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The Wars We Sing of: Modern and Medieval Warfare in Tolkien's Middle-earth

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The Wars We Sing of: Modern and Medieval Warfare in Tolkien's Middle-earth

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Student paper award winner

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As a species, war is arguably our most complex, costly and destructive undertaking; General Patton once famously observed that "Compared to war, all other forms of human endeavor shrink to insignificance." It is only by placing war in the context of narrative, by saying "The Battle of Britain had an enduring impact on the country," or "this is what the Battle of the Somme meant to our family," or "fighting in the Pacific changed me forever" that the experience of war becomes comprehensible, and throughout history these narratives have been expressed as stories. Certainly, J.R.R. Tolkien was no stranger to war. As a medievalist, he studied texts such as *Beowulf*, *The Song of Roland*, and *The Nibelungenlied*, all of which focus on violence, conflict, and heroism in combat. Tolkien was also a veteran of World War I; he served at the Somme, and as he notes in the foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*, "By 1918 all but one of my close friends were dead" (*The Fellowship of the Ring* xi). Particularly given Tolkien's own combat experience, one could easily take issue with Tolkien's decision to tell stories of war in a medieval, mythological, and heroic setting. In the wake of the World Wars that devastated Europe, is *The Lord of the Rings* indeed a return to an outdated and horrifically misguided vision of warfare? In what way could a novel about kings, cavalry charges and valiant deeds on the field of battle communicate truth about the mechanized, impersonal meat grinder of 20th century combat?

In this paper, I will suggest that Tolkien unifies modern and medieval visions of warfare by presenting war as a narrative experience; in Middle-earth, as in the real world, war can only be processed and communicated as story. Examined in this way, *The Lord of the Rings* is not a story of either modern or medieval warfare, though Tolkien certainly employs elements of both. Instead, it is in large part a story *about* war stories: an examination of the ways in which cultural narrative of war are constructed and maintained.

The individual experience of war always takes place in a specific cultural context. A French knight in Charlemagne's service who fought the Saracens at the Battle of Roncevaux Pass would have a very different perspective on wartime experience than a French soldier who served under Pétain at the Battle of Verdun. Even if by some miracle these two hypothetical soldiers were to fight in precisely the same battle under precisely the same conditions, they would not perceive the battle or their place within it in the same way. As the military historian John Keegan observes in his book *The Face of Battle*, the deafening noise of a World War I battlefield would likely be enough to disable a medieval soldier, never mind the howitzers, machine guns, and poison gas (324). Even more significantly, soldiers from very different cultures and time periods do not necessarily see themselves or their place within society in the same way.

The Wars We Sing of · Alethea Gaarden

Yuval Noah Harari notes that soldiers in the Renaissance and earlier eras were often willing to endure great hardship because they believed that it gave their lives meaning and purpose: winning glory in combat was a means of advancing their own honor and, by extension, that of their families (67). But in post-Enlightenment cultures like those in Europe and the United States, the goal of life is no longer the accumulation of personal and familial honor but the development of the self. Harari suggests that the trauma of modern warfare is caused at least in part because it poses a threat to “[soldiers’] understanding of life as the continuous process of developing and improving an enduring entity called ‘self’” (68). In other words, the differences between modern and medieval war narratives are not simply a function of the changed nature of combat. Instead, they are a product of the changing paradigms of participant individuals and cultures, and war narratives are therefore dependent on the *culture* in which they are constructed. Because Tolkien develops Middle-earth as a secondary world of significant depth and complexity, his characters have the opportunity to inhabit their own cultures, and to engage with elements of other cultures. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien uses important cultural features including [1] geography and a sense of place, [2] a sense of lost glory and past greatness, [3] literature, poetry, and song, and [4] distinct differences between cultures, in order to shape and express his characters’ war narratives.

It is significant that many, if not all, copies of *The Lord of the Rings* include a map of Middle-earth. These maps, like the ones that Frodo and Merry pour over during their time in Rivendell, are simultaneously history, myth, and geography. In her paper “Archaeology and the Sense of History in J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle-earth,” Deborah Sabo notes that “Tolkien was clearly sensitive to the fact that the life of a people, their beliefs and all events that go to make up their history, are intimately bound up with place” (91-92). Throughout his legendarium,

Tolkien develops Middle-earth as a world every bit as ancient, complex, and deeply-rooted as medieval England. One consequence of this rich history is that characters in Middle-earth can react to places that are important to their own cultures in much the same way than an Englishman of Tolkien’s day might react to the fields of Agincourt, Waterloo, or—should he wish to revisit old stomping grounds—the battered, desolate plains of the Somme. John Keegan, in his book *The Second World War*, frequently points out the significance that historic and mythic place-names could hold. Bazeilles, for example, a small town near Ardennes in northern France, “was a place of legend in French military history; it was there in 1870 that the elite *colonials* had fought to the death against the Germans in ‘the house of the last cartridge’” (73), but by 1940 the Germans had occupied the town at last. Similarly, during the abortive battle for Greece in 1941, “the British made their last stand at Thermopylae, where the Spartans had fallen defying the Persians 2500 years before” (158).

In Middle-earth, which in the Third Age has largely fallen into ruin, there is no shortage of ancient battlefields, and many of them are referenced throughout the text. Even Gollum knows his history, or at least parts of it. When Frodo and Sam trudge through the Dead Marshes in *The Two Towers*, they see corpses in the water, and Gollum tells them that “There was a great battle, long ago. . . tall Men with long swords, and terrible Elves, and Orcses shrieking. They fought on the plains for days and months at the Black Gates. But the Marshes have grown since then, swallowed up the graves; always creeping, creeping” (261).

Clearly, geography—particularly the geography of historic battlefields—is used as a system of reference in *Lord of the Rings* as well as in the real world, in large part because it ties the events of the present into a culturally-significant past. By comparing the past to the present in this way, Tolkien is also able to foster a sense of lost glory and past greatness within Middle Earth: not only are

The Wars We Sing of · Alethea Gaarden

his characters aware that they are walking through bloody and thus hallowed ground, but they are often able to make comparisons between their own martial journeys and those of the historic figures who came before them. When Aragorn sees Weathertop in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, he offers the hobbits a piece of the watchtower's history, saying: "It is told that Elendil stood there watching for the coming of Gil-galad out of the West, in the days of the Last Alliance." Merry presses Aragorn with questions, but he is still "lost in thought" (209), presumably still thinking about his kingly ancestor, or perhaps the last great war that the West fought against Sauron.

Though long dead, Elendil is deeply significant in *The Lord of the Rings*, and his sword, Narsil, is even more important. Much like the watchtower on Weathertop, Elendil and Narsil tie the events unfolding in *The Lord of the Rings* to a meaningful past. A fallen king, a broken sword, and a ruined watchtower are all symbols of lost power and glory. Why was Paris such a prize for Hitler and Nazi Germany? When German troops marched past the Arc de Triomphe de l'Étoile, they were claiming victory not over a city, but over the heart of France—over the symbol and site of national glory and historic pride. The fall of France was traumatic not only because of the immediate practical ramifications for its citizens and allies, but because it was a devastating psychological blow; it damaged, perhaps even shattered, a cultural narrative that had been enconced in monuments, literature, and collective memory. It was bad enough that the German *blitzkrieg* rendered the Maginot Line irrelevant, and that the greater part of France was occupied by the enemy. It was even worse that the country of Napoleon had fallen to German occupation in a mere six weeks. Consequently, a new narrative emerged. "The sense of a predestinated national doom. . . overwhelmed the nation," Keegan writes, adding that after the fall of France, the "decline of *le grande nation*, set about by philistines and barbarians, might seem irrevocably charted" (87). In one sense, it is

cultural narrative that turns events into tragedies. The fall is possible, and made all the more horrible, because of the pride that came before it.

A similar sense of loss and lessening echoes through *The Lord of the Rings*. The broken sword of Elendil is a mark of Gondor's fall from pride, as is the withered White Tree in the Citadel of Minas Tirith; indeed, the city is itself evidence of cultural decay within the once-great kingdoms of men. In *The Return of the King*, Tolkien describes how "Pippin gazed in growing wonder at the great stone city, vaster and more splendid than anything that he had dreamed of." But the great city "was in truth falling year by year into decay," and Pippin is at least vaguely aware of it. "In every street they passed some great house or court over whose doors and arched gates were carved many fair letters of strange and ancient shapes: names Pippin guessed of great men and kindreds that had once dwelt there; and yet now they were silent. . . ." (9)

The past is our context for the present, and the depth of Tolkien's secondary world allows his characters to reflect on this context. In this way, Tolkien gives great weight and significance to the War of the Ring, presenting it not as an isolated series of events but as part of a cultural history stretching back hundreds and thousands of years. When the armies of Gondor and Rohan march on the Black Gate, Imrahil of Dol Amroth calls it "the greatest jest in all the history of Gondor: that we should ride with seven thousands, scarce as many as the vanguard of its army in the days of its power, to assail the mountain and the impenetrable gate of the Black Land!" (*Return* 164). As in Imrahil's case, if an individual has access to this kind of cultural narrative, it will inform and shape his understanding of contemporary events.

Thus far, this paper has discussed how cultural narratives of war can be expressed through geography and place, as well as a sense of past glory and greatness. Such narratives can also be expressed through literature, poetry, and song, and this was certainly the case in World War I. Paul

The Wars We Sing of · Alethea Gaarden

Fussell writes in *The Great War and Modern Memory* that the experience of the average British soldier in the trenches was in large part defined by traditionally English narratives of war. As Fussell points out, the *Oxford Book of English Verse* was a standard text in the trenches. So was *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Soldiers liked to read about characters “who played their parts, half ignorant and yet half realizing the inexorable march of fate and their own insignificance before it” (qtd. in Fussell 163) and they defined their own experience in the context of their cultural and literary vision of war, no matter how far that vision diverged from reality.

In a similar way, Tolkien's characters use culturally-significant songs, poetry, and myths to orient themselves throughout the War of the Ring. Although literature and oral tradition add to the sense of place and history discussed earlier, they also provide models of heroic behavior and appropriate conduct in war. The lighthearted ditties that the hobbits sing in the first half of *The Fellowship of the Ring* soon give way to more serious songs and poems. At Weathertop, Sam recites the beginning of *The Fall of Gil-galad*, a heroic elegy; in Moria, Gimli chants a song about Durin the Deathless, the first and greatest of the dwarves. In *The Return of the King*, Théoden's army sings as they ride into battle, “and the sound of their singing that was fair and terrible came even to the City” (111). At Helm's Deep, exhausted and waiting for the next wave of a never-ending onslaught, Aragorn reminds his companions:

“Is it not said that no foe has ever
taken the Hornburg, if men
defended it?”
‘So the minstrels say,’ said Éomer.
Then let us defend it, and hope!’ said
Aragorn” (*Towers* 153).

Just as soldiers in World War I looked to Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Tolkien's characters find inspiration, hope, and strength in the historical or mythic figures enshrined in literature and song. In *War and*

the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien, Janet Brennan Croft observes that while Minas Tirith is under siege, soldiers trapped within the city keep up their spirits by singing “amid the gloom some staves of the Lay of Nimrodel, or other songs of the Vale on Anduin out of the vanished years” (qtd. in Croft 45).

According to Fussell, however, the existing literary model of English heroism that Tolkien parallels throughout *The Lord of the Rings* was insufficient in the face of the realities of trench warfare. The result of this gap was bitterness and disillusionment, and Tolkien is willing to acknowledge that literature cannot always meet the needs of individuals caught up in pain and suffering. Frodo is a key example. By the time he and Sam reach the foot of Mount Doom, no poems or songs can strengthen him, and even memories of his beloved home in the Shire, which he set out on his quest determined to protect, have lost all joy and meaning for him. It is only grim, hopeless determination—and when that fails, Sam's determined support—that keeps Frodo moving. There are some situations too grim for song, and in the end, it is only the presence of his dearest friend that offers any consolation: “I am glad you are here with me,” Frodo says, as all of Sauron's works begin to crash down around them. “Here at the end of all things, Sam” (*Return* 241). The power of companionship and *esprit de corps* even in the most miserable of circumstances is a recurring theme in literature from the World Wars. As former Marine Eugene Sledge writes in his classic memoir *With The Old Breed*, “War is brutish, inglorious, and a terrible waste. Combat leaves an indelible mark on those who are forced to endure it. The only redeeming factors were my comrades' incredible bravery and their devotion to each other” (315). Sam is able to save and redeem Frodo through his devotion when stories of the courage and loyalty of other, more distant heroes are no longer sufficient to the task.

But war narratives depend on literature in another, and much more practical, way. Soldiers in World War I frequently struggled to express the realities

The Wars We Sing of · Alethea Gaarden

of trench life because they lacked any culturally appropriate language with which to do so. War narratives, whether in the form of letters, family stories, or published narratives, depend at least in part on the needs and expectations of their intended audience. But a “decent solicitude for the feelings of the recipient” (Fussell 182), and the tradition of “British Phlegm” which demanded that even horrific experiences be treated as nonchalantly as possible, crippled attempts by soldiers at the front to communicate their lived experience of war. Even private records like diaries are influenced by cultural considerations: what kind of language is available? Are there words or phrases that effectively express what an individual is feeling? Merry, when he is healed by Aragorn after the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, acknowledges the insufficiency of his own cultural language to the needs of the moment when he says that “it is the way of my people to use light words at such times and say less than they mean. We fear to say too much. It robs us of our right words when a jest is out of place” (*Return* 149). Sam experiences the same problem when he returns to the relative safety of the Shire and his beloved Rosie Cotton says: “If you’ve been looking after Mr. Frodo all this while, what d’you want to leave him for, as soon as things look dangerous?” Rosie, of course, does not realize how absurd her statement is, and poor Sam has no idea how to explain matters to her. “That was too much for Sam. It needed a week’s answer, or none” (312). Certainly, war influences language (Fussell 21-23), but language, or a lack thereof, also has an impact on the way that war narratives are preserved and communicated. What is *not* communicated can be just as significant as what is. Does Sam ever find a way to explain the gravity of his journey to Rosie? In either case, what she and their children understand of war will be affected by what Sam chooses, or is able, to tell them.

Along with geography, a sense of lost greatness, and the power of literature and song, differences between cultures also play a

role in cultural narratives of war. Particular societies in Middle-earth, as in the real world, might be closer (Gondor; the Rangers of the North) or farther away (the Shire) from the realities of death, hardship, and violence. Harari observes that for twentieth-century Western societies, the gulf between war and peacetime experience is broad; “Whereas in 1916 a realistic report of life in the trenches would have shocked most British civilians. . .[a Renaissance soldier’s] reports of the miseries his comrades experienced. . .would have sounded quite familiar to many of his countrymen” (66). In *The Lord of the Rings*, the gulf between war and peace is nowhere more evident than in the Shire, Tolkien’s idealized English pastoral. In the distant past, the hobbits living in the Shire had been obliged to defend themselves from the dangers of the outside world, but as time wore on “they forgot or ignored what little they had ever known of the Guardians, and of the labors of those that made possible the long peace of the Shire. They were, in fact, sheltered, but they had ceased to remember it” (*Fellowship* 6). Under the protection of the Dúnedain of the North, the Shirefolk live out their quiet and amiable lives, oblivious to the dangers that lurk everywhere outside their land. In consequence, when Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin begin their journey to Rivendell (and, after the Council of Elrond, to Mordor) they are wildly unprepared for what awaits them, and their sanitized narrative of danger and war is insufficient to the task at hand. When they first meet Aragorn in Bree, they are frightened by his ragged appearance, but Pippin says, philosophically, that they will probably look just as dirty and disreputable after some time on the road. Aragorn is unconvinced. “It would take more than a few days, or weeks, or years, of wandering in the Wild to make you look like Strider,” he tells them. “And you would die first, unless you are made of sterner stuff than you look to be” (194). It is in brief moments like this one at Bree that Tolkien most clearly brings together modern and medieval visions of warfare. The hobbits, much like the brave young Englishmen of the summer of 1914, are

still bright with the innocence of their own halcyon days; Aragorn, the weathered soldier of a far more medieval world, has few if any of their illusions. But both Aragorn and the hobbits must make their way through the battles and dangers to come, and they will all tell their own stories of the War of the Ring to those who come after them.

In Tolkien's short work "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth's Beorhthelm's Son," two of his characters have the following brief exchange: "What a murder it is, / this bloody fighting," one says, as they both look down at their leader's headless, mangled corpse. But the other only replies, "and no worse today than the wars you sing of" (qtd. in Nelson 70). In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien tells us a story of war that is both sung and spoken—a story that echoes with both medieval honor and modern disillusionment, and that is rooted in the battlefields, the sorrows, and the languages of a complex and enduring world. Because Tolkien presents war as an experience that is communicated and preserved through narrative, he is able to tell a story about something more than cavalry charges or life in the trenches. War is a tragic, destructive, and fundamental part of human experience, and it is part of a narrative that stretches from the siege of Troy to the Battle of the Somme. Tolkien may have worked outside the lines of our own history, but *The Lord of the Rings* has nevertheless shaped—and will continue to shape—our own cultural understanding of war. We have taken Frodo's story and made it a part of our own.

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