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'Morning Stars of a Setting World': Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturæ* and Tolkien's *Legendarium* as Neo-Platonic Mythopoeia.

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Abstract

Examines a possible source of the imagery associated with Tolkien's representations of divine and queenly women in Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturæ*, or *Complaint of Nature*. De Lille was a 12th century theologian and poet associated with the Chartres school, and an influence on Chaucer.

Additional Keywords

de Lille, Alain. *De Planctu Naturæ*; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Elbereth/Varda; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Galadriel; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Gandalf; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Nienna; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Yavanna



“MORNING STARS OF A SETTING WORLD”:
ALAIN DE LILLE’S *DE PLANCTU NATURÆ*
AND TOLKIEN’S *LEGENDARIUM*
AS NEO-PLATONIC MYTHOPOEIA

CHRISTOPHER VACCARO

INTRODUCTION

EMERGING FROM THE CHRISTIAN EXEGETICAL TRADITION, medieval mythography used Greek and Roman myths for the purpose of edifying readers. Such texts allegorically employed the pantheon of pagan divinities and heroes in order to promote Christian principles. Many were commentaries on works from classical antiquity; some were prosimetra, narratives of alternating verse and prose, composed to convey moral instruction. Two influential examples of the latter are Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* and Alain de Lille’s *De Planctu Naturae* (*Complaint of Nature*). The following essay argues that a comparison of Alain’s *De Planctu* and selections from the *legendarium* of J.R.R. Tolkien provides greater insight into the similarities between two Neoplatonic Christian mythopoeic systems.

There is ample scholarship concerning the moral vision behind Tolkien’s literature; only a small portion of this, however, is devoted to the influence of Platonic and Christian Platonist ideology specifically. In “Tolkien’s Platonic Fantasy,” Jon Cox highlights Plato’s most significant influences on Tolkien’s writings from the cosmology to character creation. In his essay “The Rings of Tolkien and Plato,” Eric Katz astutely recognizes the similarities between the One Ring and Plato’s Ring of Gyges and the deeper ethics that runs through the two texts. In her “Naming the Unnameable: The Neoplatonic ‘One’ in Tolkien’s *Silmarillion*,” Verlyn Flieger identifies the Platonic concept of “the One” within Tolkien’s cosmogonic narrative. Situating Tolkien alongside Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysias within the discourse of ineffability, Flieger argues that Tolkien used heart and imagination to successfully create his All-Father deity, whereas the others only sought (and failed) to explain “it.” Regarding the nature of evil in Tolkien’s *legendarium*, Tom Shippey, John Houghton and Neal Keese have given thought to the influence of Augustinian

and Boethian Platonism.¹ John Houghton’s “Augustine in the Cottage of Lost Play: The *Ainulindalë* as Asterisk Cosmology” examines parallels within the cosmologies of Tolkien and Augustine. Matthew Fisher considers the impact of Augustine in his “Working at the Crossroads: Tolkien, St. Augustine, and the *Beowulf*-poet.” And Kathleen Dubs entered the conversation early with her “Providence, Fate, and Chance: Boethian Philosophy in *The Lord of the Rings*.” Though these investigations greatly advance readers’ understanding of Christian Neoplatonist connections to Tolkien’s works, more can certainly be done.

An additional school of medieval Platonism emerged around the Chartres Cathedral in the twelfth century, an epicenter of scholastic philosophy and poetry. Inspired to a large degree by Chalcidius’s translation of the early part of Plato’s *Timaeus*, the school was known for its depiction of nature as a creative and procreative force. Such schools produced extremely influential and well-crafted mythopoetic texts within their collections of preaching/instructional manuals and allegorical treatises. One of the most influential writers of the Chartres School was Alain de Lille (1128?-1202?). A theologian who likely studied under Peter Abelard and Thierry of Chartres, Alain was famous for his *Anticlaudianus*, *De Fide Catholica Contra Haereticos*, and his very influential *De Planctu Naturæ*, the last having inspired the works of numerous authors throughout the Middle Ages; the two most popular of these being Jean de Meun and Geoffrey Chaucer. Jean de Meun together with Guillaume de Lorris composed the thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*, employing many of *De Planctu*’s features and allegorical figures. Geoffrey Chaucer composed his own translation of this text (*Romaunt of the Rose*); his *Parliament of Birds* (*Parlement of Foules*) mentions Alain’s *De Planctu* directly, depicting the figure of Dame Nature presiding over an assembly of birds there to find their amorous mates.²

It is very likely that Tolkien knew of Alain’s *De Planctu*. In 1872, the prolific scholar Thomas Wright published *The Anglo-Latin Satirical Poets and Epigrammatists of the Twelfth Century* within the *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores* or “Rolls Series,” an important nationalist project exemplifying the Victorian preoccupation with England’s medieval past. Wright’s two-volume collection includes texts by Geoffrey of Winchester, Hugh the Chanter, Reginald of Canterbury, Marbod of Rennes, and Alain de Lille among others, and provides an appendix containing the eighth-century English riddles of

¹ Tom Shippey examines the subject in relationship to the nature of evil in *Road to Middle-earth* (Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 140-150.

² “And right as Aleyn, in the Pleynt of Kynde / Devyseth Nature of aray and face” (ll. 316-17).

Tatwine and Aldhelm.³ We know Tolkien's close friend and colleague C.S. Lewis read Thomas Wright's 1872 edition of *De Planctu* (along with Douglas Moffat's 1908 English translation) and provided translations of two lengthy passages from the text in his *The Allegory of Love*, a book on which Tolkien offered constructive criticism; Lewis was sure to thank Tolkien in the book's Preface. *De Planctu* would have been read by many medievalists during Tolkien's tenure, and it remains an important text for those interested in medieval attempts at Christian mythopoesis.⁴

We must be cautious when using Lewis and other Oxford colleagues as evidence of Tolkien's familiarity with a work and when providing similarities between his legendarium and works that appear to have no direct relationship to it. So while *De Planctu* would certainly have been readily available, without evidence proving Tolkien's familiarity with the work "the best we can hope for, and all we should aim for in such cases," as Jason Fisher argues, "is a comparative study" (37).

De Planctu's central drama circulates around a pantheon of pagan divinities and Christian virtues assembling before the narrator as the Goddess descends from the heavens by chariot drawn by Juno's birds (peacocks). There is Natura herself and her priest Genius, Venus along with her husband Hymen and their son Cupid, and Antigamus (Venus's lover) with their illegitimate son Jocus (Sport or Mirth). Influenced by Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Alain's text gives voice to the figure Natura, who expresses concern over the weakening of human morality.⁵ Venus had been given by Natura the proper anvils and hammers in order to look after human sexual behavior, and she did well until she grew bored and had an affair with Antigamus (Prose 5, p. 56). From that point on, sexual indecency and acts of immoderate love have increased in number as have vices such as greed, lust, and pride. After her complaint, Natura summons her entourage of Virtues (Chastity, Temperance, Generosity, Humility), informing them that she will send a letter to Genius by means of Hymen. The letter will instruct Genius to excommunicate those who continue to behave in a manner contrary to proper grammar and to God's law. Once this

³ See Yvette Kisor's entry in the *Tolkien Encyclopedia* (570) where Kisor mentions the importance of the Anglo-Latin riddle tradition. Tolkien's interest in the English riddle tradition is well known and attested by his composition of "Enigmata Saxonica Nuper Inventa Duo" in *Northern Venture*, 1923. He mentions Aldhelm's contribution to the poetic tradition in his early draft of "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" (see Drout's edition, p. 97 et seq.).

⁴ See Jane Chance's *Medieval Mythography*.

⁵ Quotations from *De Planctu* come from Douglas M. Moffat's translation *The Complaint of Nature*. For additional work by Alain on this subject, see also his *Anticlaudianus*. C.S. Lewis refers to Moffat's translation in his *Allegory of Love*.

is carried out, the dream-vision ends, and the narrator is alone and (like the reader) edified by the experience.

The *Natura* figure of the Chartres School traces its origins back to the works of Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Macrobius, Chalcidius, Boethius, and more directly from the *De Mundi Universitate* of Bernard Silvestris. Plato never personifies Nature in his *Timæus*, but this work becomes foundational for those who later come to conceive of the *Natura* concept (Economou, *The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature* 13). Aristotle speaks of Nature (*Physis*) as working alongside God in *De Caelo*. Plotinus sees Nature as the generative partner of two world-souls. Macrobius is the first to personify Nature as *artifex*, giving her attributes that were to become part of the tradition, and Chalcidius’s commentaries on the *Timæus* concretize the figure as playing an intermediary role between the eternal world-soul and sublunary matter. Boethius supplied a personification, describing *Natura* as a creative principle, which as an *artifex* presides over nature. Bernard Silvestris’s goddess *Noys*, God’s providence, sends a tearful *Natura* to work alongside *Urania* and *Physis* to create Mankind (Economou, *Goddess* 156). Alain’s *De Planctu Naturæ* articulates the author’s anxiety over sexual behavior, using the *Natura* construct as a symbol of an accord between human behavior and God’s law.

GENRES

Many texts fit within the parameters of more than one genre. *De Planctu* is a prosimetrum set within a Christianized pagan framework in imitation of the moral allegories of the Ancients. Tolkien’s texts are clearly not prosimetra despite having many verse passages, and they do not explicitly use Ancient Greek and Roman mythology, though they certainly did so early on in Tolkien’s career as John Rateliff and others have revealed.⁶ Yet elements of this mythology occasionally remain fossilized, so that in describing the “dishevelled dryad loveliness” of Ithilien, comprehension depends upon the reader’s familiarity with Greco-Roman imagery (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] IV.4.650).

Positioned within the literary roots of the western fabulist tradition, *De Planctu* may also be classified as proto-fantasy. Images of nymphs (Meter 3, 21) and dryads (3, 22) laughing amongst the trees and the assembly of ageless Virtues provide fairy-like imagery. There is a magic to the shifting appearances and garments of its central characters. Divinities populate the idyllic setting. Phoebus, Juno, Jove, Æolus, Thetis, Nereus, and Proserpine all display reverence to *Natura*. Unlike Tolkien’s fairy stories, however, there is no journeying of a hero, no “there and back again” that leads to the birth and

⁶ John Rateliff, in *The History of the Hobbit*, finds references to the Greco-Roman deities, to Theseus, and to Ganymede in Tolkien’s early drafts.

maturation of a hero. In fact, there is no central conflict in *De Planctu*, only an occasion for Natura to instruct the narrator and to orchestrate the excommunication of those burdened by vice.

Within both systems, we can locate variations of the elegiac *ubi sunt* motif found in Boethius' *Consolation* and in the Old English poem *The Wanderer*, which articulates it thusly: "Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago? / Hwær cwom maððumgyfa?" ("Where has the steed gone? Where has the man gone? Where has the treasure-giver gone?"; ln. 92).⁷ A similar elegiac element is found in the very opening lines of *De Planctu* as the narrator expresses his sorrow over the loss of appropriate expressions of love:

I change laughter to tears, joy to sorrow, applause to lament, mirth to grief, when I behold the decrees of Nature in abeyance; when society is ruined and destroyed by the monster of sensual love. [...] Alas! Whither has the loveliness of Nature, the beauty of character, the standard of chastity, the love of virtue departed? (Metre 1, 3)

The nostalgia is specific to the memory of a (fictionalized) virtuous past and expresses lament over civilization's moral decline.

Tolkien borrows directly from *The Wanderer* and gives us his version of the motif at the entrance to Edoras in his *The Two Towers*.⁸ This is one of many instances (Faramir's speech to Frodo and Sam being another) where Tolkien points to the decline of the world over time. A very similar elegiac tone is found in a 1941 letter from Tolkien to his son Michael. It is a father's letter of guidance and advice to his son regarding unrestrained love:

This is a fallen world. The dislocation of sex-instinct is one of the chief symptoms of the Fall. The world has been 'going to the bad' all down the ages. The various social forms shift, and each new mode has its special dangers: but the 'hard spirit of concupiscence' has walked down every street, and sat leering in every house, since Adam fell. (*Letters* 48)

Living now in this fallen world Tolkien sees his love for God as the most reliable source of comfort: "Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put

⁷ The famous phrase from Roman tradition is: *Ubi sunt qui ante nos in mundo fuere?* "Where are those who, before us, existed in the world?" The line from the *Consolation* is: *Ubi nunc fidelis ossa Fabricii manent?* "Where now do the bones of loyal Fabricius lie?" (Meter 7, ln. 15).

⁸ Here Aragorn recollects lines of verse from Rohan that spoke of its past's nostalgia for its past, what is to him an echo of an echo: "Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing? / Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the bright hair flowing?" (*LotR* III.6.508).

before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament. . . . There you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves upon earth" (52). In this, he is very close to Alain's sentiments:

In Him is no spot found, Him no evil fault attacks, with Him no tempting passion abides. Here is splendor never failing, life untiring and immortal, a fountain always springing, a fruitful conservatory of being, the great source of wisdom, the primal origin of goodness. (Prose 4, 40)

Both authors share a belief in the fidelity of God's love. Yet supplying moral advice in personal letters is different from having a character in a story do it or having it be the sole objective of the narrative. And while there is room to examine Tolkien's implicit moral framework, at no time does he give a character such an explicit lament over amorous practices. Tolkien stays far away from delivering such direct messages. That said, the elegiac remains a central feature of his fiction and that of Alain.

Comparing Tolkien's texts to an allegorical work is simultaneously useful and challenging. As straightforward allegory, *De Planctu* is rigidly bound by its assigned terms in a manner similar to the medieval morality play *Everyman*; characters must signify what they are named. Yet interestingly Alain couches his allegory within a mythopoeic tradition. While Tolkien expressed distaste for allegory elsewhere in his writing, he was clearly fond of its moderate application when adding mythic dimension to his writing. His allegorical comparison of *Beowulf* to a tower in his "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" is a well-known example. Yet Tolkien employs not one but two allegories in that well-known essay. In the first, the poem *Beowulf* is an adventurer guided by the divine lady Historia, "the fairy godmother later invited to superintend its fortunes" (6). Historia does not travel alone; she is accompanied by the Ladies Philologia, Mythologia, Archaeologia, and Laographia. The lady Poesis, to Tolkien's point, is often left behind. Here Tolkien seems attracted to the mythological potential of the allegory of the "excellent ladies," who have more in common with medieval mythic figures than "fairy godmothers." Allegory often tells a story within a story, and we have, in the case of Dame Historia, a story of epic contours. In a letter to Stanley Unwin, Tolkien admits that "the better and more consistent an allegory is the more easily can it be read 'just as a story'; and the better and more closely woven a story is the more easily can those so minded find allegory in it. But the two start out from opposite ends" (*Letters* 121). While Tolkien is able to read some of his works allegorically (*Smith of Wootton Major* and *Leaf by Niggle* are examples) and was himself involved in a fairly Christian mythographic project, it is safe to say Tolkien would have found

Alain's degree of allegorizing not only unsatisfying but also unsuitable for the making of a proper fairy story.

A significant difference in genre between *De Planctu* and Tolkien's works is that the former remains a dream vision. The narrator appears to be in a dream from the beginning or very soon after and wakes at the text's close. Tolkien argued adamantly against the use of a dream vision in the telling of a fairy story, arguing that such a framework dispels the belief in the fantastical phenomena. In a well-known passage in "On Fairy-stories," he writes: "if a waking writer tells you that his tale is only a thing imagined in his sleep, he cheats deliberately the primal desire at the heart of Faërie: the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder" (35). While Tolkien's Middle-earth characters often dream, readers are never told that their experience is merely an illusion dispelled upon waking.

Lastly, Alain's text was a heavily moralizing treatise providing instruction on love and judging its aberrations. Such a text known for its vehement opposition to sexual diversity is challenging to read and even more challenging to consider alongside a well-loved author. Yet many readers will find something they love in a work despite the existence of odious material; this is especially true of medieval literature. Tolkien would have found *De Planctu's* naturalization of Christian values and the mythological manner of their promotion in some ways similar to his own, though he deliberately kept away from such a judgmental tone and maintained a supportive stance toward alterity in his own work. In fact, there is considerable evidence to suggest he was very sympathetic to the experience of marginalization and to the plight of the Other.⁹ He had, as Jane Chance has recently argued, experienced marginalization in many forms himself.¹⁰

THE COSMOLOGICAL SUBLIME

Features of the Platonic sublime (orderliness, harmony, purity, and luminosity) anchor Alain's mythopoeic project. Surrounded by ornaments of stars and stones, Natura's world is full of harmony and precision. The music accompanying the dance of gems moving about her body "frolicked in little notes, [...] quickened into tones rich and swelling, [...] advanced into the full burst of harmony, the depth of which stirred delight in our ears" (Prose 1, 9).

Natura explains how God, the *mundi* [...] *architectus* "world's architect" (Wright 468) succeeded in creating his sublime work:

⁹ See *Tolkien and Alterity*, edited by Christopher Vaccaro and Yvette Kisor, for a wide range of arguments on this subject.

¹⁰ See Jane Chance, *Tolkien, Self and Other: "This Queer Creature."*

He governed with harmony of proper order, furnished with laws, and bound with ordinances. [...] All things, then, agreeing through invisible bonds of union, plurality returned to unity, diversity to identity, dissonance to harmony, discord to accord in peaceful agreement. (Prose 4, 43)

Natura’s description promotes the image of an orderly universe and of the beauty of God’s “wonderful work.” The movement of this universe is one of eventual return; that which was splintered returns to unity, that which was dissonant returns to harmony. Pervasive throughout Alain’s text is the sense that the world was properly and deliberately sculpted, its beauty predicated upon its order. And Natura’s role in this creation narrative is not insignificant; as God’s Regent, she is the “divinity” responsible for the formation and stamping of forms according to His will.

This celestial harmony is inextricably bound to luminosity, an image surrounding Natura and her retinue. The narrator himself makes the association during his request to understand why Natura is so distraught:

O offspring of God, mother of all things, bond and firm chain of the universe, jewel of earth, mirror to mortality, light-bringer of the world! [...] who inlayest the heavens with the gold of manifold stars, making bright the seat of our upper air, and filling the sky with gems of the constellations and with divers soldiery [...]. (Meter 4, 32-33)

Starlight is linked to the beauty of perfect universal forms, and Natura is responsible for the courses of the sun and moon, for the creation of the stars and constellations. Their ordered movement about the sky speaks to her responsible stewardship over the earth.

Natura’s luminosity also extends to her entourage as seen when she addresses the assembly. The imagery is interwoven with and sustains the elegiac overtones of the text as the virtuous are defined as lamps that guide those adrift in a fallen world:

O lonely lamps in human darkness, morning stars of a setting world, scattered planks to those suffering shipwreck, solitary ports on earthly floods! (Prose 8, 83)¹¹

Mariners navigate by use of the stars, using them to arrive safely at their ports. The association of Natura’s Virtues to morning’s stars is interesting here. The

¹¹ The Latin is useful here. “O sola humanæ tenebrositatis luminaria, occidentis mund, sidera matutina, naufragorum tabulæ speciales, portus mundialium fluctuum singulares!” (Wright 509-510)

Virtues guide humanity through the darkness of the world and perhaps through their own personal trials. Wisdom, “alone the morning-star of the night of humanity” (Prose 6, 65), is most necessary for dispelling the darkness of ignorance and vice.

Lastly, *De Planctu*’s mythopoesis frequently links starlight, gemstones, and numerology. To signify her governance over the constellations, Natura wears a “thickly starred” golden diadem with twelve gemstones being the most prominent, arranged in groups of three. The first three shine above the others and the first of these possesses the greatest beauty: “[T]hree jewels, by the bold pride of their beams, supplanted and outshone the other nine. The first stone condemned darkness to exile by its light, and cold by its fire” (Prose 1, 7). Below these twelve, there are an additional seven stones that hover and dance about Natura in the harmonious music described earlier (Prose 1, 9).

Similar to Alain, Tolkien provides a sense of order and beauty in his cosmology. Middle-earth is the product of Ilúvatar’s thought, wrought as he intended to the last detail. Everything can be traced back to a greater unity.¹² Tolkien sets his history far enough back in time so that readers become privy to the creation of the universe and the establishment of a home for the gods. Ilúvatar himself crafted the (what is to us) primary reality of the world (*Letters* 259). At times, his governance is direct; at others, he delegates authority amongst a small group of ancillary guardians, some of whom are very much like Natura while others bear little resemblance. The universe begins as a balanced and unified construct; all is in harmony.

Tolkien has this universe infused with a musical consonance through which the “Holy Ones” become enlightened: “Yet ever as they listened they came to deeper understanding, and increased in unison and harmony” (*Silmarillion* [Sil] 15). And while the Lucifer figure, Morgoth, attempts to establish his own theme thereby causing dissonance and discord, Ilúvatar’s plan incorporates even this into the beauty and harmony of his music and his greater plan.¹³

Tolkien’s mythos is rife with this luminous imagery. Often it is associated with the unearthly beauty of such characters. In the face of Varda, Queen of the Stars, “the light of Ilúvatar lives still” (*Sil* 26). In the shape of the cosmological tree, Yavanna is “crowned with the Sun” (*Sil* 28). And of the Maia Melian we are told, “the light of Aman was in her face” (*Sil* 55). Akin to Alain’s “lonely lamps in human darkness” are Tolkien’s celestial and exceptional Elven

¹² Verlyn Flieger makes a strong case for the fragmentation of that which was once unified in her *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien’s World*.

¹³ “This is your minstrelsy; and each of you shall find contained herein, amid the design that I set before you, all those things which it may seem that he himself devised or added” (*Sil* 17).

and mortal characters, whose virtues stand out. The resonance between the Old English *Christ I* poem and Tolkien’s Eärendil figure is worthy of comment.¹⁴ Also referred to as “Day-Spring” and the “Morning Star,” Eärendil the mariner was responsible for beseeching the gods to cast out Morgoth’s darkness. Ultimately placed aboard the glass vessel Vingilot, his course across the heavens and the light of the Silmaril on his brow mark Eärendil as a symbol of hope and virtue not only for the Edain who followed his light to their island of Númenor, but to the Eldar as well. Other extraordinary characters throughout Tolkien’s *legendarium* might be conceived as “lonely lamps” of virtue as well. One example is Frodo, whose interior virtue is rendered visible through his luminous face: “Sam had noticed that at times a light seemed to be shining faintly within” (*LotR* IV.4.652).

In Middle-earth, numerology buttresses the mythology and is frequently associated with jewels and artifacts. Similar to the three brightest stones of Natura’s diadem, which “supplanted and outshone the other nine” (*Prose* 1, 7), the Silmarils were a set of three coruscating and hallowed jewels that outshone all other gems and cast out all darkness, burning those individuals not virtuous enough to hold them:

As three great jewels they were in form. [...] Therefore even in darkness of the deepest treasury the Silmarils of their own radiance shone like the stars of Varda; and yet, as were they indeed living things, they rejoiced in light and received it and gave it back in hues more marvelous than before. (*Sil* 67)

The three Silmarils were jewels in form, but in essence they were living light. Their greatness is echoed dimly in the Third Age by three additional stones, the Elven rings of power (and their wielders: Elrond, Galadriel, and Gandalf). And like the seven stones that hover and dance about Natura’s form (*Prose* 1, 7), there are the “Seven stars and seven stones, / And one white tree” (*LotR* III.11.597) associated with the Faithful of Númenor.¹⁵ The seven stars represent the kingdom of Westnesse (or Elenya) as do the seven seeing stones later used to communicate from great distances. And most relevant to the *De Planctu* image, the seven-starred constellation, Valacirca, the Sickle of the Valar, is placed in the heavens by Varda as a challenge to Melkor, though in Tolkien’s draft notes it

¹⁴ Tolkien knew of “earendel” from its appearance in the *Christ I* poem as well as in Snorri Sturluson’s *Prose Edda* and the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus. It is often translated as “day spring” and “morning star” and is understood to be our planet Venus and also symbolic of Christ.

¹⁵ “And Seven Stones they had, the gift of the Eldar” (*Sil* 276).

was set in honor of the goddess Yavanna (Lady Palúrien), whom Melko(r) had attempted to malign.¹⁶

DIVINE LADIES

Within these Neoplatonic mythopoeic projects, luminosity is paired with the beauty of a structured and frequently female-governed universe; Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* is a well-known example.¹⁷ Female deities stand in for God and become his voice. In Alain's prosimetra, Natura occupies this divine space. She does the fashioning, creating, and stamping and so demands a great deal of obedience and tribute. Lady Generosity's invocation reveals this expansion of Natura's own jurisdiction and authority:

O first foundation of everything in nature! O special protection for all! O queen of the region of earth! O trusty agent of a principal above the heavens; who, acting under the authority of the eternal master, dost not disturb thy faithful administration with any disobedience; whom the whole world is bound by the primal righteousness to obey! [...] (Prose 9, 90)

Natura looks after God's creation, protecting all who live within it through her powers. She is queen over the earth and over the assembly of Virtues. As "foundation," her essence supports the operation of everything that exists.

The setting in which the Queen of Earth resides is within a deep beautiful forest, wherein there exists an abundance of light and water; silver streams run through her woods. Cupid, the legitimate child of Venus and Hymen, "dwells by gleaming springs, silvery in white splendors" within the "wooded valley" (Prose 5, 56).¹⁸ The narrator describes the beauty of spring: "[a] silver splendor clothed the wanton streams, and had ordered its daylight to be

¹⁶ "Aulë was making a silver sickle. Melko interrupted his work telling him a lie concerning the lady Palúrien. Aulë so wroth that he broke the sickle with a blow. Seven sparks leapt up and winged into the heavens. Varda caught them and gave them a place in the heavens as a sign of Palúrien's honour" (*The Book of Lost Tales [BoLT]*, Part 1, 133).

¹⁷ When covering the subject of divine ladies, it must be recognized that the Virgin Mary and Natura share many of the same traits. Miri Rubin's *Mother of God: The History of the Virgin Mary* describes the nature imagery and orderly beauty of the Virgin (260), while Roberta Magnani argues for the crossover between these two female divinities. Much as with Mary, perfection and purity meet in Alain's Natura; she is likewise a mediator and bridge between the celestial and sublunary worlds.

¹⁸ Cupid is the son of Hymen and is Natura's nephew; he represents the unsullied love of husband and wife. Natura's argument centers around the legitimacy of this lawful son of Venus as opposed to the illegitimacy of her son through adultery, Mirth.

on the rivers. One could see the garrulous flow of a changing fountain, the murmur of the running of which was a prologue to sleep" (Meter 3, 23).

Within this forest, Natura descends from the heavens to engage with the dreamer, who has just expressed his sorrow over the destructive influence of sensual love. In the narrator's introductory description of Natura's physical form, readers encounter the luminosity of the divine female figure:

While I with sorrowful lament was repeating these elegies over and over again, a woman glided down from the inner palace of the impassable heavens [...]. Her hair, which shone not with borrowed light but with its own, and which displayed the likeness of rays, not by semblance, but by native clearness surpassing nature, showed on a starry body the head of a virgin. (Prose 1, 5)

There is a balance and a harmony to every part of Natura's form as it is described in the *blazon du corps* passage of *De Planctu*. Complementing the surrounding starlight, her golden eyebrows are "starry in golden brightness" and her golden comb, "smoothed into the dance of due orderliness the gold of her hair" (Prose 1, 5). The gold of Natura's eyebrows and of her orderly hair, like all else, signifies the perfection of her character and her form. Through her, the order of the cosmos is manifest and sanctified.

Additionally, Natura is depicted as a weeping goddess. Upon their initial meeting, the narrator testifies to her outward sorrow: "[S]he tried to blot out the smile of her beauty with precious tears. For a stealthy dew, sprung from the welling of her eyes, proclaimed the flow of inward grief" (Prose 1, 6). Natura weeps on account of the transgressions of humanity and in pity for those who have lost their way. She sympathizes with the fallen, recognizing their frailties, though ultimately she sets this pity aside in order to pronounce an excommunication through Genius (Prose 9, 90).

Natura is likewise associated with the hammer and anvil of lawful creation and execution. The dilemma in *De Planctu* is that these instruments had been lent to Venus:

I have assigned to her [Venus] two lawful hammers, by which she may bring the stratagems of the Fates to naught, and present to view the multiform subjects to existence. Also I appointed for her work anvils, noble instruments, with a command that she should apply these same hammers to them, and faithfully give herself up to the forming of things, not permitting the hammers to leave their proper work, and become strangers to the anvils. (Prose 5, 50)

Venus fails in this responsibility; hammers and anvils are misapplied and this allows for a host of unnatural behaviors emerging initially from intemperance, drunkenness, greed, and pride.

Natura is associated too with the mimetic image of the mirror, herself called at one point the “mirror to mortality” (Meter 4, 32). At times this “mirror” catches the beauty of natural forms as it does with the “mirror of the violet” (Meter 3, 22) and the “shining mirror of the moon” (Meter 4, 33). At other times, it catches the pure form of character, as when Natura writes a letter to Genius: “I, who find in thee, as in the mirror of Nature, myself again in marked resemblance” (Prose 8, 85). And the textual narrative itself is likened to a mirror, held before the speaker: “[w]ith the mirror of this visionary sight taken away, the previous view of the mystic apparition left me, who had been fired by ecstasy, in sleep” (Prose 9, 95). The mirror of Natura’s complaint provides a “visionary sight,” which allows the dreamer to gain greater knowledge of the feminine divine mechanism, herself a mirror, governing the world.

As previously stated, Alain’s Natura appeared in medieval works throughout Europe and remained relevant to twentieth-century scholars of courtly love. While no evidence exists to substantiate a claim of influence, a cursory summary reveals that many of Tolkien’s celestial females (Varda, Yavanna, Nienna, and even Galadriel) possess similarities to Natura’s features.¹⁹ Varda, Lady of the Stars, is the Middle-earth figure most closely linked to a celestial luminosity. In the later version of Tolkien’s cosmogony, she is responsible for these stellar creations.²⁰

Too great is her beauty to be declared in the words of Men or of Elves;
for the light of Ilúvatar lives still in her face. In light is her power and her
joy. [...] Elbereth they name her, and they call upon her name out of the
shadows of Middle-earth, and uplift it in song at the rising of the stars.
(*Sil* 26)

Like Alain’s Natura, “who inlayest the heavens with the gold of manifold stars [...] filling the sky with gems of the constellations” (Meter 4, 33), Varda represents a divine link to the celestial spheres, with their order and benevolence. While her luminosity hardly need be traced solely back to the medieval Natura image, her role in the genesis of these coruscating spheres provides an interesting association as does her proximity to Ilúvatar, the “great architect” of Middle-earth.

¹⁹ A comparison of Natura imagery surrounding Melian, Lúthien, and Arwen would also be useful but is outside the scope of this analysis.

²⁰ Kristine Larsen gives a thorough account of Varda’s development in “[V]Arda Marred- The Evolution of the Queen of Stars.” Eventually the power of starlight is entirely hers.

Yavanna is the deity of fauna and foliage, of fertility and growth. She is called Palúrien (the “wide-world”) and Kémi (“Earth”) and Queen of the Earth. Like Natura, Yavanna weeps on account of the marring of the earth, which is in her care. A passage in *The Book of Lost Tales* provides an image of the goddess weeping upon seeing the twisted, choked, and blighted earth (*BoLT* 1. 99) and Meril describes to Eriol her entreaties to Manwë:

Thereat rose Palúrien in sorrow and tears, and told of the plight of the Earth and of the great beauty of her designs and of those things she desired dearly to bring forth; of all the wealth of flower and herbage, of tree and fruit and grain that the world might bear if it had but peace. (105)

In the final version of the tale, this quality is retained: “Yavanna would walk there in the shadows, grieving because the growth and promise of the Spring of Arda was stayed.” However, Yavanna’s entreaty to Manwë no longer includes this tearful plea on behalf of fruit and flower (*Sil* 47).

Like Natura, Yavanna’s own shape metamorphosizes according to her desire, taken on an almost kaleidoscopic quality as she changes from woman to cosmological arbor vitae:

In the form of a woman she is tall, and robed in green; but at times she takes other shapes. Some there are who have seen her standing like a tree under heaven, crowned with the Sun; and from all its branches there spilled a golden dew upon the barren earth, and it grew green with corn. (*Sil* 27-28)

Associated with the mimesis of nature, Yavanna is the keeper of “countless forms,” her own taking that of a tall woman or a giant tree. Yavanna’s grievances are also shared by her consort Aulë, the smith of the gods, whose life is fixed around the instruments of the forge.

The hammer and anvil associated with Natura’s procreative industry are not, in Tolkien’s works, associated with a deity of sexuality (of which Tolkien has none) but to Yavanna through her husband, Aulë. However, materiality and desire (carnality?) are inextricably linked even in Middle-earth. And it is not insignificant that Aulë is responsible to some degree for instilling within Sauron (*Sil* 32) a desire for material things. Despite what he brings to Yavanna’s cluster of associations, Aulë himself never performs in a way that encourages depravity; yet that role is taken on by some whom he inspired.

And as Natura displayed “precious tears” as a sign of her “inward grief” (*Prose* 1, 6), Tolkien’s goddess Nienna also mourns over Melkor’s depraved behavior and its impact on the physical world: “Mightier than Estë is Nienna, sister of the Fëanturi; she dwells alone. She is acquainted with grief, and

mourns for every wound that Arda has suffered in the marring of Melkor" (*Sil* 28). Unlike Natura, however, Nienna clearly takes on the mantle of mercy without judgment. She inspires pity for others, not moralizing nor excommunications.

Lastly, Galadriel's description and setting are similar to those of Natura.²¹ While the Elf-queen is not divine in the sense the Ainur are, she appears so to the mortals who meet her. In fact, she takes on a fairly sublime quality to the hobbits as when Sam tells Faramir: "You, you could dash yourself to pieces on her, like a ship or a rock; or drown yourself, like a hobbit in a river. But neither rock nor river would be to blame" (*LotR* IV.5.680). Galadriel's associations with nature are numerous and Sam praises her in a manner fitting a nature goddess:

Beautiful she is, sir! Lovely! Sometimes like a great tree in flower, sometimes like a white daffadowndilly, small and slender like. Hard as diamonds, soft as moonlight. Warm as sunlight, cold as frost in the stars. Proud and far-off as a snow-mountain, and as merry as any lass I ever saw with daisies in her hair in springtime. (*LotR* IV.5.680)

Galadriel too is associated with starlight, specifically with that of Eärendil, the Evening/Morning Star. Its radiance harkens back to the pristine and hallowed light of the Silmarils and the Age of Trees. Lady and star are neatly conjoined through the gem-stoned ring Galadriel wears upon her hand. The scene is rich and significant enough to present in full:

She lifted up her white arms, and spread out her hands towards the East in a gesture of rejection and denial. Eärendil, the Evening Star, most beloved of the Elves, shone clear above. [...] Its rays glanced upon the ring about her finger; it glittered like polished gold overlaid with silver light, and a white stone in it twinkled as if the Even-star had come down to rest upon her hand. (*LotR* II.7.365)

Much like Natura's stone-studded diadem, the white stone of the elven ring Nenyá conveys a sense of celestial order and beauty. It represents Galadriel's desire to preserve the beauty that exists, a goal she shares with Alain's goddess.²² Galadriel will later offer Eärendil's light to Frodo as a gift: "In this

²¹ Sandra Miesel writes on Tolkien's desire to revise Galadriel's history and make her pure and without stain in "Life-Giving Ladies: Women in the Writings of J.R.R. Tolkien."

²² According to George D. Economou, nature "could stand for the Platonic intermediary between the intelligible and material worlds; or for the divinely ordained power that presides over the continuity and preservation of whatever lives in the sublunary world" (*Goddess* 3).

phial [...] is caught the light of Eärendil's star, set amid the waters of my fountain. It will shine still brighter when night is about you. May it be a light to you in dark places, when all other lights go out. Remember Galadriel and her Mirror!" (*LotR* II.8.376). Offering Frodo and readers a degree of awareness and an "light" enment, the scene's devotional aspect is striking. Verlyn Flieger calls to our attention the splintering of light in Tolkien's cosmos and the Phial's role as metonymy for the Light unbroken (*Splintered Light* 159). This purity of light links Galadriel and *Natura* through this Platonic imagery.

The setting in which we find Galadriel likewise resonates with *Natura*'s. The Fellowship meets her high atop Caras Galadhon after passing around the hill of the city, which seemed "afire with stars" (*LotR* II.7.353). Tolkien writes "[t]he chamber was filled with a soft light; its walls were green and silver and its roof of gold" (354). Alain's dreamer found *Natura* in white (though shifting) robes and adorned with golden hair and lashes. When the Fellowship first glimpsed Galadriel, she was "clad wholly in white, and the hair of the Lady was of deep gold"; her eyes "were as keen as lances in the starlight, and yet profound, the wells of deep memory" (354).²³ Much like the "silver splendor" which had "clothed the wanton streams" (Meter 3, 23) of *Natura*'s forest, a silver luminosity filled the space all around Galadriel's court:

[They] saw before them amid a wide lawn a fountain shimmering. It was lit up by silver lamps that swung from the boughs of the trees, and it fell into a basin of silver, from which a white stream spilled. Upon the south side of the lawn there stood the mightiest of all the trees; its great smooth bole gleamed like grey silk, and up it towered, until its first branches, far above, opened their huge limbs under shadowy clouds of leaves. (*LotR* II.7.354)

The fountain "shimmered," "the silver lamps" lit up the lawn, the "white stream" poured from the basin, and the bole of the tree "gleamed." While the City of Trees does not carry a hegemonic allegorical weight, it is clearly symbolic, as is the river Nimrodel and the luminescent princess after which it is named.

Galadriel's sacred grove possesses a similar cast to that of her court; a silver luminosity permeates its waters. Drenched by the light of the most holy of stars, the divine Lady is set amongst imagery of branches and greenery:

²³ It has been astutely observed by Leslie Donovan that Galadriel's golden tresses align the Lady of the Wood with the Germanic valkyrie figure. I argue here that *Natura*'s own gold hair (Prose 1, 5) could be added to this consideration.

The evening star had risen and was shining with white fire above the western woods. Down a long flight of steps the Lady went into a deep green hollow, through which ran murmuring the silver stream that issued from the fountain on the hill. At the bottom, upon a low pedestal carved like a branching tree, stood a basin of silver, wide and shallow, and beside it stood a silver ewer.

With water from the stream Galadriel filled the basin to the brim, and breathed on it, and when the water was still again she spoke. 'Here is the Mirror of Galadriel,' she said. (*LotR* II.7.361)

Something of a chapel, this hollow is the scene of Galadriel's principle reveal both to Frodo and to readers as she uncovers her ring and her mirror, the latter being equally inseparable from Galadriel's fountains and streams.

Reflecting the interior of the character looking into it, Galadriel's mirror possesses some "visionary" aspects of the *speculum naturæ*. While Galadriel doesn't counsel Sam or Frodo, those who "look within" her mirror must distinguish reality from possibility. For Sam, the experience feels remarkably dream-like. The longer he stares, the darker his visions of the future become; the experience brings sorrow and conflict. Frodo is given a glimpse into the deep Gondorean past and his not too distant future. For both hobbits, Galadriel's mirror challenges loyalties and commitments, providing self-awareness. Lastly, *The Lord of the Rings* itself serves as a mirror to its readers in a manner similar to Alain's *De Planctu*, making similar gestures to legitimize a virtuous life and courtly/Platonic forms of love.

Natura's physical description, her associations, and her ethical register find resonances in numerous textual instances both medieval and modern. Within his mythographic parameters, Tolkien erects around his divine ladies a *mis-en-scène* similar to Alain's goddess. Each lady mentioned above is a lamp, literally and figuratively, guiding mortal characters and serving as an exemplar.

NATURE'S PRIEST

There are several authors from whom Tolkien could have encountered the medieval Genius figure, namely Bernard Silvestris, Alain de Lille, Jean de Meun and John Gower. According to Jane Chance Nitzsche, de Meun's Genius in the *Roman de la Rose* is an amalgamation of Bernard's and Alain's conceptualizations (131). In one section of his *De Mundi Universitate*, Bernard describes his Genius as "an aerial sprite who sends man warnings of future danger through dreams and omens, a natural power which makes flowers bloom and plants grow at the approach of the figure Natura" (Nitzsche 2). Meanwhile, Alain's Genius is largely occupied with censuring and excommunicating those who live debased lives.

Alain describes his Genius as having signs of age and wisdom: “His head was clothed with locks of hoary whiteness and bore the marks of wintry age” (Prose 9, 90-91). Genius is the figure called upon by Natura to excommunicate the depraved offenders of Natural Law. As such, he must uncover his “sacerdotal vestment” (Prose 9, 94) in order to perform the excommunication:

[L]et him be isolated from the harmonious assembly of the things of Nature, whoever [...] is often shipwrecked in gluttony, [...] or thirsts in the fire of avarice, or ascends the shadowy pinnacle of insolent pride [...]. Let him who is deep in the abyss of gluttony be chastised by shamefaced beggary. [...] Let him who, exalted on the precipice of pride, throws out a spirit of arrogance, fall ingloriously into the valley of dejected humility. (Prose 9, 94-95)

Serving as Natura’s high priest and surrogate, Genius is made responsible for pronouncing the goddess’s edicts. Such a function in *The Lord of the Rings* is given to Gandalf.

Gandalf is already understood to be an angelic figure; Tolkien tells us as much in his letters.²⁴ As the Maia Olórin, he studied under Nienna, and from her learned pity. Often he walked disguised among the Elves, sending “fair visions or the promptings of wisdom” into their hearts (*Sil* 31). As a symbol within *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf signifies hope and encouragement and the steadfast struggle of virtue against evil. He is humble, but potent. His physical description resembles that of Alain’s Genius: “He had a long white beard and bushy eyebrows that stuck out beyond the brim of his hat” (*LotR* I.1.25). His body is often bent with age and responsibility; however, at times he looms “tall and menacing” (34) as was mentioned above. Later, he passes through fire and death to become the direct wielder of divine power, the White Rider, who sends to allies warnings of future dangers.

Throughout the novel, Gandalf does his best to convince Saruman that his recent path is sterile and doomed to fail. Following the victory at Helm’s Deep, Gandalf arrives at Orthanc after having been a prisoner there many months before. He comes to give Saruman a choice and serves, along with Galadriel, as a register and judge of the characters’ ethics. When it becomes clear that Saruman is no longer interested (or possibly capable) of turning away from

²⁴ “I would venture to say that he was an *incarnate* ‘angel’ strictly an ἄγγελος: that is, with the other *Istari*, wizards, ‘those who know’, an emissary from the Lords of the West, sent to Middle-earth, as the great crisis of Sauron loomed on the horizon.” To Robert Murray, S.J., *Letters*, 202.

self-imposed exile and strife against Nature literally (Fangorn Forest) and figuratively (his breeding of the Uruk-hai), Gandalf takes on the role of judge:

You have become a fool, Saruman, and yet pitiable. You might still have turned away from folly and evil, and have been of service. But you choose to stay and gnaw the ends of your old plots. Stay then! But I warn you, you will not easily come out again. Not unless the dark hands of the East stretch out to take you. (*LotR* III.10.583)

Highlighting Saruman's tragic loss, Gandalf's words are prophetic. By the novel's end, Gandalf not only restores a potential for matrimony and fecundity, which had been postponed during the lengthy struggle against Sauron, but he excommunicates Saruman from the community of the virtuous.²⁵

"Saruman!" [Gandalf] cried, and his voice grew in power and authority. "Behold, I am not Gandalf the Grey, whom you betrayed. I am Gandalf the White, who has returned from death. You have no colour now, and I cast you from the order and from the Council." (III.10.583)

Gandalf's word is final, his authority and elevated rank a result of his great sacrifice and the will of Galadriel.²⁶ He reveals himself to be no longer what he once was, but rather a priest and 'messenger' of a divine verdict:

He raised his hand and spoke slowly in a clear cold voice. "Saruman, your staff is broken." There was a crack, and the staff split asunder in Saruman's hand, and the head of it fell down at Gandalf's feet. "Go!" said Gandalf. With a cry Saruman fell back and crawled away. (III.10.583)

From this point on, Saruman is no longer an Istar; his privileges and his powers have been revoked. Yet despite all that Saruman had done to his neighbors in Rohan and in the Shire, Gandalf the White continues to hope for his former friend's reform and salvation until their last meeting. Throughout the narrative, Gandalf never falters; he remains true to his mission, to the Valar, and to Ilúvatar himself. As a "Servant of the Sacred Fire" his role (as Genius figure) is to bring out the best in people, to stoke their courage, and if all else fails, to pronounce judgment.

²⁵ See Vaccaro, "Saruman's Sodomitic Resonances" in *Tolkien and Alterity* for specific correspondences.

²⁶ Gandalf was sent back for a time by Ilúvatar and dressed in his new robes by Galadriel (*LotR* III.5.502-503).

CONCLUSION

It has been the goal of this essay to underscore the noticeable correspondences between Alain de Lille’s *De Planctu Naturæ* and Tolkien’s legendarium, to use the former as a mirror into Tolkien’s inspirations. While the corresponding details are found in other texts, in the aggregate they highlight fascinating similarities. The narrative of an assembly of the virtuous brought together to fight against the manifestations of “unnatural” desire is set against the backdrop of an ordered and harmonious cosmic design. Though sorrowing and eager to return to the spirit-world, the members of this assembly work to uphold a high moral standard.

Tolkien manages to weave with textile craftsmanship a number of disparate discourses together, producing a unique mythopoeic universe. Characters such as Galadriel and Gandalf are very much akin to those virtuous figures (the “lonely lamps” and “morning stars”) of Alain de Lille’s twelfth-century dream-vision, *De Planctu Naturæ*.

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