

Arthur and Aragorn:

Arthurian influence in *The Lord of the Rings*

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Along with the downfall of Sauron and the destruction of the One Ring in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* there is another great event: one of renewal that fills the vacuum of greatness and power. That event is the ascension of Aragorn, son of Arathorn, to the throne of Gondor and all the Dúnedain. In many ways this renewed king resembles another king of old lore – King Arthur. Tolkien viewed the evolution of mythologies in much the same way he viewed the evolution of languages. They were tied together and he regarded his work in language as applicable to mythology.¹ Part of his scholarly work as a philologist was to work his way back through related languages to their root. Likewise, of his fiction Tom Shippey noted in *The Author of the Century* that “he did not think that he was entirely making it up. He was ‘reconstructing’” as Tolkien put it.² What influence did King Arthur and the legends that surround him have on the story in *The Lord of the Rings* and this ‘reconstruction’? Despite Tolkien’s dismissal of the Arthurian Mythology in a letter to Milton Waldman as “imperfectly naturalised” with its ‘faerie’ “too lavish, and fantastical, incoherent and repetitive”³ it has been argued that Tolkien actually used the Arthurian legends when he created his own body of legend. In her article, “J.R.R. Tolkien and the Matter of Britain”, Verlyn Flieger challenges Tolkien’s criticism of Arthur against his own work and finds many comparisons between Tolkien’s work and the Arthurian Legends, comparing Tolkien’s Frodo to the legendary King Arthur.⁴ In this essay we’ll look at how Tolkien more than borrowed from the legends, but actually retold them within his famous book, casting Gandalf as the archetypal wizard, Aragorn as his reinvented Arthur, the sword Narsil as the new Excalibur, and Avallónë along with Eressëa as the magical place akin to the Arthurian isle of Avalon. We’ll even look at how the Holy Grail fits into the story.

THE WIZARD

In drawing parallels between Arthurian Legends and *The Lord of the Rings* it is important to look at the source of the Arthurian Legends – starting in the Celtic and Welsh mythologies of ancient Britain. Introduced in these stories is the character of Myrddin, originally a bard and later becoming Merlin – the wizard who serves kings with prophecy and guidance. In the Celtic world, mentioned in a book by Charles Squire on Celtic mythology, Myrddin becomes the omnipotent being, the “Zeus” (as Squires puts it) of the Arthurian cycle⁵ and, in fact, (according to John Rhys) Britain in ancient times was called Clas Myrddin, or “Myrddin’s Enclosure.”⁶

In Tolkien’s own mythology there is a striking resemblance between the wizard Gandalf and Odin⁷. Odin was a great magician in addition to being the chief god of the Northmen. Also, interestingly, Odin had use of a fast running steed (with eight legs) named Sleipnir and Odin also commanded the berserkers into battle, where they would change into bear form (suggesting Beorn in *The Hobbit*) as well as the Valkyries (ditto the Battle of Pelennor Fields⁸). Tales of Odin would

later become those of Myrddin and later still of Merlin – all of which walked the earth in the guise of an old sage, disguising their true power and nature. Jones points out in her book, *Myth & Middle-Earth*, that the name “Myrddin” was very close to the French word *merde*, which likely accounts for the change under Norman scribes⁹.

The two characters of Merlin and Gandalf are wizards – feared and respected by all those around them. They are men of miraculous power, but a power used only at need, presenting themselves in humble raiment with a pointed hat, and acting as advisors to people in positions of power. Gandalf is instrumental in aiding Aragorn in his quest to claim the kingship of Gondor just as Merlin is in aiding Arthur with his ascension to the throne by means of prophecy and counsel. However, Gandalf “out-Merlins Merlin”⁴, as Flieger puts it, by being the wizard Merlin is thought of but doesn’t necessarily show up as in the older stories. By contrast, Gandalf is a larger part of the story, giving us a glimpse of his powers and the struggles he himself fears, pushing the story forward with action rather than simply cryptic guidance. By contrast, the older tales of Merlin merely hint at what he is capable of, leaving the definition of Merlin’s power to be made by later authors. Despite this, Merlin has become the quintessential wizard of mythology. His qualities set up the stereotypical idea of a wizard and Tolkien uses those qualities in his creation of Gandalf. By taking on some of the other qualities of Merlin, Gandalf gains a connection to existing Celtic and Norse mythology as well as the well known Arthurian legends.

Both Gandalf and Merlin allowed their kings be the heroes they were meant to be on their own and did not seek the power and glory of ruling themselves or even being the “power behind the throne” as evidenced by the stories of Merlin from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Regum Britanniae* written in the twelfth century. Once Gandalf’s task is done, that is, achieving the final destruction of Sauron, he leaves Middle-earth to be ruled by Men. Of this Gandalf says, “But in any case the time of my labours now draws to an end. The King has taken on the burden.”¹⁰ What Tolkien feels is missing in Merlin he bestows upon Gandalf – that which he feels the wizard needs to be – the divine emissary of the Celtic mystical spirits.

SWORD AND KING

In examining parallels between Arthur and the hobbit Frodo, Verlyn Flieger provides convincing evidence of Arthurian influence on *The Lord of the Rings* in the previously mentioned article. Elements of Arthurian mythology spread throughout *LOR* like loose threads. Flieger explains this by illustrating how Frodo’s wounding by Gollum “recalls Arthur’s wounding by his anti-self Mordred”, how his leaving “Middle-earth to be healed in Valinor explicitly echoes the wounded Arthur’s departure by barge to be healed in Avalon”, and that his exchanges with Sam about leaving “are reminiscent of the last exchange between the despairing Bedivere and his departing king.” She further points out the similarity

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between the way Sting was given to Frodo by Bilbo's planting the sword in a wooden plank for Frodo to pull out and the act of Excalibur being pulled from the stone by Arthur⁴.

Jones, in her book, tends to draw parallels between Tristan and Aragorn. She uses Raglan's heroic guidelines to compare and contrast the two heroes, showing as many differences as similarities. Still, the similarities are there – particularly concerning Tristan's love with Isolde and Aragorn's love with Arwen. Isolde represents, like Arwen, a fairy-like beauty full of healing powers; kept from her lover by forces outside their control, but eventually rewarded with a union. Fortunately for Aragorn, his story does not follow the tragic pattern of most heroes and he eventually succumbs to old age rather than ill-luck or a malicious act¹¹. I also see many qualities of Arthur in Aragorn, including being more of a supporting role in the larger story, as Arthur often is, rather than the main character.

What could be the genesis of the character of Aragorn? One could certainly draw some conclusions based on the name alone since naming is so important to Tolkien¹² as he said in several letters. In Tolkien's Elven language of Sindarin, the name "Aragorn" means something like "King-Tree."¹³ The prefix, "Ar" (meaning "King" or "Royal"), is used throughout Númenórean history in the names of kings into the third age, down to Aragorn himself. Arthur is a prominent king of legend who shares this prefix, giving his name royal significance in the language Tolkien himself developed. "Arthur" is also the name of Tolkien's own father whom he never really knew in life. Perhaps the prefix entered Tolkien's mind as a symbol of a ruler or a patriarch (even a far off one) or perhaps it was his homage to his own father. Though, the early drafts of *The Lord of the Rings* published by his son Christopher Tolkien, in *The History of the Lord of the Rings*, do not tell us much about who or what Aragorn is. Even the personality of Strider does not exist in the early manuscripts, but was rather Trotter – a hobbit of relation to Bilbo. In revision Tolkien would write in the margin, "Correct this. Only Trotter is of ancient race." Tolkien also scribbled in the margins "Trotter will also be essential" and "Trotter is connected with the Ring."¹⁴ Beyond this Tolkien seems silent on the origin of Aragorn, allowing for speculation. Christopher Tolkien remarks that "he had been potentially Aragorn for a long time" and that "a great deal of the 'indivisible' Trotter remained in Aragorn and determined his nature."¹⁵ Arthur is surely in Tolkien's subconscious, and could have affected the creation of Aragorn. Quite likely, however, is that Tolkien knew he was going to use Arthur as the model for a new king before he ever got to writing about Aragorn.

As in the coming of Arthur, a wizard heralds Aragorn's 'arrival'. Fulfilling prophecy, he comes bearing a sword of legend, and he is victorious in uniting the lands around him. According to Layamon, and quoting Eugene Mason's translation, after Arthur was born he was taken by the elves and they "enchanted the child with magic most strong" among other blessings, including "prince virtues most good."¹⁶ This certainly brings to mind the upbringing of Aragorn among the elves of Rivendell and Lothlórien. In fact, Aragorn exemplifies elven virtues and beliefs by respecting and admiring nature, the ancient traditions of elves and men, the elven language, and healing lore.

Important to this new king is his sense of duty, symbolised by the sword that he carries which further symbolises the history of his line. Looking again at the Arthurian legends there is another similarity here, although it is doubtful if Tolkien would admit to borrowing from the 'French tainted' story of Arthur. In the fifteenth century, Sir Thomas Malory would

write down the collective romances of Arthur's mythology in *Le Morte D'Arthur*. By this time an integral part of the story is the sword Excalibur (it is present as *Caledfwlch* in the *Mabinogion* and as *Caliburen* in Layamon's *de Brut* while Wace named it Excalibur in his *de Brut*¹⁷). This sword became a symbol of the kingship, for written on the anvil that held it in the great churchyard is the prophetic "Whoso pulleth out this sword of this stone and anvil, is rightwise king born of all England."¹⁸ Arthur not only pulls the sword from the anvil, but it is revealed that he is actually the son of Uther Pendragon and thus, very much the "rightwise" king of England.

Similar to Excalibur in *The Lord of the Rings* is the sword Andúril - "Flame of the West" (also known as Narsil - "Red and White Flame", the Sword that was Broken, and later the Sword Reforged)¹⁹. This ancient sword is the very sword used by Isildur to strike Sauron and cause him to lose the One Ring. It is this sword, unlike any other blade in Middle-earth, that Sauron fears because it caused him to lose the One Ring before and because of what it heralds for the future. Like Excalibur, it is a symbol of the king and his return. Tolkien wrote in the prophetic poem about Aragorn:

*All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadow shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.²⁰*

Aragorn is, of course, the king that will rise from the ashes of the Northern Kingdom, Arnor. Likewise, Arthur rises from the ashes of the royal line of Uther Pendragon to reassert its dominance. Arthur's claim, like Aragorn's, is increased by the owning of such a sword. The sword in *The Lord of the Rings*, Narsil, is indeed "renewed", as the poem predicts, just as the "Sword that was Broken" in the tales of the Holy Grail must be remade in order to prove the worth of the hero²¹. Aragorn bears this burden proudly – "Here is the Sword that was Broken and is forged again"²². When he returns to Minas Tirith after being victorious over his enemies, he is hailed by Faramir, the Steward in the name of the king. Faramir proclaims to the people of the City how Aragorn fits all the prophecies of his coming, for he is the "bearer of the Star of the North, wielder of the Sword Reforged, victorious in battle, whose hands bring healing"²³. Faramir is clearly alluding to the prophecies and legends known to the people concerning the king that would return to rule them and usher in an age of renewal and victory over oppression. Likewise, Arthur would turn the tides drowning his country and bring victory where defeat had been known.

RE-INVENTING ARTHUR

The legends of Arthur certainly seem, to many people, to be an important (if not the) mythology of England. His story has been as much a part of English history as any historical king or queen. As for Arthurian faerie, Flieger asks in her article: "how lavish is too lavish?" and "who decides?" She then takes on Tolkien's criticism of Arthur and concludes that it is Tolkien's own *Silmarillion*, seemingly concerned with a place and history not of England, that would have to "be naturalised" - not the cycles of Arthur. She does, however, concede that Arthur's legends are irretrievably tied up with Christianity while Tolkien's own work "has no explicit Christianity" nor

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miracles, “holy hermits”, or Grail²⁴.

However, *The Lord of the Rings* does contain more subtle Christian influence. Tolkien referred to it as “a fundamentally religious and Catholic work” in a letter to Fr. Robert Murray²⁵. Arthur is not just part of his English heritage, but his Catholic heritage as well. Charles Coulombe remarks in his essay ‘The Lord of the Rings - a Catholic View’, “the Catholic imagination was also haunted by the image of great kings, like Arthur, St Ferdinand III, and St Louis IX.” These kings are “held to have been the ideal prototype for rulers: pious, brave, wonderful in a manner unapproachable for those of later times.”²⁶ Aragorn, to be a genuine king of mythology that the reader would love, needs to have these qualities as well. In achieving that Aragorn becomes the completed version of Arthur.

Going back into the past far enough it could also be said that the original myth of Arthur is pre-Christian. The first image of the Grail was not the cup that once caught the blood of Christ, but (according to Malcolm Godwin in his book on the Grail) a “mysterious otherworldly object” perhaps a dish, platter, cauldron, or chalice. It would not take on its Christian significance until later. There is no Grail in *The Lord of the Rings*, but there is the Ring. More importantly, there is the essence of the Grail. It has been said that in the Arthurian Grail cycles “there exists a direct casual relationship between the well-being and health of the king/hero [Fisher King/Perceval/King Arthur/Galahad] and the fertility of his realm”²⁷, which echoes the relationship Galadriel has through her Ring of Power, Narya, with the forest of Lothlórien in which she resides. The desolation of the land and spirit of the people around the riddermark of Rohan and kingdom of Gondor further echoes the state of the land around the castle of the Fisher King of the Grail legend. This state is rectified by the renewal of the kingship of the land by Aragorn, resembling the tie between the renewal of the king and the renewal of the land in the Grail legends. In Galadriel’s case the pastoral relationship with the land is about to vanish with the diminishing of the magic of her ring and her own return into the West, the coming wasteland (as compared to its current state) further echoing the power of the ruler with the health of the land but as inverse to the legends of the Grail.

Tolkien had a complex relationship with Arthur. As mentioned earlier, Tolkien did not feel that Arthur’s story represented the natural mythology of England³. Shippey also notes that “As for King Arthur, Tolkien might well have seen him as a symptom of English vagueness.”²⁸ However, in his essay “On Fairy Stories” he does credit the Arthurian legends as a fairy-story, telling his audience that “the good and evil story of Arthur’s court is a ‘fairy-story’²⁹. Humphrey Carpenter wrote in his biography of Tolkien that the “cycles had pleased him since childhood.” Shippey, still discussing Tolkien’s feelings on Arthur, would write “Still, the fact remains that Tolkien did produce a narrative of *entrelacement*. He had read a good deal of French romance for his *Sir Gawain* edition, and may have reflected further that even *Beowulf* has a kind of ‘interlace’ technique.”²⁸ Later in life, while working on *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien had criticised the Arthurian scholarship of fellow Inkling, Charles Williams, referring to it as “wholly alien, and sometimes very distasteful.”³⁰ The social dynamics of the Inklings most likely played a role in Tolkien’s feelings about Williams’ work, but to what degree it’s hard to say. Although, according to both C.S. Lewis and Carpenter they both read their own work to each other on

many occasions in group meetings with other Inklings. Those reading sessions likely resembled the sessions laid out in *The Notion Club Papers* (published as part of *The History of the Lord of the Rings*). In the *Papers* a kind of time travel is discussed around the idea of King Arthur and Camelot. Tolkien would later start writing his own version of the Arthurian myth itself: *The Fall of Arthur*, which was a great work according to his colleagues³⁰. It was a work, however, he would never finish. Perhaps he wanted to outdo Williams in creating a better take on the Arthurian legends when he set out to write *The Fall of Arthur*. Perhaps he had already done so when he wrote *The Lord of the Rings*. Also from *The Notion Club Papers*, Tolkien writes, “if one could go back, one would find not myth dissolving into history, but rather the reverse: real history becoming more mythical – more shapely, simple, discernibly significant, even seen at close quarters. More poetical, and less prosaic, if you like.”³¹

LAND OF SUMMER

The final parallel from the two bodies of legend is the mythical location of Avalon. The links between Atlantis and Númenór are already well known and discussed³². I believe a link to the legendary locale of Avalon also exists. At the end of his life Aragorn, unlike Arthur, does not go to an Avalon, but instead goes to sleep in the House of the King.³³ For Aragorn there is no return from the grave like Arthur’s predicted return. Tolkien wrote in a letter to Naomi Mitchison “in this setting the return of Arthur would be quite impossible”³². From Celtic mythology we have Avilion: “called Ynys Avallon, ‘Avallon’s Island’.” This island is the “Isle of Apples”³⁴ and “in the earliest myth, signified Hades”³⁵. It is also worth noting here that Galadriel bears some resemblance to the Arthurian character of Morgan le Fay, one of the queens who bears Arthur away to Avalon and, in some versions, a villainess of the story. “Few escape her nets” it is said of the Lady of the Golden Wood, Galadriel.³⁶ “Land of Summer” and the “Isle of Apples” – echoes the “Golden Wood” name of Lórien. There is a better example in Middle-earth – a place called “Avallónë” and its description is not too dissimilar from the Avalon of the Arthurian legend. For Merlin, his final dwelling and imprisonment “is a tomb of airy enchantment”:

*Encircled, shielded, and made splendid by his atmosphere of living light, the Lord of Heaven moves slowly towards the west, to disappear at last into the sea (as one local version of the myth puts it), or on to a far-off island (as another says), or into a dark forest (the choice of a third). When myth became finally fixed, it was Bardsey Island, off the extreme westernmost point of Caernarvonshire, that was selected as his last abode. Into it he went with nine attendant bards, taking with him the “Thirteen Treasures of Britain”, thenceforth lost to men.*³⁷

In Middle-earth Avallónë is a haven on the Isle of Eressëa so named “for it is of all cities the nearest to Valinor”. Its tower “is the first sight that the mariner beholds when at last he draws nigh to the Undying Lands”³⁸

*Thus in after days, what by the voyages of ships, what by lore and star-craft, the kings of Men knew that the world was indeed made round, and yet the Eldar were permitted still to depart and to come to the Ancient West and to Avallónë, if they would. Therefore the loremasters of Men said that a Straight Road must still be, for those that were permitted to find it.*³⁹