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Genre in Translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Madison Schow

In "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," Jorge Luis Borges writes of an imagined French writer, Pierre Menard, who sets out to "produce a number of pages which coincid[e]—word for word and line for line" with Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (91). Although Cervantes's *Quixote* and Menard's *Quixote* are composed of the exact same words, Borges notes that Menard's is "infinitely richer" and that the "contrast in styles" between the two versions is "striking" (94). The differences in these seemingly identical pieces come from the contexts in which the two products were written—*Don Quixote* written by a seventeenth-century Spaniard means something completely different from *Don Quixote* written by a twentieth-century Frenchman. In translations from one language to another—much more common than the situation Borges imagines—the context of the work is just as important as the changes made on the word level. Readers expect translated texts to hold the same basic information as the original text—to be equivalent to the original—if not on the extreme level of "Pierre Menard," then at least in meaning.

The expectation of consistency in content is even more true for translations from an archaic version of one language to a modern version of the same language. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is relatively readable in Middle English, so, hypothetically, not many changes would have to be

made to the words on the page in a translation to Modern English. However, "Pierre Menard" tells us that even if no words are changed, any context in which *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were to be published would fundamentally alter the meaning of the poem. The changes from the Middle English text of *Sir Gawain* to J. R. R. Tolkien's twentieth-century translation and Simon Armitage's twenty-first century translation create different genre experiences—one that prioritizes historical context and one that prioritizes modernization—through the word-choice changes of the translation process.

This paper will not consider translation itself as a genre. Raymond van den Broeck calls the appearance of translation as its own literary genre an "illusion" caused by distortions of genre as a result of moving from the start language to the target language (111). For example, a text really shifts from "tragedy" to "melodrama" via translation, not from "tragedy" to "translation" (113). It is these subtle shifts from one genre to a related genre that can be found in translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This poem, written by an unknown poet in the late fourteenth century, has enjoyed several translations since its discovery in 1824. Two important translations of this Arthurian romance are J. R. R. Tolkien's, completed around 1950 and published posthumously in 1975, and Simon Armitage's, published in 2007. The Gawain Poet and the two translators all seek a different effect on their audience, and their versions of *Sir Gawain* function differently in their contexts due to shifting expectations among readers throughout the history of English fiction. The development over time of the fantasy genre, as well as superficial differences between the published products, influence Tolkien's commitment to and Armitage's divergence from the historical genre of Sir *Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Itamar Even-Zohar conceptualizes the contexts of translations, describing the functions of translations within literature systems and the circumstances in which they become important in those systems. One of these circumstances concerns literatures that are still being established, including not only "newly founded" language systems, but also "renovated" language systems (Even-Zohar 192). Although English is a powerful and widespread language today, at the time *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was written, English had no prestige in comparison to older languages like Latin. It was a "newly founded" literature (Even-Zohar 192). Additionally, the English that is spoken today has changed drastically from the Old English of *Beowulf*, the Middle English of Chaucer, and the Early Modern English of Shakespeare.

Even English from just 200 years ago can be difficult to parse, necessitating anything from helpful glosses to full translations to aid the modern reader. The changes in context between an original and subsequent translations can be understood through genre, and specifically, in the case of translations of *Sir Gawain*, the fantasy genre. Literature within the fantasy genre, especially, can be seen as functioning in a new system because the fantasy genre is relatively new. According to Dieter Petzold, it is only when a "pragmatic view of reality had become prevalent" around the eighteenth century that there could be a "rebellion" against realism, giving rise to the fantasy genre (15). Translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* track the development of fantasy from chivalric romance to Tolkienian fantasy to today's postmodern fairy tales.

Though the Gawain Poet had never heard of fantasy fiction, he was an expert in chivalric romance, a precursor to modern fantasy, and he was aware of the tropes of the genre. According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, chivalric romance "celebrates . . . loyalty, honour, and courtly love," and romance in general "relates improbable adventures of idealized characters" ("chivalric romance"). There are plenty of examples of courtly love in *Sir Gawain* in the flirtatious but chivalrous encounters Gawain has with Lady Bertilak every morning for three days. The Gawain Poet also reminds us again and again of Gawain's moral character, and the entire narrative is dependent on an improbable encounter with the Green Knight. Because of his familiarity with the patterns in Arthurian romance, the Poet can also subvert the reader's expectations, baiting readers with tropes just to surprise them with reversals of Gawain's expected actions. Gawain is idealized, but he fails his quest. He is caught among promises of loyalty to Bertilak, Lady Bertilak, and the Green Knight, the intersection of which causes his quest to fail (Mann). According to J. Finlayson, although *Sir Gawain* "contains most of the 'characteristics' used to define romance," the Gawain Poet's "consciousness of genre" allows the poet to encourage a "wide range of interpretations" (2). This is good news for translators, as it allows for creativity and a degree of liberality in translation. Tolkien chooses to preserve the courtliness of *Sir Gawain* as closely as possible while Simon Armitage embraces the work's subversion of tropes by being more progressive in his translation process. The way Tolkien and Armitage decide to interpret the Gawain Poet's purpose determines the position of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* within the fantasy genre.

In the de facto introduction to his translation, Tolkien identifies *Sir Gawain* as "a fairy tale for adults" (3). Because of this, Tolkien's translation of *Sir Gawain* should be read in the context of twentieth-century fantasy and Tolkien's own fantasy fiction theory set out in his essay "On Fairy Stories." *The Lord of the Rings* is often considered the "hub" of modern fantasy (Klapcsik 317), and other twentieth-century fantasy writers like Ursula K. LeGuin and C.S. Lewis take similar cues, basing their fantasy solidly in English folklore and fairy tales. Unfortunately, because Tolkien's translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* was published posthumously, he was not able to write the introduction for the translation. His son, Christopher Tolkien, assembled an introduction from what Tolkien did write about his translations of *Sir Gawain*, *Pearl*, and *Sir Orfeo*. The introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is taken from the radio broadcast of Tolkien's *Sir Gawain* translation (viii). From this radio talk, we learn that Tolkien chooses to foreignize because of the expectations of translations in that time period and also because of the expectations of fantasy in that time period. Tolkien never wrote a comprehensive explanation of his translation strategy, but he did "occasionally [offer] thoughts about what constitutes a good translation" (Weyant 63). Using Curtis A. Weyant's assessment and synthesis of what Tolkien did write on the process of translation, a framework can be set up to analyze Tolkien's translation of *Sir Gawain*. Overall, according to Weyant, Tolkien believed a good translation makes unreadable texts readable to a new audience, avoids archaism without resorting to modern colloquialisms, and preserves the style of the era in which it was written.

Just as Tolkien aims to preserve the courtly style of the fourteenth century, the Gawain Poet tries to infuse credibility in his work by situating *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the pseudo-historical tradition of King Arthur. Historically, King Arthur has not only been important as a character in a story, but as a figure who might have been real and could return in England's time of need. The Gawain Poet situates *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in reality, mentioning the founding of Rome and of Britain and that the events happened in Arthur's day "as the Book of Brut beareth us witness" (Tolkien *Sir Gawain* 97). Tolkien's commitment to preserving the courtly register of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* respects this tradition. As a translator, Tolkien prioritized "turning Old English and Middle English poetry into something that could be readily understood by speakers of the modern idiom" (Smith 3). Far from modernizing *Sir Gawain and the Green*

Knight into the slang of the twentieth century, however, Tolkien aimed for a foreignized translation—one that would preserve the elevated language of King Arthur's court and the poetical prowess of the Gawain Poet while still making it readable to those with no experience in Middle English spelling. He replaced any unrecognizable fourteenth century vocabulary with Modern English words, but he makes these changes sparingly. If the Gawain Poet uses language that sounded courtly in his day, then a translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* should sound courtly even to readers far removed from the days and traditions of King Arthur. He expressed a similar opinion in regard to translations of *Beowulf*, saying that "because the diction of Beowulf was poetical, archaic, artificial…in the day that the poem was made," a translator's language must also be "literary and traditional" (Smith 6–7). Tolkien believed a translator's first goal when approaching a text is "to discover as precisely as he can what his original means" (viii) and that a translator should "maintain the same sense of time-relationship between the translated text and the modern audience as the original piece had with its audience" (Weyant 69). This produces sentences such as, "'Who hears him will, I ween, / of love-speech learn some art'" (Tolkien *Sir Gawain* 47), which is readable, but tells the reader that this story takes place in an unfamiliar time and setting in which a visit from a mystical green knight might be feasible.

The medieval-style setting communicated through the archaic language Tolkien uses is essential to Tolkienian fantasy. For example, King Théoden in *The Two Towers* speaks in a style Tolkien calls "moderated or watered archaism," arguing that if a book set long ago requires ancient weapons, clothing, and locations, then it also requires ancient-sounding language (Weyant 75). In fact, he structured *The Lord of the Rings* as a translation from an ancient book with painstaking attention to historical languages. Since Tolkien is seen as the standard for modern fantasy, readers of his translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* when it was published in 1975 (twenty years after *The Lord of the Rings*) would associate the historical chivalric romance tropes with the fantasy genre. Tolkien's commitment to preserving the courtly register of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* keeps his translation closer to the original genre of the poem and thereby situates it in the fantasy genre for twentieth-century readers. Tolkien wrote a lengthy analysis of fantasy in his essay "On Fairy Stories." He describes the setting of fairy stories as a "Secondary World," in the context of which the fantastical

events of the story make sense (157). In the real world, a knight, after being beheaded, could not have "strode forth . . . caught up his comely head . . . as if unharmed by mishap" (Tolkien *Sir Gawain* 32). Within the rules of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, however, where those in King Arthur's court are "astounded" but have still apparently "seen many marvels" (Tolkien *Sir Gawain* 26), readers can believe that the Green Knight could realistically appear and challenge Gawain to a beheading game and therefore can believe in the transformative powers of Morgan le Fey to turn Bertilak into the Green Knight. Tolkien's translation preserves the text as a chivalric romance, prioritizing what he sees as the poet's original intentions, but it is now a chivalric romance read through the lens of twentieth-century fantasy. The Secondary World of this fantasy is not only created by the magic present in the story, but by the translated language that preserves the archaic time period as a world where the high-register language of King Arthur's court is as believable as the magic.

Like Tolkien, Simon Armitage sought to foreground the alliteration and form of the poem; unlike Tolkien, rather than foreignizing the text, he wanted to "bring *Gawain* home" both "poetically" and "geographically," by which he means he wanted to situate the poem in the modern language of the West Midlands region in which the Gawain Poet was writing centuries ago ("Swimming Through Bricks"). Rather than being "generally interested in word definition," Armitage includes "a few dialect words" alongside "some of the original words" ("Swimming Through Bricks"). Fantasy readers of the twenty-first century expect the tropes of twentieth-century fantasy to be subverted as they are in stories like *Shrek* and *Cinder*, and Armitage does that by modernizing the language rather than remaining as strictly faithful to the original as possible. Instead of preserving the elevated tone of *Sir Gawain* like Tolkien does, Armitage includes phrases such as "if someone were so snooty as to snub your advance" (121) and "you'd better believe me" (101) that move the work closer to his twenty-first century audience's context. Armitage does not just translate Middle English words to Modern English words but also turns them into familiar phrases that readers can equate with their own experience. Armitage's use of modern language changes the tone of *Sir Gawain* in the same way that the modern pop culture references in *Shrek* imbue classic fairy tales with irony. Rather than the language matching the setting of *Sir Gawain*, the instances of modern slang like Bertilak telling Gawain to "Relax!" (91) and Lady Bertilak being described as "the cute

one" (109) pull the reader from the fantasy and make them aware that they are reading a translation, not being immersed in a fantasy or in a far-away time. Like *Shrek*, Armitage's translation of *Sir Gawain* carries humorous tones in the language. Liminal fantasy is a type of fantasy with a blurred border between fantasy and reality, "suggesting that the boundaries between fantasy and reality are . . . insignificant" (Klapcsik 318). Armitage "hides the threshold" (Klapcsik 318) between fantasy and reality by using modern slang in the translation of a centuries-old chivalric romance. This is different from Tolkien's blurring of history and fantasy because, to modern readers, history is as much of a Secondary World as a fantasy setting is. Armitage, on the other hand, does not treat fourteenth-century England as a fantastical setting at all, instead stressing that the poem could have been "written by somebody who lived just over . . . the hill" ("Swimming Through Bricks").

In translation, a foreignizing approach, one that moves the text away from the target culture in favor of the culture of origin, is usually seen as more difficult to read and more jarring to the reader because the translator wants it to "feel" foreign. A domesticating approach moves the text to the reader, letting the language flow as if it were originally written in the target language. When it comes to fantasy, though, familiarity is more jarring than archaism. Fantasy is a departure from the real—it is composed of anachronisms, things that are impossible in our time. Readers who expect fantasy based on the presence of magic and the medieval setting of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* will be taken out of the experience when they encounter some of Armitage's word choice, while readers of Tolkien will feel like they get what they are promised by medieval fantasy in his archaic language. In this way, genre can change the preferences of readers and writers when it comes to translations strategies. Armitage embraces anachronism while Tolkien avoids anachronism as much as possible, meaning that Armitage's language is more at home in a twenty-first century setting but foreign in the context of fantasy. Tolkien's avoidance of anachronism keeps the text foreign and heightens the fantastical experience of a Secondary World. Tolkien's and Armitage's interpretations of the historical context of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* change the genre of the poem—for Tolkien, the poem is a precious artifact to preserve, but for Armitage, it is a living story to be rewritten.

Tolkien and Armitage both remain faithful to the poetical form of the Middle English *Sir Gawain*, so it is their interpretation of historical context that changes genre. Christopher Tolkien says in the introduction to J. R. R.

Tolkien's translations of *Sir Gawain*, *Pearl*, and *Sir Orfeo* that "a primary object of these translations was the close preservation of the metres of the originals" (ix), and, in an interview, Armitage said he wanted to "showcase the musicality" of the *Sir Gawain* ("Swimming Through Bricks"). In that way, both translators try to preserve the context, but the end results are very different from one another. While Tolkien wants the poem to retain its courtliness, Armitage clarifies that his translation tries to "harmonize with the original" rather than being an "exercise in…medieval history" (*Sir Gawain* 12). Armitage's translation attempts to be a "living, inclusive, and readable piece of work in its own right" (*Sir Gawain* 12), and while Tolkien certainly aims for readability by modern audiences, not wanting it only to be read by "medieval specialists," he also sees the text as "courtly . . . well-bred . . . indeed learned" (Tolkien *Sir Gawain* 3). Because Armitage and Tolkien have different interpretations of the text's purpose and context, Armitage stressing the localness of *Sir Gawain* and Tolkien emphasizing its linguistic distance for both fourteenth- and twentieth-century readers, their translations place different feelings and meanings in the foreground. Though the two texts contain the same information and exist broadly within the fantasy genre, they place different levels of importance on the moral lessons of the text, cast the same situations as more stressful or more amusing, and carry differing serious or parodic tones.

Within fantasy, there are different subgenres, and Tolkien and Armitage prefer different ones. Tolkien sees *Sir Gawain* as a "romance, a fairy-tale for adults" (*Sir Gawain* 3). He also sees the poem as "explicitly moral and religious" (*Sir Gawain* 7). Armitage identifies the poem as "a ghost story, a thriller, a romance, an adventure story, and a morality tale" (*Sir Gawain* 11). A comparison of sections of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* demonstrative of these subgenres reveals the subtle changes to genre that a different approach to translation can make. Tolkien's purpose (translating a fairy tale) and Armitage's purpose (translating a complicated and multi-faceted fantasy) are shown in how they handle moments where *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is a ghost story, a thriller, or a morality tale.

A ghost story is "designed to provoke dread" and centers on encounters with a ghost or ghosts ("ghost story"). Both Tolkien's and Armitage's translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* obviously involve ghost story elements, but Armitage's modernization of the text's word choice emphasizes the ghost-story genre. His evocative language heightens the dread compared

to Tolkien's translation. We are made aware explicitly of the Green Knight's supernatural nature earlier in Tolkien's translation than Armitage's. Tolkien calls him a "fay-man fell" twelve lines after he appears through the door (23), while Armitage does not call the Green Knight "otherworldly" outright until sixty-two lines after his arrival (Armitage *Sir Gawain* 33). Armitage does not refer to him as anything more than "otherworldly" in this first scene, but Tolkien goes on to call the Green Knight "a phantom" (26) and refers to "fay-magic folk" (26). Tolkien is more explicit about the supernatural elements of the scene, but Armitage emphasizes the dread of the scene. When Tolkien translates the court's reaction to the Green Knight being able to move around without his head while bleeding profusely, he says, "His trunk he twisted round, / that gruesome body that bled, / and many fear then found / as soon as his speech was sped" (32). Armitage says instead, "And when he wheeled about / his bloody neck still bled. / His point was proved. The court / was deadened now with dread" (49). Armitage's word choice is much more active: His use of the word *when* in "when he wheeled about" places the reader in the time. His three short sentences, compared to Tolkien's one long sentence, create speed, and they shock the reader one by one as the events shock those in King Arthur's court. Armitage says "bloody" and "bled" in one clause, emphasizing the graphic visuals. His choice to say that the court was "deadened" with dread is much more effective at creating tension than Tolkien's "many fear then found," which suggests a passiveness of emotion. Also key to a ghost story is the irrational situation within a rational setting. Armitage's translation combines language realistic to modern readers with the undeniably unusual events of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, so his translation strategy is more suited to the unsettling nature of a ghost story.

On the other hand, a thriller focuses on "imminent dangers and evasive actions," and the conflict is based on a "sinister conspiracy" ("thriller"). Armitage dials up the suspenseful scenes in *Sir Gawain* while Tolkien keeps the tone more even. The sinister conspiracy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* begins with Morgan le Fay's plot with Bertilak to frighten Guinevere to death, which turns into a fruitless quest for Gawain during which he is caught up in a secondary plot involving Morgan and Bertilak to test his chivalry. The tension in these sensual scenes is far more pronounced in Armitage's translation. The first morning Lady Bertilak visits Gawain to tempt him, Armitage's translation says that Gawain "heard a slyly made sound . . . and lift[ed] the corner of the curtain a little / wondering warily

what it might be" (101). Then, Armitage says, "The knight felt nervous" (101). Tolkien instead describes a "soft sound"; rather than feeling "nervous," Gawain is "abashed" (55). The softness already decreases the tension, but the word "abashed" suggests that Gawain is more embarrassed at being ambushed by Lady Bertilak than nervous about the consequences of the situation. Also, instead of "turning [the matter] over in his mind," Tolkien's Gawain "wondered, / and mused in his mind how the matter would go" (56), apparently planning a next move rather than stewing over the situation. Small changes in word choice can change a scene in a translation from awkward to threatening.

Tolkien is concerned with morals and propriety in his translation of *Sir Gawain* while Armitage is more concerned with readability than message. Tolkien says in the introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that the Poet's "care in formal construction serves to make the tale a better vehicle of the 'moral' which the author imposed" (4). Tolkien's choice to translate in a courtly register preserves the solemnity of a tale that means to teach a lesson to the reader or to reveal a sobering lesson Gawain learned. While the morals of *Sir Gawain* are not lost in Armitage's translation, some of his word choice seems inapposite. Ross Smith says that sometimes "Armitage seems to lose sight of the fact that he is translating a very ancient work set in a venerable location" (9). These modern colloquialisms sometimes undercut what are, in Tolkien's translation, important moral or religious moments. At the end of the poem, when Bertilak is explaining to Gawain what went wrong in his quest, he says (in Tolkien's translation), "But in this you lacked, sir, a little, and of loyalty came short. / But that was for no artful wickedness, not for wooing either" (92). In Armitage's translation, though, Bertilak says, "It was loyalty that you lacked: / not because you're wicked, or a womanizer, or worse" (179). This drop in register from "wooing" to "womanizer" and the addition of "or worse" make the moral of the text seem more juvenile than chivalrous. The worth of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as an "explicitly moral and religious" text (Tolkien, *Sir Gawain* 7) is determined by the register of the language in translation.

Neither Tolkien's nor Armitage's translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is better than the other because of their treatment of genre, but they are better *for* certain readers. It is clear that Tolkien's translation is better for those desiring traditional fantasy based on English folklore—essentially, readers who are used to Tolkien. Armitage's translation is better

for those who desire easy access to the excitement, tension, and fear of the original Middle English version: those who want modernization rather than fantastical defamiliarization.

Apart from the word choice differences between the two translations, the presentations of Tolkien's and Armitage's translations in print also affect how readers interpret the genre. The shift from manuscript to the Ballantine softcover of Tolkien's translation to the side-by-side Middle English and Modern English hardcover of Armitage's version also change the reader's experience with genre. On the cover of the Ballantine edition of Tolkien's translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl*, and *Sir Orfeo*, readers are reminded that Tolkien is the "renowned author of The Hobbit and *The Lord of the Rings*. Through Ballantine, *Sir Gawain* was published by Del Rey, Ballantine's fantasy and science fiction imprint. Immediately, a reader will associate this translated text with Tolkien's fantasy novels. The front and back cover describe the work as "a fairy tale" and an "adventure of epic enchantment," calling to mind magic and the "Secondary World" of Tolkien's fantasy theory set forth in "On Fairy Stories." In comparison, the Armitage translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is published by W. W. Norton, well known for literary anthologies, but not for genre fiction. On the cover is a review from "Seamus Heaney, Nobel Prize-winning translator of *Beowulf*." The back cover identifies the book as "Literature" rather than fantasy, and the praise for the book emphasizes its status as a translation, with reviewers calling it a "luscious version," something that "honours the original'" and "recreates the original." Tolkien's translation treats the Middle English manuscript itself as a fantasy object freed from obscurity by Tolkien. Armitage's translation, on the other hand, is indebted to the original, but values freshness over fidelity. The fact that Armitage's translation is presented side by side with the original Middle English also changes the interpretation of genre—Armitage's translation from the beginning is presented as a translation, while Tolkien's is presented as a story in its own right. Even before beginning to read *Sir Gawain*, the audience's interpretation of genre has been determined by the way the poem is printed, either as fantasy fiction or as a classic text to be studied.

The genre of a translation is determined by the context of the translation in relation to the original, the translator's preferences and purpose, and the publisher's goals. This changes the work, but not beyond recognition. Change of genre does not destroy the integrity of the translation, but rather refreshes

it for a new audience that has new expectations. Lawrence Venuti points out that "[t]ranslating…archaic poetry" carries with it "inevitable anachronism" (244)—modern translations of antique poetry will be influenced by modern poetical forms that did not exist at the time the original was written. For example, rap influences can be used to emphasize the "popular dimension" of Italian religious poetry (244). Because a translation from Middle English to Modern English is necessarily a modernization, tracking the changes in audience expectations over time is important for understanding translated texts. A translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the twentieth century exists in a different literary system than a translation in the twenty-first century, and the differences between them are not only on the word level. The words a translator chooses can change the experience of the work completely, and this can influence how a publisher interprets genre, how that genre is communicated in the published product, who buys the book, and what genre the reader then interprets it as. No genre is inherently better for a translator to emphasize in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*—a translator's genre preference is as subjective as a reader's genre preference. It is rewarding, however, to read multiple translations of one work to experience the myriad possibilities of that work, and it is essential to continue to translate and adapt works like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to express as many possibilities of the work as possible.

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