

Sir Degare – Modern English Translation

Author Unknown

Edited by Leah Johns

Editor's Introduction

Sir Degare is a tale of romance, chivalry, and magic. It is set in Brittany making it a *Breton Lay*, which is an English/French romantic poem. *Sir Degare* includes themes similar to the great romances, such as *King Arthur* and the *Canterbury Tales*. These themes include chivalry, romance, Christianity, and kinship, but fundamentally, it is a tale of chivalry and heroism. It follows the story of Degare, who is conceived in rape by a fairy knight. His mother is the daughter of a noble king. Before leaving the princess, the fairy knight gifts her a broken shaft of his sword and instructs her to give it to the son that she will have from their night together. This broken sword will be how the fairy knight recognizes his son if he were to encounter him. Degare is taken to a hermit to be raised to manhood. The princess leaves with her son two magical gloves, that will only fit her, and a letter. The letter explains the magic of the gloves and instructs Degare to find his mother once he is older. Degare has many adventures; he slays a dragon and saves a princess. Meanwhile, he finds his mother and his father, reunite them and marries the princess he saves.

The authorship of *Sir Degare* is unknown. There are nine known manuscripts of the poem. Four of them were found to be dated in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, two even later than that. The other three are from the sixth century.¹

Sir Degare, like many medieval tales, is a Christian poem. There are several references to God, such as characters praying to him or obeying his laws. The poem is about Degare seeking for both of his parents. He begins believing that the hermit's family is also his family. When he reaches manhood, he is given the letter his mother wrote and told to seek after her. Once she is found, he receives a new quest to seek after his father. This seeking and obedience to the instructions given by his mother saves Degare from marrying his mother. With hints of the Oedipus complex,² Degare is believed to be spared by the will of God:

"But God, that all things may steer,
Would not that they sinned together:" (Lines 627-628)

It is from this seeking that Degare emerges at the end victorious.

Sir Degare adds to the repertoire of chivalrous tales with its emphasis on seeking after what was lost and ending victorious. The translation makes available in Modern English the heroic and chivalrous tale of *Sir Degare*.

Editor's Notes

This poem, preserved in its Middle English form, is a translation from Middle English to Modern English. The translation tools used to make this edition were ChatGPT and DeepL.³ Specific instructions were given to ChatGPT to keep the translation direct without changing sentence structure. DeepL was used to provide alternative phrasing and word translations. Much of the poem was kept as a direct translation with minimal edits made.

The poem was written in octosyllabic couplets⁴ with an AA, BB, CC, AA pattern. The rhyme scheme was preserved as much as possible. There are some exceptions for the sake of comprehension. An example is shown below:

“There was no man, truly,
That strong in war nor in tournament,” (Lines 13-14)

The octosyllabic couplets were also kept as a direct translation. Degare's name was also changed in spelling from Sir Degarre to Sir Degare. The syllable for “Degare” was counted as two. A few additions were made by the editor to bring the syllabic count close to eight:

“This [noble] king he had no heir
But a maiden child, free and fair;” (Lines 19-20)

In some places throughout the Middle English version of the poem, it switches to first person:

“Ich wene in Bretaine ther be non
So strong a man so he is on.”⁵

This was sometimes changed to fit the tone of the poem. As shown below:

“There thought to be in Brittany none
So strong a man as he is one.” (Lines 882-883)

Some pronoun phrasing was also changed. Here is an example:

“He took from her her maidenhood,”
“He took by force her maidenhood,” (Line 13)

I hope you enjoy *Sir Degare*.

Leah Johns,
John Adams College, April 2026

Sir Degare

Listen, lords, gentle and freemen,
I will you tell of Sir Degare:
Knights that were sometime in land
Many wonders would find
Seek adventures by night and day,
How they might their strength assay;
So did the knight, a Sir Degare:
I will you tell what man was he.

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20

30

That was buried in an abbey 40
In a lush forest there beside.
With great company he would ride,
In her procession, and mass both,
With poor men feed, and naked clothe,
Offering bring, great plenty,
And feed the convent with great dainty.

Toward the abbey he came riding,
And many knights by his side,
His daughter also by him rode. 50
Amid the forest they abode.
Her chamberlain she called to her
Along with other damsels two
And said that they must alight
To do their needs and by her right;
They alighted down all three,
Two damsels and the maiden,
And for a long while there abide,
Till all the folk was forth ridden.

They gotten up and after would,
And nothing could their way hold. 60
The wood was rough and thick, in truth,
And they took the way amiss.
They turn around and ride west
Into the thick of the forest.
Into a lawn they are coming,
And it was well perceived
That they were amiss gone.
They rush forward every one
And called and cry all together,
But no man could aright them hear. 70

They knew not what was best to do;
The weather was hot before noon;
They lay them down upon a green,
Under a chestnut tree, supposed,
And each fell asleep every one
But the damsel wake and alone.
She walked and gathered flowers,
And listened song of wild fowls.
So far in the lawn she goes, true,
That she knows not where ever she is. 80

To her maidens she want anon.

But she knew never what way to go.
Way she thought was best to turn,
Awayward then she turned awry.
“Alas!” she said, “that I was born!
Now I know I am forlorn!
Wild beasts me will to grind
Before any man me shall find!”

Then saw she such a welcome sight:
Toward her walked a stoutly knight, 90
Gentle, young, and lively man;
A robe of scarlet he had on;
His face was fair, his body each ways;
Of countenance right courteous;
Well-faring legs, foot, and hands:
There none alike in all the King's land
More honest man than was he.
“Damsel, welcome may thou be!
Be thou not afraid of wight:⁶
I am come here a fairy knight; 100
My kind is for arms to wear,
On horse to ride with shield and spear;
Therefore afraid be thou not:
I have nought but my sword brought.

I have loved thee many a year,
And now we be just us self here,
Thou shalt my lover ere thou go,
Whether pleaseth thee well or woe."
Then there nothing could she do
But weep and cried and would have flee; 110
And he now began her to hold,
And did his will, what he would.
He took by force her maidenhood,
And afterwards up before her stood.

“Beloved,” he said, “gentle and free,
With child I know that thou shalt be;
Sure I know it will be a boy;
Therefore, my sword thou shalt have,
And when he is of good age
That he may by himself wield, 120
Take him the sword, and bid him try
To seek his father in each land.
The sword is good and convenient:
Lo, as I fought with a giant,

I broke the point in his head;
And since, when he was sure dead,
I took it out and have it here,
Ready in this here my amner.⁷

Yet by adventure time be it
That my son shall meet me with: 130
By my sword I may him know.
Have good day! I must go hence.”
The knight passed the way he came.
All weeping the sword she took,
And came home sorely sickened,
And found her maidens all sleeping.

The sword she hid as she might,
And then she awoke them quickly,
And led them to the horses anon,
And went to ride everyone. 140
Then saw they at the mete⁸ last
Two squires come pricking fast.
From the king they were rightly sent,
To ask whither his daughter went.

They brought her into the right way
And came fair to the abbey,
And did the service in all things,
Many masses and rich offerings;
And when the service was all done
And passed over the noon, 150
The king to his castle ride;
His daughter rode by his side.
And he governed his kingdom all
Stoutly, as a good king shall.

But when each man was glad and blithe,
His daughter sighed and sorrowed very;
Her womb grew more and then more;
Meanwhile she might, she hid sorrow.
On a day, as she weeping sat,
One of her maidens understood. 160
“Madam,” she said, “for charity,
Why weep you now, tell it me.”

“Ah! gentle maiden, kind chosen,
Help me, or I am forlorn!⁹
I have ever been meek and mild:

Lo, now I am quick with child!
If any man it understand,
Men would say by street and strand
That my father the king it won
And I was never acquainted man! 170
And if he himself had it know,
Such sorrow shall to him smite
That never blithe shall he be,
For all his joy is in me,"
And told her all together there
How it was begotten and where.

"Madam," quoth the maid, "care thou not:
It quiet away it shall be brought.
No man shall know in God's realm
What it becomes, but thou and I. 180
Her time had come, she was unbound,
And delivered all with sound;
A knave-child there was born:
Glad was the mother therefore.
The maiden served her at will,
Wrapped that child in clothes still,
And laid it in a cradle anon,
And was ready therewith to go.

Yet its mother was him held:
Four pound she took of gold, 190
And ten of silver also;
Under his foot she laid it then, -
For such thing it might serve;
And then she took a pair of glove
That her lover sent of fairy land,
That would go on no man's hand,
Nor on child nor on woman,
But on herself well it would.
Those gloves she put under his head,
And then a letter she wrote and made, 200
And knit it with a silken thread
About his neck with God speed
That whoever it found should know.

Then in the letter thus is writ:
"For charity, any good man
This helpless child find can,
Let christen it with priest's hand,
And bring it to live in land,

For it is come of gentle blood.
Help it with God's own good, 210
With treasure that under its feet lies;
And ten-years-old when he is,
Give him these the same gloves two,
And bid him, wherever he go,
That he love no woman in land
But these gloves will put on her hand;
For surely on hand will they not be
But on his mother that him bore."

The maiden took the child with,
and quietly went in evening tide, 220
throughout the long winter night.
The weather was clear, the moon bright;
then she became suddenly aware
of a hermitage built in stone:
a holy man had dwelling there.
She went toward it hastily,
and set the cradle at his door,
and dared not remain any longer,
but passed on immediately.
She came home that selfsame night, 230
and found the lady sorrowful,
weeping bitterly and in great grief,
and toldeth her everything
that happened and where she had been.

The hermit arose early then,
And his servant was up also,
And said together their matins,¹⁰
And served God and His holy saints.
The little child they heard cry,
And called after help on high; 240
The holy man his door undid,
And found the cradle in the place;
He took up the clothes anon
And beheld the little child;
He took the letter and read well soon
That told him what he should do.

The hermit held up both his hands
And thanked God of all His sending,
And bore that child in chapel,
And for joy he rang his bell. 250
He laid up the gloves and the treasure

And christened the child with great honor:
In the name of the Trinity,
He named the child Degare,
Degare meaning nought else it is
But thing that knows not what it is,
Or thing that is near forlorn also;
Therefore the child he named thus then.

The hermit that was holy of life
Had a sister that was a wife; 260
A rich merchant of that country
Had her espoused into that city.
To her that child he sent then
By his servant, the silver also,
And bade her take that good heed
It to foster and to feed,
And if God Almighty would
Ten years of the child's life hold,
Again, to him she should it return;
He would teach him of clergy and clerks. 270

The little child named Degare
Was brought into that city.
The wife and her lord together
Kept him as if it were their own.
By the time it was ten years old,
It was a fair child and a bold,
Well nourished, good and gentle;
Was none better in all that land.
He thought well that the good man
Had been his father that him won, 280
And the wife his mother also,
And the hermit his uncle both;

And when the ten years was spent,
To the hermitage he was sent,
The hermit was glad him to see,
He was so fair and so free.
He taught him clerks' knowledge and lore
Other ten winters or more;
And when he was of twenty year,
Stalwart he was, of such power 290
That there was no man in that land
That one breadth him might withstand.

Then the hermit sees, without lie,

A man for himself that he was,
Stalwart to do each and every work,
And of his age so good a clerk,
He took him his florins and his gloves
That he had kept for his behooves.
But the ten pound of precious sterlings
Were spent in his fostering. 300
He took him the letter to read,
And beheld all written and to deed.

“O dear him, for charity,
Was this letter made for me?”
“Yes, by our Lord, it shall help us!”
Thus it was, and told him all.
He knelt down all so quickly,
And thanked the hermit of his life,
And swore he would not cease one moment
Till he had found his blood kin. 310
For in the letter was thus written,
That by the gloves he should know
Which were his mother and who,
If that she would liveth then,
For on her hands they alone would be,
And on no other they could be.

Half the florins he gave the hermit,
And half them he took with him,
And took his leave and would go.
“Nay,” said the hermit, “shalt thou not so! 320
To seek thy kin may thou not endure
Without horse and good armor.”
“Nay,” quoth he, “by Heaven’s King,
I will have first another thing!”
He hewed down, both great and grim,
To bear in his hand with him,
A good sapling of an oak;
When he therewith gave a stroke,
No were he never so strong a man
Nor so good arms had upon, 330
That he should not fell to ground;
Such a staff to him he found.

Then to God he him betook,
And either from other weeping broke.
The child Degare went his way
Through the forest all that day.

No man he heard, nor none he saw,
Till it was well noon passed high;
Then he had heard a noise keen
In a valley, and blows great. 340
Quickly there he began to go:
What it were that he would see.
An earl of the country, stout and fierce,
With a knight and four squires,
Had hunted a deer or two,
And all their hounds already were gone.

Then was there a dragon grim,
Full of filth and also venom,
With a wide throat and teeth great,
And wings bitter with to beat. 350
As like a lion he had feet,
And his tail was long and great.
The smoke came out of his nose away
As far out as that of a chimney.
The knight and squires he had torn,
Man and horse to death he'd slain.

Dragon, the earl began to assail,
And he defended him as a man,
And stoutly laid on with his sword,
And strong strokes on him gave; 360
But all his blows harmed him not:
His hide was hard as iron wrought.
The earl fled from tree to tree —
Fain he would from the dragon be —
And the dragon began to assail;
The doughty earl in that battle
Suddenly, saw this child Degare;
“Ha! help!” he said, “for charity!”

The dragon saw the child come;
He left the earl and to him went, 370
Blowing and yawning also,
As he would swallow him then.
But Degare was too full strong;
He took his bat, great and long,
And in the fore head he him battered
That all the forehead he burst.
He fell down anon aright,
And struck his tail with great might
Upon Degare's full body side,

That upside-down he began to glide; 380
But he started up as a man
And with his bat laid upon,
And all to burst him every bone,
That he lay dead, still as a stone.

The earl kneeled down quite quickly
And thanked the child of his life,
And made Degare with him go
To his castle right anon,
And well at ease he Degare made, 390
And offered him all that he had,
Rents, treasure, and also land,
For to hold all in his hand.
Then answered the hero Degare,
“Let there come first before me
Thy lady and other women bold,
Maidens and widows, young and old,
And other fair damsels sweet.
If my gloves be to them meet
For to put upon their hand,
Then I will gladly take thy land; 400
And if they all be not so,
I will take me leave and go.”

All the women were forth brought
In wide countries and forth sought:
Each the gloves assay began,
But none with might could put them on.
He took his gloves and on them did,
And took his leave in that place.
The earl was gentle man of blood, 410
And gave him a steed full and good
And noble armor, rich and fine,
When he would arm him therein,
And a palfrey for him to ride on,
And a knave to be his man,
And gave him a sword very bright,
And dubbed him there to be a knight,
And swore by God Almighty
That he was better worthy
To use horse and arms also
Than with his bat about to go. 420

Sir Degare was well and blithe,
And thanked the earl many a time,

And leapt upon his palfrey,
And went forth happy in his way;
Upon his steed right his man,
And led his arms as he well can;
Many a journey they ride and set.
So on a day great folk they met,
Earls and barons of renown,
That came from a city, town. 430
He asked a servant what tidings,
And whence they came and what is this thing?

“Sir,” he said confidently, “truly,
We come from a parliament.
The king a great council made
For needs that he to do had.
When the parliament was full,
He let cry both far and near,
If any man were of arms so bold
That with the great king would rightly joust, 440
He should have in solemn marriage
His daughter and his heritage,
That is his kingdom good and fair,
For he had no other heir.

But no man dare grant thereto,
For many it assays and may not do:
Many earl and many baron,
Knights and squires of renown;
But each man, that jousts with him, truly
Has of him a foul despite: 450
Some he breaks the neck anon,
And of some even the back-bone;
Some through the body he pierces,
Each is maimed or gravely hurt;
But no man may do him any thing
Such wonder chance hath the king.

Sir Degare, thus thought, began:
“I am certainly a stalwart man,
And of my own I have a steed,
Sword and spear and rich clothing; 460
And if I fell the king down,
Ever I have won renown;
And though he may me hurt sore,
No man knows where I was born.
Whether death or life me befall,

Against the king I will ride!”
In the city his inn he takes,
And rests him and makes merry.

On a day with the king he met,
And kneeled down and him greeted: 470
“Sir king,” he said, “of much might,
My lord, I sent hither anon right
For to warn and prepare you that he
By thy leave would joust with thee,
And win thy daughter, if he may;
As the cry was this other day,
Jousts he hath to thee undertaken.”
“By God!” quoth the king, “he is welcome.
Be he baron, be he earl,
Be he burgher, be he churl, 480
No man will I ever forsake.
He that winneth all shall take.”

On the morrow the jousts were set;
The king him provided the better,
And Degare knew of no man,
But all his trust is God upon.
Early to church then went he;
The mass he heard of the Trinity.
The Father he offered one florin,
To the Son another all so fine, 490
And to the Holy Ghost the third;
The priest for him began to pray.
And when the service was all done,
To his inn he went full soon
And let him arm well and fine,
In good armor to joust in.

His good steed he began bestride;
His squire bore his shaft beside;
In the field the king to await,
As he came riding many a man, 500
Stoutly out of the city town,
With many a lord of great renown;
But all that in the field be
That the jousts many could see
Said that they never yet saw
So bold a man with their eye
As was this the gentle Degare,
But no man knew from whence he was.

Both they began to joust then,
But Degare knew not thereof. 510
The king had the greater shaft
And knew enough of the craft.
To break his neck he had intended:
In the helm he set his stroke,
That the shaft did all burst;
But Degare was very strong
That in the saddle still he sat,
And in the stirrups held his feet;
For truth I say, without lying,
He knew no more of jousting. 520

“Alas!” quoth the king, “alas!
Me befell never such a case,
That the man that I might hit
After my strong stroke might sit!”
He taketh a well greater shaft
And swore that he it must be,
“If his neck will not in two,
His back shall, ere I hence go!”
He rode again with great speed
And with thought to bear him down, 530
And struck Degare hard anon
Right against the weak breast-bone.

The shaft was stiff and wondrous good,
And Degare’s steed rightly stopped,
And all before he rose on high,
And then was he fallen nigh;
But as God Almighty would,
The shaft broke and might not hold,
And Degare his course rode out,
And was angered out of his wit. 540
“Alas!” quoth he, “for villainy!
The king hath smitten me twice,
And that I touched him not yet.
Now I shall advise me better!”

He turned his steed with heart grim,
And rode to the king, and he to him,
And together they came full right,
And in the shields their strokes set
That the spears all tore apart
And up right to their hand split, 550

That all the lords that there be
That all the jousting might surely see
Said they never saw with eye
Man that might so long endure,
In wrath for nearly nothing,
Sustain a stroke of their king;
“But he is doughty for the nonce,
A strong man of body and bones.”

The king eagerly began to speak:
“Do bring me a shaft that will not break! 560
Ah, by my truth, he shall go down!
Though he be stronger than Samson;¹¹
And though he be the bare fiend,
He shall down, in spite of his head!”
He took a shaft was great and long,
The shield another also strong;
And to the king full even he rides;
The king fails, and he him strikes;
His shaft was strong and good withal,
And well-sharpened the coronel.¹² 570

He struck the king in the lighter:
He might not move neither far nor near.
The king was strong and hard set;
The steed rose up before with that,
And Sir Degare so thrust him then
That, in spite of who began grudge,
Out of the saddle he him cast,
Tail over top, right at last.
Then was there long hooting and cry;
The king was sore ashamed therefore; 580
The lords came with might and main
And brought the king on horse again,
And said with one crying, truly,
“Child Degare hath won the prize!”

Then was the damsel sorry,
For she knew well the why:
That she should be espoused then
To a knight that she never had seen,
And lead her life with such a man
That she knows not who her won, 590
Nor in what land he was born;
Careful was the lady therefore.

Then said the king to Degare,
“My gentle son, come hither to me:
And thou wert all so gentle a man
As thou seemest in sight upon,
And as well could wisdom do
As thou art stalwart man thereto,
Me thought my kingdom well bestowed:
But be thou worse, be thou better, 600
Covenant I will with thee hold.

Lo, here before my bold barons,
My daughter I take thee by the hand,
And seize thee here in all my land.
King thou shalt be after me:
God grant thee good man to be!”
Then was the child glad and blithe,
And thanked the king many a time.
Great provision then was there wrought:
To church they were together brought, 610
And espoused that lady truly,
Under Sacrament, holy.

Lo, what chance and wonder strong
Befalleth many a man with wrong,
That cometh into a strange land
And weds a wife for any reward
And knows nothing of her kin,
Nor she of his, neither more nor less,
And are wedded together to live
Peradventure, and be nigh sib! 620
So did Sir Degare the bold
Espouse there with his mother
And that gentle lady also
Her own son was espoused to,
That she upon her body bare.
Lo, what adventure befell them there!

But God, that all things may steer,
Would not that they sinned together:
To church they went with bold barons;
A rich feast they began to hold; 630
And when was well passed noon
And the day was all done,
To bed they should wend, that free,
The damsel and Sir Degare.
He stood still and bethought him then

How the hermit, the holy man,
Bade he should no woman take
For fairness nor for riches' sake
But she might these same gloves two
Lightly on her soft hands do. 640

"Alas, alas!" then said he,
"What mischance is come to me?
Alas! witless wretch I am!
I had rather than this kingdom
That is seized into my hand
That I were far out of this land!"
He wrung his hands and was sorry,
But no man knew therefore why.

The king perceived and said then,
"Sir Degare, why fare thou so? 650
Is there anything done ill,
Spoken or said against thy will?"
"Yea, sir," he said, "by Heaven's King!
I shall never, for no espousing,
Whilst I live, with woman deal,
Widow nor wife nor damsel,
But she these gloves may take and find
And lightly draw upon her hand."
His young bride that heard him there,
And all for thought changed her cheer 660
And at last began to turn her mood:
Her visage waxed as red as blood.

She knew then gloves that were hers.
"Show them hither, my dear sir."
She took the gloves in that place
And lightly on her hands did them,
And fell down, with rueful cry,
And said, "God, mercy, mercy!
Thou art my son hast espoused me here,
And I am, son, thy mother dear. 670
I had thee lost, I have thee found;
Blessed be Jesus Christ that stound!"

Sir Degare took his mother then
And held her in his arms two.
Kissed and clasped her many a time;
That it was she, he was full blithe.
Then the king great wonder had

Why that noise that they had made,
And marveled at her crying,
And said, "Daughter, what is this thing?" 680
"Father," she said, "thou shalt hear:
Thou thinkest that I a maiden were,
But certainly, nay, sir, I am none:
Twenty winter now it is gone
That my maidenhood I lost
In a forest as I was,
And this is my son, God it wot:¹³
By these gloves well I wot."

She told him all the truth there,
How the child was gotten and where; 690
And how that he was born also,
To the hermitage she sent him then,
And since heard of him nothing;
"But thanked be Jesus, Heaven's King,
I have found him still alive!
I am his mother and ere his wife!"

"Dear mother," said Sir Degare,
"Tell me the truth, for charity:
Into what land I may turn
To seek my father, swift and eager?" 700
"Son," she said, "by Heaven's King,
I know thee of him nothing
But when he from me departed,
His own sword he me be taught,
And bade I should take it thee forthon¹⁴
If thou livedst and wert a man."
The sword she fetched forth anon right,
And Degare it out plucked.
Broad and long and heavy it was:
In that kingdom no such was. 710

Then said noble Degare forthon,
"Whoso it owned, he was a man!
Now this vow have that I kept,
Night nor day will I ever sleep
Till that I my father see,
If God will that it so be."
In the city he rested all night.
On morrow, when it was daylight,
He arose and heard his mass:
He dressed him and forth began pass. 720

Of all that city then might none
Neither with him ride nor go
But his knave, to take firm heed
To his armor and his steed.

Forth he rode in his resolute way
Many a pace and many journey;
So long he passed into west
That he came into the old forest
Where he was begotten sometime.
Therein he rides many a mile; 730
Many a day he rode began;
No quick beast he found of man,
But many wild beasts he saw
And sweet birds singing on high.
So long it drew to the night,
The sun was down aright.
Toward the town he would surely ride,
But he knew not ever by which side.

Then he saw a water clear,
And amid a swift running river, 740
A fair castle of lime and stone:
Other dwelling there was none.
To his knave he said, "Tide what tide,
On foot further will I not ride,
But this here abide will we,
And ask harbor for charity,
If any quick man be here alive."
To the water they came as swift;
The drawbridge was down by then,
And the gate open also, 750
Into the castle he began to speed.

First he saddled up his steed;
He tied up his palfrey.
Enough he found of hay and oats;
He bade his groom in high charge
To keep well all that their things.
He passed up into the hall,
Beheld about, and began to call;
But neither on land nor on high
No ever a quick man he saw. 760
Amid the hard stone hall floor
A fire was built, strong and stout,
"By faith," he said, "I am all sure

He, surely he who built that fire
Will come home yet again tonight;
Abide I will a little while.”

He sat down upon the dais,
And warmed himself well each way,
And he beheld and perceived
How in at the wood door came 770
Four damsels, gentle and free;
Each was clad well to the knee.
The two bows and arrows bore,
The other two were charged with
Venison, that both rich and good.
And Sir Degare up and stood
And greeted them full fair indeed,
But they answered with no word,
But went into chamber anon
And barred the door after soon. 780

And soon thereafter withal
There came a dwarf into the hall.
Four feet of length was in him;
With his visage both stout and grim;
Both his beard and his long hair
Was crisp and yellow as wax;
And with great shoulders and square;
Right and stoutly looked he;
Much were his feet and his hands
As the greatest man of the land; 790
He was clothed and well aright,
His shoes were cut as a knight;
He had on a surcoat over,
Furred with soft vair¹⁵ clearly.

Sir Degare him beheld and laughed,
And greeted him full fair enough,
But he answered never a word,
But set trestles and laid the board,
And torches in the hall he lighted,
And ready to supper dressed. 800
Then there came out of the bower
A damsel of great honor;
In the land none fairer was;
In a linen clothed she was
With her acome¹⁶ maidens ten,
Some in scarlet, some in green,

Gentle of body, of semblance sweet,
And Degare them began greet;
But they all answered no word,
But went to supper anon right. 810

“Surely,” quoth Sir Degare,
“I have greeted them, and they not me;
But they be dumb, by and by
They shall be speak first ere I.”

The lady that was of hue so bright,
Amid she sat anon¹⁷ right,
And on either half maidens five.
The dwarf them served all so swiftly
With rich meats and well prepared;
The cup he filled with all his might. 820

Sir Degare knew of courtesy:
He set a chair before the lady,
And therein himself had set,
And took a knife and carved his meat;
At the supper little he ate,
But beheld the lady fair,
And saw as fair a woman
As he ever looked on,
That all his heart and his thought
To love her was carefully brought. 830
And when they had supped enough,
The dwarf came, and the cloth he drew;
The ladies washed every one
And went to chamber quickly anon.

Into the chamber he came full soon.
The lady on her bed sat,
And a gentle maid at her feet,
And harped notes were good and fine;
Another brought spices and wine. 840
Upon the bed he set down
To hear the melodic harp’s sound.
For with mirth of notes so shrill,
He had fell down on sleep still;
So he slept soundly all that night.
The lady wrapped him warm indeed,
And a pillow under his head laid,
And went to bed in that place.

On morrow when it was daylight,
She was up and ready dressed.
Fair she had woke him then: 850
“Arise!” she said, “prepare thee, and go!”
And had said thus in her game:
“Thou art worthy to suffer shame,
That all night as a beast slept,
And none of my maidens didst keep.”

“O gentle lady,” said Degare,
“For God’s love, forgive it me!
Truly, the merry harp it made,
Else misdeed did not I had; 860
But tell me, lady so gentle,
Ere I out of thy chamber go,
Who is the lord of this land?
And who this castle hath in hand?
Whether thou be widow or wife,
Or maiden yet of clean life?
And why here be so many women
Alone, without any man?”

The fair damsel sore sighed,
And began to weep anon right:
“Sir, well fain I would tell thee, 870
If ever better it should be me.
My father was a rich baron,
And had many a tower and town.
He had no child but me;
I was his heir of his country.
In company had many a knight
And squires that were good and light,
And stalwart men of service,
To serve in court far and near;
But then is there here beside 880
A stern knight, known full and wide.
There thought to be in Brittany none
So strong a man as he is one.

He had loved me full long ago;
But in his heart never more
Nor might I love him again;
But when he saw there was no gain,
He was about with mastery
To ravish me fast away.
My knights would well defend me, 890

And often fought they and he;
The best he slew the first day,
And then another, by my faith,
And then the third and the fourth,—
The best that might go on earth!

My squires that were so stout,
By four, by five, they rode out,
On horses and armed well enough:
His mighty body he them slew. 900
Mine men of service he slew all,
And other pages of my hall.
Therefore I am sore afraid
Lest he would win me at last.”
With this word she fell to ground,
And lay aswoon a full great while.
Her maidens to her side came
And in their arms her up took.

He beheld the lady great pity.
“Lovely madam,” quoth he,
“One of thine I am surely here: 910
I will thee help, by my power.”
“Yea, sir,” she said, “then all my land
I will thee give into thy hand,
And at thy will my body,
If thou mayst avenge me of him.”
Then was he glad all for to fight,
And well gladder that he might
Have the fair lady so bright
If he slew that other knight.

And as they stood and spoke together, 920
A maiden cried, rueful expression,
“Here comes our enemy, upon us!
Draw the bridge and shut the gate,
Or he will slay us every one!”
Sir Degare started up at once
And at a window saw him,
Well-armed on a sturdy high horse;
A fairer body than he was in
In arms he never saw none.
Sir Degare armed himself quickly 930
And on a steed began to ride out.

With a spear with a great of might,

To the knight he rode against.
The knight's spear all burst apart,
But Sir Degare was so strong
And so that hard to him thrust,
But the other knight sat so firm,
That the knight's steed's back broke
And fell to ground, and he also;
But at once started up the knight 940
And drew out his own sword bright.
"Alight," he said, "down at once;
To fight you shall go on foot.
For you truly, have slain my steed,
Death-blow shall be your reward;
But your steed slay I will not,
But on a foot fight I will."

Then on foot they took the fight,
And struck together with bright blades.
The knight gave Sir Degare 950
Stern strokes and great aplenty,
And he him again also,
So that helm and shield cleft in two.
The knight was aggrieved and sore
That his armor had burst there:
A stroke he gave Sir Degare,
So that to ground fallen is he;
But he started up at once right,
And such a stroke he gave the knight
Upon his head so hard set 960
Through helm and head and bascinet¹⁸
That at the breast stood the dent;
Dead and down he fell, truly.

The lady lay in a chamber,
And beheld the battle every part.
She was never before so glad:
She thanked God a many time.
Sir Degare came into castle;
Against him came the damsel,
And thanked him greatly for that deed. 970
Into chamber she began him lead,
And had unarmed him at once,
And set him upon her bed,
And said, "Sir, by charity,
I pray you will dwell with me,
And all my land I will you give,

For whom he did rather battle.
A shield he cast about his shoulder 1020
That was of arms rich and dear,
With three maidens' heads of silver bright,
With crowns of gold precious to sight.

A shaft he took that was not small,
With a sharpened coronel.¹⁹
His squire took another spear;
By his lord he began it bear.
Lo, adventure began to happen—
Son against father began to ride,
Neither knew the other not at all! 1030
And now begins the first fight.
Sir Degare took his course there;
Against his father a shaft he bore;
To bear him down he had intended.

Right in the shield he set his blow;
The shaft broke all to pieces,
And in the shield left the coronel.
Another course they began to take;
The father took, for the son's sake,
A shaft that was great and long, 1040
And he another also strong.
Together they rode with great force,
And either bore the other down.

With strong blows that they smote there,
Their poor steeds' backs broken were.
On foot they began to fight
And laid on with their swords clear.
The father amazed was he
Why that his sword was pointless,
And said to his son indeed, 1050
“Hearken to me a little while:
Where were you born, in what land?”
“In Little Britain, I understand:
A king's daughter's son, without falsehood,
But I know not my father.”

“What is your name?” then said he.
“Certainly, men call me Degare.”
“O Degare, son of mine!
Certainly I am father thine!”
And by your sword I know it here: 1060

The point is in my aumener.”²⁰
He took the point and set thereto;
Degare fell in a swoon then,
And his father, certainly,
Also he beganeth to swoon;
And when they from swoon were arisen,
The son cried our mercy there
To his own father for his misdeed,
And father to his castle lead,
And bade him dwell with him always. 1070

“Certainly, sir,” he said, “nay;
But if it were your good will,
To my mother we go together,
For she is in great in mourning.”
“Gladly,” said he, “by Heaven King.”
Sir Degare and his dear father,
Into England they went together.
They were armed and well equipped.
As soon as the lady saw that knight,
Wonderfully well she knew the knight; 1080
At once she changed her color right,
And said, “My dear son, Degare,
Now you have brought your father with thee!”

“Yes, madam, for surely thou be!
Now well I know that it is he.”
“I thank, by God,” said the king,
“Now I know, without lying,
Who Sir Degare’s father was!”
The lady swooned in that place.
Then afterward, now surely, 1090
The knight wedded the lady.
She and her son were divided apart,
For they were too near of kin.
Now went forth Sir Degare;
With the king and his company,
His father and his mother dear.

Unto that castle they went
Where dwelled that fair lady bright
That he had won in great fight,
And wedded her with solemnity 1100
Before all the lords in that country.

Thus came the knight out of his care;
God give us grace well to fare.
Amen.
The life of Sir Degare
Both courteous and noble.

¹ Stokoe, William C., Jr. "The Double Problem of Sir Degare." *PMLA*, vol. 70, no. 3, 1955. Cambridge Core, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/pmla/article/double-problem-of-sir-degare/F665BB2A6F2224ED07F6A00C4C75D531>

² Bliss, Lee Ramsey. "Sir Degare: A Study in Inconsistency." *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 4, 1965, pp. 427–434. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1316392>.

³ <https://www.deepl.com/en/translator>

⁴ Moss, Rachel Elizabeth. "Sir Degare." *The Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature in Britain*, edited by Siân Richard and Robert Rouse, Wiley Online Library, 2017, pp. 1706–1708. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118396957.wbemlb102>

⁵ "Sir Degare." *The Middle English Texts Series*, The Rossell Hope Robbins Library, University of Rochester, <https://metseditions.org/read/Rx7ryp7SGVZlbK5iv2BbiV3x0xDWqY>. Accessed 29 Apr. 2026.

⁶ A living creature, a person, or being.

⁷ An official who is responsible for distributing charity.

⁸ Meal.

⁹ Completely lost, abandoned, or ruined.

¹⁰ Prayers.

¹¹ Judges 13-16

¹² The metal head of a tilting spear or lance used in jousting.

¹³ To know or be aware of.

¹⁴ Therefore or for this reason.

¹⁵ Mottled or variegated.

¹⁶ Accompaniment.

¹⁷ Quickly, soon, right away.

¹⁸ Medieval European open-faced combat helmet.

¹⁹ The metal head of a tilting spear or lance used in jousting.

²⁰ An Alms purse, or small bag.