Sir Gawain & the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo. A Review by Paul H. Kocher

T'S a pure delight to find that Tolkien has left us complete translations (modernizations really) of those three major poems of the 14th century - 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight', 'Pearl' and 'Sir Orfeo'. We owe their discovery and publication to Christopher Tolkien, his son and literary executor, who has given them us "just as they came" from his father's pen. Only in those relatively few instances in which Tolkien had made no personal final choice between two or more competing versions did his son exercise his editorial powers in choosing the one which seemed to him to be the latest in time.

Furthermore we owe to Christopher Tolkien three hitherto unpublished essays by his father. One, on verse forms, which is printed in the appendix of this book (pp 143 - 49). The other two are in the introduction (pp 13 - 25). Of these two the first, a superb commentary on 'Sir Gawain', derives in part from Tolkien's notes, but chiefly from a talk he gave on the BBC Third Programme in 1953, just after his translation of 'Sir Gawain' had been read on that programme that year. The second of these essays is the original draft of an essay written for E. V. Gordon's edition of 'Pearl' shortly after the two men had collaborated in preparing what was long to remain the standard text of 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' (1925).

In his brief preface to the book, Christopher Tolkien supplies quotations from his father which explain why Tolkien embarked on the labour of translating. Above all he wanted the poems to be read and enjoyed by literate people outside the university who had not mastered English as written in the West Midlands 600 years ago. He also believed, however, that even the scholars inside the university community would understand such poems better after putting themselves through the discipline of rendering them into standard modern English. And he was the first to stress that he himself had learned much about the three poems from translating them.

These benefits would accrue, however, only if the translator kept them closely to the metre of the originals. And, one might add, to those elements in the language which have remained unchanged since the time of their composition.

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The meters of 'Sir Gawain' and 'Pearl' being alliterative, Christopher Tolkien thought it useful to add an appendix on their verse forms (pp 143 - 49). This is the third essay by Tolkien never before published, so far as I know. Again, the son had no desire to compose an essay on that subject. After searching through his father's papers he picked out those notes, first drafts, commentaries, etc., which had to do with the verse forms of the three poems.

As a result the section on 'Sir Gawain' is composed from drafts made for, but not used in "an introductory talk to the broadcasters of the translation". Consequently, Christopher Tolkien was able to say that "there is very little in these accounts (and nothing that is matter of opinion) that is not in my Father's own words". That is, virtually everything that appears in the appendix on verse forms comes from Tolkien himself. We can only be grateful for the son's industry and good judgement.

Even with all this help let no one imagine either that the process of translating the three poems can have been easy, or that our understanding of it will be all plain sailing. Doubts on the first matter can be settled at once by comparing the translations with the original texts used: For 'Sir Gawain' either the edition by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (1925 revised by Norman Davis in 1967) or that of Sir Israel Gollancz (1940) is standard. For 'Pearl', E. V. Gordon's edition (1953) serves very well. And as for 'Sir Orfeo', the second edition by A. J. Bliss (1966) prints all three manuscript versions, known as Auchinleck, Harley 3810, and Ashmole 61.

In 'Sir Gawain' the stanzas vary in length from just under 20 lines to nearly 30. In every case the final five lines begin with a two-syllable tail rhyme, followed by four rhyming lines (ababb), each with only two stressed syllables. All the lines before these last five are in the usual alliterative meter, which contains anywhere from two to four stresses per line, always divided by a caesura in the middle. They do not rhyme, of course. From the Medieval point of view this is not a particularly difficult stanza form, assuming that one knows how to write proper alliterative verses, which is not so easy as it looks. In any case, Tolkien as translator handles it with practised skill, born partly of his close acquaintance with the original text of the poem, and partly of his close affinity with its subject-matter.

This affinity is two-fold. One is with that element of the plot which narrates Gawain's temptation by Bertilak's wife, who knowing that Gawain accepts and practises the medieval code of courtly love, which culminates in the physical union of the lovers, comes to his bed on three successive mornings in order to seduce him. What she does not know is that Gawain is an even better Christian than he is a courtly lover, and is enabled by prayer to resist the sin of adultery, not to mention treachery to his host. 'The Lord of the Rings', of course, is full of temptation scenes, especially those surrounding the One Ring.

At least equally attractive to Tolkien would be the magical element associated by the poet of 'Sir Gawain' with Morgan le Faye, whose very name brands her as a fairy (faye). Only near the end of the poem does Gawain discover that she it is who, having learnt her spells from Merlin, sent Bertilak to Arthur in the guise of the Green Knight in order to terrify the court and, if possible, kill Guinevere whom she hates. Morgan may even have devised the temptation

of Gawain by Bertilak's wife, since the evil Fairy first appears as an old crone "leading her by the left hand". Later she sits "highest at table" with Bertilak beside her, while Gawain and the lady of the castle sit apart from the others, "at the centre" as with Bertilak, so with the lady. Morgan is her close companion and seemingly confers with her during the days of Gawain's testing.

But even before Gawain's arrival at the castle the poet has been kept busy building up the "fairy" theme. Arthur's court has thought of the Green Knight as a "phantom and fay-magic" (line 240). Some of Arthur's knights go so far as to blame their King for allowing Gawain to accept the Green Knight's challenge, which exposes him to certain death, "beheaded by an elvish man for an arrogant vaunt" (line 681). Again riding through the wilds of Wales in search of the Green Chapel, Gawain has to fight dragons, wood-trolls, wild beasts and ogres (stanza 31). This sounds almost like a journey through Middle-earth. And, to strengthen the parallel, Tolkien translates the "molde" of the original text, meaning simply "earth", into "Middle-earth" (line 914).

'Pearl', composed probably by the same poet, not very far from the end of the 14th century, offers a 20th century translator an even harder problem in metrics. Each stanza is 12 lines long, every one of them alliterative, but each also part of a rhyme scheme (abababababbcbc). The finding of six alliterative lines rhyming b, four rhyming a, and two rhyming c cannot have been easy even for so great a master of words as Tolkien. Further compounding the task is the poet's decision that the last line of each stanza in every group of five stanzas must be nearly the same, thus providing a variant refrain for the group. That is, the first five stanzas of the poem should not stray far from the concluding line: "For that Pearl, mine own, without a spot". Finally the first line of every one of the first five-stanza group must include a key word from the last line of its predecessor. In this example the poet has chosen the word "spot".

Tolkien did not seem to regard these requirements as a strait-jacket for his art, but rather as a salutory species of discipline to be overcome. A comparison between Tolkien's translation and the original text of 'Pearl' (as provided by E. V. Gordon, 1953) shows how faithfully he adhered to the customs of its form, without being slavish about it. Which is as much to say that Tolkien well knew how to balance on this thin edge between over-literal and over-free renditions, a problem that many translators never solve.

Suppose we consider for the moment the first five stanzas which begin 'Pearl', remembering that each stanza is 12 lines long, abababababbcbc.

In stanza 3:

	Original Text	Tolkien's translation
a words:	sprede, rede, fede, dede	spread, red, shed, dead
b words:	runne, sunne, dunne, wonne, bygone, sponne	run, sun, done, won, begun, none
c words:	not, spotte	not, spot

Tolkien's stanza 3 has almost exactly the same a, b and c rhyme words as in

the original text.

But stanza 2 is at the opposite extreme: every one of the new rhyme words is quite different from the old, in all 12 lines.

Most stanzas in 'Pearl', to take stanza 4 as example, mix the two extremes without compassion: the a words are all different, the b words are all the same and of the c words one is the same and the other is different.

One emerges from such comparisons within 'Pearl' wondering why any poet, medieval or not, should ever elect to put his work into such form. But some did, and Tolkien seems not to have had any special difficulty with it.

The theme of 'Pearl' is the proper (Christian) handling of grief. At the outset the narrator, the poet, the "I" of the poem, is grieving inordinately for his little daughter, not yet two years old, who has just died. The refrain of the first five stanzas, repeating over and over "My pearl", "mine own" reveals the strong sense of his personal ownership of the girl. She is his, she belongs only to him, not to God. This possessiveness is at fierce debate with his reason, which tells him that he must reconcile himself to her death, and with Christ's bidding him "be comforted". Worn out by this war within, the girl's father falls asleep and dreams of meeting his little child on the borders of paradise. The beauty of the woods, the clearness of the water of the river which he cannot cross, the light shining over all which is like no other light are masterfully described by the poet and translated by Tolkien 'con more'.

What happens next is a very subtle study of how the father-narrator gradually and painfully achieves peace through talking with his daughter, now a queen in heaven. While he grieves vainly on earth, sometimes he blames God for separating them, sometimes he berates himself. And through all these storms she gives him quiet consolation which steadies him. In the end he is allowed to see her among the brides of Christ in the new Jerusalem. When he wakes he is able to surrender his daughter, and his grief, to the Lord. This penetrating study of grief, a perennial human problem, and the poem's description of a far-off land, not of this earth, would (I think) have attracted both Tolkien's imagination and his Christian faith.

'Sir Orfeo' is one of eight Breton lays surviving in English. Half are in 12 line rhyming stanzas of elaborate design, the remainder in octosyllabic rhyming couplets. 'Sir Orfeo' lies within this latter group. Tolkien was clearly interested in the type, for he wrote one himself, 'The lay of Aotrou and Itroun', likewise in couplets but with the periodic insertions of the harper's comments in a four-line stanza at a number of strategic places throughout the poem.

Of the three surviving MSS telling the tale of 'Sir Orfeo' (Orpheus), Auchinleck is generally reputed to be the best. Nevertheless, most students of the text carry over into it several lines from Harley 3810. One of these is the 24 line opening of the poem which Tolkien feels free to take from the Harley opening. Another is a passage (lines 33 – 46) from the Harley MS, praising Orfeo's great skill in harping. Thereafter the poem proceeds rapidly to the episode in which Queen Heurodis (Eurydice) is warned by the fairy king that on the morrow he will come for her invisibly and carry her off to his kingdom inside a mountain. In spite of the vigilance of Sir Orfeo and his 1,000 knights, Heurodis is duly carried off, invisible to everyone. Leaving his kingdom

in the charge of his steward, Orfeo spends years searching hill and dale for his wife. He also searches especially, of course, for traces of the King of "Faerie" who has abducted her.

Tolkien with his great liking for elves, describes this king as only he can. The King's crown is made of a single blazing jewel. He orders Heurodis to be in the arbour of the castle the next day, whence he will take her to his kingdom. And if she fails to appear he will find her nonetheless and "all thy limbs shall rend and tear". Not a mild character, that King. Orfeo lives in the wild wood for many a long year before he meets Heurodis riding through the forest with her companions and also learns to see, also, "the King of Faerie" hunting. At other times he observes the King leading a mighty host of fierce elven warriors, but he never finds out where or why. Knights and ladies he sees dancing by, for elves cannot long resist the dance. Some of the episodes recall 'Smith of Wooton Major'.

Sir Orfeo follows the elves through a dark cave into a beautiful valley and manages to play his harp at a great feast. The sweet music draws from the King a promise to release Heurodis, whom he has brought here secretly from Winchester, Orfeo's castle. The final task for Orfeo on his return to the real world where he rules is to test his steward in order to determine his loyalty. (Compare the stewards of Gondor in 'The Lord of the Rings'.) The steward having passed all tests, Orfeo names him heir to the throne.

It remains to ask when and why these poems received translation. As to the when, Christopher Tolkien is able to give us only a vague upper limit on each of the poems: e.g. "A form of his 'Pearl' translation was in existence more than thirty years ago (i.e. 1945), though it was much revised later." The translation of 'Sir Gawain' was completed "soon after 1950" since it was broadcast on British radio in 1953. About 'Sir Orfeo' Tolkien's son can only say that it was "made many years ago, and had been (I believe) for long laid aside".

My own surmise is that Tolkien's withdrawal from joint authorship of the 'Pearl' text with E. V. Gordon in the late 1920's marks a watershed. Before that date he restricted his efforts to scholarly pursuits, as in the massive glossary to Kenneth Sisam's anthology (1921) and in the edition of 'Sir Gawain' which he and Gordon prepared together (1925). But after the watershed it would seem that he began looking for means of reaching out past the walls of Oxford. Translations of difficult medieval poems for public appreciation was one way of extending his range, or (better) one step. But the pressures of University life and teaching required him to proceed cautiously in breaking away. Tolkien had not yet burned any bridges behind him. He really burned them when he sat down to write the history of Middle-earth. And even this he hedged prudently, for he began by gathering materials to write a "history" of Elvish tongues, which would be "primarily linguistic in inspiration", as he remarks in the foreword to the second edition of LOTR. Linguistics, his particular trade one might say, was still being kept in the forefront of his great fictions. Later, when his friends told him that such a book would never sell, he jettisoned most of its linguistic element in favour of straight history and the pursuit of excellence in a field of writing which was strange to him.

This process, I suggest, went on for several years in the early 1930's, culminating in the success of 'The Hobbit' in 1937.

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WILLOW WHISPERS

by Perri Ellis

Willow whispers to the brook.
Rivers murmur,
Dark trees look,
With long toes,
And fingers long,
For the whisper,
Of watery brook.

Will O' the whisp,
In swampy holes,
Whisper willow,
In the dark night old.

Dead is the light,
And the river's cold.
Bold trees at night,
Old willows old .....
    Old......
      Old......
        Old......
          Old......
            Old......