

**Pre-print extract from S. Lee and E. Solopova, *The Keys of Middle-earth: Discovering Medieval Literature through the fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Palgrave, 2005). To purchase full book go to:
<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?PID=270390>.**

4.9 Treebeard's List – *Maxims II* (TT, 'Treebeard')

4.9.1 Plot Summary

Merry and Pippin, having escaped the Orcs, flee into Fangorn's forest, where they encounter Treebeard, the Ent. Treebeard is puzzled as to what the two Hobbits are and recites an ancient poem which lists the various flora and fauna of Middle-earth.

Christopher Tolkien (*Treason*, pp. 411-21) notes that the character of Treebeard, and the Ents themselves, seem to have come late to Tolkien, and he puzzled over how they would fit into the story.

4.9.2 Medieval Text: *Maxims II*

Maxims II is found in a British Library manuscript – Cotton MS Tiberius B.i (ff. 115r-v). It's dating is troublesome, and the nature of the poem suggests ancient folklore passed down from generation to generation (as indeed Treebeard's poem was). Cassidy and Ringler argue that it 'probably reached its present form in the tenth century or slightly earlier, though some of the material in it may be much older' (1974, p. 373). It is called *Maxims II* because a very similar poem (*Maxims I*) appears in 'The Exeter Book'. A 'Maxim', according to the *OED* is:

'A rule or principle of conduct. Also: a pithily expressed precept of morality or prudence (*spec.* occurring in Old English verse); such a precept as a literary form.'

Marsden (2004, p. 296) notes:

'The OE maxims present an intimate view of the world in literal terms. Indeed, on the face of it, they may seem to state the obvious ... but that is the point'.

Shippey (1976, p. 12) described it as having 'barely imaginable purpose' yet at the same time 'undeniable charm'.

4.9.3 Discussion

One of the tensions presented in *LR* is that of change, and unfamiliarity. Several examples appear in the book of the damaging effects of both, or the consequences of the disruption of the natural order. ‘Older’ peripheral characters such as Gaffer Gamgee and the wise healer Ioreth of Minas Tirith, continually eulogize about the past, noting the sense of flux and disorder that surrounds the present. The Nazgûl’s appearance in the Shire at the beginning is presented as something that *should not be* – and a sign of times that are strange and changing. When the hobbits appear in The Prancing Pony, Barleyman Butterbur is moved to remark that they did not often get parties from the Shire ‘nowadays’ (*LR*, p. 150), and this theme of unfamiliar occurrences continues.

One of the most interesting examples of this arises from the meeting between Treebeard the Ent, and Merry and Pippin. Treebeard is presented with three main characteristics (beyond his personal appearance that is) – a) his strength; b) his age; c) his knowledge. The last two combine to present an image of immense wisdom, but a dislike of change. Into Treebeard’s timeless, ageless world therefore, the appearance of the hobbits is yet another sign of the strange disconcerting times, which along with the mechanization of Orthanc feed the Ent’s fear of imminent doom (encompassing both the sense of destruction, and the original Old English word *dom* meaning ‘judgement’).

Treebeard views Merry and Pippin partly with suspicion, but more importantly with curiosity. In an attempt to understand these two ‘very odd’ creatures he recalls a poem from long ago that seems to set out an encyclopaedia of the fauna of Middle-Earth. This poem presents a short list of the creatures of the world, sometimes balancing them with their characteristics or locations. Treebeard fails to find the hobbits in his list and seems to settle for Pippin’s suggestion of ‘Half-grown hobbits, the hole-dwellers’ (*LR*, p. 453).

This ‘list’ could be described as ‘gnomic’, i.e. concerned with wisdom, from the Greek *γνώμη* meaning ‘mind, judgement’. In addition, it bears a strong resemblance to the poem presented below, *Maxims II*. The verse sets out how things have been and will be, with everything in its place or with its reason, and has a sense of hierarchy. Kocher (2002, pp. 81-82) elaborates on this suggesting Treebeard’s song lists the four ‘free peoples’ first (into which he later inserts hobbits), followed by the implied ‘not free’ creatures such as the animals and birds. Such a hierarchy is not especially evident in *Maxims II*, although we do witness the closing emphasis on the power of God and the uncertainty (as opposed to what has been listed) of the afterlife.

The Old English also conveys to the audience a feeling of how things *must* be, which is possibly what Treebeard is searching for. The bear will hunt bees – that is what a bear is meant to do – and the eagle will live in its eyrie. Moreover like Treebeard’s song, *Maxims II* undoubtedly encapsulates folk wisdom passed down from generation to generation of the early English. Again like the Ent’s list it mixes people and creatures, describing their characteristics, the places they live, and so on. Yet unlike Treebeard’s poem, the Old English is more complete, and it varies considerably from natural elements (the weather, animals), to what we might describe as the supernatural (dragons and demons), but which were all too real in Middle-earth.

It is understandable therefore that Tolkien associated the Ents with these maxims as their attitude to memory and the past is a main feature of their character. Kocher (2002, p. 113) states: 'For them [Ents] life is a history in which the past grows into the present, all in due order, and they remember every part of it sequentially and calmly.' Tolkien also imitates the style of Old English poetry by keeping his lines short, breaking them consistently into two halves, and linking them by alliteration (see 2.3.4 for a fuller discussion of 'Alliterative Verse').

There is one major noticeable difference between the two pieces (outside of their length that is). As one reads through the Old English poem a clear Christian message emerges, especially strong towards the end. Middle-earth is, on the other hand, a non-Christian world (or at best pre-Christian). Even if Treebeard had remembered the whole of the poem he would not have finished it in a manner evident in *Maxims II*, unless he referred to the Valar. However, if we consider what is being said in the Old English poem, it is not too dissimilar from Tolkien's philosophy. Looking at lines 48-63 of the Old English we have an abundance of Tolkienian. The star in the heavens (l. 48) reminds us of Eärendil, the almost predetermined struggle of good against evil (l. 50), and the 'friend against foe' seems to summarize the history of Middle-earth and the War of the Ring. There are the personal struggles also. The fight against old age (l. 50) recalls Théoden; the light in the darkness (l. 51) – the struggle in Shelob's lair; armies face armies in the War; and over all of this the wise one, Gandalf, ponders (l. 54). There is also the uncertainty about the afterlife. Only the immortal know their future in Middle-earth, but for those doomed to die (i.e. men or Elves, such as Arwen, who have chosen mortality) their fate is uncertain.

Maxims II presents us then with an outline of the major characteristics of the seasons, animals, places in society and alludes to such nebulous concepts as 'fate' (Old English *wyrd*). Treebeard may have been able to do likewise if he had remembered all of the verses.

Readers of *LR* may also see similarities between the Old English, and the verse that haunts Aragorn, declaring his lineage: 'All that is gold does not glitter...' which is very close to a maxim in feeling. Furthermore they should also note at l. 2 the phrase *orðanc enta geweorc* translated as 'the cunning work of giants', similar to the opening of *The Ruin* (4.5, l. 2). Here two words leap out. The Old English word *ent* – meaning 'giant'; and *orðanc* – meaning 'cunning'. That the former was the inspiration for the race of Ents in *LR* is beyond doubt. In Tolkien's guide to the names in *LR* (see Lobdell, 1975) the derivation from the Old English word *ent*, meaning 'giant' was confirmed. However he notes that 'the Ents of this tale are not in form or character derived from Germanic mythology' (pp. 164-5), implying they were not based on the giants of Old Norse literature. We can also look to Tolkien's declaration in a letter from 1954 when he states:

'As usual with me they [the Ents] grew rather out of their name ... I always felt that something ought to be done about the peculiar Anglo-Saxon word *ent* for a 'giant'' (*Letters*, 157, p. 208).

As Shippey (1992, p. 103) explains:

‘Anglo-Saxons believed in ents ... What were they? Clearly they were very large, great builders, and clearly they didn’t exist anymore’.

Once again Tolkien is trying to present an answer to this puzzle. He had come across the word several times in Old English and was impressed by the awe with which the Saxons held these great builders. Although one could offer the interpretation that these were just Romans, and the cunning works were the devastated Roman villas the Saxons came across as they moved into Britain, Tolkien seized the opportunity to connect the medieval literature to his own fiction, and provided an alternative answer, namely that there were a race called *Ents*. Treebeard and his companions then, lived in Middle-earth before mainland Europe was formed. They eventually die out, or become trees (as is hinted at in *LR* with the loss of the Ent-wives). Yet their name survived to represent a mythical ancient race of giants, even down to the time of the Saxons. Treebeard’s poem then, could be an attempt at an early version of *Maxims II*.

4.9.4 *Maxims II*

Cyning sceal rice healdan. Ceastra beoð feorran gesyne,
orðanc enta geweorc, þa þe on þysse eorðan syndon
wrætlic weallstana geweorc. Wind byð on lyfte swiftust,
þunar byð þragum hludast. Þrymmas syndan Cristes mycclē.
Wyrð byð swiðost, winter byð cealdost, (5)
lencten hrimgost (he byð lengest ceald),
sumor sunwlightegost (swegel byð hatost),
hærfest hreðeade-gost, hæleðum bringeð
geres wæstmas, þa þe him god sendeð.
Soð bið swicolost, sinc byð deorost, (10)
gold gumena gehwam, and gomol snoterost
fyrngearum frod, se þe ær feala gebideð.
Wea bið wundrum clibbor. Wolcnu scriðað.
Geongne æþeling sceolan gode gesiðas
byldan to beaduwe and to beahgife. (15)
Ellen sceal on eorle. Ecg sceal wið hellme

4.9.4 *Maxims II*

A King must rule a kingdom. Cities are visible from afar,
the skilful work of giants; those that in this world are
wondrous work of wall-stones. Wind is the swiftest in the sky,
thunder is sometimes loudest. Christ's glories are great.
Wyrd is strongest, winter is coldest, (5)
spring frostiest (for it is the longest cold),
summer fairest with sunshine (the sky is the hottest),
harvest most glorious as for men it brings
the year's produce, which God sends them.
Truth is the trickiest, treasure is the dearest, (10)
[as] gold is for all men, and the old one is wisest
through former years, he who before has experienced much.
Woe is wondrously clinging. The clouds wander.
Good companions must encourage a young Atheling
to battle and to ring giving. (15)
Courage must [be] in a warrior. A sword, in battle, must experience

hilde gebidan. Hafuc sceal on glofe
wilde gewunian. Wulf sceal on bearowe
earn anhaga. Eofor sceal on holte,
toðmægenes trum. Til sceal on eðle (20)
domes wyrcean. Daroð sceal on handa,
gar golde fah. Gim sceal, on hringe,
standan steap and geap. Stream sceal on yðum
mencgan mereflode. Mæst sceal on ceole,
segelgyrd seomian. Sweord sceal on bearme, (25)
drihtlic isern. Draca sceal on hlæwe,
frod, frætwum wlanc. Fisc sceal on wætere
cynren cennan. Cyning sceal on healle
beagas dælan. Bera sceal on hæðe,
eald and egesfull. Ea of dune sceal (30)
flodgræg, feran. Fyrd sceal ætsomne,
tirfæstra getrum. Treow sceal on eorle,
wisdom on were. Wudu sceal on foldan
blædum blowan. Beorh sceal on eorþan

the helm. The hawk must on the glove
stay wild. The wolf must [be] in the grove
a wretched recluse. The boar must [be] in the wood
strong with the might of tusks. A good man must in the homeland (20)
achieve fame. The dart must [be] in the hand,
the spear adorned with gold. The gem must, on the ring,
stand steep and broad. The stream must in the waves
mix with the ocean. The mast, [and] the sailyard, must
in the ship, rest. The sword must [be] in the lap, (25)
that noble iron. The dragon must [be] in a mound,
wise, [and] proud of jewels. The fish must in the water
give birth to its kin. The king must in the hall
deal out rings. The bear must [be] on the heath
aged and awesome. The river from the hill must (30)
journey, sea-grey. The army must [be] together,
a troop of glorious ones. Truth must [be] in a man,
wisdom in a warrior. The wood must on the land
bloom with fruits. The hill must on the earth

grene standan. God sceal on heofenum, (35)
dæda demend. Duru sceal on healle,
rum recedes muð. Rand sceal on scylde,
fæst fingra gebeorh. Fugel uppe sceal
lacan on lyfte. Leax sceal on wæle
mid sceote scriðan. Scur sceal, on heofenum, (40)
winde geblanden, in þas woruld cuman.
þeof sceal gangan þystrum wederum. þyrs sceal on fenne gewunian
ana innan lande. Ides sceal dyrne cræfte,
fæmne, hire freond gesecean, gif heo nelle on folce geþeon
þæt hi man beagum gebicge. Brim sceal sealte weallan, (45)
lyfthelm and laguflod, ymb ealra landa gehwylc,
flowan firgenstreamas. Feoh sceal on eorðan
tydran and tyman. Tungol sceal on heofenum
beorhte scinan, swa him bebead meotud.
God sceal wið yfele, geogoð sceal wið ylðo, (50)
lif sceal wið deaþe, leoht sceal wið þystrum,
fyrð wið fyrde, feond wið oðrum,

stand green. God must [be] in the heavens,(35)
the Judge of deeds. The door must [be] in the hall,
the roomy mouth of the building. The boss must [be] on the shield,
the strong protection of fingers. The bird must upwards
sport in the air. The salmon must in the pool
wander with a quick shot. The shower must, in the heavens, (40)
mixed with the wind, come into this world.
The thief must go in dark weather. The demon must dwell in the fen
alone within the land. The woman, a maiden, must with secret craft,
seek her friend, if she will not thrive among [her] people
so that one might buy her with rings. The sea must surge with salt, (45)
cloud-cover and ocean-flood, about all the land,
[and] mountain streams [must] flow. Cattle must on the earth
produce and teem. A star must in the heavens
shine bright, as the Creator commanded it.
Good must strive against evil, youth must against old age, (50)
life must against death, light must against darkness,
army against army, an enemy with the other,
foe against foe, about the land,

lað wið laþe, ymb land sacan,
synne stælan. A sceal snotor hycgean
ymb þysse worulde gewinn, wearh hangian, (55)
fægere ongildan þæt he ær facen dyde
manna cynne. Meotod ana wat
hwyder seo sawul sceal syððan hweorfan,
and ealle þa gastas þe for gode hweorfað
æfter deaðdæge, domes bidað (60)
on fæder fæðme. Is seo forðgesceaft
digol and dyrne; drihten ana wat,
nergende fæder. Næni eft cymeð
hider under hrofas, þe þæt her, for soð,
mannum secge hwylc sy meotodes gesceaft, (65)
sigefolca gesetu, þær he sylfa wunað.

[and] declare sin. Ever must the wise one think
about the struggle in this world, a criminal hang, (55)
to fairly atone for that crime which he did before
against the race of men. The Creator alone knows
whither the soul must journey afterwards,
and all the spirits which journey before God
after the day of death, wait for judgement (60)
in the embrace of the Father. The future is
secret and hidden; the Lord, the saving Father,
alone knows. No-one comes back
hither under the roofs, who here, in truth,
might tell men what the Creator's decree is, (65)
[or] the dwelling of the victorious people, where He Himself lives.

4.9.5 Notes

L. 1. The idea that the work, i.e. buildings, being referred to is Roman, is reinforced by the loan-word *ceastra*. Shippey (1976, pp. 13-14) also notes the proximity of *Maxims II* to the beginning of a version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in the same manuscript, and sees this opening statement as linked to one of the overall themes of the *Chronicle*, namely strong but righteous power.

L. 5. *Wyrð* 'fate'. A concept which the Anglo-Saxons held dearly, that there was some over-riding power, namely 'wyrð', which could govern all things (see earlier discussion under *The Ruin*, 4.5). Marsden (2004, p. 298) suggests 'providence' due to its proximity to the reference to Christ.

L. 10. *swicolost* 'trickiest'. Many editors emend *swicolost* meaning 'trickiest' to *switolost* 'clearest', but Shippey (1976, p. 134 n.1) notes how in *The Durham Proverbs* there is an allusion to the problems of always telling the truth.

L. 13. Many previous editions (including the *ASPR*) emend the manuscript *wea* meaning 'woe' to *weax* meaning 'wax' (i.e. 'wax is very sticky'). However, this edition follows Shippey (1976, p.134 n.2), when he observes that a 'feeling for the triteness of consolation' is common in other Anglo-Saxon poems.

L. 14. An 'Atheling' is a prince, or young royal nobleman.

L. 16. *sceal* 'must'. The modal auxiliary verb *sculon* or 'must' is used consistently in the poem, without an infinitive. Therefore, where it is needed, a suggested verb has been supplied, e.g. 'be', 'stay', 'belongs', etc. It is placed in parenthesis to show that it does not appear in the original. The formula still remains in Modern English with the expression 'Needs must'. Marsden (2004, p. 296) explains that two verbs are used *byð/bið* 'is' and *sculan* 'must'. He suggests the former is reserved for 'unchanging truth'.

Ll. 16-17. *Lit.* 'Edge must against the helm at battle experience'; i.e. a sword, in battle, will clash against a helmet.

Ll. 17-18. Marsden (2004, p. 299) suggests 'the hawk, wild though it be, must get used to the glove'.

Ll. 24-5. *Lit.* 'The mast must in the ship, the sail-yard, rest.'

Ll. 26-7a. A perfect description, of course, for Smaug in *TH*.

L. 40. *sceote* 'shot'. This conveys the idea of a darting movement. However, many editors (e.g. Marsden, 2004, p. 300) have noted that this could also mean 'trout' from the Old English *sceota*.

L. 42. Christopher Tolkien (*Treason*, p. 65, n. 32) notes that Tolkien contemplated using *Thyrs-* in one of his place-names, presumably to mean ‘troll’ or ‘giant’. However, he abandoned this and chose *Etten-*, another word for ‘monster/giant’ surviving in Old and Middle English, and then eventually ‘Ent’.

Ll. 43-5. *Lit.* ‘The woman must with secret craft, a maiden (virgin?), seek her friend if she will not thrive among [her] people so that one might buy her with rings.’ This is a curious statement. It seems to imply that unless the woman can catch her own husband (through some secret way), she runs the risk of being ‘sold’, via the dowry, to another suitor. Cassidy and Ringler (1974, p. 375) interpret this as ‘girls who want to have secret lovers never get married’, but suggest this is naïve and ‘one would like to think that a moralizing scribe has juggled with folk wisdom, leaving us with *nelle* (44b) where pragmatism wrote *wille*’.

L. 46. *Lit.* ‘about each of all the land’.

Ll. 50-54. These lines are somewhat complex. The essence of the translation is the setting up of opposites, i.e. good against evil, youth against age, etc. Yet the final half-line *synne stælan* is awkward, and suggests the ‘revealing of sin’, or ‘charging someone with a crime’. Rodrigues (1995, p. 192) suggests ‘avenge hostility’, but this does not seem acceptable. Marsden (2004, p. 301) suggests ‘both sides, in order to justify their action, will perhaps accuse the other of breaking some law or agreement.’ Cassidy and Ringler (1974, p. 375) also point to a possible link with *Eccl.* 33 : 15.

Ll. 62-3. *Lit.* ‘The Lord alone knows the saving father’.

4. 9. 6 Further Reading

The most up-to-date edition of *Maxims II* is available in Marsden (2004, pp. 296-301), but see also Rodrigues (1995, pp. 189-93); Bradley (1982, pp. 512-15); and Cassidy and Ringler (1974, pp. 373-5) which includes a black and white facsimile of the manuscript. For an analysis of *Maxims II*, a discussion of it in the context of other ‘gnomic poetry’, and an edition of the poem with facing translation see Shippey (1976, pp. 12-20, 76-79, and 134). See also *ASPR*, vi, pp. 55-7.