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Divination and Prophecy in JRR Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*: Some Observations [Notes]

Abstract

Lists and describes prophetic statements and poems, the use of the *palantíri* in divining far-off events, and the place of prophecy in Middle-earth. Examples of prophecy are mostly used to establish mood; while examples of divination play a more prominent part in the narrative and demand moral decisions on the part of the characters. Thus they not only are important plot devices, but they also reveal to the reader important aspects of the moral nature of Tolkien's Middle-Earth.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings; Prophecy in J.R.R. Tolkien; Divination in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Objects—Palantíri

DIVINATION AND PROPHECY IN THE LORD OF THE RINGS: SOME OBSERVATIONS

ROBERT FIELD TREDRAY

WHEN READING *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*, ONE IS STRUCK (at least this reader was) by a sense of the numinous. The reader feels a connection to another world. And not just because the world of the novel is called "Middle-earth" or because some of the characters are elves or goblins. Such elements are expected in fantasy novels. But Tolkien not only transports the reader into the fictional world of Middle-earth; he also connects him to a world beyond Middle-earth, a world only glimpsed even by the characters in the novel, yet somehow glimpsed by the reader as well. One of the ways Tolkien does this is by the use of divination and prophecy, elements which are common to many works of fantasy literature, but used here to masterful effect. Let us consider how he does this.

At the outset it is important to distinguish between divination and prophecy. The Oxford Dictionary Online defines *prophecy* as "A prediction of what will happen in the future," or "The faculty or practice of prophesying." It defines *divination* as "The practice of seeking knowledge of the future or the unknown by supernatural means." Well and good, but I suggest that there is more to be said. Prophecy is inspired utterance, usually regarding future events, or the consequences of action. It "comes to" the prophet spontaneously, either from God or from some other higher source. The prophet does not have to do anything, and in most cases cannot do anything, to make it happen. Divination, on the other hand, is an intentional activity. The diviner takes certain actions by means of which she or he receives special insight or arcane knowledge, either of events far away or of events in the future. Such actions commonly take the form of casting horoscopes, reading cards or runes, crystal-gazing, etc. As such, divination may be considered a form of magic, a method of overcoming the normal human limitations of time and space. The resulting insight then becomes a basis for determining a course of action. Instances of both prophecy and divination occur in *The Lord of the Rings*. They occur, of course, in others of Tolkien's writings as well; but I shall restrict myself here to a consideration of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Many of Gandalf's statements may be considered prophetic, or at least oracular. They are apparently based on his special wisdom as a Wizard. He says, for example, at the Council of Elrond, after Legolas had reported the escape of Gollum, "Well, well, he is gone [...] But he may play a part yet that neither he nor Sauron have foreseen" (*LotR* II.2.256). This certainly turns out to be true, but it is not at all specific. Gandalf does not suggest, and apparently does not know, what that part may be. This can hardly be counted as a "prediction of what will

happen in the future.” It tells us only that the Wizard is wise, which surely we already knew.

Similarly vague are Frodo’s words about Sam. After Sam sings his song, “The Stone Troll,” Frodo says, “I am learning a lot about Sam Gamgee on this journey. First he was a conspirator, now he’s a jester. He’ll end up by becoming a wizard—or a warrior!” (*LotR* I.12.208). Sam does indeed become a warrior; but when Frodo speaks, neither he nor the reader has any idea how that might happen, and we are not encouraged to take the statement seriously.

Other prophecies come, at least indirectly, from Aragorn. Also at the Council of Elrond, Aragorn tells Boromir, “For the Sword that was Broken is the sword of Elendil that broke beneath him when he fell. It has been treasured by his heirs when all other heirlooms were lost; for it was spoken of old among us that it should be made again when the Ring, Isildur’s Bane, was found” (*LotR* II.2.247). Aragorn does not attribute these words to any individual, but they are certainly prophetic. They foretell a specific event, namely the reforging of the sword, under certain specified circumstances. And had the prophecy not been heeded, the whole plot of the story would have been very different, if not impossible. Yet on the whole it is a minor detail. The story could well have been written without mentioning it.

Later, in the chapter “The Passing of the Grey Company,” Aragorn recalls another ancient prophecy, that of Malbeth the Seer concerning the Paths of the Dead. “Thus spoke Malbeth the Seer, in the days of Arvedui, last King of Fornost”:

Over the land there lies a long shadow,
westward reaching wings of darkness.
The Tower trembles, to the tombs of kings
doom approaches. The Dead awaken;
for the hour is come for the oathbreakers:
at the Stone of Erech they shall stand again
and hear there a horn in the hills ringing.
Whose shall the horn be? Who shall call them
from the grey twilight, the forgotten people?
The heir of him to whom the oath they swore.
From the North shall he come; need shall drive him:
He shall pass the Door to the Paths of the Dead. (*LotR* V.2.781)

This is perhaps the longest and most elaborate quotation of a prophecy in the text, and the reader cannot ignore it. But it establishes mood more than it advances the plot. Aragorn’s taking of the Paths of the Dead is certainly a crucial event in the tale. Only by this means was it possible to defeat the armies of Mordor besieging Minas Tirith. Still, the prophecy itself is a minor detail. The

story might just as well have been told without the elaborate quotation. We already knew that Aragorn would take the Paths of the Dead; he had announced this intention just before quoting Malbeth, and had uttered his own prophecy, though it went almost unnoticed at the time:

“Alas! Aragorn my friend!” said Éomer. “I had hoped that we should ride to war together; but if you seek the Paths of the Dead, then our parting is come, and it is little likely that we shall ever meet again under the sun.”

“That road I will take, nonetheless,” said Aragorn. “But I say to you, Éomer, that in battle we may meet again, though all the hosts of Mordor should stand between.” (*LotR* V.2.779)

The first-time reader is apt to take this, as Éomer did, as a mere expression of (probably forlorn) hope. Later, when Aragorn and Éomer do in fact meet on the Pelennor Fields, we read:

And so at length Aragorn and Éomer met in the midst of the battle, and they leaned on their swords and looked on one another and were glad.

“Thus we meet again, though all the hosts of Mordor lay between us,” said Aragorn. “Did I not say so at the Hornberg?”

“So you spoke,” said Éomer, “but hope oft deceives, and I knew not then that you were a man foresighted.” (*LotR* V.6.848)

So Aragorn has functioned as a prophet in his own right. But if he had never made his prophetic remark it would have made little difference in the narrative. The prophecy is but another minor detail.

Still another prophecy is made by Glorfindel. Long ago, in the battle that had ended the realm of Angmar, Glorfindel had driven off the Witch-king. “Eärnur now rode back, but Glorfindel, looking into the gathering dark, said: ‘Do not pursue him! He will not return to this land. Far off yet is his doom, and not by the hand of man will he fall.’ These words many remembered [...]” (*LotR* App.A.1051). But this prophecy does not even occur in the main text; it appears only in the appendix, so the first-time reader does not know of it. Apparently one of those who remembered it, however, was the Witch-king himself, for in the battle of the Pelennor Fields he tells Dernhelm, “Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me.” Then “Dernhelm” laughs and replies, “But no living man am I. You look upon a woman. Éowyn am I, Éomund’s daughter.” (*LotR* V.6.841). Meriadoc (also not a man) and Éowyn then slay the Witch-king. The effect on the reader (at least on this reader) is rather like that in *Macbeth*, when MacDuff tells Macbeth that he had been “ripped from his mother’s womb

before his time," and thus was not a "man born of woman." It is truly weird, like Shakespeare's Sisters, in the original sense.

Dreams and visions are closely akin to prophecy, as they also come unbidden to the dreamer or seer. Dreams seem to be associated with Tom Bombadil, although how, if at all, they are connected to the Master is unclear. In the house of Tom Bombadil, three of the four hobbits are troubled by disturbing dreams, although only Frodo's seems to be clairvoyant. He dreams of a man carried off from the top of a high tower by a great eagle (*LotR* I.7.127). But it is not until more than a hundred pages later that we learn the significance of this dream. At the Council of Elrond, Gandalf tells of his imprisonment by Saruman at the top of the Tower of Orthanc, and his rescue by Gwaihir the Windlord. Frodo interrupts his narrative:

"I saw you!" cried Frodo. "You were walking backwards and forwards. The moon shone in your hair."

Gandalf paused astonished and looked at him. "It was only a dream," said Frodo, "but it suddenly came back to me. I had quite forgotten it. It came some time ago; after I left the Shire, I think."

"Then it was late in coming," said Gandalf [...]. (*LotR* II.2.261)

It is an interesting detail, but one that had surely been forgotten by the reader as well as by Frodo.

Again, on the Barrow-downs, after Bombadil has rescued the hobbits from the barrow, he mentions the Men of Westemnet who had forged the blades he had given them, adding, "Few now remember them [...] yet still some go wandering, sons of forgotten kings walking in loneliness, guarding from evil things folk that are heedless."

The hobbits did not understand his words, but as he spoke they had a vision as it were of a great expanse of years behind them, like a vast shadowy plain over which there strode shapes of Men, tall and grim with bright swords, and last came one with a star on his brow. Then the vision faded, and they were back in the sunlit world. (*LotR* I.8.146)

The reader understands the whole thing no more than do the hobbits; only later do we come to realize that the Men were Rangers, and the last is Aragorn.

Of course the most prominent dream in the text is the dream of Faramir and Boromir, in which they hear the riddling verse:

Seek for the Sword that was broken:
In Imladris it dwells;
There shall be counsels taken

Stonger than Morgul-spells.
There shall be shown a token
That Doom is near at hand,
For Isildur's Bane shall waken,
And the Halfling forth shall stand. (*LotR* II.2.246)

It is to find the meaning of this verse that Boromir comes to the House of Elrond, which is certainly essential to the plot. And the verse figures later in the narrative as well, when Frodo meets Faramir. But its primary function here is to introduce the character Boromir into the narrative, and to provide an opportunity for much lengthy exposition.

These dreams and prophecies are mostly part of the background of the novel. As literary devices, they certainly contribute to the novel's mood. By them the reader knows that he is in a world where prophecy is possible, where men are somehow connected to the numinous. But other than establishing mood, their main function is foreshadowing. With two exceptions, the reader hardly notices them as they occur, and whatever their importance may be is only perceived by the reader much later.

Divination has a more prominent place in *The Lord of the Rings*. Two obvious examples come immediately to mind: the *palantíri* and the Mirror of Galadriel. The *palantíri* are a means of overcoming the human limitations of space. They are crucial to the plot; they are also profoundly ambiguous. It is by means of a *palantír* that Sauron corrupts Saruman and drives Denethor mad. And it is by the use of a *palantír* that Aragorn challenges Sauron and goads him into disastrous precipitate action. When Pippin asks Gandalf if the *palantír* had been made by the Enemy, Gandalf replies thoughtfully:

No [...] Nor by Saruman. It is beyond his art, and beyond Sauron's, too. The *palantíri* came from beyond Westeros, from Eldamar. Fëanor himself wrought them, maybe, in days so long ago that the time cannot be measured in years. But there is nothing that Sauron cannot turn to evil uses. Alas for Saruman! It was his downfall, as I now perceive. Perilous to us all are the devices of an art deeper than we possess ourselves. (*LotR* III.11.597)

The Stones of Seeing are products of Elvish craft. Their origin is very ancient, but they are not gifts of the gods. And they must be *used*. One must look into a *palantír* to derive any benefit from it; it does not work on one's mind unbidden. And thus it is neither good nor evil in and of itself. Gandalf's remarks give the reader a glimpse into Tolkien's moral universe. Evil is not inherent in objects, whether natural or artificial. The evil aspects of things come from the uses to which they are put, and the intentions behind those uses. Things we do not

understand are dangerous, because they may become the means whereby we become entangled in the evil purposes of others. And not even a Wizard is immune from that danger. This is of course true above all of the Rings, especially of the One Ring. In this world prudence and humility are essential virtues. If one does not recognize one's own limitations, one will almost inevitably come to grief.

Aside from the Rings themselves, perhaps the most prominent magical object in *The Lord of the Rings* is the Mirror of Galadriel. This is another tool of divination, and is specifically connected with "magic" in the text. In Lorien, the Lady Galadriel invites Frodo and Sam to follow her, leading them down a long stairway to where a silver basin stands on a pedestal beside a stream. When she has filled the basin with water and breathed on it, she invites the hobbits to look:

"What shall we look for, and what shall we see?" asked Frodo, filled with awe.

"Many things I can command the Mirror to reveal," she answered, "and to some I can show what they desire to see. But the Mirror will also show things unbidden, and those are often stranger and more profitable than things we wish to behold. What you will see, if you leave the Mirror free to work, I cannot tell. For it shows things that were, and things that are, and things that yet may be. But which it is that he sees, even the wisest cannot always tell. Do you wish to look?"

Frodo did not answer.

"And you?" she said, turning to Sam. For this is what your folk would call magic, I believe; though I do not clearly understand what they mean; and they seem to use the same word of the deceits of the Enemy. But this, if you will, is the magic of Galadriel. Did you not say that you wished to see Elf-magic?" (*LotR* II.7.361-62)

But what Sam sees, looking into the Mirror, is a vision of the destruction of the Shire, and his father being made homeless. He shouts, "I must go home!" But now Galadriel herself undercuts his (and the reader's) dependence on the visions she has provided:

You cannot go home alone [...] You did not wish to go home without your master before you looked in the Mirror, and yet you knew that evil things might well be happening in the Shire. Remember that the Mirror shows many things, and not all have yet come to pass. Some never come to be, unless those that behold the visions turn aside from their path to prevent them. The Mirror is dangerous as a guide of deeds. (*LotR* II.7.363)

(Shades of *MacBeth* again!) Sam decides not to forsake the quest.

“Do you now wish to look, Frodo?” said the Lady Galadriel. “You did not wish to see Elf-magic and were content.”

“Do you advise me to look?” asked Frodo.

“No,” she said. “I do not counsel you one way or the other. I am not a counsellor. You may learn something, and whether what you see be fair or evil, that may be profitable, and yet it may not. Seeing is both good and perilous. Yet I think, Frodo, that you have courage and wisdom enough for the venture, or I would not have brought you here. Do as you will!” (*LotR* II.7.363)

(One may recall Frodo’s much earlier remark to Gildor, “[I]t is also said, ‘Go not to the Elves for counsel, for they will say both no and yes’” [*LotR* I.3.84]). Frodo looks into the Mirror and sees a series of visions, culminating in the Eye of Sauron, of which Galadriel is also aware. This results in the conversation between her and Frodo in which she is revealed as the keeper of the ring NENYA. Frodo then offers her the One Ring, which she refuses. So the reader has learned much from the Mirror, even if the hobbits have not.

So for Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*, divination is highly problematical. It is not to be trusted, although it may be useful. It must be interpreted, and that is not easy, even for the wisest. It provides connections, beyond time and space, to the larger world. But those connections are ambivalent. Problems are not solved; difficulties are not magically dissolved; conundrums remain. The diviner is left alone in his dilemma.

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