

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 Tirus 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 carolling 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!" again and again.

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 saddlestraps, 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
criss-crossed 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 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.

(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 simple 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

til 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 kneeguards 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 true love 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 iceicles 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 leavetaking 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.

"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!

(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 to 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.