

# Sir Gawain and The Green Knight

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# Text

- Oral Pretext for a Literate Poem
- Late 14<sup>th</sup> Century
- Alliterative Revival
- Alliterative lines with no fixed number of syllables
- Stanzas; ends with five short lines rhyming a,b,a,b,a.



# Chivalry and Art of Love

- <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/capellanus.html>
- Church's role and Crusades
- Knight/Lady parallels Knight/Lord
- Medieval Marriage
- Andreas Capellanus' "Art of Love," end of 12<sup>th</sup> C.; Eleanor of Aquitaine



# Historical Context

- Plague, 1348-
- Hundred Years War
  - Longbow and Canon begin to change importance of Knights
  - King Edward III, Order of the Garter; Round Table, 1344
- Great Schism
- **This is a time of challenge for Faith, Chivalry and the role of the Nobility.**



# Framing: Troy and Arthur's Court

- "Since the siege and the assault was ceased at Troy,  
The walls breached and burnt down to brands and ashes,  
The knights that had knotted the nets of deceit  
Was impeached for his perfidy, proven most true.  
It was high-born Aeneas and his haughty race  
That since prevailed over provinces, and proudly reigned  
Over well-nigh all the wealth of the West Isles.  
Great Romulus to Rome repairs in haste;...  
Felix Brutus on many broad hills and high Britain he sets,  
Most fair."

- Return to Troy in last stanza

# Second Frame: New Years Eve

- Time of feasting and celebration and renewal
- “This king [Arthur] lay at Camelot at Christmastide;  
Many good knights and gay his guests were there,  
Arrayed of the Round Table rightful brothers,  
With feasting and fellowship and carefree mirth.  
There true men contended in tournaments many,  
Jointed there in jousting these gentle knights,  
Then came to the court for carol-dancing,  
For the feast was full fifteen days,  
With all the meat and the mirth that men could devise.”
- **Why is this time and setting so important?**



# Green Knight with Holly and Ax

- “But in his one hand he had a holly bob  
That is goodliest in green when groves are bare,  
And an ax in his other, a huge and immense,  
A wicked piece of work in words to expound:  
The spike of green steel, resplendent with gold...

- **Why a Holly Bob and an Ax?**

- **Why all in Green?**

# Hospitality and Game

- Arthur offers him welcome and hospitality but he refuses:  
"Nay so help me," said the other, "He that on high sits,  
To tarry here anytime, 'twas not mine errand;  
But as the praise of you, prince, is puffed up so high,  
And your court and your company are counted the best,...  
But if you be so bold as all men believe,  
You will graciously grant the game that I ask by right."



# The "Game"

- The Game is that one Knight of the Round Table may take one whack at his neck with the ax today. One year from today, however that same knight must search out the Green Knight at the Green Chapel where he will return that blow.
- No one steps forward so the Green Knight shames them for cowardice.
- Arthur offers and then Gawain steps in

# Gawain Requests Right to Stand In for Arthur and the Court

- “For I find it not fit, as in faith it is known,  
When such a boon is begged before all these knights,  
Though you be tempted thereto, to take it on yourself  
While so bold men about, upon benches sit,  
That no host under heaven is hardier of will,  
Nor better brothers-in-arms where battle is joined;  
I am the weakest, well I know, and of wit feeblest;  
And the loss of my life would be least of any;  
That I have you for uncle is my only praise;  
My body, but for your blood, is barren of worth;”

- **Why does Gawain offer to play the game?**



# Part 2: Seasons Pass and Gawain Readies to Journey

- “And why the pentangle is proper to that peerless prince  
I intend now to tell, though detain me it must.  
It is a sign by Solomon sagely devised  
To be a token of truth, by its title of old,  
For it is a figure formed of five points,  
And each line is linked and locked with the next  
For ever and ever, and hence it is called  
In all England, as I hear, the endless knot.  
And well may he wear it on his worthy arms,  
For ever faithful five-fold in five-fold fashion  
Was Gawain in Good Works, as gold unalloyed,  
Devoid of all villainy, with virtues adorned in sight.”

# Symbolism

- Pentangle 171-2; Five Sense; Five Fingers; Five Wounds; Five Joys (Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, Ascension, Assumption); Five Virtues (Beneficence, Brotherly Love, Pure Mind, Manners, Compassion)





# Lord Bertilak's Castle and Hospitality: Parallelism

- After traveling North Gawain is lost in forest
- Prays to Mary on Christmas Eve and then sees a castle
- He is welcomed by Porter, his horse and he are fed and he is given a fine place to sleep and rich clothes
- Three days of feasting;
- Three days of games
- New Years Day is the 7<sup>th</sup> day

# Gawain swears allegiance to Lord

- “Noble sir,” said the knight. “I cannot but think  
All the honor is your own—may heaven requite it.  
And your man to command I account myself here  
As I am bound and beholden, and shall be, come  
What may.”

The lord with all his might  
Entreats his guest to stay;  
Brief answer makes the knight:  
Next morning he must away.”



# Bertilak's Challenge/Game

- Each day he will hunt and Gawain shall stay in bed late and then take dinner with the Lord's wife
- In the evening each SWEARS to give the other whatever profit he has made that day.

# Day One

- Lord hunts a deer that is afraid and tries to escape
- Meanwhile the Lady flirts with Gawain in his bedchamber
- He resists her charms but accepts a kiss
- That knight he gives a kiss to the Lord and he receives the venison in exchange.
- He pledges to serve her.



# Day Two

- The Lord hunts a raging boar; it fights and hurts many of his men and hounds, but eventually he slays it.
- Gawain is pursued by the Lady and she shames him for not being more courteous; is he really the famed Gawain, supposedly a great knight and lover?
- She wants romantic words
- He kisses her

# She is testing him

- “Thus she tested his temper and tried many a time,  
Whatever her true intent, to entice him to sin,  
But so fair was his defense that no fault appeared,  
Nor evil on either hand, but only bliss  
They knew.  
They linger and laugh awhile;  
She kisses the knight so true,  
Takes leave in comeliest style  
And departs without more ado.”



# Third Day: Gifts

- The Lord hunts a cunning fox
- The lady pursues Gawain again; she “hails” him like the men hail the fox.
- She asks for a parting gift as a token: he has nothing to give because he is traveling
- She offers him an expensive ring; he says No
- Instead she offers him her girdle of green silk

# Green Girdle

- “But if the virtue that invests it were verily known,  
It would be held, I hope, in higher esteem.  
For the man that possess this piece of silk,  
If he bore it on his body, belted about,  
There is no hand under heaven that could hew him  
down,  
For he could not be killed by any craft on earth.”  
He accepts it.  
She gives him three kisses and asks that he not  
reveal that she has given him the girdle.



# Confession

- He goes to Confession and is absolved of his sins we are told.
- But can he be absolved immediately after having sinned by breaking his vow to the Lord?
- He gives three kisses to the Lord, who gives him the Fox
- But he doesn't give the girdle

# The Green Chapel and Test

- It is a cold winter day and the forest is desolate
- The Green Chapel is a tunnel in the earth with bits of Green sod on top, resembling a barrow mound. (death?)
- The Green Knight appears; Gawain has kept his word.



# Three Blows

- The Knight glanced aside the blow and it didn't hit; but Gawain flinched. The knight shames him for showing cowardice that he didn't show when Gawain cut his head off.
- Second blow he pulls back, and this time Gawain is firm
- Third blow he strikes him with a glancing blow on the neck that drew blood but did no farther harm.

# Green Knight Explains

- He pulled back the blade the first two times because Gawain was true to his word and 'returned what was owed' to the Lord
- The third time he struck because Gawain has his belt
- Gawain is guilty of cowardice, covetousness, and disloyalty.



# Gawain's Shame

- “Accursed by a cowardly and covetous heart!  
In you is villainy and vice, and virtue laid low!”  
Then he grasps the green girdle and lets go the knot,  
Hands it over in haste, and hotly he says:  
“Behold there my falsehood, ill hap betide it!  
Your cut taught me cowardice, care for my life,  
And coveting came after contrary both  
To largesse and loyalty belonging to knights.  
Now am I faulty and false, that fearful was ever  
Of disloyalty and lies, bad luck to them both!”

# Reconciliation

- Green Knight gives Gawain the belt and tells him to wear it as a reminder
- All men are sinful from Adam on; list of men who were seduced by women including Solomon, Samson, and David
- Gawain will wear the belt as a sign of pride and the frailty of the flesh



# Arthur Receives Gawain and the Custom of the Belt

- Gawain tells his story including his failure (he doesn't hide it now—he has learned his lesson)
- Arthur commands that “Each brother of that band, a baldric should have, a belt oblique, of a bright green, to be worn with one accord for that worthy's sake.”

# The Green Knight as an Archetype

- Represented in Christian Architecture:

## Green Man in Kent

- Nature Deity associated with corn harvest and with sacrifice

Reflect a pre-Christian pagan cult?

Others reject this notion:

<http://www.whitedragon.org.uk/articles/greenman.htm>





# Order of the Garter



- “Honi soit qui mal pense.” Shame be to the man who has evil in his mind
- Motto of the Order of the Garter, 1348, Edward III; blue garter fell off a countess during a dance and the king put it on his leg
- What is signified by the Knights of the Round Table wearing a Green belt?



# Summary

The Green Knight assimilates Celtic Fertility and Nature Worship with Christianity and Christian virtues

Story highlights the challenge of courtly love where knight's loyalty is divided between Lord and Lady

Story outlines how a Christian knight should be loyal, honest, humble, brave, generous and courteous

May have been part of Edward III's propaganda