

NAXOS
AudioBooks

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

New verse translation by Benedict Flynn

Read by **Jasper Britton**

POETRY



NA286512D

1	I. When siege and assault had ceased...	1:47
2	This fair Britain, founded by that famous knight...	0:52
3	The king lay at Camelot one Christmas tide...	1:08
4	With New Year not yet a day old...	1:16
5	Now, Arthur would not eat until all were served...	0:58
6	So he stands, the stern young king...	1:06
7	I'll say nothing more about the meal...	1:12
8	Green, were both the garments and the grinning man...	1:31
9	Garbed in green was the gallant rider...	1:27
10	And yet he had no helm or hauberk either...	1:38
11	Stunned, the court stared...	1:00
12	From the dais Arthur watched...	1:34
13	'Fight? Have no worry.'	1:28
14	If he astonished them first...	1:21
15	'By heaven,' said Arthur...	0:53
16	'Grant me grace,' said Gawain...	1:06
17	The king commanded the courtly knight to stand.	1:12
18	'By God,' said the Green Knight...	1:24
19	The Green Knight stood...	1:30
20	For he held the head up high in both his hands...	1:29
21	And yet high-born Arthur was heavy at heart...	1:25
22	II. Arthur was granted his gift of adventure...	1:29
23	So comes the summer season...	1:10

24	Yet he lingers till All Hallows...	1:26
25	He dwelt there that day...	1:09
26	Hasped in his armour...	1:26
27	Last they showed him his bright shield...	1:12
28	First he was found faultless...	1:35
29	He struck his steed with his spurs...	1:07
30	Gallant Sir Gawain then in God's name rode out...	1:04
31	Forsaken he rode far distant from his friends...	1:28
32	More merry in the morning...	1:13
33	Scarcely three times had he signed the holy cross...	1:10
34	So he stayed his steed...	1:05
35	'Sir,' said Gawain...	1:31
36	Gawain gazed at the good man...	1:38
37	A chair by the chimney hearth...	1:14
38	Then enquiries came, but questions carefully put...	1:21
39	The Knight, done with his dining...	2:23
40	When Gawain gazed upon that gracious lady...	1:15
41	On that morning when men remember the birth of our dear lord...	1:16
42	That day they made much merriment...	1:19
43	With courteous questions he asked Gawain...	1:44
44	Gladness filled Gawain then...	1:20
45	'Oh, one thing more' the master said...	1:21

46	III. Long before first light...	1:24
47	At the burst of the baying the forest trembled.	1:29
48	While the lord sought sport among the forest leaves...	1:48
49	'Good morning, good knight,' she murmured to Gawain...	1:51
50	'Good Lord!' said Gawain...	1:10
51	'Madam,' said that debonair man...	1:26
52	She bids him good day...	1:29
53	Still at his sport, the lord spurred his steed...	1:47
54	The head, too, and the neck...	0:57
55	The lord commands his men to meet...	1:29
56	Afterwards in a chamber, by the chimney...	0:52
57	Scenting quarry by a marshy covert...	1:34
58	Pressing close to shoot hunters...	1:09
59	Coming to the curtain, she coyly peeped in...	1:52
60	I would learn from you, my lord,'...	1:32
61	'Good faith,' said Gawain then...	1:16
62	Roused from rest, he rose...	1:07
63	At last came the lord...	0:56
64	Then in triumph many bugles blew the prise...	1:07
65	Merry, the lord with loud voice and laughter...	1:12
66	They laid out tables on top of trestles then...	1:00
67	They drank more amid laughter...	1:08
68	After Mass, he and his men down a morsel...	1:21

69	To hear the hounds' voice was truly heart's delight...	1:36
70	Out of the deepest darkness of drowsy dreams...	1:06
71	For that precious princess...	1:18
72	'Such words,' said the woman...	1:19
73	She offered him a rich ring...	1:30
74	'Do you refuse this silk now,'...	1:12
75	With a word of farewell she went on her way...	1:05
76	So let him linger there in the lea of their love...	1:24
77	With night setting in...	1:25
78	With mirth and minstrelsy...	1:15
79	Courteous he kissed them...	1:11
80	IV. So New Year draws near...	1:25
81	He fastened on the finest pieces himself...	1:04
82	Then Gringolet was groomed for him...	1:05
83	The drawbridge was lowered...	1:08
84	I have brought you this far...	1:23
85	'Good Sir Gawain, let that grim man well alone...'	1:15
86	'Mary!' said the servant...	1:02
87	He put spurs to Gringolet...	1:23
88	'By God, what a desolate spot,'...	1:15
89	Gawain called out then, loud and clear...	1:28
90	'Gawain,' said the Green Knight then...	1:13
91	The gallant in green prepared himself...	1:27

92	'So have at it, by your faith...'	1:22
93	Up, up swiftly went the axe...	1:10
94	The knight stood back and rested on his axe...	1:32
95	'For that braided belt you wear...'	1:41
96	But the other lord laughed and then said lightly...	0:53
97	'Truly, no,' Gawain said...	1:03
98	'But the belt,' said Gawain...	1:27
99	'In this green guise she sent me...'	1:23
100	Our worthy knight went by wild ways...	1:17
101	'Behold, sir,' he said...	1:47

Total time: 2:14:16

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight are fortunate to be with us. Their survival, like that of Beowulf's, is a story of luck and literary providence. The sole Beowulf manuscript narrowly escaped destruction by fire in 1731. The only copy of the Gawain poem lay untitled in the same collection, forgotten for over two hundred years before it re-surfaced in 1839. Both are now, one hopes, safe for posterity, in the British Library.

The Gawain poet has been less fortunate than his hero. We know next to nothing of him, not even a name. He was probably a man, given the detailed knowledge of hunting and armour in the poem, and it is likely that he wrote the three other devotional poems bound with the Gawain manuscript. One, known as Pearl, is a mysterious and moving allegory about a father's grief at the death of his two year old daughter.

Although the Gawain poet was a contemporary of Chaucer, writing in the 14th century, Gawain is an altogether different proposition from Chaucer's work. Chaucer was a master of the form and style of French and Italian poetry in English. Gawain has a wilder, archaic feel, familiar and strange at the same time, but definitely more Norse saga than Canterbury Tale.

The reason is geographical. Chaucer's culture was centred on London. Gawain was written for an audience in the north of England, an area around Cheshire, Derbyshire and 'the wilderness of Wirral'. This flourishing northern culture retained more Anglo-Saxon elements, both in ethos and language, than Chaucer's southern world.

Gawain's quest does take place in a saga setting. It is a grimly realistic winter landscape that the poet evokes through

a dialect with words of Norse origin that were not, or rarely, part of Chaucer's vocabulary.

But the most important difference between them, and source of the archaic feel of Gawain, comes from the northern poet's preference for alliteration, a central component of Anglo-Saxon poetry. As Chaucer mockingly makes the Parson in his *Canterbury Tale* say, 'I am a Southren man. I can nat geeste 'rum, ram, ruf,' by lettre.' ('I cannot recite "rum, ram, ruf" letter by letter').

We rarely come across alliteration today, but for centuries it was the poetic norm. The rules are complex, but the basic line of Anglo-Saxon poetry has four stresses, three of which begin with the same consonant, with a break after the first two. In the Gawain poet's expert hands the repeating consonants reinforce the drama, the sense of the words and their emotional content.

He does not avoid rhyme, every stanza finishes with an ancient rhyming device known as the 'bob and wheel'. The bob is a very short alliterative line of only

two syllables. The rhyming wheel which follows is a counterpoint of four lines, used to create suspense or offer an ironic commentary on what has gone before.

To a translator of Gawain, attempting to reproduce the effect of the original in modern English, keeping to the rules of alliteration without inserting anachronisms or making a nonsense of the word order is the central problem. The pitter-patter of consonants may sound strange to our ears, yet without it much of what the Gawain poet intended his audience to hear in listening to his poem is lost. Gawain demands to be heard, and the alliteration gives Gawain its distinctive quality: an Old English form bearing a Romance tale of chivalry and courtly love.

The story begins at Camelot when the Christmas festivities of Arthur's court are interrupted by the appearance of a green knight. Not merely a knight in green, but entirely of green, riding an equally green horse. The intruder throws down a monstrous challenge: strike him a blow now, in return for his striking a blow a year hence.

Sir Gawain, Arthur's young nephew, accepts. He takes up the Green Knight's monstrous axe, and beheads him. To the horror of the court, the body, still living, picks up the head. It instructs Gawain to be at the Green Chapel, to receive a return blow, in twelve months time.

What follows, as Gawain searches for the Green Chapel, is a cracking story in four parts or 'fitts' that weave together three different narratives.

The beheading game, the main plot, has its roots in ancient pagan folklore. The earliest version is an 8th century Irish story, Briciu's Feast, where Gawain's role is played by the Irish hero Cuchulain.

The narrative tension is increased by two other tests of the hero's honesty, loyalty and chastity: Gawain's exchange of winnings with his host Sir Bertilak, and his attempted seduction by Sir Bertilak's lusty wife.

The theme of temptation by the hostess appears in a number of medieval romances. The closest analogue to Gawain's experience of staving off the hostess is Yder, an Anglo-Norman

romance, where the wife attempts to seduce the guest so that her husband may have power over him.

The exchange of winnings was a real part of Germanic culture, much like an American Indian potlatch ceremony. A man, given a gift, had to return an equal or better one to the giver or risk losing honour. In Gawain the emphasis is on the exchange as a game of truth and keeping true to one's word.

In the telling of the story the exchange of winnings and the hostess temptation appear to be unconnected with the beheading game. The Gawain poet's originality lies in the way he combines all three so that the hero's survival in the beheading game depends on his honesty and chastity in the others. The whole poem becomes a test of truth.

As Gawain faces his trials, the fateful New Year's Day meeting at the Green Chapel draws closer, and we are aware with Gawain of the near-certainty that he will lose his head. The story's conclusion, though moral and didactic, is no less thrilling a denouement for that. And,

as ever with the stories of Camelot, we find the powerful sorceress Morgan le Faye, Arthur's half sister, working in the background to destroy the Round Table.

One of the greatest stories of English literature from any period, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a magical medieval combination of the epic and the uncanny. As the Gawain-poet says, since Brutus first came to Britain from Troy, long before we were born, there have many been tales like this. It is a tribute to his skill that very few have been as well told.

Notes by Benedict Flynn

**The music on this recording is taken from
the NAXOS catalogue**

TRADITIONAL GAUDETE CHRISTUS EST NATUS Oxford Camerata / Jeremy Summerly	8.558170
ANON DEN III RONDO, DEN VI RONDO LES QUATRES BRANIES Convivium Musicum Gothenburgense	8.558170
ANON PARLAMENTO (Arr. ENSEMBLE UNICORN) Ensemble Unicorn	8.553131
ANON ISABELLA (Arr. ENSEMBLE UNICORN) Ensemble Unicorn	8.553131
ENGLISH , DEO GRACIAS ANGLIA Oxford Camerata / Jeremy Summerly	8.550751

Music programmed by Nicolas Soames

Cover picture: Cotton Nero Ms AX: The headless Green Knight in Arthur's Hall,
English School (14th century)
Courtesy The Bridgeman Art Library

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

New verse translation by Benedict Flynn

Read by **Jasper Britton**

A mysterious knight all in green arrives at King Arthur's court and issues a bizarre challenge. Gawain answers the knight – but at what cost?

This new translation keeps all the poetic power of the original's extraordinary alliteration. In doing so it brings the saga vividly to life, and in a manner that demands to be heard.

One of the greatest stories of English literature from any period, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a magical medieval combination of the epic and the uncanny.



Jasper Britton took the lead in the Regent's Park Open Air Theatre production of *Richard III* and has also worked for the Royal National Theatre and the RSC. His television appearances include *The Bill* and *Peak Practice*. He also reads *Poets of the Great War* and *Treasure Island* for Naxos AudioBooks.

CD ISBN:

978-962-634-865-9

View our catalogue online at

www.naxosaudiobooks.com



Total time
2:14:16

Produced by Nicolas Soames
Recorded at Motivation Sound Studios, London
Edited by Arthur Ka Wai Jenkins

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. UNAUTHORISED PUBLIC PERFORMANCE,
BROADCASTING AND COPYING OF THESE COMPACT DISCS PROHIBITED.
© 2008 NAXOS Audiobooks Ltd. © 2008 NAXOS Audiobooks Ltd.
Made in Germany.