

Topic Page: [Sir Gawain and the Green Knight](#)

Summary Article: “**Sir Gawain and the Green Knight**”

From *Encyclopedia of New Years Holidays Worldwide*

Popular title given to an otherwise untitled, alliterative romance poem of unknown authorship, believed to have been written in the latter part of the fourteenth century. Formerly in the possession of the English politician Sir Robert Cotton (1570—1631) and now residing in the British Library, a manuscript copy bearing the poem also contains three other similarly untitled alliterative poems that have come to be known as *Pearl*, *Patience*, and *Purity*. All four poems were written in the North or West Midland dialect of Middle English, and a single authorship has been proposed but disputed by some. The first modern translation of *Gawain* was published by J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon in 1925.

Gawain is structured such that the beginnings of lines often feature a pair of stressed, alliterative syllables followed by a *caesura* or “breath-point,” then usually two additional stresses at the ends of the lines. For example:

Guaun gripped to his ax, and gederes hit on hy3t. (Gawain hefted the axe, swung it high.) —Line 421

Inserted at various intervals are alliterative rhyming sections, each with five lines termed the “bob and wheel”: the first line contains one stress-syllable rhyming as *a* (bob), while the remaining four lines each have three stress-syllables rhyming as *baba* (wheel). For example:

in stedde,
He brayde his bulk aboute,
pat vgly bodi pat bledde;
Moni on of hym had doute,
Bi pat his resounz were redde.
(To see,
Twisting his bloody, severed
Stump. And the knights were wary,
Afraid before he ever
Opened that mouth to speak.)
— Lines 439—443

Gawain opens during the fifteen-day period of winter holidays in King Arthur's court at Camelot, a boisterous period marked with great feasting, dancing, jousting tournaments, and lords and ladies “rejoicing in their rooms.” While the subjects revel at the New Year's feast, suddenly a gigantic Green Knight riding a green horse and armed with an axe enters and challenges any one of Arthur's knights to take this axe and strike a single blow against him. One condition is laid, that the Green Knight may return the blow a year and a day later. Sir Gawain, Arthur's nephew and the youngest of the knights, steps forward in Arthur's place when the latter had accepted and decapitates the giant who, after a bloody display of twitching, dives for and retrieves his head which has rolled among the terrified knights. After reminding Gawain of his bargain, the Green Knight departs.

On the day following All Saints, Gawain, true to his promise, departs Camelot on a trek in search of the Green Chapel, where he must complete his part of the bargain. En route, Gawain encounters and overthrows a host of bogies such as dragons and satyrs. Exhausted, he chances upon a castle in the West Midlands on Christmas Eve where he receives a warm welcome from the lord of the castle and

his lady and learns that the Green Chapel is nearby. When Gawain would depart on the day after Christmas, he instead accepts a bargain from the lord: while the latter hunts abroad, Gawain may take his ease at the castle and will receive anything caught in the hunt, on condition that Gawain, without explanation, surrenders to the lord in the evening whatever Gawain gains during the day. On each of three successive days while the lord is away, the lady of the castle attempts to seduce Gawain, who has vowed chastity for the mission. On the first day, he only grants her a kiss, which he returns to the lord in exchange for a deer; on the second day, two kisses in return for a boar. On the third day, the lady bestows a green silk girdle which she assures will protect him, but Gawain, breaking the bargain, hides the girdle and only returns three kisses to the lord in exchange for a fox.

On the morrow, Gawain with girdle in tow meets his fate with the Green Knight, who delivers three blows with an axe. The first two are deliberate misses, but the third blow slightly cuts Gawain on the neck. Then the Green Knight reveals that he is an incarnation of Bertilak (or Bercilak) de Hautdesert, lord of the castle. The three blows symbolized the three encounters that Gawain had experienced with the lord's wife, the third blow having punished Gawain slightly for accepting the girdle; had Gawain yielded completely to the wife, he would have forfeited his life. The Green Knight further reveals that the witch Morgan le Fay, mistress to Merlin the wizard and a resident of the castle, had sent him to Camelot to test the pride of Arthur's knights and to see if their virtuous reputation was true. The efficacy of the girdle as a protective talisman is left open to the reader's speculation.

Smitten with remorse for having succumbed in part to a woman's wiles, Gawain bemoans the fate of men at the hands of women and vows to wear the green girdle forever as a mark of his "sin." Back at Camelot, instead of chastising Gawain for his "slip" of knighthood, Arthur decrees that all his knights shall wear a green girdle in recognition of Gawain's courage and the fallibility of men. The poem's concluding phrase, "HONY SOYT QUI MAL PENCE," closely resembles the motto for the Order of the Garter, founded c. 1348 by King Edward III of England: "Honi soit qui mal y pense" (Old French, "Shame upon him who thinks evil of it").

The Greene Knight, another English narrative poem of anonymous authorship and composed c. 1500 in the South Midlands, similarly features a bewitched, shape-shifting green knight named Sir Bredbedde, sent to test Sir Gawain's virtue at Christmastime. This poem consists of 86 stanzas rhyming as *aabccb*. A Green Knight character also appears in other literary settings. For example, the Koran includes the story of one named Al-Khidr (Arabic, "Green Man") who thrice tests the faith and obedience of Moses. The stories of the Kurdish Muslim writer Saladin (1138—1193) also feature a Green Knight figure as a Spanish warrior. Thus some have proposed that the Green Knight character originated in Middle Eastern culture and was brought to Europe by the Crusaders where it blended with elements of Celtic (beheading and regeneration) and Arthurian (chivalry) imagery. In Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* (or *d'Arthur*), Gawain's brother Gareth battles two brothers, knights who identify themselves by colors: the Red Knight and the Green Knight. Yet the latter is an independent character from the Green Knight found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

"Sir Gawain and the green knight" (2008). In W. D. Crump, *Encyclopedia of new years holidays worldwide*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/sir_gawain_and_the_green_knight



© 2008 McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers



© 2008 McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers

APA

"Sir Gawain and the green knight" (2008). In W. D. Crump, *Encyclopedia of new years holidays worldwide*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/sir_gawain_and_the_green_knight

Chicago

"Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" In *Encyclopedia of New Years Holidays Worldwide*, by William D. Crump. McFarland, 2008. https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/sir_gawain_and_the_green_knight

Harvard

"Sir Gawain and the green knight" (2008). In W.D. Crump, *Encyclopedia of new years holidays worldwide*. [Online]. Jefferson: McFarland. Available from: https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/sir_gawain_and_the_green_knight [Accessed 17 September 2019].

MLA

"Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" *Encyclopedia of New Years Holidays Worldwide*, William D. Crump, McFarland, 1st edition, 2008. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/sir_gawain_and_the_green_knight. Accessed 17 Sep. 2019.