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# J. R. R. Tolkien's 'Gawain's leave-taking': A composite translation of 'Against my will I take my leave' (Vernon MS 407v) and a door to further criticism

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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the manner in which the publication of the deluxe slipcased edition of J. R. R. Tolkien's *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl and Sir Orfeo* (2020) has helped to uncover some new evidence concerning Tolkien's poem/translation 'Gawain's leave-taking' (1925), and the possible early influence of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late 14th c.) on the initial stages of Tolkien's *Legendarium*, in particular on *The lay of Leithian* (1925–1931). The article reveals, for the first time, the source for Tolkien's poem/translation, namely 'Against my will I take my leave' (Vernon MS 407 v) as edited in Carleton Brown's *Religious lyrics of the XIVth century* (1924), and the importance of ascribing the work by Tolkien to the year 1925 or earlier. It is my hope that this contribution nudges other scholars to examine the evidence with care and to propose enlightening analyses, especially considering that the influence of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in Tolkien's early writing remains unexplored.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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J. R. R. Tolkien; 'Gawain's leave-taking'; 'Against my will I take my leave'; Vernon MS; Bodleian Library MS Eng. poet. a. 1; Middle English; *The lay of Leithian*; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; Arthurian Legend; The Collected Poems of J. R. R. Tolkien

For frendschiþe þat I here haue founde,  
A-3eyn mi wille I take mi leue. (Brown [ed.], 'Against my will I take my leave', ll. 7–8)

For friendship that I here have found  
Against my will I take my leave. (Tolkien, 'Gawain's leave-taking', ll. 7–8)<sup>1</sup>

J. R. R. Tolkien had a life-long engagement with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late 14th c., henceforth *SGGK*) that began at King Edward's School, Birmingham, where he discovered and studied with passion this West Midlands Middle English work that (Carpenter 2000: 54; Scull & Hammond 2017a: 15), for Tolkien, was written in the

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<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this paper was read at the University of Glasgow during an event which celebrated 70 years since J. R. R. Tolkien delivered the W. P. Ker Memorial Lecture on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in Glasgow (1953–2023). A recording of the talk is available at: [https://youtu.be/Q4c\\_bKoTM0k?t=2978](https://youtu.be/Q4c_bKoTM0k?t=2978).

language of his Suffield ancestors (Tolkien 2000: 213–218).<sup>2</sup> As early as 1920, Tolkien taught *SGGK* for a term in Oxford (Ryan 2002: 46; Scull & Hammond 2017a: 120, 838), and, later that year, Tolkien was hired by the University of Leeds, where he continued teaching the poem until 1925 (Cossio 2022: 1307). 1922 saw the publication of *A Middle English vocabulary* in which Tolkien glossed a passage of 360 lines concerning the testing of Gawain. A scholarly edition of *SGGK* was published in 1925 in collaboration with E. V. Gordon, which underwent many corrections in 1930 and 1936, and which remains the standard edition as revised by Norman Davis (Pascual 2017: 251). Tolkien lectured on *SGGK* again in Oxford from 1946 to 1959 (Ryan 2002: 52; Cilli 2019: 365–368), and delivered the W. P. Ker Memorial Lecture on *SGGK* at the University of Glasgow in 1953.<sup>3</sup> That same year, he also completed a translation of the poem on which he had been working for around thirty years (Scull & Hammond 2017a: 423; 2017b: 69; 2017c: 1197). He continued to revise this work until his death (Scull & Hammond 2017c: 976–977).<sup>4</sup>

In my previous research, I carefully studied both the first and also the revised version of Tolkien and Gordon's edition of *SGGK* (1925, 2nd edn 1967), as well as Tolkien's translation of the poem (1975), and the W. P. Ker memorial lecture (1983), among other published materials, in order to understand the influence *SGGK* had on Tolkien's fiction (Cossio 2022: 1306–1927). As in earlier scholarly works (see Shippey 1996; 2005; 2022; Drout 2007; Ross Smith 2009; Bowers 2019), I paid no heed to the short poem of 32 lines in 4 stanzas named 'Gawain's leave-taking' (Tolkien 2020a: 255, ll. 1–32),<sup>5</sup> first published by George Allen & Unwin within the volume *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo* in 1975. Until 30 April 2020, Christopher Tolkien presented his father's poem, without any further details, as a translation of the first three and last stanzas of a poem within the Vernon Manuscript (MS. Eng. poet. a. 1), a massive compilation of religious and didactic texts mostly in Middle English, but also Anglo-Norman and Latin, from the final years of the fourteenth century (c. 1390–1400), and with a possible West Midlands origin.

The publication of the deluxe slipcased edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo* contains new information on the nature of the poem (Tolkien & Tolkien: 2020), since it includes as a frontispiece the manuscript of 'Gawain's leave-taking'. After the title and before the actual poem, Tolkien writes: 'This is a haul simpl.<sup>6</sup> of the first & last stanzas of a poem in Vernon MS CB. RL xivc p134' (2020b: unpaginated frontispiece). I have only recently identified the source in Tolkien's cryptic annotation, which should be read as: 'C[arleton] B[rown]. R[eligious] L[yrics] xiv c[entury] p134'. This enables us to locate the exact source text for the translation in the manuscript, and to know from which edition of the poem Tolkien was translating, as well as learning the title of the work, three pieces of information not provided by Christopher Tolkien.<sup>7</sup> As Christopher points out, the poem is indeed a translation from Middle English (Christopher Tolkien 2020: 11), and now is known

<sup>2</sup>See also Leonard Neidorf (2017: 91–113) for Tolkien's engagement with Arthurian matter in relation to his poem *The fall of Arthur* (2013).

<sup>3</sup>See Andoni Cossio & Dimitra Fimi (2024: 1–19) for a comprehensive account of the lecture and related matters.

<sup>4</sup>For additional details on the Tolkien-*SGGK* relation see Cossio (2022: 1307, 1321) and Cossio & Fimi (2024: 2–3).

<sup>5</sup>To my knowledge, no scholar other than Carl Phelpstead (2007: 614–15) has written about 'Gawain's leave-taking'. However, Phelpstead's contribution only summarises the information contained in Christopher Tolkien's preface (2020: 11). A new edition of the poem was published on 12 Sept. 2024, see Tolkien (2024: 649–651).

<sup>6</sup>The word 'haul' means 'unlawful appropriation' in this context and 'simpl.' is an abbreviation for 'simplified'.

<sup>7</sup>Christopher may have been aware of all these facts, but there are no extant public records that either support or contradict this hypothesis.

to be found on folio 407v of Bodleian Library MS Eng. poet. a. 1, and that Tolkien rendered the poem from Carleton Brown's<sup>8</sup> edition (Brown 1924: 134–136, ll. 1–64).<sup>9</sup> The source poem is 8 stanzas long, each of which contains 8 four-foot lines rhyming ababbcbc,<sup>10</sup> and it is named after the refrain in lines 8, 16, and 24 'Against my will I take my leave'.<sup>11</sup>

To refer to Tolkien's work only as a translation is slightly misleading. Tolkien's edition and authorial intent depart from a regular translator's approach to the task, turning his work at least into a hybrid piece in the middle ground between a translation and a literary creation.<sup>12</sup> The title is changed to 'Gawain's leave-taking' and four stanzas are deleted with the intention of dispensing with the most moralising lines so as to match the new topic,<sup>13</sup> namely Gawain's departure from Sir Bertilak's castle to meet the Green Knight (Christopher Tolkien 2020: 11): 'If ought there were that dear ye hold,/Full fain I would the deed achieve' (Tolkien 2020a: 255, ll. 29–30). Tolkien's renditions of these two lines are by far the ones that depart most from the original: '[3]if euere I miȝte ful fayn I wolde/Don ouȝt þat weore vn-to ȝow leue' (Brown 1924: 136, ll. 61–2). Although Tolkien calls it 'a haul simpl. of the first & last stanzas of a poem in Vernon MS' (Tolkien 2020b: unpaginated frontispiece), he does not note that the original poem is not related to *SGGK* by any means (Christopher Tolkien 2020: 11), and that he himself altered the title and content to match his personal interpretation or transmutation of the source. Tolkien's mind may have associated *SGGK* with 'Against my will I take my leave' owing to their similar date of composition and dialect. Though in 'Against my will I take my leave' the poet does not make use of the alliterative metre, it does contain recurrent alliteration (and poetic vocabulary of such tradition) with the intent of ornamenting the lines and establishing certain semantic connections that often recall *SGGK*. Tolkien's translation retains the original's alliteration and metre in most lines as far as this is possible in modern English, i.e. 'Wher-euer ȝe go, on gras or grounde' ['Wherever you go on grass or ground'] (Brown 1924: 134, l. 5; Tolkien 2020a: 255, l. 5), but there are exceptions. By way of illustration, he

<sup>8</sup>Prof. Carleton Brown (1869–1941) was a philologist from the United States. Brown sent Tolkien offprints of at least three of his articles over the years (Cilli 2019: 30), and Tolkien asked Houghton Mifflin to forward Brown a copy of the first US edition of *The Hobbit* out of the twelve author copies offered by the publisher in March 1938 (unpublished 5 March 1938 letter from Tolkien to Houghton Mifflin). These two facts suggest that they were no less than acquaintances, but nothing else is known of their relationship.

<sup>9</sup>Kenneth Sisam gifted a copy of Brown's book to Tolkien before 1 Feb 1924 (see Scull & Hammond 2017a: 133). The only other extant version of the poem is in Simeon MS (British Library, Add MS 22283, f. 129 r.), but Tolkien's knowledge or use of it remains unknown. Hermann Varnhagen published an edition of the poem collating the Vernon and Simeon MSS versions of the work (1884: 289–91). Although there is no evidence he consulted them, Tolkien probably knew about this version from a note in Brown's edition (1924: 277), and the same applies to F. J. Furnivall's edition of the Vernon MS version (1901: 666–8, ll. 1–64). There were no facsimiles nor other editions available when Tolkien translated the poem. It remains a mystery whether Tolkien ever studied the Vernon MS directly, but it is worth noting that this important MS for Middle English studies has remained in the possession of the Bodleian Libraries (University of Oxford) since the late seventeenth century.

<sup>10</sup>John Burrow indicates that the origin of such a characteristic stanzaic rhyme scheme with a refrain in the last line of each stanza, shared by other fifteen 'refrain lyrics' in Bodleian Library MS Eng. poet. a. 1, is the French '*balade*' (Burrow 1990: 187; cf. Thomson 1990: 201).

<sup>11</sup>See image 693 (folio 407v) of the digital MS at: <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/52f0a31a-1478-40e4-b05b-fddb1ad076ff/surfaces/4d0d4354-a3ce-4c74-98b5-e025d6b1b151/#>.

<sup>12</sup>This explains the nomenclature 'composite translation' in the title.

<sup>13</sup>It is interesting to consider that in pseudo-ballades as 'Against my will I take my leave': 'When the sense of each stanza makes any serious attempt to lead into its refrain (which is, admittedly, not always the case), the poem's thought will tend to be radial rather than linear. Instead, that is, of a sequence of argument from stanza to stanza, one finds each stanza relating independently to the thought expressed by the refrain, like spokes to a hub; and in that case the order and number of stanzas may vary quite freely, without noticeable incoherence or loss' (Burrow 1990: 188–189). This may account for Tolkien's elision of four stanzas in the middle of the poem when translating it and yet keeping the last stanza with the envoy.

is forced to drop alliteration from a lift in another line while avoiding clashing stresses and creating a more regularly alternating rhythm: ‘Crist kepe ow out of cares colde’ [‘Now Christ you keep from sorrows cold’] (Brown 1924: 136, l. 63; Tolkien 2020a: 255, l. 35). The translator also modifies two out of the four alliterating sounds in another line so that each pair only alliterates with itself, owing to the restrictive possibilities modern English lexicon offers if meaning is to be preserved: ‘Nou Bernes, Buirduis bolde and blype’ [‘Now Lords and Ladies blithe and bold’] (Brown 1924: 134, l. 1; Tolkien 2020a: 255, l. 1). Tolkien even adds alliteration to a metrical position that lacked it in the source, inevitably dropping it from another: ‘for frendschipe & for ziftes goode’ [‘For friendship and for favours good’] (Brown 1924: 134, l. 9; Tolkien 2020a: 255, l. 9).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, with regard to the content, the prayer in the last stanza of ‘Against my will I take my leave’ and its overall religious speech befit *SGGK*’s Gawain; it is implied throughout the Vernon poem, and in Tolkien’s own, that the poetic ‘I’ bids goodbye to the earthly world as death nears, a theme that resonates with this particular Gawain for obvious reasons. Tolkien agreed with Israel Gollancz that, before Gawain departed to meet the Green Knight, he said farewell to his hosts at night with no additional courteous words on parting in the morning (Tolkien n.d.: fol. 57v; Gollancz 1940: 111). The content of ‘Gawain’s leave-taking’ would thus complete the hint of Gawain’s unreported goodbye speech in lines 1975–1986 of *SGGK* at night,<sup>15</sup> which means that Tolkien’s modern translation ‘good day’ of the phrase *good dai* in the Vernon MS should be understood in the Middle English sense ‘goodbye’.

Furthermore, the publication of the manuscript of ‘Gawain’s leave-taking’ and the ‘Editor’s Note’, by Chris Smith from Harper Collins Publishers, uncovered important evidence (Tolkien 2020b: unpaginated frontispiece; Smith 2020: 11–12). Smith replied the following when asked about the authorship of the material contained in the ‘Editor’s Note’, a point to which I shall return: ‘The note was drafted by me, drawing upon all information then known and communicated by Christopher Tolkien, and approved by the Tolkien family prior to its inclusion in the book. As stated in my Note, the original intention was for Christopher to revise and update his introduction, whereby he would have drawn upon the same information, but events sadly dictated otherwise’ (Personal communication, 27 March 2023). Christopher found the poem in 1974, but it is unknown when did he realise that ‘Gawain’s leave-taking’ and an early version of the opening lines — predating Manuscript A — of *The lay of Leithian* were composed around the same time (Smith 2020: 11–12).<sup>16</sup> The first few lines of *The lay of Leithian* follow the last stanza of the fair copy of ‘Gawain’s leave-taking’, and this version of the opening of *The lay of Leithian* resembles Manuscript A of the lay in *The lays of Beleriand* (1985) except for the fact that it contains an additional couplet after line 12, indicating that it is an earlier version (Christopher Tolkien 1985: 157).<sup>17</sup> The phrase in line 4 ‘meat was sweet’ (Tolkien 2020b: unpaginated

<sup>14</sup>There are more variations, but an exhaustive discussion of these is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>15</sup>In Tolkien and Gordon’s first edition of *SGGK* note to 1979 ff. reads: ‘The elaborate leave-taking was required by good breeding’ (1925: 112).

<sup>16</sup>*The lay of Leithian* (1925–1931) is an unfinished narrative poem of 4223 lines divided in fourteen cantos that tells the story of Beren and Lúthien until Carcharoth devours Beren’s hand holding one of the Silmarilli.

<sup>17</sup>It is unknown the exact date when Christopher learnt that the material that follows the last stanza of ‘Gawain’s leave-taking’ is an early draft of the beginning of *The lay of Leithian*. However, it seems that the couplet, ‘from England unto Eglamar / o’er folk and field and lands afar’—inserted as a variant of Manuscript A of *The lay of Leithian* and reproduced on page 157 of *The lays of Beleriand*—was extracted from the piece that followed ‘Gawain’s leave-taking’. If this is so, Christopher had attributed the lines to *The lay of Leithian* at least before 1985, when the poem and its variants were published within *The lays of Beleriand*.

frontispiece), which appears to be removed as a consequence of C. S. Lewis' remark on 6 December 1929 (Christopher Tolkien 1985: 315; Smith 2020: 12), is also present in Manuscript A (Christopher Tolkien 1985: 154, 157). This is precisely the information, together with the additional couplet after line 12, that allowed Christopher to ascribe this particular beginning of *The lay of Leithian* and 'Gawain's leave-taking' to the year 1929 or earlier.

In any event, Smith's 'Editor's Note' (2020: 11–12) drew 'upon all information then known and communicated by Christopher Tolkien' which was never revised by Christopher himself (Smith, personal communication, 27 March 2023). This may account for the omission of the reference in *The Lays of Beleriand* which proves that 'Gawain's leave-taking' and these initial verses of *The lay of Leithian* were composed in 1925.<sup>18</sup> As mentioned above, this version of the beginning of *The lay of Leithian* antedates Manuscript A in *The Lays of Beleriand* (Christopher Tolkien 1985: 157), and Tolkien added some dates to Manuscript A, the first being 23 August 1925 beside line 557 (Christopher Tolkien 1985: 150). Therefore, if this last piece of evidence is paired with the fact that Tolkien wrote in his diary having begun *The lay of Leithian* in the summer of 1925 (Christopher Tolkien 1985: 159), the fair copy of 'Gawain's leave-taking', at the end of which those initial lines of *The lay of Leithian* were written, was composed at the latest in 1925.<sup>19</sup>

Regardless of the date provided by Smith, the most relevant part is Christopher's conclusion that follows:

It can therefore be stated with reasonable certainty that J. R. R. Tolkien had *SGGK* in mind even as he worked on the poem that would become *The Lay of Leithian*. (Smith 2020: 12)

The succinct quotation highlights the value of all these newly published materials, i.e. they have the ability to open further enticing lines of enquiry that are likely to result in fruitful criticism, especially considering that the influence of *SGGK* in Tolkien's early writing remains unexplored. It is my hope that this contribution encourages other scholars to examine the evidence with care and to propose enlightening analyses, since 'For now at last I take my leave' (Tolkien 2020a: 255, l. 32).

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<sup>18</sup>Ugo Truffelli was the first to write about this publicly on 20 May 2020: [https://www.tolkienguide.com/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?post\\_id=25019#forumpost25019](https://www.tolkienguide.com/modules/newbb/viewtopic.php?post_id=25019#forumpost25019). In Scull and Hammond's online 'Addenda and Corrigenda' to page 451 of their *Reader's Guide* (updated in July 2020), the date given is 'no later than summer 1925': <https://www.hammondandscull.com/addenda/guide2.html>. The latest edition of 'Gawain's Leave-Taking' suggests 'no later than 23 August 1925' (Tolkien 2024: 651).

<sup>19</sup>Note that Tolkien owned Brown's book which contained the source for 'Gawain's leave-taking' since early 1924, see footnote 9.

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