Tolkien editor, reader and critic of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

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ABSTRACT: In addition to his work to produce a new edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in 1925, with his colleague and friend E. V. Gordon, Tolkien also put much effort into translating the romance in verse (his translation broadcast on the BBC in 1953 was published posthumously, with minor revisions, in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*). Moreover, he wrote a revealing introduction to his translation for a radio talk and delivered a lecture on the medieval romance in Glasgow in 1953 (published in *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*). The goal of this paper is to explore his vision and appreciation of the poem, and put them in critical perspective. Tolkien had very interesting insights on some aspects of the work, especially its focus on grace and the figure of Mary, while downplaying what Armitage regards as its Northern 'sauciness'. Among other things, the exploration of Tolkien's views will lead to a re-examination of the religious and moral tenor of the poem, its confession scenes, and main temptations in its long Fitt 3, whose centrality he rightly emphasized.

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INTRODUCTION

Tolkien was both innovative in his approach to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as he successfully broke new scholarly ground – especially philologically, with a co-edition of the Middle English poem and romance – and traditional in his outlook, as his reading of the work was conservative and imbued with his own Catholicism, quite consonant with the spiritual leanings of the poet himself.

Tolkien engaged with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* throughout his entire professional life, and even beyond, perhaps as much as with *Beowulf*. His biographer mentions that he probably encountered the Middle English romance when he was fifteen, and became so familiar with it that he came to recite excerpts to his schoolfriends[1] (along with *Beowulf* and *Pearl*). However, its influence on his own creative work seems to have been limited, at any rate much more than for *Beowulf*, for instance[2].

My purpose here is to examine why and how he engaged with this romance in particular within the broader context of his career, and discuss

[1] Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 43, 54.

[2] To take just one telling example, in *The Hobbit*, there is a literary quotation from *Beowulf*, as Smaug is woken up like the dragon in the Old English epic, by a thief stealing a cup. Attempts to find connections between *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Tolkien's works are far from being as fruitful (but see, e.g., Leo Carruthers, "Homme elfique, peuple elfique"; Claire Jardillier, "Les échos arthuriens dans *Le Seigneur des anneaux*"; Ben Reinhard, "Tolkien's Lost Knights", Tom Shippey, "Tolkien and the *Gawain*-Poet").

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his interpretation in the light of subsequent critical endeavour. I first examine how Tolkien came to work on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*, henceforth), before presenting his views and putting them in perspective.

TOLKIEN'S ENGAGEMENT WITH *SGGK*

Tolkien felt from the first a deep affinity with the language of *SGGK*, and not just with its subject matter and its handling. All this moved him to produce an edition and a verse translation of the medieval romance.

DIALECTAL AFFINITY

As Leo Carruthers points out, one of the reasons for Tolkien being drawn to *SGGK* is a philological interest in West Midlands dialects, whether medieval or diachronically closer: Tolkien felt a deep connection with the West Midlands, as he had been raised in the southern part of that area, from which his family originated too; in addition, he learned, as a philologist, that up to the 13th century, the West Midlands dialect appeared to have remained closer to Old English than other English dialects, retaining many conservative features and resisting longer post-Conquest French linguistic influence[3].

SGGK was probably composed in the last quarter of the 14th century, and couched in a northern brand of the West Midlands dialect, then current

[3] Leo Carruthers, "Homme elfique, peuple elfique", 12-13.

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in or around Cheshire[4] and very different from the contemporary English of Chaucer. In Tolkien's own count, *SGGK* has three times as many words borrowed from French as Scandinavian loanwords[5]. Knowing Tolkien's dislike for most things French, and especially the Conquest[6], this presumably did not contribute to making the work dearer to him[7]. Nonetheless, he still found in the language of the poem something to which he could relate personally.

TOLKIEN'S EDITION OF SGGK

Tolkien published in 1925 his own edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* with his friend, colleague and former student E. V. Gordon.

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[4] Discounting the minor complications and qualifications discussed in Putter and Stokes, "The *Linguistic Atlas* and the Dialect of the *Gawain* poet".

[5] Tolkien and Gordon (eds), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 138.

[6] Carpenter, *Tolkien*, 22, 67, 129.

[7] The poet himself was much more of a francophile. He apparently took French manners to be the height of fashion and a model to follow: when the company assembled in Bertilak's private room are about to part, after the first formal promise to exchange gifts, he writes: "And sythen with frenkysch fare and fele fayres lotes | Thay stoden and stemed and stylly speken, | Kysten ful comlyly and kaghter her leve." (1116-1118) Simon Armitage (whose translation and chosen edition is used for reference in this paper) does translate "frenkysch fare and fele fayre lotes" (literally "French manners and many gracious words") by "immaculate exchanges of manners and remarks", thereby losing the French medieval connection, which would have been poorly understood by most readers nowadays.

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Tolkien was partly dissatisfied with previous editions, including Gollancz's. In his opinion, they were not reader-friendly enough for the use of students, who needed more guidance to elucidate the difficult language and the mixed versification of the work. He established the original text and produced the linguistic apparatus of the edition – including metrical observations and an extensive glossary with etymologies – while Gordon wrote the literary notes[8]. Their edition was very-well received at the time and contributed to Tolkien's appointment as Professor at the University of Oxford in the same year. It is still popular in the form of a second edition, revised by Norman Davies, the "green book" mentioned by Simon Armitage:

> I can't pinpoint the moment I decided to translate *Sir Gawain*, or remember how and why the idea came to me. A series of coincidences, probably. Like noticing my wife's dog-eared copy of the Tolkien and Gordon edition, the "green book", poking out of the bookshelf.[9]

Tolkien was doing pioneering work in systematically providing etymologies for every word in his glossary, though he inevitably erred at points, because he could not benefit from the impressive linguistic hindsight and research we now have. To take just one trivial example for a word borrowed from French, Tolkien writes, for the word designating the cloth covering of Gawain's aventail, *urysoun* (spelled *vrysoun*): "Embroidered silk

[8] Carpenter, *Tolkien*, 111-2.

[9] Simon Armitage, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 195.

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band on helmet 608 [OFr. *Horso(u)n*.]"[10]. The *Dictionnaire de Moyen Français* offers, for the entry *horson*, the following: "garniture matelassé et piquée servant à protéger la tête et les épaules du contact de l'armure"[11], with first attestations going back to the second half of the 14th century (and therefore at the very beginning of Middle, and not Old, French). The online Middle English Dictionary gives a non-committal definition for *urisoun*: "An ornamental band or piece of silk attached to or covering a helmet." The complex motifs embroidered on it are described at some length (l. 608-14), making it almost impossible to regard this covering as a small decorative band or strip going around the edges of a knight's helmet (which was, indeed, a feature of the late 14th century bascinet[12]).

In sum, despite the fact that some of Tolkien's word analyses or etymologies have now been refuted, especially with respect to Old Norse[13], he made great advances to deepen our understanding of the language of *SGGK*, on which scholars are still able to build.

TOLKIEN'S VERSE TRANSLATION

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[10] Tolkien and Gordon (eds), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 224.

[11] "Reinforced stitched padding used to prevent armour contact with head or shoulders" (my translation).

[12] Christopher Gravett, *English Medieval Knight*, 62.

[13] J. A. Simpson, "Notes on some Old Norse Words"; Dance, *Words Derived from Old Norse* in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Tolkien had started translating *SGGK* in contemporary English and in verse in the early 1920s[14]. He wrote about this translation, along with those of *Pearl* and *Sir Orfeo*:

> These translations were first made long ago for my own instruction, since a translator must first try to discover as precisely as he can what his original means, and may be led by ever closer attention to understand it better for its own sake. Since I first began I have given to the idiom of these texts very close study, and I have certainly learned more about them than I knew when I first presumed to translate them.[15]

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The process of translating the original poem has undoubtedly enriched and informed its editing (and vice versa), which certainly proved true in my experience. Tolkien also wrote:

> I have made it [my translation] with two objects (to some extent, I hope, achieved): to preserve the original metre and alliteration, without which translation is of little value except as a crib; and to preserve, to exhibit in an intelligible modern idiom, the nobility and the courtesy of this poem.[16]

[14] Thomas Honneger, "Sire Gauvain et le Chevalier vert", 678.

[15] Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, v.

[16] Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 74.

Tolkien's choice of alliterative metre (along with rhymed bob-and-wheel lines) is interesting in itself. He had already tried his hand at using it in his *Lay of the Children of Húrin*, which he had to set aside after obtaining a professorship in Oxford[17]. In fact, the long alliterative line, the alliterative metre in use when the *Gawain*-poet was composing, is still not an important research topic. Some progress has been made since Tolkien's days, and it is now quite firmly established – among other things[18] – that such lines had to end with a syllable containing a schwa (or, at least, a weak syllable, containing a reduced, very short vowel). Tolkien's alliterative lines do not follow the rule, just as with the first two lines of the second stanza:

> And when fair Britain was founded by this famous lord,
> Bold men were bred there who in battle rejoiced.[19]

Both lines end with a stressed, strong syllable. In spite of this, Tolkien managed to endow some of his own compositions with poetic power, like his unfinished Arthurian *Fall of Arthur*, re-creating a meter that, in fact, never quite existed as such.

TOLKIEN'S READING OF *SGGK*

[17] Tolkien, *The Fall of Arthur*, 10.

[18] See: Putter, "Lost in Translation".

[19] Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, 16.

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In 1953, Tolkien delivered a lecture in Manchester on *SGGK*, now available in printed form as an essay in *The Monsters and the Critics, and Other Essays*. He also wrote notes for a radio talk he gave in the same year, delivered at the end of a series of BBC broadcasts of his verse translation. These are reproduced "(in slightly reduced form)" by his son Christopher in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo* (1975). The following discussion is based on both sources. Since Tolkien had worked extensively on the language of the poem and had long been steeped in its literary aspects as he had taught it as part of his professional duties, his views deserve some attention, even today.

A complex fairy tale

Tolkien opens the presentation of his translation with the statement:

> If the most certain thing known about the author is that he also wrote *Patience*, *Purity* and *Pearl*, then we have in *Sir Gawain* the work of a man capable of weaving elements taken from diverse sources into a texture of his own; and a man who would have in that a serious purpose.[20]

The emphasis on the seriousness of the poem is worth noting. Leaving that point aside for the moment, it appears that a rich variety of elements has been expertly blended in it. Benson later remarked that the poet plays with

[20] Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, 3.

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traditional elements found in romance and weaves them together with new strength[21]. But Tolkien had something else in mind – its presumed literary sources, French romances and Celtic material like the *Fled Bricrenn*:

> it [*SGGK*] belongs to that literary kind which has deep roots in the past, deeper even than its author was aware. It is made of tales often told before and elsewhere, and of elements that derive from remote times, beyond the vision and awareness of the poet.
> […] His story is not *about* those old things, but it receives part of its life, its vividness, its tension from them. That is the way with the greater fairy-stories – of which this is one. There is indeed no better medium for moral teaching than the good fairy-story (by which I mean a real deep-rooted tale, told as a tale, and not a thinly disguised moral allegory). As the author of *Sir Gawain*, it would seem, perceived; or felt instinctively, rather than consciously: for being a man of the fourteenth century, a serious, didactic, encyclopaedic, not to say pedantic century, he inherited "faerie", rather than turned deliberately to it.[22]

This links up nicely with Tolkien's conception of faerie, developed in his essay "On Fairy-stories"[23], and especially the notion that fairy-stories derive their potency from the antiquity of the primaeval powers and sources

[21] Larry Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 167.

[22] Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 72-74.

[23] Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 109-161.

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they tap into[24]. They are brought together in a new tale, with a didactic and high moral purpose in *SGGK*.

Tolkien regarded this romance as a fairy tale for adults[25], by which he meant that it pertained to the category called *le merveilleux* by the French[26]. For Tolkien, *faërie* means "enchantment", and something marvellous, in its technical meaning, elicits a sense of wonder for the audience (or readers) because it goes much beyond what one would expect or regard as normal[27]. Arthur's court is thus struck with wonder at the Green Knight's size and colour. This category is then naturally connected to magic and, at the time, it was traditionally contrasted with (divinely-produced) miracles[28]. The

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[24] The euchatastrophic – unexpected but psychologically soothing – ending, fundamental to Tolkien's conception of fairy tales, is highly problematic in *SGGK*, as suggested by Tatjana Silec-Plessis (personal communication; Silec-Plessis and Breton, "The Enchanted World of *The Green Knight*"): Gawain is fêted as the perfect Arthurian knight on his return to Camelot, but much is left unresolved, as Gawain and the court appear to have missed the import of his adventure, which may be not lost on some readers and listeners.

[25] Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, 3.

[26] As Michael Reid remarks, *faerie* can either mean relating to faeries or, merely, to magic (Reid, "Morgan le Fay, Ambiguity and the Supernatural in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*").

[27] See, e.g., Jacques Le Goff, "Le merveilleux", 710; Michel Zink, "La merveille, la nature et l'humanité", 5.

[28] The marvellous proper, in a restricted sense, is conceptualized as distinct from the divinely miraculous and the devilishly magical, as a middle ground between the two – as it were – from the turn of the 12th and 13th centuries, as Jacques Le Goff demonstrates ("Le merveilleux", 711).

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courtiers trying to rationalize the Green Knight's appearance echo speculations then current to account for what seems to lie beyond the purview of the natural order: if supernatural but not miraculous, one has to assume the use of magic (devilish or not) – which is potentially tolerated by God – and, if not, a contradiction between what one believes and the actual unfolding of natural laws, or an unexpected result obtained through human art[29]. The courtiers are thus faced with a hermeneutical conundrum as they hesitate between a natural and supernatural interpretation of the Green Knight's height (l. 140-1) and wonder whether he is a fairy or an illusion (l. 239-40). The poet invites listeners and readers to raise similar questions, and settle for themselves the delicate issues posed by the Green Knight's abnormality and apparent use of magic (or mastery of illusion). When they learn much later that Morgan was the instigator of the challenge, they have a satisfying explanation on the surface, but they might further wonder whether she was unwittingly moved to resort to magic to offer Gawain and Arthur's court an opportunity for moral improvement, for recognizing the vanity of *hubris*. As Bertilak says concerning Morgan:

> She guided me in this guise to your great hall
> to put pride on trial, and to test with this trick
> what distinction and trust the Round Table deserves.[30]

[29] Magic is sometimes rationally explained as a human art obtained through much hard work and learning (Zink, "La merveille", 8), which is the case for Morgan (l. 2446-2448).
[30] l. 2456-2458: Armitage, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 185.

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In any event, if – or once – introduced, faerie (the marvellous) has to be taken for granted, accepted by convention as part of the world represented in the fiction. Yet, owing to the attempts at rationalization that I have pinpointed and the ontological uncertainty they bring about[31], also to be found with the girdle, whose magical protection even Gawain doubts since he still believes he might undergo decapitation at the Green Chapel, I can only partly agree with Tolkien's assertion that:

> this poet was as it were determined to take the story and its machinery for granted, and then to examine the problems of conduct, esp. as regards Gawain, that arose.[32]

Let us now turn to this aspect of the work, which Tolkien foregrounded and made much of.

MORALITY AND MARIAN PIETY

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[31] This would bring part of *SGGK* under the scope of fantastic literature, following Todorov's definition of fantastic (to which the Gothic belongs) as "being essentially grounded on the reader's (who identifies with the main character) hesitation as to the nature of strange happenings" – being understood that this hesitation may disappear because those are accepted as part of the real world (magical elements are part of the real fictional world in romances), or because they can in fact be explained as a product of imagination or resulting from an illusion (Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la literature fantastique*, 164). Zink reminds us that SGGK is not alone in this respect ("La merveille, la nature et l'humanité", 6).

[32] Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 74.

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The nub of the plot lies in the third fit, with its interlacing of hunting episodes and temptation scenes, which gives an interpretative key for the ultimate trial and treatment of Gawain at the Green Chapel. Tolkien makes this essential point, emphasizing what he regards as the main theme of the romance:

> The poem is divided into four fits or cantos; but the third is much the largest, with more than a quarter of the whole (872 lines out of a total of 2530): a numerical pointer, as it were, to the real primary interest of the poet. And yet actually he has tried to conceal the numerical evidence by attaching, skilfully yet artificially, part of what belongs to the situation of the Third Fit to the Second Fit. The temptation of Sir Gawain really begins as far back as the beginning of stanza 39 (l. 928) (if not earlier) and lasts more than a thousand lines. All else is by comparison, even when highly pictorial, perfunctory. The temptation was to this poet the raison d'être of his poem. All else was to him scenery, background, or else machinery: a device for getting Gawain into the situation which he himself wished to study.[33]

Stanza 39 describes Gawain's first encounter with Bertilak's lady in the castle chapel on Christmas Day. He appears to be spell-bound by her charm. In fact, Tolkien argues for a long third fit because he sees temptation, in its

[33] Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 74.

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sexual form, first and foremost[34], as the most significant topic in the romance.

As he puts it elsewhere:

> His [The poet's] major point is the rejection of unchastity and adulterous love […] but this he has complicated again, after the way of morals in real life, by involving it in several minor problems of conduct, of courtly behaviour to women and fidelity to men, of what we might call sportsmanship or playing the game.[35]

The poet certainly engages with some basic questions addressed by Chrétien de Troyes in *romans courtois* like *Érec et Énide*, investigating the relationship between love and knightly duty, which includes concern for one's honour and proper behaviour at court. The *Gawain*-poet and Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde* explore very similar concerns and, in Tolkien's words, "deal, from different angles, with the problems that so much occupied the English mind: the relations of courtesy and love with morality and Christian morals and the Eternal Law."[36] According to him, lines 1773-1774

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[34] The hunting scenes are not just interludes framing the temptation scenes though, as first suggested by Savage (*The* Gawain-*poet*, 31-48). My own interpretation of the hunting scenes and the courtly episodes in Gawain's room are developed in: Olivier Simonin, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 31-31; Olivier Simonin, "L'aventure de Hautdésert".

[35] Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, 4.

[36] Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 105.

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("He was careful to be courteous and avoid uncouthness, | cautious that his conduct might be classed as sinful"[37])

> place the moral law higher than the laws of 'courtesy', and explicitly reject, *adultery* as part of courtesy possible to a perfect knight. A very contemporary and English point of view![38]

What is striking here is the insistence on the paramount importance of rejecting illicit sexual temptation. Tolkien himself was wary of lechery, having primarily in mind the sin of adultery. As an earnest Roman Catholic, the figure of the Blessed Virgin must have been inspirational, an immaculate model to follow[39]. Since Gawain is explicitly referred to as Mary's Knight (l. 1769) when she saves him from adulterous fornication, it may be surmised that the Blessed Virgin is Gawain's lady, for whom he feels a spiritual kind of love.[40] His special devotion and relation to her is highlighted on several occasions[41].

[37] Armitage, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 139.

[38] Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 91.

[39] Leo Carruthers, "Tolkien et la prière", 22.

[40] This hypothesis may be unknowingly suggested by Bertilak's lady, when she expresses concern over Gawain having another paramour, because of whom he cannot accept her gifts (l. 1782-1785).

[41] Simonin, « La figure de la Vierge dans *Sire Gauvain et le Chevalier Vert* ».

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Tolkien was especially sensitive to the Marian piety expressed in the poem[42]. He thought of the Virgin Mary as a dispenser of grace[43], Gawain being one recipient in the romance. This idea is all the more appealing to me since it is echoed in the symbolic significance of the number five, which does stand for perfection as the poet is at pains to tell his audience. It is the number of the perfect man that has rid himself of his animal side in the Kabbalah. It is also the number of divine Grace in response to human weakness, in the Old Testament[44]. Similarly, five is connected to redemption and Christ the God-Man in the New Testament, through the five wounds he received on the cross (one of the series of fifths associated with the pentangle: 642-3). The depictions of the pentangle on Gawain's shield and that of Mary on its inner side is unlikely to be coincidental. *SGGK* is arguably a poem more concerned with grace than with lechery.

VALUES AND LITERARY VALUE

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[42] Tolkien's devotion to the Blessed Virgin is well-documented. In *The Lord of the Rings*. He wrote the hymn to the elvish queen of the stars (Elbereth Gilthoniel) as plainchant – sung by Galadriel to Frodo and his companions as a farewell – with the Virgin Mary in mind, to whom the elvish figure is quite akin (Leo Carruthers, "Tolkien et la prière", p. 27; *Tolkien et la Religion*, 230-232).

[43] Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, 3.

[44] Chapter 7 in the Book of *Numbers* contains 12 occurrences of "And for a sacrifice of peace offering, two oxen, five rams, five he-goats, five one-year old lambs". This is often adduced in support of the view that the number five is associated with thanksgiving.

To investigate the minor problems of conduct and behaviour that he detects, Tolkien argues that the poet makes a distinction between three planes to provide a scale of values, as it were:

> There were for him, it seems clear to me from the handling of this tale, *three* planes: mere jesting pastimes, such as that played between Gawain and the lord of the castle; 'courtesy', as a code of 'gentle' or polite manners, which included a special mode of reverence to women, and could be held to include, as it was by the lady, the more serious, and therefore more dangerous, 'game' of courtly love-making, which might compete with moral laws; and finally real morals, virtues and sins. These might compete one with another. If so, the higher law must be obeyed. From the first arrival of Sir Gawain at the castle, situations are being prepared in which such competitions, with dilemmas of conduct, will occur. The author is chiefly interested in the competition between 'courtesy' and virtue (purity and loyalty); he shows us their increasing divergence, and shows us Gawain at the crisis of the temptation recognizing this, and choosing virtue rather than courtesy, yet preserving a graciousness of manner and a gentleness of speech belonging to the true spirit of courtesy.[45]

This excerpt deserves quoting in full. There are three moral planes: a trivial one, relating to leisure and games; another one concerned with polite or

[45] Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 95.

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courteous behaviour; and finally, the most important one, that of morality proper with its religious implications.

Since Gawain remains virtuous, the minor blemish of accepting the girdle is almost immaterial, except in his own judgement. Others judge him much less harshly, typically accounting his fault as next to nothing, a mere trifle. There are judges for each of the three planes, Tolkien is quick to say: Arthur's court for courtesy, Bertilak as the Green Knight for trivial games, and the priest at the castle chapel for the highest one[46]. Regarding Gawain's confession at Hautdesert castle, the poet tells us that "The priest declares him so clean and so pure | that the Day of Doom could dawn in the morning"[47]. Tolkien was fully right when he observed that whether the acceptance of the girdle is confessed or not is a moot point because it is at most a venial sin, not preventing salvation (in spite of the critical heat generated by this issue since[48]). His introduction of a three-tiered scale of values is also helpful to assess the gravity of Gawain's self-accusation of treachery[49], the latter two pertaining to the lowest, superficial level.

In addition, Tolkien intuited the significance of the "subtle form of pride" that Gawain may display, which explodes when he understands he has

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[46] Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 96.

[47] l. 1883-1884: Armitage, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 145.

[48] A famous article by Burrow ("The Two Confession Scenes") demonstrates that Gawain cannot be absolved for the sin of concealing the girdle, sparking much further discussion.

[49] Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 99. He also declares himself guilty of greed and cowardice, which amounts to little more than his all-too-human fear of death. For a thought-provoking interpretation of covetousness as a wish to be granted a longer span of life, see: Newhauser, "The Meaning of Gawain's Greed".

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been fooled by Bertilak and his wife. I have argued elsewhere that this burst of pride and anger might be his worse fault, of much consequence, as he seems to refuse man's inherent incapacity to reach perfection and thus salvation by himself[50].

I believe what Tolkien really failed to see is the intermittent lack of seriousness of the poet, his playfulness or his Northern sauciness, as Simon Armitage would have it.[51] The *Gawain*-poet relished playing with romance conventions and the literary reputation of Gawain in a metafictional game, testing the limits of the genre as he ostensibly supports chastity while invoking dubious *topoi* relating to *amour courtois* through Bertilak's lady. Even if he disapproves and questions those, he was of the Devil's party without knowing it, to paraphrase Blake on Milton. There is evident glee at putting Gawain in very awkward situations, as when he wears the lady's very feminine girdle (whose symbolic fitness Tolkien objected to[52]). The work is roiling with biting irony, and not merely situational irony[53]. The *Gawain*-

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[50] Olivier Simonin, "Sir Gauvain et la catégorisation de vices".

[51] Excerpt from an interview from the fourth instalment ("The Rebellious Tongues of the North") of the radio series *Matter of the North* by Melvyn Bragg, first broadcast on 1/09/2016 on BCC Radio 4. Armitage presumably overplayed the grim and biting humour of the original poem, adopting his "Arnold Bennett mode" (Claire Hélie, "Armitage's Gawains").

[52] Tolkien, *The Monsters and the Critics*, 105.

[53] Simonin, "L'aventure de Hautdésert"; Gawain finding himself in a position whereby he is facing decapitation and is presented with severed heads (of deer, of a boar) or has to be joyful, or needs to be well-mannered while rejecting the lady's advances, are instances of situational irony.

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poet was much closer to Chaucer in spirit if not in mood than Tolkien made him out to be.

CONCLUSION

Tolkien's life-long interest in *SGGK*, through his editing, translating and teaching of it, made him understand subtle aspects of the work, in which he steeped himself. He was especially sensitive to its moral and religious tenor, quite consonant with his own Catholicism. His outlook, however, was conservative in that he failed to appreciate what I might anachronistically call its modernity or, rather, its post-modernity: its questioning of the genre and tradition to which it itself belongs, its brilliant mixture of seriousness and playfulness, its subtle engagement with its readers or audience, as well as its unresolved, ambiguous ending regarding Gawain and the continuation of his career.

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