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### What J.R.R. Tolkien Really Did with the Sampo?

#### **Abstract**

Examines and describes the methods and ways in which Tolkien used and modified the Finnish epic *The Kalevala* in his creation of the tales that became *The Silmarillion*.

#### **Additional Keywords**

The Kalevala; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Finnish mythology

## What J. R. R. Tolkien Really Did with the Sampo?

Jonathan B. Himes

MOST scholars who study J. R. R. Tolkien's works have much to say about his debt to Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic literatures, but surprisingly few have studied his use of the Finnish *The Kalevala* in depth. Because Tolkien relied extensively on its central mythic object, the Sampo, for his conception of the Silmarils, a closer analysis<sup>1</sup> of the changes to Lönnrot's epic reveals much about the inventive method of Middle-earth's mythologist. I propose that Tolkien refashions the skirmishes between Finnish provinces over the socio-economic supremacy afforded by the Sampo, into the world war among all races of Middle-earth for the moral and terrestrial stability offered by the Silmarils. His methods for reworking the Sampo epic into *The Silmarillion* were: [1] to present conflicts of stark morality without allegorizing; [2] to use pagan elements without bowdlerizing; [3] to bridge gaps in the source with other traditions or his own imagination; and [4] to expand the playing field of the epic to a global scale. His express purpose was to propagate a secondary world through feigned history.

Many medievalisms wrought by nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers have arguably produced some of the world's finest literary works. Elias Lönnrot published *The Kalevala* in 1849, after Finland achieved self-governance. The European romanticism of the time "emphasized the importance of the past and the value of old folk poetry, and the Finnish achievement of a national epic was linked" to this movement (Alhoniemi 229). The latter half of that century saw William Morris crafting his "historical" fantasies and romances. The output of these two writers had a profound influence on J. R. R. Tolkien, who in his teens was inspired to rework many scenes of Lönnrot's epic in the verse-and-prose style of Morris's early novels. As early as 1914 he writes to his future fiancée Edith Bratt about "trying to turn one of the [*Kalevala*] stories—which is really a very great story and most tragic—into a short story somewhat on the lines of Morris' romances with chunks of poetry in between" (*Letters* 7). Years later (1955) he recounts his creative process to W. H. Auden: "But the

beginning of the legendarium, of which the Trilogy is part (the conclusion), was in an attempt to reorganize some of the *Kalevala*, especially the tale of Kullervo the hapless, into a form of my own" (214). This material was to fit his "series of invented languages" which "became heavily Finnicized in phonetic pattern and structure" (214).

The early influence of *The Kalevala* on Tolkien cannot be overstressed, though it was certainly tempered by Tolkien's Roman Catholicism before he set about the task of retelling selected parts of it. During his final terms at King Edward's he discovered "this strange people and these new gods, this race of unhypocritical low-brow scandalous heroes" (Carpenter 49), with whom he felt more at home the more he read. Once at Oxford, he presented a paper on how these Finnish ballads retained a "primitive undergrowth" that other European traditions had cut out, and of his wish that his home country had more of the same sort of literature (59). This was the project he took upon himself (as he later wrote): that of constructing a mythology for England that was "'high', purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of a land long steeped in poetry" (90). From Tolkien's own account of his predilection for the primitive heroism encountered in *The Kalevala*, unflinching in its tragic depiction of such unsavory themes as Kullervo's incest, we discern also the desire he had to ennoble the characters and present their struggles on the vast scale of an entire world, not merely between warring tribes as in Lönnrot's work. He had hoped to publish this backdrop of myth and legend as *The Silmarillion* during his lifetime, but it was not until 1977—four years after his death—that his readers became aware of the depth and complexity of his life's work.

This reclamation of northern European medieval literature—bringing its pre-Christian traditions within the fold of their belief—is one Tolkien shared with his Oxford companions, the Inklings. Within their imaginative works of fantasy and/or science fiction they sought not so much to reconcile pagan materials with Christianity as to salvage their richness without either praising heathen practices or diluting them. Though their favored modes of storytelling differ, these Oxford scholars incorporated elements from medieval romance, epic, legend, and poetry which most writers shunned in the Modernist period. C. S. Lewis borrowed liberally from the Middle Ages for his Narnia series as well as his science fiction trilogy (both with a definite allegorical intention).

Charles Williams wrote quasi-mystical Arthurian poetry as well as fantasy pot-boilers.

Tolkien did not share exactly the same aesthetic as his colleagues: he “cordially dislike[d] allegory in all its manifestations” (*Letters* 189), and found Arthurian legend too explicitly Christian to base his mythology upon (Rogers and Rogers 31). Tolkien’s primary interest was in the Elves and not the fate of men, and so a setting too overtly Christian would emphasize humanity and minimize the realm of *Faërie*. What the Inklings did have in common with Tolkien, however, was a habit of drawing inspiration from their favorite medieval texts and then expanding the parts that fit their Christian morality without losing the medieval flavor of the original. While Lewis’s Narnia books had witches and Williams’s thrillers had black magic and Tarot, Tolkien’s *Silmarillion* featured spell-singing duels similar to those of *The Kalevala* between the sea- and sleigh-faring shamans, Väinämöinen and Lemminkäinen, and their enemies from Northland. The backward glance in the fiction of Tolkien and his friends is a sympathetic one, locating aspects of early or pre-Christian medieval literature which might otherwise be only occultic or unorthodox without their moral outlook.

Of the scholars who have studied Tolkien since the 1980s, few have paid more than a passing glance at the influence of the *The Kalevala* on *The Silmarillion*.<sup>2</sup> Many acknowledge Lönnrot’s contribution to nineteenth-century philological enthusiasm for northern European myths, but offer only sketchy information about the Finnish heroes and their quests.<sup>3</sup> A few writers have focused on certain tales or characters from that tradition,<sup>4</sup> but some of the best linguistic and literary criticism of Tolkien can be found in Finnish publications like *Scholarship and Fantasy*. However, surprisingly little has been said about the Sampo in relation to the Silmarils. Given their centrality to the mythical worlds that they inhabit, in terms of the quests they give rise to and their effects on both environment and characterization, it is a wonder that these mythic objects have not been treated more fully.

Tom Shippey summarizes what scholars have theorized concerning the mysterious nature of the Sampo, and how tantalizing such an enigma must have been for Tolkien, who was predisposed to read between the lines of his favorite texts (181). A fairly insightful treatment of *The Kalevala*’s influence on Tolkien can be found in Randel Helm’s *Tolkien and the Silmarils*, which has an extensive discussion of Kullervo (6-12). In fact, many Tolkien critics focus on

Kullervo when mentioning *The Kalevala*, probably because Tolkien singled it out in his letters, and because “Of Túrin” resembles it so closely. Although Helms illuminates the process by which Tolkien transforms the lustful and destructive serf into the tragic hero of Túrin, he does not explain the connection of the Sampo to the Simarils with equal precision, particularly in regard to the characters involved in its forging and theft. His dividing of Louhi’s role into both Thingol and Melkor, and of Ilmarinen’s role into both Fëanor and Beren (and Melkor as well!), is not only bewildering but also unnecessary (42). Instead of a cursory matchup of Tolkien’s characters with their “originals” in Lönnrot, a more prolonged gaze on their functions within each work is needed to understand what Tolkien did with the Sampo in forging the Silmarils. This will be covered in the section *The Motivations for Forging and Thieving*.

Before proceeding to analyze this creative method, I would like to clear up some statements made by other critics concerning Kullervo, lest some misconceptions creep into the present discussion. Helms remarks that in reworking the Kullervo cycle, Tolkien was “learning to outgrow an influence, transform a source, developing a crude medieval tale into a larger and finer thing” (6). First, Kullervo was not medieval; at least he did not come down to Lönnrot through the oral Finnish poetry as did the other characters of the 1849 *Kalevala*. Of all the mythic figures in it, Kullervo is most the invention of Lönnrot, being a “composite character” of ancient European motifs of a superhuman child, German ballads of unwitting incest, and medieval warriors leaving home; he “lacks a real counterpart in authentic tradition” (Branch xxxi). The distinction is important, for some writers have remarked off-handedly about Tolkien’s borrowings from “medieval” material like *The Kalevala*.

Second, the case of Kullervo is indeed enlightening, especially when considering Tolkien’s creative method alongside Lönnrot’s. Both felt they had come across material that deserved to be reworked into a new verse form. Lönnrot himself said of the Finnish sources: “The Kullervo runes were particularly confused,” to which Juha Pentikäinen adds, “It was not easy for Lönnrot to weave the character of Kullervo, found in the runes from the southern regions, into the plot of the *Kalevala*. [. . .] Nevertheless, he considered the Kullervo poetry so significant that he sought a place for it” (40). In other words, in the disparate strands of oral tradition surrounding the crude and hapless wonder boy, Lönnrot saw the possibility of making a coherent narrative reflecting the sort of luckless character recognizable to Finns and yet appealing

to a wider audience for its tragedy. M. A. Branch states that “Lönnrot has transformed Kullervo into a hero comparable to Oedipus and Hamlet, and condemned by the fates to destruction” (xxx). Tolkien certainly felt that the tragedy of Kullervo was worth the pains of reworking. The vivid scenes of the hapless hero could bear a more serious dramatization, and he wound up making two versions of alternate length. The shorter one, “Of Túrin Turambar,” appears in *The Silmarillion*.

In changing the Kullervo story, Tolkien employed the first two methods I mentioned: [1] he presented stark moral conflicts without allegorizing, and [2] he borrowed pagan elements without bowdlerizing. The effect of tragedy is heightened by tainting Túrin’s destiny with inescapable doom. Though imperfect, he is more a victim of Melkor’s subtle designs than an evil-doer. Instead of omitting the killing and incest, Tolkien makes them the integral result of Túrin’s indomitable yet unwitting youth, while suppressing his spite and pettiness.

Whereas Kullervo lashes out with malice to kill Ilmarinen’s wife and Untamo’s household, Túrin attacks too rashly, inadvertently killing Saeros upon extreme provocation, and later mortally wounding his friend Beleg in the confusion of his rescue from Morgoth. In his days as Neithan the Wronged and then Mormegil the Black Sword, Túrin exhibits traits of the noble outlaw *a la* Morris’s Fellowship of the Dry Tree in *The Well at the World’s End*, or even David’s war band pursued by Saul in 1 Samuel 21-30. Another difference is that Kullervo’s incest is the result of chasing maidens in his sleigh, but for Túrin it is a marriage doomed by the amnesia cast over his sister by Glaurung the dragon. “Of Túrin” retains many of Kullervo’s crimes that comprise the core of Lönnrot’s powerful scenes—culminating in the hero asking his sword of its willingness to slay him and its affirmative reply—with a difference in the culpability of the protagonist. Tolkien continues this process of moral refinement of *Kalevala* material without the loss of important thematic devices in his appropriation of Sampo elements.

Lönnrot and Tolkien both tended to emphasize the pagan aspects of the sources they worked from, though Tolkien’s Christian morality underlies that pagan material. Felix Oinas describes the creative process of Lönnrot: “His editorial practices betray his tendency to reduce the Christian and legendary features, while strengthening both the heathen and the historical-realistic elements” (290). There is one occasion, however, when Lönnrot makes Christian

allusions clearly in his verse. This is found in the last runo (canto) concerning the virgin birth of Marjatta's (Mary's) son, the future King of Karelia. Despite the obvious Christian overtones, the characters do not conform to New Testament morality. Unlike John the Baptist, Väinämöinen is angered at the new savior's baptism, and he sings a new vessel to make his sky voyage away. He takes solace only in leaving behind his *kantele* (dulcimer) and his legacy as the sage and singer of his people, even though Kalevala owes its protection and rejuvenation from the Sampo pieces to the valor of Väinämöinen.

Half of this creative procedure was also Tolkien's method, that of reducing the explicitly Christian elements from sources, while strengthening the heathen. If the great mariner Eärendil is meant as a figure of John the Baptist, in the sense of a forerunner to the salvation of his people, then he is at once more gracious in behavior and more "cloaked" in that role than his counterpart Väinämöinen, who is embittered at the new king who supplants him. Unlike Lönnrot, however, Tolkien tended rather to amplify legendary matter and to diminish historical-realistic details. That is, he preferred a consistency of inner-reality to his world that depended not on "real world" explanations, but on the laws of his fantasy realm. Thus Eärendil represents the hope of Middle-earth's succour, not by appealing to the well-known Christian tradition, but by reference to a more obscure Old English passage expressing the hope for an intercessory link to pagan ancestors.<sup>5</sup> Tolkien ties this theme of hope into his legends through Eärendil's conveyance of a Silmaril across the heavens in his vessel. The fate of Arda as largely contingent upon the fate of the Silmarils—one of the "laws" put into operation early in the legends—maintains the continuity of the invented history rather than conventional Christian beliefs.

Regarding Tolkien's creative process, both Shippey and Helms contrast the 1917 tale "Of Túrin Turambar" with one made later that year, "Of Beren and Lúthien." Both reveal the author attempting to transcend literary influence with varying levels of success. Helms considers "Túrin" to supersede its predecessor "The Fall of Gondolin" in terms of "gradually freeing his imagination from its juvenile derivative state," even though "Gondolin" is said to have no literary precedent (5, 6). Shippey agrees, but goes further saying that "Túrin" realizes more fully the idea of doom only glimpsed of in "Beren" and more fully digests its source, as if that were a virtue (195). True, Tolkien skillfully reworks the Kullervo story into his tale, as with the use of Sigurd the dragonslayer, but the borrowings are more conspicuous than those in "Beren."



In this third tale the importations are indeed numerous.<sup>6</sup> However, they exemplify the third method of Tolkien's creative process: he bridges the gaps between sources with his imagination. Tolkien imbues them with his own romantic experiences and synthesizes the sources with each other, creating more of a seamless narrative with an air of originality. What Shippey enumerates as faults—the repetition, brevity, and variety of sources—are what can actually be considered strengths. According to Umberto Eco, allusions to outside works can be part of the appreciation of a text for an insider (a “Model Reader”), especially when combined ingeniously by an author (22-23). Helms claims that “Beren” triumphantly provides the “adequate protagonist” lacking in the first two tales of 1917, and along with Tolkien himself, regards “Beren” as the masterpiece of *The Silmarillion* (12). Though it too contains scenes of pathos and darkness, it is more positive than the others. Indeed, the tale differentiates itself in its opening lines: “Among the tales of sorrow and of ruin [ . . . ] there is joy [ . . . ] . And of these histories most fair still in the ears of the Elves is the tale of Beren and Lúthien” (*Silmarillion* 162).

One feature of “Beren” criticized by Shippey needs to be addressed at greater length, because it informs our reading of the entire *Quenta Silmarillion* and may be one of the elements Tolkien pinched from *The Kalevala* along with the Sampo. I have already mentioned how the discernible sources deftly weave together, and as for brevity, the compressed narrative prose style is simply appropriate for the discourse adopted by the author, that of a high rhetoric in the biblical vein. The other feature that was named a fault, but is in fact a strength, is repetition. Certain images, incidents, and themes recur in the course of the story, and if any of these are at all enjoyed by the reader in themselves, their reappearance in varied form can be part of the pleasure of reading. They are the sort of central scenes or lyrical passages that haunted Tolkien throughout his life, like the meeting of a man and an elf-maiden in a forest, which he revisited not only in “Beren” more than once, but in different guises throughout *The Silmarillion* and even in *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>7</sup>

Although repetition may hold little appeal for those with a modernist (or postmodernist) aesthetic who value innovation or novelty as the legitimate test of art, it is the proper province of certain types of literature. Eco explains that perceiving variations within the repetitions of an art form is probably one of the oldest aesthetics, and is an appropriate artistic sensibility in our age of mass culture (14, 28). Repetition is certainly a feature of the Norse sagas,

whose generations of kin-slaying, curses, and broken promises are repeatedly echoed by Tolkien. In a protracted literary form such as the epic, it serves a practical function in reminding the audience of the major themes in the work. For *The Silmarillion* the repeated oaths, rash promises, doom, quests, and falling kingdoms sustain the minutiae of the history. As in real life there are cycles of similar circumstances, but with infinite variety and different outcomes in successive generations.

Repetition in the cantos of *The Kalevala* serves a number of purposes, usually providing the structural cues needed by an audience of oral poetry. The basis of Lönnrot's text is in fact the notes he took from live performances of folksingers in the region of Karelia, edited from variants of the same traditional tales or ballads. The multiple epithets of each character—Ahti (Lemminkäinen) the Islander, the wanton loverboy; Steady Old Väinämöinen, the eternal bard; Louhi, mistress of Northland, the gap-toothed hag<sup>8</sup>—serve as leit motifs, helping the audience identify the cast and associate their actions in the cantos with recognizable phrases. Also, *The Kalevala's* parallelisms in versification with slight alterations help the listener to follow the action before the singer moves on to the next point:

I will go to forge the Sampo,  
Weld its brightly-coloured cover

.....

For 'twas I who forged the heavens,  
And the vault of air I hammered. (Kirby 111)

If Tolkien has been criticized for the brevity of his compressed narrative, then *The Kalevala* certainly errs on the other side. Oinas comments, "The action is thin in comparison with the great bulk of the epic, and some digressions that delay or interrupt the main course of events are rather tedious" (298-99). Admittedly, the cantos are redundant: the main action of many cantos usually involves at least three attempts, such as the tasks of the three suitors, the three disasters sent from Louhi to Kalevala, and the trials of forging both the Sampo and Ilmarinen's golden bride. The versification also grows repetitious when Väinämöinen tells lies—four times to the maid of Tuonela, and three times to Annikki—about the destination of his travel. Such redundancy in stanzas with varied elements builds up expectation, often with intended humor in *The Kalevala*. While reading, one is constantly reminded that this effect may well

breed hilarity in the lively oral tradition from which it derived, wherein two singers each clasp a hand and slosh beer in the other while swaying to the kantele and trading lyrics. The humorous tone engendered by this magnitude of repetition in the ballads is far afield from Tolkien's program. Though he is sympathetic to the unabashed shamanism and cycle of repeated themes, Tolkien lifts much of Finland's mythology out of the beerhall and renders it in the concise and high tone of sacred annals.

Lofty prose may distinguish its style rather than folk song, but *The Silmarillion* owes much of its overall structure to the Sampo-centered *Kalevala*. Both reach back in time for mythical accounts of creation before introducing the major characters who instigate the struggles over the Sampo and Silmarils; both entail the loss of those mythical objects; and both end on a note of triumph for the primeval heroic figures, or at least the diminished might of their enemies for the time being. In the midst of these shared structural features, Tolkien not only reshuffles some of the events surrounding the Sampo, but he also borrows some of the "three-fold gradation" of intensifying action which Oinas points out as being prevalent in Lönnrot's cantos (298). As already pointed out, reiteration is conspicuous in *The Kalevala* through the successive actions and the repetitious dialogue in a majority of the cantos, often with comic effect. The cycles of repetition in *The Silmarillion*, however, are subtle and are spread throughout the tales.

As the recognizable patterns unfold, the gradation of actions goes from bad to worse as Melkor's lies and influence reach further out and infect Middle-earth even after he is gone. Because of all this tumult down through the ages, the fate of the Silmarils is encompassed by a larger "theater of war" than that of the Sampo. This is characteristic of Tolkien's fourth method: he expands the playing field of the epic to a global scale. The Silmarils pass through three lands (Valinor, Beleriand, Utumno). One of them passes through three races of hands (Elf, Vala, Human), wreaking havoc among three races (Elf, Dwarf, Human) after Thingol's possession of it. Three Elven kingdoms fall (Nargothrond, Doriath, Gondolin), and after three generations of strife (Beren, Dior, Eärendil), that Silmaril sails the skies on the brow of Eärendil while the others come to rest in earth and sea. The tales comprising these three-fold repetitions provide a much more convoluted history of the Silmarils than the basic outline of the Sampo cycles. For all its charming interludes and digressions,

the Finnish epic was considerably less comprehensive and global than Tolkien wanted for his secondary world.

### The Mythical Nature of the Sampo and the Silmarils

Because of the sheer breadth of Middle-earth's early history, the attributes of its central quest-object would have to be described more clearly than the Sampo if it was to be coveted by nations and passed down through generations. The nature of the Sampo as given by Lönnrot was vaguely mystical and totemistic, yet foundational to the agricultural functioning of the arctic society depicted—just the sort of philological enigma that Tolkien was drawn to. Much of his fantasy invention owes its origins to puzzling or cryptic references from medieval texts which philologists like Tolkien and his predecessors were certain once held sway in the popular imagination, or at least were recognizable to the literary audience of the early material. For example, he developed the Ents of Fangorn Forest from the Old English word *ent* or “giant,” and as already mentioned, Eärendil was an Old English allusion without a clear referent. A great deal of the philologists' work involved reconstructing the possible meaning, or the evolution of, an unclear word formation by piecing together evidence from comparable words. Tolkien's imaginative fiction often proceeded along the same lines, and the Sampo was just such an object of mystery.

In Finnish, “sampo” is not a word with a meaning other than the name given to the mythic object in *The Kalevala* and the folk traditions of Finland. A related word used sometimes is *sammas*, another “nonsense word,” according to Shippey (181), but which means “pillar” in Finnish, according to Oinas (291). What Tolkien knew of it was gleaned from Kirby's 1907 translation and the bits of the original he translated himself, “like a school boy with Ovid” (*Letters* 214). Kirby's translation describes it as having three sides composed of a corn-mill, a salt-mill, and a coin-mill; it also has a “brightly-coloured cover” (115). Because it was forged by Ilmarinen the smith, who “welded it and hammered at it” (115), we may assume it is metallic, yet its “roots” are nine fathoms deep. Is it a machine or a powerful organic totem? It exhibits traits of both in providing the material needs of Pohjola in abundance:

Now was grinding the new Sampo,  
And revolved the pictured cover,  
Chestfuls did it grind till evening,

First for food it ground a chestful,  
And another ground for barter,  
And a third it ground for storage. (115)

The swiveling “bright lid” or revolving “coloured cover” is another part of the puzzle. The entire Sampo appears to be a structure so massive that its decorated cover can be seen turning while the mills continually grind, secured behind nine locks in the Mount of Copper.

Scholars have hazarded several guesses as to the Sampo’s actual nature, but the prevailing view advanced by Uno Harva is that of a world pillar which grinds like a gigantic mill under the “decorated lid” of the sky (Oinas 291). This idea of a swiveling lid formed by the sky, which drives the mill, is sensible since the Sampo is forged by Ilmarinen, the sky-god of Finnish mythology who brags of hammering out the vault of heaven before the world began. Also, the descriptions of the Sampo are analogous to magic mills as in the *Edda*, or to the Tree of Life in world myths. Because Tolkien read profusely in this kind of material, he probably saw within the Sampo the embodiment of these traditional notions of a world axis.

The sort of legends Tolkien was creating, however, needed something a bit more intelligible, an invention of separable parts, each enviable enough to arouse the lust of the most powerful rulers for its control and capable of inciting multiple quests to sustain the long history. This mythic symbol could not be suitably embodied in a single form like the Sampo; Tolkien had to divide the world pillar from the brightly-decorated lid, assigning the different attributes to them but joining them somehow in origin. The one would be rooted as a Tree of Life, while the other would be mobile, “brightly-coloured” and exchangeable, i.e. more easily stolen or passed around. These became the Two Trees of Valinor and the three Silmarils, the former grown organically, and the latter forged with the essence derived from the light sources of the world, the Two Trees. They provide more than the socio-economic supremacy of the Sampo; the whole world depends on the light they emanate.

In redefining the constituent elements of his quest-objects from the properties of the Sampo, Tolkien employed all four of his creative methods. He devised objects that bring out the best in heroes and the worst in villains, inciting [1] conflicts of stark morality. The light of the Two Trees within the Silmarils represents more than the socio-economic advantages of the Sampo

for Pohjola; the potential for illuminating the earth with rare and precious beauty can be coveted and hoarded, depriving the whole world of powerful light. This sets up oppositions of absolute right and wrong between those seeking to protect that power and those craving to possess it. The Silmarils respond in kind to those who bear them; they “suffer” the hands of Beren and Eärendil to carry them because their hearts are good, whereas Morgoth, Carcharoth, and Maedhros are burned by the jewels’ touch because their intentions are evil.

Borrowing the ideas of a polar tree, upon which the picturesque lights of the sky depend for their movement, Tolkien invokes [2] the use of pagan sources without bowdlerizing. Early cultures of pre-Christian Europe and Asia, including Saxon and Scandinavian peoples, held primitive beliefs about a universal tree or pillar that supported the lights of the sky and benefitted the world (Oinas 291). These ideas find their way into the mythic objects at the heart of Middle-earth’s central crises. In conceiving of the Silmarils as jewels and the Two Trees as a shining “world pillar,” Tolkien [3] bridged a gap in the source with his imagination. As stated earlier, the indefiniteness of the Sampo as a tangible object would have been a liability in the plots of *The Silmarillion*. Therefore, Tolkien creates the vivid jewels and trees whose lights he describes as more inherently beautiful and crucial to the whole world than the Sampo, which offers its owner little more than industrial advantage.

By dividing the mythical attributes of the Sampo into separate but related quest-objects, he [4] expanded the playing field of the epic to a global scale. The increased number of mythic objects allows for a sophisticated series of quests down through the early ages of Middle-earth. Thus the Two Trees are vanquished by Melkor, but their light is preserved within the mysterious substance of the Silmarils which he steals, providing impetus for Fëanor, Beren, and eventually the Valar to undertake missions for their retrieval. All of them set out for different reasons against the dread power of Morgoth and his agents, though the motivation of each involves the fate of the Silmarils in this intergenerational conflict across the map of Middle-earth.

### The Motivations for Forging and Thieving

The diversity of attempted thefts of the Silmarils has much to do with the initial purpose for which they were wrought: Fëanor had a presentiment of doom, and so he sought with his whole heart to put his gemcraft to full use. In

this respect, *The Silmarillion* differs most from the forging and theft cantos of *The Kalevala*. Tolkien borrows extensively from these areas of his source, yet he significantly alters the motivations of the chief agents of the major actions in order to produce the sort of large-scale war between good and evil that frames the myriad adventures of his secondary world. Whereas the *Kalevala* heroes' wooing the maid of the north is what leads Ilmarinen to forge the Sampo, the imminent danger of Melkor is largely what motivates Fëanor to craft the Silmarils. To accomplish this change Tolkien relies primarily on his first and fourth methods of dealing with the Sampo material: [1] he presents conflicts of stark morality, and [4] he expands the playing field of the epic to a global scale.

Although the latter portion of *The Kalevala* contains the battle for the Sampo and Louhi's attempted revenge, the great bulk of the epic is concerned with village life and the rituals of White Sea Karelians, particularly the wooing tasks and marriage lore found in several cantos. As Pentikäinen writes, "*The Kalevala* is, in fact, very much a wedding drama" (47). Even the supernatural trials imposed on the suitors by Louhi are merely hyperbole for everyday tasks: carving (a boat from a distaff), skiing to corral an elk (a demonic one), ploughing a field (of swarming vipers), and so on. However, when Louhi asks Väinämöinen to forge the Sampo for the hand of her daughter, he must enlist the services of Ilmarinen the master smith. After the daunting task is accomplished, Ilmarinen offers up the Sampo willingly, hoping to win the maid for himself. It is for the sake of marriage, then, that the fate of the Sampo is to be locked up, stolen, and finally broken to pieces; Väinämöinen salvages the remnants, but never is it forged anew. The Silmarils are likewise irreplaceable, but their role is more weighty than the gift of a marriage suitor. Here Tolkien [1] presents a conflict of stark morality. Melkor has already begun to spread his hate, and Fëanor, "being come to his full might, was filled with a new thought, or it may be that some shadow of foreknowledge came to him of the doom that drew near" (67). Because of the threat that eventually engulfs the world in war, he turns all his skill to the fashioning of the jewels that alone can house the light of Valinor.

To present the perennial world war of Middle-earth in terms of absolute good and evil, Tolkien has to reshuffle a crucial scene or two from *The Kalevala*. He establishes Melkor's irredeemable wickedness as early as the *Ainulindalë*, whereas the enmity between Louhi and the south is revealed gradually, and

the fault is just as much Lemminkäinen's for beheading her husband in a scuffle. Her final retributive act of stealing the sun and moon occurs near the end of the epic, after the Sampo is stolen from her. Like Melkor, Louhi sneaks up during a celebratory gathering of the heroes and removes the light sources from their perch on the tips of the trees. Tolkien may well have borrowed this scene, placing it among the very first of Melkor's attacks.

When Melkor and Ungoliant extinguish the original sources of the world's light, Fëanor will not sacrifice his finest creation to mend the Two Trees of Valinor. Like other protagonists, his will becomes corrupted by the machinations of Melkor, the source of absolute evil. So strong is the love of the skilled craftsman for his work that he protests:

"For the less even as for the greater there is some deed that he may accomplish but once only; and in that deed his heart shall rest. It may be that I can unlock my jewels, but never again shall I make their like; and if I must break them, I shall break my heart, and I shall be slain; first of all the Eldar in Aman." (*Silmarillion* 78)

The selfishness of Melkor has already infected Fëanor. Unlike Aulë, he will not surrender the work of his hands for the good of others. The desire to create is so strong for Ilúvatar's creatures that they are tempted to idolize their handiwork and hoard it unto themselves. Thus is the labor of skilled craftsmanship treated more seriously in *The Silmarillion* than in *The Kalevala*, where the heroes are lured by the prosperity engendered by the Sampo, and not the design of the contraption itself. Lönnrot is not so concerned with which side is morally better, whereas Tolkien's serious comment on the danger of selfishness forms the stark moral backdrop of his tales.

The obsession with obtaining the Silmarils does not die when Fëanor falls in the attempt. Others take up the challenge, though motivated for different reasons. Because of his overarching conflict of good and evil, Tolkien situates his use of the Sampo theft as an intermediate quest for a Silmaril, before the final battle in which the Valar drive out Morgoth for good. This [4] expands the playing field to a global scale, distributing the motivations for theft—or retrieval—among more characters than the few heroes from the land of Kalevala.

Whereas Tolkien presents numerous protagonists, Lönnrot tends to collapse various legendary figures into a single character, such as Kaukomieli and Ahti, whose exploits of love and war Lönnrot attributes to Lemminkäinen. As already mentioned, Kullervo is a composite character, largely of Lönnrot's own making.



The purpose of this reduction of *dramatis personae* was to confer the feats of heroism upon some of the best known figures of Finnish myth and legend, and organize their exploits around the theft of the Sampo. He makes Väinämöinen, Ilmarinen, and Lemminkäinen the heroes of southern Kalevala who champion the cause of Finnish nationalism by supplanting Louhi and the northern Lapps of Pohjola. This battle for provincial preeminence between Karelian neighbors is quite localized in comparison with the grand sweep of Middle-earth warfare encompassed by *The Silmarillion*.

Instead of reducing his cast of characters, Tolkien telescopes many of Lönnrot's scenes across time and space, allotting different portions of the Sampo plot to various generations of Elves and Men caught up in the web of Morgoth's deception. He incorporates the aspects of wooing and theft into the tale "Of Beren and Lúthien," and ascribes the motivations of Louhi and the suitors to Thingol and Beren. At this point in *The Silmarillion* the Silmarils have already been forged, and the moral conflict has been established. In this intermediate quest, then, the King of Doriath offers his daughter to Beren for the wooing task of retrieving a Silmaril. There is even a rival suitor for Lúthien, Daeron the foremost minstrel in the land, although his appearance is brief. Thingol is motivated by the Silmaril's startling power and worth in making his rash promise, much as Louhi, who desires the staggering productive capacity of the Sampo, sets her daughter's suitors upon impossible errands. Tolkien adopts other character functions from *The Kalevala* for the tale of Beren: Finrod and Sauron duel by singing their spells like Lemminkäinen and the Master of Northland; Lúthien sings the entire stronghold of Morgoth to sleep, just as Väinämöinen sings the household of Louhi into slumber; and Beren gouges a Silmaril from Morgoth's crown with the knife Angrist, using the kind of ingenuity Lemminkäinen displays by uprooting the Sampo with a monstrous ox.

These are but a few examples that reveal Tolkien's method of dealing with his source material. The nature of the changes made while borrowing elements from *The Kalevala* suggest the sort of aims he had as a Christian philologist in the twentieth century. Both Tolkien and Lönnrot sought to create literature of epic proportions for their native countries; however, their cultural backgrounds gave them different aesthetic and rhetorical choices. Lönnrot wrote during the early nineteenth century, as Finns were forging their national identity. For this purpose, Lönnrot drew upon the oral traditions surrounding the Sampo. He chose southern Kalevala as the site of his heroes' homeland, and he presented

their struggle against the neighboring Lapps of northern Pohjola as an inspiring epic for his country. Tolkien also wanted to give his native land a series of indigenous myths and legends, but early twentieth-century England was occupied with the atrocities of world war. Like his fellow Inklings, he was attracted to the medieval literature of northern Europe, and he saw within it the possibilities of expressing his Christian values, despite the pessimism of his own war-torn era. Writing in a tone of noble courage, Tolkien borrowed from sources like *The Kalevala* to present the epic history of a doomed world, whose Silmarils still offer light in dark times.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In developing this analysis of how Tolkien handles *The Kalevala*, I am indebted to the eloquent statement of a method found in C. S. Lewis's scholarly essay "What Chaucer Really Did to *Il Filostrato*" (*Essays and Studies* 19 [1932]: 56-72; repr. C. S. Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays*. Ed. Walter Hooper. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979. 27-44).

<sup>2</sup>Even the more recent works dealing with influences on Tolkien's fantasy make only slight reference to the *Kalevala* (Richard Mathews's *Fantasy: The Liberation of Imagination*. New York: Twayne, 1997) or none at all (Patrick Curry's *Defending Middle-earth: Tolkien, Myth, and Modernity*. New York: St. Martin's, 1997).

<sup>3</sup>For example, James Hodge likens Väinämöinen and Ilmarinen to Gary Cooper and Clint Eastwood in his article "Tolkien: Formulas of the Past." *Mythlore* 29 (1981): 15-18.

<sup>4</sup>Iwan Morus points out the use of *Kalevala* elements in "The Tale of Beren and Lúthien" *Mallorn* 20 (1983): 19-22, while David Dettman discusses Finnish influences in "Väinämöinen and Bombadil: Finnish Folklore and *The Lord of the Rings*, Part One." *Minas Tirith Evening Star* 8.4 (July 1979): 3-8.

<sup>5</sup>Shippey explains that the inspiration for Eärendil originated from the uncertain meaning of the lines Tolkien encountered in *The Advent Lyrics*: "*Eala earendel, engla beorhtast, ofer middangeard monnum sende . . .*" (183).

<sup>6</sup>Middle English *Sir Orfeo*, *The Kalevala*, the *Volsunga Saga*, the Grimms' "Rapunzel," Old English *Genesis B*, the *Mabinogion*, and the *Prose Edda*. See Shippey 193.

<sup>7</sup>The pattern consists of a male encountering a female in a forest who enchants him with her singing and dancing. Thingol and Melian (though he is the elf and she a Maia), Beren and Lúthien, and Aragorn and Arwen are those "doomed" to fall in love this way.

<sup>8</sup>These are the character names and nicknames as rendered in Keith Bosley's 1989 translation of *The Kalevala*.

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