

**SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN
KNIGHT. A MIDDLE-ENGLISH
ARTHURIAN ROMANCE
RETOLD IN MODERN PROSE**

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Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. A Middle-English Arthurian Romance Retold in Modern
Prose by Jessie L. Weston

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JESSIE L. WESTON

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ARTHURIAN ROMANCES

Unrepresented in Malory's
"Morte d'Arthur"

*Sir Gawain and the
Green Knight*



Der Sammler

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

A Middle-English Arthurian Romance *Retold in Modern Prose*,
with *Introduction & Notes*, by
Jessie L. Weston, *Translator of*
Wolfram von Eschenbach's "Parzival" * * * * *

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Preface to First Edition

THE poem of which the following pages offer a prose rendering is contained in a MS., believed to be unique, of the Cottonian Collection, Nero A. X., preserved in the British Museum. The MS. is of the end of the fourteenth century, but it is possible that the composition of the poem is somewhat earlier; the subject-matter is certainly of very old date. There has been a considerable divergence of opinion among scholars on the question of authorship, but the view now generally accepted is that it is the work of the same hand as

Pearl, another poem of considerable merit contained in the same MS.

Our poem, or, to speak more correctly, metrical romance, contains over 2500 lines, and is composed in staves of varying length, ending in five short rhyming lines, technically known as a bob and a wheel,—the lines forming the body of the stave being not rhyming, but alliterative. The dialect in which it is written has been decided to be West Midland, probably Lancashire, and is by no means easy to understand. Indeed, it is the real difficulty and obscurity of the language, which, in spite of careful and scholarly editing, will always place the poem in its original form outside the range of any but professed students of mediæval literature, which has encouraged me to make an attempt to render it more accessible to the general public, by giving it a form that shall be easily intelligible, and at the same time preserve as closely as possible the style of the author.

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For that style, in spite of a certain roughness, unavoidable at a period in which the language was still in a partially developed and amorphous stage, is really charming. The author has a keen eye for effect; a talent for description, detailed without becoming wearisome; a genuine love of Nature and sympathy with her varying moods; and a real refinement and elevation of feeling which enable him to deal with a *risqué* situation with an absence of coarseness, not, unfortunately, to be always met with in a mediæval writer. Standards of taste vary with the age, but even judged by that of our own day the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* comes not all too badly out of the ordeal!

The story with which the poem deals, too, has claims upon our interest. I have shown elsewhere* that the beheading

*"The Legend of Sir Gawain," Grimm Library, Vol. VII. (Chapter IX. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight).

challenge is an incident of very early occurrence in heroic legend, and that the particular form given to it in the English poem is especially interesting, corresponding as it does to the variations of the story as preserved in the oldest known version, that of the old Irish *Fled Bricrend*.

But in no other version is the incident coupled with that of a temptation and testing of the hero's honour and chastity, such as meets us here. At first sight one is inclined to assign the episode of the lady of the castle to the class of stories of which the oldest version is preserved in Biblical record—the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife; a *motif* not unseldom employed by mediæval writers, and which notably occurs in what we may call the *Launfal* group of stories. But there are certain points which may make us hesitate as to whether in its first conception the tale was really one of this class.

It must be noted that here the lady is