

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

For over 100 years Oxford World's Classics have brought readers closer to the world's great literature. Now with over 700 titles—from the 4,000-year-old myths of Mesopotamia to the twentieth century's greatest novels—the series makes available lesser-known as well as celebrated writing.

The pocket-sized hardbacks of the early years contained introductions by Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Graham Greene, and other literary figures which enriched the experience of reading.

Today the series is recognized for its fine scholarship and reliability in texts that span world literature, drama and poetry, religion, philosophy and politics. Each edition includes perceptive commentary and essential background information to meet the changing needs of readers.

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

*Sir Gawain and the
Green Knight*

A Verse Translation by
KEITH HARRISON

With an Introduction and Notes by
HELEN COOPER

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

I

AFTER the battle and the attack were over at Troy,
The town beaten down to smoking brands and ashes,
That man enmeshed in the nets of treachery—the truest
Of men—was tried for treason; I mean
Aeneas, the high-born,* who, with his noble kinsmen,
Conquered many countries and made themselves masters
Of almost all the wealth of the Western Isles.*
Romulus goes off in haste towards Rome, raises
At first that fine city with pride, bestowing
On her his famous name, which she still has now. 10
Ticius builds new towns in Tuscany
And Langeberde lays out homes in Lombardy
And, joyfully, far over the French sea,
Felix Brutus founds Britain* by ample down
and bay;
Where war, and joy, and terror
Have all at times held sway;
Where both delight and horror
Have had their fitful day.

And after Britain was founded by this brave fighter
Rough fellows were fathered here who relished a fray
And made much mischief in troubled times.
More marvels have occurred in this country*
Than any other since then, so far as I know.
But of all the kings who've commanded this land
Men say King Arthur was the greatest in courtesy. 20

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Let me tell you, then, a tale of adventure,
A most striking one among the marvels of Arthur
Which some will consider a wonder to hear.
If you listen closely to my words a little while
I'll tell it to you now as I heard it told

30

in town:

A bold story, well proven,
And everywhere well known,
The letters all interwoven
As custom sets it down.*

Christmas time. The king is home at Camelot
Among his many lords, all splendid men—
All the trusted brothers of the Round Table
Ready for court revels and carefree pleasures.
Knights in great numbers at the tournament sports
Jousted with much joy, as gentle knights
Will do, then rode to the court for the carol-dances.*
The festival lasted fifteen long days*
Of great mirth with all the meat that they could manage.
Such clamour and merriment were amazing to hear:
By day a joyful noise, dancing at night—
A happiness that rang through rooms and halls
With lords and ladies pleasing themselves as they pleased.
So in delight they lived and danced there together:
The knights of highest renown under Christ Himself,
The loveliest ladies that ever on earth drew breath,
The handsomest king that ever kept court,
All in that hall were beautiful, young and, of
their kind,
The happiest under heaven,

40

50

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

A king of powerful mind;
A company so proven
Would now be hard to find.

With the New Year so young it had hardly begun,
Those seated at the dais* were given double servings.
Then, when the sound of the chanting in the chapel subsided,
The king came with all his knights to the hall
And loud cries leapt out from clerics and laymen:
'Noel!' they shouted, again and again 'Noel!'
Then noble knights ran forward with New Year gifts,*
Handed out what they had, shouting, with loud
Guessing-games about each other's gifts.
Even when they guessed wrong the ladies laughed—
And, believe me, those who won weren't angry at all.
This merrymaking took place before the meal.
When they had washed* they took their tables
In their right ranks, highest first, as was fitting.
Queen Guinevere, the gayest of all the gathering,
Sat at the high dais which was hung with adornments,
A canopy over her, silken curtains all round:
Damasks of Toulouse and rich drapes from Turkestan*
Sewn and set off by the most detailed designs
In rich metals and jewels, beautifully beaten
and wrought—
No woman lovelier,
Her grey eyes* glancing about;
In beauty she had no peer,
Of that there was no doubt.

60

70

80

But Arthur refused to eat till the rest were served.

He was in merry mood, like a mischievous boy.
He liked a life of action and couldn't abide
Long stretches of lying about or sitting idle;
His blood burned, his restless mind roused him.
But that day he was driven by a different resolve; 90
He had nobly decided never to eat at feasts
Such as these, until someone had told him
A strange story or a splendid adventure*—
Something marvellous and beautiful that he might believe,
With the clamour of battle, attacks, the clash of arms—
Or till someone entreated him to spare a knight
To join with in jousting, jeopardizing their limbs
And even their lives on the field, yielding advantage
As the favours of fortune touched the luckier one.
Such was Arthur's new custom with his court, 100
At feasts and festivals, with the fine company
in his hall.

So now, in his kingly way,
He stands fearless and tall,
Alert on that New Year's Day,
And jests among them all.

In this regal manner he remains for quite a while
Talking of courtly trifles before the High Table
Where the knight, Gawain, is next to Guinevere,
With Agravain a la Dure Main at the other side— 110
Both sons of the king's sister, trusted brother knights.
Bishop Baldwin is head of the High Table
With Iwain, Urien's son,* to keep him company.
All these are seated and served with honour
And likewise those on the long side-tables.

The first course comes with a burst of trumpets
Whose banners hung from them in brilliant colours.
And now a clatter of kettledrums, a chiffing of fifes:
Wild music that ricochets off walls and rafters;
And the listeners' hearts leap with the lively notes. 120
Costly and most delicious foods are carried in:
Great mounds of steaming meat—so many dishes
There's little space in front of the lords and ladies
To set all the heaped silver platters that rapidly
appear.

Each man eats as he wishes,
Lustily takes his share;
Each pair has twelve full dishes,*
Bright wine, and foaming beer.

Well, I won't tell you more about the meal; 130
You can be sure, of course, there was little lacking.
But now another sound was stirring—one
Which would allow the king to come and dine.
The first course had barely been served
To all the court, the music hardly hushed,
When there hove into the hall a hideous figure,
Square-built and bulky, full-fleshed from neck to thigh:
The heaviest horseman in the world, the tallest as well,
His loins and limbs so large and so long 140
I think he may have been half-giant;
Anyway, I can say he was the mightiest of men
And, astride his horse,* a handsome knight as well.
But if he was broad of back and chest
His build, mid-body, was elegantly slender,
His face befitting his form, his bold lineaments

cut clean.

But the hue of his every feature
Stunned them: as could be seen,
Not only was this creature
Colossal, he was bright green—

150

Green all over, the man and his garments as well!*
A surcoat snugged him tight at the waist
And, over that, a tunic, closely trimmed inside
With fine fur, the cloth resplendent and furnished
With borders of bright ermine; the hood, turned back,
Looped from his coat-collar and was also lipped with fur.
Neat stockings, tightly drawn up, clung to his calves,
All green, and green also the spurs that hung below,
And they glinted gold against the striped silk hose
Of his stockinged feet* fixed in the stirrups.

160

And all his garments this unearthly green
Down to the bars of his belt, and the shining stones
That richly studded the magnificent array
Around the saddle, and around himself: a silken ground
The details of whose embroidery would be difficult
To describe, with its delicate birds and butterflies
In bright green, and a hem of hammered gold;
The cords of the breast-harness, the beautiful crupper-cloth,
The burnished bridle-stud of baked enamel,
Even the steel of the stirrups on which he stood,
The saddle-bows and the broad saddle-skirts—
All glinted with the greenish glow of jewels;
And the steed he rode of the same bright

170

green strain:

A horse of massive limbs,

Most difficult to restrain;
A useful mount!—with gems
Studding his bridle and rein.

And he was fresh-looking, this fellow decked out green.

The hair of his head matched his horse's coat:
Bright hair, curling and cascading down his back;
And, bunched on his chest, a bushy beard
Which, with the locks that hung from his head,
Was well-trimmed just above the elbow-joints
So half his arms were hidden beneath hair
Which cleaved to his neck like a king's cape.*
The horse's mane was like that mantle of hair,
Groomed and combed, and neatly knotted,
Plaited and filigreed in gold and green—

180

One hank of hair to each strand of gold.
The tail and the forelock were alike in detail;
The bright green bands around them both
Were strung all along with studded stones
And knit together with a knotted thong
Along which a row of bells rang brilliantly.
No one watching had ever before beheld
A horse like that—and such a horseman had never crossed
their tracks:

190

To them he looked as bright
As summer lightning that cracks
The sky, and no man might
Withstand his dreadful axe.

200

And yet he wore no hauberk, bore no helm,
No mail or metal-plate—no arms or armour at all:

No spear to thrust, no shield against the shock of battle,
But in one hand a solitary branch of holly
That shows greenest when all the groves are leafless;*
In the other hand he grasped his axe—a huge thing,
A dreadful weapon, difficult to describe:
The head of the big blade over a yard in length, 210
The spike of green steel and wrought gold,
The blade brightly polished, with a broad edge
Beautifully cast to bite keen as a razor;
The shaft he grimly gripped it by, a straight staff
Wound with iron bands right to the end,
Engraved all about with elegant green designs,
Circled with lace-work lashed to the end
And looped round and round the long handle
With plenty of priceless tassels, attached
With bright green buttons, richly braided. 220
And now he shoves past them all, heaves into the hall
And rides right up to the High Table, afraid
Of nothing. He greeted no one, just glared over their heads.
The first words he spoke were these: 'Where is', he said,
'The leader of this lot?*' I'd be pleased indeed
If he came forward and traded a few words
with me.'

He looked at every knight,
Strutted, and rolled his eye;
Stopped, fixed them in his sight 230
To find whose fame stood high.

And they gazed at him a long moment, amazed.
Everyone wondered what it might mean
That a man and his mount could both be coloured

The green of sprouting grass, and even greener—
Like emerald enamel that glowed on a ground of gold.
They studied him, waited, stalked up warily, stood
Wondering what in the world the man might do.
They'd seen strange things, but never a sight like this;
They thought it must be a sort of magic, or a dream. 240
Most of the men were too terrified to reply;
Struck dumb by his words, they waited, stock-still.
A pall of torpor settled over the hall
As if all dozed. Their talk dropped and their tongues
went dry,
Not only, I think, from fear,
But also from courtesy,
To give the king they revere
Chance of a first reply.

The king, from the high board, beholds these curious things, 250
Then, quite free of fear, greets him graciously.
He says: 'Well, sir, you're surely welcome here.
I am the master of this hall and my name is Arthur.
Do dismount and bide with us a while—
Whatever your wish, we'll learn about it later.'
'No, so help me, He that reigns in Heaven!
To pass time in this place was not my plan at all.
But because your name, my lord, is so renowned—
Your castle and your court—and your knights known
As the hardest on horseback, in armour the most 260
Formidable, the fiercest at mêlées and tournaments,
The bravest and best in the wide world,
And because they say the bright crown of courtesy
Itself sits here—these things have brought me by,

Nothing but these for, as sure as I bear this branch,
I travel in peace and seek no trouble.
Had I come belligerently, were I bent on war,
I have a hauberk at home, and a helm also,
A shield and a sharp spear, both shining bright;
And I have other weapons to wield, that's for certain. 270
But, since I want no war, my dress is innocent.
So, if you're as bold as everybody says,
You'll grant me graciously the sport that I seek
by right.'

'Well, if you're hungering,
Sir knight, sir courteous knight,
To try your strength,' said the king,
'You'll certainly have your fight.'

'No, no, I'm not brewing for trouble, I tell you—besides,
It's clear there's no one here but beardless boys. 280
If I bore armour, if I sat on a battle-steed,
No man could match me among these milk-sops.
I need only some diversion for the new season.
It's Yuletide and New Year. Here are many young men.
If any now hold himself bold enough,
If any so hot-blooded or so hare-brained,
Has the stomach to strike one stroke for another,*
I'll give him the gift of this beautiful battle-axe
Which weighs heavy enough for his every wish.
And I shall bear the first blow, as I am, bare-necked. 290
Now, if any man has the mettle to meet my challenge
Let him step down and seize this weapon.
There, I throw it down, let him take it as his own.
I'll receive the first blow right here, without blenching,

If he but allow me to return that blow however
I may;
And yet I'll give him respite:
A whole year, plus a day—
So, if your liver's not white,
Quick now, who's ready to say?' 300

If they were astounded at first, the crowd in the court
Went even quieter now, both high and low.
The horseman swivelled himself about in the saddle
And rolled his red eyes around, most horribly,
Bunched together his brows of bristling green,
Wagged his beard this way and that, and watched.
When no word came he gave a great hacking cough,
Carked his throat clear, most eloquently, and spoke:
'And this is supposed to be Arthur's house,' he cried,
'Whose fame flies through the remotest regions!*' 310
Where are your boasts of valour now, your bold victories,
Your pride, your prizes, your wrath and rousing words?
Am I right? All the pageantry and power of the Round Table
Made nothing by the words of one man?
You're all white with fear, and not a whack fallen!
And he laughed so loud the king blanched with anger,
Then his brow darkened in shame, his face flushed
blood-dim—
He grew as wild as the wind;
The whole hall turned grim. 320
Then, being of noble kind,
The king strode up to him

And replied: 'By Heaven, sir, your request's very silly,

But as you ask for a silly thing I'll see you have it.
No man here is scared by what you've said.
Give me your great battle-axe, in the name of God.
I'll easily provide what you've pleaded for!
He leaps down lightly, seizes the man's hand
Who also dismounts in high disdain.
Arthur takes the axe. He grips the huge handle, 330
And swings it, practising to hack him down.
The fellow pulls himself up to his full height,
Taller than any man in the hall by a head and more.
He stands there, looking serious, smoothing his beard—
Remote, expressionless. He draws his coat down,
Unafraid, no more dismayed by the thought of an axe-blow
Than if a knight nearby had fetched him a flagon
of wine.

Beside the queen, Gawain
Bows to the king, gives sign: 340
'Please, my good liege, it's plain
This little fight is mine.

I would ask you,' continued Gawain, to his master and king,
'To bid me rise from my bench and stand beside you,
So that I can quit the table courteously
Without causing displeasure to my lady queen.
I wish to give counsel before this wise court
For, truth to tell, it does not appear proper to me
That a demand like this, delivered with such disdain,
Should be dealt with—whether you wish or no—directly, 350
By you alone, while all around you sit many men
Than whom few under heaven are firmer in will
Or stronger in body when a battle begins.

I am the weakest and the least in wit;
Loss of my life is therefore of little account.
I am, by birth, your nephew; besides that, nothing.
My one virtue, your blood that runs in my veins.
Since this affair's so foolish and unfit for you
And since I asked soonest, please leave it to me.
If I have blundered, let the whole hall, without blame, 360
decree.*

The nobles thereupon
Confer, and all agree:
Gawain should take him on,
And let the king stay free.

Then the king commanded the knight to stand
And he rose up promptly, prepared himself correctly,
Knelt down before the king and felt the cold weapon;
And the king graciously gave it him, held up his hand
And granted him God's blessing, commended him, praying 370
That his heart and his hand remain resolute:
'Take care, cousin,' said the king, 'how you swing at him,
For, if you strike him right, I'm really sure
You'll withstand any blow he plans to give you back.'
Gawain, axe in hand, goes towards the man
Who bravely waits for him, afraid not a whit.
Then the green knight speaks to sir Gawain:
'Let's repeat our agreement before we go further,*
But first I entreat you, sir, teach me
Your true name, that I may trust you.* 380
'In good faith,' said the good knight, 'I am called Gawain,
And I am to make this cut at you, come what may,
And a twelvemonth from now I'll take another one

From you, with whatever weapon you choose, to pay
it back.'

The knight gives him reply:

'Ah, sir Gawain—what luck!

I am pleased exceedingly

That you will make the stroke.

'Yes, by Heaven, sir Gawain,' the knight says, 390
'I'm delighted I'll get this gift from your hand.
You have repeated precisely and truthfully
All the conditions of the covenant I asked of the king,
Save that you will assure me by your troth,
You will seek me yourself, wherever your search
Takes you in the world—and you'll win the same wages
As you give me before this fine company.'

'Where shall I find you, sir, where are you from?
By Him that made me, I know nothing of your home;
Neither do I know you, your court, or what you're called— 400
Nothing. So please tell me now your name
And I'll use all my wits to find my way to you:
I swear by that, and there's *my* troth on it.'

'Enough for New Year's Day, no more needs saying,'
Continued the man in green to the courteous Gawain.
'You'll not discover that until you've dealt your blow.
When you have struck properly then I'll provide you with
All you need know about my castle and name.
Only then need you learn where I live, to keep the contract.
And if I keep quiet the bargain's even better: 410
You can remain here, all year, in your own country!

Enough said!

Now grip this axe until

We see of what stuff you're made.'

'Gladly, sir, that I will!

Says Gawain. He strokes the blade.

On the ground the green knight girds himself;
He lets his head fall forward, revealing the flesh.
His long locks tumble down over his crown
Baring the nape of his neck for the blow. 420
Gawain sets his left foot slightly forward;
He grips the axe and lifts it over his head
Then brings it down, neat and quick, on the bare nape
So that the sharp blade shattered the neck-bone,
Bit through the flesh and sliced the knight in two.
The flashing blade bit a deep groove in the ground,
The head sprang from the body and hurtled to earth
And some fumbled it with their feet as it rolled around.
Blood spurted from the great body and splattered the green,
But still he didn't fall, didn't falter at all, 430
But strode forward steadily on firm thighs,
Reached out fiercely among the ranks of knights,
Gripped his handsome head and quickly picked it up;
Then hurried to his horse, caught hold of the halter
Stepped into the stirrups and swung up,
Holding his head, by its own hair, in his hand,
Then sat there in the saddle, stubbornly,
As if nothing had happened—though now he was wearing
no head.

He twisted around. Amazed 440
At that gross trunk that bled,
In pure terror they gazed,
And marvelled at what he said,

For now he holds the head in his hand up high
And turns it to face the noblest at the table.*
It lifts its eyelids, gives them a long stare, then
Slowly opens its mouth, and these words come out:
'Be prepared to do as you promised, Gawain;
Seek me faithfully until you find me, sir.
As you have pledged in the presence of these noble knights, 450
You will go to the Green Chapel, to receive
Such a blow as you have dealt—you now deserve it!—
That blow to be borne on New Year's morning.
Men know me as the knight of the Green Chapel,
And, if you ask, you cannot fail to find me.
Come, therefore—or be known as a craven coward!'
With a quick twist he tugs at the reins
And, still holding his head, rides through the hall doorway.
His horse's hooves kick fire from the flint-stone.
Which way he was headed no one could readily say, 460
Nor could they name the country whence he came.

And so?

Well, the king and his chosen knight
Laughed as they watched him go*—
Yet they had to admit
They'd seen a marvel too.

Though Arthur's heart stood still in wonder,
He showed no sign of it, but said aloud
To his queen, in his most courteous manner,
'Dear lady, please don't be dismayed. 470
Such deeds are welcome at the Christmas season,
Like the interludes,* the laughing and singing
And the carol-rounds with royal lords and ladies.

Nevertheless, now I may proceed with my meal
For I have seen a marvel, I mustn't deny it.'
He caught Gawain's eye, and lightly said to his knight:
'Now sir, hang up your axe,* it's hacked enough for today.'
And they hung it high on a drape over the dais,
That men might gaze upon it as a marvel
And point to it, and tell the tale of its power. 480
Then they went together to the table,
The king and his knight, who were now served in splendour,
With double helpings of the daintiest things:
All kinds of fine fare, and more music.
So they passed their time in delight, until at last
night fell.
Now, Gawain, think of your quest,
And let no terror quell
Your courage in the test
You have taken on. Think well! 490

II

THIS novel event was Arthur's New Year present
 At the dawn of the year; he yearned for such adventures.
 Yet they all wanted for words as they went to their tables,
 For now the business in hand is heavy, burdensome.
 Gawain was glad to begin the sport in the hall
 But, if the game grew serious, think it no surprise,
 For if men are feather-wits when the wine's flowing,
 Time races on, nothing remains unchanged;
 Our endings rarely square with our beginnings.*
 Yuletide once past, the year followed fast behind,*
 Each new season turning in its time: 500
 After Christmas, the crabbed fasting-time of Lent
 When people eat fish for meat, and simple fare.*
 Then the world's fresh weather fights with winter:
 Cold shrinks into the ground, clouds rise;
 Warm rain shuttles down in flashing showers
 Over the flatlands; flowers poke up,
 Fields and groves put on their freshest green;
 Birds start building, they call out loudly
 For the calm of summer that spreads its balm on valleys 510
 and slopes.
 Rich hawthorn-blossoms swell
 And burst in rows; in the copse
 New bird-sounds run, pell-mell,
 Through the glorious full tree-tops.

And then broad summer, when balmy winds

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Out of the west breathe on bush and seed,
 And plants under a wide sky dance in joy;
 When dew gathers and slips in drops from wet leaves 520
 As they bask in the sumptuous beams of the bright sun.
 Then autumn, with sombre shadows striding towards
 Winter, warning the grain to grow to fullness.
 On dry days he drives the rising dust
 Up from the folding fields, where it spirals high.
 In the huge heavens, winds wrestle with the sun;
 Tawny leaves are ripped from the linden tree
 And lush grass in the field leans over, and greys.
 Whatever rose up earlier now ripens and rots;
 The year dwindles, all days seem yesterdays.
 Winter winds on as it will, as it has done 530
 of old.

And when the Michaelmas moon*
 Burns on the icy wold
 Gawain fears he must soon
 Make his quest through the cold.

Till All Hallows' Day he stays with Arthur
 Who, on that holiday, held a feast in his homage
 With much revelry and rejoicing of the Round Table.
 The lords, out of courtesy, with their comely ladies,
 Came in sorrow for love of the young knight, 540
 And yet, though sad, they still made jests,
 Not showing their feelings but suppressing their sorrow.
 After the meal, in gloomy mood, Gawain came to the king
 Concerning his journey, and said straight out:
 'It is time, my lord, to take my leave of you.
 You know what it's about, and I'll not bother you

With all my difficulties, and the small details.
I'm duty bound to depart tomorrow, without delay,
To get my blow from the man in green, as God decrees.
Then the best men of the court gathered together: 550
Iwain and Erik, and many more besides;
Sir Doddinvalde de Savage, the Duke of Clarence,
Lancelot, Lionel, that good man, Lucan;
Sir Bors, Sir Bedevere, big men both,
Mador de la Port,* and also many more
Of great renown. They gathered around the king.
Now, heavy with care, they counselled the knight
And many suffered their sorrow secretly,
Regretting that the good Gawain should make the quest
And bear such a horrible blow, and not hit back, 560
but wait.

Gawain put on good cheer.
'Why should I hesitate?'
He said. 'Kind or severe,
We must engage our fate.*'

He stays on all that day. Next dawn he dresses,
Calls early for his arms,* they are duly carried in.
First, a red silk carpet is spread on the floor
And the lustrous gilt armour laid on it, glistening.
Dressed in a doublet of worked silk from Turkestan 570
And a king's cape, cleverly made, closed at the neck,
Its inside hems fringed with shining fur,
He strolls among the armour and strokes the steel.
They fix steel sabatons onto his feet,
Lap his legs in gleaming metal greaves,
Their brilliant knee-joints newly burnished,

And fasten them, with knotted filigree, to his knees.
Fine thigh-pieces, lashed with leather thongs,
Cover his thick thighs, and close over them.
A coat of link-mail, its rings glinting, 580
Clasps him round, over a tunic of finest cloth;
Polished arm-pieces, with gay-coloured elbow-guards,
Are fastened to his arms and, last, gauntlets of steel.
In all, the finest-fitting gear to guard him on
his ride:
His coat-armour, trimmed by hand,
His gold spurs proudly tied;
Girt with a silken band,*
His broadsword swung at his side.

Buckled up, the knight glowed in his bright armour; 590
The smallest lace or loop gleamed gold.
Clothed in this manner, he goes to hear Mass*
Solemnly celebrated at the great altar.
Then he comes to the king, and his court-companions,
Takes his leave courteously of the lords and ladies;
Escorting him out, they kissed him, commending him to
Christ.
By then Gringolet* stood ready, girt with a saddle
That, studded with new nails cut specially
And bordered with gold, gleamed brightly.
The bridle was richly barred and wrapped with gold. 600
The furnishings of the breast-harness, of the fine skirts,
Crupper and caparison, matched those of the saddle-bows,
And all was gilded with new gold nails
That flickered and flashed like tiny sun-flares.
He takes hold of the helm, which is strongly stapled

And thickly padded inside, and quickly kisses it.*
It sat high on his head, held with a hasp
Behind, and a bright strap clasping the visor
Embroidered and set with the best gems
On a broad silk hem, with birds on the seams:
Parrots preening their wings, depicted among
Turtle-doves, and true-love knots, so numerous
It must have taken the ladies seven seasons

to sew.

The circlet round his crown
Was even more precious, though;
Its device of diamond-stone,
Burned with a dusky glow.

THEN they show him the shield, its gules shimmering,
And its pentangle* picked out in pure gold.
He grips the girdle of the shield, flicks it quickly
Round his neck. It fits him neatly.
Now, though it delay me, I propose to say
Why the pentangle bedecks the noble knight:
It is a design that Solomon devised,* a sign
And token of truth*—quite rightly too,
For its figure comprises five points
And its lines overlap and link with each other
With no ending anywhere; and men in England
Call it, accordingly, the Knot without End.
Therefore it suits the knight in his bright armour
Ever faithful, five times, five ways in each.
Gawain was known as a good knight, like gold
Purified of fault, his virtues clearly and openly
revealed.

The pentangle he was wearing
On surcoat and on shield
Bespoke his gentle bearing
And trust that would not yield.

First, he was found without fault in his five senses;*
Again, his five fingers never failed him,
And all his faith in the world was in the five wounds
That Christ received on the Cross, as the Creed tells;*
And whenever this warrior was embroiled in battle
His sole and steadfast thought was simply that
His courage came, finally, from the five joys
The courteous Queen of Heaven had from her child;*
Therefore, painted in comely colours, he carried
Her gracious image; it glowed inside his shield
And when he gazed thereon his courage never wavered.
Of the fifth group of five he honoured constantly
The first four were generosity, good fellowship,
Cleanness, and courtesy, uncurbed and unimpaired;
Lastly, compassion,* surpassing all: these final five,
More firmly fixed on that knight than on any other,
These five, compounded by faith, conjoined in him,
Each one woven with the other, each one unending,
Fastened on five points that never faltered,
Nor strayed from each other, but stayed together
Always without end, as I have found, no matter where
A man might begin the design, or strive to close it.
Therefore the knot on this new shield was fashioned
Royally, in red gold on red gules:.*
Such is the pure pentangle which people of old
were taught.

He is ready now in his gay
Armour; his lance is brought.
He took it, gave them good-day—
For evermore, he thought.

He jabbed the steed with his spurs and sped away 670
So fast that sparks flew from the flint-stone.
At the sight of the knight riding off, they sighed.
Grieving for Gawain, all the lords and ladies
Said truthfully to each other: 'By heaven, it's a pity
That he is gone, with his huge gift for life!
To find his equal will be far from easy.
It would have been wiser to proceed discreetly,
To have endowed the noble knight with a dukedom.
He would have been a lord of men, a magnificent leader;

A much better destiny than being destroyed, his head 680
Struck off by an elfish man out of selfish pride.
Whoever heard of a king heeding the counsel
Of capricious knights in the nonsense of Christmas games?
Much warm water flowed from their eyes
When the good man went from their dwelling
that day.

He bade them well, then took
Himself, without delay—
As I heard tell from the book—
Along his tortuous way. 690

Now the knight rides through the realm of Logres:*
Sir Gawain, in God's service, finding it no game.
At times, companionless, he takes his rest at night
Where he finds little of the food to his liking.

No good friend but his horse in those woods and hills,
And no one save God to speak to on his way,
While he is nearing the wastes of Northern Wales.
He keeps to the right of the Isles of Anglesey,
Fords the foreshore by the promontory, first
Wading over at Holyhead, then heaving ashore once more 700
Into the forest of Wirral,* the wilderness. Few there
Were loved by God or men of goodwill.
And wherever he went, asking those whom he met
If they knew anything of a knight in green
Or by chance, of the Green Chapel in the region around,
They said, no, no, they'd never seen him,
Nor even heard of a man in that land, dressed all
in green.

He turns down dreary ways
Where dark hillsides lean, 710
His mood changing as the day's,
But the chapel could not be seen.

He clammers over rough slopes in curious regions;
Estranged from his friends, he rides on, ranging far.
At each water-ford, or river-reach that he crossed
He found, more often than not, a foe before him—
One so foul and violent he had to fight him.
Among those hills he met so many marvels
It's hard to tell a tenth part of them all.
Sometimes he wars with dragons, or with wolves; 720
With wodwos, who watched him from woodland crags;
With bulls and bears; sometimes with savage boars,
And giants from the high fells,* who followed him.
Had he not been brave and sturdy, not served God,

He would have died, been destroyed many times.
But if those fights were fierce, winter was worse,
When chilling water spilled out of the clouds
Freezing as it fell, pelting the pale ground.
Almost killed by sleet, he sleeps in all his armour
More nights than enough among the rough rocks,
Where plummeting cascades from the summits ran cold
Or hung over his head in hard ice-blades.
This way, in danger, in pain and hardship,
Over the land the knight rides till Christmas Eve,

730

alone;

Then, in despair on his ride,
He cries in a plangent tone
That Mary be his guide
To a house, a warm hearth-stone.

Through the morning he rides on merrily,* beside a hill,
Into a dark wood, wonderfully wild.
High hills all around; below, a grove of oaks,
Huge and hoary, more than a hundred of them.
Hazel and hawthorn were tangled together there,
And everywhere rough mounds of hairy moss.
Hunched on bare branches, doleful birds
Piped out pitiful calls in the bitter cold.
The knight glides under them on Gringolet
Through bogs and quagmires, quite alone,
Fearing the whims of fate, worried that he would
Never see the Lord's service, Who, on that same night,
Was born of a maid to assuage our sorrow.*
And he implored Him, saying, 'I beseech thee, Lord,
And Mary, mild Mother, so dear to us,

740

750

That I might soon hear mass in a holy place
And Matins in the morning—I ask it meekly,
And therefore promptly say my Paternoster, Ave
and Creed.*

And, riding as he prayed,
He repented each misdeed,
And signed himself, and said:
'May Christ's Cross lend me speed!'

760

HARDLY had he made the sign three times
When, in the midst of the wood, he saw a moated castle
On open ground, rising from a mound; boughs
Of massive trees by the moats enclosed it.
Built on meadow-ground, with a beautiful park all round,
It was the finest castle ever kept by a knight.

A spiked palisade, its palings tight together,
Surrounded many trees, and ran two miles around.
The knight studied the stronghold from the side
As it glimmered and glowed among the tall oak trees.
He removed his helm in reverence, humbly thanked
Both Jesus and Saint Julian* for their bounteous deed
And their great courtesy in granting him his plea.
'Now, grant me a good night's lodging,' he beseeched.
Then, with his gold spurs, he urged Gringolet on.
By good chance he had chosen the main road
And it brought him to the drawbridge quick
and straight.

770

780

The bridge was drawn upright
And shut tight every gate;
Against the wind's worst might
Those walls were inviolate.

The horseman waited at the bank, hesitated at the brink
Of the double ditch* that ran around the castle.
The walls sank down far into the dark water,
And rose to a huge height over it;
The fine stone soared up to the cornices.
Its battlements were formed in a style most fitting, 790
With graceful turrets spaced out at intervals
And a row of lovely loopholes with locking shutters.
A better barbican the knight had never seen.
Further in, he descried the wall of the high hall
With its bold, regular towers and tough battlements
And clusters of painted pinnacles, cleverly joined,
Their high carved tops far up in the sky.
He also caught sight of the chalk-white chimneys
That shimmered immaculately on the tower-tops:
From any vantage-point so many turrets and towers 800
Amid the parapets, and scattered so thickly,
It seemed a pure fancy, or a model made from paper.*
From his horse, the knight thought it so inviting
He wondered: 'If I can work my way inside,
A respite here in the Holy Season would be a time
of grace.'
He called out. After a time,
A porter, high up, whose face
Smiled down, acknowledged him
And welcomed him to that place. 810

'Good sir,' said Gawain, 'would you take a message for me
To the lord of the castle, and ask for lodging?'
'Yes, by Saint Peter, though I'd guess', replied the porter,*
'You're welcome to lodge here as long as you like.'

He hurried off, and straightway came back
With many more people, to receive the knight properly.*
They let fall the drawbridge, walked out towards him
And knelt down in courtesy on the cold ground
To greet the man in a manner they gauged befitting.
They let him ride through the great gates, now wide 820
Apart. He bade them stand, passed over the bridge
Where several of the men steadied his saddle.
He dismounted, and more men stabled his steed.
And then the knights and their squires descended
To greet him, and lead him off to the lord's hall.
As he unhasped his helmet, everyone hurried
To seize it in their hands, and serve this noble man.
They relieved him of sword and shield and bore them off.
Then, courteously, he greeted each man among them.
They all pressed forward proudly to honour the prince 830
And brought him to the hall, still in his bright armour
Where a fire burned fiercely in the big grate.
Then the lord of the castle came forth from his chamber
To greet with high honour the man in his hall.
He said: 'You may stay as long as you like.
All here in this hall is yours, to do whatever you have
in mind.'
'My warmest thanks!' They embrace
Gladly, their arms entwined.
'May Christ reward your grace;
You are indeed most kind.' 840

Gawain gazed at the man that greeted him,
And a powerful prince he looked, the castle's lord:
A towering fellow, trim, and in his prime.

His wide beard glistened like a beaver's hide.
Stern-looking, on stalwart legs he strode forward,
Fiery-faced, his eye fierce, and his speech
Noble, an excellent thing, the knight thought,
For him to be master of the men of that castle.
The lord turned towards a side-room, straightway ordered 850
That a servant be given to Gawain, to tend him.
In a trice, at his call, many came and took him
To a bright room with regal bedding:
Curtains of silk cloth with gilded hems,
Delicate coverlets of lovely smooth sable,
With parti-coloured panels and stitch-worked seams,
And the curtains ran along cords of red-gold rings.
Silks of Toulouse and Turkestan spread down the walls
And fine carpets, matching them, covered the floor.*
And there, with merry quips, they quickly removed, 860
To his great relief, his mail and gleaming raiments,
And promptly fetched him fine fresh robes
To choose from and change into, as he wished.
No sooner had he chosen one with flowing skirts
That suited him, and put it on, than it seemed to everyone
By his appearance that spring was clearly beginning
For its glorious colours, as it lightly covered his limbs,
Caught fire and glowed and, surely, they thought,
Christ had never created a creature like
this knight. 870

They saw, no matter where
He came from, this man might
Be a prince without any peer
Wherever bold men fight.

A seat with sumptuous furnishings, its cover-cloths
And quilted cushions crafted masterfully,
Was fetched and set before the fire where
The coals glowed. A glorious cloak of brilliant silk,
Opulently appointed, was placed over his shoulders.
It was fringed inside with the finest animal-fur, 880
Earth's best ermine, the broad hood also of fur.
He sat there, looking most handsome in that seat.
Warmth ran through his limbs and his liveliness
Returned. Soon they set up a trestle-table
Laid with a new cloth and napkins, spotless white,
A salt-cellar, and cutlery, all silver.
He washed in his good time, and went to his food.
Serving-men, with becoming grace, brought bowls
Of several excellent soups, exquisitely seasoned,
Steaming and brimming over, then dishes of various fish.* 890
Some baked in bread, some broiled on the embers,
Some boiled, or stewed with spices, in their juice,
All served with delicate sauces that he relished.
And he politely proclaimed it a feast, again
And again, whereon they bade him, again and again,
'Please eat!
This fast is for your good;
Tomorrow's fare will be meat.'
Gawain was in jovial mood,
Flushed with the wine and heat. 900

Then they asked, and ascertained in a tactful way,
By detailed questions put to the knight discreetly,
That he was of Arthur's court; and he courteously revealed
That he was a knight and kinsman of King Arthur,

That royal and renowned lord of the Round Table;
That it was, in fact, Gawain who sat before them,
And he'd arrived, as chance decided, at Christmastide.
When the lord learned that Gawain was staying with him
He laughed loudly, delighted with his luck.
And all the folk in the hall were full of joy
And presented themselves without ado because all virtue,
Excellence, strength and good breeding belonged
To this reputable person, praised everywhere,
Whose honour was held highest before all men.
And each man said quietly to his companion:
'Now we shall see a marvellous show of manners,
And learn from the intricate turns of his conversation;
Without even seeking we'll see just what
Good talk can be, for the prince of courtesy walks
Among us. Surely God has showered his grace
On us in granting us a guest such as Gawain
At the season when all on earth sing the birth of God
above!

Surely we shall receive
From him a knowledge of
Fine ways and, I believe,
The subtle speech of love.*

By that time dinner was done. The fine company
Rose. Night was now closing in.
Chaplains made their way to the chapel
And bells rang out richly, as befitting
The blessed evensong of the festive season.
The lord attends; his lady is there also.
She goes in gracefully, to her private pew

And straightway Gawain enters the chapel as well.
The lord takes hold of a fold of his gown and leads him
To a seat, acknowledges him, speaks his name,
Adding, moreover, that his presence gladdens him more
Than anything. Gawain thanks him again. They embrace,
Then sit together silently through the service.
Later, the lady wished to look on the knight:
She came from her pew, accompanied by peerless women,
But she, in looks and complexion, the loveliest of all:
Well-groomed, graceful, perfectly poised—
Even lovelier than Guinevere, thought Gawain.
He goes forth into the chancel, to greet her formally.
Another lady led her by the left hand,
An elderly lady, one clearly much older than her,
Who was held in high honour by everyone there.
These two were quite unlike in every way:
One was winsome and young, the other withered.
A glow of roseate colour shone on the first,
While rough and wrinkled cheeks hung from the other.
Kerchiefs and clusters of pearls adorned the younger;
Her breast and bright throat, showing bare,
Glowed more freshly than the first snow on the hills.
The other, swathed in a gorget that hid her neck,
Her swart chin wrapped in chalk-white veils,
Her forehead muffled up in folds of silk,
Was trellised round with trefoils and jingling rings,
And nothing of her uncovered but her black brows,
Her two eyes, her nose and naked lips—
All sour to the sight, all strangely bleared:
A beautiful lady, by God, let it not be
denied!

Squat body, and thick waist,
Her buttocks full and wide,*
Much daintier, to his taste,
The young one at her side.

Gawain, gazing on the one who looked so gracious, 970
Received the lord's consent to go forward in greeting.
He faces the old one first, bows very low;
The fairer one, very lightly, he embraces
In comely fashion, kisses her, speaks to her courteously.
They beg his acquaintance; he eagerly requests,
In all solicitude, to be their true servant.
They take him between them and, talking, lead him
To a side-room where first of all, they call
For spices,* which men speed to bring them unstintingly,
With beakers of warming wine at each return. 980
The jubilant lord leapt about in joy
Telling them, time and again, to amuse themselves.
He snatched his hood off,* gaily snared it on a spear
Declaring 'He wins the honour of wearing this
Who makes up the most amusing Christmas game—
And, by my faith, with the help of my friends, I'll fight
The best of you before I give this garment up.'
With whirling words and laughter the lord enjoys himself
That night, with many games for sir Gawain, to make
him glad, 990
Until, the hour being late,
'Bring lights!' the fine host said.
Gawain gave all goodnight
And went off to his bed.

So the morning when men are mindful of the time
When the Lord, for our destiny, was born to die,
For whose sake joy wakens in every house in the world,
Fell to them there as well that day: delicious foods,
Both at the formal dinner and the more casual meals,
Were plentifully served, by strong men at the long dais. 1000
The ancient lady sat in the loftiest place
With the lord, I believe out of courtesy, beside her.
Gawain and the lovelier lady sat together
At the central board where the food was served first.
Then all in the hall were subsequently served
According to their state—the appropriate form.
There was meat, great mirth and much delight,
Difficult indeed to describe to you now
If I tried to tell it in all its finer details.
But I do know that Gawain and the lovely lady 1010
Delighted in each other's bright company,
And in the deft dalliance of courtly conversation.
No innuendo darkened their delicate speech;
Their witty word-play surpassed the sports of the other lords.
With blares
Of trumpets, drums' loud measures
And pipes with their pleasing airs,
All tended to their pleasures
As these two looked to theirs.
Great mirth and merriment that day and the next, 1020
And the third, as pleasure-filled, followed hard.
They celebrated St John's day* with joy and jubilation.
This was the final festive day for in the grey
Of morning they knew many guests were going.

So they whiled away the night in high style,
Drinking wine and dancing the finest carols.
At last, very late, all who were not of that place,
All those who were going, slowly took their leave.
Gawain gave them farewell. The lord leads him aside,
Brings him to his own bedroom, beside the fire; 1030
There he detains him, shows his delight, thanks him
For the high honour he has heaped on them all
In staying at his house for that solemn season,
And in gracing his court with his gay company:
'Indeed, as long as I live, I'll be the better for it,
That Gawain has been my guest at God's feast.'
'My thanks are to you,' says Gawain, 'for in good faith,
I claim the honour as mine, may the High King reward you.
I am most eager to please you, to perform your every wish,
Both small and great, as I am bound by my knight's
decree.' 1040

• The lord tries hard to hold
Gawain in his company
Much longer, but he is told
By the knight it cannot be.

Then he put many questions to his guest, courteously
Asked him what grim business forced him at that time
To ride so resolutely from the king's court alone,
Even before the end of the festive season.
'Indeed, sir,' said Gawain, 'your question comes home. 1050
A difficult and urgent duty spurred me on:
I am summoned to seek a particular place
Of whose location I have no notion at all.
And I must not miss it on New Year's morning

For all the rich land in the realm of Logres.
My lord, please let me put you a question:
Tell me truthfully if you've heard any man mention
The Green Chapel, or the ground that church stands on,
Or the knight who keeps it, clothed in bright green.
A meeting with that man at such a landmark, 1060
If I'm still alive, was set by solemn agreement,
And there's but little time till the New Year.
If God permit, I would set my gaze on him
More willingly, by God's Son, than I would on anything
In the world. So, by your leave, I'm bound to proceed;
There are barely three days more. I must make ready
For I'd rather meet quick death than defeat in my quest.'
The lord laughed. 'In that case you can stay,
Because I will show you well before where to go.
Let the whereabouts of the Green Chapel worry you no
longer. 1070
You can rest at ease, lie in as long as you please
Until late morning on the first day of the year,
Then ride to the meeting place at midday, to do what you
must do.
Stay until New Year's Day,
Then you can rise, and go.
We'll set you on your way.
It's only a mile or so.'

At this, Gawain, most gratified, laughed gladly:
'My heartfelt thanks—indeed, you have helped exceedingly! 1080
My quest is at an end. I shall spend, at your behest,
Therefore, a longer time, and do as you would wish.'
Then the knight took hold of him, sat beside him,

And bade the ladies enter to please them better,
And they passed a delightful time before the fire.
The lord, in his levity, let forth shrieks of glee
Like someone losing his wits, or unaware of his acts,
Calling out to the knight in a loud cry:
'So, you have chosen to do what I asked of you!
Will you promise, here and now, to hold to that vow?' 1090
'Most certainly I will, sir,' said the noble knight,
'While I bide in your house I'm bound by your command.'
'Well, because you've come so far and travelled hard,
Then kept late nights with me, you're not quite rested.
You need nourishment and sleep, that's easily seen.
So remain in your room and rest at your leisure
In the morning, till Mass, then go to your meal
With my wife, as soon as you wish. She will sit
With you for company till I come back to court.

Understood? 1100

Quite early I shall rise
For hunting in the wood.*
With this, Gawain complies,
And bows, as polite men should.

'Furthermore,' said the lord, 'let's settle on a bargain.
Whatever I win at hunting will henceforth be yours;
And you, in turn, will yield whatever you earn.*
There, my fine fellow, swear on it truly,
Whether we win or lose,' demanded the lord.
'By God,' replied Gawain, 'I'm ready for that. 1110
I must say I'm glad you wish to play this game.'
'Bring us all drinks, the bargain's driven!
Said the lord of the castle. And they laughed delightedly,

And drank wine, chatted, dallied, and delayed,
The lords and ladies, as long as it pleased them to.
Then, with French phrases, and lingering, light douceurs,*
They stayed on even longer, speaking softly,
And kissed each other, and kindly took their leave.
Then their serving-men slowly led them away,
Lighting each to his room with the glow of a bright 1120
torch-flame.

But, before bed, their accord
Again and again they proclaim.
He knew very well, that lord,
How to draw out his game.

III

EVEN before daybreak everyone was up.
 The guests who were going called their grooms,
 And they hurried out to saddle their stout horses,
 Get all their gear in order, pack their saddle-pockets.
 Guests of the highest rank, dressed ready for riding, 1130
 Leapt up lightly, took hold of their bridles,
 Each person going where it most pleased him.
 The beloved lord of the castle was not the last:
 Rigged out for riding, he appeared with his many men.
 Straight after Mass he ate a light meal, hastily,*
 And hurried to the field, flourishing his bugle.
 By the time daylight was gathering over the ground
 He and his men were waiting on their huge horses.
 His clever huntsmen coupled the hounds in their leashes,
 Opened the kennel door and called them forth. 1140
 They blew their bugles loudly: three bare notes.
 At that, the hounds bayed, making a great furore,
 And those that broke away were whipped and turned back.
 There were, I'm told, a hundred men of the boldest
 hunting blood.
 The keepers of the hounds
 Took up their posts and stood
 Waiting, while bugle-sounds
 Echoed around the wood.

Creatures in the wild, hearing the hounds, awoke 1150
 Trembling; terrified deer raced through the dale.*
 They sped away to safer ground, but straightway

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Were blocked by the beaters, with bellows and cries.
 They let the high-antlered harts go by
 And the big bucks with their huge horn-branches
 For the lord had forbidden, in the closed season,
 That any man interfere with the male deer.
 The hinds were held back with shouts of 'Hey' and 'Hold!'
 While the does charged down to the deep dale,
 And there you might see men loosing their long 1160
 Arrows: at each forest-break the big shafts flew,
 Their broad heads biting the tawny hides,
 And they cried out, bleeding and dying on the banks,
 The hounds racing headlong after the rest.
 Hunters, their horns blaring, hurried after:
 A mighty cracking sound, as if a cliff were splitting.
 Any wild beast beaten back from the high ground,
 Who slipped between the bowmen, was driven down
 To the stations by the water, and slaughtered there.
 The huntsmen who kept those posts were so adept 1170
 With their sleek hounds, they quickly stopped them
 And, fast as the eye could follow, dragged
 them down.
 The lord galloped, and dismounted,*
 In ecstasy galloped on,
 Riding daylong, undaunted,
 Until the light was gone.

And so the lord enjoys his sport at the forest-border,
 And the good man, Gawain, remains in bed,
 Lying snug, while the light streams down his walls.* 1180
 Under luxurious coverlets, all canopied about,
 And drowsing in soft slumber, he dimly hears

A small sound at the threshold. He listens. Now the door
Opens. He pokes his head out of the bed-clothes,
Lifts back the corner of the curtain, just a little,
Looks warily out to see what it could be.
He sees the lady there, and she is lovely to look upon.
She draws the door close-to behind her, silently,
And moves towards the bed; the man, embarrassed,
Sinks back again soundlessly, feigning sleep. 1190
She steps up lightly, steals towards the bedside,
Brushes back the curtain and cautiously creeps in,
And sits, very softly, on the bed's edge,
Lingering there at leisure to watch him waking.
The lord kept low for a long time also,
Turning over in his mind what this might mean
And what it implied, for it seemed to him a marvel.
But he murmured to himself: 'It would be more seemly
To find out, in the course of conversation, what she wants.'
• Soon he woke, and stretched, and turned towards her, 1200
Unlocked his eyelids, and looked surprised,
Then made the sign of the Cross, as if by prayer to escape
his plight.
There glowed on her lovely face
A hue both red and white.
She seemed the image of grace,
Her small lips laughing and bright.

'Good morning, sir Gawain,' said the lady merrily.
'What a careless sleeper, to let someone slip in here.
I have trapped you beautifully; unless we strike a bargain 1210
I shall bind you in your bed—of that you can be sure.'
And the lady laughed, made jests and jibes.

'And a very good morning to you,' said Gawain gaily.
'You may do with me as you wish and I'll be pleased:
In a moment I surrender—and I seek your mercy.
Truly I have no choice, trapped here as I am.'
He jests with her, to joyful peals of merriment.
'But, lovely lady, would you grant me leave
And release your prisoner, prompt him now to rise
That he might slip from his bed to find more fitting clothes?*' 1220
Then I'd be more at my ease to talk with you.'
'No, no, my fine sir,' said the sweet lady,
'You shall not budge from your bed. I have another notion.
I shall tuck you up tightly on either side
And then talk with my knight whom I have neatly trapped,
For, yes, I am certain now that you are sir Gawain
Revered by the wide world everywhere you ride.
Your knightly character and courtesy are highly renowned
By all lords and ladies—indeed, by all who live.
And now, you are next to me, and we are alone. 1230
My lord and his loyal men are far away in the forest;
Those in the hall lie sleeping, their ladies also.
The door is shut firm and fastened with a hasp.
And since I have in my house the person whom all prefer
I intend to savour each second: each passing word
I'll treasure.
Both my mind and body
Are only for your pleasure.
I'm here perforce, and ready
To serve you at your leisure.*' 1240

'In good faith,' says Gawain, 'that's certainly flattering.
However, I'm not the man whom you have in mind.

I'm not nearly worthy enough, as I well know,
To inspire such reverence as you have described.
I should be happy, by Heaven, if I could please you
And be deemed fit, in word and deed, to devote myself
To serving you—a service of purest joy!
'In good faith, sir Gawain,' said the lady gaily,
'Your excellence exceeds, your powers surpass all others.
To consider them lightly would show little courtesy;
1250 There are many ladies who would love beyond the world
To hold you in their power, as I have you now,
To while away the time with tender words,
To find solace in love, free at last from sorrow:
They would prefer that pleasure to the richest possession.
But praise Him who reigns in Heaven on high,
By whose grace I have wholly in my hand the man desired

by all.'

She brought him excellent cheer,
Being so beautiful,
1260 And the knight, with tact and care,
Answered her words in full.

'Mary reward you,* madam,' he said merrily,
'For, truly, I find your kindness most noble.
Most men receive recognition for generous deeds;
The respect I receive is through no merit of mine.
You yourself gain in honouring me this way.'
'Not so,' said the noble lady, 'I know otherwise,
For were I worth all the women who live on earth,
If I held the world's wealth in my very hand,
1270 How could I make a better bargain in a husband?
With the qualities of heart and mind I have come to find

In you—your youth, your grace and gaiety,
Of which I have heard tell, and now know to be true,
There is no man in the world I would choose before you.'
'Beautiful lady, I know you have chosen better;
Yet I am proud of the price you have placed on me.
I shall hold you as my sovereign, serve you steadfastly,
And I shall be your knight, may Christ reward you!'
Thus they discussed many things till mid-morning
1280 And the lady made as if she loved him dearly.
Gawain, more restrained, showed marvellous courtesy.
Were she the brightest beauty, the knight had little love
To spare from his sorrowful quest, which he might not
forestall.*

The cut that lays him low
Assuredly will fall.

She told him she would go,
And he agreed withal.

She said good-bye, laughed, gave a sidelong look;
1290 Then, while she stood there, astonished him with these words:
'May He who rewards fine speeches praise your performance.
However, it's hard to be sure you're really sir Gawain.*'
'Why?' he replied, and quickly questioned her,
Afraid that he may have behaved boorishly.
But the lady blessed him and spoke to him, explaining:
'Gawain is rightly held to be a gracious knight
And courtesy contained in him so completely
He could never dally so long with a lady
Without being moved—if only by some touch or trifle
1300 At a speech's end—out of kindness, to beseech a kiss.'
Gawain said: 'Well, best let it be as you wish:

I shall kiss at your command, as becomes a knight,
And more: I'll not displease you, no need to plead further.
She comes nearer at that, catches him in her arms,
Leans down lovingly and kisses the lord.
They commend each other becomingly to Christ
And she goes out gracefully without more ado.
With that, rather hurriedly, he prepares to rise,
Calls to his chamberlain,* chooses his clothes. 1310
Once ready, he leaves his room and repairs to Mass,
Then to his meal, which the men had made for him.
All that day he made merry, until the rise
of the moon.

Never so graciously,
By the young one and the crone,
Was knight received. All three
Enjoyed themselves as one.

And all the while the lord is at his sport
Hunting the barren hinds in wood and heath. 1320
By sundown, he has slain so many beasts—
Does and other deer—it is a marvel to recall.
Then at last all the men-folk flocked together
And deftly built a small hill of the deer they'd killed.
Those of noblest rank went up with their retinue
And chose all those they liked with the choicest fat
And ordered them neatly cut up, as custom demands.*
They strolled around studying them, and found
Two finger-widths of fat on even the worst of them. 1330
They slit open their slots, seized the first stomach,
Cut it out with a keen knife and knit it up.
Next they lopped off the legs, peeled back the pelt,

Tore the belly open, took out the bowels,
But deftly, not to destroy the first knot.
They gripped the gullet hard, swiftly severed
The weasand from the wind-pipe, and shucked out the guts.
They sheared off the shoulders with their sharp knives
And poked the bones through slits, preserving the sides.
They rent the breast, pulled the bones wide apart,
Then got to work on the gullet. One 1340
Ripped it swiftly, right up to the leg-forks,
Nimble cleaned out the innards; then they commenced
To free all the fillets that ran along the ribs.
They cleaned the back-bones quite correctly
In a straight sweep, down to the hanging haunch,
Lifted the haunch up whole, and lopped it off.
The loose parts, properly speaking, men call the *mumbles*.

Right down
The leg-forks they released
The flesh on every one, 1350
And quickly split each beast
Along the long back-bone.

And then they hewed off both the head and neck,
And, with a chop, severed the sides from the chine.
They kept a tidbit for the crows, tossed it into the trees,
Then rent a hole in the full flanks near the ribs
And hung the beast from branches by the hocks.
Each huntsman was handed his proper portion
While their dogs feasted hungrily on a fine doe-skin,
On the lights and liver, the lining of the paunches, 1360
And on bread sopped in the blood that spilled around.
The kill was boldly blown, the hounds bayed loudly,

And all headed for home, their meat packed up neatly,
Proudly sounding all their hunting horns.
By then the day was done, and the company came
Into the lovely hall where the knight was quietly waiting,
beside

A dancing fire at the hearth.
The lord enters with pride,
And when they meet there's mirth
And joy on every side.

1370

The lord commanded all the men to come to the hall
And bade both the ladies down, with their maids-in-waiting.
Before all the folk in the hall he orders his hunters
To fetch his venison and set it before him on the floor.
With gracious ceremony he summons Gawain
And tells the tale of all the animals he's slain;
He shows him the fine flesh hewn from the ribs:
• 'What do you say to that for sport? Is it worth your praise?
Do I deserve your thanks for my skill at the hunt?'
'Before God,' said Gawain, 'these are the finest beasts
I've seen for seven years in a winter season.'
'I give them all to you, Gawain,' was the lord's answer,
'Our contract agrees you can claim them as your own.'
'That's right,' he replied, 'and I say the same to you.
What I have won with all honour, here in your hall,
Is yours indeed, as we agreed. I give it with goodwill.'
Now he clasps him with both arms around the neck
And kisses him as courteously as he can.
'There, take my trophies for I got no more than that,
Had they been greater I'd gladly give them to you.'
'That's very fine,' replied the lord, 'Many thanks, but maybe

1380

1390

They were greater—so I wish you would tell me where,
With your subtlety, you won such a wonderful prize.'
'That's not part of the pact,' he said, 'ask me no more.
You've received what's yours. That's all, you may rest
assured.'

They laughed, and ribbed each other
With many a jaunty word,
Then went to dine together
Where fine food steamed on the board.

1400

After that they both sat together before the fire
Where the women brought them beakers of wine;
And, in their raillery, they decided to repeat
Next day the same bargain they had made before:
Whatever happened, they would hand their winnings over,
Exchanging at night the new things they had gained.
Both of them gave their oath before the gathering.
More beverages were brought, and their mirth re-kindled.
Then, at last, the lords and the ladies left,
Bidding goodnight, and quickly repaired to their bedrooms.
The rooster had not roused, cackled and crowed three times*
Before the lord leapt from his bed, and his men too.
Once more, both Mass and meal were quickly over
And, before daybreak, off to the forest in their hunting array
they hurry.

1410

Sounds of their hunting-horns
Over the wide plains carry
To the hounds, loosed among thorns,
Who hurtle towards their quarry.

1420

SOON they mount a search at the edge of a marsh,
The huntsmen goading the hounds that had the scent,

Rousing them fiercely, raising a frightful din.
The hounds, hearing the shouts, hurried forward
And sprang along the trail, a throng of forty or so,
And such a riot of yelps and yaps arose
That all the rocks around rang with the sound.
The hunters, with shouts and horn-blasts, urged them on.
At that, the pack strung together and sprinted
Down a track between a pool and a beetling crag. 1430
By the edge of a rock outcrop, near the marsh's rim,
Where rough rocks had fallen hugger-mugger,
They rushed in to flush their quarry, the hunters following.
They spread around the crag and the jagged mound
Till they were certain they'd trapped inside their circle
The beast that the bloodhounds had discovered.
Then they beat the bushes furiously, forcing him out.
Maddened, he charged at the men that checked his way,
Barrelling out, the most marvellous boar:*
• A long-time loner, cut off from his kind,* 1440
But still a redoubtable beast, the stoutest of boars,
Grunting at them grimly, and they were all dismayed
For, with his first thrust, he destroyed three dogs*
Then, in no way hurt himself, spurted away.
The men shouted 'Ho!' very loudly, again and again;
Set horns to their mouths, sounded the hunting-call,
And joyful cries rose from the milling hounds
And men, as they ran at the boar in a swelling roar
of sound.
He stops often, and growls, 1450
Then jabs at the pack around;
There are horrible yelps and yowls
Each time he maims a hound.

Then the men push forward to fire arrows at him;
They loosed the long shafts, struck him in showers,
But the tips were knocked aside by his tough hide
And no point could pierce his bristling brow;
Though the smooth-shaven shafts were shattered to pieces,
As soon as they hit him, the heads slewed off.
Then, under the welter of their pelting arrow-blows, 1460
Crazed by their baiting, he hurled himself at the hunters,
Goring them savagely as he bored forward.
Many among them were fearful, and they fell back.
But the lord, on a light horse, gallops at him hard;
Like a bold knight on a battlefield, he blows his bugle,
Sounding the rally as he rides through bush and briar
Chasing the doughty boar till, once more, darkness came.
In this way they pass the whole day at the hunt,
While our gracious knight reclines at his leisure,
In luxurious pleasure, under bed-covers rich and 1470
bright-hued.
Nor was the lady neglecting
To greet him in this mood,
For she came again—expecting
To change his attitude.

She creeps to the curtain, peeps in at the knight.
Gawain gave her first a cordial greeting,
And she, polite and eager, replied in kind.
She sat down lightly beside him, laughing;
Then, with a loving look, she started speaking: 1480
'If you are Gawain, sir, it seems to me most strange
That, being inclined to breeding and fine manners,
You've no patience with the ways of polite society,

Or, being taught them, banish them from your thoughts.
For you have surely forgotten what I showed you yesterday
In the finest lesson that my lips could form.'

'And what was that?' said the man, 'for I am unaware
Of it. But if it be true, I am much to blame.'

'But I taught you to kiss,' the kind lady said,
'To make your claim quickly when the lady is willing; 1490
Such behaviour becomes every knight who earns the name.'

'Dear lady, don't say such things,' the man said.

'I dare not do that for fear of being refused—
For, if refused, my offer would wear a fool's face.'

'In honesty, none could refuse you,' she nobly replied,
'And, of course, you have the sinew to subdue by force
Those churlish enough to wish to rebuff you.'

Gawain agreed. 'Indeed, what you say is true
But such force is unworthy in one of Arthur's court,
As is a gift not made with goodwill in mind. 1500

But see, I'm at your command, to kiss as you please:
You may take one when you like and leave off at
your whim.'

She graciously leans his way
And neatly kisses him—
And of love's turnings they say
Much in the interim.

'Now, if you won't be angry with me,' she went on,
'I would like to learn from you, sir. How does it happen
That one so young and lively as you, so active, 1510
So courteous and chivalrous, so esteemed in every house,
And of all chivalrous deeds, if one need choose, the chief—
Don't you agree?—are the deeds of love and war,

For the text and the very title of those volumes*
Which deal with knightly deeds describe in detail how men
Have hazarded their lives in the cause of love,
Suffered for love's sake long ordeals, then
Avenged themselves with valour, vanquished sorrow
And brought great joy to a lady's bedroom,
And you, known as the noblest knight in all the land, 1520
Your fame and honour following you everywhere—
How does it happen that I have sat beside you twice
Right here, and never heard the smallest word from you
About love-lore—not the least little thing.
Now, one so courteous and correct in his vows,
Would, I think, be yearning to show a young woman
At least a tiny token of the crafts of love.
Does it mean, despite your fame, you're in the dark?
Or do you think—shame on you!—I'm too slow to follow?

Not so! 1530

I've come alone to sit
And learn new ways. Please show
The treasures of your wit.
My lord, being gone, won't know.'

'In good faith,' murmured Gawain, 'may God reward you!
It gives one great pleasure—great gladness—
That one so worthy as you should come to this room
And take pains with so poor a person, and sport
With your knight—I'm flattered by your fine favours.
But to take on the task of explaining true love, 1540
To discourse, moreover, on the themes of love and war
To you, who, without doubt, are as deft
In that fine art as an army of fellows like me

Will ever be, even if we live long lives—
That would be stupid, esteemed lady, in the extreme.
I'll grant your other requests to the best of my skill
For I am deeply beholden, and will always be
Your loyal servant, may the Lord save me.'
This way, whatever other motive she had in mind,
The lady lured him on, enticing him to sin. 1550
But he held himself back so well no blemish appeared.
There was no sin on either side, nothing but innocent
pleasure.

They laughed. She lingered on;
And then, taking her measure,
Kissed him—and thereupon
Gracefully left, at her leisure.

Now the knight gets up and goes to Mass;
The morning meal was cooked and served with ceremony.
• Then, all day long, Gawain amused himself with the ladies 1560
While the lord galloped and cantered over his lands,
Chasing the wild boar that raced over the banks
And bit the best of his hounds, cracking their backs.
When he stood at bay the bowmen broke his will;
Gathering in groups, they shot shock-volleys of arrows,
Forced him to flee, to go for the open ground.
He could still make the hardest start aside.
But in the end he was spent and could spurt no more
So, quick as he could, he gained higher ground
And found a hole near a rock, where the river ran by. 1570
He got the bank at his back, began to scrape,
A foul cud foaming at the corners of his mouth
As he honed his tusks. The hunters hovered, held back,

Weary of wounding him from afar, but still afraid.
He'd hurt so many hunters. Close in now? No one would try
that task.

No sense at all in waging
More lives on such a risk
With his mad brain raging
Behind that murderous tusk. 1580

Then the lord surged up, spurring his steed fiercely,
And saw him standing at bay, surrounded by hunters.
He leaps down lightly, leaves his mount,
Unsheathes a bright sword,* strides forward,
Quickly wades the stream to where the beast waits
Watching the man warily as he lifts the weapon.
His big bristles stood up, and he snorted so loud
They were much afraid the lord might be worsted.
Then the boar made a rush, right at the man,
And with a crash they tumbled together, splashing 1590
In white water. But the beast was defeated.
Right from the start the man had sighted him well
And he drove the big blade deep into his chest,
Shoved it in to the hilt, shattering the heart.
He crashed over. The water washed him away, with his
last growls.

Quickly, before he sank,
In a splash of yelps and howls,
He was dragged onto the bank
And rent by a hundred jowls. 1600

They blew the death of the boar with a blare of horns;
Every man shouted and hallooed, loud as he could.

The huntsmen placed in charge of that hard chase
Had their hounds bay at the beast.
Then one of them, wise in the crafts of the wood,
Began with elegant care to cut up the boar.
First he hacks off the head, sets it up high,
Then splits him roughly right along the spine,
Uncoils the bowels, roasts them on red-hot coals,
Dunks bread-sops in them, divides them among his dogs; 1610
Then slices the boar-flesh into broad gleaming slabs,
Pulls out the guts, and cuts them away, as is proper.
Then sews the two halves in a single whole.
Then they truss him up on a stout stick.
Now, with their swine hanging, they swing off homeward.
The boar's head* was borne before the lord himself,
Who had dealt the death-blow in the stream after that swift

mêlée.

It seemed to him, till he saw
Gawain, a long delay. 1620
Then he called him and once more
The knight came for his pay.

The lord laughed loudly and merrily then;
He greeted sir Gawain, and joked with him joyfully.
The good ladies were called, the whole house gathered.
He points to the pieces of boar-flesh, tells them the tale
Of his great mass and vast length, how malicious he was,
And how wildly he'd fought as he fled into the woods.
Gawain hastened to praise his hunting prowess;
He commended the skills he'd so clearly displayed, 1630
For a beast of such bulk and muscle, he maintained,
Or with such broad flanks, he'd not seen before.

They patted the huge head, praised it again,
Recoiled, feigning fear, so that the lord might hear.
'Now, Gawain,' said the good man, 'as you know, this game,
By our fixed and final contract, is yours completely.'
'True,' he replied, 'and by our terms it's also right
That I must give you back the gains that are mine.'
He clasped the knight round the neck, and kissed him.
Then straightway served him again in the same way. 1640
'This evening,' said Gawain, 'we're still even, you see,
In all the covenants that, since my coming, we
have made.'
'By Saint Giles!*' the lord said,
'What a fine game you've played!
You'll heap wealth on your head
If you conduct such trade.'

The serving-men then set up trestle-tables,
And spread white cloths over them. Clear light
Gleamed on walls as the servants set waxen torches, 1650
And then brought food for all the folk in the hall.
A happy murmuring arose, then merry music
And mirth around the hearth. All sorts of singing
During the dinner, and after, rang through the room:
Old Christmas tunes and the newest carols and dances,
The most delightful pleasures a man could describe.
And our handsome knight stayed close beside the lady
Who dallied with him, offering subtle sallies,
Giving furtive and fetching glances, and he
Was caught in confusion, vexed in himself, perplexed; 1660
But, out of good breeding, he decided not to rebuff her,
But to deal with her delicately, though his plan might go

awry;
They stayed on in that way
Till the end of their revelry,
Then the lord called him away
For some fire-side causerie.

And there they drank and debated, deciding anew
The self-same terms for tomorrow, New Year's Eve;
The knight begged permission to depart next morning 1670
As it was now approaching the hour when he must go;
But to little avail, for the lord prevailed upon him:
'Stay,' he replied, 'I assure you, hand on heart,
You'll get to the Green Chapel and achieve your errand
On time, on the morn of New Year's Day, well before prime,
So rest in peace in your room, be at your ease

While I hunt in the holt and keep the covenant
To exchange my gains with you when I get home.
I have tested you twice and I have found you true
But "*third time, winner takes all*"—recall my words 1680
Tomorrow. Meanwhile, let's have more merriment,
For a man can find misery whenever he wants.'
Gawain agreed to that, and agreed to remain there.
Drinks were brought, then torches when the day

was done.
As if rocked on a raft,
Gawain sleeps on and on.
The lord, intent on his craft,
Rises at earliest dawn.

After Mass, he and his men took a quick mouthful. 1690
A magnificent morning! He calls for his mount.

All the hunters who would follow him on horse
Were girt up and in saddle at the castle gates.
Fresh light over the fields: frost on the ground,
Sun climbing through a wrack of ruddy clouds,
Dissolving them in wide light, driving them off.
The huntsmen loosed their hounds by a leafy wood.
And the rocks rang with the sound of hunting horns.
Some sniffed the trail down which the fox lay lurking,*
And cunningly crossed it, weaving about, in their way. 1700
A small whelp smells him, and yelps; the hunters call.
Up come his companions, panting madly
And, packed together, they take off on his tracks.
The fox flicks ahead of them; they soon sight him
And they're after him again fast as they can go,
Deriding him fiercely, with a furious din.
He twists quickly through a tangled thicket,
Then edges back, and bides his time in a hedge;
He hops over a hawthorn thicket by a small stream
And slinks out stealthily through the valley, 1710
Hoping to outwit the hounds and escape in the woods;
Suddenly, before him stood a band of hunters
By a gap in the trees, and three growling hounds,
all grey.

He twisted back, with a start,
And boldly sprang away
To the woods, fear at his heart,
The smell of death in the day.

When the pack gathered, and put him up,
What a din! A delicious pleasure to hear those dogs! 1720
When he veered into view they abused him bitterly,

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

A sound as if the cliffs were crashing down.
And the huntsmen hallooed mightily when they met him.
He was greeted with snarling snouts, and growls;
He was threatened, called 'cur' and 'thief',
And the dogs closed on his tail so he couldn't delay.
When he sped, going for open ground, he was headed off;
So he wound back, rapidly—Reynard* was so wily.
In this way, he led them all astray, the lord and
His men, till the height of morning, among the mountains. 1730
In his room at home the knight sleeps soundly
In the cold morning, ringed by rich awnings.
But, for love's sake, the lady was awake,
Nursing her heart's wish, lest her will weaken.
She suddenly got up, and went on her way
In a bright gown that brushed the ground lightly;
It was hemmed and lined with the finest fur.
She wore no head-piece, but in her hair-net were
Studded gem-stones, in clusters of twenty or so.
Her fair face and her throat were both 1740
Quite bare, and her breast and her white shoulders.
She deftly enters the bedroom. The door behind her
Closes; she throws wide the window,* calls the knight
To rouse him with her rich voice and joyful words:
 'I say,
 How can you sleep, good sir,
 On such a splendid day?'
 He heard, through a drowsy blur,
 Her words wafting his way.

Drugged with heavy dreams, the man muttered 1750
As one who, on waking, is shaken by the thought

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

That today his fate would gaze into his face
At the Green Chapel, where he must meet that man
And withstand his foul axe, and not fight back.
But soon as he had summoned his reason
He broke from his reverie and replied to her brightly.
The lady approaches the bed, laughs pertly,
Leans over, and lightly kisses his lips,
And he greets her warmly, in a most grateful manner.
He saw she looked lovely in her rich robes, 1760
Her features flawless, and her colour so fine
It warmed his blood, and a great blessedness welled up
In him. They smiled shyly, prattled on merrily,
And all was bliss between them, all joy
 and light.
 Their speech was calm and clear
 And everything stood right.
 Yet danger was waiting near
 Should Mary neglect her knight.

For that lovely lady pressed him hard, persisted 1770
Urgently, spurring him to the brink, and he thinks:
'I must accept her affection, or refuse, and offend her',
Concerned with courtesy, lest he be thought a boor,
But more concerned about a misdeed should he err
And betray the man to whom the hall belonged.
'God help me,' he thought, 'that's not going to happen!'
With a short laugh he lightly laid aside
All the fine phrases that tripped from her tongue.
'You merit much blame,' exclaimed the lady,
'If you lack love for the person you lie beside 1780
Who is hurt now beyond anyone in the world.

Perhaps you already love a lady and, preferring her,
You've pledged your word, promised her so firmly
You cannot break it—that's what I've come to believe.
Is it true? Be honest with me, I beg of you.
Don't disguise truth with guile, for all the love
on earth.'

'I have no love, by St John,*
I swear for all I'm worth!
No one at all—and need no one
Right now,' he replied in mirth.

1790

'That's the worst word of all,' the woman said.
'But you have given a true answer, and it grieves me.
Come, kiss me quickly, then I must hasten away.
I must go on in sorrow, as a woman will who has loved.'
Sighing, she leans across and lightly kisses him;
Then goes her way, saying as she gets up,
• 'Now, my dear, as I depart allow me this:
Please give me a small present—a glove perhaps—
To remember you by, and rid myself of my grief.'
'By Heaven,' he said, 'I wish I had something worthy
Of your loving friendship—the finest gift in the land!
Truth to tell, you deserve much more,
By rights, than any gift that I might give.
But a love-token would be of little avail,
A dubious honour indeed, to hold in your house—
A glove of Gawain as a keepsake in your care!
I have come here on a quest through rough country
And have no bearers with saddle-bags full of fine things.
Because of your love, that distresses me, dear lady.
But each man as he can. Please, it's no impoliteness that

1800

1810

I offer.'
'No, no—but since, sweet knight,
You've no gift for my coffer,'
Said the lady, 'it is right
You take whatever I proffer.'

She gave him a ring wrought in red gold.
On it, a glittering stone stood out
That gleamed with light-beams, bright as the sun.
Be assured it was worth a fine fortune.*
Nevertheless, the knight refused it, replying nimbly:
'I cannot take gifts at this time, good lady,
For I really may not tend you anything in return.'
She importuned him eagerly; again he refused
And swore, as before, he could and would not accept it.
Regretting his refusal, she then replied:
'If you refuse my ring because it appears costly
And because you'll feel yourself deeply beholden,
I shall give you my girdle, a gift of lesser worth.'
She loosed a belt she wore about her waist
Looped round her gown under her lovely mantle.
It was of green silk, sewn with a trim of gold,
Its margins highly embroidered by a fine hand.
She pleaded with him once more, with pleasant smiles,
That he might take it, unworthy as it was for a knight.
And he told her he would never even touch
Keepsake or gold, till God had sent him grace
Or before he had finished the task he had taken on.
'And now, I pray you, do not be displeased,
And do stop pressing me. My mind is firm. To that, pray be
resigned.

1820

1830

1840

Yet I am deeply beholden
For you have been so kind;
Through times dark or golden
I'll serve you with heart and mind.'

'Do you refuse my girdle,' the lady replied,
'Because it is so simple? It may well seem so.
A poor rag, really—a most improper gift.
Yet the person who knows the power of its knots
Would perhaps gauge it at a greater price, 1850
For with this green lace girt about his waist,
While he keeps it closely wound around him
He cannot be cut down by any man nor slain
By any cleverness or cunning under the whole Heavens.'
The knight, pondering her words, now began to wonder
If it might be a talisman in his terrible plight
When he came to the Green Chapel to get his gains:
• Maybe death could be foiled with this marvellous device!
Patient now as she pressed him, he allowed her to speak.
She gave him the girdle once more, most eagerly. 1860
He accepted, and she granted the gift with goodwill
And besought him, for her sake, never to uncover it
But loyally to conceal it from her lord. He conceded:*
No one will know except themselves, no matter what
the price.

He thanked her, time and again,
For her gift and her advice.
By then she had kissed Gawain
The hardy, not once, but thrice.

The lady makes ready to go and leave him be 1870

For she knows she'll get no greater satisfaction.
When she has gone Gawain gets up from the bed
And dresses in the best and richest raiment.
He hides the love-lace that the lady gave him,
Conceals it carefully where he can find it later,
Then rapidly makes his way towards the chapel,
Goes to a priest in private and beseeches him
To instruct him how to conduct his life and learn
How his soul might be saved when he leaves the earth.
Then he fully confessed, admitting his misdeeds, 1880
Both large and lesser, and begged for mercy,
And he also called on the priest for absolution.
He absolved him completely, so wholly cleansed him
That it might have been the dawning of Judgement Day.*
Then he was free to please himself and the ladies
At carols and dancing and delightful pleasures
Much more than ever before, till the fall
of night.
Each man he honoured there
And all exclaimed outright: 1890
'I think, since his coming here,
He has never shone so bright.'

LET him stay in that haven, may love come his way!
The lord is still at his sport in the far fields.
He has finished off the fox he'd followed so long:*
As he leapt over the hedgerow to look at the rascal
At a place where the hounds were giving hot chase,
Reynard ran quickly through a thicket
With the yapping rabble hard at his heels.
The lord, catching sight of the wild creature, slyly 1900

Waited, withdrew a bright sword, and struck.
He shied away from the sharp blade, tried to evade him,
But the hounds rushed at him before he could run back
And fell on him in front of the horse's feet
And harried their clever quarry, snapping and snarling.
The lord leaps down and lifts him by the pelt,
Snatches him out briskly from their busy snouts,
Holds him above his head, and bellows 'Halloo',
And the fretting hounds mill round, barking furiously.
The hunters, with their many horns, hurry along 1910
Rightly sounding the rally, till they recognize their lord.
By then the noble men of the company were coming up
And those who carried bugles blew them and cried out
And those who had no horns bellowed and hallooed:
The most cheering cry that a man might hear.
They roared for the soul of Reynard—a resounding
full note.

• The dogs are fondly praised
With strokes on head and throat,
And then Reynard is raised 1920
And stripped of his tawny coat.*

Then, with nightfall nearing, they headed home,
Proudly blowing on their stout bugles.
At last the lord dismounts by his beloved castle,
Where he finds a fire in the hearth, the knight beside it,
The good man, sir Gawain, whose heart was glad
As he'd treasured the love of the ladies in full measure.
His robe of rich blue reached to the ground,
And he looked fine in a surcoat, softly furred.
A mantling hood, that matched it, hung from his shoulders, 1930

Both trimmed with fur from the finest ermine.
He rose, met his host in the middle of the room,
Greeted him with great pleasure, exclaiming:
'This time, my lord, I'm first to keep our agreement
Which we made final that time when the wine was flowing.'
Then he embraces the knight and kisses him thrice
With as much energy and glee as he could muster.
'By Heaven,' said the lord, 'you've had enormous luck
In gaining that booty, if you drove a good bargain.'
'Don't bother your head about bargains,' he said. 1940
'I've openly returned whatever, by rights, I owe you.'
'By Mary, mine are much less impressive,'
Said the lord. 'I worked a long day and won nothing.
A miserable fox-fur, may the Devil take it!
A paltry reward to pay for such riches!
And you have given me three kisses that no man can
excel.'

'By the Cross, our bargain's good,'
Said Gawain. 'I thank you well.'
The lord, right where they stood, 1950
Told how the bold fox fell.

With mirth, music and the finest fare,
They made as merry as any man might
And they laughed with the ladies, joked and jested.
Gawain and his host were most happy indeed
Like men who are light-headed, or a little tipsy.
The lord and his retinue played plenty of ruses
Till the time fell for the last farewell
And for all to go from the hall and be off to bed.
Gawain turns, and graciously takes his leave of the lord, 1960

Greeting that noble knight with gratitude:
'May I give you thanks for this marvellous time,
And God bless you for your great honours at this feast.
Were you willing, I'd yield myself up as your man,
But, as you know, I must go on in the morning.
Please grant me, as you promised, a guide to lead me
To the gate of the Green Chapel, where God
Would have me face my fate on New Year's Day.'
'Indeed,' he said, 'I did agree to that, and you'll see
My promise fulfilled perfectly, and with pleasure.'
He promptly singles out a servant to point the way
And direct him over the dales with the least delay
By a quick path that goes through thickets and groves
of trees.

1970

The lord, for his uncommon
And countless courtesies,
He thanked, and the noble women,
And gave them his good-byes.

He spoke to them softly, his heart heavy,
And kissed them, expressing great gratitude for their
kindness,
And they, in turn, gave him their compliments,
Commending him to Christ, with grave sighs.
Now he courteously takes his leave of that noble company;
He spoke a warming word to each man he stood before
For his fine service, and the trouble he had taken,
And for tending him so faithfully all that time.
And each man there was as sorry to see him go
As if they had lived their whole lives with him.
Servants, bearing lights, led him to his bedroom

1980

And, as he needed sleep, brought him to bed.
Whether, once there, he slept, I dare not say,
For the morning was much on his mind as he thought
and thought.

1990

Let him lie there and wait,
He almost has what he sought.
If you're patient, I'll relate
All that the morning brought.

IV

NIGHT passes and New Year's Day draws near,
 Dawn drives out the dark as the Lord decrees.
 A time of wild weather; the wind increases,
 Clouds rain down over the cold ground;
 A nagging northerly pinches the skin,
 Blown snow whips about, nipping the animals;
 Wind whistles in gusts and howls off the heights,
 Packing the dales with deep drifting snow.
 Lying wide awake, the knight listens:
 At each cock-crow he told the time exactly.
 Though he closed his eyelids he dozed but little.
 Before first light he leapt briskly out of bed,
 For a lamp still burned on in the bedroom.
 He roused his chamberlain, who replied straightway.
 He bade him bring his suit of mail, and his saddle.
 The man gets up, goes to fetch his clothes for him,
 Then soon arrays sir Gawain in splendid style,
 Beginning with warm clothes against the biting cold,
 Then his mail-armor, which the men had safely stored:
 Chest-pieces, plate-armor perfectly polished,
 And his coat of mail, its metal rings rubbed clean of rust.*
 All seemed brand new and he was thankful
 indeed.

2000

2010

2020

As he buckled on each piece
 It shone like a burnished bead,
 The finest from here to Greece.
 Then he asked for his steed.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Gawain arranged the best of the gear himself:
 His coat-armor, its crest a bright blazon
 Worked in velvet, with vivid gems pointing the virtues,
 Beaten and beautifully set, with embroidered seams
 And a marvellous lining of finest fur.
 Nor did he leave off the lace-girdle, the lady's gift;
 For his own good, Gawain could not forget that.
 When he'd buckled his blade about his firm haunches
 He wound his love-token twice around him,*
 Tucked it quickly about his waist, content
 That the green silk-girdle suited him well;
 Against its ground of royal red it glowed richly.
 But he wore the green belt not for its beauty
 Nor for its pendants, all neatly polished,
 Nor for the gold that glinted on its end-knots,
 But to save himself when it behoved him to suffer
 And stand defenceless against death when he met that man
 again.
 Now that he is ready
 He strides outside, and then
 He turns and, in a body,
 Thanks all the serving-men.

2030

2040

2050

His great horse Gringolet was waiting for him.
 He had been proudly stabled; he stood there, towering,
 Fretting at the reins, fit—and itching to be off.
 The knight strode up to him, studied his coat
 And muttered softly, swearing on his oath,
 'Here are men who care, and mind about honour.
 Much happiness to the man who maintains these men.
 And may the fine lady find happiness and long life.

Whenever they cherish a guest out of their charity
Heaping honour on their heads, may the Lord
In High Heaven reward them, and all in this hall!
If I am still to dwell on this earth a while
I will certainly, God willing, return with a great gift.
He steps up into the stirrup, bestrides the big horse. 2060
His man hands him his shield; he slings it over his shoulder.
With the spikes of his gilt heels he spurs Gringolet
Who springs off at once—no more need to prance on the stones
and rear.

Now man and horse ride tall
And the man bears lance and spear.
'May Christ protect this hall;
May all things prosper here.'

The bridge was drawn down, the wide gates
Unbarred. Both halves slowly opened. 2070
As he crossed the bridge-boards the knight blessed himself.
He praised the porter, who knelt before the knight
To give him good day and pray God to keep him;
Then went off on his way with his one attendant
To point out the route to that perilous place
Where soon he must suffer that mighty blow.
They rode by bank-sides under bare branches,
They climbed by cliffs where the cold hung.
Clouds, high overhead; down below, danger.
Mist drizzled on the moors, dissolved the summits. 2080
Each peak wore a hat, a huge mist-mantle.
Brook-waters boiled, sluiced over the slopes;
White water raged against the river-banks.
The way they took through the woods was wild,

But soon it was time for the morning sun to
come up.
In a field of fresh snow
That lay on a high hill-top
The servant reined in, and now
Bade his master stop. 2090

'See, I have come this distance with you, sir,
And you are not far now from the notable place
That you have sought so long and so zealously.
But I shall tell you the truth as I know you well
And as you are a much-loved lord and man;
If you observe my words to the letter you'll be better served.
The place you're headed for is held to be perilous
For in those wastes lives the worst man in the world.
He is fearless and brutal and delights in fighting;
He is mightier than any man you might imagine. 2100
His body is bulkier than four of the best
In Arthur's house, or Hector's,* or any man's.
He chooses to challenge whoever might appear
At the Green Chapel; however skilled at arms
He will put him down, destroy him with one blow.
For he is vicious; his violence knows no mercy:
Whether churl or chaplain rides by his church,
Whether monk, or priest, or any other man,*
He thrives on killing them all, as he loves his life.
So I tell you as truly as you sit upon that saddle 2110
Go if you will—but, if he has his way, you'll be slain.
Believe me, though you have twenty lives to trade for
your own:
He's lived here since long ago;

In fights he cuts all down;
Against his deadly blow
No sure defence is known.

So it's wise, sir Gawain, to leave him be.
When you go, for God's sake take a different track.
Ride home through another region, where Christ can help
you.

2120

I'll hurry home meanwhile, and I promise
And swear, by God and all his good saints—
So help me!—and by the holy relics and all else,
To keep your secret loyally, and tell no one you ran
From any knight or man that's known to me.'
'Many thanks,' he murmured, then replied somewhat drily,
'I'm touched by your care for my welfare. I wish you well.

I'm sure you'd keep my secret quite securely,
But however firmly you held it, should I fail here
And scuttle off, fleeing in fright, as you suggest,
I'd be a fraud and coward, and could not be forgiven.
No—I shall go to the chapel, whatever happens,
And say to the man you speak of whatever I wish,
Come foul fortune or good, wherever my fate
might dwell.

2130

Tough he may be, his arm
Might wield a club that can kill,
But the Lord will save from harm
All those who serve Him well.'

'Mother of God!' cried the man, 'if your mind's made up
To take your troubles entirely on your head—
If you wish to lose your life, I won't argue.

2140

Put on your helmet, hold your spear at your side
And ride down the track that takes you close to that cliff;
Descend to the very depths of that wild valley
Then glance a little around the glade; on your left hand,
Chance is, you will see that self-same chapel
And its massive master, grimly guarding it.
Farewell, noble Gawain, for I would not
Keep you company for all the gold in the ground
Nor walk with you one foot further through this wood.'
Brusquely, the man wrenches his bridle around,
Kicks his horse with his heels, quick and hard,
And gallops off and away, leaving Gawain
still there.*

2150

'I'll neither groan nor weep,'
Muttered the knight, 'I swear.
It's God's will: I must keep
My word, and not despair.'

He goads Gringolet further on, follows the path,
Rides along a bank beside a forest-fringe,
Negotiates a steep slope down into a dale.
He surveys the scene; it seems to him dreary, wild—
No place to hide, no haven to protect him,
But on both sides, sheer beetling banks:
Rough crags and piles of jagged rocks
Like snapped spears that appeared to scratch the sky.
He halted, reined in his horse, rested a moment,
Gazing around for a glimpse of the Green Chapel.
He thought it strange that nothing caught his notice,
Save something a short way off, where a kind of mound
Rose up, a barrow* on a slope by a flowing stream

2160

2170

Where a rushing waterfall ran down. There,
The stream bubbled; it seemed to be boiling.
The man forced his horse towards the mound,
And leapt off lightly by a linden tree.
He hitched his horse's bridle to a rough branch,
Stalked over to the mound and walked around it,
Wondering what on earth such a barrow could be.
Both at the end and sides it had big vents,
The bump completely grown over with clumps of grass;
And nothing inside, save the deep dark of a cave,
Or the crevice of an old crag—he couldn't tell which
from there.

2180

'The Green Chapel! Lord, what a sight!
A place, more likely, where
In the dark of midnight
The Devil says morning prayer.

* 'An utter desert,' muttered Gawain. 'What a desolation,
With its sinister shrine, and tufts of weed everywhere!
A fitting spot for that fellow in his green gown
To do his devil's rites and unholy duties!
All my five senses say it is the Fiend
Who's brought me down here to destroy me!'
What an unhappy place! An evil chapel—Devil
Take this accursed church, the worst I've ever chanced on.'
His helmet firm on his head, lance in hand,
He strode up to the roof of that rough abode.
At that height, from behind a boulder, he heard
Way off, beyond the brook, a weird sound.
Listen to that! It clattered against cliffs, as if to shatter them:
A sound like a scythe being ground against a stone.

2190

2200

Listen! It sang, and whirred, like wild mill-water
In a race.* It clanged and rang out, rushing
Towards him. 'By God, this instrument is meant
To honour me alone; it is for me he hones

his blade!

God's will be done. To cry

"Alas" is of little aid.

Yet, even if I'm to die,

No noise will make me afraid.'

2210

With that, the knight called out with all his might:
'Who's master here, who keeps his covenant with me?'
Without halting, Gawain stalks up to the place:
'If anyone wants anything let him walk out now,
And finish this business off—now or never.'

'Be patient,' came a call from the bank above him.
'You'll very soon get what I promised you.'

The sound went on again as he ground for a while.
The grind-stone whined, then stopped; and the man
Stepped down, wound his way by a crag, and whirled
Out of a gap in the rock-wall with a grisly weapon:
Danish-made, its bright blade whetted for the blow,
Colossal and sharp, its shaft cunningly shaped.
Gauged by the gleaming lace he gripped it by
It was all of four feet broad, or more.

2220

And the man in green was dressed as he'd seen him first:
The same bushy beard, thick thighs, and hair
Hanging down—save now he saunters firmly on foot
Wielding his weapon like a walking stick.

2230

When he reached the water he refused to wade across
But vaulted over on the huge handle, not halting,

But striding, fiercely angry, over a wide field
of snow.

And Gawain bowed his head,
In greeting—but not too low.
'Well, sir,' the other said,
'I see you can keep your vow.'

'Gawain,' said the green knight, 'may God protect you.
I wish you a pleasant welcome to my place! 2240
You've judged your journey well, as a true man should,
And you're perfectly correct on the pact we agreed upon:
A twelvemonth ago, you took what fell to you then;
Now, on this New Year's Day I shall pay you back.
We're on our own down here in this lonely dale,
No man stands between us, we can strike as bitterly as
We please. Take your helm from your head. Prepare yourself!
And do not resist for I didn't restrain you
'When you hacked my head off with your first smack.'
'By the God who gave me soul and spirit, 2250
I shan't begrudge you your blow nor any harm that happens.
But take one stroke only; I'll stand still meanwhile.
Do whatever you wish—I'll neither resist
nor care.'

He dropped his head, waiting.
His neck showed white and bare,
He made as if this thing
Would never cause him fear.

Now the man in green gets ready, steadies himself,
Sweeps back the grim weapon to hack at Gawain. 2260
He flourishes it with all the force in his big body

And brings down a dreadful blow, as if to destroy him.
Had it descended as hard as he seemed to intend
He would have been bisected by that blow,
But Gawain, glancing sideways as the axe swung,
Flinched his shoulders to evade the sharp blade
As it flashed towards the flint to topple him.
Suddenly the man in green stopped his motion
Then scolded him with a spate of fine phrases:
'You're not Gawain,' he said, 'so noble and so good.* 2270
He's not afraid of a whole army by hill or dale.
And now you tremble in terror even before I touch you.
I never knew he was such a lily-livered knight!
Did I flinch, or flee from you when your blow felled me?
Did I cavil, or create a fuss at King Arthur's house?
My head flew to my feet but I never flicked an eyebrow;
And you—I haven't even touched you and you're trembling.
It's clear I'm the better man here, the case is white
and black.'

Gawain replied: 'Enough! 2280
I won't flinch when you hack—
Though once my head is off
I cannot put it back.

'But swing promptly, man, and bring me to your point.
Deliver me to my destiny—but don't delay!
I'll stand up to your stroke and start away no more
Till your steel strike me squarely. There's my oath on it.'
'Here is your bargain, then!' He heaved the blade up high
And gazed at him savagely as if somewhat crazed.
He gathered himself for a great blow, then held 2290
His hand, letting him stand there, still unharmed.

Gawain readied himself, steady in every limb,
Still as a stone, or the stump of a tree
That grips the rocky ground with a hundred roots.
The man in green chatted on cheerily, mocking him:
'Now you've recovered your nerve I have to hit you.
May the great knighthood of King Arthur guard you
And keep your neck-bone from this blow—if it can.'
Gawain, afire with fierce rage, replied,
'Get on, man. No more threatening. Strike!
It seems to me you've made yourself afraid.'
'All right,' the knight said, 'after such a speech
I'll no longer delay your quest, nor let you break
your vow.'

He stands ready to swing,
Face puckered. Imagine how
Gawain is suffering
For there is no hope now.

2300

He lifts the weighty weapon, lets it fall
Straight: the blade brushes the bare neck;
But though the arm swung fiercely he felt no harm
For his neck was only nicked, a surface scratch;
Yet when the blade broke the fatty flesh
And bright blood shot over his shoulder to earth,
Seeing his own blood-spots mottle the snow,
He leapt forward, feet together, a spear-length,
Seized his helmet, and slammed it on his head;
With a heave of his shoulders he hastily swung his shield
In front of him, drew his sword and spoke out fiercely.
Not any morning since the one when his mother bore him
Can he have been half so happy a man:

2310

2320

'Stop striking—now! Not one blow more!
I have received your stroke without strife or resistance.
If you give me more you'll get repaid:
It will be quick and fierce—you can count on what
you've heard.
Only one stroke will fall.
That was our accord
Last year in Arthur's hall.
So stop. That was your word.'

2330

The man drew back. Upending his big weapon
He shoved the shaft into the ground, leaned over the blade
And studied the knight who stood there before him
In his fine armour, his fear of being harmed
Quite vanished. That sight warms the blood in his veins.
He pokes fun at him, cracks merry jokes
In a loud tone that rebounds off the stones:
'My good fellow, no need now to be so fierce!
In our fight no one has slighted you nor
Broken the conditions of our contract made at court.
I promised one stroke only. You have handsomely paid
Your debt—you're freed from all other dues.
Perhaps I'd have struck you with much more power
Had I been nimbler, and hurt you horribly.
That first stroke was only a joke, a threat in jest;
I didn't hack you open, I hit you but lightly—rightly so
Because of our agreement fixed on that first evening
When you behaved well in my hall and gave me all
Your winnings as a wise and good man must.
And the second stroke I dealt you for that day
When you kissed my wife and returned my rights to me.

2340

2350

My arm missed both times: mere feints, no harm
to show.

Who pay their debts can rest
Quite unafraid. And so,
Because you failed the test
Third time, you took that blow.

For that woven garment you wear is my own girdle.
My wife wove it,* so I know it well.

I have missed no facts concerning your acts and kisses, 2360
Nor my wife's wooing of you; I brought it all about.
I sent her to test you out. You withstood her stoutly.
You're the most faultless warrior who walks on foot!
As a pearl is more precious than a snow-pea
So is Gawain, upon my oath, among other knights.

Yet here you lacked a little: your loyalty
Was wanting—not out of greed, not out of wantonness,
But because you loved your life—and I blame you much less
For that.' Gawain stood still, his mind in pain,
So shaken with guilt, so grief-struck that he quaked within. 2370
The blood rushed from his heart, flushing his face.

He shrivelled in shame at what the bold man told him,
And the first words that he spoke were these:
'A curse upon my cowardice—and my covetousness!
There's villainy in both, and virtue-killing vice!
He grasped the love-knot and loosened its clasp,
And hurled it hard in anger towards the man.
'There, take that tawdry love-token! Bad luck to it!
Craven fear of your blow, and cowardice, brought me
To give in to my greed and go against myself 2380
And the noble and generous code of knightly men.

I am proved false, faulty—those failings will haunt me.
From falsehood and faithlessness come a hollow heart and
ill-fame,*

And I confess to you
That I am much to blame.
What would you have me do
That I may cleanse my name?'

The lord laughed, and replied reasonably
And warmly: 'Any harm you've done is now undone. 2390
You've clearly confessed and freed yourself of fault.
You've paid your penance at the point of my blade;
I hold you absolved of all offence, and as fresh-made
As if, since birth, you had never sinned on earth.
And I give you back the girdle with the golden border.
It's green like my gown—so take it, Gawain,
To recall this contest when you ride away
Among proud princes, as an emblem to remember
Your quest and challenge at the Green Chapel. But the feast
Continues at my castle. Let us hurry home 2400
And resume our festival and our New Year revels
once more.

With my wife,' insisted the lord,
'Who was your foe before,
You'll find a new accord;
Of that I'm very sure.'

But Gawain declines, catches hold of his helm
And politely puts it on, thanking the man most warmly:
'I have lingered long enough. Good luck to you,
And may He who bestows all honour show you His bounty. 2410

And commend me to your lovely lady, your courteous wife—
Both her and the other, my two honoured ladies,
Who so neatly tricked their knight with their nice ploy.
Yet it's no wonder if a fool's made mad
By the wiles of a woman, and suffers woe.
Adam in Paradise was thus deceived by one,
Solomon by more than one; Samson also—
Delilah sealed his fate—and, after that, David
Was betrayed and brought to sorrow by Bathsheba.*
Since these were gulled by their guiles, how fine it would be 2420
To love women warmly, yet believe no word that
They say. They were the noblest men we've known;
Fortune favoured them, they were the finest, the most blessed
by Heaven.

But by women they'd used
Their wits were teased and riven.
Now I, likewise abused,
Perhaps will be forgiven.

'As for your girdle,' said Gawain, 'God reward you,
I shall bear it with the best will—not for its gleaming gold, 2430
Not for its fine-knotted cloth, nor its many pendants,
Not because of its cost or its handsome handiwork—
But I shall see it always, as a sign of my fault
Wherever I ride, remembering with remorse, in times of pride
How feeble is the flesh, how petty and perverse.
What a pestilent hutch and house of plagues it is,
Inviting filth!* And, if my vanity flare up,
When I see this love-lace it will humble me.
Now I would ask one thing, if you won't be offended:
Since you are lord of these lands where I have spent 2440

Many days in your friendship—may the One who reigns
High in Heaven reward you royally!—
By what name are you known? It's the last thing I'll ask.'
'Very well, I shall tell you,' the knight replied,
'By name I am known as Bertilak de Hautdesert.*
Through the power of Morgan le Fay, part of my menage—
By her wiles in witchcraft and her cleverness
She has mastered magic skills once kept by Merlin,
For it is well known that long ago she fell in love
With that wise wizard, as your knights have heard at your own
hearth-side. 2451

"Morgan the Goddess":* so
Titled, since none can ride
So tall, but with a blow
She will cut down his pride—

'She had me to go in this guise to your hall
To test your mettle, gather whether there's truth
In the rumours of the Round Table's renown;
She worked this marvel on me to befuddle your brains
And cause Guinevere grief, kill her with fear 2460
Of a ghastly apparition that spoke like a ghoul
And twisted his head in his own hand at the High Table.
It is she who lives in my home, the hoary lady;
Arthur's half-sister, and your own aunt as well:
The Duchess of Tintagel's daughter, who bore,
Through union with Uther, the noble Arthur, now king.
So I beseech you, come back and greet your aunt
And celebrate in my hall. The whole house loves you.
And, as much as any man, I wish you well, for
The truth that you bear, and there's my oath on it.' 2470

Gawain again said, 'No—not by any means.'
They embraced and kissed, commending each other to Christ,
The Prince of Paradise, and parted right where
they stood.

Gawain tugged at the rein,
Turned homeward fast as he could.
And the knight in bright green
Turned to wherever he would.*

And now Gawain rides along wild ways
On his good steed Gringolet, his life spared by grace. 2480
Sometimes he stayed in a dwelling, often out in the open;
He battled, and fought off vicious attacks in the valleys
Too many adventures to mention in this tale.
His neck-wound ceased to hurt him, slowly healed,
And he bore the green belt wound around him
Cross-wise as a baldric, bound fast to his side,
Its laces tied under his left arm* in a tassel,
Sign of the sorry fault that had found him out.
And thus, quite sound, the knight comes to the court.
When the king found Gawain come home, cries 2490
Of gratitude and great joy broke out, mounting as the king
And queen kissed him and all the court greeted him,
And all his trusted brother knights of the hall
Questioned him, marvelling as he told tales of the quest
And all the galling trials he had undergone:
The challenge at the Green Chapel, the antics of the man
In green, the loving friendship with the lady—and the girdle.
He bade them scan his bare neck for the scar,
That shameful hurt at the lord's hand, with himself
to blame. 2500

Grieving as he re-told
The whole tale, his blood came
Rushing, now hot, now cold,
And his face flushed in shame.

'Look, my lord,' he said, touching the love-token.
'This band belongs with the wound I bear on my neck:
Sign of the harm I've done, and the hurt I've duly received
For covetousness and cowardice, for succumbing to deceit.
It is a token of untruth and I am trapped in it
And must wear it everywhere while my life lasts. 2510
No one can hide, without disaster, a harmful deed.
What's done is done and cannot be undone.'
The king and the whole court comfort the knight,
Laughing loudly,* and they cordially decree
Right then, that lords and ladies of the Round Table
And all in their Brotherhood should wear a baldric
Bound cross-wise round them, a band of green
The same as sir Gawain's, to keep him company.
All agreed it was good for the Round Table's renown;
He who wore it would be honoured evermore,* 2520
As it is recounted in the best books of old Romance.
These marvellous things took place in the age of Arthur
As the books of Britain, Brutus' isle, all tell.
Since Brutus, that bold man, first landed here
After the battle and the attack were over
at Troy,
This land has often known
Adventures like these. I pray
That He of the thornèd crown
Bring us all to His joy. AMEN*
HONI SOYT QUI MAL PENSE* 2530