Tolkien and the *Gawain*-poet
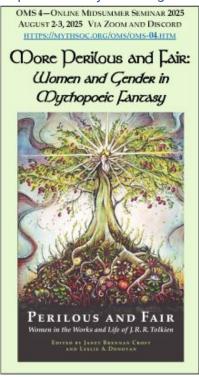
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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

accent; Arthur; dialect; "etayn"; linguistic transmission; literary transmission; philology; Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; Woses

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Abstract: One of Tolkien's major academic works was the edition he prepared, with E.V. Gordon, of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Yet this poem is only one of four in identical dialect (an important point to Tolkien) and in the same manuscript. This paper considers the philological issues these poems raise, and shows how the theories, eccentricities and linguistics of the *Gawain*-poet were read and used by Tolkien.

Tolkien's involvement with the *Gawain*-poet lasted almost the whole of his professional or writing life. Before proceeding, I should explain that by "the *Gawain*-poet" I mean not only "the man who wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", but also "the man who wrote the four anonymous poems now preserved in Cotton MS. Nero A.X, i.e. *Sir Gawain, Pearl, Purity* and *Patience*"[1]. All four are written in the same distinctive dialect. It is true that this need not mean they were written by the same hand, for the person who copied them all might for instance have "translated" poems in different dialects into his own; while, as Tolkien himself showed in his 1929 essay on "*Ancrene Wisse* and *Hali Meiðhad*", even in the Middle Ages, different people could under some circumstances have been taught at school to write the same English, no matter where they came from. So the four poems *could* all have had different authors. There has at least been a suggestion that a fifth poem, *St. Erkenwald*, in a closely similar dialect but a different manuscript, is also by "the *Gawain*-poet". I do not propose however to consider these issues. It is clear from note 13 of his 1953 essay (Tolkien, 1983b; see below) that Tolkien thought it "beyond any real doubt" that the man who wrote *Sir Gawain* "also wrote *Pearl*, not to mention *Purity* and *Patience*", while he offered no view on *St. Erkenwald*. "The *Gawain*-poet", then, meant to Tolkien the unknown author of the four late fourteenth-century poems in MS. Nero A.X.

As said at the start of this essay, Tolkien had the *Gawain*-poet in mind for at least fifty years. His first work on him was the joint edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* produced by Tolkien and his Leeds colleague E.V. Gordon, published by the Clarendon Press in 1925. It was an enormously successful book, which altered the whole current of English medieval studies – till then heavily Southern and Chaucerian in bias, at least at non-specialist level – and which is still in 1993 the standard edition (as revised and updated in 1967 by Tolkien's pupil Norman Davis). Its success led to an immediate suggestion that the same pair should go on and edit *Pearl* from the same manuscript. Almost as soon as the first edition appeared, however, Tolkien and Gordon ceased to live close together, as Tolkien went off to Oxford while Gordon took over Tolkien's Leeds chair. In Humphrey Carpenter's *Biography* (p.105), Tolkien is cited as referring rather ruefully to Gordon as "an industrious little devil"; it seems likely that Gordon wanted to press on with *Pearl* in the late 1920s while Tolkien (whose fears about his own lack of discipline can be glimpsed in "Leaf by Niggle") had turned much of his attention to other things. Time went by. Gordon died prematurely, in 1938; and when the edition of *Pearl* eventually appeared in 1953 it was signalled on the title page as "Edited by E.V. Gordon", but actually brought out by his widow Ida L. Gordon, a considerable medieval scholar in her own right. In her "Preface" to that work Mrs. Gordon records the original start as a joint product; mentions Tolkien's withdrawal from the project "when he found himself unable to give sufficient time to it"; and goes on to give "warmest thanks . . . to Professor Tolkien, who had the original typescript for some time and added valuable notes and corrections". One can probably conclude in the end that while the edition of *Pearl* is indeed largely E.V. Gordon's work, there are also substantial contributions by Ida Gordon, with in all probability both an initial input and later additions by Tolkien: some of the notes in the edition (as I indicate below) do seem resonantly Tolkienian.

In addition to these two works Tolkien also devoted the W.P. Ker Memorial Lecture of 1953 to "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight": this essay appears in the posthumous publication of 1983, *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, edited by Christopher Tolkien. The "Foreword" to that volume makes it clear that Tolkien had in 1953 just completed his alliterative verse translation of *Sir Gawain* into modern English, but that the version existing then was

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[1] I say "the man" not only because of restricted female education in the Middle Ages, but also because of the poet's clear self-portrayal as feudal servant (in *Patience*) and as a father (in *Pearl*).

repeatedly altered and emended. It came out in final form in 1975, along with the translations of *Pearl* and *Sir Orfeo*. The publishing history of Tolkien on the *Gawain*-poet then runs from 1925 to 1983, while Tolkien, as far as we know, did not cease to think and comment on the poet's works from the 1920s till his own death in 1973. References to the *Gawain*-poet in fact crop up in unexpected places in Tolkien's scholarly works; the poet's influence on Tolkien's fiction is considered further below.

Why did Tolkien feel this attraction to the poems of Nero A.X? Since I have said repeatedly in my book *The Road to Middle-earth* that philology is "the only proper guide to a view of Middle-earth 'of the sort which its author may be supposed to have desired'" (Shippey, 1992, p. 7)[2] it is not surprising that I see Tolkien's interest in the *Gawain*-poet as primarily philological. I would separate it into three strands, those of class, place and tradition.

To deal with class first: it is obvious that the dialect of the *Gawain*-poet was in no way an ancestor of modern Standard English. All the poems are full (much fuller than Chaucer) of words now found only, if at all, in non-standard dialects. One could say indeed that the modern descendants of the *Gawain*-poet's dialect are among the least-regarded and lowest-status dialects of modern England. At one point in *Sir Gawain* the Lady, flirting with Sir Gawain, tells him he ought to be eager to teach "a ʒonke þynk" about love. The addition of an extra "g/k" sound in words like "young, thing, ring, finger" is still common in areas of the North-West Midlands; it is however a feature which ambitious parents and schoolteachers try hard to stamp out.

Yet in spite of these and other marks of modern low-status, the *Gawain*-poet, most surprisingly to a modern ear, betrays not the slightest sign of linguistic self-consciousness or inferiority. His language is indeed in other areas almost haughtily high-status, as in his careful and zestful descriptions (full of technical vocabulary) of the upper-class sport of hunting. Tolkien certainly appreciated this clash of linguistic indicators. In 1928 he wrote a "Foreword" to Walter E. Haigh's *Glossary of the Dialect of the Huddersfield District*, in which he said that Haigh's work was valuable "not only to local patriotism, but to English philology" generally. He picked out words showing sound-changes dating back to Old Germanic; noted also the way in which learned words were naturalised in a powerful local speech[3]; and went on to say that there was particular interest in the study of dialects of the North-West because of the signs in them of competition and cohabitation between Old English and Old Norse. Furthermore, he remarks, in the fourteenth century this north-west area was to become:

the centre of a revival of writings in vernacular speech, of which the most interesting examples preserved are poems in an alliterative metre descended from the old verse of Anglo-Saxon times, though clothed in a language now difficult to read because of its strong Scandinavian element and its many other peculiar and obscure dialectal words. These texts do not all come from the same part of the North-West, and where each was written is still in debate, but their connexion with the modern dialects, of which that of Huddersfield is an interesting example, is immediately apparent to any one glancing at this glossary. Indeed, such books as this one sometimes throw valuable light on the meanings or forms of words in these old poems, such poems as the romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, [and] the beautiful elegiac sermon known as *The Pearl* . . .
(Tolkien, 1928, p. xvi)

On the next page Tolkien picks out a particularly unexpected case of close resemblance between the aristocratic medieval *Gawain*-poet and Haigh's working-class modern informants. The *Gawain*-poet appears at one point to make a "mistake" in English, when the Green Knight, their challenge settled, asks Sir Gawain "to com to þy naunt", i.e. "to come to thine aunt". It looks as if someone, poet or scribe, has mixed up "þyn aunt" (used at line 2464) with "þy naunt" (line 2467), both forms deriving properly from Old French *aunte* (as the Tolkien-Gordon glossary says). But was this a "mistake"? Mr. Haigh's informants made it spectacularly clear that they used both words, in their pronunciation *ænt* and *nont*. However they regarded *nont* as normal, and *ænt* as affected. Haigh cites a man saying teasingly to his daughter, thought to be trying to ingratiate herself with her (rich) aunt Sally by talking a form of standard English:

> "Thæ thinks thi nont Sally'll bau thi e niu frok if thæ toks faun (polite) to er – imitating her – 'ænt Sarah are yo goin' out? au'll mind th'ouse for yo waul yo kum back'. It's 'ænt Sarah' this en 'ænt Sarah' t'tuther; bet thi nont Sally'll maund er bræss muer ner tha maunds other or, er *er ees*."[4]

The *Gawain*-text was not mistaken, in other words (Tolkien always liked theories which corroborated old poems instead of correcting them); it offered a good rendition of actual speech, confirmed by observation in the present day; the fact that *ænt* and *nont* are no longer casually interchangeable bears witness only to the baleful effects of (Tolkien's phrase) "the powerful southern rival, literary English"; in happier days class had not been a linguistic issue, at least in poetry in English.

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[2] The phrase in single inverted commas comes from the "Preface" to the Tolkien and Gordon edition of *Sir Gawain*, where the editors use it to describe their own intentions as regards the poet.

[3] As for instance the word "auction". I have commented on Tolkien's playing with the two meanings of this in *The Road to Middle-earth* (1992, p. 85).

[4] In this quotation I have not reproduced several of the marks used by Haigh to indicate pronunciation. It should be noted that in this dialect the dipthong "ai" is changed to "au". It is part of the father's teasing imitation of his daughter's accent that he has her say "mind" for "maund" – though not "I" or "while". A translation would run: "You think your aunt Sally'll buy you a new frock if you talk fine to her. "Aunt Sarah, are you going out? I'll mind the house for you till you come back." It's "Aunt Sarah" this and "Aunt Sarah" the other; but your Aunt Sally'll look after her money more than you look after either her or her house."

Tolkien would I am sure have preferred it if a West Midlands form of English had become standard, instead of the South-East Midlands form which actually did so. He was probably attracted on one level to the *Gawain*-poet's works by their demonstration that great poetry could be written without strain in what would now be regarded as a "vulgar" or "ugly" dialect. But which dialect is it, exactly? In the "Foreword" to Haigh Tolkien suggested that *Sir Gawain* was probably written "to the west of Huddersfield" (p. xvii n.), while he and Gordon declared in their 1925 edition that "the Lancashire character of the language is perfectly preserved" (p. viii). Tolkien himself was mistaken here, though in a way which I am sure he would be glad to have demonstrated. Later research since 1925 – of course conducted with the advantage of many more located texts than were available to Tolkien – puts the *Gawain*-poet a county and a half further south, in the valley of the River Dane, on the boundary between Cheshire and Staffordshire, and indeed (one can see there is no needless shilly-shallying among philologists) at map-reference 393364 on the Ordnance Survey charts, a location reckoned as correct to within a hundred yards[5]. Further corollaries of this very precise location[6] are that the poet was probably connected with Dieulacres Abbey near Leek in Staffordshire, that he may have imagined the castle of Sir Bertilak as being located at Knight's Low in Swythamley Park, and most relevantly for Tolkien that – writing in a local dialect for a local audience – he encouraged his hearers to imagine his Arthurian romance as set in a landscape they knew, and which they could name. Thus, as the huntsmen set out to hunt the wild boar (perhaps at Wildboarclough, just above the Dane), the poet says:

Þenne such a glauer ande glam of gedered rachche3
Ros, þat þe rochere3 rungen aboute
(ll.1426-7)

Tolkien and Gordon in 1925 gloss "rocher" as "rock [Old French *roch(i)er*]" – one of the strong points of their edition was that it showed immediately which language words in the poem were derived from, Old English, Old Norse or Old French – and Tolkien's translation of 1975 accordingly reads:

Then such a baying and babel of bloodhounds together arose, that the rock-wall rang all about them.

But if one is gathering hounds at Swythamley or Wildboarclough in the Dane valley, the rock-wall that is likely to be resounding is not "the rocheres", but "the Roaches" – the steep jagged hills overlooking the valley, still called "the Roaches", and with a name which derives from the Old French root *rocher* just as certainly as Tolkien and Gordon's proposed reading. I have remarked in *The Road to Middle-Earth* (1992, p. 87) how Tolkien liked in *The Hobbit* "to make names out of capital letters" – turning "the hill" into "The Hill", the stream at its foot into "The Water", and so on. I am sure Tolkien would have been delighted to see the *Gawain*-poet doing in a sense the opposite – turning "the Roaches" into "þe rochere3", the Flash brook three lines later

into "a flasche" – but in the secure knowledge that his local audience would very probably as it were insert their own capital letters once more, and feel sure that they were living (as Tolkien thought we all do) on the site of ancient legend and romance.

This close equation by the *Gawain*-poet of legendary past and real present, of which Tolkien was not aware, is nevertheless corroborated by features of the *Gawain*-poet's dialect of which Tolkien was very well aware, namely its deep tap-root into old and largely forgotten tradition. Tolkien comments on this quality in the poem at the start of his 1953 essay, regrettably going on to say he is at present concerned with other matters (see Shippey, 1992, pp. 272-3). I do not think, though, that there is any difficulty in tracing what Tolkien meant, providing always that one looks at the *Gawain*-poet with a philological eye. Consider for instance lines 720-5 of the poem, describing Sir Gawain's adventurous ride from Camelot (evidently somewhere down South) into the wilderlands of the Pennines:

Sumwhyle wyth worme3 he werre3, and with wolues als,
Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, þat woned in þe knarre3,
Boþe wyth bulle3 and bere3, and bore3 oþerquyle,
And etayne3, þat hym anelede of þe he3e felle;
Nade he ben du3ty and dry3e, and dry3tyn had serued,
Douteles he hade ben ded and dreped ful ofte.

Tolkien translated this passage as follows:

At whiles with worms he wars, and with wolves also,
at whiles with wood-trolls that wandered in the crags,
and with bulls and with bears and boars too, at times;
and with ogres that hounded him from the heights of the fells.
Had he not been stalwart and staunch and steadfast in God,
he doubtless would have died and death had met often.

But it is essential for a philological understanding to go back to the original, or indeed to go back and forward between original and translation, for (to quote Tolkien again):

a good translation is a good companion of honest labour, while a "crib" is a (vain) substitute for the essential work with grammar and glossary, by which alone can be won genuine appreciation of a noble idiom and a lofty art.
(Tolkien, 1983a, pp. 50-51)

If one looks at the original poem, and then at the Tolkien/Gordon glossary, several words in these six lines should catch the eye: for instance, "dreped". The Tolkien and Gordon glossary says "dreped, *pp*. slain, killed, 725. [OE. *drepan*, smite; ON. *drepa*, kill.]". So is the word an Old English or an Old Norse one? As one can see from his 1975 translation, Tolkien definitely took the word in its Old Norse sense, not its Old English one. "Ded and dreped" to him was a tautology, the line meaning "he would have been dead and killed time and time again". Why then give both etymologies (if the Old English one is irrelevant), and why convict the

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[5] See McIntosh *et al.* (1986) especially vol. 1 p. 178 and vol. 3 p. 37 (where a misprint has crept in over the map-reference).
[6] The points below are made by R.W.V. Elliot in *The Gawain Country* (1984). Elliot's location of the poem was strikingly confirmed by McIntosh *et al.* in the 1986 study cited in note 5.

poet of repeating himself? The answer as usual is a philological one: I have no doubt that yet another of the points which drew Tolkien to the *Gawain*-poet was his dialect's unusual fusion of the two languages Tolkien studied most, Old English and Old Norse – a fusion so intimate that one could have an Old English past participle form (the Old Norse form would have given "drepen" not "dreped") with an Old Norse meaning. Even modern Standard English is to an extent not often realised a mixture of English and Norse. For the *Gawain*-poet's ancestors that mixture had been even deeper and more thorough. Though the poet was also extremely familiar with French, his language showed clearly an old and stubborn resistance to Latinate forms, southern influence, and Standard English. The point about "ded and dreped" is (in a way) a trivial one. But Tolkien thought such points could not be faked. They were the linguistic guarantors of true literary tradition: part of "this flavour, this atmosphere, this virtue that such *rooted* works have", as he says on the first page of his 1953 essay.

In any case there are more significant details in lines 720-5. The word "etayne3" certainly caught Tolkien's eye. It is glossed "ogre, giant . . . [OE. *eoten*]". Tolkien and Gordon obviously knew that the parallel word *iötunn* is extremely common in Old Norse – Tolkien uses it freely in his scholarly work. But the point here is first, that this time the form "etayn" *must* come from Old English, not Old Norse; and second, extremely significantly, that while *iötnar* are common in Norse literature, *eotenas* or "etayne3" are extremely rare in English. The word is found some half-dozen times in Middle English (see *OED* under "eten"), and just once in Old English: indeed, in *Beowulf* (not cited by the *OED*). Had the *Gawain*-poet got the word from *Beowulf?* Almost certainly not[7]. To him, as to the *Beowulf*-poet, it was not an antiquarian word to be snuffled out of a library, but a word from living speech, preserved (like the *ænt/nont* distinction) over centuries innocent of books. The fact that we rarely encounter the word only shows that in the Middle Ages the best stories were rarely written down. Nevertheless the survival of such words indicates a true tradition of giant-stories lasting from *Beowulf* to *Sir Gawain*, or to use Tolkien's dates, from about 725 AD to about 1375 – a longer interval than that which separates the *Gawain*-poet from us.

And then there are the "wodwos" of line 721. I have discussed the survival of this word up to the present day, indeed to the address of Tolkien's Leeds office and my own, in *The Road to Middle-Earth*, see p. 60 n., so I will say here only that it repeats the pattern of true tradition surviving in altered and in this case genuinely "mistaken" form. "Wodwos" is here clearly plural; its singular (in the *Gawain*-poet's mind) would presumably be "wodwo"; but the Old English word from which it should be derived, as Tolkien and Gordon record, would be *wudu-wása*, whose plural would be *wudu-wásan*. The *Gawain*-poet ought to have written "wodwosen" (and maybe he did). But somewhere down the line the true historical form was forgotten, except in place and personal names, no doubt because the stories and the concept of the "trolls of the forest" were being forgotten – till revived, of course, in the Woses (NB plural form), the "Wild Men of the Woods" of Druadan Forest in *The Lord of the Rings* 5/V, "The Ride of the Rohirrim".

Even the "mistakes" of the *Gawain*-poet, it will be seen, tell a story to the philological mind, of which Tolkien was the twentieth century's most prominent example. "Þy (n) aunt" bears witness to the naturalisation of French and the survival of living speech. "Dreped" and "etayne3" in their different ways tell us about the relations of Englishmen and Norsemen off the normal historical map; "etayne3" and "wodwos" between them hint at a great but lost tradition of story-telling, again off the normal literary and critical map. Yet more details could be picked out of the same six lines. A common "vulgarism" much reproved by schoolteachers is "dropping your aitches". Did the *Gawain*-poet drop his aitches? In line 723 "Etayne3" alliterates with "anElede" and is obviously meant to alliterate with "He3e". Should the latter then not be pronounced "E3e"?[8] One cannot be sure, but in his translation Tolkien scrupulously follows the "error" of his original: the only way to get the traditional and correct three alliterations out of Tolkien's line is to read it as: "and with Ogres that 'Ounded 'im from the 'Eights of the fells" – a perfectly plausible pronunciation in the area, just as good as Standard, and backed up not only by the *Gawain*-poet but once more by the *Beowulf*-poet, whose aitches are not above suspicion either.

Nevertheless, one may say in the end, words, etymologies and glossaries apart, what did Tolkien make of the *Gawain*-poet as a thinker, a poet, a story-teller: not just a language-user, a "set text", and a subject for budding philologists to cut their teeth on? We have substantial evidence here in the 1953 essay to which I have already referred. This is no easier to paraphrase than any other of Tolkien's scholarly works. But one conclusion I would venture to draw from it is that Tolkien saw the *Gawain*-poet – as he had earlier presented the *Beowulf*-poet – as an artist in vital respects much like himself: someone deeply embedded in a Christian and Catholic tradition, but nevertheless (if in definitely subordinate fashion) ready to make use of the lost, popular, monster-creating, "fairy-tale" traditions which we can infer fron his very vocabulary.

Tolkien's main point about *Sir Gawain* is thus that in it "the temptations of Sir Gawain, his behaviour under them, and criticism of his code, were for our author his story, to which all else was subservient" (Tolkien, 1983b, p. 83). "All else", one should remember, includes many of the most dramatic and mythically-suggestive scenes in the poem: the appearance of the fearsome Green Knight with axe and holly-branch at Arthur's court, his beheading by Sir Gawain, his instant resurrection, the long journey of the knight into the wilderness as quoted above, and the "trial-and-

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[7] Though I am sure Tolkien would like to have it pointed out that the first person known to have owned *Beowulf* was Lawrence Nowell, Dean of Lichfield, the traditional heart of the West Midlands, and less than fifty miles from the River Dane. See (more explicitly) Sisam, 1953, pp. 61-4.

[8] One of the rules of alliterative verse is that all vowels may alliterate with each other.

repayment" scene in the midwinter snow at the eerie Green Chapel. All interesting, says Tolkien, but "subservient", even (1983b, p. 74) by comparison "perfunctory". Rather than expanding on any or all of these, Tolkien prefers to spend a high proportion of his essay discussing a scene so seemingly underweighted in the poem as to have received almost no critical discussion, and that discussion entirely mistaken; i.e., stanza 75 of the poem, in which Sir Gawain (having resisted the Lady's sexual temptations, but accepted from her a girdle as a gift) goes to confession and is absolved. On this stanza, Tolkien says, "the whole interpretation and valuation [of the poem] depends". Either the poet meant it, in which case it is to be taken seriously, or he was "just a muddler" and his story "just a fairy-story for adults, and not a very good one" (1983b, p. 87).

Tolkien's opposition here is a highly aggressive one, showing how very much he wanted to see the poet not only as an orthodox Catholic with strong awareness of the sacraments, but as a conscious ethical thinker. If one takes this scene Tolkien's way, then the poet makes his character go to confession and *either* not mention his retention of the girdle *or* be told by his confessor that retaining it, against the compact he has made with the Lady's husband, is not a sin. Tolkien prefers the second option, which involves him conceding that much of the action of the poem in the Beheading Game and the Exchange of Winnings compact is in a way not serious – though potentially fatal – but just "a game with rules". It is these rules Gawain is breaking by retaining the girdle, not a moral commandment. The moral code *would* have been broken, however, if Gawain had stooped to adultery with the Lady, and that is why the temptation scenes are the centre. One might sum up by saying that Tolkien views the poem as bringing two systems into conflict with each other, a Christian moral code and an aristocratic code of honour: the conflict being decided very definitely, by such scenes as the "confession" stanza, in favour of the former.

I am bound to say at this point that I disagree with Tolkien over some though not most of his interpretation[9]. I agree about the conflict of codes, but feel that the poet exerts his energies to reconcile them, rather than subordinating one to the other: in which case, to take up Tolkien's dilemma over the nature of Gawain's confession, the poet's intention was to suggest the former, not the latter, of Tolkien's alternatives – Gawain did not mention retention of the girdle any more than a modern would feel obliged to confess a foul at football or perhaps a post-dated cheque in business. It is true that I am not a Catholic, and so may underrate the force of what the poet shared with Tolkien. On the other hand, when Tolkien at the end puts the poem into elaborately but not ironically modern terms of "the Old School Tie" and "the colours of the First Eleven", I can perhaps speak as one who shared an Old School Tie with Tolkien, and deep interest in the same First Elevens and Fifteens, and so may stress only to a greater degree than he does the real importance of "games with rules" and "codes of honour".

It seems to me, indeed, that by stressing the poet's moral Catholicity Tolkien put himself into a difficult position, which he himself recognised, over the very nature of the temptation. For if the castle is "a courteous and Christian hall" (as I agree it is), what are we to think of the Lady's repeated temptations to adultery? What would have happened if Gawain had succumbed? Would his only problem then, in the Exchange of Winnings plot, have been keeping to the letter of his compact with the castle Lord? Surely not. Tolkien in fact refuses to pursue this line of thought, urging that all this is unthinkable, and not to be explained away by any of those "ancient and barbaric customs" (i.e. wife-swapping) against which C.S. Lewis also reacted[10], or by "tales in which memory of them is still enshrined". In saying this Tolkien once again abjured a whole tradition of ancient story of a kind he himself, in fiction, repeatedly used: a whole *legendarium* of ettens and woodwoses and soulless, dangerous elf-maidens. Yet despite abjuring it with the words "we are not in that world", Tolkien nevertheless finds suggestions of that world indispensable. The reason we do not wonder about the chances of a "successful" temptation, Tolkien says, lies in the menacing suggestions left over in the poem of "fairy story". If Gawain did respond to the Lady, he would meet something terrible, like the heroine of "Bluebeard" opening a forbidden door: "hanging in the background, for those able to receive the air of 'faerie' in a romance, is a terrible threat of disaster and destruction" (1983b, p. 83).

The interesting thing for those who, forty years later, are reading Tolkien's fiction is the careful and perhaps compulsive way in which Tolkien presents an image of an artist wholly dedicated to one tradition (the Christian and Catholic one), nevertheless employing echoes of another (the long and originally pre-Christian tradition of native fairy-tale and monster-story), and using both to create a critique of a third (an essentially secular code based on humour, etiquette and good manners). It is hard to resist the thought that Tolkien read the *Gawain*-poet this way because it resembled his own experience: though one might well put Tolkien a good deal closer to fairy-tale than his predecessor, if at the same time no further away from Catholicity. Perhaps the vital point, however, is that even in his strong advocacy of the one tradition Tolkien is unable to do without the other. Just as I see Tolkien's fiction as in several senses a "mediation" between a Christian world and a heroic pagan one (see Shippey, 1992, pp. 188, 198-200 etc.), so Tolkien sees the *Gawain*-poet as understanding and drawing on both those worlds, while in this case "subordinating" one to the other. And, just as I argue that this "mediation" between two worlds gives *The Lord of the Rings* a moral force which would be lacking if it were just "a saint's life, all about temptation [or] a complicated wargame, all about tactics" (Shippey, 1992, p. 133), so Tolkien says firmly, leading straight on from the quotation above about "the air of

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[9] My views are explained in Shippey, 1971.

[10] Lewis's essay "The Anthropological Approach", first published in Tolkien's 1962 *festschrift* and reprinted in Lewis 1969, is in large part a reaction to interpretations of *Sir Gawain* such as Tolkien is here rejecting.

'faerie'", that in the mixed mode of *Sir Gawain*:

> The struggle becomes intense to a degree which a merely realistic story of how a pious knight resisted a temptation to adultery (when a guest) could hardly attain. It is one of the properties of Fairy Story thus to enlarge the scene and the actors; or rather it is one of the properties that are distilled by literary alchemy when old deep-rooted stories are rehandled by a real poet with an imagination of his own.
> (Tolkien, 1983b, p. 83)

De te narratur fabula, one might say: Tolkien describes himself. Nor would he, I feel, view it as anything but a compliment to be fitted into literary tradition in a place similar to that of the *Gawain*-poet. There is furthermore one typically, even pedantically philological point from the passage already cited which once more associates Tolkien with his predecessor. The poet says that Sir Gawain fought many dangerous ventures before he ever got to his temptation:

> Nade he ben duȝty and dryȝe, and dryȝtyn had serued,
> Douteles he hade ben ded and dreped ful ofte.

The first line of these two is, grammatically speaking, a double subordinate clause, if with its doubleness obscured by ellipsis. It means, in full expanded form: "If he had not been stalwart and staunch, *and* if he had not served the Lord", then he would doubtless have been dead and killed many times over. Put that way, one might wonder: "Well – what if he had been one but not the other? What if he had been stalwart and staunch, but not a servant of God? Or what if he had been a servant of God, but a timid and feeble one?" Gandalf would say perhaps that this is a problem best not thought about; but something like it seems to me a major part of the structure of *The Lord of the Rings* (see Shippey, 1992, pp. 128-38). And whether that is so or not, it is certainly interesting to see Tolkien himself repeating just such alternative but undecidable conditions. The *Gawain*-poet leaves it uncertain whether it is Gawain's ability or his piety which saves him; the *Beowulf*-poet has his hero similarly leave it undecided whether it is *wyrd* or "courage" that saves a warrior; and in exactly the same mode Gimli says to Merry and Pippin at *The Lord of The Rings* II, p. 169, that "luck served you there; *but* (my italics) you seized your chance with both hands, one might say." In other words luck would *not* have saved Merry and Pippin any more than serving God would have saved Gawain – *on its own!* In all these traditional stories courage and fortitude are as important as morality, piety, or the intervention of higher powers. That is what keeps them stories rather than allegories.

There are other aspects of the *Gawain*-poet's work to which Tolkien would, I am sure, have liked to pay tribute. It should not escape notice, for instance, that the poem *Purity* pays such particular attention to questions of secular good manners (seen at times as superior even to morality, or at least as more irritating when absent) that modern criticism has on the whole preferred to turn as blind an eye to them as to the issue of Gawain's confession. Tolkien would certainly also have responded powerfully to the clash of parental grief and Catholic consolation in *Pearl*, a clash perhaps even more powerful emotionally and even harder to "mediate" than that between knightly manners and Christian duty in *Sir Gawain*. Nevertheless I feel yet once more that the deepest appeal of the *Gawain*-poet to Tolkien lay in the innumerable problems he set for philologists, all of them full of suggestion for the "philological mind". At line 115 of *Pearl* the dreaming narrator finds himself in a land by a strange stream where dazzling stones shine:

> As stremande sterneȝ, quen stroþe-men slepe,

or as Tolkien translates it:

> As streaming stars when on earth men sleep.

"Stroþe" however does not mean "on earth". The note in Gordon's edition reads:

> 115 *stroþe-men*: of uncertain meaning and derivation. *Strothe* in *Sir Gawain* 1710 appears to be derived from ON. *storð* "stalks of herbage", but the North-West place-names containing Stroth, Strother . . . point to a native OE. **stroð, *stroðor . . . *Stroð* appears to have had the meaning "marshy land (overgrown with brushwood)", and probably influenced the development of the imported ON. *storð*. Here *stroþe-men* is probably used in a generalized poetic sense to mean "men of this world" . . . , but *stroþe* would probably carry with it also, pictorially, a suggestion of the dark, low earth onto which the high stars look down.

One wonders how far credit for this note should be shared between E.V. Gordon, I.L. Gordon, and Tolkien. The philological point about Old English and Old Norse is only a reversal of what is said above about "dreped", and could have come from any of the three. The image of the men in the brushwood, asleep and in the dark, yet looked down on by the high, streaming stars *which they cannot see* seems however a perfect image of life in Middle-earth as portrayed by Tolkien and as remarked by Gildor or Galadriel. The marshy scrubland where the "stroþe-men" sleep is the same as *galadhremmin ennorath*, "tree-tangled" Middle-earth itself, and the "stremande sterneȝ" are the sign of Elbereth Gilthoniel, "Elbereth Star-kindler". In this as in many other ways the images of the *Gawain*-poet have been received and transmitted by Tolkien back into living literary tradition.

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