EPIC AND ROMANCE IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

Épica y romance en El señor de los anillos

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ABSTRACT: In the field of comparative literature *The Lord of the Rings* has been most frequently studied within the contexts of romance and epic. This approach, however, leaves out important generic aspects of the global picture, such as the narrative's strong adherence to the novel genre and to mythic traditions beyond romance and epic narratives. If we choose one particular genre as the yardstick against which to measure the work's success in narrative terms, we tend to end up with the conclusion that *The Lord of the Rings* does not quite make sense within the given limits of the genre in question. In Tolkien's work there is a narrative and stylistic exploration of the different genres' constraints in which the Western narrative traditions – myth, epic, romance, the novel, and their respective subgenres – interact in a previously unknown but still very much coherent world that, because of the particular cohesion required by such a chronotope, exhibits a clear contextualization of references to the previous traditions. As opposed to many contemporary literary expressions, the ensuing absence of irony and parody creates a generic dialogue, in which the various narrative traditions explore and interrogate each other's limits without rendering the others absurdly incompatible, ridiculous or superfluous.

Keywords: J. R. R. Tolkien; *The Lord of the Rings*; Comparative literature; Genre criticism; 20th century English literature.

RESUMEN: En el campo de la literatura comparada, *El señor de los anillos* ha sido analizada sobre todo en el contexto del romance y la épica. Sin embargo, este acercamiento deja de lado importantes aspectos genéricos, como la presencia del género de la novela y las tradiciones

mitológicas. Si elegimos cualquier género concreto como vara de medir para evaluar el éxito de la obra en términos narrativos, tendemos a llegar a la conclusión de que *El señor de los anillos* no termina de encajar en ninguno. En la obra de Tolkien, existe una exploración narrativa y estilística de los límites de diferentes géneros literarios en que las principales tradiciones narrativas occidentales –el mito, la épica, el romance y la novela, con sus respectivos subgéneros– interactúan en un mundo previamente desconocido pero muy coherente que, debido a la cohesión requerida por el uso de semejante cronotopo, muestra una consistente contextualización de las referencias a las tradiciones previas. A diferencia de muchas expresiones literarias de modernistas contemporáneos, la resultante ausencia de ironía y parodia da lugar a un diálogo entre tradiciones en que los diferentes géneros exploran e interrogan sus propios límites sin dejar a otros como absurdamente incompatibles, risibles o superfluos.

Palabras clave: J. R. R. Tolkien; *El señor de los anillos*; Literatura comparada; Teoría de géneros literarios; Literatura inglesa del siglo XX.

SUMMARY: 1. Introductory remarks on epic and romance in *The Lord of the Rings*. 2. Problems with genre-based interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings*. 3. Relevant readings of *The Lord of the Rings* in terms of literary genre. 4. Conclusions; a brief outline of possibilities for further research. 5. Bibliographical references.

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON EPIC AND ROMANCE IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

The Lord of the Rings is probably one of the literary works that has proven most difficult to pinpoint genre-wise. Since its publication in 1954-55 it has been labelled myth, epic, romance, heroic romance, adventure novel, fantasy, heroic fantasy, and fairytale, to name but a few. One might even read it as a narrative poem or a depository of «reversed [etymological] engineering» (Gilliver, 2006, p. 144).

Within this overwhelming amount of generic considerations, in the field of comparative literature *The Lord of the Rings* has been most frequently studied within the contexts of romance and epic. Over the years it has been convincingly compared to the literature of Chrétien de Troyes and Wolfram von Eschenbach (Ryan, 1984); to Milton's works (Sly, 2000), Virgil's compositions (Morse, 1986; Greenman, 1992; Obertino, 1993), Homer's epics (Fenwick, 1996), and to the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Miller, 1991; Schlobin, 2000), as well as many other literary expressions in these two genres with bearings on *The Lord of the Rings*. While it is true that this approach leaves out important generic aspects of the global picture, such as the narrative's strong adherence to the novel genre and to mythic traditions beyond romance and epic narratives, it is a justified approach in many ways. Tolkien *did* draw on many sources from the mediaeval and ancient world, in which romance and epic modes of fiction dominated. This has been persuasively shown in a multitude of essays in anthologies such as those edited by Battarbee (1993), Reynolds & GoodKnight (1996), Clark & Timmons

(2000), and Isaacs & Zimbardo (2004), as well as in a good number of articles found in the specialized journals *Tolkien Studies*, *Mythlore*, *Studies in Medievalism*, and *Inklings: Jahrbuch für Literatur und Asthetik*, among others. Such preferences may have been a result of personal taste, but also of Professor Tolkien's academic research at Oxford University, where he taught and translated Old and Middle English for many years.

However, quite apart from the author's biographical data, or the sheer amount of scholarship that centres on the disclosure of analogues between Tolkien's literary work and that of others, there is a strong case to be made for epic and romance features as being dominant in *The Lord of the Rings* on purely *generic* grounds. Let us take a brief look at these two literary traditions in order to make this a little clearer.

The first *epic* narratives of Classical Antiquity are long tales that take place in a semi-primordial setting in which the supernatural and the natural worlds blend freely. The setting here is typically the Mediterranean world of the Bronze Age, also called the Heroic Age. The heroes may be more or less direct descendants of gods or goddesses, such as Achilles or Aeneas; they may have a certain degree of divine blood in their veins, like Odysseus, or they may be humans that are helped by some divine agency, for instance Jason of the *Argonautica*. One of the main projects of the epic narratives of Classical Antiquity was to preserve the cultural legacy of a particular community – to recall modes of behaviour considered ideal and to establish a distinctive and coherent heroic-mythic-historical past of that community. The *Iliad*, for instance, is an epic account of a war between the Greeks and the Trojans, but it was composed and written for a Greek audience and as such it became decisive in shaping the idea of what it meant to be a Greek citizen – for the Greeks. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil started out from the opposite side in order to help the Roman emperor re-establish a sense of what it meant to be a Roman citizen, by means of a heroic tale that centred on the mythic-heroic foundation of Rome. At the same time, epic narratives are marked by a strong nostalgia for this lost, heroic world of the past.

As Hainsworth (1991, p. 6) says, epic narratives differ from plain heroic poetry in that they not only celebrate the heroic action; they also explore and question its consequences. While the heroic exploits are used as the central thread in the story, many other stories, or *digressions*, are attached to it at a subordinate level. This is such a salient feature that most scholars consider it central to the idea of the epic narrative – for instance, it is significant that Aristotle, the first scholar to produce written literary criticism concerning the epic tradition, should explain Homer's narrative technique by highlighting the use of a central story as a starting point for other episodes that adhere to it (*Poetics*, XXIII). These digressions are frequently included to create temporal and spatial depth, and one of the greatest challenges for tellers or writers of epic narratives is to make the strict internal coherence, with its exquisite attention to the consequences of what has been said and done,

compatible with the self-contained, almost encyclopaedically complete world the heroes inhabit. One way of solving the ensuing difficulties is to compress the temporal span of the main story, which normally begins just before the dénouement of the most crucial events. An example is the central heroic action of the *Iliad*, that tells of the last days of a ten-year-long war while at the same time evoking the whole world of the civilization in which it takes place, together with the (pseudo)historical chain of events leading up to it.

These would be some of the main characteristics of «full-scale» epic narratives, which we find mainly in the Classic Greek and Roman literature. The most known examples of such tales are Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Some would perhaps add the *Argonautica* of Appolonius Rhodius, and the much later *Beowulf*, to the list. However, other mediaeval works also exhibit at least some of the aforementioned traits. If we broaden the definition we might include some *chanson de geste* – narratives of the Middle ages, such as the *Nibelungenlied* (but probably not *Le Chanson de Roland* and *El Cantar del Mío Cid*, that lack in epic depth and fullness in their portrayal of time, space, and the sum of a culture), and the religious epics of Dante and Milton (that in thematic scope, style, and narrative technique come close to the ancient epics of Homer and Virgil), but we would certainly be stretching the limits of the genre too far if we included the works of Malory, Ariosto, Boiardo, Tasso and Spenser, too influenced by romance standards to be considered epic literature in their own right.

Where, then, would Tolkien's work come into the picture? On many levels, and quite ostensibly at that. *The Lord of the Rings* is the story of the end of the Third Age and the central action spans two years, but the text also sums up the main historical events and the cultural legacy of several thousand years of the History of Middle-earth. As in the epic tradition, the temporal and spatial depth of the world is transmitted by means of digressions that are motivated by the main action – for instance, Gandalf's narrative of the history of the Ring in the second chapter of the book, or the tales and testimonies given at the Council of Elrond – but also by regular catalogues in the appendices, which must be seen as an internal part of the narrative.

Another epic feature of *The Lord of the Rings* is that the story is set in a remote past which blends historical and primordial time: Tolkien (2000, p. 239) considered that the events take place in this world, but that «the historical period is imaginary». At the same time, he provided this pseudo-historical past with a proper cosmogony and a pantheon of gods, though they are not frequently referred to in the actual text but come through as a mythic backdrop to the story.

Like the Homeric heroes, Aragorn – who on the epic level at least is the most conspicuous protagonist of the tale – is an exemplary representative of his community, and his deeds constitute the central thread in the epic part of the tale. As many epic heroes,

he is neither purely mythic nor completely human, but of a lineage related to the gods, superior to the human race in lifespan.

The Lord of the Rings is also similar to epic narratives in that its internal logic and coherence does not depend on a realist kind of verisimilitude, but neither is it a dream-like world without reference to space and time. In *The Lord of the Rings* we find a very obvious intention to invest the fictional world with considerable spatial and temporal coherence – more so, I would say, than in most realist novels – by means of constant references to distances and dates, tales and (pseudo)historical data that evoke a thoroughly historicized and complete world in spite of the presence of supernatural elements.

Certain parts and passages of the narrative, such as the Battle of Helm's Deep, or The Battle of the Fields of the Pelennor, exhibit not only themes, actions and character-types that are singularly typical of the old epic narratives set in pagan contexts, but even reproduce the heroic alliterative diction of the descriptive passages – a feature intimately related to the original oral transmission of such tales.

If we move on to the *romance* genre, in purely etymological terms it is a mediaeval literary form or a poetic composition written in a Romance language; i.e., a language derived from Latin. A slightly more detailed generic description is found in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which defines it as a mediaeval story about chivalric adventure that includes themes of love and religious allegory. However, there is more to the genre than that. Most stories of the romance type certainly deal with chivalry, love, adventure and mystery, but these subjects may be explored in many different narrative modes. For instance, the term can be applied to episodes or entire books by authors as varied as Homer, Appolonius Rhodius, Chrétien de Troyes, Malory, Ariosto, Horace Walpole, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Morris and John Buchan. Rather than thinking of this genre as a fixed set of narrative characteristics and themes, it is probably more accurate to say that romance is a literary portrayal of a fluctuating perception of reality, centring on the protagonists' subjective visions of the world and how these visions are related to his or her spiritual, amorous and moral life.

If we are to undertake any attempts at further classification, I believe, together with Beer (1977), that it is possible to speak of three main stages in the evolution of the genre: mediaeval romance; Renaissance or Elizabethan romance (depending on where it was written); and Nineteenth-century romance. Typical of *mediaeval romance* – for instance, the works of Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, the anonymous author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Robert de Boron, among others – is the *quest*, related to the protagonist's personal growth and moral maturation, by means of all sorts of bewildering, haphazard, and extravagant adventures. In more technical terms, many of the authors of mediaeval romance rely heavily on central images as metaphors

for truth, beauty, moral perfection, etc., to make the overall significance of the story transcend more forcefully. The Holy Grail is perhaps the most famous example, but most stories rooted in this narrative tradition are brimful with other poetically rendered symbols, making them markedly allegorical and symbolic in character.

Verisimilitude is, in mediaeval romance, always secondary to the central aim of conveying spiritual ideals, and the physical space often appears quite distorted, becoming vague and dim. Everyday paraphernalia, on the other hand – animals, food, tools, weapons, architectonical details, heraldic displays, and so on – can easily amass pages of meticulous description. In mediaeval romance, the portrayal of time and space does not convey a realist vision of the world and neither does the action: one example is the hysterical succession of adventures that continually cross the knight's path, seemingly without any fixed narrative plan. All these traits make the romance narratives acquire a dreamlike and transcendent quality.

In the late Middle Ages and during the Renaissance, another type of romance narrative emerged, blending with the more coherent, serious and rigid epic style. While these tales are often very long and centred on historical or pseudo-historical events, they are also marked by the presence of a long chain of more or less interconnected romance adventures of the most gratuitous and at times even hilarious kind. However, these adventures are often subjected to a more organized narrative plan than their mediaeval predecessors, sometimes piecing together into a coherent whole a previously chaotic corpus of tales and legends, as in Malory's *Le Mort D'Arthur*; sometimes sending more modern heroes across the mediaeval world of adventure with ironic winks, as in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*. We may add Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*; Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* and Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* to the list of the most famous examples of this kind of romance, by some also called *epic romance*.

The seed to the next stage in the development of romance literature was sown when novelistic verisimilitude, narrative coherence and attention to credible and particular «facts of life» were mixed with the previously described attachment of the romance genre to a subjective perception of reality and the implicit acknowledgement of strange and powerful forces (spiritual, aesthetic, psychological or otherwise) acting upon the protagonists' imagination in distressing and/or enchanting ways. The gothic novel, featuring works of authors such as Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve and Matthew Gregory Lewis, was the first distinctive expression of this phase in the evolutionary chain of romance literature to take shape in the middle of the Eighteenth century. The combination of romance and realist novel standards developed into a good number of sub-genres in the Nineteenth century, such as the original fairy-tale tradition of the German Romantics and British Victorian writers; the pseudo-mediaeval narratives of Walter Scott; the prose-romance tradition of Nathaniel Hawthorne and others; the fantasy novel as developed

by George MacDonald and William Morris, and the British adventure novel which includes works of writers such as Rider Haggard and John Buchan.

The Lord of the Rings is indebted to most of these expressions of romance in one way or another. As in mediaeval romance, many of the adventures in Tolkien's narrative do indeed seem to take place gratuitously and the improbable coincidences are many (at least from the point of view of more realist modes of fiction). For instance, Tolkien's use of *eucatastrophe* – the author's own term for the unexpected happy turn of events that he considered one of the pillars of a successful fairy tale (Tolkien, 2008, pp. 75-76) – can be said to adhere more easily to the romance genre than to any other narrative paradigm. As in mediaeval romance, in Tolkien's work there is also a constant mélange of Christian and pagan motifs, offering an apparently secular and half-mythic, half-legendary alternative to the contemporary audience without completely losing touch with a Christian world-view and ethos[1]. Furthermore, we frequently come across visual images that are used to express the essence of the protagonists' experience – for instance, the statue of the king in Ithilien, vandalised by orcs but redeemed by flowers, or the symbolically rendered stream flowing out on the barren rocks of Mordor. Sometimes, usually coinciding with episodes taking place in forests such as the Old Forest, Lothlórien and Fangorn, the perception of space and time becomes vague and unstable, conveying a sense of a dreamlike reality in which the strangest adventures may (and do) take place.

As for later examples of the romance tradition that have left their mark on *The Lord of the Rings*, we may read Frodo and Sam's journey with Gollum towards Mount Doom within the context of the British adventure novel, both in terms of characterization and themes (Lobdell, 2004, pp. 1-24; Simonson, 2008, pp. 200-202). The narrative treatment of the episodes taking place in Shelob's Lair and at Cirith Ungol could be taken straight out of a tale of gothic horror, in the vein of M. G. Lewis, E. A. Poe, or even H. P. Lovecraft, while the Ithilian interlude bears a certain resemblance to characters, diction, settings and themes at display in the pseudo-mediaeval prose romances of Walter Scott, or other British renderings of mediaeval legends, such as Gilbert's (1998) version of Robin Hood (that was first published in 1912).

In short, it seems safe to say that the epic and romance traditions dominate a great part of *The Lord of the Rings*. In fact, we might situate most of the action from Rivendell and up to the final episode of the Scouring of the Shire within the framework of these genres (and their different subgenres) without too much effort. The epic Council of Elrond, in which many digressive stories from the past and from more peripheral parts of Middle-earth are pulled into the main thread that concerns the War of the Ring, sets the scene for the ensuing

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[1] In my essay «Tolkien's Triple Balance: A Redemptive Model of Heroism for the Twentieth Century» (forthcoming), I discuss the dichotomy between a Christian and a pagan ethos in Tolkien's literature at greater length.

epic episodes taking place in Rohan, Gondor, and at the Black Gate, in turn interspersed and imbued with a distinctive romance flavour, added by the episodes taking place in Lórien, Fangorn, and Ithilien, and in the episodes following the victory at the Black Gate.

2. PROBLEMS WITH GENRE-BASED INTERPRETATIONS OF *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

However, by choosing romance or epic as our point of departure for readings of *The Lord of the Rings*, we may become blinded to other generic aspects of the text. What of the 19th century-novel standards in the opening chapters of the tale? How do we make room for the nature-mythic qualities of the Tom Bombadil-digression; the supernatural forces fighting for supremacy of Frodo's consciousness at Amon Hen; or the overtones of Nordic and Christian myth blended in the duel between the Balrog and Gandalf on the bridge of Khazad-dûm? How can we account for the particular stylistic features of the dialogue between the hobbits and the *rohirrim*, vacillating between novelistic and epic standards? And what about Saruman's very modern, «novelistic» speech at Isengard? Though romance and epic are the most salient genres at play in Tolkien's work, to read *The Lord of the Rings* only as a work in these traditions is to obscure other areas of generic interaction and miss out on some central stylistic features which are at the core of the particular aesthetic attraction of this literary work.

It can of course be argued that epic and romance are the basis for the modern novel and its different variants – that, for instance, epic narratives of Classical Antiquity were used by authors such as Chrétien de Troyes and Chaucer and furnished with mediaeval clothing; that the romance genre is, in fact, an integral part of both the epic – from Ulysses' journey in the enchanted archipelago on through the romance of Jason and the Golden Fleece in the Argonautica – and the novel – as in *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, Cervantes' famous parody of the romance genre[2] in what has been labelled the first truly modern novel. It might be said that the bud of the novel has been carried forward through the ages through these generic vehicles, until it flowered in modern English in the first half of the 18th century with Defoe and Richardson, and subsequently developed into even more elastic sub-genres. We might even go as far as to say that myth, heroic poetry and folk tales were always an integral part of epic and romance narratives, both in secular and Christian forms, and that between the two they contain all other literary modes of expressions. From this standpoint, *The Lord of the Rings* is certainly a work firmly set in the romance and epic tradition – but then again, what literary work wouldn't be? Clearly, such an all-inclusive definition does not help us much in our struggle to bring to light the generic distinctiveness of Tolkien's alluring narrative.

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[2]   For an illuminating study on the interdependence of Cervantes' novel and the preceding romance tradition, *vid*. Jewers, 2000.

There is also an added difficulty with a fixed genre-based approach when it comes to reading and interpreting *The Lord of the Rings*, because a substantial part of the underlying narrative structure of Tolkien's work is made up by the actual *tension* operating between different genres in dialogue with each other. This, I believe, is the key to interpret the stylistic and generic features of the work *relevantly* – that is, within its own established context, within the context of the Western narrative tradition as a whole, and within the context of contemporary literature written in English. If we choose one particular genre as the yardstick against which to measure the work's success in narrative terms, we tend to end up with the conclusion that *The Lord of the Rings* does not quite make sense within the given limits of the genre in question. This, I believe, is very often the result of the aforementioned tension, which in turn results from a narrative and stylistic *exploration* of the different genres' constraints.

Let me try to show this by taking a look at a few examples of the inconsistencies that arise when interpreting and judging Tolkien's narrative from the point of view of a particular genre. Aragorn, one of the central characters of *The Lord of the Rings* is, in fact, many different Aragorns, depending on the narrative circumstances in which he operates in various stages of his journey towards Minas Tirith and kingship. From an overall perspective, the story of Aragorn may well be called epic – as it implies or emphasises most of the distinctively epic features that we have commented on earlier. However, the epic character of his journey is insistently «marred» by other elements that, generically speaking, belong most properly to other traditions. One example of this is Aragorn's «vain pursuit» of Merry and Pippin. At this point in the story, from an epic point of view Aragorn should hasten to Gondor, make war against his foes and reclaim the throne that belongs to him by right of blood. Instead, he sets out to save two hobbits, who at this point seem totally insignificant for the outcome of the global, epic War of the Ring. This little adventure is obviously bound to fail from the point of view of purely epic paradigms – and so it does. On the other hand, the episode makes a lot of sense in a romance narrative centred on the quest for moral and spiritual growth, in which the protagonist exposes himself to a series of tests to evaluate his virtues and shortcomings in this respect. In the words of Gandalf:

> [...] 'Come, Aragorn son of Arathorn!' he said. 'Do not regret your choice in the valley of the Emyn Muil, nor call it a vain pursuit. You chose amid doubts the path that seemed right: the choice was just, and it has been rewarded. For so we have met in time, who otherwise might have met too late. But the quest of your companions is over. Your next journey is marked by your given word. You must go to Edoras and seek out Théoden in his hall. For you are needed. The light of Andúril must now be uncovered in the battle for which it has so long waited. […]' (Tolkien, 1993, p. 522).

Aragorn's moral strength has been tested, Gandalf implies, and he has been rewarded for passing it. This assertion, on behalf of a moral authority, gives Aragorn the final license to abandon the idealist hunt for the hobbits and embark on the bellicose adventures that are to be fulfilled in the War of the Ring. Moving out of the romance forest and on to the epic wastes of Rohan, he is able to cast off his inhibiting romance cloak and assert his epic ego fully. Already at the gates of Meduseld a quite different Aragorn emerges, engaged in an aggressive and violent argument with the door warden and showing us a side of himself which is far removed from the suffering romance knight who only a few pages earlier was ready to face the risk of failure and humiliation for the sake of spiritual growth and moral commitment. Now Aragorn refuses to leave his sword outside the Hall and defies both the door warden and the King of Rohan by proudly affirming his identity, up to a point where armed combat seems inevitable[3].

What really concerns us here is whether or not the epic Aragorn, blood-thirsty and arrogant at the gates of Meduseld, is compatible, within the narrative framework of *The Lord of the Rings*, with the romance Aragorn humbly trying to aid a pair of weak hobbits. Put next to each other, the sequences would certainly seem incoherent and hence increase the difficulties in measuring the success of Aragorn's characterization against other achievements written in the romance or epic genres. Because, if we choose epic as a yardstick, Aragorn's humble quest for the hobbits makes little sense – and if we choose romance, his arrogant and foolhardy stance at the gates of Meduseld is quite out of line with the requirements of etiquette on behalf of questing romance knights seeking aid at a royal house. This «problem» is not exclusive of Aragorn, or of the genres of epic and romance; it pervades the whole range of genres and subgenres, and the characters related to them, in *The Lord of the Rings.* Even if we would accept a mélange between epic and romance as the dominant genre in this work, the many novelistic features of the narrative would interfere quite unfavourably, and with great insistence at that: the trivial novelistic concerns and carefree tone of the opening chapters, with Gandalf sticking out his hand through the open window at Bag End and hauling Sam by the ear with expressions such as «Bless my beard!» is only one example. Then again, if we choose the novel as the «official» generic vehicle for a comparative analysis, the ethereal elves, the high-sounding solemn speeches, the heroic portrayal of war, etc., all make the story difficult to judge relevantly.

This stylistic peculiarity has tricked some commentators into thinking that Tolkien developed his plot and his characters without any clear sense of direction or coherence – at least from the point of view of the genre the commentator has chosen as reference. Manlove (1978, p. 181), for instance, attributes the fact that Tolkien's

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[3] For a more complete analysis of Aragorn's road to kingship from the point of view of genre inter-action, *vid*. Simonson, 2008.

novelistic outset is modified towards romance standards as the narrative goes on, to sheer incompetence of Tolkien as a writer. However, to say that *The Lord of the Rings* is a poorly crafted narrative with reference to the appearance of romance elements is just as absurd as to complain about the flatness of Achilles' characterisation in the *Iliad*, the physical impossibility of Atlas being turned into a mountain in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the excessive emphasis on heroic feats in *Chanson de Roland*, or the lack of realism in the descriptions of physical space in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Actually, it is not only absurd – it is misleading, too, because in *The Lord of the Rings* the narrative transitions between the different registers are subtle and efficient, leading the average reader to accept the shifts in tone, diction, descriptions, etc. without usually raising an eyebrow. At least, few qualified critical commentaries have highlighted flaws in generic cohesion, and there have been *many* qualified commentaries on this work over the last fifty years.

3. RELEVANT READINGS OF *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* IN TERMS OF LITERARY GENRE

Let us now return to a question which was implicitly posited earlier: how can we account for the generic interaction in Tolkien's work and measure its success? The question is relevant not only from the point of view of analysing the work's intrinsic literary qualities, but also because the difficulties in judging it within the framework of a defined generic context has made it problematic to evaluate Tolkien's achievement within the panorama of English literature written in the 20th century. I believe, like Honegger (2008) that the stylistic particularity of Tolkien's work is one of the strongest reasons for those unfavourable responses that miss the target altogether, especially on behalf of the inheritors of the so-called *New Criticism*, who tended to judge literature from a modernist perspective[4]. However, the lack of a defined generic context has also been one of the main reasons for the shortcomings of more enthusiastic critics, who in their readings have emphasised certain generic aspects – mostly related to mediaeval sources – at the expense of others, making *The Lord of the Rings* look like a piece of literature quite out of touch with its times, from a generic as well as a thematic point of view.

Only until quite recently, the question of how to interpret and assess *The Lord of the Rings* without losing touch with the fact that it has strong ties both to romance and epic literary practices *and* to contemporary literary expressions, remained largely unanswered, if addressed at all. This is actually quite surprising, since the great amount of possibilities for critical interpretation related to different sets of genre-based conventions,

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[4]   The most notorious examples are probably Wilson's (1956) and Toynbee's (1961) naïve dismissals of Tolkien's work as escapist and juvenile.

together with the seemingly endless amount of analogues to literary works taken from very varied literary traditions, seem to indicate that *The Lord of the Rings* is made up of all genres at the same time, and this is a stylistic device that links it very clearly to some very famous examples of more or less contemporary literature written in the English language. The simultaneous presence of genres taken from different stages in the evolution of the Western literary tradition is in fact one of the main features of three of the most admired and read works of the so called high modernism – Joyce's *Ulysses*, Pound's *The Cantos*, and Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The «mythical method» – a label coined by Eliot to refer to the structural framework taken from mythical (or epic) sources that organises a seemingly chaotic dispersal of images in Joyce's *Ulysses* – yields a simultaneous presence of the whole literary past of the Western world, as can be clearly seen not only in Joyce's work, but in *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*, too. Much of the same thing happens in *The Lord of the Rings*[5].

One of the first scholars to acknowledge the simultaneous presence of a multiplicity of genres in this work was Tom Shippey, who in 1983 published *The Road to Middle-earth*, which remains the most influential comprehensive study of Tolkien's literature up to this date. Shippey (2003, pp. 210-211) does not establish a common ground between Tolkien and modernism, but he goes as far as to highlight the fact that *The Lord of the Rings* incorporates the five modes of literature, as outlined by Northrop Frye (1971) in his classic study of literary genres *Anatomy of Criticism*, first published in 1957. This is not the place to explain Frye's theory of modes in detail; suffice to say that each of the five modes is related to the power of the protagonist over his fellow men and over his environment, ranging from the heroes of myth (gods) in the *mythic* mode, on through the heroes of the epic tales in the mode of *romance*; the heroes of the chanson de geste – type in the *high mimetic* mode; the common man or woman of the realist novel in the *low mimetic* mode, and the underdogs of the *ironic* mode, whose protagonists are inferior to other people and to their environment. Shippey (2003, p. 219) believes that one of the main reasons why *The Lord of the Rings* appeals to such a broad audience is the singular way in which it combines these different narrative tempers. While I agree with Shippey on this, I believe that we should add the fact *The Lord of the Rings*, together with the works of the three canonical modernist writers we just mentioned, also belong in a strong (though not complete) sense to the sixth mode outlined by Frye, namely *ironic myth*, which is characterised, among other things, by a return to mythic structures, often incorporating a great part of the preceding literary traditions of the Western world on a simultaneous level. In Frye's (1971, p. 42) words:

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[5]   For an analysis of Tolkien's version of the «mythical method», *vid*. Honegger, 2006.

Irony descends from the low mimetic: it begins in realism and dispassionate observation. But as it does so, it moves steadily towards myth, and dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to reappear in it. Our five modes evidently go around in a circle. This reappearance of myth in the ironic is particularly clear in Kafka and in Joyce [...] However, ironic myth is frequent enough elsewhere, and many features of ironic literature are unintelligible without it.

Why, then, was not *The Lord of the Rings* appreciated as a new, albeit unusual, version of high modernism upon publication? Simply put, because there are many formal differences between Tolkien's literature and the works of the three great modernists, rooted in profound disagreements about aesthetic preferences and what it means to «reflect [the contemporary] time as it is», to use Traversi's (1978, p. 54) somewhat sweeping definition of T. S. Eliot's literary ambition. In particular, Tolkien's tale shows a different treatment of the dialogue between the narrative traditions of the past. In the modernist literature, the dialogue between genres that interact on a simultaneous level yields ironic results, juxtaposing a trivial and often seemingly senseless present with a glorious and ceremonial past full of (now lost) meaning, almost as if the authors were splashing stains of colour randomly on a classic canvas. The result is a shocking contrast between different techniques, motifs, and world-visions. Tolkien's aesthetic agenda is entirely different in this respect. Consciously or not, he weaves the different traditions together, creating a much smoother tapestry based on a more harmonious dialogue between seemingly opposing world views, narrative techniques, styles and dictions. Tolkien tones down the potential clashes by means of carefully prepared transitions, making the dialogue almost invisible. Instead of rendering the old heroism derisive in the face of a very much un-heroic present (as represented by the hobbits), or the other way around, he somehow makes the two of them compatible *within the narrative framework* of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The key to understand the difference lies in the obtrusive lack of irony in Tolkien's literature. Again, this is not the place to delve deeper into the reasons for Tolkien's lack of appreciation for modernist aesthetics – related, among other things, to linguistic, religious, philosophical and personal artistic convictions – but it is important to highlight the fact, because it might prove a good starting point in our quest to explicate Tolkien's particular use of the romance and epic genres. Before doing so, however, let us turn to the Russian critic and philosopher Michael Bakhtin (1982), who will help us acquire some necessary theoretical background. In his classic study *The Dialogic Imagination* (first published 1975), made up of four essays that have contributed significantly to the scholarship in the field of literary theory and comparative literature, Bakhtin explains the concept of *dialogism* as the most distinctive stylistic feature of the novel genre. As opposed to the epic, whose major drive is to create a homogeneous, complete,

self-contained fictional world, the novel is capable of drawing other genres into its orbit and make use of them in a dialogistic, heterogeneous way.

The second concept of Bakthin which is relevant to our present purpose is the *chronotope*. When discussing the forms of time in the novel, Bakhtin refers to this concept as the particular relationship between space and time in a given narrative context. This is what defines the different centres of artistic expression within a work of fiction in the novel genre, and it is both the particular combination contained within each chronotope *and* the particular relationship between multiple chronotopes within a given novel, that makes each work in the genre unique.

This approach to the novel genre opens up new vistas when contemplating the dialogue between genres in *The Lord of the Rings*. According to Bakhtin's definitions, Tolkien's work could be read and interpreted as a novel, consisting of different chronotopes that in turn display particular genre dialogues, depending on the portrayal of the relationship between space and time contained in each. For instance, this perspective might disclose the more profound reasons why Aragorn acts like a romance hero in Fangorn and like an epic hero at Meduseld, explaining the differences in attitude, diction, and in the narrator's descriptive variations on the basis of the particular combinations of narrative elements that integrate conceptions of space and time, and hence also worldviews and generic expressions, in each of the episodes.

At a first glance, this would seem to make sense. A whole series of narrative elements related to the romance tradition dominates the action taking place in Fangorn, such as Gandalf's mysterious appearance out of nowhere like a regular romance wizard, or the actual forest environment that encapsulate the characters, blurring their perception of space and time. Similarly, a number of elements related to the world of epic affect the dialogue in the narrative zone of Meduseld – not only the theme of the heroic approach to a royal hall but the entire environment of Rohan, with close ties to *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon world, or the *rohirrim*'s strong emphasis on heroic feats as the only way to achieve immortality, mark the diction, style and characterisation.

To take the argument further, we might go on to say that *The Lord of the Rings* is a novel made up of a great number of narrative zones (or chronotopes, in Bakhtin's terminology), and the construction of each of these depends on the dominant elements in the particular dialogues between different literary genres taken from the Western narrative tradition as a whole.

However, in the line of the modernist approach to tradition, Bakthin also stresses parody and irony as the essential trigger of the dialogic imagination – in his view, the ironic relationship with previous tradition is necessary in order to liberate the genres of the past from their more rigid bounds and make a new and innovative use of them

within the sphere of the novel genre. Again, this would not be applicable to *The Lord of the Rings*, whose stance is not at all ironic but rather sincerely respectful, almost to the point of innocence, towards the preceding literary traditions it incorporates. And this starting point makes all the difference, as we said earlier, because it yields a dialogic style which is very distinct from the contemporary works that exhibit a similar literary drive.

Is *The Lord of the Rings*, then, *sui generis*? Perhaps. But does this also imply that it is impossible to interpret it from a given set of generic standards, and therefore also impossible to compare and evaluate it within the context of contemporary literature? Not necessarily. Clearly, Tolkien's particular dialogic style, in which irony is absent, was evidently not fashionable in the mid-twentieth century. Some even claimed it was out of touch with the times, accusing it of escapism in terms as gross as «juvenile trash» (Wilson, 1956). Whether this is true or not is actually quite irrelevant when judging *The Lord of the Rings* as literature, but it is still worth to take it into account because, as we said earlier, it is probably one of the main reasons why the work has failed to enter the canon of studies in English literature: since the smooth handling of genre dialogue in this work made its relationship to contemporary literary expressions invisible, many critics did not know how to tackle it genre-wise. In other words, if we want to analyse Tolkien's work as literature on its own grounds, in its own right *and* within the context of twentieth century English literature, we would not only need to grasp the similarities between Tolkien's work and contemporary literary expressions, and to appreciate and understand the differences – due to the particular dialogic style in the work, we would also need to design a new set of critical tools, adapted to the narrative circumstances of *The Lord of the Rings*, in order to assess Tolkien's handling of genre in this work. But how would these tools look like?

One possibility is to stick to Bakhtin's premises up to a certain point, considering Middle-earth, as it is portrayed in *The Lord of the Rings*, as the artistic construction of a literary chronotope which is made up of a whole set of minor ones, each conditioning the spatio-temporal relationships and acting upon the different genres that take part in the dialogue in a particular way. We might then say that Tolkien's dialogue *differs* from contemporary literature in so far as the Western narrative traditions – myth, epic, romance, the novel, and their respective subgenres – interact in a previously unknown but still very much coherent world[6] that, because of the particular cohesion required by such a chronotope, exhibits a clear contextualization of references to the previous traditions. The ensuing *absence* of irony and parody triggers a need to create a different

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6   In spite of its invented space, history and mythology, Middle-earth is, of course, not completely foreign to the modern reader. In Curry's (1997, p. 24) opinion, *The Lord of the Rings* shows «exactly the world that is under severe threat from those who worship pure power, and are its slaves: the technological and instrumental power embodied in Sauron [...] and the epitome of modernism gone mad. We thus find ourselves reading a story about ourselves, about our own world».

dialogue, in which the various genres explore and interrogate each other's limits so as not to render the others absurd, ridiculous or generally superfluous in context.

Hence, in *The Lord of the Rings*, the character-drawing, the descriptions of action and setting, and the treatment of different themes are not coherent from the point of view of any fixed, genre-based conventions, but rather do they seem to acquire coherence from the *dialogue* between traditions. Depending on the particular narrative characteristics of each situation, as well as the degree of influence of the dominant generic vehicle and the intended movement of the transition, the traditions may add or abort the influence of others, but not without previously exploring each other's limits. This process defines a great deal of the characterization, the descriptions of physical space and the action presented in *The Lord of the Rings*, and it is fundamental to take it into account when analysing literary genre in this work – especially, perhaps, epic and romance.

4. CONCLUSIONS; A BRIEF OUTLINE OF POSSIBILITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Epic and romance are, since the beginning of narrative composition in Western literature, blended traditions – heavily indebted to myth, heroic poetry and folktales. The novel is so, too, and Tolkien's work hosts all these traditions within a framework based on a system of narrative transitions, superseding the modernist use of ironic clashes. The method for analysis outlined above pretends to reflect this particularity and provide us with a tool to analyse Tolkien's work relevantly. By identifying the underlying narrative strategies for these transitions, i.e., the different narrative zones, composed of particular dialogues that in turn make up the interweaving of literary genre in this work, it should be possible for us to analyse it both in its own terms and as a particular expression of contemporary vanguard literary tendencies. It is to be hoped that this perspective might help us clear the way for a new understanding of the place of *The Lord of the Rings* within English literature of the 20th century.

One possible approach to the study of Tolkien's work in the classroom would be to read it together with the modernists, both as a literary expression in its own right and as a valuable contrastive example of how literary genres of the past can be manipulated in a work of modern fiction without resorting to the «mythical method» and the irony of the modernists.

As we have seen, there are many possibilities for genre interpretation in a work as rich and varied as *The Lord of the Rings*. In this respect, quite little has still been done in terms of the actual style, the craftsmanship Tolkien employed[7]. The approach that we

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[7]   A couple of recent examples include Walker (2009) and Rateliff (2009).

have just outlined can be used for this purpose, but also to continue exploring the inter-relationships between, and interdependence of, the romance and epic traditions in general, and with regards to how these genres are associated to particular places, themes, and characters within Tolkien's work. Furthermore, it might be used to illuminate Tolkien's profound and wide-ranging appreciations of mediaeval literature, taken from a variety of traditions written in many different languages.

An interesting related perspective is the one adopted by Clive Tolley (1992) in his unfairly neglected essay «Tolkien and the Unfinished». Here, Tolley presents a general overview of Tolkien's tendency to rewrite literature that he sympathized with but would have liked to be different, and his drive to fill in the missing gaps in incomplete manuscripts with material of his own invention. Tolley's essay does not offer any in-depth analysis on the matter, but it has the merit of opening up essential lines of inquiry that have not been pursued at very great length by later scholarship. This reconstruction and filling-in of gaps may well be one of the major drives in Tolkien's authorship, not only in the works that most obviously exhibit this tendency, like *The Homecoming of Beorthnot*, but also in *The Lord of the Rings*, as shown, for instance, by the example of the inclusion of the Ents as a response to a (for Tolkien) unsatisfying episode in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*[8].

Finally, the proposed method's emphasis on dialogism should not be seen as the only possible or justified perspective. It is of course perfectly legitimate, and often very illuminating, to read and analyse Tolkien's work within the framework of *specific* genres. It might even be potentially rewarding to use it for didactic purposes, as an introduction to mediaeval or nineteenth century literature[9]. For instance, the student of *Beowulf*, of Old and Middle English poetry; the gothic novel; original nineteenth-century fairy tales, and imperial adventure novels, will in Tolkien's work find plenty of stylistic similarities and devices clothed in modern fiction, that might help them see more clearly the intentions of the classic authors. This, in turn, could prove a valuable starting point for a relevant analysis of the modern fantasy genre, heavily influenced by Tolkien's fiction.

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[8]   Tolkien himself (2000, p. 212) says of the Ents: «Their part in the story is due, I think, to my bitter disappointment and disgust from schooldays with the shabby use made in Shakespeare of the coming of 'Great Birnam wood to high Duinsane hill': I longed to devise a setting in which the trees might really march to war».

[9]   Lee and Solopova (2006) offer a good introduction to how Tolkien's works can be used for studying mediaeval literature. The opposite approach is offered by Turgon (2004), in an edition of a series of translations into modern English of medieval texts that were likely sources of inspiration for Tolkien. Turgon's explicit aim is to understand Tolkien's own work – both his translations and his prose.

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