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The Presence of the Past

A comparative analysis of medieval Arthurian romance and modern fantasy fiction

Content

Introduction

> "They lie in all the pools, pale faces, deep deep under the dark water. I saw them: grim
> faces and evil, and noble faces and sad. Many faces proud and fair, and weeds in their
> silver hair. But all foul, all rotting, all dead. A fell light is in them." Frodo hid his eyes in
> his hands. "I know not who they are; but I thought I saw there Men and Elves, and Orcs
> beside them."
> "Yes, yes," said Gollum. "All dead, all rotten. Elves and Men and Orcs. The Dead
> Marshes. There was a great battle long ago, yes, so they told him when Sméagol was
> young. (...) They fought on the plain for days and months at the Black Gates. But the
> Marshes have grown since then, swallowed up the graves; always creeping, creeping."
> "But that is an age and more ago," said Sam. "The Dead can't be really there!" (*Towers*
> 222)

In *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the past is literally all over the place. The quote above shows
how events that happened in the past are still present in the present of the story. It also shows
how this past is not completely 'dead', no matter what Sam would like to believe: the lights
of the dead people can lead our heroes astray, to their own deaths. Even though the dead and
the ancient battle do not directly impact the plot of Frodo's quest, their presence cannot be
ignored and presents a physical danger to the characters, years after the event has happened.
To go with a more figurative reading: the past in *The Lord of the Rings* is like the dead faces
in the water. It lies just beneath the surface of the present, and provides not just an
atmosphere or a background, but actually reaches out and influences the characters and
events of the story.

This 'presence of the past' is not unique to *The Lord of the Rings*. Fantasy books in
general seem to be preoccupied with long time-spans and a past that does not safely stay in
the past. In George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*-series, the cold Others from legend
rise again in the North and Children of the Forest, the long-lived original inhabitants of
Westeros, are still hidden in out of the way places. *The Serpentwar Saga* by Raymond Feist
presents characters from an earlier series that happened a long time before and, like *A Song of
Ice and Fire*, features an enemy from an age before mankind. In Elizabeth Moon's *The Deed
of Paksenarrion*, the deed from the title refers to the finding of a royal heir, who went
missing 40 years before. A quick search on the site Goodreads for the genre 'fantasy' yields

phrases such as "The boy has slept there for generations" (Holly Black, *The Darkest Part of the Forest*), "an ancient needle with the power to mend what has been torn" (Michael Jensen, *Woven*), "a centuries-old enemy" (Jeaniene Frost, *Bound by Flames*), and "old truths will live again" (Brian Staveley, *The Emperor's Blades*). The realist genre – which is often placed in opposition to fantasy – shows far less emphasis on the past. The history of England does not impact the plot of *Pride and Prejudice*, even if the circumstances in which Elizabeth Bennet lives are of course the product of that (colonial) history. Even in books such as *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, where connections are drawn between different events through history, the past affects the present mainly through memory, and the connections often emerge in the mind of the characters themselves.

There is however another 'genre', if you can call it that, that seems to handle the past in similar ways as the fantasy books. The heroes of medieval Arthurian romance practically stumble across the past any time they are on a quest. Especially the later, expanded versions of the Arthurian stories are littered with tombstones that need to be lifted, old spells (or 'customs') that need to be broken, and shields or swords with a genealogy any knight would be proud of. In the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle, one of the most extended attempts at telling the story of Arthur and his knights, "the consequences of the past for the present and the future [are] a fundamental organizing principle of the narration" (36), according to *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval French Literature*. Like the past of *The Lord of the Rings*, the past in the Arthurian romance is very much alive.

This could of course be sheer coincidence. After all, fantasy is mostly a twentieth and twenty-first century phenomenon, while Arthurian romance flourished from, roughly, the twelfth century to the fifteenth. However, fantasy as a genre often refers to the Middle Ages. Feudal societies, knights, damsels and sword-fights are plot-elements that appear again and again. Colin Manlove in his introduction to *Modern Fantasy* states that "[fantasy] often draws spiritual nourishment from the past (...) particularly from a medieval and/or Christian world order" (163). The *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* states that for later twentieth century fantasy – after Tolkien, who was a medievalist – "the default cultural model for the fantasy world was the Middle Ages" (James ed. 70). There are also scholars who have pointed out a more specific connection between fantasy and Arthurian romance. Flo Keyes focuses mostly on the thematic similarities between the genres in *The Literature of Hope in the Middle Ages and Today*, while Frank Brandsma in *Excalibur meets Memory, Sorrow and*

Thorn focuses more on worldbuilding and narrative techniques, like entrelacement. Northrop Frye uses a rather broad definition of romance as a mode of storytelling, which includes both medieval romance and fantasy literature.

Is it possible that the way of engaging with the past is also an expression of the kinship between fantasy and medieval Arthurian romance? On the surface, it does look like there are definitely resemblances, but the fantasy works have been written centuries later. This invites the question whether or not the ways both genres treat the past are indeed similar, or actually quite different. Is there more than a vague similarity? In short, the central question is:

To what extent does the role of the past in modern fantasy fiction resemble the way the past is used in medieval Arthurian romance?

To answer this question, I will use three angles of approach, three themes that all capture an aspect of the past. Firstly, I will compare the way genealogy plays a part in the construction of the narrative. Genealogy is a manifestation of the past, which directly influences certain characters in their actions and their way of life. Secondly, prophecy will be discussed. This might seem counter-intuitive, as prophecy is associated with the future, but an assessment of prophecy is vital, in that it provides information about the concept of time as it exists in the different genres. Moreover, prophecy also provides a way to link an earlier time within the present-day of the story. To conclude, I will examine how the past is accessed in the present. What sources are there and how are they presented?

First, however, it is essential to give a definition of the terms I will be working with. What is fantasy? What is Arthurian romance? What is meant by 'the past'? I will also introduce the texts belonging to both genres that I will be using.

Fantasy and Arthurian romance

Establishing a definition of fantasy myself would probably be enough for another thesis, which is why I will use the definition of Colin Manlove in his introduction to *Modern Fantasy*, which is in my opinion very thorough. It also offers a clear division from genres closely related to fantasy, like fables and science-fiction, without limiting it down too much. By Manlove's definition, fantasy is a

> fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of the
> supernatural with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at
> least partly familiar terms. (157)

The term fiction excludes those books that were written with a legitimate truth claim – the bible is not fantasy, even if some people do not believe in it. The supernatural is that which is inexplicable by laws of nature or science, often associated with magic or a deity. It is important to note that this magical or divine element is not necessarily seen as 'supernatural' in the universe of the fantasy novel itself. Magic can be a part of every-day life, with no one so much as batting an eye. But the reason why the genre is called fantasy is that there is something in it that is not possible or would be perceived as supernatural in our world, like ghosts, magic, shapeshifters or for instance dragons.[1]This supernatural element should be substantial and irreducible, substantial in that it should be "more than a postulate" (160) and irreducible in that the supernatural cannot be explained away. This means that moralistic fables do not really count as fantasy, because the whole point of them is to explain away the supernatural. It also excludes so-called dream-narratives, like *Alice in Wonderland*, in which all the impossible happenings turn out to come from the dreamer's imagination. The 'sense of wonder' produced by fantasy is not a by-product, but a deliberate effect in the genre. The world that is described is supposed to be different from our own and the reader should be aware of that. The last part of the definition, "with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms", distinguishes fantasy from a lot of horror and ghost stories, in which the supernatural element is supposed to stay "alien" (Manlove 164). However, I would like to remark upon the use of the word 'mortal'. Some fantasy novels, like Diana Wynne Jones' *Dalemark Quartet*, feature protagonists that are immortal, in this particular case without being aware of it. The distinction between mortal and immortal might not be a very helpful one in fantasy. What Manlove assumingly tries to do is make a distinction between characters like us – mortal, human, unfamiliar with the supernatural – and the characters with a full knowledge of the secondary world. Most fantasy-novels use an uninitiated person or creature as a protagonist, so that we can explore

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[1] Naomi Novik's *Temeraire* series is set in Napoleontic times in the ordinary world. She only added one new element: dragons. Even though most of the historical background is correct and realistic, the addition of something supernatural makes her novels fantasy.

the wonders of the fantasy-world together with that character.

Like fantasy, the characteristic elements of romance are difficult to define and this causes endless discussions. Part of that comes from the fact that it is a modern distinction, whereas the term 'romans', in Old French, in medieval sources usually refers to the language instead of the genre. In the introduction of the *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, the genre is very broadly characterized as "a dynamic network of fictions, written first in verse and then in prose, that recounted the exploits of knights, ladies, and noble families seeking honor, love, and adventure" (Krueger ed. 2). Arthurian romance – romances connected to King Arthur – is a subgroup within the genre, but it is one of the best known and most popular ones. "Their tremendous popularity (…) established them as a major force that other romance authors might choose to imitate, adapt, criticize, or even burlesque, but which they did not often ignore" (Krueger ed. 2). Again very broadly, we could say that Arthurian romances are fictions that recount the exploits of knight, ladies, and noble families seeking honor, love and adventure, connected to Arthur or his court. To this definition one element should be added, which is the marvelous nature of the adventures. A questing beast, a lady who lives in a lake, rings that can discern any spell, these are all possible in the Arthurian world.

Because of the great amount of texts in both genres, the decision has been made to take three representational works, one belonging to the Arthurian romance and the other two belonging to the Fantasy genre. These works are the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle for Arthurian romance, and as representatives of fantasy, *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien and the *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* trilogy by Tad Williams.

The *Lancelot-Grail* cycle is a work of monumental proportion, composed between 1215 and 1235 (*History* ix). It consists of five books: *The History of the Holy Grail*, *The Story of Merlin*, the *Lancelot Proper*, *The Quest for the Holy Grail* and *The Death of Arthur*. *The History of the Holy Grail* is about the origin of the Grail, the cup from which Jesus Christ drunk during Last Supper and in which later on his blood is collected. It is about Joseph of Arimathea, the man who took the Grail from Jesus' house and collected the blood, and his descendants, as they make their way to Britain in the first century AD. *The Story of Merlin* tells about the conception of Merlin and how he serves first Uther and then Arthur. The early days of Arthur's reign are described and it ends with the birth of Lancelot. The third book, the longest of all, is all about Lancelot: his childhood, his infatuation with the queen and their

affair, his heroic deeds and his sins. It also tells how Lancelot is tricked into conceiving Galahad, the hero of *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, which describes pretty much what the title says. *The Death of Arthur*[2] then, tells about the later days of Arthur's reign and about the ultimate battle between him and Mordred, in which both perish. It ends with the death of the central figure in the whole cycle: Lancelot. The reason why the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle is used in this thesis is that, in the words of Norris J. Lacy, it constitutes "the most extended attempt to elaborate the full story of the Arthurian era and to set that era in a framework of universal history" (*History* ix). The original *Lancelot-Grail* was in medieval French prose, but I am using the translation in English made by a team led by Norris J. Lacy.

The second representative work used in this thesis has already been mentioned. J.R.R. Tolkien (1892-1973) was a professor at Oxford. He published *The Hobbit* in 1937, which was meant and marketed as a children's book. The first part of its 'sequel', *The Lord of the Rings*, was published in 1954. A ring that was found in *The Hobbit* turns out to be the One Ring, forged by the dark lord Sauron centuries before. Sauron had been defeated before, but is growing again in strength. If he regains the Ring, he will be able to rule the earth. A fellowship is formed, whose members "shall represent the other free Peoples of the World" (*Fellowship* 282) – four hobbits, two men, an elf, a dwarf and a wizard – whose ultimate goal it is to destroy the ring in the fires of Mount Doom in Mordor. In the *Cambridge Companion to Fantasy*, *The Lord of the Rings* is described as looming "over all the fantasy written in English – and in many other languages – since its publication; most subsequent writers of fantasy are either imitating him or else desperately trying to escape his influence" (James ed. 62). Together with C.S. Lewis' work, it is also credited with "helping to give modern fantasy its medievalist cast"(James ed. 63). When discussing fantasy, there is almost no way to avoid *The Lord of the Rings*.[3] That is why it is one of the works used in this thesis.

Memory, Sorrow and Thorn is a trilogy by Tad Williams, set in a land called Osten Ard. The first book, *The Dragonbone Chair*, was published in 1988, the last, *To Green Angel*

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[2] To save space, I will refer to the books as follows: *History* (*The History of the Holy Grail*), *Merlin* (*Story of Merlin*), *Lancelot I or II* (The *Lancelot Proper*, which is divided over 2 books in the edition of Lacy), *Quest* (*Quest for the Holy Grail*) and *Death* (*The Death of Arthur*).

[3] I will use the following abbreviations for the parts of *The Lord of the Rings*: *Fellowship* (*The Fellowship of the Ring*), *Towers* (*The Two Towers*) and *Return* (*Return of the King*).

Tower, in 1993.[4] Though some parts are written from different perspectives, the main protagonist is Simon, or Seoman. When *The Dragonbone Chair* begins, he is just a scullion in Hayholt, the castle of king Prester John. When Prester John dies, his son Elias becomes king. It soon becomes clear that king Elias has made a deal with the Storm King. This was once a member of a race called the Sithi, who turned to dark magic when humans were on the verge of destroying his people. Now he is bent on revenge and destruction. According to an old prophecy, three legendary swords – Sorrow, Thorn and Memory – are seen as the only way to stop this Storm King. In the three books, Simon and other people – among whom Elias' brother Joshua, his daughter Miriamele and a troll named Binabik – fight against Elias and his allies. Eventually, they manage to defeat him and the Storm King. Simon – who is apparently a legitimate descendant of an earlier king – becomes king, with Miriamele as his queen. *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* is used as an example of post-Tolkien fantasy.

Medieval and modern concepts of the past

To what extent does the role of the past in modern fantasy fiction resemble the way the past is used in medieval Arthurian romance?

We have already defined two of the terms in this question, 'fantasy' and 'Arthurian romance'. However, in order to be able to answer the main question, it is important to specify the meaning of the word 'past' too. In the Merriam-Webster dictionary simply described as "an earlier time: the time before the present", it is far from an unambiguous concept. The past is studied, analyzed and used, and the ways in which this is done differ from culture to culture. In this section I will briefly examine the concepts of the past as they existed at the moment the main works in this thesis came into being. What does the past mean to the people living in these periods? What is, according to them, the right way to study it? How does the past stand in relation to the present? In short: *How was the past seen in medieval times and how does this differ from contemporary theories about the past?*

Janet Coleman starts her chapter about 12th century historiography in *Ancient and medieval memories* by stating that "medieval historians are derided for having no interest in

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[4] The novels will be referred to as *Chair* for *The Dragonbone Chair*, *Stone* (*The Stone of Farewell*), *Angel Tower I* (*To Green Angel Tower: part 1*) and *Angel Tower II* (*To Green Angel Tower: part 2*)

the pastness of the past, and it has even more frequently been said that they 'simply' lacked 'a sense of the past'" (275). What is meant by this, having no sense of the past? Looking at medieval art and history, it is clear that there exists a different attitude to history. For example, the reign of Arthur in the *Lancelot-Grail* allegedly takes place in 5th century AD,[5] even though the characters behave and dress like their 13th century audience. Of course the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle is what we would now call fiction, but its attitude to the past is in line with, for instance, the depiction of biblical characters in "something misleadingly analogous to 'modern dress'" (Anderson 22). In *The Concept of Time in the Historiography of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Hans-Werner Goetz notes that "temporal changes – the differences in times and epochs – were often neglected by unceremonious comparisons of events from distinctly different centuries or eras" (139). The 'pastness of the past', in other words its difference from the present time, does not seem to have been the focus of medieval inquiry.

At the same time, "the authors acknowledged and noted change and development, and they distinguished between epochs or phases in history" (Goetz 139). Similarly, Coleman states that "there was an increasing awareness of discontinuities" during the twelfth century (286). Katalin Halász, in *The Representation of Time and Its Models in the Prose Romance*, goes beyond this, saying that the medieval mind "responds less to the gradual accumulation of the effects of passing time than to spectacular changes that occur with suddenness" (177). The problem does not seem to have been that medieval historians did not notice any differences between 'then'and 'now'. Apparently though, they did not see these differences as the most defining characteristic of the past. To explain this, let us take a look at how history is actually written in the Middle Ages.

History in the Middle Ages starts with eyewitness testimonial. The common etymology given for the word 'historia' in the Middle Ages was that it came from the Greek word for 'to see' (Brandsma 58). And following this, history was seen as "the literal freezing of events experienced through representative texts" (Coleman 281). It is also important to realize that, for medieval historians, there was nothing arbitrary or unreliable about language. "[Words] were adequate signs for things" (Coleman 281).

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[5] When Galahad arrives at Camelot in *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, his seat tells us that "FOUR HUNDRED FIFTY-FOUR YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE PASSION OF CHRIST"

However, a written down testimony is only the starting-point: it needs to be interpreted. There is the literal experience that someone had and there is the deeper meaning, in which an experience is part of a bigger story – the story of Christianity, the story of God. As Goetz says, "[A]ll history was God's revelation of the process of salvation. (...) Therefore, it had sense and meaning" (Goetz 164). This idea about the past corresponds to the medieval worldview in general, where "the coming into being of all things, the whole course of development in things that change, every sort of thing that moves in any wise, receives its due cause, order, and form from the steadfastness of the Divine mind", as Boethius wrote in *The Consolation of Philosophy* (82), one of the most-read texts during the whole Middle Ages.

A central part in this worldview was the idea that time eventually would end. And this idea was very much alive: "people thought they must be near the end of time, in the sense that Christ's second coming could occur at any moment" (Anderson 23). With this in mind, history itself was "a continuously progressing development toward the end of all history" (Goetz 154).

In short: the 'pastness of the past' and real differences between certain time periods, were not the main interest from a medieval perspective. With God as its primary source, history "was meant to be transcended by being interpreted and understood (…) in its universal, a-temporal nature" (Coleman 284).

It is impossible to cover all developments on the ideas about the past, or even all contemporary theories about it. That is why I have chosen to focus on three main points, that distinguish the modern point of view from the medieval perspective on the past. First of all, the disappearance of God from the Western worldview, secondly, the increasing focus on the 'otherness' of the past and thirdly, the problem of representation through language.

According to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, the eighteenth century marks "the dusk of religious modes of thought. The century of the Enlightenment, of rationalist secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness" (11). 'Modern' here does not simply refer to a time period, but more to a frame of mind.

> What has come to take the place of the mediaeval conception of simultaneity-along-time is (…) an idea of 'homogeneous, empty time', in which simultaneity is, as it were, transverse, cross-time, marked not by prefiguring and fulfillment, but by temporal

coincidence, and measured by clock and calendar. (24)

'Coincidence': this word in itself captures the difference between the medieval and modern view. In a world where God is omnipotent, coincidence cannot exist. "What place can be left for random action, when God constraineth all things to order?" (Boethius 92). In a medieval worldview, the present is connected to the past as all historic events had a purpose in God's plan. When God is no longer believed to govern the whole universe, this is untenable. Instead we are connected to people living simultaneously, not because we know them or have a lot in common with them, but because we happen to live in this world at the same time. This is, of course, completely coincidental and random.

The second change, the shift from essential similarity to essential otherness, is discernible in the Romantic period. Romanticism is a movement in arts, culture and way of thinking that emerged at the end of the 18th century and continued through the first half of the 19th, though its influence can be found even today. Medieval authors "recognized an irretrievability of history, but they did not acknowledge a thorough alteration through the coming of new epochs" (Goetz 162). In Romanticism, the 'thorough alteration' *was* acknowledged and in fact became the central concept to the notion of the past. "The modern point of view is organized around a series of ruptures," as Peter Frischke asserts in *The Melancholy of History* (4), about historiography in the Romantic era. Key terms were "dispossession, loss, and disenchantment" (Frischke 8). The past was placed in opposition to the present, as completely 'other'. People not only lived differently in the past, they had a different state of mind that was not accessible to modern people. Janet Coleman argues that the "nineteenth-century kind of sentimental history of a lost otherness is what truly characterizes much, but not all, of modern history, and it is this to which we are heir" (Coleman 593). It is this idea of lost otherness which comes to the forefront for instance in *The Stone of Farewell* when Binabik the troll tells Simon that "It is only in these late and sad days that all this land has become empty of voices" (*Stone* 408).

Lastly, the representation of the past has become problematic. This has first of all to do with a larger problem of representation in modern Western culture. The medieval idea that there is a one-on-one relation between words and things – the "non-arbitrariness of the sign" – is, in the words of Anderson, "an idea largely foreign to the contemporary Western mind" (14). Language is the only way we have to describe the world, but it does not work well. The

same applies to the past, enhanced by the fact that we can only access it through sources. "The past really did exist. The question is: *how* can we know that past today – and what can we know of it?" as Linda Hutcheon asks in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*.

Now that we have established the difference between the medieval and modern view on the past, it is time to start analyzing the way the past functions in the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle, *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* trilogy. I will start by looking at the way genealogy plays a role in the plot of the stories and the lives of the characters. Then I will look at prophecy to get an idea of the worldview in respect to time in the different books, after which I will examine the sources of the past in these narratives.

Genealogy

Genealogy – the history of family – is one of the most direct ways in which the past plays a role in the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle. Someone's lineage determines someone's position, his obligations and his destiny, for instance in the case of Galahad. *The Lord of the Rings* is also concerned with genealogy, though to a lesser degree. A lot of characters are identified by their patronym and especially the hobbits seem to like genealogy, but who their ancestors are, does not determine the success of their mission. In the figure of Aragorn however, even when he is still a ranger, the nobility of his descent sometimes shines through. It is one of the reasons he is part of the fellowship, because, as Gandalf says, "the Ring of Isildur concerns him closely" (*Fellowship* 282). In *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* Simon starts out as one of the lower class. At the end of the series however, he turns out to be the heir of an earlier king and he ascends to the throne himself. In this section, I will compare the way genealogy functions in these three texts.

In *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages*, R. Howard Bloch states that "nobility represented a quality of birth, and a man was powerful because his ancestors (...) were already in command" (Bloch 68). When your father is a knight, you are by right of birth, suitable to become a knight too. If you can claim that your ancestors have been knights for generations, your claim is even more firmly established. Bloch shows that "the genealogical memory of small aristocrats does not go back beyond the mid-eleventh century, that of chatelains reaches as far as the first third of the eleventh, and that of counts extends in some instances all the way to the Carolingian period" (Bloch 80).

The farther back your lineage goes, the more it solidifies your own nobility. The character of Galahad in the *Lancelot-Grail* is in this respect a prime example. His line goes back to Joseph of Arimathea, who collected Christ's blood and who brought the grail to England. The "integral tie to an origin is preserved" (Bloch 33) and if tracing your lineage as far back as possible is important, then his "[kinship] places Galahad in a position of unassailable privilege" (Shichtman 13). In Galahad's case, his birthright is not a fief or knighthood: he is the one who will "put an end to the wondrous events now taking place in this land" (*Quest* 5).

Though lineage and origin is not such an all-pervading theme in *The Lord of the Rings*, we do see the idea of birthright with Aragorn. The line of kings of Gondor was broken and the descendants live in exile. Even so, there is no other king chosen. Gondor is still ruled by stewards of a lesser line who do not have the right to the throne by birth. Only Aragorn, who is a direct descendant of kings, can be king. Aragorn himself stresses the fact that "the heirs of Valandil have ever dwelt in a long line unbroken from father unto son" (*Fellowship* 254). The patrilineal nature of the genealogy is in line with the medieval model, where family holdings and name in principle passed on to the eldest son.

Memory, Sorrow and Thorn has a more complicated attitude to genealogy. On the one hand, birth does determine someone's position. Elias is Prester John's eldest son, so he has the right to the throne. Camaris was the older brother of the Nabban duke Leobardis, and so has a better claim to Nabban than his nephew. On the other hand, Prester John himself was "a swordless farmer's son" (*Chair* 285), and became king by 'slaying the dragon'. These conflicting tendencies come together when Simon, having just discovered his legacy, gets offered the throne. "I did what I had to do, and I lived through it. None of that has anything to do with who my great-great-however-many-greats-grandfather was!" (*Angel Tower II* 628). Lineage does not determine someone's suitability to rule, but people believe it does. "You know and I know that what blood flows in you makes no difference – it's all red. But your people need to believe in something" says Duke Isgrimnur (*Angel Tower II* 628).

But it was not just a matter of inheriting a position. Lineage shows, in a number of ways. Firstly, it is apparent in the appearance of a person. Lancelot is often referred to as "extremely handsome" (*Lancelot II* 269) or "remarkably goodlooking and well built" (*Lancelot II* 63). This is not coincidental, it is an outward manifestation of his quality as a knight and of his impressive descent. When Aragorn proclaims his identity to Éomer, Legolas and Gimli notice that Aragorn "seemed to have grown in stature [and] in his living face they

caught a brief vision of the power and majesty of the kings of stone" (*Towers* 24). Though *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* seems to resist the power of lineage in part, Eahlstan Fiskerne, Simon's ancestor, "looked much like Simon" (*Angel Tower II* 618). That is in fact how Simon himself discovers his legacy.

Secondly, descent also means inherent qualities: prowess and loyalty are not only indicators of a noble lineage, but also the effects of it. When Arthur pulls the sword out of the stone, no one knows yet that he is Uther's son and thus by birth the king of Britain. But he displays largesse, wisdom and prowess, inborn qualities indicative of royalty. Aragorn has "the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known" (*Return* 125).

Thirdly, lineage is connected to symbols. Bloch talks about heraldry, saying that "the inherited heraldic sign was an important expression of the continuity of lineage" (Bloch 77). Lineage was apparent in material objects and a similar system is to be found in both fantasy works. Narsil, the blade that was broken when Elendil used it to defeat Sauron, signifies Aragorn's identity as heir and presents an immediate connection to the past. It is also used in that context, when he shows it, reforged, to the army of the Dead. The reforged sword signifies the reforged line and establishes him as Isildur's heir. Another token of his heritage is the ring he always wears. In *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* it is also a ring, worn by Simon even before he knows its significance. "Eahlstan's ring they kept in the royal family, and passed it down from parent to child"(*Angel Tower II* 624). Again, lineage is signified and revealed by a symbol.

Genealogy plays a decisive part in the lives of characters. In fact, Simon would not even have been born if it hadn't been for his father's lineage. The doctor doing the delivery first wants to save the mother, saying that "she can always have another child" (*Chair* 34) But when he hears that her husband – a descendant of Eahlstan – is dead, he saves Simon instead. Throughout the books, however, Simon is unaware of his heritage and does not act upon it. When he is offered the throne, his descent is only one of the reasons – the other being his deeds and the stories that have sprung up around him. In contrast, Aragorn is acutely aware of his ancestors. He is defined by them, as he is often referred to as 'Isildur's heir', but he also defines himself as such and bases his decisions upon this fact, saying on one occasion that "it seemed fit that Isildur's heir should labour to repair Isildur's fault" (*Fellowship* 258). Genealogy is not without obligations and this idea is also clearly present in the *Lancelot-Grail*. Galahad might by birth be deserving of the Perilous Seat and the finding of

the Grail, the adventures he brings to an end are also his duty. There is no other path for him than to quench the flames on the tomb of Simeon, to stay a maiden and to go on the grail quest. "[Ancestors] leave work to be done, insults to avenge, sins to expiate; in this way, the ancestors program the lives of their descendants" (Halász 181).

Genealogy is a way to link the past and the present and a way to link different books. The five books of the *Lancelot-Grail* are connected by genealogical lines and these connections are constantly referenced. So Galahad's parentage is an important recurring theme in *The Quest for the Holy Grail*, referring back to characters and events in the *Lancelot Proper*, *The Story of Merlin* and *The History of the Grail*. But the tendency to connect and unify the different characters and events with each other does not only reveal itself in referring backwards to genealogy. There are also references forward. This means predictions and prophesies – about which more later – but also direct interventions in lineages. An example is when Joseph of Arimathea, in *The History of the Grail*, is told by a miraculous voice: "tonight you are to know your wife carnally. May such seed issue that will keep and maintain the land that is promised to you" (*History* 119). Joseph of Arimathea has to have offspring, in order for him to be Galahad's ancestor. And apparently God himself acknowledges the value of ancestry and actively engineers the genealogy leading to Galahad. "Such an important valorizing device is genealogy that it turns into an instrument of God's will, a means by which an individual is predestined for greatness" (Looper 51).

However, even in the Middle Ages birth is not everything. It is important to remember that the birthname of Lancelot, Galahad's father, was also Galahad. Again and again it is said that when Lancelot was born, he had the potential to find the grail and accomplish everything that Galahad later accomplishes. Only his love for Queen Guinevere ensures that he will never fulfill what could have been his destiny. There is, then, a sense of choice and the idea exists that your birth, though it can determine much in your life, does not prevent people from taking another path. Still, the importance of birth in the *Lancelot-Grail* is enormous and the modern fantasy works come nowhere near to that in the importance they attach to genealogy. This might be the result of a changed worldview. The modern western world places emphasis on equality and the idea that with hard work, you can be whatever you want to be.

Lineage does connect the plot to earlier events that are not in the books: ancient history, like Isildur's fate, actually has a direct bearing on the story because one of the main character is his descendant. Lineage also impacts the lives of characters profoundly. In the

case of Aragorn, it is clear that his bloodline more or less automatically renders him perfect as a king, where Simon denies the power of blood, saying that "All the royal blood in the world did not make me less a dupe for Pryrates and the Storm King"(*Angel Tower II* 624). Even so, he looks exactly like King Eahlstan and is it a coincidence that he displays all the qualities of a king? Still, a genealogical destiny as with Galahad is not really apparent. There might be an unbroken line from Isildur to Aragorn, but there are no hints that this *had* to be, more as if it *happened* to be. Simon's lineage has even less of a destiny to it. Also, lineage does not affect other characters in the same way. There is no sense at all that Sam from *The Lord of the Rings* or Sludig from *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* could only accomplish their respective quests because of their genealogy.

The matter of genealogical destiny does however bring us to the next point: prophecy. What is it, where does it come from and how does it work?

Prophecy

> This is the reason why [Merlin] knew the things that were done, spoken, and past: he inherited this from the devil. Moreover, he knew things that were to come; Our Lord willed that he should know things contrary to those he knew from the other side. (*Merlin* 172)

As this quote demonstrates, the *Lancelot-Grail* attributes the power to know the past to devils, while the power to know the future comes from God. This idea originates from the medieval concept of time, the idea that it had 'sense and meaning', as explained in the theoretical background. In the words of Janet Coleman: "Nothing is unpredictable" (295). Nothing that happens is not in some way part of Gods plan. God is all-knowing and all-powerful. This is the reason that prophesies are able to exist and, in the *Lancelot-Grail*, are never wrong. Not everyone can know the future, but this is not because the future is unknowable, or that anything can happen. As Merlin explains to clerks who could not find out why Vortigern's tower kept falling down: "because you are foolish and wicked, what you tried to find out eluded you (...) You are not ones to see it" (*Merlin* 184). For Merlin, who received the gift of prophecy from God himself, knowledge of the future is not murky or fragmented: he demonstrates again and again that he knows every detail of what will happen, though his

wording might be a bit cryptic. There is no doubt or uncertainty and the things that are predicted in the *Lancelot-Grail* all come to pass. Like genealogy, prophecy is used to link the different books, characters and events. Throughout the *Lancelot Proper*, there are moments in which Galahad's birth and accomplishments are predicted. When Lancelot fails to raise a tombstone at the Holy Cemetery, the man within the tomb tells him that "from your lineage will come the one who will deliver me and will fulfill the adventure of the Perilous Seat and who will bring the adventures of Britain to an end" (*Lancelot* 13). Moreover, "more than once prediction is involved in a flashback, thus linking – if the predicted event has just been realized – past and present, or past, present, and future" (Halász 180). Apart from spoken prophesies and inscriptions on tombs or other objects that tell who is destined to accomplish a certain thing, there are dreams or visions that show part of the future. These often use objects and animals to hint at what is to come. However, these ambiguous and incomprehensible images are not left as such. When Gawain dreams of a serpent fighting a leopard and then simultaneously killing and getting killed by small serpents, he tells this to a hermit, a man of God. This hermit then explains what every detail signifies, predicting Arthur's war with Lancelot and the subsequent war with Mordred, which will eventually happen two books later (*Lancelot* 99).

Where the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle is littered with prophesies, *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* only has one, telling the characters that "three swords must come again" (*Chair* 660). The language is cryptic, leading to sentences such as:

> Find the Call whose lowde Claime
> Speaks the Call-bearer's name
> In a Shippe on the Shallowest Sea-
> -When Blayde, Call, and Man
> Come to Prince's right Hande
> Then the Prisoned Shall Once more go Free (*Stone* 186)

Nothing mentioned in the prophecy is called by an instantly recognizable name. Instead, figurative descriptions are used, like the 'Shippe on the Shallowest Sea', which refers to a city that looks like a ship in the forest of trees. There is no hermit that is able to clarify. In fact, finding out the meaning of the prophecy is one of the main plotlines of the story and certain elements only become clear as they happen or after they have happened, like the

'Prince's right Hande' (*Angel Tower I* 603).

The source of the prophecy is not completely clear either. It comes from an old book, *Du Svardenvyrd*, written by the mad priest Nisses. But how did he come by this knowledge? Interestingly, no one in the trilogy makes the connection with their religion. There is a church in Osten Ard, revolving around the Jesus-figure Usires Aedon, but the prophecy is unrelated to Usires and no one suggests otherwise. Instead, the prophecy is at times even placed directly in opposition to the Usires-belief. "These holy men of Nabban who read it after Nisses passing pronounced it heretical and dangerous [as] its subject matter was 'unholy'", are Doctor Morgenes' words in the foreword of *The Dragonbone Chair* (xi). Still, the Aedonite characters in the trilogy do believe in the prophecy and act upon it, as do pagan people – like Tiamak the Wrannaman – and even trolls and Sithi, whose belief is unclear but definitely not Aedonite. At the end of the book – spoiler alert – it is hinted that the prophecy might have come from the Storm King himself and everything was his plan. Some parts of the prophecy would require him to be able to foresee certain events. How else would he have known there would be a prince, with a loyal companion nicknamed 'The Right Hand'?

So where does the prophecy come from? How does it exist and why does it come to pass? A hint appears in *The Dragonbone Chair*, when Simon is shown a Sithi mirror. According to legend, this mirror is a scale of a Great Worm which circles "all worlds at once, those of waking and those of dreaming... those that were, and those that will be. His tail is in his mouth, so he has no end or beginning" (*Chair* 860). The future, the 'will be', is thus equated with the past, suggesting that it is somehow fixed, unalterable. The image of the Great Worm who bites his own tail enforces the notion that everything goes in circles and things repeat itself.

The Sithi mirror gives access to the Dream Road. Throughout the books, dreams seem to hint at future events. A new prophecy, about Joshua's children, also seems to come from the Dream Road (*Angel Tower II* 351). Throughout the book though, the idea that the past is fixed is challenged, indirectly challenging the fixed future. In fact, the ultimate plan of the Storm King turns out to be to turn back time itself, to undo his own fate. If even the past is not unchangeable, then the future might not be as set either. Of course, all attempts to reach the past and change it eventually do fail. The question remains then if prophesies work because everything that will happen is in some way already there, or if the future is more open than that.

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Notwithstanding these uncertainties, prophecy has an enormous impact in *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*. Most of the plot is driven by the prophesy itself: that is how the main characters know they need to get the two other swords in the first place. So the prophecy does not just predict what will happen, things are done because of the prophecy. It is not self-fulfilling as in a Greek Tragedy, but it acts like an instruction manual containing information that is necessary to the present situation. In this sense, I would argue, it is completely opposed to the notion of prophecy in *The Lord of the Rings.*

When Sam looks into the Mirror of Galadriel in *The Fellowship*, it shows him a glimpse of the future: the scourging of the Shire. The moment he sees his father getting evicted from his house, Sam immediately wants to go home. Galadriel however warns him some of the things the mirror shows "never come to be, unless those that behold the visions turn aside from their path to prevent it. The Mirror is dangerous as a guide of deeds" (*Fellowship* 367). This allows for a much more open future, that can change according to decisions. It also points to a specific aspect of *The Lord of the Rings*: the future – prophecy – is not often used as a 'guide of deeds'. The Ring is destroyed, because that is the logical thing to do in light of knowledge from the past. A quote from one of the few prophesies in the book is needed to elaborate on this:

> The Tower trembles; to the tombs of kings
> doom approaches. The Dead awaken;
> (...)
> The heir of him to whom the oath they swore.
> From the North shall he come, need shall drive him:
> he shall pass the Door to the Paths of the Dead. (*Return* 39)

Note that the present and future tense are used, in contrast to the prophecy in *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*, which uses the imperative. Moreover, this prophecy is not completely necessary. It does influence Aragorn's decision, but all the information he needed – the oath that was sworn and broken, the fact that the dead still exist in some form – was already available to him from legend and history. The prophecy only reminds him.

Even so, prophesies are possible in the story world and they do come true. This is consistent with the theme throughout the book that certain things and people have their designated time or role. "I can put it no plainer than by saying that Bilbo was *meant* to find

the Ring, and *not* by its maker. In which case you also were *meant* to have it", as Gandalf says (*Fellowship* 61). Just so, the elves leave Middle Earth because the "time of Elves is over" (*Fellowship* 265) and Gandalf is sent back from the death "until my task is done" (*Towers* 94).

Tolkien's world, though, is "surprisingly unreligious", as Edward James writes in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Fantasy* (69). Though there might be gods, there is almost no mention of them, nor of religious ritual or any belief system that the characters might have.[6] Kathleen Dubs sees the influence of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* in the world-order of Middle Earth. Boethius presents "a universe of order and harmony in which everything (…) has purpose, even if that purpose is beyond the perception of human understanding" (37). This universe is governed by God, who controls all things. But even if His hand is in everything that happens, this does not mean that humans always perceive this. What is Gandalf's task? How should he do it? Who sent him back? It is not clear. But there is something that wants him to be there, that knows about the future. Dubs does stress that Boethius does not rule out free will. Indeed, no "creature be rational, unless he be endowed with free will" (Boethius 94). In *The Lord of the Rings*, "Frodo has been appointed to the task, yet he must also accept it" (Dubs 40). Prophecy in *The Lord of the Rings* corresponds with the world view that something governs the world and that the future is thus knowable to a certain extent. At the same time, prophecy is not an order, and the characters can, even must, make their own decisions.

In short, though all three narratives contain prophesies, these function differently in each case. This corresponds to differing concepts of time. The *Lancelot-Grail* presents a universe where God is present and all events in past, present and future can be traced back to Him. *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* is unclear about the source of the prophecy and about the nature of time. Are past and future fixed? Is there a benevolent presence behind all that transpires? In *The Lord of the Rings*, the answer to the last question is a definite yes. Even so, this presence is never named, and free will is possible. Now however, it is time to take a cue from *The Lord of the Rings*. As everything has its appointed time, now is the time for the third theme: sources of the past.

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[6] In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien recounts the mythology of Middle Earth, which does include gods.

Sources of the past

After seeing how the past relates to the present-day of the different stories, both in overall worldview and in the more practical daily life, we must focus our attention on the way the past is accessed. How do the characters in the story world obtain knowledge of the past? What sources are there and how are they presented? And, of course, are there any striking resemblances or differences between fantasy and romance? First of all, I will look at eyewitnesses and after that, at the remnants of the past – visible, tangible remains, like ruins or landscape in general.

We have already met Merlin in the section about prophecy. Through his unusual descent, he also has knowledge of the past. Merlin puts this past in writing, by means of the scribe Blaise. "I'll tell you something that no one but God could tell you. Make a book out of it so that the many people who hear it will be the better for it" (*Merlin* 176). Throughout the *Story of Merlin* Merlin reports back to Blaise everything that he has seen, and "Blaise put everything into his book, which is how we still know it" (*Merlin* 85). This is not the only time this device is used. At King Arthur's court, knights going on a quest swear on relics to tell the truth when they come back. Afterwards, like Merlin, they dictate their adventures to scribes. One such instance in the *Lancelot Proper* is on All Saints' Day, when "the scribes who recorded the deeds of the companions of King Arthur's household were summoned" (*Lancelot II* 238). This custom is interesting, as it reflects the medieval historiographic practice of using eyewitnesses as a source. "As far as narrative technique is concerned, the [Lancelot-Grail cycle] also combines the generic characteristics of the prose chronicle and Arthurian romance when it comes to the figure of the eyewitness narrator" (Brandsma 64). Whether or not the medieval audience believed the particular events in the *Lancelot-Grail* to be true, the eyewitness was at that time an authoritative source of history, and the Arthurian romance makes use of that association.[7] "Thus fiction is masked as truth" (Brandsma 66).

In the prologue of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien does something very similar to what the medieval authors do. The prologue reads like an academical introduction, in which Tolkien not only provides some background on races and places of Middle-Earth, but also accounts for his sources. "This account of the end of the Third Age is drawn mainly from the

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[7] It is always a tricky business to assess the reaction of the medieval audience. Would they take the claims in the books seriously or would they look at it as we do, as a literary device used for entertainment purposes? My guess is the latter, but even without giving a definitive verdict on the issue, it is clear that the that the narrative

Red Book of Westmarch (...) It was in origin Bilbo's private diary, which he took with him to Rivendell. Frodo brought it back to the Shire [and] nearly filled its pages with his account of the War"[8] (*Fellowship* 22). The main story relies on the authority of eyewitness testimony. The characters, Frodo, Bilbo and also Sam, are the source of *The Lord of the Rings* (even if they did not witness all of the events narrated themselves). This is very much like the passages in the *Lancelot-Grail*, when the writing down by scribes is explicitly mentioned as source for the story as it is written down in the *Lancelot-Grail*. In *The Lord of the Rings*, there are also several instances where eyewitnesses function within the narrative.

Special mention must be made of the elves in this matter. Elves are immortal, so their existence allows for an eyewitness testimonial of ancient history.[9] This is exactly what Elrond does during the council in *The Fellowship*. After giving the general history of the ring, he suddenly switches to first person when he talks about the Last Alliance of Elves and Men. He even connects it to a time before, saying that it "recalled to me the glory of the Elder days" (*Fellowship* 249). "I thought that the fall of Gil-galad was a long age ago," Frodo reacts in his astonishment (249). Suddenly history becomes very real through the presence of one who actually experienced it. In Tolkien, like in the *Lancelot-Grail*, we see the power of the eyewitness as a source of history. There is also something else, though, as seen in the prologue, which uses academical language. It mimics the style of writing and the method of scholarly history. In *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*, the academical emphasis is even stronger.

One of the main sources of the past in *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* is a book written by Doctor Morgenes called *The Life and Reign of King John Presbyter*. Excerpts from this text are incorporated in the narrative, and they are all written in the style of real-world history books, which "tend to suppress grammatical reference to the discursive situation of the utterance (producer, receiver, context, intent) in their attempt to narrate past events in such a way that the events seem to narrate themselves" (Hutcheon 91). If eyewitnesses were associated with truth and history in the Middle Ages, the academic language is seen as trustworthy in modern times. This is reinforced by the opposition that is created between the

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techniques that are used carry the connotation of truth.

[8] The name 'Red book of Westmarch' is reminiscent of names given to some medieval manuscripts, like the Yellow Book of Lecan, the Red Book of Hergest or the Book of Leinster. This adds to the semi-academical tone of the prologue.

[9] Apart from the elves, there are other immortal or long-lived beings in Middle Earth. Tom Bombadil, the Ents and the wizards on the side of good, and orcs and Sauron himself for instance at the side of evil. Elves do however make a good example.

record of Morgenes and other, less academical, sources. "The ballads say that they fought all day and into the night, but I doubt greatly that was so. (...) it only *seemed* to some of the tired observers that these two great men had battled all the day long" (*Chair* 431). Not only does this place 'history' in opposition to legend (ballads), it also undermines the reliability of the eyewitness. The observers were tired and they remembered it differently from how it really happened. This is reflected by an incident in *The Dragonbone Chair* where Simon cries that he saw Ineluki, the Storm King, during an episode described earlier in the book. This could have been a moment like the one in *The Lord of the Rings*, where a witness suddenly makes an old tale seem less distant. Instead, others deduce that Simon probably saw one of the Storm King's minions. Eyewitnesses in *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* do not have the absolute truth-claim they had in the *Lancelot-Grail.*

Apart from eyewitnesses, there are also other sources of the past in the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle. These are tombstones, crosses, buildings or even ships. Mostly they are connected to the history of the Grail or the bloodline of Lancelot and Galahad and as a result often feature in more than one book of the *Lancelot-Grail* cycle. An example is the black cross, on which twelve relatives of Joseph of Arimathea are martyred in *The History of the Grail*.

> God worked a great miracle here, for the stone of the cross did not change color, but remained black in memory of the blood that was shed there. For this reason those who knew the truth about it called it the Black Cross, and this name never changed until King Arthur's reign, at the time when the adventures of the Grail were brought to an end (137).

In the *Lancelot Proper*, Gawain and his companions stop at the cross and the whole story is again recounted in the text (*Lancelot II* 86).[10] Notice that God is the one who creates this landmark as a reminder. This corresponds to the medieval idea that history itself is the revelation of God's intention. The sign, moreover, seems to be directed at a specific point in time: Arthur's reign, when the adventures of the grail take place.

I started this thesis with a passage about the Dead Marshes, that showed how

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[10] *The History of the Grail*, like *The Story of Merlin*, was probably written after the *Lancelot Proper* and *The Quest for the Holy Grail*. So the references forward are created after the references backward.

landscape and the past were inherently tied up. In *Archeology and the sense of history in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth*, Deborah Sabo discusses several locations in Middle Earth where past and place collide. She discerns two main ways in which landscape prompts engagement with the past: as "experience of the Other, and experience of Heritage" (102). The Barrowdowns evoke an experience of the Other, as the place and its history are both foreign to the hobbits. In the same way, Dunharrow is 'Other' to the Rohirrim, and calls up a feeling of dread and unease. An example of an experience of Heritage is for instance the way Aragorn relates with Weathertop. The hobbits learn its history from him and this history is Aragorn's. "His knowledge about these places is in part the privilege of his ancestry. If the kingdom has been politically truncated and culturally fragmented, he, as its heir, still retains a kind of tenure that is expressed through his intimate knowledge of the land" (Sabo 102). Whether in an experience of the Other or of Heritage, one thing is important: these ruins are never just scenery. The characters always interact with them. Stories, memories and emotions are attached to them and these stories are part of the story of *The Lord of the Rings* itself. Sabo shows that, even if the experience is of the Other, the eventual result for the characters is one of inclusion into the past. The Barrowdowns are the burial place for the kings of the Westernisse, who fought the Dark Lord, Sauron, long ago. "The hobbits are entering into a historical continuum going back to the ancients [or] becoming aware that they are already part of that continuum" (Sabo 101).

Sabo uses the concept of cultural landscape in her approach and often refers to real-world practice. She praises Tolkien's realism in his characters' reaction to certain features of the landscape, saying for instance that: "In *The Lord of the Rings*, the tale that ghosts inhabit the mountain is literally true, but this need not prevent us from appreciating the comparative realism of Tolkien's treatment of the Rohirrim's beliefs about the place" (106). It is a very useful approach, yielding interesting insights, but for our purpose it is crucial to remember that we are not talking about realism here. We are talking about fantasy and in fantasy we do not need to be content with just stories. The past can speak for itself and even act for itself, as we see in both the Dead Marshes as the Barrow-downs episode. In *Narrative Pattern in the Fellowship of the Ring*, David Miller says about the events in Moria that "when the Balrog is waked, we discover that we are archeologists as well as investigators of what happened to the dwarf civilization" (107). The cause of the destruction of the old civilization is still there, leading to a situation comparable with investigating the remains at Pompeii

while the volcano never stopped erupting since. In this sense, a safe distance from the past – the objective view of an archaeologist – is impossible as the past is not just in the past.

In *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* the past is also very present. As the story begins, we are introduced not only to our protagonist, but also to the place where he lives, the Hayholt. The attention given to its features and its history almost makes the castle a character itself. The Hayholt "showed the work of diverse hands and times: the rough-hewn rock and timber of the Rimmersmen, the haphazard patching and strange carvings of the Hernystiri, even the meticulous stonework of Nabbanai craftsmen. But looming over all stood Green Angel Tower, erected by the undying Sithi" (*Chair* 6). Like in *The Lord of the Rings*, buildings or landscapes can be read and are a source of stories. Again, the fantasy element allows for a more literal interpretation of a present past. In the tunnels beneath the castle, fragments of the history of the keep still exist. Voices are heard and visions are seen. In this way, the characters can interact with the past in a more direct way.

An interesting thing about the Hayholt quote is that it seems to be talking about multiple pasts. Different people have lived at the same place and made it their own. Throughout the book, it becomes clear that these people have their own past and that this sometimes leads to conflicts, like at the council, where the Hernystiri prince and a Rimmersman almost get into a fight over a 500-year old battle. In *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*, the past is surrounded by uncertainty and (mis)interpretation. Witnesses are not necessarily reliable and stories or emotions that are connected to a certain place are not always true or shared by all. Sometimes there are different stories about the same place. *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* seems to problematize the access to the past a lot more than *The Lord of the Rings*. It draws attention to the way people make up their own stories and how these stories are sometimes more powerful than the truth – a theme that we also saw in the section about genealogy.

In conclusion, *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*, *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Lancelot-Grail* all use similar narrative devices, drawing on the conventions of history-writing to make their fiction more real.[11] These conventions do however differ, so that a comparison shows a mix of similarity and difference very much like we have

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[11] Real does not necessarily mean that they want their readers to believe them. What the techniques achieve is an enhancement of the suspension of disbelief.

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encountered in the other subtopics. In *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Lancelot-Grail*, the remnants of the past stress continuity, the idea that the characters are still in the same story - *The Lord of the Rings* – or that the history always led to the events taking place in this story – *Lancelot-Grail*. As the description of the Hayholt shows, the past in *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn* consists of multiple, different stories. Which one is true? In what story are the characters and the readers really involved? This uncertainty keeps the reader guessing, which is part of what makes the series fun to read.

Conclusion

Throughout the thesis we have seen a mix of difference and similarity. This might come as no surprise, as the main question was: *To what extent* does the role of the past in modern fantasy fiction resemble the way the past is used in medieval Arthurian romance?

The *Lancelot-Grail* reflects a medieval ideology and shows us a world in which everything makes sense. Genealogy does not only give *the right* to rule or to become a knight, but also makes a person *right* to do so. The possibility of prophecy exists because all is governed by God – who knows exactly what will happen. Prophecies are clear and understandable for people close to God. They do not need to use the imperative, as what they say will happen regardless. The past, if read correctly, will reveal the plan of God and the present is just another part of this plan. In Goetz's word, the medieval historians used history "to investigate the temporal position of the present in the course of the universal and salvational history" (164). If there is one thing the *Lancelot-Grail* shows, through genealogy, prophecy and sources of the past, it is the continuity between past and present. Lancelot, Joseph of Arimathea, Salomon and his wife – who furnish a ship for Galahad –, even Adam and Eve, are all part of the same story. In first instance, this is the story of the Grail. But the story of the Grail is a story about man and God.

The fantasy works also use genealogy, prophecy and some of the themes and motifs that we also encounter in medieval romance, but they never use it in exactly the same way. As Richard West says in *The Interlace Structure of 'The Lord of the Rings'*: "Lover of the past as he might be, Tolkien was nevertheless our contemporary" (82). Both he and Tad Williams might refer back to the Middle Ages, but they will not produce a medieval work, simply because they are not from the Middle Ages. Of course, the question is if producing a

medieval work in modern times is even desirable.

It might be a good idea to look at what is changed and what has remained of the medieval worldview in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*.

Of the two fantasy novels, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* stays closest to the medieval concepts. Even if Tolkien avoids to mention religion, it is clear that there is something guiding the characters. Aragorn's right to the throne by birth is never questioned and emphasis is placed on his bloodline and the qualities that come with it. He has the hands of a healer and even enjoys a longer lifespan than his subjects. The changes come in the extent to which genealogy and prophecy are important. Genealogy does not determine per se whether you are able to be a hero: apart from his father, Sam's family is never mentioned, nor does it seem to be the cause of his loyalty or his bravery. Prophecy is less present than in the *Lancelot-Grail*, but it is mostly of the same nature, less an order to do something than a description of what will come to pass. Something rather modern in his world is the all-pervading sense of loss. This is what Sabo calls Tolkien's trademark view of the past, characterized by the feeling "that it was greater and more glorious than the present" and "a sense of loss and regret for the deeps of time" (96). At the end of *The Lord of the* Rings, the ancient evil is gone, the elves are leaving for good, the dead have vanished from the mountain and there are constant hints that hobbits, dwarfs and Ents will one day disappear from the world as well. The idea that things are coming to an end might recall the medieval idea of the end of time, but in *The Lord of the Rings* it is 'just' the ending of an age. Time continues, just with less wonder and magic. This is closer to the romantic idea of discontinuity, of a disenchanted modern world opposed to the Other, inaccessible past.

Memory, Sorrow and Thorn strays even further from the medieval worldview in its execution of the themes. Its focus on multiple narratives and the uncertainty of truth – about the past, but also more specifically about genealogy (Joshua is not Prester John's son, Simon did not even know his parents), prophecy (where does it come from, is it even meant for the main characters?) and sources – is decidedly modern. Still, it does use these themes, even if it transforms them. What is so appealing about the Middle Ages as a model? Or are the medieval elements in the stories just a genre characteristic?

All the focus on the past might give the impression that I agree with Manlove's statement that fantasy is mainly concerned with "what is lost from the old rather than what is gained from the new" (163). He argues that most fantasy narratives are structured like the

subtitle of *The Hobbit*, there and back again, signaling a break in and then a return to normality. It is the restoration of order, rather than the establishing of a new order – as apparent by the word 'return' in *The Return of the King*. However, I do not agree with this view. Even though the past is extremely important in fantasy as a genre, it looks forward. The fact that an age comes to an end and that this means that elements of the earlier age are gone for good, suggests that real change – a rearrangement of the order of the world – is possible. And indeed, the end of both trilogies, *The Lord of the Rings* and *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*, heralds the beginning of something new. The age of men replaces the age of elves, and, as David Miller says in *Narrative Pattern in The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo's quest "does result in man's increased independence from the powers of both light and darkness" (104). In *Memory, Sorrow and Thorn*, there is also a feeling that Simon's ascendance to the throne brings about a different order. In the afterword of *To Green Angel Tower* we encounter the characters a year after the last battle with Ineluki. Plans are being made to build a new archive, "[a] place of learning where nothing will be lost or hidden" (*Angel Tower II 647)* and to visit the trolls, who for the first time in their history have invited humans. Things are changing, but, as the building of the archives shows, the past is not just neglected. On the contrary, the new era is built on the old.

Both books start out with a protagonist who does not have (enough) knowledge about the past. Hobbits have been sheltered for generations. Gandalf and Elrond tell Frodo the story of the Ring and Sauron. Simon has only heard the stories from a groom and the woman who raised him. When he wants to hear stories about "real things (…) things that happened" (*Chair* 23), Doctor Morgenes is the one who tells him about the history of the peoples of Osten Ard. At the end of the series, both Frodo and Simon not only know about history, they have become a part of it and experienced for themselves the value of knowledge of the past.

What does the past mean for the present? That is one of the main themes in these fantasy books and, I think, fantasy in general. The genre does look back and it does lament the things that are lost, but this does not mean that it loses itself in melancholy. The ending of a quest often brings the beginning of something new, without throwing everything old away. What fantasy shows us, is that the past is relevant, whether it survives intact and 'true', or in stories that might contradict each other.

This might explain why the Middle Ages is used for inspiration. The medieval worldview is coherent and inclusive: the belief in an omnipotent God meant that the whole

world refers back to him. This made the past extremely relevant for the present time. The *Lancelot-Grail* showed us how the past seems to work towards the present, by genealogy, prophecies and remnants of the past, like the Black Cross. Fantasy uses the same elements, but is written in modern times, for a modern audience. Medieval characteristics clash with modern ideas, leading to a transformation of the story-components. What we see in fantasy then, is a modern interpretation of some medieval concepts, making them relevant for a modern audience. In a sense, this is very medieval. In the Middle Ages historical figures might be dressed in medieval clothes, in fantasy medieval concepts gain new meaning by modernizing them.

As a critic, Tolkien said that 'fairy-stories', as he called them, "have (…) more permanent and fundamental things to talk about [than "transcient" modern phenomena, such as electric lighting]" (149). It is the fantasy component, inspired by the medieval, that gives us immortal beings and allows for dead to stay alive for centuries, thus *showing* us, instead of *telling* us, that the past is all around us, that it is always present in our houses, our streets, our way of thinking. This is one of the fundamental things that medieval romance conveys with every fiber of its being, and that fantasy now proudly upholds in modern times.

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