ENKER (SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT 150 AND 2477)
In 1958, Beryl Rowland wrote a meticulous refutation of the then-current assertion that Chaucer could not have understood Sir Gawain and the Green Knight because of its strange dialect. She examined all the words found in the poem but not in Chaucer’s writings, categorized them according to language of origin and semantic field, and searched them out in other Middle English texts and in dictionaries of Middle English and Medieval French. Her aim was to determine their comprehensibility to a Londoner with Chaucer’s background and experience. As for enker, she thought its meaning was unknowable, and that ‘Chaucer’s translation would have been as good as anyone else’s.’

Derek Brewer in 1997 confidently declared his admiration for ‘the poet’s literally brilliant invention of enker grene for the colour of the complexion of Gawain’s challenger. The power of the greenness lies partly in the unusual adjective, of Norse derivation, enker, “vivid.” There is nothing sickly or undernourished about the greenness of the Green Knight’.

There had been no new lexicographical discoveries to justify Brewer’s certainty about the etymology and the meaning of enker, but during the intervening forty years the general attitude toward the Knight’s appearance had been greatly changed. Critics and translators had reinterpreted his colour in a much more extravagant form—a process which continues to have its effects on scholars and amateurs alike. This may be seen most clearly by comparing a sequence of translations of line 147, ‘For wonder of his hwe men hade’.

1910: Cox: men wondered at his hue
1929: Banks: Men wondered at the hue
1934: Gerould: Men wondered at the hue
1952: Jones: For men had wonder of the hue
1959: Stone: Men gaped at the hue of him
1965: Gardner: But astounded, every man there/Stared at the stranger’s skin
1970: Raffel: And stunning the court/With the color of his race
1974: Barron: So that they were amazed at his colour
1992: Winny: His hue astounded them
1997: Hughes: But what amazed them all/Was his colour
1998: Harrison: But the hue of his every feature/Stunned them
2003: Merwin: But more than anything/His color amazed them

4 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, tr. Theodore H. Banks (New York, 1929).
5 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, in Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, tr. Gordon H. Gerould (New York, 1929).
7 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, tr. Gwyn Jones (London, 1952; repr. Ware, 1997).


2006: O’Donoghue: They were shocked by his colour though.15
2007: Armitage: Amazement seized their minds.16

From the fourteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, the courtiers were the grammatical subjects of a rather placid verb—I think had wonder might be even milder than ‘wondered’. Now, readers are led to see them as the objects of forceful verbs, and are encouraged to share their shocked astonishment at the translators’ subsequent words ‘Crown to toe dense green’ (Hughes), ‘entirely emerald green’ (Armitage), or, with exclamatory italics and punctuation, ‘green from head to toe!’ (O’Donoghue).

This increased vigour, and the reversal of subject and object, are similarly unsupported by any new linguistic analysis. The two questions are interconnected, and need to be considered together. For a century, critics have relied on an improbable etymology for enker, and the shock value of the knight’s appearance has been exaggerated to produce sensationalist shock value of the knight’s appearance has an improbable etymology for enker which is derived from the proto-Germanic root for ‘one’.

Apparently while revising Stratmann’s dictionary for Oxford University Press, Henry Bradley published a brief article in 1889 with an alternate etymology: ‘The word enker.. is, in fact, the Old French encré, “inked”. Examples of vert encré, “dark green”, pers encré, “dark blue”, are given by Godefroy s.v.’.20 The current Oxford English Dictionary entry, the descendant of Bradley’s entry for the 1897 version of the dictionary, preserves this etymology.

The overwhelming majority of scholars have accepted einkar as the etymon, relying on dictionary definitions rather than considering the contexts in which the word appears. Or, rather, they have paid lip-service to einkar while omitting it or paraphrasing it however they please, just as if there had been no etymological study at all. Not one of the translations or editorial glosses I have found would be acceptable to a scholar of Old Norse as an explanation of einkar, or as a translation for any examples in skaldic verse (it does not occur in the Edda). None of the 61 citations of the word in the exhaustive Dictionary of Old Norse Prose21 could be translated as ‘vivid’, ‘dense’,

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16 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, tr. Simon Armitage (New York, 2007).
19Francis Henry Stratmann, A Dictionary of the Old English Language Compiled from Writings of the XII. XIII. XIV. and XV. Centuries, 2nd edn. (Krefeld/London, 1873), 150 <https://archive.org/details/dictionaryofolde00stra/page/150/mode/1up> (accessed 1 Mar. 2024).
21 See <https://onp.ku.dk/onp/onp.php?o17032> (accessed 1 Mar. 2024). This project could serve as a model to any future dictionaries of ancient or medieval languages, in that it is, in effect, a lemmatized and glossed concordance to the entire corpus with links to other corpora, to other dictionaries, and to scans of manuscripts and authoritative editions of all the texts.

As for Bradley’s etymology, Tolkien and Gordon—who were notorious at the time for neglecting previous scholarship—ignored it. This would not be surprising if it had been presented only in the article in The Academy, which remains unknown today. But for them to pass over an OED entry for such a difficult word from an editor of Bradley’s calibre is a bit extreme, especially considering that Tolkien worked for the OED in 1919–20 under Bradley’s supervision. Their decision, I think, was responsible for the MED’s choice to mention only the Old Norse connections for enker and for the fact that the possible French source has receded into the background. The glosses of those few scholars who mention the French etymology differ little from the others: ‘bright’ and ‘vivid’ predominate.

If so many people agree, no matter what the etymologists say, that enker means some poetic synonym of ‘bright’, then critics might be forgiven for ignoring the complexities in their notes. This is, for example, what the editors Andrew and Waldron, Burrow, Silverstein, and Battles do, along with numerous translators.

We have reached this current state, I think, because Bradley too relied on the definition in the dictionary rather than the citations. After he made the inspired connection between enker grene and vert encré, no-one, including Bradley, considered the context in which vert encré occurred or the circumstances in which it might have come to be included in our poem. To be fair, this was considerably harder to do in 1889 than it is in 2023 with all ten volumes of Godefroy’s dictionary on one’s hard drive, along with the twenty-eight volumes of the Dictionnaire du Moyen Français, and the ability to search hundreds of thousands of pages of medieval texts to find further examples.

Such a study quickly reveals that in the fourteenth century vert encré was a specific term in the international technical vocabulary of high fashion, and that encré was used in that context alone. It is the name for a particular shade of expensive woollen cloth. An hypothesis to that effect could have been made in 1889 on the basis of the entry for encre in Godefroy alone, since all four citations refer to cloth, two to ‘pers [blue] encré’ and two to ‘vert encré’. The quotations about vert make it clear that vert encré is a name for the material itself: ‘quatre pieces de vert encré’ and ‘Chappe de vert encré’. This has long been

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22 See Oliver Farrar Emerson, ‘Review of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon’, Journal of English and Germanic Philology xxvi (1927), 248–58; and J.R. Hulbert, ‘Review of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon’, Modern Philology xxiii (1925), 246–9. Even the generally positive review in the inaugural year of Oxford’s own journal, which opens with ‘not the least of the merits of this excellent edition is that it does not profess to epitomize all the “literature” that has gathered around the poem’, says ‘their omission to state in the footnotes the authors of the emendations they have adopted, should be rectified in a second edition’, J.H.G. Grattan, ‘Review of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon’, RES i (1925), 485. The defects critics noted were in large measure corrected by Norman Davis, who points out in his Preface that he had consulted not only Gollancz’s 1940 edition and other criticism produced after the first edition of Tolkien-Gordon, but also ‘earlier work, notably (though not only) by C. Brett, O.F. Emerson, J.R. Hulbert, T.A. Knott, F.P Magoun, H.L. Savage, and Mrs. E.M. Wright’, vi. It is a serious mistake, I believe, to cite Davis’s work as ‘TG’ or ‘T&G’, since it was he who made the work into a credible piece of scholarship.

23 See ‘Notes and Documents’, Tolkien Studies 12 (2015), 141–8 for Tolkien’s laudatory obituary, originally published in The Bulletin of the Modern Humanities Association 20 (1923), 4–5. The reprint is accompanied by important biographical information about Bradley from Tom Shippey and Peter Gilliver, as well as more detail about Tolkien’s work on the dictionary.


25 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Theodore Silverstein (Chicago, 1974).
noted: ‘En effet, au moyen âge beaucoup de tissus... n’étaient designés que par leur couleur. Ainsi on disait: un drap pers, drap rouge, drap vert ou simplement: un bleu, un rouge, un vert.’ Further examples bolster the hypothesis. The Dictionnaire du Moyen Français entry for vert (II. A., vol. 28, 249) includes two quotations: ‘4 aulnes et demie de [drap] vert encre de Bruxelles’ (4 ells of ‘vert encre’ of Brussels) from 1387; and ‘une aulne de drap à taindre en vert ancre coustoit XIII solz parisis’ (one ell of cloth for dyeing ‘vert encre’ cost 13 Parisian sous) from 1420. It is only one of many varieties of green: the DMF lists vert brun, vert gai, vert herbu, and vert perdu on the same page.

The linguistic techniques mustered for incorporating French fabric terminology into other languages are varied, but there is a consistent pattern when it comes to encre. It is borrowed intact, not calqued or translated, even when the colour attached to it is translated. In Occitan, the word encre is kept unchanged (that is, not translated into ‘tanchado’): ‘III aunas pers (blue) encre’, (1344) and ‘X aunas morat (deep red) encre’ (1346). In Italian in 1296, we find ‘verdi encrè’ three times; vert has been translated but encrè has again been adapted to Italian phonology. Similarly, in Latin encre is simply borrowed intact: ‘viridi. encres’. In England, of course, courtly inventories were written either in Latin or in French, so we find Latin ‘de viridi encre’ in 1219, ‘viridi enkre’ in records of Edward I, and ‘vert gay’, ‘vert med’ [i.e. vert medium], and ‘vert encrè’ in French among the cloths supplied to Edward III in 1329. Among the eleven purchases of vert encrè in the account book of Philip the Bold of Burgundy in 1386–8, we find three references to ‘vert ancre d’Engleterre’; similar purchases are mentioned in records from Dijon and Toulouse, so it is a reasonable assumption that English vert encrè was considered to be of high quality; Zangger indeed thinks that vert encrè is ‘typique du paysage anglais’.

Bradley’s ‘dark green’ is a translation of Godefroy’s ‘vert foncé’. Leaving aside the question of differences between the semantic fields of ‘fonce’ and ‘dark’, it is important to note that vert encrè is only one of at least three types of cloth whose names can be translated by ‘vert foncé’; the DMF provides that same definition for vert brun and vert perdu. These saturated green fabrics were expensive, since they needed to be dyed twice—and dyers, reasonably enough, charged double. Sumptuary laws, at least in Spain, forbade squires from wearing them. Second, vert encrè is the Spring colour par excellence. Charles VI of France (who later became the father-in-law of both England’s Richard II and Henry IV) was especially fond of it, as his tailor reports:

For the ‘bastard’ houpelande, that is to say, which is in between the long and the short for thought of it as a borrowing (accessed 1 Mar. 2024).


Lisa Monnas, ‘Some Medieval Colour Terms for Textiles’, in Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (eds), Medieval Clothing and Textiles x (Mortlacham, 2014) 41, n. 94.


Zangger, Contributions, 13.

Monnas, ‘Some Medieval Colour Terms’, 46; for a price list, see Trattato dell’ Arte della Seta, in Arte della Sete in Firenze, ed. Girolamo Gargioli (Florence, 1868), 78 <https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_X1DvQTBbU7gC/page/n91/mode/2up> (accessed 1 Mar. 2024).

riding out’ I always recommend Flanders cloth, and mainly vert brun and vert encre of Brussels, which is lined with vert clair from Brussels and Rouen. Every year, to celebrate the first day of May, the day the first leaves appear, the King has made for him, for his brother the Duc d’Orléans and for 24 of the greatest lords of the Court, 26 absolutely identical cloaks, the total cost of which amounts to 52 Parisian pounds (2542 francs 80 sous), and they thus go to the fields all uniformly dressed.  

Each knight’s yearly vert encre houppelande therefore cost as much as a pair of draught horses, or a year of a labourer’s work.  

I think that the (admittedly later) full-size houppelandes in Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini portrait and Van der Weyden’s Mary Magdalen might well be the colour in question, and that the picture for May in the Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry represents the less expensive vert gai version of the same garment.  

In sum: the vert encre etymology is preferable to the einkar etymology because:

1. encre is a word in a language well known to the poet and his audience.
2. vert encre occurs in numerous documents from the poet’s time and cultural milieu.
3. einkar is never associated with colour; encre is only associated with colour, and that colour is most frequently green. And to reiterate: in the fourteenth century, it is only associated with fabric.
4. vert encre had a long history of being incorporated, without reference to its grammar or significance, into other languages according to exactly the linguistic pattern that would produce enker grene.
5. encre fits the grammar of both line 150 and line 2477, but ‘the knight in the singularly green’, as required by einkar, does not work.
6. encre does not require or even tolerate the ‘fudging’ of translations (‘very’ to ‘deep’ to ‘bright’ to ‘emerald’).
7. encre is more in keeping with status of enker as a rare word; words that occur only once or twice in sizeable corpora are normally glossed something more like ‘a rare type of wood’ or ‘an alternate name for saxifrage’ or ‘kind of locust’ than like ‘very’.

Enker grene therefore should join bleaunt, pelure, sendal, tars, tuly, tolouse, etc. in a list of French-derived high fashion terms in the poem. Chaucer, as comptroller of the customs of wools, skins and tanned hides for the port of London, would have encountered such cloth under a variety of names and would surely have understood this one. Editors and translators should add a note to line 150 saying ‘enker green: a costly green fabric fashionable in the fourteenth century’.


I would strongly recommend the episode of fashion historian Amber Butchart’s BBC documentary series ‘A Stitch in Time’, which shows a reconstruction of the lady’s dress in the Arnolfini Portrait. The entire series is worthwhile, if only as a corrective to the view of history as based on words alone; in the Arnolfini episode, from minute 18 through 22, one can see the dying process in detail. Further information about medieval green
If line 150 refers only to the Knight’s clothing, why, one might ask, were the courtiers astonished by his colour? The answer is... they weren’t. They simply wondered at his appearance. The belief that the Knight’s skin is ‘enker grene’ has skewed the reading of line 147, ‘For wonder of his hwe men hade’. Translators of Middle English texts tend to replace hwe with ‘hue’ or ‘colour’ unless forced to do otherwise, and examples such as ‘Thus spitte I out my venym vnder hewe/Of holynes’ (Pardoner’s Prologue 421–22),51 ‘Hawerly in his own hue his heved was covered’ (Cleanness 1707) and ‘As like to Himself of lote and hue’ (Pearl 896),52 or the various Middle English devils who appear ‘on engles hywe’ (see examples at MED 3a) are too often treated as metaphoric extensions of the ‘real’ meaning of the word. The OED, however, (apparently on the grounds of historical precedence) and the DOE (with numerous examples of Latin equivalents) choose to prioritize ‘Form, shape, figure’ and ‘form, figure’. Putter and Stokes point out that this is the appropriate meaning for ‘hwe’ in line 147, noting that it echoes ‘forme’ in line 145,53 and that it is only because of the ‘bright green’ etymology that (in retrospect) hwe = colour came to mind. Coupled with the irrelevant fact that colour is the only sense surviving in Modern English, the misreading of ‘hwe’ and the incorrect etymology of ‘enker’ have resulted in the current mistaken belief that these lines refer to green skin.

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52 Quoted from Putter and Stokes, The Works of the Gawain Poet.
53 The wordplay they note, however, is dependent on the ‘green skin’ reading of line 150 and disappears with the ‘green cloth’ reading.