

Sir Gawain in Middle English†

Note that the symbol Þ/þ [thorn], originally a runic letter, represents the *th* sound in modern English, and the symbol ȝ [yogh], also inherited from Old English, represents the velar, palatal spirant, as in modern English "young." After 1300, ȝ began to be replaced at the beginning of words by the letter "y" and by "gh" elsewhere, where it represents a guttural consonant sound, as in Scots *loch*. In modern English "gh" often signals a now-silenced yogh. Hence the Middle English word *þoȝt* (as in line 1867), is our modern word *thought*.

The Green Knight Enters

- 130 Now wyl I of hor seruisse say yow no more,
For vch wyȝe may wel wit no wont þat þer were.
An oper noyse ful newe neȝed billiue,
þat þe lude myȝt haf leue liþode to cachi;
For vneþe watz þe noyce not a whyle sesed,
135 And þe first cource in þe court kyndely serued,
þer hales in at þe halle dor an aghlich mayster,
On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyȝhe;
Fro þe swyre to þe swange so sware and so þliȝ,
And his lynes and his lymes so longe and so grete,
140 Half etayn in erde I hope þat he were,
Bot mon most I algate mynyn hym to bene,
And þat þe myriest in his muckel þat myȝt ride;
For of bak and of brest al were his bodi sturme,
Both his wombe and his wast were worthily smale,
145 And alle his fetures folȝande, in forme þat he hade,
ful clene.
For wonder of his hwe men hade,
Set in his semblaunt sene;
He ferde as freke were fade,
150 And oueral enker-grene.

Sir Gawain's Shield

- 620 Then þay schewed hym þe schelde, þat was of schyr goulez
Wyth þe pentangel depaynt of pure golde hwez.
He braydez hit by þe bauderyk, aboute þe hals kestes.

† For additional information about Middle English and its pronunciation, see J. A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre, *A Book of Middle English*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 9–13; and Fernand Mossé, *A Handbook of Middle English*, trans. James A. Walker (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), pp. 7–15. These excerpts are based on the text edited by Tolkien, Gordon, and Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925). Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press.

pat bisemed be segge semly fayre.
And guy be pentangel apendez to pat prynce noble

625 I am in tent yow to telle, pof tary hyt me schulde:
Hit is a syngne pat Salamon set sumquyle

In bytoknyng of trawpe, bi tytle pat hit habbez,
For hit is a figure pat haldez fyue poyntez,

630 And vche lyme vmbelappez and loukez in oper,
And ayquere hit is endelez; and Englych hit callen
Oueral, as I here, be endeles knot.

Forpy hit acordez to bis knyzt and to his cler armez,
For ay faythful in fyue and sere fyue sybez

635 Gawan watz for gode knawen, and as golde pured,
Voyded of vche yrlany, wyth vertuez ennourned
in mote;

Forpy be pentangel nwe

He ber in schelde and cote,

As tulk of tale most trwe

And gentylest knyzt of lote.

The Gift of the Green Girtle

'Now forsake 3e his silke,' sayde be burde penne,

'For hit is symple in hitself? And so hit wel semez.

Lo! so hit is littel, and lasse hit is worry;

Bot who-so knewe be costes pat knit ar perinne,

He wolde hit prayse at more prys, parauenture;

For quat gome so is gorde with his grene lace,

While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,

per is no habel vnder heuen toheue hym pat myzt,

For he myzt not be slayn for slyzt vpon erbe.'

1855 pen kest be knyzt, and hit come to his hert

Hit were a juel for be jopardé pat hym iugged were:

When he acheued to be chapel his chek for to fech,

Myzt he haf slypped to be vnslayn, be slezt were noble.

1860 Penne he pulged with hir brepe and poled hit to speke,

And ho bere on hym be belt and bede hit hym swybe—

And he granted and hym gafe with a goud wylle—

And bisozt hym, for hir sake, disceuer hit never,

Bot to lelly layne fro hir lorde; be leude hym acordez

pat neuer wyze schulde hit wyt, iwysse, bot pay twayne

1865 for nozte;

He ponked hir oft ful swybe,

Ful bro with hert and hozt.

Bi pat on pryne sybe

Two Old French *Gauvain* Romances†

As early as the second verse-paragraph of the poem, the narrator of *Sir Gauvain and the Green Knight* indicates that the story he intends to tell is not original with him: some men consider it quite a marvel, he says, an exceedingly strange adventure among the wonders of Arthurian tradition (lines 27–29). At a later point he seems to be saying that he learned his story from a book that was read aloud: Gauvain, in his quest for the Green Chapel, followed many bewildering routes, "as I heard the book say" (line 690). At the end of the poem, we learn that all who wore the green baldric after Sir Gauvain had introduced it to Arthur's court were honored, as it is told in "the best book of knighthood" (line 2521), and that "the books of Brutus' deeds" bear witness to the adventure (lines 2522–23). But no single source for the poem's complicated narrative has ever been identified, nor is such a story told in the historical account of King Arthur in Wace's earlier poem *The Brut*, to which line 2523 may allude.

From what sources did the author of *Sir Gauvain* derive the familiarity he displays in Part I with King Arthur's Round Table, the knights of his court, and their customs and adventures? We know that his readings in general included works in Old (that is, medieval) French, because he alludes by name, in his poem called *Cleanness*, to the author of the second installment of the famous thirteenth-century allegorical poem *The Romance of the Rose*. In addition, some descriptive details in *Cleanness* apparently derive from Mandeville's *Travels*, a popular quasi-factual, quasi-mythical report of wanderings among exotic and fantastic places. This too the poet would have read in French.

It is thus impossible to believe that, living as he did at a time when the literary culture of France heavily influenced that of England, the *Gauvain*-poet did not know the Arthurian stories as retold by the most famous poet of medieval France, Chretien de Troyes (ca. 1140–1200). But the English poet's works contain no allusions to Chretien, and, although Sir Gauvain—called by his French name, Gauvain—is an important member of the cast of characters in several of Chretien's romances, he is not the hero of any of them, and no part of the narrative content of *Sir Gauvain* is to be found in them.

There does exist, however, a pair of little-known poems in Old French, evidently dating from the period when Chretien wrote, whose central character is Sir Gauvain. The two are linked with each

† Translated by Marie Borroff, with the assistance of Brian J. Reilly from the text edited by R. C. Johnson and D. D. R. Owens, *Two Old French Gauvain Romances* (Edinburgh:

other, with Chretien, and with our late-fourteenth-century English romance. The unique extant copy is found in a manuscript copied in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century in which they appear side by side. Modern editors have called them "The Knight of the Sword" and "The Mule without a Bridle." They are composed in the prosodic form that Chretien used in all his narrative poems: successive rhyming pairs of octosyllabic (eight-syllable) lines. What makes them of particular interest here is the fact that each contains one of the major narrative motifs brilliantly intertwined by the Gauvain-poet in a single plot. In "The Knight of the Sword," Gauvain is sexually tempted when he must lie in bed next to a beautiful and receptive woman and is punished twice for making advances to her by a magic sword that gives him a superficial wound. In the end, it turns out that he is not killed by the sword, as the lady's would-be lovers usually are, because the sword will not kill the best knight in the world. In "The Mule without a Bridle," Gauvain stays in a castle in which his uncouth host, who wears a large ax or "gisarme" (*Gauvain*, line 288) around his neck, offers him a "game" according to which he is to cut off the host's head in the evening and allow his own head to be cut off in return next morning. He accepts; later, the other man makes as if to perform the return blow but in the end withholds the stroke. It is also interesting that the last episode of "Sword," like that of *Sir Gauvain*, includes an antifeminist theme. Sir Gauvain is impelled by the actions of the lady he has chosen as his love to break into an antifeminist diatribe similar to the speech made by Sir Gauvain when he has learned the true meaning of Lord Bertlak's wife's earlier attempts to seduce him.

The opening passage of each poem alludes to Chretien. In "Sword," the narrator names him; defends him against the charge of having failed to include a romance about Sir Gauvain, the best of Arthur's knights, in his retellings of Arthurian legend; and proposes to remedy that lack in the story that follows. In "Mule," the narrator calls himself by the name "Paiens de Maisieres." This is a parody of Chretien's name in which *Pagan* is substituted for the given name *Christian* and the name of an unknown town for that of the illustrious Troyes, capital of the duchy of Champagne and seat of Chretien's patroness, the Countess Marie. A modern equivalent might be "Pagan of Podunk."

Some scholars have thought that these two poems should be added to the known works of Chretien. (The fact that the narrator refers to himself by name in the third person in the first poem is no argument against Chretien's authorship, as Chretien himself does this in the openings of several of his stories). But the use of another, parodic name in the second poem suggests both were written by someone other than the famous poet who was poking fun at him. What is more, they are far shorter than Chretien's Arthurian poems. The latter range

from about 6650 to about 7050 lines, whereas "Sword" and "Mule" are 1206 and 1136 lines long, respectively.

Whether or not this pair of poems is to be ascribed to Chretien, it is hard, on reading them, to resist the supposition that the *Gauvain*-poet knew them and might even have been stimulated by them to combine the themes of resistance to sexual temptation on the part of the hero with his acceptance of a "game" calling for reciprocal beheadings.

The translations here are summaries that include close renderings, in quotation marks, of the parts of the narratives that have parallels in *Sir Gauvain*. I have put verbs in the past tense throughout, whereas in the originals, present and past tenses alternate in typical medieval fashion. In "The Knight of the Sword," Sir Gauvain is the center of attention from the beginning; in "The Mule without a Bridle," the first section focuses on Sir Kay, the seneschal, or official master of ceremonies, of Arthur's court, who in early Arthurian tradition was viewed favorably but later came to be characterized in negative terms. Here he is used as a foil to the hero; he abandons, after some disconcerting experiences along the way, the quest that the more courageous Sir Gauvain then successfully completes.

The Knight of the Sword[†]

"Let all who love pleasure and joy come forth to hear about an adventure that befell the good knight who upheld loyalty, prowess, and honor, and never at any time loved a cowardly, perfidious, or uncourty man. I tell of Sir Gauvain, who was so famed for elegant manners and great feats of arms that no one who wished to write a complete account of his virtues would ever come to the end of it. Yet though I cannot tell everything, that is no reason for me to remain silent. Chretien de Troyes must not be blamed—he who knew so well how to tell tales of the great and famed King Arthur, his court and his retinue—for never telling of Sir Gauvain. He was far too worthy to forget. Wherefore I am pleased to tell for the first time of an adventure that befell this good knight."

[Sir Gauvain, staying with King Arthur and his court at Carlisle, liked to ride out in the nearby forest during the day.]

"One day he had his horse made ready, and dressed himself in courtly fashion. He donned a pair of golden spurs over well-tailored hose of silk, fine white breeches, a shirt of pleated linen cut short and wide, and a mantle lined with miniver. He was indeed richly attired!"

[†] This is a summary of the poem, including excerpts closely translating the original. The latter are in quotation marks. *Gauvain* is the Old French version of the name *Gauvain*.

[He rode on so far that he lost his way. Looking for the road back, he came upon a knight scared by a fire with his steed tethered to a tree. The knight told him that he lived close by and invited Sir Gauvain to be his guest, provided that he would stay with him in the forest that night. In the morning, the strange knight went on ahead to make preparations for the reception of a guest. Sir Gauvain, following him slowly, encountered a group of shepherds and heard one of them lamenting the fate that would surely befall him at the stranger's castle. They told Sir Gauvain that no one who stays there returns, and that the lord "kills any guest in his home who contradicts him on any point." Gauvain paid no heed to their story and went on to the castle. He was cordially received by the lord and his retainers.]

"There, running to meet him, was the lord of the castle, who made a great show of joy at his arrival. A valet took his arms, another took Gringolet, and a third relieved him of his spurs. His host took him by the hand and led him over the bridge. They found within, in the room in front of the tower, a splendid fire with luxurious seats all around it covered with purple silk. Outside, Sir Gauvain could see men leading his horse to a stable and bringing him grain and hay in abundance."

[The lord then introduced Sir Gauvain to his beautiful daughter. The lord said that he wished her to keep Gauvain company and that if he pleased her and he was pleased by her in return, it would be an honor to her. He left them together, and Sir Gauvain addressed her "courteously and without the least awkwardness" and "very graciously offered her his service." She, for her part, was reluctant to reveal the feelings he had aroused in her because she knew that he would never be able to possess her. She told him that no good could come of their friendship and cautioned him to refrain from contradicting her father on any point. A meal followed.]

"When they had washed, they sat down, and the servants set, on top of the beautiful white tablecloths, the salicellars and the knives, followed by the bread, and the wine in cups of silver and fine gold. I have no wish to describe the courses in detail one by one; there was an abundance of meat and fish, roast pheasant and venison, and they fell to gladly. The host urged Gauvain and his daughter to drink. He told the damsel that she should encourage the knight, and said to Gauvain, 'You should be well pleased that I wish her to be your love.' When they had eaten their fill, the servants removed the cloths and brought them water and a towel with which to dry themselves."

[The lord left for a while, and Gauvain and the damsel had further conversation in which she repeated her words of caution and said she prayed that he might depart without having quarreled with her father. He returned, and they had a light supper of fruit and wine. The lord then told them that he wanted Gauvain to sleep in his bed, and that his daughter was to sleep with him. All three entered the bedchamber.]

"[I] was richly hung with tapestries, and twelve candles, set all around it, were burning there, casting a brilliant light. The bed was adorned with rich spreads and white sheets. But I have no wish to tarry in describing the luxurious sheets of foreign silks from Palermo and Romagna with which the bedroom was provided, or the fur coverlets of vair and miniver. I shall describe it all to you in a word: whatever is suitable for making the body of a knight or a lady comfortable in winter and in summer was there in great abundance. There were many costly furnishings in the room, so that Gauvain marveled greatly at the riches he saw. The host said to him 'This room is indeed beautiful. Both you and this young girl will lie there, and no one else will be present. Damsel, close the door, and do as he bids you, for I know well that people such as you and he have no need of a crowd of witnesses. But I solemnly warn you not to put out the candles—that would anger me greatly. I give you this command because I want him to see your great beauty when you lie in his arms, as that will increase his pleasure, and I want you to see his handsome body.' Then he left the bedroom and the damsel closed the door.

"Sir Gauvain lay down on the bed; the damsel returned and lay naked beside him; there was no need to entreat her to do so. All night, she lay in his arms. Sweetly he kissed and embraced her again and again, and things progressed so far that he was on the point of consummating his desire, when she said 'Sir, please! Things cannot continue thus. I do not lack protection here.' Gauvain looked around in every direction and saw no living thing. 'Belle,' he said, 'I pray you, who would stop me from having my way with you?' She answered, 'I shall willingly disclose to you all I know. Do you see the sword hanging there, the one with the decorative knot of silver below the pommel, and the hilt of fine gold? I am not inventing what you will hear me tell you, since I have seen it more than once in practice. My father prizes the sword highly, for it has killed for him many worthy knights of high repute. Be assured that he has caused more than twenty knights to be killed right here. I do not know what his reasons are, but I have never seen a knight escape who entered this door. My good father puts on a good show of hospitality, but as soon as any of them misbehaves, he seizes on him to kill him. It is imperative that his guests avoid the least hint of rude behavior; it is best to steer a wholly straight course. He immediately asserts his rights if he catches anyone in the smallest misdeed. If a guest behaves himself well and is not caught on any pretext, then he is told to sleep with me, and thus meets his death. Do you know why none escape from this room? If in any way a guest shows his intent to accomplish his desire for me, immediately the sword cuts into his body, and if he first goes toward it to seize and remove it, it straightway leaps out of the sheath and strikes him. Know that the sword is enchanted in such a way that it protects me without fail. I

might not have conveyed this knowledge to you, but you are so courteous and sage that it would be a great pity, and would weigh on my mind forever after, if you were killed because of me.'

"Now Gauvain was at a loss. He had never in his life heard of such a danger, wherefore he suspected that she had told him this to protect herself from his desire to take his pleasure with her. On the other hand, he thought to himself that the affair could never be kept secret: that he had lain a whole night alone with a young girl in her bed, naked body to naked body, and that, deterred solely by a word from her, he had foregone his desire. Better it seemed to him to die honorably than to live long in shame. 'Belle,' he said, 'I take no account of what you have told me. Since I have come to this point, I wish here and now to become your lover; you cannot escape it.' She replied, 'From this moment on you cannot blame me, whatever happens.' He then drew so close to her that she uttered a cry. The sword leapt from the sheath and flew through the air to his body, wounding his side in such a way that it sliced off some of his skin but did not hurt him severely. It also pierced the covers and all the sheets through to the straw stuffing of the mattress. Then it shot back into its sheath. Gauvain lay there dumbfounded, his desire wholly extinguished. 'Sir,' she said, 'Please hear me, in the name of God! You think that I spoke to you as I did because I wanted to protect my body, but truly, I have never done so for any knight except you. And believe me, it is a great wonder that you were not immediately and without remedy killed by this first blow. In God's name, lie here peacefully and from now on refrain from touching me in any way. Even a wise man may undertake something that turns out to his disadvantage.'

"Gauvain remained thoughtful and unhappy, not knowing how to behave. Should God grant that he returned to his own country, the affair could never be kept a secret. It would be known everywhere that he had lain alone all night with a beautiful young girl and had not touched her, with nothing to prevent him except a sword no hand had wielded. He would be forever shamed if she escaped thus. What vexed him all the more was the fact that the candles cast a brilliant light by which he could see her beauty. Her hair was blond, her forehead smooth, her eyebrows delicate, her eyes bright, her nose well-positioned, her complexion fresh, her small mouth laughing, her neck long and graceful, her arms long, her hands white, her sides soft and smooth, her skin white and tender beneath the sheets. So lovely and well-made was her body that no fault could be found with it.

"He moved gently toward her, being a man who was in no way uncouth, and was about to make his conquest complete when the sword leapt from its sheath and again assaulted him. The flat of the

blade struck his neck—he almost thought he had lost his wits. But it wobbled a bit, took three fingers' breadth off his right shoulder, and cut a piece from the silken sheet, whereupon it flew back and thrust itself into the sheath once more.

"When Gauvain felt himself injured on his shoulder and his side, and saw that he could not succeed in his endeavors, he was vexed and grieved, not knowing what to do next and irked by this enforced abstinence. 'Sir,' said she, 'are you dead?' 'Damsel,' he replied, 'not I. But tonight I am giving you a gift: I hereby declare a truce with you.' 'Sir, by my faith,' she said, 'if it had been declared when it was asked for, you would now be in a more pleasant situation.' Gauvain was greatly discomfited, and the damsel as well. Neither the one nor the other slept; rather, their distress kept them awake through the night until it was day.

"Next morning, the lord came to the bedchamber and called out loudly. When he learned that no harm had befallen Gauvain, he was very much displeased. He saw some blood on the bed-linen, and said he was sure that Gauvain had wanted to possess his daughter, but had been prevented by the sword. Gauvain acknowledged that he had guessed the truth. The lord then demanded that he tell him his country and his name. When he learned who his guest was, he revealed that all the knights who had come there before him had been killed by the sword but that the sword would not kill the best of all knights. He then offered him his daughter and the lordship of his castle. Gauvain accepted the former with pleasure, but refused the latter.

"It soon became known throughout the countryside that a knight had visited the lord and had tried to possess the damsel, but that the sword had made two passes without harming him fatally. Many knights and ladies came there, and the lord served them sumptuously; entertainers amused them, and they listened to music and played games. At night, when all went to bed, the lord led Gauvain and his daughter to the room where they had lain before, and married them.

"He set them side by side without interference, then went out and closed the door. What more should I say? That night, Gauvain did as he wished; at no time did a sword fly at him through the air. It does not displease me to think that once again he assaulted the damsel, and she for her part was not distressed in the least."

[After many more days had passed, it came to Sir Gauvain that he had been away from the court for a long time and that his kinsfolk and friends must think he had been killed. He sought permission from the host to leave and take the damsel with him and asked that she be dressed fittingly so that when he returned, her beauty and obvious nobility would be

admired. The two departed, taking the road back to court through the woods. But they had hardly set forth when she took hold of the bridle of his horse and stopped them. She explained that she had forgotten the beautiful greyhounds she had raised herself and did not wish to leave without them. Gauvain returned and fetched them, and they traveled on together.

Suddenly a knight came riding toward them, fully armed and mounted on a fine steed. Without a word, he came up to them, took hold of the girl and drew her away without any objection from her. Gauvain challenged him for her, and, since he was lightly armed, asked him to wait while he went and obtained full armor so that they could fight for her on equal terms. Instead, the knight proposed that they withdraw from her on either side and let her choose which one she wished to accompany further.]

"But the damsel, who well knew how Gauvain was able to acquit himself, wanted next to assess the valor and prowess of the other knight.

"Know this, all of you, whether you be short or tall, whether you laugh or groan on hearing my tale: there is scarcely a woman in the world, were she the sweetheart of the best knight from here to India, whose love for him would be so great that, if he lacked prowess at home, she would prize him as much as a pinch of salt. You know well of what prowess I speak."

[Gauvain was greatly vexed, but ceded the damsel to the knight without argument. He was so courtly that he did not address one word to her, but said to the knight, "May God never look on me with favor if I fight for something that doesn't care about me."

The knight and the damsel then departed, but at the edge of the woods, she halted, and told him that she could not be his sweetheart unless she had her greyhounds. The knight returned to Gauvain and accused him of taking them away even though they did not belong to him. Gauvain proposed that they play the same game they had played before: that they withdraw to either side, call the greyhounds, and let them choose which one to go to. The knight agreed, thinking that he would have them one way or the other. The dogs chose to go to Sir Gauvain, whom they knew, and this pleased him well.]

"But once again the damsel refused to accompany the knight unless she had her greyhounds. He ordered Sir Gauvain to stop and let the greyhounds alone, insisting that they did not belong to him. Gauvain replied:

'It is discourteous of you to oppose me thus. But I am in possession of the greyhounds, since they came to me. May God in His majesty disown me if I give them up. I gave the damsel to you because she attached herself to you, though she was mine and had come

with me. Now it is reasonable that without threat you must leave the greyhounds to me, for they are mine and came to me, and of their own free will attached themselves to me. Know one thing for certain—and in me you can see the proof of it—that if you wish to take your pleasure with this girl, your joy will be short-lived. I fervently hope she hears me! I assure you that as long as she was with me, I did all that she wished. Now see how she has treated me! Know well that it is not with dogs as it is with women. Never will a dog leave for a stranger its master who has fed it. A woman will quickly abandon hers if he does not fulfill all her desires. Such inconsistency is hard to understand. The greyhounds have not abandoned me; thus I can prove, without contradiction from anyone, that the nature and love of a dog are worth more than the way a woman behaves."

[The knight then challenged him to combat, and they fought fiercely. Gauvain finally knocked the knight and his horse down together, dismounted, pinned him against the ground, struck him a series of blows on the head, then dislodged a section of his body-armor and thrust his sword into his side. He left him lying there, retrieved his horse and the greyhounds and leapt into the saddle. The damsel begged him not to leave her, explaining that when she saw how poorly armed he was compared to the stranger, she was afraid to go to him.]

"'Belle,' said he, 'this amounts to nothing. Your excuses are worthless: apologies of this kind have no value. Such faith, such love, such a disposition one often finds in woman. He who wishes to harvest in his country a wheat other than he sows, and he who wishes to find in a woman a nature other than her own, are alike lacking in wisdom. Women have been thus since God made the first of them. The more a man takes pains to be of service to them, the more he repents himself in the end; the more a man honors and does as they wish, the more distressed he becomes, and the more he loses by it. Pity never moved your heart to uphold my honor and protect my life; rather, your feelings were quite the opposite. Country folk say 'It is at the end that one sees how each thing reveals itself.' May God never look graciously on him who finds a woman deceitful and false, yet cherishes and loves and protects her. Now keep the company you have chosen.' Thereupon he left her to herself, and never knew what became of her."

[He returned home; his friends rejoiced to see him, and they listened willingly as he told them all his adventures from first to last.]

The Mule without a Bridle

"Country folks have a proverb saying that many old things which have been put aside are still useful. Therefore, each man should hold on to what he already possesses. The old ways are less esteemed today than the new ones, but often prove to be more valuable. For this reason, Pains de Maisieres says people should follow the old ways rather than the new.

Here begins an adventure of a damsel on a mule who came to King Arthur's court.

[King Arthur was holding court at Carlisle, during Pentecost, with a great assembly of knights and ladies. A young girl came to the castle riding on a mule that had a halter but no bridle. She told the company that the bridle had been taken from her maliciously and that she would never be happy until she got it back. She promised anyone who would undertake the adventure that she would be his when he returned with the bridle and said that she would immediately give him her mule, which would take him to a castle. There he could obtain the bridle, but not peacefully.

Kay, the senechal, offered to go in search of the bridle and departed, riding the mule. He wanted to kiss the girl before he left, but she refused, telling him that she would kiss him when he returned with the bridle. On his journey, the mule took him through a forest full of lions, tigers, and leopards (who recognized the mule and did homage to her) and a deep and wide valley; bitter cold and full of a dreadful stench, in which were snakes, scorpions, and other creatures. Beyond it he entered a meadow with a fountain and then came to a black river crossed only by a very narrow footbridge made of iron. Here Kay, fearing even greater dangers than he had already encountered, turned back.

When, on his return, it was discovered that he did not have the bridle, he was disgraced and did not come again to court. Then Sir Gauvain said that he would undertake the errand. He was granted permission to do so by the king and queen.]

"[H]e wished to embrace the damsel before he left. It was right that she should kiss him, and she did so willingly. Now she felt at ease, since she was certain that she would get the bridle back without fail, however things might go."

[Gauvain rode through the forest and the valley, passed through the meadow, and found the footbridge over the black river, which looked as if it belonged to the devil. It was no wider than a hand, but he struck the mule and she jumped onto the bridge and crossed it.

He then came to a splendid castle surrounded by a deep river and enclosed by a circle of wooden stakes. On each was impaled the head of a

knight. The castle itself was revolving rapidly; he succeeded in entering it by waiting until the gate came in front of him and immediately spurring the mule to jump. Within, the castle precincts were empty. Riding on, he came to a portico, where he was greeted by a dwarf who, after bidding him welcome, disappeared without saying more. Before him was a deep vault or cellar; soon, a shaggy, churlish fellow wearing a large ax around his neck ascended the stair from the vault and confronted him. He told Gauvain that he had wasted his journey; for the bridle was closely guarded and he would have to do battle for it. Gauvain assured him that he was ready to pay for the bridle in full.

The churl invited him to his lodging, stalled the mule, and served him dinner. He then made up a bed for him.]

"Now he approached him. 'Gauvain,' said he, 'you will lie alone all night in this very bed, without offering challenge or protest. Before you go to bed, I am making a request of you with peaceful intent. Since I have heard of the high esteem in which people hold you, and because the occasion has presented itself, I offer you a game, to accept if you will.' And Gauvain promised him that he would accept it, whatever it might be. 'Speak here and now,' he said, 'and I shall make my choice, so help me God, without deception, since I consider you my good host.' The other man said 'Tonight, cut off my head with this sharp gisarme, but on this condition, that I cut yours off when I return in the morning.' 'I would not know much,' said Gauvain, 'if I did not know what my decision would be. Tonight I'll cut off your head, and in the morning I will give you mine, if you want to take it.' 'Damned be he who asks for more,' said the churl, 'so come now!' Then he led him off. The churl rested his neck on a block. Now Gauvain took the ax, and with-out tarrying chopped off his head with one blow. The churl straight-way jumped to his feet and picked up his head. He returned to the cellar, and Gauvain went right to bed and slept soundly until morning.

"As soon as it was day, Gauvain got up and attired himself. Behold! the churl came back, entirely cheerful and in the best of health, with his gisarme around his neck. Gauvain might well think his wits had gone astray when he saw the head that he had cut off the night before. Nevertheless, he had no fear. Then the churl, who had lost nothing, spoke. 'Gauvain,' said he, 'I have come back, and I remind you of your agreement.' 'I have no objections at all, since I see what it behoves me to do, and I know there is no way of combating it.' And indeed, he might well have done so, but he did not wish to commit a treacherous deed: since he had pledged himself, he wished to abide by the bargain. 'Come at once, then,' said the churl. Gauvain went to him and placed his neck on the block, whereupon the churl said 'Stretch your neck out all the way.' 'By God, there's no more of it, but strike it if you wish.' So help me God, there would have been great

^f Like the preceding text, this is a summary of the poem, including excerpts closely translating the original. The latter are in quotation marks.

damage and grief if he had done so! The churl lifted the gisarme high to frighten him, but he had in fact no intention of touching him, since he had shown such great loyalty, and had so fully kept his promise."

[Now Gauvain asked him how he could obtain the bridle. The churl told him that he still had to fight two lions, kept shackled together there, who were so fierce that no one could fight them and survive. He assured him that he would give him as much help as he could. He brought him a suit of armor, gave him a steed to ride, and supplied him with seven shields. A fierce battle followed, in which Gauvain lost several of the shields but finally killed a lion with his sword. In his battle with the second lion, he lost all but one of the remaining shields but finally split the lion's head with his sword and killed him. He then asked again for the bridle, but the churl said that before he obtained it the whole sleeve of his armor would have to be covered with blood.]

The churl then took him to a chamber where a wounded knight was lying. The knight welcomed Gauvain by name and said that it was necessary for them to fight each other. It was the custom in that land that every knight who came to the castle had to fight with the knight who was in residence there; if he lost, his head was cut off and impaled on one of the stakes outside. Gauvain and the knight fought fiercely for a long time, but finally Gauvain cleft the helmet of his opponent. He then begged for mercy and told him that it was he who had impaled on stakes the heads of all the knights who had come in search of the bridle. He had defeated each of them, but Gauvain was superior to them all.

Gauvain then asked yet again for the bridle. The churl told him that he would now have to fight two dreadful fire-breathing serpents and gave him a stronger suit of armor that he would need to wear in his encounter with them. He killed both serpents and cut them to pieces. The dwarf he had seen earlier reappeared and said that he must now eat with his mistress and that he might then take possession of the bridle. He took him to the lady, who, after they had eaten, expressed her gratitude for the help Gauvain had given her sister and offered to take him as her lord and give him the castle. Gauvain politely refused and said that he must leave, for he was overdue at King Arthur's court. She then gave him the bridle and ordered the churl to take the castle to stop revolving so that he could depart unhindered. After he had crossed the bridge, he looked back and saw people dancing in the streets. The churl, who had led him out, told him that he had rescued the people by killing the beasts that persecuted them. God, through him, had delivered them, illuminating the people who were in darkness.¹

Gauvain retraced his journey and arrived at King Arthur's castle. The damsel who owned the bridle kissed him a hundred times and more, and said that her person, by right, was wholly at his service and that she was sure no other knight could have obtained the bridle for her. Gauvain recounted

all his adventures to her. She then asked leave to depart. The king and the queen begged her to stay and take as her lover one of the knights of the Round Table. She said she did not dare to and asked for her mule. Refusing any escort, she began her return journey, riding again into the forest.]

From The Alliterative Morte Arthure†

[Feast at Christmas]

70 Then he holds a Christmas feast at Carlisle Castle,
75 This acclaimed conqueror, in kingly state,
80 With dukes whose dominions lay in distant lands,
85 Earls and archbishops and other lords aplenty,
90 Bishops and bannerets^o and bright-helmed knights
95 From all parts of his provinces: approach when they likel!
100 But on Christmas Day, when the company assembled,
105 From that acclaimed conqueror there came a command
110 That no lord was to leave, but linger at court
115 Until a term of ten days had come to an end.
120 Thus in royal array he holds his Round Table
125 With princely pleasures and plenteous fare;
130 Never, to my knowledge, was a nobler feast
135 Made in midwinter in the West Marches.^o
140 But on New Year's Day, at noon, as it befell,
145 As the king was seated and served at the sumptuous feast,
150 There rushed in suddenly a Senator of Rome,
155 With a train of sixteen knights, trooping in together.
160 He saluted the sovereign and the assembly there;
165 To king after king he courteously bowed;
170 Guenever, the gracious queen, he greeted as he liked,
175 And next, to the monarch he made known his errand.

[The senator tells King Arthur that he bears with him a notarized summons ordering him to appear in Rome. There he must explain why, disregarding his father's sworn fealty to the Roman Empire, he is occupying Roman lands. If he ignores this summons, the emperor's forces will ravage his kingdom, and he himself will be captured and brought to Rome.]

The king gazed at him grimly; his great eyes shone
As bright as burning coals when the fire blazes high.

1. The language of the poem here clearly echoes a prophetic reference in Isaiah to Christ's deliverance of the Old Testament patriarchs in the so-called Harrowing of Hell: "The

† Translated into modern English verse by Marie Borroff, from the text edited by Valene Krishna, *The Alliterative Morte Arthure: A Critical Edition* (New York: Bunt Franklin, 1976). The *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, a poem composed in the late fourteenth-century in the North Midlands area of England, offers a description of King Arthur's feast at Christmas.

His look was like a lion's; his lip he bites.
 The envoy's fell to the earth in abject fear;
 130 Crouching before the king like curs^o in a kennel;
 As daunted by his demeanor^o as if doom were at hand. *low-bred dogs*
 Then a warrior, recovering, rose up among them, *manner*
 And cried, "O crowned king, courteous and noble,
 Let no envy be hurt by so honorable a monarch,
 135 Since we are wholly in your hands, and ask you for mercy:
 We owe allegiance to Lucius, who is Lord of Rome,
 The most marvellous man of all monarchs on earth.
 We have come at his command—excuse us, we pray!"

[Arthur angrily calls the envoy a coward. The envoy replies that he and all his company are utterly daunted by the fierce countenance of the king, who is the lordliest personage he ever saw. Arthur says that out of respect for the emperor, he will temporarily restrain himself, conferring with his lords and doing as they advise. Meanwhile, he invites the Romans to stay with him seven nights "to see what life we lead in these humble lands" (line 154). A description of the feast follows.]

Then the first course came in, before the king himself:
 Boar-heads borne high upon bright silver trays
 By tall lads in livery elegantly attired;
 Boys of royal blood, a band of three score.
 180 There was flesh of fat deer, with frumenty^o beside;
 Wild beasts and birds, brought fresh from the forests;
 Peacocks and plovers on platters of gold;
 Fillets of porcupine force-fed in pens;
 Then herons under hot sauce; the slices heaped high;
 185 Breasts of swan basted in bright silver chargers;
 Tender tarts of guinea-fowl—taste when they like!—
 Morsels most tempting, that melted on their palates;
 Then shoulders of wild swine, the brawn sheared thick;
 Biterns^o on embossed plates, and barnacle geese, *heron-like bird*
 190 Birds cooked under cover of crusts baked brown;
 And great breasts of boar in bounteous display;
 All in sumptuous sauces to solace their hearts,
 With blue flames flicker, to keep the fare hot . . .
 195 Whose luster delighted all who looked on them there.
 Then cranes and curlews^o, cunningly roasted,
 Rich stews of rabbit, redolent with spices,
 Pheasants fancifully served, with feathers in fans,
 Panoplies^o of pastries, puffed piping hot. *long-legged bird*
 200 Claret and Cretan wine copiously flowed *splendid display*
 From *cruchins*^o crafted of silver, curiously wrought; *pipes*

Wines from Alsace and eastern vineyards;
 Rhine wine and Rochelle, none richer to savour;
 Venetian vintages of various hues
 205 That flowed from gold faucets—fill his cup who liketh!—
 The cabinet of the king was encased in silver,
 With great gilded goblets, glorious to behold;
 The chief butler, chosen among chevaliers of rank,
 Was the courteous Sir Kay, who bore the cups round;
 210 Sixty alike were set before the King himself,
 Carven most cunningly by craftsmen renowned;
 Embossed all about with brilliant gems,
 That if poison were privily put in the wine,
 215 The bright gold abruptly would break all to pieces,
 Or else the venom be made void by virtue of the stones.
 And the sovereign seated there in seemly splendor,
 Clad in cloth of gold, with his company of knights
 Adorned with the diadem duly on dais,^o *platform*
 220 Who was deemed most doughty of all dwellers on earth.
 Then the Conqueror cordially called to those lords,
 Rallied^o the Romans with ready speech: *mocked*
 "Sirs, keep a cheerful countenance and comfort yourselves;
 We know nothing here of nicely cooked fare;
 Our barren lands bring forth no better than this.
 225 Wherefore, without feigning, enforce yourselves all
 To feed on such feeble food as you find before you."
 "Sir," says the Senator, "as I hope for Christ's help,
 Such royal fare ne'er reigned within Roman walls!
 There is no prelate, nor pope, nor prince upon earth
 230 Who would not be pleased to praise such peerless dishes."