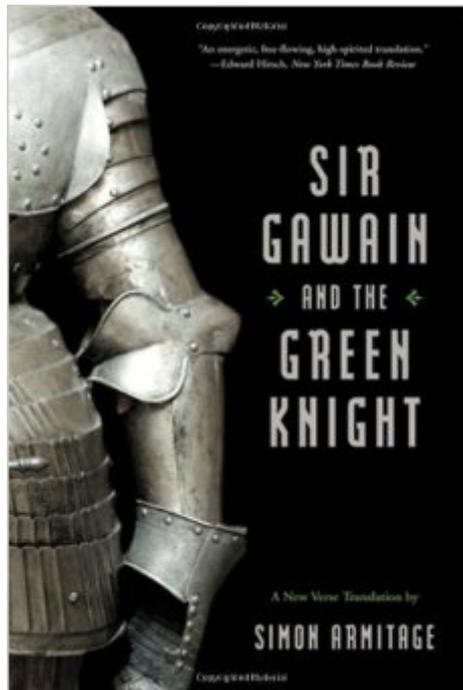


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Sir Gawain And The Green Knight (A New Verse Translation)



Synopsis

"Compulsively readable. ... Simon Armitage has given us an energetic, free-flowing, high-spirited version." •Edward Hirsch, New York Times Book Review One of the earliest great stories of English literature after *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain* is the strange tale of a green knight on a green horse, who rudely interrupts King Arthur's Round Table festivities one Yuletide, challenging the knights to a wager. Simon Armitage, one of Britain's leading poets, has produced an inventive and groundbreaking translation that "[helps] liberate *Gawain* from academia" (*Sunday Telegraph*). 2 illustrations

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Customer Reviews

Also alliteration and a lot of it. Simon Armitage has produced a contemporary translation of the noted 14th century Middle English poem. In so doing he has been faithful to the original work, while rendering it accessible and interesting to modern readers. The action begins when the knights of King Arthur's Round Table are disturbed in their Christmas feasting by the arrival of a fearsome Green Knight who issues a remarkable challenge: "if a person here present, within these premises, is big or bold or red-blooded enough to strike me one stroke and be struck in return, I shall give him as a gift this gigantic cleaver and the axe shall be his to handle as he likes. I'll kneel, bare my neck, and take the first knock. So who has the gall? The gumption? The guts? Who'll spring from his seat and snatch this weapon? I offer the axe - who'll have it as his own? I'll afford him one free hit from which I won't flinch, and promise that twelve months will pass in peace, then claim, the duty I deserve in one

year and one day. Does no one have the nerve to wager in this way?" Gawain accepts the challenge, and lops off the Green Knight's head with a single swipe, only to have the Knight stand up, pick up his head, and remind Gawain to meet him at the appointed time. The ensuing quest, culminating in an ambivalent and unexpected ending, weaves together themes of chivalry and the natural, hunting and seduction, as well as Christianity and paganism. The symbolism is many layered and ushers the reader into ever deeper understandings from an ancient era. But it is the language, the evocative delighting in words, that I most enjoyed.

I guess in an enterprise like this - creating the nth translation of an ancient classic - distinction of a given effort comes from the balance of readability, poetry, and faithfulness. This translation hikes the "readability" parameter all the way up. Most book reviewers of this translation use the "can't put it down" cliché, and it's true. No need to discuss further: if you're looking for a heckuva read, even if you're familiar with this work, you need look no further. As for poetry, Armitage is a distinguished poet, and clearly invested great care in the music, nuance, and language (including, yes, tons of alliteration...in most cases working off a different consonant than the original). The result stands as a work of art, hence my five stars. One can't argue with greatness. As for faithfulness...I'm no scholar, so don't take this as more than a comment from the peanut gallery. But as I read, I'd often glance over at the Middle English text and feel dismayed to find that more liberty was taken than I'd have preferred. In many cases, the Middle English is fully intelligible and quite affecting, yet Armitage chooses quite different language. On the other hand, his method is proven by the vibrantly engaging result. My biggest quibble is that the translation contains three or four VERY jarring instances of discordantly modern colloquialisms (without discernible reason, to my eye) that come from out of nowhere. If I'd known I'd be writing this review, I'd have noted them, but never mind; as you read, you can't help but trip on them. Each time, I'd shake my head in disbelief. But, again, they're extremely infrequent.

I've read a lot of translations of the poem "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" (I regularly teach it), and I thought that nobody could outdo the standard, quite wonderful version by Marie Borroff (also published by Norton). Well, I've just finished reading Simon Armitage's amazing translation, and I was wrong. Armitage's should be the new standard version used by students and lay readers everywhere. It captures both the energetic alliteration of the original and also its wonderful toggling between formal and colloquial registers. It does a magnificent job of approximating the galloping rhythm of the long verses, but is equally stunning at managing the "bob and wheel" that brings each

long verse to comically neat closure (e.g., see Armitage's description of Gawain's emblem, the pentangle -- "[he] bore that badge on both / his shawl and shield alike. / A prince who talked the truth. A notable. A knight," ll.636-39). It takes some poetic chutzpah to fiddle with the Gawain-poet in this way. But Armitage has the versifying courage and the nervy tone just right. I think the 14th-century poet, whoever he was, would admire and appreciate this new version. That's also because Armitage shows humility as a translator too when it matters. For example, he works hard to preserve the delicate moral ambiguities of the original poem. It's difficult to translate Gawain's refusal to give the seductress, the lady of the manor (where his humility, his loyalty and his self-control are tested) a token of his affection with the perfect blend of courtesy and self-regard that is there in the original ("Hit is not your honour to haf at this tyme / A glove for a garysoun of Gawaynes giftes," ll.

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