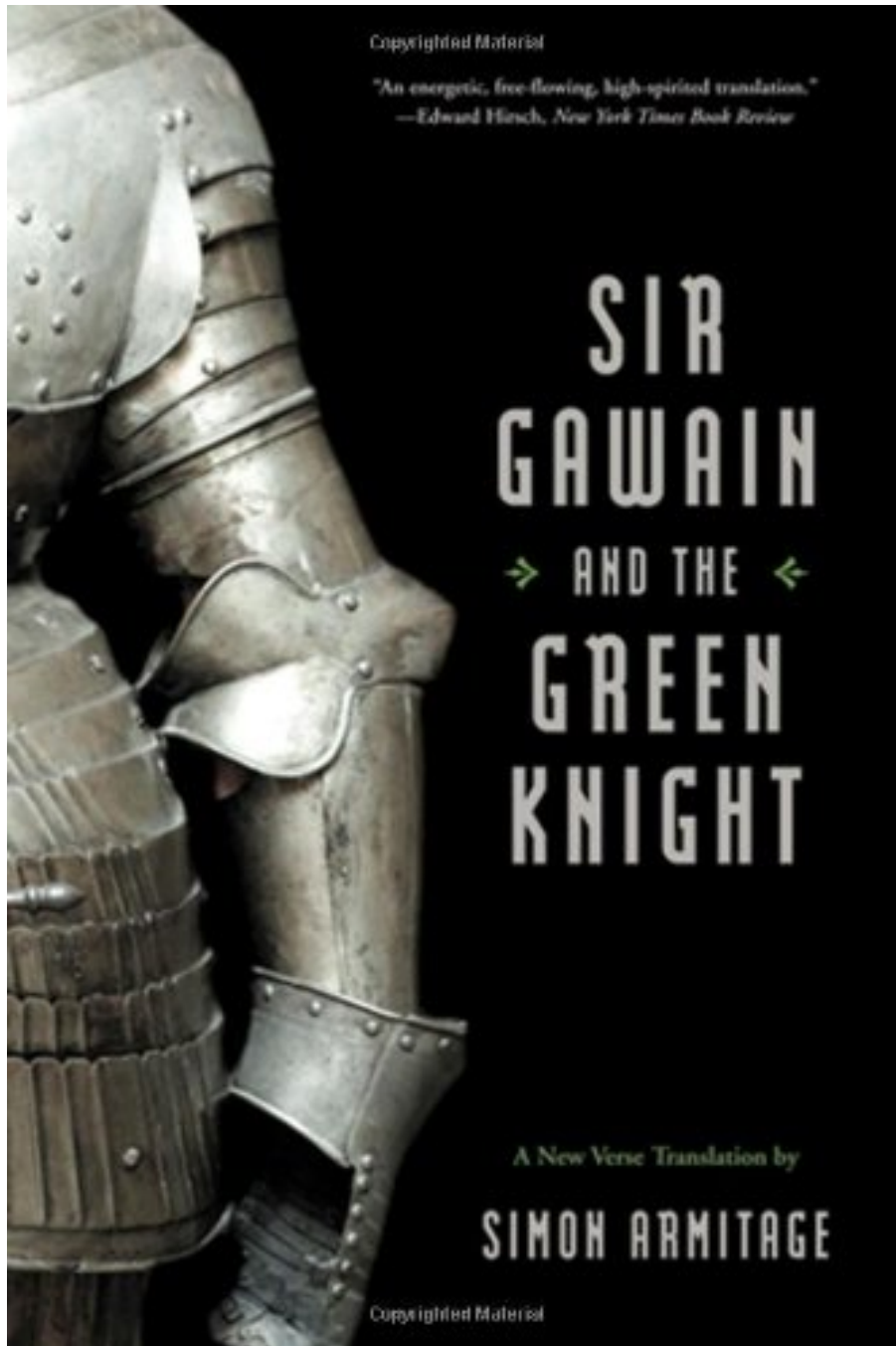


# SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT (A NEW VERSE TRANSLATION) BY SIMON ARMITAGE



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Review

“Drives the force of the old poem through the green Armitage fuse. Highly charged work.” (Seamus Heaney, Nobel Prize-winning translator of *Beowulf*)

“Simon Armitage's luscious version of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*? continues the tradition of great poet-translators such as Edward FitzGerald, Arthur Waley, and Seamus Heaney. Like them, he has taken an artifact from a remote era and made it his own, while simultaneously restoring it to itself.” (John Ashbery)

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"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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#### Most helpful customer reviews

70 of 76 people found the following review helpful.

Boar Hunts and Bedchambers

By Andrew Schonbek

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. Here is the description of a boar hunt that takes place while Gawain fends off the amorous advances of a beautiful mistress:

"The front men stepped forward to fire a shot,  
aimed arrows at him that were often on target,  
but their points could not pierce his impenetrable shoulders  
and bounced away from his bristly brow.  
The smooth slender shafts splintered into pieces,  
and the heads glanced away from wherever they hit.  
Battered and baited by such bombardment,  
in frenzied fury he flies at the men,  
hurts them horribly as he hurtles past,  
so that many grow timid and retreated a tad.  
But the master of the manor gave chase on his mount,  
the boldest of the beast-hunters, his bugle blaring,  
trumpeting the tally-ho and tearing through the thickets  
till the setting sun slipped from the western sky.  
So the day was spent in pursuits of this style,  
while our lovable young lord had not left his bed,  
and, cosseted in costly quilted covers, there he  
remained.  
The lady, at first light,  
did not neglect Gawain,  
but went to wake the knight  
and to change his mind."

Recommended reading (once you start with the alliteration it's hard to stop).

37 of 38 people found the following review helpful.

Above All, Readable

By New Yawkuh

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.

So if readability and poetic sweep are your preference - and why wouldn't they would be if you're reading for pleasure? - this is definitely a book to own. If you're a Middle English scholar or a knowledgeable veteran of multiple previous Gawain versions, you ought to approach with a forgiving attitude. Armitage takes pains, in the introduction, to claim a minimally invasive approach. But don't all translators say the same?

Just an aside, perhaps naive: issues of spelling seem to constitute a great deal of the original's impenetrability. I'd love to read a truly minimally invasive translation, where spelling is modernized and only crucial obsolete words are individually replaced (alliteration be damned), in order to enjoy an easier undiluted taste of The Poet's voice. I hasten to note that even if such a translation existed, Armitage's work would still sit proudly on my shelf.

26 of 26 people found the following review helpful.

New best Gawain translation

By Wanda B. Red

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 nery 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. 1806-07), but Armitage's "it strikes me as unseemly that you should receive / nothing greater than a glove as a keepsake from Gawain" hits the mark pretty well; by placing Gawain's reference to himself in the third-person at the end of the line, he makes us wonder if the hero isn't buying in a bit too easily to the reputation that has

preceded him.

I'm not going to repeat the plot of the whole poem here; it's well known, easy to find online, and other amazon reviewers have gone over it. Armitage's confidence as a translator is expressed in his willingness to provide the original language of the poem on a facing page (Borroff's translation does not do this), so the reader can take a long look at the luscious original. Sure, he changes a word here or there (every translation does this), but Armitage is scrupulously true to the spirit of the original.

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