

Emotion and Theme in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*

Philip Hardie's *Last Trojan Hero* (Hardie, 2014), a magisterial survey of Virgil's "reception," mentions J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) only once, mentioning a German essay on LOTR and "the Vergilian Tradition" (Anzinger, 2010) with the words "It has even been claimed," implying incredulity about the claim. For Hardie, in the twentieth century Virgil's presence survives only in "pockets of interest," e.g. Shamus Heaney, women's literature and *Battleship Galactica* (Hardie, 2014,18). Using Tolkien's lecture, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," his letters and those of C. S. Lewis and an examination of a major theme of LOTR, I will argue for significant Virgilian influence on LOTR in emotion and theme.

"The real resemblance of the *Aeneid* and *Beowulf* lies in the constant presence of a sense of many-storied antiquity." (Tolkien, 1936, n.21) Tolkien considered this trait his *forte* as an author. He wrote his son, Christopher. "There are quite different emotions: one that moves me supremely and I find small difficulty in evoking: the heart-racking sense of the vanished past." (Carpenter, 1981, 110)

Beowulf, *Aeneid* and LOTR evoke this "heart-racking sense" by references to "the vanished past." Readers of Homer recognize many mythological references in the *Aeneid*. "There are more than five hundred references in LOTR to the past ages of Middle-earth" (Kreeft, 2005, 135), references to stories composed by Tolkien himself and published by his son, Christopher as *The Silmarillion* (1977) and *The History of Middle Earth*, (1983-1996).

With *Beowulf* too much is lost for a secure reconstruction of its mythological or historical backdrop, but Tolkien believed that it was known to the poem's author. The *Beowulf*-poet "was, in fact, like Virgil, learned enough in the vernacular department to have an historical perspective." (Tolkien, 1936, 267) *Beowulf* "is a poem by a learned man writing of old times,

who, looking back on the heroism and sorrow, feels in them something permanent and something symbolical... To his task the poet brought a considerable learning in native lays and traditions: only by learning and training could such things be acquired.” Tolkien links the poets’ learning and melancholy “To a similar antiquarian temper, and a similar use of vernacular learning, is probably due the similar effect of antiquity (and melancholy) in the *Aeneid*.” (272-273)

Like Tolkien, Virgil and the *Beowulf*-poet wrote sympathetically of a heroic heathen past, shaped by fate (*fatum, wyrd*). One scholar argues for *Schicksal* in LOTR (Anzinger, 2010, 384-6). A theme not found in *Beowulf* but central to LOTR and *Aeneid* is vocation. For all their differences, Aeneas, Frodo and Aragorn share a deep sense of vocation, expressed much as Tolkien’s friend and colleague, C. S Lewis, describes it in his letters and scholarly writings. When composing *Preface to Paradise Lost*, Lewis wrote Dorothy Sayers: “I have just re-read the *Aeneid* again. The effect is one of the immense costliness of a vocation combined with a complete conviction that it is worth it.” (Hooper, 2:750). Lewis discusses vocation in *Preface to Paradise Lost* (Lewis, 1943, 38): “It is the nature of a vocation to appear to men in the double character of a duty and a desire, and Virgil does justice to both.”

Both Virgil and Tolkien use the challenge of vocation as fulfilling and tragic to provide the basis for a great, long work. I shall adduce relevant passages involving Aragorn and Frodo. For instance, at the end of *Aeneid* 8 Aeneas picks up his mother’s gift, a shield decorated with scenes from Rome’s future history. “He rejoices in the pictures, though he does not know the events.” (*rerumque ignarus imagine gaudet.*) At Rivendell Frodo accepts his vocation. “I will take the ring,” he said, “though I do not know the way.” Elrond responds, “I think that this task is appointed for you, Frodo.” In both works, “To follow the vocation does not mean happiness: but once it has been heard, there is no happiness for those who do not follow” (Lewis, 1943, 39)

Bibliography

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