

“In the Hilt is Fame”

K.S. Whetter, R. Andrew McDonald Mythlore 25(1/2): 5-28. Fall/Winter 2006. (No. 95/96)

Considering that Tolkien's professional life was spent immersed in Germanic, Norse, Celtic, and English medieval literature and mythology, including texts rich in swords and sword-lore, it is scarcely surprising that the characters in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are provided with weapons whose names, descriptions, acquisition, characteristics and lore echo those of what Tolkien called the "northern mythological imagination" ("Monsters" 268), or as one recent critic has put it, the "real Middle-earth" (Bates): Northwestern Europe in the early and central middle ages.

The blades of Middle-earth as presented in these works display the influence of famous literary, mythological, and historical weapons from northern Europe in the middle ages, highlighting Middle-earth's well-established inheritance of Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, Norse and later medieval literature and mythology. Moreover, because of the association of specific weapons with particular heroes in this literature, such a study also bears on the nature of heroism in Tolkien's work.

The principal blades of Middle-earth will need little explication. Several are introduced early in *The Hobbit*, when the swords Glamdring and Orcrist, as well as Bilbo's initially unnamed blade, are taken from the lair of the trolls (2.50-51)... Tolkien makes it clear almost from the moment that the swords are introduced that they are no ordinary weapons. Apart from being ancient, the blades are imbued with magical properties. Sting, Glamdring and Anduril all glow, while Merry's Westrenesse blade melts after striking the Nazgul at the battle of Pelennor Fields. These swords, replete with names, runes, histories, and magical properties, make their presence felt at crucial moments in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; indeed, they are celebrated as living personalities in Middle-earth, just as the historical and literary weapons of the "real Middle-earth" on which they were modeled were also celebrated by poets, bards, and writers of the middle ages.

In both Middle-earth and the literature of medieval Europe there is a rich tradition of famous weapons with names. Among the pre-eminent swords of medieval literature are Beowulf's Hrunting and Naegling, Waldere's Mimming, Sigurd's Gram, Roland's Durendal and, best known of all, Arthur's Excalibur, but there are numerous references to lesser-known blades in the Scandinavian sources, including Dragvandil (Slicer), Fotbitr (Leg-biter), Gramr (Fierce), Hrati (Keen), as well as St. Olaf's famous sword Hneitir (Davidson, *Sword* 177). ... Since Glamdring and Orcrist are known to the Goblins as Beater and Biter (4.72; 4.70), these names seem reminiscent to us of Leg-biter, Slicer, and Hneitir, names derived from the abilities of the swords to wound in either particular or more general ways.