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The Peril of the World

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The Peril of the World

Abstract

Examines Tolkien's Ring in relation to other rings in folklore, myth, and fantasy, and their association with power through the importance of the hand to human beings. [Note that the author's name is not included in the issue; obtained from West's *Tolkien Criticism: An Annotated Checklist*.]

Additional Keywords

Rings in folklore; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Objects—The Ring

The PERIL of the WORLD



Tolkien's Rings are generally discussed as symbols of power, with the Great Ring functioning additionally as a sort of formal device enabling the critic to pinpoint moral turpitude, to distinguish relative heroes from relative villains. The symbolization of power precisely in the form of magic talismans (of whatever type) is ascribed to the fairy tale aspect of the work, with little additional significance.¹ In effect, the customary mode of operation is to relegate the Rings as rings to the periphery, of interest chiefly to those who care to investigate Germanic antecedents. Also meriting consideration, however, is the basis for the success of these Rings in representing power, or how the magic ring functions as a variety of archetype.

Any survey of the literature of witchcraft and (especially) that of the fairy story will indicate that magical or logically inexplicable powers are attributed somewhere to almost any type of object. With respect to the fairy tale, in Andrew Lang's popular anthologies, for example, which contain fairy and other kinds of tales having a number of cultural origins, credited with special powers are items as diverse as cloaks and combs, fire and fingers, tables and telescopes. The inventory is quite large, but when frequency of occurrence is considered, most of the items on the list actually appear in very few tales. The most outstanding exception is the magic ring, which figures prominently throughout the anthology. Magical jewelry other than rings is rare.

Magic rings also occupy a prominent position in the tradition of witchcraft. There are attestations of rings of varying composition, some plain and others set with stones, inscribed, or otherwise decorated. The powers ascribed to various types of rings in different sources are quite exhaustive. Therapeutic abilities and power over or protection from evil spirits appear most often,² but there are other types of abilities attested as well, such as those of the Malay rings which, when combined with shorn hair in a coconut shell, promote the growth of trees.³ One very instructive manuscript contains a formula for the construction of a ring to be made of either gold or silver, set with a red jacinth, and engraved with the image of a nude girl riding on a lion and surrounded by six worshipers. This ring also is not either therapeutic or a protective amulet. If made at Sunday noon, with the moon "in the tenth degree," it would confer power over others: "People shall bow down before the owner of such a ring, and no man shall be able to withstand him."⁴ The powers of this ring are reminiscent of those attached to the Ruling Ring, when operated by a keeper possessing sufficient power of his own.

The importance of magic rings is usually ascribed to the position of even ordinary rings as symbols of power, due to their circularity, the significance of which is related either to the shape of the sun or to the status of the circle as a perfect figure. The former view is expressed by E. A. Wallis Budge in his study of ring talismans: "They [early men] probably associated the ring with the solar disk and believed that it therefore possessed strength and power and continuity and wore it as an amulet--the ideas of divinity, strength, power, and protection were associated with the ring in very early times."⁵ And further: "As the

ring has been from a very early period the symbol of sovereignty and authority we have Royal-Rings, Coronation-Rings, Arch-episcopal and Episcopal-Rings, Investiture-Rings, Serjeants-Rings, etc."⁶ The theory of the circle as a perfect figure is adopted by Cavendish in *The Black Arts*:

"The circle has been considered powerful in magic from time immemorial....Perhaps it is a perfect figure because every point on the circumference is equidistant from the centre."⁷

The circle is undoubtedly potent as a traditional symbol of extensive power and magic, whether manifested in the form of the barrier which protects the Western magician from the power of the demon he has conjured, C. G. Jung's Indian mandalas, or the circle of fire used in ancient Chinese rainmaking ceremonies.⁸ It is therefore not improbable that the ascription of power to the ring is in some way related to the aura surrounding the circle. But it is scarcely the only factor. The beauty and value of the metals or stones of which rings are often constructed probably do not play a significant role, considering the relative paucity of other types of magical jewelry (as opposed to unset magical precious and unprecious stones and to non-magical jewelry, with which fairy literature is well supplied), and the fact that beauty and power do not necessarily co-occur in magic talismans.⁹ Definitely important, on the other hand, is the sense of the marvelous involved, the "quality of strangeness and wonder."¹⁰ This is not merely a question of the attraction of the numinous. There is something inherently incredible about a ring as an instrument of power, so small and innocent-appearing an object as it is--totally unlike any magical or non-magical sword, for instance. This is a part of the charisma attached to all magic rings, including Tolkien's:

"Ah! The ring!" said Boromir, his eyes lighting.
Is it not a strange fate that we should suffer so much fear and doubt for so small a thing? So small a thing!"

(Ball. I, 514)

So very small a thing, "the least of rings, the trifle that Sauron fancies" (I, 318). The sense of the marvelous is also evident in the connotations present in one of the more common of the Ring's many appellations, the One Ring, or simply the One ("He only needs the One; for he made that Ring himself, it is his, and he let a great part of his own former power pass into it, so that he could rule all the others" (I, 82)).

But most significant for the connection between rings and power is the close association of rings with the hand. As a species, humans are hand-oriented; the hand is the instrument of human mastery over the world, and a primary symbol of power. Its evolution provided an unprecedented control of the environment.¹¹ The ring thus derives its attribute of power and its position as an archetype from the hand on which it is worn.¹² So deeply is the magic ring embedded as a motif, as it appears in witchcraft and in fairy literature, that the circle may well be as dependent on the ring for its magical reputation as the ring is on the circle.

It should be noted that the ring is not the only object to have acquired an ambience of power from being associated with the hand; there are others, such as the traditional

staff of the wizard or necromancer. But nowhere is it as predominant, or the association so close and inevitable, as in the case of the ring.

The Rings of Power draw heavily on the mystique surrounding the magic ring for their effect; they permeate Middle Earth. But in any case few traditional talismans are as well developed as the Great Ring (its apparent Germanic antecedent, for one, is rather flabby by comparison). It is the credibility of the ring as Ruling Ring that makes it so successful as a thing of evil, the "peril of the world" (I, 318). Saruman deprived of power is merely a nuisance, though "he could do some mischief still in a small mean way" (III, 325). The Ring apparently confers absolute power over all the inhabitants of Middle Earth to any keeper strong enough to use it, but any good intended or accomplished with it, or any seeming good connected with it, is turned to evil. To a lesser custodian, it offers invisibility, which seems useful enough, and not inherently evil, but this is tainted by heightened visibility to the Eye and the Nazgul, the risk of fading permanently into the wraith world, and the threat of treachery, as in the Ring's acquisition of the title of Isildur's Bane. It provides sharpened hearing and understanding of tongues, to Sam at least, but it dims sight. It provides immortality, but immortality coupled with stagnation. It offers some protection in the form of its keeper being better able to detect imminent danger (Frodo is the first to sense the evil of the ringwraiths (I, 105) and to become aware of Gollum following (I, 406); he is able to sense Shelob's thought (II, 421). Of the Hobbits, only Frodo has prophetic dreams (I, 154, 177, 187). But as a counterbalance, the Ring attracts danger, drawing the Nazgul after it and attracting the attention of other evil such as Caradhras and the Watcher in the Water, which "seized on Frodo first among all the Company" (I, 405). There is more at work here than the will of Sauron, or the fact that the Ring is "fraught with all his malice" (I, 333). The Ring has a will and purpose of its own, a sentience which is a burlesque of true life, just as orcs and trolls have been twisted by Sauron into burlesques of elves and ents. It "looks after itself" (I, 87) and it is "trying to get back to its master" (I, 88).

In her interesting and imaginative essay, "Everything is Alive," Gracia Fay Ellwood discusses the magical power or "virtue" (which may be good or evil) of various things and places in Middle Earth as a manifestation of their possession of a low level of "aliveness" and ability to interact with various persons (p. 30).¹³ Places associated with the Elves, such as Rivendell or Hollin, have a good virtue, while the virtue of Mirkwood and Minas Morgul is evil. With respect to objects showing "a semi-human kind of responsiveness" (p. 31) there are, among others, the Elf-made rope which retrieves itself at Sam's wish, the horn of Rohan which Merry receives from Eowyn, and the door leading into Moria. Also included by Mrs. Ellwood in this category is the One Ring, which "possesses virtue exceeding that of any other 'inanimate' object in Middle Earth" (p. 33), having much initiative, although "there is a certain automatic quality about its evil" (p. 35). However, there are fundamental differences between the Ring and other "virtuous" objects. A very common characteristic or tendency of magical objects is that the powers possessed by a given talisman are an extension of the powers possessed by ordinary objects of the same type. Thus a plausible magic sword is one which helps its fortunate owner to perform more slaughter with greater efficiency. Under ordinary circumstances one would not expect a magic sword to provide lavish banquets. That is the function of the magic table, which in its turn would be unlikely to invade the rightful province of the magic mirror or reflecting pool. The Mirror of Galadriel does, as Mrs. Ellwood points out, have a limited amount of initiative at its disposal, but this initiative is confined to selecting the images to be presented, when it is left free to do so. The Mirror provides visions. It lacks other powers. Most magical objects are also limited to one or a few functions--the palantiri, for example, are restricted to providing visions and communicating thought. (Magic places are rather passive. They give protection, without actually providing any powers to anyone; the same is true of a number of talismans.) Some objects, such as rings, have little function in particular attached to them; the powers which can be plausibly attributed to them are therefore not

similarly restricted. The Ruling Ring is versatile, powerful, and active. Far from being automatic, it exhibits a good deal of creativity and ingenuity in the powers and temptations offered to various victims--power in accordance with stature. It is a fully competent entity. The virtuous objects in Middle Earth are simply not in its class.

The virtue possessed by magical objects is frequently something which has been tacked on by a spell or some other means to a preexisting object; hence the magic of the Elves is imposed on a place, and the swords obtained by the Hobbits from the barrow derive their magic from spells applied to them. But the Ring and its powers are inseparable. It has been created whole. By the same token a magical object (not usually a place, at least in Middle Earth) can often be detoxified. If a virtue of "finding and returning" (II, 385) has been set by spell upon the lelethron staffs given by Faramir to Frodo and Sam, perhaps it can be taken off again. The Ring, on the other hand, must be completely destroyed.

It is difficult to know how to assess the effect on the work had Tolkien ultimately chosen some object other than the ring to serve as primary talisman of power, but it is somewhat questionable whether so many people would be quite so excited over the Great Brooch. The Rings are essential to Middle Earth.

NOTES

1. Selecting a couple of favorites, aspects of the Rings as symbols of power are discussed by Alexis Levitin in "Power in The Lord of the Rings" (Orcrist 1:4/TJ IV:3), and by Donald L. Reinken in "J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings: A Christian Refounding of the Political Order" (Christian Perspectives: An Ecumenical Quarterly [Winter, 1966], reprinted in TJ II:3, 1966, pps. 16-23. An analysis which attempts to go further, though in another direction (and with results which are unfortunate in the extreme), appears in Hugh T. Keenan's "The Appeal of The Lord of the Rings: A Struggle for Life" in Isaacs and Zimbardo, Tolkien and the Critics (Notre Dame, 1968). Here, the Ring is approached as a "female symbol" (p. 69).
2. See E. A. W. Budge's survey of ring amulets in Amulets and Talismans (New York, 1961), pps. 291-306.
3. Walter Skeat, Malay Magic (London, 1900), pps. 353-355.
4. Rollo Ahmed, The Black Art (London, 1936), p. 161.
5. Budge, p. 291.
6. Ibid., p. 300.
7. Richard Cavendish, The Black Arts (London, 1967), p. 236.
8. See Edward H. Schaefer, "Ritual Exposure in Ancient China," Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies XIV (1951), pps. 130-184.
9. So, for example, in a Chinese tale, "Why Cats and Dogs are Enemies" (Lim Sian-tek, More Chinese Fairy Tales [New York, 1948], pps. 23-27, the lucky ring which brings wealth, rather like Tolkien's dwarf rings, is described as old and rusty. Another noteworthy example which, however, is not a ring, is the nondescript magic coin, easily mistaken for ordinary, which appears in Edward McMaken Eager's wonderful Half Magic. Another attribute of this regrettably somewhat neglected book is an attractively drawn Merlin.
10. J. R. R. Tolkien in "On Fairy Stories," Essays Presented to Charles Williams, reprinted in The Tolkien Reader (New York, 1966), p. 47.
11. Bernard Campbell, Human Evolution (Chicago, 1966), p. 165. For an interesting discussion of the difference in orientation (hand versus teeth) between two presumably intelligent species, see John Cunningham Lilly's otherwise truly execrable The Mind of the Dolphin: A Nonhuman Intelligence (New York, 1967), p. 170.
12. In A Dictionary of Symbols (New York, 1962), J. E. Cirlot states that the necklace acquires some of its symbolism from the part of the body on which it is worn (p. 216). But the ring is only discussed in terms of circle symbolism (p. 261). It seems odd that, having granted the existence of this kind of sympathetic magic to jewelry in the form of the necklace, he should deny it to jewelry in the form of the ring.
13. Gracia Fay Ellwood, Good News From Tolkien's Middle Earth (Grand Rapids, 1970), pps. 13-83.