



mythLORE A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 32
Number 1

Article 6

10-15-2013

Troy and the Rings: Tolkien and the Medieval Myth of England

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Recommended Citation

Livingston, Michael (2013) "Troy and the Rings: Tolkien and the Medieval Myth of England," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 32 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol32/iss1/6>

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Abstract

Asserts that, far from abandoning his early grounding in the classics upon discovering Northern mythology and languages, Greek and Roman motifs remained an important element of Tolkien’s “soup” and he used them in many ways in *The Lord of the Rings*. Livingston pays particular attention to themes, characters, incidents, and Mediterranean history that have roots in *The Iliad*. Family structure is one place where we can see convincing parallels, with Boromir as an asterisk-Hector and Faramir as an asterisk-Paris, rewriting the deficiencies in their source-characters as Gondor is the history of Troy re-written.

Additional Keywords

Homer. *The Iliad*—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Quintus Smyrnaeus. *Posthomerica* (The Fall of Troy)—Influence on J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Boromir; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Faramir; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Sources—Classical; Trojan War in J.R.R. Tolkien



ROY AND THE RINGS:
TOLKIEN AND THE MEDIEVAL
MYTH OF ENGLAND

MICHAEL LIVINGSTON

A Myth for England

ONE OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN QUOTES attributed to J.R.R. Tolkien regarding the composition of both *The Lord of the Rings* and the greater surrounding body of Middle-earth materials is his intent to create a “mythology for England” that he otherwise felt lacking (Carpenter 89; italics original). I say “attributed” because while few critical engagements by either fans or scholars have failed to take note of this aim, Tolkien himself can nowhere be quoted as having utilized the phrase.¹

Despite the fact that the “quote” itself appears to be a critical invention rather than an authorial statement, there is little question that the desire to create a myth for England was in one way or another a founding principle of Tolkien’s creativity. Indeed, Tolkien himself expressed a similar sentiment at multiple points in his life. Discussing the content of *The Lord of the Rings* in a letter to publisher Milton Waldman (probably written in late 1951), for instance, Tolkien described at length the fact that he “was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands.” Thus, he wrote, he once “had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend” that he “could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country” (*Letters* 144).² Though this effort to fill in the gaps by crafting a myth for England admittedly grew into something far more complex, the essentially

¹ To the contrary, the phrase occurs first in Carpenter’s standard biography of Tolkien, apparently moving over time from biographer to biographee: Anders Stenström is likely right in his theory that the phrase is the result of Carpenter splicing snippets from Tolkien’s letters (“A Mythology?” 310-11). For a brief history of the pervasiveness of the phrase in Tolkien studies, see Jason Fisher, “Mythology for England.”

² This letter has had an enormous influence on the direction of Tolkien criticism, a control that critics are beginning to question; see, e.g., Michael D.C. Drout, “Towards a Better Tolkien Criticism,” pp. 19-20. It is nevertheless cited here as a foundation point for what Drout and Hillary Wynne have labeled the “Source School” of Tolkien studies of which this present essay is unashamedly a part (“Tom Shippey’s *J.R.R. Tolkien*,” 106-08).

“English” quality of the mythology of Middle-earth has never been forgotten. Not surprisingly, it has pervaded much of the criticism of Tolkien’s work.³ All the more odd, then, that so little attention has been paid to the fact that—as Tolkien well knew—the Middle Ages *already had* a myth for England, and that any medievalist creating a myth for England founded on medieval texts—as Tolkien undeniably was—would presumably utilize that myth in the making of his own. The primary aim of this essay is to suggest that critics of Tolkien may have neglected the debt that the author owed to the myths of Troy: those of both the War and its aftermath. Identifying this debt, in turn, might reveal a great deal about how Tolkien utilized source materials, and how he intended to create his so-called “myth for England,” particularly as it relates to his completed masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*.⁴

Trojan Britain

From at least the ninth century, when the legend was included in the *Historia Brittonum*, commonly attributed to Nennius, most medieval writers thought the name *Britain* derived from Brutus, a descendant of the Trojan Aeneas, who himself fled Troy during the war first recounted in Homer’s *Iliad*.⁵ After a number of adventures, Aeneas brought the nobility of Homer’s Troy to Italy, where he became a founding ancestor to Rome itself (this part of the tale originating in Virgil’s *Aeneid*). Circumstances forced Brutus, either the grandson or great-grandson of Aeneas, to bring a Trojan fleet to the British Isles (then called Albion), and there he defeated a race of giants and established a civilization with its capital at New Troy (that is, London). Thus, in simplified summary, Homer’s Troy founded first Rome (via Aeneas) and then England (via Brutus), making the English the heirs to both Roman and Trojan (and arguably Greek) histories.

This medieval myth for England was the “Trojan ‘hypermyth,’” as Thomas Honegger terms it (116), a complex construction wrought from a web of writers over the centuries. The most famous sources among them are surely the

³ As but a few examples not discussed later in this essay, see Chance, *Tolkien’s Art*, and Lobdell, *England and Always*. For a specific reading of Tolkien’s “England” as an Anglo-Saxon England, see Drout, “A Mythology for Anglo-Saxon England.” More broadly, the concept of building a “mythology for England” has been utilized by critics investigating the influence of both Anglo-Saxon and Norse literature, culture, and history in Tolkien’s work; see, for instance, Paul Kocher’s “Mythology for England.”

⁴ Reference will be made to the materials of the *Silmarillion*, but for reasons of space and clarity of focus, the main thrust of the argument will be engaged upon *Lord of the Rings*.

⁵ This etymology—like the mythology of which it is a part—is false: the name *Britain* derives not from the legendary Brutus, but from Brythonic, one of the two primary native languages of the Celts living on the Isles and the basis for modern Welsh and Cornish

Classical writers Homer and Virgil, but there are other ancient sources, and even later medieval contributors, too, like Dares Phrygius, Dictys Cretensis, and others to be discussed in this essay. The most well-known presentation of the full-fledged hypermyth as it relates to England is arguably that given by Geoffrey of Monmouth, a twelfth-century monk whose *Historia regum Britanniae* tells the accumulated tale in great detail.⁶ As Tolkien would have known, this oft-recalled notion of a Trojan England whose roots could be traced directly back to Homer's *Iliad* was deeply rooted in the cultural landscape of the Middle Ages. In the 1380s, for instance, it was so pervasive that there was talk of renaming London "Troynovant" [New Troy] (Barney 472). And late-medieval writers like Chaucer or the anonymous author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* could casually mention the history and fully expect the audience to fill in all necessary details.⁷ The Trojan mythology, by the later Middle Ages, had effectively become the standard mythological explanation of the country's past.⁸ For this reason alone, Honegger rightly raises the notion that we should thus fully expect to find Troy in Middle-earth, even though he himself quickly passes this by in favor of more specifically Anglo-Saxon sources that Tolkien utilized in constructing his myth for England.

Honegger's turn to the North is hardly unique, and this concentration on the role that England—or, more precisely, one cultural philologist's idea of an English past⁹—plays in Tolkien's work might have left us as critics somewhat blind to understanding the full range of materials the author could have used to compose his work. As we will see, this neglect of Tolkien's possible debts to Troy

⁶ This influential text would have been well known to Tolkien as a medievalist; indeed, Hammond and Scull have noted that the name of one of Tolkien's minor characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, Gorbodoc Brandybuck (*LotR* I.1.23), almost certainly derives from Geoffrey of Monmouth's work (*Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion*, p. 59). Coincidentally, one of the early standard studies of the supposed Trojan ancestry of the British people is "Trojans in Britain," by George Gordon—a man Tolkien considered a valued friend, colleague, and collaborator, and who had an important role in Tolkien's successful pursuit of an Oxford appointment.

⁷ The *Gawain*-poet in fact frames his narrative within this "Anglo-Trojan myth," opening and closing his tale with references to it. On Tolkien's important use of *Pearl*, another work of the *Gawain*-poet, see Noah Koubenec, "The Precious and the Pearl."

⁸ There are many other medieval mythologies—those revolving around King Arthur, Charlemagne, or even (late in the period) Robin Hood—but none holds the same ethnogenic position that Troy does. This is precisely part of the point Tolkien himself makes when he writes, in the aforementioned letter to Waldman, that "the Arthurian world [...] is imperfectly naturalized" and as a result could "not replace what I felt to be missing" (*Letters* 144).

⁹ Some of the other definitional dangers in this matter—what England? when England?—are addressed by Drout and Wynne in "Tom Shippey's *J.R.R. Tolkien*."

may be doubly unfortunate: not only might we be inadequately recognizing a key piece of the source puzzle for Tolkien's works, but by missing it we might be unable to appreciate fully just how far Tolkien was willing to go to create his myth for England. Tolkien used Homer and the Trojan hypermyth. We know this from his own composition notes, as we will see. The question is only how pervasively or deeply he did so, and why. If the Trojan brothers Hector and Paris play some role in the formation of Tolkien's brothers Boromir and Faramir, for instance, then recognizing the differences between these figures might therefore reveal a great deal about exactly how Tolkien revised Homer's originating vision and thus intended to create his "myth for England."

Let me be clear at the outset, however: while I intend to argue (at times, as with Boromir and Faramir, in deliberate provocation) for the placement of parts of the Trojan myth at a fundamental level of Tolkien's work, I am *not* arguing that Tolkien's creation is founded on Troy, or that Troy is even the most prominent factor in those narrative elements that will be here examined. Instead, the argument here is that this cumulative Trojan hypermyth is just *one* of several compounded layers that resonate beneath the literary surface of Tolkien's complex work, just as there are multiple wyrms that undergird Tolkien's construction of Smaug. Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull, for instance, note connections between Gandalf's account of his fight with the Balrog in Moria and the struggle against the shape-shifting Proteus in Homer's *Odyssey*, between the beacons of Gondor and the beacons described in Homer's *Iliad*, and more generally between some of Tolkien's descriptions and "the elaborate similes often found in Homer."¹⁰ At the same time, Scull and Hammond diminish this influence: Tolkien's interest in the Classics "contributed to the 'leaf-mould of the mind' from which Tolkien's creative writings grew, though their influence on his fiction and poetry was less than that of the literature of Northern Europe" (*J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* 2.174; quoting Carpenter 178). This is no doubt true. Yet even if this Trojan layer of sourcing is a minority layer, likely outpaced in volume by the oft-noted influence of northern materials, it does not follow that Troy is an insignificant contributor to the making of Middle-earth. Some materials are denser than others.

Tolkien, Troy, and the Critics

Tom Shippey, one of the most influential Tolkien critics, seems to speak for the majority mindset when he states that Tolkien was "determinedly hostile to 'the Classical Tradition', as Eliot called it," contrasting that "Classical" line of literary allusion, with its sirens of Joyce, Eliot, and even Milton, with Tolkien's

¹⁰ Hammond and Scull, *Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion*, pp. 392, 509, 622. See also their *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*, 2.173-76.

“major debts” to “the native and Northern tradition which Milton never knew and Eliot ignored” (Shippey, *Tolkien* 314). In Shippey’s view, Tolkien thus becomes a modern anti-modernist, his Renaissance not the rebirth of Homer and the Classics but a resurgence of the old “English” past. Appropriately to this view, Shippey’s oft-cited *Road to Middle-earth* does not mention Homer even a single time. Indeed, the notion that Tolkien deliberately distances himself from writers like Homer has become such an engrained critical commonplace post-Shippey that biographer John Garth is able to imagine how the author “turned his back enthusiastically on the Classics that had nurtured his generation at school,” a decision that Garth attributes to the notion that such texts “had become romantically entangled with Victorian triumphalism” (42).

While there is certainly a vast wealth of evidence to support Tolkien’s interest in the mythology of the North—and quite rightly so—there is surprisingly little evidence that he simultaneously abandoned Classical mythology in the conscious way that both Garth and Shippey imagine: that notion, like the phrase “mythology for England,” can nowhere be attributed directly to Tolkien himself. The closest we can reach to direct authorial evidence for such a negative comparison between these mythologies comes from Tolkien’s youth: a 1911 statement that “though as a whole the Northern epic has not the charm and delight of the Southern, yet in a certain bare veracity it excels it” — scarcely an indication of his presumed hostility for Homer and the Classics (qtd. in Shippey, “Writing”). Quite to the contrary, there is much evidence, even directly from Tolkien himself, that he never abandoned his affection for “the Southern.” As late as 4 November 1954, he listed Homer, Virgil, the *Beowulf*-poet, and “Shakespearian tragedy” as “the great names of world literature whose works he certainly respected” (*Letters* 201). And in his famous essay, “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics,” he laments: “Alas for the lost lore, the annals and old poets that Virgil knew, and only used in the making of a new thing!” (27-281).¹¹

Educated in a turn-of-the-century English system, Tolkien would have been exposed to the Classics at an early age; as Dustin Eaton points out, “like all male school children of his era and class, Tolkien quickly became proficient in classical and Homeric Greek and thoroughly versed in Homer’s mythology.” He began his education at Oxford in 1911 by reading *Litterae Humaniores* (i.e., the Classics), with specific lectures on Homer in the following years.¹² Beyond such

¹¹ For a lengthy study of Tolkien’s uses of Virgil, see Morse, *Evocations of Virgil*. There are many other accounts of the influence of the wider range of Classical works on Tolkien’s literary output, a subject beyond the purview of this essay, but of particular note are recent essays by Kristine Larsen and Miryam Librán-Moreno.

¹² For a close look at Tolkien’s Oxford career, with specifics to his studies of Homer, see Scull and Hammond, *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*, 1.28-38.

generalities, we know from Tolkien himself that Homer had a profound impact on the direction his life would take. In a letter dated 2 December 1953, written to Robert Murray, S.J., Tolkien observed: "I was brought up in the Classics, and first discovered the sensation of literary pleasure in Homer" (*Letters* 172). Such awareness is perhaps to be expected from a man educated within a Western intellectual tradition that has typically proclaimed to be rooted in the Ancient Greeks, but Tolkien's interests ran deeper than a passing fancy: we have evidence from the drafts of his work that Homer entered specifically into Tolkien's mind at numerous points during the actual composition of *Lord of the Rings*. In his notes outlining what would become the beginning of *The Return of the King* (V.i), for instance, Tolkien terms the gathering of companies at Minas Tirith a "Homeric catalogue" (*War of the Ring* 229), a note that critic Todd Jensen has expanded upon, examining how Tolkien used the particular catalogs in Book 2 of Homer's *Iliad*. Even in the published forms of his work, a handful of critics have noted traces of Homer or other sources of the Trojan hypermyth. Catherine Hooley briefly draws some superficial connections between Odysseus' journey to the dead (and Aeneas's, too) and that of Tolkien's Aragorn. Kenneth Reckford discusses several correspondences between Tolkien's works and Homer's *Odyssey*, including the riding of barrels and—along with prominent non-Trojan sources like the Eddic poem *Fafnismal*, of course—Bilbo's name-games in *The Hobbit*. Elements of the *Odyssey* are likewise recognized by Mac Fenwick, who views Tolkien's use of feminine figures as owing much to Homer's precedent. And Alex Lewis and Elizabeth Currie have discussed the possibility that Tolkien may have used the Trojan War in constructing the tales of the Legendarium that surround the Fall of Gondolin, a topic that David Greenman has previously examined.¹³ None of this should surprise us, of course: Tolkien himself in the aforementioned Waldman letter parenthetically observes that he utilized the Greek legends (which surely includes Homer and the Trojan hypermyth) alongside the "Celtic, and Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish" myths "as an ingredient" in the making of his own (*Letters* 144).

Even those who have found Homeric or Trojan influences on Tolkien's work have often been quick to discard them, however. The aforementioned Eaton, for instance, while admitting that "there is much in Tolkien's work that is reminiscent of Homer," nevertheless discards the idea of a Homeric influence: "there is nothing in Tolkien's correspondence to indicate that he consciously employed Homer's motifs as his own" (285). Eaton's concerns over conscious use—though difficult to answer and perhaps too much in ignorance of what Drout terms some of the most basic "old chestnuts of literary theory," such as

¹³ Steve Walker also lists a handful of Homeric allusions in a broader discussion of Tolkien's mixing of historical periods in his work (*Power of Tolkien's Prose*, pp. 116-17, 136).

Barthes and Foucault (“Towards a Better Tolkien Criticism” 20)—are understandable. Source analysis at its best, as E.L. Ridsen observes in a recent essay, “provides a powerful tool to gain insight” into the way an author works, enabling us to make more productive use of their texts (24). While we may begin such searches by hearing echoes, therefore, we need to aim for something more tangible indeed.

Troy and Gondor

In a letter to Charlotte and Denis Plimmer, written on 8 February 1967, Tolkien not only related the geography of Middle-earth with our own but also specifically to Troy:

The action of the story takes place in the North-west of ‘Middle-earth’, equivalent in latitude to the coastlands of Europe and the north shores of the Mediterranean. [...] If Hobbiton and Rivendell are taken (as intended) to be at about the latitude of Oxford, then Minas Tirith, 600 miles south, is at about the latitude of Florence. The Mouths of Anduin and the ancient city of Pelargir are at about the latitude of ancient Troy. (*Letters* 376)

Tolkien here directly associates the lands of Gondor with those of historical Troy, and his identification of the city itself with Pelargir indicates how directly he may have conflated the historical with the imagined in his mythology.¹⁴ That identification, in turn, might well have motivated some of the history of Tolkien’s Middle-earth: mimicking Troy, Pelargir was a harbor until the coastline moved. Despite these potential influences, however, the city of Minas Tirith has perhaps the greater claim to the history of Troy.¹⁵ Most obvious, perhaps, are the physical similarities between the cities of Minas Tirith and Troy: both known for their impregnable walls, both besieged in the focus of a struggle that seemingly holds civilization in the balance.¹⁶

¹⁴ In a related argument, Michael Brisbois has shown how “real-world” geography connects with that of Tolkien’s “imaginary” world in “Tolkien’s Imaginary Nature,” 198-201.

¹⁵ Though one probably should not overlay maps of the real world and Middle-earth in any scalable way, Tolkien’s geography could be said to bear out additional connections: Pelargir is situated in the area of Gondor known as Lebennin, which could be a scarcely veiled orthographical variant on Lebanon. The world has known since Heinrich Schliemann’s excavations in the late 1860s that Troy is likely to be identified with the uncovered citadel near Hisarlik, Anatolia, north of Lebanon just as Minas Tirith is north of Lebennin. A quite tenuous and speculative connection, to be sure, but one worth noting.

¹⁶ On the possibility that the Roman Empire served as the model for Gondor, with Minas Tirith representing Ravenna and Osgiliath taking the place of Rome, see Ford, “White City,” esp. 60-62. As we will see, when viewed through the lens of Virgil and the Anglo-

A simple Gondor-Troy connection can thus be made—and *was* made by the author—at the general level of geography, an observation that on its own can bear some critical fruit. If in constructing Middle-earth Tolkien was driven by the general geographical associations to allow real history to resonate within his “sub-creation,”¹⁷ for instance, then within the history of Gondor we would thus expect to find echoes of not only Troy, but also its adversarial Greeks, in addition to the histories of the Holy Land and even Byzantium. Miryam Librán-Moreno’s recent study concluding that “Tolkien made Gondor functionally similar to Constantinople,” while provocative in its own right, might thus be placed within a larger mythological framework (“Byzantium, New Rome” 111). To see further how Tolkien may have engaged the Trojan hypermyth—and to find something more concrete and critically robust than mere geographical proximity—we will need to look at what is arguably the heart of the epic of Troy: the complex series of relationships that provoke the city to war and lay bare what is ultimately its futile and misguided but nonetheless noble heroism.

Hector and Boromir

For all its gods and goddesses, battles and blood, the Trojan War is at its core a highly human affair. And within the central, all-too-human cast of the hypermyth, perhaps no characters are more important than the several sets of brothers who populate his tale: Agamemnon and Menelaus, Hector and Paris (or Deiphobus or any of King Priam’s fifty princely sons), and even, in a symbolic sense, Achilles and Patroclus, to say nothing of half-brothers such as Telamonian Ajax and Teucer. The interactions of human brotherhood (and perhaps even of divine family dynamics) is unquestionably a recurring motif of the *Iliad*, one that reveals characterization even as it drives the plot forward.

Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, too, is a human drama: despite the hobbits and elves, trolls and orcs, wizards and wargs, it is most essentially the story of the end of the Third Age and the rise of humanity in the Fourth.¹⁸ Aragorn is most central to this ascension at the end of the *Lord of the Rings*, but no less

Trojan myth, Ford’s argument and that presented here are not necessarily exclusive of one another.

¹⁷ Tolkien, due both to his devout Catholic faith and to his awareness of the debt his world owed to what he called “Primary Reality,” humbled any urge to term his Middle-earth a full-fledged “creation” of his own making. See, for instance, his letter to Milton Waldman (?1951) in *Letters*, p. 145.

¹⁸ This is not to deny that the book is organized around the central arc of the Hobbits, of course, or that the larger framework of Tolkien’s mythology is organized around the Elves. Rather, it is to say that, as Tolkien himself admits in two different letters, these figures of fantasy “are only a representation or an apprehension of a part of human nature,” that they “are just different aspects of the Humane” (*Letters* 149, 236).

important are the men of Minas Tirith: in particular, the Steward Denethor II and his two sons, Boromir and Faramir.¹⁹ The portrayal of these characters, I will argue, might be influenced by the Homeric Priam and his sons, Hector and Paris, both in similarity and difference: Tolkien has simultaneously built upon Homer's foundation and changed it in order to further the creation of a mythology for England.

For many readers, there is no greater tragedy in Homer's *Iliad* than the death of the loyal and noble Hector at the hands of the raging Greek demi-god, Achilles. This was certainly the reading accepted by Shakespeare, whose Hector in *Troilus and Cressida* is contrasted heavily with Achilles and the Greeks: the Trojan hero is noble, the Greeks who kill him are wicked. James Redfield has argued that this kind of interpretation is in fact Homer's intention in the *Iliad*: "the pathos of the poem is concentrated on the death of Hector," marking him as the central character around whom the narrative is composed (29). To be sure, the esteem in which Hector was held in the Middle Ages earned him a place alongside Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar as the three pagans among the Nine Worthies: nine men thought to best exemplify the honorable ideals of chivalry.²⁰ Yet, as even Redfield argues, Hector is not blameless for his end: his own actions as they unfold through the death of Patroclus might arguably cast him in a negative light, even if within the Fate of Zeus it is difficult to say whether he is actually responsible for those actions.

The broad strokes of parallels to Tolkien's Boromir are clear enough. Like Hector, he stands as the heroic example of martial, mortal man. Like Hector, he is an eldest son, presumptive heir to his father's holdings. Like Hector, he is unequaled among men on the battlefield, already renowned for his actions before he even appears in the narrative. He is seemingly a man of honor (*timê*, Homer would say). Like Hector, he is doomed by his devotion to his family and his nation: Boromir's loyalty to Denethor and the people of Gondor, while noble in its way, results in his misguided pursuit of power, a fateful undoing in much the same way that Hector must fall due to the fact that his love for Troy leads him to take actions (defending Paris, for instance) that are in fact more about the visible use of power than about the long-term service of the state. Boromir's fault, in fact, is his Homeric quality: he is bound to a social system in which glory (*kleos*) is the end goal of action, an aim to be won at the expense of others or in death. After achieving this—by, in Boromir's eyes, gaining the power of the Ring

¹⁹ That Tolkien's interests might gravitate toward the motif of brotherhood in his studies and in his creative work would be unsurprising: he was twelve years old when he and his younger brother were left in the care of the church after their mother's death left them orphaned.

²⁰ For the history of the Nine Worthies, a key study is Horst Schroeder, *Der Topos der Nine Worthies*.

so that he can destroy his people's enemies—he can return to Minas Tirith in a triumphant homecoming (*nostos*), which is a Homeric theme most familiar from the *Odyssey*. And in his refusal to bow to the wishes of the Elves, Boromir is also guilty of a kind of hubris (*hybris*).

Other less specific parallels between the figures might even help to elucidate peculiar moments in the text. For instance, the reasons for Galadriel's gift of a "golden belt" to Boromir upon the leaving of Lothlorien are not made clear in the text or explained by any critic (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] II.8.375), but we could postulate a debt to the Classical model of Hector. In book 7 of the *Iliad*, Hector and Telamonian Ajax engage in a day-long duel before the gathered armies of Greece and Troy. When night falls without a victor, the two men exchange gifts that unbeknownst to them will cause each man great harm according to later renditions of the Trojan story. Ajax gives to Hector a "war belt coloured shining with purple" (trans. Lattimore, 7.305), a wondrous prize that will ultimately be used by the raging Achilles to attach Hector's body to his chariot as he drags the battered corpse before the walls of Troy (Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 112). In return for this belt, Hector gives Ajax a sword, the weapon that Ajax will use to take his own life (see, e.g., Hyginus, op. cit., Sophocles' *Ajax* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 13). The parallels between the gift-givings can only be taken so far, of course: Galadriel is hardly Greater Ajax. But Boromir's belt is among the possessions pointedly left upon his corpse as his friends send his remains afloat over the Falls of Rauros (LotR III.1.416) for the unexpected homecoming that is his fate (*kēr*). No other explanation has been offered for the form or the fate of Galadriel's gift.

Boromir, Asterisk-Hector

Tolkien was always careful to term his mythology as one that is ultimately meant to be associated with our world, fantastic though it might seem at times: "This is a story of long ago," he writes in the Foreword to *The Hobbit*—not, we should note, "a story of long ago in a galaxy far, far away" or the like. Thus Middle-earth's legends are connected to *our* legends, its languages to our languages, and its people to our people—if all at a distance deep in the fictional mists before recorded history. This is not to say that Tolkien thought that the Battle for Helm's Deep truly occurred somewhere in, say, Eastern Europe, but that something like the assault on the Hornburg *could* have occurred there, and perhaps that something like it *ought* to have occurred there. Middle-earth, in other words, is the result of the application of philological principles (finding words behind words, stories behind stories) to mythology. Tom Shippey has elsewhere termed the resulting mythology-behind-mythologies an "asterisk-reality," a provocative phrasing that underscores the philological foundations of Tolkien's creative process, since non-extant words whose existence is rooted out

by linguistic laws are typically preceded by asterisks to mark their “invention” as missing links in the evolutionary chain of language.²¹ If Tolkien was inspired in this philological craft by the “literary pleasure” of Homer, if indeed the *Iliad* and its post-Homeric continuations within the Trojan hypermyth are among the many already documented sources utilized in the composition of Tolkien’s masterwork, then we might see in Boromir, for instance, an “asterisk-Hector.”

Strikingly, we can find an “asterisk-Hector” at work even in moments where other mythologies would seem to far outpace Troy in influencing the text. Boromir’s death in battle below the gate of Gondor (Argonath), for example, appears at first glance to have relatively little to do with the death of Hector below the gate of Troy. For one thing, Boromir faces no Achilles: the leader of the orcs who collectively strike him down, Ugluk, is a fearsome foe but nothing on the measure of Peleus’s son. There is a plain difference in geography between the hardscrabble plain before Troy and the trees of Amon Hen, and of course Achilles pointedly defiles the corpse of Hector, yet Boromir is left only mortally wounded by his orc foes. And while it is true that both men seek help in their final fight—one often forgets that Hector is tricked by the gods into thinking his brother Deiphobus stands with him for support—much more is made of this in Tolkien’s vision: Boromir repeatedly blows upon the horn of Gondor in order to bring the aid of the fellowship to his side. This last difference in particular seems to work strongly against a Trojan influence, for the image of Boromir blowing his horn even as he falls—calling down the vengeance of his allies upon those who have taken his life and taken the hobbits—is quite obviously owed to *The Song of Roland*, the non-Trojan medieval epic of France: One need only replace the orcs with the *Song*’s Saracens, its hobbits with Roland’s comrades Olivier and Turpin, and Aragorn with Charlemagne.²² This is nothing at all like Homer, yet even this most seemingly non-Trojan of moments in Boromir’s legend actually dovetails with that of Hector as it is found within the greater Trojan hypermyth: according to Ludovico Ariosto’s famed *Orlando Furioso*, Roland’s sword Durendal, broken at his death—just as Boromir’s is at his death (*LotR* III.1.414)—once belonged to Hector of Troy (Canto 23.78, trans. Waldman, p. 275). There is no question that *Song of Roland* is the dominant source here, but that does not deny the possibility that Tolkien could be melding Hector into Roland through the character of

²¹ For a detailed discussion of this process in relation to Tolkien, see Shippey’s *Road to Middle-earth*, 1-54.

²² That Tolkien would be well acquainted with the *Song of Roland* is something to be expected of a medievalist, but we know it was a specific point of discussion among the Inklings on at least one occasion: see Scull and Hammond, *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*, 1.327. Tolkien’s letter to Waldman, cited earlier, also implies use of such materials in his inclusion of “Romance” among the sources for his mythologies (*Letters* 144).

Boromir, especially given Tolkien's aforementioned "leaf-mould of the mind" compositional strategy.

Faramir, Asterisk-Paris

After Homer's Hector has died, Priam speaks on several occasions of how Hector was "the best of my sons" (*Iliad* 24.242). He drives his remaining children from his sight with a stick, "scolding" and "cursing" them:

Make haste, wicked children, my disgraces. I wish all of you
had been killed beside the running ships in the place of Hektor.
Ah me, for my evil destiny. I have had the noblest
of sons in Troy, but I say not one of them is left for me,
Mestor like a god and Troilos whose delight was in horses,
and Hektor, who was a god among men, for he did not seem like
one who was child of a mortal man, but of a god. All these
Ares has killed, and all that are left me are the disgraces. (*Iliad* 24.247-60)

Likewise, it is perhaps the overwhelming trait of Tolkien's Denethor that he is broken by the loss of his son Boromir; Faramir, like Paris and the rest of Priam's sons, is a pale shadow to the eldest son in his father's eyes. Indeed, it is his preference for Boromir that is among the first words the steward of Gondor speaks in the *Lord of the Rings*: "My Boromir! Now we have need of you. Faramir should have gone in his stead" (V.i.755). And again, when Faramir faces his father for the first time after his brother's death, the Priam-like sentiment is all too clear:

"Do you wish then," said Faramir, "that our places had been exchanged?"
"Yes, I wish that indeed," said Denethor. (V.4.813)

If we accept Boromir as (in part) an asterisk-Hector, then perhaps Faramir, too, can be viewed as influenced by one or more of Priam's other sons in much the same way. Who, then, among the cast of the Trojan hypermyth might we have in mind when we read of Faramir?

Startlingly, the Trojan figure that seems to have the most intriguing similarities to Faramir might be Paris, a character who at first glance could hardly be more unlike Faramir. While known for his outstanding beauty, Homer's Paris is not an impressive figure in any martial sense. Hector's first words in the *Iliad*, in fact, are to accuse his "evil" younger brother of cowardice and selfishness, going so far as to wish that he "had never been born, or killed unwedded" (3.39-40). It is his taking of Helen from Menelaus of Sparta that precipitates the fall of Troy, of course, yet even for all her love of him she herself

nevertheless speaks of Paris as one who knows neither “modesty” nor “shame” (6.349-51). Tolkien might well have branded him a cad.

Little enough of this has a parallel in Faramir, who is honor personified and the character in whom Tolkien said he saw much of himself (*Letters* 251). At the same time, there are similarities between the bow-wielding Paris and the bow-wielding Faramir, arguably enough to mark the two men for comparison.²³ As we have already seen, both men are younger brothers, both little loved by their fathers. More particularly, however, there are striking echoes in their mortal (or in Faramir’s case, near-mortal) woundings within the Trojan hypermyth. Paris’s death is narrated in many texts within this web of stories, including that of Dictys Cretensis, which was highly influential in medieval England. The most detailed account of his death, however, is that found in Quintus Smyrnaeus’ *Posthomerica*, which, while unknown through much of the Middle Ages, was readily available to a modern scholar like Tolkien. According to Book 10 of this text, Paris’s death comes when he is struck through the chest by an arrow near the Greek ships. Alive but gravely wounded, he is dragged back into the walls of Troy. Alas, the leechcraft of the doctors is unable to lessen the pain of his wound, which is described again and again in terms of fire. Only a salve from Oenone, the wife he abandoned for Helen, can save Paris’s life. He goes to her, but she spurns him as he once spurned her, leaving him to die in agony upon the slopes of Mount Ida:

that pale suppliant fell
Faint with the anguish of his wound, whose pangs
Stabbed him through brain and heart, yea, quivered through
His very bones, for that fierce venom crawled
Through all his inwards with corrupting fangs;
And his life fainted in him agony-thrilled.
As one with sickness and tormenting thirst
Consumed, lies parched, with heart quick-shuddering,
With liver seething as in flame, the soul,
Scarce conscious, fluttering at his burning lips,
Longing for life, for water longing sore;
So was his breast one fire of torturing pain. (10.273-84)

When word of his death comes to his mother, she cries out in horror at what the siege has done to her city and her life:

²³ It is worth noting, perhaps, that in his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” Tolkien professed: “I had and have a wholly unsatisfied desire to shoot well with a bow” (55).

Dead!—*thou* dead, O dear child! Grief heaped on grief
Hast thou bequeathed me, grief eternal! Best
Of all my sons, save Hector alone, wast thou!
While beats my heart, my grief shall weep for thee.
The hand of Heaven is in our sufferings:
Some Fate devised our ruin—oh that I
Had lived not to endure it, but had died
In days of wealthy peace! But now I see
Woes upon woes, and ever look to see
Worse things—my children slain, my city sacked
And burned with fire by stony-hearted foes,
Daughters, sons' wives, all Trojan women, haled
Into captivity with our little ones! (10.373-84; emphasis original)

Paris's body is returned to Troy and placed on a funeral bier, where it is set alight. Oenone, heartbroken for all her wrath, in silence throws herself into the flames to burn with him.

There is much in this accounting that rings of Faramir. Like Paris, Faramir is struck with a "deadly dart" (*LotR* V.4.821) upon the battlefield. Brought back within the city walls, Faramir is left "wandering in a desperate fever [...] with poison in his veins" (823-4), just as Paris lay on Mount Ida "seething as in flame" as "that fierce venom crawled / Through all his inwards." Denethor, overcome with despair at having lost both his sons to war, joins the mother of Paris and Hector in lamenting a vision of the future that ends in fire: all is lost; the city (whether Troy or Minas Tirith) and all within it are doomed and will be slaughtered as their enemies complete the siege. "Better to burn sooner than late," Denethor says, "for burn we must" (825). Denethor then takes his fevered son to the Tombs, where he places him on a pyre and intends to set fire to their bodies together, thus collapsing the Trojan roles of both Oenone and Hecuba at Paris' death: "He lies within," Denethor tells Gandalf, "burning, already burning. They have set a fire in his flesh. But soon all shall be burned. The West has failed. It shall all go up in a great fire, and all shall be ended. Ash! Ash and smoke blown away on the wind!" (V.7.852). Indeed, as Denethor goes on he seems even to pick up the very same imagery, if not the phrases, of Paris's mother:

I would have things as they were in all the days of my life [...] and in the days of my longfathers before me: to be the Lord of this City in peace, and leave my chair to a son after me, who would be his own master and no wizard's pupil. But if doom denies this to me, then I will have *naught*: neither life diminished, nor love halved, nor honour abated. (V.7.854, emphasis in the original)

Unlike Paris, however, Faramir is not dead at this moment. Gandalf saves him, though Denethor does indeed burn himself upon the pyre. Faramir is taken to the Houses of Healing, but as with Paris in Troy, whose “help no leech availed” (10.280), “Faramir burned with a fever that would not abate,” despite the fact that “the leechcraft of Gondor was still wise” (V.8.860).

As it was with Hector, of course, the argument that Faramir can function as a kind of asterisk-Paris is not an argument that every aspect of Faramir’s character or the plot surrounding him is indebted to Paris within the Trojan hypermyth. I am arguing for the applicability of Troy to Tolkien’s work, but this is not an argument for allegory (see, e.g., Tolkien’s differentiation between the terms in his foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*). We cannot cut and paste the cast between these tales in any whole fashion. Acknowledging the influence of Paris on Faramir need not make a Helen of Éowyn any more than acknowledging the influence of Fafnir on Smaug need make a Sigurd of Bilbo. At the same time, there are surely enough parallels to entertain the notion of influence—even if, as with Fafnir and Smaug, it is not an exclusive influence.

Tolkien’s New Troy

Earlier we noted Ridsen’s suggestion that source studies are most useful when they function as “a powerful tool to gain insight” into an author’s creative procedures. Accordingly, as we approach Tolkien’s work in light of the Trojan hypermyth we would do well to look for hints of Tolkien’s authorial approach by examining the gaps between his own textual weavings and their forebears. In other words, the similarities between the legends might call our attention to the fact of their use, but it is in the differences that the author creates between them that we might be able to see the actual *reason* for their use.

This same-but-different quality is especially evident (and, I hope, provocatively intriguing) in the case of Boromir’s brother. Whereas Paris’s salve can come only from his return to the healing hands of his wife Oenone, Faramir’s salve can come only from the healing hands of Aragorn, an act that proves he is the king of Gondor returned. It is in this basic fact, no doubt, that Tolkien’s “asterisk-Paris” is most sharply estranged from Homer’s “real-Paris.” Paris dies. Faramir lives. Indeed, Faramir’s tale ends with his having been granted the love of a royal woman from Gondor’s great neighbor of Rohan, a fate quite unlike Paris’s tragic dalliances with Helen, a royal woman from Troy’s great neighbor of Greece (who could hardly be more unlike Éowyn). More than that, Faramir’s recovery arguably marks the recovery of Minas Tirith itself, whose parallels with its own Homeric counterpart are broken most clearly in the fact that the city never falls. Gondor, unlike Troy, quite clearly survives the wrath of the siege.

If, as I am arguing here, Tolkien has embedded the Trojan hypermyth more deeply into his narrative than previously suspected, then what are we to make of these fundamental differences? One possible answer, I suggest, may already be visible to those who have taught works like Virgil's *Aeneid* (wherein the defeated Trojan Aeneas lays the seeds for a glorious Rome) or the aforementioned *Historia regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth (which brought Priam's line to the founding of Britain by Brutus): students, after all, are often flummoxed by the fact that so many cultures tied their histories to losing Troy, not victorious Greece.²⁴ For Tolkien, the matter is even more profound: laboring to produce his "mythology for England" in spirit if not in name, he could hardly deny the pre-existing Troy-England mythological connections handed to him by the very medieval traditions he professionally studied and sought to preserve. At the same time, however, he could re-examine what those traditions meant.

Given the opportunity to create a kind of "asterisk-Troy"—to write a story behind its story, a legend behind its legend—Tolkien could well have viewed himself as "restoring" Troy from the anti-Trojan bias of Greek writers like Homer. The Classical Paris was a weak and immoral coward destroyed by lust, anathema to so much of what Tolkien held dear. *His* Paris, therefore, is entirely the opposite: a noble and honorable hero saved by love. Homer's Hector fell in tragedy: his death marks the breaking of Trojan spirit. Tolkien's Hector falls in tragedy, too: his end marks the breaking of the Fellowship of the Ring—but then it also paradoxically enables the spirit of determination that leads to the destruction of the Ring. Where the prize belt of Homer's Hector is used to desecrate his corpse, the prize belt of Tolkien's Hector is borne proudly upon his corpse. Homer's Troy fell to the Greeks and was destroyed. Tolkien's Troy—the Troy that would give rise to England—would not fall.

Composing what was effectively another "source" for the Trojan hypermyth, therefore, one that could stand alongside if not behind Homer (and all those writers who followed in the Blind Poet's wake and brought the Trojans to English shores), Tolkien could "cleanse" the legend of those aspects that perhaps did not fit with his re-invention of a proper English past. Thus Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* would become, in more ways now than he could imagine, the classical myth for England.

²⁴ If Homer's influence on Tolkien has been inadequately studied, the same is likely true of Virgil and Rome. One might note, however, that some of the arguments presented about a "Trojan Tolkien" might also apply to those areas of study, given the Trojan foundation of Rome (and thence England) within the Trojan hypermyth. Tolkien thus might be said to compound Rome and Troy into a single "old world" in Gondor and Minas Tirith. The Roman connections made by Ford ("White City"), for instance, would not just remain valid but gain force.

If this is so, then the mythologies of Troy—not only Classical texts, like those of Homer and Quintus Smyrnaeus, but even later medieval texts, like those of Dares Phrygius and Dictys Cretensis, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, Lydgate's *Troy Book*, and all the rest—merit reinvestigation in Tolkien studies. Rather than seeing Tolkien as a man who “turned his back enthusiastically on the Classics” (to return to Garth's imaginative imagery), we might instead see the author as a man who folded the Classics into the heart of his life's work. We may find that, in the end, he tried to reinvigorate the Southern tradition by bringing it into harmony with the Northern—all within the wondrous epic of his mind, *The Lord of the Rings*.

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