



The Tolkien formation... is typified by two kinds of fiction...; the first kind transpires in historical novels...; the second... pulls away from more or less straight history... towards legend, myth, fairy-tales, and the great underworld of magic and the occult. (Fred Inglis, The Promise of Happiness: Value and Meaning in Children's Fiction (1981), p.213.)

In this relatively recent, vigorous and broad-based study of children's literature Inglis made incisive categorisations of 'the new work', in particular, in English children's books written since c. 1950. One of his key arguments is that Tolkien's success and achievements 'light up the formation of a group of people, [this being] a social progress which declares itself in the outline of ideas' (ibid.), and argues that such writers find their 'forms and narratives' in the trio before mentioned 'distinguishable but related strands of fiction-making' (p.213).

Inglis cites as an example of the first commando arm Penelope Lively (p.133) (op.cit., pp.226-8), yet her The Whispering Knights¹ (1971) may be held to be a text which belongs to both fictional modes. This second work of hers is not an historical novel² but rather about present-day children in present-day surroundings. The author is concerned -- as always -- with continuity, with how people and places incorporate the past, in this instance how the malevolent spirit of Morgan Le Fay can come back and contend with her foes, the equally ancient forces of good, the 'whispering Knights' of the title, but clearly also the Rollright Stones, a great monolith circle, on the border between Oxfordshire and Warwickshire. Ancient field paths are equally important to the story, as is generally and externally, 'the power of place'.³ Yet both Inglis and Rees fail to observe just how close this book is to Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings (1954-55), let alone how the later text can illumine the earlier one.

The Lively story is set in a Cotswold village, Steeple Hampden, a former 'place of evil' (p.61) once dominated by a witch⁴ --

*She is Morgan Le Fay... and Duessa, and Circe,
and the Witch in Snow-White, and the Ice Queen,
and many, many others. (p.17);*

one who 'always has a feeling for places that have once been hers' (p.18) and endeavours to repossess such a spot in the hope that 'it will once again become a place of evil' (p.61). This

enemy is given all the characteristics of Tolkien's Black Riders, as the story develops.

These may be listed:

1. 'the important thing is never to meet her on her own ground... You must never play the game according to her rules'⁵ (p.34);

2. the pursuit of her victims on a demonic horse -

'they could see the ripple of powerful muscles, and the flare of nostril... its furious snorting, they and Morgan, locked in their deadly game of hide-and-peek'⁶ (p.110);

3. the characteristics of

'Morgan's approach... the dreadful chill stealing into their bones, and hear the hiss⁶ of her breath' (p.117);

4. the assault in sleep on the intended victim, as of the child Martha:

'nameless fears... harried her in forms of dreams... witches, goblins... and other vaguer horrors, that rose up grinning'⁷ (p.22);

5. the emotion and anger of the Enemy -

'there was a thin voice screaming... somewhere high above... in the sky... it certainly was nothing human or animal'⁸ (pp.86-87);

6. the innocent are pursued by menacing shadows, with

'the shape of a figure in a cloak' (p.24);

7. the sound of the Enemy when thwarted:

'A wailing, thin and high, beginning as a moan and then rising to a shriek... a manic hideous sound' (pp.135-6);

and

'a terrible, mounting wail of rage and despair' (p.143);

8. the horrible eyes of the Enemy:

'her eyes were terrible. They were black, and cold as frost, and quite empty of anything but a furious intent to destroy' (p.71);

9. the ancient quality of the face of the White Witch -

'the face was young... it carried with it also a total strangeness, a suggestion of something very old and far away'⁹ (p.142);

10. the indestructible quality of evil¹⁰ -

'She is never routed for ever, for of course she exists at different levels in time' (p.148);

as with the hobbits in both Tolkien's fantasies, so with the company of children here, the mediator of the Divine assesses their moral achievement:

'I can see you have been a long way... You have done magnificently... the task is complete.' (pp.146-47)

Penelope Lively's text also contains many other mythic motifs familiar to readers of writings about Middle-earth:

- danger away from the consecrated safety of an ancient [Christian] village -

'in the field they were back in an

older, more unpredictable world' (p.37);

- significance in (wise) old tales -

'a story that persists in that way must have some kind of substance' (p.16);

- earlier ages and mores -

'She is from a time far older than ours' (p.17);

- the horrible colour of the living dead -

'her skin was bone-white'¹¹ (p.70);

- the pounding sound of the demonic pursuit -

'there was a drumming in her ears' (p.140) which
'hunted her through strange landscapes' (p.23);

- the nature of the only real opposition to such evil -

'It's courage and conviction that count' (p.63);

or the undead nature¹² of the ancient monoliths, the Hampden Stones -

'a circle of rough grey stones, dappled with lichen and pock-marked by age, sunk deep in the grass'. (p.64)

While some readers may feel, from this catalogue, that the story is too obviously derivative of Tolkien-reanimated motifs and symbols, the present writer prefers to regard it as an intense meditation on an ancient rural landscape¹³, with a consequent response to its legends, folklore and (regional) superstitions¹⁴. Some of the other motifs, like that of the ancient road across the fields (pp.90, 139, 140, etc.), are not ones used conspicuously by Tolkien, while that of the denser forest than today's,

'crouched against the skyline like a sleeping animal' (p.141),

is not so much an echo of the march of the Ents as a suggestion that the place itself, the hill of the standing stones, has reverted to an earlier, more wooded period, much as it was at the time of the 'great battle' (p.75) there so very long ago. It was alive then, as perhaps it may be again in the time of great spiritual crisis.

Indeed, while the inspiration, and influence of Tolkien is obvious, David Rees was very correct in his assessment of *The Whispering Knights* and other of her early novels:

What Penelope Lively has achieved... is something unique, a kind of book that is neither history nor fantasy but has something of both, and that cannot be labeled conveniently -- a book where the power of place is a stronger force than most of the characters¹⁵, where "history is now." (loc.cit., p.187)

Thus, while the work under discussion can and should stand on its merits as a peculiarly sensitive musing on the old Oxfordshire/Warwickshire border country, it affords many powerful insights into Tolkien's creation by its analogous handling of related ideas:

- the witch-warlock characteristics of the Black Riders;

- the occult-like assaults on Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*;

- the subtle glosses on the nature of 'shadow' (pp.132,156);

- the reptilian nature of Angmar and, even more, of Sauron;

- the strength and poignant eternal vigil of soldiers⁶ (here 'Knights') dedicated to a cause and for whom there is no rest in this sublinary world;
- the spiritual dangers of lusting for food leading to more serious forms of greed and selfishness (p.44);

or the phenomenology of hope being the metaphysical basis for (the practice of) courage.

In essence, then this novel from the 'Tolkien formation' affords us insights into: the nature and necessity of the positive life; the ontological nature of evil; the power of landscape; and the interrelatedness of the past and present. It has the added merit that it can bestow illuminating insights into the seemingly more distanced but essentially contemporary fantasies of J.R.R. Tolkien.

NOTES

1. All page references are to the Piccolo edition, 1973, etc.
2. Its closeness to this form is stressed by David Rees in his essay 'Time Present and Time Past - Penelope Lively', originally published in The Horn Book Magazine, February 1975, but quoted from as printed in his The Marble in the Water (1980), pp.185-198.
3. Rees, loc.cit., p.187.
4. While Tolkien's Lord of the Black Riders is called Angmar, 'the Witch-king', critics do not follow up this occult aspect of the Nine Riders. While Tolkien may not ever explicitly refer to the Rollright Stones on the N. Oxfordshire boundary, something very like them is suggested in The Fellowship of the Ring (1954):

... the stone-rings upon the hills... Stone-rings grinned out of the ground like broken teeth in the moonlight. (p.141).

[Editor's Note: These stones are mentioned in Farmer Giles of Ham: George Allen & Unwin (1949), [p.27], as Tom Shippey showed in his The Road to Middle-earth: George Allen & Unwin (1982), p.102:

'There is a local legend... attached to the Rollright Stones on the north edge of Oxfordshire, mentioned for a moment in Farmer Giles of Ham. These, says the story, [Arthur J. Evans, 'The Rollright Stones and

their Folklore', Folklore, vol.6 (1895), pp.6-51.], were once an old king and his men. Challenged by a witch to take seven strides over the hill and look in the valley below, the king found his view blocked by a barrow and the witch's curse fulfilled:

"Rise up, stick, and stand still, stone,
For King of England thou shalt be none.
Thou and thy men hoar stones shall be
And I myself an eldern tree."]

5. Advice given by the 'white Witch', Miss Hepplewhite, whose role approximates to that of Gandalf at many points. The danger is analogous to Frodo's putting on the One Ring.
6. Several times equated with a snake (e.g. pp.115, 118).
7. Compare the terrors experienced by Frodo after the wounding by the knife of a Black Rider.
8. Compare the sound heard over the Dead Marshes by Frodo and Sam, or at Weathertop by Pippin and Merry (I, 207).
9. Compare also the account of Galadriel at the end of The Fellowship of the Ring (1954).
10. Compare Gandalf's comments on the Necromancer, towards the end of The Hobbit (1937). Again, here, the advice is given by the good magician, Miss Hepplewhite.
11. Tolkien used this compound of Gollum.
12. Compare the perceptive response of Merry and Pippin to the Púkel-men statues, on the ride to Minas Tirith in The Two Towers (1954).
13. Compare Lively's 1976 publication, The Presence of the Past: An Introduction to Landscape History.
14. Tolkien responds to many local (i.e. Oxfordshire and nearby) settings - e.g. in Smith of Wootton Major, or in Farmer Giles of Ham, to the place-name, Worminghall, or Bree's 'Chetwood', the same name as the village in Buckinghamshire.
15. The little girl, Martha, who is the prime target of Morgan's assault reminds us of both Gollum and of Frodo.
16. Compare: 'It's time the Knights was coming back to look after their own' (p.75). Similar legends continue about other saviours of the nation, like Arthur, or Sir Francis Drake, who are all, with Aragorn, Rangers and protectors of the simple folk.

