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## “What have I got in my pocket?” – Tolkien and the Tradition of the Rings of Power

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## **“What have I got in my pocket?” – Tolkien and the Tradition of the Rings of Power**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

This paper is based on my contribution to the catalogue of the exhibition 'Ringe der Macht' (2019), published as 'Tolkien und die Tradition der Ringe der Macht.' In Harald Meller, Susanne Kimmig-Völkner, and Alfred Reichenberger (eds.). 2019. Ringe der Macht / Rings of Power. Internationale Tagung vom 09. Bis 10. November 2018 in Halle (Saale). Tagungen des Landesmuseums für Vorgeschichte Halle. Band 21.1 (2019). Halle (Saale): Landesmuseum für Vorgeschichte, 227-246.

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Tolkien's Rings of Power feature prominently in the history and tales of the Second and Third Ages of Arda – so much that Tolkien played with the idea to name his epic about the War of the Ring first 'The Magic Ring', which was later changed to *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>2</sup> Much has been written about Tolkien's possible sources of inspiration for the One Ring,<sup>3</sup> yet the question as to a complete list of all the ingredients that went into the making of the 'Ring soup'<sup>4</sup> has not been answered conclusively – and possibly never will. Nor is it my intention in this paper to try and add yet another half a dozen putative sources to the list. Rather, I will attempt to analyze the way the cook Tolkien makes use of some of his ingredients to create the 'Ring soup' in the Cauldron of Story. Not all ingredients are of the same order. Some, like the meat and the vegetables, provide the bulk of the ingredients, while others may be compared to spices, herbs, or condiments that add subtle yet distinct notes to the dish. The author-cook's art consists in striking the right balance between the different ingredients, and source criticism has its place in helping to determine the success or failure of the project<sup>5</sup> – not least since the recipe of the 'Ring soup' changed from *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings*. We should therefore not be deterred from investigating Tolkien's sources if this furthers our understanding and appreciation of the 'soup', although Tolkien himself has been critical towards attempts to go looking for the 'bones of the ox' (cf. *TOFS* 39-40). There will always be diners who want to look up the recipe of the dish they enjoyed at the restaurant to better appreciate the skill and artistry that went into the meal. It is for those that I have written this paper.

## 2 Knowledge, Gaps, and Information Transfer

Knowledge of the Rings of Power and their role in Tolkien's work is characterized by a double asymmetry. Within the cosmos created by Tolkien, we have very different levels of knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Louisa McDonnell for expertly translating the first draft of this essay from German, and Dr. Allan Turner for his advice and comments on matters big and small. Also, I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers who gave helpful suggestions towards the substantial revision of the text.

<sup>2</sup> The original draft title page of the manuscript (Marquette, MS. Tolkien 3/1/2) with 'The Magic Ring' struck through, followed by a question mark lower on the page, and replaced by 'The Lord of the Rings' was on display at the 'Tolkien: Maker of Middle-earth' exhibition. It is reproduced in the catalogue to the exhibition (McIlwaine 2018: 331, illustration 148). The draft title page dates from 1957, yet Tolkien mentioned "the sequel to the 'Hobbit' – The Lord of the Ring" (*Letters* 40, letter no. 33) already in August 1938. The singular 'Lord of the Ring' is then replaced by February 1939 by the title as we know it: "the new story – *The Lord of the Rings*" (*Letters* 41, letter no. 35).

<sup>3</sup> See the bibliography for an extensive though by no means fully exhaustive list of publications on the topic.

<sup>4</sup> I am adapting Tolkien's use of Dasent's words, as thematized in his 'On Fairy-Stories' (*TOFS* 39-40). On the 'Cauldron of Story', see *TOFS* (44-45).

<sup>5</sup> See Fisher (2011) and Shippey (2011) for a defense of (correctly understood) source studies.

about the various rings. We possess relatively detailed and extensive information about the One Ring and know its history right from its creation by Sauron, but we know less about the three Elven Rings and almost nothing about the sixteen lesser Rings of Power.<sup>6</sup> This in itself heterogeneous, but in part extensive Secondary (fictional) World knowledge about the Rings of Power stands in contrast to the almost complete lack of knowledge about the processes of the creation of Rings of Power and their operation in Tolkien's world.

This fact establishes the second asymmetry, because there is a significant difference between the Primary and Secondary World<sup>7</sup> knowledge of how rings of power are made and how they work. We have a certain Primary World knowledge about the creation of magic rings,<sup>8</sup> while information about these processes in Tolkien's world is missing. One can guess that the creation of the magic rings follows precise rules and processes in Tolkien's Secondary World as well. We have references to, for example, Saruman's research and intensive study of traditional knowledge and mention of his own experiments in this area.<sup>9</sup> These are all indications that in Middle-earth, there exists also a body of knowledge, though no longer easily accessible, with clear principles and rules how to make magic rings.

That Tolkien keeps a low profile on this issue is understandable and in line with his strategy of (as far as possible) deliberate avoidance of all metaphysical-religious topics. In *The Lord of the Rings*, he not only refrains from describing all forms of organized religion and cult acts, but also restricts the mention of magic and magical practices to a few cases.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See the relevant lexicon articles by Honegger (2007), Vadean (2012), Delattre (2012), and Schneidewind (2016). See also Fisher (2008) on the Elven Rings of Power in particular.

<sup>7</sup> The reality of life we perceive to be real is considered the Primary World, while the literary world is called the Secondary World.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Reichenberg (2019, especially 28-38), who discusses some of the practical aspect of ring-making. In *The Rhinegold*, Richard Wagner's Loge, in response to Wotan's query about how to make a magic ring, gives the following (rather unsatisfactory) answer: "rune of magic makes the gold a ring; no-one knows it; but he can use the spell who blessed love forswears." / "Runenzauber zwingt das Gold zum Reif; keiner kennt ihn; doch einer übt ihn leicht, der sel'ger Lieb' entsagt." (Wagner 1899: 93-94).

<sup>9</sup> Thus Gandalf, in the chapter 'The Shadow of the Past,' says about Saruman: "His knowledge is deep, but his pride has grown with it, and he takes ill any meddling. The lore of the Elven-rings, great and small, is his province. He has long studied it, seeking the lost secrets of their making" (*LotR* 48). In 'The Council of Elrond,' Galdor of the Havens describes Saruman as "learned in the lore of the Rings" (*LotR* 250). Furthermore, upon his arrival in Orthanc, Gandalf remarks: "He [Saruman] wore a ring on his finger" (*LotR* 258), which is probably supposed to be more than just a simple description of Saruman's fashion sense. And Saruman then styles himself "Saruman Ring-maker" (*LotR* 269).

<sup>10</sup> On Tolkien's conscious omission and avoidance of explicit mentions of matters religious, see Tolkien's letter to Father Robert Murray, S. J. (*Letters* 172, letter no. 142). Genuinely magical acts, such as for example Gandalf's kindling of a fire in a snowstorm on the Caradhras (*LotR* 290), can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Typically, it is the supernatural beings like Gandalf and Sauron who use magic. On 'magic' in Tolkien's work, see the complementary papers by Bachmann (2007) and Shippey (2007c) and, more recently, Nagy (2019).

These deliberately sparsely used references to magic, in conjunction with the gaps relating to the production and operation of the magic rings, have the effect of activating the reader's Primary World knowledge on the topic. Tolkien's approach can be compared to phenomena analyzed in gestalt psychology, which illustrate our brain's capacity to fill in gaps by means of completing partial patterns and construct meaning from fragmentary information. Analogous to gestalt psychology, Tolkien can rely on the hypothetical reader, even if that reader does not have a profound knowledge of the creation and use of magic rings, to be so familiar with the concept of magic rings from legends and fairy tales that he or she subconsciously adopts the Primary World parameters. This strategy is comparable to Tolkien's approach through which he established the idyllic Shire as the spiritual home of the reader. I would therefore like to explain it briefly.

A look at the map of Middle-earth gives an idea of what the emotional anchoring of the ideal reader<sup>11</sup> in this region means. The Shire is in its geographical position comparable to Oxfordshire and Warwickshire in England.<sup>12</sup> This means that the ideal reader subconsciously takes on the point of view of a protagonist based in northwestern Europe – with consequences for the assessment of the surrounding lands. It is therefore not surprising that in Middle-earth, too, evil comes from the east – as has historically been the case several times for onlookers in northwestern Europe.<sup>13</sup>

As in the case of the Shire, Tolkien also plays in the 'Ring of Power' with the suggestive effect of his references and counts on the reader to refer to his or her own world knowledge. But what does the reader learn from the texts themselves? First of all, it must be noted that the ring from *The Hobbit* in its original version from 1937 differs from the One Ring from *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) in some essential respects.<sup>14</sup> The ring that Bilbo found in *The Hobbit* (1937) in the caves under the Misty Mountains is apparently a magical ring that makes the wearer

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<sup>11</sup> In Tolkien's case, the ideal reader is probably an Englishman born around 1890 and raised in rural Oxfordshire.

<sup>12</sup> Tolkien himself wrote in a letter: "It [the Shire] is in fact more or less a Warwickshire village of about the period of the Diamond Jubilee [of Queen Victoria, i.e. 1897]" (*Letters* 230, letter no. 178); see also the detailed linguistic analysis of the dialect of the Shire by Johannesson (2004), which supports this claim.

<sup>13</sup> See Tolkien's observation in his 1955 letter to W.H. Auden: "a man of the North-west of the Old World will set his heart and the action of his tale in an imaginary world of that air, and that situation: with the Shoreless Sea of his innumerable ancestors to the West, and the endless lands (out of which enemies mostly come) to the East." (*Letters* 212, letter no. 163). The 'enemies out of the East' scenario applies not only to the Huns, whose descriptions in early medieval sources and their later adaptations provided the inspiration for Tolkien's orcs (see Shippey 2007b: 120-121), but also to the Vikings and many of the later threats (Mongols, Napoleon, Hitler, and the post-*LotR* Communist bloc).

<sup>14</sup> The original text is now available in the inexpensive facsimile edition of *The Hobbit*; see also Douglas Anderson's *The Annotated Hobbit* (2002), which makes explicit the changes to the text of the first edition and the comments.

invisible<sup>15</sup> and thus joins the series of magic rings from fairy tales and legends. We do not find out about any side effects, and the fact that Gollum even considers giving his ring to Bilbo as a prize after his defeat in the riddle competition suggests that the ring is not thought to make the wearer dependent or be ‘addictive’ at this point in time. This assessment is confirmed by the further course of action, as Bilbo wears the ring repeatedly and sometimes even for longer periods of time, such as during his stay in the halls of the Elvenking Thranduil.<sup>16</sup> Bilbo Baggins does not appear to be harmed by prolonged and repeated contact with the ring.

All of this shows that Tolkien, at the time the story of Bilbo Baggins was written in the late 1920s and early 1930s, had not yet thought that Bilbo’s ring could be a ‘Ring of Power’ in the format of the later conceived One Ring. In addition, the children’s story about Bilbo the Hobbit was initially only very loosely linked to the rest of the legends and myths of Middle-earth. Because even if Middle-earth provides the geographical framework and certain elements from the *legendarium*<sup>17</sup> flow into the narrative with the stay in Rivendell, the narrative reverts to its original light tone when it returns to the Shire. The excursion into the threatening world of Middle-earth remains just an excursion and, as the subtitle suggests, it is actually a ‘there and back again.’

### 3 From Magic Ring to the One Ring of Power

What began as an amusing but otherwise rather harmless story about a dragon’s treasure only changed over the course of time while Tolkien was working on the sequel, which originally had the working title *The New Hobbit*. The extensive prologue provides the reader with detailed information about the history and customs of these cute creatures, and the first chapter, ‘A Long-Expected Party,’ continues the light-hearted tone of *The Hobbit*.<sup>18</sup> With this prologue and first chapter, a bridge is built between the two works, and the first forty pages can rightly be seen as a continuation of the earlier work. However, this changes radically with the second chapter, ‘The Shadow of the Past.’ The tone becomes ominous, and a dark cloud pushes in front

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<sup>15</sup> The question of how the magic of the ring works is discussed below in the section on *The Enchanted Castle*.

<sup>16</sup> See the narrator’s comment: “Poor Mr. Baggins – it was a weary long time that he lived in that place alone, and always in hiding, never daring to take off his ring, [...]” (*Hobbit* 157).

<sup>17</sup> The term *legendarium* is used in Tolkien research to designate all of Tolkien’s texts relating to Middle-earth (whether published or not).

<sup>18</sup> The original conception of *The Lord of the Rings* as a continuation of *The Hobbit* is still reflected in the title of the first chapter, ‘A Long-Expected Party,’ which obviously alludes to the title of the first chapter in *The Hobbit*, ‘An Unexpected Party.’ The history of the origins of *The Lord of the Rings* is documented in volumes 6-9 of *The History of Middle-earth* (Tolkien 1983-1996).

of the sun over the idyllic Shire. Bilbo's harmless magical ring finally turns out to be the One Ring that plays a central role in the struggle for the rule of Middle-earth.

Tolkien's real-world authorial lack of knowledge about the true significance of the ring/Ring is reflected in an ironic refraction in the figure of Gandalf, under whose nose the One Ring, desperately sought after by all, lay unrecognized for years. With the revelation of Bilbo's ring as the One Ring of Sauron, the hobbits still remain important identification figures for the reader,<sup>19</sup> but it is no longer simply a question of helping a small troop of dwarves recapture their kingdom and, in doing so, evolving from homebody into adult and mature hobbit. Rather, we step onto a stage on which the epic-universal conflict between good and evil is carried out – with the One Ring as the focal point that bundles the different energies and storylines together. This is also reflected in the new title of the work. The text is no longer called *The New Hobbit*, but *The Lord of the Rings*.

However, what is not at all clear at this point is the nature of the threat and how the One Ring works. Gandalf already gives an outline of the history of the One Ring in the second chapter and emphasizes the danger it poses, but the reader has no precise idea of what effect the One Ring has on its wearer. Bilbo seems to have kept the Ring in his trouser pocket most of the time,<sup>20</sup> but it does not seem to have influenced him particularly strongly.<sup>21</sup> Frodo, especially after he has begun to wear it around his neck on a chain, is immensely more subject to the influence of the Ring. In general, it can be stated that the One Ring gains more and more weight and importance as the narrative progresses, yet it is only after the chapter 'The Council of Elrond' that it takes a central position. This new importance manifests itself firstly in the title of the work (*The Lord of the Rings*), secondly in the title of the first book (*The Fellowship of the Ring*) and its mission, namely the destruction of the One Ring in the heart of Mount Doom, and last but not least in the title illustrations for the first volume, which Tolkien designed himself. They all show the One Ring in the centre – and depending on the variant, this is surrounded by or in opposition to the Elvish Rings of Power.

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<sup>19</sup> For the function of the hobbits as identification figures for the reader when exploring Middle-earth, see Shippey (2000: 45-49, esp. 48).

<sup>20</sup> Bilbo seems to keep it in his trousers pocket, since that is where he returns it to when Merry sees him avoiding the Sackville-Bagginses (*LotR* 104). He has no particular reason to think he might need it that day, which suggests that he usually keeps it there in case of need. He also has his hand in his trousers pocket at the farewell party as he gives his speech (*LotR* 31). There is certainly no indication that he hid it away somewhere as Gollum did. Frodo seems to have continued Bilbo's habit, at least initially: "[Frodo] looked indisposed – to see Sackville-Bagginses at any rate; and he stood up, fidgeting with something in his pocket." (*LotR* 38).

<sup>21</sup> In retrospect, Bilbo's amazing longevity is recognized as an effect of the Ring. Otherwise, the hobbit seems to have an extraordinary resistance to any other influence from the Ring.

Thanks to Gandalf's detailed narration and the contributions of other protagonists, the reader is well informed about the story of Sauron's Ring after the chapter 'The Council of Elrond.' The chain of transmission of the One Ring from Sauron to Isildur to Déagol to Sméagol/Gollum and finally to Bilbo and Frodo has been completely reconstructed and documented. But even now it is still not clear how the One Ring works. The person who, along with Sauron, could best provide information on this, the Istar Saruman, is unfortunately not present. Saruman has not only researched intensively the history of the Rings of Power but has also delved so deeply into the secrets of the lore of the Ring that he can now make magic rings himself.<sup>22</sup> Sadly, he defected to the opposing side and is therefore not available as a source of information. We must therefore try to understand the nature of the One Ring from the reports how it affects the wearer or those persons who come into contact with it.

A first rough overview gives the following picture: Gollum, who owned the Ring for centuries, is addicted (and suffers from withdrawal symptoms). Bilbo, on the other hand, who also had it for a longer period of time, is hardly affected, and the Ring does not seem to have any influence on Tom Bombadil. Gandalf and Galadriel both fear the possible effects and therefore refuse to come into closer contact with the Ring. Sam, who takes it after Frodo's supposed death, has visions of his power owning the Ring, but they cannot really dissuade him from his mission. Boromir, on the other hand, is influenced solely by the thought of the Ring (and possibly by its proximity), while his brother Faramir seems to be immune to the temptation emanating from the Ring (the same applies to Aragorn). So, the Ring affects different people in very different ways. This suggests it works like an amplifier of already existing corrupting tendencies.<sup>23</sup> However, this does not seem to be the whole truth in *The Lord of the Rings*, for we have several situations in which the One Ring has an active role. Gandalf, for example, speaks of the fact that the One Ring wants to return to its master and therefore leaves Gollum (*LotR* 55). Or it seems to influence Frodo in such a way that at the first encounter with one of the Ringwraiths in the Shire, he feels the strong desire to put it on his finger (*LotR* 75), or then also on Weathertop with fatal consequences (*LotR* 195). This suggests that the evil power of the Ring is not just a passive-reacting force.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> This is what Saruman calls himself: "Saruman Ring-maker" (*LotR* 269).

<sup>23</sup> See Shippey (2000: 128-143), whose basic thesis on the mode of operation of the One Ring is summarized in the following.

<sup>24</sup> See Testi (2018) for a comprehensive discussion of the theological intricacies of Tolkien's Middle-earth.

The exact manufacture and mechanics of ring magic and its classification in the metaphysical framework of relevance for Middle-earth<sup>25</sup> were deliberately left vague by Tolkien and we cannot hope for his help.<sup>26</sup> Although the author himself leaves us in the lurch, there is another writer who, as a reader of Tolkien's work, asked herself exactly these questions, and in her own work gives what I think is a very good explanation of how the One Ring works. I am speaking of J.K. Rowling and the *Horcruxes*. This term was coined by J.K. Rowling for her Harry Potter books with no specific etymology to describe the outsourced soul or part of a soul. A Horcrux allows the wizard to choose to put several parts of his soul into objects<sup>27</sup> or other creatures and thus improve his chances of survival. For the creation of a Horcrux, however, it needs the energy that is released by killing a person.<sup>28</sup> Sauron's Ring must be based on a similar idea, although he immediately poured the lion's share of his power into the object and did not bother to divide it up among several items. The parallels between the One Ring as 'Horcrux *avant la lettre*' and the medallion by Merope Gaunt, which Harry, Ron and Hermione wear alternately on a chain around their necks in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, are obvious.<sup>29</sup> In contrast to Tolkien, Rowling explicitly describes in her book how such an object is manufactured and what its mode of action is – and thus contributes indirectly, and for Tolkien posthumously, to the explanation of the mode of action of the One Ring.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4 Sources: The Bones of the Ox, Greens, Taters, Spices and Herbs

Let us return, however, to Tolkien and the One Ring, as well as the question of where he possibly got the inspiration from to turn his magic ring into a 'problem ring' or rather a 'Ring of Power.' We cannot, in the space of a paper, cover all the possible or putative sources of inspiration and influence, and will therefore focus the discussion on exemplary instances from

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<sup>25</sup> In my opinion, the best introduction to the metaphysical-religious dimension of Tolkien's Secondary World is offered by Caldecott (2012).

<sup>26</sup> Even the *Silmarillion* chapter 'On the Rings of Power and the Third Age,' in which these narratives come to an end (*Sil* 285-304, on the Rings of Power in particular 298-303), contains neither precise details of how the Rings are made nor detailed explanation of how they work.

<sup>27</sup> Incidentally, Tolkien mentions the beast-fable 'The Monkey's Heart' which features this motif (*TOFS* 37).

<sup>28</sup> See the explanations by Professor Slughorn in the chapter 'Horcruxes' in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (Rowling 2007, esp. 265).

<sup>29</sup> The close parallels between a Horcrux and the One Ring were noted early on. Thus, Stürzer makes the comparison in her tabular listing of parallels (2012: 104). See also the various blog-entries on the topic (e.g. [https://www.reddit.com/r/AskScienceFiction/comments/362b7y/lotr\\_harry\\_potter\\_was\\_the\\_one\\_ring\\_a\\_horcrux/](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskScienceFiction/comments/362b7y/lotr_harry_potter_was_the_one_ring_a_horcrux/)).

<sup>30</sup> I can very well imagine that Tolkien would have welcomed such an explanatory approach – especially since it is not presented in the form of a theoretical treatise, but as an organic part of another mythopoetic project. Tolkien himself often took philological and literary questions as the starting point for his stories and presented possible answers within a fictional frame; see Honegger (2011).

different categories. This will allow us to better appreciate the complex interplay of the different ingredients – some of which are key in creating the unmistakable flavour of Tolkien’s ‘Ring soup’, others are less prominent and work more subtly in the background. The search for clues leads us to excavations in Lydney in the county of Gloucestershire, to magical rings in ancient, medieval, and modern literature and folklore, but also to Richard Wagner, whose importance for Tolkien’s work has been fully explored only relatively late.<sup>31</sup>

The first obvious starting point in our search for clues is David Day’s book *Tolkien’s Ring* from 1994, which has been reprinted several times and is still commercially available today. The volume is a treasure trove of sagas, legends, stories and retelling of stories, reports, etc. that contain magic rings in one way or another. Unfortunately, Day’s volume meets the standards of a scholarly publication to a very limited extent. He does not give any information on the immediate sources of the legends and reports retold by him, nor does he give evidence of citations or provide a bibliography to the volume. The best you get is “Tolkien wrote ...”, or he just gives the title of the book he is quoting from but without specifying the page numbers or the edition used. On the one hand, one could therefore get the impression that Day is a somewhat quirky universal scholar who, when it comes to rings, has a multitude of sometimes very recondite sources, like for example court files from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and that he simply does not want to bother with such trivialities as sources and citations. On the other hand, it is also very possible that Day, in good medieval fashion, did not work his way through a pile of primary sources, but rather was fortunate enough to come across an informative anthology that summarizes them.

Such a compressed overview can be found in, for example, George E. Patten’s article ‘Rings’ in *Appletons’ Journal of Literature, Science, and Art* (Patten 1870). Several of the texts discussed by Day are mentioned in Patten’s brief overview, and Day’s versions differ mainly in that he retells them in greater length, provides them with illustrations by Alan Lee and, whenever possible, relates them to Tolkien’s work. Whether or not David Day was actually familiar with the publication of George Patten is not relevant for my purposes. Patten’s article is important insofar as it shows that basic information on apparently remote and difficult-to-

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<sup>31</sup> Lin Carter seems to be one of the earliest critics to comment on the parallels. In his 1969 *Tolkien: A Look Behind The Lord of the Rings*, he dedicates four pages (136-140) to discussing putative Wagnerian influences on Tolkien. From the 1980s onwards, John Ellison published several articles related to the topic. David Day dedicated an entire chapter to Wagner in his *Tolkien’s Ring* (1994: 161-175), basically summarizing Wagner’s *Ring-cycle*, but also attempting an evaluation of its importance for Tolkien (Day 1994: 179-180). In 2007, Tom Shippey’s conference-paper from 2003 appeared in print, and in 2012 the first two monographs on the topic were published in quick succession: Christopher MacLachlan’s *Tolkien and Wagner. The Ring and Der Ring* (2012) and Renée Vink’s *Wagner and Tolkien: Mythmakers* (2012).

access primary sources on the subject of ‘rings’ was readily available even before Tolkien’s lifetime (1892-1973). Patten’s article is from 1870 and did little more than bundle together information from older publications. Nor was it the only publication that (at least in part) was devoted to the topic.<sup>32</sup>

Taking these circumstances into account, it becomes clear that David Day’s book does not play a major role as a scholarly publication. Nevertheless, it is useful as a starting point for one’s own research insofar as it occasionally contains correct and original ideas, such as the one on the importance of Wagner’s Ring for Tolkien’s work (Day 1994: 179-180). Unfortunately, Day too often gets sidetracked, and the central points are in danger of being lost in a jumble of less relevant information.

#### 4.1 The Ring of Silvianus

The problem with all of the magical, literary, or historical rings mentioned by Patten or Day is that Tolkien, with a greater or lesser degree of probability,<sup>33</sup> knew them or had heard of them, but they can’t be proved to have any direct and demonstrable connection with his life and work. It was therefore a small sensation when, in connection with Peter Jackson’s *Hobbit* films, the research for a direct, concrete inspiration for the One Ring revealed a previously (supposedly) overlooked ‘magic ring’ which is said to have a direct connection to Tolkien.<sup>34</sup>

This ‘Ring of Silvianus,’ also called the ‘Vyne Ring,’ was found in 1785 near the old Roman town of Silchester. It is a 12 g heavy and 2.5 cm large gold ring with an attached bezel showing a portrait with the inscription “VENVS.” On the hoop itself is the engraved blessing saying “SENICIANE VIVAS IIN DE,” which should probably read correctly “SENICIANE VIVAS IN DEO” (‘May Senicianus live in God,’ i.e. ‘May God protect Senicianus’).<sup>35</sup> We do not know whether Tolkien knew the ring and the inscription. What we do know, however, is that he was asked by his colleague Sir Mortimer Wheeler, who was in charge of the archaeological

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<sup>32</sup> Evans (1922) and Heather (1931), who reflect the knowledge at the time of Tolkien’s early and middle literary creative period, would also be of relevance. They do not deal exclusively with rings, but in the context of their discussion of gemstones, this inevitably comes up.

<sup>33</sup> The ring of the magician of Courtray (1548) probably belongs to the category ‘less likely,’ while Tolkien certainly knew the rings from the Norse sagas and legends.

<sup>34</sup> See for example the article by Maev Kennedy ‘The Hobbit Ring that May Have Inspired Tolkien Put on Show’ in *The Guardian* on April 2, 2013. The article by Mark Horton and Lynn Forest-Hill (2014) gives a sober, fact-based presentation of the state of research on the subject.

<sup>35</sup> See Gerrard (2019) for a recent discussion of the scholarship about the Vyne ring.

excavations of the Romano-British shrine in Lydney, to research the name of ‘Nodens’.<sup>36</sup> Tolkien was therefore familiar with the lead tablet found in Lydney with the following curse inscription: “DEVO NODENTI SILVIANVS ANILVM PERDEDIT DEMEDIAM PARTEM DONAVIT NODENTI INTER QVIBVS NOMEN SENICIANI NOLLIS PETMITTAS SANITATEM DONEC PERFERA VSQVE TEMPLVM DENTIS” (‘Dedicated to the god Nodens. Silvianus lost a ring and donated half [its value] to Nodens. He should not give health to those named Senicianus until it [the ring] has been returned to the temple’). To explain these two objects, which are obviously linked by the name ‘Senicianus’, the researchers reconstructed the following sequence of events:<sup>37</sup> a member of the Senicianus family or someone with this name stole Silvianus’ gold ring. He obviously knew the identity of the thief more or less exactly and therefore donated the lead curse plaque in the Nodens temple in Lydney. Senicianus, the alleged thief, must have feared precisely this and therefore tried to neutralize the curse with a blessing engraved on the stolen ring. Ring, theft of the ring, cursing the thief – these are all elements that appear at least partially and in a modified form in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, even if a direct inspiration of the One Ring through the Ring of Silvianus seems to me rather speculative.

#### 4.2 Magic Rings in Medieval Literature and in Folk Tales

We are on safer ground with the magic rings in medieval literature, as we can verify Tolkien’s acquaintance with texts such as Chrétien de Troyes’ *Yvain ou Le chevalier au lion* or its Middle English adaptation *Ywain and Gawain* and, of course, the Welsh variant *Owein, or the Lady of the Fountain* (in the *Mabinogion*).<sup>38</sup> There we find for example a magic ring that does nothing more or less than make the wearer invisible. Yvain receives it from the lady-in-waiting Lunete when he finds himself trapped in the gatehouse between the portcullis and can thus escape capture. However, the ring then plays no role in the further course of the romance and is no longer mentioned. Such magic rings are often narrative props that are used strategically when necessary and then disappear back into the narrator’s box of tricks.

<sup>36</sup> Tolkien’s research was published in 1932 as ‘Appendix I: The Name ‘Nodens’’ to Wheeler’s report. It has been re-published in *Tolkien Studies* 4 (2007): 177-183.

<sup>37</sup> See Horton and Forest-Hill (2014: 51) and, more recently, Rateliff (2018: 196-199).

<sup>38</sup> See Cilli (2019) who lists all the books and texts for which we have a ‘Tolkien connection.’

More relevant, as it shares some key-characteristic with the One Ring, is the magic ring from the folk tale of Charlemagne and the snake. According to the legend,<sup>39</sup> a snake appeared at one of Charlemagne's 'public audiences' and draws his attention to a large, ugly toad sitting on its eggs, preventing them from hatching. Charlemagne has the toad grabbed and burned and the snake comes back the next day with a ring (some versions give a gemstone) and drops it into Charlemagne's goblet in gratitude. Charlemagne gives this ring to his wife Fastrada without being aware of its special property: the ring arouses a passionate love or affection in the giver for the person who wears the ring. As long as Fastrada is alive, this is not a problem, and it is also not noticed that Charlemagne is especially fond of his wife. When she dies, however, it takes the wisdom and ingenuity of Bishop Turpin to realize that the emperor's deep grief and his refusal to release Fastrada's body for burial are beyond normal. Turpin correctly suspects that the reason for this can be found in the ring and removes it from the corpse's finger. In this way he heals the emperor from his obsessive fixation on the corpse of his wife and she can finally receive an appropriate burial. The price for this, however, is that the bishop, as the new owner of the ring, has to endure the ruler's special and, over time, rather burdensome and even intrusive attention. Only when he succeeds in throwing the ring into a pond on a hunting trip does the emperor's fixation on him loosen and Charlemagne 'falls in love' with the place where the ring was sunk by Turpin – and establishes his residence there in Aachen. The legend in its longer form has been available in written form at least since Johann Jakob Scheuchzer (1672-1733) and has found its place in numerous collections of legends and folk tales. Thus, there was a good chance that Tolkien knew this story in one form or another – and through it the motif of 'obsession with a ring'!

#### 4.3 Magic Rings in Contemporary Literature

My essay is not the place to explore Tolkien's 'contemporary reading behaviour,' which is an endeavour that would take up far more time and space than we have available.<sup>40</sup> That is why I

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<sup>39</sup> In volume two of *Deutsche Sagen* (Grimm and Grimm 1818: 130-132) the Brothers Grimm give a variant of the legend as well as references to older sources for the story; see also August Pauls' article in the *Zeitschrift des Aachener Geschichtsvereins* (1895).

<sup>40</sup> Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond give an insight, albeit spread over three volumes in their *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* (2017). Holly Ordway's book *Tolkien's Modern Reading* (2021) provides a recent in-depth exploration of Tolkien's 'modern' reading habits.

would like to briefly mention only three books which Tolkien could possibly have been influenced by in the design of the mode of operation of the One Ring.<sup>41</sup>

The first is *The Enchanted Castle* by the popular author Edith Nesbit, published in 1907 when Tolkien was just 15 years old.<sup>42</sup> Nesbit's book tells the adventures of three children who spend their school holidays exploring an enchanted castle. What is interesting here is a magic ring that, among other things, makes the wearer invisible. Once put on the finger, the ring cannot be removed, and the wearer has to wait until the effect is over and the ring falls off by itself. For the three 'invisible ones' (Madlen, Gerald, Eliza) this is 21, 14 and 7 hours, respectively. The description of invisibility in Nesbit's novel raises questions. Here, the wearer still has a shadow in direct sunlight, and the ring only makes the clothes (including hat) worn on the body invisible – and also food, that disappears in the mouth. But as soon as the object no longer has direct physical contact with the wearer, like for example when Eliza takes her hat in her hand, it becomes visible again.

H. G. Wells in his *The Invisible Man* (1897)<sup>43</sup> was a little more logical and only made the body itself invisible, not the clothing. Also with Wells, the ingested food only slowly becomes invisible through assimilation in the body and therefore remains visible for the first few minutes after eating. Overall, Wells tries hard to put the phenomenon in a (pseudo-) scientific context and goes to some lengths to explain the chemical and physical process of how Griffin achieves invisibility. Tolkien also had to grapple with this problem – perhaps precisely because he knew Wells' and Nesbit's descriptions and felt neither one nor the other to be suitable for his story. Tolkien's early versions contain some elements analogous to Nesbit's narrative, such as the food and crockery and cutlery items floating in the air as if by magic (Scull and Hammond 2017, *Guide* II: 846). These scenes, which come close to slapstick, disappear with the reworking, as does the telltale shadow of the ring bearer in direct sunlight.<sup>44</sup> The question of how the Ring makes the wearer's clothes invisible seems to have been solved by Tolkien in

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<sup>41</sup> Doubtlessly, other books could be cited. The latest parallel to the One Ring was discovered by Freigeiro in Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Fair Maid of Perth* (1828) in 2018.

<sup>42</sup> See Scull and Hammond (2017, II: 846), who point out some of the obvious parallels between invisibility in Nesbit's book and Tolkien's descriptions of invisibility through the One Ring. Unfortunately, neither Christopher nor Priscilla Tolkien can remember reading *The Enchanted Castle* as children (Scull and Hammond 2017, II: 846) nor does Ordway list it among those of Nesbit's books that can be linked to Tolkien with certainty (Ordway 2021: 302). However, this does not rule out the possibility that Tolkien had read the book himself as a teenager or was otherwise familiar with the story, and Ordway's discussion of Nesbit's use of magic as a possible influence on Tolkien's concept of Bilbo's magic ring/the One Ring (Ordway 2021: 74) could be profitably extended to the magic ring in *The Enchanted Castle*.

<sup>43</sup> Ordway (2021: 207-208) discusses Wells as an author Tolkien knew fairly well, yet we cannot prove a first-hand acquaintance with *The Invisible Man*.

<sup>44</sup> See chapter 5 in *The Hobbit*, where Bilbo got stuck between the door and the door-post and "one of the goblins inside shouted: 'There is a shadow by the door. [...]' (82).

such a way that he assumes a kind of ‘cloud of invisibility’ generated by the Ring. This ‘cloud of invisibility’ becomes explicitly visible in his illustration of Bilbo in Smaug’s cave in Tolkien’s picture *Conversation with Smaug*.<sup>45</sup> Compared to Wells’ science-rationalism, it is a fairytale-like solution, but it certainly corresponds to the character of the narrative and certainly fits more harmoniously into the overall picture of Middle-earth than a (pseudo-) scientific digression.

The question of invisibility, as before the problem of dependency and influence from the Ring, was taken up again decades later by J.K. Rowling with the Cloak of Invisibility. This idea draws on the older and more consistent concept of the magic cloak.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, Rowling separates the function of invisibility from that of power, which is embodied in the Elder Wand, which under normal circumstances makes the owner invincible in a duel.<sup>47</sup>

Another parallel between Nesbit’s and Tolkien’s rings is the ability of the invisible wearer, described by Nesbit, to perceive the ‘parallel world.’ With Tolkien this is the world of the Elves (e.g. Glorfindel at the ford of Rivendell [*LotR* 223]) and the Ringwraiths (Frodo and the Ringwraiths on Amon Sûl [*LotR* 195]). For Nesbit, it is the stone statues in the castle park, which are linked to Greco-Roman mythology. They come to life after sunset and enjoy themselves harmlessly in the garden and later invite the children to a nightly picnic – a bit like Gildor and the Elves in the Shire. I can well imagine that Tolkien – should he have known Nesbit’s novel – went against this downplaying and trivialization in his epic by not simply copying the motif but reinterpreting it and placing it in a different context.

With Nesbit, the concept of the magic ring becomes a little more complicated towards the end: the ring turns out to be a magic ring that fulfills a wish of the wearer. However, this wish must be formulated precisely and clearly. The history of the ring and the explanation of its magical powers are given by Psyche, who informs the children that the ring was given to one of the ancestors of Lord Yalding, the owner of the enchanted castle, and this ancestor had created much of the visible castle, and more, with the help of the ring’s magical power. Now when Lord

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<sup>45</sup> See, for example, the colour-reproduction in *Pictures by J.R.R. Tolkien* (Tolkien 1979: Picture 17).

<sup>46</sup> Even if the invisibility cloak is sometimes depicted as headwear – a cap or hood –, one of the meanings of the (medieval) Latin *cappa* is ‘cloak, cape.’ It has been preserved in this sense in the English word ‘cape.’ For a discussion of the meaning and etymology of ‘cap’, see the entry ‘cap, n.1’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The tradition of the ‘Tarnhelm/Tarnkappe’ (i.e. helm/cap of invisibility) has its analogue in the ‘Helm of Hades’ (the Greek original means literally ‘dog-skin of Hades’ and is either translated as ‘Helm of Hades’ or ‘Cap of Hades’).

<sup>47</sup> The story of the Cloak of Invisibility and the Elder Wand are told in Chapter 21, ‘The Tale of the Three Brothers’, of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (Rowling 2007: 329-343). By making Death the one who gives the Cloak of Invisibility to the youngest of the brothers, Rowling links her tale to Greek mythology, where the item bestowing invisibility (‘Helm/Cap of Hades’) is also associated with the god of the dead (Hades).

Yalding wishes that the ring would lose its magic and everything that was created by that magic disappear, parts of the castle and the jewels vanish into thin air, as do certain people (Mr. Ugly) whose existence was down to the magical power of the ring. This is similar to Tolkien's Rings of Power, as when destroyed (or when the One Ring is destroyed), all the things that are held by its magic will disappear.

A contemporary book for Tolkien that deals with the dangers of a mysterious, wish-fulfilling magical object is Charles Williams' metaphysical thriller *Many Dimensions* (1931). Williams was not only a friend of C.S. Lewis, but also a member of the Inklings, a literary group of intellectuals that included, among others, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Owen Barfield, Hugo Dyson, Nevill Coghill, and Charles Williams.<sup>48</sup> With that we can be sure that Tolkien knew both the author and the work personally.<sup>49</sup> In *Many Dimensions* we don't have a magic ring, but we have a magic stone from King Solomon's crown. The stone consists of *prima materia* from the Garden of Eden and gives the ability to travel in space and time, to read the minds of other people and to fulfil wishes like the healing of illnesses – and probably much more. Before the rather ignorant protagonists can recognize and use the full potential of the stone, Williams makes it disappear from this world in a way borrowed from the legend of the Grail. For Tolkien, with his strongly Catholic background, it was certainly of interest how it was portrayed, how such an object represents a temptation for each of us. While the wicked want to use the power of the stone for their more or less selfish goals, the good as well as the guardians of the stone are characterized by the fact that they consciously renounce any use of the power of the stone and thus act similarly to Galadriel or Gandalf.

While in Charles Williams' *Many Dimensions* (1931) the question of the total and direct takeover of power with the help of the magical object is never explicitly discussed, and the stone is, in the end, no longer accessible, this question arises explicitly in the aforementioned novel *The Invisible Man* by H. G. Wells (1897). One could see Wells' book as a 're-write' of the Gyges saga in Plato's *Republic* (II, 359-360). Both Gyges and Griffin, the protagonist in Wells' novel, want to abuse their invisibility to gain power. Gyges is successful with his plan and, with the help of the magic ring, rises to become the tyrant of Lydia. In the case of Griffin, invisibility becomes a problem insofar as it cannot be turned on or off at will but becomes a permanent property of the respective human body. This follows from Wells' pseudo-scientific

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<sup>48</sup> See Humphrey Carpenter's award-winning study *The Inklings* (Carpenter 1981).

<sup>49</sup> Ordway (2021: 215-219) discusses the relationship between Tolkien and Williams in general and mentions *Many Dimensions* in passing (218), yet she does not include it among those books by Williams we are certain Tolkien knew (305).

reference framework, which makes it difficult to fall back on a magical explanatory pattern more suitable for the needs of the narrative. Griffin's invisibility is the result of a physical and chemical transformation – with all the difficulties that result. Under the circumstances described by Wells, the clothes remain visible – which leads to the often comical situations described in detail in the novel. This excessive focus on the direct and indirect effects of permanent invisibility is responsible for the fact that Griffin's plans to seize world domination seem grotesque and comical rather than threatening, and the original moral content of the Gyges narrative is almost completely lost. I can therefore very well imagine that with the One Ring, Tolkien took up the difficulties contained in the Gyges myth anew and wanted to put them up for discussion in a larger and, above all, morally more serious context.<sup>50</sup> Wherever and in whatever direction the One Ring developed in the course of its career from *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings*, at least initially the 'Gyges question' is definitely relevant. Gollum/Sméagol, who kills his friend Déagol in order to get the Ring into his possession, abuses invisibility to gain certain advantages (*LotR* 53), and as with Gyges, the question arises: How does someone behave who, due to his invisibility, does not have to fear retaliation for his deeds and is therefore outside of any social control? With Gollum, however, this was exhausted in petty underhandedness, since, according to Gandalf, the One Ring can only confer on the wearer "power according to his stature" (*LotR* 53). Only when the One Ring comes into contact with such powerful and charismatic personalities as Gandalf, Boromir or Galadriel does its full potential unfold – whereby, interestingly, invisibility no longer plays a role. One could strikingly claim that in *The Hobbit* we still have the Ring of Gyges in front of us, which then turns into the ring of power from Richard Wagner's *Ring-cycle* in the course of *The Lord of the Rings*. More on this in the following, last part of my essay.

#### 4.4 Tolkien and Wagner

Rings, whether magical or not, can be found in many tales, myths and legends of Germanic and, more specifically, Norse origin. Of all these, however, only one is of special interest for the development of the One Ring: the Ring of the Nibelung in the *interpretatio Wagneriana*. I emphasize this because in research Tolkien's bon mot "Both rings were round, and there the resemblance ceases" (*Letters* 306, letter no. 229) has often meant that Wagner's influence was categorically excluded. Tolkien was perhaps not very happy with what Wagner had done with

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<sup>50</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between the Ring of Gyges and the One Ring, see Neubauer (2021). See also the older articles by Morse (1980) and Katz (2003).

Andvari's Ring – and even less with what the National Socialists did with Wagner's work during his lifetime – but Wagner's *Ring*-cycle was in many ways too close to his own legend for Tolkien to be able to ignore it and shrug it off. How closely the two Secondary Mythologies are linked to one another only became clear some ten years ago when, after decades of relative academic neglect,<sup>51</sup> two independent monographs were published on the subject: Renée Vink's *Wagner and Tolkien: Mythmakers* (2012) and Christopher MacLachlan's *Tolkien and Wagner: The Ring and Der Ring* (2012). Both authors show that the similarities between Tolkien and Wagner go far beyond what could be explained by accessing the same medieval sources. The parallels range from structural-narrative elements to the borrowing of names to motifs and their reworking. In the context of this essay, I cannot go into detail on Tolkien's examination of Wagner's work, but would like to use a few selected examples to show how and to what extent this functioned as a point of departure, inspiration, but also a point of irritation.

Edward R. Haymes discussed the fundamental structural parallels between the two epics on the occasion of his lecture 'The Two Rings: *The Lord of the Rings*; *The Ring of the Nibelung*,' given on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2004 at the Wagner Society of New York. He renders visible the parallels between the two works by providing the following plot sketch, which applies to either epic:

A greedy, smaller-than-human creature finds a treasure in the depths of a river. He carries it to his underground retreat where he retains it until it is stolen by a visitor from the upper world. He swears eternal hate to the thief. The treasure is, of course, a ring of great power. The ring exerts strange influences on its owners including giving them the ability to disappear. The ring becomes the object of a fatal struggle between close friends or brothers, in fact it seems always to bring danger or death to its owners. A hero enters the fray armed with a reforged sword that had been broken. Various races of humanoid beings attempt to gain control of the ring by magic and by heroism until it is finally brought at great cost and sacrifice back to its origin where it is purified by fire. The last pursuer perishes along with the ring. (Haymes 2004)

Like all summaries, this one also has the disadvantage that it is greatly simplified and abbreviated – but precisely because of this, it draws attention to the parallels that are otherwise overlooked.

On the level of names, we have an obvious parallel and answer to Wagner's *Mime* with the petty-dwarf *Mim* in Tolkien's story *The Children of Húrin* (Tolkien 2007). It is an example of how Tolkien reacts to Wagner's treatment of the common sources. As the research by Shippey (2007a), Vink (2012) and MacLachlan (2012) has shown, Tolkien often understands his

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<sup>51</sup> See the discussion in footnote 31.

interpretations as a corrective to Wagner's representations. Tolkien's description of Turin's honorable and respectful treatment of the petty-dwarf Mîm can also be seen as a criticism of and an alternative to Siegfried's brutal and cruel treatment of Mime in *Siegfried*.

Furthermore, Wagner was well aware of his medieval source texts, but he was not primarily an academic. As a consequence, he saw such philological-literary riddles as the ring problem<sup>52</sup> not so much as a scholarly challenge, but as something that an artist could redesign with the proverbial artistic freedom. The following changes and innovations compared to his old Norse source texts are to be noted:<sup>53</sup>

- 1) The ring becomes the central motif that gives the cycle its name. It is no longer just a 'normal' magical ring, which represents a source of never-ending wealth, but is intended to help achieve "measureless might,"<sup>54</sup> and as Loge proclaims: "A toy 'tis in the waters sleeping, serving for children's delight; but if to a rounded ring it be fashioned, measureless might it grants, and wins the world for its lord." (Wagner 1899: 90-91).<sup>55</sup> To do this, however, the Creator / Lord of the Ring has to renounce love, as Woglinde explains: "He who the sway of love forswears, he who delight of love forbears, alone the magic can master that forces the gold to a ring." (Wagner 1899: 43).<sup>56</sup> This the frustrated Alberich does willingly, because "The world's wealth by thy spell might I win for mine own? If love be denied me, my cunning shall win me delight? [...] My hand quenches your light, I wrest from the rock the gold, fashion the ring of revenge; for, hear me ye floods: love henceforth be accursed!" (Wagner 1899: 47-50).<sup>57</sup>

<sup>52</sup> On the 'ring problem' in the Nibelungen narrative cycle, see Shippey (2007a).

<sup>53</sup> Carter (1969: 138-139) is the first to provide such a list (with eight items). His list is expanded and amended by Vink (2012: 15-29), who provides twenty-eight points.

<sup>54</sup> Wellgunde, First Scene. The German original has "maasslose Macht" (Wagner 1899: 42). See also Alberich Fourth Scene: "As its [i.e. the Ring's] gold gave measureless might." / "Gab sein Gold mir Macht ohne Maass." (Wagner 1899: 175). I use the 1899 bilingual edition of *Das Rheingold / The Rhinegold*, since it might well be that Tolkien and his friends, C.S. and Warren Lewis, were familiar with this edition.

<sup>55</sup> Loge, Second Scene. The German original reads: "Ein Tand ist's in der Wasser's Tiefe, lachenden Kindern zur Lust; doch ward es zum runden Reife geschmiedet, hilft es zur höchsten Macht, gewinnt dem Manne die Welt." (Wagner 1899: 90-91).

<sup>56</sup> Woglinde, First Scene. The German original reads: "Nur wer der Minne Macht entsagt, nur wer der Liebe Lust verjagt, nur der erzielt sich den Zauber, zum Reif zu zwingen das Gold." (Wagner 1899: 43).

<sup>57</sup> Alberich, First Scene. The German original reads: "Der Welt Erbe gewänn' ich zu eigen durch dich? Erzwäng' ich nicht Liebe, doch listig erzwäng' ich mir Lust? [...] Das Licht löscht ich euch aus; entreisse dem Riff das Gold, schmiede den rächenden Ring; denn hör' es die Fluth: so verfluch' ich die Liebe!" (Wagner 1899: 47-50). See also Alberich cursing the gods in the Third Scene: "A love by me was once forsworn, All that have life shall eke forswear it!" / "Wie ich der Liebe abgesagt, Alles was lebt soll ihr entsagen!" (Wagner 1899: 140-141).

- 2) Wagner gives a clearly documented tradition for Alberich's ring: Rhine-daughters (as guardians of the Rhinegold, the raw material from which the ring is forged) – Alberich (who forges the ring from the Rhine gold) – Loge and Wotan – Fafner – Siegfried – Brünnhilde – Rhine-daughters.
- 3) He connects the 'Tarnhelm' (helm of invisibility) with the ring and thus brings the two elements 'power' and 'invisibility' into close proximity to one another.

Of these three Wagnerian innovations, the first is certainly the most important and plays a central role in the genesis of the One Ring. It is in Wagner's work that we find the connection between power and the ring for the first time so explicitly formulated. It is Wellgunde, a daughter of the Rhine, and the god Loge who address the power aspect at the beginning of the *Ring-cycle*. Wellgunde explains: "The world's wealth would be won by the man who, out of the Rhinegold, fashioned the ring which measureless might would bestow." (Wagner 1899: 41-42).<sup>58</sup> Of course, the 'Lord of the Ring' has to pay a price for the power of the ring (see above).

Here again Tolkien's reaction to this Wagnerian element is interesting: for him it is precisely love (often the love of friends) that helps against the temptation of the One Ring – as is the case with Sam and, in a modified form, with Faramir. The wearer of the One Ring has to pay a price with the gradual loss of his own will and personality, yet this erosion of the personality is counteracted at least partially through friendship/love.

## 5 Conclusion

As we have seen, Tolkien's 'Ring soup' comprises a great variety of ingredients, but we can identify three elements that make it into his 'signature dish'. These elements derive from very different traditions. First, we have the ancient story of Gyges' ring with the moral question: How do you act when you don't have to take responsibility for your actions? As a second element we have the promise of the 'measureless might' of the ring of the Nibelungs in the Wagnerian reading.<sup>59</sup> And as a third and last element, there is the motif of obsession, as can be found in the tale of Charlemagne and the snake.

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<sup>58</sup> Wellgunde, First Scene. The German original reads: "Der Welt Erbe gewänne zu eigen, wer aus dem Rheingold schüfe den Ring, der maasslose Macht ihm verlieh" (Wagner 1899: 41-42).

<sup>59</sup> Strangely enough, Wagner's protagonists are often not really interested in the ring, and despite its prominent position as the namesake of the entire cycle, it does not really occupy the central position – things that Tolkien solves differently.

It would be wrong to claim that Tolkien consciously and deliberately designed the One Ring by using motifs from the story of Gyges to which he added a dash of the folk tale of Charlemagne and the snake. In my opinion, these two sources belong to the category of the “leaf-mould of the mind” (Carpenter 1977: 131) and act rather unconsciously – together with other known or unknown elements. Yet, it is different with Wagner’s *Ring*-cycle, which is not so much a component of the unconscious ‘leaf-mould of the mind,’ but an inspiration that injects its all-permeating flavour into Tolkien’s ‘Ring soup’. At the same time, it also acts as an irritation and provokes Tolkien into rewriting Wagner’s *Ring*-story.

#### Abbreviations

- Hobbit* Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. 1937. *The Hobbit*. Third edition. London: HarperCollins, 1995.
- Letters* Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. 1981. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.
- LotR* Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. 1954-55. *The Lord of the Rings*. 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary one-volume edition. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.
- Sil* Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. 1977. *The Silmarillion*. Edited by Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- TOFS* Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. 2008. *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*. (Expanded edition, with commentary and notes; first edition 1947). Edited by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson. London: HarperCollins.

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