

Translation exercises – Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
2013/14

Fitt 2.
ll. 619–655.

Then they showed him the shield that was bright red, with the pentangle painted in pure gold colour; he swings it by the strap, throwing it around his neck. It suited the knight very well; and why the pentangle belonged to that noble ruler, I am willing to tell you, even if it will cause delay. It is a sign that Solomon once established as a symbol of integrity by the entitlement that it incorporates; because it is a figure that has five points, and each line interlaces and ends in one another, and it is endless everywhere, and everywhere in England, as I here, (630) it is called ‘the endless knot’. Therefore it fits this knight and his fair weapons; because Gawain was well known to have always been faithful in five ways, and five times in each way, and purified like gold, free from all types of villainy, and graced with knightly virtues. Therefore he wore the new[ly painted?] pentangle on his shield and coat, as a man most truthful in his words, and knight gentlest in his speech.

(640) First, he was found faultless in his five senses; and secondly, the man never failed with his fingers; and all his trust on earth was in the five wounds that Christ received on the cross, as it is told in the Creed; and at whichever battle this man was present, his steadfast thought was, above all other things, that he received all his fortitude from the five joys that the gracious queen of heaven had from her child – this is the reason why the knight had her image beautifully painted on the inner side of his shield, (650) so that when he looked there, his courage never failed. The fifth five that I found the knight to use were generosity and comradeship above everything else, his purity and courtesy was never out of place, and compassion, above all points: these five purities were fastened more strongly on this man than on any other.

ll. 713–39.

He climbed over many cliffs in strange countries, having wandered far from his friends, riding as a stranger. And at each ford or at every water the knight crossed, it was a wonder if he did not find a new foe before him, and one that was so foul and fierce that the fight behoved him. The man found so many wonders in the mountains that it would be too difficult to tell a tenth part of it. (720) Sometimes he fights with dragons, and with wolves too, sometimes with trolls that lived on the crags, with bulls as well as bears, and at other times with boars, and with giants that pursued him from the high rocks. If he had not been brave and enduring, and had not served God, he no doubt would have been dead, and killed a number of times [=very often]; for war did not afflict him so much that winter was not worse,¹ when the clear cold water shed from the clouds and froze before it could have fallen on the pale earth. [He was] nearly killed by the sleet [when] he slept in his armour (730) more than enough nights on naked rocks, as the cold stream flew splashing from the mountain top and hung from high above his head in hard icicles. Thus rides the knight in peril and pain and very hard conditions until Christmas Eve all alone. The knight that very time made his complaint to Mary, so that she would direct his ride, and guide him to some dwelling.

¹ i.e.: ‘war was bad enough, but winter was even worse’; however, it’s better to keep the structure, because it indicates a stronger emphasis.

II. 943–69.

She was among all the others the most beautiful of skin, of flesh and of face, and of proportion and colour and qualities, and more beautiful than Wenore/Guenever, so the knight thought. She made her way through the chancel to cherish that gracious one. Another lady led her by the left hand, who was older than her, she seemed an ancient, and she was highly honoured by the men around. (950) But the ladies were unlike one another upon looking, for if the young one was fresh, the other was yellow [=withered]. This one was arrayed with rich red everywhere; rough wrinkled cheeks hung loosely on that other one. This one's clothes (kerchiefs) with many bright pearls displayed her bare breast and pure white neck, shining brighter than snow that falls on the hills; that other was attired with a neckkerchief over the neck, wrapping up her black chin with chalk white veils, her forehead folded in silk, muffled up everywhere, (960) edged and latticed with ornaments around, so that nothing was naked of that lady, but the black eyebrows, the two eyes and the nose, the naked lips, and even these were unpleasant for the sight and exceedingly bleared. One may call her a lady of the earth, by God. Her body was short and thick, her buttocks swelling and broad; the one who was with her was more pleasant to look upon.