Tolkien's Arthurian Twilight: Ancient Influences in *The Fall of Arthur*

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J.R.R. Tolkien's alliterative poem *The Fall of Arthur* was published for the first time in 2013. Though Tolkien began writing it at least as early as 1934, the poem is unfinished, comprising 953 lines in its current edition, with much additional material hinted at in drafts and notes on the poem. All of the material was compiled and edited by Christopher Tolkien. The original inspiration for most of the poem's material was a series of late medieval Arthurian tales, namely the *Alliterative Morte Arture* and the last book of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. The plot of these stories revolves around King Arthur's last continental campaign and the betrayal by Mordred in Britain. Arthur and his knights return to England and regain the throne from Mordred, but only after a bitter civil war that claims Arthur's life. At a relatively early point in his retelling, Tolkien "ceased to work on *The Fall of Arthur*," in his son's view "one of the most grievous of his many abandonments" [1.] (122).

Christopher Tolkien's Commentary

Readers hoping to familiarize themselves with the material that directly inspired *The Fall of Arthur* will find comfort in Christopher Tolkien's commentary, which takes up the larger part of the first edition text. Despite their "decidedly optional" nature, the commentaries contain a wealth of information concerning the conception of *The Fall of Arthur*. The most elaborated section, 'The Poem in Arthurian Tradition', is recommended for understanding the medieval influences on Tolkien's poem. According to Christopher Tolkien, it "is an account of the derivation of my father's poem from particular narrative traditions and its divergences from them," and it contains little else (13). In the foreword to Tolkien's recently published translation of *Beowulf*, Christopher Tolkien reflects on his work in *The Fall of Arthur*, stating that his intention is not to offer "a critical survey of [Tolkien's] views..." but rather a portrait "of the scholar in his time, in words of his own, hitherto unpublished" [2.] (xiii). Christopher achieves this admirably in his commentary, and particularly in 'The Poem in Arthurian Tradition'.

It is perhaps fortunate that Christopher Tolkien does not critically examine *The Fall of Arthur*, for his methods do not correlate with his father's ideas about literary critique. In *Beowulf: The Monsters & The Critics*, Tolkien suggests that the "comparison of skeleton 'plots' is simply not a critical literary process at all," and that the popularity of that method has more antiquarian appeal than anything else. [3.] (14) Tolkien's critical approach is best conceived in his examination of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a fourteenth century Arthurian poem which he held in high esteem. Tolkien is not concerned with "the origins of the tale or its details," nor even with the form that these reached the author. Rather, the antiquity that brought *Gawain* "part of its life, its vividness... [and] its tension," intrigues Tolkien. Though admittedly the "figures of elder myth... echoes of ancient cults, beliefs and symbols" did not likely directly influence the poet, their impression on the final form of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is precisely what makes it worthy of detailed attention. [4.] (72)

Ancient Echoes

Whether Tolkien reveals many of the apparitions that haunted the *Gawain* poet is questionable. He could only guess at many influences on a six hundred year old poem, whose author is now completely unknown. It is fortunate that many of Tolkien's views are preserved in his copious writings; and it is clear that he was fascinated by the 'ancient echoes' that he attempts to decipher in *Gawain*. *The Fall of Arthur* provides an exciting reflection of the Celtic origins that Tolkien often sought for in medieval literature. Various literary motifs in the poem expose the influence of *Beowulf* and other, antiquated traditions that may hardly be recognized without scrutiny. Taken into consideration with Tolkien's views on the Celtic influences on Arthurian legend and British literature, it becomes apparent that *The Fall of Arthur* is an attempt by Tolkien to bridge the antiquity of his subject and the lateness of his material.

In the medieval poems on the Death of Arthur, vague mentions of Rome suggest that those writers recognized Arthur's antiquity, though little evidence is ever presented in the texts about when or why this was so. Christopher Tolkien argues that his father chose a particular time period in *The Fall of Arthur*. It takes place "after the final end of the Roman rule of Britain with the withdrawal of the legions in 410, and from memories of battles fought by Britons" against "invaders, Angles and Saxons, spreading from the eastern regions." This is suggested by Tolkien mentioning "the ancient world," the world "fading," and the "tides" of time, and alludes to the weakening of Roman Christendom (13, 88). In the late medieval stories, Arthur's goal is to subdue Roman ambitions in Britain, but Tolkien instead makes Arthur a defender, attempting to protect the vestiges of Roman civilization in fifth century Britain – a far more likely scenario.

Farmer Giles of Ham

One of Tolkien's most interesting references to Arthurian times is in the introduction to *Farmer Giles of Ham* (1937). In his chronicler's persona, Tolkien admits that the "time and space" for Giles and the Little Kingdom was not exactly known, being "somewhere in those long years, after the

days of King Coel maybe, but before Arthur or the Seven Kingdoms of the English..." Characters from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Brittaniae* (c. 1136) are cited as evidence, including the legendary founder of the British Kingdom, Brutus, and his successors, Locrin, Camber, and Albanac. The *Historia* also provided inspiration for the legend retold in *The Fall of Arthur*. Despite this, Christopher Tolkien comments on it only briefly, stating that no evidence suggests that it directly influenced his father's work. This may be true, though all these characters came to feature in Middle Welsh literature, a tradition with which Tolkien was intimate. However it arose, his knowledge of them evidently added to his conception of Arthur in Late Antiquity.

Arthur's Campaign

Christopher Tolkien expresses doubts about the extent and purpose of Arthur's campaign in *The Fall of Arthur*, due primarily to the brevity of his father's words on the subject and the representation of Mirkwood. Tolkien's interest in Germanic and Norse myth led him to use the term liberally in his works, though in this instance the location of Mirkwood is not clear. It was where Arthur and his army halted after a tireless campaign through central Europe, and its margins stood "on the houseless hills ever higher mounting / vast, unvanquished, lay the veiled forest" (I.70-71). Christopher Tolkien can only suggest that Arthur was "far to the east of the regions of Saxon settlement" (86). It is possible to seek more precisely where Tolkien may have envisioned Mirkwood to be, in *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*.[5.] In both of these poems Tolkien makes explicit references to Mirkwood that may shed light on his conception of the place in *The Fall of Arthur.* Mirkwood is mentioned being "on the marches of the East" (*Volsungs* VII.14) [5.] where Goths ruled and were numerous, and also as a place where Atli (Attila) mustered his armies (*Gudrun* I.6).[5.] In the Roman period this would denote an area east of Saxon dominion, as Christopher Tolkien suggests, but also not far over the mouths of the Rhine, which Tolkien mentions in *The Fall of Arthur*. That the foes in Mirkwood were nameless and more akin to phantoms than men suggests that Arthur may have stood at the brink of the Roman – and therefore the known – world.

The chance did not come for Arthur to march into Mirkwood. Tolkien follows the medieval tradition of Sir Cradoc's arrival to warn Arthur of Mordred's betrayal (effectively ending the campaign), but Tolkien's presentation is new. His version of Sir Cradoc's warning strikes me in much the same way as the watchman of the Scyldings' words to Beowulf: both are pivotal announcements by secondary characters, directed at the protagonists. Their statements are important for their people in each case, declamatory but practical, strong in style. The differences between Sir Cradoc's warning in the *Morte Arture* and Tolkiens' text are also clear:

> "Sir, thy warden is wicked and wild of his deedes, /For he wandreth has wrought senn thou away passed. / He has castels encroched and crownd himselven, / Caught in all the rentes of the Round Table; / He devised the rewm and delt as him likes..." (Sir Craddok, *Alliterative Morte Arture* 3523-3527.)

> "While war ye wage on the wild peoples / in the homeless East, a hundred chiefs / their seahorses swift and deadly / have harnessed in havens of the hidden islands. / Dragon-prowed they drive over dark billows; / on shores unguarded shields are gleaming / and black banners borne amid trumpets." (Sir Cradoc, *The Fall of Arthur* I.153-159.)
> 'What warriors / are ye, clad in corslets, that have come thus steering your / tall ship over the streets of the sea, hither over deep waters? / Lo! I long while have dwelt at the ends of the land, keeping / watch over the water, that in the land of the Danes no foeman / might come harrying with raiding fleet..." Watchman, Tolkien's *Beowulf*, 193-198.

(The words of the watchman were also of course paralleled in *The Lord of the Rings* by Théoden's captain Háma, acting as the doorwarden of Meduseld.) (*LotR* 'The King of the Golden Hall')

Beowulf's Words

In *The Fall of Arthur*, many passages suggest Tolkien's interest in renewing the speech familiar to him from *Beowulf*, though this is perhaps the best representation in the finished verse. In Christopher Tolkien's commentary on 'The Unwritten Poem' he discusses a drafted scene involving King Arthur grieving Sir Gawain's death. He states, "my father dashed down a few words here, with a heading 'Sir Iwain comforts [Arthur] with Beowulf's words,' and goes on to relate Beowulf's words to King Hrothgar concerning vengeance and grief.

It is possible that the influence of *Beowulf*'s verse on Tolkien has nothing to do with an interest in revitalizing Arthur's ancient roots, though there are other connections to suggest otherwise. Tolkien's attention to detail when describing weaponry and armour is often notable in his works. In Sir Cradoc's warning (above) Tolkien writes of 'seahorses' and 'dragon-prows', ideas inspired by the high-prowed longships that haunted the North during the 'viking' raids – very like Beowulf's ship. Both terms are repeated in Book IV of *The Fall of Arthur* to describe the ships of the Saxons defending Britain against Arthur's return (177-78). In battle, Tolkien gives the heathen lords of Lochlan "helms boar-crested" (IV.205). The richly crafted helmet that Beowulf wears into the mere to fight Grendel's mother is covered in "images of the boar" (1211), which are also found on surviving Anglo-Saxon and Norse helmets. These descriptions suggest a particular impression of the pagan foes in *The Fall of Arthur*.

Sword in Tolkien

Detailed accounts of swords abound in Tolkien's writings, from *Farmer Giles* to *The Silmarillion*. His style suggests that descriptions in *Beowulf* were influential throughout. Hrunting is "pre-eminent" and has a "blade stained with a device of branching venom, / made hard in the blood of battle" (1215-17). The giant sword that Beowulf recovers from and killed Grendel's mother with is "the work of trolls," with a

golden hilt covered in runes and "snakelike ornament" (1406, 1420). Arthurian swords are named in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*, [6.] c. 1150, and their names remained popular into Malory's time. The famous Excalibur is only mentioned in Tolkien's draft work (as Caliburn), but in the finished text Sir Gawain "brandished / his sword renowned – smiths enchanted / ere Rome was built with runes marked it / and its steel tempered strong and deadly" (IV.197-200). It was called Galuth, and the *Morte Arture* calls it a 'good' sword (Though it seems unlikely that Tolkien was inspired by that description!)

The alliterative verse itself is one of the most ancient elements of *The Fall of Arthur*. Christopher Tolkien dedicates an appendix to 'Old English Verse', in an attempt to appreciate its influence on his father's work. The alliterative tradition began as a "great vernacular literature" during the Anglo-Saxon period, though "only a tattered fragment" remains today (226). The metre likely developed from an interest in providing a stage for Germanic words, which stress the beginning of syllables and phrases – very different than rhyming in French. *Beowulf* is among the earliest and most prominent surviving alliterative poems, and obviously held a particular place in Tolkien's mind. The alliterative verse continued to be used in medieval English, with *Beowulf* and the *Morte Arture* representing opposite poles of the tradition explored in *The Fall of Arthur*.

Tolkien's Remarks

Tolkien made some interesting, albeit obscure, remarks about medieval Arthurian literature. In a letter from 1949, he argues that his incorporation of a blunderbuss (an antiquated form of shotgun) into the otherwise medieval world of *Farmer Giles* was "not really worse than all medieval treatments of Arthurian matter" (*Letters* 133). Such treatments were the result of Arthur being put into the 'Pot,' as Tolkien describes the process in his essay *On Fairy-Stories.* King Arthur "was boiled for a long time, together with many other older figures and devices," to create the pseudo-historical figure that dominated the medieval imagination (126). The result was a larger-than-life character that consulted with wizards, dueled giants and sought the Holy Grail. In varying degrees, Tolkien took issue with all of these qualities. In a letter explaining his intentions for writing *The Lord of the Rings,* Tolkien switches tracks to discuss the fidelity of the Arthurian world. He scorns the lavishly "fantastical, incoherent and repetitive" motifs that derive from Arthur having been woven into so many different stories; Tolkien also disapproves of Arthur's explicit Christianity, which casts him in a strictly medieval light (144). Despite an apparent lack of realism, Tolkien does not doubt that in the late medieval England, Arthurian 'history' was official. In *English and Welsh* he goes so far as to say that it "was hardly safe to express in public doubt of [Arthur's] veracity" [7.] (165).

One Hundred Pages

Though less than a thousand lines were written, Christopher Tolkien collected more than one hundred pages of draft material for *The Fall of Arthur*, suggesting that the completed poem would be much longer. If Tolkien thought that Arthurian literature was tarnished and confounded, what motivated him to dedicate so much thought to Arthur? A final clue comes from *English and Welsh*, the memorial lecture that Tolkien presented in 1955. In it he refers to the Celtic influence on *Beowulf*, which is "full of dark and twilight, and laden with sorrow and regret" (172). Some of the last vestiges of the Celtic world reside in the Welsh language, Tolkien states, and it may only be glimpsed through "the names in Arthurian romance that echo faintly the Celtic patterns of their origin" (194). In his own Arthurian tale, freed from traditional boundaries, Tolkien replaces late medieval material that he is critical of, with aspects from *Beowulf* and other traditions reflecting his enthusiasm for the Celtic twilight. An impression of Arthur is revealed that is at once unique to Tolkien, yet more feasible than many other renderings of the legendary king and his times. Despite its unfinished state, there is no doubt that *The Fall of Arthur* is a commendable attempt to lift Arthur back out of the Pot.

Page numbers in the text either refer generally to The Fall of Arthur, or specifically to the volume under discussion at that point.

1. Tolkien J.R.R., ed. Christopher Tolkien. *The Fall of Arthur*. London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2013. Page numbers are given in the text.
2. Tolkien J.R.R., ed. Christopher Tolkien. *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*. London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2014.
3. Tolkien J.R.R., ed. Christopher Tolkien. 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics.' *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. London: George Allen & Unwin 1983; HarperCollinsPublishers 1997.
4. Tolkien J.R.R., ed. Christopher Tolkien. 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.' *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. London: George Allen & Unwin 1983; HarperCollinsPublishers 1997.
5. Tolkien J.R.R., ed. Christopher Tolkien. The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún. London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2009.
6. Geoffrey of Monmouth, Trs. Lewis Thorpe. *The History of the Kings of Britain*. London: Penguin Classics, 1973.
7. Tolkien J.R.R., ed. Christopher Tolkien. 'English and Welsh.' *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. London: George Allen & Unwin 1983; HarperCollinsPublishers 1997.

Texts of the ancient poems can generally be found on the internet by Googling the title required (original or in modern form, depending on the kind of edit you are looking for) and Text. The editor is not seeking to give URLs as these often change over time. Geoffrey can also be found, in whole or in part.

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