

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

A CHAMBER OPERA LIBRETTO BASED ON THE ANONYMOUS MEDIEVAL POEM

Robert Fahrner

ACT I

Scene 1

PLACE: King Arthur's Castle. The Great Hall.

TIME: New Year's Day. Night.

CHARACTERS: ARTHUR; GUENEVERE; GAWAIN; BISHOP; LADIES 1, 2 and 3;
KNIGHTS 1, 2, 3 and 4; PAGES 1, 2 and 3.

(The Court enters informally and gathers around a table.

(KNIGHT 1 leads in LADY 1, smiling and talking inaudibly. LADIES 2 and 3 enter together, flirting with KNIGHT 2, who enters with KNIGHT 3.

(GAWAIN, the BISHOP, and KNIGHT 4 enter, the BISHOP talking inaudibly.

(Meanwhile, PAGES 1 and 2 enter with banners and stand behind the table; PAGE 3 enters to serve the table.

(ARTHUR leads in GUENEVERE. She breaks into laughter twice at his inaudible remarks.)

(As soon as all are in place, ARTHUR nods to the BISHOP for a blessing. The BISHOP makes three signs of the cross over the table.

(Then ARTHUR signals that the dancing may begin. He takes off his crown and leaves it at his place at the table.)

(KNIGHT 1 bows to LADY 1 and they move forward to begin the dancing. After a while, KNIGHT 2 bows to LADY 3 and they join the dancing. As the dancing grows in excitement, the spectators participate with clapping and stomping.)

Who commands as King of this castle?
I say I will see the man and speak to him.

I am called Arthur and King of this castle.
Stay with us and share our celebration:
After your welcome ask whatever you will.

My goal, God knows, is not to play guest to this group.

Fame draws my face to your feast!

But the branch I bear here before you
 Proclaims I proceed in peace.
 If I wanted to wield weapons and war,
 I would have burst in and bellowed for battle--
 companion-crowded,
 chain-coated,
 crest-crowned--
 And pointed a pike.
 And pointed a pride-piercing pike.

But see: my garments are soft!

Ha!
 My goal is a game!
 If your fame is fact-founded,
 Grant me my game.

ARTHUR (becoming irritated):

Sir, you will not fail to fight here if that is the favor you seek.

GREEN KNIGHT (laughing boisterously):

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!
 In faith, I say I seek no fight here:

(tauntingly)

Your board abounds with beardless boys.
 I say I merely crave of this court a game, a Christmas game.
 You celebrate the Circumcision; Christmas spirit swells.
 If one of your band--
 blood-bold,
 rage-rash,
 war-wild--
 Dares to strike a stroke in exchange for a stroke,
 I shall bestow on his bravery this broadaxe,
 And I shall bear his blow first, bereft as I am of armor.

Come! Come!

Come, some sport-seeker:

claim my axe,

cleave my poise,

keep my axe--

providing by pact on New Year's next I pay a blow
for

a blow.

Come!

I call for a contest.

(There is no response.)

Cowering,

cringing,

crouching!

Can this be Arthur's courage-castle?

Where is the pride, the power, the prowess you proclaim?

The fame of your feats is falsed

By the sport of a single stranger.

ARTHUR (leaving his place and approaching the GREEN KNIGHT):

Sir, you seek the senseless.

But since you seek it, you shall secure it.

Your blatant boasting frightens none of this band.

Give me that axe now, for the glory of God,

(accepting the axe from the GREEN KNIGHT)

And I shall bestow the blow you beg.

GAWAIN:

My master, make the match mine, I implore you.

Only order me to abandon my place--

(bowing to GUENEVERE and to his peers)

To free my leaving from any discourtesy to my royal lady

or

to my loyal peers--

And I shall rush to relieve you of rudeness.

(irate)

It is unfitting that you undertake to answer it.

My life would be little loss.

You are my uncle: your blood in my body is my one boast.

For you this affair is abject and absurd.

Abandon it to me who have asked first.

If I have spoken anything amiss, may all admonish me.

KNIGHTS (while ARTHUR beckons him to come and GAWAIN moves around to kneel before the King):

Cut! Cut!

Cut carefully! Cut! Cut! Cut!

ARTHUR (bestowing the axe on GAWAIN):

Cut carefully, kinsman:

(humorously)

If you strike with skill I am sure

(smiling meaningfully)

You will bear whatever blow he will be able to offer you later.

GREEN KNIGHT (while ARTHUR moves away):

I shall state the plan again before we start.

First of all, friend, I want your name in good faith.

GAWAIN:

Good sir, graciously:

Gawain.

And I understand that after this encounter,
Whatever happens here,
I must meet you in twelve months' time,
Ready to receive your return blow--

with no weapon
and
no wavering.

GREEN KNIGHT:

I stake my fame and my future on the fact
That the person picked
To put his power
Against my power
Is perfect
For the pact.

By God, Sir Gawain, I am indeed glad
It is you who will strike the stroke I seek.
The plan you present is proper:
It keeps the conditions proposed to the King.

But I want your sworn word, warrior, before these witnesses,
That you yourself will seek me alone next Christ-season--
world-wandering,
wild-wintering,
way-wondering--
To bear the blow deserved by your blow.

GAWAIN:

Where shall I wander? Where are your winter-walls?
May the Almighty Monarch abandon me if I am aware of your nation
of your name.

Only announce to us who you are
and

where you abide,

And I shall expend eager effort to encounter you:
This I affirm before all with an awe-inspired oath.

GREEN KNIGHT:

I wanted your sworn word;
 I have won it.
 After I have borne your blow,
 I shall provide what you plead--
 my home and my name--
 So you can keep the compact.
 But if I am silent,
 The compact will be canceled and you will be champion.
 Then do not seek; stay safe and secure.

 Enough talk!
 Grasp well the war-axe:
 Wield it!

GAWAIN:

Gladly.

(GAWAIN moves to the task quickly. The GREEN KNIGHT moves into position quickly, his back to the audience. With one blow of the axe, GAWAIN cuts off the head of the GREEN KNIGHT. The spectators react with disbelief and horror. The GREEN KNIGHT pauses in his place, then slowly picks up his head and holds it high. He faces the Court.)

GREEN KNIGHT:

Prepare to pay your pledge, Gawain:
 Seek me and submit to the stroke I owe you.
 You have sworn in the sight of your sovereign.
 Go gravely to the Green Chapel, gallant:
 welcome the New Year there
 and
 welcome my fair blow there.
 Many give me the name Knight of the Green Chapel.

Come or be called coward!

(The lights black out.)

Scene 2

PLACE: King Arthur's Castle. A hall.

TIME: The Vigil of All Saints' Day. Dusk.

CHARACTERS: ARTHUR; GAWAIN

(The lights discover GAWAIN sitting on a step.)

GAWAIN:

Month has merged with month
Until my year of anxious anticipation has almost ended.

We lamented the last of the Yuletide leisure
While weather-wild winter warred against the world.
Then fish-fast lent led in lagging spring:
 flower-fair,
 shower-soft,
 wind-warm.
Moist meadowlands moved into green magnificence
While boisterous birds began their building
And fruit buds burst into bloom.
 And fruit buds burst into exuberant bloom.

When welcome summer warmed the world,
The west wind whistled gently, gently, under the watchful sun
And the blissful earth basked--
 herb-elated,
 leaf-lovely,
 thick-thriving--
 in eager exultation.

But autumn arrived too soon.
 But harvest-hurrying,
 soil-swirling,
 winter-warning autumn arrived too soon.
 Riots of crops ripened and rotted;
 Winds wrestled the warmth;
 Leaves lashed the land.
 The world withered.

My year of liberty has yielded many yesterdays.

(ARTHUR enters. GAWAIN sees him and addresses him.)

The somber Michaelmas moon
 Long ago admonished me to ask approval for my adventure,
 But I lingered on in tardy leisure.
 Now we already observe the eve of All Saints' Day

(GAWAIN moves toward ARTHUR.)

Lord of my life, I entreat leave to depart in the morning.
 You heard my honor-oath:
 I am bound to bear the blow of the Green Knight.

(GAWAIN kneels before the King.)

Lord of my life, I entreat leave to depart in the morning.

ARTHUR (placing his hands on GAWAIN'S shoulders):

Go.
 Go tomorrow with the grace of God, nephew:
 Seek the man and submit to his stroke.

GAWAIN (rising):

I accept your approval gratefully, my lord.

ARTHUR (as they move to leave together):

If you keep your celebrated courtesies
and your chastity,
You cannot fail to conquer your foe.

(They go out. The lights fade.)

Scene 3

PLACE: King Arthur's Castle. The Chapel.

TIME: All Saints' Day. Dawn.

CHARACTERS: ARTHUR; GUENEVERE; GAWAIN; MONKS 1 and 2; BISHOP;
KNIGHTS 1, 2, 3 and 4; LADIES 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
and 8; PAGES 1, 2, 3 and 4.

(PAGES 1 and 2 enter and roll out a white carpet embroidered in gold. PAGES 3 and 4 enter with a tray piled high with GAWAIN'S apparel and arms.)

(PAGES 3 and 4 take the shield from the top of the tray and stand it, clearly visible to all, near the BISHOP'S place. Then the PAGES take their places for the ceremony.)

(KNIGHTS 1 and 2 enter from one side, KNIGHT 3 from the other.)

(LADIES 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 enter with GUENEVERE. The LADIES curtsey as GUENEVERE moves through the group to her position in the center of the front row of LADIES.)

(MONKS 1 and 2 accompany the BISHOP. MONK 1 carries a candle, MONK 2 a tall cross. The entire group bows as the BISHOP takes his place.)

(Walking and standing one pace behind and to the side of the King, KNIGHT 4 enters with ARTHUR. The entire group bows as ARTHUR takes his place.)

(GAWAIN enters and moves toward the carpet. He wears a purple cape over his tights and doublet; when he is one pace from his position, PAGES 1 and 2 move behind him and take away the cape. He steps onto the carpet.)

(GAWAIN genuflects to the BISHOP, to ARTHUR, and to GUENEVERE. Each receives the obeisance with a bow of the head.

(PAGES 1 and 2 move toward the BISHOP with the tunic.)

BISHOP (making three signs of the cross):

Accept your tunic: may it testify, as you travel, to your towering chastity.

(PAGES 1 and 2 put the tunic on GAWAIN as PAGES 3 and 4 move forward with the shoes.)

WOMEN:

May it testify, as you travel, to your towering chastity. Amen.

BISHOP (making three signs of the cross):

Accept your shoes: may they stride resolutely to the task and on to perfect sanctity.

(PAGES 3 and 4 put the shoes on GAWAIN as PAGES 1 and 2 move forward with the greaves.)

WOMEN:

And on to perfect sanctity.

MEN:

Amen.

BISHOP (making three signs of the cross):

Accept your greaves: may they guide the steps of your venture to God's glory.

(PAGES 1 and 2 put the greaves on GAWAIN as PAGES 3 and 4 move forward with the hauberk.)

WOMEN:

May they guide the steps of your venture to your merit and to God's glory.

BISHOP (making three signs of the cross):

Accept your hauberk: may it hold off deadly harm for the augmenting of earthly life and heavenly honor.

PAGES 3 and 4 put the hauberk on GAWAIN as PAGES 1 and 2 move forward with the vambraces.)

MEN AND WOMEN:

And heavenly honor.

BISHOP (making three signs of the cross):

Accept your vambraces: may they avert all violent encroachments on your valor and your virtue.

(PAGES 1 and 2 put the vambraces on GAWAIN as PAGES 3 and 4 move forward with the gauntlets.)

WOMEN:

May they avert all violent encroachments on your valor and your virtue.

BISHOP (making three signs of the cross):

Accept your gauntlets: may they guard your hands as you grasp for victory and eternal glory.

(PAGES 3 and 4 put the gauntlets on GAWAIN as PAGES 1 and 2 move forward with the surcoat.)

MEN:

Amen.

BISHOP (making three signs of the cross):

Accept your surcoat: may it symbolize dedication to the service of your sovereign and of your Savior.

(PAGES 1 and 2 put the surcoat on GAWAIN as PAGES 3 and 4 move forward with the spurs.)

MEN AND WOMEN:

And of your Saviour.

BISHOP (making three signs of the cross):

Accept your spurs: may they speed your courage to terrestrial success and to celestial splendor.

(PAGES 3 and 4 put the spurs on GAWAIN as PAGES 1 and 2 move forward with the sword.)

WOMEN:

And to celestial splendor.

BISHOP (making three signs of the cross):

Accept your sword: may it slash away all assaults on your safety and on your sacred chastity.

(PAGES 1 and 2 put the sword on GAWAIN as PAGES 3 and 4 move forward with the helmet.)

MEN:

Amen.

BISHOP (making three signs of the cross):

Accept your helmet: may it hold harmful onslaughts from your head And heedful courtesy in your mind.

(PAGES 3 and 4 present the helmet to GAWAIN. He kisses it and then holds it in his right arm. PAGES 1 and 2 meanwhile move to the shield. They simply lift it for the blessing, one on either side of it. PAGES 3 and 4 return to their places.)

MEN AND WOMEN:

Amen.

BISHOP (making three signs of the cross):

Accept your shield.

WOMEN:

May it shelter your person in security;
May it support your spirit in sanctity.

BISHOP:

The shining sign of the Pentangle suits you well:
Solomon himself established this star
As a symbol of splendid fidelity.

It is a figure with five points--

BISHOP, MEN AND WOMEN:

--each line interlocking,
 each line overlapping,
 each line unending.

BISHOP:

It befits you, because you are unendingly virtuous
 in five ways,
 and in each way with reference to five things.

First you are faultless in your five senses,
 then in your five fingers.
 All your fervent faith is fostered by Christ's five wounds;
 All your fiery courage flows from the five joys the Virgin
 found in her Child--
 so her fair face is fittingly
 figured inside your shield.
 Finally, five virtues are especially affixed to your fame:
 commiseration,
 compassion,
 charity,
 courtesy,
 chastity.

The shining sign of the five-pointed star therefore suits you well.

Accept your shield.

(PAGES 1 and 2 turn the shield, displaying the face of the Virgin, and slip it onto GAWAIN'S left arm. Then they join PAGES 3 and 4.)

WOMEN:

May it shelter your person in security.

MEN AND WOMEN:

May it support your spirit in sanctity. Amen.

(GAWAIN takes several forward paces. He goes onto one knee before the BISHOP for the final admonition.)

BISHOP (extending his hands over GAWAIN'S head):

Keep chastely the commandments and the counsels of your Eternal King.

(GAWAIN rises, moves to ARTHUR, and goes onto one knee for the King's farewell. ARTHUR steps down to him.)

ARTHUR (placing his hands on GAWAIN'S shoulders):

Undertake courageously the commission of your temporal King.

(GAWAIN rises, moves to GUENEVERE, and goes onto one knee for her farewell. GUENEVERE steps down to him as he kneels.)

GUENEVERE:

With this courteous kiss I commend you to Christ.

(She kisses him lightly on the forehead.)

(GAWAIN rises and leaves slowly. The Court watches him go.

(As soon as he has gone, the grouping begins to break up very slowly and very quietly. The Court is very depressed.)

(ARTHUR moves first. As he starts to turn, the Court bows. KNIGHT 4 accompanies the King, one pace behind.

(As GUENEVERE turns to move through the group of LADIES, they curtsey. Two LADIES accompany the Queen, one pace behind, and the rest follow.

(The BISHOP leaves accompanied by the MONKS. When the BISHOP first moves, the PAGES and the KNIGHTS bow to him. KNIGHT 3 leaves as the BISHOP leaves.

(PAGES 1 and 2 begin to roll up the carpet; PAGES 3 and 4 take the tray and leave. All the PAGES are carefree and careless.

(KNIGHTS 1 and 2 move to leave, informally and slowly. They go around the PAGES rolling up the carpet.)

KNIGHT 1:

By Christ, the loss of that knight is a calamity for the Court. It will be impossible to find his peer in perfect manhood.

(PAGES 1 and 2 finish rolling up the carpet and they leave.)

KNIGHT 2:

Gawain was created to command;
Now he is bargained off for base beheading
In answer to the boasts of a bewitched barbarian.

KNIGHT 1:

Who ever heard of a King allowing such a Christmas contest!

(They leave. The lights fade quickly.)

Scene 4

PLACE: Northern England. The wilderness.

TIME: Christmas Day. Dusk.

CHARACTERS: GAWAIN; GUIDE.

(The lights discover GAWAIN resting in utter dejection and misery.
He has set aside his helmet and shield.)

GAWAIN:

Alone

I wandered away from my world
 of warfare
 and wassail
 and worship:
 into the North,
 with West-washed Wales to my left;
 into the North,
 with wave-walled Anglesey to my left;
 into the North,
 to the wooded wild-land of Wirral.

And always

I found nothing of the Green Knight.

Alone

I roamed through the rain-ravaged
 rock-rank
 rage of Wirral;

Alone

I battled back-bristling boars
 and blast-blazing dragons
 and bellow-boasting giants;

Alone

I waged my way north,
 even to the wilderness of Westmoreland.

And always
I found nothing of the Green Knight.

Alone
I wander in the ice-winter wilderness:
 in white-mossed hollows,
 along silver-stark streams,
 among hoar-tangled hawthornes and hazels and oaks;

Alone
I wander on frost-fierce ridges and rocks,
 through wanton mist
 and wind-whirled snow.

Alone--
 alone and lost in an alien land--
I wander, while the festive world recalls in wonder
 the birth of the Blessed Saviour.

And still
I find nothing of the Green Knight.

(Looking upward, he kneels to pray.)

O Merciful Father--
 and Mary, Mildest Mother--:
Meekly I ask
For an abode
Where I might hear Mass
In humble honor
Of the Holy Christmas Season.
O Merciful Father--
 and Mary, Mildest Mother--:
Mindful of my mission,
Meekly I ask.

(He makes the sign of the cross

May the cross of Christ maintain me.

(The GUIDE appears suddenly. His abrupt appearance is mysterious. GAWAIN is first surprised, then puzzled, then elated. He has risen.)

GAWAIN:

Loyal sir,

Would the lord of your lodging
Receive a roaming knight under his merciful roof:

GUIDE:

By Peter,
I know you will be welcome.

Walk here,

(He leads the way. GAWAIN picks up his helmet and shield quickly and hurries after him.)

GAWAIN:

May the Lord grant good lodging!

(They leave. The lights fade quickly.)

Scene 5

PLACE: The Castle in the Wilderness. The Great Hall.

TIME: Christmas Day. Night.

CHARACTERS: LORD OF THE CASTLE; LADY OF THE CASTLE; GAWAIN; MORGAN;
PAGES 1, 2 and 3; LADIES 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7; KNIGHTS
2, 3 and 4; COURT FOOL; GUIDE; MONK.

(The lights discover the Court celebrating Christmas. The LORD leads the group in the singing of a carol; the COURT FOOL IS capering.)

LORD, LADY, MEN AND WOMEN:

Now mark with mirth
The blessed birth--
from Christmas
until Candlemas.

(GAWAIN and the GUIDE enter during the singing. KNIGHT 4 takes GAWAIN'S helmet and shield and hands them to the GUIDE.)

LORD (moving toward GAWAIN):

Welcome, warrior!
This wall-warm world is yours:
Possess as you please here
whatever you will.

GAWAIN (embracing the LORD):

May the new-born Redeemer, noble lord,
Reward you richly.

(The LORD motions the Court to resume singing. The LORD, GAWAIN, KNIGHT 4 and the GUIDE move aside to remove GAWAIN'S outer garments.)

MEN AND WOMEN:

Now mark with mirth
The blessed birth
from Christmas
until...

LORD:

From how far do you come:

GAWAIN:

From a land, mighty lord,
More than a lonely month away.

KNIGHT 4:

From what court do you come?

GAWAIN:

From the realm, sir,
of the radiant-royal Arthur.

LORD:

And will you tell us
Which knight favors our Christmas feast?

GAWAIN:

Good lord, graciously:
Gawain.

(With a burst of delighted laughter, the LORD swings around and gets the attention of the whole Court. The singing breaks off. The changing of the garments is interrupted.)

LORD:

This guest is Gawain, gallant Gawain,
By God,
From courage-crowded Camelot!

KNIGHTS 2, 3 and 4:

Peerless-perfect Gawain!

KNIGHT 2:

We shall see unmatched skill
in wielding weapons and fearless warfare!

KNIGHT 3:

We shall see unmatched style
in courtly love and conversation!

KNIGHT 4:

We shall see unmatched strength
in Christian-constant chastity--

KNIGHT 2:

And courage--

KNIGHT 3:

And courtesy!

LORD:

Truly, God graces our Christmas
In granting such a guest as Gawain!

KNIGHTS 2, 3 and 4 (as KNIGHT 4 moves toward the other two):

We shall watch and learn his flawless ways
as he shares
this joyous season.

(The LORD and GAWAIN move to resume changing clothes. The GUIDE and PAGE 1 approach to assist. Behind them, the Court turns its attention to one of the LADIES who moves forward, sits on a step, and begins singing.)

LORD:

Gallant Gawain,
I breathe a better man
Because you grace my feast
 this God-glorying day.

GAWAIN:

Mighty lord,
I merit little these many honors.
But you merit all honor
 for your matchless generosity.

I shall wait upon your will
 in all things whatsoever

(kissing the LORD'S ring)

As long as I linger here.

LORD:

By Peter,
This pledge pleases me.
Possess in your pause here
 whatever you will.

(as an afterthought)

And pause long.

WOMAN:

Noel, noel, noel, noel.

My lords and my ladies,
 be mindful, be mindful,
Of maiden-mother Mary
 and of her Holy Son.
Noel, noel.

WOMAN AND WOMEN:

Noel.

WOMAN:

My lords and my ladies,
 be mindful, be mindful,
Of...

GAWAIN:

Mighty lord, I may not:
Morning-adorning Mass
Must mark my departure.

LORD:

What dire task drives you into dread winter
Forlorn of Christmas-feasting friends?

GAWAIN:

An urgent mission, merciful lord:
By oath-accord
I must accompany the approaching year
To meet a man
I am loath to look upon late
For a kingdom of land!

Yet even now
The quick-yielding year leaves me yearning
For news of the knight.

Humbly I ask: have you ever heard
 of the Green Knight
 or
 of the Green Chapel?

LORD:

Peace!

(The LORD begins to move toward his seat. His comment and his action attract the attention of everyone; the two groups are united again. The WOMAN who has been singing stops abruptly and moves out of the way.)

Pause here in peace:

Your green goal is gained!
That curious chapel is close to this castle!

(He is standing in front of his seat.)

Pause here in peace until the pledge-day--
Then go with my guide
to your pact-place and your promise.

(He sits.)

GAWAIN (moving toward the LORD):

My endless journey is ended!
I humble-offer heaven and you thanks,
Honored lord.
Now I may remain here as you ask,
Resolve-ready for your rule.

(He is standing very close to the LORD.)

LORD:

You pledge to do as I please.
Will you prove this pledge promptly?

GAWAIN (kissing the LORD'S ring):

Worthy lord, I shall wait upon your will
As long as I linger here.

LORD:

Then hear well my will!
Because you come to my castle
cold-cleft,
fast-frail,
watch-worn,
You shall stay in soft ease here--

Storing sleep
 and strength
 and warmth--
While I pursue a pleasure-planned hunt.

GAWAIN:

Honored sir,
Homage-held I heed your order.

LORD:

Until I come back to keep at court
The feast of the faultless Innocents,
My wife will provide company at plate
 and
 at prayer.

LADY (to the LORD):

Steadfast in your service, splendid lord,
I shall do so.

(to GAWAIN)

Stay welcome and seek strength, esteemed sir,
In soft-sweet repose.

GAWAIN (kneeling before her and accepting her extended hand):

I lack language to lavish suitable thanks,
Lovely lady.

LORD (standing and interrupting the intimacy of their encounter):

For fun, knight,
For festive fun,
Let us further form a pact:

Let us trade in turn in three days
 whatever I win in the woods
 and
 whatever you win within walls.

A Christmas sport, sir!
Let us honor-pledge a prompt trade
 of winnings--whether they be worthy
 or
 worthless!

GAWAIN:

By heaven, I pledge my honor.
I am happy my hoast likes an amusing game!

LORD (smiling):

Bind a barter-bargain, then, with drink!

(They drink. They laugh.)

LORD:

A barter-bargain!

GAWAIN:

A barter-bargain!

(They laugh.)

LORD (to the entire Court):

Hunt-horns soon will draw up dawn!

(to the MONK)

Come! Come!
Chant-crown Christmas!

(The MONK moves to a prominent position and kneels with his back to the audience. The Court kneels, backs to the audience, for the service. The LADY catches GAWAIN'S eye as they move to kneel. The LORD sees the exchange of interested glances and deliberately kneels between the two. MORGAN watches the three of them carefully.)

MONK:

Today the Blessed Christ is born,

MEN AND WOMEN:

the Anointed One appears;

MONK:

Today adoring angels sing,

(The LADY stares at GAWAIN. He senses her staring and he turns his head. Their eyes meet. MORGAN watches all this; the LORD does not see it.)

MEN AND WOMEN:

adoring archangels sing;

MONK:

Today the just rejoice:

(All stand. The MONK turns to the group. The members of the Court pass on either side of him, singing. As each goes by, the MONK sprinkles him with holy water.

(All leave after this blessing except the LADY, who moves to a good position for watching GAWAIN.)

MEN AND WOMEN:

Glory to God;
Glory,
Glory to God.
Alleluia.

(The LORD and GAWAIN do not move by the MONK for the blessing. They turn and begin their exchange. Realizing that they do not intend to receive the water formally, the MONK tosses a little in their direction before he leaves.)

LORD:

God grant you rest, Gawain!
We shall trade takings in three days.

GAWAIN:

Worthy lord, willingly.

LORD:

Whatever I win in the woods,
warrior;
Whatever you win within walls!

(By this time all have gone except the LORD, the LADY and GAWAIN.)

LADY:

Whatever you win within walls!

GAWAIN:

I pledge my honor!

LORD:

A prompt trade of winnings--
be they worthy or worthless.

LADY:

Be they worthy or worthless.

GAWAIN:

An amusing game!

LORD:

So let us swear a sure-sealing oath.

LADY:

An amusing game.

LORD:

I swear to share the winnings!

Swear!

GAWAIN:

I swear to share the winnings!

LADY:

And

I swear to snare the warrior!

LORD:

I swear to share!

GAWAIN:

I swear to share!

LADY:

I swear to snare!

LORD:

I swear!

GAWAIN:

I swear!

LADY:

I swear!

(The three leave separately. Before he exits, the LORD turns to look briefly at the departing GAWAIN. GAWAIN does not turn. The lights fade slowly.)

ACT II

Scene 1

PLACE: The Castle in the Wilderness. The gateway; Gawain's room.

TIME: St. Stephen's Day. Dawn.

CHARACTERS: LORD OF THE CASTLE; LADY OF THE CASTLE; MORGAN; GAWAIN;
PAGES 1 and 2; KNIGHTS 1, 2, 3 and 4.

(The lights discover GAWAIN, the LORD
KNIGHTS 1, 2, 3 and 4, and PAGES 1 and
2 gathering to leave for the hunt. The
PAGES carry some little baggage; the
LORD and the KNIGHTS sing a hunting song;
GAWAIN watches. GAWAIN and the LORD
embrace briefly when they first meet--
with no interruption of the song.

LORD AND KNIGHTS:

Come, companions, come!
Ho, hoho, ho, hoho, hoop!

The dogs dash here. Now here!
Ho, hoho!
Here! The pack pauses here
Around the panting prey. Here!
Ho, hoho!

LORD:

Clear-crisp horns call
Kennel and castle and stable
Clamoring into the dawn-cold:
 hounds howling,
 sportsmen scurrying,
 steeds straining.

The flaunt-fierce frenzy
Fires the forest with crafty fear.

Clear-crisp horns clamor-call!

Farewell, fair wife.
Farewell, famed warrior.

GAWAIN:

Farewell, mighty master.

LADY:

Farewell, mighty master.

LORD (as he turns to go):

We shall trade takings in three days.
A barter-bargain!

GAWAIN:

A barter-bargain!

(The LORD and his party leave, singing the hunt song. GAWAIN watches them go as he moves toward his bedroom. The LADY and MORGAN watch GAWAIN. When the hunters are gone, MORGAN turns to go as the LADY moves toward GAWAIN'S door.

(GAWAIN, meanwhile, has lain down on his bed.)

(The LADY and MORGAN exchange glances when the LADY reaches the door. The hunt song has faded slowly during all of this: by the time the two women exchange glances, it is gone.)

LORD AND KNIGHTS:

Come, companions, come!
Ho, hoho, ho, hoho, hoop!

(The LADY enters GAWAIN'S bedroom. He senses her presence as she enters and pretends to be asleep.)

LADY:

Ah, sir! You sleep so soundly
And miss the splendor-morning!

(She sits on the side of the bed.)

Good morning, matchless Gawain.

(GAWAIN pretends to awaken. He pretends to be surprised to discover her.)

Surely you sleep unwary,
So easily I steal here to seize you!

(She blocks his efforts to get out of bed. He crosses himself.)

GAWAIN (smiling broadly):

Good morning, gracious madam.

Amazed at abrupt capture,
Your captive asks appeasing truce.

LADY:

So my captive seeks truce!

(She blocks his efforts to move.)

Strict terms keep him snug in his cell!

GAWAIN (laughing):

Lovely lady, allow him to leave his cell
And attend you appropriately.

LADY (restraining him even more):

No, no! He may not leave, knight!
Instead, see: I secure-seal his cell!

(That part of the game is over. She draws back her arms somewhat as she continues, but she still restrains him.)

Gawain, Gawain!
Lords and ladies in all lands
Acclaim your lustrous life:
And you are here!
And you are here,
And I am here--
 you and I are alone.
My lord with huntsmen follows horns and hounds.
My household sprawls hushed.
Your loft is locked.

Let us make love-talk!

(She touches his shoulder.)

Let us make love!

Seize my sweet body
And seek satisfaction.
Stark-strong desires
Surge to be seized.

GAWAIN:

Lovely lady, you lavish with luck
A man without merit!
Yet accept him as least among the admirers of your excellence
And you award him all joy!

LADY:

Gawain, Gawain!
Such slighting of your excellence
Would show scant excellence in me!

So many ladies would spurn treasures
To sit with you as I sit with you now--sharing solitude
and
soft-sweet solace.
I thank heaven I have him all long to have!

GAWAIN:

May Mary reward your courtesy, madam,
But my life does not match my merit-renown.
Your lofty merit mistakes my lowly merit!

LADY:

No, no!
No, no!
May Mary help me!

Were I celebrated and esteemed above all my sex,
and seeking a splendid lord,
I should select you, sir:
your manliness,
your manners,
your modesty.
You merit your renown: no man matches you!

GAWAIN:

Heaven reward you, how you honor me!
But you have a far worthier lord, lovely lady,
And I remain your humble homage-knight.

LADY (standing up abruptly):

Sir, surely you are not Gawain!

GAWAIN (getting up onto his knees):

Worthy lady, why not Gawain?

LADY:

Gawain would not linger with a lady
Without subtly seeking a courteous kiss!

GAWAIN:

Lovely lady, let it be as you like;
Humbly and obediently, your homage-held knight
Hastens to heed your order.

(She kneels opposite him on the bed. They lean forward for the exchange of kisses. He kisses her on the cheek, politely; she kisses him on the mouth, passionately.)

(She rises and moves toward the door slowly; she stops at the door. He is still kneeling on the bed. All this time they stare into each others eyes. She turns to leave his room. The lights fade lingeringly.)

Scene 2

PLACE: The Castle in the Wilderness. The Chapel.

TIME: St. John's Day. Evening.

CHARACTERS: GAWAIN; LADY OF THE CASTLE; MORGAN; MONK; PAGES 3 and 4; LADIES 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8.

(The MONK and the women of the household, gathering for vespers, enter in procession. PAGE 3, with a tall cross, leads. The PAGE moves upstage and faces the audience; the MONK and the worshippers kneel facing him and the cross.

(The LADY and GAWAIN come in from opposite sides. When they near each other, she pulls him aside before he can join the worship. She begins her lines immediately.)

LADY (pretending to be very angry--with her head high and her eyes flashing):

Surely, sir, you are not Gawain!

You share none of his celebrated ways,
And those shown to you, you scorn!

Certainly you spurn
what I showed you yesterday.

GAWAIN (amazed at her sudden attack and trying to placate her):

What do I spurn, worthy lady?
I offer no willing offense.

MONK AND WOMEN:

Today the Blessed Christ
is born,
the Anointed One
appears.

MONK:

Let us honor the Holy
Apostle John.

WOMEN:

Hail, Holy John, hail!

MONK:

He rested his head,
his holy head,
Upon the heart of God.

WOMEN:

Hail, Holy John, hail!

LADY:

You spurn courtly kissing, sir.
For such favor as I showed,
Courtesy surely demands response.

GAWAIN (with concern):

Leave these thoughts, lady!
I only refrain from asking kisses
 in dread of refusal:
Refusal makes asking remiss!

LADY (pretending to yield somewhat to
his appeasement):

None could spurn your kisses, sir.

(She runs her fingers along his arm.)

You are strong enough
 to subdue one so boorish!

GAWAIN:

Yes, lady, but because in my land
Force in love brings little luck,
I await an order to offer my worship-kiss.

(She turns to embrace him. He kisses her
politely on the cheek; she kisses him
passionately on the mouth.)

MONK:

Let us honor the Holy Apostle
 and Evangelist John.

WOMEN:

Hail, Holy John!
Hail, Holy John!

MONK:

He heard the mysteries of
 heaven--

WOMEN:

He heard the mysteries of
 heaven
For humble humankind.

MONK:

Hail, Holy John, hail!

WOMEN:

Hail!
Help us, Holy John, to merit
 the joys of heaven.
Help us, Holy John!

LADY:

Now tell me, knight--
 without anger at my asking--
 Why a hero so handsome,
 so hardy,
 so honored for love-skill,
 Shows so little interest in love.

Lordly chivalry
 Lives for love.
 Nothing means more to gallant men:
 They serve,
 They suffer,
 They stake life for love of their ladies.
 And returning to attend their adored ones,
 True knights shower them with solace
 and
 sweetness.

You are known as the noblest knight of the age.
 Yet I see no sign of courtly love-skill.
 A man so courteous,
 so gracious,
 so suave with homage-pledges as you
 Ought to offer
 Eager love to a lady.

Are you without skill
 in spite of your love-fame?
 Or am I too stupid for your subtle art?

Shame, sir, shame!
 I long to learn love-games:
 Show me some skill!

MONK:

Hail, Holy John!

WOMEN:

He rested his holy head
 Upon the heart of God.

MONK AND WOMEN:

Glory to God!
 Glory,
 Glory to God!
 Alleluia.

MONK:

Hail, Holy John!

WOMEN:

Let us honor the Holy
 Apostle John.

MONK:

Hail, Holy John!

WOMEN:

Let us honor the Holy
 Apostle and
 Evangelist John.

GAWAIN:

Our Redeemer will reward you:
How great is my happiness
That one so worthy as you
Bothers with one so worthless!

But for me to teach love to you
Who are more able in that art
Than a hundred such as I--
My lady, this is madness!

Accept me as least among your admirers
And I shall lavish you with lasting gratitude
For my joy, so help me heaven!

(She smiles. She takes his face in her two
hands and kisses him passionately on the
mouth. She looks fully into his face and
smiles very, very broadly.)

MONK:

Hail, Holy John!

WOMEN:

He heard the mysteries of
heaven--

MONK:

He heard the mysteries of
heaven for humble
humankind.

WOMEN:

Hail, Holy John;
hail, Holy John!

MONK:

Hail, Holy John!

WOMEN:

Hail!
Help us to merit,
Help us to merit the joys,
the joys of heaven,
The joys of heaven. Amen.

(The service is over. GAWAIN and the LADY turn and kneel quickly for
the final blessing. They leave in procession with the worshippers as
the lights fade.)

Scene 3

PLACE: The Castle in the Wilderness. Gawain's room and an area outside it; the gateway.

TIME: Holy Innocents' Day. Night.

CHARACTERS: LORD OF THE CASTLE; LADY OF THE CASTLE; GAWAIN; MORGAN; MONK; COURT FOOL; PAGES 1, 2, 3 and 4; LADIES 1, 2, 3 and 4; KNIGHTS 1, 2, 3 and 4.

(The lights discover GAWAIN in his bedroom and the LADY and MORGAN at some distance from the bedroom looking toward the door. The LADY slips off her outer gown, revealing a seductive kirtle with an extremely low neckline. It is bound at the waist with a green girdle.

(MORGAN takes the garment and stands where she is, simply holding the gown and looking toward the bedroom. The LADY moves to GAWAIN'S room and enters it.)

(The LADY, laughing in delighted excitement, sweeps to GAWAIN'S bed and kneels to kiss him tenderly. He smiles. She sits next to him and begins to fondle him. He still smiles. Then she stretches out somewhat and begins to embrace him more passionately. Torn between fear of sin and fear of rebuffing her discourteously, he is increasingly alarmed.)

GAWAIN (suddenly leaving the bed):

May Mary help me, this must not be!

LADY (rising from the bed and circling it):

Surely you deserve censure
If you love not the life lying near you!

(She pretends to become suspicious.)

But perhaps you have left a lady,
 a lady more lovely,
 a lady basking in your lasting love-pledge--

(breaking off)

I see it is so.

(She moves to him and touches his shoulders lightly.)

Hide nothing, knight:
Let me know of the pledge now.

GAWAIN (moving away from her slightly):

By the Blessed Innocents,
I have left no love-pledge, lady.

(He pauses, reluctant to go on. He turns to her. When he does go on,
he is simply honest, very polite, and, above all, very gentle.)

Nor do I long to leave a love-pledge yet a while.

LADY (feigning utter dejection):

Your honest answer heaps my heart
 with heavy anguish.

(approaching him)

Solace my spirit-sorrow with a sweet kiss.

(They exchange polite kisses. She turns to go. When she gets to the
door, she turns as though she has had an afterthought.)

LADY:

Since we separate so soon,
Leave me some little keepsake--
 a single glove, perhaps--
To lessen my love-grief.

GAWAIN:

O lady, I long to have with me
 in this alien land
 the worthiest objects I own:
For you merit all of them, and more.

But to bestow on your devotion a base glove--
This is hardly proper honor!

LADY (giving up on that without a skirmish and holding out a ring she
has taken off):

Though I receive nothing of yours, knight,
Accept this adoration-symbol.

GAWAIN:

I must refuse your ring, lady:
Having nothing to render,
 nothing may I receive.

LADY (taking off her girdle and holding it out to him):

If the ring seems too splendid-strong a bond,
Then take a simple silken thing.

GAWAIN:

Anxious to avoid offense,
I must ask you to abandon giving:
Having nothing to render,
 nothing may I receive.

And yet I shall admire your kindness always.

LADY (feigning annoyance):

You spurn my silk
Because it seems so simple.

GAWAIN:

My lady, while I pursue my mighty mission--
 and heaven help me thrive--
I must set aside all earth affairs.

LADY (closing in):

But know, knight, the wonder-nature of this knit:
A man wearing this magic-green
Can be slain by no skill on earth.

(GAWAIN immediately considers accepting the girdle. The LADY senses his momentary interest and presses on.)

He can be slain in no strife on earth.

(GAWAIN is strongly tempted now. He realizes that this might be the solution for the hazards of New Year's Day.

(The LADY moves to put the girdle around him.)

LADY:

By no skill--
 in no strife--
 on earth.

GAWAIN (giving in to what is taking place with a certain amount of relief):

With awe I accept, madam.

(Outside the bedroom there is some little commotion: the hunters are approaching. The lights come up slightly. PAGE 3 crosses to meet the men; LADY 1 enters, looking for the hunting party. MORGAN moves toward the bedroom, anxious that the LADY come out.

(The LADY has finished fastening the girdle about GAWAIN. The two sense the activity outside and its meaning. There is an urgency in the bedroom.)

LADY (hastily arranging his outer gown to conceal the girdle):

For my sake, sir, conceal it always:
Hide it from my hunter-husband.

GAWAIN:

No one shall ever know:
You hear my honor-oath.

(The LADY makes a move to go.)

GAWAIN (momentarily forgetting the commotion outside):

And you leave, lady, with my lasting thanks.

(She moves back to him hastily and gives him a quick kiss. He returns a quick kiss.)

(Outside the bedroom, LADY 2 and the MONK enter to welcome the hunters.)

GAWAIN (suddenly aware of the urgency of the situation):

My lasting thanks.

(The Lady steps out of the bedroom. MORGAN bustles up to her and the two hurry off to a relatively inconspicuous place where MORGAN helps the LADY into her gown.)

(GAWAIN follows the LADY out of the bedroom and stands pensively just outside it. Looking around, he sees the MONK standing in an elevated, very conspicuous place. He considers snatching the opportunity for going to confession.)

(Meanwhile, general excitement continues to mount. The lights grow brighter. The hunters are heard singing in the distance.)

KNIGHTS:

Come, companions, come!

(Now GAWAIN has resolved to confess. He moves to the MONK and says something inaudible. The MONK nods. GAWAIN kneels at his feet as he hands him a crucifix. With bowed head, and staring intently at the crucifix, GAWAIN mumbles inaudibly to the listening MONK.)

LORD AND KNIGHTS:

Come, companions, come!

Ho, hoop,
ho, hoop,
ho, hoop, ho!

(At the same time, LADIES 3 and 4 enter together; LADY 5 enters alone; the COURT FOOL enters cutting a small caper, although no one pays attention to him. PAGE 4 crosses in the back to assist the approaching party. The LADIES all look in the direction of the hunters.)

(By now, GAWAIN has finished his confession. The MONK, giving absolution, mumbles inaudibly and makes the sign of the cross. GAWAIN rises, greatly relieved, and with the MONK turns to face the approaching party.

(By now, the LADY and MORGAN have finished arranging the gown and they move to a position for greeting the LORD.)

(On the last line of their song, the hunters suddenly burst into view. They are very boisterous. PAGES 1 and 2, carrying some little baggage, lead; KNIGHTS 1, 2, 3 and 4 follow.

(Entering last and sweeping to the center of the gathering, the LORD immediately commands the situation.)

LORD:

Fierce-winter night falls
 on the Feast-day of the Innocents
Forcing us to festive fires.

(extending his arms to embrace the approaching LADY)

Good wife!

LADY:

Splendid sir, we salute you.

LORD:

Gallant Gawain!

GAWAIN (approaching to embrace the LORD):

We welcome you, worthy lord.

LORD (beckoning to PAGES 3 and 4 who are still out of sight):

I come to keep our Christmas compact.

(PAGES 3 and 4 enter bearing between them a slain deer lashed onto a pole. PAGES 1 and 2 leave.)

LORD (gesturing toward the animal):

Does my deer deserve praise?

GAWAIN (studying it):

Mighty lord,
I have seen no match for it in many winters.

LORD:

Until dusk-dark the first day
We darted after dog-dodging,
 trumpet-driven,
 death-dreading deer,
Piling high the plunder.
Cut-keen steel gutted the catch;
 huntsmen feasted on fire-roasted flanks;
 dogs devoured blood-drenched bread.

But I preserved my prey:
Possess by pact
My plump-proud prize!

GAWAIN:

[illegible]

(Quickly but solemnly he kisses the LORD once on the cheek.)

LORD:

Gawain, I am grateful.
But where did you win such wealth?

GAWAIN:

Ah, my lord,
We agreed to no such asking!

LORD (good naturedly) :

Ha !

(He beckons and PAGES 1 and 2 advance bearing between them an immense boar's head. PAGES 3 and 4 take away the deer.)

Boldly on banks,
 in bogs,
 in bushes,
We battled a brawny boar all the next day.
But by night my blade was buried in his bristle-brave heart.

By treaty, take him!

GAWAIN (touching the head):

Only matchless courage masters such might!
Accept abiding gratitude, my lord,
and all that I acquired that day.

(Quickly but solemnly he kisses the LORD twice on the cheek.)

LORD:

By God, Gawain,
What gain you get!

I have tried you twice
 and found you faithful.
May the third test prove best!

GAWAIN:

And here I render today's harvest.

(Quickly but solemnly he kisses the LORD three times on the cheek.)

LORD:

By Christ, what commerce you control!

GAWAIN (aware of the hidden girdle):

No matter, my lord.
I have offered all I owe.

LORD:

Paltry my payment!
From dawn we tracked a flight-fleet fox--
 waiting,
 weaving,
 wheeling.

Finally, fenced with fangs and fury,
He surrendered his stealthy soul
 and his skin.

(beckoning to PAGE 3 who advances with a fox's skin)

The Fiend possess it: this pelt
Is my poor payment for your precious kisses.

GAWAIN (embarrassed by the whole third exchange):

Enough! It needs no excuses.
Accept my thanks, mighty lord,
 for your honors
and for your hospitality
 these Holy Days.
The Redeemer reward you.

Mindful that the New Year is near,
Again I ask about
 the mysterious chapel and my fateful mission.

LORD:

All I promised I shall perform:
A guide will point out the pact-place
 before Prime on the pledge-day.
Therefore take your ease until then.

(to the LADY)

Come!

(to GAWAIN and the others)

Come!

Let us carouse while we can.

(ominously)

For Fate can fell us at will!

(The lights black out as they turn to go.)

Scene 4

PLACE: The Green Chapel and the area around it.

TIME: New Year's Day. Dawn.

CHARACTERS: GUIDE; GAWAIN; GREEN KNIGHT.

(The GUIDE, with increasing trepidation because of the ominous nature of the place, enters leading GAWAIN.)

GUIDE (reluctant to go farther):

Gravely I guide you
to this grim-green ground.
Go back, good Gawain!

(Resolutely, GAWAIN passes the GUIDE and moves forward a little.)

GUIDE (excitedly):

Flee! Flee this fearful place
and its fiend-fierce tenant!
Flee the death dealt to disturbers
of this dire domain!

(GAWAIN moves forward a little more.)

GUIDE:

Flee! Flee for God's favor!
I vow to hide your flight forever.

GAWAIN (reluctantly):

The Redeemer will reward your concern, sir,
But I must meet my fate manfully.

(determinedly)

Heaven will help me!

GUIDE (solemnly):

By Peter! For your boast
You will bear the blow of doom!

(He hands GAWAIN his helmet and his sword hurriedly.)

Go in grace, gallant Gawain.
All the gold in God's creation
Could not keep me here!

GAWAIN (to the hastily departing GUIDE):

May heaven love your lord
 and his lady
 and his loyal household!

(He turns and contemplates the eerie surroundings, especially the prominent circular mound.)

(with awe)

O Mary, Mildest Mother,
 on this evil mound
Demons must sing matins at midnight!

(with returning strength)

Dread will not delay me!

(boldly)

What man meets me here?

GREEN KNIGHT (from off stage, frightfully):

The Green Knight!

The Green Knight!

God guard you, Gawain!

(The GREEN KNIGHT bounds into view. He leaps to the center of the mound, axe in hand.)

GREEN KNIGHT:

And God guard you, Gawain!

You come to keep the compact?

Prepare to pay your pledge!

GAWAIN (removing his helmet):

Good sir, willingly:

I shall bear your blow as you bore mine.

(GAWAIN moves into position resolutely. The GREEN KNIGHT raises his axe and pauses. Then just as the weapon comes down, GAWAIN glances up to see what has delayed the blow and the axe misses him.)