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**The Forest Haven Episode: How *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*’s Hautdesert Shaped *The Lord of the Rings*’ Caras Galadhon**

### **Abstract**

J. R. R. Tolkien’s long professional involvement with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c. 1400) was at its peak during the writing of *The Lord of the Rings* (composed between 1937-1949, revised until c. 1955 and published during 1954-1955). Taking the previous fact further, this interdisciplinary paper aims to employ the principles for a meticulous study of Tolkien’s sources (Fisher) in conjunction with ecocriticism (Buell, Cohen, Garrard, Morton, Nichols, Palti, Ralph, Reynolds, Rudd, Simonson, Twomey and Woods) to explore how *SGGK* influenced *LotR*. In particular, the journey through the wilderness and the sojourn in the haven of Sir Bertilak’s castle/Hautdesert inside a forest seem to have been borrowed by Tolkien to later incorporate them in the form of the stopover in Caras Galadhon, Lothlórien. The close reading of those passages reveals striking similitudes that cannot be explained unless *SGGK* is the main source. In both cases, due to the looming natural threats, the narrative justifies Gawain’s and the Fellowship’s wish to find a refuge, which is correspondingly provided by a walled and seemingly protective space. Despite the apparent safety, the protagonists cannot avoid the perilous moral test they will undergo. The most remarkable parallels are those between Gawain and Boromir of Gondor, both of whom fail the trial yet are later revered for

## How *SGGK*'s Hautdesert Shaped *LotR*'s Caras Galadhon

their insignificantly stained ethics. The critical lens of ecocriticism becomes key to unearth and analyze the borrowed material and to recover the relevant and central role of the forest in both episodes.

Keywords: J. R. R. Tolkien; *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; *The Lord of the Rings*; source study; ecocriticism; forests; medieval literature

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (hereinafter *SGGK*) is an anonymous 2530-line-long poem with an approximate date of composition around the year 1400. The story begins in the court of King Arthur on New Year's Day when Sir Gawain volunteers to take part in the mysterious Green Knight's exchange-of-blows game. Despite being decapitated by Gawain, the Green Knight survives, and Gawain is forced to promise he will readily endure the Green Knight's blow one year later at the Green Chapel, a place he will have to seek. The poem then narrates Gawain's journey across the Wilderness of Wirral and his stay in the midst of a forest at Sir Bertilak's castle/Hautdesert,<sup>1</sup> where he rests until his appointed rendezvous with the Green Knight. Meanwhile, Gawain's morality is put on trial by means of a game of exchange of gains devised by Bertilak, under Morgan le Fay's orders, executed with the help of Lady Bertilak's seductive stratagems. For three days Bertilak hunts restlessly all day, and at the end of each, he correspondingly offers a large number of deer (hinds and does), a boar and a fox to Gawain. Parallel to these game-hunting scenes, Gawain's gains are described suggestively. Lady Bertilak's six kisses are readily tendered to Bertilak by Gawain, yet the latter fails to surrender the third day's apparent magic girdle in the hope that it will protect his life. Later, after meeting the Green Knight, Gawain learns that he is none other than Bertilak under an enchantment. Bertilak congratulates Gawain for faithfully reporting all gains but the girdle, out of fear of

## How *SGGK*'s Hautdesert Shaped *LotR*'s Caras Galadhon

death, for which Gawain is punished with a small incision on the neck. The narrative ends with Gawain's return to the court of King Arthur and the shameful admission of his failure, though the ladies and knights of Camelot wholeheartedly admire his feat.

With this complex and compelling plot of medieval adventure and Christian morality, it is no wonder that J. R. R. Tolkien was precociously drawn to *SGGK*. More so if we consider that West-Midland M(iddle) E(nglish) was for Tolkien the language of his Suffield ancestors he felt close to his heart, especially in the form of alliterative literary productions such as *SGGK* (*Letters* 213, 218). The work was already among Tolkien's dearest in his school days (Scull and Hammond, *Chronology* 15), which even led to occasional recitations of certain passages for the delight of his friends (Carpenter 54). Tolkien began his academic career at the University of Leeds (1920-1925), where he may have lectured on *SGGK* when teaching courses on ME texts.<sup>2</sup> This is suggested by *SGGK* being part of the "Selected Text in Old and Middle English" in the Final Examination for English Language and Literature students (University of Leeds, *Calendar* 153), and by examination papers with questions like number nine of *Old & Middle English Texts A*: "Contrast Havelock and Sir Gawayn as romances" (University of Leeds, unpaginated). During that period, in *A Middle English Vocabulary* (1922, probably started after summer-autumn of 1919 [Scull and Hammond, *Chronology* 116]), Tolkien scrutinized each term from a passage of 360 lines concerning the testing of Gawain. When his time at Leeds was drawing to an end, Tolkien published a scholarly edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1925, began after February 1922 [127]) together with E. V. Gordon, this time carefully looking at every single word.<sup>3</sup> His academic contact with the work partly ceased for some years,<sup>4</sup> but from 1945-1959, he lectured on it almost continuously as the Merton Professor of English Language and Literature.<sup>5</sup> In 1953, he delivered an enlightening lecture on *SGGK* in honor of W. P. Ker, which summarizes Tolkien's understanding of the poem's

## How *SGGK*'s Hautdesert Shaped *LotR*'s Caras Galadhon

cruces regarding Gawain's temptation and morality. That same year, he also completed a meticulous translation of the poem (*Chronology* 423) started sometime around 1922-1925 (Scull and Hammond, *Reader's Guide, Part I* 69; *Reader's Guide, Part II* 1197), and posthumously published by Christopher Tolkien in 1975.<sup>6</sup>

This brief chronology makes evident how worthy of philological and literary attention Tolkien believed *SGGK* to be.<sup>7</sup> It also highlights Tolkien's thorough knowledge of the ME work, which satisfies Jason Fisher's first condition for proper source hunting in Tolkien's fiction (37). One of Tolkien's firmest beliefs was that a writer's new contribution to the world was the result of reshaping past models, at most according to one's own style, from an older corpus of works (Sotheby's 297). However, Tolkien, who considered literary source detection unimportant and the final story derived from the different materials more relevant ("Fairy" 39-40), purposefully cloaked the adapted sources in his tales.

Thus, following Fisher's call for a deeper analysis (37-39), more arduous work is now needed to explain how the original material in *SGGK* was reworked and blended with Tolkien's new creation. The time frame during which Tolkien intensively worked on *SGGK* strongly suggests that the ME poem influenced his writing of *The Lord of the Rings* (hereinafter *LotR*, composed between 1937-1949, revised until c. 1955 and published during 1954-1955). Moreover, as Tolkien himself acknowledged, the source for the humorous 'olde-tyme' prologue of *Farmer Giles of Ham* (1949) was *SGGK* (Scull and Hammond, "Notes" 191-194), which shows Tolkien's readiness to introduce material from the ME poem consciously into his works at the time he was composing *LotR*.<sup>8</sup>

Upon recognizing *SGGK* as a source of inspiration for Tolkien, different borrowings, chiefly focusing on characters, have been proposed. Verlyn Flieger discusses the influence of *SGGK*'s Green Knight on the characterization of Treebeard ("Green" 211-222). Tom Shippey,

briefly explores Tolkien's relationship with the poem, discussing several philological points and the possible resonances of *SGGK* in Middle-earth, comparing the Green Knight with Tom Bombadil as both are 'generated' from the land (122-123). Building on some of Shippey's claims, Ethan Campbell argues that the *wodwos* mentioned in *SGGK* inspired Tolkien to create the polarized Dunlendings and Woses, who, despite sharing a quite similar nature, act very differently (189-194).

This predominant attention to characters in source criticism has obscured the influence of, what Weronika Łaskiewicz labels, a crucial setting in Tolkien's fiction: the forest (46). A quick glance at *SGGK* and *LotR* not only reveals the outstanding relevance of forests in both stories, but also that a substantial part of the narratives takes place in the midst of these settings.<sup>9</sup> However, little attention has been paid to how the forest of *SGGK* influenced the representation of those in *LotR*, especially considering how important real and literary forests were for Tolkien.<sup>10</sup> While Rebecca Merkelbach suggests that Tolkien's forests may have broadly been shaped by medieval literature (58), John M. Bowers effectively narrows down the scope by asserting that: "As one of the great landscape writers in our tradition, Tolkien had learned much from the *Gawain* Poet about woodlands" (114).

Regarding the influence of *SGGK* upon *LotR*, I argue that the episode of the sojourn in Sir Bertilak's castle/Hautdesert surrounded by a forest, which temporarily pauses the journey through the wilderness in *SGGK*, becomes a successful model that Tolkien imitates in the episode that takes place in Caras Galadhon, Lothlórien, in *LotR*. There are clear parallels between Hautdesert and Caras Galadhon in the seemingly protective and comforting environment that these two locations provide, including the motif of the moral test. It is significant that the borrowing of the physical setting of the forest, which for Tolkien represented the essence of *Fäerie*,<sup>11</sup> is the origin and engine which sets in motion the events

that unfold in both narratives, and to some extent determines their outcome. Thus, ecocriticism becomes essential to examine the setting, as it enables a comprehensive scrutiny of the environments and the unearthing of the adapted elements in each of the texts. In order to analyze the source, the second edition revised by Norman Davis of Tolkien and Gordon's *SGGK* will be employed because it includes the substantial emendations from 1930 and 1936, and Tolkien revised and apparently accepted the proofs of the new edition (Scull and Hammond, *Chronology* 728). Tolkien's translation will provide the renderings for the lines, as it illustrates best his understanding of the work.<sup>12</sup> The translations of individual or clusters of words are my own, but always with Tolkien's interpretation in mind.

### **Gawain and the Fellowship in Search of a Haven**

Although the themes and language intricacies of *SGGK* still confound scholars today, some of the poem's cruces are widely understood. One of them is the overt interaction between the natural and civilized world, which can also be found in *LotR*. As Maria A. Volkonskaya states: "the main opposition in the poem, as expressed through language, is court and culture with French loanwords as their marker versus wilderness, nature, and the Green Knight" (8). For Corinne J. Saunders this distinction, emphasized through words, is also exemplified by the different locations in the story: "the contrast between the security of the court, and the discomfort and danger, real and supernatural, of the quest landscape plays a central role" (148).

The previous two quotations are fully applicable to both the *Gawain*-poet's and Tolkien's literary creations. However, boundaries and separation are hotly debated in the field of ecocriticism since its inception. William Rueckert first argued that the binary civilization/wilderness is the most common type of dualist thinking (119), a twofold hierarchical division that Greg Garrard calls 'hyperseparation,' whose categories tend to be

represented by the moral extremes of goodness and badness, leading only towards hypocrisy and mysticism (92, 206). These two positions can be evened out by Ashton Nichols' term 'urbanature' (4) or Garrard's 'natureculture' (92, 208), which aim to debunk the binary to reconcile and unite both concepts into a continuum that conveys their interrelation and reciprocity as well as acknowledges the dependence of the civilized on the wild.

While there is a need to rephrase and reconceptualize the division, the attempts to blur the distinction are equally detrimental. Lawrence Buell advocates for the importance of maintaining an updated form of the separation as an indicator of real-world facts and humanity's wishes (6). This idea is endorsed by Timothy Morton, who believes that the new materialist continuum should not neglect the manifest 'otherness' (244). Andoni Cossio and Martin Simonson therefore conclude that both concepts, nature and civilization, should be understood as equally significant and valuable (91). Yet, both notions also present a clear division outside of civic spaces, well typified by the literary forest, which has always been a liminal setting, not only physically but also psychologically (91-94; Cossio 415-416; Simonson, "Arboreal" 12, 19). For Michael W. Twomey the forest of *SGGK*, which is exposed to human stewardship (31-45), conveys the distinction of such separation in an indirect manner (28). I adopt this last view for my analysis of the correspondences, as the *Gawain*-poet and Tolkien display a clear distinction between the wilderness/forest and cultured space while both forests are managed. In any case, the civilized forest havens of Caras Galadhon and Hautdesert, in their dual nature, unexpectedly open the door to the liminal world of Faërie. This allows the exploration of each characters' morality in ways that are impossible in the ordinary world, because for Tolkien the inhabitants of Faërie have the "power to play on the desires of our bodies and of our hearts" ("Manuscript B" 211).

## How *SGGK*'s Hautdesert Shaped *LotR*'s Caras Galadhon

At any rate, before arriving at those destinations in both stories, the subplots need to develop in a plausible direction which justifies leading the journey thither. To begin with, the process and motivations behind temporarily postponing the quest and seeking refuge in the forest haven in both stories reveal important analogues. After Gawain leaves the safe court of King Arthur and plunges into the wilderness, the environment changes. He then faces the alliterating worms, wolves, *wodwos* [satyrs/trolls of the forest], bulls, bears, boars and *etaynez* [ogres/giants] (Tolkien and Gordon 20; ll. 720-723), which are only fleetingly mentioned and thus indicative of the *Gawain*-poet's comical treatment of these hackneyed episodes of medieval romance. Tolkien instead chooses to develop those incidents into long episodes in *LotR*. After departing from Rivendell, the Fellowship's journey is delayed by lengthy passages concerning encounters with the monstrous Caradhras (*LotR* 286-294), wargs (297-308), the Watcher in the Water (308-309), orcs (324-331), cave-trolls (324, 329), the Balrog (326-331), more pursuing orcs and Gollum (345-346).

Together with the pressing hardships, Gawain faces loneliness "al one" (Tolkien and Gordon 21; l. 735), but that is not the end of his tribulations. As Kathleen Palti explains, since the journey begins in winter instead of the more benign spring, it makes nature in the poem more threatening (47; Pearsall and Salter 152; Spearing 139): "For werre wrathed hym not so much þat wynter nas wors" (Tolkien and Gordon 21; l. 726).<sup>13</sup> Revealingly, this is matched by the Fellowship's bitter taste of winter, having to bear the "icy blast" (*LotR* 282) from the outset of their journey. They are not alone like Gawain, for they count on each other's company; however, when Gandalf their guide is gone, the Fellowship's intense bereavement conveys how lonely they feel after his parting: "Grief at last wholly overcame them, and they wept long" (332). After enduring the bitter cold, the loss of their leading member, and under the looming threat of being pursued by orcs, the Fellowship seeks refuge in Lothlórien, where evil



## How *SGGK*'s Hautdesert Shaped *LotR*'s Caras Galadhon

is kept at bay (338). In fact, Tolkien makes the need of finding a haven a must, as aside from hiding from enemies, the Fellowship is in desperate need for counsel both concerning practical issues, such as the course to take, and on the spiritual plane.

*SGGK* presents certain fantastic touches by dispensing with the need for consistency regarding supernatural events, internal time<sup>14</sup> and the knight's survival.<sup>15</sup> However, as in *LotR*, the poet generates a similar need for Gawain to procure accommodation. Gawain can physically respond against his non-human opponents, but he can neither combat nor defeat the freezing wilderness, a suffering which in Jeffrey J. Cohen's view is highlighted, reflected and shared by the surrounding sad birds and the entwined hawthorns and hazels (37). To stay alive, finding shelter becomes imperative. After sleeping rough in his armor on the snow for several nights, these being "innoghe" [enough] (Tolkien and Gordon 21; ll. 729-730), the disoriented knight begs for a refuge (ll. 736-739). Although predominantly motivated by his wish to fulfil spiritual duties and celebrate Christ's birth (ll. 755-756; "*Gawain*" 77), it is not credible that Gawain dispenses with a shelter until his appointed rendezvous with the Green Knight despite the indulgences in verisimilitude.

The rough pattern marked by *SGGK* to justify a momentary pause in the quest and the passages leading towards it are paralleled by Tolkien at many points. By means of this artful pretext, the *Gawain*-poet is able to complicate the plot and introduce Sir Bertilak's castle, a haven in the midst of the forest for which Gawain begs. Hautdesert is presented as a refuge from the beginning, but one where magic is at work as the vivid surrounding oaks (Tolkien and Gordon 22; l. 772), which contrast with the dull and possibly bare trees encountered at the forest entrance (21; ll. 743-746), suggest that the deadly winter does not affect this Faërie otherworld (Cohen 46-48; Whitaker 35). William F. Woods describes Hautdesert as impenetrable, believed by Gawain to be the most secure stronghold, as lines 803-806 illustrate

## How *SGGK*'s Hautdesert Shaped *LotR*'s Caras Galadhon

(216), and Gillian Rudd highlights how lines 783-784 emphasize the weatherproof properties of the castle (*Greenery* 121). Gawain personally expresses his desire to be admitted until the rendezvous and his thoughts reveal he deems Hautdesert “fayr innoghe” [good enough] (Tolkien and Gordon 23; l. 803) and expects his stay to be “auinant” [pleasant] (l. 806), which is borne out when he describes his stopover as a “selly soiorne” [marvelous sojourn] (l. 1962). Although the particular nouns the poet uses to specify Gawain’s wish “wone” (21; l. 739) and “herber” (l. 755) tend to be translated as ‘dwelling’ and ‘lodging’ correspondingly, Woods renders *herber* as ‘haven’ since Gawain is back to a safe, enjoyable and friendly court comparable to his native Camelot (215). This view is shared by Tolkien himself, who claims: “There Gawain was to feel and be ‘at home’ for a short while, to find himself unexpectedly in the midst of the life and society that he most liked” (“*Gawain*” 78). The word ‘unexpectedly’ recalls Jane Suzanne Carroll’s words on how in Tolkien’s fiction, a courteous host and welcoming lodgings are found “in the most unexpected places,” not restricted to urban or country communities and frequently found in the wilderness (42). This feature, possibly borrowed from *SGGK*, has certainly found its way into Lothlórien.

Other attributes of Hautdesert and the surrounding forest are incorporated in turn. In the same way as Cohen calls Hautdesert a “bubble” (48), Merkelbach describes Lothlórien as a “place of refuge” (62) because it is virtually of the same nature as Hautdesert. After the Fellowship crosses the river Silverlode, the “wolves were howling on the wood’s borders: but on the land of Lórien no shadow lay” (*LotR* 349) as evil cannot find its way in (338, 364-365). Once the members of the Fellowship arrive in Caras Galadhon, the new sense of safety allows them to rest and fall asleep without concern (349), epitomized by Aragorn’s later remark: “I shall sleep without fear for the first time since I left Rivendell” (358). The harsh winter can be momentarily forgotten as well thanks to the belated leaf shedding of the *mellyrn*,<sup>16</sup> and though

## How *SGGK*'s Hautdesert Shaped *LotR*'s Caras Galadhon

the Fellowship is aware that the temperature will gradually increase when heading towards southern latitudes (285), the constant mentions of freezing wind and low temperature cease altogether: "The air was cool and soft, as if it were early spring" (358). Lastly, the Fellowship finds in Caras Galadhon, as Gawain does in Hautdesert, an appropriate and pleasant environment during its stay as conveyed when leaving: "Their hearts were heavy; for it was a fair place, and it had become like home to them" (370).

Similarities continue upon a closer scrutiny of the physical features of the havens. Without totally eliminating otherness, as the ecocritical theory above suggests, the *Gawain*-poet seems to emphasize the safety of the refuge by delimiting, a technique Tolkien adopted to justify the safety experienced by the members of the Fellowship. Saunders describes how Hautdesert is part of the forest and indivisible from it, with no definite boundaries (155). However, though the castle is integrated into the forest, in the same fashion as Dimitra Fimi claims that the elven dwellings in Lothlórien merge with the surrounding wood (47), there are some clear barriers as well. For example, though Palti argues that natural/civilized boundaries are undermined in the poem, she draws clear lines at Hautdesert: "While the lord of the castle . . . hunts wild animals in the surrounding woods and hills Gawain remains behind, within a moat, castle walls, a bedroom, and a curtained, quilted bed" (47; Cohen 26; Ralph 438). This is epitomized by the three lines which contrast the "lynde-wodez euez" [forest's borders], where Bertilak hunts, with the liminal curtains of Gawain's bed, simultaneously surrounded by solid walls (Tolkien and Gordon 33; ll. 1178-1180).<sup>17</sup> Hautdesert thus shields the protagonist against the cold and the threats of the forest and wilderness. Wild nature in the form of untamed animals only access Hautdesert once slain by Bertilak and the hunting party, and even the tamed dogs are kept compartmented by the "kenel" [kennel] from the castle (32; l. 1140). While in Hautdesert, Gawain is only reminded of the pernicious cold, that silent killer more menacing

## How *SGGK*'s Hautdesert Shaped *LotR*'s Caras Galadhon

than his former opponents, in the morn before the encounter with the Green Knight (55; ll. 2000-2005), suggesting that once outside the haven he will no longer be protected from the dangers of wilderness, as in fact happens.

As both narratives continue, the mechanisms of defense are further described. The intention is to highlight the impenetrability of both strongholds once again so that protagonists deem them safe enough to relax and be caught off guard. About Hautdesert, we learn that: “Þe walle wod in þe water wonderly depe, / Ande eft a ful huge hezt hit haled vpon lofte / Of harde hewen ston vp to þe tablez, / Enbaned vnder þe abataylment in þe best lawe” (22; ll. 787-790).<sup>18</sup> The fortress has been erected on a mound in a glade (l. 765), which is surrounded by a “park” (l. 768) of about “two myle” (l. 770) integrating the castle into the wooded area yet fencing and delimiting it “With a pyked palays pyned ful þik” (l. 769).<sup>19</sup> Likewise, one finds similar architectonic barriers that protect the haven from threats in Caras Galadhon. The city equally stands on a hill in a glade; the trees within form an analogous tamed ‘park’ (though not apparently for hunting); and it is surrounded by a high wall which, though green, represents a clear boundary and fortification (*LotR* 353). Moreover, like Hautdesert, Caras Galadhon is encircled by a “fosse” (353), and if that were not enough, ten miles southwards and eastwards from the city there is an additional “high green wall,” protecting it from the potential attack of any Sauronian troop belonging to Dol Guldur (371).

However, Caras Galadhon’s defensive power, and Lothlórien’s as a whole, is secured by enchantment. Galadriel reveals to Frodo that Sauron is repelled from Lothlórien thanks to the protective girdle which emanates from Ninya, the Ring of Adamant (364-365). This recalls the earlier Girdle of Melian which safeguarded the Forest of Neldoreth and The Forest of Region in Beleriand. During her residency and apprenticeship with the mighty Melian, Galadriel must have learned all about this defensive mechanism (*Silmarillion* 136).

Comparatively, even if Hautdesert is heavily inhabited, the absence of a garrison could also hint at a possible protective enchantment by Morgan le Fay. Since Cohen suggests that Morgan's power is also related to nature (45), as Galadriel's, it comes as no surprise that the defensive spells repel winter from both settings. Yet, more revealing for this source study is the fact that Lady Bertilak offers both a ring and a girdle as presents to Gawain, more so when the magic girdle's bearer is said to be able to repel external mortal blows. In any case, Tolkien not only further transforms and develops the girdle's form, origin and magical properties in *LotR*, but also casts off the bogus nature of the original.

### **Safe Grounds, Perilous Tests**

The looming winter and enemies, the lost Gawain's sense of religious duty and the Fellowship's need for practical and spiritual counsel all provide excuses in both narratives for the protagonists to seek refuge in these welcoming, pleasant and solidly defended spaces. However, what goes on underneath the luring Hautdesert and Caras Galadhon? Are these harbors as safe as they seem at first glance? As Simonson argues, the blurry and metaphorical locations of the genre of medieval romance enable the exploration of inner psychological issues (*Narrative* 45). With the intention of placing Gawain's impeccable ethics and virtues, represented by the pentangle (Tolkien and Gordon 18-19; ll. 633-665), under scrutiny in *SGGK*, Sir Bertilak's eerie fortress in the midst of the forest becomes the perfect setting to subject Gawain to perilous sexual and moral temptation (Saunders 151-154; Whitaker 31) after he feels protected and at home.

As it is belatedly revealed, the advances of Lady Bertilak and the game of exchange of gains were a test devised by Bertilak, under Morgan le Fay's orders, to prove Gawain's faithfulness. As A. C. Spearing explains, while Gawain believes to be safe he "is in greatest

## How *SGGK*'s Hautdesert Shaped *LotR*'s Caras Galadhon

peril, it turns out, not in the wilderness or in any public space, but in this most private of all spaces [his private chamber]" (142). In Palti's opinion, the danger is so great that Gawain's life is at stake as his survival depends on his rightful behavior towards Lady Bertilak, parallelly represented by the hunting scenes (48).<sup>20</sup> In the same way as the hunted animals are deluded by Bertilak and the hunting party, Gawain is tricked by Lady Bertilak. Thus, as Iris Ralph pinpoints, the forest, both within and without the haven, becomes the even grounds where game and Gawain are put on trial for survival (438). As the cornered game inside the strategic hunting grounds, the boundaries and walls in Hautdesert turn against Gawain this time, rendering his escape from Lady Bertilak impossible. The moral test which can bring about Gawain's downfall becomes the axis on which the plot revolves till the encounter with the Green Knight/Bertilak, who will issue the verdict of Morgan's assessment. This stresses once more the importance of the forest location where every element contributes to the narrative symbiotically, from the architectonic boundaries and characters to any form of manifest nature within.

Danger also becomes apparent inside the haven of Caras Galadhon in *LotR* by means of a test, though in this case, both the characters and readers are warned beforehand. Aragorn, in an attempt to soothe Boromir's concerns towards Lothlórien, openly suggests that their morality may be assessed once they have crossed its borders: "[Lothlórien] is fair and perilous; but only evil need fear it, or those who bring some evil with them" (*LotR* 338). In this way, the episodes of Caras Galadhon and Hautdesert function as hazardous moral scanners that lay bare the protagonists' codes of ethics, judged according to a Christian system of values. As Lady Bertilak does with Gawain, Galadriel tantalizes the members of the Fellowship with that each desires most in order to assess their covetousness, yet the clearest analogues are those between Sir Gawain and Boromir of Gondor.

## How *SGGK*'s Hautdesert Shaped *LotR*'s Caras Galadhon

Unaware of the peril, the gullible Gawain readily welcomes his good fortune of securing luxurious accommodation in answer to his prayer and the total attention of the comely Lady Bertilak in the midst of the forest. Considering how the initial bargain between the Green Knight and Gawain turns out for the latter, the reader/audience of the poem might already anticipate some further twist, treachery and trial in the often-liminal wooded setting of medieval romance. More so if one regards the *forest ferly wylde* (Tolkien and Gordon 21; l. 741), “hore okez” (l. 743), *hasel and hazborne harled al samen* (l. 744), “roze raged mosse” (l. 745) and *bryddez vnblype* (l. 746)<sup>21</sup> as foreboding ill omen. For Rudd, the beginning of a new stanza to introduce this novel space, Gawain’s raised spirits and the common geographical border markers of both the high ground and hawthorns nearby indicate that the forest constitutes a boundary (“Wilderness” 61). For Angela Carson, not only the hawthorn but also the other tree species, together with the sudden appearance of the castle, mark the transition towards the otherworld (10-13).<sup>22</sup> All these readings could additionally be supported by the sole manuscript of *SGGK*, as the first line of the stanza that introduces the castle (Tolkien and Gordon 22; l. 763) bears one of the five smaller and plainly colored initials that occupy three lines, and which seem to indicate shifts in the poem. Once the perfect setting for each test has been established, the onset of Gawain’s temptation immediately begins when he first lays eyes on Lady Bertilak, revealing his thoughts and impressions: “Ho watz þe fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre, / And of compas and colour and costes, of alle oþer, / And wener þen Wenore, as þe wyze þoʒt” (26-27; ll. 943-945).<sup>23</sup> If we bear in mind, as contemporary readers/audience likely knew, that Wenore [Guinevere] was the fairest of Camelot, this is not a minor claim. Lady Bertilak’s beauty is further stressed by means of a comparison with the old lady, the sorceress Morgan le Fay in disguise, which allows the *Gawain*-poet to offer a complete physical description of the young Lady Bertilak (ll. 947-969). This is in no way trivial

as it intensifies Gawain's initial enthusiasm towards her (ll. 970-980), justifying the later almost unbearable temptation.

Carson asserts that Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay amount to a single character and that they only represent two sides of Gawain's powerful enemy Morgan, a fact easily grasped by the poem's readers/audience that does not force an interpretation on the text (5-6). This argument would further support Tolkien's borrowing, but even if one assumes that the neglected but central figures of Morgan le Fay and Lady Bertilak (Cohen 33) constitute two different characters, they seem to have been fused by Tolkien into a single one in *LotR* for the occasion of the moral test and in order to make it happen. Galadriel, a crucial character in the story, is a powerful sorceress, "*she* could do some wonderful things, if she had a mind" (*LotR* 361), and beyond fair, "Lady Galadriel is above all the jewels that lie beneath the earth!" (356), though she is devoid of Lady Bertilak's sexually cajoling behavior and Morgan le Fay's ill intentions.<sup>24</sup> It is difficult to justify a sexualized reading of Galadriel, and even more so one which supports Boromir's concerns of her dubious intentions, "I do not feel too sure of this Elvish Lady and her purposes" (358), as it is straightforwardly rebutted by Aragorn: "There is in her and in this land no evil, unless a man bring it hither himself" (358). Sam, with the benefit of hindsight and slight reproach towards Boromir, is quick to defend Galadriel's innocence as well in front of Boromir's brother Faramir: "It strikes me that folk takes their peril with them into Lórien, and finds it there because they've brought it. But perhaps you could call her perilous, because she is so strong in herself. You, you could dash yourself to pieces on her, like a ship on a rock; or drown yourself, like a hobbit in a river. But neither rock nor river would be to blame" (680).

Lady Bertilak's first two visits to Gawain's chamber gradually build tension, culminated by the tryst on the third day. At this time, the Lady appears to be at the peak of her



beauty, grace and good looks (Tolkien and Gordon 49; ll. 1757-1765), and the heightened passion is heading towards a dangerous direction for Gawain: “Þay lanced wordes gode, / Much wele þen watz þerinne; / Great perile bitwene hem stod, / Nif Maré of hir knyzt mynne” (49; ll. 1766-1769).<sup>25</sup> Lady Bertilak’s advances leave Gawain no alternative but to wisely decline her favors in a courteous manner even if he hurts her feelings (49-50; ll. 1770-1772, ll. 1792-1794). Gawain has passed the chastity test, but unluckily for him it is not over yet. The Lady insists that Gawain must keep a gift from her, first offering a “rynk of red golde” [ring of red gold] (50; l. 1817), and second a “girdel” [girdle] (l. 1829), both of which Gawain refuses since he claims to owe her too much to accept any presents (51; l. 1842). Although he fares well till this point, the last temptation, which holds the possibility to save his life, is irresistible to him. The rejected *girdel* is proffered once more but this time stressing that the wearer cannot be slain (ll. 1851-1854), and Gawain readily accepts it to avoid being killed by the Green Knight (ll. 1855-1858). This comes at the cost of not being able to exchange his gain with Sir Bertilak, thus breaking their pact (ll. 1863-1864).

The girdle, later discovered to be Bertilak’s (65; l. 2358), becomes part of Gawain’s outfit and symbolizes nature due to its hue and obvious connection with the Green Knight (Rudd, *Greenery* 123). This ultimately bonds the only ‘magical’ item in the story to the fitting setting of the otherworldly forest, the only place where the object could have been crafted, disclosed and obtained in a credible way. What Gawain is ultimately offered is physical safety. By means of her ring and protective girdle which evoke Lady Bertilak’s presents, Galadriel similarly tenders an illusion of security to the members of the Fellowship in Lothlórien: “each had felt that he was offered a choice between a shadow full of fear that lay ahead, and something that he greatly desired: clear before his mind it lay, and to get it he had only to turn aside from the road and leave the Quest and the war against Sauron to others” (*LotR* 358).

## How *SGGK*'s Hautdesert Shaped *LotR*'s Caras Galadhon

Unsurprisingly, Gawain is given a similar tempting choice by Sir Bertilak's servant, who escorts the knight to the quest's end, promising his silence on the matter, though Gawain, as Boromir, declines the proposal (Tolkien and Gordon 58-59; ll. 2118- 2139; *LotR* 358). Tolkien does not reveal exactly what Boromir is proffered, yet some of the character's intentions had previously been disclosed in Rivendell: "Frodo caught something new and strange in Boromir's glance, and he looked hard at him. Plainly Boromir's thought was different from his final words. It would be folly to throw away: what? The Ring of Power? He had said something like this at the Council, but then he had accepted the correction of Elrond" (369). Galadriel seems to have tempted Boromir with the Ring, this equally circular accessory, making him believe that its possession would bestow enough power in his hands to save Gondor, the life of his fellow Gondorians and ultimately his own.

Boromir and Gawain have fared well in their corresponding initial trials, but their assessment has only begun. In order to compare the two tests and their outcomes, it is important to understand Tolkien's opinion on Gawain's moral behavior. Although the Green Knight says, "At þe þrid þou fayled þore" (Tolkien and Gordon 65; l. 2356),<sup>26</sup> he also recognizes that "On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote zede" (l. 2363)<sup>27</sup> and "Bot for 3e lufed your lyf; þe lasse I yow blame" (l. 2368).<sup>28</sup> Evelyn Reynolds, associating Gawain with the innocent game, interprets the Green Knights/Bertilak's last addition as the expert hunter's awareness of Gawain being excusably driven by every prey's natural impulse to stay alive (44). Tolkien's reading mitigates Gawain's pardonable failure as well by further justifying his actions:

He would never have been in the position where he was bound to secrecy, contrary to the games-pact, if he had not wanted to possess the girdle for its possible power: he wished to save his life, a simple and honest motive, and by means that were in no way contrary to his original pact with the Green Knight, and conflicted only with the

## How *SGGK*'s Hautdesert Shaped *LotR*'s Caras Galadhon

seemingly absurd and purely jocular pact with the lord of the castle. That was his only fault. ("*Gawain*" 96)

Boromir's fault is more complex in that he actively seeks the Ring that he is neither offered nor manages to secure. We learn from his brother Faramir that in his childhood, Boromir wished to become the king of Gondor, though as the son of the Steward his aspirations could never materialize (*LotR* 670). Faramir also reveals some additional thoughts on his sibling's possible emotional response to the Ring: "If it were a thing that gave advantage in battle, I can well believe that Boromir, the proud and fearless, often rash, ever anxious for the victory of Minas Tirith (and his own glory therein), might desire such a thing and be allured by it" (671). For Tolkien, Gawain's wish to protect his life is an "honest motive" ("*Gawain*" 96), while Boromir's must lay beyond honesty, compounded by his personal aspirations to protect Gondor, the lives of his people and ultimately his own. As Kayla Beebout pinpoints, considering that even the righteous Gandalf and Galadriel find themselves prey of the Ring's lure, Boromir's desire is not a sign of dishonesty in itself (4). The apparent grandeur that the Ring's possession grants is its main enticement as it can seemingly satisfy Boromir's desire for glory and coax him into its obtention by force. However, since Boromir's fundamental goal is the collective good, is his failure morally inferior to that of Gawain?

As in Gawain's case, Boromir's test takes place once outside the haven and the forest, in a relatively neighboring wild space and with a single witness. Among the trees that clothe the slopes around the long oval lake Nen Hithoel: "[Boromir's] fair and pleasant face was hideously changed; a raging fire was in his eyes" (*LotR* 399), and after that he attempts to snatch the Ring from Frodo. However scary or violent Boromir seems, it is the only attempt of such kind in the whole narrative and Boromir's only blamable wrongdoing. After Frodo flees and Boromir realizes his insanity, he immediately feels remorse: "'What have I said?' he cried.

‘What have I done? Frodo, Frodo!’ he called. ‘Come back! A madness took me, but it has passed. Come back!’” (400). Like Gawain, he feels ashamed of his *couetyse* [covetousness] and confesses his wrongs (Tolkien and Gordon 69; l. 2508; *LotR* 414); however, both men are held in high esteem by their peers for their deeds, and their sins are ultimately forgiven. Boromir is first pardoned and highly honored by Aragorn’s verdict: “You have conquered. Few have gained such a victory” (414),<sup>29</sup> and later on appreciated by Pippin’s: “He died to save us, my kinsman Meriadoc and myself . . . and though he fell and failed, my gratitude is none the less” (755). Gawain is also exonerated from his fault by the Green Knight/Bertilak (Tolkien and Gordon 66; ll. 2393-2394), and revered in Camelot by King Arthur’s court, and the green band, representing the green girdle, becomes a sign of distinction (69; ll. 2515-2521). Though Boromir’s sacrifice to protect Merry and Pippin seems to be Tolkien’s redemption for his apparent misdeed, that is not necessarily the case. Boromir plays a crucial role in dividing the Fellowship, a necessary step for the multiple-strand narrative which follows and, as Beebout explains, which allows the main quest to be completed (6, 8). His death, in the light of the previously presented evidence (Boromir’s attempts to guarantee the personal safety of others and his repentance), cannot be understood as a mere punishment, more so because it serves the higher purpose of indirectly contributing to the salvation of Middle-earth. Thus, Boromir reaches Gawain’s moral stature, pinpointing Tolkien’s final borrowing from *SGGK*’s forest haven episode.<sup>30</sup>

## **Conclusion**

After demonstrating Tolkien’s long exposure to *SGGK* and by means of ecocriticism, I have shown how Hautdesert heavily influenced the episode of the forest haven of Caras Galadhon in *LotR*, including the moral test. Although this may not be the only source, Tolkien seems to

## How *SGGK*'s Hautdesert Shaped *LotR*'s Caras Galadhon

have followed the *Gawain*-poet's pattern to justify the sojourn to guide his protagonists towards a similar appealing and protective environment. Tolkien reworks the *SGGK* episode for his own purposes which shows a modern ecologically-conscious sensibility of the importance of the environment (in this case the forest) for the wellbeing of human(oid) characters. These safe spaces integrated into the forest protect the heroes from the threats of the wilderness/forest, but not from perilous moral evaluation. Both Gawain and Boromir fail once they face their fate outdoors, yet their moral offenses seem pardonable according to Tolkien's standards for honest motivation. If anything, the failure makes both characters more humane, real and credible, as genuine and believable as the surrounding woodlands described. Tolkien adapts the original material by having Boromir slain according to his own complex sub-creative agenda, while not forgetting to grant Boromir enough recognition to match Gawain's.

Ultimately, this study proves that paying careful attention to the natural world in literature through the lens of ecocriticism yields profitable findings. Most of the proposed borrowings in *LotR* from *SGGK* focus entirely on characters, and this neglects the interrelation and mutual constitution of the characters and the forest space, the environment that allows these characters to gather, interact and progress in the story. Ecocriticism helps to overcome those limitations and enriches academic analyses by broadening their perspectives. This source study epitomizes that claim, but even those analyses that only deal with narratives of humans interacting with spaces created by humankind are full of natural details whose importance for the plot and characterization await to be revealed through this critical approach.

Besides nature writing, forests tend to become mere backdrops in contemporary literary works, which tend to favor urban environments. However, in fantasy, a genre heavily indebted to and evocative of the liminal forest of medieval romance, the ubiquitous portrayal of wooded

areas has turned them into a hallmark of the genre (Łaszkiwicz 55). Apart from nature writing, the works of Tolkien (and fantasy more broadly) recover and rediscover forests with their rich, enjoyable and naturally-rooted stories that allow modern humans to value and understand these spaces. Literature of this kind is forward-looking, but without a proper ecocritical evaluation many of its rich details may remain unnoticed or, perhaps worse, fade into the background.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Although there is no scholarly consensus on Hautdesert being the denomination of the castle, I employ that name to easily distinguish the stronghold from the Wilderness of Wirral, the wooded hunting grounds and the Green Chapel.

<sup>2</sup> From 1 May onwards in Trinity term of 1920 before leaving for Leeds, Tolkien taught a course on *SGGK* on Saturdays at the University of Oxford School of Geography (Scull and Hammond, *Chronology* 120, 838), and that same term, he also gave a lecture on *SGGK* at the Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages (Ryan 46).

<sup>3</sup> Gordon wrote most of the notes, whereas Tolkien prepared the text and the extensive glossary (Anderson 17-18).

<sup>4</sup> Between 1925-1945 when Tolkien held the Chair of Anglo-Saxon in Oxford, he lectured only on Germanic philology, Old English, Old Norse and Gothic, as charted by the *Oxford University Gazette*, vols. LVI-LXXXV. However, Tolkien and Gordon considerably revised their edition of *SGGK* for the second (1930) and third impressions (1936).

<sup>5</sup> *SGGK* "was a staple in the years 1946 to 1958, being treated in no fewer than 14 different terms" (Ryan 52).

<sup>6</sup> Tolkien's translation of *SGGK* was broadcast by the BBC during December 1953 (Tolkien, *Letters* 444), and was introduced by his essay "A Fourteenth-Century Romance" published on 4 December in *Radio Times*.

<sup>7</sup> Tolkien considered *SGGK* a masterpiece of English Literature and the best English narrative poem of the Middle Ages, only comparable to *Troilus and Criseyde* (c. 1380) by Geoffrey Chaucer (Tolkien, "Gawain" 72, 105).

<sup>8</sup> The 'olde-tyme' prologue was added from 1946 onwards (Scull and Hammond, Introduction 19). However, in *Farmer Giles of Ham*'s early 1938 revision (15-17), Tolkien already incorporated parodied elements from *SGGK* such as allusions to the damaging foxhunt (*Farmer* 42), or Giles' process of wearing his quirky battle gear, starkly contrasting with Gawain's magnificent armor (*Farmer* 78-79; Scull and Hammond, "Notes" 210-211). Knighthood in the Little Kingdom is also notoriously debased as opposed to that portrayed by Gawain in *SGGK*.

<sup>9</sup> See Saunders for a detailed explanation of the importance of the forest in *SGGK* (148-154).

<sup>10</sup> Openly acknowledged in his essay on *Smith of Wootton Major* (1967): "in this tale Forest and Tree remain dominant symbols" ("*Smith*" 116).

<sup>11</sup> "My symbol [for the concept of Faery] is . . . the Forest: the regions still immune from human activities, not yet dominated by them . . . Going deep or far into Faery from such points represents a passing further and further away from a familiar or anthropocentric world" ("*Smith*" 116).

<sup>12</sup> In Tolkien's own words: "A translation may be a useful form of commentary" (Christopher Tolkien vii).

<sup>13</sup> "for though war wearied him much, the winter was worse" (Tolkien, *SGGK* 51; st. 31, l. 726). Tolkien's translation only provides the corresponding stanza of *SGGK*, lines are my addition.

<sup>14</sup> In a similar manner, although time in Lothlórien is measured and corresponds to the chronogram Tolkien devised, the members of the Fellowship disagree on the actual duration of the stay (Flieger, "Faërie" 38).

<sup>15</sup> Tolkien posits that in *SGGK* the element of Faërie is the underlying mechanism that makes the story work by solving its potential problems and unanswered questions, a device implicitly understood by the reader/audience (“*Gawain*” 83).

<sup>16</sup> Pl. of *mallorn*, a trees species invented by Tolkien.

<sup>17</sup> Even if each word occurs several times in the poem, *wode* [wood/forest] and *wowe/woze* [walls] do not alliterate with each other despite technical feasibility. Though the etymologies of these two nouns are unrelated, their similar spelling and minimal pair status in pronunciation, together with the fact that both represent a sort of boundary, implicitly draws them closer in significance and enhances their contrastive value.

<sup>18</sup> “The wall waded in the water wondrous deeply, / and up again to a huge height in the air it mounted, / all of hard hewn stone to the high cornice, / fortified under the battlement in the best fashion” (Tolkien, *SGGK* 53; st. 34, ll. 787-790).

<sup>19</sup> “Within a palisade of pointed pales set closely” (Tolkien, *SGGK* 53; st. 33, l. 769)

<sup>20</sup> See Ralph’s review of the discussion on this crux and the relation among the fox, Gawain and Bertilak (431-444). See also Twomey (50).

<sup>21</sup> Tolkien translates them emphatically as: ‘forest fearsomely wild’ (*SGGK* 51; st. 32, l. 741), “aged oaks” (52; l. 743), ‘hazel and hawthorn huddled and tangled’ (l. 744), “rough ragged moss” (l. 745) and “birds bleakly” (l. 746). However, the literal renderings are: ‘forest wondrously wild’ (l. 741), ‘grey/hoar oaks’ (l. 743), ‘hazel and hawthorn tangled together’ (l. 744), ‘shaggy ragged moss’ (l. 745) and ‘birds unhappy/mournful’ (l. 746).

<sup>22</sup> The access to the otherworld in Lothlórien is marked parallelly by the *mellyrn* and emergence of Caras Galadhon.

<sup>23</sup> “She was fairer in face, in her flesh and her skin, / her proportions, her complexion, and her port than all others, / and more lovely than Guinevere to Gawain she looked” (Tolkien, *SGGK* 59; st. 39, ll. 943-945).

<sup>24</sup> Morgan’s epithet “la Faye” [le Fay] (Tolkien and Gordon 67; l. 2446), rendered as ‘the fairy,’ strengthens the connection between Morgan and Galadriel, additionally supporting Tolkien’s borrowing.

<sup>25</sup> “They spoke then speeches good, / much pleasure was in that play; / great peril between them stood, / unless Mary for her knight should pray” (Tolkien, *SGGK* 91; st. 70, ll. 1766-1769).

<sup>26</sup> “Thou didst fail on the third day” (Tolkien, *SGGK* 114; st. 94, l. 2356).

<sup>27</sup> “the fair knight most faultless that e’er foot set on earth!” (Tolkien, *SGGK* 115; st. 95, l. 2363). Note the added emphasis by means of an exclamation mark in the translation.

<sup>28</sup> “but because you loved your own life: the less do I blame you” (Tolkien, *SGGK* 115; st. 95, l. 2368).

<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, even if time is pressing hard on them, Aragorn and Legolas compose impromptu songs paying tribute to Boromir, and together with Gimli, they arrange a meticulous funeral that matches such deserved by a lord of the heroic stature of the Gondorian (*LotR* 415-418).

<sup>30</sup> It is worth briefly noting the employment of Christian calendar symbolism in both *SGGK* and *LotR*, though it does not indicate a further borrowing but rather a shared Christian tradition. The exchange-of-blows game in *SGGK* occurs on 1 Jan, the Feast of the Circumcision of Christ, which proves that God has come to Earth embodying a human being. Gawain’s incision appears to be analogous, proving Gawain’s own embodied existence as a fallen human open to redemption and not as an ideal knight or literary character. In the same way as the Feast of the Annunciation on March 25 anticipates the world’s salvation, the defeat of Sauron on the same day in *LotR* equates to a hopeful victory over the forces of evil.

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