

# Re-writing the past - The pillars of Middle-earth

Andreas Gloge

Translation from the original German by Marie-Noelle Biemer

The best place to start, when attempting to comprehend Tolkien's mythic dimensions, merely hinted at in stories, songs, and lore in *The Lord of the Rings*, is with *The Silmarillion*. Tolkien tried hard to have both books published at the same time because he was convinced they were too closely linked to each other to be separated (cf. Carpenter 1991, 182ff). But the publishers shrank from his demands. They judged *The Silmarillion* unsuitable for the contemporary market and in any case it largely consisted still of a complex, disordered pile of innumerable manuscripts and revisions. In the event, *The Silmarillion* was published posthumously by Tolkien's son Christopher, who made what he thought the best choices amongst his father's manifold notes. A few years later, the twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* followed, also edited by Christopher Tolkien. It filled many gaps as regards content and offered alternative versions to *The Silmarillion* based on hitherto neglected scripts by J.R.R. Tolkien.<sup>1</sup>

There will never be an authorised version of *The Silmarillion*, so many interpretative approaches should only be considered with care. However its literary value for *The Lord of the Rings* is beyond question. "In any case it served as a primary source for The Lord [of the Rings]" (Mathews 1978, 56) and "[b]y incorporating various epic traditions and types into one form – and one, moreover, which closely adheres to the requirements Aristotle prescribed for the epic in his *Poetics*, including unity of action – Tolkien devises a unique form of *fantasy writing*" (Mathews 1978, 57f). According

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to Mathews, *The Silmarillion* serves as a primary source for the actions and motivations of different cultures and traditions in Middle-earth and thus explains the geographical and socio-political structures in *The Lord of the Rings*. For this reason, *The Silmarillion* is included in the following examination of the influence of old myths and legends.

### The importance of language

J.R.R. Tolkien found international fame as an author but first and foremost he was a philologist who taught for 39 years at the universities of Oxford and Leeds. Besides his penchant for Old

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"And now the songs have come down among us out of strange places and walk visible under the Sun." (TT, 191)

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English, he also possessed a variously extensive knowledge of Latin, Greek, Finnish, Gothic, Welsh, and Icelandic. According to his biographer Carpenter he was "well versed in all dialects of Anglo-Saxon and Middle English" while additionally "during 1919 and 1920, when he was working on the Oxford Dictionary he made himself acquainted with a number of other early Germanic languages" (Carpenter 2002, 178f).

It is thus no great surprise that in his great life's work, *The Lord of the*

*Rings*, no less than fifteen languages emerge (cf. Noel 1977, 28ff). They vary from the only hinted at to the extensive, in conversations, names, songs, poems, or lore. In a letter to W.H. Auden, shortly after the publication of the last volume of *The Lord of the Rings* in 1955, Tolkien said about his love for languages:

'Most important, perhaps, after Gothic was the discovery in Exeter College library, when I was supposed to be reading for Honour Mods, of a Finnish Grammar. It was like discovering a complete wine-cellar filled with bottles of an amazing wine of a kind of flavour never tasted before. [...] All this only as background to the stories [of Middle-earth], though languages and names are for me inextricable from the stories. They are and were so to speak an attempt to give background or a world in which my expressions of linguistic taste could have a function. The stories were comparatively late in coming'. (Carpenter 1995, 214)

Inspired by his own poems, the invention of his own grammar, and by old mythologies (as for example the relatively new Finnish epic *Kalevala*<sup>2</sup>), Tolkien began to work on private stories, which would give his "taste for language" a function and a sense, in 1917. Those episodes, which were only published after his death as *The Silmarillion* and which depict the creation and world history of Middle-earth over a period of more than 6000 years, formed an inspirational well for his two most successful books, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Tolkien invented not only two elvish languages, Quenya and

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1. A rough abstract of *The Silmarillion* can be found in Carpenter (1991a, 190-241) where a more than ten thousand word long letter from Tolkien to Milton Waldmann (Collins publishers) in 1951 has been summarised. In it, Tolkien explains the relevance of *The Silmarillion*. In Garbowski (2000, 59-63) more information and explanation concerning the posthumous publication of *The History of Middle-earth* and *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* (1980, George Allen & Unwin), published as *Nachrichten aus Mittelerde* in German, can be found. These works illuminate the mythical background of Middle-earth and have contributed considerably to the character of the world of *The Lord of the Rings*.

2. The Finnish national epic was finished in its complete revision in 1849. See <http://virtual.finland.fi/english/kalevala.html> (13.4.2002) for more details.

Sindarin (*cf. RK, 493-530*), with vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation but he also supplied his fictitious peoples with appropriate language patterns that clearly distinguished them from one another in the story:

'Tolkien used English to represent the Common Speech, Westron, spoken by the hobbits and most of the Free Peoples of Middle-earth. The relationship of English to the languages of other peoples indicates those peoples' relationships to the hobbits. Throughout most of *LOR*, Anglo-Saxon based English is used to give the effect of simple dignity and proximity to nature. In the Shire, the English Tolkien used was informal and often unsophisticated and provincial. In Rohan, actual Old English words, names and phrases were used to show that their relationship to Modern English reflects the similarities between the tongues of the Shire and the Mark. These two languages had a common source in the speech of Wilderland, where both the hobbits and the Rohirrim originated. In Gondor, French and other Latin-based words were used to suggest a language still more removed and noble than the Common Speech used elsewhere. This was because the inhabitants of Gondor spoke not only Westron but Elvish as well.' (*Noel 1977, 29*)

While the language diversity in Middle-earth is often only hinted at, it shows distinct depth elsewhere, with the elves, for example. The entire conception, at any rate, proves Tolkien's love of languages and the sound of old words which renders *LOR* stylistically more interesting – though some readers unfamiliar with elvish vocabulary might wonder about the exact sense of the words. Here Tolkien's propensity for symbolism shows. It is less the clearly definable sense and more the function for the plot or the magic of the atmosphere that determines his creative direction. It can be found in the poems in elvish as well as in some isolated, seemingly wistful, remarks:

"Galadriel' he [Sam] said faintly, and then he heard voices far off but clear: the crying of the Elves as they walked under the stars in the beloved shadows of the Shire, and the music of the Elves as it came through his sleep in the Hall of Fire in the house of Elrond.'

*Gilthoniel A Elbereth!*

And then his tongue was loosed and his voice cried in a language which he did not know:

*A Elbereth Gilthoniel  
o menel palan-diriel,  
le nallon sí di'nguruthos!  
A tiro nin, Fanuilos!*

(*TT, 425*)

Even though neither Sam nor the reader can grasp immediately the exact meaning of these words, the passage has a certain effect and meaning because of the strange language. Helmut W. Pesch ascribes this function to a reflection of the magical character of language as well as to its function as a medium of creation which in turn determines the magical character (*cf. Pesch 1982, 183*). Tolkien himself felt that the creative use of language was almost equal to an act of creation, which would bring us closer to God (*cf. Tolkien 1987, 157*). The imagination of the reader at this is as much engaged as by the creative power of words.

During the long years of writing and revising Tolkien reconsidered and rewrote almost every single word in *LOR* and he grew very fond of his own creations, such as the newly devised plural of dwarf (dwarves instead of dwarfs). Even though the publisher's typesetters corrected 'dwarves' to 'dwarfs', 'elvish' to 'elfish' and 'further' to 'farther' at first, Tolkien showed an impressive determination concerning his own Middle-earth orthography and grammar, finally managing to establish his unconventional forms in spite of the critical efforts of his publisher's typesetters (*cf. Carpenter 1991, 45, 224, 225, 409, 410*).

In addition to these word variations, which lend his texts a personal touch independent of the grammatical style, Tolkien put every single word, though it was only concerned with trivial things, in *LOR* under consideration to see whether or not its derivation and operation was to the immediate purpose of the world of Middle-earth. For example the tobacco that Gandalf and the hobbits enjoy throughout the story and which even gets its own chapter "Concerning Pipe-weed" (*FR, 26*) in the prologue of *LOR*, is described as pipe-weed not as tobacco. Though Tolkien clearly classifies this pipe-weed as tobacco through its mode of production and usage, he calls it pipe-weed in his own unique language. The reason for that might be, as Shippey suspects, that tobacco

does not accord with the phonetic structure of English and sounds too outlandish for the Shire.

It ['tobacco'] is an import from some unknown Caribbean language via Spanish, reaching English only after the discovery of America, sometime in the sixteenth century. [...] 'Pipe-weed' shows Tolkien's wish to accept a common feature of English modernity, which he knew could not exist in the world of elves or trolls, and whose anachronism would instantly be betrayed by a word with the foreign feel of 'tobacco'. (*Shippey 1982, 53*)

In contrast to all the special and magical moments of the newly-formed language elements, Tolkien also proves his ability to deal critically with the use of language. Thus he portrays Saruman, the head of the White Council, who in the end falls prey to his own lust for power, as a master of manipulation using only the sound of his voice:

'Suddenly another voice spoke, low and melodious, its very sound an enchantment. Those who listened unwarily to that voice could seldom report the words that they heard; and if they did, they wondered, for little power remained in them. Mostly they remembered only that it was a delight to hear the voice speaking, all that it said seemed wise and reasonable, and desire awoke in them by swift agreement to seem wise themselves. When others spoke they seemed harsh and uncouth by contrast; and if they gainsaid the voice, anger was kindled in the hearts of those under the spell. For some the spell lasted only while the voice was spoke to them, and when it spoke to another they smiled, as men do who see through a juggler's trick while others gape at it. For many the sound of the voice alone was enough to hold them enthralled; but for those whom it conquered the spell endured when they were far away, and ever they heard that soft voice whispering and urging them. But none were unmoved; none rejected its pleas and its commands without an effort of mind and will, so long as its master had control of it.' (*TT, 228*)

Here Tolkien illustrates how the power of language can be misused for propagandist and manipulative ends as it was practised by the great pow-

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ers everywhere in the world in Tolkien's time.

Saruman and to some extent his servant Wormtongue, as well as Smaug in *The Hobbit*, have the knowledge and talent to use this powerful medium to gain ascendancy over others. In spite of his love of language, Tolkien does not avoid the ambivalence of language as a means of communication but contrasts the wonderful songs of the elves with a dark warning that language can be used for evil purposes by cunning individuals such as Saruman.

Language has also the function of transferring into the present knowledge of and about the past, in order to extract new wisdom from it. It is important to note that the effectiveness of language elements consciously used by the author lends Middle-earth plausibility and authentic depth and thus furthers his purpose in creating a myth.

'For a not inconsiderable number of readers and critics the languages with their oddly genuine resonance contribute to the 'inner consistency of reality' of Middle-earth that the author desired. Certainly the languages (together with the more fragmentary ones) as they have been incorporated into the mythology bolster the sense of historicity of Middle-earth.' (*Garbowski 2000, 71*)

This 'inner consistency of reality' is the basis for the reader's fascination with *LOR*. Because the secondary world of Middle-earth is so plausibly drawn it stands as a literary construct so complex that even after repeated reading as yet undiscovered details can be found.

How important those language elements were for Tolkien can be seen in the following etymological and mythological analyses of a few names and passages in his books. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to retrace the original, mostly Old English, meanings of every single name in *LOR* that have been drawn from secondary literature. It has to be mentioned, though, that almost every invented name in *LOR*, be it that of a creature, an item or a geographical feature, either has Old English as a source or is rooted in the Nordic world of gods and heroes. These roots have been so carefully chosen by Tolkien that the bases of these names always

bears a striking if at first hidden meaning (at least for linguistic amateurs) that contributes to the texture of Middle-earth. The studies of Ruth Noel (1977), T.A. Shippey (1982), and Armin Dahlke (1998) can be referred to here. In their books they point out the integral characteristics of Tolkien's methodology<sup>3</sup>.

A mere list of the different origins of words in this paper certainly cannot mirror their importance in the readers' perception, but the intensity of Tolkien's investigations and efforts can be demonstrated. They ultimately revert to the cultural roots of nearly all Western European peoples. The subliminal familiarity with Middle-earth thus formed is as relevant for the impact of *LOR* as the influence of mythology and religion which is elaborated upon in the following. I have to point out, though, that in letters and conversations Tolkien freely admitted to these parallels and inspirations, but many similarities to old myths are based on speculations which in turn rest on a knowledge of the author's expertise. This conflicts with Tolkien's view that a literary work should be the only source for interpretation, ignoring all the author's personal history.

### The heritage of Norse mythology

The most important Norse myths and legends can be found in the *Edda*, the epic of the Scandinavian gods. It serves Tolkien as an inspiration for names and actions in Middle-earth's cosmos. The process starts with the dwarves in *The Hobbit*. They obtain their names almost exclusively from the Old or Poetic Edda and assume the essential characteristics of their names in their original meaning. Additionally, Tolkien adapts the dwarves' appearance and way of life from the Siegfried saga by describing them as small in stature, stubborn, gold-loving craftspeople and assigning them the mountains as a home. These adaptations have been clearly retraced by Armin Dahlke (1998, 22-26). It is interesting to note that Tolkien takes the main features of the elves, who are considered to be the counterpart of dwarves amongst the free peoples in the history of Middle-earth, from an Anglo-Saxon background. By the use of this contrast he immediately breaks the symbolic fetters which would have restricted him had he

designed too accurate an adaptation of Norse mythology.

In addition to the dwarves, other peoples and characters in *LOR* are modelled on the gods and heroes of the Edda and its legends. Thus the Norse god Odin has his successors in the wizard Gandalf as well as in the dark lord Sauron. Odin's personality has been split by Tolkien so that all his good characteristics are mirrored in Gandalf and his bad in Sauron.

Gandalf is, besides his similarity in appearance to Odin (*cf. Noel 1977, 111*), wise, learned, benevolent, a master of fire, a man of many and similar names; he has a connection with eagles and ravens and has a similar function to the god of storm reflected in the sobriquet "Gandalf Stormcrow" (*LOTR II, 143*). His 'etymological nature' can be found in the Old Norse word *Gandalf* which means "elf versed in magic" (*cf. Dahlke 1998, 50-53*). Besides, Odin possessed a magic horse which can be compared to Shadowfax, Gandalf's exceptional steed, which also understands human speech (*cf. Noel 1977, 111*).

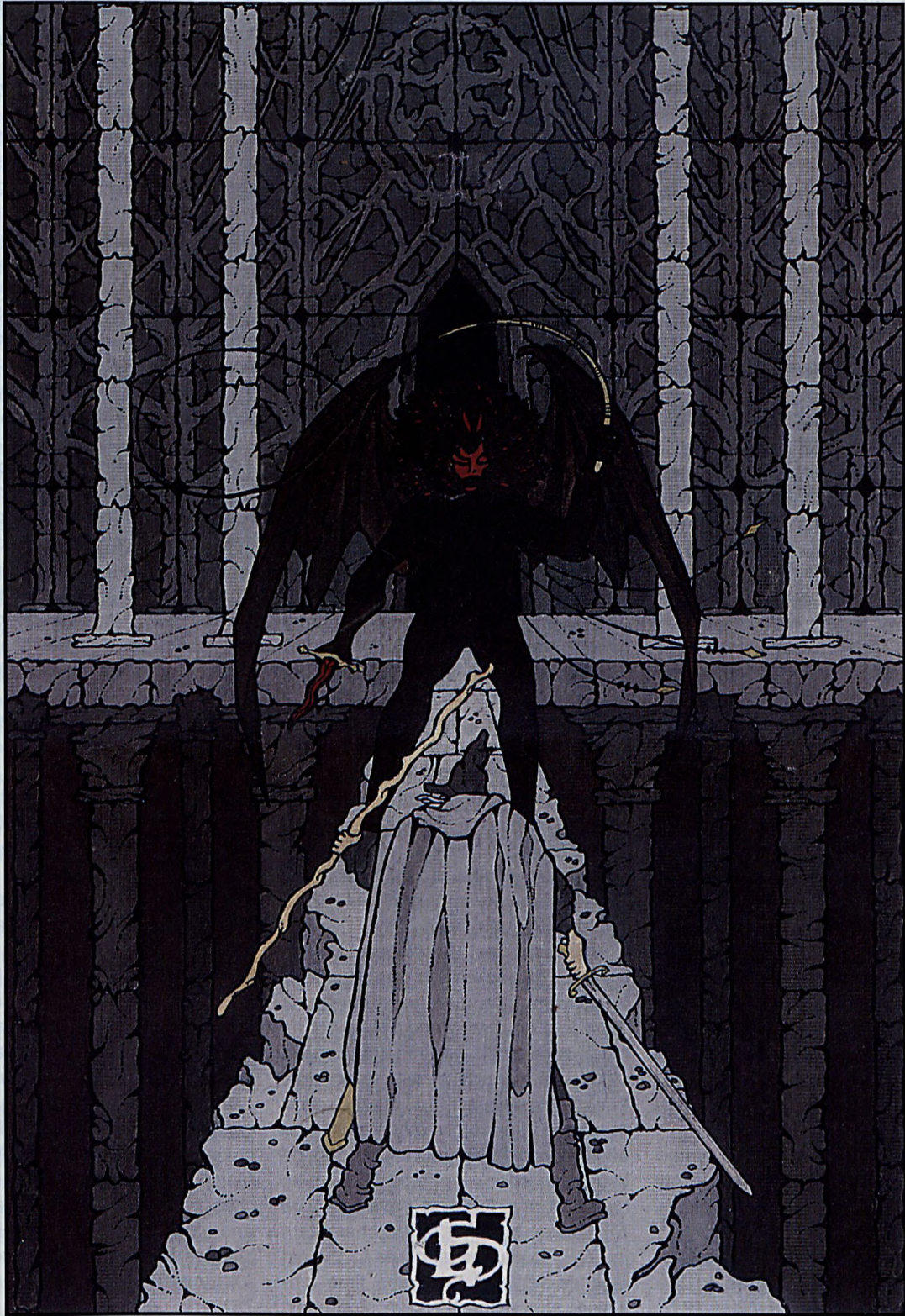
Sauron is never described in his physical form but is exclusively characterised by dark symbolism: a lidless eye, a master of magic rings, an authority similar to the gods of war and death, a thief of old wisdom in order to implement his own plans. All this can be traced back to Odin's darker side (*cf. Dahlke 1998, 56-58*).

The fallen wizard Saruman emerges as a link between these two Odin figures. He, like Loki of the Norse pantheon, can be identified by his variegated appearance which is emblematic of his different faces and manipulative falsehoods. Just as Loki leaves the gods, Saruman turns his back on the White Council to pursue evil (*cf. Dahlke 1998, 53*), misuses and contemptuously mocks his old friends and is finally killed by Grimā Wormtongue, like the serpent's poison that drips down on Loki when he is fettered as a punishment for his evil deeds. But Saruman is not as vital to the course of events in *LOR* as Gandalf or Sauron are. Thus his character is not supplemented with Anglo-Saxon or Biblical mythological symbolism as are the latter two. The creation of Gandalf and Sauron as binary opposites, or antipoles, stemming from one common source mixed with additional

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3. Tolkien's essay "Ein heimliches Laster" about his attitude towards the love of words and language can be found in *Tolkien (1987, 209-235)*.





*The Bridge of Khazad-dum*

*Lorenzo Daniele*



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and differentiating elements can be traced back to Tolkien's notion of secondary creation. This differs from mere adaptation to this extent; although he transfers parts of Norse mythology to Gandalf and Sauron, he completes them with different components of varying origin and thus creates something entirely new.

Further parallels to Odin and Loki can be found in Frodo and Gollum's relationship. Frodo's name stems from Frô, a different name for the Scandinavian goddess of fertility Freya. It means 'wise' or 'fertile'. He also emerges as Froda in Beowulf but shows special parallels to the Danish king Fródi, a descendant of Odin. Those parallels manifest in a similar attitude towards their homeland (cf. Noel 1977, 59ff). Gollum first appears in a grotto below ground when he meets Bilbo in *The Hobbit*. This recalls the dwarf Andvari who withholds a valuable ring from Loki and eventually curses its thief.

The dramatic meeting between the Fellowship and the Balrog in the Mines of Moria also reflects the end of the world as announced in the Edda. The Balrog shows strong parallels to the god Surt for "[b]oth were giant figures combining darkness and consuming fire. Each was armed with a flaming sword and each fought high on a frail bridge, breaking it down" (Noel 1977, 146). Surt was one of the vital powers that presaged Ragnarok, the end of the world, and the fight with Gandalf is described just as it happens in the Norse legend "with the powerful wizard destroyed in overthrowing his enemy, but returned to life in a higher form" (Noel 1977, 147). Though the world does not end in *LOR*, Tolkien describes a world of decline full of vanishing ancient peoples and the beginning of a new, less magical, age which is foreshadowed, amongst other things, by the Balrog's Ragnarok symbolism.

Further elements typical of Norse mythology are mirrored in the barrow downs, the graves of warriors of old, in Boromir's funeral on a boat floating down the river, and in the female warrior Éowyn who is compared to the Valkyries of the Edda (cf. Noel 1977, 83f). As with Gandalf and Sauron this is only partly true for Éowyn's character. Though she hides behind a Valkyrie mask, her true nature and the

character's function are completely different.

Numerous small similarities and analogies to Norse mythology could be mentioned here, as for example the trees bestowing life in *The Silmarillion*. They equal the World Tree Yggdrasil, a giant ash, in their status and link to the gods. But the few examples already mentioned should be sufficient to draw an adequate picture of Tolkien's methodology and his intention to take selected fragments of Scandinavian mythology and insert them into his own. Tolkien digresses from the available material, though, and gives it a whole new and modified meaning; not necessarily a more topical one, but a meaning transformed.

'Tolkien was irritated all his life by modern attempts to rewrite or interpret old material, almost all of which he thought led to failure of tone and spirit. Wagner is the most obvious example. People were always connecting *LOR* with *Der Ring der Nibelungen*, and Tolkien did not like it. [...] [W]hat upset Tolkien was the fact that Wagner was working, at second-hand, from material which he knew first-hand, primarily the heroic poems of the Elder Edda and the later Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*. Once again he saw difference where other people saw similarity. Wagner was one of several authors with whom Tolkien had a relationship of intimate dislike: Shakespeare, Spenser, George MacDonald, Hans Christian Andersen. All, he thought, had got something very important not quite right.' (Shippey 1982, 220)

It is important therefore to assess how far Tolkien adapts the elements taken from his numerous sources to fit them into his own world. He is not as much concerned with reanimating the old Norse legends as with integrating the still existing spirit of these worlds of legend into his own secondary creation in a different form. This can be especially seen in reference to style, structure and the epic battles in *The Silmarillion* but also in the characters in *LOR*. Tolkien pays tribute to the old legends while at the same time creatively enhancing his own stories or, as Garbowski (2000, 71) puts it: he produces an "inner consistency of reality" not only through the diversity of languages but also by systematical-

ly choosing mythic elements for his secondary world and the action taking place in it.

### The influence of Anglo-Saxon mythology

One of the best known Old English texts is the almost 3000 line long heroic poem *Beowulf* which was probably written in the seventh century<sup>4</sup>. Tolkien's known interest in and fascination with *Beowulf* shows in the adoption of significant strands from *Beowulf* in *The Hobbit*. The scenes with the dragon clearly follow *Beowulf's* adventure, though they have of course been adapted to the story (cf. Noel 1977, 60f). Shippey (1982, 220) calls *Beowulf* "[t]he single work which influenced Tolkien most" and Dahlke (cf. 1998, 7ff) also sees the basis for Tolkien's mythological foundation of Middle-earth in it. Both authors, as well as Ruth Noel (cf. 1977, 81ff), mention numerous etymological examples as evidence for their assumptions. These examples show that many names and places of the human peoples of Middle-earth, like Rohan and its inhabitants, have been taken from *Beowulf* or other Old English tales. Whether Tolkien was searching for appropriate Old English words which fitted his ideas or whether his stories were inspired by the names in the old heroic epics, is difficult to reconstruct.

The legend of King Arthur is certainly formative for the development of some of the characters and actions, contrary to Ulrike Killer's statement that Tolkien never reverted to the "*matière de Bretagne*" even though the legendary King Arthur is considered to be Great Britain's national hero (cf. Killer 1991, 424). The final scene at the Grey Havens for example shows some remarkable parallels to Mallory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (cf. Noel 1977, 54). The most striking analogies can be found in Aragorn and Gandalf's characters, which reflect Arthur and Merlin to a certain extent. Ruth Noel cites no less than seventeen crucial, and as many more small, resemblances between the development of Arthur and Aragorn (cf. Noel 1977, 68-76) and almost a dozen instances suggesting that Gandalf is modelled on Merlin (cf. Noel 1977, 109f). The relationship between the two is interesting as well: the wizard acts as a

4. cf. Graddol (1997, 59). The exact date of origin is in dispute. In other sources the eighth century is mentioned.

counsellor and guide behind the scenes at the beginning while the proud warrior waits for his chance to accede to the throne of his kingdom, his rightful heritage.

Another aspect that owes something to Celtic mythology is certainly the portrayal of the elves. Tolkien's elves are similar to the Celtic elven-folk, the *Sidhe*, in both appearance and behaviour (cf. Noel 1977, 113ff and Dahlke 1998, 21). In contrast to other races of Middle-earth, the elves' names are not derived from Old or Middle English but go back to the languages Tolkien invented himself. That is why this people receive the greatest depth and independence in Middle-earth. This can especially be seen in the *Silmarillion* episodes which are primarily concerned with the history of the elves.

The influence of Shakespeare on Tolkien's mythological foundation for *LOR* cannot be ignored, in particular, *Macbeth*. The most obvious example is the march of the Ents towards Isengard. Tolkien explains without reserve that the march as well as the role of the Ents themselves was inspired by Shakespeare's play:

'But looking back analytically I should say that Ents are composed of philology, literature, and life. They owe their name to the *eald enta geweorc* of Anglo Saxon, and their connexion with stone. Their part in the story is due, I think, to my bitter disappointment and disgust from schooldays with the shabby use made in Shakespeare of the coming of 'Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill': I longed to devise a setting in which the trees might really march to war.' (Carpenter 1995, 212)

The fateful prophecies uttered by the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* also find their counterpart in *LOR*. Boromir's preoccupation with the power of the ring does not leave him even after his meeting with Galadriel. The change in him following this prophetic encounter is obvious to the reader. From that point on, Boromir is convinced he has found the right way even if it means resorting to violence and shedding his friends' blood:

'To me it [the test of Galadriel] seemed exceedingly strange', said Boromir. 'Maybe it was only a test,

and she thought to read our thoughts for her own purpose; but almost I should have said that she was tempting us, and offering what she pretended to have the power to give. It need not be said that I refused to listen. The Men of Minas Tirith are true to their word.' But what he thought that the Lady had offered him Boromir did not tell.' (LOTR I, 464-465)

Like *Macbeth*, Boromir cannot shake off the vision of power and success, and impatience and ambition gnaw at him from the inside. In the end he oversteps the bounds of what is permitted and becomes treacherous. In contrast to *Macbeth* though, he does not commit murder, but instead repents and sacrifices himself for his friends.

The prophecy of the Weird Sisters concerning the death of *Macbeth* can also be applied to the Witch-King, Lord of the Nazgûl, who was foretold that "No living man may hinder me!" (RK, 136), "implying his invincibility but actually outlining a strange doom [...] [and] he was destroyed within the framework of the prophecy – at the hands of Éowyn, a woman, and Meriadoc, a hobbit" (Noel 1977, 139).

As a last important feature of the Anglo-Saxon influence, hobbits have to be mentioned even though they certainly are one of Tolkien's most self-contained new creations. Tolkien does not revert to literary sources of the English culture here but to socio-historical ones. Just like the ancestors of the English people, the hobbits settled at their new home in three different tribes after having fought for their country in decisive battles (cf. FR, 20f).

'Thus historically the Shire is like/unlike England, the hobbits are like/unlike English people. [...] Both emigrated in three tribes, Angles, Saxon and Jutes or Stoor, Harfoots and Fallohides, all since then largely mingled. The English were led by two brothers, Hengest and Horsa, i.e. 'stallion' and 'horse', the hobbits by Marcho and Blanco, cp. Old English *marh*, 'horse', *blanca* (only in *Beowulf*) 'white horse'. All four founded realms which evolved into uncharacteristic peace [...] Organisationally too the Shire, with its mayors, musters, moots and Shirriffs, is an old-fashioned and idealised England, while the hob-

bits, in their plainness, greediness, frequent embarrassments, distrust of 'outsiders' and most of all in their deceptive ability to endure rough handling form an easily recognisable if again old-fashion self-image of the English. The calquing is most evident, however, on the map.' (Shippey 1982, 77-78)

As a matter of fact, many place names in the Shire are taken from the Oxford area, which supports Shippey's analysis. The reason that the hobbit passages, especially the early chapters, in *LOR* are, proportionally, more humorously written might derive from the possibility that they derive from actual experience in Tolkien's own neighbourhood. Tolkien always disapproved of attempts to interpret his texts as an adaptation of his time and contemporaries but it is striking that the seriousness in form and expression is far less developed in the Shire than in all the other episodes of *The Lord of the Rings*. The exact reason remains speculative but the possibility of ironically dealing with his fellow beings through the eyes, ears and mouths of hobbits at least stays comprehensible from Shippey's viewpoint<sup>5</sup>.

### The Bible and Christendom in Middle-earth

J.R.R. Tolkien's strong adherence to his Catholic faith is well known. In a letter to his son Michael, who had been wounded a few weeks before in 1941, he wrote:

'Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament ... There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves upon earth, and more than that: Death: by the divine paradox, that which ends life, and demands the surrender of all, and yet by the taste (or foretaste) of which alone can what you seek in your earthly relationships (love, faithfulness, joy) be maintained, or take on that complexion of reality, of eternal endurance, which every man's heart desires.' (Carpenter 1995, 53f)

Tolkien's commentary on Middle-earth's religiousness is found mainly in *The Silmarillion* which shows clear parallels to the Bible in content and

5. Though similarities to Jonathon Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) as regards hobbits can be identified, there is no concrete evidence of a conscious adaptation on Tolkien's part.

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style even though it is full of pagan mythology. It starts with the genesis of the world by Eru, the one god, and continues with the fall of Melkor (also called Morgoth) and that of the elves, as well as with their exodus from Valinor, home of the gods. An almost endless story of wars, loss, tragic deaths and hopeless friendships is created in *The Silmarillion*, which derives its name from the Silmarilli, the three primordial jewels in which the light of Valinor, an analogy of Christian paradise, has been caught. The jewels symbolise a last vestige of perfection in a fallen world and become the principal objects of lust of all creatures during Middle-earth's First Age. The Second Age describes another fall, this time that of the Men of Númenor who dare attack Valinor, the land of the gods, in the pride and conceit that they are equal to them. This is similar to the building of the Tower of Babel. But the Valar destroy the mighty fleet and conceal the way to their paradisiacal shores. Only the remaining elves have the ability to sail into the West, thus leaving Middle-earth forever. In the mythology this heralds the Third Age, in which the echoes of these powerful and dramatic events of *The Silmarillion* form the foundation for the action and motivation in *The Lord of the Rings*. As we see later with Boromir, Denethor, Saruman and Gollum sin and forgiveness play a pivotal role in the stories of Middle-earth. It is not difficult to identify Tolkien's staunch Catholicism:

'In the letter to Waldman Tolkien claims his mythology is concerned with, among other things, the Fall 'and that in several modes', since he felt the Fall is something always present in human history. If the First Age was primarily about the Fall of the elves, the Second Age is dominated by the Fall of men, especially those privileged to live in Numenor. Nevertheless, far more than with the remaining Silmarillion mythology, the Numenor cycle's significance was only to be attained in its relationship to the Third Age.' (Garbowski 2000, 67)

Also associated with the biblical fall of mankind, which has its counterpart in *The Silmarillion* as indicated above, is the presence of a personified demonic power which seduces and perverts everything natural, thus assuming dev-

ilish traits. These counterparts of the biblical Satan can be found in the shape of the Valar outcast Melkor and his follower and later successor Sauron who wake the dormant egoistic longings of humans, dwarves and elves to wage their eternal wars against their immortal arch-enemies, the Valar. While Melkor weaves his treacherous webs during the First Age Sauron takes over that role in the Second Age and up to the time of *LOR*. Randel Helms accurately notes that Sauron's career is modelled on the biblical and Miltonic Satan (cf. Helms 1991, 49). But I believe he errs in his assertion that in the Satan myth Tolkien finds an altogether satisfying starting point for his own exploration of absolute evil (cf. Helms 1991, 49). Elrond explains in Rivendell that nothing, not even Sauron, is evil from the beginning (cf. FR, 350) "which suggests that he is, like Satan, a fallen being of great power" (Purtill 1974, 103). This is also true of Melkor who fell into disgrace during the creation of the world because his troublesome individuality did not please his fellow gods who were striving for harmony. Accordingly, many parallels can be drawn between *The Silmarillion* and the Bible.

'But the main point about *The Silmarillion* is that it is a kind of bible, an encyclopaedic epic of return which shows us ways of living with loss and the pain of recovery. Nearly contradictory to the theme of loss in the tales is the medium itself, the great wealth of mythic and archetypal invention, creation, recovery which *The Silmarillion* contains. [...] *The Silmarillion* is a crown of light, a properly inspiring testament to be returned to and reread with growing pleasure. It is both the beginning and the culmination of Tolkien's subcreation'. (Mathews 1978, 59)

The biblical influences on content, structure and style which are so predominant and evident in *The Silmarillion* are less obvious in *The Lord of the Rings*, though they never vanish. As a starting point it can be reasonably assumed that the mythical framework of Middle-earth avails itself of the Bible as a model, mixed with the aforementioned texts of Norse legends and parts of Anglo-Saxon culture, all combined in *The Silmarillion* whose episodes are embedded in the songs

and tales of *The Lord of the Rings*.

### Conclusion

Tolkien always wanted to publish *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* together. He did not succeed even though he was convinced of its importance:

'Its shadow [that of *The Silmarillion*] was deep on the later parts of *The Hobbit*. It has captured *The Lord of the Rings*, so that that has become simply its continuation and completion, requiring *The Silmarillion* to be fully intelligible – without a lot of references and explanations that clutter it in one or two places.' (Carpenter 1995, 136f)

Tolkien's original intention before he wrote even one sentence of *The Lord of the Rings* was

'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 England; to my country. [...] The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama. Absurd.' (Carpenter 1995, 144f)

Even though the origin of many passages and much creation in *LOR* and *The Silmarillion* can be traced back to old myths and legends<sup>6</sup>, the form of legend which influenced Tolkien the most, and which of these has the biggest part in his works, are not questions that play a decisive role in assessing Middle-earth's mythology. It is only important to recognise and evaluate the symbolism formed by myth and religion which is extant in the world of Middle-earth and thus also in *The Lord of the Rings*.

'Tolkien plunges into the sacrality of the natural; he delves into basic human emotions and a symbolic structure that is so widely distributed over cultural boundaries that it can be called fundamentally human symbolism. The stories evoke participation in a secular religion – that is, a religion in which all is sacred because all things, even the most natural, are related to one another and to a founding transcendence.' (William Dowie: *Salu* 1979, 267)

During the Middle Ages, a period that has served as a model for almost every fantasy novel regarding society,

6. A comprehensive list of literary influences in the areas mentioned in this paper can be found in Shippey (1982, 220-226).

politics and evolution, the world of legends, ghosts and mythical creatures, of heroes and epic poems possessed a real aspect which influenced people's superstitions and everyday life. From the earliest days of human society these kinds of convictions formed the first legends, stories which are denied their validity and relevance in today's materialistic and no longer spiritually oriented society. Considering that in the old myths, legends and fables, which were taken seriously in the past, is hidden a deep-seated human longing for explanation and comprehension of their own environment, it is easy to understand that it is a topical necessity of human life to revert to old things in order to create something new out of them – just as Tolkien did. Tolkien does not take on board all Christian or all legendary interpretation of the world, but avails himself of those sources of the past which were appealing to him. That is also why they cater for such a variety of different readers. Other fantasy authors such as Alan Garner have given their opinion on the value of mythologisation:

'I need some kind of crutch, some kind of framework, I suspect. My most reputable reason for doing it is that myth is not an attempt to entertain, it is an attempt to explain something. Originally people did not sit around and cook up fairy stories to get through the long winter evenings. They were trying to come to terms with their environment, so you find that over the millenia [sic] myth contains crystallised human experience and very powerful imaginary. This imaginary is useful for a writer if he uses it responsibly. It can work against him if he does not use it properly, but if he uses it correctly then he has very powerful cutting tools in his hands which work beneath the surface.' (*Alan Garner in: Swinfen 1984, 101*)

But there is a crucial difference between Tolkien and other authors of fiction, such as Alan Garner, who also borrow from old legends in order to add substance to their stories. As with most other authors Tolkien of course read much literature before ever producing literature of his own. But because of his academic career and his love for languages he was probably more erudite than many of his contemporaries. Tolkien stands out for dealing with the work of authors from

the past on a different level. He is not as much concerned with the conversion of literary texts into a more topical and suitable form in structure or content, as with an entirely new creation which refers to what he considers relevant and traditional archetypes. Thus the new creation pays tribute to its older template and is primarily adapted to the texts, not concerned with the readers' expectations.

'Even where old texts are recollected, the effort of adapting old models to the modern situation is often striking: whenever Tolkien's contemporaries James Joyce, T.S. Eliot or Eugene O'Neill let themselves be inspired by old myths and legends it was only to try and experiment with their relevance for Man in the 20th century. Even T.H. White with all his love for the magic world of the Arthurian epics changed the figures of his revised *Morte d'Arthur, The Once and Future King* (1938-58) into modern, psychologically interesting people. He thus achieves an ironic distance from the original. And it is this ironic distance which Tolkien dispenses with in his dealings with the old material. It does not occur to him to alter the traditional material when he starts to implement his plans in 1917 which would eventually lead to *The Silmarillion*. He wants to create something new based on old models.' (*cf. Petzold 1980, 35*)

The purely mimetic activity in the Aristotelian sense of imitating the old according to human nature is not what this is all about. What counts is to show ordinary and well-known things in a construct such as a secondary fantasy world to give them a new and more important context in order to gain insights about oneself and one's environment; an ability which might have been lost in the course of time. According to C.S. Lewis, the virtue of a myth is "that it takes all the things we know and restores to them the rich significance which has been hidden by the veil of familiarity" (*Purtill 1974, 154*). The same is true of Tolkien's treatment and transformation of mythology. It is still unclear about many parallels to old legends in Tolkien's Middle-earth whether he put them in on purpose or whether they crept into the stories unperceived due to Tolkien's academic knowledge.

'And it is mysterious to witness how in the phenomenon of succession

intended things mix with guided ones so that it becomes impossible to decide who imitates and sets out to repeat what has already come to pass: the person or fate. [...] Because we follow in the footsteps of others and all life is completion of mythical presence.' (*cf. Thomas Mann: in Tschirner, Susanne 1989, 157*)

But however one classifies Tolkien's form of 'imitation', in view of the mythical historicity of the secondary world Middle-earth the existence of mythic substance plays an enormous role when looking at the powerful symbolism of that world.

Tolkien's vocabulary and proficiency in languages are also very important. By clever and deliberately unconventional usage of old and reshaped words, Tolkien triggers his readers' unconscious familiarity with the roots of their own language in order to find their way around in Middle-earth and at the same time makes them feel emotionally safe and intellectually challenged.

'Tolkien used word-play in promoting the idea that *LOR* describes an age dimly remembered in historical vocabularies. This helps to arouse the reader's interest when words from historical contexts are used. For example, he used the Old English word *ent* and *orc* for highly specific types of creature, which he suggests were only vaguely or inaccurately remembered in Old English mythology. Tolkien often gave historical words a misleading meaning for the sake of a pun. For example, he made the "Cracks of Doom" (traditionally meaning the signal for the Day of Judgement) into a physical landmark – fissures in the interior of Mount Doom, where, as it happens, a type of day of judgement took place.' (*Noel 1977, 32*)

Further examples of the use of old, almost forgotten words pervade *Lord of the Rings*. The characteristics of what is described in Middle-earth are always linked to the meaning in Old English or Norse mythology (*cf. Noel 1977, 32ff*). This applies especially to geographical occurrences but also to names and characters. This complex methodology enhances the remarkable mythical value of the literary context to a certain extent and at the same time arouses linguistic interest in the reader. In all probability, it serves also to further the author's enjoyment in the creative use of language.



# Mallorn XLI

## Appendix

I would like to mention some points about the new German translation of *The Lord of the Rings*, published nationwide in 2000. In accordance with my foregoing thesis I believe the new translation's effects steer in a doubtful direction. In the "Tolkien Times", published by Klett-Cotta publishers who own the German rights to Tolkien's books, a scene in Bree is quoted which shows both the old and new translation next to each other (with a commentary by the translator Wolfgang Krege). A clear tendency to update Tolkien's language can be seen. The text is adapted to modern German thus altogether disregarding Tolkien's intentional old-world quality of the language and its special effect. The following examples should suffice to demonstrate my meaning. Striking differences are italicised.

*Original version (FR, 208-209):*

(1) "Where are you, you woolly-footed *slow-coach*?"

(2) "A *cheery*-looking hobbit bobbed out of a door..."

(3) "But we've got a room or two in the north wing that were made special for hobbits, *when this place was built*."

(4) "Here is a nice little *parlour*"

(5) "If we don't come, *ring and shout*"

*Old translation (Tolkien Times, 4):*

(1) „Wo steckst du denn, du wollfüßiges *Faultier* 1?"

(2) „Ein *vergnügt* aussehender Hobbit schoß aus der Tür heraus..."

(3) „Aber wir haben ein paar Zimmer im Nordflügel, die eigens für Hobbits vorgesehen wurden, *als dieses Haus gebaut wurde* 2."

(4) „Hier ist eine nette kleine *Gaststube*"

(5) „Wenn er nicht kommt, *läutet und ruft*"

*New translation (Tolkien Times, 4):*

(1) „Wo steckst du, Nob, du *flaumfüßiger Penner* 3?"

(2) „Ein *aufgeweckt* 4 aussehender Hobbit kam aus einer Tür hervorgeschossen..."

(3) „Aber im Nordflügel haben wir ein paar Zimmer, die wurden speziell für Hobbits angelegt, *als dieser Laden hier gebaut wurde* 5."

(4) „Hier haben wir ein nettes kleines *Klubzimmer* 6."

(5) „Wenn er nicht kommt, *nochmal lauter bimmeln und brüllen* 7"

1. Sloth 2. when this house was built 3. fluffy-footed dosser 4. bright 5. when this here pile was built  
6. club room 7. jangle [the bell] and yell again

Of course, these are only small changes but even in these few passages a more or less subliminal imitation of modern German usage is revealed. Even though the hobbits can be said to communicate in the most modern form compared to all other peoples in Middle-earth, too modern a translation of Tolkien's carefully selected prose runs the risk of destroying the magic of this remote world by making the language sound too vulgar.

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