before God, from your grace at this time.
I have none to give you in return, and none will I take.”
She pushed it and pressed him, and he refused her pleading,
and swore swiftly upon his word that he would not accept it. 1825
And she, sorry that he refused, said to him further:
“If to my ring you say nay, since it appears too rich,
and you would not so deeply be indebted to me,
I shall give you my girdle, for less gain that will be.”
She unbounded a belt swiftly that was wrapped around her waist 1830
tied on top of her dress under her handsome outer coat.
It was made of green silk, and with gold trim,
though only braided around the borders, embroidered by hand;
and this she gave to Gawain, and gladly pressed him,
saying that though it was of no worth he should take it. 1835
And he said nay, he would not, he would never receive
either gold or jewelry, before God’s grace sent him
to accomplish the quest for which he had come here.
“And therefore I beg you, please do not be angry,
and cease to insist on it, for to you I will always 1840
say no.
I’m deeply in debt to you
for the friendship that you show;
I’ll be your servant true
however things may go.” 1845

“Do you refuse this silk,” asked the fair lady,
“because in itself it appears so poor?
See how small in size, and smaller in value!
But a knight, one who knew of its inner nature,
would probably appraise it at a far higher price. 1850
For whoever goes girdled with this green belt,
while he keeps it well clutched closely around him,
there is none so strong under heaven who can hit him;
for he could not be killed by any cunning hand.”
The knight then took note, and thought now in his heart, 1855
it’d be a prize in that peril that was appointed to him.

When he got to the Green Chapel to be granted his sentence,
 if by some subtle way he weren't slain, it'd be a supernatural device.
 After he heard her advice, he didn't debate her words;
 and she pressed on him the belt, pushing it eagerly; 1860
 and he agreed, and she gave it very gladly indeed,
 and prayed that he, for her sake, would never part with it,
 but on his honor hide it from her husband; and he then agreed
 that no one ever would know, nay, none in the world

but they. 1865

With a heart that was sincere,
 great thanks he'd often say.
 The knight she found so dear
 a third time kissed that day.

Then she left him alone, receiving permission to leave, 1870
 for there was no more amusement she could get from the man.
 When she was gone, Sir Gawain got himself ready,
 arose and robed himself in noble clothing.

He put away the love-lace that the lady had given,
 hiding it carefully where he could find it later. 1875

Then first of all he chose to travel to the chapel,
 privately approached a priest, and prayed that he
 would uplift his life, that he might learn better how
 his soul should be saved when he was sent away from the world.

There he cleanly confessed himself and declared his misdeeds, 1880
 both the major and minor ones, and for mercy he begged,
 to absolve him of them he asked the good priest;
 and he absolved him and made him as safe and as clean
 as if tomorrow Doomsday indeed were due to come.

Thereafter he made more merriment among the fair ladies, 1885
 with gentle carol-dances and all kinds of enjoyment,
 more than he ever did before that day, and when darkness came,
 so did bliss.



A hunting scene in which a fox is cornered by dogs and hunters.

Each man there said: "Oh how
 delighted this man is!
 Since when he came till now,
 he's not as happy as this." 1890

Now indoors let him dwell and have his dearest delight
 while the lord yet spurs his horse to speed in his sport!
 At last the fox that he followed so long fell; 1895
 for, as he flew through the forest to find the furry villain,
 where the hounds he had heard pressed hard on his trail,
 Foxy on his road came through a rough thicket,
 and all the hounds in a rush were right on his heels.
 The man, aware of the wild creature, watchfully awaits him, 1900
 brings out his shining spear and at the beast hurls it;
 and the fox was frightened, and would have backed away
 But a hound hastened up, and had him before he could;
 and right by the horse's feet they fell upon him,
 and the wily fox was worried amidst the wild clamor. 1905

The lord quickly gets his feet on land and lifts the fox,
 swiftly snatching him away from their salivating mouths,
 holding him high over his head, hooraying loudly;
 and there many furious hounds bark at him fiercely.
 Huntsmen hurried there, and with horns many
 were sounding an assembly, till they saw the master.
 When his noble company had now come together,
 all those bearing bugles were blowing at once,
 and all the others hollered who had no horn:
 it was the merriest music that ever men played,
 the resounding song cleansed Foxy's soul, which now
 awoke.

To the hounds they pay their fees,
 their heads they fondly stroke,
 and Foxy they then seize,
 and off they skin his cloak.

And then they hastened homeward, for night was now at hand,
 making loud music on their mighty horns.
 The lord dismounted at last at his beloved home,
 found a fire in the hall, and there by the fireplace
 Sir Gawain the good, who also was glad,
 among the ladies in delight, had a life most joyful.
 He was wearing a blue cloak that came to the ground;
 his outer coat well woven with a soft lining,
 and its hood of similar hue hung on his shoulder:
 both were all fringed with white fur very finely.
 He met the master in the midst of the gathering,
 and in gladness greeted him, and graciously said:
 "In this case I'll be the first to fulfill our agreement
 that we made when we spared nothing on our drinking,"
 He then grabs the knight and kisses him thrice,
 as long and deliberately as he could lay lips upon him.
 "By Christ!" the other said, "you've come by a fortune
 in winning such prizes; were they worth what you paid?"
 "In fact, the price was not important," he promptly answered,
 "and now plainly is paid the profit I gained."

"By Mary!" said the other man, "mine does not measure up
 for I have hunted all day, and nothing else have I got
 but this foul fox fur—may the Devil have it!—
 and that is a very poor price to pay for such treasures
 as you have thrust upon me, three such kisses
 so good."

"Tis enough," then said Gawain.
 "I thank you, by the Rood*,"
 and how the fox was slain
 he told him as they stood.

With amusement and music and meats for their pleasure,
 they were as merry as any men could be;
 amid the laughter of ladies and light words of jest
 both Gawain and the good lord could be no gladder,
 unless they were tipsy or else drunken indeed.
 Both the host and his household went on with their games,
 till the hour had approached when they all had to part;
 the fine folk now were all bound for bed at last.
 Bowing low to the lord as the first to leave there,
 the good knight graciously thanked him:
 "For such a wondrous welcome as I have had within these walls,
 for your honor at this high feast the High King reward you!
 In your service I pledge myself, as your servant, if you accept.
 For I must make my move tomorrow, as you know,
 if you give me some good man to go, as you promised,
 to guide me to the Green Chapel, as God may permit me
 to face on New Year's Day such doom as I must."
 "On my word," said his host, "with healthy good will
 I promptly shall hold to all that I have promised."
 Then a servant he assigns him to escort him on the road,
 and through the valleys to lead him, so without doubt or delay
 he might through wild and wooden ways most straightly
 pursue.

* Rood: a cross symbolizing Jesus's cross.

He said, "My thanks receive,
for all you've done and will do!"
The knight then took his leave
of the ladies too.

1975

Sadly he kissed them and said his goodbyes,
and pressed often upon them with plenty of thanks,
and they promptly repaid him with the same;
to God's keeping they gave him, sadly sighing.
Then he parted with courtesy from the people of the castle;
he gave thanks to all the men that he met
for their care, for his comfort, and for their kind service,
and the trouble each had taken in attending to him;
and every one was as sad to wish him goodbye
as if they had lived all their lives in honor with Gawain.
Then with servants carrying lights he was led
to his chamber and brought sweetly to bed to rest.
I cannot say for certain if he slept soundly,
for he had many matters of the next morning
in his thought.

1980

1985

1990

There let him lie in peace,
so near the goal he sought.
If your patience would increase,
I'll tell what morning brought!

1995

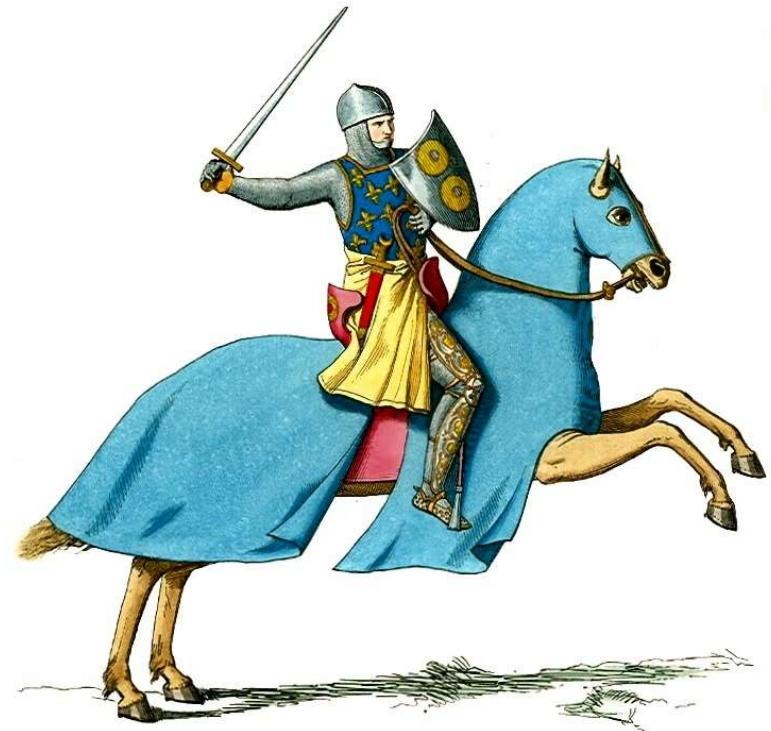


Illustration of a medieval knight by Paul Mercuri.

PART IV

Now the New Year draws near and the night passes,
 day comes driving away the dark, as ordained by God;
 but wild weather of the world is awakened in the land,
 clouds keenly cast the cold upon earth
 with bitter breath from the North biting the flesh.
 Snow comes shivering sharp to shrivel the wild things,
 the whistling wind whirls from up high
 and drowns every valley full of very deep snow drifts.
 The knight listens a long time as he lies in his bed;
 though he lays down his eyelids, he sleeps very little:
 at the crowing of every cock he clearly recalls his quest.
 Briskly he rose from his bed before the break of day,
 for there was light from a lamp that illumined his chamber.
 He called to his servant, who quickly answered him,
 And he ordered him to bring his armor and his saddle.
 The man got his clothes and collected his armor,
 and then was ready to suit up Sir Gawain in full dress;
 first he put on him his clothes to keep out the cold,
 and after that his chain mail armor that had been well tended;
 both his chest piece and his plates polished all brightly,
 the rings rid of the rust on his rich chain mail:
 all was neat as if new, and the knight thanked him
 with delight.
 He put on every piece
 all polished, shining bright,
 the best from here to Greece
 “My horse!” called out the knight.

He put on the most prominent pieces himself:
 his outer cloth, with the image of a clear symbol
 upon velvet surrounded by pure gleaming gems
 all bound and braided about it, with embroidered seams
 and with fine furs lined wondrously within,

yet he did not overlook the lace the lady had given him;
 that Gawain would not forget because of his own good thinking;
 when he had hung his sword upon his huge hips,
 he twined the love-token twice then around himself,
 and swiftly he tied it snugly to his waist,
 that girdle of green silk, and gallant it looked
 upon the royal red cloth that was rich to behold.
 But he didn’t wear this girdle because of his wealth or its worth,
 not for pride in it pendants, though they were polished,
 not for the glittering gold that gleamed at its ends,
 but so that he might save himself when he was forced to suffer,
 forced to bear a blow without deflecting it with his own blade
 of war.
 Equipped, the knight so bold
 came out in front of the door,
 where to that high household
 he gave great thanks once more.

Now Gringolet was groomed, that great and high horse
 who had been living to his liking and was loyally tended:
 that gallant horse of good health was eager to gallop.
 His master came to him and looked over his armor,
 and said, “Now solemnly I swear on my virtue
 there are servants in this castle who have done honorably well!
 For their lord that leads them, may his life be joyful!
 For their beloved lady, may her life be delightful!
 If they out of charity cherish a guest in this way,
 upholding their house in honor, may He that upholds
 heaven on high reward them, and all of you too!
 And if I were to live this life a little longer upon earth,
 I would give you some gifts gladly, were I able.”
 Then he steps in the stirrup and strides on his horse;
 a servant gave him his shield, and on his shoulder he slung it.
 He goaded on Gringolet with his gilded heels,
 and he plunged forth on the pavement, and prancing no more
 stood there.

| | | | |
|--|------|--|------|
| His squire was ready to ride; his helmet the squire would bear. “Christ keep this castle!” he cried and wished it fortune fair. | 2065 | the worst warrior in the world dwells in that wasteland; for he is strong and stern, and delights in striking, and he is mightier than any man upon the earth, and his body is bigger than the four best men that are in Arthur’s house, in Hector’s* or others’. All who go to the Green Chapel will face his challenge; no one passes by that place who’s so powerful in combat that he doesn’t hack them to death with the force of his hand. For he is a monstrous man, and knows nothing of mercy; for be it a fool or a chaplain that rides by the Chapel, a monk or a priest going to mass or any other man, he will be slain as soon as he goes there alive. And so I say to you, as sure as you sit in your saddle, if you go there, you’ll be killed, if that creature has his way. Trust me, it’s true, although you may have twenty lives, don’t yield. | 2100 |
| The drawbridge was brought down and the broad gates then unbarred and swung back upon both hinges. The brave man blessed himself and, crossing the bridge boards, told the guard, who was kneeling to the knight, to rise up. He said “Good day, Sir Gawain!,” and “God save you!” Then he went on his way with the one man only to guide him as he goes to that grievous place where he is due to endure the deadly blow. They go by banks and by hills where branches are bare, they climb along cliffs where clings the cold; the heavens are lifted high, but under them evilly mist hangs moist on the land, melts off the mountains; every hill has a hat and wears a huge robe of mist. Brooks babble and gurgle on hillsides all around, bubbling brightly on their banks as they bustle downwards. The way they must take through the woods is very wild, until soon the hour comes when the sun rises that day. | 2070 | | 2105 |
| High on a hill they stop, white snow beside them lay; his squire now at the top requested that they stay. | 2075 | He’s lived there now so long and beat men off the field; against his swing so strong yourself you cannot shield. | 2110 |
| “Up to now I have taken you so far, sir, and now you are near to that noted place that you have inquired and questioned about so curiously. But I will tell you the truth, since I know you well now, and you are a lord in this life that I love greatly, if you follow my advice things will go better for you. The place that you plan on going is perilous to men, | 2080 | And so, good Sir Gawain, now go another way, and leave the man alone, for the love of God, sir! Come to some other country, and there may Christ keep you! And I shall hasten home again, and on my honor I promise that I swear by God and all His gracious saints, so help me God and the holy relics, and plenty of other oaths, that I will keep your secret safe, and say not a word that ever you decided to flee from any enemy that I knew of.” “Great thanks!” said Gawain, and regretfully answered: “Man, I wish you well, who wishes me well, and I am certain you would keep my secret safe, but no matter how carefully you hid it, if I left here fleeing because I feel fear, in the fashion you speak of, I would be a coward and I could not be excused. | 2115 |
| | 2085 | | 2120 |
| | 2090 | | 2125 |
| | 2095 | | 2130 |

* Hector: an ancient hero from the Trojan War.

Nay, I'll go to the Chapel, and take whatever chances I have,
and have such words with that wild man as my wish is
to say, come fair or come foul, as fate will give
me there. 2135

He may be a fearsome knave,
and an axe his hand may bear,
but the Lord can always save
the servants in His care.”

“By Mary!” said the other man, “now you make it so clear 2140
that you wish to bring about your own doom,
and would like to lose your life; I shall not delay you!
Have your helmet on your head, your lance in your hand,
and ride down by yonder rock where runs this same trail,
till you are brought to the bottom of this baleful valley. 2145

A little to your left look over the meadow,
and you will see on the slope the chapel that you seek,
and the great man who stays on those grim grounds.
Now farewell in God's name, Gawain the noble!
For all the gold in the world I would not go with you, 2150
nor join you in friendship through this forest one foot further!"
He turned his horse's bridle back towards the woods,
hits his horse with his heels as hard as he can,
gallops over grassy parts, and leaves the good knight there
alone, 2155

Gawain said: "By God on high,
I will neither grieve nor groan.
With God's will I comply;
My deeds are not my own."

Then he put spurs to Gringolet, and seeing the trail, 2160
thrust in along a bank by a thicket's border,
rode down the rough hill right to the valley;
and then he gazed all around: he thought it was a grim place,
and saw no sign of shelter on any side at all,
only high hillsides steeply rose on either side, 2165
and were notched with gnarly rocks and boulders;

the sky itself appeared to be scraped by the peaks.
Then he halted and held in his horse for the time,
and often scanned the view in order to find the Chapel.

On every side he saw nothing, which seemed strange to him, 2170
except for a mound that might be the end of a green pasture,
a worn heap on a hill by the edge of the water,
and beside it fell a creak that was flowing down;
the water bubbled within, as if it were boiling.

He urged on his horse then, and came up to the mound, 2175
there lightly dismounted, and lashed his reins to a tree,
with a rough branch he tightly secured them.

Then he went to the mound and walked around it,
debating in his mind what might it actually be.
It had a hole at the end and at either side, 2180
and patches of green grass had grown all over it,
and it was all hollow within: nothing but an old cavern,
or a cave in an old rock, it was unclear just what was
in his sight

“Is this the Chapel Green,
O Lord?” said the gentle knight.
“Here the Devil may be seen
saying prayers around midnight!”

“On my word,” said Gawain, “what a wild place!
This chapel looks evil. With herbs overgrown
it fits well that fellow transformed into green
to follow here his devotions in the Devil’s fashion.*
Now I feel it in my five senses: the Fiend himself
has brought me here with his bargain to destroy me.
This is a mound of misery, the most accursed church
that I have ever entered. Evil take it!”
With helmet on his head and his lance in his hand,
he goes up to the roof of that rough dwelling.

*In a famous work of the time, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the Devil is dressed in green.

Then he heard from the high hill, in a hard rock wall
beyond the stream, a sudden startling noise. 2200
How it clattered in the cliff, as if to cut it in two,
as if someone was grinding a scythe upon a grindstone!
How it hissed and it rasped like racing mill water!
How it rushed and it reverberated, rotten to hear!
Then "By God," said Gawain, "I guess this noise 2205
is meant in my honor, and properly to hail my arrival
as a knight!
Gods will be done today!
Though words won't help my plight,
my life I'll give away; 2210
no noise will give me fright.

Then clearly the knight there called out loudly:
"Who is the master in this place who will meet me?
For now it's good Gawain that walks on these grounds.
If anyone has anything to ask, let him hasten to me, 2215
and make his needs known, either now or never!"
"Stay!" said someone standing on the hill over his head,
"and you shall get in good time what I vowed to give you."
Still with that rasping racket he continued on a while,
and went back to his grinding, till he wished to descend. 2220
And then he climbed past a large rock, and came out of a hole,
stepping out of a hidden nook with a horrible weapon:
a Danish axe newly sharpened and ready for swinging,
with cruel cutting-edge curved next to the handle— 2225
grinded on a whetstone, and four feet in width,
it was no less, and had light colored lace on the handle;
and the great man in green still dressed as before,
his locks of hair and long beard, his legs and his face,
except on bare feet on the ground he approached,
steadied himself with the axe on the stones as he walked. 2230
When he walked to the water, he didn't go in,
but hopped over with his axe and haughtily strode,
fierce and formidable on a field where far all around

lay snow.
Sir Gawain now met him there, 2235
but didn't bow down low.
The other said: "Beware,
I'll keep my word, you know!"

"Gawain," said that green man, "may God keep you!
On my word, sir, I welcome you to my place, 2240
and you have shown yourself trustworthy by traveling here,
and you haven't forgotten the agreement between us:
that at this time twelve months ago you took your turn,
and I should now this New Year nimbly take mine.
And we are in this valley now truly on our own; 2245
there is no one to bother and we can play as we like.
Take the helmet off your head, and I will give you pay!
Spare me no more debate than I gave you before
when you swiped off my head with only one swing!"
"Nay," said Gawain, "by God that gave me my soul, 2250
I shall bother you not a bit with any badmouthing.
Only restrain yourself to one swing, and I shall stand still
and put up no defense while you do as you like
right here."
With a nod of his neck he bowed, 2255
and let bare flesh appear;
for terror he was too proud,
and showed no signs of fear.

Then the great man in green gladly prepared him,
gathered up his grim tool to hit Gawain; 2260
with all the life in his limbs aloft he heaved it,
swung as mighty a swing as if he meant to destroy him.
Had it come down to the dreadful spot he aimed it at,
then under that strike the strongest man would have died.
But beneath that swing's path Gawain swerved to one side, 2265
as down it came gliding in that green place to end him;
fearing the sharp iron, he pulled back a little with his shoulders.
With a jolt the other man jerked back the blade,

and called out to the knight, teasing him with taunts.
“You’re not Gawain,” said the green man, “who’s so renowned,
who never flinches from any foes on the field;
and now you flee in fear, before you even feel hurt!
That knight has never been known for any such cowardice.
I neither flinched nor backed away from your blow, sir,
nor uttered any excuse in the court of King Arthur.
My head flew to my feet, and yet I never fled;
but you, before you’ve had any hurt, you cower in your heart,
and so I deserve to be named the nobler knight,
therefore.”
“I flinched once,” Gawain then said,
“and I’ll do so no more.
But, unlike you, my head
cannot be restored.

But get busy, I beg you, sir, and bring this to an end.
Deal me my destiny, and do it without delay! 2285
For I shall bear from you a swing and won't move again
till your axe has hit me, have here my word on it!"
"I'll take my swing then!" the other said, and heaved the axe high,
and watched him as wrathfully as if he were wild with rage.
He aimed for a mighty blow, but didn't touch Gawain, 2290
holding back hastily his hand, before it could do any hurt.
Gawain cautiously awaited the blow, and didn't flinch,
but stood as still as a stone or the stump of a tree
that has a hundred tangled roots embedded in rocks.
This time the man of green remarked merrily: 2295
"So, now you have yourself under control, I must hit you.
May the high order of knighthood that Arthur gave you
save your throat from this swing—if it can."
Angrily and with annoyance Sir Gawain then answered:
"Why! hack away, you healthy man! You drag this out. 2300
It's your heart that I think is now cowering!"
"In faith," said the fellow, "you speak so fiercely,
I will no longer linger by delaying this task
right now."

The other backed away, and rested on his axe,
dropped the handle to the ground, and leaning on its head,
gazed at the good knight as he did when he first got there.
Seeing him standing so strong, so stern and fearless,
armed and unafraid—this pleased the green knight's heart. 2335
Then merrily he spoke with a mighty voice,
and loudly it rang; he said to the lord:
“Fearless knight, there is no need to be so fierce!
No man here has treated you without manners,

nor given you anything not granted by agreement at court. 2340
 I vowed to give you a hack, and you have had it,
 so be content; I relieve you of all remaining rights I might claim.
 If I had been rougher, it might have been a hit,
 I could have handled you more harshly, and harmed you.
 My first swing was just playing around to make you afraid, 2345
 and I swung without hitting: my reason for this fake swing
 was the agreement we affirmed on the first evening,
 and you fairly and unfailingly in faith kept with me,
 all that you gained you gave me, as a good man would.
 The second swing I gave you, man, for the mornings 2350
 when my beautiful wife kissed, and the kisses you gave me.
 For the two swings I only swung harmlessly into the air
 right here.
 A true man must be true,
 Then there's no fear in it. 2355
 That third day I know you
 had failed, so my axe bit!

 For that woven girdle that you wear is my very own:
 my own wife awarded it to you, I know well indeed.
 Now I am aware of your kisses, and your courteous ways, 2360
 and of my wife's flirting with you: I planned that myself!
 I sent her to test you, and you seem to me truly
 the fair knight most faultless that ever set foot on earth!
 As a pearl is more highly prized than a snow pea,
 so is Gawain, in good faith, higher than other gallant knights. 2365
 But in this you lacked, sir, a little, and of loyalty came up short.
 But that was not because of your wickedness, or the flirting,
 but because you loved your own life: thus I blame you less."
 The other stern knight in thought stood a long while,
 in such grief and disgust that he had aching in his heart; 2370
 all the blood from his chest mingled with the color of his cheeks,
 and he shrank into himself with shame at the speech.
 The first words that he then found to say were:
 "Damn you, Desire, and Cowardice too!
 In you is vileness, and vice that destroys virtue." 2375

He then took the treacherous thing, and untying the knot
 fiercely flung the belt at the feet of the knight:
 "Look at the corrupter; let it have a foul fate!
 Worrying about the hit I would take, Cowardice led me
 to consent to Desire, forsaking my true nature, 2380
 which is generous and trustworthy as is fitting to knights.
 Now I am a fraud at fault—I who had always been afraid
 of treachery and violating virtue: and now these faults
 I bear!
 I confess, sir, to you 2385
 my fault is clear right there.
 I apologize too,
 and now I will beware."

 Then the other man laughed and lightly answered:
 "Any harm to me is healed beyond a doubt; 2390
 you have confessed so cleanly and acknowledged your errors,
 and have been plainly punished from the brush of my blade,
 so, I believe, you are purged of that debt, made as pure
 and clean as if you had done no evil since the day you were born.
 And I give you back, sir, the girdle with gold at its hems, 2395
 for it is green like my gear. So, Sir Gawain, you may
 think about this day when you walk in a procession
 among princes of high praise; it will be a plain reminder
 of this exchange at the Green Chapel between chivalrous knights.
 And now you shall in this New Year come to my castle, 2400
 and revel in the rest of this festive season; oh it will
 be good."
 The lord said, "You should stay.
 Now that you've understood
 my wife won't make you her prey, 2405
 she will behave as she should."

 "Nay!" the knight said, seized his helmet,
 and took it off, thanking the mighty man:
 "I have lingered too long! May your life now be blest,
 and He promptly repay you Who places all honors! 2410

And give my regards to her grace, your good wife,
 both to her and to the other, to my honored ladies,
 who subtly beguiled their servant with their designs.
 But it's no marvel if a man is made a mad fool
 by the workings of a woman, and brought to ruin. 2415
 For so was Adam* fooled by a woman on earth,
 and Solomon by several, and Samson moreover
 was doomed by Delilah; and afterwards David was
 blinded by Bathsheba, and he bitterly suffered.
 Now, so troubling were these women's tricks, it'd be a triumph 2420
 to love them well and believe them not—if only a man could!
 Since these were, in their time, among the most blessed
 and eminent among all other men under heaven yet were
 tricked too—
 each one was once betrayed 2425
 by a woman that he knew,
 so though a fool I'm made—
 I've some excuse for you.”

“But for your girdle,” said Gawain, “may God repay you!
 That I will accept with good will, but not for the gold so gleefully 2430
 bordering it, nor the silk, nor the hanging pendants,
 nor for wealth, nor for its fine workmanship,
 but as a token of my failed test I shall turn to it often
 when I ride, though others renown me, I'll regretfully recall
 the failure and the frailty of flesh, which is so perverse, 2435
 so tender, so ready to be tainted by impurities.
 Thus, when pride pricks my heart because of my fighting prowess,
 one look at this love-lace shall lower it.
 But one thing I would ask of you, if you don't mind,
 since you are the lord of yonder land, where I lived for a while 2440
 in your house and in honor—may He reward you
 Who holds up the heavens and sits high above us!—
 what is your true name? I shall ask nothing further.”

* Adam, Solomon, Samson, and David were all men in the Old Testament of the Bible who met with misfortune, in part, due to a woman.

“That I will truly tell you,” then responded the other.
 “Bertilak de Hautdesert* hereabouts I am called, 2445
 and was transformed into the color and size you see
 by the might of Morgan the Fairy,† who in my manor lives
 and has studied cunning books and supernatural crafts.
 She has mastered many of the magic arts of Merlin;
 for long ago she fell deeply in love 2450
 with that accomplished cleric, as at Camelot the story is held
 in fame;
 and “Morgan the Goddess”
 is therefore now her name.
 No power can man possess 2455
 too high for her to tame.

She made me go in this disguise to your good court
 to put its pride to the test, seeing if the reports were true
 that repeat the great renown of the Round Table.
 She put this magic upon me to deprive you of your wits, 2460
 hoping to hurt Guinevere, and that she might die from horror
 aghast at that gore that gruesomely spoke
 with its head in its hand in front of the high table.
 It is she who lives at my home, that ancient lady;
 she is indeed your own aunt, Arthur's half-sister, 2465
 daughter of the Duchess of Tintagel and brave Sir Uther,
 who afterwards had Arthur, the current king.
 Therefore I urge you sincerely, sir, return to your aunt!
 In my hall make merry! You love my household,
 and I wish you well, upon my word, sir knight, 2470
 among any that live under God, for your great loyalty.”
 But he denied him with a “Nay! by no means I will stay!”
 They then hug and kiss and commend each other to the care
 of the Prince of Paradise; and they part on that

* Hautdesert: “Haut” and “desert” in French translate together as “high wilderness.”

† Morgan the Fairy: Also known as Morgan le Fay, she is a sorceress and the half-sister of King Arthur.

cold grass, 2475
 Off to the court of the king
 Gawain's horse gallops fast.
 The green knight's glittering,
 continuing as in the past.

 Gawain rides through the wilderness of the world 2480
 on Gringolet: by the grace of God, he survived.
 Often staying in a house, often lying out in the open,
 often vanquishing an enemy in the adventures he met,
 which I do not intend to tell the tale of this time.
 The hurt in his neck had now healed, 2485
 and he wore the bright colored girdle around himself
 across the chest like a belt bound around his side,
 under his left arm with a knot it was tied
 to remind him of the taint of his failure that was found out;
 and so at last he came to the Court again safely. 2490
 Joy was awakened when the lords became aware
 that good Gawain had returned: "What glad news!" they thought.
 The king kissed the knight, and the queen also kissed him,
 and then, taking turns, many true knights there greeted him.
 They inquired about his quest, and he recounted all the marvels, 2495
 describing all the hardships and hospitality he had met,
 what happened at the Chapel, the cheerful festivities,
 the love of the lady, and last of all the girdle.
 The notch in his naked neck he showed them
 and told how his dishonesty to the knight whose hand did it 2500
 was to blame.
 He told the truth in torment;
 his cheeks revealed blood's flame;
 in agony that moment,
 he showed it to his shame. 2505

 "Look! Lord," he said at last, with the girdle in his hand,
 "This is the scar! Because of it, a scar is seen on my neck!
 This is the grief and disgrace I have gotten for myself
 from the desire and cowardice that overcame me there!

This is the token of my violating virtue for all to view, 2510
 and I must wear it while I remain in the world;
 for a man may cover his blemish, but he cannot banish it,
 for once it is there, it can never be removed."
 The king comforted the knight, and the court also
 laughed loudly to cheer him up, and made this law in merriment: 2515
 whichever lords and ladies belonged to the Table,
 and every knight in its Brotherhood, must wear a sash,
 a band of bright green across the chest,
 and because of love of that knight it was part of official attire.
 For that was regarded as a distinction of the Round Table, 2520
 and afterwards it was an honor to have it,
 as it is written in the best of the tales of chivalry.
 This marvel happened in the days of Arthur,
 as the Book of Brutus bears within it;
 since Felix Brutus the bold knight first came to Britain, 2525
 after the siege and the assault had ceased at Troy,
 I trust;
 that marvels such as this
 took place here in life's dust:
 now God's Crown brings us bliss,
 through bearing what He must. 2530

AMEN.

SHAME ON HIM WHO THINKS EVIL OF IT*

*This phrase is written at the end of the poem in Anglo-Norman French
 (HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE), which is different from the language of
 the rest of poem, Middle English. Therefore, it might have been added later.
 This is the motto of an order of knights, known as the Order of the Garter,
 that wears a sash across their chests, though usually not a green one. It is
 likely that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written for the founding of the
 Order in 1348 or in its honor.



A royal member of the Order of the Thistle is depicted in this 19th century illustration. The broad cloth sash across his chest is similar to that worn by the Order of the Garter and what is described at the end of the story.



An 1882 shows Queen Victoria wearing the Order of the Garter sash.



Queen Elizabeth II (right) and her husband Prince Philip (left) are photographed wearing the sash of the Order of the Garter in 2007. The sash is also worn in the manner of Prince Philip.