

# Sir Gowther

*anon*

*a fourteenth or early-fifteenth century Middle English Breton lai, based upon the late-twelfth century French poem Robert de Diable*

**Translated and retold in Modern English prose**

**by**

**Richard Scott-Robinson**

This lai has been translated and retold from: Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Eds), 1995. *The Middle English Breton Lays*. Medieval Institute Publications. TEAMS Middle English texts. From National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1, with missing lines interpolated from British Library MS Royal 17.B.43

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# Sir Gowther

anon

*fourteenth or early-fifteenth century*

**G**od, that art of myghtis most · Fader and Sone and Holy Gost · That bought man on Rode so dere · Shilde us from the fowle fende · That is about mannys sowle to shende · all tymes of the yere – Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, who paid for us with such suffering on the cross, shield us from the foul fiend who lurks nearby and might steal our souls away at any moment! There was once a time when the devil came to women disguised as their husbands. In this way was Merlin conceived, and indeed King Arthur himself, in a manner of speaking.

What a strange thing it is to learn that the denizens of an Otherworld can make a woman pregnant. They take on the form of another man because they have no form of their own; or, at least, so the clergymen tell us and I shall not dispute this here. But I shall tell you of a fairy child who led his mother a merry dance with his wild deeds!



I sought high and low for a Breton lay and have brought out of this marvellous region the following strange tale. There was a duke in Austria who married a very beautiful lady who had the complexion of a lily and cheeks like roses. After the wedding there was a magnificent banquet and the whole day was spent in jousting; and the day after that as well, and

the duke purchased a great deal of honour in some fierce fighting, and won ten horses for himself.

The duke and duchess lived happily for ten years and more, but no child was forthcoming. Their happiness began to wane. And one day the duke said to his wife: ‘I think you must be barren and I would like a divorce.’

The lady sighed and was very sad that she had not conceived. And so she prayed to God and to Mary that she might become pregnant, she did not care how.

One day, in her orchard, she met a man who became very amorous with her. He looked just like her husband and so she lay down beneath a tree and they made love together. But when their lovemaking was over, he revealed his true form to her.

‘I have given you a child,’ he said, ‘who will become an uncontrollable youngster and wield weapons like a maniac!’

She got up off the ground and ran away as fast as she could to her room, offering prayers as she went. And in the evening, she induced her husband to make love to her all night.

‘An angel came to me from heaven,’ she said, ‘and assured me that tonight I will conceive a child and that all our troubles will be over.’ And her husband was quite happy to comply with her wishes, for he still loved her.

The baby developing within her womb was none other than Merlin’s half-brother! The lady gave birth to a little boy and the Duke took him to church and christened him Gowther, little knowing what a dreadful child he would become. A number of wet-nurses were sucked to death by the infant! When three had been buried, the duke sent for another six and after twelve months they, too, lay beneath the ground.

The knights of that country took council together and declared to the duke that it was no joke that so many of them had lost their wives for the sake of his son, and refused to provide any more wet-nurses. His mother offered her own breast to the child; he snuggled up to it and tore off her nipple! She fled from the room, shouting for a priest.

Doctors were able to heal the wound, but no other woman dared suckle the child, so he was fed on rich sauces and soon grew to acquire a voracious appetite.

When he was fifteen years old, Gowther made a sword for himself, of iron and steel; a sword so large that nobody but himself could wield it. Make no mistake, he was a strong youth and terrorised many people unjustly.

*The tale of Sir Gowther is a Middle English work whose anonymous author claims: ‘I sought high and low for a Breton lay and have brought out of this marvellous region the following strange tale...’. Two features of the story may reveal an underlying design: an episode where Sir Gowther sits under the dining table with the emperor’s dogs; and later when Gowther fights, first as a black knight, then as a red knight and finally in white arms. The fourteenth century tale of Robert of Cisyle recounts an episode where King Robert takes on the appearance of a different man and sits with the dogs, while King Robert still appears to be alive and well. And in the twelfth century romance Ipomadon, the hero fights as a white knight, then a red knight and then as a black knight, before assuming the identity of another knight entirely.*

*The story exists in two other manuscripts of the late-fifteenth century: British Library Royal MS 17.B.43 and National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1. The tale of Sir Gowther is based upon a late-twelfth century French poem called Robert de Diable, with input from Irish and Breton folk tradition, Medieval hagiography and as the reader may no doubt at some point spot, a certain twelfth century romance by the Anglo-Norman poet Hue de Rotelande.*



He matured more in a year than other youths do in six or seven, and by the age of sixteen he could ride skilfully and was so evil that the duke had no control over him at all and had no other choice but to make him a knight. There was no one in the land who could survive a blow from his sword! Gowther’s mother was so distressed by what people told her about her son that she could not hide her sorrow. She was at her wit’s end and fled to a castle where she tried to hold out against him; for anyone who met with Gowther was justified in saying: ‘A curse that you were ever born!’

for he was very likely to kill them and cut their horse in two.

The shame of it all killed the duke.

**N**ow Sir Gowther is duke! Holy Church is shamed and desecrated, its priests and clergymen assaulted. The new duke would suffer no Masses to be sung in his presence, nor allow any friar to preach within earshot. At all times, in cold blood and in hot, he would work his father's will! Hunting was his favourite pastime, in park and forest, woodland and heath.

One day, as he was out with his dogs, he came across a convent. As he rode towards it, the prioress and her nuns quickly came out in procession. He and his men raped them all, then herded them into their church and burnt them alive. Why should I conceal the truth?

All who believed in Christ, young and old, were brought to grief. He would deflower virgins and force wives from their husbands, kill men and compel friars to jump from high cliffs. He would kill clergymen, burn hermits and widows and cause parish priests to be hung from hooks.

An old earl rode to the duke and said: 'Sir, why do you act like this? We suspect that you are not Christian, but some fiend's son, perhaps, come to torment us. You devote yourself to evil, never to good, and behave like the devil's sibling.'

'Sir,' replied Sir Gowther angrily, 'if you spread these lies about me you shall be hanged and drawn,' and he threw the old man into a dungeon and rode as fast as he could to his mother.

'Mother,' he cried, 'tell me at once who my father was, or this will glide into you,' and he laid the point of his sword against her breast.

'My lord, so recently buried, was your father,' she answered.

'You lie!' he screamed, and wept.

'Son,' said his mother, comforting him, 'I shall tell you the truth, then. A fiend lay with me in the orchard on the day that you were conceived. I thought that it was your father because he looked just like him. It was underneath a chestnut tree.'



They both wept sorrowfully. 'Go and confess to a priest,' said Gowther, 'and I will take myself to Rome, to learn another way of life,' and something prompted him to cry, 'Lord, Mercy!' to God, whom Mary bore. He prayed to God, and to Mary the mother of

God, to save him from his father, the fiend, and to bring him at last into heaven, which Her son had bought for all His believers. Then he went back to the old earl, released him and said: 'Look after my castle for me, for I am off to confess to the Pope and to seek to make amends for all I have done.'

So he left the old earl as his heir and journeyed to Rome on foot. But he took his sword, which hung always by his side.

He arrived at Rome and waited for an audience with the Pope.

When the opportunity at last arose, Gowther knelt upon one knee, addressed the Pope devotedly and craved absolution. The Pope asked. 'Where are you from?'

'I am the Duke of Austria,' he replied. 'My father was a friendless fiend, though my mother is noble enough.'

'I will gladly absolve you,' cried the Pope. 'Are you christened?'

'Yes, my name is Gowther, and now I love God.'

'It is good that you have come, for otherwise I would have had to make war upon you, for you have destroyed Holy Church in your country.'

'I am sorry,' said Gowther, 'and I swear to do all your bidding from now on, and to endure whatever penance you choose to give me.'

'Lay down your sword, then, and I will hear your confession and absolve you.'

'No Holy Father, it must stay with me, for my friends are few.'

'Then wherever you go from now on,' said the Pope, 'you will take no food but that which has been in the mouth of a dog, and you shall not speak a word until such time as God gives you a sign that your penance is over and your sins are forgiven.'

Gowther knelt before the Pope's chair and received his absolution. And outside, in Rome, he would swallow no food unless it had been in the mouth of a dog; and he travelled to a far country, as witnesses have said, and lay down under a hill, and then a greyhound brought him food each day, as though he were her pup.

For three nights he lived like this, and each day the greyhound brought him a loaf of bread. But on the fourth day the greyhound did not appear, and he got up and went towards a castle that lay nearby. In the castle lived the Emperor of Germany and Gowther sat down by the gates, for he could not enter. Then trumpets blew and knights gathered as the emperor made his way to his hall. Gowther saw his chance, for there was no porter at the gate nor usher at the hall door who could stop him. He raced swiftly through the crowd up to the high table and sat beneath it. The steward came towards him with a stick and threatened to beat him if he did not go away.

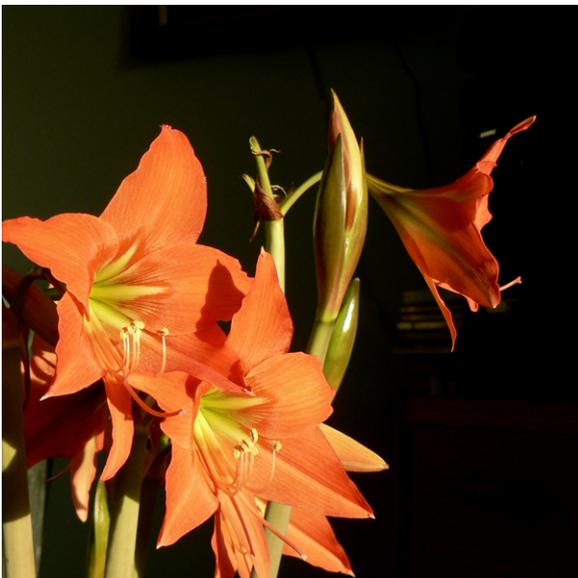
'What's going on?' asked the emperor.

‘My lord,’ said the steward, ‘a man, the most handsome I ever saw – come and look!’

The emperor went to look, but he could not get a single word out of the fellow, though he let him remain where he was and gave him some food. ‘He is no good to anybody like this,’ said the emperor, ‘although it may be that he is under some penance or other.’

When the emperor had been served, he sent some food to the dumb man, but Gowther let it lie where it was. Then a spaniel came with a bone in its mouth and Sir Gowther grabbed the bone and chewed on it. Neither grouse nor pie would he eat, but only what he could get from the mouths of the dogs.

The emperor and the empress and all at the high table watched this, and gave food to their hounds; Sir Gowther drew near, perceiving that it was his best chance of getting enough to eat. So he ate amongst the dogs and at night was led to a little room where he hid beneath a blanket. Shortly before midday the next morning he was allowed into the hall, and they called him Hob the fool.



The emperor had a daughter who was also mute. She tried to speak but could not, though she was very beautiful and gracious. And one day, a messenger came and said to the emperor: ‘My lord the sultan sends you his finest greetings and asks me to inform you that he will make war upon you, burn all your cities and kill all your people unless you send him your daughter, so that he may marry her.’

‘I have but one daughter,’ said the emperor, ‘and she is as dumb as a stone, although she is as fair as the fairest. And I shall not, by the sacrifice God made for us, give her to any

heathen bastard like your sultan however strongly I may be coerced into doing so, may God bring her speech back!’

The messenger took this reply to the sultan, and terrible events began to unfold, as he brought his army closer. The emperor, a doughty fighter, took personal command of half of his own forces, and his field marshal took control of the other half. Sir Gowther went to a quiet room and prayed to God that he should send him armour, shield, a spear and a warhorse that would be able to sustain him in a fight.

He had hardly finished this prayer when all appeared at the door as he had asked. The horse and the armour were black. He leapt onto the mighty steed, hung the shield around his neck, took the lance in his hand, and galloped through the castle gates. Only the emperor’s daughter knew who he was. He spurred across marsh and moor towards the battlefield, and when he arrived, the emperor and the sultan had already assembled their armies to face one another.

Sir Gowther gave no quarter and took no prisoners but smashed many a head and felled many a horse; here a heathen went rolling into the mud, there a knight fell from his saddle with his brains spilt. He put the sultan's army to flight and hindered its retreat until nightfall, killing many heathens in the process. Then he rode back in the company of the emperor himself, although nobody knew who he was – nobody, that is, except the emperor's mute daughter. He went to a private chamber, took off his arms, and everything vanished where he laid it, he knew not where nor how. The emperor was eating in the hall when Sir Gowther entered and took his place between two hunting dogs.

The maiden took two fine greyhounds, washed their mouths out with wine and gave a loaf of bread to one and a fillet steak to the other; Sir Gowther did not hesitate but accepted these gifts when they arrived. He sat comfortably, then went to rest in his little room.

The next morning a messenger arrived from the sultan. 'Sir,' he said, 'I bring you word that yesterday you killed many of the sultan's men and today he will take to the field with an army of more than ten thousand to avenge that wrong.'

'Bring me horse and armour,' cried the emperor, 'and let us join battle!'

Sir Gowther retired to a quiet room and prayed that he might again be given the means to fight on the side of the emperor. God provided Sir Gowther with red arms and a chestnut horse, and the red knight followed the emperor's host through forest and fen. And when the armies engaged, as the romance relates, Sir Gowther caused many a knight to tumble from his horse, hacked at many a shield and helmet and captured the enemy banner, leaving a swathe of headless corpses behind him. He conducted himself magnificently!

'Ah, Lord God!' cried the emperor, 'who is this magnificent knight in red who helps me so? We had another like him in black yesterday, who caused great discomfort to the Saracens. This red one deals out heavy blows as though his arms were made of lead. His sword is so strong and sharp that he wastes not a thrust but does damage with every swing.'

The emperor galloped into the thick of the fighting to assist the red knight in his slaughter. The sultan fled into a forest with the remains of his army. Sir Gowther accompanied the emperor home and retired to his small chamber where his horse and arms vanished as soon as he discarded them. Then he went into the hall, where he found the emperor already at supper, so he sat down amongst the dogs. The maiden fetched the greyhounds and did as she had done on the previous day, and when Hob the fool had eaten, he retired to his little room.

The emperor thanked God who had made the night and the day that things had gone so well for him; twice had the sultan been defeated, with all his fiercest warriors now slain except for those who had managed to flee. 'Adventurous knights-errant are lending their help to us as well,' he boasted. 'Two in as many days, although I have no idea where they

have come from. One in red and another in black. Had either of them not appeared when he did, events might have taken a different course entirely!’

The mood in the hall took on the atmosphere of a festival, with minstrels and dancing; but Sir Gowther remained in his little room, exhausted by his day’s work, bruised and weary. He thought only of redeeming himself in the eyes of God.

At last, everybody went to bed. And in the morning, a messenger arrived from the sultan.

‘My lord is no longer going to show you any tolerance!’ said the messenger. ‘Now it is war! Unless you give him your daughter, he will lay siege to your castle, spill blood and break bones to such an extent that not one of your knights will remain alive at the end of it.’



‘Your sultan is nothing!’ cried the emperor, contemptuously. ‘I shall gather my army again, if he likes, and meet him outside!’

All the emperor’s knights had themselves armed, and by mid-morning had jumped onto their horses, taken their shields and spears and sallied through the castle gates. Sir Gowther offered up a prayer that he might swiftly be sent a horse and some arms and soon found himself in possession of some fine new armour, along with a milk-white steed and a white shield. Thus equipped, he rode after the host.

The emperor’s mute daughter had been the only one to see through Sir Gowther’s previous disguises and she was the only one now who knew who this white knight really was. Without any ceremony he galloped after the army. The emperor was at its head, and soon Sir Gowther joined him. Shortly, the battle began, knights were killed, banners thrown down and the sultan, wearing black sable and with three silver lions rampant upon his shield, very quickly came to grief. For the good knight, Sir Gowther, moved swiftly in his new equipment and none more effectively. Every blow he gave cut through steel; he felled both horse and man and made them tumble to the ground! The enemy foot-soldiers began to retreat as their cavalry failed to give them the support they needed. For the sake of the emperor’s daughter, the sultan had soon been the cause of many a casualty!

Sir Gowther, that doughty warrior, rode always with the emperor, protecting him, and there was no Saracen knight who dared come within a spear’s length of them, so mighty were they both. Sir Gowther rained such blows upon the enemy with his sword that men’s lives were in constant jeopardy and whoever loitered in the fray could be sure of receiving his death wound.

Sir Gowther fought with all his resolve, and the emperor with all his might, but by a clever ploy the Saracens succeeded, nevertheless, in capturing the emperor. He was led

away by the sultan. But Sir Gowther rode after them and in a valiant rescue managed to cut off the sultan's head, returning the emperor to the safety of his own battle lines. A stray spear, however, caught the white knight in the shoulder, which caused a great deal of anguish to the mute maiden who was watching all this drama unfold from a high place in the castle. And in her grief, she fell out of her tower. A squire carried her back into the castle where she lay motionless as though she was dead.

The emperor returned from the battlefield and sat in the hall where his meal was served to him. The white knight went straight to his small chamber and took off his war gear, then went to sit amongst the dogs. He noticed the absence of the emperor's daughter, and saw how his lord was grieving.

The emperor sent word to the Pope, and he came with some cardinals to officiate at the funeral. The pontiff and his entourage gave absolution to the body of the emperor's daughter before it was buried. But as they were doing so, through the grace of God she awoke and said: 'Sir Gowther, the Lord of Heaven greets you and forgives you all your sins. He grants you the joy of heaven and urges you to speak merrily, to eat and drink heartily, for you are one of His.'

And she said to her father: 'It is he who fought so valiantly for you, for three days in succession.'

The Pope heard Sir Gowther's confession, kissed him and said: 'Now you are God's child, so give no thought to the devil, whom we must all battle against.'

With the encouragement and the blessing of the emperor and the Pope, Sir Gowther married the emperor's daughter, who was courteous, beautiful and who was, moreover, now able to speak and was heir to all her father's lands.

The Pope gave the happy couple his blessing and returned to Rome. And when the marriage feast was over, Sir Gowther journeyed to Austria to give the old earl control of all his dukedom, and he let the earl marry his mother, who was still taking refuge in her castle. And he caused an abbey to be built, gave it lands and rents and a strong wall, and filled it full of black monks to sing psalms and Masses: 'And here I shall lie when I die,' he ordained.

But despite the Pope's absolution and the forgiveness of all his sins by God, Sir Gowther was still tormented by the memory of the nuns he had once burnt to death in their own church, and so he attached to the abbey a convent, to be a place of learning where Masses could be sung for the souls of those dead nuns, until the world's end.

When he returned to Germany, he found that his father-in-law, the emperor, had died.

So now Sir Gowther is Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, the flower of all Christian knights, and scourge of all pagans!

Sir Gowther was ready, always, to grant favours requested for God's love, to give alms to the poor and uphold the rights of noblemen and the privileges of the Church. Thus, was

he better advised than before! He reigned for many years, an Emperor of great power, and when he died, he was buried in the abbey he caused to be built in Austria. And at his golden shrine, through the grace of God, many miracles take place; for he who was once a cursed knight is now inspired by the Holy Ghost, and causes the blind to see and the dumb to speak, and cripples to be healed of their infirmity.

This Breton lay was written on parchment. Jesus Christ, son of God, give us the fortitude to earn a place beside you in Heavenly Bliss.

Amen.