"The Northern Literature" and the Ring Trilogy

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Abstract
Examines “the northern spirit” in Tolkien's fiction, the tension between the spirit of “uttermost endurance in the service of indomitable will” and the prideful desire for reputation.

Additional Keywords
Anglo-Saxon literature—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Chivalry in The Lord of the Rings; Norse literature—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Old English literature—Influence on Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Sources; Diana Paxson
"THE NORTHERN LITERATURE"

by Mariann Russell

J.R.R. Tolkien was first known not as a creator of the "lower mythology" of "fairy story" but as a Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford, a specialist in the "early-ages" chivalry, and a lover of the "almost wholly lost antiquity of the North and of these Western Isles." A glance at some aspects of Tolkien's treatment of early English literature may however shed some light on his own created mythology in the Ring trilogy. Tolkien's comments on Beowulf, Maldon, and Sir Gawain may illustrate that concept of chivalry developed in his own fiction.2 A note on that tradition of English chivalry—seen both as a code of manners and as part of a religious view of life—may illustrate the values at the core of the trilogy.

Reviewers have noted the narrative power of J.R.R. Tolkien's King trilogy, the quality of such mythic inventions as the British treeherders and the golden-leaved forest of Lorien, and the sheer inventive power displayed in the creation of another world with its history and geography detailed not only in the narrative but in maps, paleography, calendars, family-trees, and chronological tables. The quality of such imaginative effort is noteworthy, but the peculiar quality of the tale will not be grasped unless it is remembered that the invented history of the Second and Third Ages, with its languages and landscapes, its orcs, trolls, wizards, and hobbits revolves about the quest of the grey-cloaked companions of the Ring. The whole complicated, varied, and fantastic world created in such detail by Tolkien turns on a conflict between good and evil similar to that presented in the fiction of Charles Williams and C.S. Lewis. Patricia Spacke has already indicated how the ethical patterns of the trilogy are intended to convey a theological scheme.3 It may be further stated that this conflation of ethical patterns and theological outlook has for Tolkien a tradition in the early English chivalric narratives.

Certain elements that Tolkien found in Norse and Old English literature can be found in the Ring trilogy. The dragon or worm as symbol of undying evil, the notion of men and the gods fighting together against evil embodied in a monster, the ring of power, and the one who himself bears his antecedents in the northern literature.4 Tolkien's use of language is evocative of the Old English tradition just as such characters as trolls, dwarfs, and heroic kings are of the Norse tradition.

More specifically, Tolkien sees a continuing tradition of Christian English chivalry. For him the word "heo\-werod" refers not only to the Anglo-Saxon fellowship but also to the early Christian fellowship or court. Beowulf's heorowserod is an early Round Table: "The men of these legends were conceived as kings of chivalrous courts, and members of societies of noble knights, real Round Tables" (Prefatory Notes to Beowulf and Finn.). Arthur in his court as "the lord" and "his heorowserod; the Round Table" ("Homecoming," p. 17) is a later development of the same literary tradition of English chivalry, beginning with Beowulf, continuing with Maldon, and ending with Sir Gawain, the end of the "older-ages" treatment of chivalry.5 That this is considered a Christian tradition is indicated by Tolkien's comment in Beowulf and Finn., p. xxi, which partially includes even Beowulf in the tradition of Christian chivalry.

But in what does the Christianity of this tradition lie? How are the battles and adventures, the codes of warfare and bravery, related to a value structure whose context is Christian?

To Tolkien the spirit of northern literature centers upon the quality expressed in the words of Beorhtwold in Maldon (II. 89-90), "will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our strength lessens": the "doctrine of the uttermost endurance in the service of indomitable will" (Homecoming," p. 13). To Tolkien, however, this northern spirit "is never quite pure, it is of gold and an alloy" ("Homecoming,"p. 14); for together with the indomitable will goes pride: a desire for reputation and personal glory. The true greatness of the northern heroic condition is therefore embodied not in the chief who in Beowulf, Maldon, and Gawain disregards the good of the heorowserod, his company or fellowship, but is embodied in a loyal subordinate service of the heorowserod. It is suggested that Tolkien constructs his own story in like order, using a company to introduce a Christian meaning into his tale patterned after the northern literature.

In the Ring trilogy the northern spirit of man striving to fulfill an almost impossible task can be seen in the central action of the book—Frodo's attempt to carry the Ring of Power to its destruction at Mount Doom. However, Frodo like Beowulf does not attempt to "do the impossible deed" alone but has assigned to him eight companions who make up the Fellowship of the Ring, a modern heorowserod. The interior structure of the Company finally, the Ring is based on loyalty to the other companions and to the quest undertaken. This loyalty involves a consciousness of hierarchy. Gandalf, the wizard, is the Company's leader, and after his temporary removal, Aragorn, the future king of the western lands, is the leader. Just as the hobbits respect these leaders, Frodo's servant Sam talks "My king, and my lord, and my master," (Second Journey, p. 275). This loyalty is illustrative of the impure northern spirit which places a desire for reputation and personal glory above the good of the heorowserod. Boromir's attempt to take the ring and use it for his own purpose is the result not of malice but of the misguided use of power. Boromir, a truly courageous prince of Gondor, wishes to use the great power of the Ring against the forces of evil. Here is his dream: "What could not a warrior do in this hour, a great leader? What could Aragorn do? Or if he refuses, why not Boromir? The Ring would give me power of Command. How I would drive the hosts of Mordor, and all men would flock to my banner!"6 This dream is clearly the temptation of the Ring. The incident, eventually leading to the disruption of the fellowship but not to the abandonment of the quest, is a structural triumph for Tolkien, for his story is built around the struggle of the weak against the strong, of obedience against pride, of the Company against the Enemy. The heroism Tolkien chooses is that of the "obedient subordinate," Frodo, rather than of the natural leader, Boromir. The disruption of the Fellowship enables us to focus on Frodo's low key heroism while not losing sight of his companions' more spectacular battles. The lonely quest into Mordor and the crowded battles defending Gondor are alike part of the one battle of the few against the many.

The image of the Company in the world thus expands to include meanings related to the conflict between good and evil, and ultimately to project a hint of man's condition in the universe. Tolkien has embodied "that state of being
which is common to humanity when every man feels that he is indeed fighting forlornly, in a cause which he hardly knows and in which he does not believe, against spiritual enemies and interior treacheries who are triumphant and all but omnipotent." This state, intended to be a description of an aspect of the human condition, also describes for Tolkien the state of the Christian in the world as well as the spirit embodied in the early English chivalric poetry. For, as he says, "The Christian was (and is) still like his forefathers, a mortal hemmed in a hostile world." Although the Ring trilogy, as Patricia Spacks has pointed out, ends on a note of affirmation, Tolkien does successfully convey something of the heroic spirit of northern literature. The image of the Company does successfully illustrate that most "moving" kind of heroism, that of obedience and love.

Footnotes


3 "Ethical Patterns in The Lord of the Rings," Critique, 3 (1959), 134.

4 Northern literature refers primarily to Anglo-Saxon literature as part of a body of literature written in Germanic languages and distinguished from the legend, mythology of the South, especially of the Greek tradition.

5 Edmund Wilson, "Ooh, Those Awful Orcs!" The Nation, 182 (1956), 313.

6 J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1954), p. 414. Most of us are familiar with Christian authors' uses of the struggle between pride and humility, between willfulness and obedience. Obviously, by pride and willfulness Tolkien does not mean the magnified petulance of a child but a coldly adult vice. To Tolkien pride means the deliberate preference of a certain image of oneself to objective reality. The self image may be noble, glorious, or a mere distortion of truth, but in Middle-earth the preferred image remains a deadly peril.


ODDS AND ENDS

Sometimes manuscripts get separated from cover letters, or the pages of either get separated from each other. (We heartily recommend that fine invention, the stapler.) If the author's name and address are not on both letter and MS, we are in trouble. There are two such orphans among the papers I inherited when I became editor. One is a letter dated January 3, 1977, citing W. H. Auden's poem "City Without Walls." Will the writer kindly seek permission for us to quote the poem, and write us again? Another is a review, now sadly dated, of Grotta-Kurska's biography, written by Wendell Wagner, Jr, no address.

Jerome Rosenberg and Marie Nelson are owed additional issues of Mythlore, will anyone who knows their respective addresses please contact the Whittier box number?

We would like permission to print a paper by Sister Mary Anthony Weinig, on Williams, delivered at the MLA convention in December of 1977. Will Sister Mary W., or anyone who knows her address please get in touch with us?

About mid-August Christine Smith, art editor, received a notice of an insured parcel for her. However, when she went to the post office to get it the clerks could not find it. Subsequent searches have not turned it up. She was told it was a flat parcel (presumably containing artwork) and from somewhere in the East, but no one could recall the sender's name. If you sent art about that time and received no acknowledgment, you would do well to claim your insurance money.

Margaret Hannay has a letter in Mythlore 17 dealing with several points made in a previous letter regarding Lewis and feminists. The letter to which she is replying was not, however, by Dirk W. Mosig but by Mary M. Stolzenbach.