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► **To cite this version:**

Leo Carruthers. The Old English Beowulf and Tolkien's Middle-earth. Davide Astori, Elisa Sicuri. Creating Worlds through Languages. Tolkien between Philology and Conlanging, Bottega del Libro, pp.73-90, 2019, Tolkien between Philology and Conlanging, 978-883 215 822 9. hal-03961565

HAL Id: hal-03961565

<https://hal.science/hal-03961565>

Submitted on 29 Jan 2023

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The Old English *Beowulf* and Tolkien's Middle-earth

LEO CARRUTHERS

Language and literature as inspiration

Although J.R.R. Tolkien became world-famous for his fictional writings, he was first and foremost a philologist, a specialist in ancient languages, who taught the early forms of English, Norse and Welsh at university, and also prepared scholarly editions of medieval texts. Without his linguistic training and knowledge of medieval literature, he would never have written his best known creative works, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; they in turn are elements in the wider mythology which was revealed in *The Silmarillion*, edited and published posthumously by his son Christopher Tolkien. In fact, the entire history of Middle-earth depends on the author's fascination with language and his love of Germanic and Celtic legends.

The Old English *Beowulf* (early 8th century) has a particular importance in this respect. Tolkien loved the poem, its symbolism and its language, which he taught professionally for years, and this overflowed in many ways into his fictional writings. Among other English works which attracted him were the prose *Ancrene Wisse* (c. 1200), a rule for female anchorites, and the alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (c. 1390), both of which he edited; it is no coincidence that all three texts originated in the West Midlands, a region of personal interest to Tolkien. Despite his passion for language, his involvement in works such as these was not restricted to linguistic matters; he was also a lover of literature, of the imagination, of the manner in which great writers of the past had given expression to human ideals and aspirations. This is nowhere more evident than in his 1936 British Academy lecture on *Beowulf*.

Tolkien was introduced to *Beowulf* as a teenager at grammar school in Birmingham, which he attended between 1900 and 1911. Encouraged by a teacher, he read it first in translation, later in the original Old English. Soon Tolkien, unusually for pupils of his age, was reciting passages from *Beowulf*, as well as the Old Norse *Völsungasaga*. Following his studies in Oxford (1911-15), after the Great War he would go on to make his career as a teacher of English and Germanic philology; he spent five years at Leeds University before returning to Oxford, firstly as Professor of Anglo-Saxon (1925-45), then as Merton Professor of English Language and Literature (1945-59). Tolkien saw the history of literature as the story of language: history lay in words, in what they revealed of the people who had given birth to a particular language. What he loved most was the Germanic languages of the North European peoples with whom he felt a deep sense of identity.¹ *Beowulf*, the longest and most important Old English poem, had a prominent place in his lectures; and when reciting passages from it in the classroom, Tolkien, with his natural gift for story-telling, would give a dramatic performance (Carpenter, 1977: 138). In 1926, early in his teaching career, he translated the poem into Modern English, but this was not published until 2014.²

His most famous lecture, '*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics', delivered to the British Academy on 25 November 1936, was to mark a turning point in scholarly attitudes to the Anglo-Saxon poem. In the 19th century, when *Beowulf* first entered university curricula, there was little appreciation of its literary value; considered to be badly constructed, its main interest was thought to be historical. This was due in part to a lack of understanding of the work, its structure and meaning, but perhaps even more to the separation that existed in university departments between Language and Literature. As a result, anything in English before Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1385-1400) was hardly reckoned to be worth reading. Tolkien was anxious to redress the balance, to show that both sides were diminished by a rigid distinction between the two disciplines, and to demonstrate that medieval poetry deserved to

¹ His surname was of German origin, though the family had settled in England in the 18th century. In his letters, he insisted on the spelling 'Tolkien' and the pronunciation Tol-keen [tolki:n] (see especially Letter 347, p. 428).

² It thus escaped being listed by Hans Sauer, *205 Years of Beowulf Translations and Adaptations (1805-2010): a Bibliography*, Trier: WVT, 2011, which identifies 82 English translations as well as many in other languages. For Italian, he lists seven complete and four partial translations; of the complete, the most recent is Giuseppe Brunetti, *Beowulf*, Biblioteca Medievale 89, Roma: Carocci, 2003.

be taken seriously as art. The major thrust of his British Academy lecture was to present *Beowulf* as a literary work, subtle, complex and sophisticated, an exceptional achievement capable of standing up to severe critical analysis. The monsters, he thought, should not be seen as mythological intruders which merely hindered historical discussion, but rather as central to the meaning.

During his lifetime, Tolkien published only one other piece directly relating to the poem: his introduction to Charles Wrenn's revision of Clark Hall's 1911 prose translation of *Beowulf*, first revised by Wrenn in 1940. Tolkien's 'Prefatory Remarks' turned into a 35-page article, partly dealing with the question of the art of translation and partly explaining the purpose of Old English metre and alliteration.³ On the question of style, he favoured the high, noble and dignified as against the short, snappy and colloquial. Arguing that the diction of *Beowulf* was 'poetical, archaic, artificial (if you will), in the day that the poem was made', he defended the use of 'an archaic vocabulary, and word-order, artificially maintained as an elevated and literary language' (Clark Hall, 1950: xvi, xvii). One may see here the connection between Tolkien's philological work and his fictional art, of which he may well have been thinking as he wrote. At the time of the 'Prefatory Remarks' (early in 1940), the writing of *The Lord of the Rings* had reached the middle of Part 2, later called *The Two Towers*; and it is notable that as the novel progresses, the growing sense of doom is accompanied by an increasing use of the high style, with its almost biblical sonority. His appreciation of Old English style thus overflowed into his own prose.

It has been argued that Tolkien felt a deep sense of fellowship with the *Beowulf*-poet, 'a virtual identity of motive and belief' (Shippey, 1992: 44) that went beyond mere influence. The Anglo-Saxon poem had always had a freakish aspect which only someone of the same temperament and instinct – like Tolkien himself – could empathise with. This is partly the point of his allegory (in the British Academy lecture) of the man building a tower from old stones lying in a field: what the *Beowulf*-poet did with those stones (old pagan stories handed down from generation to generation, of monsters and dragons and kings), Tolkien himself did in *The Lord of the Rings* (Flieger, 2002: 15). He went even further, however, because he first constructed the ruined tower (*The Silmarillion*) from which he salvaged those parts of his heroic fantasy which were published in his lifetime. *Beowulf* is an allusive poem, full of references to ancient things, stories and legends of the pagan heroes of old who lived long ago, very different from the Christian society which was the Anglo-Saxon poet's own milieu. Tolkien regretted that 'we do not know more about pre-Christian English mythology' ('Monsters' 24).⁴ But it is perhaps mistaken to suppose that all such references in the poem were meant to be explicit, even to the original audience. Their function is to provide depth, a sense of time, the perspective of ancient history; and for this, it is enough for them to be there. Composed of oft-told tales, medieval stories had deep roots, ancient and unknown sources; and Tolkien sought to preserve the same kind of atmospheric depth in his fiction.

Tolkien's interest in *Beowulf*, the need to understand its background and its lost or unknown sources, helps to explain part of his difficulty in getting his own multi-layered fiction ready for publication. If this is true for *The Lord of the Rings*, it is even more so for *The Silmarillion*, a vast series of tales which he never did bring to completion. The mythology was left unfinished for a number of reasons: in addition to the fact that he was a busy man with heavy professional commitments, as an author he was both dilatory and perfectionist, doubting that *The Silmarillion* would interest the general reader. Yet he was anxious to publish it, in part or in whole, and hoped to do so at the same time as *The Lord of the Rings*; but even had the publisher accepted such a large and costly project (which was not the case in the 1950s), the author himself found it impossible to conclude and edit the stories to his own satisfaction. The mythology had been taking shape since 1916-17, as 'The Book of Lost Tales', but this early form was later abandoned; it was eventually published posthumously in *The History of Middle-earth* series.⁵ This mythology is the background to *The Lord of the Rings*, the ancient time to which its characters, especially the Elves, look back. But the reader does not need to know all the details of the 'lost tales' in order to enjoy the later novel. It is enough that the allusions are there, to provide a sense of depth, as in *Beowulf*.

³ This preface was reprinted as 'On Translating Beowulf', in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien, London: Allen & Unwin, 1983, repr. HarperCollins, 2006, p. 49-71.

⁴ Page numbers refer to Christopher Tolkien's edition of the essay (1983, repr. 2006).

⁵ Edited by Christopher Tolkien, 1983-96, where *The Book of Lost Tales* makes up the first two volumes (1983-84). Humphrey Carpenter, writing in the *Biography* (1977: 98), knew of its existence.

Tolkien paid the same meticulous attention to detail in *The Lord of the Rings*, revising and rewriting it as he did *The Silmarillion* in order to iron out every possible inconsistency. But the two works are essentially different; they can, and do, exist separately. While *The Silmarillion* stands behind all the songs and legends that went into the making of *The Lord of the Rings*, knowledge of it is not essential to enjoyment of the more famous novel. Tolkien's earlier mythology is the equivalent of what medievalists would like to have, a kind of *Ur-Beowulf*, in order to understand all the allusions in the Old English poem; but the general reader of *Beowulf*, no more than the original Anglo-Saxon audience who simply enjoyed listening to a good story, does not need to grasp all the details. 'The illusion of historical truth and perspective, that has made *Beowulf* such an attractive quarry, is largely a product of art', as Tolkien wrote ('Monsters' 7).

Although *Beowulf* survives only in a single manuscript, a West Saxon version of c. 1000-20, in all likelihood it emanated from the West Midlands. Despite ongoing argument as to the exact date and origin of the poem, critical opinion, in Tolkien's day as now (see Neidorf, 2014), largely agreed in placing the original composition of *Beowulf* in early 8th-century Mercia; the court of King Æthelbald (716-57) has been suggested as the probable place. The old kingdom of Mercia, which lasted as an independent political unit down to 918 when it was brought under Wessex control, was essentially coterminous with the West Midlands. Its capital was at Tamworth and its cathedral at Lichfield, both of which are only a short distance north of Birmingham. Tolkien could therefore feel pride in the fact that *Beowulf* was a product of his home region; as a philologist, he could see a logical connection between the language of the original Mercian poem (hints of which may be glimpsed in the surviving Wessex version) and the West Midland dialect of Middle English, as preserved in *Ancrene Wisse*, which he wrote about in a 1929 article. This aspect of the poem's development over the centuries contributes to Tolkien's picture of The Shire in *The Lord of the Rings*. The hobbits have only a dim memory of the ancient kings of men who once ruled over their beloved Shire. Tolkien, whose stories are full of a nostalgic sense of the passing of time and the fall of kingdoms, may well have been thinking of Mercia and its rulers, Æthelbald and his successor Offa (757-96); once the most powerful of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, Mercia fell first to Viking invasion in the 9th century and then to West Saxon supremacy in the 10th.

Beowulf as Inter-Text

The name 'Beowulf' literally means 'bee-wolf', a metaphor for 'bear' (the animal) in Old English; this is one of the sources for the shape-changer Beorn in *The Hobbit*, at least for his name (which also means 'bear'), though not for his character. Beyond the reference to the wild beast, the root-meaning of Beorn's name, from Old Norse *björn* (early Germanic **brunaz*), is the colour brown. The bear is thus 'the brown one', a simple way in earlier times to avoid pronouncing the taboo name of a dangerous animal – which Beorn in *The Hobbit* certainly is, when not in human form.

But Beowulf's fight with the dragon is perhaps the single episode in the poem that most obviously found its way into Tolkien's fictional works. It is very clear in two of his dragon-slaying stories, and also underlies fights with various monsters in *The Lord of the Rings*. Smaug, the dragon in *The Hobbit* who jealously guards his treasure, depends largely on *Beowulf*, where the dragon's hoard bears a curse to which the hero is not immune. Bilbo's taking of the cup, Smaug's terrible anger, the destruction of Laketown, and the dragon's death at the hands of Bard, are strongly dependent on the corresponding scenes in *Beowulf*. Tolkien's other dragons, Glaurung in *The Children of Húrin* (2007),⁶ and Chrysophylax in *Farmer Giles of Ham* (1949),⁷ recall that of *Beowulf*, but also the dragon Fafnir of

⁶ A shorter version of this story had earlier appeared as the tale of Túrin Turambar, chapter 21 of the *Quenta Silmarillion*, the longest text in the volume making up *The Silmarillion* (1977), where the dragon is named Glaurung. In the oldest version, 'Túrin and the Foalókë', in *The Book of Lost Tales*, Part 2, the dragon was named Glorund. Túrin's deeds owe something to both the Germanic hero Sigurd (or Siegfried) and the Finnish hero Kullervo in the *Kalevala* (see Flieger, 2015).

⁷ The name Chrysophylax Dives means 'Gold-guard the Rich'. Like *The Hobbit*, *Farmer Giles of Ham* was originally a fairy tale told by Tolkien to his children in the 1930s. First published in 1949, it was reprinted in *Tales from the Perilous Realm* (1997), more recently introduced by Tom Shippey (2008), p. 99-165, and again in a special anniversary edition (1999). Shippey draws attention to parallels, in characters and in the story-line, with both *Beowulf* and *The Hobbit*.

Nordic legend.⁸ While there are no dragons in *The Lord of the Rings*, two parallel scenes echo the manner in which Beowulf and Wiglaf despatch the dragon between them: this applies both to Sam's brave attack on the spider Shelob in defence of Frodo (*The Two Towers*, IV.10),⁹ and to the death of the Witch King at the hands of Éowyn and Merry (*The Return of the King*, V.6). In the latter case, the young hobbit's sword disintegrates in the Nazgûl's black blood just as Beowulf's gigantic sword melts away like ice after cutting off Grendel's head (1606-9; T 1345-8).¹⁰

In addition to the large picture, many details from *Beowulf* – names and isolated words – found their way into *The Lord of the Rings*. A Germanic hero called Fróda, famous in song, to which the poem briefly alludes (2025; T 1702), is the origin of the name Frodo, Tolkien's hero; the Old Norse word means 'wise'. In the poem, the partly human Grendel and his mother are twice said to be descendants of the biblical Cain, the first murderer, and therefore outcasts from society (106-8, 1261-7; T 86-7, 1048-53). Cain's 'evil broods' also include *eotenas ond ylfe ond orcneas*, 'ogres and goblins and haunting shapes of hell, and the giants too' (112; T 90-1); these will resurface, in Middle-earth, as trolls, elves and orcs. But while his orcs remain totally evil, Tolkien redeemed the elves in order to give them, in his fiction, a much nobler function. He would have felt justified in doing this because he knew that the Old English word *ylf* had in fact evolved, in form and in signification, in the course of time: it is found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, where the magical green giant is described as an *aluisch mon*, 'elvish man, uncanny creature' (verse 29, line 681).

As for Tolkien's treelike Ents, one of his most original creations, they take their name from the Old English word *ent*, meaning 'giant', found in *Beowulf*: *seah on enta geweorc*, 'He gazed upon that work of giants' (2717; T 2284-5). A similar expression occurs in other Anglo-Saxon poems, often in association with ruined buildings, doubtless of Roman origin: *The Ruin*, l. 2 *brosnað enta geweorc*, 'the work of giants has fallen'; and *The Wanderer*, l. 87, *eald enta geweorc*, 'ancient work of giants'. Tolkien's Ents are both gigantic and strong, but they also echo the Anglo-Saxon awe of the past – for the Ents in Middle-earth, arising out of the depths of time, were previously unknown to Men and Hobbits.

If the Elves of Middle-earth are the children of the stars, and men walk under the sun, the great power of evil in *The Lord of the Rings* is portrayed as a shadow, a nothingness, before which all light fails and all creatures cower in terror. Sauron is the Dark Lord, but he is a creature, not a god, as we learn in *The Silmarillion*; a *Maia*, or angelic power, he is a mighty spiritual being who rebelled against Ilúvatar, the All-Father, an idea modelled on the Judeo-Christian concept of Satan, the once-bright Lucifer. In *The Silmarillion* Sauron is only the servant of Melkor-Morgoth, a Vala or demiurge, the principal figure in the mythology corresponding to Lucifer; but this role is taken over by Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*. His chief servants are the Ring-wraiths, former men who have been turned into shadows, whose presence breathes the chill of death. In addition to the Bible, Tolkien took the idea of the 'shadow' from *Beowulf*, where it is an image associated with Grendel, the *sceadu-genga* ('a shadow walking' 703; T 574), the 'robber-fiend' who seeks to drag men 'to the shades' (*under sceadu bregdan*, 705-7; T 577-8). Frodo's great fear is that, if he fails in his mission, he will not be killed but turned into a Ring-wraith himself, a hateful being acting only at the instigation of evil. This idea, too, echoes the hideous association with Grendel.

Perhaps what links *The Lord of the Rings* to *Beowulf* more than anything else is the heroic spirit of Northern courage that Tolkien praised so highly in his 1936 lecture. 'The worth of defeated valour in this world is deeply felt', as he wrote ('Monsters' 23). It is true that Beowulf is overcome, but in death he loses no honour, whereas his adversary the dragon gains none. Noble even in defeat – perhaps especially so – this kind of courage is seen at its best in the face of insuperable odds, as in that other Old English heroic poem, the *Battle of Maldon*, which recounts the actual defeat of an Anglo-Saxon force by Vikings in the year 991. The words of Byrhtwold, an English retainer, lamenting his fallen lord, Byrthnoth, have become famous (Gordon, 1937: 61, l. 312-3):

⁸ Fafnir the dragon appears in the Icelandic *Volsungasaga* (13th century) and the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*, both of which are ultimately based on common Germanic legends.

⁹ The monstrous spider is forced to withdraw in pain to nurse her wounds. Having been put out of action, she does not reappear in the story, but we are not told whether she recovered or not from Sting.

¹⁰ Line numbers are given firstly for the Old English text (*Beowulf*, ed. Wrenn, 1973), then for Tolkien's prose translation, here marked 'T' (2014).

*Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað*
(The spirit shall be harder, the heart keener,
courage the greater, as our strength grows less).¹¹

This pithy expression of the spirit of courage Tolkien took as the basis for a composite work, *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*.¹² It has three parts, only the second of which is fictional: (1) a short introduction to the *Battle of Maldon*; (2) a verse dialogue between two characters, said to be survivors of the real battle, discussing the strategic error made by their leader, the dead English general; (3) a discussion of Byrhtnoth's fault, one of overweening pride and misplaced honour which led him to make a strategic error, ending in defeat and death. The Old English word for this sentiment is *ofermode*, which carries a sense of insolence and over-confidence; it echoes a similar term applied to the dead hero Beowulf, who was *lofgeornost*, 'for praise most eager' (3182; T 2669) – the last and slightly ominous word in the poem.

What gives *The Lord of the Rings* its suspense is the feeling that the future of the world hangs on a thread; but it derives its elevated tone from the courage and dignity with which the protagonists – especially the diminutive and normally unheroic hobbits – face their destiny. In this novel filled with sublime and unforgettable scenes, there is hardly a moment to equal that in which Frodo volunteers, of his own free will, to carry the Ring to the fires of Mount Doom, though to penetrate the enemy stronghold and to destroy the Ring seems a hopeless task. The most unlikely anti-hero, a home-loving hobbit, is willing to risk all in the attempt, simply because it seems to be the right thing to do; and when he speaks up at the Council of Elrond, declaring 'I will take the Ring, though I do not know the way' (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, II.2), he seals his fate. In this he demonstrates the essence of courage: not fearlessness, but the overcoming of fear for the sake of others and in defence of right. Though Frodo has none of the attributes of Beowulf, he attains at that moment the same level of courage as the aged king who goes forth alone to save his people from the dragon. And though Beowulf dies, there is a sense in the poem that the struggle to survive is the thing that matters – which is why it is honourable to go down fighting. Giving up, handing the enemy an easy victory, is the antithesis of the heroic spirit; and it is this dogged courage that most tellingly unites Frodo and his faithful Sam, plodding on to the brink of doom, to Beowulf and his kinsman Wiglaf.

Of all the peoples in the novel, none more obviously recalls the early Anglo-Saxons than the Rohirrim, or Riders of Rohan. Their territory resembles the grasslands of the North German plains, while their culture evokes that of the Germanic tribes of the heroic age. Expert horsemen, they echo the retainers in *Beowulf* who race their steeds back from Grendel's mere as they sing their songs of praise (864-71; T 703-5). Their language is a somewhat archaic form of the Common Speech, which Tolkien renders by the use of Old English (OE). They call themselves Eorlings or OE *Eorlingas* after their eponymous ancestor Eorl (cf. Scyldings and Scylfings in *Beowulf*). Their land they name the Riddermark, a translation of OE *Riddena-mearc* ('March of the Riders'), and their lord is King of the Mark, a name closely related to the historical OE name for Mercia, *Mierce*, '(people of) the Mark, or March', i.e. Tolkien's beloved English Midlands. The king has built for himself a royal hall, Meduseld (OE 'meadhall'), inside a fortress called Edoras (OE 'enclosures, courts'); closely modelled on Hrothgar's Heorot in *Beowulf*, its elevated position and gleaming roof can be seen at a great distance. The king himself is named Théoden, which is simply the OE word for ruler, from *theode(n)*, 'nation', of which the king is both chief and symbol.

The chapter entitled 'The King of the Golden Hall' (*The Two Towers*, III.6) is evidently a calque on the poem. Just as Beowulf and his men have to go through a series of military and diplomatic checks (the coastguard, the door-warden) before being allowed to enter Heorot unarmed, so Gandalf, Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli are subjected to the same process before being ushered into Théoden's presence. The man they find, mentally crippled by personal loss and unwise advisers, resembles the aged Hrothgar, overwhelmed by the depredations of Grendel and his own inability to act in defence of the Danes. Just as Queen Wealtheow in the poem offers the cup of friendship to Beowulf, so Éowyn, Théoden's niece, offers the cup to Aragorn; and the greeting she uses, *Wæs thu hál* (OE *Hail to thee!*), taken directly from

¹¹ My translation. Tolkien and Gordon together had edited *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in 1925.

¹² First published in *Essays and Studies*, 6 (1953), reprinted in the 2001 edition of *Tree and Leaf* (1964, 2001), p. 121-50.

the poem (407: T 329), is retained in the original language in the Meduseld scene. Éowyn's name means 'Horse-friend' in OE, while her brother, Éomer, is 'Great horse'.

Théoden rules a small territory in alliance with the ancient kingdom of Gondor and Arnor that formerly held sway in Middle-earth, north and south. The Stewards of Gondor, though not claiming the title of king, are Númenóreans, of lineage nobler than Théoden of the Mark, and their regal court in the great walled city of Minas Tirith makes even Meduseld look rustic – a taunt which Saruman throws in Théoden's face when the king comes to Orthanc. If the Mark recalls a somewhat primitive Germania, or Mercia of early pre-Christian days, Gondor is more like late Anglo-Saxon England, a wealthy kingdom, a settled and sophisticated society that could look back on centuries of cultural development. Thus *The Lord of the Rings* brings together, in the form of two distinct but allied human groups, two aspects of *Beowulf*: its early Germanic heroes, and its late Anglo-Saxon audience who looked back on an ancient period of their ancestral tradition.

Like Théoden of the Mark, the Steward of Gondor and his family become the focus of events which are directly inspired by scenes in *Beowulf*. Remodelled and transmuted, not calqued to the same degree as in 'The King of the Golden Hall', the ancient funeral scenes are of special value to Tolkien. The first of these in the poem is also the first to be used in the novel, in *The Two Towers*, III.1, 'The Departure of Boromir', the latter being the elder son of Denethor the Steward. In a highly evocative manner, the farewell to Boromir in the elven canoe strongly echoes the ship-burial of Scyld Scefing at the opening of *Beowulf*: the laying of the body in the vessel, arrayed with his arms and golden belt, and the launching of the boat into unknown waters, are infused with the same dignified, melancholy spirit as in the poem. This is reinforced in the novel by the dirge chanted by Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli, though in this case, there being no lament for Scyld in the poem, it is the funeral dirge for Beowulf that serves as a model for Boromir's. Despite this delay at an urgent moment – the young hobbits, Merry and Pippin, have been carried off by Orcs – the three singers, all of royal origin, know the value of courtly ceremony; it comes naturally to them to give the fallen warrior a worthy valedictory.

Boromir's boat is carried down the River Anduin, where his younger brother Faramir, several days later, sees it gliding by on its way to the sea. Faramir is wiser and better than his rash and impetuous sibling. He is a more spiritual, intellectual man, though these qualities have not endeared him to his father Denethor, who is inclined to treat him as a molly-coddle. There is an echo here of the gentle boy Beowulf, who, before developing his superhuman strength, had not been judged very promising material for a warrior (2183-9; T 1835-41). But Faramir, in whom, like Aragorn, the Númenóreans of old live again, is made of stern stuff. As the novel proceeds, he grows more and more like the hero Beowulf, not only in his military prowess and leadership skills, but also in his virtue and wisdom. Through parallels like this, it may be seen that Tolkien freely makes use of various aspects of the poem in his fiction.

The funeral rites for Beowulf are put to further use in *The Return of the King*, for both Denethor (V.7) and Théoden (V.8, VI.6). As the crazed Denethor leaps upon the burning pyre, the crackling of the flame is physically the same, but morally the opposite, of the *swogende leg, wope bewunden* ('a roaring flame ringed with weeping', 3145-6; T 2641) that consumes Beowulf's body. Théoden dies more honourably. Awakened from his torpor by Gandalf, he leads his men proudly in the War of the Ring and falls at the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, where his dying words to Merry and Éomer (V.6) recall many aspects of Beowulf's farewell speech to Wiglaf (2794-2816; T 2350-66). After the battle, Théoden's body is laid out in state in the House of the Steward, the twelve guards who stand about his bed (V.8) recalling Beowulf's twelve warriors. When he is brought back to his final resting-place at Edoras, the Men of the Mark bury him in a house of stone, then raise a mound, covered with turves of green grass and *simbelmynë* or 'evermind', a small white flower that grows in all seasons (VI.6); the analogy with Beowulf's barrow, which recalls him ever to the minds of men, is obvious. Finally the Riders of the King's House ride round about Théoden's barrow and sing a funeral dirge, while the women of Rohan weep (VI.6). All these details are plainly inspired by the conclusion of *Beowulf*, but again we see the way in which Tolkien uses various elements for his own purpose. In the poem, the hero's body is first cremated, then his ashes are covered with a mound of stones; in the novel, the pyre is made by Denethor himself, whereas the barrow is built for Théoden. Both ideas come from the same passage in *Beowulf*; but Tolkien did not feel hobbled, as it were, by any obligation to relate them to the same individual. Much in the poem fired Tolkien's imagination – scenes, characters, speeches, even individual words – but he was too great a writer, too inventive a genius, to rely on calques.

Moral and elegiac tone

A devout Catholic, Tolkien saw the creation of a genuine work of art as a kind of ‘sub-creation’, reflecting and complementing God’s creation. This spiritual purpose is evident in his fiction. *The Silmarillion* opens with a creation myth, bearing some relation to the Judeo-Christian tradition, placing everything under the authority of a sole Creator; the latter, in the Elvish tongue, is named Eru, the One, and Ilúvatar, the All-Father. The struggle between good and evil in *The Lord of the Rings* is plainly religious, with Frodo coming close to being a saviour-figure; close, but not quite, for despite his courage he remains weak and fallible, and indeed succumbs to the corrupting power of the Ring at the final, crucial moment (though an earlier good deed saves him from the consequences of his weakness). There is a parallel in this with *Beowulf*, also a near-saviour and yet only a man, morally superior and yet imperfect, who lays down his life for the people but is also a victim of the curse which lies on the dragon’s treasure. Just as the *Beowulf*-poet had to deal with the delicate problem of presenting good pagans in a favourable light to a Christian audience, so Tolkien, who places *The Lord of the Rings* in a remote heroic age, avoids any explicit reference to religion – even to Ilúvatar, who remained unknown to readers before the publication of *The Silmarillion*. The balance between the high moral tone and religious atmosphere on the one hand, coupled with the avoidance of proselytising unsuitable to a pre-Christian past, is one of the less obvious, but still very real, connections between Tolkien and the Anglo-Saxon work.

Attempting to define the genre of *Beowulf* in his 1936 lecture, Tolkien described it as ‘an heroic-elegiac poem’ (‘Monsters’ 31): something unique, neither an epic nor a lay (though sharing some aspects with each of these genres), evoking at the same time both the heroic and the elegiac modes found elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon poetry. This is because it is about death; not just the death of a great warrior-king, but death in general, the inescapable end which faces all mortals. This is the meaning of the dragon, and of the final word in the main body of the essay (before the appendix), ‘until the dragon comes’ (‘Monsters’ 34), i.e. until we die. Tolkien did not mean to suggest that evil always defeats good – a profoundly irreligious idea, which he could never have accepted – but simply that death overtakes everyone. In Germanic mythology, it was only in song and story that a hero’s reputation lived on, which is why the gaining of glory in this life was so important. The transience of human life – a recurring theme in *Beowulf* – harmonises with a Christian view, though the latter downplays evanescent human glory in favour of the divine and eternal.

Much of the same transitory tone flows into *The Lord of the Rings*, a novel one might also qualify as a heroic-elegy. In its elegiac aspect it is about the passing of all things, the upheaval of the world, the end of the Third Age, the beginning of the Age of Men. Even the immortal Elves, who do not grow old and die but remain attached to this world, are filled with sadness at the speed with which other living things change and disappear around them; and when their own time comes to leave Middle-earth, they go to the Immortal Lands, an Earthly Paradise prepared for them by Mandos, one of the Valar or demiurges. Among mortal creatures, only the Ring-bearers (the hobbits Bilbo, Frodo and Sam) are allowed, by special dispensation, to join them in the Undying Lands. They take the place, as it were, of the three elvish women (Lúthien, Nimloth, and Arwen) who gave up their physical immortality in order to marry men. The Doom of men remains a mystery to the Elves, who know only that Ilúvatar allows them to die, but not to disappear completely; in some way beyond understanding, men are destined to be reunited with the Creator. Death is therefore, in Tolkien’s mythology, the ‘gift of Ilúvatar’ to men, because death for them is not extinction. Men themselves, who desire everlasting life, do not know clearly what this means; only that, as Aragorn says to Arwen, ‘We are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory’ (*The Return of the King*, Appendix A.v, ‘The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen’). And in this there lies a final parallel with *Beowulf*. The maker of the Old English poem, as Tolkien wrote, ‘expended his art in making keen that touch upon the heart which sorrows have that are both poignant and remote’ (‘Monsters’ 33). Just so, Tolkien the creative writer made keen that same sorrow, that passionate nostalgia for eternity, in *The Lord of the Rings*.

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