

ARAGORN AND THE PATHS OF THE DEAD: ODYSSEUS COMES TO MIDDLE-EARTH

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...how is it then, unhappy man, you have left the sunlight and come here, to look on dead men, and this place without pleasure? – The Odyssey, Book XI.

For me the time of stealth has passed. I will ride east by the swiftest way, and I will take the Paths of the Dead. – The Lord of the Rings, Book V, Chapter 2.

Much has been made of the medieval literary influences on the fantasy works of J.R.R Tolkien, and rightly so. However, as important as it is to realize the dramatic contributions that Anglo-Saxon or Norse stories have made to the fabric of Middle-earth, to discount entirely the influence of tropes and themes of other literary traditions in *The Lord of the Rings* would be a disservice to both the story and the author. Tolkien was an extremely well-educated man, and his knowledge extended far past the Medieval philology for which he was best known academically. Long before he encountered the Old English mead halls, or the forges and mountains of the Finns, Tolkien was educated in the languages and myths of the ancient Greeks.¹ Though his interests certainly wandered on to different subjects as he grew up, the tales of classical antiquity have left indelible marks on the history and people of Middle-earth.

Perhaps the clearest example of classical influence on *The Lord of the Rings* is the voyage through the Paths of the Dead and subsequent summoning of the ghostly Oathbreakers by Aragorn in *The Return of the King*. Aragorn's encounter with the dead is not entirely without antecedent. One of the most well-known stories in Homer's *Odyssey* is the wily hero Odysseus's harrowing trip to the underworld. Like Aragorn, Odysseus is a hidden king, separated from his kingdom by forces far beyond his control. Both heroes must leave the land of the living for the underworld, face death,² and then return in order to regain their rightful places. As a literary device, Aragorn's encounter with the dead serves the same function as Odysseus's. For both characters the trip to the underworld involves a confrontation with the failures of the past, and only by overcoming these can either hero proceed in his quest. Both heroes symbolically conquer death, and thereby are able to achieve their greater goals.

The two episodes are aesthetically quite similar to one another. Both heroes are characters who, within their respective worlds, dwell on the border between the mundane and the supernatural.³ Both are guided by forces they don't quite understand to ends that they cannot be sure of. For both, the underworld, literal in Odysseus's case, or figurative in Aragorn's, is somewhat of a side quest to which supernatural agents have guided them as they pursue their main goals. As for the imagery of the two lands of the dead, though Aragorn and his company of riders do not enter Middle-earth's actual underworld, the sequence which describes the Paths of the Dead takes

¹ Garth, p. 14.

² Symbolically and literally.

³ Both are human, but Odysseus is descended from Zeus, and Aragorn from both the legendary kings of Numenor and the elves.

on a shadowy, ethereal feel that is reminiscent of Odysseus's trip to Hades.⁴

Neither hero decides to brave the realm of the speaking dead lightly. For both Aragorn and Odysseus the decision to make the journey is in accordance with supernatural instructions. Odysseus's supernatural guide to Hades is the sorceress Circe, who tells Odysseus that he must visit the prophet Teiresias before he can return home, and then gives him detailed instructions about the location of the entrance to Hades and what he must do in order to allow the prophet to speak.⁵ Teiresias, of course, is himself a conduit for supernatural wisdom, and tells Odysseus how he may ultimately soothe the wrath of the god he has angered. Both of these guides appear as humans, in terms that Odysseus can easily deal with, but both serve to connect him with the supernatural forces that control his world. Odysseus's fate is wrapped up in the will of the gods, and the gods use these agents, with their semi-divine wisdom, to move him along in his quest.

Aragorn, too, is urged to pursue the Paths of the Dead by prophecy, brought to him by agents who are more than human. The elves in this case serve much the same function as Circe and Teiresias do in the *Odyssey*. In *The Lord of the Rings*, elves occupy an intermediary position between the mortal world and the unseen forces that shape Middle-earth. If there are 'gods' at work in Middle-earth,⁶ their methods are far less direct than those of the *Odyssey*, but the elves serve as a reminder that supernatural forces support Aragorn and his companions.

Aragorn is told to "remember the Paths of the Dead"⁷ in a message from Elrond by his sons, the elves Elladan and Elrohir. The message, it is revealed, refers to an ancient prophecy by a seer named Mableth. The prophecy indicates that one who is descended from the legendary king, Isildur, will muster the Oathbreakers in time of greatest need. Not only does Aragorn have to muster the spirits in order to win the upcoming battle for Minas Tirith, but doing so will prove that he is indeed the heir to Gondor's throne, reinforcing that he is indeed a king. The ghosts within the mountain originally swore their broken oath to Aragorn's ancestor, and by forcing them to fulfill it, Aragorn will show that his authority and leadership are at least as strong as the heroic Isildur's.

In much the same way, those he meets during his trip through Hades reinforce Odysseus's kingship and heroic status to the reader. Of course, everyone knows that Odysseus is a king and a hero, but he is telling this tale as a vagabond who has washed up on the shores of a foreign kingdom. In the underworld he assumes a kingly role and holds court, as it were, dispensing the gift of ram's blood that gives the dead speech, and allowing the dead noble women to speak with him one by one. He then encounters Agamemnon and Achilles, the two greatest heroes of the Trojan War, who hail him as a fellow king and speak of the deeds they performed together. In this way Odysseus slyly reminds his audience that not only was he one of the foremost heroes of the Trojan War, but he was also one of the few to survive, and have a chance to reclaim his true station.

On a somewhat deeper level, Odysseus's successful encounter with the dead heroes of the Trojan War shows that he has overcome his own past and mortality, and that he will survive to reach Ithaca and restore his kingdom. Achilles, Agamemnon, and Aias exemplify the valor, power, and bravery of the heroes in the Trojan War, but their heroic road has led them straight into death's icy grasp. They are Odysseus's peers, and in fact they surpass him in all but cunning, for Agamemnon is the greater king, and Achilles the greater warrior. All their greatness and power, however, have done little more than lead them into cheerless damnation, and it seems reasonable that Odysseus can expect the same fate unless he adopts a different path. Apparently, to succeed

⁴ "...fear flowed like a grey vapour" (Tolkien 70). Or later Gimli felt "...a groping horror that seemed always just about to seize him; and a rumour...like the shadow-sound of many feet" (Tolkien 72).

⁵ Lattimore, p. 165.

⁶ There are, of course.

⁷ Tolkien, p. 55.

as a great hero means that he must fail as a husband and father, and betray the trust of his subjects. Of course, Odysseus is driven by something other than the lust for glory and fame that led heroes like Achilles to his doom. Odysseus never wanted to go to war or defeat the strongest foes he could find. His quest is to fulfill his responsibilities to his subjects, and to restore the father and husband lost by his family, reclaiming what is rightfully his. For him, death means failure, so he will continue to live.

The dead that Aragorn encounters similarly represent the past failures of those very much like him. The Oathbreakers call to mind that the humans of Middle-earth are historically undependable. They betrayed their lord in his hour of need by simple inaction and, in the same way, it would be very easy for Aragorn to flee back to his beloved Arwen and remove himself from the dangerous path ahead. The ancient lord of the Oathbreakers, Isildur, is an even sharper example of how drastically not only men, but specifically those men of Aragorn's kingly bloodline, can fail. Isildur's weakness and pride led him to allow evil to continue in Middle-earth when he could have destroyed it for good. The same weakness that plagued such a great hero as Isildur must also threaten to undo his descendant, Aragorn. Aragorn, however, like Odysseus, is blazing a new trail away from his past. He has already proven that he does not covet the One Ring that his ancestor failed to destroy, and, avoiding the temptation to take center stage, which would be his right as king, he allows himself to be sacrificed as a distraction so that another may become the hero who destroys evil.

Similar as Aragorn's voyage is to that of Odysseus, there are significant differences, and within those differences the method and viewpoint of J.R.R Tolkien becomes apparent. His love of ancient stories and themes is obvious, but in his own mythology a new theme is integrated, that of redemption. In Middle-earth, the tragedies that befall the heroes of other legends seem to be narrowly avoided, and ultimately turned to good. Here, Aragorn's kingdom will not be destroyed by lust and treachery, as Camelot was. Gandalf will not fall under the sway of an enchantress, and Theoden, in his old age, will regain the strength and wisdom that were stolen from him.

Tolkien uses the episode in the Paths of the Dead to show the same theme. Where Odysseus can do little more for the dead in Homer's Hades than enable them to speak for a little while, Aragorn is able to free the spirits of the Oathbreakers from the purgatorial prison in which they had so long languished and give them rest at last. Every single one of Odysseus's brave warriors dies during his return from Troy, while Aragorn musters the dead specifically so that the lives of his companions might be saved. Aragorn's encounter with death proves his heritage, yes, but it also reinforces the notion that he is the one who will set right the mistakes of the past, avoid the downfalls of his forefathers, and, as a *selfless* king, do what is necessary to defend his people.

This is not to slight Odysseus. He does everything in his power to bring his warriors home with him, but fate is against him. Teiresias, in his prophecy, tells Odysseus how he can reach home with his crew intact and in his own boat, but of course, the prophet's injunction not to harm the cattle of Helios is broken, and all besides Odysseus perish in a horrible fashion. Odysseus is doomed by Poseidon to be long-suffering, fated to endure all pains short of death itself before finally regaining his rightful place. He must reach the shores of Ithaca alone and in rags so that he can once again display his cunning against the suitors. The possibility that his beloved warriors might be there with him is really nothing more than an illusion, a cruel false hope, for, as with all prophecy in ancient Greek literature, only the worst outcome is ultimately possible.

As for the souls of the dead with whom Odysseus speaks after Teiresias, they show the grim fate that awaits all in Odysseus's world, even, ultimately, the hero himself. The spirits are all nobility; powerful and important while they lived. The women Odysseus encounters after speaking

with his mother⁸ represent the best status and opportunity possibly available to anyone in that world, while Agamemnon, Aias, and Achilles are the most successful men of their time. They're rich, famous, and have each won honor for their names. Even for such as these, Hades is a dismal, unhappy place.

Odysseus can do nothing for them, and so can see that when he does die, nothing will be done for him either. A sip of blood from the black ram allows the dead a voice, but no lasting relief from the grief that plagues them. When they do speak, their speech is almost wholly directed at what they did when they were alive, as though all their thoughts can focus on nothing else. Their overwhelming interest in Odysseus is that he can fill them in on the news from the land of the living, where things are still happening and the sweet life they have lost continues on. Achilles probably sums up this situation best in his reaction to Odysseus's news that he has won the highest renown among all Achians: "O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying. I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another man, one with no land allotted to him and not much to live on, than be a king over all the perished dead." (Lattimore, 180).

Odysseus's journey to Hades allows him to succeed in his quest, but ultimately he will be unable to avoid the fate of those he meets in the underworld. Facing and overcoming death is not useless- he succeeds, saves his son and his kingdom and is reunited with his wife- but in the end, all he has really done is buy himself a short bit of time before he must face the grave again, this time for eternity. As Odysseus leaves Hades, he passes among the greatest heroes of the ancient Greeks, and sees the cold rewards that await even the best of men. It may be that one day, if his deeds are great enough, he might be counted among their ranks in memory, but there is no question that his spirit will join them in death.

Aragorn, on the other hand, can offer hope and relief to the dead spirits he encounters. They have suffered for thousands of years, yes, but in following Aragorn, they are allowed a chance to set right their ancient crime. As Aragorn says: "...when all this land is clean of the servants of Sauron, I will hold the oath fulfilled, and ye shall have peace and depart forever." (Tolkien 74). In Tolkien's world, Aragorn is able to offer the peace and rest that are unavailable to the shades in Homer's Hades. Aragorn bends death to his will, but leaves the dead better than he found them.

By the same token, Aragorn preserves his living companions. Unlike Odysseus's warriors, Legolas, Gimli, and the Dunedain Rangers arrive at the battle for Minas Tirith alive and able to aid their allies. This shows again that Aragorn is a selfless leader. He has left behind the things dear to him so that he can protect and support his companions. Odysseus cares for his men, but his goal is to reach *his* home, so that he may reclaim *his* kingdom, wealth and family. Not that it is entirely his choice, but if his men must die so he can satisfy the wrath of the god and reach Ithaca once again, then so be it. For Aragorn, however, keeping his companions safe is a major part of his overarching goal. Odysseus will sacrifice a great deal to preserve the life he cherishes, but Aragorn will sacrifice everything he has so that others can lead the lives they cherish.

In the end, Aragorn winds up redeeming not only the Oathbreakers, but his own family. All of Middle-earth has suffered from the ancient selfishness of Isildur, but Aragorn turns that around through his humility and willingness to serve the people of Middle-earth before he leads them. He invests his birthright in Middle-earth, tying his own kingly destiny to that of the lowliest Hobbit and the most common peasant of Rohan. In this way, Aragorn not only proves his bloodline on the Paths of the Dead, but symbolically corrects the failures of his ancestors. Aragorn demonstrates not only that he has the right to rule Gondor, but also that he has the character necessary to be a good king. He has the character that Isildur lacked. Long-suffering Odysseus can hope to win through to his rightful place, enjoy a good life with those he loves, and equal the famous heroes he sees in Hades. Aragorn will surpass Isildur, the great hero of his past. He will rule a Middle-earth

⁸ In what is one of the saddest moments in all literature.

Bellum, "Aragorn and the Paths of the Dead," *The Grey Book*, volume 2 (2006), page 5

that he has first preserved.

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