


**Tolkien, J. R. R. 2024. “*Sir Gawain y el Caballero Verde*” junto con “*Perla*” y “*Sir Orfeo*” editado por Christopher Tolkien. Translated by Jorge Luis Bueno Alonso. Barcelona: Minotauro. Pp. 445. ISBN 9788445009802.**

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The book under review is the Spanish translation of the volume *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight with Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, the latter consisting of J. R. R. Tolkien’s modern English translations of those three great medieval English poems.<sup>1</sup> The English book was first published by George Allen & Unwin in 1975 and reissued with revisions and additional materials by Harper Collins in 2020. Until now, it was the only book from the classical Tolkien canon that remained untranslated into Spanish.


The Spanish translation replicates the contents of the original volume, which, in addition to a preface by Christopher Tolkien and an introduction drawn from notes and materials by Tolkien senior, comprises the following main components: *Sir Gawain y el Caballero Verde*, Conferencia sobre *Sir Gawain* en memoria de W. P. Ker, *Perla*, and *Sir Orfeo*. The volume concludes with a glossary of archaic and technical words, an appendix on the versification of *Sir Gawain* and *Perla*, and, finally, *La despedida de Gawain* (which is Tolkien’s modern English translation of four stanzas from a Middle English poem contained in the Vernon manuscript of Oxford).<sup>2</sup> The Spanish book is accompanied by a substantial series of 108 translator’s footnotes (obviously absent from the English version) that clarify details of the translation process and provide contextual information for a better understanding of the poems.

At first glance, the Spanish book stands out for its thickness compared to the English volume: 445 pages versus 255. This is due to one of its great assets: the Spanish versions of all the poems contained in the volume are presented with Tolkien’s modern English translation on the facing page. Readers can, therefore, compare the Spanish version with Tolkien’s text for themselves. A testament to the reliability of the Spanish translation is that it was undertaken by Professor Bueno Alonso, of the University of Vigo, a medievalist by profession with

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<sup>2</sup> For more on *Gawain’s Leave-taking*, see the excellent essay by Andoni Cossio (2024); regarding the lecture on *Sir Gawain* in honour of W. P. Ker, see Cossio and Fimi (2024).

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extensive experience in translating medieval and modern English texts into both Spanish and Galician, including, for example, the Spanish version of Tolkien's *The Battle of Maldon together with The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* (2023).

The translation philosophy followed by Bueno Alonso is presented in the fifth footnote (24), which concludes the introduction and leads into *Sir Gawain y el Caballero Verde*. There it is stated that the Spanish poems maintain the lexical register and syntactic complexity of Tolkien's translations and that, as in the latter, the poetic form of each text has been preserved in Spanish (adapted, naturally, to the target language): in *Sir Gawain*, alliterative verses and a final rhymed *ababa* structure (known as bob and wheel in English); in *Perla*, *ababababbcbc* rhyme with occasional alliteration; and rhyming couplets in *Sir Orfeo*. This characteristic makes the book a work of considerable value, as it contains, to this reviewer's knowledge, the first version in Spanish of the poems *Perla* and *Sir Orfeo*, and the first verse translation of *Sir Gawain*.<sup>3</sup> As an illustration, an extract from the canonical edition of the latter poem (Tolkien and Gordon 1967) is cited below, along with the modern English and Spanish versions contained in the reviewed book:

"I woled wyt at yow, wy3e," þat worpy þer sayde,	
"And yow wrathed not þerwyth, what were þe skylle	
þat so 3ong and so 3epe as 3e at þis tyme,	1510
So cortayse, so kny3tyly, as 3e ar knowen oute—	
And of alle cheualry to chose, þe chef þyng alosed	
Is þe lel layk of luf, þe lettrure of armes;	
For to telle of þis teuelyng of þis trwe kny3tez,	
Hit is þe tytelet token and tyxt of her werkke3,	1515
How ledes for her lele luf hor lyuez han auntered,	
Endured for her drury dulf stoundez,	
And after wenged with her walour and voyded her care,	
And bro3t blysse into boure with bountees hor awen—	
And 3e ar kny3t comlokest kynd of your elde,	1520
Your worde and your worchip walkez ayquere,	
And I haf seten by yourself here sere twyes,	
3et herde I neuer of your hed helde no wordez	
þat euer longed to luf, lasse ne more;	
And 3e, þat ar so cortays and coynt of your hetes,	1525
Oghe to a 3onke þynk 3ern to schewe	
And teche sum tokenez of trweluf craftes.	
Why! ar 3e lewed, þat alle þe los weldez?	
Oþer elles 3e demen me to dille your dalyaunce to herken?	
For schame!	1530
I com hider sengel, and sitte	
To lerne at yow sum game;	
Dos, techez me of your wytte,	

<sup>3</sup> The two existing translations (Rambla Fortes and Álvarez-Torrijos 2004, and Torres Oliver 2008) are in prose.

Whil my lorde is fro hame.” (Tolkien and Gordon 1967, 42–43)

Next, Tolkien’s poetic version in Modern English:

“I would learn from you, lord,” the lady then said,  
 “if you would not mind my asking, what is the meaning of this:  
 that one so young as are you in years, and so gay,  
 by renown so well known for knighthood and breeding,  
 while of all chivalry the choice, the chief thing to praise,  
 is the loyal practice of love: very lore of knighthood –  
 for, talking of the toils that these true knights suffer,  
 it is the title and contents and text of their works:  
 how lovers for their true love their lives have imperilled,  
 have endured for their dear one dolorous trials,  
 until avenged by their valour, their adversity passed,  
 they have brought bliss into her bower by their own brave virtues –  
 and you are the knight of most noble renown in our age,  
 and your fame and fair name afar is published,  
 and I have sat by your very self now for the second time,  
 yet your mouth has never made any remark I have heard  
 that ever belonged to love-making, lesser or greater.  
 Surely, you that are so accomplished and so courtly in your vows  
 should be prompt to expound to a young pupil  
 by signs and examples the science of lovers.  
 Why? Are you ignorant who all honour enjoy?  
 Or else you esteem me too stupid to understand your courtship?  
     But nay!  
 Here single I come and sit,  
 a pupil for your play;  
 come, teach me of your wit,  
 while my lord is far away.” (134, 136)

And here Bueno Alonso’s Spanish translation of Tolkien’s text:

“Me gustaría saber de vos, señor,” dijo después la dama,  
 “si no os importa que os lo pregunte, qué puede significar esto:  
 que alguien tan joven de edad como vos, y tan alegre,  
 tan bien conocido por ser caballero de buena crianza,  
 de tanta fama, y puesto que en la caballería la elección principal,  
 el punto más importante al que prestarle atención, es la práctica  
 leal del amor (corazón mismo de la caballería),  
 pues, puestos a hablar de las fatigas por las que pasan los fieles  
 caballeros, ésta del amor es la que le da auténtico contenido,  
 tema y título a todos los textos que tratan de sus tareas:  
 cómo los amantes ponen en peligro sus vidas por el amor verdadero,  
 cómo por la persona amada pasan por penosas pruebas,  
 para después, vengados por su valor y victoriosos ante la adversidad,  
 dotar de felicidad al dormitorio de su amante dándole sus dones  
 más preciados. Sois el más noble y afamado caballero

de nuestro tiempo, incluso en tierras lejanas vuestra fama  
 y buen nombre cosas son bien conocidas.  
 Por segunda vez me siento a vuestro lado, mas de vuestra boca  
 no escucho que salgan sentencias sobre  
 la práctica del amor, ni muchas ni pocas. A buen  
 seguro, ya que sois tan sincero y cumplidor de vuestras  
 promesas, bien podríais mostrarle a esta joven pupila  
 alguna señal significativa de las artes amorosas.  
 ¿Entonces? ¿nada sabéis, vos, que tanta honra tenéis?  
 ¿O me consideráis demasiado estúpida para comprender vuestro cortejo?  
 ¡De eso nada!  
 Aquí sola vengo a sentarme,  
 una pupila para vuestra jugada;  
 vuestras artes venid a enseñarme,  
 mi señor se halla lejos de esta morada.” (135, 137)

It is well-known that the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* used the syntax of the characters' direct speech as a characterization device (Spearing 1964). In the passage above, when the Lady of the Castle addresses Gawain directly during her second visit, a clear anacoluthon is observed (Tolkien and Gordon 1967, 115; Clark 1966, 360–70). In lines 1508–11, the speaker, frustrated by the young knight's resistance to her seductive attempts, begins a sequence of questions that would seem to culminate in an indirect but clear request: “why don't you sleep with me?”. In line 1511, however, the logical progression of the discourse is interrupted. The Lady, as if her voice were suddenly transformed into that of Andreas Capellanus, formulates a series of generalizations about chivalry and courtly love, and, at the end of this digression in line 1519, she does not resume the previously interrupted reasoning. The anacoluthon in her speech is key, as it subtly but powerfully reflects how her mind, not being completely honest, incurs a break in logic. This important rhetorical device is preserved in both Tolkien's modern English translation—with the untimely introduction of an adversative subordinate clause headed by *while*—and Bueno Alonso's Spanish translation, which also resorts to a subordinate clause (of a causal type, introduced by *puesto que*). Bueno Alonso's fidelity to Tolkien allows the contemporary Spanish-speaking reader to access the literary subtleties of the medieval English text, preserving in Spanish the effect of numerous stylistic devices used by the poet.

Special mention should be made of the poetic form used in both translations. Tolkien follows a versification system that reproduces that of the original work, making use of alliteration as a structural component.<sup>4</sup> This means that, in both

<sup>4</sup> This means that Tolkien, by adhering strictly to the metrical rules of medieval poetry, naturally sometimes deviates slightly from the content of the original. For a detailed explanation of the metrical rules summarized below, see the appendix of the reviewed book (429–41) and the famous essay by C. S. Lewis (1939). For a general description of the evolution of these rules from Old English poetry, see Pascual (2017).

the modern English text and the medieval poem, lines can be divided into two verses or half-lines, usually with two metrical stresses each, joined by alliteration of the stressed syllables. Root syllables of semantically relevant words, such as nouns, adjectives, or, occasionally, conjugated verbs or pronouns, are generally stressed. Furthermore, the last metrical stress of the line, as a rule, interrupts the alliteration. For example, in line 1509, the stressed syllables of *démen* (an infinitive) and *dílle* (an adjective), in the first verse, are linked by alliteration to *dályaunce* (a noun) at the beginning of the second verse. Alliteration on *d* is interrupted by the infinitive *hérken*, which carries the second metrical stress of the second half-line. The corresponding line in Tolkien's text follows the same metrical pattern: *esteem* and *stupid*, both in the first verse (and stressed respectively on the second and first syllables), are linked by alliteration on *st* with *understand* in the second verse (and stressed on the second syllable), while *courtship* interrupts the alliteration. For Tolkien, it is possible to replicate the medieval versification system based on structural alliteration, as English, in both its Modern and Middle periods, is a language with strong stress and accentual rhythm. The syllabic rhythm and less prominent stress variations in Spanish make a strict reproduction of this versification system highly challenging and inefficient. Bueno Alonso, however, has not abandoned this important formal feature of the work and has strived to produce verses that contain, at a minimum, two syllables joined by alliteration (in some cases, with remarkably successful results, such as in the line "tema y título a todos los textos que tratan de sus tareas," cited above). Thanks to this effort, Bueno Alonso's translation is the only one in Spanish that manages to convey part of the original poetic effect of the medieval work.

To give the reader an idea of how the other two great works included in the volume—*Perla* and *Sir Orfeo*—have been translated, the first stanza of the former and the first twelve lines of the latter are presented below. These passages are offered in three versions: the original Middle English text (according to the canonical editions: Gordon 1953 and Bliss 1954), its modern English translation, and its Spanish version, as they appear in the reviewed volume (286–87, 382–83).<sup>5</sup>

Perle, plesaunte to prynces paye  
 To clanly clos in golde so clere,  
 Oute of oryent, I hardyly saye,  
 Ne proued I neuer her precios pere.  
 So rounde, so reken in vche araye,  
 So smal, so smoþe her syde3 were,  
 Quere-so-euer I jugged gemme3 gaye,

5

<sup>5</sup> Of the three versions available in the first edition of Bliss (1954), the one from the Auchinleck manuscript, the earliest and most reliable, is cited here. To learn more about Tolkien's opinions on this text, see Tolkien and Hostetter (2004).

I sette hyr sengeley in synglere.  
 Allas! I leste hyr in on erbere;  
 Þurȝ gresse to grounde hit fro me yot. 10  
 I dewyne, fordolked of luf-daungere  
 Of þat pryuy perle wythouten spot. (Gordon 1953, 1)

Here follows Tolkien's translation:

Pearl of delight that a prince doth please  
 To grace in gold enclosed so clear,  
 I vow that from over orient seas  
 Never proved I any in price her peer.  
 So round, so radiant ranged by these,  
 So fine, so smooth did her sides appear  
 That ever in judging gems that please  
 Her only alone I deemed as dear.  
 Alas! I lost her in garden near:  
 Through grass to the ground from me it shot;  
 I pine now oppressed by love-wound drear  
 For that pearl, mine own, without a spot. (286)

And next, Bueno Alonso's translation:

Perla de deleite que al príncipe complace,  
 adorno perfecto en puro oro engastado,  
 juro que ni allende el mar donde el sol nace  
 una igual en valor jamás he hallado.  
 Tan redonda, tan radiante, tan fina parece,  
 tanta suavidad se percibe en su costado  
 que al dar a gentiles gemas el juicio que merecen  
 sólo a ella la consideré como algopreciado.  
 ¡Ay! La perdí en un jardín nada apartado:  
 entre la hierba por el suelo de mí se alejó.  
 Por la horrible herida del amor me siento angustiado  
 por esa perla, mía, que ni una mancha mostró. (287)

Now the initial twelve lines of *Sir Orfeo* in Middle English:

We redeþ oft & findeþ [y-write,]  
 & þis clerkes wele it wite,  
 Layes þat ben in harping  
 Ben y-founde of ferli þing:  
 Sum beþe of wer & sum of wo, 5  
 & sum of ioie & mirþe al-so,  
 & sum of trecherie & of gile,  
 Of old auentours þat fel while,  
 & sum of bourdes & ribaudy,  
 & mani þer beþ of fairy; 10  
 Of al þinges þat men seþ  
 Mest o loue, for-soþe, þai beþ. (Bliss 1954, 2–3)

In Modern English:

We often read and written find,  
as learned men do us remind,  
that lays that now the harpers sing  
are wrought of many a marvellous thing.  
Some are of weal, and some of woe,  
and some do joy and gladness know;  
in some are guile and treachery told,  
in some the deeds that chanced of old;  
some are of jests and ribaldry,  
and some are tales of Faërie. (382)

And in Spanish:

A menudo leemos y encontramos por escrito,  
como nos recuerdan los sabios eruditos,  
que las canciones que ahora cantan los arpistas  
están hechas de grandes cosas muy bien vistas.  
Algunas del bien hablan, y otras de mal,  
y en otras hay alegría y gozo sin igual;  
algunas tratan de la traición y del engaño,  
en algunas se cuentan las hazañas de antaño;  
algunas son de bromas y groserías  
y otros son cuentos de Fantasía. (383)

As can be observed, like Tolkien, Bueno Alonso succeeds in reproducing the original's rhyme scheme in *Perla*, also incorporating occasional alliteration. In the first two lines, for example, the words *Perla*, *príncipe*, *complace*, *perfecto*, and *puro* form an alliterative chain that associates the pearl with the ideas of nobility and innocence from the beginning of the poem. In this particular case, it can even be said that the Spanish version surpasses both the original and Tolkien's translation: in the original there are four alliterating words (*Perle*, *plesaunte*, *prynces*, *paye*) and in Tolkien three (*Pearl*, *prince*, *please*), while in Bueno Alonso's version there are five. It should also be noted that the translator has endeavoured systematically to employ consonantal rhyme, with occasional use of assonance. In the passage from *Sir Orfeo* cited above, for instance, assonance is observed between *escrito* and *eruditos*, a device that appropriately recalls the compositions of the *mester de juglaría*.

In conclusion, Bueno Alonso's translation is a carefully executed work, with notable literary value and undeniable pedagogical utility. The reviewed volume can be used with great benefit in English Philology courses, both in Spain and in other Spanish-speaking countries. Unlike the original modern English book—whose archaic tone can make it difficult for many Spanish-speaking students to

access—this edition presents the modern English and Spanish translations on facing pages, which significantly facilitates the reading and understanding of these important medieval poems, while also contributing to English language learning. The publication of this volume also represents an excellent opportunity for English medievalists in Spain to leverage the renewed interest in Tolkien's figure and work as a means of introducing new readers to the jewels of medieval English literature.

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