

It is well known that the lives of heroes in ancient mythology follow a common pattern. Human beings seem to have an archetypal vision of what constitutes a hero: strong and valorous, a saviour of his people. It takes little imagination to see why we would dream of these characteristics in our heroes. Yet there are other aspects of the archetypal hero which are less immediately obvious: his loneliness, his separation from his kind, his attunement to greater powers, his possession of talismanic symbols of authority. These all form part of the heroic dream of humankind, and most heroes of mythology participate in it to a greater or lesser degree. But this heroic dream is not limited to the mythologies of ancient peoples. On the contrary, it is alive and flourishing today, and not all of it can spring from a scholarly and mechanical echo of ancient mythology. It comes from the eternal vision of the heroic archetype. Luke Skywalker is one such twentieth-century hero; Superman is another. Yet another is J.R.R. Tolkien's Aragorn, the returning king of *The Lord of the Rings*.

A hero's story begins not with his first display of valour, but rather with his birth and early infancy. As a child he is often threatened by powers that would do him harm, powers hostile to him because he represents some kind of potential harm to *them*. His potential is frequently foretold in a vision or oracle, as King Laios of Thebes was warned that his own son Oedipus would one day overthrow him. In Aragorn's case, his potential was seen by his mother's mother Ivorwen even before his own conception. She urged the hasty marriage of her young daughter Gilraen to the mature Arathorn: "The days are darkening before the storm, and great things are to come. If these two wed now, hope may be born for our people." Aragorn's lineage matches that of the traditional hero. He is of royal blood, the direct descendant of the Kings of Númenor, and the heir to the Middle-Earth kingdoms of Arnor and Gondor. But his father Arathorn was killed when Aragorn was only two years of age, and he and his mother, for safety's sake, were forced to take

refuge in the house of Elrond Halfelven at Rivendell. "Elrond took the place of his father and came to love him as a son of his own. But he was called Estel, that is 'Hope', and his true name and lineage were kept secret at the bidding of Elrond; for the Wise then knew that the Enemy was seeking to discover the Heir of Isildur."

The fostering of the infant hero in exile away from his native kingdom is a common motif in ancient mythology. Oedipus was rescued from his father's attempts to put him to death and adopted by the royal family of Corinth. Theseus, like Aragorn, spent his childhood with his mother, in a royal household, to be sure, but not that of his true father, the King of Athens. Until the hero comes of age, his true identity and name are hidden, often from the hero himself. In Oedipus's case, his ignorance of his real lineage was catastrophic; Aragorn, under the enlightened tutelage of Elrond, was informed of his own identity when he reached the age of twenty. At the same time as he discovered his own heritage, he was given the talismans of his descent: the ring of Barahir and the broken shards of Elendil's sword, Narsil, kept safe at Rivendell through the ages. Theseus too experienced this rite of passage in taking up the emblems of his heritage: the sword and sandals left for him at the time of his conception by his father, King Aegeus.

When the hero grows to manhood, he is ready for the chief experiences of his life: love and war. Aragorn, like Theseus or Herakles or Jason or Odysseus, experiences war in the context of wanderings. Many decades of his life are spent in travel and fighting, always keeping his true identity secret, posing as Strider in the North or as Thorongil in Gondor. Odysseus too was reluctant to reveal his real name to those he encountered, proclaiming himself as "No-man". In many of his travels and adventures, the ancient hero has the help of a benevolent deity. The wise goddess Athena was the special friend of Odysseus, Perseus and others. Helping Aragorn in his quests is the wizard Gandalf, one of the Maiar, a group of beings who are second only to the Valar.

Aragorn's love also parallels that of the heroes of ancient mythology. Contrary to much folktale, the prince does not fall in love with the goose-girl. The love interest of a hero is generally no one less than a royal maiden, such as Jason's Medea or Theseus's

Ariadne. Arwen, daughter of Elrond, may not be "royal" in the strict sense, but her lineage is perhaps more noble than Aragorn's own. And as a participant in elven powers, she shares some of the superhuman qualities of a Medea or an Ariadne. It is interesting to note that there is often a blood relationship between the hero and his love. Sometimes it is disastrously close, as was the case with Oedipus and his mother Jocasta (we could compare the narrowly averted love affair between Luke Skywalker and his sister Princess Leia). Aragorn's relationship to Arwen is not so incestuous; but she is his first cousin (62 times removed!).

The hero's relationship with his princess's father is often a tense one. It can be hostile (Jason and Medea's father, Aietes, are enemies), but even when it is amicable, stresses appear. Elrond, Arwen and Aragorn, as virtuous as all three may be, are unable to resolve the impasse of their triangle: Aragorn, by the nature of his relationship with Arwen, must remove her (for all eternity) from her father. The resulting grief of Elrond can only be based on the human psychology experienced by parents who give up their child to a stranger. Elrond's resentment of Aragorn is quelled; but it can still be sensed.

Some of the tension between the mythic hero and his lady's father can spring from the latter's fear that his power will be usurped by this new generation. Theseus threatens not only Minos's hold on his daughter but also his hold on his kingdom. Oedipus takes both Laios's wife and Laios's life. This is not true of Aragorn and Elrond. But Aragorn does fulfill the hero's life pattern in that his rightful assertion of royal power in his native kingdom is resisted by the figure who has wielded that power until his arrival: Denethor, Steward of Gondor. Theseus's first arrival in Athens was resisted by his own father Aegeus (until Theseus's true identity was revealed). Pelias, who held the throne rightly belonging to Jason, tried to get the hero out of the way by sending him after the Golden Fleece. Similarly, Denethor resists laying down his role as *de facto* ruler of Gondor. He refuses to recognize the rightful claim of Aragorn, and this resistance is removed only with Denethor's death. The hostility encountered by the hero on his return to his ancestral kingdom is part of the tale of Aragorn, as it is of so many heroes.

Where Aragorn departs from the typical life pattern of a mythic hero is in his death. It is common in the "not happily ever after" world of ancient mythology for the hero to die as alone and separate as he had spent his childhood. Theseus and Oedipus both die alone and mysteriously, in exile from their native kingdoms. Perhaps it was a concession to twentieth-century tastes that had Tolkien have his hero fulfill his reign in splendour and prosperity, and die surrounded by family in the hall of his forefathers. But even so, the pattern reasserts itself with respect to Aragorn's mate: if Aragorn himself does not die alone and in exile, the same cannot be said for Arwen. She dies a lonely death in the deserted land of Lothlórien.

The heroes of ancient or modern mythology clearly have much more in common than simple strength or courage. How we imagine them in our stories must be based on some deeply felt concept of what a hero is, both in himself and to his society. Such a vision of heroism may be susceptible to scholarly analysis; but it can scarcely be consciously held by the countless generations of human beings who have made it the pattern for their heroes for thousands of years. It must be deeply rooted in the human psyche, a dream which springs up spontaneously and, it may be, eternally.