

from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

translated by Marie Borroff

The work begins at the start of a New Year's Eve feast at King Arthur's Court in Camelot. Before anyone has started eating, the festivities are interrupted by an immense green knight who suddenly appears at the hall door. The knight rides a green horse and is armed with a gigantic ax.

This horseman hurtles in, and the hall enters;
Riding to the high dais,¹ recked he no danger;
Not a greeting he gave as the guests he o'erlooked,
Nor wasted his words, but "Where is," he said,
5 "The captain of this crowd? Keenly I wish
To see that sire with sight, and to himself say my say."
He swaggered all about
To scan the host so gay;
He halted, as if in doubt
10 Who in that hall-held sway.

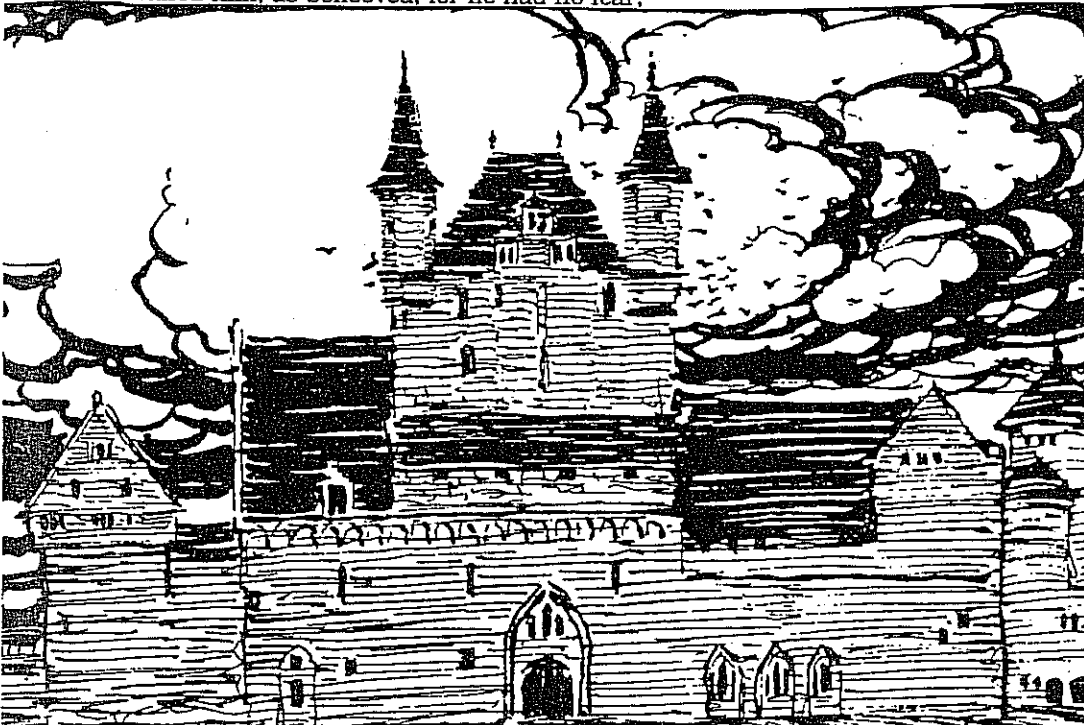
1. **dais** (dā' is) *n.*: Platform

There were stares on all sides as the stranger spoke,
For much did they marvel what it might mean
That a horseman and a horse should have such a hue,
Grow green as the grass, and greener, it seemed.
15 Then green fused on gold more glorious by far.
All the onlookers eyed him, and edged nearer,
And awaited in wonder what he would do,
For many sights had they seen, but such a one never,
So that phantom and fairy the folk there deemed it,
20 Therefore chary² of answer was many a champion bold,
And stunned at his strong-words-stone-still they sat
In a swooning silence in the stately hall.
As all were slipped into sleep, so slackened their speech
apace.

2. **chary** (cher' ē) *adj.*: Not giving freely.

Not all, I think, for dread,
25 But some of courteous grace
Let him who was their head
Be spokesman in that place.

Then Arthur before the high dais that entrance beholds,
And hailed him, as behooved, for he had no fear.



30 And said "Fellow, in faith you have found fair welcome;
The head of this hostelry Arthur am I;
Leap lightly down, and linger, I pray,
And the tale of your intent you shall tell us after."

35 "Nay, so help me," said the other, "He that on high sits,
To tarry here any time, 'twas not mine errand;
But as the praise of you, prince, is puffed up so high,
And your court and your company are counted the best,
Stoutest under steel-gear on steeds to ride,
Worthiest of their works the wide world over,

40 And peerless to prove in passages of arms,
And courtesy here is carried to its height,
And so at this season I have sought you out.
You may be certain by the branch that I bear in hand
That I pass here in peace, and would part friends,

45 For had I come to this court on combat bent,
I have a hauberk³ at home, and a helm beside,
A shield and a sharp spear, shining bright,
And other weapons to wield, I ween well, to boot,
But as I willed no war, I wore no metal.

50 But if you be so bold as all men believe,
You will graciously grant the game that I ask by right."

Arthur answer gave
And said, "Sir courteous knight,
If contest here you crave,

55 You shall not fail to fight."

60 "Nay, to fight, in good faith, is far from my thought;
There are about on these benches but beardless children,
Were I here in full arms on a haughty⁴ steed,
For measured against mine, their might is puny.

65 And so I call in this court for a Christmas game,
For 'tis Yule, and New Year, and many young bloods about;

If any in this house such hardihood claims,
Be so bold in his blood, his brain so wild,
As stoutly to strike one stroke for another,

65 I shall give him as my gift this gisarme⁵ noble,
This ax, that is heavy enough, to handle as he likes,
And I shall bide the first blow, as bare as I sit.

If there be one so wilful my words to assay,
Let him leap hither lightly, lay hold of this weapon;

70 I quitclaim it forever, keep it as his own,
And I shall stand him a stroke, steady on this floor,
So you grant me the guerdon to give him another, sans
blame.⁶

In a twelvemonth⁷ and a day
He shall have of me the same;
75 Now be it seen straightway
Who dares take up the game."

3. **hauberk** (hō' bərk) n.:
Coat of armor.

4. **haughty** (hōt' ē) adj.:
Lofty.

5. **gisarme** (gɪ zärm') n.:
Battle-ax.

6. **I . . . blame**: I will
stand firm while he strikes
me with the ax provided
that you reward me with
the opportunity to do the
same to him without being
blamed for it.

7. **twelvemonth**: A year.

If he astonished them at first, stiller were then
 All that household in hall, the high and the low;
 The stranger on his green steed stirred in the saddle,
 And roisterously his red eyes he rolled all about,
 Bent his bristling brows, that were bright green,
 Wagged his beard as he watched who would arise.
 When the court kept its counsel he coughed aloud,
 And cleared his throat coolly, the clearer to speak:
 "What, is this Arthur's house," said that horseman then,
 "Whose fame is so fair in far realms and wide?
 Where is now your arrogance and your awesome deeds,
 Your valor and your victories and your vaunting words?
 Now are the revel and renown of the Round Table
 Overwhelmed with a word of one man's speech,
 For all cower and quake, and no cut felt!"
 With this he laughs so loud that the lord grieved;
 The blood for sheer shame shot to his face, and pride.
 With rage his face flushed red,
 And so did all beside.
 Then the king as bold man bred
 Toward the stranger took a stride.

And said, "Sir, now we see you will say but folly,
 Which whoso has sought, it suits that he find.
 No guest here is aghast of your great words.
 Give to me your gisarme, in God's own name,
 And the boon you have begged shall straight be granted."
 He leaps to him lightly, lays hold of his weapon;
 The green fellow on foot fiercely alights.
 Now has Arthur his ax, and the haft grips,
 And sternly stirs it about, on striking bent.
 The stranger before him stood there erect,
 Higher than any in the house by a head and more;
 With stern look as he stood, he stroked his beard,
 And with undaunted countenance drew down his coat,
 No more moved nor dismayed for his mighty dints
 Than any bold man on bench had brought him a drink of
 wine.

Gawain by Guenevere
 Toward the king doth now incline:
 "I beseech, before all here,
 That this melee may be mine."

"Would you grant me the grace," said Gawain to the king,
 "To be gone from this bench and stand by you there,
 If I without discourtesy might quit this board,
 And if my liege lady^s misliked it not,
 I would come to your counsel before your court noble.

S. liege (l[é]j) lady:
 Guenevere, the wife of the
 lord, Arthur, to whom
 Gawain is bound to give
 service and allegiance.

For I find it not fit, as in faith it is known,
When such a boon is begged before all these knights,
Though you be tempted thereto, to take it on yourself
While so bold men about upon benches sit,

125

That no host under heaven is harder of will,
Nor better brothers-in-arms where battle is joined;
I am the weakest, well I know, and of wit feeblest:
And the loss of my life would be least of any;

130

That I have you for uncle is my only praise;
My body, but for your blood, is barren of worth;
And for that this folly befits not a king,
And 'tis I that have asked it, it ought to be mine,
And if my claim be not comely let all this court judge in
sight."

135

The court assays the claim,
And in counsel all unite
To give Gawain the game
And release the king outright.

Then the king called the knight to come to his side,
And he rose up readily, and reached him with speed,
Bows low to his lord, lays hold of the weapon,
And he releases it lightly, and lifts up his hand,

140

And gives him God's blessing, and graciously prays
That his heart and his hand may be hardy both.

145

"Keep, cousin," said the king, "what you cut with this day,
And if you rule it aright, then readily, I know,
You shall stand the stroke it will strike after."
Gawain goes to the guest with gisarme in hand,
And boldly he bides there, abashed not a whit.

150 Then hails he Sir Gawain, the horseman in green:
"Recount we our contract, ere you come further.
First I ask and adjure you, how you are called
That you tell me true, so that trust it I may."
"In good faith," said the good knight, "Gawain am I
155 Whose buffet befalls you,⁹ whate'er betide after,
And at this time twelvemonth take from you another
With what weapon you will, and with no man else alive."
The other nods assent:
"Sir Gawain, as I may thrive,
160 I am wondrous well content
That you this dint¹⁰ shall drive."

9. **Whose . . . you:** Whose
blow you will receive.

10. **dint:** Blow.

"Sir Gawain," said the Green Knight, "By God, I rejoice
That your fist shall fetch this favor I seek,
And you have readily rehearsed, and in right terms,
165 Each clause of my covenant with the king your lord,
Save that you shall assure me, sir, upon oath.
That you shall seek me yourself, wheresoever you deem
My lodgings may lie, and look for such wages¹¹
As you have offered me here before all this host."
"What is the way there?" said Gawain, "Where do you
170 dwell?"

11. **wages:** A blow.

I heard never of your house, by Him that made me,
Nor I know you not, knight, your name nor your court.
But tell me truly thereof, and teach me your name,
And I shall fare forth to find you, so far as I may,
175 And this I say in good certain, and swear upon oath."
"That is enough in New Year, you need say no more,"
Said the knight in the green to Gawain the noble,
"If I tell you true, when I have taken your knock,
And if you handily have hit, you shall hear straightway
180 Of my house and my home and my own name:
Then follow in my footsteps by faithful accord.
And if I spend no speech, you shall speed the better:
You can feast with your friends, nor further trace my
tracks.¹²

12. **If I tell
you . . . tracks** (lines
178-183): The Green
Knight tells Gawain that he
will let him know where he
lives after he has taken the
blow. If he is unable to
speak following the blow,
there will be no need for
Gawain to know.

185 Now hold your grim tool steady
And show us how it hacks."
"Gladly, sir; all ready,"
Says Gawain; he strokes the ax.

The Green Knight upon ground girds him with care:
Bows a bit with his head, and bares his flesh:
190 His long lovely locks he laid over his crown,
Let the naked nape for the need be shown.
Gawain grips to his ax and gathers it aloft—
The left foot on the floor before him he set—
Brought it down deftly upon the bare neck,
195 That the shock of the sharp blow shivered the bones
And cut the flesh cleanly and clove it in twain.¹³
That the blade of bright steel bit into the ground.
The head was hewn off and fell to the floor;
Many found it at their feet, as forth it rolled;
200 The blood gushed from the body, bright on the green,
Yet fell not the fellow, nor faltered a whit,
But stoutly he starts forth upon stiff shanks,
And as all stood staring he stretched forth his hand,
Laid hold of his head and heaved it aloft,

13. **clove it in twain:** Split
it in two.

205 Then goes to the green steed, grasps the bridle.
Steps into the stirrup, bestrides his mount,
And his head by the hair in his hand holds,
And as steady he sits in the stately saddle
As he had met with no mishap, nor missing were his head.

210 His bulk about he haled,
That fearsome body that bled:
There were many in the court that quailed
Before all his say was said.

215 For the head in his hand he holds right up;
Toward the first on the dais directs he the face,
And it lifted up its lids, and looked with wide eyes,
And said as much with its mouth as now you may hear:
"Sir Gawain, forget not to go as agreed,
And cease not to seek till me, sir, you find,
220 As you promised in the presence of these proud knights.
To the Green Chapel come, I charge you, to take
Such a dint as you have dealt—you have well deserved
That your neck should have a knock on New Year's morn.
The Knight of the Green Chapel I am well-known to many,
225 Wherefore you cannot fail to find me at last;
Therefore come, or be counted a recreant knight."
With a roisterous rush he flings round the reins,
Hurtles out at the hall door, his head in his hand,
That the flint fire flew from the flashing hooves.
230 Which way he went, not one of them knew
Nor whence he was come in the wide world so fair.
The king and Gawain gay
Make a game of the Green Knight there,
Yet all who saw it say
235 'Twas a wonder past compare.

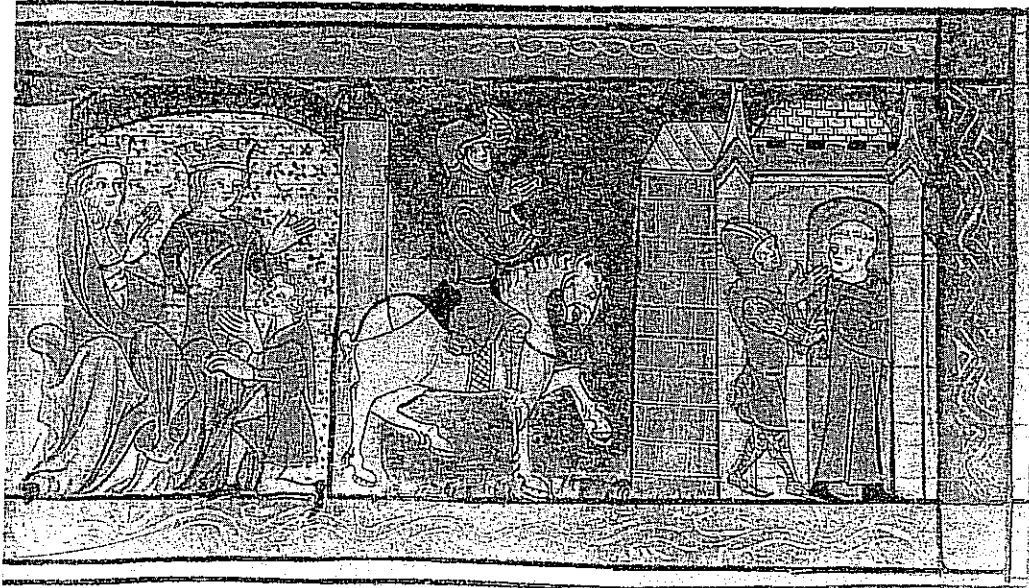
Though high-born Arthur at heart had wonder,
He let no sign be seen, but said aloud
To the comely queen, with courteous speech,
"Dear dame, on this day dismay you no whit;
240 Such crafts are becoming at Christmastide,
Laughing at interludes, light songs and mirth,
Amid dancing of damsels with doughty knights.
Nevertheless of my meat now let me partake,
For I have met with a marvel, I may not deny."
245 He glanced at Sir Gawain, and gaily he said,
"Now, sir, hang up your ax, that has hewn enough,"
And over the high dais it was hung on the wall
That men in amazement might on it look,
And tell in true terms the tale of the wonder.
250 Then they turned toward the table, those two together,
The good king and Gawain, and made great feast,
With all dainties double, dishes rare,
With all manner of meat and minstrelsy both,
Such happiness wholly had they that day in hold.

Now take care, Sir Gawain,
That your courage wax not cold
When you must turn again
To your enterprise foretold.

The following November, Sir Gawain sets out to fulfill his promise to the Green Knight. For weeks he travels alone through the cold, threatening woods of North Wales. Then, when he prays for shelter, he comes upon a wondrous castle on Christmas Eve, where he is greeted warmly by the lord of the castle and his lady. Sir Gawain inquires about the location of the Green Chapel, and the lord assures him that it is nearby and promises to provide him with a guide to lead him there on New Year's Day. Before the lord and Sir Gawain retire for the night, they agree to exchange whatever they receive during the next three days. Sir Gawain keeps his pledge for the first two days, but on the third day he does not give the lord the magic green girdle that the lady gives him because she promises that the girdle will protect him from any harm. The next day, Gawain sets out for the Green Chapel. His guide urges him not to proceed, but Gawain refuses to take this advice. He feels that it would be dishonorable not to fulfill his pledge. He is determined to accept his fate; however, he does wear the magic green girdle that the lady had given him.

12

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT
The Bodleian Library, Oxford



He puts his heels to his horse, and picks up the path;
260 Goes in beside a grove where the ground is steep,
Rides down the rough slope right to the valley;
And then he looked a little about him—the landscape was
wild,

And not a soul to be seen, nor sign of a dwelling,
But high banks on either hand hemmed it about,
265 With many a ragged rock and rough-hewn crag;
The skies seemed scored by the scowling peaks.
Then he halted his horse, and hove there a space,
And sought on every side for a sight of the Chapel,
But no such place appeared, which puzzled him sore,
270 Yet he saw some way off what seemed like a mound,
A hillock high and broad, hard by the water,
Where the stream fell in foam down the face of the steep
And bubbled as if it boiled on its bed below.

The knight urges his horse, and heads for the knoll;
275 Leaps lightly to earth; loops well the rein
Of his steed to a stout branch, and stations him there.
He strides straight to the mound, and strolls all about,
Much wondering what it was, but no whit the wiser;
It had a hole at one end, and on either side,
280 And was covered with coarse grass in clumps all without,
And hollow all within, like some old cave,
Or a crevice of an old crag—he could not discern aright.

12
"Can this be the Chapel Green?
Alack!" said the man, "Here might
285 The devil himself be seen
Saying matins¹⁴ at black midnight!"

14. *matins* n.: Morning prayers.

"Now by heaven," said he, "it is bleak hereabouts;
This prayer house is hideous, half covered with grass!
Well may the grim man mantled in green
290 Hold here his orisons,¹⁵ in hell's own style!
Now I feel it is the Fiend, in my five wits,
That has tempted me to this tryst,¹⁶ to take my life;
This is a Chapel of mischance, may the mischief take it!
As accursed a country church as I came upon ever!"

15. *orisons* n.: Prayers.

16. *tryst* (trist) n.: Meeting.

14
295 With his helm on his head, his lance in his hand,
He stalks toward the steep wall of that strange house.
Then he heard, on the hill, behind a hard rock,
Beyond the brook, from the bank, a most barbarous din:
Lord! it clattered in the cliff fit to cleave it in two,
300 As one upon a grindstone ground a great scythe!
Lord! it whirred like a mill-wheel whirling about!
Lord! it echoed loud and long, lamentable to hear!
Then "By heaven," said the bold knight, "That business up
there
Is arranged for my arrival, or else I am much misled.

Let God work! Ah me!
All hope of help has fled!
Forfeit my life may be
But noise I do not dread."

Then he listened no longer, but loudly he called,
"Who has power in this place, high parley to hold?
For none greets Sir Gawain, or give him good day;
If any would a word with him, let him walk forth
And speak now or never, to speed his affairs."
"Abide," said one on the bank above over his head,
"And what I promised you once shall straightway be
given."

Yet he stayed not his grindstone, nor stinted its noise,
But worked awhile at his whetting before he would rest,
And then he comes around a crag, from a cave in the rocks,
Hurling out of hiding with a hateful weapon,
A Danish ax¹⁷ devised for that day's deed,
With a broad blade and bright, bent in a curve,
Filed to a fine edge—four feet it measured
By the length of the lace that was looped round the haft.
And in form as at first, the fellow all green,
His lordly face and his legs, his locks and his beard,
Save that firm upon two feet forward he strides,
Sets a hand on the ax-head, the haft to the earth;
When he came to the cold stream, and cared not to wade,
He vaults over on his ax, and advances amain
On a broad bank of snow, overbearing and brisk of mood.

17. Danish ax: A
long-bladed ax.

Little did the knight incline
When face to face they stood;
Said the other man, "Friend mine,
It seems your word holds good!"

"God love you, Sir Gawain!" said the Green Knight then,
"And well met this morning, man, at my place!
And you have followed me faithfully and found me betimes,
And on the business between us we both are agreed:
Twelve months ago today you took what was yours,
And you at this New Year must yield me the same.
And we have met in these mountains, remote from all eyes:
There is none here to halt us or hinder our sport;
Unhasp your high helm, and have here your wages;
Make no more demur than I did myself
When you hacked off my head with one hard blow."
"No, by God," said Sir Gawain, "that granted me life,
I shall grudge not the guerdon,¹⁸ grim though it prove;
And you may lay on as you like till the last of my part be
paid."

18. guerdon: Reward.

350 He proffered, with good grace,
His bare neck to the blade,
And feigned a cheerful face:
He scorned to seem afraid.

Then the grim man in green gathers his strength,
355 Heaves high the heavy ax to hit him the blow.
With all the force in his frame he fetches it aloft,
With a grimace as grim as he would grind him to bits;
Had the blow he bestowed been as big as he threatened,
A good knight and gallant had gone to his grave.
16 [360 But Gawain at the great ax glanced up aside
As down it descended with death-dealing force,
And his shoulders shrank a little from the sharp iron.
Abruptly the brawny man breaks off the stroke,
And then reproved with proud words that prince among
knights.

365 "You are not Gawain the glorious," the green man said,
"That never fell back on field in the face of the foe,
And now you flee for fear, and have felt no harm:
Such news of that knight I never heard yet!
I moved not a muscle when you made to strike,
370 Nor caviled at the cut in King Arthur's house;
My head fell to my feet, yet steadfast I stood,
And you, all unharmed, are wholly dismayed—
Wherefore the better man I, by all odds, must be."
Said Gawain, "Strike once more;
375 I shall neither flinch nor flee;
But if my head falls to the floor
There is no mending me!"

17 ["But go on, man, in God's name, and get to the point!
Deliver me my destiny, and do it out of hand,
380 For I shall stand to the stroke and stir not an inch
Till your ax has hit home—on my honor I swear it!"
"Have at thee then!" said the other, and heaves it aloft,
And glares down as grimly as he had gone mad.
He made a mighty feint, but marred not his hide;
385 Withdrew the ax adroitly before it did damage.
Gawain gave no ground, nor glanced up aside,
But stood still as a stone, or else a stout stump
That is held in hard earth by a hundred roots.
Then merrily does he mock him, the man all in green:
390 "So now you have your nerve again, I needs must strike;
Uphold the high knighthood that Arthur bestowed,
And keep your neck-bone clear, if this cut allows!"
Then was Gawain gripped with rage, and grimly he said.

395 "Why, thrash away, tyrant, I tire of your threats;
You make such a scene, you must frighten yourself."
Said the green fellow, "In faith, so fiercely you speak
That I shall finish this affair, nor further grace allow."
He stands prepared to strike
And scowls with both lip and brow;
400 No marvel if the man mislike
Who can hope no rescue now.

He gathered up the grim ax and guided it well;
Let the barb at the blade's end brush the bare throat;
He hammered down hard, yet harmed him no whit
405 Save a scratch on one side, that severed the skin;
The end of the hooked edge entered the flesh,
And a little blood lightly leapt to the earth.
And when the man beheld his own blood bright on the
snow,

410 He sprang a spear's length with feet spread wide,
Seized his high helm, and set it on his head,
Shoved before his shoulders the shield at his back,
Bares his trusty blade, and boldly he speaks—
Not since he was a babe born of his mother
Was he once in this world one half so blithe—
415 "Have done with your hacking—harry me no more!
I have borne, as behooved, one blow in this place;
If you make another move I shall meet it midway
And promptly, I promise you, pay back each blow with
brand.

420 One stroke acquits me here;
So did our covenant stand
In Arthur's court last year—
Wherefore, sir, hold your hand!"

425 He lowers the long ax and leans on it there,
Sets his arms on the head, the haft on the earth,
And beholds the bold knight that bides there afoot,
How he faces him fearless, fierce in full arms,
And plies him with proud words—it pleases him well.
Then once again gaily to Gawain he calls,

430 And in a loud voice and lusty, delivers these words:
"Bold fellow, on this field your anger forbear!
No man has made demands here in manner uncouth,
Nor done, save as duly determined at court,
I owed you a hit and you have it; be happy therewith!
The rest of my rights here I freely resign.
435 Had I been a bit busier, a buffet, perhaps,
I could have dealt more directly; and done you some harm.

19
440 First I flourished with a feint, in frolicsome mood,
And left your hide unhurt—and here I did well
By the fair terms we fixed on the first night;
And fully and faithfully you followed accord:
Gave over all your gains as a good man should.
A second feint, sir, I assigned for the morning
You kissed my comely wife—each kiss you restored.
For both of these there behooved but two feigned blows by
right.

445 True men pay what they owe;
No danger then in sight.
You failed at the third throw,
So take my tap, sir knight.

450 "For that is my belt about you, that same braided girdle,
My wife it was that wore it; I know well the tale,
And the count of your kisses and your conduct too,
And the wooing of my wife—it was all my scheme!
She made trial of a man most faultless by far
Of all that ever walked over the wide earth;
455 As pearls to white peas, more precious and prized,
So is Gawain, in good faith, to other gay knights.
Yet you lacked, sir, a little in loyalty there,
But the cause was not cunning, nor courtship either,
But that you loved your own life; the less, then, to blame."
460 The other stout knight in a study stood a long while,
So gripped with grim rage that his great heart shook.
All the blood of his body burned in his face
As he shrank back in shame from the man's sharp speech.
The first words that fell from the fair knight's lips:
465 "Accursed be a cowardly and covetous heart!
In you is villainy and vice, and virtue laid low!"
Then he grasps the green girdle and lets go the knot,
Hands it over in haste, and hotly he says:
"Behold there my falsehood, ill hap betide it!
470 Your cut taught me cowardice, care for my life,
And coveting came after, contrary both
To largesse and loyalty belonging to knights.
Now am I faulty and false, that fearful was ever
Of disloyalty and lies, bad luck to them both! and greed.
475 I confess, knight, in this place,
Most dire is my misdeed;
Let me gain back your good grace,
And thereafter I shall take heed."

480 Then the other laughed aloud, and lightly he said,
"Such harm as I have had, I hold it quite healed.

You are so fully confessed, your failings made known,
And bear the plain penance of the point of my blade,
I hold you polished as a pearl, as pure and as bright
As you had lived free of fault since first you were born.
And I give you, sir, this girdle that is gold-hemmed
And green as my garments, that, Gawain, you may
Be mindful of this meeting when you mingle in throng
With nobles of renown, and known by this token
How it chanced at the Green Chapel, to chivalrous knights.
And you shalt in this New Year come yet again
And we shall finish out our feast in my fair hall with
cheer.

485

490