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Title: Shaping idealisms : studies in Middle English romances and the literature of the Medieval Revival
Issue Date: 2014-12-10

'J.R.R. Tolkien, Philologist and Holist', in: Ron Pirson (ed.), *Lembas-Extra 2004.* Leiden: The Dutch Tolkien Society Unquendor, pp. 1-14.

J.R.R. Tolkien, Philologist and Holist[1]

Bart Veldhoen

Tolkien's everyday work as a philologist had an enormous influence on his creative writing; in a sense, that everyday work formed the basis of what makes his novels unique. Therefore I will first try to describe what a philologist is and does.

Tolkien studied, apart from the Classical Languages, certainly also the ancient West- and North-Germanic languages (Old English and Old Norse); possibly also some Celtic and Finnish, which he certainly read in translation. This led to a career during which, from working on the huge English dictionary "on historical principles", he made it to professor of Old- and Middle-English Language and Literature. It is certainly also important to mention that, during Tolkien's working days, Cambridge and Oxford had come under the spell of the new science of cultural anthropology, which had come up since 1900 under the influence of Jessie Weston (*From Ritual to Romance*) and Sir James Frazer (*The Golden Bough*), who had collected materials about magic and religions from all places and times of the history of the world. The nineteenth-century collections of local folklore and orally transmitted stories were professionalized and compared on a world-wide basis.

Tolkien's work as a philologist consists in studying anything that is necessary to make old texts (that is: before the Renaissance) accessible to the modern public. Anything that is in the way of the modern reader for a proper understanding of those old texts comes under the interest of philology. Naturally, language is a first point of attention: the history of each

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[1] This article is based on a paper presented at Unquendor's Slotfeest, Saturday 28 June 2003.

language, but also the mutual influencing of languages on each other. A telling example is the question why, as a result of which circumstances, the English language uses French loan-words for meat-dishes on the table (pork, beef, veal, mutton), while the animals themselves keep their original English forms (pig, cow, calf, sheep). A good knowledge of history is, therefore, indispensable. And not only of the historical context, but also of the history of ideas. A philologist studies concepts of heroism, chivalry and court-culture, ideas about government and state and mutual responsibilities, power, hierarchy and relationships. But also the role of landed property and money-economy, medicine, cosmology. And, of course, anything to do with the discovery of meaning in life: religion, myths of origin, folklore. An old or medieval text cannot be understood properly without such knowledge.

So, as a true philologist, Tolkien occupied himself, besides his daily teaching of students, with the editing of texts, lexicography, translation, textual interpretation and literary history. Just to mention one example of each: his edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is still authoritative, as is its glossary; he also provided the glossary for Kenneth Sisam's much-used anthology of fourteenth-century English texts; his translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo* and *Pearl* is, perhaps, less of a success, but it is still used a lot by students; his interpretation of Beowulf in "Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics" broke new ground; his article "On Fairy Stories" initially did the same, though it has been pushed to the background by later scholarly studies. This is an illustration of what an all-round philologist can do and what passes under his eyes year after year in his teaching.

An ancient new myth
As a creative writer Tolkien distinguishes himself from his predecessors – and from his contemporaries – by an essentially different kind of imagination. Fairytale-type literature had come into fashion with the Romantics of the early nineteenth

century and had begun to flourish especially since the appearance of the fairytale-collections of Charles Perrault (Mother Goose) and the brothers Grimm. Nevertheless, Tolkien remains unique compared with the great trendsetters Lord Dunsany and William Morris and with his contemporaries T.H. White and C.S. Lewis, because his works are not creations of his own imagination, or simple reworkings of existing stories, but use a variety of existing texts and worlds of ideas for their basis. Scenes, motifs and ideas from highly diverse, but always already existing, texts from world literature are mingled and combined so that his new "myth" not only begins to assume epic proportions, but also achieves the authority of all those ancient works out of which Tolkien has composed his work. As a knowledgeable and skilful philologist Tolkien was able to take that very far.

An exhaustive analysis of the origins of all the details could easily fill a book. For the present a few examples will have to do to illustrate this important difference to other fantasy-writers.

The opening sentence of "Ainulindalë", the first book of the *Silmarillion*, states that the All-Father – coined as Ilúvatar in Old-Germanic manner by the inhabitants of Arda – was "Eru, the One", an obvious reference to Plato's myth of Er, the One, in his *Timaeus*. The process of creation is then described as the Ainur singing together in harmony. The idea of creation as musical harmony goes back ultimately to Pythagoras, but was prominently worked out by the Christian Roman philosopher Boethius in *Of Music*. Both Plato and Boethius were very influential in the thinking of the Middle Ages in Europe. In his later *Of the Consolation of Philosophy* Boethius elaborates further on this musical harmony of creation by stating that no single theme can continue to exist independently in the universe unless it is directed to the One. That is precisely what we see happening in the "Ainulindalë" when Melkor, who will become Morgoth, begins to weave his own melody into the harmony of creation and introduces Evil into the creation as a

result. Tolkien's representation of Evil has, anyway, very complex roots in various ancient traditions. Apart from Boethius' disharmony, also Old Norse mythology knew Evil, in the person of the god Loki, not as an independent counter-force, but as a product of one of the creating gods. Loki has no intention to set himself up as a power of Evil, but as a co-creator he is so clumsy, and maybe so arrogant, that his creatures are perversions of the useful. For instance, he creates the wolf (warg) Fenrir, who will initiate the end of the world by devouring the sun and the moon. Also the Christian idea of Satan's envy as the source of Evil and Satan's role as Tempter play a part in Tolkien's story. Finally, we also see in *The Lord of the Rings* an idea derived from Manicheism, that Evil has a part to play in the totality of creation and is necessary for its completion, which we see in the form of Bilbo's and Gandalf's and Frodo's pity towards Gollum, about whom they also believe that he has a part to play at the end.

Another form of explicit association with existing myths is to be found towards the end of *The Silmarillion*, when the story of the downfall of Númenor in the "Akkallabêth" is rounded off with the mentioning of the other names of the lost country, among which "Atalantë" and "Avallonë" are clearly references to the story, going back to Plato, of Atlantis washed away in the ocean and to the island of Avalon of the King Arthur-stories vanished into the mists.

Not only the story-motifs, but also the language evokes recognizable existing forms. On the first couple of pages of *The Silmarillion* I detect the language of the English King James Bible translation, especially that of the Psalms, and possibly other constructions going back to Hebrew. I also notice plural formations which appear to originate in the Finnish of the *Kalevala*, and pronouns which were common in medieval English. Word-order with the direct object heading the sentence, or adjectives following the nouns, are typical for the Celtic Welsh of the *Mabinogion*, an early-medieval collection of tales.

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Also proper names have often been derived from old texts. In the Old-Norse *Edda*-poem "Voluspá" there is a listing of the names of dwarves which contains the names of all the dwarves in *The Hobbit*, and also Gandalf's. The term "Middle-earth" is also from the *Edda*-poems. Another interesting instance is the fact that in the Old-English epic *Beowulf* the words "theoden" (= ruler), "thengel" (= prince) and "grima" (=mask) occur – as words, not as names – giving the King of Rohan in *The Lord of the Rings* Théoden, son of Thengel and his malicious counsellor Grima Wormtongue their roots and, as I argued earlier, the authority of the historical (con)text.

And so on and so forth. But the point is clear that Tolkien wished to produce more than an occasional fantasy. In the holistic manner he has woven together existing motifs and ideas from different cultures and times. By holism I understand the belief that all existing ideas and myths contain pieces of what holists see as one whole. A combination of all the roots of knowledge, experience, insight and wisdom lead the holist to the true history of the earth. Tolkien's life-long endeavour to write a complete history of Middle-earth reveals him as a holist, who, as he grew older, was developing, in my opinion, "New Age"-inclinations. My surmise is that, in the end, he came to believe in his own myth; but it certainly did not start out that way. At the basis there was the philologist, who created his stories out of his vast knowledge of ancient texts and ideas.

William Blake
And not only texts from Antiquity and the Middle Ages. As a writer and an English Literature-scholar Tolkien must have felt a certain amount of affinity with the late-eighteenth-century poet William Blake, who, in a number of very long poems, had created some large-scale visions – and who illustrated his own poems, as Tolkien did, for instance, in his *Father Christmas Letters*. In one of his long poems, *Vala, or the Four Zoas*, Blake represents the universe in the form of the Universal Man, who

splits himself into four beings: Urizen (thought), Luvah (passion), Urthona (imagination and anger) and Tharmas (pity). After the Fall Luvah splits into two: the male Orc (masculine violence) and the female Vala (manipulative and sensual). The connection with Blake goes further than the simple borrowing of the names Orc and Vala(r). As a follower of the philosopher Swedenborg, Blake, like Tolkien, detested and was opposed to industrialization. Blake called the late-eighteenth-century factories in his poems – with a term derived from John Milton – "dark satanic mills"; he considered machines and factories as degrading and unnatural: a perversion of nature. Two short fragments from Blake's poetry to illustrate my point: In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* an angel and the poet are entering a factory:

> By degrees we beheld the infinite Abyss, fiery as the smoke of a burning city, beneath us, at an immense distance, was the sun, black but shining; round it were fiery tracks on which revolv'd vast spiders, crawling after their prey.

Welcome to Mordor! The long poem ends with a "Song of Liberty", in which we find:

> Waked from his eternal sleep, the hoary element roaring fled away: Down rushed, beating his wings in vain, the jealous king; his grey-browed councillors, thunderous warriors, curled veterans, among helms, and shields, and chariots, horses, elephants, banners, castles, slings, and rocks, Falling, rushing, ruining! buried in the ruins, on Urthona's dens;
> All night beneath the ruins; then, their sullen flames faded, emerge round the gloomy king. With thunder and fire, leading his starry hosts thro' the waste wilderness, he promulgates his ten commands, glancing his beamy eyelids over the deep in dark dismay, Where the son of fire in his eastern cloud, while the morning plumes her golden breast, Spurning the clouds written with curses,...

You see: with poems like that in one's head "The Battle of the Pelennor Fields" has already been mapped out in considerable detail.

In the Prologue to *The Fellowship of the Ring* Tolkien describes hobbits as beings who "love peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered and well-formed countryside was their favourite haunt. They do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom, though they were skilful with tools". This would appear to touch directly upon the major themes of *The Lord of the Rings*. Whether it concerns the materialistic ferreting of the dwarves in the depths of Moria, which leads to the unleashing of evil powers, or Saruman and Sauron with their mining activities, for which woods are felled and the earth is torn open, and their crossbreeding of races (uruk-hai, wargs), the same abhorrence of the unnatural that Blake already showed of the "dark satanic mills" is also at the basis of Tolkien's representation of the powers of evil; of what we have come to call, with a Soviet-Russian term, the military-industrial complex.

Much of the material that found its way later on into *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth* had already been jotted down by Tolkien in the trenches of the First World War and been worked out in the period of economic depression and continual threat of the 1920s and '30s. Materialism and imperialism were the themes of the day and Tolkien experienced them personally. It seems, therefore, hardly surprising to me that these have become the central themes of *The Lord of the Rings*: an anti-industrial and anti-materialistic system of values, in the manner of Blake and Swedenborg, and a showing-up of imperialistic exercise of power.

Tolkien is not opposed to power as such; he is not a nihilist or anarchist. But he is making a distinction between good and bad exercise of power. He appears to suggest that good exercise of power consists of: enabling ordinary people to lead their ordinary lives; to make that possible and to guarantee that,

without intervening in those lives. Again not invented, but derived from the feudal ideals of late-medieval court culture, so familiar to him from his everyday work as a philologist. Gandalf, Elrond and Aragorn describe their role as "guardians" like that in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and Galadriel, Théoden and Denethor express themselves in similar terms later on. Bad exercise of power is seen as perverted exercise of power (Saruman) and imperialistic domination (Sauron) .The 'good' powers show no desire to dominate and they feel connected with nature. They can be recognized by their respect for nature: the hobbits and their agricultural society and appreciation of pipe-tobacco, the Elves and their care of the woods. They leave nature undisturbed and find, as recognition of that fact, the Masters of nature (Bombadil, the Ents, Gân-Búri-Gân) on their side, who are themselves indifferent to power.

The 'bad ones' are recognizable by the unnatural manner of their dealing with nature: they crossbreed races and tear open the earth with mines and they destroy woods. The trenches of the First World War had already, for Tolkien and his readers, shown the desolation and senselessness of such 'creations'.

In Tolkien's Middle-earth of the Third Age nature still resists such perversities: when the Orcs, on their way to Isengard with the captive Merry and Pippin, begin to chop down trees, they draw the attention of the Ents, which proves fatal to them.

The dwarves have taken up a doubtful position from the start – from their creation, as described in the second chapter of the "Valaquenta" in *The Silmarillion*. Although not evil by nature, their materialistic disposition threatens always to degenerate into boundless greed, which will uncover evil powers, such as the Balrog in Moria. Already in *The Hobbit* Smaug the dragon was a symbol of what their character might degenerate to. Thus the dwarves illustrate the problem of good and bad exercise of power in their turn.

Men, too, destined to dominate the Fourth Age, can still develop in different directions in the Third Age. We see them

finding a place for themselves between the violence which the defence of Middle-earth requires, and the planting of trees: the silver-white tree in the Gondor of the King and, as a parallel, Sam's trees in the Shire, Galadriel's gift. By contrasting Aragorn with Saruman, Faramir with Boromir, Théoden with Denethor, Tolkien suggests that Men do have the capacity to do the right thing, but "They are so easily seduced", as Galadriel and Elrond stress in their colloquy in the film *The Two Towers*. To the fact that the film is more hopeful (or more American?) than the book I would like to come back later.

Analysing further how the great themes of *The Lord of the Rings* have been worked out in the development of the characters, the symbolism and the structure of the novel, would take us too far. That would fill many articles – and Master's theses! For a psychoanalytical interpretation following the theories of Carl Jung I should like to recommend an article by Derek Brewer: "*The Lord of the Rings* as Romance".[2] A highly revealing analysis of the structure of *The Lord of the Rings* is to be found in chapters 4 and 6 of Anne Wilson, *Magical Thought in Creative Writing*.[3] She demonstrates clearly how first the development of Frodo's character, and later the development of the great themes are expressed by structural parallels between different story-lines and between characters, and by a careful alternating of the themes of Death and Nature and resurrection. One does not have to agree with their conclusions to find the analyses very stimulating.

One example must suffice here. Anne Wilson emphasizes the numerous parallels between Théoden and Denethor: They each have lost their heir, both welcome Gandalf in an un-

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[2] In M. Salu & R.R. Farrell (eds.), *J.R.R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller*, London: Cornell University Press 1979.

[3] Anne Wilson, *Magical Thought in Creative Writing: The Distinctive Roles of Fantasy and Imagination in Fiction*, Stroud: The Thimble Press 1983.

friendly manner because they are under the Enemy's influence, both receive a dedicated hobbit as confidant, they each have a relative (Éowyn and Faramir) who is rescued from death by that hobbit (and who marry each other in the end), and both their deaths are the Enemy's doing. And yet, in spite of the similarities, it is the differences that are made clear when Théoden is, but Denethor is not, granted a resurrection. The difference lies in the nature of their despair: despondency in the one, arrogance in the other, which creates interesting parallels with Saruman. A belief in alliance and united stands remains crucial. Her conclusion is that tactical decisions always have to be moral rather than logical, otherwise they just lead to more evil.

A good start for an analysis of one's own would be to consider first the similarities and differences between the various Homely Houses: the Shire, Bombadil's house, the inn The Prancing Pony, Elrond's house; and next to do the same with the various Houses of Power: Lórien, Orthanc, Meduseld, Barad-Dûr and Minas Tirith. Also by comparing the "fellowships" of fundamentally dissimilar parties on the "good" side: Frodo-Sam-Gollum, Aragorn and the Army of the Dead, the Rohirrim and the Ents, with the armies on the opposite side, also composed of dissimilar elements: orcs and wolves, southern men and elephants, trolls and corsairs, a lot can be learned about what constitutes good and evil in this story. The idea that evil is a perverse parody of the good appears to confirm, again and again, both its lack of principle and its perpetual attraction. In the end it is pity that makes the difference, as shown by Bilbo to Gollum in *The Hobbit* and by Gandalf and Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*. The philosophers Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Arthur Schopenhauer will have nodded their approval of their pupil Tolkien.

Peter Jackson's The Lord of the Rings

Since I delivered my lecture at Unquendor's Slotfeest, the filming of *The Lord of the Rings* has been completed, which enables

me to consider briefly whether justice has been done in the films to Tolkien's approach and themes. Film is, of course, a totally different medium than a written story and must make use of totally different means. I will ignore the insoluble problem of films making an inevitable (but unjustified) impression of realism and, as a result, inviting the viewer to identify with the characters. But I will take into consideration that the means which film uses are "art"-manipulations such as the theatre also uses: expression, gesture, movement, mise-en-scène, editing, structure.

Expression is, of course, important in a visual medium. The iconography, or type-casting, of the actors deviates rather markedly from the book, but is generally effective as expression of the story-line. Gandalf, as "good wizard", steeple-crowned hat and all, is contrasted quite strikingly with Saruman as "evil magician", governing the elements with streaming hair and outstretched arms (compare the nineteenth-century iconography of Merlin). Galadriel looks, perhaps, a bit much like a good fairy-godmother, but that does emphasize that she is, after all, the "giver of gifts". Arwen, with her tip-tilted little nose, reminds me of Cleopatra, and Elrond of a certain type of teacher; in both cases that seems defensible to me. The most dramatic change is in Aragorn's appearance: in the book he is always designated as "stern" and "noble", but in the film he has been given the typical appearance of the suffering Christ. Such an emphasis on his role as Messiah seems to me not to be in keeping with Tolkien's conception, but it is clearly very much in keeping with that of the film, which provides him, therefore, with a matching death and resurrection, to which I will come back shortly.

But staying with the theatrical for the moment: the problem of inner conflicts within characters has been very effectively solved by giving Frodo more conversations with Sam (more and different ones than in the book), and for Aragorn a number of dream-conversations with Arwen. Arwen's own inner struggle is made visible by means of flashbacks. And the split

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Gollum-Sméagol is also a typically filmic solution of a story-telling problem. But what I like best of the "dramatic" features is the theatrical gesture of hands folded around each other: we see that happening when Gandalf and Bilbo are saying good-bye after Bilbo's eleventy-first birthday (after he has let go of the ring), then the same gesture again between Gandalf and Frodo, repeatedly between Arwen and Aragorn – when occasionally the immortality-jewel changes hands – and finally between Aragorn and Boromir just before the latter's death and when Aragorn takes leave of Frodo at the Rauros. It is precisely by the repetition of this gesture of encouragement and solidarity that the idea of "fellowship" as a source of strength is convincingly conveyed. Nothing wrong with that, I would say.

The fact that the films have made some rather drastic changes in the structure of the story undoubtedly serves the purpose to clarify the overall themes, and so to keep the major story-line clearly before the viewers' eyes. Saruman's despair and treachery come much earlier in the films: his "dark satanic mills" are already shown during the journey to Rivendell, at the expense of the Barrow-Downs and Tom Bombadil. In the film the hobbits receive their swords from Aragorn instead of from Bombadil, and Frodo is saved after his wounding at Weathertop by Arwen instead of by Glorfindel. The story has become a bit thinner this way, but the internal coherence is made more clearly visible.

For the same reason the complementarity of characters is made more prominent in the films. Aragorn is portrayed as insecure and hesitant, uncertain of his ways but yet fully resolved, over against Saruman's betrayal based on the desperate conviction of the impossibility of resistance, literally as black against white. That helps the audience to recognize the same process later on when it manifests itself within single characters, first in Théoden, then in Denethor. Also Grima's (added) desire for Éowyn, which places him in a complementary position to Faramir, makes the contrast visible between a bad and a good counsellor. Faramir is also structurally com-

pared with Boromir through the fact that, in the film, both want to take the ring to Gondor, for which the Faramir-Frodo episode has been adapted in the film: Faramir takes Frodo with him to Osgiliath before he admits the pointlessness of that choice – which he still does before it is too late, unlike Boromir might have done.

The most extreme, however, is the addition of a "death and rebirth" for Aragorn: during the attack of the Wargs just before the battle of Helm's Deep. It is evident that a parallel is meant with Gandalf's "death" in Moria: in both cases the mourning for them is shown emphatically, and so it is made clear how much the hope of all the parties concerned is founded on these characters; how Messianic they are (in the films). Aragorn's dream, while he is "dead", reveals first Arwen's dilemma between choosing for her father and immortality and the giving up of those in order to give Aragorn hope; then a conversation between Galadriel and Elrond, in which they stress that mortal men, in their weakness, are so easily seduced to despair. They decide on a Last Alliance – because their own days are over anyway – and so Arwen is left behind in Middle-earth as a kind of sacrifice to Hope. In contrast to the book Galadriel's and Elrond's Elves come to the rescue at Helm's Deep, by which the idea of a Last Alliance and a "last stand" has been moved from the third to the second film, and the line from the Fellowship to the final battle before the gates of Mordor also remains visible in the second film.

Gimli is given the role of stressing once more the self-sacrifice involved in such a "last stand" by taking back his peremptory "Nobody tosses a dwarf" in Moria with his request "toss me!" before the gate of Helm's Deep. The theme of hope through self-sacrifice is forcefully presented to us in this way.

The only deviation from Tolkien's book that cannot, to my mind, be justified on thematic or structural grounds as being, at least, "in the spirit of" the book is Frodo's reason for protecting Gollum. From one of the last conversations between Frodo and Sam in the film it appears that Frodo wants to save Gollum

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because that is the only way he can believe in his own salvation. Here Tolkien's Manicheistic idea about the role that evil has to play eventually at the completion of creation has been thrown overboard for the sake of a sell-out to psychological realism. In this detail the filming turns out to be in the American tradition, with more hope for mankind and the future than the philologist Tolkien, with his knowledge of history and cultures, found it possible to suggest. But on the whole, I think, Tolkien has little cause to be unhappy about this filmic rendering of his work. FRODO LIVES!