

WHOSE RING IS IT ANYWAY?

by K.C. FRASER



Ly **SUBJECT** is a long epic dealing with heroes, dwarves, a dragon and a broken sword, and its central feature is a magic ring which gives its wearer power over the world. Now the readers of this journal will immediately deduce that I am going to speak of Tolkien's Lord of the Rings: but if I were writing for musical readers they would certainly suppose that I had in mind The Ring of the Nibelung by Wagner. Are the similarities between the two just coincidences, or did the opera really influence the book?

Although the parallel with Wagner was so obvious that it was first remarked on by Rayner Unwin, the first person outside Tolkien's immediate circle to read The Lord of the Rings,¹ Tolkien in later life had trenchant views on it. Commenting on a Swedish critic who had brought the point up, he wrote: "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases."² But I do not think the resemblance can so easily be shrugged off.

Let us consider, as a contrast, the Finnish Kalevala, a collection of legends to which Tolkien openly acknowledged his debt. Indeed, he stated in a letter to his son that it gave him the idea for The Silmarillion.³ Not only was Finnish the most substantial influence on the Elvish languages, but the story of Túrin in the Silmarillion is closely paralleled by that of Kullervo in the Kalevala. But, if we look at LoTR, we find little Finnish influence, apart from the elvish languages which, of course, had already been invented before that book was written. As far as the plot is concerned, the only possible connection seems to be a slight similarity between Gandalf and Väinämöinen, the hero of the Kalevala, both being elderly wizards who, at one point in the story, are rescued by an eagle. So that, if we were to propose the Kalevala as a major source for LoTR, we would be wrong.

On the other hand, connections between LoTR and the Norse myths, which were already Wagner's sources, are legion. We know that Tolkien was already reading Old Norse while at school,⁴ and in his Honours course at Oxford specialised in that language.⁵ As a Professor of Anglo-Saxon he would have had a continuing interest in Norse legends and there is evidence that they also influenced his literary output, for he told W.H. Auden that, apparently in the inter-war period, he had written "an attempt to unify the lays about the Völsungs from the Elder Edda."⁶

At this point it is necessary to say a little about what the Norse myths are. Be it noted that I cannot claim any special knowledge of them, and have simply read some standard sources.



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The legends have survived because they were written down in Iceland, mostly in the 13th century. There are three main sources, the Poetic Edda, a collection of poems, some of which may have originated as early as 800 A.D.; the Prose Edda, compiled by the historian Snorri Sturluson in a deliberate effort to preserve the myths which were in danger of disappearing under the influence of Christianity; and the Volsunga Saga, which describes at greater length the story of the Volsung family, found also in the Poetic Edda. It is remarkable that those few of the characters who can be identified with historical figures are not Icelanders at all, but Central European chieftains of the 4th and 5th centuries. This fact provides a date and a place for the origins of the legends. Some of the same characters also appear in the German poem the Nibelungenlied, written about 1200: its sources must have been related to those of the Norse myths.

Now whereas the amount of influence these Norse legends had on Tolkien is controversial, (I shall return to it later), they are of course the fundamental sources of Wagner's Ring: in a letter to an admirer he listed his sources in detail⁷ and they are, in the main, those just mentioned.

It is essential to my argument to point out that Tolkien himself was acquainted with the Wagner Operas. We find him, at the age of 19, making a scathing reference to the errors of Wagner's interpretation of the Volsunga Saga.⁸ Later Tolkien's great friend C.S. Lewis was a Wagner enthusiast, and in one source it is said that Lewis took him to see one of the Ring operas.⁹

We do not have to look far to see the influence of the Norse myths in Tolkien's works. There is, for example, the well-known fact that all but one of Tolkien's Dwarf-names, not to speak of that of Gandalf, are taken from the list of Dwarves occurring in the Poetic Edda.¹⁰

The Prose Edda describes the distinction between Light-Elves and Dark-Elves that Tolkien used, (in a rather different sense), in the Silmarillion.¹¹

Tolkien himself acknowledged that he thought of Gandalf as similar in appearance to Odin,¹² who as a modern critic says "frequently wandered through the worlds in disguise, particularly in the disguise of an old man with a staff, one-eyed, grey-bearded and wearing a wide-brimmed hat."¹³ Apart from the one eye, this might be Gandalf as he appeared to Aragorn in Fangorn.¹⁴

The Volsunga Saga tells of the broken pieces of Sigmund's sword being made into one again for his son Sigurd, just as Aragorn had the pieces of the sword of his ancestor Elendil reforged for him.

In both the Poetic Edda and the Volsunga Saga a character kills his brother in order to gain the Ring, just as Smeagol killed Déagol in LoTR.¹⁵

Nearly all these parallels between Tolkien and the Norse myths can also be found in Wagner's Ring. But are there parallels between Tolkien and Wagner that do not occur in the myths? There are indeed.

Some of these are of a comparatively minor nature. For instance, at one point in the opera, the goddess Erda is addressed as Wala, (pronounced Vala and meaning, approximately, Wise Woman). Is this a source for the Valar?¹⁶

In the opera Siegfried occurs a scene in which the cowardly dwarf Mime, (compare Mim in the Silmarillion), who is planning to murder Siegfried for the sake of the Ring, imagines himself as a world ruler.¹⁷ In LoTR we find similarly the unworthy Gollum, planning to murder Frodo to obtain the Ring, imagining himself as "Gollum the Great".¹⁸

There is another parallel between Mime and Gollum, for just as in The Hobbit Gollum and Bilbo ask each other three riddles,¹⁹ the penalty for failure being death, so in Siegfried Mime engages in a similar wager with the disguised Wotan.²⁰ In both cases the evil character loses but is spared.

However there is, beside these minor points, a parallel between Wagner and Tolkien that is actually fundamental to both works: I refer to the importance of the Ring itself. To prove the point, it will be necessary to study the place of the Ring, both in the two works and in their Norse and German sources. I would have found this impossible to do, but for the work of the late Deryck Cooke, in his study of Wagner's sources entitled I Saw the World End.²¹

There are two famous rings in the Norse myths.

In the Eddas is described the ring Draupnir, which had the magical property of reproducing itself into nine other rings every nine nights; this was a valuable treasure, but by no means all powerful. Both the Eddas and the Volsunga Saga also mention a ring of similar properties, [It attracts gold to its bearer, cf. the Dwarf-rings in LoTR, Ed], possessed at first by the dwarf Andvari who, on losing it, declared that "every man who owned that ring would get his bane from it,"²² a curse that is worked out in later episodes.

A ring, not apparently with any magical powers, plays a significant part in the Nibelungenlied in which is also found the great (but not magic) Treasure of the Nibelung, which causes its possessor great trouble. The poet says that, among the treasure, lay "a tiny wand of gold, and if any had found its secret, he would have been lord of all mankind"²³ but this wand plays no part at all in the plot, since none of the characters know of its existence, and it is never mentioned again.

Very different is the status of the Ring in Wagner's operas. Here, the accursed ring is, for the first time, turned into a talisman conferring power over the world. Deryck Cooke describes it thus: "Not only shall the ring bring death to everyone who possesses it, but it shall bring unhappiness to everyone connected with it; those who do not possess it shall be consumed with envious longing for it; he who does possess it shall be so consumed with care, through fear of being killed for it, that he shall long for the death that he knows awaits him: 'the ring's master shall be the ring's slave, until it returns to the hand of its maker.'²⁴ Is this not a perfect description of the Ring in LoTR?²⁵ Cooke also notes that the source of the all-powerful talisman may be the mysterious little wand of the Nibelungenlied, but "in attaching this concept to the ring of Scandinavian sources, Wagner created a symbol entirely his own."²⁶

There is another characteristic of the Ring which may come from Wagner. In the Nibelungenlied there occurs a cloak of invisibility: Wagner, to make it easier for the stage, changed it into a helmet called the Tarnhelm. Those who have heard the operas will know that the ring and the Tarnhelm were made at the same time and consequently are frequently mentioned together. Could this be the source of the Ring's power of invisibility in Tolkien? (In fairness, there is an obscure medieval German poem in which a ring of invisibility is mentioned).²⁷

But the Ring, both in Tolkien and in Wagner, is not merely an essential part of the plot: it is, in fact, the pivot of the whole work in each case. Every critic knows that Wagner's operas are an allegory of the conflict between Power and Love, and that Power is symbolised by the ring. (In a recent production this message was emphasised by depicting the Rhine, at the point where the Ring originated, being crossed by a hydro-electric dam!) The text states this symbolism plainly in the first act of Rhinegold: "The world's inheritance he would win to himself who, from the Rhinegold, created a ring which would give him boundless power"; but: "only he who denies the power of Love... can aim at the magic that forces the gold into a ring."²⁸ And, on the other hand, we find Tolkien in 1956 writing that "of course my story is not an allegory of Atomic power, but of Power (exercised for Domination)."²⁹ As for Love, we can hardly deny that Sauron has renounced it. To reinforce the point, in each work the destruction of the Ring, in ending its power, also ends an Age of the world. This combination, he it noted, is first found in Wagner, not in its sources. Remarkably, in both works, the last event that happens to the Ring before its destruction is that an evil character, (Gollum in the book³⁰ Hagen in the opera)³¹ tries to seize it and dies in the attempt.

Thus I suggest that it is more than likely that, in spite of his denial, it is from Wagner that Tolkien obtained the central symbol of his fictional universe. The Norse myths might have provided him with an accursed ring, but only in Wagner does it confer supreme power over the world. There is one final point that may be significant. In scene 3 of Rhinegold, Alberich, who had the Ring made, describes himself as "lord of the Ring", ("des Ringes Herr")³² Is it possible that even the title of Tolkien's book came from Wagner? [LoTR is called "Der Herr der Ringe" in German. Ed.] Truly, the two rings had more in common than being round.

Notes

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2. J.R.R. Tolkien, Letters (ed. Humphrey Carpenter), London, Allen & Unwin, 1981, p.306.
3. Tolkien, op.cit., p.87.
4. Carpenter, op.cit., p.35.
5. Tolkien, op.cit., p.12.
6. Tolkien, op.cit., p.379.
7. Deryck Cooke, I Saw the World End, London, Oxford University Press, 1979, pp.89-90.
8. Carpenter, op.cit., p.46.
9. Humphrey Carpenter, The Inklings, London, Allen & Unwin, 1978, p.56.
10. Carpenter, op.cit., p.383.
11. P.H. Mallet, Northern Antiquities, trans. by Bishop Percy, London, Henry G. Bohn, 1859, p.414.
12. Tolkien, op.cit., p.119.
13. Brian Branston, Gods of the North, London, Thames & Hudson, 1955, p.113.
14. LotR, II.3.v.
15. LotR, I.1.ii.
16. Richard Wagner, The Authentic Librettos of the Wagner Operas, New York, Crown Publishers, 1938, p.137 (Rheingold, Scene 4).
17. Wagner, op.cit., p.209 (Siegfried, Scene 1).
18. LotR, II.4.ii.
19. III, 5.
20. Wagner, op.cit., p.199 (Siegfried, Scene 1).
21. Cooke, op.cit.
22. The Saga of the Volsungs, trans. by Margaret Schlauch, New York, American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1930, p.87.
23. The Nibelungenlied, trans. by A.T. Hatto, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1965, pp.145-9.
24. Cooke, op.cit., pp.223-4.
25. LotR, I.1.ii.
26. Cooke, op.cit., pp.137-8.
27. Cooke, op.cit., p.121.
28. Wagner, op.cit., p.104 (Rheingold, Scene 1).
29. Tolkien, op.cit., p.246.
30. LotR, III.6.iii.
31. Wagner, op.cit., p.306 (Götterdämmerung, Act 3, Scene 3).
32. Wagner, op.cit., p.124.

