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## The Blade Against the Burden: The Iconography of the Sword in *The Lord of the Rings*

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### The Blade Against the Burden: The Iconography of the Sword in *The Lord of the Rings*

#### Abstract

Invites us to consider the deeper social implications of carrying and using a sword in the medieval world of Middle-earth—how bearing a sword not only indicates leadership and service, but provides an opportunity for social mobility, in addition to its more obvious military meanings. Considers as examples Merry and Pippin swearing oaths to, respectively, Théoden and Denethor; Éowyn's heroic deeds; and especially Aragorn's use of Narsil/Andúril as a symbol of legitimacy and service to his people.

#### Additional Keywords

Faalty in The Lord of the Rings; Leadership in The Lord of the Rings; Swords; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Aragorn



THE BLADE AGAINST THE BURDEN:  
THE ICONOGRAPHY  
OF THE SWORD IN  
*The Lord of the Rings*

MICHAEL J. BRISBOIS

IF ONE CONSIDERS THE TERM “ARTIFACT” in relation to the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, several thoughts spring to mind. First and foremost is the way in which his work has been regarded as cultural artifact, born out of his generation’s experience in World War One, but so wildly received by subsequent generations that its popularity informs, either for or against his work, in scholarly opinions of his novels. It is also an artifact of both the medieval and the modern world. The frame story conceit of *The Lord of the Rings*, that Tolkien is not a novelist but a translator, and the story we read is in fact “Frodo and the One Ring” found in the fictitious *Red Book of Westmarch* (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] Prologue 1) is an echo of the medievalist practice of classifying certain works by color. The academic presentation of the novel, with its publisher’s note on the text, forward, lengthy appendices and multiple indexes, arrays the symbols of scholarship and the early medieval period in the intellect and imagination in order to further acceptance of the fantastic elements that are necessary to both understanding and enjoying the narrative. In order to further discuss the way in which artifacts function as symbols, I will explore the way in which one particular marker of medievalism, the sword, serves to reinforce the themes of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien’s novel is filled with wondrous and magical items. They range from the innocuous—magical ropes and bread—through to the important, such as Frodo’s mithril shirt, and on to the definitive in the One Ring. Each contributes to the symbolic construction of Middle-earth, but prior scholarship on Tolkien’s artifacts has, understandably, been focused almost exclusively on the One Ring. Prior work on source texts has led to excellent connections being drawn between the One Ring and Plato’s Ring of Gyges in *The Republic* (Cox) and various works of medieval literature, including the Norse Sagas and the *Nibelungenlied* (Shippey, *Road to Middle-earth*). There are very few scholars who have taken issue with the Ring’s metaphor of addiction, power and corruption. As Tom Shippey

has said, the Ring is “far too plausible, and too recognizable” for a Twentieth Century audience to easily dismiss (*J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* 115).

Just as understanding the Ring is critical to understanding the novel, it is equally important not to overlook other artifacts in the text. No image or artifact, aside from perhaps an armored horseman, is as effective in presenting the medievalism of the novel as the sword. The Ring, as powerful as it is, is a far more universal and atemporal figure when compared to a sword. Throughout the novel, swords serve as markers of identity and authority and serve to ennoble their bearers. Paradoxically, when used as a tool of violence swords demonstrate the villainous intent of the bearer. Unlike the Ring, which works by corrupting the bearer's intentions, as Gandalf, Elrond, and Galadriel each in their own turn insist and Frodo's ultimate failure confirms, the sword is a symbol that is defined through the actions of the individual. The sword is less polarizing and predetermined, but no less defining, and it is through the use of the sword that a character's true nature can be revealed.

Throughout the novel, the Fellowship does everything within its power to avoid conflict and only fights in self-defense. Conflict, with the exception of a few brief moments of action, such as the Orc Chieftain's charge in Moria or Sam's struggle to capture Gollum, is rendered in broad strokes (*LotR* II:5, 317; VI:1, 600). Swords instead play a larger role in the hero's social activism. Both Pippin and Merry mark their willingness to serve their respective lords by offering their swords to them, and despite the possibility of great humor in these scenes, there is so much self-sacrifice apparent in this use of these weapons that there is no laughter (V:1, 739-40; V:2, 760). Éowyn proves her arguments regarding the strength of women and the equality of the sexes by defeating the Witch-king of Angmar on the field of battle (V:6, 823-4). Even the assault on Mordor's Black Gate is understood as a sacrificial rearguard action intended to distract Sauron and hopefully allow Frodo time to destroy the Ring (V:9, 855-864).

This social use of the sword is an interesting sign of how Tolkien's imagined world circulates its social powers. Swords, a weapon of violence, are contrasted with rings, commonly a symbol of alliance (wedding bands, signet rings used to seal pacts). Swords, used responsibly, allow those without power to gain access to respect in cultures which marginalize them (be it on grounds of race, like the hobbits, or gender, as in the case of Éowyn). These characters do not use their swords as tools against their own cultures, but use them as signs of their service, proving their worth in execution of their duties. Rings, on the other hand, are most commonly placed in the hands of the powerful, to disastrous consequence: the “dwarf-lords” are undone and the “mortal” kings of Men become slaves to Sauron's will (I:2, 49).

There are two main complications in this brief mention of the magical rings: the elf-rings, and Faramir's rejection of the One Ring. In the former case,

none of the elf-rings are in possession of mortals—only the semi-divine (Galadriel and Elrond) and the divine (Gandalf) bear them, so the problems relating to the corruption of the bearers is rendered null by this fact; the rings are protected by the exceptional natures of their bearers. Galadriel's and Gandalf's temptations by the One Ring are momentary and make the latter case of Faramir a figure worthy of more consideration. Boromir is corrupted by the One Ring because of his desire for power—he believes in winning war by any means necessary. Faramir clearly does not. He is unwilling to sacrifice the virtues he is fighting for. This disregard for power and focus upon virtue is similar to Sam's focus on simple domestic pleasures—both remain largely unaffected by the Ring because neither desires power. This is similarly the source of Frodo's strength as well, though his corruption by the Ring raises questions about Frodo's character.<sup>1</sup> Rings are tools of the powerful, and circulate power among entrenched authorities, while swords can provide greater social mobility to those disadvantaged by the feudal societies of Middle-earth.

Of course, there are exceptions to the use of swords as social tools of self-defense. Orcs, along with Saruman and his ravagers, are all too eager to use their weapons against others. This willingness to harm, the desire to harm, presents a culture which is prone to internal violence and cruelty. Consider the multiple times throughout the novel in which orc quarrels with orc, most critically while they have captured Frodo at Cirith Ungol (VI:1, 885-87). Similarly, Saruman meets his end at the hands of Wormtongue, though in that case it is a knife, a far more common bladed tool and meant to show just how diminished Saruman has become as Sharkey (VI:8, 996). These societies use swords as tools of violence, and their ability to maintain coherence is constantly tested by this flawed use of the sword.

In a recent issue of *Mythlore*, K.S. Whetter and R. Andrew McDonald also turned to the neglected subject of swords in the novel. Their essay "In the Hilt is Fame" is an excellent consideration of the way in which Tolkien's medieval sources resonate with his novel's world, and I would direct any scholar interested in the source texts or the instrumental magical practice of naming weapons to that particular article. And although my immediate concern is with the use of swords as semiotic markers in the text, I find it most useful to reiterate Whetter and McDonald's position that the novel is as much a recreation of a heroic age as it is a forerunner of the modern fantasy genre (26). Far too often, Tolkien is read in view of his imitators, rather than as the continuation of the romance tradition. In fact, it is exactly the use of a heroic past as a literary model that spurs the reader to engage with the text more completely, and it is the lack

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<sup>1</sup> I often wonder if Frodo's exalted position as Ringbearer is the source of his failure. He is tempted by the Ring before the Council of Elrond, but not as powerfully as afterwards.

of this traditional continuity that diminishes so many authors who attempt to duplicate Tolkien's feat.

In the faux-historical conceit of *The Lord of the Rings*, the presentation of the subject matter generates interest in the reader and attracts those interested in serious medieval material. *The Lord of the Rings's* continued popularity is due in part to its use of authentic medieval texts in its source material. The construction of the imaginary world of Middle-earth was done in such a careful manner, with an intentional turn away from direct allegory, that the novel is able to appeal to readers from many walks of life. The non-religious reader might take comfort in its lack of Western religion, as the youth of the 1960s did (Walmsley). But a religious reader might also take comfort in the statement by Tolkien that this work is "a fundamentally religious and Catholic work" (Tolkien, *Letters* 172). A pacifist reader might take heart in Frodo's struggle to destroy the weapon of the Enemy, while a militaristic reader will thrill at the desperate battles of Helm's Deep, Minas Tirith, the Pelennor Fields and the Black Gate, however much that might be a result of misreading.

*The Lord of the Rings* presents a world which allows its model readers to engage their contemporary subjectivity with an idealized image of medieval life. The historical re-creationist hobbies that many Tolkien readers engage in, from social costume parties to isolated video games, indicate that people interested in the Middle Ages also find Tolkien's work interesting. The connection between Tolkien's academic and personal writings is made clearest in the way in which his writings on Beowulf express his own methodology:

As the poet looks back into the past, surveying the history of kings and warriors in the old traditions, he sees that all glory (or as we might say 'culture' or 'civilization') ends in night. The solution of that tragedy is not treated [...]. We get in fact a poem from a pregnant moment of poise, looking back into the pit, by a man learned in old tales who was struggling, as it were, to get a general view of them all, perceiving their common tragedy of inevitable ruin, and yet feeling this more *poetically* because he was himself removed from the direct pressure of its despair. (Tolkien, "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" 23)

Tolkien looks back, sees the end of culture and civilization in his Somme experience, but offers a way out of it through the creation of Middle-earth. There are considerable idealism and contemporary echoes in the way the novel presents its medieval world. The quaint Shire is far more recognizable as Edwardian than Anglo-Saxon, and the heroics of the Fellowship have far more to do with modern theology and morality than with Beowulf's fame-seeking. The sword, as more than simply a weapon, plays a role in this relationship between the medieval and the reader. As no other character is as marked by his

relationship with the sword as Aragorn, the narrative connection between character and weapon makes him an ideal subject for closer reading.

As the man who would be king, Aragorn is certainly not constructed in a historically accurate manner. Through signification, Aragorn is tied to the image of the medieval, perhaps even pre-Christian, king, but he is rendered more palatable to a modern audience through his kindness and compassion. While he is indeed fearless and skilled in battle, he is far more an ideal of a medieval king rather than the reality. Much like the returning Richard the Lionheart of the Robin Hood legend, Aragorn is valiant and noble, a benevolent monarch more concerned with the well-being of his people than his own success. His kindness is evident in his gentleness to Frodo following the death of Gandalf, and his selflessness is clear in his desire to rescue Merry and Pippin.

Along with his sword, Andúril, Aragorn is an example of Tolkien's process of reflecting the present in the symbolic construction of Middle-earth. As a medievalist Tolkien was intimately aware of the importance of a king wielding a sword through the many iterations of the figure found throughout medieval literature—the hero-chieftain of the lays, sagas, and Arthurian legends. Swords, such as Arthur's Excalibur, have always been symbols of leadership (DeVries 20-21). Their effectiveness as a weapon and their high cost of manufacture have made them the most elite of arms in most cultures. Many Bronze and Iron Age burial sites are the final resting places of king's swords, and there is evidence that swords were used as votive sacrifices, usually to the rivers where they have been found, a practice reflected in the myth of the Lady of the Lake (Bradley 99-101, 132-3). Anthropologist Christian Keller notes that while "a sword is obviously made for killing people [...] it carries a symbolic message, which could be killer, soldier, free man, aristocrat or the like" (92).

Aragorn's place as monarch demands the use of a sword. The cultural conventions built up around weapons and their wielders as well as the cultures that produce them (consider the *katana* and Japan) are aspects of a deeply entrenched relationship that cannot be ignored. The model reader of *The Lord of the Rings* would intuit that any other weapon would conflict with Aragorn's role as king. A ranged weapon, such as a bow, is too removed from one's opponents and often signifies lawlessness (as it does in the Robin Hood legend). Despite Legolas's mastery of such a weapon, it bears lower class connotations in a medieval context. Class relationships also eliminate hafted weapons, such as spears and halberds, because these were the weapons of the peasant infantry, not noble kings. In Aragorn's ascendancy in Gondor, he fights as a chevalier, the proper medieval place for a king and knight (*LotR* V:10, 866-74). While it is true that rods and scepters are symbolically linked to kings, Aragorn could not have satisfactorily wielded a blunt weapon such as a mace, due to the clerical

connotations of such a weapon in medieval warfare and the connection between lordship and the sword.

Aragorn's blade is not only a symbol of lordship and kingly responsibility, but also a metaphor in the novel's representation of Middle-earth's millennial renewal. In the novel, Aragorn's sword is originally Narsil, the sword wielded by Elendil at the Battle of the Last Alliance, during the final days of the Second Age. When Elendil was struck down by Sauron, his son Isildur rushed to his aid. In the battle, Narsil is shattered, but Isildur manages to cut off the finger bearing the One Ring. Following these events, the sword remained shattered to serve as a reminder of Isildur's corruption by the Ring (*LotR* I:2, 51).

When we first meet Aragorn in the novel, he is still Aragorn-Strider, a roguish figure misunderstood by those who do not know him. When the hobbits challenge his virtue in the Inn at Bree, Aragorn uses the broken blade as a marker of identity:

He stood up, and seemed suddenly to grow taller. In his eyes gleamed a light, keen and commanding. Throwing back his cloak, he laid his hand on the hilt of a sword that had hung concealed by his side. [...] "I am Aragorn son of Arathorn" [...] He drew out his sword, and they saw the blade was indeed broken a foot below the hilt. "Not much use is it, Sam?" said Strider. "But the time is near when it shall be forged anew." (I:10, 168)

Aragorn's transformation from ranger to returning king and Middle-earth's revitalization in the coming of the Fourth Age is here telegraphed through Narsil's fallen form. Once the sword has been remade and renamed Andúril following the Council of Elrond, it serves as a symbol of renewal and a marker of Aragorn's identity throughout the remainder of the novel, as evidenced by Aragorn's encounter with Éomer and his Riders on the Plains of Rohan:

Aragorn threw back his cloak. The elven-sheath glittered as he grasped it, and the bright blade of Andúril shone like a sudden flame as he swept it out. "Elendil!" he cried. "I am Aragorn son of Arathorn, and am called Elessar, the Elfstone, Dúnadan, the heir of Isildur Elendil's son of Gondor. Here is the Sword that was Broken and is forged again!" [...] He seemed to have grown in stature while Éomer had shrunk; and in his living face they caught a brief vision of the power and majesty of the kings of stone. For a moment it seemed to the eyes of Legolas that a white flame flickered on the brows of Aragorn like a shining crown. (III:2, 423)

Aragorn's use of Narsil in Bree and Andúril in Rohan indicate that the reader should understand the sword as being representative of kingship and the virtues associated with it. Aragorn might use the weapon to mark his identity, but in



Gondor it is not necessary for him to use it assume the throne. He fights no war of unification nor suffers any martial challenge from his nobles.<sup>2</sup>

The distinction Tolkien draws between Aragorn's role as king and warrior is best examined through a comparison with a source text Tolkien was familiar with: The *Volsunga Saga*. In short summary, *The Saga of the Volsungs* tells the story of the dragon-slayer, Sigurd. It begins with a genealogy tracing back to Asgard and progresses through the death of Sigurd's father, a king, to Sigurd's life with his adoptive father, Regin. In time, Sigurd receives a special sword forged to represent his kingship, slays the dragon Fafnir, and becomes a proper king. In the course of his adventures, he marries the beautiful and willful Gudrun and aids his friend Gunnar in seducing the Valkyrie Brynhild by assuming Gunnar's form, riding through a wall of fire, and spending three days and nights with her. This seduction ultimately leads to his downfall as he is betrayed by his allies over the deceit and is murdered in bed (Byock).

At this point, a brief comparison of the *Volsunga Saga* and the *Nibelungenlied* is warranted, as it contains the seeds of the historical development that Tolkien's narrative represents. The Sigurd of the Volsungs is quite similar to the courtly hero Siegfried of the *Nibelungenlied*, but there are distinct differences between the two works. The romance is far less magical than the Saga. There is no dragon, no shape-shifting (although a cloak of invisibility is a key element of the romance). The *Nibelungenlied* is also less bloody. In both stories, the betrayal and murder of the hero is an act of cowardice, but Siegfried's death is poetic, for he is speared in the back while crouched at a stream, with narrative emphasis placed on the flowers stained by his blood (Hatto 131-2).

In contrast, Sigurd is killed in bed, with his wife Gudrun next to him. He is cut so viciously that the killer's blade drives into the bed. Sigurd awakens and though fatally wounded and unable to rise, grasps a sword and hurls it at his fleeing murderer. The sword hits with such force that it splits his target in two. Amidst the commotion, Gudrun awakens covered in blood, appropriately screaming and lamenting proud Sigurd's murder (Byock 90).

The contrasts between Sigurd and Siegfried show how the basic outline of a story can remain similar, while the actual events may be changed to suit the audience's sensibilities. Sigurd is a Norse hero. Some of his actions are unconscionable to a Christian reader. Siegfried is the medieval, Christian knight. His violent impulses are supposedly tempered by courtly romance and etiquette. His tale is similar to Sigurd's but different in tone and morality.

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<sup>2</sup> While the Appendices mention Gondor's, and by extension Aragorn's, involvement in conflicts following the close of *The Lord of the Rings*, these are not internal conflicts, nor do any of Aragorn's allies question his right to the throne. There is no mention of Aragorn fighting wars of aggression or expansion, again fulfilling the novel's view of warfare: it is only justified in defense.

The change in tone and morality between the pre-Christian source and the reformation of the text is exactly what takes place within Tolkien's use of pre-Christian myth. If we recall the summary of the saga above, there are obvious similarities: the saga tells the story of the downfall of a king, whose son is raised by a trusted friend. In time, this son receives a sword that marks him as a king, undertakes great challenges and risks, and becomes a proper king. In many of these details, Aragorn and Sigurd are nearly identical. Both are orphaned sons of kings. Both are raised by a foster father-figure: Sigurd by Regin, Aragorn by Elrond. Both embark on a period of travel and receive proper education in courtly and intellectual matters. More interestingly, both characters have a shattered sword in their past. In Sigurd's case, his father Sigmund shatters his sword against a foe's spear, while Aragorn's ancestral blade Narsil is shattered by Sauron. Similarly, each receives a sword forged at the hands of or by command of their adopted father. The swords are both named, Gram and Andúril respectively, lending them the air of instrumental magic. Both Sigurd and Aragorn are presented as characters in tune with nature: Sigurd can speak to birds and Aragorn is a Ranger (an exclusive group of wilderness guides and warriors). While Aragorn does not exactly slay a dragon as Sigurd does, he does vanquish many foes and achieves a singular victory over the ghosts in the Paths of the Dead, who may be considered to be similar in nature to dragons, due to their connection with the fall of Empires and the inevitability of death (Bates 75-78).

In a more complex manner, both characters are selflessly willing to help others and both immediately take responsibility for their actions, but many of the inner psychological aspects of the characters differ. Sigurd never pauses in his pursuit of adventure. He shows little caution and never doubts the correctness of his action, nor does he show any regret over wrongdoing: "He did not lack in courage and he never knew fear" (Byock 73). His actions, while often thrilling, are aggressively violent, with Sigurd actively waging wars of conquest. Many sections of the saga are focused on the seductive conquest of women, mostly under false pretenses. Aragorn is not like Sigurd in these respects. Whereas Tolkien's hero is confident of his right to be king, he is neither womanizing nor dishonest (though subterfuge plays a role in *The Prancing Pony*). He does not glory in war, nor fight a war of conquest. His war is a war of rearguard action, desperately buying time for the passive quest of Frodo to succeed. In order to be recognized as king, Aragorn must be recognized through an act of healing, not killing. Aragorn is also a monogamous hero, remaining true to Arwen despite the advances of Éowyn. What this means is that Aragorn is patterned after Sigurd in outward appearance and experience, but is morally and psychologically different.

There are also key narrative differences between the two works and the two characters. The events of Sigurd's past are less clear, less singular. Sigurd's father's death in the saga is random, an accident of battle, but in *The Lord of the Rings*, Sauron, the one who sunders Elendil's sword and becomes Aragorn's nemesis, is so important he becomes the titular character. Sigurd's sword is made fresh and new, which contrasts markedly with renewal of the past that is marked by the reforging of Aragorn's blade. This distinction indicates a change in the way history is viewed. For the Norse, history is more abstract, less permanent, but for the Christian Tolkien, all history must be teleological and therefore requires a similarity to major mythic events.

Ultimately, Aragorn's right to kingship rests entirely upon his ability not to use his sword. It is instead his role as healer to Éowyn and Faramir that fulfills the prophecy of his return. The prophecy is a clear break from the medieval role of king as military leader and has a far greater connection with the Christian virtue of charity, although it does resonate with the medieval belief in divine providence. Tolkien presents us with a narrative that is all too familiar to readers because it is a structure that repeatedly appears in both history and literature. The millennial process that Middle-earth undergoes, in brief, the prophet of Gandalf using the heroes Frodo and Aragorn to return the glorious past to the present and usher in a golden age, is Tolkien's own attempt to poetically remove himself and his readers from the direct pressure of modernity.

Sigurd is like a shell, hollowed-out by Tolkien and refashioned into his ideal king—a Christian king. Aragorn is externally a pre-Christian northern European hero, but internally he is a much more modern, self-aware, and moralizing Christian hero. In this process lies a large part of the appeal of romance and fantasy: it creates a continuum in which the images of the past seem to hold our values, reassuring the reader that their moral position is correct and has always been so. The characters of the *Volsunga Saga* are at times very alien to us. But the characters of *The Lord of the Rings* are not. This is because of the theme of modernity Tolkien explores in his work.

*The Lord of the Rings* asks questions of modernity, criticizing its apparent lack of values or spirituality. It asks questions of its intentions and its possible endpoints. The growing isolation of the individual and the growing power of hegemony are expressed through Sauron and the emptiness of Middle-earth. Part of the reason the Shire is so appealing is because of the sense of community found in those sections of the novel. Questions of power and the nature of governance are brought out through depictions of the One Ring and Aragorn. Of course, some of the answers are Christian. Pity, mercy, and Christian charity are dominant themes in the book, both through Gollum's and Aragorn's stories. Many of the novel's events are very conservative and based on Tolkien's monarchism. But throughout the narrative, the novel's response to Modernity is

millenarian, invoking the renewal of the past and the coming of a golden age. Tolkien's conservatism is not a matter of social regression or inertia, but driven by utopian longing that finds expression in his masterpiece.

Tolkien's attempt to provide a new way in which to discuss modernity, distinct from both the prior realism and the broader Modernist experiment, relies on the semiotic use of history as an artifact. The blade of the sword becomes the tool against the dangers of totalitarianism and wanton industrialism. Just as the Ring is a burden upon Frodo's mind and body, the risks of using militarism to combat despotism seems an equal burden upon the men and women of Middle-earth. The tragedy of Boromir, the fall of Saruman, and the madness of Denethor all rely upon an arrogant conviction that their use of offensive violence would be justified. Sadly, the novel's portrayal of economic greed, environmental degradation, and war as an excuse to extend power and wealth still resonates with contemporary readers. For Tolkien the key is knowing not when to use the sword, but when to lay that burden down.

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**NEW: Life memberships available. See our website for details. Please see our website for non-US membership rates as well.**

Check    Money Order    Discover® Card (enter info below)

**Note: A phone # is required above for credit card orders in case of problems**

Discover® Card # \_\_\_\_\_ Expiration Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature (for Discover® Card Only): \_\_\_\_\_

Send to:

**The Mythopoeic Society Orders Department**

**920 N. Atlantic Blvd. #E**

**Alhambra, CA 91801, USA**