Kortirion among trees the Trees: the influence of Warwick on J.R.R. Tolkien's vision of Middle-earth

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JRR Tolkien's connections with Warwick are well documented but not widely acknowledged, and yet Warwick's physical and historical presence were an important aspect of his creative imagination throughout his life. This essay charts the significant influence of Warwick in Tolkien's work from its first appearance in a poem dedicated to the town to its thematic presence in the myths of *The Silmarillion* and the epic adventure *The Lord of the Rings*. His foremost biographer, Humphrey Carpenter, has written that Tolkien 'found Warwick, its trees, its hill, and its castle, to be a place of remarkable beauty' and yet little notice has so far been taken of the way all those elements of Warwick that were so attractive to Tolkien can be seen echoing in his works throughout his life.

During the late sixties his residency in the town was celebrated. Humphrey Carpenter notes that during that time 'students at Warwick University renamed the Ring Road around their campus "Tolkien Road"'. Sadly, however, the importance of Warwick in Tolkien's life and work is far less often mentioned than his connections with Birmingham and Oxford, in spite of the fact that his love of romance in both senses, as personal emotional involvement, and as a form of medieval storytelling, was inevitably touched by Warwick's medieval history and setting as much as by his own personal associations with the town.

Tolkien's works are full of nostalgia for lost ages. After the depressing industrial landscape of early twentieth-century Birmingham in which he was brought up, coming to Warwick must indeed have seemed to Tolkien, as if (to borrow Frodo's words as he enters the elven realm of Lothlorien) he had indeed 'stepped over a bridge of time into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more'. But the history and configuration of Warwick had resonances for Tolkien that made it especially significant in relation to his scholarly interests. Middle-earth itself is only the modern spelling and pronunciation of the world as it was known and named in the Middle Ages. It was Middleerde, middangeard, and other cognate versions that referred to the same place between the upper and lower regions. And Anglo-Saxon Waerincgwican would also have attracted the man who was to become a renowned scholar of Anglo-Saxon literature.

Anglo-Saxon Warwick, on its rocky outcrop, commanded a crossing on the river Avon. It was fortified in 914 during the Anglo-Saxon offensive against Mercian Viking settlement, becoming one of the Anglo-Saxon burhs or fortified towns of the kingdom of Mercia. (By the time

Doomsday Book was written it was a royal borough). Tolkien himself acknowledged that his kingdom of Rohan was Anglo-Saxon England, specifically Mercia. He gave the horsemen of Rohan not just Old English as their language, but the dialect of Anglo-Saxon known as Old Mercian, which would have been used in pre-Conquest Warwick and the surrounding shire. Tolkien did not want his Rohirrim to speak standard West Saxon although, or perhaps because, that was the dominant language of language and literature before the Conquest. Tolkien's best known contribution to Anglo-Saxon studies was his analysis of *Beowulf*, and this poem is widely thought to have been composed for Offa King of Mercia, although the language of the manuscript is primarily West Saxon. Tolkien's attitude to the elitism implicit in the status accorded to West Saxon can be deduced from one of his early letters in which he wrote: 'I think I shall have to refuse to speak anything but Old Mercian.'

The physical aspect of Anglo-Saxon Warwick suggests the pattern of Edoras, the chief settlement in Tolkien's Rohan. Early Warwick would have been fortified with a stout wooden palisade. Its halls, including that of its lord Earl Thurkill, as well as all the smaller dwellings and buildings would have been primarily constructed of wood. Like the hall of the kings of Rohan, Earl Thurkill's great wooden hall could have looked out from its elevated position on the hill on which modern Warwick now stands, over the rolling green countryside of Warwickshire; but that Warwick was swept away in the years following the Norman invasion of 1066 and a new town developed with a feudal lord, a steward of the newly defined 'county'. The Anglo-Saxon stronghold became a Norman castle, looming over the countryside, as much a threat and declaration of power as a protection to the local people. Norman castles were intended to quell an unruly conquered populace. In the aftermath of 1066, stone replaced wood as the means of differentiating the rulers from the ruled.

Tolkien once corrected an impression that he deplored war by saying that it was not only modern warfare that he had in mind, but the cultural catastrophe of the Norman Conquest. We know, however, that Tolkien admired the stone-built castle on its rock rising above the river which became a model for Middle-earth locations such as Minas Tirith, Amon Hen and Amon Sul, as well as Edoras - all fortified places set on imposing rocks, hills or mountains. Nor would he have ignored the beauty of the Beauchamp chapel or its association with Richard Beauchamp earl of Warwick, one of the great knights-errant of the Middle Ages. Sir Richard epitomised in life the values of knighthood set down in the manuscripts of medieval romances upon which Tolkien drew for inspiration. The other medieval buildings that survived the 1694 fire that devastated Warwick would have added to the sense of stepping back in time. Also from the medieval period Warwick's medieval hospital or Maison Dieu has its reflection in the Houses of Healing in Minas Tirith to which Merry Brandybuck, Eowyn, the Lady of Rohan, and Faramir, second son of the steward of Gondor are taken after their separate encounters with the deadly Lord of the Nazgûl.

Tolkien uses the two historical aspects of Warwick, the Anglo-Saxon and the post-Norman medieval as sources for two of the most clearly defined kingdoms of Middle-earth - Rohan and Gondor. They are neighbours and allies in the book, but their social, cultural, and political situations are clearly differentiated, and that differentiation can be illuminated through the history of Warwick. In The Lord of the Rings Tolkien maps geographically what was in reality a temporal change. He contrasts the society and culture of Rohan with the culture and society of Gondor, and as Rohan is Anglo-Saxon, Gondor is influenced by Norman and French culture and history. Here Tolkien changes the scale. Where Meduseld, the hall of the kings of Rohan sits on a hill, Minas Tirith's rocky location is a shoulder of Mindolluin, in the White Mountains, where the

Steward of Gondor sits isolated in his massive citadel above the city. However, while Theoden of Rohan regains his nobility in old age, Denethor the Steward echoes the Carolingian usurpation of the Frankish Merovingians in his arrogant refusal to bow to the 'last of a ragged house long bereft of lordship and dignity'. Although the scale changes in a reflection of the historical shift, the configuration of Minas Tirith like that of Edoras reiterates the geography of Warwick.

Warwick's associations in Tolkien's life are of two principle kinds, and these are interwoven in the medieval English romances which were the focus of much of his academic work. His marriage to Edith Bratt in the church of St Mary Immaculate on Wednesday, March 22nd was the culmination of a period in Tolkien's life that bore striking similarities to some of those same romances. These romances were popular stories of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, composed as poems in different dialects of Middle English, probably for oral performance by travelling storytellers and minstrels, and they formed an important part of the inspiration for his later epic *The Lord of the Rings*.

John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, Ronald to his family, had been born in South Africa in 1892, but after his father died his mother brought little Ronald and his baby brother Hilary back to England and settled in her native Birmingham. Sadly the boys were orphaned in 1904 when their mother died of diabetes. For a while Ronald and his brother were fostered by their austere aunt Beatrice, but they also enjoyed the guardianship of their local Catholic priest in Birmingham. Father Francis was a caring man, whose desire to find the boys more congenial lodgings unexpectedly resulted in a major confrontation when the sixteenth-year-old Ronald fell in love with Edith, a lodger in the house Father Francis had found as a refuge for the boys. Edith was nineteen and Father Francis was horrified at the attachment. He forbade them to see one another until Ronald came of age, which in those days, of course, was not until the age of twenty-one.

Reluctantly, Ronald suffered this long prohibition. His obedience sprang from respect for his guardian, and similar circumstances are part of the relationship he created between the Ranger Aragorn, the king-in-waiting, and Arwen the Elven Lady of Rivendell in *The Lord of the Rings*. Their marriage is prohibited by Arwen's father Elrond Half-elven until Aragorn has won back and united the realms of Gondor and Arnor, the lands of his forefathers. Aragorn does not defy the will of Elrond, his one-time foster-father, any more than Ronald defied Father Francis.

The motif of separated lovers occurs frequently in the medieval English verse romances in which dispossessed and orphaned young princes are fostered, and then have many adventures while trying to reclaim their patrimony and win the hand of the lady they love. In King Horn the eponymous young knight travels from the south of England to Ireland and back before he wins Rymenhild. Bevis of Hampton has to win back his lands - Southampton and the Isle of Wight - before he can settle down with Josian, his Armenian princess. Havelok the Dane travels from Grimsby and back, uniting the kingdoms of England and Denmark as he is united with his beloved Goldboru, heiress to the throne of England. This motif of the winning of the lady and the land reiterates an ancient mythical belief that a king was wedded to his land as to his wife.

The famous romance known as Guy of Warwick offers a different source for Tolkien's creativity which diverges somewhat from the pattern. The youthful Guy falls in love with the daughter of his lord the Earl of Warwick. But guy is the son of the Earl's steward, and is therefore a social inferior. This suggests an analogue for the love story in *The Lord of the Rings* between Faramir, second son of Denethor the Steward of Gondor, and Eowyn the Lady of Rohan, the king's niece. The inferiority motif also underlies the love story of Beren and Luthien in *The Silmarillion*, in

which Beren, a mortal man, is considered inferior to the elven lady Luthien, because she belongs to one of the families of the High Elves. The patterns of separation or mismatched social status in all these tales may be taken to offer a 'courtly conceit' for Tolkien's own devotion to Edith. More significantly, all the medieval romances belong to the genre known as *The Matter of England*, in which fictional or legendary heroes are transplanted to actual geographical locations.

All these medieval heroes, and others in romance tradition, belong to specific geographical locations - southern England, Southampton, Grimsby, Warwick - and the place of Warwick in Tolkien's storytelling belongs in this tradition of *The Matter of England*. As Andrew King has noted in his book *The Faerie Queene and the Middle English Romance*: The matter of just memory, this native practice transposes even Continental sources into British geography endowing it with entertaining and even mythic, significance. Tolkien declared he was writing a mythology for England and the inspiration provided by Warwick was entirely in keeping with traditions that he would have known from his scholarly work on texts such as *Sir Orfeo*, set in Winchester, and Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, set partly in Northumberland.

After the emotional darkness of Ronald's long separation from Edith, it is hardly surprising that the beauty of Warwick touched him, for it was the place where their love at last shook off the difficulties of the past. Having begun his lifelong studies of Old English eventually at Oxford, and having travelled abroad, and reached the milestone of his twenty-first birthday, Ronald was at last free to write to Edith, which he did at the start of January 1913. She wrote back to say she was already engaged to someone else! However, on Wednesday 8th January 1913, just five days after his birthday, Ronald met Edith again. By the end of that Wednesday in 1913 they were unofficially engaged, but now another obstacle arose. Ronald was a devout Catholic and Edith was not. She had moved to Cheltenham and was living with a couple who would not have approved of her conversion, so she moved again, this time to set up home with her cousin Jennie, and the ladies chose Warwick for their new home. Here, Edith received instruction in the Catholic faith from Father Murphy, parish priest of Warwick and she and Ronald were formally betrothed.

In 1915 having graduated from Oxford with a first class degree in English, Ronald joined the Lancashire Fusiliers as an officer. While he was in a training camp in Staffordshire Edith was still living in Warwick. In a letter to her Ronald wrote of the poem he was composing that was inspired by the town. The poem, *'Kortirion among the Trees'*, evokes a fading town overshadowed by towering elms, that was built by elves on a hill close to a river, and it contains what were to become some of his most characteristic themes.

Three versions of this poem were published by Christopher Tolkien in the first *Book of Lost Tales* (1983), for Tolkien worked on it intermittently for around fifty years - a testimony to the importance he placed on the ideas expressed in the poem and inspired by Warwick, to which he dedicated it. There are marked differences between the versions in the vocabulary which expresses the poem's most significant features, but some concepts remain unchanged, or only slightly modified. Two extracts must serve as examples. The first version begins:

> *O fading town upon a little hill,*
> *Old memory is waning in thine ancient gates,*
> *The robe gone grey, thine old heart almost still;*
> *The castle only, frowning, ever waits*
> *And ponders how among the towering elms*

The Gliding Water leaves these inland realms
And slips between long meadows to the western sea

....

And slowly thither have a many gone
Since first the fairies built Kortirion.

And from the third version:

O ancient city on a leaguered hill!
Old shadows linger in your broken gate,
Your stones are grey, your old halls now are still,
Your towers silent in the mist await
Their crumbling end.

....

The River Gliding leaves these inland realms
And slips between long meadows to the Sea,

....

The Fair, the first-born in an elder day,
Immortal Elves, who singing in their way

....

Pass like a wind among the rustling trees.

The earliest version of the poem is full of the freshness and vigour of its youthful creator, even if its ideas are expressed with a certain rawness. The rhythm and metre are suitably measured to convey the stateliness of the subject. The second version is even more measured, while the third shows the mature creativity that is found in Tolkien's major prose works as well as in the poem. In this late version the archaisms that belonged to a pre-war deference to the authority of the past are rejected as 'thy' and 'thine' become simply 'your'. The anthropomorphism is gone - the grey robe, old heart, and frowning castle are exchanged for grey stones, old halls and silent towers, and the greater simplicity has greater power. Unchanged are the melancholy and nostalgia, the sense of diminishment or 'fading', particularly of the elves, and their association with trees and hills. The imagery of water - the flow of the river and the importance of the sea - signalled by its capitalisation in the later versions, these are all themes Tolkien refers to again and again in his later work. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the elves are leaving Middle-earth, and so it is losing the beauty and wisdom associated with them. The sea is often a presence sensed or feared, and in both this book and in *The Silmarillion* it is connected with loss, separation and exile. The story of the elves in all Tolkien's works is the story of their passing and re-passing over the great western or Sundering Sea.

Kortirion as a concept went through many changes. Originally the city on the Isle of Tol Eressea, it was a refuge for Elves returning into the West from which they originated but were not permitted to enter. By the time Tolkien wrote *The Silmarillion*, the city had become Tirion and it too was built on a green hill and was the home of elves in the far west from which the most

destructive of them emerged. The creation of Kortirion in the poem was thus an early step towards the ethical cosmology and epic mythology which underpins Tolkien's vision of Middle-earth as it is alluded to in *The Lord of the Rings* and described in *The Silmarillion*.

To anyone in the twenty-first century not familiar with Tolkien's elves, his association of them with Warwick - indeed to describe any town as 'the city of elves' - could be seen as peculiar. However, although Tolkien's works echo with images of fading and diminishing, and with the Otherworld of elves and fairies, these are emphatically not childish fantasies. Tolkien's elves are not the gossamer sprites of the Conan Doyle photographs, nor the charming children with wings illustrated in the flower-fairy books. Tolkien's elves developed from the myths and legends he studied and delighted in and are closer to the Irish and Welsh myths of beautiful and dangerous beings. Indeed, in his essay called *'On Fairy Stories'* he describes the world of the fairies as 'the Perilous Realm', because its beauty acts as an enchantment on mortals. The perilous nature of the fairy realm is expressed vividly in a fourteenth-century verse romance known as *Sir Orfeo*, which Tolkien edited. In this story, set in Winchester, the fairy king is violent and dangerous, threatening to have the mortal wife of King Orfeo torn to pieces.

Elves also have a place in more familiar English literature. Chaucer wrote ironically in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* of the coming of Christianity when, he said,

> *now kan no man se none elves mo*
> *For now the grete charitee and prayeres*
> *Of lymytours and othere hooly freres*
> *...*
> *maketh that ther ben no fayeryes.*
> *For ther as wont to walken was an elf*
> *Ther walketh now the lymytour hymself.*

Now no one can see elves any more. Now because of the great kindness and prayers of wandering and other kinds of friars there are no fairies. For where elves used to walk the wandering friar himself now walks.

Perhaps the most famous warrior elf is the Red Cross knight in Spenser's Elizabethan epic poem *The Faerie Queene*. In this post-Reformation allegory, the warrior elf fights against contemporary images of evil. Although Tolkien the devout Catholic expressed and understandable dislike for Spenser's heavily anti-Catholic epic, the connection of Warwick/Kortirion with elves nevertheless echoes a literary tradition that associated them with change as well as with aggression. In all these instances they are depicted as Other, but no less in size and presence than the mortals with whom they interest.

The connection between elves and the hill on which Kortirion is built recalls the importance of green hills in ancient Celtic mythology where they were regarded as the entrance to the Sidhe (shee), the Otherworld where the immortals dwell. For Tolkien, the Celtic world of immortals was one that had known its greatest days. The melancholy of diminishment is perhaps best known in his descriptions of the High Elves of Lothlorien for whom 'spring and summer have gone by'. But, as Tolkien knew, the concept of fairies had itself diminished. From tall and beautiful Celtic warriors and hunters, by way of Oberon, Titania, and Puck, they became the ephemeral little creatures of the Conan Doyle photos and other nineteenth and early twentieth-century representations such William Allingham's humorously gothic poem *The Fairies* which begins:

Up the airy mountain,
Down the rushy glen,
We dare no go a-hunting,
For fear of little men'.
Wee folk, good folk,
Trooping all together;
Green jacket, red cap,
And white owl's feather!

Tennyson managed a grander vision with his 'horns of Elfland faintly blowing', and the 'fairy Lady of Shallott'. These representations of a faerie Otherworld delighted the Victorians, but Tolkien's vision was on a more epic scale, and *'Kortirion among the Trees'* was a step on the road of that epic creative journey, although the poem, like Warwick itself, is barely mentioned by early commentators on Tolkien's life and work.

Tom Shippey, in his recent book *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, remarks that 'Tolkien repeatedly said he was a 'West-midlander by blood'", and the Warwickshire countryside beyond Warwick itself has been scoured for hints of its influence on Tolkien's creativity. Of all the Warwickshire locations acknowledged by Tolkien himself, Hob Lane has probably caused the greatest interest because it contains the first syllable of 'hobbit'. This lane is a linguistic blind alley into which many have strayed, even though in *The Lord of the Rings* 'hobbit' is only the Shire dialect version of the name. In Middle-earth the men of Rohan refer to members of this small race as 'holbytla', which is what Théoden King of Rohan calls the hobbit Merry Brandybuck.

Any Anglo-Saxon dictionary distinguishes two parts to Tolkien's word: 'hol' and 'bytla', meaning respectively 'hole' and 'builder' or 'dweller', while the verb 'bytlan' means to build: thus the perfect description of a hobbit, someone who 'builds' holes in which to live. The alteration in spelling from 'holbytla' to 'hobbit' (like the alteration perhaps of the Middle English name Goldboru to Goldberry) reflects similar changes in the transmission of many words that have come down to us from earlier forms of English, and Treebeard the ent gives the modern translation when he makes a new line in the Old Lists of the inhabitants of Middle-earth, to accommodate the hobbits he has just met. He calls them 'half-grown hobbits, the hole dwellers'. This removes the difficulty of reconciling the medieval word 'hob' meaning 'devil' with the charming and stout-hearted hobbits, a difficulty which only arises from being too hasty in making etymological assumptions.

Other Warwickshire locations cause other difficulties. Near the village of Long Compton, long barrows, ancient burial mounds, can still be seen on the tops of the hills, and together with the Rollright stones have been taken by Professor Shippey and others as inspiration for Tolkien's description of standing stones and barrows in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. But we have to allow that Warwickshire is not the only place in England where long barrows and standing stones can be found. We know from Tolkien's letters, for example, that he visited the long barrow south of Oxford known as Wayland's Smithy, an equally atmospheric source for his episode with the Barrow-wight.

While leaving geographical influences unspecific allows readers in every part of the world the freedom to enter Tolkien vision of Middle-earth, in the case of Warwick, we can trace the town's importance to that vision. Its geography inspired his very early creation of the elvish city of Kortirion, the city of trees on Tol Eressea, the Lonely Isle. This city went on to become Tirion in

The Silmarillion. Tolkien himself said in *The Book of Lost Tales* that the history of Tol Eressea was the history of England, and Warwick was a 'disfigured Kortirion', using 'disfigured' in the sense particular to his mythology, to suggest that because it was no longer the dwelling place of elves its ancient mythical beauty had waned: a sense captured in all the versions of the Kortirion poem. Nevertheless, Warwick's remaining beauty and importance to his personal life was such that he dedicated his poem to the town and returned to its image again and again in his writing throughout his life.