

## VI. Remediating Character

Aragorn seen through different media<sup>1</sup>

*Whenever I'm in trouble, my hero will come and rescue me.*

Tifa Lockheart (*FINAL FANTASY VII*)

Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy<sup>2</sup> has long been considered impossible to adapt to other media. Tolkien himself found the work "unsuitable for dramatic or semi-dramatic representation" (*Letters*, p. 255) and although Terrence Tiller, who adapted the books for the BBC Third Programme<sup>3</sup> corresponded with him, Tolkien did not enjoy this first dramatization (*Letters*, p. 228). This, however, has not deterred others from making their own version, using such diverse media as animated and live action film, a radio play, several computer games<sup>4</sup>, and a musical. One of the most recent adaptations is Peter Jackson's 2000-2003 series of films, which spurred new interest in Tolkien's original work, and also led to new derived adaptations in the form of, amongst other things, board games, trading card games, wargames, and computer games. As Jackson's adaptation is especially action oriented the character of Aragorn has become one of the main protagonists even becoming more important than Gandalf<sup>5</sup>. In this chapter, I will compare the character of Aragorn as he is depicted in some of these adaptations. I will use Ralph Bakshi's 1978 animated film version; Brian Sibley's and Michael Bakewell's 1981 radio play; Peter Jackson's 2000-2003 live action film trilogy, and finally the official *FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING* game produced by Vivendi. For brevity's sake, I will limit the main comparison to the first encounter with Aragorn at the inn of the Prancing Pony in Bree. Before I do so, however, I will first introduce Aragorn as he is shown by Tolkien.

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<sup>1</sup> This text first appeared as "A Man lean dark tall: Aragorn Seen Through Different Media" in T. Honegger (ed.) *Reconsidering Tolkien*, Zollikofen Walking Tree Publishers, 2005. pp. 171-209. It has undergone only minor revisions.

<sup>2</sup> I will abbreviate the full title to *LOTR*. I quote from the three-volume 1974 paperback edition published by Allen and Unwin. The book titles will be abbreviated to *FR* (*Fellowship of the Ring*), *TT* (*Two Towers*) and *RK* (*Return of the King*). To distinguish between the main tale and the appendices I will refer to the appendices with the letter *A*. I will refer to the 2000 edition of Humphrey Carpenters *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien as Letters*.

<sup>3</sup> This was the only adaptation made in Tolkien's lifetime. It aired during 1955 and 1956.

<sup>4</sup> The earliest official computer game is a text adventure entitled *LORD OF THE RINGS* released in 1981 for the TRS-80 Model I home computer. See the website *TOLKIEN GATEWAY* for a listing of all the games derived from Tolkien's works: [http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Games\\_by\\_year](http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Games_by_year).

<sup>5</sup> Although it is a very crude method, a simple word count of the original texts shows that Frodo's name is mentioned the most frequently, with 1855 entries, followed by Sam with 1230 entries and Gandalf with 1076 entries. Even when counting both the names Aragorn (707) and Strider (226), reference to Aragorn only totals to 933.

*Tolkien's Aragorn*

One inconvenience with the character of Aragorn is that Tolkien presents him both in the book and in the appendices, as he writes himself: “[T]he highest love-story, that of Aragorn and Arwen Elrond’s daughter is only alluded to as a known thing” (*Letters*: 161). Even though he regarded it “the most important of the Appendices [and] part of the essential story” (*Letters*: 237), he put it outside the book:

Because it could not be worked into the main narrative without destroying its structure: which is planned to be ‘hobbito-centric’, that is, primarily a study of the ennoblement (or sanctification) of the humble. (*Letters*: 237)

To fully understand Aragorn’s motives, it is therefore necessary to include the appendices, and I will do so. As the finding of the One Ring not only triggers the Ring quest but also Aragorn’s personal quest (his foretold role as Elendil’s and Isildur’s heir as future king of Gondor and Arnor which in itself is closely tied in with the story of Aragorn and Arwen), I will use the Ring as reference for a short sketch of Aragorn’s past.

At the end of the Second Age at the *Last Alliance* in the year 3441 Sauron is overthrown. His power departs when Isildur cuts the Ring from his hand:

‘I [Elrond] beheld the last combat on the slopes of Orodruin, where Gil-galad died, and Elendil fell, and Narsil broke beneath him; but Sauron himself was overthrown, and Isildur cut the Ring from his hand with the hilt-shard of his father’s sword, and took it for his own.’ (*FR*: 234)

By claiming the Ring<sup>6</sup>, Isildur turns it into an heirloom of the North Kingdom<sup>7</sup>, not knowing that it will cause his death:

‘But the Ring was lost. It fell into the Great River, Anduin, and vanished. For Isildur was marching north along the east banks of the River, and near the Gladden Fields he was waylaid by the Orcs of the Mountains, and almost all his folk were slain. He leaped into the waters, but the Ring slipped from his finger as he swam, and then the Orcs saw him and killed him with arrows.’ (*FR*: 58)

Eventually Isildur’s inheritance Arnor, the kingdom of the North, “is broken up in princedoms and finally vanishes” (*Letters*: 157). Isildur’s line survives but they become “a hidden wandering Folk”. (*Letters*: 157). Ultimately, in the year 1976 of the Third Age Isildur’s descendant Aranarth takes “the title of Chieftain of the Dúnedain” and the

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<sup>6</sup> “This I will have as weregild for my father and brother” (*FR*: 234).

<sup>7</sup> “The Great Ring shall go now to be an heirloom of the North Kingdom” (*FR*: 242).

heirlooms of the house of Isildur<sup>8</sup> "are given in keeping to Elrond" (*A*: 334). The kingdom of Gondor further to the south endures long and even prospers, but eventually all of Anárion's<sup>9</sup> descendants die<sup>10</sup> and Gondor is ruled by a line of stewards. Then in 2463 the One Ring is found by Déagol, but Sméagol murders him and takes it (*FR*: 59). Under its influence he gradually becomes Gollum and hides in the Misty Mountains, where the One Ring 'disappears' again: "The Ring went into the shadows with him, and even the maker, when his power had begun to grow again, could learn nothing of it" (*FR*: 60). Sauron, at first, does not look for the Ring because "[h]e believed that the One had perished; that the Elves had destroyed it" (*FR*: 58). In 2850, however, Gandalf finds out that Sauron is "seeking for news of the One, and of Isildur's Heir" (*A*: 336).

While the ring is in Gollum's possession Aragorn is born in 2931. When he is "only two years old" his father is "slain by an orc-arrow" (*A*: 302). Aragorn is taken to Rivendell and "his true name and lineage were kept secret at the bidding of Elrond" (*A*: 303). In 2939 Sauron's "servants are searching the Anduin near the Gladden Fields" (*A*: 336), which indicates that he must have found out that the Ring was not destroyed. Two years later, when Aragorn is ten years old, the Ring comes into the possession of Bilbo and thus resurfaces. A year later Bilbo returns to the Shire and "Sauron returns in secret to Mordor" (*A*: 337). Then in 2951 Sauron "came to the dark tower and openly declared himself" (*FR*: 240). This coincides with Aragorn's twentieth birthday. Although "only twenty years of age" Elrond saw that he:

"was early come to manhood, though he would yet become greater in body and in mind. That day therefore Elrond called him by his true name, and told him who he was and whose son; and he delivered to him the heirlooms of his house" (*A*: 303).

Note that Aragorn learns about his true identity at the moment that Sauron resumes power in Middle Earth. This echoes Gandalf's words<sup>11</sup>: "and that was in the very year of the finding of this Ring: a strange chance, if chance it was" (*FR*: 240)

Aragorn does not see his inheritance as a burden. On the contrary, "his heart was high within him; and he sang, for he was full of hope and the world was fair" (*A*: 303). It is in this moment that he first sees Arwen and falls in love. Elrond opposes their friendship, because he knows that the time will come when the Elves will leave Middle Earth and he

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<sup>8</sup> The ring of Barahir and the Sceptre of Annúminas. The shards of Narsil are already in Rivendell, taken there by Othar Isildur's squire.

<sup>9</sup> Anárion is Isildur's brother.

<sup>10</sup> "The line of Meneldil son of Anárion failed, and the Tree withered, and the blood of the Númenoreans became mingled with that of lesser men" (*FR*: 235).

<sup>11</sup> Spoken at the council of Elrond where he tells how the White council drove Sauron out of Mirkwood.

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wants to take Arwen with him. As both Elrond and Aragorn know that “many years of Men must still pass” (*A*: 305), Aragorn leaves Rivendell to go out into the wild, where “[f]or nearly thirty years he laboured in the cause against Sauron; and he became a friend of Gandalf the Wise, from whom he gained much wisdom” (*A*: 305). Of his years in the wild Tolkien writes: “His ways were hard and long and he became somewhat grim to look upon, unless he chanced to smile; and yet he seemed to Men worthy of honour, as a king that is in exile, when he did not hide his true shape” (*A*: 305).

When Aragorn is forty-nine, he comes to Lothlórien. There he unexpectedly finds Arwen and she falls in love with him. They become betrothed and Aragorn gives her one of his heirlooms, the ring of Barahir<sup>12</sup>. When Elrond hears of the betrothal it saddens him and he informs Aragorn that Arwen “shall not be the bride of any Man less than the King of both Gondor and Arnor” (*A*: 307)<sup>13</sup>. The defeat of Sauron has now become doubly significant to Aragorn; he therefore renews his wanderings outside Rivendell. Meanwhile Arwen makes a great standard “such as only one might display who claimed the lordship of the Númenoreans and the inheritance of Elendil” (*A*: 307). Then in the year 3001, Bilbo holds his farewell party. Gandalf suspects that Bilbo’s ring may be the One Ring, so he calls on Aragorn to find Gollum (*FR*: 241). When the search seems unfruitful, Gandalf goes to Gondor to find out more about the One Ring. Meanwhile Aragorn has not abandoned his quest for Gollum and he eventually finds him. However, it is too late: Gollum has already been captured by Sauron and under torture he has revealed the name of the new owner of the Ring: the Ring plot is set in motion<sup>14</sup>. Sauron can still be beaten but if he regains the Ring he will be more powerful than before: “The Enemy still lacks one thing to give him strength and knowledge to beat down all resistance, break the last defences, and cover all the lands in a second darkness. He lacks the One Ring” (*FR*: 57).

Not all of the above is known to the reader of *LOTR*. As we shall see, Tolkien deliberately keeps the true identity of Aragorn obscure. Some information is given, but until the hobbits reach Rivendell it is sparse and easily overlooked. However, to adapt the character for other media, this information is indispensable because it shows Tolkien’s view of Aragorn’s role.

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<sup>12</sup> Which is of extra significance because it once belonged to Beren; see note 13.

<sup>13</sup> In doing so, he repeats the actions of King Thingol, who set the mortal Beren the impossible task of recovering a Silmaril from the Crown of Morgoth before he would be permitted to wed Lúthien Morgoth’s immortal Elven daughter. She is Arwen’s forebear, with whom she is often compared.

<sup>14</sup> Although it takes another seventeen years before Frodo starts his journey.

Tolkien's fondness of the Volsunga Saga, and especially the story of Sigurd, is well known<sup>15</sup>. There are many apparent similarities between the life stories of Aragorn and Sigurd. Both Aragorn's and Sigurd's father are killed by an enemy. Sigurd's even before he is born<sup>16</sup>. In the saga Sigmund (Sigurd's father), with his dying breath, says to his wife Hjordis: "thou art great with a man-child; nourish him well; and with good heed, and the child shall be the noblest and most famed of all our kin" (Morris 1888: Chapter XII)<sup>17</sup>. Both Aragorn and Sigurd are the last of their line and both grow up in a sheltered environment. Aragorn's mother Gilraen finds a safe haven with Elrond. And Hjordis is taken in by King Hjalprek of Denmark. There Sigurd is fostered by Regin: "Now Sigurd's foster-father was hight Regin, the son of Hreidmar" (Morris 1888: Chapter XIII). And Aragorn is fostered by Elrond: "Elrond took the place of his father and came to love him as a son of his own" (A: 302-303). Both Aragorn and Sigurd have powerful non-human guardians. Sigurd has the Norse god Odin and Aragorn has Gandalf the Istari<sup>18</sup>, who are both portrayed as long bearded old men<sup>19</sup>. Both Aragorn and Sigurd inherit a powerful sword. Sigurd inherits his father's sword Gram: "keep well withal the shards of the sword: thereof shall a goodly sword be made, and it shall be called Gram, and our son shall bear it, and shall work many a great work therewith" (Morris 1888: Chapter XII). And Aragorn inherits Narsil, the sword of Isildur: "'Here is the ring of Barahir,' he [Elrond] said, 'the token of our kinship from afar<sup>20</sup>; and here also are the shards of Narsil'" (A: 303). In both cases, the swords have been broken in the battle that caused their last owner's death: "and as Sigmund smote fiercely with the sword it fell upon the bill and burst asunder in the midst" (Morris 1888: XI). Before Sigurd and Aragorn can fight their first battle, the swords have to be forged anew: "So he [Regin] made a sword, and as he bore it forth from the forge, it seemed to

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<sup>15</sup> About Andrew Lang's Sigurd story, Tolkien remarked that "it was the best story that he had ever read" (Carpenter, 1977, p. 39). When Tolkien won the Skeat Prize for English in 1914, he spent five pounds of the prize money on Morris's translation of the *Volsunga Saga* and the related work *The House of the Wolfings* (ibid, p. 99). Writing about his childhood's story preferences Tolkien wrote "I had very little desire to look for buried treasure ... Red Indians were better ... But the land of Merlin and Arthur was better than these, and best of all the nameless North of Sigurd of the Völsungs, and the prince of all dragons. (Tolkien, 1983, pp. 134-135). But also in later years Tolkien was very much involved with the Volsunga Saga. As his son Christopher Tolkien writes "That the ancient poetry in the Old Norse language known by the names of the *Elder Edda* or the *Poetic Edda* [the majority of which consists of the stories of the Volsungs] remained a deep if submerged force in his later life's work is no doubt recognised" (Tolkien, 2009, p. 3). See the Addendum for more information on the subject.

<sup>16</sup> As some instances have already been quoted above, I will skip part of the Aragorn examples.

<sup>17</sup> As I will quote from the online library version, I cannot give page numbers, but will use chapter numbers instead.

<sup>18</sup> Tolkien describes Gandalf as an "Odinic wanderer" (*Letters*: 119).

<sup>19</sup> "an old man, long-bearded" (Morris 1888: Chapter XIII); "An old man... He had a long white beard" (*FR*: 32).

<sup>20</sup> The Ring was used as a token by Barahir's son Beren when he sought Finrod's aid in the Quest of the Silmaril. Aragorn's line stems from Elros, Elrond's brother. Both are the sons of Eärendil the mariner, who is a descendant of Beren and Lúthien.

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the smiths as though fire burned along the edges thereof" (Morris 1888: Chapter XV); "Very bright was that sword when it was made whole again; the light of the sun shone redly in it, and the light of the moon shone cold, and its edge was hard and keen" (*FR*: 264). These similarities<sup>21</sup> – orphan, last of line, threat/sheltered, foster-father, non-human guardian, magical heirloom sword and kingly destination – are not unique to Sigurd and Aragorn. They also appear in Arthurian, Carolingian and other legends. They follow the characteristic patterns of the hero myth as shown by Lord Raglan in his book *The Hero, a Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (1936), Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) and Georges Dumézil in his work *Mythe et Épopée II, Types épiques indo-européens: un héros, un sorcier, un roi* (1971). They can also be found in Northrop Frye's *Mythos of Summer: The Romance* (1957, pp. 186-206).

Tolkien did not deliberately create similarities with existing stories; he just recalled them: "always I had the sense of recording what was already 'there', somewhere: not of 'inventing'" (*Letters*: 145). This does not mean, however, that his 'telling' of the events is not original:

These tales are 'new', they are not directly derived from other myths and legends, but they must inevitably contain a large measure of ancient wide-spread motives or elements. After all I believe that legends and myths are largely made of 'truth', and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode; and long ago certain truths and modes of this kind were discovered and must always reappear (*Letters*: 147)

I agree with Houghton (2003), Shippey (1982; 2000) and Chance (2004), who see Tolkien's stories as "the tendency of philologists to construct not only the forms of lost words (typically marked by a pre-fixed asterisk) and lost languages, but also the world-views that those words and languages described" (Houghton, 2003, p. 171). Or as Shippey puts it:

However fanciful Tolkien's creation of Middle-earth was, he did not think that he was entirely making it up. He was 'reconstructing', he was harmonizing contradictions in his source-texts, sometimes he was supplying entirely new concepts (like hobbits), but he was also reaching back to an imaginative world which he believed had once really existed, at least in a collective imagination: and for this he had a very great deal of admittedly scattered evidence (2000, p. xv).

What Tolkien grasped was an inherent aspect of myth, which Doniger calls the cross-cultural, or transcultural experience:

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<sup>21</sup> See also Day (1994, pp. 37-77); Day (2003, pp. 168-179); Jones (2002, pp. 72-74); Petty (2003, pp. 145, 164-166, 272); and Burdge and Burke (2004, pp. 154-156).

We often feel that various tellings of a much-retold myth are the same, at least in the sense that they do not disappoint us by omitting what we regard as essential parts of the myth, without which it would lose at the very least some of its charm, and at the most its meaning. When we say that two myths from two different cultures are "the same" we mean that there are certain plots that come up again and again, revealing a set of human concerns that transcend any cultural barriers, experiences that we might call cross-cultural or transcultural. (Doniger, 1998, p. 53)

The transcultural aspect of myth makes it "an inherently comparative genre" (ibid., p. 27), which Doniger does not limit to written media alone. But in order to compare a myth across different media it is necessary to first define the micromyth:

The micromyth is the neutral structure... It is an imaginary text, a scholarly construct that contains the basic elements from which all the possible variants could be created, a theoretical construct that will enable us to look at all the variants at once and ask questions of all of them simultaneously. (ibid., p. 88)

As Doniger points out, the micromyth is a scholarly construct necessary to reduce a story to its basic elements in order to make inter- and cross-media analysis possible. I have dubbed Aragorn's micromyth the hero-king myth. It can be summed up as follows:

- The hero (who can be male or female) is separated from his parents at an early age; in many hero-myths this is because one or both parents are slain by an enemy.
- The hero is fostered either in the normal chivalric tradition or because he is an orphan.
- The hero initially does not know his heritage or the destiny he has to fulfil.
- The hero has certain assets which make him stand out from other people.
- The hero distinguishes himself by his acts and deeds.
- The hero receives as heirloom an artefact with 'magical' properties (in West-European legends this usually is a sword).
- The hero has a non-human guardian.
- The kingdom suffers because of the absence of the rightful king.
- To become king the hero must prove that he is the true heir.

This list does not include an element in both Aragorn's and Sigurd's story which shows that their myths are even more closely linked: Éowyn and Brynhild. Tolkien needs Éowyn for several reasons; the elemental being the creation of an asterisk-cosmogony<sup>22</sup>. On the one hand, Éowyn is needed to kill the King of Angmar, the Lord of the Nazgûl of whom Gandalf says "if words spoken of old be true, not by the hand of man shall he fall" (*RK*: 81)<sup>23</sup>. On

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<sup>22</sup> So termed by Houghton (2003) and Shippey (2003).

<sup>23</sup> Tolkien was very disappointed with Shakespeare's treatment of the prophecies in *Macbeth*, a play he looked back on with "bitter disappointment and disgust" (*Letters*: 212 note). Part of the reason he created the Ents

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the other hand, her healing by Aragorn through a kiss<sup>24</sup> echoes Brynhild's awakening by Sigurd and the kiss of the fairy prince that awakens Sleeping Beauty. The healing itself serves yet another purpose: to show that Aragorn is a true king.

Aragorn's similarities with Sigurd could be called the Germanic part of his character. They show Aragorn in the tradition of the Germanic or Celtic hero, but this is only one part of his character. Perhaps one could say that this is Aragorn in his *high mimetic* mode<sup>25</sup> (Frye, 1957, p. 34), Aragorn in his disguise as Ranger<sup>26</sup>. When his true lineage has been revealed to both Frodo and the council in Rivendell his other role, of (Christian) king, is shown more and more. This is Aragorn in the mode of *hero of romance*, the rightful heir to the kingdoms of Arnor and Gondor and the person who through his rule will bring peace and prosperity to Middle Earth. This transition is not as gradual or linear as written here. It is closely tied in with the overall story. Aragorn's true identity must be hidden from Sauron until the appropriate time<sup>27</sup>, so his true lineage and appearance are mostly shown in places where it is safe to do so, as in Rivendell or Lothlórien, or when needed, for instance when Aragorn uses Athelas (Kingsfoil) to heal Frodo's wound. Still, more and more elements of the *hero of romance* gradually come to light:

- Elven wisdom and the foresight of the Dúnedain.
- The power to heal (at first shown tentatively with Frodo, but when Aragorn 'has grown', in its full form when he seemingly revives Éowyn from the dead).
- The sword-that-was-broken Narsil/Andúril of which it was foretold that it should be forged anew when the Ring was found (tied in with Boromir and Faramir's dream).
- Galadriel calls him Ellesar, the name foretold as his royal name.
- Commanding the Palantír of Orthanc.
- Commanding the Dead at the Paths of the Dead.
- Finding the sapling of the White Tree, which grows and blossoms after he plants it in Gondor.

Tolkien very cleverly uses the other characters to show the transition from Ranger to king. When we read about Aragorn we must not forget that the larger part of *LOTR* is told from

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was "the shabby use made in Shakespeare of the coming of 'Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill'" (ibid.), the third of the second set of prophecies. The second prophecy in this set declares that "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth" (Act 4, Scene 1). Tolkien thought that the 'answer' to the prophecy, namely that MacDuff "from his mother's womb / Untimely [was] ripp'd" (Act 5, Scene 8), was too contrived. Tolkien found his own solution for the death of the Lord of the Nazgûl: "not by hand of man shall he fall" – at the fight Eowyn is a woman dressed as a man – more in keeping with the way prophecies and riddles work in Anglo-Saxon texts.

<sup>24</sup> "he [Aragorn] bent and kissed her on the brow" (*RK*: 127).

<sup>25</sup> Although Frye's modes are presented as techniques of literary criticism, they can also be used to compare other narrative media, especially when the original medium is text.

<sup>26</sup> Note that the word Ranger is invariably spelled with a capital letter in *LOTR*.

<sup>27</sup> I disagree with Øystein Høgset, who in his article *The Adaptation of The Lord of the Rings – A Critical Comment* (2004) sees this transition as Aragorn "coming to terms with his heritage".

a hobbit's point of view<sup>28</sup>. In their descriptions and comments, what we mostly see is Aragorn the Ranger, who even has another name: Strider. Bilbo, who knows more about Aragorn, calls him Dúnadan, leader of the Dúnedain, his Rivendell name. Bilbo is also the creator of the "All that is gold does not glitter" verse (*FR*: 238), that goes with the name of Aragorn (*FR*: 170). It is obvious that Tolkien uses the verse not only to convince the hobbits that Aragorn is trustworthy, but also to alert us readers that we too should be aware that there is more to Aragorn than meets the eye.

Who then is this Strider, this Ranger? Tolkien first mentions Aragorn when Gandalf recounts the capture of Gollum to Frodo in the second chapter of the first book: "a friend: Aragorn, the greatest traveller and huntsman of this age" (*FR*: 64). It should be noted that this is Gandalf speaking and his vision of Aragorn is different from that of the hobbits. He knows Aragorn's true lineage and what he and his Dúnedain have already done to oppose Sauron. Still, it is not opportune for Tolkien to reveal this information at this early stage of the trilogy, so all we can deduce at the moment is that Aragorn is an exceptional Ranger<sup>29</sup>. It is in the common room of the Prancing Pony in Bree when the hobbits (and the reader) first encounter Aragorn<sup>30</sup>:

Suddenly Frodo noticed that a strange-looking weather-beaten man, sitting in the shadows near the wall, was also listening intently to the hobbit-talk. He had a tall tankard in front of him, and was smoking a long-stemmed pipe curiously carved. His legs were stretched out before him, showing high boots of supple leather that fitted him well, but had seen much wear and were now caked with mud. A travel-stained cloak of heavy dark-green cloth was drawn close about him, and in spite of the heat of the room he wore a hood that overshadowed his face; but the gleam of his eyes could be seen as he watched the hobbits.

'Who is that?' Frodo asked, when he got a chance to whisper to Mr. Butterbur. 'I don't think you introduced him?'

'Him?' said the landlord in an answering whisper, cocking an eye without turning his head. 'I don't rightly know. He is one of the wandering folk - Rangers we call them. [...] What his right name is I've never heard: but he's known round here as Strider. Goes about at a great pace on his long shanks; though he don't tell nobody what cause he has to hurry. [...]

Frodo found that Strider was now looking at him, as if he had heard or guessed all that had been said. Presently, with a wave of his hand and a nod,

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<sup>28</sup> "I have told the whole tale more or less through 'hobbits'" (*Letters*: 246). As we shall see, this is part of Tolkien's scheme to keep Aragorn's identity hidden not only from Sauron, but also from the reader. This is also the reason why he suggested, when he found out that due to costs *LOTR* had to be published as three separate volumes, that the title of the last volume should be *The War of the Ring* and not *The Return of the King*, as the latter would reveal Aragorn's true identity (*Letters*: 167)

<sup>29</sup> A group of Men who "were taller and darker than the Men of Bree and were believed to have strange powers of sight and hearing, and to understand the languages of beasts and birds" (*FR*: 149). Apart from the information that Rangers smoke pipe-weed this is the first description given. Notice another similarity with Sigurd, who could also understand the language of birds after drinking Fafnir's blood.

<sup>30</sup> I use the complete description because the first encounter with Aragorn will be the part that I will use for my comparison with the other versions.

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he invited Frodo to come over and sit by him. As Frodo drew near he threw back his hood, showing a shaggy head of dark hair necked with grey, and in a pale stern face a pair of keen grey eyes.

'I am called Strider', he said in a low voice. 'I am very pleased to meet you. (FR: 155-156)

The visual description of Aragorn is seen through Frodo's eyes; who and what he is is Butterbur's interpretation. Still, Aragorn introduces himself as Strider<sup>31</sup>. As he explains later, this is for his own protection: "I had to study *you* first, and make sure of you. The Enemy has set traps for me before now" (FR: 169, original italics). In the meantime, Frodo, the hobbits, and the reader encounter a grim looking man who knows about the Ring and who wants to join the company. Either the information he gives or his person convinces Frodo that there is more to this man than meets the eye: "I think you are not really as you choose to look" (FR: 164-165). However, even when Aragorn tells the hobbits his real name (already mentioned in Gandalf's letter that only Frodo, Sam and Pippin have read), we only get a glimpse of his real character: "He stood up, and seemed suddenly to grow taller. In his eyes gleamed a light, keen and commanding [...] his face softened by a sudden smile 'I am Aragorn son of Arathorn" (FR: 169-170). Tolkien uses this glimpse of Aragorn the king several times, for instance in Lórien where "those who saw him wondered; for they had not marked before how tall and kingly he stood, and it seemed to them that many years of toil had fallen from his shoulders" (FR: 355), or when he answers Éomer's pertinent questions: "He seemed to have grown in stature while Éomer had shrunk; and in his living face they caught a brief vision of the power and majesty of the kings of stone" (TT: 29-30). In Bree, however, we do not yet know the meaning of Bilbo's lines "Renewed shall be blade that was broken, [t]he crownless again shall be king" (FR: 168). All we know is that the lines go with the name Aragorn, that Strider is Aragorn and that he possesses a broken sword of which he says: "the time is near when it shall be forged anew" (FR: 170). Aragorn has, as yet, not been linked to the Dúnedain or to Isildur.

On the way to Rivendell Tolkien shows us Aragorn's skills as a Ranger. His knowledge of Athelas (the name Kingsfoil is not given) could well be part of these skills. Only after this episode when Pippin asks him where he gets his knowledge from<sup>32</sup> does Aragorn say that "The heirs of Elendil do not forget all things past" (FR: 197). But this remark is so casual that Pippin overlooks it. Glorfindel calls Aragorn Dúnedan in his elven

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<sup>31</sup> In the next chapter Aragorn distances himself from the character Strider by speaking of Strider in the third person.

<sup>32</sup> Pippin adds that he cannot have learned it from the birds and beasts because: "the birds and beasts do not tell tales of that sort" (FR: 197), thus confirming that not only the Men of Bree believe that Rangers can talk to animals; and again alluding to the link between Aragorn and Sigurd.

greeting but the hobbits do not notice this<sup>33</sup>. Only in the safe haven of Rivendell does Aragorn's ancestry become known. First Gandalf tells Frodo who Aragorn really is, to which Frodo responds: "'Do you really mean that Strider is one of the people of the old Kings?' [...] I thought he was only a Ranger.'" (FR: 213). Finally, it is Elrond who informs those gathered at the council of Aragorn's true identity, after Boromir has recounted his and Faramir's dream:

'And here in the house of Elrond more shall be made clear to you' said Aragorn, standing up. He cast his sword upon the table that stood before Elrond, and the blade was in two pieces. 'Here is the Sword that was Broken!' he said.

'And who are you, and what have you to do with Minas Tirith?' asked Boromir, looking in wonder at the lean face of the Ranger and his weather-stained cloak.

'He is Aragorn son of Arathorn,' said Elrond; 'and he is descended through many fathers from Isildur Elendil's son of Minas Ithil. He is the Chief of the Dúnedain in the North' (FR: 237)

At the council Gandalf tells the story of Aragorn's capture of Gollum a second time. But now that we know who he really is Tolkien cannot only reveal more; he can also show us how he sees Aragorn, as these are Aragorn's own words:

'There is little need to tell of them,' said Aragorn. 'If a man must needs walk in sight of the Black Gate, or tread the deadly flowers of Morgul Vale, then perils he will have. I, too, despaired at last, and I began my homeward journey. And then, by fortune, I came suddenly on what I sought: the marks of soft feet beside a muddy pool. (FR: 243)

Tolkien shows us a man who puts his own life at risk for the greater cause but does not boast about it. As Aragorn says himself, "it seemed fit that Isildur's heir should labour to repair Isildur's fault" (FR: 241). He admits fallibility by stating his despair and shows that finding Gollum was pure chance. Therefore, although he is of high birth and chieftain of the Dúnedain, he undertakes the search himself and shows that he does not hold himself higher than other men.

Now the time to forge Narsil anew has also come. The Ring has been found and battle is at hand:

Aragorn [...] turned to Boromir again. 'For my part I forgive your doubt,' he said. 'Little do I resemble the figures of Elendil and Isildur as they stand carven in their majesty in the halls of Denethor. I am but the heir of Isildur, not Isildur himself. I have had a hard life and a long; and the leagues that lie between here and Gondor are a small part in the count of my journeys. [...]

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<sup>33</sup> This becomes obvious in Rivendell when Bilbo waits for his friend Dúnedan and Frodo does not know that he means Aragorn. As Glorfindel is speaking Elvish, where the word *dún-adan* means Man of the West/Númenorean, only the reader knows that he is addressing Aragorn.

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'Our days have darkened, and we have dwindled; but ever the Sword has passed to a new keeper. [...] 'But now the world is changing once again. A new hour comes. Isildur's Bane [the Ring] is found. Battle is at hand. The Sword shall be reforged. I will come to Minas Tirith. (FR: 238-239)

Before the Fellowship leaves Rivendell the sword is therefore forged again. As Burdge and Burke (2004) point out Narsil is a symbol of destiny. The broken sword motif is also part of many of the myths that belong to the hero-king cluster<sup>34</sup>. We must therefore assume that Aragorn carries Narsil for this reason, which seems to be exemplified when he unsheathes the sword in Bree after Bilbo's lines<sup>35</sup>. As Narsil can also identify him as Aragorn, the sword remains hidden at his side most of the time. However, he knows that the Ring is on its way to Rivendell so presumably the main reason he has brought the sword is that it can be forged again: "for it was spoken of old among us that it should be made again when the Ring, Isildur's Bane, was found" (FR: 237). At the moment, however, Aragorn's destiny does not lie with the Ring. As Elendil's heir, he sees it as his duty to stand by Gondor:

His own plan [...] had been to go with Boromir, and with his sword help to deliver Gondor. For he believed that the message of the dreams was a summons, and that the hour had come at last when the heir of Elendil should come forth and strive with Sauron for the mastery. (FR: 349)

After the council Aragorn uses his full titles more often but always with pride and always when he is sure that he is not addressing one of Sauron's henchmen. Although Elendil's heir must still remain hidden from Sauron's eyes, Tolkien can more and more stress the fact that this is Aragorn the king, not Strider the Ranger:

'Fear not!' said a strange voice behind him. Frodo turned and saw Strider, and yet not Strider; for the weatherworn Ranger was no longer there. In the stern sat Aragorn son of Arathorn, proud and erect, guiding the boat with skilful strokes; his hood was cast back, and his dark hair was blowing in the wind, a light was in his eyes: a king returning from exile to his own land.

'Fear not!' he said. 'Long have I desired to look upon the likenesses of Isildur and Anárion, my sires of old. Under their shadow Elessar, the Elfstone son of Arathorn of the House of Vandalil Isildur's son heir of Elendil, has nought to dread! (FR: 372)

These are the words of someone who is proud of his lineage and who is glad that the day is at hand when he can shed his disguise and fight Sauron openly. But it is only after the fall of Orthanc before the Battle of the Pelennor Fields that he can reveal his true identity to Sauron by using the Palantir:

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<sup>34</sup> As was already shown it is also part of Sigurd's story, another hero-king myth.

<sup>35</sup> That Aragorn carries no other weapons save Narsil is shown when he has to defend the hobbits on the road to Rivendell: he uses flaming brands of wood.

'It was a bitter struggle, and the weariness is slow to pass. I spoke no word to him, and in the end I wrenched the Stone to my own will. That alone he will find hard to endure. And he beheld me. [...] To know that I lived and walked the earth was a blow to his heart, I deem; for he knew it not till now. The eyes in Orthanc did not see through the armour of Théoden; but Sauron has not forgotten Isildur and the sword of Elendil. Now in the very hour of his great designs the heir of Isildur and the Sword are revealed; for I showed the blade re-forged to him. He is not so mighty yet that he is above fear; nay, doubt ever gnaws him.' (RK: 46)

As we later learn, he has done so to draw Sauron's attention to himself and away from Frodo. It is Gandalf's and Aragorn's intention that Sauron should think that Isildur's heir will claim the One Ring. However, now that the truth is revealed, Tolkien can finally show Aragorn in his full mode of *hero of romance* and it is only after this moment that the major points of this mode – the Paths of the Dead, the houses of Healing and the finding of the sapling of the White Tree – are told. Aragorn now also displays the banner that Arwen made:

[U]pon the foremost ship a great standard broke, and the wind displayed it as she turned towards the Harlond. There flowered a White Tree, and that was for Gondor; but Seven Stars were about it, and a high crown above it, the signs of Elendil that no lord had borne for years beyond count. And the stars flamed in the sunlight, for they were wrought of gems by Arwen daughter of Elrond; and the crown was bright in the morning, for it was wrought of mithril and gold.

Thus came Aragorn son of Arathorn, Elessar, Isildur's heir, out of the Paths of the Dead, borne upon a wind from the Sea to the kingdom of Gondor (RK: 108-109)

But even when the battle has been won Aragorn does not claim his kingship. At the last debate, he says: "I do not yet claim to command any man" (RK: 139). It is Imrahil prince of Dol Amroth who first acknowledges Aragorn's new role: "'As for me,' said Imrahil, 'the Lord Aragorn I hold to be my liege lord, whether he claims it or no.'" (RK: 139). And later when they ride out towards the Black Gate, in a last attempt to gain more time for Frodo, it is again Imrahil who says: "'Say not *The Lords of Gondor*. Say *The King Elessar*. For that is true, even though he has not yet sat upon the throne" (RK: 143 original italics). Aragorn's final transition comes after the ring is destroyed, when Elrond arrives with the sceptre of Annúminas and with Arwen, keeping his promise that Arwen may wed Aragorn when he has shown that he is the true heir of Elendil:

[A]nd last came Master Elrond, mighty among Elves and Men, bearing the sceptre of Annúminas, and beside him upon a grey palfrey rode Arwen his daughter, Evenstar of her people.

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And Frodo [...] said to Gandalf: 'At last I understand why we have waited! This is the ending. [...]' (RK: 221)

Is it possible to translate Aragorn's complex transition to another medium? And, if not, is this because of the medium's restrictions or of the mediator's choices?

### *Ralph Bakshi's Aragorn*

The problem with any adaptation of *LOTR* is that the story has to be condensed. Choices have to be made and Tolkien himself was well aware of this: "an *abridgement* by selection with some good picture work would be pleasant" (*Letters*: 261). Another problem, especially with the character of Aragorn, is his duality of both Ranger and king: the man we get to see in Bree has to incorporate both the grim, sinewy and at times gaunt-looking Ranger and the stature and nobility of the future king. Another complication, as with any text, is that the reader forms his/her own mental picture and, to add to this, *LOTR* is a thoroughly visual work, so anyone attempting to put the words into images will always displease someone. Cross-media content analysis should also take into account that each medium has its own apparatus to convey a narrative to its audience. As we saw in the previous chapter, this not only implies that audience's expectations are media-specific, but also that every adaptation is the product of at least three modifications: the choices made by the person or persons creating the adaptation, the 'language' of the medium used and the restrictions posed by the medium. When examining the different versions of the Bree scene I will therefore very briefly sum up the major restrictions of the medium used and the main means by which it depicts character<sup>36</sup>.

The first film adaptation of *LOTR* is Ralph Bakshi's animated film made in 1978. The most obvious restriction posed by the medium is of course length. In an attempt to address this problem, Bakshi planned to make two films. The 1978 picture is the only one produced; it ends after the battle at Helm's Deep. A film evidently tells a story through visualization and the angle, level, height, distance, and other qualities of framing strongly influence the way we view a character<sup>37</sup>. To tell his version Bakshi combines traditional cell animation with rotoscoped live-action footage. However, for character animation Bakshi preferred "old fashioned animation"<sup>38</sup>, which, depending on the animation style used,

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<sup>36</sup> It is impossible to do this adequately within the scope of this chapter. The reader should only take it as a reminder that the media used are very diverse.

<sup>37</sup> As Bordwell and Thompson (2001, p. 220) point out the context of the film ultimately determines the function of the framings; so one should be careful when attributing meaning to framing techniques.

<sup>38</sup> Bakshi in an interview (Naugle, 2004)

usually means that facial features and expressions are less distinct. In this animated film the voice of Aragorn is provided by John Hurt, who at the time of the recording was 41.

As with Tolkien's version we first see Aragorn in the common room of the inn at Bree. In a close-up<sup>39</sup> of Frodo, who looks round to assess the other guests at the inn, we see Strider sitting in the background as the camera pans<sup>40</sup>.



Image VI.1 The panning camera shows Strider sitting in the background (Bakshi, 1978, 00:20:42)

When the camera stops panning, we get a medium long shot of Aragorn as Strider.



Image VI.2 The first full view of Strider (Bakshi, 1978, 00:20:45)

We see a man sitting comfortably with his back against the wall and his legs stretched out before him, smoking a long plain pipe. He is wearing beige coloured boots, a brown coloured short sleeved tunic with a large belt and disproportionately large belt buckle. His eyes are obscured by the hood of the long dark-brown mantle that he is wearing. Around his wrists we see leather arm cuffs and his left arm rests on the pommel of a clearly visible

<sup>39</sup> A close-up of a character usually only shows the head, hands or feet; the medium close shot shows the body from the chest up; the medium shot from the waist and the medium long shot from the knees or completely.

<sup>40</sup> Strictly speaking there is a glimpse of Aragorn a few seconds before this moment, but only those who know what to look for will notice the hooded figure in the background.

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sword at his left side. His legs are bare, and his skin tone is much darker than that of the hobbits. Contrary to Tolkien's description, his clothes do not look muddy or worn and Narsil, though sheathed, is clearly visible<sup>41</sup>. Frodo does not ask Butterbur who the man is. In the next shots we sometimes see Strider in the background of the frame, always in the same pose. He only looks up once when Frodo is singing his song.



Image VI.3 Strider in the hobbits' private room (Bakshi, 1978, 00:24:02)

After Frodo's debacle with the Ring the hobbits flee to their room, where Strider is already waiting. As he stands up we see that he wears a brown band above the elbow of his left arm and that his hair is black and comes to the nape of his neck. His face is clean-shaven and looks grim but not gaunt. It is dominated by a crooked nose with a clearly visible hook. His eyes are black. His somewhat broad face with the crooked nose and his broad shoulders make him look more like a wrestler than a ragged man used to living on the road. He certainly does not look like Tolkien's description in Gandalf's letter<sup>42</sup>: "a Man, lean, dark, tall". As he has not been introduced, he tells the hobbits that his name is Strider and that he is a friend of Gandalf. In Bakshi's version, Gandalf's letter is omitted so Strider's rebuke of Butterbur –"there is no one else for them to take up with except a fat innkeeper who only remembers his name because people shout it at him all day"– seems cruel and even arrogant. In the original text Aragorn uses almost the same words but there he speaks in anger because if Butterbur had not forgotten the letter, Frodo and the

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<sup>41</sup> Compare the original "a sword that had hung concealed by his side" (*FR*: 169)

<sup>42</sup> As I have hopefully shown before, Gandalf's depiction of Aragorn is more reliable and is probably the way Tolkien would describe him himself.

Ring would have been safe in Rivendell before the riders had found the Shire; so even his words make Bakshi's Aragorn less noble than the Ranger Tolkien shows us. The following action seems to confirm this because when Sam challenges him shortly after Butterbur has left, Aragorn says: "if I wanted the Ring for myself, I could have it, now"; and then draws his sword. The hobbits cower back until they see that a third of the sword is missing including the point. Then Aragorn says: "My name is Aragorn, son of Arathorn. If by life or death I can save you, I will". And the scene ends.



Image VI.4 Aragorn shows Narsil (Bakshi, 1978, 00:26:22)

As the viewers do not know Bilbo's rhymes, this name does not mean anything. Up until this moment it has not been mentioned, and although he knows Frodo's real name and why the riders follow him, compared to the original there is nothing to corroborate this. Frodo seems to rely only on his intuition when he says "I think one of the enemies' servants would, well, seem fairer and feel fouler", to convince Sam that Strider can be trusted. In the original, Frodo uses these words to explain to Aragorn that he wanted to believe him before Gandalf's letter came. However, the least credible element in Bakshi's version of Aragorn is Narsil. As Tolkien puts it himself, "Strider does not 'Whip out a sword' in the book. Naturally not: his sword was broken" (*Letters*: 273). And this is exactly what this Aragorn does: he whips out his sword, where in the original he only lays his hand on the hilt, but does not draw the sword at this moment. In the original Narsil is only unsheathed some moments later to show the hobbits that Aragorn carries the broken sword as mentioned in Bilbo's poem. The usual reaction of my students to the Bakshi scene is laughter, as Aragorn looks completely ridiculous. This is enhanced by the camera

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angle, which attempts to show Aragorn from a hobbit's point of view. Furthermore, Narsil is broken at the wrong end. Narsil is "broken a foot below the hilt" (*FR*: 170) not a foot from the tip. Anyway, without the rhyme, or Aragorn's words about the re-forging of the sword, what good is this broken sword? Only those who have read the book, prior to seeing the film, know who Aragorn and Narsil are. Therefore, although Bakshi's adaptation certainly tries to stay true to the book – within the limitations imposed by the medium –, because of the choices made only fans of the books will know this. The depiction of Aragorn is that of a Ranger as envisioned by Bakshi. The way he looks and behaves not only make him implausible as a future king; they even reduce his mimetic mode to that of *low* or even *ironic mimesis*. Moreover, although he shows Narsil, without the proper context we cannot place him in the hero-king tradition.

### *Sibley and Bakewell's Aragorn*

In a radio play, character is mainly shown through the voice of the actor who "represents his feeling for the character in tone and style" (*Letters*: 254). And although the medium is not as restrictive as film where the length of the adaptation is concerned, Tolkien's main reason for deeming *LOTR* unsuitable for dramatization is because "it needs more space, a lot of space" (*Letters*: 255). Dramatization also means that the original text, including descriptions of the scenery, has to be transformed to dialogue. Only actions that can be made audible, like running feet, slamming doors, rustling paper, can be 'translated'. As this is characteristic of the medium, audiences know and expect these 'audible' props.

In the 1981 BBC radio play by Brian Sibley and Michael Bakewell, Aragorn is introduced in the following scene:

[Common room of the inn, voices mumbling in the background]  
*Frodo*: Mister Butterbur who's that strange-looking weather-beaten man sitting by the wall smoking a pipe? I don't think you introduced him.  
*Butterbur*: Oh him. I don't rightly know. He is one of the wandering folk - Rangers we call 'em. He disappears for a month, or a year, and then he pops up again. What his right name is I've never heard: but he's known round here as Strider.  
*Frodo*: Why's that?  
*Butterbur*: Well on account of his going about at a great pace on his long shanks of his [Frodo laughs] though he don't tell nobody what cause he has to hurry.

This dialogue is very close to the original. The encounter with Strider even lasts almost as long, so that all the essential parts, including the long conversation before Gandalf's letter and the letter itself, are included. There is a slight difference, however. Gandalf's letter is read aloud so that all present, including Strider, hear the contents. In the original Aragorn

speaks the first lines of the rhyme as a response to Frodo's description of his looks, thus unwittingly confirming that he is the real Strider, as Frodo shows by his question "Did the verses apply to you then? [...] But how did you know that they were in Gandalf's letter, if you have never seen it?" (*FR*: 170). So in the original Narsil is only secondary proof that Aragorn is who he says he is. In the radio play, Narsil becomes the sole proof of his true identity and therefore gains in status. This is enhanced by the fact that the verses are accompanied by dramatic music, making them sound more like a prophecy than the verses composed by a hobbit friend.



Image VI.5 Sir Robert Stephens, Aragorn's voice

The most crucial element of this adaptation is, of course, the actor who provides Aragorn's voice. As Brian Sibley (1995, p. 12) says himself in the accompanying booklet, Robert Stephens was a controversial decision: "He was, for some, an unlikely choice; but for a great many listeners Robert's powerfully idiosyncratic performance embodied a strong sense of Aragorn's lost nobility". Sibley does not elaborate, so I can only speculate that the choice was controversial because Stephens was well known for his recordings and theatre work including numerous Shakespearian roles, although at the time of the recording his career seemed over<sup>43</sup>. My Dutch students are not aware of this; they describe the voice as being wise, older, and trustworthy, elements of *high mimesis*<sup>44</sup>. The listener's comments thus show that this Aragorn is a believable future king. The iconic use

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<sup>43</sup> Listeners must also have been aware of Stephens's personal life (his public display of drunkenness was part of the reason his career suffered). This was not how they envisioned Tolkien's Aragorn.

<sup>44</sup> In Northrop Frye's sense of the term i.e. the hero who is a leader, an authority, someone who has greater powers of expression, someone who in his words and deeds is of a different (nobler) cut than others.

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of Narsil not only shows Aragorn as a *hero of romance*, but it also roots this version firmly in the hero-king tradition<sup>45</sup>.

### *Peter Jackson's Aragorn*

Peter Jackson's live-action version solves the problem of length by making three films, each lasting approximately three hours; the extended DVD versions even last up to forty-eight minutes longer. Jackson's version is action-oriented and to pace the tempo the films are divided up differently from the books. Because each film had to stand on its own, new scenes were added either to maintain balance or to provide necessary information. However, in doing so they deviate dramatically from the original and the films cease to be faithful adaptations<sup>46</sup>. The great strength of Jackson's version is the visualization. It is not surprising therefore, that as far as outer appearance is concerned, this Aragorn hits the mark. As Jackson says in the commentary "like the description of Tolkien's, of Strider sitting in a corner of the room and it is great to be able to just like nail them on screen" (FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING EXTENDED DVD VERSION, 2001)



Image VI.6 After Frodo asks who the stranger is Strider is shown a bit more clearly  
(Jackson, 2001, 00:51:14)

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<sup>45</sup> Since the publication of the original article that constitutes this chapter a website dedicated to the radio dramatization was launched. See <http://www.tolkienradio.com/>

<sup>46</sup> For instance, in *THE TWO TOWERS* a whole scene is added: *The Wolves of Isengard* where Aragorn apparently dies by going over a cliff. In the commentary to the extended DVD version Peter Jackson, Fran Welsh and Philippa Boyens give at least four different reasons why they added the scene, well aware that they had overstepped the boundaries. Since the publication of the original article Gary Appenzeller has created three webpages listing all the differences between the books and the Peter Jackson films. See the links *FotR differences*, *TTT differences*, and *RotK differences* on his website <http://gary.appenzeller.net/>

Apart from his pipe, which is not “curiously carved” (*FR*: 155), this is Aragorn as Frodo sees him, including the boots “caked with mud” (*ibid*) and the “travel-stained cloak” (*ibid*). His gaunt-looking face, unshaven beard and greasy hair show us a man who has been on the road a long time, a true Ranger. This depiction of Aragorn only has one major ‘fault’: he is wearing the ring of Barahir. As we shall later see, Aragorn is not carrying Narsil, so we must assume that, at some time in the future, but not in Bree, the ring will serve as proof of his identity<sup>47</sup>.



Image VI.7 Aragorn wearing the Ring of Barahir on the index finger of his left hand. (Jackson, 2002, 00:54:16)

As the Bree scene lasts about three minutes (excluding Frodo putting on the Ring), I will give the complete dialogue here:

[Merry, Sam and Frodo are eating at a table in the common room of the Prancing Pony.]

*Sam*: That fellow's done nothing but stare at you [close-up of Frodo] since we arrived. [Frodo takes a furtive look, camera shows a long shot of Aragorn sitting in the corner. Followed by a medium to long shot of the hobbits at the table]

*Frodo* [to Butterbur]: Excuse me? That Man in the corner who is he?

*Butterbur* [close-up]: He's one of them Rangers. [close-up of Frodo and Sam] They're dangerous folk [long shot of Strider], wandering the Wilds. [camera

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<sup>47</sup> The ring's name is only given in the extended version of *THE TWO TOWERS*. Up till that moment only the true Tolkien fan can identify the ring by the way it looks. But the true Tolkien fan also knows that the ring was given to Arwen. See p. 192 and note 12 and 13.

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zooms in to medium close shot] What his right name is I've never heard, [close-up of Butterbur] but around here he is known as Strider.

*Frodo*: [close-up] Strider?!

[Extreme close-up of Strider's pipe and eyes. Back to Frodo who feels compelled to put on the Ring, but comes to his senses just in time when he hears Pippin mention the name Baggins. In his rush (medium close shot of Strider taking his pipe out of his mouth) to reach Pippin he falls (medium close shot of Strider sitting up) and the Ring slips on his finger. (Ring sequence). When Frodo is visible again Strider's hand grabs him and pulls him away. Close-up of Frodo]

*Strider* [hooded]: You draw far [close-up of Strider] too much attention to yourself [Strider takes Frodo by the shoulder] "Mr. Underhill".

[Strider shoves Frodo up some stairs and into the back room]

*Frodo* [close-up]: What do you want?

[While talking Strider, still hooded, walks to some candles]

*Strider* [close-up]: A little more caution from you, that is no trinket you carry.

*Frodo* [close-up]: I carry nothing.

*Strider* [medium close shot, extinguishes candles]: Indeed. I can avoid being seen if I wish... [candles are out] but to disappear entirely [Strider pulls away his hood] that is a rare gift.

*Frodo* [close-up]: Who are you?

*Strider* [close-up]: Are you frightened?

*Frodo* [close-up]: Yes.

*Strider* [close-up]: Not nearly frightened enough. I know what hunts you. [starts to walk towards Frodo]

[Medium close shot of Strider (who has heard something) turning while drawing his sword (which is not broken). The door opens and the other hobbits burst in.]

*Sam* [medium close shot]: Let him go! Or I'll have you Longshanks.

*Strider* [medium close shot]: You have a stout heart, little hobbit. [Sheaths his sword, shot turns back to Sam, Merry and Pippin] But that will not save you. [close-up of Frodo] You can no longer wait for [close-up of Aragorn] the wizard, Frodo. They're coming.

In Jackson's version, nothing Strider does or says justifies the hobbits trusting him. In fact, at the beginning of the scene Jackson uses sound, image, and camera framing to make Strider look as menacing as possible. To anyone who does not know the books this might well be one of the enemies who are after the Ring. And what Strider tells Frodo could also have been used to lure the hobbits into a false sense of security. Only on the road to Rivendell does Merry ask "How do we know that this Strider is a friend of Gandalf?" We must assume, although we have not seen it<sup>48</sup>, that more information was given at Bree<sup>49</sup>. Frodo answers Merry's question with "I think a servant of the enemy would look fairer but feel fouler" and somewhat fatalistically adds "We have no choice but to trust him" So eventually, as in the book, it is Frodo's intuition that makes him follow Strider. In the Bree scene Jackson does not use Narsil because:

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<sup>48</sup> Not even in the extended DVD version.

<sup>49</sup> The viewer can at least assume that the hobbits escaped from certain death at the hand of the Ringwraiths because of Strider's help.

The one thing that I knew from the book that I could never do in the movie, mainly because I could never imagine it working was the rather iconic moment where Strider pulls out his sword and it's the broken sword. And I just thought, well it's great in a book but in a movie people are going to laugh. This heroic figure pulls out the sword and there's only half a sword in his scabbard because half of it has broken off. I just thought it's gone'a get a laugh. Especially for people that don't know the books. (director's commentary FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING EXTENDED DVD VERSION, 2001)

Without Narsil, Bilbo's verses are superfluous. Gandalf's letter is, in fact, completely omitted, no doubt as it would slow down the fast-paced action of the scene.

Similar to Tolkien's version we only find out Aragorn's true identity at the council of Elrond<sup>50</sup>. But Jackson's primary reason is not that Aragorn's real identity has to remain hidden from Sauron, it is because Aragorn fears that he will make the same mistake Isildur has made. This Aragorn is not proud of his heritage. As a result, the transition from Ranger to king is the reluctant struggle of an heir who doubts his bloodline and his part in the Ring quest. In doing so, Jackson turns the Germanic hero into a Renaissance Hamlet full of doubt and fallibility. By leaving out Narsil there is nothing that identifies this Aragorn with a *hero of romance*. His actions at Bree do not even show him in a *high mimetic* mode. And because Jackson recasts Aragorn's part to that of the reluctant heir most of the elements of the hero-king myth are also left out of the story. Jackson refashions Aragorn in a (post-) modern type action hero, giving the present generation of movie goers a hero they can identify with<sup>51</sup>.

### *Computer Game Aragorn*

My final comparison will look at the official *FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING* game produced by Vivendi. I choose this game because, contrary to most other recent *LOTR* games, it is not based on the Peter Jackson films<sup>52</sup> but on Tolkien's book. Computer game adaptations of books or films differ from other media in that they give the gamer the opportunity to actively participate in the story by playing one of the characters. In the Vivendi game the

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<sup>50</sup> In fact, in Jackson's version the name Aragorn is not even mentioned before the council at Rivendell, not even when Frodo asks Strider directly who he is. At the council, we can surmise from Frodo's reaction that to him as well the information that Strider is Aragorn is new.

<sup>51</sup> A non-representative survey I held amongst first and second year students showed that most of them see Aragorn as the true hero of the films.

<sup>52</sup> The film-based games are all action-oriented, as we will see. In the PS2, Gamecube and XBOX version of the *TWO TOWERS* the gamer can only take on the role of Aragorn, Legolas, or Gimli. In *THE RETURN OF THE KING* Gandalf, Sam and Frodo are also playable characters. In both Game Boy Advanced versions, the gamer can choose between all of these and even play as Éowyn. In the GBA games, the action required clearly depends on the character chosen; this makes these games more interesting. The GBA games also allow for multiplayer games (with two or more GBA's) so that each gamer can be one of the characters in the quest. It is even possible to play the multiplayer game with two or more Aragorns simultaneously. In October 2010 a new *LOTR* based game was launched, *THE LORD OF THE RINGS: ARAGORN'S QUEST*, in which, as the title suggests, Aragorn is the main protagonist.

### *Remediating Character*

gamer first takes on the role of Frodo, but when action demands it he switches to Aragorn and later on also to Gandalf. To create a computer game, the greater part of *FR* is translated into action. In the beginning of the game, for instance, the gamer has to search Frodo's house to find the Ring. As this action-oriented 'rewriting' could result in a totally different story, game-play is interrupted from time to time by non-interactive cutscenes to advance the story. Truly great games<sup>53</sup> make the interactive sequences so immersive that the gamer 'feels' part of the story and thus gains a better understanding of the ordeal the characters have to undergo. The time spent playing a computer game usually is not a reflection of the actual story time but of the time it takes the gamer to overcome the game's obstacles and puzzles. Fortunately, in the *FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING* these obstacles and puzzles are all linked to the original story<sup>54</sup>. Story and character visualization are usually done through animation, although part of the appeal of the film-based *LOTR* games comes from the transitions between the interactive animated sequences and the live-action cutscenes taken from the films. As we saw in the previous chapters, visual detail in computer games largely depends on the graphic capabilities of the computer platform for which the game has been produced. As in so many games, *THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*'s cutscenes, which are all pre-recorded, show greater detail than the interactive parts, which are visualized while the game is being played.



Image VI.8 When Frodo enters the common room for the first time, Aragorn is standing in the distance (Black Label Games, *FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*, 2002)

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<sup>53</sup> Which this game is not.

<sup>54</sup> As we shall see a bit later on, 'linked to' does not necessarily mean that these events happened in the original.

Because the Bree scene is a vital part of the story, it is shown in an animated cutscene. When Frodo (the gamer) enters the inn, there is no one behind the counter. The gamer first has to walk on into the common room where the other hobbits already are. The common room is occupied by some very unsavoury characters (apart from a dwarf), one of which appears to be Bill Ferny. By contrast with the book, Strider is standing. He is a tall man, who fits Gandalf's description of "lean, dark and tall". His square jaw bears the shadow of a beard and his face looks serious<sup>55</sup>. He has prominent cheekbones, dark eyebrows, dark eyes and his long sleek dark hair comes well below his shoulders. He is not dressed like Tolkien's Aragorn. He does not wear a cloak, presumably because that would be inconvenient for the subsequent fight scenes. This is also the reason why he carries a bow and a quiver of arrows, and why he carries a functioning sword instead of Narsil<sup>56</sup>. He is wearing a padded doublet with a long sleeved shirt underneath, period buckskin hoses and long boots. His hands are covered by long gloves that also cover the lower arm. As decoration he wears a small shield-like device with the design of a cross on his chest. None of his clothing seems to be stained or torn, but this can be due to lack of detail<sup>57</sup>. For a Ranger he is appropriately dressed. However, from his clothes and the weapons he carries it is immediately clear that this Aragorn has been 'designed' to play a more active role in the game.



Image VI.9 The camera zooms in on Aragorn when he identifies himself.  
(Black Label Games, *FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*, 2002)

<sup>55</sup> Alec Baldwin comes to mind.

<sup>56</sup> Although he does not carry a sword in the inn (he only has his quiver). However, as soon as he steps outside to find Merry (at the end of the second cutscene), he is seen to be carrying a sword.

<sup>57</sup> Even if it were graphically possible to add the stains, more detail would cost extra rendering time in the action sequences.

When Frodo first walks up to Aragorn, he is greeted cordially and although Frodo introduce himself as Mr. Underhill, Aragorn does not give his own name. To advance the game Aragorn instructs Frodo to get a room. Back at the counter Butterbur has arrived, and a cutscene follows. Butterbur's lines are very similar to those in the book. When Frodo is back in the common room, the main Bree scene takes place:

[As soon as you enter the room the cutscene starts with Pippin telling the other guests about Bilbo's birthday party. Frodo walks over to Strider]

*Strider*: Master Underhill I'd stop your friend from talking if I was you. [Pippin goes on, coming to the part about the Ring] You'd better do something quick.

[Song-ring sequence. Frodo reappears]

*Strider*: What you did was worse than anything your friend could have said.

*Frodo*: It was an accident.

*Strider*: I want a word with you somewhere quiet.

[Cut to the hobbits' room, Strider seems to be getting up from the stone ledge of the hearth. The camera shows him from a low angle, to represent a hobbit eye-level. When the camera focuses on the hobbits the shot is shown from a high angle, to represent Strider's eye-level. Unlike Bakshi's film, these camera positions work and they give the scene more atmosphere.]

*Sam*: Hello. Who are you? And what do you want?

*Strider*: I am called Strider. And if what I say is helpful to you, I want you to take me with you.

*Frodo*: I would not agree to any such thing till I knew a lot more about you.

*Strider*: Excellent. You seem to be coming to your senses again after your accident...

*Butterbur*: [enters the room] Beggin' your pardon. I need a word.

*Sam*: Everyone in this place needs a word.

*Butterbur*: I remembered what it was I forgot.

*Frodo*: What?

*Butterbur*: About a Shire hobbit named Baggins, but called Underhill.

*Frodo*: Who told you this?

*Butterbur*: Gandalf the wizard. He asked me to send this letter to you in the Shire. But I forgot. I, I expect he will turn me into a block of wood.

[Frodo reads the letter silently, we hear Gandalf's voice]

*Gandalf*: Dear Frodo, bad news. You must leave for Rivendell before the end of July. Do not wait for your birthday. I will meet you if I can, or follow you if I can't.

*Frodo* [reads on, presumably to himself, but his lips are moving]: You can trust the ranger called Strider. But make sure he is the real Strider. His true name is Aragorn [turns to look at Strider]

*Strider*: I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn. And if by life or death I can save you, I will. I thought I would have to persuade you without proof, but my looks are against me.

*Frodo*: I believed you, or I wanted to. The enemy's spies look fair but feel foul. While you feel fair...

*Strider*: But look foul. [Sam laughs]

*Pippin*: Hold on, where is Merry? He is still not back from his walk.

*Strider*: Stay here. I'll find him.

Compared to Bakshi's and Jackson's version more lines and elements of the original are kept. This holds true for all the lengthy cutscenes in the game<sup>58</sup>. In Gandalf's letter Bilbo's verse is left out, probably because it does not make any sense without Narsil. And since this Aragorn will have to fight to fulfil his role as game warrior, he cannot carry Narsil with him. So in this version Gandalf's letter serves as sole proof that he is Aragorn, and as he reacts to the letter Frodo must have read the last part sufficiently loud enough for Aragorn to hear. When the game commences it becomes clear that more than being the Aragorn of the book, this Aragorn is the warrior in the game<sup>59</sup>, whose primary actions are fighting with sword and bow. This becomes immediately clear from the interactive part that follows, where Aragorn, in an obvious change from the book, goes out to save Merry. To do this he, assisted by the other hobbits, has to fight and kill the unsavoury characters first seen in the common room, including Bill Ferny, who accuses him of wanting to keep the reward for finding the hobbits to himself. After Bree, on route to Rivendell, Aragorn is faced by orcs, wargs and even trolls, where in the book there are none. The fights often take place in broad daylight, whereas Tolkien emphasized that minions of the Enemy mostly fight in the dark. Consequently, light and fire are used in the book to drive them off.

These changes to the original story are necessary to conform to the gameplay requirements of the action adventure game, which dictate that the number of opponents and the difficulty level of the fights have to increase in the course of the game. To comply, the game even introduces new level end-bosses, such as the troll Aragorn has to fight before the group reaches Weathertop. In a game that tries to be true to the book, these additions not only feel counterfactual and forced; they also distract from the story. In this case, Juul's criticism that you would not be able to extract the original narrative from the game is true<sup>60</sup>. The other games, those that derive from Peter Jackson's trilogy, are more successful in balancing gameplay and story. As these games are based on the already action-packed films and start when the real action begins, at Weathertop<sup>61</sup> (so not depicting the greater part of the first film *THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*)<sup>62</sup>, there is no forced

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<sup>58</sup> Confirming that this is the official game sanctioned by the Tolkien estate.

<sup>59</sup> As I explained in Chapter III, fantasy type games have typical roles a character can assume, the most common being warrior, magic user, and thief. As I have shown, these roles ultimately go back to Tolkien's *LOTR*, so we now bizarrely have a character acting out a role the original character helped to create.

<sup>60</sup> See the introduction.

<sup>61</sup> Before that, there is a training mission where the gamer is Isildur at the Siege of Barad-dûr.

<sup>62</sup> The games are closely linked to the films and were appraised for their smooth transition of gameplay to cutscenes directly taken from the films. Because they left the more narrative parts out of the games, to understand the complete story, the gamer would have to have seen the films first. This, however, was completely intentional. The success of the games was also for a large part due to the success of the films.

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balance between gameplay and narrative, as in the book-based game. In fact, the games focus on those parts of the story that give the most interesting gameplay (such as the journey through the Mines of Moria). And where they allow their story to deviate from the original, the deviation feels logical within the context of the story, for example when the Uruk-hai attack at the Parth of Galen and Amon Hen; the same moment that Frodo decides to leave the fellowship. In the book and the film, Frodo leaves unhindered. In the game, the gamer has to actively fight off the enemies (as Aragorn, Gimli, or Legolas) so that Frodo can leave. Moreover, the gamer can fail, so that Frodo can be captured in this mission. If this happens, however, consistent with the gameplay of action adventure games the game ends, and the gamer has to play the level again. Furthermore, these games do not rigorously adhere to the inclusion of increasing numbers of enemies or new level end-bosses, as they use the ones that already occur in the course of the story (the Kraken, the Balrog, etc.), showing that a balance between narrative and gameplay is also possible without the introduction of new elements.

In short, in the officially sanctioned game, the Aragorn portrayed in the interactive parts is not Tolkien's Aragorn, but an action-based game warrior. And this is the duality shown in the game, not that of Ranger versus king but that of cutscene book Aragorn versus interactive game warrior, where the warrior tilts the balance. The part of game warrior has no need for the elements of neither the hero of high romance nor of any elements of the hero-king myth. After Rivendell Andúril becomes part of Aragorn's inventory, not so much as proof of his kingship, but rather as the superior melee weapon needed for future battle.

### *A Man, lean, dark, tall*

Peter Jackson's interpretation of Tolkien's book has shifted the audience's attention to the character of Aragorn and for those who have seen his trilogy, Viggo Mortison will always be Aragorn. As Strider, he visually (apart from his weapons) at least looks the part. But Jackson shows us an Aragorn that is very different from the one Tolkien envisioned. To set the balance right I have tried to show the real Aragorn as he is portrayed in *LOTR*, including the appendices and Tolkien's letters. I've used Wendy Doniger's micromyth and Northrop Frye's fictional modes to find those elements that define Aragorn's duality. I then looked at several adaptations of the first encounter with Aragorn in Bree, to see whether and how this duality was shown in other media, bearing in mind the principal characteristics of each medium. However, as I have found in my lectures, although some of the other interpretations are perhaps more true to the original, Jackson's vision

dominates even when the original text has been read for reference. It seems that, for the time being at least, Jackson's Aragorn is the new standard. Still, every generation has adapted *LOTR* to suit its own needs; this is part of the book's strength and lasting appeal. In my view at least, this is also possible because of Tolkien's use of "ancient wide-spread motives [and] elements" (*Letters*: 147).

*Addendum*

It has only very recently become clear how much influence the story of Sigurd the Volsung had on Tolkien's work. In 2009 Christopher Tolkien posthumously published Tolkien's own interpretation of Sigurd's and the Volsungs' story in the form of two long alliterative poems, the *Völsungakviða en nýja* (The New Lay of the Völsungs) and *Guðrúnarkviða en nýja* (the New Lay of Guðrún). That Tolkien had composed these poems was long unknown, although he hinted at having written alliterative poems dealing with the Volsungs, Sigurd and Gunnar in two letters to W.H. Auden, one dated 29 March 1967 (*Letters*, 378) and one dated 29 January 1968. It is unclear when Tolkien wrote the poems, but his son guesses that it must have been shortly after he abandoned the Lay of Leithian, i.e. the legend of Beren and Lúthian (Tolkien, 2009, p. 5), so well within the timeframe of *The Lord of the Rings*. As noted, Aragorn's and Arwen's story bears some strong resemblances with that of Beren and Lúthian, so if Christopher Tolkien is right about the date, both the poems and the abandoned lay may have had some impact on Aragorn's story. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to compare Tolkien's own version of Sigurd's hero-king myth with that of Aragorn.