

Teaching Myth through Tolkien and Tolkien through Myth

In this paper I will describe our experience teaching a course on myth and Tolkien and will share material related to the course.

Courses on Tolkien are typically offered by English departments, and only rarely by faculty in Classical Studies. Kenneth Reckford's "Classics 30: The Heroic Journey," which he taught at Chapel Hill until his retirement, stands out as the earliest example; John T. Kirby's Tolkien-based "Ancient Epic" course at Purdue is another. These courses use the heroic journey, or monomyth, developed by Joseph Campbell, as a way to make meaningful comparisons between Tolkien's work and classical myth. Students, for example, are invited to see Frodo as a hero on a journey, like that of Odysseus or Aeneas, and to see parallels between Tolkien's work and myth on an archetypal level that goes beyond mere "story-telling."

As I will show, our course takes a somewhat different approach. We use Tolkien's created mythology and his focus on philology to explore mythopoesis and the process of how meaning is created through myth. For example, by using Tolkien's own ideas about myth-making, embodied in his notion of sub-creation, we are able to present the story of Aulë's creation of the dwarves and Fëanor's morally problematic creation of the simarils to draw parallels with the stories of Prometheus, Pandora, and Daedalus. On a broader level, we have students read *The Silmarillion* in the context of Hesiod's *Theogony* in order to explore how authentically mythic worlds, complete with gods and demi-gods, may be called into being; and we present the Hobbit and Bilbo's incongruous role as a hero to show how the role of the epic hero is problematized, and in a sense recreated, in Homer's *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. These and other topics establish a context for reading *The Lord of the Rings* as mythic history in the second half of the course and for drawing parallels with Arthurian legend and *Beowulf*.

The course is reading intensive, but it has been very successful in attracting students from a wide variety of backgrounds to take a course in Classical Studies. By focussing on mythopoesis and sub-creation, we are able to present some difficult theoretical approaches to myth, such as Girard's idea of mimetic rivalry, in very concrete form. The importance of languages and philology to Tolkien's creative process has also persuaded students of the importance of studying Greek and Roman works in the original languages, which has helped recruit students for our other courses. Finally, we believe that our course has succeeded in providing students with an enlightening way to read (or to reread) Tolkien and one that is authentic to his own ideas about myth.