

Sir Gawain

and the

Green Knight



As the poem begins, Arthur and his knights are gathered to celebrate Christmas and the new year with feasting and revelry. In the midst of their festivities, an enormous man—who is entirely green—bounds through the door.

Splendid that knight errant stood in a splay of green,
And green, too, was the mane of his mighty destrier;
Fair fanning tresses enveloped the fighting man's shoulders,
And over his breast hung a beard as big as a bush;
5 The beard and the huge mane burgeoning forth from his head
Were clipped off clean in a straight line over his elbows,
And the upper half of each arm was hidden underneath
As if covered by a king's chaperon, closed round the neck.
The mane of the marvelous horse was much the same,
10 Well crisped and combed and carefully pranked with knots,
Threads of gold interwoven with the glorious green,
Now a thread of hair, now another thread of gold;
The tail of the horse and the forelock were tricked the same way,
And both were bound up with a band of brilliant green
15 Adorned with glittering jewels the length of the dock,
Then caught up tight with a thong in a criss-cross knot
Where many a bell tinkled brightly, all burnished gold.
So monstrous a mount, so mighty a man in the saddle
Was never once encountered on all this earth
till then;
20 His eyes, like lightning, flashed,
And it seemed to many a man,
That any man who clashed
With him would not long stand.

But the huge man came unarmed, without helmet or hauberk,
25 No breastplate or gorget or iron cleats on his arms;
He brought neither shield nor spearshaft to shove or to smite,
But instead he held in one hand a bough of the holly
That grows most green when all the groves are bare
And held in the other an ax, immense and unwieldy,
30 A pitiless battleblade terrible to tell of. . . .

- 1 knight errant** (ēr'ənt): a knight who wanders about, searching for adventure in order to prove his chivalry; **splay**: display
- 2 destrier** (dēs'trē-ər): war horse.
- 5 burgeoning** (būr'jə-nīng): growing.
- 8 chaperon** (shāp'ə-rōn'): hood.
- 10 pranked with knots**: decorated with bows.
- 13 forelock**: the part of a horse's mane that falls between the ears.
- 15 dock**: the fleshy part of an animal's tail.

- 24 hauberk** (hō'bərk): a coat of chain mail (a type of armor).
- 25 breastplate or gorget** (gōr'jīt) or **iron cleats**: armor for the chest, the throat, or the shoulders and elbows.

King Arthur stared down at the stranger before the high dais
 And greeted him nobly, for nothing on earth frightened him.
 And he said to him, "Sir, you are welcome in this place;
 I am the head of this court. They call me Arthur.
 35 Get down from your horse, I beg you, and join us for dinner,
 And then whatever you seek we will gladly see to."
 But the stranger said, "No, so help me God on high,
 My errand is hardly to sit at my ease in your castle!
 But friend, since your praises are sung so far and wide,
 40 Your castle the best ever built, people say, and your barons
 The stoutest men in steel armor that ever rode steeds,
 Most mighty and most worthy of all mortal men
 And tough devils to toy with in tournament games,
 And since courtesy is in flower in this court, they say,
 45 All these tales, in truth, have drawn me to you at this time.
 You may be assured by this holly branch I bear
 That I come to you in peace, not spoiling for battle.
 If I'd wanted to come in finery, fixed up for fighting,
 I have back at home both a helmet and a hauberk,
 50 A shield and a sharp spear that shines like fire,
 And other weapons that I know pretty well how to use.
 But since I don't come here for battle, my clothes are mere cloth.
 Now if you are truly as bold as the people all say,
 You will grant me gladly the little game that I ask
 as my right."
 55 Arthur gave him answer
 And said, "Sir noble knight,
 If it's a duel you're after,
 We'll furnish you your fight."

"Good heavens, I want no such thing! I assure you, Sire,
 60 You've nothing but beardless babes about this bench!
 If I were hasped in my armor and high on my horse,
 You haven't a man that could match me, your might is so feeble.

And so all I ask of this court is a Christmas game,
 For the Yule is here, and New Year's, and here sit young men;
 65 If any man holds himself, here in this house, so hardy,
 So bold in his blood—and so brainless in his head—
 That he dares to stoutly exchange one stroke for another,
 I shall let him have as my present this lovely gisarme,
 This ax, as heavy as he'll need, to handle as he likes,
 70 And I will abide the first blow, bare-necked as I sit.
 If anyone here has the daring to try what I've offered,
 Leap to me lightly, lad; lift up this weapon;
 I give you the thing forever—you may think it your own;
 And I will stand still for your stroke, steady on the floor,

31 dais (dā'īs): a raised platform where honored guests are seated.

33 this place: Camelot, Arthur's favorite castle and the site of his court of the Round Table.

43 In medieval tournaments, knights on horseback fought one another for sport.

44 courtesy is in flower: the high standards of behavior expected in a king's court are currently flourishing.

47 spoiling for: eager for.

61 hasped: fastened.

68 gisarme (gī-zärm'): a battle-ax with a long shaft and a two-edged blade.

75 Provided you honor my right, when my inning comes,
to repay.

But let the respite be
A twelvemonth and a day;
Come now, my boys, let's see
What any here can say."

76–77 let the respite . . . day: let the period of delay be a year and a day.

80 If they were like stone before, they were stiller now,
Every last lord in the hall, both the high and the low;
The stranger on his destrier stirred in the saddle
And ferociously his red eyes rolled around;
He lowered his grisly eyebrows, glistening green,
85 And waved his beard and waited for someone to rise;
When no one answered, he coughed, as if embarrassed,
And drew himself up straight and spoke again:
"What! Can this be King Arthur's court?" said the stranger,
"Whose renown runs through many a realm, flung far and wide?
90 What has become of your chivalry and your conquest,
Your greatness-of-heart and your grimness and grand words?
Behold the radiance and renown of the mighty Round Table
Overwhelmed by a word out of one man's mouth!
You shiver and blanch before a blow's been shown!"
95 And with that he laughed so loud that the lord was distressed;
In chagrin, his blood shot up in his face and limbs
so fair;
More angry he was than the wind,
And likewise each man there;
And Arthur, bravest of men,
100 Decided now to draw near.

And he said, "By heaven, sir, your request is strange;
But since you have come here for folly, you may as well find it.
I know no one here who's aghast of your great words.
Give me your gisarme, then, for the love of God,
105 And gladly I'll grant you the gift you have asked to be given."
Lightly the King leaped down and clutched it in his hand;
Then quickly that other lord alighted on his feet.
Arthur lay hold of the ax, he gripped it by the handle,
And he swung it up over him sternly, as if to strike.
110 The stranger stood before him, in stature higher
By a head or more than any man here in the house;
Sober and thoughtful he stood there and stroked his beard,
And with patience like a priest's he pulled down his collar,
No more unmanned or dismayed by Arthur's might
115 Than he'd be if some baron on the bench had brought him a glass
of wine.

102 folly: dangerous and foolish activity.

114 unmanned: deprived of manly courage.

Then Gawain, at Guinevere's side,
 Made to the King a sign:
 "I beseech you, Sire," he said,
 "Let this game be mine.

120 "Now if you, my worthy lord," said Gawain to the King,
 "Would command me to step from the dais and stand with you
 there,
 That I might without bad manners move down from my place
 (Though I couldn't, of course, if my liege lady disliked it)
 I'd be deeply honored to advise you before all the court;
 125 For I think it unseemly, if I understand the matter,
 That challenges such as this churl has chosen to offer
 Be met by Your Majesty—much as it may amuse you—
 When so many bold-hearted barons sit about the bench:
 No men under Heaven, I am sure, are more hardy in will
 130 Or better in body on the fields where battles are fought;
 I myself am the weakest, of course, and in wit the most feeble;
 My life would be least missed, if we let out the truth.
 Only as you are my uncle have I any honor,
 For excepting your blood, I bear in my body slight virtue.
 135 And since this affair that's befallen us here is so foolish,
 And since I have asked for it first, let it fall to me.
 If I've reasoned incorrectly, let all the court say,
 without blame."

The nobles gather round
 And all advise the same:
 140 "Let the King step down
 And give Sir Gawain the game!" . . .

Arthur grants Gawain's request to take on the Green Knight's challenge. The Green Knight asks Gawain to identify himself, and the two agree on their pact. Gawain then prepares to strike his blow against the Green Knight.

On the ground, the Green Knight got himself into position,
 His head bent forward a little, the bare flesh showing,
 His long and lovely locks laid over his crown
 145 So that any man there might note the naked neck.
 Sir Gawain laid hold of the ax and he hefted it high,
 His pivot foot thrown forward before him on the floor,
 And then, swiftly, he slashed at the naked neck;
 The sharp of the battleblade shattered asunder the bones

123 liege (lēj) **lady**: a lady to whom one owes loyalty and service; here used by Gawain to refer to Queen Guinevere.

126 churl: rude, uncouth person.

149 asunder: into pieces.

150 And sank through the shining fat and slit it in two,
And the bit of the bright steel buried itself in the ground.
The fair head fell from the neck to the floor of the hall
And the people all kicked it away as it came near their feet.
The blood splashed up from the body and glistened on the green,

155 But he never faltered or fell for all of that,
But swiftly he started forth upon stout shanks
And rushed to reach out, where the King's retainers stood,
Caught hold of the lovely head, and lifted it up,
And leaped to his steed and snatched up the reins of the bridle,
160 Stepped into stirrups of steel and, striding aloft,
He held his head by the hair, high, in his hand;
And the stranger sat there as steadily in his saddle
As a man entirely unharmed, although he was headless
on his steed.

156 shanks: legs.

157 retainers: servants or attendants.

165 He turned his trunk about,
That baleful body that bled,
And many were faint with fright
When all his say was said.

165 baleful: threatening evil; sinister.

He held his head in his hand up high before him,
Addressing the face to the dearest of all on the dais;
170 And the eyelids lifted wide, and the eyes looked out,
And the mouth said just this much, as you may now hear:
"Look that you go, Sir Gawain, as good as your word,
And seek till you find me, as loyally, my friend,
As you've sworn in this hall to do, in the hearing of the knights.

175 Come to the Green Chapel, I charge you, and take
A stroke the same as you've given, for well you deserve
To be readily requited on New Year's morn.
Many men know me, the Knight of the Green Chapel;
Therefore if you seek to find me, you shall not fail.

180 Come or be counted a coward, as is fitting."
Then with a rough jerk he turned the reins
And haled away through the hall-door, his head in his hand,
And fire of the flint flew out from the hooves of the foal.
To what kingdom he was carried no man there knew,
185 No more than they knew what country it was he came from.

What then?
The King and Gawain there
Laugh at the thing and grin;
And yet, it was an affair
Most marvelous to men.

As the end of the year approaches, Gawain leaves on his quest to find the Green Chapel and fulfill his pledge. After riding through wild country and encountering many dangers, he comes upon a splendid castle. The lord of the castle welcomes Gawain and invites him to stay with him and his lady for a few days.

The lord proposes that he will go out to hunt each day while Gawain stays at the castle. At the end of the day, they will exchange what they have won. While the lord is out hunting, the lady attempts to seduce Gawain. Gawain resists her, however, and on the first two days accepts only kisses, which he gives to the lord at the end of each day in exchange for what the lord has gained in the hunt. On the third day Gawain continues to resist the lady, but she presses him to accept another gift.

190 She held toward him a ring of the yellowest gold
And, standing aloft on the band, a stone like a star
From which flew splendid beams like the light of the sun;
And mark you well, it was worth a rich king's ransom.
But right away he refused it, replying in haste,
195 "My lady gay, I can hardly take gifts at the moment;
Having nothing to give, I'd be wrong to take gifts in turn."
She implored him again, still more earnestly, but again
He refused it and swore on his knighthood that he could take
nothing.

197 implored: begged.

Grieved that he still would not take it, she told him then:
200 "If taking my ring would be wrong on account of its worth,
And being so much in my debt would be bothersome to you,
I'll give you merely this sash that's of slighter value."
She swiftly unfastened the sash that encircled her waist,
Tied around her fair tunic, inside her bright mantle;
205 It was made of green silk and was marked of gleaming gold
Embroidered along the edges, ingeniously stitched.
This too she held out to the knight, and she earnestly begged him
To take it, trifling as it was, to remember her by.
But again he said no, there was nothing at all he could take,
210 Neither treasure nor token, until such time as the Lord
Had granted him some end to his adventure.
"And therefore, I pray you, do not be displeased,
But give up, for I cannot grant it, however fair
or right.

204 tunic . . . mantle: shirtlike garment worn under a sleeveless cloak.

215 I know your worth and price,
And my debt's by no means slight;
I swear through fire and ice
To be your humble knight."

"Do you lay aside this silk," said the lady then,
"Because it seems unworthy—as well it may?"

220 Listen. Little as it is, it seems less in value,
But he who knew what charms are woven within it
Might place a better price on it, perchance.
For the man who goes to battle in this green lace,
As long as he keeps it looped around him,
225 No man under Heaven can hurt him, whoever may try,
For nothing on earth, however uncanny, can kill him.”
The knight cast about in distress, and it came to his heart
This might be a treasure indeed when the time came to take
The blow he had bargained to suffer beside the Green Chapel.
230 If the gift meant remaining alive, it might well be worth it;
So he listened in silence and suffered the lady to speak,
And she pressed the sash upon him and begged him to take it,
And Gawain did, and she gave him the gift with great pleasure
And begged him, for her sake, to say not a word,
235 And to keep it hidden from her lord. And he said he would,
That except for themselves, this business would never be known
to a man.

He thanked her earnestly,
And boldly his heart now ran;
And now a third time she
240 Leaned down and kissed her man.

When the lord returns at the end of the third day, Gawain gives him a kiss but does not reveal the gift of the sash.

On New Year's Day Gawain must go to meet the Green Knight. Wearing the green sash, he sets out before dawn. Gawain arrives at a wild, rugged place, where he sees no chapel but hears the sound of a blade being sharpened. Gawain calls out, and the Green Knight appears with a huge ax. The Green Knight greets Gawain, who, with pounding heart, bows his head to take his blow.

Quickly then the man in the green made ready,
Grabbed up his keen-ground ax to strike Sir Gawain;
With all the might in his body he bore it aloft
And sharply brought it down as if to slay him;
245 Had he made it fall with the force he first intended
He would have stretched out the strongest man on earth.
But Sir Gawain cast a side glance at the ax
As it glided down to give him his Kingdom Come,
And his shoulders jerked away from the iron a little,
250 And the Green Knight caught the handle, holding it back,
And mocked the prince with many a proud reproof:
“You can't be Gawain,” he said, “who's thought so good,
A man who's never been daunted on hill or dale!
For look how you flinch for fear before anything's felt!

248 his Kingdom Come: his death and entry into the afterlife; a reference to the sentence “Thy kingdom come” in the Lord's Prayer.

255 I never heard tell that Sir Gawain was ever a coward!
I never moved a muscle when *you* came down;
In Arthur's hall I never so much as winced.
My head fell off at my feet, yet I never flickered;
But you! You tremble at heart before you're touched!
260 I'm bound to be called a better man than you, then,
my lord."

Said Gawain, "I shied once:
No more. You have my word.
But if my head falls to the stones
It cannot be restored.

259–260 The Green Knight has proclaimed himself a better man than Gawain.

265 "But be brisk, man, by your faith, and come to the point!
Deal out my doom if you can, and do it at once,
For I'll stand for one good stroke, and I'll start no more
Until your ax has hit—and that I swear."

"Here goes, then," said the other, and heaves it aloft
270 And stands there waiting, scowling like a madman;
He swings down sharp, then suddenly stops again,
Holds back the ax with his hand before it can hurt,
And Gawain stands there stirring not even a nerve;
He stood there still as a stone or the stock of a tree
275 That's wedged in rocky ground by a hundred roots.

O, merrily then he spoke, the man in green:
"Good! You've got your heart back! Now I can hit you.
May all that glory the good King Arthur gave you
Prove efficacious now—if it ever can—
280 And save your neck." In rage Sir Gawain shouted,
"Hit me, hero! I'm right up to here with your threats!
Is it *you* that's the cringing coward after all?"
"Whoop!" said the man in green, "he's wrathful, too!
No pauses, then; I'll pay up my pledge at once,
I vow!"

285 He takes his stride to strike
And lifts his lip and brow;
It's not a thing Gawain can like,
For nothing can save him now!

He raises that ax up lightly and flashes it down,
290 And that blinding bit bites in at the knight's bare neck—
But hard as he hammered it down, it hurt him no more
Than to nick the nape of his neck, so it split the skin;
The sharp blade slit to the flesh through the shiny hide,
And red blood shot to his shoulders and splattered the ground.
295 And when Gawain saw his blood where it blinked in the snow
He sprang from the man with a leap to the length of a spear;
He snatched up his helmet swiftly and slapped it on,
Shifted his shield into place with a jerk of his shoulders,
And snapped his sword out faster than sight; said boldly—

300 And, mortal born of his mother that he was,
There was never on earth a man so happy by half—
“No more strokes, my friend; you’ve had your swing!
I’ve stood one swipe of your ax without resistance;
If you offer me any more, I’ll repay you at once

305 With all the force and fire I’ve got—as you
will see.

I take one stroke, that’s all,
For that was the compact we
Arranged in Arthur’s hall;
But now, no more for me!”

307 **compact**: binding agreement.

310 The Green Knight remained where he stood, relaxing on his ax—
Settled the shaft on the rocks and leaned on the sharp end—
And studied the young man standing there, shoulders hunched,
And considered that staunch and doughty stance he took,
Undaunted yet, and in his heart he liked it;

313 **staunch**: firm; **doughty** (dou’tē):
brave.

315 And then he said merrily, with a mighty voice—
With a roar like rushing wind he reproved the knight—
“Here, don’t be such an ogre on your ground!
Nobody here has behaved with bad manners toward you
Or done a thing except as the contract said.

320 I owed you a stroke, and I’ve struck; consider yourself
Well paid. And now I release you from all further duties.
If I’d cared to hustle, it may be, perchance, that I might
Have hit somewhat harder, and then you might well be cross!
The first time I lifted my ax it was lighthearted sport,

325 I merely feinted and made no mark, as was right,
For you kept our pact of the first night with honor
And abided by your word and held yourself true to me,
Giving me all you owed as a good man should.
I feinted a second time, friend, for the morning

325 **feinted** (fān’tīd): pretended
to attack.

330 You kissed my pretty wife twice and returned me the kisses;
And so for the first two days, mere feints, nothing more
severe.

A man who’s true to his word,
There’s nothing he needs to fear;
You failed me, though, on the third
Exchange, so I’ve tapped you here.

335 “That sash you wear by your scabbard belongs to me;
My own wife gave it to you, as I ought to know.
I know, too, of your kisses and all your words
And my wife’s advances, for I myself arranged them.

336 **scabbard** (skäb’ərd): a sheath
for a dagger or sword.

340 It was I who sent her to test you. I’m convinced
You’re the finest man that ever walked this earth.
As a pearl is of greater price than dry white peas,
So Gawain indeed stands out above all other knights.
But you lacked a little, sir; you were less than loyal;

345 But since it was not for the sash itself or for lust
But because you loved your life, I blame you less.”
Sir Gawain stood in a study a long, long while,
So miserable with disgrace that he wept within,
And all the blood of his chest went up to his face
350 And he shrank away in shame from the man’s gentle words.

The first words Gawain could find to say were these:

“Cursed be cowardice and covetousness both,
Villainy and vice that destroy all virtue!”

He caught at the knots of the girdle and loosened them

355 And fiercely flung the sash at the Green Knight.

“There, there’s my fault! The foul fiend vex it!

Foolish cowardice taught me, from fear of your stroke,
To bargain, covetous, and abandon my kind,

The selflessness and loyalty suitable in knights;

360 Here I stand, faulty and false, much as I’ve feared them,

Both of them, untruth and treachery; may they see sorrow
and care!

I can’t deny my guilt;

My works shine none too fair!

Give me your good will

365 And henceforth I’ll beware.”

354 girdle: sash.

356 vex: harass; torment.

At that, the Green Knight laughed, saying graciously,
“Whatever harm I’ve had, I hold it amended
Since now you’re confessed so clean, acknowledging sins
And bearing the plain penance of my point;

370 I consider you polished as white and as perfectly clean

As if you had never fallen since first you were born.

And I give you, sir, this gold-embroidered girdle,

For the cloth is as green as my gown. Sir Gawain, think

On this when you go forth among great princes;

375 Remember our struggle here; recall to your mind

This rich token. Remember the Green Chapel.

And now, come on, let’s both go back to my castle

And finish the New Year’s revels with feasting and joy,
not strife,

I beg you,” said the lord,

380 And said, “As for my wife,

She’ll be your friend, no more

A threat against your life.”

“No, sir,” said the knight, and seized his helmet

And quickly removed it, thanking the Green Knight,

385 "I've reveled too well already; but fortune be with you;
May He who gives all honors honor you well." . . .

And so they embraced and kissed and commended each other
To the Prince of Paradise, and parted then
in the cold;

390 Sir Gawain turned again
To Camelot and his lord;
And as for the man of green,
He went wherever he would.

