Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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Historical Prologue

(1)

The siege and assault having ceased at Troy
as its blazing battlements blackened to ash,
the man who had planned and plotted that treason
had trial enough for the truest traitor!
Then Aeneas the prince and his honored line
plundered provinces and held in their power
nearly all the wealth of the western isles.
Thus Romulus swiftly arriving at Rome
sets up that city and in swelling pride
gives it his name, the name it now bears;
and in Tuscany Tirius raises up towns,
and in Lombardy Langoberde settles the land,
and far past the French coast Felix Brutus
founds Britain on broad hills, and so bright hopes
begin,
where wonders, wars, misfortune
and troubled times have been,
where bliss and blind confusion
have come and gone again.

(2)

From the founding of Britain by this brave prince,
bold men have bred there, burning for war,
stirring up turmoil through the turning years.
More wonders in the world have been witnessed here
than anywhere else from that age forward.
But of all who were crowned kings over Britain
the most honor was Arthur's, as old tales tell.
So I mean to make known a marvel on earth,
an astonishing sight, as some men would call it,
an extraordinary exploit among Arthur's wonders.

Listen to this lay for a little while
and as townsmen tell it, so this tale will trip
along,
a story pinned in patterns
steadfast, steady, strong:
aligned in linking letters
as folk have loved so long.

Book I: Christmas in Camelot

(3)

One Christmas in Camelot King Arthur sat
at ease with his lords and loyal liegemen
arranged as brothers round the Round Table.
Their reckless jokes rang about that rich hall
till they turned from the table to the tournament field
and jousted like gentlemen with lances and laughs,
then trooped to court in a caroling crowd.
For the feast lasted a full fifteen days
of meals and merriment (as much as could fit.)
Such gay glee must gladden the ear --
by day what a din, and dancing by night!
The halls and chambers were heaped with happy
lords and ladies as high as you like!
There they were gathered with all the world's goodness:
knights as kind as Christ himself,
ladies as lovely as ever have lived,
and the noblest king our nation has known.
They were yet in the pride, in the prime of their youth,
and filled
as full of heaven's blessing
as the king had strength of will.
And mighty men surpassing
all were gathered on that hill.

(4)

While the year was as young as New Years can be
the dais was prepared for a double feast.
The king and his company came in together
when mass had been chanted; and the chapel emptied

as clergy and commons alike cried out,
"Noel! Noel!" over and over.
And the lords ran around loaded with parcels,
palms extended to pass out presents,
or crowded together comparing gifts.
The ladies laughed when they lost at a game
(that the winner was willing, you may well believe!)
Round they milled in a merry mob till the meal was ready,
washed themselves well, and walked to their places
(the best for the best on seats raised above.)
Then Guinevere moved gaily among them,
took her place on the dais, which was dearly adorned
with sides of fine silk and a canopied ceiling
of sheer stuff: and behind her shimmering tapestries from far Tarsus,
embroidered, bedecked with bright gems
that the jewelers would pay a pretty price for
any day,
    but the finest gem in the field of sight
    looked back: her eyes were grey.
    That a lovelier's lived to delight
    the gaze—is a lie, I'd say!

(5)

But Arthur would not eat till all were served.
He bubbled to the brim with boyish spirits:
liked his life light, and loathed the thought
of lazing for long or sitting still longer.
So his young blood boiled and his brain ran wild,
and in many ways moved him still more
as a point of honor never to eat
on a high holiday till he should have heard
a strange story of stirring adventures,
of mighty marvels to make the mind wonder,
of princes, prowess, or perilous deeds.
Or someone might come, seeking a knight
to join him in jousting, enjoying the risk
of laying their lives on the line like men
leaving to fortune the choice of her favor.
This was the king's custom at court,
the practice he followed at pleasant feasts held
in his hall;

therefore with bold face
he stood there straight and tall.
As New Years proceeded apace
he meant to have mirth with them all.

(6)

So he stood there stock-still, a king standing tall,
talking of courtly trifles before the high table.
By Guinevere sat Gawain the Good,
and Agravaine of the Heavy Hand on the other side:
knights of great worth, and nephews to the king.
Baldwin, the bishop, was above, by the head,
with Ywain, Urien's son, sitting across.
These sat at the dais and were served with due honor;
and many mighty men were seated on either side.
Then the first course came with a clamor of trumpets
whose banners billowed bright to the eye,
while kettledrums rolled and the cry of the pipes
wakened a wild, warbling music
whose touch made the heart tremble and skip.
Delicious dishes were rushed in, fine delicacies
fresh and plentiful, piled so high on so many platters
they had problems finding places to set down
their silver bowls of steaming soup: no spot
was clear.
Each lord dug in with pleasure,
and grabbed at what lay near:
twelve platters piled past measure,
bright wine, and foaming beer.

(7)

I need say no more how they served the food,
for what fool would fancy their feast was a famine?
But a new noise announced itself quickly enough
to grant the high lord leave to have dinner.
The music had finished but a moment before,
the first course just served, and set before the court,
when a horrible horseman hurtled through the doors,
his body as brawny as any can be,
so bull-necked, big-thighed, bulky and square,

so long-legged, large-limbed, looming so tall
I can hardly tell if he were half troll,
or merely as large as living man can be --
a handsome one too; as hearty a hulk as ever rode horse.
His back and chest were broad as a barrel,
but he slimmed at the waist, with a slender stomach,
and his face was well formed, with features sharp
and clean --
Men sat there gaping, gasping
at his strange, unearthly sheen,
as if a ghost were passing,
for every inch was green.

(8)

He was got up in green from head to heel:
a tunic worn tight, tucked to his ribs;
and a rich cloak cast over it, covered inside
with a fine fur lining, fitted and sewn
with ermine trim that stood out in contrast
from his hair where his hood lay folded flat;
and handsome hose of the same green hue
which clung to his calves, with clustered spurs
of bright gold; beneath them striped embroidered silk
above his bare shanks, for he rode shoeless.
His clothes were all kindled with a clear light like emeralds:
His belt buckles sparkled, and bright stones were set
in rich rows arranged up and down
himself and his saddle. Worked in the silk
were too many trifles to tell the half of:
embroidered birds, butterflies, and other things
in a gaudy glory of green and inlaid gold.
And the bit and bridle, the breastplate on the horse,
and all its tackle were trimmed with green enamel,
even the saddle straps, the stirrups on which he stood,
and the bows of his saddle with its billowing skirts
which glimmered and glinted with green jewels.
The stallion that bore him was the best of its breed
it was plain,
a green horse great and strong,
that sidled, danced and strained,
but the bridle-braid led it along,

turning as it was trained.

(9)

He was a fine fellow fitted in green --
And the hair on his head and his horse's matched.
It fanned out freely enfolding his shoulders,
and his beard hung below as big as a bush,
all mixed with the marvelous mane on his head,
which was cut off in curls cascading to his elbows,
wrapping round the rest of him
like a king's cape clasped to his neck.
And the mane of his mount was much the same,
but curled up and combed in crisp knots,
in braids of bright gold thread and brilliant green
crisscrossed hair by hair.
And the tossing tail was twin to the mane,
for both were bound with bright green ribbons,
strung to the end with long strands of precious stones,
and turned back tight in a twisted knot
bright with tinkling bells of burnished gold.
No such horse on hoof had been seen in that hall,
nor horseman half so strange as their eyes now held
in sight.

He looked a lightning flash,
they say: he seemed so bright;
and who would dare to clash
in melee with such might?

(10)

Yet he had on no hauberk, nor a helmet for his head,
neither neck-guard nor breastplate to break heavy blows,
neither shaft nor shield for the shock of combat.
But he held in one hand a sprig of holly
that bursts out greenest when branches are bare;
and his other hand hefted a huge and awful ax,
a broad battleax with a bit to tell (take it who can)
with a large head four feet long:
the green steel down the grain etched with gold,
its broad edge burnished and bright,
shaped razor-sharp to sheer through steel,

and held high on a heavy staff
which was bound at the base with iron bands
gracefully engraved in bright green patterns.
A strap was strung through the steel head, running
loop after loop down the length of the handle,
which was tied with tassels in abundance, attaching
by rich braids onto bright green buttons.
This rider reined in as he rode through the doors
direct to the high dais without a word,
giving no greeting, gazing down on them all.
His first word came when he stopped. "Where," he said,
"is the master of these men? I've a mind to see
his face and would fancy a chat with the fellow who wears
the crown."
To each lord he turned
and glancing up and down
he fixed each face to learn
which knight held most renown.

(11)

They stared at the stranger, stunned, a very long time.
For each man wondered what it might mean
that man and mount both shone a shade
as green as the grass, and greener even
than green enamel glows when gold makes it brighter.
All eyes were on him, and some edged closer,
wondering what in the world he would do.
They had seen enough strange sights to know how seldom they are real;
therefore they feared him for a phantom, a sending from the Unseen Realm.
So of all those noble knights, none dared answer
but sat there stupefied by the strength of his voice.
A silence fell filling that rich hall as if they'd all fainted
or suddenly slept: their voices just vanished
at their height.
Some, I suppose, were not floored,
but chose to be polite,
letting their leader and lord
be first to speak to that knight.

(12)

Arthur stood watching adventure advance
and answered quickly as honor bid, neither awed nor afraid,
saying, "Wanderer, know you are welcome here.
dismount, if you may; make merry as you wish,
and we may learn in a little while what you would like."
"So help me God who sits on high," he said, "No."
"It is not my purpose to pass any time in this place.
But I have been told that your reputation towers to heaven:
that your court and castle are accounted the finest,
your knights and their steeds as the sturdiest in steel,
the best, the boldest, the bravest on earth,
and as fitting foes in any fine sport.
True knighthood is known here, or so the tale runs,
which is why I have come calling today.
You may be sure by this branch that I bear
that I come in peace, with no plans for battle.
I have a hauberk at home, and a helmet too,
and other weapons I know well how to wield.
Yet as war is not my wish I am wearing soft silk,
but, if you are as bold as men believe you to be,
you will be glad to grant me the game that is mine
by right."
Then Arthur said, "I swear,"
"most courteous, noble knight,
if you'd like to battle bare,
you'll not fail to find a fight."

(13)

"Never fear," he said, "I'm not fishing for a fight
with the beardless children on the benches all about.
If I were strapped on steel on a sturdy horse
no man here has might to match me.
No, I have come to this court for a bit of Christmas fun
fitting for Yuletide and New Years with such a fine crowd.
Who here in this house thinks he has what it takes,
has bold blood and a brash head,
and dares to stand his ground, giving stroke for stroke?
Here! I shall give him this gilded blade as my gift;
this heavy ax shall be his, to handle as he likes.
and I shall stand here bare of armor, and brave the first blow.
If anyone's tough enough to try out my game,

let him come here quickly and claim his weapon!
I give up all rights; he will get it for keeps.
I'll stand like a tree trunk -- he can strike at me once,
if you'll grant me the right to give as good as I get
in play.
But later is soon enough,
a full year and a day.
Get up, if you think you're rough,
let's see what you dare to say!"

(14)

If at first he had stunned them, now they sat stone-still:
the whole hall, both high and low.
The mounted man moved in his saddle,
glared a red glance grimly about,
arched his bushy brows, all brilliant and green,
his beard waving as he waited for one man to rise,
to call or came forward. He coughed loudly,
stretched slowly, and straightened to speak.
"Hah! They call this King Arthur's house,
a living legend in land after land?
Where have your pride and your power gone,
your bragging boasts, your big words?
The glories and triumphs of the Round Table
have toppled at the touch of one man's words!
What? Fainting with fear, when no fight is offered?"
He let out a laugh so loud that Arthur winced
with shame; the blood shot to his flushed face
and churned
with rage and raised a storm
until their hearts all burned.
All king in face and form,
he reached that rider, turned,

(15)

and said, "Look here, by heaven! Have you lost your mind?
If you want to be mad, I will make you welcome!
Nobody I know is bowled over by your big words,
so help me God! Hand me that ax --
I will grant you the gift you beg me to give!"

He leaped lightly up and lifted it from his hand.
Then the man dismounted, moving proudly,
while Arthur held the ax, both hands on the haft,
hefted it sternly, considered his stroke.
That burly man bulked big and tall,
a head higher than anyone in the house.
He stood there hard-faced, stroking his beard,
impassively watching as he pulled off his coat,
no more moved or dismayed by his mighty swings
than anybody would be if somebody brought him a bottle
of wine.
Gawain, sitting by the queen,
could tell the king his mind:
"Lord, hear well what I mean,
and let this match be mine."

(16)

"Grant leave, good lord," said Gawain to the king,
"to stir from my seat and stand by your side;
that I might rise without rudeness from this table
without fear of offending your fair queen,
and come before your court as a counselor should.
It is plainly improper, as people know well,
to point this proposal at the prince himself.
Though you may be eager to act for yourself,
there are so many bold knights on the benches all about,
none more masterful in mind maybe than move under heaven,
nor many built better for the field of battle.
Of all your men of war I am the weakest and least wise,
and my life little enough to lose, if you look at it clearly.
My only honor is that you are my uncle;
my only boast is that my body carries your blood.
Since this whole matter is such a mockery, it is not meant for you;
and I am first on the field: let this folly be mine.
If my claim is uncalled-for let the court judge; I will bear
the blame."
They huddled hushed around
and all advised the same:
respect the royal crown,
and give Gawain the game.

(17)

Then the king commanded him to rise and come forward,
and he stood quickly, walked with stately steps
to kneel before the king and claim his weapon.
Arthur handed it over and held up his hand
to give him God's blessing. With a glad smile
he charged him to be hardy in heart.
"Cousin, careful," he said, "cut him but once.
and if you teach him truly, I trust you will find
you can bear the blow that he brings you later."
Gawain went to the warrior, weapon in hand,
not the least bit bashful, as bold as can be.
Then the Green Knight said to Gawain,
"We should go over our agreement before we begin.
First, knight, I would know your name,
told truly as one I can trust."
"My name is Gawain," he said, "I give it in good faith,
as I will give you a blow and bear what comes after.
At this time in twelve months I will take a blow back
from what weapon you wish, but from no other knight
alive."

The other answering spoke,
"Sir Gawain: good. I derive
great pleasure from the stroke
your hardy hands will drive."

(18)

"Gad!" the Green Knight said. "Sir Gawain, I am glad
that your fist will fetch me the fun I hoped to find.
You have quickly retold in trustworthy words
a correct account of the contract I asked of the king,
save one stipulation that I must state: let it stand as your oath
that you will seek me yourself, and search anywhere
you feel I may be found to fetch back the same wages
I am paid today before this proud court."
"Where should I look?" Gawain asked, "Where do you live?"
"By Him that made me, your house is not known to me,
neither do I know you, knight, nor your court nor your name.
But teach me truly, tell me where to find you
and I shall work my wits out to win my way there.

I give my plain promise; I pledge you my word."
"That is enough for a New Year's pledge; you need say no more,"
-- So the green man answered gracious Gawain --
"If I'm telling the truth, why, when I've taken your tap,
and you've lopped me lovingly, you'll learn at once
of my house and my home and how I am named.
Then you can try my hospitality and be true to our compact.
Or I'll have no words to waste, which would be well for you:
you'd relax in this land, and not look for me further.
But stop!
Take up the grim tool you need,
and show me how you chop."
"Gladly, sir," he said, "Indeed,"
and gave the ax a strop.

(19)

The green knight got ready, feet firm on the ground;
leaned his head a little to let the cheek show,
and raised the rich riot of his hair
so the nape of his neck was naked and exposed.
Gawain held the ax high overhead,
his left foot set before him on the floor,
swung swiftly at the soft flesh
so the bit of the blade broke through the bones,
crashed through the clear fat and cut it in two,
and the brightly burnished edge bit into the earth.
The handsome head fell, hit the ground,
and rolled forward; they fended it off with their feet.
The red blood burst bright from the green body,
yet the fellow neither faltered nor fell
but stepped strongly out on sturdy thighs,
reached roughly right through their legs,
grabbed his graceful head and lifted it from the ground,
ran to his horse, caught hold of the reins,
stepped in the stirrup, strode into the saddle,
the head dangling by the hair from his hand,
and seated himself as firmly in the saddle
as if he were unhurt, though he sat on his horse without
a head.
He swiveled his bulk about;
the ugly stump still bled.

They gaped in fear and doubt
because of the words he said.

(20)

For he held the head up evenly in his hand,
turned the face toward the top of the high table,
and the eyelids lifted and looked on them all
while the mouth moved, making these words:
"Gawain, get ready to go as you have promised,
Seek me out, sir; search till you find me
as sworn here in this hall where all these knights heard.
I charge you, come as you chose to the Green Chapel to get
as good as you gave -- you've got it coming
and will be paid promptly when another year has passed.
Many men know me as the Knight of the Green Chapel,
so search faithfully and you'll not fail to find me.
Come, or be called a faithless coward!"
He roared like a raging bull, turned the reins,
and drove for the door, still dangling the head,
while fire flashed from the horse's feet as if its hooves were flints.
Where he went no one knew,
nor could they name the country he came from nor his kin.
What then?
The king and Gawain grinned
and laughed at the Green Knight when
they knew full well it had been
a portent to their men.

(21)

Though High King Arthur's heart was heavy with wonder
he let no sign of it be seen, but said aloud
with a king's courtesy to his lovely queen:
"Beloved lady, never let this dismay you.
It is good to get such games at Christmas,
light interludes, laughter and song,
or the whole court singing carols in chorus.
But truly, I can turn now to my table and feast;
as my word is good, I have witnessed a wonder."
He turned to Sir Gawain and tactfully said,
"Hang up your ax; it has cut all it can."

It was attached to a tapestry above the high table
for all men to marvel on who might see it there,
as a true token of a tale of wonder.
Then they sat in their seats to resume their feast,
Gawain and the king together, while good men served them
the rarest, dearest delicacies in double portions,
with whole batteries of the best foods, and the singing of bards.
The day finished, and their feast was filled with joy
and zest.

Sir Gawain, have a care
to keep your courage for the test,
and do the deed you've dared.
You've begun: now brave the rest.

Book II: Gawain's Journey

(22)

This gift of adventure is what Arthur got
to bring in the year with the boasts he liked best.
Yet they said little, but sat, took their seats,
gorged with grim business heaped in their hands.
Gawain was glad when those games began,
but no one should wonder at the weighty ending.
Men's minds may grow merry when their drinks are mighty,
but a year paces past in unforeseen patterns:
The model seldom matches what is made.
So Yule raced by, and the year ran after,
each season passing in set sequence.
After Christmas comes the discomfort of Lent,
which tries the flesh with fish and simpler food.
But then the world's weather wrestles with winter:
cold clings to the ground, but clouds rise,
releasing warm rain; rinsing showers
fall to the flat earth; flowers appear,
both field and forest are fringed with green.
Birds busy themselves building, and with brilliant song
celebrate summer, for soon each slope
will rush

to bloom with blossoms set
in lines luxuriant and lush,
while noble notes form nets

that fill the forest hush.

(23)

Then the summer season when the west breeze blows
and soft winds sigh on seed and stem.
How the green things glory in their urgent growth
when the dripping dew drops from the leaves,
waiting for the warm sun's welcome glance.
But then Fall flies in, and fills their hearts,
Bidding them be rich, ripe, and ready for winter.
The autumn drought drives up dust
that billows in clouds above the broad earth.
Wild winds whistle, wrestling the sun;
Leaves launch from each limb and land on the soil,
while the green grass fades to grey.
What rose at the first now ripens and rots
till the year has gathered its full yield of yesterdays.
In the way of the world, winter winds
Around
till the Michaelmas moon
brings frost to touch the ground.
When Gawain remembers all too soon
that he is duty bound.

(24)

Yet he lingered with Arthur past All Saints Eve
who set up a feast to send his knight off
with revelry rich as the Round Table offered.
Yet lordly knights and lovely ladies
gazing at Gawain anxious with grief
let nothing but laughter pass through their lips.
They made themselves merry for one man's sake.
Sad after supper he sought out his uncle,
spoke of his quest, and clearly proclaimed:
"My life's own liege lord, I ask now your leave.
What this matter means, and how much it costs
you know well enough: nothing worth words.
But soon after dawn I must search out onslaught

and meet the green man: May God be my guide."
Then the highest in that hall hastened together,
Iwain, and Erric, and many another –
Sir Dodinel de Sauvage, the Duke of Clarence,
Lancelot, and Lyonel, and Lucan the Good,
Sir Bors and Sir Bedivere (big men both)
And many proud lords, with Mador de la Port.
Thus the court collected and came near the king
to offer advice with anguished hearts.
So much secret sorrow swept through that hall
that one so good as Gawain must go forth doomed
to bear the brunt of a blow and let his own blade
rest.
But Gawain said with cheerful face:
"Why shrink back from the quest?
Though fate bring glory or disgrace
A man must meet the test."

(25)

He rested till morning then rose to get ready,
asked early for his armor and they brought it all out,
arranging each piece on a rich, red rug
where the gear all glittered like a gallery of gold.
The strong knight stood there to take up his steel,
dearly dressed in a doublet of silk
and a hooded cloak cunningly made
with a lining of ermine layered inside.
His feet were fitted in fine steel shoes,
and his legs were sheathed in shining greaves
with knee guards above them, burnished bright
and tied to his knees with tassels of gold --
Then cuisse-plates whose clever curves enclosed
his thick, hard thighs, and were bound there with thongs;
while the mesh of his mail-shirt with its rings of bright metal
richly quilted, wrapped him round,
and well-burnished braces on both of his arms,
gallant elbow-gear and gauntlets of steel,
and all the finest, fairest stuff to fit him
for his ride
a surcoat richly made,
his gold spurs worn with pride,

girt with a glistening blade,
a silk sash round his side.

(26)

When he got it all on his gear was splendid:
each loop and latch-hook lustrous with gold.
He left as he was, then listened to mass
offered in honor before the high altar,
came to the king and his court companions,
took loving leave of lords and ladies
in a crowd of kisses and hopes for Christ's care.
Gringolet was groomed and ready to go,
his gleaming saddle gaily fringed with gold
newly nailed there for this matter of note.
His striped bridle was bound with bright gold.
The pattern of the harness and the proud skirts,
of saddle-bow, caparison, crupper were all the same:
red arrayed with rich gold studs
that glinted and glittered like the glance of the sun.
Then he held up his helm and kissed it in haste:
It was stiffened with staples, padded with stuffing,
Sat high on his head, and buckled behind
where the neck-guard was graced with gleaming silk
bedecked and embroidered with the best gems.
There were birds on the seams of the broad silk bands:
painted parrots on a field of periwinkles,
turtledoves entwined with truelove blooms too thick
to be sewn by many women in seven winters'
care.

Yet nothing half so dear
brought color anywhere
as the circlet's bright and clear
diamonds in his hair.

(27)

When they brought him his shield, it was bright red gules,
painted with a pentacle of purest gold.
Holding the baldric, he hung it from his neck,
and the sign thus set suited him well.
Why the pentacle is proper to that noble prince

I must let you know, though I linger in the telling.
It is a sign that Solomon set long ago
to signify truth by a trustworthy token.
It is a figure with five fine points
and each line overlaps and locks with the others,
everywhere endless: the English, I hear,
most often call it the Endless Knot.
And so it fits this knight with his flashing armor,
who was faithful five ways and five times each.
All knew Gawain to be good as purified gold:
devoid of villainy, his virtues were a court's
delight.

Thus he wore the five-point star
on shield and surcoat in plain sight,
his honor without stain or scar,
a gentle, low-voiced knight.

(28)

First, he was found faultless in his five senses,
and his five fingers never failed him in any deed,
and all his faith in this world was in the five wounds
that Christ carried on the cross, as the Creed informs us.
No matter where he moved in melee or in battle
it was his fervent thought through thick or thin
that when he fought his courage came from the five joys
the high Queen of Heaven had of her child.
(And so the noble knight would never wear his shield
till her image had been painted on the inner half;
for when he saw her face his courage never failed.)
And a fifth five was found in Gawain:
bounty and brotherhood above all else;
courtesy and a clean heart (these were never crooked)
and the finest point, compassion -- these five virtues
marked him more than any man alive.
Now all these five fives were fastened round this knight
and each embraced the others in unbroken pattern
and met in five fixed points that never failed,
nor bunched together, nor split in pieces,
but ran on endlessly at every point --
where the figure failed, it found new beginnings.
Therefore the shield shone with the knot thus shaped,

gold royally arranged against red gules --
the noble pentacle as it is known by men
of lore.
Now ready to go his way,
he lifted his lance as if for war,
gave them all good day --
and left them there forevermore.

(29)

He set spurs to his steed and sprang on his way
so swiftly the sparks sprayed out behind him.
All that saw him so splendid sighed deep within
and whispered soft words one to another
in compassion for that prince: "By Christ, what a pity,
to lose such a leader, whose life is so noble!
There is hardly his equal anywhere on earth!
A wary approach would have been wiser;
better to have made such a man a duke --
such a brilliant leader; the best in the land.
Better by far than this foolish waste,
beheaded by an elf, and all for arrogant pride!
What kind of king would take such counsel
when his courtiers quarrel over Christmas games?
How the warm tears welled till all their eyes were wet
when that handsome lord left his home behind
that day,
nor lingered on his road,
but swiftly found his way.
Through pathless realms he rode --
so I heard the annal say.

(30)

So this rider rode through the realm of Britain,
Sir Gawain in God's service: and to him it was no game.
He would lie down alone with no one to lead,
nor find before him any food that he liked,
Nor any help but his horse over hill and wood,
Nor any man but his Maker to make conversation --
till he neared the neighborhood of North Wales,
held all the isles of Anglesey on his left

and reached the river where its headlands rose
high near Holyhead, and held on across
through the Forest of Wirral. Few or none lived there
whom God could love, or a good-hearted man.
And he asked often, of all whom he met
if they could give him news of a green knight
or how he could get to the Green Chapel.
And they all said no, never in their lives
had they seen someone who was such a shade
as green.
The paths he would take were strange,
with little cheer to glean,
and his hopes would often change
till that chapel could be seen.

(31)

He climbed past cliffs in unknown country,
a stranger faring far from his home.
At each stream and ford that he found in those lands
enemies lurked (unless his luck held) --
vicious, violent, hard to avoid.
In those mountains he met so many strange wonders
a tenth of the total could hardly be told.
He dared to fight dragons and warred with wolves,
or lurking woses, living wild on the crags,
or with bulls, or bears, or boars on occasion,
and trolls that hunted him across the high hills.
Only constant courage and the care of his God
could save him sometimes from certain death.
For if warfare was hard, winter was worse,
when the clouds shed water cold and clear
which froze in the air and fell as sleet.
He lay down half-dead, drenched in his armor,
too many times to bear: and on barren stone
where cold-running creeks came clattering down
and icicles hardened high overhead.
Thus with peril and pain, in difficult plight,
he carried on alone till the Eve of Christmas
fell.
Then lifting head he cried:
"Good Mary, hear me well --

and grant me grace to ride
to realms where people dwell."

(32)

With sunrise his heart rose as he rode from the highlands
deep into woodland wild past belief.
There the high hills hemmed in a forest
of huge and hoary oaks -- hundreds together;
and heavy hazel and hawthorn thickets
with rags of rough moss wrapped round each limb --
while on the bare branches the huddled birds
were perched, piping pitifully in the cold.
Gawain passed them on Gringolet, going on
through marsh and mire, a man all alone
and worried. He wondered what he could do
to celebrate our Savior's service on the very night
he was born of a virgin to bear our sorrows.
And therefore sighing he said, "I beseech thee, Lord
and Mary, the mildest, dearest of mothers:
Help me to some haven where mass can be heard,
and matins tomorrow. I ask this meekly,
and in token now pray my Pater, my Ave,
my Creed.
He continued on his way,
confessing his misdeeds,
and crossed himself to pray,
"Christ's cross now grant me speed!"

(33)

He had signed himself scarcely three times
when he made out a moat and a mound in the wood --
a low hill with a lawn, through a lacework of branches
that grew from great oaks guarding a dike.
He had found there a castle fit for a lord,
placed in the open, a park all around it,
with bristling stakes in a strong stockade
that turned for two miles round groves of trees.
Sir Gawain saw one whole side of that stronghold
as it shimmered and shone through the shaking leaves.
He held his helm, with head bowed in thanks

to Jesus and Saint Julian, whose gentle grace
had cared for his needs and come to his aid.
"Safe lodging," he called, "I beseech of you yet!"
Then he goaded Gringolet with gilded heels
and choosing the chief roadway by sheer chance
he came quickly to the causeway's end
at last
to drawbridge lifted tight
to gateway shuttered fast.
Such walls in granite might
would shrug off wind or blast.

(34)

He held back his horse where the bank halted
in a deep double ditch close dug to the wall,
which plunged in the pool impossibly deep --
and then its full, huge height heaved itself up
in tiers of tough stone straight to the top,
its battlements built in the best style,
its guard-towers rising in graceful rows
lined with loopholes covered and latched:
a barbican better than the best he knew.
He noticed behind it a high-roofed hall
tucked among towers, from whose clustered tips
buttresses sprang, and pinnacled spires
cunningly carved, and crafted with skill.
Chalk-white chimneys were checkered about
like radiance rising from rooftops and towers.
So many painted pinnacles stood round that place
or climbed from the castle's crenellated walls
that it seemed like a cutout clipped from paper.
As he sat there in saddle, it seemed very fine
if only he could enter the innermost court,
and win welcome there to worship in a house
so blessed.
A porter came at call,
more gracious than the best,
who stood upon the wall
and hailed that knight on quest.

(35)

"Good sir," said Gawain, "please grant me the favor
(if your lord allows) to lodge in this house."
"By Peter," said the porter, "be perfectly sure
that you, Lord, are welcome as long as you like!"
Then swift-paced the porter moved to approach him,
and others came with him to welcome their guest.
They dropped the great drawbridge, then drawing near proudly,
they bowed, their knees bent upon the bare earth
to one whom they welcomed as worthy of honor.
They granted him passage; the portals swung wide;
he called them to rise, and crossed the great bridge.
Men steadied his saddle: he slipped off his horse
and sturdy men came to lead it to stable.
Knights and their squires were the next to come,
delighted to lead the lord to the hall.
Hardly had he lifted his helm when many hands
were swift to receive it in courteous service --
and in the same way his sword was set by his shield.
He nobly acknowledged each of those knights,
proud men close-pressed to honor a prince.
Still strapped in bright steel, he strode to the hall
where a bonfire burned bright on the hearth.
Then the lord himself descended to see him,
moving to meet him with exquisite manners.
"You are welcome," he said, "to what this house holds,"
"everything is yours to use as you please
in this place."
"God bless you," said Gawain then,
"And Christ repay your grace."
They met like joyful men
in open-armed embrace.

(36)

Gazing on one who greeted him so well,
Gawain felt that fortress had a fine lord:
a man in his prime, massively made;
his beard all beaver-brown, glossy and broad;
stern, stalwart in stance on his sturdy thighs,
his face bold as fire, a fair-spoken man --
who certainly seemed well-suited, he judged,

to rule there as master of excellent men.
The lord led him in, and ordered at once
that someone be sent to serve in his chamber.
Then the household staff hurried to obey
and brought him to a bedroom, brightly arranged
with gold-trimmed curtains of the clearest silk
and fine-crafted coverlets, beautiful quilts
with bright fur above and embroidered edges.
There were rings of red gold on rope-drawn drapes,
tight-hung tapestries from Tarsus and Tolouse;
and similar fabrics were set underfoot.
As they talked with him gaily, they took off his garments,
removing his byrnie and his bright armor.
Then rich robes were brought as the servants rushed in
a choice from the best to change for his own.
As soon as he picked one and pulled it in place,
a fine-fitting kilt with swirling folds,
it seemed to them all that suddenly light
shone round his shape in the shades of spring,
beautiful, bright about all his limbs.
Christ never had such a handsome knight,
they thought:

> Wherever men appear,
> surely Gawain ought
> to reign without a peer
> in fields where fierce men fought.

(37)

Before the chimney where charcoal glowed a chair
lined with fine fabric was found for Sir Gawain,
sumptuous with cushions on a quilted seat.
And then a rich robe was thrown around him
of brilliant, gaily embroidered silk
filled out with fur: the finest of pelts,
and every bit ermine, even the hood.
Thus he sat, relaxed and in lavish splendor,
till he felt far better in the fire's warmth.
Then they took a table, laid it on trestles,
and covered it with clean and clear white cloth,
saltcellars, napkins, and a silver service.
He washed as he wished and went to his meal.

Then the table was set in suitable style
with soups of all kinds, seasoned superbly
in double-sized servings; plus assorted fish,
some breaded and baked, some broiled on the coals,
some simmered, some set in savory stews;
each subtly spiced with sauces that pleased him.
Exclaiming he kept on calling it a feast,
but all of them answered with equal courtesy
and said,
"Take penance while you can;
tomorrow you'll be fed!"
He made a merry man --
the wine went to his head.

(38)

Then queries and questions carefully framed
on private matters were put to that prince.
So he spoke of his court, in courteous words,
as that which highborn Arthur held as his own,
who ruled the Round Table as its regal king --
and their guest, he told them, was Gawain himself,
come to them at Christmas as his course unfolded.
On learning whom luck had brought him the lord
laughed out loud for sheer heart's delight.
Within that moat every man was eager to move,
and pressed forward promptly to enter the presence
of "that paragon of prowess and of perfect manners,
whose virtues and person are constantly praised:
of all men on earth most worthy of honor!"
Each man of them, murmuring, remarked to his fellows,
"Now we shall see courtesy cleverly displayed
among faultless feats of fine conversation!
We will learn untaught how to talk nobly
when we face such a fine father of breeding!
God has graced us indeed, with a grand blessing,
to grant us the guest that Gawain will make
when we sit and sing glad songs of Christ's
new birth.
The meaning of his mannered ways
will show what words are worth --
and teach us terms to play

the game of lovers' mirth."

(39)

When the dinner was done, and their darling rose,
it was nearly dark, for night was approaching.
The chapels were opened as the chaplains came
with bells ringing richly, right as they should
for vesper devotions on the verge of Christmas.
The lord now led the way, his lady beside him;
she paced along prettily and entered her pew.
When Gawain came gliding in with a glad heart,
the lord latched on to him and led him to his seat,
glad-handing Gawain, greeting him by name,
and said he was the most welcome guest in the world.
After hearty hugs and heartfelt thanks,
they sat soberly together till the service ended.
As the lady had been longing to look on the knight,
she emerged to meet him, her maidens about her.
In form she was fairest: in figure and face,
complexion, comportment surpassing all others,
and to Gawain not even Guinevere could equal her grace.
She steered through the chancel to strengthen his welcome.
Another lady led her by the left hand
who was obviously older: an elderly matron
whom the household held in the highest honor.
But in looks the two ladies were obviously unlike:
one active and young, one yellow with age.
On the first a flush rose, ruddy and fair;
on the other, rough wrinkles on rugged cheeks.
On the first one, clear pearls displayed on a kerchief
shone from her breast and her bare throat
whiter than snow on the winter hills.
The other one's kerchief covered her neck,
and bright veils billowed round her black chin,
while silk framed her forehead, which was fretted round
with lacework linked in delicate loops.
Nothing was bare about her but her black brows,
over eyes and nose over naked lips,
and those made a sorry sight, bleary and sour.
She was, God knows! A lady of grace
and pride --

but her body was short and thick;
her buttocks big and wide.
A tastier plum to pick
was the beauty by her side.

(40)

Meeting her gracious, light-hearted gaze
he took the lord's leave and approached the ladies.
He greeted the elder with a grand bow,
and wrapping the lovelier in a light embrace,
he planted a pretty kiss with extravagant praise.
They offered their acquaintance, and he asked at once
to be their faithful servant if it seemed fitting.
They took him between them and led him off, talking,
to a chimneyed chamber; and they charged the servants
to speed out for spices, and not to be sparing,
but to bring back each time the best of the wine.
The lord kept leaping about in delight,
bid them make merry as much as they could,
then hauled off his hood and hung it on a spear,
urging them to earn it as a signal honor
for the merriest man among them that Christmas.
"By my word! I shall work to win with the rest
against all this company, to keep it myself!"
Thus the lord made it lively with laughter and jokes
to gladden Sir Gawain with the joy that games
incite.
Time passed; the twilight fled;
the servants kindled light.
Then Gawain sought his bed,
and bade them all good night.

(41)

In the morning when men remember the birth
of our dear Lord to die for our destiny's sake,
all men on earth grow merry at heart.
So it was that delicacies filled out their day:
At breakfast and banquet the best of the food
was spread out in splendor by spirited men.
The old, ancient woman had honor of place,

with the lord, I believe, politely beside her.
Gawain and the gracious lady were both given seats
in the middle, where the meal was measured out first,
and afterward to everyone all through the hall,
served in due sequence, as it seemed proper.
They had food, they had fun, they were filled with joy:
too much for tongue to tell of with ease,
and a struggle, at least, to state it in full.
But this I give you: that Gawain and the gracious lady
were perfect companions in their place together,
and such pleasantries passed in their private speech
(which was fine and fair; also free from sin)
that no princely sport could possibly surpass
their game.
Then trumpets, drums to measure
tunes that pipes proclaim:
as each man took his pleasure,
and those two did the same.

(42)

One fun-filled day followed another,
with a third day thrust into the thick of it.
Saint John's day was generous with jubilant song:
the last day like it left to them there.
The guests would be going in the grey morning,
so they were up to all hours over their wine,
kept calling for dances and caroling round,
and left their leave-taking till late in the night
that would soon send them off by separate ways.
'Good day,' began Gawain, but grabbing him his host
pulled him aside privately by a pleasant fire,
laid it on at length and lavishly thanked him
for granting him such grace and gladness of heart
as to honor his house on this high season
and fill up his fortress with the finest manners.
'As long as I live, sir, my life will be better
to have had Gawain as my guest at God's own feast.'
'God help me,' said Gawain, 'may He grant you better:
for any such honor is only your due.
I am simply your servant, one who seeks to please you,
oath-bound to honor all men, be they high

or low.'
And though the lord takes pains
to urge him not to go,
Sir Gawain still explains
his answer must be no.

(43)

"But Gawain," that good man graciously asked,
"Has some dark deed driven you forth,
that you rushed from the royal court? Must you now ride alone
when holiday feasts are not wholly done?"
"Sir," he responded, "you have spoken truly:
"I had to depart on a high and a hasty matter.
For I myself am summoned to seek out a place,
though I wonder where in the world to find it.
I'd not fail to near it by New Year's morning
for all the land in Britain -- by the love of God!
I have come with questions that require answers --
so tell me the truth: has any tale reached you
of the Green Chapel, or on what ground it stands,
or about its guardian, a green-skinned knight?
For I have set myself, by most solemn pledge,
to meet this man, though it may go hard.
But now the New Year is nearly complete,
and if the Lord allows it, I'll look upon him
more gladly -- by God's Son! -- than on any good thing.
Therefore sir, as you see, I must set out now
for I doubt that three days will do for this business
and I'd far rather die than be doomed to fail."
Then the lord answered, laughing, "You must linger now!"
"You will get to your goal in good enough time,
and can give up guessing on what ground it lies,
and can lie abed as late as you wish,
and finally set forth the first of the year,
yet make it there with morning still mostly left
that day --
spend till New Years as you please,
then rise and ride that way;
We'll guide you there with ease --
it's not two miles away."

(44)

Then gaiety filled Gawain, and he gladly laughed.
"I must earnestly offer my uttermost thanks!
With my goal at hand, I can grant your wish,
dwell here a while, and do as you bid me."
"Sit down," said his host, seizing his arm.
"Come, let's delight in the ladies' presence!"
Thus they made a pleasant party apart by themselves.
The lord let out laughs as loud and as merry
as a madman, maybe, whose mind was far gone.
He called to his company, crying aloud,
"You have sworn to serve me however seems best;
will you act to honor this oath here and now?"
"Certainly, sir," he said in reply.
"While your walls ward me your will is supreme."
He returned: "You are tired, and have traveled far.
We all have been wakeful, nor are you well-rested,
nor fed quite as fully, I fear, as should be.
You must lie in late, and lounge at your ease
past morning mass, and make it to breakfast
whenever you wish. My wife will eat with you
and keep you company till I come again.
You stay,
but I myself will ride
hunting at break of day."
Then Gawain bowed with pride
and promised to obey.

(45)

"Look," said the lord - "Let us now bargain:
What I get in the wood I will give to you,
and charge in exchange whatever chance may deal you.
Friend, here's how to do it: we'll hold to our word
regardless who gains or gives up the most."
"By God!" Gawain answered, "I grant what you ask;
just give me the game -- I will gladly play it!"
"Then let's down this drink, and our deal is made!"
said the lord of that land, and they laughed together.
So these lords and ladies relaxed as they drank
and played gallant games while it gave them pleasure.

Then in French fashion, with many fine words,
they made their excuses with murmured farewells,
and pretty pecks planted on either cheek.
Then bright burning torches were born by the servants
who led them at last to lie down softly
in bed.
Before they reached the door,
what promises they said!
And how that country's lord
made fun times fly ahead!

Book III: Courtly Games

(46)

A crowd stirred early at the crack of dawn.
The guests who were going had their grooms at work,
and they set about swiftly saddling the horses,
strapping up gear and stowing their bags.
The richly dressed riders were ready to travel,
swinging into saddles, snatching up reins,
each man of them heading where he meant to go.
The beloved lord of that land was not last among them
but came ready to ride with riders about him.
He had a hasty meal when he had heard mass,
and hurried with horn-call to the hunting fields.
Before the light of day illumined the earth
both master and men had mounted their steeds.
Then the hunters who knew how leashed their hounds in pairs,
cast open the kennel door and called them outside
and blew three long blasts on their blaring horns.
Then the beagles burst out and kept baying fiercely
while they curbed and kept them from casting for scents.
I hear there were a hundred hunters as clever
as can be.
Now huntsmen take their places,
and all the hounds run free,
as horn-call clamor races
swift past brush and tree.

(47)

The first hint of the hunt horrified the forest.
Deer darted through clearings, driven by panic,
seeking safe haven—but suddenly they turned,
bolting from the hunters who blocked their escape.
The harts they let hurry by with their high heads tossing,
and the big bucks also, with their broad antlers –
for the lord enforced a limited season
when no man might hunt for the male deer.
But the hinds were held back with a "Hey there! Whoa!"
and the din drove the does to the deep valleys.
Then slipping from the string there came down-slanting arrows.
As they burst round each bend more bolts found their mark,
and the broad heads bit through their brown hides.
How they brayed—how they bled—and on the banks died
as the pack came pelting pell-mell behind them
while hunters with upraised horns came hurrying after,
blowing blasts so loud they could have burst the cliffs.
If any escaped unscathed from the archers
they were stopped and slaughtered at the stations below.
As they came harried from the heights and were hunted to the streams,
the men who manned those stations were such master hunters
and their greyhounds so gigantic, they grabbed them at once
and dispatched them as promptly as people could look
their way.

The lord, his eyes grown bright
would spur, dismount or stay –
galloping with great delight
right past the end of day.

(48)

While the lord found delight in the linden-wood,
that good man Gawain had a grand bed
where he dozed while daylight dappled the walls
and crept through the counterpanes and curtains about him.
As he drifted half-dreaming, a delicate noise
sounded softly at the door, which suddenly opened.
When he heard this he heaved his head from the sheets
and pulled a corner of the curtain carefully aside,
warily wondering what it might be.
It was the lady herself, such a lovely sight,
who closed the door carefully and quietly behind her

and bent toward the bed. Blushing the fellow
lay down and lurked there, looking asleep.
Taking step after step, she stole to the bed,
caught up the curtain and crawling inside
sat down beside him with silent motions.
A long while she lingered there to look at him waking.
The man lay unmoving for more than a while,
for his mind was bemused what to make of this
strange situation. It seemed most amazing.
But he said to himself, "It would suit far better
if I let the lady enlighten me herself."
Then he straightened and stretched and stirring toward her
he opened his eyes and acted astounded.
Then he crossed himself as if he claimed protection
from that sight --
her chin and cheeks were sweet,
blending red and white;
her voice a pleasant treat
where small lips smiled delight.

(49)

"Good morning, Sir Gawain!" she gaily exclaimed.
"You're a sound sleeper! I slipped in unnoticed
and you are quite my captive! Unless we come to terms
I shall bind you in your bed -- of that be quite certain."
Delighted the lady laughed as she teased him.
"Good morning, gay lady!" answered Gawain blithely.
"Just decide on my sentence; it will suit me nicely.
I'm your prisoner completely, and plead for your mercy.
It's my best bet, so I had better take it!"
(So he teased her in turn, returning her laughter.)
"But at least, lovely lady, allow me one wish:
pardon your prisoner, please let him rise;
let me be out of bed, in better apparel,
and we'll finish chatting in far greater comfort."
"Certainly not, good sir," that sweet lady said.
"You'll not budge from your bed: I have better plans.
I shall hold you here -- and that other half also --
and get to know the knight I've so neatly trapped.
I know enough after all, to know of Sir Gawain
whom all the world worships; every way you ride

your courteous character is acclaimed most nobly
by lords and by ladies and all living people.
And now you are here, and here we're alone --
my lord and his men will be long afield;
the servants are sleeping; so are my maidens;
I have closed the door, it's securely locked;
and since I have in this house he whom all admire,
I shall spend my time in speech I am sure
to treasure.
My person's yours, of course,
to see you take your pleasure;
I am obliged, perforce,
to serve you at your leisure."

(50)

"In good faith," said Gawain, "I would gain too much!
Though I am hardly he of whom you are speaking --
the honor you outline is obviously more
than what I am worth -- and how well I know it!
By God! I'd be glad if it seemed good to you
to assign some other service I might do
to value and revere you; I'd be very glad."
"In good faith, Sir Gawain!" she gaily replied.
"If I prized the prowess that pleases all others
so little or so lightly, I'd be less than gracious!
There is no lack of ladies who'd love so very much
to have one so handsome held as I have you,
who'd be so glad to listen as your gracious speech
softened their sorrows and soothed all their cares
that they would gladly give all the gold they have!
But I praise the Prince whose place is in heaven
that I have right here what others hope to see
by grace!"
She'd such a cheerful air
who seemed so sweet of face,
but he with spotless care
answered every case.

(51)

"Madam," said that debonair man, "may Mary reward you!"

In good faith, I have found you to be fine and noble,
but though a person's prowess may be praised by others,
the honors they assign are not owed to me.
The worthiness is yours, who think well of others."
"By Mary!" she remarked. "I must disagree.
Were I worth as much as all women living,
and all the wealth of the world were where I could spend it,
I should hunt very hard and haggle for a lord
of such nature as I know that this knight has here --
high-minded, hearty, and handsomely formed.
As I heard from others and hold to be true,
there's no finer fellow to be my first choice."
"Fair lady, I find your first choice was better,"
he replied, "but I am proud to be prized so highly.
I am your sober servant and you my sovereign queen --
I have become your knight and may Christ reward you."
Thus till mid-morning passed they made conversation;
and always she acted as if she adored him;
while Gawain was guarded though gracious enough.
"Were I the loveliest of ladies," the lady surmised,
"love can mean little when he has loss so much
in mind --
the blow he must receive,
his debt repaid in kind."
She asked if she could leave,
and he was so inclined.

(52)

Then she gave him good day and glanced at him laughing,
and as she stood astonished him with these stunning words.
"Now may God grant you honor for gracious conversation,
but I guess that Gawain's not your given name."
"What do you mean?" the man asked at once,
afraid he had failed in some form of honor.
"Bless you," she answered. "I must base my doubt
on Gawain's known graciousness, his grand reputation.
How could the complete paragon of perfect behavior
spend so much time speaking with a lady
without craving a kiss in courteous fashion
by a tactful hint or turn of conversation?"
"Very well," said Gawain, "your wishes will guide me,

I shall kiss when called upon, as becomes a knight
who would not upset you. Say nothing more."
At that she came close and clasping her arms
bent beautifully down, embraced him and kissed.
"Now may Christ care for you," they called to each other,
and away she went without a word further.
But he's ready to rise, and rushes out soon,
calls for his chamberlain, chooses his clothing,
and thus changed, charges out cheerfully to mass.
When he dined that day, delicacies were served him;
making merry past moonrise that man gave fun
free reign.

The world could never hold
two finer dames, it's plain,
the young one and the old --
those two could entertain.

(53)

Meanwhile the lord of the land led the hunt on
through forest and field to find deer to cull.
Before the sun set, he had slain so many
does and other deer, it dazzles the mind.
Bragging, bold hunters brought in their loot,
and dragging the deer together, gave the dogs their share.
Master and manservant mucked through the pile
to find the finest, fattest of corpses
and cut them to cutlets, as the custom dictates.
The assayers kept searching, to see what they had,
but found two fingers'-breadth of fat on the worst.
Then they slit the slot, seized the first stomach,
shaved it with a sharp knife, and shut it with cord,
then struck off the four limbs, stripped off the hide,
and broke open the belly; the bowels they removed
cautiously, taking care to keep the knot tight.
They got their hands on the gullet, gripped it and pulled
the flesh free of the windpipe and flung out the guts.
Then they sheared off the shoulder-blades with their sharp knives,
slipping them through a slit to keep the sides whole.
Bifurcating the breast, they broke it in halves.
Then, beginning at the gullet, one man got to work
quickly and carefully, cutting to the thighs,

to empty out the avanter and afterward free it
from the meat where the membranes remained by the ribs.
When the back bones were clear, they bent down to cut
the offal from the haunches, which hung all together,
then pulled it up in one piece and put it to one side:
Know that it is named the "numbles", as that word is
defined.
At the fork of the thighs,
they fold the skin behind,
then cut it where it lies,
the backbone to unbind.

(54)

They hacked off head and neck in one heavy blow,
broke off the backbone, ripped back the ribs,
and flung out the filthy bits as food for the ravens.
They thrust a thick hook through either half,
and hung them by their hocks high off the ground
to give each fellow his fair share when they finished working.
They gave their hounds the hide to have as their feast,
with the liver and the lungs, the lining of the stomach,
and bread bathed in blood, blended with the rest.
Horns hailed the hunt and the hounds bayed
as they packed up their plunder and paced homeward,
while their blaring bugles sounded a brassy tune.
Before the light was lost, the whole lot surged
into the lord's fine fortress, where he found his guest
Alone.
Bright bonfires burn
and joy full-blown –
now it's Gawain's turn
To welcome him home.

(55)

Then the lord gave orders for them all to gather,
summoned matron, mistress, and their maids to join him,
commanded the men mustered before him
to make the meat ready and march it straight in –
then gaily gave Gawain the game he brought home,
and recounting his kills – all quick-footed beasts –

showed him fine, marbled flesh flayed from their ribs.
"Does this prize please you? Are mine praiseworthy deeds?
Have I earned accolades for expertise and skill?"
"I'll grant that!" his guest said, "for no greater haul
have I seen in winter's season for the past seven years!"
"And all of it I owe to you, all you shall have,
for you have won your wager, and my word is good."
"Agreed!" Gawain answered. "I grant you the same!
What my courtesy and courage have caught is yours.
The prize I pass on is the pay I won."
Impeccably puckering, he planted a kiss,
saying "Here is your haul! I have nothing else.
I'd make over more, were it mine to give."
"Why that's good!" he told Gawain. "I am grateful, you know.
Though the business would have been better if you hadn't been so coy
about where this prize was won and how your wit claimed it."
"That was not how we settled it! I can say no more.
You gained what I got, so our game is tied
today."
They laugh and show respect
with every word they say.
Then on to dinner, to select
dainties from every tray.

(56)

They sat by hearth in the hall. The servants
dealt out fine drinks; they downed every one,
so bent on their bantering that they bet again
and recorded the covenant they had kept before:
each to give what he got, whether good or bad --
everything earned before evening faded
before court and courtiers, to make accounts balance.
They took one last taste, toasting each other
with courteous compliments to cap it all off.
Parting from their companions, they paced off to bed.
Before the cackling cock could crow a third time
the lord and his liege-men leaped out of bed,
broke their fast fittingly and filed off to pray.
Before the red sun rises, they go rushing off
to chase
with whoops and huntsmen's horns

through forest and field apace.
Howling among the thorns,
hunting dogs lead the race.

(57)

Soon they were summoned to search through a marsh.
Hunters harried the hounds that hit the scent first
with a Hey! Hoy! Hi! and a hullabaloo.
The other hounds heard and hastened to join them,
a fine set of forty fierce for the chase.
Such babel, such bedlam! From the baying dogs
there rose a racket that rang from the hills.
The hunt kept them hustling, by horn or by mouth,
till the savage assembly swept in a pack
between a bog in the bottomlands and a broken crag.
On a bank, by a bluff where the bog ended
and rough rocks clustered in a reckless sprawl
they broke forward barking; and brave men followed.
They surrounded the ridge and the rocky ground,
certain it concealed what they sought to find,
the beast that the bloodhounds' baying marked.
Then they beat the bushes and bid him come forth,
and he rushed their ranks, risking it all –
a breathtaking boar, breaking from cover,
an unmated male, massive but alone.
He was a barrel of a beast, as big as they come,
ferocious in his rage. And they rued his coming.
For at his first thrust he threw three men aside
and sped off at full speed, sparing the rest.
So they whooped and hollered as hard as they could,
blowing blasts on their horns to bring all who heard.
In a rapturous rush, both riders and hounds
badger and bait the beast that they mean
to kill.

Often he stands at bay
And gives the pack its fill.
He hurts the hounds and they
whimper, yowl, and shrill.

(58)

Archers came after him, aiming their bows.
They showered him with shots that landed, sure enough;
but though they hit him hard, with a hail of arrows,
hide shielded his shoulders, and he shrugged them off,
or they rebounded from the barbs that bristled round his head
(though the shafts shattered from the sheer force
that made them bounce back, when their arc bent to earth.)
At length, aroused and enraged by their harassing fire
and filled with a fighting frenzy, he fell on the hunters,
swiftly savaging all who set themselves against him,
while their fellows fell back, fearing for their lives.
But the lord leaped on his horse and lit out after him,
blowing his bugle like a warrior bent on battle.
Calling the recall, he crashed through the brush,
pursuing the savage beast until the sun faded.
They did this all day, driving along
while our own fine fellow was free to relax
and dally the day away, dressed in the fanciest
of styles.

The lady is inclined
to greet her guest with smiles.
For she has set her mind
once more to work her wiles

(59)

She came to the curtain, caught it and peeped in.
Sir Gawain greeted her as graciously as ever,
and she echoed his answer with ardent words,
settled softly beside him, suddenly laughed,
and with a flirting face flung out these words:
"If you, sir, are Sir Gawain, it seems rather strange
that a knight renowned for his noble deeds
cannot show courtesy as custom demands.
What someone tries to teach you, you toss from your mind!
You have already lost the lessons I taught
by the wisest words my wits could supply."
"How so?" the man said. "It upsets me to think it
fact that I failed you, but the fault is mine."
"Yet I coached you in kissing," she cried with bright eyes,
"wherever favor may be found, to be first to claim it,
as suits the sort of knight who seeks to show honor."

"Lay off, dear lady!" that bold lord replied,
"I fear to follow hints when favor is uncertain,
Or to offer insult by unexpected gifts."
"My word!" she cried merrily, "You may not be refused!
You're a strong, upstanding fellow; unstoppable, even,
if anyone should be evil enough to answer you with scorn."
"God help me," Gawain answered, "you make a good point,
but force is frowned on where my family lives
or the getting of gifts where goodwill is lacking.
But I'll call you the conqueror: Kiss me when you like.
Have it or hold off, if that's how you judge
the case."
The lady, leaning down,
Sweetly kisses his face.
And then their talk swings round
To love's deep grief and grace.

(60)

"I would love if you would enlighten me," that lovely one said.
"If you don't mind my asking, what might be the reason
that a fine, fresh-faced fellow like yourself,
so lordly, so polite, and lauded by all –
Well, wherever chivalry is shown, all are sure to praise
the essence of honor, the true art of love!
When men tell of the trials of any true knight
both title and text are portrayals of love:
How each for his own dear love offered his life,
endured great dangers for his darling's sake,
and overcame them by his courage until his cares vanished
and brought bliss home to bed, bountifully earned.
And you are known as the noblest knight of your generation.
Your honor and importance are everywhere renowned,
yet I have sat by your side, Sir, at least twice
without witnessing even one word from your lips
relating to love: neither less nor more.
Shouldn't anybody so eager to do exactly as vowed
Be willing to show how wooing is done,
Or share tips I can trust on the ways of true love?
What? Are you some innocent whom everyone admires,
Or do you deem me too dull to dally with a while?
No way!

I came alone; I sit
to see how well you play.
Come now, show your wit
while my lord is far away."

(61)

"God help me!" said Gawain, "and His grace reward you!
It gives me great pleasure, and I am glad to learn
that one so worthy as you should wish to attend me,
or take time to entertain your tiresome knight
with any kind of courtesy. It comforts me greatly.
Must I take the trouble to describe true love
or interpret every text about the trial of arms
when I am well aware that your wit has mastered
that art more than a multitude of men such as I
could dream of doing while I dwell on earth?
Fair lady, such folly would be far too much!
Your desire is my command, if my might can do it,
For I owe you everything, and always will be
certain to serve you as our Savior wills!"
So the temptress teased him, testing him often,
Working to win him, no matter why she did.
But he made so fine a defense that no fault appeared
Or evil in either of them. Their innocence
was bliss.
They laughed; her tender look
got no further than a kiss.
At length, the leave she took
ended her would-be tryst.

(62)

Up our man stood and made straight for mass
and after a bountiful breakfast beautifully served,
relaxed with the ladies until the light faded.
But Gawain's gracious host galloped around,
barreling after the boar that bounded uphill
then swung round to savage the pursuing hounds,
brought to bay until bowmen found him,
and arrows forced him out, to an open field.
So many shafts showered down when they all showed up,

yet the finest hunters flinched when he faced them down,
until the end, when exhausted, unable to run,
he crept as quick as he could to crouch in a hollow,
a rock face whose rim faced a running stream.
He got the bank at his back. Then he braced his feet,
and froth foamed from his mouth, filling the corners,
as he whetted his white tusks. Weary of the hunt,
all the bold bystanders brace themselves
to annoy him from afar. But no one dares
come near.
He hurt so many before
they're eager to stay clear.
His fury promises more
tearing by tusks they fear ...

(63)

Until one rider arrived and reined in his steed
to find the boar held at bay with brave men around him!
The lord left his saddle, slid lightly down,
brought out his bright blade, and then, bounding forward,
barreled toward the bank where the beast waited.
The swine saw him coming, sword in hand.
Its bristling barbs and bloodthirsty snorts
made the watching knights worry he went to his doom.
With a rush the beast came running at him,
so that man met monster in a muddled heap.
But with an accurate eye he angled his sword,
placing the point so it pierced its breast
hard up to the hilt and made its heart shatter.
Snarling, it swayed; then sank in the water's
depth.
A hundred hounds caught it,
baying for its death,
and all the hunters taught it
fear with its last breath.

(64)

They signaled their success by sounding many horns;
all who were able made their outcry heard.
The hounds howled victory at the hunters' orders,

the men in charge of the chase they'd won.
That left the business of butchery. The best man they had
set to work quickly cutting it up.
He hacked off its head, hoisted it on a stake,
cut the ribs from the ridge that ran down its back,
took out the intestines, toasted them over coals
and blended them with bread – a bonus for the hounds.
Then he chopped the hams into choice cuts
and scooped out the innards, as easy as you please.
Next, he cut the carcass cleanly in two
and hung both halves from a heavy pole.
Then they hurried homeward, hauling the pig,
whose head they hoisted high before their lord,
who withstood it mid-stream and struck the fatal
blow.

Back home he paused in doubt
Until Sir Gawain showed
And then he sought him out
to get what he was owed.

(65)

The lord's voice is loud and his laughter merry,
and when he greets Sir Gawain, he is glad indeed.
He sends for his servants and summons the ladies
to boast about the boar meat he's brought to the table:
about how big and brawny and brutally strong
and wild that pig was in its woodland lair.
Gladly, Sir Gawain congratulates his host
praising the great prize his prowess has earned.
"What a mass of meat!" that good man replied,
"Such huge racks of ribs are but rarely served!"
Then they brought in the boar's head. "Bless me," he said,
shuddering at what they showed him to show his respect.
"Gawain," said his gracious host, "this game is for you,
as we promised in our pact (and as you plainly know.)
"That is so," Gawain said. "And soon you will know
how willingly I grant my winnings to you!"
Bending down he bussed him, embracing his neck,
and sent him the same gift a second time too.
"That's all for the evening. We're even," he said.
"Our pact is complete; it has been properly

dismissed."
The lord said, "by Saint Giles
you never seem to miss!
You'll go home in style
if you carry on like this."

(66)

Then they took out trestles, set tables on them,
and covered them with cloth. The clear light of torches
woke along the walls, washing them with flame.
As men moved through the hall, making folk welcome,
there were glad greetings and gaiety as they gathered close
in hordes by the hearth until the hall was full.
At supper and after, many elegant songs,
Christmas compositions, and carols were sung –
more high-mannered merriment than man can relate.
Seated beside her, Sir Gawain, polite,
bore looks the lady sweetly launched his way–
sly, secret smiles, persuasively aimed,
that left the fellow flustered, furious with himself.
Barred by his good breeding from rebuffing her again,
he talked politely with the lady, though he looked at her
aghast.
That party pleased the hall.
But when their fervor passed,
the lord dismissed them all,
and sat down to drink at last.

(67)

There the pair of them parleyed. The pact they discussed
would renew their bargain for New Year's Eve.
But our pilgrim pleaded he must depart at dawn –
with little time left, he dare not lose his way.
But the lord wouldn't let him leave in such haste,
and said, "I swear on my soul: you can safely trust
you will greet the Green Chapel and get your chore done
by the year's first light, long before sunrise.
So relax as you like! You may lie at ease
while I head out to hunt; just hold to our exchange
and turn over your take in return for mine!

For I have tested you twice and trust you to do it.
Just make "third time throws best" your thought for tomorrow.
Make merry while you may, my lord! Meditate on joy,
for sorrow can be sought whenever the soul desires."
Graciously Sir Gawain agreed to remain.
Flushed, they finished their drinks and then found their beds' delight.

Sir Gawain lay abed
undreaming through the night
The lord did as he said
and dressed before first light

(68)

He took mass with his men, and a morsel after.
It was a fine morning. As they fetched his mount,
the rest of the riders made ready, waiting
crouched in the saddle by the castle gate.
The world was a wonder: fields washed with frost,
the red sun rising over a ruddy mist,
and white clouds coasting on a clear blue sky.
They set the hounds free at the forest's edge,
and made the rocks ring when they raised their horns.
Finding the fox's scent, they followed its spoor,
twisting and turning to track it with care.
A harrier howled. The hunt master cheered him,
and the pack pelted after him, panting and baying,
running in a rabble right on his heels.
Though the fox fled before them, they found him at once,
and when they saw him themselves, they pursued him harder,
baying at him and barking up a bloodthirsty racket.
So he dodges and doubles back through many dark thickets,
holds up to hear them where a hedge conceals him,
and at length overleaps a ditch lined with thorns,
then stealing out stealthily through a stand of trees,
thinks he's escaped scot-free from their skillful tracking.
But he's walked unawares past a well-placed blind,
and three hounds hurled themselves at him – hard, and without delay.

Swiftly turning, he whirled,
and sent their assault astray.
With all the woe in the world,

to the forest he fled away.

(69)

Shall we praise life's delights? Listen to the hounds
howling together, hot on his trail!
What a racket they raise as they rage behind him,
as if cliffs have crumbled into clattering heaps!
Here's a "Halloa!" The horsemen have found him,
and the hounds hail him too, with horrible snarls.
Next, they throw threats. "Thief!" they all cry.
With hounds on his heels, he must hasten on,
for they cut him off quick when he cuts away
and reel him right in. Yet Reynard is wily
and leaves lord and liege-man laggard behind him
through mountain mazes till mid-afternoon.
Back home, our hero had a wholesome night,
and let the curtains comfort him all that cold morning.
But love meant the lady could not let sleep
impair the bold purpose planted in her heart.
So she rose right up and readied herself
in a full-bodied cloak that fell to the earth,
finely fitted with fur well-trimmed.
No careful coif for her head! But colorful gems
caught her coiled hair in clusters of twenty.
Her enthralling face unveiled, her throat thrown naked,
bare to the breast, and with her back exposed,
she comes to the chamber door, closes it behind her,
and waving the curtains wide, bids the warrior rise,
eagerly urging him up, her voice eloquent
with cheer.

"Fellow, how can you sleep,
when the morning is so clear!"
Gawain was drowsing deep
but he couldn't help but hear.

(70)

The man lay muttering, enmeshed in his dream
like one groaning in the grip of many grim thoughts:
how that very day, destiny would deal out his fate

when he greeted his challenger at the Green Chapel
and bent his head to bear an undebated stroke.
But when the woman woke him, his wits recovered
and he bolted up in bed, begging her pardon.
Laughing, the lady came, lovely and sweet,
bending over his fair brows and bussing him with zest.
He greeted her gravely in his most gracious fashion;
but what a woman he saw, wonderfully dressed,
faultless in feature, fair-skinned and blushing,
sending wild joy working through him, warming his heart.
Soft smiles made it certain: they slipped into mirth,
bursting with bonhomie and bantering from sheer
delight.

But laughter takes its toll,
and joy is hard to fight.
He stood in peril of his soul --
Pray, Mary, save your knight!

(71)

That paragon among princesses pressed him so hard
that she urged him to the edge where he must either choose
to let himself be her lover or loutishly refuse.
Discourtesy was for cads – he cared for his honor,
but dreaded the danger if he should do wrong
and betray the lord's trust who held title there.
"God help me! It won't happen!" – so our hero swore
and with light, playful laughs kept laying aside
all the passionate propositions she put to him then.
"For shame, sir!" she said, "I must censure you
if you can't love the lady lying beside you
before all the world's women – oh, my wounded heart!
But if you have a lover, a lady that you like better,
a promised partner to whom you are pledged so firmly
that you would not wound her – that I can well believe!
Is there any such woman? I wish you would tell me!
For the love of life, neither lie nor speak
with guile!"

"By Saint John," the man replied,
and gave her a gentle smile.
"I want no one by my side,
And have not for a while."

(72)

"These words," said the woman, "are the worst of all;
I am inarguably answered. O my aching heart!
I must call it quits; just kiss me goodbye.
One must live forlorn if one loves too much."
Breathing deep, she bent down – decorously kissed him –
then stopped, stepped free, and as she straightened said,
"Beloved, before I leave, allow one request:
Grant me some gift – your glove, if you like –
as memento, reminder, and a mourner's comfort."
"Well," said our warrior, "I wish I had here
any love-prize as precious as a true prince must offer!
Most assuredly, madam, your merit has earned
by right greater recompense than I can raise here.
But to tender you a token of little true worth –
It would not honor you, lady, to offer you now
a mere glove as a love-gift, out of all Gawain has.
Mine is an urgent errand in unexplored lands
without bodyguards or baggage or beautiful things.
Love is the last thing my heart longs for now.
Men do as they must. Do not mourn my fate,
or pine."
"My lord, your honor is pure,"
she said, "yet I must decline.
Though I get nothing of yours,
what you shall have is mine."

(73)

She raised a rich ring forged of red gold
from which a stone stood out, startlingly bright,
that cast brilliance about itself like the blazing sun
(offering, it is safe to say, a sizable fortune!)
But the fellow refused and firmly replied,
"I have no taste for treasure at a time like this;
There are no gifts I can give, nor gold I dare take."
She pressed it upon him, but he put her off,
swearing with swift, certain oaths that he'd accept nothing.
A frown crossed her face; finally, she said,
"If you won't take my ring or any rich treasure

that might leave you too heavily beholden to me,
I shall give you my girdle, and you will gain less!"
Swiftly she slipped off a slender bit of lace
bound about her hips under her bright mantle
(green silk glinted from its golden fringe
that lay draped round her dress, deftly embroidered) –
which she held out to our hero and hopefully asked
if he would take such treasure, tawdry though it might be.
But he swore he would never set hand on such things --
neither love-gift nor gold – until our gracious Lord
helped him rise to the challenge he had chosen to face.
"Please, I pray you, do not press me so.
Let this business be, as I am bound never
to relent.
I owe you much indeed! –
and am ever and always intent
to serve you in thought and deed.
With that you must be content."

(74)

"So this silk is unacceptable," she said, and scoffed,
"because it's such a simple thing? So it may seem –
a mere scrap, skimpy, and of scant worth –
but one conscious of the qualities caught in its web
might place its price a point or two higher!
Just get a man girded in this green lace,
and insofar as it is fitted firmly about him,
no hero under Heaven can harm him at all,
nor can he be killed by any craft on Earth."
As he considered what she said, it seemed in his heart
that for the peril that approached him, it made the perfect gift.
When he got what he had given at the Green Chapel,
and it saved his neck, would that not be a noble trick?
He relented at last and gave her leave to speak,
and she pressed it upon him with passionate gestures.
As soon as he consented, she set it in his hands,
beseeching him for her sake to conceal her gift
most loyally from her lord. At length he agreed
that no one could know; he would never breathe
a word.
She could hardly dismiss

his heartfelt thanks; so undeterred,
she leaned in to land a kiss:
That one made her third.

(75)

Then the lady took her leave and left him to himself;
nothing more the man said could amuse her further.
When she was gone, Gawain got himself ready:
Rising, he wrapped himself in his richest clothing,
gathered up the girdle she had given him,
and set it carefully aside where he could safely find it.
As his next step, he steered straight for the chapel
where he approached a priest and privately asked him
to take his full confession and inform him better
how his soul must be saved, before he set forth.
There he cleared his conscience, disclosing his sins,
from the largest to the least, soliciting mercy –
absolution for everything he had ever done.
And he absolved him exhaustively, dissolving his guilt
as if the end of all things was imminent by morning.
Then Gawain laughed with the ladies, delighting them all
With sweet-sounding carols and every sort of joy
as he never did on other days, and when darkness fell,
even more.
Every man admired him,
and each of them swore
that no such joy had fired him
at any time before.

(76)

Let us leave him now, relaxing, where love sought him out,
and look to the lord, who did not lose his quarry,
but finished off the fox he'd followed for so long.
As he hurdled a hedge to overhaul the rogue,
he could hear the hounds hurrying up.
Reynard came racing through a rough thicket
with the pack pressing behind him, pounding on his heels.
The warrior waited, watching intently;
then swiftly drew his bright sword and swung at the beast,
which flinched from the flashing blade and would have fallen back,

but before it could dodge, a dog dragged it aside,
and the hounds massed to mob it before his mount's feet,
worrying the wily beast with the wildest racket.
The master dismounted, made for the beast,
took hold of it and hauled it from the hounds' jaws,
and held it high overhead, hallooing loudly,
over the brutal clamor of the baying dogs.
The hunters headed towards him with their horns held high,
sounding the assembly until they saw their lord.
When that grand company was gathered at last,
those who bore bugles blew them together,
while the rest raised their voices in a riotous shout.
It was the merriest commotion any man could hear!
What a rich requiem they raised, for poor Reynard's soul
invoked.

The hounds got their reward;
their heads were patted and stroked
and then men took Reynard
and deprived him of his coat.

(77)

They headed home at last, when it was hardly light,
sounding their success on insistent horns.
The master dismounted at his manor door
to find the flagstones fire-warmed, and his friend waiting—
Sir Gawain the Good, who was glad indeed,
and delighted the ladies by his loving manner.
His rich blue robe reached to the ground,
the soft fur of his surcoat suited him well,
and a hood just like it hung from his shoulders;
both were trimmed and tasseled with a touch of ermine.
The two men met in the middle of the court,
where Gawain greeted him and graciously said,
"First of all, I shall honor my oath-bound word,
the deal we drew up while drinking non-stop."
He embraced that brave man and bussed him three times,
as lustily and as long as his lips could manage.
"Good Lord!" said the lord. "You landed a bargain
if you can amass such merchandise and still make a profit!"
"The price is not the point," he replied in turn,
"as the promised goods have been paid in full."

"Mine are no match," the master responded,
"for I have hunted this whole day through and yet have nothing
but this foul fox-skin – fiend take the beast! –
which is far too poor to pay for such prize winnings,
three perfect kisses, so passionately put
across."
"It works," the knight replied,
"I thank you, by the Cross!"
Then he heard how Reynard died,
and what his fox-skin cost.

(78)

With mirth and minstrelsy and many kinds of food
they celebrated as sweetly as any soul could manage –
to the lilt of ladies' laughter and the loudest jests.
Our hero and his host were in such high spirits
that the whole assembly seemed either insane or drunk,
until the evening neared its end, when they must all separate,
each of them bound to their own bed at last.
Getting up, Gawain graciously went
to ask the lord's leave and politely thanked him.
"What a wondrous welcome I have had this season!
May King Arthur honor you for all you have done.
I must set myself at your service (if that seems proper),
for as you are well aware, I go my way tomorrow.
So task one of your attendants to teach me, as you promised,
how to get myself to the Green Chapel, where, if God so wills
New Year's Day will make known to me the nature of my doom."
"In good faith, and with good will," the good man replied,
"every promise I've ever made you, I aim to carry out."
Then he assigned a servant to set him on his way
And conduct him without detour by the down-lands road,
following it as fast as he could through forest, wood,
and fell.
"I owe you, sir, my duty,
And gratitude as well."
Then bowing to the beauties,
Gawain bid them all farewell.

(79)

Crying and kissing, he declared them friends,
wishing them well with overwhelming thanks.
But as good as they got, they gave right back,
and with sad sighs commended his soul to Christ.
Next, and most graciously, he greeted the household.
To each man he met he made his thanks known
for proper care, pleasant company, and painstaking attention
to the business that had brought him the benefit of their service.
And the servants were as sorry to see him go
as if raised to reverence him as their rightful lord.
Holding lights uplifted, they led him to his chamber,
brightly bringing him to bed, where he could be at rest.
I cannot say for certain whether he slept well,
for tomorrow held much to enmesh him deep
in thought.
Let him lie there still.
He is near to what he sought.
And if you will sit still,
I shall say what morning brought.

Book IV: The Green Chapel

(80)

Now the New Year draws near, and the night passes
as light limits shadow by our Lord's decree.
But wild weather stirred in the world's four corners.
There were clouds whose keen breath fell cold on the earth,
bitter-sharp and biting, a blast from the North.
Flakes fell in flurries, flailing around,
and the wind whistled past, whirling from the heights,
drowning dale and valley under drifting snow.
Gawain lingers there, listening, as he lies in bed.
Though he keeps his eyes closed, he catches no rest.
Each rooster-cry rouses him, for his reckoning's due.
Before daylight dawned, he dressed himself swiftly
under a lamp whose light illumined his chamber.
He called for his chamberlain, who was quick to answer,
and asked for his saddle and his suit of mail.
So the fellow went off, fetched back his things,
and got him ready to ride as royalty should.
First he wrapped him up warm against winter's chill,

then gave him his other gear, which had seen good care.
Both his plate-mail and its padding were polished and clean;
the rust rubbed from each link until his ring-mail glittered.
It was as good as he first got it, Gawain must happily
concede.
Here and now, each piece
was polished and proud indeed –
the best between Britain and Greece.
So he bade him bring his steed.

(81)

Though he arrayed himself in his richest clothing –
his coat bearing his crest exquisitely stitched,
vivid against velvet, a vision of jewels
embodying the bright virtues, with em333broidered seams,
and a fine fur lining sewn from the finest pelts –
still he did not neglect the lady's gift, the girdle she supplied.
For his own good, Sir Gawain could not forgo that token.
He belted his blade upon his broad hips,
wrapped the lace in a ring around himself twice,
then swiftly cinched it snug at his waist.
That girdle of green silk suited Gawain well.
Against his royal red clothing it made a rich display.
But it was not his purpose to display such treasure,
nor was it for pride in its pendants, polished though they were,
with glittering gold glistening from their tips.
He sought only to save himself from harm
when he must bow his head to the bite of knife
or sword.
By then his mind was set
on the road that lay before.
The servants bowed, and yet
he thanked them even more.

(82)

His great steed Gringolet had been girthed and bridled —
He'd been comfortably cared for and securely housed.
That proud horse pined for the prick of the spur.
When they led him to Lord Gawain, he looked him over,
and on his soul swore this most solemn oath:

"The men quartered in this castle are courteous indeed!
May the lord who leads them ever live in bliss,
and his delightful lady receive love's blessings!
If they by their charity cherish a guest
and keep honor close, then may our King aid them
who holds highest Heaven – and help you all, too.
If I might walk in this world a little while longer,
I should gladly give you the gifts you deserve."
First he stepped in the stirrup; then he strode aloft.
His man showed him his shield; he shouldered it securely,
and goaded Gringolet with his glittering heels,
who struck the stone as he started to rear
and prance.
His squire prepared to ride,
bearing his spear and lance.
"This castle is Christ's," he cried;
"May its fortunes ever advance!"

(83)

The bridge was brought down. The broad castle gates
were unlocked and laid open to both left and right.
He crossed himself quickly; then, crossing the planks,
praised the porter, who knelt to that prince and said –
"Good day, Sir Gawain; may God keep you safe!" –
Then that worthy went off with but one companion
to point out the path to the perilous place
where he must needs get a most grievous blow.
They beat their way past bluffs where every branch was bare.
They clambered past cliffs where cold icicles clung.
The heavens hung over them, ugly underneath.
Moisture misted the moor and melted on the mountains.
Each hill had a hat, a huge hood of fog.
The brooks boiled over, breaking against the banks,
and then washed up white, whipped to a lather.
They took a winding way indeed through that wood,
until the set time for the season, when the sun's brilliance
unfolds.
They halted on a hillside
snowy, white, and cold,
for he who rode by his side
bade his master hold.

(84)

"Thus far have I guided you, good sir, at this time,
and even now you stand near the noteworthy place
that you sought for, and searched after, with such insistent questions.
But be certain when I say this, seeing that I know you,
my lord, as one in this life whom I well love –
It would be worth your while to let my wisdom guide you.
The place you are pressing toward has a perilous name.
This wilderness holds the wickedest warrior on earth.
He is strong and stern, and he strikes with zeal,
for he is the mightiest man in this mortal realm,
and his body outbulks the four bravest heroes
in Arthur's house, or Hector, or anyone else.
What games he gets up to in the Green Chapel!
Whoever approaches that place, though he be proudly armed,
will get a deadly drubbing by dint of his hands,
for he's a merciless man, immoderate in spirit.
Whether peasant or pastor passes that chapel,
or minister, or monk, or any other man,
he'd sooner slaughter that fellow than save his own life.
As certainly as you sit in the saddle, sir, I must say,
if you come there, he'll kill you; of that there's no question.
You can trust it would be true, though you had twenty lives
to spend.
    For ages he's made the throes
    of savage strife descend.
    Against his bitter blows
    no one can defend."

(85)

"Therefore leave the man alone, my dear lord Gawain,
and for Christ's sake, sir, set off by some other route!
God speed you, go! Just get on your way,
and I shall head home myself; but first hear me promise
what I swear before God and all his good saints:
So help me God, the Holy Mother and whoever else!
I will keep your secret safe and certainly never say
that you ever had to flee from any foe I knew."
"I am grateful," Gawain said, and gruffly replied,

"I wish you well indeed, for you want to help me,
and I am certain my secret would be safe with you.
But no matter how close you kept it, if I came this far,
then let that fellow frighten me enough to flee as you suggest,
I could only be called a coward; I could not be excused.
I shall chance the Green Chapel, whatever that choice entails,
and tell that terrible knight whatever tale I choose,
and take the future that befalls me, though my fate be good
or grave.

Though no one ever escape
that stern fellow or his stave,
yet God himself can shape
his servants' fate, and save."

(86)

"By Mary!" said the other man, "now that you've made it clear
that you intend to take so much trouble on yourself,
and would like to lose your life, I will let you be.
Here, put your helmet on your head; I'll hand you your spear.
Just ride by that route there, beneath that rocky cliff,
till it brings you to the bottom of that bleak ravine.
Then look round the land; on the left-hand side
you will glimpse the glade that holds the Green Chapel
and the massive man-at-arms who makes it his home.
So, my good lord Gawain, in God's name, farewell!
Not for all the gold in the ground would I go with you,
nor follow you through this forest even one foot further!"
Then he wrenches his reins around to ride off through the wood,
hits his heels against his horse as hard as he can,
crashes across the clearing, and leaves him to carry on
alone.

"By God himself!" said Gawain,
"I shall neither grieve nor groan.
For me, God's will is given:
By Him, my deeds are known."

(87)

He got Gringolet going; then, gaining the path,
cut through a cleft covered with trees
and rode down that rough slope right to the bottom.

And then he looked around. It was a lonely place,
with no sign of any settlement to be seen at all,
only sheer slopes shielding even sharper cliffs,
and high, rocky ridges, rough-edged and jagged;
the sky seemed to scrape that escarpment's edge.
Then he halted and held back his horse for a while,
swiveling from side to side, seeking the chapel.
He could see nothing of the sort – which seemed rather strange –
save for a hint out in the open, a hillock of sorts,
a barrow bulging over the bank of a stream,
near a furrow that formed where two freshets joined.
The brook kept bubbling as if it were boiling over.
He prodded his horse and approached the mound,
swung smoothly from his seat, snagged the reins round
a rough branch, and then bound them about the same tree.
Then he bent toward the barrow and beat his way towards it,
wondering within himself what it might be.
It was open at the ends and on either side,
but clogged and clotted everywhere by large clumps of grass.
And it was all hollow on the inside – nothing but an old cavern,
or maybe a cleft in a broken crag; he could not say which
was right.

"Could this be the Green Chapel?"
wondered the noble knight.
"Here I suppose the Devil
prays in the middle of the night."

(88)

What a wasteland this is!" the warrior declared.
"This chapel is a chancy place, utterly choked with weeds:
A fine place for that fellow fitted out in green
and the services he must celebrate after Satan's fashion.
My five senses inform me that the fiend intends
the understanding that he struck with me to destroy me here.
This is a chapel of mischance – just chuck it in hell! –
the most sinister sanctuary I have ever seen or entered."
With a high helm upon his head, holding his lance,
he rode up to the roof of that rough structure.
Then from the high hill he heard a horrible noise
ringing from the rocks and ridges beyond the brook.
How it clattered against the cliff, like a cleaving knife,

and grated like a grindstone grinding a scythe!
How it rushed and rang out, raw to the ear!
"By God!" Gawain said. "The gear he prepares
is whetted to welcome me in a most worthy manner,
it's clear.
Alas! God's will be done.
Even though my death draws near,
I shall finish what I've begun.
No noise can make me fear."

(89)

Then the knight announced himself with noise of his own:
"Who holds power in this place and is prepared to meet me?
Here is Gawain the Good! You've got him right here.
If anyone wants anything, let him answer quickly
and make his needs known. It is now or never!"
"So, wait!" someone said from somewhere above him,
"and you shall have in a hurry what I'm here to give you."
Yet he got on with his grinding for a good while longer,
working on his whetting before he went down.
Then he came off the crag where a crevice opened,
and whirled round the wall. His weapon was deadly,
a Danish axe (never dull) to deal out the blow,
with a big blade that bent round the haft –
finished with a file, and more than four feet high.
It loomed even larger against the lace's brilliance.
The Green Knight and his gear were as green as ever
from his head to his heels, plus his hair and beard.
But he came forth with both feet set firmly on earth,
striking steel to stone as he stalked forward.
When his way reached the water, he didn't wade across,
but vaulted over on his axe and eagerly strode,
brutal and bloodthirsty, across a broad field covered
with snow.
Sir Gawain bowed in greeting,
but not particularly low.
The other said, "Our meeting
here proves what I wanted to know."

(90)

"Gawain," the green man said, "may God be your shield!
As you well know, warrior, you are welcome here.
You have timed your travel as a true knight should,
and you recall the covenant that was declared between us:
That after twelve months time, you take what you have coming,
and I repay my part promptly by New Year's day.
Here we are in this valley, very much alone.
Here there are no spectators to spare; we can spar freely.
Once you haul that helmet off your head, you'll have what I promised!
Don't argue any more than *I* did back then,
when with one single whack you whipped off my head."
"No," said Gawain, "By God who gave me my soul,
I won't give an inch of ground, however grim my fate.
Stick to one stroke, and I will stand stock still
and offer no argument to anything you do
right here."
He bent his neck and bowed
to reveal it bare and sheer
but acted utterly uncowed:
He would not wince in fear.

[To be continued]