
Fall 10-15-1970

A Proposal for a Doctoral Dissertation

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Recommended Citation

Rogers, Deborah Webster (1970) "A Proposal for a Doctoral Dissertation," *Tolkien Journal*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 3 , Article 8.

Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/tolkien_journal/vol4/iss3/8

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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



Abstract

This is a proposal for a doctoral dissertation in the Department of Comparative Literature of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This proposal was accepted 19 May 1970.

A Proposal for a Doctoral Dissertation
in the Department of Comparative Literature
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Deborah Webster Rogers
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Title of the work: The Use of Medieval Material in the Fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis (This is the working title; it will get a more evocative one.)

Aim of the work: to study how these two medievalists and fiction writers draw on their field of scholarship in their creative writing.

Need for the work: grounds for its existence and observations on its current non-existence.

This century's leading writers of fantasy have, interestingly enough, both been medievalists: I mean C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien.

I propose an investigation of how their intimacy with medieval literature shows itself in their fiction. There are two major angles to pursue: attitudes and borrowings. Attitudes are vaguer: this author writes fiction which reflects his turn of mind, this scholar soaks himself with joy in medievalia, the two must be related if they are so highly congenial to the same person. (Pleasure in the medieval as well as in fantasy is also common, though not universal, among Tolkien's and Lewis' readers.) One soon sees that Tolkien displays his medieval sources more purely, Lewis with more admixture of the classical. This diversity will let us show two aspects of the middle ages: their originality, and their status as heirs of classical culture (of which they were well aware:

Qu'an Grece ot de chevalerie
Le premier los et de clergie.
Puis vint chevalerie a Rome
Et de la clergie la some,
Qui or est an France venue.)¹

The more easily traceable angle is that of plain borrowing. Artists tend to borrow from other artists whom they like and admire anyway; and it happens that the middle ages are a period which smiles particularly upon artistic borrowing. Even an author who was making up a work would ascribe it to some source. "Professor Tolkien has said himself that his medieval studies serve to fertilize his imagination, that his typical response to medieval literature is to write a modern work in the same tradition."² A small and a large example of borrowing spring to mind: several of the names of Tolkien's dwarves (Nain, Ori etc.) come from Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda*. And a weightier matter is the narrative technique of *The Lord of the Rings*. Any reader will notice that the tale has a lot of meanwhile: our attention is led from one group of characters to the simultaneous adventures of another. A trained medieval reader, such as Mr. West in the article already quoted, will recognize this as the medieval narrative technique of "interlace" (Ferdinand Lot and Eugene Vinaver's word), reminiscent of Malory and Spenser.

Secondary works, especially on Tolkien, have been multiplying in the last few years, as his stories and the vivid interest which they engender have hit the public eye. They have been elegantly bibliographed by Mr. West in his *Tolkien Criticism: an Annotated Checklist* (Kent State University Press, 1970). I shall be using his numbering to refer to other works. Mr. West is now at work on a Lewis bibliography.

Most of the secondary works have been articles, some dealing with the stories' popularity more than with themselves (e.g. West B33, B63).

My proposed thesis takes up a topic which has not yet been well explored; for, though many of the articles³ examine some medieval parallels, none can do so in extenso and none deal with Tolkien and Lewis equally. Lin Carter's book *Tolkien: a Look behind the Lord of the Rings* also talks of Tolkien's medieval sources, but one must observe that Mr. Carter is sloppy and spotty on his research. The two valuable books of criticism which are out are both collections of essays: Neil Isaacs and Rose Zimbaro, *Tolkien and the Critics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) and Mark Hillegas, *Shadows of Imagination* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), which includes essays on Lewis and Charles Williams.

Method for the work: I shall concentrate on the major fiction of each author, that is to say:

Tolkien:

The Hobbit
The Lord of the Rings
The Fellowship of the Ring
The Two Towers
The Return of the King

Lewis:

The Deep Heaven trilogy
Out of the Silent Planet
Perelandra
That Hideous Strength
the Narnia chronicles
The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe
Prince Caspian
The Voyage of the Dawn Treader
The Silver Chair
The Horse and his Boy
The Magician's Nephew
The Last Battle

References to their other fictions (*Farmer Giles of Ham*, *The Screwtape Letters*, etc.) will be incidental.

As for works of medieval literature, it is from Lewis and Tolkien themselves that I shall learn which ones merit special attention in connection with this thesis. First, because their published non-fiction directs us to certain works: Lewis' *Allegory of Love* to the *Roman de la Rose*, Tolkien's "Monsters and the Critics" to *Beowulf*, etc.; one sees where the writer has applied his attention. Besides pursuing this lead, I shall try to get the curricula for Lewis' and Tolkien's courses in medieval literature. This tells one what a teacher has been in daily contact with, and it is likely to affect him.

Having the pertinent medieval works in hand, then, I shall explore two ways in which Lewis' and Tolkien's medievalism is shown: attitudes and "matiere." The thesis is to consist of eight chapters in three divisions:

- I. Lewis and Tolkien
 1. introductory chapter on their educational background and work in the medieval field.
- II. Six chapters on borrowings:
 2. narrative structure
 3. places
 4. objects
 5. names
 6. characters and figures
 7. occurrences or plot-elements
- III. Conclusion
 8. Attitudes

The chapter on narrative structure will describe the techniques of Lewis and Tolkien and then compare them. Mr. West has already studied Tolkien's interlace, so I shall devote more time to Lewis. It must be pointed out that both men are writing prose narrative, which form has so far usually shown up at ends of

periods (the Golden Ass, the prose Reynard and the prose Arthurian romances are all late).

Examining motion in the story would work the transition between narrative structure and the chapter on places. Arthur's knights leave his court for adventures and return to tell about them, hobbits travel "there and back again," but where does this pattern take place?

Medieval works to a great extent occur in the real universe in which we live. Not that their "real universe" corresponds to what our era means by that phrase. The setting may be as tangible as Ronceval, but the universe also includes Heaven (or the Heavens) and Hell. Nor were they strangers to the device of setting a story inside the characters' heads (Roman de la Rose). And then there are such realms as Asgard and Faerie, where one cannot say for sure what the writer believes and what he means as fiction. On the other hand, as contemporaries of Lewis and Tolkien, we know what they are making up and what not: we can distinguish fact (the clouds of Perelandra), extrapolation from fact (green on Mars interpreted as Handramits), and fantasy (the Wood between the Worlds).

Lewis' Deep Heaven trilogy is clearly located: in the planetary system of Sol, on the second, third and fourth planets, with the terrestrial scenes in England, in a fictional region. The Narnia chronicles hint at a myriad universes (The Magician's Nephew), and most of the tales start on Earth in England, but the greater part of the action takes place on the world (flat) and the continent which contain the country of Narnia. Pauline Baynes has done some mapping.

Of all the settings for the works under study, Tolkien's Middle-earth is the most precisely worked out. He and his son and cartographer Christopher have spared no pains to give their readers clarity on the 4,000,000 square miles involved. Some questions remain, in that this region is not the whole of the world referred to, and in that the relation of Middle-earth to this planet is not clear. Tolkien has said that it is in this world, leaving his studious readers to debate over where and when.

Within all these universes there are regions, and within these regions features, both natural and artificial. There are high places: celestial bodies, mountains, hills; low places: caves, mines, underground realms; waters: springs, streams, seas; woods and trees; islands; kingdoms of earth, air, fire and water. These stories are hotbeds of archetypal places. There is the enclosure, be it garden or university. There are towns, castles, houses, bridges. Our study of artificial places such as these will lead into the chapter on objects.

This chapter will have several sections:

- vehicles of transportation
- vehicles of communication
- food and drink
- clothes and colors
- ornaments
- weapons
- utensils etc.

Under each section there will be two main divisions: natural, and supernatural or magic. This chapter is to discuss the objects in themselves; their effects on the plot will be taken up in chapter VII. The procedure in each section will be to study these objects in Lewis and in Tolkien, and compare how they use their medieval sources.

Vehicles of Transportation. Miss LeMoine has pointed out that Tolkien uses more natural, Lewis more supernatural means of transportation; also Tolkien more walking, Lewis more floating or flying. I hypothesize that this is in exact proportion to Lewis' stress on

Providence and Tolkien's on doing it (one's mission) oneself.

Vehicles of Communication. Here it is Tolkien who has more magic means, what with palantiri and moon-runes. The dream or vision is always a possible vehicle of communication, but Lewis and Tolkien both rely primarily on the word. Their love of words is shown by the precision of their usage, by Tolkien's frequent bursting into poetry, by Lewis' unremitting campaign against those who debase the language (see especially Weston's speech and Ransom's translation before the Oyarsa of Malacandra).

Food and Drink. They are both a practical necessity and a sign of fellowship and rejoicing. The latter could be called their sacramental use. Under it, for both Lewis and Tolkien, one must include tobacco (pipe tobacco).

Clothes (also Nakedness) and Colors. The middle ages had a regular code of color symbolism (green for hope, blue for constancy etc.). One consideration in this section will be whether Lewis and Tolkien have such a code, and whether it is their own or the medieval one.

Ornaments. Besides being natural or magic, they can be natural (flowers, stones) or artificial (metal-work, embroidery).

Weapons. Like clothes and ornaments, they may be an allegory of their bearer (e.g. Aragorn's broken sword). A vehicle or utensil may become a weapon (e.g. the bulldozers at Edgestow).

Utensils, etc. The most outstanding object in this category will be the Grail. Some others will be fire- and light-producing objects, tools, wands and staves.

The next chapter will deal with names and the Adam privilege of the subcreator. Tolkien is especially gifted at naming. Names can belong to persons or beings (Gimli, hross, Babteca), places (Brocéliande) and things (Durendal). Five categories seem to be called for: titles, such as Cid; names which simply are that person's name (Charles, William); names made up for their sound (the giant Rumblebuffin, the mouse Reepicheep); names taken from other names (Filli and Kili from Snorri's dwarves; Mark [Studdock] from Mark the evangelist, the young man who was almost captured⁴); and--and this will be the most interesting--names chosen for the meaning of their root-words (Frost, Wither, Gandalf, Aslan).

The chapter on characters and figures will naturally follow the section on names. It will have six sections, and under each of them Tolkien, Lewis and the medieval works will be examined in turn:

- the Hero
- the Lady
- the Magician
- the Villain
- The Companion
- Non-Human Beings.

Matters to consider about the hero include the question of perfection, the question of size, and the question of class. Perfection: is he already perfectly fit for the job he is doing? Examples are Aragorn, Ruy Diaz, Beowulf. Is he fit for his job except for one flaw? Roland's pride, Gawain (in Gawain and the Green Knight)'s fear for his life. Is he, and this is most important, becoming fit, growing into his herodome? All Tolkien's hobbits do this, and nearly all Lewis' heroes (e.g. Ransom and Eustace Scrubb). The outstanding medieval example is Porceval.

That brings us to the question of size: is your hero a healthy adult human male of outstanding status? That is a large hero (Egil, Siegfried, William of Orange). Is he, on the other hand, a hobbit, a child, or perchance a fox? That is a small hero. Concern with the small hero is said to be characteristic of the twentieth century, but in view of Reynard this cannot be strictly true. There remains the question of class, and I don't mean is he an aristocrat or not, I mean what kind of a hero, what is his *métier*? Ruler, warrior, scholar, lover? Or, of course, a combination. Charlemagne, Njal, Professor Ransom the Pendragon, Troilus.

Next to the hero one studies the ladies, bless 'em. The first question is, is this female a figure or a character? One finds both in both periods. La haulte amie of courtly lyric is always a figure; so are the maumarées, day-dreamers and mistresses of chansons de toile, lais and some romances. Tolkien's Arwen is a figure. Lewis is impressively free of girl paper dolls; the quartet of Grace Ironwood, Mother Dimble, Camilla Denniston and Ivy Maggs could be called figures, but compare them with Arwen and you will see that even in minor personages, characterization is a very strong suit of C. S. Lewis. The most important ladies are characterized as fully as anyone in their stories: Gulburc is a character, so is Eowyn, so are Jane Studdock and Lucy Pevensie (Lucy is almost a hero). One must also consider the question of whether the lady is good or bad (see also the magician and villain categories). If Lasaraleen were a character rather than a figure, she would be insufferable, and could hardly help but be detrimental to any plot in which she had a central role. Susan Pevensie's character develops in a sad though quite conceivable way.

The magician can be good or bad, also male or female. Examples are Merlin, Jadis, Gandalf, and the N.I.C.E. gang. You didn't think the latter were magicians? They are what Screwtape said was his party's most longed-for man: the materialist magician.

The villain can be a magician (Uncle Andrew), but he or she can be any number of things besides: a jaloux, a losenger, a traitor, a coward, a liar, an envier, a despoiler, a luster after power. The worst thing about villains is that they pervert qualities or powers which could be applied to good ends: Ganelon's cleverness, Weston's scholarly prowess and perseverance, Saruman's might of wizardry. The morally neutral description "doing her job and no frills" describes Dr. Ironwood, but also the abhorrent Fairy Hardcastle.

"Bare is brotherless back." We must also study the character of the hero's companion (friend, guide or faithful servant). He has two main functions: first, simply to extend the hero's possibilities of action; to form, in a way, a composite hero. One could so regard the Round Table, the household of St. Anne's, or the ninefold fellowship of the Ring. Puddleglum stands in this relation to Jill and Eustace.

More interesting is the situation when the companion's character has qualities which the hero's lacks: "Roland est fort et Olivier est sage." No author whose concern is character will make the companion a carbon copy of the hero (hence Puddleglum's pronounced and memorable personality), but cases of specific complementarity are rarer. Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are one, also the provocative trio of Frodo, Sam and Gollum. Hence also the skeptical MacPhee at St. Anne's.

After these categories, we are still left with a lot of non-human characters and figures. Some of these will have been considered already: Reynard the fox under heroes, Shift the ape under villains, Jadis the giant-jinn cross under magicians, and so on. We shall devote some attention to plain beasts (lions, horses, dogs etc.) and some to old or new mythological creatures

(e.g. elves, ents, hrossa, centaurs, nazgûl): their beauty or menace, their looks and habits.

The transition between the study of characters and that of plot-elements would be an examination of the processes of change in a character: growing up, gaining self-knowledge, performing or not performing a task, perversion, conversion, perdition, redemption I have mentioned Perceval under growing heroes and Susan under degeneration. Edmund, Mark and Gimli (in relation to elves) are notable converts.

Other categories of plot-elements emerge, which can most clearly be shown in outline form (this list is not exhaustive).

Conflicts	e.g.
wars	crusades
battles	Five Armies
single combats	Peter-Miraz
quarrels	Jill-Eustace
temptations and seductions	Weston-Tinidri!
Magics	
transformations	witch-snake
appearances and disappearances	Ring
renewed youth	Ramandu
oblivion	Lucy and spell
psi qualities	clairvoyance
Damage	
missing persons or things	entwives
betrayal	Ganelon
killing and maiming	Fisher-King
Voyages	
quests	dwarves' treasure
Communications	
visions	dreams chez Bombadil
prophecies	men to rule Narnia
messages	dead nightingale
conversations and councils	at Rivendell
Rewards and punishments	Rabadash
Tests	Lancelot in cart
Captures, rescues and escapes	statues chez witch
Recognitions and not	Balin & Balan
Mistakes	"safe" cave
Rejoicings	
feasts	passim
dances	Narnia
weddings	Aragorn-Arwen
courtesy	passim

An examination of the endings of our stories would lead from plot-elements to attitudes. Have they a eucatastrophe or a dyscatastrophe? Why?

The chapter on attitudes will fall naturally into two sections: the author's taste, and his view of the universe. Taste is the things the writer shows a personal liking for. Lewis and Tolkien, besides being contemporaries, medievalists and fantasists, were friends, so they share many of these: pipe tobacco, food, fellowship. Lewis manifests a particular love for beasts.

In the section on views of the universe, Christianity will be prominent, since that is the backbone of the medieval Weltanschauung and also the religion of the modest Tolkien and the outspoken Lewis. Not always overtly religious, but of moment to medieval as well as twentieth-century authors is the question of "wie man zer werlte solte leben," i.e. the writer's values and ethics. These also will be studied in this final chapter.

Given the studies and the fictions of Tolkien and Lewis, my proposed topic is clearly a fertile field, and it is not yet overfull of folk. I would request your gracious leave thither to direct my explorations.