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Tolkien & Spenser

Abstract

Compares the style, content, and allegorical interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Faerie Queene*.

Additional Keywords

Allegory; Quests in literature; Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene*—Relation to Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*—Relation to Spenser

TOLKIEN & SPENSER

by Nan Braude

Spenser is a Tolkien off whom it's respectable to make a living.

---Robert M. Adams, The New York Review, 6/6/68

The prime motive for writing LotR was the desire of a tale-teller to try his hand at a really long story that would hold the attention of readers, amuse them, delight them, and at times maybe excite them or deeply move them.

---J. R. R. Tolkien, Foreword to Ballantine ed. of Lord of the Rings

The generall end therefore of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline.

---Edmund Spenser, Letter to Sir Walter Raleigh attached to 1590 edition of The Faerie Queene

On the dust jacket of my copy of The Hobbit (the U.S. hard-cover edition), Richard Hughes is quoted as describing The Lord of the Rings as "an heroic romance--something which has scarcely been attempted on this scale since Spenser's Faerie Queene" This is one of the commonest ways of characterizing Tolkien's epic. It is also compared frequently to Ariosto, Malory, and Wagner, I believe with more justification. But it is the comparison with Spenser on which I wish to focus. The genesis of this article is a series of arguments I have had with the director of my Ph.D. dissertation (which is on The Faerie Queene), trying to convince him that he ought to read Tolkien. I have finally given up the attempt, because I have come to the conclusion that a liking for Spenser does not necessarily imply a taste for Tolkien.

The two works have a great deal in common on the surface, and indeed more fundamentally. Perhaps the most important point is that both are structured around the great image of the Quest. In Tolkien, it is a quest-in-reverse, to lose rather than to find something. In Spenser, it is a quest-within-a-quest: the hero of each book, the champion of a particular virtue, accomplishes his quest within that book; and the frame of the whole is Prince Arthur's quest for Gloriana, the Faerie Queene herself. But the structure is even more complex. Britomart, the champion of Book III, has as her quest the search for Artegall, her destined husband. But she doesn't even meet him until Book IV. The achievement which concludes her book is the rescue of the lady Amoret, whom she has never even heard of until the next-to-last canto. In Book VI, the hero's quest is the pursuit of the Blatant Beast; but he spends most of his time wooing, winning, and rescuing a lovely shepherdess. And the heroes of Book IV have no quest at all: most of the book is taken up with the adventures of other characters in pursuit of their quests.



Two other points of similarity are, like the quest, traditional for the genre of romance. One is the narrative pattern of entrelacement, or interlacing. An adventure will be melodramatically broken off at a climactic point, while the author returns to the adventures of other characters in "another part of the forest." In this, Spenser and Tolkien differ quantitatively rather than qualitatively: there is a heck of a lot more going on in the Faerie Queene, so much so that some characters get completely lost in the shuffle. The other is a trait noticed by the late Rosemond Tuve in her fine book Allegorical Imagery (Princeton, 1966). This is the admixture of the marvelous with ordinary daily reality. We are all aware of this to some extent in Tolkien, who is concerned not only with Elves and Ents and Rings of Power but also with beer and pipeweed and Sam's grandfather. The modern reader may be less prepared to recognize the ordinariness of the Faerie Queene, however, for much of it has become strange and "romantic" with the passing of time. It is true that history does not record the occurrence in sixteenth-century England (or even Ireland, Spenser's home for the last twenty years of his life) of giants, dragons, and walls of enchanted flame, and even hermits were a thing of the pre-Reformation past; but castles, courts, and brigands were all known to the poet at first hand, and he was acquainted with at least one knight who fought in tournaments and dedicated his life to the ideals of chivalry (Sir Philip Sidney, an early patron of Spenser and the model for Sir Calidore in Book VI).

I shall now turn to the differences. The most obvious is that of form. The Faerie Queene is an epic poem, and its author is one of the very greatest poets of the English language. The Lord of the Rings is an epic in prose. Spenser's poetry is not mere narrative verse (like much of Scott's), a medium devoted primarily to telling the story. It is poetry: complex, indirect, elaborate, ornate. This, of course, is what puts so many people off. The modern reader, raised on prose, is unwilling to devote to 400 pages of fine print (in double columns, yet) the same effort that is required by a Shakespearean sonnet. It is not, however, impossible to acquire the skill. (One of the best ways is to read The Poetry

of "The Faerie Queene" by Paul J. Alpers--my aforementioned dissertation director--which teaches you to do exactly that.) But it is a specialized skill, like riding a bicycle, while anyone who can read English prose can read Tolkien. He is concerned with telling a story; but Spenser is trying to convey the qualities of an experience.

The second and greatest difference between the two is indicated in the epigraphs to this article: the intention of the writer. Tolkien is telling you a story; Spenser is showing you how to live. Tolkien has called his book an "exercise in the linguistic aesthetic"; Spenser describes his intention as the portrayal of the twelve private moral virtues. His chosen device, allegory, is cordially disliked by Tolkien.

The essence of LotR is that it is what Tolkien himself, in "On Fairy-stories," calls a Secondary World, internally consistent and imaginatively convincing. Tolkien is interested in languages, genealogies, racial and national histories, geography, botany, and politics. Tolkien fandom in general has concerned itself with elaborating on these interests. If Sauron is the Lord of the Rings, his creator is the Lord of the Maps and Appendices. Tolkien believes that a story should have applicability to life in the Primary World (this is his alternative to allegory), and his own work certainly does; but the concept seems to me to imply that the moral relevance comes almost as an afterthought, which is precisely the opposite of the allegorical method. In a true, living allegory, like The Faerie Queene or The Pilgrim's Progress, story and meaning are twins born of one birth, like Spenser's Amoret and Belphebe; it is impossible to tell which came first, or to imagine either of them being different without also destroying the internal consistency of the other. True allegories work with natural symbols--forest and court, king and shepherd, bread and wine, battle and marriage. The patterns in Spenser are ideal patterns, capable of not one but many significances, often simultaneously: a knight slays a dragon and wins the hand of a lady; a prince, seeking a beautiful maiden who has appeared to him in a dream, goes searching for her, righting wrongs and aiding the helpless whom he meets on his way. Spenser's allegories are complete on the story level. In an artificial allegory, like Stephen Hawes' Pastime of Pleasure, awkwardnesses show up on not one but both levels: his hero is prepared for the slaying of giants and winning of a lady by being instructed in the Seven Liberal Arts, which makes very little sense as story or allegory.

Tolkien himself has more skill at allegory than his dislike of it would suggest; in pointing out that LotR is not one, he carefully explains just what an allegory of the atomic bomb in recent history would be like. But he is simply not interested in creating allegories. His interest begins and ends with the Secondary World; relevant and applicable only because a valid secondary creation must be true to the realities of the Primary World. Spenser's Faerie may not be, in Tolkien's sense, a true Secondary World; it is impossible to tell how far it is from Castle Joyous to the House of Busirane, or exactly where Phaedria's Isle is sit-

uated with respect to the Bower of Bliss. Middle Earth is a landscape of the imagination; Faerie is a landscape of the soul. Reading the poem, we discover what it feels like to experience anger and despair, lust and greed, friendship and courtesy. Tolkien shows us these things, but we never learn what it is like to be Gandalf or Grishnakh or Galadriel. They are there primarily to delight us, not to teach us.

Tolkien's basic purpose is aesthetic; Spenser's is moral. Ultimately, it is in their own proper spheres that they satisfy us most. LotR is far more successful as a story pattern, as an artistic whole. Spenser's poem is more satisfying as an image of human experience. The two are not mutually exclusive: The Faerie Queene gives us satisfying story patterns (which is what I'm writing that dissertation on), and Tolkien does show something of the value of human experience. Roger Sale's remark about Spenser, that "he sees human life as his subject but not as the limit of his material,"² is also true of Tolkien (whom Sale also admires), but in a somewhat different sense. Human life is Tolkien's subject, but he is interested in other things too. In The Faerie Queene, all the other things ultimately become part of human life. Nothing is simply there, belonging only to itself, like the Argonath or Mirrormere; everything is a fragment of human experience, polished and faceted that it may reflect us better to ourselves.

My dissertation director, Mr. Alpers, is interested in neither Christianity nor medieval romance. He ought to be the world's worst critic of Spenser, since these are the things that the poet is most interested in. As a matter of fact, he is a particularly intelligent and sensitive interpreter of The Faerie Queene, because he is concerned with poetry and human experience, the poem's underlying realities. But do you think that he ought therefore to like The Lord of the Rings?

---Nan Braude

1 And then there is Leaf by Niggle.

2 Reading Spenser: An Introduction to "The Faerie Queene" (Random House, 1968), p. 58.

