

# Pearl Poet



*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

**Pearl Poet**

# **Sir Gawain and the Green Knight**



Published by Good Press, 2022

[goodpress@okpublishing.info](mailto:goodpress@okpublishing.info)

EAN 4064066466510

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[Fytte the First](#)

[Fytte the Second](#)

[Fytte the Third](#)

[Fytte the Fourth](#)

# Introduction

## [Table of Contents](#)

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is the finest representative of a great cycle of verse romances devoted wholly or principally to the adventures of Gawain. Of these there still survive in English a dozen or so; in French — the tongue in which romance most flourished — seven or eight more; and these, of course, are but a fraction of what must once have existed.<sup>[intro 1]</sup> No other knight of the Round Table occupies anything like so important a place as Gawain in the literature of the middle ages. He is the first mentioned of Arthur's knights, for about 1125, ten years before Geoffrey of Monmouth dazzled the world with his revelation of King Arthur, William of Malmesbury in his *Chronicle of the Kings of England* had told of the discovery of Gawain's tomb in Ross, Wales, and had described him as Arthur's nephew and worthy second. Where other knights quailed, Gawain was serene; where other champions were beaten, Gawain won; and where no resolution, strength, or skill could avail, Gawain succeeded by his kindness, his virtue, and his charming speech. The strange knight in the *Squire's Tale* gave his message so politely, says Chaucer,

"That Gawain with his old curteisye  
Though he were come ageyn out of Fairye  
Ne coude him nat amende with a word."

But in time other heroes became more popular than he, and in some of the French prose romances of the thirteenth century Gawain's character was defaced that others might appear to excel him; and Malory in his *Morte Darthur* (c. 1470), which is based chiefly upon these later French romances, and Tennyson in his *Idylls of the King*, which in turn is mostly based on Malory, have unfortunately perpetuated this debased portrait. To get a glimpse of the real Gawain one should read, besides our piece, such romances as the *Carl of Carlisle*,<sup>[intro 2]</sup> *Golagros and Gawain*,<sup>[intro 3]</sup> *The Wedding of Sir Gawain*,<sup>[intro 4]</sup> the *Mule Sans Frein*<sup>[intro 5]</sup> and the episodes in Miss Weston's *Sir Gawain at the Grail Castle*, and *Sir Gawain and the Lady of Lys*, in the attractive little series of *Arthurian Romances Unrepresented in Malory's Morte d'Arthur*.<sup>[intro 6]</sup>

*Gawain and the Green Knight* has been preserved to us, like many another precious work — for example *Beowulf* — by a single lucky manuscript, Cotton Nero A.X. of the British Museum. It is found there along with three other remarkable poems of the same dialect and style, all in the same handwriting; and naturally the four pass as the work of one author, although not all scholars are agreed on this point. These three are *Pearl* (1212 lines), a highly finished elegy in an elaborate stanza, a masterpiece of delicate beauty and craftsmanship; *Patience*, and *Cleanness* (or *Purity*), of 500 and 1800 lines respectively, both written in the most powerful and highly colored alliterative verse, the former telling the story of Jonah, the latter of Belshazzar's feast and fate.<sup>[intro 7]</sup>

These poems are the artistic culmination of what is called the alliterative revival of the fourteenth century in England, the best known example of which is *Piers the Ploughman*. Other splendid pieces, worthy to stand beside these, are *Winner and Waster*, *The Parliament of Three Ages*, and the Thornton *Morte Arthure*.<sup>[intro 8]</sup> It is a surprising and not-well-explained phenomenon that after two centuries or so of the short-lined, rhyming verse in stanzas or in couplets such as the young Chaucer wrote — which is generally considered to have been of French origin — there should suddenly appear a great bulk of



poetry in the archaic unrhymed style of the Anglo-Saxons. The great peculiarity of this verse is alliteration, the repeating of the same letter or sound at the beginning of several words in a line — a device which has never been given up in English poetry. A characteristic Anglo-Saxon line is,

"Wadan ofer wealdas; wudd baer sunu."

To wade over the wolds; the son bare the wood.

Any vowel could alliterate with any other, thus, —

"Innan ond utan iren-bendum."

Inside and outside with iron-bands.

The chief accent fell on the alliterative syllables, of which there could be three, as in the examples given, or two — these being the commonest types; or four, or none — these rarer. The number of unaccented syllables was immaterial; but a line consisted normally of four feet, with a cæsural pause in the middle. In our poem we find somewhat the same conventions, as in line 3, —

"The tulk that the trammes of tresoun there wrought";

and line 27, —

"For-thi an aunter in erde I attle to schawe."

In our piece groups of such lines are concluded by an odd phrase and a little rhyming stanza of five lines, often called a "bob and a wheel." This poetry was dignified, strong, resonant, and in skillful hands apt for stirring deeds and rich, highly colored description; but it was the alliteration, probably, which tempted to use words in a forced sense, and to invent odd and fanciful terms — at any rate, these northern and Scottish poets were very much given to that sort of thing. Of course, the fact that they wrote with extreme virtuosity in a richly worded dialect, strange to us heirs of a more southern speech, has much to do with this effect. This poetry flourished chiefly in the north. Chaucer, naturally, was familiar with it, and makes his parson say, —

"But trusteth wel, I am a Southren man,

I can nat geste — rum, ram, ruf — by lettre,

Ne, God wot, rym hold I but little better;"

which rather sounds as if Chaucer had meant to have an alliterative poem precede the *Parson's Tale*.[\[intro 9\]](#)

Our romance, and the rich field of folklore within which it lies have recently been made the subject of a penetrating study by Professor G.L. Kittredge,[\[intro 10\]](#) whose main results may be thus summarized. *Gawain and the Green Knight* is doubtless, like the great majority of the mediæval English romances, a translation from the French, although the French original is now lost. To the author of this French poem is due the happy combination of two fine old widely current stories. One of these, the "Challenge," can be traced back to an elaborate Irish version of the year 1000 or earlier — the manuscript containing it, the celebrated *Book of the Dun Cow*, was written about 1100. In this a supernatural being with a replaceable head tests the hero's courage much as he does in our poem. In the other, the "Temptation," the chosen hero, by resisting the seductive lady, is enabled to free the lady's husband from an enchantment. Both these tales occur separately in mediæval romances, the former in the *Book of Caradoc* — a continuation of Chrétien's *Percival*,[\[intro 11\]](#) the *Mule Sans Frein*, *Perlesvaus*,[\[intro 12\]](#) and *Humbaut*,[\[intro 13\]](#) the latter in the *Carl of Carlisle*, the *Chevalier à l'Épée*,[\[intro 14\]](#) and elsewhere. The work of the brilliant

French combiner was, like numerous other French Arthurian romances of his period, a well-constructed and pellucid narrative. It did not attain the moral depth of our poem, where Gawain's virtues, the elaborateness and keenness of his temptation, and his repentance for his slight fault, are more powerfully set forth. There is no reason to suppose that the beautiful descriptions of wild nature were in the French poem; and very likely the arming of the hero and the hunting were less elaborated there. It seems probable, too, that our author has changed the motivation and ending of the story; for in his original it would be natural to suppose from the analogues that the Green Knight enticed Gawain to his castle in order that this greatest of heroes might rid him of his strange hue and giant form, and that, after Gawain had succeeded, the disenchanting knight accompanied him to Arthur's Court. The English author gave this up, and invented another and weaker motivation, based on the well-known hatred of Morgan la Fay for Queen Guinevere. It is the only blemish in the otherwise faultless construction that the reason here assigned for the Green Knight's visit to Arthur's Court is Morgan's desire to frighten Guinevere out of her wits.

Another English version of our tale is found in Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript. This is a late romance of 516 lines, in six-line stanzas like the following: —

"He had a lady to his wife,  
He loved her deerlye as his liffe,  
She was both blyth and blee;  
Because Sir Gawaine was stiffe in stowre  
She loved him privilye paramour,  
And she never him see."

Most scholars regard the *Ballad Green Knight*, as it is often called, as a mere working-over of the alliterative romance; but because the author of it has reverted to a better and older sort of motivation — i.e., the love of the Green Knight's wife for Gawain — and because he has likewise restored the presumably older features of the Green Knight's becoming one of the Round Table, and for other reasons, some hold that the *Ballad Green Knight* is derived from a form of the story older than our romance; and that in this older form the Green Knight's wife was a fairy, who for love of Gawain lured him to the other-world by this odd heading adventure.[\[intro 15\]](#)

It is also said in the *Ballad Green Knight* that it is because of this adventure of Gawain's that the Knights of the Bath wear a lace about the neck until they have won their spurs, or a lady takes it off. And after the alliterative romance in our manuscript follows the motto of the Knights of the Garter — "Hony soyt qui mal pence." Obviously, then, there has always been an effort to connect Gawain's green lace with some chivalrous order in England, and such efforts still continue; but as yet it has not been made to seem very probable that the writer of the present poem had in mind anything of the kind.[\[intro 16\]](#)

Of our author we know only what can be deduced from his works. He must have been a native of Lancashire or thereabouts, since he employs the North-West Midland dialect, as it is called, and since he describes with so much accuracy and gusto the wild scenery of the three north-western counties of England. None but a person truly religious could have written a poem informed with so lofty a moral tone. Perhaps no other writer of his age could have pictured the scenes between Gawain and the lady without having them border either on the luscious or the coarse. And only a man conversant with the highest society of his time, a man who had seen the world, could describe with such loving wealth of detail