

## Sir Gawain and the Green Knight\*

FITT<sup>1</sup> 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;<sup>2</sup>  
 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 Romulus<sup>3</sup> 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 Langobard<sup>4</sup> did likewise building homes in Lombardy.  
 And further afield, over the Sea of France,  
 Felix Brutus<sup>5</sup> 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").

all roundly carousing and reveling in pleasure.  
 40 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,  
 with more food and drink than a fellow could dream of.  
 45 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  
 that hall:  
 55 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.<sup>6</sup>  
 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.





crimped at the collar, like a king's cape.  
 The mane of his mount was groomed to match,  
 combed and knotted into curlicues  
 then tiseled 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.

200 His look was lightning bright  
 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,  
 a miracle or magic, or so they imagined.

240 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,  
 and the business which brings you we shall learn of later."

255 "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."

280 "I'm spoiling for no scrap, I swear. Besides,  
 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,



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  
 now to his king inclines  
 340 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  
385 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."

390 "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  
395 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.  
400 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,"  
405 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.  
410 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."  
415 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,  
420 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  
425 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,  
430 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,



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.

505 Then the world's weather wages war on winter:  
 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,  
 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.

525 Then all which had risen over-ripens and rots  
 and yesterday on yesterday the year dies away,

remain.

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

810

“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.

825

Then knights, and the squires of knights, drew near,  
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.

830

Then he made himself known to nobles and knights  
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.

835

Then the master of the manor emerged from his chamber,  
to greet him in the hall with all due honor,

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

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—<sup>8</sup>  
                       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

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

from the Court of Arthur, King of Camelot,  
 the royal ruler of the Round Table,  
 905 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

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  
 by far.

1015       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 Day<sup>9</sup> 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."

1045       At length his lordship tried  
           to get his guest to stay.  
           But proud Gawain replied  
           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

9. December 27.



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.

- 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
- 1760 and seeing her so lovely and alluringly dressed,  
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
- 1765 and bright.  
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
- 1775 and be counted a betrayer by the keeper of the castle.  
"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:

1815 "Nay, knight, since you decline  
to pass to me a prize,  
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,  
1825 and swears, on his name as a knight, not to swerve.  
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

1880 so his soul might be saved when he goes to his grave.  
 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  
                   and say, "Such charm and cheer;  
 1890 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.

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  
 so the moors and the mountains were muzzy with mist  
 2080 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.

He's lurked about too long  
 2115 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  
 2130 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  
 2135 behaves.

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

2140 “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  
 2145 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;  
 2150 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  
 2155 for home.

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

2160 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  
 2165 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  
 2170 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.  
 2175 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:  
 2180 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.

2185 “Green Church?” chunters the knight.  
 “More like the devil’s lair  
 where at the nub of night  
 he dabbles in dark prayers.”

2190 “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.  
 2195 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  
 2200 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.  
 2205 “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.  
 2210 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.  
 2215 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.”

2220 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  
 2225 filed 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.”

The green knight spoke again, “God guard you, Gawain.  
2240 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.

Suddenly the green knight summons up his strength,  
2260 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!"

"So be brisk with the blow, bring on the blade.  
2285 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.

Hoisted and aimed, the axe hurtled downwards,  
2310 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  
 2330 and hold the axe in hand."

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,  
 2335 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  
 2340 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.  
 2345 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.  
 2350 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.

The person who repays  
 2355 will live to feel no fear.  
 The third time, though, you strayed,  
 and felt my blade therefore."

"Because the belt you are bound with belongs to me;  
 it was woven by my wife so I know it very well.  
 2360 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,  
 2365 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,  
 2370 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.  
 2375 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.  
 "My downfall and undoing; let the devil take it.

2380 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.

2385 "Such terrible mistakes,  
 and I shall bear the blame.  
 But tell me what it takes  
 to clear my clouded name."

The green lord laughed, and leniently replied:  
 2390 "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.  
 2395 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.  
 2400 But follow me home. New Year's far from finished—  
 we'll resume our reveling with supper and song.

What's more  
 my wife is waiting there  
 who flummoxed you before.  
 2405 This time you'll have in her  
 a friend and not a foe."

"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  
 2410 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  
 2415 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.<sup>2</sup>  
 2420 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.

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, Genesis 3:6; Solomon, 1 Kings 11:3; Samson, Judges 16:4–18; and David, 2 Samuel 11:1–15.

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

"But the girdle," he went on, "God bless you for this gift.  
2430 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,  
Gawain on Gringolet, by the grace of God,  
2480 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 PENCE<sup>3</sup>

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 the Crown's main sources of revenue. During this period he was living in a rent-free