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## The Place of Myth in a Mythical Land: Two Notes (Converging)

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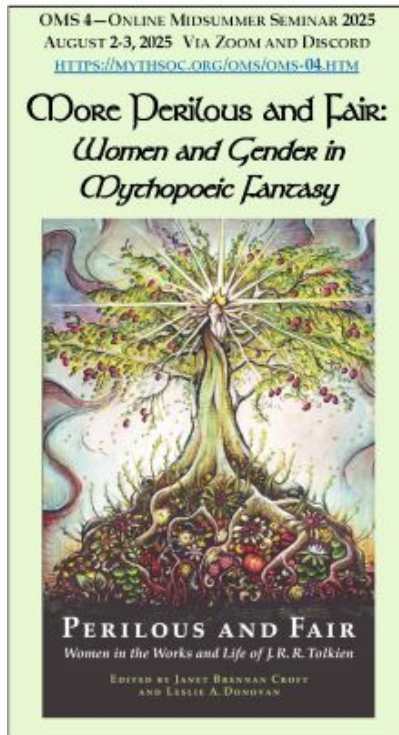
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## The Place of Myth in a Mythical Land: Two Notes (Converging)

### Abstract

Discusses aspects of “reality to the senses” and communication of “lore” in *The Lord of the Rings*. Notes Tolkien’s use of invented mythology within his secondary world and his technique for making that world real to the senses.

### Additional Keywords

Myth in literature; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Mythology; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Technique; Paula Marmor

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# The Place of Myth in a Mythical Land: Two Notes (Converging)

by Lionel Basney

In my title, "myth" has two analogical but distinct meanings. First--most common and first in the title--a "myth" is a tale (or coherent set of tales) recounting fantastic or heroic events which crystallize and "project dramatically" the values of the tribe that tells the tale. In literary language, the myth is a "total symbolic construct" embodying these values; for the tribe itself, the myth functions as a repository of its knowledge and practical wisdom, as an explanation of the ultimate origins of things or customs, and sometimes as a forecast of apocalypse.<sup>1</sup> "What it offers is the dramatization of powers that are assumed to have universal authority over the actions of men."<sup>2</sup> In practice this "universal authority" is normally the sanction of the political or religious authority which governs the tribe. Myth on this level fades into fairy tale and nursery rhyme at one end and deepens into Scripture at the other. It appears in The Lord of the Rings as poetry or fable recalling and celebrating the elder days. I will need to consider this further in the second note.

But how can we modify this definition in order to apply "myth" to The Lord of the Rings as a whole, as in "mythical land?" Obviously, Tolkien's stories are fantastic (and heroic). Just as plainly, however, they summarize values for no definable social or cultural unit like a tribe. What The Lord of the Rings tells us is not "knowledge," for the tales are imaginary. (Wisdom, of course, is another matter.) We do not believe in Tolkien's world in quite the literal way that Amerinds believed tales of the coyote man, or Amazonian Indians tales of the primeval monkey or serpent; as Tolkien would put it, we hold "secondary belief." At the same time, we are not deceived by the sense that Middle-earth has the same frank, primary-color, daylight coherence that characterizes real (in contrast to invented) myths. The tale does leave us with a sense of coherent symbolic structure. (This is not the "feel" of allegory, which is, as Van Ghent says, intellectual; the feel of myth is emotional.)<sup>3</sup> It also possesses a sort of "universal authority," or universal applicability, which depends on no specific set of cultural values or any specific cultural authority. Middle-earth is one, consistent, ethically intelligible--and "true" in a sense above the truths of specific cultural formulae.

1

My first note concerns two related techniques for making this mythical world impress us with its sensuous solidity--its "reality to the senses." Near the end of The Discarded Image, Lewis spends a paragraph on "the characteristically medieval type of imagination."

It is not a transforming imagination like

Wordsworth's or a penetrative imagination like Shakespeare's. It is a realising imagination. Macaulay noted in Dante the extremely factual word-painting; the details, the comparisons, designed at whatever cost of dignity to make sure that we see exactly what he saw. Now Dante in this is typically medieval. The Middle Ages are unrivalled, till we reach quite modern times, in the sheer foreground fact, the "close-up."<sup>4</sup>

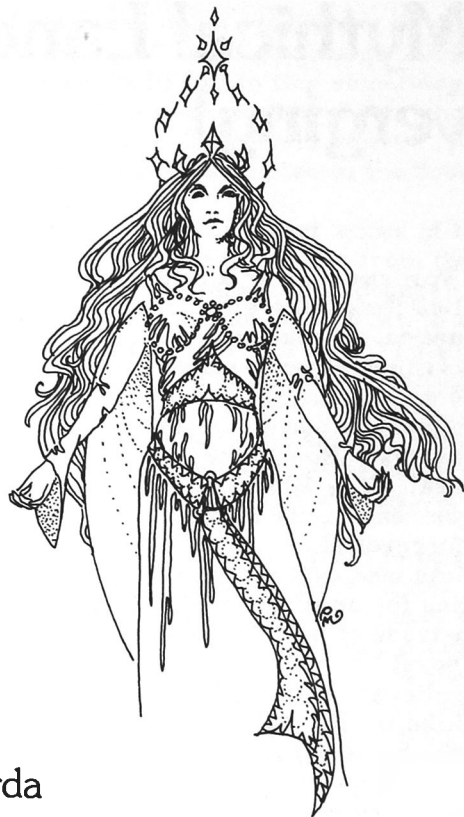
Lewis lists medieval examples, and remarks that this genius for sensuous realism has become the stock-in-trade of modern novelists. So be it: but with a "novel" like Tolkien's, I think, we are back to the medieval, even Dantean, "realising imagination." Like Dante, Tolkien describes beings and events which are purely imaginary. Each has, as it were, made up an imaginary world "beforehand," and then written stories which "project" this world in a narrative situation. Now neither Tolkien nor Dante created his world ex nihilo; Dante's depends on the cosmic myths of Scholastic theology, and Tolkien's topography, as has been remarked, is very British. But the job of "realising" these settings is still more urgent than that of the ordinary novelist.

Like Dante, then, or the author of Huon, Tolkien sets out to "realise" his scenes with sharp visual, tactile, auditory detail. A good example--a real detail in a climactic place, though heavily redolent of romance--is the horns of Rohan heard by Pippin in Minas Tirith (III, 103, 126).<sup>5</sup> A host of examples appears earlier during Merry and Pippin's captivity by the orcs of Saruman. Now an orc is quite beyond my experience; at this point, Tolkien bears down on the sensuous detail to help us "feel" Pippin's situation.

An Orc seized Pippin like a sack, put its head between his tied hands, grabbed his arms and dragged them down, until Pippin's face was crushed against its neck; then it jolted off with him (II, 51).

Pippin was bruised and torn, his aching head was grated by the filthy jowl and hairy ear of the Orc that held him. Immediately in front were bowed backs, and tough thick legs going up and down, up and down, unrelenting, as if they were made of wire and horn... (II, 55). A long hairy arm took each of them by the neck and drew them together. Dimly they were aware of Grishnakh's great hand and hideous face between them; his foul breath was on their cheeks. He began to paw them and feel them. Pippin shuddered as hard cold fingers groped down his back. (II, 58).

Several things cause the extraordinary vividness of these passages, not least the active verbs ("grabbed



Varda

...dragged...crushed...jolted") and the deliberate impersonality of the references to the orcs ("it... bowed backs and tough thick legs"). But specific sensory details carry the passage over--the huge ear, the clumsy, heedless strength, the piston legs, the halitosis and filth. Beside this image of coarsest masculine power the hobbits are no more or less than the children they are often called by mistake.

In contrast, Tolkien sometimes omits such detail deliberately, but again his purpose is to make us "feel" the reality of his myth. Lewis describes this technique also: "In *Paradise Lost* (as its theme demands) the art lies less in making us imagine the concrete than in making us believe we have imagined the unimaginable."<sup>6</sup> Again Tolkien's tactics resemble an older work. But there is a difference too. Milton had to surmount a dogmatic conviction that God, Satan, angels and so on are beyond human imagination. Tolkien, on the other hand, must intentionally leave some things "unimaginable" for the sake of his story--and then must help us to imagine them. In many instances, to describe too concretely would be to lessen. The exact lineaments of the Balrog in Moria "could not be seen: it was like a great shadow, in the middle of which was a dark form, of man-shape maybe, yet greater..." (I, 344). Here as elsewhere Tolkien makes good use of the blurring effects of shadow and darkness to create a sense of huge but unvisualized menace. This is an art where hint and suggestion "make us believe we have imagined." The best example, of course, is Sauron, who surrounds his throne with veils of darkness. Not only do we never get a close-up, until the Ring is destroyed and a shadow rises from Barad-dur. Tolkien only defines Sauron by metonymy and synecdoche. We fear Sauron because of the menace of the Ringwraiths--themselves only occasionally

"realized" with concrete detail (e.g., the snuffling which pursues Frodo through the Shire)--and feel disgust at his effect on the land (II, 239). We see him in terms of the Black Hand (like Frodo's, four-fingered) to which Isildur and Gollum refer, and of the Red Eye, an iconographic symbol but also the palpable representative of Sauron's telepathic attention to the affairs of the Ring. The force of Sauron's presence broods in the story. But Tolkien achieves this without description, depending on allusion and transferred feelings.

## 2

Knowledge, "lore," and its use is a secondary (perhaps) but not minor theme in *The Lord of the Rings*. Gondor's greatness lies as much in its "lore"--through which it reaches back to the Numenoreans--as in its present-day military strength. Rivendell, as Aragorn says, is a storehouse for the knowledge of older days (I, 214); Aragorn and Gandalf study the lore of Elrond before the company sets out for Moria (I, 219). When Faramir hears of Gandalf's fall, he laments the world's loss of "lore" (II, 279). In contrast, Middle-earth's villains corrupt or are defeated by their knowledge. Saruman was corrupted by delving for knowledge beyond his moral strength (II, 203). Sauron corrupts the craft of forging rings; his fate at the story's climax is determined by the limits of his knowledge, his incapacity to imagine states of mind other than his own.

Much of the knowledge in Middle-earth is retained and communicated in oral-mythical form. The men of Rohan are wise, and know their own history, though as Aragorn says they have no book-learning (II, 33). In contrast, the lore of Gondor--and of the hobbits--is literary. The Shire Red Book and Bilbo-Frodo's book represent the growth of mythical lore into full-fledged "history," characterized by an explicitly literary form.

None of this is, in itself, particularly novel. But a revealing facet of this theme is the frequency with which lore in mythical form is "realized" by the events of the story. Of course, regarded one way, the entire quest is a birth into knowledge for the hobbits who participate. The Shire itself begins and ends the Great War in naivete; but the four hobbits who go find their credulity and ignorance of the larger world challenged at every point. The peoples they encounter, moreover, find the hobbits' appearance a challenge to their credulity and skepticism. Tolkien repeatedly matches an event with its mythical equivalent, showing how an insular myth is "fulfilled" by an unexpected appearance or occurrence. The pattern is this: an individual character, more often than not on his home ground, suddenly recognizes that some reality of which he had known only in myth--legend, fable, poem, nursery rhyme--now faces him in broad daylight, or is attested to on authority he cannot question. But the reality never loses its mythical fascination. To use a distinction I made earlier, what was mere nursery rhyme turns out to be Scripture, and fulfilled Scripture at that.

This archetypal event occurs in pure form at least fifteen times in the course of the trilogy. Pippin en-

counters the trolls he had heard about from Bilbo (I, 218); Boromir learns from Elrond of the Ring's fate, about which the tales of Gondor have been largely silent (I, 256); Haldir meets hobbits (I, 357); Boromir hears from Celeborn, and Aragorn and Legolas more particularly from Gandalf, about the Ents (I, 390; II, 102); Eomer encounters Aragorn and his sword, and hears from the three companions about the reality of Galadriel (II, 35-36); Eothain meets hobbits (II, 37); Gimli learns of the Endless Stair from Gandalf, who has been there (II, 105); Sam sees an Oliphaunt (II, 255, 270); like his brother, Faramir encounters the Ring (II, 289), and later tells Denethor of the halflings "that I have seen walking out of northern legends" (III, 84); Beregon meets hobbits (III, 33); men of Rohan and Lossarnach march to battle in Mordor, which had been only a legend to them (III, 162); Imrahil's family story about elf-ancestors is confirmed by Legolas, who can see them in him (III, 148). In each case some intimation of the existence of hobbits (Ents, and so on) had been given by a cultural myth; and in each case the myth, perhaps ignored or disbelieved before, turns out to be a version of sober reality.

"Dreams and legends," says Eomer, "spring to life out of the grass" (II, 36). As to others, the experience is to him a harbinger of a new and special era, times in which ultimate battles must be fought. But the era is also characterized by this special and unexpected form of education. The "realization" of myths whose value as knowledge had been questioned or ignored recurs in a vivid, repeated experience: some simple reality is both discovered and recognized--the discovery is a recognition. A unique sort of learning takes place--the myth that one knew and did not know suddenly becomes the most valuable bit of knowledge one possesses.

The experience of myth-fulfillment is another form of the bond which grown among the free peoples who oppose Saruman and Sauron. It is through this experience that the various free peoples recognize each other and their enemy. They are united, finally, by knowledge as well as by their common love for freedom and justice. And their mythical knowledge of one another, brought into the daylight and flesh and blood, represents the active *caritas* that holds them together, best symbolized, perhaps, by the Fellowship of the Ring.

### 3

My two brief notes converge when we recognize that the levels of Tolkien's larger myth, and of his creatures' myths, also converge by analogy. Tolkien communicates the solid reality of his myth by bringing us within touching distance of his mythical characters. Similarly, the myths his peoples hold bring them within touching distance of "mythical" realities. This analogical development should suggest one further step. Middle-earth as a whole should itself "open out" to its readers in terms of unexpected reality. The values of Tolkien's myth--courage, charity, freedom, justice--are values that our loftiest and most ancient cultural and religious myths assure us that we enjoy: though in all truth they are hard to find in concrete form around us. Whether or not we ever see a "halfling walk out of northern legend" is finally less important than the possibility of being

educated to recognize these mythical values in the ordinary events of our normal lives. Is Tolkien challenging us to realize our own cultural myths? To do so in practices and situations which are "real" to us would be to rediscover our own lives "dipped in myth."<sup>7</sup> What we know best and think about least would be the "realest" and most significant knowledge we have.

### NOTES

1) If I were following in the footsteps of modern structuralism--Levi-Strauss, for instance--I might have to say that the tribal myth creates the tribal values. But my definitions here are literary rather than anthropological, and my sources correspond to this bias. Though references to others may be inherent, my conscious sources are two: Dorothy Van Ghent, The English Novel: Form and Function (New York: Harper and Row, 1961); pp. 52-53; and Northrop Frye, Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology (New York and Burlingame: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1963), pp. 21-38.

My title echoes a recent article by W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., "In Praise of Rasselas: Four Notes (Converging)," Imagined Worlds: Essays on some English Novels and Novelists in Honour of John Butt, eds. Maynard Mack and Ian Gregor (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1968), pp. 111-136.

2) Van Ghent, The English Novel, p. 53.

3) *Idem*.

4) The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature (Cambridge: University Press, 1964), p. 206.

5) All references to The Lord of the Rings are to the second edition, revised (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965).

6) Lewis, The Discarded Image, p. 207, n. 1.

7) Lewis, "The Dethronement of Power," Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J. R. R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings", eds. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbardo (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 16.



Goldberry