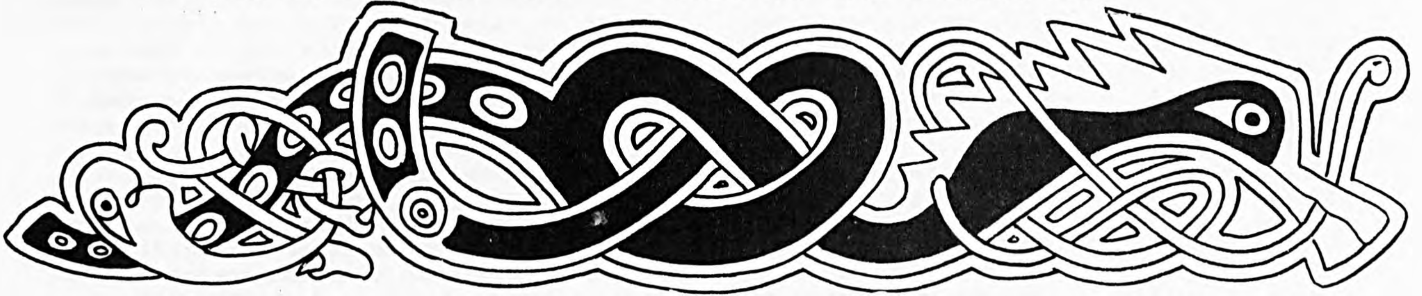
TOLKIEN'S SHIRE AND WAGNER'S NUREMBERG

A COMPARISON BY JOHN A. ELLISON



n the 1st Day OF JULY, 1927, the Viennese poet and fantasist Hugo von Hofmannsthal, who is now best remembered as the librettist of many of the operas of Richard Strauss, wrote to him a letter the subject of which is the possible relationship between fantasy and historical reality. Such a relationship extensively underlies Tolkien's world; I have argued elsewhere ('The Reality of Middle-earth', Amon Hen 54, pp. 14-15) that the illusion of historical reality becomes in his hands a convention which the reader unconsciously accepts, and that this is an essential feature of his "method", and one quite personal to him. The Shire, and Middle-earth as a whole, display a special quality of reality, which is that called "indestructible truth" by Hofmannsthal in his letter.[1] The instance of it referred to in the letter is Wagner's portrait of sixteenth century Nuremburg in the opera "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg" (The Mastersingers of Nuremberg). "It brings to life," says Hofmannsthal, "a genuine complete world which did exist, not . . . imaginary or excogitated worlds which have never existed anywhere".

It is strange that no one seems yet to have remarked on the striking parallels between Tolkien's 'myth' of the Shire, and Wagner's, of Nuremberg, although they are closer and more significant than the likenesses of subject-matter, superficially more obvious, between LotR and "The Ring". (It is possible to make extensive and detailed comparisons between LotR and "The Ring", in terms of structure, treatment and atmosphere, but that is not the point at issue here.) In order to avoid any misunderstanding, I should make it clear that the kind of parallism that I am discussing has nothing to do with "influence", real or imagined. There is no evidence, as far as I know, that Tolkien knew "Die Meistersinger", or ever saw it performed.

The Shire, presumably, is not a deliberate portrayal of England in allegorical guise, but, clearly, it reflects Tolkien's feelings about England, and those of immense numbers of other people. Professor T. A. Shippey has

shown, in his recent study (1982, pp. 77-9), how closely the Shire's history, place-names and institutions are modelled on English counterparts. To what sort of an England, and especially, to an England of what period, does the Shire relate? It has not yet been touched by the Industrial Revolution, but otherwise all that can be said is that it does not represent a society of "medieval" character and outlook, in this contrasting strongly with Middle-earth as a whole. The well-to-do elements in Shire society perhaps could have felt at home in Jane Austen's world; at least Sir Walter Elliott, of Kellyach-hall in Somerset, shows a truly hobbit-like involvement with his family tree. The real significance of the social structure of the Shire, however, surely lies in Tolkien's personal experience. He was paying tribute to a way of life whose disappearance was, for him, a saddening and personal reality. In his own words, "the country in which I lived in childhood was being shabbily destroyed before I was ten" (FotR, Foreword, p. 8). It has been suggested that life as it is lived in Bag End really pertains to the life Tolkien lived in Oxford between the wars, but that is misleading and irrelevant. Bilbo's and Frodo's daily lives comprise nothing whose existence would have been improbable or out-of-place about the year 1800. The slight sense of anachronism one may feel in reading the first chapter of The Hobbit, and in a few places early in LotR is a matter of style rather than one of content.

The stiking and characteristic feature of Shire society is that it consists of small isolated communities, quite self-dependent, and in consequence extremely cohesive. Outside influences barely exist, and a journey of more than twenty miles seems, to the inhabitants, like the equivalent of migration to a far-distant country; "They're queer folk in Buckland". Little more than a century ago there were still many parts of England from which a journey to the nearest market-town represented an important undertaking, and one to London a rare and hazardous adventure. The everyday life of the Hobbits is not a struggle for the bare means of subsistence; yet all the same it is hardworking and not particularly glamorous. "Growing food, and eating it, occupied most of their time". Their satisfaction with their way of life comes as a result of the ordered rhythm of life's daily round, and a strong sense of every individual's value to the community, and of his or her place in it.

Bilbo and Frodo, on the other hand, sometimes meditate on life in the Shire as if it was some kind of rural idyll. They do so, however, only when they are far outside its borders, and as a way of relieving their minds, temporarily, of the burden of current anxieties and tribulations, like the Irishman who only extols the charms of "the owld country" when he is exiled from it. What Tolkien is really appealing to is that sense of local community and local identity, which once was, in great measure, England itself, and which today has vanished even in the most remote parts of the country. Other writers have chronicled such a way of life, and described its nature in detail. Tolkien's special achievement is to have created out of it a myth with all its concomitant evocative power and symbolic significance. The hostile 'literary-critical' attitude to Tolkien, and its persistence and aggresiveness represent, in their way, a back-handed tribute. The use of terms like 'escapist' and 'infantile' acknowledges, by implication, the myth's force and influence. A public display of 'English' sentiment still provokes (as Elgar's music has often done) a public reaction of 'English' shamefacedness in some quarters.

English art and literature does not offer another wholly comaparable instance, but Conan Doyle created a myth whose appeal resembles Tolkien's in some ways. It is interesting that aficionados of Sherlock Holmes and his world sometimes develop a tendency, as we do with Middle-earth, to think of that world as a 'real' one. Learned articles have discussed, say, the number and dates of Watson's marriages, or the precise location of 221B Baker Street. Doyle grounded his myth in the historic reality of London as it once was, and some of its appeal today lies in its evocation of an England that has gone forever, one where half the map of the world is coloured red, and income tax is only a shilling in the pound. But it centres, of course, around Holmes and Watson as individuals, who became archetypes. The world created around them is there for the purpose of emphasizing that they are at its centre. The myth is not concerned with a society or a community as such, or with creating the sense of one. The most complete portrait by an English artist of a single self-contained community inspired by the artist's sense of local identity is "The Borough", Benjamin Britten's portrait of Aldeburgh in the opera "Peter Grimes". This, however, has no significance as a 'myth', in Tolkien's sense, though it has obvious literary precedents in, say, Middlemarch or Casterbridge.

The enclosed world of the rural community in any case has had a special appeal to several generations of English city-dwellers and suburbanites. Its Continental counterpart is the image of the self-enclosed city community of craftsmen and artisans, typified in the imagination of romanticism by late medieval and sixteenth century Nuremberg. The appeal of this city world became intense and widespread among middle-class Germans from the early 19th century onwards. It existed quite independently of

Wagner, although it was Wagner who gave it, in "Die Meistersinger", the most powerful artistic expression. To quote Hofmannsthal's letter again: "This city, which was quite unspoiled in the 1830s ... was one of the great decisive experiences of the romantics ... down to Richard Wagner, the man who rounded off the romantic age".

The parallels with the Shire begin with the nature of Wagner's 'historical reality', which in "Die Meistersinger" is, like Tolkien's, "feigned". The opera presents a portrait of sixteenth century Nuremberg, the city of Albrecht Dürer and Hans Sachs, as a tightly-knit closed community of craftsmen and artisans, dominated by its trade guilds, and united by the virtues of plain straightforward honesty and communal solidarity. But this picture, convincing as it is, in fact is true only of a later time than the sixteenth century.[2] At this period Nuremberg was an international trading and financial centre; its leading citizens were bankers, merchants and entrepreneurs. Nevertheless the world depicted in the opera did subsequently come into being; and it continued to exist right up to the middle of the nineteenth century. This was the time when Nuremberg, and the many other South German cities like it, lost their independence and the last of their guild privileges, and became fully absorbed into the German states. Wagner in the opera created a myth of the independent, self-sufficient urban community, at the very time the reality was disappearing before his eyes. Seventy years later Tolkien was to do the very same thing with its English rural equivalent.

The Shire and Nuremberg are portrayed in depth and in detail by their respective creators, and there are a sumber of striking similarities in the respective ways this is done. Each society, independent in status, and closely knit and inward-looking in character, expresses its identity in its traditions and their outward expression in status and ceremony. On the one side there are the various offices and feasts characteristic of the organization and calendar of the Shire, and also the intricate network of customs and family relationships, which Tolkien elaborated still further towards the end of his life (Letters, pp. 289-96, Letter 214). On the other side there are the intricate "rules" of the Mastersingers guild and the offices associated with it and with the city; there are the festivities with the processions of the guilds and the singing contest, which take place on Midsummer's day. This is the ceremonial climax of the year in Nuremberg, just as is Midyear's day in the Shire. Both societies, although the Shire has "hardly any 'government'", regulate themselves by well-defined and universally respected 'rules'. The Hobbits attributed theirs to "the King", and kept them because they were "'The Rules' (as they said), both ancient and just" (FotR, Prologue, p. 18). Life and values in Nuremberg are seen in terms of the rules of the Mastersingers, and the prestige they confer on those who have mastered them.

The "rules" in each case are parodied in the exaggeration and distortion which events impose on them. In the Shire there are the grotesque additional "rules" which are such a feature of existence under the dictatorship of Saruman. The corresponding role in Nuremberg is played by the slavish adherence to the Mastersingers' rules typified in the person of the pedantic town-clerk Becknesser, and the absurd results it produces. The comparisons between Tolkien's work and Wagners even extend as far as characterization. Hans Sachs, the central figure of the opera, is a Gandalf-like figure in his relation to the other Mastersingers, and to the citizens of Nuremberg. This is even more the case as regards his relationship, as a guiding father-figure, with the young knight Walther von Stolzing, which is an exact counterpart of Gandalf's with Bilbo and Frodo.

No doubt the response of the literary-critical 'opposition' to all this would be to suggest that both worlds represent the same kind of nostalgic backward-looking bourgeois "paradise". (This attitude, in regard to "Die Meistersinger", has in fact been quite widespread in certain circles in post-war Germany.) This would be to ignore the extent to which Tolkien and Wagner both undercut their respective 'sub-creations' by warning us not to treat them uncritically. Tolkien makes it abundantly clear that the Hobbits' independent spirit and sense of community have a negative side to them. These qualities are inseparable from a tendency to parochialism of outlook and dullness of perception that in themselves, are not admirable. In the concluding phase of the War of the Ring these limitations involve the Shire in a disastrous and traumatic experience, which a degree of interest on the part of its inhabitants in the affairs of the outside world would surely have enabled it to avoid. In the late pieces of writing which appear in UT, "The Quest of Erebor", Tolkien seems to be unusually concerned to stress Bilbo's seeming complacency and stupidity (in the eyes of Thorin and the Dwarves), and by implication the complacent attitude of hobbits in the Shire in general. Did he, perhaps, feel that at times in LotR he had 'laid it on a bit too thick' in the hobbits favour, and that now was the time to redress the balance? The riot which breaks in on the peace of Midsummer's Eve in Nuremberg, and Hans Sachs' famous "Wahn",[3] monologue, which comments on it, indicate the violence which may underly the burghers' placid existence. The triumphant end of the opera still contains Sachs' prophetic

words of warning, "Beware! Ill times threaten us all ..." etc.

The similarity between the respective myths of Tolkien and Wagner resides to some extent in cultural nationalism, or regionalism, and its place as a component of the art of each of them. Tolkien's 'roots' in the West Midlands (like Benjamin Britten's in East Anglia) are clearly of the greatest importance to him. The now well-known letter (Letters, p. 37, Letter 30) regarding a German publication of The Hobbit, contains a revealing sidelight, in its reference to himself as an "English (not "British") subject" who fought in the "English (not "British") army". In Wagner's case his cultural nationalism was of a rather more specific and self-conscious kind, scathing though he could be about even his own countrymen at times. Outside his art, it tended from time to time to acquire political overtones. In making such a comparison as has been drawn in the foregoing pages, one therefore runs a slight risk of arousing such overtones, however much one may deplore, as Tolkien himself did, attempts to use LotR as political allegory, from any standpoint. No one, after all, needs to be reminded of the course of European history after 1868 (the year "Die Meistersinger" was first performed). And no one who knows the opera needs reminding of the monstrous perversion of Wagner's art and ideals which occurred under the Third Reich. However silly and unjustified the occasional press and public references to "the politics of Tolkienland" may be, it is not altogether surprising that, in the light of many people's sensitivities, that they continue to appear from time to time. The point is that both LotR and "Die Meistersinger" have survived and will survive, all vicissitudes of political storm and stress and partisan interpretation. You cannot say, nevertheless, that they have no possible 'political' dimension. They must have, simply because they are not 'escapist' works in any derogatory sense. Like all significant works of art, they reflect life as it was being lived, and history as it was being made, at the times they were created.

FOOTNOTES

(1) The letter, in an English translation, appears in The Correspondence between Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal (introd. E. Sackville-West, transl. H. Hammelmann & E. Osers), Collins, 1961; republished by Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 433-4.

(2) For a fuller account, see Timothy McFarland, "Wagner's Nuremberg", in English National Opera/Royal Opera Guide series No. 19 (Die Meistersinger) (John Calder, 1983), pp. 27-34. This part of the present argument is considerably indebted to the above article.

(3) "Wahn", in English, "madness" or "frenzy", in a collective sense.

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T. A. Shippey: The Road to Middle-Earth, George Allen & Unwin, 1982.

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Lament for the High Born

For those who yet dwell in Middle-earth,
The summer has passed us by.
The autumn of our ancient world
Reflects from clouded skies.

The sun yet shines upon our land,
The gentle rain still falls,
But darker is the dark of night
Since Elf Kings left their halls.

A reign of darkness, long has passed
Our fields once more are green.
But greyer now are field and wood,
Elf Lords no more are seen.

A realm beyond the sea have they,
To which they have returned,
And we are left upon these shores,
But in our memory burned

Remembrance of a fair Elf folk
They, first-born, we, the last
But now we hold their land in trust,
Into the West, the Elves have passed.

David Phillips