



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

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Volume 32  
Number 2

Article 4

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4-15-2014

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Janet Brennan Croft  
*University of Oklahoma*

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### Recommended Citation

Croft, Janet Brennan (2014) "Tolkien's Faërian Drama: Origins and Valedictions," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 32: No. 2, Article 4.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol32/iss2/4>

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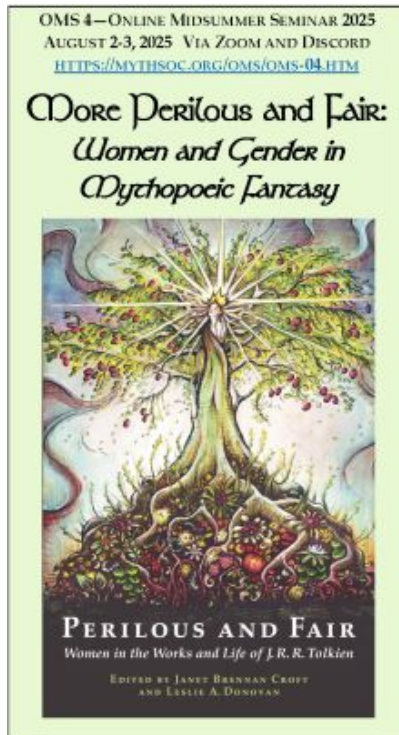
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## Tolkien's Faërian Drama: Origins and Valedictions

### Abstract

Attempts to define the characteristics of faërian drama through the way it changes the lives of dreamers such as Scrooge, the *Pearl* poet and Sir Gawain, and Smith of Wootton Major.

### Additional Keywords

Dream visions; Faërian drama; Pearl (poem); Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"; Tolkien, J.R.R. Smith of Wootton Major; Tolkien, J.R.R., trans. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo

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## TOLKIEN'S FAËRIAN DRAMA: ORIGINS AND VALEDICTIONS

JANET BRENNAN CROFT

IN HIS ESSAY "ON FAIRY-STORIES," TOLKIEN INTRODUCES the concept of Faërian Drama: plays which the elves present to men, with a "realism and immediacy beyond the compass of any human mechanism," where the viewer feels he is "bodily inside its Secondary World" but instead is "in a dream that some other mind is weaving" rather than a dream of his own. Faërian drama is a form of Elvish art a human can almost but not quite grasp and understand, something the witness/participant may ponder and work through for the rest of his or her life. While Tolkien describes Faerie in ambivalent terms at different points in drafts of "On Fairy-Stories," both suggesting its actual reality and treating it as a conceit (one version includes the phrase "[t]he marvels of Faerie are true, if at all, only on a different plane" 265), the concept of faërian drama is a useful tool for thinking about the profound work the subconscious does, in cases where the mind is deeply conflicted or in need of major change or growth and thus receptive when presented with an opportunity for a transformative experience.

The relevant passage is lengthy, but dense with meaning:

Now "Faërian Drama"—those plays which according to abundant records the elves have often presented to men—can produce Fantasy with a realism and immediacy beyond the compass of any human mechanism. As a result their usual effect (upon a man) is to go beyond Secondary Belief. If you are present at a Faërian drama you yourself are, or think that you are, bodily inside its Secondary World. The experience may be very similar to Dreaming and has (it would seem) sometimes (by men) been confounded with it. But in Faërian drama you are in a dream that some other mind is weaving, and the knowledge of that alarming fact may slip from your grasp. To experience directly a Secondary World: the potion is too strong, and you give to it Primary Belief, however marvellous the events. You are deluded—whether that is the intention of the elves (always or at any time) is another question. They at any rate are not themselves deluded. This is for them a form of Art, and distinct from Wizardry or Magic, properly so called. They do not live in it, though they can, perhaps, afford to spend more time at it than human artists can. The Primary World, Reality, of elves and men is the same, if differently valued and perceived.

We need a word for this elvish craft, but all the words that have been applied to it have been blurred and confused with other things. Magic is ready to hand, and I have used it above (p.32), but I should not have done so: Magic should be reserved for the operations of the Magician. Art is the human process that produces by the way (it is not its only or ultimate object) Secondary Belief. Art of the same sort, if more skilled and effortless, the elves can also use, or so the reports seem to show; but the more potent and specially elvish craft I will, for lack of a less debatable word, call Enchantment. Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose. ("On Fairy-stories" [OFS] 63-64)

This is all well and good, but as Flieger and Anderson point out in their commentary, "no definition of what the faërian [drama] consists of is given [and] no examples of such 'plays' or 'abundant records' are given"; Tolkien's description actually "does little to clarify the concept" ("Editors' Commentary" 112) or show how the experience of faërian drama truly differs from an ordinary dream or vision.

However, there is a hint here about the purpose of this art form that may set us on the right path to a good definition. I think we can find this purpose clearly described elsewhere in "On Fairy-Stories," and use it for the basis of a preliminary definition of the faërian drama: The artistic goal of faërian drama, like that of the fairy tale itself, is to awaken in the witness/participant an openness to Fantasy, Escape, Recovery, Consolation, and the possibility of Eucatastrophe. The one essential goal is Recovery, which makes the witness/participant receptive to the rest. Structurally, this goal is achieved through a variety of artistic effects, the most basic of which is that the participant must believe fully in the reality of the experience while within it.

What I propose to do here is expand and refine this preliminary definition by working backwards from several examples of what we might classify as faërian drama (because they appear to produce the effects which Tolkien describes), studying how they achieve their effects, looking at sources Tolkien was familiar with, and then examining how Tolkien uses the concept in some of his own works.

### **Techniques of the Faërian Drama**

Christopher Garbowski has done just this in his article on the Christmas film *It's a Wonderful Life*, which he considers a classic example of the faërian drama at work. Garbowski expands on Tolkien's description by explicitly suggesting a moral element to the fairy art: that the "primary goal" of faërian drama is "a meeting of the aesthetic and the ethical" (45). Here the viewer of the

film can clearly see that the intent of the drama—the film-within-a-film of the Pottersville sequence—is not the mere *manipulation* of magic for its own sake, but *consolation* and *recovery*. George Bailey is intended, through participating in this drama, to recover his proper perspective on life and his will to live (Garbowski 39). This is clearly what angel-in-training Clarence intends in presenting George with a palpable vision of a Georgeless alternate reality.

I would suggest that one of the purest examples of faërian drama possible is the Ur-story from which *It's a Wonderful Life* descended: Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. There are several important elements to consider here. There is the preparatory softening of Scrooge's resistance so he is more receptive: the reminders of the anniversary of Marley's death, the inescapability of the Christmas season, several ghostly occurrences on his trip home that evening, even his head cold and indigestion. There is the dramaturge of the event, Marley's Ghost, setting the scene and stating unequivocally the ethical purpose of the visitations: the "chance and hope" of Scrooge escaping a fate like his own (80). There is the "satisfaction" of Scrooge's senses at each change of scene, in Dickens's loving piling-on of sensual detail after detail, and Scrooge's dreamlike feeling of being part witness, part participant in each stave—in some cases able to physically affect his environment, in others not. And then there are the undeniable ethical results, exactly as intended by his spirit-guides, of the aesthetic and eucatastrophic experience: Scrooge's reclamation as a man of generosity and moral purpose, "as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man, as the good old city knew" (172).

Bottom's Dream, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, might serve as a somewhat flawed example—though it might better be termed Titania's Dream, for its purpose was the recovery of Titania's proper love for Oberon, rather than providing any ethical lesson for the poor foolish mortal caught up in it. (It seems the elves do practice faërian drama on each other, after all.) Whether Bottom remains lastingly "translated" (III.i.113) by his accidental experience is up to the intent of each production's director; in the Michael Hoffman-directed movie starring Kevin Kline, a trace of faerie remains with bully Bottom, for though he remains a buffoon and the grace of Faery touches Flute's acting, not his own, he has been given the gift of catching glimpses of Faery all around him. But generally, Bottom feels not "the slightest pain of humiliation"; he "seems to have learned nothing about himself" and is "entirely content with who he is" (Bevington 261-2). However, there are other, more straightforward examples of faërian drama at work in the play: consider the young lovers lost in the woods and led "up and down, up and down" (III.ii.396) by Puck. In line with the classic effects of faërian drama, they "awaken to a better understanding of their own human weaknesses and need for charitable forbearance" (Bevington 261-2).

### Interlude: Refining the Definition

So given these selected examples, how might we catalog the essential elements of a proper faërian drama, one that awakens the witness/participant to the possibility of Fantasy, Escape, Recovery, Consolation, and Eucatastrophe?

First, as a participant, one is in some way or another clearly not in the realm of one's every-day life; the vision feels real and as if one is immersed in it (that is, it "satisfies the senses" in Tolkien's terms). One may, while there, experience "appalling perils as well as profound pleasures" (Peppetone 155). In part this is because one can act, think, and move within the vision, though perhaps with certain limitations, and one's actions have consequences that either are as expected or that follow the logic of the secondary world—that is, events do not occur in the illogical or random fashion they might in a mere dream.

And there is often (though not always) a feeling of joining a world already in progress, that will continue after one leaves; in modern terms, one might compare the faërian drama to an interactive MMORPG (massively multi-player online role-playing game),<sup>1</sup> but entered into not at one's own instigation but at the near-irresistible invitation of something outside oneself. There is also often a sense of the fragility of the vision—that it may end unexpectedly or one may be ejected from it unceremoniously for bad behavior: as Tolkien describes it, "while he is there it is dangerous for him to ask too many questions, lest the gates should be shut and the keys be lost" (OFS 27).

Additionally, the participant must be ready for the experience, his or her mind in a liminal state ready to be overturned and re-aligned by the vision, like Scrooge on the anniversary of his partner's death. Also in contrast to a straightforward dream experience, as Garbowski points out, the participant is (more or less) free to refuse to enter, though "the consequence of such a rejection is being robbed of the opportunity of *recovery* that has been proffered" (46).

Perhaps most importantly, the moral purpose of the drama or vision may or may not be announced at its inception, but is entirely clear in retrospect: recovery of the soul, with its implications of redemption, reclamation, and

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<sup>1</sup> Péter Kristóf Makai makes the claim that immersive computer games are the closest approach to faërian drama we currently have, and that they have the potential to go even further; to function like the holodeck in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* or the virtual reality simulator of the movie *The Thirteenth Floor*, where the faërian drama experience is technically assisted and sought out willingly. What his model lacks is the sense of an outside, non-human agency (e.g., elves) creating these immersive experiences for an ethical as well as aesthetic purpose. But as Makai points out, "Describing [the fairies] is not needed for a theory of Fantasy because only the *actions* of the fairies matter" (41). So, as he goes on to say, "even if we do not have Tolkien's definition of the matter [...] of Faërian Drama, we *do* know its effects on the spectators witnessing it" (42). How and by whom the effects were created is perhaps not nearly as important as the receptivity of the mind of the participant.

personal (spiritual, emotional, or psychological) growth. Remember, as Garbowski put it, that faërian drama is an act of sub-creation (44) at the highest level of art, and its "primary goal" is "a meeting of the aesthetic and the ethical" (45). Rather than providing "closure in the traditional sense," the faërian drama experience leaves the character "at a juncture after which nothing can remain the same" (45). The participant is privy to "otherworldly revelations, reserved for those who are temporarily privileged as well as burdened" (Pepetone 151). The "spect/actor," to use Makai's term, "enact[s] a story in some shape or form that is reminiscent of narrative progress towards a desired goal: the (happy) end, Tolkien's *eucatastrophe*" (50). The faërian drama is a clear dividing line in the participant's life; there is before, and there is after.

### Tolkien's Sources

Where else, besides a probable familiarity with *A Christmas Carol* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, might Tolkien have encountered a foundation on which to base his theory or conceit of faërian drama? In particular, where might we find those "abundant records" of which he so assuredly speaks? I would suggest that he was referring to sources he was familiar with as a scholar: medieval dream visions, such as *Pearl*, and tales of encounters with the fantastic that read like dream visions without an explicit dream frame, like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

"At the simplest level," according to J. Stephen Russell, "a dream vision is the first person account of a dream; the dream report is usually preceded by a prologue introducing the dreamer as a character and often followed by an epilogue describing the dreamer's reawakening [...]." Within the prologue, "the reader often learns that the dreamer was distressed or concerned about some unnamed problem or worry [...]." The dream may record events that seem "superficially naturalistic" or "self-consciously allegorical"; common elements may include an enclosed garden, "preternatural light, talking animals, or a personified figure of authority" (Russell 5-6). This "guide," if present, "reveals some kind of wisdom to him or her that will either comfort or impart needed knowledge" (Boenig 100). Importantly, "the dreamer is *always* a character in his dream narrative." The reawakening, the return to the real world, provides closure for the narrator and the narrative (Russell 5-6).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Pearl* is what we might think of as the *locus classicus* of the dream vision, but the genre goes back to Gilgamesh's dream of the coming of Enkidu to tame his wildness, and stretches to include Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with its narrator starting out wandering in a dark wood rather than conventionally dreaming. C.S. Lewis's dream-vision novel *The Great Divorce* is a deliberate revival of and "reaction to" the medieval genre, and particularly evokes Dante (Boenig 97-99, 102).

I would suggest that for a dream vision or tale of the fantastic to fit the definition of faërian drama we are developing, the dreamer or narrator must be somewhat troubled in mind or else, as we might say now, in need of an intervention, and he must find in the vision some sort of response to what troubled him in the prologue. Finally, the epilogue must show the ethical and aesthetic purpose of the vision having some effect.

Without some purpose or effect, a dream of the fantastic is just Enchantment, and nothing more. Tolkien's own criticism of dream-frame stories, like Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, tells us something about what faërian drama is *not*: "any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole story [...] is a figment or illusion" takes away from the "truth" of the tale. If a tale is presented as "only a dream," it "cheats deliberately the primal desire at the heart of Faërie: the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder" (OFS 35); that is, a mere dream lacks the sense of encounter with something clearly *other*, outside the dreamer's own mind.

While Tolkien was familiar with an extremely wide range of medieval literature, I'm going to concentrate on *Pearl* and *Gawain* for this paper since we have his translations and notes, and since these notes clarify what Tolkien thought was the purpose of the dreams and *aventures* of the central characters.

*Pearl* is perhaps the easiest to interpret as a faërian drama, though it is couched in entirely Christian terms. Here is a dreamer who is aware, both before and after, that he dreams. It is a dream in which he feels that he physically acts and learns something that eases his soul's unrest, and in which his senses are satisfied that the fantastic and allegorical landscape is real. The river, to him, is truly a river—though the pebbles on its bed are jewels, it seems to be a physical river too fast and deep to wade (127-8). The character of the pearl-maiden herself, elf-like in appearance and as reserved and detached from the dreamer's common humanity as one of Tolkien's own Elves, speaks and acts in a manner that is a didactic melding of the aesthetic and ethical. The Jeweler is "educated" by his "visionary experiences" (Lynch 193), yet a central question of the poem is "how [a] human being can properly interpret, and convey to others, a superhuman experience" (Kruger 135). In Tolkien's notes on *Pearl*, he writes of its medieval author that "men, aware of the vagaries of dreams, still thought that amid their japes came visions of truth" (Introduction 14). While he does not use the term "faërian drama" here, it is clear he is thinking along the same lines as he does in "On Fairy-Stories":

[T]he narrated vision in the more serious medieval writing represented, if not an actual dream, at least a real process of thought culminating in some resolution or turning-point of the interior life—as with Dante, and in *Pearl*. And in all forms, lighter or more grave, the 'I' of the dreamer remained



the eyewitness, the author, and the facts that he referred to outside the dream (especially those concerning himself) were on a different plane, meant to be taken as literally true [...]. (15)

Tolkien goes on to say that the pearl-maiden treats the dreamer with "the hardness of truth [...] all is revealed to him, and he has eyes, yet he cannot see" (18). The dreamer had to be in the right frame of mind to receive the vision and profit from it; if he had instead "received it incredulously or rebelliously [...] he would have awakened by the mound again" (19) in the same state of woe and fear of mortality as before.<sup>3</sup>

The events of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* can be read, though they are presented as "superficially naturalistic" occurrences, as a dream-vision much like that in *Pearl*. The frame is Arthur's court; the initial challenge, our growing awareness of Gawain's tendency to hubris, and the nightmarish beheaded-yet-speaking "fay-man fell" (28) with his deadly challenge represent the prologue. Gawain's *aventures* in seeking the Green Chapel provide the softening of his resistance; "at whiles with worms he wars, and with wolves also, / at whiles with wood-trolls that wandered in the crags" (51). By the time he reaches Bertilak's castle, exhausted by hunger and cold, he is ripe for the dreamlike threefold-testing of his courtesy devised by the fairy queen Morgan le Fay (118). On his return to the real world of Arthur's court we see him chastened and newly ashamed of his weaknesses. In Tolkien's opinion, through Gawain's temptations and reactions "he becomes a real man" (Introduction 7) rather than a prig who is a little too proud of his own perfect courtesy and piety; he is "peculiarly fitted to suffer acutely in the adventure to which he is destined" (6).

And here is where I think we can see Tolkien acknowledging an unequivocal moral purpose for the dream vision and thus faërian drama: this experience was designed to lead Gawain, specifically and exclusively, through a series of trials and temptations uniquely suited to expose his peculiar weaknesses and frailties, and chasten, strengthen, and mature him.

### Fruition

Let us move on to representations of faërian drama in Tolkien's fictional works—what he winds up doing with this concept and these examples in his own art. *The Lord of the Rings* is full of dreams and visions, some of which might qualify as faërian drama or at least dream visions, though they are not clearly designated as such. Frodo in particular seems susceptible; his visions in Galadriel's mirror and on Amon Hen and his dreams in the house of Tom Bombadil seem more guided and purposeful than would be the case if his

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<sup>3</sup> The mound is his daughter's grave—and recall that mounds are also entrances into Faery.

subconscious were merely working through the materials in his own mind. Aragorn, on first meeting Arwen while singing of Lúthien, wonders if he had either “strayed into a dream” or “received the gift of the Elf-minstrels, who can make the things of which they sing appear before the eyes of those that listen,” showing at least a familiarity with the effects of faërian drama (*LotR* App.A 1058). One might find more examples elsewhere in the legendarium (not so much in *The Hobbit* perhaps, although Bilbo does dream, of home and dancing bears and dinner). True faërian drama, however, seems to play more of a part in the shorter fiction and poems.<sup>4</sup>

Three poems (probably) all written in the early 1930s can be interpreted as showing the dangerous side of participation in faërian drama. “The Sea-Bell” warns of the risks of succumbing to hubris while inside the bounds of Faery; the offender is punished both within the drama and on his return to mortal life. “The Last Ship,” conversely, is about the tragedy of refusing the call and turning back on the very threshold of Faery, losing the chance, as Garbowski put it above, of “the opportunity of *recovery* that has been proffered.” “Ides Aelfscyne,” published in Old English in *Songs for the Philologists* in 1936, is a *belle dame sans merci* poem of a mortal taken against his will by an “elf-fair lady” (in Tom Shippey’s translation, 357) but always longing to return home, never content to stay with her; again, rejecting the chance to experience Faery.

While *Leaf by Niggle* would also be worthy of analysis, I want to focus on *Smith of Wootton Major*, which Shippey has called Tolkien’s “Valedictory Address” (*Author* 303), as the key and final statement about faërian drama in Tolkien’s work. Verlyn Flieger warns us when embarking on study of *Smith* that “the more you try to define it the less you see” (“Pitfalls” 160) so we must tread warily. *Smith* is capable of many readings—as an autobiographical allegory of professor/writer’s life (Shippey), as Tolkien’s farewell to art (Kocher);<sup>5</sup> as his anxiety and grief at facing the end of life (Carpenter; these three cited in Flieger, “Afterword” 65), as proof of the concept of “On Fairy-Stories” (Flieger “Afterword” 60), as a lesson in stewardship (Dickerson and Evans 181), as a text about mysticism and religion (Sternberg). What I want to look at, using faërian drama as my approach, is the mechanism of *how* and just a glimpse of *why* the story manages to “bounce.”

Tolkien says himself that *Smith* “is a ‘Fairy Story’, of the kind in which beings that may be called ‘fairies’ or ‘elves’ play a part and are associates in action with human people, and are regarded as having a ‘real’ existence, that is

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<sup>4</sup> Many of course see Tolkien himself as a particularly skilled practitioner of faërian drama, with *The Lord of the Rings* as his masterwork (see Kreeft 79, for example), the reading experience taking us into a world that “contains many things besides elves and fays [including] ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted” (OFS 32).

<sup>5</sup> Supported by Tolkien’s own notes, “Suggestions” 81.

one in their own right and independent of human imagination and invention" ("Smith" 84). As Flieger insists in her debate with Tom Shippey on allegory in *Smith*, "Its subject is the experience of a human in the Faery world" and "[t]he purpose of fairy tales is not to make sense but to give the reader a glimpse of the perilous realm" ("Allegory Versus Bounce" 187).

But is that all there is? While Flieger at the time of this debate was against any allegorical reading of *Smith*, she admitted that "the opacity of the story invites interpretation" (188). She insisted that "the actual experience of enchantment by Smith [...] is at the center of *Smith*" but he has a "total lack of any key to the meaning of the phenomena to which he is witness" (189). I think Smith finds that the meaning of his *aventures* "increases with re-reading" (192), as it were; with Shippey, he might say, in later life, "I do not know, but am still thinking about it" (198).

As with anything else he touches, Tolkien is by no means simplistic here in *Smith*. Smith's experiences do not perfectly fit the definition of faërian drama we have developed at all points—and yet the sum of his adventures incontrovertibly *is* an example of the mechanisms and effects of faërian drama. Perhaps the first difference we must deal with is the fact that young Smith is not troubled in mind or in need of an intervention when he receives the star at the age of nine. What Smith experiences in Faery does not impact him with the straightforward didacticism of what the ghosts showed Scrooge. This is, in fact, because it is not Smith who is in need of intervention, but his village and society. As Tolkien's essay on *Smith* reveals, the village of Wootton Major had become "comfortable and self-satisfied," even vulgarized, losing its long connection with Faery (92-93). The rulers of Faery, out of love for Man or the obligations of kinship, or even a mutual necessary interdependence of which Men are unaware, devise a plan for the "enlightenment and vivification" (99) of Wootton Major, in which certain humans will be chosen as a type of "Apprentice" (96) to visit Faery and bring back a whiff of the air of that perilous country to their families and society. In this way, the "actual experience of enchantment," as Flieger insists, *is* at the center of the story—but there is also a clear ethical purpose behind the simple aesthetic one. It is similar, in a way, to Gandalf's mission as one of the Istari: "the kindling of all hearts to courage" (*Unfinished Tales* 389).

While we have established that it is society, not Smith, that requires intervention, young Smith does acquire the star when he is in a liminal state. The Feast of Good Children is a once-in-a-lifetime ceremonial experience, to which not all children are invited, and his kindness in giving the coin from his slice to Nell sets him apart from the other children. It is on his tenth birthday, another liminal date, when the star makes itself known and Smith begins to develop his beautiful voice, his skill in craftsmanship, and the ability to visit Faery. As

Tolkien says of Gawain, Smith is already “peculiarly fitted to [...] the adventure to which he is destined.”

Faery is entirely outside of the reality of his mundane world, yet Smith clearly is fully satisfied in his senses while there—he tastes the bitter tears of the birch, and he experiences the swiftness and joy of dancing with the Queen and her ladies. There are physical results from his travel; the star shines brightly when he returns, and he may be tired after a particularly long journey. He is able to carry artifacts home from Faery, like the Queen’s Living Flower or the lily bell toy for young Tomling. He encounters reminders, such as the elven mariners returning from war, that Faery is a vast world with concerns of its own, one that extends physically and temporally far beyond the understanding of the human participant.

Another departure from what we might consider the typical faërian drama is that Smith experiences not just one dramatic incident but forty-eight years of adventures. Instead of just “before and after,” there is before, *during*, and after. Yet this isn’t so unusual, after all; while the Jeweler may have but one dream of his Pearl and George Bailey only needs an hour or so in Pottersville to learn his lesson, Gawain’s encounter with Faery stretches over several days, and Scrooge experiences three distinct episodes (which he is told will take three nights) punctuated by mundane sleep. In *The Divine Comedy*, “Dante stays long in Hell, digging himself and the reader deeper and deeper into it” (Boenig 98). The “lesson” Smith must “learn” for the sake of his society in fact *requires* nothing more or less than his prolonged exposure to Faery, “digging” himself deep into the land.

And what lesson is this, in the end? What precisely is the moral and ethical purpose of this particular long drawn-out episodic faërian drama? Smith is “a learner and explorer” (*Smith* 24); he learns many things in his travels, “some of which gave him joy, and others filled him with grief” (37), and some which “he could not clearly remember nor report to his friends” (26). This joy and grief becomes a grace that shows through in his craft, both in the shapeliness and delight of what he forges and his singing while he works.

Martha Sammons suggests that Recovery is the lesson Smith learns, in the sense that Tolkien uses the term in “On Fairy-Stories.” Not for his own sake, for he was young enough when selected never to have lost the clear sight of childhood, but in that he was chosen to experience and pass on the revitalizing perspective of Recovery to those in his community capable of seeing. Smith’s lasting grace is that even though he gives up the star, initially crying out that he can no longer see clearly, his, shall we say, baptized imagination and clear sight return almost immediately (6; 47 in *Smith*).

And yet Smith *does* also take a personal lesson away at the end. David Doughan proposes that the ultimate theme of *Smith* is renunciation, and that the

story shares a philosophical theme with the Book of Job: "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (20). This is supported by Tolkien's own statement that one of the points of the tale is "sacrifice, and the handing on, with trust and without keeping a hand on things, of power and vision to the next generation" ("Suggestions" 81). It is, as Tolkien writes, "An old man's book [...] weighted with the presage of 'bereavement'" (*Letters* 389.) Like Bilbo and Frodo giving up the Ring in their vastly different ways, like Galadriel resisting the temptation of power and like the elves leaving Middle-earth at the conclusion of *The Lord of the Rings*, like Arwen dying alone and bereaved in the autumn leaves on Cerin Amroth, Smith's hard lesson at the end of his visions and adventures is that of letting go, giving up, and passing on the gift. As Doughan puts it, "a voluntary acceptance of renunciation is preferable to any attempt to hold on to the perceived good when the time has come to let it go" (21). And like the grace in art which Smith brings back from Faery, this renunciation of his gift is a moral *exemplum* to all who are privy to it.

Nokes's short exposure to an episode of didactic and straightforward faërian drama—the revelation of Alf as the King of Faery and the granting of his wish—may seem simply a comic afterthought at the end of the story, but here we are meant to contrast Smith, in his humility and openness to experience, with a mind not prepared to receive evidence of Faery, thinking it was just a dream "which (like Ebenezer Scrooge) he attributes to bad eating habits" (Pepetone 155). Nokes is of course affected anyway as he becomes thinner and thinner—and yet he denies Faery to the end, showing there is indeed more work for young Tim to do in returning Faery to Wootton Major.

### Conclusion

The episode of Nokes and the Fairy King underscores that one purpose of the story *Smith of Wootton Major* is to remind us that Faery is all around and may be trying to get our attention for our own sakes—for our individual and societal reclamation and recovery. In fact all stories of faërian drama and dream vision seem to share this deep theme in one way or another. "For while in *Smith* Tolkien concedes that Faery is perilous to the traveler, he also wants to show it as necessary to humankind. Where the Fairy-story essay spoke of the dangers, the *Smith* essay concentrates almost entirely on its beauty, on its spiritual value, and its beneficent and necessary influence on the human world" (Flieger, "Pitfalls" 165).

So let us expand on the preliminary definition and list of key structural elements I began earlier:

1. The Goal: The artistic goal of faërian drama, like that of the fairy tale itself, is to awaken in the witness/participant an openness to

Fantasy, Escape, Recovery, Consolation, and the possibility of Eucatastrophe. The one essential goal within the experience is Recovery, the “regaining of a clear view” (OFS 67), which makes the witness/participant receptive to the rest, which he or she may encounter later after waking if not within the experience itself. There is a specific moral teaching purpose designed for the chosen participant/witness.

2. The Witness: The participant/witness must be in a liminal and receptive state; he or she must be troubled by something, in need of intervention, or specifically chosen to bring back the witness of Faery to benefit a larger group. His or her resistance to the experience is typically broken down by “softening” events leading up to it. The participant may, consciously or unconsciously, deliberately seek out the experience.
3. The Techniques: The goal is achieved through a variety of artistic effects, the most basic of which is that the participant must believe fully in the reality of the experience while within it. The dreamer is always an acting character in the drama. The moral purpose of the experience may or may not be revealed to the participant at the time; it may become clear only on awakening or after long reflection. A dramaturge or guide may or may not be present. There is likely to be a sense that the dreamer has entered a pre-existing world, which will continue to exist after he or she leaves, and from which he or she could be expelled without notice.
4. The Consequences: The experience of faërian drama cannot be dismissed as a mere dream; upon awakening, the participant must retain a sense that the events were real and “other,” with lasting consequences and moral effects, and not solely creations of his or her dreaming mind. The experience must also have addressed something that troubled or disturbed the dreamer.

It may behoove us, whether we believe in fairies or not, to look on the experiences of characters who have participated in faërian drama in sub-created works as a template for how we can best benefit from such experiences in our own lives. In examining these abundant fictional records for clues of faërian intervention, we find a reminder to be aware of our own liminal states and psychological needs, and to be prepared to ponder and pore over our experiences in the twin faery lights of ethic and aesthetic. To be Scrooge, not Bottom; Smith, not Nokes.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**JANET BRENNAN CROFT** is Head of Access Services at the University of Oklahoma libraries. She is the author of *War in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (2004; winner of the Mythopoeic Society Award for Inklings Studies), has published articles on Tolkien and other topics in *Mythlore*, *Mallorn*, *Tolkien Studies*, and *Seven*, and is editor of three collections of essays: *Tolkien on Film: Essays on Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings* (2004), *Tolkien and Shakespeare: Essays on Shared Themes and Language* (2006), *Lois McMaster Bujold: Essays on a Modern Master of Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2013), and co-editor of the forthcoming *Tolkien in the New Century: Essays in Honor of Tom Shippey* (2014). She also writes on library issues, particularly concerning copyright. She is currently the editor of *Mythlore* and book review editor of *Oklahoma Librarian*, and serves on the board of the Mythopoeic Press.



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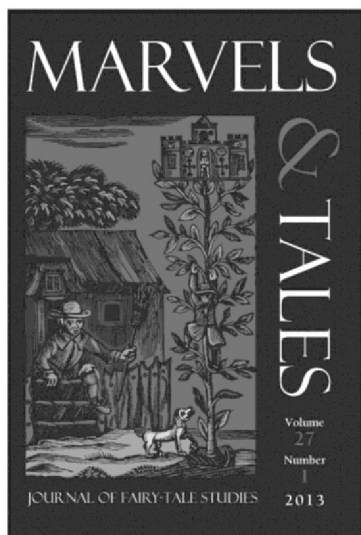
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