Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is, scholars assure us, an English poem. But to the nonspecialist it is "English" only in a technical sense. Its language and form put it beyond the reach even of readers who can make their way through Chaucer, who was a near contemporary of the anonymous Gawain poet.

John Ridland gives us a recognizably English Gawain, and a very pleasurable one at that. The language is ours. It is slightly elevated, as befits a work so finely crafted, but only enough to demand our attention. Better yet, the verse is recognizably English as well. Originally written in the same alliterative verse technique/tradition as *Beowulf, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was archaic in its own day; now, over six-hundred years later, alliterative verse can be as inaccessible as the pentatonic harp tunes that apparently accompanied it. Ridland gives the poem a long, loose-iambic line that sings in the lyrical passages, creeps in the spooky ones, and cavorts in the comic ones. Suddenly a poem that lay out of the main channel of English literature comes to us full sail, part of the armada that includes Marlowe, Shakespeare, Milton—even Ogden Nash.

—Richard Wakefield, author of *A Vertical Mile*

With his loving rendition of a great classic into vigorous metrical lines, John Ridland has given *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* a fresh lease on life. I've seen several other versions of this masterpiece, but none so engagingly readable as Ridland's. His preface, too, is useful and illuminating. Here is a book to enjoy right now and to cherish forever.

—X.J. Kennedy, author of *Fits of Concision: Collected Poems of Six or Fewer Lines*

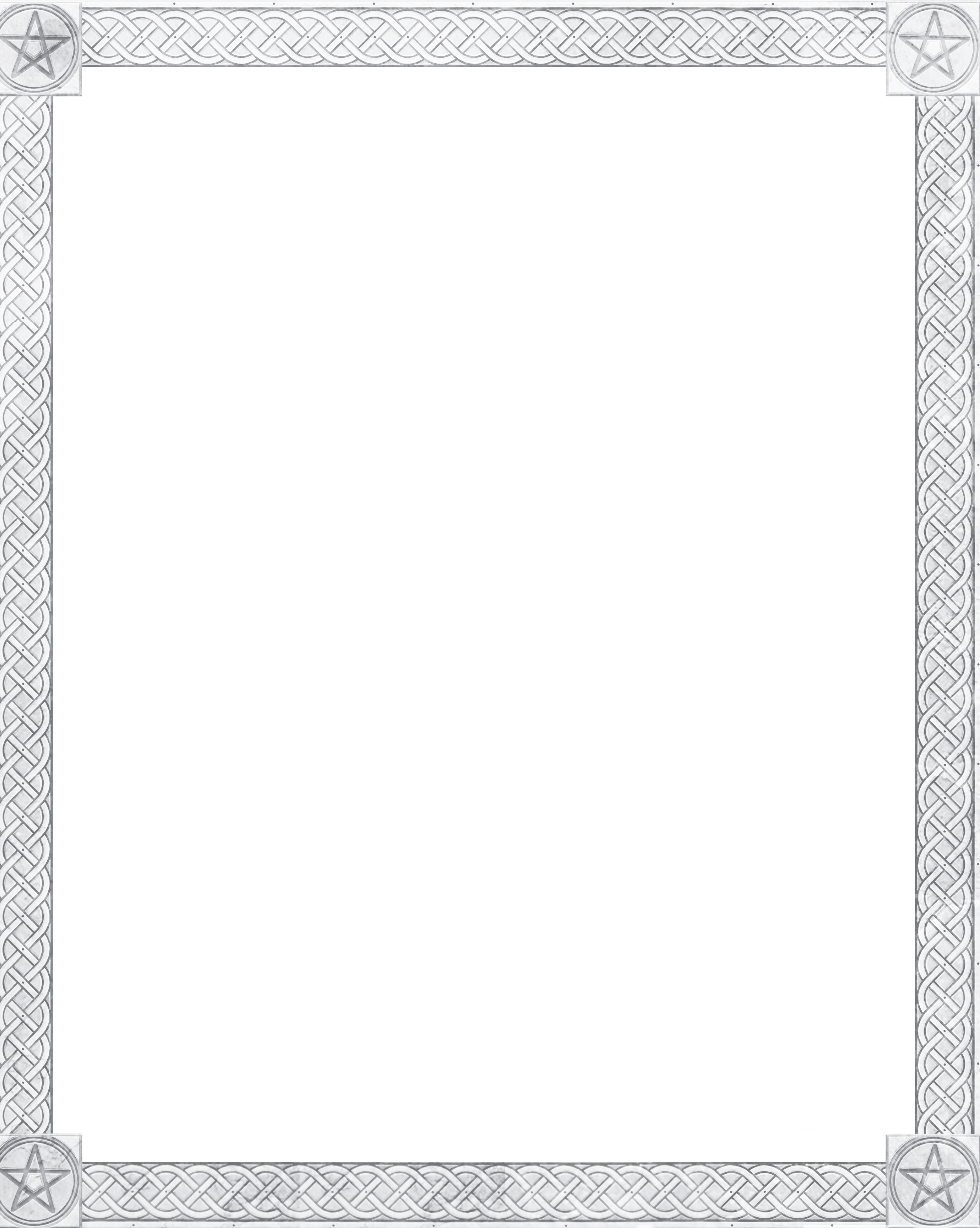
A confession: when I first sat down to read an earlier version of this manuscript, I prepared myself for what I associate with Medieval literature not by Geoffrey Chaucer—the verbal equivalent of delicate, varicolored millefleurs in charmed distorted landscapes inhabited by strange beings; magic that defies reason and logic but satisfies the desire for miracles; happy endings that have nothing to do with real human experience. And yes, all of that is here, along with the proofs—both violent and courtly—of the courage, faith, grace and nobility valued by that age. But then I found so much more than I expected, so much that surprised and delighted me by being sophisticated, worldly and intellectually challenging!

There is, for example, a detailed, fairly brutal depiction of hunting as it must have been, complete with the behavior of dogs, hunters and prey, deaths and butchering; there is the parallel depiction of an attempted seduction—a "hunt" for love—by a woman who, initially reminiscent of Potiphar's wife, turns out to be a very different creature; there is the temptation of a virtuous man, not, as in the story of Job, by Satan, but by a wise and ancient "goddess" (yes, in this Christian text!) revealed to be a relative of the tempted man, and a magician to boot; there is a token that is at once a lady's love gift, a proof of our longing for life, a badge of sin and a symbol of honor.

This is, in other words, a book that assumes, subverts and laughs slyly at the innocence we expect in Medieval lore. It upholds, instead, a realistic appraisal of the human being as he navigates the challenges of real life: surviving, behaving himself as well as he can, not doing any more injury than he can help, not claiming any more admiration from others than he deserves, or pretending to more strength—physical or moral—than he can put into practice.

The language in which the consummate poet and translator John Ridland serves up this delicious story in verse is exactly what it deserves. The descriptions are exuberant, the narrative flows and exhilarates like the wine at the courts we're asked to imagine, and the exchanges between complex characters so subtly flavored by intelligent diplomacy that it makes the dialogue of much current fiction seem, by contrast, like a six-pack on the front stoop. Read this book. I can't promise that you will find in it exactly what I have found, because I suspect that, like all enchantments, it shifts and assumes different forms to different eyes. But I do guarantee surprises, and inexhaustible delight.

—Rhina P. Espaillat



A NEW VERSE TRANSLATION IN MODERN ENGLISH
WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY

John Ridland

WITH A FOREWORD BY

Maryann Corbett

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The entire poem was printed by Juan Pascoe at Taller Martín Pescador in Tacámbaro, Michoacán, Mexico, on a cast-iron nineteenth century handpress in an edition of two hundred copies. The wording of a good many lines in that edition has been slightly revised for the present one.

After I had translated the whole poem, I fell in with the late Mary Vezey, editor of a little magazine, *Sticks,* who scrutinized every line of the Middle English and insisted that my version cover every word of it (as several recent translations have failed to do). It is a lasting regret that she died before seeing Juan Pascoe's presentation of the work to which she had contributed so much.

Many others assisted me in reaching this final version of my translation: my old friend Russ Ferrell; the late Charles Muscatine of the University of California, Berkeley; Peg and Chris Lauer; the late Barry Spacks; Carol Pasternak; Kay Young; Carl Gutierrez-Jones; Randy Schiff; Francelia Clark; Stan Morner; Charles Martin; Tim Murphy; Richard Wakefield; and I am sure there are others, to whom I apologize for not naming. My greatest debt is to my wife Muriel whom I married while we were fellow students of Gawain under Professor Muscatine at Berkeley.

INTRODUCTION

I've been in love with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for fifty years, after first reading the original poem as a graduate student in English at the University of California in Berkeley. More to the point, a year later I first had the chance to teach it, largely in paraphrase, to undergraduates at Los Angeles State College—as I did again at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in the 1970s. Always I kept hoping I could find my way to transposing the whole poem into Modern English someday. That day finally came in 2003, the summer before I retired from UCSB. From 2005 until her untimely death in 2009, I became extremely indebted to the assistance of Mary Veazey, editor of *Sticks,* a quirky little magazine out of Maplesville, Alabama, as far from Los Angeles or New York as the unknown Northern Midlands court where the poem was first presented was from London. Mary's spirit of relentless accuracy has stayed with me during my final revisions.

Why does *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* demand to be translated when his contemporary Chaucer doesn't? Today, as in 1960, I believe that very few non-graduate students dare to venture into the thickets of the poem's Northern West Midlands dialect of Middle English. Even the accessibility of Chaucer's Southern dialect suffered, thanks to the Great Vowel Shift of the Fifteenth Century, when our vowels stopped sounding like those of present-day European languages. Chaucer's versification suffered even more from the loss of the final unaccented *e* on many words, eliminating enough syllables to make his meter unscannable and almost unreadable. To correct this flaw, as he saw it, Alexander Pope, three centuries after Chaucer's time and the same number before ours, translated Chaucer into proper Modern English verse. Chaucer's London dialect proved fittest to survive the struggle to create Modern English, pushing aside the Northern Midlands speech of the unknown author of *Sir Gawain* (whose anonymity is simply another indignity). Bad luck for the Unknown Poet and his dialect, but against that, we should set his extraordinary good luck in the poem's having survived at all, since it exists in a single scribal manuscript, leather bound in a small volume with three other poems of similar length and probably, scholars agree, written by the same

author. Against that, there are nearly a hundred manuscript copies of *The Canterbury Tales,* not even counting their first printed publication by William Thynne in 1532. The *Gawain* manuscript was tucked away in the private library of Sir Robert Cotton, which caught fire in the early eighteenth century, not harming this particular book, fortunately, although it was not read and edited by anyone until the early nineteenth century. It could not be widely read in Modern English until Jessie Weston's 1898 prose translation.

Despite its obscure dialect, however, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* so clearly belongs on the shelf of Essential Medieval English Literature that numerous translators have tried to "carry it across" (the root meaning of *trans-late*) into Modern English. I have consulted more than a dozen translations while making my own. My version differs from most others in two ways: first, I am determined to maintain the meanings of as many of the original words as possible while bringing them across from Middle English, without forcing a modern cognate word out of its common usage. This makes my lines longer than others in total word count, though the line contents and numbering are the same as the original. And second, I believe this is the only translation written in a familiar modern meter.

This is a controversial claim. Brian Stone (1959), T.H. Banks (1962), Marie Boroff (1967), Burton Raffel (1970), J.R.R. Tolkien (1975), William Vantuono (1999), Simon Armitage (2006), Bernard O'Donoghue (2007), and quite a few others, all have done battle with alliterative strong-stress verse. This meter, which was native in Old English, had been invaded and transformed, three centuries before the *Gawain* poet's time, by French accentual-syllabic measures. The extent of the conversion is evident in Chaucer's practice and in his famous put-down of the *rum-ram-ruf* alliterative verse that some of his contemporaries were writing (particularly William Langland in the popular *Piers Plowman).* Whether they were *still* writing it in the fourteenth century, or *reviving* it, seems to be a scholarly argument which I'll have to watch from the sidelines, but since Langland and the *Gawain* poet are sometimes included as part of an Alliterative Revival, these twentieth and twenty-first century translators have been striving to *revive* a *revival.* Alliterative accentual verse has not remained a major poetic tradition outside of the translation of Old or Middle English poems, except for the occasional tours de force by W.H. Auden or Richard Wilbur, and others, of whom in her foreword, Corbett mentions Anthony Hecht, Lewis Turco, Joshua Mehigan and herself.

Today's readers therefore have to be taught how to read it aloud: put extra emphasis on the stressed syllables that begin with the same sound, and some others that don't alliterate, and take a pause in the middle of the line. It's as if an American football team suddenly had to play by the rules of soccer (no hands!) or of rugby (no forward passes!). Alliterative accentual verse in Modern English is, for a modern reader, forced, pedantic, or pedagogic—none of

which is fun. And the original *Gawain and the Green Knight* (a title supplied by editors, not by the manuscript) is as much fun to read as anything in Chaucer.

One solution to this difficulty is to translate the poem into prose, like Neilson and Webster in 1916, or Gordon Hall Gerould in 1929, or free verse, like W.S. Merwin in 2002, but this choice loses the momentum with which regular meter can sweep a reader of long poems along. Such readers must be at heart *listeners.* Poems were read aloud in the fourteenth century, as they were five hundred years before in the time of *Beowulf.* There's a small contemporary painting of Chaucer reading from a lectern to a "noble audience" in London, and scholars suppose the *Gawain* poet must have done the same in his provincial court. Another solution to the problem of making it go in verse, which no one else has attempted recently, is to adopt a familiar accentual-syllabic meter, such as what Frost called "loose iambics"—mostly iambic feet, with a good number of anapests. Mine is perhaps closer to "loose anapestics" with a good sprinkling of iambs, but who's counting? I didn't scan or classify my meter while writing, but Corbett in her foreword and an article online[1] found it a generally satisfying solution.

Since this sort of meter has been familiar for centuries, it doesn't need to have its rules explained. In the long-lined strophes I aim for seven accents to the line, which could therefore be heard as a one-line merger of the first two lines of the traditional ballad quatrain, where four beats are followed by three. This stanza is heard in songs from nursery rhymes on up to "Sir Patrick Spens" and beyond. With such a familiar verse form, the varied natural stress levels of speech accommodate the metrical pattern of unaccented and accented syllables, and when the lines of this translation are read as normal speech by a native speaker of English, I believe the meter will assert itself. Variations in speech stress (and pitch and juncture and all the other elements of language) contribute variety to the steady accentual beats of the meter, while the regularity of that meter imposes a higher degree of order on the speech stresses:

Soon they gave tongue and the search was on along one side of the marsh

I would scan this line as "loose iambics," with four iambs, two anapests, and an initial trochee:

/ x |x / |x x / |x /|x / |x / |x x /
Soon they gave tongue and the search was on along one side of the marsh,
trochee iamb anapest iamb iamb iamb anapest

1 http://www.barefootmuse.com/archives/issue9/corbett.htm

There is a barely noticeable pause after the fourth foot—a caesura but a light one, a surface scratch not a deep cut. Following the fourth beat, such a pause threatens to turn my measure back into ballad meter, and with rhymes on the end, these lines would lapse into the cumbersome "Fourteeners" (seven iambic feet without variation) of the mid-sixteenth century. That's why I kept end rhymes off the long lines, and even not rhyming I had to work hard to avoid the inevitable singsong characteristic of this form:

> Soon they gave tongue and the search was on
>   Along one side of the vale,
> The huntsmen urging on those hounds
>   That had first picked up the trail.

Formatted like this the rhythm would break into awkward short measures, rousing the anticipation of end rhyme every two lines: the 2530 lines of the original poem would become a ballad of about 5000 lines—an English language record, perhaps, but not an enviable one; and they would have to break into quatrains, further stultifying the movement of the whole poem. Laid out as two unrhymed lines instead of four, however, the pause seems fainter, and the line ends are not tagged as hard as they would be with rhymes:

> Soon they gave tongue and the search was on along one side of the marsh,
> The huntsmen urging on those hounds that had first picked up the trail.

The poet almost always end-stops his lines: on a very few occasions when he doesn't, you take notice. And seldom do the lines pair off into what would be quatrains in regular ballad meter. The poet is a master of long sentences.

Unlike modern translators who commit themselves to reviving the alliterative-accentual tradition, thus requiring a specified number and placement of alliterating syllables per line, I have ladled on the alliteration ad lib as an ornament—and the style of the original is as lavishly ornamented as an illuminated manuscript, as Corbett notes independently. At some point early on I realized I was dealing out alliterations in a sort of poetic poker game: three *s*'s in the first line above beat a pair of *h*'s in the second line, the latter a "weak" hand, but better than not even a pair, like quite a few of my lines, though internal rhyming may strengthen some. When I noticed this dancingly alliterative line in the third long strophe of the story (after the two-strophe historical backstory), I realized the potential of this analogy:

> A delightful din all down the day, and dancing all the night

(*Five d's!)* It was a game that helped keep me drawing from the deck of the thesaurus and the dictionary for fresh alliterations. Ad hoc or random alliteration could emulate the sound effects of the original without imitating the exact pattern, deceiving some readers into thinking I was in fact composing in accentual alliterative verse.

The original manuscript set ornamented initial letters at four places, tacitly dividing the poem into Parts that scholars have called "Fits" (a medieval term which I have not used here), and these are as artfully placed as Dickens's novels' installment endings: I'll leave the reader to test that point. Within those Parts, a pattern is set of each long stanza or strophe forming a distinct unit, which is broken only once, quite startlingly. During Part III, while the lord of the castle is out hunting animals and his wife is back home in the castle hunting Gawain, the action cuts back and forth from scene to scene with remarkably cinematic skill, as if a film script specified "EXTERIOR. DAY. FOREST SCENE.—INTERIOR. MORNING LIGHT THROUGH BEDROOM WINDOWS." Sometimes the scenes are separated among strophes, but at other times they are merged, cutting from one to the other even in mid-sentence.

At the end of each strophe comes what is called the "bob and wheel" stanza, which really *is* a stanza, in that it is always five lines long, rhyming *ababa,* and often including some alliteration, which the poet's habitual practice can't help slipping in. The first line "bob" contains a single iambic foot, the four lines of the "wheel" each have three. In doing this, the poet shows himself adept at the newer style brought over from France as well as the older Germanic meter, and shows us he can use them both in a single poem—it's a unique metrical performance as far as I know. Some critics have found these little stanzas extraneous, simply summarizing what has been, or is soon to be, told. I do not agree at all; for example in line 147, when the huge, "awe-inspiring" man rushes into the Christmas festivities at Camelot, for eleven lines his bulk and handsomeness are carefully described. The most unusual detail, however, which surely anyone would notice first, and which is keyed in the poem's title, is withheld until the very last word of the bob-and-wheel (italics mine):

> Men marveled at the hue
> That stained him with its sheen;
> Charging into their view,
> He was—face and all—*bright green!*

(These little stanzas, by the way, since I was determined to keep them rhyming, even slantingly, took sometimes as long to translate as their whole strophe.)

So, beyond all the twists and turns of the story and the lustrous descriptive details, can we say what the whole poem is "about"? The original audience must have been taken by Gawain's exemplification of the virtues of a Christian courtly knight, while noticing that since he was only human, he could fall short of perfection—an encouragement to ordinary sinners. That is all very Medieval and properly so. But for modern non-Medievalists? I think it's largely about keeping cool—about *playing* it cool, even—when things heat up: keeping a cool head in order to literally *keep* your head.

Like all masterpieces, the poem makes us aware of many particulars we may not have considered before. For example, against my expectations, I found the hunting and butchering scenes quite as fascinating and as delicately described as the bedroom ones. I knew enough about the latter to imagine and appreciate them, but never having been a hunter, I had a lot to learn about the former: there are important differences between Red Deer, which are "harts" and "hinds," and Fallow Deer, which are "bucks" and "does." And "fallow" has nothing to do with an unplowed field, but derives from the Old English *fealu* for "yellow." In the end, I thought, if I were starving in the woods, I could butcher a deer by following the step-by-step instructions in the poem. These graphic details may distress modern readers with vegetarian leanings. But those hunters didn't, to quote W.S. Merwin, "maul and murder living creatures" for sport. The huge heap ("quarry") of venison is divided up for each member of the hunting party to take home his share: in that culture and climate, where nothing grows in winter, the men had to be hunters, and this was *food* to keep them and their families alive.

How the hunting scenes are played against the bedroom ones has been much debated—what human qualities each animal represents and how each chase lines up with Gawain's actions. I think the specific reality of the narrative is too dense for this to be of much immediate concern to the reader or listener. I believe we are being invited to keep our eyes on what the "camera" shows and our ears on the sounds the microphones pick up. One thing that strikes me is how well the poet knows both the man's world of hunting and the woman's world of the bedroom and hall, and how the poem lets us live equally in each. Both sets of action have moral and even spiritual implications that are not dismissible as "typically Medieval" but provide something for "typical" Modernists—or Post-Modernists—to ponder. The conflict between Gawain's natural instinct to survive and his religious and courtly principles is just as relevant in today's world of religious, moral, and patriotic confusions.

Some Technical Details

1. The syllables of the name *Gawain* (I have ignored the occasional manuscript spelling *Wawain)* are so nearly equally stressed that I have sometimes used it as a natural iamb rather than a trochee.

2. The poem's verbs are constantly switching from past tense to the historical present. Sometimes I think the shift from past to present worked like a sudden zoom to closeup in a movie, but I have been persuaded by several readers that this is too confusing in Modern English and so have stuck to the past tenses consistently.

3. To have provided the Middle English text on verso pages would require a professionally qualified specialist to resolve the scores of cruxes that the manuscript presents, as Andrews and Waldron note in their comprehensive edition of the *Poems of the Pearl Manuscript* (2002). The Internet can provide acceptable versions of the original text. My purpose has been to make a modern poem that is as true to the meanings as to the spirit of that original, and therefore to be readable without the Middle English facing it.

John Ridland
Santa Barbara, California

FOREWORD

HAVING READ JOHN RIDLAND'S TRANSLATION with pleasure part by part, as the parts appeared in magazines, I am delighted to see it and read it whole at last. Like Ridland, I fell in love early with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.* The poem has been bowling readers over in just this way ever since its discovery in Sir Robert Cotton's collection, and its later presentation to the world in print in 1824. Technically brilliant, narratively gripping, and visually gorgeous, it has everything a reader could want, and it needs only to be made accessible in modern English.

The poem's pull on me, as on many other readers, depended not only on its story, a romance in the Arthurian tradition, but also on its intricate metrical and alliterative pattern. A small sample of the meter appears below. The poem uses a four-stress line, divided by a caesura, with at least two of the stresses and as many as four alliterating with one another. Each strophe of these lines is wrapped up with a four-line "wheel" (of a five-line "bob and wheel") in rhymed trimeter. As I've written elsewhere, in the essay that Ridland refers to in his introduction, I was a little slow to believe that modern readers have trouble with the four-stress alliterative line, or that the poem needs to be translated in something other than its original meter.

The reason it does need to be translated, for everyone who is not a specialist in Middle English, is laid out in the introduction. The question is how the poem's sounds should be handled in translation, since sound is such a huge element of the poem's artistry. Is the seven-foot line—called variously heptameter or ballad meter or fourteeners—an appropriate tool for balancing concern for the poem's sounds with care for its meaning? When I first met the idea, I needed convincing. Happily, I have been convinced by the work you see here.

The essence of the *Gawain* poet's method is extravagance. Extravagance, as Robert Frost has said in a lecture[2], is a legitimate feature of poetry, and this poem's original surface is a fireworks display of rhythmic and sonic effects. But all that dazzle can leave a translator

2 Frost, R. (1962). "On Extravagance: A Talk." In *Robert Frost. Collected Poems, Prose and Plays,* eds. R. Poirier and M. Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1995, pp. 739–740

cross-eyed. One difficulty is that many of the alliterating words of the poet's Northwest Midland dialect have no direct survivals in contemporary English. We can see a little of this in the sample passage below. Tulk, for example, translated "man" or "fighting man" or "soldier," has no modern equivalent that starts with t. Neither does trammes, meaning "devices" or "stratagems." To stick with the pattern of alliteration and stress, one must come up with approximations, words that may hit the right sound but only sidle up to the original meaning. All translation risks this loss, but strict form sharpens the risk.

The second difficulty is the way the modern reader expects to hear a four-stress line. The modern poets who sometimes use it (Auden, Wilbur, Hecht, Lewis Turco, and more recently Joshua Mehigan and I) tend to stick to lines of eight to ten syllables, like this one from Wilbur's "Lilacs":

> These laden lilacs   at the lawn's end

To show how hard it is to fit the *Gawain* poet's lines into that space, I present the opening lines of the Middle English with their spelling modernized, their alliterating and stressed syllables marked with boldface type, and their syllables counted:

> Sithen the **sege** and the as**saut** watz **ses**ed at **Troye**, (15 syllables)
> The borgh **brit**tened and **brent** to **brond**ez and **ask**ez, (13)
> The **tulk** þat the **tram**mes of **tres**oun ther **wroght** (11)
> Watz **tried** for his **trich**erie, the **trew**est on **erthe**: (15)
> Hit watz **En**nias the **ath**el, and his **high**e **kynd**e, (14)
> That sithen **deprec**ed **prou**inces, and **pat**rounes bi**come** (16)
> **Wel**neghe of al the **wel**e in the **west iles**. (13)

To boil those long lines down to modern accentual tetrameter, a translator has to decide, over and over, which words to jettison. This means even further loss of meaning.

Ridland's great insight is that heptameter is roomy and unconstricted, as well as being satisfying to the modern ear. The alliteration is not lost; the heptameter allows the alliterating words to fall naturally within the line. Most importantly, it gives the translator enough space to accommodate all the words in even the longest, most syllable-packed lines of the original.

And there are very important reasons to preserve as much of the poem's substance as possible. One reason is that we know nothing, apart from *Gawain* and the other poems in the same manuscript, about the poem's author, his background, his milieu, and his reasons for writing. Only the poems tell us about the poet. To dig deeply into the poem, we want

answers to questions like these: Is this very court-centered poem connected with royal patronage? If so, was the author connected to Richard II, he of the very aristocratic, free-spending, and unwarlike ways? Does the reference to Arthur as childgered (which might be translated "childish" or "childlike" or "boyish" or "youthful") relate to the very young accession of Richard, and to criticisms of his policies? Is there some insinuation in the fact that Gawain, who comes from the royal court, fails a test of courtliness that his provincial hosts are judging? Nearly every fact of the author's life that we might care about is lost to history and unavailable as a way to illuminate the poem. So all the meaning we have, we need to hang onto.

If you've come to this very accessible rendering for pure entertainment, you might not be interested in those historical questions. But there's another important reason to give the reader all the words there are: the poet's extravagance of descriptive detail. The *Gawain* poet is, in Burton Raffel's phrase, incomparably visual, and his descriptions are pleasurable in the same way as the exquisite miniatures of the Duc de Berry's manuscript book of hours, *Les Très Riches Heures*. Panoramas of banqueting and hunting, closely observed rituals of dressing, arming, and game preparation, and rich descriptions of landscape and weather—Ridland's translation presents these in all their delightful, over-the-top particularity.

Ridland also meets the challenge of the poem's traditional formulas and repeating epithets. Modern audiences look to poets for originality and surprise, but medieval audiences valued and expected these repetitions, especially in a romance. The present translation strikes a pleasing balance between tradition and freshness.

The result is that a contemporary reader can experience the same sort of pleasures that the poet wanted to provide for the audience he had in mind. That was almost certainly a listening audience. It may have been a courtly audience of the poet's peers, or it may have been a less august company but still a company that shared the old values of courtliness, knighthood, and romance—values that were beginning to be seen as stuffy and old fashioned but that were still alive. What the poet's audience wanted was delight: delight of the ear and of the eye, and also of the seductions of a good story, in which many story lines interweave and still untangle themselves at the end—satisfyingly, but with a hint of ambiguity. This is the experience that gives the poem the pull it had on its first audiences, and still has on new generations of readers. I invite you to imagine yourself in a tapestry-hung great hall, among those medieval hearers. John Ridland's translation has made it easy to do that.

Maryann Corbett
Saint Paul, Minnesota

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Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

PART I | CHRISTMAS AT CAMELOT

After the siege and the assault had been exhausted at Troy,
And the city had been broken to bits, and burnt to brands and ashes,
The man that wrought that tragedy, by means of his treasonous works,
Was brought to trial for treachery, truly the worst in the world.
It was Aeneas the nobleman and his high-and-mighty kin,
Who later oppressed many provinces, becoming overlords
Of well-nigh all the wealth in the islands that lie away to the West.
After that, Romulus, rich in rank, rushed swiftly off to Rome.
He was the first with pomp and pride to build that city up,
10 And he named it from his own name, which now the place still bears;
Tuscius turned to Tuscany, setting up dwellings to start with;
Longbeard in Lombardy lifted up houses;
And far across the French Channel, by a man named Felix Brutus,
On many broad and sloping banks our Britain happily was
Created;
To war, and woe, and wonder,
By turns we have been fated;
And here both bliss and blunder
Have flourished or abated.
20 And after Britain had been founded by this noble lord,
Bold men were bred up in it, who craved the clash of combat;
Time after time, as the years turned, they stirred up many troubles.

And more amazing, marvelous things have come to pass in this country
Than in any other land I know of, since that ancient time.
But of all the kings that ever built in Britain, ruling here,
King Arthur was the noblest one, as I have always heard.
And therefore I intend to present an adventure, a true tale,
Which some of those among you may think more like a miracle,
An extraordinary adventure among the Arthurian wonders.
30 If you will listen to this tale, just for a little while,
I shall tell it to you right away, as I heard it in the court
Being told—
Here written down in ink,
A story strong and bold,
Its letters truly linked
In our Britain as of old.

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King Arthur's court lay at Camelot as Christmastime was coming,
Attended by many gracious lords, and the worthiest of knights—
All the courtly brotherhood of the world-renowned Round Table—
40 With costly revelry carried on, and carefree entertainments.
At times they conducted tournaments where many men would tilt,
Jousting there most joyously, these knights of gentle birth,
And afterwards rode back to court to sing and dance their carols;
For there the festivities went on full strength for fifteen days,
With all the meals and merriment that anyone could devise.
Such clamorous and gleeful noise was glorious to hear,
A delightful din all down the day, and dancing through the night,
To the heights of happiness everywhere in the halls and in the chambers
For those great lords and their grand ladies, whatever they liked best.

50 Indeed, with all the delight in the world, they were dwelling there together,
The most noted knights that ever served, save for Christ himself,
And the very loveliest ladies that ever lived on earth,
And their king the handsomest ruler who ever had held court,
For all these fair folk in that hall were in the flush that youth
Can give,
Since Heaven had blessed them most—
Their king superlative
In mind and will, his host
The hardiest troops alive.

60 While the New Year still was so very young it had only just come in,
The court was served double helpings on the daises that day.
From the moment the king had entered the hall in the company of his knights,
After Mass had been celebrated by all with chanting in the chapel,
Loud cries were being cast aloft, by clerics and by others.
"Noël!" they shouted out anew, naming it over and over,
And next the noble men ran out and passed their presents around,
Crying loudly, "New Year's gifts!" and "Guess which hand it's in!"
Busily bantering back and forth about the presents they gave.
Ladies laughed out loud in sport even when they were losers,
70 And he who won would not be sorry, you may be sure of that.
They kept on making all this mirth until it was time to feast.
Then, after they had washed their hands, they went to their seats in order,
The best-born always seated above, as it seemed proper to do.
Queen Guenevere, the fairest of all, was set in their very midst,
Taking her place on the high dais, with hangings all about:
Fine silk draperies on the walls, and a canopy overhead
Of excellent tapestry from Toulouse, and cloths from Turkestan,
Embroidered, and among the threads the finest gems were set
That could be purchased in those days, indeed at any price,

80 With many pence.
Breathtaking to behold,
With bright gray eyes she glanced;
A lovelier gem, we're told,
Never held men entranced.
But Arthur would not eat his meal until all the rest had been served,
So boisterous in his youthfulness, he was even somewhat boyish.
He liked his life to lie lightly on him, and two things he disliked:
Either to lie in bed too late, or to sit still too long,
Since his young blood and restless mind kept him busy all the time.
90 And also another inclination had lately become his custom:
For he in his high majesty declared he would not eat
On such a festive holiday before he had been told
A weird and wonderful account of some adventurous thing,
Of some amazing marvel that he might believe to be true,
About his ancestors and their arms, or other adventurers;
Or until some true knight sought from him a man of a similar sort
To join with in a jousting match, to lay themselves at risk,
A life for a life in jeopardy, the one against the other,
Allowing Fortune to favor one, to give that man the edge.
100 This was the custom for the king, when he was holding court,
At each and every splendid feast among his noble people
In the hall.
Proud in both face and figure,
He ruled them, standing tall
In the New Year, full of vigor,
Making merry with them all.
So there he stood, the spirited king, steadfast and masterful,
Chatting of gracious courtly trifles in front of the high table.
There good Sir Gawain was given a seat beside Queen Guenevere,

110 And Agravain of the Hard Hand sat on his other side,
Both of them sons of the king's sister, his nephews, and trusted knights.
At their table Bishop Baldwin sat, in the place of honor, by Arthur,
And Ywain, son of Urien, shared the same platters with him.
These seated on the dais were sumptuously served,
And after them many trusty men, ranged at the long sideboards.
Then the first course was carried out to the cracking sound of trumpets—
Slung under every one of them, a brilliant banner hung;
And a new noise of kettledrums combined with the noble bagpipes,
Whose loud, wild, warbling notes wakened the hall's echoes,
120 So that many hearts were lifted high as the blasts of music touched them.
Dishes came fast and furiously, piled high with many dainties,
Such an abundance of fresh meats, laid on so many plates,
That the servers had trouble finding room at everybody's place
To set the silver platters down that held the broths and stews,
On the cloth.
Each lord took what he wished,
None grudged him, none was loath;
Each pair had a dozen dishes,
Good beer and bright wine both.
130 But now I will say no more about the serving of their feast,
For everyone must surely know that none would be left wanting.
Another noise, entirely new, was nearing them in a rush,
And this indeed would give the king permission to eat his dinner!
For scarcely had the ringing trumpets ceased reverberating,
And the first course had been served in the court to all, in order of rank,
When in there burst through the hall door a horrifying figure,
The tallest in his stature that ever stalked the earth;
From his neck to his midsection so solid and squarely built,
And his loins and limbs of such a length and also such a girth,

140 I wouldn't find it hard to grant he was genuinely half-giant!
Nevertheless I must suppose he was actually a man,
And quite the best looking of that bulk that ever could ride a horse;
For although his body was so broad across the back and breast,
Both his belly and his waist were slender, most becomingly,
And every part of him in proportion completely followed suit
When seen.
Men marveled at the hue
That stained him with its sheen;
Charging into their view,
150 He was—face and all—bright green!
And his clothing, like the fellow himself, was all adorned in green:
A straight, tight-fitting tunic clinging close about his trunk,
With a handsome mantle over it, decorated inside
With fur trimming around the edge where the elegant lining showed,
Shining bright as ermine, and the same was seen in the hood
That was tossed back, free of his locks, and lay across his shoulders;
Snugly fitting stockings he wore, in that same shade of green,
That hugged his calves, and he had strapped on bright spurs underneath
Of shiny gold, over silken borders, which were richly striped,
160 And below his shanks he wore no shoes, as he came riding in.
And all the rest of his vesture, truly, was also sparkling green,
Both the bars running across his belt and the other brilliant stones
That richly were arranged throughout his elegant array
Over his person and his saddle, upon a silken backing.
It would be tedious to tell you half the bright details
That were embroidered over it, the birds and butterflies,
With gay beadwork of bright green set in amidst the gold.
The pendants of the horse's breastplate, the splendid crupper band,
The studs on the bit, and all the metal, were coated with enamel;