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Breaking the Dragon's Gaze: Commodity Fetishism in Tolkien's Middle-earth

Steven Kelly
Kansas State University

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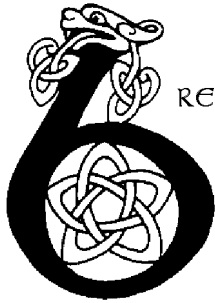


Abstract

Examines Tolkien's treatment of economics in Middle-earth, using tobacco as an example of a *Lukácsian* fetishized commodity, and explains why this is important not just as an example of world-building but as an indicator of the power and danger of unexamined economic assumptions.

Additional Keywords

Lukács, Georg; Marxist interpretations of *The Lord of the Rings*; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Economics; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Objects—Tobacco; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Middle-earth—Economics; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Hobbit*; Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*



PEAKING THE DRAGON'S GAZE:
COMMODITY FETTERISHNESS IN
TOLKIEN'S MIDDLE-EARTH

STEVEN KELLY

IT IS NO GUARDED SECRET THAT J.R.R. Tolkien's MIDDLE-EARTH is a remarkably well-wrought fictional world. Tolkien was keenly aware of the importance of world-building in mythopoeic fantasy; in his landmark essay "On Fairy-Stories" [OFS], he expounds on the fantasy writer's imperative to create "a Secondary World which [the reader's] mind can enter," a world that "accords with the laws" of itself (52). Tolkien clearly took his own advice to heart. Critics like Tom Shippey, Patrick Curry, Brian Rosebury, and an army of others have convincingly argued on behalf of the great depth of Tolkien's world-building, especially in regards to his construction of Middle-earth's languages, history, geography, and meta-literature¹ The depth of Tolkien's mythopoeic universe is truly impressive and surely serves as one reason why so many readers find themselves engrossed with his books.

Despite being so masterfully crafted, there are curious anomalies sprinkled throughout Middle-earth—things like umbrellas, clocks, waist-coats, and tobacco, among others—that are obviously characteristic of nineteenth-century England and which threaten to snap readers out of the fictional spell.²

¹ Michael D.C. Drout, Namiko Hitotsubashi, and Rachel Scavera are among the most recent scholars who have taken up the subject of Tolkien's world-building. Their essay "Tolkien's Creation of the Impression of Depth" effectively summarizes previous scholarship on the subject while also offering a wonderfully detailed analysis of Tolkien's many versions of the Túrin story as a case-study of their own claims. In short, they argue that "the tortuous evolutionary histories of [Tolkien's] texts" play an integral role in creating such an impressive quality of depth (167).

² The list of these world-building anomalies is extensive: umbrellas (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] I.1.36, 38; VI.8.1026; VI.9.1033); coffee (*Hobbit* 1.18-19); potatoes (LotR I.1.22, 24, 37; IV.4.661); silver pennies (LotR I.1.25, 37; I.11.180); clocks (*Hobbit* 1.21, 1.28, 13.255, 16.282; LotR I.1.34); waist-coats (*Hobbit* 5.100, 7.141; LotR I.1.37); post-office (*Hobbit* 4.71; LotR I.3.65; LotR VI.8.1014); express train (LotR I.1.27). There are numerous instances of tea throughout Tolkien's fiction, especially in *The Hobbit* and the beginning of *Fellowship of the Ring*. There are even more instances of tobacco (pipe-weed) throughout all of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, which I explain further in this essay.

The presence of these anachronisms is well documented in Tolkien scholarship, perhaps most notably by Shippey in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. While Shippey recognizes these anachronisms are out of place in Middle-earth, he doesn't fault Tolkien for them. In fact, he argues that Tolkien's inclusion of Victorian-period anachronisms actually *aids* the immersive effect:

[Tolkien] wanted [...] to bridge the gap between the ancient world and the modern one. The hobbits are the bridge. The world they lead us into, Middle-earth, is the world of fairy-tale and of the ancient Northern imagination which lay behind the fairy-tale, rendered accessible to the contemporary reader. (47-8)

In short, Shippey asserts that these anachronisms serve as a cultural anchor, a portal into the secondary world of Middle-earth. The idea is that once the link has been established, readers can walk across the bridge and more readily engage in the fantasy.

But bridges can also be perilous. Coincidentally, Tolkien himself records the unexpectedly dangerous nature of bridges in *The Children of Húrin*. Consider when Túrin convinces King Orodreth of Nargothrond to build a "mighty bridge" over the river Narog to accommodate "the swifter passage of their arms" in and out of the fortress (163). Though the bridge temporarily defends the kingdom, it ultimately betrays Túrin and the Elves at the time of their greatest distress:

In that day the bridge that Túrin had caused to be built over Narog proved an evil; for it was great and mightily made and could not swiftly be destroyed, and thus the enemy came readily over the deep river, and Glaurung came in full fire against the Doors of Felagund, and overthrew them and passed within. (177-8)

Bridges can be perilous because their keepers cannot always control what gets across.

As was the case with Túrin's bridge, Shippey's "bridge" rationale emphasizes the ease of passage between two worlds—the real world of the reader and the world of fairy-tale. I maintain, however, that these anachronisms also let something else creep into the story, another "dragon" of sorts: capitalist ideology. In this essay, I argue that Tolkien's economic world-building process reproduces certain aspects of capitalist economic structures, complicating the conventional understanding of Middle-earth as a generally

pre-capitalist society.³ To illustrate my claim, I explain how pipe-weed essentially serves as a Lukácsian “fetishized commodity,” in which a complex series of working relationships *among people* becomes obscured and recast as a relationship *between people and things*. While some might argue that my claim is irrelevant to the field of Tolkien studies, I demonstrate that it is significant because it tells us about how Tolkien's ideological environment influenced his works and because recognizing forms of economic domination accords with Tolkien's broader themes. Lastly, it's important to point out that pipe-weed's fetishism is bleeding over into the primary world, which ultimately shows that even fictional instances of capitalist ideology can result in tangible effects in the real world.

ECONOMIC STRUCTURES IN MIDDLE-EARTH

Before moving any further, I'd like to establish some important context about Tolkien's economic world-building. As discussed above, Shippey maintains that Middle-earth is a combination of two different worlds: the old Northern European world of fairy-tale and a relatively modern world represented in the Shire. Aside from the physical characteristics of their respective inhabitants, the distinction between the two worlds is perhaps best characterized by the differences in their economic infrastructure.

While the economic structure of Middle-earth evades simple categorization—after all, it's a world populated by a number of different cultures spread over a widely ranging landscape—the majority of Middle-earth primarily belongs to the old Northern world of fairy-tale that Shippey describes. Though it's tempting to insist that the world of fairy-tale exists outside of real time and space, generally that world would be characterized best as medieval (or even pre-medieval). Consequently, we would expect Middle-earth to have a feudal or pre-feudal economic system, and throughout much of Middle-earth that's precisely what we find. In the realm of Gondor, which is among the most advanced cultures of Middle-earth, readers come across several references to fiefs, one of the central components of feudal society (*LotR* V.1.758; V.6.858; V.9.892). Though there are no specific references to feudalism in Rohan, it's analogous in several respects to medieval culture, especially English medieval culture. Critic Verlyn Flieger notes that “the

³ Few scholars have utilized Marxist/materialist perspectives in their analyses of Tolkien's works. Those few materialist critiques in existence have focused primarily on issues of class disparity and inegalitarian political structures in Middle-earth (Giddings 1983; Inglis 1983) or have argued that Tolkien's stories allegorize the supposed evils of communism and socialism in modern society (Otty 1983; Oberhelman 2007). To my knowledge, no critic has yet analyzed the significance of commodification in Tolkien's fiction.

correspondences [she] saw between the Anglo-Saxon language, customs, architecture, and verse forms [...] occurring in [*Beowulf*] and those of the culture of Rohan were unmistakable" (18).⁴ These elements considered, it would be safe to assume that Rohan would also have a predominantly feudal or tributary economic structure. Essentially, then, much of Middle-earth is grounded in thoroughly medieval forms of subsistence.

Nestled within this predominantly medieval world, however, is the Shire—a relatively small, isolated pocket of land whose economic order contradicts the medieval standard. Admittedly, from one perspective the Shire seems to be somewhat economically consistent with the rest of Middle-earth, particularly in that it's pre-industrial. Hobbits produce what they need to survive from small farms, gardens, and herds of livestock, using relatively simple technology that is a far cry from the current model of industrial agriculture; in fact, one of the first details Tolkien provides readers with in *The Lord of the Rings* is that hobbits "do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom" (Prologue.1). The apparent simplicity of hobbit subsistence practices has led Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans to argue that the Shire is a self-sufficient, sustainable, small-scale agricultural society that on the surface seems to resist industrialism and capitalism, which they consider to be an attractive, if not slightly romantic, ideal (75-77). Taking it even further, Olga Markova observes how "modern Communists" have interpreted Tolkien's "anti-industrial ideas" and his depiction of the hobbits' simple agrarian lifestyle "as a return to primordial Communism," a Marxist ideal free from the exploitative and destructive forces of capitalism (165). As a result, Markova claims that for many readers *The Lord of the Rings* "has today become an alternative for the contemporary ideology of the commercialization of society" (167). Superficially, then, these critical interpretations of the Shire's economy would seem to contradict my central thesis.

However, considering the finer details, it would be a mistake to fully characterize the Shire as a pastoral, pre-capitalist utopia. No matter how simple and rustic life in the Shire might appear, hobbit society has certain features—in particular, those anachronisms discussed above—that mirror elements of nineteenth-century England. As if the details from the story itself weren't persuasive enough, Tolkien himself wrote in one of his letters that the Shire is "more or less a Warwickshire village of about the period of the

⁴ Despite recognizing Tolkien's medieval references, Flieger also makes a point of acknowledging the text's "nonmedieval" elements, including the peculiarities of the Shire and the "twentieth-century military-industrial complex of Isengard" (18). Along with many others, Flieger sees Tolkien as a "modern medievalist," one who has adapted medieval themes for modern times and modern audiences.

Diamond Jubilee," temporally associating it with the Victorian period at the close of the nineteenth century (*Letters* 230). By this time, England's economic base was several centuries removed from the age of feudalism and already firmly in the grip of the capitalist mode of production. It was a society in which umbrellas, silver pennies, tea, coffee, and tobacco were a normal part of life. These kinds of goods, which require specialized industries and complex systems of labor to produce, are largely inconsistent with the picture Tolkien provides about the material culture of the Shire. What results is a clash between two distinct economic worlds.

PIPE-WEED: A HOMELY HOBBIT ICON

To illustrate the disjunction resulting from Tolkien's inclusion of Victorian-era economic fragments, I would like to use as a case study one especially notable luxury good in Tolkien's fiction: pipe-weed. This leafy, smoke-able plant shows up frequently throughout Tolkien's stories; in fact, the concepts of pipe-weed, pipes, or smoking are mentioned on over 30 separate pages in *The Lord of the Rings* and 7 pages in *The Hobbit*. As a result, pipe-weed is almost as emblematic of hobbits as their short stature and furry feet. Hobbits are well-known for their appreciation of homely comforts and "the good life," and their consumption of pipe-weed (also referred to simply as weed or leaf) is an extension of that ideal lifestyle.⁵ When they're at home, Bilbo and Frodo enjoy smoking as an activity of relaxation. Members of the Fellowship smoke it periodically during their quest, as long as they have it in supply and can afford to risk it.⁶ Merry and Pippin rejoice over their discovery of two barrels of pipe-weed in the flotsam of Isengard and they smoke while recounting their tale of the battle there to Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli (*LotR* III.9.566-579). Perhaps most curiously, a good smoke is the first thing a grievously-injured Merry requests after the horrific siege of Minas Tirith (*LotR* V.8.880). And given their love for smoking, it's no surprise that a pipe-weed shortage in the Shire caused by a vengeful Saruman contributes to the "rousing" of the Hobbits during "The Scouring of the Shire" (VI.8.1012, 1025). Though pipe-weed by no means

⁵ Tea—another commodity of comfort—also maintains a presence in Middle-earth, though not to the same degree as pipe-weed. Tolkien's references to tea are generally restricted to the beginning of *The Hobbit* and *The Fellowship of the Ring*, but they still play a significant role in hobbit characterization. For example, even casual readers will remember that *The Hobbit* famously begins with what's essentially a grand tea party (1.15).

⁶ Of the members of the Fellowship, only Legolas and Boromir abstain from smoking. It should also be noted, of course, that the wizards Gandalf and Saruman are virtually as fond of pipe-weed as the hobbits are.

dominates Tolkien's texts, its prominence is unmistakable—a bright thread woven into the fabric of Middle-earth culture.

While pipe-weed might seem to fit naturally into Tolkien's secondary world, upon closer examination readers will find that there are puzzling inconsistencies and gaps in our knowledge of how the good makes its way into the leather pouches of Middle-earth's characters. For instance, where exactly does pipe-weed come from, in terms of its actual source of production? Tracing the sources of agricultural goods like grains, vegetables, bacon, and mushrooms is relatively straightforward, as these are the kind of products that hobbit farmers could grow, raise, or harvest for themselves. Furthermore, Tolkien clearly provides readers with the infrastructure needed to produce those goods, in terms of referencing farms, gardens, and mills. However, unlike most agricultural goods in the Shire, pipe-weed wouldn't be independently grown by hobbits for personal consumption.

To be fair, Tolkien does provide the history of pipe-weed's discovery and incorporation into Hobbit society. In the "Prologue" of *The Lord of the Rings*, he creatively gives us this information through the words of Merry, who proudly informs us that the smoking of pipe-weed "is the one art that we [Hobbits] can certainly claim to be our own invention."⁷ There are several important conclusions we can draw from "Merry's" history of pipe-weed. First, he reveals that it was technically possible for some Hobbits to grow their own pipe-weed, since "Tobold Hornblower of Longbottom in the Southfarthing first grew the true pipe-weed in his gardens." Merry also mentions that the plant is "not native" to the North of Middle-earth, but was brought from the South, where it "grows abundantly" (but where it is not widely consumed); furthermore, "it is never found wild" in the North, where it "flourishes only in warm sheltered places like Longbottom" (Prologue.8-9).⁸ As

⁷ In *The History of Middle-earth*, Christopher Tolkien reveals that his father included a version of this lore about pipe-weed in earlier drafts of the chapter "The Road to Isengard" (*The War of the Ring* [War] 36-9). While a small fragment of this survives in the final version (*LotR* III.8.562-3), Tolkien eventually moved most of it to the "Prologue." Notably, a reference to "Home-grown" leaf was cut from the final version, as was the notion that Rangers originally brought the plant to the North (*War* 37, 38).

⁸ As stated above, Merry is very aware that pipe-weed is, quite literally, a transplant from the warmer southern lands of Gondor. He even "suspect[s]" that it was "originally brought over Sea by the Men of Westernesse," whose descendants knew it as "*sweet galenas*, and esteem it only for the fragrance of its flowers" (Prologue.8-9). There are a couple of interesting implications we can draw from Merry's suspicions about pipe-weed's more exotic origins. First, like tobacco, pipe-weed was brought to the "Old World"/Middle-earth from a mysterious land across the sea. (The similarities stop there, however; after all, the Númenóreans were the powerful colonizers, rather than the colonized.) Second, Merry's description of how the Gondorians regarded the plant only

a result of these geographic constraints, it seems that only a small portion of Hobbits could have grown pipe-weed; therefore, it would have been by necessity a specialized local industry. That being said, the vast majority of Hobbits—especially those who were the main characters of Tolkien's stories, who lived further to the north and west in the Shire—would have been unable to grow their own pipe-weed, and there are no textual references of them ever doing so. Instead, they would have to either trade or pay for it. Pipe-weed would have been a commodity.⁹

PIPE-WEED: A FETISHIZED COMMODITY

On the surface, the presence of commodities in Middle-earth might not seem like anything to fuss about, considering that commodities are such a normal part of daily life in the modern world. Yet, the arrival of commodities in any society comes with a number of significant—and often detrimental—consequences. Georg Lukács, a Hungarian Marxist critic, provides us with sobering insight into these consequences. As he explains in his essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," before the arrival of capitalism people obtain the necessities of life primarily through self-sufficient production and direct barter (Lukács 173). However, as societies increase in complexity and undergo a variety of economic and social transformations, securing these necessities becomes increasingly difficult. One way of overcoming such difficulties is to establish a system of monetary exchange. A crucial economic transformation takes place after the development of standardized currency: the products of human labor shift primarily from having "use value" to having "exchange value"—the defining characteristic of a commodity—and the effects of that shift become especially pronounced as capitalism advances.

As a result of the increasing dominance of exchange value, the relations of production under which commodities are produced become

for its "fragrance," rather than as a consumable that could be traded commercially, lends further credence to the notion that the Hobbits transformed it into a commodity.

⁹ Aside from Tobold Hornblower and the previously mentioned instance of "Home-grown" leaf that was cut from the final draft (see footnote 7), Tolkien does indicate one other instance of individuals growing pipe-weed. In *RotK*, when asked by Gandalf if he has any pipe-weed, Barliman Butterbur responds, "That's just a thing that we're short of, seeing how we've only got what we grow ourselves, and that's not enough. There's none to be had from the Shire these days" (VI.7.991). However, Barliman's words clearly indicate that people rely on mass production of the commodity in the Shire to supply their needs—a point that's crucial to my thesis and that will be explained further in the section below.

displaced. The human labor that goes into making commodities is obscured by the predominance of exchange value; people are disconnected from other people, transforming—in fact, corrupting—what was once a relationship between people into a relationship between consumers and commodities. Divested from the social relations of production, these commodities become fetishes, objects artificially or even “magically” imbued with a special kind of power (Lukács 174). This foregrounding of the relationship between products and the resulting concealment of their social relations of production is also known as commodity fetishism. Consequently, “a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity,’ an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (Lukács 172). While the relations of production under capitalism are sufficient to ensure exploitation on their own, commodity fetishism—a product of these relations of production—serves as an ideology that actually reinforces the exploitation of the working class. It’s this reinforcement that makes commodity fetishism so harmful; as an ideology, it acts as a kind of “spell” that keeps people blind to capitalism’s abuses against workers.

Admittedly, at first it might seem that Lukács’ ideas about commodity fetishism and reification shouldn’t apply to Tolkien’s fictional world. After all, there are no corporations in Middle-earth; there are no capitalist barons or factories operated by wage-laborers; and aside from a few inns like The Green Dragon and The Prancing Pony, there’s not really even mention of small business. However, the moment that Tolkien decided to include commodities like pipe-weed in his secondary world, he inadvertently paved the way for commodity fetishism to enter that world as well. In other words, his effort to bridge the gap between the old Northern world of fairy-tale and the modern world of his readers allowed the dragon of capitalism to enter his story, and pipe-weed is the most obvious “smoking snout” of that dragon, since it is most certainly a fetishized commodity. It has been imbued with a special power, particularly in the way the *product itself* is associated with comfort; for instance, consider Gandalf’s remark about how he “should like a pipe to smoke in comfort” as the Fellowship travels southward from Rivendell (*LotR* II.3.285), or Pippin’s reference to pipe-weed as a “well-earned comfort” after the momentous battle at Isengard (*LotR* III.8.557).¹⁰ In truth, we do not see

¹⁰ Likewise, in an earlier draft of the chapter “The Road to Isengard,” Merry tells Théoden that “[Pipe-weed] is rest and pleasure and the crown of the feast. . . .” (*War* 37). While this passage didn’t make the final cut, the fetishism is still clear. Tolkien doesn’t write that smoking pipe-weed brings one “rest and pleasure” and so forth, but that it *is* these qualities. Of course, Tolkien is speaking figuratively here and criticizing him for that seems, admittedly, pedantic. But ideology is *that* pervasive: it penetrates down to

the relations between the people who produced and distributed the pipe-weed; we only see the commodity itself, which takes on a life of its own in the story. Though readers vaguely know where pipe-weed comes from thanks to Tolkien's "Prologue," the only detail we have about those personally responsible for the production of pipe-weed is that Old Toby "discovered" it and started the trend of smoking it. We have no textual information about the actual "human" labor that goes into growing, processing, and selling pipe-weed in the fictional present.

At the same time, readers will see that other kinds of cultural products are privileged in terms of the transparency of the "human" relations of production in ways that pipe-weed is not. We know precisely the social relations that went into the production of certain artifacts made by the Elves and Dwarves: for example, Thorin's Arkenstone, the elven blades Sting and Glamdring, and the elven cloaks gifted to members of the Fellowship in Lórien—made, respectively, by the Dwarves of Erebor (*Hobbit* 12.243), the metal-smiths of Gondolin (*Hobbit* 3.62), and the Lady Galadriel and her elven maids (*LotR* II.8.373). Tolkien didn't hesitate about going into detail about the sources of these prestige artifacts fabricated in small number, but he makes no mention of the hobbits or others who actually produce, process, and distribute pipe-weed. It's almost as if this commodity is considered too mundane to have the social relations of its production revealed to a degree of detail equal to that of prestige goods—a result of being widely distributed rather than unique or relatively rare.

Furthermore, there's another layer to the fetishism of pipe-weed that merits discussion, and that's the evolution of the term Tolkien uses to refer to the commodity throughout his publishing history. In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien's term for the leafy plant that hobbits smoke is, quite simply, "tobacco." By the time *The Lord of the Rings* was published, however, "tobacco" is, with two exceptions (Prologue.8, III.9.562), replaced instead by terms like "pipe-weed" or "leaf."¹¹ I think it's important to consider Tolkien's motivations for making the change in terminology. Of course, one possible explanation for the change is that Tolkien simply enjoyed tobacco enough to want to include more about it

the level of metaphor. For further preliminary reading, I suggest *Metaphors We Live By* by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson.

¹¹ Interestingly, Tolkien used "tobacco" in a rough outline of the chapter "The Palantir" (*War* 72), and likely did so in other notes. "Tobacco" even survived into late drafts of the chapter "The Scouring of the Shire" (*Sauron Defeated* 95). Barring the two exceptions cited above, the (relative) absence of other instances of "tobacco" elsewhere in *LotR* seems to indicate a clear editorial choice on Tolkien's behalf. Curiously, though, Tolkien kept using the term "tobacco" in *The Hobbit*, even after publishing a revised edition of the book in 1966, over 10 years after the publication of *LotR*.

in the story, so he decided to strengthen his world-building by giving the commodity a new name and a back-story. As a philologist, Tolkien probably wouldn't have been blithe about word choice. Though merely conjecture, it seems far more likely that he felt that the term "tobacco" was linguistically out of place. The term is of Spanish origin,¹² so Tolkien might have viewed tobacco as a foreign word that wouldn't fit as well within his secondary world as would a more distinctly English term like "pipe-weed," doubly notable for its characteristic Germanic compounding.

There's no way to be absolutely sure about why Tolkien changed the terminology. Regardless of his motivations for making the change, it certainly affects the way readers experience pipe-weed in the story. Though it's not a change in concept—readers will understand that characters are still smoking a plant—the linguistic shift from "tobacco" to "pipe-weed" produces a distinct aesthetic effect. In changing the name, Tolkien has defamiliarized tobacco, making us look at it in a different light. Arguably, pipe-weed *does* seem to fit better into the world of Middle-earth. Yet, while it may be more aesthetically pleasing, the revised term simultaneously alters readers' perception of what that good really is. It's like another form of fetishism; not only is the commodity fetishized in a way that obscures the human labor associated with it, it's also made into a linguistic fetish. Calling the commodity "pipe-weed" superficially hides the fact that it's actually tobacco, which makes it even more difficult for readers to see the way the labor of its production is obscured. The term "pipe-weed" intervenes in the chain of signification in the mind of the reader. Instead of seeing "tobacco" and thinking about cigarettes, Phillip Morris, billion dollar industry and so forth, readers see "pipe-weed," which instead signifies hobbits, Gandalf, Longbottom Leaf, and comfort. Pipe-weed is benign. Tobacco, at least in the modern world, is not.¹³

¹² The Spanish word "tabaco" was itself adapted from "the name in the Carib of Haiti of the Y-shaped tube or pipe through which the Indians inhaled the smoke." "Tabaco" was first recorded in 1535 by the Spanish historian Oviedo, but wasn't recorded in English until 1577 (*OED Online*).

¹³ Interestingly, after the credits of the home DVD version of *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, there's a one-minute advocacy advertisement warning viewers against the dangers of tobacco. It's disguised at first to seem like a soda commercial, with three adventure-seekers bungee-jumping off a bridge to retrieve cans of soda. When the third person jumps and picks up a can, he explodes—and the ad reports that tobacco is the only product that kills one-third of its consumers. It's exceptionally grim, driving home the way that contemporary society disdains tobacco. However, it should be noted that the ad is condemning the health risks of tobacco, rather than the way tobacco exploits its laborers and imprints its consumers with capitalist ideology.

Though Tolkien's motivations for including pipe-weed in his stories were certainly innocuous, the presence of this anachronistic commodity has allowed capitalist ideology to sneak into Middle-earth. The bridge has let in the dragon, and, once inside, the dragon is allowed to work its mischief. Again, looking to *The Children of Húrin* can provide us with a compelling metaphor to understand how capitalist ideology is acting upon Tolkien's readers. When Túrin learns of the sack of Nargothrond, he rushes across the bridge in full battle-fury, daring to challenge Glaurung. But Túrin, always victorious in battle, couldn't imagine what would happen next:

Then Túrin sprang about, and strode against him, and fire was in his eyes, and the edges of Gurthang shone as with flame. But Glaurung withheld his blast, and opened wide his serpent-eyes and gazed upon Túrin. Without fear Túrin locked in those eyes as he raised up his sword; and straightaway he fell under the dreadful spell of the dragon, and was as one turned to stone. (178)

In his recklessness, Túrin is caught off-guard and bewitched by the dragon's gaze. Snared in that spell, Túrin "hearkened to [Glaurung's] words, and he saw himself as in a mirror misshapen by malice, and he loathed what he saw" (179). The dragon's gaze distorts reality and prevents Túrin from seeing the truth. He believes Glaurung's lies about the imaginary peril of his kin back in his homeland, prompting Túrin to depart needlessly and allowing Glaurung to bewitch his sister Niënor. Glaurung's spell also prevents Túrin from hearing the cries of Elven captives—Finduilas, the princess of Nargothrond whom he loved, among them—as they're led away from the fortress and eventually slain.

In a way, the two-fold fetishism of pipe-weed in Tolkien's fiction is very much like the dragon's gaze. It distorts the reality of the true nature of human relations within the capitalist system of production. Instead of seeing pipe-weed as a product of human labor, people only see the "phantom objectivity" of the commodity itself, and what's left is an obsession with a thing. Like the cries of Finduilas and the other Elven captives, the toil of laborers goes unheeded.

IN DEFENSE OF A MARXIST READING OF TOLKIEN

Understandably, my argument about the commodity fetishism of pipe-weed in Tolkien's works is likely to draw criticism. For one, my interpretation could be construed as textual nit-picking. Tolkien didn't have to describe his world to the most minute detail; he could focus on developing details he thought were relevant. In one of his letters, Tolkien reveals that he

was aware of the underdeveloped economics in his works and argues that what he provided should have been sufficient:

I am not incapable of or unaware of economic thought; and I think as far as the “mortals” go, Men, Hobbits, and Dwarfs, that the situations are so devised that economic likelihood is there and could be worked out: Gondor has sufficient “townlands” and fiefs with a good water and road approach to provide for its population; and clearly has many industries though these are hardly alluded to. The Shire is placed in a water and mountain situation and a distance from the sea and a latitude that would give it a natural fertility, quite apart from the stated fact that it was a well-tended region when they took it over (no doubt with a good deal of older arts and crafts). (*Letters* 196)¹⁴

Tolkien thought that the economic details he included were adequate enough to create the illusion of verisimilitude and that readers could simply fill in the gaps for themselves.¹⁵ On a related note, other critics might point out an obvious and justifiable fact: Middle-earth isn't a real world, no matter how adeptly developed it seems. To expect Tolkien to replicate the many economic complexities of society, let alone all the other aspects of society, would be to hold him to an unfair, impossible standard. Some things must be left out for the sake of narrative convenience. There's just not enough space to write about the cabinetmaker and the grocer, or the tailor and the tanner, or the marketplace and all the exchanges of money—and if all those details were in fact included, it probably wouldn't create a compelling reading experience.

Middle-earth certainly isn't a record of a real world and all the material and social complexities that go along with it. At the literal level, there aren't any actual workers being exploited in the pipe-weed industry. However,

¹⁴ This letter is also cited by Dimitra Fimi in *Tolkien, Race, and Cultural History*. Fimi thinks of these economic details as a component of “material culture,” which she considers an element of setting. She remarks that “materiality and material culture are not always clearly defined and described” in *LotR* (162). Like Shippey, Fimi specifically references the anachronistic characteristics of hobbits and their life in the Shire, and even shares a similar position on the function of their anachronism (179-185). However, her discussion of material culture is connected to her broader thesis about how nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas about race and history helped shape Tolkien's works, rather than specifically exploring economic ideology, like this essay does.

¹⁵ It should be noted, though, that when Tolkien writes about economics, he's really only thinking of the means of production—fertile land, water, other resources. What's especially lacking from his economics are the real *relations* of production associated with those means. Again, he's left out the “human” element, which is the unifying thread of my analysis.

the fact of the matter is that Tolkien *did* insert certain features of capitalism within a generally pre-capitalist world. There are significant consequences resulting from that choice, regardless of his intentions, and it's important for us to seriously consider these implications.

First, exposing the commodity fetishism within Middle-earth is important because it tells us about the ideological environment in which Tolkien was writing. Broadly speaking, all artists write within the shadow of their time's ideology. As a part of any society's superstructure, art is inherently infused with ideology, even while it might be purposefully trying to resist it. By its very nature, ideology is typically hidden from both author and reader, having become a naturalized part of how they view the world. With this "hidden" nature in mind, it might seem like a hopeless or nearly impossible task to identify ideology within a text. However, critic Terry Eagleton, summarizing the work of the French Marxist Pierre Macherey, brilliantly explains one mechanism by which we can see and begin to challenge ideology's shadowy influence:

For Macherey, a work is tied to ideology not so much by what it says as by what it does not say. It is in the significant *silences* of a text, in its gaps and absences, that the presence of ideology can be most positively felt. It is these silences which the critic must make "speak." [...] Because a text contains these gaps and silences, it is always *incomplete*. Far from constituting a rounded, coherent whole, it displays a conflict and contradiction of meanings, and the significance of the work lies in the difference rather than the unity between these meanings. [...] The critic's task is not to fill the work in; it is to seek out the principle of its conflict of meanings, and to show how this conflict is produced by the work's relation to ideology. (34-5)

One of these "gaps and absences" in Tolkien's fiction is the underdeveloped and unexplained economic infrastructure of anachronistic commodities like pipe-weed. This gap underlies the fundamental contradiction between the pre-capitalist, Northern world of fairy-tale and the semi-capitalist world of the Shire. From this perspective, then, Tolkien's economic "silences" can be read as much more than a simple matter of "not having enough space." Instead, Tolkien's economic silences indicate that his fiction is a product of capitalist ideology even as its medievalism is an example of romantic anti-capitalism.¹⁶

¹⁶ This kind of analysis is not unprecedented; Elizabeth Hoiem convincingly argues that one of Tolkien's Middle-earth short stories, "Aldarion and Erendis," actually embodies British colonial ideology, despite the story's supposed critique of materialistic colonialism in favor of a more moral, interdependent message. Hoiem's analysis shows

Tolkien grew up in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, when England was still a dominant colonial power. Though he was by no means a “noble” or a financial elite, Tolkien was certainly a cultural elite; he was white, Christian, and, most importantly, highly educated, and he spent most of his working life as a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford. He was certainly wealthy enough to buy his own tobacco from a local shop, and he was in a position where he wouldn’t have ever had to question the ultimate source of his tobacco or come into contact with the people whose labor brought the commodity into the comfort of his own home.¹⁷

To be clear, I’m not arguing that Tolkien was ignorant about these matters. In a letter to his son Christopher, Tolkien references how “some fascinating material on the hobbit Tobacco industry” had been put into the appendices (*Letters* 79).¹⁸ It’s not surprising that Tolkien would have had some concept of the mass production of tobacco; the word “industry” itself connotes large-scale production involving complex systems of labor and transport, rather than a smaller “home-grown” style of production. However, that understanding of “industry” isn’t what’s communicated in his fiction. Rather than taking “hobbit tobacco industry” at face value, it seems more reasonable that its function is largely metonymic in Tolkien’s mind. After all, the information about pipe-weed provided in the “Prologue”—rich as it may be—is wholly historical, geographical, or botanical in nature. There’s no mention of the actual processes of the production or “industry” of pipe-weed, let alone the economics or systems of labor associated with it. In short, it would seem that pipe-weed was fetishized in Middle-earth just as it was—or even *because* it was—fetishized in Tolkien’s actual world.

how Tolkien fell victim to British ideology as he simultaneously appeared to criticize it (84).

¹⁷ Interestingly, Guy Davenport—a writer and professor of English and the University of Kentucky who studied Old English under Tolkien at Oxford—suggests an alternate, and unlooked-for, inspiration for pipe-weed in Middle-earth: tobacco-growing culture in Kentucky. In a brief *New York Times* article, Davenport recalls a conversation with Allen Barnett, a lawyer from Kentucky who attended Oxford with Tolkien for a time, in which Barnett reportedly reminisced, “He could never get enough of my tales of Kentucky folk. He used to make me repeat family names like Barefoot and Boffin and Baggins and good country names like that.” With that anecdote in tow, Davenport remarks, “And out the window I could see tobacco barns. The charming anachronism of the hobbits’ pipes suddenly made sense in a new way.” It should be noted, of course, that Davenport’s anecdotal evidence and swift conclusions are hardly authoritative. Nevertheless, his account does offer a tempting perspective on pipe-weed’s origins, however spurious it may be.

¹⁸ This material, naturally, would become what eventually makes it into “Concerning Pipe-weed” in the “Prologue,” and would be removed from the appendices.

Tolkien's economic silences also indicate an implicit reproduction of capitalist-imperialist domination. It's no secret that in the primary world tobacco has a history tainted by exploitative capitalism and colonialism. The pursuit of growing and selling tobacco, a plant native to the New World, played an important role in the colonization of the New World and is connected to the genocide of certain Native American groups and the forced transport of African slaves to work on plantations (Blackburn 224-5). Though there's no way of knowing for certain whether readers' imaginations leap to these colonial associations when they come across pipe-weed in Tolkien's works, the history of the product is undeniably inscribed in the very words, unpleasantly waiting there for readers to uncover—or, more likely and more problematically, to *not* uncover. By including pipe-weed in his story, Tolkien unknowingly reproduced the dark colonial history of England, compounding the fact that the commodity has been alienated from its sources in his secondary world similar to the way it has been largely alienated from its sources in our own world.

Second, it's important to recognize the presence of commodity fetishism in Middle-earth because this kind of Marxist critique, much like Tolkien's fiction itself, is fundamentally concerned with resisting power and domination. Though there are many themes expressed through Tolkien's stories, perhaps among the most important ones are the critique of absolute power and the imperative to resist power that seeks to dominate. Tolkien famously resisted simple allegorical readings of his works, preferring to couch their lessons in terms of "applicability" (*LotR* Foreword.xxiv). That being said, in his *Letters* Tolkien asserts that, if anything, *The Lord of the Rings* could be read as "an allegory of the inevitable fate that waits for all attempts to defeat evil power by power" (121). In another letter, and in response to the popular idea that the Ring of Power symbolized the Atomic bomb, Tolkien writes, "my story is not an allegory of Atomic power, but of *Power* (exerted for Domination)" (*Letters* 246). These ideas about power certainly show up in Tolkien's fiction. The central driving conflict in *The Lord of the Rings* is Sauron's quest to reclaim the Ring and subjugate all the creatures of Middle-earth to his will, while the protagonists' actions are all geared toward resisting that fate and destroying the object that would grant Sauron the power to achieve that end.

On the surface, Tolkien's theme of power seems to be mostly referring to the political variety—and that's definitely still a relevant issue for modern readers. The world is not free, and though it's dangerous thinking to be so reductive as to label any political despot today as a real-world Sauron, arguably there are modern leaders and institutions whose desires to dominate and control people seem at least Sauron-esque. Yet one form of power that is

largely overlooked, and that's also especially relevant to modern readers, is economic power. For instance, a 2013 study by Oxfam International reported that we are living in a world where just 85 people control as much wealth as the poorest 3.5 billion (Wearden). Within the system of global monopoly capitalism, the world's wealth is being dominated by a tiny elite, while the vast majority of people are essentially wage-thralls who experience the abuses of capitalist ideology, including commodity fetishism, which only further contributes to their thralldom. Economic domination is a real and pressing concern, and it is in the spirit of Tolkien's project to address such domination, even if doing so requires us to reveal instances in which such domination is built into in his work.

Finally, it's important to reveal the presence of commodity fetishism in Middle-earth because that presence implicitly reinforces the same capitalist phenomena in our own world, subtly enculturating readers with capitalist ideology even further. Far from challenging readers to examine the economic underpinnings of the world, Tolkien's works actually reproduce a similar level of economic unawareness endemic in modern society. In fact, Dickerson and Evans observe that the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* "has led many readers to try to emulate certain superficial, stereotyped features of the Hobbits' world," including "tea drinking" and "pipe smoking" (92). While Dickerson and Evans see this kind of behavior as indicative of many people's desire to return to a simpler, more sustainable agricultural life, it could also be seen as a kind of false consciousness. These fans might think they are returning to a simpler lifestyle, but they're almost certainly not growing their own tea and tobacco. Searching for "lord of the rings pipes and tobacco" on Google pulls up more than 320,000 results, containing dozens of different merchant sites selling pipe replicas from the books and Peter Jackson's films, as well as a wide variety of tobaccos. There are also thousands of *LotR* blog posts and discussion boards regarding pipe-smoking. Clearly, there's a lively pipe-smoking sub-fandom within the broader *Lord of the Rings* fandom, and many of these fans are undoubtedly buying pipe-smoking commodities, which are even more fetishized considering their powerful association with Hobbit life. It seems it would be far more tempting to think about how "hobbit-ish" you'll feel for buying and consuming pipe tobacco than to think about the complex and exploitative system that delivered those products into your hands.¹⁹

¹⁹ For example, such pipe-weed fans probably aren't thinking about people like the Cuello sisters—three teenage girls who struggled with chronic illness (on account of heavy exposure to nicotine) caused by working in tobacco fields in North Carolina, but who had to continue working to help their family make ends-meet (Thompson); or the thousands of migrant workers exploited and trapped working for substandard wages in

However minor it seems, there are real, negative effects surrounding the fetishism of these commodities in Middle-earth.

CONCLUSIONS: BREAKING THE DRAGON'S GAZE

One of Tolkien's primary purposes in writing his fiction was to re-enchant the world, to "look at green again, and be startled anew (but not blinded) by blue and yellow and red" (OFS 67). The function of re-enchantment is to achieve what Tolkien called "recovery," a "regaining of a clear view," a way "to clean our windows [...] so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity—from possessiveness" (OFS 67). In many ways, Tolkien's fiction accomplishes those aims. Rocks, rivers, trees, and animals come alive and shine with a new luster; simple foods like bread and butter, bacon and beer, all seem to taste richer and satisfy better than ever before; and a quiet life of peace and comfort—a life spent telling and listening to stories and taking leisurely walks with loved ones in autumn and spring—is recast as the highest privilege rather than mundane drudgery.

However, enchantment may not always be so enlightening. There are negative forms of enchantment, too, and Tolkien was keenly aware of it: "Fantasy can, of course, be carried to excess. It can be ill done. It can be put to evil uses. *It may even delude the minds out of which it came*" (OFS 65, emphasis added). Tolkien's fantasy world is arrestingly beautiful and exceptionally well-crafted, but it is not without a degree of negative enchantment. As I've demonstrated in this paper, in trying to combine the old Northern world of fairy-tale and the modern, more relatable world of the reader, Tolkien unknowingly allowed commodity fetishism to creep into Middle-earth. The dragon of capitalist ideology has crossed the bridge and cast its glamour upon author and reader alike, which has real negative consequences in the primary world.

In addition to "recovery," Tolkien firmly believed in fantasy's power to allow readers to escape from the abuses of modern society, famously likening the escape of the fantasy reader to the escape of a prisoner unjustly jailed (OFS 69). But what, exactly, is the nature of the prison that needs to be escaped? For Tolkien, that prison was most significantly composed of walls of totalitarianism, industrialism, and the concomitant destruction of the natural world—conditions that absolutely justify escape. Yet, the economic domination of monopoly capitalism is another negative feature of modern society that Tolkien has overlooked and even implicitly reproduced in his works, as my

harsh conditions on Kazakh tobacco farms operated by Phillip Morris ("Kazakhstan"); or a variety of other real-world examples of exploitation.

analysis has shown. Economic domination is a prison that needs to be escaped; the dragon's gaze of capitalist ideology needs to be broken.

Admittedly, it's no easy task, for the dragon's gaze is powerful and pervasive. In *The Children of Húrin*, Túrin has to slay Glaurung to completely destroy the spell, which he accomplishes by sneaking into a ravine and thrusting the dread sword Gurthang up into the dragon's soft underbelly. It's a heroic deed that in the end costs him his life and the lives of others. Though Glaurung's death was dearly bought, Túrin's heroism was immortalized in the songs of Middle-earth. It became a tale that cut through the darkness of the First Age, a reminder that those who seek to dominate others can be defeated if people have the strength of heart to resist them. Likewise, capitalist ideology is a powerful force in the primary world, at times seeming insurmountable. Even so, it's a power that should and must be resisted. Though critical projects like mine might seem scarcely able to even nick capitalism's thick, diamond-encrusted hide, that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. Collectively, Marxist criticism can be used as a tool—a theoretical equivalent to Gurthang—to break the dragon's gaze and raise readers' consciousness about the systematic abuses of human labor in the world, even if it forces us to honestly criticize our most beloved authors. We owe it to the peoples of this world, our own Middle-earth, to do so.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STEVEN KELLY teaches composition and literature at Kansas State University, where he also received his MA in English and BA in anthropology and political science. His academic interests include fantasy literature, cultural studies, and archaeology. Currently, he's working on a project that explores humanoid origins throughout epic fantasy texts. He tries very hard not to be distracted by the internet and the golden age of TV.

