

Translation Class Set Pieces, Week 3

SGGK, lines 619–55

Then they showed him the shield, which was of bright gules [red], with the pentangle depicted on it, pure gold in colour. He swung it by the baldric, put it around his neck, and it suited the knight very well.

And I am determined to tell you, though it will delay me, why the pentangle belongs to that noble prince. It is a sign that Solomon once devised as a token of integrity, which it has a right to be. For it is a figure that contains five points and each line overlaps and locks into each other and everywhere it is endless, and everywhere the English call it ‘the endless knot’, so I’ve heard. Therefore it befits this knight and his bright arms: forever faithful in five ways and five times in each way, Gawain was known for good and, like refined gold, free from every imperfection, graced with chivalric virtues. Therefore he wore the new [? newly-painted?] pentangle on his shield and his coat armour as a man most true of his word and the most refined of knights in his speech.

First he was found faultless in his five senses, and second the man never failed in his five fingers, and all his trust on earth was in the five wounds that Christ received on the cross, as the Creed tells us. Wherever this man was present in battle, his steadfast thought, above all other things, was that he derived his fortitude from the five joys that the noble queen of heaven had of her child; for this reason, the knight fittingly had her image painted on the inside of his shield, so that when he glanced at it his courage never failed. I find the fifth five that pertained to the man were generosity and companionship above all things; his purity and his courtesy were never awry, and compassion, which passes all other qualities: these perfect five were more firmly embedded in this nobleman than in any other.

SGGK, lines 713–39

He climbed over many cliffs in strange places; he wandered far from his friends and travelled as a stranger. At each ford or lake he crossed, it was strange if he did not find an enemy in front of him, and one so foul and fierce that he had to fight him. The knight found so many marvels among the hills that it would be hard to tell a tenth of them. Sometimes he wars against dragons and with wolves too; sometimes with satyrs that lived in the crags; with bulls and bears both, and at other times with boars; and giants that pursued him though the high fells [= precipitous rocks].

If he had not been bold and enduring, and served God, doubtless he would have been killed stone-dead many times, for fighting did not afflict him so much that the winter wasn’t worse, when cold, clear water fell from the clouds and froze before it could fall to the pale earth. Almost dead with the sleet, many nights he slept in his armour among bare rocks, where the cold stream ran splashing from the crest and hung over his head in hard icicles.

Thus, in danger and trouble and hardship, the knight rides alone over the land until Christmas Eve. At that time, the knight made his complaint [= prayer] to Mary, that she might show him where to ride and guide him to some dwelling-place.

***SGGK*, lines 943–69**

She was the most beautiful of them in skin and flesh and complexion, and in proportion and colouring and nature, and more lovely than Guenore, so the knight thought. He went through the chancel to greet that noblewoman courteously. She was leading another lady by the left hand, who was older than she; she seemed aged and was held in great honour by the nobles around her. But the ladies were very dissimilar to look at, for where the young one was fresh, the other was withered: the first arrayed everywhere in rich red, rough wrinkled cheeks hung in folds on the other. The one wore kerchiefs, with many lustrous pearls, and left her chest and throat uncovered, shining more brightly than the snow that falls on the hills; the other had a neckerchief covering her neck, bound over her black chin with chalk-white veils; her forehead was enfolded in silk; she was muffled up everywhere, and edged and latticed about with trinkets so that nothing was bare on that lady but her black eyebrows, her two eyes and her nose, and her naked lips, which looked sore and amazingly bleared: you might call her a monstrous mortal [lady on earth], by God! Her body was short and thick, her buttocks round and broad; the one she had with her was sweeter to the taste.