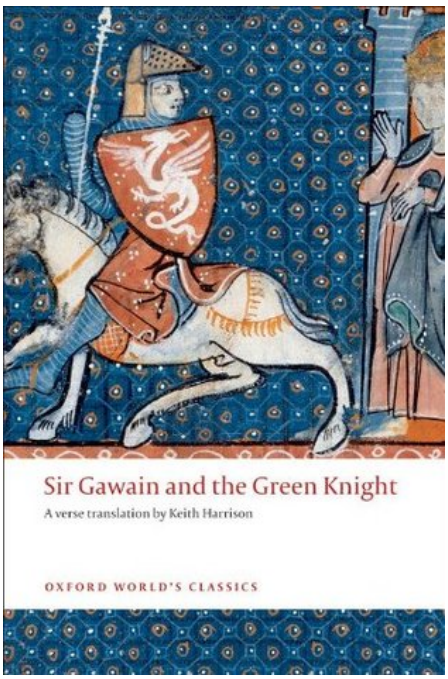

Sir Gawain and The Green Knight

Unknown , Keith Harrison (Translator) , Helen Cooper

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The finest translation in and for our time'

(Kevin Crossley-Holland)

Sir Gawain and The Green Knight, with its intricate plot of enchantment and betrayal is probably the most skilfully told story in the whole of the English Arthurian cycle. Originating from the north-west midlands of England, it is based on two separate and very ancient Celtic motifs of the Beheading and the Exchange of Winnings, brought together by the anonymous 14th century poet. His telling comprehends a great variety of moods and modes - from the stark realism of the hunt-scenes to
the delicious and dangerous bedroom encounters between Lady Bercilak and Gawain, from moments of pure lyric beauty when he evokes the English countryside in all its seasons, to authorial asides that are full of irony and puckish humour. This new verse translation uses a modern alliterative pattern which
subtly echoes the music of the original at the same time as it strives for fidelity.
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Sir Gawain and The Green Knight Details

Date	:	Published September 11th 2008 by Oxford University Press (first published 1390)
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Author	:	Unknown , Keith Harrison (Translator) , Helen Cooper
Format	:	Kindle Edition 160 pages
Genre	:	Classics, Poetry, Fantasy, Fiction, Historical, Medieval, Mythology, Arthurian

From Reader Review Sir Gawain and The Green Knight for online ebook

Nikki says

"Note: you have also reviewed the following editions of this book:

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Paperback) (isbn)
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Paperback) (isbn 0140440925)
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Paperback) (isbn 0140424539)
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (isbn 0719055172)
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (isbn 0571223281)
Sir Gawain & the Green Knight (Paperback) (isbn 0030088801)
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Paperback) (isbn 1146360738)"

Oops.

Anyway, I reread Simon Armitage's translation in honour of getting a signed copy (I was going to go to his talk about his new book in Leeds, but I ended up being in Cardiff due to my grandfather's death, so we phoned up and Waterstones arranged for him to sign a copy of Sir Gawain for me, which isn't as good as getting to speak to him but is still pretty good).

For my money, though Simon Armitage's translation isn't the most *accurate* academic translation, it captures something that even Tolkien doesn't manage to grasp, despite the care he took translating the poem, and that I haven't seen anywhere else. I remember doing a course on this poem (in the Middle English), and we talked about the poem being playful, and in part mocking the court and Gawain (but with affection). I feel like Simon Armitage's translation brings out that aspect very well, without losing the sense of nobility and chivalry that the poem is so rightly known for.

It also barrels along at a tremendous pace, and reads a lot more like popular literature than Tolkien or Brian Stone's translations. You might not think that a good thing, of course, but I think it suits the story.

Jason Koivu says

Contains the greatest "OH FUCK" moment in medieval literature!

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight - listed here as written by Unknown, though I believe it may have been penned by that prolific Greek author Anonymous - is a classic tale from Arthurian legend in which the code of honor attributed to chivalry is heavily ensconced.

There are many interpretations of the poem's meaning, and historically speaking it's often dependent on the reader's bias. For instance, Christians latched on to the sex aspect and pagans saw a Green Man parallel. Me? I just see it as damn good fun, just as I'll wager the eagerly listening common folk heard it told by their smoky peat fires so many hundreds of years ago.

Sinem A. says

yazar? bilinmeyen 14. yydan kalma eser erdemli olmakla ilgili k?sa bir kahraman?n yolculu?u hikayesi. dili,kurgusu ve çevirisi gerçekten ba?ar?l?.

Mark Adderley says

It’s always puzzling to know what to do with a book subtitled “A New Verse Translation.” It’s all very well for the moment, of course, but what about in a few years? When the translation is no longer new, will it need a new title? I have similar reservations about terms like “postmodern.” What comes after it? Post-postmodern? And is modernism now called pre-postmodernism?

All of which doesn’t seem strictly relevant, except that I can’t help feeling that there’s something slightly self-conscious about Simon Armitage’s new verse translation of the Middle English masterpiece Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, which is somehow symbolized by the subtitle.

The other thing about the subtitle is that it is exactly the same as Seamus Heaney’s new verse translation of Beowulf, which, since it was published in 1999, isn’t really new any more. On the front cover of Armitage’s translation is a glowing review from Heaney, and in the Acknowledgements section, Armitage acknowledges Heaney himself and his translation as one of his inspirations. Inside the jacket-flap, another reviewer, this one anonymous (like both the Beowulf- and Gawain-poets, ironically) but writing for the Sunday Telegraph, enthuses about how both Armitage and, earlier, Heaney, have helped “to liberate Gawain [or, presumably, Beowulf:] from academia.” Like Heaney’s Beowulf, Armitage’s Gawain has a facing-page original text and translation; like Heaney’s Beowulf, Armitage’s Gawain has a black cover with a stylish armoured figure on it; like Heaney’s Beowulf, Armitage’s Gawain has ragged pages along the vertical edge, making is I suppose equally difficult to turn the page.

Heaney’s Beowulf was well known, among other things, for bringing the ancient poem right up-to-date—the new date, that is, not the eighth-century date at which the poem was composed. Thus, Heaney translated the poem’s famous opening word, “Hwæt!” as “So.” Further down the page, the Old English “þæt wæs god cyning!” became “That was one good king.” Such translations as these made many academics wonder about the advisability of providing “new verse translations” of medieval poems. But since, as the Sunday Telegraph’s reviewer enthusiastically proclaimed, the aim of both translations was to liberate the poems from academics, what they thought really didn’t matter. It didn’t matter that Faber and Faber in Britain, and W. W. Norton in America were turning not to translators with a knowledge of the Middle Ages for these translations, but to poets who had to learn the language as they went.

I’ll give you some examples from Armitage’s Gawain. Early in the poem, when the feast in Camelot, the Gawain-poet writes that the canopy over the royal dais “were enbrawded and beten wyth the best gemmes / That myght be preved of prys wyth penyes to bye / in daye” (78-80). This can be literally translated as “were embroidered and beaded with the best gems that could be proved of value to buy in that day.” The translation is rough and unpleasant, but it’s literal. Armitage translates that the tapestry was “studded with stones and stunning gems. / Pearls beyond pocket. Pearls beyond purchase.” Here’s it’s not specifically the translation that’s at issue. Armitage has translated into a style that is hip for the moment—the use of parallelism and

fragment—but which, for one, gives undue emphasis to a rather unimportant feature of the description and, for another, uses a poetic trick that pulls the reader out of the world of the poem and into the modern world. That was one good canopy.

Here's another example. When Gawain arms to face the Green Knight at the end of the poem, the poet describes his armour as "The gayest into Grece" (2023). Acknowledging that "into" might better be translated as "unto," we can see that the line is supposed to imply that Gawain's armour is the most splendid in Europe—in the known world, in fact. in the medieval imagination, Greece was the edge of the civilized world. It included Byzantium, the seat of the eastern Roman Empire, known for its stylized art, gold and blue, richness and wealth. The description places Gawain's armour in that oriental world, giving audiences a mental image of splendour, brightness, colour, vividness. Armitage writes that "no man shone more, it seemed / from here to ancient Greece." Armitage specifically limits the reader to thinking not of Byzantine art, but of the Greece of mythology. The original line held both implications. The translation directs us exclusively to one.

In all fairness, Armitage defends this practice in his introduction and, as we might expect, his argument is airtight. So would an argument be from the opposite perspective. That's the nature of argument. But I can't help wondering if there's something wrong with entrusting the translation of a masterpiece of medieval literature to someone whose expertise is modern poetry—Ted Hughes and the like. It's like entrusting brain surgery to a heart specialist. Sure, he knows enough anatomy to get away with it. But I'm not sure that "getting away with it" is really enough. I'd like to be imaginatively transported to the world of medieval romance, not of new verse translations.

It's also only fair to add that this is a highly readable translation. You speed through these pages, and time flies away from you. You've just met Arthur at Camelot, and before you know it, you're reading the concluding lines. Some lines are particularly beautiful, particularly the famous passage of the seasons, and one passage actually made me think about the poem in a different way. (It was the section detailing Camelot's craven assertion that it would be "Cleverer to have acted with caution and care" [line 677:]; that puts their eventual glib and joyous acceptance of Gawain's error into a wholly different perspective, for me.)

Ultimately, I think, we have to see a book like this not so much as a translation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, but as Simon Armitage's poem inspired by it. As such, it's a beautiful achievement—certainly as beautiful as Heaney's Beowulf—and will hopefully lure many readers to its source, the Middle English poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

RK-ïsme says

I first read this in 1975. I've read it several times since. The translation (Marie Borroff) is good. I am entirely taken in by the parallel structures in the story. Sir Gawain comes off as a wonderfully human character in a type of literature not known for well developed characters.

Eddie Watkins says

I'd been attracted to this poem for years and years, but somehow never read it; tiptoeing 'round it like a

gentleman too dignified to display his blood-gorged book lust. The title itself attracted me - the name Gawain and the idea of a Green Knight evoked plenty of mental imagery: greenery and silver clashings in fecund fairy tale landscapes. I also like the way Tolkien's name looks and sounds (evocative of tangled teeming forests clearly delineated) so I dipped into his version a while ago, but it seemed stiff and wooden, even opaque, or something, so I didn't pursue it. Then along came this version, translated by a fairly young English poet, Simon Armitage, with a back blurb by John Ashbery (a favorite poet of mine), so I gave it a whirl.

All of these old books should be translated by young poets. What freshness! What verve and bounce! I cantered right through it like a glossy horse over tight green turf. This is a remarkable poem; its literary sophistication tempered by rustic intemperence, striking imagery, bejeweled descriptions of gracile angelic maidens and boar hunting gore, and mysterious castles and the Woodwose (or Wodwo) the Wildman of the Woods. I'm sure scholars have taken issue with Armitage's obvious strayings from literal translation, but who cares! The point is to keep these old texts alive, and Armitage does that in sprightly spades. Instead of dead paper this book should've been printed on live leaves.

It's a fairly simple and well-known story, so I won't go into its details, but I must mention the overall chaste (yet pan-sexual) sexiness of it. Gawain is one of the great androgynous heroes in literature, but then the Middle Ages were filled with the likes of him - dandies with blood-smeared swords, lithe curvy athletes in bright body-hugging armor - and his mild, ambiguous undoing in the poem is his acceptance of a green silk girdle proffered to him by a temptress. The author momentarily lingers over his description of this silk garment worn beneath his shining armor, emphasizing the muscled curves. The girdle will protect him from harm; the harm being his accepting as part of a deal to be beheaded by the Green Knight (the Green Knight allowed Gawain to behead him at the beginning, before trotting off with his green head under his green arm). Mutual beheading? Green silken undergarment and a sword? There is some dense pan-sexual coding in that scene. But the sword merely knicks Gawain's extended neck, and he's allowed to return to Camelot lightly shamed, with a fast fading scar.

Richard Derus says

Rating: 5* of five

This is the book to get your poetry-resistant friend this #Booksgiving 2017. I read it on a dare. I don't like poetry very much, it's so snooty and at the same time so pit-sniffingly self-absorbed that I'd far rather stab my hands with a fork repeatedly than be condescended to in rhyming couplets.

This tale is fabulous in every sense of the word, which is no surprise since it's survived for so many centuries. But poet and translator Simon Armitage has made the old world new again. He sucked me right in and never let me come up for air with his gorgeous words and his carefully chosen words and his alliterative rhythmical phrases.

If the idea of a Norton Critical Edition is keeping you far away from this delightful read, rest assured it's not stodgy or dry or just plain boring. It's vibrant, alive, shimmering with an inner power, waiting for you to open its covers and fall utterly under its spell. Become happily ensorcelled, gentle reader, relax into the sure and strong embrace of a centuries-old knight and his spectacular tale.

Tanja (Tanychy) St. Delphi says

I didn't know where to post this so I think this is a good place!
It remains me of my Literature professor, in a good way of course! :)

Arthur Graham says

She gave him her 'girdle', did she? A little something to remember her by, hmmmm? Personally, I found it rather hard to believe that a hound dog like Gawain would pass up the opportunity, but I did ultimately enjoy this humorous tale of chivalry and self-imposed cockblockery. Green Knight rules!

Vivian says

Enchanting translation that made me love words again. The cadence and rhythm Armitage employed gave life to the modern English rather than direct translation. The Introduction laid out precisely what he would do and why he made the choice he did--to preserve the beauty of the poetry, both the alliterative Anglo-Saxon and the breakout stanzas of continental rhyming.

And I fell in love with language again. I found myself speaking aloud or mouthing them to feel the words tumbling out. For that joy, I am grateful again. As a selection for my Yuletide reading, I was most fortunate.

The tale itself is quite simple, but filled with so many tidbits. It is a heroic story as Sir Gawain is tested. The similarities between the Green Knight and the Green Man mythology was one of the most interesting to me. But, the amalgamation of Christianity and pagan beliefs is fascinating. I'm going to ignore the misogynistic aspects of Christianity and women as the downfall of man when it is clearly their own decisions at play or here specifically, at the behest of another-- Yes, please continue to abdicate personal responsibility. Thus, I found the judgment at the end interesting.

Sir Gawain got off lightly, and I concur with his interpretation of his actions over those of the Knights of the Round Table. The poem itself might be only a four star read, but how it made me feel bumps this to five stars, easily.

Jan-Maat says

An enjoyable translation:

> *Yes, he dozes in a daze, dreams and mutters*
> *like a mournful man with his mind on dark matters-*
> *how destiny might deal him a death-blow on the day*
> *when he grapples with the giant in the green chapel;*
> *of how the strike of the axe must be suffered without struggle.*
> *But sensing her presence there he surfaces from sleep,*

drags himself out of his dreams to address her.
Laughing warmly she walks towards him
and finds his face with the friendliest kiss.
In a worthy style he welcomes the woman
and seeing her so lovely and alluringly dressed,
every feature so faultless, her complexion so fine,
a passionate heat takes hold in his heart.
Speech tripped from their tongues and they traded smiles,
and a bond of friendship was forged there, all blissful
and bright.
They talk with tenderness
and pride, and yet their plight
is perilous unless
sweet Mary minds her knight.

William Langland's The Vision of Piers Plowman, Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales and the anonymous Sir Gawain and the Green Knight all come from the end of the thirteenth century, all written in distinctly different regional styles of English. Distinct is an understatement, in purely personal terms Chaucer I can enjoy, Langland is work to read and understand while I find the language of Gawaine incomprehensible. But there are translations.

Armitage in his translation sought to achieve a distinctive Northern flavour, despite being a Southerner this wasn't something that held me away from the text and if he hadn't mentioned it in his introduction I wouldn't have noticed or thought of this as requiring a particular effort or intention on his part. On reflection not paying homage to the Northern origin in the word choice seems a distinctly odd idea.

The poem is on the one hand written in a Christian context with a nod as above to the idea of Courtly love while on the other the mutual decapitation challenge (not to be tried at home) that the Green Knight and Sir Gawaine are engaged in reminds me a bit of the Mabinogion in which occasionally the loss of one's own head, while moderately inconvenient, is not necessarily fatal.

Then Gawain called as loudly as his lungs would allow,
'Who has power in this place to honour his pact?
Because good Gawain now walks on this ground. Whoever will meet him should emerge this moment and he needs to be fast - it's now or it's never.'
'Abide,' came a voice from above the bank.
'You'll cop what's coming to you quickly enough.'

Though above all this is a poem that has the taste of childhood about it, not because we enjoyed decapitating each other back down in Sarf London, but because the story of Sir Gwain's quest is interwoven with the memory of walking through the park to school on a foggy autumn morning when the fog was so thick that I could not even see the trees lining the pathway, lost in the wilderness wandering wildly in search of the green chapel with only my little feet to guide me to my destination.

Terry says

One of the best of the 'classic' Arthurian tales. Gawain is presented a bit differently here from many of the other ones. Usually he's a bit of a braggart and kind of a jerk, especially to women, but here he is presented as the perfect exemplar of courtoisie. He's also a bit young and still untried, so maybe that explains it for those who want to be able to have a grand unified theory of Arthuriana.

Anyway, you probably all know the story: Arthur is about to have a New Year's feast, but according to tradition is waiting for some marvel to occur. Right on cue in trots the Green Knight on his horse, a giant of a man who proceeds to trash the reputation of the entire court and dare someone to cut off his head as long as he gets to return the favour. No one makes a move and Arthur decides he better do something about this until Gawain steps up and asks to take on this quest himself. Everyone agrees and Gawain proceeds to smite the green head from the Knight's body. Everyone is fairly pleased with the result until the Green Knight gets up, picks up his smiling head, and says: "See you next year, G. Don't forget that it's my turn then." (I paraphrase, the middle english of the poet is far superior.) Needless to say everyone is a bit nonplussed by this.

The year passes and Gawain doesn't seem to do much of anything until he finally decides it's time to get out and find this green fellow and fulfill his obligation...hopefully something will come up along the way to improve his prospects. What follows is a journey to the borders of the Otherworld as well as a detailed primer on just how one ought to act in order to follow the dictates of courtliness. Gawain ends up being the guest of Sir Bertilak, a generous knight who says that the Green Chapel, the destination of Gawain's quest, is close by and Gawain should stay with them for the duration of the holidays. We are treated to some coy (and mostly chaste) loveplay on the part of Bertilak's wife from which Gawain mostly manages to extricate himself without contravening the dictates of politeness, as well as the details of a medieval deer, boar and fox hunt with nary a point missing.

In the end Gawain goes to the chapel and finds that his erstwhile host Bertilak was in fact the Green Knight. Gawain submits himself and is left, after three swings, with only a scratch as a reward for his courteous behaviour in Bertilak's castle. Despite the apparent success of Gawain, he views the adventure as a failure since he did not come off completely unscathed and he wears a girdle he was gifted by Bertilak's wife as a mark of shame to remind himself of this. Harsh much?

The language of the Gawain poet's middle english is beautiful and I highly recommend reading it in the original with a good translation at hand to catch the nuances of meaning. The poem is replete with an almost dreamlike quality that is made real by all of the exquisite details of medieval life that are interspersed throughout the text. This is a great book to read at Christmas time.

Aubrey says

[Morgan la Fay (hide spoiler)]

Morgan says

Are you looking for a quick, but violent, Christmas/New Year's poem? How about a poem set during Camelot with witches and heroic fantasy? Maybe something along the lines of Christian Romance? Or simply a good timeless poem?

After a quick reread I still love this poem. This isn't the original translation or edition I read, but it felt the same...maybe a little more modern with the language. I'd forgotten how detailed this was and how violent. I remembered some of the plot, but forgot about all head-chopping and the sexy women. I remember my teacher in college wondered if this was possibly written by a woman because of the description of the clothing, I still wonder that myself, but the parts with the violence I'm not so sure about.

This is a Christmas/New Year's read though. It might be a little underrated as something you would read during the season, but it is all about Christianity during the time it was written. It might be propaganda at times, but I liked the allegories and the Christian imagery. I liked the disruptions of the green chapels.

If you want to read this poem, I recommended this version or one that you can easily read. The original and non-translated version is in Middle English, which isn't easy. Reading Middle English after college is work rather than reading something for fun or to refresh your memory. Can't say this about other versions, but Bernard O'Donoghue makes Sir Gawain and the Green Knight accessible for people who want to read this with ease.

Jan-Maat says

The season if not of *mellow fruitfulness* than of frost and fog brings this back to me with the childhood memory of going to school in a proper pea souper, every familiar landmark lost only the tarmac footpath remained solid beneath my childish feet, occasionally a hut would burst out of the milkiness to demonstrate that I was making progress. My little quest however did not take a year and a day, as all self respecting quests must.

Alas the language is beyond me, I am comfortable with Chaucer (though I suspect that's just the false friends fooling me), and I found Langland, with concentration, manageable, but dialect of English, roughly contemporary to the other two a bit too much, maybe if I knew some Norse or Danish, or had been born and raised in that country where it had been written rather than close to the dark waters of the Thames I would find it easier. But this edition does have a fine cover illustration which takes you to the heart of the matter.

If you don't know it all, then it is a medieval English poem dealing with a knight of King Arthur's court, who gets into a beheading game with a wandering Green knight (view spoiler) and in order to take his turn at being beheaded Sir Gawain must first find the aforementioned Green knight, so the entire story in lost in the fog - mysterious antagonist cannot be found, playing a game of which you don't know all the rules, mysterious temptations (as illustrated by the front cover), is the hero going to die, what does it all mean. Lost in the fog, wandering, but you reach the destination all the same.

I thoroughly enjoyed the Simon Armitage translation if the gentle reader is curious enough.
