



he 1975 publication of four translations by J.R.R. Tolkien from Middle English was of interest not just to teachers of courses in medieval literature. But however much the readers of The Lord of the Rings may enjoy the equally romantic tone of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Sir Orfeo, and "Gawain's Leave-taking", or readers of "Leaf by Niggle" may enjoy Pearl, nevertheless something beyond simple enjoyment is called for: some sort of assessment of the works as translations. In this article I would like to open a debate on Tolkien's rendering of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight¹.

One of the stylistic matters which strikes the reader is how old-fashioned the diction and phrasing is. For a number of examples all drawn from five pages: "In sooth" (s.43); "I would fainer" (s.43); "a-hunting wend my way" (s.44); "quoth" (s.45); "did oft spur" (s.47); "More seemly 'twould be" (s.48); "leave grant me" (s.49); "Nay, for sooth, fair sir" (s.49); "I wot well" (s.49); "abed" (s.49). Some of these are examples of archaic diction - "a-hunting", "wot", "abed"; and some are inversions of the modern prose order of the language - "leave grant me". The latter, in particular, Ezra Pound outlawed early this century. I am not trying to defend Pound's aesthetics, but they have been highly influential. Tolkien's ability to ignore them puts him in the Victorian (or Edwardian) tradition, rather than the typically Modern. However, I do not intend this as an attack on Tolkien; simply as an aesthetic placement.

A comparison will illustrate this point more fully. Here is the stand of the boar in the second hunt (stanza 62) in Tolkien's translation and then that of Brian Stone:

"...but in such haste as he might he made for a hollow
 on a reef beside a rock where the river was flowing.
 He put the bank at his back, began then to paw;
 fearfully the froth of his mouth foamed from the corners;
 he whetted his white tusks. Then weary were all
 the brave men so bold as by him to stand
 of plaguing him from afar, yet for peril they dared not
 come nigher.

(1) Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Sir Orfeo; translated by J.R.R. Tolkien and edited by Christopher Tolkien, George Allen & Unwin, 1975. References in the text are to stanza numbers.

He had hurt so many before,
that none had now desire
to be torn with the tusks once more
of a beast both mad and dire."

One finds here such poeticisms as an unnecessary progressive form, "the river was flowing"; inversions - "began then to paw", "a beast both mad and dire"; and unusual word choice, "nigher" (for closer), and unusual word form, "afar". Tolkien also has an awkward sentence, "Then weary were all the brave men so bold as by him to stand of plaguing him from afar". Presumably that means, "Then all the brave men were weary of plaguing him from afar", but exactly how is "as by him to stand" related to the rest of the clause? (Stone is also going to have trouble with the sentence.)

Brian Stone translates:

"But with the speed he still possessed, he spurted to a hole
On a rise by a rock with a running stream beside.
He got the bank at his back, and began to abrade the ground.
The froth was foaming foully at his mouth,
And he whetted his white tusks; a weary time it was
For the bold men about, who were bound to harass him
From a distance, for done dared to draw near him
For dread.
He had hurt so many men
That it entered no one's head
To be torn by his tusks again,
And he raging and seeing red."²

The "beside" in the second line would normally be "beside it"; was is omitted in the last line, two omissions which are not as anti-modern as Tolkien's inversions and old-fashioned diction. Otherwise the only divergence from 'Pound's dictum' is the awkward sentence: "a weary time it was for the bold men about, who were bound to harass him from a distance", but even that seems clearer than Tolkien's.

But, one may ask, which is the better translation? Here is the passage in a recent edition:

"...Bot in þe hast þat he myzt he to a hole wynnez
Of a rasse bi a rokk þer rennez þe boerne.
He gete þe bonk at his bak, bigynez to scrape,
þe froþe femed at his mouth vnfayre bi þe wykez,
Whettez his whyte tuschez; with hym þen irked
Alle þe burnez so bolde þat hym by stoden
To nye hym on-ferum bot neze hym non durst
for woþe;
He hade hurt so mony byforne
þat al þuzt þenne full loþe
Be more wyth his tusches torne,
þat breame watz and branywod bothe..."³

I translate this literally, ignoring the alliterative meter:

But in the speed that he could [manage], he reaches a hole
[consisting] of a ledge of rock where the stream runs.
He gets the bank at his back, begins to scrape [or paw the ground],
the froth foamed at his mouth hideous[ly] at the corners,
[he] whets his white tusks; of him then were wearied
all the men so bold who stood about him,
of harassing him from a distance, but near him none dare [come]
because of danger;
he had hurt so many [men] before
that all were then very loath
to be torn [any] more with his tusks,
[Since he] was both fierce and frenzied...

(2) Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; translated by Brian Stone, Penguin, (2nd. edition), 1974.

(3) Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; ed. J.R.R. Tolkien & E.V. Gordon, revised Norman Davies, (2nd. edition), Oxford, 1967, pp.43-44.

That one clause is a mess. Let me ignore the lines of the poem:

Then all the men were wearied who stood around him, they were wearied of harassing him from a distance, but were afraid of the danger in getting closer.

Going back to the question of who does the better translation: as one would expect, there is no clear-cut decision. When the ms. says "he to a hole wynnez", Tolkien translates "he made for a hollow" and Stone, "he spurted to a hole". Neither of them choose the most precise verb, but then both of them are alliterating on their verbs, so some variance is necessary. Stone is livelier with spurted, but probably a little further from the literal meaning. Tolkien has decided hole, instead of being from the Old English hol ('hole'), is from the Old English holh ('hollow'). That is not what my text's glossary says, but it is a legitimate decision, I suppose. (The fact that the edition of Sir Gawain by Tolkien and E.V. Gordon also glosses this hole as 'hole' is also beside the point.⁴)

I am rather dubious about Tolkien's translation of rasse in the second line of this passage with 'reef'; the basic meaning of rasse is 'level'. In the glossary of the Tolkien and Gordon edition, they suggest that here it means 'smooth bank', and Davis suggests 'ledge of rock' (both suggestions are marked as questionable). 'Reef' may conjure up pictures of the boar taking his stand on some sort of land-projection into the stream or river, but I do not find this in the original.

Of course this sort of minutiae could be discussed throughout. Let me give just a few more comments. In stanza 8 is a passage which interests me:

"...clear spurs below
of bright gold on silk broideries banded most richly,
though unshod were his shanks, for shoeless he rode."

That third line in the original reads:

"And scholes vnder schankes þere þe schalk rides."

(Schalk is one of the poet's many synonyms for man.) The question is, what does scholes mean? In the glossary of the Tolkien and Gordon edition, it is said to be a plural noun: "sollerets, shoes with long pointed toes" (p.188), but in their notes they indicate that at least one scholar preferred "shoeless". I wonder what caused Tolkien to change his mind from 'sollerets' to 'shoeless'? (Brian Stone, by the way, writes something which I see no source for: "With shields for the shanks and shins when riding.")

One minor fault in Tolkien's version is his inability to get the word green at the end of the seventh stanza. The original poet holds back the magical colour until the last word:

"He ferde as freke were fade,
And oueral enker-grene."

("He fared as [a] man [who] was bold, and entirely bright green." Freke is another of the poet's synonyms for man.) But Tolkien only manages:

"...as a fay-man fell he passed,
and green all over glowed."

Stone does better:

"Men gaped, for the giant grim
Was coloured a gorgeous green."

A thing which Stone cannot manage, in his usually modern language, is the second person pronoun shifts in the poem. For example, at Sir Bertilak's castle, Gawain is addressed as you by his host and hostess, you being technically the second person plural but actually serving as a courtsey

(4) Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: ed. J.R.R. Tolkien & E.V. Gordon, Oxford, 1925 (corrected 1930), p.167.

between equals⁵. Here is an exchange from stanza 65, upon the host's giving the boar to Gawain (Tolkien's pronouns follow the original):

"'Now, Gawain,' said the good man, 'this game is your own
by close covenant we concluded, as clearly you know.'
'That is true,' he returned, 'and as truly I assure you
all my winning, I warrant, I shall award you in exchange.'"

I suspect that the two kisses which follow, while part of the game they are playing, are only possible between social equals (outside of a religious or perhaps an amatory context).

On the other hand, when the Green Chapel is reached, the Green Knight greets Gawain with the second person singular - a mark of inequality or social disrespect (this is in stanza 90):

"'Have thy helm off thy head, and have here thy pay!
Bandy me no more debate than I brought before thee
When thou didst sweep off my head with one swipe only!'"

Gawain replies in kind.

A conclusion? I have only obvious points to offer. Like all translations, Tolkien's will appeal to some people (those who savour The Lord of the Rings) and not to some others (those who read Ezra Pound's Cantos for style). In addition, I find a number of technical points interesting, the translation being sometimes quite accurate (you vs. thou) and sometimes slightly questionable (hollow instead of hole; reef for rasse). Perhaps this is not fully the assessment I called for at the first of my paper, but it is a first step.

(5) Op. cit. ref. 3, pp.144-145. As Norman Davies indicates, there are a few inconsistencies in the uses, but a general pattern is maintained.



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continued from p.11)

has been very selective. In order to keep the book within manageable proportions, he has given entries only for those works which he considers to be of real importance to the scholar and has excluded those peripheral items which make only a passing reference to Tolkien, or which pretend that Middle-earth is "real", most newspaper articles, adaptations of Tolkiens works into other media - and most fan-magazine articles. The main reason for this last limitation is that most such magazines are not available in libraries where researchers who would use the Checklist would go. He thus includes items only from the Tolkien Journal, Orcrest and Mythlore. Mallorn is omitted, except for when it reprints a piece.

There are nevertheless 755 entries in this section. A relatively cursory perusal seems to show that virtually all of the significant pieces of Tolkien criticism have been included; I cannot at present see any notable omissions.

Accompanying each entry West gives a note summarising its content. In this he is at pains to be objective and detached, though perhaps one can read his own feelings between the lines here and there. The asterisk beside an entry denoting a work, in West's opinion, of especial value which was present in the first edition of the Checklist is here dropped.

The work as a whole is obviously the product of a great deal of care and labour on the part of its compiler, but which, as the result shows, was well spent. Hardly a book, perhaps, for the average "fan", it is an essential tool for anyone undertaking research into Tolkien's writings, and as such can be warmly recommended. The only drawback is, as you might expect, the price. The U.K. distributors (Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., LONDON WC2E 8LU) are charging £17.50 a copy, which is rather more than the U.S. price of \$25.00 might lead you to expect.

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