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The Romantic Imagination of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer and J.R.R. Tolkien

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Abstract

Studies on the presence of Romantic elements in J.R.R. Tolkien's literary production have steadily risen to prominence, especially since the publication of Julian Eilmann's landmark monograph *J.R.R. Tolkien: Romanticist and Poet* (2017) and, more recently, the edited collection *The Romantic Spirit in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (2024). Our paper seeks to contribute to this scholarly upsurge by presenting a comparative analysis of Tolkien's works and those penned by one of the most noteworthy authors of Spanish Romanticism, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836–1870). Akin to the *Kunstmärchen* of German Romanticism and Tolkien's Fairy-stories, Bécquer's *Leyendas*—e. g. "El monte de las ánimas" (1861), "Los ojos verdes" (1861), and "El rayo de luna" (1862)—retell or (re)invent Spanish legends via an authorial figure who acts as a mediator between the past (historical and feigned) and the present. Like Tolkien's, Bécquer's prose works reference an idea of the past in order to romanticize the world within the text, through which Bécquer recreates a fantastic vision of Spain. This romanticization is conjured in Bécquer's storytelling through the worldbuilding of a perilous realm inhabited by ghosts of medieval knights, spectral monks, spirits of good and evil, apparitions, the author, and ourselves as readers; it is our world, with its beliefs and landscapes, re-enchanted. Whilst the concept of re-enchantment has been readily addressed in Tolkien scholarship, our paper will specifically deploy Eilmann's reframing of Tolkien's concept of "recovery" as a Romantic venture. This helps us explore the points of convergence and uniqueness between Bécquer's writing and specific episodes of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and the wider legendarium. We therefore seek to establish a connection that transcends barriers in time, language, and space by interpreting these authors' oeuvres as the expression of a shared Romantic practice where reality and Faërie coalesce.

Additional Keywords

Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer; J.R.R. Tolkien; Romanticism; Faërie; recovery; worldbuilding; medievalism; folklore

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THE ROMANTIC IMAGINATION OF GUSTAVO ADOLFO BÉCQUER AND J.R.R. TOLKIEN¹

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INTRODUCTION

As WILL SHERWOOD STATES IN THE INTRODUCTION to *The Romantic Spirit in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (2024), “[h]istorically, Romanticism has been woefully overlooked in Tolkien scholarship” (xix), and yet, “[w]hether a conscious or unconscious act, Tolkien was incorporating and building on tropes, ideals, worldviews and aesthetics that were, during his lifetime, associated with Romantic artists, philosophers and authors” (xv). The past twenty years have seen a shift towards a more emphasized inclusion of Romanticism and the Romantic in the field of Tolkien Studies, as evidenced by Romanticism being placed at the center of the German Tolkien Society’s (DTG) 2010 seminar² and the Tolkien Society Hybrid Seminar 2024, the publication of Julian Eilmann’s groundbreaking 2017 monograph *J.R.R. Tolkien: Romanticist and Poet*, the release of *The Romantic Spirit in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (2024), and the publication of several other shorter writings.³ Our paper seeks to continue exploring the points of encounter and divergence between J.R.R. Tolkien’s literary oeuvre and the multiple strands of artistic expression dubbed as Romantic by elaborating a comparative study between Tolkien’s literary production and that of the Spanish late-Romantic author Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer.⁴ The goal of our paper is not, however, to offer conclusive proof of the influence Bécquer’s works may have had on Tolkien or whether Tolkien had in fact read Bécquer’s *Legends*, as

¹ An earlier version of this paper was read at The Tolkien Society Hybrid Seminar 2024, Tolkien’s Romantic Resonances. A recording of the talk is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDj5vFkTzFI>.

² Held at Friedrich-Schiller University Jena, see Thomas Fornet-Ponse et al. for the conference proceedings.

³ See Anna E. Thayer (89–99) and Robert T. Tally (1–8) as samples.

⁴ It is worth reminding readers that: “Romanticism, at its most essential, is not a set of attitudes, but rather an intimate and unified personal conception of the world that, nevertheless, extends beyond individual authors and national boundaries” (Bynum 123). Bécquer is at times described as a “post-Romantic” author (Aldana Reyes 87, 105n12).

no evidence on these matters has been uncovered to this day.⁵ Rather, we seek to visualize how these two authors, distinct in the language, place, and time of their emergence, share a Romantic practice that infuses their literary endeavors.

It is possible that readers of *Mythlore* have heard of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836 Seville–1870 Madrid), the greatest exponent of late Spanish literary Romantic writing (Ilie 312), and perhaps even perused some of his works. Regardless of your knowledge of the author, you are probably wondering why and how Bécquer and his works could further our understanding of J.R.R. Tolkien (1892 Bloemfontein–1973 Bournemouth). We argue that, when their fiction, and in particular their prose, are placed side by side, the distinct tang of their creations is not so different, and that such a comparative exercise is, ultimately, also one of connection that broadens the scope and affordances of Tolkien scholarship.

To begin with, their approach to fiction also shares common ground with regard to worldbuilding, in Mark J.P. Woolf's sense of the word (29), as for Bécquer the primary world was a point of departure as well, for "the notion that another world exists beyond this one, in a dimension that is rarely glimpsed by the poet, and then only with the fortuitous aid of his [sic] imagination" (Ilie 317), but that is not all. It is worth pointing out that Bécquer and Tolkien shared several traits that help overcome the historical, cultural, and age gap that sunders them.⁶ Both were left orphans as young boys,⁷ struggled in their early years, and found solace in Catholicism. As they grew up and matured, they took up painting and writing, the latter turning into a source of income for Bécquer through journalism and other literary activities,⁸ as well as becoming part of Tolkien's academic duties and a private amusement he later monetized. Bécquer and Tolkien wrote poetry and prose with passion,⁹ and they relied on a literary circle that spurred them on to continue creating. They also espoused conservative political views, and had a comparable attitude towards the dangers

⁵ Whether Father Francis Morgan's lost library, to which Tolkien had access (Ferrández Bru 32), contained a volume of Bécquer's popular *Obras* (first published in 1871 and never out of print since then) is a difficult but interesting matter to explore. However, such speculations also need to account for Tolkien's: a) knowledge of Spanish at the time and b) acquaintance with the source. There are no extant records of Tolkien's familiarity with the works of Bécquer (see Carpenter; Cilli; Scull and Hammond; Tolkien, *Letters*).

⁶ See Gabriel Núñez Molina for a succinct summary of Bécquer's cultural, economic, political, and social milieu (2–6, 8–10, esp. 5–6, 8).

⁷ Both of their fathers died first, followed shortly after by their mothers.

⁸ See Pascual Izquierdo for details (17–27).

⁹ The recent publication of *The Collected Poems of J.R.R. Tolkien* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2024) in three volumes, edited by Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, testify to Tolkien's devotion to poetry, as he is often regarded as a prose writer only.

of modernity, which they tried to address or even redress through their fiction.¹⁰ Since both were born in times of change and upheaval, it is not surprising that they used their vivid imaginations to deal with trauma and disenchantment through fantastic worldbuilding with a strong influence of folklore.

Bécquer was trying to achieve this by means of updating the by then almost deceased subgenre of legends with innovative lyric narratives that radiate originality and literary quality in their treatment of popular traditions,¹¹ and Tolkien by modernizing the traditions of the fantastic inaugurated by authors like George MacDonald and William Morris, as well as bringing forth a new genre within the literary landscape of the mid 20th century. One must nonetheless pay heed to Tobin Siebers's observation that "all Romantic literature inclines restlessly toward the fantastic. The Romantic and the fantastic are too intimately joined to be divided" (13). These two creative strands constitute the means through which Bécquer tried to preserve the customs that he thought would disappear with the industrial revolution and machines. He wished that his contemporaries regarded the past with the respectful attention it deserved, acknowledging the debt to the works of their ancestors so as to avoid that these faded into careless oblivion (Bécquer, *celda* 4.136). For him, his legends were contributions to a tradition to be handed down for future use. Bécquer established a dialogue with the past that was relevant in the present, especially because the legends were published in newspapers and magazines (see also Núñez Molina 8; Ilie 317). His attempt, or rather success, was not wholly different from that of Tolkien in that both tried to bring forth a mythical past that had the power to reenchant the land by romanticizing it. Our intention is to conduct a comparative analysis that can help us understand and appreciate both writers' particular approach to Romanticism. This paper not only considers similarities but also the characteristics that make each writer unique within a similar shared tradition.

RECOVERY AND ROMANTICISM

For our study, we will deploy Eilmann's reframing of the Tolkienian concept of Recovery. In "On Fairy-stories," Tolkien names *Recovery* as one of the cornerstones of fairy-stories, which he then defines as the "regaining of a clear view [...] 'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them'" ("On Fairy-

¹⁰ While some of Bécquer's writings address his contemporaries' dissociation with their inherited culture and values, his legends represent the effects that such detachment has in their characters' worldview (Sierra 480), in particular that of protagonists. See Sarah Sierra for two extended examples (481–490).

¹¹ Attempts which can be rendered the most successful of the entire subgenre of legends in Spanish letters (Izquierdo 31–34) as well as the last outstanding vestiges of Romanticism in Spain (Aldana Reyes 109).

stories" ["OFS"] 67). For Eilmann, recovery underscores how "fairy-tales, or fantasy in general [...] is able to uncover the marvel in the mundane," which is directly linked to the concept of Romanticization (8). Eilmann then connects the perspective through which recovery is possible with a Romantic view, arguing that:

By looking through the Romantic 'perspective glass', the prosaic world is more clearly visible [...] and at the same time re-enchanted, so we are 'startled anew'. In the Romanticist view, such an enchantment does not mean a step backwards into an unenlightened or childlike thinking, at least not with regard to the metaphysical truth connected with it. (8)

In this sense, Tolkien's stories about Faërie¹² recover elements of the primary world which are then seen in a new light in Arda, as evidenced through the construction of this fictional world throughout the author's literary production. Rather than arguing how Tolkien and Bécquer romanticized real-world places, we want to focus on how Faërie "is the world in a romanticised state" (Eilmann 106). The world within these texts thus doubles as both a reimagined version of our primary world and acts as a secondary world. Furthermore, Middle-earth affords the protagonists of works like *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* instances in which they are marveled and startled afresh by the world they have come to consider familiar and known. Re-enchantment in Tolkien's works thus functions both at the level of the reader and at the level of the narration, where characters marvel at the veiled or yet-to-be explored wonders of the place they call home, such as the moment Frodo places his hand on the trunk of a *mallorn* tree for the first time (Flieger 167; Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] II.6.351).

As for Bécquer, this poet romanticizes the Spain of his literary creations by weaving into his worldbuilding the history, "landscapes of ruins¹³ and desolation," and popular traditions of real-world places like Aragón, Cataluña, Toledo, Sevilla, and Soria along with the offspring of his own imagination (Aldana Reyes 89).¹⁴ These stories emulate the German Romantic model of the *Kunstmärchen*, "generally involving magic or the supernatural" and are often set in fictional medieval times (98). The fantastical vision of Spain's past and present recreated in Bécquer's prose legends or *Leyendas* went against the grain established by the historical, realist literature of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Spain, making it a recovery of the world known to the author and his readers.

¹² "[T]he realm or state in which fairies have their being" (Tolkien, "OFS" 32).

¹³ For Bécquer "ruins are far more than lifeless reminders of a dead past. They are traces and vestiges of another existence" (Bynum 45).

¹⁴ In the words of Brant B. Bynum: "Bécquer can be related to an essential pan-European Romanticism that has imagination at its core" (17), which contrasts with other Spanish Romantics (13–17; see also Ilie 314–317 and Núñez Molina 10).

BÉCQUER'S LEGENDS AND TOLKIEN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

Bécquer published his legends in newspapers and magazines from 1858 to 1864 early in his adulthood. The three legends under analysis in this paper were published in *El Contemporáneo*, a conservative newspaper published in Madrid from 20 December 1860 until 31 October 1865.¹⁵ "El monte de las ánimas" (7 November 1861), "Los ojos verdes" (15 December 1861), and "El rayo de luna" (12 & 13 February 1862) are all set in the province of Soria, Spain,¹⁶ and contain religious connotations throughout.¹⁷ In Brant B. Bynum's words, Bécquer had a preference for "places where mediation between matter and spirit is possible, that is to say, places characterized by isolation, silence, dimness and interiority" (42), which accord well with the primary settings in these three legends. It must be noted that although there are traces of northern European and national folklore,¹⁸ these are only the ingredients for an original, highly personal, and sophisticated tale. The supernatural element is subtle, and alternative empirical explanations are offered throughout the tale, though it is proven by the end that logic cannot account for all the otherworldly occurrences. These legends were not, however, an act of escapism through literary creation with interpolations of the fantastic (Izquierdo 23), but rather interpretations of reality through fiction. Although the seemingly well-defined boundaries of the real and the supernatural stand at contrast in "Los ojos verdes" and "El monte de las ánimas" (Izquierdo 35), these two legends also establish a playful and complex dialogue between these two planes that constitutes their essence.¹⁹ This statement also applies to "El rayo de luna." Bécquer is not interested in historical accuracy or

¹⁵ Bécquer published several other legends in this venue, and he became its director at the end of 1864 (Izquierdo 26). See Fernando Darío González Grueso for the periodicals in which each of Bécquer's legends appeared, including the dates of publication (58n1).

¹⁶ The city of Soria and its surroundings in "El monte de las ánimas" are fictionalised but real (see Bécquer, "ánimas" 206n3, 207n5), as those in "El rayo de luna" (Bécquer, "luna" 251n7). "Los ojos verdes" is instead a tale set in an unspecified vicinity of Moncayo range, province of Soria (see Bécquer, "verdes" 218n3, 219n4).

¹⁷ "[W]hile Bécquer's works may be colored, to some extent, by the prevailing ideas of his time, including idealistic philosophy, he is still powerfully influenced by the Christian faith" (Bynum 25; see also Aldana Reyes 89).

¹⁸ Whereas part of the material in "El monte de las ánimas" seems to originate from tales about coquette women and cursed clerics of diverse provenance, there are several possible sources for "Los ojos verdes," though the most prominent appear to be those from European folklore which incorporate evil water spirits (see Bécquer, "verdes" 217n1). In turn, "El rayo de luna" is based seemingly on other legends (Bécquer, "luna" 247-248n1) while it contains northern European folkloric elements as well (249n5). In all cases, the end product of Bécquer's writing constitutes an innovation. See González Grueso for a brief compendium of folkloric sources in Bécquer's legends (58-59, 61-62, 66-67).

¹⁹ This is the hallmark of Bécquer's oeuvre as a whole (Castells Molina 45).

in factually reconstructing a medieval past,²⁰ but rather in sketching a plausible setting where his fantastic tales, instead of clashing head on with reality (Castells Molina 45; González Grueso 67), provoke a sense of wonder and, potentially, interrogate the boundaries of that reality.

For our comparative study, we will undertake two different strategies: a comparison on the basis of theme and a comparison on the basis of a close-reading exercise. In terms of theme, *The Lord of the Rings* presents a series of places that, either through the hobbit-centric perspective of the novel or in the popular knowledge of the inhabitants of Middle-earth, “constitute a mysterious Other and symbolize the danger of straying beyond familiar territory” (Sabo 98). Examples in point are the Barrow-downs in *The Fellowship of the Ring* and the Paths of the Dead in *The Return of the King*.²¹ Whilst a more detailed account of how these places came to be does not form part of the novel’s main plot, the lore surrounding them adds depth to Middle-earth as a fictional, world-building construct and challenges the main characters’ understanding of the world they inhabit. In both the Barrows and the Paths, evil shadows or accursed creatures entered these places and made them their abode, transforming them into sites of peril and death filled with the echoes of the past that are juxtaposed to the events of the novel’s present. The Barrow-downs remain on the fringes of hobbit-lore, but do “not belong to hobbit history” (Sabo 98). Spirits have animated the bones guarded by the mounds, infusing them with the memories of battles lost at the hand of Carn Dûm, Angmar.²² In *The Return of the King*, the Paths of the Dead appear as a place with a “fell name” which the living avoid and from whence none have come back to tell the tale (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] V.2.781). As made clear by the lore of the Dúnedain, the former worshippers of Sauron and traitors to Isildur’s cause fled, and are now cursed to walk the hills and passages as the “Sleepless Dead” (V.2.781-2).

²⁰ Philip Silver indicates that “for Bécquer as a national-romantic, oral tradition and the ruins of religious monuments were the preferred sources of national values and hence more precious than any historical ‘truth’” (76).

²¹ Nick Groom describes the Barrow-downs as “a disquieting place” (415). Obviously, this is true for readers, but even more so for the hobbit protagonists.

²² In a non-anthropocentric reading of the passage Groom argues that “[t]he witchery of this predatory wight is lithic, drawn from rock and stone” (415). However, in the B variant of the manuscript “Of the Journey of the Black Riders according to the account that Gandalf gave to Frodo,” it is explained that during the Witch-king’s brief sojourn at the Barrow-downs, “the Barrow-wights were roused, and all things of evil spirit, hostile to Elves and Men, were on the watch with malice in the Old Forest and on the Barrow-downs” (Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales* 348).

In “El monte de las ánimas” or “The Mountain of Souls,” Bécquer intertwines fictional events and characters of the Middle Ages with real-world places in the city of Soria and the banks of the river Duero. Whilst the plot addresses the tragic story of seemingly unrequited love of Alonso for Beatriz, the storyline takes place amidst the ominous lore of the Mountain of Souls. Like the Barrows and Dunharrow, the Mountain in Bécquer’s legend is a place to be avoided, for on the night of All Hallows, the ghosts of templars and local noblemen leave their graves to reenact the battle that led to their doom and hunt down those who dare trespass their domain. These spirits are trapped in a void or purgatory, and similar to the Wights and the Sleepless Dead of Tolkien’s Middle-earth, they are not benign, as “the mere sight of them freezes with horror the blood of the bravest, turns their hair white or the whirlwind of their fantastic race entrances them” (Bécquer, “ánimas” 212).²³ In Bécquer’s legend, the narrator is unclear about the cause of Alonso’s death; he is either eaten by wolves or slain by the specters that rove about the mountain. Beatriz instead is found dead with a horror-struck countenance, and is later witnessed as a ghost who runs endlessly around Alonso’s tomb, being chased by the ghouls of the past. Here Bécquer romanticizes encounters with the bygone age by wrapping them in an aura of spectrality that inspires readers to look at the city of Soria under a new lens. Both Bécquer and Tolkien exploit the powers of their Romantic imagination to cross the threshold of the mundane and the otherworldly, and yet both tales are firmly rooted in an earthly, material setting with ghostly touches.

With regard to the close reading, “Los ojos verdes” [“The Green Eyes”] tells the tale of a malicious undine who enchants Fernando, a nobleman who spends the rest of his days by her pool until the spirit causes Fernando to drown himself. A particular scene in this legend exudes an air of romantic enchantment, as Fernando narrates:

“I believed I saw, glittering at its [the pool’s] bottom, a strange thing . . . , very strange indeed: the eyes of a woman [...] Perhaps it was just a ray of sunlight that slithered through its foam; perhaps one of those flowers

²³ “cuya sola vista puede helar de horror la sangre del más valiente, tornar sus cabellos blancos o arrebatarle en el torbellino de su fantástica carrera.” “Arrebatar” appears to mean ‘enchant’ or ‘enrapture’ in this context. All translations, including titles, are our own. Medieval romances are characterized by the use of monstrous creatures to gauge the morality and acts of courage of the protagonists, a tradition followed by Tolkien (Forest-Hill 39) as well as Bécquer (Aldana Reyes 98). However, there is a crucial difference: whereas the hobbits endure the test of the Barrow-wights, at least with the aid of Tom Bombadil, Fernando warns Beatriz (and readers) from the beginning that his chances against the spirits of templars and noblemen are nought, as the quote above illustrates.

which float among algae at the bed of the pool, whose calyxes are of the color of emeralds . . . ; I do not know; I believe I saw a gaze that locked its eyes on mine" (Bécquer, "verdes" 223).²⁴

This cheerful description of Fernando's first encounter with the undine contrasts starkly with the last in the change of weather and time of day, and also the morbid romantic elements described this time by a detached omniscient narrator: "The night began to lengthen its shadows; the moon shimmered on the pool's surface; the puffs of wind made the mist swirl, and the green eyes glowed in the dark as will-o'-the-wisps that run over the glimmer of the foul waters . . ." (Bécquer, "verdes" 226).²⁵ Tolkien leans towards this last quotation's tone and atmosphere in the chapter "The Passage of the Marshes," as "mists curled and smoked" above the marsh water (*LotR* IV.2.625). Sam experiences the lighting of the corpse candles first as "a wisp of pale sheen," then as "dimly shining smoke, some like misty flames flickering slowly" (IV.2.627). Frodo describes the sight of the dead as follows:

I have seen them too. In the pools when the candles were lit. They lie in all the pools, pale faces, deep deep under the dark water. I saw them: grim faces and evil, and noble faces and sad. Many faces proud and fair, and weeds in their silver hair. But all foul, all rotting, all dead. A fell light is in them. (IV.2.628)

Tolkien and Bécquer seek different narrative ends with their descriptions,²⁶ and yet both convey through their respective romantic portraits an uncanny aura of life that extinguishes, placing the emphasis on light, and especially the *ignes fatui*.

The analysis of "El rayo de luna" ["The Moonbeam"] benefits from both a theme-based comparison and a comparative close-reading with *LotR* in order to understand authorial intent better. In this legend, Manrique, a solitary nobleman, mistakes the fleeting glimpses of moonbeams for his ideal lover, an

²⁴ "creí haber visto brillar en su fondo una cosa extraña . . . , muy extraña: los ojos de una mujer [...] Tal vez sería un rayo del sol que serpeó fugitivo entre su espuma; tal vez una de esas flores que flotan entre las algas de su seno y cuyos cálices parecen esmeraldas . . . ; no sé; yo creí ver una mirada que se clavó en la mía."

²⁵ "La noche comenzaba a extender sus sombras; la luna rielaba en la superficie del lago; la niebla se arremolinaba al soplo del aire, y los ojos verdes brillaban en la oscuridad como los fuegos fatuos que corren sobre el haz de las aguas infectas . . ." The significance of the color green in *LotR* should also be kept in mind, i.e. the green light that emanates from Gollum's eyes (Tolkien, *LotR* IV.2.632) or the greenish glow of the Barrows (I.8.140).

²⁶ In Bécquer's work ("verdes" 217–226), it seems to lead to the momentary unity of matter and spirit (Bynum 88–90), in this case represented by the act of Fernando kissing the undine (Bécquer, "verdes" 226; Bynum 89), which inevitably results in disaster.

illusory woman he chases after until he realizes it was only an optical effect;²⁷ a deep feeling of disenchantment with life ensues. A comparison on the basis of theme reveals that the mystical encounter described by Bécquer (“luna” 252) bears resemblance with Aragorn’s first sight of Arwen (Tolkien, *LotR.App.* A.1058), though in this latter case the object of Aragorn’s love at first sight is of course corporeal.²⁸ It is true that the personalities of the two lovers, Aragorn and Manrique, are quite at variance. Although Manrique lives during bellicose times (Bécquer, “luna” 248, 261), he lives in the world of waking dreams in complete isolation, fantasizing with and chasing after impossible loves, to the point that he appears to be on the onset of madness; at the beginning of the legend he is described as “loco,” meaning ‘mad,’ twice (250, 252). The level-headed Aragorn may come across as an idealistic character to some, but one whose ideals are rooted in pragmatic matters, as he lacks leisure and peace to build castles in the air, as his fate dictates (*LotR.App.*A.1060; Mohammadi 439–441). Yet both men are arrested by the mere first sight of those who appear to be perfect partners. The incorporeality of the woman Manrique thinks he sees is matched by Aragorn’s doubts about the veracity of his sight, as he wonders whether Arwen is just a byproduct of Elvish minstrelsy.²⁹ Manrique’s perception is only matched by that of a poet in apprehending the unseen (Izquierdo 67), which is precisely the ability that cast doubts on Aragorn’s discernment of the real from the unreal. In the two cases, the elaborate interplay between these two planes strengthens and elevates Aragorn’s and Manrique’s episodes beyond any traditional narrative of budding love. Bécquer and Tolkien have disparate purposes with the inclusion of such scenes in their respective works, but these loves at first sight exude an air of similarity, a shared Romantic tradition whose recovery of the ordinary is illustrated best by a close reading of certain passages.

The analysis of such sections benefits from placing them side by side in comparison for a later analytical commentary. Regardless of Manrique’s and Aragorn’s different personalities, social situations, and physicality of their ideal women, the excerpts of those first encounters with the female characters are once more representative of the authors’ Romantic disposition:

²⁷ This lack of materiality of the beloved that Bécquer painstakingly elaborated throughout his writings is characteristic of his *Rimas* [*Rhymes*] (de la Flor 29, 33)

²⁸ This encounter is reminiscent of Beren and Lúthien’s as narrated, for example, in *The Silmarillion*, where Beren is described as having fallen “into enchantment” at the very sight of Lúthien, “and he became dumb, as one that is bound under a spell” (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 165).

²⁹ Aragorn has knowledge of Faërie—quite literally—and yet there is an element of this enchantment that catches him off guard.

At the end of the somber poplar-lined avenue, he [Manrique] had seen flutter something white that floated for a moment and then vanished in the darkness. It was the edge of the dress of a woman, of a woman who had crossed the path and was hiding in the foliage the moment the mad dreamer of chimeras and impossibilities entered the gardens. (Bécquer, "luna" 252)³⁰

And suddenly even as he [Aragorn] sang he saw a maiden walking on a greensward among the white stems of the birches; and he halted amazed, thinking that he had strayed into a dream, or else that he had received the gift of the Elf-minstrels, who can make the things of which they sing appear before the eyes of those that listen. (Tolkien, *LotR*.App.A.1058)

The lack of bodily descriptions and even the associations with the color white (of the supposed dress and stems of birches) are conspicuous, but even more so the failing or lack of light (sunset in *LotR* and midnight in "luna"), since all of them combined create the perfect atmosphere for the encounters. Even the backdrop trees in each situation, although they are composed of poplars in "luna" and birches in *LotR*, trigger a similar sensory response in readers with their light-colored bark,³¹ especially in these poorly illuminated environs. The denouement of the love stories is, however, where lies the most striking contrast. Manrique continues his search to no avail for two months and then decides to go back to the place where he first saw the mysterious woman. That is when he realizes to his horror that no such person exists: she is just moonbeams filtering through the canopy, which causes him to spend his days in inaction and solitude, leading everyone to believe he is insane (Bécquer, "luna" 260–261). The nameless narrator agrees with Manrique in the realization that we spend our lives chasing after our own flights of fancy which dissolve the very moment we apprehend them (262).³² Aragorn does not undergo the same fate, and not only because Arwen is flesh and blood, but also because in spite of the end of the relationship being tainted by the tragedy of Aragorn's mortality, they enjoy each other's company and love for years (*LotR* App.A.1062–1063). Tolkien and Bécquer address this matter in distinct ways; for Bécquer, an ideal match can only exist in the realm of unrealized imagination, and, for Tolkien instead, this has its place at a mythical level that could be expressed through writing. This difference, which could reflect the beliefs of each writer, does not translate into

³⁰ "En el fondo de la sombría alameda había visto agitarse una cosa blanca que flotó un momento y desapareció en la oscuridad. La orla del traje de una mujer, de una mujer que había cruzado el sendero y se ocultaba entre el follaje, en el mismo instante en que el loco soñador de quimeras e imposibles penetraba en los jardines."

³¹ Many subspecies of poplars in the Iberian Peninsula have whitish or light-brown bark.

³² For Izquierdo this is an autobiographical aphorism (67).

a lack of vigor in reenchanting the land, an accomplishment at which both Bécquer and Tolkien succeed at length.

CONCLUSION

Bécquer, unlike Tolkien, died in obscurity. His editors' post-mortem efforts were key to secure his national and international fame. Although Tolkien passed away as a renowned author, posthumous undertakings have been instrumental in helping readers understand his works, mind, and fictional world better, as evidenced by the editions of his unpublished pieces. What we wanted to achieve in this paper, by comparing and contrasting these authors side by side, was to, first, demonstrate how they can be connected in their treatment of Romantic motives and their different approaches. Second, we wish to emphasize that literary scholarship in both the Spanish-speaking world and the Anglosphere has everything to gain by pursuing these comparative analyses, which underscore Tolkien's universal relevance. It is our hope that the present article serves to spark a transnational discussion.

Until now, critics have interpreted the fantastic elements in Bécquer's legends as mere embellishments that made stories about human nature more appealing or at most that strengthened certain narrative strategies. However, a close comparison with Tolkien has drawn to light that the fantastic in Bécquer is not simply ornamental or a plot device, but instances of small-scale worldbuilding. Bécquer shines at enchanting his native Spain and recovering the extraordinary land of Soria anew, a setting for human stories where the environment does not simply fade into the background. As it also happens with Middle-earth, the land and its cultural associations play a crucial part in both Bécquer and Tolkien.

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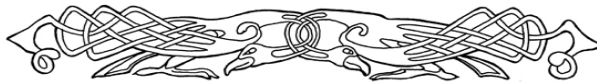
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