



# Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

HEROIC ROMANTICISM –  
MEDIEVAL ROMANCE  
LATE 14<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

# Characteristics medieval romance

- **Chivalry** (ridderlijkheid) is idealised
- The knight and his **noble deeds** are idealised.
- An important element of a medieval romance is the **courtly love** of the knight for the lady.
- The setting is often **imaginary** or unclear.
- **Supernatural elements** add tension and mystery.
- **Disguises** (vermommingen) and **hidden identities**
- The **number 3**
- The knight goes on a **quest**, which is usually successful.

# Courtly Love (*hoofse liefde*)

- ▶ A love between a knight and a married lady of the nobility
- ▶ Code of 'Chivalry' – mostly friendship
- ▶ Obedience and loyalty
- ▶ Strict rules!
- ▶ Exchange of gifts
- ▶ Had to stay a secret
- ▶ Considered art: poetry and passion



# Christianity – the number 3

- ▶ Wholeness, completeness and perfection
- ▶ God is 'omniscient', omnipotent' en 'omnipresent' (*alwetend, almachtig en alomwezend*).
- ▶ 'The Holy Trinity' – Father, Son and holy Spirit
- ▶ Sir Gawain is tested three times throughout the story
- ▶ He stays with the Lord and Lady Bertilak for three days
- ▶ The wife tries to seduce him three times, et cetera.



# Quests

Quests are a part of medieval romanticism. Most of the time, these quests end well.

- ▶ The hero's journey towards a goal
- ▶ Takes a lot of effort and the hero has to take on many obstacles
- ▶ The hero has to obtain something (or someone!) to take home

# Who is Sir Gawain

- ▶ One of the bravest knights of King Arthur
- ▶ Younger nephew of King Arthur
- ▶ Very brave
- ▶ Land of King Arthur: Wales

4 parts

Long, alliterative lines followed by short rhyming lines



# Challenge accepted

Sir Gawain is a very brave young man, who wants to be a knight. Knights are faithful servants; they are very loyal to their lord and they want to serve.

Gawain accepts the Green Knight's challenge:

1. He wants to spare King Arthur from having to cut off the Green Knight's head;
2. He wants to show his bravery and loyalty (thus chivalry)

# Three tests

1. Is he brave enough to accept the Green Knight's challenge?
2. Will he keep his pact with the Green Knight? Will he follow the rules/ **Code of Chivalry** and adhere to the five virtues?
  - ▶ Friendship/ loyalty
  - ▶ Generosity
  - ▶ Chastity (*kuisheid*) – sinful nature is also a theme
  - ▶ Courtesy (*hoffelijkheid*)
  - ▶ Piety (*vroomheid*) – therefore Christianity is a theme
3. Will he follow the rules/**Code of Courtly love**? Will he be able to resist temptation?



# Does Gawain pass the three tests?

1. Is he brave enough to accept the Green Knight's challenge?
  2. Will he keep his pact with the Green Knight? Will he follow the rules/ **Code of Chivalry**?
  3. Will he follow the rules/**Code of Courtly love**? Will he be able to resist temptation?
- He accepts the Green Knight's challenge. (courageous, loyal)
  - He kisses the lady, but resists further temptation ( courteous, chaste)
  - He accepts the green belt, but doesn't give it to the lord. ( disloyal, not generous)
  - He goes to meet the Green Knight, but flinches (= *deinst terug*) ( cowardly)
  - Later he lets the Green Knight strike a blow (courageous)
  - He is ashamed but the lord forgives him.

# Resources

- ▶ <https://gawaincomic.com/2019/12/26/seasons-greetings/>
- ▶ <https://medium.com/@faberacademy/sir-gawain-and-the-study-of-plot-809f06792607>
- ▶ <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/courtly-love-with-cat-raffaella-lunelli.html>