

Tolkien, Eucatastrophe, and the Rewriting of Medieval Legend

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Studying J.R.R. Tolkien and his rewriting of medieval legend in his own original work, I have perceived that Tolkien sometimes disliked aspects of the stories he encountered – especially their endings. In several cases, over the years, he chose to rewrite medieval poems that he loved, but with certain elements transformed. His concept of *eucatastrophe* informs his rewriting to such a degree, and so consistently, that I have concluded that there is in fact a “principle of eucatastrophe” that guided Tolkien’s re-visionary processes.

Tolkien invented the term “eucatastrophe” in an essay, in which he defined it as the *opposite* of tragedy. He further defined it as the opposite of the “dyscatastrophe” of sorrow and failure, which, Tolkien admits, may be “necessary to the joy of deliverance” (Tolkien, “On Fairy-stories,” in *Tales from the Perilous Realm*, 384) For the philologist, eucatastrophe is a *good* catastrophe, the consolation of a happy ending, and “the eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale – and its highest function” (384).

In this comparative literary analysis, I will examine three case studies from Tolkien’s oeuvre, in which Tolkien practiced eucatastrophic rewriting: his folk-tale, “Sellic Spell,” in which he rewrites the Old English poem *Beowulf*; his poem, “Princess Mee,” in which he re-envision aspects of the myth of Narcissus and the Middle English dream vision poem, *Pearl*; and his character of Éowyn from *The Lord of the Rings*, in whom he re-imagines the fate of Brynhild, a shield-maiden and valkyrie from the *Völsunga Saga*. In each case, Tolkien rewrites the original so that sorrow is transformed into happiness in Tolkien’s new versions. When exploring these transformations, I also will consider possible psychological motivations behind Tolkien’s artistic choices.

Eucatastrophic Rewriting of *Beowulf* in “Sellic Spell”

Tolkien’s life-long fascination with the Old English poem *Beowulf* is well known, particularly from his landmark essay, “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*.” Tolkien viewed the poem not as an epic, as it is most commonly regarded, but as a “heroic elegy” because the story advances through its focus on one hero, Beowulf, and the trials that lead up to his eventual death and funeral commemoration at the end of the poem. Less well known is Tolkien’s essentialized, folktale version of the epic, “Sellic Spell.” Christopher Tolkien’s publication of his father’s prose translation of *Beowulf*, together with “Sellic Spell” in 2014, along with Dimitri Fimi’s commentary published in *Mallorn* in the same year, however, has recently brought both to the attention of a larger audience. A brief comparison of key differences between these two works reveals how Tolkien’s principle of eucatastrophe

affected his rewriting.

Tolkien completed his prose translation of *Beowulf*, along with a commentary on the poem, in 1926, but did not write “Sellic Spell” until the early 1940s. He wrote his story in both modern English and in Old English, and he wrote a related text, a poem called “The Lay of Beowulf” as well as various notes on these original compositions. Tolkien’s title for his story, “Sellic Spell,” comes from line 2109 of the *Beowulf*: *hwilum syllic spell rehte aefter rihte rúmheort cyning* (“or again, greathearted king, some wondrous tale rehearsed in order due” [Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, 358]). His story title means “wondrous (or marvelous) tale.” Tolkien expressed his intentions for his story in a note later preserved and published by his son:

This version is *a* story, not *the* story. It is only to a limited extent an attempt to reconstruct the Anglo-Saxon tale that lies behind the folktale elements in *Beowulf* – in many points it is not possible to do that with certainty; in some points (e.g. the omission of the journey of Grendel’s dam) my tale is not quite the same. (Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, 355).

In fact, Tolkien’s folktale version differs significantly from the original poem. The differences demonstrate how the concept of “eucatastrophe,” a sudden joyous turn of events, inspired Tolkien’s imaginative rewriting of the *Beowulf* story.

Although written in England, sometime between the 7th and the 10th centuries, *Beowulf* is set in Scandinavia. The plot of the Old English poem develops through a sequence of three fight scenes in which the hero, Beowulf, combats three supernatural foes: Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and a dragon. The historical sub-plot of the poem concerns feuds between medieval Scandinavian tribes: Geats, Swedes, Danes, Heathobards, and Frisians. (A chronology of the development of these feuds is clearly laid out in Marijane Osborn’s *Beowulf: A Guide to Study*, 38-41). Interwoven with the main plot and the historical sub-plot are several lyrical digressions recalled by the poet-narrator and/or sung by a *scop*, a maker-poet and harper-singer within the story, some of which reveal the stories of women: Hildeburgh, Hygd, and Modthryth. Wealtheow, queen of the Danes, features importantly in the poem as does a Geatish woman who wails out the hero’s funeral oration at the poem’s end.

In contrast, in composing “Sellic Spell,” Tolkien deliberately cut out the historical sub-plot in order to focus on the main plot and poetic narrative of *Beowulf*. In Tolkien’s folk-tale version, Beowulf becomes Beewolf; Hrothgar, the King of the Golden Hall (i.e., Heorot); Brecca, against whom the hero competes in a swimming contest on the monster-infested deep, Breaker; Unferth, his “flyting” opponent,

Unfriend; Grendel, Grinder; and so on. Beowulf is raised an orphan who acts much like a bear and lacks courteous speech, but eventually succeeds as a warrior, defeating Grinder and his “dam” – as Tolkien calls her, comparing her to the female parent of an animal, such as a horse. The Old English poem actually calls Grendel’s mother a *brim-wulf* or “sea-wolf.”

Yet even with this focus on the main plot, Tolkien’s rewriting of *Beowulf* in his folktale version is dramatically different from the original writing. Notably, he entirely drops the final fight with the dragon, and he introduces new characters, Handshoe, whose magical gloves enable him to move aside or tear apart great stones, and Ashwood, who carries a powerful spear. The addition of these characters may suggest that Tolkien was aiming to create a variant of the “skillful companions” type of folktale, but inverting its usual narrative results: instead of helping, Bee-wolf’s companions and their skills actually hinder his progress until he overcomes them.

But perhaps the most notable change Tolkien makes comes at the end of his story. Whereas *Beowulf* ends with the death of the hero, “Sellic Spell” ends with his marriage. This is announced in the second half in a single sentence: “A great lord he became, with broad lands and many rings; and he wedded the King’s only daughter” (Tolkien, “Sellic Spell” in *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, 385). Even without further elaboration on this marriage, suddenly, the story is no longer a heroic elegy: it is a fairy-tale. Tolkien has applied his principle of eucatastrophe, and now *Beowulf*, as rewritten in “Sellic Spell,” has a “sudden joyous turn of events”: a royal marriage.

The audience knows that this marriage contributes to the hero’s social advancement and reputation, to a good life and later victories, for the story concludes by observing, “And after the King’s day was done, Beowulf became king in his stead, and lived long in glory. As long as he lived, he loved honey dearly, and the mead in his hall was ever of the best” (385). This is a happy ending, even a fairy-tale ending. *Beowulf* is no longer an elegy. It has been transformed by the eucatastrophic joy of marriage.

Tolkien knowledge of folk-tale certainly inspired his rewriting. But perhaps so too did his own good marriage to Edith, his sweetheart, whom he had met as a teenager. Her role in Tolkien’s life, his mythology, and, indeed, all of his eucatastrophic rewriting is highly significant. Indeed, this influence can be further considered in Tolkien’s poem, “Princess Mee.”

Eucatastrophic Rewriting of the Myth of Narcissus and *Pearl* in “Princess Mee”

“Princess Mee” is a longer version of a shorter poem called “Princess Ni,” which Tolkien originally published in *Leeds University Verse, 1914-1924* (Shippey, “Poems by Tolkien,” 515-17). In 1961, Tolkien aunt, Jane Neave (his mother’s younger sister), asked him to write a collection of verse with Tom Bombadil “at the heart of it.” Tolkien subsequently published *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil and Other Poems*

from *the Red Book* (1962), nearly all of them had been published previously and then revised – including the fourth poem in the collection, “Princess Ni,” now entitled “Princess Mee.” In this poem, Tolkien used his principle of eucatastrophe to rewrite aspects of both the myth of Narcissus and the Middle English dream vision poem, *Pearl*.

According to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus was a beautiful and vain young man, adored by both men and women. A girl, Echo, fell in love with him and wasted away from longing while he spurned her – only able to repeat the words he himself said to her. When almost nothing was left of her but her voice, she asked the gods for vengeance, and they granted it to her: when Narcissus saw his own reflection in a pool of water, he fell in love with himself, without realizing he was looking at a mirror-image he could never have or hold. His love-sick state caused him to waste away in turn, until finally, the gods took pity on him and turned him into a flower: the narcissus flower.

In “Princess Mee,” Tolkien is apparently intent upon rewriting the myth of Narcissus, changing the lead character from a man to a woman (and from a human to an elf) and changing the narrative from a sad tale of self-absorption and paralysis to a delightful story about self-awareness and free movement. For in “Princess Mee,” the protagonist of the poem does not reject a lover (as Narcissus does Echo) nor fall in love with herself (as Narcissus does when he sees his own reflection) nor waste away from longing for her own reflection (as Narcissus does until the gods take pity on him and transform him into a flower). Instead, the princess accepts herself, without becoming obsessed with herself, and indeed appears to have great delight in seeing the reflection of her own existence.

“Princess Mee” is a simple narrative poem about a lovely, little elven princess. It describes the physical appearance of the princess and how she dances with her reflection in a pool of water. The imagery associated with the princess is similar to that associated with the Maiden who appears in the late-fourteenth century, Middle English dream vision *Pearl*: “pearls in her hair / all threaded fair; / of gossamer shot with gold / was her kerchief made” (Tolkien, “Princess Mee,” in *Tales from the Perilous Realm*, 196, lines 4-7). Like pearls, the colors white and gold (standing for purity and holiness) are clearly associated with both the Maiden and the Princess. Tolkien refers to the pearls of this princess no less than three times (lines 4, 67, 74), including in the very last line of the poem, making the pearls a significant visual element in her description and a symbol of her identity. Other repeated elements, her “kirtle fair” and “slippers frail / Of fishes’ mail” are clearly significant as well.

Pearl begins with a man in a garden, where the man has lost a precious pearl and, upon falling asleep, the man’s “spirit sprang” into space (Tolkien, “Pearl,” 125). He wanders in a bejeweled paradise until he encounters a stream he cannot cross; on the other side of it stands his beloved Pearl-Maiden. They converse at length about his sorrow over losing her until she reveals that she has asked for him to be shown a vision. He beholds the New Jerusalem and

the Lamb of God, bleeding from his side, yet with a joyous countenance. At first, the man is moved by this, but then he is distracted when he sees his Pearl-Maiden in procession with other virgins following the Lamb. He starts toward the water, desiring to cross it and be with the Pearl-Maiden, but before he can set one foot therein, he is startled awake to consider the significance of this dream.

In “Princess Mee,” Tolkien makes eucatastrophic changes to *Pearl* intended to introduce a fairy-tale element of happiness in the rewriting for the protagonists. First, Tolkien appears to cut out everyone and almost everything from *Pearl* except for the Princess (Maiden) and her dancing-pool (the stream), characterizing her as “alone” (198). But she only seems to be so. In fact, the writer-reader-viewer is watching her – and so is in the role of the Dreamer.

Notably, the Pearl-Maiden transformed into Princess Mee is not static, but dynamic, literally dancing for joy. She is not a strict teacher, but a happy learner. She can look at herself, at the reflection of “Mee,” and the writer-reader-viewer can behold her to his heart’s content without ever contending with a suffering Lamb’s contrary will. The fact that Tolkien has the Princess looking at “Mee” in the pool is surely a play on words: it is not only her name, but also “me.” It is as if the Princess is the writer-reader-viewer’s *anima*.

Significantly, the Princess also has similarities to Lúthien, being dressed in a gray mantle with a blue hood as she is, and being so very beautiful in her dancing. This picture of a beautiful, fairy-woman dancing alone in a wood is iconic in Tolkien’s imagination, inspired by a day when his own wife danced for him. It is most fully realized in his versions of the legend of Beren and Lúthien, in which Beren sees Lúthien dancing and desires her: the beginning of their love-story. In “Princess Mee,” the parallel character for Beren (or for Tolkien) is the writer-reader-viewer.

This imaginative participation of writer and reader in the viewing of Princess Mee, a woman ostensibly dancing alone with her reflection, recalls the Dreamer’s gaze upon the Pearl-Maiden – and Beren’s on Lúthien. The *Pearl*-poet subtly critiques the Dreamer’s preoccupation with what he sees, especially because the Dreamer apparently values it over what he hears (and thus over the divine truth the Pearl-Maiden is trying to speak to him), but Tolkien’s take on Beren’s gaze is more sympathetic. While Tolkien, like the *Pearl*-poet, does critique men who see Luthien’s beauty and wish to possess Luthien as a object – men like her father Thingol, her lover Beren, her enemy Thu/Sauron (especially in the verse version published in *The Lays of Beleriand*) – he also, ultimately, makes his legend a great love-story, the goal of which is not renunciation, but consummation for the greater good of Middle-earth. For ultimately, the descendants of Beren and Lúthien will help to eradicate evil from the good lands.

The existence of “Princess Mee” suggests the complex ways in which Tolkien’s imagination interacted with his sources and experiences from his own life, elements from his legendarium, and details from *Pearl* highlighted in his translation and commentary (that is, the introductory essay).

“Princess Mee” is surprisingly complex in content, and in transmission history (developing as it does over time from “Princess Ni” and in relation to both the Pearl-Maiden and Lúthien, not to mention Tolkien’s wife, Edith, who inspired the character of Lúthien), in a way not implied by the way the author characterizes it along with other poems in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* in a preface, saying: “a better example of their general character would be the scribble . . .”

The very dismissiveness implied by such characterization, compared to the intensive re-writing Tolkien did of these poems, compels us to reconsider Tolkien’s intentions in these poems in relation to his larger legendarium. In “Princess Mee,” Tolkien rewrites classical and medieval legend to emphasize the eucatastrophic joy of healthy self-love and the acceptable, fulfilling gaze of the lover upon the beloved. These changes, like the marriage of Beowulf in “Sellic Spell,” appear to be motivated by Tolkien’s own love-story and by the woman central to it, his beloved wife, Edith. Her influence may also be perceived in the character of Éowyn.

Eucatastrophic Rewriting of Brynhild’s Fate in Éowyn’s Character in *The Lord of the Rings*

Tolkien re-wrote the Old Norse poem variously known as the Völsunga Saga, the Elder Edda or the Poetic Edda in his own narrative poem, “The New Lay of the Völsungs.” In 2009, Tolkien’s son and posthumous editor, Christopher Tolkien, published the “New Lay” with other materials as *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*. In the foreword, Christopher estimates that his father completed this poem in the early 1930s, after laying aside the Lay of Leithian, concerning Beren and Lúthien (5). Tolkien made a number of striking changes to the Völsunga Saga in his “New Lay,” which Christopher discusses in his commentary (183-249), but Tolkien took his re-writing of at least one aspect of the medieval Old Norse legend to a eucatastrophic level. Specifically, Tolkien’s character of Brynhild in his “New Lay” bears remarkable resemblance to the character of Éowyn in *The Lord of the Rings*, in key respects (some of which are discussed by Leslie Donovan in “The Valkyrie Reflex”), but the fates of the two shield-maidens are distinctly different.

In the “New Lay,” as in the Völsunga Saga, Brynhild is a shield-maiden and a valkyrie. The Old Icelandic word *valkyrie* means “chooser of the slain,” which reflects the role valkyries play in Old Norse mythology: as the handmaidens of the god Odin, they choose fallen warriors from battlefields and convey them to Valhalla. Brynhild first appears in Tolkien’s poem when the hero Sigurd sees a war-clad warrior he thinks is a man lying on the ground with a sword. Sigurd literally discovers her when he lifts her helmet and sees her shining hair: a woman! (139). This recalls Éowyn’s decision to disguise herself as Dernhelm and her later discovery on the battlefield by her brother, Éomer, and subsequently, in Gondor’s Houses of Healing, by Aragorn, who awakens her as Sigurd awakened Brynhild.

In the Norse myth, Brynhild has been cursed by Odin to wed, but she has taken a vow to marry only a fearless man. In Tolkien’s version, Brynhild’s desire is for Sigurd because

he is the “World’s Chosen” and the “serpent-slayer” of the dragon Fáfñir (121). They pledge their troth to be married, but Brynhild wants to wait until Sigurd becomes a king before wedding. In the interim, Brynhild becomes a great queen, but Sigurd breaks his vow and marries Gudrún. Brynhild is later tricked by Sigurd into marrying his friend, his wife’s brother, Gunnar. This betrayal leads Brynhild to desire vengeance when she realizes it. She urges Gunnar to kill Sigurd, and Gunnar in turn urges his brother to do the deed for him. So Sigurd is murdered, and Brynhild later kills herself: a tragedy, and from Tolkien’s perspective, apparently, one in need of a eucatastrophe.

Like Brynhild, Éowyn is a shield-maiden (though not a valkyrie). She is also under some external pressure and internal expectation that she marry when Aragorn arrives in Rohan, and she desires him because of his greatness: a motive she shares with Brynhild. Éowyn, as already noted, also disguises herself in man’s battle-gear. She then fights against the forces of Mordor besieging Gondor, where she slays both a wraith and his winged steed, but is herself badly wounded in the encounter. It is at this point that Tolkien applies his principle of eucatastrophe to change the tragic fate of Brynhild in the happier experience of Éowyn.

Éowyn’s Gunnar is not a deceiver, but the honorable Faramir of Rohan who wishes to wed her. Éowyn, unlike Brynhild, chooses to surrender the ways of a shield-maiden, marry Faramir, and become a healer. The marriage is approved and blessed (not forced or finagled) by King Aragorn, and Éowyn dwells in Ithilien with Faramir happily thereafter.

It is notable that Tolkien wrote that, of all his characters, he felt himself to be like Faramir (Tolkien, *Letters* #180, 232). This being so, it is natural to wonder if Faramir’s relationship to his beloved Éowyn is in some way like Tolkien’s relationship to his beloved Edith. It would seem that Tolkien transformed Brynhild’s tragic fate to Éowyn’s happy ending, emphasizing the eucatastrophic joy of healing after a terrible experience of battle with a demonic power. Ennobling Éowyn’s character so that she chooses a good marriage to a man who loves her, rather than insisting out of pride on a match to a man famous for his greatness, fits with Tolkien’s implied ideal behind all eucatastrophe: that honorable character, despite all intervening suffering, will eventually result in a good destiny.

Conclusions

J.R.R. Tolkien’s principle of eucatastrophe led him to transform medieval legends when he rewrote them. He rewrote the ending of *Beowulf* in “Sellic Spell” to emphasize the joy of marriage. He re-envisioned the myth of Narcissus and the dream vision *Pearl* in “Princess Mee” to reveal the joy of healthy self-love and the acceptable, fulfilling gaze of the lover upon the beloved. He re-imagined the fate of Brynhild in the character of Éowyn, doing way with the tragedy of a lover’s murder and the beloved’s suicide in favor of a shield-maiden’s physical and psychological healing from a wraith’s demonic attack on her life. In *The Lord of the Rings*,

Éowyn’s joy continues to grow in her marriage to Faramir and their purposeful work together in Ithilien. In each case, these eucatastrophic transformations appear to be tied to Tolkien’s own personal love-story and to the inspiration of his beloved wife, Edith, which shows the interplay between Tolkien’s knowledge of medieval literature and his real-life experience of loving and being loved.

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