THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 131: SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 131: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. In this episode, we're going to conclude our look at the English literary revival of the late 1300s with one of the most popular poems of that period – Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. This poem was composed around the same time as the Canterbury Tales, but this particular poem is very different from Chaucer's works. It was composed in a different part of England, so the dialect is different. It also uses alliteration, instead of the rhyming verse that Chaucer used. So it has a much more traditional Old English feel about it. But despite the difference in language and style, it remains one of the most enduring poems from the Middle English period, and so this time, we'll examine the story of Gawain and the Green Knight, and we'll also explore the language used to tell the story.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now let's turn our attention to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Over the past few episodes, we've explored a very important period in the history of the English language. I realize that it may seem like the overall progress of the story has stopped, and that we've been stuck in the late 1300s for some time. But that is largely because there was an explosion of English literature in these final two or three decades of the century. Piers Plowman was composed, John Wycliffe and his followers translated the Bible into English, Geoffrey Chaucer composed most of his poetry including the Canterbury Tales. And a poet in the northern part of England composed an Arthurian poem called Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. It's hard to say why this was such an active period for English literature, but it probably had a lot to do with the general re-emergence of English as an officially accepted language around the middle of the century. As we've seen before, French had experienced a bit of a decline in official circles, and in its place, English had become the language of the schools and the language of Parliament. And a decade or so later, there was this massive renaissance of English literature with most of the highly revered works coming around the same time as each other in the last quarter of the century. Then the movement faded a bit as the 1300s gave way to the 1400s.

This is a reminder that literary movements often came in waves, with writers influencing and encouraging each other, leading to periods when certain types of literature flourished. But eventually, those waves dissipated, and those literary movements faded. Well, the same type of thing had happened to Arthurian romances in France over the prior century.

In the late 1100s and 1200s, French writers had been consumed by stories about King Arthur. Many Arthurian romances had been written in France, and the story of Arthur had been fleshed out in those works. Writers like Chretien de Troyes expanded the Arthurian universe with new stories and new characters like Lancelot. In fact, much of what we associate with the modern Arthurian legend was created in those French stories.

But by the late 1300s, that period of Arthurian literature had faded in France. There seemed to be a sense that the material had been taken as far as it could go. But despite the waning interest in France, writers in England were keeping the legends alive. And that was especially true in the north of England. Several Arthurian works were composed in England during the 1300s, and it appears that most of them were composed in the northern regions. And one of those poems was included in a manuscript that was largely forgotten for about five centuries.

At some point in the late 1300s, a scribe compiled a manuscript that contained four poems. It is unlikely that the scribe was the actual poet. He probably was a scribe working in the burgeoning book-making industry, and he simply copied these pre-existing poems for a customer. Whatever motivated the scribe to create the manuscript, it is generally agreed that all four poems in the book were composed by the same poet, though the name of the poet is unknown. All of the poems are written in the same dialect which was a dialect spoken in the northwest Midlands. And they're all written in a similar style, even using some of the same unique word choices. And these poems are only found in this one particular manuscript. There are no other copies from this period, so these were not widely circulated works. The exact date of the manuscript is unknown, but the script that was used and other general attributes of the book suggests that it was compiled at some point in the late 1300s – around our current point in the overall story of English.

The history of the book after that point is unclear, but it ultimately ended up in Robert Cotton's massive book collection in the 1700s. You might remember him from earlier episodes of the podcast. He was the guy who collected all of those Old and Middle English manuscripts – and many of those surviving works were preserved thanks to his collection. His collection also included the only surviving copy of Beowulf. And you might remember that the house where his collection was maintained caught fire at one point, and some of the manuscripts in it were burned and lost forever. But thankfully, this little book of four poems survived the fire.

It wasn't until the next century that scholars really began to read and dissect the book. One of the poems called Pearl is a lament about the death of a small child. Two of the other poems deal with specifically Christian topics, suggesting that the author was a cleric or had been trained in the Church. The final poem is a story about a ghostly green figure who tempts one of King Arthur's most loyal knights named Gawain. It didn't have a title, but it became known as 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.' With its publication in the 1800s – nearly five centuries after it was written – the story finally began to be read by a wide audience, and it proved to be very popular. Within Middle English literature, its popularity is only rivaled by the Canterbury Tales.

Now I noted that this poem survived as part of Robert Cotton's collection which also included the only surviving copy of Beowulf. Well, the Gawain poem has a couple of other things in common with Beowulf. Like Beowulf, it features a monster or supernatural being as one of its main characters. And also like Beowulf, it's composed using alliteration in the style of Old English poetry. Unlike Chaucer, who usually wrote rhyming poetry, this particular poet preferred the more traditional English style.

For this reason, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is part of a larger movement that is sometimes called the 'Alliterative Renaissance' or the 'Alliterative Revival.' It referred to a period in the late Middle Ages when English poets once again resorted to alliteration when composing their poetry. Most of those poems in that style were composed in the northern and western parts of the country. You might remember that Piers Plowman also used alliteration, so it was also part of this movement. Now the term 'Renaissance' or 'Revival' implies that these poets were harkening back to that earlier period of Old English poetry, perhaps because that was the way that English poetry had traditionally been written. So with the revival of English as a literary language, these poets may have thought that that was the way you wrote poetry in English. However, some scholars are skeptical about terms like 'Renaissance' or 'Revival.' They think that the old style never really disappeared in those regions, so it wasn't so much a conscious decision to bring back an old style, as much as a continuation of a style that was still being used.

What's so interesting about the Gawain poet's style is that he did incorporate some rhyming verses as well, and he did so in a very deliberate way. The poem is divided into a series of short stanzas. The total number of lines within each stanza varies, but it's usually around a dozen lines. Again, each line uses alliteration with a series of words that begin with the same sound. But at the very end, each stanza ends with five rhyming lines – the final four being very short lines of just a few words. This little rhyming section at the end of each stanza is often referred to as the 'bob and wheel,' and it's a style that's really unique to this poem.

The alliteration of the poem is also important as it relates to the history of English. In order to write that kind of poetry, you actually need a very large vocabulary, because you need to incorporate words that tell the story, but also begin with specific sounds. So if you're composing a rhyme, you really just focus on the final word in each line. Those are the key words that have to end with the same sound. But if you're composing a poem using alliteration, you have to come up with several words within each line that all begin with the same sound. So it's actually a bit more challenging in that regard, and it requires you to have a pretty broad vocabulary to pull from. You might remember that Old English poets used stock phrases and formulas to satisfy the requirements of the line. Well, the Gawain poet delves into his deep vocabulary of native Old English words, French and Latin loan words, and the Norse words that were so common in the northern Midlands. So we have this fascinating mixture of words – many of which were probably considered to be old-fashioned at the time and aren't really found in English documents beyond this point. In fact, they're rarely found outside of this type of poetry.

So for example, the poem features knights and other characters who interact with each other, so the poet routinely had to refer to a person or man or knight. And that meant that he needed lots of synonyms for ***person***, and he needed a variety of words that began with different letters. So in addition to words like ***man*** and ***knight*** and ***lord*** – all of which came from Old English – he also used a lot of other terms. Sometimes he used the word ***prince*** which came from Latin and French. Sometimes he used the word ***tulk*** which is apparently an Old Norse word. It's only found in a handful of works from this general period, and it appears in a couple of the other poems in the manuscript that contains the Gawain poem.

The poet also used a variety of Old English terms that were quickly disappearing from the language, some of which are rarely found beyond this period. For example, he used Old English words for 'man' like ***gome***, ***lede***, and ***segge***. He also used the word ***wyghe*** which meant 'person.' And he used ***freke*** which meant 'knight.' He also used the Old English word ***burne*** which meant 'warrior.' It's distinct from the word ***bairn*** meaning 'a child' which still survives in some dialects in northern England and Scotland. The poet also used the Old English word ***renk*** meaning 'warrior' which is related to the word ***rank*** in the phrase 'rank and file.' He used the Old English word ***schalk*** meaning 'servant' which survives in the second part of the word ***marshal***. And he also had another interesting synonym at his disposal. It was the word ***haþel***.

That is another one of those words that only appeared in a handful of poems around this period of time from the late 1300s into the 1400s. And the Gawain poet used it quite a bit.

Another interesting thing about the word ***haþel*** is that it appears in all four of the poems contained in this particular manuscript, even though it wasn't a very common word. And it's those types of linguistic clues that have lead many scholars to conclude that all four of the poems in the manuscript were composed by the same author.

There's also another interesting thing about that word ***haþel*** meaning man or warrior. It actually appears to be a portmanteau, and that would make it one of the first known portmanteaus in the English language.

Now a portmanteau is a word that is formed by taking parts from two or more different words and putting them together. So it's what happens when ***breakfast*** and ***lunch*** are combined to form the word ***brunch***. When ***motor*** and ***hotel*** are combined to form ***motel***. When ***smoke*** and ***fog*** form ***smog***. When ***ipod*** and ***broadcast*** form the word ***podcast***. Also think about words like ***Brexit***, ***bromance***, ***frenemy***, ***mansplain***. We create these types of words all the time in Modern English, but it was very rare to do that in older periods of English. As I noted, this word ***haþel*** is one of the first recorded portmanteaus in the language. It combines the Old English words ***hæleþ*** meaning warrior and ***æþel*** meaning noble. And together, ***hæleþ*** and ***æþel*** created this word ***haþel***.

So we see how the Gawain poet pulled from his extensive vocabulary to come up with the words he needed to satisfy the alliteration requirements of the poem.

Now before we get to the poem, let me make a couple of other quick notes about the language of the poem and the hero of the poem.

First of all, as I have noted, the poem is written in a dialect that was spoken in the northwest Midlands. Scholars have even pin-pointed the location to the region around Cheshire, so roughly speaking, the region south of modern-day Liverpool and Manchester. The poet also appears to have had a very good knowledge of the Welsh marches, so that location is consistent with those descriptions. So that was apparently where this dialect was spoken. It's very different from Chaucer's London dialect, and it has a lot of northern features. I'm not going to go through all of those northern features because I covered them in some detail in the last episode, but this poet

used a lot of the same features that Chaucer gave to his northern students in the Reeve's Tale which we explored last time. However, being from the Midlands, the Gawain poet's dialect shows a bit more of a blend of north and south. For example, he used both the northern pronoun ***their*** and its southern equivalent ***her***. He also tended to end his plural nouns with the northern '-S' ending which became standard over time, but he sometimes used the southern '-EN' ending as well. So again, this dialect contains a mixture of northern and southern features which is what we would expect to see in the Midlands.

And then lastly, let me make a quick note about the hero of the poem – Gawain. In the Arthurian legends, he was the nephew of Arthur, and he was actually Arthur's leading knight in the original versions of the legend. So you may be wondering why we don't hear very much about Gawain in the modern re-telling of the legends. Well, this is another one of those cases where we can thank – or blame – the French writers who expanded the legend in the late 1100s and 1200s.

Gawain was a figure in the original Welsh versions of the legend. And he continued to be a major figure in the early Latin version composed by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the 1100s called 'The History of the Kings of Britain.' That book was very popular at the time, and it triggered much of the interest in Arthur in England and France and other parts of Western Europe. Again, Gawain featured very prominently in that version of the story. He was Arthur's right-hand-man. But then those French writers like Chretien de Troyes expanded the story, and he added the character of Lancelot. And over time, Lancelot largely replaced Gawain as the Arthur's greatest knight in the French tradition.

Well, that was the French tradition. Back in England, Gawain remained the principal knight. And that's probably why he was featured as the hero in this poem about the Green Knight. And Gawain's prominence continued for about another century or so. But then, in the late 1400s, Sir Thomas Malory compiled many of the Arthurian stories into his somewhat definitive work called 'Le Morte d'Arthur' – or 'the Death of Arthur.' And he pulled heavily from the French tradition. And that's really when Lancelot started to replace Gawain in the English tradition as well. But again, that change took place at a later date, so Gawain remains the hero here in this poem. By the way, Lancelot is actually mentioned in the poem, but he is just another member of the Round Table.

Also, one last note regarding the name Gawain. I've mentioned that name a few times in earlier episodes of the podcast, and I always get feedback about the proper way to pronounce it. Generally speaking, the A-I-N spelling represents the /ain/ sound in Modern English as in words like ***pain*** and ***chain*** and ***stain***. So the most common modern pronunciation is either /GAH-wain/ or /guh-WAIN/ – depending on which syllable you stress. But if we try to identify the pronunciation in Middle English, things become a little more complicated.

First, if we use the normal spelling G-A-W-A-I-N, we encounter that letter combination A-I in the second syllable. In Old English, that spelling typically represented the /ai/ sound, so that would give us the pronunciation /ga-wine/. But as I noted a few episodes back when I was talking about Chaucer, the sound represented by that spelling shifted in the late Middle English period and became more /æ-ee/ – at least in Chaucer's dialect. So that would give us something more

like /ga-wæ-een/. But again, all of that assumes that the pronunciation was based on the modern spelling G-A-W-A-I-N. In reality, the spelling of the name varied greatly in the Middle English period – suggesting that the pronunciation varied even during that time. In fact, in this particular poem, the poet spells it several different ways, but it's usually spelled it G-A-W-A-N – implying that the pronunciation was more like /ga-wan/ which is another common pronunciation today. And I should also note that the name eventually evolved into the modern name Gavin, and that also indicates that the second vowel sound was shortened over time. So at any rate, the proper Middle English pronunciation is debatable, but for purposes of this episode, I'm using /ga-wain/ for the modern translation and /ga-wan/ for the original Middle English passages since that more closely matches the poet's spelling.

So with that, let's turn to the actual poem. I'm going to take you through the poem by reading and analyzing a few key passages. And as I often do, I'm going to give you the Modern English translation first, and then I'll read the original Middle English version. I'm also electing to keep the stanzas in tact as much as possible without breaking them up into smaller segments. I think that will give you a better sense of the alliteration and the overall flow of the language.

In keeping with tradition, the poem begins by noting the mythical origins of the British kings by stating that the line of kings were descended from the Trojan warrior Aeneas who was also the mythical founder of Rome. This was a widely-accepted mythology at the time, and it served to link Arthur to the ancient Romans, and even to the Trojans and Greeks. The poet tells us that Arthur was the most courteous of all the British kings, and he says that he will now recount a story he heard about a marvelous event that occurred during Arthur's reign. Having set the scene, the poet tells us that it was Christmastime at Camelot.

(L. 37-45)
This king lay at Camelot at Christmastime,
With many lovely lords, leaders of the best,
Revered knights of the Round Table, all the rich brethren,
With rich revelry a-right, and reckless mirth;
There true men rode in tournaments time and time again,
Jousted with jolly these gentle knights,
Then came to the court, and danced to carols,
For the feast was in force for full fifteen days,
With all the meat and mirth that men could envisage.

Þis kyng lay at Camylot vpon kryst-masse,
With mony luflych lorde, ledeȝ of þe best,
Rekenly of þe rounde table alle þo rich breþer,
With rych reuel oryȝt, & rechles merþes;
Þer tournayed tulkes bi-tymeȝ ful mony,
Iusted ful Iolilé þise gentyle kniȝtes,
Syþen kayred to þe court, caroles to make.
For þer þe fest watȝ ilyche ful fiften dayes,
With alle þe mete & þe mirþe þat men couþe a-vyse;

So the poet has told us that it was Christmastime at King Arthur's court. He speaks of the festivities, including tournaments, jousting, dancing and eating. He mentions that the guests danced to 'carols,' and it's important to keep in mind that the word ***carols*** didn't refer to Christmas carols in the modern sense of the term. It referred to medieval dances – usually ring dances – that were accompanied by singing.

And this short passage also shows us how the poet incorporated a lot of synonyms for the guests. He refers to them as ***lede***ȝ, ***rekenly***, ***tulks***, ***knights***, and ***men.*** Each choice helped to maintain the required alliteration in each line.

The poet continues his description of the festivities at the court during Christmastime and the days that followed. He then turns his attention to the New Year's feast held at the court. Arthur and his knights entered the hall. People laughed and played games and entertained themselves until dinner time. Then everyone gathered at the dinner table with Guinevere sitting in the middle of the gathered knights and Gawain sitting beside her.

The dishes were served accompanied by the blaring of trumpets and kettledrums. There was so much food that there was barely room on the table for all of it. Though all were gathered for the meal, Arthur wouldn't eat until all at the tables were served. It was also customary that on such a holiday, the king wouldn't eat until someone told a story of some great adventure or a joust was held between the knights. So Arthur engaged in casual conversation while the guests were served. Finally, the meal was underway, but it was about to be interrupted by an uninvited guest.

(L. 130-146)
Now I will say to you no more of the service,
For all may well know that there were none who were lacking.
But then, another noise and a new one suddenly drew near.
In less time than a guest had leave to take a bite.
For scarcely was the noise in the hall not a while ceased,
And the first course in the court kindly served,
When there hurried in the hall a horrible figure,
The greatest in height of any human in the whole world.
From the neck to the waist, so stout and so thick,
And his loins and limbs so great and long,
Half a giant from under heaven, I hope he was.
To my mind, he was the most intimidating man,
And the mightiest of any man that might ride in saddle,
From his back to his breast, his body was bold and stern,
But his womb (abdomen) and waist were worthily small
And all his features followed in form and proportion, full clean,
For the men were amazed at his color,
Set in this outwardly scene,
He fared as a freakish phantom,
And all over, he was bright green.

Now wyl I of hor seruise say yow no more,
For vch wyȝe may wel wit no wont þat þer were;
An oþer noyse ful newe neȝed biliue,
Þat þe lude myȝt haf leue lif-lode to cach.
For vneþe watȝ þe noyce not a whyle sesed,
& þe fyrst cource in þe court kyndely serued,
Þer hales in at þe halle dor an aghlich mayster,
On þe most on þe molde on mesure hyghe;
Fro þe swyre to þe swange so sware & so þik,
& his lyndes & his lymes so longe & so grete,
Half etayn in erde I hope þat he were.
Bot mon most I algate mynn hym to bene,
& þat þe myriest in his muckel þat myȝt ride;
For of bak & of brest al were his bodi sturne,
Bot his wombe & his wast were worthily smale,
& 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,
& ouer-al enker grene.

So out of nowhere, the poet has introduced the remarkable character of the Green Knight to the story. And note the 'bob and wheel' ending to that passage. Each line uses alliteration, but at the very end, the last five lines also use rhyming verse. Each stanza of the poem ends this way.

Now after telling us that the knight was bright green, the poet then makes clear that he doesn't mean that figuratively. He means that the knight was literally green. Not only was his skin green, he was also dressed in green. And even the horse that he was riding was green, as was its saddle and bridle. The poet tells us that the horse's saddle "glemered & glent al of grene stones" – 'glimmered and gleaned all of green stones.' Notice the alliteration. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this is the first recorded use of the word ***glimmer*** in the English language. It's probably from the same Old English root as ***gleam***. The poet then follows that word ***glimmer*** with the word ***glent*** to carry out the alliteration. ***Glent*** is an Old Norse word meaning 'to flash or gleam.' And a little later in the poem, the poet uses the word ***glitter*** for the first time. It was probably derived from a Norse word, and it's ultimately derived from the same Germanic root as ***glimmer*** and ***gleam***. All of these words pop up is this poem in large part because the poet needed words with similar meanings that began with the same sound. So ***glimmer*** and ***glitter*** are used for the first time because they alliterated with words like ***glent*** and ***gleam***, and more importantly, they alliterated with the word ***green*** which was very important to this story.

Now having described the knight's appearance, the poet then provides another important note. We're told that the green knight wasn't wearing a helmet, or chain mail, or armor. He didn't carry a sword or shield. He simply carried a branch of green holly in one hand and an ax in the other.

(L. 221-231)
This knight came near and navigated the hall.
Driving toward the distinguished dais, not disturbed by danger,
Without greeting the gathered guests, glancing over their heads.
Whereupon he spoke his first words, ‘Where’ he asked,
‘is the governor of this gang that I might gladly address?
To set my sight on that sir, I have something to say to him.’
To the knights he cast his eye,
And observed them up and down,
Studying each one as he went by,
To see who had he most renown.

Þis haþel heldeȝ hym in, & þe halle entres,
Driuande to þe heȝe dece, dut he no woþe,
Haylsed he neuer one, bot heȝe he ouer loked.
Þe fyrst word þat he warp, "wher is," he sayd,
"Þe gouernour of þis gyng? gladly I wolde
Se þat segg in syȝt, & with hym self speke
raysoun."
To knyȝteȝ he kest his yȝe,
& reled hym vp & doun,
He stemmed & con studie,
Quo walt þer most renoun.

So the Green Knight took the measure of the guests in the hall. Arthur and his knights sat in stunned silence. The Green Knight had demanded to speak to the ‘governor’ of the group, so Arthur spoke up and identified himself as the leader. He said, “welcum iwys to þis place, Þe hede of þis ostel Arthour I hat” – ‘Welcome indeed to this place, I am the head of this hostel. My name is Arthur.’

Arthur invited the ghostly knight to dismount from his horse and join the festivities. But the Green Knight rejected the offer.

(L. 256-278)
“No,” said the knight, “So help me, from Him that sets on high,
To remain in this mansion for any while is not my motive,
But since thy stature, sir, is held so high,
And thy brilliant castles and brave knights are said to be the best,
Thy men are the strongest in steel-armor to ride on steeds,
The most worthy and well-considered in all the world
Prepared to put up a fight for the pure play of it.
And here chivalry is shown, as I have heard said,
And that has brought me here, at this time.
You may be assured by this branch that I bear here
That I pass in peace, and seek no plight

For if I had fared here in a fighting way
I have a hauberk of chain mail at home, and a helmet too
A shield and a sharp spear shining brightly
And other weapons to wield, I well know their worth,
But since I wish no war, I wear a softer wardrobe
But if thou brothers are as bold as many believe
Thou will goodly grant me the game that I ask by right."
Arthur did answer
And said, "Sir courteous knight,"
If thou crave battle here,
We will not fail to fight."

"Nay, as help me," quod þe haþel, "he þat on hyȝe syttes,
To wone any quyle in þis won, hit watȝ not myn ernde;
Bot for þe los of þe lede is lyft vp so hyȝe,
& þy burȝ & þy burnes best ar holden,
Stifest vnder stel-gere on stedes to ryde,
Þe wyȝtest & þe worþyest of þe worldes kynde,
Preue for to play wyth in oþer pure laykeȝ;
& here is kydde cortaysye, as I haf herd carp,
& þat hatȝ wayned me hider, I-wyis, at þis tyme.
ȝe may be seker bi þis braunch þat I bere here,
Þat I passe as in pes, & no plyȝt seche;
For had I founded in fere, in feȝtyng wyse,
I haue a hauberghe at home & a helme boþe,
A schelde, & a scharp spere, schinande bryȝt,
Ande oþer weppenes to welde, I wene wel als,
Bot for I wolde no were, my wedeȝ ar softer.
Bot if þou be so bold as alle burneȝ tellen,
Þou wyl grant me godly þe gomen þat I ask,
bi ryȝt."
Arthour con onsware,
& sayd, "sir cortays knyȝt,
If þou craue batayl bare,
Here fayleȝ þou not to fyȝt."

So again, notice the alliterating lines and the little 'bob and wheel' rhyming section at the very end. At first glance, this stanza presents the Green Knight as a visitor who is not looking for a fight, but only asking to play a game – to offer a challenge to the gathered knights. But Arthur assumes otherwise, and responds that if the ghostly figure is looking for a fight, he will find it there in the hall. So why does Arthur assume that the Green Knight's motives are not so innocent?

Well, there's a subtle indication that is lost on most modern readers. When the Green Knight addresses Arthur the king, he addresses him with the pronouns ***thou*** and ***thee*** and ***thy***. Now as you may recall, those were the standard second person pronouns inherited from Old English, and they were the ones you used when you were speaking to an individual. Those were the singular forms. The pronouns ***you*** and ***your*** were the plural forms used when addressing a two or more people. And even though this distinction has long disappeared from English, I think most of us recognize this older form of the language because ***thou***, ***thee*** and ***thy*** survived into the early Modern English period. And we still hear those old pronouns in Shakespeare's plays, and in the King James Bible, and other works of literature from the early modern period. Of course, those distinct singular forms eventually disappeared, and they were replaced with the plural forms ***you*** and ***your***. So today, ***you*** does all the work, and we use it for both singular and plural.

But again, in late Middle English when the Gawain poem was composed, the pronouns ***thou*** and ***thee*** and ***thy*** were still being used to address an individual, but the way they were used had evolved. By that point, they resembled the way French uses its second person pronouns. ***Thou*** and ***thee*** and ***thy*** were only used when addressing a family member or close friend or someone who was your inferior. So they were only used in informal situations. If you were addressing a superior, or a stranger who might be your superior, you were expected to use the more formal or polite pronoun which was the plural pronoun ***you***. So the plural pronoun ***you*** was being used as a singular pronoun at this point, but only in formal situations as a polite form of address. Again, if you speak French, that's basically the same way the pronouns work there. And that was the beginning of the evolution of ***you*** from a strictly plural pronoun to the all-purpose pronoun that it has become today.

So given the distinction between informal ***thou*** and ***thee*** and ***thy*** – and formal ***you*** and ***your*** – we would expect that King Arthur would be addressed with the latter. After all, he was the king and a highly revered king at that. Once Arthur had introduced himself to someone, that person would almost always address him with the formal ***you***. But the Green Knight doesn't do that. He addresses Arthur with the informal pronouns ***thou*** and ***thee*** and ***thy***. And that implied that the Green Knight didn't recognize Arthur as his superior. That would have been considered an affront to the king, and it may explain why Arthur assumes that the Green Knight is looking for a fight.

By the way, Arthur also addresses the Green Knight with ***thou*** and ***thee*** and ***thy*** in return. So neither character gives much respect to the other. Throughout their exchange, they 'thou' each other in this same way – choosing not to use the polite form of address which would have been expected. And this would have been very obvious to an English speaker of the late 1300s. The main point here is that the use of these second person pronouns had acquired a social context by this point, and speakers and poets were very particular about the way they used those words. And here, the Gawain poet uses them to indicate that the Green Knight didn't fit into the normal social order recognized at the Arthurian court.

One other quick note about that passage before we move on. In one line, the Green Knight says that he has heard that Arthur and his men are brave and love physical contests. In my translation, he says that the men are "Prepared to put up a fight for the pure play of it," but the original line

was “Preue for to play wyth in oþer pure laykeȝ” – literally ‘Proven for to play with in other pure likes.’ Notice that word at the end – ***laykeȝ*** (/likes/) – spelled L-A-Y-K-E-yogh. Yogh was the Old and Middle English letter that looked like a cursive Z or zed, and it represented several different sounds depending on the context. The Gawain poet used it a lot for the ‘s’ sound at the end of words. Well, this word ***laykeȝ*** (/likes/) meant games or sports. It was a northern dialect word, and it still survives in the north of England as ***lake*** – or /like/ – meaning ‘to play.’ It’s a Norse word which corresponds to a similar Old English word. And the reason why I know that word survives in northern England is because several of you have noted that word in the various voice samples that I have collected over the past few years. Several of you have submitted regional words and phrases that aren’t generally found in standard English, and couple of you from Yorkshire have mentioned that the word ***lake*** is still used as a synonym for ***play***. Here is an example from listener Paul who provides a short sentence – first in his local Yorkshire dialect and then in standard English.

> [CLIP] “When I were a lad, and I were bored, my father had said to me, ‘Go out and lake,’ so I’d go out to the park and start laking with my mates. When I was a boy, and I was bored, my father would say to me, ‘Go out and play,’ so I’d go out to the park and start playing with my friends. The word ‘lake.’ Old English or Norse meaning ‘to play.’”

So as we can see, the poet’s language and word choices may seen very old-fashioned at first listen, but it isn’t as old-fashioned as you might think. Some of these terms are still found in modern English dialects in northern England and Scotland.

Now returning to the poem, the Green Knight has requested to play a game, but Arthur has answered by saying that if the ghostly knight wants a fight, he has come to the right place. Now the Green Knight responds.

(L. 279-300)
No, I have not fared here to fight, in good faith I tell you
There are about this bench nothing but beardless children.
If I were held fast in arms on a high horse,
There is no man here to match me, for your might is too weak.
Therefore, I crave in this court a Christmas game,
For it is Yule and New Year, and here are many young men;
If anyone is this house holds himself in such high esteem
And is so bold in his blood, and brave in his head,
That he dares to swap one stiff stroke for another,
I shall give him as my gift this great battle-ax, this gisarme
This ax, that is heavy enough for him to handle as he likes,
And I shall abide and bear the first blow on my body – as I sit here,
If any soul seated here is so brave to stand and test what I say,
Leap to me quickly and I will let go of this weapon,
He can have it forever, and keep it as his own,
And I shall receive a stroke from him, without shuddering,
But I shall be granted the right to regain my grace a give a blow in return,

when I say,
And I will grant a delay,
For twelve months and a day,
Whereupon the debt shall be repaid.
Now, what do you have to say?

"Nay, frayst I no fyȝt, in fayth I þe telle,
Hit arn aboute on þis bench bot berdleȝ chylder;
If I were hasped in armes on a heȝe stede,
Here is no mon me to mach, for myȝteȝ so wayke.
For-þy I craue in þis court a crystmas gomen,
For hit is ȝol & nwe ȝer, & here ar ȝep mony;
If any so hardy in þis hous holdeȝ hym-seluen,
Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,
Þat dar stifly strike a strok for an oþer,
I schal gif hym of my gyft þys giserne ryche,
Þis ax, þat is heué in-nogh, to hondele as hym lykes,
& I schal bide þe fyrst bur, as bare as I sitte.
If any freke be so felle to fonde þat I telle,
Lepe lyȝtly me to, & lach þis weppen,
I quit clayme hit for euer, kepe hit as his auen,
& I schal stonde hym a strok, stif on þis flet,
Elleȝ þou wyl diȝt me þe dom to dele hym an oþer,
barlay;
& ȝet gif hym respite,
A twelmonyth & a day;
Now hyȝe, & let se tite
Dar any her-inne oȝt say."

So the Green Knight made an offer to the gathered knights of the round table. He offered to let any one of them strike him with the ax, but the one who delivers the blow has to agree to let the Green Knight return the favor exactly one year and day later.

At first, Arthur and his men sat in stunned silence. No one said anything, so the green ghost turned in his saddle to see if anyone had the nerve to take him up on his offer. With no response, the Green Knight mocked the gathered men. He said that Arthur and his men were known far and wide, so where was there pride and bluster? He laughed at them and suggested that they were cowards.

Arthur's anger gave him the courage to approach the Green Knight. Arthur confronted the green figure and said that the proposed game was senseless. The idea was such madness that it deserved to be granted. Arthur grabbed the ax and prepared to strike the knight, but suddenly, Arthur's nephew Gawain stood up and intervened. He insisted that he be the one to take up the challenge. He said the obligation should fall to Arthur's loyal knights – not to the king himself. Gawain begged his uncle for the right to strike the blow upon the neck the Green Knight.

Arthur relented and gave the ax to Gawain. Gawain approached the Green Knight who asked the young man his name, and Gawain identified himself. The knight reiterated the terms of the agreement. Gawain will strike him across the neck with the ax, but twelve months and a day later, the Green Knight will repay the blow upon Gawain. Gawain agreed, and the terms of the game were settled.

(L. 417-443)
The Green Knight stepped down and stood upon the ground
And leaned his head forward a little to lay bare his skin,
He laid his long lovely locks of hair over his crown
With his naked neck now showing.
Gawain gripped the ax, and gathered it up high,
His left foot he fastened to the floor in front of him.
He thrust the ax through the naked flesh
So that the sharp blade shattered the neck bones
And sank through the soft skin and sliced it in two
Until the bright steel blade bit into the ground
The fair head was freed from the neck and fell to the earth.
The gathered fellows kicked it with their feet across the floor.
The blood bleeding from the body as it blanketed the green skin.
But the frightening figure never faltered nor fell.
He stepped forth on sturdy legs as strong as before.
And reached out among the rollicking knights and retrieved his head.
He picked it up and placed it in the palm of his hand
And then strolled to his steed, and seized the bridle
Stepped into the stirrups and straddled the horse.
He held his head by the hair in his hands.
Said knight sat sternly in his saddle.
As if no mishap had happened to him, though he had no head,
He twisted his trunk about
That ugly body that bled
The guests were afraid, no doubt
When they heard what he said.

The grene kny3t vpon grounde grayþely hym dresses,
A littel lut with þe hede, þe lere he discouere3,
His longe louelych lokke3 he layd ouer his croun.
Let þe naked nec to þe note schewe.
Gauan gripped to his ax, & gederes hit on hy3t,
Þe kay fot on þe folde he be-fore sette,
Let hit doun ly3tly ly3t on þe naked,
Þat þe scharp of þe schalk schyndered þe bones,
& schrank þur3 þe schyire grece, & scade hit in twynne,
Þat þe bit of þe broun stel bot on þe grounde.
Þe fayre hede fro þe halce hit to þe erþe,

Þat fele hit foyned wyth her fete, þere hit forth roled;
Þe blod brayd fro þe body, þat blykked on þe grene;
& nawþer faltered ne fel þe freke neuer þe helder,
Bot styþly he start forth vpon styf schonkes,
& ru[n]yschly he raȝt out, þere as renkkeȝ stoden,
Laȝt to his lufly hed, & lyft hit vp sone;
& syþen boȝeȝ to his blonk, þe brydel he cachcheȝ,
Steppeȝ in to stel bawe & strydeȝ alofte,
& his hede by þe here in his honde haldeȝ;
& as sadly þe segge hym in his sadel sette,
As non vnhap had hym ayled, þaȝ hedleȝ he were,
in stedde;
He brayde his bluk aboute,
Þat vgly bodi þat bledde,
Moni on of hym had doute,
Bi þat his resounz were redde.

So the Green Knight held his head toward the gathered knights, and turned the face in their general direction. The head spoke directly to Gawain – telling him to honor his end of the bargain. Gawain was told to make his way to the Green Chapel in one year's time where the debt was to be repaid with a stoke of the ax upon his head on New Year's Morning. The headless knight said that he was known as the Knight of the Green Chapel, and if Gawain should happen to break his word, he would forever be regarded as a coward. The Green Knight then rode out through the door and disappeared from sight.

With that, the scene in the hall began to return to normal. After a moment, Arthur dismissed the events as a Christmastime apparition, and the gathered crowd returned to eating, drinking, singing and dancing. But the revelry disguised the concern felt by Gawain and his uncle Arthur. They both knew that Gawain would have to honor the deal that had been made, and Gawain's fate was likely sealed.

The New Year's festivities marked the beginning of a new year, and that year quickly passed as one season gave way to the next. In describing the spring and summer time, the poet included the following lines:

(L. 518-20)
Lovely are the leaves that spring thereout,
When that damp dew drops off the leaves,
To abide a blissful blush of the bright sun,

Wela-wynne is þe wort þat woxes þer-oute.
When þe donkande dewe dropeȝ of þe leueȝ,
To bide a blysful blusch of þe bryȝt sunne.

I mention this passage because it contains one of the first recorded uses of the word ***blush*** in the English language. The poet refers to the 'blissful blush of the bright sun,' and here we see the original sense of the word ***blush***. It meant a glimpse or glance or quick look. So the bright sun glimpses or glances at the dew on the leaves. That original sense of the word ***blush*** has largely disappeared, except in the very well-known phrase 'at first blush' which also appeared around this same time in the 1300s. Of course, we all know that 'at first blush' means 'at first glance,' but you may have wondered what 'blushes' have to do with 'glances.' Well, originally, a ***blush*** was a glance. In the early modern period, the sense of the word shifted from 'looking at something' to 'the way something looked.' So it came to refer to a person's general appearance. And from there, it was short step to the reddish appearance that a person gets when they are embarrassed or ashamed. So that was the evolution of ***blush***, and as I noted, this passage in the Gawain poem is one of the first recorded uses of the word in English. It isn't entirely clear where the word came from, but the best guess is that it came from an unrecorded word in either Old English or Old Norse.

Now the Spring and Summer gave way to Autumn, and as the end of the year approached, Gawain finally announced that the time had come for him to depart on his search for the Green Knight in order to repay his debt. Before leaving, he was outfitted in his armor, and the process is described in great detail in the poem. Gawain's horse was also outfitted with a saddle, bridle and accessories that were 'glittering' and sparkling. As I noted earlier, this poem contains the first recorded use of the word ***glitter***, and the description of the ornaments on Gawain's horse is the context for that reference. The poet wrote of the accessories: "Þat al glytered & glent as glem of þe sunne" (l. 604) – 'that all glittered and glinted like the gleam of the sun.'

Fully outfitted, Gawain headed out on his journey to find the castle where the Green Knight lived. He then proceeded through the countryside, and along the way, he asked strangers if they knew of the Green Knight or the Green Chapel. No one had heard of either, so Gawain traveled deeper and further into the frozen countryside. He traveled until Christmas Eve without ever finding the figure he was searching for. Finally, he prayed to Mary for help in finding a house where he could hear Christmas Mass. A short time later, he came upon a massive castle – the most beautiful castle that any knight had ever seen.

Gawain was welcomed into the mansion and led to the central hall where he was greeted warmly by the lord of the castle. The host was large and stout, and he assigned a servant to attend to Gawain. Gawain soon joined the host and other guests at a large dinner. During the meal, the other dinner guests asked Gawain about himself to find out who he was and where he came from. They did so very discreetly. According to the poem:

Then was spied and spoken in a spare way,
By discreet questions of that prince, put to himself.

Þenne watȝ spyed & spured vpon spare wyse.
Bi preue poynteȝ of þat prynce, put to hym-seluen.

Gawain told them that his name was Gawain, and he had come from King Arthur's court. He had been guided to the castle by chance and found himself there on Christmas day. The host and the others laughed and felt honored to be joined by such a prominent guest. They knew that Gawain would exhibit the finest manners and best forms of speech. The poem says that they murmured to each other and said the following:

God has given us his good grace in truth
he has granted us to have such a guest as Gawain

God hatȝ geuen vus his grace godly for soþe,
Þat such a gest as Gawan grauteȝ vus to haue,

So Gawain was welcomed by all in attendance. Now those two little passages may not seem all that significant, but they point to a very, very important development in the language. It's very subtle, but the spellings indicate that the scribe pronounced a specific sound in a new way. That sound was a vowel sound, and it may be an early indication that the Great Vowel Shift had begun in certain parts of England.

Now we're going to explore the Great Vowel Shift in upcoming episodes. The Great Vowel Shift is the term for the series of vowel changes that took place in English in the transition from Middle English into Modern English. These changes took place over more than two centuries, and they account for the way a large portion of our words are pronounced today, and they also wreaked havoc on spelling because, as we'll see, English spelling became fixed and standardized before the Great Vowel Shift was complete. As a result, when the vowel changes were finally settled, many words were no longer pronounced like they were spelled.

So this is a very important topic in the history of English, and we have some subtle indications that the process was starting to get underway in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. These indications come from the way the scribe spelled the word ***given*** and the Middle English word ***prive*** which meant private or discreet. ***Prive*** is an early form of the word ***privy***, and of course, a variation of the word ***private***. Both ***privy*** and ***private*** are derived from the same Latin root word ***privatus***. The people at the dinner table had asked with 'prive' or discreet questions, and they felt that they had been 'given' God's grace by having Gawain attend the dinner. The initial vowel sound in each of those words was traditionally spelled with an 'I' and pronounced with the sound of the letter 'I' at the time – which was /ee/. So ***prive*** (/preev/) was P-R-I-V-E, and ***given*** was pronounced /gee-ven/ and was spelled G-I-V-E-N. And just to be clear, the letters U and V were not distinct yet, so instead of the modern angular V, they were actually spelled with the curvy U, but it represented the 'v' sound.

So both of those words were spelled with an 'I,' and both were pronounced with the long 'I' sound – which was /ee/. Now the location where that /ee/ sound is pronounced in the mouth is very important to the Great Vowel Shift. That sound is located very high in the mouth. Of all the vowel sounds, it is pronounced at the highest and most forward position in the mouth. I mentioned last time that we still have that pronunciation is some words, especially words which have been borrowed from other languages in recent centuries. I gave examples of Italian food

terms like ***pizza*** and ***spaghetti*** and ***linguini***. So we sometimes use that pronunciation today, but we mostly use the modern long 'I' sound which evolved over the course of the Great Vowel Shift. And of course, that sound is /ai/ as in the name of the letter. Notice that the /ai/ sound is pronounced much further in the back of the mouth. So over time, the sound shifted from /ee/ (high in the front of the mouth) to /ai/ (low in the back of the mouth). We can hear that shift in the difference between Middle English ***prive*** (/preev/) and Modern English ***private***.

Well that sound didn't go directly from /ee/ to /ai/. It actually changed in stages – moving lower and backward one step at a time. The specifics aren't really important here, but I just want to note that the sound shifted backward over time in small gradual steps.

Now that process is very important to the Great Vowel Shift because – during that series of vowel changes – most of the long vowel sounds actually shifted upward and higher in the mouth. But those other sounds couldn't shift upward until the /ee/ sound had moved out of the way. So if you imagine a broken down car blocking traffic on a highway, all the cars behind it can't move until a tow truck comes and moves that broken car out of the way. And once that car is gone, all of the cars lined up behind it can start to move forward. Well, that's what happened in the Great Vowel Shift. As long as the letter 'I' had the /ee/ sound, it was basically blocking the other vowels underneath it. They couldn't move very much. But when that /ee/ sound started to shift backward, it cleared the way for all other vowels underneath it and behind it to move upward and forward. And so scholars look for evidence to pinpoint when this /ee/ sound started to shift backward in the mouth to clear the way. And we can see some potential evidence of that change in the way the Gawain scribe spelled some of these words which traditionally had that /ee/ sound. Rather than spelling them with a letter 'I' which had that sound, he chose instead to spell them with a letter 'E' which represents a slightly lower vowel sound. That suggests that he pronounced the word ***prive*** as /preve/ and ***given*** (/gee-ven/) as /geh-ven/.

Again, some scholars cite these types of spellings in the Gawain poem as an early indication that the long vowel sound represented by letter I was starting to shift backward and was starting to be pronounced with a slightly lower vowel sound, at least by some speakers in the north Midlands. And if that assumption is correct, this poem might be an early indication that the Great Vowel Shift was starting to get underway.

By the way, this evidence is cited by John H. Fisher and Diane Bornstein in their collection of Old and Middle English texts called 'In Forme of Speche is Chaunge.' They cite these unique spellings in the Gawain poem as evidence of that early vowel shift.

We'll leave that issue there for now, but I wanted to plant that seed for you, because it's going to bear a lot of fruit in future episodes.

Now returning to the poem, the dinner came to an end, and Gawain attended mass. The next day, he was invited to a large Christmas feast where he sat beside the wife of his host. At the head of the table was a very old woman who we will later find out was Morgan le Fay – a key figure in the Arthurian legends. She was a witch or sorceress who emerged as a sinister character in the

French versions of the legends. But to Gawain, she was merely an old woman who attended the dinner.

During a conversation with host, Gawain explained that he needed to find the Green Chapel and the knight who guards it. He needed to arrive there in three days time. The host said he knew the location of the chapel, and he invited Gawain to remain as a guest at the castle until the final day, at which time, he would have a servant show Gawain the way. Gawain agreed. The host then told Gawain that he was going on a hunt, and he asked Gawain to remain behind and rest and keep his wife company. The host then proposed that they each agree to exchange whatever they should acquire during their respective adventures. Gawain agreed.

The next morning the host left for the hunt while Gawain slept. The host's wife entered Gawain's bedroom and tried to seduce him. Gawain declined the advances, but ultimately agreed to accept a kiss.

Later the host returned, having killed several deer. He gave all the venison to Gawain, and in exchange, Gawain grabbed his host and kissed him – telling him that the kiss was the only winnings he had acquired. The host accepted the kiss and asked Gawain where he acquired it. Gawain said that such information was not part of the agreement.

The next morning, the host once again left for the hunt, and Gawain remained in bed. And once again, Gawain was visited by the wife who tried to seduce him. And again, Gawain rejected the advances, but this time, he acquired two kisses from the wife. This host finally returned to the manor having killed a boar during the hunt. He gave the boar to Gawain, and Gawain returned the gift with two kisses.

The next morning the host went fox-hunting, and his wife once again entered Gawain's bed chamber to seduce him. It took every bit of willpower Gawain could muster, but he once again resisted his urges. The lady eventually realized that Gawain would not give in to her advances, so she offered him a gift to remember her by. She offered a ring, but Gawain politely declined. Then she offered a green sash which he also declined. But then she told him that the sash had magical powers and would protect him from any strike or blow. Gawain reconsidered and accepted the sash, and both agreed to keep the gift a secret from her husband. When her husband returned with the fox he had killed, he gave it to Gawain, and Gawain provided kisses in exchange, but he said nothing about the green sash.

New Years Day came and the night passed, and Gawain prepared himself for his rendezvous with the Green Knight. He wore his chain mail and armaments, and he also wore the sash – "Bot forto sauen hym-self, when suffer hym by-houed" – 'but for to save himself when it behooved him to suffer.' Gawain then mounted his horse, said goodbye to those he had met at the castle, and headed out to search for the Green Knight with the guide that the host had provided.

Together they traveled through the snow and the mountainous terrain until they finally reached the approach to the Green Chapel. The guide stopped and showed Gawain the path, but warned him not to proceed. He said that the Green Knight was a monster who showed no mercy, and

Gawain should turn around and leave while he still had the chance. But Gawain proceeded to avoid begin considered a coward and to satisfy his destiny.

Gawain traveled the path, but didn't see a proper chapel anywhere. He only found a desolate area and cave with a crevice in it. Gawain thought that it was place where the Green Knight worshiped the devil. But then he heard a noise coming from a high hill. It was a strange sound – "As one vpon a gryndelston hade grounden a syþe' – 'as one upon a grindstone had ground a scythe' – or ax. So it sounded like someone sharpening an ax. Gawain called out for the lord of the place. And then he heard a voice.

(L. 2217)
"Abide there," said someone on the bank, above – over his head,
"and thou shalt have in haste the thing I promised you once."

"Abyde," quod on on þe bonke, abouen ouer his hede,
"& þou schal haf al in hast, þat I þe hy3t ones."

Then he came from behind a crag, and came out of a hole,
Whirling out of a 'wro' – or nook – with a wicked weapon,
A Danish ax – newly ordained – for dealing the blow.

And syþen he keuereȝ bi a cragge, & comeȝ of a hole,
Whyrlande out of a wro, wyth a felle weppen,
A deneȝ ax nwe dyȝt, þe dynt with to ȝelde

And the knight was geared in green, just as the first time,
Both the face and the legs, the locks of hair and the beard.

& þe gome in þe erene gered as fyrst,
Boþe þe lyre & þe leggeȝ, lokkeȝ, & berde

"Gawain," said the green man, "May God guard you!
Why, thou art welcome to my place,
And thou has timed thy travel as a true man should;
And thou knows the covenant made between us."

"Gawayn," quod þat grene gome, "God þe mot loke!
I-wysse þou art welcom, wyȝe, to my place,
& þou hatȝ tymed þi trauayl as true mon schulde;
& þou knoweȝ þe couenaunteȝ kest vus by-twene."

Gawain agreed to accept the stroke of the ax without defense. He lowered his head to accept the stroke. The Green Knight raised his ax up high, but when he started to lower the ax, Gawain flinched. The Green Knight stopped and laughed, teasing Gawain for flinching, saying that he (the Green Knight) had not done so when he received Gawain's blow, thereby declaring himself

to be the better knight. Gawain replied that he wasn't able to restore his head to his body like the Green Knight, so he flinched. But he would not do so again.

The Green Knight raised his ax again and started to swing it downward. Gawain didn't flinch this time, but once again, the Green Knight stopped in mid-swing. He laughed and praised Gawain for not flinching that time. Gawain was now furious, and he demanded that the demon complete the act and deliver the blow. The Green Knight relented.

He lifted lightly his weapon, and let it straight down,
With the edge of the blade by the bare neck.
Though it hammered Gawain heartily, it hurt him no more,
It slightly slashed him on that one side, so that it severed the skin.

He lyftes lyȝtly his lome, & let hit doun fayre,
With þe barbe of þe bitte bi þe bare nek
Þaȝ he homered heterly, hurt hym no more,
Bot snyrt hym on þat on syde, þat seuered þe hyde;

So Gawain received the blow from the Green Knight, but it merely grazed the side of his neck and left a small cut, but other than that, Gawain was fine. He jumped up and withdrew his sword, and told the Green Knight that he had repaid the debt, and if further blows were intended, he was prepared to fight back. The Green Knight responded:

(L.2338-2363)
"Bold man, don't be so belligerent on this battlefield,
No man here has been unmannerly or mistreated you,
Nor conducted himself outside the covenants contained at the king's court,
I owed you a stroke, and you have it, you have been well paid,
I release you of any remnants, and any remaining rights,
If I was determined to deliver a deadly deed,
I could have done so, and dealt you much more harm,
First, I made a motion merrily, not meant to be serious,
I withdrew without a wound, which was warranted,
According the agreement we authored that first night.
You were trusted to act truthfully, and have been true to your word,
All your gains you gave me, as a good man should.
That second motion I made was for the morning
When you were kissed by my wife, and gave the kisses back to me.
For both of those, I barely moved, and bestowed not a blemish,
When true men act truly;
They have nothing to fear,
But the third gift, you didn't tell me,
So I gave you a scratch with my gear.
For it is my woven sash that you wear,
My own wife willed it to you, I know full well,

I know about your kisses, and other conduct,
And the wooing of my wife, I arranged the work myself,
I sent her to test you, and truly I think
that you are as faultless as any fellow to set foot on earth.

"Bolde burne, on þis bent be not so gryndel;
No mon here vn-manerly þe mys-boden habbe,
Ne kyd, bot as couenaunde, at kyngeȝ kort schaped;
I hyȝt þe a strok, & þou hit hatȝ, halde þe wel payed,
I relece þe of þe remnaunt, of ryȝtes alle oþer;
ȝif I deliuer had bene, a boffet, paraunter,
I couþe wroþeloker haf waret, to þe haf wroȝt anger.
Fyrst I mansed þe muryly, with a mynt one,
& roue þe wyth no rof, sore with ryȝt I þe profered,
For þe forwarde that we fest in þe fyrst nyȝt,
& þou trystyly þe trawþe & trwly me haldeȝ,
Al þe gayne þow me gef, as god mon shulde;
Þat oþer munt for þe morne, mon, I þe profered,
Þou kyssedes my clere wyf, þe cosseȝ me raȝteȝ,
For boþe two here I þe bede bot two bare myntes,
boute scaþe;
Trwe mon trwe restore,
Þenne þar mon drede no waþe;
At þe þrid þou fayled þore,
& þer-for þat tappe ta þe.
For hit is my wede þat þou wereȝ, þat ilke wouen girdel,
Myn owen wyf hit þe weued, I wot wel forsoþe;
Now know I wel þy cosses, & þy costes als,
& þe wowyng of my wyf, I wroȝt hit myseluen;
I sende hir to asay þe, & sothly me þynkkeȝ,
On þe fautlest freke, þat euer on fote ȝede;

So it is now revealed that the Green Knight was in fact Gawain's host at the Christmas castle. And Gawain was being tested by the wife while he resided at the castle. The first two times, Gawain was honest and returned the kisses he received earlier in the day. So the Green Knight withheld the first two strokes. But since Gawain didn't confess the receipt of the sash, the Green Knight did deliver a glancing blow on the third stroke, but it was only a minor cut for a minor offence. All in all, Gawain had passed the test that he had been given.

Gawain was relieved to discover the truth, but was disappointed that he had not been entirely truthful about the sash and had given in to the temptation to keep it secret. The Green Knight then revealed that his name was Bertilak, and that the entire ordeal had been arranged by Morgan le Fey – the elderly woman who had attended the dinner back at the castle. She hated Guinevere, and she had sent him to Camelot in the form of the Green Knight to frighten Guinevere to death.

After these disclosures, Gawain returned to Camelot where he was welcomed with celebrations. He revealed what happened and the shame of keeping the green sash a secret and breaking his promise to his host. He said that he would never remove the sash as a sign of his shame. Arthur's knights laughed and assured him that he kept his word more than any other person could have, and they all agreed to wear a similar sash from then on as a sign of solidarity with Gawain.

And that concludes the 14th century poem known as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. It also concludes our look at this revival of English poetry and literature in the late 1300s. Next time, we'll turn our attention back to the real world, and we'll explore what was happening in actual English court of Richard II. As we'll see, it wasn't all that different from King Arthur's court as described in Gawain poem. The one thing that they both had in common was elaborate feasts and banquets. And that meant they the court needed lots of cooks and chefs. And around this point in the history of English, some of Richard's chefs prepared a collection of recipes used at the court. And that collection of recipes is apparently the oldest cookbook composed in the English language.

So next time, we're going to talk about food and cooking. And we're going to examine how the process of cooking and eating shaped the English language. So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.