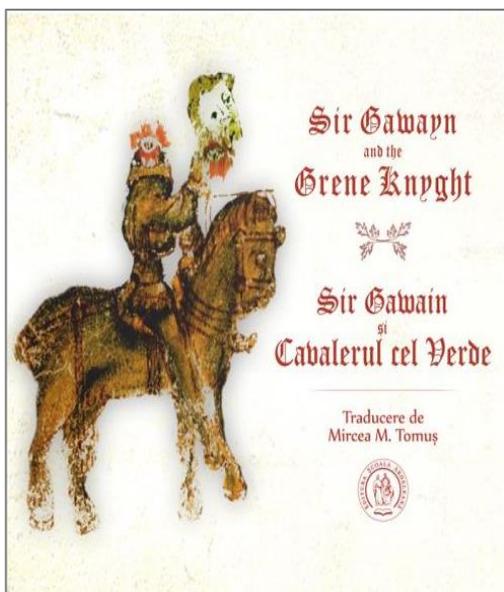


BOOKS

***Sir Gawain and the Greene Knyght / Sir Gawain și Cavalerul cel Verde.*
Preface, translation and notes by Mircea M. Tomuș. Cluj-Napoca:
Școala Ardeleană, 2021, 352 p.**

The medieval romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* instantly gained unreserved scholarly admiration when it was first published, in a Middle English version, in 1839. Its editor, Sir Frederic Madden, a palaeographer from the British Museum, had been fascinated by the story contained in the “stern, stylish letters, like crusading chess pieces” falling into “orderly ranks along faintly ruled lines” (Simon Armitage, Introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. A new verse translation*, translated by Simon Armitage, W. W. Norton & Company, 2007, p.10) of the now famous Cotton MS Nero A. x. manuscript and thought it worthwhile to make it available to the larger public. At that time, the anonymous manuscript had been patiently waiting in libraries for no less than five centuries. Composed towards the end of the fourteenth century, it was rather



loosely put on paper in the next century by a scribe who also added 12 miniatures of a somewhat rudimentary nature that mark the division of the text into four poems (apart from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, three other religious narratives in verse: *Pearl*, *Patience* and *Purity/Cleanness*).

When rendering *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* into Modern English, translators have had many difficulties and have often taken slight liberties, particularly when they also tried to reproduce the prosody of the original, seeing in the poet's own occasional technical irregularities a justification in this respect. Such ordeals increase exponentially when the translator assumes the ambitious task of resurrecting the voice of the medieval poet in languages as different from Middle English as Romanian.

In 2021, Mircea M. Tomuş, a distinguished professor at Kirkwood Community College from Iowa, published his Romanian translation of *Sir Gawain and the Grene Knyght* at the prestigious Şcoala Ardeleană Publishing House from Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The impressive graphical qualities of the book announce and sustain the exceptional quality of the translation itself, based as it is on the Middle English text and on Mary Boroff's exemplary Modern English version, generally acknowledged as one of the closest to the original. The previous Romanian prose version (*Sir Gawain și Cavalerul Verde*, translated by Dan P. Iliescu, Univer, 1982) cared nothing for the formal poetic aspects of the text, and reductively ignored its dialectal flavour for the sake of a rather literal transposition of the text in the target language. The new 2021 translation crafted by Mircea M. Tomuş manages to do what must have seemed impossible to others before – while ingeniously imitating the alliterative patterns of the original in a language that never knew this tradition, it also makes the poem appear to Romanian readers as it appeared to its medieval audiences: “conservative, yet courtly, wise and learned” (J.R.R. Tolkien, Introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, translated by J.R.R. Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975, p. 14).

In the well-balanced and informative preface he attaches to his translation, Tomuş modestly warns his Romanian readers that the alliterative style of the text might feel somewhat “artificial” (15) to them. Yet such readers can but feel amazed at the linguistic dexterity and creativity with which the translator arrives at a poetic discourse that brilliantly recreates the delightful peculiarities of his source. This is by no means the result

of chance or luck, as professor Tomuş has an outstanding experience in terms of literary creation and translation. Before he emigrated to the USA, where he now teaches rhetoric, poetics, medieval and modern literature, he assiduously published poetry, prose and literary criticism in important cultural journals from Romania. In America, he continued his work as a translator, having so far published English versions of some of the masterpieces of Romanian literature.

One of the challenges of translating *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* into Romanian comes from the fact that it is written in a dialect considerably different from Chaucer's, whose *Canterbury Tales* have found an impressive Romanian embodiment in Dan Duţescu's transposition from 1958. Thus, the task assumed by Mircea M. Tomuş was certainly rendered more difficult by the awareness that the Romanian language of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* should sound different not only from that of Leviţchi's version of *Beowulf* (with its alliterative patterns and rather archaic vocabulary), but also, and primarily, from the Romanian of Duţescu's translation.

Without too many Romanian language models from the corresponding period at his disposal (there are few, if at all, extant documents of this sort in Romania), Tomuş must have often found himself as tested/tempted as the hero in the story while trying to maintain the perfect equilibrium within his own pentagram of translation virtues. Unlike Gawain, though, the Romanian translator finishes his project in undeniable triumph. The vocabulary, grammar, syntax, prosody and style of his translation minutely reconstruct the poetic identity of this most beloved medieval story in a language and culture that are quite far-removed from it.

The alternation of familiarity and strangeness that characterizes the original is mirrored in the Romanian translator's inspired combinations of words easily recognizable to today's readers, be they formal or informal, and dialectal terms whose forms and meanings are no longer in use (e.g. "citav" [well-made], "pohfală" [pride], "contăș" [jacket], "dugliš" [lazy]). Some of these obsolete terms and phrases are explained in the glossary carefully provided at the end of the volume, while others may sound more or less slightly familiar to readers coming from various regions of Romania (e.g. "amu" [here], "beutură" [drink], "înfătoșare" [appearance], "becisnic" [weak], "slujeri" [retainers], "cânțuire" [song], "a găta" [to finish], "picere" [legs] etc.). On the whole, the translation seems to have a rather suitable Romanian northwestern sound most probably resulting from the translator's (justified) preference for the linguistic varieties of his own native Transylvanian area. At this point, we cannot help noticing the fateful parallelism between the *Gawain* poet's and the Romanian translator's geographical locations in their countries.

Such linguistic choices also play an important role in the recreation of the subtle streak of irony and humour that colour the unpredictable narrative of the hero's trials. The discursive strategies adopted by Mircea M. Tomuş fully enable the playful poetic voice from the source text to come through in all its playful ingenuity in the target language: „Gawain, grijește-acum // Să nu te prindă păcatul, // Că te-așteapt-un drac de drum // După cum ți-a fost datul!” (487-490). The temptation scenes from Bertilak's castle abound in manifestations of “the emotion which informs the conventional message – the humour, compassion, irony, dread, joy”

(John Gardner, Introduction and Commentary to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: in a modern English version*, translated by John Gardner, The University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 12). Despite his thorough knowledge of courtly language and gestures, the noble knight is revealed as only too human in the end. While tormented by inner struggles and hesitations, he is no less capable of fully enjoying the presence of the beautiful princess in chamber: „O vede așa de voioasă și de-arătoasă în mândru-i veșmânt // Cu fața-i frumoasă, fin colorată și trupul fermecător, // Că sufletu-i e podidit de plăcere și de desfătare. // Cu zâmbete-alese se încântă unul pe altul, tânjind, // Și nețărmurita lor încântare între ei năboiește // Cu bucurie. // Cu alint și leri-i ler, // Unul pe altul iubitori se îmbie. // Primejdie mare-l paște pe cavaler // Dacă nu l-o ocroti Sânta Mărie.” (1760-1769)

The quotations above illustrate, at the same time, the uncompromising formal quality of the translated text, whose metrical patterns, alliterations and rhymes artfully echo those of the Middle English original. The stringency principle, whose importance a scholar like Leon Levițchi never tired to emphasize, is thus scrupulously observed (the number of lines in the original perfectly equals the number of lines in the translation).

Such technical efforts, multiplied as they undoubtedly were by various semantic ambiguities, inevitably render the Romanian text somewhat less “formulaic” than the language whose fairy-tale “expectedness” (Marie Boroff, Introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. A new verse translation*, translated by Marie Boroff, W. W. Norton & Company, 1967, p. xii) seems to characterize the Middle English poem. This turns out to be an advantage for the Romanian translator.

Fully aware of how the story derives its fundamental meaning through an interpenetration of realism and fantasy, Mircea M. Tomuş attentively distributes a number of morphological and syntactical recurrences in the text that direct the reader's attention towards some of its most significant paradigms. We find one such key term in the first description of the Green Knight when he daringly enters King Arthur's dinner hall. The Romanian noun "vedenie", which is the word selected by the translator to render the Middle English "syȝt" [*sight*] introduces a certain ontological ambiguity that reverberates throughout the story. It makes an intriguing synthesis between the English meanings of the term (which designates perceptual objects that are part of the

real, however distressing or shocking) and the Romanian connotation of something coming from another order of existence. The subsequent chain of events and actions depends on this equivocation, assumed as such by the Arthurian knights. Their code of honour forbids them to question the intrusion of the miraculous into their courtly life and Gawain finds himself caught in the trap opening itself between reality and imagination. Thus, the story tantalizingly suggests that a courageous journey into the fictional is utterly essential for the revelation of the difficult truths of human condition.

We can only be grateful to Mircea M. Tomuş for having enabled the *Gawain* poet to charm us in a language he never dreamed he would speak so admirably.

Elena CIOBANU

*Associate Professor,
Vasile Alecsandri University
Bacău, Romania
Email: ciobanu.elena@ub.ro*