And I speak as someone who loves you: if you'll listen
To me, you'll manage this business better.
That place where you're hurrying is dangerous,
Knight:
The most horrible creature in the world lives
In that wilderness, a grim wildman who loves
To kill, the hugest creature on the earth,
Bigger and stronger than four of Arthur's
Best knights, or Hector, or anyone else.
He waits in that green chapel, grim,
Determined, and no one rides by, no knight
Proud of his sword, but he beats him to death
With one blow. A ruthless man, born
Pitiless, who kills priests or peasants,
Monks or abbots, anyone who passes:
Killing is as natural as air, to him!

And so I say to you, sitting in your saddle,
If you go there, you're dead: it's the simple truth,
Knight—dead if you'd twenty lives
To lose!
He's lived there for years,
He kills as he chooses:
Fight without fear,
Gawain, but you're bound to lose.

"And so, good sir, leave him in peace,
In the name of God pick some different
Path! Ride wherever Christ takes you,
And I'll hurry home, and I promise you, knight,
I swear by God and all His saints,
I'll swear by any oath you ask,
That I'll keep your secret, conceal this story
Forever, keep it from everyone on earth."
"By God," said Gawain, grimly polite,
"I'm grateful, fellow, for all your good wishes;
I believe you'd keep it secret, I believe you.
But however loyally you lied, if I rode
Away, fled for fear, as you tell me,
I'd be a coward no knight could excuse.

Whatever comes, I'm going to that chapel,
And I'll meet that wild man: however it happens
It will happen, for evil or good, as fate
Decides;
However wild
He may be,
God can see,
"God can save."

"By Mary!" said the man, "you've said so much
Of your bravery that the blame will be yours when
you lose
Your life. You want to lose it: proceed.
Your helmet's on your head, your spear's in your
hand:
Ride along the rocky side
Of this path; you'll come to a wild valley;
On your left, a little farther down,
You'll see exactly what you want, that green
Chapel, and the green oaf who owns it.
Gawain the noble, go in God's name!
I wouldn't join you for all the gold
In the world, not a foot further through this wood."
And he swung his horse around, dug
His heels in its side, and raced away,
Leaving Gawain with no guide, alone

"God is good."
Said the knight. "I'll not weep
Or complain: I keep
My trust in Him, I'll do as He would."

Then he spurred Gringolet down the path,
Across a slope, beside a grove,
Riding a rough road to the valley
Below. Then he looked about. It seemed wild,
No sign of shelter anywhere, nothing
But steep hills on every side,
Gnarled crags with huge rocks,
Crags scratching at the sky! He stopped,
Pulled back on the reins, held Gringolet ready
While he stared this way and that, seeking
The chapel. He saw nothing—except
A queer kind of mound, in a glade
Close by, a rounded knoll near a stream,
Set right on the bank, beside the brook:
And that water bubbled as though it were boiling!

He sent Gringolet forward, stopped
Near the mound, dismounted and tied his horse
To a lime-tree, looping the reins on a branch.
Then he walked closer, walked around
The knoll, trying to think what it was.

He saw holes at the end and the sides,
Saw patches of grass growing everywhere,
And only an old cave inside—
A hole—a crevice in a crag: he couldn’t
Tell.

“My Lord, my Lord,” said that courteous knight,
“Can this be the chapel? At midnight,
Here, the devils of hell
Could pray their prayers quite well!

“By Jesus, it’s lonely here: this chapel
Is ugly, gruesome, all overgrown.
But a good place for the green knight,
He could serve the devil properly, here.
By Christ, it’s Satan who struck me with this
meeting,
I feel it! He’s sent me here to destroy me.

What an evil church: may destruction end it!
The most cursed chapel I’ve ever come to!”
His helmet on his head, spear in his hand,
He climbed across to its rough roof—
Then heard, from a high hill, on a boulder,
Beyond the brook, a violent noise—
What! It clattered on the cliff, as if
To split it, like a grindstone grinding a scythe.
What! It whirred like water at a mill.
What! It rushed and it rang, and it sang
Miserably. “That’s meant for me,” said Gawain,

“A kind of greeting. By Christ, I’ll greet him
Better.
God’s will be done!—‘Alas, alas!’—
What good is wailing? It never
Helps; I’ll never gasp,
Though my life be severed.”

Then he raised his voice, calling out loud:
“Who lives in this place? who’s here as he promised
To be? Gawain is walking right
On your roof. If you want him, come to him quickly,
Now or never, let’s have it done with.”
“Just wait,” said someone up over his head,
“What you’re waiting to have, you’ll have in a
hurry.”
But he stayed where he was, working that wheel
With a whirring roar. Then he stopped, and stepped
Down across a craig, came
Through a hole, whirling a fierce weapon,
A long-bladed battle-axe, sharpened for the stroke,
Its massive blade bent to the shaft,
Filed like a knife, on a grindstone four feet
Wide; a leather strap hung at
Its length; and the green man looked as he’d looked
At the start, his skin and his beard and his face,
Except that he skipped like a dancer, setting
His axe-handle on stones and leaping along.
At the brook, to keep dry, he leaned on the handle
And hopped across, and hurried to Gawain,
Grim on a broad battlefield covered
With snow.

And Gawain waited,
Not bowing low;
And the green man said: “You came:
I can trust you now.

“Be careful, Gawain! You’re welcome,” the green
man
Went on, “here in my home, you’ve made
A difficult journey, and you came on time,
You’ve kept your faith. Now keep the rest:
A year ago I gave you your chance;  
Today the turn is mine. We're completely
Alone, in this valley; no one can come  
Between us, however fiercely we fight.
Take off your helmet, and take my axe-stroke.  
Hold yourself still, as I did when you slashed
My head from my shoulders with a single blow."
"By God," said Gawain, "may the Holy Ghost
Grant me the power to begrudge you nothing.  
Keep to the bargain, swing just once,
And I'll stand still, and you'll do exactly
As you please."
And he bent his neck, leaned
Forward; the white flesh gleamed.
He tried to seem
Fearless, but his knees
Were weak. And the green man got ready, lifted
That huge axe in both his hands,
Swung it up with all his strength,
And pretended to swing straight at his neck.
If he'd hurled it down as he swung it high
Gawain would have been dead forever.
But the knight looked to the side, and saw it
Coming, glittering as it fell to his throat,
And he pulled his shoulders back, just a bit,
And the green man jerked the blade away,
And poured a host of proud words on that prince:
"Gawain? You can't be Gawain, his name
Is too noble, he's never afraid, nowhere
On earth—and you, you flinch in advance!
I've heard nothing about Gawain the coward.
And I, did I flinch, fellow, when you swung
My neck? I never spoke a word.
My head fell, and I never flinched.
And you, before it can happen your heart
Is quaking. Who doubts that I'm the better
Man?"
"I flinched," said Gawain,
"I won't again.
Drawing his sword, and speaking fiercely—
Never since his mother bore him had he known
Half the happiness he suddenly felt:
"Stop, green man! Don't swing again!
I've taken a single stroke, and stood still for it:
No more, or else I'll repay you in kind—
Believe me, fellow, I'll pay you fully
And well.

You've had your stroke,
And one was all
We agreed to, in Arthur's hall.
And so, sir, stop, halt!"

The green man stood listening, leaning on his axe
(It was upside down, he rested on the blade),
And watching the knight, how bravely he waited,
How unafraid, armed and ready,
Standing alert. And he liked what he saw.
And then he spoke, with a cheerful, booming
Voice, addressing Gawain: "Warrior,
Soldier, no need to be fierce, now.
No one's used you badly, shown you
Discourtesy; what was done was what we agreed.
I owed you a stroke, I've paid you a stroke:
I release you from any and all obligations.
Perhaps, if my hands were quicker, I could have
Dealt you a better blow, and done harm.

I pretended one stroke, a threat, a joke,
But left you whole; I had the right,
Because of our other agreement, in my castle;
You kept it faithfully, performed like an honest
Man, gave me everything you got.

Except that you kissed my wife: I swung
For that reason—but you gave me back her kisses.
So all you got, for that, was a puff

Of air:

An honest man
Need never fear.
But still, the third day, there

In my castle, you failed—and you felt
That, here.

"That belt you're wearing: it's mine, my wife
Gave it to you—I know it all, knight,
The kisses you took, and gave, and all
You did, and how she tempted you: everything.
For I planned it all, to test you—and truly,
Not many better men have walked
This earth, been worth as much—like a pearl
To a pea, compared to other knights.
But you failed a little, lost good faith—
Not for a beautiful belt, or in lust,
But for love of your life. I can hardly blame you."
And Gawain stood silent, stood a long time,
So burdened with grief that his heart shuddered:
His blood ran like fire in his face,
He winced for shame at the green man's words.
And finally he found words of his own:
"A curse on cowardice and a curse on greed!
They shatter chivalry, their vice destroys
Virtue." Then he loosened the belt, unfastened it,
And grimly threw it to the green man. "There!
Take the faithless thing, may it rot!
Fear of your blow taught me cowardice,
Brought me to greed, took me from myself
And the goodness, the faith, that belong to knighthood.
I'm false, now, forever afraid
Of bad faith and treachery: may trouble, may
sorrow

Come to them!
Oh knight: I humbly confess
My faults: bless me
With the chance to atone.
I'll try to sin less."

Then the green man laughed, and courteously explained:
"The damage you did me is cured, it's gone.
You stand confessed so clean, you took
Such plain penance at the point of my axe,
That I hold you cleansed, as pure in heart
As if from your birth to this day you'd never
Sinned! And Gawain, I give you this belt,
As green as my gown. Remember your challenge,
Here, as you walk your way among knights
And princes, keep this token for chivalrous
Men to know your adventure at the green
Chapel. And now, in this New Year, come
to my castle again, and we'll finish this festival
With good cheer."

And he pressed him to come,
Saying, "My wife will be there,
You can make her your friend, who was once
Your bitter foe."

"No, truly," said Gawain, taking
Off his helmet, and thanking the green knight
Courtly. "I've lingered long enough.
May happiness come to you, from Him who decrees
All honors! And convey my wishes to your gracious
Wife, and that other honored lady,
Who cleverly tricked their knight. No wonder:
There's nothing remarkable in their making a man
Foolish, in women winning men
To sin, for Adam our father was deceived
Just so, and Solomon, and also Samson—
Delilah was his death—and later David
Endured misery for Bathsheba's beauty.

Women ruined them: how wonderful if men
Could love them well, but never believe them!
And these were the noblest knights of their time,
The best, the very best, who walked
The world
In those days—and women tied them
In knots, whirled them
In circles. I've been beguiled,
As they were: this excuse should be heard.

"But your belt," said Gawain, "may God reward
you!"
And I want you there, by my faith, for myself,
As much as I've ever wanted anyone."
And Gawain again said no, he could not.
They embraced, and kissed, and commended each other
To Christ, and parted, there on that snow-covered Field;
And Gawain and Gringolet rode home
To Arthur's castle, and the green Knight rode where he pleased,
Alone.

Now Gawain rides in the world's wilderness,
Alive by the gracious mercy of God.
He slept under roofs, he slept under trees,
And he knew adventures, and won victories,
That I hope to tell some different time.
The nick in his neck had grown whole;

He wore that gleaming belt slanted
Across his tunic, tied beneath
His arm, as a sign and token of the sin
He'd committed, and his sorrow and shame. And so
He arrived at court, safe and sound.

And the king, when he heard, called to his knights,
Laughing, delighted, that Gawain was home.
And he kissed his knight, and the queen kissed him,
And a host of noble soldiers greeted him,
Asked his adventures; and he told them marvelous Things, never concealing his hardships,
Told them of the chapel, described the green knight,
Talked of the lady, and at last of the belt.
He showed them the faint scar on his neck,
Sign of his treachery, given as a loving

Warning:
He groaned, admitting it,
Suffered torment;
Blood flooded the skin
In his face, as he mourned it.

"My lord," said Gawain, lifting the belt,"This band and the nick on my neck are one
And the same, the blame and the loss I suffered
For the cowardice, the greed, that came to my soul.
This sign of bad faith is the mark of my sin:
I'll wear it on my waist as long as I live,
For a man may hide an injury to his soul,
But he'll never be rid of it, it's fastened forever."
The king consoled him, and all that court,
And they laughed and resolved, then and there,
That lords and ladies of Arthur's Table
Would each of them wear a slanted belt
Around their waists, woven of green,
To keep company with their well-loved Gawain.
And that belt was the glory of Arthur's Round Table;
Its knights wore it forever more,
As the best books of romances tell.
And so in Arthur's time this adventure Took place, as the Book of Brutus bears witness,
After that bold Brutus appeared
In Britain, when the siege and assault had done
For Troy;
And other adventures as well,
Of great and loyal Knights. Now may the royal
King of the world keep us from Hell!

[Shame to him who finds evil here]