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Abstract

Studies a set of images Tolkien deploys with great skill to represent essential thematic elements of the opposition between forces of the Alliance and the Enemy. These include the organic and natural symbols of Gondor, Rohan, Dol Amroth as opposed to the Eye of Mordor and White Hand of Isengard. McGregor's observations on Saruman's choice of imagery are particularly valuable in showing how Tolkien revealed the wizard's attempts to play both sides even at the symbolic level.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Saruman; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Heraldry; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Symbolism; Color in The Lord of the Rings; Heraldry in J.R.R. Tolkien



TOLKIEN'S DEVICES: THE HERALDRY OF MIDDLE-EARTH

JACDIE MCGREGOR

ONE OF MANY COLORFUL SURFACE DETAILS in *The Lord of the Rings*, its pattern of heraldic banners and emblems deployed in the manner of national flags (most visibly, but not exclusively, by armies in the field) might easily be taken as mere decoration but for their associations with several resonant and significant symbols used in the novel. In cases such as the Evil Eye or the White Tree, these associations are obvious to any attentive reader, whereas others, most notably perhaps the Hand of Isengard, seem to require more careful scrutiny. Whether obvious or not, however, the pattern suggested by considering these various symbols in relation to one another, with the resulting correspondences and contrasts that emerge, is one that resonates with, underscores, and clarifies some of the novel's central themes. This essay therefore seeks to demonstrate, through close examination of several examples, how, far from being merely decorative, these heraldic devices serve to amplify the text itself.

Critical discussions of heraldry in Tolkien's text are rare, outweighed by interest in designs included in his collected pictures or commemorative calendars, and these are dominated by Elvish devices dating back to the period of *The Silmarillion* rather than those (primarily Mannish and Orcish) recorded in the Third Age. A good example is Margaret Purdy's article "Symbols of Immortality," which recognizes that "the various banners and emblems present in *The Lord of the Rings*—the white horse of the House of Eorl, for instance, or the swan-ship of Dol Amroth—are indeed similar to the conventional coats of arms of European heraldry" (19), but passes over these to focus on the "strikingly different" devices favored by the Eldar (and some of the Houses of the Edain who fell under their influence). Purdy does, however, offer some useful introductory remarks on the "European heraldry of the Primary World", for example that its terminology is "as esoteric and specialized, in its way, as that of physics, chemistry or biology" (19). Since Tolkien's own approach to the subject appears to be artistic rather than scientific, one is hardly required to be an expert to comment on it, and in what follows I shall avoid all reference to escutcheons, fesses, lozenges, grand quartering, marks of cadency, and the like.

The role played in *The Lord of the Rings* by heraldic color in particular is treated in an earlier article, Miriam Miller's "The Green Sun," where it is in fact

given a broader application than is possible here (where the focus is heraldic emblems *as such*). Miller's assertion is that there is a heraldic quality to Tolkien's treatment of color throughout the text; for example, "color in *The Lord of the Rings* can be used as a marker of identity, literally and figuratively heraldic" (8). It is used for "establishing atmosphere and delineating theme, as a means of expressing the highest emotions, and as an external sign of inner moral and spiritual condition" (9). Detailed examples are offered and used to illustrate two striking primary observations:

1. that Tolkien used a strangely limited palette—red, green, blue, black, gray, brown, yellow, and white (the last two are also referred to as gold and silver)—with very, very few exceptions.
2. that these color words are used without modification; i.e., we see, again with very, very few exceptions, *green*, not pale green, or emerald green, or chartreuse. (3)

Miller implies that the simplicity and boldness of Tolkien's color scheme produces a kind of heraldic effect throughout, notably where such patterns are used (as they often are) symbolically. This is a view I am inclined to support; it certainly does apply to the treatment of banners and emblems, where both the colors and devices chosen have an immediate applicability to those who bear them (or on whose behalf they are borne). In this instance it is undoubtedly true that "more than a convenient mark of identification or a way to tell the 'good guys' from the bad ones [...] color seems to be an external indicator of the most profound emotional states" (8).

The first mention of specific military insignia in *The Lord of the Rings* is that of the unfamiliar tokens Aragorn finds among the gear of the slain Orcs under Amon Hen, especially the "strange device" of "a small white hand in the centre of a black field" (III.1.415). The experienced ranger immediately differentiates this from "the sign of the Red Eye" used by "[t]he Orcs in the service of Barad-dûr" (416) and concludes, correctly, that it must be a new badge adopted by Saruman, clear evidence of his pretensions to emerge as a power in his own right. This distinction between the emblems of Isengard and Mordor is emphasized throughout the episode of Merry and Pippin's capture by the Urûk-hai, where the tension between the two Orcish parties (three if one counts the group from Moria) constitutes an important development. Whereas Uglûk and his followers are consistently distinguished by "the White Hand of Isengard" (III.2.437), those who later join forces with them from eastwards of the Great River "had a red eye painted on their shields" (III.3.451). What is more, the followers of both badges attribute to them an agency that makes them clearly synonymous with the powers adopting them: the Isengarders boast of "the Hand that gives us man's-flesh to eat" while Grishnákh dismisses Saruman as "a dirty

treacherous fool” and warns that “the Great Eye is on him” (III.3.446). Despite his objections, the “filthy white badges” have the upper hand, so to speak, and later, at Helm’s Deep, they are out in force: “The lightning flashed, and blazoned upon every helm and shield the ghastly hand of Isengard was seen” (III.7.533). With the overthrow of Saruman’s power at the end of Book III, the White Hand effectively disappears from the text, whereas the Red Eye remains a sinister presence for much longer. I shall postpone further discussion of both badges, however, until we have first considered those opposing them.

The chief emblems of Men begin to appear in Book V, and are immediately marked by a beauty and nobility that is associated with an all but vanished past—notably so among the uniforms Pippin sees at Minas Tirith:

Upon the black surcoats were embroidered in white a tree blossoming like snow beneath a silver crown and many-pointed stars. This was the livery of the heirs of Elendil, and none wore it now in all Gondor, save the Guards of the Citadel before the Court of the Fountain where the White Tree once had grown. (V.1.753)

While less exalted, a similar effect is achieved by the “gilded banners [of] Imrahil, Prince of Dol Amroth [...] bearing the token of the Ship and the Silver Swan” (V.1.771) and by “the device of the white horse” (V.3.802) on the shield Éowyn gives to Merry.¹ Each of these three features especially prominently at the great battle of the Pelennor, where “the swan-knights of Dol Amroth” are distinguished by the “blue banner at their head” (V.4.820), while Théoden’s “banner blew in the wind, white horse upon a field of green, but he outpaced it” (V.5.838); but pride of place is given to the iconic moment when,

upon the foremost ship a great standard broke, and the wind displayed it as she turned towards the Harlond. There flowered a White Tree, and that was for Gondor; but Seven Stars were about it, and a high crown above it, the signs of Elendil that no lord had borne for years beyond count. And the stars flamed in the sunlight, for they were wrought of gems by Arwen daughter of Elrond; and the crown was bright in the morning, for it was wrought of mithril and gold. (V.6.847)

The evident majesty of Aragorn’s royal standard is deepened still further by the historical and ultimately mythic associations of its emblems, in particular its centerpiece, the White Tree. First and foremost, this is the tree grown from the

¹ This is of course the horse of Eorl, which he is depicted riding to the field of Celebrant on the tapestry in Théoden’s hall in III.4, but it is only at this later stage of the narrative that it appears as a blazon (on shield or banner).

sapling that Isildur brought from Númenor and whose history is so intimately bound up with the fortunes of the royal house. There is throughout an implicit parallel between the two, based on an underlying motif of growth and continuity; that the line of kings endures for so long is tied to the venerable age of the tree. Nor does the parallel end there. Just as the house of Elendil claims descent from the Númenórean kings, so the tree is itself a sapling of Nimloth, the tree of Númenor. That tree in turn was a gift of the Elves of Eressëa, seedling of Galathilion, grown from the fruit of Telperion, one of the two primal Trees of Valinor—or Paradise. Likewise, the kings of Númenor descend via Éarendil from the blended bloodlines of Men and Elves and in part, via Lúthien the daughter of Melian, from the semi-divine race of the Maiar. In common to both strains, human and arboreal, is a celestial quality linking them to the beginning of the world and an authority sanctioned by divinity itself.

All this moreover has an added aptness to the tree archetype. The connection to the Two Trees of Paradise has already been noted; the Norse Yggdrasil is a more shadowy presence: the world-tree that grows through, unifies and symbolizes the entire cosmos. With its roots in the nether hells and its branches soaring to the highest heavens, bringing forth worlds like fruits, Yggdrasil takes the natural attributes of any tree to their logical limits; beginning with the buried seed and growing to limitless bounds, its slow growth unites time as well as space. And that the tree symbol lends itself so often, and so easily, to represent in diagrammatic form the generations of a family or the species and subspecies of natural life-forms shows how appropriately it embodies the idea of the oneness of all creation. For all these reasons, the tree symbol expresses to perfection the grandeur, antiquity, divine authority and organic wholeness of the true kingship as Tolkien conceives it, and makes the emblem of Gondor no mere arbitrary badge but an apt and impressive expression of its essential qualities.

The heraldic colors employed—in this as in all the examples found in the text—are also strikingly apt.² That the tree is white is primarily a straightforwardly naturalistic detail; the sapling that Aragorn finds on Mindolluin has leaves that are “silver beneath” and “flowers whose white petals shone like the sunlit snow” (VI.5.971). This unusual coloring also marks its

² One is tempted to observe here that the “national flags” of Middle-earth have a resonance rarely if ever found among those known to primary world history. This is in part because of the role of color in, as I have already quoted Miller as pointing out, “establishing atmosphere and delineating theme, as a means of expressing the highest emotions, and as an external sign of inner moral and spiritual condition” (9). But it is also because a similar function is served by the choice of emblem, and this is then redoubled in combination: the primal emotions evoked by the colors used, together with the literal and symbolic associations of the emblem, combine to produce a representation that does not merely depict king and country, but actually embodies them.

descent from Tolkien's "tree of life," Telperion, and lends it associations of ethereal beauty and purity, and ultimately of the sacred, that deepen its connection to the Blessed Realm and its divinely sanctioned stewardship of all creation. Moreover, these associations are further strengthened by the addition of the jewel-like stars and the shining crown. Finally, the choice of a black field offsets the white and/or silver emblems to maximum advantage by deepening the contrast, and suggests the effect of celestial light against the backdrop of a deep night sky. That this is no coincidence is clear when one considers Tolkien's consistent use of stars and starlight as tokens of a typically "Elvish" beauty and transcendence.

Initially, it is also a little surprising that the banner and livery of the royal house should be black—which the text, following a widespread tradition, primarily associates with the forces of evil. It hardly needs pointing out how marked this association is; the ubiquitous references to the Black Breath, the Black Gate, the Black Land, the Black Riders, the Black Speech, the Dark Lord, the Dark Power, the Dark Tower, the Dark Years, the Great Darkness, the Shadow, together with such motifs as the Orcs' aversion to light, the impenetrable pall that hangs over Mordor, and the characteristic appearance of its armies as "clad in sable, dark as the night [...] small black figures in rank upon rank [...] moving like ordered shadows" (IV.8.706) and so on, provide overwhelming evidence to that effect. But it is not, of course, the whole picture. For one thing, as Miller reminds us, "evil in its most essential form is more than blackness, the absence of color" (9), and cites as evidence the description of Frodo and Sam, in Shelob's lair, walking "in a black vapour wrought of veritable darkness itself that, as it was breathed, brought blindness not only to the eyes but to the mind, so that even the memory of colours and of forms and of any light faded out of thought" (IV.9.718). This, as the passage goes on to imply, is an eternal night, an abyss of oblivion without hope, utterly unlike the beauty of the night lit up by stars.

Mere blackness in itself, then, is not evil; only the context makes it so. Likewise, in heraldic practice, the Enemy does not enjoy a monopoly on the use of black—although, as Aragorn notes, "he does not use white" (III.1.416), so that the clean and elegant contrast of the white tree on black differs substantially in its effect from the unrelieved darkness associated with Mordor, its armies and its denizens. (That the same basic contrast of black and white is—ironically—employed by Saruman will be considered below in its proper place.) Indeed this difference recalls Tom Bombadil's memories of "the dark under the stars when it was fearless—before the Dark Lord came from Outside" (I.7.131), as well as the image of "glinting stars" that Frodo, Sam and Gimli see in Mirrormere "like jewels sunk in the deep" (II.6.334). The implications are of a primordial darkness

immanent with mystery, profoundly awe-inspiring, and untainted by the shadow of evil.

The "great standard" (V.6.847) with its royal insignia is also contrasted with "the banner of the Stewards" (V.1.752) that floats from the pinnacle of the White Tower when Pippin first arrives there. The two are clearly differentiated by a note in the appendices that, just as the Ruling Stewards "bore a white rod only as the token of their office," so too "their banner was white without charge; but the royal banner had been sable, upon which was displayed a white tree in blossom beneath seven stars" (App.A.1053). That is, the two are complementary, but the detailed pageantry of the kingship is contrasted by a strangely virginal plainness on the part of the stewards. (One suspects Tolkien may have had in mind the mediaeval custom that an untried knight bore an unadorned white shield until such time as he had earned the right to sport armorial bearings of his own.) The same complementary contrast is also clearly observable in the furnishings of Denethor's hall:

At the far end upon a dais of many steps was set a high throne under a canopy of marble shaped like a crowned helm; behind it was carved upon the wall and set with gems an image of a tree in flower. But the throne was empty. At the foot of the dais, upon the lowest step which was broad and deep, there was a stone chair, black and unadorned, and on it sat an old man gazing at his lap. In his hand was a white rod with a golden knob. (V.1.754)

The marked sense of dignity and protocol in the fact that the Steward, despite being Gondor's absolute ruler, will not usurp the office or the symbols of the royal house is later matched by Aragorn's reluctance to assert his authority until after his coronation, upon the eve of which "the standard of the Stewards, bright argent like snow in the sun, bearing no charge nor device, was raised over Gondor for the last time" (VI.5.965-66).

The complementary role also played by the White Horse of Rohan and "the silver swan of Dol Amroth" (V.6.843) has already been noted above. The latter in particular shares with the White Tree distinctively Elvish associations; the reader notes for example how the image of the swan-ship recalls Lothlórien, where the history of Amroth and Nimrodel was related by Legolas, who upon later meeting the Prince Imrahil "saw that here indeed was one who had elven-blood in his veins" (V.9.872). The simple adaptation of a living creature (the Swan) into an artefact (the Ship) that imitates its natural grace and serenity, and the pure whiteness it shares with the Tree, combine to produce an impression similarly ethereal. In contrast to the deep black background of its royal cousin, however, this emblem is set against a clean aquatic blue, completing the effect of a graceful creature serenely gliding over pure waters. This is also appropriate to

Dol Amroth's estuarine setting, which further reflects its Elven history and Tolkien's consistent use of the sea to connote the journey beyond this earthly realm. Briefly, also, this banner flies above Minas Tirith, when Aragorn, reluctant to press his claim prematurely, asks Imrahil to govern the city during Faramir's recovery: "And in the morning the banner of Dol Amroth, a white ship like a swan upon blue water, floated from the Tower, and men looked up and wondered if the coming of the King had been but a dream" (V.8.871).

"[T]he White Horse upon Green" (App.A.1071) is a kindred symbol, but its associations are English rather than Elvish; as Miller reminds us, it "inevitably recall[s] the prehistoric horses carved into the chalk-white hills of England, now surrounded by green grass" (5). As "Men of the Twilight" (IV.5.679), the barbaric though noble Rohirrim lack any Elvish influence and their cultural emblems are correspondingly "Mannish"; children of the sun, unlettered, descendants of nomadic tribes, their relative youth as a people, love of freedom and the rolling plains of their country are embodied in the image of the horse running over sunlit grass. It is moreover an integral part of their history and national identity as the sons of Eorl—the founder of Rohan and tamer of the mighty steed Felaróf, sire of the *mearas* and forefather of Shadowfax, who "might have been foaled in the morning of the world" (II.2.262). In common with both Tree and Swan, however, the Horse is distinctively white—but also, and perhaps more importantly, a wholesome and vigorous living creature, even an embodiment of the life force. The green field is as apt a background as the blue of Dol Amroth, and one reflected in landscapes where the Rohirrim do battle, as when Éomer "rode to a green hillock and there set his banner, and the White Horse ran rippling in the wind" (V.6.847). So all three emblems, set against natural colors, have a clear kindred resemblance, though each enjoys its distinct identity. The three are also increasingly united, initially in the battle scenes, ultimately—and with heightened effect—on the field of Cormallen, when Sam and Frodo are ushered into their presence, allowing them to be seen by fresh eyes on an exalted occasion:

Behind the seat upon the right floated, white on green, a great horse running free; upon the left was a banner, silver upon blue, a ship swan-prowed faring on the sea; but behind the highest throne in the midst of all a great standard was spread in the breeze, and there a white tree flowered upon a sable field beneath a shining crown and seven glittering stars. (VI.6.953)³

³ It may be noted that the "living" quality common to all three emblems is reflected in the apt choice of active verbs used in describing them: the White Horse is "running free" or runs "rippling in the wind"; the Silver Swan "float[s] from the Tower," as "a ship [...] faring on the sea"; the White Tree "blossom[s]" and "flower[s]."

In total opposition and contradistinction to the emblems of Gondor and Rohan there stands the sinister sign of the Great Eye, one of the most important symbols of the text (a centrality marked by its use in Tolkien's early cover designs). This, as the examples cited earlier illustrate, is consistently painted in red on a black background.⁴ Two further instances are the "embassy from the Dark Tower" that emerges prior to the final battle, with its "small company of black-harnessed soldiery, and a single banner, black but bearing on it in red the Evil Eye" (V.10.888), and the orc-helmet Sam finds to help disguise Frodo in Mordor: "a black cap with iron rim, and iron hoops covered with leather upon which the Evil Eye was painted in red above the beaklike nose-guard" (VI.1.913). Even more obviously than in the case of the White Tree, this is far from a merely arbitrary device; it refers to a discernible reality in the world of the novel, the Eye in fact being at the very least a synecdoche for Sauron himself. We have already noted one such usage by Grishnákh; another is his warning to Uglúk that the Nazgûl are "the apple of the Great Eye" (III.3.452), and two more are Aragorn's foreboding that "[t]he Red Eye will be looking towards Isengard" (III.9.564) and Gandalf's elaboration: "[t]he Eye of Barad-dûr will be looking impatiently towards the Wizard's Vale, I think; and towards Rohan. The less it sees the better" (III.9.589). Before considering more fully the real nature of the Eye, however, it will be convenient to unpack the implications of its representation.

Firstly, the black background, as noted, is standard for the servants of the enemy and connotes not the sublime nocturnal mystery of Gondor's banner but the covering darkness of secrecy, the Shadow, the absence of light, the void. Against this the redness of the Eye suggests its fiery wrath, the same infernal quality one associates with the "dark fire" of the "flame of Udûn" as contrasted with the "Secret Fire" of Gandalf's celestial "flame of Anor" in their confrontation on the Bridge of Khazad-dûm (II.5.330). The suggested image is that of a dull brooding glow of burning amid the murky smoke and shadows of the underworld.⁵ And in this context, the particular function of the Eye is to evoke

⁴ I am indebted to Nick Groom for pointing out that Mordor's colors violate the laws of arms. The relevant details are those summarized by Purdy as follows: In European heraldry, "[t]here are the five 'colors'—gules (red), azure (blue), vert (green), purpure (purple) and sable (black)—the two 'metals'—or (gold or yellow) and argent (silver or white) [...]. In addition to this there is the rule 'Color shall not be laid upon color, nor metal upon metal.'" (19) Since sable and gules are both classed as 'colors,' laying one upon the other constitutes a clear breach.

⁵ Miller argues persuasively that "the colors of evil, of war and destruction: black and red" are used so pervasively that they can be said to function as a *leitmotiv*; for example, "like the fight with the Balrog, the journey of Frodo and Sam through Mordor [...] is painted in red and black" (7).

the presence of something hostile hidden in the darkness but nonetheless watching the observer, a secret lurking threat reminiscent of Blake's Tyger.

This is all especially apt when one considers the nature and behavior of Sauron throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. It is indeed clear to the reader that the Eye is not even merely a metaphor for the Dark Lord but a real (though not necessarily physical) presence in itself. In "Sauron is Watching You," Edward Lense explores the way a "sense of being constantly watched by terrible eyes is an important part of the texture of life in Middle-earth" (3), something that increases steadily until the protagonists experience it as "a strong sense of dread, a feeling that the watchers will see you at any moment and destroy you" (6). Above all, of course, it is "Frodo, exposed to the Eye because he is carrying the Ring [who] is more subject to this feeling than anyone else in the work" (5). The most memorable and vivid instance of this presence manifesting is also the text's earliest (and defining) reference to it, in the vision Frodo sees in the Mirror of Galadriel:

But suddenly the Mirror went altogether dark, as dark as if a hole had opened in the world of sight, and Frodo looked into emptiness. In the black abyss there appeared a single Eye that slowly grew, until it filled nearly all the Mirror. So terrible was it that Frodo stood rooted, unable to cry out or to withdraw his gaze. The Eye was rimmed with fire, but was itself glazed, yellow as a cat's, watchful and intent, and the black slit of its pupil opened on a pit, a window into nothing.

Then the Eye began to rove, searching this way and that, and Frodo knew with certainty and horror that among the many things that it sought he himself was one. But he also knew that it could not see him—not yet, not unless he willed it. (II.7.364)

This is, of course, a passage of great power and significance in the novel, and it is also the clearest visualization of the Eye that either Frodo or the reader is vouchsafed. But although it represents a "real" version of the figure reproduced on the shields and banners of Mordor's armies, there is no indication either here or elsewhere in the text that Sauron is *literally* incarnate in this form. This is all the more necessary to stress after the widespread influence of Peter Jackson's film adaptation, in which the Eye was (understandably) visualized in this way, suggesting a vast searchlight operating from the summit of Barad-dûr. By contrast, the text suggests nothing more than that Sauron is somehow (it is never clear exactly how) present in, and confined to, the topmost chamber of his tower. He is, significantly, never directly encountered or described at any point and the various manifestations of the Eye are qualified in a number of ways.

First of all, it is almost always presented from Frodo's point of view—though it is strongly implied in the above example that Galadriel is equally

aware of it (as well as that both she and the other keepers of the Elven-rings, Elrond and Gandalf, have access to this kind of vision in general—as do those with access to *palantiri*). That Sam also detects its presence during the brief period when he takes the Ring confirms that it is the Ring itself that confers such awareness, though this effect may prove lasting, especially after long exposure to its influence (as is most clearly seen in the case of Gollum).

Further, the Eye is only ever seen in detail in Galadriel's Mirror (which is implied to have special properties). It may be the case that the *palantiri* behave similarly (as in the films) but the reader never sees directly what the characters who look into them see. On the other hand, there are numerous examples of the Ring-bearer not seeing but *feeling* the Eye, implying that it is not a visible object at all but an entity detectable only by means of some sixth sense (one that is, again, conferred—or at least heightened—by the Ring). One might reasonably assume that it is like the familiar experience of feeling uneasily that someone is watching us (as indeed happens to Frodo when Boromir finds him on Amon Hen).

The first of many compelling instances of this kind (as contrasted with actually *seeing* the Eye, as in Galadriel's Mirror) occurs when Frodo, having escaped Boromir, is sitting on the Seat of Seeing, wearing the Ring, and so enabled to see all the way into Mordor:

And suddenly he felt the Eye. There was an eye in the Dark Tower that did not sleep. He knew that it had become aware of his gaze. A fierce eager will was there. It leaped towards him; almost like a finger he felt it, searching for him. Very soon it would nail him down, know just exactly where he was. Amon Lhaw it touched. It glanced upon Tol Brandir—he threw himself from the seat, crouching, covering his head with his grey hood. (II.10.401)

Here, while he sees the Tower, Frodo only feels the Eye that is in it, albeit in the most tangible way, and at the same time knows that it is aware of him, though it too cannot yet see him. The implications are, firstly, that what he feels is the uncanny but unmistakable sense of being looked at and, secondly, that what it in turn senses is likewise his own awareness of it. On this and similar occasions, it seems less likely that it is a literal Eye looking at him than that it is an invisible psychic prescience (just as Frodo himself does not see it physically but in what is proverbially called the mind's eye).

One of the most vivid examples of the full power and terror of this experience occurs when Frodo has come within just a few days' journey of the Black Gate:

But far more he was troubled by the Eye: so he called it to himself. It was that more than the drag of the Ring that made him cower and stoop as he walked. The Eye: that horrible growing sense of a hostile will that strove with great power to pierce all shadows of cloud, and earth, and flesh, and to see you: to pin you under its deadly gaze, naked, immovable. So thin, so frail and thin, the veils were become that still warded it off. Frodo knew just where the present habitation and heart of that will now was: as certainly as a man can tell the direction of the sun with his eyes shut. He was facing it, and its potency beat upon his brow. (IV.2.630)

In this instance, the nature of the Eye becomes more ambivalent: on the one hand, it is the “sense of a hostile will,” an evidently *mental* experience; on the other, it has *physical* effects—Frodo feels it as a distinct and specifically localized emanation. But the only occasion on which it becomes (or *seems* to become) physically visible, is as the hobbits are climbing the final road to the Sammath Naur and swirling clouds part for a moment to reveal the summit of the Tower, at which point: “as from some great window immeasurably high there stabbed northward a flame of red, the flicker of a piercing Eye” (VI.3.942). But it is no more than a flicker, and it may not even be there, its possible physical position being qualified both by the “as” and by its further qualification as a “terrible vision,” arguably apparent to Frodo alone.

As it happens, the text’s whole treatment of sight, seeing and the unseen raises a complex of ideas that lies outside the scope of this essay; Lense’s comments on the Eye (cited above) help explain how the “watchfulness” that is so evident throughout it mean “that large parts of *The Lord of the Rings* read like the record of a paranoiac’s delusions” (6), and this theme is usefully amplified by Janet Brennan Croft in *War in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*. For Croft, “Frodo’s experience of the war,” by contrast with that of his companions, is “more akin to modern war in its unrelieved stress”; the situation, typical of World War I, of the “soldier who was fixed in one place and could not see an enemy to fight” informs Frodo’s “sense of being under the constant observation of an unseen enemy” (134–5). That he must at all times remain undercover, avoiding exposure to an all-seeing gaze that is constantly on the lookout, even searching for him, while itself remaining invisible, permanently hidden in the shadows, contributes more than anything else to the sustained suspense that dominates large stretches of the narrative.

For my current purpose, however, it is sufficient to note that the Eye of Mordor, to an even greater extent than the other heraldic devices in the novel, corresponds to a definite reality within its fictional world—and prompts an immediate emotional response, in this case one of unalloyed terror. I have already noted the role the color symbolism plays in creating this effect, as well as the overt suggestion of an intent unnerving gaze. But there is a further feature of

this image that contributes significantly to the impression it makes, particularly in relation to those of the banners described above. Where the Tree, Swan and Horse, as noted, are all complete, wholesome and healthy living beings, the Eye is curiously disembodied, detached from any natural context, and it consequently conveys an impression of atrocity or violation. This is entirely consistent with Tolkien's conception of evil in general, which is informed primarily by his Christian orthodoxy. Evil in this view is a disease, a corruption, a malformation, something that strikes one at an almost intuitive level as just plain wrong. It is also in keeping with a widespread pattern in Tolkien's work as a whole that his evil characters are somehow maimed, that as they tend to seek power without authority they inevitably sacrifice their native virtue in the process. As this too is a theme that exceeds the bounds of this essay, it is sufficient here to point out that the further Tolkien's characters sink into evil, the more they lose of themselves, the more winnowed they become—of personality, of individuality, in effect of their souls. Sauron, being the principal representative of evil in *The Lord of the Rings*, takes this nonentity to the furthest degree. Despite being the novel's eponymous figure, he never appears in person, is probably a disembodied spirit, though confined to haunt his tower, controls vast forces from afar, remains at all times remote, mysterious and invisible, and is in many ways an absence, as is indicated by one of his many titles being "the Shadow"—despite nonetheless wielding immense, almost godlike, power at a distance.

This impression of maiming, then, of dismemberment, is implicit in the image of the single fiery eye gazing from the darkness of the void, a lurking fearful hunted paranoia diametrically opposed to the free-spirited, robust organic emblems of Gondor and of Rohan. It is all the more notable then that the other principal emblem of an enemy power is likewise disembodied—the White Hand of Isengard.⁶ This, it may be remembered, is first noted by Aragorn with some surprise, as the renegade wizard Saruman's emergence as an aspiring power is a relatively recent and unforeseen event, and his heraldic badges have not been noted before. But that the Hand, like the Eye, appears in isolation betrays a similar unnaturalness, as well as that Saruman has—probably unconsciously—modeled his political and military organization on that of Mordor. Indeed this point is made explicitly and with telling emphasis on one occasion, when the narrator comments of the wizard's stronghold that

⁶ In "The Road and the Ring," Mark Hennelly sees hands and eyes in general in Tolkien's text as forming part of a complex Ring/Road dialectic: "The linear arm, hand, and fingers, especially when wielding a sword, primarily practice road values [active], while the circular eye participates in ring themes [contemplative]. [...] At their worst, hands grasp rapaciously to possess and hoard; at their best they demonstrate affection," just as, "[w]hen motivated by pity, the eye can provide insight and prophetic vision" opposed to Sauron's "brooding, self-centered circle" (9).

A strong place and wonderful was Isengard, and long it had been beautiful; and there great lords had dwelt, the wardens of Gondor upon the West, and wise men that watched the stars. But Saruman had slowly shaped it to his shifting purposes, and made it better, as he thought, being deceived—for all those arts and subtle devices, for which he forsook his former wisdom, and which he fondly imagined were his own, came but from Mordor; so that what he made was naught, only a little copy, a child's model or a slave's flattery, of that vast fortress, armoury, prison, furnace of great power, Barad-dûr, the Dark Tower, which suffered no rival, and laughed at flattery, biding its time, secure in its pride and its immeasurable strength. (III.8.555)

The satirical point thus made is that all earthly dictators, however they may delude themselves to be original and benevolent reformers are in truth no more than echoes of an impulse both ancient and diabolical. But it also reinforces the likelihood that the White Hand thinly disguises a kindred resemblance to the Red Eye. The parallel is further underlined by the way both badges have been used to fashion grandiose signposts leading to their respective domains. Upon the road to Mordor, Frodo and Sam encounter a once majestic Númenórean monument now defaced by the enemy:

a huge sitting figure, still and solemn as the great stone kings of Argonath. The years had gnawed it, and violent hands had maimed it. Its head was gone, and in its place was set in mockery a round rough-hewn stone, rudely painted by savage hands in the likeness of a grinning face with one large red eye in the midst of its forehead. (IV.7.702)

Corresponding to this is the “tall pillar [that] loomed up before” the company riding to Isengard: “It was black; and set upon it was a great stone, carved and painted in the likeness of a long White Hand. Its finger pointed north” (III.8.554).

But the differences between the two are likewise significant. Where the Eye is straightforwardly sinister, the Hand is ambiguous and only faintly unsettling, implying either a threat or an offer, combining the qualities of potency, craft and wisdom as well as a potential for benevolence or even generosity. And this is entirely in keeping with the differing natures of the Dark Lord and his treacherous ally. Where the former is openly evil, a Satanic figure motivated solely by undisguised malice and the lust for domination, the recently corrupted Saruman still attempts to delude both others and himself that he is motivated by a greater good. In a speech that evidently expresses Tolkien's opinion of Chamberlain's policy of appeasement, he has Saruman say

We can bide our time [...] deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order; all the things that we have so far striven in vain to accomplish, hindered rather than helped by our weak or idle friends. There need not be, there would not be, any real change in our designs, only in our means.

To which Gandalf, voicing Tolkien's allegiance to an uncompromising moral code, replies "I have heard speeches of this kind before, but only in the mouths of emissaries sent from Mordor to deceive the ignorant" (II.2.259). The emblem of the Hand, then, can easily be seen to perform the same function as Saruman's rhetoric—to persuade others that his cause is just. In this the choice of white plays an important role.

I have already attempted to show how Tolkien both conforms to, and questions, the traditional association of black and darkness with danger, fear and evil. The same can also be said of his treatment of white. The symbols of the good powers we have considered, the use of white stone in the construction of Minas Tirith, and the fact that the principal organization formed to oppose the Dark Lord is named the White Council, provide abundant evidence of conformity to a corresponding association of white, light, purity, vision and moral goodness. But the White Hand subverts this easy identification and throws out the pattern. One of the reasons why Aragorn deduces the badge to be Saruman's is because Sauron "does not use white" (III.1.416), suggesting again his deliberate rejection of goodness as such—a suggestion confirmed by Grishnákh's reference to the Isengarders' "filthy white badges" (III.3.446).

But in Saruman's case white is a natural choice and in fact references the history of his corruption and treachery. As chief of the order of wizards and elected head of the Council of the Wise, white is originally his distinctive color, as grey is that of the Odinic wanderer Gandalf and brown of the quasi-Franciscan nature-lover Radagast.⁷ But in changing his allegiance, he changes his wardrobe too, becoming "Saruman of Many Colours" so that "his robes, which had seemed white, were not so, but were woven of all colours, and if he moved they shimmered and changed hue so that the eye was bewildered." When Gandalf comments "I liked white better," his sneering response is that "It serves as a beginning. White cloth may be dyed. The white page may be overwritten; and the white light may be broken." The last image in particular recalls Shelley's "Dome of many-coloured glass," as does Gandalf's prompt rejoinder "In which case it is no longer white. [...] And he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom" (II.2.259). Of this scene, Miller comments that

⁷ "The description of Radagast the Brown, lore-master of herbs and beasts and friend to the birds, I think, cannot fail to bring to mind the picture of St. Francis of Assisi, surrounded by the flora and fauna of the forest, dressed in his customary brown friar's habit" (Miller 5).

Saruman has changed from pristine white to the entire spectrum which results from the breaking of light, revealed in his treachery; the once-good has been corrupted by his commerce with the evil forces which emanate from the Dark Tower. But he still has colors, even if only the broken colors of refracted light. (9)

In this way, the color symbolism can be seen as figuring not only moral *states* but *processes*. Similarly, one can note the reverse process at work in Gandalf's appropriation of Saruman's former color "as an outward sign of his apotheosis" (9): the sequel to the wizards' debate is Gandalf's sacrificial death and resurrection as a glorified figure in "gleaming white" like "snow in the sunshine," who announces that he is in a sense "Saruman as he should have been" (III.5.495) and who now has the "power and authority" to depose his former master with the ringing declaration "I am not Gandalf the Grey, whom you betrayed. I am Gandalf the White, who has returned from death. You have no colour now, and I cast you from the order and from the Council" (III.10.583).

With this in mind, it becomes evident that the White Hand conceals Saruman's betrayal and desertion of his true colors, so to speak, just as his benevolent appearance disguises his inner corruption. Furthermore, one should not ignore the choice of background; like those of Mordor and Gondor, the emblem of Isengard appears against a black background. In fact, the combination of white on black is identical in the last two cases—and yet the effect still differs. Where the royal standard of Gondor evokes a profound night sky, and Mordor's banners the blackness of the abyss, that of Isengard does neither. It is curiously abstract in fact, as if aiming at nothing more than a pretentiously stylish contrast. Since the only real difference is the emblem itself, this must be the deciding factor. And here the dismembered quality it shares with the Evil Eye is clearly significant, but to this is added a further incongruity. Where the whiteness of the Horse or the Swan, or even that of the Tree, is entirely naturalistic, that of the Hand suggests an unwholesome ghostly pallor. So here again, the maimed and tainted nature of evil is referenced, only this time with an added effect of self-deceiving masquerade.⁸

⁸ In arguing for this difference, I for once part company with Miller, who argues that Gondor and Isengard share a color scheme for similar reasons: "In a context in which black and white are thematically opposed as symbols of evil and good, it is appropriate then for both Saruman and Gondor to bear the morally ambiguous black and white—recalling [...] the very checkered history of the Numenoreans." (5). This seems to me to be oversimplified in disregarding the role played by the choice of emblem in modifying the total impression, and the differing significations of black depending on context. Also, I feel, it misapplies Númenórean history in general to the quite honorable legacy of the house of Elendil.

But before our survey of Tolkien's heraldry is complete, there are two further examples to consider, both of subsidiary Enemy regiments that are mentioned briefly in passing, as if unimportant, and yet they too help in defining the consistent pattern of symbolism we have been considering. When Sam comes across the aftermath of the battle between the two warring orc-factions in the tower of Cirith Ungol, he distinguishes "[t]wo liveries" among the dead, "one marked by the Red Eye, the other by a Moon disfigured with a ghastly face of death" (VI.1.903). The former, which belongs to the garrison of the tower, is familiar; the latter is that of a scouting party sent out from the city of Minas Morgul, which is governed by Sauron's principal servants, the Nine Ringwraiths or Nazgûl. Their choice of livery is an example of the same kind of "mockery" we have already seen in the "huge sitting figure" whose head has been replaced by a "rough-hewn stone, rudely painted [...] with one large red eye" (IV.7.702). The Nazgûl have simply appropriated the symbol of the originally Númenórean city and then corrupted it, exactly as they have with the city itself. The contrast is described in detail when Frodo passes it on his way to the pass of Cirith Ungol and sees it lit up not by

the imprisoned moonlight welling through the marble walls of Minas Ithil long ago, Tower of the Moon, fair and radiant in the hollow of the hills. Paler indeed than the moon ailing in some slow eclipse was the light of it now, wavering and blowing like a noisome exhalation of decay, a corpse-light, a light that illuminated nothing. (IV.8.703)

What we have here then is a horrible parody of the wholesome nature symbols typically employed by the kingdoms of Men. While not described in detail, the "Moon disfigured with a ghastly face of death" must presumably be yet another instance of a white figure upon a black field—though Sauron does not use white himself, he appears not to forbid his vassals from doing so. And here the pure celestial argent of moonlight has been replaced by a pallor even more sickly than that of Isengard's Hand.

The one remaining example is the banner of the Haradrim, a nation of Men from the south who fight on the side of the Enemy. They are presented as a race of fierce barbarians, threatening and dangerous but, being human, neither completely other nor intrinsically evil—and their chosen emblem appears to reflect this. It is described in full on just one occasion, in direct opposition to that of Rohan at the battle of the Pelennor fields, when the chieftain of the Haradrim "was filled with a red wrath and shouted aloud, and displaying his standard, black serpent upon scarlet, he came against the white horse and the green with great press of men" (V.6.839). The colors are recognizably those of Mordor, but in inversion; the combination of red and black is again intended to feel threatening, but red now being prominent, the primary connotations are of a stereotypically

“southern” heat and passion, and by association a propensity towards anger and bloodletting. Obviously these are meant to be read as unpleasant qualities, but they are also human and vital in contrast to Mordor’s infernal blackness. Similarly, the emblem of the serpent, while a frightening animal, predatory and presumably poisonous, and carrying the particularly evil associations implicit within Tolkien’s essentially Christian symbolism, is nonetheless a whole and living creature, vigorous and proud, and so has more in common in one way with the horse than with the disembodied eye—just as the Haradrim are depicted as having at least some redeeming features and as being misguided rather than merely corrupt.

For a first time reader of *The Lord of the Rings*, the eight banners discussed here are primarily likely to contribute to the overall impression of prolific detail in which the fictional world is presented. With a little more attention, however, one begins to notice how richly and variously their respective combinations of colors and emblems express the histories and cultures, the allegiances, characters and natures, of those who bear them, as well as how the correspondences and contrasts among them express their various relationships of alliance, kinship, fealty, opposition, rivalry, imitation or corruption. As such, they form an integral and invaluable part of the novel, and of the whole experience of reading it.

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