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## On the Shoulders of Humphrey Carpenter: Reconsidering Biographical Representation and Scholarly Perception of Edith Tolkien

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### On the Shoulders of Humphrey Carpenter: Reconsidering Biographical Representation and Scholarly Perception of Edith Tolkien

#### Abstract

In his obituary for Carpenter, Douglas A. Anderson reviews Carpenter's "long and complex" involvement with the subject of his 1977 authorized biography, indicating that "with [Carpenter's] passing it is time to begin to assess his changing perspectives on Tolkien and on his own Tolkien-related work." Since its publication, Carpenter's biography of Tolkien, which Anderson calls "an excellent book. . . unusually accurate more than a quarter of a century after it was written, despite many advances in Tolkien scholarship" remains a largely unquestioned authority, its influence so entrenched as to be virtually invisible. As a result, scholarship on Tolkien, from biography to criticism, remains overwhelmingly influenced by Carpenter's perspectives and methods, which, by Carpenter's admission, are not always strictly fact-based.

This influence is particularly pronounced in discussions of Tolkien and gender, which rely heavily on Carpenter's depiction of Tolkien's relationships with his mother, and with his wife Edith. In spite of scholarly reluctance to engage in the "biographical criticism" that Tolkien opposed, phrasing from Carpenter's biography—or very close paraphrase—functions as evidence of dysfunction or sentimentalism, repeated as fact, sometimes without citation. An example is Carpenter's assertion that "after [his mother] died, his religion took the place in his affections that she previously occupied." Carpenter's interpretations of Tolkien and Edith's relationship dynamic are often used to pass judgement on the author without considering that Carpenter, as the member of a younger generation, was already influenced by the drastic changes in relationships and gender roles of the 1960s and 70s.

This paper will review Carpenter's vexed relationship with the subject of his biography, offer evidence of the pervasive and often hidden scholarly use of the biography, and review Carpenter's own negative and misleading depiction of Edith before offering some alternate interpretations of Edith's character and situation before and during her marriage.

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## Additional Keywords

Biography



ON THE SHOULDERS OF  
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REPRESENTATION AND SCHOLARLY  
PERCEPTION OF EDITH TOLKIEN

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IN THE NINTH AND SEVENTH DECADES SINCE THE PUBLICATION of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, respectively, twenty-first century Tolkien studies continue to be shaped by scholarship that causes us to review, rethink, and reconsider what we know about these two works, *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien's legendarium, his languages and creative process, and in some cases, the author himself. Recently, Tolkien scholarship has been consolidated in multi-volume collections like Stuart Lee's contribution to Routledge's Critical Assessments of Major Authors series (2017), in important benchmark volumes like Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie Donovan's *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Life and Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (2015), and in bibliographies such as Croft's "Bibliographic Resources for Literature Searches on J.R.R. Tolkien" (2016) in the *Journal of Tolkien Research* and the current and up-to-date "Mythlore Index Plus" compiled by Croft and Edith Crowe. Meanwhile, Christopher Tolkien has continued to make available newly edited versions of key works in the history of Middle-earth and of his father's creative development, most recently *Beren and Lúthien* (2017) and *The Fall of Gondolin* (2018). With the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversaries of *Mythlore* and Mythcon encouraging further reflection, it is particularly appropriate to acknowledge sources and influences, and to seek to understand how they have shaped contemporary approaches to Tolkien's works. One often consulted but seldom questioned source in Tolkien studies is the authorized biography of J.R.R. Tolkien, written by Humphrey Carpenter with the endorsement of the Tolkien family and published by Allen and Unwin in 1977. The current state of scholarship is that primary biographical sources are still very difficult to access, to verify, and to analyze, making Carpenter's *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* an invaluable resource. What deserves attention is how the label "authorized" and the lack of access to sources that might corroborate or contradict Carpenter has impacted scholarship, positioning Carpenter as a giant, his influence so pervasive as to be almost invisible. Nowhere is this so

apparent as in the case of Edith Tolkien, about whom, objectively, very little is known, but whose relationship with her husband is invoked in analyses of women in Tolkien's works, in discussions of his religious beliefs, in evaluations of his friendships, and in general accounts of his character. Given the tendency of scholars and critics to rely on Carpenter's account, treating as fact his assumptions, his judgments, and his interpretations of the material that he synthesized during the relatively short process of researching and writing the biography,<sup>1</sup> the positioning of Edith Tolkien in Tolkien scholarship as a controversial figure—an elf-maid, a shy, mousy figure, a non-intellectual, an aspiring pianist with thwarted ambitions, a victim of spousal neglect, an invalid, a shrewish, nagging wife—deserves consideration. Without her own words, and with only a portrait that is highly mediated by Humphrey Carpenter, there has been little attempt to understand Edith Tolkien as an individual and a woman—the woman beloved by J.R.R. Tolkien—and the place she occupies in Tolkien's life, including her importance to his work. Famously, Tolkien wrote to Christopher Tolkien after her death, "she was (and knew she was) my Lúthien," an oft-quoted but largely inaccessible sentiment (*Letters* #340, 420). Nevertheless, by way of Carpenter's representation, Edith Tolkien is often used as a representative figure in studies of gender in Tolkien's works and the lives and works of Tolkien and the Inklings more generally.

Carpenter's biography has inspired, from some of the earliest reviews, the kind of morbid speculation that led its subject to detest biography and biographical criticism.<sup>2</sup> While this may be in part because of the mode of criticism that was dominant in the 1970s, it also derives from how Carpenter represents his subject, often supplying hints and interpretations where facts are unavailable, as when he alludes to the Tolkien's marital conflict over religion. For example, in an early review of Carpenter's biography, John Carey writes that Tolkien "retained something of Father Francis's view of sex. Even marital relations had to be atoned for by frequent confession—a requirement that Mrs. Tolkien had found distasteful, and hotly contested" (qtd. in Pearce 46). Carey then uses his interpretation—based on his extrapolation from Carpenter—of Tolkien as sexually repressed to characterize the women in Tolkien's works as

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<sup>1</sup> In his obituary for Carpenter in *Tolkien Studies* (2005), Douglas A. Anderson reports that Carpenter began work on the biography in January 1975 and had completed the first draft by February 1976 (219). He reportedly wrote *The Inklings* in three weeks (220).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Pearce's discussion of Tolkien's objections to biographical criticism, "rooted in a distrust of Freudian speculation and subjectivism," which also includes an excerpt from C.S. Lewis's "On Criticism" as evidence and insight into the friends' response to Freudian literary criticism as amateurish and imprecise, and a form of hostile criticism against a deceased author the critic wishes to debunk, and of Pearce's defensive stance when describing his own methods (11).

“perfectly sexless” (qtd in Pearce 47–48). The assertion that Tolkien believed that intercourse within marriage required confession, countered by Pearce and by critic Brian Rosebury, derives from the scant and undocumented information provided by Carpenter—information so vague and yet suggestive as to invite speculation (Pearce 46). Pearce also offers a rare critique of Carpenter in reference to one of the most often-repeated “truths” about Tolkien, that “after [his mother] died his religion took the place in his affections that she had previously occupied,” identifying in Carpenter’s statement “the sort of Freudian analysis that Tolkien and Lewis so despised” (Pearce 21). Elsewhere, however, Pearce relies on extensive summary and paraphrase of Carpenter’s perspectives and echoes the language of the biography, as when he notes that Edith “slipped into a lukewarm acceptance of her adopted creed which contrasted starkly with the passion and depth of Tolkien’s faith” (36), a point he elaborates in a later chapter without explicit reference to Carpenter, but in accord with Carpenter’s judgment. Even John Garth, whose biographical study *Tolkien and the Great War* diverges from Carpenter’s work significantly, relies on Carpenter’s biography for observations about Tolkien’s courtship, marriage, and even his moods, as when he recounts that “Tolkien immediately contacted Edith Bratt, who had made a new life in Cheltenham. But three years apart had withered her hopes and she was engaged to someone else” (29) or that “Tolkien had been prone to fits of profound melancholy, even despair, ever since the death of his mother, though he kept them to himself” (48). Drawing on additional material, and certainly owing a significant debt to *The Tolkien Family Album*, the 2014 biography *Tolkien* by Raymond Edwards enters into dialogue with Carpenter, relying on audience knowledge of Carpenter without necessarily citing the earlier biographer. Following conventions that have varied by discipline and over decades of Tolkien scholarship, or perhaps—given the pervasive nature of Carpenter’s reports on Tolkien’s life—evoking the old citation guideline for “common knowledge” (that which appears in many sources), direct citations of Carpenter’s biography are not as frequent as might be expected. Garth, for example, cites this reference to Tolkien’s melancholy but not the first reference, to Edith’s “withered hopes,” though it seems to derive from Carpenter’s paraphrase of an unpublished letter from Edith to Tolkien.<sup>3</sup> Edwards,—unlike Garth, who provides some corrective information in his footnotes<sup>4</sup>—rarely

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<sup>3</sup> Carpenter reports that Edith “had only become engaged to George because he had been kind to her, and she felt ‘on the shelf,’ and there was no other young man that she knew, and she had given up believing that Ronald would want to see her again after the three years had passed. ‘I began to doubt you, Ronald,’ she told him in her letter, ‘and to think you would cease to care for me’” (*Biography* 69).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Garth corrects Carpenter’s interpretation of sentiments Tolkien expressed to Edith about high-ranking officers in World War I, writing in the note to p. 94 of *Tolkien*

identifies Carpenter's inaccuracies and often echoes Carpenter's words and meaning without direct citation; however in some contexts, as when representing Tolkien's purported belief that his mother was a martyr,<sup>5</sup> Edwards relies on readers' knowledge of Carpenter while seeking to shift subtly the overall impression that Carpenter's words convey—here, that Tolkien's Catholicism was irrational and superstitious. Identifying Carpenter's direct influence in sources that only acknowledge—without direct citation—a great debt to the biography demonstrates that the majority of biographical information on Tolkien, regardless of where it is reported, can ultimately be traced back to Carpenter.

One work that makes conspicuous use of Carpenter to establish Edith as a figure representative of Tolkien's relationship with women is *Women Among the Inklings* (2001) by Candice Fredrick and Sam McBride, a study that is particularly useful to identifying Carpenter's continued influence. In the years since its publication, *Women Among the Inklings* has proven to be influential, with Google Scholar listing at least 64 citations including Jane Chance's *Tolkien the Medievalist* (2003) and articles on gender in Tolkien's works including Nancy Enright's "Tolkien's Females and the Defining of Power" (2008). In a review in *Mythprint*, David Bratman calls *Women Among the Inklings* "an honest and insightful book that should cause all Inklings readers to think hard about the authors." However, Bratman does identify treatment of Tolkien's biography as a weakness of the study and criticizes Fredrick and McBride's work for its methods, specifically that "convinced that Christian fans of the Inklings tend unjustly to reject feminist thought, and that sympathetic critics tend to be apologetic or even hagiographical, the authors go out of their way to find problems with portrayals of women in the Inklings' work." Their methodology is somewhat complicated by the general resistance to biographical criticism in Inklings scholarship, as described in detail by Pearce. Comparing female characters in works by Tolkien and Charles Williams, Fredrick and McBride argue that their fictional women "are not based on Tolkien's or William's experience with wives, mothers, and female acquaintances" (107-108), but nevertheless use biography to establish the place of women in the Inklings' lives, thought, and fiction, often contrasting the authors' opinions on and treatment of *actual* women with their representation of fictional women as mythic and symbolic. Their volume is useful, here, as an example of Carpenter's biography being used to support a consciously provocative thesis by way of a more

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and the Great War that "[c]ontrary to Carpenter's assertion, this does not mean JRRT disliked the majority of other officers, the subalterns with whom he spent most of his time." Similarly, Garth's note to p. 232 indicates "that where Humphrey Carpenter's account of 1917 does not seem to match JRRT's service record, I have followed the latter."

<sup>5</sup> See Edwards p. 37.

extreme—but not wholly inaccurate—adoption and paraphrase of Carpenter’s judgments than in more conservative or traditional works of Tolkien criticism.

Carpenter’s pervasive influence is hardly surprising. As the authorized biography, Humphrey Carpenter’s *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* justly occupies a privileged position in Tolkien scholarship. In his 1992 preface to *J.R.R. Tolkien: Architect of Middle-Earth*, published the year before Carpenter’s, Daniel Grotta describes how “Carpenter had a seemingly unassailable advantage: the family’s blessing and full cooperation, complete access to all Tolkien’s private papers and letters [...], and entrée to all of Tolkien’s friends and associates.” While, by contrast, Grotta writes “I did most of my research in libraries and newspaper morgues, and interviewed the relatively few of Tolkien’s friends and associates who bridled at the kind of intellectual censorship that the Tolkien family tried to impose” (8).

Possibly as a result of these difficulties, Grotta’s biography contains inaccuracies that have been easy to identify as simple factual mistakes.<sup>6</sup> Grotta has in many ways deliberately positioned himself in opposition to the Tolkien Estate, but his observation about Carpenter’s advantage is accurate, if perhaps incomplete. Carpenter reflected on the drawbacks of writing an “authorized” biography:

In a sense it’s marvelous: you have a free run of the papers, and everyone feels they ought to help you. On the other hand, you incur obligations [...]. You really have to toe the party line. Not that there’s anything in the Tolkien book which was censored by the family, but I think I could have been more detached, and perhaps more objective, if I hadn’t felt under some obligation to his family. (qtd. in Anderson 220)

In a later conversation, Carpenter explains how he was unable to reconcile his initial view of Tolkien as a “rather comic Oxford academic” with the facts of his life, most notably his “strange childhood” and upbringing by a Roman Catholic priest. Because of Carpenter’s inability to reconcile his initial impulse toward slapstick with the discovery of what Carpenter deemed Tolkien’s “uptight Pauline moral values,” Carpenter describes the first draft of the biography as “a long and sprawling thing” that was “deemed unacceptable by the Tolkien family”: “I went away and rewrote it, and it was then deemed acceptable. What I’d actually done was castrated the book, cut out everything which was likely to be contentious. I’ve therefore always been displeased with it ever since” (qtd. in Anderson 219-220). This has not, however, called into question the accuracy of the biography, which Douglas Anderson praises as “an excellent book that has stood well the test of time, remaining both readable and unusually accurate

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example Scull and Hammond’s *Companion and Guide* vol. 2, pp. 110-111.



more than a quarter of a century after it was written" (Anderson 220). Ultimately, Carpenter's biography of Tolkien is the work of an author influenced by his own participation in the Oxford milieu,<sup>7</sup> his own historical context, and his feelings toward his subjects (and their religious beliefs), while also being profoundly shaped by his methodologies.

That Carpenter's methodology infuses his biography of Tolkien with much that is not strictly factual or verifiable is clear from two accounts that Carpenter gave of his methods—one from a 1998 interview and one from his "Sources and Acknowledgements" in *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*. Explaining what Anderson terms an "imaginative" approach to biography, Carpenter describes himself in the interview as "one of those biographers (and there are many of them) who, I think, are very close to novelists in their approach to the material":

I try not to let my imagination as such run riot, but I do write imaginatively. I do that consciously, and I have sometimes gone away from the area of strict fact when it seemed to me worthwhile doing so. In my Tolkien biography, and then in *The Inklings*, I included two chapters of imaginary happenings: an imaginary day in Tolkien's company and, in *The Inklings*, an imaginary conversation. I thought that actually expressed the general truths about these men much more succinctly than chapter after chapter of all sorts of lists of what they did in one week or another, and where they spent Christmas and so on. (qtd in Anderson 221)

These fictionalized moments do offer the author's insights to the reader in ways that enhance the pleasure of reading. Carpenter identifies his use of source material as streamlined for a casual reader rather than transparent, as a scholar might prefer:

In this book I have quoted J.R.R. Tolkien's words usually without giving references to the sources of the quotations. Such references would have had to be numerous and therefore (I considered) tiresome to the eye, and since many quotations are taken from unpublished material, references would only have been of very limited interest. (*Biography* 276)

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<sup>7</sup> Anderson tells how the primary qualification Carpenter offered to members of the Tolkien family was his acquaintance with Oxford, and with "the milieu in which he operated" (219). Anderson also recounts how Carpenter's theory of biography involved both "self-education" and "personal relevance," and in the case of Tolkien's biography, "the personal agenda was (Carpenter's) own childhood": "I'd lived in the same culture as him, in an Oxford academic family. I wanted to portray that milieu, about which I had very mixed feelings" (qtd. in Anderson 220-221).

However, Carpenter also indicates how he has “eschewed the customary row of dots to indicate a passage omitted in the middle of a quotation” for similar reasons (276). For a scholar, this signals the possibility of lost context, and missed opportunity to make independent rather than mediated judgments about the material.

Since the 1981 publication of *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, many of Carpenter’s quotations can be easily accessed with fuller context; however, the letters themselves are edited by Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien, and the volume follows similar criteria for selection and omission. The introduction to the *Letters* explains that the volume focuses on Tolkien’s creative output and publication rather than on personal details, meaning that “an enormous quantity of material would have to be omitted” and “priority has been given to those letters where Tolkien discusses his own books” (*Letters* 1). In particular, the “very large body of letters” that Tolkien wrote to Edith from 1913–1918 has been omitted, and there are few letters from 1918–1937, of which the ones that survive would be excluded from the collected letters because of their limited treatment of Tolkien’s creative work. Other sources that Carpenter used in his biography, such as the coded diary that became Carpenter’s “principal source of information” for the years of 1919–1933, remain unpublished<sup>8</sup> (*Biography* 276–7). Significantly, the time period in question is the one in which Carpenter makes the most frequent references to dissatisfaction between the spouses. As a consequence, there is very little concrete and verifiable detail to explain references to marital discord in the biography and *The Inklings*. Here, Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond’s *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide vol. 1: Chronology*,<sup>9</sup> a scholarly reference rather than a narrative biography,<sup>10</sup> provides a valuable supplement by recording events of Tolkien’s life with minimal narrative commentary. However, though they do consult primary sources, Scull and Hammond also acknowledge their debt to Carpenter’s work, and often

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<sup>8</sup> In the same appendix, Carpenter lists sources for the information in the biography, including letters from Tolkien’s father Arthur, correspondence and interviews with Tolkien’s brother Hilary, and various letters and diaries written by Tolkien himself. Discussing the process of researching the biography, Carpenter recounted in a 1977 interview, “I realized when I embarked on the project that I would have to sift through literally thousands of letters. I mean thousands. A number of very closely-written diaries, and a pile of manuscripts, which took up so much space that it requires more than 100 box-files to store it” (qtd. in Anderson 219).

<sup>9</sup> The two volume *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* by Scull and Hammond has been superseded by an expanded three-volume set, published in 2018.

<sup>10</sup> *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide vol. 2*, a reader’s guide, contains an entry on “Biography” that outlines Tolkien’s and his family’s objections to biography, the various attempts at biographies, and their strengths and weaknesses.

repeat or echo Carpenter's opinions and judgments. A useful, if easily overlooked, resource that remains free of Carpenter's influence is *The Tolkien Family Album* (1992), which is truly an "inside source," being written by John and Priscilla Tolkien. A slim volume, it nevertheless offers a glimpse into the character of J.R.R. Tolkien and Edith Tolkien through their family interactions and the memories they shared with their children, as well as through the photographs included in the album.

Beyond methodology, Carpenter's biography offers a striking and often troubling interpretation of its subject. He sets up a peculiar dichotomy in Tolkien's life, noting that "[i]t is a strange paradox, the fact that *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* are the work of an obscure Oxford professor [...] who lived an ordinary suburban life bringing up his children and tending his garden." He then questions, "Or is it? Is not the opposite precisely true? Should we not wonder instead at the fact that a mind of such brilliance and imagination should be happy to be contained in the petty routine of academic and domestic life [...]?" (*Biography* 118). Carpenter's bias in reference to Tolkien's "petty routine" discounts the extent to which both—academic and domestic life—were dear to Tolkien, both pleasurable and engaging, and certainly the extent to which both his academic interests and his domestic sensibilities figured prominently in his fiction. The dichotomy that permeates the biography—positioning artistic brilliance and imagination on the one hand, and domesticity and academia on the other, goes on to color general and critical understanding of Tolkien's marriage and family life, involving Edith Tolkien as a necessary point of narrative tension. To better understand how this narrative frame defines Carpenter's representation of Edith, and to consider the scholarly consequences of this representation, it is helpful to review Carpenter's perspective on Edith and John Ronald's relationship from its inception.

It is important, first of all, to note the tone of Carpenter's narrative. Here, it is helpful to compare Grotta's much less detailed account. On their youth and the seriousness of the attachment, Grotta reports that "Tolkien was probably not yet sixteen when he fell in love for the first—and only—time in his life" (29). Elaborating on this point, and anticipating the three-year separation of the lovers, Grotta notes that "(i)n time, the friendship grew into a 'love match,' as the Tolkien family later described it. Such a relationship at their tender age was bound to be discouraged, so it necessarily developed in secret" (29). Grotta tells how Edith and Tolkien were involved in a plot to provide extra food to Tolkien and his brother Hilary, and how, when they were caught, "the entire story of their affection eventually came out":

Their respective guardians were informed of the situation, and Edith Mary was banished to the house of an aunt and uncle, with whom she

subsequently lived for a number of years. Not only were they separated, but they were expressly forbidden to see, visit, write, or communicate with each other in any way. [...] Perhaps the years of waiting and anticipation helped sharpen Tolkien's love—in any event it made him much more determined to marry Edith Mary, despite the difficulties. (Grotta 30)

Grotta's account of their courtship and separation does contain inaccuracies. For example, the couple with whom Edith lived during the intervening three years were not her biological family though she did call them "Aunt" and "Uncle" (Carpenter 52). Overall, however, the tone of the account suggests that Tolkien's love for Edith was genuine, though they were both young, and that the separation was enforced from both sides—his guardian as well as hers—which may or may not be accurate. By contrast, the perspective that Carpenter offers on the relationship encourages reader skepticism as to whether the match was suitable or the love genuine.

From the beginning, and perhaps to increase dramatic tension, Carpenter emphasizes factors that would make a successful union unlikely. In his first description of their meeting, he mentions the three-year difference in their ages in a way that introduces doubt, then dismisses the doubt with an explanation that emphasizes only Edith's physical attractiveness: "True, he was sixteen and she was nineteen. But he was old for his age and she looked young for hers, and she was neat and small and exceptionally pretty" (47). He reintroduces the age difference in reference to Father Francis Morgan's objections (49), and again an account of their early marriage: "[Tolkien] was also uncomfortably conscious of wasted time, for he was not twenty-seven and Edith was thirty" (107). In describing their early attraction, Carpenter also stresses their intellectual difference for the first time of many: "Certainly she did not share his interest in languages, and she had received only a rather limited education. But her manner was very engaging" (47). The resulting account of their attraction is somewhat trite: "With two people of their personalities and in their position, romance was bound to flourish. Both were orphans in need of affection, and they found that they could give it to each other" (48). Perhaps most characteristic of Carpenter's treatment of their relationship is his observation, immediately following this rationale for their attraction, that "[d]uring the summer of 1909 they decided they were in love," the phrase "decided they were in love" carrying the implication that this was a whim rather than a "love match" (48).

Scholars echo this language from Carpenter frequently. Scull and Hammond, for example, write that "[b]y summer 1909 they will decide that they are in love" (Scull and Hammond I.14). In his essay "Root and Tree: The Growth of Tolkien's Writing" in Pearce's *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Celebration*, Richard Jeffrey

repeats both the fact and judgment, but makes explicit that the judgment derives from Carpenter: “The summer of the following year, as Humphrey Carpenter puts it, they ‘decided they were in love’” (145). However, the same essay echoes—and perhaps emphasizes—Carpenter’s tone and judgment on the couple’s reunion, writing that Tolkien “seems to have assumed she was being kept in cold storage for him,” but that “she, not surprisingly, didn’t feel so certain about him” (145). Edwards’s biography, meanwhile, diverges from Carpenter’s in the emphasis it places on Edith’s illegitimacy, and in its elaboration of the details of her parentage; however, he too also echoes the language and tone of Carpenter’s judgments in the account of their meeting:

The Tolkiens found they had as a fellow lodger a nineteen-year-old girl, Edith Bratt. She and Tolkien became friends, and allies against Mrs Faulkner’s constricting household regime (Edith persuaded the housemaid to smuggle extra food from the kitchen to the boys). But the following summer, *they decided they were in love*. (Edwards 35, emphasis added)

Writing of the enforced separation between Edith and John Ronald, Carpenter positions the narrative in opposition to the relationship, writing that “Father Francis was not a clever man, and he did not perceive that by compelling Ronald and Edith to part he was transforming a boy-and-girl love-affair into a thwarted romance” (Carpenter 52). He implies quite plainly that a smarter strategy would have been to allow the romance to run its course. Rather than sympathizing with the star-crossed lovers, Carpenter’s narrative manipulates readers into considering the romance inadvisable, leading to such misreadings of Tolkien’s letters as Fredrick and McBride’s remark that Tolkien “acknowledged to his son that his marriage was to some extent ‘unfortunate’” (51).<sup>11</sup> Similarly, it is because of Carpenter’s tone and phrasing that Edwards is able to assert that “[w]hether this youthful romance would have, under other circumstances, amounted to anything is obviously unknowable and probably irrelevant” (35). However, Edwards’s musing becomes part of an inside dialogue with Carpenter’s text, placing Father Francis’s actions in the socio-historical and legal contexts of “long

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<sup>11</sup> The actual letter from Tolkien to his son Michael states, “I fell in love with your mother at the approximate age of 18. Quite genuinely, as has been shown—though of course defects of character and temperament have caused me often to fall below the ideal with which I started. Your mother was older than I, and not a Catholic. Altogether unfortunate, as viewed by a guardian. And it *was* in a sense very unfortunate; and in a way very bad for me. These things are absorbing and nervously exhausting. I was a clever boy in the throes of work for (a very necessary) Oxford scholarship. The combined tensions nearly produced a bad breakdown. I muffed my exams [...]” (*Letters* #43, 52).

engagements, and marriages postponed for financial reasons or because of reservations on the part of one or the other family,” and reminding readers that “Tolkien could not in any case have got married, or engaged (an engagement was still at this date a legally binding connexion, which could provoke an action for breach of promise if subsequently broken off) without his guardian’s permission” (36).

Carpenter’s initial descriptions of the differences between the prospective spouses set up the chapters that follow, in which Carpenter stresses how their three-year separation widened the gap that already existed in their talents and interests. First, he emphasizes the male-centered intellectual world in which Tolkien lived:

At the age when many young men were discovering the charms of female company he was endeavouring to forget them and to push romance in the back of his mind. All the pleasures and discoveries of the next three years—and they were vital years in his development, as vital as the years with his mother—were to be shared not with Edith but with others of his sex, so that he came to associate male company with much that was good in life. (53)

At this point, Tolkien was still at King Edward’s school and not yet at Oxford, though Carpenter stresses that neither school would encourage interaction with women or consideration of women as intellectual equals: “At Oxford the company had to be male. [...] In any case the men really preferred each other’s company. The majority of them were fresh from the male preserves of the public school and they gladly accepted the masculine tone of Oxford” (61-62). Carpenter nevertheless blames Tolkien for leaving Edith out of this world. Commenting on their engagement, he writes that

Part of the trouble lay in Ronald’s self-chosen role of sentimental lover, which was quite unlike the face he showed to his male friends. There was real love and understanding between him and Edith, but he often wrapped it up in amatory cliché; while if he had shown her more of his ‘bookish’ face and had taken her into the company of his male friends, she might not have minded so much when these elements loomed larger in their marriage. But he kept the two sides of his life firmly apart. (74-75)

Carpenter’s point that “Ronald’s self-chosen role of sentimental lover” would be “unlike the face he showed to his male friends” is self-evident, a rhetorical gesture meant to identify a separation of spheres and to label it as peculiar—which in fact, it was not. More important is the observation that he wrapped

“real love and understanding” in “amatory cliché.” Tolkien would, later in his marriage, self-consciously reject chivalric tradition and romantic idealism more generally, for philosophically sound reasons that reflect sophisticated notions of how men and women should relate to one another.<sup>12</sup> But as a relatively young man, with little experience of women, literary and romantic “amatory cliché” would be the mode available to him. Again, Carpenter uses this term—“amatory cliché”—rhetorically, describing Tolkien’s early devotion to Edith “as a shining ideal” and adhering rather firmly to that characterization, often contrasting it with reality or what (vaguely) their marriage would later become (66). Finally, Carpenter’s recommendation that Tolkien show her “more of his ‘bookish’ face” and “take her into the company of his male friends” presumes that those friends would be open to the intrusion, as the Inklings were not.

Further developing Tolkien’s exclusion of his love relationship from his male-centered sphere, Carpenter explains that though “[t]he T.C.B.S. was now equally represented at Oxford and Cambridge” and “[t]he four friends occasionally met,” Tolkien “never mentioned to them the existence of Edith Bratt” until “that the time was approaching for her reception into the Catholic Church they had decided to be formally betrothed.” Carpenter’s phrasing, that “he would have to tell his friends” gives clear indication of reluctance, a judgment he makes explicit in the same passage: “He wrote to Gilson and Wiseman, very uncertain as to what to say, and not even telling them his fiancée’s name; clearly he felt that it all seemed to have little to do with the male comradeship of the T.C.B.S.” (75-76). Here it is interesting to compare John Garth’s treatment of Tolkien’s announcement of his engagement to the T.C.B.S., which notes, with documentation to elucidate the feelings of those involved, the friends’ fear that Tolkien, when married, would drift away from the group. While Garth reports that “In preparation for the momentous event Tolkien had finally told his friends about Edith,” he represents as natural Tolkien’s fear, shared by his friends, that “his engagement might cut him off from the TCBS.” He cites correspondence from Wiseman and Gilson to show how their “congratulations were tinged with the anxiety that they might lose a friend”:

Wiseman said as much in a postcard. ‘The only fear is that you will rise above the TCBS,’ he said, and demanded half-seriously that Tolkien somehow prove ‘this most recent folly’ was only ‘an ebullition of ultra-TCBSianism’. Gilson wrote more frankly: ‘Convention bids me congratulate you, and though my feelings are of course a little mixed, I do it with very sincere good wishes for your happiness. And I have no

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<sup>12</sup> For Tolkien’s discussion of “the romantic chivalric tradition,” see letter #43 in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (48-49).

fear at all that such a staunch tcbsite as yourself will ever be anything else.' Would John Ronald reveal the lady's name? he added. (Garth 33).

There is evidence that Christopher Wiseman in particular cultivated a relationship with the Tolkiens as a couple.<sup>13</sup> Edwards, like Carpenter, seems to judge Tolkien with an account of the late revelation of his engagement and the detail "he did not tell them Edith's name" (74). However, a few pages earlier Edwards proposes Tolkien's lack of financial prospects as an explanation for secrecy about the engagement (55-56). Edwards also proposes a more sympathetic portrait of the separation of spheres represented in Carpenter's work:

Wiseman reminded Tolkien he had yet to tell him the name of his betrothed. Would his engagement drive out or at least compromise existing close friendships? Although he insisted he abominated the idea of a 'compartmented life' in which Edith and the TCBS were discrete, Tolkien, like many men of his time, and indeed before and since, was never quite sure how to reconcile his romantic life with the claims of male friendship. (81)

Edwards carries his technique of answering unnamed critics beyond Carpenter, commenting that "for the vast majority of Tolkien's contemporaries, this sort of quandary was a function of shyness and all-male schooling rather than latent homosexual feeling" (81).

When Carpenter intimates that Tolkien ought to have shown Edith "more of his 'bookish' face," he also introduces a contradiction. Carpenter characterizes Edith throughout the biography as unintellectual—someone who could not have moved in academic circles due to a lack of interest, temperament, and training, and perhaps most of all because she lacked encouragement from her husband. He explains how "Edith Tolkien had only been given a limited education at a girls' boarding-school which, while good in music, was

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<sup>13</sup> See also Scull and Hammond, who replicate Carpenter's emphasis on this detail in their record of Tolkien's announcement of his engagement: "?17-?19 December 1913 Tolkien informs his T.C.B.S friends that he is engaged, but gives no details about Edith, not even her name. He possibly tells G.B. Smith in person (no letter of congratulations from Smith is in Tolkien's T.C.B.S. correspondence file) and writes to Wiseman and Gilson" (48). Later they record that Wiseman "urges Tolkien and Edith to spend one of the next two weekends at the Wiseman home in London" (73); there were also other letters exchanged between the friends in which Edith/engagement were mentioned and visits.



indifferent in other subjects" (156).<sup>14</sup> With some condescension and his own Oxford-educated bias, he relates how she spent her period in Cheltenham "in a markedly non-intellectual middle-class household," and identifies this as well as Edith's "poorly educated" cousin Jennie<sup>15</sup> as an explanation for Edith's failure to "continue her education or improve her mind" (156). In Tolkien's use in their courtship of the term "little one" as an endearment, Carpenter finds evidence that he did not "encourage her to pursue any intellectual activity":

He did not encourage her to pursue any intellectual activity, partly because he did not consider it to be a necessary part of her role as wife and mother, and partly because his attitude to her in courtship (exemplified by his favourite term for her, 'little one') was not associated with his own intellectual life; to her he showed a side of his personality quite different from that perceived by his male friends. Just as he liked to be a man's man among his cronies, so at home he expected to live in what was primarily a woman's world. (156)

Circular logic and use of isolated details for extrapolations and generalizations are striking in these pronouncements about Tolkien's marriage from much later in the narrative—the Tolkiens' life on Northmoor Road in 1926. These references to Edith's lack of intellectual activity effectively position Tolkien's marriage in opposition to Carpenter's vision of an ideal academic marriage.

Meanwhile, Carpenter sets up Edith's life apart from Tolkien in a way that establishes a baseline of social engagement by which to measure her married life. Explaining how Edith spent the three years of their separation, Carpenter starts by describing a lonely life devoid of company, but ends on an idealistic note:

There were few guests at the house beyond the vicar and elderly friends of the Jessops, but Edith could find companionship of her own age with her school-friend Molly Field whose family lived nearby. She practiced the piano every day, took lessons on the organ, and began to play for services at the Anglican parish church, which she attended regularly. She involved herself in church affairs, assisting at the Boys' Club and the

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<sup>14</sup> Women's access to education of the type that would have made Edith more of an intellectual equal for her husband is one of many points of social history that future biographical studies of the Tolkiens might address.

<sup>15</sup> For a more sympathetic account of Edith's cousin Jennie Grove, see Edwards, who, relying perhaps on information included in *The Tolkien Family Album* (*Family Album* 36), softens Carpenter's judgment on Jennie, who was a mother-figure to Edith; Edwards acknowledges both the great help that Jennie must have been to the young couple and the difficulties of having an additional member in their household (Edwards 55, 111).

choir outings. She joined the Primrose League and went to Conservative Party meetings. She was making a life of her own, a better life than she had known before, which she would find it hard to relinquish when the time came. (52)

He later elaborates on Edith's independence and involvement with the church in reference to her conversion to Catholicism:

She was a member of the Church of England, and a very active member. During her separation from Ronald a large proportion of her life had centered on the parish church at her Cheltenham home, and she had made herself useful in church affairs. She had in consequence acquired some status in the parish; and it was a smart parish, typical of an elegant town. Now Ronald wanted her to renounce all this and to go to a church where nobody knew her; and looking at it from that point of view she did not relish the prospect. (73)<sup>16</sup>

It is unfortunate, here, that Carpenter does not cite Edith's own words—from letters, perhaps, or diaries—giving the reader access to these sentiments in context, and from their source. He continues to stress Edith's independence—sometimes at the expense of her fiancé—in his account of her life in Warwick with her cousin Jenny. He supposes that Edith's choice of Warwick was in fact antagonistic—or at any rate, passive aggressive—toward Tolkien, who had taken her away from her comfortable living arrangements and another engagement and forced her to convert to Catholicism. Edwards reports a detail missing from Carpenter: that “by the terms of her father's will, she had inherited property around Birmingham” (54). In every description of their engagement, Carpenter implies regret; in Warwick for example, “[s]he had her own piano and she could practice for hours, but she knew now that she would never make a career as a musician—marriage and raising a family would prevent it—so there was little incentive to do much playing” (76). In fact, there seems to be little likelihood that Edith would become a pianist from the time that she was deposited at Mrs. Faulkner's boarding house by “the family solicitor, [who] did not seem to know what he should do next [for Edith]” (47). Like Carpenter, Edwards identifies for Edith the potential career as a concert pianist, though unlike Carpenter, he identifies this as a personal ambition of Edith's before Mrs.

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<sup>16</sup> Edwards writes, similarly, that “Edith, meanwhile, had made a life for herself in Cheltenham. The family friends she lived with, the Jessops, had a large house and a comfortable life. Edith was socially active, in particular in the local Anglican church. She had always been an accomplished pianist, and now took great pleasure playing the organ at her parish church” (54).

Faulkner's boarding house, which effectively ruined her career prospects: "although Mrs. Faulkner was 'musical,' she disliked the sound of Edith practising, and inevitably her playing (and career prospects) suffered" (35). John and Priscilla Tolkien corroborate the restrictions imposed by Mrs. Faulker, but describe Edith's lifelong love of music as a "great love, and talent, for playing the piano" (27) without necessarily identifying music as a career ambition. It should be noted, when considering possible musical ambitions, that many of the details necessary—certifications and exams, or even enrollment in the Birmingham School of Music—for a music career, or to distinguish legitimately qualified teachers from less skilled or honest ones from the Nineteenth Century forward, seem not to have materialized for Edith.<sup>17</sup>

Overall, Carpenter's vision of Edith's musical career being thwarted by marriage, echoed very closely by Edwards, looks a bit different when placed in the context of women's social history and Edith's own feelings on the topic; on the one hand, while women did have greater ability to support themselves than in the nineteenth century, the resulting income did not make single life more attractive than marriage for most. In her study of *Feminism and the Family in England, 1880-1939*, Carol Dyhouse writes that "even those feminists who were most convinced in the equation between economic independence and self-respect, and most determined in their rejection of the idea of marriage as a dignified 'career' for women, had to recognize the problem that sexual inequalities were structured into the labour market," and to conclude that married women were better off economically than single, working women, even considering the potential instabilities of marriage (Dyhouse 37).<sup>18</sup> Edith herself was unwilling to remain single, as her engagement to George Field demonstrates. In a letter to Tolkien, she writes that "she had only become

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<sup>17</sup> See part 3 of the online article "The Social History of Piano Teaching" by Dr. Sally Cathcart of *The Curious Piano Teachers Blog* for a discussion of the requirements for teaching music in the Nineteenth century forward; for some discussion of discrimination against women in music, see Debra Brubaker Burns, Anita Jackson and Connie Arrau Sturm's essay on "Piano Pedagogy and Performance."

<sup>18</sup> Dyhouse cites Margaret Cole's influential early study, *Marriage, Past and Present* (1939) as discussing the insecurities of marriage for women, while also being "forced to concede, ruefully, that 'with a very few exceptions, the educated woman, like her working class sister, will be better off *economically*, especially when she is over thirty or thirty-five, if she can find a man in something like her own economic condition who is willing to marry and to support her, even if she has to resign all thoughts of earning money herself.' Good, well-paid jobs for working women, however able and well-educated, were still extremely rare. Wilma Meike had made precisely the same point twenty-three years earlier: 'Feminine economic ambition is naturally blunted by the knowledge that while it is practically impossible for a woman to provide for her old age by her own earnings, there is always rather more than a sporting choice that marriage will give her security'" (37-38).

engaged to George because he had been kind to her, and she felt ‘on the shelf,’ and there was no other young man that she knew, and she had given up believing that Ronald would want to see her again after the three years had passed” (Carpenter *Biography* 69). Though speculation proposes that Tolkien was more in love with Edith than she with him, or that her independence made her unwilling to wait for him, a less savory aspect of Edith’s engagement to George Field may be gleaned from details in *The Tolkien Family Album*: that, miserable at the home of the Jessops, Edith may have been desperate to escape. Though Edith, for a while, “fared better than Ronald” during their three-year separation,

Uncle Jessop appears to have been a martinet with a strong temper and a weak heart. He dominated his wife, who in turn begged Edith not to cross him. Edith said she would often work out her frustrations on the piano, playing something powerful and stirring, such as a Schubert Impromptu or a Beethoven sonata. She also spent hours copying music meticulously. One or two of her albums still remain, showing her taste ranging from classical music to ballads of the time. (30)

With this additional information, Edith’s parish activity resembles the social activity of a young woman who had “too much time on her hands and too little companionship with those her own age” (*Family Album* 30). Significantly, by the time she entered into the engagement with George Field, she would have been on the verge of being considered a spinster, not quite a derogatory term by this point, but one that did imply a certain failing—that she was unwanted or unmarriedable. The engagement may have been the result of equal parts discouragement with her long separation from Tolkien and desperation to remove herself from an untenable domestic situation.

Having provided his account of how each of the lovers spent their years apart—in separate pursuits, growing apart rather than together—and positioned the lovers in a world in which men and women exist in separate, largely incompatible spheres, Carpenter summarizes their situation in a way that sets up his discussion of the couple’s married life:

They no longer knew each other very well, for they had spent the three years of their separation in two totally different societies: the one all-male, boisterous, and academic; the other mixed, genteel, and domestic. They had grown up, but they had grown apart. From now on each would have to make concessions to the other if they were to come to a real understanding. Ronald would have to tolerate Edith’s absorption in the daily details of life, trivial as they might seem to him. She would have to make an effort to understand his preoccupation with his books and his

languages, selfish as it might appear to her. Neither of them entirely succeeded. (74)

The resulting impression is that the Tolkiens were a couple who were never meant to be together, and that Tolkien himself was a man who knew very little about marriage—or indeed, of women. Such an impression can necessarily skew any reading of Tolkien’s words on the subjects of women or marriage. As a notable example of the influence of Carpenter’s narrative on discussions of gender and marriage in Tolkien’s life and work, consider the following advice from a letter (omitted from *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*), often cited as evidence of Tolkien’s privileging of male friendship, or to highlight the dominance of the husband over wife:

“There are many things that a man feels are legitimate even though they cause a fuss. Let him not lie about them to his wife or lover! Cut them out—or if worth a fight: just insist. Such matters may arise frequently—the glass of beer, the pipe, the non writing of letters, the other friend, etc. etc. If the other side’s claims really are unreasonable (as they are at times between the dearest lovers and most loving married folk) they are much better met by above board refusal and ‘fuss’ than subterfuge.” (qtd in Carpenter, *Biography* 159)

In *The Inklings*, Carpenter gives a particularly harsh interpretation of these words, citing them as indication that “Tolkien himself felt that time spent with the Inklings and in other male company could only be gained by a deliberate and almost ruthless exclusion of attention to his wife” (*Inklings* 168). Fredrick and McBride, taking their cue from Carpenter, interpret this particular quote to mean that “his Inklings friendships were incompatible with his family’s expectations of him” and that “such friendships were his right and privilege as a man.” They find in this passage evidence of “Tolkien’s commitment to a sexist double standard [that] prevented him from encouraging his wife’s intellectual development” (50-51). An alternate reading of Tolkien’s marriage advice might acknowledge that there is only passing reference to “the other friend,” and instead emphasize the practical advice of choosing one’s battles and the admonition not to lie to one’s spouse.

Nevertheless, in offering a critique of Carpenter’s treatment of the Tolkiens’ marriage, it is important not to gloss over the problems that the couple did experience. With the unavailability of primary sources, a sense of balance can be achieved mainly by acknowledging what seems to be true—the good and the bad—and when possible, to consider the domestic situation described by Carpenter within social and historical context—which has rarely if ever been done. But in considering the question of whether the Tolkiens were ill-fated, or

should not have wed, it is also important to observe that Tolkien was married for over fifty years to the same woman, and loved his wife. He seems to have had a certain stoicism with regard to the long-term commitment that marriage entails, not related to any particular marital problem, but related to the belief that divorce was not only a sin, but a great evil.<sup>19</sup> One might imagine that he soldiered on during difficult times. It is noteworthy that according to C.S. Lewis, who did not mean it to be complimentary, Tolkien was “the most married man he knew” (qtd. in Sayer 14). It is also important to acknowledge that no marriage is *ideal*—Tolkien might add, “in this fallen world”—and to consider Tolkien’s words from the same letter that he wrote to his son Michael when Michael was considering marriage expressing the idea that “the ‘real soul-mate’ is the one you are actually married to” (#43, 51). While they certainly faced challenges, a preconceived idea of what would have made theirs a better match can only inhibit understanding.

There are certain clear conflicts that surface and resurface in Carpenter’s account of the Tolkiens’ marriage: conflict over religion and conflict over male intellectual friendship. In the overall picture of married life, however, Carpenter’s criticism of the Tolkiens’ domestic arrangements—and number and frequency of children—plays a part, and requires brief mention. Carpenter sets the tone for broader discussion of Edith’s fertility and the Tolkiens’ approach to family planning by mentioning her presumed reactions to each pregnancy. First, describing the time of their first son’s infancy, Carpenter describes Edith sympathetically as “wearied by looking after the baby and [...] often in pain—the effects of the difficult birth had been long-lasting.” In this context, and indeed, in the same sentence, Carpenter mentions that she “wrote bitterly to Ronald: ‘I’ll never go round with you again’”—a curious statement that in Carpenter’s context seems to set up a negative attitude toward sexual intimacy because of a wish to avoid pregnancy (*Biography* 106). A few pages later, Carpenter writes that Edith “was pregnant once more,” and implies that this is not ideal with the phrasing: “*but at least* she could give birth in her own house and bring up the baby in a proper home” (109, emphasis mine). Toward the end of the following chapter, a mere five pages later in some editions, Carpenter writes that “[a]t the beginning of 1924 Edith was upset to find that she was pregnant again” (114). Carpenter juxtaposes the observation that “she hoped that it might be a daughter” with “it proved to be a boy” who was “an especial delight to his father” (114). Carpenter thus paves the way for other critics to speculate, or even to declare with certainty what Edith’s feelings were toward her pregnancies without providing her own words on the subject. Edwards’s close paraphrase of Carpenter reads, “At the start of 1924, Edith was distressed

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<sup>19</sup> See Tolkien’s letter to C.S. Lewis on the topic of divorce (*Letters* #49, 60–62).

to find she was again pregnant. She was thirty-five; her two boys were then six and three. She hoped for a daughter, but, in the event, a third boy was born on 21 November" (122-123). Without Edith's own words, the statement that Edith was "distressed to find she was again pregnant" or "upset to find that she was pregnant again" is problematic because of the extremely personal nature of the sentiment, and the variety of possible contributing factors. Edwards's implied reasons—that her distress was due either to her own age or the ages of her boys—suggests that 35 was old for a third child, or that the spacing of her boys would have been considered close, neither of which is strictly true. It is difficult, here, to reconstruct the reasons—of many—that Edith might have been ambivalent about her pregnancy, but the one reason that is absent from both accounts is her health, which, in addition to a troubling situation with the pollution and security of Leeds,<sup>20</sup> might have made pregnancy unattractive.

Shortly after he mentions the birth of their last child, "the daughter that Edith had long hoped for" (*Biography* 119), Carpenter reveals the Tolkiens' separate sleeping arrangements, the positioning conspicuous given his overall depiction of Edith as ambivalent or even vexed about repeated pregnancies: "The alarm rings at seven in Tolkien's bedroom, a back room that looks east over the garden. It is really a bathroom-cum-dressing-room, and there is a bath in one corner of it, but he sleeps here because Edith finds his snoring tiresome, and because he keeps late hours that do not harmonize with her habits" (120). Rather than being an objective statement, Carpenter's phrasing casts blame on Edith for finding his snoring tiresome; readers, in turn, understand that she blames Tolkien for failing to adhere to her standards. This is consistent with Carpenter's description of Edith, who was expected to run a home with precision—and even, if she were to have been a part of Tolkien's university life, with *panache*—as both inept, having "only known a home life of the most minimal sort in her own childhood," and as "authoritarian," "demanding that meals be precisely on time, that the children eat up every scrap, and that servants should perform their work impeccably" (*Biography* 159).<sup>21</sup> Seemingly as a result of their failure to harmonize, "they have their own rooms and do not disturb one another" (120). Carpenter does not mention that marriage advice of the time recommended

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<sup>20</sup> Edwards reports that "[l]ate in 1923, the Tolkiens' house in Leeds was burgled; their new maid, it turned out, was involved with a criminal gang. Edith's engagement ring was amongst the things taken. Their domestic situation was, clear, not ideal; we have noted above the heavily polluted air of the city centre, and now (surely) the Tolkiens would have felt unsafe as well" (122).

<sup>21</sup> Edwards writes, comparably, that "[s]he had had no particular preparation for running the large household she now had" and even invokes "authoritarianism" (163-164).

separate sleeping arrangements,<sup>22</sup> nor does he indicate sympathy for the spouse whose sleep was disrupted, as twenty-first century representations of marriage might do. Nevertheless, this sleeping arrangement becomes emblematic of the lack of unity and harmony in the marriage, repeated more emphatically in a later chapter: "To some extent Ronald and Edith lived separate lives at Northmoor Road, sleeping in different bedrooms and keeping different hours" (160). We learn that Tolkien had to work at night, or Edith would interrupt him for "some domestic duty" or "tea with a friend" (160). Edith is described as insistent—even nagging—and starved for attention, and there is no mention here of Tolkien's pleasure in the domestic.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, writing years later, George Sayer would recall that "when I called, it was always Mrs. Tolkien who answered the door. One of her jobs was to protect her husband from people who would interfere with his work. She would then go upstairs to tell him that I, an admissible visitor, was there" (Sayer 11).

Less clearly identifiable as common marital issues—like number and spacing of children, general domestic arrangements—are the couple's conflicts over Catholicism and the Inklings. In general, the former is presumed to have hurt Tolkien more deeply; the latter, Edith. Here, certain of Carpenter's opinions deserve careful attention. Carpenter is known to have had biases based on Tolkien's Catholicism and religion more generally that might have influenced his representation of the religious conflicts. Potentially an even stronger bias, though less easily labeled, is Carpenter's ideal vision of Oxford married life, which, along with his disappointment that Tolkien did not lead a more interesting life and the fault he finds with Edith as a non-intellectual, directs the narrative of Tolkien's home life. Carpenter reveals his approach to Tolkien's life in the introductory note to part four when he states that after the War and Tolkien's first academic position in Leeds, "nothing really happened" (118). Having decided that Tolkien's genius was somehow out of place in his daily existence, Carpenter locates the disconnect squarely in the person of Edith, whom he has already established as a non-intellectual, and thus satisfies the need for biographical conflict to stimulate Tolkien's genius in their marriage. He reveals, specifically, the problem posed by a non-academic spouse in the contrast between his idyllic descriptions of Oxford<sup>24</sup> and his account of Edith's

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<sup>22</sup> Hilary Hinds's article "Together and Apart: Twin Beds, Domestic Hygiene and Modern Marriage, 1890-1945," explains how twin beds came to be regarded as a "hygienic" and "modern" choice for sleeping arrangements beginning in the nineteenth century, becoming a "taken-for-granted choice for many" (283) in the early twentieth century.

<sup>23</sup> See George Sayer, "Recollections."

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Part 2, Ch. 5: "Oxford" for a description of Tolkien's enthusiasm for and engagement with male-centered Oxford undergraduate life; Part 3, Ch. 2: "Oxford Interlude" for Tolkien's nostalgia for Oxford; Part 4, Ch. 1 for North Oxford as "a



misery there, and by positioning the Tolkiens' marriage—and Edith in particular—in opposition to the ideal picture of an Oxford academic marriage. Edith, we learn, was miserable in Oxford, where Tolkien thrived. Edith as the non-academic spouse becomes the problem, her misery a result of her ill-fit. As the ideal picture of an Oxford academic marriage, Carpenter offers the domestic situation of Deputy Professor of Comparative Philology Joe Wright:

Wright married a former pupil. Two children were born to them, but both died in childhood. Nevertheless the Wrights carried on a stoic and lively existence in a huge house built to Joe's design in the Banbury Road. In 1912 Ronald Tolkien came to Wright as a pupil, and ever afterwards remembered 'the vastness of Joe Wright's dining-room table, when I sat alone at one end learning the elements of Greek philology from glinting glasses in the further gloom.' Nor was he ever likely to forget the huge Yorkshire teas given by the Wrights on Sunday afternoons [...].  
(*Biography* 64)

Carpenter highlights two points: Wright's marriage to a former pupil, someone who shares his own intellectual context, and the hospitality that the Wrights provided to students. He does not consider how, as bereaved parents, the Wrights' lifestyle circumstances were different from Tolkien's own. In describing the Tolkiens' life in Oxford, Carpenter introduces Edith's painful shyness and the problems it caused in the context of Oxford etiquette.<sup>25</sup> In spite of the shortcomings he lists, he proposes that "Edith might have been able to make a positive contribution to [her husband's] life in the University" (157). Clearly referring back to the Wrights, Carpenter suggests that Edith might have made more of the opportunities of Oxford if she had been "lucky" enough to be an expert in her husband's field or if she could, like other wives, "make their home into something of a social centre for their husbands' friends, and so participate in much of their lives" (157).

Describing a very daunting social order in which visitors, who "might be dons' wives, such as the terrifying Mrs. Farnell, wife of the Rector of Exeter, whose presence even frightened Ronald" would "leave their calling-cards on the hall tray [...] to indicate that Mrs Tolkien was of course expected to *return* the call after a short interval" (157), Carpenter limits his account only to Tolkien and Edith, making Edith's ill-fit seem unusual. However, rather than being

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concentrated colony of academics, their wives, their children and their servants" (119) and eclectic community, and for the fictional "day in the life" of Tolkien.

<sup>25</sup> This stands in contrast to Carpenter's portrait of Edith before marriage as somewhat of a socialite—or at least a socially active, engaged woman—who was reluctant to be tied down to children and domesticity.

amenable even to a woman who was more intellectual, Oxford seems to have demanded a particular type of society woman. In Manchester rather than Oxford, feminist Helena Swanwick,<sup>26</sup> describing exactly the kind of circle of women that Carpenter depicts, complained of “the unforeseen problems of social intercourse when one was defined as ‘a faculty wife,’” and confesses that she “lapsed badly” when it came to returning their calls within the specified time, as Edith did—though Swanwick’s reason was that she found the wives “unexhilarating” (Dyhouse 43). In the 1850s Josephine Butler described an all-male atmosphere in Oxford devoid of any sense of “home life,” though she found expanded conditions (in the 1920s) more bearable. Another near-contemporary—Margaret Cole—resented the expectation that she should feed rather than converse with important visitors, and participate in designated “occupations of female Oxford” rather than in the life of the university (Dyhouse 43–45). Returning to Oxford after Tolkien’s first position in the “refreshingly informal” (*Biography* 112) society of Leeds, Edith is described as “very lonely, frequently without company other than the servants and children during that part of the day when Ronald was out or in his study,” and distrustful of Oxford society<sup>27</sup> (*Biography* 159). Though Oxford was, according to Carpenter, “gradually becoming less rigid,” Edith’s discontent seems far from atypical. In addition, Carpenter reveals at this moment in that narrative that Edith “suffered severe headaches which could prostrate her for a day or more,” but without clear sympathy for—or indeed, connection to—how this might have impacted her social life or household management (*Biography* 159). Nevertheless, the limiting and somehow unsympathetic vision of Edith as neglected spouse is neither questioned nor qualified, existing in Edwards’s 2014 biography as an unhappy and unfortunate contrast to Tolkien’s busy, happy, productive professional life.

Unlike Edith’s, Tolkien’s social life at the time is indeed noteworthy, involving as it did the meetings of the Inklings. In what has become the dominant narrative, Edith is positioned firmly in opposition to her husband’s famous friends—problematic positioning at best, since readers are likely to be

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<sup>26</sup> Helena Swanwick lived from 1864–1938.

<sup>27</sup> Compare Edwards: “Tolkien’s professional life, then, was busy, and his imaginative writing varied and prolific (if all, at this stage, exclusively for private consumption); his personal life, though, was not easy. There were difficulties in his marriage; Edith had never settled into the social life of Oxford dons’ wives, and had never been part of Tolkien’s circle of (male) friends. Tolkien was usually out for much of the day, and often in the evenings also. She was lonely, and felt neglected by her husband. She had had no particular preparation for running the large household she now had (four children, plus domestic help of one sort or another) and tended to cloak uncertainty with authoritarianism” (163–164).

admirers of Tolkien and C.S. Lewis in particular, and enamored of their intellectual pursuits, and thus less sympathetic to a wife who would stand in way of such extraordinary and productive friendship. Here again, it is useful to consider the particular way—and the complexity with which—Carpenter depicts Tolkien's relationship with C.S. Lewis *vis à vis* his relationship with Edith. Writing either of Tolkien's life or of the life (biography) he was writing, Carpenter notes "the inevitable corollary of a life that centres on the company of men, and on groups such as the Inklings: women get left out of it" (*Biography* 156). However, there are times when his use of sources in *The Inklings* as compared to *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* varies in a way that calls into question his evidence for the case he is trying to build. In the biography, in the account of how Tolkien and Dyson influenced Lewis's acceptance of Christianity, Carpenter includes the following quote exclusively in the context of Tolkien's relationship with C.S. Lewis:

Friendship with Lewis compensates for much, and besides giving constant pleasure and comfort has done me much good from the contact with a man at once honest, brave, intellectual—a scholar, a poet, and a philosopher—and a lover, at least after a long pilgrimage, of Our Lord. (*Biography* 152)

In the biography, which is the earlier work, this quote is entirely removed from the context of Tolkien's marriage, included in a chapter titled "Jack" after chapters discussing Tolkien's "Christian and ascetic attitude" and his academic work. By contrast, in *The Inklings* Carpenter identifies the same passage as evidence of Tolkien's estrangement from Edith:

His marriage, never easy, had begun to go through a long period of extreme difficulty caused largely by his wife's resentment of his Roman Catholicism, and by other factors that went back to the broken childhoods they had both endured in Birmingham. By 1929 the Tolkiens were bringing up four children at their north Oxford house, but this if anything increased rather than lessened the strains of their marriage. It was thus with much feeling that Tolkien wrote in his diary, "Friendship with Lewis compensates for much." (*The Inklings* 32, emphasis mine)<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> While acknowledging that "amidst the quarrels, there was both forgiveness and enduring affection," Edwards, like Carpenter in *The Inklings*, uses the comment that "Friendship with Lewis compensates for much" as evidence that "their domestic life was clearly unhappy" (164).

Placement of the quotation in the latter example implies a meaning that was not indicated by the first use of the quote in the biography, suggesting a strong need for scholarly access to the diary itself for clarification.

There does seem to have been abundant evidence of Edith's negative feelings in the papers Carpenter examined, and presumably Edith was outspoken on the topic of her husband's devotion to his friends. George Sayer testifies in his recollection of Tolkien that the relationship between Tolkien and Lewis "had been very close, so close that Edith Tolkien had resented the time that her husband spent with him" (14). Combined with Carpenter's general representation of Edith, readers come to suspect a shrewish, nagging wife who would—if she could—have prevented her husband from having intellectual friendships (or perhaps any friendships outside of the home) in order to keep his attention focused on home and hearth. This interpretation bears a striking resemblance to C.S. Lewis's relationship with Mrs. Moore, and may owe more of a debt to Lewis's domestic arrangements than to Tolkien's. A footnote in *The Inklings* makes this comparison explicit: "Lewis's view of women was modeled more closely on Mrs. Moore and on Tolkien's wife Edith than on university wives in general" (165). Whether or not Lewis himself identified Edith with his own domestic partner, who by various accounts was extremely domineering, Carpenter certainly does. Although in both volumes Carpenter situates Tolkien as a neglectful spouse, justifying the feelings of neglect he attributes to Edith, he does so without sympathy for Edith's position. In particular, he observes that "she could see that one side of him came alive when he was in the company of men of his own kind. More specifically she noticed and resented his devotion to Jack Lewis" (*Biography* 159). According to Carpenter, this friendship puzzled Edith because Lewis, although friendly to the children, seemed unable to interact with Edith in what might be considered a normal manner, being instead "shy and ungainly"—indicative, perhaps, of a general difficulty interacting with adult women in domestic contexts (159). Carpenter also reports that "[m]any women found Lewis as unbearable as he found them" (*Inklings* 165). While he does not speculate on Lewis's ideas about women, Carpenter mentions in *The Inklings* Lewis's mother's early death, his brother Warnie's discomfort with women, and Lewis's unconventional domestic arrangement with Mrs. Moore, all of which may plausibly be considered as reasons why Lewis was not at ease with adult women, particularly Edith, who as Tolkien's wife, competed with Lewis for Tolkien's company. The result is the now-dominant narrative of spousal neglect, influenced heavily by Carpenter's interpretations of the letter in which Tolkien offers marital advice to his son Michael, and founded on the notions that "his need of male friendship was not entirely compatible with married life," that this was simply "one of the sad facts of a fallen world," and that Tolkien "thought that a man had a right to male pleasures, and should if

necessary insist on them" (*Biography* 159). This narrative of neglect forms a cornerstone of Fredrick and McBride's account of Tolkien's marriage, and a foundation for their critique of his depiction of women. Fredrick and McBride report that "[e]ven their children observed the separation between family life and the Inklings" (50), and identify, without consideration of whether any other intellectual, male or female, would be blamed for failing to mention a spouse in a letter, a separation between the spouses based on "Tolkien's letters, which rarely mention Edith" (50). Pearce's account of Edith's resentment and Tolkien's insistence on male companionship betrays a typical lack of understanding of Edith's perspective by quoting, immediately after introducing Edith's feelings of neglect, C.S. Lewis's *The Four Loves* as a justification of the male friendship that Tolkien and Lewis enjoyed before focusing the remainder of the chapter on Tolkien and Lewis's friendship and its importance for the concept of myth both shared (Pearce 52-54).

From Carpenter's accounts, it is worth considering what Tolkien's "life with his male friends" might have looked like in daily practice, and by what standards they might or might not be "compatible with married life"—in particular, given the attention to work-life balance issues common in contemporary discussions of marriage. In reference to the Inklings rather than to Tolkien's marriage, Carpenter depicts Tolkien as almost the "jealous spouse" of the group, describing a devotion to Lewis that does seem to rival, in Carpenter's account, Tolkien's devotion to Edith. In comparison to his friendship with the other Inklings, Tolkien's "devotion to Jack Lewis was more profound; his feelings for the other Inklings never equalled it" (*Inklings* 169). Carpenter baldly states that "the friendship was not quite so important to Lewis as it was to Tolkien" (*Inklings* 33), and Lewis's tendency to spread himself among many friends, compared to Tolkien's preference (often attributed to introverts) for remaining devoted to a much smaller number of people, resulted in some disappointment on Tolkien's end at the limited access that he had to his friend. George Sayer, on the other hand, reports that Lewis, knowing about Edith's resentment, harbored his own jealousy, and reports "that the two had different concepts of friendship" (14). In considering how intense friendship and frequent need for intellectual fulfillment beyond his academic work and writing influenced his relationship with his wife, we can take Carpenter's description of the importance of clubs at Oxford, and add to it the specifics he offers of Inklings meetings. Even so, a revised view of Tolkien's marriage would start not from the intellectual milieu in which Tolkien moved, or the literary and intellectual impact of Tolkien and Lewis, but from the lived reality of marriage and the expectations that have traditionally accompanied the union. Carpenter mentions that Tolkien and Lewis habitually met "on Monday mornings, when

they would talk for an hour or two and then conclude with beer at the Eastgate, a nearby pub" (*Biography* 150). Of the Inklings he writes that

The group, or various members of it, would meet on a weekday morning in a pub, generally on Tuesdays in the Eagle and Child (known familiarly as 'The Bird and Baby'); though during the war when beer was short and pubs crowded with servicemen their habits were more flexible. On Thursday nights they would meet in Lewis's big Magdalen sitting-room, congregating some time after nine o'clock [...] and would terminate at a late hour. (153)

This was in addition to their participation in the Kolbitár group. Notably, on the famous occasion of Lewis's conversion, the friends "talked in Lewis's rooms until three a.m., when Tolkien went home" (*Biography* 151). In his obituary for Tolkien, Lewis writes,<sup>29</sup> "He was a man of 'cronies' rather than of general society and was always best after midnight (he had a Johnsonian horror of going to bed)" (15) which makes it sound as though Tolkien, though married, regularly spent his time—late into the evening—in the company of Lewis and the Inklings. Here it is worth recalling Lewis's description of Tolkien as "the most married man he knew," meant to express Lewis's frustration when Tolkien was unavailable to him, in the context of the number of times the two friends were together during a given week. Edith Tolkien was not the only family member to feel a sense of neglect. Carpenter describes Warnie Lewis's feelings about his brother's friendship with Tolkien:

Outside term time, Tolkien and Lewis sometimes went for afternoon walks together. Warnie Lewis liked to enjoy as much of his brother's company as possible, and he was not always pleased about this. "Confound Tolkien!" he wrote in his diary on one such occasion. "I seem to see less and less of J. every day." (*Inklings* 55)

Lewis, however, makes special arrangements and considerations for his brother that he would not, at that point in his life, have countenanced for a man's wife:

Knowing Warnie's feelings, Jack took a great deal of trouble not to leave his brother out of anything and, when Tolkien and he decided to spend an evening reading aloud the libretto of Wagner's *Die Walküre*, Warnie was asked to join them even though he knew no German and could only take part by using an English translation. (*Inklings* 55-56)

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<sup>29</sup> For an account of the controversy surrounding the ascription to Lewis (who predeceased Tolkien by 10 years) of Tolkien's obituary in the *Times*, see n.1 to John Rateliff's essay "Inside Literature" in *Tolkien in the New Century: Essays in Honor of Tom Shippey* (2014).

Even acknowledging problems with Carpenter's account of their marriage, there is much here to explain a spouse's feelings of neglect. Indeed, only the semi-mythic stature of the individuals and the friendship involved can explain the degree to which Tolkien's marital strife has been treated as an unfortunate but understandable side-effect of (perhaps first and foremost) a poor match, and second (and more importantly) the extramarital intellectual needs of a quietly brilliant husband. A more contemporary understanding might acknowledge Edith as the victim of poorly communicated expectations and even worse work-life balance.

More cryptic, and hence more difficult to clearly discern, are the frequent references to Edith's resentment of Catholicism. Carpenter's narrative moves rather quickly from Edith's acquiescence to Tolkien's requirement that she convert to her disillusionment and, finally, resentment. In the chapter that outlines their marital strife, Carpenter summarizes "the problem of Edith's attitude to Catholicism":

Before they were married, Ronald had persuaded her to leave the Church of England and to become a Catholic, and she had resented this a little at the time. During the subsequent years she had almost given up going to mass. In the second decade of marriage her anti-Catholic feelings hardened, and by the time the family returned to Oxford in 1925 she was showing resentment of Ronald taking the children to church. (160)

In the narrative, Tolkien moves from a firm, authoritarian position, perhaps motivated by jealousy, to somewhat neglectful and incompetent, and finally, to hurt and bewildered—out of touch with his spouse until their reconciliation on the matter of religion. As Carpenter casts it, Edith's interest in religion is more social than it is spiritual or doctrinal,<sup>30</sup> while Tolkien is emotionally attached to Catholicism, and perhaps a bit fanatical, as in Tolkien's "rigid, almost medieval, insistence upon frequent confession" (Carpenter 160). Some of these problems are historical. Writing after the Second Vatican Council,<sup>31</sup> which relaxed many of the earlier stringencies of Catholic practice, Carpenter treats as choices

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<sup>30</sup> Here it may be interesting to consider Carpenter's own religious background—raised by an Anglican cleric, an atheist at 21, a cautious believer in an afterlife when he was happily married, persuaded by the Inklings' theology while writing *The Inklings*, and unconvinced by New Testament theology and a "complete unbeliever" shortly thereafter (Anderson 217, 221). These fluctuations in his own religious belief might have influenced Carpenter's impressions of Edith's conversion, and his depiction of her position relative to Catholicism.

<sup>31</sup> The Second Vatican Council, popularly called "Vatican II," the 21st ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church, spanned the years 1962–65. It was announced by Pope John XXIII on Jan. 25, 1959.

matters that would have carried the weight of obligation. Carpenter's references to frequent confession or confession before mass, for example, neglect to inform readers that before Vatican II, this was established practice, considered necessary for reception of the Eucharist in Holy Communion, as was fasting past midnight before receiving Communion at any time during the following day. Similarly, Carpenter seems unaware of the importance of marriage as a Sacrament in the Catholic Church, and of the pastoral emphasis on avoiding "mixed" or interfaith marriages.<sup>32</sup> For Tolkien, raised by a priest in the decades following the pontificate of Pope Leo XIII, marrying a non-Catholic would have been a grave matter of conscience that imperiled not only his marriage but his soul. Edwards offers some explanation of Catholic opposition to mixed marriages, though with the caveat that they "inevitably remained frequent," and explains that "a 'mixed marriage' might never be celebrated in the context of a full Nuptial Mass," though we learn later that by marrying during Lent, "the then custom of the Church forbade a full Nuptial Mass" (55, 87). Carpenter reduces the theological import of Edith's conversion to "an emotional matter," both related to Tolkien's feelings for his mother and "in part, though he would not have admitted it, a test of her love after her unfaithfulness in becoming engaged" (73).

On the other hand, it is not difficult to see how Edith's situation would be less than ideal for a healthy conversion. Though Edwards represents Edith as reluctant to convert (55), and John and Priscilla Tolkien say that "Ronald persuaded Edith" (36), as Carpenter describes it, Edith was amenable to conversion—"indeed she believed that her family had long ago been Catholic" (*Biography* 73). However willing or unwilling, it seems unlikely that the full theological weight was communicated adequately to Edith. At the time, instruction of potential converts to Catholicism was inconsistent and lacked clear process. But she had practical and social concerns as well, since in addition to losing her social circle, she faced discrimination and eviction from the house in which she lived (73). Even with a mature and committed faith and independent decision to convert, such severe censure would have been trying. From what we know from Carpenter, however, Edith's instruction in

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<sup>32</sup> Speaking on matters of faith in his official capacity as head of the Catholic Church, Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) made frequent reference to marriage in Encyclicals (or Apostolic Letters) addressed the Church and faithful in specific countries as well as to the Church as a whole. In *Arcanum* or *On Christian Marriage* (1880) he emphasizes the "dignity of the sacrament," the need for Christian marriage in an increasingly secular age, and devotes some attention to the dangers of marrying outside of the Catholic faith (*Arcanum* 20). Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) similarly felt the urgency to reassert Church teaching on marriage in his Encyclical *On Christian Marriage*, or *Castus Conubii* (1930) which speaks out more firmly on marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics.



Catholicism was not sound; she “was instructed in the Catholic faith by Father Murphy, the parish priest at Warwick, who did the job no more than adequately. Ronald was later to blame much on the poor teaching given her at this time” (76). Carpenter adds that “he himself did not help her,” and somewhat incongruently, that “[h]e found it difficult to communicate to her the deep and passionate nature of his own faith, entwined as it was with the memory of his dead mother”—again, setting up an elementary Freudian reading (76). Being on the one hand irrationally attached to the Church as a mother-figure, Tolkien is also accused of a failure to engage his wife intellectually: unlike “the lucidity he demonstrated in his theological arguments with Lewis,” Carpenter reports that “to Edith he presented only his emotional attachment to religion, of which she had little understanding” (160). While Tolkien was not entirely unemotional concerning Lewis’s prejudice against Catholicism, it seems self-evident that a friend’s and a spouse’s attitude toward one’s faith are not entirely analogous, and that communication between friends and spouses is also quite different.

Thus, a conversion that was voluntary but not self-initiated, and at first yielded happiness (“Edith made her first confession and first communion, which she found to be ‘a great and wonderful happiness’”) faded into routine and discomfort as the social life of the parish fell short of her wishes and “she began to dislike making her confession” (76). However, it seems that her health played a part in this as in her social failure in Oxford; Carpenter reports that

It was [...] all too easy when she was worried about her health (which was often) to postpone going to mass. She reported to Ronald that getting up to go to church early in the morning and fasting until she had made her communion did not agree with her. ‘I want to go,’ she told him, ‘and wish I could go often, but it is quite impossible: my health won’t stand it.’ (76)

Though Carpenter treats it as an excuse—not an uncommon response to women’s maladies—and though there could possibly have been health-related dispensations for mass attendance, health may in fact have presented an obstacle to consistent and faithful practice of Catholicism given Edith’s frequent, debilitating headaches; the guilt of missing—and having to confess—Sunday obligations insurmountable. At any rate, understanding of Edith’s perspective is naturally limited, subject to speculation, and repeated with varying degrees of virulence. A year before Carpenter’s detailed account, Grotta reports that “the Tolkiens were at odds with each other over the question of religion” (75); all other accounts of this conflict are indebted to Carpenter. Joseph Pearce reports, with a convert’s insight, that “Tolkien’s impatience [for Edith’s conversion] bore bitter fruit. Edith entered the Church with more mixed feelings than may have been the case if he had been prepared to wait. The residue of resentment, the

result of her being rushed into a decision before she was ready, remained with Edith for many years, possibly for the remainder of her days" (35).<sup>33</sup> Less sympathetically, in a perfect encapsulation of Carpenter's account, Fredrick and McBride repeat Carpenter's pronouncements about the psychology of Tolkien's faith, and assume a direct cause-and-effect relationship between confession and marital conflict. They acknowledge, however, that "these difficulties should not imply a complete rift between the two, or that their relationship devolved to a consistently unhappy one" (51). Here, it might be worthwhile to consider what other factors might contribute to a rift in religious practice within families and marriages; like responses to pregnancy and childbirth, spirituality and religious practice are generally acknowledged to be complex and individualized. A detail from Edwards suggests that the matter of Edith's conversion and religious practice contains unknown nuances—that soon after her marriage,

Edith struck up a friendship with the Catholic priest of the village, Fr Augustine Emery, who was musical (a violinist) and who, one Sunday, voluntarily celebrated a nuptial blessing for the couple to supply for the one omitted from their Lenten wedding (the congregation, Tolkien wryly observed, probably thought they had been living in sin). Fr Emery kept in touch with the Tolkiens over the coming decades. (88)

Friendship with one priest does not indicate an affection for her new religion, or satisfaction with conversion; however, Edith's early experiences of Catholicism were not all lonely and uncomfortable, as Carpenter and others have strongly implied.

Given the tone that Carpenter's biography sets when discussing Edith, and how marriage and domesticity existed unharmoniously, side-by-side with Tolkien's professional academic and creative pursuits, it seems almost natural that Edwards should announce Edith's death abruptly, after the chapter sub-heading "Oxford at last" (277). The sub-heading announces the end of the final chapter in the Tolkiens' life together, in which the couple moved from Oxford to Bournemouth, a favorite vacation destination of Edith's. The phrase "at last" has a dual meaning—that Tolkien is relieved to be returning from Bournemouth

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<sup>33</sup> See also Edwards: "[W]ith time, Edith came to feel that Tolkien had unfairly pressured her into becoming a Catholic, and she resented this, particularly as her experience of Anglicanism in the years they were apart had been a happy and sociable one. At some point in these years, probably towards the end of the 1920s, she stopped practising as a Catholic, and was unhappy that Tolkien took the children to church; occasionally, she let her resentment spill over into anger. Tolkien himself kept the emotional loyalty to the faith of his childhood (as far as we can tell, he kept up his religious practice during these years, although he may have lacked something in fervour), and was grieved by what he saw as Edith's desertion of it" (164).

to the place where he felt most at home, Oxford, and that it was the last move he was to make. In either case, the first sentence, "On 29 November 1971, after ten days' illness, Edith Tolkien died," announcing as it does the event that facilitated this move back to Oxford, fits with the overall idea that Edith was, in many ways, a burden. Carpenter tells how after Edith's death, Tolkien, though distressed, was free, "as he had not been within memory" (*Biography* 254). The Tolkiens' sojourn to Bournemouth—made temporary by Edith's death—is the subject of some controversy in itself; treatment of this move demonstrates the extent to which, in narrating Tolkien's life, scholars perpetuate unrealistic visions of marriage. Characteristically, the controversy originates with Carpenter. Having decided, "by the beginning of 1968, when he was seventy-six and Edith seventy-nine," to move, "he and Edith considered several possibilities in the Oxford area. But eventually they settled on Bournemouth" (247). In stark contrast to his fond account of Oxford, Carpenter denigrates what was Edith's preferred locale by identifying Bournemouth as "a peculiarly unloveable place," "[e]ven by the standard of English seaside towns" (249). Condescendingly, he describes it as "a setting in which elderly people of some affluence can be comfortable [...] with others of their age and class"; he adds that "Edith Tolkien had come to like it very much [...] for in Bournemouth for the first time in her life she had made a large number of friends" (248). Comparing it to the life she had known "in the Jessop household at Cheltenham," Carpenter describes Edith's preferred social setting at Bournemouth as "upper middle-class, affluent, *unintellectual*, and with an easy friendliness towards its own kind" (248, emphasis added). Edwards identifies in Bournemouth "the sort of agreeable, unstuffy (and unbookish) society in which Edith flourished" (274). Tolkien, on the other hand, was miserable in this setting, "though he found an occasional articulate fellow male" (Carpenter *Biography* 249); the move "involved much sacrifice," though Carpenter indicates that the purpose of the sacrifice—to increase Edith's happiness—was achieved, which inevitably improved Tolkien's own moods (*Biography* 251). Edwards describes what Carpenter calls the "purpose" to the "sacrifice" more directly, as "belated recompense to her for the years of her loneliness amongst his friends and occupations in Oxford" (274). In sympathy with Edith Tolkien in response to Carpenter's account, readers might wonder, along with Fredrick and McBride, who call the move to Bournemouth "a generous, loving gesture on Tolkien's part," "why Tolkien couldn't have taken some step toward increasing his wife's happiness at an earlier stage of their marriage" (52-53). In a neat summary of Carpenter, Edwards writes that

Edith was happy to be in Bournemouth, and regained something of the vivacity she had possessed as a young woman; Tolkien, although he took

pleasure in his wife's happiness, felt isolated, cut off from the society of his intellectual peers. Friends visited occasionally, but it was not like living in Oxford. For all his adult life, he had been what used to be called a clubbable man, much given to talk with male cronies and belonging to various societies and clubs whose meetings were often enriched by dinners. (275)

Rather than identifying the compromises inherent in marriage, the biographical accounts maintain a male-female, intellectual-nonintellectual dichotomy, ever emphasizing the failure of the spouses to achieve unity, and stressing the satisfaction of one at the expense of the other. Fredrick and McBride describe "the trade-off: three years of happiness for Edith within the social world she enjoyed versus her decades of nervousness, depression, and discomfort at Oxford; three years of vapid mental torpor for Tolkien versus his decades of moving at will between two separate worlds—a happy domestic life and the intellectual stimulus of male camaraderie" (52). Lacking in all of these accounts is an acknowledgment of the realities not only of living and communicating with—of truly understanding the needs of—another person, and, more tangibly, an acknowledgment that Oxford was, simply, the location of Tolkien's professional vocation—a preferable location, and position, to Leeds, though the society might have been easier to navigate.

Carpenter's biography looms like a giant over Tolkien scholarship, but standing on the shoulders of giants means seeing a bit farther than he was able. And this requires some skepticism. We can acknowledge, first, that in positioning his approach to Tolkien's life as the development of a man of brilliance who created popular and profound works of imaginative literature, Carpenter assumes that imaginative art is not the product of an ordinary, middle-class, suburban life. Through his representation as extraordinary the separation of Tolkien's home and intellectual lives, and his emphasis on marital strife, he sharpens an already existing social dichotomy, presumably in order to create the tension he deems necessary for artistic production. But perhaps it is possible to overstate these conflicts, to misrepresent and misunderstand them—particularly lacking the perspective of the other member of the union. Social histories of the early twentieth century indicate that in many ways, the Tolkiens' marriage resembles an average marriage of their generation. They were married for most of their lives. By Tolkien's account, he remained in love with his wife. John and Priscilla Tolkien offer some insight into Edith's own perspective in *The Tolkien Family Album*; notable are their image of "A small, compact oak desk, and in front of it a woman sitting in a pretty Edwardian harp-shaped chair writing letters" and an account of her high spirits at the Dresden House School (27). Embedded in the descriptions of Edith Tolkien are terms like "vivacity," and in

Tolkien's letters after her death are references to "the gallant and gay courage which Edith had in such full measure" (*Family Album* 69). Moving forward, I would like to propose, along with a representation of Edith as a fully-realized individual and participant in her marriage, contextualization of Tolkien as an average husband of his generation and one negotiating with his wife a life (in marriage) for which neither had a strong model. I would like to offer a vision of Edith as neither shrew or elf-maiden,<sup>34</sup> but as an influence on her husband's visions of marriage, and perhaps a strong source of personal motivation for his attempts to understand through his fiction different relationship models. In short, while Edith Tolkien remains largely inaccessible to scholars of Tolkien, I would like to suggest the possibility of a woman who was not a victim in her marriage, but rather, struggled with many of the same life-issues common to marriages into the twenty-first century, expressing frustration, anger, perhaps wry humor—in short, dealing with marital communication and disagreements in wholly human ways.

One incident from the biography—used to demonstrate Edith's antipathy toward her new faith and (by extension) her new husband—offers insight into Carpenter's influence while also allowing for the kind of reconsideration of Carpenter's representation that thus far only John Garth—in a very specific context—has accomplished, though without the aid of Garth's extensive investigative research. Carpenter reports that in 1917, "[t]he local Catholic church was a poor temporary affair set up in a cinema, so that [Edith] felt almost inclined to go to the Anglican parish church with Jennie, who was a member of the Church of England" (Carpenter 104). Repackaging this information, Fredrick and McBride report that "Edith developed second thoughts about her conversion; the Catholic church in Hornsea was temporarily housed in a movie theater" (49). The implied causation in Fredrick and McBride is problematic. Just as Pearce deems implausible that "a scholar as widely read and as perceptive as Tolkien would cling blindly to a belief throughout his entire life out of loyalty to, or as a substitute for, a mother's love" (Pearce 23), it is an insult to Edith to attribute to the aesthetics of the temporary location of the liturgy a sudden shift in resolve so soon after conversion. An alternate reading might be that having been raised in the Church of England, the poor accommodations and marginal status of the Roman Catholic Parish combined with her cousin's practice of the faith Edith had so recently renounced provided a temptation for Edith to attend services at the Anglican parish. Without knowing the source of the sentiment, it seems equally plausible that Edith—

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<sup>34</sup> Here it should be noted that Edith was the model, not for a passive elf-maiden who merely danced in the woods, but for Lúthien, an active participant with Beren in his quest for the Silmaril.

known to have a sense of humor—would have written to Tolkien, wittily proposing the accommodations as grounds for returning to the Church of England. After all, only a few years before the couple had amused themselves by tossing sugar cubes into the hats of passers-by! That it is possible to offer a more sympathetic reinterpretation of this marital communication without changing the basic facts demonstrates, above all, the importance of context, and how lack of context may have skewed current understanding. Future biographical studies of the Tolkiens should endeavor to place Edith Tolkien in her own social and historical context, even if it is not possible to represent her in her own words—the goal not to find and expose sordid details or to allow for psychoanalysis of the author’s fiction, but to narrow the quite considerable gap between Tolkien’s representation of women, regard for women’s intellectual abilities as evidenced by his work and friendship with female students, and what is currently known, implied, or suspected about his relationship with his wife. Such a study would represent the courtship and family life of Edith and John Ronald against the social, historical, and religious backdrop of early twentieth-century Britain in order to promote understanding of how—or whether—the Tolkiens’ marriage moved with or against the trends of their own historical period and demographic group, along with some consideration of how marriage is understood to function according to contemporary scholarship in the fields of psychology and sociology and according to Tolkien’s religious understanding. In the meantime, while Humphrey Carpenter’s *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* remains an invaluable scholarly research, some rhetorical consideration of Carpenter’s perspective is necessary, and can only enrich our current understanding of Tolkien’s life and works.

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