

Kristína Hajníková

The Language of War in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Béowulf*
(ÚAJD, FF UK, Praha 2010, 73 pp.)

Opponent's review

The thesis presents an analysis and comparative study of terms denoting “warrior” in *Beowulf* (*Beo*) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*SGGK*). The choice of texts and terms for comparison determines the interdisciplinary potential of the thesis: apart from the central lexicological aspect the findings are relevant for the study of alliterative verse form in Old English and Middle English period, of poetic diction of Old English epic poetry and alliterative courtly romance and last but not least, they may offer a useful material for addressing the problem of continuity in poetic form and its transmission beyond Old English period.

While such issues cannot be treated in depth within the scope of a BA thesis, it is definitely one of the merits of Ms Hajníková's study that she realizes these complex dimensions of her enquiry and reflects them in the preliminary commentary. Her presentation of the linguistic methodology applied in the research part of her study is accessible, lucid and well-organized; the combination of morpho-semantic analysis, frequency analysis and contextual analysis is well suited to render a complex picture of lexical usage. The thesis has a firm and logical structure showing good analytical skills and a confident grasp of the subject, documented also by the extensive bibliography which well exceeds the expected standard at this stage. Ms. Hajníková's study fulfills the criteria set for a BA thesis and accomplishes its purpose.

Despite the overall high standard of the thesis, certain reservations may be expressed as regards some of its formal aspects as well as individual problems in the selection and assessment of material and the use of certain concepts. Some of the issues raised here should be addressed in the defence.

1. The literary-cultural section of the theoretical introduction relies rather too heavily on direct quotes, albeit rigorously referenced; a paraphrase would reduce a certain wordiness of the section and would, in my opinion, result in greater precision of description. As it is, this part shows the author's efforts and her ability of critical reflection of the subject in less favourable light than the thesis in general.
2. Partly due to this feature, the section introduces certain concepts problematic in use or definition, e.g. “*national*” in relation to the definition of epic and its application to *Beo* and Old English “heroic” poetry, or “*tradition in poetry*”/ “*poetic tradition*” which should be defined with greater precision, as it is applied to vastly differing phenomena (oral-formulaic theory, archaisms in poetry, potential continuity between Old English verse and the alliterative revival).

Q: Can we operate with a single concept of tradition in the above cases? How should it be defined?

3. The thesis postulates the existence of a distinct alliterative poetic diction but excludes Langland and the more southern poets, whose diction differs. For easier orientation it would be expedient to list the texts which supply the basis for determining this part of the poetic vocabulary or otherwise to define its context.

Q: Does the distribution of this word-group rather follow regional (north/south) or generic (romance/moral allegory) criteria? Is any such distinction relevant?

4. While the componential analysis of the material is very thorough, the results raise the question whether in diachronic study independent contextual study should not precede the componential analysis of terms based on dictionary entries. In effect, the latter thus inevitably relies on contextual reading done by somebody else, whose criteria for and degree of interpretation are difficult to check. This is best apparent in cases of words with the semantic feature [+MAN] (to what extent may the sense “warrior” be determined solely by their occurrence in military context or by the fact that they are used to refer to warrior

figures?) and the category "Character" (nothing in the meaning of simplices "beado" and "rinc" appears to suggest why the compound *per se* should have the feature [+CRUEL] and [+GLOOM] in contrast to the apparently semantically and morphologically parallel "gub-rinc").

Q: Could the author demonstrate on an individual sample the exact procedure applied in the componential analysis?

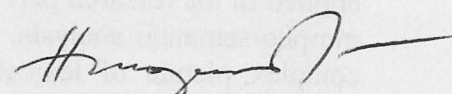
What extra semantic feature above the obligatory [+WARRIOR] is represented by [+WAR] in case of *SGGK*?

What kind of component in *SGGK* would parallel [+HERO] in *Beo*? Is this a strictly semantic category or does it express a literary-cultural classification?

5. It may be regretted that the contextual analysis in *Beo* is limited to terms referring to the protagonist and Wiglaf, as this excludes the use of the terms from the given lexical field in negative context. In purely numeric terms, too, this does not offer a representative picture.

Conclusion: Despite minor flaws the thesis represents a thorough and well-organized study of a difficult and complex subject with a potential for further research. I recommend it for defence with a preliminary mark EXCELLENT to VERY GOOD.

Prague, 8 September 2010



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