

Description of Gawain's Shield

When they brought him his shield, it was bright red gules,
painted with a pentacle of purest gold.
Holding the baldric, he hung it from his neck,
and the sign thus set suited him well.
Why the pentacle is proper to that noble prince
I must let you know, though I linger in the telling.
It is a sign that Solomon set long ago
to signify truth by a trustworthy token.
It is a figure with five fine points
and each line overlaps and locks with the others,
everywhere endless: the English, I hear,
most often call it the Endless Knot.
And so it fits this knight with his flashing armor,
who was faithful five ways and five times each.
All knew Gawain to be good as purified gold:
devoid of villainy, his virtues were a court's
delight.

Thus he wore the five-point star
on shield and surcoat in plain sight,
his honor without stain or scar,
a gentle, low-voiced knight.

First, he was found faultless in his five senses,
and his five fingers never failed him in any deed,
and all his faith in this world was in the five wounds
that Christ carried on the cross, as the Creed informs us.
No matter where he moved in melee or in battle
it was his fervent thought through thick or thin
that when he fought his courage came from the five joys
the high Queen of Heaven had of her child.
(And so the noble knight would never wear his shield
till her image had been painted on the inner half;
for when he saw her face his courage never failed.)
And a fifth five was found in Gawain:
bounty and brotherhood above all else;
courtesy and a clean heart (these were never crooked)
and the finest point, compassion -- these five virtues
marked him more than any man alive.
Now all these five fives were fastened round this knight
and each embraced the others in unbroken pattern
and met in five fixed points that never failed,
nor bunched together, nor split in pieces,
but ran on endlessly at every point --
where the figure failed, it found new beginnings.
Therefore the shield shone with the knot thus shaped,
gold royally arranged against red gules --
the noble pentacle as it is known by men
of lore.

Now ready to go his way,
he lifted his lance as if for war,
gave them all good day --
and left them there forevermore.

