



CHANGING TIMES: TRANSLATION AND MEANING IN SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

SOURCES CITED
 Simon Armitage, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
 Marie Borroff, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
 W. S. Merwin, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
 Middle English Compendium

THE POEM

The original *Green Knight* poem is written in alliterative meter, meaning that the poem relies on the repetition of consonants in successive syllables to create an eb and flow. This is common of Germanic-English poetry and creates a unique problem for any translator; as words evolve over time, so does their pronunciation, and thus this meter falls apart in direct translation. On top of this, certain words fall out of use entirely and can therefore only be modeled with modern language.

These factors typically lend the *Green Knight* to being translated in one of two ways. It is either translated in free verse, which is often more faithful to the poem's direct meaning but loses its unique alliterative style, or in modern alliterative verse, which sacrifices meaning in favor of the poem's eb and flow.

ALLITERATIVE METER

Whether the poem is translated via free verse or alliterative style, much of the *Green Knight's* original word choice, and the meaning therein, comes from the poem's alliteration. As language evolves, however, this meaning changes form, and it is the translator's job to maintain this meaning via modern language without fully disrupting the work.

In free verse translation, this is a simple predicament to solve. Without the necessity of set form, words can be translated into their direct modern counterparts, removing any confusion. In alliterative translation, this problem means that any translator will at some be led away from both the *Green Knight's* original language and its modern-day parallels due to a lack of alliterative terms that are directly associated with said language's meaning.

SYMBOLIC WEIGHT

On top of the direct alliterative meter of the *Green Knight*, translation also struggles to maintain meaning in the poem's "manner," or its symbolic weight. Most words in poetry are not chosen strictly because they fit a form; rather, words are chosen because they denote themselves to a form while *also* carrying metaphoric value associated with the poem's topic.

In both free verse and alliterative translation this is a difficult point to maintain. Human behavior and belief denotes the meaning of language, and nearly 700 years of societal change has taken place since the *Green Knight's* composition. This means that much of the symbolic weight present in the poem relies on terms that once had an entirely different meaning than they do today, or terms that otherwise have no modern meaning at all as they've fallen from the dictionary.

LINE 104: "HE STIGHTLES STIF IN STALLE"

STALLE- Unyielding, relentless, undaunted, courageous

Borroff 103
 "The stout king stands in state..."

Armitage 104
 "...he stood there tall and straight..."

Merwin
 "Bravely he stands waiting..."



KNYGH, FREKE, AND TULK

The original *Gawain* poet uses almost a dozen different words for either "man" or "knight," with each choice functioning towards the poem's alliteration:

Line 149: "He ferde as freke were fade..."
Armitage: "...a knight of such a kind..."
Borroff: "...For man and gear and all..."
Merwin: "A bold knight riding..."

Line 562: "The knyght mad ay god chere..."
Armitage: "Yet, keeping calm, the knight..."
Borroff: "He said, 'Why should I tarry?'"
Merwin: "Still, the knight spoke cheerfully..."

Line 2133: "...and talk with that ilk tulk the tale that me lyste..."
Armitage: "...say me piece to that person, speak to him plainly..."
Borroff: "...and say to that same man such words as I please..."
Merwin: "...and say what I have to say to that same man..."



LINE 1137: "BY THAT ANY DAYLYGHT LEMED UPON ERTHE."

Lem- A flash, gleam, beam of light.

The full three-syllable alliterative style fails here in favor of using the word "lemed." Though this word has fallen from modern vocabulary, it is an important choice; "lemed" flows from the mouth like a glimmer of light itself, and ends just as abruptly. The term has a metaphoric weight associated with its meaning. In this sense, the difficulty in translating "lem" comes not from a lack of modern counterparts, but from a lack of similar symbolic meaning within these counterparts.

Armitage
 "So as morning was lifting its lamp to the land..."

Borroff
 "By the dawn of that day over the dim earth..."

Merwin
 "By the time that daylight shone over the earth..."