

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

A New Verse Translation by Caleb Wallis, English Department 2023

Reviewed by Doctor Johnson, Morris, and Professor Graham

Abstract

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a 14th century chivalric romance poem written in Middle English with a combination of alliterative and rhyming meter. Despite the poem's popularity in recent media, this is all of what we know about *The Green Knight's* history. When it comes to other popular mythological pieces such as *The Odyssey*, a title of distinct authorship gives these poems a defined time and style, which in turn leads to a figure of authority over the poem itself. Even many poems without an author, such as *Beowulf*, still manage to retain such a figure through their continued use in academic and popular spaces, as seen in the prominence of translators such as Chickering and Heaney. *The Green Knight*, however, not only has an absent author, but also any major figure of authority. No one owns *The Green Knight* in the way Homer owns *the Odyssey*, nor is anyone *The Green Knight's* academic standard in the way Chickering's translation is for *Beowulf*. This creates an immediate draw for any translator seeking to work with medieval source material, as such a lack of authority means that, through the skill and style of a talented translator, *The Green Knight* can be made one's own in a way that *The Odyssey* cannot. In this light, I will be presenting my own translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This translation is in modern prose and seeks to combine both medieval and modern language with the poem's existing alliterative style.

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Part 1

Once the siege on the city of Troy had ceased
With its citadels sacked into cinders and ashes,
That man they named mutinous and marked as a traitor,
Was tried for his treachery, though no one was more true:
Aeneas they called him, who came with his high kind
To conquer and pillage and claim himself king
Of what was the wealth of the Western Isles.
Great Romulus rushed at once towards Rome;
With pride, he pronounced his princely town made
Which even now is still known by his name. (10)

By Tirus, townships arose in Tuscany,
Longobard lifted his high homes in Lombardy,
And from the far French Sea Felix Brutus sets out.
He settles the broad hills and basins of Britain,

Full of bliss,

Where woe, revenge, and wonder,
Have lingered ever since.

Where blessedness and blunder,
Are given equal chance.

When this baron had grandly built up Britain, (20)
A battle-race was bred there, bereft not of bloodshed,
Who in time turned their lives into tales and legends.
In this land more has happened, merry and marvelous,
Than in any other I've known since that ancient time.
But of all the Kings of Britain who have ever been born,
One has never been as noble and knightly as Arthur.
So I'll give here a tale that's both gallant and grand,

Which may seem rather strange, or so many have said:
A wonder-filled quest from the court of King Arthur.
So linger here a while and listen to my lay, (30)
And I'll tell it how those in the town did, too,

With their tongues,
As I've written it nicely,
A story strongly-spun,
With letters laid precisely,
As is now always done.

Christmastime came to Arthur's kingdom,
Where the loveliest of lords, the brightest of ladies,
And the Round Table, rich with its righteous brothers,
Were merry with mighty mirth and careless cheer. (40)

Good tourney was made by the men for some time,
Those gentleman knights, joyful in their jousting,
Then they came back to the castle to carol and laugh,
Where for a full fifteen days, they did nothing but feast,
With more meat than those men could ever imagine.
The sound of their gladness and glee was glorious,
A din during the day, and dancing at night,
They were happy in their halls and chambers,
Those lords and those ladies, delighted to be alive.

With all the wealth of the world, they gathered together, (50)
The most noble and courteous knights under Christ,
And the most dazzling dames ever devised by the world,
And the comeliest king the court had yet crowned,
For all these fair folk in their very first age

Were still called
Happiest under grace of God,

King famous for his will;
Greater knights will never trod
Through valleys or through hills.

When the New Year had been newborn for only a night, (60)
The host of the high-table were served double their helpings.

When the King and his company came into the hall,
The chirping and chanting of the chapel went silent,
And the clerics cried out, and the choir with them,
“Noel anew! Lay the song of Nativity! Noel, Noel!”

Then the nobles ran forth, and having prepared their presents
Gave their gifts gladly, and claimed them just the same,
And bickered and bantered busily for these gifts,

Until the ladies laughed loudly, though they had lost,
And there wasn't a wroth winner, as your probably guessed. (70)

They kept themselves merry and mirthful until mealtime arrived,
Then, when they had washed well, they went to their seats,

The best knight above them all, as seemed to be right,
With Guinevere, goodly and gay, sat in the center

Of that dutiful table, well-dressed upon her dais,
With fine curtains of silk forming a canopy around her,

The most brilliant of tapestries from Toulouse and Turkestan,
Studded and set all about with sensational gemstones

Of the costliest sort, for kings and their courts, gleaming like

Torchlight stars. (80)

So stunning was the comely queen,

With eyes of moonstone grey,

That the world still hasn't seen

Her rivaled to this day.

But Arthur would not eat until all were served;

He was bursting with exuberance, being almost boyish.
He held no lack of love for his life, and cared little
Only for lying and lazing while time was let to pass by,
So busy and boiling were his young blood and his wild brain.

And also, there was a custom that the King strove to keep,

(90)

One he had never failed to honor: he would not eat

Upon such a holy day until he'd heard a story—

Some terrific fable or tremendous tale

Of some miraculous marvel he might well believe,

Those of kings, and courts, and castles, and armies,

Or until a suppliant soul came seeking a great knight

To join him in jousting, their lives put in jeopardy,

Man against man, might unto might, each letting

Fortune chose their fates and grant them favor or ruin.

Yes, this was the custom of the king's court and castle,

(100)

And of his feasts and festivals with his friends

And his knights.

King Arthur with his face so fair,

Stands resolute and tall.

He leads himself without a care;

A merriment to all!

Stiff and strong he stands there, the king himself,

Talking of trifles and troubles to the high-table host.

Good Gawain was sat beside gay Guinevere,

While Agravain the Hard Hand sits at his other side,

(110)

Both sons of the king's sister and sublime knights.

The table's head was bestowed onto Bishop Baldwin,

With Ywain, Urien's son, to eat alongside him.

First this fine host was fantastically served,

Then those stalwart souls sat at the side-tables.

Comes in the first course with a cracking of trumpets

Hung with many bright and beautiful banners,

And then came the noise of the noblest of pipes,

Warbling so wild and whirring so weird

That many a heart was held high by their touch.

(120)

Then the delicacies were delivered and dealt,

The freshest of foods, and dishes so full

There was barely a place to present the platters

Or set the silvers that held the stews

On the cloth.

Each took the food that pleased them there,

With ner' a loathing thought.

A dozen dishes for each pair,

With beer and bread and broth!

Now I shall say no more of this service,

(130)

Where no man nor woman went without their share,

For suddenly a new noise drew near,

And the lord was left to leave his supper

When, soon after the sound had ceased,

Scarcely after the first course was served,

A figure came forth through the frame of the door:

The tallest of travelers, towering above the torches,

Not an unmuscle part from his neck to his nape,
With loins and limbs so long and great
That I'd hold him to be an earthly half-giant (140)
Or the mightiest man in the mortal world,
And sturdy as well, sitting strong in his saddle
With his back and his breast and his body upright,
And a stomach all sleek despite his muscle,
While the rest of his features were fine in form
And cleanly.

But more than his august shape,
His hue was to be seen;
From his boots up past his nape,
This knight was summer green. (150)

And his gear and garments and guise were green, too,
With a straight-cut coat that stuck to his sides,
And a cloak covering his form, the cloth lined
With finely-cut furs, well-fitted and warm,
And elegantly embellished with ermine, too,
That sat lazy under his locks and laid upon his shoulders.
The stockings he wore were of the same green,
Clinging to his calves, with clean, gleaming spurs
Of bright gold set on strips of shimmering green silk
That sat above his slippers, strapped to his socks. (160)

And all his extra vesture was green as well,
From his belt to buckles to the brightly hued gems
That were richly arrayed about his radiant dress
And garnished his saddle, sewn into the silk.
It would be tiring to tell of even half of the trifles,
Embroidered as he was with birds and butterflies
Stitched in the brightest of greens and gold.

And the handsome tassels and harness of his horse,
The enameled studs, the master-worked metal,
And the stirrups he stood in were of the same shade, (170)
And the bow and center and skirts of the saddle,
All glowing and glinting with emerald-green gems.
And every hair of his horse was of the same hue:

Splendid green.

That great horse stood green and thick,
Full of power and might.
Straining at his bridle quick,
Yet tamed by the green knight.

How wonderful he seemed, that warrior in green,
The hair of his head sweet as that of his horse, (180)
His fair, flowing green locks unfolding over his shoulders,
With a beard of bushy green as mantle for his breast
That hung with the lordly hair upon his head;
Both were sliced at his shoulders in semblance of a circle,
So that half of his arms were hidden beneath them,
Gowned like a great king beneath a green tunic.
The mane of his horse matched this majesty,
Well-kept and combed, cut into a good length,
Braided with golden bows about the bright green,
Every hair hemmed with a brilliant hue. (190)

Its tail and its top were entwined all the same,
And both were bound with bands of viridian
That were studded with beads and star-shining stones,
And tied at the top with knot to-and-fro
Beside a dozen ringing bells of brilliantly polished gold.
Nowhere on Earth was there another knight like this,
Nor such a faery horse, fake-seeming as green fire

And yet real.

“That rider shone like lightning,”

Said those who glimpsed the knight.

(200)

“His visage great and frightening,

None would withstand his might.”

Yet he wore no helmet, nor a hauberk either,

Nor polished plate, nor any other protective piece,

And he bore no blade nor shield to swing and block,

But he held in his hand a sprig of holly,

That is greatest in green when groves are bare,

And his shoulder supported the most striking of axes,

A weapon to wound, cruel and unworldly—

The head on the haft measured an ell and a half

(210)

And was forged of green steel, trimmed with gold,

With a broad edge that burned bright as the sun

That could shred a man apart, razor sharp as shears.

The heavy handle gripped by the stranger’s hand

Was set with steel from its summit to its end

And engraved with gracious artworks of green.

A light lace ran about it, looped at the head,

Held by a hardy knot to the haft,

With twirling and twining tassels attached

By emerald-green buttons, brilliant and bold.

(220)

This warrior waltzes through the wonder-struck hall,

Heads towards the high table, having no fear,

Giving no greetings, great in his stature.

“Where,” he thunders, the first thing from his throat,

“Is the head of this host? Happily I would see him,

For I’ll parley and pact with no other person;

Only he.”

In his eyes he held the knights,
And looked them up and down,
To find out which soldier might (230)
Carry the most renown.

The guests only stared as the knight said his say,
Marveling at what such a scene might mean,
That a man and his mount should be made of a color
Green as grass that grows by the river,
With their green enamel glowing brighter on the gold.
Some stood and studied him, while others strode nearer,
And all watched with wonder at what he'd do next,
For they'd seen many sights, but never one such as this,
So they figured it a trick of some fairy or phantom, (240)
Thus many sat still in their seats and just stared,
Shocked and astonished and stricken like stone,
While a swooning silence encircled the hall
So soundless it seemed like they'd fallen asleep

Just like that.

Though not all were stilled by fear—
Some froze in courtesy,
And stood there waiting to hear
What Arthur's words would be.

Then the king welcomed this weird warrior, (250)
Talking with tolerance, his temperament brave.
“Welcome and warmth you've found here, warrior.
Arthur is my name, the head of this house.
Hop from your horse, stay here for a while,
And let us learn later what it is that you seek.”
“So help me,” said the knight, “By He who sits in Heaven,
To wait is not my want, and it wanders from my errand,

But as love for you, lord, is lifted so high,
And your castle and court are considered the best,
Your steel-plated soldiers the strongest of riders, (260)
The most wonderful and worthy yet known to the world,
Proven most peerless in play and in war,
And since you carry, I've heard, your courtesy so high,
My curiosity's been caught, so I've come to you this season;
By the holly branch I hold in my hand, be certain
That I come here in kindness, to cause you no sorrow,
For if I sook slaughter and swordplay this night,
I've a helmet back home, and a hauberk as well,
And a shield that shines, and a sharp spear,
And other weapons to wield, if I well choose as such, (270)
But as I want not for war, I'm wearing no armor.
So if you're courageous and courteous and cool as they say,
You'll graciously grant me the game that I seek

This cold night.

Arthur answered him boldly,
"Most courteous Sir Knight,
If you seek battle only,
You'll get a fair-fought fight."

"No," spoke the knight, "I'll not have a clash
With these beardless boys around the benches; (280)
For if I'd come to your castle all clasped in my arms,
No man here could match me, so great is my might.
Instead I call to this court for a Christmastime game,
For Yule is yet new, and New Year still newer:
If any man of this manor has made himself up
To be bold in his blood and be brave in his acts,
Let him strike at this stranger; I'll strike him one too,

And I'll give him my axe, the greatest of gifts,
Heavier than steel, and his alone to handle.
Better yet, I'll bide the first blow, sitting bare. (290)
So if any are tempted to test my talk,
Leap over here lightly, lay hold of my weapon,
My claim of it is quit, it's his to keep,
And I'll suffer a stoke, stiff and unflinching,
So long as he'll suffer the same thing from me,

On his oath,
In a twelvemonth and day,
Not later, and not now.
So, what have you men to say?
Who dares to take the vow?" (300)

If at first they were frightened, more fearful now
Were the hearts in that hall, the high and the low.
Atop his saddle, the stranger stirred,
His red eyes reeling left and right
Beneath his green and bristled brows,
His beard waving as he watched who would rise.
When the court remained quiet, he coughed with pride,
And sat up straight before speaking his mind:
"So this is the Kingdom of Arthur," he claimed,
"Whose renown is reputed in realms far and wide? (310)
Where's your proud and prestigious pompousness now?
Your wrath and your rage and your boastful ravings?
It seems the revel and renown of the Round Table
Has been washed away by the words of one man;
You're all frozen in fear, while I've raised not a finger!"
Then he laughed so loud that their lord nearly burst
As the blood behind his battle-worn face boiled

From his shame.

He grew furious as a storm,

And so did all his knights.

(320)

So King Arthur, true to form,

Stepped up with all his might,

“Sir,” he said, “what you’re saying is foolish;

So foolish, in fact, that it’s fitting it be granted.

Not one of my knights is made nervous by your words.

Give me your axe, and in the good name of God,

I’ll gladly grant you the game that you seek.”

He strides towards the stranger and seizes his hand;

The stranger then swiftly dismounts his steed

And hands Arthur his axe, who holds it by the handle

(330)

Careful and steady, seeking to strike,

While the knight stands neat as a nail before him,

His head the highest in that house by far.

He stood there sternly, he stroked his beard,

He drew his coat down, undaunted, and yawned,

No more scared of the stroke that Arthur sought

That he’d have been if a man from the benches brought

Him good wine.

Gawain, sat beside the Queen,

Interrupted Arthur:

“I must beseech you, my king,

(340)

Give this fight to me, sir.”

“My lord, if you’d like me,” said Gawain loudly,

“To step from my seat and stand beside you,

Respectfully relinquish my place at the table

So long as my lady the Queen likes it so,
I would come to your counsel before this great court.
For I find it unfitting, and so should my fellows,
That when a quest of this kind is brought to the court
You should take it yourself, yield your own talents, (350)
While so many bod soldiers stay sitting on the benches
Who've never been matched or mastered by other men
Or beaten or bloodied or bettered in war.
I'm the weakest and the worst or your warriors here,
So you'd miss my life the least should I lose it.
Were I not your nephew, I'd have no noteworthy traits;
I am born of your blood, and beyond that have nothing.
A quest of this kind is unfit for a king,
So as I have asked for it, allow me this trial,
And if my claim isn't comely, let the court place their blame (360)

Upon me.

The Knighthood speaks together,
And each one says the same:
Free Arthur from his fetters
And give Gawain the game.

Then the sovereign summoned Gawain to his side,
Who readily rose up and rushed to the king.
He bowed before Arthur, who bestowed him the axe,
Letting go of the hilt, and held up his hands
To grant brave Gawain the blessing of God (370)
So that he may be hardy of heart and of body.
"Be careful, my cousin, to keep the axe steady,
For should you rend this knight rightly, I reckon it true
That you'll bare the blow from the blade he'll owe after."
Gawain walks towards the warrior, wielding the axe,

And halts before the horse, unflinching and hardy,
He gruffly hails Gawain, the rider in green:
“Recount our contract before you come any further.
Then declare what you’re called by this court—say your name,
And tell it to me truthfully to prove I can trust you.” (380)

“In good faith, I’m Gawain,” said the gallant knight.
“I’ll deliver the stroke, and despite what happens,
In twelve months’ time I’ll take my own
From whatever weapon you wish to wield
Against me.”

The stranger sings his praises,
“Gawain, I’m glad it’s you
Who among all these daisies
Will try to strike me through.”

“By god,” says the green knight, “Gawain, I’m happy (390)
This favor should fall upon your valiant fist,
As you’ve rightly repeated my reason for coming
And made clear that you comprehend the terms of our covenant.
However, I ask you to accept a final oath:
That you’ll seek me yourself next winter season,
No matter the milage or where I may be,
To stand a stroke like you’ll serve here tonight.”

“But where should I wander? Where is your home?
By Him in the Heavens, I’ve never heard of you, knight—
I don’t know your name or the name of your court. (400)
But if you’ll tell me your title, and be truthful about it,
I’ll work out the way using all of my wits,
And I swear on my soul that I’ll stand by this oath.”

“That is enough this New Year. You needn’t say more,”
Said the knight in green to noble Gawain.

“I tell you the truth—once I’ve taken your knock
And your swing has struck me smartly, you’ll learn
Of my house and my home, and you’ll have my name, too,
Then you can follow my footsteps and find my abode.
Or I could stay myself silent, and your soul would be happy
In keeping to this court, never caring to look forward—

But enough!

Take the grim axe in your hands,
Let’s see the blow I’ll trade.”

Gawain says, “As you command,”
And pets his violent blade.

The green knight gets to his knees on the ground
And bends forward a bit, showing beautiful flesh.
He lays the locks of his lovely hair aside
To make naked the nape of his burly neck.

Gawain holds the hilt of the axe sky-high,
His left foot planted on the floor in front of him,
And brings it barreling into the knight before him,
So strong that he slices straight through the bone,
So fast that he flays the knight’s flesh in two,
So brutal that the bright blade bites into the floor
As the horseman’s fair head falls hewn to the Earth
And is kicked through the court by Camelot’s knights.

His brilliant red blood poured bright on the green,
Yet the man doesn’t falter, nor fumble or fall,

Instead, he stands up on sturdy legs and strides forward.

The soldiers watch startled as he scours the floor

Lays hold of his head, lifts it high,

Then struts towards his steed, snatches the bridle,

Steps into the stirrups and settles upon his mount,

Holding his head by his brilliant green hair,
And steadily he sits in his noble saddle
As if nothing of any note had happened, as if he never

Lost his head.

He threw his hulk all about, (440)

That body bleeding red,

And the knights began to rout

Before his say was said.

The knight held his head up high in the air

And turned it towards the noblest man of the tables.

It lifted its eyelids and looked straight at ahead,

And spoke as such, with words all stern,

“Sir Gawain, don’t forget the promise you’ve given

To follow me faithfully, near and far,

As was pledged in the presence of these knights and nobles. (450)

I charge you with searching for the Green Chapel,

Where you’ll receive a stroke—as you have served me—

When December dwindles, and New Year dawns.

I am known by the name of the Knight of the Green Chapel,

And you can’t fail to find me if you’re faithful in your hunt.

So come, or be counted as a coward, Gawain.”

With a rush the rider twists the reins,

And hurtles out of the hall, still holding his head,

So fast that bright fire flicked from the hooves.

Where he was heading, they had no idea, (460)

Nor what kingdom he came from on his terrible quest.

And after?

The King and Sir Gawain joke

About the green knight there.

Yet the knights who saw it know

No marvel can compare.

Though Arthur was awed in his awesome heart,
He let no sign of it be seen, but rather said
To his comely queen in courteous words,
“My dear lady, don’t let this disturbance upset you. (470)

Such quests are common when Christmas comes round,

While our laughs are lively, and our songs are loud,

And the lords and ladies are lost in their tidings.”

He paused. “And I can finally join in the feasting

For I’ve seen a spectacular thing, I would say!”

Then he glanced at Gawain and said with glee,

“Now hand up your axe—you’ve hewn enough, sir.”

This was done above the dais, where it decorated the wall

So that men could marvel at the might of Gawain

And tell the true tale of his terrible wonder. (480)

Then the two of them turned towards the table,

The noble King and his knight, where their men nicely

Served them double their dishes, the rarest of delicacies,

All manner of meats, and the sweet songs of minstrels,

So that happiness held their hearts until the hallowed moon

Graced the sky.

Now be careful, Sir Gawain,

Let courage take your heart,

And make sure you turn again

To play your promised part. (490)

Part 2

This contest was just the thing Arthur had wanted
When he was young in years, with a yearning for stories.
And though talk among the tables before had teetered,
That terrible knight now haunted their tongues.
If Gawain was glad to play games in that hall,
Don't wonder should the mood turn worse for wear,
For though many a man may become merry with drink,
A year, like Arthur, yearns for its youth,
As it shifts and shapes into forms anew.

So Christmas closed, and the New Year came, (500)
And the seasons marched swiftly in their set order.
After light-hearted Yule came lonesome Lent,
That tests the flesh with simple food and fish.
But then the world made war on Winter with other weather:
The cold sank low, while the clouds began to climb,
Weeping their warm and wistful rains
Upon fields of fair, wind-swept flowers.
The ground and the groves were all fashioned in green,
While birds flittered busily among branches, singing songs
In solace of the summer that crept softly after (510)

Vibrant spring.

Soft blossoms open lightly
Among the grass and trees,
And music echoes brightly,
Among the birds and bees.

Then came summer with swift, soft winds
As Zephyr blew sweetly over the seeds and grasses.

The green plants growing then were gleeful
When the dew dripped from their delicate leaves
And was bathed in the sun's bright blush. (520)
But then hailed the harvest, hardening the land,
Warning the greens to ripen before winter.
With drought, it dried the land to dust
That flew up high from the faces of the fields
In wrathful winds that wrestled with the sun.
The leaves flew from lime-trees and fell lightly to the ground,
While the grass withered from green into grey.
Then the crops are ready to either ripen or rot,
And the year moves forward yesterday by yesterday
And winter winds up in the world again, (530)

As it does.

At Michaelmas the pale moon
Comes with the winter's night,
Reminding Sir Gawain soon
To take his anxious flight.

But he stayed with Arthur until All Saint's Day,
Who held a feast in the fair name of that famous knight
With all the revels and riches of the Round Table.
The lords and lovely ladies there
Were all gathered in grief for love of Gawain, (540)
Yet no matter, they gave him only mirth and merriment;
That gentleman got plenty of joyless jests.
But the meal was mournful, and after it he met Arthur
To speak of his sorrow, and plainly he said:
"Now, lord of my life, I beg your leave.
You know the cost of my contract, and I don't care
To retell you the terms of this troublesome promise.

Come tomorrow, I must seek the terrible toll
Of the Green Knight, guided by God's will."
Then the noblest of the knights flocked together, (550)
Yvain, and Erik, and others so grand,
Sir Donddinaval de Savage, the Duke of Clarence,
Lancelot, Lionel, and Lucan the Good,
Sir Bors and Sir Bedivere, both big knights,
And many other mighty men, like Mador de la Port.
This company of Camelot gathered round the King
To counsel Gawain with care and comradery.
All the souls in that hall were stricken with sadness
That a good man like Gawain was going on this errand;
To bear a blade and offer no blow (560)

In return.

Yet the knight still kept cheerful
And said, "Why should I cry?"
"When destiny runs fearful
What can we do but try?"

He dwelt there all day, and dressed in the morning,
Asked early for his arms, and had all of them brought.
First a crimson carpet was cast over the floor,
Atop which glittered his gear in the golden light.
He stalwartly stepped up and handled the steel— (570)
Donned a tunic of tight Turkish silk,
Then a well-cut cape, closed at his neck,
That was set with soft and silver fur.
Then they set his feet into steel shoes
And locked his legs behind lavish grieves
And fixed polished plates to protect his knees
All set with strings of soft gold.

Then cuisses were fitted to completely encase
His thickly thighs, tied with thongs.
Next was a suit of sparkling steel rings **(580)**
That he bore on his body and beautiful clothes:
His arms were bound in bright braces
With good elbow guards and powerful gauntlets,
All the terrible tools he need to tackle

His dread quest.

Gawain's armor flare brightly,
His gold spurs gleamed with pride,
His longsword dangled knightly
From silk bands at his side.

When he was clad in his coat, he shone like a king,
(590)

With its lachets and lacings all lined with gold.
Then, suited as he stood, he set off to Mass,
Offered and honored at the high altar.
After, he came to the King and his friends in the court,
Took his leave of Camelot's lords and ladies,
Who kissed him and wept and commended him to Christ.
By then Gryngolet was ready with a gift for Gawain:
A saddle that gleamed with fringes of gold
And new studs, made specially for this sorrowful journey.
The bridle was bound in bright stripes of gold, **(600)**
While the midpanels matched their marvelous appearance
To the cropper and cover and saddlebow's color.
And it was all grounded by nails that glimmered red-gold
Like rays of the rich and radiant sun.
Then he hold up his helmet and kisses it hastily,
Strong and stuffed with a soft lining,

And sits it high on his head, held in place
Both above and below with a brilliant cloth
Embroidered with the best and brightest of gems
On a broad silken boarder with birds sewn about, (610)
Like parrots that were painted perching and singing
Or turtle-doves and lovers knots, tangled so tight
That the women must have worked it for seven winters

At the least.

His crown was the greatest part
All bound with diamonds bright,
Shimmering like glassy hearts
As if they'd caught moonlight.

Then they showed him the shield, and it shone like blood
With the pentacle painted upon it in gold. (620)
He threw it about his heck by the belt,
And it fit his fearless figure well.

But why the pentangle was appropriate for that prince
I intend to tell you, though I'll tarry a bit:
King Solomon designed this symbol long ago
As a token of truth, which it stands for today,
As it's a figure that's formed from five points
With its lines all linked and locked together,
And its all-around endless, thus when mentioned in England,
Their name is the "never-ending" or "endless" know. (630)

So it matched this man in his marvelous armor;
He was faithful in five things, and five ways more.
Gawain was a good knight, and pure as gold,
All void of villainy, he was virtuous and loyal

To a fault.

So he bore that star anew

Upon his shield and cont

Proving his words true,

Though everyone had known.

First, he was faultless in his five senses,

(640)

Second, his five fingers never failed,

Third, his faith was in the five wounds

That the creed says Christ received on the cross.

Fourth, whenever he found himself fighting,

His thoughts were stirred toward a thing in specific:

He found fearlessness in the five joys

That the Queen of High Heaven had in her Child.

For this purpose, the knight had her portrait painted

Inside of his shield with skillful strokes,

So he could harden his heart by looking upon her,

(650)

That the sight of her visage would strengthen his soul.

The fifth of the fives Gawain followed

Were fellowship and charity for both friends and foes.

A constant kindness and cleanly heart,

And pity, surpassing all bias—five points

In his heart that held him so high among men.

Now all five of these fives remained strong in this fellow,

All braided and bound in between themselves endlessly,

Fixed in a five-pointed, unfailing form

Where no single side overlapped with itself

Or came to an end, for the kept on continuing

(660)

Wherever an end or beginning began.

So the star sparkled on his stately shield

In goodly gold on crimson ground—

The pure pentangle, as people had heard of

In stories

Armored and feeling gay,
He took his lance in hand,
Kindly bid them all good day,
Then set out from that land.

He spurred his steed and sped away **(670)**

So swift that the stones sparked in his wake.

Thos who saw that horseman sighed in their hearts

And spoke in soft and sorrowful words

Of concern for Gawain, “By Christ, it’s a crime

That so noble a knight goes to lose his life!

No fellow so find can be found on this Earth.

The smarter decision would have been to act secretly

And dub him a duke, as her certainly deserves;

A lord of lords—a leader of men—

All better than being cut to bits, **(680)**

Or beheaded by beast for boyish pride.

What kind of a king would take such counsel

While caught in the revelries of Christmastime?”

They wept warm and woeful tears

When beloved Gawain took leave of their land

That dark day.

Not one place did he abode—

Instead, he went his way,

Over strange and unknown roads,

Or so the legends says. **(690)**

Now he rides through the rough realms of Logres,

Sir Gawain, by God, through his ride was no game!

Many nights he was left alone and longing

For food before him, or friends he missed.

He had no company but his horse and the hills,

And only God to guide him through his grueling quest
Until he had nearly wandered into Northern Wales,
Where the Isles of Anglesey kept to his left.

He follows the fords, and find the headlands

By the Holy head, so he hurries ashore **(700)**

Into the wilderness of Wyrale, where the wild folk

Had lost their love for the Lord and men.

And he questioned, on his quest, all those he encountered

If they knew of the knight all garnished in green

Or of the Green Chapel, the ground he called home.

“No,” they answered. “Never a knight

Has come to this country looking so curious

As you say.”

Through places barren and strange

Gawain wanders and rides. **(710)**

Often his temper will change

Before the Chapel’s sight.

He clammers up cliffs in peculiar lands,

Far from his friends, forsaken he rides.

At each spot he splashes through stream or brook

It was a wonder when no warrior stands in his way

So fierce or monstrous he’s forced into fighting.

In the mountains alone he faced so many marvels

That to tell just a tenth would be a hard time.

Here with dragons and snapping wolves he warred **(720)**

There in the crags he matched with

With bulls and bears and wild boars

And trolls that came slobbering from treacherous tunnels.

Yet through duty and daring and devotion to God

He kept death by both devil and man from his doorstep.

But if war was so dreadful, then winter was worse,
When cold, clear rain poured out from the clouds
And froze as it fell to the frigid earth.
Nearly slain by the sleet, he slept in his armor
More nights than he knew among naked rocks
Where cool water clattered from mountain crests
And icicles hung high up in the heavens.
So in peril and pain, through a plight like no other,
Gawain crossed through the country until Christmas Eve,

All alone.

On that cold and Holy Tide,
Gawain prays to Mary
That through her grace she might guide
Him to sanctuary.

Emboldened, that morning he marched through the mountains
Into a fearsome forest, full-grown and wild,
With rippling hills that ran the whole range
Hidden beneath hundreds of huge, hard oaks.
The hazel and hawthorne were huddled together,
Cocooned in coats of ragged moss,
While downcast birds upon their bare branches
Lifted sorrowful songs to the freezing sky.
At Gawain's command, Gryngolet glides
Through mists and marshes. The man goes alone,
Concerned for his quest, in case he should falter
In service of our Sire, who on that same night
Was born to Mary to bring us His blessing.
Sighing, he'd say, "I beseech you, Lord,
And Mary, our mild and dear mother.
Guide me to some manor where I might hear mass

(730)

(740)

(750)

And matins and tomorrow morning, I ask,
As with patience I pray my pater, ave,

And my creed.

He rides on in his praying,

Burdened by his mistakes,

(760)

While crossing himself, saying,

“Christ, help me on my way.”

No sooner than he’s said these words he saw

In those perilous woods a peculiar place

High on a hill, bordered by heather

And timber trunks and a treacherous moat:

The comeliest castle a knight could conceive,

Perched in a prairie of the greenest grass

With a palisade of pikes planted about

The tall trees for two or more miles.

(770)

Gawain stared at a side of that stronghold

As it shimmered and shone through the shaking oaks,

Then with helmet in hand sent thanks up high

To Jesus and Saint Julian, both gentle and kind,

Who’d heard his cry and conducted his course.

“Now allow me peace in this lodging, my Lord.”

With his gilded spurs, he girds Gryngolet,

And by luck he selects the leading gate

Which brings Gawain bounding to the drawbridge’s

End with haste.

(780)

The bridge was drawn and tethered,

The gates were locked up fast.

The walls were built to weather

The cold wind’s greatest blast.

He sat on his steed beside the bank

Of the seething moat that surrounded the stronghold.
From the wonderous depths of the water, the walls
Towered toward the coming twilight,
Built from bricks of black stone
That supported stunningly styled battlements (790)
And watchtowers trusted to guard the grounds
From winding windows, well-lit and locked.
Gawain had never seen such superb security,
And behind this he beheld a brilliant hall
Surrounded by a series of ascending towers
With spires that scratched the cloudy sky
That were crowned with beautifully carved caps.
Chalk-white chimneys from warm chambers
Stood there glimmering in the soft starlight,
While painted pinnacles peeked from the roof (800)
In so many clusters across the castle,
It seemed the scene was made out of paper.
Atop Gringolet, Gawain was gladdened at the thought
Of staying in that citadel, where he might find solace
And kindness to comfort him through the Christmas Season,

By God's grace.

He hollered, and soon there came
A porter to the wall,
Who welcomed noble Gawain
And asked him why he called. (810)

“Good sir,” said Gawain. “Will you go with a message
To the master of this manor, that he might let me stay?”
“By Saint Peter,” said the porter, “I will, but I predict
You’ll be welcome in these walls for as long as you wish.”
Then quickly he left and came back with a caucus

Of retainers and attendants to receive the stranger.
They let down the drawbridge, crossed the divide,
And fell to the freezing earth before him,
Welcoming that wayfarer as worthily as they could.
Then they guided Gawain to the wide-open gate **(820)**

Where he beckoned them to rise and rode over the bridge.
A huddle of servants helped him step from his saddle,
And a few of their strongest took his steed to the stables.
Then the knights and their squires drew near the newcomer
To conduct him, kindly, into the keep.

When he heaved off his helmet, a squabble of hands
Reached out to relieve the rider of his load;
They bore off his blade and his buckler as well.
Graciously he greeted those gallant knights
Pressed all in that passage to proffer their respects. **(830)**

Decked in his armor he was delivered to a hall
Where a fire flickered with shadowy flames.
The lord of that land left his chamber
To meet with this man taking refuge in his manor.
“Salutations,” he said. “You are welcome to stay,
And whatever you wish or will, you may do

While you’re here.”

“Thank you,” Sir Gawain uttered,

“May Christ show you a grace.”

Then as if they’d been brothers **(840)**

Those gentlemen embraced.

Gawain gazed on that great man who greeted him there,
The kind and courageous lord of that castle.
Massive as a mammoth, at the peak of his manhood,
With a beaver-red beard all thick and bristly,

He was stalwart in build and strong in his stance,
And his face was fiery, and his words came fair.
Thus it seemed to suit him, Gawain supposed,
To command such a company in so fine a castle.
The lord then led Gawain to his lodgings, **(850)**

Seeking a servant to see to the rider,
And a number of knights responded to this notion
By bringing him to a beautifully embellished bedroom
With silks that shimmered in shades of gold,
Quilts crafted from a hundred colors,
A coverlet over the couch, cut from white fur,
Curtains roped through red-gold rings,
And tapestries of Toulousian and Turkish make
Fixed to the walls and flat on the floor.

With cheer, with humor, all chipped in to help **(860)**
Strip Gawain of his grimy chainmail and gown,
Then they brought him bunches of brilliant robes
In the choicest bright colors to choose and change into.
Soon he was standing in a spectacular gown
That fit him fantastically, with flowing ribbons
So spellbinding, it seemed to the spectators there
That spring had surfaced in a blossom of sunlight
To color the lines of his lively limbs.
Christ, they claimed, had never created

Such a knight, **(870)**
Whose country was still unknown,
And yet possessed the might
To stand in a league alone
Wherever armies fight.

In front of the fire, where charcoal flickered,

A seat was set up for Gawain to settle on,
Cushioned with comfortable pillows and quilts,
Then they cast a cozy cloak around his shoulders
Of warm brown cloth embroidered with sky-blue,
Finished with the finest of snow-white fur— **(880)**

Ermine, to be specific—and hood made the same.

Suited so splendidly, he settled by the fireside

To warm up his spirit, wearing from wandering.

A table was set on tough tresses by his attendants,

Then covered with a clean, frost-white cloth

And a salt bowl, and napkins, and silver spoons.

Gawain washed himself well, and went to his meal,

Where several servants gladly served him

Savory soups, all perfectly seasoned,

In servings of all sizes. There were fish of all sorts, **(890)**

Some baked into bread, others blackened by fire,

Some spiced, some boiled, some simmered in stews,

And all slathered in sauces adored by the soldier.

Far too frequently he thanked them for the feast,

But his carefree companions simply urged him to continue

As he pleased.

“This might as well be penance;

Tomorrow you’ll be fed!”

And Gawain grew resplendent

As wine rose to his head. **(900)**

Then talking tactfully as he sat at the table,

They politely posed questions to the prince.

Courteously, he said he came from Camelot,

Court of the courageous King Arthur,

Righteous ruler of the Round Table,

And with Gawain himself they now sit for supper,
Who has come to their keep by luck this Christmas.
When the Lord learned that his guest was Gawain,
He was so elated he laughed out loud.

All the men in that manor then made a fuss
To preside in Prince Gawain's presence,
Whose prowess and purity were so often praised,
Whose courage and courtesy were so often commended,
That among all men he seemed honored the most.

(910)

The knights said softly to those beside them,
"If we watch, we might witness some grace or wonder
In the noble display of this dauntless knight.

We may spot in his speech the best style of talking,
Since he comes from the kingliest of royal courts.

Kind is the grace we've been given by God,
That a guest so great as Gawain would be ours
As we sit here and sing of the seraphic birth

(920)

Of our Lord.

To act in a knightly way,
Gawain shall teach us well,
And love's sweet language, we pray,
We might just learn as well."

When dinner was done and Gawain got up,
Sunlight slunk through the darkened sky.

Chaplains, yawning in their chapels and churches,
Banged on their ringing, binging bells
To signal the evensong service was starting.

(930)

The lord arrives first, then later his lady,
Who sneaks into the safety of secluded pew.

Gawain happily goes, praising God,

And is led through the lines of Mass to the lord.
“Gawain,” he greets. “My honored guest.
No one in the world is more welcome than you.”
At that, Gawain thanks him; then they embraced
And sat through the service together in silence. **(940)**
The lady, seeking to look upon the stranger,
Snuck from her seat with her servants in tow.
In face and in fashion, she was undoubtedly fair,
With color in character, and cunning eyes,
Greater, Gawain thought, than Guinevere herself.
In the church’s chancel they shared salutations.
To her left, another lady loosely held her hand
Who was tall and ancient, traced by time,
And it seemed, to the soldier, highly respected.
In looks, those ladies were nothing alike. **(950)**
Where one was young-witted, the other was withered.
One’s flowing blood seemed flushed with fire;
One’s rolling cheeks were rough with wrinkles.
A pearl-speckled handkerchief hung from one’s head
That sparkled like the snow-white skin of her neck,
Bare as a mountain, and bright as her breast.
The other was swaddled in a soft scarf,
Her chin concealed by chalk-white veils,
Her forehead fettered in folds of silk
Adorned and sewn with delicate decorations, **(960)**
So that nothing was bare but the black of her brows,
Her eyes, her nose, and her naked lips,
A sorrow to see, for how bleary they seemed.
A matriarch, mighty and motherly, you’d admit
Before God!

Her body was short and thick,
Her buttocks broad and wide.
Most men would prefer to pick
The lady at her side.

As Gawain gazed at that gracious woman, **(970)**

The lord gave him leave to approach those ladies.

He bowed before the blessed matriarch,

And lightly embraced the blooming beauty,

Kissing her with courtesy. He spoke to them kindly;

They greeted him with glee. "Might I," asked Gawain,

"Stay as your servant, should you desire?"

They told him "Of course!" and took him between them

To a smoke-smelling fire. A servant then sped

For spices and scones, specially baked,

And wine to warm their spirits and worries. **(980)**

The Lord kept leaping to his lively feet,

Making them merry, with mirth in his steps:

He'd hang his hood from his high-standing spear

And swing it around them, a reward for the soul

Who could cause them all comfort that Christmas night.

"And against you, I'll seek it myself!" he said.

"Lest my friends leave my hair hoodless and hanging!"

So the Lord lifted their hearts with laughter

And Gawain was glad as a guest could ask

That cold night, **(990)**

'Till the darkness made them light

The lamps with mellow fire.

Gawain bid them all goodnight,

And to his bed retired.

In the morning, they took time to remember the moment

Our destined Redeemer was delivered to the world,
When wonder for Christ wells in the world.

Many delights abounded that day:

A hundred hearty meals were made
And served to the nobles with spectacular service.

(1000)

In the highest seat, the old woman sat
With the Lord, politely, to her left, so I've heard.

Gawain and the lady lingered like lovers,
Took seats in the center, and said their prayers,

Then servants hauled a feast through the hall,
And in order of status, each soul was served.

There was meat! There was mirth! Everybody was merry!

So merry, they were, that my words cannot match them,
And my pen cannot paint the simplest of pictures.

But I know that Gawain and the noble lady
Were comforted by the close company of the other

(1010)

Through warm solace and secret words,
Through conversation clear of crude vulgarity,

So that their game surpassed all princely pleasures

On this Earth.

The pipes played loud and joyous

While trumpets laughed and cried.

The hall thrummed to their voices,

And those two sat beside.

They dined and delighted all that day and the next,
And sang and celebrated the next day as sincerely,
Then the jubilee of Saint John's Day departed more gently,
As the season sped to a sonorous close.

At the grey light of morning, the guests were to go,
So they drunk and danced through the darkened night

To the sound of carols and spirited songs.
At last, when it was late, they all took their leave,
Settings off on their strange and separate ways.
“Goodbye,” said Gawain, but he was grabbed by the Lord,
Led to his chamber, with the summerhot chimney, **(1030)**
And drawn to the fire, where the Lord thanked him dearly
For the honor that horseman had shown his house
In warming his castle with such a wonderous character.
“As I live, my life and my luck will be better
That Gawain was my guest at the feast of God!”
“My friend!” said Gawain. “In good faith, thank yourself!
The High King bless your house for your honor!
Your needs are now mine, by my name as a knight!
All your bundles are burdens, I’ll bear with pride, **(1040)**

Day or night.”

The Lord tries and tries again,

To get the knight to stay,

But Gawain replies the same:

By light, he must away.

Then the lord of that place politely implored
What troublesome trial had torn such a knight
From Camelot’s court, alone and courageous,
As the cold of Christmas came crashing down.
“You’ve guessed it,” said Gawain. “But I’ll tell you the tale: **(1050)**
I was called from the court by a dreadful quest—
Summoned to seek out some secret place!—
But where in the world it waits, I don’t know!
I wouldn’t fail to find it by the first light of New Year
Were the Lord to bestow me all the land of Logres!
Though maybe, my lord, you can mend my misfortune,

By telling me, truthfully, if you've heard the tale
Of the Green Chapel, and the ground where it lies,
And the knights who guards it, garbed all in green.
Our souls, you see, are sealed by a promise **(1060)**
That I'll meet the man there—if I make it, that is.
But nearly nothing remains 'till New Year
And, by God, I'll give that knight my graces,
More graces than gold or glimmering gems!
So my Lord, with your blessing, I must by first light.
My death is to be delivered in only three days
And to desert or deny that? I'd rather die."

Through his laughter, the Lord said, "Stay longer, then,
And I'll point out that perilous place in due time!
Stop fretting you won't find the Green Chapel, my friend! **(1070)**
You can stay in your silks, sleep in your bed,
Give your goodbyes on the dawn of the year,
And meet him that morning, to do with the man

As you please!

Stay here until New Year's Day,

And ride meet him then.

For only two miles away,

You'll find the Chapel's glen!"

Glowing with glee, Gawain rejoiced,
"For a gift such as this, I must thoroughly thank you! **(1080)**
By your courtesy, I've accomplished my quest, so I'll stay
Until then, and see that your desires are satisfied!"
Seizing Gawain's tunic and sitting him at his side,
The Lord called for ladies to keep the room lively.
They stayed there in solace beside one another,
The Lord, by the fire, laughing and lounging

Unaware of his words, or the world, at that.

Then suddenly, like a storm, he screamed at Gawain:

“You’ve pledged to perform all I petition!

With courage, will you keep our covenant tonight?”

(1090)

“Don’t doubt me in my duty,” said devoted Gawain,

“I’m yours while I keep comfort in this castle.”

“Your travels left you torn and tired,” said the Lord,

“And though we’ve patched up your person, presented you a bed,

I wonder if your burden keeps you weak and weary.

When you return to your room, find yourself rest.

And tomorrow, after Mass, come for your meal

When you will; you’ll find that my wife will be waiting.

She’ll keep your comfort and company while I’m gone

From this place.

(1100)

At morning’s grey light I go

To hunt the shadowy woods.”

Sir Gawain bowed deep and low,

Agreeing as he could.

“Additionally,” said the Lord, “I’ve a deal for those days:

Whatever I win in the woods is yours,

And whatever you win while I’m away will be mine!

Sir, by the Saints, let’s swear to exchange,

Let’s make a commitment, no matter the consequence!”

“By God,” said Gawain, “I’ll play at your game

And be glad for the gamble, if it be good!”

(1010)

“Then I declare we drink to conclude our contract,”

Roared the Lord with such life that everyone laughed.

So they drank and delighted through the dark of the night

For as long as they wanted, those lords and ladies.

Then with whispers and wishes of courtly words,

They stood, almost silent, and speaking with warmth
Kissed one another with courtesy, then departed,
Brought to their beds by blazing torches
And the servants who carried them, to keep off the cold

(1120)

Of the night.

As they walked the shifting hall,

The two discussed their pact.

The Lord of those castle walls

Could play a game with tact.

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