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Perilous Wanderings through the Enchanted Forest: The Influence of the Fairy-Tale Tradition on Mirkwood in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*

Abstract

Considers the roots of Mirkwood in European fairy tale traditions, using Basile's *Pentamerone* as a typical example, and how Tolkien adapted and rejected traditional features of the perilous wood to suit his thematic and stylistic needs as a story-teller.

Additional Keywords

Basile, Giambattista. *Pentamerone*; Fairy tales—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Forests; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Mirkwood; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*—Sources

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ERILIOUS WANDERINGS THROUGH THE ENCHANTED FOREST: THE INFLUENCE OF THE FAIRY-TALE TRADITION ON MIRKWOOD IN TOLKIEN'S *The Hobbit*

MARCO R.S. POST

Inevitably they find their way into the forest. It is there that they lose and find themselves. It is there that they gain a sense of what is to be done. The forest is always large, immense, great, and mysterious. No one ever gains power over the forest, but the forest possesses the power to change lives and alter destinies. In many ways it is the supreme authority on earth and often the great provider. It is not only Hansel and Gretel who get lost in the forest and then return wiser and fulfilled. (Zipes 66)

TREES AND FORESTS ARE A PERVASIVE AND RECURRENT *leitmotiv* throughout Tolkien's fictional *oeuvre* which significantly affects his work, as can be seen in the special prominence given to them both as settings (e.g. the splendor and glory of the magical forest of Lothlórien or the ominous Fangorn forest) and characters (e.g. Treebeard and the resentful Old Willow). In Middle-earth, forests figure not only prominently as a geographical background for the medieval-romance-like¹ adventures that occur there, but also carry important thematic resonances for the stories that take place in that fantastical world. This is particularly so the case, I will argue in this essay, for the forest of Mirkwood, which plays an important role, both thematically and structurally, in *The Hobbit*. Although considerably more critical attention has been given to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien's *chef d'oeuvre*, *The Hobbit* (which predates *The Lord of the Rings* in publication and acts as a prequel to it) is an intriguing work of fiction on its own right, which also merits further critical analysis for the sake of a better understanding of Tolkien's legendarium as a whole. Mirkwood is the largest extant forest of Middle-earth, through which the protagonist Bilbo and his thirteen companion dwarves need to pass in order to reach their destination, the hoard of gold inside the Lonely Mountain on the other side of the forest. However, Mirkwood is a dark and perilous place to be in, and of course various problems emerge as the company is crossing that wild expanse and have to

¹ For a detailed analysis of elements from the medieval romance tradition in Tolkien's *oeuvre*, see George H. Thomson.

be dealt with. Mirkwood is a coinage by Tolkien, who translated it from Old Norse *Myrkviðr* (meaning “dark wood”) into its Old English hypothetical variant **Myrcwudu*, which in turn was slightly modernized in spelling into Mirkwood (Fisher 9). The etymology of the name ‘Mirkwood’ is representative of the broader pattern within Tolkien’s fictional work of borrowing from a wide array of sources from antiquity and the Middle Ages. As has frequently been asserted (e.g. Sullivan 282-283, Thomson 58), Tolkien, a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, drew much of his fictional material from medieval Germanic and Celtic folklore, myths, and romances. As such, it is quite likely that Tolkien’s depiction of forests, too, has not been created *ex nihilo*, but is the result of inspiration by and borrowing from these sources. In this essay, the question that I set out to answer is how borrowings from these sources have influenced the description of the enchanted forest of Mirkwood. An analysis of the manner in which Mirkwood fits within a broader tradition of folklore and fairy tales will yield further insight on the structural and thematic function of the forest in *The Hobbit*. The main hypothesis I will work from is that Mirkwood by and large fits within the literary *topos* of the enchanted forests in the fairy-tale tradition. Within West-European fairy tales, forests, too, have an important thematic and structural function, and as such they would have provided a template for Tolkien to draw on. Tolkien, however, in the process of adapting the *topos* of the enchanted forest, plays with it and adds further elements to it from other literary traditions, namely Classical literature and nineteenth- and twentieth-century novels. I will examine these influences on the representation of Mirkwood as well, to analyze how the manner in which they are adapted and juxtaposed contributes to the enchanting and simultaneously estranging nature of Mirkwood.

In the tradition of the West-European fairy tale, the forest is a recurring *topos* with distinctive features that frequently fills a characteristic function within the tales. To begin with, forests (like other wild locations remote from society) often act as a foil to civilization and urbanity. Often, one finds in such fairy tales a dichotomy between on the one hand the bustling city/court with its civilization and light, and on the other hand the untamed forest with its wildness, rawness, loneliness, and darkness (Canepa 207-210, Messerli 274). Within the forest, the protagonist usually finds shelter from what s/he hoped to escape from the civilized world (e.g. forced marriage or a plot to assassinate him/her). On the other hand, because of their feral nature, forests in fairy tales are also challenging places, in which the courage and aptitude of the protagonist is tested and in which s/he needs to prove his/her worth. A successful completion of this challenge is often accompanied by a rise in social status, by marital success, and/or by financial benefit (Canepa 207-210). As Vladimir Propp observes, forests are often the locale in which the donor can be found (84), i.e. one who helps the protagonist in his/her quest, for instance by providing him/her with an artifact of magical potency (Propp 79-83). Moreover, the forest in the West-European fairy tale recurrently has the function of a *limen* to the Otherworld, which is to say a

conventional landmark which signifies the boundary between the mundane and the banal on the one hand and the magical and fantastic on the other:

The European fairy tale creates two non-homeomorphic [i.e. dissimilar] worlds—a magical world of supernatural beings from the beyond, and a non-magical one of normal human beings—worlds that are divided from one another through occasionally fluid but sometimes also inflexible boundaries and frontier regions. With this first structure a second coexists in that for the narrator and the listener both worlds belong in any case to the same “magic” virtual world of the fairy tale, which is clearly separated from their own real one. (Messerli 274)

Although other objects in the landscape can be used symbolically to signify the transition to the Otherworld as well, such as a bridge, pond, river, or well, the forest is a *limen* “of particular importance” (Messerli 274). To illustrate these generic traits more clearly, I will now briefly examine the role of the forest in Giambattista Basile’s *Pentamerone* (1634 & 1636) and the Grimm Brothers’ *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (1812), respectively, two very prominent and influential collections of West-European fairy tales.

In Basile’s *Pentamerone*, the forest is, according to Nancy Canepa, “one of the most characteristic topographies” (207), and as a consequence it naturally plays an important role within its tales. Here, too, we find the generic role of the forest as a foil to courtly civilization and as a provider of both challenges and opportunities for the protagonist. However, rather than simply representing ‘the wild,’ forests in *Pentamerone* are instead more like an empty slate of Otherness on which the characters of the tales project their fears and desires. Although inciting fear on the trespassers, the real danger characters from the *Pentamerone* can expect comes from intruders from the civilized world, or from an occasional skulking band of brigands. Instead, forests often represent a *locus amoenus*, an idyllic place of safety and comfort, in which the protagonists can rest from their agonies in the courtly world before reemerging into civilization. Despite their associations with wilderness, forests function rather as some sort of counter-court, bustling with social activity (particularly from rustic as opposed to civilized folk) and in which frequently haphazard encounters with strangers occur (Canepa 207-214). Nonetheless, stresses Canepa, the typical forest in the *Pentamerone* is “a middle ground whose ‘in-betweenness’ is not so much the liminal site for rites of initiation as it is a stage for metaphors of hybridity [i.e. for metaphorically representing heterogeneous and incongruous thematic elements of the narrative] that highlights [the *Pentamerone*’s] engagement with historical reality and diverse traditions” (214).

Jack Zipes stresses the importance of forests in Grimm’s *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* as facilitators of social mobility for the protagonists. In these fairy tales, forests are “unconventional” and “free” spaces in which the protagonists, far

removed from the rigid social stratification of the courtly world, must prove themselves by overcoming the challenges that waylay their path (Zipes 66-67). As Zipes asserts:

In a majority of the tales it is interesting to see how the forest also serves as a kind of topos: it is the place that belongs to all the people, it levels all social distinctions and makes everyone equal. The forest allows for a change in protagonist's destiny and enables the social type to distinguish him or herself. (Zipes 70)

Some concrete examples of this are, amongst others, "The Glass Coffin," in which a tailor, lost in the forest, rescues a princess who subsequently marries him, and "The Blue Light," in which a witch in the forest, as a donor figure, helps a soldier to gain vengeance on the king and to marry his daughter. It must be emphasized here that in the German tradition, rather than belonging to some monarch or nobleman, forests were free land, belonging to no one in particular (Zipes 73); this, together with their remoteness from the civilized world of the court, enables them to function as social equalizer to the protagonists, who, instead of their social standing in civilization, can now only rely on their own skills and bravery.

What can be seen in the analysis of the manifestation of the *topos* of the enchanted forest in specific fairy tales, namely Basile's *Pentamerone* and the Grimm brothers' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, respectively, is that even though at a generic level general tendencies exist, individual fairy tales all play with conventions and appropriate some aspects of it while modifying others. This, however, is a very characteristic trait of fairy tales, as they do not have rigid genre conventions, but tend to be very fluid and hybrid. As Ruth Bottigheimer observes, "A 'fairy tale' is a slippery thing" (39), as it closely connects to other literary genres as folk tales, medieval romances and legends. As such, "Europe's rich corpus of fairy tales has labyrinthine origins" and has exhaustively borrowed from a wide variety of literary sources, while continuously adapting and reshaping them (Bottigheimer 44). The *topos* of the enchanted forest, hence, is as fluid as pervasive within the West-European fairy tale. However, as we have seen in the examples of the *Pentamerone* and the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, in all cases it is connected with the Other and the Otherworldly, it is hallmarked by an (at times ambiguous and contradictory) contrast to its foil the court, and it functions as a place of action where protagonists have to prove their worth and can rise in status when successful.

When comparing the typical traits of the *topos* of the enchanted forest in fairy tales with the forest of Mirkwood in *The Hobbit*, a first reading might indeed confirm that the characteristic dichotomy between civilized urbanity versus its antithetical wilderness in the woods applies to Tolkien's novel as well. The first time Mirkwood is described in the novel, it is as "the dark and dangerous wood, that lay outstretched far to North and South a day's ride before them, barring their way to the

East, the terrible forest of Mirkwood" (VII:136-7). Beorn, who hosts Bilbo & company for several days in his abode, says that "[i]f you lived near the edge of Mirkwood, you would take the word of no one that you did not know as well as your brother or better" (VII:142), implying that most folks skulking near Mirkwood are shady and unreliable characters. The image that emerges from these quotations seems to confirm the typical dichotomy of court versus forest. Furthermore, during the most part of their journey through the forest, Bilbo and the thirteen dwarves do not encounter a single soul.

As Bilbo and the dwarves progress through Mirkwood, though, this apparently clear-cut dichotomy is slowly being debunked: the novel first invokes expectations of wilderness and barbaric desolation, only to complicate this image later on. A clear example of the problematization of this dichotomous conception would be the Wood-elves resident in Mirkwood, whom Bilbo and his dwarf companions encounter at the outer edge of the forest. The role of these Wood-elves in *The Hobbit* is ambiguous: despite the narrator's assertion that they are "Good People" (VIII:179), they waylay Bilbo and company and put the dwarves in jail for trespassing on their lands, the latter fact suggesting that the Wood-elves claim sovereignty over (at least parts of) Mirkwood. Contrary to the generic contrast between court and wilderness, the royal palace of the Wood-elves is situated within the boundaries of Mirkwood. This means that in *The Hobbit* court and forest are not really antithetical in their relationship, but in fact coincide here both spatially and thematically. This is further substantiated by the fact that some days before their first direct contact with the Wood-elves, Bilbo and the dwarves hear horns blowing and hounds barking and see deer fleeing to safety, a sign of Wood-elves hunting in their territory. In medieval England, forests often belonged to the monarch or some nobility as their own property, to which they had exclusive hunting rights (Withers 86-87). So, too, in *The Hobbit*: the Elves are the only ones allowed to hunt in Mirkwood, and when the dwarves fire volley after volley of arrows after the deer, every single shot misses, as if the narrative underscores here that the animals in Mirkwood are not theirs to hunt. The claim of sovereignty the Wood-elves make on Mirkwood seems to go contrary to the position of forests in the Grimm brothers' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, where these do not belong to anyone, in accordance with the old German tradition of forests as free space under the dominion of no one. However, the rule of the Wood-elves is challenged: goblins and enormous spiders continuously transgress their boundaries, paths have fallen into neglect and disuse, and the Elves seem to be unable to oversee all the territory they claim as their own. Even though the Elves lay claim to the whole of Mirkwood, large tracts of it are *de facto* no-man's land.

So what we can see, then, is that rather than a generic opposition between civilized court and wild forest in *The Hobbit*, one finds in Mirkwood an intricate mélange of wilderness and civilization instead. Tolkien has carefully manipulated the expectations based on the *topos* of the enchanted forest: at first he has evoked an

image of desolation and wilderness, only to complicate it with layers of courtly life and civilization later on. Up to a certain extent, this playful modification of the typical dichotomous image of the forest as a literary *topos* is reminiscent of Basile's *Pentamerone*, in which, too, the antithetical relationship between court and forest is invoked only to be tinkered with, thus creating and refuting the expectations of the reader. Continuing this line of argument, the court of the Wood-elves can be seen as a reflection of the counter-court found in the forests of Basile's *Pentamerone*. What the forests of Tolkien, the Grimm brothers, and Basile all have in common is that they function as spaces of Otherness, which at first appear deserted and wild, yet which later turn out to contain a rich fabric of social interactions in what is effectively a sylvan counter-court.

The urbanity-wilderness dichotomy is even further problematized when looking at the affective evaluation of Mirkwood. The feral wilderness of Mirkwood is perceived as threatening by Bilbo and his dwarf companions, but elsewhere in the novel technology and industry, concepts that epitomize urbanity, are actively condemned by the narrator when he speaks of "machines that have since then troubled the world" (IV:73). According to Michael J. Brisbois's analysis of the portrayal of nature within the *oeuvre* of Tolkien, nature is depicted in an intermediate (yet sometimes contradictory) position between these two extremes: ideally, people are to live in a symbiotic relationship with nature and to act as stewards over it, providing care, respect and husbandry, something which is actualized *par excellence* by the Elves. An instrumental view of nature, on the contrary, one based on exploitation, such as held by the goblins, is portrayed as villainous (Brisbois 203). This analysis seems by and large applicable to *The Hobbit* as well. However, the relationship with nature is always tenuous, and apart from the Elves, who manage to coexist peacefully with Mirkwood and do not seem to be greatly bothered by its perils, most characters struggle with their relationship with nature, as is exemplified by the protagonists of the novel's fear and awe with respect to Mirkwood. So too, of course, in fairy tales, in which the forest often performs a highly ambiguous role both as social equalizer and giver of opportunities, but also as a place of menace and of destabilizing and alienating Otherness.

Moving on to another characteristic of the *topos* of the enchanted forest, the *limen*, one can see that Mirkwood most certainly has some Otherworldly characteristics, such as its perennial darkness, the Enchanted River that streams through it, and the monstrous spiders that skulk inside, all of which render an image of Mirkwood as an Otherworldly place of enchantment—certainly when contrasted to their almost homely stay before in Beorn's lodgings. However, having said this, one can wonder how far the borders of Mirkwood truly are a liminal zone, as strictly speaking the Otherworldly in *The Hobbit* is not confined within Mirkwood, but can be found throughout Middle-earth, albeit maybe a bit more in Mirkwood than in most other regions. Even though the Otherworld in typical fairy tales is not located at one

specific point, but can be found at various places overlapping the ordinary world, the fact that one has to access it through a *limen* suggests that there is some sort of separation between the two, and the *limen* serves as a hallmark signifying the transition between the two. However, in Middle-earth one sees that the ordinary and the magical are mostly interwoven with one another, and consequently one can find magic at various places: when Bilbo and the dwarves cross the Misty Mountains, mountain giants hurl boulders to one another, when the company has just departed the Shire (the homeland of Bilbo), a group of trolls is encamping after having skulked the lands, looking for easy quarry,² and then there is of course the dragon lurking in the Lonely Mountain. The boundaries between the normal world and the Otherworld are much more porous in *The Hobbit* than in fairy tales, and there certainly is no forest figuring as a noticeable *limen* between the two.

Even though this means that a rigid distinction between normal world and the Otherworld is much less evident in *The Hobbit*, it could be argued that this difference does exist in the separate status enjoyed by the Shire in Middle-earth. What sets the Shire apart from all the other lands in Middle-earth is its very banality and lack of anything magical or wondrous. Apart from the diminutive size of its inhabitants, it is striking how mundane and familiar the Hobbits in the Shire in fact are as fantasy creatures. Tom Shippey argues that Tolkien basically 'calqued' the Shire from Edwardian England, by which he means that the author of *The Hobbit* took bits and pieces from English culture and society and reconstituted them back together again translated into a creatively new form neither belonging fully to the real world nor to Middle-earth (115-116), in the same manner as "Mirkwood" is a calque from Old Norse, but is strictly speaking neither genuinely Old Norse nor Modern English. "The point about calques is that the derivative does not sound anything like its original: nevertheless, it betrays influence at every point. Thus historically the Shire is like/unlike England, the hobbits like/unlike English people" (Shippey 116).

Consequently, one could argue that the difference between the ordinariness of the Shire and the magicalness of Middle-earth is very much reminiscent of the typical difference between the normal world and the Otherworld in fairy tales. In fairy tales, what matters most is not so much the presence of the Otherworldly itself, but the interaction of the normal world with the Otherworld: it is at the very intersection of these two domains that the plot of fairy tales takes place. As Tolkien himself argues:

² Note that the trolls are encountered *west* of the "Edge of the Wild," a line drawn on the map of Wilderland to emphasize the barbarity and Otherworldliness of all the lands east of Rivendell. As such, the "Edge of the Wild" strictly speaking cannot be regarded as a *limen* to separate the mundane from the fantastical either.

Stories that are actually concerned primarily with ‘fairies’, that is with creatures that might also in modern English be called ‘elves’, are relatively rare, and as a rule not very interesting. Most good ‘fairy-stories’ are about the *aventures* of men in the Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches. Naturally so; for if elves are true, and really exist independently of our tales about them, then this also is certainly true: elves are not primarily concerned with us, nor we with them. Our fates are sundered, and our paths seldom meet. Even upon the borders of Faërie we encounter them only at some chance crossing of the ways. (“On Fairy-Stories” 113)

Consequently, as Bilbo undertakes the journey to the Lonely Mountain, he transgresses the indistinct yet present boundary between the Shire of the normal world and the Otherworldly rest of Middle-earth; the interaction Bilbo henceforth has with the Otherworld is what makes up the plot of *The Hobbit* and is simultaneously what makes the novel fairy-tale-like.³ Additionally, it is also this very interaction which makes the Otherworldly in the novel comprehensible and palatable. The focalization of the narrative through the character which is most like the reader and least Otherworldly allows the reader to share Bilbo’s experiences of marvel and to identify with him the better whilst simultaneously Bilbo functions as a bridge between the reader and the otherworld. As Tom Shippey notes, “*The Hobbit* [...] can be seen as primarily [a work] of mediation” in which “Bilbo acts as the link between modern times and the archaic world of dwarves and dragons” (259).

Having now digressed somewhat upon the fairy-tale-like interaction between the normal world and the Otherworld in *The Hobbit*, though, let me now to resume my argument about how Mirkwood fits within the *topos* of the enchanted forest.

Yet another aspect that Mirkwood in *The Hobbit* has in common with forests in the West-European fairy tale tradition is its function in the plot as a whole: for in Tolkien’s novel, too, the woodlands serve as a place of challenge and possibility, in which the protagonist needs to prove his worth to gain upward social mobility. In the beginning of the tale, Bilbo has never experienced any adventure before (I:10), and looks according to the dwarves “more like a grocer than a burglar” (I:26). Nevertheless, as Bilbo undertakes the quest to the Lonely Mountain he runs into all sorts of adventures and is frequently tested and challenged, out of which he emerges as a stronger and more courageous man. According to William H. Green, the plot of *The Hobbit* is structured in four distinct parts, each beginning and ending with a sojourn in a safe haven and all of them with a challenging adventure in the middle. First of all, there is the departure from the Shire to Rivendell, during which three trolls have to be defeated; secondly, the journey through the Misty Mountains from

³ For further information on the distinction between the Shire and the rest of Middle-earth in *The Hobbit*, see Jean MacIntyre.

Rivendell to Beorn's hall, during which Goblins threaten the safe passage of Bilbo and company; then the brooding Mirkwood has to be crossed, until the protagonists find repose in Lake Town; finally, the dragon in the Lonely Mountain needs to be dealt with and the conflict about the hoard he is guarding needs to be settled before the denouement of the novel. With each next challenge, the difficulty level rises incrementally, beginning quite trivially with three trolls near the Shire and ending with the dire menace of Smaug the dragon (Green 133-138). Despite the fact that Mirkwood is only third of the four challenges, and therefore not the most difficult of them all to overcome, an important and profound transformation in Bilbo's character occurs in these woods that allows him to be strong enough to face the threat of the dragon, for it is in Mirkwood that Bilbo is for the first time engaged in combat and learns to fight and kill when necessary. The passage where Bilbo has just killed his first adversary, a giant spider, illustrates this point clearly:

There was the usual dim grey light of the forest-day about him when he came to his senses. The spider lay dead beside him, and his sword-blade was stained black. Somehow the killing of the giant spider, all alone by himself in the dark without the help of the wizard or the dwarves or of anyone else, made a great difference to Mr. Baggins. He felt a different person, and much fiercer and bolder, in spite of an empty stomach, as he wiped his sword on the grass and put it back into his sheath.

"I will give you a name," he said to it, "and I shall call you *Sting*." (VIII:167)

To begin with, one can notice here the great psychological impact the rite of passage of killing his first enemy has upon Bilbo: it "made a great difference to Mr. Baggins" and "he felt a different person" after it. As a consequence, he feels "much fiercer and bolder." But it is particularly overcoming the challenge *on his own* which makes Bilbo feel proud, proving he is equally worthy as any warrior and is not just some "grocer" who is chaperoned by the wizard and the dwarves. Instead, we see a reversal of roles, for it is the underdog Bilbo (underdog not only in expectations of him but in physical size as well) who rescues the dwarves, entangled in webs, from the hazardous spiders. The naming of the sword is not merely symbolical here; it also more or less underlines Bilbo as having achieved his true destiny. For the name 'Bilbo' is most likely derived from Middle English *bil-boie*, meaning sword-boy, and consequently the fact that Bilbo now has a sword,⁴ knows how to wield it, and has given it a name, means that he in effect fulfils the destiny his name has meted out to him (Green 133).⁵

⁴ By Hobbit standards, admittedly; for Men or Elves *Sting* would have been no more than a sizeable "knife" (II:53).

⁵ Parenthetically, I would just like to point out that although *qua* plot Mirkwood does fit the structure typical for the fairy-tale genre for the forest as facilitator of social mobility, the means by which this happens is somewhat different, in the sense that the typical Proppian donor is

Another structural fairy-tale element which characterizes the passage through Mirkwood is the transgression of interdictions and the subsequent adventures that result from it. According to Vladimir Propp, the plot of fairy tales often begins with the departure of an older person (mostly a parent figure), who utters an interdiction before s/he departs, which is then violated, with trouble that has to be solved by the protagonist as a result (25-8). Similarly, before Bilbo and company enter Mirkwood, Gandalf, the wizard who has organized the quest and who functions as a *de facto* parental figure for the protagonists, departs to deal with the problematic situation involving the Necromancer elsewhere. Before Gandalf leaves them, though, they receive two pieces of advice about how to cross Mirkwood: Beorn stresses that they are not to touch or drink from the water of the Enchanted River and the wizard cautions them that under no circumstances are they to stray from the path (VII:143). The first interdiction is not transgressed willingly: the turmoil among animals of the forest distracts the company, resulting in Bombur falling in the stream and falling into a magical comatose sleep as a result. Alternatively, though, one could perhaps argue that the dwarves should have been more cautious and therefore failed to heed the interdiction enough by means of their inattentiveness.

However it be, the consequences of this first transgression are not extremely dire, except that they facilitate the second, worse transgression: for Bombur, while asleep, has pleasant dreams of a feast waiting for them if only they digress from the path (138). Thus, the hungry company is tempted to leave the path and go looking for the feast waiting for them at the fires burning beyond the forest path. Naturally, they yield to temptation, and then the adventure of Mirkwood begins: first a pack of dire spiders takes the dwarves in captivity, whom Bilbo must rescue, and then the Wood-elves lock the dwarves up in the dungeons of their palace, and Bilbo again must prove his worth by coming to their aid. Another interesting aspect about this is that the protagonists make three attempts to make contact with the Wood-elves by the fires (all three of which fail); this fits the aspect of trebling which is so typical for the structure of adventures for folktale protagonists (Propp 74-75). Since the admonition not to stray from the path is repeated several times, both by Gandalf and by Beorn (sometimes the prohibition is even capitalized entirely, for instance: "DON'T LEAVE THE PATH!" [VII:150]), it must be quite significant for the structure of the plot of the Mirkwood episode of the quest, and indeed until that point the journey in Mirkwood went more or less smoothly; only directly after the transgression are the lives of the protagonists jeopardized. Rather than a serious drawback on their journey, though, in effect it only works out for the best, for this course of events allows Bilbo to mature psychologically (see my above analysis on the naming-of-the-sword episode) and it allows the hobbit and his dwarf companions to take a better route, since (as they find

absent here. Bilbo does acquire a magical artifact that aids him in his quest, but he finds it in the Misty Mountains, not in Mirkwood.

out later) the escape from the Elven dungeons via the river is the only route being properly maintained (more or less), whereas the path originally planned for the company is neglected, grown wild and unsafe due to roaming goblins (X:203). So what can be seen here, then, is that the structure of the plot in Mirkwood is remarkably similar to the plot framework of adventures in fairy tales as Vladimir Propp has sketched.

Although (as we have seen so far) Mirkwood in *The Hobbit* does fit nicely in the West-European fairy tale tradition with respect to its function for the plot, it is important to note that it does not adhere at all to this tradition qua spatialization, i.e. the manner in which space is represented in literature. As Alfred Messerli points out, spatial representation in the West-European fairy tales is hallmarked by three underlying features: "economy in the organization of space, the discontinuous order of spatial perception, and the significance of the narrative perspective for the narrated space" (276). Regarding the first feature, this entails that spatial details are only given sparingly, and that wide elaborations in spatial setting are often completely absent. As regards Messerli's second point, it can be noted that people travel from one place to another quite suddenly, without much elaboration on the voyage itself, but only intermittent descriptions regarding stops where something happens. The final feature signifies the lack of a clear cartography behind fairy tales, but that instead the reader usually only learns about happenings in a palace or forest in some unspecified or fantastic place, without much geographical relations between different places (Messerli 276-278).⁶

The description by Messerli of the characteristic manner of representing space in the West-European fairy tale contrasts sharply to the accounts of space in *The Hobbit*, on all three features. First of all, the narrator often indulges in detailed descriptions of the spatial setting, with which he effectively creates the ambiance and mood of the setting. Exemplary is the description of Bilbo and the dwarves entering Mirkwood:

They walked in single file. The entrance to the path was like a sort of arch leading into a gloomy tunnel made by two great trees that leant together, too old and strangled with ivy and hung with lichen to bear more than a few blackened leaves. The path itself was narrow and wound in and out among the trunks. Soon the light at the gate was like a little bright hole far behind, and the quiet was so deep that their feet seemed to thump along while all the trees leaned over them and listened.

⁶ This aspect can for instance be seen as well in *Smith of Wootton Major*, of all the literary works by Tolkien the one most fairy-tale-like, which also lacks a map of the sort otherwise characteristic in Tolkien's fiction.

As their eyes became used to the dimness they could see a little way to either side in a sort of darkened green glimmer. Occasionally a slender beam of sun that had the luck to slip in through some opening in the leaves far above, and still more luck in not being caught in the tangled boughs and matted twigs beneath, stabbed down thin and bright before them. But this was seldom, and it soon ceased altogether. (VIII:151)

This excerpt defies the principle of the economy of space, for the description is actually quite elaborate, and is in fact only a part of a much larger description of Mirkwood. However, the spatial description not only gives the reader an impression of what the forest is like, but it also sets the tone: it creates an image of confinement in its similarity to a “tunnel” and of a lurking threat and of gloom in the repeated emphasis on darkness and the color black. Furthermore, this spatial description also defies the underlying principle of discontinuous spatial narration: for the words “soon,” “occasionally,” “seldom” sketch an image of temporal progression, underlining that this is not a static description of an image of Mirkwood, but rather a dynamic account through which the reader gets to know the wood as the company progresses through the forest. The passage is a narration of a journey through a forest, not a representation of just one single scene.

Thirdly, it must be emphasized that Mirkwood is only a minor part in a large and intricate fantasy world Tolkien created for his legendarium: the latter abounds with rich details and an exhaustive cartography of which the events in *The Hobbit* are merely a tiny aspect. Tom Shippey would surely disagree with me, as he states that it is particularly *The Lord of the Rings* which is truly a “Cartographic Plot” (107), and that at the time *The Hobbit* was made Tolkien was not yet advanced enough in the elaboration of his legendarium to make the novel as complex in detail as its sequel (109-118). What little cartography he does perceive to be present in *The Hobbit* “add[s] nothing to the story but decoration and a ‘Here be tygers’ feel of quaintness” (Shippey 114). I concede that the cartography of *The Hobbit* is not as intricate as in *The Lord of the Rings*, yet it would be too harsh to conclude that it is almost completely absent, and it certainly is considerably more present in *The Hobbit* than in a typical fairy tale. There is of course the map of Wilderland and Thrór’s map of the Lonely Mountain which visually give structure to the spatial aspect of the narrative (the former of these two maps especially). At a textual level, too, one can see that Tolkien has done some thinking as to how different lands and geographical features relate to one another in the novel, something which is normally all but absent in fairy tales, as the following excerpt of the travelling company on their route to Mirkwood attests:

As soon as they left his [Beorn’s] high hedges at the east of his fenced lands they turned north and then bore to the north-west. By his advice they were no longer making for the main forest-road to the south of his land. Had they followed the pass, their path would have led them down a stream from the

mountains that joined the great river miles south of Carrock. At that point there was a deep ford which they might have passed, if they had still had their ponies, and beyond that a track led to the skirts of the wood and to the entrance of the old forest road. But Beorn had warned them that that way was now often used by the goblins, while the forest-road itself, he had heard, was overgrown and disused at the eastern end and led to impassible marshes where the paths had long been lost. Its eastern opening had also always been far to the south of the Lonely Mountain, and would have left them still a long and difficult northward march when they got to the other side. North of the Carrock the edge of Mirkwood drew closer to the borders of the Great River, and though here Mountains too drew down nearer, Beorn advised them to take this way; for at a place of a few days' ride due north of the Carrock was the gate of a little-known pathway through Mirkwood that led almost straight towards the Lonely Mountain. (VII:144-145)

From this it can be concluded, then, that the spatial representation (through maps, descriptions) of Middle-earth defies the convention of space in the West-European fairy tale as "a-cartographical" and a "deviation of the subjective space structure from the Euclidean image of the real world" (Messerli 278). The amount of detail, accuracy, and internal consistency with which Tolkien crafted his legendarium (spatially as well) is a significant reason why this fantastic world has so much psychological realism and can therefore be so persuasive and immersive to the reader (Rateliff 2-6). In this respect, then, it can be said that even though with respect to the structural and thematic function of space Tolkien borrows much from medieval narratives and fairy tales, the style of narration of *The Hobbit* seems to be based on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideal of psychological realism. Tolkien, as a medievalist and conservative Catholic, generally was not very keen to apply a modernist style in his work (see Patchen Mortimer for a different point of view), but it seems undeniable that with respect to the style of narration Tolkien bases his representation of space to a significant degree on contemporary literary sources. Just as the Otherworldly aspects of Middle-earth are mediated through Bilbo, who is a much more familiar character to the reader than any other character in the book, so, too, is the alterity of *The Hobbit* made more accessible through a style of narration which is much less exotic than the *fabula* which it narrates.

The literary sources which inspired the creation of Mirkwood, though, are not limited to West-European fairy tales; Nordic folklore and modern literature, as in addition influences from Classical Antiquity can be detected in *The Hobbit* as well. The passage Bilbo and his accompanying dwarves make through Mirkwood, for example, resembles on various points a *katabasis* through the underworld, a *topos* of Classical epic poetry. In the quotation above on the entry of Bilbo and his dwarf companions into Mirkwood I have already dealt with the evocation of a sinister darkness and confinement in the tunnel-like passage through Mirkwood. As William H. Green

already noted, tunnels and darkness seem to be a recurrent *leitmotiv* throughout *The Hobbit*, for in the second (goblin tunnels in the Misty Mountains), third (Mirkwood) and fourth (the dwarven halls in the Lonely Mountain) part of the novel Bilbo and company must travel through dangerous tunnel-like environments in which adversaries waylay their quest (137). This similarity between the parts is even made explicit when the narrator intimates about the traveling company that “they grew to hate the forest as heartily as they had hated the tunnels of the goblins, and [that Mirkwood] seemed to offer even less hope of ending” (VIII:152).⁷ While inside Mirkwood, Bilbo and the dwarves encounter hosts of moths, an insect species that seems to be endemic to the forest (VIII:153); moths are nocturnal creatures, so their plenitude there underlines the pervasive darkness of Mirkwood. The inedibility of all food, the presence of dozens of reflecting eyes without any visible bodies attached to them that gaze at the travelling company, and the sightings of anomalous spider webs all add to the semi-supernatural and sterile aspect of the forest. Instead of teeming with life, the forest is felt to be suffocating and stuffy (VIII:152-153). Thus, Mirkwood resembles dark barren Hades in which countless souls linger and roam. The most direct similarity between Mirkwood and Hades, however, is the Enchanted River, which causes all those who drink of it or touch it to fall in a comatose sleep. Already the appearance of the Enchanted River evokes images of death and darkness: “[i]t flowed fast and strong but not very wide right across the way, *and it was black, or looked it in the gloom*” (VIII:153, my emphasis). But the most important link to the Hades is that it resembles the magical rivers that flow through the Greek underworld and cause magical effects upon those that attempt to cross it or who drink of it, such as the Styx (which strips gods from their immortality), the Lethe (causing oblivion), and the Acheron (which brings about sorrow). Like the rivers of Hades, the Enchanted River needs to be crossed by a boat as well and has no bridge over it (VIII:153). The magical effect of the Enchanted River on those who touch it or drink from it is also reminiscent of Hades, as the coma caused by it is like an intermediate state of consciousness between life and death. It goes too far to claim here that the depiction of Mirkwood is completely and directly based on Hades, or that the journey of Bilbo and his thirteen dwarf companions through Mirkwood is unequivocally and entirely constructed on the template of the *katabasis*; nonetheless, there are various elements of Mirkwood that evoke reminiscences to the *topos* of *katabasis*, which

⁷ What this implies, then, is that tunnels and underground spaces function very ambiguously in *The Hobbit*: on the one hand, Bilbo’s residence in the Shire is a tunnel, which is associated with coziness and comfort (“Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort” [I:9]), whereas on the other hand most challenges Bilbo and company face in their quest occur in dark, confined, and perilous spaces. So there is something very uncanny (in the Freudian sense of the word) about the challenges the protagonists are faced with.

effectuate the sinister, uncanny, and perilous nature of the forest. It is interesting to note, though, that borrowing from Classical *topoi* is also a typical feature of the West-European fairy tale tradition (think only about the *Psyche & Cupid* theme borrowed from Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* in "The Beauty & the Beast" for instance [Warner 273-276], or about Zephyrus featuring in Madame d'Aulnoy's *Île de la Félicité*). So in this respect Tolkien indirectly adheres to the tradition of the fairy tale as well.

Mirkwood not only parallels Hades in its appearance and function, but also resembles it in its primeval nature and ancient history; as such, Mirkwood is a chronotope thematically resonating with the primordial and raw force of nature which has to be subdued by Bilbo and the dwarves in *The Hobbit* repeatedly and which signifies the main challenges they come across on their quest. In the novel, one encounters recurring descriptions underlining the sheer antiquity of Mirkwood: the trees at the entrance of the forest are "too old and strangled with ivy and hung with lichen to bear more than a few blackened leaves" (VIII:151). Further on, one reads that:

There was a greenish light about them, and in places they could see some distance to either side of the path. Yet the light only showed them endless lines of straight grey trunks like pillars of some huge twilight hall. There was a breath of air and a noise of wind, but it had a sad sound. A few leaves came rustling down to remind them of that outside autumn was coming on. Their feet ruffled among the dead leaves of countless other autumns that drifted over the banks of the path from the deep red carpets of the forest. (VIII:158)

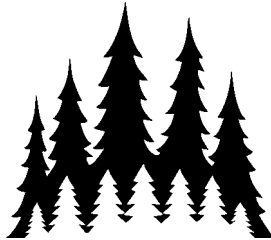
The dead leaves of "countless other autumns" that Mirkwood has witnessed are a testimony to the exceptionally old age of the forest. This image of Mirkwood as an Ur-setting is augmented by the fact that it is inhabited by Elves, who, with their long history and immortality, are a timeless and ancient folk. Furthermore, the ubiquitous darkness of the forest is reminiscent of the primeval blackness of Chaos before the Creation. However, one notices, too, the vast size of the forest in the description above: the trees visible seem to be "endless," and overall, the forest resembles "some huge twilight hall." On maps of Middle-earth in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, as well, one can see the sheer enormousness of the forest. Thus, Mirkwood is colossal both in time and in space.

Mirkwood is therefore linked to the plot through what Mikhail Bakhtin has conceptualized as the chronotope: instances in literature where time, space, and theme all merge together at one focus point. The chronotope is, put succinctly, a place of which its temporal dimension becomes so foregrounded that it is almost tangible, which carries important thematic resonances, and which has an essential function in structuring the plot of the narrative (Bakhtin 250-258). It is important to note that Mirkwood chronotopically depicts the theme of struggle against primeval and elemental opponents throughout *The Hobbit*, and can thus thematically be linked to

events occurring in other places in the novel, specifically the struggle with the dragon Smaug in the Lonely Mountain. In *“Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics,”* which was published at the time he was writing *The Hobbit*, Tolkien, in his analysis of the structural and thematic function of the monsters in *Beowulf*, underlines that in Nordic mythology the dragon represents a formidable and “elemental” foe, a kind of superlative enemy: “A dragon is no idle fancy. Whatever may be his origins, in fact or invention, the dragon in legend is a potent creation of men’s imagination, richer in significance than his barrow is in gold” (“Monsters” 32, 16). In *The Hobbit*, as well, Smaug represents a matchless and primordial adversary which Bilbo and the dwarves need to overcome, somehow. It is significant in this respect that dragons in *The Hobbit* are a personification of ancient, elemental, and timeless evil. As Thorin Oakenshield states: “there were lots of dragons in the North in those days [when Smaug invaded the Lonely Mountain]” (I:32), which underlines dragons as beings from the past, an ancient era now almost over, except for some extant, antiquary relics alluding to a time primeval. As can be seen, Mirkwood and Smaug the dragon have in common that they are elemental and primordial forces which have to be overcome by the adventuring protagonists. The exceptionally old age and vast expanse of Mirkwood thus not only allude to the struggle with Smaug the dragon to come, but, more importantly, function as signifiers of an underlying theme in the novel of facing the challenge against the dreadful and raw forces of nature. When linking this observation back to my previous comments on the affective evaluation of Mirkwood, this of course only demonstrates the profound complexity and ambiguity with which Tolkien depicts nature in *The Hobbit*: simultaneously feral and gentle, provider and destroyer, threatening and full of opportunities.

To conclude, it can be said that Mirkwood in *The Hobbit* is a complex phenomenon which draws upon multiple sources and which performs multiple functions in the novel. Some typical aspects of the *topos* of the enchanted forest in the West-European fairy tale have been borrowed in the creation of it (e.g. its function as a place for upward social mobility), whereas others seem to have been modified somewhat (e.g. the forest as a distinct *limen* to the Otherworld). In addition, elements from Classical literature have been used that are resonating within the enchanted forest of Mirkwood, and the manner of spatialization and fictional cartography seems to be derived from nineteenth- and twentieth-century psychological realism. This, of course, is in accordance with the very heterogeneity and hybridity of the fairy tale, which has always incorporated and adapted other literary sources, which has proven to be one of the main reasons for the enduring popularity of the genre throughout widely diverging times and places. As a result of its heterogeneous nature, Mirkwood is a highly complex literary *mélange* that plays with conventions and expectations: for example, while on the one hand it is a wild, elemental, and perilous place to be in, it simultaneously resists the characteristic dichotomy between civilization and wilderness because a royal court can be found within the very boundaries of the

forest. Moreover, in its appropriation of various elements and its performance of different functions simultaneously, often contradictory situations occur. An illustration of this is the *topos* of the *katabasis* that can be seen resonating in the voyage of Bilbo and the dwarves through Mirkwood, which is peculiar, for forests are usually the epitome of life and nature, so associations with death and decay in this instance seem paradoxical. These contradictory elements derived from various literary sources, then, create a sense of estrangement to the reader by the very creation and destruction of expectations based on this idiosyncratic interplay of conventions and *topoi*. As Viktor Shklovsky has already pointed out, evocations of estrangement (or *ostranenie* as he called it) can be a powerful literary device for enhancing the aesthetic experience for the reader, allowing him/her to experience a sense of wonder caused by the artistically innovative juxtaposition of elements borrowed from various literary traditions (5-24). This sense of estrangement gives Mirkwood the appearance of an enchanted forest, a place of magic and wonder, which is then made credible because of its nineteenth- and twentieth-century psychological realism with respect to the elaboration of detail, internal consistency, and technique of narration.



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