

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

FITT¹ i

Once the siege and assault of Troy had ceased,
with the city a smoke-heap of cinders and ash,
the traitor who contrived such betrayal there
was tried for his treachery, the truest on earth;²

5 Aeneas, it was, with his noble warriors
who went conquering abroad, laying claim to the crowns
of the wealthiest kingdoms in the western world.
Mighty Romulus³ quickly careered towards Rome
and conceived a city in magnificent style
10 which from then until now has been known by his name.
Ticius constructed townships in Tuscany
and Langobard⁴ did likewise building homes in Lombardy.
And further afield, over the Sea of France,
Felix Brutus⁵ founds Britain on broad banks
15 most grand.

And wonder, dread and war
have lingered in that land
where loss and love in turn
have held the upper hand.

20 After Britain was built by this founding father
a bold race bred there, battle-happy men
causing trouble and torment in turbulent times,
and through history more strangeness has happened here
than anywhere else I know of on Earth.

25 But most regal of rulers in the royal line
was Arthur, who I heard is honored above all,
and the inspiring story I intend to spin
has moved the hearts and minds of many—
an awesome episode in the legends of Arthur.

30 So listen a little while to my tale if you will
and I'll tell it as it's told in the town where it trips from
the tongue;
and as it has been inked
in stories bold and strong,
35 where loyal letters linked
have lasted loud and long.

It was Christmas at Camelot—King Arthur's court,
where the great and the good of the land had gathered,
the right noble lords of the ranks of the Round Table

* The translation is by Simon Armitage.

1. "Fitt" is a technical term used by the *Gawain* poet, and other late-medieval English alliterative poets, to designate the longer divisions of a poem.

2. The treacherous knight is Aeneas, who was a traitor to his city, Troy, according to medieval tradition, but Aeneas was actually tried by the Greeks for his refusal to hand his sister Polyxena

over to them.

3. Like Aeneas, the legendary founder of Rome is here given Trojan ancestry.

4. The reputed founder of Lombardy. Ticius is not otherwise known.

5. Great-grandson of Aeneas and legendary founder of Britain, not elsewhere given the name *Felix* (Latin, "happy").

40 all roundly carousing and reveling in pleasure.
Time after time, in tournaments of joust,
they had lunged at each other with leveled lances
then returned to the castle to carry on their caroling,
for the feasting lasted a full fortnight and one day,
45 with more food and drink than a fellow could dream of.

The hubbub of their humor was heavenly to hear:
pleasant dialogue by day and dancing after dusk,
so house and hall were lit with happiness
and lords and ladies were luminous with joy.
50 With all the wonder in the world they gathered there as one:
the most chivalrous and courteous knights known to Christendom;
the most wonderful women to have walked in this world;
the handsomest king to be crowned at court.
All these fair folk in their first age, together in
55 that hall:

most fortunate under heaven,
with Arthur, that man of high will;
no bolder band could ever
be found on field or hill.

60 With New Year so young it still yawned and stretched
helpings were doubled on the dais that day.
And as king and company were coming to the hall
the choir in the chapel fell suddenly quiet,
then a chorus erupted from the courtiers and clerks:

65 "Noel," they cheered, then "Noel, Noel,"
"New Year Gifts!" the knights cried next
as they pressed forwards to offer their presents,
teasing with frivolous favors and forfeits,
till those ladies who lost couldn't help but laugh,
70 and the undefeated were far from forlorn.⁶

Their merrymaking rolled on in this manner until mealtime,
when, worthily washed, they went to the table,
and were seated in order of honor, as was apt,
with Guinevere in their gathering, gloriously framed
75 at her place on the platform, pricelessly curtained
by silk to each side, and canopied across
with tasteful tapestries of Toulouse and Tharsia,
studded with stones and stunning gems
beyond pocket or purse, beyond what pennies
80 could buy.

But not one stone outshone
the quartz of the queen's eyes;
with hand on heart, no one
could argue otherwise.

85 But Arthur would not eat until all were served.
He brimmed with ebullience, being almost boyish
in his love of life, and what he liked the least
was to sit still watching the seasons slip by.

6. The forfeit that made the ladies who lost laugh was in all likelihood a kiss.

His blood was busy and he buzzed with thoughts,
 90 and the matter which played on his mind at that moment
 was his pledge to take no portion from his plate
 on such a special day until a story was told:
 some far-fetched yarn or outrageous fable,
 the tallest of tales, yet one ringing with truth,
 95 like the action-packed epics of men-at-arms.
 Or till some chancer had challenged his chosen knight,
 dared him, with a lance, to lay life on the line,
 to stare death face-to-face and accept defeat
 should fortune or fate smile more favorably on his foe.
 100 Within Camelot's castle this was the custom,
 and at feasts and festivals when the fellowship
 would meet.

With features proud and fine
 he stood there tall and straight,
 105 a king at Christmastime
 amid great merriment.

And still he stands there just being himself,
 chatting away charmingly, exchanging views.
 Good Sir Gawain is seated by Guinevere,
 110 and on his other side Agravain the Hard Hand sits,
 both nephews of the king and notable knights.
 At the head of the board sat Bishop Baldwin,
 with Ywain, son of Urien, to eat beside him.
 First those sitting on the dais⁷ were splendidly served,
 115 then those stalwarts seated on the benches to the sides.
 The first course comes in to the fanfare and clamor
 of blasting trumpets hung with trembling banners,
 then pounding double-drums and dinning pipes,
 weird sounds and wails of such warbled wildness
 120 that to hear and feel them made the heart float free.
 Flavorful delicacies of flesh were fetched in
 and the freshest of foods, so many in fact
 there was scarcely space to present the stews
 or to set the soups in the silver bowls on
 125 the cloth.

Each guest received his share
 of bread or meat or broth;
 a dozen plates per pair—
 plus beer or wine, or both.

130 Now, on the subject of supper I'll say no more
 as it's obvious to everyone that no one went without.
 Because another sound, a new sound, suddenly drew near,
 which might signal the king to sample his supper,
 for barely had the horns finished blowing their breath
 135 and with starters just spooned to the seated guests,

7. A raised platform. Although the Round Table is referred to (line 39), the king and queen, along with the most prominent members of the court, are seated above the rest.

a fearful form appeared, framed in the door:
 a mountain of a man, immeasurably high,
 a hulk of a human from head to hips,
 so long and thick in his loins and his limbs
 140 I should genuinely judge him to be a half giant,
 or a most massive man, the mightiest of mortals.
 But handsome, too, like any horseman worth his horse,
 for despite the bulk and brawn of his body
 his stomach and waist were slender and sleek.
 145 In fact in all features he was finely formed
 it seemed.

Amazement seized their minds,
 no soul had ever seen
 a knight of such a kind—
 150 entirely emerald green.

And his gear and garments were green as well:
 a tight fitting tunic, tailored to his torso,
 and a cloak to cover him, the cloth fully lined
 with smoothly shorn fur clearly showing, and faced
 155 with all-white ermine, as was the hood,
 worn shawled on his shoulders, shucked from his head.
 On his lower limbs his leggings were also green,
 wrapped closely round his calves, and his sparkling spurs
 were green-gold, strapped with stripy silk,
 160 and were set on his stockings, for this stranger was shoeless.
 In all vestments he revealed himself veritably verdant!
 From his belt hooks and buckle to the baubles and gems
 arrayed so richly around his costume
 and adorning the saddle, stitched onto silk.
 165 All the details of his dress are difficult to describe,
 embroidered as it was with butterflies and birds,
 green beads emblazoned on a background of gold.
 All the horse's tack—harness strap, hind strap,
 the eye of the bit, each alloy and enamel
 170 and the stirrups he stood in were similarly tinted,
 and the same with the cantle and the skirts of the saddle,
 all glimmering and glinting with the greenest jewels.
 And the horse: every hair was green, from hoof
 to mane.

175 A steed of pure green stock.
 Each snort and shudder strained
 the hand-stitched bridle, but
 his rider had him reined.

The fellow in green was in fine fettle.
 180 The hair of his head was as green as his horse,
 fine flowing locks which fanned across his back,
 plus a bushy green beard growing down to his breast,
 which hung with the splendid hair from his head
 and was lopped in a line at elbow length
 185 so half his arms were gowned in green growth,

crimped at the collar, like a king's cape.
 The mane of his mount was groomed to match,
 combed and knotted into curlicues
 then tinsel with gold, tied and twisted
 190 green over gold, green over gold.
 The fetlocks were finished in the same fashion
 with bright green ribbon braided with beads,
 as was the tail—to its tippety-tip!
 And a long, tied thong lacing it tight
 195 where bright and burnished gold bells chimed clearly.
 No waking man had witnessed such a warrior
 or weird warhorse—otherworldly, yet flesh
 and bone.

His look was lightning bright
 200 said those who glimpsed its glow.
 It seemed no man there might
 survive his violent blow.

Yet he wore no helmet and no hauberk either,
 no armored apparel or plate was apparent,
 205 and he swung no sword nor sported any shield,
 but held in one hand a sprig of holly—
 of all the evergreens the greenest ever—
 and in the other hand held the mother of all axes,
 a cruel piece of kit I kid you not:
 210 the head was an ell in length at least
 and forged in green steel with a gilt finish;
 its broad-edged blade brightly burnished,
 it could shear a man's scalp and shave him to boot.
 The handle which fitted that fiend's great fist
 215 was inlaid with iron, end to end,
 with green pigment picking out impressive designs.
 From stock to neck, where it stopped with a knot,
 a lace was looped the length of the haft,
 trimmed with tassels and tails of string
 220 fastened firmly in place by forest-green buttons.
 And he kicks on, canters through that crowded hall
 towards the top table, not the least bit timid,
 cocksure of himself, sitting high in the saddle.
 "And who," he bellows, without breaking breath,
 225 "is governor of this gaggle? I'll be glad to know.
 It's with him and no one else that I'll hold
 a pact."

He held them with his eyes,
 and looked from right to left,
 230 not knowing, of those knights,
 which person to respect.

The guests looked on. They gaped and they gawked
 and were mute with amazement: what did it mean
 that human and horse could develop this hue,
 235 should grow to be grass-green or greener still,

like green enamel emboldened by bright gold?
 Some stood and stared then stepped a little closer,
 drawn near to the knight to know his next move;
 they'd seen some sights, but this was something special,
 240 a miracle or magic, or so they imagined.
 Yet several of the lords were like statues in their seats,
 left speechless and rigid, not risking a response.
 The hall fell hushed, as if all who were present
 had slipped into sleep or some trancelike state.

245 No doubt
 not all were stunned and stilled
 by dread, but duty bound
 to hold their tongues until
 their sovereign could respond.

250 Then the king acknowledged this curious occurrence,
 cordially addressed him, keeping his cool.
 "A warm welcome, sir, this winter's night.
 My name is Arthur, I am head of this house.
 Won't you slide from that saddle and stay awhile,
 255 and the business which brings you we shall learn of later."
 "No," said the knight, "by Him in highest heaven,
 I'm not here to idle in your hall this evening.
 But because your acclaim is so loudly chorused,
 and your castle and brotherhood are called the best,
 260 the strongest men to ever mount the saddle,
 the worthiest knights ever known to the world,
 both in competition and true combat,
 and since courtesy, so it's said, is championed here,
 I'm intrigued, and attracted to your door at this time.
 265 Be assured by this holly stem here in my hand
 that I mean no menace. So expect no malice,
 for if I'd slogged here tonight to slay and slaughter
 my helmet and hauberk wouldn't be at home
 and my sword and spear would be here at my side,
 270 and more weapons of war, as I'm sure you're aware;
 I'm clothed for peace, not kitted out for conflict.
 But if you're half as honorable as I've heard folk say
 you'll gracefully grant me this game which I ask for
 by right."

275 Then Arthur answered, "Knight
 most courteous, if you claim
 a fair, unarmored fight,
 we'll see you have the same."

"I'm spoiling for no scrap, I swear. Besides,
 280 the bodies on these benches are just bum-fluffed bairns.
 If I'd ridden to your castle rigged out for a ruck
 these lightweight men wouldn't last a minute.
 But it's Yuletide—a time of youthfulness, yes?
 So at Christmas in this court I lay down a challenge:
 285 if a person here present, within these premises,

is big or bold or red-blooded enough
 to strike me one stroke and be struck in return,
 I shall give him as a gift this gigantic cleaver
 and the axe shall be his to handle how he likes.
 290 I'll kneel, bare my neck and take the first knock.
 So who has the gail? The gumption? The guts?
 Who'll spring from his seat and snatch this weapon?
 I offer the axe—who'll have it as his own?
 I'll afford one free hit from which I won't flinch,
 295 and promise that twelve months will pass in peace,
 then claim
 the duty I deserve
 in one year and one day.
 Does no one have the nerve
 300 to wager in this way?"

If flustered at first, now totally foxed
 were the household and the lords, both the highborn and
 the low.
 Still stirrured, the knight swiveled round in his saddle
 looking left and right, his red eyes rolling
 305 beneath the bristles of his bushy green brows,
 his beard swishing from side to side.
 When the court kept its counsel he cleared his throat
 and stiffened his spine. Then he spoke his mind:
 "So here is the House of Arthur," he scoffed,
 310 "whose virtues reverberate across vast realms.
 Where's the fortitude and fearlessness you're so famous for?
 And the breathtaking bravery and the big-mouth bragging?
 The towering reputation of the Round Table,
 skittled and scuppered by a stranger—what a scandal!
 315 You flap and you flinch and I've not raised a finger!"
 Then he laughed so loud that their leader saw red.
 Blood flowed to his fine-featured face and he raged
 inside.
 His men were also hurt—
 320 those words had pricked their pride.
 But born so brave at heart
 the king stepped up one stride.

"Your request," he countered, "is quite insane,
 and folly finds the man who flirts with the fool.
 325 No warrior worth his salt would be worried by your words,
 so in heaven's good name hand over the axe
 and I'll happily fulfill the favor you ask."
 He strides to him swiftly and seizes his arm;
 the man dismounts in one mighty leap.
 330 Then Arthur grips the axe, grabs it by its haft
 and takes it above him, intending to attack.
 Yet the stranger before him stands up straight,
 highest in the house by at least a head,
 but stands there sternly, stroking his beard,

335 drawing down his coat, countenance undaunted,
 about to be bludgeoned, but no more bothered
 than a guest at the table being given a goblet
 of wine.

By Guinevere, Gawain
 340 now to his king inclines
 and says, "I stake my claim.
 May this melee be mine."

"Should you call me, courteous lord," said Gawain to
 his king,
 "to rise from my seat and stand at your side,
 345 politely take leave of my place at the table
 and quit without causing offence to my queen,
 then I would come to your counsel before this great court.
 For I find it unfitting, as my fellow knights would,
 when a deed of such daring is dangled before us
 350 that you take on this trial—tempted as you are—
 when brave, bold men are seated on these benches,
 men never matched in the mettle of their minds,
 never beaten or bettered in the field of battle.
 I am weakest of your warriors and feeblest of wit;
 355 loss of my life would be least lamented.
 Were I not your nephew my life would mean nothing;
 to be born of your blood is my body's only claim.
 Such a foolish affair is unfitting for a king,
 so; being first to come forward, it should fall to me.
 360 And if my proposal is improper, let no other person
 stand blame."

The knighthood then unites
 and each knight says the same:
 their king can stand aside
 365 and give Gawain the game.

So the sovereign instructed his knight to stand.
 Getting to his feet he moved graciously forward
 and knelt before Arthur, taking hold of the axe.
 Letting go of it, Arthur then held up his hand
 370 to give young Gawain the blessing of God
 and hope he finds firmness in heart and fist.
 "Take care, young cousin, to catch him cleanly,
 use full-blooded force then you needn't fear
 the blow which he threatens to trade in return."
 375 Gawain, with the weapon, walked towards the warrior,
 and they stood face-to-face, not one man afraid.
 Then the green knight spoke, growled at Gawain:
 "Before we compete, repeat what we've promised.
 And start by saying your name to me, sir,
 380 and tell me the truth so I can take it on trust."
 "In good faith," said the knight, "Gawain is my name.
 I heave this axe, and whatever happens after,
 in twelvemonth's time I'll be struck in return

with any weapon you wish, and by you and you
alone."

The green man speaks again:

"I swear on all I know,
I'm glad it's you, Gawain,
who'll drive the axe-head home."

"Gawain," said the green knight, "by God, I'm glad
the favor I've called for will fall from your fist.
You've perfectly repeated the promise we made
and the terms of the contest are crystal clear.

Except for one thing: you must solemnly swear
that you'll seek me yourself; that you'll search me out
to the ends of the earth to earn the same blow
as you'll dole out today in this decorous hall."

"But where will you be? Where's your abode?
You're a man of mystery, as God is my maker.

Which court do you come from and what are you called?
There is knowledge I need, including your name,
then I shall use all my wit to work out the way,
and keep to our contract, so cross my heart."

"But enough at New Year. It needs nothing more,"
said the warrior in green to worthy Gawain.

"I could tell you the truth once you've taken the blow;
if you smite me smartly I could spell out the facts
of my house and home and my name, if it helps,
then you'll pay me a visit and vouch for our pact.

Or if I keep quiet you might cope all the better,
loafing and lounging here, looking no further. But
we stall!

Now grasp that gruesome axe
and show your striking style."

He answered, "Since you ask,"
and touched the tempered steel.

The green knight took his stance, prepared to be struck,
bent forward, revealing a flash of green flesh
as he heaped his hair to the crown of his head,
the nape of his neck now naked and ready.

Gawain grips the axe and heaves it heavenwards,
plants his left foot firmly on the floor in front,
then swings it swiftly towards the bare skin.
The cleanness of the strike cleaved the spinal cord
and parted the fat and the flesh so far
that the bright steel blade took a bite from the floor.

The handsome head tumbles onto the earth
and the king's men kick it as it clatters past.
Blood gutters brightly against his green gown,
yet the man doesn't shudder or stagger or sink
but trudges towards them on those tree-trunk legs
and rummages around, reaches at their feet
and cops hold of his head and hoists it high,

and strides to his steed, snatches the bridle,
steps into the stirrup and swings into the saddle
still gripping his head by a handful of hair.
Then he settles himself in his seat with the ease
of a man unmarked, never mind being minus
his head!

He wheeled his bulk about,
that body which still bled.
They cowered in the court
before his speech was said.

For that scalp and skull now swung from his fist;
to the noblest at the table he turned the face
and it opened its eyelids, stared straight ahead
and spoke this speech, which you'll hear for yourselves:

"Sir Gawain, be wise enough to keep your word
and faithfully follow me until you find me,
as you vowed in this hall within hearing of these horsemen.
You're charged with getting to the Green Chapel,
to reap what you've sown. You'll rightfully receive
that what is due to be dealt to you as New Year dawns.

Men know my name as the Green Chapel knight,
and even a fool couldn't fail to find me.
So come, or be called a coward forever."

With a tug of the reins he twisted around
and, head still in hand, galloped out of the hall,
so the hooves brought fire from the flame in the flint.
Which kingdom he came from they hadn't a clue,
no more than they knew where he made for next.

And then?

Well, with the green man gone
they laughed and grinned again.
And yet such goings-on
were magic to those men.

And although King Arthur was awestruck at heart
no sign of it showed. Instead he spoke
to his exquisite queen with courteous words:

"Dear lady, don't be daunted by this deed today,
it's in keeping that such strangeness should occur at Christmas
between sessions of banter and seasonal song,
amid the lively pastimes of ladies and lords.

And at least I'm allowed to eat at last,
having witnessed such wonder, wouldn't you say?"
Then he glanced at Gawain and spoke gracefully:
"Now hang up your axe⁸—one hack is enough."

So it dangled from the drape behind the dais
so that men who saw it would be mesmerized and amazed,
and give voice, on its evidence, to that stunning event.
Then the two of them turned and walked to the table,

8. A colloquial expression equivalent to "bury the hatchet," but here with an ironic literal sense.

the monarch and his knight, and men served the meal—
double dishes apiece, rare delicacies,
all manner of food—and the music of minstrels.
485 And they danced and sang till the sun went down
that day.

But mind your mood, Gawain,
lest dread make you delay,
or lose this lethal game
490 you've promised you will play.

FITT ii

This happening was a gift—just as Arthur had asked for
and had yearned to hear of while the year was young.
And if guests had no subject as they strolled to their seats,
now this serious concern sustained their chatter.

495 And Gawain had been glad to begin the game,
but don't be so shocked should the plot turn pear-shaped:
for men might be merry when addled with mead
but each year, short lived, is unlike the last
and rarely resolves in the style it arrived.

500 So the festival finishes and a new year follows
in eternal sequence, season by season.

After lavish Christmas come the lean days of Lent
when the flesh is tested with fish and simple food.

Then the world's weather wages war on winter:
505 cold shrinks earthwards and the clouds climb;
sun-warmed, shimmering rain comes showering
onto meadows and fields where flowers unfurl;
woods and grounds wear a wardrobe of green;
birds burble with life and build busily

510 as summer spreads, settling on slopes as
it should.

Now every hedgerow brims
with blossom and with bud,
and lively songbirds sing
515 from lovely, leafy woods.

So summer comes in season with its subtle airs,
when the west wind sighs among shoots and seeds,
and those plants which flower and flourish are a pleasure
as their leaves let drip their drink of dew

520 and they sparkle and glitter when glanced by sunlight.
Then autumn arrives to harden the harvest
and with it comes a warning to ripen before winter.

The drying airs arrive, driving up dust
from the face of the earth to the heights of heaven,
525 and wild sky wrestles the sun with its winds,
and the leaves of the lime lie littered on the ground,
and grass that was green turns withered and gray.
Then all which had risen over-ripens and rots
and yesterday on yesterday the year dies away,

530 and winter returns, as is the way of the world
through time.
At Michaelmas⁹ the moon
stands like that season's sign,
a warning to Gawain
535 to rouse himself and ride.

Yet he stayed until All Saints' Day¹ by his sovereign's side,
and they feasted in the name of their noble knight
with the revels and riches of the Round Table.

The lords of that hall and their loving ladies
540 were sad and concerned for the sake of their knight,
but nevertheless they made light of his load.
Those joyless at his plight made jokes and rejoiced.
Then sorrowfully, after supper, he spoke with his uncle,
and openly talked of the trip he must take:

545 "Now, lord of my life, I must ask for your leave.
You were witness to my wager. I have no wish
to retell you the terms—they're nothing but a trifle.
I must set out tomorrow to receive that stroke
from the knight in green, and let God be my guide."

550 Then the cream of Camelot crowded around:
Ywain and Eric and others of that ilk,
Sir Dodinal the Dreaded, the Duke of Clarence,
Lancelot, Lionel, Lucan the Good,
and Sir Bors and Sir Bedevere—both big names,
555 and powerful men such as Mador de la Port.
This courtly committee approaches the king
to offer up heartfelt advice to our hero.

And sounds of sadness and sorrow were heard
that one as worthy and well liked as Gawain
560 should suffer that strike but offer no stroke in
reply.

Yet keeping calm the knight
just quipped, "Why should I shy
away. If fate is kind
565 or cruel, man still must try."

He remained all that day and in the morning he dressed,
asked early for his arms and all were produced.

First a rug of rare cloth was unrolled on the floor,
heaped with gear which glimmered and gleamed,
570 and the stout knight steps onto it and handles the steel.

He tries on his tunic of extravagant silk,
then the neatly cut cloak, closed at the neck,
its lining finished with a layer of white fur.

Then they settled his feet into steel shoes
575 and clad his calves, clamped them with greaves,
then hinged and highly polished plates
were knotted with gold thread to the knight's knees.

Then leg guards were fitted, lagging the flesh,
 attached with thongs to his thick-set thighs.
 580 Then comes the suit of shimmering steel rings
 encasing his body and his costly clothes:
 well burnished braces to both of his arms,
 good elbow guards and glinting metal gloves,
 all the trimmings and trappings of a knight tricked out
 585 to ride:

a metal suit that shone;
 gold spurs which gleam with pride;
 a keen sword swinging from
 the silk belt to his side.

590 Fastened in his armor he seemed fabulous, famous,
 every link looking golden to the very last loop.
 Yet for all that metal he still made it to mass,
 honored the Almighty before the high altar.
 After which he comes to the king and his consorts
 595 and asks to take leave of the ladies and lords;
 they escort and kiss him and commended him to Christ.
 Now Gringolet is rigged out and ready to ride
 with a saddle which flickered with fine gold fringes
 and was set with new studs for the special occasion.
 600 The bridle was bound with stripes of bright gold,
 the apparel of the panels was matched in appearance
 to the color of the saddlebows and cropper and cover,
 and nails of red gold were arrayed all around,
 shining splendidly like splintered sunlight.
 605 Then he holds up his helmet and hastily kisses it;
 it was strongly stapled and its lining was stuffed,
 and sat high on his head, fastened behind
 with a colorful cloth to cover his neck
 embroidered and bejeweled with brilliant gems
 610 on the broad silk border, and with birds on the seams
 such as painted parrots perched among periwinkles
 and turtle doves and true lover's knots, tightly entwined
 as if women had worked at it seven winters
 at least.

615 The diamond diadem
 was greater still. It gleamed
 with flawless, flashing gems
 both clear and smoked, it seemed.

Then they showed him the shining scarlet shield
 620 with its pentangle painted in pure gold.²
 He seized it by its strap and slung it round his neck;
 he looked well in what he wore, and was worthy of it.
 And why the pentangle was appropriate to that prince
 I intend to say, though it will stall our story.

625 It is a symbol that Solomon once set in place
 and is taken to this day as a token of fidelity,
 for the form of the figure is a five-pointed star
 and each line overlaps and links with the last
 so is ever eternal, and when spoken of in England
 630 is known by the name of the endless knot.
 So it suits this soldier in his spotless armor,
 fully faithful in five ways five times over.
 For Gawain was as good as the purest gold—
 devoid of vices but virtuous, loyal
 635 and kind,

so bore that badge on both
 his shawl and shield alike.
 A prince who talked the truth:
 known as the noblest knight.



640 First he was deemed flawless in his five senses;
 and secondly his five fingers were never at fault;
 and thirdly his faith was founded in the five wounds
 Christ received on the cross, as the creed recalls.
 And fourthly, if that soldier struggled in skirmish
 645 one thought pulled him through above all other things:
 the fortitude he found in the five joys
 which Mary had conceived in her son, our Savior.³
 For precisely that reason the princely rider
 had the shape of her image inside his shield,
 650 so by catching her eye his courage would not crack.
 The fifth set of five which I heard the knight followed
 included friendship and fraternity with fellow men,
 purity and politeness that impressed at all times,
 and pity, which surpassed all pointedness. Five things
 655 which meant more to Gawain than to most other men.
 So these five sets of five were fixed in this knight,
 each linked to the last through the endless line,
 a five-pointed form which never failed,
 never stronger to one side or slack at the other,
 660 but unbroken in its being from beginning to end
 however its trail is tracked and traced.
 So the star on the spangling shield he sported
 shone royally, in gold, on a ruby red background,

2. A five-pointed star, formed by five lines drawn without lifting the pencil from the paper; as Solomon's sign (line 625), a mystical significance was attributed to it.

3. The Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, Ascension, and Assumption. These overlap but are not similar to the Five Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary, which were not formally established until the 16th century.

the pure pentangle as people have called it
for years.

665 Then, lance in hand, held high,
and got up in his gear
he bids them all good-bye
one final time, he fears.

670 Spiked with the spurs the steed sped away
with such force that the fire-stones sparked underfoot.
All sighed at the sight, and with sinking hearts
they whispered their worries to one another,
concerned for their comrade. "A pity, by Christ,
675 if a lord so noble should lose his life.
To find his equal on earth would be far from easy.
Cleverer to have acted with caution and care,
deemed him a duke—a title he was due—
a leader of men, lord of many lands;
680 better that than being battered into oblivion,
beheaded by an ogre, through headstrong pride.
Whoever knew any king to take counsel of a knight
in the grip of an engrossing Christmas game?"
Warm tears welled up in their weepy eyes
685 as gallant Sir Gawain galloped from court
that day.

He sped from home and hearth
and went his winding way
on steep and snaking paths,
690 just as the story says.

Now through England's realm he rides and rides,
Sir Gawain, God's servant, on his grim quest,
passing long dark nights unloved and alone,
foraging to feed, finding little to call food,
695 with no friend but his horse through forests and hills
and only our Lord in heaven to hear him.
He wanders near to the north of Wales
with the Isles of Anglesey off to the left.
He keeps to the coast, fording each course,
700 crossing at Holy Head and coming ashore
in the wilds of the Wirral, whose wayward people
both God and good men have quite given up on.⁴
And he constantly enquires of those he encounters
if they know, or not, in this neck of the woods,
705 of a great green man or a Green Chapel.
No, they say, never. Never in their lives.
They know of neither a chap nor a chapel
so strange.

He trails through bleak terrain.
710 His mood and manner change

4. Gawain travels from Camelot north to the northern coast of Wales, opposite the islands of Anglesey, where he turns east across the Dee to the forest of Wirral in Cheshire.

at every twist and turn
towards that chosen church.

In a strange region he scales steep slopes;
far from his friends he cuts a lonely figure.
715 Where he bridges a brook or wades through a waterway
it's no surprise to find that he faces a foe
so foul or fierce he is bound to use force.
So momentous are his travels among the mountains
to tell just a tenth would be a tall order.
720 Here he scraps with serpents and snarling wolves,
here he tangles with wodwos⁵ causing trouble in the crags,
or with bulls and bears and the odd wild boar.
Hard on his heels through the highlands come giants.
Only diligence and faith in the face of death
725 will keep him from becoming a corpse or carrion.
And the wars were one thing, but winter was worse:
clouds shed their cargo of crystallized rain
which froze as it fell to the frost-glazed earth.
Nearly slain by sleet he slept in his armor,
730 bivouacked in the blackness amongst bare rocks
where meltwater streamed from the snow-capped summits
and high overhead hung chandeliers of ice.
So in peril and pain Sir Gawain made progress,
crisscrossing the countryside until Christmas
735 Eve. Then
at that time of tiding,
he prayed to highest heaven.
Let Mother Mary guide him
towards some house or haven.

740 That morning he moves on, skirts the mountainside,
descends a deep forest, densely overgrown,
with vaulting hills to each half of the valley
and ancient oaks in huddles of hundreds.
Hazel and hawthorn are interwoven,
745 decked and draped in damp, shaggy moss,
and bedraggled birds on bare, black branches
pipe pitifully into the piercing cold.
Under cover of the canopy he girded Gringolet
through mud and marshland, a man all alone,
750 concerned and afraid in case he should fail
in the worship of our Deity, who, on that date
was born the Virgin's son to save our souls.
He prayed with heavy heart. "Father, hear me,
and Lady Mary, our mother most mild,
755 let me happen on some house where mass might be heard,
and matins in the morning; meekly I ask,
and here I utter my pater, ave

5. Wild men of the woods.

and creed."

760 He rides the path and prays,
dismayed by his misdeeds,
and signs Christ's cross and says,
"Be near me in my need."

No sooner had he signed himself three times
than he became aware, in those woods, of high walls
765 in a moat, on a mound, bordered by the boughs
of thick-trunked timber which trimmed the water.
The most commanding castle a knight ever kept,
positioned in a site of sweeping parkland
with a palisade of pikes pitched in the earth
770 in the midst of tall trees for two miles or more.
He stopped and stared at one side of that stronghold
as it sparkled and shone within shimmering oaks,
and with helmet in hand he offered up thanks
to Jesus and Saint Julian,⁶ both gentle and good,
775 who had courteously heard him and heeded his cry.
"A lodging at last. So allow it, my Lord."
Then he girded Gringolet with his gilded spurs,
and purely by chance chose the principal approach
to the building, which brought him to the end of the bridge
780 with haste.

The drawbridge stood withdrawn,
the front gates were shut fast.
Such well-constructed walls
would blunt the storm wind's blast.

785 In the saddle of his steed he halts on the slope
of the delving moat with its double ditch.
Out of water of wondrous depth, the walls
then loomed overhead to a huge height,
course after course of crafted stone,
790 then battlements embellished in the boldest style
and turrets arranged around the ramparts
with lockable loopholes set into the lookouts.
The knight had not seen a more stunning structure.
Further in, his eye was drawn to a hall
795 attended, architecturally, by many tall towers
with a series of spires spiking the air
all crowned by carvings exquisitely cut.
Uncountable chimneys the color of chalk
sprutted from the roof and sparkled in the sun.
800 So perfect was that vision of painted pinnacles
clustered within the castle's enclosure
it appeared that the place was cut from paper.⁷
Then a notion occurred to that noble knight:
to seek a visit, get invited inside,
805 to be hosted and housed, and all the holy days

remain.

Responding to his call
a pleasant porter came,
a watchman on the wall,
810 who welcomed Sir Gawain.

"Good morning," said Gawain, "will you go with a message
to the lord of this house to let me have lodging?"
"By Saint Peter," said the porter, "it'll be my pleasure,
and I'll warrant you'll be welcome for as long as you wish."
815 Then he went on his way, but came back at once
with a group who had gathered to greet the stranger;
the drawbridge came down and they crossed the ditch
and knelt in the frost in front of the knight
to welcome this man in a way deemed worthy.
820 Then they yielded to their guest, yanked open the gate,
and bidding them to rise he rode across the bridge.
He was assisted from the saddle by several men
and the strongest amongst them stabled his steed.
Then knights, and the squires of knights, drew near,
825 to escort him, with courtesy, into the castle.
As he took off his helmet, many hasty hands
stretched to receive it and to serve this noble knight,
and his sword and his shield were taken aside.
Then he made himself known to nobles and knights
830 and proud fellows pressed forwards to confer their respects.
Still heavy with armor he was led to the hall
where a fire burned bright with the fiercest flames.
Then the master of the manor emerged from his chamber,
to greet him in the hall with all due honor,
835 saying, "Behave in my house as your heart pleases.
To whatever you want you are welcome, do what
you will."

"My thanks," Gawain exclaimed,
"May Christ reward you well."
840 Then firmly, like good friends,
arm into arm they fell.

Gawain gazed at the lord who greeted him so gracefully,
the great one who governed that grand estate,
powerful and large, in the prime of his life,
845 with a bushy beard as red as a beaver's,
steady in his stance, solid of build,
with a fiery face and fine conversation:
and it suited him well, so it seemed to Gawain,
to keep such a castle and captain his knights.
850 Escorted to his quarters the lord quickly orders
that a servant be assigned to assist Gawain,
and many were willing to wait on his word.
They brought him to a bedroom, beautifully furnished
with fine silken fabrics finished in gold
855 and curious coverlets lavishly quilted

6. Patron saint of hospitality.

7. Paper castles were a common table decoration at feasts.

in bright ermine and embroidered to each border.
 Curtains ran on cords through red-gold rings,
 tapestries from Toulouse and Turkistan
 were fixed against walls and fitted underfoot.
 860 With humorous banter Gawain was helped out
 of his chain-mail coat and costly clothes,
 then they rushed to bring him an array of robes
 of the choicest cloth. He chose, and changed,
 and as soon as he stood in that stunning gown
 865 with its flowing skirts which suited his shape
 it almost appeared to the persons present
 that spring, with its spectrum of colors, had sprung;
 so alive and lean were that young man's limbs
 a nobler creature Christ had never created, they declared.

870 This knight,
 whose country was unclear,
 now seemed to them by sight
 a prince without a peer
 in fields where fierce men fight.

875 In front of a flaming fireside a chair
 was pulled into place for Gawain, and padded
 with covers and quilts all cleverly stitched,
 then a cape was cast across the knight
 of rich brown cloth with embroidered borders,
 880 finished inside with the finest furs,
 ermine, to be exact, and a hood which echoed it.
 Resplendently dressed he settled in his seat;
 as his limbs thawed, so his thoughts lightened.
 Soon a table was set on sturdy trestles
 885 covered entirely with a clean white cloth
 and cruets of salt and silver spoons.
 In a while he washed and went to his meal.
 Staff came quickly and served him in style
 with several soups all seasoned to taste,
 890 double helpings as was fitting, and a feast of fish,
 some baked in bread, some browned over flames,
 some boiled or steamed, some stewed in spices
 and subtle sauces which the knight savored.
 Four or five times he called it a feast,
 895 and the courteous company happily cheered him
 along:

 "On penance plates you dine—⁸
 there's better board to come."
 The warming, heady wine
 900 then freed his mind for fun.

Now through tactful talk and tentative enquiry
 polite questions are put to this prince;
 he responds respectfully, and speaks of his journey

905 from the Court of Arthur, King of Camelot,
 the royal ruler of the Round Table,
 and he says they now sit with Gawain himself,
 who has come here at Christmastime quite by chance.
 Once the lord has gathered that his guest is Gawain
 he likes it so well that he laughs out loud.
 910 All the men of that manor were of the same mind,
 being happy to appear promptly in his presence,
 this person famed for prowess and purity,
 whose noble skills were sung to the skies,
 whose life was the stuff of legend and lore.
 915 Then knight spoke softly to knight, saying
 "Watch now, we'll witness his graceful ways,
 hear the faultless phrasing of flawless speech;
 if we listen we will learn the merits of language
 since we have in our hall a man of high honor.
 920 Ours is a graceful and giving God
 to grant that we welcome Gawain as our guest
 as we sing of His birth who was born to save us.

 We few
 shall learn a lesson here
 925 in tact and manners true,
 and hopefully we'll hear
 love's tender language, too."

Once dinner was done Gawain drew to his feet
 and darkness neared as day became dusk.
 930 Chaplains went off to the castle's chapels
 to sound the bells hard, to signal the hour
 of evensong, summoning each and every soul.
 The lord goes alone, then his lady arrives,
 concealing herself in a private pew.
 935 Gawain attends, too; tugged by his sleeve
 he is steered to a seat, led by the lord
 who greets Gawain by name as his guest.
 No man in the world is more welcome, are his words.
 For that he is thanked. And they hug there and then,
 940 and sit as a pair through the service in prayer.
 Then she who desired to see this stranger
 came from her closet with her sisterly crew.
 She was fairest amongst them—her face, her flesh,
 her complexion, her quality, her bearing, her body,
 945 more glorious than Guinevere, or so Gawain thought,
 and in the chancel of the church they exchanged courtesies.
 She was hand in hand with a lady to her left,
 someone altered by age, an ancient dame,
 well respected, it seemed, by the servants at her side.
 950 Those ladies were not the least bit alike:
 one woman was young, one withered by years.
 The body of the beauty seemed to bloom with blood,
 the cheeks of the crone were wattled and slack.
 One was clothed in a kerchief clustered with pearls

8. "Penance" because, although sumptuous, the meal consists of fish dishes appropriate to a fasting day.

955 which shone like snow—snow on the slopes
 of her upper breast and bright bare throat.
 The other was noosed and knotted at the neck,
 her chin enveloped in chalk-white veils,
 her forehead fully enfolded in silk
 960 with detailed designs at the edges and hems;
 nothing bare, except for the black of her brows
 and the eyes and nose and naked lips
 which were chapped and bleared and a sorrowful sight.
 A grand old mother, a matriarch she might
 965 be hailed.

Her trunk was square and squat,
 her buttocks bulged and swelled.
 Most men would sooner squint
 at her whose hand she held.

970 Then Gawain glanced at the gracious-looking woman,
 and by leave of the lord he approached those ladies
 saluting the elder with a long, low bow,
 holding the other for a moment in his arms,
 kissing her respectfully and speaking with courtesy.
 975 They request his acquaintance, and quickly he offers
 to serve them unswervingly should they say the word.
 They take him between them and talk as they walk
 to a hearth full of heat, and hurriedly ask
 for specially spiced cakes, which are speedily fetched,
 980 and wine filled each goblet again and again.
 Frequently the lord would leap to his feet
 insisting that mirth and merriment be made:
 hauling off his hood he hoisted it on a spear—
 a prize, he promised, to the person providing
 985 most comfort and cheer at Christmastime.
 "And my fellows and friends shall help in my fight
 to see that it hangs from no head but my own."
 So the laughter of that lord lights up the room,
 and Gawain and the gathering are gladdened by games
 990 till late.

So late, his lordship said,
 that lamps should burn with light.
 Then, blissful, bound for bed,
 Sir Gawain waved good night.

995 So the morning dawns when man remembers
 the day our Redeemer was born to die,
 and every house on earth is joyful for Lord Jesus.
 Their day was no different, being a diary of delights:
 banquets and buffets were beautifully cooked
 1000 and dutifully served to diners at the dais.
 The ancient elder sat highest at the table
 with the lord, I believe, in the chair to her left;
 the sweeter one and Gawain took seats in the center
 and were first at the feast to dine; then food

1005 was carried around as custom decrees
 and served to each man as his status deserved.
 There was feasting, there was fun, and such feelings of joy
 as could not be conveyed by quick description,
 yet to tell it in detail would take too much time.
 1010 But I'm aware that Gawain and the beautiful woman
 found such comfort and closeness in each other's company
 through warm exchanges of whispered words
 and refined conversation free from foulness
 that their pleasure surpassed all princely sports
 1015 by far.

Beneath the din of drums
 men followed their affairs,
 and trumpets thrilled and thrummed
 as those two tended theirs.

1020 They drank and danced all day and the next
 and danced and drank the day after that,
 then Saint John's Day⁹ passed with a gentler joy
 as the Christmas feasting came to a close.
 Guests were to go in the grayness of dawn,
 1025 so they laughed and dined as the dusk darkened,
 swaying and swirling to music and song.
 Then at last, in the lateness, they upped and left
 toward distant parts along different paths.
 Gawain offered his good-byes, but was ushered by his host
 1030 to his host's own chamber and the heat of its chimney,
 waylaid by the lord so the lord might thank him
 profoundly and profusely for the favor he had shown
 in honoring his house at that hallowed season
 and lighting every corner of the castle with his character.
 1035 "For as long as I live my life shall be better
 that Gawain was my guest at God's own feast."
 "By God," said Gawain, "but the gratitude goes to you.
 May the High King of Heaven repay your honor.
 Your requests are now this knight's commands.
 1040 I am bound by your bidding, no boon is too high
 to say."

At length his lordship tried
 to get his guest to stay.
 But proud Gawain replied
 1045 he must now make his way.

Then the lord of the castle inquired courteously
 of what desperate deed in the depth of winter
 should coax him from Camelot, so quickly and alone,
 before Christmas was over in his king's court.
 1050 "What you ask," said the knight, "you shall now know.
 A most pressing matter prized me from that place:
 I myself am summoned to seek out a site

and I have not the faintest idea where to find it.
 But find it I must by the first of the year, and not fail
 1055 for all the acres in England, so the Lord help me.
 Consequently this inquiry I come to ask of you:
 that you tell me, in truth, if you have heard the tale
 of a green chapel and the ground where it stands,
 or the guardian of those grounds who is colored green.
 1060 For I am bound by a bond agreed by us both
 to link up with him there, should I live that long.
 As dawn on New Year's Day draws near,
 if God sees fit, I shall face that freak
 more happily than I would the most wondrous wealth!
 1065 With your blessing, therefore, I must follow my feet.
 In three short days my destiny is due,
 and I would rather drop dead than default from duty."
 Then laughing the lord of the house said, "Stay longer.
 I'll direct you to your rendezvous when the time is right,
 1070 you'll get to the green chapel, so give up your grieving.
 You can bask in your bed, bide your time,
 save your fond farewells till the first of the year
 and still meet him by midmorning to do as you might.
 So stay.

1075 A guide will get you there
 at dawn on New Year's Day.
 The place you need is near,
 two miles at most away."

Then Gawain was giddy with gladness, and declared,
 1080 "For this more than anything I thank you thoroughly,
 and shall work to do well at whatever you wish,
 until that time, attending every task."
 The lord squeezed Gawain's arm and seated him at his side,
 and called for the ladies to keep them company.
 1085 There was pleasure aplenty in their private talk,
 the lord delighting in such lively language,
 like man who might well be losing his mind.
 Then speaking to Gawain, he suddenly shouted:
 "You have sworn to serve me, whatever I instruct.
 1090 Will you hold to that oath right here and now?"
 "You may trust my tongue," said Gawain, in truth,
 "for within these walls I am servant to your will."
 The lord said warmly, "You were weary and worn,
 hollow with hunger, harrowed by tiredness,
 1095 yet joined in my reveling right royally every night.
 You relax as you like, lie in your bed
 until mass tomorrow, then go to your meal
 where my wife will be waiting; she will sit at your side
 to accompany and comfort you in my absence from court.

1100 So lounge:
 at dawn I'll rise and ride
 to hunt with horse and hound."

The gracious knight agreed
 and, bending low, he bowed.

1105 "Furthermore," said the master, "let's make a pact.
 Here's a wager: what I win in the woods will be yours,
 and what you gain while I'm gone you will give to me.
 Young sir, let's swap, and strike a bond,
 let a bargain be a bargain, for better or worse."
 1110 "By God," said Gawain, "I agree to the terms,
 and I find it pleasing that you favor such fun."
 "Let drink be served and we'll seal the deal,"
 the lord cried loudly, and everyone laughed.
 So they reveled and caroused uproariously,
 1115 those lords and ladies, for as long as they liked;
 then with immaculate exchanges of manners and remarks
 they slowed and they stood and they spoke softly.
 And with parting kisses the party dispersed,
 footmen going forward with flaring torches,
 1120 and everybody was brought to their bed at long last,
 to dream.
 Before they part the pair
 repeat their pact again.
 That lord was well aware
 1125 of how to host a game.

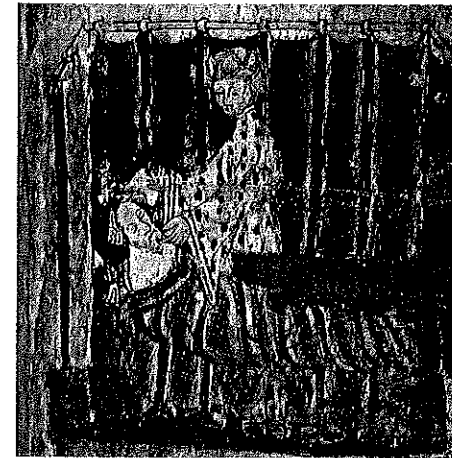
FITT iii

Well before sunrise the servants were stirring;
 the guests who were going had called for their grooms,
 and they scurried to the stables to strap on the saddles,
 trussing and tying all the trammel and tack.
 1130 The high-ranking nobles got ready to ride,
 jumped stylishly to their saddles and seized the reins,
 then cantered away on their chosen courses.
 The lord of that land was by no means last
 to be rigged out for riding with the rest of his men.
 1135 After mass he wolfed down a meal, then made
 for the hills in a hurry with his hunting horn.
 So as morning was lifting its lamp to the land
 his lordship and his huntsmen were high on horseback,
 and the canny kennel men had coupled the hounds
 1140 and opened the cages and called them out.
 On the bugles they blew three long, bare notes
 to a din of baying and barking, and any dogs
 which wandered at will were whipped back into line
 by a hundred hunters, or so I heard tell,
 1145 at least.

The handlers hold their hounds,
 the huntsmen's hounds run free.
 Each bugle blast rebounds
 between the trunks of trees.

1150 As the cry went up the wild creatures quaked.
 The deer in the dale, quivering with dread
 hurtled to high ground, but were headed off
 by the ring of beaters who bellowed boisterously.
 The stags of the herd with their high-branched heads
 1155 and the broad-horned bucks were allowed to pass by,
 for the lord of the land had laid down a law
 that man should not maim the male in close season.
 But the hinds were halted with hollers and whoops
 and the din drove the does to sprint for the dells.
 1160 Then the eye can see that the air is all arrows:
 all across the forest they flashed and flickered,
 biting through hides with their broad heads.
 What! They bleat as they bleed and they die on the banks,
 and always the hounds are hard on their heels,
 1165 and the hunters on horseback come hammering behind
 with stone-splitting cries, as if cliffs had collapsed.
 And those animals which escaped the aim of the archers
 were steered from the slopes down to rivers and streams
 and set upon and seized at the stations below.
 1170 So perfect and practiced were the men at their posts
 and so great were the greyhounds which grappled with the deer
 that prey was pounced on and dispatched with speed
 and force.
 The lord's heart leaps with life.
 1175 Now on, now off his horse
 all day he hacks and drives.
 And dusk comes in due course.

So through a lime-leaf border the lord led the hunt,
 while good Gawain lay slumbering in his sheets,
 1180 dozing as the daylight dappled the walls,
 under a splendid cover, enclosed by curtains.
 And while snoozing he heard a slyly made sound,
 the sigh of a door swinging slowly aside.
 From below the bedding he brings up his head
 and lifts the corner of the curtain a little
 wondering warily what it might be.
 It was she, the lady, looking her loveliest,
 most quietly and craftily closing the door,
 nearing the bed. The knight felt nervous;
 1190 lying back he assumed the shape of sleep
 as she stole towards him with silent steps,
 then cast up the curtain and crept inside,
 then sat down softly at the side of his bed.
 And awaited his wakening for a good long while.
 1195 Gawain lay still, in his state of false sleep,
 turning over in his mind what this matter might mean,
 and where the lady's unlikely visit might lead.
 Yet he said to himself, "Instead of this stealth
 I should openly ask what her actions imply."
 1200 So he stirred and stretched, turned on his side,



The Temptation of Sir Gawain by Bertilak's Wife. Gawain may think he is protected, but bedrooms are dangerous places.

lifted his eyelids and, looking alarmed,
 crossed himself hurriedly with his hand, as if saving
 his life.

1205 Her chin is pale, her cheeks
 are ruddy red with health;
 her smile is sweet, she speaks
 with lips that love to laugh:

"Good morning, Sir Gawain," said the graceful lady,
 "You sleep so soundly one might sidle in here.
 1210 You're tricked and trapped! But let's make a truce,
 or I'll bind you in your bed, and you'd better believe me."
 The lady laughed, making light of his quandary.
 "Good morning, madam," Gawain said merrily.
 "I'll contentedly attend whatever task you set,
 1215 and in serving your desires I shall seek your mercy,
 which seems my best plan, in the circumstances!"
 And he loaded his light-hearted words with laughter.
 "But my gracious lady, if you grant me leave,
 will you pardon this prisoner and prompt him to rise,
 1220 then I'll quit these covers and pull on my clothes,
 and our words will flow more freely back and forth."
 "Not so, beautiful sir," the sweet lady said.
 "Bide in your bed—my own plan is better.
 I'll tuck in your covers corner to corner,
 1225 then playfully parley with the man I have pinned.
 Because I know your name—the knight Sir Gawain,
 famed through all realms whichever road he rides,
 whose princely honor is highly praised
 amongst lords and ladies and everyone alive.
 1230 And right here you lie. And we are left all alone, .

with my husband and his huntsmen away in the hills
and the servants snoring and my maids asleep
and the door to this bedroom barred with a bolt.
I have in my house an honored guest
1235 so I'll make the most of my time and stay talking
a while.

You're free to have my all,
do with me what you will.
I'll come just as you call
1240 and swear to serve you well."

"In good faith," said Gawain, "such gracious flattery,
though I am not him of whom you speak.

I don't dare to receive the respect you describe
and in no way warrant such worthy words.

1245 By God, I would be glad, if you agreed it fitting,
to devote myself through speech or deed
to the prize of your praise—my joy in it would be pure."

Said the gracious lady, "Sir Gawain, in good faith,
how improper on my part if I were to imply
1250 any slur or slight on your status as a knight.
But what lady in this land wouldn't latch the door,
wouldn't rather hold you as I do here—

in the company of your clever conversation,
forgetting all grief and engaging in joy—

1255 than hang on to half the gold that she owns?
I praise the Lord who upholds the high heavens,
for I have what I hoped for above all else by
His grace."

1260 That lovely-looking maid,
she charmed him and she chased.
But every move she made
he countered, case by case.

"Madam," said our man, "may Mary reward you,
in good faith, I have found your fairness noble.

1265 Some fellows are praised for the feats they perform;
I hardly deserve to receive such respect.

It is you who is genuinely joyful and generous."

"By Mary," she declared, "it's quite the contrary.

1270 Were I the wealthiest woman in the world
with priceless pearls in the palm of my hand
to bargain with and buy the best of all men,
then for all the signs you have shown me, sir,
of kindness, courtesy and exquisite looks—
a picture of perfection now proved to be true—
1275 no person on this planet would be picked before you."

"In fairness," said Gawain, "you found far better.

But I'm proud of the price you would pay from your purse,
and will swear to serve you as my sovereign lady.

Let Gawain be your servant and Christ your Savior."

1280 Then they muse on many things through morning and midday,
and the lady stares with a loving look

but Gawain acts graciously and remains on guard,
and although no woman could be warmer or more winning,
he is cool in his conduct, on account of the scene he

1285 foresees:

the strike he must receive,
as cruel fate decrees.
The lady begs her leave—
at once Gawain agrees.

1290 She glanced at him, laughed and gave her good-bye,
then stood, and stunned him with astounding words:

"May the Lord repay you for your prize performance.
But I know that Gawain could never be your name."

1295 "But why not?" the knight asked nervously,
afraid that some fault in his manners had failed him.

The beautiful woman blessed him, then rebuked him:

"A good man like Gawain, so greatly regarded,
the embodiment of courtliness to the bones of his being,
could never have lingered so long with a lady
1300 without craving a kiss, as politeness requires,
or coaxing a kiss with his closing words."

"Very well," said Gawain, "Let it be as you wish.

I shall kiss at your command, as becomes a knight,
and further, should it please you, so press me no more."

1305 The lady comes close, cradles him in her arms,
leans nearer and nearer, then kisses the knight.

Then they courteously commend one another to Christ,
and without one more word the woman is away.

1310 Rapidly he rises and makes himself ready,
calls for his chamberlain, chooses his clothes,
makes himself ready, then marches off to mass.

Then he went to a meal which was made and waiting,
and was merry and amused till the moon had silvered
the view.

1315 No man felt more at home
tucked in between those two,
the cute one and the crone.
Their gladness grew and grew.

1320 And the lord of the land still led the hunt,
driving hinds to their death through holts and heaths,
and by the setting of the sun had slaughtered so many
of the does and other deer that it beggared belief.

Then finally the folk came flocking to one spot
and quickly they collected and counted the kill.

1325 Then the leading lords and their loyal men
chose the finest deer—those fullest with fat—
and ordered them cut open by those skilled in the art.

1330 They assessed and sized every slain creature
and even on the feeblest found two fingers worth of fat.
Through the sliced-open throat they seized the stomach
and the butchered innards were bound in a bundle.

and hooked out the bowels through the broken belly,
but carefully, being cautious not to cleave the knot.
1335 Then they clasped the throat, and clinically they cut
the gullet from the windpipe, then garbaged the guts.
Then the shoulder blades were severed with sharp knives
and slotted through a slit so the hide stayed whole.
Then the beasts were prized apart at the breast,
1340 and they went to work on the gralloching again,
riving open the front as far as the hind fork,
fetching out the offal, then with further purpose
filleting the ribs in the recognized fashion.
And the spine was subject to a similar process,
1345 being pared to the haunch so it held as one piece
then hoisting it high and hacking it off.
And its name is the numbles, as far as I know, and
just that.

Its hind legs pulled apart
1350 they slit the fleshy flaps,
then cleave and quickly start
to break it down its back.

Then the heads and necks of hinds were hewn off,
and the choice meat of the flanks chopped away from the chine,
1355 and a fee for the crows was cast into the copse.
Then each side was skewered, stabbed through the ribs
and heaved up high, hung by its hocks,
and every person was paid with appropriate portions.
Using pelts for plates, the dogs pugged out
1360 on liver and lights and stomach linings
and a blended sop of blood and bread.
The kill horn was blown and the bloodhounds bayed.
Then hauling their meat they headed for home,
sounding howling wails on their hunting horns,
1365 and as daylight died they had covered the distance
and had come to the castle where the knight was ensconced,
adjourned

in peace, with fires aflame.
The huntsman has returned,
1370 and when he greets Gawain
warm feelings are confirmed.

Then the whole of the household was ordered to the hall,
and the women as well with their maids in waiting.
And once assembled he instructs the servants
1375 that the venison be revealed in full view,
and in excellent humor he asked that Gawain
should see for himself the size of the kill,
and showed him the side slabs sliced from the ribs.
"Are you pleased with this pile? Have I won your praise?
1380 Does my skill at this sport deserve your esteem?"
"Yes indeed," said the other. "It's the hugest haul
I have seen this seven years in the winter season."

"And I give it all to you, Gawain," said the master,
"for according to our contract it is yours to claim."

1385 "Just so," said Gawain, "and I'll say the same,
for whatever I've won within these walls
such gains will be graciously given to you."
So he held out his arms and hugged the lord
and kissed him in the comeliest way he could.
1390 "You're welcome to my winnings—to my one profit,
though I'd gladly have given you any greater prize."
"I'm grateful," said the lord, "and Gawain, this gift
would carry more worth if you cared to confess
by what wit you won it. And when. And where."
1395 "That wasn't our pact," he replied. "So don't pry.
You'll be given nothing greater, the agreement we have
holds good!"

They laugh aloud and trade
wise words which match their mood.
1400 When supper's meal is made
they dine on dainty food.

Later, they lounged by the lord's fire,
and were served unstintingly with subtle wines
and agreed to the game again next morning
1405 and to play by the rules already in place:
any takings to be traded between the two men
at night when they met, no matter what the merchandise.
They concurred on this contract in front of the court,
and drank on the deal, and went on drinking
1410 till late, when they took their leave at last,
and every person present departed to bed.
By the third cackle of the crowing cock
the lord and his liegemen are leaping from their beds,
so that mass and the morning meal are taken,
1415 and riders are rigged out ready to run as
day dawns.

They leave the levels, loud
with howling hunting horns.
The huntsmen loose the hounds
1420 through thickets and through thorns.

Soon they picked up a scent at the side of a swamp,
and the hounds which first found it were urged ahead
by wild words and shrill shouting.
The pack responded with vigor and pace,
1425 alert to the trail, forty lurchers at least.
Then such a raucous din rose up all around them
it ricocheted and rang through the rocky slopes.
The hounds were mushed with hollers and the horn,
then suddenly they swerved and swarmed together
1430 in a wood, between a pool and a precipice.
On a mound, near a cliff, on the margins of a marsh
where toppled stones lay scattered and strewn,

they coursed towards their quarry with huntsmen at heel.
 Then a crew of them ringed the hillock and the cliff,
 1435 until they were certain that inside their circle
 was the beast whose being three bloodhounds had sensed.
 Then they riled the creature with their rowdy ruckus,
 and suddenly he breaks the barrier of beaters,
 —the biggest of wild boars has bolted from his cover—
 1440 ancient in years and estranged from the herd,
 savage and strong, a most massive swine,
 truly grim when he grunted. And the group were aggrieved,
 for three were thrown down by the first of his thrusts;
 then he fled away fast without further damage.
 1445 The other huntsmen bawled "hi" and "hay, hay,"
 blasted on their bugles, blew to regroup,
 so the dogs and the men made a merry din,
 tracking him nosily, testing him time and time
 again.

1450 The boar would stand at bay
 and aim to maul and maim
 the thronging dogs, and they
 would yelp and yowl in pain.

Then the archers advanced with their bows and took aim,
 1455 shooting arrows at him which were often on target,
 but their points could not pierce his impenetrable shoulders
 and bounced away from his bristly brow.
 The smooth, slender shafts splintered into pieces,
 and the heads glanced away from wherever they hit.
 1460 Battered and baited by such bombardment,
 in frenzied fury he flies at the men,
 hurts them horribly as he hurtles past
 so that many grew timid and retreated a tad.
 But the master of the manor gave chase on his mount,
 1465 the boldest of beast hunters, his bugle blaring,
 trumpeting the tally-ho and tearing through thickets
 till the setting sun slipped from the western sky.
 So the day was spent in pursuits of this style,
 while our lovable young lord had not left his bed,
 1470 and, cosseted in costly quilted covers, there he
 remained.

The lady, at first light,
 did not neglect Gawain,
 but went to wake the knight
 1475 and meant to change his mind.

She approaches the curtains, parts them and peeps in,
 at which Sir Gawain makes her welcome at once,
 and with prompt speech she replies to the prince,
 settling by his side and laughing sweetly,
 1480 looking at him lovingly before launching her words.
 "Sir, if you truly are Gawain it seems wondrous to me
 that a man so dedicated to doing his duty

cannot heed the first rule of honorable behavior,
 which has entered through one ear and exited the other;
 1485 you have already lost what yesterday you learned
 in the truest lesson my tongue could teach."
 "What lesson?" asked the knight. "I know of none,
 though if discourtesy has occurred then blame me, of course."
 "I encouraged you to kiss," the lady said kindly,
 1490 "and to claim one quickly when one is required,
 an act which ennobles any knight worth the name."
 "Dear lady," said the other, "don't think such a thing,
 I dare not kiss in case I am turned down.
 If refused, I'd be at fault for offering in the first place."
 1495 "In truth," she told him, "you cannot be turned down.
 If someone were so snooty as to snub your advance,
 a man like you has the means of his muscles."
 "Yes, by God," said Gawain, "what you say holds good.
 But such heavy-handedness is frowned on in my homeland,
 1500 and so is any gift not given with grace.
 What kiss you command I will courteously supply,
 have what you want or hold off, whichever
 the case."

So bending from above
 1505 the fair one kissed his face.
 The two then talk of love:
 its grief; also its grace.

"I would like to learn," said the noble lady,
 "and please find no offence, but how can it follow
 1510 that a lord so lively and young in years,
 a champion in chivalry across the country—
 and in chivalry, the chiefmost aspect to choose,
 as all knights acknowledge, is loyalty in love,
 for when tales of truthful knights are told
 1515 in both title and text the topic they describe
 is how lords have laid down their lives for love,
 endured for many days love's dreadful ordeal,
 then vented their feelings with avenging valor
 by bringing great bliss to a lady's bedroom—
 1520 and you the most notable knight who is known,
 whose fame goes before him . . . yes, how can it follow
 that twice I have taken this seat at your side
 yet you have not spoken the smallest syllable
 which belongs to love or anything like it.
 1525 A knight so courteous and considerate in his service
 really ought to be eager to offer this pupil
 some lessons in love, and to lead by example.
 Why, are you, whom all men honor, actually ignorant,
 or do you deem me too dull to hear of dalliances?

1530 I come
 to learn of love and more,
 a lady all alone.
 Perform for me before

my husband heads for home."

1535 "In faith," said Gawain, "may God grant you fortune.
It gives me great gladness and seems a good game
that a woman so worthy should want to come here
and take pains to play with your poor knight,
unfit for her favors—I am flattered indeed.
1540 But to take on the task of explaining true love
or touch on the topics those love tales tell of,
with yourself, who I sense has more insight and skill
in the art than I have, or even a hundred
of the likes of me, on earth where I live,
1545 would be somewhat presumptuous, I have to say.
But to the best of my ability I'll do your bidding,
bound as I am to honor you forever
and to serve you, so let our Savior preserve me!"
So the lady tempted and teased him, trying
1550 to entice him to wherever her intentions might lie.
But fairly and without fault he defended himself,
no sin on either side transpiring, only happiness
that day.

1555 At length, when they had laughed,
the woman kissed Gawain.
Politely then she left
and went her own sweet way.

Roused and risen he was ready for mass,
and then men sumptuously served the morning meal.
1560 Then he loitered with the ladies the length of the day
while the lord of the land ranged left and right
in pursuit of that pig which stampeded through the uplands,
breaking his best hounds with its back-snapping bite
when it stood embattled . . . then bowmen would strike,
1565 goading it to gallop into open ground
where the air was alive with the huntsman's arrows.
That boar made the best men flinch and bolt,
till at last his legs were like lead beneath him,
and he hobbled away to hunker in a hole
1570 by a stony rise at the side of a stream.
With the bank at his back he scrapes and burrows,
frothing and foaming foully at the mouth,
whetting his white tusks. The hunters waited,
irked by the effort of aiming from afar
1575 but daunted by the danger of daring to venture
too near.

1580 So many men before
had fallen prey. They feared
that fierce and frenzied boar
whose tusks could slash and tear.

Till his lordship hacks up, urging on his horse,
spots the swine at standstill encircled by men,

then handsomely dismounts and unhands his horse,
brandishes a bright sword and goes bounding onwards,
1585 wades through the water to where the beast waits.
Aware that the man was wafting a weapon
the hog's hairs stood on end, and its howling grunt
made the fellows there fear for their master's fate.
Then the boar burst forward, bounded at the lord,
1590 so that beast and hunter both went bundling
into white water, and the swine came off worst,
because the moment they clashed the man found his mark,
knifing the boar's neck, nailing his prey,
hammering it to the hilt, bursting the hog's heart.
1595 Screaming, it was swept downstream, almost slipping
beneath.

At least a hundred hounds
latch on with tearing teeth.
Then, dragged to drier ground,
1600 the dogs complete its death.

The kill was blown on many blaring bugle
and the unhurt hunters hollered and whooped.
The chief amongst them, in charge of the chase,
commanded the bloodhounds to bay at the boar,
1605 then one who was wise in woodland ways
began carefully to cut and carve up the carcass.
First he hacks off its head and hoists it aloft,
then roughly rives it right along the spine;
he gouges out the guts and grills them over coals,
1610 and blended with bread they are tidbits for the bloodhounds.
Next he fetches out the fillets of glimmering flesh
and retrieves the intestines in time-honored style,
then the two sides are stitched together intact
and proudly displayed on a strong pole.
1615 So with the swine swinging they swagger home,
the head of the boar being borne before the lord
who had fought so fiercely in the ford till the beast
was slain.

1620 The day then dragged, it seemed,
before he found Gawain,
who comes when called, most keen
to countenance the claim.

Now the lord is loud with words and laughter
and speaks excitedly when he sees Sir Gawain;
1625 he calls for the ladies and the company of the court
and he shows off the meat slabs and shares the story
of the boar's hulking hugeness, and the full horror
of the fight to the finish as it fled through the forest.
And Gawain is quick to compliment the conquest,
1630 praising it as proof of the lord's prowess,
for such prime pieces of perfect pork
and such sides of swine were a sight to be seen.

Then admiringly he handles the boar's huge head,
feigning fear to flatter the master's feelings.
1635 "Now Gawain," said the lord, "I give you this game,
as our wager warranted, as well you remember."
"Certainly," said Sir Gawain. "It shall be so.
And graciously I shall give you my gains in exchange."
He catches him by the neck and courteously kisses him,
1640 then a second time kisses him in a similar style.
"Now we're even," said Gawain, "at this eventide;
the clauses of our contract have been kept and you have what
I owe."

"By Saint Giles," the just lord says,
1645 "You're now the best I know.
By wagering this way
your gains will grow and grow."

Then the trestle tables were swiftly assembled
and cast with fine cloths. A clear, living light
1650 from the waxen torches awakened the walls.
Places were set and supper was served,
and a din arose as they reveled in a ring
around the fire on the floor, and the feasting party
made much pleasant music at the meal and after,
1655 singing seasonal songs and carol dancing
with as much amusement as a mouth could mention.
The young woman and Gawain sat together all the while.
And so loving was that lady towards the young lord,
with stolen glances and secret smiles
1660 that the man himself was maddened and amazed,
but his breeding forbade him rebuking a lady,
and though tongues might wag he returned her attention
all night.

1665 Before his friends retire
his lordship leads the knight,
heads for his hearth and fire
to linger by its light.

They supped and swapped stories, and spoke again
of the night to come next, which was New Year's Eve.
1670 Gawain pleaded politely to depart by morning,
so in two days' time he might honor his treaty.
But the lord was unswerving, insisting that he stayed:
"As an honest soul I swear on my heart,
you shall find the Green Chapel to finish your affairs
1675 long before dawn on New Year's Day.
So lie in your room and laze at your leisure
while I ride my estate, and, as our terms dictate,
we'll trade our trophies when the hunt returns.
I have tested you twice and found you truthful.
1680 But think tomorrow *third time throw best*.
Now, a lord can feel low whenever he likes,
so let's chase cheerfulness while we have the chance."

So those gentlemen agreed that Gawain would stay,
and they took more drink, then by torchlight retired to
1685 their beds.

Our man then sleeps, a most
reposed and peaceful rest.
As hunters must, his host
is up at dawn and dressed.

1690 After mass the master grabs a meal with his men
and asks for his mount on that marvelous morning.
All those grooms engaged to go with their lord
were high on their horses before the hall gates.
The fields were dazzling, fixed with frost,
1695 and the crown of sunrise rose scarlet and crimson,
scalding and scattering cloud from the sky.
At the fringe of the forest the dogs were set free
and the rumpus of the horns went ringing through the rocks.
They fall on the scent of a fox, and follow,
1700 turning and twisting as they sniff out the trail.
A young harrier yowls and a huntsman yells,
then the pack come panting to pick up the scent,
running as a rabble along the right track.
The fox scurries ahead, they scamper behind,
1705 and pursue him at speed when he comes within sight,
haranguing him with horrific ranting howls.
Now and then he doubles back through thorny thickets,
or halts and harkens in the hem of a hedge,
until finally, by a hollow, he hurdles a fence,
1710 and carefully he creeps by the edge of a copse,
convinced that his cunning has conned those canines!
But unawares he wanders where they lie in wait,
where greyhounds are gathered together, a group
of three.

1715 He springs back with a start,
then twists and turns and flees.
With heavy, heaving heart
he tracks towards the trees.

It was one of life's delights to listen to those hounds
as they massed to meet him, marauding together.
1720 They bayed bloodily at the sight of his being,
as if clustering cliffs had crashed to the ground.
Here he was ambushed by bushwhacking huntsmen
waiting with a welcome of wounding words;
1725 there he was threatened and branded a thief,
and the team on his tail gave him no time to tarry.
Often, in the open, the pack tried to pounce,
then that crafty Reynard¹ would creep into cover.
So his lordship and his lords were merrily led

1. The Old French word for "fox" (*goupil*) gave way to "Reynard" as a result of the immense success of stories about the cunning fox Reynard, anti-hero of the *Roman de Reynard*.

1730 in this manner through the mountains until midafternoon,
while our handsome hero snoozed contentedly at home,
kept from the cold of the morning by curtains.
But love would not let her ladyship sleep
nor suppress the purpose which suppressed her heart.
1735 She rose from her rest and rushed to his room
in a flowing robe that reached to the floor
and was finished inside with fine-trimmed furs.
Her head went unhooded, but heavenly gems
were entwined in her tresses in clusters of twenty.
1740 She wore nothing on her face; her neck was naked,
and her shoulders were bare to both back and breast.
She comes into his quarters and closes the door,
throws the window wide open and wakes Gawain,
right away rouses him with ringing words for
1745 his ear.
"Oh, sir, how can you sleep
when morning comes so clear?"
And though his dreams are deep
he cannot help but hear.

1750 Yes he dozes in a daze, dreams and mutters
like a mournful man with his mind on dark matters—
how destiny might deal him a death blow on the day
when he grapples with the guardian of the Green Chapel;
of how the strike of the axe must be suffered without struggle.
1755 But sensing her presence there he surfaces from sleep,
comes quickly from the depths of his dreams to address her.
Laughing warmly she walks towards him
and finds his face with the friendliest kiss.
In a worthy style he welcomes the woman
and seeing her so lovely and alluringly dressed,
1760 every feature so faultless, her complexion so fine,
a passionate heat takes hold in his heart.
They traded smiles and speech tripped from their tongues,
and a bond of friendship was forged there, all blissful
and bright.
1765 They talk with tenderness
and pride, and yet their plight
is perilous unless
sweet Mary minds her knight.

1770 For that noble princess pushed him and pressed him,
nudged him ever nearer to a limit where he needed
to allow her love or impolitely reject it.
He was careful to be courteous and avoid uncouthness,
and more so for the sake of his soul should he sin
and be counted a betrayer by the keeper of the castle.
1775 "I shall not succumb," he swore to himself.
With affectionate laughter he fenced and deflected
all the loving phrases which leapt from her lips.
"You shall bear the blame," said the beautiful one,

1780 "if you feel no love for the lady you lie with,
and wound her, more than anyone on earth, to the heart.
Unless, of course, there is a lady in your life
to whom you are tied and so tightly attached
that the bond will not break, as I must now believe.
1785 So in honesty and trust now tell me the truth;
for all the love alive, do not lessen the truth
with guile."
"You judge wrong, by Saint John,"
he said to her, and smiled.
1790 "There is no other one
nor will be for this while!"

"Those words," said the woman, "are the worst of all.
But I asked, and you answered, and now I ache.
Kiss me as I wish and I shall walk away
1795 in mourning like a lady who loved too much."
Stooping and sighing she kisses him sweetly,
then withdraws from his side, saying as she stands,
"But before we part will you find me some small favor?
Give me some gift—a glove at least,
1800 that might leaven my loss when we meet in my memory."
"Well it were," said Gawain. "I wish I had here
my most precious possession as a present for your love,
for over and over you deserve and are owed
the highest prize I could hope to offer.
1805 But I would not wish on you a worthless token,
and it strikes me as unseemly that you should receive
nothing greater than a glove as a keepsake from Gawain.
I am here on an errand in an unknown land
without men bearing bags of beautiful things,
1810 which my regard for you, lady, makes me regret;
but man must live by his means, and neither mope
nor moan."
The pretty one replies:
"Nay, knight, since you decline
to pass to me a prize,
1815 you must have one of mine."

She offers him a ring of rich, red gold,
and the stunning stone set upon it stood proud,
beaming and burning with the brightness of the sun;
1820 what wealth it was worth you can well imagine.
But he would not accept it, and said straight away,
"By God, no tokens will I take at this time;
I have nothing to give, so nothing will I gain."
She insists he receive it but still he resists,
and swears, on his name as a knight, not to swerve.
1825 Snubbed by his decision, she said to him then,
"You refuse my ring because you find it too fine,
and don't care to be deeply indebted to me;
so I give you my girdle, a lesser thing to gain."

1830 From around her body she unbuckled the belt
 which fastened the frock beneath her fair mantle,
 a green silk girdle trimmed with gold,
 exquisitely edged and hemmed by hand.
 And she sweetly beseeched Sir Gawain to receive it,
 1835 in spite of its slightness, and hoped he would accept.
 But still he maintained he intended to take
 neither gold nor girdle, until by God's grace
 the challenge he had chosen was finally achieved.
 "With apologies I pray you be not displeased,
 1840 but end all your offers, for always against them
 I am.
 For all your grace I owe
 a thousand thank-you's, ma'am.
 I shall through sun and snow
 1845 remain your loyal man."

"And now he spurns my silk," the lady responded,
 "so simple in itself, or so it appears,
 so little and unlikely, worth nothing, or less.
 But the knight who knew of the power knitted in it
 1850 would pay a high price to possess it, perhaps.
 For the body which is bound within this green belt,
 as long as it is buckled robustly about him,
 will be safe against anyone who seeks to strike him,
 and all the slyness on earth wouldn't see him slain."
 1855 The man mulled it over, and it entered his mind
 it might just be the jewel for the jeopardy he faced
 and save him from the strike in his challenge at the chapel.
 With luck, it might let him escape with his life.
 So relenting at last he let her speak,
 1860 and promptly she pressed him to take the present,
 and he granted her wish, and she gave with good grace,
 though went on to beg him not to whisper a word
 of this gift to her husband, and Gawain agreed;
 those words of theirs within those walls
 1865 should stay.
 His thanks are heartfelt, then.
 No sooner can he say
 how much it matters, when
 the third kiss comes his way.

1870 Then the lady departed, leaving him alone,
 for no more merriment could be had from that man.
 And once she has quit he clothes himself quickly,
 rises and dresses in the richest of robes,
 stowing the love-lace safely aside,
 1875 hiding it away from all hands and eyes.
 Then he went at once to the chapel of worship,
 privately approached the priest and implored him
 to allow his confession, and to lead him in life

so his soul might be saved when he goes to his grave.
 1880 Then fully and frankly he spoke of his sins,
 no matter how small, always seeking mercy,
 beseeching the counselor that he receive absolution.
 The priest declares him so clean and so pure
 that the Day of Doom could dawn in the morning.
 1885 Then in merrier mood he mingled with the ladies,
 caroling and carousing and carrying on
 as never before, until nightfall. Folk feel
 and hear
 and see his boundless bliss
 1890 and say, "Such charm and cheer;
 he's at his happiest
 since his arrival here."

And long let him loiter there, looked after by love.
 Now the lord of the land was still leading his men,
 1895 finishing off the fox he had followed for so long.
 He vaults a fence to flush out the victim,
 hearing that the hounds are harrying hard.
 Then Reynard scoots from a section of scrub
 and the rabble of the pack rush right at his heels.
 1900 Aware of its presence the wary lord waits,
 then bares his bright sword and swishes at the beast,
 which shirks from its sharpness, and would have shot away
 but a hound flew forward before it could flee
 and under the hooves of the horses they have him,
 1905 worrying the wily one with wrathful baying.
 The lord hurtles from his horse and heaves the fox up,
 wrestles it from the reach of those ravenous mouths,
 holds it high over head and hurrahs manfully
 while the bloodthirsty bloodhounds bay and howl.
 1910 And the other huntsmen hurried with their horns
 to catch sight of the slaughter and celebrate the kill.
 And when the courtly company had come together
 the buglers blew with one mighty blast,
 and the others hallooed with open throats.
 1915 It was the merriest music ever heard by men,
 that rapturous roar which for Reynard's soul
 was raised.
 The dogs, due their reward,
 are patted, stroked and praised.
 1920 Then red fur rips—Reynard
 out of his pelt is prised.

Then with night drawing near they headed homewards,
 blaring their bugles with the fullness of their breath.
 And at last the lord lands at his lovely home,
 1925 to find, by the heat of the fireside, his friend
 the good Sir Gawain, in glad spirits
 on account of the company he had kept with the ladies.

His blue robe flowed as far as the floor,
 his soft-furred surcoat suited him well,
 1930 and the hood which echoed it hung from his shoulders.
 Both hood and coat were edged in ermine.
 He meets the master in the middle of the room,
 greets him graciously, with Gawain saying:
 "I shall first fulfill our formal agreement
 1935 which we fixed in words when the drink flowed freely."
 He clasps him tight and kisses him three times
 with as much emotion as a man could muster.
 "By the Almighty," said the master, "you must have had luck
 to profit such a prize—if the price was right."
 1940 "Oh fiddlesticks to the fee," said the other fellow.
 "As long as I have given the goods which I gained."
 "By Mary," said the master, "mine's a miserable match.
 I've hunted for hours with nothing to my name
 but this foul-stinking fox—fling its fur to the devil—
 1945 so poor in comparison with such priceless things,
 these presents you impart, three kisses perfect
 and true."
 "Enough!" the knight entreats,
 "I thank you through and through."
 1950 The standing lord then speaks
 of how the fox fur flew!

And with meals and mirth and minstrelsy
 they made as much amusement as any mortal could,
 and among those merry men and laughing ladies
 1955 Gawain and his host got giddy together;
 only lunatics and drunkards could have looked more delirious.
 Every person present performed party pieces
 till the hour arrived when revelers must rest,
 and the company in that court heard the call of their beds.
 1960 And lastly, in the hall, humbly to his host,
 our knight says good night and renews his gratitude.
 "Your uncountable courtesies have kept me here
 this Christmas—be honored by the High King's kindness.
 If it suits, I submit myself as your servant.
 1965 But tomorrow morning I must make a move;
 if you will, as you promised, please appoint some person
 to guide me, God willing, towards the Green Chapel,
 where my destiny will dawn on New Year's Day."
 "On my honor," he replied. "With hand on heart,
 1970 every promise I made shall be put into practice."
 He assigns him a servant to steer his course,
 to lead him through the land without losing time,
 to ride the fastest route between forest
 and fell.
 1975 Gawain will warmly thank
 his host in terms that tell;
 towards the womenfolk
 the knight then waves farewell.

It's with a heavy heart that guests in the hall
 1980 are kissed and thanked for their care and kindness,
 and they respond with speeches of the same sort,
 commending him to our Savior with sorrowful sighs.
 Then politely he leaves the lord and his household,
 and to each person he passes he imparts his thanks
 1985 for taking such trouble in their service and assistance
 and such attention to detail in attendance of duty.
 And every guest is grieved at the prospect of his going,
 as if honorable Gawain were one of their own.
 By tapering torchlight he was taken to his room
 1990 and brought to his bed to be at his rest.
 But if our knight sleeps soundly I couldn't say,
 for the matter in the morning might be muddying
 his thoughts.
 So let him lie and think,
 1995 in sight of what he sought.
 In time I'll tell if tricks
 work out the way they ought.

FITT iv

Now night passes and New Year draws near,
 drawing off darkness as our Deity decrees.
 2000 But wild-looking weather was about in the world:
 clouds decanted their cold rain earthwards;
 the nithering north needled man's very nature;
 creatures were scattered by the stinging sleet.
 Then a whip-cracking wind comes whistling between hills
 2005 driving snow into deepening drifts in the dales.
 Alert and listening, Gawain lies in his bed;
 his lids are lowered but he sleeps very little
 as each crow of the cock brings his destiny closer.
 Before day had dawned he was up and dressed
 2010 for the room was livened by the light of a lamp.
 To suit him in his metal and to saddle his mount
 he called for a servant, who came quickly,
 bounded from his bedsheets bringing his garments.
 He swathes Sir Gawain in glorious style,
 2015 first fastening clothes to fend off the frost,
 then his armor, looked after all the while by the household:
 the buffed and burnished stomach and breastplates,
 and the rings of chain mail, raked free of rust,
 all gleaming good as new, for which he is grateful
 2020 indeed.
 With every polished piece
 no man shone more, it seemed
 from here to ancient Greece.
 He sent then for his steed.

2025 He clothes himself in the costliest costume:
 his coat with the brightly emblazoned badge

mounted on velvet; magical minerals
inside and set about it; embroidered seams;
a lining finished with fabulous furs.

2030 And he did not leave off the lady's lace girdle;
for his own good, Gawain won't forget that gift.
Then with his sword sheathed at his shapely hips
he bound himself twice about with the belt,
touchingly wrapped it around his waist.
2035 That green silk girdle truly suited Sir Gawain
and went well with the rich red weaves that he wore.
But our man bore the belt not merely for its beauty,
or the appeal of its pennants, polished though they were,
or the gleam of its edges which glimmered with gold,
2040 but to save his skin when presenting himself,
without shield or sword, to the fatal swing of
the axe.

Now in his gear and gown
he turns towards those ranks
2045 who served with such renown
and offers thorough thanks.

Then his great horse Gringolet was got up ready.
The steed had been stabled in comfort and safety
and snorted and stamped in readiness for the ride.
2050 Gawain comes closer to examine his coat,
saying soberly to himself, swearing on his word:
"There are folk in this castle who keep courtesy to the forefront;
their master maintains them—happiness to them all.
And let his lordship's lady be loved all her life.
2055 If they choose, out of charity, to cherish a guest,
showing kindness and care, then may heaven's King
who reigns over all reward them handsomely.
For as long as I live in the lands of this world
I shall practice every means in my power to repay him."
2060 Then he steps in the stirrup and vaults to the saddle
and his servant lifts his shield which he slings on his shoulder,
then he girds on Gringolet with his golden spurs
who clatters from the courtyard, not stalling to snort
or prance.

2065 His man was mounted, too,
who lugged the spear and lance.
"Christ keep this castle true,"
he chanted. "Grant good chance."

2070 The drawbridge was dropped, and the double-fronted gates
were unbarred and each half was heaved wide open.
As he clears the planking he crosses himself quickly,
and praises the porter, who kneels before the prince
and prays that God be good to Gawain.
Then he went on his way with the one whose task
2075 was to point out the road to that perilous place
where the knight would receive the sorry stroke.

They scrambled up bankings where branches were bare,
clambered up cliff faces where the cold clings.
The clouds which had climbed now cooled and dropped
2080 so the moors and the mountains were muzzy with mist
and every hill wore a hat of mizzle on its head.
The streams on the slopes seemed to fume and foam,
whitening the wayside with spume and spray.
They wandered onwards through the wildest woods
2085 till the sun, at that season, came skyward, showing
its hand.

On hilly heights they ride,
snow littering the land.
The servant at his side
2090 then has them slow and stand.

"I have accompanied you across this countryside, my lord,
and now you are near the site you have named
and have steered and searched for with such singleness of mind.
But there's something I should like to share with you, sir,
2095 because upon my life, you're a lord that I love,
so if you value your health you'll hear my advice:
the place you proceed to is held to be perilous.
In that wilderness lives a wildman, the worst in the world,
he is brooding and brutal and loves bludgeoning people.
2100 He's more powerful than any person alive on this earth
and four times the figure of any fighting knight
in Arthur's house, or Hector or any other hero.
He chooses the green chapel for his grim goings-on,
and to pass through that place unscathed is impossible,
2105 for he deals out death blows by dint of his hands,
a man without measure who shows no mercy.
Be it chaplain or churl who rides by the chapel,
monk or priest, whatever man or person,
he loves murdering more than he loves his own life.
2110 So I say, just as sure as you sit in your saddle,
if you come there you'll be killed, of that there's no question.
Trust me, he could trample you twenty times over
or more.

2115 He's lurked about too long
engaged in grief and gore.
His hits are swift and strong—
he'll fell you to the floor."

"Therefore, good Sir Gawain, let the man go,
and for God's sake travel an alternate track,
2120 ride another road, and be rescued by Christ.
I'll head off home, and with hand on heart
I shall swear by God and all his good saints,
and on all earthly holiness, and other such oaths,
that your secret is safe, and not a soul will know
2125 that you fled in fear from the fellow I described."
"Many thanks," said Gawain, in a terse tone of voice,

"and for having my interests at heart, be lucky.
I'm certain such a secret would be silent in your keep.
But as faithful as you are, if I failed to find him
and were to flee in fear in the fashion you urge,
I'd be christened a coward, and could not be excused.
So I'll trek to the chapel and take my chances,
say my piece to that person, speak with him plainly,
whether fairness or foulness follows, however fate
behaves.

He may be stout and stern
and standing armed with stave,
but those who strive to serve
our Lord, our Lord will save."

"By Mary," said the servant, "you seem to be saying
you're hell-bent on heaping harm on yourself
and losing your life, so I'll delay you no longer.
Set your helmet on your head and your lance in your hand
and ride a route through that rocky ravine
till you're brought to the bottom of that foreboding valley,
then look towards a glade a little to the left
and you'll see in the clearing the site itself,
and the hulking person who inhabits the place.
Now God bless and good-bye, brave Sir Gawain;
for all the wealth in the world I wouldn't walk with you
or go further in this forest by a single footstep."
With a wrench on the reins he reeled around
and heel-kicked the horse as hard as he could,
and was gone from Gawain, galloping hard
for home.

"By Christ, I will not cry,"
announced the knight, "or groan,
but find my fortune by
the grace of God alone."

Then he presses ahead, picks up a path,
enters a steep-sided grove on his steed
then goes by and by to the bottom of a gorge
where he wonders and watches—it looks a wild place:
no sign of a settlement anywhere to be seen
but heady heights to both halves of the valley
and set with saber-toothed stones of such sharpness
no cloud in the sky could escape unscratched.
He stalls and halts, holds the horse still,
glances side to side to glimpse the green chapel
but sees no such thing, which he thinks is strange,
except at mid-distance what might be a mound,
a sort of bald knoll on the bank of a brook
where fell water surged with frenzied force,
bursting with bubbles as if it had boiled.
He heels the horse, heads for that mound,
grounds himself gracefully and tethers Gringolet,

looping the reins to the limb of a lime.
Then he strides forwards and circles the feature,
baffled as to what that bizarre hill could be:
it had a hole at one end and at either side,
and its walls, matted with weeds and moss,
enclosed a cavity, like a kind of old cave
or crevice in the crag—it was all too unclear to
declare.

"Green Church?" chunters the knight.
"More like the devil's lair
where at the nub of night
he dabbles in dark prayers."

"For certain," he says, "this is a soulless spot,
a ghostly cathedral overgrown with grass,
the kind of kirk where that camouflaged man
might deal in devotions on the devil's behalf.
My five senses inform me that Satan himself
has tricked me in this tryst, intending to destroy me.
This is a haunted house—may it go to hell.
I never came across a church so cursed."
With head helmeted and lance in hand
he scrambled towards skylight in that strange abyss.
Then he heard on the hillside, from behind a hard rock
and beyond the brook, a blood-chilling noise.
What! It cannoned though the cliffs as if they might crack,
like the scream of a scythe being ground on a stone.
What! It whined and wailed, like a waterwheel.
What! It rasped and rang, raw on the ear.
"My God," cried Gawain, "that grinding is a greeting.
My arrival is honored with the honing of an axe
up there.
Then let the Lord decide.
'Oh well,' won't help me here.
I might well lose my life
but freak sounds hold no fear."

Then Gawain called as loudly as his lungs would allow,
"Who has power in this place to honor his pact?
Because good Gawain now walks on this ground.
If anyone wants anything then hurry and appear
to do what he needs—it's now or it's never."
"Abide," came a voice from above the bank.
"You'll cop for what's coming to you quickly enough."
Yet he went at his work, whetting the blade,
not showing until it was sharpened and stropped.
Then out of the crags he comes, through the cave mouth,
whirling into view with a wondrous weapon,
a Danish-style axe for dealing the dint,
with a brute of a blade curving back to the haft
fired on a stone, a four footer at least
by the look of the length of its shining lace.

And again he was green, as a year ago,
 with green flesh, hair and beard, and a fully green face,
 and firmly on green feet he came stomping forwards,
 2230 the handle of that axe like a staff in his hand.
 At the edge of the water, he will not wade
 but vaults the stream with the shaft, and strides
 with an ominous face onto earth covered over
 with snow.

2235 Our brave knight bowed, his head
 hung low—but not too low!
 "Sweet Sir," the green man said,
 "Your visit keeps your vow."

2240 The green knight spoke again, "God guard you, Gawain.
 Welcome to my world after all your wandering.
 You have timed your arrival like a true traveler,
 honoring the terms that entwine us together.
 Twelvemonths ago at this time you took what was yours,
 and with New Year come you are called to account.

2245 We're very much alone, beyond view in this valley,
 no person to part us—we can do as we please.
 Pull your helmet from your head and take what you're owed.
 Show no more struggle than I showed myself
 when you severed my head with a single smite."

2250 "No," said good Gawain, "by my life-giving God,
 I won't gripe or begrudge the grimness to come,
 so keep to one stroke and I'll stand stock-still,
 won't whisper a word of unwillingness, or one
 complaint."

2255 He bowed to take the blade
 and bared his neck and nape,
 but, loath to look afraid,
 he feigned a fearless state.

2260 Suddenly the green knight summons up his strength,
 hoists the axe high over Gawain's head,
 lifts it aloft with every fiber of his life
 and begins to bring home a bone-splitting blow.
 Had he seen it through as thoroughly as threatened
 the knight, being brave, would have died from the blow.

2265 But glimpsing the axe at the edge of his eye
 bringing death earthwards as it arced through the air,
 and sensing its sharpness, Gawain shrank at the shoulders.
 The swinging axman swerved from his stroke,
 and reproached the young prince with some proud words:

2270 "You are not Gawain," he goaded, "with his good name,
 who faced down every foe in the field of battle
 but now flinches with fear at the foretaste of harm.
 Never could I hear of such cowardice from that knight.
 Did I budge or even blink when you aimed the axe,
 2275 or carp or quibble in King Arthur's castle,
 or flap when my head went flying to my feet?

But entirely untouched, you are terror struck.
 I'll be found the better fellow, since you were so feeble
 and frail."

2280 Gawain confessed, "I flinched
 at first, but will not fail.
 Though once my head's unhitched
 it's off once and for all!"

2285 "So be brisk with the blow, bring on the blade.
 Deal me my destiny and do it out of hand,
 and I'll stand the stroke without shiver or shudder
 and be wasted by your weapon. You have my word."
 "Take this then," said the other, throwing up the axe,
 with a menacing glare like the gaze of a maniac.

2290 Then he launches his swing but leaves him unscathed,
 withholds his arm before harm could be done.
 And Gawain was motionless, never moved a muscle,
 but stood stone-still, or as still as a tree stump
 anchored in the earth by a hundred roots.

2295 Then the warrior in green mocked Gawain again:
 "Now you've plucked up your courage I'll dispatch you properly.
 May the honorable knighthood heaped on you by Arthur—
 if it proves to be powerful—protect your neck."
 That insulting slur drew a spirited response:

2300 "Thrash away then, thug, your threats are hollow.
 Such huffing and fussing—you'll frighten your own heart."
 "By God," said the green man, "since you speak so grandly
 there'll be no more shilly-shallying, I shall shatter you,
 I vow."

2305 He stands to strike, a sneer
 comes over lip and brow.
 Gawain is gripped by fear,
 no hope of rescue now.

2310 Hoisted and aimed, the axe hurtled downwards,
 the blade bearing down on the knight's bare neck,
 a ferocious blow, but far from being fatal
 it skewed to one side, just skimming the skin
 and finely snicking the fat of the flesh
 so that bright red blood shot from body to earth.

2315 Seeing it shining on the snowy ground
 Gawain leapt forward a spear's length at least,
 grabbed hold of his helmet and rammed it on his head,
 brought his shield to his side with a shimmy of his shoulder,
 then brandished his sword before blurting out brave words,

2320 because never since birth, as his mother's babe,
 was he half as happy as here and now.
 "Enough swiping, sir, you've swung your swing.
 I've borne one blow without backing out,
 go for me again and you'll get some by return,
 2325 with interest! Hit out, and be hit in an instant,
 and hard.

One axe attack—that's all.
Now keep the covenant
agreed in Arthur's hall
and hold the axe in hand."

2330

The warrior steps away and leans on his weapon,
props the handle in the earth and slouches on the head
and studies how Gawain is standing his ground,
bold in his bearing, brave in his actions,
armed and ready. In his heart he admires him.
Then remarking merrily, but in a mighty voice,
with reaching words he rounded on the knight:
"Be a mite less feisty, fearless young fellow,
you've suffered no insulting or heinous incident
beyond the game we agreed on in the court of your king.
One strike was promised—consider yourself well paid!
From any lingering loyalties you are hereby released.
Had I mustered all my muscles into one mighty blow
I would have hit more harshly and done you great harm.
But my first strike fooled you—a feint, no less—
not fracturing your flesh, which was only fair
in keeping with the contract we declared that first night,
for with truthful behavior you honored my trust
and gave up your gains as a good man should.
Then I missed you once more, and this for the morning
when you kissed my pretty wife then kindly kissed me.
So twice you were truthful, therefore twice I left
no scar.

2350

The person who repays
will live to feel no fear.
The third time, though, you strayed,
and felt my blade therefore."

2355

"Because the belt you are bound with belongs to me;
it was woven by my wife so I know it very well.
And I know of your courtesies, and conduct, and kisses,
and the wooing of my wife—for it was all my work!
I sent her to test you—and in truth it turns out
you're by the far the most faultless fellow on earth.
As a pearl is more prized than a pea which is white,
in good faith, so is Gawain, amongst gallant knights.
But a little thing more—it was loyalty that you lacked:
not because you're wicked, or a womanizer, or worse,
but you loved your own life; so I blame you less."
Gawain stood speechless for what seemed a great while,
so shocked and ashamed that he shuddered inside.
The fire of his blood brought flames to his face
and he shrank out of shame at what the other had said.
Then he tried to talk, and finding his tongue, said:
"A curse upon cowardice and covetousness.
They breed villainy and vice, and destroy all virtue."
Then he grabbed the girdle and ungathered its knot
and flung it in fury at the man before him.

2360

2365

2370

2375

Dread of the death blow and cowardly doubts
meant I gave in to greed, and in doing so forgot
the freedom and fidelity every knight knows to follow.
And now I am found to be flawed and false,
through treachery and untruth I have totally failed," said
Gawain.

2380

"Such terrible mistakes,
and I shall bear the blame.
But tell me what it takes
to clear my clouded name."

2385

The green lord laughed, and leniently replied:
"The harm which you caused me is wholly healed.
By confessing your failings you are free from fault
and have openly paid penance at the point of my axe.
I declare you purged, as polished and as pure
as the day you were born, without blemish or blame.
And this gold-hemmed girdle I present as a gift,
which is green like my gown. It's yours, Sir Gawain,
a reminder of our meeting when you mix and mingle
with princes and kings. And this keepsake will be proof
to all chivalrous knights of your challenge in this chapel.
But follow me home. New Year's far from finished—
we'll resume our reveling with supper and song.

2390

2395

2400

What's more
my wife is waiting there
who flummoxed you before.
This time you'll have in her
a friend and not a foe."

2405

"Thank you," said the other, taking helmet from head,
holding it in hand as he offered his thanks.
"But I've loitered long enough. The Lord bless your life
and bestow on you such honor as you surely deserve.
And mind you commend me to your fair wife,
both to her and the other, those honorable ladies
who kidded me so cleverly with their cunning tricks.
But no wonder if a fool finds his way into folly
and be wiped of his wits by womanly guile—
it's the way of the world. Adam fell because of a woman,
and Solomon because of several, and as for Samson,
Delilah was his downfall, and afterwards David
was bamboozled by Bathsheba and bore the grief.²
All wrecked and ruined by their wrongs; if only
we could love our ladies without believing their lies.
And those were foremost of all whom fortune favored,
excellent beyond all others existing under heaven,"
he cried.

2410

2415

2420

2425

"Yet all were charmed and changed
by wily womankind.

2. Lines 2146–49 single out well-known male figures from the Hebrew Scriptures whom Gawain reads as having fallen on account of female deception. The relevant references are as follows: for Adam

I suffered just the same,
but clear me of my crime."

2430 "But the girdle," he went on, "God bless you for this gift.
And I shall wear it with good will, but not for its gold,
nor its silks and streamers, and not for the sake
of its wonderful workmanship or even its worth,
but as a sign of my sin—I'll see it as such
when I swagger in the saddle—a sad reminder
2435 that the frailty of his flesh is man's biggest fault,
how the touch of filth taints his tender frame.
So when praise for my prowess in arms swells my pride,
one look at this love-lace will lessen my ardor.
But I will ask one thing, if it won't offend:
2440 since I stayed so long in your lordship's land
and was hosted in your house—let Him reward you
who upholds the heavens and sits upon high—
will you make known your name? And I'll ask nothing else."
"Then I'll treat you to the truth," the other told him,
2445 "Here in my homelands they call me Bertilak de Hautdesert.
And in my manor lives the mighty Morgan le Fay,
so adept and adroit in the dark arts,
who learned magic from Merlin—the master of mystery—
for in earlier times she was intimately entwined
2450 with that knowledgeable man, as all you knights know
back home.

Yes, 'Morgan the Goddess'—
I will announce her name.
There is no nobleness
2455 she cannot take and tame."

"She guided me in this guise to your great hall
to put pride on trial, and to test with this trick
what distinction and trust the Round Table deserves.
She imagined this mischief would muddle your minds
2460 and that grieving Guinevere would go to her grave
at the sight of a specter making ghostly speeches
with his head in his hands before the high table.
So that ancient woman who inhabits my home
is also your aunt—Arthur's half sister,
2465 the daughter of the duchess of Tintagel; the duchess
who through Uther, was mother to Arthur, your king.
So I ask you again, come and greet your aunt
and make merry in my house; you're much loved there,
and, by my faith, I am as fond of you my friend
2470 as any man under God, for your great truth."
But Gawain would not. No way would he go.
So they clasped and kissed and made kind commendations
to the Prince of Paradise, and then parted in the cold,
that pair.

2475 Our man, back on his mount
now hurtles home from there.

The green knight leaves his ground
to wander who-knows-where.

So he winds through the wilds of the world once more,
2480 Gawain on Gringolet, by the grace of God,
under a roof sometimes and sometimes roughing it,
and in valleys and vales had adventures and victories
but time is too tight to tell how they went.
The nick to his neck was healed by now;
2485 thereabouts he had bound the belt like a baldric—
slantwise, as a sash, from shoulder to side,
laced in a knot looped below his left arm,
as a sign that his honor was stained by sin.
So safe and sound he sets foot in court,
2490 and great joy came to the king in his castle
when tidings of Gawain's return had been told.
The king kissed his knight and so did the queen,
and Gawain was embraced by his band of brothers,
who made eager enquiries, and he answered them all
2495 with the tale of his trial and tribulations,
and the challenge at the chapel, and the great green chap,
and the love of the lady, which led to the belt.
And he showed them the scar at the side of his neck,
confirming his breach of faith, like a badge
2500 of blame.

He grimaced with disgrace,
he writhed in rage and pain.
Blood flowed towards his face
and showed his smarting shame.

2505 "Regard," said Gawain, as he held up the girdle,
"the symbol of sin, for which my neck bears the scar;
a sign of my fault and offence and failure,
of the cowardice and covetousness I came to commit.
I was tainted by untruth. This, its token,
2510 I will drape across my chest till the day I die.
For man's crimes can be covered but never made clean;
once sin is entwined it is attached for all time."
The king gave comfort, then the whole of the court
allow, as they laugh in lovely accord,
2515 that the lords and ladies who belong to the Table,
every knight in the brotherhood, should bear such a belt,
a bright green belt worn obliquely to the body,
crosswise, like a sash, for the sake of this man.
So that slanting green stripe was adopted as their sign,
2520 and each knight who held it was honored ever after,
as all the best books on romance remind us:
an adventure which happened in Arthur's era,
as the chronicles of this country have stated clearly.
Since fearless Brutus first set foot
2525 on these shores, once the siege land assault at Troy
had ceased,

our coffers have been crammed
with stories such as these.
Now let our Lord, thorn-crowned,
bring us to perfect peace. AMEN.

2530

HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE³

3. "Shame be to the man who has evil in his mind" (Anglo-Norman French). This is practically identical to the motto of the Order of the Garter ("Honi soit qui mal y pense"). The order

was founded ca. 1350; apparently a copyist of the poem associated this order with the one founded to honor Gawain.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

ca. 1340–1400

Medieval social theory held that society was made up of three "estates": the nobility, composed of a small hereditary aristocracy, whose mission on earth was to rule over and defend the body politic; the church, whose duty was to look after the spiritual welfare of that body; and everyone else, the large mass of commoners who were supposed to do the work that provided for its physical needs. By the late fourteenth century, however, these basic categories were layered into complex, interrelated, and unstable social strata among which birth, wealth, profession, and personal ability all played a part in determining one's status in a world that was rapidly changing—economically, politically, and socially. Chaucer's life and his works, especially *The Canterbury Tales*, were profoundly influenced by these forces. A growing and prosperous middle class was beginning to play increasingly important roles in church and state, blurring the traditional class boundaries, and it was into this middle class that Geoffrey Chaucer was born.

Chaucer was the son of a prosperous wine merchant and probably spent his boyhood in the mercantile atmosphere of London's Vintry, where ships docked with wines from France and Spain. Here he would have mixed daily with people of all sorts, heard several languages spoken, become fluent in French, and received schooling in Latin. Instead of apprenticing Chaucer to the family business, however, his father was apparently able to place him, in his early teens, as a page in one of the great aristocratic households of England, that of the countess of Ulster, who was married to Prince Lionel, the second son of Edward III. There Chaucer would have acquired the manners and skills required for a career in the service of the ruling class, not only in the role of personal attendant in royal households but in a series of administrative posts. (For Chaucer's portrait, see the color insert in this volume.)

We can trace Chaucer's official and personal life in a considerable number of surviving historical documents, beginning with a reference, in Elizabeth of Ulster's household accounts, to an outfit he received as a page (1357). He was captured by the French and ransomed in one of Edward III's campaigns during the Hundred Years War (1359). He was a member of King Edward's personal household (1367) and took part in several diplomatic missions to Spain (1366), France (1368), and Italy (1372). As controller of customs on wool, sheepskins, and leather for the port of London (1374–85), Chaucer audited and kept books on the export taxes, which were one of

apartment over one of the gates in the city wall, probably as a perquisite of the customs job. He served as a justice of the peace and knight of the shire (the title given to members of Parliament) for the county of Kent (1385–86) where he moved after giving up the controllership. As clerk of the king's works (1389–91), Chaucer was responsible for the maintenance of numerous royal residences, parks, and other holdings; his duties included supervision of the construction of the nave of Westminster Abbey and of stands and lists for a celebrated tournament staged by Richard II. While the records show Chaucer receiving many grants and annuities in addition to his salary for these services, they also show that at times he was being pressed by creditors and obliged to borrow money.

These activities brought Chaucer into association with the ruling nobility of the kingdom, with Prince Lionel and his younger brother John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, England's most powerful baron during much of Chaucer's lifetime; with their father, King Edward; and with Edward's grandson, who succeeded to the throne as Richard II. Near the end of his life, Chaucer addressed a comic *Complaint to His Purse* to Henry IV—John of Gaunt's son, who had usurped the crown from his cousin Richard—as a reminder that the treasury owed Chaucer his annuity. Chaucer's wife, Philippa, served in the households of Edward's queen and of John of Gaunt's second wife, Constance, daughter of the king of Castile. A Thomas Chaucer, who was probably Chaucer's son, was an eminent man in the next generation, and Thomas's daughter Alice was married successively to the earl of Salisbury and the duke of Suffolk. The gap between the commoners and the aristocracy would thus have been bridged by Chaucer's family in the course of three generations.

None of these documents contains any hint that this hardworking civil servant wrote poetry, although poetry would certainly have been among the diversions cultivated at English courts in Chaucer's youth. That poetry, however, would have been in French, which still remained the fashionable language and literature of the English aristocracy, whose culture in many ways had more in common with that of the French nobles with whom they warred than with that of their English subjects. Chaucer's earliest models, works by Guillaume de Machaut (1300?–1377) and Jean Froissart (1333?–1400?), the leading French poets of the day, were lyrics and narratives about courtly love, often cast in the form of a dream in which the poet acted as a protagonist or participant in some aristocratic love affair. The poetry of Machaut and Froissart derives from the thirteenth-century *Romance of the Rose*, a long dream allegory in which the dreamer suffers many agonies and trials for the love of a symbolic rosebud. Chaucer's apprentice work may well have been a partial translation of the twenty-one-thousand-line *Romance*. His first important original poem is *The Book of the Duchess*, an elegy in the form of a dream vision commemorating John of Gaunt's first wife, the young duchess of Lancaster, who died in 1368.



Middle-class Prosperity. Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434. Note the way the religious elements of the scene are secondary to the fine, rich qualities of fabric represented here.