J. R. R. Tolkien and the art of translating English into English

ROSS SMITH

Translation techniques favoured by Tolkien in rendering *Beowulf* and other medieval poetry into modern English

J. R. R. TOLKIEN was a prolific translator, although most of his translation work was not actually published during his lifetime, as occurred with the greater part of his fiction. He never did any serious translation from modern foreign languages into English, but rather devoted himself to the task of turning Old English and Middle English poetry into something that could be readily understood by speakers of the modern idiom. His largest and best-known published translation is of the anonymous 14th Century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* which was published posthumously with two other translations from Middle English in the volume *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo* (Allen & Unwin 1975). The translation of Middle English texts constitutes the bulk of his output in this field, both in the above volume and in the fragments that appear in his lectures and essays. However, his heart really lay in the older, pre-Norman form of the language, and particularly in the greatest piece of literature to come down to us from the Old English period, the epic poem *Beowulf*.

A paper by Professor Tom Shippey titled 'Tolkien and the *Beowulf*-Poet' commences with the rhetorical question: 'Did Tolkien ever wonder whether he might possibly be the *Beowulf*-poet reincarnated?' (Shippey 2007:1). The logical answer, as Shippey points out, is no: for a start, Tolkien was a Christian and did not believe in reincarnation. But the underlying message is clear in that one way or another, Tolkien felt he had a special rapport with his ancient predecessor. Rather than as an Anglo-Saxon avatar, Tolkien saw the *Beowulf*-poet as his philological ancestor, linked to him not by blood-lines but by art and etymology. In the English tradition of legend and myth that Tolkien worked so hard to regenerate, he saw *Beowulf* as being at one end of the tradition and himself at the other. This intimate sense of identification means that *Beowulf* permeates Tolkien's fiction profoundly and inevitably, while Tolkien's knowledge of the poem in turn permeates Beowulfian scholarship on the deepest of levels. His most celebrated paper, 'Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics' (1936), profoundly affected critical perception of the poem. Seamus Heaney called it 'epoch-making', while Tom Shippey reckons it could well be the most cited paper of all time in the humanities. Certainly, it is virtually impossible to read a learned account of *Beowulf*, its themes, purpose and significance, without finding a reference to Tolkien's 1936 essay.

Tolkien's translations of the two great poems mentioned above have suffered contrasting



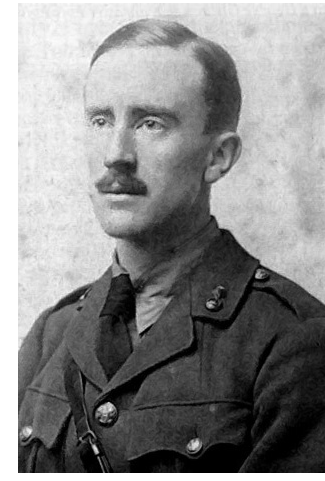
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doi:10.1017/S0266078409990216
English Today 99, Vol. 25, No. 3 (September 2009). Printed in the United Kingdom © 2009 Cambridge University Press

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409990216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

fates. His work on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has spent much time in the limelight despite being a lesser object of Tolkien's devotion. His scholarly edition of the poem with E. V. Gordon was published in 1925 and became a standard academic text, while his verse translation in modern English was read on BBC radio in 1953 and subsequently published in the above-mentioned volume. Nonetheless, while he did deliver an extensive lecture (later edited and included in the 1983 collection of essays titled *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*) concerning certain themes in *Sir Gawain*, he never provided a detailed description of the methods and techniques he had applied when translating the poem from Middle English.

Conversely, Tolkien's translations of *Beowulf*, while known to exist, remain concealed from view. During his lifetime Tolkien composed a prose translation of the entire poem and a verse translation of part of it, but these have not yet been edited and published. We therefore have to make do with a few fragments. However, unlike in the case of *Sir Gawain*, Tolkien did write a fairly detailed description of the criteria he thought should be applied when translating *Beowulf* and other Old English verse in an essay titled 'On Translating Beowulf', which was initially published in 1940 as an introduction to a new edition of J. R. Clark Hall's prose translation and later included in the above-mentioned collection *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. In typically idiosyncratic fashion, Tolkien commences his essay by making a few cursory remarks about the translation by Clark Hall before launching himself into an enthusiastic, detailed and completely personal account of exactly how *Beowulf* and other Anglo-Saxon alliterative poetry should be translated. In view of his obvious enthusiasm for the subject, one can only wonder why Tolkien never published his own versions of *Beowulf*. The answer is probably for the same reason he did not publish *The Silmarillion* and the multitude of other myths, tales and poems that never saw the light of day during his lifetime, namely his near-chronic perfectionism combined with an understandable fear of public scrutiny. Tolkien was loath to accept that a work was ever actually finished. He missed his deadline for *The Lord of the Rings* by several years and would probably have gone on re-reading and honing the text indefinitely were it not for the moral and commercial commitments he had already undertaken. In the case of such a technically and artistically complex project as a translation of *Beowulf* , in verse or even in prose, involving a work with which he felt so closely identified, it is easy to imagine how difficult it was for Tolkien to be able to decide that he had finally got it right, that he could not better the translation he had achieved, and that his manuscript could go to the publishers. Therefore, the *Beowulf* translations formed part of the mass of unfinished projects inherited by Christopher Tolkien upon his father's death, though there is hope that the translations will eventually be published in one form or another.



Tolkien in British army uniform, 1916

Guidelines for translating Old English

While Tolkien was reluctant to publish anything more than fragments of his *Beowulf* translation, he was quite willing to explain the approach that in his opinion should be taken towards such a monolithic task. Publishing the actual translation would have exposed Tolkien to public aesthetic judgement; explaining his criteria did not. Paradoxically, therefore, while we have no 'Beowulf Translation' by Tolkien, we do have 'On Translating Beowulf'.

In 'On Translating Beowulf' Tolkien is somewhat disdainful of Clark Hall's prose translation which he is meant to be presenting. He informs us that prose translations are useful as a study-guide for students who are struggling with the intricacies of the original Anglo-Saxon text, but have little else to recommend them.

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Prose translations of Old English verse are unavoidably dull and flat; a far better option is a translation which attempts to maintain the rhyme and metre of the original, whatever the syntactic and semantic sacrifices this may involve. Tolkien (1997:74) repeats this opinion early on in his essay 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' when he states the aims of his translation (before falling silent on the subject): '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, by a poet to whom "courtesy" meant so much'. His stance in this respect therefore seems clear. As has been mentioned many a time, Tolkien was a man of strong opinions and if he felt something to be right, he would defend his idea no matter how directly it flew in the face of majority opinion. Some scholars regard the translation of poetry in verse as a hopeless enterprise due to the sheer difficulty it involves. Tolkien took the opposite view. For him, prose translations constituted the easy alternative, with true expressiveness, art and intellectual effort being reserved for translations in verse, like those he himself produced.

As is inevitable in the light of his interest in phonology and sound-symbolism, the matter of sound figures prominently in Tolkien's translation guidelines in 'On Translating Beowulf'. Sound is, of course, an essential component of poetry in any century and in any language. In this respect, Tolkien warns prospective translators that they should be careful in the treatment of apparent synonyms in the Anglo-Saxon poem because although the words in question may be semantically close, in phonetic terms they can differ widely and each phoneme chosen by the poet evidently produces a different impact on the reader, or listener. For instance, using the single word 'shield' to translate *bord, lind, rand* and *scyld* is hardly appropriate from a poetic viewpoint. To take an example from modern English, the nouns *wood* and *timber* may often be interchangeable, but in phonetic terms they are markedly different and provoke quite distinct aesthetic responses. Tolkien comes back to this subject in his discussion of the best way of rendering the so-called *kennings* (noun compounds) which are typical of Old English poetry, using metaphors such as *colour* and *texture* to try to get his message across:

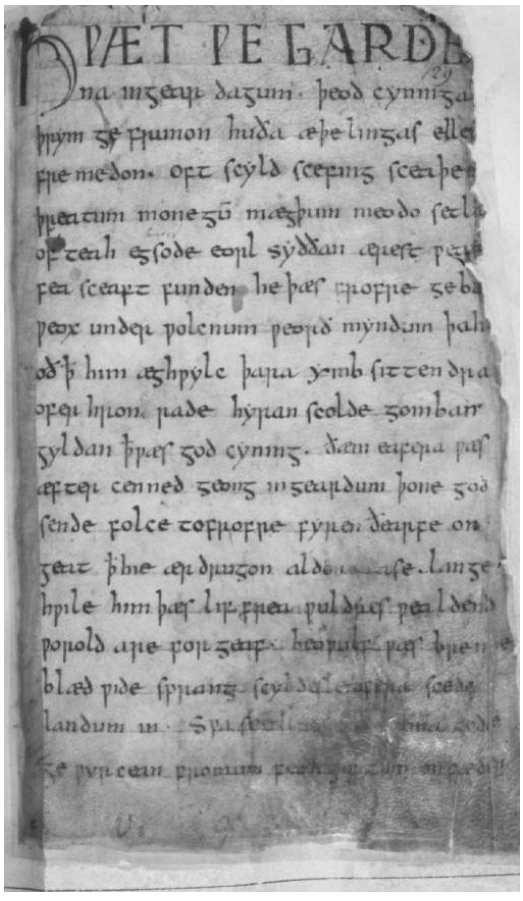
> It is plain that the translator dealing with these compounded words must hesitate between simply naming the thing denoted (so 'harp' for *gomen-wudu* 'play-wood') and resolving the combination into a phrase. The former method retains the compactness of the original but loses its colour; the latter retains the colour, but even if it does not falsify or exaggerate it, it loosens and weakens the texture. (Tolkien 1997:58)

The most appropriate manner of dealing with inventive word-play of this kind is a habitual dilemma for translators of poetry and imaginative literature; how far can one distance oneself from the original text while continuing to represent it with some degree of fidelity? According to Tolkien, the translator has to take the *kennings* on a case-by-case basis, weighing up in each instance the aesthetic trade-off between using a single modern word and inventing an equivalent compound term. He has no easy answer to the translator's dilemma, but he tries to express in metaphorical terms what will be lost and gained in each case: *compactness* may be retained, *colour* may be kept or lost, *texture* may be loosened or weakened. Precisely what he means by this is worth examining further.

By retaining the *compactness*, Tolkien means keeping the translated term similar in size, or number of syllables, to the original term, which ensures that the poem's metre will not be excessively distorted. However, he warns us that this could lead to a rather dull choice, causing the loss of *colour*, i.e. phonetic attractiveness. Alternatively, the translator can invent a new, imaginative compound term which retains the *colour* because it is aesthetically pleasing, but again there is a down-side because such a choice may distort (*loosen* or *weaken* in Tolkien's words) the overall *texture* of the poem. By *texture*, Tolkien seems to be referring to the metrical, syllabic and linear structure of the poem, though he could also be referring to the imagery used by the poet in the original work, in the event that the translator decides to invent a term or compound which works well in metrical and phonological terms, but which departs from the original metaphor.

Here are some examples of how this difficulty has been tackled by translators over the years. In *A Companion to Beowulf*, Ruth Johnson Staver offers samples by numerous translators of lines 237–40, which contain the compound term *lagustraete,* literally 'sea-street'. The choices made by translators are as

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First page of the sole surviving manuscript of Beowulf (courtesy of the British Library)

follows, with the year of publication in brackets. We can start with an outstanding example of retained *compactness* at the cost of *colour* in the simple use of the word *ocean* by David Wright (1957) in his plain English translation. J. M. Kemble (1835) was rather more imaginative in his first full *Beowulf* translation, choosing *lake paths*, perhaps because he took *lagus* to mean 'lake' rather than 'sea'. William Morris (1895) changed this to *lake-street* in his translation, while John Earle (1982) offers an extreme instance of 'colour' over 'compactness' in his choice of *watery high-way*. Seamus Heaney (2000) decided on *sea-lanes* partly to alliterate with *steep-hulled* in the second half of the line, while R. M. Liuzza (2002) preferred *sea-road*. Francis Grummere (1909) and Frederick Rebsamen (1991) use *ocean ways* and *wave-swells,* respectively, to alliterate with *weapons* and *water*. For their part, Ben Slade (2002) opts for *sea-street* and Michael Alexander (1973) goes for *sea-ways* (Staver 2005:20–21). These ten translations reflect ten different options: it is a tribute to the breadth of English vocabulary that all the above writers succeeded in finding an original solution. As for *colour* and *texture*, we can see that most translators sought to strike a balance between semantic fidelity and poetic charm, influenced in most cases by the additional need to respect the restrictions of the alliterative verse form. Such a middle course, where allowed by the original syntax, seems to be the best solution and reflects Tolkien's own admonition about translating, not 'rewriting', the poem.

Tolkien also provides a warning on the subject of what he calls *etymological fallacy*, a problem more commonly referred to as 'false friends' among modern language learners and translators. Etymological descent, he tells us, is a most untrustworthy guide to a fit choice of words, offering as examples the words *wann, mod, burg*, and *ealdor*, which we are told, respectively, do not mean 'wan', 'mood', 'borough' and 'alderman', but rather mean 'dark', 'spirit or pride', 'stronghold', and 'prince'. This advice can logically be extended to the translation of any language, suggesting once again that serious translation should only be undertaken by someone with a profound understanding of the source language and the associated capacity to detect and avoid pitfalls of this kind.

The last area covered by Tolkien in the guidelines he sets out in 'On Translating Beowulf' concerns the appropriate style for rendering the poem in a modern idiom. Tolkien takes the view that Beowulf was written in the eighth century: there is much controversy among experts over its date of composition, but there is consensus with regard to the fact that the poem describes quasi-historical events that occurred a long time earlier. The Beowulf poet, therefore, used a number of words which when he wrote the poem were already old-fashioned or which were retained for strictly poetic use, thereby providing his work with the requisite air of antiquity and solemnity. In Tolkien's view, to be faithful to the spirit of the original, translators into modern English should follow a similar procedure:

> If you wish to translate, not re-write, *Beowulf*, your language must be literary and traditional: not because it is now a long while since the

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poem was made, or because it speaks of things that have since become ancient; but because the diction of Beowulf was poetical, archaic, artificial (if you will) in the day that the poem was made. Many words used by the ancient English poets had, even in the eighth century, already passed out of colloquial use for anything from a lifetime to hundreds of years.

(Tolkien 1997:54)

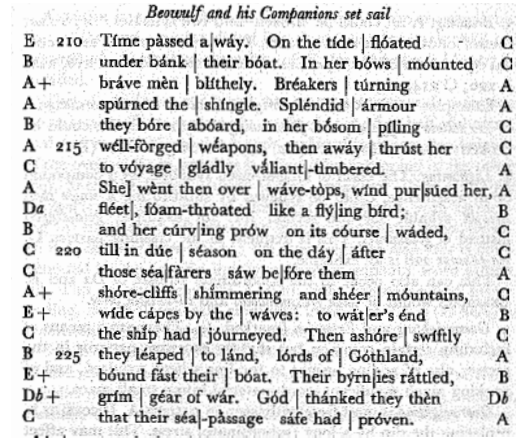
Tolkien warns, however, that the opposite fault should equally be avoided:

> Words should not be used merely because they are 'old' or obsolete. The words chosen, however remote they may be from colloquial speech or ephemeral suggestions, must be words that remain in literary use, especially in the use of verse, among educated people.
>
> (Tolkien 1997:55)

The notion of what constitutes an 'educated person' has changed since Tolkien wrote these lines and his advice may now seem outdated, or even politically incorrect. Certainly this is one area in which the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, in his celebrated version of *Beowulf*, chose not to follow Tolkien's advice and he clearly eschews language of this kind. The terms Heaney uses to flavour his translation are not those that 'remain in literary use' but rather are words of ancient Celtic or Anglo-Saxon stock that subsist in British dialects, such as *bawn* (fortress), *tholed* (suffered), *reek* (smoke), and *bothy* (hut), and which will be known by at least part of his readership. Those unable to recognise these terms are provided with a brief explanation in his introduction. Heaney thus manages to gives his *Beowulf* an old-world air which is down-to-earth and solidly rooted in British tradition. To use a distinction that Tolkien himself disliked, we could say that Heaney's choices are based on language, rather than on literature. In this respect, it is illuminating to compare Heaney's poetic interpretation with Tolkien's own, in lines 210–16:

> Time went by, the boat was on water,
> in close under the cliffs.
> Men climbed eagerly up the gangplank,
> sand churned in surf, warriors loaded
> a cargo of weapons, shining war gear
> in the vessel's hold, then heaved out,
> away with a will in their wood-weathered ship
>
> (Heaney 2001:17)

Tolkien's version, included as a sample in 'On Translating Beowulf', is as follows:



Beowulf and his Companions set sail

E	210	Tíme pàssed a|wáy. On the tíde | flóated	C
B		under bánk | their bóat. In her bóws | mounted	C
A+		bráve mèn | blíthely. Bréakers | túrning	A
A		spúrned the | shíngle. Spléndid | ármour	A
B		they bóre | abóard, in her bósom | píling	C
A	215	wéll-fórged | wéapons, then awáy | thrúst her	C
C		to vóyage | gládly váliant|-timbered.	A
A		She] wènt then over | wáve-tòps, wínd pur|súed her,	A
Da		fléet|, fóam-thróated like a flý|ing bírd;	B
B		and her cúrv|ing prów on its cóurse | wáded,	C
C	220	till in dúe | séason on the dáy | áfter	C
C		those séa|fárers sáw be|fóre them	A
A+		shóre-cliffs | shímmering and shéer | móuntains,	C
E+		wíde cápes by the | wáves: to wát|er's énd	B
C		the shíp had | jóurneyed. Then ashóre | swíftly	C
B	225	they léaped | to lánd, lórds of | Góthland,	A
E+		bóund fást their | bóat. Their býrn|ies ráttled,	B
Dẻ+		grím | géar of wár. Gód | thánked they thèn	Dẻ
C		that their séa|-pássage sáfe had | próven.	A

Fragment of Tolkien's Beowulf translation showing metrical patterns and syllable stresses, from 'On Translating Beowulf'.

> Time passed away. On the tide floated
> under bank their boat. In her bows mounted
> brave men blithely. Breakers turning
> spurned the shingle. Splendid armour
> they bore aboard, in her bosom piling
> well-forged weapons, then away thrust her
> to voyage gladly valiant timbered.
>
> (Tolkien 1997:63)

Consistent with his own advice, Tolkien uses words like *blithely*, *splendid*, *bore, bosom* and *valiant*, all of which can be regarded as educated or poetic and which help to give an antiquated feel to the verse. He also takes a considerable amount of poetic liberty with the syntax: 'On the tide floated under bank their boat', for instance, turns normal English word-order on its head. However, Tolkien does not really succeed in reflecting the rough, tight-knit texture of the Anglo-Saxon language. In contrast, Heaney does not use a single word that falls outside common colloquial speech in Modern English, yet thanks to a careful choice of solidly English nouns – *gangplank, warriors, war-gear, wood-weathered ship* – he manages to give the verse an archaic air while also reflecting, to the extent possible, the linguistic feel of the original. In any event, it should be noted that each translation reflects the prevailing poetic and aesthetic values of the times in which it was written and it is inconceivable that Tolkien, or anyone else, could have created a translation like Heaney's back in the 1950s.

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Keeping courtesy in Middle English

In his translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Tolkien applies the 'poetical, archaic and artificial' style he refers to with regard to *Beowulf*. If we recall the passage cited above from his essay about *Sir Gawain*, where he says that his purpose is to 'preserve, to exhibit in an intelligible modern idiom, the nobility and the courtesy of this poem', it seems clear that any other stylistic choice was out of the question; to reflect the chivalric notions of nobility and courtesy, Tolkien needed to employ a Maloryesque register.

The English poet Simon Armitage, who has published his own modern-English translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Faber, 2006), has the following to say about Tolkien's poetic style: 'I read Tolkien's translation when I was in my mid-20s; not surprisingly for someone who had studied and decoded the original text, his is a highly faithful rendition. But I never really responded to the antique diction and syntax – it struck me at times as even older than the original' (interview in *The Guardian* newspaper, December 2006). Saying Tolkien's versions seems 'older than the original' is obviously an exaggeration, but Armitage's point is clear: the kind of language Tolkien used is now *passé*. In Tolkien's defence, as suggested above, it can be alleged that such criticism is not really fair because any poet translating *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in that period would have used broadly similar, pseudo-archaic language. It may also be mentioned in passing that Armitage's use of certain very modern English expressions in his translation of *Sir Gawain* seems decidedly more out of place in a poem of such venerable stock than Tolkien's archaisms.

A comparison of their versions helps to illustrate this. The following passage describes the action immediately after Gawain has chopped off the Green Knight's head, in full view of the assembled Knights of the Round Table. Both poets try to reflect the alliterative verse of the original text. Tolkien's rendering is as follows:

> The fair head to the floor fell from the shoulders,
> and folk fended it with their feet as forth it went rolling;
> the blood burst from the body, bright on the greenness,
> and yet neither faltered nor fell the fierce man at all,
> but stoutly he strode forth, still strong on his shanks,
> and roughly he reached out among the rows that stood there,
> caught up his comely head and quickly upraised it,
> and then hastened to his horse, laid hold of the bridle,
> stepped into stirrup-iron, and strode up aloft,
> his head by the hair in his hand holding;
> and he settled himself then in the saddle as firmly
> as if unharmed by mishap, though in the hall he might
> wear no head. (Tolkien 1975:40)

Evidently this is not contemporary English, but the language employed in these lines suggests that Tolkien's style is not quite as antiquated as Armitage makes out. The words or phrases which cannot be regarded as ordinary current usage are: *fair* (in the sense of attractive), *forth, strode, comely, upraised, hasten, shanks* and *mishap* – a mere eight instances in 13 lines, or in 124 words. Moreover, there are only four cases of non-standard syntax: hardly worthy of being derided as 'older than the original'. We should note, however, that some instances of these syntactic inversions are rather extreme, as was the case in the sample of Tolkien's *Beowulf* translation cited earlier. The clause 'his head by the hair in his hand holding' is particularly unnatural, even though it mirrors the syntax of the original verse.

Let us now look at Armitage's version of the same section:

> The handsome head tumbles onto the earth
> and the king's men kick it as it clatters past.
> Blood gutters brightly against his green gown,
> yet the man doesn't shudder or stagger or sink
> but trudges towards them on those tree-trunk legs
> and rummages around, reaches at their feet
> and cops hold of his head and hoists it high,
> and strides to his steed, snatches the bridle,
> steps into the stirrup and swings into the saddle
> still gripping his head by a handful of hair.
> Then he settles himself in his seat with the ease
> of a man unmarked, never mind being minus
> his head! (Armitage 2006:49)

Logically, Armitage's translation has a much more up-to-date feel to it: all the vocabulary is normal modern English. Moreover, the word-order is standard English all through, which is a notable achievement in view of the extreme difficulty involved in trying to maintain rhyme and metre while reflecting the sense and

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wording of the original, without 'wrenching the syntax'. He also creates a wonderfully dynamic sequence using the repeated 's' sound for all the verbs between *strides* and *still gripping*, giving a real sense of action. However, such words and phrases as *clatter*, *snatches, rummage around* and *cops hold of* are excessively colloquial and have little justification other than to provide the required alliteration. At times Armitage seems to lose sight of the fact that he is translating a very ancient work set in a venerable location (Arthur's Camelot) and that such a context imposes certain limits on the language he can use. The final clause, 'never mind being minus his head!', seems particularly out of place in this regard.

In the interview referred to above, Simon Armitage gave an interesting example of just how much the approach of a poet to his own work can change in fifty years. He mentions how deeply impressed he had been by the Gawain poet's description of the capture and subsequent dismembering of a deer: 'No portion of the animal seems to escape the hunter's knife or the poet's eye, with some of the more grisly portions being guzzled by the dogs or tossed into the woods for the crows. But as full and frank as these passages are, I figured that only by seeing the real thing would I get a true sense of what was actually taking place.' Accordingly, he travelled to visit a deer farm near his home in Yorkshire in order to watch a modern farmer go through the same process of slaughtering and dressing a deer. As well as directly witnessing the gruesome work, he took advantage to ask the slaughter-man about certain bits and pieces of the butchered animal which are mentioned in the poem and which he had found hard to identify, such as *knot*, *chine* and *slot*.

This enthusiasm for seeking out real, direct experience as a means of inspiring poetry (or poetry translation) contrasts radically with the attitudes prevalent in Tolkien's day. The idea of Simon Armitage up to his ankles in gore in a Yorkshire slaughterhouse could hardly be farther removed from our habitual image of Professor Tolkien in his library, puffing quietly on his pipe, quite content to rely on books, experience and his own imagination for poetic inspiration and with little interest in venturing anywhere farther than his own back garden. Perhaps the fact that Tolkien, like many writers of his generation, had received more than enough first-hand experience of bloodshed and terror in the trenches made any such experimenting seem frivolous.

Translation as a literary conceit

Turning now to Tolkien's fiction, it is interesting to note that in Appendix F to *The Lord of the Rings* he informs us that his entire epic story is in fact a translation. English was not the language spoken by the human communities in *The Lord of the Rings* and used by dwarves, elves, orcs and ents as a lingua-franca: that language was *Westron*, but for the story to be comprehensible to the non-*Westron* speakers of our day it had to be translated into English. He develops this idea by informing readers that there were different variations of *Westron*, ranging from the often rustic form spoken by the Hobbits and Bree-men in the north-west to the more elevated speech of the inhabitants of Gondor in the south. These had to be reflected in the narrative by using different regional or social registers from modern English. For their part, the Saxon-like Rohirrim, a proud people with a highly developed sense of ethics but less sophisticated than the men of Gondor in cultural matters, had their own language which Tolkien equated to Anglo-Saxon in English culture. The Rohirrim used *Westron* as a lingua-franca when communicating with other communities of men and consequently the type of English they speak in *The Lord of the Rings* is tinged with words from their own language (*Rohirric*), notably names, for which Tolkien sought suitable equivalents derived from Anglo-Saxon. Two of the most important names, *Éomer* (the king's nephew) and *Meduseld* (the royal house), are in fact lifted straight from *Beowulf*, which illustrates the philological ebb and flow between ancient and modern which is so characteristic of Tolkien's work.

The device of introducing a fictitious translator was not an original idea of Tolkien's but was common in the knightly romances that enjoyed enormous popularity in France and Spain – and to a lesser extent in Britain – between the 13th and 16th centuries, many of which commenced with the discovery of a book, manuscript or parchment written in a foreign language which the narrator had to translate into the vernacular of his time so that the story could be enjoyed by his less linguistically gifted fellows (almost certainly men, as literate women were expected to read more

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genteel material). These purported foreign languages included Latin, Greek, English, French, German, Tuscan and Hungarian. Some famous works employing this device are the 16th century *Amadís de Grecia* (falsely translated into Spanish from Greek), *El Caballero Zifar* (false translation from Latin) and *Florando de Inglaterra* (false translation from English). Some even claimed to be translations of other translations, the most notable instance being the great 15th century romance *Tirant lo Blanch*, known in English as *The White Knight*, by Joanot Martorell, who originally wrote the story in *Valenciano* (a language of south-east Spain akin to Catalan), supposedly on the basis of a Portuguese translation of an original manuscript in English!

Like the medieval authors who created these characters, the addition of a primary layer of pseudo-authenticity was doubtless one of Tolkien's objectives when he decided to include a reference to the matter of translation in the Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*. But did he really need to go to all that trouble? It can safely be assumed that his readers' appreciation of *The Lord of the Rings* would not have been diminished had the entire Appendix on language been omitted. Upon completing Tolkien's great work, one scarcely feels a need for an explanation of why it is mostly written in English. However, Tolkien's idiosyncrasies with regard to language and his obsession with the internal consistency of his invented world went well beyond the reach of ordinary linguistic or aesthetic judgements. What he felt upon reading through his magnum opus and hearing his characters speak English must have been similar to the feeling most of us get when seeing a dubbed film: it seemed incongruous, and at least some kind of artifice was required to justify this apparent inconsistency in the massive edifice he had created. In the Appendices, therefore, which were added once the story itself had been completed rather than being envisaged from the start, the author took the opportunity to furnish a last-minute explanation: the story was a translation into English from the historical chronicle kept by the Hobbits under the name of the *Red Book of Westmarch*, wherein their greatest adventures were recorded. The translator, as is made clear by the use of the first person, was Tolkien himself. The author could thus rest assured that if it occurred to anyone to ask why Frodo, Aragorn and company spoke English, he would have an answer ready.

Anyone interested in a more detailed description of Tolkien's process of translating from his invented languages into modern English should consult the above-mentioned Appendix directly. Here I wish to mention just one notable instance of Tolkien's self-translation, namely his explanation of how he incorporated into his etymological scheme of things the word *hobbit*, his most celebrated neologism. By Tolkien's own account, the name came straight to him from his own imagination without any clearly recognisable antecedent. This meant that an antecedent had to be invented and the author accordingly explains that *hobbit* is the modern English equivalent of the term *holbytla* in Anglo-Saxon (which we should recall equates to *Rohirric* in the Middle-earth languages), whose etymology is described by Gilliver in *The Ring of Words*:

> Upon encountering the Rohirrim, the hobbits notice that their speech contains many words that sound like Shire words but have a more archaic form. The prime example is their word for the hobbits themselves: holbytla. It is made up of hol 'hole' and bytla 'builder'; it just happens, as far as we know, never to have existed in Old English.
>
> (Gilliver 2006:144)

To ensure that the information provided is complete, Tolkien ends his explanation in the Appendices to *The Return of the King* by informing readers that with respect to the 'real' human languages of Middle-earth, *hobbit* (modern English) is a translation of *kuduk* (*Westron*) and *holbytla* (pseudo-Anglo-Saxon) is a translation of *kûd-dûkan (Rohirric)*. The etymological source of these *Westron* and *Rohirric* words in some earlier, ancient Middle-earth *Ursprache*, however, is not provided: it seems that by this stage even Tolkien's enthusiasm for linguistic invention had reached its limit.

It is also interesting to note with respect to *The Hobbit* that in its first edition, published in 1937, Tolkien slipped quietly into the plot in the guise of a scribe, concealing his identity in the runes that border the picture on the dust-jacket. When deciphered, the runes tell us the name and origin of the story: *The Hobbit or There and Back Again, being the record of a year's journey made by Bilbo Baggins; compiled from his memoirs by J. R. R. Tolkien and published by George Allen & Unwin* (Tolkien/Anderson 2002: Appendix B). The author's role as a scribe, or interpreter, was present from the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078409990216 Published online by Cambridge University Press

very beginning in his published fiction.

To sum up, therefore, we can see that translation was an essential theme in Tolkien's academic and fictitious work, in differing ways. On a primarily linguistic plane, Tolkien drew on his knowledge as a philologist and his gifts as a poet to translate early English poetic works which are partly or wholly unintelligible to the modern lay reader. On the plane of his own literary creativity, he used translation as a conceit to reinforce the authenticity of his greatest work and maintain his invented world's internal coherence, while allowing himself to take a small but active part as the chronicle's translator. ■

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