

of self-knowledge is not clear. The poem is probably less a conscious attempt to cut the Arthurian heroes down to size than it is a Christian exploration, in the form of a romance, of "the cycle of social living, alienation, self-discovery, desolation, recovery and restoration" (J. A. Burrow). Its exemplary value, the questions constantly before the reader: how to recognize temptation and how to steer the right moral course, must have given the poem its power over medieval audiences and is still its attraction. Arm, protect himself as he will, among his fellows at court, with the pentangle, with "powerful," talismanic gems, with the magic belt, Gawain has still to face the cycle of experience. He does not come home to journey's end and rest, but back to society, wearing the badge that will remind him of his condition, and seeing others wear it too, in token that humility, true penitence, and trust in God's grace are man's only possible rejoinder to his sinful condition.

The translation, which attempts to keep the meter and alliteration of the original, is by Brian Stone, published in 1959 and fully revised in 1972. It is based on the text of Sir Israel Gollancz (1940), with readings adopted from that of J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (2nd ed., 1967). Annotation is by the present editor.

## Sir Gawain and the Green Knight<sup>o</sup>

### Fitt<sup>o</sup> 1

#### I

The siege and the assault being ceased at Troy,<sup>o</sup>  
 The battlements broken down and burnt to brands and ashes,  
 The treacherous trickster<sup>o</sup> whose treasons there flourished  
 Was famed for his falsehood, the foulest on earth.  
 Aeneas the noble and his knightly kin  
 Then conquered kingdoms, and kept in their hand  
 Wellnigh all the wealth of the western lands.  
 Royal Romulus<sup>o</sup> to Rome first turned,  
 Set up the city in splendid pomp,  
 10 Then named her with his own name, which now she still has:  
 Ticius<sup>o</sup> founded Tuscany, townships raising,  
 Longbeard<sup>o</sup> in Lombardy lifted up homes,

Sir . . . Knight The manuscript of the poem is untitled. The numbering of parts and stanzas is also modern.

Fitt the Old and Middle English word for a section or canto of a poem

Troy Medieval belief was that western European civilization began after the destruction of Troy by the Greeks, after which the Trojan Aeneas eventually reached Italy. The descendants of Aeneas made themselves masters of the rest of the European continent.

trickster Probably Aeneas himself, or perhaps Antenor. Both, according to medieval tradition, were traitors who plotted to hand over Troy to

the Greeks if they could not get away by other means. Antenor, the legendary founder of Padua, is the less likely candidate, since he is not necessary for the little genealogy by which we are here being taken to the founder of Britain. The "treachery" of both is meant to set off the "truth" of Gawain.

Romulus the legendary founder of Rome, therefore given Trojan ancestry

Ticius perhaps Tuscus, legendary founder of Tuscany; or Tirus, his father

Longbeard *Langaberde*: Langobardus, legendary ancestor of the Lombards, and allegedly Aeneas's descendant

And far over the French flood Felix Brutus<sup>o</sup>  
 On many spacious slopes set Britain with joy  
 And grace;  
 Where war and feud and wonder  
 Have ruled the realm a space,  
 And after, bliss and blunder  
 By turns have run their race.

#### II

And when this Britain was built by this brave noble,  
 Here bold men bred, in battle exulting,  
 Stirrers of trouble in turbulent times.  
 Here many a marvel, more than in other lands,  
 Has befallen by fortune since that far time.  
 But of all who abode here of Britain's kings,  
 Arthur<sup>o</sup> was highest in honour, as I have heard;  
 So I intend to tell you of a true wonder,  
 Which many folk mention as a manifest marvel,  
 A happening eminent among Arthur's adventures.  
 Listen to my lay but a little while.  
 Straightway shall I speak it, in city as I heard it,<sup>o</sup>  
 With tongue;  
 As scribes have set it duly  
 In the lore of the land so long,  
 With letters linking<sup>o</sup> truly  
 In story bold and strong.

#### III

This king lay at Camelot<sup>o</sup> one Christmastide<sup>o</sup>  
 With many mighty lords, manly liegemen,  
 Members rightly reckoned of the Round Table,<sup>o</sup>  
 In splendid celebration, seemly and carefree.  
 There tussling in tournament time and again  
 Jostled in jollity these gentle knights,  
 Then in court carnival sang catches and danced,<sup>o</sup>  
 For fifteen days the feasting there was full in like measure

Felix Brutus grandson or great-grandson of Aeneas, and founder of Britain. *Felix* ("happy") may reflect the *sele* ("fortunate"), used of him in other sources—and *felix* was a conventional adjective for founders.

Arthur a Welsh form of the Latin Artorius; in contrast to most names in Middle English Arthurian romance, which reach it through Old French (see Fig. 46)

heard it an appeal to an older, probably non-existent authority, a regular medieval way of placing author and reader on the same footing

letters linking i.e. by the alliterative technique; but the meaning may also be "embodied in truthful words"

Camelot King Arthur's capital, identified by Malory as Winchester, but placed by others in

Wales or in the southwestern (Celtic) parts of England

Christmastide One of the great religious feasts and occasions for chivalric gatherings: festivities lasted until Twelfth Night, the eve of Epiphany (January 6). Arthur was said to hold court and wear his crown five times a year: at Easter, Ascension Day, Pentecost, All Saints, and Christmas (see Malory, *Morte Darthur*, below). Round Table part of Queen Guinevere's dowry to King Arthur, made for King Uther by the wonder-worker Merlin; a "holy table" for 150 knights, preventing dispute about whose was the more honorable place (see Fig. 47)

sang . . . danced performed "caroles," or dances accompanied by song

With all the meat and merry-making men could devise,  
Gladly ringing glee, glorious to hear,  
A noble din by day, dancing at night!  
All was happiness in the height in halls and chambers  
For lords and their ladies, delectable joy.

With all delights on earth they housed there together,  
Saving Christ's self, the most celebrated knights,  
The loveliest ladies to live in all time,  
And the comeliest king ever to keep court.  
For this fine fellowship was in its fair prime

Far famed,  
Stood well in heaven's will,  
Its high-souled king acclaimed:  
So hardy a host on hill  
Could not with ease be named.

## IV

The year being so young that yester-even saw its birth,  
That day double on the dais were the diners served.  
Mass sung and service ended, straight from the chapel  
The King and his company came into hall.  
Called on with cries from clergy and laity,  
Noël° was newly announced, named time and again.  
Then lords and ladies leaped forth, largesse distributing,  
Offered New Year gifts° in high voices, handed them out,  
Bustling and bantering about these offerings.

Ladies laughed full loudly, though losing their wealth,  
And he that won was not woeful, you may well believe.  
All this merriment they made until meal time.  
Then in progress to their places they passed after washing,  
In authorized order, the high-ranking first;°  
With glorious Guinevere,° gay in the midst,  
On the princely platform with its precious hangings  
Of splendid silk at the sides, a state° over her  
Of rich tapestry of Toulouse° and Turkestan°  
Brilliantly embroidered with the best gems  
Of warranted worth that wealth at any time  
Could buy.

Fairest of form was this queen,  
Glinting and grey° of eye;  
No man could say he had seen  
A lovelier, but with a lie.

Noël Latin *natalis*, birthday  
New Year gifts the regular medieval custom  
first at the kind of table the poet knew, at  
which guests were seated in order of rank, not  
the Round Table (see Figs. 43, 47)  
Guinevere Arthur's queen

state canopy  
Toulouse *tolouse*, a rich fabric, perhaps from  
Toulouse in France  
Turkestan *tars*, rich and costly Eastern stuff  
grey the regular color for a medieval heroine's  
eyes

## V

But Arthur would not eat until all were served.  
He was charming and cheerful, child-like and gay,  
And loving active life, little did he favour  
Lying down for long or lolling on a seat,  
So robust his young blood and his beating brain.  
Still, he was stirred now by something else:  
His noble announcement that he never would eat  
On such a fair feast-day till informed in full  
Of some unusual adventure,° as yet untold,  
Of some momentous marvel that he might believe,  
About ancestors, or arms, or other high theme;  
Or till a stranger should seek out a strong knight of his,  
To join with him in jousting, in jeopardy to lay  
Life against life, each allowing the other  
The favour of Fortune, the fairer lot.

Such was the King's custom when he kept court,  
At every fine feast among his free° retinue

In hall.  
So he throve amid the throng,  
A ruler royal and tall,  
Still standing staunch and strong,  
And young like the year withal.

## VI

Erect stood the strong king, stately of mien,  
Trifling time with talk before the topmost table.°  
Good Gawain° was placed at Guinevere's side,  
And Agravaing° of the Hard Hand sat on the other side,  
Both the King's sister's sons, staunchest of knights.  
Above, Bishop Baldwin began the board,°  
And Ywain, Urien's son,° ate next to him.  
These were disposed on the dais and with dignity served,  
And many mighty men next, marshalled at side tables.  
Then the first course came in with such cracking of trumpets,  
(Whence bright bedecked blazons° in banners hung)  
Such din of drumming and a deal of fine piping,  
Such wild warbles whelming and echoing

adventure a custom of Arthur's often mentioned  
in French romances. The adventure (chance en-  
counter, French *aventure*) might happen to one  
of the company then and there, or merely be  
reported by someone present.

free *fre*, noble  
topmost table Arthur would face down the hall,  
from the middle of the long side of the high  
table on the dais, the most honored guests to  
either side of him. The side tables (l. 115)  
were on the floor of the hall, along the walls,  
at right angles to the high table. The guests  
sat on benches or forms.

Gawain Gawain is usually presented, in early  
Arthurian romance, as the greatest of Arthur's  
knights for his courtesy and war-like prowess.  
Later, his status is reduced. He was Arthur's  
nephew and his estates were in Scotland.

Agravaing Gawain's brother  
Baldwin . . . hoard The bishop, Arthur's ad-  
viser, sat in the place of honor at his right  
hand.

Ywain, . . . son. Ywain and Urien may have  
been historical Welsh kings. Ywain was also  
Arthur's nephew and one of his best knights.  
blazons coats of arms

120 That hearts were uplifted high at the strains.  
Then delicacies and dainties were delivered to the guests,  
Fresh food in foison,<sup>o</sup> such freight of full dishes  
That space was scarce at the social tables  
For the several soups set before them in silver

On the cloth.

Each feaster made free with the fare,  
Took lightly and nothing loth;  
Twelve plates were for every pair,  
Good beer and bright wine both.

## VII

130 Of their meal I shall mention no more just now,  
For it is evident to all that ample was served;  
Now another noise,<sup>o</sup> quite new, neared suddenly,  
Likely to allow the liege lord to eat;  
For barely had the blast of trump abated one minute  
And the first course in the court been courteously served,  
When there heaved in at the hall door an awesome fellow  
Who in height outstripped all earthly men.

From throat to thigh he was so thickset and square,  
His loins and limbs were so long and so great,  
140 That he was half a giant on earth, I believe;  
Yet mainly and most of all a man he seemed,  
And the handsomest of horsemen, though huge, at that;  
For though at back and at breast his body was broad,  
His hips and haunches were elegant and small,  
And perfectly proportioned were all parts of the man,

As seen.

Men gaped at the hue of him  
Ingrained in garb and mien,  
A fellow fiercely grim,  
150 And all a glittering green.

## VIII

And garments of green girt the fellow about—  
A two-third-length tunic, tight at the waist,  
A comely cloak on top, accomplished with lining  
Of the finest fur to be found, made of one piece,  
Marvellous fur-trimmed material, with matching hood  
Lying back from his locks and laid on his shoulders;  
Fifty held-up hose, in hue the same green,  
That was caught at the calf, with clinking spurs beneath  
Of bright gold on bases of embroidered silk,  
160 But no iron shoe armoured that horseman's feet.

foison plenty  
noise The "adventure" was arriving which had

to take place before Arthur would consent to eat.

And verily his vesture was all vivid green,  
So were the bars on his belt and the brilliants set  
In ravishing array on the rich accoutrements  
About himself and his saddle on silken work.  
It would be tedious to tell a tith of the trifles  
Embossed and embroidered, such as birds and flies,<sup>o</sup>  
In gay green gauds,<sup>o</sup> with gold everywhere.  
The breast-hangings of the horse, its haughty crupper,<sup>o</sup>  
The enamelled knobs and nails on its bridle,  
And the stirrups that he stood on, were all stained with the same;  
So were the splendid saddle-skirts and bows  
That ever glimmered and glinted with their green stones.  
The steed that he spurred on was similar in hue

To the sight,

Green and huge of grain,  
Mettlesome in might  
And brusque with bit and rein—  
A steed to serve that knight!

## IX

Yes, garbed all in green was the gallant rider,  
And the hair of his head was the same hue as his horse,  
And floated finely like a fan round his shoulders;  
And a great bushy beard on his breast flowing down,  
With the heavy hair hanging from his head,  
Was shorn below the shoulder, sheared right round,  
So that half his arms were under the encircling hair,  
Covered as by a king's cape, that closes at the neck.  
The mane of that mighty horse, much like the beard,  
Well crisped and combed, was copiously plaited  
With twists of twining gold, twinkling in the green,  
First a green gossamer, a golden one next.  
His flowing tail and forelock followed suit,  
And both were bound with bands of bright green,  
Ornamented to the end with exquisite stones,  
While a thong running through them threaded on high  
Many bright golden bells, burnished and ringing.  
Such a horse, such a horseman, in the whole wide world  
Was never seen or observed by those assembled before,

Not one.

Lightning-like he seemed  
And swift to strike and stun.  
His dreadful blows, men deemed,  
Once dealt, meant death was done.

flies butterflies  
gauds ornaments  
crupper harness strap passing under the horse's

tail, or saddle skirts. The harness and trappings  
of a knight's horse were often very elaborate.

## X

Yet hauberk° and helmet had he none,  
 Nor plastron° nor plate-armor proper to combat,  
 Nor shield for shoving, nor sharp spear for lunging;  
 But he held a holly° cluster in one hand, holly  
 That is greenest when groves are gaunt and bare,  
 And an axe in his other hand, huge and monstrous,  
 A hideous helmet-smasher for anyone to tell of;  
 The head of that axe was an ell-rod long.  
 Of green hammered gold and steel was the socket,  
 And the blade was burnished bright, with a broad edge,  
 Acutely honed for cutting, as keenest razors are.  
 The grim man gripped it by its great strong handle,  
 Which was wound with iron all the way to the end,  
 And graven in green with graceful designs.  
 A cord curved round it, was caught at the head,  
 Then hitched to the haft at intervals in loops,  
 With costly tassels attached thereto in plenty  
 On bosses of bright green embroidered richly.  
 In he rode, and up the hall, this man,  
 Driving towards the high dais, dreading no danger.  
 He gave no one a greeting, but glared over all.  
 His opening utterance was, 'Who and where  
 Is the governor of this gathering? Gladly would I  
 Behold him with my eyes and have speech with him.'

He frowned;

Took note of every knight  
 As he ramped and rode around;  
 Then stopped to study who might  
 Be the noble most renowned.

## XI

The assembled folk stared, long scanning the fellow,  
 For all men marvelled what it might mean  
 That a horseman and his horse should have such a colour  
 As to grow green as grass, and greener yet, it seemed,  
 More gaudily° glowing than green enamel on gold.  
 Those standing studied him and sidled towards him  
 With all the world's wonder as to what he would do.  
 For astonishing sights they had seen, but such a one never;  
 Therefore a phantom from Fairyland the folk there deemed him.  
 So even the doughty were daunted and dared not reply,  
 All sitting stock-still, astounded by his voice.

hauberk coat of chain-mail armor  
 plastron armor for upper breast and neck  
 holly evergreen cluster from that shrub, perhaps  
 to signify the knight's immortality, or merely

to match his color. Holly is the symbol of  
 Christmas and of the immortal Christ, the red  
 berry symbolizing his blood.  
 gaudily beautifully

Throughout the high hall was a hush like death;  
 Suddenly as if all had slipped into sleep, their voices were

At rest;

Hushed not wholly for fear,  
 But some at honour's behest;  
 But let him whom all revere  
 Greet that gruesome guest.

## XII

For Arthur sensed an exploit before the high dais,  
 And accorded him courteous greeting, no craven he,  
 Saying to him, 'Sir knight, you are certainly welcome.  
 I am head of this house: Arthur is my name.  
 Please deign to dismount and dwell with us  
 Till you impart your purpose, at a proper time.'  
 'May He that sits in heaven help me,' said the knight,  
 'But my intention was not to tarry in this turreted hall.  
 But as your reputation, royal sir, is raised up so high,  
 And your castle and cavaliers are accounted the best,  
 The mightiest of mail-clad men in mounted fighting,  
 The most warlike, the worthiest the world has bred,  
 Most valiant to vie with in virile contests,  
 And as chivalry is shown here, so I am assured,  
 At this time, I tell you, that has attracted me here.  
 By this branch that I bear, you may be certain  
 That I proceed in peace, no peril seeking;  
 For had I fared forth in fighting gear,  
 My hauberk and helmet, both at home now,  
 My shield and sharp spear, all shining bright,  
 And other weapons to wield, I would have brought;  
 However, as I wish for no war here, I wear soft clothes.  
 But if you are as bold as brave men affirm,  
 You will gladly grant me the good sport I demand

By right.'

Then Arthur answer gave:  
 'If you, most noble knight,  
 Unarmoured combat crave,  
 We'll fail you not in fight.'

## XIII

'No, it is not combat I crave, for come to that,  
 On this bench only beardless boys are sitting.  
 If I were hasped in armour on a high steed,  
 No man among you could match me, your might being meagre.  
 So I crave in this court a Christmas game,  
 For it is Yuletide and New Year, and young men abound here.  
 If any in this household is so hardy in spirit,

Of such mettlesome mind and so madly rash  
 As to strike a strong blow in return for another,  
 I shall offer to him this fine axe freely;  
 This axe, which is heavy enough, to handle as he please.  
 290 And I shall bide the first blow, as bare as I sit here.  
 If some intrepid man is tempted to try what I suggest,  
 Let him leap towards me and lay hold of this weapon,  
 Acquiring clear possession of it, no claim from me ensuing.  
 Then shall I stand up to his stroke, quite still on this floor—  
 So long as I shall have leave to launch a return blow

Unchecked.

Yet he shall have a year  
 And a day's reprieve,<sup>o</sup> I direct.  
 Now hasten and let me hear  
 300 Who answers, to what effect.'

## XIV

If he had astonished them at the start, yet stiller now  
 Were the henchmen in hall, both high and low.  
 The rider wrenched himself round in his saddle  
 And rolled his red eyes about roughly and strangely,  
 Bending<sup>o</sup> his brows, bristling and bright, on all,  
 His beard swaying as he strained to see who would rise.  
 When none came to accord with him, he coughed aloud,  
 Then pulled himself up proudly, and spoke as follows:  
 'What, is this Arthur's house, the honour of which  
 310 Is bruited abroad so abundantly?  
 Has your pride disappeared? Your prowess gone?  
 Your victories, your valour, your vaunts, where are they?  
 The revel and renown of the Round Table  
 Is now overwhelmed by a word from one man's voice,  
 For all flinch for fear from a fight not begun!  
 Upon this, he laughed so loudly that the lord grieved.  
 His fair features filled with blood

For shame.

He raged as roaring gale;  
 320 His followers felt the same.  
 The King, not one to quail,  
 To that cavalier then came.

## XV

'By heaven,' then said Arthur, 'What you ask is foolish,  
 But as you firmly seek folly, find it you shall.  
 No good man here is aghast at your great words.  
 Hand me your axe now, for heaven's sake,  
 And I shall bestow the boon you bid us give.'

year . . . reprieve the usual term for a legal contract      Bending directing

He sprang towards him swiftly, seized it from his hand,  
 And fiercely the other fellow footed the floor.<sup>o</sup>  
 Now Arthur had his axe, and holding it by the haft  
 Swung it about sternly, as if to strike with it.  
 The strong man stood before him, stretched to his full height,  
 Higher than any in the hall by a head and more.  
 Stern of face he stood there, stroking his beard,  
 Turning down his tunic in a tranquil manner,  
 Less unmanned and dismayed by the mighty strokes  
 Than if a banqueter at the bench<sup>o</sup> had brought him a drink  
 Of wine.

Then Gawain at Guinevere's side  
 Bowed and spoke his design:  
 'Before all, King, confide  
 This fight to me. May it be mine.'

## XVI

'If you would, worthy lord,' said Gawain to the king,  
 'Bid me stir from this seat and stand beside you,  
 Allowing me without lèse-majesty<sup>o</sup> to leave the table,  
 And if my liege lady were not displeased thereby,  
 I should come there to counsel you before this court of nobles.  
 For it appears unmeet to me, as manners go,  
 When your hall hears uttered such a haughty request,  
 Though you gladly agree, for you to grant it yourself,  
 When on the benches about you many such bold men sit,  
 Under heaven, I hold, the highest-mettled,  
 There being no braver knights when battle is joined.  
 I am the weakest, the most wanting in wisdom, I know,  
 And my life, if lost, would be least missed, truly.  
 Only through your being my uncle, am I to be valued;  
 No bounty but your blood in my body do I know.<sup>o</sup>  
 And since this affair is too foolish to fall to you,  
 And I first asked it of you, make it over to me;  
 And if I fail to speak fittingly, let this full court judge  
 Without blame.'

Then wisely they whispered of it,  
 And after, all said the same:  
 That the crowned king should be quit,<sup>o</sup>  
 And Gawain given the game.

## XVII

Then the King commanded the courtly knight to rise.  
 He directly uprose, approached courteously,

footed the floor jumped off his horse  
 banqueter . . . bench a man at his seat  
 lèse-majesty French *lèse-majesté*, offense against  
 the dignity of a ruler, severe discourtesy

No bounty . . . know i.e. the only good in my  
 body comes from your blood  
 quit excused from the contest

Knelt low to his liege lord, laid hold of the weapon;  
 And he graciously let him have it, lifted up his hand  
 370 And gave him God's blessing, gladly urging him  
 To be strong in spirit and stout of sinew.  
 'Cousin, take care,' said the King, 'To chop once,<sup>o</sup>  
 And if you strike with success, certainly I think  
 You will take the return blow without trouble in time.'  
 Gripping the great axe, Gawain goes to the man  
 Who awaits him unwavering, not quailing at all.  
 Then said to Sir Gawain the stout knight in green,  
 'Let us affirm our pact freshly, before going farther.  
 I beg you, bold sir, to be so good  
 380 As to tell me your true name, as I trust you to.'  
 'In good faith,' said the good knight, 'Gawain is my name,  
 And whatever happens after, I offer you this blow,  
 And in twelve months' time I shall take the return blow  
 With whatever weapon you wish, and with no one else  
 Shall I strive.'  
 The other with pledge replied,  
 'I'm the merriest man alive  
 It's a blow from you I must bide,  
 Sir Gawain, so may I thrive.'

## XVIII

390 'By God,' said the Green Knight, 'Sir Gawain, I rejoice  
 That I shall have from your hand what I have asked for here.  
 And you have gladly gone over, in good discourse,  
 The covenant I requested of the King in full,  
 Except that you shall assent, swearing in truth,  
 To seek me yourself, in such place as you think  
 To find me under the firmament, and fetch your payment  
 For what you deal me today before this dignified gathering.'  
 'How shall I hunt for you? How find your home?'  
 Said Gawain, 'By God that made me, I go in ignorance;  
 400 Nor, knight, do I know your name or your court.  
 But instruct me truly thereof, and tell me your name,  
 And I shall wear out my wits to find my way there;  
 Here is my oath on it, in absolute honour!  
 'That is enough this New Year,<sup>o</sup> no more is needed,'  
 Said the gallant in green to Gawain the courteous,  
 'To tell you the truth, when I have taken the blow  
 After you have duly dealt it, I shall directly inform you  
 About my house and my home and my own name.  
 Then you may keep your covenant, and call on me,  
 410 And if I waft you no words, then well may you prosper,

take . . . once take care that you give one New Year a time associated with friendship  
 stroke only and piety

Stay long in your own land and look for no further  
 Trial.

Now grip your weapon grim;  
 Let us see your fighting style.'  
 'Gladly,' said Gawain to him,  
 Stroking the steel the while.

## XIX

On the ground the Green Knight graciously stood,  
 With head slightly slanting to expose the flesh.  
 His long and lovely locks he laid over his crown,  
 Baring the naked neck for the business now due.  
 Gawain gripped his axe and gathered it on high,  
 Advanced the left foot before him on the ground,  
 And slashed swiftly down on the exposed part,  
 So that the sharp blade sheared through, shattering the bones,  
 Sank deep in the sleek flesh, split it in two,  
 And the scintillating steel struck the ground.  
 The fair head fell from the neck, struck the floor,  
 And people spurned it as it rolled around.  
 Blood spurted from the body, bright against the green.  
 Yet the fellow did not fall, nor falter one whit,  
 But stoutly sprang forward on legs still sturdy,  
 Roughly reached out among the ranks of nobles,  
 Seized his splendid head and straightway lifted it.  
 Then he strode to his steed, snatched the bridle,  
 Stepped into the stirrup and swung aloft,  
 Holding his head in his hand by the hair.  
 He settled himself in the saddle as steadily  
 As if nothing had happened to him, though he had  
 No head.

He twisted his trunk about,  
 That gruesome body that bled;  
 He caused much dread and doubt  
 By the time his say was said.

## XX

For he held the head in his hand upright,  
 Pointed the face at the fairest in fame<sup>o</sup> on the dais;  
 And it lifted its eyelids and looked glaringly,  
 And menacingly said with its mouth as you may now hear:  
 'Be prepared to perform what you promised, Gawain;  
 Seek faithfully till you find me, my fine fellow,  
 According to your oath in this hall in these knights' hearing.  
 Go to the Green Chapel without gainsaying to get  
 Such a stroke as you have struck. Strictly you deserve

fairest in fame noblest; those at the high table

That due redemption on the day of New Year.  
 As the Knight of the Green Chapel I am known to many;  
 Therefore if you ask for me, I shall be found.  
 So come, or else be called coward accordingly!  
 Then he savagely swerved, sawing at the reins,  
 Rushed out at the hall door, his head in his hand,  
 And the flint-struck fire flew up from the hooves.  
 460 What place he departed to no person there knew,  
 Nor could any account be given of the country he had come from.

What then?

At the Green Knight Gawain and King  
 Grinned and laughed again;  
 But plainly approved the thing  
 As a marvel in the world of men.

XXI

Though honoured King Arthur was at heart astounded,  
 He let no sign of it be seen, but said clearly  
 To the comely queen in courtly speech,  
 470 'Do not be dismayed, dear lady, today:  
 Such cleverness<sup>o</sup> comes well at Christmastide,  
 Like the playing of interludes,<sup>o</sup> laughter and song,  
 As lords and ladies delight in courtly carols.  
 However, I am now able to eat the repast,  
 Having seen, I must say, a sight to wonder at.'  
 He glanced at Sir Gawain, and gracefully said,  
 'Now sir, hang up your axe: you have hewn enough.'  
 And on the backcloth above the dais it was boldly hung  
 Where all men might mark it and marvel at it  
 480 And with truthful testimony tell the wonder of it.  
 Then to the table the two went together,  
 The King and the constant knight, and keen<sup>o</sup> men served them  
 Double portions of each dainty with all due dignity,  
 All manner of meat,<sup>o</sup> and minstrelsy too.  
 Daylong they delighted till darkness came

To their shores.

Now Gawain give a thought,  
 Lest peril make you pause  
 In seeking out the sport  
 490 That you have claimed as yours.

cleverness or: curious deeds  
 interludes pageants, short humorous plays, at  
 entertainments or between the acts of sacred  
 dramas

keen quick  
 meat food

Fitt 2

XXII

Such earnest<sup>o</sup> of noble action<sup>o</sup> had Arthur at New Year,  
 For he was avid to hear exploits vaunted.  
 Though starved of such speeches when seated at first,  
 Now had they high matter indeed, their hands full<sup>o</sup> of it.  
 Gawain was glad to begin the games in hall,  
 But though the end be heavy, have no wonder,  
 For if men are spritely in spirit after strong drink,  
 Soon the year slides past, never the same twice;  
 There is no foretelling its fulfilment from the start.  
 500 Yes, this Yuletide passed and the year following;  
 Season after season in succession went by.  
 After Christmas comes the crabbed Lenten time,  
 Which forces on the flesh fish and food yet plainer.  
 Then weather<sup>o</sup> more vernal wars with the wintry world,  
 The cold ebbs and declines, the clouds lift,  
 In shining flowers the rain sheds warmth  
 And falls upon the fair plain, where flowers appear;  
 The grassy lawns and groves alike are garbed in green;  
 Birds prepare to build, and brightly sing  
 510 The solace of the ensuing summer that soothes hill

And dell.

By hedgerows rank and rich  
 The blossoms bloom and swell,  
 And sounds of sweetest pitch  
 From lovely woodlands well.

XXIII

Then comes the season of summer with soft winds,  
 When Zephyrus<sup>o</sup> himself breathes on seeds and herbs.  
 In paradise is the plant that springs in the open  
 When the dripping dew drops from its leaves,  
 520 And it bears the blissful gleam of the bright sun.  
 Then Harvest comes hurrying, urging it on,  
 Warning it because of winter to wax ripe soon;  
 He drives the dust to rise with the drought he brings,  
 Forcing it to fly up from the face of the earth.  
 Wrathful winds in raging skies wrestle with the sun;  
 Leaves are lashed loose from the trees and lie on the ground  
 And the grass becomes grey which was green before.  
 What rose from root at first now ripens and rots;

earnest pledge  
 action MS. "adventures," meaning chance en-  
 counters  
 Now . . . full literally: Now they were fully  
 provided with stern deeds (to talk of), whole  
 fistfuls of them

weather famous passage of welcome to spring,  
 preparing for change in the action of the poem  
 and echoing Gawain's lack of care—as yet—for  
 the debt he will have to pay when the year  
 sinks again  
 Zephyrus the west wind

530 So the year in passing yields its many yesterdays,  
And winter returns, as the way of the world is,  
I swear;

So came the Michaelmas<sup>o</sup> moon,  
With winter threatening there,  
And Gawain considered soon  
The fell way he must fare.

## XXIV

Yet he stayed in hall with Arthur till All Saints Day,<sup>o</sup>  
When Arthur provided plentifully, especially for Gawain,  
A rich feast and high revelry at the Round Table.  
The gallant lords and gay ladies grieved for Gawain,  
540 Anxious on his account; but all the same  
They mentioned only matters of mirthful import,  
Joylessly joking for that gentle knight's sake.  
For after dinner with drooping heart he addressed his uncle  
And spoke plainly of his departure, putting it thus:  
'Now, liege lord of my life, I beg my leave of you.  
You know the kind of covenant it is: I care little  
To tell over the trials of it, trifling as they are,  
But I am bound to bear the blow and must be gone tomorrow  
To seek the gallant in green, as God sees fit to guide me.'  
550 Then the most courtly in that company came together,  
Ywain and Eric and others in troops,  
Sir Dodinal the Fierce, the Duke of Clarence,  
Lancelot and Lionel and Lucan the Good,  
Sir Bors and Sir Bedivere, both strong men,  
And many admired knights, with Mador of the Gate.<sup>o</sup>  
All the company of the court came near to the King  
With carking<sup>o</sup> care in their hearts, to counsel the knight.  
Much searing sorrow was suffered in the hall  
That such a gallant man as Gawain should go in quest  
560 To suffer a savage blow, and his sword no more  
Should bear.

Said Gawain, gay of cheer,  
'Whether fate be foul or fair,  
Why falter I or fear?  
What should man do but dare?'

Michaelmas Feast of St. Michael, September 29  
All Saints Day November 1, one of the great  
religious festivals. See l. 37n above.  
Eric . . . Gate (ll. 551-55) i.e. the flower of  
the court. Eric was famous in French romances;  
Sir Dodinal was a great hunter in the wild; the  
Duke of Clarence, one of whose adventures  
parallels Gawain's, was Arthur's nephew; Lancelot  
was, in the later Arthurian tradition, one of  
Arthur's greatest knights and Queen Guinevere's

lover; Lionel was Lancelot's cousin; Lucan was  
the royal butler, an important official (see  
Malory, *Morte Darthur*, below) and one of the  
last survivors of the knights at Arthur's death;  
Bors was probably Lionel's brother; Bedivere  
was one of the earliest of Arthur's knights, and  
in Malory is Arthur's last companion; Mador was  
the keeper of the castle gate.  
carking oppressive

## XXV

He dwelt there all that day, and at dawn on the morrow  
Asked for his armour. Every item was brought.  
First a crimson carpet was cast over the floor  
And the great pile of gilded war-gear glittered upon it.  
570 The strong man stepped on it, took the steel in hand.  
The doublet he dressed in was dear Turkestan stuff.  
Then came the courtly cape, cut with skill,  
Finely lined with fur, and fastened close.  
Then they set the steel shoes on the strong man's feet,  
Lapped his legs in steel with lovely greaves,<sup>o</sup>  
Complete with knee-pieces, polished bright  
And connecting at the knee with gold-knobbed hinges.  
Then came the cuisses,<sup>o</sup> which cunningly enclosed  
His thighs thick of thew,<sup>o</sup> and which thongs secured.  
580 Next the hauberk, interlinked with argent<sup>o</sup> steel rings  
Which rested on rich material, wrapped the warrior round.  
He had polished armour on arms and elbows,  
Glinting and gay, and gloves of metal,  
And all the goodly gear to give help whatever  
Betide;  
With surcoat richly wrought,  
Gold spurs attached in pride,  
A silken sword-belt athwart,  
And steadfast blade at his side.

## XXVI

590 When he was hasped in armour his harness<sup>o</sup> was noble;  
The least lace or loop was lustrous with gold.  
So, harnessed as he was, he heard his mass  
As it was offered at the high altar in worship.  
Then he came to the King and his court-fellows,  
Took leave with loving courtesy of lord and lady,  
Who commended him to Christ and kissed him farewell.  
By now Gringolet<sup>o</sup> had been got ready, and girt with a saddle  
That gleamed most gaily with many golden fringes,  
Everywhere nailed newly for this noble occasion.  
600 The bridle was embossed and bound with bright gold;  
So were the furnishings<sup>o</sup> of the fore-harness<sup>o</sup> and the fine skirts.  
The crupper and the caparison<sup>o</sup> accorded with the saddle-bows,  
And all was arrayed on red with nails of richest gold,  
Which glittered and glanced like gleams of the sun.

greaves armor for the leg, from ankle to knee  
cuisses armor for the thigh  
thew muscle  
argent silvery  
harness man's armor  
Gringolet the name of Gawain's horse, most

likely via 12th-century French, but possibly  
Welsh in origin, meaning "white-hard"  
furnishings ornaments  
fore-harness armor for the horse's fore-parts  
caparison rich ornamental cloth covering for a  
horse



Then his casque,<sup>o</sup> equipped with clasps of great strength  
 And padded inside, he seized and swiftly kissed;  
 It towered high on his head and was hasped at the back,  
 With a brilliant silk band over the burnished neck-guard,  
 Embroidered and bossed<sup>o</sup> with the best gems  
 610 On broad silken borders, with birds about the seams,  
 Such as parrots painted with periwinkles<sup>o</sup> between,  
 And turtles<sup>o</sup> and true-love-knots<sup>o</sup> traced as thickly  
 As if many beauties in a bower<sup>o</sup> had been busy seven winters

Thereabout.

The circlet on his head  
 Was prized more precious no doubt,  
 And perfectly diamonded,  
 Threw a gleaming lustre out.

## XXVII

Then they showed him the shield of shining gules,<sup>o</sup>  
 620 With the Pentangle<sup>o</sup> in pure gold depicted thereon.  
 He brandished it by the baldric,<sup>o</sup> and about his neck  
 He slung it in a seemly way, and it suited him well.  
 And I intend to tell you, though I tarry therefore,  
 Why the Pentangle is proper to this prince of knights.  
 It is a symbol which Solomon conceived once  
 To betoken holy truth, by its intrinsic right,  
 For it is a figure which has five points,  
 And each line overlaps and is locked with another;  
 And it is endless everywhere, and the English call it,  
 630 In all the land, I hear, the Endless Knot.<sup>o</sup>

Therefore it goes with Sir Gawain and his gleaming armour,  
 For, ever faithful in five things, each in fivefold manner,<sup>o</sup>  
 Gawain was reputed good and, like gold well refined,  
 He was devoid of all villainy, every virtue displaying

In the field.

Thus this Pentangle new

casque helmet

bossed studded

parrots . . . periwinkles The silk would have something of the appearance of border decoration in contemporary manuscripts.

turtles turtledoves—emphasizing Gawain's true and faithful courtesy and knighthood in love as in war

true-love-knots two bands with a knot in the center to symbolize union

bower ladies' quarters

gules the heraldic name for red; Gawain's arms are usually green and gold

Pentangle Not elsewhere part of Gawain's coat of arms, it was a five-pointed star, which could be drawn without taking pen from paper, symbol of safety and perfection, and came to be known as Solomon's sign. It is related to the similar hexagram of two interlocking triangles, the "Star of David." The pentangle/pentagram

was also used as a magic sign, to give power over spirits; it is sometimes associated with the five letters of the name of Jesus or with his five wounds.

baldric a belt, often richly embroidered, worn diagonally across the body to support sword, bugle, or other such article

Endless Knot i.e. because its interlacing lines are joined and continuous

five . . . manner These five times five are each a side of the pentangle: the five wits, i.e. senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell; the five fingers; the five wounds of Christ on the cross—two hands, two feet, and side; the five joys of the Virgin, the joyful mysteries of the rosary—Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, Ascension, and Assumption; and the five social virtues. The five wits and especially the five wounds and five joys were frequently the subject of religious meditation and religious lyrics.

He carried on coat and shield,  
 As a man of troth most true  
 And knightly name annealed.

## XXVIII

First he was found faultless in his five wits.  
 Next, his five fingers never failed the knight,  
 And all his trust on earth was in the five wounds  
 Which came to Christ on the Cross, as the Creed tells.  
 And whenever the bold man was busy on the battlefield,  
 Through all other things he thought on this,  
 That his prowess all depended on the five pure Joys  
 That the holy Queen of Heaven had of her Child.  
 Accordingly the courteous knight had that queen's image<sup>o</sup>  
 Etched on the inside of his armoured shield,  
 So that when he beheld her, his heart did not fail.  
 The fifth five I find the famous man practised  
 Were—Liberality and Lovingkindness leading the rest;  
 Then his Continenance and Courtesy,<sup>o</sup> which were never corrupted;  
 And Piety, the surpassing virtue. These pure five  
 Were more firmly fixed on that fine man  
 Than on any other, and every multiple,  
 Each interlocking<sup>o</sup> with another, had no end,  
 Being fixed to five points which never failed,<sup>o</sup>  
 Never assembling on one side, nor sundering either,  
 With no end at any angle; nor can I find  
 Where the design started or proceeded to its end.  
 Thus on his shining shield this knot was shaped  
 Royally in red gold upon red gules.  
 That is the pure Pentangle, so people who are wise  
 are taught.

Now Gawain was ready and gay;  
 His spear he promptly caught  
 And gave them all good day  
 For ever, as he thought.

## XXIX

He struck the steed with his spurs and sprang on his way  
 So forcefully that the fire flew up from the flinty stones.  
 All who saw that seemly sight were sick at heart,  
 And all said to each other softly, in the same breath,

image Arthur was said to have had the Virgin's picture on his armor and shield, and to draw strength from the sight. Gawain's spotless piety and courage are emphasized by the transfer of the image.

Liberality . . . Courtesy Gawain's knightly virtues do not here include the one that he displays most in the poem: truth to one's word. Liberality and loving-kindness—beneficence and broth-

erly love—are courtly virtues; so is continence, or sinlessness; all together go to make up courtesy, truly chivalrous behavior.

interlocking i.e. as in the pentangle; each virtue reinforcing and feeding into the others

five points . . . failed Five was thought the first perfect number, the union of male three and female two.

In care for that comely knight, 'By Christ, it is evil  
 That yon lord should be lost, who lives so nobly!  
 To find his fellow on earth, in faith, is not easy.  
 It would have been wiser to have worked more warily,  
 And to have dubbed the dear man a duke of the realm.  
 A magnificent master of men he might have been,  
 And so had a happier fate than to be utterly destroyed,  
 Beheaded by an unearthly being out of arrogance.  
 Who supposed the Prince would approve such counsel  
 As is giddily given in Christmas games by knights?  
 Many were the watery tears that welmed from weeping eyes,  
 When on quest that worthy knight went from the court  
 That day.

He faltered not nor feared,  
 But quickly went his way;  
 His road was rough and weird,  
 Or so the stories say.

## XXX

Now the gallant Sir Gawain in God's name goes  
 Riding through the realm of Britain,° no rapture in his mind.  
 Often the long night he lay alone and companionless,  
 And did not find in front of him food of his choice;  
 He had no comrade but his courser in the country woods and hills,  
 No traveller to talk to on the track but God,  
 Till he was nearly nigh to Northern Wales.°  
 The isles of Anglesey he kept always on his left,  
 And fared across the fords by the foreshore  
 Over at Holy Head to the other side  
 Into the wilderness of Wirral,° where few dwelled  
 To whom God or good-hearted man gave his love.  
 And always as he went, he asked whomever he met  
 If they knew or had knowledge of a knight in green,  
 Or could guide him to the ground where a green chapel stood.  
 And there was none but said him nay, for never in their lives  
 Had they set eyes on someone of such a hue

As green.

His way was wild and strange  
 By dreary hill and dean.°  
 His mood would many times change  
 Before that fane° was seen.

Britain MS. Logres, Arthur's kingdom; England south of the Humber  
 Northern Wales Gawain came from Camelot in southern England north through Logres almost up to the north coast of Wales, and then cut east, keeping Anglesey on his left. The poet seems to expect that people will know the route, which probably then led across the River Dee

between Chester and the estuary. The modern Holyhead in Anglesey cannot be the Holyhead of the poem.  
 Wirral the Wilderness of Wirral in Cheshire, a forested area, noted in the 14th century for criminals and outlaws  
 dean valley  
 fane church

## XXXI

He rode far from his friends, a forsaken man,  
 Scaling many cliffs in country unknown.  
 At every bank or beach where the brave man crossed water,  
 He found a foe in front of him, except by a freak of chance,  
 And so foul and fierce a one that he was forced to fight.  
 So many marvels° did the man meet in the mountains,  
 It would be too tedious to tell a tenth of them.  
 He had death-struggles with dragons, did battle with wolves,  
 Warred with wild men who dwelt among the crags,  
 Battled with bulls and bears and boars at other times,  
 And ogres that panted after him on the high fells.  
 Had he not been doughty in endurance and dutiful to God,  
 Doubtless he would have been done to death time and again.  
 Yet the warring little worried him; worse was the winter,  
 When the cold clear water cascaded from the clouds  
 And froze before it could fall to the fallow° earth.  
 Half-slain by the sleet, he slept in his armour  
 Night after night among the naked rocks,  
 Where the cold streams splashed from the steep crests  
 Or hung high over his head in hard icicles.  
 So in peril and pain, in parlous plight,  
 This knight covered the country till Christmas Eve

Alone;

And he that eventide  
 To Mary made his moan,  
 And begged her be his guide  
 Till some shelter should be shown.

## XXXII

Merrily in the morning by a mountain he rode  
 Into a wondrously wild wooded cleft,  
 With high hills on each side overpeering a forest  
 Of huge hoary oaks, a hundred together.  
 The hazel and the hawthorn were intertwined  
 With rough ragged moss trailing everywhere,  
 And on the bleak branches birds in misery  
 Piteously piped away, pinched with cold.  
 The gallant knight on Gringolet galloped under them  
 Through many a swamp and marsh, a man all alone,  
 Fearing lest he should fail, through adverse fortune,  
 To see the service of him who that same night  
 Was born of a bright maiden to banish our strife.  
 And so sighing he said, 'I beseech thee, Lord  
 And thee Mary, mildest mother so dear,

marvels like any hero of romance, riding out in fallow dun-colored, untilled search of adventure

That in some haven with due honour I may hear Mass  
 And Matins tomorrow morning: meekly I ask it,  
 And promptly thereto I pray my Pater and Ave  
 And Creed.<sup>o</sup>

He crossed himself and cried  
 For his sins, and said, 'Christ speed  
 My cause, his cross my guide!'<sup>o</sup>  
 So prayed he, spurring his steed.

## XXXIII

Thrice the sign of the Saviour<sup>o</sup> on himself he had made,  
 When in the wood he was aware of a dwelling with a moat  
 On a promontory above a plateau, penned in by the boughs  
 And tremendous trunks of trees, and trenched<sup>o</sup> about;  
 The comeliest castle that ever a knight owned,  
 It was pitched on a plain, with a park all round,  
 Impregnable palisaded with pointed stakes,  
 And containing many trees in its two-mile circumference.  
 The courteous knight contemplated the castle from one side  
 As it shimmered and shone through the shining oaks.  
 Then humbly he took off his helmet and offered thanks  
 To Jesus and Saint Julian,<sup>o</sup> gentle patrons both,  
 Who had given him grace and gratified his wish.  
 'Now grant it be good lodging!' the gallant knight said.  
 Then he goaded Gringolet with his golden heels,  
 And mostly by chance emerged on the main highway,  
 Which brought the brave man to the bridge's end

With one cast.

The drawbridge vertical,  
 The gates shut firm and fast,  
 The well-provided wall—  
 It blenched at never a blast.

## XXXIV

The knight, still on his steed, stayed on the bank  
 Of the deep double ditch that drove round the place.<sup>o</sup>  
 The wall went into the water wonderfully deep,  
 And then to a huge height upwards it reared  
 In hard hewn stone, up to the cornice;  
 Built under the battlements in the best style, courses jutt<sup>o</sup>  
 And turrets protruded between,<sup>o</sup> constructed  
 With loopholes in plenty with locking shutters.

Pater . . . Creed the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Creed  
 Christ . . . guide common formula of prayer  
 sign of the Saviour i.e., he crossed himself  
 trenched moated  
 Saint Julian patron saint of travelers  
 place a castle of the elaborate, pinnacled, chim-

neyed, later 14th-century type, on the way to being more a place to live in than a stronghold (Fig. 44)  
 jutt<sup>o</sup> continuous horizontal bands of stone projected from the wall below the battlements, to discourage scalers  
 between at intervals

No better barbican<sup>o</sup> had ever been beheld by that knight.  
 And inside he could see a splendid high hall  
 With towers and turrets on top, all tipped with crenellations,<sup>o</sup>  
 And pretty pinnacles placed along its length,  
 With carved copes,<sup>o</sup> cunningly worked.  
 Many chalk-white chimneys the chevalier saw  
 On the tops of towers twinkling whitely,  
 So many painted pinnacles sprinkled everywhere,  
 Congregated in clusters among the crenellations,  
 That it appeared like a prospect of paper patterning.  
 To the gallant knight on Gringolet it seemed good enough  
 If he could ever gain entrance to the inner court,  
 And harbour in that house while Holy Day lasted,

Well cheered.

He hailed, and at a height  
 A civil porter appeared,  
 Who welcomed the wandering knight,  
 And his inquiry heard.

## XXXV

'Good sir,' said Gawain, 'will you give my message  
 To the high lord of this house, that I ask for lodging?'  
 'Yes, by Saint Peter,'<sup>o</sup> replied the porter, 'and I think  
 You may lodge here as long as you like, sir knight.'  
 Then away he went eagerly, and swiftly returned  
 With a host of well-wishers to welcome the knight.  
 They let down the drawbridge and in a dignified way  
 Came out and did honour to him, kneeling  
 Courteously on the cold ground to accord him worthy welcome.  
 They prayed him to pass the portcullis, now pulled up high,  
 And he readily bid them rise and rode over the bridge.  
 Servants held his saddle while he stepped down,  
 And his steed was stabled by sturdy men in plenty.  
 Strong knights and squires descended then  
 To bring the bold warrior blithely into hall.  
 When he took off his helmet, many hurried forward  
 To receive it and to serve this stately man,  
 And his bright sword and buckler<sup>o</sup> were both taken as well.  
 Then graciously he greeted each gallant knight,  
 And many proud men pressed forward to pay their respects.  
 Garbed in his fine garments, he was guided to the hall,  
 Where a fine fire was burning fiercely on the hearth.  
 Then the prince of those people appeared from his chamber  
 To meet in mannerly style the man in his hall.  
 'You are welcome to dwell here as you wish,' he said,

barbican outer fortification of a castle  
 crenellations battlements  
 copes ornamental tops

Saint Peter One porter swears by another, the  
 castle porter by the porter of heaven.  
 buckler shield

Then watched awake<sup>o</sup> with me, you are not well supplied  
 With either sustenance or sleep, for certain, I know;  
 So you shall lie long in your room, late and at ease  
 Tomorrow till the time of mass, and then take your meal  
 When you will, with my wife beside you  
 To comfort you with her company till I come back to court.

1100

You stay,  
 And I shall get up at dawn.  
 I will to the hunt away.  
 When Gawain's agreement was sworn  
 He bowed, as brave knights may.

## XLV

'Moreover,' said the man, 'Let us make a bargain  
 That whatever I win in the woods be yours,  
 And any achievement you chance on here, you exchange for it.  
 Sweet sir, truly swear to such a bartering,  
 Whether fair fortune or foul befall from it.'

1110

'By God,' said the good Gawain, 'I agree to that,  
 And I am happy that you have an eye to sport.'  
 Then the prince of that people said, 'What pledge of wine  
 Is brought to seal the bargain?' And they burst out laughing.  
 They took drink and toyed in trifling talk,  
 These lords and ladies, as long as they liked,  
 And then with French refinement and many fair words  
 They stood, softly speaking, to say good-night,  
 Kissing as they parted company in courtly style.  
 With lithe liege servants in plenty and lambent torches,  
 Each brave man was brought to his bed at last,

1120

Full soft.  
 Before they fared to bed  
 They rehearsed their bargain oft.  
 That people's prince, men said,  
 Could fly his wit aloft.

## Fitt 3

## XLVI

In the faint light before dawn folk were stirring;  
 Guests who had to go gave orders to their grooms,  
 Who busied themselves briskly with the beasts, saddling,  
 Trimming their tackle and tying on their luggage.  
 Arrayed for riding in the richest style,  
 Guests leaped on their mounts lightly, laid hold of their bridles,  
 And each rider rode out on his own chosen way.  
 The beloved lord of the land was not the last up,

1130

watched awake revealed

Being arrayed for riding with his retinue in force.  
 He ate a sop<sup>o</sup> hastily when he had heard mass,  
 And hurried with horn to the hunting field;  
 Before the sun's first rays fell on the earth,  
 On their high steeds were he and his knights.  
 Then these cunning hunters came to couple<sup>o</sup> their hounds,  
 Cast open the kennel<sup>o</sup> doors and called them out,  
 And blew on their bugles three bold notes.<sup>o</sup>  
 The hounds broke out barking, baying fiercely,  
 And when they went chasing, they were whipped back.  
 There were a hundred choice huntsmen there, whose fame

Resounds.

To their stations keepers strode;  
 Huntsmen unleashed hounds:  
 The forest overflowed  
 With the strident bugle sounds.

## XLVII

At the first cry wild creatures quivered with dread.  
 The deer in distraction darted down to the dales  
 Or up to the high ground, but eagerly they were  
 Driven back by the beaters, who bellowed lustily.  
 They let the harts with high-branching heads have their freedom,  
 And the brave bucks, too, with their broad antlers,  
 For the noble prince had expressly prohibited  
 Meddling with male deer in the months of close season.<sup>o</sup>  
 But the hinds were held back with a 'Hey' and a 'Whoa!'  
 And does driven with much din to the deep valleys.  
 Lo! the arrows' slanting flight as they were loosed!  
 A shaft flew forth at every forest turning,  
 The broad head biting on the brown flank.  
 They screamed as the blood streamed out, sank dead on the sward,  
 Always harried by hounds hard on their heels,  
 And the hurrying hunters' high horn notes.  
 Like the rending of ramped<sup>o</sup> hills roared the din.  
 If one of the wild beasts slipped away from the archers  
 It was dragged down and met death at the dog-bases  
 After being hunted from the high ground and harried to the water,  
 So skilled were the hunt-servants at stations lower down,  
 So gigantic the greyhounds that grabbed them in a flash,  
 Seizing them savagely, as swift, I swear,

As sight.

sop bread dipped in spiced wine; see Chaucer, the General Prologue, l. 336  
 couple put leashes on  
 kennel The hounds would have been in one large kennel.  
 notes The hunting horn had only one note, so that differentiation was by long and short. The

names of the calls were mote, trut, trrororout, trrorororout.  
 close season Winter, September to June, was the closed season for male deer; only females were hunted during winter.  
 ramped sloping

The lord, in humour high  
 Would spur, then stop and alight.  
 In bliss the day went by  
 Till dark drew on, and night.

## XLVIII

Thus by the forest borders the brave lord sported,  
 And the good man Gawain, on his gay bed lying,  
 Lay hidden till the light of day gleamed on the walls.  
 Covered with fair canopy, the curtains closed,  
 And as in slumber he slept on, there slipped into his mind  
 A slight, suspicious sound, and the door stealthily opened.  
 He raised up his head out of the bedclothes,  
 Caught up the corner of the curtain a little  
 And watched warily towards it, to see what it was.  
 It was the lady, loveliest to look upon,  
 Who secretly and silently secured the door,  
 Then bore towards his bed: the brave knight, embarrassed,  
 Lay flat with fine adroitness and feigned sleep.  
 Silently she stepped on, stole to his bed,  
 Caught up the curtain, crept within,  
 And seated herself softly on the side of the bed.  
 There she watched a long while, waiting for him to wake.  
 Slyly close this long while lay the knight,  
 Considering in his soul this circumstance,  
 Its sense and likely sequel, for it seemed marvellous.  
 'Still, it would be more circumspect,' he said to himself,  
 'To speak and discover her desire in due course.'  
 So he stirred and stretched himself, twisting towards her,  
 Opened his eyes and acted as if astounded;  
 And, to seem the safer by such service, crossed himself  
 In dread.

With chin and cheek so fair,  
 White ranged with rosy red,  
 With laughing lips, and air  
 Of love, she lightly said:

## XLIX

'Good morning, Sir Gawain,' the gay one murmured,  
 'How unsafely you sleep, that one may slip in here!  
 Now you are taken in a trice. Unless a truce come between us,  
 I shall bind you to your bed—of that be sure.'  
 The lady uttered laughingly those playful words.  
 'Good morning, gay lady,' Gawain blithely greeted her.  
 'Do with me as you will: that well pleases me.  
 For I surrender speedily and sue for grace,  
 Which, to my mind, since I must, is much the best course.'  
 And thus he repaid her with repartee and ready laughter.  
 'But if, lovely lady, your leave were forthcoming,

And you were pleased to free your prisoner and pray him to rise,  
 I would abandon my bed for a better habilitation,  
 And have more happiness in our honey talk.'  
 'Nay, verily, fine sir,' urged the voice of that sweet one,  
 'You shall not budge from your bed. I have a better idea.  
 I shall hold you fast here on this other side as well  
 And so chat on with the chevalier my chains have caught.  
 For I know well, my knight, that your name is Sir Gawain,  
 Whom all the world worships, wherever he ride;  
 For lords and their ladies, and all living folk,  
 Hold your honour in high esteem, and your courtesy.  
 And now—here you are truly, and we are utterly alone;  
 My lord and his liege man are a long way off;  
 Others still bide in their beds, my bower-maidens too;  
 Shut fast and firmly with a fine hasp is the door;  
 And since I have in this house him who pleases all,  
 As long as my time lasts I shall linger in talk take

My fill.

My young body is yours,  
 Do with it what you will;  
 My strong necessities force  
 Me to be your servant still.'

## L

'In good truth,' said Gawain, 'that is a gain indeed,  
 Though I am hardly the hero of whom you speak.  
 To be held in such honour as you here suggest,  
 I am altogether unworthy, I own it freely.  
 By God, I should be glad if you granted it right,  
 For me to essay by speech or some other service,  
 To pleasure such a perfect lady—pure joy it would be.'  
 'In good truth, Sir Gawain,' the gay lady replied,  
 'If I slighted or set at naught your spotless fame  
 And your all-pleasing prowess, it would show poor breeding.  
 But there is no lack of ladies who would love, noble one,  
 To hold you in their arms, as I have you here,  
 And linger in the luxury of your delightful discourse,  
 Which would perfectly pleasure them and appease their woes,—  
 Rather than have riches or the red gold they own.  
 But as I love that Lord, the Celestial Ruler,  
 I have wholly in my hand what all desire

Through his grace.'

Not loth was she to allure,  
 This lady fair of face;  
 But the knight with speeches pure  
 Answered in each case.

My young . . . still (ll. 1237-40) This seems  
 like a direct assault for the first temptation of

Gawain, engineered at least—see below—by a  
 sorceress.

## LI

'Madam,' said the merry man, 'May Mary requite you!  
For in good faith I have found in you free-hearted generosity.  
Certain men for their deeds receive esteem from others,  
But for myself, I do not deserve the respect they show me;  
Your honourable mind makes you utter only what is good.'

1270

For were I worth the whole of womankind,  
And all the wealth in the world were in my hand,  
And if bargaining I were to bid to bring myself a lord,  
With your noble qualities, knight, made known to me now,  
Your good looks, gracious manner, and great courtesy,  
All of which I had heard of before, but here prove true,  
No lord that is living could be allowed to excel you.'  
'Indeed, dear lady, you did better,' said the knight,  
'But I am proud of the precious price you put on me,  
And solemnly as your servant say you are my sovereign.  
May Christ requite it you: I have become your knight.'

1280

Then of many matters they talked till mid-morning and after,  
And all the time she behaved as if she adored him;  
But Sir Gawain was on guard in a gracious manner.  
Though she was the winsomest woman the warrior had known,  
He was less love-laden because of the loss he must

Now face—

His destruction by the stroke,  
For come it must was the case.  
The lady of leaving then spoke;  
He assented with speedy grace.

## LII

1290

Then she gave him good-bye, glinting with laughter,  
And standing up, astounded him with these strong words:  
'May He who prospers every speech for this pleasure reward you!  
I cannot bring myself to believe that you could be Gawain.'  
'How so?' said the knight, speaking urgently,  
For he feared he had failed to observe the forms of courtesy.  
But the beauteous one blessed him and brought out this argument:  
'Such a great man as Gawain is granted to be,  
The very vessel of virtue and fine courtesy,  
Could scarcely have stayed such a sojourn with a lady  
Without craving a kiss out of courtesy,  
Touched by some trifling hint at the tail-end of a speech.'  
'So be it, as you say,' then said Gawain,  
'I shall kiss at your command, as becomes a knight  
Who fears to offend you; no further plea is needed.'  
Whereupon she approached him, and penned him in her arms,  
Leaned over him lovingly and gave the lord a kiss.  
Then they commended each other to Christ in comely style,

1300

And without more words she went out by the door.  
He made ready to rise with rapid haste,  
Summoned his servant, selected his garb,  
And walked down, when he was dressed, debonairly<sup>o</sup> to mass.  
Then he went to the well-served meal which awaited him.  
And made merry sport till the moon rose

At night.

Never was baron bold  
So taken by ladies bright,  
The young one and the old:  
They throve all three in delight.

## LIII

And still at his sport spurred the castellan,  
Hunting the barren hinds in holt<sup>o</sup> and on heath.  
So many had he slain, by the setting of the sun,  
Of does and other deer, that it was downright wonderful.  
Then at the finish the folk flocked in eagerly,  
And quickly collected the killed deer in a heap.  
Those highest in rank came up with hosts of attendants,  
Picked out what appeared to be the plumpest beasts  
And, according to custom, had them cut open with finesse.  
Some who ceremoniously assessed<sup>o</sup> them there  
Found two fingers' breadth of fat on the worst.  
Then they slit open the slot, seized the first stomach,<sup>o</sup>  
Scraped it with a keen knife and tied up the tripes.  
Next they hacked off all the legs, the hide was stripped,  
The belly broken open and the bowels removed  
Carefully, lest they loosen the ligature of the knot.  
Then they gripped the gullet, disengaged deftly  
The wezand<sup>o</sup> from the windpipe and whipped out the guts.  
Then their sharp knives shore through the shoulder-bones,  
Which they slid out of a small hole, leaving the sides<sup>o</sup> intact.  
Then they cleft the chest clean through, cutting it in two.  
Then again at the gullet a man began to work  
And straight away rived it, right to the fork,  
Flicked out the shoulder-fillets, and faithfully then  
He rapidly ripped free the rib-fillets.  
Similarly, as is seemly, the spine was cleared  
All the way to the haunch, which hung from it;  
And they heaved up the whole haunch and hewed it off;  
And that is called, according to its kind, the numbles,<sup>o</sup>

I find.

debonairly elegantly

holt wood  
assessed i.e. to see how good and thick the  
flesh was. The chief of the hunt cut a slit down  
the breast, or brisket. Hunting was a highly  
formalized, aristocratic pastime, with an elabo-  
rate language and etiquette.

slit . . . stomach slit open the hollow at the  
base of the throat; and seized the gullet  
wezand esophagus  
sides skin of the sides  
numbles offal from back and loins

1350 At the thigh-forks then they strain  
And free the folds behind,  
Hurrying to hack all in twain,  
The backbone to unbind.

## LIV

Then they hewed off the head and also the neck,  
And after sundered the sides swiftly from the chine,  
And into the foliage they flung the fee of the raven.<sup>o</sup>  
Then each fellow, for his fee,<sup>o</sup> as it fell to him to have,  
Skewered through the stout flanks beside the ribs,  
And then by the hocks of the haunches they hung up their booty.  
1360 On one of the finest fells<sup>o</sup> they fed their hounds,  
And let them have the lights,<sup>o</sup> the liver and the tripes,  
With bread well imbrued with blood mixed with them.  
Boldly they blew the kill amid the baying of hounds.  
Then off they went homewards, holding their meat,  
Stalwartly sounding many stout horn-calls.  
As dark was descending, they were drawing near  
To the comely castle where quietly our knight stayed.

Fires roared,

1370 And blithely hearts were beating  
As into hall came the lord.  
When Gawain gave him greeting,  
Joy abounded at the board.

## LV

Then the master commanded everyone to meet in the hall,  
Called the ladies to come down with their company of maidens.  
Before all the folk on the floor, he bid men  
Fetch the venison and place it before him.  
Then gaily and in good humour to Gawain he called,  
Told over the tally of the sturdy beasts,  
And showed him the fine fat flesh flayed from the ribs.  
1380 'How does the sport please you? Do you praise me for it?  
Am I thoroughly thanked for thriving as a huntsman?'  
'Certainly,' said the other, 'Such splendid spoils  
Have I not seen for seven years in the season of winter.'  
'And I give you all, Gawain,' said the good man then,  
'For according to our covenant you may claim it as your own.'  
'Certes, that is so, and I say the same to you,'  
Said Gawain, 'For my true gains in this great house,  
I am not loth to allow, must belong to you.'

fee . . . raven bit of gristle flung into a tree  
for the crows and ravens gathered around the  
hunt  
fellow . . . fee The portions of the carcasses

were assigned to members of the hunt in  
order.  
fells skins  
lights longs

And he put his arms round his handsome neck, hugging him,  
And kissed him in the comeliest way he could think of.  
'Accept my takings, sir, for I received no more;  
Gladly would I grant them, however great they were.'  
'And therefore I thank you,' the thane said, 'Good!  
Yours may be the better gift, if you would break<sup>o</sup> it to me  
Where your wisdom won you wealth of that kind.'  
'No such clause in our contract! Request nothing else!'  
Said the other, 'You have your due: ask more,

None should.'

They laughed in blithe assent  
With worthy words and good;  
Then to supper they swiftly went,  
To fresh delicious food.

## LVI

And sitting afterwards by the hearth of an audience chamber,  
Where retainers repeatedly brought them rare wines,  
In their jolly jesting they jointly agreed  
On a settlement similar to the preceding one;  
To exchange the chance achievements of the morrow,  
No matter how novel they were, at night when they met.  
They accorded on this compact, the whole court observing,  
And the bumper was brought forth in banter to seal it.  
And at last they lovingly took leave of each other,  
Each man hastening thereafter to his bed.  
The cock having crowed and called only thrice,<sup>o</sup>  
The lord leaped from bed, and his liege men too,  
So that mass and a meal were meetly dealt with,  
And by first light the folk to the forest were bound  
For the chase.

Proudly the hunt with horns  
Soon drove through a desert place:  
Uncoupled through the thorns<sup>o</sup>  
The great hounds pressed apace.

## LVII

By a quagmire they quickly scented quarry and gave tongue,  
And the chief huntsman urged on the first hounds up,  
Spurring them on with a splendid spate of words.<sup>o</sup>  
The hounds, hearing it, hurried there at once,  
Fell on the trail furiously, forty together,  
And made such echoing uproar, all howling at once,  
That the rocky banks round about rang with the din.

break disclose  
cock . . . thrice Third cock-crow was just be-  
fore dawn.

thorns looking for boars, which lurk in such  
difficult places  
spate . . . words Hounds needed more encour-  
agement to tackle boars. See Fig. 45.

Exchanging what we achieve when the chase is over.  
 For twice I have tested you, and twice found you true.  
 1680 Now "Third time, throw best!" Think of that tomorrow!  
 Let us make merry while we may, set our minds on joy,  
 For hard fate can hit man whenever it likes.  
 This was graciously granted and Gawain stayed.  
 Blithely drink was brought, then to bed with lights

They pressed.

All night Sir Gawain sleeps  
 Softly and still at rest;  
 But the lord his custom keeps  
 And is early up and dressed.

## LXVIII

1690 After mass, he and his men made a small meal.<sup>o</sup>  
 Merry was the morning; he demanded his horse.  
 The men were ready mounted before the main gate,  
 A host of knightly horsemen to follow after him.  
 Wonderfully fair was the forest-land, for the frost remained,  
 And the rising sun shone ruddily on the ragged clouds,  
 In its beauty brushing their blackness off the heavens.  
 The huntsmen unleashed the hounds by a holt-side,<sup>o</sup>  
 And the rocks and surrounding bushes rang with their horn-calls.  
 Some found and followed the fox's<sup>o</sup> tracks,  
 1700 And wove various ways in their wily fashion.  
 A small hound cried the scent, the senior huntsman called  
 His fellow foxhounds to him and, feverishly sniffing,  
 The rout of dogs rushed forward on the right path.  
 The fox hurried fast, for they found him soon  
 And, seeing him distinctly, pursued him at speed,  
 Unmistakably giving tongue with tumultuous din.  
 Deviously in difficult country he doubled on his tracks,  
 Swerved and wheeled away, often waited listening,  
 Till at last by a little ditch he leaped a quickset hedge,  
 1710 And stole out stealthily at the side of a valley,  
 Considering his stratagem had given the slip to the hounds.  
 But he stumbled on a tracking-dogs' tryst-place unawares,  
 And there in a cleft three hounds threatened him at once,

All grey.

He swiftly started back  
 And, full of deep dismay,  
 He dashed on a different track;  
 To the woods he went away.

small meal a bite  
 holt-side wood-side  
 fox's Descriptions of medieval set fox-hunts are

rare; Chaucer's Nun's Priest's Tale is an example in another genre.

## LXIX

Then came the lively delight of listening to the hounds  
 When they had all met in a muster, mingling together,  
 For, catching sight of him, they cried such curses on him  
 That the clustering cliffs seemed to be crashing down.  
 Here he was halloosed when the hunters met him,  
 There savagely snarled at by intercepting hounds;  
 Then he was called thief and threatened often;  
 With the tracking dogs on his tail, no tarrying was possible.  
 When out in the open he was often run at,  
 So he often swerved in again, that artful Reynard.  
 Yes, he led the lord and his liegemen a dance  
 In this manner among the mountains till mid-afternoon,  
 While harmoniously at home the honoured knight slept  
 Between the comely curtains in the cold morning.  
 But the lady's longing to woo would not let her sleep,  
 Now would she impair the purpose pitched in her heart,  
 But rose up rapidly and ran to him  
 In a ravishing robe that reached to the ground,  
 Trimmed with finest fur from pure pelts,  
 Not coifed as to custom,<sup>o</sup> but with costly jewels  
 Strung in scores on her splendid hairnet.  
 Her fine-featured face and fair throat were unveiled,  
 Her breast was bare and her back as well.  
 She came in by the chamber door and closed it after her,  
 Cast open a casement and called on the knight,  
 And briskly thus rebuked him with bountiful words

Of good cheer.

'Ah sir! What, sound asleep?  
 The morning's crisp and clear.'  
 He had been drowsing deep,  
 But now he had to hear.

## LXX

The noble sighed ceaselessly in unsettled slumber  
 As threatening thoughts thronged in the dawn light  
 About destiny, which the day after would deal him his fate  
 At the Green Chapel where Gawain was to greet his man,  
 And be bound to bear his buffet unresisting.  
 But having recovered consciousness in comely fashion,  
 He heaved himself out of dreams and answered hurriedly.  
 The lovely lady advanced, laughing adorably,  
 Swooped over his splendid face and sweetly kissed him.  
 He welcomed her worthily with noble cheer  
 And, gazing on her gay and glorious attire,

coifed . . . custom For this third, subtler, and more important temptation, she has prepared more fully and less modestly.



Her features so faultless and fine of complexion,  
 He felt a flush of rapture suffuse his heart.  
 Sweet and genial smiling slid them into joy  
 Till bliss burst forth between them, beaming gay

And bright;

With joy the two contended  
 In talk of true delight,  
 And peril would have impended  
 Had Mary not minded her knight.

## LXXI

1770 For that peerless princess pressed him so hotly,  
 So invited him to the very verge, that he felt forced  
 Either to allow her love or blackguardly rebuff her.  
 He was concerned for his courtesy, lest he be called caitiff,  
 But more especially for his evil plight if he should plunge into sin,  
 And dishonour the owner of the house treacherously.  
 'God shield me! That shall not happen, for sure,' said the knight.  
 So with laughing love-talk he deflected gently

1780 The downright<sup>o</sup> declarations that dropped from her lips.  
 Said the beauty to the bold man, 'Blame will be yours  
 If you love not the living body lying close to you  
 More than all wooers in the world who are wounded in heart;  
 Unless you have a lover more beloved, who delights you more,  
 A maiden to whom you are committed, so immutably bound  
 That you do not seek to sever from her—which I see is so.  
 Tell me the truth of it, I entreat you now;  
 By all the loves there are, do not hide the truth

With guile.'

Then gently, 'By Saint John,'<sup>o</sup>  
 Said the knight with a smile,  
 'I owe my oath to none,  
 Nor wish to yet a while.'

## LXXII

'Those words,' said the fair woman, 'are the worst there could be,  
 But I am truly answered, to my utter anguish.  
 Give me now a gracious kiss, and I shall go from here  
 As a maid that loves much, mourning on this earth.'  
 Then, sighing, she stooped, and seemlily kissed him,  
 And, severing herself from him, stood up and said,  
 'At this adieu, my dear one, do me this pleasure:  
 Give me something as gift, your glove<sup>o</sup> if no more,  
 To mitigate my mourning when I remember you.'  
 1800 'Now certainly, for your sake,' said the knight,  
 'I wish I had here the handsomest thing I own,

downright literally, loving  
 Saint John the oath by the "beloved disciple,"  
 whose feast day was December 27—appropriate

to the time, the situation, and the character of  
 Gawain  
 glove a frequent love token

For you have deserved, forsooth, superabundantly  
 And rightfully, a richer reward than I could give.  
 But as tokens of true love, trifles mean little.  
 It is not to your honour to have at this time  
 A mere glove as Gawain's gift to treasure.  
 For I am here on an errand in unknown regions,  
 And have no bondsmen, no baggages with dear-bought things in them.  
 This afflicts me now, fair lady, for your sake.  
 Man must do as he must; neither lament it

Nor repine.'

'No, highly honoured one,'  
 Replied that lady fine,  
 'Though gift you give me none,  
 You must have something of mine.'

## LXXIII

She proffered him a rich ring wrought in red gold,  
 With a sparkling stone set conspicuously in it,  
 Which beamed as brilliantly as the bright sun;  
 You may well believe its worth was wonderfully great.  
 But the courteous man declined it and quickly said,  
 'Before God, gracious lady, no giving just now!  
 Not having anything to offer, I shall accept nothing.'  
 She offered it him urgently and he refused again,  
 Fast affirming his refusal on his faith as a knight.  
 Put out by this repulse, she presently said,  
 'If you reject my ring as too rich in value,  
 Doubtless you would be less deeply indebted to me  
 If I gave you my girdle,<sup>o</sup> a less gainful gift.'  
 She swiftly slipped off the cincture<sup>o</sup> of her gown  
 Which went round her waist under the wonderful mantle,  
 A girdle of green silk with a golden hem,  
 Embroidered only at the edges, with hand-stitched ornament.  
 And she pleaded with the prince in a pleasant manner  
 To take it notwithstanding its trifling worth;  
 But he told her that he could touch no treasure at all,  
 Not gold nor any gift, till God gave him grace  
 To pursue to success the search he was bound on.  
 'And therefore I beg you not to be displeased:  
 Press no more your purpose, for I promise it never  
 Can be.

I owe you a hundredfold  
 For grace you have granted me;  
 And ever through hot and cold  
 I shall stay your devotee.'

girdle belt, which turns out to have magical  
 properties (ll. 1851 ff.), as elsewhere in the  
 romances

cincture French *ceinture*, belt

## LXXIV

'Do you say "no" to this silk?' then said the beauty;  
 'Because it is simple in itself? And so it seems.  
 Lo! It is little indeed, and so less worth your esteem.  
 But one who was aware of the worth twined in it  
 1850 Would appraise its properties as more precious perhaps,  
 For the man that binds his body with this belt of green,  
 As long as he laps it closely about him,  
 No hero under heaven can hack him to pieces,  
 For he cannot be killed by any cunning on earth.'  
 Then the prince pondered, and it appeared to him  
 A precious gem to protect him in the peril appointed him  
 When he gained the Green Chapel to be given checkmate:<sup>o</sup>  
 It would be a splendid stratagem to escape being slain.  
 1860 Then he allowed her to solicit him and let her speak.  
 She pressed the belt upon him with potent words  
 And having got his agreement, she gave it him gladly,  
 Beseeching him for her sake to conceal it always,  
 And hide it from her husband with all diligence.  
 That never should another know of it, the noble swore  
 Outright.

Then often his thanks gave he  
 With all his heart and might,  
 And thrice by then had she  
 Kissed the constant knight.

## LXXV

1870 Then with a word of farewell she went away  
 For she could not force further satisfaction from him.  
 Directly she withdrew, Sir Gawain dressed himself,  
 Rose and arrayed himself in rich garments,  
 But laid aside the love-lace the lady had given him,  
 Secreted it carefully where he could discover it later.  
 Then he went his way at once to the chapel,  
 Privily<sup>o</sup> approached a priest and prayed him there  
 To listen to his life's sins and enlighten him  
 On how he might have salvation in the hereafter.  
 1880 Then, confessing his faults, he fairly shrove himself,<sup>o</sup>  
 Begging mercy for both major and minor sins.  
 He asked the holy man for absolution  
 And was absolved with certainty and sent out so pure  
 That Doomsday<sup>o</sup> could have been declared the day after.  
 Then he made merrier among the noble ladies,  
 With comely carolling and all kinds of pleasure,

checkmate to get the final blow; see l. 2195  
 Privily secretly, discreetly  
 shrove himself But he keeps the belt; the poet  
 seems not to regard this as major or minor sin,  
 since Gawain confesses and receives absolution.

Doomsday the Day of General Judgment.  
 Gawain has been made so clean of sin as to be  
 ready for heaven tomorrow, should tomorrow be  
 Judgment Day.

Than ever he had done, with ecstasy, till came

Dark night.

Such honour he did to all,  
 1890 They said, 'Never has this knight  
 Since coming into hall  
 Expressed such pure delight.'

## LXXVI

Now long may he linger there, love sheltering him!  
 The prince was still on the plain, pleasuring in the chase,  
 Having finished off the fox he had followed so far.  
 As he leaped over a hedge looking out for the quarry,  
 Where he heard the hounds that were harrying the fox,  
 Reynard came running through a rough thicket  
 With the pack all pell-mell, panting at his heels.  
 1900 The lord, aware of the wild beast, waited craftily,  
 Then drew his dazzling sword and drove at the fox.  
 The beast baulked at the blade to break<sup>o</sup> sideways,  
 But a dog bounded at him before he could,  
 And right in front of the horse's feet they fell on him,  
 All worrying their wily prey with a wild uproar.  
 The lord quickly alighted and lifted him up,  
 Wrenched him beyond reach of the ravening fangs,  
 Held him high over his head and hallooed lustily,  
 While the angry hounds in hordes bayed at him.  
 1910 Thither hurried the huntsmen with horns in plenty,  
 Sounding the rally<sup>o</sup> splendidly till they saw their lord.  
 When the company of his court had come up to the kill,  
 All who bore bugles blew at once,  
 And the others without horns hallooed loudly.  
 The requiem that was raised for Reynard's soul  
 And the commotion made it the merriest meet ever,

Men said.

The hounds must have their fee:  
 They pat them on the head,  
 Then hold the fox; and he  
 Is reft of his skin of red.

## LXXVII

Then they set off for home, it being almost night,  
 Blowing their big horns bravely as they went.  
 At last the lord alighted at his beloved castle  
 And found upon the floor a fire, and beside it  
 The good Sir Gawain in a glad humour  
 By reason of the rich friendship he had reaped from the ladies.  
 He wore a turquoise tunic<sup>o</sup> extending to the ground;

break turn away  
 rally recall

tunic robe. Blue was the color of fidelity.

The reins, hooking them round a rough branch;  
 Then he went to the barrow, which he walked round, inspecting,  
 Wondering what in the world it might be.  
 2180 It had a hole in each end and on either side,  
 And was overgrown with grass in great patches.  
 All hollow it was within, only an old cavern  
 Or the crevice of an ancient crag: he could not explain it

Aright.

'O God, is the Chapel Green  
 This mound?' said the noble knight.  
 'At such might Satan be seen  
 Saying matins at midnight.'

LXXXVIII

2190 'Now certainly the place is deserted,' said Gawain,  
 'It is a hideous oratory, all overgrown,  
 And well graced for the gallant garbed in green  
 To deal out his devotions in the Devil's fashion.  
 Now I feel in my five wits, it is the Fiend himself  
 That has tricked me into this tryst, to destroy me here.  
 This is a chapel of mischance—checkmate<sup>o</sup> to it!  
 It is the most evil holy place I ever entered.'  
 With his high helmet on his head, and holding his lance,  
 He roamed up to the roof of that rough dwelling.  
 Then from that height he heard, from a hard rock  
 2200 On the bank beyond the brook, a barbarous noise.  
 What! It clattered amid the cliffs fit to cleave them apart,  
 As if a great scythe were being ground on a grindstone there.  
 What! It whirred and it whetted, like water in a mill.  
 What! It made a rushing, ringing din, rueful to hear.  
 'By God!' then said Gawain, 'that is going on,  
 I suppose, as a salute to myself, to greet me

Hard by.

God's will be warranted:

"Alas!" is a craven cry.

2210 No din shall make me dread  
 Although today I die.'

LXXXIX

Then the courteous knight called out clamorously,  
 'Who holds sway here and has an assignation with me?  
 For the good knight Gawain is on the ground here.  
 If anyone there wants anything, wend your way hither fast,  
 And further your needs either now, or not at all.'  
 'Bide there!' said one on the bank above his head,  
 'And you shall swiftly receive what I once swore to give you.'

Yet for a time he continued his tumult of scraping,  
 2220 Turning away as he whetted, before he would descend.  
 Then he thrust himself round a thick crag through a hole,  
 Whirling round a wedge of rock with a frightful weapon,  
 A Danish axe<sup>o</sup> duly honed for dealing the blow,  
 With a broad biting edge, bow-bent along the handle,  
 Ground on a grindstone, a great four-foot blade—  
 No less, by that love-lace<sup>o</sup> gleaming so brightly!  
 And the gallant in green was garbed as at first,  
 His looks and limbs the same, his locks and beard;  
 Save that steadily on his feet he strode on the ground,  
 2230 Setting the handle to the stony earth and stalking beside it.  
 He would not wade through the water when he came to it,  
 But vaulted over on his axe, then with huge strides  
 Advanced violently and fiercely along the field's width

On the snow.

Sir Gawain went to greet

The knight, not bowing low.

The man said, 'Sir so sweet,

Your honour the trysts you owe.'<sup>o</sup>

XC

'Gawain,' said the Green Knight, 'may God guard you!  
 You are welcome to my dwelling, I warrant you,  
 And you have timed your travel here as a true man ought.  
 You know plainly the pact we pledged between us:  
 This time a twelvemonth ago you took your portion,  
 And now at this New Year I should nimbly requite you.  
 And we are on our own here in this valley  
 With no seconds to sunder us, spar as we will.  
 Take your helmet off your head, and have your payment here.  
 And offer no more argument or action than I did  
 When you whipped off my head with one sroke.'  
 'No,' said Gawain, 'by God who gave me a soul,  
 The grievous gash to come I grudge you not at all;  
 Strike but the one stroke and I shall stand still  
 And offer you no hindrance; you may act freely,  
 I swear.'

Head bent,<sup>o</sup> Sir Gawain bowed,

And showed the bright flesh bare.

He behaved as if uncowed,

Being loth to display his care.

**Danish axe** The sort of ferocious, long-bladed axe originally used by the Viking pirates, with-out a spike on the back. At King Arthur's court the Green Knight had carried a *guisarme*, spiked and richly ornamented, a much more knightly weapon.

**love-lace** The original reads simply "thong."  
**trysts you owe** The stress is on Gawain's keeping of his oath.

**Head bent** The words pick up the description of the Green Knight awaiting the stroke at Arthur's court.

## XCI

2260 Then the gallant in green quickly got ready,  
Heaved his horrid weapon on high to hit Gawain,  
With all the brute force in his body bearing it aloft,  
Swinging savagely enough to strike him dead.  
Had it driven down as direly as he aimed,  
The daring dauntless man would have died from the blow.  
But Gawain glanced up at the grim axe beside him  
As it came shooting through the shivering air to shatter him,  
And his shoulders shrank slightly from the sharp edge.  
The other suddenly stayed the descending axe,  
2270 And then reproved the prince with many proud words:  
'You are not Gawain,' said the gallant, 'whose greatness is such  
That by hill or hollow no army ever frightened him;  
For now you flinch for fear before you feel harm.  
I never did know that knight to be a coward.  
I neither flinched nor fled when you let fly your blow,  
Nor offered any quibble in the house of King Arthur.  
My head flew to my feet, but flee I did not.  
Yet you quail cravenly though unscathed so far.  
So I am bound to be called the better man

Therefore.'

2280 Said Gawain, 'Not again  
Shall I flinch as I did before;  
But if my head pitch to the plain,  
It's off for evermore.'

## XCII

'But be brisk, man, by your faith, and bring me to the point;  
Deal me my destiny and do it out of hand,  
For I shall stand your stroke, not starting at all  
Till your axe has hit me. Here is my oath on it.'  
'Have at you then!' said the other, heaving up his axe,  
Behaving as angrily as if he were mad.  
2290 He menaced him mightily, but made no contact,<sup>o</sup>  
Smartly withholding his hand without hurting him.  
Gawain waited unswerving, with not a wavering limb,  
But stood still as a stone or the stump of a tree  
Gripping the rocky ground with a hundred grappling roots.  
Then again the Green Knight began to gird:<sup>o</sup>  
'So now you have a whole heart I must hit you.  
May the high knighthood which Arthur conferred  
Preserve you and save your neck, if so it avail you!  
Then said Gawain, storming with sudden rage,  
2300 "Thrash on, you thrustful fellow, you threaten too much.

made . . . contact possible manuscript reading: gird mock  
ryne, i.e. "cleave"; thus, "did not cut through  
the man"; or: ryne, "touch"

It seems your spirit is struck with self-dread.'  
'Forsooth,' the other said, 'you speak so fiercely  
I will no longer lengthen matters by delaying your business,  
I vow.'

He stood astride to smite,  
Lips pouting, puckered brow.  
No wonder he lacked delight  
Who expected no help now.

## XCIII

Up went the axe at once and hurtled down straight  
At the naked neck with its knife-like edge.  
Though it swung down savagely, slight was the wound,  
A mere snick on the side, so that the skin was broken.  
Through the fair fat to the flesh fell the blade,  
And over his shoulders the shimmering blood shot to the ground.  
When Sir Gawain saw his gore glinting on the snow,  
He leapt feet close together a spear's length away,  
Hurriedly heaved his helmet on to his head,  
And shrugging his shoulders, shot his shield to the front,  
Swung out his bright sword and said fiercely,  
(For never had the knight since being nursed by his mother  
Been so buoyantly happy, so blithe in this world)  
'Cease your blows, sir, strike me no more.  
I have sustained a stroke here unresistingly,  
And if you offer any more I shall earnestly reply,  
Resisting, rest assured, with the most rancorous

Despite.

The single stroke is wrought  
To which we pledged our plight  
In high King Arthur's court:  
Enough now, therefore, knight!

## XCIV

The bold man stood back and bent over his axe,  
Putting the haft to earth, and leaning on the head.  
He gazed at Sir Gawain on the ground before him,  
Considering the spirited and stout way he stood,  
Audacious in arms; his heart warmed to him.  
Then he gave utterance gladly in his great voice,  
With resounding speech saying to the knight,  
Bold man, do not be so bloodily resolute.  
No one here has offered you evil discourteously,  
Contrary to the covenant made at the King's court.  
I promised a stroke, which you received: consider yourself paid.  
I cancel all other obligations of whatever kind.  
If I had been more active, perhaps I could  
Have made you suffer by striking a savager stroke.

First in foolery I made a feint at striking,  
 Not rending you with a riving cut—and right I was,  
 On account of the first night's covenant we accorded;  
 For you truthfully kept your trust in troth with me,  
 Giving me your gains, as a good man should.  
 2350 The further feinted blow was for the following day,  
 When you kissed my comely wife, and the kisses came to me:  
 For those two things, harmlessly I thrust twice at you

Feinted blows.

Truth for truth's the word;  
 No need for dread, God knows.  
 From your failure at the third  
 The tap you took arose.

## XCV

2360 'For that braided belt you wear belongs to me.  
 I am well aware that my own wife gave it you.  
 Your conduct and your kissings are completely known to me,  
 And the wooing by my wife—my work set it on.  
 I instructed her to try you, and you truly seem  
 To be the most perfect paladin ever to pace the earth.  
 As the pearl to the white pea in precious worth,  
 So in good faith is Gawain to other gay knights.  
 But here your faith failed you, you flagged somewhat, sir,  
 Yet it was not for a well-wrought thing, nor for wooing either,  
 But for love of your life, which is less blameworthy.'

2370 The other strong man stood considering this a while,  
 So filled with fury that his flesh trembled,  
 And the blood from his breast burst forth in his face  
 As he shrank for shame at what the chevalier spoke of.  
 The first words the fair knight could frame were:  
 'Curses on both cowardice and covetousness!<sup>o</sup>  
 Their vice and villainy are virtue's undoing.'  
 Then he took the knot, with a twist twitched it loose,  
 And fiercely flung the fair girdle to the knight.  
 'Lo! There is the false thing, foul fortune befall it!  
 I was craven about our encounter, and cowardice taught me  
 2380 To accord with covetousness and corrupt my nature  
 And the liberality and loyalty belonging to chivalry.  
 Now I am faulty and false and found fearful always.  
 In the train of treachery and untruth go woe

And shame.

I acknowledge, knight, how ill  
 I behaved, and take the blame.  
 Award what penance you will:  
 Henceforth I'll shun ill-fame.'

covetousness more than desire for wealth and possessions: entanglement in the values of this world

## XCVI

Then the other lord laughed and politely said,  
 'In my view you have made amends for your misdemeanour;  
 You have confessed your faults fully with fair acknowledgement,  
 And plainly done penance at the point of my axe.  
 You are absolved of your sin and as stainless now  
 As if you had never fallen in fault since first you were born.  
 As for the gold-hemmed girdle, I give it you, sir,  
 Seeing it is as green as my gown. Sir Gawain, you may  
 Think about this trial when you throng in company  
 With paragons of princes, for it is a perfect token,  
 At knightly gatherings, of the great adventure at the Green Chapel.  
 2400 You shall come back to my castle this cold New Year.  
 To revel away the rest of this rich feast

We shall go.

Thus urging him, the lord  
 Said, 'You and my wife, I know  
 We shall bring to clear accord,  
 Though she was your fierce foe.'

## XCVII

'No, forsooth,' said the knight, seizing his helmet,  
 And doffing it with dignity as he delivered his thanks,  
 'My stay has sufficed me.<sup>o</sup> Still, luck go with you!  
 2410 May He who bestows all good, honour you with it!  
 And commend me to the courteous lady, your comely wife;  
 Indeed, my due regards to both dear ladies,  
 Who with their wanton wiles have thus waylaid their knight.  
 But it is no marvel for a foolish man to be maddened thus  
 And saddled with sorrow by the sleights of women.<sup>o</sup>  
 For here on earth was Adam taken in by one,  
 And Solomon by many such, and Samson likewise;  
 Delilah dealt him his doom; and David, later still,  
 Was blinded by Bathsheba, and badly suffered for it.  
 2420 Since these were troubled by their tricks, it would be true joy  
 To love them but not believe<sup>o</sup> them, if a lord could,  
 For these were the finest of former times, most favoured by fortune  
 Of all under the heavenly kingdom whose hearts were

Abused;

These four all fell to schemes  
 Of women whom they used.  
 If I am snared, it seems  
 I ought to be excused.<sup>o</sup>

My stay . . . me I have been long enough away from Arthur's court  
 sleights of women The stock anti-feminist *exempla* of the Old Testament: Adam and Eve (Genesis 3); Solomon and his 700 wives and 300 concubines (I Kings 11:3); Samson and Delilah (Judges 16); David and Bathsheba, wife of Uriah (II Samuel 11:2-4). See Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. They seem to come in

oddly, but the point is merely that these were all women who had made men swerve from the path of (knightly) virtue.  
 believe i.e. put full trust in  
 If . . . excused Gawain seems now to be excusing himself on the ground that if such great men were deceived by women, it is no wonder if it happens to him.

## XCVIII

2430 'But your girdle,' said Gawain, 'God requite you for it!  
 Not for the glorious gold shall I gladly wear it,  
 Nor for the stuff nor the silk for the swaying pendants,  
 Nor for its worth, fine workmanship or wonderful honour;  
 But as a sign of my sin I shall see it often,  
 Remembering with remorse, when I am mounted in glory,  
 The fault and faintheartedness of the perverse flesh,  
 How it tends to attract tarnishing sin.  
 So when pride<sup>o</sup> shall prick me for my prowess in arms,  
 One look at this love-lace will make lowly my heart.  
 But one demand I make of you, may it not incommode you:  
 2440 Since you are master of the demesne I have remained in a while,  
 Make known, by your knighthood—and now may He above,  
 Who sits on high and holds up heaven, requite you!—  
 How you pronounce your true name; and no more requests.'  
 'Truly,' the other told him, 'I shall tell you my title.  
 Bertilak of the High Desert<sup>o</sup> I am called here in this land.  
 Through the might of Morgan the Fay,<sup>o</sup> who remains in my house  
 Through the wiles of her witchcraft, a lore well learned,—  
 Many of the magical arts of Merlin<sup>o</sup> she acquired,  
 For she lavished fervent love long ago  
 2450 On that susceptible sage: certainly your knights know  
 Of their fame.  
 So "Morgan the Goddess"  
 She accordingly became;  
 The proudest she can oppress  
 And to her purpose tame—

## XCIX

2460 'She sent me forth in this form to your famous hall  
 To put to the proof the great pride of the house,  
 The reputation for high renown of the Round Table;  
 She bewitched me in this weird way to bewilder your wits,  
 And to grieve Guinevere and goad her to death  
 With ghastly fear of that ghost's ghoulish speaking  
 With his head in his hand before the high table.  
 That is the aged beldame who is at home:  
 She is indeed your own aunt, Arthur's half-sister,  
 Daughter of the Duchess of Tintagel<sup>o</sup> who in due course,

pride mother of the deadly sins, which a knight, especially, must avoid  
 Bertilak The name Bertilak is Celtic. High Desert (*Haut-desert*) probably refers to his castle.  
 Morgan le Fay sorceress half-sister of King Arthur, who imprisoned his knights, first called "goddess" (l. 2452) by the 12th-century Gerald of Wales. She was said to have told Arthur of Lancelot's adultery with Guinevere; and Guinevere is said to have revealed her intrigue with

another knight—hence their enmity (l. 2460). Merlin the wizard of Arthur's court, who fell in love with Morgan and taught her his magic  
 Duchess of Tintagel See Malory, *Morte Darthur*, below. The story is first told by Geoffrey of Monmouth (12th century). Igraine, Duchess of Tintagel, conceived Arthur by King Uther Pendragon, who deceived her in the likeness of her husband; after her husband's death she married Uther.

By Uther, was mother of Arthur, who now holds sway.  
 Therefore I beg you, bold sir, come back to your aunt,  
 Make merry in my house, for my men love you,  
 And by my faith, brave sir, I bear you as much good will  
 1470 As I grant any man under God, for your great honesty.'  
 But Gawain firmly refused with a final negative.  
 They clasped and kissed, commending each other  
 To the Prince of Paradise,<sup>o</sup> and parted on the cold ground  
 Right there.

Gawain on steed serene  
 Spurred to court with courage fair,  
 And the gallant garbed in green  
 To wherever he would elsewhere.

## C

1480 Now Gawain goes riding on Gringolet  
 In lonely lands, his life saved by grace.  
 Often he stayed at a house, and often in the open,  
 And often overcame hazards in the valleys,  
 Which at this time I do not intend to tell you about.  
 The hurt he had had in his neck was healed,  
 And the glittering girdle that girt him round  
 Obliquely, like a baldric, was bound by his side  
 And laced under the left arm with a lasting knot,  
 In token that he was taken in a tarnishing sin;  
 And so he came to court, quite unscathed.  
 1490 When the great became aware of Gawain's arrival,  
 There was general jubilation at the joyful news.  
 The King kissed the knight, and the Queen likewise,  
 And so did many a staunch noble who sought to salute him.  
 They all asked him about his expedition,  
 And he truthfully told them of his tribulations—  
 What chanced at the chapel, the good cheer of the knight,  
 The lady's love-making, and lastly, the girdle.  
 He displayed the scar of the snick<sup>o</sup> on his neck  
 Where the bold man's blow had hit, his bad faith to  
 1500 Proclaim;  
 He groaned at his disgrace,  
 Unfolding his ill-fame,  
 And blood suffused his face  
 When he showed his mark of shame.

## CI

'Look, my lord,' said Gawain, the lace in his hand.  
 'This belt confirms the blame I bear on my neck,  
 My bane and debasement, the burden I bear

2510 For being caught by cowardice and covetousness.  
This is the figure of the faithlessness found in me,  
Which I must needs wear while I live.  
For man can conceal sin but not dissever from it,  
So when it is once fixed, it will never be worked loose.  
First the king, then all the court, comforted the knight,  
And all the lords and ladies belonging to the Table  
Laughed at it loudly, and concluded amiably  
That each brave man of the brotherhood should bear a baldric,<sup>o</sup>  
A band, obliquely about him, of bright green,  
Of the same hue as Sir Gawain's and for his sake wear it.  
2520 So it ranked as renown to the Round Table,  
And an everlasting honour to him who had it,  
As is rendered in Romance's rarest book.  
Thus in the days of Arthur this exploit was achieved,  
To which the books of Brutus<sup>o</sup> bear witness;  
After the bold baron, Brutus, came here,  
The siege and the assault being ceased at Troy

Before.

Such exploits, I'll be sworn,  
Have happened here of yore.  
Now Christ with his crown of thorn  
2530 Bring us his bliss evermore! AMEN.

HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE

c. 1380-1400

## THE VISION OF PIERS PLOWMAN

It is surprising how little we know about when, where, and by whom *The Vision of Will Concerning Piers Plowman* was written. The poem was widely known and read, for it exists in a large number of manuscripts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, was printed several times in the sixteenth, and was used, known, and referred to by sixteenth-century poets such as Skelton, by the religious Reformers a little later, and by others. But the few clues that we have to the identity of its author amount to little. He names himself several times as Will; he seems to have come from the West of England and to have been brought up in the area of the Malvern Hills, in Worcestershire, the scene of his vision. Many of the manuscripts of his book were copied there and thereabouts, and the long alliterative line that he uses for his meter survived, or was revived, with more strength in the West than elsewhere during the fourteenth century. The poet certainly spent some time in London.

The name of William Langland, traditionally associated with the poem, must serve

**baldric** This has been thought to mean, in conjunction with the motto of the Order of the Garter—*Hony soyt qui mal pence*—placed at the end of the poem by the scribe, that the poem commemorates the founding of the Garter by Edward III about 1347. But the colors are wrong: the garter was dark blue. A later Gawain

romance makes the lace white and sees in it the origin of the collar worn by Knights of the Bath. The association looks like an afterthought, not intended by the Gawain poet, despite his concern with chivalric values. **books of Brutus** i.e. any chronicle or romance of the "matter of Britain"

until scholarship finds a better. Even so, we are not much ahead, since we know nothing of William Langland either, and may be giving this name to at least two separate poets. *Piers Plowman* exists in three versions, called by scholars A, B, and C, all composed between about 1360 and about 1385. A, the earliest and shortest (about 2500 lines), opens with an allegorical vision of the corruption of society and the attempt to purify it through Piers the Plowman. Piers personifies the ordinary man, seeking goodness through humility, honest endeavor, and obedience to the law of God. This section is followed by another, much shorter: *The Vita de Dowel, Dobet and Dobeat* (The Life of Do Well, Do Better, and Do Best), in which another vision is presented. In his quest for the good Christian life and for the rational and intellectual foundations of faith, the poet asks information from Thought (intellectual activity), Wit (rational understanding resulting from thought), Study (Wit's wife: formal, disciplined reading and thought), and others. The search is inconclusive.

The B text, of about fifteen years later, is a radical revision and expansion of A. Adding further books, or *passus* (Latin *passus*, a step or stage), this version almost doubles the length of the whole. The search for Do Well is expanded, leading to Do Better (the life of Christ) and then to Do Best (the life of the church), each of them embodied in Piers.

The C text is a revised version of B, about ten years later, of much the same length, with some major cuts and additions.

Scholars are divided as to whether these three versions are the work of one man, or more. Though many now believe that one man was the author, this is not certain and the situation is baffling. It is less easy to explain the correspondences between the versions if more than one poet had been at work than it is to explain the differences if we accept A, B, and C as the work of a single poet rewriting his poem, keeping his theme intact, developing parts of it, and cutting out others, in response to changes in opinion and interest, and to contemporary events and pressures. It is hard to imagine a reviser, C, entering so thoroughly into the highly individual, vivid, and complicated style and personality of the original poet, B, and rising, in his additions, to the power and intensity of the earlier version. Nevertheless, the poetic quality of C is sometimes weaker, so that it may be the work of a later reviser rather than the poet of the B text's final revision, made toward the end of his life.

"Langland," then, is a fiction, but a convenient one. His long dream-allegory poem describes those ingredients of the social and religious condition of England in his day which he wishes to see reformed. The form in which it is cast allows the poet to pass easily from one mode of existence to another, from the description and outspoken criticism of current religious and social practices to the introduction of allegorical personages such as Holy Church, Lady Meed, Conscience, Kind Wit, and the rest. As in a dream, the real fits perfectly well with the abstract or symbolic; and the dream may help us to see the essential truth behind the apparent, the spiritual implication of the actual. Neither cancels out the other: they are coordinates.

This is not to say that the poem always has the fourfold significance that in the medieval period was drawn out of the text of the Bible—that it can everywhere be read for its literal meaning, its allegorical significance, its application to Christ and the church, and its application to divine love. The poem always functions on at least two levels, however—literal and figural—and sometimes on more; and it transposes easily from one to another.

So, this first and most important principle underlying the procedures of *Piers*