

Journal of Tolkien Research

Volume 19
Issue 3 "J.R.R. Tolkien and Medieval Poets" in
honor of Richard C. West

Article 6

2024

Tolkien's _Beowulf_-poet and His Dantean Tower

Michael David Elam
Regent University, melam@regent.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Elam, Michael David (2024) "Tolkien's _Beowulf_-poet and His Dantean Tower," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 19: Iss. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol19/iss3/6>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Tolkien Research by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

Tolkien's *Beowulf*-poet and His Dantean Tower

Cover Page Footnote

I must thank Michaila Shahan, my undergraduate research assistant, who did much searching and gathering of material I needed and discussed with me her findings in ways that helped me refine this piece.

In “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics” (“Monsters”), J.R.R. Tolkien’s tower metaphor is part of a larger allegory that Tolkien uses to clarify the motives driving the *Beowulf*-poet. Tolkien’s allegory presents the poet as an architect using material from a pile of stones to construct a tower, the poem *Beowulf*, an object not only of curiosity but also of scorn. It is a structure built by a Christian poet from pre-existing pagan material, represented in the allegory by the pile of stones from which he draws (Tolkien, “Monsters” 7-9).¹ The culmination of Tolkien’s tower metaphor is the assertion that “from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out on the sea” (8). Michael D.C. Drout points out that the origin of the tower metaphor “has its source ultimately in a lecture by Matthew Arnold . . . quoted by [W.P.] Ker in *The Dark Ages*” (6-7).² Tolkien’s metaphor likely adapts details in a discussion by Matthew Arnold, where Arnold describes the poet who wrote the *Mabinogion* as “pillaging an antiquity of which he does not fully possess the secret; he is like a peasant building his hut on the site of Halicarnassus or Ephesus; he builds, but what he builds is full of materials of which he knows not the history, or knows by a glimmering tradition merely;—stones . . . of an older architecture, greater, cunninger, more majestic” (Arnold 46-47).³ Tolkien’s adaptation of Arnold’s metaphor, however, replaces the idea of pillaging antiquity with that of using the material of an inherited field to build a tower that facilitates the poet’s view of the sea from the top (Tolkien, “Monsters,” 7-8). More importantly, however, the culmination of Tolkien’s metaphor in a view of the sea evinces a strong Dantean signal toward the idea of purgation, a view explicitly seen twice in Dante’s *Purgatorio*. The first view comes in *Purgatorio*’s first canto, where Dante the pilgrim has just emerged from his journey through the Inferno:

The dawn was gaining ground, putting to flight
the last hour of the night; I recognized,
far off, the rippling waters of the sea.
(Dante, *Purgatory* 1.115-17)⁴

The second view comes later as Dante wakes from a dream before entering the gates of Purgatory itself:

¹ I follow Michael D.C. Drout’s convention of referring to this work as “Monsters,” as opposed to the source material from which Tolkien composed it, which I, again following Drout, refer to as “Critics” (7 n.12). I refer to Drout’s work as *B&C*.

² As far as I can tell, W.P. Ker refers to Arnold’s work once, quoting Arnold’s using “natural magic” to characterize Celtic literature (Ker 47). I must thank Michaila Shahan, my undergraduate research assistant, who did much searching and gathering of material I needed and discussed with me her findings in ways that helped me refine this piece.

³ Also quoted in Drout (182-83).

⁴ Mark Musa’s translation is titled *Purgatory*, and I refer to it parenthetically thus; I use the more customary title *Purgatorio* otherwise.

Beside me was my Comfort [Virgil], all alone.
 Now it was day, the sun two hours high,
 and what I saw before me was the sea. (9.43-45)

Tolkien, a medievalist, knew and engaged with Dante's work. Jim Stockton's index of meetings from the Oxford Dante Society Minutes, for example, shows Tolkien as having presented a paper to the society on 11 November 1947 about the word *lusinghe*, which appears in the first canto of *Purgatorio* (135).⁵ Tolkien also mentions Dante in a letter to Charlotte and Denis Plimmer in 1967, saying, "At one time Lewis and I used to read him to one another. I was for a while a member of the Oxford Dante Society (I think at the proposal of Lewis, who overestimated greatly my scholarship in Dante or Italian generally)" (*Letters* 530). And while these instances are over a decade and more after Tolkien wrote the material for "Monsters," it shows Tolkien having a previous, engaged knowledge of Dante's work and invites searching for and further investigation of places in Tolkien's work where Dantean overtones are seen.⁶ The view from the tower in Tolkien's presentation, then, serves to show the poet's intent to purge in some way matters associated with *Beowulf* and to offer a sanctified vision of the pagan past from which he draws, even as it coincides with Tolkien's own attempt to purge *Beowulf* criticism of what he saw as its misunderstandings.

Aside from Tolkien's tower metaphor likely coming initially from Arnold, Tolkien's allegory is strikingly applicable to Dante: two Christian poets build their tower-like structures with especial mindfulness to a pagan past. Tolkien likely saw the work of the earlier Old English *scop* in a similar light as that of the latter Italian *poeta*.⁷ Dante the poet, drawing heavily from the works of Virgil, who serves as

⁵ The word *lusinghe* appears in canto 1, line 92 of *Purgatorio*; Mark Musa's translation reads "flattery." The account of Tolkien's talk is presented by John R. Holmes and shows Tolkien discussing not only the word from canto 1 of *Purgatorio*, but also the term *l'aere bruno* ("the brown air"; "the darkening air" in Musa's translation) in the first line of *Inferno* 2.

⁶ The index to *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* (C&G) points to over a dozen meetings Tolkien attended of the Oxford Dante Society from 1946 to 1954 (3:1646). C&G also offers a brief account of the society's objects and Tolkien's membership, which ran from his election in 1945 to his resignation in 1955 (2:1235-36). Its only mention of "purgatory" in the index leads to a passage referring "to an early poem by Tolkien, **Habbanon beneath the Stars*, and an entry in an early word-list which connects Habbanon with a place of purgatory" (1:804). One should note that in the 1967 letter to the Plimmers, Tolkien expressed admiration for Dante, "a supreme poet," in clarifying an assertion that the poet did not "attract" him: "My reference to Dante was outrageous. I do not seriously dream of being measured against [him]" (530). This letter is also cited in C&G (2:1236). Indeed, other than references related to the Oxford Dante Society, the *Companion and Guide* contains no other discussions related to Tolkien and Dante.

⁷ Dante's *Comedy* was written between 1307 and 1321, centuries after *Beowulf*. Still, significant Dantean motifs found in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, especially related to emergence

guide to Dante the pilgrim, builds both a literal and a poetic tower-like mountain and climbs it, elevating his vision and cleansing the work of his reason, accompanied by his guide, the pagan poet Virgil. Similarly, the *Beowulf*-poet, according to Tolkien, “using afresh ancient and largely traditional material,” climbs his own tower, and, in the most striking similarity of all, the *Beowulf*-poet, like Dante’s pilgrim, views the sea (“Monsters,” 9).⁸ Tolkien sees the *Beowulf*-poet as a Christian man in a Christian milieu reappropriating his source material, and in ways its original authors did not likely intend, in order to gain a uniquely Christian view that also reframes his sources more harmoniously to Christianity than in the sources themselves. Such reframing would help make more palatable Beowulf’s pagan heroic virtue of Northern Europe to a post-conversion audience that might be nervous to see anything of value in a man whose virtues Christianity’s supplanted, or at least adjusted. They might see through the new frame Beowulf’s perseverance against malice as a northern foreshadowing of Christian perseverance.

Indeed, the idea of Northernness is a concern of Tolkien’s, and in a letter to his son, Michael, Tolkien overtly describes a “northern spirit” that he associates with *Beowulf* as being most nobly expressed in England—the earliest place, he says, where such a spirit was “sanctified and Christianized” (*Letters* 78).⁹ But more significant are two statements found in the previously mentioned letter to the Plimmers, before he offers them his thoughts about Dante. The first statement regards the location of Minas Tirith: “The action of the story [*The Lord of the Rings*] takes place in the North-west of ‘Middle-earth’, equivalent in latitude to the coastlands of Europe and the north shores of the Mediterranean. . . If Hobbiton and Rivendell are taken (as intended) to be at about the latitude of Oxford, then Minas Tirith, 600 miles south, is at about the latitude of Florence” (*Letters* 528). Here, Tolkien explicitly associates the city of Minas Tirith with Florence, where Dante was born in 1265 and from which he was exiled in 1301, and shows his interest in

from the underground and viewing the stars, show their importance for shaping important sequences in Tolkien’s writing and suggest Dante was a valuable source for him. To my knowledge—aside from an article by Judith Caesar, who points out a number of motifs from *Inferno* that Tolkien uses in *The Lord of the Rings*—none of these has been explored. Indeed, I am currently working on scholarship that examines Tolkien’s allusions to Mount Purgatory and his use of Dantean trajectories of travel as major components of meaning in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

⁸ It is important to note that Dante’s view comes just as he is about to enter the first of Mount Purgatory’s seven levels; Dante’s position is still high, though, coming from the top of the foothills that rise to the base of the mountain. One should also differentiate between Dante the pilgrim and Dante the poet; the pilgrim is a character used by the poet to portray his journey—from recognizing sin (in *Inferno*), seeing how it might be cleansed for the elect (in *Purgatorio*), and achieving a view of beatific vision (in *Paradiso*).

⁹ Also cited in Drout (11). This idea of especially sanctified English Christianity appears in numerous places throughout “Monsters.”

explicitly associating his writing with Christian geography.¹⁰ The second statement comes further on in the letter and refers to W.H. Auden's assessment of Tolkien's view of the North. There Tolkien says,

Auden has asserted that for me 'the North is a sacred direction'. That is not true. The North-west of Europe, where I (and most of my ancestors) have lived, has my affection, as a man's home should. . . but it is not 'sacred', nor does it exhaust my affections. . . The North was the seat of the fortresses of the Devil. The progress of the tale [*The Lord of the Rings*] ends in what is far more like the re-establishment of an effective Holy Roman Empire with its seat in Rome than anything that would be devised by a 'Nordic'. (*Letters* 528-29)

Again, though these statements come after "Monsters" was published, they indicate a train of thought that privileges Christianity and the element of sanctification, particularly expressed in the idea of Purgatory.

In "Monsters," however, Tolkien asserts that the *Beowulf*-poet seems deliberately to suppress overtly Christian elements in his work (22),¹¹ but scattered throughout "Monsters" are details strongly suggesting that Tolkien actually believed the poem to function according to a purgatorial principle, something that either cleanses or is cleansed by the poet's intent, or both. In fact, I would argue that Tolkien himself scatters such details to express own personal conviction about the purgatorial nature of *Beowulf*. Such a conviction may have been at odds with some of what he actually argues in the essay in sympathy with a northern sense of ultimate defeat in righteous struggle, or he may be at pains to suppress overt mention of purgation for the sake of emphasizing the *Beowulf*-poet's praise of Beowulf, the pagan hero of his narrative. But evidence of the conviction remains.

Be that as it may, the tower allegory is a late addition to Tolkien's essay that would mitigate such apparent incongruities. In early drafts of "Critics," where one might expect to read about the tower built from ancient stones, one sees instead that Tolkien says the poet used the stones to build a rock garden:

¹⁰ I am currently writing a more extensive piece on the purgatorial nature of Minas Tirith, especially with respect both to Pippin's stay there and to the Houses of Healing. I believe it is no coincidence that the city, like Mount Purgatory, is seven-tiered, nor that episodes during Pippin's stay represent purgatorial experiences on different levels of the city corresponding roughly to Purgatorio's levels.

¹¹ Tolkien's own note on this point (45-46) attempts to explain references to Cain and Abel as interjections by the poet in order to shade the work with "Scriptural colour," poetic interjections distinct from the thoughts of the poem's non-Christian characters inhabiting a wholly non-Christian world.

I would present you with the following allegory, and would have it borne in mind. A man found a mass of old stone in a unused patch, and made of it a rock garden; but his friends coming perceived that the stones had once been part of a more ancient building, and they turned them upsidedown to look for hidden inscriptions; some suspected a deposit of coal under the soil and proceeded to dig for it. They all said “this garden is most interesting,” but they said also “what a jumble and confusion it is in!” (“Critics” 68)

The deployment of the tower metaphor instead of the rock-garden allegory is certainly more apt to express the hopeful effect the poet's work has on himself.¹² It elevates both the poet and his work, and raises the source material itself, literally because it is a tower and morally because it is the means by which the poet gains his lofty view. Still, Michael D. C. Drout points out that the rock garden metaphor better captures a nuance of class-distinction permeating much of Tolkien's discussion in “Monsters,” a class distinction linked to the poet's Englishness. Drout writes that the rock-garden allegory has the effect of making the poet's use of his material something done in “particularly English fashion” (11). The change from rock garden to tower, however, fundamentally changes the qualities Tolkien wants to emphasize in the *Beowulf*-poet. The English fashion of transformation is itself transformed into something especially Christian too, and more especially purgatorial. The transformation of the metaphor shows Tolkien's urge to present *Beowulf* in terms of its purgatorial quality, and the urge permeates the subtext of “Monsters”—namely that the process of adapting from the old cleanses the adapter and sanctifies the old material by its use to facilitate the poet's vision, a Christian vision.

It is also important to recognize that Michael Drout has already asked, “what was the sea he was able to view from [the tower's] top?” (19). His extensive answer—which he links to a discussion by Clare Lees, that the view is something akin to transcending the poet's own time—touches on the idea of reproduction bound up with the tragedy “that [Beowulf] fails to reproduce,” a feature of the poem Tolkien saw as important in the poet's overall scheme to equate the death of Beowulf with the death of his people (24).¹³ I largely agree with the culmination of

¹² See Drout, *B&C*, 10 ff. Both of Tolkien's early drafts of “Critics” in Drout's edition contain the allegory of the rock garden.

¹³ Drout offers an extensive, nuanced critique of Lees' argument that Tolkien's view is ultimately tied up with “‘masculinist’ ideology,” though many details in support of her argument he agrees with (19). Drout never quite comes to an explicit answer to the question posed, but focuses on seeing Tolkien's understanding of the *Beowulf*-poet's view being associated with the fallen condition of mankind (19-27).

Drout's exploration landing on the idea that human flaw seems inextricably part of Tolkien's notion about the view from the top of the Beowulfian tower.

Nevertheless, I contend that the explicit reference to the sea being the object of the poet's gaze gestures explicitly to the view of the sea offered by Dante in *Purgatorio*, especially the later view in the Canto 9. Human flaws, for the elect, may be cleansed. Even the first view comes as Dante begins his preparation to enter Mount Purgatory's gates, which he will do in Canto 9 after climbing its foothills. Tolkien's essay does not make explicit connection to Dante's *Comedy*, perhaps to avoid the difficulty of anachronism, but one cannot believe that the connection would be lost on him. Even if the tower metaphor was not suggested first to him by Dante's *Purgatorio*, employing it in "Monsters" as part of his allegory, containing as it does details present in Dante's work, accompanying also Tolkien's later references to Virgil as an adapter of ancient material, one must consider that Dante's very own work is analogous to that of the *Beowulf*-poet according to Tolkien's own conception—the Christian poet building a tower and mindful of the ancient pagan material, suggested by the presence of Virgil, which I will discuss more below.

For now, I turn to a number of places where "Monsters" alludes to the Dantean in order to establish Tolkien's urge to associate *Beowulf* with a purgatorial intent. These allusions are not necessarily limited only to the *Purgatorio*, but touch on matters associated with Dante's entire *Comedy*, matters that taken together show the kind of Christian vision Tolkien believes the *Beowulf*-poet portrays in his poem. I have already shown the pertinent similarities between Tolkien's tower and Dante's mountain, but now I want to show how the details function to express Tolkien's desire to sway his audience toward recognizing the value of longing for purgation.

The first group of elements I want to explore occurs around Tolkien's tower allegory, especially the tower metaphor itself. Among these elements, the clearest and most relevant is the nature of the sight of the sea from atop the tower. The seemingly enigmatic view offers open-ended possibilities concerning the nature of the poet's view mediated by Tolkien, and though some may understandably, and rightly in many cases, prefer the enigma offered in open-ended possibilities, the two specific moments on Mount Purgatorio should instruct us about the nature of the sea. The first comes in the opening Canto of *Purgatorio*, where Dante recounts following Virgil to the mountain's shore in order to find the pliant reed with which he will be girt for his climb. Here, the pilgrim's view of the sea comes at the foot of his mountain, the bottom of the tower, and marks the beginning of humility, the disposition needed to climb the terraces of Purgatory. The view of the sea here comes as the pagan poet, Virgil, instructed by the pagan statesman, Cato, prepares the Christian pilgrim for a sanctification journey that will also lead to another pagan poet, Statius, on the upward journey. None of these details but the view of the sea

associated with climbing a tower is present in Tolkien's metaphor, but its associations to a pagan past in service of Christian sanctification are relevant to those familiar with Dante's work. Although it is difficult to know precisely how Dante the pilgrim understood his view of the sea,¹⁴ for Tolkien it is reasonable to think that his *Beowulf*-poet's view would be near that of his own, namely of the thing that separates one from a desired place. Beyond "Monsters," a significant example of this quality may be understood in the way Tolkien uses the sea as the road by which the elves may reach the promised land of Valinor, the same road Frodo and Gandalf use to travel to life beyond Middle Earth. Paradoxically, the road and the obstacle are the same thing. Indeed, it is Tolkien's view that matters most in the end. For Tolkien, the sea awakens longing, and longing's object is the final desirable destination.

But Tolkien's *Beowulf*-poet views the sea from the top of his tower, not the base as in Canto 1 of *Purgatorio*. Dante, though, also presents a view from a higher vantage point later on in Canto 9, when he recounts waking from the first of three dreams, finding he's been carried up to the top of the foothills where the gates of Purgatory stand. Having been carried to Purgatory's entrance while dreaming himself to be a kind of Ganymede seized by a Jovian eagle, and having described being wakened in terms of Achilles' being spirited away by his mother from Greek recruitment for the Trojan War—imagery heavily steeped in pagan narrative—the pilgrim's sight marks the moment that will begin his Christian purification process with a view of the sea (*Purgatory* 9.13-42).

Dante encapsulates preparation for such a journey between two views of the sea. Tolkien, however, culminates his *Beowulf*-poet's motive for building his tower as a view of the sea from the top of the finished composition. The view of the sea here is a commitment to see the larger reality as only Christian sanctification can offer by way of his poem. Both poets draw from their pagan sources in order to build their empowering structures. In the case of Dante, the higher view of the sea begins a climb punctuated by three dreams, dreams that incrementally shed a pagan perspective for a Christian one. The pagan material slowly gives way in the purgatorial journey to Christian revelation.¹⁵ In the case of Tolkien, the view of the

¹⁴ Given Dante's presentation of the unsanctioned voyage Ulysses attempts to make, an account of which Ulysses gives in *Inferno* 26.100-142, ending with being sunk in sight of Mount Purgatorio, and given the nature of the souls of the elect being ferried across the sea to arrive at the mountain, narrated in *Purgatorio* 2.10-51, it is likely that part of Dante's conception of this sea includes separating the elect from the damned. Presumably the souls of the elect experience crossing the sea as a journey of hope.

¹⁵ The first dream comes in Canto 9, where the imagery is almost entirely pagan in nature; the second comes in Canto 19, where Virgil reveals a siren trying to seduce Dante in a dream; and the third comes in Canto 27, where Dante sees Jacob's wives, Rachel and Leah, each respectively advocating for living contemplatively and actively. The progression of Dante's dreams suggests the conversion

sea comes by way of the pagan material, upon which he stands to achieve his desired Christian view of life after death, a victorious life following death in defeat. The act of building, sorting through to choose the pieces most appropriate to help him climb, perhaps even suggesting how to climb, sanctifies poet and poem—just as Dante’s conversations with his pagan guide instruct him through two-thirds of his journey toward the beatific vision.¹⁶ Tolkien’s allusion is clear: the *Beowulf*-poet’s motivation is bound up in purgation, but such purgation need not be limited to that of the poet; it may be that the audience, even the source material itself is the subject of such purgation. As Tolkien puts it, “a fusion that has occurred *at a given point* of contact between old and new, a product of thought and deep emotion,” and later, “rehandling in a new perspective an ancient theme: that man, each man and all men, and all their works shall die. A theme no Christian need despise” (“Monsters” 20, 23). Indeed, the slow giving way of pagan imagery to Christian during the pilgrim-poet’s ascent in *Purgatorio* may have affinities to the *Beowulf*-poet’s moral interjections, interjections that color the poet in decidedly Christian shades.

The next purgatorial signal in the tower allegory I want to discuss is a phrase regarding the critics’ approach to the tower, a signal which directs readers toward the same place in *Purgatorio* as the poet’s view of the sea in Canto 9. Tolkien says that critics who perceive the older material used to construct *Beowulf* do not bother climbing its steps (8). The almost imperceptible significance is amplified once one realizes that in the very canto where Dante prepares to enter Mount Purgatory’s gates and views the sea, over a third of the canto’s lines are devoted to Dante’s preparation, the first part of which is the climbing of three steps that mark recognition of sin to be cleansed. One recognizes Tolkien’s primary intent to show *Beowulf*’s critics as insensitive to the poet’s goal for composing it, but Tolkien’s embedding the words, “without troubling to climb the steps,” as a parenthetical aside signals that to climb the steps to a tower from which one can view the sea is to humble oneself to the sanctifying purpose of that tower (8).¹⁷ Even the critics’

of Dante’s thinking from pagan terms to Christian, with the central dream showing the pagan siren’s deception.

¹⁶ Virgil leads Dante through the Inferno and accompanies him up Mount Purgatory; Beatrice guides Dante through the celestial spheres in *Paradiso*.

¹⁷ Given Tolkien’s own deep adapting and embedding of his sources, I believe the signal was intentional on Tolkien’s part. I have presented papers on similar matters of intentionality in Tolkien’s adaptation of his sources, one concerning Tolkien’s reworking in *The Hobbit* of the death of Bodvar Bjarki from *Hrólfr Kraki’s Saga* and another concerning similarities between Melkor’s motives for opposing Ilúvatar in *Ainulindalë* and Satan’s motives for opposing God presented in Dante’s *Paradiso*. Nevertheless, Tolkien’s own words about writing parts of *The Hobbit* are instructive: “*Beowulf* is among my most valued sources; though it was not consciously present to the mind in the process of writing, in which the episode of the theft arose naturally (and almost inevitably) from the circumstances. It is difficult to think of any other way of conducting the story at that point. I fancy the author of *Beowulf* would say much the same” (*Letters* 41).

hunt “for hidden carvings and inscriptions” brings to mind the first terrace of Purgatory characterized by relief carvings in which exempla of virtue and vice serve to exhort humility and admonish pride (*Purgatory* 10). Tolkien's disapproval of the critics is meant to serve the overall argument that *Beowulf* is perpetually misunderstood when dismantled to find its sources and when it is criticized for the poet's using his sources in ways diverging from the original. However, note that the detail of the steps in the allegory belies an immediate, albeit beneath-the-surface, preoccupation with the cleansing power of drawing from earlier sources in order to discover a more complete, sanctified vision those sources make possible. In order to experience the intended effect of the tower, one must take the steps that entail the proper attitude for climbing toward sanctification. To view the sea, one must humbly climb the edifice prepared.

Another significant detail in the area of the tower metaphor occurs immediately afterward, where Tolkien characterizes *Beowulf* scholarship in his day as “a conflicting babel,” itself a conscious reference to the ancient tower on the plane of Shinar, and it stands in stark contrast with the poet's tower, *Beowulf*.¹⁸ Tolkien implies that the noise of criticism associated with Babel, the failed project of humanity seen as an affront to God himself, reveals insensitivity to the tower's purposes, especially the Christianized vision of the pagan past. I come back now to Virgil, and in this section, Tolkien's arguments refer early to the Roman poet, an object of poetic imitation in the Middle Ages generally, the overt object of imitation for the post-*Beowulf* poet Dante, and the explicit point of stylistic contact in Tolkien's further elaboration on critical confusion about what *Beowulf* actually is (“Monsters” 8). The name of Virgil in the mouth of an anonymous critic, whose criticism Tolkien hopes to bypass in order to present a clearer understanding of the poem, implies disallowing any imitation of him as relevant for understanding *Beowulf* (8). But Tolkien refers to Virgil favorably when discussing how poets can make antiquity appealing by using its materials to construct the new, and even presents Virgil as a precursor to the *Beowulf*-poet, pointing out that the effect of *Aeneid* also relies in part on his audience's understanding of ancient matters he does not explain in the poem. Tolkien laments, “Alas for the lost lore, the annals and old poets that Virgil knew, and only used in the making of a new thing!” (27-28).

There are a couple of other details that by themselves would not warrant scrutiny, but are similar in kind to other material scattered throughout the essay and make such examination reasonable. One concerns a doubly-gesturing metaphor drawn not only from Dante's *Comedy*, but also from Lewis Carol's “Jabberwocky,” while the other detail situates the voices of the critics beneath rapid flight (8-9). Tolkien characterizes the approaches taken by historians and antiquarians metaphorically as the “bubbling” of jabberwocks “in the tulgy wood of conjecture,”

¹⁸ Drout devotes an entire section to Tolkien's “Babel of voices” in his edition of “Critics” (29-65).

whose own searches are helpful but limited in the ability to illuminate presumably the darkness of the woods of studying *Beowulf* (9). Such a reference is clearly meant to exploit the nonsensical qualities which characterize Carol's poem, but the shared valence of meaning with Dante is that of the wood, the place in which a pilgrim might find oneself lost if not sufficiently prepared to understand the nature of the place encountered. Tolkien's assertion that the obvious path leads to realizing "that we have to deal with a poem by an Englishman using afresh ancient and largely traditional material" guides away from the nonsensical tulgy wood to a Dantean tower of purgation, which is what the *Beowulf*-poet built (9).

The other, almost imperceptible detail reasonably understood in Dantean terms is that of Tolkien's sentence about reaching the views of criticism contemporary to him: "To reach these," he writes, "we must pass in rapid flight over the heads of many decades of critics" (8). The rapid flight from the wood to the base of the tower around which so many critics of *Beowulf* murmur in their searches has affinities with the journey of the elect to the shores of Mount Purgatory, bypassing the dark wood that launches Dante the pilgrim on his journey.¹⁹ The rapidly moving boat guided by the angel's wings (Dante, *Purgatory* 2.13-51) may have found its way into Tolkien's thought, and the proximity of the detail to the mountain-tower and its parallel to the dark wood that opens the entire *Comedy* seems a significant inclusion. Perhaps its inclusion is the result of the writer's subconscious connections or overt appropriation of details from his sources, the foundation on which "Monsters" is built, but whatever the case, the detail sits among a cluster of allusions that can be found in Dante's *Purgatory*.

More signals occur where the work of the *Beowulf*-poet is being discussed, namely, ways the poet thinks about his tower and things the poet does by building it. The tower metaphor already establishes the poet's facilitating his view of the sea, a view associated with the physical view from Mount Purgatory itself, but Tolkien also sees other aspects of the poet's work as having qualities one would rightly understand as Dantean. Tolkien takes much time exploring and explaining the choice of the *Beowulf*-poet to place monsters at the core of his poem, offering along the way extensive answers to critics that dismiss such a choice as defective. Tolkien early on, almost banally, asserts, "He esteemed dragons . . . He liked them," and later suggests that the poet intends the episode with Grendel as "an eminently suitable beginning" ("Monsters" 12, 32). The purpose of such placement of the monsters serves the tragedy of Beowulf's humanity, a humanity subject to the vicissitudes and inevitable failures bound up in its fallen condition. But in a later

¹⁹ Incidentally, similar movement is seen in *The Hobbit* when the eagles deliver Bilbo, Gandalf, and the dwarves from a flaming wood and set them back on a good path (99-106); and in Book 2 of Chaucer's *The House of Fame*, the dreamer is transported by an eagle, and refers to his journey in contrast to Ganymede (2.589), to the hill atop which sits the House of Fame.

letter, Tolkien offers thoughts that reveal more nuanced thinking about dragons and the appearance of one in *Beowulf*:

I find 'dragons' a fascinating product of imagination. But I don't think the *Beowulf* one is frightfully good. But the whole problem of the intrusion of the 'dragon' into northern imagination and its transformation there is one I do not know enough about. Fafnir in the late Norse versions of the Sigurd-story is better; and Smaug and his conversation obviously is in debt there." (*Letters* 189)

Certainly Tolkien did not lose any of his knowledge about dragons since he delivered "Monsters" a dozen years or so before what he says in this letter, but his words indicate that the value of *Beowulf*'s dragon is not primarily in its strictly poetic effect. Rather its main value is in its symbolic quality, which it gains because of the poet's management of theme. To die fighting a dragon is to die fighting primordial evil, and the consolation of such a fight lies in the dragon itself being killed. For a Christian, in light of the book of Revelation, dragon fights read in the metaphorical mode become fights against Satan himself, and the inherited reality of *Beowulf* dying in such a fight, a detail obligating the poet to retain its outcome, becomes a signal for the Christian poet that a man can face and defeat Satan. The old material lends itself to such an allusion, itself cleansed in recognizing that Christ defeats the dragon, and the old material becomes a structure upon which to see a vision purged of pagan dross.²⁰

With such transformation of imperfect pagan foresight into cleansed recognition of Christian reality, Tolkien's references to Virgil in "Monsters" also take on special pertinence. They are connected with signals about how the poet may be working to reappropriate his source material. Although Tolkien focuses on such references because they characterize other critics' understanding of *Beowulf*, the aptness of Tolkien's references to Virgil's adapting his own sources increases when one remembers that Virgil is a guide for Dante, and Virgil is also a poet drawing from, among other things, the old material of his sources in order to realize his own vision.²¹ Tolkien wants to discuss what the borrowing poet hoped to accomplish, why the *Beowulf*-poet's view of the sea was important enough to build a tower. Comparing the *Beowulf*-poet with Virgil, Tolkien writes that between them "the real likeness is deeper and due to certain qualities of the authors . . . It is this deeper

²⁰ From as early as the New Testament book Revelation, Christians have associated the dragon as a symbol of Satan. Another noteworthy account is Saint Margaret's being swallowed by Satan, who is in dragon form.

²¹ The three major surviving works of the Roman poet Virgil may be seen as imitations of exemplars from earlier Greek antiquity: *Eclogues* draw from Theocritus' *Idylls*, *Georgics* from Hesiod's *Works and Days*, and *Aeneid* from a conflation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

likeness which make things [in their poems] ring alike” (“Monsters” 24). Tolkien’s focus as he goes on emphasizes the difference in conceptions of monsters and gods between ancient poets like Virgil, conceptions Tolkien labels “southern,” and those like the *Beowulf*-poet, which he labels “Northern” (“Monsters” 25). Nevertheless, in Tolkien’s own view, part of the importance of each poet’s work is that each comes at a pivotal moment of historical change, the view from a “threshold” that points to some greater promise ahead. Tolkien’s juxtaposition of *Aeneid* 7.203-204 with *Beowulf* 1863b-65 reinforces the view of purgation by showing a future golden age of Saturn being in continuity with the founding of Rome, the nation Virgil hopes to cast in near messianic light in his poetry.²² Such purgation of the account of the fugitive Trojan as founder of Rome inherited by Virgil rests in material Tolkien thinks is lost to those that might scrutinize the new purposes for which the Roman poet uses it (“Monsters” 27-28). For the *Beowulf*-poet, as Tolkien sees it, the view amplifies the potential hopelessness of pagan heroism in light of Christian conversion, but attempts to capture virtue in the pre-Christian that points to something like a sanctified understanding of such heroism in purged Christian sight.²³

While it is true that Tolkien goes on to develop the pessimistic idea of being defeated by primordial evil as a focus of *Beowulf*, Tolkien continually reminds the reader that the poet is a Christian working in light of a post-conversion mindset that would have as its hope the ultimate defeat of the monsters Tolkien sees as the fitting main subjects of the poem. Tolkien points out that the Christian mind of the age of Bede would recognize the monsters of *Beowulf* as representing something of the ancient evils that afflict all men, pagan and Christian alike, and that such evils are also “inevitably the enemies of the one God” (“Monsters” 22). Even in the ultimate defeatism of the pagan struggling ineffectually against evil, a Christian would recognize the perennial battle of the soul against evil in a fallen world, in which everything has its demise; and Tolkien shows that the *Beowulf*-poet reveals value for the Christian audience to remember “man’s struggles in the dark past, man fallen and not yet saved, disgraced but not dethroned” (“Monsters” 23). In this respect, Tolkien’s tower metaphor, with its *Purgatorio* allusions, implies the cleansing of the heathen subject of the poem, the man Beowulf.²⁴ It becomes a view of the sea, across which is the anticipated home of salvation for Christians.

²² In addition to offering the epic account of the pre-existing story of Aeneas founding Rome in *Aeneid*, Virgil shows the empire poised to usher in an age of peace not only in *Eclogue* 4, often seen by early Christian as evidence that a non-Christian looked for a messianic deliverer, but also, though to a lesser extent, in *Eclogue* 1, where the shepherd Tityrus says a god resides in Rome to whom he will offer perpetual sacrifice for restoring his lands.

²³ See Tolkien’s letter to his son Christopher (*Letters* 78), quoted earlier in this essay.

²⁴ Tolkien writes, “we might say that this poem was (in one direction) inspired by the debate . . . shall we or shall we not consign the heathen ancestors to perdition?” (“Monsters” 23). And while *Beowulf* was written a number of centuries before Dante lived, Tolkien would know that this

The *Beowulf*-poet wrote from a decidedly Christian perspective in a decidedly Christian poetic tradition, one that explicitly connected the people of England to the matter of creation itself in the Cædmon tradition (Monsters" 26-27). That, along with linking the Old Testament account of Cain to Grendel and his motives for attacking Heorot, to Tolkien shows the poet equating the people of Hrothgar with the godly patriarchs of the Bible, offering "a Christian English conception of the noble chief before Christianity" (Monsters" 27). Again, Tolkien emphasizes the darkness of the pagan implied to the poet by his sources, but he is careful to point out that the emphasis on pagan hopelessness is a product of the character's words and thoughts, not the poet's, whose interjections remind the audience that the action of the story, indeed all actions in the world, are subject to moral realities established by God.²⁵

In the end, Tolkien sees the *Beowulf*-poet presenting a hero, first defeating monsters associated with sin embodied in the human-like Grendel and his mother, and then defeating, though defeated by, the dragon, a monster connected to primordial evil opposed to God. That presentation Tolkien sees coming from a consciously Christian understanding applied back to this pagan source material, and the culminating vision serves to cleanse the story and recast it in a Christian view that shows defeat in the struggle against evil turned ultimately into victory and hope for eternal life in Christian reality. This is the poet's tower, and his view is the sea, never described for us by Tolkien. He lets it stand full of the same pregnant possibilities he ascribes to *Beowulf*, allowing the details of its building, the critics' interactions with it, and its end to invite further scrutiny into Tolkien's conceptions of poetic composition. In this case, the composition has as a major purpose the purging of matter, though builder and audience may approach it with similar ambitions of having their own perspectives cleansed in the end.

References

Caesar, Judith. "Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Dante's *Inferno*." *The Explicator* 64, no. 3 (2006): 162-166.

Dante. *The Divine Comedy, Volume 1: Inferno*. Translated by Mark Musa. New York: Penguin, 2003.

question was explored by Dante in a number of places, not only in the presence of Cato at the base of Mount Purgatory in Canto 1 of *Purgatorio*, but also notably in the presence of the heathen rulers Trajan and Ripheus in the sphere of Jupiter in Canto 20 of *Paradiso*.

²⁵ This is especially evident in Tolkien's discussion, "'Loſ' and Dom; 'Hell' and 'Heofon,'" in the essay's appendix ("Monsters" 36-42).

- . *The Divine Comedy, Volume 2: Purgatory*. Translated by Mark Musa. New York: Penguin, 1985.
- . *The Divine Comedy, Volume 3: Paradise*. Translated by Mark Musa. New York: Penguin, 1986.
- Drout, Michael D.C. *Beowulf and the Critics by J.R.R. Tolkien*. Revised 2nd ed. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 402. Tempe: ACMRS, 2011.
- Holmes, John R. “How Tolkien Saved His Neck: A *Lusinghe* Proposition to the Oxford Dante Society.” *Mythlore* 40, no. 1 (2021): 193–207.
- The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*. Edited by Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, revised and expanded ed., 3 vols. London: HarperCollins, 2017.
- Ker, W.P. *The Dark Ages, Periods of European Literature* 1. New York, Scribner’s 1904.
- Stockton, Jim. “Inklings and Danteans Alike: C.S. Lewis, Colin Hardie, Charles Williams, and J.R.R. Tolkien’s Participation in the Oxford Dante Society.” *Mythlore* 38, no. 2 (2020): 133-138.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. “Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics.” In *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, 5-48. London: Harper Collins, 1983.
- . “‘Beowulf’ and the Critics.” A and B versions. In Drout, *Beowulf and the Critics*, 67-177.
- . *The Hobbit*. New York: Mariner, 2012.
- . *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.