Tolkien™ in / Tolkien™ and Academia

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It is commonplace knowledge that Tolkien wrote ***The Lord of the Rings*** to be a "Mythology for England." But this apocryphal quotation (no one can provide the original citation), makes a set of claims for ***The Lord of the Rings*** that don't really hold water. Anders Stenström originally pointed this out[1] – that the quotation was imaginary and he questioned whether Tolkien would have really thought of his work as a cycle of mythology. I agree with Stenström's suggestion and think it is highly unlikely that Tolkien, who was immersed in the various medieval genres all his life, would have thought of ***The Lord of the Rings*** or ***The Silmarillion*** as mythology. He would have placed them in Legends or Romance, not either Myth or Epic.[2] But this is a discussion for another column. Today I want to talk about one of the best books I have read in a couple of years. It is a study of English romance motifs from the end of the Anglo-Saxon era to Stuart England – Helen Cooper's ***The English Romance in Time: Transforming motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the***

1. Stenström, Anders, 1995, A Mythology? For England? In ***Proceedings of the J. R. R. Tolkien Centenary Conference***, ed. P. Reynolds and G. H. Goodknight, Mythlore v. 80 pp. 310-314.

2. Parts of ***The Silmarillion*** are mythic and parts are epic, but the majority of the work falls into the category of romance.

death of Shakespeare (Oxford University Press, 2004). The reason it is pertinent to those of us that think about Tolkien is that she doesn't really stop with the death of Shakespeare, but continues the narrative and analysis through John Bunyan's ***Pilgrim's Progress*** to the Twentieth Century and Tolkien.

The book traces the major motifs of medieval romance and shows how they changed through time. Cooper discusses 'memes' – major plot elements that recur in romance, are familiar to most readers and lead to a set of expectations and expected outcomes. The way in which these plot elements are treated from the Eleventh Century to the Twentieth Century can show surprising continuity, given the changes in English society across that time. And yet changes did occur as individual writers modify memes, the reasons to read romance changed, romance readers' social status changed, and new discussions of social issues developed in romance texts. Cooper covers motifs in these broad areas: the quest and pilgrimage; travel across the sea and being lost/abandoned at sea; magic and how it exists in the romance world; elves, fairies, and Faërie; love and sexual desire; women accused and on trial (for adultery); restoring the rightful heir to a kingdom; and the happy ending. The writers of these works use some or many of these themes unproblematically or they may contradict the expectations established by the appearance of a motif.

It is fascinating to see how these motifs appear and replicate through time. Some are still going strong, such as the quest and the rightful king in Tolkien or C. S. Lewis. Others have faded from our reading of romance. Cooper's book opens with the famous stage direction in Shakespeare's ***Winter's Tale***, "Exit, pursued by a bear." This line is notable because a modern reader of the play is completely unprepared for it. There is no discussion or even mention of bears by any character up to that point in the play. Later we hear of the bear cruelly devouring Antigonus, but the sudden first appearance of a bear in a stage direction

is a surprise. It was not a surprise for the Elizabethan audience who first saw the play. Antigonus is in Bohemia to abandon a child in the wilderness. In many the popular romances of the time, bears and wilderness and child abandonment were very strongly associated. Cooper's book works to restore "literary competence" to the modern reader of medieval romance, to help us read these works with an understanding of some of the assumptions and common knowledge that medieval and early modern readers had. She does an excellent job and I can see myself re-reading this book every few years as I try to digest medieval and early modern writers.

Romance is hard to define precisely and Cooper has a nice discussion of some of the problems in articulating a definition. She eventually concludes that readers of romances knew what they are and could easily recognize them because of their common motifs. She draws an analogy with family resemblances; there are many similarities in appearance of individual members of a family, as well as many differences. There is usually no single feature that is identical and establishes family resemblance, but a varying group of overlapping similarities. "The romance genre – any genre, indeed – is best thought of as a lineage or a family of texts, rather than as a series of incarnations or clones of a single Platonic Idea"[3] Romance is a genre that readers recognize by the plot and subject matter. Writers produce romance by interacting with prior works in the genre. So if a work has a quest, a true love, a true king to be restored, and a happy ending it is clearly a romance. It is important to note, however, that any (or many) of the motifs common to romance can be absent or contravened in the story and the work remains solidly in romance territory. Cooper, although she limits her detailed

3. Cooper, p. 8

discussion to works prior to the Mid-Seventeenth Century, does have a number of things to say about Tolkien and the modern descendants of the medieval romance, Fantasy and Science Fiction. Those are what I will concentrate on here, but I'll reiterate here that I would wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone who wants to get a grasp of the popular and fantastic literature of the Middle Ages.

She portrays Tolkien and C. S. Lewis as the bridge between modern fantasy and the romances so common up through the Seventeenth Century. Romance faded significantly in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, until the genre was revived by Tolkien and Lewis. Both were scholars of romance and took romance seriously, recognizing that, for over 600 years, romance was the vehicle that authors used to discuss critical moral and social issues. Tolkien did the same – addressing *in story* highly unfashionable topics such as duty, honor, wartime sacrifice, and service to others. This struck a strong chord in readers of the last half of the Twentieth Century, but early Tolkien critics missed the point and didn't see the seriousness of his literature.[4] Romance was not simple escapist literature and, as we know well, neither is Tolkien's (or Lewis') writing. On an interesting side note, Cooper points out that the most fantastic of romances were still strongly connected to the real world. If a knight travels in the realm of Faërie, he eventually comes home having learned a lesson or proved his worth. He returns to the known world to report his experiences, giving the author and readers a chance to talk about what they mean. Here is one area where Fantasy and Science Fiction, with their otherworldly settings, may be diverging significantly from romance.

Questing is hugely important in both Tolkien and in romance. There are many, many variants on the quest and, like medieval authors of romance, and

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4. As discussed by Tom Shippey in the afterword to ***J. R. R. Tolkien Author of the Century.***

Tolkien plays with variations on the quest motif. Frodo and the fellowship are questing to dispose of something, not find it. Tolkien also adopts an important feature of medieval Arthurian romances, interlace. As characters multiplied in the questing knight tales, their stories began to be told simultaneously with the narrative moving back and forth between different characters. ***The Lord of the Rings*** fits very comfortably in the interlaced frame. Questing westward is also a strong theme in medieval romances, where the western ocean held islands of wonders. One example is the voyage of Brendan, who was guided by God to a land full of marvels, and then ordered to return to Ireland after only a few days in this paradise. The islands to the west are magical and holy, if they can be found. I had never realized that there was such a large literature on wanderers at sea and the providential assistance of God. Clearly there are broad parallels in Tolkien's work.[5] The echo of Christian resurrection that some readers see in the travel to Tolkien's Western Isles has precedent in medieval romance and in Shakespeare's ***The Tempest***.

Another surprise was that magic is relatively rare in medieval romance. Magic is often a kind of embellishment or decorative thematic material, but it does not play a significant role in the plot or the solution to the problem. In most romances it is the hero or heroine who makes decisions and follows through with action that leads to the solution. I would argue that this is also the case for Tolkien's work. Magic is present, but peripheral - especially in ***The Lord of the Rings***, where almost all the magical items could be done without. The Ring is important as a plot device, of

5. Cooper notes that Lewis' ***Voyage of the Dawn Treader*** has strong parallels with a number of early medieval works where the sea voyage was to experience wonders, not for personal or imperial gain. As time went on the focus of the western sea quest changed, looking more like imperial expansion in Elizabethan times.

course, but it is not to be used by the good characters. What else is there? *Palantiri*, *lembas*, the elvish cloaks, Gandalf's magic flashlight, the other rings, the creation of orcs as a race. These are useful, yes, but really relatively marginal to the core of the plot, in which men, hobbits and the other free peoples join together in a moral and military struggle. It is decision and action that resolve the problem. In this way the works are very similar to medieval romance.

Tolkien's treatment of women has received a lot of attention. There are many parallels between his women and those of medieval romance. Cooper notes that, especially in English romance, there is very little sex in stories of romantic love. Most romances required faithfulness on the part of both male and female protagonists. Continental romances were more tolerant of adultery, but in English texts pre-marital sex was usually just that, pre-marital. Tolkien is true to form in leaving sex out of his text. Romance leans heavily on true love, surviving tests of loyalty, to be eventually realized in the end. The women of romance did not just sit passively and pine for their knight, however - they took action, often as a part of an interlaced plot. The triangle of Aragorn, Arwen, and Eowyn fit a little uncomfortably into this pattern, but some of the themes of romance can be seen: loyalty to and sacrifice for true love, the testing of the man, waiting for one to prove worthiness, and a woman disguised as a warrior in battle.

Fairy land, Faërie, is set apart from our world and the border between the two is hazardous. The nature of fairies and their world is a topic of much discussion in romance. In some texts elves and fairies were a fourth order of beings, not angelic, or demonic (i.e. fallen angels) and not human. They inhabited a fifth place, not heaven, hell, purgatory or our earth. They also seem to sit outside Christian theology. This set-apart world for immortal beings has obvious parallels in

Tolkien's legendarium.

Another romance feature that Tolkien incorporates is the quest for the true king. Romance almost always subscribed to the notion that there is one true heir to the old king.[6] The legitimacy of the true heir is endorsed by God. In romance this most often became a plot element when the crown was unjustly seized or there was contention for the throne. In that case one had only to find and bring the true heir back from exile; a sign from God will prove who is to be king. In these stories the challenge is finding the character or getting him back to the kingdom. In ***The Lord of the Rings***, the true king is also hidden and there is contention for the throne. Through heroic deeds the rightful king is made obvious. Lineage and worth were held secret, but never really in question.

I'm afraid this survey has devolved into a simple listing of parallels. Given the space here there isn't the opportunity to be more expansive. But I will encourage you to do some exploring yourself. Cooper's book is a tremendous introduction and detailed survey of romance motifs. While she doesn't talk about Tolkien very much, her detailed tracing of motifs and their treatment under various authors gives us a glimpse of a world that Tolkien knew intimately. Reading one of the chapters, and thinking about the parallels in Tolkien's Middle-earth leads to speculation on how Tolkien viewed the important social issues discussed in romance. How does Tolkien comment on these same issues in the plot of ***The Lord of the Rings***? This is an opportunity to listen in on Tolkien's dialogue with the literature of the Middle Ages.

This column concludes the six-part series Dr. Dettman originally agreed to provide. The column will go on hiatus, and may return on an irregular basis. Meanwhile, if you've missed any installments, all are available online at www.americantolkiensociety.org

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6. One exception was in Elizabethan England, where this motif faded due to the very questionable legitimacy of the Tudor claim to the throne.