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John Seland
Nanzan University, Japan

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INKLINGS FOREVER, Volume III

A Collection of Essays Presented at the Second
FRANCES WHITE COLLOQUIUM on C.S. LEWIS & FRIENDS

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Sir Gawain and Bilbo: Interrelationships

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Sir Gawain and Bilbo: Interrelationships

John Seland

As is well known, in 1925, Tolkien, along with E. V. Gordon, edited a version of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. [1] Considering the fact that Tolkien was extremely well acquainted with *Sir Gawain*, one wonders if there might be some connections between the medieval poem and his novel, *The Hobbit*, published in 1937. In this essay, I would like to show that in several important ways *The Hobbit* does bear a close relationship to *Sir Gawain*, and most likely was influenced by Tolkien's study of the earlier work. The two works show points of similarity in their structure, their genre, the way the heroes are characterized, and their religious concerns. Let us examine these points in greater detail, beginning with a close look at Sir Gawain.

The plot of *Sir Gawain* is rather simple. On Christmas Eve many knights and fair ladies gather in King Arthur's banquet hall in order to celebrate the holidays. Suddenly a strange man, a giant all dressed in green, enters the room, and issues a challenge. If a knight would dare strike and cut off his head, then one year later, on New Year's morning, he must receive the same kind of stroke at the green giant's castle in a distant land. Gawain decides to accept the challenge. However, when he strikes at the visitor's neck, surprisingly, the man then picks up his head, gets on his horse, and rides from the hall, shouting back to Gawain to remember his promise.

The following autumn Gawain begins his quest. Passing through wild lands in the north full of dragons, giants, fierce animals and evil men, he arrives in Wirral, a wild, uncivilized region. Eventually, on Christmas Eve, he sees a great castle. He

enters it and is made welcome. The master of the castle suggests that Gawain rest there for three days, since the place of the Green Knight is not too far away. Also, a bargain is made: each day the host and Gawain will exchange whatever each receives during the day.

On the first day, while the host is hunting, his wife goes to Gawain's bedchamber, surprising him by speaking words of love. But Gawain resists, just as he does when she asks him to accept a gift. All he will accept is a kiss. That evening, when the host offers Gawain some of the deer that he has killed, Gawain in turn offers him a kiss. On the second day, the wife comes again, this time tempting Gawain even more severely. Gawain again resists, and again the lady kisses him, this time twice. In the evening, the host shares some of the bounty, the meat of a boar. The same pattern continues on the third day; however, this time, although Gawain remains chaste, he accepts a girdle from the lady, since she claims it is magical and can defend him from all harm. In addition, she kisses him three times.

That night, when they are at supper, the host shares the day's catch with Gawain, the meat of a fox. As before, Gawain kisses him, however, he says nothing about the girdle. On New Year's morning, Gawain rides to the Green Chapel and meets the Green Knight. However, when the Knight brings his ax down, Gawain moves a little to the side, with the result that the weapon doesn't touch his neck. On the second attempt it is the Knight who avoids cutting Gawain's neck. The blade does descend the third time, but only to skim Gawain's neck. At that Gawain readies himself to fight, but

the Knight merely laughs. Then he tells Gawain everything.

He is the lord of the castle. Gawain escaped the first two blows, because for two days he was faithful to his promise. But because he failed to reveal the girdle—and here he is guilty of cheating (Burton Raffel 25)—he received a slight cut on his neck. The whole escapade, says the Knight, was an agreement with Morgan le Fay. She and the Knight wanted to test the mettle of Arthur's court, renowned for its courage and bravery. [2]

Gawain resisted the Knight's wife's temptations; his only fault was to keep the girdle, for which the host forgives him. Gawain did it in order to save his life, a factor meriting mitigation.

Once back in Camelot, Gawain reveals his story and his shame. ("To be the victim of a trick is perhaps the worst blow Gawain has to endure, because it deprives him of self esteem," A. C. Spearing 104). However, to show their love for him, everyone decides to wear silk girdles. It becomes a traditional part of their costume as Knights of the Round Table. [3]

When ones turns to *The Hobbit*, one finds certain striking similarities to *Sir Gawain*. The first concerns the structure of each work. At the very beginning of the poem (Fit I), we are given a kind of prologue that briefly traces the founding of Britain, from Brutus back to the fall of Troy. King Arthur is then listed as one of most valiant kings to rule the country. The author then proposes to relate "a wondrous adventure that fell out of his time." One cannot help but imagine that the story to follow will enumerate something relating to the fall of Troy. Indeed, it may even be that King Arthur's court, or someone in his court, will somehow be involved in a sort of "fall." Indeed, the next movement of the

poem points in that direction. The giant's challenge to the Arthur and his knights allows the author to suggest that the court is not all that it is credited to be. In what seems a deficiency in courage, a virtue of which a good knight should be renowned, no one, for instance, accepts the giant's challenge, so that it is with a certain embarrassment that Arthur himself does. It is also apparent that the knights and ladies at court are enjoying themselves rather festively, although a better way to prepare for Christmas would be a subdued mood of prayer and meditation. Gawain's rather excessively modest way of persuading Arthur to let him accept the challenge also causes us to wonder whether he will be strong enough in one year's time to fulfill the challenge given by the green giant.

Afterwards, when Gawain sets out on his quest, we enter more fully into the main action (Fits II, III, and IV). But even here, there is development. Gawain must first battle all kinds of monsters, but even worse, he must contend with the freezing winter weather. Following this, he is warmly welcomed at the castle. Then comes the lady's three temptations, balanced by the three hunts of the host. After resting sufficiently, Gawain travels to the Green Giant's cave, where he tries to fulfill the covenant. At this point, after giving Gawain a slight wound, the Giant reveals his identity as well as the purpose for the testing. Having learned this, Gawain returns home. However, here the author appends a kind of corollary to the main story, showing the reactions of the court to Gawain's ordeal. This section also serves to put Gawain's deeds into a more comic perspective: he takes his humiliation very seriously, while the court sees his behavior as worthy of remembrance. In effect, the author balances the seriousness of the action and the hero's mood with one that is more comic,

the point being that although chivalry and Christianity are not in harmony, this is simply "a condition of life in an imperfect world" (Howard 56). "The poem is thus both a tragic romance with the sad moral that perfection is beyond our grasp and an unromantic comedy with the happy point that if a man aims high enough he can come as near perfection as this world allows" (Benson 30).

These two sections of the poem, then, the scene depicting life at Arthur's court, and the return journey, act as a kind of frame, enclosing the main action of the story, the temptation scenes and the meeting with the giant before his cave.

Bilbo's adventures in *The Hobbit* follow a similar pattern of "separation, initiation, and return" (Matthews 32). The sudden appearance of Gandalf and the dwarves serves as an introduction to the main action; they give a motive for the journey to Lonely Mountain: to retake the gems stolen by the dragon Smaug many years previously. (Even the title of chapter one, "An Unexpected Party," seems a reflection of the beginning of *Sir Gawain*, when the giant surprises everyone by his sudden appearance.) The unexpected appearance of Gandalf and his subsequent challenge—to go on the adventure in order to retake the stolen jewels—also afford the reader an opportunity to gain insights into Bilbo's character: his excessive love of comfort, his immaturity, and his timidity—all elements pointing to the fact that he is suffering from depression (William Green). We also come to realize that buried underneath all this lies the "Took" side of his personality that he inherited from his mother: a wish to wear a sword, and to go on adventures, to challenge himself and lead a more daring life.

The next sections of the novel, from Chapters II to XVII, give the main action of the story. They also bear a resemblance to

Sir Gawain. In the poem the temptations of the lady grow ever stronger, as she offers herself to Gawain, each time in a more persuasive way. (The severity of the temptations are symbolized by the host's difficulty in hunting: the deer is relatively easy to hunt, less so is the boar; and hardest of all is the cunning fox.) Like Gawain, Bilbo must confront many adversaries, each one incrementally more dangerous than preceding ones. Having overcome the relatively foolish trolls (who allow themselves to be turned into stone by exposing themselves to sunlight), Bilbo must then contend with the more violent goblins. His next adversary, the degenerate but intelligent hobbit, Gollum, is even more dangerous. However, Bilbo manages to escape from Gollum, thanks to his wit and to the good fortune of having found Gollum's magic ring. Following this—and having rejoined the dwarves—he must then contend with Wargs (evil wolves), then spiders, then Wood-elves. However, his greatest tests occur from this point on.

The first is with the dragon Smaug. Bilbo acts with great physical courage when he descends alone into the dragon's tunnel, knowing full well that Smaug is there. His moral virtue is again seen when, rather than stealing a great amount of treasure, he settles for the Arkenstone. Shortly afterwards, realizing that Thorin intends to fight in order to hoard the entire treasure, he bravely goes to Bard and gives him the gem, hoping it can be used as a bargaining tool. After a final battle between the evil and good forces, all ends happily when the good triumphs.

At this point, similar to *Sir Gawain*, Tolkien adds a final section to the novel. Bilbo is not received as warmly as Gawain was at his return, indeed, he finds that "dragon sickness," greed, has affected some of his own townsmen, who, presuming he

has died, are busy auctioning off his property. However, this section allows Tolkien to show further how greed corrupts. Also, as in *Sir Gawain*, it serves to round out Bilbo's adventures, thus fulfilling the novel's subtitle, "There and Back Again." Here, too, thematically, it resembles *Sir Gawain*. The comic stance taken by the Green Giant, who persuades Gawain not to take his humiliation too seriously, finds a parallel in the court's decision to honor Gawain, a decision which, once again, gives his adventure a more comic tone. The growth in Bilbo's character, and Gandalf's approval of him likewise gives the story a decidedly lighter tone, which serves to compensate for the loss of Thorin's life.

Along with similarities of structure, one finds in both works a great deal of balance in symbolism, themes, and significant actions, a stylistic honing that shows considerable skill. The prevalence of "twos" and "threes" in the poem are especially noteworthy. "Things are arranged in pairs—there are two New Year's days, two 'beheading' scenes, two courts, and two confessions." [There is also] the juxtaposition of the two symbols, the shield and the girdle" (Howard 44). The two themes—the temptation of Gawain and the beheading Challenge—also fit this pattern. We also see how Death, represented by the Green Giant as well as winter, contrasts with Life, symbolized by the coming of Spring and Gawain's new lease on life. In other places in the poem things are arranged in a pattern of threes. Thus there are three temptations, three hunts, three kisses, and three strokes of the ax.

The same kind of stylistic and thematic balancing is found throughout *The Hobbit*. Gollum, we come to see, is the alter-ego of Bilbo (Nitzsche 36), an example of what Bilbo could become were he to give in to his selfish impulses. [4]

Gollum, writes the critic Jane Nitzsche, represents inordinate "love of self (sui amoris) specifically directed toward lower or bodily functions," just as Smaug is directed to more "spiritual" evil, such as pride, envy, anger and covetousness (Nitzsche 36). There are many other such parallels. Smaug, for instance, is "a vast incarnation of the infantile state that Bilbo has been outgrowing throughout the story" (Green 43). His dungeon is a mirror of Bilbo's comfortable underground home in the Shire, that is filled with all sorts of carpets and paneled walls and pantries ("lots of these" 11), so that he can live as comfortably as possible. Many other caves are mentioned in the course of the story. Each one is like a womb that Bilbo must pass through to be reborn. He needs to go within, to face what lies within his unconscious self and come to terms with it in order to come to new life.

Another focal point the two works share is a similarity of genre: both are romances, more specifically, romances based on a mixture of folklore and fairy tale, two literary forms replete with the magical. Thus Morgan le Fay, in an effort to give the court a few pointers on the virtue of humility, arranges the headcutting scene in the early stages of the story. So, too, the magic girdle Gawain wears "has powers of its own . . . magical properties to save the wearer from being slain" (Howard 48). The magic ring in *The Hobbit* functions in much the same way, allowing Bilbo to escape several dangerous situations. The emphasis on the importance of following advice or, in negative terms, not to do what is prohibited—a staple idea in many fairy tales—is also given much attention in *The Hobbit*. [5] Because the dwarves forget Beorn's advice and stray from the path, they are captured by the Wood-elves. Also, the wild creatures Gawain must deal with as he searches for

the Green Knight find a counterpart in those whom Bilbo encounters. The creatures in the poem serve both as a kind of preliminary test of Gawain's courage and a sign of greater trials to come. In Bilbo's case, too, such creatures as spiders and goblins and Wood-elves act as preliminary tests to later, more severe tests by greater foes.

We also find in each work realistic elements. In *Sir Gawain*, this can be seen in the author's inclusion of place names, such as Wales, Anglesey, Holy Head, the River Dee, and Wirral Forest (698-701). In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien includes real people, like Bard, the Master of Dale, and the men of the lake-town. Also, because Tolkien is more interested than the Gawain poet in the theme of maturation, he uses creatures like goblins and spiders in a number of ways. They represent difficult experiences by which Bilbo's prowess and courage are tested. They also symbolize the dangers prevalent in society itself. Great care, as well as a good measure of self-awareness are necessary to cope with the world. On a psychological level, the creatures can also be seen as "externalizations of psychic phenomena" (Matthews 32), that is, hidden aspects of Bilbo's own psyche. The trolls, for instance, symbolize "unrestrained libido . . . the power, the numinous potency, of the complexes that reside in Bilbo's Unconscious" (O'Neill 58-9) and which he must overcome if he is to attain individuation. This, too, gives the novel a basis of reality. In any event, the combination of romance and realism in each work serves as a way by which the respective authors are able to weave in their favorite themes, such as the nature of heroism, the true virtues of the good Christian knight (particularly the need for "a humble and a contrite heart" (E. Talbot Donaldson 99), and the need for maturity.

A further element both works share

is the way the characters are portrayed. Gawain and Bilbo are both untested at the beginning, just as both experience severe trials that serve to clarify for the reader their inherent virtue. Here, however, the similarity ends. Gawain's tests serve to show both his own individual worth as well as that of the court. Bilbo's, however, are more for his own personal growth, rather than that of his hobbit community. We also see that, although Gawain does experience individual growth after completing his quest—at least he grows in self-awareness—it is not to the extent that Bilbo grows. Furthermore, Gawain's awareness comes, as it were, in a rush. The sudden revelation by the Green Knight of the whole plot and why it took place comes to Gawain like a shock. Bilbo's maturation is a much more carefully constructed, deliberately protracted affair. Step by step he advances, "always gaining in confidence, competence, and character—all qualities that lead to self-sufficiency" (Green 89). It is as if Tolkien wrote the book with this specifically in mind, as if he intended the story to clarify the process of growing to maturity. We are also aware that Gawain was not completely successful during the quest. He compromised, using "worldly means in the wrong way" (Howard 49), and depending on a magic girdle rather than on God's grace to save his life. Thus he "falls short of the ideal" (Marie Borroff 66). Bilbo, on the other hand, albeit with a great amount of help from Gandalf, is successful. Unlike Gawain, he resists the temptation to use worldly things, such as the ring and the treasure, in the wrong way.

A further point of clarification concerns the outcome of their respective trials. E. Talbot Donaldson writes about this. "Gawain's courtesy," he says, "fails him . . . in the sense that it involves him in a profoundly embarrassing and dangerous situa-

tion with the lady: it results in trouble instead of the serenity that courtesy, as the diplomat's virtue, is supposed to procure. Then the second of his great virtues, his martial prowess, is denied him by the promise he has made not to defend himself against the Green Knight's return stroke" (99). In Bilbo's case, except for his mistakes in dealing with the trolls in the early part of the story, there is no question of failure; he is consistently successful. He learns from each experience, just as he learns from the example of Gandalf. Though he is disappointed in the greed shown by so many, he is hardly shocked in the way Gawain is by a sudden revelation of the truth.

A further distinction can be made in the nature of the trials and the success with which each hero faces them. Gawain fulfills his promise to meet the Green Knight at the appointed time. However, his failure to reveal the girdle is a matter of rather serious import, especially since the good knight must be a man of courtesy. In not telling his host about the girdle, Gawain is being discourteous.

Bilbo's courage is also tested. But, unlike Gawain, in each case he passes the test as he learns how to act with both physical and moral courage. He is clumsy and a bit foolish when he tries to pickpocket a troll, with the result that Gandalf must come to the rescue. Later, when Gollum stands before the opening of the cave, Bilbo is tempted to kill him. However, he doesn't, feeling that being invisible and having a sword gives him an unfair advantage. Once again, he shows great moral strength. Not long after this, Gandalf departs, knowing that Bilbo has become capable of leading the dwarves. The trust invested in him proves true when, several times afterwards Bilbo resists the temptation to escape to safety by himself. Instead, he bravely faces

his enemies one by one. Thus, rather than running for safety, Bilbo fights and kills many of the spiders, again saving the dwarves' lives. When they are imprisoned by the Wood-elves, he devises a way to free them, putting them in barrels so they can escape the dungeon. He also passes a major test when, knowing the dragon is inside, he still decides to go there. "Going on from there," the narrator tells us, "was the bravest thing he ever did" (184). After this, Bilbo still faces other temptations, but because of his moral maturity, he overcomes them. Rather than hoard the treasure he finds in the tunnel, for example, he shares it. And rather than keep the Arkenstone for himself, he generously gives it to Bard, the heroic man of Dale.

He also overcomes the temptation to hoard a large part of the treasure for himself. And, in what may actually be the greatest success of all, he refuses to be puffed up by his successes. When Gandalf teases him after their adventures have finished, "You are a very fine person, Mr. Baggins, and I am very fond of you; but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!" he replies, laughing, "Thank goodness!" (255). With that they both enjoy a good smoke.

A final point concerns the religious concerns of both writers. *Sir Gawain* is "basically a Christian poem," writes Burton Raffel. "The description of the pentangle star on Gawain's shield (619ff) shows a passionate Christianity and . . . the whole testing tale which underlies the plot of the poem has a deeply Christian framework" (28). Also, religion is dealt with quite openly. Gawain prays to Mary, he signs himself with the sign of the cross, and he calls on Christ to help him. The theme of life-in-death is also present. "Gawain has almost lost his life, by seeking to keep it, and has found his life, by being willing to

lose it" (Denton Fox 12).

Tolkien's novel is also religious, but the religious elements are subtle and hidden, since, as with *The Lord of the Rings*, he did not want the book to be seen as an allegory. An overt mention of Christian themes, he felt, would detract from the mythological-fantasy aspects of the book. Nevertheless, religion plays an important part in the story. Evil finds personification in the wild creatures, in Gollum, the dwarves, and the greedy men of Esgaroth. So, too, as in *Sir Gawain*, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the theme of finding life by sacrificing it for others. Indeed, in doing this, Bilbo becomes a kind of Christ-figure. Like Christ, he is a "burglar," stealing souls from the evil that threatens them.

Considering the fact that the two works give evidence of much different cultural and social values, and realizing that the purpose of the author of each work was unique, one hesitates to say with conviction that there is a direct relationship between them. Nevertheless, as we have seen, there do share many points in common. Beyond this, one wonders: Is it not possible that Tolkien was especially moved by the example of Gawain? Could it not be that Gawain's character and manners left a deep impression, one that he kept in mind when delineating the character of Bilbo? For, as we can see, Gawain was not such an ideal knight after all. He was fallible; indeed, when put to the severest test, he fell. Despite the great fuss made over his membership in the Round Table, and despite all the outward trappings of armor, and all the boasting of Arthur and the court, Gawain was simply human. At heart, he was more or less a man just like ourselves: anxious to prove his mettle, but in fact, very frightened before an unknown giant; tempted by a woman offering her love but, when he learns of the plot, angry at her for trying to trick him—

and yet not above using a trick himself in order to save his life . . . perhaps it was all this that impressed Tolkien the most. In *The Hobbit*, Bilbo fares much better, once he overcomes his fears. But, as he himself knows so well, much of his success comes because of the help of Gandalf, or through luck (read: God's grace). That is why it is so satisfying to see him agreeing so readily with Gandalf's statement, "You are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!" When we think of it, so, too, was Gawain: just a little fellow in a wide world. Bilbo and Gawain: they have a lot in common.

Notes

1. A second edition appeared in 1967, revised and edited by Norman Davis (Oxford UP), in a volume that incorporates much of the recent scholarship on the poem, and "will presumably be accepted as the standard edition" (Denton Fox 115).
2. The witch also wanted to frighten Guenevere out of her wits (because of an ancient jealousy between the queen and Morgana) (Raffel 27).
3. Larry D. Benson comments: "This final scene is only an extension of the recurrent alternation of romance and unromantic elements that repeatedly undercuts the high seriousness of the narrative . . . The Green Knight . . . has an attitude of his own, unromantic rather than anti-romantic in its refusal to take romance seriously" (242).
4. Nietzsche (*Tolkien's Art: "A Mythology for England,"* New York: St. Martin's, 1979) offers a very helpful Jungian interpretation of *The Hobbit*, al-

though she sees the novel as a more Christian work than Tolkien intended. Other helpful sources elucidating Jung's influence on Tolkien include: *A Tolkien Compass*, a book of essays edited by Jared Lobdell (La Salle: Open Court, 1975); Timothy R. O'Neill, *The Individuated Hobbit: Jung, Tolkien and the Archetypes of Middle-Earth* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979); and William H. Green, *The Hobbit: A Journey into Maturity* (New York: Twayne, 1995).

5. A riddle contest, in which a prisoner gains his freedom by posing a problem which in its nature is insolvable is also a well-known motif in fairy tale literature. (Christopher Tolkien, *The Saga of King Heidrik the Wise* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1960), xx. Dorothy Matthews also points out that "Folk motifs form the very warp and woof in the texture of the tale [*The Hobbit*]" ("The Psychological Journey of Bilbo Baggins," in *A Tolkien Compass*, ed. Jared Lobdell (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1975), 28. William Green also remarks about the prevalence of "prohibition" in many fairy tales. (*The Hobbit: A Journey into Maturation*, New York: Twayne, 1995) 86. John Speirs has some good information about the Green Knight as bearing a relationship to "the Green Man—the Jack in the Green or the Wild Man of the village festivals of England and Europe ("Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Denton Fox, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 83.

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