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### J.R.R. Tolkien, Sub-Creation, and Theories of Authorship

#### Abstract

Tolkien is unfortunately underrated as a theorist in literary studies—in fact, alas, generally invisible to the mainstream. This essay draws attention to his ideas about sub-creation and allegorical “dominion” of the reader, contrasting Tolkien’s stated and implied theories with those of Roland Barthes, and elucidating Tolkien’s concern with “the delicate balance between authors, authority, and interpretive freedom.” Saxton draws on “Leaf by Niggle,” *The Silmarillion*, and *The Lord of the Rings* for examples of Tolkien’s theories in action.

#### Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Silmarillion*; Allegory in J.R.R. Tolkien; Authorship, Theories of; Authorship, Theories of; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Aulë; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Fëanor; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Niggle; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Theory of sub-creation; Tolkien, J.R.R. “Leaf by Niggle”



## J.R.R. TOLKIEN, SUB-CREATION, AND THEORIES OF AUTHORSHIP

BENJAMIN SAXTON

EVEN A BRIEF GLANCE AT THE AUTHOR OF *The Lord of the Rings* reveals a man who constantly questioned his role as a creator, interpreter, and delegator of texts. J.R.R. Tolkien's well-known essay "On Fairy-Stories" and excerpts from his *Letters* outline the ways in which the author as "sub-creator" imagines and creates secondary worlds of fiction. Tolkien also provided instances in his own fiction—especially in "Leaf by Niggle," early sections of *The Silmarillion*, and *The Lord of the Rings*—that function as metacommentaries on the process of authoring texts. In part because he is regarded as a fantasist, however, far removed from the realm of literary theory, and also because Tolkien has been described (and self-described) as a writer who consciously eschewed modern literary conventions, there have been few attempts to situate Tolkien's understanding of "sub-creation" in relation to contemporary theories of authorship.<sup>1</sup> Many of these theories, of which Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" presents a primary example, assume that a single, indivisible meaning resides with the author's presence. Once there is a final separation between the author and the text, meaning is no longer circumscribed and one may freely revel in what Barthes calls the indeterminacies or "pleasures" of the text. An important question to consider, however, is whether the increased (or endless) interpretive freedom that Barthes desires *necessitates* the permanent removal (or "death") of the author. Although he has rarely been invoked in contemporary debates on authorship, Tolkien was deeply concerned with the delicate balance between authors, authority, and interpretive freedom. In this essay I suggest that Tolkien's views on the relationship between the author and God, on "sub-

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<sup>1</sup> For a range of approaches to the topic, see Judith Klinger's edited volume *Sub-creating Middle-earth—Constructions of Authorship and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*.

creation," and on the historical character of language all present an alternative to Barthes's zero-sum game in which *either* the author *or* the reader can survive.

### **The Death and Return of the Author**

How does Tolkien's understanding of authorship anticipate, parallel, and ultimately depart from approaches that call for the removal of the author? To answer this question it will be helpful to begin with "The Death of the Author," Barthes's stimulating essay that redefined the terms in which the author could be accepted or rejected in contemporary (post-1970) discourse. Like Tolkien himself, Barthes grounds his conception of the author in an analogy between the author and the divine. He points out that, throughout history, the image of literature has been "tyrannically centered" on the author, who "still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, [and] magazines" (143). Yet Barthes is not content to define the author as mere celebrity or royalty: he must elevate the author to divine status. From the essay's title, which alludes to Nietzsche's earlier pronouncement of the death of God, to the "Author-God" whom he invokes, Barthes is at pains to establish an ongoing analogy that draws upon the attributes of the divine. As Sean Burke explains, for Barthes, "The author is to his text as God [...] is to his world: the unitary cause, source and master to whom the chain of textual effects must be traced, and in whom they find their genesis, meaning, goal and justification" (23). Just as the natural theologian searches for traces of God in nature or from design, so too is the text the site from which evidence of the author (and hence the text's meaning) can be found.

The responsibility of the reader-critic, in this view, is to work backwards from the evidence to the source, collecting the fragmented dispersions of meaning within a text and moving, referentially, to the ultimate meaning that inheres with the Author-God. The presence of the author has crucial implications when it comes to the possibility of apprehending meaning:

To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyché, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained'—victory to the critic. (147)

Barthes's comments establish, on the one hand, not only the author's privileged position but also the privileged position of the critic, whose ability to "explain" the text endows him or her with authoritative status. On the other hand, the author becomes the gateway to meaning, the "impose[d] limit" that shuts out any possibility for unfettered interpretation. For Barthes, the presence of an

author that grounds the text within a finite set of meanings is a misguided imposition that must be corrected. The text, he writes, “is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (146). In a poststructuralist inversion that is reminiscent of Michel Foucault’s declaration that the author is one of many “functions” of the text,<sup>2</sup> it is language, not the author, that scatters meaning across a dizzying matrix of cultural influences. Once the text is freed from the author, the reader is no longer obligated to trace meaning back to its originary source. Indeed, “once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile” (Barthes 147). Barthes acknowledges and embraces the anti-theological implications:

In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law. (147)

The analogy between author and God reaches its conclusion: following the death of God is now the death of the author and, with it, a vast expansion of interpretive possibilities.

Throughout his theological analogy, Barthes assumes that domination follows naturally from God’s omnipotence and omnipresence and, secondly, that the author retains this omnipotence when he constructs a text. Barthes thus reacts strongly against an Author-God that dominates, appropriates, and denies alternative interpretations: “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (148). However, as Burke points out, it is not necessary to accept the relationship between author and God solely on Barthes’ terms:

The attributes of omnipotence, omnipresence, of being the first uncaused cause, purpose and end of the world are all affirmed a priori of the Christian God; they inhere in his definition, without them He is not God. Not so for the author though: we can, without contradiction, conceive of authors who do not issue ‘single theological messages’, who do not hold a univocal mastery over their text. (25)

As I will try to show, in his fiction Tolkien breaks down the causal relationship that Barthes establishes between omnipotence and domination and, in its place,

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<sup>2</sup> See Foucault’s “What is an Author?”

presents God as an omnipotent force that leaves space for the creativity and agency of his subjects.

Like Barthes, Tolkien sees a natural connection between the artist as “sub-creator” and God as Creator. In “On Fairy-Stories” Tolkien points out that the creative impulse, often expressed within the mode of fantasy, derives from the divine: “Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made but made in the image and likeness of a Maker” (“On Fairy-Stories” [OFS] 55).<sup>3</sup> These intrinsic affinities between artist and “Maker,” not only in “image and likeness” but also in a desire to create, form the basis for Tolkien’s theory of sub-creation. The sub-creator’s invention of Secondary Worlds reflects, albeit imperfectly, God’s creation of our (Primary) world. The story-maker’s success, Tolkien claims, depends on his ability to make a consistent “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” (OFS 37). Even this brief description of sub-creation demonstrates how, for Tolkien, the analogy between author as sub-creator and God as Creator is both an undeniable and an essential component of fantasy writing. In what follows, I will address how this analogical relationship plays out in Tolkien’s fiction, in “Leaf by Niggle,” *The Silmarillion*, and *The Lord of the Rings*.

### **Creative Collaboration in “Leaf by Niggle”**

While “Leaf by Niggle” can be read as a Catholic version of one’s spiritual journey or as an allegory of social roles (with Niggle “standing for” the marginalized artist), it also offers an example of proper “sub-creation.” Readers of this lovely story will recall that, as his name suggests, the protagonist spends most of his time “niggling” incessantly over the details of a painting that contains rivers, mountains, and, most significantly, a giant Tree. Unfortunately, a series of distractions and interruptions (often from his neighbor Parish) prevents Niggle from completing his masterpiece, and Niggle embarks on his journey dismayed that the painting will remain unfinished. Incredibly, however, Niggle finds himself inside the very painting over which he labored. After exploring the countryside, Niggle is astounded to discover that, when he finds his beloved giant Tree, “[a]ll the leaves he had ever laboured at were there, as he had imagined them rather than as he had made them; and there were others that had only budded in his mind” (“Leaf by Niggle” [Leaf] 104).

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<sup>3</sup> Tolkien’s views also appear in the poem “Mythopoeia”: “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. / [...] That right has not decayed: / we make still by the law in which we’re made” (OFS 54).

Although he is supremely pleased with his creation, Niggle senses that the various trees and mountains are somehow incomplete: "Nothing needed altering any longer, nothing was wrong, as far as it had gone, but it needed continuing up to a definite point" (105). Niggle eventually realizes that own power and creative abilities are not sufficient to complete the painting: "'Of course!' he said. 'What I need is Parish. There are lots of things about earth, plants, and trees that he knows and I don't. This place cannot be left just as my private park. I need help and advice: I ought to have got it sooner'" (105-106). To complete his creation Niggle works in concert with Parish, his pragmatic-minded neighbor who does not see the value of art until he, like Niggle, is transported into Niggle's Secondary World. After working together, and not without difficulty, the pair improves upon Niggle's world and strengthens their friendship in the process. Niggle's power as a sub-creator, then, is not absolute: although his "secondary world" develops solely from his creative impulses, its untapped potential is realized only through creative collaboration.

### **Sub-creation in *The Silmarillion***

While "Leaf by Niggle" is a direct, even allegorical, rendering of sub-creation, early sections of *The Silmarillion* offer a less explicit commentary on the ways in which power, authority, and agency function among the creative artists in Middle-earth. In "The Music of the Ainur," when Ilúvatar chooses musical themes in order to shape and define the contours of Middle-earth, he delegates responsibility to the Valar:

Of the theme that I have declared to you, I will now that ye make in harmony together a Great Music. And since I have kindled you with the Flame Imperishable, ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme, each with his own thoughts and devices, if he will. But I will sit and hearken, and be glad that through you great beauty has been wakened into song. (*Silmarillion* [S] 15)

The Valar are not a group of automatons who mindlessly carry out Ilúvatar's will but rather an artistic group of sub-creators whose imagination leads to a splendid harmony of chords. Rather than ruling in a fashion that would be justified by his vast power,<sup>4</sup> Ilúvatar takes pleasure *through* the actions of the Valar.

The autonomy and creative freedom that the Valar enjoy are contingent on an understanding that they work within the boundaries that Ilúvatar

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the way in which Tolkien's God diverges from a Hobbesian conception of God as a creator who is justified because of His immense power, see Rosebury, especially 178-86.

establishes. This freedom is threatened when “it came into the heart of Melkor to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar ; for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself” (S 16). It is important to note that even though Melkor’s vision is rebellious in nature, it remains creative: he never loses the ability to shape the music “of his own imagining” (S 16). Melkor’s rebellion is reprehensible not because he employs creativity, but because he desires a self-apotheosis that will increase his personal power and glory. Yet even as he enacts this rebellion, Melkor’s theme cannot wholly separate itself from Ilúvatar’s primary theme:

[Melkor’s theme] had now achieved a unity of its own; but it was loud, and vain, and endlessly repeated; and it had little harmony, but rather a clamorous unison as of many trumpets braying upon a few notes. And it essayed to drown the other music by the violence of its voice, but it seemed that its most triumphant notes were taken by the other and woven into its own solemn pattern. (S 17)

The fact that the most “triumphant notes” from Melkor’s music are put into the service of Ilúvatar’s theme underscores the relationship between Creator and sub-creator: while the latter enjoys agency and creativity, this freedom is contained within, and is ultimately subordinate to, the pattern of the former.<sup>5</sup> As Ilúvatar informs him, Melkor is unable to circumvent Ilúvatar’s music: “[T]hou, Melkor, shalt see that no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me, nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempteth this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined” (S 17). Melkor’s rebellion ultimately fails because of his attempt to transcend his designated role as a sub-creator.

Another member of the Valar, Aulë, provides a striking contrast to Melkor’s rebellious motives. Although he has not been granted permission to do so, Aulë creates the Dwarves because “he was unwilling to await the fulfillment of the designs of Ilúvatar “ (S 43). Unlike Melkor, however, Aulë’s disobedience is tempered by a genuine longing to bring creatures into the world who can appreciate Ilúvatar’s handiwork. As Aulë explains, “I desired things other than I am, to love and to teach them, so that they too might perceive the beauty of Eä, which thou hast caused to be. [...] As a child to his father, I offer to thee these things, the work of the hands which thou hast made” (S 43). Aulë is forgiven because, unlike Melkor, his choice to create the Dwarves stems not from desire for personal aggrandizement but rather from desire to please his Creator. Both

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<sup>5</sup> Jason Fisher and Thomas Fornet-Ponse offer excellent discussions of the tension between freedom and authority in *The Silmarillion*.



Melkor and Aulë display creative impulses, but it is the intentions that drive these impulses that ultimately determine the merit of their actions. While Melkor transgresses the Music of the Ainur in order to elevate himself to a position of superiority, Aulë creates the Dwarves with an attitude of humility.

Perhaps the most striking example of misapplied sub-creation is found in the story of Fëanor, whose decision to craft the Silmarils has crucial consequences in the history of Middle-earth. A prince of the Noldor, the most voracious, creative race of Elves, Fëanor quickly becomes “the most subtle in mind and the most skilled in hand” (S 64). Like the other sub-creators endowed with creative abilities, Fëanor’s desire to create is initially good, and in the spirit of preservation he crafts the three Silmarils. But due in part to his headstrong nature and the corrupting influence of Melkor, Fëanor hoards them: “for Fëanor began to love the Silmarils with a greedy love, and grudged the sight of them to all save to his father and his seven sons; he seldom remembered now that the light within them was not his own” (S 69). Soon, Fëanor’s internal struggle is forced to a crisis point. The original maker of the light that is contained in the Silmarils, Yavanna, suggests that the Two Trees might be restored if Fëanor allows them to use some of the light from the Silmarils. But Fëanor refuses. “It may be,” he says, “that I can unlock my jewels, but never again shall I make their like; and if I must break them, I shall break my heart, and I shall be slain. [...] This thing I will not do of free will” (S 78-79).

Much of the dark tone and content of *The Silmarillion* results from Fëanor’s decision to withhold the Silmarils.<sup>6</sup> The slaying of Elves by Elves, the terrible oath that Fëanor’s sons carry out, the death of Fëanor himself—all of these unfortunate events are the product of a single will bent on dominating and hoarding, not creating. To return to the passage above, the discussion between the Valar and Fëanor contains an important contrast in how sub-creation can take positive or negative forms. While the Valar will not tamper with the Silmarils without Fëanor’s consent—Manwë asks Fëanor if he will “grant” what Yavanna asks – Fëanor’s refusal stems from a selfish desire to keep the Silmarils to himself. Fëanor’s downfall is especially tragic because, even as he is spurred on by his anger, we sense that Fëanor’s creative energies could have accomplished even greater things. Fëanor offers perhaps the most tragic example of misapplied sub-creation and the extent to which creative abilities are bound up with destructive potential.

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, the question of using the Silmarils or withholding them is a hypothetical one since Melkor has captured them. In terms of Fëanor’s character, though, it makes his failure all the more glaring. As is often the case throughout Tolkien’s mythology, characters are judged less by the results of what their choices yield than by the choices themselves. For an excellent study on the role of decision-making and free will in Tolkien’s mythology, see Dickerson’s *Following Gandalf*, especially chapter four.

### **The Renunciation of Power in *The Lord of the Rings***

The shift from the First Age of *The Silmarillion* to the Third Age of *The Lord of the Rings* marks a number of changes in the scope and tone of Tolkien's mythology. Many readers and critics have commented on the understated religiosity of *The Lord of the Rings*, including a reader who expressed his amazement with the powerful presence of a God and a religion that remain unseen: "[Y]ou [...] create a world," he wrote to Tolkien, "in which some sort of faith seems to be everywhere without a visible source, like light from an invisible lamp" (*Letters* 413). Catherine Madsen similarly observes that "in *The Lord of the Rings* God is not shown forth, nor does he even speak, but acts in history with the greatest subtlety" (47). What implications does this have for the treatment of sub-creation in *The Lord of the Rings*? Though there are no active sub-creators in the Third Age, the examples of Ilúvatar, Aulë, and Melkor find analogues in characters who must decide what to do with the Ring of Power. As a result, the renunciation of power becomes a chief theme throughout *The Lord of the Rings* and the characters are forced to respond to the temptation that the Ring poses. As a way of highlighting these responses, a number of characters function as foils or oppositional figures. The arrangement of these foils—between wizards (Gandalf and Saruman), kings (Théoden and Denethor), brothers (Faramir and Boromir), or even Hobbits (Frodo and Gollum)—underscores the reality of choice in Middle-earth and how these choices, very much like the act of sub-creation, are bound up with a crucially important issue for Tolkien: freedom and the denial of freedom.

Consider the first pairing of Gandalf and Saruman. After Frodo asks, "You are wise and powerful. Will you not take the Ring?" Gandalf responds:

"No! [...] With that power I should have power too great and terrible. And over me the Ring would gain power still greater and more deadly." His eyes flashed and his face was lit as a fire within. "Do not tempt me! For I do not wish to become like the Dark Lord himself. [...] I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great for my strength." (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] I.2.60)

There is no question that Gandalf greatly desires the Ring, if only to use it for good or to "keep it safe." But he has the foresight to recognize that no one, no matter how powerful or determined, can withstand the Ring. Indeed, the import of Frodo's quest hinges on this very point. Either the evil nature of the Ring or Frodo's addiction to it (or perhaps both)<sup>7</sup> overcomes Frodo's genuine wish to

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<sup>7</sup> In *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*, Tom Shippey discusses how the Ring contains two divergent presentations of evil: the Boethian view, in which evil is only the absence (or privation) of good; and the Manichean view, in which Good and Evil are discrete powers

destroy it, and it is only through Frodo's compassion for Gollum that the Ring is destroyed at all. Saruman, by contrast, attempts to convince Gandalf that, with the Ring, they can rule Middle-earth together: "We must have power, power to order all things as we will, for that good which only the Wise can see. [...] And listen, Gandalf, my old friend and helper!" [said Saruman], coming near and speaking now in a softer voice. "I said *we*, for *we* it may be, if you will join with me" (*LotR* II.2.252). Saruman's entreaties, of course, are merely a pretext for the acquisition of the Ring and its power—power that, importantly, would be Saruman's alone. Gandalf quickly identifies the deceptiveness of Saruman's offer: "[O]nly one hand at a time can wield the One, and you know that well, so do not trouble to say *we!*" (II.2.253).

The characters with the most integrity, on the other hand—Gandalf, Aragorn, Galadrial, and Elrond come to mind—recognize that the Ring's power, like Sauron's, is to subdue and absorb others' wills into the service of one's own. The impulse to dominate, which the Ring amplifies and facilitates, is fundamentally evil because it denies the gift of freedom that Ilúvatar bestowed upon the Elves and Men. As Matthew Dickerson puts it, "If the greatest gift to Man is that of freedom, and with it the gift of creativity, then the greatest evil—the evil of Melkor, his servant Sauron, and the Sauron's One Ring—is the taking away of that gift of freedom" (Dickerson 114). As a result, although sub-creation is not taken up explicitly in *The Lord of the Rings*, it finds expression in the themes of freedom, creativity, and authorial control.

To summarize, then, the relationship between Creator and sub-creator in Tolkien's mythology diverges from Barthes's notion of the relationship between God and author in two key respects. First, the creative artists in Tolkien's fantasy—Niggle, Ilúvatar, Melkor, Aulë, and Fëanor—retain attributes of the divine, but they are not omnipotent. Second, Ilúvatar, by contrast, who *does* retain omnipotence and all the attributes normally associated with the Christian God, does not rule through domination but rather through a delegation of power. Throughout his mythology, and especially in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien conceives of God as a force that is at once omnipotent and passive, detached yet invisible, consistently requiring his subjects to be active agents without foreclosing the possibility of a mysterious type of Providence that is involved, to provide one example among many, with Gollum's role in the destruction of the One Ring. God in Middle-earth exists, in Brian Rosebury's words, "not as original Power but as original Artist: an essential feature of an

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that wage an eternal war. As Frodo and others try to resist the Ring, it is never clear whether one's desire to keep the ring comes from within (the Boethian view) or if the Ring is a non-sentient evil force that wishes to return to its master (the Manichean view).

artist, in Tolkien's conception, being the renunciation of power over one's creatures, the delegation of power to others" (186).

### **Narrative Freedom and Responsibility**

The renunciation of power not only occurs within Tolkien's myth but also between Tolkien, as the author of his mythology, and the Hobbits who create, narrate, and edit their own stories. Gergely Nagy points out that Tolkien's willingness to clear a space for multiple narrative accounts in his texts provides a diversity of voices, both from the past and from the present: "The different author positions in the fictional texts (like Bilbo's role as original author, translator, compiler or adaptator or Frodo's as author) inscribe different sorts of relationships toward texts and their contents into the textual world [...]. The texts' layers, reflecting various uses, make available a variety of voices, from the past and present of the imagined world" (33-4). Just as Ilúvatar grants the Valar and the inhabitants of Middle-earth the capacity for agency, so too does Tolkien delegate his own narrative responsibilities.<sup>8</sup>

Nagy's comments also contain implications for the role of history in Tolkien's myth. Less widely known than Tolkien's desire to increase interpretive possibilities on a thematic level—via applicability rather than allegory, for example—is his belief that the textual space draws its meaning from a multiplicity of cultural and historical factors. "Tolkien was convinced," Ralph Wood explains, "that languages and cultures are inextricably rooted in time and place, that geography is hugely determinative for the way people think and act, that human variety is tied to the knotty particulars of place, that a people's first products are its myths and stories" (Wood 594). While these historical particulars are crucial to the formation of any text, in other words, they should not take precedence over the story itself. To use Tolkien's metaphor from "On Fairy-Stories," the various scraps and sources of textual meanings, from the philological to the cultural, are the "bones" (or raw materials) that comprise the "soup" (that is, the story). It is often a mistake, in Tolkien's view, to read stories during their intermediate stages or in incomplete forms, since the "bones" may take away our appreciation for the final, tasty "soup."<sup>9</sup>

Tolkien's metaphor connects, too, with his cautionary advice against reductive interpretations. In his *Letters* and the preface to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien spoke explicitly against the notion of an author controlling a text. As

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<sup>8</sup> A different, though no less fascinating, question involves the ways that we can understand Tolkien to be the author of the later, unfinished works that Christopher Tolkien has edited and partially revised.

<sup>9</sup> This is an especially relevant question since much of Tolkien's work, including *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, had undergone numerous revisions. See Shippey's *The History of Middle-earth*, pp. 289-95.

many readers of Tolkien are aware, he disliked allegory because of its tendency to limit both the author's and the reader's potential for creativity: "I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of the reader. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author" (*LotR* Foreword xvii). Here, Tolkien resists the notion of allegory in which the characters and plot are merely instruments that are "dominat[ed]" by the author's engineered moral or idea.<sup>10</sup> This sense of constriction led Tolkien to view characters as subjects, fully capable of agency, rather than lifeless objects controlled by the author.

I would like to end by addressing a paradox about Tolkien's views on authors, readers, and sub-creators. As I have tried to show, Tolkien was acutely conscious of the historically specific character of language and all its products, and did not like reductive interpretations that blurred the difference between one context and another, or that equated superficially similar things that in many other ways are unlike. As his *Letters* demonstrate most forcibly, Tolkien often defended his writing against these perceived *misreadings* of his work. For example, in response to Morton Zimmermann's screenplay of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien complained that he frequently found his work treated "carelessly in general, in places recklessly, and with no evident signs of any appreciation of what it is all about" (*Letters* 270). On the one hand Tolkien's displeasure is understandable, especially for any of us who feels that his creative work has been misinterpreted or overlooked. But how do these comments square with Tolkien's insistence on the "freedom of the reader" instead of "the purposed domination of the author?"

This question relates not only to Tolkien but also to his zealous fans who, when it comes to understanding Tolkien's mythology, are passionate about "getting it right." As Michael Drout sums it up, in some quarters of Tolkien studies, attempts to transgress accepted meanings found in Tolkien's *Letters* or elsewhere stops just short of being sacrilegious. "[I]n their zeal to find the interpretation of Tolkien's literature in his letters," he writes, "critics ignore the problem that the *Letters* are not a transparent, unambiguous guide to the 'real meaning' of Tolkien's literature or, for that matter, his scholarship" (20). Yet the problem continues, due in no small part to the legendary picture of Tolkien himself, a description that tends to omit the fact that Tolkien, just like the rest of us, was susceptible to error. Drout writes that "the practically hagiographic

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<sup>10</sup> Angus Fletcher has discussed how allegories are especially effective in conveying the author's preferred ideology because the underlying moral, political, or social message takes precedence over the literal storyline. Consequently, there is a sense that the author has systematically mapped out the characters and plots in advance, and is moving the characters over a figurative chess board according to the prescribed allegorical pattern.

treatment given to Tolkien's persona, "The Professor" in the words of fandom, is problematic not only in theoretical terms, but also for [...] practical reasons: [...] he was not always correct, and his opinion, even of his own books, should not be given the status of holy writ" (19). Although there is no clear answer to the problem of authority versus freedom in the Tolkien universe, one way in which these positions may be reconciled is via E.D. Hirsch's classic distinction between "meaning" and "significance." *Meaning*, Hirsch writes,

is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person, or a conception, or a situation, or indeed anything imaginable. (8)

The text, in other words, has a determinate meaning, but also has many "significances" that change over time and from reader to reader. The freedom that Tolkien recognizes for the reader, then, is not freedom to misunderstand the meaning of a text—or to recklessly create meanings willy-nilly—but freedom to furnish that meaning with new significances. In this context a dialectical give-and-take exists between the author and the reader instead of the domination (or "murder") of one over the other.

Throughout his life, in letters, essays, and—most of all—in his mythopoeic creation, Tolkien struggled to balance the authority of the author with the autonomy of the reader. For Tolkien, in stark contrast to Barthes, such a balance was possible and, I believe, even an essential outgrowth of Tolkien's moral-theological vision. Both Tolkien's repudiation of modernist literary trends and the vocabulary with which he grapples with the problem of authority—"allegory," "applicability," "sub-creation"—account largely for the tendency to view Tolkien's theoretical contributions as either outmoded, irrelevant, or simply out of touch with his contemporaries. In fact, Tolkien was not only a fantasist but also a theorist who constantly revised, tested, and dramatized the problem of authorship in his fiction.



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# TWO CALLS FOR PAPERS FROM THE MYTHOPOEIC PRESS

## Women in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien

edited by Janet Brennan Croft (mythlore@mythsoc.org) and Leslie Donovan  
(press@mythsoc.org)

The place of women in Tolkien's world is a perennially troublesome topic. On the surface, Tolkien's major works seem to ignore women or place them on unattainable pedestals, and popular criticism of Tolkien often focuses on this issue. But a closer look can be quite revealing; the deeper one delves into the *legendarium* and other works, the more prevalent, complex, and powerful the female characters turn out to be. Additionally, male characters often exhibit and are valued for what might be seen as feminine characteristics, and characters who balance feminine and masculine traits are held up as ideals. This collection will bring together several classic essays on Tolkien's portrayal of women and the feminine with new takes on the topic.

Projected publication date: Spring 2014

Deadline for abstracts: May 30, 2013

Deadline for finished papers: September 1, 2013

## Baptism of Fire: The Birth of Modern British Fantasy in World War I

edited by Janet Brennan Croft (mythlore@mythsoc.org)

In Great Britain, the post-World War I years saw a flowering of fantasy written by authors who had lived through its horrors. Tom Shippey observed in *Tolkien: Author of the Century* that the originators of what we would consider the "late twentieth-century fantastic mode" were in many cases "traumatized authors" who had survived combat and other experiences of the war. Janet Croft, in *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, notes psychiatrist W.H.R. Rivers's observations that his Great War patients processed their experiences through both dreams and writing. This essay collection will examine the fantasy fiction, poetry, and potentially art of authors affected in one way or another by the Great War and its lasting legacy.

Some authors we may consider are: J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, E.R. Eddison, Kenneth Grahame, A.A. Milne, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Mervyn Peake, James Stephens, David Jones, G.K. Chesterton, Rudyard Kipling; see <http://www.firstworldwar.com/poetsandprose/index.htm> for more possibilities.

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Deadline for finished papers: April 1, 2014