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Abstract

Applies folk-tale analysis tools to the climactic Mount Doom scene of *The Lord of the Rings*, finding intriguing roots in the “ogre blinded” motif most familiar to readers from the Polyphemus episode of *The Odyssey*.

Additional Keywords

Homer. *The Odyssey*—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Folk tales; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. “Mount Doom”

THE OGRE BLINDED AND *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

DANIEL PERETTI

J.R.R. Tolkien drew upon many narrative sources to create his Middle-earth, some obvious and some obscure. But many of the studies on this subject ignore a particularly important scene: the climax at Mount Doom. The few critical examinations of the events that take place there tend to look upon them in light of the end of the quest; that is, they try to find meaning in them as part of the plot and as part of a literary tradition of questing. None have attempted to explore this part of the story as a literary version of an international tale that originated in oral tradition.

The chapter titled “Mount Doom” is reticent regarding its roots. This essay will attempt to prove that it is actually a transformation of an internationally distributed folktale type, Aarne-Thompson Type 1137: The Ogre Blinded (hereafter AT 1137). Though nothing in the work itself nor in Tolkien’s writings about it indicates that he consciously kept this tale type in mind while composing his work, the similarities are great—as are the differences. Thus this essay will also show the ways in which the tale was changed, the meanings behind some of those changes, and the conscious and unconscious process that shaped it. This is a study of creativity.

Tolkien developed his own metaphor to describe creativity, the Cauldron of Story (“On Fairy-Stories” [OFS] 125). To Tolkien, the Cauldron represents tradition: the stories already told, consisting of motifs and plots developed in the past that new storytellers draw upon when telling new stories. Folklorists catalogue these stories and classify them into numbered tale types based on common motifs and structures (tale types are explored in detail below). But storytellers encounter these stories only in particular instances which vary in detail. Stories ladled from the Cauldron will contain different elements organized in different combinations because the tellers each have their own versions; however, they are still scooped from the same Cauldron. Tolkien’s own Cauldron, fashioned and filled during years of extensive reading, was deep and vast, as a glance through any study of his work will indicate. The following will attempt to illuminate his relationship with this Cauldron—with tradition—and perhaps something of the manner in which he cooked.

Accomplishing this requires two steps: First, to prove Tolkien’s acquaintance with AT 1137 in other forms—preferably in more than one source.

Doing so will indicate that Tolkien had more than a passing familiarity with the tale type, perhaps enough to demonstrate that he had internalized it. Second, to identify convincingly the events at Mount Doom with those of AT 1137. Once that is done, some conclusions may be drawn.

That Tolkien encountered this tale type before writing *The Lord of the Rings* is remarkably easy to prove. In Humphrey Carpenter's biography, we learn that Tolkien could read ancient Greek (35). In fact he became absorbed by Homer early in his life: "I was brought up in the Classics, and first discovered the sensation of literary pleasure in Homer" (*Letters* 172). The earliest written variant of AT 1137 comes from Book IX of *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus encounters the Cyclops Polyphemos (Bk. IX 152-62). In fact, so important is this version to the tale type, its subtitle is Polyphemos (Aarne and Thompson 362). In Tolkien's essay "On Fairy-Stories," he reveals his love of folktale collections. He mentions one specifically that gave him great pleasure: J.F. Campbell's *Popular Tales of the West Highlands*, which contains another variant of AT 1137 called "Conall Cra Bhuidhe."

With further digging, it might be possible to connect Tolkien to other variants—specifically those found in *The Arabian Nights* or some of the Icelandic Sagas—though it seems likely that, as with the above, he only knew of them through written sources. However, the fact that he had more than a passing familiarity with two variants seems sufficient.

The second phase, proving identity of the tales, is more complex. Certainly the books that gave the author his first "sensation of literary pleasure" would have a profound impact on that author's later work. Richard Dorson put forward a scheme for identifying folklore sources in literature (1-8). He states that one must begin with the author's biography, to search therein for evidence of the author's exposure to the folklore in question. It has already been seen that Tolkien had encountered variants of AT 1137, so we need not explore this further, but Dorson's scheme is tripartite: he also calls for examination of both internal and external evidence to seek corroboration and proof of identity.

For Dorson, the internal evidence should provide proof that the author was connected to an oral tradition. Such proof would ideally come in the form of authentic descriptions of storytelling events and awareness of the characteristics of oral tales, such as variation and multiple existence. Though Tolkien's works probably do provide such evidence, it is less relevant for the current study. Tolkien's sources as he describes them were certainly literary; however, he was a member of a group that read many of these works aloud. There is quite a bit of evidence in *The Lord of the Rings* that points to his awareness of oral tradition (for instance, many of his characters compose songs orally), but again, this is not relevant to the present study.

The third part of Dorson's scheme requires external corroboration, and here is where our attention is best kept. Identification, as Alan Dundes points out (136) is all about similarities. Are the elements of the chapter "Mount Doom" similar enough to variants of AT 1137 for it to be called a version of that tale type? To answer this question, we must first understand the concept of the tale type.

A tale type, according to William Hansen, is "a traditional, migratory story whose texts, though varying in details, share a fairly constant core of coherent action" (Hansen, "Homer" 444). As Gyula Ortutay is "tempted to say," types may be looked on as "fixed limits towards which variants progress or from which they recede [or] abstractions derived from the long series of always changing variants" (143). The constant core, the fixed limit—these are determined by scholars, and it is safe to say that no pure tale type exists in tradition. The individual manifestations are particular and unique. The description of AT 1137 found in the Tale Type Index is a bit too abstract for our purposes, so we will use Hansen's summary:

[A] man (sometimes with companions) comes to the dwelling of an ogre, usually a giant. The cannibalistic ogre keeps him in his lair. In self-defense the hero destroys the ogre's eyes (or his only eye) by means of a spit (or boiling liquid). Subsequently he covers himself with a sheepskin, joins the ogre's sheep, and crawls out of the lair. Having escaped from the ogre's dwelling, the hero sometimes mocks the ogre, and often the monster throws him a magic ring, but when the hero puts it on, the ring repeatedly yells 'Here I am,' thereby guiding the blinded ogre to him. Since the ring cannot be removed, the man is obliged to cut off his finger, after which he escapes, taking with him the ogre's valuables. ("Homer," 450)

Hansen notes that the ring motif (motif D1076) does not appear in many versions (including Homer's version), but that "[v]ery likely the Ring Episode persists in transformation as the ogre's curse, which like the magic ring does the hero some harm but fails to prevent his escape. The curse also links the Kyklops adventure with the remainder of Odysseus' return by motivating Poseidon's anger at Odysseus" (450).

A summary of Campbell's version will be of benefit. It begins with Conall recounting his adventures to placate a king who would have Conall and his sons killed. In one of them, Conall comes to the cave of a one-eyed, goat herding giant who threatens to eat him. Conall says to the giant: "But I see thou art one-eyed. I am a good leech, and I will give thee the sight of the other eye" (Campbell 112). With use of cauldron and fire, Conall blinds the giant's one good eye. With the giant guarding the door, Conall slays its fine buck and disguises himself in its skin to make his escape. He then taunts the giant with his escape,

and the giant gives him a ring. Foolishly, Conall puts it on. The giant calls out to the ring, which answers "I am here." Unable to get the ring off his finger, Conall cuts the finger off and throws it in a deep lake. When the giant calls out, the ring answers. The giant leaps into the lake and drowns. As proof of his tale, Conall shows the king his hand, with only four fingers on it.

Now here is Tolkien's own summary of the relevant sequence in *The Lord of the Rings*:

[Frodo and Sam] reach the Mountain of Doom and the high chamber of the Fire—dogged still by the relentless Gollum, over whom the Ring that he no longer possesses has a power that nothing but death could heal.

We reach the brink of the First [sic], *and the whole plan fails*. The Ring conquers. Frodo cannot bear to destroy it. He renounces the Quest, and claims the Ring and puts it on his finger. The Dark Lord is suddenly aware of him and all the plot. His whole appalling will is withdrawn from the battle at the Gates and concentrated on the Mountain (within sight of his throne). Gollum comes up, and wrestles on the brink for mastery with Frodo. He bits [sic] off finger and Ring, and screams with exultation, but falls in his mad capering into the abyss, and so ends. And so the Ring is after all unmade—and even the treachery of Gollum has served its end (as Gandalf foretold).

The Hobbits are nearly overwhelmed in the resulting cataclysm. From afar they glimpse through the clouds the catastrophic downfall of the Dark Tower, and the disintegration of Sauron. The Mountain erupts. At last they lie choked in fume and flame on a last rock-isle in a sea of molten lava. [...]

The cry of 'the Eagles' really is heard. They come down the wind from the North, and directed by Gandalf, bear up the bodies of Frodo and Sam and bring them out of the ruin of Mordor. (qtd. in Hammond and Scull 747)

At first glance the similarities are not great. I hadn't even noticed them until I read Hansen's essay, in which he points out the magical ring that appears in some of the variants. It cannot be removed save by the shedding of blood. Also, the ring belongs to a being whose defining characteristic is a single eye. Though this is not a universal characteristic of the tale type, it is quite common in the northern and western parts of Europe. Immediately we see some similarities on the surface, but to prove identity requires more than surface similarity. To see just how thoroughly the tales identify, it is useful to lay out the elements and motifs according to their writers:

Homer

Journey to a cave
Fire, smoke
Villain with one eye
Blinding
Escape on animal (sheep)
Curse

Campbell

Journey to a cave
Fire, smoke
Villain with one eye
Blinding
Escape on animal (goat)
Magical ring
Exposes wearer to owner
Removed by force
Thrown into liquid (lake)
Death of giant

Tolkien

Journey to a cave
Fire, smoke (volcano)
Villain with one eye
Blinding (see below)
Escape on animal (eagle)
Magical ring
Exposes wearer to owner
Removed by force
Falls into liquid (lava)
Death of Sauron

Juxtaposed in this manner, the similarities become apparent; but they become even more evident if examined further. For example, though Frodo and Sam do not blind Tolkien's ogre, Sauron, if we take the other half of the story—the battles fought in Book V—we may look at this as an attempt to blind the eye of Sauron to the activities of the Hobbits, not so that they may escape, but so that they may secretly enter his domain. Tolkien writes, "The Eye was not turned to them: it was gazing north to where the Captains of the West stood at bay" (*LotR* 942). Sauron remains unable to see them, for all purposes blind to their movements. This makes even more sense when combined with the Frodo's claim of the Ring for himself, which alerts Sauron to his presence in much the way that the ring calls out to its owner in Campbell's variant: "[A]s Frodo put on the ring and claimed it for his own [...] The Dark Lord was suddenly aware of him, and his Eye piercing all shadows looked across the plain to the door that he had made [on Mount Doom]; and the magnitude of his own folly was revealed to him in a blinding flash" (948). Certainly this seems sufficient to illustrate that the events on Mount Doom share the same "core of action" as AT 1137. The more Tolkien's tale is examined, the more similar it seems to the others.

For example, Tolkien sets his climax at a volcano. Homer thoroughly describes the barren and wasted landscape of the Cyclopes (another similarity with Tolkien's setting for the scene, Mordor), but says nothing about a volcano. Yet the cave does contain a fire, which is used to temper the stake that will blind Polyphemus. The same is true for the highland tale, while in other variants the hero uses the fire to boil water with which to blind the giant.¹

Sauron, it is necessary to reiterate, is never described in much detail. Basically all we know about him is that he sits atop his dark tower and looks out on the world as he schemes and commands. His servants often refer to him as The Eye. As Frodo gazes across the lands of Middle-earth from a high seat, he

¹ Wilhelm Grimm was one of the first to write about the Cyclops. He saw the single eye as a solar symbol, an interpretation that proved quite popular (summarized in Glenn 141). Barber and Barber relate the eye to the cauldron of a volcano (108).

encounters his enemy: “And suddenly he felt The Eye. There was an eye in the Dark Tower that did not sleep” (*LotR* 401). In fact, as Frodo and Sam near his land, they come upon a defiled monument to an ancient king of Gondor, whose head has been replaced by “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” (702). Yet we know that Sauron is, at least, humanoid. We have the words of Gollum: “He has only four [fingers] on the Black Hand, but they are enough” (641). Equating Sauron with the Cyclopean Ogre seems appropriate; and, though many of the events may not occur in precisely the same way or in the same order, the similarities seem sufficient to label Tolkien’s climactic episode at Mount Doom a transformation of AT 1137.

But what of the differences? They cannot be merely dismissed. According to Alan Dundes, differences are the key to interpretation (136). They also lead us to insights about Tolkien’s creative process. The relevant differences may be summed up as follows:

- 1) Frodo receives the ring at the beginning, not near the end of the episode;
- 2) This episode is the climax of Tolkien’s tale, not set near the beginning;
- 3) The hero is rescued instead of escaping by ingenuity;
- 4) The heroes are not trapped in the cave;
- 5) Frodo does not cast away the ring/cut off his finger on his own.

The first two seem somehow related, both having to do with the order of events. They can perhaps be explained by an observation made by Tom Shippey, who writes that *The Lord of the Rings* “inverts a very familiar narrative pattern, in that it is not a quest to obtain something, but an anti-quest, to get rid of it” (324).

In a tale that inverts a familiar pattern, it makes sense that events which normally happen at the beginning of the familiar tale happen at the end of this one. Odysseus tells of his adventures near the middle of *The Odyssey*, but they are set, in terms of plot, at the beginning of his travels home from Troy. Likewise, Conall Cra Bhuidhe—the hero of the tale recorded by Campbell—faces his one-eyed enemy at the beginning of his adventures.

Differences 3 and 4 likewise seem related. The heroes of Tolkien’s story are not crafty like Odysseus, nor are they great fighters like Conall Cra Bhuidhe. Though they are not trapped, having journeyed to the cave in Mount Doom of their own accord, the erupting volcano ensures their death.² Frodo and Sam, to fit with Tolkien’s intentions (which will be discussed below), are humble, even

² It is interesting here to bring up something revealed in Tolkien’s early drafts for this chapter: as Frodo and Sam try to leave the cave, they find they are trapped by one of the Nazgûl, servants of Sauron (*Sauron Defeated* 6).

weak. Their escape from the situation and death come not by their own doing, but by a sort of providence in the form of the eagles.

The final difference, that Frodo essentially fails at his task, requires the most attention. Seldom do writers of quests have their heroes fail, and though Tolkien himself calls it failure in his summary, he sees it in a different light than many of his readers. In the years following the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien received many letters inquiring about Frodo's failure in Mount Doom. His replies were usually something like the following, which is relevant enough to be quoted at length:

The final scene of the Quest was so shaped simply because having regard to the situation, and to the 'characters' of Frodo, Sam, and Gollum, those events seemed to me mechanically, morally, and psychologically credible. But, of course, if you wish for more reflection, I should say that within the mode of the story the 'catastrophe' *exemplifies* (an aspect of) the familiar words: 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.' [...]

[T]here are abnormal situations in which one may be placed. 'Sacrificial' situations, I should call them: sc. positions in which the 'good' of the world depends on the behavior of an individual in circumstances which demand of him suffering and endurance far beyond the normal—even, it may happen [...] demand a strength of body and mind which he does not possess: he is in a sense doomed to failure [...]. Frodo was in such a position [...]. But at this point the salvation of the world and Frodo's own 'salvation' is achieved by his previous *pity* and forgiveness of injury. [...] [B]y a 'grace' [Gollum's] last betrayal was at a precise juncture when the final evil deed was the most beneficial thing any one [could] have done for Frodo! By a situation created by his 'forgiveness,' he was saved himself [...]. (*Letters* 233-4)

So Tolkien's purpose for the scene was to present a "fairy story exemplum" (Shippey 145, also *Letters* 252) of The Lord's Prayer. But why, then, did it need to take the form it did? Tolkien's own words quoted above, that it proceeded from the mechanics of story and character, are not a sufficient answer for academic study. One does not need a giant with one eye, a severed finger, and a mountain of fire to exemplify this idea.

There have been many interpretations of Tolkien's work, some of which take the events at Mount Doom into account. They employ scholarly theories such as structuralism (Petty) and psychoanalysis (Jackson, qtd. in Shippey 324), but none of them have endeavored to correctly identify what they were dealing with. Those who have searched for sources deal with other part of the story, finding parallels between, for example, the sailing of Aragorn's commandeered

fleet of black-sailed ships with Theseus's return to Athens from Crete (Day 120), or vague similarities and differences between Middle-earth and the invented world presented in "Jack and the Beanstalk" (King 42-48). None of them so much as mention the Tale Type index, despite Neil Isaacs's call for "an analysis of folk-elements in Tolkien, an actual accounting of motifs according to the Aarne-Thompson [sic] index" (Isaacs 6) in 1968.

Thus, most interpretations offer little insight relevant to the present study, save perhaps for one. Ursula K. LeGuin describes the trio of characters who make it to Mount Doom as one hero divided into four parts: Frodo, Sam, Gollum, and Sméagol. Frodo, on his own, fails at the quest, "and has to have it accomplished for him by his mortal enemy, Gollum, who is, however, his kinsman, his brother, in fact himself . . ." (107). So we see that, though Frodo was unable to take the Ring off, in another sense he does accomplish it himself. This adds a new dimension even to Tolkien's own reading of his book. But we still have not answered the question of how the scene came to be.

Again, we turn to Tolkien's letters. When asked whether or not the poem *Beowulf* was an inspiration for the scene in *The Hobbit* where Bilbo steals a cup from a dragon, Tolkien replies, "though it was not consciously present to the mind in the process of writing [...] it is difficult to think of any other way of conducting the story at that point" (*Letters* 31). *Beowulf* had brewed in Tolkien's Cauldron for years, shaping his work. From this, we might infer that Tolkien was subconsciously aware of Tale AT 1137 and its various elements and motifs as he composed his story, and that he might answer our question in the same way.

Further evidence that Tolkien engaged in such retellings of older tales, sometimes deliberately, lurks in other parts of his work. He wrote of an ancient island called Númenor, inhabited by men until a disaster, born of arrogance, caused the higher powers of Tolkien's world to send the island beneath the sea. Tolkien himself refers to this as "the Atlantis isle of Númenor" (*Letters* 175). He writes: "The particular 'myth' which lies behind this tale, and the mood both of Men and Elves at this time, is the Downfall of Númenor: a special variety of the Atlantis tradition" (*Letters* 197-8). He also explains that "the beginning of the legendarium, of which the [*Lord of the Rings*] Trilogy is part (the conclusion), was in an attempt to reorganize some of the Kalevala, especially the tale of Kullervo the hapless, into a form of my own" (*Letters* 214). However, though these were conscious attempts to transform other tales into his own, it does not explain how the seemingly unconscious use of AT 1137 came about.

For that, we turn to Gyula Ortutay. He describes a process by which folktales combine and change because of affinity, "*the method of attraction*" (163). Affinity occurs because of similarity among the motifs of different tales. For example, several different tale types may contain the motif of a magical ring (D162.2.1) or a one-eyed ogre (F512.1.1, F531.1.1.1). According to Ortutay, "a

peculiar attraction between related or similar types and structures [...] leads through a series of variants to the birth of new types and forms. This is one of the methods by which oral transmission creates new products through variants." It is, he notes, "an elementary feature of memory and association" (164) of which there are three principle forms. Only the first is relevant to the present study: "Kindred structures, forms and formulas (formal aspect), types and motifs (content aspect) exert mutual attraction which then appears in the variants as approximation, transformation or contamination" (166). Similar tales attract each other. The human mind connects and combines them. From this, tales merge and change.

Ortutay never declares that any of this needs to be conscious. Tolkien's statement about the specifics of the climax arising from the mechanics of the story itself is quite accurate. Tolkien, in serving the plot of his story and the actions of the characters, had created a situation where form and motif held a strong affinity to type 1137, of which he had long been familiar principally through variants from J.F. Campbell's *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* and Book IX of *The Odyssey*. He had established a one-eyed enemy, a magical ring, and a volcano where his climax would occur. While his tale formed in his mind, the affinity between the motifs led to their combination. Earlier drafts incorporate more of the elements (such as the Nazgûl trapping them in the cave). When a story contains a magical ring as part of its conflict, there are of course multiple possible resolutions, some of which are more dramatic than others. Tolkien, aware of one of the more dramatic possibilities as part of tradition, naturally responded to its affinity with the tale he had been writing.

I have essayed to put the climax of *The Lord of the Rings* into its proper tradition as a transformation of AT 1137. Tolkien himself gives us a set of associations: the Lord's Prayer—particularly the lines "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil"—which he had in mind as the idealistic foundation for the scene. That many others do not detect this association is evident in the many letters Tolkien received questioning Frodo's failure to dispose of the Ring himself. Yet Tolkien did not fail. His popularity and recent critical attention and praise aside, he tells us so himself. Frodo made possible the quest's completion, which was all he needed to do. He made victory possible, and in this way Tolkien's task mirrors that of his character. The author makes possible the conditions for finding meaning, both in his own mind and in that of his audience. We can study either, and the present essay has been focused on shedding light on the former.

Yet even with these illuminations, the creative process remains largely mysterious. Tolkien's own metaphor seems apt for his process: "Speaking of the history of stories [...] we may say that the Pot of Soup, the Cauldron of Story, has always been boiling, and to it have continually been added new bits, dainty and

undainty" (OFS 125).³ Tolkien had ideas; he had demands of his plot set in place from years earlier when he wrote *The Hobbit*; he had a tradition. All of these went into his cauldron. When it came time to write his climax, he dipped his ladle in and salted to his taste.

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³ This passage comes in Tolkien's essay during a lengthy criticism of folklorists in general, to which a proper response is perhaps due but is, alas, not appropriate in the present essay.

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