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Tolkien As Scholar and Artist

Abstract

Looks at Tolkien's sources and influences in literature, myth, and personal experience. Discusses the concept of "influence" and the mistaken modern "worship" of "utter originality." Lists and describes some of his scholarly works.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influences; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Sources; Tolkien, J.R.R. Scholarly works

TOLKIEN AS SCHOLAR AND ARTIST
by Clyde S. Kilby

I believe that J. R. R. Tolkien as creative writer belongs among the nobility and I think he will be read after nine-tenths of contemporary writers now called "great" are forgotten. But who can say for sure what gives a writer lasting greatness or who can tell the deeps from which creativity derives? Professor Tolkien's own illustration is that of forest compost into which a seed falls. One knows that the seed germinates, but the particular leaf or bit of compost immediately determinant is another matter.

In respect to Tolkien's hobbit stories, one thing is perfectly clear. Their double wellspring of love of fantasy and love of language is all but prenatal. As a young child Tolkien "desired dragons with a profound desire," and somewhere between the nursery and the beginning of school he was already curious about etymology. The full-blown interest in Faërie and philology came when he was a young man. More than fifty years ago he was already at work on what was to become The Lord of the Rings, Silmarillion, and Akallabêth, covering the three ages of Middle-earth. Only Professor Tolkien himself could adequately trace the rivulets that make up this glorious river, and I shall be able to do little more than suggest known sources. Actually, surprisingly little is known about the background of his creative works. One wonders, for instance, how his two years as an assistant on the Oxford English Dictionary and his vocabulary studies in Old and Middle English, together with his years of association with students and dons at the University of Leeds and at Pembroke and Merton Colleges at Oxford, have influenced his creative experience. Let us hope that a large autobiography may be forthcoming from Professor Tolkien.

Early in his life he began retelling Western world myths in his own words and later attempted to combine these into a credible whole. This close work with myths gave him the impression that they had lacunae and other shortcomings. Beowulf, for instance, he found strong in structure but weak in details. This, plus his growing sensitivity to the world of philology, are two of the causes which launched him into his own myth creativity. Perhaps I should add that his "borrowings" are almost wholly from Scandinavian and Northern mythology. Though he was born in Africa, he seems to have made no use of African myth or legend other than touches of Egyptian. There is little evidence, I think, of Oriental myth. Tolkien has a surprisingly broad knowledge of American literature, but American folklore is also absent from his myth. The only touch I have noticed might be Aragorn's sharp powers of sight and hearing and his ability to track an adversary through the forests, characteristics ascribed to the American Indian.

The word "borrowings" may need some explanation. Our view of creativity differs rather sharply (and I think for the worse) from that of medieval and earlier times. Today we feature the "star" and tend to become more enamored of a name than of an accomplishment. We also worship utter originality to the point of eccentricity and regard literary indebtedness as shameful. These things were not always so. In earlier times art belonged to the people, and when it came to such things as the folk tale or song, most anyone might change or embellish it as he thought best. Even the medieval cathedrals took on new architectural patterns as time passed and one builder did not mind beginning where the last had left off, and plagiarism in our modern sense was unknown. Tolkien's use of myth patterns and elements belongs to this earlier tradition.

His myth has its closest affinity with the Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Norse, Gaelic, Finnish, and Germanic. Since he is a good Greek scholar, it is only natural for that exalted mythology to have its effect also. Matthew Hoffman (Tolkien Journal, II:1) has pointed out that person and place names such as Durin, Dain, Thrór, Erebor, Glóin, Gandalf, and several of the dwarves in The Hobbit are from Norse sources. Tolkien himself has made it clear that Middle-earth is like Midgard. Shadowfax is like Odin's Sleipnir, the fastest horse in the world. Both the dwarves in Tolkien and the dwarfs in Scandinavian myth are extremely clever, and also easily provoked. In both mythologies, some of the dwarf(ve)s and elves live together. In both, runes and barrows, riddle-making and wolf-riders, and the use of rings, etc., are frequent. In Norse myth Garm is a vicious dog who guards hell, and very different, except in name, from the lazy conniver of Farmer Giles of Ham. Of course there are trolls in Norse myth, but there the sun's rays turn a giant into stone on the same pattern as the trolls in The Hobbit. There is also in the Norse the story of a big toe that is hurled into the sky and becomes a star. If we compare Tolkien's beautiful account of Eärendil's similar experience we perhaps have an example of Tolkien's wish to improve upon the older myth. Actually there is an Earendel, or Morning Star, in Norse myth. The overwhelming sense of Götterdämmerung hangs over both Northern myth and Tolkien's. Eowyn is like Hervor in loving the sword and field of battle better than the home. Tolkien has Isildur's Bane and Durin's Bane; in Norse myth there are swords called Fafnir's Bane and Hjalmar's Bane. A talking sword in the Silmarillion is fashioned on Norse myth, and in both Tolkien and Norse a broken sword is preserved looking to reforging and gallant use in a future generation. Helgi had a daughter by an elf woman, like the unions of elves and men in the Ring and Silmarillion. In Norse myth one man is permitted to live three times as long as others. One Fridthjof disguises himself by pulling a broad-brimmed hat over his eyes, like Saruman in Fangorn Wood. The Silmarillion, when published, will show a similar record of borrowings, especially those having to do with the creation and early history of Midgard. There is no space here to discuss another important agreement between Tolkien and Northern myth, i.e., that though both worlds are often filled with violence, the Tao or moral order is always sturdy.

At another level, and as might be expected, Tolkien uses his personal experience in his stories. In a feature in the Oxford Mail (Aug. 3, 1966), Tolkien is reported to have spoken nostalgically about a Shire-like old mill and its charming pond near Birmingham where he lived as a boy. "I could draw you a map of every inch of it," he said. The hobbits, he went on, are modeled on the village people and children at this place. "They rather despised me because my mother liked me to be pretty. I went about with long hair and a Little Lord Fauntleroy costume. The hobbits are just what I should like to have been but never was--an entirely unmilitary people who always came up to scratch in a clinch." As we were driving a few miles east of Oxford, Professor Tolkien pointed out to me the village in which he had located Farmer Giles, and on the same trip he called my attention to some rolling hills that he described as fitting hobbit holes. The storms in The Hobbit and at Caradhras in the Ring are modeled after Tolkien's experience in the Swiss Alps in 1911 when he and some friends saw two thunderstorms come together and had great boulders fall very close to them where they had taken refuge.

Fred Lerner (Tolkien Journal, II:3) reminds us that there is considerable philological autobiography in Tolkien's Angles and Britons

(University of Wales Press, 1963, esp. pp. 37-41). This book does indeed reveal a side of Tolkien that needs to be understood as explaining his remark that the Ring is nothing more than a study in "linguistic esthetics." The unique thing we learn in the book is that his philological studies have all the warmth of life. There he describes his pleasure in languages as he learned them: French, Latin, Greek, Spanish, etc. "Gothic," he says, "was the first to take me by storm, to move my heart." Just to look at the vocabulary in a Gothic primer gave him, he says, a delight equivalent to Keats's on first hearing Chapman's Homer. Instead of indicting a sonnet, Tolkien began immediately to invent words on the Gothic pattern, and it was on this language that he modeled his Elvish. Later Finnish gave him immense pleasure, but it was Welsh, and particularly medieval Welsh, that bewitched him. "I heard it coming out of the west. It struck at me in the names on coal-trucks; and drawing nearer, it flickered past on station signs, a flash of strange spelling and a hint of a language old and yet alive...it pierced my linguistic heart." That language touched some subconscious depth in Tolkien that has continued to this day to reverberate. He says that most of his person and place names in the Ring are deliberately modeled on those of the Welsh, and he thinks that this element "has given perhaps more pleasure to readers than anything else" in that story.

He points out, by the way, that the pleasure felt in a language is quite different from a scholarly or practical knowledge of that language, being "simpler, deeper-rooted, and yet more immediate than the enjoyment of literature." He thinks it is best felt in the mere contemplation of vocabulary or in a string of proper names. It will be remembered that Professor Tolkien declared the Ring to be without allegorical intentions and chiefly an essay in linguistic esthetics. But it is clear enough that such an aim in Tolkien's case is far from either that of a cold-blooded scholar or else of a mere fiddler with words, rather that for him a language, properly experienced, is capable of establishing its own full world of mythic meaning.

The immense success of Tolkien's creative works has lately overshadowed his scholarly activity. Yet the latter, though in published form quite limited, is significant. One such indication is the fact that on the occasion of Tolkien's seventieth birthday in 1962 a volume called English and Medieval Studies dedicated to him as scholar and teacher was written by twenty-two of his former pupils as well as colleagues and friends. In 1922 Tolkien published A Middle English Vocabulary and in 1925 he edited, with E. V. Gordon, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. In 1936 he delivered the Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture to the British Academy on Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics, an essay which has become something of a classic in its field. He has recently translated Sir Gawain and the Pearl and these are to be published shortly. But the most important of his essays for the reader of the Ring is "On Fairy Stories" (in Essays Presented to Charles Williams, Oxford University Press, 1947), an essay which C. S. Lewis declared to be perhaps the most important contribution yet made on its subject. All that Tolkien says there is important to an understanding of him as myth-maker and writer of "Faerie." But this subject is covered by Mr. Auden.

I shall only add that Professor Tolkien believes one of his lifelong blessings has been a constitutional sense of humor. It is certainly one of the things we enjoy in its variety of appearances in Tom Bombadil, Farmer Giles, The Hobbit, and, more subtly, in The Lord of the Rings.