Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
Stage Adaptation by Linda Marie Zaerr – 2001

CAST
Narrator            Deer
King Arthur         Boar
Queen Guenevere    Fox
Sir Gawain          Hunter
Bertilak            Guide
Lady of the Castle  Lords and Ladies

[Instrumental music runs throughout this play, coordinated with the action as movie music is.]

NARRATOR:
King Arthur and his knights were making merry one Christmas-tide, passing the time with jousting and caroling and feasting and dancing. The most famous knights in Christendom and the fairest ladies that ever lived and the most courteous king of all the kings that ruled Britain dwelt there together in great joy. On New Year’s Day, King Arthur held the best feast of all. It was his custom, however, not to eat on this occasion until he had seen some great marvel or adventure. The first course came with blaring trumpets and bright banners. Hardly had the whole court been served when an incredible knight rode into the hall.

For wonder of his hwe men hade,
Set in his semblaunt sene;
He ferde as freke were fade,
And oueral enker-grene.

His clothes were green; his face was green; his hair was green; but his eyes were fiery red.

GREEN KNIGHT:
Where is the governor of this assembly? I would like to speak with him.

NARRATOR:
A dead silence fell in the rich hall. Everyone sat amazed. Finally Arthur greeted him.

ARTHUR:
Welcome. Come join our company.

GREEN KNIGHT:
No. I have not come to sojourn here. I have heard of the courtesy of your court, that the knights here are the boldest in armor. If you are as bold as they say, you will grant me the sport I seek by right.

ARTHUR:
You will not fail to find battle here if you seek it.

GREEN KNIGHT:
I do not seek battle. There are but beardless children on these benches. I only crave a Christmas game. If anyone here is so hardy that he will exchange blows with me, I will give him this axe. He may strike the first blow, and after a year and a day he must come find me, and I will pay him back. Now, speak quickly. Does anyone dare answer this challenge?

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
NARRATOR:
Everyone was silent.

GREEN KNIGHT:
What, is this Arthures hous? [NARR.: quoth the hathel thenne]
That al the rous rennes of thurgh ryalmes so mony?
Where is now your sourquydrye and your conquestes,
Your gryndellayk and your greme, and your grete wordes?
Now is the reuel and the renoun of the Rounde Table
Ouerwalt wyth a word of on wyghes speche.

NARRATOR:
Arthur's blood shot for shame into his face, and he immediately answered the challenge. Arthur was preparing to strike the blow when Sir Gawain spoke from his place beside Queen Guenevere.

GAWAIN:
It is not appropriate for the king to risk himself thus in a foolish game. I am the least of your knights, only worthy because you are my uncle, so let me play this game.

NARRATOR:
The king handed him the axe, blessing him.

GREEN KNIGHT:
I am glad, Sir Gawain, that it is you who will strike this blow.

NARRATOR:
The grene knyght vpon grounde graythely hym dresse s,
A littel lut with the hede, the lere he discouerez,
His longe louelych lokkez he layd ouer his croun,
Let the naked nec to the note schewe.
Gauan gripped to his ax, and gederes hit on hyght,
The kay fot on the folde he before sette,
Let hit doun lyghtly lyght on the naked,
That the scharp of the schalk schyndered the bones,
And schrank thurgh the schyire grece, and schade hit in twynne,
That the bit of the broun stel bot on the grounde.
The fayre hede fro the halce hit to the erthe,
That fele hit foyned wyth her fete, there hit forth roled;
The blod brayd fro the body, that blykked on the grene;
And nawther faltered ne fel the freke neuer the helder,
Bot stythly he start forth vpon styf schonkes,
And runyschly he raght out, there as renkkez stoden,
Laught to his lufly hed, and lyft hit vp sone;
And sythen boghez to his blonk, the brydel he cachchez,
Steppez into stelbawe and srydez alofte,
And his hede by the here in his honde haldez;
And as sadly the segge hym in his sadel sette
As non vnhap had hym ayled, thagh hedlez he were

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
in stedde.
He brayde his bulk aboute,
That ugly bodi that bledde;
Moni on of hym had doute,
Bi that his resounz were redde.

GREEN KNIGHT:
Gawain, be true to your promise. Come seek the return blow on New Year's morning...I am the knight of the Green Chapel.

NARRATOR:
With that he turned and rode away. Lords and ladies looked at one another in amazement, but Arthur made light of the matter.

ARTHUR:
Now we may eat, since no one can deny that we have seen a marvel.

[INSTRUMENTAL INTERLUDE]

NARRATOR:
Shortly after All Saints' Day, Sir Gawain armed himself and set forth on his quest. He traveled into many unknown parts and met with strange adventures. At last, on Christmas Eve, weary and freezing, he came to a castle. The lord of the Castle greeted him warmly and welcomed him to join in their Christmas festivities. They made great mirth. The lady of the castle was especially delightful. She had gray eyes, and she was fairer even than Guenevere. She and Sir Gawain spent much time laughing and talking together.

In the course of the celebration the lord of the castle suggested a game they should play. He would go out hunting the next day, and Sir Gawain would stay at home and sleep in and do what he pleased all day. In the evening they would exchange what they had gotten during the course of the day.

[INSTRUMENTAL INTERLUDE]

The next morning the lord of the castle got up early and went out to hunt deer. [The deer hunt is pantomimed during the bedroom scene, but not in such a way that it distracts from the main action.]

Sir Gawain slept until the sun shone on the walls. Then he was awakened by the sound of someone softly entering his chamber. He peeped out from behind the bed curtains and saw it was the lady of the castle. He was embarrassed and pretended to be still asleep to see what she would do. She parted the curtains and climbed up onto the bed. He lay there a long time, but at last he stretched and pretended to wake up and feigned surprise at seeing the lady.

LADY [laughing]:
Good morning, Sir Gawain. You are a careless sleeper when someone can slip in here. Now I have caught you! But we can make a truce. I will bind you in your bed. [She tucks the blankets in under him.]

GAWAIN [laughing]:
Good morning, bright Lady. I will do all your will, and that pleases me well, for I yield completely and plead for grace! But, Lady, would you allow your prisoner to arise? If you give me leave, I would get out of bed and dress myself so that I could keep you better company.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
LADY:
Oh no! I will join you in bed, for you are the best man I have ever seen, and everyone admires you, and my husband is away. You are welcome to my body.

GAWAIN:
I am not the person you are thinking of. I am completely unworthy to achieve such honor.

NARRATOR:
The lady continued to draw Gawain to love, but he evaded her request with utter courtesy.

LADY:
You can't be Sir Gawain.

GAWAIN:
Why not?

LADY:
Sir Gawain always kisses ladies whenever he can.

GAWAIN:
I will kiss at your commandment. [They kiss once.]

NARRATOR:
When the lord of the castle came back that evening, he presented a hundred deer to Sir Gawain, and Sir Gawain gave him a kiss. They laughed and determined to make the same bargain for the next day.

[INSTRUMENTAL INTERLUDE]

NARRATOR:
On the second morning the lord went out to hunt a wild boar, and the lady again came to Sir Gawain. [The boar hunt continues in pantomime throughout this scene, again not detracting from the main subject.]

LADY [embroidering]:
Your reputation travels everywhere, and I have sat by you here now twice, yet I have never heard you speak a single word about love. You, who are so courtly, should yearn to show a young thing some token of true love’s craft.

GAWAIN:
I am honored that so worthy a lady as you would come here to play with your knight. But for me to tell you about true love, when you wield so much more of that art than I ever will, that would be utter folly.

LADY:
Sir, I am amazed that you have forgotten what I taught you yesterday.

GAWAIN:
What is that? If this is true, the fault is my own.

LADY:
I taught you about kissing, as becomes a courteous knight.

NARRATOR:
And twice they kissed.
The lord returned in the evening with a ferocious boar which he had slain himself at much risk. He presented it to Sir Gawain, and Gawain gave him two kisses.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
Gawain was going to leave the next day to seek the Green Chapel, but the lord of the castle told him it was not far, and he could leave the following morning and get there on time. So Gawain stayed to play the exchange game a third time.

[INSTRUMENTAL INTERLUDE]

NARRATOR:
The next morning, while the lord of the castle chased a wily fox, Sir Gawain slept soundly, enclosed by lovely curtains on the cold morning. [The fox hunt continues during this scene.] When the lady awakened him, he greeted her eagerly, though again he evaded her request. She seemed saddened at this, and asked that he accept a ring.

GAWAIN:
I don’t want any gifts, my lovely one, at this time. I have given you none, nor will I take any.

LADY:
If the ring is too rich, then accept this green belt. Lo! It is little, but its worth is great. Whoever is girt in this green lace can be hewn down by no man under heaven, nor slain by any trick.

NARRATOR:
He thought of his agreement with the Green Knight, and, at last, accepted the belt, promising to keep it secret from her husband. [The fox is slain.] In the course of the morning he kissed her three times. When her husband returned, he at once presented him with the three kisses and received from him a fox which had cleverly eluded them much of the day, but at the last had been caught.

[INSTRUMENTAL INTERLUDE]

NARRATOR:
The next morning Sir Gawain set out with a guide for the Green Chapel.
Thay bowen bi bonkkez ther bowez ar bare,
Thay clomben bi clyffez ther clengez the colde.
The heuen watz vphalt, bot vgly ther-vnder;
Mist muged on the mor, malt on the mountez,
Vch hille hade a hatte, a myst-hakel huge.
Brokez byled and breke bi bonkkez aboute,
Schyre schaterande on schorez, ther thay doun schowued.
Wella wylle watz the way ther thay be wod schulden,
Til hit watz sone sesoun that the sunne ryses
that tyde.
Thay were on a hille ful hyghe,
The quyte snaw lay bisyde;
The burne that rod hym by
Bede his mayster abide.

GUIDE:
I have brought you this close, but I will go no further. The Green Chapel is a terrible place. The worst man in the world lives there, and he slays whomever passes by, be he monk, knight, or peasant. Do not go there. I will never tell anyone that you turned back.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
GAWAIN:
I will go on. God will help me.

NARRATOR:
So the other man reluctantly left him, and Sir Gawain rode on alone. At length he came to a hollow green mound beside a stream.

GAWAIN:
Could this be the Green Chapel? This would be a good place for the Devil to say his mass.

NARRATOR:
Then he heard, from across the stream, a terrible sound as if someone were sharpening a scythe on a grindstone.

GAWAIN:
This is surely a greeting meant for me. [He calls out.] Who is master of this place? For now Gawain is here. If anyone wants me, come here quickly.

GREEN KNIGHT:
Wait there, and you shall have what I promised you.

NARRATOR:
The Green Knight went on whetting his blade; then at last He keuerz bi a cragge, and comez of a hole, Whyrlande out of a wro wyth a felle weppen, A denez ax nwe dyght, the dynt with to yelde.

The Green Knight greeted him, and Gawain prepared himself for the blow. He knelt down and leaned his head forward and laid bare his neck, feigning boldness, for he dared not show his fear.

[The Green Knight raises the axe slowly and strikes fast, but stops the axe before it hits. MUSIC STOPS]

GREEN KNIGHT:
You cannot be Gawain, who is held to be so good; for now you flinch in fear before you are hurt. I never heard such cowardice in that knight, Sir Gawain. I shuddered not when you struck your blow.

GAWAIN:
I flinched once; I will do so no more. But when my head falls on these stones, I cannot it restore.

NARRATOR:
Again he raised the axe and let it fall. [Gawain does not flinch. The Green Knight halts his blow.]

GREEN KNIGHT [laughing]:
So, now you have your heart whole. I am glad! Now hold the high order that Arthur gave you. . . . and see if your neck can survive this!

GAWAIN [frustrated]:
Wy! Thrash on, you fierce man. You threaten too long! I think you are afraid of yourself!

GREEN KNIGHT:
Well, I won’t delay your errand any longer with this light conversation.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
A third time he raised the axe and let it fall...but Gawain's head did not roll on the ground in a pool of blood. The blow only nicked his neck. [Gawain springs aside and jumps to his feet.]

The covenant is fulfilled! [The Green Knight leans on his axe and looks at Sir Gawain with joy.]

You have no need to be so fierce. If I had wished to strike harder I could easily have done so. The two harmless blows were for the first two days when you kissed my fair wife and gave the kisses to me. You failed on the third day, and therefore I struck the blow. The green belt you are wearing is mine. I gave it to my wife and sent her to test you. You are a good knight, Sir Gawain. You failed, not for wickedness or for wooing, but because you loved your own life.

Cursed be cowardice and covetousness! [He unties the belt and flings it at the feet of the Green Knight.] I confess before you that I am faulty and false.

You have confessed your errors so cleanly and paid penance beneath my blade, that I hold the small harm that I had healed beyond doubt. So come back to the castle, and my wife, who was your foe, shall be your friend.

Never! But I would like to keep the belt to remind me of my fault. Also, I would like to know what is your true name.

I will tell you gladly. I am Bertilak de Hautdesert. Morgan la Faye, who dwells in my castle, enchanted me and changed my color to distress Guenevere, hoping she would die of fear. Morgan is your aunt. Therefore return to my hall and make merry.

Nay, I shall not.

So they parted, and Gawain returned to Camelot, wearing the green belt as a baldric. There, with much shame, he told Arthur and the court of his adventures. The king comforted him, and, laughing, made a law that, for the love of Sir Gawain, every knight of the Round Table should wear a green baldric. This became a distinction of the Round Table and was held in honor evermore after.