"OTHER MINDS AND HANDS": AN EXPERIMENT IN RECONSTRUCTING "THE TALE OF VALACAR AND VIDUMAVI"

by KATHLEEN HERBERT

In 1951, Tolkien COMPOSED A detailed account of the mythological and legendary cycles of Middle-earth (Letters, pp. 144-5, Letter 131). Referring to his purpose and hopes, he wrote:

> "I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama".

He added the rueful, self-mocking comment, "Absurd". But is it?

With his usual generosity, Tolkien seems to have envisaged, even wished, that his own work might be used as material for the creation of more English stories, poems, plays — operas, perhaps? — and pictures. In earlier periods, this would have been expected as a matter of course. The characters of Homer lived and died again in 5th century Athenian tragedy. Geoffrey of Monmouth's Historia Regum Britanniae gave the strongest impetus to the composition of medieval Arthurian literature. Shakespeare took what he wanted from the chronicles of Hall and Holinshed to create his dramatic "epic" of the House of Plantagenet.

I have used these works as examples because, in spite of their age (the Oresteia is nearly 2,500 years old and can still pack the National Theatre) their characters and themes are still potent, sometimes disturbingly so. It seems to be true that — genius and craftsmanship being equal — works that are based on, or imaginatively inspired by, actual mythology or ritual or heroic legend make more psychic impact and have greater survival value than the products of "rootless" fantasy or the isolated individual imagination. This is because, however fantastic these traditional stories have become, however much has been altered or added by generations of bards, sagamen and grandparents at winter firesides, they always contain something that was lived out in the actions and feelings of human beings somewhere, sometime, on this planet. It is this element in the traditional stories that carries the seed of life from one creative imagination to the other. The process is totally

different from imitation or plagiarism.

Tolkien was fully aware of the effects of this process on his own imagination. In a letter to the Observer, published 20th February 1938 (Letters, p. 31, Letter 25) on the subject of his material, he wrote:

> "As for the rest of the tale, it is ... derived from (previously digested) epic mythology and fairy story ... Beowulf is among my most valued sources; though it was not consciously present to my mind in the process of writing".

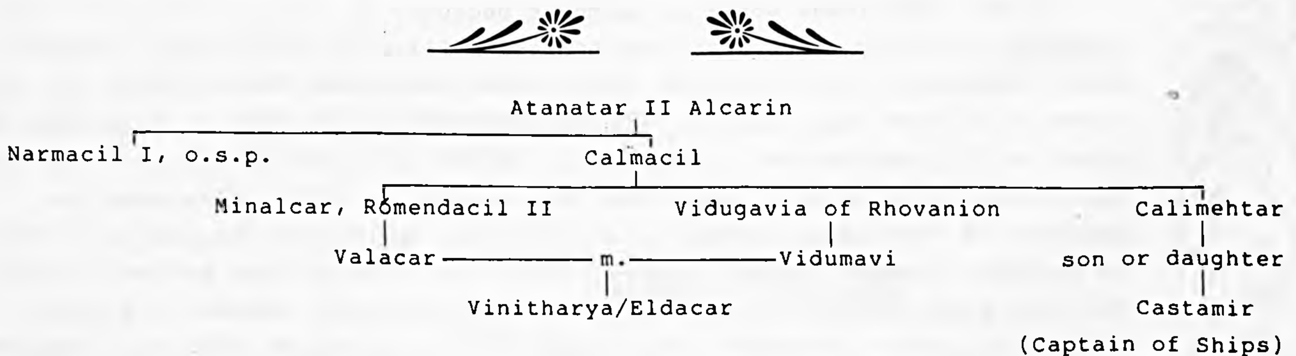
Not many people are so much at home as Tolkien was among the earlier languages and literatures of Europe. However, he infinitely preferred the creation of stories to the production of "books about books"; he offered the roughly sketched parts of his "majestic whole" to "other minds and hands"; he earnestly wished that Old English should be, as it ought to be, a source of vitality, interest and pleasure in modern English (not something alien and incomprehensible called Anglo-Saxon). Bearing these three points in mind, I decided to take one of the balder entries in the 'Annals of the Kings' (RotK, App. A) and juxtapose it, first, with the Germanic world in the Age of Migrations and then with a passage of Old English poetry, to see whether it has the potentiality for imaginative growth and development into a full-length tale.

"Valacar. In his time the first disaster of Gondor began, the Kin-strife. Eldacar, son of Valdacar (at first called Vinitharya) deposed 1437. Castamir the Usurper† 1447. Eldacar restored, died 1490" (Rotk, pp. 318-19).

The descent and family relationships of these Gondorian rulers can be seen in the family tree below.

The dry facts of the 'Annals' are fleshed out a little in Appendix A, section iv: "Gondor and the Heirs of Anarion" (RotK, pp. 325-7). Here it is told that Romendacil, having won a great victory over the Easterlings, closed the passage of the Anduin to foreigners beyond the Emyn Muil. "But since he needed men, and desired to strengthen the bond between Gondor and the Northmen, he took many of them into his service and gave to some high rank in his armies. Rómendacil showed especial favour to Vidugavia, who had aided him in the war. He called himself King of Rhovanion, and was indeed the most powerful of all the northern princes, though his own realm lay between Greenwood and the River Celduin. In 1250, Rómendacil sent his son Valacar as an ambassador to dwell for a while with Vidugavia and make himself acquainted with the language, manners and policies of the Northmen. But Valacar far exceeded his father's designs. He grew to love the Northern lands and people, and he married Vidumavi, daughter of Vidugavia. It was some years before he returned. From this marriage came later the war of the Kin-strife. For the high men of Gondor already looked askance at the Northmen among them; and it was a thing unheard of before that the heir to the throne, or any son of the king, should wed one of lesser and alien race. There was already rebellion in the southern provinces when King Valacar grew old. His queen had been a fair and noble lady, but short-lived according to the fate of lesser Men, and the Dunedain feared that her descendants would prove the same and fall from the majesty of the Kings of Men. Also, they were unwilling to accept as lord her son, who though he was now called Eldacar, had been born in an alien country and was named in his youth Vinitharya, a name of his mother's people."

Christopher Tolkien has pointed out, in a note to "Cirion and Eorl" (UT, p. 311, note 6) that "the names of the early kings



and princes of the Northmen and the Eotheod are Gothic in form, not Old English". In the letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien describes Gondor after the zenith of its power as fading "slowly to decayed Middle Age, a kind of proud, venerable but increasingly impotent Byzantium". We can then see the collapsing and fragmenting Arnor as the foundering Western Empire. The increasingly strong Northern 'presence' in the forces of Gondor would parallel the 'Germanizing' of the late-Roman armies; while the high rank that some of the Northmen attained suggests the careers of Odovacer and Stilicho. Gondor regarded Rhovanion as a barrier against the Easterlings as the Romans regarded the Goths as a barrier against the Huns. This did not produce perfect harmony and happiness: Alaric's Visigoths sacked Rome in 410; by 489, Theodric was ruler of Italy. Similarly, Gondor did not altogether trust Rhovanion: "it was learned by the regent (Minalcar, later Rómendacil II, Valacar's father) that the Northmen did not always remain true to Gondor, and some would join forces with the Easterlings, either out of greed for spoil or in the furtherance of feuds among their princes" (or — by analogy with the history of relations between the Empire and the Goths — through signs of fear and treachery on the part of the 'civilised' power). There was always a strange atmosphere of contempt and admiration, gratitude and suspicion.

Into this tense atmosphere, in 1250 comes Valacar's embassy and his falling in love, not just with the princess Vidumavi ("Wood-maiden") but with the Northern folk and their way of life. Indeed, as Tolkien puts it "he grew to love the Northern lands and people, and he married Vidumavi ...", it seems as if the Northern atmosphere and culture were Valacar's first loves, and he married Vidumavi because she seemed to be their incarnation. This is always dangerous; because when the human incarnation is removed from the 'enchanted' atmosphere, the spell can fade in the light of common day. Disenchantment is particularly likely to set in when the foreign husband has come from a complex, subtle and over-civilised environment like Gondor and brings his bride back to it: what had seemed to be refreshing naturalness and innocent simplicity can then appear as clumsiness, illiteracy and stupidity.

Valacar's marriage was no part of his father's plan — "Valacar far exceeded his father's designs" — and it would be very natural is he neither asked his father's permission or even informed him before he returned to Gondor, either because he had become so absorbed into Rhovanion that Gondor had faded into the background of his mind, or because he was afraid of being specifically forbidden to marry Vidumavi and of being ordered home. Romendacil had a formidable personality: as well as being a great general, he had ruled on behalf of his slack-twisted uncle and then for his own father; he cannot have been used to having his will crossed, and he was already inclined to be suspicious of Northmen, though he used them.

So it is very likely that he only knew of his son's union with Vidumavi after the couple had been married for some years (Vinitharya/Eldacar had been born in Rhovanion and had been known "in his youth" — not just as a baby — by his Northern name) when they arrived in Osgiliath. The cultural shock must have been almost as great for Rómendacil and the court of Gondor as it was for Vidumavi — it is unlikely that the Northern warriors in his army had brought their womenfolk with them; he did not want them to settle.

Something of what the poor Wood-maiden felt when she saw the great city of Osgiliath and passed — dwarfed and shrinking — inside its walls, can be recreated imaganitively by combining Tolkien's desciption of Minas Tirith (which was originally merely the western citadel to Osgiliath — the 'Tower' to 'London' by comparison) with what remains of pre-Turkish Constantinople: the mighty walls and, above all, the interior of Haghia Sophia (e.g. in Michael Grant, Dawn of the Middle Ages). The Gondorians, on their part would have been used to the sight of Northern armour and splendid though barbaric ornaments — compare the Sutton Hoo treasures and the breathtaking Lombard, Visigothic and Frankish jewellery. They would not have been prepared for the sight of a Northern princess. Thanks to the preservation of the grave of Queen Arnegund, wife of Chlotar I (d. 561), under the abbey church of St. Denis, we can get an idea of how she might have appeared: in an open-fronted crimson gown fastened with two disc brooches and a long, elaborately-worked golden pin like a stiletto, the wide sleeves ending in gold-embroidered cuffs; a tunic of violet silk just covering the knees, girt with a long, gold-embroidered girdle; white linen stockings cross-gartered to the knee, the straps ending in jewelled tags that would sway as she walked; slippers of soft, purple-dyed leather with golden clasps - shoes, stockings and garters well-displayed by the short tunic and the open gown (e.g. D. Wilson, ed., The Northern World, p. 52). It is an enchanting costume, suggesting a Dark Age Viola or Imogen, but one can imagine the horrified contempt it would cause in Byzantium — or Osgiliath.

No time would be lost in 'civilising' the prince's wife and son. Vinitharya's name would be changed at once, and the boy sent away to the household of some great noble of impeccable ancestry and manners "for fosterage, according to the custom", as would be said to Vidumavi in polite

excuse, really to make sure that he did not retain any undesirable habits of his mother.

The imagination of the early English was fascinated by the situation and ultimate fate (usually tragic) of princesses whose marriages linked two races or tribes. "Frithuwebbe" was the Old English term — "peace-weaver", surely one of the loveliest words for "woman" in any language; but when the weaving was done with the woman's own loyalties and emotional ties, any tension between her blood-kin and her marriage-kin could tear her apart. Tolkien has described how this befell Queen Hildeburh in Finn and Hengest; Beowulf comments on the likely end of Princess Freawaru's betrothal to a young king whose father had been killed by hers: "Rarely indeed does the death-spear rest, even for a little while, after a king-slaying, though the bride be a treaure".

Vidumavi's marriage was not endangered by an ancient feud: the threat to her peace was more subtle. Gondor needed friendship with Rhovanion, but even on a single page of the 'Annals' (RotK, p. 326), even in admitting the need for an alliance, the Gondorian annalist manages to mention the Northern race disparagingly five times:

"Nearest in kin of lesser men to the Dunedain"
"it was a thing unheard of ... that the heir to the crown should wed one of lesser and alien race"
"short-lived according to the fate of lesser men"
Vidugavia "called himself King of Rhovanion"
"feared her descendants would ... fall from the majesty of the Kings of Men".

In other words, Vidumavi was inferior and had contaminated the purity of the race. It is highly unlikely that Gondorians would be guilty of the vulgarity of Saruman in a temper: "What is the house of Eorl but a thatched barn where brigands drink in the reek, and their brats roll on the floor among the dogs?" but the Annalist shows that this was what they thought and Vidumavi would be made aware of it in every condescension, ironic compliment, elaborate courtesy, pitying smile. She would be nervous, try too hard to please and then retreat into her own pride. Husband and wife would each worry whether they had wrecked the happiness of the other; their worry would be mistaken for weariness and disgust. There would be great strain on such a marriage, even if others were not determined to wreck it — and it is fairly clear from the 'Annals' that a break would have been widely welcomed.

In Old English literature, the woman whose emotional situation is closest to Vidumavi's is the nameless speaker of The Wife's Lament. This is a short poem (53 lines) from the Exeter Book (MS dated c. 990-1000); its poet speakes in the persona of a deserted and outcast wife, surveying the ruins of her life, in which her greatest torment is not only that she still loves the man who has hurt her but realises that he also loved her and is suffering bitterly from their estrangement.

One of the greatest difficulties in composing stories outside one's own time, whether historical or fantasy, is avoiding anachronism — not so much in material details, which any careful writer will check — but in thoughts and feelings. This is never totally avoidable, of course, because the writer is a part of his own historical period; everything he creates is mediated by his perceptions and by the words available for his use. Here is the great stumbling-block: 20th century English is increasingly polarized between banal colloquialism and technical jargon; the uneasiness shown by some critics of Tolkien's 'high style' stems from the fact that he refused to accept this limitation and impoverishment of his native language. Also, his knowledge of earlier literature gave him an unerring sense of the speech and thought patterns of the heroic age. Using passages from The Wife's Lament as a key to Vidumavi's thoughts and feelings would prevent her sounding like the heroine of a magazine romance or a feminist tract.

There are several versions of the poem available in modern English verse (e.g. those edited by Michael Alexander (the most exciting); Richard Hamer (with the O.E. text) and Kevin Crossley-Holland (with a recording Argo/Decca ZPL 1058). See Bibliography for full details); it is interesting to compare them. (The divergencies are due to a feature of language that Tolkien brings out very clearly in his textual commentary in Finn and Hengest: that words can have more than one meaning or shade of meaning. In each context, one meaning will predominate; but those familiar with the language will be aware of the other implications, but a translator, particularly using verse, which prevents clumsy paraphrases, has to choose one equivalent. See Tolkien's excursus on the word "wrecca".)

It is imagined that Vidumavi is speaking:

"I have always endured torment because of my banishments" (line 5).

She uses the word "wrecca" — exile, outlaw — and she uses the plural. One "banishment" is her present separation from her husband; the other is her journey to her husband's home. The word is eloquent of the loneliness, homesickness and fear of a foreign princess given in diplomatic marriage, to whom the new home, even with the kindest welcome from the in-laws, is a kind of exile.

Vidumavi did not meet with kindness.

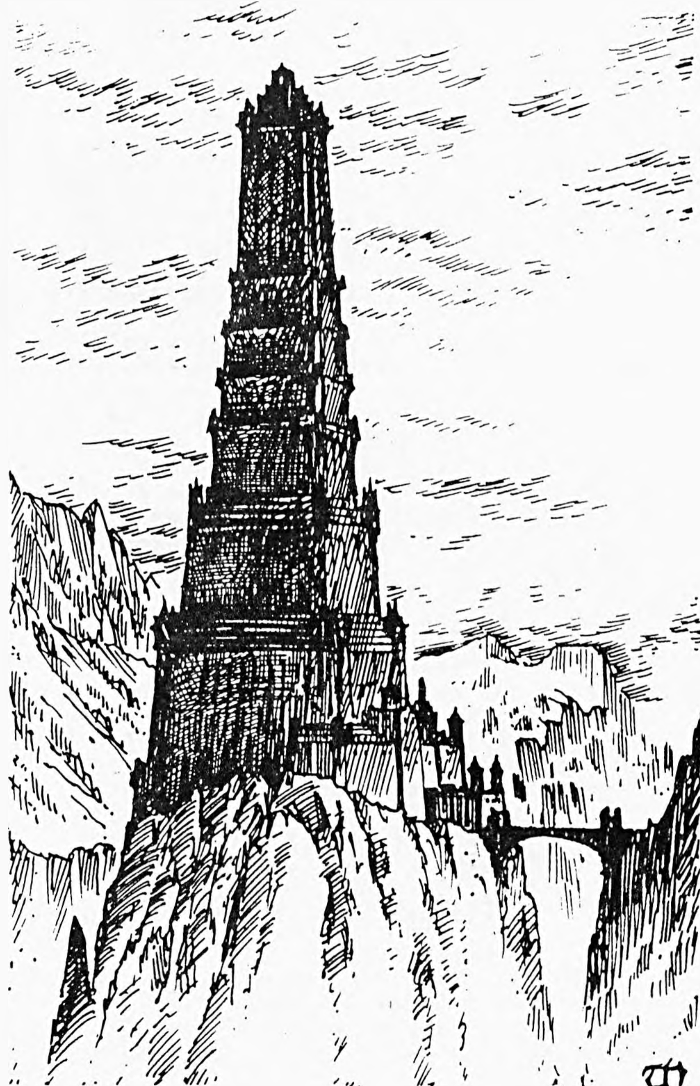
"When I set out to take up my duties, a friendless exile in my sore need, my husband's kinsmen began to meditate how, by secret plots, they might separate us, so that we might suffer a loathsome existence, the world's width between us; and I yearned for him" (lines 9-14).

The word represented by "duties" is one generally used in Old English when a young warrior is looking for a place in a king's or noble's war-band: here it gives a touching sense of the girl's mixture of devotion and awe for her Númenorian husband. The most powerful member of her husband's kinsmen, Minalcar Rómendacil, would be furious at the match, and at the fact the Valacar had gone beyond his instructions, but he could not afford to lose the support of Rhovanion on his north-eastern fontier. That would follow inevitably if Vidumavi were obviously murdered, or publicly repudiated, or returned to her kin of her own accord with a tale a slights and insults. He also had the large contingent of Northmen in the Gondorian army to deal with. An early death in childbed would be the best end he could hope for to the unwanted marriage; or some sickness that could be plausibly explained as a "summer fever" likely to attack a Northern girl pent up in a southern city. I do not think that Rómendacil would stoop to poisoning her himself but he would 'not strive officiously to keep alive'.

Vidumavi's greatest danger, as the 'Annals' make clear, came from the family of Calimehtar, Rómendacil's younger brother. It was his grandson, Castamir, who played a leading part in the ruinous civil war and usurped the kingdom for ten years.

Old English literature gives little space to motiveless villains — even Grendel and his mother are allowed their feelings and their points of view. It would improve the "Tale" if Calimehtar and his family could see themselves, at least in the beginning, as acting to protect the honour of the royal stock and the best interests of Gondor. If Calimehtar's son had been Valacar's rival since boyhood, it could have started as a noble, almost friendly rivalry, in adventures and contests of bravery and endurance, like Beowulf's swimming wager with Breca. Calimehtar's family had ability and courage: Castamir was a great Captain of Ships — "he had the greatest following of all the rebels ... and was supported by the people of the coasts and of the great havens of Pelargir and Umbar". We will suppose that this support was partly hereditary; that his family's power base was in South Gondor and the mouths of Anduin. It may have been their especial duty and privilege, as heirs of Elendil, to counter the descendants of the Black Númenoreans in the region of Umbar; but this post of honour would make them vulnerable to the sorcery which these still practised. So what had at first been honourable ambition became perverted to evil, which Calimehtar and his family brought into Osgiliath, not only in their minds but in their households. For some of the Black Númenorians, women as well as men, took service with them, glad of a chance to corrupt and ruin the descendants of Elendil, and to turn Gondor's most valuable ally, Rhovanion, into an enemy by destroying their princess and putting the guilt on Rómendacil or Valacar.

In addition, for the purposes of the "Tale" we may create a feminine involvement in the developing feud: though the royal family did not approve of marriages between cousins in blood, let us say that Calimehtar's wife was of a high Gondorian family with some royal connections in its ancestry and that she had a niece whom both Calimehtar and Rómendacil had chosen as a suitable bride for Valacar on his return from the Rhovanion



mission. This lady could regard herself as having been slighted and put the duty of avenging the insult on her menfolk; she and her friends among the court ladies would be well able to make Vidumavi miserable and to poison her confidence with vicious rumours.

"First my lord went away from this people, over the tossing waves; care came to me with every dawn, wondering where in the world my king might be" (lines 6-8).

Becoming aware of disaffection in the South, though as yet unaware of the corrupted loyalty of Calimehtar's family, Rómendacil sent Valacar on a royal visit to strengthen the spirits of the garrison of Umbar. He went by ship, down the Anduin and then south along the coast, and so right out of Vidumavi's vague knowledge of the world beyond her own homeland.

"My lord had ordered me to make my dwelling here ... so I was ordered to dwell in this forest grove, under the oak tree, in this grave mound. This barrow is ancient; I am nothing now, only yearning. The dales are dark, hills high above, bitter ramparts overgrown with briars — a joyless homestead" (lines 15, 27-32).

The words "eorthscraefe" (earth-sepulchre) and "eorthsele" (earth-cave) indicate a Neolithic chambered tomb like the West Kennet Long Barrow. The description in the Old English poem is inevitably reminiscent of the Druadan Forest and the works of the Púkel-men. Vidumavi cannot understand why Valacar himself should order her to go to this eerie and desolate dwelling. He had wanted to get her out of the City while he was not there to guard her; he was aware of the nearness of evil and sorcery, though he could not yet identify their source and he could not even be sure that his father would protect her. He hoped that the very remoteness of the district and the rumour of strange presences would keep her hiding-place a secret; that the Púkel-men would have care of her; that in the forest her woodcraft could make her less vulnerable to traps than in the City; that if it came to the worst she could make her way across Calenardhon and north up the Anduin to her own people. He did not dare explain this to Vidumavi - not only were there spies all around, some using sorcery, but she herself was not skilled in hypocrisy and concealing her feelings.

"I had found for myself a very well-matched husband — cruel-fated, sad at heart, hiding his mind, brooding on murder, but blithe in his bearing" (lines 18-21).

Vidumavi's feelings are a mixture of love, pity, bewilderment and horror. People from a simpler culture could be made uncomfortable, uneasy or downright alarmed by the Dúnedain's reserve, complexity and irony. These are seen at their extreme in Denethor; but also in Aragorn and even, at times, in Faramir. Valacar would never be an easy husband for Vidumavi to understand; at that particular time he was also having to hide his feelings to avoid alerting his enemies to the fact that he was suspicious; perhaps even pretending to be weary of Vidumavi, so that those who were plotting against her might take him for an ally and reveal their plans. Vidumavi's ill-wishers about the court would make sure that she was told he would be glad to be rid of her.

"Again and again we vowed that nothing could separate us save only death, nothing else; now everything is changed; our love is cancelled as if it had never been" (lines 21-7).

It is summer, the long days drag cruelly: "All over the earth, friends are living in love, lying in bed together, while I wander alone at dawn around this burial-mound, where I must sit the summer-long day, where I may weep for my exile and my many hardships" (lines 33-9).

And yet, she cannot wallow in self-pity; with an amazing lift out of her own pain, she is able to see Valacar far away by that unknown ocean (which she can only imagine as like the Sea of Rhûn — a wintry Baltic or Caspian) also lonely and grieving for lost happiness. She can pity him.

"In some dreary dwelling under a rocky cliff by the flowing tide, frozen in stormy weather, my dear lord sits weary-hearted and racked with care — too often he will remember a happier home" (lines 47-52).

With a relationship of this emotional complexity and tension, and given the political situation in Gondor and the neighbouring lands, it would be easy to construct a story-line of action and suspense, plot and counter-plot, murder and magic. How would it end? Romantics would vote for escape, reconciliation and 'happy-ever-after'; but there is very little promise of happy endings in the Silmarillion and the Lord of the Rings. Or there could be a complete tragedy, with Vidumavi hideously murdered by Black Númenoreans, believing that it was on Valacar's orders, and Valacar, suspecting his kin's complicity but unable to prove their guilt (perhaps they were not actively guilty) hiding his rage while waiting for a chance to strike back. So Gondor moves inevitably towards its first disaster, the Kin-strife.

If I were writing this "Tale" I would end it in harmony with the clear-eyed, unillusioned stoicism which Tolkien shared with the early English: with a voluntary and loving separation at Vidumavi's own

choice. Leaving her son with Valacar, she would go back with all honour to Rhovanion to take up the work which first brought him to her people. By living among the Northmen she would serve as a link and interpreter between the two races, preventing misunderstandings by acting as a "frithuwebbe" — a peace-weaver. She would also, even in her home-coming, be entering upon her third "exile" — one that would last for the rest of her life.

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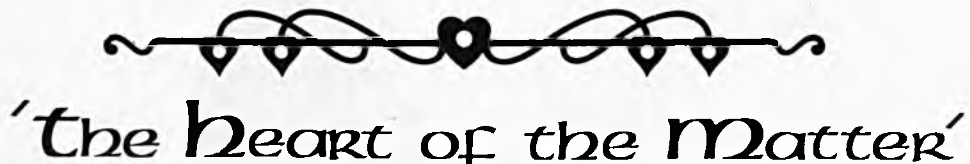

'The Heart of the Matter'

BY THE TIME The Lord of the Rings had been accepted as a literary classic in the mid-Sixties, those of us lesser beings privileged to know the Professor were aware first of all of his status as the most eminent linguist in the University. It was well known for example that one did not need to be studying Anglo-Saxon in earlier years to attend the famous dramatic lectures on Beowulf.

Considering then the colossal amount of philological work to which he was commited, it is a miracle of courtesy and sheer physical energy that so many questions, particularly of a linguistic nature were answered in such detail to those already dedicated to a study of things.

However, he was far more reticent on the 'Inner Meaning' of the works. Obviously the diversity of layers of sources of inspiration reveal a mind as complex as that of Yeats; like Yeats, we are all as thinking people attracted by the 'fascination of what's difficult'. We would not wish it were otherwise.

The main point I wish to make then, is that this eminent don had an irrepressible sense of humour, and delighted in what might best be described as games of intellectual chess. When questioned on any topic, from the House of Stuart to the validity of Anglican Orders, he would immediately take up whichever line of argument opposed his questioners; thus inevitably checkmating anyone foolhardy enough to engage such a formidable mind in debate. All this was done with the utmost charm and youthful glee; with Professor Tolkien, it was impossible to win a debate.

Thus we have to treat the Letters and anecdotes such as we have not as 'ex cathedra statments', but as remarks to be taken very much in context; not only when such comments were written, but who they were written to can alter the intended meaning considerably. But please do not think that this implies that anything said was intended to be seriously misleading.

However, it remains the prerogative of every artist to chose to explain or not to explain 'inner meaning'; particularly if they wish to remain silent over those issues that lie closest to their hearts, It is precisely because the Professor loved his fellow men, from the NCOs he met, in the trenches of the Great War to the gardeners at Merton College that my own feelings for Master Samwise are so deep; but personal relationships have an ethical copyright.

Remember that much of the material incorporated in the works was inspired by issues that lay at the heart of his own family life. And as his family was his greatest love of all, we owe it as a point of honour to tread very carefully, because where his deep and innermost thoughts lie, we do indeed tread on holy ground.

I. T. T.