Lost in Translation: Reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the Original and in Translation

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It is wonderful news that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is now one of the literary works that students preparing for the *agrégation* are expected to study[1]. This is the poem that turned me into a medievalist. I first encountered it as a second-year undergraduate student at the University of Amsterdam, and when I applied to do a postgraduate degree in England and had to submit a sample of written work as part of the application I sent in an essay on the poem. It was on the weather in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. I had noticed how changeable it was even in the space of a few days. Think of the crisp but gloriously sunny mornings when the lord of the castle is out hunting and the daylight gleams on the walls of Gawain's bedroom, and then think of how, on New Year's Eve, when Gawain has to set off for the Green Chapel to face his doom, the weather takes a sudden turn for the worse:

> Bot wylde wederez of the worlde wakened theroute
> Cloudes kesten keenly the colde to the erthe
> With nye inoghe of the northe the naked to tene;
> The snaw snitered ful snart, that snayped the wylde;
> The werbelande wynd wapped fro the highe
> And drof uch dale ful of dryftes ful grete.
> The lede listened ful wel, that lay in his bedde;

[1] This essay is based on a plenary lecture given at the conference *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Text and Images*, held at *Maison de la Recherche de la Sorbonne Nouvelle* in Paris (7-9 December 2023). I would like to thank the conference organizers, and in particular Claire Vial and Olivier Simonin, for inviting me to give this lecture. In revising the lecture for publication, I have added references but have otherwise retained the informal style of my original lecture.

Thagh he loukes his liddes, ful little he slepes. (2000-2007)[2]

"But the wild storms of the season awakened outside,
clouds bitterly dumped the cold down onto the earth,
with pain aplenty from the north, to torment the naked flesh.
The snow came down smartingly, nipping the wild animals with cold.
The shrilling wind whapped down from the high ground
and drove every valley full of great drifts of snow.
The man listened well as he lay in his bed.
Although he shuts his eyes, he sleeps very little."

What you are reading here is the original text of the poem in the edition by Myra Stokes and myself, together with my translation, which incorporates the foot-glosses provided in our edition for all difficult words. I am acutely aware that students taking the *agrégation* will be expected to read *Sir Gawain* in the translation by Simon Armitage[3]. This is infinitely preferable to students not reading the poem at all, but I do hope that they will be inspired by it to read the poem in an original-language edition. In this essay I shall explain why in my view Armitage's translation (or any other modern English translation) is no match for the original.

We might as well go straight to Simon Armitage's translation of the above-cited passage:

But wild-looking weather was about in the world:

[2] All quotations from the Middle English text are from *The Works of the Gawain* Poet, ed. by Ad Putter and Myra Stokes, London, Penguin, 2014.
[3] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, tr. by Simon Armitage, London, Faber, 2009. The translation was revised in 2018. The revised edition is cited from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Middle Ages*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt, 10th edition, New York, Norton, 2018, pp. 201-255.

clouds decanted their cold rain earthwards;

the nithering north needled man's very nature;

creatures were scattered by the stinging sleet.

Then a whip-cracking wind comes whistling between hills

driving snow into deepening drifts in the dales.

Alert and listening, Gawain lies in his bed;

His lids are lowered, but he sleeps very little.

There us much to like about the translation. You can see how careful Armitage is to make something of the alliteration in the original. Alliteration, the repetition of the same sound at the beginning stressed syllables, should be audible to anyone who reads the poem aloud, but, as the printed word is a visual medium, it might be helpful to make the alliteration visible. I have done so below by emboldening the alliteration:

Bot **w**ylde **w**ederez of the **w**orlde **w**akened theroute

Cloudes **k**esten **k**enely the **c**olde to the erthe

With **n**ye i**n**oghe of the **n**orthe the **n**aked to tene;

The **sn**aw **sn**itered ful **sn**art, that **sn**ayped the wylde;

The **w**erbelande **w**ynd **w**apped fro the highe

And **d**rof uch **d**ale ful of **d**ryftes ful grete.

The **l**ede **li**stened ful wel, that **l**ay in his bedde;

Thagh he **l**oukes his **l**iddes, ful **l**ittle he slepes. (2000-2007)

Simon Armitage rightly regards alliteration as an essential component of the poem. Using an alliterative collocation to make his point, he wrote in the preface to his translation: "alliteration

is the warp and weft of the poem, without which it is just so many fine threads"[4]. And so Armitage imitates, in his own way, the poem's soundscape, which again I have tried to make visible in typeface:

> But **w**ild-looking **w**eather was about in the **w**orld:
> **c**louds de**c**anted their **c**old rain earthwards;
> the **ni**thering **n**orth **n**eedled man's very **n**ature;
> creatures were **s**cattered by the **s**tinging **s**leet.
> Then a **w**hip-cracking **w**ind comes **w**histling between hills
> **d**riving snow into **d**eepening **d**rifts in the **d**ales.
> A**l**ert and **l**istening, Gawain **l**ies in his bed;
> His **l**ids are **l**owered, but he sleeps very **l**ittle.

The attempt to re-create alliterative verse for the modern reader is not without problems, however. In the first place, while for the poet and his audience this was a familiar metre, which had recently been revived by poets from the North-West Midlands (the *Gawain* poet's homeland)[5], to modern ears it seems quaint and archaic. A translator can mimic the alliteration, but that does not mean he is re-creating the experience of a late fourteenth-century audience. What is more, Armitage does not in fact follow the verse structure of the original. If we examine the passage in the original, it will be observed that the last beat of every line does not participate in the alliteration. This is a general rule in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the poems of the Alliterative Revival more broadly. Denoting an alliterating beat with *a* and a non-

[4] *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, tr. by Simon Armitage, London, Faber, 2009, p. viii.
[5] One of the first poems of the Alliterative Revival is *Winner and Waster*, composed in the county of Cheshire (where the *Gawain* poet was born and bred) around 1352. See Thorlac Turville-Petre, "*Wynnere and Wastoure*: When and Where", in *Loyal Letters: Studies on Mediaeval Alliterative Poetry and Prose*, ed. by L. A. R. J. Houwen and A. A. McDonald, Groningen, Egbert Forsten, 1994, pp. 155-166.

alliterating beat with *x*, we can say that the normal alliterative pattern *is aa(a)/ax.* As the extract from his translation shows, Armitage produces various alternative patterns, including *aa/xa* (his favourite) and *xa/aa*. These patterns, however, occur only exceptionally in the Middle English unrhymed alliterative long line – so exceptionally that editors of alliterative verse have regarded them as scribal errors and where possible emended them[6].

Even more fundamental to alliterative poetry than alliteration is its distinctive metre[7], and in this regard too we notice some important differences. In *Sir Gawain* and other poems in this metre, every alliterative long line must end in a final unstressed syllable, typically an inflectional syllable or a final *e* ("theroutë", "erthë", "tenë", slepës, etc.)[8]. Armitage observes no line-ending constraint and so makes his life much easier than did the *Gawain* poet. Finally, there exists in the original poem an essential rhythmical asymmetry not only between the first half-line (the a-verse) and the second half-line (the b-verse), but also between the two rhythmical subunits that make up the second half-line. Consider the last two b-verses in the original: "that lay in his bedde "and "ful little he slepes". If we scan these b-verses (using *w* for a weakly stressed syllable and *S* for a strong stress), we can see that their rhythm is wSwwSw and wSwwSw. Leaving aside the obligatory final unstressed syllable at line ending, what you will notice is that in these b-verses the first "dip" (a sequence of one or more unstressed syllables) is short (one syllable only) or absent while the second one is long. This pattern of asymmetry is consistent in *Gawain* and in other poems in this metre: if the first dip of the b-verse is short (or absent), then the second must be long, and, conversely, if the first is long,

[6] See Hoyt N. Duggan, "Alliterative Patterning as a Basis for Emendation in Middle English Alliterative Poetry", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 8 (1986), pp. 73-105.
[7] Ralph Hanna, "Defining Middle English Alliterative Poetry", in *The Endless Knot: Essays on Old and Middle English in Honor of Marie Borroff*, ed. by M. Teresa Tavormina and R. F. Yeager, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1995, pp. 43-64, and Thorlac Turville-Petre, "Is *Cheuelere Assigne* an Alliterative Poem?", in *The Transmission of Medieval Romance: Metres, Manuscripts and Early Prints*, ed. by Ad Putter and Judith A. Jefferson, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2018, pp. 116-126.
[8] Diereses indicate a schwa that should be pronounced. On the feminine line ending rule see Ad Putter, Judith Jefferson and Myra Stokes, *Studies in the Metre of Alliterative Verse*, Oxford, Medium Aevum, 2007, pp. 19-71, and Ian Cornelius, *Reconstructing Alliterative Verse: The Pursuit of a Medieval Meter*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 121-122.

then the second must be short (or absent)[9]. In Armitage, by contrast, the b-verses are predominantly anapaestic, as in "Gawain **l**ies in his bed, "but he **s**leeps very little". Each of these b-verses consists of two anapaests (wwSwwS). Armitage, in other words, tends, whether consciously or not, to produce the soundworld familiar from the English tradition of accentual-syllabic verse, which is, to use the technical term, *homomorphic* – that is, characterised by the repetition of the same pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Alliterative metre, on the other hand, is *heteromorphic*.[10] The repetition of the same rhythmical shape is forbidden in *Sir Gawain*, at least as far as the long line is concerned, where the b-verse must not replicate the rhythm of the a-verse, just as in the b-verse itself the second dip must not replicate the length of the first.[11] Now, it is well known that Armitage did not set out to produce a close translation, but anyone who believes that what was achieved by this poetic license is a close imitation of the metre and alliterative patterning of the poem should think again. The original poet would never have allowed himself to write "alliterative verse" as practised by Armitage, because the rules he observed were totally different.

This is not to say that there is not a lot to like in the Armitage translation: "the nithering north needled man's very nature" gets across the sense that the weather as the poet imagines it is not just unpleasant but positively hostile, actively intent on inflicting pain on any living creature exposed to it. It is out to get you, to "torment you" (says the poet), to "needle you" says Armitage; to "pinch you with cold" says the poet, to "sting" you, says Armitage. But I also notice some losses. When I encountered the passage as a student, what impressed me was the way the weather in the poem functions as what T. S. Eliot called an "objective correlative."

[9] Hoyt N. Duggan, "The Shape of the B-Verse in Middle English Alliterative Poetry", *Speculum* 61 (1986), 564-92, and Thomas Cable, *The English Alliterative Tradition*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991, pp. 85-94.
[10] See Angus McIntosh, "Early Middle English Alliterative Verse", in *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and its Literary Background: Seven Essays*, ed. David Lawton, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 1982, 20-33.
[11] On this principle of "dissimilation", see Cable, *English Alliterative Tradition*, p. 86, and Putter, Jefferson, and Stokes, *Studies*, p. 264.

Since subjective emotions can only be expressed indirectly, poets need (in Eliot's words) "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of the *particular* emotion"[12]. The sudden storm is the objective correlative to Gawain's turbulent state of mind. This is not contradicted by the fact that it is also an entirely realistic description of a winter storm that would make anyone very reluctant to get up and go outside, as Gawain is obliged to do, for what the poet has done is to match inner worlds and outer worlds. In the Armitage translation, I therefore really miss the verb *wakened* of the original. The storms "awaken", and when we move from outdoors to indoors, we encounter Gawain, too, awake: "ful little he slepes". The antithesis of "Thagh he loukes his liddes, ful little he slepes" is also more effective in the original than in the translation. I cannot see what has been gained by transposing the grammar into the passive ("His lids are lowered"). Gawain is making every effort to sleep, and the active voice of "loukes" gets that across.

As for the storm being "about in this world", it is hard to avoid the impression that Armitage has been misled by "worlde", which is here used in the older sense "the law of nature". A more accurate translation would be "season" or "the time of year". This is also the required sense when the poem describes the coming of summer: "But then the weder of the world with wynter hit threpes" (504), meaning "But then the weather of that time of year fights with winter". Again, that meaning is lost in Armitage's translation: "Then the world's weather wages war on winter". There are many such "false friends" (words used in senses unlike the modern ones) in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Armitage occasionally falls for them. An egregious example is when the hunting dogs in *Gawain* are "rewarded" after killing the fox ("Her houndes thay there rewarde", 1918). The word is here used as a technical hunting term, referring to the edible treat (usually bits of bread mixed with the animal's entrails and soaked

[12] T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems" in *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays*, London, Methuen, 1920, expanded edition, New York, Dover, 1968), pp. 55-59 (p. 56).

in its blood) given to the hounds[13]. Reading Armitage's translation, "The dogs, due their reward, are patted, stroked, and praised", an unwary reader might get the idea that you "reward" dogs by patting them on the head.

This is not going to be a lecture on errors of translation, however. What I would like to do instead is to focus on two fundamental aspects in which the original text of *Gawain* transcends the translation. One is the surprise element that is built into the verse structure of the poem. What makes it possible for us to talk of stanzas in *Gawain* at all is that they all end with five rhyming lines: a very short, one-beat line, called the "bob", followed by four lines of loosely iambic trimeter, called the "wheel". Armitage captures the iambic rhythm of the bob and wheel very well. For example:

> And the horse: every hair was green, from hoof
>
> *to mane.*
>
> *A steed of pure green stock*
>
> *each snort and shudder strained*
>
> *the hand-stitched bridle, but*
>
> *his rider had him reined.* (173-178)

I have put the bob and wheel in italics. Armitage has rendered these lines as beautifully homomorphic poetry. Their rhythm more or less corresponds with that of the original lines, and I think that the poet would have been pleased with Armitage's rendering to that extent, though we should note that the contrast between the accentual rhythm of the alliterative long

[13] Cf. *The Middle English Text of the Art of Hunting by William Twiti*, ed. by David Scott-Macnab, Heidelberg, Winter, 2009, pp. 18-19: "ye shall yif to your houndys the bowellis broiled with breed, and it is callyd reward".

lines and the iambic rhythm of the rhyming lines is more pointed in the original poem. This is because the alliterative long lines are resolutely heteromorphic in *Gawain*, while Armitage already shifts into homomorphic verse in the preceding long lines. In this instance, it would have grieved the poet that the last b-verse before the bob and wheel ("was green, from hoof") is already iambic. This iambic rhythm is unmetrical in the alliterative long line and spoils the rhythmical contrast between the alliterative long lines and the short lines.

Where Armitage really betrays the spirit of the original, however, is that he loses the unpredictability of the bob. If we put ourselves in the place of the original audience, most of whom would have heard the poem read out aloud rather than seeing it in writing, then what strikes you about the bobs in *Gawain* is their sheer unpredictability. You can never hear the bob coming[14]. That is partly because there is not a set number of lines after which the bob comes (since stanza length is irregular, you cannot, so to speak, "count" on the bob), but also because in the *Gawain* poet's semantics and syntax, all long lines must be complete sense units, so that the bobs present themselves almost as "afterthoughts"[15]. The bob always rounds off (and goes with) the preceding long line, but it is never semantically or grammatically necessary. Contrast the translation with the original and my literal translation (the bob is in italics):

The fole that he ferkes on fyne of that ilke

Sertayn:

A grene horse, gret and thik,

A stede ful stif to strayn;

[14] On the surprise element of the bob, see Howell D. Chickering, "Stanzaic Closure and Linkage in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *Chaucer Review* 32 (1997), 1-31, and Ad Putter, "The Predictable and the Unpredictable: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Metres of Middle English Romance", in *Evur happie & glorious, ffor I hafe at will grete riches*, ed. by Marcin Krygier and Liliana Sikorska, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 2013, pp. 71-88.

[15] Cf. Norman Davis's comments on the bob: "[it] seldom adds anything to the meaning, and is often distinctly redundant … It is possible that this element of the stanza was an afterthought of the author's", in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, revised by Norman Davis, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 152.

In brayden brydel quik,

To the gome he was ful fayn. (173-8)

"The horse that he rides on exactly matching,

certainly:

A green horse, large and thickset

a horse hard to control;

lively in its well-fashioned bridle,

he was very responsive to the man."

Here and elsewhere, the bob is not actually all that meaningful; it seems tagged on, but that is actually what makes it so effective. When we hear the bob, we know that the stanza is ending, but the poet does not want us to be able to anticipate it, because he liked the element of surprise. If we go back now to Simon Armitage, you will see that he spoils this effect:

And the horse: every hair was green, from hoof

to mane.

"From hoof" makes it entirely predictable that the complement "to" plus noun coming. The other problem is that Armitage often treats the last alliterative long line of the stanza as if it could be syntactically unfinished. The enjambment this creates is simply taboo in alliterative poetry: alliterative long lines are complete sense units, and enjambement in the rhyming lines too is avoided (cf. Armitage's jarring enjambment at 177).

Admittedly, the *Gawain* poet, too, sometimes integrates the bob syntactically, but these exceptions show what a wonderful craftsman he was, because whenever the bob is thus

integrated, he nevertheless manages to observe the rule that the alliterative long line must be self-standing. Some examples will illustrate his method. Here is Gawain as he leaves Castle Hautdesert in the early morning, grateful that his hosts have made everything ready for his departure. The original text is followed by Armitage's translation:

> And all was fresch as upon first, and he was fayn thenne
> To thonk. (2019-2020)

> all gleaming as good as new, for which he is grateful
> indeed.

On this occasion Simon Armitage's bob does in fact have the tag-like quality that characterises most of the bobs in *Gawain*, but annoyingly this happens just when it is not so in *Gawain*. For what the *Gawain* poet performs here is a form of syntactical word play. He ends his alliterative line with the idiomatic "he was fayn thenne", and since alliterative long lines are complete units of sense, we first interpret this to mean "he was happy then". However, when the bob surprises us by announcing itself as the infinitival complement of "fayn", we are forced to do a double-take and revise our earlier interpretation to "he was eager to give thanks". The English term for constructions that trick us into parsing them first one way and then another is "garden-path sentences". To give a comic example (courtesy of Wikipedia's entry for "garden-path sentence"): "Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana". The first clause prepares us to read "flies" as a verb and "like" as a preposition, but at the end of the second clause we realise we have been tricked: "flies" needs to be re-analysed as a noun and "like" as a verb. There is nothing so outrageous in *Gawain*, but in the case of bobs that force themselves on the preceding line an integral grammatical component, we are always caught off guard and always obliged to

adjust an earlier interpretation. Take, for instance, the Green Knight's request to speak to King Arthur:

…. "Gladly I wolde
See that segge in sight and with himself speke
Resoun". (225-227)

Here "speak" first appears to be intransitive ("I would gladly see that man with my own eyes and speak with him"), but when *resoun* enters the frame we realize it must be intransitive ("and speak words with him"). There is another fine example when Gawain's horse, Gringolet, is fetched from the stable and is impatient to get moving again:

And he startes on the stone, stode he no lenger
To praunce (2063-2064)

To grasp the wordplay involved in the second example, we need some help from a historical dictionary, so I cite from the *Oxford English Dictionary* the two relevant senses of the verb "stand", firstly the current sense, and secondly the now-obsolete sense:

I.3.a.

Old English–

intransitive. To remain motionless in a standing position

† **II.11.b.i.** *with infinitive*

c1400–1854

intransitive. In negative constructions or in conditional clauses. To stop or wait in order to do something; to make a point of or insist upon doing something. *Obsolete*.

As in my previous examples, the verb preceding the bob (here "stode") masquerades as being self-sufficient, requiring no complementation when the bob comes along and tells us otherwise. In this case, the verbal transformation is especially delightful, because it so effectively catapults us forward in the action. For one moment it looks as if the horse has only just begun to stir ("stode he no lenger"), but the next moment it becomes clear that Gringolet has been prancing all the while and is now striding forwards. We are well and truly on the way. To his credit, Armitage gets the obsolete sense of "stand" plus infinitive, but the magic of the original is gone:

> [Gringolet] clatters from the courtyard, not stalling to snort
>
> or prance. (2063-4)

There is no wordplay here and no startling progression of movement.

The second dimension where the original has a clear edge over the translation it is the social one. Armitage is generally excellent on the rough elements – the inhospitable landscapes, the inclement weather, the brusqueness of the Green Knight, and so on – but wildness in *Sir Gawain* is balanced by an extraordinary sensitivity to the requirements and consequences of social situations, to politeness, tact, embarrassment, the need to respect the feelings of others and on occasion to keep up appearances. One might expect a modern person might have a more refined sense of such matters than a fourteenth-century poet, but if Armitage's translation is a measure of progress then we have not advanced at all. We all remember that the Green Knight

rides into the hall with his outrageous challenge and that Gawain takes up the challenge, but who has paid as much attention to the seating arrangements as the poet?

> Thus standes in stalle the stif king himselven
> Talkande before the highe table of trifles ful hende,
> There good Gawan was graythed Guenore biside,
> And Agravayn a la dure mayn on that other side sittes,
> Bothe the kynges sistersunes and ful siker knightes.
> Bishop Bawdewyn above begines the table,
> And Ywan, Uryn sone, ete with himselven. (107-113)

In Armitage's translation, here cited from the revised 2018 edition, this becomes:

> And still he stands there just being himself,
> chatting away charmingly, exchanging views.
> good Sir Gawain is seated by Guinevere,
> and on his other side Agravain the Hard Hand sits,
> both nephews of the king and notable knights.
> At the head of the board sat Bishop Baldwin,
> With Ywain, son of Urien, to eat beside him.

The first thing to say is that this translation corrects a mistake in Armitage's first edition, which reads "And at Arthur's other side sits Agravain the Hard Hand". That earlier translation gets the seating plan wrong. What the poet envisages is a high table with six diners – exactly like

the arrangement that was the normal social reality for medieval feasts. Illustrations of medieval banquets from two fourteenth-century manuscripts provide a close match. On folio 72v, the illuminated *Prose Alexander* in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 264, shows King Alexander and his queen consort in the middle of the table (the queen on Alexander's left side (from his perspective), with two guests on either side[16]. The *Prose Lancelot* in British Library Royal D IV, fol. 1r, shows the same arrangement, with King Arthur and Queen Guinevere at the centre, flanked again by two guests to the right and two to the left[17].

The *Gawain* poet tells us who the honoured guests who are sitting next to the royal couple are. Next to Guinevere sits Gawain, and "on that other side", that is, next to Gawain (and not next to Arthur as per Armitage's unrevised edition) sits Agravaine. Why these are paired together the poet also tells us: they are "[b]othe the kynges sistersunes". To be exact, they are sons of the king's half-sister Morgause (who had married King Lot of Orkney). What the poet does not say but certainly knew (and might have expected his audience to know) is that Gawain is Morgause's eldest son and Agravaine the second eldest[18]. The seating arrangement thus reflects the seniority of the king's closest kinsmen. At the king's right hand, the seat of honour, sits Bishop Baldwin, who as a lord spiritual is given ceremonial precedence over the lords secular [19]. Then next to Baldwin is Yvain, who is also the son of a king (King Urien).

Ywain	Bishop Baldwin	Arthur	Guinevere	Gawain	Agravaine

[16] The image is digitised at https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/8d17bc13-14b6-4a56-b3b5-d2e1a935c60d/surfaces/90334ea8-bc5a-4b36-a994-889234f97653/.
[17] Digitised at https://blogs.bl.uk/.a/6a00d8341c464853ef01b7c8f9076b970b-popup.
[18] These are stated as "facts" in Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du Graal*, ed. Félix Lecoy, Paris, Champion, 1984, lines 7886-8: "… Gauvains est li ainznez, / et li seconz est Agravains, / li Orguilleus as dures mains".
[19] As we note in our edition (see n. to line 112), "As a lord spiritual, Baldwin is also given ceremonial precedence in *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*, 'The besschope gan the tabull begynne' (A 359)."

When the Green Knight makes his challenge, it thus stands to reason that Gawain must intervene, not just because he understands that the king cannot be risked, but also because the position of honour he occupies, second only to Baldwin, who is a bishop and so not in the reckoning, demands that he rises to the challenge. But there is something else that Gawain understands, and that is the social awkwardness of leaving the queen sitting with no companion. I remind you that King Arthur is not sitting down – for it is his custom not to do so until he has seen or heard of a marvellous adventure. "Thus standes in stalle the stif king himselven", writes the poet, where "himselven" is emphatic. A good translation is "none other than the king"; a poor one is Armitage's "just being himself". When you are the host at a party, you cannot "just be yourself" but must play the right social part, which here means entertaining the guests by making polite small talk. Before Gawain gets on his feet, he acknowledges that there are two parties that need placating – on the one hand, Arthur (because it is not done to get up from the table without permission from the host) and on the other Guinevere, who would be left sitting without any table companion on either side. Accordingly, Gawain asks permission from both:

> "Wolde ye, worthilych lord," quoth Wawan to the kynge,
> Bid me bow fro this bench and stande by yow there,
> That I without vilany myghte voyde this table,
> And that my lege lady liked not ille
> I wolde come to your counsel before your court riche …" (343-347)

In Armitage's translation, only Arthur is given a say in the matter, and then without Gawain's subtle suggestion that whatever he might wish to do is dependent on what his lord's wishes:

"Should you call me, courteous lord", said Gawain to his king,

"to rise from my seat and stand at your side,

Politely to take leave of my place at the table

And quit without causing offence to my queen,

Then I would [earlier edition: "shall"] come to your counsel before this great court."

Armitage must have recognised that "shall" is much too direct, but while "would" is a great improvement, I would prefer a translation that registered the parallelism of *wolde ye, I wolde* in the original. The modal verb "will" in Middle English had the primary sense of "wish to", and so the construction means "if you should wish … then I should wish". The tactful suggestion is that Gawain would not want anything that Arthur would not also want. I would also prefer a translation in which Gawain does not patronise the queen. While the Armitage translation assumes that it is for the king to say whether she is happy with that plan, the original does not: the clause beginning with "that" is a conditional clause of its own ("And if my lady ….').

The translation fails to register social subtleties at other points too. I have time for only one example, the passage in which Arthur restores a semblance of normality after everyone at court has witnessed the bloody beheading:

Thagh Arthur the hende kyng at hert hade wonder,

He let no semblaunt be sene, but sayde ful highe

To the comlyche quene with cortayse speche:

"Dere dame, today dismay you never:

Wel bicomes such craft upon Cristmasse –

Laykyng of enterludes, to laghe and to synge …" (467-472)

Armitage translates:

> And although King Arthur was awestruck at heart
> no sign of it he showed. Instead he spoke
> to his exquisite queen with courteous words:
> "Dear lady, don't be daunted by this deed today,
> it's in keeping that such strangeness should occur at Christmas
> between sessions of banter and seasonal song ...".

The original seems to me much better on several counts. The first is that Armitage simply omits the words "ful highe" (very loudly). This is crucial, however, because it is the poet's tactful hint that Guinevere is only ostensibly the intended recipient of this message. If Arthur had indeed intended his "cortayse speche" for the queen, saying loudly that she should not be upset would not be very courteous at all, for it is bad manners to draw public attention to someone's discomposure. What makes Arthur's words courteous, and what the adverbial "ful highe" registers, is the fact that this is said for the benefit of the assembled knighthood. What Arthur is really saying to them is "get your act together, men! Let's get back to jollity and let's not give the ladies any cause for alarm"[20].

As King Arthur knows, the best way to restore normality is to pretend that nothing extraordinary has happened. You do not do so by calling attention to the "strangeness" of what has just happened, as Armitage's Arthur does. You do it by normalising the marvel that has

[20] For fuller discussion, see my "Comedy in the Works of the *Gawain* Poet and in Henry Bergson", in *Parodies courtoises, parodies de la courtoisie*, ed. by Margarida Madureira, Carlos Clamote Carreto, and Ana Paiva Morias, Paris, Classiques Garnier, 2016, pp. 15-30.

just occurred, something that Arthur does brilliantly by reducing the beheading to a dramatic illusion, an "interlude". Interludes were especially associated with Christmas. Note, for example, from 1418, an official prohibition issued by the mayor of London against the performing of "enterludes … duryng this holy tyme of Cristemes", interludes involving such things as "disgyysingis with feynyed berdes, peynted visers, diffourmyd or colourid visages".[21] Thanks to Arthur's quick thinking, the Green Knight's beheading is assimilated to an elaborate theatrical stunt. Looking over the translation, I miss the poet's social intelligence, the loss of "ful highe" and "enterludes", and I regret the false note struck by Arthur calling it "such strangeness". "Strange" it certainly is, but the party must go on as if nothing untoward had happened. Being honest, "just being yourself", is simply not what Arthur's duty as host requires. What is needed is polite dissimulation: "Thagh Arthur the hende kyng at hert hade wonder, / He let no semblaunt be sene…" (467-8).

In conclusion, reading *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in translation (however fluent the translation may be) is in my view a poor substitute for reading the poem in the original language. I appreciate that the language of the original is hard, but there exist numerous editions that help students to understand it. Simon Armitage's translation has the merit of reckoning with the poet's verse form, but it does not actually produce the kind of verse the poet wrote. Armitage's alliterative patterns are not the poet's; the rhythms of the alliterative long lines are quite different (radically heteromorphic in the poem; tending towards homomorphic in the translation), and the element of surprise that the bob has in the poem is lost in translation. Some of this may be inevitable: Armitage is writing for modern readers, whose expectations of what rhythmical poetry is and how it will be encountered (on the page, where readers see the bob coming in any case) are very different from those of medieval audiences. What was not

[21] *Memorials of London Life in the XIIIth, XIVth, and XVth Centuries*, ed. by Henry Thomas Riley, London, Longmans, 1867, pp. 669-70.

inevitable (unless tactfulness is in decline) is the blunting of the poet's delicate social awareness. The subtleties and indirections of courteous behaviour, which this poet understood so well, should not be beyond our ken. Reading the poem in the original gives us the best chance to meet the poet's social intelligence with our own.