Once the siege and assault had done for Troy,
And the city was smashed, burned to ashes,
The traitor whose tricks had taken Troy
For the Greeks, Aeneas the noble, was exiled
For Achilles' death, for concealing his killer,
And he and his tribe made themselves lords
Of the western islands, rulers of provinces,
And rich: high-handed Romulus made Rome
Out of nothing, built it high and blessed it
With his name, the name we know; and Turrus
Father of Tuscan founded towns;
And the Lombards planted a land; and Brutus
Split the sea, sailed from France
To England and opened cities on slopes

And hills,
Where war and marvels
Take turns with peace,
Where sometimes lightning trouble
Has struck, and sometimes soft ease.

And noble Brutus' Britain grew rich
In battlebold knights, who loved to fight
And fought, and often brought pain to their people.
Far more than in any land in the world
Wonderful things have been worked in England.
But of all her kings Arthur was always
Most glorious, as the tales tell—and knowing
A strange adventure, told of Arthur
And his knights, as surpassingly strange a tale
As even Britain has spawned, I'll tell it
Here and now, as I've heard it told,
If you'd like to listen to the poem I'll read,
Spun
Out of ancient stories
Set down by honest men
With bold words
And faithful pens.

At Christmas the king held court at Camelot,
Surrounded by gracious lords, worthy
Knights of the Round Table, brothers in arms,
Reveling in that rich pleasure. Noble
Knights day after day rode
In tourneys, jousted gallant and well,
Then galloped to court, and sang, and danced—
For Camelot's Christmas feast was fifteen
Days, as full of food and laughter
As feasting could be made, loud and happy
And glorious to listen to, noisy days,
Dancing nights, lords and ladies
Rejoining in their rooms, and in Arthur's castle,
Comming together in the height of delight,
The most famous warriors of Christ our King,
And the loveliest ladies in the world, and Arthur
The noblest of rulers, reigning in his court.
It was springtime in Camelot, in the Christmas snow,
In that castle
Most blessed on earth,
With the best of vassals
And a king of such worth
That no time will surpass him.

With the New Year drawing close, courtiers
And ladies sat to a double feast;
Mass had been sung in the chapel, the king
And his knights came to the hall, and priests

And laymen called "Noël! Noël!"
And shouted and sang, and nobles ran
With New Year's presents in their hands, noisily
Passing in a crowd, calling: "Presents!
Presents!" and loudly disputing gifts,
While ladies laughed when kisses were lost
(And whoever won them found it hard to weep),
And till dinnertime came they ran and laughed;
Then they washed and sat at that stately table,
The noblest nearest their lord, and his queen,
Guenevere the gay, seated in their midst:
Arranged around that priceless table
Fringed with silk, with silk hung
Over their heads, and behind them velvet
Carpets, embroidered rugs, studded
With jewels as rich as an emperor's ransom—
And the queen
Watching with shining
Gray eyes, seemed
As beautiful a lady
As a man could have seen.

Yet Arthur, boisterous and merry as a boy,
Refused to eat till the others were served:
His blood ran young, and his brain was restless,
And he liked to be gay, he hated lying
About or sitting long at a time,
And a point of honor held him back,
A vow he had taken and meant to keep,
Not to be seated at a festive table
Until he'd been told a tale of adventures
Or marvels, some mighty story to remember
Of princes, of battles, of perils or wonders,
Or a courtly visitor had begged some knight
Of the Round Table to rise and ride in combat,
Fight for his life, man against man,
As fate determined. Wherever he held
His court the king was ruled by this custom,
Whenever he sat with his knights around him
And feasted.
His face proud
He remained on his feet,
And his laughter was loud
As he waited his New Year's treat.

So the fearless king stood in front of his table,
Talking of elegant trifles. And Gawain
The good sat beside Guenever, and Agravaine
Of the hard hands on her other side,
Both Arthur's nephews, faithful knights,
And Bishop Bawdune at the king's right
And Urien's son Ywain with him.
This central table sat high in luxury
And around them lesser knights in rows.
With a flaring crack of trumpets the feast
Began, trumpets all hung with bright banners,
And drums beat, and glorious bagpipes
Rumbled and shrilled their quick-step tunes,
And hearts beat quick with the music. At the signal
Rare and delicate dishes were served,
And venison in great slabs, and so many platters
That there was almost no place to set them in front of
The guests, broths and stews in overflowing
Abundance.

All ate as they pleased
And as much as they wanted,
A dozen dishes apiece,
And beer and wine flowed free.

I've nothing more to tell of their feasting:
Any fool knows with what splendor they were fed.
And to send the prince to his dinner, a different
Sound approached—the trumpets and pipes
Were barely still, the drums silent,
The first dishes set in place,
When a ghastly knight sprang through the door,
Huge, taller than men stand, so square
And thick from neck to knee, thighs
So broad around, legs so long.
He seemed half an ogre, a giant,
But clearly the biggest creature in the world
And the fairest, the gayest for his size, as thin
In the waist, as flat in the belly, as his back
And chest were grim and immense, from cheek
To chin fine and elegant, with an easy
Grace

And stunning the court
With the color of his face:
A fiery, snorting
Fellow, and his hands were green, and his face.

And his armor, and his shirt, were green, all green:
A short tight tunic, worn close, and a merry
Mantle, sewn-in with fur that rippled
As he rode, trimmed rich at the edges with bright
White ermine, both his mantle and the hood thrown
low
On his back, below his flowing hair;
And his smooth-webbed stockings, stretched taut
on his legs,
Were green, all striped with embroidered silk,
And his shining spurs were gold, and he wore
No shoes, rode peacefully to that prince's court.
Everything about him was an elegant green.
From the colored bands on his belt to the jewels
Set in his clothes and his saddle, woven
Around with silk designs: birds
And butterflies flew in that embroidery, beautifully
Worked and fine, decorated in green
And with gold scattered across them. His horse's
Armor was enameled, and the saddle and its straps
And the bit in its teeth were green, and the stirrups
For that knight's feet were green, and his saddle
Horn, and the shining leather hung
From the saddle, glittering and gleaming with green
Stones, and his stallion too, as green

As its rider,

A huge horse,
Headstrong, decisive.
And quick, but caught up
By his hand’s touch on the bridle.

His clothes and his armor were glorious, this green
Knight, his hair the color of his horse
And waving down his shoulders. A beard
As thick as a bramble-bush grew from his chin
And fell in front as far as the hair
In back, hair and beard cut

At the elbow, like a king’s hooded cape
Enclosing his neck and half his arms;
And his horse’s mane hung long, combed
And curled, braided strand for strand
With gold thread, a strand of green hair,

Another of gold; and his forelock, and his tail
Were braided to match, bound in place
With a green band, dotted with precious
Stones the length of that flowing tail,
Then laced with an elaborate knot, and strung

With dozens of bright gold bells that rang
As he rode—and rider, and horse, stranger
Than anything seen on earth, before
That day.

He seemed to glow
Like lightning, they say
Who were there: who could know
The force of his blows?

And yet he wore no helmet, no mail-shirt,
No neck-armor, nothing against steel or arrow,

Nor carried a shield nor swung a spear,

Had only a branch of holly in one hand
(Holly that grows greenest when the woods are bare)
And an axe in the other, monstrous, huge,
A vicious weapon four feet wide,

Hammered of green steel, and of gold,
With a polished blade, a bright cutting
Edge, and long, and stropped like a razor
Ready to shear, and his hand held it
By a thick staff, strong and straight

And wound round with iron at the end;
It was carved with lovely green symbols and designs
And hung by a strap run through the head
And down the handle, looped around
And tied with delicate tassels and embroidered
Buttons, green and rich. This knight

Stalked in the door and through the hall
To Arthur’s high table, afraid of no one,
Greeting no one, ignoring them all.
And when he spoke: “Where,” he said,
“Is the lord of this company? I’d like to see him
In person and exchange some words.” He stared

At the knights,

Rolling his eyes up
And down, then stopped
And squinted, hunting the knight

Of noblest renown.

And they themselves sat and stared,
Wondering, bewildered, what it meant that a knight
And his horse could have such a color, could grow
As green as grass, or greener! and glow
Brighter than emerald enamel and gold.

And those who were standing watched, and walked
Carefully near him, not knowing what he’d do—
They’d all seen wonders, but nothing like this.
And some said he was witchcraft, a phantom,
And were afraid to answer him, then gasped at his voice
And trembled, sitting motionless in that noble
Hall, silent as stones, as corpses;
All speech was swept away as if sleep

Had dropped
From the sky—but some
Surely stopped
Their tongues in courtesy, to do honor
To Arthur, whose words should come first.

And Arthur stood watching the strange arrival
And greeted him gravely (for he knew nothing of fear)
And said, "Sir, you are welcome in my house,
For I am Arthur and I rule this court.
Step down from your horse and stay, let me pray you,
And whatever you've come for can be talked of afterward."
"No, God help me," said the green man, "I have
No interest in lingering here! Yet you
And your court are so famous, prince, and your castle
And your knights are praised so widely—the proudest,

The boldest soldiers to sit on a horse,
The bravest and best of men, eager
To compete in noble games—and your courtesy
Is told in such terms, that I came to see
If these tales were true. You can surely tell

By this branch here in my hand that I've come
In peace, not seeking, not giving offense:
Had I ridden with my men, intending to fight,
I've a helmet and mail-shirt at home, and a shield,
And a sharp spear, shining bright,
And other weapons meant for war.
I intend no war, what I wear is in peace.
And if Arthur is as brave as his fame, in the name
Of this Christmas season you'll grant me the sport
I've come for."

And Arthur replied,
"Your wish is done, sir.
If you've come to fight
We'll fight and not run, sir."

"No, not fighting: believe me, prince.

These benches are filled with beardless infants.
Wearing my armor, riding to war,
There's no muscle in this hall to match me. It's a game
I want to play, a Christmas sport

For the season. Your court sings of its daring:
If they'll dare it, any of these eager knights,
Rise so boldly, so fierce, so wild,
And give a blow and take a blow,
I'll offer this noble axe and let them
Swing its weight as they like, and I'll sit
Without armor and invite them to strike as they please.

Anyone with the nerve to try it, take
This axe, here. Hurry, I'm waiting!
Take it and keep it, my gift forever,
And give me a well-aimed stroke, and agree
To accept another in payment, when my turn

Arrives,
But not now: a year
And a day will be time
Enough. So: is anyone here
Able to rise?"

If he'd stunned them at first, they sat stiller, now,
All who followed Arthur, noble
And knave. That knight swiveled in his saddle,
His eyes rolling fierce and red,
And he wrinkled his bristling brows, gleaming
Green, and switched his beard from side
To side—And no one rose—And he reared
Like a lord, and yelped, and laughed, and said:
"Hah! Is this Arthur's house, hailed
Across the world, that fabled court?
Where have your conquests gone to, and your pride,
Where is your anger, and those awesome boasts?
And now the Round Table's fame and its feasting
Are done, thrown down at the sound of one man's
Words—and you sit there shaking—at words!"
And he laughed so loud that Arthur winced,
His fair face flooded hot with shame,

And his cheeks;

He flared as angry as wind,
And all his people
Burned. And the bold king
Strode toward the green
Knight: "By God, fellow, this is foolish
Stuff—but you've asked for folly, and folly.
You'll get! No one's afraid of your nonsense:
For God's sake, give me your axe, I'll grant
Your request!" Light and fast, he ran
And clasped the green knight's hand. And proudly
The green man dismounts. And Arthur lifts
The axe, and whips it about, gripping it
Firm in his fists, grim, determined.
That haughty knight stood huge at his side,
A head and more the tallest in the hall;
Stroking his beard, his face set
And still, he quietly pulled down his coat,
As indifferent to Arthur swishing his axe
As if the king were a waiter carrying
Wine.
Gawain was seated near
The queen; he leaned
Forward: "Hear me,
My lord. Let this challenge be mine."

Then Gawain bowed to the king. "Release me,
My liege, from this bench, and let me come to you,
Permit me to rise without discourtesy,
And without displeasing your queen. Let me come
to counsel you, here in your noble court.
It seems wrong—everyone knows how wrong—
When a challenge like this rings through your hall
To take it yourself, though your spirit longs
For battle. Think of your bold knights,
Bursting to fight, as ready and willing
As men can be: defer to their needs.
And I am the slightest, the dullest of them all;
My life the least, my death no loss—
My only worth is you, my royal
Uncle, all my virtue is through you.
And this foolish business fits my station,
Not yours: let me play this green man's game.

If I ask too boldly, may this court declare me
At fault."
The knights whispered, buzzed,
Then all
In a voice said it was
For Gawain; the king should halt.

Then Arthur ordered his knight to rise,
And Gawain rose and came quickly
To the king, and kneeled, and accepted the green
man's
Axe as Arthur yielded it, lifting
His hands to bring God to Gawain, commanding
That heart and hand must be steady and strong.
"Be careful, cousin," said the king, "to strike
But once; offer exactly what he asks.
And his stroke will be easier to stand." Axe
In hand Gawain approached the green man,
Who waited patient, calm, unmoving.
Then he spoke to the knight: "Before we proceed,
Friend, we ought to make everything clear.
And I ask you, first, your name: speak it
Openly, and speak the truth." "In truth
It is Gawain who offers this stroke, and agrees,
No matter what happens, to accept a stroke
From you, in exactly a year, with whatever
Weapon you choose—from you, and only
From you!"

The green man smiled:
"Sir Gawain, no one could do
What you'll do, and delight me
More—no man alive.

"By God," he swore, "Sir Gawain, I'm glad
To have what I wanted at your hands. You've spoken
Our bargain beautifully, and spoken it fair,
And omitted nothing I asked the king
Except, knight, your word to seek me
Yourself, to come to me there where I am,
At home on this earth, and to take the same
Reward you'll give me today in this court."
“And where will you be?” asked Gawain. “Where is your home? By God, I’ve never heard of your castle, or you, or your court, or your name. Tell me, teach me, give me your name, and I’ll come to you, however hard the road, wherever you are: I swear on my word.”

“That’s oath enough, at Christmas,” said the green man,

“I need no more. Once you’ve swung my axe neatly and well, there’ll be time to tell you where my home is and my house, and to tell you my name, and you’ll test my castle, and me, and keep your word. And perhaps I’ll say nothing, once you’ve struck, which is better for you, you could stay here with your king and not hunt my door—

But stop!

Take my good axe, and show me a chop."

“Exactly as you ask,” said Gawain, ready to stop.

Still smiling, the green man bowed, and bent his head a bit, baring his neck, his lovely long hair tossed back, leaving

The naked flesh open, exposed.

Gawain hefted the axe, swung it high in both hands, balancing his left foot in front of him, then quickly brought it down. The blade cut through bones and skin and fair white flesh, split the green man’s neck so swiftly that its edge slashed the ground. And the head fell to the earth, rolled on the floor, and the knights kicked it with their feet:

The body spurted blood, gleaming red on green skin—but the green man stood a moment, not staggering, not falling, then sprang

On strong legs and roughly reached through thrashing feet, claimed his lovely head, and carrying it to his horse caught the bridle, stepped in the stirrups and mounted, holding his head by its long green hair, sitting high and steady in the saddle as though nothing had happened. But he sat there headless, for everyone.

To see,

Twisting his bloody, severed stump. And the knights were wary, afraid before he ever opened that mouth to speak.

And he held that head high, slowly turning its face toward Arthur and the noblest of his knights, and it lifted its lids and stared with wide eyes and moved its lips and spoke, saying: “Gawain, be ready to ride as you promised; hunt me well until you find me—

As you swore to, here in this hall, heard by these knights. Find the green chapel, come to take what you’ve given, a quick and proper greeting for a New Year’s Day. Many men know the knight of the green chapel: seek me, and nothing can keep you from me.

Then come! or be called a coward forever.”

With a violent rush he turned the reins and galloped from the hall, his head in his hands; his horse’s hooves struck fire on the stone.

And where he rode to no one knew, no more than they’d known from where he came. And then?

Arthur and Gawain grinned at the joke, and laughed at the green man, though those who had seen him knew miracles had been sent.
Arthur's heart whirled in wonder,
Yet he showed nothing, turned to his beautiful
Queen and spoke courteously, but loud:
470 “My love, let nothing of this disturb you.
These are things right and proper
For Christmas, and for courtly ladies and their
knights,
Miming and plays, carols and laughter.
But now I can dine, I admit it; the marvel
475 I awaited has come.” Then he glanced toward
Gawain:
“Sir,” he said slowly, “hang up
Your axe: it has cut enough for one night.”
And servants hung it high against
A tapestry, a trophy for everyone to stare at,
480 True evidence of marvelous things.
Then knights and ladies returned to table,
And Arthur and Gawain, and good men served
them
Double portions, as rank demanded.
They ate and drank and listened and watched
485 And the day was delight, and was long, and was
finally

Done.
And now, Gawain: think.
Danger is yours to overcome
And this game brings you
490 Danger. Can the game be won?
The green man began Arthur's New Year
With the marvels he loved to hear of. But the men
Of the Round Table sat silent at their meat, stuffed,
Now, with grim business, Gawain
Enjoyed the beginning of that game, in his king's
Court, but no one would laugh at the end—
For men may be cheerful, mulling their wine,
But a year runs fast, and always runs different;
Start and finish are never the same.
So Christmas goes by, and all the swift year,
Each season racing after the other:
Christmas pursued by uncomfortable Lent,
Trying men's flesh with simple food
And with fish; then fair weather fights with foul,
Clouds fill the sky, the cold shrinks away,
Rain falls clear in warm showers,
And the flat earth opens into flowers
And fields and plains grow thick and green,
Birds start their nests and sing like angels
For love of soft summer, creeping across
The slopes;
And hedgerows swell tall,
And blossoms blow open,
And glorious woods are all
Echoing joy and hope.
And after summer's soft winds, Zephyrus
Whistles quietly with seeds and herbs,
Sprouting delightful plants, painted
Wet with dew falling from leaves,
Waiting to be warm in the bright sun.

Then autumn comes rushing, calling the plants
To watch for winter, to grow while they can;
And he dries the earth and drives dust
Swirling to the sky, and wild winds
Run to wrestle with the sun; leaves
Are thrown from trees and lie dead on the ground,
And green grass withers. And everything
Slender and new ripens and rots,
And a year runs away in passing days,
And winter winds back, as winter must,
Just so.

Till the Michaelmas moon
Promises snow—
And Gawain soon
Recalls what he has to do.

But he stays with Arthur till All-Saints Day.
And the king makes a feast in his honor, the court
And their ladies merry around the Round Table,
Gracious knights and lovely women

Grieving for love of Gawain, but laughing
And drinking his name, smiling and joking
While their hearts sank gray and cold. And Gawain
Feasts, then sadly approaches his uncle
And speaks of his journey, and bluntly says:

"Lord of my life, I ask your leave.
You know my promise: I've no pleasure in retelling
it,
Spelling my troubles, except just this:
Tomorrow I go to the green man and his axe,
Tomorrow without fail, as God guides me."

And the best of Arthur's knights came to him,
Iwain, and Eric, and many more,
Sir Dodinel de Sauvage, the Duke of Clarence,
Lancelot, and Lionel, and Lucan the Good,

Sir Bors, and Sir Bedivere—strong men, both—
And other proud knights, with Mador de la Port.
They came to the king, all of them, to counsel
Gawain, but their hearts were heavy. In secret
Thoughts, that day, Arthur's hall
Rang with silent lament, sorrow
For so good a man as Gawain, on so hard
A quest.

But Gawain only smiled:
"Should I waste my time
With fear? Whether pleasant or wild,
Fate must be put to the test."

So he rested that day, then rose the next morning
And at dawn called for his armor. It was brought,
But first a rich red rug was spread
On the floor: gold armor gleamed where it lay.
Then Gawain stepped forward, took steel in his
hands,
And over a doublet of Tharsia silk
Fastened a hood, tied at the neck
And lined inside with thick fur. Then hammered
Steel shoes were set on his feet, and his legs
Wrapped all around with well-hinged metal,
With armored knee-plates, polished bright
And fastened tight by golden cords;
Thigh-plates, elegant and thick, closed
Around his strong muscles, and were laced
In place. And then his mail-shirt, metal
Woven like silk, hung shimmering on his chest,
And polished arm-pieces, and beautifully bent
Elbow joints, and steel gloves,
And all the equipment he needed, and owned,

For that ride,
Draped with heraldic designs—
And gold spurs on his feet,
And his good sword at his side,
And a sash belted neat.

And Gawain's gear shone rich, the smallest
Laces and loops glowing with gold.
Ready in armor, he stood at the altar
For mass to be chanted, then came to the king
And the assembled knights of Arthur’s court,
And took courteous leave of lords and ladies,
Who kissed him, commended him to Christ, then walked him
There where Gringolet stood ready, his saddle
Of gleaming leather, hung with gold,
Studded with new nails, and a striped bridle,
Trimmed and tied with gold. And Gringolet’s Breast-plates, and shining saddle-skirts,
And tail-armor, and the cloth on his back, matched
His saddle-bows, all set on a background
Of rich gold nails that glittered like the sun.
Then Gawain lifted his lined helmet,
Sewn like steel, and quickly kissed it;
It sat high on his head, clasped behind,
With delicate embroidered silk on the neckband,
Decorated with jewels along its length
And with birds stitched on the seams, parrots
Perched among painted purple flowers,
And turtle doves, and lovers’ knots
So thick that ladies could have sewn them for seven Winters.

And around the top
Of his helmet were a crop
Of diamonds, brown and white, sprinkled
In a magic knot.

Then they carried in his shield, striped with bright red;
A pentangle star, painted pure gold,
Shone at its center. He swings it by the belt,
Then tosses it across his neck. And the sign
Of that star, its perfect points, fitted
That prince, and I’ll tell you how, though it hold up
This tale. Solomon shaped that star—
Triangles blended in triangles—as a symbol
Of truth, for each of its angles enfolds
The other, and fastens the other, five
In all and everywhere endless (and everywhere
In England called the infinite knot).
And Gawain wears it by right, on his bright
Armor, faithful five ways and each way
Five times, a noble knight, as pure
As gold, as good as any knight in any gleaming Castle
And worthy of that star,
The noblest of men in asking
And telling, the hardest
For words to baffle.

His five senses were free of sin;
His five fingers never failed him;
And all his earthly hope was in Christ’s
Five wounds on the cross, as our creed tells us;
And whenever he stood in battle his mind
Was fixed, above all things, on the five
Joys which Mary had of Jesus,
From which all his courage came—and was why
This fair knight had her face painted
Inside his shield, to stare at Heaven’s
Queen and keep his courage high.
And the fifth of his fives was love and friendship
For other men, and freedom from sin,
And courtesy that never failed, and pity,
Greatest of knightly virtues—and these noble
Five were the firmest of all in his soul.
And all these fives met in one man,
Joined to each other, each without end,
Set in five perfect points
Wholly distinct, yet part of one whole
And that whole seamless, each angle open
And closed, wherever it end or begin.
And so the pentangle glowed on his shield,
Bright red gold across bright red stripes,
The holy pentangle, as careful scholars
Call it.

And Gawain was ready,
And his lance steady
He spurred his horse and rode strongly away;
Sparks flew from the stones. And Arthur's Court watched him, and sighed, all Camelot Sad at his fate, men saying
One to the other: "By Christ, what a crime
To lose Gawain, whose life was so noble!
How many men on this earth can match him?
Better to have been more prudent, to have made him
A duke before this could happen. He seemed
A brilliant leader, and could have been,
And had better been than this—his head Lopped off by an elf, and only for pride.
What king has ever allowed such games,
Playing such stupid sport at Christmas?"
Warm tears rolled in their eyes
As they watched that lovely knight riding away.

And he never delayed,
Rode on his way;
And books say
That he rode where men go astray.

And he rode through England, Sir Gawain, on God's Behalf, though the ride was hardly a happy one.
He was often alone, at night, in places
Where the path ahead of him could please no one.

Only his horse rode with him, through woods
And hills, and the only voice he heard
Was God's, until he reached the north
Of Wales. The Anglesey Islands were always
To his left; he forded rivers near the highlands,
Crossing at Holy Head and landing
In the wilderness of Wirral Forest, where few men
Lived whom God or a good man could love.
And Gawain asked, as he rode, if anyone
He met had heard of a green man, or a green Chapel, anywhere nearby, and everyone
Said no, never in their lives, neither seen
Nor heard of a man whom heaven had colored Green.

Gawain's path
Wound through dreary scenes,
And his head leaned
First this way, then that, as he hunted that chapel.

He climbed over cliffs in many strange lands,
Nowhere near home, friendless now.
And at every ford over every stream
He found himself facing enemies so foul
And wild that they forced him to fight for his life.
He met so many marvels in those hills
It is difficult to tell a tenth of it—dragons
Attacked him, and sometimes wolves, and satyrs,
And forest trolls, running out of rocks,
And bulls, and bears, and ivory-tusked boars,
And giant ogres leaping from crags.

His strength saved him, and his courage, and his faith
In God: he could have died a dozen times
Over. And the fighting was hard, but the foul
Winter was worse, so cold that rain
Froze before it could fall to earth;
Sleeping in his armor, sleet came close
To killing him, lying on open rock
Where icy rivers charged from mountains
And over his head icicles hung.

Sharp and hard. In danger and hardship
Gawain stayed alone, riding until Christmas Eve,
When he prayed to Mary
To end his grief,
To guide his weary
Steps to relief.

Next morning, more cheerful, he rode down a hill
To a deep forest, incredibly wild,
Set into mountains and surrounded by hundreds
Of huge gray oaks. Hazel and hawthorn
Were snarled and tangled together, and shaggy
Moss hung everywhere in ragged clumps;
And sad birds sat on the bare
Branches, piping pitifully in the cold.
Gawain hurried his horse, crossed swamps
And mires and bogs, acres of mud,
Afraid, now, that he'd lost all chance
Of hearing Christmas mass and honoring
Mary's son, born to end
Our sorrow; and sighing, he said: "Oh Lord,
Oh Mary, gentlest Mother and dear,
I beg you to send me some lodging, to let me
Hear mass before morning; I ask meekly,
And in proof pray swiftly my pater, my Ave,
My creed."
He prayed as he rode,
And wept for misdeeds,
And shaped the sign of the cross
And called Christ in his need.
Three times he shaped that sign, and suddenly,
On a hill above a field, set deep
Among massive trees, he saw a moat
And a castle—the loveliest ever owned,
In the middle of a meadow, with woods and lawns
And a thick palisade fence, and grass
And grounds running more than two miles. And
Gawain
Stared at those stone walls glittering
Through tall white oaks, towering around
A steep moat, and removing his helmet
Gave courteous thanks to Jesus and Julian,
Patron of travelers, for the kindness he'd been shown,
For the answering of his prayer. "Lord, grant me
Good lodging!" he cried, and spurring Gringolet
With his gift heels he hurried along
The path and luckily aimed at the main
Gate and quickly came to the end
He sat on his horse, who had halted on the bank
Of the deep double ditch in which
The walls were set, towering immense
Out of the water, hard stone
Hewed in the noblest style, topped
With rows of battlements, and turrets, and beautiful
towers for sentries, and lovely loophole
Windows, shuttered now—he'd never
Seen a better fortress. And beyond
The walls he could see a high-roofed hall,
And pinnacled towers along it, fitted
To the walls, carved and crafted by ingenious
Hands. And high on those towers he saw
A host of chalk-white chimneys, gleaming
Bright in the sun—and everywhere the stone
Painted and cut, bowmen's notches
And watchmen's places scattered across
The castle, so it seemed scissored out of paper.
And resting on Gringolet, Gawain thought it
A pleasant place to lodge in, while the holiday
Run—if ever he could manage to get
Inside.
He called, and a porter
Quickly appeared, polite,
Standing on the wide
Wall and greeting the knight in good order.
"Good sir," said Gawain, "would you carry my
words
To the lord of this house, ask him for shelter?"
"By Peter, I can speak his heart; you're welcome
Here," said the porter, "for as long as you like."
He bowed, went down the wall and came back
In a moment, with men to greet Sir Gawain.
They dropped the drawbridge, came courteously out
And knelt in the snow, welcoming on their knees
That noble knight, honoring his rank;
820 They begged him to ride on that broad bridge
And he raised them with a hand and rode across.
They held his saddle, and helped him down,
And ran to stable his horse. And squires
And knights swarmed from the castle, happy
825 To escort so excellent a soldier to their hall;
When he lifted his visor they hurried to take
His helmet from his hands, anxious to serve him;
And they took his sword, and his shield. And one
By one they greeted them all, courteous,
830 And proud men pressed forward, glad at his coming.
Still in his armor they led him to the hall,
Where a huge fire crackled on the hearth.
And the lord of that company came from his chamber
To honor Gawain, the guest in his hall:
835 “Everything here is yours, use it
As you please; accept it as your own, for as long
As you like.”
And Gawain replied:
“Thank you, May Christ
840 Reward you.” And like brothers they kissed
And embraced and were glad.

And Gawain watched his gracious host
And judged him a worthy knight, tall
And strong and experienced, in the prime of life;
845 His beard was heavy, all beaver-colored,
His face as red as fire, and more fierce;
He stood firm and forbidding on thick legs;
But his words were courtly, and Gawain thought him
Worthy to lead a host of good warriors.
850 And the lord of that castle led him aside,
Commanded a man to serve him well,
And others led Gawain to a glorious bed
In a noble room, hung with strips
Of shining silk, trimmed with gold,

With a bedspread sewn in the softest fur,
Gleaming ermine, and around him curtains
On red-gold rings, with a rope to pull,
And silk tapestries spread on the walls
And floors, red and white silk. Then his man
Removed his armor, and his mail-shirt, pleased
To work with so noble a knight. And he quickly
Brought him rich robes, and Gawain
Chose which he liked, and changed his clothes,
And wore that lovely long-skirted gown—
And all at once it seemed to be Spring,
865 As his face shone, and that fair robe
Glistened with color, and Gawain walked,
Gracious, among waiting knights, and they thought,
Each of them, that Christ had made no better
Man.

Whatever his land,
He seemed a matchless
Prince, meant to attack
In the center of battle.

In front of the fireplace, where coals glowed,
They set him a covered chair, its cushions
Quilted and beautifully worked, embroidered
In silk; and a brown mantle, richly
Sewn, and bright, a gay cloak;
Furred with the thickest skins, was thrown
On his shoulders; his hood, too, was ermine;
880 And Gawain sat in that splendid place
And soon was warm, and his spirits rose.
A long table was laid on trestles,
And a white cloth hung on it, and across it
Another cloth, and silver spoons,
And a salt-dish. He washed and went to his meat.
And men hurried to wait on him, brought him
Savory stews, and broths, seasoned
And hot, all double-sized portions, and fish
885 Of every kind—baked and breaded,
Grilled on charcoal, boiled, and in spiced
Soups—and sauces sweet to the tongue.
And Gawain called it a feast, graciously
Praised their table when they begged him to excuse it.
Then quiet questions were asked, tactful
And discreet: where had he come from, was it far?
And Gawain explained that he rode from noble Arthur's court, that glorious king
Of the knights of the Round Table, and that he was a soldier named Gawain, sitting in their hall,
Come to their Christmas, as chance led him.
Later, hearing that Gawain was with him.
And the knights in that castle shouted with pleasure,
Proud to stand in his presence—Gawain, Eternally praised, bearer of excellence,
Most able, most knightly, best on earth,
Most famous, most honored of men. And each of them
Whispered to his fellow: "How sweet it will be to see such easy, virtuous skill!
What lessons we will learn in noble speech, What marvelous words, what practiced methods
Of converse, now that we welcome this model Of perfect breeding! God has been good,
Truly, to grant us a guest like Gawain,
In this season when men sing and rejoice
In His birth.
This knight will lead us to the meaning Of manners, will work
Miracles for us to see
In the soothing of lovers' hurts."
When dinner was done, and Gawain rose,
It was nearly night. And priests went walking
To their chapels, and rang out loud and merry Chimes, as rightly they should, calling
Holiday vespers for the faithful to hear.
And the lord came, and his lady, she
In a beautiful pew, gracefully at prayer.
And Gawain hurries happily after them;
The lord takes him by the sleeve and leads him
To a bench, and greets him, and calls him by name,
And tells him no man could be more welcome.
And Gawain thanks him, and they throw their arms around each other, sit side by side
For the service. And the lady looked at Gawain,
And afterward, her women around her, came
To her lord, her face the fairest white,
And in all things the softest woman on earth— Lovelier than Guenevere, in Gawain's eyes.
She walked round the altar, to greet him. Another Lady led her by the left hand,
Older than her, ancient and old
And honored by a host of good knights. And how Unlike they were, that pair, the young one Fresh, the old one faded yellow;
Rich red cheeks on the one, rough And wrinkled jowls on the other, loose
And dangling; coverings hung with pearls On the young one's throat and breast, showing Skin whiter than snow on the hillsides,
While the old one wrapped a kerchief on her neck And hid her black chin in white
Veils and muffled her forehead in latticed Embroidered silk, and left nothing Bare but her black brows, two Eyes, and a nose, and naked lips, All awful to see, bleared and sour—
But a lady honored here on earth, By God!
Stumpy and short,
Her buttocks broad:
There was better sport
In the lady she bowed.
And watching that lady watch him, Gawain
Went to meet them, with her lord's consent:
Bowing low, he saluted the old one,
But the pleasanter woman he wrapped in his arms
For a courteous kiss and chivalric words.
And the ladies asked to know him, and he quickly
Pledged himself their servant. Each lady
Took an arm, and held him, and talking as they went
They led him to a room and a fire, and called
For platters of spice-cakes, and her lord's people
Carried in cakes and pleasing wine.
And her lord leaped to his feet, over
And over, urging them to mirth; he tugged
At Gawain's cloak, and pulled a spear
From the wall, challenging the knight to win it
From him, make Christmas a merry time:
"And by my faith I'll fight to keep it,
Myself and my friends, as best I can."
And he laughed and jested, to please Sir Gawain
With jokes and games, there in his hall
That night,
Until the hour
When he called for lights,
And they left that bower
For sleep's delight.

On that morning when men remember God's birth,
His descent to earth to save our souls,
The world rejoices for His sake—and that castle
Ate and drank God's name, dishes
Of dainties and sweets on tables and at meals,
Brave men celebrating in proper style:
The ancient lady at the lord's right,
And the lord come courteously to his seat beside her,
And Gawain and the gay lady together.
Between the others, when the table was laid;
And the rest sitting where they thought it best.
And when everyone was seated in good order, there
was meat
And drink and mirth, laughing and joy
So free and full that to tell it all

Would trouble my pen, however it tried.
And yet I can tell you that Gawain and the lord's
Fair lady sat gaily side by side,
Relishing each other's laughter and courtly
Speech—private, but courteous and pure,
A surpassing sport, fit for princes
And their ladies.

Trumpets and drums
And pipers played;
Each man minded his own,
And so did the knight and the lady.

That day, and the next, were spent in delight,
And then the third came as happily, as crowded
With joy: the Feast of St. John rang
With pleasure, and all of them thought it the end
Of their sport. And expecting to be sober, in the gray
Morning, they danced to the gayest music,
And laughed, and guzzled wine. And as late
As they could, whoever had to took
Slow leave and left, finally, to stumble
Home, And saying goodnight to his host
Gawain was grasped and led to his bedroom,
Beside the fire, an arm across
His back, and thanked for the honor he'd shown him,
Gracing his castle at that holy time,
Adorning his house. "By God, while I live,
Gawain, I'll be a better man
For this season you've blessed." "My thanks, good sir,
But God almighty knows that honor
Is yours—may the Lord reward you! I sit here,
Ready and willing to do as you ask,
In anything large or small; so duty
Requires me."

And the lord tried
To tempt him to stay,
And Gawain sighed,
Knowing no way.
Then the lord asked him about himself,
What heavy burden drove him, in those holy
days, away from Arthur, riding
Alone in the wilderness while the world of towns
"A heavy, pressing errand takes me
to a place, somewhere, I don't know where
Or how to find it. But find it I will and
I must, by New Year's morning, with God's
Help. By England, I'll find it! So let me
Ask you, sir, here and now,
If you've ever heard of a green chapel,
Anywhere in this world, and a green knight
Who holds it as his own. For he and I
Have agreed to meet, made a solemn exchange
Of vows, and I'm to come there, if I can,
By New Year's morning, which is almost here.
If He would let me, I'd be happier to see
That green man—by God's own Son!—than gold
Or silver or jewels. Which is why I can't stay
In your castle: I've three days' time to keep
My word; I'd rather be dead than fail."
Then the lord laughed: "Ah, now you'll stay;
I know the green chapel, forget that part
Of your trouble. All in good time I'll tell you
Its place. Rest in your bed, ride
At New Year's, but not too early in the day,
And you'll be there by noon, you'll see that chapel
And that knight.

Rest till the new year, friend,
Then rise and ride
Away. We'll set you on the right
Road—a mile or two, then the end!"

Then Gawain was glad, and laughed: "My thanks,
Host, for this above all! My adventure
Is certain: I can stay exactly as you like,
And please you in everything, perform what you
ask."

Then the lord took him and set him at his side,
And sent for the ladies, for everyone to rejoice.
And how happy all of them were! The lord
Babbled—all for love of Gawain—
Like a mad man never knowing what he said.
And suddenly he cried to the knight, shouting:
"Do as I ask, you'll do as I ask:
Now, will you do it now, what I ask?"
"Sir, exactly," said the honest knight.
"Your servant for as long as I stay in your house."
"Well, you've traveled hard, and far,
Then sat up feasting with me: sleep
And rest are your needs. I know that, knight.
So lie in your bed, high in this house,
Till mass is sung tomorrow, and eat
When you please, and with my wife: she'll keep
You company, amuse you until I make

I'll rise at dawn
And spend the day with my hounds."
Gawain bowed,
Agreed, and waited. He went on:

"And more: we two can make a bargain:
Whatever I earn in the woods will be yours,
Whatever you win will be mine in exchange.
Shall we swap our day's work, Gawain? Answer
Me plain: for better or worse, an exchange?"
"By God," said Gawain, "I agree, and your pleasure
Pleases me, I like your game." "Then bring us
A pledge, and the promise is sealed," cried
The lord of that castle—and they laughed together
And drank and made delightful talk
With the ladies, for as long as they liked, and after

Said goodnight like Frenchmen, with soft
Words and courteous speech, standing
And exchanging gracious kisses. Then they climbed
To their beds, each of them led by a crowd
Of servants holding torches high
And still their eyes
Met, as they climbed:
That lord relished delight
And could spin it out fine.

PART THREE
Long before dawn the castle woke:
Departing guests called for their grooms,
And men came running, saddles in hand,
And tied up their gear, and packed their bags,
And the guests came, ready to ride,
And leaped on their horses, shook the reins,
And rode where they wanted, each to his home.
And the well-loved lord of that castle was not
The last one ready, he and his men;
After mass he ate a hasty
Meal, and blowing his bugle galloped
To the hunt. He and his knights were set
In their saddles before the sunlight gleamed.
Huntsmen leashed up hounds, opened
Kennel doors and called out dogs.
Blaing long notes, and loud, on their horns.
And beagles bayed and barked and snarled
And were whipped and shouted back when they
strayed.
Aside, a hundred wonderful hunters,
They tell me.
And keepers took up places
And dogs ran free,
And the forest swelled
With horns and hooves and chases.
At the cry of the hounds, wild animals
Shook, dazed deer in valleys
Bolted for hills—and were shut in their woods
By a shouting ring of beaters. Stags
With arching antlers were allowed through the gates,
And flat-horned big bucks, for that noble lord
Had ordered that the law of the season be observed
And no man touch a male deer.
But hinds they hallooed back—“Hey hey!
Watch out!”—and they drove does deeper
Into valleys, and arrows slanted down,
Great broad arrows flying at every
turn, cutting deep in brown hides.
Hah! They screamed, and bled, and high
On slopes they died, hounds hurrying
After them, and hunters with horns, blowing
So hard that the echo seemed to crack
Cliffs. And deer that escaped arrows
Were caught by keepers, cut down and killed,
Hunted back from the safety of high ground:
These men all knew their trade, and their grey-
hounds
Were so huge that leaping on a deer from behind
They tore him down, right there, as fast
As the telling.

The lord rode and yelled
And ran, till night
And darkness fell.

So the lord plays at the edge of the wood,
And Gawain lies in a lovely bed,
Quiet until daylight comes creeping up the walls
And over the coverlet and around the curtains.
And sleeping in peace he heard, suddenly,
A noise at his door, and heard it swing to—
And pulling his head from the pillow he parted
The edge of the curtain, and peered carefully
Out, wondering who had entered. The lady
Of that castle, beautiful to watch, silently
Shut that door behind her and approached
The bed. And Gawain, embarrassed, dropped
His head and pretended to close his eyes,
And the lady came nearer, and quietly lifted
The curtain, and softly entered, and gently
Sat at the edge of the bed, and waited,
And watched, for Gawain to awake. And he kept
her
Waiting, hiding his head, wondering
Why she had come, and what she meant
To do. He thought it a strange adventure
Indeed—but said to himself, “Better
To ask, and know, than hide in sleep.”
So he tossed, and stretched, and turned toward her
And opened his eyes, and played at surprise,
And crossed himself, as though to bless
Her face was sweet,
Her skin was white and pink;
She spoke like birds
Singing, and her small lips laughed.

“Good morning, Gawain,” said that beautiful
woman,
“Your sleep is so innocent that anyone can catch
you—
And now you’re caught! If no one arranges
A truce, I’ll tie you to your bed—I will!”
Laughing, she teased him with a flurry of words.
“Good morning, lady,” said Gawain gaily,
“Whatever you please will please your servant
Here: I surrender at once, I beg
For mercy—the best I can hope for, now.”
And he laughed with her, as they juggled words.
“My lovely captor, release me a moment,
Order me to rise and dress more properly,
So I can leave this bed, as I’d like to do.
And a walking knight would please you more.”
“Good sir,” said that lovely, “stay where you are.
You’re not to rise: I’ve better plans,
I'll lock you where you lie, and sit where I am,
And then I can talk to this knight I've caught.
For I know who you are, Gawain himself,
Honored all over the world. I've heard them
Praise your perfect chivalry, pure
To lords, to ladies, to everyone alive.

And here you are, and we're alone,
My lord and his men away in the woods,
All men asleep, and my maids too,
Your door shut, and locked with a bolt—
And having in my house a man so loved
I refuse to waste my chance, for as long
As it lasts.

Now please us both,
Decide our path.
Your arms are too strong,
I bow to your force."

"Lord!" said Gawain. "How lucky I am,
Lady, not to be the knight you speak of:
To take that kind of honor for my own
Would be sinful; I know myself too well.

By God, I'd be glad, if it pleased you, to offer you
Some different service, in word or deed:
To serve such excellence would be endless delight."
"Indeed, Sir Gawain," said that lovely lady,
"You own such excellence, such surpassing power,
That to slight your ability would be lack of breeding.
How many women there are, my gentle
Knight, who'd rather hold you in their castles,
As I hold you here, and hear your courteous
Voice, and comfort their sorrows and cool
Their grief, than keep their gold and treasure.
My love for our Lord who rules in Heaven
Restraints me, though His grace has given me what
all women
Want."

She spoke so well,
And looked so well,
Then taking the throat they quickly separated
Esophagus and windpipe, and flung out the guts;
Then carved the shoulder-bone loose, pulled it
Through a small slit, and kept the hide
Whole. Then they cut the breast in halves;
And starting to cut at the throat they ripped
The carcass to where the front legs fork;
Emptied the edible guts; then cut
Away the membranes around the ribs:
They carved along the backbone, down
To the haunch, so the meat held together,
Then lifted it up all at once, and cut it
At the end (properly called the nunes,
I know),
And the folds of the hind legs
And the meat on those bones,
Were quickly cut, and the spine
Laid open.

Then they cut off the head, and cut off the neck,
And carved the flanks away from the spine,
And threw the ravens’ fee in a thicket.
Then they ran a hole through the ribs and hung
The carcasses by the hind legs, each
Taking the parts proper to his rank.
They set out liver and lungs and tripe
On a fresh-flayed skin, mixed with bread
Soaked in blood, and fed their hounds.
Then hunting horns blared, and dogs bayed
As, taking their venison, hunters turned home to
High staccato bugling, loud
And clear. By sunset they had come to that castle
—And there was Gawain, quietly waiting
Near a bright

Fire, at peace.
The lord came to that knight,
Joyful, and they greeted
Each other with delight.

And the lord ordered all the household
To his hall; both ladies came, with their maids;
And when everyone had gathered he commanded that his men
1375 Bring his venison to him; and he turned
To Gawain with a gracious laugh, asking
That he note the bushy tails of noble
Deer; and he showed the bright flesh
From their ribs. "Does it please you, this sport?
Have I earned
1380 Your praise? Have I won appreciation with my
skill?"
"Most certainly," said the knight. "These are the best
Game I have seen in seven winters."
"It's yours, Gawain," said the lord: "Our agreement
Lets you claim it as your own." "You are right,"
1385 Said that knight, "and I say the same, for here
In this house I have won a worthy prize,
One I am proud to make yours." He put
His arms around the lord's neck
And kissed him as courteously as a knight could:
1390 "Here are my winnings, I won no more;
I would give it gladly, were there more to give."
"I am pleased," said the lord, "and I thank you,
Perhaps
Your winnings are the best. And perhaps you can
tell me
Just where your skill won you this prize?"
1395 "No," said Gawain, "we said nothing of that.
You've had what I owe you: there's nothing more
To claim."
They laughed, and were gay,
And exchanged sweet words. And again
They sat to supper and ate
Famously.

And then they sat by a fire, in a private
Room, and the best of wines were brought them,
And again as they sought their beds they agreed
1400 To make the same bargain for another
Morning: whatever their winnings they'd exchange
them
In the evening, when they met once more. Everyone
In that court heard their vows; they drank
One final toast, laughing, and took leave
Of each other, gracious to the end, and both
1410 Hurried to their beds. When the cock had crowed
And cackled for the third time, the lord
Had leaped from his blankets, and his men were
around him.

They ate their food, and heard their mass,
And all were gone to the wood before light
1415 Had gleaned;
Huntsmen and horns ran loud
Across the fields,
Following hounds
Racing in the leaves.
1420
Quickly they caught a scent, along
A marsh, and the master of hounds encouraged
Their baying, shouting wild words,
And the hounds that heard him, or heard the
barking,
Forty at once, hurried to the chase,
1425 And such a babbling uproar of dogs
Whirled up that the rocks and cliffs rang:
The huntsmen urged them on, blowing
Bugles and yelling, and they rushed along
In a pack, between a forest pool
1430 And a high cliff—and in a knoll, near the marsh,
At the foot of the cliff, with boulders tumbled
About, men and dogs stopped,
Then nosed around that knoll, in the rocks,
Until they knew he was trapped, the beast
1435 That bloodhounds had run to the ground. And they
beat
On the bushes, and called him out, and he crashed
At a line of men, came rushing through,
The most marvelous boar, driven from his own
Herd by old age, but the hoariest,
Fiercest, hugest boar in the world,
1440 Charging out, grunting. And he drove
Three of them to the ground, and they shouted and cried out,
But he ran past, quickly, not anxious
1445 To fight. "Ho! Hey! Hey!"
They hallooed, and rallied the hounds with their horns.
And men and dogs lifted their voices
And ran behind him, noisily racing
To a kill.
1450 And often he spun about,
And stood, and sliced with his snout,
And ripped a yelping,
Leaping dog, and routed
The rest. And hunters rushed as close
1455 As they dared, raining arrows on his back,
Hitting him over and over, but hurting
Nothing: the skin on his shoulders was like steel,
And no point could pierce his forehead. The smooth
Shafts shivered and broke, the metal
1460 Bounced away. And after a time
The blows began to bother him, and foaming
At the mouth he rushed at the men, and hurt them,
And many drew back in fear. Not the lord:
On a light horse he galloped behind him,
1465 Sounding his horn, calling his hunters,
Riding boldly after the boar
In the thick brushwood, till the sun sank low.
And all day long they raced through the wood,
While our gracious Gawain lay quiet and comfortable
1470 In his bed, lay easy in bright-colored blankets
And sheets,
And the lady remembered, and came
To greet him
Early in the morning, seeking
1475 Some change in his frame
Of mind. She peered through the curtain, and
courteous
Gawain gave her a warm welcome,
Risking their lives for a beloved, enduring
In that great name great grief and pain,
Finally finding revenge and destroying
Sorrow, earning happiness in their true love's
Arms)—just why so young and handsome
A knight, so famous in your time, could find me
Sitting at your bedside, not once but twice,
And never reveal that your head could hold
A single word of love, not one?
A knight so ready with gracious vows
Should eagerly open his treasures to an innocent
Girl, teach her some signs of true love's
Skill. Hah! Is your heart unlettered,
Despite your fame? Do I seem too stupid?
For shame!
I've come alone, tame
For the study of love's high game:
Come, while we're still alone,
Teach me till my husband comes home.”

“Christ reward you!” said Gawain. “I can't
tell you, lady, how delighted I am
That one so noble and knowing as you
Would come here, would care to sport with so humble
A knight, would grant me a single warm glance.
But for me to try to tell you true love's
Rules, repeat romances to you,
Knowing that you know everything I could say
And more, are wiser in love than a hundred
Like me could be if I lived to a hundred,
This would make me a hundredfold fool!
As best I can, I want to obey you;
This is my duty, now and forever,
To serve you, lady, so help me God!”
And so she tested him, pushed and probed,
Trying to tempt him, pretending love,
And Gawain was so gracefully evasive that he seemed
Always polite, and nothing happened

But happiness.
They laughed and fenced,
And at the end,
Offering a courtly kiss,
Off she went.

And the knight rose, made ready for mass,
Then sat to a splendid dinner. He sported
With the lord's two ladies all that day,
While the lord was racing over fields,
After the ferocious boar that rushed up
Hillsides and broke the backs of his best
Hounds, holed in till arrows drove him
On, out of shelter, to run
In the open—arrows falling like flies
On his hide. He held them off, leaping
Wild, until at last running
Was over and, weary, he worked his way
To a rocky hole over a river.
The hill was behind him; his hooves pawed
At the ground, foam grimaced on his snout;
And he sharpened his tusks, waiting. Tired
And still afraid, the hunters stood safely
To the side; they wanted to annoy him, but no one
Came near:

So many had been gored
By those tusks that fear
Of being torn
Held them: he seemed wild, he seemed
Weird.

And then the lord rode up, urging
His horse, and saw him hided in and his hunters
Watching. He jumped lightly down, drew
His bright-polished sword and began to approach
him,
Hurrying across the ford to his hole.
And the boar saw him, saw his bright sword,
And his hackles rose, and he snorted so loud
That the hunters were afraid for their lord's life.
Then the beast rushed out at him, straight and quick,
And man and boar blended in steaming
White water; but the boar had the worst, for the lord
Had measured his charge, and aimed his sword
Into his throat, and planted it deep,
Down to the hilt, so the heart was cut,
And snarling as he fell the boar surrendered
And dropped.

And a hundred hounds
Leaped as he stopped,
And hunters pulled him to the ground,
And dogs bit him down.

And the horns sounded a hundred victory
Calls, and the men who still could shouted
In triumph, and the master of hounds made
His beasts bay and bark. And a hunter
Trained to the art happily began
To carve that boar. He cut off the head
And planted it high on a post, then tore
Deep along the backbone, hauling
Out the intestines (broiled on coals,
Dressed with bread, they were fed to the dogs).
Then he cut out the meat in gleaming slabs,
Removing the edible guts for later
Roasting, and hung the two halves together
And roped them to a heavy rod. Then they hurried
Home, carrying the carcass; the head
Was paraded in front of the lord himself,
Who had battled the boar to death with his own
Strong hands.

The trek to his hall
And Gawain seemed longer than all
The long hunt. He came, he called,
And there Gawain stands.

Laughing loud, shouting a merry
Speech, the lord exulted, seeing
Gawain. His ladies came, and the court,
And he showed them the thick flesh, told them
How huge a beast he had fought, how fierce

When they’d finally cornered him deep in the forest.
And Gawain gave him the praise he deserved,
Told him how well he’d proved his worth;
So immense a beast, such massive slabs
Of meat, he’d never seen before.
They hefted that huge head, and Gawain
Admired it, and admired the lord’s fierce courage
In cutting it off. “Now Gawain, it’s yours;
We’ve agreed, you know our game. That’s settled.”
“I know,” said the knight, “and just as truly
Let me give you, once more, everything I got
For myself.” He embraced the lord, and kissed him,
And immediately kissed him again. “We are quit,”
Said Gawain, “here, tonight, as we agreed
To be; the bond has been kept, to the letter
And complete.”

“And by Saint Giles,” swore the lord,
“I can’t compete;
There’s nothing you won’t afford
If you always trade so sweet.”

They set up tables on trestles, covered them
With cloth, and kindled a clear bright light
With waxed torches, mounted on walls;
Men rushed about with platters and meat;
And around the blazing fire they laughed
And were happy, singing (both at supper
And after) a host of beautiful songs,
Christmas part-songs, and untired carols,
As merry as a man can tell of, and always
The lord’s lady was seated beside
Gawain. And so loving were her glances, her speech,
Her winks, her secret marks of favor,
That the knight was stunned, and angry with himself
But courtesy kept him civil, he made himself
Gracious and kind, no matter how twisted

Things turned.

And when food and laughter
Had ended together,
They gathered where a fire burned
In a private chamber,
And chatted and drank, and wondered whether
To make the same agreement for New Year's

And in the morning, arguing that his time had almost
Come. But the lord argued against it:
"As I am a knight, I give you my word,
Gawain, that you'll get to that green chapel
And your errand there, early on New Year's Day. You rest high in your room,
I'll hunt in the forest, and we'll hold our agreement
As it was, trading profit for profit,
For I've tested you twice, and you've proved yourself true.

The third throw will come up best, cast
The die, drink while we can, and rejoice,
For sorrow we can have whenever we seek it."
And Gawain agreed, and agreed to stay,
And they drank it in wine, then walked behind torches

Gawain slept
Peaceful and quiet;
But the lord dressed
Early, he had tricks to try.

He and his men heard mass, gulfed
A morsel, then sought their horses in that sweet Morning air. All of his huntsmen
Sat ready mounted, in front of the hall.
The world was beautiful, hung with frost,

And the huge red sun rose through clouds
And came, white and gleaming, to the sky.
Beside a wood they unleashed their hounds,
And rocky hillsides rang with their horns:
The fox's trail was found, they followed it
Close to the ground, keeping it warm;
A beagle bayed, the huntsman hallooed him,
And the rest of the dogs rushed where he'd called,

A snorting pack running in the fox's Footsteps, as he ran in front of them; they found him.
Saw him, and ran as fast as they could,
Crying his fate with fierce yelps,
While he dodged and doubled about in bushes
And thorns, stopping by hedges to listen.
And then he leaped a fence, by a little
Ditch, and crawled across a bit
Of marsh, hoping the hounds would miss him,
And suddenly, before he could stop, he found
That three of the snarling greyhounds had leaped
For his throat.

He swerved in his tracks,
Ran swiftly back
Where he'd come; loaded
With grief he raced to the wood.

How good it was to hear those greyhounds,
Gathered around him, ringing him in:
The curses they called on his head clattered
As if the cliffs had fallen. A man
Would find him, and shout, and snarling tongues
Would follow his feet across the forest.
They labeled him "thief," threatened his life,
And he could not hesitate, the hounds ran fast:
If he left the wood they were waiting, but he knew
How to hide and ran in, swift and clever.
And in fact he led them by the heels, the lord
And his men, past midday, dodging in the hills,
While gracious Gawain slept at peace
In those noble curtains, on that cold morning. But the lady—for love—refused herself sleep.
Not expecting to fail, her purpose firm,
She rose from her bed, and quickly went to him,
Wrapped to her feet in a gay mantle
Furred with perfect blended skins,
And her hair held in a jeweled net
Set with stones by the dozen; her beautiful Face and her throat were carefully bare.
Her dress cut low in front and in back.
She came to his room, closed his door
Behind her, opened a window and called him
Awake, laughing and scolding with cheerful Words:
“O! How can you sleep
When the morning's so clear?” He was deep.
In a miserable dream
But that speech he heard.

He'd been mumbling and tossing, lost in his nightmare
Like a man deeply troubled in mind,
Remembering how fate was scheduled to come to him
Tomorrow, at the green chapel, with the green man's stroke, and he could not fight: he recovered
His wits, hearing the lady's words,
And struggled awake, answering quickly.
And she came to the bed, laughing sweet,
And bent to his face, and gave him a graceful kiss; he composed his face, and welcomed her warmly.
And seeing how beautiful she was,
And how dressed, and her face, and her body, and her flesh
So white, joy welled in his heart.
With gentle smiles they started to talk,
And their talk was of joyful things, they spoke only of bliss.
Words came flowing free,
Each was pleased
With the other; and only Mary could save him from this.

That beautiful princess pressed him so hard,
Urged him so near to the limit, he needed
Either to take her love or boorishly
Turn her away. To offend like a boor
Was bad enough; to fall into sin
Would be worse, betraying the lord of that house.

“God willing,” he thought, “it will not happen!”
He parried, with a loving laugh, her passionate speeches, her talk of special favor.
She told him: “Shame is all you deserve,
Refusing to love a lady who lies
Besides you, her heart weeping openly,
Unless there's a lover your heart likes better,
To whom your faith's so firmly tied
That nothing can loosen it. And now I know.
And pray you, sir, to tell me truly:
Love’s not love that hides the truth
From love.”
He said: “By good Saint John,”
And smiled to prove
His claim, “I've none,
And none will have for now.”

“And those,” she exclaimed, “are the ugliest words
In the world! You've told me the truth, and hurt me
Hard. Kiss me, and I'll leave you here
Alone. I'm a woman with sorrow, not love.”
Sighing, she stooped and quietly kissed him,
Then left his side, saying: “Now dear,
Here at this parting grant me this,
Give me something, your glove, some gift
Of your own, to remember you with, to soften
My sorrow.” “By God,” said Gawain, “I wish
The daintiest thing in the world were here
In my hand, to match my devotion; but you're worthy
Of more, lady, than I'm able to give you.
Some trifle, some worthless token, is infinitely
Less than your honor deserves—a simple glove is no keepsake I could bear to give you.
I'm empty-handed, here, alone
On a pilgrimage to an unknown land; I've no porters
With gifts. It wears at my heart, lovely,
Not to oblige you, but a man must do
As he must.

Do not resent it, sweet.”
"Never," said that lusty
Lady. "But see:
If I've nothing from you, you'll have this
from me."

She offered a red gold ring, richly
Worked, set with a dazzling stone
That shone like the sun—a gift suitable
For the ransoming of kings. But Gawain refused it,
Saying at once: "My lady fair,
In God's own name there's nothing I can take,
Not now, when I've nothing to give in return."
She offered it again; he declined, gently
Vowing he could never accept. And that noble
Woman, pained, tried once more:
"If my ring is really too rich a gift,
Then be less in my debt, but take my belt,
Neither as costly nor as good." She quickly
Drew it from around her waist, knotted
Over her tunic, under her cloak:
Trimmed with gold, it was green silk
Embroidered with stones, but only at the edges.
And she held it in her hand, begged that he take it,
Worthless, unworthy as it was. He refused,
Explaining that until, by the grace of God,
He was able to end the adventure he'd begun,
He could never touch either gold or treasure.
"And I beg you, lady, not to be angry,
And to give this over, for I cannot and I will not agree.
For your kindness I owe you
A knight's fealty,
And I'll always show you
The service I know you deserve." "You refuse this silk," she said,
"Which seems such a trifle? So it may seem.
See how small it is! And how slight.
But whoever knows what's woven in its threads
Would value it rather more, I suppose:

For any man bound with this belt,
This green lace locked around him,
Can never be killed, here under God's
Own heaven—no blow, no trick, nothing
Can hurt him." Gawain hesitated, his heart
Reached for protection, like a thief for a gem:
He could come to that chapel, and take that stroke,
And with this glorious device walk off
Unharmed. He held his tongue, allowed her
To speak—and she pressed it on him, urgent—
And he was ready to surrender, then smiling, surrendered,
And agreed, as she asked, to stay silent, to hide
The gift from her husband, agreed that only
She and Gawain would share the secret
Forever.
And he thanked her, happy
And gracious as never
Before. And she tapped
Three kisses to his cheek all together.

Then she took her leave, and left him there;
Her games with Gawain were over. And after
She'd gone that knight quickly got himself
Up out of bed and properly dressed,
And he hid her love-gift in a safe place,
Covering it carefully so he could find it later. Then he went swiftly to the chapel, walked
Inside and sought a priest in private,
Asked to have his confession heard,
His soul instructed in the pathways to heaven.
And he told his sins, small and large,
And prayed for the mercy of almighty God,
And begged the priest to absolve him, and his soul
Was anointed so completely clean that the Day
Of Judgment could have come with the sun, and
been welcome.
And he pleased himself with the lord's two ladies, Singing carols and making merry
Where a fire was burning, and Gawain was seated beside it, waiting, smiling and at ease, happy at the sport he'd had with the ladies: His rich blue mantle reached to the ground, his jacket was lined with lovely soft fur, like the hood that hung across his shoulders, both of them bright with ermine. And Gawain met the lord in the middle of his hall, with his men around him, and greeted him graciously:

"First let me keep our agreement, made last night and sealed in such flowing wine," he threw his arms around his host and kissed him three times, three vigorous kisses. "By Christ," said the lord, "getting these goods must be merry hunting, if the price is right." "Who cares about cost?" said Gawain quickly. "What I've owed you I've paid you, here in the open."

"And I," the lord replied, "pay you less, for in all this long day's hunting this miserable fox skin's my prize—may the devil earn as much!—and three such kisses as you gave me are better than a dozen bedraggled hides."

"Enough," said Gawain, "by God I thank you for the fruit of your ride."

And the hunt, and the hard chase were described.

And they sang and were sung to, and ate as they liked—The lord and Gawain drank to the ladies, and the ladies laughed, and jests were exchanged—Enjoying themselves as much as men can except in halls neither sane nor sober. Everyone joked, knights and nobles and their lord, till the time for parting, and they finally rose and made their way to bed.
And Gawain took humble leave of the lord,
A courtly farewell of grateful words:
“For this marvelous visit I’ve had in your house,
Your Christmas grace to me, may God repay you!
Enroll me forever as one of your knights.

Tomorrow, as you know, I must ride on my way:
Assign me, please, the guide you promised,
To show me that green chapel, where God
Has decreed that on New Year’s Day I must meet
My fate.” “By my faith,” swore the lord, “you’ll
find me

Ready to give you everything I agreed to.”
And he chose a servant to set him on the road,
Lead him through hills as quickly as could be,
Guide him on good paths across
Woodlands.

And Gawain thanked him, and kissed
His hands,
Then turned to the two grand
Ladies, and wished them

Farewell, sadly exchanging kisses,

Urging his gratitude with polished grace—
Which the ladies returned as good as they got,
With sorrowful sighs commending him to Christ.
And courteous to all, he left them all,
Thanking every man he met

For his kindness, the particular pains he’d taken,
Serving Gawain as his lord’s guest.
And every man regretted his going.
Almost convinced they’d relished his honor
All their lives. Then they led him to his room

And brought him to his bed, where rest waited.
But whether he slept or not I dare not
Say; he could have remembered many

Things.

Yet let him lie as he will,

His adventure ringing
In his ears. Sit still
A moment more, and I’ll sing it.
Now New Year's comes, and the night passes,
Daylight replaces darkness, as God
Decrees. But storms crackled through the world,
Clouds tumbled their bitter cold
On the earth, northwinds freezing the poor;
Snow shivered in the air, and animals
Shook; the wind whistled from the hills
And drove snowdrifts down in the valleys.
And Gawain listened, lying in his bed;
His eyelids were closed, but he slept little.
Each cockcrow told him what hour had come.
And just before dawn he rose, dressing
Quickly by the light of a lamp; then he called
His groom, who came running, and ordered him
To bring his mail-shirt and Gringolet's saddle.
His weapons and all his armor were brought,
And Gawain was made magnificently ready:
First wool, against the winter cold,
And then his brightly polished war-gear,
The belly shield, and the steel plates,
And the gleaming rings of his mail-shirt, all ready.
Shining as when he'd worn them to that castle.

His groom
Had wiped and rubbed them
Inch by inch. No man
Was handsomer from Rome
To Dublin.

And though he wore the most glorious clothes
—A heraldic vest embroidered over
In velvet, with magical jewels mounted
In front, and seams sewn in color,
All lined inside with the softest fur—

He also wore the lady's gift,
Well aware of his own best interest:
When his sword hung at his side, he wound
That belt twice around him, wrapped it
Quickly, happily across his waist,

The bright green silk shining beautifully
Against the royal red of his tunic.

But Gawain was indifferent to that rich glow,
To the polished stones gleaming at its fringe,
To the gold glittering at either end,

Determined to save his neck when he bent it
Toward death, tamely taking an axe-blow,

A knife-stroke.

Dressed,

Armed, he left

The castle, quickly walked
To his horse, thanking the noble folk

Around him. And Gringolet was ready, stood huge,

Waiting, well-fed, well-lodged, when his master
Rested, now strong and ready to gallop.

And seeing his sleek flanks, Gawain
Quietly exclaimed, his words sober:
"There are men, in this castle, who care about
courtesy,

And their lord maintains them—may they live in
delight!

May love be his lovely lady's reward!

When they open these gates, when they welcome a
guest,

Honor flows from their hands! May the Lord

Of us all reward them, who rules in Heaven.

And if I survive, here on earth,

May I live to reward you myself?" Then he set
His foot in the stirrups and swept to the saddle;
His shield was brought, and he took it on his

And with golden heels he spurred Gringolet,

And he stopped prancing, leaped forward

On the pavement;

His rider was mounted,

Spear and sword waved

In the air. "May Christ save

This castle," Gawain pronounced.

Then the drawbridge came down, and the thick
gates

Drew back, swung open, unbarred. And the knight

Crouched himself and rode across;

He blessed the porter, who knelt before him,

Wished him Godspeed and God's good will

For Gawain; then almost alone, rode off,

Following in his guide's footsteps, leading him

Along the dangerous road to that axe-

Stroke. Trees stood bare, on the slopes

Where they rode, and the rocky cliffs lay frozen.

Clouds blew high, but the sky was ugly;

Mist drizzled, melted on the mountains,

Every hill wore a hat, a cloak

Of fog. Brooks foamed at their banks,

Splashing on the shore, bright, where they flowed.

Their path wound wild, around a wood,

Till the time when the winter sun rises

In the sky:

Snow covered the high

Hill they rode on, white

And cold; and the guide

Drew up, asked Gawain to halt.

"I've brought you this far; now you've come close,

Knight, to that place you've been hunting, scurrying

And prying so hard to find. Let

Me speak to you privately, for I know who you are,