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Abstract

A study of Arthurian and other medieval romance motifs in the Old Forest episode, relying heavily on the linguistic features of this chapter.

Additional Keywords

Forests; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Arthurian romances; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Medieval romances; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Middle-earth—Geography; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Symbolism; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings. "The Old Forest"

Tolkien in the Land of Arthur: the Old Forest Episode from *The Lord of the Rings*

Corinne Zemmour

For all its earlier medieval origins, serving—particularly in France—the needs of an essentially courtly and aristocratic society, Arthurian literature has far outlived that society. The old Matter of Britain has been incorporated into other texts, addressing other, newer readers. Just as its own themes were developed from far older myths, so its cultural legacy and the formalized nature of its textuality have been handed down to modern ‘fantasy literature,’ ever open to all forms of legends and beliefs.

Much of our understanding of its survival into the present day, and much of our appreciation of its literary effect, depend upon a close analysis of the ways in which the Arthurian spirit is still capable of moving, and in turn of moving us. I have chosen to trace this persistent Arthurian influence in a single early episode in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*: the “Old Forest” chapter in the first book of the *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the opening volume of the six-book Cycle.¹ Although much of the inspiration for the work comes from Tolkien’s Old English scholarship and from his fascination with Celtic, Germanic and Finnish myths,² we must remember that he was also an authoritative editor of the classic Middle English Arthurian poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Arthurian Literature, Fantasy Literature: Finding the Way

In this short chapter, in which events finally force Frodo, Sam, Merry and Pippin to flee their home and set out on their hazardous journey, the four Hobbits (accompanied part-way by Fatty Bolger) find themselves in the most striking of landscapes, where two worlds collide. We are at a geographical frontier, where a great tall Hedge ‘looms suddenly ahead’ (144), as a clear demarcation. On the nearer side is the Shire, the companions’ familiar homeland; but the Hedge takes on an

added shape, when one thinks of what lies on the other side: we are now at an ideological frontier. At this point, in fact, the Hedge—unclimbed and unclimbable, “netted over with silver cobwebs” (144)—symbolizes the demarcation between a given society and a universe so alien that it is quite simply an “unreal country” (160). It is indicative that, in her authoritative monograph on the Arthurian knight errant, Marie-Luce Chênerie points out that:

Au-delà du monde profane, loin de la société courtoise, l'espace des errances et des aventures baigne dans un décor naturel auquel le roman arthurien prête souvent un caractère 'sacré', c'est-à-dire, dans ce cas au moins, surhumain, donc redoutable et fascinant... (emphasis added, Chênerie 143)

[Beyond the everyday world, far away from courtly society, the country of adventure, of the Quest, may take on a natural aspect, but it is one which Arthurian Romance often invests with a 'sacred' quality - in this case, at least, a supernatural quality, at once frightening and fascinating'.]

In the light of this comment, we may see that the Hedge forms a strikingly similar dividing line, all the more so because several indications, both in the prologue to the Cycle and seeded throughout the first volume, invite us to see in the Hobbit community something approaching an echo of the old courtly society.³ Despite everything that happens to them, the Hobbits cultivate a civilized style, even if it is not that of the “big folk” (as they call us), whose love of technical progress they do not share. Their fields, proof of their mastery of rebellious nature, and close to their houses (144), here come to resemble those meadows of Arthurian literature which soothe the knights as they return to their own world, after all their trials.

Hobbit homes have a similar significance. While the start of the episode sees our heroes leaving theirs behind, at the end they are welcomed into Tom Bombadil's home, where, as in the castles of medieval romance, splendor and lavish hospitality represent a perfect example of noble *mores*. By this point we understand the scene's specifically socio-literary ambience. Although in many ways resembling old-fashioned Gloucestershire villagers, Tolkien's hobbits do also observe a number of the rules of behavior of medieval courtly society. Of course this does not mean that their world is based on that of French nobility; yet there is an interesting similarity between the two sets of customs that

at least suggests certain parallels. On this point, Tolkien tells us specifically about the Hobbits:

And laugh they did, and eat, and drink, often and *heartily*, being fond of simple jests at all times, and of six meals a day (when they could get them). They were *hospitable* and delighted in parties, and in *presents*, which they gave away *freely* and eagerly accepted. (emphasis added, *LotR 2*)

The party which Bilbo Baggins (*the* hobbit, precursor to the Cycle, his character emblematic of the entire community) prepares for his birthday is also highly indicative. At the very idea of all the promised entertainments at Bag End, the inhabitants of Hobbiton are seized by the same feverish excitement as are the inhabitants of any castle awaiting the arrival of Erec.⁴ Since Tolkien takes such pains to suggest them, these parallels are not mere chance. Indeed, in Chrétien de Troyes' romance *Erec et Enide* there are at least two passages particularly apposite in this context. The first describes the welcome King Lac prepares for his son, and his ardent desire that everyone should honor the young knight:

Ainz qu'Erec el chastel venist,
Deus messagiers avant tramist
Qui l'alerent au roi conter.
Li rois fist maintenant monter
Qu'il ot oïes les noveles,
Clers et chevaliers et puceles,
Et comande les corz soner
Et les rues ancortiner
De tapiz et de dras de soie
Por son fil recevoir a grant joie...

(Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec* ll.2291-300)

[Before Erec came to the castle he sent two messengers ahead, who went to tell the king. As soon as he heard the news, the king had clerks and knights and maidens mount upon their horses, and he ordered the horns to be blown and the streets to be adorned with tapestries and silken sheets, in order to receive his son with great joy...]

The second passage, describing the generous gifts presented both to Erec and to Enide his companion, draws even closer the

resemblance between hobbit custom and the rules of medieval courtly hospitality:

Le jor ot Erec mainz presanz
De chevaliers et de borjois:
De l'un un palefroi norrois
Et de l'autre une cope d'or;
Cil li presante un ostor sor,
Cil un brachet, cil un levrier
Et li autres un esprevier,
Li autres un destrier d'Espaigne;
Cil un escu, cil une ansaigne,
Cil une espee, et cil un hiaume.
Onques nus rois an son rëaume
Ne fu plus lieemant veüz
N'a greignor joie receüz.
Tuit de lui servir se penerent;
Molt plus grant joie demenerent
D'Enyde que de lui ne firent... (ll. 2350-65)

[Erec received many presents that day from knights and from burghers: from one a Norwegian palfrey, and from another a golden cup; one gave him a red goshawk, one a pointer, one a greyhound, another a sparrow-hawk, and another a Spanish charger; this one a shield, that one a banner, this one a sword, , that one a helmet. Never was any king more gladly welcomed in his kingdom, nor received with greater joy. All strove to serve him; yet they made still more of Enide than they did of him...]

This sense of hospitality really is as profoundly set in the hobbit mind as it is in courtly convention. The hobbit love of giving and receiving food finds its notable counterpart further on in the same romance, as King Arthur (in the depths of the forest, and on a fast-day to boot) unfailingly offers Erec some magnificent fare:

Ce fu un samedi a nuit
Qu'il mangierent poissons et fruit,
Luz et perches, saumons et truites,
Et puis poires crues et cuites... (ll. 4217-20)

[It was a Saturday evening, when they ate fish and fruit, pike and perch, salmon and trout, and then fresh and cooked pears...]

The frontier line of the Hedge does not, however, merely separate two worlds: it will act as a conduit between them. A necessary conduit to adventure, for, just like Arthurian knights, the Hobbits have a mission to accomplish: in their case, to defend the One Ring of Power, now in Frodo's possession, to keep it from the clutches of the terrible Black Riders and winged Nazgûl sent out by the evil Sauron, and finally to convey it to Mount Doom, and thus destroy the malevolent force for ever. So the Hobbits carefully prepare for their journey. The heroes of Arthurian romance depart mounted on steeds or palfreys; the Hobbits choose ponies, sturdy despite their small size, which in any case is more suited to that of their riders. Even though, on leaving home, they have as yet no way of knowing it, their expedition will be punctuated by many stages, just as would be an Yvain's or a Perceval's journey into adventure. They will find themselves in a clearing, wait at the foot of a hill, descend into a valley, while stopping regularly en route to take rest (the Hobbit constitution demands frequent stops for refreshment).⁵ In this chapter's journey, they will start at daybreak, at the Point A of their own homes, and end at dusk, at the Point B of Tom Bombadil's dwelling: *a priori*, a cyclic itinerary in space and time. In between these two points,⁶ Tolkien's knights errant move at varying speeds according to the conditions, sometimes (152) abandoning their horses and continuing on foot. Given this pattern, it is not surprising to find an accelerated tempo indicated in the chapter by the verbs *to hurry* (three occurrences), *to run* (nine) and *to rush* (once). This speed is counterpointed by verbs denoting slower, or more encumbered motion: *to stumble* (three times), *to scramble* (twice), *to struggle* (twice), *to clamber*, *to drag*, and *to stagger*. Again, *to pass* occurs seven times, stressing movement through the forest, while frequent change of direction or choice of path is conveyed by eight occurrences of *to take way*, *to cut across* or *to turn*. Use of *to start* (once) and *to be back* (twice) sets logical termini to a journey,⁷ within which *to halt*, *to stop* and *to stand* denote pauses on no less than thirteen occasions.⁸ General progress, including movement on horseback, is underlined by the direct use of *to go*, *to come* and *to ride*, while, a third way through the chapter, the travelers purposefully achieve their only clear topographical goal, the shaven crown of the hill in the middle of the forest: "The Hobbits led their ponies up, *winding round and round until they reached the top*" (emphasis added, 149).

This whole use of the language of motion is very close, both semantically and syntactically, to those medieval French expressions found throughout the Arthurian Cycles, and constructed around the temporal adverb 'si' ('and thus,' 'so'), denoting the progression of events (see Marchello-Nizia). The point is that the Hobbits' journey is first and foremost a Quest: a quest on which Frodo sets out, with his companions Sam, Pippin, and Merry, as they quit the Shire and the threat of the Black Riders who lie in wait for them. It is thus only natural that Tolkien should automatically (and thirty-one times in all in this chapter) select verbs such as *to follow*, *to lead*, *to explore*, *to discover* and *to find*. In exactly the same way as the authors of Arthurian romance in the Middle Ages, he will turn his work into a **map**, with a clearly-defined topography, criss-crossed by the elements of a complex itinerary: *track*, *road*, *way* (together, 19 occurrences in the chapter), and above all *path* (28 occurrences).⁹ Tolkien has such a predilection for *path* that some commentary is needed, and will be given later.

Let us return, with the Hobbits, to the Hedge: a very Janus-Hedge. One side, that turned towards the Shire, is protective; the other, outer side signifies the beginning of the quest, and of adventures beyond. It is high and massive, but a very sophisticated brick-lined cutting leads down to an excavated and solidly vaulted tunnel beneath and through it. The overall effect is that of a lock, permitting travelers to pass from the inner to the outer stage, from the world of the Hobbits to the other world.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, the far end of the tunnel is closed off by "a gate of thick-set iron bars" (145); again, not surprisingly, when Merry pushes the gate to, after the companions have passed through, "it shut with a clang, and the lock clicked." Not to shut the gate would leave the homeland open to invasion by dark forces; the sound, however, is still "ominous," since it effectively reminds the Hobbits that they have now passed beyond their pale of settlement.¹¹ Significantly, the word "hedge" occurs twelve times in this episode; for the Hobbits it remains a precious point of reference.¹²

Because it closes the Shire in upon itself, and at the same time cuts it off from the lands beyond, the Hedge acts as a frame for each of these two worlds, just as medieval Arthurian romance encompasses both courtly society and a universe outside. It is between these twin poles that

Tolkien sets the stage for the great Quest, following his medieval forerunners in the full tradition of chivalric adventure.

The essential world of this adventure is defined by means of four groups of nouns, which lead the 'Hobbits Errant' from a horizontal plane stretching before them to a sense of steeping vertical descent, the whole imbued with great topographical convention.¹³ The first group contains: *forest, wood, bush, spinney, glade, and clearing*. The second includes: *water, pool, and bog*. The third brings in: *tree, willow, oak, fir, ash, and pine*. The fourth mainly consists of: *valley, hollow, and fold*.

Some of these listings call for comment. *Glade*, for example, although found four times—twice set formally into the toponym of *The Bonfire Glade* (146, 147)—is once replaced by *clearing* (148). This is not for simple stylistic effect; there is a possible deeper significance. Whereas a *glade* occurs in the natural world, a *clearing* is by definition man-made; the Old Forest suffered from such deprivations, above all, a long time before, when, in reprisal for the trees' encroachment up to the Hedge, "the Hobbits came and cut down hundreds of trees, and made a great bonfire in the Forest" (146). The *Bonfire Glade* is thus an ironic misnomer, and Tolkien's single use of *clearing* properly heightens the ambivalence of the surroundings in which the questing Hobbits find themselves, as they (like the knights errant of Arthurian tradition) pass through a place which has been the scene of conflict and transgression, and to which they are drawn as by a magnet.¹⁴

There is a similar contrasting, and, at first, seemingly puzzling effect in the fact that Tolkien uses *forest* twenty-five times in this chapter, almost twice as frequently as *wood* (14 occurrences), to the extent that *forest* becomes the key noun over all the four groups. Apart from the crucial choice of *Forest* for the toponym itself, both words are employed interchangeably, to form a composite. It is interesting that Tolkien here allows the older, English *wood*—with its polysemic connotations of animism and even madness—to be overlaid by the more neutral French loan.¹⁵ There may be some reasons for this. Firstly, in the case of the Old Forest, overstressing *wood* might have added too sinister a coloring for the episode: the forest's disquieting aspects are after all carefully counterbalanced by the welcoming figure, songs and home of Tom Bombadil (himself as much part of the Old Forest as any of its gnarled trees). Secondly, the English medievalist in Tolkien might well have hit

instinctively upon “Old Forest,” as an appropriate Middle-earth forerunner of the historical New Forest, preserve of Anglo-Norman kings. A third reason will be suggested later.

Whatever the reasons for its presence, we should not ignore the relatively frequent occurrence of *forest*. The word joins *water*, *tree*, and *valley*, as the major or dominant constituents within their respective paradigms, with the other nouns in the groups performing a minor function.¹⁶ There are also parallel syntagmatic links between *forest* and *water*, between *water* and *wood*, and between *willow* and *forest*. The resultant effect of these groupings on Tolkien’s prose is a very powerful and evocative system of denotative and connotative patterning. The author has here recreated four of the physical perspectives which also go to make up the classic—and highly persistent—frame of Arthurian composition. Starting with *forest* and *wood* (as interchangeable as the *bois* and *forêt* of French Arthurian tradition), we find many associations of these twin nouns with *tree*, *ground*, and *turf*, relating them all to a theoretically well-defined world of the horizontal: verdant, arboreal and potentially extending over a great distance. After the holocaust of trees in the Bonfire, the Hobbits “burned all the ground in a long strip east of the Hedge” (146), and other references, to *edge* (145) and *borders* (150), serve to stress this image of the perimeter line of the forest. Once this line is crossed, the perspective moves far inwards, centripetally: “There are various queer things living *deep in the Forest* [...]” (146); “[...] through the midst of the Forest” (150); “They were being headed off [...] *into the heart of the Forest*” (151).

The author’s forest consists of multiple zones (*lands*), among which is a treeless glade which appears to stretch eastwards, to the entrance to the underground passageway. Further down, the south-eastern part of the forest is taken up by the valley of the Withywindle, with higher ground rising above it in two terraces. Outside the glade there is much mixed vegetation; Tolkien specifically calls it “more crowded” (147). Marching with the flowing waters of the Withywindle below, the sides of the valley are covered with willows, reeds, rushes, and many other wild plants. All around, *bogs and pools*, and *rills running down gullies* (153), characterize a wet wasteland; above, however, the flora changes.

On the higher forest lands rise pines and fir-trees. Further down, on the next level, these give way to the serried ranks of oaks and ashes that delineate *the denser wood*, together with *other strange and nameless trees* (151). Here the way is *choked with brambles*, indicating the very tangled nature of this forest level. This very denseness implies lack of light, duly emphasized by Tolkien: images of shadows, darkness, and night recur in the text of this chapter, while the waters of the Withywindle are correspondingly brown (154). The Old Forest is a complex entity, and—not surprisingly—its description sets it up very much as a woodland archetype.

In comparison, bushes and spinneys are relatively more modest sites, though never mentioned far from the greater woodland; they form enclaves within the forest (see, in particular, pp. 151 and 160). Just like the darkly-colored water of the river, the bush takes on many of the attributes of the other covered zones. It is dense and thick, albeit of lesser volume, so that it serves to cover over holes and hollows in the heart of the forest, thus echoing the wood's inextricable entanglement: a hollow *filled with thick bushes and matted undergrowth* (151). In association, almost in complicity, with its darkness, this thick vegetation also breeds sounds: *Strange furtive noises ran among the bushes and reeds* (160). Spinneys are also quite thick, but not so impenetrable: indeed, on setting out from home, the Hobbits have very soon to pass through this particular woody corridor (144). Here, intriguingly, the trees of this spinney-outrider of the deeper forest are planted within the Shire, bordering upon Hobbit fields.

It is to the trees that we must now turn, the trees that are first and foremost denizens of the forest. As we have seen, they are mainly groups of oaks, ashes, pines, and firs, with willows occurring overwhelmingly as single specimens. In contrast to the spreading horizontality of the woodland, all Tolkien's trees seem to emphasize the same vertical composition (from *root* and *trunk* to *stem* and *top*), flourishing with *branch*, *bough*, and *leaf*. This arboreal verticality maintains all the characteristics of the Tolkien forest: any differences between the individual species is thrown into relief by their pronounced similarities. A native of the Mediterranean or northern forests, the oak shares its tall height with the European or Near Eastern ash, and so they are indicated in the text.¹⁷ Although these particular trees do not exceed forty meters in height, they are large and dark (147), although—in a

mirror-image between foot and tree-top—their roots are *green or grey* (146). These roots also copy the disturbing anarchy of the twisted branches above, *writhing and interlacing* (147) as they trace a forest pattern printed on the tree-trunks themselves: rarely slender or straight, more often thick, bent, squat, twisted or leaning. As for the pines and fir trees, they too are tangled together, their foliage deep and dark (151).

Of all the trees, it is the willow which is the direct representative and guardian of the forest, and Tolkien moves on to another register of adjectives to describe it: where, for the other trees, he may have employed *high* or *tall*, we now find *big*, even *great* (155, 154), and the menacing and vertiginous combination of the two: *great big* (155). Accordingly, and by means of a very skilful *mise-en-abyme*, the notion of great size moves across from the other trees, to rest with this dominant species, designating the overhanging branches, then the roots, then the single tree itself (155). It is worth underlining the fact that one of its *great* roots seems as massive as its trunk, and that, for Tolkien, the tree-trunk itself is no longer 'big' or 'thick', but *huge* and *enormous*,¹⁸ its bark proof against any puny Hobbit assault.¹⁹ Far from being able to be shifted, it occupies a considerable space, and is not easily circumscribed.²⁰ The sheer width of its circumference is hollow enough to swallow up both Pippin and Merry, cavernous enough to turn the former's warnings into a *muffled yell* (156). The willow's interior is full of darkness, echoing that of the whole woodland, and it is no less gnarled and twisted than the other great trees. Yet, because it is metonymic of the entire forest, the phrase *the whole willow* (156) irresistibly takes on an added dimension beyond the sentence in which it occurs. The willow's vertical lines break through the dense horizontality of the forest, and confer a sense of increased volume upon the scene of the Hobbits' adventure.

Within this space, however, areas of downward verticality (indicated by *valley*, *hollow*, or *fold*) are not neglected in this chapter; stressing the falling-away of the ground, they vary in relationship to the degree of depth conveyed. While we do not find the first term in association with the others, folds and hollows are sequentially linked. The valley is exclusively that of the Withywindle, deeply cut into the forest, with steeping banks and suitably damp surroundings (150). But there are also shallower declivities and undulations, and for Tolkien, in these cases of 'hollow' and 'fold', the appropriate relationship between

signifier and signified is sometimes a shifting one, as is apparent in the following extract:

Then *deep folds* in the ground were discovered unexpectedly. [...] Each time they *climbed down* they found the *hollow* filled with thick bushes and matted undergrowth [...]. The afternoon was wearing away when they *scrambled and stumbled into a fold* that was *wider and deeper* than any they had yet met. It was so *steep and overhung* that it proved impossible to *climb out of it* again. (emphasis added, 151-52)

We can see that, here, 'hollow' alternates with 'fold' in a way that suggests features which are not strictly its own. In turn, with 'fold,' the signified undergoes a semantic metamorphosis associating it with the image of a sheer-sided fissure, disproportionately wide, and as immeasurably deep as the very forest itself, whose vertical plant forms lead steeply back down to the valley beneath. There is thus a latent isomorphism passing between these three signifieds. Operating at a point of axial convergence, all the sites of descending verticality project the image of a landscape in which all the features blend together, their characteristics interchangeable. With striking chiasmus, Tolkien describes height and depth cancelling each other out by being inverted and juxtaposed: "They were in a *deep dim-lit gully* over-arched by trees *high above them*" (emphasis added, 152).

This spatial configuration is not particularly hospitable. Because the various aspects of the forest inform the whole décor of the quest of the Hobbits errant,²¹ the novelist has composed a lexical score with sinister connotations, the melodic line of which is composed of 'deep,' 'dark,' and 'damp,' either employed on their own, or together, or by twos juxtaposed,²² and blended with all the other terms noted above.²³ In Tolkien's work we encounter the same auditory and visual landscape sketched by the medieval composers of Arthurian Romance, who themselves added to adjectives conveying the immensity of the forest others redolent of its impenetrable mystery:

'la taille de ses arbres séculaires, l'épaisseur de son feuillage, la barrière de ses broussailles la font *haute, profonde, espesse, antieue, obscure, ramue, foillue, noire, espineuse, anieuse.*' (emphasis added, Chênerie 150)

[The sheer size of its ancient trees, the thickness of its foliage and the dense obstruction of its undergrowth all serve to render it *haute* (high), *profonde* (deep), *espesse* (dense), *antievve* (ancient), *oscure* (dark), *ramue* (thickly wooded), *foillue* (leafy), *noire* (black), *espineuse* (thorny), *anieuse* (arduous, painful).]

Because they are so monosyllabic, because they are semantically so self-sufficient, and because their shared initial consonant lends itself so well to alliteration, ‘damp,’ ‘dark,’ and ‘deep’ recapture the effect of medieval assonance and impart an insistently rhythmical and musical quality.

Tolkien undoubtedly shares with his medieval counterparts much of the sources of his inspiration.²⁴ The treatment reserved for certain words seems to confirm this. Although *path* does not have a generic specification in his work, it remains of crucial interest in that it is probably the oldest-attested term.²⁵ And even if *clearing* only occurs once in this chapter, it is still preciously evocative of medieval times, since it corresponds to the Old French *essart*, redolent of Royal and feudal clearances.²⁶ As far as *forest* is concerned, we have already discussed above some possible reasons for its preference over *wood*; there is, besides, a third reason, linked to the word’s semantic charge, since it derives from the Latin *forestis*, ‘without, beyond the walls.’ Because the forest sums up and encompasses all the fears and obsessions of a feudal courtly society, it is only logical that it should feature so frequently in Arthurian romance.

Tolkien’s use of language, not least his play of words like ‘forest,’ ‘path,’ and ‘clearing,’ combines to lend his mysterious landscape a deliberate sense of the archaic, moving us further and further into the Middle Ages, as he engages with his own authored romance. And beyond these purely spatial indicators, turning to specific activity, we can detect echoes of typological conventions.

When Frodo admits that his only chance of escaping from the Black Riders is to pass through the forest²⁷—and when, all too conscious of the harshness of his position, he confides to his friends “I am flying from mortal peril into mortal peril” (137)—his adventure and those of his companions take on Arthurian dimensions. The whole meaning of Arthurian adventure acquires dramatic intensity precisely through this type of paradox. The forest may well be *anieuse*, harmful, to the eyes of all courtly knights; it may well have inspired terrible legends among the

Hobbits;²⁸ it and its trees may well have aroused the deep suspicions of Merry, Pippin and Sam;²⁹ the forest may well be, for everyone, something *abominable* and *dreadful* (144, 155). But none of this matters: since it always awakens in people dual feelings of attraction and repulsion, the forest remains the centre of exploit and adventure par excellence. Because confronting the forest gives him the chance to deceive his enemies, who will hardly expect him to adopt such an inconceivably daring stratagem, Frodo will not hesitate: the temptation of the challenge wins the day, and with it the promise of splendid achievement.

Henceforth, any attempt to talk him out of his intended course of action—even by Fredegar, who starts by warning the companions, then tries to put them off, and ends by predicting their disaster³⁰—will only have one result, a standard feature of all courtly literature: the glorification of Hobbit courage, as Merry, in his role of guide and seer, invites his friends to enter the other world. As Marie-Luce Chênerie points out:

Les destins héroïques se caractérisent par un ou plusieurs voyages au pays des morts, des descentes aux enfers, des visites par un Autre Monde terrifiant ou fascinant, en tout cas des lieux interdits aux vivants ordinaires. (Chênerie 614)

[It is characteristic of the hero's destiny that he should undertake one or more journeys to the land of the dead, descend into the underworld, make his way through an Otherworld at once terrifying and fascinating—all places barred to ordinary mortals.]

In these circumstances there will inevitably be warnings and cautions of all kinds; equally inevitably, these will be full of 'worst-case' premonitions of death and disaster. This is part and parcel of the whole concept of the heroic quest, and here again Tolkien's work runs very much parallel with the dialectic of medieval literature.³¹ That the hobbits' resolute determination has much in common with the unswerving steadfastness of the courtly knight may be shown by citing one celebrated example among many: Yvain's insistence on storming the Castle of Pisme Aventure, despite its dangers. Cutting short all the conventional rhetorical warnings, Chrétien's hero states outright:

“Dame [...] Dex le vos mire!
Mes mes fins cuers leanz me tire:
Si ferai ce que mes cuers vialt.”

(Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain* ll. 5169-71)

[“May God keep and reward you, my lady! Yet my chivalrous heart is urging me thither, and I must do my heart’s bidding.”]

Arthurian Literature, Fantasy Literature: The Pattern of Adventure

But as soon as they pass through into that other universe—where darkness rules, made all the deeper by the dark brown waters of the Withywindle; a palette extending from an infernal red glow to the black of the Shades (see Mozzani 272a-b [‘Brun’]), reinforced by the omnipresent grey of the guardian willow (see Chevalier and Gheerbrant 487-88 [‘Gris’])—as soon as they cross the border into a land full of pain and tribulation, our heroes’ courage will be sorely tested.

In the first instance, supernatural powers will increase around them, as they enter a theatre of fear in an irrational and frightening world. They will feel a growing malaise (Tolkien calls it an ‘uncomfortable feeling,’ 147). Their experiences will leave them perplexed and upset (like Sam, confronted with the great willow, 154-55). Then a sharp anxiety will take hold of them, plunging them into a state of utter distress and then triggering such terror that they will cry out loud. At first, however, calm reigns in the land of adventure, as Tolkien indicates, once his characters have passed through the subterranean passage: ‘For the moment there was no whispering or movement among the branches’ (147). Indeed, here and there, a certain gaiety accompanies the Hobbits’ journeying, punctuated as it is by words like: ‘cheerful(ly),’ ‘hopeful(ly),’ ‘encourage(d),’ ‘song/sing,’ ‘happily,’ ‘glad,’ ‘laughing.’³² And the Hobbit-knights errant, encouraged by the trotting of their steeds, will make progress ‘much quicker, and with better heart’ (148). Yet such moments are rare, as are the terms describing them. In the woodland peace is a fragile commodity, and Tolkien’s reference to the wanderers’ ‘better heart’ is an ironically qualified one, since it serves as a prelude to far less encouraging events.

The fact is that, far belying their initial appearance, the woodland trees are desperately *strange* (151), and the forest *queer*.

Indeed, the latter adjective occurs no fewer than four times in the chapter, together with one example as a substantive: *queerness*.³³ In addition, Merry's explanatory words are themselves hardly reassuring: "But the Forest is queer. Everything in it is very much more alive, more aware of what is going on, so to speak, than things are in the Shire" (145). All around the heroic Hobbits, shapes are shifting. A *fold* will develop strange outlines and become so massive that it no longer corresponds to anything the Hobbits have ever experienced.³⁴ While the tree trunks twist themselves into hideous postures (rendered positively spectral by the Forest's ancestral antiquity³⁵), the willow, the monarch of the valley, metamorphoses into a half-plant-like, half-human monster, pawing the air with its *long-fingered hands*, its roots transformed into *dragonets* (154). The whole wood comes to resemble a head of tangled hair (149), while through it paths change their position or rise up out of the ground,³⁶ as at the whim of some eternal architect with no place in any Hobbit pantheon.³⁷ In this the paths are just imitating the movement of the shifting trees themselves. Tolkien's forest positively throbs with occult animism. It is true that a strict numerical count will show that there are more verbs of motion referring to the Hobbits than to the surroundings,³⁸ but one should not ignore this minority count. For Tolkien this is no gratuitous metaphor, nor even a simple stylistic feature; its significance is underscored by Merry's insistent tones.³⁹ To make matters worse, root and branch seem to detach themselves from their trees and take on independent life; ⁴⁰ other branches will sway without any wind, or bend darkly over a pathway (146, 160). Of necessity, the Hobbits spur each other on at crucial stages of their adventure. With a touch of humor in his words, Frodo will manage to conquer his fears,⁴¹ while Sam will respond with a wistfully funny question at the crucial and tense moment when the friends have to try to dispose of the willow as soon as possible.⁴² Both Frodo and Merry will do their best to fight against fear, the one by singing to encourage the others, despite everything (148), the other by keeping cheerful and promising a *rousing chorus* soon enough (149). Merry will also pretend not to understand Pippin's words of warning about the forest zone ("I don't know what stories you mean [...]," 145), and even refuses to refer directly to the real threat, preferring to take refuge in paraphrase and evasions less calculated to disturb his imagination.⁴³ Even though he

does consent to speak of the Forest, he does so firstly by ascribing the supposed supernatural happenings there purely to Hobbit tradition; then by distancing himself from what he tells Pippin about it; then again by insinuating that because he has himself never experienced anything of the kind, the stories have no basis in fact; and finally by insisting that he does not believe a word of them.⁴⁴ But our brave Hobbit is seeking to persuade himself by his own resolute words.⁴⁵ As a result, while even Frodo himself reaches the stage of being tempted to turn back, even if that means committing the anti-chivalric sin of *recreantise*, cowardice, Merry maintains his façade of enthusiasm with his companions.⁴⁶

The Forest world is not just disturbingly supernatural: it is also an inhospitable, aggressive world. Its trees are *dangerous* (146), and harbor a dark *enmity* towards the Hobbit-knights (147). Their displeasure at their presence is overt, and they show themselves *very unfriendly* and even *bestly* towards them (145, 146, 155); the entire forest represents an almost permanent source of *danger* (147). The Hobbits are besides weighed down by an inevitable historical responsibility, since their forebears had cut down hundreds of trees (146). Such demolition is ill-fated, and—as in Lucan’s *Pharsalia*—the forest bears a grudge against the companions, and shows it continually.⁴⁷ Acting on its behalf, the river banks raise up their sharp, steep ridges in front of them, and a tree drops one of its branches or sticks out one of its roots (145, 149). Each time the message is clear: the Hobbits are unwelcome, their presence profanes this gloomy place. While the spate waters of the brook leading down to the Witherwindle are *strong and noisy* (152), the forest is intent on spying on the intruders. The terms *leer*, *watch*, *watchful*, and *whisper* convey a sense of a conspiracy against its Hobbit victims; although, as Merry remarks, its purpose is enigmatic: “I thought all the trees were whispering to each other, passing news and plots along in an unintelligible language [...]” (145-46).

Humans no longer pass this way, and this is the very antithesis of Baudelairean synesthesia ([...] *à travers des forêts de symboles* [...] [Baudelaire, II.3-4]). Indeed, there will soon enough be no dialogue at all between Hobbits and trees, since the latter are already *nameless* (151). Now if *strange furtive noises* run through the bushes and reeds flanking the valley (160), it is to underline their hostility and to make us realize that this is equally the very antithesis of the biblical Burning Bush. This

forest is a malevolent organism, withdrawing into an inexorable silence, mirroring that of the travelers. When Pippin does express his fears by crying out aloud, there is “no echo or answer, though the wood seemed more crowded and more watchful than before” (147). The wood actually sets about taking reprisals: firstly, by depriving the Hobbits of those sites potentially favorable to their wellbeing. As an area reclaimed from the woodland, the clearing would appear to have everything to offer them; but it is invaded by nettles, and deadly hemlock spreads over it to such an extent that (for all their hopes) it offers them no sure haven (148). Again, the hill on the upper level, encircled by a wall of foliage, is degraded into giving the repulsive image of a bald head (149); as a result it deprives the travelers of any benefit associated with the wondrous power of mountains, so universally symbolic of the seat of the gods.

Indeed, in order, as it were, to prevent the Hobbits from invoking any divine power, the forest shrouds their errant journey in a thick mist. The theme of light—conveying the hope of salvation from the heavens—is certainly not absent from this chapter. Several terms evoke it, among them the nouns *light*, *day*, *daylight*, *sun*, *sunlight*, *sunshine*, and *sky*; the adjectives *blue*, *clear*, *sunlit*, *golden*, and *gleaming*; and the verb *to shine*. But the luminous rays of the sun have difficulty in piercing a dense atmosphere made almost palpable by the words *mist*, *smoke*, *foggy*, *fog*, *hazy*, and *haze*.⁴⁸ No sooner do we read that “The light grew clearer as they went forward,” and a little further on: “There was sky above them, blue and clear,” than Tolkien hastens to redress the balance, pointing out that “The sun was not, however, high enough yet to shine down into the clearing” (147-48). Again, although “The air was gleaming and sunlit [...],” we find an instant authorial corrective: “[...] but hazy” (149). Fog and mist are often seen as the work of demons (see Mozzani 270b [‘Brouillard (brume)’]), emanating from worlds as occult as these forest surroundings; and the grey-dark of night is also the color of fog (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 487b [‘Gris’]). It is not surprising that the Hobbits’ sight should be dimmed. Although verbs of seeing and looking are frequent, one should not be deceived: it is rare that nothing obstructs their view.⁴⁹ And even when this view is not completely blocked,⁵⁰ it is often extremely restricted.⁵¹ As a result the travelers are unaware, until too late, of the traps set by the forest. Unexpected bushes cover over holes deliberately hollowed in the ground; undergrowth spreads across a

path, as though lying in wait for something or someone; a carpet of roots puts the ponies on the alert, and they manage to avoid them, only to stumble against another, hidden one.⁵² From this point onwards our Hobbits errant gradually succumb to intense physical fatigue. The heat very soon becomes intolerable; the sun is too bright, and is now positively harmful, burning them (150, 153, 154). The air becomes suffocatingly *hot, heavy, and thick* (148, 149, 152); it has already been charged with a murky reek rising from the Witherwindle which in places is stagnating, choked with rotting willow trunks, branches, and leaves.⁵³ The tired Hobbits feel their limbs grow heavy (160). The leaves of the willow tree ruling over the valley here have a particular role to play. They cast a spell over Merry and Pippin, lulling them to sleep. While Frodo tries to resist their influence, they whisper into his ear, infiltrating the deadly idea of immersing himself in the dark, lazily winding Lethlike river waters (154). Then sleep weighs them down, as a prelude to the first linguistic symptoms of paralysis: the *making of words* (149) requires such a massive effort from the Hobbits that Frodo will find himself incapable of formulating whole sentences, and Sam will be reduced to stuttering (153, 154).⁵⁴ Because they are now effectively immobilized, a huge tree-root will set about strangling Frodo, and a tree-trunk will grip Merry in its vice-like and pincer-sharp bark (155-56). Finally, the companions will be *prisoners* in this adventure world (156),⁵⁵ constantly finding every way through to where they want to go barred to them (147). As for returning to the Shire (*to be back*, in Tolkien's world), they can no longer even dream of it. Even if, at a given moment, the author does show us a Frodo ready to turn back, he nevertheless makes it plain ("if that [is] still possible," 149) that any return is now unthinkable.

This state of affairs is above all attributable to those doors and gates which in the Tolkien world enjoy an ambiguous status. As they lock the tunnel gate behind them—its *thick-set iron bars* seeming visibly to project something of the other world into that of the Shire—the Hobbits are effectively cutting off their source of escape (145). The very sounds it makes ("[...] it shut with a clang, and the lock clicked") are as *ominous* as the wood will be *queer*. The effect is of the Forest extending its territory, and encroaching upon the Shire. Even back home, at the start of their adventure, the Hobbits spontaneously keep quiet, stealing furtively out of the house as though fearing to draw upon themselves the attention of

supernatural forces. And without even waiting for them to depart, the Forest casts a grey tinge upon the grass of Hobbit-land, dispatches a grove of trees to stand guard there, and turns the Shire air very foggy, so that the travelers find themselves “riding off into the mist, which seemed to open reluctantly before them and close forbiddingly behind them” (144). As they leave they can hear “someone closing the door of a distant house”; it is as though this very sound is sent by the baleful Forest-god, as a sign that all return is now forbidden them.

These increasingly supernatural powers will also provide the Hobbits with an appropriate stage for their exploits. No itinerary they choose will aid them, since their surroundings are those of continually renewed deception and frustration. In this the Hobbits share the experience of their Arthurian predecessors, and here the naming of the route is revealing.⁵⁶ Of the four key terms found in this chapter, *way* has the most general of meanings. Alternating with the others, it may be seen to refer above all to two kinds of ‘way’: those criss-crossing the Shire, and those striking out beyond. Keeping in mind this distinction, the signifier of *road* places this term in the first category of ‘way’, since it almost always refers to the East Road, which traverses the Shire, and gives the Old Forest a wide berth to the north, on its way to the Ford of Bruinen and to Rivendell.

The word *track* has an intermediate meaning. It also suggests an established man-made route, but one passing through the middle of the forest (and not commonly encountered by Hobbits).⁵⁷ With *path* we are very much in the woods; in this topography of ‘errance’ three paths connect the tunnel across to the clearing, the clearing up to the hill, and the hill down to the valley of the Witherwindle: three key stations in the Adventure of the Old Forest. As well as shifting, the paths are also capricious. That leading towards the clearing is *faint* (146), hardly visible, and vanishes among the trees, concealing itself from the view of the questing Hobbits. The second path fades away as well on its way up the hill, only to reappear suddenly on the other side (149-50); yet it is *misleading*, bending right and pushing Frodo and his friends down towards the valley. As soon as they decide to quit this path and strike out to the left hand, on a direct route north, where the going seems easier, their expedition becomes even more hazardous: their way is forever barred to the left, and they are *forced to the right, and downwards* (150).

Merry may well have declared “We don’t want to go *that way!*” but it is no use, the four companions must willy-nilly go where the paths lead them.⁵⁸ The Hobbits are most clearly not masters of their itinerary, and Tolkien is quite specific on this point: “They were being headed off, and were simply following a course chosen for them” (151). Because they have quite literally been *brought [...] to the hill* by the path (150), with no say on where they may suddenly find themselves, the Hobbits have no influence at all on events. It only takes the forest floor beneath them to lose its stability, with paths and tracks zigzagging up and down, for their situation to deteriorate. The verbs *climb*, *bend*, *fall*, *descend*, *rise*, and *grow* bear witness to this incessant motion, while Tolkien points out how rare and impermanent are those moments when: “The path stopped climbing, and became for a while nearly level.”⁵⁹

Similar circumstances make the journey a painful and laborious one, with the ground suddenly shifting its level disjointedly, without warning: sometimes a descent will start gently, and then accelerate sharply (or vice-versa); sometimes it will give way abruptly to a gradual incline (150-52). At the same time verbs such as *clamber*, *scramble*, *stumble*, and *climb* (with adjectives such as *difficult* and *troublesome*), convey the hardship which these conditions impose upon mount and rider alike. The contours of nature fast become chaotic, blurring all spatial and temporal reference points.

Tolkien certainly includes landscape indicators which, theoretically, ought to help establish one’s position. In matters of direction, he seems to provide us with regular compass bearings: north / northwards, east / eastern / eastwards, south / southern / southwards, west, and so on throughout the chapter. He even spells out estimated distances, and continually notes instances of advance and retreat by the use of: *before*, *forward(s)*, *ahead*, and *in front of*; and *back*, *backwards*, and *behind*. But these precise references are often less than reliable.⁶⁰ Although Tolkien tells us how “Tom [...] disappeared in front of them,” how the Hobbits find “a wide sweep of grass welling up before them,” and how they see Tom’s house “before them” (159-61), all these indicators are essentially relative. The author is so skilled in these subtle touches that most of his *trompe l’oeil* distances and directions have the effect of making things already depicted as far away recede indefinitely, and of rendering quite inaccessible things situated rather intangibly near

at hand.⁶¹ In such circumstances Merry's location of paths is bound to contain a wide margin of error:

Not far from this tunnel there is, or was for a long time, the beginning of quite a broad path leading to the Bonfire Glade, and then on more or less in our direction, east and a little north. That is the path I am going to try and find. (146)

The degree of qualification and imprecision in this statement is striking: geographical details fade away, and chronological ones as well. On the latter point, it is true that Merry rouses Frodo at four-thirty in the morning, that according to Tolkien the adventure in the Old Forest takes place in the autumn, that the Hobbits occasionally stop for a midday meal, that during their journey a late afternoon sun will beat down, and that later still the evening shadows will fall. And yet, for all that the travelers set out two hours after waking, Tolkien immediately qualifies his precision: *Soon after six o'clock* (144). This is understandable: the presence of the Forest distorts all parameters, even in Hobbit-land. The text may subsequently be punctuated by adverbs and prepositions denoting present, future, simultaneity, repetition, duration, or suddenness; these notions are, however, illusory, resulting in a strictly relative, approximate chronology. Details of departure and subsequent reference may seem precise, but they doom to failure any attempt to set out a convincing time-line.⁶² In any case Tolkien himself hesitates, seeming to espouse his heroes' own perspective. As if in response to Merry (and in the absence of any clear or logical links), he writes: "after riding for about an hour," and again, "it must have been about eleven o'clock," or again, "After an hour or two" (144, 150-51). Within this less than coherent framework, prompted by the deliberately vague adverbs *then* and *there*, all perspectives of time and place coalesce, so that the Hobbits find themselves plunged in a world of mirages.

Here the most significant verb is *to seem*, which sums up every kind of confusion: visual, aural, and intellectual. In the Hobbit's minds the sun suddenly sinks, trees of all types become more slender and less gnarled, and the companions feel that they are on an island surrounded by a sea of trees (160, 151, 150). All this will compromise their power of judgment, and prevent them from seeing things as they really are. The glade appears to them as welcoming a site as any *locus amoenus*, even

though it is in fact a *dreary place*; and the forest, too, seems to grow softer and more gentle, at the very moment when it is at its most menacing (148). As we have seen, the Hobbits are incapable of thinking rationally in their choice of route (151). At the same time they are conscious of their errors, and this has the effect of compromising all sense of certainty.⁶³ Merry is the first to be assailed by doubts, and this causes him more and more to qualify what he says to his companions, finally admitting that he has no idea where they are.⁶⁴ At the moment when near-madness overtakes them—and Frodo's subsequent state is almost akin to Tristan's, *lost and witless* (157)—the Hobbits have become wanderers, losing *all clear sense of direction* (151) in this mythical, dream-like land where time is standing still.⁶⁵

But this topography does offer opportunities, and choices. It would be quite wrong to assume that Arthurian romances (or fantastic tales) always leave their readers with these depressing images of heroes in utter despair. It is essential to appreciate the impulse and motivation behind such works. There is a pact between the author of an Arthurian romance and his audience: we agree to follow the hero into the forest and to share his fear, on the express condition that he will conquer it and emerge triumphant. This type of pact is also valid for fantasy fiction, and Tolkien will respect it, as he does all the other conventions of medieval literature.

From the moment he bows to the will of natural forces, and takes the right-hand path which will in fact prove the most honorable and important (since it sets him directly on the way to a classic rite of passage), Merry the guide, and his friends, will discover the route which they have sought for so long. All has been prepared in advance and will now come to fruition; there is indeed a power at work, revealing the way—and that way out for which Pippin has so devoutly wished. These paths are in fact paths of glory, reserved for Hobbit-knights like Merry and his companions who have dared confront the perils on the way.

With the help of Tom Bombadil, whose laughing songs offer a perfect antidote to the surrounding atmosphere of mortal depression, the Hobbits manage to surmount and move on past the great weeping willow, the master of the forest (finally scolded by Tom into returning to the silent ranks of the other trees, 159). Now, as in Arthurian romance, the ground becomes more level and firmer underfoot, the grass is once

more *smooth and short*, the wild Withywindle reverts (with matching alliteration) to being *small and swift*, and the whole forest metamorphoses into a tamed thing, *clipped and trim as a hedge* (160). At this precise moment, entering Tom's house, the whole company achieves a sort of apotheosis, at the chapter's end: "And with that song the hobbits stood upon the threshold, and a golden light was all about them" (161).⁶⁶

Conclusion

An analysis of the "Old Forest" chapter in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* uncovers a patterning of themes, myths and lexical motifs common to both fantasy literature and works of Arthurian fiction—with its whole framework of structural anthropology, it is a timeless product of the human imagination. The very title of this chapter reflects upon the whole volume, as indeed it does upon the entire Cycle. Arthurian literature still manages to touch us, often through the medium of modern fantasy literature, because it plays on our fears, setting before us heroic means of vanquishing them. If Tolkien's fiction affects us in the same way, it is because Frodo, Merry, and the company of Hobbits can trace their lineage back a long way, to the knights of King Arthur.

Notes

This article is based in part on a paper read at the 2000 Leeds International Medieval Congress.

¹ Our particular choice of the "Old Forest" chapter (as representative of a basic Arthurian theme) is supported by an illuminating *a posteriori* letter written by Tolkien on 30 June 1972, revealing how important forests are to his book, and to him: "In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies. Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees were loved; elsewhere forests are represented as awakening to consciousness of themselves. The Old Forest was hostile to two-legged creatures *because of the memory of many injuries*. Fangorn Forest was old and beautiful, but at the time of the story tense with hostility because it was threatened by a machine-loving enemy. Mirkwood had fallen under the domination of a Power that hated all living things, but was restored to beauty and became Greenwood the Great before the end of the story" (emphasis added, *Letters* 419-20). The Old Forest is the first great wood encountered in *The Lord of the Rings*: its significance is

thus a key one, notably in the context of this present article's illustration of the work's powerful Arthurian heritage.

² Indeed, a new collection of essays, *Tolkien the Medievalist*, edited by Jane Chance, concentrates almost entirely upon these areas.

³ "It is plain indeed that in spite of later estrangement *Hobbits are relatives of ours* [...] Of old they spoke *the languages of Men*, after their own fashion, *and liked and disliked much the same things* as Men did [...]" (emphasis added, *LotR* 3).

⁴ "When Mr Bilbo Baggins of Bag End announced that he would shortly be celebrating his eleventy-first birthday with a party of *special magnificence, there was much talk and excitement in Hobbiton* [...] On this occasion *the presents were unusually good* [...] When every guest had been welcomed and was finally inside the gate, *there were songs, dances, music, games, and, of course, food and drink* [...]" (emphasis added, 27, 35).

⁵ Just as in Arthurian Romance, these stages are carefully plotted, on the smallest itinerant scale as on the most dramatic achievement, conventional topography suddenly blending into startling physical description. As a by-product, it may be noted that it is Tolkien's own very medieval attention to fundamental detail that has enabled a full Atlas to *The Lord of the Rings* to be compiled (see Strachey).

⁶ Pierre Gallais would call these points (both positive and negative) 'stations' on the Logical Hexagon, a template on to which he suggests Arthurian Romances may be plotted.

⁷ The perilous nature of the journey is stressed by the use of *to steal out*, reinforcing the neutral initial *to start* (144).

⁸ On the point of word-frequency, see n. 9 below.

⁹ We are very conscious, here and elsewhere in this article, of the risk of seeming to attach an unduly weighty significance to sheer word-count. Prudence is certainly advisable here; nevertheless, the high frequency of certain terms does in our opinion serve to convey something of the rhetorical repetition of courtly romance and of other medieval texts.

¹⁰ As so often in *The Lord of the Rings*, we are left with a sense of mystery, of an unanswered question: who might have built this tunnel? There are several analogues in Arthurian literature (in the *Prose Lancelot*, for example).

¹¹ There is a clear topographical ambivalence in this feature of the tunnel with its imposing gate, and an irony in this very impression of solidity and permanence, since the Hobbits now find that the structure acts as a barrier to re-entry into their world.

¹² Merry admits to Pippin that up to now he has not dared venture too far into the Other World ("I have only once or twice been in here after dark, and then only near the hedge," 145); and Frodo's instructions to Merry are extremely cautious ("Don't let us lose one another, or forget which way the Hedge lies!" 146).

¹³ This particular topography is composed of clearly active elements; other, far more passive attributes will be discussed later.

¹⁴ Note the connotations of the phrasing on pp. 146 and 147: "[...] quite a broad path leading to the Bonfire Glade," and "There is the Bonfire Glade in front of us."

¹⁵ Elsewhere, even early on in the Cycle, he will not hesitate to indicate a sinister potential: for example, Woody-End, "a wild corner of the Eastfarthing" (95), where the Hobbits are ominously tracked by Black Riders.

¹⁶ *Water* occurs 12 times, *tree* (all types of reference) 69 times, and *valley* 4 times. Other occurrences in the first group are: *bush* (2) and *spinney* (1); in the second group: *bog* (2) and *pool* (1); in the third group: *willow* (22, all types of reference), *oak*, *fir*, *ash*, *pine* (1 each).

¹⁷ One should proceed with caution in the actual naming of species. Although the context makes it reasonably clear which trees are being referred to here, Tolkien actually says, simply, “the *trees* became taller, darker and thicker,” and “a large branch fell from an old overhanging *tree*”—in fact, until p. 151 (“pines and firs replaced the oaks and ashes”), he never once provides a name. Indeed, this is the only line in the whole chapter in which he specifically names these four species. The effect is to invoke an anonymous tree mass, all part of the same sinister, living and encompassing organism that is The Old Forest. This renders all the more striking the sudden change to specificity, from p. 152 onwards, with the repeated mention of ‘willow’, as the travelers find themselves threatened by one menacing tree, until they are relieved by Tom Bombadil.

¹⁸ p.154. Given the willow’s near-hypnotic effect on the Hobbits, there may be an element of optical illusion here (“He [Frodo] lifted his heavy eyes and saw leaning over him a huge willow-tree, old and hoary. Enormous it looked [...]”), but the adjectival word-order here is calculated to stress the impression of the tree’s massive size.

¹⁹ p. 155: “Frodo and Sam beat upon the tree-trunk where Pippin had lain. [...] It was quite useless. [...] He kicked the tree with all his strength.”

²⁰ The willow’s circumference is implied as Sam and Frodo “went round to the other side of the tree” (155).

²¹ These aspects spread even beyond these boundaries (see below).

²² The word *dark* occurs 13 times, *deep* 8 times, and *damp* twice.

²³ It may be noted more precisely that, for the most prominent of these lexical areas encountered throughout this Chapter Seven, the occurrences are as follows: *thick* (7, including one relating to air) and *wide* (7); *great* (6), and *tall* (5, of which three concern plants, grass and reeds); *high* (3) and *long* (3, including grass); *large* (2), *huge* and *enormous* (1 each); *steep* (3); *grey* (9) and *brown* (2); *night* (4), *shadow* (2), and *shadowy*, *shadowed*, and *overshadow* (1 each).

²⁴ To the extent that the novelist effectively exploits myths common to cultures and societies from Ireland to Finland. Despite its lack of Arthurian matter (central to this article), Chance’s *Tolkien the Medievalist* usefully covers other aspects of the novelist’s mythopoesis.

²⁵ ‘Track’, which enters the English language between 1425-75, is the most recent term in this group. Of the others, ‘path,’ ‘road,’ and ‘way’ all predate 900. See *The Random House Webster’s College Dictionary*, articles ‘path,’ ‘road,’ ‘track,’ ‘way’ (pp. 955b, 1122a, 1362a-b, 1453b-1454a). Of all these, Tolkien has a decided preference for the older word ‘path.’

²⁶ See Hindley, article ‘Essart’, p. 299b.

²⁷ Merry agrees with him, declaring: “It sounds *very desperate*, but I believe Frodo is right. It is the only way of getting off *without being followed at once*. With luck we might get a considerable start” (emphasis added, 141).

²⁸ Tolkien himself slips in a brief but revealing detail, and Fredegar stresses the existence of these beliefs (see below, n.30). Pippin asks: “Are all the stories about it true?” (145), later confessing that: “I begin to believe all the stories about it” (153). Merry pretends not to take account of them: “I don’t know what stories you mean” (145), but will in turn cite a strictly literal tradition: “They do say the trees do actually move [...]” (146).

²⁹ Merry: “I have only once or twice been in here after dark, and then only near the hedge” (145). Pippin: “I am getting very suspicious of this Forest and everything in it” (153). Sam: “I don’t like this great big tree. I don’t trust it” (155). And Merry again: “They do not like all that about ending and failing [...] I should not sing any more at present” (149).

³⁰ Fredegar's triple sequence (141-42) is worth noting: (1) "But that can only mean going into the Old Forest! [...] You can't be thinking of doing that. It is quite as dangerous as Black Riders"; (2) "But you won't have any luck in the Old Forest [...] No one ever has luck in there. You'll get lost. People don't go in there"; (3) "Well, do as you think best! [...] I am more afraid of the Old Forest than of anything I know about: the stories about it are a nightmare; but my vote hardly counts, as I am not going on the journey." There is a strikingly formal, staged pattern to his words, leading up to his final admission that he will not be going. The role that Tolkien has assigned to Fredegar is a classic one of medieval romance: that of the irresolute doubter (a Kes figure), whose warning serves to push the hero to extremes of valor.

³¹ Chênerie goes on to cite one telling Old French example, from the 13th-century courtly romance *Claris et Laris*: "Ore esgardez que vous ferez! / Ja mes de ceanz n'isterez / Ceste nuit vous covient morir / Dels iert de vostre char porrir / Qui si est bels et delitable [...]" (614). ["Beware of what you are doing! You shall never leave this place, but are doomed to die: your fair and fine body will rot away most grievously [...]"

³² See, for example, pp. 148, 150, 159.

³³ See pp. 145, 146, 150, 160. Tolkien has chosen this word well. The repetition lays stress on its implications of 'Otherness,' evoking time and again an alien, abnormal world.

³⁴ "[...] they scrambled and stumbled into a fold that was wider and deeper than any they had yet met" (152).

³⁵ *Old* is wide-spread in this chapter. It relates three times to *forest*, once to *tree*, and six times to *willow*; it is supported by other terms: *ancient* and *hoary*, both referring again to the willow tree.

³⁶ "Whenever one comes inside one finds open tracks; but they seem to shift and change from time to time in a queer fashion" (146).

³⁷ Cf. p. 146: "But something makes paths"; and again, p. 153: "Who made the tracks, do you suppose, and why?" [...] "I don't know [...] who could possibly come here often enough to make a path..."

³⁸ 33% of the occurrences of *run* involve the natural surroundings, together with 21% of *go*, 20% of *turn*, and only 14% of *pass*. We shall return to this point later.

³⁹ "The trees do actually move" (146); "These trees do shift" (147).

⁴⁰ See pp. 145, 147, 148, 149, 152, 154.

⁴¹ For example, in his reply to Fredegar: "If there are no worse things ahead than the Old Forest, I shall be lucky" (145).

⁴² As the Hobbits discuss the possibility of burning the tree, Sam responds: "I suppose we haven't got an axe among our luggage, Mr Frodo?" (156).

⁴³ "If you mean the old bogey-stories Fatty's nurses used to tell him, about goblins and wolves and things of that sort [...]" (145).

⁴⁴ "They do say the trees do actually move [...]" ; "[...] or so I am told [...]" or at least I have heard so"; "I have never seen any of them"; "At any rate I don't believe them" (145-46).

⁴⁵ The case of Pippin shows that even the most valorous knight may suffer moments of doubt, as, weary of the struggle against the forest, he admits: "I begin to believe all the stories about it" (153).

⁴⁶ "He spoke cheerfully, and if he felt any great anxiety, he did not show it" (149).

⁴⁷ Compare Lucan's description of Caesar's felling of a pagan grove: "The axe-men came on an ancient and sacred grove. Its interlacing branches enclosed a cool central space into

which the sun never shone, but where an abundance of water spouted from dark springs [...] Caesar gave orders for the grove to be felled [...] Yet the loneliness and solemnity of the grove awed his very toughest soldiers; they shrank from their task, convinced that if they struck at the sacred trees the axes would rebound, turn in the air, and chop off their legs" (*Pharsalia*, 78-79).

⁴⁸ In a notable example of parallel irony *foggy* also indicates the far more homely atmospheric conditions prevalent in the Shire.

⁴⁹ Such verbs often imply a somewhat perfunctory range of perception: "they saw the Hedge" (144); "As if through a gate they saw the sunlight before them" (152); "they could see the dark line of the Hedge" (146); "they could see [the path] running" (148); "ahead, they could see the path going almost straight forward" (149); "looking back" (146); "Merry was looking from side to side" (147); "They sat on the green edge and looked out" (150).

⁵⁰ As in the following examples: "they had not been able to see the rising morning" (148); "they had not been able to see it from the hill-top" (151).

⁵¹ For instance, accumulating significantly on p. 150: "they could see little but mists[...]" ; "the southern half of the Forest faded from view"; "the autumn haze still prevented them from seeing much [...]"; "they could not make out [...]"; "they could see nothing that might be the line of the great East Road"; "the horizon was veiled"; "they glimpsed far-off in the east [...]"; "it was good to see a sight of anything beyond the wood's borders."

⁵² See pp. 151, 153, 146-47, 148.

⁵² In this precise passage Tolkien exploits all the evocative powers of cadence and repetition, blending them to convey a feeling of oppressiveness based on contextually accentuated visual and olfactory sensations: "[...] there wound lazily a dark river of brown water, bordered with ancient willows, arched over with willows, blocked with fallen willow, and flecked with thousands of faded willow-leaves. The air was thick [...]" (152).

⁵⁴ In fact, more than once, the Forest actually cuts the Hobbits short, silencing them: "the cry fell as if muffled by a heavy curtain" (147); "Frodo tried to sing a song to encourage them, but his voice sank to a murmur" (148); "his voice faded into silence," "the others did not answer" (149).

⁵⁵ The chapter contains many terms indicating enclosure. Apart from the binary syntactic framework of *behind* / *before*, one also finds *trapped* or *gripped* (155), the adjective *close* (148-49), and the verbs *surround*, *arch* (146), and above all *close* (144, 145, 151). There is also the associative *roof* and *wall* (148); in fact this mural metaphor is as effective in depicting the Hobbits' captivity as is the aiding and abetting hill.

⁵⁶ For details in Arthurian romance, see Chênerie, *Le Chevalier errant*, pp. 145.

⁵⁷ The ambivalence of this particular term—partly in the human domain, partly in that of the Other—is reinforced by the ancient and quasi-mystical significance with which it has invested, ever since Alfred Watkins' classic 1925 *The Old Straight Track*.

⁵⁸ It is notable that, in 57% of the occurrences of 'to cut across' and 'to lead', the subject is the path itself.

⁵⁹ p.149. The (double) adverbial modifier should be noted here. Tolkien will similarly indicate that "the mist was now almost gone [...]" and again: "they could see the path going almost straight." The effect is of things not quite in order.

⁶⁰ The question remains, in the face of such a profusion of indicators (which all turn out to be contrived), whether one is in fact capable of knowing in which direction one is facing, or where exactly most of the mentioned reference points are to be found.

⁶¹ Mingling with adverbial expressions like *on the far side* (146), *at the far end* (145), *to a point further back* (144), *some distance from* (145), *not far from* (146), or *near at hand* (149), are even more flexible ones: *a hundred yards and more beyond* (146), *“the Road must lie that way, and it could be many miles off.”*

⁶² See the crux expressed in n.60 above: these are deceiving details which do not help us to decide when exactly, or over what period of time, something is happening.

⁶³ Hence the subconscious emergence of such expressions as *to try to, to guess, to think, and to hope*.

⁶⁴ Merry’s confidence on p. 144 is in stark contrast to his progressively disconcerted state: *“That is the path I am going to try and find”* (146); *“Merry was looking from side to side, and seemed already uncertain which way to go [...] “There is the Bonfire Glade in front of us (or I hope so)”* (147); *“[...]we shall be bound to come out the east side of the Forest eventually [...] I don’t know in the least how far down the Witherwindle we are”* (153).

⁶⁵ Note the use of the words *dream* (154), *dreaming* (155), *unreal* (160).

⁶⁶ This quasi-religious imagery brings to mind the luminous and dew-soft (*anrosinee*) forest of Arthurian romance, the sight of which, at dawn, welcomes and rewards all those deserving knights who have emerged victorious from dark perils. See Chênerie, *Le Chevalier errant*, p. 155.

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