

BOOK REVIEW

SIR GAWAIN AND THE GRENE KNYGHT | *SIR GAWAIN ȘI CAVALERUL CEL VERDE*

Translated by Mircea M.Tomuș, Școala Ardeleană Publishing.
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Translating a poem is a challenge. One must first know how to read the poem and the poet's intentions before embarking on this task. The most recent translation into Romanian of the famous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* by Mircea M. Tomuș shows exactly why this is a necessity, and what can emerge after a careful and dedicated exercise as the one carried out by this particular translator.

Mircea M. Tomuș is a scholar versed in Old English and Old French poetry, as well as in medieval poetry. Tomuș teaches rhetoric, poetics, and modern and medieval literature at Kirkwood Community College in Iowa, USA. He is a translator and a critic, whose academic background allows him a better understanding of how to best translate not only the content, but whatever lies between the lines of a text as well.

This volume is a well-edited book, in an easy-to-read, parallel format with the original Middle English text on the left and the Romanian equivalent on the right, making it the perfect tool for students of medieval poetry. The attention to details translates into a perfect symmetry of the English and the Romanian texts, in both form and tone. This book opens with a preface by the translator and continues with the translation proper, a general note on the edition, notes on the text, and acknowledgments. The choice to add the notes on particular aspects of the translation at the end of the book is an inspired one, as it protects the symmetry of the book's layout and does not distract the reader from the text of the translation.

Although a suitable tool for the student and scholar of Middle English literature, this is not an edition limited to those who know and study this particular text. The preface is a brief presentation of the poem. The translator's scholarly background is noticeable in this short paratext. As Tomuș effortlessly teaches the reader who randomly lifted this book from the shelves of a bookstore about its heritage and meaning in Anglo-Saxon poetry. The preface simultaneously carries a word of praise for the anonymous poet, whose mastery of language, rhetoric, and poetic style is emphasized by the translator. The same attention to details and the same intentional attitude towards the creation of the poem are to be found in Tomuș's translation as well.

In the preface, Tomuș mentions that he relied on the original Middle English text, as well as on Maria Borroff's excellent Modern English version. Unlike Tomuș, Dan Iliescu who published a translation of *Sir Gawain* in 1982 relied primarily on Tolkien and Gordon's 1930 edition, with adjustments from Burrow's and Cawley's editions. Iliescu's rendering of *Sir Gawain* into Romanian is a prose text, in which most of the character of the poem is lost. According to the note on that edition, Iliescu chose to remove most of archaic and regional forms of words found in the text in order to bring it as close as possible to a neutral and common Romanian that would be understood by all. However, in doing so, a very large part of what the poem is—its special linguistic flavour, its atmosphere, its overall charm stemming from the connection between content and form— all these are lost to the Romanian readership. Contrastively, Tomuș's translation, through the very decisions that made it difficult, namely loyally matching the tone and the rhetoric of the original, maintains those features renounced by Iliescu.

From the very first lines of the translation, Tomuș impresses with his fidelity to the original. He maintains the strong alliterative character of the source text, as well as some of the rhythmic French legacy, namely the typical "bob and wheel" rhyming pattern. The opening lines "Când turbatul tumult s-o mântuit la Troia,/Cetatea fu pusă pe jar primprejur, după juruire,/Și ticălosul prin trufașă trădare, strcuratu-s-a'n templu,/Să fure Paladiul, primeninind potrivnica soartă, dar pedeapsă primi ..." (19) show Tomuș's care for alliteration, with strong *t*'s, *p*'s, and *j*'s, bearing as close a resemblance as possible to the original alliteration with *s*'s, *b*'s, and *t*'s. Similarly, from the first page of the text one can notice the "bob and wheel" effect of the rhymes. This means that the reader must speed up the reading/reciting tempo, which adds stylistic charge to the text: "Cu dreptate./Multe minuni, de viață și moarte,/Se-ntâmplară în cele locuri luminate/Și de povești prăznuite multe avură parte/ În vâltori de vremuri vânturate" (19).

The translator consciously and intentionally chooses to use the dialectal language and mimic the particular feel of the original. While Chaucer's poems can be understood with minimal efforts, the Gawain poet, although most likely a contemporary of Chaucer, is hard to decipher because of the richness of the

lexicon, as well as the very prominent regional forms. The original abounds with archaic forms, probably foreign to the original audience as well, since—compared to Chaucer—the Gawain poet uses a multitude of words of Germanic origin. Tomuș chooses to mimic this regionality and archaic nature of the poem into the Romanian text. Take for example the following verses: “Deși nobilul Arthur aiurit era în adâncul inimii sale,/Nu vroia ca alții să-i vază necazul, așa că vorovi/Cătră frumoasa lui soață, cu sârg și cu vorbe săltate:/- Domnița mea, nu te deda amarului alean, căci astea-s dibace/Marafeturi și fapte ce se fătuiesc de Crăciun, fără-ndoială.../Cu danțuri și dulci daraveri și colinde după datini,/Să prăznuiască acum prințesele noastre cu puternicii cavaleri” (77).

In this short excerpt one can form an idea about the tone of the translation. The language here feels so close to the old texts of Romanian folklore and tale. The regional terms (“vorovi”, “sârg”, “alean”) offer authenticity to the text, while the peculiar pronunciations—here reflected in the spelling (“soață”, “vază”, “danțuri”)—of every day words point to the oral character of the poem. Through this, the translation stays relevant and true to the themes of the poem and the ways in which the Gawain poet explores them.

Translating this text into Romanian has both advantages and challenges for the translator. While Middle English words often have the stress on the first syllable—which makes alliteration easy to obtain—Romanian does not follow the same pattern. As with French, alliteration is more difficult to obtain in Romanian, but nevertheless, we see in this translation a successful endeavour to capture the essence of alliterative poetry. As challenging an endeavor as this has been, there are also advantages to translating into Romanian. One such aspect is the relaxed word order of Romanian, which allowed sufficient freedom to create alliteration. Similarly, Romanian has a very rich lexicon with words of different origins and etymologies, with different pronunciations and slight differences in the various “graiuri¹” of the language. This richness is surely an advantage when translating such a long and complex poem, whose strict compositional rules place constraints on the translator. All of these aspects offered Tomuș sufficient tools and choices to create a translation exceptionally loyal to the original. Tomuș not only brought some of the Anglo-Saxon heritage to the Romanian public, but he actually adapted a story of chivalry and cunning, a hero’s tale, and made the reader feel as if it were truly his/her own. With this, Tomuș brings service to stories, such as this one, that speak not only of a time and a culture, but of human nature itself.

¹ Regional sub-varieties of Romanian based on geographical delimitations.

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