

# The Magic of Magic - A Line of Development from the *Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings*

Fabian Geier, Bamberg

This paper has initially been written for talks at Jena University and at Gdańsk University in 2008. I am very grateful for all the comments and criticisms I have received there. In the version I offer here I am omitting a second part, that deals with Tolkien's own reflections on the matter and shows why the term „magic“ has to be or should be used inconsistently.

<a href="#">Starting Points.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Vulgar Magic: The Hobbit.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Magic Growing Up: From the New Hobbit to the Lord of the Rings.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">The Ring.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Hobbits and Elves.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">Magic as Aesthetics.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">The Dilemma of Magic.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Workarounds.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Part II – Tolkien's Reflections.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Tolkien's Words.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Distinctions: Magia and Goeteia.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Connections.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Conclusion.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>

version 0.9.81

## Starting Points

I want to talk about magic. This, however, is a difficult task. Rationality is, after all, considered to be the very opposite of magic<sup>1</sup>. So discussing magic rationally, as the method of a scholarly paper requires, may be a contradiction in terms. By rationally examining the irrational, I might run the risk of eliminating the very features that render magic magical. It can well be that magic simply cannot be analysed, „cannot be caught in a net of words“ as Tolkien says (FS 114). Magic almost seems like a ghost that only exists as long as you don't watch.

But this is of course the case: magic *does* not exist. Whatever magic exactly is, this is maybe the point that is most easily agreed on among a reasonable and enlightened audience. But fortunately it does not matter much whether magic exists. I am a philosopher by profession and in philosophy we have a great tradition of talking about nonexisting things - philosophical discourse is infested with pegasi, centaurs or entire parallel universes and their respective ontological commitments.

Magic, at first glance, is of the same type as centaurs and pegasi. We only have to make the distinction that magic is not referring to things but to events. Even a „magic sword“ is rendered magic insofar it has a certain effect, like killing everyone whom it injures, or making its bearer invincible. Thus it is not precise to say that magic does not „exist“. I should rather have said: it does not work in the reality we know. We can thus pin

---

1 This has not always been the case. What was called magic at the time of the Renaissance was obviously a kind of proto-science itself, that was to a large degree mechanistic and relied on experiments, as opposed to speculation and superstition. However in my paper I refer to ideas that are nowadays associated with the term magic.

down the following preliminary definition: *magic is the bringing about of supernatural effects. „Supernatural effects“ means effects that are not in accordance with the natural laws we believe to be true*<sup>2</sup>.

In literature magic is even more popular than in philosophy. Magic is doubtless one of the chief features of the Fantasy genre<sup>3</sup>, be it in books, films or interactive worlds like online and offline roleplaying games. The latter are especially interesting because they often come with a full-fledged system of magical powers and spells, ready for use. This is necessary because interactive use of magic has higher systematic demands compared to ordinary literature. Roleplaying and computer games have to provide laws and abstract terms that state the types of powers and spells and the types of magicians so that the players can make use of them. In other words: such games provide a comprehensive system of laws for empirical phenomena. Such a system is indeed structurally identical with the laws of nature we know, it merely does not correspond to the real system. In short: magic becomes a *fictional physics*.

Tolkien's world, too, provides the basis for the reconstruction of a system of laws. This is especially the case because his universe is not a mere background for a linear narrative. It is much more detailed and more coherent than any single narrative requires. Tolkien's world is quite independent from a particular plot, and this feature has always been a major attraction to his admirers. Many people have delved into his works in order to get a systematic knowledge of his world, and not least of its magic aspects. They want to know how things work.

There is one discussion in particular that has attracted my attention. It was a question in the newsgroup rec.arts.books.tolkien, raised by someone who called himself Teepee<sup>4</sup>. He asked how Sauron did set the One Ring to work, and how exactly it achieved control over the Three and what was necessary to do so. From there spun a discussion that finally amounted to 234 posts, discussing all the textual details and speculations available. I, too, started to write an answer to the opening post – but unfortunately it „got out of hand“ (L 34,40,41) and I never sent it off. This paper is largely what became of it.

The main point that I tried to make was that I did not like the whole pseudo-physical approach to magic (and to magic rings in particular), that underlined the discussion. This was not how I read and understood Tolkien. The discussion made everything mechanical. I missed the *mystery of magic*. And I had always especially appreciated Tolkien's writings for retaining it. My main impression was that Tolkien did not handle magic as a mere tool.

It was, by the way, for the same reason, that the beginning of Peter Jackson's movie adaption of the *Lord of the Rings* shocked me so much. In the opening scene Sauron seems to be using the ring as a weapon, almost like a shooting device - and this I find utterly vulgar. One of the best things I had always found was the subtlety of the ring's power, that could never be directly seen. This is the aim for which I set out here: to discuss the idea of magic (a very difficult topic according to Tolkien, L xx), especially but not

---

2 That would be the definition of magic no matter whether these laws are true or not. As soon as we find that we have erred this will affect the extension of what events we are inclined to call „magic“. Furthermore, besides laws this definition also includes probabilities we expect, though here it is more difficult to differentiate what we want to call magic – because whatever happens by chance „could have come about naturally“ (see below).

3 Apparently there are counter-examples to this. But genres are, if we put it extensionally, just agglomerations of family-resemblances (Wittgenstein), and do not have to be defined by a single essence. Intensionally and dialectically, however, this remains to be discussed. I think there is some truth about genre-theory. Here, however, I merely refer to the usual use of genre *terms*.

4 Newsgroups: alt.fan.tolkien, rec.arts.books.tolkien  
By: "teepee"  
Date: Sun, 30 Sep 2007 23:47:18 +0100  
Subject: How did Sauron do it...

exclusively in the example of the One Ring.<sup>5</sup>

### **Vulgar Magic: The Hobbit**

The One Ring is one of the most important and yet one of the least discussed protagonists of the *Lord of the Rings*. It is the focus of more than an age of Arda and almost seems to be a conscious entity having a mind of its own - like in slipping from a finger just in time, having a tendency to be found xx, attracting orcs to attack Isildur and „trying to get back to its master“(LotR I 84). This however is how the ring is characterized eventually in the *Lord of the Rings*. In order to fully understand this thing and its powers it is useful to trace it back to where it all began - where it surprisingly showed up on the floor of a cave - in the *Hobbit*.

The *Hobbit* was a book Tolkien initially wrote for his children. It later became the prequel to the *Lord of the Rings*, but at the time of its writing Tolkien did not know this. It started as a simple story, in which Bilbo, a nice little creature from a homely country is pushed into a full-fledged adventure with dragons, dwarves and goblins. And somewhere inbetween these extraordinary events he stumbles upon the ring and puts it into this pocket (H chapter 5).

Tolkien introduces the ring as a „magic ring“ – and by this term it is shown as a typical magical device as it occurs in legends and fairy-tales: like the ring Draupnir of Odin in the old-norse Sagas, or the ring of Gyges in Plato<sup>6</sup>. Tolkien introduces it as one of many, that existed of old, and by this he actively refers to such a tradition. However he chiefly needs it as a device to get the story going. The Ring puts the untrained and all but heroic burglar into a position where he could accomplish extraordinary tasks. The ring is a precious thing of course, but just a device that made people invisible, without a clearly developed background. There is no particular reason why – it just does it. Period.

This type of effect is what I will call *fairy-tale-magic*<sup>7</sup>. It is indeed the predominant kind of magic in the *Hobbit*: the self-closing buttons, the talking purse, magically tuned harps, elvish doors sealed „by magic“, Gandalf lighting the room up when Bilbo faints or his skill of directing smoke-rings are all of this type: it is clearly beyond what could be achieved by natural powers and yet not developed more elaborately than necessary for the particular occasion.

Therefore fairy-tale-magic is of course not what I have described above as fictional physics. Fairy-tale-magic means effects that just are as they are, and are never part of a greater system. Its essential characteristic is, that it is *not* elaborate beyond the immediate circumstances. But fairy-tale-magic agrees with fictional physics insofar as it is as pragmatic: both are forms of tool-like magic. Magic comes as devices and actions that can be utilized in any way the caster wants. Both are therefore lower forms of magic - magic without mystery – or, as I will call it, *vulgar magic*.

### **Magic Growing Up: From the New Hobbit to the Lord of the Rings**

Contrary to the *Hobbit* the *Lord of the Rings* houses a more advanced, more subtle form of magic, that produces a much deeper impression of mystery. However, this does not mean that the *Lord of the Rings* is free of vulgar devices. Such devices are especially centered on Gandalf, the wizard. In the *Lord of the Rings* he has of course grown in wisdom and personal depth, but nonetheless he retains his heritage as a fairy-tale-magician, which is signified by his beard, age, hood and the wielding of a staff. He can cast spells, and he

---

5 I will refer to the movies several times but this is only for the sake of illustrating my arguments. I do not want to insinuate that they are badly done, because we discuss some things that even the best movie cannot easily achieve.

6 John D. Rateliff gives a detailed account of magic rings in HH I 174ff

7 as opposed to Tolkien's well-chosen term „fairy-story“, see FS

does so, reluctantly but nevertheless visibly: at the confrontation with the Balrog, both in the chamber and at the bridge. He lights up his staff at the mines of Moria and he also uses it to light a fire from wet wood. I have sometimes dubbed the staff „Gandalf's lighter“. I like this term exactly because it is so extraordinarily insensitive. I could as well call Glamdring and Sting „Orc-detectors“, or the Palantiri a „magical TV-Set“: Such wordings are utterly anachronistic and destroy whatever remains of the aura of ancient wisdom and mystery that these devices are supposed to carry. Such wordings *disenchant* magic entirely<sup>8</sup> – and this shows in a nutshell the attitude towards magic that I find insufficient.

But let us turn to the more subtle form of magic. This kind of magic is present in many places in the final version of the *Lord of the Rings*, but it entered it only slowly as the book became more and more serious. First the book was intended to be just a „New Hobbit“, as Tolkien initially called it. His publisher had indeed talked him into writing a sequel after the first *Hobbit* had become a best-seller and won an award for children's books. But in writing the sequel it „got out of hand“<sup>9</sup>, and when Tolkien finished the manuscript 12 years later, it had grown far beyond the limits of a children's story.

Thanks to Tolkien's son Christopher, who edited much of the private papers and his father's drafts, it is possible to pursue the traces of this development in detail. While some vulgar elements survive until the final version of the *Lord of the Rings*, there are others that are abandoned and more subtle forms taking over their parts. In the early drafts Tolkien for example explicitly mentions a *charge* of the staff:

‘I have lost my staff, part of my beard, and an inch of eyebrows,’ he said. ‘But I have blasted the door and felled the roof against it, and if the Chamber of Mazarbul is not a heap of ruins behind it, then I am no wizard. All the power of my staff was expended [?in a flash]: it was shattered to bits.’ (TI 195)

In later versions Tolkien removes this remark. We cannot tell whether Tolkien meant the idea of a charge to loom in the background or whether he abandoned it entirely, since both things happened in cases, where he abandoned other remarks. But what is clear is that many similar changes were made that made magic events *less and less explicit*. This marks the development from vulgar magic towards a more subtle form of magic: allusions replace explanations. Both the causes and effects become less clear. The subtlety of magic increases by it becoming more remote and more indirect.

You can see this again in the Moria-chapter: Gandalf remains behind to hold the door – and in the first version of the chapter we can see him putting his staff into the keyhole in order to cast a locking spell. In later versions it cannot be seen how exactly Gandalf accomplishes it: we see hardly anything from afar, and cannot make out the words he mumbles – and this makes it a lot more mysterious (and adds significantly to Gandalf's dignity). Only after the event we are told what actually happened – but mediated by Gandalf who is telling the tale (and who has never been famous for being very concrete in his explanations<sup>10</sup>). The same accounts for what happened after Gandalf's fall and at the final duel with the Balrog on the top of the mountain:

There was none to see, or perhaps in after ages songs would still be sung of the Battle of the Peak.’ Suddenly Gandalf laughed. ‘But what would they say in song? Those that looked up from afar thought that the mountain was crowned with storm. Thunder they heard, and lightning, they said, smote upon Celebdil, and leaped back broken into tongues of fire. Is not that enough? (LotR III 129)

This, mediated by a narrator, even two layers of narrators, is the only description of a major magical battle of the *Lord of the Rings*. The other central confrontations between

8 cf. Terry Pratchett ad lib.

9 see footnote 6 xx

10 which also, strangely enough, adds to his dignity. The same thing accounts for abandoning the „eyebrows“-remark.

magically skilled persons in the *Lord of the Rings* don't have visible spells: neither the confrontation between Gandalf and Saruman or Gandalf and the Nazgul is clearly a magical fight - though we can feel the air bustling with magic ingraspable. This, by the way, is another great fault of the movies, because they replace these dense confrontations with an Indiana-Jones-style duel<sup>11</sup>.

The point about the increasing remoteness of magic is, that it makes it more difficult to tell how magic works. Sometimes you even cannot tell whether there is any magic at all: the events actually to be seen could have come about naturally as well. This is the case for the Caradhras blizzard (again: as opposed to the movie). Or in the possibly self-disconnecting rope in the Eryn Mui. It is also the case in Gandalf's „healing“ of Theoden, where the wizard does not clearly cast or take a spell from the old man. The things Gandalf reminds Theoden of have an argumentative force apart from magic, and the opening of the window further supports his instructions psychologically. We don't know - nor do we need to know - whether there is more involved in this. Gandalf's influence is in any case extraordinary, whether it is natural or partly supernatural.

The point I want to make is this: in the more subtle forms of magic there *is* no answer to the question whether it is magic or not. You cannot grasp it as a clear event – the very thing that is necessary for tool-like magic. This is greatly depicted in what Sam says about Lothlorien, when Frodo asks him about magic.

If there is any magic about, it's right down deep, where I can't lay my hands on it, in a manner of speaking. (LotR I 468)

This is the decisive characteristic of the finer kinds of magic: you cannot lay your hands on it, you cannot tell *where it kicks in*, cannot describe it in a precise and pseudophysical system of cause and effect. There must be some mist around it. Remoteness and indirectness are the main ingredients.

If you have seen the movie „The Blair Witch Project“ I can point out to you a scene that greatly illustrates this. In the movie the protagonists are in the realm of a witch (who is never depicted!). They come to a place which they recognize to have seen three days before, but they feel sure that they have walked strictly in one direction since then. Again you cannot tell explicitly whether they erred, or whether their senses have been deceived by a spell or whether they have been teleported back. After all it could all be natural, they might have lost their direction without any outer influence, but you can *guess* they have not...

## **The Ring**

The difference between vulgar and subtle magic can best be seen in the ring itself. It also develops from vulgarity to mystery. This change is also signified by a name-change: the „magic ring“, as it is called in the *Hobbit* turns into a „Ring of Power“ in *the Lord of the Rings*. This change is important, for Tolkien was very consciously choosing his terms, and it corresponds to wider change: In the *Lord of the Rings* the word „magic“ occurs only 19 times, and mostly in places where it is discussed as a concept, while in the *Hobbit* it occurs 32 times, though the book just a fifth as long.

The gradual change of the Ring's character is even the main driving force for the change of the whole work, the main agent of the development of the story, as Tolkien said

---

11 I admit that not all confrontations are like that: the destruction of the bridge below the Balrog, and the flood at the Bruinen ford – these do include visible magic. But it is good that especially Saruman never appears in such a context – because other than the Balrogs and Nazgul he is a talking and very complex character!

Indeed Saruman is never seen weaving spells in the *Lord of the Rings* – even though he is so closely related to the use of machines. The same accounts for Sauron and it shows, by the way, that Tolkien did not (or at least not consistently) link the evil of machines to the idea of instrumentality.

(L xx). Indeed in the first draft of the „Long-Expected Party“ (the first chapter of the *Lord of the Rings*) Tolkien did not know what the story was all about. Only when he decided to „make return of ring a motive“(sic, RS 41) and elaborated its nature and origin did the story start developing.

The first step is that the invisibility, so far a handy effect of the ring, now becomes complemented with a penalty: the idea of becoming a wraith if you use the ring too often or for the wrong purposes. Tolkien adds an evil side to the tool. Yet in principle a tool remains a tool, even if there is a penalty: you just have to calculate the risk. But in Tolkien's book, and this was a second step, penalty soon becomes paradox: The very thing that makes the ring powerful makes it dangerous (power *is* danger). Even more: the very will to use it is involved in its effects (the ring is „addictive“, as Allan Turner said<sup>12</sup>). Therefore it loses the main character of a tool: it cannot be handled at will anymore. The will is itself affected by it and so it is not neutral to being used for arbitrary ends as tools are.<sup>13</sup>

Now the question remained why the Necromancer (who later turned out to be Sauron) would hunt for Bilbo's ring in particular. The ring had to be special: It was the last ring he misses. But soon Tolkien also called it „especially powerful“(RS 258, see also footnotes 14, 22, 29 +xx ) and finally it became the ruling ring – the one that controlled all others. Now the special categories of the rings (three, seven, nine) diversified and the ring verse came up and thus we have reached the state of affairs as we know it.

After this vast transformation the attribute „magic“ seems to be no longer applicable, for the ring has lost its tool-character, which was the main feature of traditional 'magic rings'. The ring is not a magic ring in the tradition of fairy-tale any more, but a ring of power. Even more – it is *the* ring of power, which is almost a platonic idea and not just an arbitrary instance of a type – for its effects are all but concrete. It is an almost pure manifestation of the idea of power, because it shows in many facets the complex logic of power itself: the dialectics of force, which means the use of power, both for good and for bad ends, and its destructive and corruptive tendencies. But it is hard to tell what the ring effects *in concreto*.

Here we have reached the question of the nature of the ring and its inner principles. This is what the newsgroup had inquired about. But Tolkien leaves us alone too soon. He does not say: „Rings of power work according to the following rules...“. We cannot get much out of Tolkien when it comes to ring physics (as opposed to „ring lore“).

But we *can* say at least two things about the ring. The ring grants 1. a vast power and 2. it (therefore) corrupts its bearer. But a concrete form of this power is never stated. The ring is ultimately powerful, but in an entirely unspecific way. Or it is all too specific: it gives, we hear, „power according to the bearer“ (LotR xx). And we are given some examples how this could turn out in concreto: Galadriel's vision of a deadly beautiful queen, Gandalf's vision of cruel, merciless justice (an Aquinian topic, by the way), or Sam's short vision of a country infested with gardens. We could easily add a Denethorian, Boromirian or Sauronian vision to this. But none of these details show the concrete characteristics of the ring, but only of its respective (potential) bearer. Also it remains unclear how exactly the ring would bring all this about. All these descriptions are visions of how the respective character would act, if he were an undisputed ruler. But if he were he would not need a special power to act like this. Again: all the imagined things could happen without any supernatural effect involved. Saruman's empire, or Sauron's at the

---

12 cf. Allan Turners essay in this book.

13 First this paradox appears in the wording: „you must either lose it or yourself“(RS 41), though more in structure than in content. At this point Tolkien was not yet sure about the nature of the ring. For a while he considered tying the dangerous part to what he called the „dragon-longing“ - greed and restlessness related to the possession of gold - but soon (with the dragons finally leaving the book) the Necromancer came into place and proved to be the more powerful idea. This was supported by the black riders that had appeared on the scene. Now invisibility was tied to the idea of wraiths (and to the danger of becoming a wraith) and the idea emerged that the „Lord of the Rings“ - and here the title originated - spread many rings to create wraiths and to enslave the peoples of Middle Earth.

time of the War of the Ring were both set up without a ring's power. There is no clear magic here either. The ring is never a weapon, never setting anything into motion in particular. Its power remains an entirely abstract power.

The same thing accounts for its corruptive element, which can easily be seen in Boromir. Boromir is the type who would also be in danger if the ring were to be entirely passive. After all he is in a moral dilemma: he must threaten a friend to save the city and the people he loves. This is a tough decision for a proud warrior and patriot, even without any magical corruptive forces.

The only clear effect that the ring is said to bring about (apart from invisibility, which is a remnant from its vulgar origins) is giving command over other wills. Over the ring-wraiths at first, and then about others as well, similarly as Sauron controls his orcs in battle. So the only concrete effect is some kind of telepathic ability. Yet this power is not absolute. It is rather an amplifier<sup>14</sup> than a remote control. We never see it used to control arbitrary people<sup>15</sup>. People must be suitable. It must be the ones already corrupted, which means: the ones that would follow an evil leader anyway. The ring's power makes the link stronger of course. But again, you cannot tell when exactly it kicks in.

### Hobbits and Elves

It is significant that the *Lord of the Rings* has not fully made the transition to mystery. There is a coexistence of vulgar and subtle forms of magic that is contrasted especially in the people of the elves as opposed to the hobbits<sup>16</sup>. The best place to see this is the Lothlorien chapters, and the attempts, especially of the more naive Hobbits, to put the magic of the place into words, like in the quote I have given above. Very interesting is Pippin's question at the farewell, and the remarkable answer he receives:

Are these magic cloaks?' asked Pippin, looking at them with wonder. 'I do not know what you mean by that,' answered the leader of the Elves. 'They are fair garments, and the web is good, for it was made in this land. They are elvish robes certainly, if that is what you mean. Leaf and branch, water and stone: they have the hue and beauty of all these things under the twilight of Lórien that we love; for we put the thought of all that we love into all that we make. (LotrR (50<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition p. 370))

This passage, by the way, also enters the *Lord of the Rings* only at a late stage. None of the published manuscripts have it (xx: don't the elves there even talk the same way about magic?!). The contrast between Hobbits and elves in magical matters is not there in the first stages, when the *Lord of the Rings* was still dominated by vulgar magic.

The fascinating thing (and very typical for Tolkien) is, that with the development of more subtlety, the vulgar elements often do not vanish, but get a new function. In many cases they become *the Hobbit-perspective*: The Hobbits grasp on things is down-to-earth and to a high degree pragmatic. But by depicting this just as a *perspective*, Tolkien can insinuate that pragmatic descriptions are not the most adequate descriptions of what is going on. You can sense that there is something beyond it but you cannot grasp it.

The same thing happened, by the way, to the *Hobbit*. When Tolkien turned to revising it during the writing process of the *Lord of the Rings* he also made some steps towards an

---

14 see Shippey, *Author*. This description grasps something correctly, but not perfectly so. Judith Klinger was right to point out to me, that it does not adequately describe the relationship between Frodo and the Ring. And there is something to say for her inclination to believe, that the ring is an entirely passive device.

15 When Sauron forged the one ring and used it, the bearers of the three were still able to take off their rings. They were just „revealed“ to him, not controlled by him. And again: of this we only hear mediated by legend, we never see it happen in the *Lord of the Rings*.

16 or mortals in the wide sense. Men and dwarves must be included here in a way, cf. i.e. LotR II 112.

integration with the more mature narrative of the *Lord of the Rings*<sup>17</sup>. First, he actually changed some of the crucial passages of the text, most notably in chapter V, the ring-chapter. Contrary to the first version of the text Gollum is not willingly offering Bilbo the ring in the revision. Why not? Because this is unimaginable according to the character of the ring. This is a step away from an arbitrary tool, because he brings the behaviour of the user into accord with the nature of the ring.

The more important thing is however that Tolkien incorporated this revision itself into the plot. Tolkien provides an in-world explanation for the change. The first version was the story as Bilbo first told the dwarfs. He had altered the truth a bit in order to support his claim of ownership of the ring. And even this untypical habit for a stout Hobbit fits with the effect of the ring. Again the additional mediating layer – making the whole stuff a Hobbit's account (a thing that Tolkien applies for the *Lord of the Rings* as well) – acts like a prism. Thus magic can have a tool-like shape from time to time, because it is implied that there is a higher and more true account of it, that a Hobbit's mind did not catch. This tactics could, if we wanted, be used to to apologize all the naive magical devices: this is just what the Hobbits made of it.

### **Magic as Aesthetics**

To the contrary, Elvish magic as such can hardly be grasped in pragmatic terms. It can hardly be grasped in any terms at all, because you do not know when to apply the term: you don't know where it starts and where it ends. „Leaf and branch, water and stone“ - it is woven into ordinary life, into the landscape – into the *concrete situation and impression*. Elvish magic is situative. And, this is my main point, it is linked to the *aesthetics* of places and persons. This is the central difference from pragmatic, tool-like magic: the subtle form of magic, elvish enchantment, is blended with aesthetics (and even with morals, as in the Boromir-case or Tolkien's aversion to technology that is contrasted to the beauty he finds in nature). This is why there is no word for it, from an elvish perspective. And this is also why Tolkien calls elvish magic an „art“:

I have not used 'magic' consistently [...] (since all human stories have suffered the same confusion). But the Elves are there (in my tales) to demonstrate the difference. Their 'magic' is Art, delivered from many of its human limitations: more effortless, more quick, more complete (product, and vision in unflawed correspondence). And its object is Art not Power, sub-creation not domination and tyrannous re-forming of Creation. (L No. 131)

This kinship of magic and art or magic and aesthetics can be seen in two points:

1. Aesthetics, just like subtle forms of magic, does not allow arbitrary repetition and reconfiguration. This is the very opposite of tool and power, which require the possibility arbitrary use. However this also means, that subtle magic is as elusive as aesthetics is: repeat it once too often and the mystery is gone. Therefore you shouldn't ask for how it works. It *is* indeed a ghost that vanishes on closer scrutiny, that cannot survive analysis. Analyse it, put it into laws, depict it clearly and it is gone. Laws and aesthetics are not exactly opposites but arch-enemies, and you cannot keep them in the same place and both alive for long. For aesthetics the particular situation is important<sup>18</sup>. Aesthetics is in the concrete, not universal. Elvish magic is tied to the *here and now*, and does not reveal itself as an abstract reusable law<sup>19</sup>.

17 This is one of the reasons why the Hobbit is in itself also heterogenous, viz. has more and less vulgar aspects of magic. The Hobbit was even subject to a similar development as the *Lord of the Rings*: Tolkien quickly abandoned the more blatantly vulgar devices, like dwarves with coloured beards taking instruments from out of nowhere, in favour of a more careful handling of vulgar magic. Except in the case of the ring, vulgar magic occurs mostly at the borders of the tale. The plot does not depend on it.

18 For example it is better to see Legolas awake at night than to be told that „elves do not (need much) sleep“.

19 And this is at the same time a mythical impulse. It is the same force that makes magic and what makes

For the fragile fabric of a concrete aesthetic form of magic, incomplete information, remoteness and indirectness are thus essential: we must not have enough data to form a law. This is what creates the nimbus that surrounds magic.

A good example of this – and the link between aesthetics and magic – is Tolkien's tendency to not show things. This happens extensively with regard to legends (which are opposed to history in quite a similar way as subtle from vulgar magic). Tolkien leaves many informations out, especially in the *Lord of the Rings* – and this makes the remote past all the more mysterious and deep.

Another example lies on the visual plane: when fantasies are depicted visually they become all too real. They lose their divinity and become fully down-to-earth. This is the principal problem of making fantasy visual – in movies or in drama<sup>20</sup> - because Fantasy essentially relies on the nimbus of the divine. Especially when it comes to High elves, but also to the great evil protagonists like Sauron or Morgoth every possible picture is false, because it does not carry the power ascribed to them. A mere description without a picture is the more powerful tool here and can incorporate much deeper effects. Tolkien talks about this when he was asked for a closer description of the flowers Elanor and Niphredil:

„I have not seen anything that immediately recalls niphredil or elanor or alfirin: but that I think is because those imagined flowers are lit by a light that would not be seen ever in a growing plant and cannot be recaptured by paint. Lit by that light, niphredil would be simply a delicate kin of a snowdrop; and elanor a pimpernel (perhaps a little enlarged) growing sun-golden flowers and star-silver ones on the same plant, and sometimes the two combined.“ (L 402)<sup>21</sup>

2. The second characteristics that subtle forms of magic and aesthetic experiences share is the fact that the subject is involved. Aesthetic experience is not just subjective, nor fully objective, but lies in a connection of both. Thus the attitude of the subject matters. It cannot be changed arbitrarily without threatening the mystery. The attitude must both generally be an attitude of awe (as opposed to a pragmatic attitude) and specifically be sensitive to the nature of the situation. And this is indeed an important part of art: art is never arbitrary, but in accordance with the nature of its object<sup>22</sup>.

This is shown in Tolkien's elves one of whose characteristics lies in being blended with the impressions of their surroundings. They cannot be stripped from their love for natural structures. You could perhaps say that they are rather a selfconscious part of the nature than of the culture of Arda – culture in the sense of a consciousness that makes arbitrary use of natural resources.

An important side-effect of this identification of aesthetics and magic is, that aesthetic impressions are always true in the *Lord of the Rings*. Nothing that is evil is beautiful<sup>23</sup>. The fear at the sight of the Nazgul from Weathertop, the ages can be seen in the eyes of the Elves, even the impression Gandalf makes on Legolas, Aragorn and Gimli at his return, before they recognize him: there is never delusion in the connection of aesthetics and morality. The aesthetic experience always shows the thing itself, or, more abstractly spoken: the beautiful is good.

For the same reason Tolkien must deny any sarcasm in Fantasy: If there is truth in the immediate impression, there must not be a second, independent (or even

---

myth. Horkheimer-Adorno rightly saw this in *The Dialectics of Enlightenment*.

20 Nevertheless it remains possible. A good example was Heidi Steimel's mentioning of the first *Hobbit* movie, that showed only the shadows on the wall when the dwarves played their song. In some cases just no picture fits.

21 A sidekick: here we have the ultimate answer to the infamous Balrog-Wings-Question: it is not supposed to be answered. Tolkien says somewhere (in the HOME, I guess) that the Balrog is supposed to be ungraspable.

22 Arnold Schönberg: „Kunst kommt von Müssen“, vgl. Adorno: *Philosophie der Neuen Musik* xx

23 Annatar would be a counter-example. But the story of him is very remote. For the *Lord of the Rings* and the *Silmarillion* my claim seems to be true.

contradictory) layer of meaning behind it. Irony destroys the magic of the immediate, because with it every immediate impression might be false. This is what makes fantasy mythic (and pathetic!). Tolkien says so in *On Fairy Stories*:

There is one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself. That must in that story be taken seriously, neither laughed at nor explained away. (FS 114)

### **The Dilemma of Magic**

So after all we have arrived at a much more subtle and much more demanding concept of magic: magic as art, magic as aesthetic experience. This however is a little too good to be true. The problem is that not all types of aesthetic experience can be called magic. Thus we need a *differencia specifica*, a specific quality, that differentiates magic from other forms of aesthetic experience. The genuine characteristic of magic is that it is about (supernatural) alteration of some sort. This means an empirical, physical effect has to be tied to magic, or we cannot recognise it as magic at all. But once we can recognise an effect, we can think of using it for different purposes. This boils down to the fact that *mysterious magic always remains indebted to vulgar magic*. Magic can never be fully separated from the pragmatic.

Let me try to illuminate this by an example: Imagine someone wants to convince you that „magic“ really existed (let's say Uri Geller invited you to his house to show you how he bends an anvil by the sheer force of concentration). What is the most reasonable reaction to this? It is not reasonable to deny his claims right away. In principle it is possible that the phenomenon he describes can be invoked. There is no *a priori* reason to rule out any conceivable phenomenon, that means: no noncontradictory phenomenon. It is in principle possible that there are laws of nature, that might not yet be known to us. So we have to investigate it. If there is something to be found, however, then we can ask for its reasons: we can do research. So we can start testing Geller's bending capabilities with different materials and circumstances, look for causes and effects and to try to examine possible laws behind it. But whatever the outcome of our investigation, it would destroy the magic in either case: *if it works, it's natural science, if not, it's nothing at all*. In both cases there is no mystery<sup>24</sup>.

Now, the same dilemma accounts for secondary worlds as well. A magical event must describe an alteration of something, or you cannot identify it as magic at all. But as soon as it can be described as altering something, it can also be utilized. It either has an effect or not. Thus magic is either vulgar or it is nothing at all. You have to show its effect or there is nothing, but you also must not show it or magic loses its magic. This is what I call the *dilemma of magic*.

### **Workarounds**

However, apparently it is possible to retain mystery in spite of the dilemma (in reality as well as in literature). So how does that work? We have already seen how it can be done: You must play tricks on reason. Our mind can only grasp things in the categories of entity,

---

24 This happens already abstractly: if you say "there is either a law I don't know or it is nothing" – then you have already disenchanting it. You do not have to find the actual law in order to do so. No matter how, as soon as you think about it, you cannot just stand there in awe. But it is the very standing in awe that constitutes magic, as a nimbus around effects of alteration. Again it is a matter of attitude. Awe requires a state of nonthinking. And this is again a central feature that magic shares with art: aesthetics is something that happens in the relationship between a subject and an object – not an object alone (see above).

causality, and designation. Mystery that is not supposed to be grasped in these categories can therefore only be achieved in an indirect way. Because of this mystery is always a compromise, a tricky way between thinking and not-thinking, i.e. a description of alteration without the necessary data of how it all comes about (alteration only in a special situation).

This is the same way by which a sense of wonder is achieved in esoterics. And this at the same time shows why all esoterics fails: its theories must *necessarily* either leave blind spots in knowledge or be contradictory. Inconsequence must be its genuine feature, or esoterics loses its mystery – and becomes natural science. It must at the same time use and defy reason, or it is not esoterics any more<sup>25</sup>.

But what is reckless when it comes to natural sciences, is welcome as a device of literature. And Tolkien is indeed a master in stepping beyond the borders of vulgar magic by more than one strategy. The main point of all these strategies is: you have to remain obscure. I see at least four ways by which this could be achieved<sup>26</sup>:

1. Leave blind spots in knowledge. Be unclear about causes and effects. Give a particular situation, but don't give enough data to form a law. We can name situations of alteration, but keep them mysterious by keeping them unsystematic, not repeat them too often, so we cannot infer a law from them. Magic should be like little spotlights in the dark: single, concrete situations, that do not amount to a full-fledged abstract system.

The irony of this is, that by this strategy we return to fairy-tale magic: we have single situations of supernatural alteration but no complete system that explains them sufficiently. The difference to fairy-tale-magic is however that the situations described must not be arbitrary, but give a vague idea of consistency that still does not allow us to form mechanical laws<sup>27</sup>. This leads us to the second strategy.

2. Remain abstract. Give abstract ideas but do not tell the reader how they instantiate. This is the case with the ring, which is an *abstract power*. The ring's character is a consistent one: it incorporates the idea and psychology of power, but it is entirely unclear how this boils down to concrete effects.

3. A third strategy is: Use paradoxes. Paradoxes are the perfect trick to play on reason<sup>28</sup>. Not every contradiction is wrong. They can sometimes be solved when you apply finer distinctions to them (this is the basic idea of dialectics). But not all contradictions are solvable. The trick is to make an insolvable contradiction look like a solvable one. A literal paradox must insinuate that on a higher plane (whatever that means) what it describes could be understood. I presume that this is a pattern we find in all religions. In Tolkien we find it for example in the Valar, who are present everywhere and at the same time incarnate in one particular place.

4. A fourth strategy is to invent a mediating perspective. Once there is a narrator like a hobbit, behind whose biased and limited account the truth is concealed, we have a similar pattern as in the case of paradoxes. We have the illusion that there is something more divine behind what is described all too plainly. We listen to the designate account of the narrator and *abstractly* sense something else behind it, without being able to tell what it is. We use a contradictory analogy of the pattern: „it is like that, just not like that“ („like this,

---

25 This accounts also for the only promising argument in favour of esoterics: the claim that the very scientific attitude destroys the effects. An attitude of awe is necessary for certain things to work. Differently put: They work only as long you do not want to know why. - But this again means nothing other than applying and defying reason at the same time.

26 You could say 1 & 2 are strategies to reach obscurity by incomplete knowledge, 3 & 4 to reach it by analogies.

27 I am inclined to add that it is better when magic is not a crucial part of the plot. The plot should better be achieved by natural means and magic should be free from the burden of keeping the story going.

28 Here paradoxes do not mean what I called the paradox of the ring. That was a practical paradox, a paradox of action, here I mean theoretical paradoxes: just plain contradictions.

just more mysterious“). In Tolkien: By realising that all the pragmatic explanations are „only“ the hobbit-perspective, we get a feeling that there is something that cannot be grasped properly inside the terms of pragmatics. The hobbit's perspective provides a shell for the unknowable and thereby achieves mystery. We cannot, in fact, have it without the shell.

So from all these strategies we see that Tolkien could not help but retain both sides: vulgar and mysterious magic. He could of course have done it in a different fashion – abandon all the plainly vulgar devices and remain with an almost natural world. But I don't know whether this would improve his books. Many different cases are possible on the gradual scale from vulgarity to mystery. It is a gradual scale because mystery can never fully escape vulgarity. But at the same time mystery as the regulative idea of magic, if magic is meant to be any different from science. So we cannot let go of the pragmatic aspect - but we should not let go of the mysterious aspect.

It is also an interesting question to ask whether the change I have described is a change of Tolkien's convictions or a deliberate change he brought about as the story changed from the children's story to adult romance.

I would say it is both but with a strong emphasis on the latter: subtle magic is there already. The Silmarillion is full of it (I will postpone a closer analysis to the written version of the paper), and also the Hobbit itself has some of it (my answer to Heidis instrument-question). But it increased. Thus I think that Tolkien further refined all of his works away from vulgar to subtle, but he did not only discover it when he wrote the LotR.

## Part II – Tolkien's Reflections

„Tolkien's fiction cannot be reduced to his views“ (Curry 99)

So far I have left out Tolkien's own reflections. This is because I think that the ideas that can be found in his literary writings are substantial in their own right, and because it is not always easy to synchronize these with his theoretical views. But of course the present discussion will not be complete without consulting Tolkien himself on the matter, especially when it comes to the questions of how the word „magic“ could and how it should be used, and how it relates to terms like enchantment, Faerie, Elvish, sorcery, wizardry, necromancy and quite a few more. As others have already investigated these aspects in great depth<sup>29</sup>, I will still keep my discussion of Tolkien's „magic“ incomplete. I only want to add some philosophical strands, which I think such an analysis should incorporate, because, as Bachmann says: „To Tolkien the philologist, there is no 'mere' terminology“. (Bachmann 47)

[...]

### Bibliography

- Bachmann, Dieter. „Words for Magic. *Goeteia, Gûl and Lúth*“. *Myth and Magic. Art According to the Inklings*. Ed. Thomas Honegger, Eduardo Segura. Zürich und Bern: Walking Tree, 2007. 47-56.
- Carpenter, Humphrey, Ed. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. London: HarperCollins, 1995.
- Curry, Patrick. „Iron Crown, Iron Cage: Tolkien and Weber on Modernity“. *Myth and Magic. Art According to the Inklings*. Ed. Thomas Honegger, Eduardo Segura. Zürich und Bern: Walking Tree, 2007. 99-108.
- Fornet-Ponse, Thomas. „Kunst oder Maschine? Magie bei Tolkien“. *Der Flammifer von Westernis* 17 (3/2002), 24-27.
- Hageböck, Michael. „Kunst und Technik. Anmerkungen zu Tolkiens 'Magie'-Begriff“. *Inklings-Jahrbuch* (21), 37-85.
- Hammond, Wayne G. and Christina Scull. Art.: „Magic“. *The J. R. R. Tolkien Companion and Guide. Reader's Guide*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. 575-578.
- Kegler, Karl R., Thomas Fornet-Ponse and Adelheid Kegler. „Was besagt die Untersuchung von Magie für Tolkiens Werk? Eine Entgegnung auf Michael K. Hageböck“. *Inklings-Jahrbuch* (22), 212-241.
- Rateliff, John D.: *The History of the Hobbit. Vol. 1: Mr. Baggins*. London: HarperCollins, 2007.
- Shippey, Tom. *J.R.R. Tolkien – Author of the century*. London: HarperCollins, 2000.
- . „New Learning and New Ignorance. Magia, Goeteia and the Inklings.“ *Myth and Magic. Art According to the Inklings*. Ed. Thomas Honegger, Eduardo Segura. Zürich und Bern: Walking Tree, 2007. 21-46.
- Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. „Beowulf and the Critics“. *Beowulf and the Critics*. Hg. Christopher Tolkien. London: Allen and Unwin, 1983. 5-48.
- . „On Fairy-Stories“. *Beowulf and the Critics*. Hg. Christopher Tolkien. London: Allen and Unwin, 1983. 109-161.
- . *The Lord of the Rings*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Allen&Unwin, 1981.
- . *The Return of the Shadow*. Hg. Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins, 1988.
- . *The Treason of Isengard*. Hg. Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins, 1989.
- . *Sauron Defeated*. Hg. Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins, 1992.

---

<sup>29</sup>Illuminating articles have been written by Thomas Fornet-Ponse, Patrick Curry, Tom Shippey and Dieter Bachmann. An extensive account of the places where Tolkien discusses magic is given in Hammond/Scull. In addition to this, some have brought up the idea that there was actually no magic in Tolkien's works at all. To this there is nothing more to say than what Kegler, Kegler and Fornet-Ponse have written in the *Inklings-Jahrbuch* 22 xx.