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The Relevance of Rivendell's Growing Cultural Value from *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings*

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The attention to detail J. R. R. Tolkien showcased in medieval scholarship, widely recognized for its influence on the discipline,¹ did not diminish in his fictional writings. In the sequel to *The Hobbit* (*H*, 1937), *The Lord of the Rings* (*LotR*, 1954–1955), Tolkien made significant additions to the prequel's revisited locations. Among this supplemental material, the cultural addenda to Rivendell bear ulterior significance. If the fate of the expedition is, in part, determined in *H*'s Rivendell, it can be argued that the destruction of the Ring and the fall of Sauron could not have occurred without Rivendell's assistance in *LotR*. This short article will prove this often-overlooked fact while it charts the cultural evolution of Rivendell from the prequel to the sequel.

In the well-known letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien wrote, c. late 1951, that Rivendell is “a kind of enchanted sanctuary” and that the house of Elrond “represents Lore – the preservation in reverent memory of all tradition concerning the good, wise, and beautiful. It is not a scene of *action* but of *reflection*. Thus, it is a place visited on the way to all deeds, or ‘adventures’” (*Letters* 153, #131, italics in the original). In *LotR*, Rivendell continues to fulfil the same function as in *H* by providing the protagonists with the necessary supplies (*H* III.45; *LotR* II.3.280), and allowing them to heal their bodies, rest, and prepare psychologically to face future adversities (*H* III.50; *LotR* II.3.274).² However, the change in status that Rivendell undergoes from *H* to *LotR* is motivated in part by its strengthened cultural value.

Readers are given an incipient sample of the cultural memory preserved in *H*'s Rivendell when Elrond teaches the protagonist the names and history of the swords Orcrist and Glamdring, and how to read Thrór's Map (*H* III.50–51).³ Elrond also advises Gandalf, Thorin, Bilbo, and the party of dwarves on what road to take and how to enter the Lonely Mountain (*H* III.51–52). In *LotR*, the stored knowledge is suggested to be even greater; uncounted tales are saved from being forgotten in Rivendell, as those Aragorn recalls about Gandalf: “there are tales in Rivendell of greater deeds of his than any that I have seen” (*LotR* II.4.311), and Frodo is under the impression that “In Rivendell there was memory of ancient things,” many of which have practical applications (*LotR* II.6.349). For instance, Sam and Frodo learnt from Bombadil in the Old Forest that “Middle-earth magic is dependent on poetic speech and songs” (Eilmann 110), but they yet lacked both the Phial of Galadriel and the lyrical words that could cast the light of the two trees of Valinor, and help them overcome certain obstacles such as Shelob (*LotR* IV.9.720, IV.10.729) and the Watchers of the Tower of Cirith Ungol (VI.1.915) in Mordor. It is in Rivendell where they learn such knowledge by paying heed to Bilbo's song “Eärendil was a mariner” and the Elves' performance “A Elbereth Gilthoniel,” which buried them deep in their subconscious minds while both are either awake or in the realm of sleep (*LotR* II.1.233–238). This knowledge can be retrieved in emergencies as a last resort, as when Sam is about to be slain by Shelob: “he heard voices far off but clear: [...] the music of the Elves as it came through his sleep in the Hall of Fire in the house of Elrond. *Gilthoniel A Elbereth!*” (*LotR* IV.10.729,

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italics in the original). Furthermore, the fact that Rivendell “is a place visited on the way to all deeds” (Tolkien, *Letters* 153, #131) assures a stream of visitors of diverse provenance who can supplement Rivendell’s physical and oral repository with distant tales and lore, as happens during the Council of Elrond (*LotR* II.2.239–271). Thus, though we are never told how, it is unsurprising that Gandalf, Bilbo, and the party of dwarves’ “plans were improved with the best advice” in *H*’s Rivendell (*H* III.50). In *LotR* instead the extensive two chapters (*LotR* II.1.219–238 and II.2.239–271) set in this wooded area provide the Fellowship with explicit indispensable information and advice to succeed in their perilous mission.

All things considered, the author acknowledges that there are many intricate and interconnected reasons for the Free Peoples’ eventual success in the War of the Ring. However, as this note has made clear, Rivendell is both an essential cultural stronghold and facilitator of victory. Unlikely as it is that Bilbo and the Dwarves would have found the secret entry to the mountain without paying a visit to Rivendell, the chances of Frodo surviving the Morgul blade and setting off to Mordor with the right equipment and company are next to naught with no Rivendell in sight. With no cultural center which preserved the lore and artifacts of Gondor’s and Arnor’s former monarchies, no unifier king could have been restored either, and without a strong ruler, the final battle of the War of the Ring and its aftermath would have resulted in even more dramatic consequences, if not defeat.⁴ I hope that this brief incisive note nudges other scholars to reconsider Rivendell’s cultural relevance, as well as spark a debate and further research concerning Rivendell’s centrality in this regard within the wider context of Tolkien’s entire legendarium, not just his two best-known published works.⁵

Notes

1. See Leonard Neidorf for recent examples (“J. R. R.” 1; “*Finnsburg*” 44–45, 47). See also Andoni Cossio (171).
2. In Rivendell, Bilbo gives Frodo two items that will greatly aid him, directly or indirectly, in the Quest of the Ring: the magical Sting and a *Mithril* shirt of mail (*LotR* II.3.277).
3. The adventure is after that point constrained by the spatial-temporal dimension of finding the secret entrance to the Lonely Mountain before/by the last sunrises of Durin’s day. This is only established after the cultural custodian of Rivendell, Elrond, uncovers and renders the map’s moon runes into Common Speech, which has both a direct bearing on the metanarrative and intra-story levels.
4. The phrase “visited on the way to all deeds, or ‘adventures’” encapsulates best the Aragorn-Rivendell relation (Tolkien, *Letters* 153, #131). Rivendell preserves Aragorn’s past, present, and future, and it becomes an unending source of inspiration throughout his life, but especially during the War of the Ring. It is in this sanctuary where Strider casts his rags, soubriquet, and old wandering life aside, and Aragorn begins to transit into his future-king persona.
5. David D. Oberhelman’s succinct depiction of this aspect of Rivendell may provide a starting point: “Elrond established this refuge to gather the last of the Noldor in the northern half of Middle-earth and preserved their wisdom and lore, both oral and written, within his refuge. In the Hall of Fire the ancient songs, tales, and other oral traditions of the First and Second Ages are replayed, but Imladris also holds a large cache of maps, books, and manuscripts the Noldor have managed to retain after the destruction of Beleriand and Eregion in the Second age” (161–162). Oberhelman’s brief extract offers a glimpse into Tolkien’s wider legendarium, not just *LotR*. This or similar lines of enquiry that contextualize Rivendell’s growing cultural value in the history of Middle-earth are worth pursuing.

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