Oh! What a Splendidly Silly Sprig of Holly!!

in Mr Simon Armitage's 'Translation' of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'

This essay is a critical appreciation of the translation of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' by Simon Armitage that was published by Faber and Faber in 2007.

The essay is hand-written in fifty-four pages. It is hoped that, despite the inconsistences of the somewhat hurried script, it may be acceptable as honouring the original poem in its 'lel letteres loken'.

Michael George Gibson
Knutsford, Cheshire
June 2014

Speak, Jackdaw:

Messrs. · Faber and Faber have foisted upon us
Mr. · Armitage's awful and arrogant 'translation'
of a · marvellously mannered and moulded poem.
It is a feebly · false and fatuous, foxy hotch-potch;
such a · shameful sham and shocking farrago;
a variously · vain, vacant and vicious pastiche;
and a · galling and gulling, ungracious travesty.
As a · pompously perpetrated and preposterous parody,
and a · messy, meddling and muddled mish-mash,
it has inspired this · sceptical scarifying and scathing
'skinning'.

Michael George Gibson
Knutsford, Cheshire
June 2014

"Good **G-r-r**-ief !
G-r-r-eat God !
It's **G-r-r**-eeney Todd !"

Oh! What a Splendidly Silly Sprig of Holly!!

in Mr Simon Armitage's 'Translation' of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'

Messrs. Faber and Faber introduce us to Simon Armitage's 2007 'Translation' of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' with this encomium:

> Simon Armitage's new version is meticulously responsive and responsible to the tact and sophistication of the original – but equally suceeds in its powerfully persuasive ambition to be read as an original new poem. It is as if, six hundred years apart, two northern poets set out on a journey through the same mesmeric landscapes – acoustic, physical and metaphorical – in the course of which the Gawain poet has finally found his true and long-awaited translator.

In this essay it will be argued that this is all 'a puff of nonsense.'

Mr. Armitage has in many ways shown an ignorance of, and even a contempt for, the "tact and sophistication" of the original poem.

This essay will show that he has failed to acknowledge and respect many of the subtle and lovely elements of the marvellously mannered poem, in matters of both metrics and meaning, and that he has produced a 'translation' which is in the end much of an ugly, meddling and muddled pastiche, and a vain and preposterous sham.

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In his own short Introduction, Mr. Armitage suggests that the poem's

> "lack of authorship seems to serve as an invitation opening up space within the poem for a new writer to occupy."

The term "lack of authorship" is a strange and evasive one, presumably intended to express the fact that we do not know who was the author of the poem. The whole statement is, for want of any more objective critical term, silly guff. By dealing with portions of Mr. Armitage's 'translation', and comparing them with the original text, this essay will show how this "new writer" occupies his "space within the poem" in an unmannerly and seemingly ignorant way. He appears to be largely unaware of the metrical structure of the original verse, or not to care about its meticulous craftsmanship. Had Mr. Armitage translated from, say, John Anderson's 1996 Everyman edition of the poem, or read JRR Tolkien's lovely and infinitely superior verse translation, and the notes on verse-structure that accompany them, he would have had a better idea how he might have proceeded respectfully and responsibly in his own verse 'translation'. It would appear from the quotations he makes of transliterated Middle English that he has looked at Burrow's edition published by Penguin in 1972; but he does not acknowledge this, which is itself an unprofessional and unmannerly way of proceeding, a peculiar and 'shifty' way of suggesting that the poem is somehow 'his own'.

This essay will also suggest that Mr. Armitage shows a lack of awareness of, or a disinterest in, the diction and narrative mode of the original poem – its "sophistication" as one might say. The poem may be said to be telling a story of mannerly actions in a highly mannered society. In this respect Mr Armitage is inconsistent in his tone and in his telling of the tale.

It may be objected, of course, that there is no requirement on Mr. Armitage to make any particularly close and 'slavish' imitation of the original poem in any respect. It is open to him to make as 'free' a 'version' as he wishes. However, his own express decision to make an alliterative version, and his publisher's declaration that his version

is "meticulously responsive and responsible" to the original, requires that the strictest criteria be used in assessing it.

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In his five-page Introduction, Mr. Armitage displays a most peculiar understanding of the poem. What he has to say about its alliterative nature will be considered later. Attention will first be given to his description of what he perceives to be other characteristics of it, in his final paragraph, which is presented here:

> *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a poem which succeeds through a series of vivid contrasts: standard English contrasting with colloquial speech; the devotion and virtue of the young knight contrasting with the growling blood-lust of his green foe; exchanges of courtly love contrasting with none-too-subtle sexual innuendo; exquisite robes and priceless crowns contrasting with spurting blood and the steaming organs of butchered deer; polite, indoor society contrasting with the untamed, unpredictable outdoors . . . and so on. Those contrasts stretch the imaginative universe of the poem and make it three-dimensional. Without the space they open up, there would be no poem to speak of. The same contrasts can be observed in the form of the poem as well as its tone, with elements of order and disorder at work throughout, often operating simultaneously. On the side of order we have the four-beat pulse of each line, the very particular number of verses, and the rhyme and rhythm of the 'bob and wheel' sections. On the side of disorder we have the unequal line lengths, the variable verse lengths, and the wildly fluctuating pace of the story. Even the alliteration, constant and insistent for the most part, occasionally fades from view altogether. So within the strictures and confines of this very formal piece we detect a human presence, the Gawain poet, a disciplined craftsman who also liked to run risks and take liberties. He would appear to have set himself a series of rules, then consciously and conspicuously gone about bending them. As his translator, I hope to have been guided by his example.
>
> Simon Armitage

This paragraph consists of two incompatible halves. The first half, ending at "no poem to speak of," concerns "vivid contrasts" of a sort that he says are to be found in the matter of the narrative. However, there is a spuriousness and a falseness about these "contrasts." Differences in speech-registers are the usual stuff of fictional narr-

atives, as of life; they are nothing exceptional. The same can be said for differences in character. Then consider Mr. Armitage's expression "the growling blood-lust of his green foe." This is misleadingly melodramatic: the Green Knight is not presented in this way in the original poem. And then consider that there is no "crown" mentioned anywhere in the story. Further, the organs of the butchered deer are not described as "steaming": the poem's audience is left to imagine that for themselves, if they will. Mr. Armitage is something of an 'embroiderer,' to use a metaphor – and of a 'fibber,' to use a more colloquial term. Then the ideas expressed in the second and third sentences of the paragraph, though they sound impressive, are analytically and critically meaningless, a sort of 'metaphorical blather.'

The substance of the second half of the paragraph, from "The same contrasts," is different. The "contrasts" that Mr. Armitage claims to be demonstrating here concern the objective, technical nature of the verse. They are not of the "same" nature as the "vivid contrasts" in the text that he presented earlier. Further, he now claims to be showing us "contrasts" between "order" and "disorder," which were not terms used in discussing the "contrasts" earlier. Mr. Armitage's is a doubly deceitful or disordered dissertation.

When we examine these supposed "contrasts" in the technical nature of the verse, we find that he is talking unsupported and unsupportable nonsense. Consider the third statement in the second half of the paragraph, where he tells us:

> "On the side of disorder we have the unequal line lengths, the variable verse lengths, and the wildly fluctuating pace of the story."

These suggested sources of "disorder" are spurious. The assertions are nonsense, as we shall show. However, before we examine them, we need to attend to the confusion that is inherent in most discussions of poetry in which the terms 'verse' and 'line' are used.

In his sentence quoted above, Mr. Armitage means by a "verse" any of the one hundred and one sections of the poem which are seen to end with what is called a 'bob and wheel'. It would be better if in our discussions we could agree to use the terms 'line', or 'verse', or 'verse-line' for any measured line of poetry. The term verse in its primary sense derives from the Latin 'versus', a 'furrow'; and a furrow is, after a turn, followed by a further furrow. The one hundred and one sections of the poem here, which Mr. Armitage calls "verses," may instead be called 'pieces,' if not 'sections'. We may then use the term 'part' for any of the four larger portions into which the poem is divided.

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Now we may consider the first of Mr. Armitage's curious assertions in that third sentence in the second half of the last paragraph of his Introduction. His suggestion is that "the unequal line lengths" constitute some sort of "disorder". What does he mean? Is this perceived "disorder" of shall we say a 'stylistic' sort, or of a technical and metrical sort? Mr. Armitage will tell us nothing more. We must assume that he has difficulty in understanding the metrical structure of the longer verse-lines in the poem. However, in his previous sentence he has said that:

"on the side of order we have the four beat pulse of each line."

"Each line", he says, is so ordered. What clearer 'ordering' does he want? He is arguing against himself here. This is all most peculiar.

Now, we may suspect that this is diversionary nonsense to prevent us from giving too much attention to the claims made in the last three sentences of his Introduction. Mr. Armitage's assertion that "the Gawain poet" was "a disciplined craftsman" is true, and this truth has been demonstrated and praised by many able and devoted people over many years. However, the further claim that the Gawain poet "appears to have set himself a series of rules, then conspicuously gone about bending them" because he "liked to run risks

and take liberties" is false and ridiculous. Indeed, it is reprehensible. Mr. Armitage offers no support for the assertion. It is 'tosh'. His making of it appears to be empty posturing, a preposterous 'taking of liberties' in itself that is intended to make it less likely that his readers might find his 'translation' of the poem to be no match for the original in craftsmanship and beauty.

But perhaps this judgement of Mr. Armitage is ill-founded and premature. We shall set it aside for the time being, 'save as', and approach the matter another way. It is possible that he has actually read a lot about the metrics and technical craftsmanship of the Gawain poet, but has either not understood it or has chosen to ignore it. To 'take liberties' you have to know what the 'constraints' are that you wish to be 'liberated', or to 'liberate' yourself from. Perhaps he has read Anderson and Tolkien; perhaps he has worked from the Early English Texts Society version of the original poem by Sir Israel Gollancz – from which all the quotations from the original poem that are given in this essay have been taken. If he has, he is not 'letting on'. However, it is also possible that, despite his declared interest in the "form" of poetry, Mr. Armitage has not informed himself to any great extent concerning the verse-structure of medieval alliterative poetry in general or of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' in particular; that he does not much care about it; and that he is proceeding to 'translate' the poem only as some sort of four-beat verse of a generally alliterative character. It is this second conjecture that we shall act upon now. We shall analyse some of Mr. Armitage's text against the original, and draw upon further matter from his Introduction. As we go, we shall meanwhile 'keep our options open', as it is said.

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To begin again. Mr. Armitage seems to be saying that there is considerable variation or "difference" in the line lengths of 'Sir

Gawain and the Green Knight,' and that this variation constitutes some sort of "disorder." However, the "disorder" is, he says, deliberate. The poet has set himself "rules" (of a sort that Mr. Armitage does not deem it necessary to specify) and has "then consciously and conspicuously gone about bending them" (in ways which again he does not specify). This is a somewhat irresponsible form of literary analysis and criticism; but, anyway, his claim is false.

We shall start to counter it by making some preliminary notes on certain aspects of the medieval alliterative tradition and its craft principles.

We will go back to some Old English verse. We must assume that Mr. Armitage is unaware that, for instance, line 1413 of 'Beowulf,'

ẃisra ḿonna ẃong sceáwian,

and line 1167,

þæt he hæfde ḿod ḿicel þeah þe he his ḿagum ńære,

are both acceptable, normal, ordered, four-beat verse-lines, and are thus metrically equivalent to each other. (The text is from Michael Swanton's edition of 1978, for Manchester University Press; the stress-marks are mine.) He may also be interested to know that line 1166,

æt ḟotum sæt ḟrean Ścyldinga; gehwylc hiora his ḟerhþe
ṫreowde,

though it has five main beats in it, which is unusual, is not "disordered": it is an accepted variant of the usual four-beat verse-line, an augmented form. In the main body of each verse-line there are four main beats, or pulses, which are usually considered as two pairs. In lines 1167 and 1166 the pairs are preceeded by a considerable amount of material additional to the words carrying the pairs of beats. This is not disorderly or "disordered"; it is what the maker of the verse-lines needed here to carry the sense of the story on. In the case of line 1166 the maker included a word which takes a stress that alliterates, and this is an extra ornament in the system. We shall describe this technique more fully later on.

Turning to 'Gawain,' we assume that for Mr. Armitage some of

the later verse-lines in the twenty-first piece of the third part of the poem (lines 1648 - 1662) are "disordered". It would seem that he is unlikely to appreciate that line 1650,

/Wakned bi wozez waxen torches,

is metrically equivalent to lines 1660 and 1661,

Pat al for-/wondered watz pe wyze, & wroth with hymselven,
Bot he/nolde not for his nurture nurne hir azaynez,

in that there are, in each, four main beats that can be set more or less isochronously in reading or in recitation. Furthermore, we must suppose it unlikely that Mr. Armitage is properly aware of the well-ordered fifth and alliterating beat in line 1659,

Wyth stille/stollen countenaunce, pat stalworth to plese.

We will return to this piece later, when we have further examined what little it is that Mr Armitage tells us that he knows about the verse-structure of 'Gawain, beyond there being the "four-beat pulse" in the verse-lines, and when we have then made some notes on what he should know about it – or what he may indeed know about it but hasn't deemed it necessary to tell us.

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Mr. Armitage has this to say about the alliterative mode of the poem:

> "Some translators, for perfectly valid reasons and with great success, have chosen not to imitate its highly alliterative form. But to me, alliteration is the warp and the weft of the poem, without which it is so many fine threads."

We observe here the somewhat extravagent metaphor "the warp and the weft." What else, materially, can there be in this metaphorical poem? But it is more important to note the use of the word "imitate". 'Imitation' may be more or less close. We presume that Mr. Armitage sees his version as some sort of 'imitation' of the original – for one thing, in being "highly alliterative". He goes on:

> "In some very elemental way, the story and the sense of the poem is directly located within its sound. The percussive patterning of the words serves to reinforce their meaning and to countersink them within the memory."

The first sentence here, despite the seeming dramatic importance of the phrase "In some very elemental way", has no very precise meaning. It turns on the doubtful metaphor, "located". Perhaps in some 'mazy' way we are meant to be 'moved' to 'feel' the words "story", "sense" and "sound" 'cluster' together in the same 'location'. The second sentence may perhaps be 'moving' towards a discussion of onomatapoeia, but it is more concerned with saying something about the memorability that alliteration – and, of course, rhyme – can give to a text. However, the metaphors of 'reinforcing' and 'countersunk screws', though they suggest ideas of material craftsmanship, do not 'mix' too well with the earlier 'weaving' metaphor of "warp and weft". What we particularly note in this 'blur' of ideas is the term "percussive patterning" – though it rather distractingly brings to mind the idea of 'hammering' rather than 'screwing' –, which suggests that there may be some sort of systematic use of alliteration in the original poem. We shall see if Mr Armitage finds such a system, and whether or not he imitates it.

His discourse now takes a strange turn. Is he still talking about "percussive patterning", or whatever, when he says:

> "So in trying to harmonise with the original rather than transcribe every last word of it, certain liberties have been taken. This is not an exercise in linguistic forensics or medieval history; the intention has always been to produce a living, inclusive and readable piece of work in its own right. In other words, the ambition has been <u>poetry</u>."

This is baffling. There is a logical disjuncture here. The "so" and the "rather than" suggest that some material has been left out. How might "harmonising" – in all its 'melodiousness' – relate to "imitate" here, and to "percussive patterning" in the previous sentence? Why does the clause "transcribe every last word" suddenly appear? We are not told what "certain liberties" have been taken with what. Then, the second sentence

is also curiously tendentious. A dichotomy – and a false one – is set up between "an exercise in linguistic forensics or medieval history" and "a living, inclusive and readable piece of work." Tolkien's grasp of "linguistic forensics" and of "medieval history" were both of the highest order; and his alliterative translation is as "living, inclusive and readable" as one could wish. There would seem to be some rather opaque 'special pleading' by Mr. Armitage here, which prepares the way for those extraordinary claims that he makes concerning "disorder" later in his Introduction. It is all a somewhat undisciplined and disgraceful mode of argument and persuasion. It is as if he is saying: In my 'imitation' of the poem I am going to take unspecified "liberties" in order to be more "living, inclusive and readable" in my 'translation' (from sources that I am not going to specify or politely acknowledge) than are many other translations (which, again, I will not specify). We 'smell a rat' – or perhaps a 'fox.'

Mr. Armitage now deals more directly with matters of alliteration:

> "On the subject of alliteration it should be mentioned that within each line it is the stressed syllables that count. A line like 'and retrieves the intestines in time-honoured style' (1612) might appear not to alliterate at first glance. But read it out loud, and the repetition of that 't' sound – the tut-tutting, the spit of revulsion, the squirming of the warm, wet tongue as it makes contact with the roof of the mouth – seems to suggest a physical relationship with the action being described."

This is a curious passage. We may first ask, who is Mr. Armitage writing for? Perhaps the answer is, an "inclusive" audience. Anyone who knows well what alliteration is, will not need to be shown where it occurs in his line 1612. For anyone who may not know much, or who may perhaps even know nothing about the alliterative style that is "the percussive patterning" and "the warp and the weft" of the original poem, this is all that they are told about it. In Mr. Armitage's line 1612 there is what he calls a "patterning" of three and, perhaps he thinks,

even four, main, stressed syllables. However, a 'pattern' is by general definition 'a sequence or arrangement of corresponding parts or motifs.' One line does not establish 'alliterative patterning' in a set of verses. In any one verse-line there is an arrangement of elements. If that arrangement is a motif repeated in subsequent verse-lines, then we may say that there is a 'pattern'.

The only other verse lines that Mr. Armitage quotes in the Introduction are six in Middle English that are possibly taken from Professor Burrow's Penguin edition of the poem:

> And rogh knokled knarres with knorned stones (2166)
>
> Hit had a hole on the ende and on aythers side,
> And overgrowen with gres in glodes aywhere,
> And all was holw inwith, nobot an olde cave,.. (2180-2182)
>
> Bot Arthure wolde not ete til all were served,.. (85)
>
> Forthy, iwis, bi your wille, wende me behoves. (1065)

Anyone previously unaware or uninformed about alliterative "patterning" in medieval verse might begin to get some idea of it from examination of these verse-lines; but they would probably have been baffled by lines 2180 and 2182, where the alliteration is on h and any vowel. Mr Armitage himself has no more to say here about the alliteratively patterned fabric of the original poem, and of his own approach to it in 'translation.' Are we to conclude from this single verse-line of his, 1612, that the 'pattern' we may expect in every, or in most, verse-lines is that the first three main beats, and possibly the last, will alliterate? That would indeed be "patterning." But, if not, what <u>are</u> we to expect?

In the paragraph under review, which began, "On the subject of alliteration," Mr. Armitage has no more to say about "patterning." It now moves on to other aspects of verbal sound, directly introducing – though avoiding using the term itself – the matter of onomatapoeia. He takes that one verse-line of his, 1612, as an example:

> and retrieves the intestines in time-honoured fashion.

It is unlikely that the audience for the original poem were at all squeamish about this line 1612:

& hatz out pe hastlettez as hiztly bisemez.

Here 'hastlettez' means entrails generally; and 'hiztly bisemez' means 'noble', 'fit' and 'seemly', indicating a right and proper ritual. Mr. Armitage's verse-line gets this quite well; but does he really expect us to react as strongly as he suggests, to ideas that are introduced by the oddly reticent word 'retrieves', which misses the more direct vigour of 'hatz'? Who does he imagine will be "tut-tutting," "spitting in revulsion" and thinking on "the squirming of a warm wet tongue as it makes contact with the roof of the mouth", as they respond to the craftsmanship of his verse-line? Mr Armitage certainly seems to have entertained himself intently here; but he should not expect too many of his readers to be stimulated into going, as he has, somewhat

over the top in an orgy of onomatopoeia.

The formal and technical inferenee that we might take from this paragraph is that we should be expecting some sort of onomatapoeic excitement from every verse-line in his own version of the poem, and indeed from every verse-line in the original (which is an exhausting and absurd prospect); for the paragraph continues with this:

> "If the technique is effective, as well as understanding what we are being told we take a step closer to actually experiencing it. It is an attempt to combine meaning with feeling."

The only other reference that Mr. Armitage makes in his Introduction to alliterative arrangement as an abstract and objective æsthetic feature of the original poem is in that last paragraph, where he suggests that another sort of "disorder" occurs in the poem when "the alliteration, constant and insistant for the most part, occasionally fades from view entirely." We shall consider this strange and tendentious statement in due course. But before doing so, and in order to take up from §5, where we were first examining Mr. Armitage's general grasp of the alliterative verse-form, we may give a brief descr-

iption of the conventions of alliterative verse in Old and Middle English.

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The verse-line generally has four main beats or stresses in it, as Mr. Armitage suggests; and it is usually notionally regarded as being composed of two 'halves', or portions, with two beats in each. From the examples already quoted it may be seen that the first 'half' of a verse tends to have more 'verbal material' in it than does the second, and that it may, as already stated, have an additional full stress in it. So we can say that there tends to be greater 'wordage' in the 'opening portion' of a verse-line than in the 'closing portion'. The general, the principal arrangement of the alliterating beats is that the first three of the standard four stresses alliterate, but not the last. This is the basic arrangement, from which there may be variation. It is the predominant motif, from which a sense of pattern is derived. Quite often in Old English verse – though not so often in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' – only the first and the third beats, or the second and the third, will alliterate. Thus in one way or another, except on rare occasions, the two halves of the verse-line are 'tied' together. There are also quite a number of verses in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' in which all four of the standard stresses alliterate; but the general æsthetic effect throughout the poem is that the alliterative 'density' is greater in the earlier part of the verse-line than in the later part. This gives an overall effect of a sort of 'pulsation' from line to line, as the fore-part of the verse seems to 'fill', after which a 'relaxation' occurs as the line extends to its 'turn' into the next. In 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' this early 'density' or 'weighting' of the verse-line is made more pronounced by there often being, as we earlier noted, a considerable amount of material preceeding the four standard beats. This material may be called a 'fore-running', and any full beat in it may be called a 'fore-beat'. We have already noted that in for instance line 1166 of 'Beowulf', and in line 1659 of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', there is an alliterating fore-beat. In the latter poem there is a significant proportion of verse-lines that have a fore-running which holds a fore-beat; and a considerable proportion of these fore-beats alliterate with others in the line.

These, then, are the conventional structural principles of medi-

eval alliterative verse that the 'absent' author of the poem has used to shape its sound and sense. These are the principles of which Mr. Armitage is either ignorant or which he has chosen to ignore and even to deliberately subvert.

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In a first examination of the way that Mr. Armitage goes about his work of 'translation' we may return to where we left off in §5. Some of the longer lines from the twenty-first piece of the third part of 'Gawain' were introduced. We were examining Mr. Armitage's contention that the phenomenon of "unequal line lengths" was "on the side of disorder." Here are lines 1648 to 1663:

1648 Þenne þay teldet tableȝ, trestes alofte,
Kesten cloþeȝ vpon, clere lyȝt þenne
Wakned bi woȝeȝ, waxen torches
Seggeȝ sette, & serued in sale al aboute.
1652 Much glam & gle glent vp þer-inne
Aboute þe fyre vpon flet, & on fele wyse,
At þe soper & after, mony aþel songeȝ,
As coundutes of kryst-masse & caroleȝ newe,
1656 With alle þe manerly merþe þat mon may of telle.
& euer oure luflych knyȝt þe lady bi-syde;
Such semblaunt to þat segge semly ho made,
Wyth stille stollen countenaunce, þat stalworth to plese,
1660 Þat al for-wondered watȝ þe wyȝe, & wroth with hym-seluen,
Bot he nolde not for his nurture nurne hir a-ȝayneȝ,
Bot dalt with hir al in daynte, how-se-euer þe dede turned
to wrast;

These verse-lines are all perfectly well ordered, though some have five stresses in them, not the four that Mr. Armitage regards as the rule. Four of these verses are markedly longer than the rest, lines 1659-62, and these presumably are, for him, "disordered."

This is the piece in the poem where, after the second hunt and the lady's second visit to Gawain, the company is going to supper. Here she will publically but surreptitiously 'come on to' the knight, to use the modern idiom. (It is somewhat surprising that Mr. Armitage – whose modernising 'translation' is mostly fairly formal and often quite archaic, but which will from time to time break into jarring colloquialism – does not himself use the phrase. After all, he does have it that on her first visit "she giggled girlishly" as she played with him; and much earlier in the story he says to us, at line 496,

but/don't be shocked if the plot turns pear-shaped;

and earlier still, on New Year's Day, he had Arthur hoping that he might hear some tall tale or "action-packed epic" – that is at line 95.) As the lady starts her 'game' at supper, the verse-lines expand – which in a way craftily allows the complexity of the situation to be intensely described and well accommodated.

Before that, however, there are such apparently simple verses describing the festivities as line 1652:

Much/glam and gle glent vp per-inne.

This verse-line clearly has four main beats in it, starting with 'glam', which is best translated as 'a merry noise'. But the first word, 'Much', can be given almost a full stress, a fore-beat. With or without such a fore-beat, the standard alliterative arrangement on the first three beats in the main body of the line is clear. The word 'gle' means 'joy' or 'mirth'. 'glent' occurs in four other places in the poem to mean 'gleam'. A fairly literal translation of the verse-line, which follows the alliterative arrangement, is:

And much/gaiety and glee gleamed up therein,...

though this may be criticised as losing the idea of 'noise' directly.

Mr. Armitage gives us a strange and more inaccurate version, thus:

and a/din arose as they revelled in a ring...

Though he may be commended for getting in the idea of noise, he takes

away the substance of the emphatic 'Much', loses the 'gleam' of things, and employs a reversed alliterative arrangement, so that the whole form and effect of the original line is changed.

It is at line 1658 that the lady is shown to be starting her work on Gawain:

"Such semblaunt to pat segge semly ho made,..

This verse-line is visibly longer than line 1652, but has an equivalent structure, with the first word inviting a good measure of stress, and alliterating, in this case, with the first three of the other beats. A plain, literal translation, taking the meaning of the verse in conjunction with the next, as dealt with below, is:

And such a semblance to that stalwart in seemliness she made,..

Mr. Armitage's approximation to the meaning is hardly adequate. It lacks the 'dramatic weight and tension' of the original:

and so loving was that lady towards the young lord,..

Mr. Armitage's four-beat rule, that is presumably in effect here, means that there is no fore-beat as such, even a non-alliterating one. Then, in the original, the alliterative arrangement links the two subtly opposed words 'semblaunt' (with a meaning here of 'dissembling') and 'semly'. By conflating these two terms in the single, simple word 'loving', and loosening the alliterative arrangement, Mr. Armitage's 'poem' loses the poetic effect of the original. A beat falls 'soggily' on the somewhat insignificant word 'towards', increasing the blandness of his verse-line.

It is at line 1659 that the greater material expansion of the verse-lines begins. However, there is nothing untoward about the next four verse-lines, though they are of the sort that Mr. Armitage must deem "disordered." They are all ordered expansions of the basic form. It is Mr. Armitage who shows that he does not have the poetic craftsmanship with which to meet the opportunity presented to him to give a full and adequate translation. In this respect his "meticulously responsive" 'translation' is a sham.

Line 1659 is 'weighty':

Wyth (/) stille/stollen countenaunce, pat stalworth to plese,..

'Stille' here means 'quiet' and 'meek', and gives a full and alliterating fore-beat. It is a nicely ironic term to use in this situation where the lady is taking the initiative. 'Stollen' means 'stolen' or 'surreptitious.' Both adjectives qualify 'countenaunce' (which probably had a secondary stress, as indicated), and this word links back to 'semblaunt' in line 1658. Then we have the noun 'stalworth', with its sense of 'strength', which characterises Gawain and carries through into the following verse-lines of the piece. That noun is the object of the verb 'plese', with its own meanings and connotations. A literal if somewhat archaic-sounding but orderly and appropriate translation of this verse is:

With (/) subtle,/stealthy countenance, that stalwart man to please...

Mr. Armitage has caught something of the original verse-line in his 'translation':

With/stolen glances and secret smiles..;

But this is more 'invention' than 'translation'. It is engagingly graphic; but it is in many ways an untrue simplification of the original line. His verse-line has much less verbal material in it; and it lacks the alliterating fore-beat. This, together with the strange alliterative arrangement that he so often uses, moves what we might call 'the centre of gravity' of the verse-line from near its beginning to nearer its end. This is a serious loss of form and substance. In Mr Armitage's "meticulously responsive and responsible" hands the original poem literally shrinks, while its meaning is depleted.

Line 1660 in the original poem is a little longer still:

Pat (/) al for-wondered watz pe wyze, & wroth with hym-seluen,..

Here we should first note that the fore-running has even more substance

than that in the previous verse, and can carry the 'dramatic weight' of a fore-beat in recitation. 'Al' is often written more fully as 'alle', suggesting a schwa that will make the word virtually dissylabic. And we may likewise take into account the ampersand, that may be extended to an almost dissylabic 'ande'. There is a lot of material in this verse-line, but it is not "disordered". It is basically an augmented four-beat line having the standard alliterative arrangement, as with the earlier verse 1652. The four beats in the main body of the line may be delivered more or less isochronously in recitation or reading, aloud or internally, in an easy lilting rhythm. The fore-running, with what may or may not be a fore-beat, is an ornamentation giving 'dramatic momentum' to the verse. In the main Mr. Armitage would seem to get the true, lilting rhythm into his version of the poem, which some translators fail to do; but this makes his contention of "disorder" all the more perverse. In his 'translation' of this verse-line there is his usual reduction of verbal material, and a rhythmical simplification which is attendant on that; and in other respects his verse is wanting. He gives us:

that it/ muddled his mind and sent him half-mad,..

'For-wondered' in the original means 'full of wonder, amazement', or 'disconcerted', rather than "muddled"; and Middle English 'wroth' is from Old English 'wripan', so it means 'twisted', not "half-mad". The idea of Gawain 'twisting' within himself is wonderful. Mr. Armitage misses this; and his idiosyncratic alliterative arrangement alters the metrical character of the verse-line. A literal translation such as,

That all in/wondering was that wight; he writhed within himself;

though somewhat archaic and stilted, is in many ways a more fitting one, which retains the alliterative structure of the original verse-line. (Indeed, the stiltedness quite well suggests Gawain's awkward position.)

Line 1661 is metrically equivalent to line 1660 (and to most of the others in the piece), with four beats in the standard alliterative arrangement:

Bot he/nolde not for his ′nurture ′nurne hir a′zaynez,..

Mr. Armitage gives us a version with about the same amount of verbal material in it:

But to/snub a ′noblewoman was ′not in his ′nature,..

His alliterative arrangement is more intense, with all four main beats seeming to alliterate (if we allow the 'sn' of the first beat to qualify). There are a number of verse-lines in the original poem in which all four main beats alliterate; and there are even some in which an alliterating fore-beat occurs in addition. However, his 'translation' of meaning goes awry again. The Middle English word 'nurne', which appears elsewhere in the poem as 'norne', clearly means to 'give' or 'offer' something; and 'azaynez' means 'towards'. Mr. Armitage has clearly read it as 'against'.

When we come to line 1662, and the 'bob' at 1663, we see the way his 'translation' is going. In the original poem these two verse-lines read:

Bot/dalte with hir al in ′daynte, how-se-ever pe ′dede ′turned
to ′wrast;..

Mr. Armitage's version is:

and though/tongues might ′wag he re′turned her at′tention
all ′night.

In the original verse-line 1662 we have to work carefully, in order to fit in smoothly and rhythmically the wordage between the first and second, and second and third beats, before delivering the last two beats in a measured way. The challenge to do so may be said to suggest the challenge faced by Gawain in the story. Mr. Armitage has been drawn in to setting down quite a long line of his own; but to get his four beats more or less isochronous (we suppose), and produce an "ordered" verse-line, he has simplified that challenging rhythmic complexity of the original. However, it is in his misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the mean-

ing of these verses that he does most damage to the fabric of the original poem. His 'translation' of the meaning here is almost the opposite of the truth of it.

In these two lines, Middle English 'dalte' means 'deal' or 'exchange'; 'daynte' is 'honour' or 'courtesy', or perhaps 'finesse'; 'dede' is 'practise' or 'dealings'; and 'wrast' is from Old English 'wræst', which meant 'excellence', 'nobility' or 'comliness' and thus had something of the same meaning as 'daynte'. By simplifying and paraphrasing in such a way as to fail to translate any of these words directly into his own verse-line, Mr. Armitage has failed to convey the complexity of the challenge to Gawain <u>not</u> to return the lady's blatent but surreptitious blandishments in kind, while at the same time indeed not doing anything to "snub" her. The true "tact and sophistication of the original" somewhat escapes Mr. Armitage here. The meaning and metre of lines 1661-3 may be translated fairly directly as:

> But he/could not, for his chivalry, in kind make advances,
> But/dealt with her in all courtesy, that, whatever, the deed might turn
> to virtue.

The further work of rendering the meaning of verse-lines 1662 and 1663 into a more fully alliterating form is challenging, with a 'wheel' coming up, and the impossibility of finding rhymes with 'virtue' (though 'flirt, you' would be fun to try); but the words and word-order might be changed to give such as:

> But/dealt with her in all daintiness, that, whatever, the deed to virtue
> be turned.

-9-

Matters of metrics and meaning of course inevitably interact, and we have run somewhat ahead of ourselves here in dwelling so much on questions of meaning. We shall now concentrate more on the metri-

cal and alliterative structure of the verse. Let us review the position that we have reached.

We have argued for the integrity of the four- or five-beat verse-line in the poem. Mr. Armitage has asserted that there is a consistent four-beat structure only, while also making an unsupported claim that the poet has "consciously and conspicuously" gone about "bending" certain "rules" that are not specified by him.

With regard to alliteration, we have briefly described the conventions that the poet has followed, and drawn attention to a particular feature of this poem, the prevalence of fore-beats in often quite extensive fore-runnings. Mr. Armitage has asserted that the alliteration is "constant and insistent for the most part," without giving any specific description of the conventions; and he has also made unsupported claims, firstly that the poet has also been "bending" some "rules" in these matters, and, secondly, that the alliteration "occasionally fades from view altogether."

As we have already said, we do not know what Mr. Armitage knows about these matters, or what he means by his assertions. We suspect that he is talking deliberate nonsense in order to somehow free himself to take "liberties" in his own version – "liberties" that result in the misrepresentation and even demeaning and subversion of the integrity and worth of the original poem. But we shall continue to credit him with innocent ignorance for as long as we are able, and will examine further what he does with the material that he is 'translating.'

Here is something of a technical examination of the verse in the opening piece of the poem, and of Mr Armitage's version of it – though we shall take into account other aspects of his 'translation.'

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In both versions the presence of a fore-running, or not, is indicated by a 'bar-line'. All the main beats in the verses are indicated with an oblique stress-mark. All the alliterating beats are marked with a small 'a'.

Siþen þe | sege & þe assaut wat3 | sesed at | Troye,
þe bor3 | brittened & | brent to | bronde3 & | aske3,
þe | tulk þat þe | trammes of | tresoun | þer | wro3t
Wat3 | tried for his | tricherie, þe | trewest on | erthe.
Hit wat3 | Ennias þe | athel & his | hi3he | kynde
þat | siþen de | preced | prouinces, & | patrounes | bicome
Welne3e of | al þe | wele in | þe | west | iles,
Fro | riche | Romulus to | Rome | ricchis | hym | swyþe;
With | gret | bobbaunce þat | bur3e he | biges | vpon | fyrst,
& | neuenes hit his | aune | nome, as hit | now | hat;
| Ticius to | Tuskan, & | teldes | bigynnes;
| Langaberde in | Lumbardie | lyftes vp | homes;
& | fer | ouer þe | French | flod | Felix | Brutus
On | mony | bonkkes ful | brode | Bretayn he | sette3,
wyth | wynne;
Where | werre & | wrake & | wonder
Bi | syþe3 hat3 | wont | þer-inne,
& | oft | boþe | blysse & | blunder
Ful | skete hat3 | skyfted | synne.

Once the | siege and | assault of | Troy had | ceased,
with the | city a | smoke-heap of | cinders and | ash,
the | turncoat whose | tongue had | tricked his | own | men
was | tried for his | treason – the | truest | crime on | earth.
Then | noble | Aeneas and his | noble | lords
went | conquering | abroad, laying | claim to the | crowns
of the | wealthiest | kingdoms in the | western | world.
Mighty | Romulus | quickly | careered towards | Rome
and con | ceived a | city in | magnificent | style
which from | then until | now has been | known by his | name.
| Ticius constructed | townships in | Tuscany
and | Langobard did | likewise, building | homes in | Lombardy.
And | further | afield, over the | Sea of | France,
on | Britain's broad | hill-tops, Felix | Brutus | made
his | stand.
And | wonder, | dread and | war
have | lingered | in that | land
where | loss and | love in | turn
have | held the | upper | hand.

When we took at the markings, verse by verse, the eye, shall we say, detects a general difference between the two versions that may be termed a difference in 'zoning', or perhaps one of 'density' or 'intensity'. Firstly it may be seen that in the original there is, overall, more material in the fore-runnings, with extra beats, some of which may be alliterating. The reduction in material in Mr. Armitage's version might have been anticipated, because he has declared for an unvarying four-beat line. Then it may be seen that Mr. Armitage's version is more 'diffuse', in that in nine of the main verse-lines he has an alliterating final beat; whereas in the original no final beat does so. Further, we see that in the original the alliterative arrangement in the main four-beat body of the verse-lines shows a distinct regular-

ity in that, in twelve of the fourteen, the arrangement is that beats 1, 2, 3 alliterate. This is a pattern. Mr. Armitage's verse-lines, however, lack such regularity, such a system. Indeed, he employs no particular predominant arrangement.

When we extend this analysis to the forty-four main verse-lines in the first three pieces of the poem, the situation can be more clearly defined. In the original poem, none of the final beats is alliterative. In thirty six of the forty-four verses, the alliterative arrangement is on beats 1, 2, and 3. When considering the situation in Mr. Armitage's verse-lines, we must first exclude from consideration six cases where he alliterates on all four beats (in lines 22, 26, 31, 46, 47 and 52), as this is an arrangement that occurs from time to time in the original. What we then find is that, in twenty-four of the remaining thirty-eight verse-lines, Mr. Armitage alliterates on the final beat. In the original poem the patterning is strong. It is a pattern. Nearly two thirds of the verse-lines have the 1, 2, 3 arrangement. This, then, is the motif from which other verses may occasionally vary without weakening the overall patterning effect. On the other hand Mr. Armitage achieves the following 'arrangements':

1, 2, 3	nine times
1, 2, 4	eleven times
1, 3, 4	six times
2, 3, 4	four times
1, 2	once
1, 3	four times
1, 4	twice
2, 4	once

This is not the "patterning" that he implies in his Introduction is to be found in his 'translation'. Where is the "warp" and where is the "weft" in this? Mr. Armitage claims that his 'poem' is "not only for the eye, but for the ear." This is a silly remark in any event: all true poetry is 'for the ear'; but here, in respect of his use of alliteration, the ear (and indeed the eye) tells us that his version of the true poem is a mess and an unprincipled muddle. The 'fabric' with which he presents us after the use he has made of his 'percussive hammer,' his 'countersinking screwdriver' and his 'weaving shuttles' is neither 'cloth' nor 'cladding'. It is not rhythmic to ear or eye

in its alliterative structure. Nor is it 'tasty' to the 'tongue': as we "retrieve the intestines" of his incontinent' verse 'method', it is not so much a matter of 'tut-tut!' as of 'tripe!' Mr Armitage is, in this respect, plainly a poetic pretender.

Remembering what Messrs. Faber and Faber told us, that

> "Simon Armitage's new version is meticulously responsive and responsible to the tact and sophistication of the original,"

we may return them a more sober assessment. The original poet has made tactful and sophisticated use of the old conventions of alliterative verse, to which he has brought his own particularly pronounced use of augmentation in the fore-runnings of the verse-lines. Mr. Armitage's achievement is tactless and unsophisticated. The claims made for the 'translation' are vain and false, as is Mr. Armitage's "hope to have been guided" by the example of the maker of the original poem. He may, as we suspect, be aware of the conventions that shaped the original poem; or he may, as we are choosing to assume, be truly ignorant of them. In either case, his liking for "running risks" and taking "liberties" has resulted in his producing an indisciplined, unsystematic 'mish-mash'. We could say, in a 'mock-alliterative' verse that Mr. Armitage's

> deliberate libertarianism debilitates the verse-structure.

In the original poem the systematic alliteration provides the especial æsthetic pleasure of expecting and encountering that predominant, patterning '1, 2, 3' motif. When there is variation from this, it is in accordance with certain subsidiary or complementary principles. As we have noted, there may be verse-lines in which all four principle stresses in the main body of the line alliterate. This is one sort of augmentation that the poet uses. But when we find him using only two such alliterating beats, 1 and 3, 1 and 4, 2 and 3, or 2 and 4 — which are actually all accepted, minimal arrangements in the Old English verse-line — he will often supplement the arrangement by providing an alliterating fore-beat. In this way he maintains that general 'intensity' in the early part of the verse-line. This contributes to what we have described as the somewhat less patterned but nevertheless insistant 'zoning' effect. We turn from one verse-line, with its usually non-alliterating final beat, into the density at the beginning of the

next, which creates what we have described as a 'pulsating' effect. Two examples of this augmentation are lines 136 and 236:

> þer hales in at þe/halle dor an aghlich mayster;..
> þen grene/aumayl on golde glowande bryȝter;..

Mr. Armitage does not provide these pleasurable effects. The metrical 'principles' that he has provided for himself in his version of the poem are that there shall be four beats in the verse-line; that generally three of these beats will alliterate; and that the first and the last beats are those most likely to be part of the alliterative arrangement. It is true that he has given his verses a generally rhythmic, four-beat shape; but these measured verse-lines are not sufficient to make a poem, let alone a good one: further organisation is required for that. Mr. Armitage's approach in these formal matters is chronically disorganised. We may say, in a regular alliterative verse,

> that his risk-running rule-bending ruins his verses.

In this most important respect his craftmanship is deplorable in comparison to that of "the Gawain poet," who has emphatically not "finally found his true and long-awaited translator."

-11-

There is one other matter concerning alliteration that may be dealt with here. Mr. Armitage's observation in the final paragraph of his Introduction, that

> "Even the alliteration, constant and insistent for the most part, occasionally fades from view altogether,"

is false to the point of impertinence and unscrupulousness. In order to make such a claim, he must have assessed every verse-line of the original poem. What evidence do we have of this? A survey of the first one thousand verses of the original will not provide a conclusive result, but should be sufficient for the purpose of refutation. We find that of those thousand verse-lines there are two in which the alliteration may be regarded as weak, but where it has certainly

not "faded from view altogether." They are these:

He watz so/joly of his joyfnes, & sum-quat childgered (86).
Heme wel/haled hose of pat same grene (157).

However, it may be that in the first case the 'French' pronunciation of j was close enough to the s for the s to be regarded as alliterating — just as the various vowel-sounds and h were considered as being equivalent for the purpose. But it might also be the case that 'child' should be thought of as having a final -e, and a schwa, and that the compound word took two stresses, of which the first, with its 'ch', can be considered to alliterate with the js. In the second case, the lack of an alliterating beat in the penultimate position may be seen (or heard) as compensated for to some extent by the supporting alliterating fore-beat. Or it might charitably be considered that there is a scribal error here. But if these are the sorts of scant examples on which Mr. Armitage is basing his observations, then his assessment is clearly false and absurd — indeed it may be called ignorant, petty, presumptuous and misleading. He uses 'phantom' examples to support a vacuous claim that the poet had a general plan or technique of 'creative disorder.' To this we can say 'balderdash' — which sounds like an old Scandinavian imprecation, but seems to constitute a valid and appropriate critical term to use here.

Before we return to consideration of Mr. Armitage's handling of the first piece of the poem, there are two other peculiar assertions of his that we should consider. In the sentence previous to that in which he declares that the alliteration "occasionally fades from view altogether," he declares that:

> "On the side of disorder we have... the variable verse lengths, and the wildly fluctuating pace of the story."

This analysis of the structure of the poem is fatuous blathering — if the term is not tautologous.

By a "verse" here Mr. Armitage means what we are calling a 'piece.' There is no requirement or expectation that, in the telling of a story in prose, or in verse-lines, or in a play, the paragraphs, chapters

or scenes should contain equal amounts of material. Each piece of the original poem tells its part of the tale in a steady and satisfying way. Likewise, 'changes of pace', in so far as they may be measured, are an expected and natural part of the telling of a good story. In the original poem there is no 'wildness' in the telling of the tale: the whole story of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' is beautifully measured out for us.

Let us turn from this 'tricky, trying and torturous tendentiousness' to consideration of a few other matters in Mr. Armitage's treatment of the first piece of the poem.

-12-

In §10 we were dealing with metrical matters. We may observe that in his version of this piece, Mr. Armitage does have two possible fore-beats that are not predicted by his 'four-beat rule' – though we cannot be sure that he actually observes them. These are in lines 1 and 8. However, these are 'cancelled out' by what rather ask to be taken as extra beats in the body of lines 4 and 14.

With regard to a different technical matter, we note that in his handling of the rhyme scheme of the 'bob and wheel' Mr. Armitage's craftsmanship again rather deserts him. Rhyme well used is 'blissful'. His failure – or refusal – to rhyme lines 16 and 18 is an insulting 'blunder.' A full rhyme-scheme is a "rule" that the poet of the original has nowhere "gone about bending." Why must Mr. Armitage present us with such ugliness? Others who have translated the poem into alliterating verse, such as Stone (1959), Tolkien (1975) and Borroff (1967) have all managed the 'bob and wheel' here with aplomb.

-13-

Now we may turn again to matters of translating the meaning of the original poem. If we can somehow set aside our perception of the metrical and alliterative shaping of the verse-lines, what we are

left with is a telling of the story in somewhat plain prose, in a formal 'tone'. There is hardly a figure of speech in the whole poem. A translator may then paraphrase the substance of the story in a similarly formal way, or may do it more informally. So a translator may choose to make a more 'expressive' or 'poetic' rendering of the original text, using figures of speech and so forth. In the main, Mr. Armitage keeps his discourse somewhat formal, with a somewhat old-fashioned and even archaic sort of diction, which is generally appropriate until he produces his own absurd phrasings and inventions that we may deal with later in this essay. However he can, as we shall consider more closely in due course, employ a jarring and bizarre colloquialism. There is a hint of this here in his use of the word "careering" in line 8. But a more significant lapse in translation results from Mr. Armitage's misunderstanding of, or disinterest in, the true meaning of line 14 in the original, which reads:

> On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez,..

The literal meaning of this is:

> On many hillsides of the broadest, Britain he established,...

Mr. Armitage's rendition of this in his lines 14 and 15,

> On Britain's broad hill-tops, Felix Brutus made
> his stand,

fails to convey the information that Britain was to take its name from Felix Brutus. This is not a hugely significant error; but it is at the very least careless of him to confuse the issue. We noted earlier that Mr. Armitage's version of the poem is not to be "an exercise in linguistic forensics or medieval history." Nor, perhaps, is it to be an exercise in strict attention to the smaller or even larger essential details of the original story. Now, the matter of his version in some way being a "human" and 'deliberately risk-taking disordering', in a technical sense, of the actual or imagined "strictures and confines of this very formal piece," is one thing. This is another. Both sorts of 'informality' result in mistranslation, and are to be deplored.

-14-

This discussion about methods of translation has dealt with matters of metrical structure, alliterative arrangement, meaning and 'tone'. To amplify and conclude our findings with regard to Mr. Armitage's 'translation' of the poem we will examine his version of the tenth piece of the poem against the original text (lines 203-231). The texts have have been marked out in the same way as with the first piece.

Whe*þer* | hade he no helme ne hawb[e]rgh nau*þer*,
204 Ne no | pysan, ne no plate þat pented to armes,
Ne no | schafte, ne no schelde, to schwue ne to smyte,
Bot *in* his | on honde he hade a holyn bobbe,
Þat is | grattest *in* grene when greue3 ar bare,
208 & an | ax *in* his o*þer*, a hoge & vn-mete,
A spetos | spar*þ*e to expou*n* *in* spelle quo-so my3t;
Þe | hede of an eln3erde þe large lenk*þ*e hade,
Þe grayn al of | grene stele & of golde hewen,
212 Þe bit | burnyst bry3t, *with* a brod egge,
As wel | schapen to schere as scharp rasores;
Þe stele of a | stif staf—þe sturne hit bi-grypte—
Þat wat3 | wou*n*den wyth yrn to þe wande3 ende,
216 & al bi | grauen *with* grene, *in* *gracios* werkes,
A lace | lapped aboute, þat louked at þe hede,
& so | after þe halme halched ful ofte,
Wyth tryed | tassele3 þerto tacched *in*-noghe,
220 On botou*n*3 of þe | bry3t grene brayden ful ryche.
Þis ha*þ*el | helde3 hy*m* *in*, & þe halle entres,
Driuande to þe | he3e dece, dut he no wo*þ*e,
Haylsed he | neuer one, bot he3e he ouer loked.

Yet he | wore no helmet and no hauberk either,
no | armoured apparel or plate was apparent,
and he | swung no sword nor sported any shield,
but | held in one hand a sprig of holly –
of | all the evergreens the greenest ever –
and in the | other hand held the mother of all axes,
a | cruel piece of kit I kid you not:
the | head was an ell in length at least
and | forged in green steel with a gilt finish;
the | skull-busting blade was so stropped and buffed
it could | shear a man's scalp and shave him to boot.
The | handle which fitted that fiend's great fist
was | inlaid with iron, end to end,
with | green pigment picking out impressive designs.
From | stock to neck, where it stopped with a knot,
a | lace was looped the length of the haft,
| trimmed with tassels and tails of string
fastened | firmly in place by forest-green buttons.
And he | kicks on, canters through that crowded hall
to | wards the top table, not the least bit timid,
| cocksure of himself, sitting high in the saddle.

224 Þe fyrst | word þat he warp, ' wher is,' he sayd,
' Þe | gouernour of þis gyng? gladly I wolde
Se þat | segg in sy3t, & with hym-self speke
ray | soun.'
228 To | kny3te3 he kest his y3e,
& | reled hym vp & doun,
He | stemmed & con studie
Quo | walt þer most renoun.

'And | who,' he bellows, without breaking breath,
'is | governor of this gaggle? I'll be glad to know.
It's with | him and him alone that I'll have
my say.'
The | green man steered his gaze
| deep into every eye,
230 ex | plored each person's face
to | probe for a reply.

To begin with, we will make a comparison of the texts line by line. In the later stages groups of verses will be considered.

However, before that, we may see that in the original text, thirteen of the twenty-four main verse-lines are in the '1, 2, 3' alliterative arrangement; there are four verse-lines in which all four main beats alliterate; there are six verse-lines with other conventional arrangements; and there is one irregular verse-line. In Mr. Armitage's set there are twelve verses in various conventional arrangements – with five in the '1, 2, 3' arrangement, two 'fours', and five others – and twelve irregular verse-lines with an alliterating final beat. It may further be observed that in the original text there are eleven augmenting, alliterating fore-beats, as well as a number of other possible fore-beats. Therefore there is more early material in the original verse-lines than Mr. Armitage takes into his own verses, and the alliterative arrangement concentrates generally towards the early stages of them. Again, the original text of this piece has the predominant, conventional alliterative pattern: Mr. Armitage's version has only "insistant" alliteration that is ultimately an ugly muddle.

We may now proceed verse-line by verse-line.

Line 203:

Wheper | hade he no helme ne haubergh nauper,..
Yet he | wore no helmet and no hauberk either,..

The previous piece had closed with a description of the Green Knight as fearsome and potentially deadly. 'Wheper' here is an emphatic 'however,' and can carry a fore-beat. Mr. Armitage's verse-line weakens this emphasis and

also damages the alliterative patterning by reversing it. A stronger translation might be:

And yet/he had on no helmet nor hauberk either,..

Line 204:

Ne no/pysan ne no plate þat pented to armes,..
No/armoured apparel or plate was apparent,..

Mr. Armitage reduces the fore-running. Then he leaves out the specific article of armour—which is an unnecessary sacrifice of detail, because the obsolete term 'pizane' can be retained to stand with 'hauberk' in the previous verse-line. Having lost his alliterative syllable with it, he then makes do by working one in, against convention, as the last beat again. 'Pented' in the Middle English means 'pertained'; so a stronger and closer verse-line, and one that is no more 'archaic-sounding' than some of the peculiarly 'prim' or inappropriately pompous verse-lines that Mr. Armitage can produce, is this:

Nor any/pizane nor plate-armour that purposed to arms,..

(And with regard to what we have termed Mr. Armitage's sometimes

peculiarly 'prim' or 'inappropriately pompous' verse-lines,

we mean such as these:

'whose virtues reverberate across vast realms' (370),
attended architecturally by many tall towers (795),
'that might leaven my loss when we meet in my memory' (1800),

and

'for my loss of faith I was physically defaced' (2507).

When the original verses are simply translated, they are more "readable" than these obtuse structures got up by Mr. Armitage.

Line 205:

Ne no/schafte ne no schelde, to schwue ne to smyte,..
And he/swung no sword nor sported any shield,..

Mr. Armitage manages to imitate the full alliterative arrangement in the original verse-line. That verse is making a distinction between ceremonial

and more functional weapons; but despite his use of the well-chosen word "sported," Mr. Armitage does not fully achieve this. He has substituted a "sword" for a (spear-)'schafte' (though this is not so "disordered" as his replacement of 'tayle' with the rather removed "fetlocks" in line 191); and then the idea that he presents to us with "swung no sword" is a gratuitous and somewhat silly piece of overdramatisation which starts to deflate the true humour and profound seriousness of the whole picture of the Green Knight that has been laid out for us in the previous three pieces, and will be completed in the next few verses. Perhaps the greatest challenge presented to us by this poem is to understand what the Green Knight may have signified to the sensibilities of the original 14th century audience. Their's was a world in which such outlandish wonders as a huge green knight could be more readily believed in than in our own.

A cautious translation of the verse-line, which follows it simply through, is:

And no/'a shaft nor any 'a shield to 'a show or to 'a smite with;..

Line 206:

'Bot in his/'a on 'a honde he hade a 'a holyn 'bobbe;..
But/'a held in one 'a hand a 'sprig of 'a holly-

The description of the figure has throughout been a sort of 'slow-motion' account of what the eye of the beholder would take in more quickly. The literary drama is exquisite. The narrator can put a significant fore-beat on 'Bot' in the considerable fore-running, as he presents to the listener's 'mind's eye' what is actually the most curious and less deadly of the objects that the Green Knight bears. By placing the second beat in the main body of the line on the word 'honde', drawing out the long vowel in 'on', and giving the word a schwa, the author concentrates our 'gaze' on that one hand, before the 'holyn bobbe' is presented to our imagination. The whole line can be drawn out so that even the 'his' almost becomes a subsidiary fore-beat. 'On the other hand', Mr. Armitage's four-beat arrangement (as we must suppose it to be), and his minimal fore-running, dissipate the especial 'gravity' of the verse-line. Then in other respects his 'translation becomes truly ridiculous. The 'bobbe' that the Green Knight carries is a significant mass of holly – a 'branch' or a 'bundle' – that must bal-

ance in its way the dreadful object not yet 'revealed' as being carried in his other hand. So we must imagine a 'branch', or a 'bundle', or perhaps even a more carefully made 'wreath' of holly: but not a 'sprig' of the sort that might be found on the top of a 'tame', modern, domestic Christmas pudding. This is not simply silly; it is, rather, somewhat shameful. It is as if Mr. Armitage holds the poem in some sort of contempt. The verse-line simply translates to:

But in his/one hand he held a holly bundle,..

The effect of Mr. Armitage's verse-line is to make the Green Knight an even greater 'figure of fun'. He does this again and again. He has "the great green chap" – as he calls him in line 2496 – behave throughout the story with a childishly exaggerated truculence. Sometimes he has him 'mouth off' lines like 310 quoted above. At others he has him uttering such jocularly demotic stuff as,

'I'm/spoiling for no scrap, I swear. Besides,
the/bodies on this bench are just bum-fluffed bairns' (279-80).

Perhaps he thinks that this mode of discourse may be more "readable." As he swings from one mode to another, sometimes in the same verse-line, as in

Then at/last, in the lateness, they upped and left (1027),

and

that the/girdle being given could be just the job (1856),

our assessment of his narrative style can only be that it is a 'farrago' – or perhaps merely a 'hotch-potch', like.

Line 207:

Þat is/grattest in grene when greves ar bare,..
of/all the evergreens the greenest ever,..

Mr. Armitage manages to significantly distort the sense of the original verse-line. His 'light' and 'smartly' repetitive verse misses the simple point: the meaning is not that the holly is the greenest of evergreens, but that its greenness is outstanding when most other trees are leafless in winter. How silly of him not to see this; or how disrespectful of the original text not to bother to convey the obvious meaning. There is something a little mad about all this. One may

simply remake the verse-line as:

That is the/greatest in green when the groves are leafless;..

Line 208:

& an/axe in his oper, a hoge & vnmete,..
and in the/other hand held the mother of all axes,..

The silliness deepens, and is destructive. Here the 'comic' colloquialism of the phrase "the mother of all axes" is bathetic. In this respect the verse-line accords with so many others in Mr. Armitage's 'translation.' For instance, in the fourth part of the poem he represents Gawain as saying to the Green Knight:

'Get/hacking, then, headbanger, your threats are hollow' (2300),

and

'Enough/swiping, sir, you've swung your last swing.
I've/born one blow without bottling out' (2322-3).

The 'readability' and 'inclusiveness' of these verses, and their 'poetry', is ungraceful and ungracious. They are ugly, as is his verse 208. A straightforward translation serves the serious substance of the original verse better:

And an/axe in the other, a huge, an immense one,..

Twelve verse-lines are now spent in describing this weapon. They are metrically, alliteratively and tonally of a particular formal gravity. At least eight of them have an extra stress in a fore-running, and seven of these fore-beats are part of the alliterative arrangements. If Mr. Armitage is aware of this, he ignores it. In only one of his next twelve verse-lines does he, perhaps, vary from his four-beat pattern.

Line 209:

A spetos/sparpe to expoun in spelle quo-so myzt;..
A/cruel piece of kit I kid you not:..

The banality of Mr. Armitage's rendering is again to be condemned as stupid and as contemptuous of the dignified tone and craftsmanship of the original poem. (At line 288 the axe becomes "this gigantic cleaver.") The telling of the story in this unmannerly way prejudices the original indirect humour of

the tale, because that humour derives from, and co-exists with, the serious, dignified and mannered basis of the poem. Mr. Armitage's spoiling of this is not simply silly: it is nasty. A closer translation is:

A terrible/tool to treat of in a tale, whoso might...

Though the use of the word 'tool', from Old English 'tol', meaning 'weapon', is rather at risk of being drawn into the banal 'orbit' of Mr. Armitage's "kit," we will ask our audience to be forebearing.

Line 210:

Þe/hede of an elnzerde þe large lengþe hade,..
the/head was an ell in length at least...

To compare this line in the original text (which line is one of the rare ones with an unconventional alliterative arrangement) with Mr. Armitage's version of it, raises interesting matters of poetics. They are both four-beat verse-lines; but the original verse has a far greater 'sonic presence'. It is probable that in the original dialect of the poem all the 'final es' were sounded as schwas. Then, further, in the Middle English word 'elnzerde', the first part, 'eln', was probably sounded almost as two syllables, 'elen'; and the r in 'zerde' was well articulated; so that the whole word was a considerable 'mouthful'. Then there is the considerable word 'lengþe' to be worked into the rhythmic scheme between the full beats on 'large' and 'hade', even as it alliterates with the former. The sonic and metrical complexity of the line marvellously conveys the size and length of the axe – in a way that Mr. Armitage's curt verse-line fails to do. If we imitate the substance and diction of the original as well as we are able, retaining the Middle English 'elnzerde' as the somewhat less 'weighty' 'ell-yard', we get a verse-line which is quite substantial and has an appropriate and effective archaic gravity:

And the/head of an ellyard in its long length had there.

Line 211:

Þe grayn al of/grene stele & of golde hewen,..
and/forged in green steel with a gilt finish;..

In the original verse-line the considerable fore-running, with its alliterating fore-beat, allows the words 'grene' and 'stele' to be seperately stressed, and the

wonder of the axe-head to be better taken in. Mr. Armitage's verse-line has an ambiguous metrical structure. It is possible that on this occasion he is allowing a five-beat verse-line,

and forged in/green steel with a gilt finish,

which would give a better translation of the verse-form of the original line. But he avoids dealing directly with the Middle English 'grayn'. This difficult and interesting word apparently comes from Old Norse 'grein', which means a (forked?) 'branch'; and this beautifully suggests the spreading blade of the Danish axe in the manuscript illustration. The verse-line may be translated as:

That grew out in/greenest steelwork, and with gold was forged.

This may be said to be more faithful to the original verse-line, and more 'lively' than that of Mr. Armitage, however it is read. (However, it must be said that his idea of a "gilt finish" is a reasonable one; and our verse-line could accordingly be ended, "and with golden hueing.")

Line 212:

Þe bit/burnyst bryzt, with a brod egge,..

the/skull-busting blade was stropped and buffed...

The original verse-line is masterful. Middle English 'bit' means 'edge', and gives us modern English 'bite'; and 'burnyst bryzt' makes us concentrate on that 'bit'. The endings of the three words almost allow us to touch and test the 'bit' - they provide the sort of onomatapoeic effect that Mr. Armitage relishes and says is such an important effect of the alliterative style, but which he fails to imitate in his own verse-line here. The original verse then describes the breadth of the crescent axe-blade, its 'brod egge'. Middle English 'egge' is pronounced so that the word is almost onomatapoeically 'sheared' into two syllables; and 'brod' is spoken with a long vowel and a schwa, so that it is also almost two syllables which may be well spread in spoken delivery. Mr. Armitage's verse-line is crass. He has 'connected' the word 'burnyst' to the word 'rasores' in the next verse-line. Then he has 'gone off on one' into the absurdity of introducing the terms "stropped" and "buffed". Both these terms concern the use of pieces of leather, for fine polishing a variety of substances as much as for

sharpening a 'razor.' He forgets that the sound of the axe being sharpened in the later scene of the story is:

As/one vpon a gryndelston hade grounden a sipe;.. (2202)

(But even in this piece of the poem, at line 2220, Mr. Armitage again has the axe-blade being "stropped.")

Then there is the further absurdity of his term "skull-busting." It suggests a blunt blow, rather than a 'biting' or 'shearing' one. All this he has 'bundled up' in a verse-line which has one of his weakest, and wonkiest, and perhaps 'wackiest' alliterative arrangements.

(Here, a simple "exercise in linguistic forensics" is fun, in order to give some substance and support to the introduction of the latter two terms in that alliterative trio. The Collins English Dictionary (1979) has this entry for the word 'wonky':

> **won·ky** ('wɒŋkɪ) *adj.* **+ki+er, +ki+est.** *Brit. slang.* **1.** shaky or unsteady. **2.** not in correct alignment; askew. **3.** liable to break down or develop a fault. [C20: variant of dialect *wanky*, from Old English *wancol*]

The term is pertinent enough; as indeed is the term 'wacky':

> **wack·y** ('wækɪ) *adj.* **wack·i+er, wack·i+est.** *Slang.* eccentric, erratic, or unpredictable. [C19 (in dialect sense: a fool, an eccentric): from WHACK (hence, a *whacky*, a person who behaves as if he had been whacked on the head)] —**'wack·i+ly** *adv.* —**'wack·i+ness** *n.*

And with this latter there is a nice 'echo' with "skull-busting.")

It is easy enough to represent the beautiful substance of the original verse-line with:

The 'bit was/'burnished 'brightly, with the 'broadest of 'edges,..

Line 213:

As 'wel/'schapen to 'schere as 'scharp 'rasores;..

it could/'shear a man's 'scalp and 'shave him to 'boot.

In the original text there are five onomatapoeic 'shearing' sounds. It is another exquisitely-formed verse-line, with the fore-beat dramatically taking and concentrating our attention at the outset. Mr. Armitage's idea of a huge "skull-busting" but razor-like blade is now developed with further inappropriate jocularity. His verse-line loses onomatapoeic effect with the sc in "scalp" rather than the sch of the 'schere' and 'scharp' of the original, and

the dropping of 'rasores' with its 'sharpened' rs; and it comes to an anticlimactic and absurdly 'blunt' end as he returns erratically to 'old-fashioned' speech with "to boot." However, it may be said that Mr. Armitage's verse-line is well and rhythmically shaped. Further, he gives a sufficient fore-running in which to try out a fore-beat – whether he intended it or not. His verse-line is adequate here; but it is more effective to give a close imitation of the original verse:

And as 'well/'shaped was to 'sheer as are 'sharpened 'razors.

The original plural 'razores' (the final syllable of which we cannot imitate) beautifully suggests both of the extended tips of the crescent blade.

-15-

We may temporarily turn from this line-by-line analysis of the muddle that Mr. Armitage is making, to some broader consideration of his methods.

We have given some attention to his description of the Green Knight's "mother of all axes" as "a cruel piece of kit" and as a huge "skull-busting" 'razor.' Perhaps Mr. Armitage felt compelled to take such jocular and demotic turns because the original poem has a 'denseness' and a seriousness from which he needed to 'escape'. But such an approach to translation has led to a falsification of the tone, substance and meaning of the original poem. This would not matter so much if his version had been honestly presented as an alternative one which, say, 'at times takes a refreshingly light-hearted approach to a dense medieval romance', or some such. However it has been claimed instead, as we have already noted, that Mr. Armitage's version is:

"meticulously responsive to the tact and sophistication of the original"...

This is clearly untrue; and nor does his version

"...equally succeed in its powerfully persuasive ambition to be read as a new poem."

The second assertion depends upon the interesting use of the word "equally." It is no doubt true that Mr. Armitage is "powerfully ambitious". And it is no doubt also true that Messrs. Faber and Faber are "powerfully ambitious" to 'per-

suade' us that Mr. Armitage's version has a literary value 'equal' to that of the original poem. But that implied or entailed assertion is false. As we said at the outset, Mr. Armitage's version could perhaps be deemed a poem of sorts, when its metrical and other formal qualities have been fully assessed; but if it is, it is a very poor one, and is certainly not the 'equal' of the original. As a poem, of sorts, or as a peculiar piece of poetic writing, it is, formally and tonally, a unpleasant muddle. The assertions that are made by Messrs. Faber and Faber on behalf of Mr. Armitage are devious nonsense; and Mr. Armitage must be said to be an 'accessory' to this falsehood.

To be jocular in our own turn, we may consider if the term 'pastiché' might apply to Mr. Armitage's version of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'. We find that it does apply well enough to his mixture of styles. Then, under the influence of the alliterative mode of the original poem, and of his own version, another word comes 'careering' into consciousness for consideration, 'impasto'. We look it up. Yes, it applies nicely, in a metaphorical way, to Mr. Armitage's 'pasting on' of his constant and insistent but unpatterned alliteration. Then another term presents itself for consideration, one in which there is a change of vowel to give 'colour': 'imposter'. We look it up in our trusted dictionary, and ponder on it. If there has been an imposture in the production and presentation of this book, it has been effected jointly by Messrs. Faber and Faber and Mr. Armitage. We shall think on. It does seem to be the case that there is an impostume in all of this, to be perhaps 'lanced' in an Arthurian way – if not 'razored' in a Green-Knightly fashion. And greater 'edge' is given to this discussion when we consider that Mr. Armitage has expressed a

> "superstitious (and preposterous) conviction that I was put on this planet for no other reason than to translate this poem."

Meanwhile, we cannot help thinking that a result of Mr. Armitage's "powerfully persuasive ambition" may be the production of a musical version of his "new poem". In the plot for this, Gawain becomes a fatal victim of the "mother of all axes"/"skull-busting" "razor." Then Arthur's other knights go, in succession, to find him... And so, though we have no title yet, this legend may suffice:

GOOD GR-R-RIEF! GR-R-REAT GOD! IT'S 'GR-R-R-ENY TODD'!

But we must return from this day-dreaming, to our proper task.

-16-

Line 214:

Þe stele of a/stif staf ~ þe sturne hit bi·grypte ~
The/handle that fitted the fiend's great fist...

The original verse-line has a substantial fore-running, with an alliterating forebeat; and there is more material following it than might be apparent to the eye. The word 'stif' might have been written as 'stiffe', as at line 2099; and, likewise, 'staf' might have been written as 'staffe'. With the final es sounded as schwas, after fully enunciated double consonants, and the words delivered carefully as part of an isochronous setting of the beats, the verse-line 'expands', the long shaft of the axe is made more present to the imagination, and the figure of the Green Knight made more imposing. Mr. Armitage's verse-line loses much of the substance of this; and then he fumbles for himself a contrary alliterative arrangement. At the same time he distorts the meaning of the original verse by introducing the term "fiend". This is poor stuff. The term in the original is clear. There is no suggestion in the original poem that the Green Knight is evil or fiendish, except perhaps in Gawain's musings at the 'green chapel'. Again, we may retain much of the form and sense of the original verse-line by staying close to it in translation:

The stale was of a/stiff-set staff ~ and sternly did he grip it ~

We have sought to mimic as accurately as we may, what we perceive to be the rhythm and substance of the original verse line.

(Professor Stone gives this version of the verse:

The/grim man gripped it by its great strong handle, ..

He does not observe any fore-running; and he transposes the main elements; but it is a steady line. Professor Borroff translated it thus:

/Stout was the stave in the strong man's grip, ..

"Strong" is weaker than the satisfying "grim"; and she too has no fore-running;

and the verse rather lacks 'energy'. Professor Tolkien gave us this:

The 'stem was of a 'stout 'staff, by which he 'sternly 'gripped it,..

He truly honours the verse-line, representing all its elements in a delightful translation. We may observe that, different as these three versions are, they all represent the Green Knight as fearsome rather than fiendish; and they would all appear to be responding to the conventional system of alliteration. Professor Armitage - to give him the title of which we have only just become aware - has 'lost it', and gone his own somewhat silly way.)

Line 215:

Þat watz/'wounden wyth 'yrn to þe 'wandez 'ende,..

was/'inlaid with 'iron, 'end to 'end,..

The verse benefits from purposeful recitation that puts something of a forebeat on 'Þat', as well as some stressing of 'watz'. The beauty of the line lies in the way that the three w's work to 'wind' the idea through. — no doubt the author would have liked to find another one or two ws if he could. Mr. Armitage has at least strengthened the alliterative arrangement. However, after a minimal fore-running, he produces the casual and absurd inaccuracy of the term 'inlaid' in place of the original word 'wounden'. One does not inlay a wooden 'stele', 'staf' or 'wande' with metal. His 'stumpy', inauthentic verse-line, even with full alliteration, does not measure up to the original. A literal translation is simple enough if we retain the archaic 'wand':

That was/'wound round with 'iron to the 'wand's very 'end,..

(We hope that our use of 'wand' here, which is somewhat 'pantomimic', may be seen as stemming from an approach to translation that is 'faithful' to the linguistic and alliterative 'essence' of the original text.)

Line 216:

& al bi/'grauen with 'grene in 'gracious 'werkes,..

with/'green pigment 'picking out 'impressive 'designs.

The Middle English 'bigrauen' has suggested the 'inlay' that Mr. Armitage used in the previous line. But as he correctly ascertains here, the word applies most

probably to designs carved in a wooden stave, and filled with paint. His words "picking" and "impressive" have a nice poetic subtlety. Perhaps he intends an exception to his four-beat rule here, to give a more 'impressive verse-line:

with 'green/'pigment 'picking out im'pressive 'designs.

(Whichever way the verse is meant to scan, it is surprising that Mr. Armitage didn't end the verse with the word 'patterns'.) The fore-running in the original verse 'fills out' to

Ande 'alle bi/'graven..,

with the 'alle' translating as 'completely'. It is a fore-running of five 'notes', when 'Ande' and 'alle' are pronounced with schwas. We will attempt that effect, and stay as close as we may to the meaning of the original verse. Our translation will be a more elaborate and 'antique' one, but will nevertheless, we hope, be a "living" one:

And was 'all then be/'graven with 'green there, in 'gracious 'working.

The 'then' and 'there' may seem superfluous; but they help to give the verse as much 'sonic material' as is in the original verse-line.

Lines 217 and 218:

A 'lace/'lapped a'boute, pat 'louked at pe 'hede,
& so/'after pe 'halme 'halched ful 'ofte,..

From/'stock to 'neck, where it 'stopped with a 'knot,
a/'lace was 'looped the 'length of the 'haft,..

Mr. Armitage has transposed certain elements of the original verses in a way which on the face of it successfully conveys the original meaning. He uses an appropriately archaic diction – in fact his phrasing is more archaic than the original diction. In the original verse-lines, however, there is more substance, detail and movement. In line 217, the lace is looped up to the head (there is no "stock" or "neck" in the original verses – the first term is hardly appropriate to the haft of an axe) and attached there. Then, in line 218, the lace is as it were looped round again; and this time it is attached ('halched') at many ('ful') intervals. (The full alliteration here might be said to mimic

this regular attachment.) Furthermore, there is substance in the fore-runnings which Mr. Armitage does not attempt to imitate in his own verse-lines. A close and literal translation, in the unremarkable word-order of the original text, is:

A lace was/lapped all about it, and latched at the head,
And so then/after to the handle was hitched very often.

(In verse 217 we might have had the word 'lashed' for 'latched'. 'Lashed' is from Old French 'lachier'; but the nicely archaic 'latchet,' a 'thong' or 'lace', is from Old French 'lachet.')

Line 219:

Wyth tryed/tasseleȝ perto tacched in-noghe,..
/trimmed with tassels and tails of string...

Although his (apparently) alliterating quartet of beats gets some intensity into the verse-line, Mr. Armitage cannot acknowledge any fore-running, let alone the fore-beat. However, the banality of his "tails of string" is both ridiculous and shocking. There is a disregard for the original poem that seems almost contemptuous. The text simply and clearly says that the tassels are many and costly. Mr. Armitage's "trimmed" is an interesting and appropriate word: however, it in no way conveys the sumptuousness that do the other terms; and any translational gain that it brings is more than obliterated by the absurdly bathetic "tails of string" that he has invented, and which put us in mind of 'rats' tails.' (The pseudo-alliteration of the st gives his verse-line a final 'tweak'.) A direct and adequate, if archaic-sounding, translation of the verse-line is:

With well-tried/tasselling thereto attached in plenty,..

(Mr. Armitage's invented "pieces of string" bring to mind a much later piece of imagining of his that is even more ridiculous. Gawain discovers the 'green chapel' to be a sort of hollow barrow with holes on either side and at one end. In the original poem we are told that:

He/romeȝ up to þe roffe of þo roȝ woneȝ (2198).

Mr. Armitage's 'translation' of this is:

he/scrambled to the skylight of that strange abyss.

The provision of a "skylight" in an "abyss" is a double absurdity that is almost incomprehensible.)

Line 220:

On boutonz of pe/bryzte grene brayden-ful ryche.
fastened/firmly in place by forest-green buttons.

Mr. Armitage may be acknowledging a fore-beat here – and one which alliterates – so that his verse-line may be given a near metrical equivalence with the original one. His "forest-green" is an invention that is not inappropriate; but he loses the almost uncanny 'shine' of 'bryzt'. Further, he leaves out of account the embroidered nature of the buttons and the richness of this embroidery. An easy translation of the verse-line, and one which gets the full measure of the fore-running, is this:

With buttons of the/brightest green, embroidered most richly.

-17-

The whole matter of the 'lace' around the axe-handle prompts a diversion in order to draw attention to one of the most peculiarly silly and tasteless parts of Mr. Armitage's 'translation'.

The green lacing attached to the stave of the axe must be understood to be of much the same 'stuff' as is the woven silk lace girdle that is accepted from the lady by Gawain. (The reader or listener may say that he should have made this connection; but the poem's author does not indicate that he does.)

Now; in the poem, a sword may be 'belted' with such woven silk material (as in line 2032) rather than with, as the modern mind might expect, a leather belt. We must also take account of the fact that the girdle is then described as a 'belt' (at lines 1860 and 2377); but at other times, and most often, it is referred to as the 'gordel', the 'loue lace', and so on. However, because it <u>is</u> twice called a 'belt' in the Middle English, Mr. Armitage then appears to play a rather dubious game, as we shall show.

The author of the poem gives a delightfully erotic but tasteful picture of the lady when she seeks out Gawain the second time. She wears a

fur-lined 'mery mantyle' – as did the Green Knight at Camelot, we might observe. However, the lady's mantle reaches the ground, but is décolleté at the 'brest' and 'behinde'. Under this mantle, as we learn later, she has a 'kyrtle', which will be a short tunic or petticoat.

Now; when the lady divests herself of the girdle (line 1829) that is of 'grene sylke' (line 1832) to give it to Gawain, she must be seen as tantalisingly exposed to him (and to the 'eye' of the reader or listener to the tale).

Mr. Armitage's rendering of this is:

> From around her body she unbuckled the belt
> which tightened the tunic around her topcoat,
> a green silk girdle trimmed with gold (1830-2).

This is both silly and stupid. Mr. Armitage's "green silk girdle" comes too late to neutralise the weirdness of his saying that the lady, who seems in this more like a man, has "unbuckled a belt" from a tunic <u>over</u> an absurd "topcoat." A leather belt is clearly suggested in what is a determinedly modernising (at most times) and often broadly demotic 'translation'. Mr Armitage's perversity here is shocking.

If his intent is jocular in some way, the jocularity is misplaced. In the original text the poet has said that:

> Ho lazt a lace lyztly þat leke vmbe hir sydeȝ (1830).

This means that 'she took hold of a lace-thing deftly, that was secured around her body.' There is no indication of any particular fastening here – nor is there on the occasion when Gawain leaves the castle, and the 'lace' (line 2030) is 'swype swepled vmbe his swange' (line 2034) – that is, 'quickly wrapped around his loins.'

So the notion of the girdle being a (leatherish) 'belt' with a 'buckle' is not supported; yet the idea never entirely dissipates, because Mr. Armitage coaxes it along, it seems. As the story proceeds, he usually prefers the word 'belt' to the term 'girdle'. He does so in his own version of line 2034. Then, in the last piece of the poem he twice uses the word 'belt' when the word 'sash', or 'baldric' would be appropriate. But perhaps in the case of the term 'baldric', Mr. Armitage was wary lest it be thought that he was in some way aligning his 'new poem' with a television series containing a character with that name.

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We may continue with the tenth piece.

Lines 221-3:

Þis ˈhapel/ˈheldez hym ˈin, & þe ˈhalle ˈentres,
ˈDriuande to þe/ˈheze ˈdece, ˈdut he no ˈwope,
ˈHaylsed he/ˈneuer ˈone, bot ˈheze he ˈouer ˈloked.

And he/ˈkicks on, ˈcanters through the ˈcrowded ˈhall
towards the/ˈtop ˈtable, not the ˈleast bit ˈtimid,
/ˈcocksure of himˈself, sitting ˈhigh in the ˈsaddle.

On the face of it, Mr. Armitage makes a vigorous and successful translation. His verses are dramatically effective in their way, reminding us that the man is mounted on a huge horse. However, have we ever lost sight of that fact?

Before looking at matters of meaning, we may make some metrical notes. All three of the original verse-lines have alliterating fore-beats, lending 'dramatic weight' to the lines. Mr. Armitage's system does not allow him to present such a structure. In his line 222, with his "four-beat pulse," he does not try to imitate the early 'force' in the line of 'driuande'; but he may have transferred something of it, in his own thinking, to "canters" in line 221. It is possible that in his line 223 he intends a stress on the second syllable of "cocksure" in order to achieve three alliterating beats, thus making "cock-" something of a fore-beat. It is a metrically awkward and ambiguous verse-line, with the word "sitting" almost inviting a stress, but 'floating' unaccounted for.

Regarding 'meaning,' what Mr. Armitage conveys of the sense of the original verses, there are considerable deficiences in his version. As he works within the limitations of the "four-beat pulse" of his verses, and the demands of his alliterative arrangements, unpatterned as they are, he creates a bit of a muddle. His line 221 is inappropriately inventive. He is falsely melodramatic when he describes the Green Knight as cantering through the hall. Such behaviour was hardly likely or possible; and there is no indication of any such thing in the original text. The word 'helde' is used in the poem to mean simply 'go' or 'proceed'; and, further, on two occasions it is used to mean 'bow.' The Green Knight has indeed entered the hall in an apparently threat-

ening and aggressive way: but the episode will be seen to be a measured and indeed mannered – if somewhat arrogant and truculent – challenge, a ceremonial 'game'.

Of course, 'driuande' in line 222 has connotations of power and urgency; but, even at a measured walk, the Green Knight and his horse may be seen as driving their way irresistibly forward. Mr. Armitage is himself 'driving' towards his overtly descriptive term "cocksure". The epithet is not without merit. However, it is reached by way of the most extraordinary piece of bathos. The expression in line 222 of the original poem, 'dut he no wope', beautifully suggests an arrogant unconcern – indeed close to 'cocksureness' – in the Green Knight that is fully pointed up in the next verse-line with the second use of the word 'heze'. The word here has the connotations 'high', 'haughty', 'assured', 'commanding'. Mr. Armitage has given us here the unassured and somewhat 'quavering' "not the least bit timid". This suggestion of even the slightest possibility of timidity or doubt in the Green Knight is silly.

But, then, Mr. Armitage has already reduced the measured dignity of the scene by the use of his term "top table". The sense of the grandeur of the 'heze dece' in the original verse-line is supported when the words are enunciated with schwas to give virtually four syllables. Mr. Armitage might have improved his verse-line by writing 'topmost table', thereby achieving a more substantial effect, and a smoother rhythm. (On a further metrical matter, we may observe here that in the original line 222, the fifth beat could fall on 'ouer,' and then even a subsidiary one on 'loked.')

A simply imitative, if somewhat stilted, translation of these three verses is:

The 'huge one /'hales himself 'in, and the 'hall he 'enters,
'Drives up towards the /'high-set 'dais, in 'dread of no 'harm,
And 'hailed he /'never a 'one, but 'haughtily overlooked them.

(Liberty has been taken in the use of 'huge one' for 'hapel' in line 221; but this is effective in completing the alliterative pattern.)

Lines 224-7:

De 'fyrst /'word pat he 'warp, 'wher is', he 'sayd,

Þe/gouernour of þis gyng? gladly I wolde
Se þat/segg in syȝt, & with hym-self speke
raysoun.'

'And/who,' he bellows, without breaking breath,
'is/governor of this gaggle? I'll be glad to know.
It's with/him and him alone that I'll have
my say.'

The original verse-lines are completely assured in their alliterative pattern, with line 226, as in line 221, having five alliterating beats, with which the 'bob' even alliterates. Mr. Armitage, however, does not control his alliterative arrangement in any satisfyingly systematic way.

Regarding his 'translation' of the sense of the verse-lines, he considerably distorts their meaning. In line 224 he resorts to silly melodrama as he seems to be scrabbling for three alliterating beats. The original text controls the narrative with an 'expectant' fore-beat as the information is steadily measured out to the word 'warp', which means simply 'utter', or 'offer.' Mr. Armitage gives us the quite unwarranted "bellows." This is absurdly caricatural. He proceeds into further absurdities. The idea presented, that the Green Knight does not have to break breath – from what? – except to order his 'bellowed' utterance into three short sentences, is spurious and ridiculous.

Then, in line 225 Mr. Armitage decides to 'translate' the Middle English 'gyng', which simply means 'assembly', into the pejorative "gaggle." The next piece of the poem will tell how the power of the Green Knight's presence and utterance renders the gathering still and mute, so that they 'stonstil seten' (line 242) – which Mr. Armitage himself has quite nicely, if freely, represented as "like statues in their seats." The suggestion that inevitably follows from "gaggle" is thus profoundly silly, and demeaning of the original poet's "tact and sophistication."

Mr. Armitage's verse-lines 226 and 227 fail to convey the true action and the subtly melodramatic seriousness and humour of the original poem. At line 304 we are told how the Green Knight has reddened eyes that he rolls about. In this scene, as the 'wheel' will make quite plain, the

man, and his eyes, are moving, searching to catch sight of the 'governour' of the assembly. Although, as we shall see, Mr. Armitage comes to the matter of 'eye-to-eye contact' in his own 'wheel', he has here failed to convey the full substance of the original text, and has added false elements. He loses the 'narrative tension' and the sense of movement.

A straightforward translation can retain the alliterative pattern of the original poem, and convey most of its crafty drama:

> The first/words that he wrought: 'Where' is, he said,
> The/governor of this gathering? For gladly I would now
> See that/Sire in my sight, and with himself then speak
> in right tone.'

The somewhat mannered diction of this translation is in keeping with our method throughout; and the verses are no more stilted than such as these of Mr. Armitage:

> and give/voice, on its evidence, to that stunning event (480);
> /clouds decanted their cold rain earthwards (2001);
> With/volume but less violence in his voice, he replied (2336).

Indeed, verse-lines of this peculiar nature gain an added strangeness because they mix with others of this more 'modern' sort:

> He/leaps from where he lies at one heck of a lick (1309);
> 'which has/entered through one ear and exited the other' (1484);
> 'your/words hold more worth than most anyone in the world (2470).

The word 'farrago' comes to mind again, with its lovely meaning of 'hotch-potch'. 'Farrago' itself comes from a Latin word for a mash for cattle; and this brings us to our earlier term 'mish-mash'.)

Our 'wrought' in line 224 is a little free and contrived in order to fulfil the alliterative pattern. (Tolkien has 'winged', which is rather nice, but a little too fanciful for us.) Perhaps we should settle for the simple word 'spoke'. In our 'bob' we also somewhat distort the original term 'raysoun'; but that word does, in line 1344, have a connotation of 'rightness' and conventionality. The word 'tone' then helps towards a rhyme-

scheme in our 'wheel'. 'My say' would have been closer in sense; but it makes problems in finding rhyming and sensible words to match it.

Lines 228-31:

['raysoun.']

To knyztes he kest his yze,
& reled hym vp & doun,
He stemmed & con studie
Quo walt per most renoun.

['my say']

The green man steered his gaze
deep into every eye,
explored each person's face
to probe for a reply.

These are 'stunning' moments, and the 'wheel' needs to maintain the structural and dramatic momentum and tension. For any translator, it is one thing to translate in the rhythm and metre of a true, formal poem; but more demands are placed upon the translator who tries to imitate patterns of alliteration. And the greatest test of all is posed by the problems of finding fit rhyme-schemes, while closely and faithfully translating the sense of the verse-lines.

Mr. Armitage has here put most of his effort into conveying the idea of the 'probing' gaze of the Green Knight. There is a tension of sorts in this. However, there is an untidy flaccidity about his 'wheel'. He has freed himself from any requirements to follow the sense of each short line in due order. His 'steered' is an odd word, which does not have the same sense of energy or even aggressiveness that the original 'cast' provides. Mr. Armitage fails to convey the description in line 229 of the Green Knight moving and turning on his horse, from the height of which he can 'cast' his glance. Mr. Armitage then fails to convey the stillness of 'stemmed'. Then in line 231 he changes the idea that the Green Knight is trying to identify by eye the authoritative leader of the assembly – that is, Arthur, who

has set himself aside somewhere – to one of him waiting for spoken identification. Mr. Armitage makes successive 'approximations' that progressively reduce the worth of his version. In this last line of his 'wheel' he provides an additional metrical disappointment by putting the middle stress of the three on the definite article. Then there are the disappointments of the 'rhyme-scheme' that Mr. Armitage deems sufficient. After giving himself all the freedom that he needs to approximate the sense and to move ideas about, he provides a parody of a rhyme-scheme:

say
gaze
eye
face
reply

One false rhyme is tolerable: two are not. But does it matter? Full, true rhyming mattered to the maker of this superb poem, whose anonymity has provided the 'space' for Mr. Armitage to 'invade' with his unmannerly and lazy incompetence. It mattered to Tolkien, who found these rhymes:

town
eye
down
espy
renoun

It mattered to Stone, who found these:

frowned
standers-by
around
espy
renowned

It mattered to Borroff, who found these

say
about

gay
doubt
sway

Mr. Armitage's rhyme-scheme here is even one of his 'closer' ones; but, generally speaking, he does not much care to achieve the neat beauty of a full such scheme. In this respect his 'statement of intent' is to 'rhyme' "way" with "turn" in the 'wheel' of his first piece of the poem. Not until the twentieth piece does he – perhaps – present a true rhyme-scheme with:

then
gone
again
on
men

He does, in the end, provide possibly sixteen such complete schemes – though in one case he has the rhyme "here" and "hear," and on two occasions he has "night" and "knight" paired. In about two dozen other cases his 'bob and wheel' has a false rhyme in one of the sets; and often in these cases he is asking us to equate an m with an n at verse-ends, as with the pairing "fine" and "time" in the fifth piece of the poem. In the other sixty or so arrangements he provides an ugly, cacophonous mess, often without any rhyme. For the fifth piece of the poem he has contrived this hotch-potch:

meet
fine
straight
time
'merriment

For the ninth piece he finds this 'set':

bone
flashed
soul
first
'thunderbolt

It may well be the case that, faced with such anarchic "liberties" some of Mr. Armitage's readers will be struck by "thunderbolts" of "merriment" as they proceed through this 'translation' of the wonderful poem, with all his whimsically contemptuous 'risk-taking' and 'bending of the rules'.

As a 'bob and wheel' for the tenth piece, we offer this simple and direct version:

[In right tone.]

On the knights he then cast his eye,
As he reeled him up and down;
Then stood, and sought to espy
Who wielded there most renown.

We hope that our readers will excuse one imperfect rhyme. We would hope to be able to avoid such devices, so far as possible, if we essayed our own full translation.

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The use of the term 'parody' was in the sense of 'something so badly done as to seem an intentional mockery, travesty' (Collins English Dictionary, 1979). The term 'travesty' is also a most interesting and pertinent one. The same dictionary gives as its principal meaning or usage, 'a farcical or grotesque imitation, mockery, parody,' and says that the term derives from French 'traversi', meaning 'disguised'. This entry has the new term, for us, 'farcical'. This means 'ludicrous' or 'absurd', which are both terms which we have found it both appropriate and necessary to use of this 'translation'. We find this entry for 'farce' in our dictionary, along with those for other related terms:

farce (fɑ:s) *n.* **1.** a broadly humorous play based on the exploitation of improbable situations. **2.** the genre of comedy represented by works of this kind. **3.** a ludicrous situation or action. **4.** Also: **farcemeat.** another name for **forcemeat.** ~*vb.* (*tr.*) *Obsolete.* **5.** to enliven (a speech, etc.) with jokes. **6.** to stuff (meat, fowl, etc.) with forcemeat. [C14 (in the sense: stuffing): from Old French, from Latin *farcīre* to stuff, interpolate passages (in the mass, in religious plays, etc.)]

far+ceur (*French* far'sœ:r) *n.* **1.** a writer of or performer in farces. **2.** a joker. —**far+'ceuse** *fem. n.*

far+ci (fɑ:'si:) *adj.* (of food) stuffed. [French: stuffed; see FARCE]

far+ci+cal ('fɑ:sɪkᵊl) *adj.* **1.** ludicrous; absurd. **2.** of or relating

We may mould these into a metaphor. Mr. Armitage appears to be something of a 'farceur.' He has taken a valuable poem and made a 'farsi' of it. He has sought to 'enliven' it (make it more "living, inclusive") by 'stuffing' it with a 'forcemeat' of ludicrous jokes, peculiar errors, and mixed modes of discourse. He has created a 'mish-mash'; or a 'mess,' both in the archaic sense of a meal, and in the more current sense of 'an unpleasant state of confusion.' (His 'mess' might even be said to be one of 'pottage.' 'A mess of pottage' is, our dictionary tells us, 'a material gain involving the sacrifice of higher values.')

Of course, it is still possible that Mr. Armitage's 'parody,' 'travesty,' 'farrago' and 'farce' is somehow an unconscious one, done in ignorance. But we sense that he is, like the Green Knight, having some sort of 'game,' 'a gomen.' In his Introduction he is like the fox in the poem, as he twists and turns. However, in this guise, may he be as it were a wolf-grey sheep thrust into fox's clothing? We have tried to skin him, and skin him again.

However, any presumptuous attempt to 'unmask' Mr. Armitage as a farcical 'stuffer' may be too late. The 'literary establishmen' – if there may be said to be such a thing – would seem to have already become as it were his gaggling, 'pâté de fois gras' goose-flock in respect of his 'translation' of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.'

In short, we would conclude, from the evidence here examined, that this 'translation' is a disgrace. In simple words, it is a silly and unmannerly mess. Mr. Armitage and Messrs Faber and Faber should make an apology and some sort of reparation for this sham.

Michael George Gibson

May 2014

In developing an appreciation of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', I have made use of a number of editions and translations of the poem.

My principal reference has been to the edition by Sir I. Gollancz for The Early English Text Society, published in 1940. I have the edition published by the Oxford University Press in 1967, edited by Norman Davis from the first edition by Tolkien and Gordon which was first published in 1925. I have further editions, by John Anderson, for Everyman, published in 1996, and by J.A. Burrow, for Penguin, published in 1972.

In addition to the version by Mr. Armitage that has been examined here, I have enjoyed translations of the poem by Tolkien (Ballantine, 1980), Borroff (Norton, 1967), Stone (Penguin, 1959), Harrison (Oxford, 1988), and O'Donoghue (Penguin, 2006).

I also have a copy of the Early English Text Society facsimile edition of the poem, published in 1923.

M.G.G.

In September 2014 permission was sought from Faber to use quotations from Mr. Armitage's book. In February 2015 Faber said that they were 'just waiting on final confirmation from the author that he's happy for this extract to go on line.'

M.G.G. December 2015