



The Gawain Poet: Complete Works: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Patience, Cleanness, Pearl, Saint Erkenwald

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Of the five poems contained in this book, two are acknowledged masterpieces. The plot of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, an Arthurian romance, brilliantly interweaves elements of suspense and high comedy.

Pearl, a dream vision, presents its poignant story of the education of a misguided Christian soul in metrically intricate and verbally ornate stanzas that add up to an overarching numerical design. Together with these two, Patience, Cleanness, and Saint Erkenwald make up the complete works of their anonymous author. All exhibit the dramatizing powers and metrical virtuosity of a master-poet. But none became part of the established literary canon until the second half of the nineteenth century, when the single manuscript copies in which they survive were edited and printed. Taken together, these works offer us a wide-ranging portrait of life in the late Middle Ages from the point of view of an independent-minded, learned, and cosmopolitan Englishman, a man as conversant with the conduct of life in great households as with Christian tradition and doctrine. He knew, among other things, how to sail a medieval passenger ship from its mooring to open sea, how to dress the carcass of a deer or a boar at the end of a royal hunt, and how a knight might flatter a noble and beautiful lady in the most intimate of situations while politely evading her seductive overtures.

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