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James L. Hodge

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Abstract
Finds sources for the narrator’s frequent intrusion into *The Hobbit* in Celtic and German tales and *The Kalevala*.

Additional Keywords
Author intrusion in The Hobbit; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Hobbit—Narrative technique—Sources; Edith Crowe
TOLKIEN: FORMULAS OF THE PAST  
JAMES L. HODGE

The style of The Hobbit is often described as "charming." Descriptions which employ this adjective often go on to speak of the "fairy-tale quality" of the writing and of the stylistic kinship to children's stories.

"Too true," as Bert or Tom or William might have said, but that is not the whole of it. Beneath the charm and the stylistic kinship to children's stories lies more meaningful comparisons. To consider The Lord of the Rings a modern mythology, and The Hobbit a fairy tale created on the way to achieving it is to miss the point of the very stylistic peculiarities that occasion this judgment.

To be sure, the tone of The Hobbit is lighter, and humor is more at home in its pages, but style may not be judged simply by its earnestness or lack thereof.

A recurring technique—a style motif, as it were—may be examined now as not only for the "tone" it appears to create. Such a pervasive technique in The Hobbit is the direct address by author to reader. To many this is particularly redolent of the children's story. For instance:

Yet there is little to tell about their story...

Or: I wish I had time to tell you even a few tales or one or two of the songs that they heard in that house—

Or: You are familiar with Thorin's style on important occasions, so I will not give you any more of it, though he went on a good deal longer than this—

Or: But as that comes at the end of this tale, we will say no more about it just now—

Or: And it would take too long to tell and it would tire the hearers—

Or: And they had many other men whom I could never name.

"But wait," you say, "I see the general type of remark you're demonstrating. It's the 'I don't have time' technique. It implies that much could be told but there is no interest in it for the reader, or the author cannot or does not care to dredge at this point. And I do recognize some of these passages, because I re-read my Hobbit once in a while. But those last few quotes don't sound quite right. What part of The Hobbit are they from? Where does that funny use of the word 'hearers' come from in the fifth quotation?" And so on.

The answer is simple. The first four quotations are from pages 61, 60, 70 and 116, respectively, of The Hobbit, while the fifth comes from Lady Gregory's translation of the Finn Cycle of Ireland, and the sixth comes from the Austrian Song of the Nibelungen.

In case the significance of this dramatic revelation escapes you—and well it may, unless you are as fanatic about mythology as you are about Tolkien—let me explain. The Finn Mac Cunhal (MacCool) cycle—source of the fifth quotation—is one of the four great mythological cycles of Ireland (the cycle of Finn, the cycle of Ulster, the cycle of the gods or Tuatha de Danaan) and the cycle of the Kings. It is often to one of those four cycles that we must refer when trying to gain an idea of the gods and heroes of the Gaelic Celts.

The sixth quotation is from what is sometimes called the "German national epic," one of the greatest literary productions of the German Middle Ages—the Song of the Nibelungen. This great poem was put together by an anonymous poet somewhere in Austria, circa 1200 A.D., from pieces and versions of the Siegfried-Brunhild story, and the Saga of the Fall of the Burgundians.

You may ask: "Is Tolkien's use of this technique limited and unusual, and is comparison with works like the Song of the Nibelungen really supportable?" In answer to that possible reservation, here are some more quotations. Pick out the ones from Tolkien, if you can:

I don't know what river it was

Or: I can't tell you what happened after that; I only know...

Or: I don't know how long he kept on like this...

Or: I don't know (her) genealogy, but...
Or: I don't know where he came from, nor who or what he was...

Or: What roads they took through this region I can't tell you...

Or: I have never heard what happened to...

Or: If perchance (this happened), then it is not known to me, but I can't believe it, didn't...

Or: ...but what they would have said, ..., I don't know.

Or: What else they did there, I can't say...

If you are a Tolkien fanatic, you probably picked out the Hobbit quotes, so you know that I put them in alternately, beginning with the first. If you are interested, they are from pages 43, 79, 79, 192 and 227 respectively.

Quote number four is from the Prose Edda--circa 1220, by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson.4 The Prose Edda is one of the most important records of ancient Germanic myth, legend and poetic form. It treats everything from the creation of the world, through the actions and antics of the gods themselves and the gris story of Sigurd the Volsung, to the very end of the world. The fourth quotation is from Snorri's subhemonic introduction to this work.

Quotes 2, 6, 8 and 10 are again from the Song of the Nibelungs.5 These and the accompanying quotations are examples of what one might call the "I don't know" technique of author address. The narrator turns aside from the story for a moment, smiles or frowns figurally at the reader, and says, "I don't know about all this, but anyway..."

Although—if you are an avid re-reader of The Hobbit, or very style-conscious—you may have picked out the Tolkien quotes, you will admit that the similarities to the Prose Edda, the Pim cycle and the Song of the Nibelungs are striking. You may also (I hope) be asking yourself: 1) is Tolkien really thinking of these works when he uses the technique, and not of Peter Rabbit and the Just-So-Stories?, 2) why does such a "children's story technique" turn up in some of the great literature of the Northern European Middle Ages?, and 3) how much further can this comparison be taken?

The answer to question 1), I believe, is "Yes." Tolkien was a scholar long before he was author of The Hobbit. He was intimately acquainted with the ancient languages and mythological literature of Germany, Austria, Scandinavia, Britain and Ireland, as well as Finland. That is, he was steeped in the languages and mythologies of the peoples who conquered, re-conquered, disputed and ultimately divided up non-Classical Western Europe: The Germanic, Celtic and Finish peoples. He certainly has their mythologies clearly in mind.

The answer to question 2) has to do with the nature of the medieval literature we are discussing. Author intrusion is a time-honored technique which is not at all uncommon even in contemporary literature. It was much used by medieval authors, sometimes for ironic effect, sometimes as a device for skipping over part of a long tale, and sometimes simply to explain themselves to their readers.

You will have noticed, however, that the devices we are examining—though they may be at times coy or gently ironic—are not really comparable to the extended author interruptions by many great medieval writers, whose sophistication of technique was accompanied by a tendency toward didacticism. They—like many post-medieval writers—interrupted, not just to inform, but to moralize, or condemn, at length.

The author interruptions in mythologically-based literature are either much shorter, or more naively straightforward, or both, because they reflect something more than a sophisticated writing technique. That word "hearsers," that sounded so out of place among the other quotations actually serves to remind us that the mythological tales and other fragments preserved for us were written down late in their careers. They had been preserved as oral tradition for generations before they were finally written down, and thus preserved as a part of our literary and cultural heritage. They were usually copied down during the Middle Ages by a Christian who— for one reason or another, like Snorri—wanted to preserve the old, admitted pagan material. In some cases, this led to distortion of meaning or form, because the Christian抄ist, who was often a monk or other Christian cleric, could not or would not understand the material as he found it.

The poet of the Song of the Nibelungs, whence most of our quotations have come thus far, was clearly a man of his time, imbued with the Christian and courtly view of the world and society. He was also, however, clearly fascinated by and attuned to the great literary relics of a pagan past. His poet is thus a study in contrasts, in which the brocade of chivalry frequently falls away unexpectedly to reveal the homespun of a simpler, fiercer and grimmer time. What I would call his "oral technique" is most vividly exemplified in his consistent use of foreshadowing. In the following quotations, the future is not merely hinted at, but unmistakably—and grimly—delineated. For instance, from stanza 19, lines 1-1v:

He was the falcon of the dream she had told her mother. Oh, how she would revenge herself upon her nearest kinsmen, who were to slay his later! Through his one death, there died many a mother's son.

And from stanza 71, lines 11 and 11i:

I suspect their hearts told them rightly that many of their friends were to die (on the trip).

Alternating with such grim forecasts, the poet also employs a more neutral foreshadowing, for instance:

Neither of them had any idea of what was to happen.

Or: They didn't know what he was going to do.

Or: I am afraid that was the last thing we ever saw of (them...)

Or: ...he was...wise...though not quite right, as we shall see in the end.

Or: He wished again for his nice light hobbit hole. Not for the last time.

By now you are expecting tricks, so you weren't too surprised to find a Hobbit quote popping up at the end. But did you notice the transition from the Song of the Nibelungs to The Hobbit when it actually occurred? The first two quotations are from the Song of the Nibelungs, the last three are all Tolkien.6 Therefore, the answer to question 3) in my opinion, is: Yes, the stylistic comparison between The Hobbit and North European mythological material can be carried further. Tolkien's use of neutral foreshadowing is one example of this.

Another example is the tendency, now and then, to compare the customs, morals and habits of the past with those of the present. When this is not done to teach a moral lesson, it is often simply a way of making the figures of the tale seem more human and believable. For example, from the Song of the Nibelungs:

Some had neither drunk nor eaten for three days because of their grief. Then, they couldn't neglect their bodies any longer and so, after sorrow, they took nourishment, as so often happens nowadays. (Nibelungs, 1072, iii, iv)

And from the Hobbit:

"Escaping goblins to be caught by wolves," he said, and it became a proverb, though we now say "out of the frying-pan into the fire" in the same sort of uncomfortable situations. (Tolkien, 103)

The same poet who exerts himself to make these figures of another age or world believable and sympathetic for us, may sometimes appear to intrude simply for the sake of intruding. Actually, by offering a gratuitous opinion, he is legitimately reminding us that he exists: the story-teller,
the bard, the singer. For example, from Song of the Nibelungs, Stanza 1396, line 1:

I think it must have been the devil himself who convinced her to (do that)...

Or, from the same work, Stanza 1398, lines 111 and 114: She began to cry; this, I imagine, is why (he) did it.

Or, from The Hobbit, page 147: I expect they were a kind of "purple emperor"...

Or, from The Hobbit, p. 192: Still, I dare say, more was guessed than was known, though doubtless Mr. Baggin's remained a bit of a mystery...

Occasionally, as with the word "doubtless" in the last quotation, the author's opinion is suggested without the use of the first person. For instance, from page 127 of The Hobbit:

These were all the chairs in his hall, and he probably had them low like the tables for the convenience of the wonderful animals that waited on him.

Without the word, "probably," this would be a straightforward third-person narrative passage. With "probably," it becomes quite noticeably the narrator's own opinion.

By the way, speaking of the narrator,... one of the story-teller's greatest problems is transition. How does one get from one bit of action in the story to another? What artful verbal transition can be used to whisk the audience from the predicament of one character to the triumph of another? Perhaps the courtly poet of the Song of the Nibelungs can offer us some clever transitional formulae. For instance:

But let us leave all their activity now, and tell you...

(Nibelungs, 778, 111)

Or: But let the messengers go on their way; we will tell you now... (Nibelungs, 1590, 1, 11)

Or: Now let's leave them doing what they are accustomed to doing, (and tell you about)... (Nibelungs, 1506, 1)

Or: In the pursuit of such activities we must leave the noble ladies (and tell you)... (Nibelungs, 1655, 1)

Clearly, the poet of the Song of the Nibelungs did not see a need for clever or disguised transitions. Furthermore, his rather obvious technique compares favorably to that in other mythological documents. One chapter in Lady Gregory's tales of the gods, for instance, ends with an episode about the god, Bres, and the next portion treats his rival, Nuada. Thus, the beginning of the next chapter reads:

Now, as to Nuada of the Silver Hand, he was holding a feast one time... (Gregory, 37)

Later, when a story concerning the god Lugh is interrupted by a background story about the same god, the poet returns to his original tale this way:

Now as to Lugh and the sons of Tairreann... (46)

And Lady Gregory's Finn cycle offers the following transitions:

Now, as to Finn and his people... (265)

Or: And as to Diarmaid, after Angus and Grania left him... (276)

Or: And as to Diarmaid and Grania... (285)

I could literally go on and on, for Lady Gregory's translation is replete with such self-conscious and obvious transitions. Transition in the Celtic mythological material is clearly no more polished or artful than in the Germanic epic, possibly less so.

That such techniques are an echo of the original material and not merely a conceit of the modern copyist is attested by the Finnish epic, the Kalevala, which was collected and organized by Elias Lonnrot, around 1830. The transitions here are just as strongly reminiscent of the original oral delivery—perhaps even more vividly so than those of the Germanic and Celtic pieces.

Transition is used with particular frequency in reference to Lemminkainen, who is also known as "Kauko" or "Ahti," -- and is a rough-hewn hero whose story alternates with that of the main hero, Valameer. Lemminkainen plays a kind of cavalcade to Valameer's Parthian, or, to put it in more modern heroic terms, a Clint Eastwood to Valameer's Gary Cooper. Here are some examples of transition from the Kalevala:

Now it is time to speak of Ahti
Of that lively youth to gossip.

Or: Here I part awhile with Kauko,
Leave the lively Lemminkainen,
Long from out my song I leave him
While I quickly change my subject,
Turn my song in new directions
And in other furrows labor. (Kalevala, XV, 45-50)

Or: Now I will abandon Kauko,
Long from out my song will leave him.

(Kalevala, XXXI, 465-96)

As we have already seen, Tolkien does make use of the "I don't have time" technique, the "I don't know" technique, the "in my opinion" technique and the foreshadowing technique. Does he, then, also make use of the transparent "now it's time to go from here to there" technique?

We find something similar on page 273 of The Hobbit:

He was aching in his bones for the homeward journey. That, however, was a little delayed, so in the meantime, I'll tell you something of events...

Two more obvious transitions occur in the shift from Bilbo and the dwarves to Småg's death and back again. On page 239, we read:

Now if you wish, like the dwarves, to hear news of Småg, you must go back again to the evening when he smashed the door...

The next chapter then appropriately begins:

Now we will return to Bilbo and the dwarves. (243)

Thus, we--or at least I--arrive at a conclusion. Tolkien's long and intimate acquaintance with the mythological documents of Northern Europe supplied him, not only with character types and themes, but also with the stylistic idiosyncrasies of the oral story-teller. He is the singer, the bard, the scop, the skald, the file of a re-constituted mythology. When he figuratively turns to the reader and says, "There isn't time," or, "I don't know," or "In my opinion" or, "It was not for the last time," or, "Let us go on to something else," he underlines his role as an interpreter of our mythological heritage--which is, at base, an oral tradition. Tolkien, the narrator, does not interrupt to make whimsical comments a la Uncle Wiggly. He is part of an oral tradition that confronts its hearers not with the personality, but with the person of the story-teller. Like the barda before him, he punctuates his tale with questions, comments and predictions that bring the function of story-teller to our attention. Like one of the anonymous singers of the Kalevala, he muses, now and then, for our benefit:

"How shall our song continue,
And what legends shall we tell you?
Thus will we pursue our story;
These the legends we will tell you."

(Kalevala, XX, 1-4)

Footnotes


3. Das Nibelungenlied, ed. Karl Bartisch (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1866) stanza 10, line 1; my translation. Hereafter referred to in the text by stanza in Arabic numbers and line in lower case Roman numerals, as above.


5. Stanzas 2377, 1429, 294 and 1321.

6. Nibelungen, stanzas 12 and 1920; Tolkien, pp. 70, 192 and 88.


PATHFINDERS IN FAERIE

GLEN GOODKNIGHT

Tolkien's Middle-earth, Lewis' Narnia, and Williams' Brocéliande have a similar quality. Chesterton and Lord Dunsany in their works called the place Elfland. There are many names for it: Faerie is like the unconscious mind. Tolkien says it has "both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords." In that realm a man may, perhaps, count himself fortunate to have wandered, but its very richness and strangeness tie the tongue of a traveller who would report them." (c.f. Smith of Wotton Major).

In medieval legends, it was a third and middle place between Heaven and Hell, having elements of both as well as its own distinctive qualities. It is a realm of archetypes and wonders. We visit it nightly, and vaguely recall a small portion of our visitations. It is a realm that leads to greater self-knowledge and an enlargement of being.

With these goals in mind, we are foolhardy to set off without charts, heedless of the discoveries of previous explorers, specifically here, the writers of fantasy. Many offer themselves as such who are unworthy of our trust, charming as they may initially appear. The genuine guides are invaluable in our quest, though we are to take their information with care and collectively. This alone is both a perilous and rewarding prerequisite for our quest, but it is much less demanding of us ultimately, than to step off into the realm of Faerie alone and ignorant.

How truly fortunate for us that guides proven reliable have given us a rich tradition and heritage, accessible and joyously warm, so that what might have been a terror, sadness, or disaster, instead can be a Festival in Faerie.

* * *

LEAVES BY TOLKIEN


Have you ever wished you could ask Tolkien questions about his works? Here we have the next closest possibility: Tolkien's answers to many who wrote him asking questions. Some of the answers are brief; others, in the Tolkien style, are quite long and detailed. This volume will be indispensable to serious readers and scholars in shedding new light, or clarifying textual problems, in Tolkien's works. It is a gold mine that holds much rich treasure for his admirers.

While the majority of the material deals with his works, it is more that that. Here we get a solid indication of his personality: crusty, paternal, inflexible, opinionated, orthodox, charming, compassionate. We see a man able to delve into the smallest details and see the Grand Design at the same moment. His university life, relations with the inklings, political and cultural opinions, unshakable faith, and family concerns are all well covered. The book has an excellent set of notes and an index, but it really needs to be read from cover to cover to capture its full value and unfolding drama.

This is not meant to be a full review, which should follow later, but a brief initial reaction, as it is just being released. This is an important book, of which much will be said for many years.