BETWEEN RIVERS SPRING 2024: 'SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT' - ALAN HORNE

For this quarter we have a classic with Deeside connections. In 1839, antiquarians were studying a medieval manuscript from the collection of Sir Robert Cotton: he once had it on a bookcase topped with a bust of Nero, on shelf A, in the tenth space, so they called the manuscript Cotton Nero A.x. Much of Cotton's library had been devastated by fire in 1731, but not this. Written in a hand they found ugly and hard to read, they found an astonishing long poem dating from about 1400, contemporary with Chaucer. There was and is no indication that Shakespeare, Milton, Pope or the Romantics knew anything of it; the poem seemed hardly to have circulated at all. They had discovered the great chivalric romance described by its illustrious editors, E.V. Gordon and J.R.R. Tolkien, as:

SIR GAWAYN AND ÞE GRENE KNYȜT

And we see the snag, right there.

As a sixteen-year-old doing A-level English I was not surprised that people expected me to study short passages of Chaucer in the original Middle English. Chaucer's southern dialect is quite close to modern English, and early manuscripts use letter combinations like *th* and *gh* with which we are familiar. Over the years, the tradition has grown up that editions of individual Canterbury Tales are published with difficult words or sentences glossed on the page. Given a little effort, we can read about the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's original words, and to some extent she has passed into our wider English-speaking culture, along with Chauntecleer, the Miller, and some unsatisfactory clerics. Chaucer's rhyming couplets have had an influence on poetic form which only declined somewhat with the Romantics.

This is not the situation with *Gawain*. We do not know the author. It is usually thought that it was a man, and the perspective in the poem (and others in the same manuscript) appears to be male; although the near-contemporary Julian of Norwich was a woman who took a man's name, so who can say. The dialect locates it to north Staffordshire or south-east Cheshire, not far from the *Between Rivers* area, although more precise suggestions – Dieulacres abbey north of Leek, or the abbey at Cotton near Holmes Chapel, the former home of the Cotton family – are informed guesswork. This dialect is much more distant from us than that of Chaucer, and closer to Old English and the Scandinavian languages of the Danelaw. The two dialects would have been mutually intelligible with difficulty – perhaps like a conversation between a Londoner and someone speaking broad Scots – which may explain the Gawain poem's relative lack of circulation. The manuscript also uses a range of archaic lettering conventions which create difficulties for the modern reader. One can get the hang of some of it: *u* and *v* are used interchangeably, as are *i* and *j*, and *s* and *z*. The use of the archaic letter *þ* (*thorn*), which stands for our modern *th*, is straightforward enough. That cannot be said of the fearsome *ȝ* (*yogh*). This can serve indiscriminately for modern *g*, *y*, *gh* (as in *knight*: silent now, but not then), *w* and may even indicate a plural, perhaps through confusion with *z*. The result is that the non-specialist reader who wants to read the Gawain poem in the original faces a linguistic trial.

Classic editions of the poem have not helped here. Thousands of undergraduates will have studied the poem using Gordon and Tolkien's edition, which remains widely available. This is a fantastic book, full of useful information, which presents the unmodernised text with much scholarly apparatus but no translation, only a glossary the arrangement of which doubtless made sense to editors. Barron's edition, also widely available, uses the unmodernised text with a facing page prose translation, which makes it a little easier but also allows one to skate over the original. Until recently, only an old Everyman by Cawley and Anderson used modernised spelling and glossed difficulties on the page: this is the text of the original used here, except for one example of the unmodernised version. Happily, Putter and Stokes 2014 Penguin edition in *The Works of the Gawain Poet* contains up-to-date introductory material, modernises the text, glosses obscurities on the page and has good notes. This might be the best introduction to the poem for the general reader.

The difficulty has spawned some fine translations. Tolkien's is highly readable if antique, and the self-consciously contemporary translation by Simon Armitage has been very successful, probably because Armitage aims to transmit the poetic values rather than precise meanings. Examples of both will be found below.

In medieval and early modern times, the poem was also hindered by its form. This is the final act of the alliterative tradition, which was displaced by Chaucer's rhyming verse. Stanzas and lines are of unequal length, but each line has at least three stresses which begin with a vowel or the same consonant. Each stanza is tied up at the end by the "bob", a two-syllable line, and the "wheel", a rhyming quatrain. A great deal of ingenuity was required to create this poetic machine, which works brilliantly, speeding the poem up, slowing it down, avoiding alliterative jingles. For centuries this would have been regarded as a hopelessly old-fashioned procedure. Now, perhaps not so much.

So to the poem, and its inclusion in *Between Rivers*.

If the merit of the *Canterbury Tales* is that the form allows an almost endless variety of story, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is remarkable for the variety which it fits into a poem which is about twice the length of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. It starts with a chivalric set piece as Arthur and his knights and ladies gather for the Christmas feast, but it rapidly shifts into a wonder tale with the arrival of a knight who is entirely green, including skin and hair, bringing a holly branch, an enormous axe and a challenge:

> If any so hardy in this hous holdes hymselven,
> Be so bolde in his blod, brayn in hys hede,
> That dar stifly strike a strok for an other,
> I schal gif hym of my gyft thys giserne ryche,
> This ax, that is hevé innogh, to hondele as hym lykes,
> And I schal bide the fyrst bur as bare as I sitte.
> If any freke be so felle to fonde that I telle,
> Lepe lyghtly me to, and lach this weppen,
> I quit-clayme hit for ever, kepe hit as his auen,
> And I schal stonde hym a strok, stif on this flet,
> Ellez thou wyl dight me the dom to dele hym an other
> barlay,
> And yet gif hym respite,
> A twelmonyth and a day;
> Now hyye, and let se tite
> Dar any herinne oght say.'
>
> *If any so hardy in this house here holds that he is,*
> *if so bold be his blood or his brain be so wild,*
> *that he stoutly dare strike one stroke for another,*
> *then I will give him as my gift this guisarm costly,*
> *this axe – 'tis heavy enough – to handle as he pleases;*

and I will abide the first brunt, here bare as I sit.
If any fellow be so fierce as my faith to test,
hither let him haste to me and lay hold of this weapon –
I hand it over forever, he can have it as his own –
and I will stand a stroke from him, stock-still on this floor,
provided thou'lt lay down this law: that I may deliver him another.
Claim I!
And yet a respite I'll allow,
till a year and a day go by.
Come quick, and let's see now
if any here dare reply!
(Tolkien translation)

Arthur rises angrily to the challenge but, perhaps to save the king's embarrassment, his nephew Gawain asks to take it on. He severs the Green Knight's head and, as we might expect, the Green Knight picks up the head, which opens its eyes and reminds Gawain to come in a year's time to "the green chapel" and keep his side of the bargain.

The year passes, and Gawain prepares to set out to find the green chapel. The poem expends much time on the grandeur of his armour, and even that of his horse Gringolet, before swerving into a numerological explanation of the pentangle device on his shield. Five is a key number for Gawain:

Fyrst he was funden fautlez in his fyve wyttez,
And efte fayled neuer the freke in his fyve fyngres,
And alle his afyaunce upon folde was in the fyve woundez
That Cryst kaght on the croys, as the crede telles;
And quere-so-ever thys mon in melly was stad,
His thro thoght was in that, thurgh alle other thynges,
That alle his forsnes he fong at the fyve joyes
That the hende heven-quene had of hir chylde;
At this cause the knyght comlyche hade
In the inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted,
That quen he blusched therto his belde never payred.
The fyft fyve þat I finde that the frek used
Was fraunchyse and felawschyp forbe al thyng,
His clannes and his cortaysye croked were never,
And pité, that passes alle poyntes, thyse pure fyve
Were harder happed on that hathel then on any other.

> *First faultless was he found in his five senses,*
> *and next in his five fingers he failed at no time,*
> *and firmly on the Five Wounds all his faith was set*
> *that Christ received on the Cross, as the Creed tells us;*
> *and wherever the brave man into battle was come,*
> *on this beyond all things was his earnest thought:*
> *that ever from the Five Joys all his valour he gained*
> *that to Heaven's courteous Queen once came from her Child.*
> *For which cause the knight had in comely wise*
> *on the inner side of his shield her image depainted,*
> *that when he cast his eyes thither his courage never failed.*
> *The fifth five that was used, as I find, by this knight*
> *was free-giving and friendliness first before all,*
> *and chastity and chivalry ever changeless and straight,*
> *and piety surpassing all points: these perfect five*
> *were hasped upon him harder than on any man else.*
> *(Tolkien translation)*

Gawain rides out and eventually passes into Deeside, fording the river and moving on into some uplands, perhaps approaching the poet's homeland. The apparent reference to modern Holyhead may relate to Holywell in Flintshire: this was already a place of pilgrimage when the poem was written.

> ...He neghed ful neghe into the Northe Wales.
> Alle the iles of Anglesay on lyft half he haldes,
> And fares over the fordes by the forlondes,
> Over at the Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk
> In the wyldrenesse of Wyrale; wonde ther bot lyte
> That auther God other gome wyth goud hert lovied.
> ...
> So mony mervayl bi mount ther the mon fyndes,
> Hit were to tore for to telle of the tenthe dole.
> Sumwhyle wyth wormes he werres, and with wolves als,
> Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, that woned in the knarres,
> Bothe wyth bulles and beres, and bores otherquyle,
> And etaynez, that hym anelede of the heghe felle...
>
> *He wanders near to the north of Wales*

> *with the Isles of Anglesey off to the left.*
> *He keeps to the coast, fording each course,*
> *crossing at Holy Head and coming ashore*
> *in the wilds of the Wirral, whose wayward people*
> *both God and good men have quite given up on.*
> …
> *So momentous are his travels among the mountains*
> *to tell just a tenth would be a tall order.*
> *Here he scraps with serpents and snarling wolves,*
> *here he tangles with wodwos causing trouble in the crags,*
> *or with bulls and bears and the odd wild boar.*
> *Hard on his heels through the highlands come giants.*
> *(Armitage translation)*

The first passage, connecting the poem to our area of interest, contains the only identifiable locations in a poem. The reference to Wirral may be topical. Wirral was cleared and settled in the Romano-British era, before other parts of Cheshire, but in the 1120s it became a royal forest, farmland became waste, and woodland and heath returned. In consequence, every Wirral schoolchild learns that *from Blacon Point to Hilbree, a squirrel may jump from tree to tree*. There were many complaints that the forest became a refuge for robbers, and this was one reason why Wirral was disafforested in 1384, when the Gawain poet is likely to have been active. Whether the poet's own locality was more salubrious depends on exactly where it was. East Cheshire settlements along the tributaries of the Mersey were well-settled, but the upland area was thinly populated and somewhat lawless even in the fourteenth century: the abbot of Dieulacres ran an armed gang, and when they cut off someone's head, attempts to bring the law to bear failed. The poet might possibly have been thought a hillbilly and is turning the tables on grander colleagues at Chester or Birkenhead Priory. And there is almost certainly a joke in the second passage, as the author blithely informs us that we are not going to get the battles with giants and wild men which were the usual point of chivalric romances.

In the midst of nowhere Gawain finds the wonderful castle of Hautdesert and its lord, Sir Bertilak, who offers him great welcome: perhaps an ironic reference to the grim facilities really available where the poet lived. This is Gawain, say the castle's inhabitants, now we shall learn of true chivalry; but that is not quite what they get. The green chapel is close by, says Bertilak. Gawain can rest for a few days and then can be guided there.

Bertilak proposes a kind of game: he will hunt and give Gawain the kill in exchange for whatever Gawain wins while resting through the day.

There follows what must be one of the most remarkable examples of contrasting atmosphere in English literature. There are extended descriptions of Gawain's adventures in the castle, where Bertilak's wife is trying to seduce him. These are scenes of great tenderness and teasing delicacy. This time we have Gordon and Tolkien's unmodernised text, for comparison. Bertilak's wife is taking leave of Gawain.

> 'Now he þat spedez vche spech þis disport ȝelde yow!
> Bot þat ȝe be Gawan, hit gotz in mynde.'
> 'Querfore?' quoþ þe freke, and freschly he askez,
> Ferde lest he hade fayled in fourme of his castes;
> Bot þe burde hym blessed, and 'Bi þis skyl' sayde:
> 'So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden,
> And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymseluen,
> Couth not lyȝtly haf lenged so long wyth a lady,
> Bot he had craued a cosse, bi his courtaysye,
> Bi sum towch of summe tryfle at sum talez ende.'
>
> *'Now he that prospers all speech for this disport repay you!*
> *But that you should be Gawain, it gives me much thought.'*
> *'Why so?', then eagerly the knight asked her,*
> *afraid that he had failed in the form of his converse.*
> *But 'God bless you! For this reason', blithely she answered,*
> *'that one so good as Gawain the gracious is held,*
> *who all the compass of courtesy includes in his person,*
> *so long with a lady could hardly have lingered*
> *without craving a kiss, as a courteous knight,*
> *by some tactful turn that their talk led to.'*
> *(Tolkien translation)*

Gawain is both polite and coy, but after a good deal of fencing he accepts kisses, and also the gift of a green girdle with magic powers of protection.

But these passages of courtly lovemaking are interwoven with three descriptions of Bertilak at the hunt, which combine remarkable descriptions of the natural world and bracing passages on butchery of the slain animals. Sometimes the switch between the two themes falls in mid-stanza, redoubling the impact of what is already powerful writing.

> Sythen thay slyt the slot, sesed the erber,
> Schaved wyth a scharp knyf, and the schyre knitten;
> Sythen rytte thay the foure lymmes, and rent of the hyde,
> Then brek thay the balé, the bowelez out token
> Lystily for laucyng the lere of the knot;
> Thay gryped to the gargulun, and graythely departed
> The wesaunt fro the wynt-hole, and walt out the guttez...
>
> *Through the sliced-open throat they seized the stomach*
> *and the butchered innards were bound in a bundle.*
> *Next they lopped off the legs and peeled back the pelt*
> *and hooked out the bowels through the broken belly,*
> *but carefully, being cautious not to cleave the knot.*
> *The they clasped the throat, and clinically they cut*
> *the gullet from the windpipe, then garbaged the guts.*
> *(Armitage translation)*

At the end of each day, Bertilak presents Gawain with the kill from the day's hunt. Each day, Gawain keeps his side of the bargain, giving Bertilak enthusiastic kisses. There is more to this knight than meets the eye, says Bertilak, probably twirling his beard. But Gawain says nothing of the girdle.

At New Year, Gawain is guided to the neighbourhood of the green chapel. There are fine pre-Romantic descriptions of nature as an alien threat.

> Mist muged on the mor, malt on the mountes,
> Uch hille hade a hatte, a myst-hakel huge.
>
> *...So the moors and the mountains were muzzy with mist*
> *and every hill wore a hat of mizzle on its head.*
> *(Armitage translation)*

His guide runs away. At last, Gawain notices a bare mound with a cave in it. Various Peak District features have been advanced as the model for this, perhaps Thor's Cave in the Manifold Valley, or the collapsed cave system at Lud's Church: then as now, such guesswork was probably part of the entertainment.

'Now iwysse,' quoth Wowayn, 'wysty is here;
This oritore is ugly, with erbez overgrowen;
Wel bisemes the wyye wruxled in grene
Dele here his devocioun on the develez wyse.
Now I fele hit is the fende, in my fyve wyttes,
That has stoken me this steven to strye me here.
This is a chapel of meschaunce, that chekke hit bytyde!
Hit is the corsedest kyrk that ever I com inne!'
With heghe helme on his hede, his launce in his honde,
He romes up to the roffe of tho rogh wones.
Thene herde he of that hyghe hil, in a harde roche
Biyonde the broke, in a bonk, a wonder breme noyse,
Quat! hit clatered in the clyff, as hit cleve schulde,
As one upon a gryndelston hade grounden a sythe.
What! hit wharred and whette, as water at a mulne;
What! hit rusched and ronge, rawthe to here.
Thenne 'Bi Godde,' quoth Gawayn, 'that gere, as I trowe,
Is ryched at the reverence me, renk to mete
bi rote.
Let God worche! "We loo"--
Hit helppes me not a mote.
My lif thagh I forgoo,
Drede dos me no lote.'

‘For certain,’ he says, ‘this is a soulless spot,
a ghostly cathedral overgrown with grass,
the kind of kirk where that camouflaged man
might deal in devilment and all things dark.
My five senses inform me that Satan himself
has tricked me in this tryst, intending to destroy me.
This is a haunted house – may it go to hell.
I never came across a church so cursed.’
With head helmeted and lance in hand
he scrambled to the skylight of that strange abyss.
Then he heard on the hillside, from behind a hard rock
and beyond the brook, a blood-chilling noise.
What! It cannoned through the cliffs as if they might crack,
like the scream of a scythe being ground on a stone.
What! It whined and wailed, like a waterwheel.

What! It rasped and rang, raw on the ear.
'My God,' cried Gawain, 'That grinding is a greeting.
My arrival is honoured with the honing of an axe
up there.
Then let the Lord decide.
"Oh well" won't help me here.
I might well lose my life
but freak sounds hold no fear.'

(Armitage translation)

The poem moves slowly here, and the tension builds up. The Green Knight eventually comes down, Gawain kneels to accept the blow, the Green knight goes to strike but pulls back when Gawain flinches. He goes to strike again, but does not, as if taunting. Then, on the third occasion, he cuts Gawain's neck. This is sometimes described as a nick, but the poem says that the edge passed through the hide and the grease to the flesh, and the blood sprayed over Gawain's shoulder onto the snow; so not a nick.

Gawain leaps away and seizes his arms. He has fulfilled his bargain, and any more blows will be met in kind. But the Green Knight is jolly: he and Bertilak are the same person, and this has all been a game, a kind of test, in which Gawain has proved his great virtue, failing only he did not declare the girdle, hence his cut neck. I would not be the first to notice that this places Bertilak in a position of bad faith; but perhaps this mattered less in an age when ideas of divine judgement were ubiquitous. Gawain is mortified by his weakness in taking the girdle and keeping it secret: he will always wear it as a memento of his failure and to humble himself. Bertilak mollifies him, and the poem ends with the green sash being adopted by all at Arthur's court in honour of Gawain's adventure.

With a classic poem like this, there are many references which could be given, so I will stick to one: Melvyn Bragg's BBC Radio series *In Our Time* includes an excellent podcast on the topic. But the best plan is to read the poem, in translation and, if possible, in the original; truly *an outtrage awenture of Arthures wonderes… In stori stif and stronge…*