Recreating Beowulf’s “Pregnant Moment of Poise”: Pagan Doom and Christian Eucatastrophe Made Incarnate in the Dark Age Setting of The Lord of the Rings

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Abstract
In The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien recreates the “pregnant moment of poise” that inspired him in his study of Beowulf. Tolkien believed that this moment was a brief period of “fusion” which occurred in the Dark Ages as paganism was in decline and Christianity on the rise, when the dueling notions of Doom and salvation briefly coexisted in the hearts and minds of the Anglo-Saxon people. Derived from a careful study of Tolkien’s fiction, lectures, letters, and the writings of his contemporaries, instructors, and friends, in combination with many Dark Age texts, the works of various Tolkien critics, historians, and specialists in the fields of Christian and Norse apocalypse, this thesis will consider the ways that Tolkien’s study of Beowulf inspired him in the creation of The Lord of the Rings.

Following the template that he outlined in his lecture, Tolkien integrated history, Christianity, and pagan myth to create a literary epic steeped in Christian and Norse apocalyptic images, in which incarnate religious figures walk abroad in a past that reflects the era in which Beowulf was set. The recreation of the “pregnant moment of poise” in this setting allows Tolkien to simultaneously enact the paradoxical outcomes of pagan Doom and Christian salvation at the novel’s climatic moments. When Doom and salvation collide, Tolkien’s heroes become martyrs without the necessity of death. Because they are mortals faced by powerfully magical enemies and are bereft of hope in victory, they are endowed with all of the rhetorical power that Doom elicits, but their miraculous deliverance enacts divine eucatastrophe, the moment of supreme joy that, to Tolkien, can only be fully appreciated when Doom gives birth to salvation.

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Recreating Beowulf's "Pregnant Moment of Poise": Pagan Doom and Christian Eucatastrophe Made Incarnate in the Dark Age Setting of The Lord of the Rings. Chairperson: John Hunt. In "The Lord of the Rings," Tolkien recreates the "pregnant moment of poise" that inspired him in his study of Beowulf. The recreation of the "pregnant moment of poise" in this setting allows Tolkien to simultaneously enact the paradoxical outcomes of pagan Doom and Christian salvation at the novel's climactic moments. When Doom and salvation collide, Tolkien's heroes become martyrs without the necessity of death. Yet it is the Christian and pagan version of comitatus that lead Beowulf to avenge Aushere's death. Comitatus is an agreement of loyalty and protection that men have with their lord. But because of the time that poet makes Grendel into a Christian character. The last time the Grendel enters Heorot he is "wearing God's anger" (36). Grendel represents something evil. The poet then combines the pagan idea of Ragnarok to further show to his Christian audience that Beowulf is fighting for God. Ragnarok is the end of the world and when all good warriors must fight for their g