

Kateřina Mudrová

*“The Origin and Legacy of J.R.R. Tolkien’s Character; Gandalf the Wizard”*

(ÚALK, FF UK, Praha 2019, 63 pp.)

Opponent’s review

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The thesis proposes to map the way J.R.R. Tolkien combined and adapted multiple sources of inspiration to draw Gandalf as a relatively complex, rounded character, transforming the static wizard figure established in previous works of fantasy literature and providing an impulse for subsequent development in the genre. With reference to Tolkien's own comments in the letters and observations of Tolkien scholarship it isolates three areas of inspiration shaping the world of *The Lord of the Rings* in general and the figure of Gandalf in particular: Christianity, Old Norse and Finnish mythology – with specific focus on the characters of Odinn and Vainamoinnen – and the Arthurian tradition with the central position of Merlin.

The introductory chapter places Tolkien's approach in the context of the evolution of the genre of fantasy, with special attention paid to its contrast with the allegorical method applied in the “Christian fantasy” of Tolkien's friend and colleague, C.S. Lewis. This is a comparison that figures largely also in the first analytical chapter (“Gandalf as a Christ Figure and the Influence of Christianity”). Another important point of reference established in the introduction is Tolkien's own concept of fantasy outlined in the lecture “On Fairy Stories”, a link that reappears in the concluding chapter. It is unfortunate that this double context was not made more prominent in the structuring of the introductory chapter (and the thesis as a whole): for example, the link between Tolkien's concept of fantasy and Barfield's ideas expressed in *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning*, which seems to resonate in the statement voiced in the conclusion that Tolkien's world “suggests a connection with the 'mythological past’”, however duly highlighted, is mentioned among much less relevant information in a subchapter devoted to Tolkien's membership in and relations with the Inklings.

The organization and selection of the presented data and the structuring of the argument is generally the weakest point of the thesis. The desire for comprehensiveness tends to overrule the criterion of relevance. To stay within the introductory chapter, the survey of trends in the fantasy genre before Tolkien ultimately turns into a list of names and titles, without much connection to the topic of the thesis (what has Mary Poppins to do with Gandalf?); the same could be said about the survey of the definitions of fantasy as genre. This should be either much more detailed and related to Tolkien's own position, or not included at all.

To a greater or lesser extent, the analytical chapters share in this diffuse structuring. The introduction to the “Christianity” and “Merlin” chapters, as well as the “Vainamoinnen” subchapter are mostly coherent and readable; the body of the “Merlin” chapter (4.3) benefits from being organized along a scheme adopted from Goodrich, though the reader may occasionally lose sight of this guideline. Otherwise, however, the principle adopted is mostly to list the points in which Gandalf conforms to the respective model and the points of difference, where the focus swerves from character traits to plot parallels and back (as evident for example in the subchapter on Odinn (3.1.2)). In fact, the reader is left puzzled as to what Kateřina Mudrová perceives as the main goal and effect of Tolkien's complex dialogue with his literary and legendary models, which she so meticulously documents, until the final conclusion where all the threads are tied together (statement on pp. 59-60). It would definitely make the thesis more easily navigable if each of the analytical chapters was provided with a partial conclusion summing up the main trends in Tolkien's transformation of the respective traditions.

The thesis would also benefit from a thorough revision which would correct occasional factual errors – the mistakes in the chronology of Odinn studies (Grimm's *Teutonic Mythology* definitely is not contemporary with Fraser's *Golden Bough*; Mallet's *Northern Antiquities* predate all the other works listed) and post-medieval Merlin tradition (Dryden's *King Arthur* does not belong to the 18<sup>th</sup> century) – as well as some rather persistent language lapses (punctuation in dependent statements throughout, to name the most obvious example). In general, the thesis would need a longer “polishing time”: this would eliminate unfinished sentences, especially in the last third of the text (pp. 44, 50, 60), and some embarrassing typos (R.E.Hower?!, p.10; Katrine vs Kathryn Hume, pp.14-15, etc.).

I would suggest that the following points should be addressed in the defence:

- 1) Could the “profound influence” of Barfield’s theory of a “mythological use of language” on Tolkien’s concept of fantasy and potentially his work with the traditions employed in the shaping of the character of Gandalf be explained in greater detail?
- 2) Is there any evidence that Tolkien knew and respected the Romantic theories of fiction as advanced by Coleridge and Shelley (imagination as akin to the original creation, renewed perspective of the world) and might have used them in forging his concept of fantasy?
- 3) The subchapter titled “Good vs. Evil Magic” (2.4) portrays Gandalf as a bearer of “exclusively Christian virtues”, among which are listed temperance and prudence, virtues “based on self-control”. What kind of evidence can be had for this claim? Could these virtues be related also to other philosophical systems, in consonance with the portrayal of some of the protagonists as “virtuous pagans” in a world with no organized religion (an approach mentioned on p. 22)?
- 4) Where would the use of the runes in general fit in Tolkien’s approach as mapped in the thesis?

Conclusion: With regard to the reservations outlined above, I recommend the thesis for defence with the preliminary mark GOOD (dobře).

Prague, 10 June 2019

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