

## Ideas & Trends

# Fantasy's Power and Peril

By MARINA WARNER

**M**YTHS in which heroic figures are pitted in mortal combat against diabolical enemies have gained fresh energy in popular culture since Sept. 11. The enormous success of the Harry Potter franchise and the drumroll for the imminent release of the film version of J.R.R. Tolkien's "Lord of the Rings" suggest the strong consolatory power of such starkly drawn tales of good conquering evil.

"Boy heroes doing battle with mighty monsters have long been the staple of 'bloods,' as such adventures were called when they were first published for young people in the 19th century. In modern fairy tales, the dragon-killers have shrunk in size and style: the warriors have shed wings and armor and put on spectacles, morphing into brave hobbits and young lads.

"Yet both Tolkien, who published his epic fantasy in the aftermath of World War II, and J.K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter series, are writing within an epic tradition that stretches back to ancient Greece. The evil lord Sauron in "The Lord of the Rings" is named

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after the Greek for dragon; in the Harry Potter stories, the implacable Voldemort's name means Will-to-Death in a kind of mock medieval French.

The strength and familiarity of the good-vs.-evil tale can make the narratives seem inevitable or natural. And children's writers aren't the only ones drawn to such fantasies: the Irish poet Seamus Heaney recently made an eloquent, bleak translation of "Beowulf," the Anglo-Saxon epic that formed Tolkien's life work in his professional capacity as an Oxford professor.

Fantasies of evil and dreams of victory over its agents are increasing in voltage, needless to say, in response to the terrible events of recent times. Osama bin Laden, in fact, appears eerily to be continuing Sauron and Voldemort's legacy (as well as, perhaps, the earlier ambitions of the lethal, foreign antagonists of James Bond).

These ideas have roots in the history of ancient religions. It was in the Middle East, in the thought of the prophet Zoroaster, that the gods worshiped by the ancient Persians were declared to be devils. The prophet Mani, in the middle of the 3rd century in Persia, expanded this ethical interpretation of the continuing struggle between light and dark into a strong form of religious dualism; Manicheans envisaged the clash of forces as a personal, eter-

nal struggle between divine powers of good and evil.

Both Zoroastrianism and Manicheism have profoundly influenced the extreme warrior visions of Islamic and Judao-Christian thought — Saint Augustine, for example, was a Manichee in his youth and its philosophy colored his deep commitment to the notion of original evil.

**T**HE Christian devil, though a bright angel in his beginnings, became a vehicle of irreversible wickedness: the great philosopher Origen is neither a saint nor even a father of the church because he held that the devil could be converted. This was heresy. Wagner's Ring cycle, a direct progenitor of Tolkien's myth, was forged in the same crucible. In many ways, the century that has just ended and the one that has just begun have not experienced the rise of Christian or Islamic fundamentalism so much as the revival of Zoroastrianism.

But this tradition assumes there is only one way to view the world: as a titanic battle between good and evil, with the triumphant goals of destruction, extermination and annihilation. Mythology and history suggest alternatives: fantasies of reconciliation and redemption, for example.

One countervailing fairy-tale tra-



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What was old is new again: praying at a Zoroastrian temple in Iran.

dition that has been sidelined in the epic fantasies of Ms. Rowling and Tolkien is the transformation story. The model of "Beauty and the Beast" structures thousands of fairy tales, ancient and modern. This kind of story, focusing on the possibility of change, imagines the redemption of the monster, his (sometimes her) conversion. To even mention this now seems inappropriate. Yet the fantasy of destruction in itself produces change by another means, and such changes may be more dangerous than before.

Transformation stories are associated with women, for it is Beauty's courage, perseverance and fidelity that accomplish the Beast's metamorphosis. One of the striking features of the current fantasies about evil is their thoroughgoing maleness: Tolkien's work includes examples of female monstrosity (Shelob, a gigantic, malignant spi-

der) but not of female heroism. (In the film, there's a token feminized elf, played by the actress Cate Blanchett.) And the Harry Potter books display little imagination with regard to both young and older female characters.

**A**NOTHER troubling dimension of Pottermania and the Tolkien revival is that they both invest power in talismanic objects that must be controlled, or, if necessary, smashed. Tolkien's ring, Quidditch broomsticks and other magic weapons act as instruments with an instant, direct effect. The association of magical power with weapons of destruction, not with philosophical wisdom, with devices, not with deliberation and negotiation, takes such stories out of the human arena.

Interestingly, for such fantastical tales, they reject enigma, unpredictability and wonder: the students at

Hogwarts have only to learn spells, like lessons, or acquire the right brand of weapon, to become lords of creation themselves.

It's always difficult to tell the dancer from the dance in matters of myth and ideology: do box-office megahits reflect anxieties and dreams, or do they shape them, encourage them, even incite them?

The insistence on one kind of narrative can obliterate another. Besides, while the fantasy of the dark lord who can be blamed for all harm and hurt may provide immediate comfort and hope, this kind of story knows it can't settle the matter. It imagines a perpetually recurring struggle with irrepressible forces of evil: in the Harry Potter books, Lord Voldemort comes back to life again and again.

These myths ultimately grant more power to their villains than they can ever take away.