
From the Instructor

While the class was reading the fourteenth-century Pearl Poet's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as the first text in the WR 150 seminar on "The Matter of King Arthur," Alicia Espinosa became fascinated with the power of alliterative verse to echo and instantiate the meaning of the words through sound. For the rest of the semester, Alicia delved deeper into this apparent anomaly of the Alliterative Revival that occurred in Middle English poetry long after the Old English poetic genre had been subsumed by the Anglo-Norman poetic verse forms of meter and rhyme. Alicia used her thorough research to effect in her final essay, "The Lost Tradition: Alliterative Poetry in Middle English," an extraordinarily clear picture of the unique qualities of this more experimental yet still vigorous recasting of the precise alliterative poetic rules found in poems like *Beowulf*. Alliteration is peculiarly adaptable to Germanic languages, so that the loss of the serious poetic use of alliteration can be understood in Alicia's essay as a cultural dispossession that the Pearl Poet and William Langland in his magnificent *Piers Plowman* tried to reclaim. What is most impressive about Alicia's essay is the way she uses all the major scholars of alliterative poetry to explain how and why the Old English style faded, the Middle English revival occurred, and the French poetic forms used by the contemporaneous Geoffrey Chaucer ultimately triumphed. Alicia Espinosa's essay is a classic example of the spark of interest in a topic catching fire and exciting the student to dig deeply and diligently for the treasure of knowledge to share with her colleagues.

— Sarah Campbell

WR 150: The Matter of King Arthur Then and Now

From the Writer

“Translating Troubles: Alliterative Verse in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” was my first paper for my WR 150 seminar, “The Matter of King Arthur.” This paper examines the priorities of translation. It particularly grapples with whether a translator should prioritize meaning over style when translating poetry. This paper gave me a lot of trouble at first. To make my argument for style over meaning, I needed to examine differences between three translations of Sir Gawain. The thought of uncovering those differences made me feel uneasy, since I had not attempted to analyze translations before. However, after much re-reading and highlighting, I developed an understanding of the three translations and how they differ from the untranslated poem. This paper is the result of that understanding.

— Alicia Espinosa

TRANSLATING TROUBLES: ALLITERATIVE VERSE IN *SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT*

Untitled and virtually unknown until the nineteenth century, the small manuscript containing the poem that would later become known as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* languished in obscurity. The identity of the author who wrote *Sir Gawain* remains a mystery and the author's biography conjecture. One thing, however, is certain about the Gawain-poet: he was a master of alliterative verse. The Gawain-poet's use of alliterative verse was rare in the fourteenth century. Alliterative verse seemed rustic to southern England (Tolkien 14); it only remained prevalent in midland and northern regions in this century, before it disappeared in the fifteenth century (Borroff XV). The Gawain-poet uses alliteration to his advantage, forming memorable, powerful lines using the stressed syllables and rhythm of alliterative verse in *Sir Gawain*, such as:

“Pe tulk þat þe trammes of tresoun þer wro3t” (Line 3)¹

and

“On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez wyth wyne”
(Line 15)²

Using the parameters of alliterative verse, the Gawain-poet conjures revulsion toward betrayers and traitors and anticipation for the coming story. Some translators of the Gawain-poet's Middle English, however, do not emphasize the preservation of the poet's alliterative verse. These translators instead focus on making the Middle English comprehensible to modern audiences, allowing the alliterative verse to again fall into obscurity. However, while translating for meaning is important, the most authentic translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is one that primarily

focuses on preserving the alliterative verse of the Gawain-poet. Forgoing the alliterative verse alters those characteristics that define the untranslated *Sir Gawain*: the original tone and mood, the Gawain-poet's intent, and its subtle nuances. Simon Armitage, Marie Borroff, and J.R.R. Tolkien, three of the most prominent of *Sir Gawain* translators, each attempt to retain the alliterative verse (with varying degrees of successes) and therefore allow their readers a way to more directly experience the original text.

Sir Gawain follows Gawain's struggle to fulfill the pact he made with the Green Knight. In this essay, the following lines are taken from stanza 95 in the fourth part of *Sir Gawain*. This stanza details Sir Gawain's final confrontation with the Green Knight, who references the agreement that he made with Gawain to exchange three days' worth of prizes to each other. The Knight chastises Gawain for not exchanging the girdle with him, as per their agreement. While the Knight forgives Gawain for breaking their agreement, Gawain expresses his guilt over the matter. A literal translation of this stanza is included in the appendix.

The alliterative verse the Gawain-poet employs creates a tone and mood that is characteristic to the original text. Through the maintenance of the alliterative verse in a translation, the tone of the Gawain-poet is preserved and brings a translation closer to the original text. Tone and mood change in translations of line 2374 of *Sir Gawain*. The Gawain-poet wrote "Corsed worth cowarddysse and couetyse bope."³ The poet employs a hard *c* alliteration, grabbing the reader's attention. The combination of grating, hard *c* alliteration and the placement of that alliteration in the line creates a demanding rhythm. Collectively, the alliteration and rhythm creates an anxious, trembling tone in the line. It provokes strong sensations in the reader; one wants to yell out the line. Armitage translates this line as "A curse upon cowardness and covetousness." While he maintains the hard *c* alliteration, Armitage rearranges the placement of the alliteration and adds a syllable. Armitage's translation feels uneven; the line sounds incomplete. He de-intensifies the rhythm, and the mood is more passive as a result. The Gawain-poet's apprehensive tone disappears in exchange for a hesitant tone. Borroff is more successful in preserving the alliterative verse in line 2374. She translates it as "Cursed be a cowardly and covetous heart." Borroff retains the alliterative hard *c* and its grating sound. Her translation places the alliteration in positions similar to those of the original line

and possesses the same number of syllables. Thus, Borroff maintains the demanding rhythm of the line and the Gawain-poet's intense, anxious tone. Line 2374 appears in Tolkien's translation as "Cursed be ye, Coveting, and Cowardice also." While Tolkien too conserves the hard *c* alliteration, he changes the syllabic length of the line and slows the rhythm. The translated line reads as more refined than intense and more angry than nervous.

Omitting the alliterative verse when translating *Sir Gawain* changes the intent of the Gawain-poet and distances the translation from the original text. Line 2371 in *Sir Gawain* displays how the Gawain-poet's intent becomes modified through translation. The line describes Gawain during his second confrontation with the Green Knight and originally reads, "Alle þe blode of his breast blende in his face."⁴ The stressed *b* syllables create an unforgiving sound, and generates a rhythm that tempts the reader to rush through the line, to say it quickly. The rhythm mirrors blood rushing toward Gawain's face. Altogether, the alliterative verse in line 2371 produces an intense atmosphere and implies the Gawain-poet's intent to foreshadow Gawain's anxiety later in the stanza. Armitage translates line 2371 as "and the fire of his blood brought flames to his face." Armitage replaces the *b* alliteration in favor of *f*, generating a slithery, whispery sound not present in the original line, but which steadies the rhythm. His removal of the *b* alliteration changes the original intense atmosphere, since he does not mirror Gawain's blushing. Hence, Armitage's translation removes the Gawain-poet's intent to foreshadow Gawain's later anxiety. Borroff, in contrast, translates line 2371 as "All the blood of his body burned in his face." She retains the poet's *b* alliteration and places the alliteration in similar positions to the original line, allowing Borroff to preserve the hasty rhythm. Borroff's maintenance of the Gawain-poet's original alliterative verse enables the presence of a similar intense atmosphere and foreshadowing of Gawain's anxiety. Tolkien translates this line as "All the blood from his breast in his blush mingled." Like Borroff, Tolkien retains the *b* alliteration and the unforgiving sound it creates. Tolkien, however, translates "blende" as "mingled" and places "mingled" at the end of his translated line, unlike the Gawain-poet. "Mingled" adds extra syllables and alters the original rhythm. Instead of wishing to rush through the line, one now wants to drag out the line. By altering the rhythm, Tolkien reduces the intense atmosphere. The insertion of a more passive atmosphere

removes the Gawain-poet's intent to foreshadow.

The essence of *Sir Gawain* lies in the poem's alliterative verse. Without its distinctive form, the poem loses that which characterizes it and separates the poem from other fourteenth century works. Without the alliterative verse, the work becomes prose, not poetry. Thus, a translator whose primary focus is to make a work easier to understand and ignores the alliterative verse will change the essence of *Sir Gawain*. The meaning of the original poem is present in the translation, but the poem loses its particular flavor and subtle nuances. Translations of the line "For hit is my wede þat þou werez, þat ilke wouen girdel" (2358) clearly shows how the essence of the line changes when the translator favors meaning over alliterative verse. The Gawain-poet, in this line, employs an alliterative *w* consonant which creates a smooth, gliding sound. This line also possesses a steady, even rhythm. The combination of the smooth sound and steady rhythm reminds one of a loom, on which the girdle would have been woven.

Armitage translates line 2358 as "Because the belt you are bound with belongs to me." He chooses to make this line easier to understand by replacing *wede* (*weeds*, as in *widow's weeds*) with the more commonly used *belt* and omitting *girdel*. The replacement of *wede* and omitting of *girdel* changes the essence of the line. *Wede* starts the *w* alliteration in the original line; however, it is now *belt* that the alliteration centers on in Armitage's translation. The *b* alliteration does not create the Gawain-poet's original gliding sound, but rather gives the line a more percussive sound. The percussive sound also lends an anticipatory atmosphere that is not present in the original line 2358. Armitage's omitting of *girdel* upsets the steady rhythm of the line by removing two of the line's original nineteen syllables. In tandem, the percussive sound and different rhythm are not reminiscent of a working loom. Indeed, Armitage's rhythm causes line 2358 to read more like a sentence rather than a line in a stanza.

Borroff, however, translates this line as "For that is my belt about you, that same braided girdle." Borroff, like Armitage, translates *wede* as *belt* and subsequently alters the original *w* alliteration to *b* alliteration. Borroff's translated line consequentially possesses the percussive sound of *b*, not the gliding *w*. Unlike Armitage, Borroff places the alliteration in similar positions to that of the Gawain-poet's. Borroff, though, does not omit

girdel from her translation and thus retains the original nineteen syllables. The retention of those syllables and position of the alliteration allows Borroff to form an even rhythm that is comparable to the steady rhythm of the original line 2358. While Borroff successfully maintains the Gawain-poet's rhythm, she sacrifices the effect of the alliteration by translating *wede* as *belt* (not *weed*). Her translation loses the smooth *w* sound, that would have, in combination with the steady rhythm, remind one of a working loom (as the original line does).

Finally, Tolkien translates line 2358 as "For it is my weed that thou wearest, that very woven girdle." Tolkien's translation is arguably closest to the original line, since the stylistic elements of his translation are very close to those the Gawain-poet employs. Tolkien, unlike Armitage and Borroff, translates *wede* as *weed* and not *belt*, which allows Tolkien to retain the Gawain-poet's *w* alliteration and the smooth, gliding sound. Tolkien also matches his placement of the alliteration to the positions in the original line, conserving the original nineteen syllables by not discarding *girdel*, and preserves the even, steady rhythm of the Gawain-poet. By preserving the original sound and rhythm, Tolkien does not lose the evocation of a working loom. Tolkien's success in maintaining the style and essence of the Gawain-poet centers around Tolkien's choice to translate *wede* as *weed* and not *belt*. *Weed*, like *wede*, refers to a garment, but *weed* in this sense is archaic and not commonly known. By translating *wede* as *weed*, Tolkien prioritizes the effect of the *w* alliteration over using a more commonly known word like *belt* in place of *wede*. Tolkien's choice of alliterative verse over easy understanding allows him to retain the flavor and nuances of line 2358.

In conclusion, alliterative verse forms the core of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Translators who only translate for meaning and forgo the recreation of the Gawain-poet's alliterative verse cause their translations to lose or change those aspects which make Sir Gawain so distinctive, such as the reading experience, the Gawain-poet's original intent, and the essence of the poem itself. Without alliterative verse, a translation may convey the meaning of the original poem, but the translation loses its poetic appeal. A translation of *Sir Gawain* reads similarly to prose without alliterative verse, not poetry. Thus, the most successful and authentic translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are those which preserve the alliterative verse

of the Gawain-poet. Accounting for alliterative verse when translating may make the translation harder to understand, but maintaining the alliterative verse allows readers a way to more directly experience the original text.

NOTES

1. “The man that the stratagem of treason there wrought.” All translations not attributed Armitage, Borroff, or Tokein are my by myself and Dr. Sarah Campbell.
2. “On many banks Britain full broad he rules / with joy.”
3. See appendix for literal translation
4. See appendix for translation.

WORKS CITED

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APPENDIX

Literal translation of Stanza 95, lines 2358–2388:

For it is my clothes that you wear, that is same woven girdle,

My own wife wove it; I know it well for truth.

Now I know well your kisses, and your behavior as well,

2360

And the wooing of my wife, I planned it myself.
I sent her to test you, and truly I think,
You, one of the most perfect knights who ever set foot on earth.
As pearls are to white peas, you are more precious,
In this way, Gawain, in good faith, than other fine knights. 2365
But here you lacked a little, sir, and loyalty you lacked;
But that was for no wild deed; neither for wooing.
But because you loved your life—the less I blame you.’
That other strong man in study stood a great while,
So overcome with anger, he shuddered within; 2370
All the blood in his chest rushed into his face
As he shrank all for shame while the man talked.
The very first words uttered by that knight:
‘I am cursed by cowardice and avarice both!
In you is villainy and vice that virtue destroys.’ 2375
Then he caught the knot, and wrenched it loose,
And threw the belt viciously to the man himself:
‘Lo! There’s the false thing, let it fall!
For fear of your stroke taught me cowardice
To corrupt my courtesy, my worship to forsake, 2380
That is largess and loyalty that belongs to knights.
Now am I faulty and false, and fears have always been
Of treachery and untruth—both betide sorrow
And care!
I confess to you, knight, here, 2385
All fault is my own;
Let me regain your good will
And ever after, I shall beware.’

ALICIA ESPINOSA is a rising sophomore in Boston University's College of Arts and Sciences, studying history. She was born and raised in Virginia Beach, Virginia. She has always possessed an interest in medieval history and literature but gained an even deeper appreciation for them from this seminar. Alicia can not thank Dr. Sarah Campbell enough for her support and guidance throughout the course.