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'A Merrier World:' Small Renaissances Engendered in J. R. R. Tolkien's Legendarium

Dominic DiCarlo Meo

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Abstract
After surviving the trenches of World War I when many of his friends did not, Tolkien continued as the rest of the world did: moving, growing, and developing, putting the darkness of war behind. He had children, taught at the collegiate level, wrote, researched. Then another Great War knocked on the global door. His sons marched off, and Britain was again consumed. The "War to End All Wars" was repeating itself and nothing was for certain. In such extended dark times, J. R. R. Tolkien drew on what he knew-language, philology, myth, and human rights-peering back in history to the mythologies and legends of old while igniting small movements in modern thought. Arthurian, Beowulfian, African, and Egyptian myths all formed a bedrock for his *Legendarium*, and fantasy-fiction as we now know it was rejuvenated Just like the artists, authors, and thinkers from the Late Medieval period, Tolkien summoned old thoughts to craft new creations that would cement themselves in history forever. This thesis will examine the roots of Tolkien’s influence, seeking to observe small features and decisions he made that led to innovation still felt today, from roots in children’s literature to having a closed-off creation that few could tamper with.

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'A MERRIER WORLD:' SMALL RENAISSANCES ENGENDERED BY J. R. R.
TOLKIEN'S LEGENDARIUM

By
Dominic DiCarlo Meo
A Senior Thesis Submitted to the
Eastern Michigan University
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with Honors in Language, Literature and Writing,
Department of English Language and Literature

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‘A MERRIER WORLD:’ SMALL RENAISSANCES ENGENDERED BY J. R. R. TOLKIEN’S *LEGENDARIUM*

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Sponsored by

Dr. Elisabeth Dâumer

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ABSTRACT

After surviving the trenches of World War I when many of his friends did not, Tolkien continued as the rest of the world did: moving, growing, and developing, putting the darkness of war behind. He had children, taught at the collegiate level, wrote, researched. Then another Great War knocked on the global door. His sons marched off, and Britain was again consumed. The “War to End All Wars” was repeating itself and nothing was for certain. In such extended dark times, J. R. R. Tolkien drew on what he knew—language, philology, myth, and human rights—peering back in history to the mythologies and legends of old while igniting small movements in modern thought. Arthurian, Beowulfian, African, and Egyptian myths all formed a bedrock for his Legendarium, and fantasy-fiction as we now know it was rejuvenated. Just like the artists, authors, and thinkers from the Late Medieval period, Tolkien summoned old thoughts to craft new creations that would cement themselves in history forever. This thesis will examine the roots of Tolkien’s influence, seeking to observe small features and decisions he made that led to innovation still felt today, from roots in children’s literature to having a closed-off creation that few could tamper with.

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Part I — Introductions and Canons

I. An Introduction

This thesis will examine the roots of Tolkien’s influence, seeking to observe small features and decisions he made that led to innovation still felt today. Every chapter grapples with a topic Tolkien made strides in, small stones tossed that have formed ripples in the water of literary scholarship for decades. From theological examinations to explications of allegorical symbolism for nearly every page he wrote, the scholarship on Tolkien is rich and diverse, forming an established critical canon for me to examine. This thesis seeks to explore the cracks I have found in that foundation, with individual segments of my thesis focusing on certain overlooked areas, in addition to offering observations within the context of existing Tolkien scholarship. This area of academic study is much in the same vein as its source material; flowing, dense, and always growing. The topics I have chosen to write about are small chinks in the scholarship I have studied in depth, areas that seem to have room to move about in with the benefit of countless researchers that have built the lasting foundation of Tolkien academia.

This thesis is intended for all interested parties, though certain challenges arise. As said, Tolkien’s world of Middle-earth is a dense one, from its ideological conception to the scholarship after its creation. Terms, words, languages, and characters within it are diverse and—quite literally—otherworldly. I have taken measures to detail essential phrases, such as “Legendarium and various places, peoples, and kingdoms. As a consequence, I have omitted bits of the Legendarium that can be done without on a small-scale entry in the prevailing scholarship to keep the thesis from being hampered by
context, hopefully creating a discourse where casual awareness of *The Lord of the Rings* is sufficient (whether the be of pop-culture or fans of the film adaptations). I have attached the two poems by Tolkien that I discuss at length, “The Last Ship” and “Mythopoeia,” for ease of reading—both are often difficult to find beyond small publications.

*The Legendarium* is a term that scholars, critics, and the author himself have used to varying definitions. The earliest recorded (and now public) use of “legendarium” by Tolkien is in a letter from Tolkien to an interested publisher seeking to print *The Lord of the Rings* in 1951:

> This legendarium ends with a vision of the end of the world, its breaking and remaking, and the recovery of the Silmarilli and the ‘light before the Sun’—after a final battle which owes, I suppose, more to the Norse vision of Ragnarök than to anything else, though it is not much like it. (*The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* 149)

This “legendarium” comprises all writings by Tolkien connected to the story of Middle-earth. Steeped in mythology, with their first installment being a tale for children, these published writings set the modern course for fantasy-fiction. With the benefit of posthumous publications, readers can now explore the tales behind *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, these two titles being the only official installments from the *Legendarium* published by their author. *The Silmarillion* is a book published after Tolkien’s death and completed by his son, Christopher. It represents a lifetime’s work, the skeletal backbone that *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* grew from. In order to understand the small renaissances that Tolkien engendered with his groundbreaking publications, a question of “what matters?” becomes essential to the scholarship and to understanding what Tolkien’s “canon” really is.
II. A Canon

The ninth movie in the *Harry Potter* film franchise, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, recently enchanted movie-goers last year. Written by the author of the original eleven-book sequence (including all ancillary works), J. K. Rowling, the movie magically crafted 1920's New York into a backdrop for new and familiar faces of the Wizarding World. The film has been acclaimed both critically and financially, and four more sequels are on their way over the next eight years—written by Rowling and helmed by the same director, David Yates. Even in the midst of this wonderful time to be a *Potter* fan, this may be discombobulating. With a stage-play by Rowling that is a sequel to the original seven-book series (*Harry Potter and The Cursed Child*), five films being adapted from a small “accessory field book” Rowling published, and eight movies (based on the seven books) that often to stray from the source material... Where does this new series belong? With the films? Does its printed screenplay adaption fit with the books? Is this a prequel to the novels? Do Rowling's tweets count like her “Pottermore” website does? This struggle for “what counts” is intrinsic to literature and any compilation of texts and accounts. From the Bible to Chaucer and through Shakespeare, the works authors leave in their wake bring more than just tales, stories, and fascination: the question of canon inevitably arises, especially when those writings are set in the same respective universes. The most interesting and recent “canon” discussion is that of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Legendarium*—a Tolkien-coined term for the entire writings that assembled the world of Middle-earth, from the fictional creation of that universe to the fulfillment of every prophecy set forth. In the way Tolkien released his works, a steadfast canon was established, impervious to the various literary diseases that can cloud a body of work.
In his lecture, “On Fairy Stories,”—more on this in Part II—Tolkien hints at what inspired his work and the thought process behind the growing body of Middle-earth and related texts. Tolkien shows the roots of this fiction: “Fantasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material, and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood which only the art of making can give” (78). To understand, study, to feel these things, we must also create. As inquiry into the children’s side of Middle-earth grows deeper, *The Hobbit* emerges an even more crucial work than simply for “canon”—it changed children’s literature forever. This is crucial for any argument on the nature of the *Legendarium*; paradoxically, the first published work about Middle-earth was perhaps the farthest from its roots in *The Silmarillion*, where Tolkien began his work in that universe. In a letter to an eager fan in 1948, Tolkien revealed the genesis of his world, which began when he was approximately twenty-two years old, “For though I have (in the cracks of time!) laboured at these things since about 1914, I have never found anyone but C.S. [Lewis] and my [son] Christopher who wanted to read them; and no one will publish them” (Letters 130). Here, Tolkien speaks of *The Silmarillion*, later saying in that same letter, “[The Lord of the Rings] would, of course, be easier to write if *The Silmarillion* were published first!” Every story from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* began in *The Silmarillion*, a behemoth of a text, more biblical than literary, containing myths, stories, and legends from Egyptian cultures (*The Art of “The Lord of the Rings”* 195) to Arthurian and Beowulfian myth. It was his first, and last, work—a constant backdrop in his writing.

For Tolkien, his biblical myth of Middle-earth began in *The Silmarillion* when he was young. So young, in fact, his remaining family could remember tales he would weave of ancient lands spoken with a bard-like drawl beyond his years: “he was about seven
when he began to compose his own story about a dragon" (Carpenter 30). He grew to speak over ten languages, and to invent another six at least. From scratching new languages "on the cover of one of the now very battered 'High School Exercise Books'" (The Book of Lost Tales I) to the upcoming printing of one of Tolkien's oldest poems (due out in May of 2017), the Legendarium of Tolkien has taken a long road, full of fans and scarce in publications.

After The Hobbit (1937) and The Lord of the Rings (1954-1955) were published, the popularity of the old philologist, unsurprisingly, rose more quickly than he could have ascertained. When Tolkien's publisher offered to have his phone number removed from the Oxford directory (where he lectured and frequented), Tolkien replied in a letter,

Thank you very much for your suggestions about my telephone number, which I will consider. Removing the number from the directory seems better than the method adopted by Major W. H. Lewis in protecting his brother [C. S. Lewis], which was to lift the receiver and say 'Oxford Sewage Disposal Unit' and go on repeating it until they went away. (Letters 368-9)

Even though he did not take that humorous approach, he had a bit of pride within that praise, writing once to a friend that "being a cult figure in one's own lifetime I am afraid is not at all pleasant... But even the nose of a very modest idol... cannot remain entirely untickled by the sweet smell of incense!" (ibid 418). His affair with fans was both flattering and annoying, even causing a move down the street to avoid "my deplorable cultus" who would call in the middle of the night from America and send enough packages to block the doorway to his home (Carpenter 237). As his health waned, he still sought to publish The Silmarillion, a daunting task whose motive slowly dwindled.
With each publication, J. R. R. Tolkien's will was set more firmly in stone. When *The Lord of the Rings* arrived seventeen years after *The Hobbit*, "what counted" in Middle-earth was given more material. Knowing that the odds of ever completing *The Silmarillion* were slim, Tolkien spent his infrequently spare time responding to the clamor for more Middle-earth. In a sense of patch-work to appease eager fans, Tolkien assembled appendices that were released with the final installment of the trilogy in *The Return of the King*. There, literal snippets of *The Silmarillion* were found alongside etymologies, family histories, and histories. Small glimpses into Middle-earth were given and the hungry clamors for more were heard from fans, family, and even the once-skeptical publishers. In an early letter, Tolkien said of his drafted *Silmarillion*, "I do not think it would have the appeal of the L.R.—no hobbits! Full of mythology, and elvishness, and all that 'heigh stile' as Chaucer might say, which has been so little to the taste of my reviewers" (*Letters* 238). A reply to a Colonel who had admired his work quickly turned into an unsent draft, derailed by the pouring out grievances and a reflection on what made Middle-earth work for so long. The letter remained unsent, and proof of Tolkien's concerns were left for his son to find years later:

I am doubtful myself about the undertaking. Part of the attraction of *[The Lord of the Rings]* is, I think, due to the glimpses of a large history in the background: an attraction like that of viewing far off an unvisited island, or seeing the towers of a distant city gleaming in a sunlit mist. To go there is to destroy the magic, unless new unattainable vistas are again revealed. Also many of the older legends are purely 'mythological', and nearly all are grim and tragic: a long account of the disasters that destroyed the beauty of the Ancient World, from the darkening of Valinor to the Downfall of Númenor and the flight of Elendil. And there are no hobbits. Nor does Gandalf appear, except in a passing mention; for his time of
importance did not begin until the Third Age. The only major characters of the
L.R. who appear are Galadriel & Elrond. (Letters 333-4)

His ramblings show the gestation behind his decision to choose his son, Christopher, as
his literary executor. Christopher had drawn the maps for *The Hobbit* years before its
publication, even listening to the stories that would soon form into *The Hobbit* when he
was a child. By choosing someone familiar and so intrinsically involved with the creation
of Middle-earth, Tolkien put his legacy decidedly into safe hands. “Tolkien did not have a
Grand Design, or a guiding star” writes Tom Shippey in *The Road to Middle-earth: How J.
R. R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* (327). Any Tolkien reader can see this in context, as
apparent in the necessary revisions Tolkien made to *The Hobbit*, blending that tale more
seamlessly into the story of *The Lord of the Rings* before the publication of the latter trilogy.

A canon with a wandering creator is a perilous quest, but Tolkien knew the strengths of
his works. In the appendices, brief sights of high powers are given, and the created world
is unique, yet familiar—as if it already existed before the reader ever flipped the first page.

“To go there is to destroy the magic, unless new unattainable vistas are again revealed” is
surprisingly thoughtful from an author, especially when there is a chance at new riches
and fame. Much of entertainment today is full of sequels and backstory, filling in the gaps
of old tales and movies. Last year, the first *Star Wars* Anthology film was released, a
prequel to the original film, but a sequel to the third film of the second trilogy. Easily, one
can see that same “discombobulating” air of the *Potter* franchise, a chance to expand every
aspect of a canon in an attempt for capitalizing on “what counts.”

This is where the unique canon of Tolkien’s *Legendarium* is revealed to be wholly
unique. His death in 1973 was felt around the world, and his lifelong passion for
philologic writings and creation was only seen in *The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings,* and a
few ancillary works (such as a collection of poems made to be cheap for fans to purchase—he was always worried of expenses, often telling fans to read his books at the local libraries). With two books in Middle-earth, uncountable pages of drafts, unpublished books, and thousands of notes, Christopher Tolkien was tasked with organizing and preserving “what matters” after his father’s passing. Here, Tolkien’s lecture “On Fairy Stories” becomes relevant—more on this soon—revealing the workings of Tolkien as he sought to write *The Lord of the Rings*: “it is at any rate essential to a genuine fairy-story, as distinct from the employment of this form for lesser or debased purposes, that it should be presented as ‘true’… but since the fairy story deals with ‘marvels,’ it cannot tolerate any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole story in which they occur is a figment or illusion” (*Reader 42*). Tolkien’s works were meticulously assembled, framed in the long-formed world of Middle-earth, with over six languages and ages of history. Descendants are noted, kingdoms rise and fall, and an “Old Testament” feeling of detail is ever-present. Commentary on race relations, morality, cosmology, and philology are there to be discerned, and a “truth” to the world can be felt when immersed within the pages.

The “truth” has been preserved by Christopher Tolkien, a feat that is constantly pursued within literary canons. When confronting the issue of restoring biased canons in “From Canon Fodder to Canon-Formation: How Do We Get There From Here?”, Mary Ellen Waithe observes how canons are made: “[s]cholarly study creates canons by making accurate texts available and by defining the terms by which they are studied” (para 16). Nearly a half-century of writings, translations, and languages was enough to fill chests with papers and notebooks and letters for Christopher to sort through. Drafts of letters decrying racism sent to Nazi Germany were found alongside rough etymologies of
dwarvish and Sindarin languages. Just like his father, "a good craftsman [who] loves his material," Christopher set out to finish what his father spent his whole life exploring. Like Waite discerned, Christopher first defined the "terms" of his execution in the foreword to The Silmarillion, published just four years after Tolkien's death:

A complete consistency (either within the compass of The Silmarillion itself or between The Silmarillion and other published writings of my father's) is not to be looked for; and could only be achieved, if at all at heavy and needless cost. Moreover, my father came to conceive The Silmarillion as a compilation, a compendious narrative, made long afterwards from sources of great diversity (poems, and annals, and oral tales) that had survived in agelong tradition; and this conception has indeed its parallel in the actual history of the book, for a great deal of earlier prose and poetry does underlie it, and it is to some extent a compendium in fact and not only in theory. (8)

And so the first published work outside of Tolkien's own was made, intentionally rejecting any claims of "complete consistency": a true canon in terms of published truth would never be found outside of The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. The twelve sizable books in The History of Middle-earth were published by Christopher over thirteen years, spanning the holistic work of his father beginning with the first scraps of high-school writings to the hasty notes his father made while ill and bereft. Other publications in Middle-earth, such as The Children of Hurin, published in 2007, and the forthcoming The Tale of Beren and Luthien, are merely fleshed-out stories found within The Histories, continuing Christopher's incomplete, but well-intentioned, effort for consistency.

Where a drive to produce more products, serialize existing ideas, and cross-promote various works has dominated much of our consumption of popular books today, Tolkien's revolutionary canon managed to stay away from the proto-commercialization of
his *Legendarium*. Offers to purchase the rights for a film came the year the books were published, and Tolkien would only accept “either a respectable ‘treatment’ of the book, or else a good deal of money” (Carpenter 228) and remained wary of adaptions “too ‘Disnified’ for my taste” (*Letters* 119) after seeing Walt Disney’s “retellings” of classic tales. In the end, however, Tolkien passed away before his dream was complete. He was a trapped man: his first entry into Middle-earth was a children’s tale, a mere bedtime story—chapter, by chapter, of course—set within a world he had crafted for twenty years by that point. Often, when revisions of *The Lord of the Rings* were due, he would look back on his notes and wander to *The Hobbit*, as he “found a good deal of it ‘very poor’ and had to restrain himself from rewriting the entire book” (Carpenter 230). In 1965, age began to take its hold. “I find it difficult to work—beginning to feel old and the fire dying down” (ibid 238). A slow pace and sparse publications set the foundation for a canon immune to the weathering of time, able to be studied and traced back one hundred years ago to the trenches of World War I. With that bedrock, and a sole literary executor who is still editing at the ripe age of ninety-two, the *Legendarium* has withstood faulty adaptions, decades of extreme fandom, and countless years of academic criticism. These factors each crafted a healthy soil for scholars and fans alike to harvest from, a place to labor with love and respect.
Part II—'It is no bedtime story:' The Evolution From Roots in Children's Literature

I. A Lecture

By battling against the early-twentieth century perspective on literature for children decades before even the most renowned literary scholars, J. R. R. Tolkien set a course for Children's Literature. With one lecture, Tolkien cemented his reputation as a cagey, independent scholar, with little support from the existing scholarship. Spurring new renaissances in literature, Tolkien's actions of looking back at the bedrock of all stories—mythology—created a framework for children's literature that would further bring children's literature away from repeated adaptations of Aesop, didactic stories, and a "Disnified" (Letters 119) hold on stories for children. "Ever since there were children, there has been children's literature," boldly Seth Lerer begins his gargantuan work Children's Literature: A Reader's History from Aesop to Harry Potter. Sure, not by our printed-and-bound-and-sold-on-shelves standards of the past few hundred years, but the stories and tales for children are as old as the practice of parents bouncing babies on their laps. Yet research about children's literature does not have these same roots. When J. R. R. Tolkien was chosen to lecture on "fairy-stories" one day at St. Andrew's University in honor of the children's story collector, Andrew Lang, a surprise was in store: an academic entry into Children's Literature, quick to be forgotten, and distinctly ahead of its time—and a lecture that changed the course of his own writings forever.

The publication of The Hobbit in 1937 brought instant success to J. R. R. Tolkien's name, more so than his multiple lectures on Beowulf and the importance of mythology in
the modern world (Carpenter 265). Where his works in philologic studies and critical Anglo-Saxon research failed in popularity, his work in Children’s Literature garnered quick fame with *The Hobbit*. This was a book for children, ancient in feeling but modern in reading. A narrator guides the reader through an old land where good and evil cannot be cohesively discerned, but anti-war and anti-greed messages are clear in execution. Elves in Tolkien’s world are reinvented from the post-medieval Fairies they were synonymous with, and many other advances helped enchant readers around the world with only one book. Just one year later, in 1938, Tolkien gave a lecture years in the making. “On Fairy Stories” was “written in the same period... when *The Lord of the Rings* was beginning to unfold itself” (*The Tolkien Reader* 31).

Chosen for his groundbreaking work in Andrew Lang’s specialization of Children’s Literature, Tolkien began to speak on the fact that “even the learned in such matters have used the term ‘fairy-tale’ very carelessly” (ibid 39). From there, Tolkien proceeds to deconstruct Andrew Lang’s colored books and all other comprehensive works in collecting children’s literature until that point. In the first minute of his lecture, Tolkien sets his sights on the Oxford English Dictionary, saying “you will turn to the [OED] in vain” (ibid 34) for any clear definition of “fairy-stories.” He spends the rest of the lecture raising up children, pleading for more material to be produced that will fight against the “dreadful undergrowth of stories written, or adapted to, what was—or is—conceived to be the measure of children’s minds or needs” (65). He defines why most children see through bad stories, and how fairy-tales alone will not advance a child’s imagination, saying “It is true that in recent times fairy-stories have usually been written or ‘adapted’ for children. It is a dangerous process, even when it is necessary” (59). He denounces easy
books, claiming that “[Children’s] books—like their clothes—should allow for growth, and their books at any rate should encourage it” (67). Tolkien stressed how stories and tales for children need to reflect the world around them, providing “escape” (75) when necessary, and knowledge always.

This can be considered a slightly bitter, early entry into preliminary children’s literature scholarship, especially in the field of literary studies. Renowned children’s literature scholar Jack Zipes once said in a review essay:

Whereas the majority of academic books on children’s literature written before 1972 tended to be bland histories that celebrated the good nature and intentions of children’s literature with positivist methods and a paternalizing ideology to match, the more recent studies have probed the ulterior motives of children’s literature and explored its sociopolitical and psychological ramifications. (*The Lion and the Unicorn* 9)

Zipes’s observation is both resentful and thoughtful; the institution surrounding children’s literature is a multi-faced beast comprised of parents, publishers, and learned experts all analyzing what is best for the child—just as works of children’s literature do. Comprised of fables, fairies, death, and all other topics for youth, the field of children’s literature is subjected to Zipes’ regret about the lack of early scholarship and his criticism of the early “do-good” atmosphere around children’s literature for so long. Tolkien raised these same objections as Zipes—fifty-two years prior.

“On Fairy Stories” prematurely released before the wide advent of children’s literature, doomed to get lost in the shuffle of history as the second Great War broke out that year. An attack on what most scholarship took for granted, containing deconstructions of every related field (from the Dictionary itself to Disney’s watered-down adaptions), “On Fairy Stories” was nearly dead on arrival, met with little warmth
or recognition, only republished in 1947 as a courtesy by his friend C. S. Lewis, who saw the work as too important to rot away (Carpenter 270). He was proven right as other scholars, such as Zipes, caught up nearly half a century later.

In “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien gives hints at what inspired his work and the thought process behind his growing body of Middle-earth (and related texts). He offers three crucial facets of Fantasy and Fiction to any reader—presumably academics—that seek to understand the timelessness of children’s tales and what can make an effective one: “Recovery, Escape, and Consolation” (Reader 75). If a story can effectively offer these things, then the author has fulfilled Tolkien’s idea that “[f]antasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode” (ibid 75). With successful stories come Recovery, a sense of “humility... and healing” (ibid 77). Children feel this in works that fully transport them away from daily routine and allow for imagination to fill in a story. Escape and Consolation are things “shared with romances” (83) in the sense that a great tale allows for a sense of flight to take a mind away from the moment of reading—and yet, coupled with Consolation, Escape can offer meditations and real-world applicability to our everyday life. When these three variables are met, Tolkien shows the roots of this fiction: “[f]antasy is made out of the Primary World, but a good craftsman loves his material, and has a knowledge and feeling for clay, stone and wood which only the art of making can give” (78).

We can see the truth of Tolkien’s words about children’s literature in the legacy of his works. The Hobbit rejuvenated the landscape of children’s literature, and “On Fairy Stories” shows the child-centered motivation behind its publication. Offering a small break from the pre-war tensions of Europe, The Hobbit sold out in many languages within
only a few months. Its sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*, entered a primordial “Young Adult” category; more mature in a literary sense, *The Lord of the Rings* vacillated between children’s literature (in fantasy and inspiration) and adult literature (in diction, syntax, and a few core themes). Regardless, these two publications changed the literary canon forever by means of legacy, especially by authors inspired by Tolkien’s work. The fallout from Tolkien’s two publications in Middle-earth accomplished more change than his lectures ever could. In *The Wand in the Word: Conversations with Writers of Fantasy*, Leonard S. Marcus interviews many of the “greats” within children’s literature and fantasy works. Invariably, each author addresses the looming influence of J. R. R. Tolkien, for better or for worse.

In his interview, Lloyd Alexander said, “Fantasy is now a thriving concern. Tolkien probably had a lot to do with this. *The Lord of the Rings* is the elephant in the living room. It was so unmistakably a major work that it simply could not be overlooked. People had to say, ‘Hey, this is great.’ It may well have opened it up for other fantasy writers” (Marcus 16). Where academics and authors acknowledge Tolkien’s work as groundbreaking, “On Fairy Stories” becomes a juxtaposition to that very legacy, especially where Tolkien critiques the constitution of a story for children requiring an absolute element of truth. In “On Fairy Stories,” Tolkien dedicates the brunt of the lecture to the subset of humans known as “Children.” Tolkien separates them from their stories, reflecting on the notion that fairy-tales are strictly for kids. In this digression, he gives due credit to each child’s natural intellect, stating that all stories—in order to be believed by a child—must weave a “spell” that does not violate the laws in that realm:

Children are capable, of course, of literary belief, when the story-maker’s art is good enough to produce it. That state of mind has been called “willing suspension of disbelief.” But this does not seem to me a good description of what
happens. What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful “subcreator.” He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is “true”: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside. *(The Tolkien Reader 60)*

Giving credence to each reader's mind, Tolkien protects the instincts of the child's mind. If an author is not careful, a child will outsmart the story in a “that's not true” sense. As Tolkien states, on the inside of that tale, you “therefore believe it.” Even children, the youngest of minds, have this great power. When an author coddles this instinct, the boundaries of the Secondary World are shattered and disbelief pours in.

Renowned Tolkien scholar, Verlyn Flieger, discusses Tolkien's evident hypocrisy in depth within her essay, “Tolkien on Tolkien.” This study, found in *Green Suns and Faerie: Essays on J. R. R. Tolkien*, details instances where Tolkien's *The Hobbit* can be convicted of failing to reach the progressive goals set in “On Fairy Stories.” Flieger even presents evolutions the manuscript went through, displayed by Christopher Tolkien in *The Histories of Middle-earth: Volume Six*, which show that Tolkien revised the narrator's condescending tone, removing a bard-like atmosphere to the story that seems almost distracted by explanations to a child. Ending her piece, Flieger notes:

> By Tolkien's own criteria, *The Hobbit*, particularly in the early chapters, does not altogether succeed as a fairy-story some important areas. The narrator is intrusive, patronizing, and apologetic, and, even more important, the magic is too often made fun of, while the Faërie lacks the inner consistency of reality. *(64)*

On all counts, she is correct. The narrator backtracks often, even in a chronological fashion. In *The Hobbit*, two days pass once the dragon leaves the stolen, Dwarven
mountain-home. The audience is left in the dark, knowing nothing of where the enemy went. The narrator begins chapter fourteen saying, “Now you wish, like the dwarves, to hear news of Smaug, you must go back again to the evening when he smashed the door and flew off in a rage, two days before” (225). This sort of narration is withholding, something that is not seen anywhere in *The Lord of the Rings*. As Tolkien wrote to his aunt about publishing some old poems—which would soon become *The Tolkien Reader*—over four years after *The Lord of the Rings* was published, he reflected on the childish narration within *The Hobbit*:

I am not interested in the 'child' as such, modern or otherwise, and certainly have no intention of meeting him/her half way, or a quarter of the way... I have only once made the mistake of trying to do it, to my lasting regret, and (I am glad to say) with the disapproval of intelligent children: in the earlier part of *The Hobbit*. But I had not then given any serious thought to the matter: I had not freed myself from the contemporary delusions about 'fairy-stories' and children. I had to think about it, however, before I gave an 'Andrew Lang' lecture at St Andrews on Fairy-stories; and I must say I think the result was entirely beneficial to *The Lord of the Rings*, which was a practical demonstration of the views that I expressed. (*Letters* 310)

In his own words, Tolkien displays a growth that “On Fairy Stories” precipitated, a factor of deep thought given the state of children’s literature at the time. As said in Part I, this narrative choice would later haunt him as he “found a good deal of it ‘very poor’ and had to restrain himself from rewriting the entire [Hobbit]” (Carpenter 230). The publication of *The Hobbit* before freeing himself from “contemporary delusions” on fairy stories altered his approach to *The Lord of the Rings* and redefined fantasy-fiction in a neoclassical way: a renewal from within. J. R. R. Tolkien sought to create authentically within his own views, commenting on race relations, morality, cosmology, and philology—all while maintaining
a “truth” to the world that can be felt when immersed within the pages. In the way Tolkien released his works, beginning in children’s literature, a steadfast canon was established, impervious to the various literary diseases that can cloud a body of work—still loved to this day, over one-hundred years since he began his mythology.
I. A Cage

Tolkien, like every storyteller throughout time, sought to define and capture. As we are still enthralled by the Arthurian and Beowulfian sagas millennia later, he gestated his own fantasies and secondary realities. Where war struck the land, he envisioned good defeating evil. Where men fell to vast and mighty machines, Tolkien idealized the countryside and simple life. Where women were stereotyped as docile and home-bound, he cultivated men and women side-by-side, each gender solid in its own sure way. From his smallest poems to largest epics, every character has agency—men and women alike.

Though placed in a well-established fantasy world with evil darkness fought by great heroines and heroes, “The Last Ship” by J. R. R. Tolkien remains a hidden work stowed away in Tolkien’s eponymous collection, *The Tolkien Reader*. This work features famous essays, a smaller tale than his usual endeavors, and a collection of poems that flesh out various pieces of his creation, Middle-earth. “The Last Ship” is the final installment and perhaps the most important piece in the work—fitted right inside the back cover (please see page 51 for a copy). Thoroughly founded in Tolkien’s own experiences, “The Last Ship” represents a shift in representation of women from the high-brow epics of old to the more intimate looks into the small lives presented within fantasy and fiction. Humphrey Carpenter observed much of Tolkien’s respect and love for women, from strangers to his wife, Edith. As Edith aged and was near death, Tolkien continued to love her beyond his own comfort, even moving to a town he hated—that she, of course, loved—right by the sea. As Carpenter writes in *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography*, “He himself was not
particularly happy... he was sometimes reduced to silent and impotent rage by the feeling of imprisonment... but above all he could see that Edith was happy” (249). Until her death, Tolkien placed her comfort first; a trait that affects every work he created.

Respecting women in gentle and sure ways, Tolkien incorporated females in equality within both grand works and short tales just like “The Last Ship,” found at the end of an age and far away from the epic tales of The Lord of the Rings. Though small, and seemingly insignificant to Tolkien’s larger works as a whole, this distinct poem offers a look at gender through both nature and dialogue.

Before continuing into a fuller glimpse at “The Last Ship,” an important point must be made to the very foundation of this poem: it does not exist as an independent work, therefore significant tenets of the characters and land must be revealed. This poem takes place in Middle-earth at the start of the Fourth Age; the Third Age ended with the defeat of all the great enemies in the land. For more well-versed Middle-earth fans, the Fourth Age is after Frodo has destroyed the Ring, as Aragorn sits on the throne, and all evils have seemingly ended at the great victory won by the brave men and women across many races. This work is fantasy, with magic and might side-by-side. As the Third Age ends, the immortal Elves leave the land to return to the place of their make and makers, a land far to the West beyond the sea itself. This is where “The Last Ship” comes into being, a tale of the final ship leaving Middle-earth and taking the last fragments of immortality into the West. A whole race leaving the land is a grief for everyone, and Humans are left to rule. This state of affairs gives an important context, allowing a look into the circumstances of race, gender, and nature in the piece. This sort of background information after The Lord of the Rings has ended can be found in the appendices to The
Return of the King—this poem is one of the only few hints at that age outside of that back matter of the trilogy.

Each life, no matter gender or significance, can cause ripples throughout all of time. In "The Last Ship," the main character, Firiel, begins another normal day. After watching "the gleam at the window grow" (9), Firiel leaves her home and ventures down to the river. There is nothing heroic, adventurous, or remarkable about her beyond mere normalcy. She is beautiful, seen as "elven-fair" (80), but her status remains that of just another person. This is crucial, especially when placed in Tolkien's canon as a whole. The constant motif of seemingly small and supposedly insignificant persons making great impacts on the world around them is a sustained belief in J. R. R. Tolkien's work, and here one can expect the same thing. As Firiel journeys down to the river, an opportunity to reach out beyond normalcy appears, and a chance to leave a life behind is so swift it seems nearly magical—where all ties can be broken, even from identity.

Firiel's house-by-the-sea becomes the focal point of immeasurable importance; the last communication between the immortal and mortal is casually located in a normal land. The natural imagery and presence betrays a simple, observatory look into Firiel's role in her environment. Each stanza is laden with flora and fauna in an organic manner, nearly a picturesque encapsulation of a beautiful summer day. At "three o'clock / the grey night was going" (1-2), much in the manner of a day near the summer equinox as the hours grow long. Firiel wakes with nature, leaving "Over the floor" (13) and out into the fresh day. Her harmonious existence in a normal land is a fundamental glimpse into our protagonist's mind as she ventures around. The dew she flows through clings to her gown, leaving "jewels upon its hem" (17), elevating her smock from an average-woman's
garb into a royal gown. The way Tolkien royally weaves her into the environment is indicative of what is to come; an opportunity beyond the normal world. Her gliding dance down to the river continues a princess-of-nature motif. After Firiel dashes to the river in the morn, she “leaned upon a willow-stem” (19); a fragile and slight growth that signifies a lightness to Firiel. She is lean with loose hair, animalistic in nature, one with her surroundings. “A kingfisher plunged down like a stone” (21) in front of her eyes, a kingly symbol in mythology; such renown given to kingfishers is rivaled only by swans in many traditions—and that is no different in Tolkien’s *Legendarium*. Kingfishers and swans denote a royal connection, but not merely in our typical royal tastes. The royalty in Middle-earth is a representation of the best each race has to offer. Some are born into it, others are chosen that are only humble gardeners or gentle souls. Royalty in this sense is special beyond rule and power—and most conclusively beyond gender. Firiel is greeted by this sight of kingfishers and “lily-leaves sprawling” (24), an undeniably beautiful morn, surrounded and whole with the morning about her; truly an average woman waking and walking with the land until opportunity arrives in no different fashion than the sights around her.

New royalty arrives, and a gate opens for Firiel beyond the chances of her birthright into mortality. Firiel behold a rare sight as the last of the immortal Elves flee from Middle-earth forever, returning at the end of an age—and the end of all evil threats—to the homeland they were created in so many ages ago; a land named Valinor, where the highest peaks reach into the heavens and the Elves speak to the crafters of the Earth. Her “free hair in the morning’s flame” (27) flows from her shoulders as music greets her, and Firiel glimpses a sight not oft perceived, and never to be seen again:
A ship with golden beak and oar
and timbers white came gliding;
swans went sailing on before,
her tall prow guiding.
Fair folk out of Elvenland
in silver-grey were rowing,
and three with crowns she saw there stand
with bright hair flowing. (*The Tolkien Reader* 249)

Here, the same themes surrounding Firiel apply to the Fair Folk; swans before the Elves (like her very own kingfisher), jewels bestowed on them, and bright hair in the sunlight. Veritably nothing sets them apart from the land around Firiel's homestead: they glow and arrive with corresponding creatures of royal connotation. Seeing and hearing them laud the green land and singing animals, Firiel reaches out, asking their destination. Far away, she finds, they sail beyond the greying shores of Firiel's birthplace to a land of ancient creation. They bid her to join them, seeing her "elven-fair" hair in the sun, and sun-glowing gown from a distance. Tolkien does not give their gender, but they speak in unison without segregation, all traveling together. "The oars were stayed" (73) as Firiel ponders, an opportunity spanning mortality and millennia: "Come! For your days are speeding" (78). What a doom and what a chance; come, come, you will soon die otherwise. For what fate she will face in the Undying lands, one cannot discern, but for a mortal to travel there is a prospect nearly beyond comprehension. She is not princess, she is no Elf; she is nothing more than a simple woman with a heart, mind, and beauty beholden to none. Yet despite these similarities, she is doomed perhaps beyond this rare opportunity.
Typically, where gender separates, opportunities are presented. The women of Middle-earth are often, foolishly, accused by scholars or simple onlookers of lacking character, agency, or purpose. Some even argue the opposite, claiming that not enough everyday people are present in Middle-earth, even though it is the most ordinary of everyday folk that save the world. In the essay "‘Radiant and terrible’: Tolkien’s Heroic Women as Correctives to the Romance and Epic Traditions," Jack M. Downs discusses Éowyn and Lúthien, two major female characters who accomplish wonders beyond those of men, noting, “Still, Lúthien and Éowyn demonstrate the possibility for women to step into roles traditionally filled by men in the romance and epic traditions, and each in her turn exhibits personal characteristics—faithfulness, courage, determination, and strength of will—which resonate far beyond questions of gender and heroism” (72). Commonly in literary analysis, women are examined by quantity and presence, almost akin to checking just another box of success if women act or speak in required ways.

Yet in his canon, as Downs suggests, Tolkien offers exceptions: women with agency grounded in intelligence and drive. Forbidden to venture to the warfront, the shield maiden Éowyn advances regardless, ultimately defeating the greatest warrior the enemy can bring to bear while being nothing but a mortal female supporting the other women around her. Lúthien ventures to the gates of both Heaven and Hell, demanding and commanding in equal measure. Downs continues on to say: “Tolkien was not, of course, intentionally addressing questions of feminism or gender roles, but his ongoing negotiation with the romance and epic genres naturally encompassed a revision of the roles of women within such stories” (73). Tolkien is a bridge between old writings, genres, and the tales and styles we know today. Since his canon and *Legendarium* changed the
course of fantasy-fiction forever, this facet of his work is possibly the greatest contribution to the genre—a chance for equity to take hold. In an argument between Aragorn and Éowyn at the start of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, she protects her right to choose her own fate, not confined to the home as the men of the kingdom go off to war:

‘Your duty is with your people,’ he answered.

‘Too often have I heard of duty,’ she cried. ‘But am I not of the House of Eorl, a shieldmaiden and not a dry-nurse? I have waited on faltering feet long enough. Since they falter no longer, it seems, may I not now spend my life as I will?’

‘Few may do that with honour,’ he answered. ‘But as for you, lady: did you not accept the charge to govern the people until their lord’s return? If you had not been chosen, then some marshal or captain would have been set in the same place, and he could not ride away from his charge, were he weary of it or no.’

‘Shall I always be chosen?’ she said bitterly. ‘Shall I always be left behind when the Riders depart, to mind the house while they win renown, and find food and beds when they return?’

‘A time may come soon,’ said he, ‘when none will return. Then there will be need of valour without renown, for none shall remember the deeds that are done in the last defence of your homes. Yet the deeds will not be less valiant because they are unpraised.’

And she answered: ‘All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more. But I am of the House of Eorl and not a serving-woman. I can ride and wield blade, and I do not fear either pain or death.’ (767)

No longer should women be confined, caged, as Éowyn herself then says of what she fears: “a cage... To stay behind bars, until use and old age accept them, and all chance of doing great deeds is gone beyond recall or desire” (ibid). With just a chance, Éowyn wants
something beyond recognition, worth, or power. She wants to be free of her own volition to make choices great and small; a choice Firiel suddenly has in her grasp.

Immortality, just a ship away, is offered to this ordinary woman condemned by life to die. Elves only die by wound or poison, never knowing what lies beyond the confines of this world and in the halls of their Maker. This was His gift to mankind; an opportunity to join Him in a land far from their mortal shores. So, too, Firiel is offered such a chance. She begins, “one step daring” (82), towards that bountiful opportunity. As she steps, her foot “deep in clay” (83) sinks, a reminder seemingly from the earth itself, about her portion. Her part, from the start of life, is death. There, one foot stable on the shore and the other deep in the halfway-ground between mortality and immortality, she screams, “I cannot come! ... I was born Earth’s daughter!” (87-88). Here, a final fact must be revealed about the protagonist: her namesake is Elven in origin, translating into one of the Elven tongues to mean ‘she that died.’ So she did, finite from the moment of a clay-trapped foot. She turns, leaving that incomparable choice, and returns to her home. The dew-jeweled dress has dried “as she walked back from the meadow,” returning now to her home. No longer filled with the bright sun of forenoon, she braids her hair and puts on “her smock of russet brown” (93) to work and continue to carry her lot in life just as before. Nothing has changed, but death feels ever nearer. The goodness of the first stanzas has disappeared; Tolkien’s language flows with less beauty than before, like the breath towards the end of a sad sigh. The poem closes, sadly, lamenting how “their song has faded” (104) in the mortal land. No creatures of immortality remain, their remnants are fated to become overgrown in the same land as Firiel. “The Last Ship” by J. R. R. Tolkien ends how it began, day and night flowing into one another as time continues.
onward. The Immortals have left; the land is now under the sole stewardship of mortal beings. Ageless opportunities for the natural and fair are gone forever, and the last interaction between the races of mortal and immortal is complete. Even though the agency was there, Firiel does not abandon her life or the place she has toiled to build. She claimed herself and her own nature, denying the false beauty that travelers proclaimed for themselves, bucking the high-fantasy trend of only fearsome and powerful women making it onto the pages of epic fiction. Her decision was the right one, for her own life, confirmed by Tolkien in certain letters regarding the “West” and what it holds, saying, “There was no return. The Elves who took this road and those few ‘mortals’ who by special grace went with them, had abandoned the ‘History of the world’ and could play no further part in it” (Letters 411).

Pardon if I drop analytical conventions here in conclusion of this examination of Firiel; from The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien is a quote more powerful than I can say, and needs no investigation. Tucked away in the midst of The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien is a rare reflection on gender and sexuality, with an argument I hope to prove within this essay: faced with a decision that bears a lasting sentence forever, Firiel functions with utmost certainty as the poem and nature wrap her in beautiful normality. She is an epic in the smallest proportion: just a person, a character beyond conventions of gender and race. From “Letter 42,” a postage from Tolkien to his son on the World War II warfront, Michael:

There is in our Western culture the romantic chivalric tradition still strong... Its weakness is, of course, that it began an artificial courtly game, a way of enjoying love for its own sake without reference to (and indeed contrary to) matrimony... It still tends to make the Lady a kind of guiding star or divinity – of the old-
fashioned 'his divinity' = the woman he loves – the object or reason of noble conduct. This is, of course, false and at best make-believe. The woman is another fallen human-being with a soul in peril… Yet I still think it has dangers. It is not wholly true, and it is not perfectly 'theocentric'. It takes, or at any rate has in the past taken, the young man's eye off women as they are, as companions in shipwreck not guiding stars… To forget their desires, needs and temptations. It inculcates exaggerated notions of 'true love', as a fire from without, a permanent exaltation, unrelated to age, childbearing, and plain life, and unrelated to will and purpose… One result of that is to make young folk look for a 'love' that will keep them always nice and warm in a cold world, without any effort of theirs. (49)

The earth claimed Firiel: a character rare in many older writings; just an average woman, capable of heavy decisions with great control over her own life. One with nature, and proven innocent and capable through dialogue, trial, and decisions, Firiel represents something much more powerful than common fantasy heroines: Firiel is an archetype of wisdom in common people; appreciative of nature and fate, as forces much larger than her swim into being before her very eyes. Just as in Tolkien's own life, the women in his creation are more than epic and less than regular: they are normal beyond exception and special in individuality.

II. A Disposition

In the same vein as special individuality, Tolkien had much of his own even outside of the *Legendarium*; he was prone to challenge dispositions. Before the first release of *The Hobbit*—translated to German—the Nazi party mailed J. R. R. Tolkien to inquire about his lineage, investigating if he was of "arisch origin." Since this was a matter of publication—and thus, of profit—Tolkien penned two responses and submitted them to his publisher to send, saying to his friends there, "I do not regard the (probable) absence of all Jewish blood as necessarily honourable; and I have many Jewish friends, and should
regret giving any colour to the notion that I subscribed to the wholly pernicious and
unscientific race-doctrine” (Letters 29). Of the two drafts that he sent to his publisher to
choose from, only one remains. It is rather mild-tempered, but scathing in its false respect.
We can only guess at the contents of the second letter sent to the Nazi publishers, but it is
clear Tolkien did not take kindly to racist dogma. This letter is dated “25 July, 1938,”
almost two months before the Nazi’s began formal military action against Poland and
sparking part of the Second World War (The Third Reich at War 2). Giving up all pretenses,
this draft shows Tolkien directly confronting antisemitic inquiries at their source:

Thank you for your letter. I regret that I am not clear as to what you intend by
Aryan extraction: that is Indo-Iranian; as far as I am aware none
of my ancestors spoke Hindustani, Persian, Gypsy, or any related dialects. But if I
am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of Jewish origin, I can only
reply that I regret that I appear to have no ancestors of that gifted people... I
cannot, however, forbear to comment that if impertinent and irrelevant inquiries
of this sort are to become the rule in matters of literature, then the time is not far
distant when a German name will no longer be a source of pride. (Letters 29-30)

This same theme of races and rights appears throughout The Lord of the Rings, a
consequence of the rich history between Elf, Man, Dwarves, Ents, and Hobbits. Elves and
Dwarves despise each other, Hobbits are virtually unknown outside their homeland, and
Man is seen as short-lived and lesser. When confronting an adopted prince, Éomer,
Aragorn has a conversation with the troubled man, exiled from his city by his own
possessed father.

“The world is all grown strange. Elf and Dwarf in company walk in our daily
fields; and folk speak with the Lady of the [Golden] Wood and yet live; and the
Sword comes back to war that was broken in the long ages ere the fathers of our
fathers rode into the Mark! How shall a man judge what to do in such times?”

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“As he ever has judged,” said Aragorn. “Good and ill have not changed since yesteryear; nor are they one thing among Elves and Dwarves and another among Men. It is a man’s part to discern them, as much in the Golden Wood as in his own house.” (The Two Towers 427)

No matter what unrivaled events are troubling the nations, good and ill remain the same. It is up to each culture to discern these and combat the evil that harasses all folk. The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings are set in a deep mythology—more on this in Part V—that begins with the creation of all and ends with ultimate harmony for eternity. It is a vast undertaking, and the two published stories are just a glimpse into that lore. However, I use “all folk” specifically, for the species of Men, Elf, Dwarf, Hobbit, and Ent are encompassed in those words. In Middle-earth, every free person is threatened by the looming evil of Sauron and his machinations, and the last defense against this onslaught is the unification of every race.

The Fellowship of the Ring is not only the eponymous group in the first book of The Lord of the Rings, it is also the unification of the three great races of Middle-earth: Man, Elf, and Dwarf (with the Hobbits being among the race of Men). These three peoples have a shared history of clashing dispositions. Even among the Fellowship, conflict is present. The elf and dwarf, Legolas and Gimli respectively, bristle at each other through battles and victories, soon becoming the most inseparable of friends. Legolas eventually takes Gimli with him to the West on one of the last ships—much like in “The Last Ship” above—due to “their great friendship, greater than any that has been between Elf and Dwarf” (The Return of the King 1055). Racial boundaries held fast for millennia are broken down, and trusts is forged in the fires of adversity. Even mankind faces these threats
within itself, such as when conflicting sects on opposing sides of the war meet in battle as
Sam watches a man die at the hands of the "good" men:

It was Sam's first view of a battle of Men against Men, and he did not like it much. He was glad that he could not see the dead face. He wondered what the man's name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil of heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home; and if he would really rather have stayed there in peace. *(The Two Towers 646)*

Even when staring at an enemy, Sam wonders if there was truly evil within. This theme echoes underneath each page of Tolkien's *Legendarium* where good and evil have no clear lines: dark Elves haunt the woods, just as the twisted Gollum was once a variation of a hobbit. Sam, looking beyond that corpse, wonders of the heart and the intent behind marching off to war.

Shortly after embarking on their mission, the hobbits Frodo, Sam, Pippin, and Merry were taken aback upon meeting their first group of Elves. Gildor, from a house of Elves that reaches far back in *The Silmarillion*, conversed with the hobbits as they traveled, discussing the growing darkness and treacherous paths ahead—of evils that even threaten their peaceful homeland, the Shire. Lamenting these forces, Frodo wishes for some peace in his own home. Gildor replies, "But it is not your own Shire. Others dwelt here before hobbits were; and others will dwell here again when hobbits are no more. The wide world is all about you: you can fence yourselves in, but you cannot for ever fence it out" *(Fellowship 82)*. Though harsh, this observation is indicative of Gildor's long lifespan, having seen the Shire before hobbits were advanced enough to craft homes. Even the longest civilizations are doomed to age, and the land we live on will outlast us all—in one way or another. Thinking of only home, Frodo fenced himself within the comfort of
home, an instinct that would soon fade when faced with the great world outside the pastures he knew.

As the greatest evil seen in ages begins its attack upon the free world, the Fellowship splinters. Discord from within the Fellowship tosses Frodo and Sam into the journey alone. One man perishes protecting two hobbits who are kidnapped by the enemy. Aragorn (the last descendant of the lost kings), Gimli, and Legolas pursue the hostages and rally the free folk along the way. In the calmest hour before the storm, the greatest city of man in Gondor is burning as Sauron’s forces attack. Éowyn’s father, the King of Rohan, rides with all the forces he could muster to save the last wall between evil and good: Minas Tirith. As the forces are crossing roads gone untravelled for many years, the Rohirrim are stopped by a race of men that appear from the forest around them. They are called the “Wild Men,” natives of the land before it was civilized by the races of Rohan and Aragorn’s people, Gondor:

“Bring news,” said the Wild Man. “We look out from hills. We climb big mountain and look down. Stone-city is shut. Fire burns there outside; now inside too. You wish to come there? Then you must be quick. But gorgûn and men out of far-away,” he waved a short gnarled arm eastward, “sit on horse-road. Very many, more than Horse-men... Wild Men will show you [a] road. Then you will kill gorgûn and drive away bad dark with bright iron, and Wild Men can go back to sleep in the wild woods.” (Return of the King 814)

Here, Tolkien introduces a new race of man—Natives warn of Gondor burning, and “gorgûn” lying in wait to ambush the reinforcements. These men, ancient and sturdy, know paths long forgotten by “civilized” cultures. The world around them is starting to change for the worse, with orcs and “men out of far away” (like the one that Sam saw dying) haunting their homelands. In return for guiding the additional troops safely to the battle,
the Wild Men only ask for one gift in return: “But if you live after the Darkness, then leave Wild Men alone in the woods and do not hunt them like beasts any more” (ibid 815). This society is intelligent, and brokers a spoken treatise in a language far from their own, saving their own native lands while changing the course of history, allowing for the men of Rohan to defend the city of Minas Tirith as Aragorn takes the Throne. Without even the smallest of races and forgotten cultures, the land of Middle-earth would fall to the forces of evil. Joseph Loconte draws parallels to this underlying theme of the small hero to the time J. R. R. Tolkien served on the warfront in World War I, surviving the Battle of the Somme. In A Hobbit, a Wardrobe, and a Great War, Loconte pays special attention to the smallest of races and cultures, saying:

Tolkien the soldier lived among these “ordinary men,” fought alongside them, witnessed their courage under fire, joked with them, mourned with them, and watched them die. Thus the “small people” who fought and suffered in the Great War helped inspire the creation of the unlikely heroes in Tolkien’s greatest imaginative work. Like the soldiers in that war, the homely hobbits could not have perceived how the fate of nations depended upon their stubborn devotion to duty. (76-77)

Hobbits, Wild Men, and forgotten Trees changed the War in Tolkien’s Legendarium.

Though great Kings and immortal beings as old as the stones clash against evil in spectacular battles, the ordinary people guiding soldiers through traps and carrying Rings of Power to their destruction changed the tides of history. Holding no patience for racism, and spending decades crafting equal characters both men and women, Tolkien’s small advancements fertilized a healthy soil for new writers and authors to craft from later. This, though, was no overnight task; spending a lifetime on fantastical world-building brought challenges he could never have foreseen.
Part IV — The Impact of Publication

I. A Puzzle

Tolkien’s *Legendarium* saw tragedy and blessings in its formation—a life-long puzzle comprising of writing, editing, publishing, editing, and editing again. Each one of the newer versions of *The Lord of the Rings* has elaborate notes on the text, meticulous forwards, and extensive appendices. In each part, the various authors—including Tolkien himself—carefully articulate the publication woes of getting *The Lord of the Rings* to press. Even after Tolkien’s death in 1973 (nineteen years after the initial publication), the integrity of the text was offset by the complications of multiple new languages, countless diacritics, and fantastical nomenclatures; these errors plagued that life-long work. In a “Note on the Text,” Douglas A. Anderson mentions Tolkien’s diary where he wrote, “But I am attempting to complete my work [on the revisions]–I cannot leave it while it is all in my mind. So much time has been wasted in all my work by this constant breaking of threads” (*Fellowship* x). These detailed looks into the growth of *The Lord of the Rings*, the “machinery” of a story as Tolkien was so apt to call it, show the troublesome evolution of a mythology grounded in fragmented puzzle pieces. With early entries of Middle-earth, Tolkien ignited narrative threads that would first be seen by the public in *The Hobbit*. In *The Book of Lost Tales I*, Christopher Tolkien determines the roots of the *Legendarium* in a full form, saying, “*The Book of Lost Tales* was begun by my father in 1916–17 during the First War, when he was 25 years old, and left incomplete several years later. It is the starting-point, at least in fully-formed narrative…” (xvii). Here are the earliest “threads” Tolkien began to weave—with his wife editing on spare pieces of paper—in the midst of
wartime, “where I was for a brief time in command of an outpost of the Humber Garrison in 1917, and she was able to live with me for a while” (Letters 420).

With such humble beginnings, from being two poor orphans wed in the midst of a Great War to later retiring comfortably on just royalties, the span of J. R. R. Tolkien’s success is impressive. “On Fairy Stories” becomes a foundation here, a glimpse into the evolution of his thought process while creating The Lord of the Rings after penning one of the “grandfathers” of modern fantasy and fiction—an entry into Children’s Literature that enchanted parents and children alike. However, if “On Fairy Stories” is a professional foundation, The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien are a behind-the-scenes roadmap of the decisions and emotions behind the author. Drafts, formal letters, and addresses alike are all found in here, dating back to some courtship letters in late 1914 through the final letter he wrote just days before his death in 1973. These correspondences offer a topological outlook at Tolkien’s perspective on his writings, including unsent drafts and publication notes gone unseen until Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien assembled the work. The very landscape of his attitude towards his creation adjusted through another Great War, economic struggles, and other aspects of daily life. As the tone of Middle-earth changed over publications and decades, so too did Tolkien’s conviction towards audience and purpose. The Letters betray private thoughts, personal dialogues, and the inner workings of the Legendarium in the same fashion of “On Fairy Stories,” but without the formality of a lecture hall.

I think it is plain that quite apart from it, a sequel or successor to The Hobbit is called for. I promise to give this thought and attention. But I am sure you will sympathize when I say that the construction of elaborate and consistent
mythology (and two languages) rather occupies the mind, and the Silmarils are in my heart. So that goodness knows what will happen. (Letters 26)

So writes Tolkien in December 1937—just months after the publication of *The Hobbit*—then writing to the same recipient just days later, “The Hobbit sequel is still where it was, and I have only the vaguest notions of how to proceed. Not ever intending any sequel, I fear I squandered all my favourite ‘motifs’ and characters on the original ‘Hobbit’” (29). The “Silmarils” are a core facet of Tolkien’s mythology, prompting the biblical events of *The Silmarillion*—the backdrop that *The Hobbit* was formed from. It “occupies the mind” as Tolkien moves forward, writing smaller stories completely outside of Middle-earth, in both academia and fiction. However, Tolkien always returned to Middle-earth. Almost daily, he began writing away at what would become *The Fellowship of the Ring*. In August of 1938, the process had gotten on well enough, even in the midst of teaching and other writings. Around the same time Tolkien presented “On Fairy Stories,” he wrote a crucial aside in a letter to his publisher. Even after just months of on-and-off again writing, the tone has shifted.

I have begun again on the sequel to the ‘Hobbit’ – *The Lord of the Ring*. It is now flowing along, and getting quite out of hand. It has reached about Chapter VII and progresses towards quite unforeseen goals. I must say I think it is a good deal better in places and some ways than the predecessor; but that does not say that I think it either more suitable or more adapted for its audience. For one thing it is, like my own children… rather ‘older’… But it is no bedtime story. (Letters 41)

Again, Tolkien turns to children and keeps an eye on “its audience.” The proto-*Lord of the Rings* is “older,” and “better.” Here, Tolkien acknowledges the slightly juvenile nature of *The Hobbit*, a story forged slowly, beginning as a simple bedtime tale for his children. His children and his writings grew side-by-side. Each night, a new chapter would bud until his
pen hit the paper to form the book known today. Every chapter ends with a clifhanger, leaving the company in impossibly dire situations as Bilbo fumbles through the adventure. 

*The Lord of the Rings,* however, was different from the start; the youthful narrative present in *The Hobbit* was the first characteristic to be jettisoned in its own sequel. Children’s literature was no longer the atmosphere for such a comprehensive work, and it occupied Tolkien’s thoughts. In 1939, he wrote, “I have never quite ceased work on the sequel. It has reached Chapter XVI. I fear it is growing too large. I am not at all sure that it will please quite the same audience (except in so far as that has grown up too). Will there be any chance of publication, if I can get it done before the Spring?...” (ibid 44). Five years later, writing a sequel had Tolkien stumble into a tome of a draft that even his trusted publisher was hesitant to consider releasing. Of that draft, Tolkien wrote, “I hope you still have some mild interest in it, in spite of paper shortage” (86. Nine books had formed in the draft, and the audience of the original was now old enough to have children of their own.

II. A Sequel

In late 1951, *The Lord of the Rings* was nearing completion and Tolkien’s publisher, Allen & Unwin, had withdrawn from publishing *The Lord of the Rings* in every way but formally—for Tolkien had an implied ultimatum: it must be published with *The Silmarillion* included. This was an impossible task with a paper shortage, a different tone from the previous success, and nearly two decades of passed time with only publications on *Beowulf* and various lectures to Tolkien’s name. The publishing house Collins expressed interest, especially since *The Hobbit* had proven to be a genre-revitalizing work. In order to justify the length of both publications—nearly 2,000 pages together—Tolkien wrote one of the
longest letters contained in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. The full correspondence is over ten-thousand words long, and is a history lesson of Middle-earth (and its gestation). Only a sample is featured in *The Letters*. Within this impassioned pitch, Tolkien reflects on the fundamental differences between this pending work and *The Hobbit*:

The generally different tone and style of *The Hobbit* is due, in point of genesis, to it being taken by me as a matter from the great cycle susceptible of treatment as a 'fairy-story', for children. Some of the details of tone and treatment are, I now think, even on that basis, mistaken. But I should not wish to change much. For in effect this is a study of simple ordinary man, neither artistic nor noble and heroic (but not without the undeveloped seeds of these things) against a high setting — and in fact (as a critic has perceived) the tone and style change with the Hobbit's development, passing from fairy-tale to the noble and high and relapsing with the return. (159)

Roughly fourteen years had passed since *The Hobbit* was published when the seeds of Tolkien's cynical perspective on his first novel are publicly germinated. More importantly, however, is the evolution "On Fairy Stories" catalyzed after *The Hobbit* was published. Many aspects of the "modern" fairy tales (in his time, of course) that he disagreed with in his lecture appear in *The Hobbit* in some correctional manner. For instance, look at the previous sentence and how I inserted that parenthetical phrase. As discussed in Part II above, a narrator jumps in to guide the reader within *The Hobbit*; the established land of Middle-earth requires context and direction, especially in a children's book. However, "even on that basis," the narration seems derogatory to the child, often stern or even chiding in its unpretentious and casual prose. "On Fairy Stories" fights against tales that go too far in this, urging for the mind of the child to tackle strange lands and stories without a stony hand to guide them. And yet Tolkien knows a main strength of his initial
work, the “tone and style change with the Hobbit’s development, passing from fairy-tale to the noble and high and relapsing with the return” that makes its way into the full title: *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*. The children’s book leaves the scope of that genre, with a climax that spans beyond a simple tale (and beyond Bilbo’s perspective as he is rendered unconscious for the final battle). Even though this is a pitch for a sequel drastically different than the original work, connective tissue between *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* is seen as his roots in children’s literature undergoes a metamorphosis of “tone and treatment” within the “high setting” of Middle-earth.

However, *The Lord of the Rings* was eventually published through Allen & Unwin after a slew of difficulties. The evolution from the writings of *The Hobbit* was seen clearly, and Middle-earth became an unparalleled force to be reckoned with. *The Lord of the Rings* sat firmly on the “adult” shelves from the moment it was published, though difficult to categorize. In her Preface to *Green Suns and Faërie*, Verlyn Fleiger encapsulates the complicated nature of *The Lord of the Rings*, in addition to providing a a glance at the way scholarship has changed in the aftermath of publication.

Much has changed in Tolkien scholarship since *The Lord of the Rings* was first published in the middle of the twentieth century. His work has been called both an epic and a fairy tale; it has been cataloged as pseudo-medieval and discovered as surprisingly postmodern; it has been cataloged as fantasy and hailed as superrealistic; it has been characterized as both conventional and groundbreaking, as allegorical and mythological. It is all of these and more than these, for it stubbornly refuses to be confined to any genre. It is a book that has caught the imagination and held the loyalty of three generations of readers for over fifty years and shows no sign of stopping. It is what it is. (ix)
These dichotomies clash within the *Legendarium*, and perhaps make it all the greater. Its troubled development lead to a long road full of editing and writings, drafts and revisions. Instead of a quick publication and rushed processes—though time was certainly felt—*The Lord of the Rings* was annealed for years, pressured through a World War, economic struggles, ill children, and countless difficulties. The result was a creation fully mastered by its author, set in a canon that no outside force would tamper with, and a sequel that drew upon the growth Tolkien underwent through the decades. For those reasons, it stands to this day—resonating as a creation that transcends our imaginations. "It is what it is," to each of us, a creation worth knowing.
Part V — An Apology for Mythology and Conclusions

I. A Myth and a Mythology

Each of us craves creation. Art, music, literature, and performance have obsessed humanity since as far back as we can trace. Monuments and statues are discovered under millennia of dirt; paintings and prints are found pristine in caves unoccupied for thousands of years. These early and late bits of oeuvre within individual cultures are expected to be found; vast resources and lifetimes are devoted to finding the past in the grounds, buildings, and crevasses of the world. It is there, assuredly, for we create now just as every generation past. Once discovered, we fear the loss of each finding, seeking to preserve even the most seemingly irrelevant pieces in museums and collections worldwide. Yet this preservation is a binding act, a path of unification between the past and the present with the potential to bind even the most estranged voices together. Those voices from the past—cries of creation—still echo today, confined within the categories assigned by modern thought: mythology, individual myths distilled into a culture. Mythology, post-renaissance, lost its potency, becoming merely a means to compare beauty, express knowledge, and summon the greatness of old. Mythology, once an abstract of belief itself, fell. Myths, the kernels of those beliefs, became muses of the past. Yet, each of us craves creation. In a world filled with stories, tales, and experiences strewn from cheap novels to infinite blogposts, we crave creation. Raw, true, real, escape. Again, those monuments and statues and paintings become ever more important, relics and reminders of times with stories that occupied the lands absolutely. Preserving the myths and mythologies of old forms is a bedrock for all creators to stand on, a stable foundation for the works of today.
To fall in love with words is a constant affair. Living, thinking, breathing the air of another world that ends when the cover closes leaves a whiplash of the heart… Until we each find that land we relate to, unshakably bond with, tracking down the author’s letters and notes and annotations, finding only agreement with our hearts. So one can find J. R. R. Tolkien, a man creative to the core, with beliefs and systems of vision that led to his fleshed-out *Legendarium* spanning from the margin of Tolkien’s high school books to letters from a deathbed. Where these intersect—written text, research, and letters by the author—an equilibrium is found that connects a reader with a creator. From there, you can peer into the very foundation of that creation, shoveling until the bedrock is found. For Tolkien, myths were fragments of truth itself, a point to be looked at later—separated by decades, genres, and topics. Set in the twilight years of a high-fantasy land full of history, Tolkien’s *Legendarium* stands tall on cultures long past, cementing myth and mythology into the pages of fantasy today.

Delving into the divide between myth and mythology seems trivial, superficial. Why pry these things apart, the creation and the collection? What is in this rift that is as overlooked as it is semantic? This dichotomy looks into the roots of literature, from fantasy to poetry. Cracking conventions allows us to stare at the branches of connection between Tolkien’s *Legendarium* and the bedrock of mythology. The very study of mythology means grappling with this split between mythology and myth, bringing forces to the forefront of the way myth and mythology have blended together in today’s societal awareness. Myths, the seeds to mythology’s fruit, can be seen millennia later, staying relevant to cultures on separate sides of the globe. “The myth is the public dream, and the dream is the private myth” says Joseph Campbell on page 48 *The Power of Myth*, the
written version of a handful of interviews by Bill Moyers that soon became known worldwide after Campbell's death. Campbell became fascinated with the divisions within mythology: dream and public thought, myth and reality, and even mythology against the myths themselves. As these forces dance around each other, binaries are forced to be examined at the root of every work that draws upon aspects of mythology, from characters to the monomyth. Here with Tolkien, a set of forces within harnessing that mythology becomes apparent upon closer inspection: the incorporation of old myths, while bearing a constitution of mythology itself. The semantic difference of myth and mythology becomes practiced as recognizable myths reappear within a new mythology, developed completely. For Tolkien, his myth of Middle-earth began when he was young. So young, in fact, his remaining family could remember tales he would weave of ancient lands spoken with a bard-like drawl beyond his years: “when he was about seven to compose his own story about a dragon,” (30) writes Humphrey Carpenter in J. R. R. Tolkien: a Biography. He grew to speak over ten languages, and to invent another six at least. Bound by poetry, other languages, and the stories of old, Tolkien formed his own works—either incorporating or including mythologies and myths on a level of academia-changing creations—fueled by works older than our own culture.

When night falls, the fantastic awakens. A creak in the basement becomes an intruder, the dusty dress in the closet an apparition. Our minds thrive off of the existing tenets of the world around us, morphing and imagining within the confines of our reality. So, too, Tolkien harnesses in that sense, pulling on the intruders and apparitions of ages past. In this real world—what Tolkien calls the “Primary World” (Tales From the Perilous Realm 367)—we are bound by what exists. The sky is blue and grass is green and gravity is
ever-present. Millenia of cultures, races, and peoples have been bound thus, stretching the confines of life and death to encompass the heavens and the hells. While discussing the root of stories for children, Tolkien discusses the heart of mythology, and how individual myths have diffused throughout our culture to this day. Collected in The Tolkien Reader, “Tree and Leaf”—Tolkien’s very own essay of Faerie and fiction:

At one time it was a dominant view that all such matter was derived from “nature-myths.” The Olympians were personifications of the sun, of dawn, of night, and so on, and all the stories told about them were originally myths (allegories would have been a better word) of the greater elemental changes and processes of nature. Epic, heroic legend, saga, then localized these stories in real places and humanized them by attributing them to ancestral heroes, mightier than men and yet already men. And finally these legends, dwindling down, became folk-tales, Märchen, fairy-stories—nursery-tales. (49)

In here, we see the discourse between past and present, and the avenues of mythology within it. Myth, the stories we tell, and mythology, their chronicle in time, are everything human. Descriptions of the origins around us, hero’s tales, even the everyday stories parents tell their kids at night. Religions and beliefs about the moon, once fought for, have become simple rhymes and bedtime stories. Myth is all, and yet untouchable, for once a story is immortalized in myth, it is for all to use. Myths become mythologies, then those fade to legends as legends then become stories, and soon stories get rejuvenated with a movie reboot or endearing children’s book series. There is a base-layer of applicability to these myths and mythologies, a kinship that separates them from stories that pass from memory as time goes on. Humanizing mythology itself, Tolkien stresses the importance of localization, illuminating his own approach to crafting new stories: harnessing with respect for that which exists. In the most recent, posthumous publication from the Tolkien
Estate, *The Story of Kullervo*, Verlyn Fleiger includes an essay of her own, testifying to the importance of Tolkien’s incomplete adaption of the ancient, Finnish folklore of *The Kalevala*. Fleiger asserts that “*The Story of Kullervo* was Tolkien’s earliest attempt at retelling — and in the process ‘reorganizing’ — an already-existing tale. As such, it occupies an important place in his canon. Furthermore, it is a significant step on the winding road from imitation to invention, a trial piece…” (162). In Tolkien’s letter to a prominent poet, critic, and fan of Middle-earth, W. H. Auden, he notes the roots of his interest in this ancient myth, “I mentioned Finnish, because that set the rocket off’ in story. I was immensely attracted by something in the air of the Kalevala… But the beginning of the legendarium, of which the Trilogy is pan (the conclusion), was in an attempt to reorganize some of the Kalevala, especially the tale of Kullervo the hapless, into a form of my own” (*Letters* 214). It was an old tale—distant from the modern taste—but a catalyst. However, what if a work was so cohesive—and yet so modern—it could transplant myths into today’s times, even to remain relevant as generations pass? This feat would be recognized around the world, and would never be forgotten.

In discussing the ramifications of death’s effects on the human psyche in *The Dream and the Underworld*, James Hillman delves into the bedrock of all shared, human mythologies:

What is most dead and buried in each of us is the culture’s neglect of Death. Hades only now begins to reappear in ominous new concerns with the limits to growth, the energy crisis, ecological pollution, aging and dying… For depth psychology brings back to us not only the persons of the dream and the memorial psyche of the underworld. It has also brought Death back from its exile in the parapsychology of spiritism, the theology of afterlife, the morality of rewards, and the scientific fantasies of biochemical chance or evolution—back to
its main place in the midst of the psychological life of each individual, which opens into depth at every step. Our footfalls echo on its vaults below. (67)

As Hillman suggests, the ancient myths of Death have begun to rise again in our post-World-War II culture. Without addressing it, Hillman speaks to the separation of myth and mythology, active forces that swirl around each other throughout time. As the Renaissance connected modern life with the pursuit of old knowledge, so too our culture seeks to define the unknowable, bringing it back to the individual. An obsession with what lies beyond enchants us still, especially as we confront our own mortality. In the depths of Mythology, Tolkien saw the purest echo of Death: legends and stories of infantile cultures, the echoing footfalls of a people seeking to define and capture the world around them. To this day, those old myths echo in our cultures.

II. A Legacy

When offered illustrations for the German translation of The Hobbit, Tolkien opposed the art for being "too 'Disnified'" (Letters 119), as opposed to the "Odinic wanderer that I think of" (ibid). His own characters were amalgams of old myths come to life; fruit of vines long withered, fed only by the passing scholarly glimpse into mythology. Harnessing the mythologies of Anglo-Saxon culture, Tolkien uses their familiar scent to track his own creations. The very being of tales and stories rooted in myth become constituted in his Legendarium.

Chasing his father's work and manuscripts into The Fall of Arthur, Christopher Tolkien tries to assess how J. R. R. Tolkien was inspired to write an epic poem on Arthur himself: "I have seen no need to enter the shadowy origins of the Arthurian legend in the early centuries of its history, and I will only say here that it is essential to the understanding of The Fall of Arthur to recognize that the roots of the legend drive from the
fifth century...” (13). Small scribbles in the margins of notebooks become gold mines to people seeking to discover more of Tolkien, an opportunity used to edit his own work and track his thoughts. The professor consumed the world around him, seeking through poetry and fiction to explain the world in which we live. Whether redefining gender or capturing the human thoughts of art, Tolkien sits on his own bedrock of mythology, crafting works that can build another foundation for generations to come. However, and more importantly, Tolkien’s Legendarium shows more than myth and mythology: each displays love incarnate. A love of craft, a love of Earth and the peoples it has borne upon its thin and rocky surface.

One night, almost exactly six years before the publication of The Hobbit, Tolkien took a fateful walk with his friends C. S. Lewis and Hugo Dyson. Tolkien and Dyson, devout Christians, found themselves at odds with Lewis’ observations of all myths. Tolkien was vexed, and that night penned a poem, “Mythopoeia,” to distill his argument. In the opening to the piece, Tolkien details Lewis’ argument that, “myths were lies and therefore worthless, even though ‘breathed through silver’” (Mythopoeia foreword). Lewis believed that while myths and mythologies may feel special, “silver,” they are still intrinsically false. Colin Duriez details this moment in Tolkien and C.S. Lewis: The Gift of Friendship, saying,

The pilgrimage [to Christianity] had come to a head just a few days before the trip to Whipsande. The night of September 19-20, as they made their way down Addison’s Walk, on the grounds of Magdalen College, Lewis had a long conversation with Tolkien, now a fast friend... which had shaken him to the roots.” (53)
In this conversation, Lewis doubted the commonality of all mankind: mythology, stories, legends. He claimed them to be lies. So Tolkien “recorded the long night conversation on Addison’s Walk, and many previous exchanges with Lewis, in his poem, *Mythopoeia* (the making of myth)” (ibid). “Mythopoeia” is written seven years before “On Fairy Stories,” but defends the same makers who craft “subcreations” in the forms of Secondary Worlds (please see page 54 for a copy). In heroic couplets, Tolkien adopts the tone of the British Enlightenment poetics in a work full of allusions, myth, and an adaption of the Biblical beatitudes, saying, “Blessed are the timid hearts that evil hate... Blessed are the men of Noah’s race that build...Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme (“Mythopoeia” 81, 87, 91). In perhaps the most direct verse in response to the Addison’s Walk discourse, Tolkien writes:

> The heart of man is not compound of lies,  
> but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,  
> and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,  
> man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.  
> Disgraced he may be, yet is not dethroned,  
> and keeps the rags of lordship one he owned,  
> his world-dominion by creative act:  
> not his to worship the great Artefact,  
> man, sub-creator, the refracted light  
> through whom is splintered from a single White  
> to many hues, and endlessly combined  
> in living shapes that move from mind to mind. (ibid 53-70)

Each creator is a reflection of a single inspirational “White,” refracted into brilliant hues in the minds of many—each with their own color to shine, “endlessly combined.”

Together, in the complete collection of all stories and minds and creative power; the hues
show a true light. The stories and legends we hold in our hearts are not “compound of lies,” these stories draw “wisdom from the only Wise,” an echo of the root of all man: a common existence. Lewis converted, in no small part to “Mythopoeia,” one of the greatest defenses of ancient, pagan, and modern mythologies alike.

“Mythopoeia” points towards truth, again, as Tolkien discussed in “On Fairy Stories.” The story told must ring true, the charm so effective that no occurrences will jolt the reader out the imaginative discourse. Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James observe this happening in Middle-earth, and verify the mythological roots of the *Legendarium* as they state in *A Short History of Fantasy*:

> For many readers the main attraction of *The Lord of the Rings* was precisely the feeling that Middle-earth has depth. If you turn the corner in Middle-earth, you know that there will be more world there. Tolkien spent almost twenty years writing the history, and creating the culture and economics of Middle-earth before the first taste of it was given to a broader public, in the children’s book *The Hobbit.* (44)

Here, Mendlesohn and James capture the reasoning behind “the feeling that Middle-earth has depth.” There is a bedrock there, a foundation deep within the stories in Middle-earth. That “trueness” is a main attraction, and elevates the creation into a timeless work. This is Tolkien’s legacy—a lifelong labor, crafting a world in literature so vast it is beyond epic, but grounded in the everyday folk. With old mythology and new myths, the *Legendarium* became impervious to time, shifting tastes, and numerous adaptations.

**III. A Conclusion**

The final letter collected in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* was written four days before his death. It was sent to his daughter Pricilla, detailing a trip he had taken back to
Bournemouth—the seaside village where the Tolkien's had settled down as both grew older (and slower). There, were she wanted to be—and where J. R. R. Tolkien was dithering to remain—Edith died. Years later, Tolkien returned to this town after having moved back to Oxford as a widower. With an air of nostalgia, he writes about the trip to Pricilla, cataloging small events from losing his wallet to old friends caring for him on the vacation. As always, he spoke of the weather, adding after his farewell, “It is stuffy, sticky, and rainy here at present— but forecasts are more favourable” (432).

His last released words rang true for much of his life. From surviving the Somme Offensive, watching his own sons leave for the next World War, and writing for decades and—seemingly—making little progress, the mood often felt stuffy, sticky, and rainy. *The Silmarillion*, the genesis of his writings, spent long years unwanted by any publisher until the final years of his life where it then remained unfinished. *The Lord of the Rings* was passed over for many years by several publishers, ultimately cut into three books as paper shortages from the war lessened. But forecasts were more favourable, and success came. His sons survived, his works were published, and people clamored for more of the world where good somehow made it—even in the greatest peril and darkest hours.

When Bilbo Baggins of *The Hobbit* awoke from the final battle of the novel, he found the fatally wounded Thorin, the Dwarven King, surrounded by his friends. In parting, Thorin apologized to Bilbo, praising the culture of the hobbits that ran against the instincts of the dwarves. “If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world” (*The Hobbit* 263). The *Legendarium* houses small feats of success, both in its contents and in its creation. Tolkien made a merrier world there, still steeped in troubles with enough symbolism and allegories to occupy
generations of scholars dedicated to those writings. This bled into his life, and I truly hope in his own days he made a merrier world for his wife, family, and those around him with the small renaissances he created in his works. By all indications, he did, still valuing the simple food and cheer and song above the consequent riches and fame. In his own letters and forewords, Tolkien thanks his wife and family profusely, a fact than can be seen in every page we turn—a source of inspiration and of critique, especially as his children inherited the estate. At the end of one of her compositions published in *Green Suns and Faërie: Essays on J. R. R. Tolkien*, Verlyn Fleiger finishes “Tolkien and the Idea of the Book” with an air thanksgiving and purpose within her studies of the *Legendarium*. Her words offer a conclusion here—amid a careful warning—juxtaposed against my search for the small steps Tolkien made that changed our literary canon in real-time. May the word speak for themselves, and for me:

And that is we who come after, the generations following Tolkien who have found his “book” in all aspects worthy not just of readerly enjoyment but also of scholarly study, of serious critical contextual examination through which we labor to enhance without dissecting his vision. (53)
Firiel looked out at three o'clock:
the grey night was going,
far away a golden cock
  clear and shrill was crowing.
The trees were dark, and the dawn pale,
  waking birds were cheeping,
a wind moved cool and frail
  through dim leaves creeping.

She watched the gleam at window grow,
  till the long light was shimmering
on land and leaf; on grass below
  grey dew was glimmering.
Over the floor her white feet crept,
  down the stair they twinkled,
through the grass they dancing stepped
  all with dew besprinkled.

Her gown had jewels upon its hem,
as she ran down to the river,
and leaned upon a willow-stem,
  and watched the water quiver.
A kingfisher plunged down like a stone
  in a blue flash falling,
bending reeds were softly blown,
  lily-leaves were sprawling.

A sudden music to her came,
as she stood there gleaming
with fair hair in the morning's flame
  on her shoulders streaming.
Flutes were there, and harps were wrung,
  and there was sound of singing,
like wind-voices keen and young
  and far bells ringing.

A ship with golden beak and oar
  and timbers white came gliding;
swans went sailing on before,
  her tall prow guiding.
Fair folk out of Elvenland
  in silver-grey were rowing,
and three with crowns she saw there stand
with bright hair flowing.

With harp in hand they sang their song
to the slow oars swinging;
‘Green is the land the leaves are long,
and the birds are singing.
Many a day with dawn of gold
this earth will lighten,
many a flower will yet unfold,
ere the cornfields whiten.

‘Then whither go ye, boatmen fair,
down the river gliding?
To twilight and to secret lair
in the great forest hiding?
To Northern isles and shores of stone
on strong swans flying,
by cold waves to dwell alone
with the white gulls crying?’

‘Nay!’ they answered. ‘Far away
on the last road faring,
leaving western havens grey,
the seas of shadow daring,
we go back to Elvenhome,
where the White Tree is growing,
and the Star shines upon the foam
on the last shore flowing.

‘To mortal fields say farewell,
Middle-earth forsaking!
In Elvenhome a clear bell
in the high tower is shaking.
Here grass fades and leaves fall,
and sun and moon wither,
and we have heard the far call
that bids us journey thither’.

The oars were stayed. They turned aside:
‘Do you hear the call, Earth-maiden?
Firie! Firie!’ they cried,
‘Our ship is not full-laden.
One more only we may bear.
Come! For your days are speeding.
Come! Earth-maiden elven-fair,
our last call heeding.’
Firiel looked from the river-bank,  
    one step daring;  
then deep in clay her feet sank,  
    and she halted staring.  
Slowly the elven-ship went by  
    whispering through the water:  
'I cannot come!' they heard her cry.  
    'I was born Earth's daughter!'  

No jewels bright her gown bore,  
    as she walked back from the meadow  
under roof and dark door,  
    under the house-shadow.  
She donned her smock of russet brown,  
    her long hair braided,  
and to her work came stepping down.  
    Soon the sunlight faded.  

Year still after year flows  
    down the Seven Rivers;  
cloud passes, sunlight glows,  
    reed and willow quivers  
at morn and eve, but never more  
westward ships have waded  
in mortal waters as before,  
    and their song has faded. (The Tolkien Reader 248-251)
"Mythopoeia" by J. R. R. Tolkien

To one who said that myths were lies and therefore worthless, even though "breathed through silver"

PHILOMYTHUS TO MISOMYTHUS

You look at trees and label them just so, (for trees are 'trees', and growing is 'to grow'); you walk the earth and tread with solemn pace one of the many minor globes of Space: a star's a star, some matter in a ball compelled to courses mathematical amid the regimented, cold, Inane, where destined atoms are each moment slain.

At bidding of a Will, to which we bend (and must), but only dimly apprehend, great processes march on, as Time unrolls from dark beginnings to uncertain goals; and as on page o'erwritten without clue, with script and limning packed of various hue, and endless multitude of forms appear, some grim, some frail, some beautiful, some queer, each alien, except as kin from one remote Origo, gnat, man, stone, and sun. God made the petreous rocks, the arboreal trees, tellurian earth, and stellar stars, and these homuncular men, who walk upon the ground with nerves that tingle touched by light and sound. The movements of the sea, the wind in boughs, green grass, the large slow oddity of cows, thunder and lightning, birds that wheel and cry, slime crawling up from mud to live and die, these each are duly registered and print the brain's contortions with a separate dint.

Yet trees and not 'trees', until so named and seen - and never were so named, till those had been who speech's involuted breath unfurled, faint echo and dim picture of the world, but neither record nor a photograph, being divination, judgement, and a laugh, response of those that felt astir within by deep monition movements that were kin to life and death of trees, of beasts, of stars:
free captives undermining shadowy bars,
digging the foreknown from experience
and panning the vein of spirit out of sense.
Great powers they slowly brought out of themselves,
and looking backward they beheld the Elves
that wrought on cunning forges in the mind,
and light and dark on secret looms entwined.

He sees no stars who does not see them first
of living silver made that sudden burst
to flame like flowers beneath the ancient song,
whose very echo after-music long
has since pursued. There is no firmament,
only a void, unless a jewelled tent
myth-woven and elf-patterned; and no earth,
unless the mother's womb whence all have birth.

The heart of man is not compound of lies,
but draws some wisdom from the only Wise,
and still recalls him. Though now long estranged,
man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
Disgraced he may be, yet is not dethroned,
and keeps the rags of lordship one he owned,
his world-dominion by creative act:
not his to worship the great Artefact,
man, sub-creator, the refracted light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with elves and goblins, though we dared to build
gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sow the seed of dragons, 'twas our right
(used or misused). The right has not decayed.
We make still by the law in which we're made.

Yes! 'wish-fulfilment dreams' we spin to cheat
our timid hearts and ugly Fact defeat!
Whence came the wish, and whence the power to dream,
or some things fair and others ugly deem?
All wishes are not idle, not in vain
fulfilment we devise - for pain is pain,
not for itself to be desired, but ill;
or else to strive or to subdue the will
alike were graceless; and of Evil this
alone is dreadfully certain: Evil is.
Blessed are the timid hearts that evil hate, 
that quail in its shadow, and yet shut the gate; 
that seek no parley, and in guarded room, 
through small and bare, upon a clumsy loom 
weave tissues gilded by the far-off day 
hoped and believed in under Shadow's sway.

Blessed are the men of Noah's race that build 
their little arks, though frail and poorly filled, 
and steer through winds contrary towards a wraith, 
a rumour of a harbour guessed by faith.

Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme 
of things nor found within record time. 
It is not they that have forgot the Night, 
or bid us flee to organised delight, 
in lotus-isles of economic bliss 
forswearing souls to gain a Circe-kiss 
(and counterfeit at that, machine-produced, 
bogus seduction of the twice-seduced).

Such isles they saw afar; and ones more fair, 
and those that hear them yet may yet beware. 
They have seen Death and ultimate defeat, 
and yet they would not in despair retreat, 
but oft to victory have turned the lyre 
and kindled hearts with legendary fire, 
illuminating Now and dark Hath-been 
with light of suns as yet by no man seen.

I would that I might with the minstrels sing 
and stir the unseen with a throbbing string. 
I would be with the mariners of the deep 
that cut their slender planks on mountains steep 
and voyage upon a vague and wandering quest, 
for some have passed beyond the fabled West. 
I would with the beleaguered fools be told, 
that keep an inner fastness where their gold, 
impure and scanty; yet they loyally bring 
to mint in image blurred of distant king, 
or in fantastic banners weave the sheen 
heraldic emblems of a lord unseen.

I will not walk with your progressive apes, 
erect and sapient. Before them gapes
the dark abyss to which their progress tends -
if by God's mercy progress ever ends,
and does not ceaselessly revolve the same
unfruitful course with changing of a name.
I will not treat your dusty path and flat,
denoting this and that by this and that,
your world immutable wherein no part
the little maker has with maker's art.
I bow not yet before the Iron Crown,
nor cast my own small golden sceptre down.

In Paradise perchance the eye may stray
from gazing upon everlasting Day
to see the day-illumined, and renew
from mirrored truth the likeness of the True.
Then looking on the Blessed Land 'twill see
that all is as it is, and yet may free:
Salvation changes not, nor yet destroys,
garden not gardener, children not their toys.
Evil it will not see, for evil lies
not in God's picture but in crooked eyes,
not in the source but in the tuneless voice.
In Paradise they look no more awry;
and though they make anew, they make no lie.
Be sure they still will make, not been dead,
and poets shall have flames upon their head,
and harps whereon their faultless fingers fall:
there each shall choose for ever from the All. (Tree and Leaf: Including the Poem Mythopoeia 83-88)
Works Cited


