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Rings of Power in Plato and Tolkien

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Abstract

Traces certain aspects of the One Ring, particularly the power of invisibility to tempt the wearer to immoral acts, to the Ring of Gyges, mentioned in Cicero and Plato.

Additional Keywords

Gyges (legend)—Influence on The Lord of the Rings; Plato. The Republic; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Objects—The Ring—Sources

RINGS OF POWER IN PLATO AND TOLKIEN

ROBERT E. MORSE

"I have tried to modernize the myths and make them credible." These are the words of J.R.R. Tolkien, author of Lord of the Rings. To accomplish this purpose, Tolkien drew upon a lifetime of study rich in the substance of Old Norse and Germanic myth, as well as the general traditions of European folk-lore. The fact that the Elder Edda and Nibelungenlied both contain references to rings with great power that are cursed and the bane of their possessor has led many to stop looking beyond these works for the sources influencing Tolkien. To be sure there are parallels, but these rings do not make the wearer invisible. Classical Mythology does contain a reference to a ring of power that renders its wearer invisible.

Plato (The Republic Bk.11) and Cicero (De Officiis 111.9) both tell the story of Gyges a Lydian shepherd. According to Cicero, great rains caused the earth to reveal great fissures large enough for a man to enter. Gyges entered one of these, and descending into the earth, he began to look around. He saw a bronzen horse with doors in its sides. Curious, Gyges investigated and discovered it was a casket containing the remains of an unusually large man. Gyges was attracted by a ring on the finger of the corpse which he took with him upon leaving. Later, Gyges went to a gathering of shepherds. There, while toying with the ring, he turned the bezel to the inside of his hand and vanished. When he turned the bezel back again, he could be seen. He used the advantage given him by the ring to harm others. Finally, he was able to seduce the king's wife, kill the king himself, and remove all who stood in his way until he became the master of the shepherds. Nor was anyone able to detect him in his crimes.

Cicero has given the basic facts in brief. But, if we turn to Plato's account, there seems to be additional pertinent information. Plato tells us that "it was the custom of the shepherds to hold monthly meetings and Gyges, as he sat, happened to turn the ring to the inside of his hand. When he became invisible to the group which spoke of him as if he had left the place." Plato continues to emphasize Gyges tested the ring to be sure it had the power of conveying invisibility.

In the Nibelungenlied the power of the ring is known before it is taken from Alberich. But Bilbo, like Gyges, seemingly discovered the ring by accident; also, he was unaware of its powers. When Gollum attacks him, the fleeing Bilbo hears:

"The hiss was close behind... in a moment Gollum was on him. But, before Bilbo could do anything, recover his breath...or wave his sword, Gollum passed by taking no notice of him.... what could it mean?" (Hobbit p.94)

Bilbo was not long in discovering the answer. Following Gollum he listens to creature's talk and begins to think he has found a magic ring that made him invisible. "He had heard of such things in old, old tales; but it was hard to believe he had found one, by accident." (Hobbit p.96)

Nor is the accidental nature of the ring's discovery the only parallel. Neither Bilbo nor Gyges realized that the ring had a corrupting influence, at first anyway. But, it was precisely the illustration of this influence which caused Plato through the character Glaucon to tell Gyges' story.

"...if we were to imagine the following situation; let us grant to both the just and unjust man to do whatever he wishes.... we will catch the just man doing as the unjust through self-seeking."

Glaucon was presenting the belief that no one would be able to resist using the power the ring conveyed to his own selfish advantage. This was the effect on Gyges and Gollum. The classical sources not only embody the corrosive power Tolkien's ring possesses, but they also reveal a context in which the ring is utilized to demonstrate a truth.

In fact, when we turn from the Hobbit to the Lord of the Rings, we find Gandalf's account of the ring's history is very close to Gyges' experience. First it is found in the mud and comes into Gollum's (Smeagol) possession from a dead person. It influences Gollum's emotions by inflaming his selfish desires to the point that he commits murder. Later he continues to use his power for personal gain and evil ends. Nor is anyone else aware of the power of the ring. In fact, no one knows he has it. The pertinent sections are in the Fellowship of the Ring:

"And behold when he washed the mud away, here in his hand was a beautiful golden ring..." "Give us that Deagol..." (said Smeagol) "Why?" "Because I wants it," said Smeagol. "I don't care," said Deagol, "I'm going to keep it." "Oh you are..." said Smeagol and he caught him by the throat and strangled him.... No one ever found out what became of Deagol;... Smeagol returned alone; and he found none of his family could see him when he was wearing the ring. He was very pleased with his discovery, and he concealed it; and he used it to find out secrets, and he put his knowledge to crooked and malicious uses." (p.84-85)

It was this malicious effect which the possession of the ring will produce within its bearer that is the most striking aspect of the ring in both accounts, and that bears the greatest emphasis in both authors.

The world of Tolkien's ring is one in which evil is rampant. It recalls Biblical prophecy when man has turned his way from God; so, God hides his face from man. In the words of Isaiah we will call for justice, but there is none. The desire to dominate others stemming from whatever selfish needs is the basic foundation of evil in Tolkien. When we consider in context, we find it is only one element in an extended discussion on selfishness. It is the context which forms one of the closest parallels between the sources. We should remember that Gyges and Gollum represent exponents of the belief that might makes right and justice is simple expediency. The thematic parallel is unmistakable.

Tolkien has transformed a ring of power into the Ring of Doom, a potent talisman in the struggle between good and evil. He does not wish to forge a new ring from virgin metal as Mime is forced to do; he needs a ring with a history, and he knows of many from old, old tales. He has seized an opportunity for blending diverse sources into a new and vital whole. For in this way he will be able to tap those latent forces which are needed to bring his myth to life and make it credible. The ring of power presented in Plato becomes Tolkien's Ruling Ring.