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Ben Reinhard
Christendom College

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TOLKIEN'S LOST KNIGHTS

BEN REINHARD

TOLKIEN IS OFTEN CONSIDERED A STOLIDLY TRADITIONAL and even reactionary author, and for good reason. Tolkien himself seemed almost to welcome the labels, and his debt to traditional models is obvious to all. But however reliable the Tolkien-as-traditionalist trope may be in general, it can be misleading in particulars. Taken uncritically, it can blind readers to the author's originality and willingness to depart from the traditions in which he wrote. We find one such departure in Tolkien's treatment of chivalric romance. Though Tolkien draws heavily on the medieval romantic tradition in his fiction, he displaces the knight—the archetypal hero of that tradition—from his central narrative role. Knights appear but seldom in Tolkien's larger legendarium (and never as protagonists); the knightly ethos of chivalry is routinely downplayed, criticized, and deconstructed. Tolkien's treatment of chivalry is one of his most daring breaks from tradition; it is a tribute to his creative power and the success of his world-building that few readers mark the departure. But a departure it remains, nevertheless—and one that begs for an explanation.

In this essay, I attempt to provide one by charting a middle course between those scholars who see knighthood and chivalry everywhere in Tolkien's work and those who see them nowhere at all. This essay has three goals: first, to examine the ways in which Tolkien rejected and critiqued the chivalric tradition; second, to suggest reasons why he did so; and, third, to explore the significance of that rejection for his work as a whole. Ultimately, I suggest that Tolkien replaces a defunct chivalry with a reconstructed model of heroism simultaneously more Christian and more modern than its medieval source.

Before examining precisely how and why Tolkien downplays knighthood in his fiction, it is important to establish just how unusual this decision is. Put simply, knights *should* be in Tolkien's fiction—they are all but demanded on generic, contextual, and even personal grounds. To begin with genre: with Lewis, Tolkien is recognized as one of the great heirs of the medieval romance tradition and one of its chief popularizers; indeed, Helen Cooper names the two as “the authors who kick-started the modern equivalent of the romance” (*English Romance* 4). But as Christopher Dawson points out, the historical growth of romance as a genre was essentially coterminous with the development of chivalry (*Medieval Essays* 189), to the extent that it is almost a

contradiction in terms to imagine a romance without its knight: Lancelot, Gawain, Redcross, or even Don Quixote. As Cooper has it, "Romance is inseparable from ideas of chivalry, and from the primary exponent of chivalry, the knight" (*English Romance* 41). When the 19th century romantics revived the genre, they naturally gravitated towards knighthood; Scott is, in this matter, the romantic *par excellence*. Chivalry features prominently throughout his literary career, from his very earliest works (such as the *Lay of the Last Minstrel*) to his mature novels (such as *Ivanhoe*). For all this, his most important comment on the topic came in his essay on chivalry for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Here, Scott defines chivalry as the blending of "military valour with the strongest passions which actuate the human mind, the feelings of devotion and those of love" — something never achieved before the Middle Ages ("Chivalry" 10). This new creation is, for Scott, one of the most important cultural developments of the medieval world; indeed, "[e]xcepting only the change which flowed from the introduction of the Christian religion, we know of no cause which has produced such general and permanent difference betwixt the ancients and moderns" (3).

Scott's sentiments find an echo closer to Tolkien's own day in the writings of C.S. Lewis. Like Scott, Lewis views chivalry as "the special contribution of the Middle Ages to our culture," and one of the most important differences between modernity and antiquity ("Necessity of Chivalry" 13). And, like Scott, Lewis sees chivalry as an artful combination of natural contraries: "The knight is a man of blood and iron, a man familiar with the sight of smashed faces and the ragged stumps of lopped-off limbs; he is also a demure, almost a maiden-like, guest in hall, a gentle, modest, unobtrusive man" (13). But Lewis goes a step farther than Scott. Where Scott had maintained a critical ambivalence towards the institution—roundly criticizing chivalry for perceived extravagances, abuses, and (above all) Romish superstition—Lewis presents it as necessary for the preservation of human society (see "Necessity of Chivalry," 15; a similar suggestion is made in the conclusion to his *Preface to Paradise Lost*, 137). This fascination with chivalry is borne out throughout Lewis's fiction: knights (both human and animal) dash through Narnia; the heroes of *That Hideous Strength* are presented as a kind of 20th-century Camelot, complete with Merlin and a Pendragon; John of *The Pilgrim's Regress* becomes, by the end of his story, a dragon-slaying knight. Other members of the Inklings demonstrated a similar interest in chivalry: Williams had knight-heroes for his Grail-quest in *War in Heaven* and his collection of Arthurian poetry, while Barfield experimented with Arthurian drama.¹ In many ways, Tolkien's experience in the Inklings was merely a continuation of a lifelong fascination with chivalric

¹ For substantial discussion of these and other related works, see Sørina Higgins, ed., *The Inklings and King Arthur*.

medievalism: Tolkien compared the TCBS to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (See John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War*, 14). Indeed, there were times when the young Tolkien seemed almost a knight himself: he had a strong love for horses and—for a short time—served as “a *de facto* breaker-in” for King Edward’s Horse (Garth 24).

Given the pervasive influence of chivalry on the post-Romantic English imagination in general and his own social circles in particular, it is no surprise to find the idea reflected in many of Tolkien’s writings. The greatest English romance, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, was a fixture of Tolkien’s career for nearly 30 years: his 1925 edition of the poem helped to secure his election to the Rawlinson and Bosworth professorship, and his translation of the same was broadcast by the BBC in 1953. He experimented with an Arthurian poem in his own alliterative verse, now edited as *The Fall of Arthur*; this poetic venture was praised by the legendary medievalist R.W. Chambers (see *Fall of Arthur* 10). Other, lesser works—his translation of *Sir Orfeo*, for instance, or his work on Chaucer—similarly suggest at least some abiding scholarly interest in the genre. Admittedly, some critics have suggested that Tolkien despised chivalric romance (see Michael D. Thomas, “Unlikely Knights,” 81)—but given the vast amounts of time he devoted to preserving and transmitting the genre, this seems unlikely, to say the least.

But Tolkien did more than re-present and reimagine medieval chivalric romance: he went so far as to introduce knighthood into works where it had no proper place. In his translation of *Beowulf*, Hrothgar’s Heorot is so populated by anachronistic and linguistically imprecise knights that it begins to sound very like Arthur’s Camelot: Wulfgar becomes a “knight in proud array,” Hrothgar sits “amid his company of knights,” and Beowulf is hailed as “this good knight”—all in the span of only two pages (Tolkien, *Beowulf*, 22-3)!² Tolkien defended his use of the chivalric register in his essay “On Translating *Beowulf*”:

There is no reason for avoiding *knights, esquires, courts, and princes*. The men of these legends were conceived as kings of chivalrous courts, and members of societies of noble knights, real Round Tables. [...] The imagination of the author of *Beowulf* moved upon the threshold of Christian chivalry, if indeed it had not already passed within. (57)

² The actual Old English terms translated are, respectively, *wlonc hælēð* (*Beo.* 332, proud or splendid warrior), *eorla gedriht* (*Beo.* 356, troop of noblemen or warriors), and the simple substantive adjective *þæm godan* (*Beo.* 384 “to the good [one or man]).

Most Anglo-Saxonists would disagree with Tolkien's assertions here: Heorot is not Camelot, or even on its borders. Nevertheless, the gravitational pull of chivalry on Tolkien's imagination was so powerful that even his *Beowulf* was unable to escape it.

From all of this, the impact of chivalry on Tolkien is clear. But when we turn from Tolkien's social circles and scholarship to his imaginative world, we are in for a shock: the knights that loom so large in the former are almost completely absent in the latter. In *The Hobbit*, knights are absent, full stop. The main character is, as Tom Shippey has pointed out, an upper-middle class Victorian traipsing through the world of medieval romance (see *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, 5-7 and 36-45). This is true as far as it goes. But it is worth noting that none of the *supporting* heroic characters—Gandalf, Thorin, Bard, or Beorn—have anything of chivalry about them, either; nor do any of the minor characters. If the heroes of *The Hobbit* belong to any medieval genre, it is—as Lewis noted in his “On Stories” (104)—the saga. When Azog is finally slain, it is by a literary descendant of Bothvar Bjarki; Smaug, of course, falls to Bard the Bowman, and not to any knight in shining armor. Knights are similarly absent from most of the short stories (*Smith of Wootton Major*, *Leaf by Niggle*, and so on) and from the great bulk of *The Lord of the Rings*.

So successfully does Tolkien downplay the role of knights in his works that some scholars have been led to significantly overstate the case: Thomas claims that “the word ‘knight’ never appears in *Lord of the Rings*” (“Unlikely Knights” 82). This is simply not true: Éowyn tells her brother to make Merry “a knight of the Riddermark” (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] V.8.868) in the Houses of Healing, and Merry and Pippen are eager to be recognized as “knights of the City and of the Mark” (VI.4.955) at the Field of Cormallen. Indeed, knights occur (with limited frequency) throughout the whole of *The Return of the King*. The knights of Dol Amroth man the walls of Minas Tirith, ride out on sorties, and quite literally wear shining armor: they appear as “knights in full harness” as they arrive in Minas Tirith (V.1.771); later, Imrahil uses his “bright-burnished vambrace” to detect Éowyn's breath on the Pelennor Fields (V.6.845). Similarly, the Riders of Rohan are described in terms strongly redolent of traditional chivalry: *Rider* is of course directly cognate with German *Ritter*, and the cavalry of Rohan are explicitly called “knights” at several points in the narrative. Indeed, the clash of the Rohirrim with the scimitar-wielding Southrons reads like something from a romance of the Crusades: “Great was the clash of their meeting. But the white fury of the Northmen burned the hotter, and more skilled was their knighthood with long spears and bitter” (V.6.839).

Knights are, then, undeniably present. Thomas is right, however, that chivalry is downplayed—and it is worth noting in this context just how far the “knights” of Rohan are from the medieval knight of the popular imagination.

Tolkien asserted that the Rohan is a ‘heroic’—not chivalric—civilization (see *Letters* 275-76, #210); partially for this reason, their language, poetry, and culture are all modelled on that of Anglo-Saxon England.³ In many ways, the Anglo-Saxon heritage is reflected in their manner of warfare as well: though the Riders charge into battle on horseback, they—like Harold at Hastings and Beorhtnoth at Maldon—dismount to form a shield-wall in the face of overwhelming odds (see *LotR* V.6.847). Moreover, as Michael Drout has noted, the primary models for the Riders of Rohan were not the knights of medieval romance but the much older *equitatus Gothorum*—the barbarian cavalry of Goths and Alans (see Drout, “A Mythology,” 239). Finally, while knights are present in *Return of the King*, it is important to note the precise manner in which they are presented. Both the knights of Rohan and Dol Amroth are presented *en masse* and in collective action, never as the isolated knight-hero of medieval romance. Knights there may be, but they are never allowed to become the main focus; instead, they provide the backdrop against which other, non-chivalric characters act.

The issue comes into particularly clear focus when we consider two of the most naturally chivalric characters in the romance, Faramir and Aragorn. Though Aragorn is the greater hero, Faramir is arguably more central to Tolkien’s thought—and so we begin with him. The vocabulary and imagery of chivalry hang thick about the young hero. He is courteous, pious, grave, wise, gentle, and merciful; able, as Beregond says in *Return of the King*, to “master both beasts and men” (V.4.809). Moreover, like a proper Lewisian knight, he unites the warring qualities of ferocity and gentleness in his person. He is both courageous and courteous, skilled in battle and gentle in court; “wise and learned in the scrolls of lore and song [...] and yet a man of hardihood and swift judgement in the field” (V.1.766).⁴ Indeed, Faramir himself explicitly criticizes other models of heroic action, in terms Lewis himself would have approved of,⁵ giving what Tolkien describes as “very sound reflections [...] on martial glory and true glory” (*Letters* 79, #66). He rejects the seductive temptation of the battlefield glory as an end in itself—“I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love

³ To cite only a few of the abundant available examples: “Where now the horse and the Rider” (*LotR* III.6.508) is a reworking of the Old English *Wanderer*, lines 91-6; Tolkien notes in *Letters* 381, #297 that all the names in Rohan are drawn from Old English; and the ascent to Meduseld in *Two Towers* (III.6.506-509) is drawn almost point for point from Beowulf’s ascent to Heorot in *Beowulf* 300 ff.

⁴ Tolkien’s description of Faramir in *Letters* 323, #244, could almost have been lifted from Lewis’s “Necessity of Chivalry”: he is “personally courageous and decisive, but also modest, fair-minded and scrupulously just, and very merciful.”

⁵ Indeed, the chapter “Faramir” was read to Lewis and Williams in May 1944, and “rec’d fullest approbation” (*Letters* 79, #67).

only that which they defend" (*LotR* IV.5.672)—though he notes that Gondor has largely departed from this high ideal. "We now love war and valor," he laments, "as things good in themselves" (IV.5.679). The importance of the principle articulated here cannot be overstated. Faramir is, after all, the closest thing we have to Tolkien's own mouthpiece in his work,⁶ and he gives what seems to be the fullest expression of Tolkien's theory of heroism. In his rejection of martial glory for its own sake, Faramir transcends the Northern heroic ethos described in "*Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*" and embodied in fiction by the Rohirrim and Boromir ("More like to the swift sons of Eorl than to the grave Men of Gondor," as Éomer says [*LotR* III.2.436]),⁷ adopting instead the Christian understanding of warfare articulated by Augustine and Aquinas. For Lewis, this combination of old heroic courage with civilizing Christianity was almost the definition of chivalry, and there are hints that Tolkien agreed, at least in part.⁸ Based on his theory of heroism, then, Faramir seems to be not merely a knight, but something like the ideal of knighthood itself.

Other aspects of his character support this conclusion. Faramir is nearly as scrupulous about his sworn word as the hero of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: he "would not snare even an orc with a falsehood" (IV.5.664), he treats his casually spoken word as seriously as a vow (IV.5.681), and he realizes that Frodo cannot break his troth with Gollum, whatever prudence might seem to dictate (IV.5.676-7). At times it seems almost as though his character were drawn as an illustration of Gawain's Pentangle: he is pious (as seen in the pre-meal blessing in Henneth Annûn, IV.5.676), generous (his gifts to Frodo and Sam, IV.7.694), and friendly and courteous throughout. He is moreover meek and humble, willing to stand aside and allow the higher-born Aragorn to ascend to the throne of Gondor. Finally, like Aragorn, Faramir's story ends with a happy marriage to a royal lady and the foundation of a new dynasty. The conclusion is inescapable: Faramir, Captain of Gondor, is a knight.

Or at least he should be. Tolkien, however, deliberately closes this option off for the reader. Faramir is no knight in shining armor: he is the captain of the rangers of Ithilien, "clad in green and brown of varied hues" (IV.4.657). He and his men fight on foot with bow and spear, and they attack the men of

⁶ See *Letters* 232fn, #180: "As far as any character is 'like me' it is Faramir." The same letter explicitly states that, in some matters, at least, Faramir speaks for the author.

⁷ Tolkien identifies "naked will and courage" as the essence of Northern heroism; in the case of godless Vikings, this became the exaltation of "martial heroism as its own end" (26). While he retains the will and courage, Faramir follows the classical and Christian just war tradition in uniting it to a higher end. By a curious turn, his rejection has been interpreted as a particularly *modern* innovation (see Croft 43, 101).

⁸ See especially "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" 20 and n. 16: Tolkien notes that the pagan heroic *Beowulf* has been infused with elements of the Christian imagination.

Harad in a thoroughly unchivalric guerilla ambushade (we will see below that Tolkien regarded “sporting” battles as one of the characteristic excesses of a degenerate chivalry). Having defeated the enemy, he and his men melt back into the forest “flitting in and out of the shadows” on their way back to their refuge of Henneth Annûn, hidden in a cave behind the waterfall; later, they vanish “almost in the twinkling of an eye” (IV.7.695). This close connection to the natural world of Ithilien was, indeed, a defining characteristic of Faramir from the beginning: the character came to Tolkien’s mind unbidden, simply “walking into the woods of Ithilien” (*Letters* 79, #66). In all of this—clothing, weaponry, tactics, and refuge, Faramir and his rangers participate in a medieval archetype distinct from (and in many ways opposed to) the courtly knight.⁹ They belong to the Greenwood of the medieval outlaw: Hereward the Wake, Adam Bell, and Robin Hood are their natural companions. In Faramir, Lewis’s ideal knight has become an outlaw.

If not Faramir, what of Aragorn? More than any other character in *Lord of the Rings*, Aragorn participates in the great tradition of medieval chivalric romance: he is the lost heir to a kingdom and the ‘fair unknown’; he falls in love with an unattainably superior beloved guarded by a protective father whose approval he must win before being permitted to wed; he proves his worth through “great journeys and errandries” (*LotR* App.B.1090). He is aided by his invincible and magical sword (paired, like Excalibur in Malory, with an equally wonderful scabbard), and simultaneously wins both his bride and his ancestral kingdom. His friends are then installed as client kings around him, and he rules to the end of his days in peace and prosperity. In all of this, Aragorn is the direct descendant of the great chivalric heroes of medieval romance: Arthur, Gareth, Horn, and Perceval—to name only a few. Scholars have been quick to pick up on this fact: Verlyn Flieger calls Aragorn “a traditional epic/romance hero” and claims that his romantic and chivalric attributes are essential to his character (“Frodo and Aragon,” 142 and 148, respectively); to Michael Thomas, Aragorn is a parallel to “the ideal knights of ancient lore” (“Unlikely Knights” 85); to Helen Armstrong, he is a “paladin” (“Aragorn” 23). Here, at least, Tolkien has given us a knight.

Upon closer examination, however, it is clear that Aragorn has received precisely the same treatment as Faramir. In the first place, despite the clear chivalric overtones of the Aragorn-Arwen story—or indeed, as we will see, *because* of them—the story is largely suppressed in the main body of *The Lord of*

⁹ For a discussion of the outlaw archetype and its fundamental opposition to chivalry, see Maurice Keen, *The Outlaws of Medieval Legend*, especially pp. 2-3. Carter interprets these same elements (green clothing, longbows, and guerilla warfare) as reflective of World War I-era soldiery (89-93); for a variety of reasons, I believe my reading strikes closer to the mark.

the Rings: the great bulk of it is exiled to Appendix A.I.v, and what remains is seen through the eyes of the decidedly non-knightly (and occasionally uncomprehending) hobbits. So successfully does Tolkien downplay the story that the marriage of Aragorn and Arwen appears (to the careless and casual reader, at least) to come as a complete surprise. Aragorn-as-knight is pushed aside; Strider the ranger dominates the main action. As a ranger, he is as far from a knight as he can possibly be: like Faramir, we first meet him clad in the green of the medieval outlaw (*LotR* I.9.156); he has “rather a rascally look” (I.10.164), and his reputation in Bree matches. However fair he may feel, he certainly *looks* foul. And even when his nobility is finally revealed, Tolkien makes sure that the vagabond Strider is never far from the reader’s mind. The effect is heightened by the fact that the hobbits persist in addressing him as Strider—much to the consternation of more properly chivalric characters like Imrahil (V.8.863). But the hobbits’ perspective dominates the narrative, and even in Aragorn’s great triumph at Cormallen the reader is forcibly returned to his disreputable appearance in the Prancing Pony (VI.6.953-4). The whole effect is summed up neatly in a scene in *The Two Towers*:

He wrapped his grey cloak about him, hiding his mail shirt, and stretched out his long legs. Then he lay back and sent from his lips a thin stream of smoke.

‘Look!’ said Pippin. ‘Strider the Ranger has come back!’

‘He has never been away,’ said Aragorn. (III.9.563)

Because of this, Aragorn can never be, fully and finally, a knight: the Ranger never leaves.

But Tolkien does more than diminish the natural knightliness of certain characters: he directly critiques the institution of chivalry through others. Of all the members of the Fellowship, it is Boromir who most clearly embodies the chivalric ideal. He certainly bears the most traditional knightly gear: long sword, great shield, and war-horn (III.3.279). This ancestral horn, cloven in two at his death, is obviously drawn from the literature of chivalry; indeed, it connects him directly with Roland, the greatest knight of the matter of France. Lest we should miss the point, Boromir’s model of heroism is repeatedly contrasted with that of Aragorn and the rangers. He defiantly blows his great horn as the company sets out from Rivendell, claiming he “will not go forth as a thief in the night” (III.3.279)—that is, as Aragorn would have. This contrast is made even more explicit in the Council of Elrond: Boromir speaks of Gondor, “bulwark of the West” (II.2.245); Aragorn responds by noting the less exalted and more thankless role played by the rangers of the North:

Lonely men are we, Rangers of the Wild, hunters—but hunters ever of the servants of the Enemy [...]. 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. (II.2.248)

And it is the humble and scorned Ranger who passes the test, while Boromir’s obsession with the strength of his people is closely connected to his temptation and eventual fall. Nor is this an isolated instance in Tolkien’s fiction: the same tension between the “honorable” and self-glorifying hero against the “ambush and stealth and secret arrow” of Nargothrond is played out, with even more horrible results, in the story of Túrin (see *Silmarillion*, 211 ff.)

Even greater moral problems occur when we consider Eärnur, the last king of Gondor and perhaps the most unambiguously knightly character in the larger mythos. Unlike the great majority of Tolkien’s heroes, who tend to fight on foot, Eärnur is described as leading the *cavalry* of Gondor in battle.¹⁰ Moreover, he attempts to face the Witch King, on horse, in single combat (*LotR* App.A.iv.1051), and throughout his reign, the king’s “only pleasure was in fighting, or in the exercise of arms” (1052). His chivalric pride also leads to his doom: the Witch King challenges him repeatedly to single combat, taunting him and questioning his courage. When finally Eärnur accepts, he rides “with a small escort of *knights*” (1052, emphasis mine) to do single combat with the Lord of Minas Morgul—where he is betrayed and dies, and the line of kings in Gondor comes to an end. To modify “The Monsters and the Critics,” it is clear that the wages of chivalry—in *Lord of the Rings*, at least—is death.

So far, we have been speaking of knights merely as they appear (or fail to appear) in Tolkien’s major fiction. But when we turn from Middle-earth to Tolkien’s lesser fiction, the picture changes considerably as silence and implicit criticism give way to full-blown satire. Nowhere is this more clear than in *Farmer Giles of Ham*. The knights in *Farmer Giles* cut a frankly ridiculous figure: vain, silly, and utterly ineffectual. When the dragon arises and devastates the countryside, they repeatedly refuse to do anything about the matter, and offer instead an increasingly absurd series of excuses—including fear of offending the royal cook (*Farmer Giles* 143)! When they finally *do* hunt the dragon, they proceed with minstrels, squires, and a baggage train. In all this, they are repeatedly contrasted with the good sense and practicality of the plain farmer Giles.

¹⁰ In a similar stroke, all the Gondothlim fight on foot with the sole exception of the fat and cowardly Salgant, who fawns on the traitor Meglin. See J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fall of Gondolin*, 75.

Nowhere is the contrast clearer than in the farmer's meetings with the dragon. In their first meeting, Chrysophylax attempts to shame the farmer by reminding him that a *proper* knight would "issue a challenge in such cases, after a proper exchange of titles and credentials" (43). And indeed the knights do attempt to do so when they come to the dragon's lair—but Chrysophylax charges before they finish, killing several "before they could even issue their formal challenge to battle" (59). For all this, perhaps the most cutting comment on chivalry comes during the king's first visit to Ham: he gives a long speech praising "the ancient courage" of his people, but the knights fail to notice: they "were talking among themselves about the new fashion in hats" (50). Not for nothing does Jane Chance describe *Farmer Giles* as a satire on "an effete and selfish chivalry" (*Tolkien's Art* 130).

Amidst all these criticisms, however, one deserves special notice. When Giles defeats Chrysophylax for the second time, he demands that the dragon hand over his treasure, but allows him to retain a small portion for himself. By contrast, the narrator notes, "a knight would have stood out for the whole hoard and got a curse laid upon it" (64). Taken on the surface, this seems to be just another of the story's cheap shots against chivalry: the shrewd but merciful farmer triumphing over the fecklessly haughty knight. But something is off here. Wringing every last penny from a defeated foe is *not* a characteristically knightly behavior, and I struggle to think of any parallel for this scene in the world of medieval romance. What is unprecedented in romance, however, does find a notable model in saga literature: in both the *Skaldskaparmal* and the *Volsunga Saga*, Loki captures the dwarf Andvari and extorts from him every ring he owns; as a result, Andvari curses his whole treasure—exactly as Chrysophylax would have done. But the Norse trickster god Loki—the inspiration for the knights in this scene—is about as far from chivalric as any character could possibly be. Put simply, in Tolkien's fiction, knights are held responsible even for the sins they did not commit.

And so it is that the most prominent medievalist of the 20th century excludes "the special contribution of the Middle Ages to our culture" from his imaginary world, and the great modern popularizer of Romance separates the "inseparable" element from it. He avoids, downplays, and criticizes knightly and chivalric ideals consistently throughout his published fiction: we are clearly in the presence of one those oppositions and contradictions that, as Verlyn Flieger argues, give Tolkien's works their power and imaginative unity ("Arch" 18). But while Flieger encourages us to simply take Tolkien's contradictions as they are, I cannot resist at least an attempt at an explanation. Tolkien's later academic writings—and especially his essay "Ofermod"—offer at least some guidance here. In this essay, Tolkien examines what are arguably the most hotly debated lines in the Old English poetic canon:

Đa se eorl ongan for his ofermode
alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode. (*Maldon* 89-90)¹¹

The lines refer to the 10th-century *eorl* Beorhtnoth who, when challenged by invading Vikings to a “fair fight,” allowed the enemy to establish a foothold on account of his *ofermod*. But what does the word *ofermod* mean? Explanations have ranged widely, but for Tolkien, the answer is clear: *ofermod* is nothing other than pride. But not just any pride: it is specifically *chivalric* pride. As Tolkien has it, “this element of pride, in the form of the desire for honour and glory, in life and after death, tends to grow, to become a chief motive, driving a man beyond the bleak heroic necessity to excess—to chivalry” (“Ofermod” 20). That is, chivalry is a pride and desire for glory grown to excessive proportions; this chivalry leads Beorhtnoth to his death. As Tolkien has it, such chivalry is Beowulf’s downfall, too: it is chivalry that motivates him to face the dragon alone, and chivalry that leads to his kingdom’s ultimate ruin (23). By the parameters Tolkien establishes here, chivalry is defined as *at least* an excess and probably a vice—the prideful extension of “Northern courage” he had praised in “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*” (20). On this definition, most of Tolkien’s fallen characters (certainly Boromir, and to a degree Denethor or even Saruman) can be said to have fallen through chivalry.¹² We have come far indeed from the idealized masculine perfection of Scott and Lewis.

Of course, there is a danger to make too much of this: Tolkien is not wholly consistent in his treatment of chivalry. In his essay on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for instance, Tolkien speaks favorably of the chivalric ideals of courtesy and of the “gentle courtly knight” at the poem’s center (“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” 99); in his translation of the same, he inaccurately (and inexplicably) includes ‘chivalry’ as one of the virtues represented on the hero’s shield.¹³ Moreover, Tolkien’s negative attitudes towards chivalry are almost certainly linked to his own natural pessimism. Where Lewis had imagined the young R.A.F. pilots of the second world war as modern-day knights (“Necessity of Chivalry,” 16); Tolkien compared them to “Hobbits learning to ride Nazgûl-birds ‘for the liberation of the Shire’” (*Letters* 115, #100). But however we may

¹¹ “Then the earl began, on account of his *ofermod*, to allow the hateful people too much land.” Translation mine.

¹² For a helpful survey of the impact of chivalric *ofermod* in Tolkien’s thought, see Colin J. Cutler, “Turning Back the Tides: The Anglo-Saxon Vice of *Ofermod* in Tolkien’s *Fall of Arthur*.”

¹³ At line 653 of the poem, the poet speaks of the hero’s idealized *cortaysye*—courtesy. It is an important word, as courtesy is explicitly held up as a major factor in Gawain’s temptation in the third fitt. Tolkien translates the word as *chivalry*, even though under no metrical or alliterative compulsion to do so.

try to soften it, Tolkien's scathing criticism of the institution of chivalry in "Ofermod"—in an age when everyone from Lewis to General MacArthur admired it—cannot be ignored.

What are we to make of this? Several scholars have argued that Tolkien's treatment of heroism is rooted in his own experiences in the Great War: the War destroyed European notions of chivalry—so the argument goes—and so new models of heroism were necessary.¹⁴ Steven Brett Carter gives a representative example of such argument: Tolkien provides "a new definition of the heroic model for the twentieth century in contrast to the ancient heroic ideals which are dissolved in World War I" (90). There may be some truth to this: Tolkien's general hatred for "the utter stupid waste of war" (*Letters* 75, #64) is repeatedly attested in his letters. And it is entirely possible that his particular hatred of excessive heroism was informed by the shattering realities of the War—though Tolkien himself downplayed the influence of the war on his fiction (*Letters* 303, #226), Lewis suggested that we may detect echoes of the Great War on the War of the Ring (see "Dethronement of Power" 14). But arguments such as this must be approached with caution. In the first place, the assumption that World War I destroyed the European ideal of chivalry is—as Allen Frantzen has conclusively demonstrated—simply not true. "Chivalry did not die with World War I," Frantzen argues—it endured through the 1920s to the present day (8). And it endured in Tolkien: John Garth notes that Tolkien stood solidly *against* the "disenchanted view" presented by Wilfrid Owens and the other war poets (302-3). Because of this, such arguments run the risk of misrepresenting Tolkien's complex thought on the subject of chivalry. Tolkien rejects the *term* 'chivalry,' identifying it with the worst excesses of the heroic tradition, and he rejects some of its characteristic trappings. However (as our examination of Faramir and Aragorn has shown)—he does not reject the *substance* of chivalry in its entirety. Or, to put it another way, if Tolkien does provide a new model of heroism, it is a new model firmly rooted in—not divorced from—the old chivalric precedent. This stubborn adherence to traditional models is essential to the success of his artistic project and, in Croft's formulation, "an integral part of the task of sub-creation" (23).

But if Tolkien does rely on chivalric precedent, why does he use the term "chivalry" as a catch-all for everything he dislikes in the heroic tradition, and why is he so careful to avoid unequivocal, positive depictions of chivalry in his books? We can find some sense if we turn to Tolkien's personal biases.

¹⁴ See Janet Brennan Croft, *War in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*; Steven Brett Carter, "Faramir and the Heroic Ideal of the Twentieth Century"; and (to an extent) Rebekah Long, "Fantastic Medievalism and the Great War in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*." See also Cutler, 6 and 11.

Though Tolkien occasionally uses a very broad definition of chivalry—he sees the institution arising as early as the 8th century (see, for instance, “Oferrmod” 22 and “On Translating Beowulf” 57), where most scholars would place it in the 12th or (at earliest) the 11th—he can hardly have been unaware of the ordinary usage of the word. And, in ordinary usage, the term is inevitably entangled with the high medieval chivalric ethos: the armored warrior on horseback and courtly love and the French culture that brought them both about.

But this common definition of chivalry would obviously have conflicted with Tolkien’s scholarly and patriotic preferences—and, indeed, prejudices. Humphrey Carpenter’s biography attests to Tolkien’s lifelong aversion to things French (food, language, and culture)—an aversion that began in early childhood and grew throughout his life (see *Tolkien*, 22, 67). When combined with Tolkien’s career as a student of Anglo-Saxon—that is, the language of England from before the Norman Conquest—this natural distaste became grounds for an enduring hostility; as Carpenter has it, the Conquest “pained [Tolkien] as much as if had happened in his lifetime” (129; see also Shippey, *Road* 30-2). Tolkien himself admitted to his dislike of French in a 1958 letter, and even acknowledged that his distaste for the language had “some relation” to his fiction (*Letters* 288, # 213).

We may never know the full nature of that relationship, but it is possible to identify a few of its salient features. As Tom Shippey has pointed out, the history of the Shire “correspond[s] point for point with the history of early England” (*Author* 9). This claim has merit: the Fallohide brothers cross the Brandywine with their followers in the waning days of the North Kingdom, just as Hengest and Horsa crossed the Channel during the last days of the Western Empire. But if Hobbits are the Anglo-Saxons to the Shire’s England, they differ in one crucial respect: the Shire is never conquered, and those who attempt it (Golfimbul at the Battle of Greenfields, or Sharkey’s men at Bywater) are decisively repulsed. Tolkien’s hobbits are therefore allowed to develop organically and without outside interference—to become, in a sense, more English than the English themselves. This fits closely with Tolkien’s intention to build up his mythology for England. As he says in his much-quoted letter to Milton Waldman:

I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story [...] which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country. It should possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our ‘air’ [...]. (*Letters* 144, #131)

In an imaginative world rooted in “Britain and the hither parts of Europe” (144), the culture of chivalry—precisely insofar as it is a French import—can find precious little place.

The vacuum left by the chivalric knight, however, had to be filled: Tolkien wrote romances, after all, and the romance genre demands a questing hero. Tolkien's displacement of the knight required the substitution of a new kind of hero—or, better yet, *two* kinds of hero: the halfling and the ranger. In place of the powerful and noble knight errant, we have (on the one hand) the modern, bourgeois, and above all *small* hobbits or (on the other) the half-wild, mistrusted rangers. The creation of these archetypes is one of the chief triumphs of Tolkien's imagination, and an essential part of the artistic—and, indeed, commercial—success of his works.

How are we to understand these creations? We could do worse than to begin with Tolkien's own words on the subject. In a letter to W.H. Auden, Tolkien admitted that he chose hobbits as his primary protagonists *precisely because* they diverge from the standard pattern of the romantic hero. The passage is worth quoting in full:

I myself saw the value of Hobbits, in putting earth under the feet of ‘romance’, and in providing such subjects for ‘ennoblement’ and heroes more praiseworthy than professionals: *nolo heroizari* is of course as good a start for a hero, as *nolo episcopari* for a bishop. Not that I am a ‘democrat’ in any of its current uses; except that I suppose, to speak in literary terms, that we are all equal before the Great Author, *qui deposuit potentes de sede et exaltavit humiles*. (*Letters* 215, #163)

The last line of this quote, drawn from Mary's *Magnificat*, is of special importance, pointing as it does to the exaltation of the humble—identified by Tolkien as a central theme of his work (see *Letters* 237, #181). This theme is not absolutely incompatible with the ideal of chivalry (some romantic heroes like Malory's Gareth embody the idea closely enough), but it is a poor fit. The ideal chivalric knight—Galahad, Lancelot, Gawain—was never particularly lowly to begin with, and therefore cannot be truly ennobled. The half-wise, home-loving hobbit can.

The hobbits are of course the Tolkienian heroes *par excellence*. But we find the same general logic operative in Tolkien's creation of the rangers. As discussed above, rangers like Faramir and Aragorn are at their core Lewisian knights—stern in battle, gentle in hall—stripped of all the material and social benefits ordinarily attendant on their class. This allows the ranger, paradoxically, to be in a sense more knightly than Lewis's archetypal knights: more warlike, because he fights without the benefit of castle or armor or stable social organization; more gentle, because meek in the face of universal,

unmerited scorn. To borrow Christina Heckman's term, Tolkien's rangers (and, indeed, all of his successfully heroic men) are characterized by "ascetic lifestyle[s]" ("Asceticism" 39); this asceticism allows them to fit organically with the larger themes of the work. The central importance of humility forced the highly romantic and chivalric tale of Arwen and Aragorn—though Tolkien regarded it as "part of the essential story"—to the appendices: "it could not be worked into the narrative without destroying its structure: which is planned to be 'hobbito-centric', that is, primarily a study of the ennoblement (or sanctification) of the humble" (*Letters* 237, #181). That is to say: the tale of a scorned ranger becoming king "with a crown and all and a golden cup" (*LotR* VI.7.994) neatly fits the theme of the exaltation of the humble; the story of a long-lost emperor winning a semi-divine princess bride—however important to the narrative as a whole—does not.

In all of this, Tolkien's faith looms large; as George Clark writes, "Tolkien sought a true hero motivated by a heroic ideal consistent with his own religious and moral ideals" (Clark 39). The great themes of *Lord of the Rings* were heavily determined by Tolkien's faith. Because of these, to bring a character in line with his themes was to bring it in line with his creed; the Tolkienian hero must be consistent with the author's metaphysics and morals. But though Tolkien insists on the moral superiority of the good, he is adamant in denying the good any promise or expectation of worldly success: "I do not expect 'history' to be anything but a 'long defeat'—though it contains (and in a legend may contain more clearly and movingly) some samples or glimpse of final victory" (*Letters* 255, #195). But even in legend these glimpses of 'final victory' must be of the right sort. The literature of chivalry was the product of an established and relatively secure Christendom; the knight was the embodiment of that culture's perfections. Consequently, the audience never really doubts the ultimate triumph of a Lancelot or a Galahad: the perfections united in his person coupled with the unquestioned advantages he enjoys make his victory a foregone conclusion. He succeeds because of his martial and personal superiority; victory seems to be no more than his just deserts. Because of this, the romantic knight is ill-suited as a vehicle for the eucatastrophic joy from "beyond the walls of the world" ("On Fairy-stories" 75) that lies at the heart of Tolkien's fiction—and he fails as a credible symbol of Christian heroism in the bloody and secularizing 20th century. Tolkien's hobbits and rangers, characterized by sacrifice, suffering, and vulnerability, offer a different—and, perhaps, more excellent—way.

The ranger and the hobbit do more than provide Tolkien an aesthetically and intellectually consistent model of heroism, however. They also stand as one of Tolkien's most enduring contributions to modern fantasy; both Aragorn and Frodo have dozens of literary descendants. But here we come to a

paradox. A major reason for the widespread appeal of *The Lord of the Rings* is, as Shippey has noted, the work's ability to mediate "between Christian belief and the post-Christian world in which Tolkien thought himself increasingly to be living" (Shippey, *Author* 213). This is true as far as it goes—but in this case, Tolkien does something even more surprising. Tolkien does not simply mediate between the old Christian chivalry and the post-Christian world here; his heroes are not a happy mean between the medieval knight and the modern hero. They are, as argued above, a new model of heroism—more radically Christian than the medieval knight, not less. And they succeed in Tolkien's post-Christian age anyway. It is clear that at least part of this success is rooted in Tolkien's rejection of chivalric vices and transformation of its virtues. After all, modern authors had, from the beginning of the medieval revival, struggled mightily with the idea of knighthood: how could the avatar of medieval Christian culture be translated to a secular, pluralistic modernity? The romances of Scott give some indication (think here of Rebecca's critique of chivalry in *Ivanhoe* or the authorial condescension in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*); the savage satire of Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* gives another. One need only consider the continued deconstruction of chivalry in works like *A Song of Ice and Fire* or *A Wheel of Time* to see that such uneasiness is not merely a 19th-century phenomenon. Tolkien's heroic creations have proven significantly more appealing. A full exploration of subsequent authors' adoption of Tolkienian archetypes is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this paper. For now, it is sufficient to note that, once again, the hobbit has succeeded where greater folk have failed.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BEN REINHARD is an Associate Professor of English and Academic Dean at Christendom College, where he teaches courses on Anglo-Saxon England, medieval English literature, and modern medievalism. He is completing a new verse translation of *Beowulf* to be published by Cluny Press.

