

MARY VEAZEY

*Catch-22 and The Gawain Poet*

THE SKIN-DEEP GOOD LOOKS of the dust jacket—Gawain and his horse Gringolet in red trappings set against a desolate, whited-out landscape—suggest promising things inside. The illustration propels us into a moment of Gawain’s world—that melancholy journey through the wilderness of Wirral in search of the Green Chapel where he is to be decapitated by the Green Knight in order to fulfill his part of the game he agreed to play in King Arthur’s stead. The Green Knight, through magic we assume, did not die when Gawain chopped off his head, but Gawain knows that he, being human, most certainly will.

“Simon Armitage” blazes in scarlet capitals set as large as the title, but unaccompanied by the expected “translated by.” To the uninformed eye it appears that he is the author rather than the translator. Further, the inside flap of the jacket contains a bothersome statement: an editorial writer as anonymous as the poem’s mysterious author announces that “the Gawain poet has finally found his true and long-awaited translator.” “True translator” is an oxymoron. No translation can be one hundred percent accurate, and this is especially so in translating the Gawain poet’s Middle English, a dialect of northwestern England which includes sources probably unknown even to Chaucer, namely Scandinavian languages, especially Old Norse. Such words are lost to us, so that substitute alliterative and rhyme words can never be completely “true” to the originals. When I was a naïve freshman reading Marie Borroff’s translation in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, I thought hers must be a true translation, a clear reflection of the Gawain poet’s remarkable poem, but now I realize translations involve compromises of one type or another.

Another confusing statement is Armitage’s remark in his introduction in regard to the Gawain poet: “The lack of authorship seems to serve as an invitation, opening up a space within the poem for a new writer to occupy.” “Anonymous” in no way constitutes “lack of authorship.” This was a real person, a man in all probability because it’s difficult to imagine a woman of that time lingering so obsessively over the hunting and slaughtering of the deer, boar, and fox, in Part III, at the castle where Gawain takes refuge. There’s a space within the poem for a translator, but the space for the author is taken by an unknown genius whose mastery deserves full acknowledgement.

Armitage has chosen to emulate the alliterative measure of the original stanzas, as well as to rhyme the short poems concluding each stanza—the bob-and-wheels—the first “A” being the short bob and “BABA” being the four-line wheel. Here’s one of Armitage’s most accurate—in which Gawain, at first, refuses to accept any gift or love token from Bertilak’s lady, including her green girdle ...