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**TRANSLATOR AND LANGUAGE  
CHANGE: ON J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S  
TRANSLATION OF  
*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN  
KNIGHT***

BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM  
WORKING PAPERS

SERIES: LITERARY STUDIES

WP BRP 10/LS/2015

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**TRANSLATOR AND LANGUAGE CHANGE:  
ON J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S TRANSLATION OF  
*SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT***

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, an English poem written in the latter half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, constitutes an important part of Tolkien's life as a scholar and translator. The complex language of the poem attracted his attention from the moment Tolkien first encountered it as the *Gawain*-poet used some native words that were characteristic of Old and Middle English alliterative poetry. On the other hand, more than one third of his vocabulary is not derived from Old English: approximately one tenth of a total of 2650 words has Scandinavian etymologies (although at the time they were no longer considered borrowings, but rather northern dialect words) and about a third is of French origin.

In his translation of the poem, Tolkien was primarily interested in special verse words, which resulted in his use of archaic diction such as *capadoce* 'a short cape' or *carl* 'man'. However, this study focuses on the second important feature of the vocabulary of the poem: the combination of French and dialect (Scandinavian) words, which are not distributed evenly in the original text. As the author uses the stylistic contrasts between borrowed and native words; he carefully loads some of his lines with French loanwords while others are devoid of them. This paper discusses the stylistic effect thus created by the *Gawain*-poet and whether Tolkien managed to preserve it in his translation.

JEL Classification: Z.

Keywords: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Tolkien, translation, Middle English, Modern English.

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## Introduction

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, an English poem written in the latter half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, constitutes an important part of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's life as a scholar and translator. He first read it at King Edward's School in Birmingham, and the text quickly became one of his favorites (Seaman 615-6). In 1925, his and Eric Valentine Gordon's edition of the poem was published, promptly becoming standard. Besides, *Sir Gawain* has also influenced Tolkien's own writings. For instance, the renowned philologist alludes to the opening stanza of *Sir Gawain* in his preface to "Farmer Giles of Ham": "Since Brutus came to Britain many kings and realms have come and gone. <...> the years were filled with swift alternations of war and peace, of mirth and woe, as historians of the reign of Arthur tell us" ("Farmer Giles" 66), which is highly reminiscent of

and far over the French flood Felix Brutus  
on many a broad bank and brae Britain established  
full fair,  
where strange things, strife and sadness,  
at whiles in the land did fare,  
and each other grief and gladness  
oft fast have followed there. (*SGGKb* 17)

Researchers have also noted some correspondences between *Sir Gawain* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Among others, Miriam Miller claims that these links

are pervasive and bespeak an absorption on Tolkien's part of the *Gawain*-poet's work which borders perhaps on identification. Tolkien appears then to have internalized many of the techniques of his medieval master in his quest to create a credible Secondary World <...> [S]ince both authors clearly subscribe to the philosophy that literature should instruct as well as delight, both do provide in their masterworks a similar message about the meaning of heroism in an essentially unheroic world. (362-3)

Since the 1930s, Tolkien had been working on his own translation of *Sir Gawain*, which was complete by the early 1950s and broadcast by the BBC in 1953 and 1954 (Phelpstead 614). His keen interest in the themes, mythological roots, symbolism, structure, and moral of the poem is clearly expressed in the lecture he gave on April 15, 1953. In Tolkien's view, the translation was necessary if the poem were "not to remain the literary pleasure only of medieval specialists"

(*SGGKb* 2). In his translation of the poem, Tolkien was primarily interested in “a number of special verse words, never used in ordinary talk or prose, that were ‘dark’ to those outside the tradition” (*SGGKb* 2), which resulted in his use of archaic diction such as *capadoce* ‘a short cape’ or *carl* ‘man’, creating a medievalizing idiom. When preparing the posthumous book, Christopher Tolkien had to add a glossary of archaic and technical words used by his father.

For the 1925 edition, Tolkien was responsible for compiling a detailed glossary and etymologies, and (with Gordon) pointed to the richness and diversity of the poem’s vocabulary (*SGGKa* vii). They observe that its language is far more complex than a local dialect and consists of several elements. On the one hand, the *Gawain*-poet uses some native words that were characteristic of Old and Middle English alliterative poetry. On the other hand, more than one third of his vocabulary is not derived from Old English. At a rough estimate, of a total of 2650 words about 250 have Scandinavian etymologies (although at the time they were no longer considered borrowings, but rather northern dialect words) and about 750 are of French origin (figures from *SGGKa* 138). This study focuses on the latter feature of the vocabulary of the poem: the combination of French and dialect (Scandinavian) words. It discusses the stylistic effect thus created by the *Gawain*-poet and whether it is preserved in Tolkien’s translation. Some parallels with 2007 Simon Armitage’s translation will be drawn for the sake of comparison.

## **Tolkien’s translation of *Sir Gawain*: aims and principles**

The publication of Tolkien’s translation of *Sir Gawain* was repeatedly delayed, largely due to the translator’s perfectionism and concern over the verse and diction of the poem. On 6 January 1965, he wrote to his grandson, Michael George Tolkien, “I am sorry my *Gawain* and *Pearl* will not be in time to assist you (if indeed they would): largely owing, in addition to the natural difficulty of rendering verse into verse, to **my discovering many minor points about words**, in the course of my work, which lead me off. <...> But I think **anyone who reads my version**, however learned a Middle English scholar, **will get a more direct impression of the poem’s impact (on one who knew the language)**” (*Letters* 352, here and elsewhere emphasis added). Later that year, in a letter to Rayner Unwin, Tolkien once again commented on his future readers: “Too much to say, and not sure of my target. The main target is, of course, **the general reader of literary bent with no knowledge of Middle English...**” (*Letters* 364).

In the introduction, collected by Christopher Tolkien from his father’s notes and printed posthumously, Tolkien thus specifies the governing principles of his translation:

The main object ... is to preserve the metres, which are essential to the poems as wholes, and **to present the language and style, nonetheless, not as they may appear at a superficial glance, archaic, queer, crabbed<sup>2</sup> and rustic, but as they were for the people to whom they were addressed: if English and conservative, yet courtly, wise, and well-bred – educated, indeed learned.**  
(*SGGKb* 2)

Thus, the language of the poem and the more general question of the audience and style of his translation called Tolkien's close attention. His particular interest to *Gawain*-poet's diction can be explained by their shared geographical bond to the West Midlands of England (Shippey "Tolkien and the West Midlands" 42, "Tolkien and the *Gawain*-Poet" 64-5), where Tolkien was raised, and a common linguistic heritage. As noted by Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien realized that the poem's dialect "was approximately that which had been spoken by his mother's West Midland ancestors" (43). In a letter written to W.H. Auden Tolkien declared, "I am a West-midlander by blood (and took to early west-midland Middle English as a known tongue as soon as I set eyes on it)" (*Letters* 213). Indeed, it seems as if Tolkien believed that literary tradition could be passed on through one's place of birth and genes, that, in Shippey's words, "he had a cultivated sympathy with the authors of *Beowulf* or *Sir Gawain* ... which even the poet's contemporaries had not" (Shippey *Road to Middle-Earth* 19).

## Rendering the poem's diction

Every translation, of course, is an act of interpretation of the source text and its subsequent change. As Stephen Prickett puts it,

Translation, especially from one period of time to another, is not just a matter of finding the nearest equivalents for words or syntactic structures. In addition it involves altering the fine network of unconscious or half-conscious presuppositions that underlie the actual words or phrases, and which differentiate so characteristically the climate of thought and feeling of one age from that of another. (7)

Thus, in order to evaluate the choices made by the translator, his or her interpretation of the text, we first have to understand the way this "fine network" works in the original.

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<sup>2</sup> Probably a jab to previous standard characteristics, such as: "Unfortunately, the language of the poem, which is in a West Midland dialect, is exceedingly crabbed" (Garnett 111), or "... the *Gawain*-poet is accessible only to specialists, and not fully accessible even to them, for his northwest Midlands tongue, never adopted in linguistically influential cities, has remained the curious, runish language it probably was to the average Londoner of the poet's own time" (Gardner 4).

*Sir Gawain* is an English text that witnessed a period of enormous introduction of French words and phrases (Baugh and Cable 177-8). Though much has been said on bilingualism in Late Medieval England in general, it seems that still, as Machan puts it, “much remains to be discovered about the complexities and nuances of late-medieval sociolinguistic practice” (112). The outcomes of prolonged language contact in the realm of lexical stylistics, the use of French loanwords in the period of their absorption into the native stock by sophisticated poets have started to attract researchers’ attention. For example, it has been observed that the density of borrowings in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is associated with the differences in character descriptions and their status (Miller 164-5), or that in *Boece* Chaucer alternated between condensing French loanwords and avoiding them in different passages depending on their topic (Žoludeva 109-17). The *Gawain*-poet, and here I echo many critics, is also very adept at lexical subtlety: he “is distinguished from fellow alliterative poets as much as from writers of other forms of Middle English verse, by his richness of vocabulary and the precision with which... he makes use of it” (Davenport 219).

What one may notice about *Sir Gawain* is the fact that French words are not distributed evenly in the text, but are stylistically charged and participate in the poem’s imagery. The author uses the stylistic contrasts between borrowed and native words; he carefully loads some of his lines with French loanwords while others are devoid of them (Volkonskaya 148). This technique is very prominent in some descriptive passages and in the speech of the main characters.

For example, when the Green Knight first enters Camelot, the author gives his detailed portrait. It is very ambiguous, for the challenger is a mysterious character – “an amalgam of nature and culture” (Chism 76), and the description alternates between the beautiful and the grotesque (Benson 58-95; Besserman; Burrow 12-23). We see the Green Knight both as a handsome courtier, dressed in line with the latest fashion, and a monster, a bearded churl, and the language of the description alternates accordingly. Compare ll. 151-6, which abound in French words, with ll. 179-84 (here and elsewhere words of French origin are italicized, whereas dialect (Scandinavian) words are underlined):

Ande al grayþed in grene þis gome and his wedes:  
 A *strayt cote* ful stre3t, þat stek on his sides,  
 A mere *mantile* abof, mensked withinne  
 With *pelure pured apert*, þe *pane* ful clene  
 With blyþe *blaunner* ful bry3t, and his hod boþe,  
 Þat watz la3t fro his lokkez and layde on his schulderes... (ll. 151-6)

Wel *gay* watz þis gome gered in grene,  
 And þe here of his hed of his hors *swete*.  
 Fayre fannand fax ymbefoldes his schulderes;  
 A much berd as as a busk ouer his brest henges,  
 Þat wyth his hi3lich here þat of his hed reches  
 Watz euesed al ymbetorne abof his elbowes... (ll. 179-84)

The first passage describes the Green Knight's garments that are all in step with the latest fashion. As attested by the *MED*, with the exception of the word *mantile* 'mantle, robe', all other words of French origin are examples of that great infusion of French words into the English vocabulary in the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In the second passage the description changes, and we see the grotesque, wild side of the knight: he has a great bushy beard and hair that covers his upper body like a cape. French loanwords almost completely disappear from this description; instead, the author turns to the native stock of words generously sprinkled with local dialect words of Scandinavian origin that were rarely used in the literature of the time.

These changes are even more striking in the speech of the main characters. The language used by the Green Knight, when we first see him, is brusque, simple and a bit churlish, with almost no French loanwords at all:

3if I þe telle trwly, quen I þe *tape* haue  
 And þou me smopely hatz smyten, smartly I þe teche  
 Of my hous and my home and myn owen nome,  
 Þen may þou frayst my fare and forwardez holde;  
 And if I spende no speche, þenne spedez þou þe better,  
 For þou may leng in þy londe and layt no fyrre –  
 bot slokes! (ll. 406-12)

As noted by Tim Machan, "the brusqueness of the Green Knight's language compounds the boorishness of his entrance to Camelot, and the contrast between the wildness associated with him and the civility of Arthur's court again manifests itself in the elegance of Gawain's request... to assume the test for the king" (142). This coarse manner of the Green Knight's speech provides a stark contrast to the way he speaks at the end of the poem, after he reveals himself to be the lord of the castle, a perfect example of a courteous gentleman:

Þou art *confessed* so clene, beknoven of þy mysses,

And hatz þe *penaunce apert* of þe *poynt* of myn egge,  
I halde þe *polysed* of þat ply3t, and *pured* as clene  
As þou hadez neuer *forfeted* syþen þou watz fyrst borne... (ll. 2391-4)

The Green Knight's/Lord's speech strategy has completely changed; moreover, the French borrowings he uses all entered the English language in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. These shifts in his speech reflect the stylistic value of French loanwords at the time – they indicate a change in the Green Knight, the fact that he has stopped being a ruthless churl representing the forces of nature and turned instead to courtly speech and behaviour, accepting for a while the conventions of chivalric society.

This ambiguity of the Green Knight, his inherent contrasts and contradictions are brought out from the start, in the first words with which he addresses the knights of the Round Table: 'Wher is', he said, / 'Þe *gouernour* of þis *gyng*?' (ll. 224-5) – in the violent clash between the French loanword *gouernour* 'ruler, lord', borrowed into English in the 1380s (*MED*), and the local word *gyng* 'company' (OE *genge*, OI *gengi*), which may even sound deliberately rude (Borroff 117).

Thus, there are two patterns of the distribution of lexical material in the text, i.e. two modes of diction: one which exhibits heavy foreign influence - elevated, and another which rather relies on native words (local dialect) – plain. This difference indicates a deliberate stylistic choice, and it is further supported by the very plot of this literary work. The main opposition in the poem, as expressed through language, is court and culture with French loanwords as their marker versus wilderness, nature, and the Green Knight. It is necessary to consider then whether it is recognized and preserved by Tolkien in his translation.

Let us first turn to the above-mentioned line, which is translated by Tolkien as “‘Now where is’, he said, / ‘the governor of this gathering?’” (*SGGKb* 23). Tolkien simply uses a stylistically neutral word – *gathering*, leveling down the speech of the Green Knight, which was depicted by the poet as courteous and ruthless at the same time. As a side note, Armitage, on the contrary, retains the original ambiguity using an onomatopoeic word – *gaggle* (usually denotes 'a flock (of geese)', 'a company (of women)'): “‘And who,’ he bellows, without breaking breath, ‘is governor of this gaggle?’” (*SGGKc* 35). But the effect of two words of different origin clashing in one line is, nevertheless, lost.

If we examine the lines describing the Green Knight, we will also notice some differences between Tolkien's translation and the original:



All of green were they made, both *garments* and man:  
a *coat* tight and *close* that clung to his sides;  
a *rich robe* above it all *arrayed* within  
with *fur finely* trimmed, shewing fair *fringes*  
of handsome *ermine gay*, as his hood was also,  
that was lifted from his locks and laid on his shoulders... (SGGKb 21)

*Very gay* was this great man *guised* all in green,  
and the hair of his head with his horse's *accorded*:  
fair flapping locks enfolding his shoulders,  
a big beard like a bush over his breast hanging  
that with the handsome hair from his head falling  
was sharp shorn to an edge just short of his elbows... (SGGKb 22)

Words of French origin are present in both passages; however, most of them have long been part of the English lexis, are as monosyllabic as a huge stock of native words and, in all likelihood, no longer recognized as borrowings; among these are, to name a few examples, *coat*, *close*, *fur*, *gay*. On the other hand, there are also other words of French origin, which due to the process of lexical bifurcation nowadays belong to the elevated register – *garments*, (technical) *ermine*, *guised*, *accorded*. Such words, in total contrast to the original, are present in both descriptions. Furthermore, there are no dialect or archaic words in the second passage, which could have brought out its difference from the first passage.

The Green Knight's speech, as rendered by Tolkien, seems leveled down as well:

If I tell thee the truth of it, when I have taken the knock,  
and thou handily hast hit me, if in *haste* I *announce* then  
my house and my home and mine own *title*,  
then thou canst call and *enquire* and keep the *agreement*;  
and if I *waste* not a word, thou'lt win better *fortune*,  
for thou mayst linger in thy land and look no further -  
but *stay!* (SGGKb 29)

Thou hast *confessed* thee so clean and acknowledged thine *errors*,

and hast the *penance plain* to see from the *point* of my blade,  
that I hold thee *purged* of that *debt*, made as *pure* and as clean  
as hadst thou done no ill deed since the day thou were born. (*SGGKb* 88)

We may simply consider the number of words belonging to the higher register in these passages: *haste, announce, enquire, agreement, fortune, confessed, errors, penance, purged*. And whereas Tolkien medievalizes the text by using archaic grammar (*thee, thou, thine, thou'lt, mayst, hadst*), yet nothing indicates that in the original these passages have very different modes of diction.

For a change, the final example is not related to the Green Knight. The passage comes from the description of Sir Gawain's travels through North Wales to Wirral:

Now ridez þis renk þur3 þe *ryalme* of Logres,  
*Sir Gauan*, on Godez halue, þa3 hym no gomen þo3t.  
Oft leudlez alone he lengez on ny3tez  
Þer he fonde no3t hym byfore þe fare þat he lyked.  
Hade he no fere bot his fole bi frythez and dounez,  
Ne no gome bot God bi gate wyth to karp,  
Til þat he ne3ed ful neghe into þe Norþe Walez.  
Alle þe *iles* of Anglesay on lyft half he haldez,  
And farez ouer þe fordez by þe forlondez,  
Ouer at þe Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk  
In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrle; wonde þer bot lyte  
þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied.  
And ay he frayned, as he ferde, at frekez þat he met,  
If þay hade herde any karp of a kny3t grene,  
In any grounde þeraboute, of þe grene *chapel*;  
And al nykked hym wyth nay, þat neuer in her lyue  
Pay se3e neuer no segge þat watz of suche hwez  
of grene. (ll. 691–708)

The diction of this highly poetic description is, nevertheless, plain, based on native words and local dialect words of Scandinavian origin. The four French words that are present – *ryalme, sir, iles, chapel* – were assimilated into English in the 13<sup>th</sup> - early 14<sup>th</sup> century. In Tolkien's translation:

Now he rides thus *arrayed* through the *realm* of Logres,  
*Sir Gawain* in God's care, though no game now he found it.  
 Oft forlorn and alone he *lodged* of a night  
 where he found not afforded him such fare as *pleased* him.  
 He had no friend but his horse in the *forests* and hills,  
 no man on his *march* to *commune* with but God,  
 till anon he drew near unto Northern Wales.  
 All the *isles* of Anglesey he held on his left,  
 and over the fords he fared by the flats near the sea,  
 and then over by the Holy Head to high land again  
 in the wilderness of Wirral: there wandered but few  
 who with goodwill *regarded* either God or *mortal*.  
 And ever he asked as he went on of all whom he met  
 if they had heard any news of a knight that was green  
 in any ground thereabouts, or of the Green *Chapel*.  
 And all *denied* it, saying nay, and that never in their lives  
 a *single* man had they seen that of such a *colour*  
 could be. (SGGKb 37-8)

Again, the number of elevated words is much higher (among these we even find such learned words as *commune* and *mortal*), which goes against the tone of the original.

## Conclusion

What follows from this discussion is that there is a divergence, a certain gap, between *Sir Gawain* and Tolkien's translation. What was called the first, plain mode of diction and the contrast that follows between different passages and descriptions are not preserved in Tolkien's translation, as his rendering of *Sir Gawain* maintains an elevated tone throughout the whole poem. Undoubtedly, this is partly due to language change, as French loanwords, which were only entering the English language at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, have undergone subsequent assimilation and stratification. And yet many of these words now belong to the higher register as opposed to common native words; they could have been used with more care. On the other hand, as any translation is always an interpretation of the original and not an attempt to render all the effects from one language into another, the changes are inevitable due to the translator's choices about what to keep and what to dismiss or even his or her failure to recognize certain aspects of

the original. From Tolkien's own writings we know that for him the most important element of the diction of *Sir Gawain* that had to be preserved were separate archaic words.

Furthermore, translators are usually influenced by the current state of the art. For a long time the works of the Alliterative Revival were viewed as regional, in false opposition to London. It was only recently that Ralph Hanna claimed that they were a "form of a national, not regional, literature" (509). Moreover, the use of French loanwords in the period of their absorption into the native stock by sophisticated poets has also started to attract researchers' attention quite recently. The works of Shippey ("Bilingualism and Betrayal"), Machan, Pons-Sanz and other scholars analyze how linguistic variety found in the works of late Middle English poets, namely Chaucer and the *Gawain*-poet, can figure in rhetorical strategies, but as still much remains to be discovered, this change in the critical stance on the place of alliterative poetry will probably affect only the future translators.

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