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Mythopoesis: Specific Derivation

Abstract

Illustrates the transformative use of source material in fantasy by contrasting Merry and Pippin's oath-taking scenes and their sources in *Beowulf* and *Finn and Hengest*.

Additional Keywords

Beowulf; Fantasy—Sources; Fantasy—Techniques; Finn and Hengest; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Merry; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Pippin

Mythopoesis

A Column by Sarah Beach

Specific Derivation

Following the strands of influence and derivation has proven to be an amusing pastime, particularly in one's favorite authors. Many works of scholarship dwell on points of origin for incidents, characters and names in the tales of numerous authors. J.R.R. Tolkien has received a considerable amount of this sort of attention, more so than any other fantasy writer to date. One reason for this could simply be a fascination with the vast amount of material Tolkien drew upon and integrated so well into his own works.

It is, of course, easy enough to copy things from source material. It is, in fact, so easy that copying is what many writers do, thus clouding the issue of "derivation." These days, to say that one thing is derived from something else is to convey a negative judgement of the new work. This is unfortunate, because the impulse to include or absorb something one loves is a very strong one for a Sub-creator.

The interest in the flow of derivation is perhaps stronger in the genre of fantasy than it is elsewhere, because fantasy occurs in "made up" places rather than "recreated" places. How does one take something from the "real world" and reshape it in a sub-creation? There is no set procedure, of course, but having an affection for the original material is the first step. I would like to offer the specific example of two incidents in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings (Ballantine Books: New York, 1965) to demonstrate a small portion of the process.

In The Return of the King, the two hobbits, Merry and Pippin both take service under great lords. These two hobbits are occasionally regarded as being interchangeable, for they are not major characters. But they are different, with different qualities, and Tolkien makes this clear in the two scenes where they offer their services.

The beginning of these differences takes place outside Tolkien's Middle-earth. In his academic life, Tolkien was a renowned scholar of Old English literature, particularly of Beowulf. He lectured on this work many times. It was something he was truly fond of, this Old English poem. In 1983, a book was published containing material from Tolkien's lectures on one part of Beowulf: the Finnsburgh episode. The book is an absorbing analysis of the episode, offering an intelligible interpretation.

A crucial incident in the episode comes when Hengest is given a sword -- or as it is related in Beowulf, a sword is laid in his lap. The passage is not easy to interpret, but Tolkien draws on his broad knowledge of the Northern cultures in order to offer the reasonable possibilities. In particular, he makes reference to two slightly different procedures, different in the quality of the relationship implied between the lord and the warrior giving his sword.

(1) There is a passage in Saxo Book II where after the death of Hrolfr Kraki (Rolvo) only

Viggo is left alive. Hiartvarus... his slayer asks Viggo if he is willing to become his man, and when he says yes, offers him a drawn sword; but Viggo refuses the blade, and seizes the hilt, saying that that was the way Rolvo used to offer the sword to his men..."for formerly those who were about to engage themselves as members of the king's comitatus were accustomed to promise service while touching the sword-hilt"...

(2) ...a sword could be laid on the lap as a mere present accompanying a gift of vassalship, or a request to be accepted as a vassal.... "The ambassadors of Halbdenu, brother of King Sigifridus, offered to the king (Hludovicus) as a gift a sword which had a golden hilt, earnestly beseeching that the king should deign to have their masters in place of sons, while they would honour him as a father all the days of their life." (Finn and Hengest, J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Alan Bliss, Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1983, p. 133-134.)

The differences in these two modes of sword-presentation convey different attitudes. The first focuses on a simply formal procedure. Nothing is implied about the quality of the relationship between lord and warrior. Indeed, in the first example Tolkien cites, there is a degree of personal hostility between the two. In the second example, the offer of the sword and vassalship springs entirely from the personal regard the warrior has for the lord.

When one turns from these examples, with which Tolkien was obviously quite familiar, to The Lord of the Rings one can see how he derived the differing encounters that Pippin and Merry have from his knowledge of these customs. He makes use of the distinctions between the two procedures to highlight differences between Merry and Pippin and between the lords to whom they pledge themselves.

Pippin's encounter with Denethor follows the first example Tolkien gave in Finn and Hengest. Denethor has spoken slightly of hobbits and Pippin's pride stirs him to offer his sword.

Then Pippin looked the old man in the eye, for pride stirred strangely within him, still stung by the scorn and suspicion in that cold voice. 'Little service, no doubt, will so great a lord of Men think to find in a hobbit, a halfling from the northern Shire; yet such as it is, I will offer it, in payment of my debt.' Twitching aside his grey cloak, Pippin drew forth his small sword and laid it at Denethor's feet.

...'Give me the weapon!' [Denethor] said.

Pippin lifted it and presented the hilts to him....

'I accept your service... Swear to me now!'

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will bring love to Fantastica. Then the two worlds will be one." (p. 367.)

Ende's double Fairy Story draws us in with Bastian to the marvellous world of Fantastica. But primarily it draws us in to Bastian's world, so that we feel with him the gamut of emotions that he experiences. We emerge from Bastian's story enriched by the magic of a small boy and his attempts to win the attention and love of his grieving father. As C.S. Lewis observes,

The Fantastic or Mythical is a Mode available at all ages for some readers; for others, at none. At all ages, if it is well used by the author and meets the right reader, it has the same power: to generalize while remaining concrete, to present in palpable form not concepts or even experiences but whole classes of experience, and to throw off irrelevancies. But at its best it can do more; it can give us experiences we have never had and thus, instead of 'commenting on life,' can add to it. [8]

Ende's work provides evidence for the veracity of Lewis's theory, and supports the necessity of elements "well-used by the author" meeting "the right reader": both are essential to the construction of meaning and to participation in the secondary world. Of course, Ende's book is much more than an allegory, but that demands more space than this paper allows. As allegory, however, it affirms the value of the Fantastic as a means of "adding to life" and entrenches Ende's place as the writer of fantasy among the ranks of the masters, Lewis, Tolkien and MacDonald.

NOTES

- [1] Michael Ende, The Neverending Story. Trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Allen Lane, 1983).
- [2] Josue V. Harari, "Preface" to Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism (of which he is editor) (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 37.
- [3] Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach", in Iser, The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Becket (Baltimore, 1974) quoted by Susan K. Suleiman in her Introduction to The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 44.
- [4] J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories", in Tree and Leaf (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1975), pp. 40-42.
- [5] C.S. Lewis, "On Stories", in Of This and Other Worlds, ed. Walter Hooper (London: Collins, 1982), p. 35.
- [6] M.H. Abrams, "The Deconstructive Angel", in Critical Inquiry 3 (1977), quoted by Suleiman, cit. supra, pp. 42-43.
- [7] Christopher Norris, Deconstruction: Theory and Practice (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 108.
- [8] C.S. Lewis, "Sometimes Fairy Stories Say Best What's to be Said", in Of This and Other Worlds. pp. 74-75.

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'Take the hilts,' said Gandalf, 'and speak after the Lord, if you are resolved on this.' 'I am,' said Pippin. (RK, p.30-31)

In this scene, Tolkien uses the formula of swearing on the hilts of the sword. He also repeats the tense atmosphere which is evident in the example cited in Finn and Hengest.

Merry's offering service to Theoden has a completely different tone to it.

'I have a sword,' said Merry, climbing from his seat, and drawing from its black sheath his small bright blade. Filled suddenly with love for this old man, he knelt on one knee, and took his hand and kissed it. 'May I lay the sword of Meriadoc of the Shire on your lap, Theoden King?' he cried. 'Receive my service if you will!'

'Gladly will I take it,' said the king; and laying his long old hands upon the brown hair of the hobbit, blessed him. 'Rise now, Meriadoc, esquire of Rohan of the house-hold of Meduseld!' he said. 'Take your sword and bear it unto good fortune!'

'As a father you shall be to me,' said Merry.

'For a little while,' said Theoden. (RK, p.59).

This scene follows the second example Tolkien had offered in the Beowulf study. It contains the offer of the sword as part of a gift of vassalship, and the personal relationship between the lord and warrior wherein the lord stands as father to his follower.

By placing the two scenes from The Lord of the Rings beside the examples of sword-oaths from the far older literature Tolkien knew in his role as scholar, one can see an example of specific derivation. Tolkien took something he knew well and absorbed it into his Sub-creation. The incidents in his fiction are not copies of events he knew as a scholar, rather they are the imagined children of those events. They exist not to display customs about sword-oaths, but rather to display character traits of the two hobbits. Pippin is moved by stung pride, the same pride that had been caught in the palantir's spell. Merry, however, responds to Theoden the man with love, responds with willing service to Theoden King.

The fact that Tolkien's fictive incidents are evidently derived from his scholarly examples does not imply that it was a conscious connection in his mind at the time he was writing The Lord of the Rings. In the introduction to Finn and Hengest, Alan Bliss makes clear that Tolkien gave his Beowulf lectures many times over the course of his whole career. The examples of sword-oaths were likely, then, to be part of the background fabric of Tolkien's imagination. It is the background fabric of any Sub-creator's imagination which shapes the details of the Secondary world. Anything that one has studied and absorbed with interest may provide the sort of enriching detail, as these two types of oath-taking provide in The Lord of the Rings.

Leaf and Key, continued from page 29

Niggle before his Tree because of the many seedlings within my own soul that I would have come to maturity someday. I laugh in the Mountains, knowing that if I do not paint them high and beautiful and far away, there are many who have and maybe it will not be a bad thing to be a Parish. Allegory does not reach that deeply.

A little story, this "Leaf by Niggle"; but like Atkins, I can't get it out of my mind.