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Rochester The Renewer: The Byronic Hero and The Messiah as Elements in The King Elessar

Abstract

Analyzes the character of Aragorn as an example of, and transformation of, the “Byronic” hero of nineteenth-century literature, through the addition of the redeeming and renewing qualities of a Messianic figure.

Additional Keywords

Bronte, Charlotte—Characters—Rochester—Relation to Aragorn; Byronic Hero; Jesus Christ in literature; Messianic symbolism in literature; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Aragorn

Rochester The Renewer

The Byronic Hero and The Messiah as Elements in The King Elessar

John Houghton



The notable forcefulness of the picture of the King Elessar presented in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* can, in part, be traced to the fact that Tolkien's portrait incorporates elements of two powerful images, that of the Byronic hero (especially in that facet of the King's character which may be labelled "Strider") and that of the Messiah (especially in the King's regal title "Envinvyatar," the Renewer). This combination of traits deserves particular note because it is one toward which English literature had been moving during the whole of nineteenth century, as Richard Chase implies in his essay "The Brontës, or Myth Domesticated," and yet is also a fulfillment of the criteria set out by Tolkien in his lecture "On Fairy Stories." Thus Tolkien's work can be seen as a significant development in the history of the novel, as well as a significant and powerful use of myth.

The phrase "Byronic hero" is susceptible of definition in a variety of ways, not all of them closely related to the life and work of Lord Byron himself. In *English Romantic Writers* David Perkins introduces the concept with these comments:

The "Byronic Hero" [is] first portrayed in *Canto I* and *II* of *Childe Harold* and thereafter developed variously in *The Corsair*, *Lara*, *Childe Harold III* and *IV*,

Manfred, and *Cain*. This figure had prototypes in the Gothic novels of the eighteenth century, in Chateaubriand's *Rene*, and in the characters of Milton's Satan and of Napoleon as seen through Romantic eyes. The Byronic hero continued to haunt nineteenth-century literature and philosophy. He is a man greater than others in emotion, capability, and suffering. Only among wild and vast forms of nature--the ocean, the precipices and glaciers of the Alps--can he find a counterpart for his own titanic passions. Driven by a demon within, he is fatal to himself and others; for no one can resist his hypnotic fascination and authority. He has committed a sin that itself expresses his superiority: lesser men could not even conceive a like transgression. Against his own suffering he brings to bear a superhuman pride and fortitude. Indeed, without the horror of his fate there could not be the splendor of self-assertion and self-mastery in which he experiences strange joy and triumph.¹

This basic character, as Prof. Perkins points out, recurs throughout the 19th century, and in being reused loses some of its precision: Heathcliff and Rochester are both Byronic, but neither of them is guilty of an inconceivable transgression--the first carries out his plots within, and indeed by the use of, the law, while the second, though he attempts bigamy, has borne a burden worthy of this superiority for years before he does so. Given this expansion of the concept, any definition of it must consider characters outside Byron's own work, such as Dr. Frankenstein, Heathcliff, and Rochester. One could expand that list by the inclusion of the Nietzschean Superman, Sherlock Holmes, and perhaps even such modern comic-book heroes as The Incredible Hulk. At least five common elements can be extracted from most of these characters: they have, first, a superhuman capability; second, a secret burden; third, enormous self-control; fourth, contempt for rules designed for lesser folk; and fifth, more generally, a lack of complete respectability. The second element is the generalized form of the original Byronic crime, while the fourth and fifth continue the originally rebellious nature of the character and society's response to his rebellion.

The first of these characteristics presents a problem to the author who invokes the Byronic tradition: granted that such a character has superhuman talents, the audience may well ask where those talents come from. The author has several options: he can dodge the question; he can ascribe the talents to some human source, such as exercise or study; or he can frankly grant some transcendental source for the talents. When the author chooses the third option, the character himself may even be quite unhuman--Prometheus and Satan are easy examples. In most cases, it is easy to see which of these three choices the author has made; however, in at least one classic novel, *Jane Eyre*, the obvious choice conceals

a second, and for our purposes, substantially more interesting, treatment of the hero.

Edward Fairfax Rochester, the Byronic hero in *Jane Eyre*, seems to be a case of the first option; his supernatural powers are not many (being limited to great strength and (evidently) sexual prowess, some skill in disguising himself as a woman, and, in one famous case, a kind of telepathic communication with Jane), and Charlotte Brontë doesn't go into a detailed explanation of any of them. Yet a 1948 essay by Richard Chase, "The Brontës, or Myth Domesticated," argues, in effect, that Rochester is, through his mythic dimension, a kind of divinity, a supernatural Byronic hero like Prometheus. In the essay, which appears in *Forms of Modern Fiction*,² Chase suggests that all of the Brontës were concerned with the problem of finding a place in society for the raw force of nature. In *Jane Eyre* specifically, Chase suggests, Rochester represents this force of nature; Jane, on the other hand, is associated with "duty" and with domestic society. Thus, in this novel, the question of how the human being is to deal with the divine force of nature is mythically represented as the question of how Jane can marry Mr. Rochester. The answer is as direct as it is dramatic: Rochester is maimed and nearly blinded in a fire which also (conveniently) destroys his insane first wife. Chase develops in some detail the emasculatory nature of Brontë's imagery, but her point is sufficiently clear without his painstaking examination--Rochester is acceptable only after he has been wounded; more generally, the force of nature which he represents must be damaged, must, indeed, undergo a symbolic death, before it can be resolved and given a place in society.

Chase's analysis of *Jane Eyre* treats Rochester as a mythic figure; if his argument is rephrased in traditional terms, he invites us to see Rochester as a dying god, like Attis, Adonis, and Osiris. Rochester is a god who dies in order to be domesticated, and the burden of his past lies more deeply on him than Adonis's does on him; but, if we accept Chase's thesis, the deep sense of Brontë's novel is that Rochester is in fact a Byronic hero of the third type, one whose extraordinary qualities come from his divinity. The presence of a corn-god in this tract ostensibly devoted to the lot of the English governess may seem interesting enough; but that the corn-god should succeed Prometheus among Byronic divinities suggests (however tentatively) a sequence as the nineteenth century moves from the radical revolution advocated by the Romantics to the quietly profound changes which in fact took place in Victorian England. In fact, there is a sequence not only in parallelism to social history, but also in some sense of "mythic accuracy". That is to say, if the life and death and return to life of the corn-god seem to correspond more closely to reality than does the simple prolongation of suffering we see in the story of Prometheus, then Brontë's hero may well seem a more powerful mythic figure than Prometheus and some other early Byronic characters, and may suggest that even more powerful figures are to be found farther down the line.

If there is in fact a sequence of divinities to be seen among these figures, then the next term of that sequence for an officially Christian Victorian writer would seem to be obvious. We should move from myth in rebellion to myth domesticated and thence to the hero converted; one might expect to find, after the Byronic hero as Prometheus and the Byronic hero as Adonis, the Byronic hero as Christ; yet (with the barely possible

exception of Billy Budd) no example of such a character in a major piece of Victorian literature comes immediately to mind. If there are few or no such characters, several explanations are possible. It may simply be that the 19th century was not one which was prepared to accept any myths pointing toward the Christ: there are pieces which use Christ as a character, and others which use Christ to point out something about their characters; but an allegory or myth which leads indirectly to Christ may have seemed either unnecessary or inappropriate. Or, to take another possibility, it may be that the rebellious disreputability which had always accompanied the Byronic hero was somehow a bar to making the connection with Christ--after all, Satan too was seen as a Byronic figure. In any case, the thing was not done in the nineteenth century: the Christ connection, which is the next logical term for this sketchy sequence of Byronic divinities, comes in J.R.R. Tolkien's picture of the King Elessar Telcontar. It is clear both from what Tolkien has said about the process of writing *The Lord of the Rings* and from what we know of his attitudes toward post-Chaucerian literature³, that he would hardly have intended to make the King look like Jane Eyre's Mr. Rochester; but his deeper mythopoetic intentions, indeed, his basic conception of the fairy tale as eucatastrophic myth, make his depiction of Elessar's heir the logical end toward which the Byronic hero had been moving throughout the nineteenth century.

Strider has all five of the suggested traits of the Byronic hero. His superhuman abilities include a life-span three times that of other humans and the ability to heal even the Black Breath by the laying on of hands; his self-control is almost every moment of his life--in his humility and restraint at his first meeting with Frodo and his companions, in his delicate handling of the infatuated Eowyn, in his refusal, even after the victory of the Pelennor, to take prematurely the throne of his fathers; his defiance of the rules intended for lesser men makes what may appear to us a trivial appearance in his initial refusal to leave Anduril at the doors of Meduseld, and shows up in two stronger forms soon afterwards when he passes by forbidden paths to command the obedience of the Dead and when--daring what even Gandalf dare not do--he wrestles with Sauron for control of the Orthanc stone, and wins; his secret burden is, for many of those around him, his hope to reclaim the throne of Gondor--but even those who know that he is the heir of Elessar do not guess (indeed, even many readers do not guess) that he is also on a marriage-quest like that imposed on his distant ancestor Beren, that his truly secret burden is his love for Arwen (a burden not only because of the task it imposes on him, but also because of the choice that he knows his success will impose on her); and his lack of respectability is stressed when we first meet him--"All that is gold does not glitter," the rhyme says, and Frodo implies that he looks as foul as Barliman Butterbur assumes he really is. That so many examples can be found to illustrate each of these common traits suggests that Strider, despite his many unique traits, deserves a place within the Byronic tradition; yet it does not demonstrate that he has the mythic dimension Chase finds in Mr. Rochester, much less any typological similarity to Christ.

The roots of Elessar's mythic role lie in Tolkien's often quoted Andrew Lang lecture "On Fairy-stories": in that speech, Tolkien, having coined the term *eucatastrophe* to indicate the turn toward a happy ending which characterizes fairy-stories, defends the

genre in general and the eucatastrophe in particular on the grounds that they accurately reflect the nature of the world. "Legend and History," he writes, "have met and fused."⁴ He believes that in human history, just as in a fairy-story, the worst of all possible real and undeniable disasters--the execution of God himself--has led to an unexpected and glorious triumph in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Such a view of fairy-stories is obviously tied closely to the central issues of the Christian faith in which Tolkien lived and died, and, indeed, in a very real sense, "On Fairy-stories" argues that all these stories are, by their very structure, mythic in the sense that they describe or explain a basic element of man's existential situation in a world that has been redeemed by Christ. If *The Lord of the Rings* is, as Tolkien certainly implies that it is, a fairy-story⁵, then it must also have a mythic and Christian dimension.

Once the general mythic nature of LOTR has been accepted as a kind of background for what might in the consideration of a less Christian author be thought improbable pieces of evidence, it is not difficult to show that Elessar resembles Christ in many particulars, both in the role he plays in the narrative and in his character. The "Christ-role" in the destruction of Sauron is divided among many individuals--Frodo, despite his failure, at least attempts an action of sacrificial love, while Gandalf dies and returns to life; but Elessar is given one of the greatest eucatastrophic moments in his arrival at the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, and some of the very actions that support his "Byronic traits" are Christlike in their eucatastrophic effect as well as in their nature--e.g., his healing of Faramir and Eowyn, and his taking the Paths of the Dead.

Elessar's messianic character is seen even in his name: the title he applies to himself of "Envyntar", the renewer, recalls Christ's statement in the *Apocalypse*, "Behold, I make all things new." (14.2) Elessar has prophetic ability, as did Christ, and like Christ he was hidden from his enemies in his infancy. With sufficient ingenuity, the list of detailed similarities between Elessar and Christ can be prolonged ad nauseam; yet the most significant parallel is both more general and more obvious: Elessar resembles Christ most closely in the fact that he is, as Christ was, the long-expected heir of ancient kings. The description of his coronation are rich with Messianic suggestion, from the psalm-like message of the eagle ("Sing and be glad, all ye children of the West! for your King shall come again, and he shall dwell among you/ all the days of your life"), to a specific Biblical allusion in the description of the newly-crowned King ("Ancient of days he seemed," Tolkien says, picking up the phraseology of the Book of Daniel; "I beheld till the thrones were placed, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow..." (7.9)) and a recollection of the Passion when Faramir cries "Behold the King" as Pilate had said of the thorn-crowned Christ, "Behold the man;" and above and beyond these specific elements of language is, of course, the traditional identification of European kings with Christ, a sacred kingship which is explored in detail by Ernst H. Kantorowicz in his monumental study *The King's Two Bodies* (Princeton University Press, 1957).

A good deal of evidence, then, is available to show that Elessar is a type of Christ, just as an equally large body of evidence can be found to suggest that he is a Byronic hero. In accomplishing, however

unintentionally, the union of Christ with the Byronic hero, Tolkien completed one phase of the evolution of that nineteenth century image. Why his particular way of telling the story succeeds in making this union is no easier to know than why no one of note produced such a union before him; but the most likely explanation is simply that Tolkien approached the issue from a direction which many other authors might have rejected or never even considered. Certainly, if the traditional Byronic hero's rebelliousness and indiscreetability played a role in preventing the identification of Christ with the Byronic tradition--as they many well have done--it is the fact that Elessar is a divinely appointed king which removes the bar from Tolkien's path; and the nineteenth century was not overly sympathetic to divine kingship.

Elessar's kingship matches with Strider's defiance of the rules and his disreputable appearance to reach toward central issues of Christianity. Strider violates rule and custom and common sense, but because he is who he is, these violations do not make him either rebellious or foolhardy. A Titan like Prometheus, a squire like Rochester, an orphan like Heathcliff can be a rebel--such a person's defiance of the laws or customs of lesser men makes him an antagonist of the person or society which devised those laws; but one who is himself the source of law, one who was exempted from the rules from the time they were written, cannot be a rebel--there is nothing for him to rebel against. He may take actions which would be illegal for others, but in his case, they are, by definition, not illegal. Such, of course, is the case with a king, who is the embodiment of the law and its personified source. King Charles the Martyr protested, rightly if ineffectively, that Parliament's court had not the competence to try him; and even so delimited and constitutional a monarch as Elizabeth II cannot be brought into her own courts to answer for her actions. Thus, in LOTR, for Legolas to bear his bow into Meduseld against the will of Theoden would be illegal defiance; for Aragorn to carry Anduril into the hall of his vassal (and vassal Theoden is, for the oaths of the Steward and the King of the Mark are clearly not reciprocal) would be perfectly legal, though it might be grossly impolitic. To attempt to control the Orthanc stone against the will of Sauron is futile even for such strong persons as Saruman and Denethor; but Elendil's heir by true descent has power over the stones which even the Enemy cannot gainsay, just as he has the hereditary right to pass the Paths of the Dead. Elessar is simply outside the usual rules.

The change from a character like Rochester who disobeys the laws because he feels that he is above them to one who like Strider disobeys them because the laws themselves say that he is above them is no greater and no less than the difference between subjective and objective versions of the same principle. It is not a change sufficient to remove Elessar from the ranks of the Byronic heroes; but it is sufficient to enable the comparison with Christ, whose followers claim that he can be judged by just such an objective standard, that is, by the results of what he was and did. Like Strider, Christ disobeys laws and customs without being a rebel, and like Strider, he is able to do so (Christians assert) because he is who he is--Messiah and Lord. When Jesus has apparently violated the Fourth Commandment, his response is, "The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath;" when he is asked why his followers do not fast, he says that his presence with them is reason enough to keep a feast. There are many other examples

of the same idea in the Gospels, but, as it is described in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' response at his hearing before the Sanhedrin vastly outweighs the other examples in importance. The High Priest challenges Jesus: "Do you claim to be the Christ? Do you claim to be the Son of the Blessed?" To say "yes" would be to label oneself as a political threat; but Jesus goes farther. The High Priest has used "Blessed" as a periphrasis for the name of God which even he can only pronounce once a year, on the Day of Atonement; in answering, Jesus applies the common interpretation of the name to himself: "I am," he says, repeating the words Moses heard out of the burning bush, the name the High Priest has avoided. Caiaphas rends his clothing, because he thinks that he has heard a blasphemy, and the Sanhedrin take the words as sufficient evidence that Jesus deserves to die. And so he would, for it would be blasphemy, if he were not in fact God himself; but that is, of course, what Christians claim that he is. Strider's quarrel with Hama the doorward has led to the central belief of Tolkien's religion, the religion toward which he believed fairy-stories naturally pointed.

Strider's foul appearance, as contrasted with the glory of Elessar at his crowning, leads equally to another side of the issue of Incarnation. There is a long tradition of kings traveling among their people in disguise, and that tradition contributes to the ease with which we accept the change from the roughish Strider to the handsome and noble Elessar; yet Strider is not Elessar in disguise so much as he is Elessar emptied of his royal majesty. This is an example of what Christian theologians call "kenosis," from the Greek verb meaning "to empty." There is, to begin with, a direct parallel between Strider's roughish and ruffianly appearance and Jesus' equally unprepossessing image, as described in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah: "He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised and we esteemed him not." This prophetic discourse stresses that the Messiah will not even be attractive by human standards; and the idea that the Messiah is God incarnate implies that he has set aside his divine glory as well. Neither human beauty nor divine power will be used to lure people to salvation; that is, God the Son chooses to redeem the creation not by appearing in his glory and compelling all creatures to return to close union with him, but rather by emptying himself of the divine glory which is his by right and coming among his creatures as one who has "no beauty that we should desire him." The whole logic of salvation through the Incarnation has as its first premise God's desire to be loved by the free will of men and women who could with equal ease reject him. The same logic applies in LOTR; Tolkien reports a reply to Boromir in which the king makes clear that his self-abnegation has been undertaken for the service of others:

And yet less thanks have we than you. Travellers scowl at us, and countrymen give us scornful names. "Strider" I am to one fat man who lives within a day's march of foes that would freeze his heart, or lay his little town in ruin, if he were not guarded ceaselessly. Yet we would not have it otherwise. If simple folk are free from care and fear, simple they will be, and we must be secret to keep them so. (I: 261)

Strider's language is even more reminiscent of Christ's actions when he is speaking to the hobbits at The Prancing Pony:

I hoped you would take me for my own sake. A hunted man sometimes wears of distrust and longs for friendship. But there, I believe, my looks are against me. (I: 183)

These quotations taken together show how deeply the royal imposture is, in Elessar's case, a Christ-like willingness to preserve the freedom of others; it seems that this Messianic kenosis is a basic part of the king's character. And yet the result of such Christ-like action is "a strange weather-beaten man" (I: 168) with "rather a rascally look" (I: 176) -- a classic Byronic figure. Again, the Byronic trait, when applied to the King Elessar, brings us directly to the messianic parallel.

The completion of the pattern sketched out by the use of byronic figures in the nineteenth century is also the accomplishment of Tolkien's own mythopoetic purpose. The former point is of interest to scholars, the latter should at least have given Tolkien some satisfaction; but what about the audience? The reader who sees what is going on in this "extra" dimension of Tolkien's story will be entertained by the artistry, and, if a Christian, may derive a particular pleasure from this mythic remembrance of the Christ; but there are benefits even for the reader who is not aware of what literary criticism and Christian theology see going on in the novel. Both of the elements involved in Tolkien's synthesis are so pervasive in our culture as to be unavoidable: people who have never heard of Lord Byron are still familiar with many Byronic figures, and our secular culture still manages to surround us with powerful Christian imagery and concepts. Because these two elements are so universally and unconsciously familiar, the effect of their presence in Tolkien's picture of the King Elessar is to give him that same familiarity and some of that same power. T.S. Eliot, in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," suggested that literature is an order of monuments, and said that each new addition changes the relationship of all the others. A great part of the force of the portrait of Elessar comes from the fact that it fits so smoothly among the other monuments that it seems always to have belonged there. In the words of one of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, words which have particular relevance for this Society, we see in the figure of Elessar "the whole consort dancing together." Laetamus in chorea magna.

NOTES

1. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), p. 782
2. ed. by William V. O'Connor (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1948), pp. 102-113
3. Tolkien said that, when the party reached Bree, he had no notion of who Strider was (Introductory note to "Tree and Leaf" in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), p. 31. In *The Inklings* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1981), Humphrey Carpenter refers often to Tolkien's lack of interest in "modern"---"anything later than Chaucer"---literature. He quotes Tolkien's opinion from the *Oxford Magazine* that the nineteenth century be dropped from the curriculum and compulsory papers stop at 1830 (p. 26); later he specifies Tolkien's interest as being in

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early literature, and lists only six "comparatively recent" authors who "made their mark on him." (p. 157) Bronte is not among them.

4. "On Fairy-stories," in *The Tolkien Reader*, p. 89
5. He suggests that "Tree and Leaf" may interest readers of LOTR because they were written in the same period; yet it seems clear that such interest comes not merely from the connection in time, but also from a concern with the same subject.

6. It is perhaps appropriate to say something at this point about Tennyson. If we agree to stretch the concept of the Byronic hero wide enough to include King Arthur, it may seem that that character accomplishes the union under discussion here; but, while Arthur, like any king, shares many messianic qualities with Christ, the deep structure of his myth (as Charles Williams saw) is that Arthur chooses not to be Christ-like, letting Galahad seek the Grail instead of going for it himself. At the allegorical level, of course, Tennyson's ideal knight is identified with the human soul at war with sense, not Christ at war with evil.

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* I omit references to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Holy Bible*.

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his subtlety, his creative genius, come precisely from his acceptance of and cooperation with the dark side of his own soul. That's why Andersen the fabulist is one of the great realists of literature.
(LN, p. 51)

Radical, basic, unqualified honesty and the willingness to see and accept the consequences of acts, of characters: these are the keys for unlocking the problems of evil characters, creatures born of shadow. These creatures may be part of the Sub-Creator, but they are not all of him, nor is he ruled by them.

It is the Sub-Creator's mind which gives life to the characters with which he peoples his world. The depth and range of personality which they exhibit is limited only by the will and honesty of their maker.