

RICHARD ROLLE'S *TAGILD* 'ENTANGLED':  
WELSH *TAGU* 'CHOKE', *TAGELL* 'SNARE'

*TAGILD* 'entangled' and *tagillyng* 'entanglement' are peculiarities of the prose of Richard Rolle (c. 1304-1349).<sup>1</sup> *OED*, s. v. *tagle*, quotes four instances of the forms. For *tagle* itself it quotes Newcastle upon Tyne, Public Library, MS TH. 1678, a manuscript found 'tumbling about in a drawer among old magazines and Newcastle dirt' by J. T. Fowler, who described it in *Notes and Queries*, fifth series, i (1874), 41-2.<sup>2</sup> The manuscript contains Rolle's *English Psalter* and commentary on the Canticles in a Northern dialect close to the author's original, giving the readings quoted in *OED*, 'Na man may wit hou many vices ar pat men ar tagild with' for Psalm 39: 16, and 'Swa paire affeciouns ar ay tagild with som lufe pat drawes eame fra goddes lufe' for Habakkuk 3: 31. Other manuscripts (mostly Southern) here read *takild* (a scribal variant?) or *tangild* (a nasalized phonetic variant). In the light of the Celtic etymology argued below, the reading *snaryd* in the Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 467 copy of the *English Psalter* is of special interest.

The noun *tagillynge* figures in the Thornton Manuscript (Lincoln, Cathedral Library, MS 91) text of *Desyre and Delit*, which speaks of how joy in Christ draws man's thoughts from his soul 'that he may hafe ryste in Goddes lufe, wthowtten tagillynge of oper thynges' (here Longleat House MS 29 has *taryynge*).<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere, describing the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, Rolle speaks of

---

<sup>1</sup> On the dates, see N. Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge, 1991), reviewed by S. S. Hussey in *Notes & Queries* ccxxxviii (1993), 80-1.

<sup>2</sup> N. R. Ker, *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries* (Oxford, 1969-92), iii. 491-2, and cf. *A Handlist of Manuscripts containing Middle English Prose in Oxford College Libraries*, ed. Sarah Ogilvie-Thomson (Cambridge, 1991), 107-8, reviewed by E. G. Stanley in *Notes & Queries*, ccxxxvii (1992), 388-9.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Yorkshire Writers*, ed. Carl Horstmann (London, 1895-6), 1. 46, 136, 196; *English Writings of Richard Rolle*, ed. Hope Emily Allen (Oxford, 1931), 57; *Richard Rolle, Prose and Verse*, ed. Sarah Ogilvie-Thomson, EETS 293 (Oxford, 1988), reviewed by Siegfried Wenzel in *Notes & Queries*, ccxxxv (1990), 73-4.

Counsel as 'doynge away of worldes rytches and of delytes and of al thynges pat man may be tagild with in thought or dede', where the reading of two manuscripts (London, British Library, MS Arundel 507 and the Thornton Manuscript) contrasts with that of Cambridge, University Library, MS Dd. v 64, which has *tacit*, with *cit* written over an erasure.<sup>1</sup>

*Tagild* and *tagillynge* are, then, amongst the many words used by Rolle which are rare or unknown in other writers.<sup>2</sup> *OED* links *tagle* with Scots *taigle* 'entangle, impede, hinder', earliest attested in 1635, and the various senses of *tangle* and *entangle* (quoted from the early sixteenth century onwards). To these instances can be added another from a fifteenth-century Scots poem, in the Bannatyne Manuscript (Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, MS Adv. 1.1.6) of c. 1568, beginning 'O wicket wemen, wilfull and variable', which declares women are 'Turnit fra trewth and taiclit with treichery'.<sup>3</sup>

Although Rolle's *tagle* almost certainly represents the ancestor form of English (*en*)*tangle* (and Scots *taigle*), its etymology has been a puzzle. *OED* comments, 'Probably of Scandinavian origin, and cognate with Swedish dialect (Bornholm) *taggla* 'to disarrange, bring into disorder'. Others are more cautious. Tolkien comments 'obscure'; Onions and the 1973 edition of *SOD*, 'of obscure origin'; Hoad, 'of uncertain origin'. Yet *tagle* is now again described, without citation of evidence, as 'probably of Scandinavian origin'.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the semantic difficulties in relating Rolle's *tagle* to the obscure Bornholm dialectism *taggla* 'to disarrange' make another approach possible. It is argued here that *tagle* (> Scots *taigle*) is not a Scandinavian loanword in English but a Celtic one, deriving from a Cumbric cognate of Welsh *tagu* 'to choke', *tagell* 'throat; snare'; Breton *taga* 'to choke'; Old Irish *\*tachtaid* 'he chokes, he strangles'.

---

<sup>1</sup> Horstmann, i. 197; *Fourteenth Century Verse & Prose*, ed. Kenneth Sisam (Oxford, 1921), 43; Allen, 84, 116.

<sup>2</sup> Horstmann, ii. xl n. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries*, ed. R. H. Robbins (Oxford, 1952), 225; *Medieval English Lyrics*, ed. Theodore Silverstein (London, 1971), 154.

<sup>4</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien's glossary to Sisam, s.v. *tagyld*; *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed. C. T. Onions (Oxford, 1966), 902; *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1973), 2242; *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed. T. F. Hoad (Oxford, 1986), 482; *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Lesley Brown (Oxford, 1993), 3216.

These cognate forms are widely represented in Celtic. In Irish our evidence ranges from a ninth-century gloss in a copy of Priscian in Switzerland (*nom thachtar* gl. *angor* ‘strangling’ in St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, MS 904) to the present, where *stáisiún craolachain a thachtadh* is ‘to Jam a radio station’.<sup>1</sup> Middle Welsh *tagell* is proved to derive from a British original by the Comish place-name element *\*tagell* ‘constriction, narrow neck’: hence it is likely the form also existed in Cumbric.

The history of the Brittonic forms is as follows. The sense ‘choke, strangle’ is shown as original by the cognate verbs in Welsh, Breton, and Irish. The stem of *tagell* is characteristic of words for tools, such as Middle Welsh *gwäell* ‘skewer’, *tröell* ‘whorl’, *ysgubell* ‘broom’, as well as for the female of species (*hwysfell* ‘salmon’, *iyrchell*, ‘roe-deer’); personal names (*Gwynnell*, *Mechell*); and river-names (*Crafnell*, *Llynell*). The same Celtic stem features in Gaulish *Mosella*, the river Moselle.<sup>2</sup>

A standard Welsh dictionary defines *tagell* as ‘gill (of fish), throat, double chin; snare’.<sup>3</sup> But ‘double chin’ is an error. It is a misunderstanding of *tagell hir* in a poem by Iolo Goch (fl. 1345-1400) on a beautiful girl. Unexplained in the first critical edition of Iolo’s work, *tagell* was glossed ‘double chin’ (!) in the second. Johnston alters this to ‘lower part of the Jaw or chin (gtn)’, but this still wrong.<sup>4</sup> The correct translation of *tagell hir* is ‘a long neck’. A short neck was not admired at this date. Muscatine notes that poets admired ‘a rather tall heroine, with smooth, white neck’; the Lancashire lass of ‘Mosti ryden by Rybbesdale’ in the Harley lyrics had ‘Swannes swyre swype wel ysette / A sponne lengore pen y mette’, a swan’s neck a span

---

<sup>1</sup> *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla*, ed. Giall Ó Dónaill (Baile Atha Cliath, 1977), 1190; Joseph Vendryes, *Lexique étymologique de l’irlandais ancien: Lettres T-U* (Paris, 1978), T 4-5.

<sup>2</sup> John Morris-Jones, *A Welsh Grammar* (Oxford, 1913), 233; R. J. Thomas, *Enwau Afonydd a Nentydd Cymru* (Caerdydd, 1938), 92; *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (Caerdydd, 1950-), 1209.

<sup>3</sup> *Y Geiriadur Mawr*, ed. H. M. Evans & W. O. Thomas, 5th edn (Llandysul, 1971), 403.

<sup>4</sup> *Cywyddwau Iolo Goch ac Eraill*, ed. Henry Lewis *et al.*, 1st edn (Bangor, 1925), 3; 2nd edn (Caerdydd, 1937), 423; *Gwaith Iolo Goch*, ed. D. R. Johnston (Caerdydd, 1988), 323.

longer than the poet had seen before; the damsel Oiseuse in the *Roman de la Rose* had a neck *assés gros et lons par raison* (line 540).<sup>1</sup>

In Welsh, a nun described by Hywel ap Dafydd of Raglan (fl. 1450-80) had a *mwnwgl hir feinwyn* 'a long, fine, white neck'.<sup>2</sup> A passage on usury in a translation by Sion Conwy (d. 1606) of Leonard Wright's *A Summons for Sleepers* (London, 1589) makes the sense of *tagell* clear. It says those who borrow from need no more commit sin than a woman who is raped, or a seafarer Jettisoning cargo in a storm, or a traveller giving thieves his purse before they cut his throat (*torri i dagell*).<sup>3</sup>

Having clarified the semantic range of Welsh *tagell*, we can turn to the Cornish evidence. This consists of the place-name *Tintagel* 'fort of aconstriction', in north Cornwall. First attested as *Tlat.agol* in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* (c. 1137), the later pronunciation [dZ] is explained by Norman influence (the name being best known through French romances). The *tagell* 'constriction' here is the narrow neck of land joining this spectacular defensive site to the Cornish mainland.<sup>4</sup>

The verbal element \*tak- 'choke, strangle' was, then, well attested in Celtic; *tagell* 'neck, constriction' is known in early Welsh and Cornish; and the sense *tagell* 'snare' was also known at an early date (a full account here must await completion of *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*).<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley, 1957), 18; *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett and G. V. Smithers, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1968), 114; *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Daniel Poirion (Paris, 1974), 56.

<sup>2</sup> *Cywyddau Dafydd ap Gwilym a'i Gyfoeswyr*, ed. Ifor Williams and Thomas Roberts, 2nd edn (Caerdydd, 1935), 39; Dafydd ap Gwilym, *Fifty Poets*, tr. H. I. Bell and David Bell (London, 1942), 138; *Barddoniaeth yr Uchelwyr*, ed. D. J. Bowen (Caerdydd, 1957), 85; *The Oxford Book of Welsh Verse*, ed. Thomas Parry (Oxford, 1962), 105; A. G. Breeze, Hywel ap Dafydd o Raglan and *OBWV*, Rhif 59', *Llên Cymru*, xvii/1-2 (1992), 137-9, at 138.

<sup>3</sup> *Rhyddiaith Gymraez* (Caerdydd, 1954-6), ii, 136, and cf. *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography* (London, 1959), 1115.

<sup>4</sup> On site and name, see C. A. R. Radford, Cultural Relationships of the Celtic World, *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Celtic Studies* (Cardiff, 1966), 3-37, at fig. 6; E. G. Bowen, *Britain and the Western Seaways* (London, 1972), plate 36; K. R. Dark, The Plan and Interpretation of Tintagel. *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, ix (1985), 1-17, at 2, 6; O. J. Padel, *Cornish Place-Name Elements* (Nottingham, 1985), 214, and his *Cornish Place-Names* (Penzance, 1988), 163, 195.

<sup>5</sup> On Welsh snares, see *The Chirk Codex*, ed. J. G. Evans (Llanbedrog, 1909), 97; Robert Richards, *Cymru'r Oesau Canol* (Wrecsam, 1933), 147; *Llyfr Blegywryd*, ed.

Northern Middle English *tagle* ‘entangle’ would develop naturally as a borrowing of *\*tagell* from Cumbric, spoken perhaps as late as c. 1100; and Modern English *(en)tangle* could be seen, not as a loan from Scandinavian, but as from a previously unrecognized Celtic loanword in English.<sup>1</sup>

Andrew Breeze

University of Navarre, Pamplona

\* † \*

---

S. J. Williams and Enoch Powell (Caerdydd, 1942), 80; *The Taws of Hywel Dda*, tr. G. M. Richards (Liverpool, 1954), 82.

<sup>1</sup> On Cumbric, see K. H. Jackson, Angles and Britons in Northumbria and Cumbria, in *Angles and Britons* (Cardiff, 1963), 60-84.