

Spring 3-15-1993

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Recommended Citation

Reynolds, Patricia (1993) "Funeral Customs in Tolkien's Fiction," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 19: No. 2, Article 4.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol19/iss2/4>

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Funeral Customs in Tolkien's Fiction

Abstract

Examines funeral customs and the meaning of death in Tolkien's works, particularly the deaths of Boromir, Théoden, and Denethor. Notes similar customs of various Northern European traditions. Illustrations.

Additional Keywords

Death in J.R.R. Tolkien; Funeral rites and customs in Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Boromir—Death; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Denethor—Death; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Théoden—Death

FUNERAL CUSTOMS IN TOLKIEN'S FICTION

PATRICIA REYNOLDS

An earlier version of this paper was first presented to members of L'Antica Querca, Udine, Italy, November 28th 1992.

In Tolkien's writings the characters often follow one of two types of journey: the hero-quest, as exemplified by Bilbo Baggins (*The Hobbit*), and the death journey, as exemplified by Niggle ("Leaf by Niggle"). Death is one of a handful of life experiences which are irrevocable changes. Like birth, it is a one-way ticket. Unlike birth, it usually occurs when the individual has made many links with his or her community. The attitudes and beliefs of that community are reflected in the way they treat the dead: how the body is removed from the community of the living (or maintained within it), the formal opportunities for grief and the proscribed forms which grief may take, and beliefs about what happens to the dead person: does he "go on a journey," or does he "come back to haunt us?" or does he both dispense advice and comfort as a revered ancestor?

I want to examine funerals and associated customs in Tolkien's writings because I am particularly interested in the power that many readers find in Middle-earth, and believe such activities, closely allied to religious and spiritual thought and action, are a good place to look for the sources of this power. The tributes to Tolkien published in a recent issue of *Mythlore* (Number 69, 32-48) include "No other work can bring the same kind of joy to our lives" (Marianne Russell, New York, USA.), and "Does any other work of fiction give the reader so overwhelming a feeling of supreme significance in a narrative?" (Canon Norman Power, Birmingham, England), and in a very different culture, Russian Maria Kamenkovich writes:

Even now some badly-written second-rate book could become a memorable event in our lives... That is why Tolkien proved to be even a bit too much for us... It was not just the message of the free world: it was the *Free World itself*, as in one of the Russian fairy-tales, when you open a little box given you by a fairy — and find yourself in the middle of a great town which you do not know how to put back again. We didn't want to put it back though, but the authorities did.

She continues, "Tolkien played for us the role of a Christian apostle." Across the world then, Tolkien is read as an inspirational text. There is a continuum amongst readers which ranges from the positive, re-charged feeling which comes from reading eucatastrophe to behavior which I can only compare to that exhibited by followers of a religion. There are also, of course, readers for whom Tolkien "does

nothing" — the ones who cannot get past Tom Bombadil in *The Lord of the Rings*. In looking specifically at death and death-customs I hope to show why involvement in Middle-earth takes this emotional, if not religious, form — and conversely why it is rejected.

Tolkien, as a practising and devout Roman Catholic, living mainly in the twentieth century *knew* what happens to people when they die. Tolkien knew many other belief systems, including the very different Hel of Icelandic literature, and the very similar Catholic beliefs of the Middle Ages. Now, I am not suggesting that because Tolkien draws upon these systems that his faith should be doubted, or that he was a closet pagan! As he wrote in a letter in 1958:

I have deliberately written a tale which is built on or out of certain 'religious' ideas, but is not an allegory of them (or anything else), and does not mention them overtly, still less preach them... It is mainly concerned with Death and Immortality, and the 'escapes': serial longevity, and hoarding memory. (*Letters* 283-84)

I hope you will not regard death as a morbid subject for a paper: it has not always been so excluded from our lives. Even today, there are plenty of deaths in books and films, and the centenary of a death is seen as an ideal opportunity to celebrate the life before it. What is lacking in English Literature today are works on "the good death." David Day in *The Tolkien and Middle-earth Handbook* has suggested that Tolkien was greatly influenced by George MacDonald, citing MacDonald's *Phantastes*, *Lilith* and *At the Back of the North Wind* as examples of 'good deaths.' MacDonald novels are part of a tradition stretching back into the Middle Ages.

The literature of the Middle Ages is full of death: probably not because lives were shorter (once you had passed the hazardous infant years, and providing you escaped death in childbirth and weren't living in a plague area, you had a fair chance of reaching three score years and ten). The emphasis was rather due to the religious beliefs of the time. Tolkien is particularly associated with one such work, which he edited: *Pearl*. *Pearl* is an elegy upon the death of the poet's daughter, who died a child: the poet, grief-stricken at the grave is granted a vision of his daughter in heaven. Tolkien defined the main purpose of the poem as:

the doctrinal theme, in the form of an argument on salvation ... inseparable from the literary form of the poem and its occasion, for it arised directly from the grief... (*Sir Gawain*.)

Much medieval art was concerned with the importance of a good death. One picture from the Rohan Book of hours of 1418-28 shows one deathbed repentance. The scroll coming from the man's mouth reads: "Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit. You have redeemed me, O Lord, thou God of Truth." Earlier belief is exemplified by *Beowulf*:

Swa begnornodon Geata leode
hlafordes hryre, heorð-geneatas;
cwædon þæt he wære wyruld-cýninga,
manna mildust ond mon-ðwæ rust,
leodum liðost on lof-geornost.

They said that among the kings of the world, was the gentlest of men and most gracious, kindest to men and most eager for fame. (lines 3180-3)

Here, at the funeral pyre, *Beowulf's* death and life are cause for celebration. The "hoarding memory" which Tolkien itemized as one of the "escapes" is thus a product of life and death.

When Tolkien talked about "escapes" from death he used quotation marks, and he was also referring to 'escapes' from immortality. The "escapes" are given quotation marks because they are not true escapes: death finally comes to Aragorn the long-lived; the memory, even collective memory, grows dim with the passage of time. By bracketing Death and Immortality, Tolkien removes all sense that the "escape" is fortunate or to be desired. In an earlier letter he had described "escape" as "wicked because 'unnatural' and silly because Death in that sense is the Gift of God (envied by Elves), release from the weariness of time" (*Letters* N^o 156 note, page 205). As Verlyn Flieger summarizes it "The real escape from death is through death to eternal life." (29). In "On Fairy Stories" Tolkien wrote, in the same paragraph that he wrote of "the Great Escape, the Escape from Death," of Eucatastrophe, the opposite of Tragedy, "the Consolation of the Happy Ending" (69). Death in the Christian mythology is not a gift, but a punishment, meted out to Adam and Eve for disobeying God. But in seeing death as eucatastrophe in this world, Tolkien is again saying that death is a gift which re-unites us with God. Some, Jane Chance Nitzsche, for example, have seen eucatastrophe as "the triumph of man over death and escape into the other world" (51). This is similar to the view found in some medieval poetry where elf-hame, fairyland or Avalon appears as a side-ways alternative to the above/below of heaven and hell (one such, *Thomas the Rhymer*, is quoted in "On Fairy Stories"). It would be interesting to trace the literary development of this idea through to the Tolkienian concept of the Undying Lands and beyond into the fiction of Donaldson. However, I think Nitzsche is mistaken in thinking that this translation was one of the "escapes" upon which Tolkien focused his attention. In Frodo we are presented with a character who actually makes the voyage west, and it is clear that this is not an escape from death.

Tolkien wrote to many people, expressing his ideas about the after-life of the peoples of Middle-earth. From the correspondence recorded in *Letters*, it is apparent that

Tolkien was continually redefining his eschatology. Also, you will recall, the post-death experiences of men, dwarves and elves are clearly differentiated — this is manifest in the ring-verse — and this is not to mention the afterlives (or lack of them) of hobbits, orcs, wargs, bats, Tom Bombadil and all. As I am interested in the reaction of *The Lord of the Rings'* human readers, I will concentrate upon that race. Additionally, I want to concentrate on the living's response to the dead: to funerary rites. Funerary rites embody belief in afterlife (or lack of it), burying objects with a body, for example, suggests a belief that they will be needed by the dead person. Funerary rites are also concerned with hygiene, and with providing a consolation to the bereaved beyond the reinforcement of beliefs in an afterlife.

I would like to compare three very different deaths and funerals in *The Lord of the Rings*: those of Boromir, Théoden and Denethor.

BOROMIR

Gandalf reports Boromir's death to his father as follows: "He is dead, and died well; may he sleep in peace." (*The Lord of the Rings*, Book V, Chapter 4). Boromir, mortally wounded, made a full confession to Aragorn, and wept as he repented his actions: this is as near as a pre-Christian man of virtue can get to a Good Christian death. The activities of his companions after his death are described in some detail:

Taking his axe the Dwarf now cut several branches. These they lashed together with bowstrings, and spread their cloaks upon the frame. Upon this rough bier they carried the body of their companion to the shore, together with such trophies of his last battle as they chose to send forth with him...

At the waterside Aragorn remained, watching the bier, while Legolas and Gimli hastened back on foot to Parth Galen. It was a mile or more, and it was some time before they came back, paddling two boats swiftly along the shore...

Now they laid Boromir in the middle of the boat that was to bear him away. The grey hood and elven-cloak they folded and placed beneath his head. They combed his long dark hair and arrayed it upon his shoulders. The golden belt of Lórien gleamed about his waist. His helm they set beside him, and across his lap they laid the cloven horn and the hilts and shards of his sword; beneath his feet they put the swords of his enemies. The fastening the prow to the stern of the other boat, they drew him out into the water. They rowed sadly along the shore...

Sorrowfully they cast loose the funeral boat: there Boromir lay, restful, peaceful, gilding upon the bosom of the flowing water. The stream took him while they held their own boat back with their paddles... in after-days it long was said that the elven-boat rode the falls and the foaming pool, and bore him down through Osgiliath, and past the many mouths of Anduin, out into the Great Sea at night under the stars. (*The Lord of the Rings*, Book III, Chapter 1).

This ritual draws on two distinct traditions: the medieval

The Black Prince



rituals appropriate for the nobility, and the older Northern traditions of boat-burial. A ship burial is particularly appropriate for a hero. In *Beowulf* Scyld Scefing the heroic ancestor of the Danes arrives and departs by boat.

There in the harbour stood the ring-prowed boat of the noble, icy-covered and ready to sail; they laid down there the beloved lord, the ring-giver in the hold of the ship, the honoured man by the mast; there were loaded many ornamented treasures from far away. Never have I heard of a ship more seemly fitted with weapons of war and armour, swords and corselets...Furthermore they set up a golden standard, high over his head, they bequeathed him for the sea to carry him, gave him to the ocean; he was sad in his mind and of grieving spirit. No man knows, to tell the truth, hall-councillors, heroes under heaven, who received that burden. (*Beowulf* lines 32-52)

Other literary and descriptions of boat pyres are detailed in *Beowulf and its Analogues*. *Beowulf* remains the closest source for this passage in *The Lord of the Rings*.

With the image of death-as-journey it is not surprising that boats are important in many forms of the funeral in the prehistoric north. Boat-pyres, funeral barges, boats inside barrows and boat-shaped grave markers abound. The ship as a symbol can be traced back to the earliest times: it was one of the symbols of the fertility god Freyr, and seems to be more associated with the old gods, the Vanir, than with the new gods, the Æsir. The Vanir are also said to have close connections with life in the burial mound, and with the journey to the land of the dead across the sea.

In Gotland graves and cremations were marked in outline with stones. By about 600 A.D. the dead were buried or burned in real boats. At the beginning of the second world war a seventh century boat-burial was discovered at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk.¹ The excavation report was not published until 1949, and Tolkien would have been more familiar with the Gokstad boat and Oseberg ship, found in Norway in 1880 and 1904 respectively. These two ships had been robbed, but considerable amounts of household goods and food remains had been excavated.

Hilda Ellis Davidson compares the Northern rite with the Old Kingdom Egyptian practice of including a model boat within the pyramid, where it was linked with the passage of the sun across the heavens, and a symbol of the fertility of the Nile. Davidson also notes that in a rite associated with Isis at Ostia a ship and crew were sacrificed at the opening of each shipping season. Karen Rockow (*Funeral Customs in Tolkien's Trilogy*) has found the safe-journeying of the boat magical, and is paralleled in the magic boats of Celtic heroes and especially the funeral boat of the Fair Maid of Astolat in Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur*. I would add to these a far more widely known Arthurian image, Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott."

The placing of goods around the body is usually interpreted, when found in an archaeological context, as evidence for belief in an after-life where the goods will be consumed or used by the individual. But Tolkien is

clear that the reunion with Ilúvatar which will be the after-life for mortal men is in no way connected with the physicalities of Middle-earth. Nicholas Penny presents other reasons for the presence of grave-goods:

We do not, of course, now believe that the dead will be able to use any presents we give them. But we do not only give presents because the present itself will be appreciated, but ... to satisfy other people, or our conscience, that we are prepared to make some sacrifice for someone we love — or respect — or fear (8).

Leslie Alcock notes, in addition, that the items associated with the dead may, like the body, be considered "unclean," and be disposed of in like manner (291).

But for the source of this aspect we should look to the other tradition I mentioned, the tradition of medieval nobility. The body is laid-out with what are specifically described as "trophy." The primary meaning of this word was, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*

a structure erected (originally on the field of battle), consisting of arms or other spoils taken from the enemy ...and dedicated to some divinity. Hence applied to similar monuments or memorials in later times.

The heraldic funeral, marshalled by the College of Arms "based on the extremely elaborate and complex proceedings of the public expression of homage paid at the French Court funerals of the late thirteenth century, a time when the crowns of France and England were conjoined" (173). Various trophies, known as "achievements," often symbolic were carried in the procession of the coffin, draped with a pall and bearing a wax effigy. The achievements were then displayed within the church: they could include pennants, sword and helm. A stone-carved monument portrait could also include the achievements. The first recorded use of the word "achievement" is 1548, but the achievements of the Black Prince who died in 1376 remain in Canterbury Cathedral. Nicholas Penny of the Victoria and Albert Museum has written:

The crowns, sceptres, rings and robes with which our mediaeval kings were buried were gradually replaced by imitations of less precious material, and these were, in the late Middle Ages, not buried but simply displayed on the King's funeral effigy and then returned to the royal wardrobe. (8)

The last vestiges of this tradition are present in the military burial where a beret or cap is placed on the coffin as it is carried to the grave.

We can note Aragorn's watch over Boromir's body: the three words used for the activity of sitting by the body on the night before burial in English are "watch," "wake" and "vigil." Sitting by the dead person's body on the eve of the funeral is a practice found in many cultures. It is, I think, significant that both "watch" and "vigil" have a more primary meaning of religious or devotional observance on the night before a festival or ceremony. "Vigil" is in particularly associated with the ceremony where a man keeps

awake and prays for the night before he is knighted. It is Aragorn, the most noble of the company who undertakes to watch Boromir's body. Indeed, the whole funeral is arranged by Aragorn: Legolas had pointed out that they had not tools to dig a grave or heap up a mound, and suggested a cairn, which Gimli pointed out was not possible because there were no suitable stones.² From the descriptions given of normal entombment practices in Minas Tirith given later in the book, we find out that in many respects, Boromir was accorded the kind of funeral he would have had at home, for Boromir was lain in the boat much as he would upon a table.

THÉODEN

Théoden's last words are "Ride now to victory! Bid Éowyn farewell!" Éomer's short elegiac poem speaks of the mound which is to be raised, but in the meantime he asks that the king's companions "bear his body in honour from the field, lest the battle ride over it" (*The Lord of the Rings*, Book V, Chapter 6). The same honour is to be accorded to those who fell with their king. A bier is made for Théoden from spear-truncheons,³ but the seven companions cannot be carried off, and are left behind, guarded by spears. A grave was later dug for Théoden's horse Snowmane, and a stone set up to mark it. The practice of marking burial places with stones or other markers is common to many cultures. War strains the normal practices for disposal of the dead: rites may demand time (and other expenses) which are urgently called for elsewhere, and men may die in combat far from their homelands and the places traditional among their people for burial, cremation or other practices.⁴

While Théoden dies on March 15, his funeral cortege does not set out from Minas Tirith until July 19th, and the funeral finally takes place on August 10th. It is clear that the services of the embalmers of Minas Tirith must have been enlisted.

In the funeral cortege, Théoden is laid on a golden bier, which is born upon a great wain, with his banner going before; "Merry being Thoden's esquire rode upon the wain and kept the arms of the king" (*The Lord of the Rings* Book VI, Chapter 6).

Théoden receives the traditional funeral of a king of Rohan:

...he was laid in a house of stone with his arms and many other fair things that he had possessed, and over him was raised a great mound, covered with green turves of grass and of white evermind...

Then the Riders of the King's House upon white horses made round about the barrow and sang together...

But Merry stood at the foot of the green mound, and he wept, and when the song was ended he arose and cried...

When the burial was over and the weeping of women was stilled, and Théoden was left at last alone in his barrow, the folk gathered to the Golden Hall for the great feast and put away sorrow...

The feast includes a customary drinking of the memory of the kings of the Mark, who are associated with their burial-mounds.

As might be expected, many parts of this description have parallels and sources in the practices of the Anglo-Saxons; while the early, pagan, invaders, especially in the north of England followed the practice of cremation. Cremations were frequently buried within bronze-age barrows. In Kent, which was always at the forefront of fashion, inhumation seems to have been the practice from the start. Sometimes a low, circular mound was raised over the grave. In other parts of the country, no grave was dug, but a mound raised over the body, as seems to have been the case for Théoden.

The closest parallel for the rite is found in *Beowulf*, where Beowulf is laid upon a pyre hung round with weapons. While Beowulf's companions mourn their lord, a woman prophesies evil times. Then his people built a wall around the place where the fire had been, and within this barrow placed all the gold and jewels which had been won from the dragon. Then twelve men rode round the barrow, lamenting and telling of Beowulf's great accomplishments. The funeral cup which Eowyn gives to Éomer is documented in Northern literature: *bragarfull*, the funeral-cup belongs to Bragr, the god of poetry.



The Gokstad Ship

DENETHOR

Denethor makes explicit his reasons for choosing his funeral rites, when messengers come to tell him the first circle of Minas Tirith is on fire, he tells them:

Better to burn sooner than late, for burn we must. Go back to your bonfire! And I? I will now go to my pyre. To my pyre! No tomb for Denethor and Faramir. No tomb! No long slow sleep of death embalmed. We will burn like

heathen kings before ever a ship sailed hither from the West. The West has failed. Go back and burn. (*The Lord of the Rings*, Book V Chapter 4).

The tomb he speaks of is behind the door Fen Hollen (the closed door), so called

for it was kept ever shut save at times of funeral, and only the Lord of the City might use that way, or those who bore the token of the tombs and tended the houses of the dead. Beyond it went a winding road that descended in many curves down to the narrow land under the shadow of Mindolluin's precipice where stood the mansions of the dead Kings and of their Stewards. (*The Lord of the Rings* Book V Chapter 4)

The Stewards have a single house, on Rath Dinen, the Silet Street. The House of the Stewards is:

a wide vaulted chamber ... [containing] many rows of tables, carved of marble; and upon each table lay a sleeping form, hands folded, pillowed upon a stone.

Upon reaching the vacant table awaiting Faramir, Denethor demands that there should be no embalmers, but wood and oil and a torch (*The Lord of the Rings*, Book V, Chapter 4).

The figures are no effigies, but the embalmed bodies. Embalming, when not for purposes of hygiene during transportation or delayed disposal of the body, is indicative of a belief in bodily resurrection or of some other use of the body by the dead. There is no indication elsewhere that Tolkien believed that this was the case for the men of Middle-earth — there is for example, no suggestion that the loss of Boromir's body is in any way prejudicial to his enjoyment of his after-life. I think perhaps Tolkien used the image of uncorrupted bodies to place Denethor's self-burning into stark relief. The opening of saint's tombs and finding their bodies free of decay was a popular exercise for antiquarians: escape from the processes of putrefaction was attributed to virtue. Denethor's reference to the "heathen kings" makes more sense in our history than in Middle-earth's: Tolkien's contemporaries believed that the change from cremation to inhumation was a result of the adoption of Christianity.⁵

Cremation was re-introduced in Britain in the 1880s. However a popular prejudice exists against it to this day. This seems to me to be quite separate from a belief in bodily resurrection, as professed in the Apostles' Creed, but it may have its roots there.

The funerals of Boromir, Théoden and Denethor have one feature in common: they are all the funerals of nobility. Háma's funeral (*The Lord of the Rings*, Book III, Chapter 8) is mentioned only in passing: Théoden throws the first handful of earth upon his grave. This act is part of the Christian service for burial of the dead: in the *Sarum Manual* (the modification of the Roman rite used in England from the fourteenth to mid sixteenth century) the first earth is spaded by the priest, in the form of a cross. Háma is buried "In a grave alone," not in the two mounds

where the men of East Dales and Westfold lie. The use of "grave" in opposition to "mound" suggests that something like the standard inhumation practices of the Anglo-Saxons was followed. Here only a small mound of earth, the soil dug from the grave, is heaped over it, and it will fall back as the body decomposes. Háma, as captain of the King's guard thus receives differentiated burial from the ordinary soldier, but nothing like the burial of nobility.

The nearest thing we get to a common funeral is at the beginning of *The Hobbit*. When Bilbo has been apprized of the true nature of the dwarves' mission his first enquiry is about remuneration:

"Also I should like to know about risks, out-of-pocket expenses, time required a remuneration, and so forth" — by which he meant: "What am I going to get out of it? and am I going to come back alive" (*The Hobbit*, Chapter 1)

The point is properly appreciated by Thorin and Company, who spell it out in their terms:

Terms: cash on delivery, up to and not excluding one fourteenth of total profits (if any); all travelling expenses guaranteed in any event; funeral expenses to be defrayed by us or our representatives, if occasion arises and the matter is not otherwise arranged for. (*The Hobbit*, Chapter 2).

Given that the Shire is largely modelled upon England immediately before its industrialization, we can make some guesses as to the kind of thing that Bilbo would have expected his funeral to comprise: a bier and mourners. The humorous irony is that this type of funeral — like the images conjured by "travelling expenses," images of comfortable lodgings and train-tickets (or at least stage-coach tickets) — cannot be provided on the journey the dwarves have in mind. However, after the battle of the Five Armies, Gandalf is insistent that Bilbo be sought, not just on the basis that he might be injured, but also because a body was needed if the proper postmortem ceremonies were to be performed: so we see the contract *would* have been kept.

The burial of the hobbits killed at the Battle of Bywater in a grave "where later a great stone was set up with a garden about it" is not described in detail (*The Lord of the Rings*, Book VI, Chapter 8). The setting of memorial stones, as noted above, is a widespread tradition, however the planting of the garden recalls the tradition of the war-memorial with its garden of remembrance, a feature common to many English villages after the First World War.

Bilbo, of course, never dies this side of the sea, and the memorable death-rites of *The Hobbit* are Thorin's own.

"They buried Thorin deep beneath the Mountain, and Bard laid the Arkenstone upon his breast.

"There let it lie till the Mountain falls!" he said. "May it bring good fortune to all his folk that dwell here after!"

Upon his tomb the Elvenking then laid Orcrist, the elvish sword that had been taken from Thorin in captivity." (*The Hobbit*, Chapter 18)



The Funeral Cart of William Morris

This is another noble funeral: it has elements which will later appear in Boromir's and Théoden's, but it is a dwarvish event. One point to note is that the placing of the Arkenstone upon his breast corresponds, I think to Nicholas Penny's idea of the sacrificial role of grave goods, which I spoke of earlier. Bilbo "pays his respects" to Thorin. This act derives from the royal traditions of the middle ages: it descended into popular usage by the 16th century. We are left, above all, with a keen awareness of Bilbo's loss. But *The Hobbit* is a children's book, and death is not central to it. Except in the matter of dragons.

Dragons have more to do with death than might at first appear. We know that dragons are particularly associated with fire, and this might be the connection to the dead. In *Beowulf* a dragon lives in a barrow, and in the poem *Voluspá* a flying dragon is named *Niðoggr*: "corpse-tearer." In *Beowulf* we find the poet confused between the dragon and the "guardian": a human spirit who watches the treasure. There is a continuing superstition that the last person buried in a graveyard becomes it's guardian: this belief was recorded in the highlands, in Newcastle and Ireland at the end of the last century (Opie 47). There are also possible literary sources: the fourteenth century Icelandic *Grettir's Saga*, for example.⁶ That the first test of the hero, Frodo, should be combat against such an ambiguous, death-and-barrow associated monster is again reminis-

cent of *Beowulf* where Grendel the first monster is an ambiguous outsider, associated with the evil spirits of the dead (*orcneas*). C.L. Wrenn's note on the word in Clark Hall's translation (revised edition, 1940) reads:

"evil spirits" does not bring out all the meaning. *Orcneas* is compounded of *orc* (from the Lat. *orcus* "the underworld" or Hades) and *neas* "corpses." Necromancy was practised among the ancient Germanii, and was familiar when they invaded. By the art the newly-buried dead bodies could be made to call up the spirits which had inhabited them: but of course this could, from an early Christian point of view, only be done if such spirits had been evil. *Orcneas*, then, were the evil spirits which could be conjured up from the lower world by means of necromancy.

The guardian-spirits are used in *The Lord of the Rings* too, in the Barrow-wights. While the idea of such spirits can be traced back to its sources in Northern literature, the word was invented by Andrew Lang, compiler of fairytales, in the late nineteenth century. The barrow-wights lie on stone slabs: this practice is comparable to that of Minas Tirith (the men of Gondor are the descendents of the Edain who built the mounds).

A similar sort of guardian-spirit is referred to when the light of Minas Morgul is described as a "corpse light" (*The Lord of the Rings*, Book IV, Chapter 8): the light believed,

particularly in Wales, to emanate from the grave, a portent of a coming death or indicating the route of a future funeral. This light is used again in the poem *The Last Ark*, quoted in the essay "A Secret Vice," here as a metaphoric description of the moon. The earlier version of the poem quoted by Christopher uses the image "As a corpse into the grave the moon went down in the west," thus showing that Tolkien is using the corpse-candle which follows the path that the dead body will take to the churchyard.

Fingolfin's power does not vanish with his death, and "No Orc dared ever after pass over the mount of Fingolfin or draw nigh his tomb." Similarly, "no creature of Morgoth trod thereafter upon the earth beneath which the swords of the Eldar and the Edain crumbled into rust"—the Hill of Sorrow, the Hill of Tears heaped up after the Battle of Unnumbered Tears (*The Silmarillion*, "Quenta Silmarillion" XX).

I am not sure quite what kind of creature is being compared to Maedhros (*The Silmarillion*, "Quenta Silmarillion" XVIII) when he is described as "one that returns from the dead." Since this comparison is made during a battle scene, something more substantial than a ghost or spirit is suggested. Perhaps the Anglo-Saxon *Orncneas* lie behind it.

It is also interesting to note the things which Tolkien does not talk about: the preparation of the body, the orientation of the body, the position of the body. The first I believe is omitted because he is not interested in the hygienic aspects of funerals. The only body whose position is described is Thorin: who has his hands crossed over his chest—presumably in an extended position. I assume that Tolkien does not describe this because he saw no need to suggest that anything other than the various extended burials (with hands across the chest, or by the sides, or clasped in prayer) that have been the norm in England for two thousand years.

In Karen Rockow's study (which I regret was only drawn to my attention after I had presented this paper), she concludes:

Tolkien leaves many questions unanswered and it is clear that funeral rites were not among his prime concerns. Nevertheless, it would have been almost impossible for him to have avoided some discussion of the [sic] aspects of death in a work of this scope and length. (25)

While I broadly agree with Rockow's assessment of the importance of *Beowulf*, Old Norse and Celtic Literature as sources for the forms of funeral found in *The Lord of the Rings*, I cannot agree that they are of small importance—the because of the relationship they have to one of Tolkien's prime concerns: death.

While Boromir and Théoden's funerals are so clearly paralleled in almost every feature by Scyld Scefing's and *Beowulf*'s, I do not think that Tolkien expected the reader of *The Lord of the Rings* to pick up on this. Rather, I think he used it, and it is so powerful because the *Beowulf*-poet

was describing ceremonies which worked. They contained opportunity for the anger of grief, for recall and celebration of the deeds of the dead, for expression of hope in the future of the dead and the living.

Tolkien's work is satisfying because even if it does not directly answer the big questions, the authorial voice sounds as if he knows the answers. In Tolkien's writing, as in his life, death is the greatest eucatastrophe. Whether or not any after-life is envisaged by the living, death is an individual and certain challenge to the long defeat. This is why, I believe, reading Tolkien is so spiritually uplifting. Richard Purtill wrote: "Those who do not accept Christianity will see Tolkien at best as an artist giving new imaginative expression to an outmoded view of the universe." (139) But Tolkien himself received a letter from:

a man who classified himself as 'an unbeliever, or at best a man of belatedly and dimly dawning religious feeling ... but you,' he said, 'create a world in which some sort of faith seems to be everywhere without visible source....' (Letters, N°328, page 413)

I hope I have shown that while working in a contemporary Christian framework, Tolkien has drawn on deeper, older practices and beliefs, which naturally prompt a spiritual response in those with even "dimly dawning" feeling. Myles Dillon and Norma Chadwick define Celtic literature in ways that show why Tolkien's work is sometimes called "Celtic," and capture the essence of the style with which he writes of death: it is "religious thought in the heroic mould," wherein: "No question of guilt, or punishment or judgement in an afterlife ever disturbs the serenity." (158)

I would like to leave you with a final image⁷: it is of Tolkien's own grave. English readers, especially, like to visit this place: the Tolkien Society lays a wreath there each year. In 1992 they and The Mythopoeic Society, together with some other societies commissioned these panels which were made using a traditional midlands craft whereby flower petals, small stones and shells are pressed into slabs of clay to make pictures. It is thought to have its roots in prehistoric well-worship, and is still used to day in Christian well-blessing ceremonies. The method was chosen as the only one capable of displaying the heraldic designs of Beren and Lúthien, but the idea of using the technique at the grave of the "well" of a strong stream of fantasy literature is intriguing. Certainly, a representative of the Folklore Society wanted to come and record the plaques. I end with this picture of a real grave because in his letters Tolkien is clear that the death and immortality he writes of in Middle-earth are not separated from death and immortality in our own world. ➤

Notes

1. Debate about the absence of a body in the Sutton Hoo ship, noted by Rockow (9) has subsequently been attributed, by most archaeologists,

to the soil, which had not preserved bone at all well elsewhere on the site, a huge cemetery.

2. Legolas may have been recalling the cairn of Fingolfin when he made his suggestion — see *The Silmarillion*, "Quenta Silmarillion" XVIII.
3. The *Oxford English Dictionary* does not include these weapons.
4. Indeed, the enemy can take the place of the normal community and provide the funeral. In The Battle of Unnumbered Tears, for example, it is Morgoth's orcs who pile up the men and weapons of the Eldar and the Edain (*The Silmarillion*, "Quenta Silmarillion" XX).
5. These two practices, along with the decrease in the number and variety of grave-goods, and changes in jewelry fashion, were all part of a more general trend in Anglo-Saxon culture of adopting the customs in vogue among their more southerly neighbors, and the causality of adopting particular parts of the southern culture is not currently identifiable.
6. Translations of this and other possible sources can be found in *Beowulf and Its Analogues*.
7. This paper was originally accompanied by a number of slides. Three of these are included in the printed version. The photograph of the Tolkien grave was taken by Glen GoodKnight.

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EDITORIAL NOTE

On frumsceafte Ilúvatar, þæt is Ealfæder, gescöp eal þing, 7 þá Valar, þæt is þa Mihtigan (þe sume menn sibban for godu heoldon) cōmon on þas worolde. Hie soinnodon nigon: Manwe, Ulmo, Aule Orome, Tulkas, Mandos, Lorien, Melko. (*The Shaping of Middle-earth*, p. 285)

Translation:

At the beginning Ilúvatar, that is Allfather, made all things, and the Valar, or Powers, came into the world. These are nine: Manwë, Aulë, Orome, Tulkas, Ossë Lórien, Mandos and Melko. (*The Shaping of Middle-earth*, p. 292)

The above is meant to partially demonstrate the new linguistic capabilities of *Mythlore*, thanks to the generous donation of a particular Benefactor. Previously the old Anglo-Saxon letters such as ð þ and 3 had to be hand lettered. The long and short vowel marks, such as sēt and sēð, had to also be hand lettered. See the passages on pages 18 and 46 for examples. With the new phonetic fonts, we are capable of symbols such as [wə] σ δαδ̄εθωαγγξυα δδ̄αυβ and η, among many others.

This is to assure writers, whether they are quoting Old English texts or using linguists' symbols, *Mythlore* should be able to typeset the text submitted.