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Three Rings for the Elven-kings: Trilogizing Tolkien in Print and Film

Abstract

Discusses the division of works meant to be whole into trilogies; primarily Tolkien's lengthy novel, split into two volumes due to printing considerations, and Peter Jackson's film trilogies of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*.

Additional Keywords

The Hobbit; The Lord of the Rings; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Textual history



HREE RINGS FOR THE ELVEN-KINGS: TRILOGIZING TOLKIEN IN PRINT AND FILM

ROBERT C. TALLY, JR.

J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *The Lord of the Rings* IS ALMOST CERTAINLY the most famous trilogy in the fantasy genre, or perhaps even in modern literature itself. But, as some are surprised to learn, *The Lord of the Rings* is not actually a trilogy. It was not intended to be a trilogy, and its author generally disavowed descriptions of the work as a trilogy. Extraliterary considerations such as the cost of paper and sales projections conspired to make Tolkien and his publisher break the single novel into three installments, but, in what might be called a ruse of literary history, Tolkien thereby became a founding father of the fantasy trilogy, which remains a popular and conventional format within the genre. The decision by Peter Jackson to adapt the novel by making *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy seems natural enough, even if he had originally envisioned it as requiring only two films.¹ But Jackson's decision to stretch *The Hobbit*, a much slighter text, across three feature-length movies amounts to a sort of narrative and cinematic overkill. The former, which drew strength from the conceit that it was already an adaptation of a trilogy, involved division, condensation, and carefully considered omissions; the latter, in taking a relatively short children's book and turning it into a film trilogy, required multiplication, extension, and ultimately some additional "fan fiction" wholly unrelated to the narrative that unfolds in the novel itself in order to fill the hours. In the matter of "trilogizing" Tolkien, both the print text and the film adaptations altered the substance of the narrative and created different effects, not necessarily for the better.

As for the novels, *The Lord of the Rings* was, of course, the sequel to *The Hobbit*, but its length, tone, and subject matter set it apart as a massive fantasy epic-novel in its own right. After the publication of its sequel, *The Hobbit* thus appeared as merely a prologue; apart from Bilbo Baggins's discovery of a magic ring that is later revealed to be the One Ring, the events of the earlier work do not bear directly on the plot of *The Lord of the Rings*.² The inordinate length of

¹ Ralph Bakshi's incomplete animated adaptation of the novel [1978] was also to have been two films.

² In fact, Tolkien altered the original text of *The Hobbit*, rewriting the "Riddles in the Dark" chapter to bring Gollum and the Ring more into line with their characteristics as they

The Lord of the Rings caused its publisher to divide it, on the grounds that the price of a single-volume edition seemed too high to be effectively marketable. It was strictly a business decision. As Tolkien insisted in a letter, “The book is *not* of course a ‘trilogy’. That and the titles of the volumes was a fudge thought necessary for publication, owing to length and cost. There is no real division into 3, nor is any one part intelligible alone” (*Letters* 221). Leaving aside the circumstances that led Allen and Unwin to publish Tolkien’s immense tome of a manuscript as *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King*, which appeared separately over several months in 1954 and 1955, there would be no real reason to view *The Lord of the Rings* as a trilogy. What I mean is, there is no diegetic or textual evidence to support this modern epic’s triplicity. And yet, one might argue that the historical trilogizing of this otherwise unified narrative has had real effects. In this essay, I want to discuss these effects in relation to the trilogy form, using Tolkien’s famous “trilogies” as exemplary cases, while showing how the format affects both his novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the film adaptations by Peter Jackson of that novel and of *The Hobbit*. I argue that the use of the trilogy format alters the way in which the stories are understood, and I suggest that the popularity of this form is connected to a desire for clarifying overview and structure in narrative.

WHAT IS A TRILOGY?

Tolkien’s comment about their being “no real division into 3” in this novel invites us to consider the definition of the word, for if the term *trilogy* is misapplied to *The Lord of the Rings*, then a reader might legitimately ask what constitutes a “real” trilogy. Let me propose the following: In literature and cinema, a *trilogy*, properly speaking, would require three related books or films that tell a single overarching story, but with the proviso that each book would also have to be “intelligible on its own,” to use Tolkien’s language.

Thus, for something to be a trilogy, it would certainly not be enough to take a single work and then divide it into three volumes. In the nineteenth century, for example, it was common enough for a single novel to be divided and sold in three volumes. Herman Melville’s *The Whale* was originally published in a three-volume English edition in 1851, before its single-volume publication (as *Moby-Dick, or The Whale*) in the United States a month later, but neither version of that novel would be called a trilogy. Dividing a long film into

appear in *The Lord of the Rings* (see Anderson, *Annotated Hobbit*, 128). Also, one imagines that the existence of the dragon in the north would have affected various strategies in the War of the Rings, as Tolkien makes clear in an unpublished note, “The Quest for Erebor” (see *Unfinished Tales*, 335–351).

three segments with intermissions between them would clearly not make it a trilogy either. A play divided into three acts is not a trilogy, after all.

Alternatively, the mere grouping together of three previously unrelated or otherwise independent works cannot be the basis for a trilogy either. For example, China Miéville has set three of his novels in the fictional realm of Bas-Lag, and although those three are sometimes thus referred to as “the Bas-Lag trilogy,” *Perdido Street Station* (2001), *The Scar* (2002), and *The Iron Council* (2004) each stand alone; they can be read in any order, they do not together tell one single, overarching story, and thus they do not form a trilogy. Roman Polanski’s “Apartment Trilogy,” likewise, which establishes an *a posteriori* connection between the films *Repulsion* (1965), *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), and *The Tenant* (1976), would not be a trilogy under this definition. Understood in this way, neither would the Theban plays of Sophocles that we commonly think of as the Oedipus Cycle, since *Antigone* (c. 441 BCE), *Oedipus the King* (c. 429 BCE), and *Oedipus at Colonus* (c. 401 BCE) not only stand alone as dramatic units, but were not presented as a unified three-play narrative; indeed, the order of writing and performance does not follow the chronology of the story of Oedipus and his progeny.

Finally, to make what might seem to be a more controversial distinction, I would argue that adding sequels to a formerly singular work would not render the whole a trilogy (or, for that matter, tetralogy, etc.), even if the number of individual installments stopped at three, since this original work was not conceived *as* a trilogy, and the subsequent additions were, in a sense, “tacked on.” Hence, *The Godfather* film saga, which eventually became three movies (based on a single bestseller), would not qualify as a trilogy by this definition. Neither would the “original” *Star Wars* movie trilogy, since the narrative of the film *Star Wars* (1977) was complete unto itself, but it was not originally intended to include two sequels; *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983) might not have even been made had the original *Star Wars* been a critical and financial failure. However, the subsequent “prequel” movies, which could scarcely be predicted to fail, were designed to be a single, tripartite story, so one could legitimately say that *The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Attack of the Clones* (2002), and *Revenge of the Sith* (2005) did form a trilogy within the ever-expanding series.³

Trilogies, properly speaking, are therefore perhaps more rare than we may think. A good recent example would be Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games*

³ The franchise now seems to be moving toward a more *James Bond*-style interminability, although it may maintain the now-standard trilogy format, as seems the case with the currently in-progress tripartite series beginning with *The Force Awakens* (2015) and *The Last Jedi* (2017), the first two films of a threesome, even as it produces adjuncts (such as *Rogue One* [2016]) which can be featured as standalone films.

series, in which each novel (*The Hunger Games* [2008], *Catching Fire* [2009], and *Mockingjay* [2010]) maintains a clear level of semi-autonomy while the three together form a single, longer story. Each novel establishes its own atmosphere, introduces new characters and events, and has a distinctive climax; in other words, each has a clear beginning, middle, and end, and the whole includes an overarching, three-volume plot that comprises the smaller plots of these three others. Although authorial intent need not be most definitive consideration, it ought to be noted that Collins did compose the three novels *as a* trilogy; that is, she did not write a single novel that was then divided into three books, nor did she “tack on” two sequels to a single book previously intended to stand alone. The fact that the filmmakers, in adapting this trilogy for the silver screen, chose to tell its story across four films says more about the economics of contemporary mass culture than about the relative artistic merit of trilogies or tetralogies.⁴

If Tolkien’s own novels clearly do not represent trilogies under this definition of the term, then Peter Jackson’s film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* certainly are trilogies, since the finished products were three individually intelligible movies telling a larger story over the course of all three.⁵ But, again, from Tolkien’s own point of view, as print novels, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are each single, standalone works. Tolkien was quite critical of the decision to divide *The Lord of the Rings* into three volumes, and one can only imagine how he would have felt about the adaptations of these novels for the silver screen. Not that Tolkien would have been opposed to movie versions *per se*. In a 1958 letter in which he complains bitterly about the proposed film “treatment” of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien insisted that “[t]he canons of narrative art in any medium cannot be wholly different; and the failure of poor films is often precisely in exaggeration, and in the intrusion of unwarranted

⁴ Another marvelous literary trilogy for children or young adults, Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*, did not meet with similar success at the box office when adapted to the screen, and thus did not become a “film trilogy.” The movie version of *The Golden Compass* was cut in such a way that it could conceivably stand alone, and when it failed to take in enough money, the planned adaptations of *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass* were never produced. A similar thing happened to the Susan Cooper series of novels known as *The Dark is Rising* sequence; after an unsuccessful movie, *The Seeker* (2007), plans to produce film adaptations of the other novels in the series were scrapped. In retrospect and by contrast, the success of eight Harry Potter movies, based on a seven-book series—the seventh book was turned into two films—seems almost miraculous.

⁵ Apparently, Jackson had originally intended each adaptation to comprise two films. In a well-known story, Jackson “pitched” his *Lord of the Rings* to the studios as a two-film project, but received the “green light” to make three. *The Hobbit* was reportedly shot with it in mind to make two movies, but then Jackson and company expanded or recut it in such a way to have three films, thus making the entire Tolkien project a six-film saga divided into two trilogies.

matter owing to not perceiving where the core of the original lies" (*Letters* 270). This sentence provides an inkling of the critique Tolkien may have reserved for Jackson's films.

In Tolkien's estimation, *The Lord of the Rings*, which he had divided into six "books," formed one complete and unified whole; the six parts did not constitute semi-autonomous works, all the less so when grouped two apiece in the published volumes. Once so divided, none of the three volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* sustains itself as a complete narrative with a clear beginning, middle, and end. This caused problems for Tolkien, who recognized that the artificial divisions of the narrative would reveal lack of balance and might cause confusion, introducing potential spoilers and unsatisfactory breaks.

In Jackson's film adaptations, by contrast, distinctive climaxes were generated in order to provide a sense of an ending for *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers*; in the former, it comes as a showdown between Aragorn and a recognizable, but unnamed orc leader, in a scene based loosely on the first chapter of Tolkien's Book III of *The Lord of the Rings* (i.e., in the volume titled *The Two Towers*), and in the latter, the dual battles of Helm's Deep (a memorable scene from the same Book III) and Osgiliath (a reference to an "off-camera" battle in Book V in *The Return of the King*) form joint climaxes. Viewers had to wait until the third film for Shelob's appearance, which might have been considered the climactic scene of Frodo and Sam's narrative thread in Book IV of the print edition. In making his film trilogy, Jackson wisely adapted the whole of *The Lord of the Rings* as a single, unified story into three movies, rather than trying to film each volume separately. Yet even with these "endings," viewers of Jackson's films who were unfamiliar with the story may well have been caught off guard when the first or second movie ended with so much of the larger story still left unresolved. Jackson had the advantage of planning a trilogy from the start, whereas Tolkien was forced to come to terms with a largely *post hoc* trilogizing of his singular narrative. Tolkien's consternation at the decision to publish *The Lord of the Rings* in three distinct volumes is evident in his letters, and he remained convinced that this marketing choice had had detrimental effects on the aesthetic or literary value of the work. Trilogizing this book, in his view, not only divided an otherwise unitary or coherent narrative, but actually altered its substance, even if no words or sentences were changed.

To the extent that authorial or artistic considerations have bearing on the finished product, an author's decision to write a trilogy, that is, to start out with "thirds" in mind, also has its literary, interpretative, and marketing ramifications. Its three-books-constituting-one-narrative would already be quite different from an undivided story. Non-literary factors may also play a role in this generic convention. As Farah Mendlesohn and Edward James have observed in *A Short History of Fantasy*, the "para-literary" advantages of

publishing a series of books include greater visibility of the author's name and series' title, which can be displayed horizontally across volumes, and the literal crowding out of other works on a bookshelf, a sort of colonization of the physical space in a bookstore (144). Seriality in general is another matter, beyond the scope of the present essay. But the idea of a trilogy, with its distinctive reification of beginning, middle, and end, is provocative, as it suggests a desire to clarify and make visible the stages of the Aristotelian plot. When it comes to *trilogizing* a work that was not conceived as a trilogy, whether dividing a long work into three, more manageable parts or adding, extending, or multiplying elements of a short work in order to flesh out a trilogy, the effects are noteworthy.

In the case of Tolkien's novels, as well as that of the recent film adaptations, both sorts of the *faux*-trilogy form are on display. The unitary narrative of the novel, *The Lord of the Rings*, was completed before anyone thought of dividing it into thirds. This decision has had real effects on the way the work is approached and interpreted. Even today, when nearly all of Tolkien's readers recognize *The Lord of the Rings* to be a single, complete work, the very existence of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *The Two Towers*, and *The Return of the King* as individual titles and volumes disrupts the unity of the modern epic. The trilogy form affects, and alters, the work.

In the film adaption of *The Lord of the Rings*, these effects are mitigated, in part because the trilogy format *was* intended at the outset of production, which allowed the filmmakers to reimagine Tolkien's novel, *not* as three novels to be adapted one-by-one, but as a re-unified narrative to be re-imagined in new thirds. Hence, as noted above, the films' invention of climaxes, flashbacks or jump-cuts, as well as the free use of materials which had appeared earlier or later in the narrative as represented in the texts. With the adaptation of *The Hobbit* as a film trilogy, however, Jackson and his team enacted a different sort of trilogizing upon Tolkien's source text. Rather than dividing one narrative into three parts, the filmmakers projected a three-part narrative onto the basic history and geography of Middle-earth which had been previously established on film in the earlier movies, which were also "later" with respect to the narrative's chronology. Jackson's *The Hobbit*, while operating as a "prequel" trilogy à la the *Star Wars* Episodes I-III, is no longer able to function as a prologue to *The Lord of the Rings*, but is awkwardly built upon the latter's already well-known history and geography. In both cases, albeit with different effects, the trilogizing of Tolkien's stories in text and film transformed the narratives.

"THE RHYTHM OR ORDERING OF THE NARRATIVE":

TRILOGIZING *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

With the success of *The Hobbit* in 1937, Stanley Unwin, chairman of Allen and Unwin (Tolkien's publisher), made clear to the author that a sequel

would be desirable. Tolkien was initially reluctant, and in his word “perturbed,” explaining that “I cannot think of anything more to say about *hobbits*. [...] But I have only too much to say, and much already written, about the world into which the hobbit intruded” (*Letters* 24). Along those lines, Tolkien provided Unwin with a stack of papers containing largely unrelated, certainly unpolished, tales and poems that he described as his “private and beloved nonsense” (*Letters* 26). Many years later, these papers were heavily edited and partially revised by Christopher Tolkien to form *The Silmarillion*, posthumously published in 1977, and they form the first five of the now 12-volume *History of Middle-earth*, which also includes early drafts of *The Lord of the Rings* and other notes about the history, geography, languages, and cultures of this realm. As Tolkien aficionados know well, the *Silmarillion* materials comprise stories of the cosmogony of his imaginary worlds and the genesis of Arda itself, descriptions of the Valar (or “Powers” of the earth), and especially the long Saga of the Jewels, the Silmarils, whose fates were entangled with those of the high elves and heroic men of the First Age, many millennia before hobbits first appear in Middle-earth. But in 1937, quite understandably, Unwin wanted a proper sequel to a surprising bestseller, and he assured Tolkien that “a large public” would be “clamouring next year to hear more from you about Hobbits” (qtd. in *Letters* 23). Apparently torn between his own writerly interests and the prospect of financial and other rewards, Tolkien immediately relented, assuring Unwin that, “if it is true that *The Hobbit* has come to stay and more will be wanted, I will start the process of thought, and try to get some idea of a theme drawn from this material for treatment in a similar style and for a similar audience—possibly including actual hobbits” (24). Although a draft of “A Long-Expected Party” was composed by mid-December 1937, Tolkien’s sequel would not be completed for another seventeen years. *The Lord of the Rings* would go on to become one of the bestselling and most well-regarded novels of the century, much to the chagrin of some in the literary establishment and much to the delight of uncounted legions of fans worldwide.

The story behind the story of its construction makes for a fascinating history in its own right, and the journey “from fairies to hobbits” (Fimi) along “the road to Middle-earth” (Shippey) is well worth exploring. However, my main interest here is the way that Tolkien’s sequel to *The Hobbit* became a multivolume endeavor, to Tolkien’s own dismay and to the potential detriment of the narrative itself. The literary work known as *The Lord of the Rings* is one, single and complete text, which then also included appendices that Tolkien deemed necessary for helping readers understand the languages, cultures, and overall history of Middle-earth. Tolkien felt that these appended materials were critically important for comprehending the historical situation of Frodo’s adventure, Aragorn’s restoration, and the War of the Rings. In fact, Tolkien only

grudgingly relented in his insistence that *The Silmarillion* be published first, or at least alongside, *The Lord of the Rings*, for he considered “the Saga of the Three Jewels and the Rings of Power” to be one story, and he feared that *The Lord of the Rings* on its own, “as indivisible and unified as I could make it,” would not make sense without the long backstory and “deep” history provided in the former epic collection of tales (*Letters* 138). The Unwins—by this time, the young Rayner Unwin, who as a eleven-year-old boy had famously “reviewed” the manuscript of *The Hobbit* for the publisher, had joined his father in the business—demurred, not surprisingly. With the Unwins and basic economics united against him, Tolkien acceded to letting *The Silmarillion* be: “Watching paper-shortages and costs mounting against me. But I have rather modified my views. Better something than nothing! Although to me all are one, and the ‘L of the Rings’ would be better by far (and eased) as part of the whole, I would gladly consider publication of any part of this stuff” (*Letters* 163).

The Lord of the Rings remains one immense, unified work, but Tolkien insisted that it was something of an epilogue to an even grander, earlier mythic history, which shines through in various places in the text. Indeed, he allows Sam, of all characters, to make the most striking connection between the epic narratives. In comforting Frodo, Sam recalls the tale of Beren and Luthien, before realizing that their own adventures are tied to those of the epic heroes of the past. As Sam puts it,

Beren now, he never thought he was going to get that Silmaril from the Iron Crown in Thangorodrim, and yet he did, and that was a worse place and a blacker danger than ours. But that’s a long tale, of course, and goes on past the happiness and into grief and beyond it—and the Silmaril went on and came to Eärendil. And why, sir, I never thought of that before! We’ve got—you’ve got some the light of it in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we’re in the same tale still! It’s going on. Don’t the great tales never end? (*LotR* IV.8.712)

Don’t the great tales never end? Faced with printing a 500,000-word sequel to a relatively brief, popular children’s book—a sequel which, in the author’s own view, presented only about half of what it should—Stanley and Rayner Unwin may have wondered the same!

Having conceded defeat on *The Silmarillion* matter, Tolkien was not particularly pleased with the prospect of dividing *The Lord of the Rings* into multiple volumes. First of all, Tolkien had organized his one narrative into six books, and Allen and Unwin’s decision to publish *The Lord of the Rings* in three volumes meant that each volume would contain two books apiece. Yet, as Tolkien noted, the parts themselves are not set up to work as pairs: “the ‘books’, though they must be grouped in pairs, are not really paired; and the middle pair

(III/IV) are not really related" (*Letters* 167). Tolkien preferred giving distinct titles to each of the six books—offering "Vol. I *The Ring Sets out* and *The Ring Goes South*; Vol. II *The Treason of Isengard*, and *The Ring goes East*; Vol. III *The War of the Ring*, and *The End of the Third Age*" (167)—rather than naming the volumes themselves, but if the volumes must be named, his first suggestion was "I *The Shadow Grows*[,] II *The Ring in the Shadow*[, and] III *The War of the Ring*" (167). Tolkien was generally unhappy with all the volume-title suggestions, since none really captured the substance of the material contained within them, an understandable disjunction considering that the story was never written with a trilogy in mind. As Tolkien put it in an August 8, 1953, letter to Rayner Unwin,

I am not wedded to any of the suggested sub-titles; and wish they could be avoided. For it is really impossible to devise ones that correspond to the contents; since the division into two "books" per volume is purely a matter of convenience with regard to length, and has no relation to the rhythm or ordering of the narrative. . . . (*Letters* 170)

Tolkien ultimately conceded that "The Fellowship of the Ring will do," since it "fits well with the fact that the last chapter of the Volume is The Breaking of the Fellowship" (170). He was less happy with "The Two Towers," which did and continues to cause confusion among readers, given that there are at least four prominent towers—Orthanc, Barad-dûr, Minas Tirith, and Minas Morgul (Tolkien also mentions Cirith Ungol)—in the narrative. (In a later letter, Tolkien disclosed that *the* two towers are Isengard's Orthanc and the Tower of Cirith Ungol [173], but later advised that the cover art for *The Two Towers* ought to depict Orthanc and Minas Morgul [see *Letters* 444].) Rayner Unwin apparently preferred the "Return of the King" as a title for the third volume, although Tolkien thought that it, unlike his preference ("The War of the Ring"), gave away a key plot point.

All in all, Tolkien expressed frustration with the whole idea of a trilogy, which not only divided his unified narrative into unnatural fragments, with volume titles necessarily turning individual "books" into confusing "pairs" and reifying the thirds over and against the whole, but also damaged the "rhythm or ordering" of the literary work of art. In other words, the quite reasonable business decision to publish a very long novel in three volumes had, in Tolkien's view, real and deleterious effects on the novel. For one thing, as he complained to Unwin, "there is too much 'hobbitry' in Vol. I" (*Letters* 184). On the whole, by calling *The Lord of the Rings* a "trilogy" when it is clearly not intended to be one, the reader understandably finds a certain "shapelessness," as none of the volumes can really stand completely alone (184). In *The Two Towers*, especially, this can be misleading, since the reader is naturally invited to see the adventures of Merry and Pippen (Book III) as paralleling those of Frodo and Sam (Book IV),

somehow together forming a more-or-less whole story unto itself, whereas Tolkien intended the two narrative threads to remain separate and distinct. Only rarely, in *The Return of the King*, does the narrator expressly make connections between them, as when we see Frodo and Sam pondering their next move while “Théoden lay dying on the Pelennor Fields” (*LotR* VI.2.919). Tolkien’s elaborate narrative, with its multiple storylines and odd contemporaneities, is thus altered by becoming a trilogy.

Above all, Tolkien was dismayed by the way in which the trilogy format by itself dramatically modified the shape, the rhythm, and ordering of the narrative, even if the actual words themselves were unchanged. That is, the trilogizing of *The Lord of the Rings* had real-world and literary consequences beyond simple division, even for readers who were going to read the entire work. (Obviously, those who quit after only reading *The Fellowship of the Ring*, for instance, would have a vastly different and likely unsatisfying experience.) Although Tolkien scholarship and single-volume editions today may be able to approach Tolkien’s magnum opus as a single, coherent work, the original decision to divide the narrative into thirds has had lasting effects on both the text and its readers, not to mention films and moviegoers. This is a case of “thirthing-as-othering,” in which the decision to divide the unitary narrative into three parts changes the nature of the narrative.

“TOO MUCH HOBBITRY”: *THE HOBBIT* AS A FILM TRILOGY

If this is so for Tolkien’s literary masterpiece, how much more does the trilogy format affect the film adaptations? Peter Jackson’s three-film *Lord of the Rings* adaptation (2001, 2002, 2003), which more-or-less tried to replicate the narrative divisions of the three volumes as they appeared in print, *was* conceived as a trilogy. (Actually, doubting he could get funding for three pictures, Jackson had originally pitched it as a two-film project; on the strength of his presentation, plus Tolkien’s popularity, the producers approved three films for the “three books.”) Any film adaptation will require compromises, as material will be omitted, dramatically altered, or even supplied afresh in order to satisfy the perceived requirements of a blockbuster film. Thus, for example, Tom Bombadil was omitted entirely (a decision, it seems, even Tolkien may have favored, since he admitted that “Bombadil is not an important person—to the narrative” [*Letters* 178]), Arwen’s role was enhanced (which had a dual purpose of creating an additional female hero and of providing depth to Aragorn’s love story, not to mention allowing viewers to admire actress Liv Tyler for a few additional scenes), elves of Lothlórien rather than Aragorn’s fellow human rangers join the fight at Helm’s Deep (the more elves, the better!), and so forth. As noted above, the film trilogy needed to be organized in such a way as to make each movie stand, for the most part, on its own. Hence, for example, climaxes

were built in where they did not exist, or were quite different, in the book: a showdown between Aragorn and a particularly notable but unnamed orc in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, plus a battle of Osgiliath added to the one at Helm's Deep in *The Two Towers*; arguably, the climactic events of *The Return of the King* functioned as the climax of the entire trilogy as well, with the Last Battle, the destruction of the Ring, and the "return" of the King rounding out both that discrete film and the series as a whole. Each film is one film, of course, but it might be worth mentioning that the Academy voters seemed to prefer imagining the trilogy as one complete work: although each film was nominated for Best Picture, only the third—in my personal view, hardly the best of the three—won the Oscar, from which I surmise that the voters wanted to reward the magnificent accomplishment of the trilogy as a whole.

In adapting Tolkien's books to film, Jackson and his team were able to create a balance and rhythm that Tolkien's divided narrative lacked. Where Tolkien complained that Volume I contained "too much 'hobbitry,'" for instance, Jackson could jump-cut to scenes of Gandalf speaking with Saruman, provide flashbacks to Elrond arguing with Isildur, and generally flesh out the geography and history of the world. (That need for "fleshing out" was precisely why Tolkien was eager to publish *The Silmarillion*, either before or alongside *The Lord of the Rings*, and it is why he felt the Appendices to be so crucial.) Artistically, Jackson was able to do this because his funding for three movies was basically guaranteed, and he was able to film scenes from all three movies over the course of the trilogy's production. The success of Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* undoubtedly contributed to the desire for, and funding of, a film adaptation of its "prequel," *The Hobbit*.

Speaking of too much "hobbitry," one cannot help but find grim irony in the decision by the filmmakers to turn *The Hobbit* into a movie trilogy. As noted, Jackson had originally doubted his chances of getting funding to make three *Lord of the Rings* films, and he first pitched it as a two-film project; the producers themselves, as the story goes, approved a three-movie deal that would conform to the "three parts" of Tolkien's novel. *The Hobbit*, by contrast, was supposed to be a two-film project, arguably already too much for such a short book, one that is less than half the length of *The Fellowship of the Ring* volume alone. Only after principal filming was complete did Jackson's team and the studio decide to make what had been shot as two films into a trilogy. Cynics—or, indeed, realists—can chalk this up to a straightforward cash grab, as it seems that revising and re-cutting the filmed materials into three movies is certainly an easy way to earn an extra \$300 million (or, actually, about a billion dollars worldwide). But apart from the additional revenue, one can detect in this aspect of *The Hobbit* franchise a desire to conform to the generic convention of the trilogy-form. Somehow, it "makes sense," from the perspective of

filmmakers and moviegoers alike, to have this fantasy adventure organized into a three-part whole, as a complement to the prior (or later) *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

The production of *The Hobbit* franchise includes an additional determining factor, which is that its narrative *requires* it to be a “prequel” to *The Lord of the Rings*.⁶ If Tolkien struggled to make his earlier hobbit adventure fit with the much deeper, broader, and richer geopolitical and historical world of *The Lord of the Rings*, to such an extent that he had to revise *The Hobbit* itself (most notoriously, altering the “Riddles in the Dark” chapter to create a Gollum and Ring more like the ones we encounter in the later work), then the filmmakers had a different challenge.⁷ How to fit the narrow, relatively simple story of Bilbo Baggins into the already created, vast and beautiful New Zealand landscapes and characters so beloved by viewers of the earlier film trilogy? It becomes clear that, as with George Lucas’s “prequel” trilogy in the *Star Wars* saga, Jackson has attempted to link these works together in a single hexalogy, a six-film extravaganza just crying out for DVD commentary and special Blu-ray editions. However, hexalogy is not quite accurate, since in these examples the six-part series comprises what are actually two trilogies that have been hastily spliced together after the fact. Surely Lucas or Jackson (or Tolkien, of course) would have plotted and shot things rather differently had they intended to create a unified work in six parts.

In *The Hobbit* films themselves, the interlinking of the *earlier* films that depict persons and events much *later* in time is tricky, and it led to some rather awkward moments. The framing device, also used in *The Lord of the Rings*, enables *The Hobbit* to appear to be told in retrospect, as Bilbo passes his old story down to Frodo, played again by a still spritely and enthusiastic Elijah Wood, not yet burdened with the psychological trauma of his own, later adventures. The incorporation of characters from the earlier movies who do not appear in Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (e.g., Saruman, Galadriel, and above all Legolas) provides some small sense of continuity between the *dramatis personae* of the two trilogies, although it invites unwanted questions. (For instance, if Legolas played an

⁶ On this point in relation to the many changes made in Jackson’s adaptation of *The Hobbit* to film, see Janet Brenan Croft, “Barrel-Rides and She-Elves: Audience and Anticipation in Peter Jackson’s *Hobbit* Trilogy.”

⁷ On the alterations later made by Tolkien to the original 1937 edition of *The Hobbit*, see Douglas A. Anderson, *The Annotated Hobbit* and John D. Rateliff, *The History of the Hobbit*, each of which provides details of even minor changes made by the author in both the revised 1951 edition and the 1966 emendations, part of his reassertion of U.S. copyright. As Rateliff points out, Tolkien around 1960 had considered rewriting *The Hobbit* entirely so as to match the style and tone of *The Lord of the Rings*, but he “wisely abandoned the new draft” (xxvi).

integral role in aiding the dwarves of Erebor, why is he suddenly such a stranger to all things dwarfish in his burgeoning friendship with Gimli?) Drawing on materials outside of the published corpus, the films recreate events that must have taken place, but which are not depicted in *The Hobbit*, such as the attack by Gandalf and the White Council on the Necromancer at Dol Guldur, which in turn helps to establish another connection to the plot of *The Lord of the Rings*. The last film of *The Hobbit* trilogy even alludes to Aragorn, who would have been about 10 years old at the time, as Thranduil (in the book version, simply referred to as Elvenking) advises his son Legolas to go looking for this young ranger in the wilderness. A nice touch, but it does make one wonder about the more than 60-year gap between these adventures.⁸ Indeed, the long period between the events of *The Hobbit* and those of *The Lord of the Rings*—“A Long-Expected Party” takes place 60 years after Bilbo’s return from Erebor, and Frodo and Sam do not leave the Shire until another seventeen years have passed—introduces a serious problem for the filmmakers, whose two trilogies do not easily mesh into one long, six-part narrative.

Perhaps the most significant, and unfortunate, result of the filmmakers’ decision to make *The Hobbit* into a prequel trilogy is the pacing of each movie, which features the slow slog through far too little expository material, but which then gets papered over by ridiculously out of place action sequences. The effect is to make nearly every single moment both less meaningful and more intense, literally turning the films into a series of roller-coaster rides, as in the Great Goblin’s city in the Misty Mountains in *An Unexpected Journey*, the theme-park-inspired barrel rides of *The Desolation of Smaug*, and the well-nigh interminable fighting sequences of *The Battle of the Five Armies*. In some respects, the adaptation project for *The Hobbit* is the opposite of that of *The Lord of the Rings*; where the latter required scrupulous cutting, condensation, and combination, the former indulged in the most ridiculous sorts of extension, addition, and outright invention.⁹ In fact, the first movie (*An Unexpected Journey*) was arguably too slavish in its adherence to the source materials, depicting nearly every scene and drawing them out to wearisome lengths, but by the mid-point of the second film (*The Desolation of Smaug*) it became clear that these movies were less an adaptation of *The Hobbit* than a sort of fan-fiction inspired by that novel.

⁸ During the filming of *The Hobbit*, tantalizing rumors spread of a “bridge film” that might depict the adventures of a younger Aragorn, alluded to in Tolkien’s work, but never formally depicted in any detail.

⁹ But see Croft, “Mithril Coats and Tin Ears,” on the effects of the many changes made by Jackson’s film to the story of *The Lord of the Rings*; see also Tally, “The Geopolitical Aesthetic of Middle-earth.”

In Tolkien's original book, *The Hobbit* is rather episodic, with an almost self-contained adventure in each chapter. As such, it may have been best adapted as a television mini-series, rather than as a film. By making it into one film, as in the Rankin/Bass cartoon version (1977), which did indeed first appear on television, the story could remain centered on the title character, Bilbo. In these films, however, Bilbo's own development as a "burglar" is largely limited to the first movie, whereas the blood-feud between Thorin and Azog (a character who in Tolkien's writings is dead before the events of *The Hobbit* book take place), along with action sequences and special effects, tend to dominate the subsequent installments. Three movies require three distinctive climaxes, again, so the already unbalanced story filled with numerous adventures becomes burdened with the need for a fireworks show's grand finale, which is almost made literal in *An Unexpected Journey*, with an escape from orcs and burning trees, and in *The Desolation of Smaug*, with a bizarre smelting project aimed at gilding an already golden dragon.¹⁰ The result is a hugely speculative extravaganza in which the original source materials become less and less relevant. In trilogizing the narrative of a book rather ill-suited for the format, the filmmakers projected a completely different story, at once far too extensive in exposition and far too flimsy in content. Like the derivative security whose value is backed up by worthless assets, the film trilogy finds itself ever more distant from the substance that was, presumably, its *raison d'être* in the first place.

CONCLUSION

In taking a unified work of art and turning it into a trilogy, whether by division (as in *The Lord of the Rings* novel) or by multiplication (as in *The Hobbit* films), the creators of the work—which now must be seen to include not only the author or director, but the publisher, producers, and indeed all those who are part of the conditions for the possibility of the finished product—necessarily alter it. However, one might also argue that the trilogy format can serve a valuable role in helping organize our various plots. As I have suggested, the trilogy provides a distinctive beginning, middle, and end that also highlights the incipience, mediality, and finitude of the story. Reading a book or watching a movie, knowing full well that Part 2 (the middle of the story) and Part 3 (featuring the end of the story) are still to come, dramatically changes the experience, creating an anticipatory desire as well as the comforts of closure in

¹⁰ Among the dragon's many epithets is "Smaug the Golden," as is mentioned in Appendix A of *The Lord of the Rings* (see *LotR* App.A.1072).

the overall apprehension of the work.¹¹ The delight of the vast epic form merges with the satisfaction of knowing that, most likely, all questions will be answered, all storylines completed, by the third installment's close.

The apparent predominance of the trilogy format in fantasy, both in print and on screen, is perhaps a sign of the degree to which an artificially ordered world, with distinctive boundaries and limits, demarcating a clear beginning, middle, and end, is all the more desirable in an era typified by its fluid borders or indistinct identities. Fantasy is particularly well equipped to project alternative worlds, and its narrative form may embrace figurative orders such as triads, triangles, and trinities. Such triangulations might aid readers and viewers in orientating themselves in an often-bewildering world system. But in aiding readers as they attempt to make sense of the world, such artifices may have value, just as they may create the conditions for the possibility of further error or confusion. Maps can themselves be disorienting at times, after all. As Albert Toscano and Jeff Kinkle have pointed out, "among the first products of a genuine striving for orientation is disorientation, as proximal coordinates come to be troubled by wider, and at times overwhelming vistas" (25). As with Galadriel's mirror, such conventions may not be the best guides for deeds.

In Tolkien, three rings were borne by elven kings, but there was still the One to rule them all. The trilogizing of his novel *The Lord of the Rings* presented narrative, conceptual, and organizational difficulties that troubled him, as he thought that his unified work of art suffered from these artificial divisions. As a film trilogy, Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* mostly worked well, first by maintaining each film's relative autonomy, then by making sure that the overarching plot remained visible throughout. However, one might argue that Jackson's trilogized adaptation of *The Hobbit* went beyond division and differentiation, extravagantly rushing toward rank speculation, gaudy spectacle, and dubious juxtapositions. The trilogy form complicates the storytelling, even as it also provides a sort of generic map for the reader or viewer. Tolkien's great novels, along with their twenty-first-century film adaptations, evoke the perils and the promise of the trilogy format.

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¹¹ By contrast, think of the never-ending story of the soap opera or other series without a known end-point.

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