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Abstract

Examines and categorizes the over sixty examples of folk-songs and poems in Middle-earth—songs of lore, ballads, ballad-style, and nonsense songs.

Additional Keywords

Folk song; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Songs; Annalee Peoples

TOLKIEN'S LORE: THE SONGS OF MIDDLE-EARTH

BY DIANE MARCHESANI

This paper examines Tolkien's songs as the folklore of Middle-earth. By defining folklore and categorizing the verse from the trilogy I hope to show that the songs are an integral part of the narrative, a small though colorful segment of the vast scheme of histories and cultures that Professor Tolkien devised for his creation. One need only explain to what purpose these sixty-odd poems are included in the narrative.

Folkways and traditions can provide invaluable insights into the culture and attitudes of a civilization. In older and less progressive societies than ours one often finds ancient, unbroken customs, some of which govern every important step of the people's lives from birth to death. The habits, traditions of long standing, are generally referred to as folklore. More specifically, folklore consists of: 1) myths, legends, stories; 2) riddles, proverbs; 3) charms, spells, omens; 4) ballads; 5) plant lore and customs. Folklore of a less technical society involves its members actively, while a culture such as ours affects a sophistication that holds such in contempt. Traditionally, a people transmit their lore orally from generation to generation. It serves, if sometimes inaccurately, to record their history.

J. R. R. Tolkien, in his epic trilogy, presents a civilization with a folklore as alive and complex as any we know. The Lord of the Rings reveals an entire world which extends over thousands of years, beyond three ages. Its folklore appears in the verse of its folk, taking different forms. Elves, Men, Hobbits, and other beings call upon the rhymes of their forefathers for knowledge, aid and entertainment. In fact, there are as many different types of folklore in Tolkien's world as there are in our own. Tales from history, such as those found in the Red Book of Westmarch, and songs reporting great deeds, from the ancient Fall of Gil-Galad translated by Bilbo to his own Song of Earendil, are fine examples of preserved stories, myths and legends. The Hobbit contains some marvelous riddles, and proverbs are frequent in the trilogy. Gandalf's spells, the dream prophecy of Faramir and his brother, the incantation of the barrow-wight, all fit into the third category--charms, spells, and omens. Both lyric and narrative ballads are sung or chanted after the fashion of their composers. We are even allowed a glimpse of customs in the funeral rites of fallen fighters, and of plant lore in the Houses of Healing. These song-poems record the past experiences and beliefs of the people who made them. Like true folk rhymes, they are held in memory and sung as learned from others. Bilbo's parting request of Frodo in Rivendell illustrates this: "Take as much care of yourself as you can, and bring back all the news you can, and any old tales or songs you can come by".

Noble, learned folk who studied the traditions of Middle-earth were known as lore-masters. Of these the greatest was Elrond Half-elven, and with him Gandalf the Grey. Both were ageless and infinitely knowledgeable. Rivendell, home of Elrond, was well-stocked with books of history and verse. His main interest was, understandably, the lore of his

own people, the Eldar. He was not only a master of healing but the only living being who remembered the ancient ballads completely as they had been. The wizard's specialty was hobbit-lore. Gandalf Mithrandir, the Grey Pilgrim, was the only one of the wise, the Istari, to take up such an obscure subject. His interest extended beyond it, however. He was the most powerful wizard living. "I once knew every spell in all the tongues of Elves or Men or Orcs that was ever used," (for opening doors), he says of himself. He spoke to all men and other folk in their native languages.

Deep knowledge of ancient lore proved as devastating through some as it was beneficial when employed by Elrond and Gandalf. Sauron, the Enemy, whose evil enabled him to create the One Ring--an attempt to conquer the world--was finally overthrown by his greatest achievement. Yet the destruction he had already caused was enough to bring to a close the Third Age of Middle-earth. Saruman the White, another of the Istari, had at one time been as powerful and learned as Gandalf. His research centered on the East, where he had often traveled, and later turned to Sauron. Intensive study of evil and the Enemy eventually twisted his mind.

Besides Aragorn Elessar, heir of the last of the kings, the most learned mortal was Denethor, Steward of Gondor. "There lie in his hoards many records that few now can read, even of the lore masters, for their scripts and tongues have become dark to later men". Like Saruman, Denethor, who lived too near the borders of Mordor, succumbed to evil, while Aragorn conquered to reign as the first king of the Fourth Age. Bilbo was quite a student of lore in his own right. Evidences of his life's work are the narrative of his journey into the East, There and Back Again, and the three volumes of Translations from the Elvish affixed to the Red Book.

Songs and singing were a very serious affair to the Eldar or High Elves, the Edain or Fathers of Men, and their descendants in Middle-earth. Songs had a soothing virtue. Those who sang felt their troubles lifted from them. The verse of the Dúnedain and Elves often took the form of high praise to deserving heroes or even prayer to their protectors over the Sea. The most beautiful of these is the Refrain to Elbereth which is used no less than four times. Elbereth Gilthoniel was the queen of the Valar, angelic guardians of Middle-earth. She set as a star a Silmaril, a precious stone, in the sky through which she watched over the lands. All who prayed to her for help were answered. At a painful time, when two of his companions had been captured by a war-party of Orcs, Legolas the Elf sang as he paced through the night. "And as he sang the white stars opened in the black vault above" and the light which pierced the darkness brought comfort.

Not all the peoples of Middle-earth had such a high regard for song, or people who studied lore. Beregon of the Tower Guard in Gondor praised his captain in these words: "He is bold, more bold than many deem; for in these days men are slow to believe that a captain can be wise and learned in scrolls of lore and songs, as he is, and yet a man of hardihood and swift judgement in the field. But such is Faramir."

Hobbits often went as far as ridicule. The elvish strain in Bilbo (from his Fallowhide ancestors), the part that made him turn out odd bits of verse

This essay is a condensation. Diane Marchesani died May 20, 1978, at the age of 23. Our thanks to her parents, Marie and John Marchesani, for permission to publish.

and read poetry at banquets (when everyone knows eating is the first order of business), was what led his neighbors and relatives to think him peculiar. Bilbo and Frodo, his adopted heir, both had a very un-hobbitish taste for elvish ways. Although they are merry at times, there is a certain gravity about them which separates them from their own kind.

"Not," Bilbo admits, "that hobbits would ever acquire quite the elvish appetite for music and poetry and tales. They seem to like it as much as food or more". Merry and Pippin are more typical. Frodo takes them at their word when they sing of leaving before dawn. Pippin quickly rejects this unheard-of proposal. "Oh! That was poetry!" he replies.

Despite their carefree attitude the three hobbits who travel with Frodo learn the true significance of song. Sam twice receives aid from Elbereth, crying out in melodic relief. On the verge of a battle Merry pleads to be allowed to ride: "I would not have it said of me in song only that I was always left behind". To Pippin, sworn into service of the stern Steward of Gondor, enlightenment comes more severely. When asked if he can sing, Pippin replies: "Well, yes, well enough for my own people. But we have no songs fit for great halls and evil times, lord.". . . He did not relish the idea of singing any song of the Shire to the Lord of Minas Tirith, certainly not the comic ones he knew best.

Tolkien's World is so consistent that the characteristics of the different folk who populate it appear in their songs. The ballads of the Elves can belong to no one else, and the hobbit-songs are as merry and fond of creature-comforts as they.

Four Types of Folklore

LORE

Of the variety of song-poems those considered lore or lore rhymes in this context are not necessarily musical in nature because they have another specific function than giving pleasure. The types of verse from the trilogy which belong in in this category come from the second, third and fifth sections of the folklore definition: riddles and proverbs, to which I add the Rhymes of Lore; charms, spells, and omens or prophecies; plant lore and customs.

I. When seeking the answer to a problem these folk often turned to proverbs. Sam's Gaffer was a veritable goldmine of stored sayings. The Elves repeat the one most frequently used to Frodo when he asks for advice in The Fellowship: "Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards, for they are subtle and quick to anger". Even the Elves aren't certain how to deal with the Istari. Frodo smiles and returns with a Shire by-line. "And it is also said: Go not to the Elves for counsel, for they will say both no and yes". Our ancient clichés sometimes offer tried solutions to fresh problems. Such were these proverbs of Middle-earth which spoke real truths in their unpretentious fashion.

A marvelous tête-à-tête between Gollum and Bilbo occurs in The Hobbit through which we learn several popular riddles. Some are already familiar to us, and each of them reflects the character of the questioner.

The most influential song-poems under this heading are the Rhymes of Lore. Gandalf mentions their existence first in The Two Towers, but they continually enter the narrative as significant events arise. The palantír of Orthanc, a seeing-stone used somewhat like a two-way crystal ball, came across the Sea with the Men of Númenor. After its discovery at the conference with Saruman Gandalf relates part of its history. Others include the Ents' and the Lore of Living Creatures, both introduced by Fangorn. The most consequential lore-rhyme, however in The Lord of the Rings appears in The Fellowship. The two lines inscribed in Elvish on the inside of Frodo's ring come from this verse "long known in Elvish lore". The whole poem condenses the history of the Rings of Power forged by the Elves and Sauron at a time previous to his estrangement from the free peoples. Even when superficially explained it

touches on many moments of consequence in Tolkien's narrative. The history it describes has triggered the events which compose the epic.

II. There are many examples of charms, spells and omens. Gandalf splutters spells through The Fellowship until his disappearance in Moria.

Omens and prophecies were of much importance to the inhabitants of Middle-earth. The Eldar, wizards, and Dúnedain inherited foresight as a characteristic of their races. Intent on planning the future, they were often known to receive a vision of the order of things to come. Conversely, Mithrandir and Elrond both sighed at times, "the end is dark to me. . . . I cannot see how it will come out." On his return from the Lonely Mountain, Bilbo realized that his efforts had helped to bring about the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies. Through their efforts to project, however uncertainly, the results of future events, we see that theirs is a fated, determined universe. Eru, creator of Middle-earth acknowledged as the "One-God" of Elves and Men, controls his creation.

Prophecies occur in two other forms in the trilogy: the direct prediction, passed down traditionally until it comes to pass, and the dream-prophecy. Malbeth, called the Seer, a Dúnanadan with unusual powers of foresight, predicted the coming of Elen-dil's heir who would free the spirits dwelling under the mountains beyond Dunharrow. When Aragorn chooses to ride the Paths of the Dead in a short cut to Gondor's aid, he fulfills this rhyme. Of the second type, an example is the verse which haunts every character in The Lord of the Rings. Faramir's dream, related by Boromir at Elrond's Council, predicts the doom of Middle-earth, draws together all the lore of the past two ages.

III. Amid other Rhymes of Lore we glimpse the folk medicine of these people. Athelas, a sea aration, commonly called Kingsfoil, had previously been used only to clear the air of a sick room or ease a headache. However, the herb-master remembers:

When the black breath blows
and death's shadow grows
and all lights pass,
come athelas! come athelas!
Life to the dying
In the king's hand lying!

"Doggerel" undoubtedly, yet it holds the answer to many perplexities. Aragorn saves the lives of Faramir, now Steward of Gondor since his father's suicide, Eowyn of Rohan, and Merry Brandybuck by his application of the herb. In this way he was first revealed as the predicted king to his people for, "the hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known".

BALLADS

Tolkien embellishes his narrative with many songs. Those classified as ballads are distinguishable from the other songs by a content of more stringent intensity, a higher compositional quality, and a higher sense of lyricism.

The lyric ballads tend to be a deep and personal expression often sung by someone overwhelmed with emotion. In The Two Towers Aragorn looks over the plains to Gondor, the city of his hereditary kingdom. He is embarked on an almost hopeless rescue which will carry him far from it. "Not yet," he sighs, "does my road lie southward to your bright streams". Then, unable to contain his thoughts, he bursts forth in verse. The lyrics are simple, but highly charged. He expresses in them all his doubts about the future, not only the wish to reach Gondor. This song is not really melancholy but keenly sensitive; full of the life and longing and love of the man who sings it.

Folk ballads that we know familiarly often tell a story musically. The suspense builds through repetition, incremental or refrain, dealing with a present situation, and narrative detail, sometimes flashback. Usually the story revolves around one incident in climax. Narrative ballads of Middle-earth on the other hand relate lengthy histories,

unified topically or biographically. Naturally the selections we read are fragments. Like English folk songs they exist in fluid forms. Their merit depends largely upon the skill of the narrator. Elves and Aragorn were the most consistently capable storytellers. The finest is undoubtedly the Tale of Tinuviel. It blends the beauty of expression found in the lyrical ballads with historical narrative. Throughout, the sensitivity to sound-image gives the song much of its merit, helping to set up the complex relationships between the setting and mood as they are affected by the Elf-queen and her mortal lover.

The Ent and the Entwife is closest in style of all Tolkien's songs to traditional ballads of Francis J. Child vintage. Two obvious similarities are the standard question/answer format and use of incremental repetition. These techniques emphasize the theme: disagreement and desire for reconciliation between the farm- and field-loving Entwives and their wild, forest-loving mates.

BALLAD-STYLE

The common folk of Middle-earth fall into verse nearly as easily as Elves and Dúnedain. The light, easy style in which they rendered their feelings mirrors somewhat elven ballads. These songs, written in a "ballad-style," are most often original, even spontaneous. They include walking-songs, short elegies, and traditional songs. They differ from the ballads in their simpler style, often awkward phrasing, and generally uneven meters.

NONSENSE

Throughout the trilogy Tolkien's nonsense rhymes remain one of its most purely enjoyable features. These songs are at once carefree, silly and clever, but above all fun. Tolkien seems to have had as much fun with them as the readers do. They are generally rhythmic rather than metrical. A few, such as The Man in the Moon Stayed Up Too Late, have regular feet and a consistent number of stressed syllables per line. In writing these, Tolkien employed extensive assonance, consonance, alliteration, and single word repetition. The phrasing is unusu-

ally tricky. Rhyme schemes are intricate, often involving internal rhymes and extended use of same-sounds. Different kinds of repetition complicate the patterns and add to their euphonious quality.

There is a simpler kind of nonsense song, which trills good-humoredly about something pleasant. Pippin's Bath Song has an unassuming technique. The inverted "water hot" every fourth line calls attention to the major topic of interest. Here is nothing spectacular; mere philosophical expoundings upon the virtues and uses of hot water.

While reviewing these forms of folklore Tolkien's "scheme" becomes clear. The songs are integral to the narrative. They tell parts of the story themselves in a way that could not be accomplished by prose alone, because verse has a different effect upon us. When Frodo's muffled song in the Old Forest dies out finally, the stillness and stifling pressure feels more depressing to the reader as well as the hobbits. The rhymes serve to intensify, rather than lighten as some have remarked, the circumstances they define. The mood introduced by the sweetly sad Tale of Tinuviel is a startling preface to the murderous attack of the Nazgûl on Weathertop. Through his songs Tolkien's characters reveal their feelings and personalities quite as much or more than through their prose dialogue and their actions. Bilbo, pausing on the threshold at his final departure from Bag End, softly pours out the urgent desire to follow the road. We and Gandalf feel a quiet thrill as he slips off into the night with the three dwarves.

Tolkien's verse is indispensable to his narrative. It is as varied as his characters and situations, for every being and event delivers something of itself to its song. Close study of the poems from the traditions of each race reveal these qualities. The strongly marked style of Rohirric songs (all of which we read in Westron) are easily distinguishable from those of the dwarves or hobbits, Elves or Dúnedain. The manner of phrasing, the versification, mirrors in every case the characteristics of the kind of folk.

