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### **Modern Movie Magic**

Sixty years of *The Lord of the Rings* in publication has engendered much speculation and thoughtful criticism on the breadth, depth, and transcendence of Tolkien's masterpiece. In particular, Tolkien's story has many different kinds of heroes, each one accomplishing a different journey or purpose and ending up with a different fate. Verlyn Flieger provides a wonderful background of the different types of heroes in her essay "The Concept of the Hero." She shows that Aragorn is an example of an epic hero in the medieval tradition, while Frodo is a fairy-tale hero, the "common man" with whom the reader identifies. Although she presents Aragorn in particular as a classic example of the hero motif, she is careful to distinguish him as uniquely Tolkien's, and shows how his connection with other heroes in literature is present but hidden, thereby strengthening Tolkien's narrative as a whole. She also discusses Frodo's connection with mythic hero motifs, but shows how Frodo's role as the fairy-tale hero places the story within the realm of modern literature. These themes and motifs present in fairy-stories are a vital part of literature. Motifs are what "move readers and put them in touch with what is timeless", and Tolkien incorporates them effortlessly (Flieger 2012, 141).

In recent years, a body of work has emerged that deals with Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy seriously. Like Tolkien's work before it, Jackson's trilogy ran the risk of being dismissed as part of popular culture, and therefore unworthy of scholarly criticism. However, as time goes on, more and more academics are considering the movies as a creative work, both on their own and in comparison to Tolkien's work. Because "when literary scholars approach film adaptations, their

tendency is to compare the “literary” elements of the film, such as plot, characterization, themes, to those of the novel, and to ignore or downplay cinematic elements”, the critical conclusion is often that the film pales in comparison to the book (Ford and Reid 2009, 83). But in film, the change of medium necessitates change from the original, whether the change is in content, structure, or even characterization. For example, in *The Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy, Jackson has the liberty of using flashback rather than Tolkien’s tactic of staging lengthy conversations or including appendices to communicate background information. The cinematic format allows him to swing between characters, places, and times, in a way that Tolkien was unable to do without confusing his readers. However, the wider scope and the communication of background information early on in the films distance the film audience from the heroes. In the books we can follow characters very closely, hearing their innermost thoughts, in a way that the cinematic format simply does not allow. This often changes characterization, but does not necessarily subtract anything from the film in its own right. In fact, Jackson’s changes usually are not meant to slight Tolkien’s work; rather, Jackson makes changes out of necessity, because of a change in both audience and medium. In Jackson’s works, we see a tendency for the more “medieval” elements of Tolkien’s narrative to be translated into moments of high action, stretches of dramatic scenery, or lines of key dialogue. Modern elements, such as the struggle with inner demons, the search for love, and the pursuit of happiness are better addressed in the medium of film, and resonate more clearly with modern film audiences. Aragorn, as the traditional epic hero, is the character most affected by this reality. Here I will study the differences in his character and journey between movie and book, and show that the changes created for the movie bring Aragorn alongside Frodo and Sam as a modern hero.

In the beginning of his journey, Aragorn is the Ranger Strider, but already indicates that he is more than he seems through his knowledge of the Ring, Sauron, and the Nazgûl (Robertson 2008, 321). Strider’s introduction in both book and movie is relatively similar. In both formats, we hear Frodo muse

that if Strider were an enemy, he would “look fairer, but feel fouler” (FOTR I/x and FOTR “Into the Wild”). Strider seems to be untrustworthy, a perception reflected in the reactions of Mr. Butterbur the innkeeper and the other people of Bree, but Frodo, as one hero to another, recognizes his quality. In both formats, Strider has the line “if by life or death I can save you, I will” (in the book, spoken after they read Gandalf’s letter (FOTR I/x); in the movie, spoken in the scene “The Council of Elrond” while declaring his allegiance to Frodo during his journey to Mordor). This line shows us Aragorn’s willingness to sacrifice himself if it means saving others. In both movie and book, Aragorn possesses many qualities that resonate with the classic medieval motifs of the hero. Critics recognize that Tolkien used his vast knowledge of medievalism to purposefully incorporate these, though doing so with subtlety, making Aragorn a unique hero (Flieger 2012). These qualities and accessories include the star diadem that he wears, which was a symbol of royal heritage in many Northern European folk tales, and his name Elessar, meaning Elf-stone, which echoes many historical kings who also had variations of the words “elf” and “stone” in their names (Wainwright 2004, 30). He represents the disguised hero, who spends his developing years in obscurity, but whose destiny for greatness is foreshadowed (Flieger 2012, 143). His half-elven ancestry fulfills the quality of a supernatural ancestry, in line with heroes like Arthur, Galahad, Sigmund, and Sigend (Flieger 2012, 144). His sword Andúril possesses legendary characteristics, just as did Arthur’s sword Excalibur (Flieger 2012, 147). His leadership, skill in battle, and healing abilities are also beyond the ordinary person’s capacity. The “healer” motif is rooted in Anglo-Saxon cultural history: they held “the belief that some semi-divine quality of royal blood allowed kings to cure [diseases] through touch alone” (Ford and Reid 2009, 73).

The main difference between movie and book is that in the narrative, Aragorn intends all along to claim his identity as King, and recognizes the deeds he must perform before he will rightfully inherit the throne. Throughout the story, Aragorn’s true identity is established, and his own confidence in his position is communicated through the eyes of other characters. This happens when he reveals himself to

the Rohirrim, speaking his full name aloud for the first time: “I am Aragorn son of Arathorn, and am called Elessar, the Elfstone, Dúnadan, the heir of Isildur Elendil’s son of Gondor” (TT III/ii). Upon this declaration,

“Gimli and Legolas looked at their companion in amazement, for they had not seen him in this mood before. He seemed to have grown in stature while Éomer had shrunk; and in his living face they caught a brief vision of the power and majesty of the kings of stone. For a moment it seemed to the eyes of Legolas that a white flame flickered on the brows of Aragorn like a shining crown.” (TT III/ii).

The reader has been told before this moment that Aragorn is destined for greatness, but here we are shown the power and the glory that simmer beneath the Ranger exterior.

Despite Aragorn’s assurance of his role as rightful King, he still recognizes that he must wait for the opportune moment to take the throne, and must prove himself before he does so. A fitting illustration of this type of hesitation is after the battle at the Fields of Pelennor, when Aragorn is called to enter the Houses of Healing. He says, “this City and realm has rested in the charge of the Stewards for many long years, and I fear that if I enter it unbidden, then doubt and debate may arise” (ROTK, V/viii). He understands that he must take his time claiming the throne, allowing the people to become accustomed to the idea of the return of the King before he may ascend. But this should not be confused with a personal reluctance to become King, or a lack of confidence in his capabilities. Rather, “Aragorn is a character conscious of his destiny and determined to fulfill it” (Ford and Reid 2009, 71). A final attribute Aragorn possesses in the book is the idea of “sacral kingship” encompassed by his restoration of fertility throughout the land (Flieger 2012, 228). This restoration is symbolized by the new White Tree of Gondor. This idea originated from Tolkien’s study of Anglo-Saxon culture (Ford and Reid 2009, 72). In the movie, we do not get to see Gondor or Aragorn after Aragorn’s coronation, so this medieval motif is lost. But this omission actually works to strengthen the portrayal of Aragorn that Jackson has created.

In Jackson’s world, Aragorn has rejected the role of kingship, and must go on a journey of self-discovery and affirmation before he can claim the throne. His bloodline is the source of his weakness rather than the source of his strength (Ford and Reid 2009, 79). We see his uncertainty many times

throughout the film trilogy. As Boromir is dying, he declares his allegiance to Aragorn, in a moment when Aragorn is not sure if he deserves it. Aragorn says, "I do not know what strength is in my blood," to which Boromir replies, "I would have followed you my brother, my captain...my King!" (FOTR, "The Departure of Boromir"). On his deathbed, Boromir accepts Aragorn's lineage and right to the throne, resolving an arc that began at the Council of Elrond concerning the peoples of the South's distrust of monarchy, a "more political and less mythic" interpretation of the story (Ford and Reid 2009, 82). This is a drastic change from the book, where Boromir's death is more of a personal redeeming moment. Additionally, doubts in Aragorn's mind concerning his own strength are not present in the book. Aragorn only has "internal and short-lived doubts" such as when he is uncertain whether to follow Merry and Pippin after they are captured by orcs (Ford and Reid 2009, 77). But never is he concerned about his ability to rule or his role to play in the war against Sauron. Jackson's Aragorn is plagued by this uncertainty. He fears suffering the same fate as Isildur, being too weak to resist the Ring, and it is Arwen who must reassure him that he is "Isildur's heir, not Isildur himself" (FOTR, "The Sword That Was Broken"). We do not see Aragorn resolve this self-doubt until Elrond presents him with Narsil, reforged as Andúril, Flame of the West, and begs him to take his role as King if not for the good of Middle-earth, then in order to save Arwen, whose "life is now tied to the fate of the Ring" (ROTK, "Andúril, Flame of the West"). To this, Aragorn finally responds, "Sauron will not have forgotten the sword of Elendil. The blade that was broken shall return to Minas Tirith" (ROTK, "Andúril, Flame of the West").

This re-imagining of Aragorn all serves to make Aragorn a much more accessible hero, one that resonates with the modern hero archetype, the everyman, the unlikely warrior. His supernatural lineage, his powerful weapon, his healing capabilities: all are still present, but his internal struggle places him squarely in the realm of the modern hero, since "man warring with himself...is what much of modern fiction deals with" (Flieger 2012, 157). In the books, it is clearly Frodo who plays this role. Frodo

is the fairy-tale hero, not a warrior or an unknown destined for greatness, but the “common man” who “accepts an intolerable burden...simply because no one else volunteers” (Flieger 2012, 150).

In Frodo’s story, we experience the perilous quest that both saves the world and dooms him from ever being a part of it again. Tolkien himself characterized this ending as consistent with the realm of Faërie, where there is “an ever-present peril, both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords” (*On Fairy-Stories* 1966, 3). In many ways, Frodo’s heroism works as Aragorn’s complement. Frodo and Aragorn’s journeys are opposite in both scope and outcome, but are undertaken for a common purpose. Frodo’s quest could not have been completed without Aragorn leading the armies of the West. Both Frodo and Aragorn have qualities of the savior figure. Frodo is the one who makes the ultimate sacrifice to save all of Middle-earth, by undertaking the quest that changes his life irrevocably. Aragorn, for his part, plays a role in saving the world by bringing about the years of peace and fertility that accompany the defeat of Sauron. As he declares in the book, in another example of self-assurance: “in the high tongue of old I am *Ellessar*, the Elfstone, and *Envinyatar*, the Renewer” (ROTK V/viii). All of this changes in Jackson’s world. Frodo is no longer Aragorn’s complement, because Aragorn is more of a contemporary hero. Both experience self-doubt, both take on their roles reluctantly, and only because they feel others want or need them to.

The emphasis on Aragorn’s courtship with Arwen and his love life in general in the movies is also a major transition that the modern audience can empathize with. Though we do not recognize it until the end, in the book Aragorn’s claim of his kingdom also included winning Arwen’s hand as his queen (Flieger 2012). In the movie, their love story is an intense focus, as Aragorn’s uncertainty of his claim to the throne extends to an uncertainty if he will ever be able to spend his life with Arwen. This makes his journey more personal and less epic. As part of the “superhero monomyth” that underlies his characterization in the movie, he must renounce love until he has completed his task (Croft 2011, 219). This renunciation of romantic love for the duration of his journey is evident in the interactions between Aragorn and Éowyn. In the book, Éowyn’s love for Aragorn is mainly what Bradley (2004) characterizes

as “hero-worship.” Above all, Éowyn desires a noble death in battle, and her love for Aragorn is no different than the love Legolas, Gimli, the hobbits, and Boromir feel for him: love dominated by respect and honor (83). But because she is a woman, she deludes herself and the reader by interpreting it as romantic love. Even so, her conversation with Aragorn before he leaves for the Paths of the Dead is mainly dominated by her desire to ride with him as a comrade in battle, and it is only just before she leaves him that she alludes to her love for him: “those others who go with thee...would not be parted from thee- because they love thee” (ROTK V/ii). We are not privy to Aragorn’s reaction to this declaration, and ultimately it does not matter; his future with Arwen is promised, if not yet attained. But in the movie, this conversation between Aragorn and Éowyn is broken up, with dialogue from it placed elsewhere in the film and in the Two Towers, extending the amount of screen time that Aragorn and Éowyn have together. The effect of this is to convey Éowyn’s love for him as truly romantic, since their interactions are much more frequent and personal. These interactions include their conversation in Rohan while preparing the horses for riding, a fleeting and rather suggestive look from Aragorn to Éowyn before riding to meet the Warg ambush as the people of Rohan ride to Helm’s Deep (a sequence added by Jackson entitled “The Wolves of Isengard”), acceptance of a cup in celebration after the Battle of Helm’s Deep, and so on. This culminates in their conversation before he rides the Paths, and Aragorn asks of her, “Why have you come?” and her response is “Do you not know?” (ROTK, “Aragorn Takes the Paths of the Dead”). His confession “it is but a shadow and a thought that you love...I cannot give you what you seek” is a major event in the love triangle that has developed in the trilogy between Aragorn, Arwen, and Éowyn. The love triangle serves to humanize and modernize Aragorn: he is far away from his beloved, not sure if he will ever see her again, and having to take a path where success is unlikely. In the process he is forced to reject a beautiful, brave, and deserving woman. This rejection is mostly because of his love for Arwen, but can also be interpreted as his renunciation of all romantic love, on the premises that Arwen will never be his.

Another way in which the movie brings its audience closer to Aragorn is through the portrayal of his dreams. Many times throughout the trilogy, we are actually taken inside Aragorn's dreams, the only character for which this happens. The dreams are always about Arwen, and usually concerned with her fate and whether or not it will end up intertwined with his own. A prominent and recurring nightmare is one that seems to suggest Arwen's death, in which Aragorn's Evenstar necklace (a symbol for the movie audience of Arwen's pledge to him) falls from around his neck and shatters. This concept draws upon a theme of prophetic dreams throughout the book. But in the book, it is usually Frodo having prophetic dreams, most notably in the house of Tom Bombadil:

"Frodo heard a sweet singing running in his mind; a song that seemed to come like a pale light behind a grey rain-curtain, and growing stronger to turn the veil all to glass and silver, until at last it was rolled back, and a far green country opened before him under a swift sunrise." (FOTR I/viii).

The dream is fulfilled as Frodo sails into the West: "the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise" (ROTK VI/ix). This type of dream given to Aragorn places him among the ranks of modern heroes: we see into his deepest subconscious, and we know his innermost thoughts and feelings, as we do mostly for Frodo in Tolkien's original.

In his early criticism of *The Lord of the Rings*, W. H. Auden (1961) says: "the Quest tale is ill adapted to subtle portrayals of character; its personages are almost bound to be archetypes" (40). I do not think that Auden believes this convention to be true in *The Lord of the Rings*, but nevertheless felt it an appropriate question to introduce a discussion concerning whether Aragorn's character is enhanced or lessened through Jackson's on-screen portrayal. Auden's statement may inspire belief that perhaps Aragorn's book persona is too narrow, fitting too perfectly within a certain mold. Tom Shippey also accredits the validity of the movie portrayal when he muses on a potential list from someone who had seen the movies many times before reading the books: "It would be interesting to gather from such a person a list of... 'things Tolkien left out'" (Shippey 2004, 254). However, I do not think Tolkien omitted



anything from Aragorn's character, neither do I believe Jackson neglected any elements that should have been included. Both creators made choices tailored to their audiences, and their respective works are stronger for it.

In any discussion of heroes in *The Lord of the Rings*, Samwise Gamgee cannot be overlooked. Sam is a hero utterly unlike Frodo or Aragorn, in either movie or book. Sam is motivated by neither a medieval archetype nor a fairy-tale hero motif: his actions and ultimate heroism are done out of love for Frodo (Bradley 2004, 90). Sam is the only hero who receives the choice to "pass out of the Heroic Age into the world of today" (Bradley 2004, 91). This choice is given to Sam because he is the most modern hero, the only one who is able to Recover from the journey. I emphasize Recovery because the reader of *The Lord of the Rings* experiences this as well, explained by Tolkien as "return and renewal of health" but also having been made new, and "warned that all you had (or knew) was dangerous and potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild; no more yours than they were you" (*On Fairy-Stories* 1966, 59). The book and movie incarnations of both Frodo and Aragorn receive various endings to their tale. Book and movie Frodo are both changed forever by their quest and unable to return to the life they once knew, reversing the roles between the traditional fairy-tale hero and the epic hero (Croft 2011). Book Aragorn wins his kingdom, his Lady, and rules as one of the great kings of many myths before his. Movie Aragorn wins these things as well, and the viewer has a more personal understanding of their meaning to him rather than of their significance for the greater story of which Aragorn is a part. In this way, Aragorn's role in the movie is much more resonant with the modern viewer. Both Frodo and Aragorn's fates force them to remain in the Age that they helped to create. Though movie Aragorn has become more like Frodo and Sam through his personalized, intimate portrayal and altered motivations, Sam remains the truest and most enduring modern hero. In movie and book, Sam helps to lead the viewer and reader back into the real world. Because he is able to make the choice to remain in the Shire and return to his old life, he shows us what all those who are affected by Tolkien's narrative will experience:

returning to our homes, our families, and our gardens, but forever changed by what we have undergone.

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