SIR GAWAIN
AND THE
GREEN KNIGHT

TRANSLATED BY MARIE BORROFF
EDITED BY MARIE BORROFF
AND LAURA L. HOWES

SIR GAWAIN AND
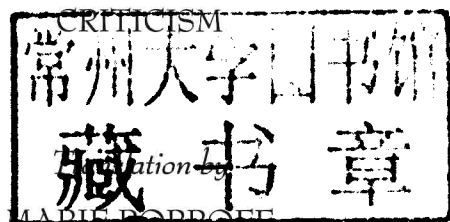# GREEN KNIGH

AN AUTHORITATIVE TRANSLATION

CONTEXTS

CRITICISM

Translation by

MARIE BORROFF

YALE UNIVERSITY

Edited by

MARIE BORROFF

and

LAURA L. HOWES
UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

This title is printed on permanent paper containing 30 percent post-consumer waste recycled fiber.

Introduction

The poem now known as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* lay hidden in a fourteenth-century manuscript for over four hundred years. When Sir Frederic Madden of the British Museum recognized the poem as one worth reading, he and a colleague painstakingly transcribed the poem for publication. The first printed edition appeared in 1839 in London, and subsequent editions have followed at regular intervals, including one by the medieval scholar J. R. R. Tolkien a dozen years before he published *The Hobbit*.[1]

The poem might still have languished in scholarly seclusion, because of its relatively difficult dialect of Middle English, had modern translations not followed its discovery, beginning in 1898 with a prose translation by Jessie L. Weston, the same scholar whose work on medieval romance was cited by T. S. Eliot in his notes to *The Wasteland*.[2] The current volume centers on a newly revised verse translation by the scholar and poet Marie Borroff, which first appeared in 1967.

Early in its modern reception, the poem was recognized as an exemplary Arthurian romance, the best in English, a masterpiece of alliterative verse. Appreciation of its poetic artistry—including its style, its surprise ending, the care with which its plot is structured, its descriptive techniques, the development of its hero, its symbolism, and its relation to Christian truth and chivalric mores—contributed to a chorus of critical acclaim that shows no signs of abating. The poem that emerges from these examinations more than holds it own and is often compared with the work of the poet's more famous contemporary, Geoffrey Chaucer.

The Story

In its simplest form, the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* follows Gawain from Arthur's court, where he steps in for Arthur

---

1. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, eds., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925).
2. Jessie L. Weston, trans., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Middle English Arthurian Romance Retold in Modern Prose*, (London: D. Nutt, 1898; rpt. 1907).

when the king is challenged by the green intruder; to a remote castle almost a year later, where Gawain is lavishly entertained—and tempted—by a gracious host and his wife; and finally to a prearranged second meeting with the Green Knight, solo, in a wild, wooded valley. The poem's end finds Gawain reunited with his cohorts at Camelot, but with a difference, as he has been tested and, by his own reckoning, has come up short.

The nature of Gawain's test spurs much debate, even within the poem itself, but again the narrative events are clear: the host's wife enters Gawain's bedroom on three successive mornings during his stay, while her husband hunts wild game with his own men. Gawain has agreed to exchange whatever he "wins" during those mornings in bed with whatever his host "wins" while hunting. And so Gawain receives several deer from the host on the first day, a wild boar on the second, and a fox on the third. In return, Gawain presents to his host a series of one, two, and three kisses he has gotten while in bed, although he refuses to tell his host the source of those kisses.

On the third morning, the lady of the castle offers Gawain something else as well: a magic girdle, an embroidered silk sash, that she claims can save his life. This is of great interest to Gawain, who knows he must meet the mysterious and apparently magical Green Knight for a second time at the so-called Green Chapel. At their first meeting, at Arthur's court, the Green Knight had proposed a "game" for any one brave enough to undertake it: a chance to behead the Green Knight, using the intruder's large ax, but with the caveat that he must then submit to the same treatment from the Green Knight in one year's time. At the poem's start, Sir Gawain successfully separates the Green Knight's head from his body, but, to the court's amazement, the Green Knight simply retrieves his head and exits the court, with a reminder to Gawain—delivered from his severed head—to keep his promise. The alleged magic of the lady's green girdle could serve as a forceful secret weapon in Gawain's next encounter with the Green Knight. And Gawain does not exchange this gift, "won" on the third day, with his host, as he should according to the terms of their agreement, but keeps it for himself.

All of these narrative threads are neatly knotted up at the end of the tale, when two of the characters coalesce into one, and the magic of Morgan la Fay is revealed as a source of underlying enchantment. While the poem's resolution may come as a complete surprise to the first-time reader, clues to its denouement in fact are scattered in the poem like bread crumbs, and the repeat reader will enjoy following their trail of discovery.

Sources and Influences

A poem as well designed and as beautifully executed as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was considered an anomaly in English by early scholars, and much effort went into searching for a French poem, from which the *Gawain*-author could have translated in creating *Sir Gawain*. In fact, several other poems contain narrative elements found in *Sir Gawain*, but no single source has been located and the skill of the *Gawain*-poet, now widely recognized, suggests that the poem is original to this poet.

Nevertheless, all writers feel the influence of previous authors, medieval writers gesture especially forthrightly to earlier works, and the *Gawain*-poet clearly knew his French. Echoes from the romances of Chrétien de Troyes include a variety of literary conventions, such as the descriptions of hospitality and a chivalric sensibility.[3] Several, more specific plot echoes can be found in post-Chrétien French romances, two of which are translated for this volume. *La Chevalier à l'Epée* (The Knight of the Sword) depicts a Gauvain renowned for his elegant manners and military prowess, who visits a stranger's castle where he is tempted sexually by the lord's beautiful daughter. In this poem, Gauvain escapes with his life from two surprise attacks by a magic sword that hangs in the daughter's bedroom. In *La Mule sans Frein* (The Mule without a Bridle), Gauvain similarly stays in a stranger's castle, but this time he engages in a game of exchanging blows to the neck with his host. Gauvain emerges unscathed from this adventure as well, for demonstrating loyalty and "trawth," the ability to keep his word.

In addition to these examples, instances of similar beheading games, found in Old Irish and in medieval French versions, suggest that underlying all of these tales is a fluid layer of oral folk tale. Indeed, another path taken by source scholarship involves following folk motifs through various narrative traditions. The Beheading Bargain, identified as folk motif type M221 by Thompson,[4] also figures in the eighth-century Irish tale *Fled Bricrend* (Bricriu's Feast) in which the hero, Cuchulainn, meets a supernatural challenger, as well as in later French romances, including the *Livre de Caradoc* and *La Mule sans Frein*, both of which feature Sir Gawain. The Exchange of

3. Ad Putter, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and French Arthurian Romance* (Oxford: Clarenden Press, 1995).
4. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957). See also Carl Lindahl, John McNamara, and John Lindow, eds., *Medieval Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs*, (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2000).

Winnings motif itself conforms to another type (M241.2) but is harder to trace in French romances that predate *Sir Gawain*. Several French romances, including *Le Chevalier a l'Epee,* test heroes through sexual temptation, but none weaves the hero's temptation so tightly with the two games.

Tracing the threads of folk narrative should be distinguished from a search for underlying mythic structure. As Carl Lindahl notes, "whatever myth lives in *Gawain*, it is clearly not a timeless, pagan Celtic construct but rather a synthesis of fourteenth-century folk beliefs and ritual patterns."[5] Studies that seek to establish the persistence of a pre-Christian "green man" myth, for example, must note that greenness is also associated with the devil in medieval literature;[6] such symbolic meaning does not remain static over time and across continents. Indeed, the fluidity of such beliefs and patterns allows poets to mold their inherited narrative motifs into their own particular design.

The Manuscript

The original manuscript of *Sir Gawain* is small, its vellum pages measuring roughly five inches across and less than seven inches high. Written in a neat, angular, scribal hand, with thirty-six lines to each page, the manuscript contains three other poems, now widely considered the work of the same poet who composed *Sir Gawain.* The group begins with a dream-vision, titled *Pearl* by modern editors, in which the poem's speaker mourns the death of his infant daughter, figured as a "precious pearl," and engages in dialogue with a Heavenly Maiden, thereby transforming his understanding of death and human loss. Two other poems, *Cleannesse* (or *Purity*) and *Patience* use biblical tales to teach moral and theological lessons, in the manner of an extended sermon or homily.[7] A fifth poem in a separate manuscript, *St. Erkenwald,* may also have been composed by the *Gawain*-poet.[8]

Twelve illustrations and several large decorated capital letters adorn the *Gawain* manuscript. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* four of

5. "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Myth in Its Time," in *Telling Tales: Medieval Narratives and the Folk Tradition*, ed. F. C. Sautman, D. Conchoda, and G. C. DiScipio (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998); but see also Christopher Wrigley, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:* The Underlying Myth" in *Studies in Medieval English Romance: Same New Approaches*, ed. Elizabeth Brewer, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988), pp. 113–128, who argues that the beheading game and the temptation scenes were "related episodes of the same immemorial myth" (p. 116).

6. See, for example, Claude Luttrell, "The Folk-Tale Element in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in Brewer, pp. 92–112.

7. Marie Borroff, trans., *The Gawain-Poet: Complete Works* (New York: Norton, forthcoming).

8. Marie Borroff, "Narrative Artistry in *St. Erkenwald* and the *Gawain*-Group: The Case for Common Authorship Reconsidered," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 28 (2006): 41–76.

the large capital letters (each stretching over five to ten lines) mark the start of four distinct sections of the poem, referred to as *fitts* by scholars, from the Middle English word for "section."[9] And even though the illustrations have been pronounced substandard by critics and in places misrepresent the text, they reveal a lively interest in narrative action. Four of the illustrations depict scenes from *Gawain:* the moments after Sir Gawain has cut off the Green Knight's head, and it speaks; the attempted seduction of Gawain by the host's wife, Lady Bertilak (see front cover); Sir Gawain's arrival at the Green Knight's outdoor "chapel"; and Sir Gawain's return to Arthur's court

Unlike several other known fourteenth-century works such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and William Langland's *Piers Plowman, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* descends to us in this single manuscript, its preservation thanks to the antiquarian collector Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631), whose seventeenth-century library also preserved for the modern era the unique copy of the epic poem *Beowulf.* The manuscript's official name, Cotton Nero A.x, Art. 3, designates its location in Sir Robert's library, which was arranged in shelves beneath the busts of Roman emperors. Before Cotton's possession of it, the *Sir Gawain* manuscript was owned by Henry Savile of Bank (1568–1617), in Yorkshire, but where it was during the two hundred years between its creation, around 1400, and its first recorded owner, no one knows.

Evidence debated by scholars since the mid-1800s indicates that Cotton Nero A.x is a copy of a lost original. This copy may itself have been made from an earlier copy, perhaps even a lavish presentation copy,[1] but we do know that it was completed around 1400, about the time that Geoffrey Chaucer died and King Richard II of England was deposed by his popular cousin Henry of Bolingbroke, who, in 1399, became King Henry IV. Some scholars date the composition of the four poems in Cotton Nero A.x to King Richard's reign (1377–99), thus naming a literary cluster of remarkable Middle English poems from this period "Ricardian poetry."[2] But others argue that the *Gawain*-poet could have been active before Richard's reign,[3] and so his poems may pre-date the mature works of Chaucer, Langland, and John Gower. It

9. For a discussion of the manuscript's capitals, see Donald Howard, "Structure and Symmetry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Speculum* 39 (1964): 425–433; and Tolkien and Gordon, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, pp. xi–xiv.
1. Gervase Matthews, *The Court of Richard II* (London: John Murray, 1968), p. 117.
2. J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the "Gawain" Poet*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1971); M.J. Bennett, "The Historical Background, in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathon Gibson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 71–90, presents a useful overview of dating scholarship.
3. See, for example, W. G. Cooke, "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: A Restored Dating," *Medium Ævum* 58 (1989): 34–48; and Francis Ingledew, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Order of the Garter* (Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), pp. 93–104.

seems safe to say that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was composed in the latter half of the fourteenth century and that the copy in the British Museum was made in the latter years of that century.

Where these poems were written may be discussed with more certainty, as their dialect of Middle English directs us to the northwest Midlands of England. Before English spelling was standardized, beginning with the advent of the printing press in the fifteenth century, poets and their scribes spelled words as they spoke them. Thus linguistic differences within spoken English were preserved, and texts from this period can be placed fairly accurately, at times within the space of a few miles. For the poems of Cotton Nero A.x, and the manuscript that contains *St. Erkenwald,* linguists can locate their geographic provenance to an area in east Cheshire, just south of present-day Manchester and not far from the border with northern Wales. The poem in fact names two actual places: the "iles of Anglesay" (line 698) and the "wyldrenesse of Wyral" (line 701), during Sir Gawain's journey in Part II. Both places are located along the northern coast of Wales, a geographical specificity that contrasts with the general romance descriptions of other places in the poem.[4]

The Author

Because of the relatively remote location of the poet's dialect area, scholars for some time assumed that the *Gawain*-poet wrote for a provincial court, with little contact with the wider international culture known to his contemporaries in London. But more recently, the author's possible connections with the king (either Edward III or Richard II, depending on the poem's date), or other members of the royal court, and even his acquaintance with London have been the subject of speculation.[5] This Cheshire poet may well have written for a community of his fellow expatriates, all living in London. That he was a learned man, most likely a secular cleric but possibly a priest, that he knew chivalric life and customs well, that he elected to compose not only in his native language but also using a native verse form can all be deduced from the poems themselves. Alliterative verse, which Borroff's translation seeks to emulate, is also the verse form of Old English poetry in which the initial sounds of important words— not their endings, as when rhyme is used—is what counts. The *Gawain*-poet wrote in a very English alliterative line, which appears to

---

4. See Ralph Elliott, "Landscape and Geography," in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet,* ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathon Gibson, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 105–117.
5. Leo Carruthers, "The Duke of Clarence and the Earls of March: Garter Knights and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,*" *Medium Ævum* 70, no. 1 (2001): 66–79; Ad Putter, *An Introduction to the Gawain-Poet* (London: Longman Press, 1996).

have been in continuous use from Anglo-Saxon times, with sporadic written records testifying to its development.[6]

Modern scholars of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* continue to debate and explore a wide array of topics: How Christian is this poem? Does it conform to generic expectations for medieval romance or does it thwart them? Can we discern a specific historical reference in the poem that would enable us to date its composition more accurately? How are we to interpret Sir Gawain's shield? How are we to understand the Green Girdle? What does the Green Knight himself represent? Is Morgan la Fay a major player in this poem, or just a marginal character? How do the intertwined hunt and bedroom scenes, in Part III, comment on each other? And when Sir Gawain "confesses" his fault to the Green Knight, are we meant to take it as a Christian act or as an act that simply mimics Roman Catholic practice? The essays that appear in this edition address these, and many other, issues. The Selected Bibliography will lead the reader more deeply into the midst of a scholarly conversation that has been going on for over a century. Indeed, for a six-hundred-year-old poem to enthrall and engage several generations of modern readers suggests just how potent its poetic power remains.

LAURA L. HOWES

---

6. Derek Pearsall, "The Alliterative Revival: Origins and Social Backgrounds," in *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and its Literary Background: Seven Essays*, ed. David Lawton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 34–53. Ralph Hanna, "Alliterative Poetry," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 488–512.

The Metrical Forms

We cannot understand fully the metrical patterns of the *Gawain*-poet's verse unless we know something about how the English language was pronounced in the late fourteenth century in the northwest midland dialect area where he lived. A feature of crucial importance in this connection is the syllabic "final -*e*" that is often sounded between the stressed syllables of Chaucer's iambic verse and always, when the word in question contains it, at the end of the line. In Chaucer's London English, this -*e* was probably pronounced in speech as well as in verse, at least in words pronounced with some degree of emphasis. It is my contention that in the spoken language of the *Gawain*-poet -*e* had wholly died out, though it continued to be reproduced in spelling (as it still is in modern words with "long vowels" like *came, hope*).[1] Accordingly, I believe that the alliterating lines of *Gawain* and *Patience* were read in the original with no sounding of -*e* within the line. Noun–adjective phrases preceded by the definite article, like "the good knight" and "the good man," which would have had four syllables in Chaucer's verse ("the goodë knight," "the goodë man") would have had three in the *Gawain*-poet's verse, as they do today, whether or not an *e* was appended to the adjective by the scribe who copied the manuscript. (In the manuscript original, we find "the gode knyght" in line 482, but "the god mon" in line 1179.) I concede the possibility that at the end of the alliterating line, -*e* was sounded where present—for example, in *Troyë* at the end of line 1. Such an archaizing mode of recitation would have been handed down from earlier times, along with the formulaic phrases that were part of the inherited tradition.

If final -*e* is silent within the long alliterating line, it follows that modern translations can reproduce, and not merely approximate, the metrical patterns of the original, as I believe I have done. My line, "There was meat, there was mirth, there was much joy" (*Gawain*, line 1007), for example, has exactly the same wording as the line in the original poem and the same metrical pattern, except for the

---

1. I present these views at length in "The Phonological Evidence" and "The Metrical Evidence" in my *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962).

above-mentioned possibility of a sounded final -*e* in *joy* (Chaucer's *joyë*). In Chaucer's verse, *meat* and *mirth*, as well as *joy*, had an -*e* that was sounded when not elided before a vowel. Because the patterns of the original are reproduced in my own verse, I see no reason to quote the Middle English version in illustrating them.

Alliterative verse as composed in the *Gawain*-poet's time had descended, with modifications reflecting changes in the language itself, from alliterative verse in Old English, which in turn was a Germanic inheritance. The tradition retained its vitality in the midland and northern regions of England in the second half of the fourteenth century but had fallen into disuse by the end of the fifteenth. Chaucer knew of it but did not compose in it himself. His Parson, in the prologue to the last of the *Canterbury Tales*, says "I am a southren man; I can nat geste [compose poetry] rum, ram, ruf, bi lettre."

Alliterative Verse

The Basic Form

The so-called alliterative long line, as we find in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is best described in terms of a basic form that serves as a point of departure for a number of variations. The fact that this same basic form and these same variations also appear in *Patience*, *Purity*, and *St. Erkenwald* is one kind of evidence for what I believe to be the common authorship of the four poems.

The rhythm of the lines that recurrently exemplify the basic form is easy to sense, as is the formal relationship between alliteration and stress. The line is divided into two half lines; this division, called the caesura, is marked by a syntactic break of at least minor importance. Each half line contains two stressed syllables, or, as I call them, chief syllables, for a total of four per line. Chief syllables are spaced temporally as the downbeats of successive measures are spaced in a musical piece played freely rather than metronomically. That is, we perceive them as recurring in a time continuum at regular, though not at exactly equal, intervals. The line can thus be described as having four "measures," in the musical sense of that word. Alliteration is not ornamental, as it is in most of the verse modern readers are familiar with, but a requirement of the form: the two chief syllables in most first half lines alliterate with each other and with the first chief syllable of the second, for a total three alliterating syllables per line. There must be at least one alliterative link between half lines. The chief syllable at the end of the line normally does not alliterate.

Some examples should make all this clearer. (I mark the vowels of stressed, or chief, syllables with a capital *C* above the line, and the first letters of stressed alliterating words with lower-case *a* below the line. The first letters of stressed nonalliterating syllables are marked *x*. The caesura in mid-line is marked /.) In the first pair of examples only, I indicate with vertical bars downbeats such as are heard, with slight variations of tempo, in freely played music.

```
                 C            C          C            C
With all the |meat and the |mirth that |men could de|vise,
                 a            a    /     a            x

        C         C    C          C
Such |gaiety and |glee, |glorious to |hear.
      a          a   /a           x
```
                                                    (lines 45–46)

```
   C                  C      C            C
|Readily from his |rest he |rose before |dawn,
 a                a   /     a            x

        C           C            C            C
For a |lamp had been |left him, that |lighted his |chamber.
       a             a     /      a           x
```
                                                    (lines 2009–10)

As the above examples show, chief syllables may be separated by one, two, or three "intermediate" syllables, most frequently by one or two. It is natural to read measures containing two and three intermediate syllables more rapidly than those containing only one.

Occasionally, chief syllables are juxtaposed, usually in the second half line:

```
        C           C              C        C
All the onlookers eyed him and edged nearer
        a           a       /      a        x
```
                                                    (line 237)

In the above example, as is permissible, several different vowels alliterate with one another.

Occasionally, the first half line contains only one alliterating chief syllable:

```
          C         C          C            C
The stranger before him stood there erect.
          a         x         /a            x
```
                                                    (line 332)

Sometimes the line contains two different alliterating letters; I mark these *a* and *b*. The pattern may be either *ab/ba* or *ab/ab*:

        C   C   C   C
And with undaunted countenance drew down his coat,
        a   b   /a   b
<div align="right">(line 335)</div>

            C   C   C   C
And they set about briskly to bind on saddles,
            a   (b)   b   /   b   a
<div align="right">(line 1128)</div>

I have put the *b* of *about* in parenthesis because it is superfluous to the formal requirements of the line; in addition, it is brought in not by the poet's choice among descriptive alternatives but inadvertently, so to speak, by his use of an idiom requiring that adverb.

Rarely, all four chief syllables alliterate:

        C   C   C   C
Sir Bors and Sir Bedivere, big men both,
        a   a   /a   a
<div align="right">(line 554)</div>

All the examples I have given so far can easily be read as having four chief syllables, and these syllables alone participate in the alliterative pattern. But two related variant forms occur in which alliteration and chief stress do not coincide, and the frequency of their appearance in the alliterative verse of the *Gawain*-poet sets him apart from other poets. In one of these variants, at least one alliterating syllable, often the single one that is required in the second half line, is an unstressed prefix:

            C   C   C   C
And that is best, I believe, and behooves me now."
            a   a   /   a   x
<div align="right">(line 1216)</div>

In the other variant, the single alliterating syllable required in the second half line is a word normally read with less stress than are neighboring words in the sentence:

        C   C   C   C
The terms of this task too well you know—
        a   a   /a   x
<div align="right">(line 546)</div>

Variants of this sort seem to appear more frequently in quoted speech than in the language of the narrator.

The Heavy Lines

A number of lines and groups of lines in *Gawain* exemplify a variant form of a different, and more important, sort. Its frequent and conspicuous presence, as with the variants just discussed, distinguishes the *Gawain*-poet from other poets of the alliterative tradition. In lines having this form, the count of stressed syllables exceeds in number the basic four. The first half line, for example, may contain three such syllables. The metrical analysis of these heavy lines has been subject to debate, the main question being whether they should be read as having five stressed syllables of equal rank rather than four and thus as divided into five stressed syllables of equal rank rather than four and thus as divided into five measures, rather than four, in the musical sense. Consider, for example, the second line of each of the following passages:

> And since this Britain was built by this baron great,
> Bold boys bred there, in broils delighting,
>
> (lines 1971–72)

> He assigns him a servant to set him on the path,
> To see him safe and sound over the snowy hills,
>
> (lines 20–21)

If equal rank were assigned to *bold, boys*, and *bred* in *Gawain* line 21, the measure-bars preceding syllables perceived as occurring at temporally regular intervals would be placed thus:

|Bold |boys |bred there, in |broils de|lighting

To |see him |safe and |sound over the |snowy |hills,

I contend, however, and have argued at length elsewhere,[2] that one of the three stressed syllables in these and other heavy first half lines is subordinated to the other two; in linguistic terms, two syllables bear primary stress, and one secondary stress. I call syllables bearing primary stress "major chief," and those bearing secondary stress "minor chief," marking minor chief syllables with a lower-case *c*. I call unstressed syllables "intermediate" and leave them unmarked. The resultant patterns appear in metrical notation as follows (I have again added measure-bars to indicate the placement of the downbeats):

```
     C    c    C          C         C
    |Bold boys |bred there, in |broils de|lighting
     a    a    a          /    a        x
```

2. See "The Alliterative Long Line: The Extended Form" in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study*.

"The first measures or units of these lines exemplify what I term "compound meter,"—that is, the pattern includes two grades of stress, major and minor, as well as intermediate syllables such as "And since this" and "over the."

An alternative reading of *Gawain* line 21 might give *there* more emphasis than it receives in my scansion above, raising it, along with *boys*, to minor chief rank; the second measure as well as the first thus becomes compound. Such an alternative reflects differences of expressive emphasis rather than of metrical form; in both, the half lines are divided into two measures, and compounding occurs.

The patterns I am describing are in fact familiar to us from nursery rhymes, jump-rope chants, and other popular forms of verse. The half line "Bold boys bred there," read with minor chief as well as major chief syllables, is similar in pattern to the first half line of "Baa baa black sheep, have you any wool?" Such popular verse exemplifies compound meter; if we tap with a finger while reciting it at a normal pace, the taps will fall on the downbeats indicated below:

> C   c   C   c   C   c   C
> |"Baa baa |black sheep, |have you any |wool?"

> C   c   C   c   C   c   C
> |"Yes, sir, |yes, sir, |three bags |full."

This kinship is one aspect of the affinity between the long alliterative line and the language and poetry of everyday.[3]

I am arguing that the triply stressed first half lines that appear in the *Gawain*-poet's alliterative verse should be scanned as consisting not of three but of two measures, one or both of these being compound, with a demotion of one primary stress to secondary. But I am not arguing, be it noted, that the metrical patterns of *Sir Gawain* are compound throughout. There is a crucial difference between the alliterative verse of the *Gawain*-poet and the kind of verse we find in such nursery rhymes as "Baa, baa, black sheep"—a difference that in fact provides additional evidence for the scansion I am proposing. The difference is that compound measures in the *Gawain*-poet's lines are read in a context in which the basic form I described at the outset predominates, creating a rhythmical momentum, an ongoing "swing," of four simple

---

3. The subordination of *boys* to *bold* accords also with a linguistic rule. In English, adjacent words of the four "open classes" (nouns, verbs, descriptive adjectives, and descriptive adverbs) do not both bear primary stress within a phrase; the stress given one of them is demoted to secondary. In sequences of adjective plus noun, for example, either the adjective or the noun will be subordinated, depending on whether the adjective has contrastive or emphatic as well as descriptive force. Thus in the isolated clause "She lives in a white house," *house* receives primary stress and *white* secondary; in the sentence "She lives in a white house, but his house is gray," the order is reversed. In line 21 of *Gawain* the adjective *bold* is rhetorically emphatic, as it might be in the spoken language in "He's a bold boy, that one."

measures per line to which the reader instinctively accommodates compound measures by accelerating them a little. If I were to rewrite *Gawain* line 21 as "Bold boys bred there, that braved fierce foes," its meter would become compound in its entirety, like that of "Sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye," and it has in fact been argued that the meter of these poems is of this sort. But a large majority of measures contain too few stressed syllables to permit us to read them as compound without distortion. In the second half line of *Gawain* 21— "in broils delighting"—compound meter relaxes into simple combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables, in accordance with the prevailing norm. The same effect would be achieved by rewriting the nursery rhymes I have been quoting as "Sing a song of sixpence, pockets of rye," and "Baa baa black sheep, have you some wool?"

Variant Combinations of Alliteration and Stress in the Heavy Lines

In the lines I have used as examples thus far, it is the first half line in which compounding occurs, and all three stressed syllables alliterate. But compounding sometimes occurs in the second half line; and the relation between alliteration, on the one hand, and major and minor (chief) rank, on the other hand, is variable. The examples that follow by no means illustrate all the possible permutations and combinations of the two aspects of the form.

Compounding in one or both halves of the line; alliteration on major chief syllables only:

$$
\begin{array}{cccccc}
C & C & c & C & c & C \\
\text{And Gawain the good man in gay bed lies} \\
a & a & x & / & a & x & x
\end{array}
$$

(line 1179)

Compounding, with alliteration lacking on minor or major chief syllables:

$$
\begin{array}{ccccc}
C & c & C & C & C \\
\text{Gawain gazed on the host that greeted him there} \\
a & a & x & / & a & & x
\end{array}
$$

(line 542)

$$
\begin{array}{ccccc}
C & c & C & C & C \\
\text{Sleet showered aslant upon shivering beasts;} \\
x & a & x & / & a & & x
\end{array}
$$

(line 2003)

In this last example, I have counted the alliteration of *sleet* with *aslant* as ornamental rather than as part of the formal pattern, because it does not link the two halves of the line.