

# MIDDLE-EARTH AND THE MIDDLE AGES

## Joseph Pearce on the Influence of *Beowulf*

Arguably the most important literary influence on *The Lord of the Rings*, the Anglo-Saxon epic, *Beowulf*, helps us understand the way in which Tolkien both conceals and reveals the deepest meaning in his own work.

Probably dating from the early eighth century, making it contemporaneous with the lives of Saints Boniface and Bede, *Beowulf* is a wonderful and wonder-filled narrative animated by the rich Christian spirit of the culture from which it sprang, brimming over with allegorical potency and evangelical zeal. It also conveys a deep awareness of classical antiquity, drawing deep inspirational draughts from Virgil's *Aeneid*, highlighting the Saxon poet's awareness of his place within an unbroken cultural continuum.

Tolkien translated *Beowulf* in its entirety, though his translation would not finally be published until 2014, and he wrote a scholarly essay

on the epic, “The Monsters and the Critics”, which is considered by many to be the most masterful critique of the poem ever written. Clearly Tolkien knew *Beowulf* well, perhaps better than anyone else of his generation, and there is no denying its seminal and definitive influence on his own work. Most obvious are the inescapable parallels between the dragon episode in *Beowulf* and the similar episode in *The Hobbit*. It is, however, in a more subtle way that the Anglo-Saxon epic can be seen to have left its inspirational fingerprints on *The Lord of the Rings*.

*Beowulf* is divided into three sections in which the eponymous hero fights three different monsters. In the first two episodes, as Beowulf confronts and ultimately defeats Grendel and then Grendel’s mother, the work is primarily a narrative in which the theological dimension is subsumed parabolically, especially in the recurring motif that human will and strength is insufficient, in the absence of divine assistance, to defeat the power of evil. This is presumably an orthodox riposte to the heresy of Pelagianism, which plagued Saxon England and which is a major preoccupation of Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History*, probably written at

around the same time as *Beowulf*.<sup>1 2</sup> *The Lord of the Rings* adopts a very similar approach in the way that it subsumes the presence of grace within the fabric of the story, unobtrusively and yet inescapably, something which is beyond the scope of our present discussion. It is, however, the allegorical technique that the *Beowulf* poet employs in the final section of the epic which most illumines the technique that Tolkien will himself employ in his own epic, emulating the anonymous poet who had taught him more than anyone else about the art of storytelling.

The dragon section of *Beowulf* commences with the theft of “a gem-studded goblet” from the dragon’s hoard, an act which gained the thief nothing but which provoked the destructive wrath of the dragon.<sup>3</sup> Beowulf takes eleven comrades with him as he goes to meet the dragon in combat, plus the thief, “the one who had started all this strife” and

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<sup>1</sup> The Pelagians believed that men could forge their own eternal destiny, earning themselves a place in heaven by obeying the teachings of Christ through a triumph of the human will over temptation. Such a belief denied the need for grace and therefore denied the need for the Church and her sacraments.

<sup>2</sup> There is much disagreement about the exact dating of *Beowulf*, its composition being shrouded in mystery. The present author agrees with those, including Tolkien, who believe it was written sometime between the mid-seventh and mid-eighth century.

<sup>3</sup> All quotes from *Beowulf* are from Seamus Heaney’s translation (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002).

who “was now added as a thirteenth to their number”. Unlike the eleven who had accompanied their lord willingly, the thief was “press-ganged and compelled” to go with them, acting as their unwilling guide to the dragon’s den. Clearly the *Beowulf* poet is employing numerical signification to draw parallels between Beowulf’s fight to the death with the dragon (an iconic signification of the Devil) and Christ’s own fight to the death with the power of evil in His Passion. Equally clearly, *Beowulf* is not a formal or crude allegory because no character in the epic is merely a personified abstraction. Beowulf is not literally Christ, though he could be called a figure of Christ, one who is meant to remind us of Christ; the dragon is not literally Satan, though he or it is clearly intended to remind us of the Devil himself. Similarly, the thief is not Judas (nor Adam) but is intended to remind us of the disciple whose act of treachery brought about his lord’s death, and the other eleven are of course reminiscent of the other eleven apostles. The numerical coincidence exhibits the poet’s intention of drawing analogous connections to the Gospel narrative of the Passion without ever succumbing to the level of formal or crude allegory. Beowulf is always Beowulf, even though he is meant to remind us of Christ.

Continuing the allusive parallels, this time with Christ's agony in the Garden, we are told that, on the eve of battle, Beowulf is "sad at heart, unsettled yet ready, sensing his death." Later, as battle is about to commence, Beowulf's appointed followers, "that hand-picked troop." "broke ranks and ran for their lives." all except one, Wiglaf, who emerges as the signifier of St. John, the only one of Christ's apostles who remained at his side during the Crucifixion. Wiglaf reprimands his comrades for their cowardice in deserting their lord, reminding them that Beowulf had "picked us out from the army deliberately, honored us and judged us fit for this action".

Prior to his death, Beowulf instructs Wiglaf to order his men to build a burial mound in remembrance of him. After his death, ten shamefaced warriors emerge from the woods, indicating that the thief was not among them. At the epic's conclusion there are once again twelve warriors riding ceremoniously around the burial mound, which had been duly constructed in accordance with Beowulf's command, indicating that the traitor had been replaced by a new member, reminiscent of the appointment of St. Matthias to replace Judas as the twelfth apostle. Although nobody would suggest that *Beowulf* is an allegory in

the formal sense, its being bereft of the personified abstractions that are the mark of formal allegory, it is clear that the poet intends his audience to see suggestive parallels between Beowulf's sacrifice of himself in the battle against evil and that of the archetypal sacrifice of God Himself on Calvary. For the Christian, and the *Beowulf* poet was indubitably Christian, all acts of genuine love involve the laying down of our lives for another. Furthermore, all those who genuinely love in this way are ipso facto figures of Christ, from whom all genuine love flows and towards whom all genuine love points. In true life as in true literature all those who live and love like Christ are Christ-like and, as such, can be said to be figures of Christ. Christ is the *archetype* of which all virtuous men, in fact and in fiction, are *types*. The *Beowulf* poet shows this through the use of numerical clues. Tolkien does something very similar in his own work, emulating the work of his Anglo-Saxon mentor.

Tolkien signifies the deepest meaning of *The Lord of the Rings* in the clue he supplies with regard to the specific date of the destruction of the Ring. The Ring is destroyed on March 25, the most significant and important date on the Christian calendar. This is the feast of the Annunciation, the date on which the Word is made flesh, when God

becomes man. It is also, according to tradition, the historic date of the Crucifixion, a fact which is all too often forgotten by modern Christians because Good Friday is celebrated as a moveable feast which falls on a different date each year. This is what the *Catholic Encyclopedia* says about the significance of March 25:

All Christian antiquity . . . recognized the 25th of March as the actual day of Our Lord's death. The opinion that the Incarnation also took place on that date is found in the pseudo-Cyprianic work *De Pascha Computus*, c. 240. It argues that the coming of Our Lord and His death must have coincided with the creation and fall of Adam. And since the world was created in spring, the Saviour was also conceived and died shortly after the equinox of spring. Similar fanciful calculations are found in the early and later Middle Ages . . . Consequently the ancient martyrologies assign to the 25th of March the creation of Adam and the crucifixion of Our Lord; also, the fall of Lucifer, the passing of Israel through the Red Sea and the immolation of Isaac.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Frederick Holweck, "The Feast of the Annunciation." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 1. (New York: Robert Appleton Company,

Let's recall at this juncture that Tolkien is both a Catholic and a very scholarly mediaevalist. He would have known of the symbolic significance of this date and his ascribing of this particular date as that on which the Ring is destroyed has palpable and indeed seismic consequences with regard to the deepest moral and theological meaning of *The Lord of the Rings*.

A great mediaeval work of literature that employs the same allegorical use of significant dates that Tolkien employs to convey deep moral and theological meaning is Chaucer's "Nun's Priest's Tale". In this parable about the Fall of Man and his subsequent redemption by Christ on the Cross (masquerading as a fable about a rooster), we are told that the story takes place thirty-two days after the beginning of March, "the month in which the world began . . . when God first made man."<sup>5</sup> Apart from Chaucer's reference to the theological significance of March, he signals that Chauntecleer's "Fall" (Adam's) and the Fox's (Satan's) happens on April 1, i.e. April Fool's Day!

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1907), accessed October 16, 2021,  
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01542a.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> For the sake of clarity, Chaucer's original English has been modified. The purist, I hope, will forgive me.

In following his mediaeval mentors in their employment and deployment of allegorical clues to deepen the theological dimension of their stories, Tolkien was infusing the genius of Christendom and its literary giants into his own timeless epic. In doing so, he was thereby situating his own work firmly within that tradition. He was also deploying those same clues to signify that *The Lord of the Rings* was working its magic most profoundly on the level of theology. Since Original Sin and the One Ring are both destroyed on the same theologically-charged date, they become inextricably interwoven so that the Ring is synonymous with Sin itself. With his Ring, Tolkien weds his own work morally and theologically to the deepest truths of Christianity, forging it in the flames of his lifelong faith.



# Bibliography

Middle-earth and the Middle Ages

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