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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

Humphrey Carpenter's J.R.R. Tolkien: A biography; England; languages; legend; mythology

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For many years it has been a received truth that what Tolkien wanted to make was (or was initially) "a mythology for England", a phrase which is always put within quotation marks and never provided with a source. As far as I have found, the true tale runs so: on p. 59 in *J.R.R. Tolkien: A biography* Carpenter (1977) wrote of the young Tolkien's appreciation of the *Kalevala*, quoting his wish for "something of the same sort that belonged to the English", and commented "perhaps he was already thinking of creating that mythology for England himself". Evidently satisfied with his phrase, Carpenter titled Part Three of his book "1917-1925: The making of a mythology" and opened it with stating Tolkien's "desire to create a mythology *for England*" (p. 89) (italics original). And thus it chanced that the phrase found its way into the biography's Index, where under Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel (1892-1973)[1] you find WRITINGS – PRINCIPAL BOOKS, starting with *The Silmarillion*, which has a secondary entry "a mythology for England", within single quotation marks (in the original) like the names from Tolkien's works, and the one actual quotation ("out of the leaf-mould of the mind"), to be found in the Index. This is where the quotation marks come from.

In context, the desirable "something of the same sort" refers to "that very primitive undergrowth" found in "[t]hese mythological ballads", the *Kalevala* (Carpenter, 1977, p. 59). This does not exactly equal *mythology*, though it might be difficult to find a one-word equivalent. It is more curious that in the later passage (p. 89) Carpenter supports his statement with a long quotation from the Waldman letter, where the original project described by Tolkien is not to make a mythology for England, but to make "a body of more or less connected legend" to be dedicated "to England; to my country" (Tolkien, 1981, number 131, paragraph 5). Like the quotation marks, this spurious connection has fixed itself in the mind of Tolkien students: during my search for the source of the quotation I was repeatedly and unhesitatingly referred to the Waldman letter.

At last I have now found a probable derivation. There are a number of places where Tolkien uses *mythology* about his own work, and in one of them he is not far from *a mythology for England*. One of the letters begins like this:

> Thank you very much for your kind and encouraging letter. Having set myself a task, the arrogance of which I fully recognised and trembled at: being precisely to restore to the English an epic tradition and present them with a mythology of their own: it is a wonderful thing to be told that I have succeeded, at least with those who have still the undarkened heart and mind.
> (Tolkien, 1981, number 180, paragraph 1)

The published text is a draft for a letter to an unidentified Mr. Thompson, so Carpenter probably saw it while he worked on the biography, and associated it with the "something . . . that belonged to the English" from Tolkien's *Kalevala* paper, and the dedication "to England" from the Waldman letter, These clearly express comparable thoughts, but the Author actually spoke of different things: in the earliest instance it was the fruitful "primitive undergrowth" in language and tradition, in the second instance his own projected *legendarium*; and the "successful mythology" in the Thompson letter was *The Lord of the Rings*, or elements of *The Lord of the Rings*. As the words *being precisely* in the quotation above seem to show, it was Mr. Thompson who had called it that; and that Tolkien, while accepting the term (cf. his acceptance in Tolkien, 1981, number 163, paragraph 1, answering W. H. Auden, another early admirer of *The Lord of the Rings*, of the term *Trilogy*) explained in paragraph 4 that behind the success there existed *The Silmarillion*, shows that Mr. Thompson had not been aware of the unpublished work. The Author's account of his project and his usage of *mythology* will both be examined below, but first I want to consider the critical tradition built on Carpenter's conflation *a mythology for England* (*a mythology* probably from the Thompson letter, *England* from the Waldman letter, and *for* chosen to join them), and his assertion that this was what Tolkien wished to create.

The word *mythology* certainly is capable of a wide sweep of meanings. Used broadly it may mean nothing more specific

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[1] That is the entry, despite the note at the head of the Index.

than "a body of stories, epic corpus". The Author for instance employs this meaning in his footnote to letter number 211, paragraph 13, where "our 'mythological' Middle-Ages" means "the Middle-Ages as they are in our stories". A little further on in the same letter (paragraph 22) he mentions "the new and fascinating semi-scientific mythology of the 'Prehistoric'", using the word in a related broad sense, "a conceptual construction with imaginative power". Obviously Tolkien has indeed created a mythology in both these senses, and obviously the phrase *a mythology for England* seems to say something more specific and significant, and has commonly been taken to do so.[2] At the same time, though many critics have piously spoken the password it has not awarded much insight, though it might make an introduction or conclusion more evocative. The truth is of course that "a mythology" (in a more specific sense than those mentioned) is not what Tolkien's oeuvre is, and not what he set out to make. There is both "mythology" and "a mythology" in *The Book of Lost Tales*, but itself is neither "mythology" nor "a mythology", if *mythology* is used in its central current sense, involving such notions as the primordial, the cosmic, the divine, the sacred, the patterns for life, society and nature. A painting of a tree may to a large extent consist of painted sky, but this does not make it a painting of sky. There is a distinction between the subject matter and the background. In *The Book of Lost Tales* the mythology forms a background (though it might come in everywhere, like the sky glimpsed between the leaves).

Critics thoughtful and philological have associated the presupposed desire to create a mythology for England with the many instances where Tolkien in his stories "reconstructed"[3] a context for ancient English or Northern mythological fragments: Earendel is the most prominent case. (We may note that this interpretation in any case comes closer to the above-quoted dictum on *The Lord of the Rings*: in these "reconstructions" the Author is restoring something that belonged to the English, presenting them with their own mythology, rather than creating something for England.) In his article in the recent *Arda* one such philologist, T. A. Shippey, accordingly observed how Tolkien contrived "to fit in all the bits and pieces which philologists during the 19th and 20th centuries had uncovered from the English stories which would have made a mythology for England, if only it

had not all got lost" (Shippey, 1992, p. 24), explicating: "Tolkien was trying to reach back to an old past, as it were the lost English equivalent of what had almost survived in Norse. He was looking back to try and find what we might call an asterisk-mythology" (Shippey, 1992, p. 26). The observation is true, but the explication only gets hold of what Tolkien was doing when he "reconstructed", not what Tolkien was doing. The painter may be using ochres, but that is not what he his doing, he is painting his tree: if every concerned element, down to the last repercussion of the *Edda*, of the mythological vestiges in English words and names, and so on, in *The Book of Lost Tales* were listed, we would still get only a list of scattered points, by which the cycle as it is would not be comprehended.[4] Important though some of the elements are, "reconstruction" is incidental to the work. Also, the reconstructive effort embraced not only mythological fragments like Earendel and Wade: the Man in the Moon might perhaps pass as "mythological", but not the nursery-rhyme porridge served to him; it could have been "reconstructed" as mythology, but was not. What the Author was concerned to cultivate the remnants of was not "mythology" but the whole "primitive undergrowth" of tradition and language, ranging from the serious to the curious.[5]

Most obviously, the asterisk-mythology view fails in that neither the Lost Tales in general nor their mythology in especial can sincerely be regarded as very like anything that might have been told among the ancient English. Tolkien's legends are (even in their earliest stage) undisguisedly idiosyncratic, and I will not be persuaded that this is the result of a glorious failure, that the Author in fact strove to reproduce the lost English mythology as he conceived it to have been.

There is a further difficulty which encumbers the idea of making *a mythology for England*, reconstruction or not. It may be less obvious, but was lucidly exposed by Shippey. I quote summarily:

> So if Tolkien thought he was going to make a mythology for England, this meant . . . trying to give people something which was so evidently missing that they would not believe it if you gave it to them . . . So I think that public acceptance would never have been very likely. I think Tolkien knew that . . . He tried a

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[2] Quite possibly it was not meant very specifically. Where Carpenter (1977) on p. 6 says of Tolkien "Once more he refers to his own mythology", the back-reference is *The Lord of the Rings*.

It is of course absolutely legitimate to use *mythology* in the broad "imaginary invention"-sense – Tolkien himself did so, as we have seen and will return to below. Apart from the erroneous quotation marks, which may be the publisher's fault, there is no blame on the biography, which was not meant as a revealing literary analysis. My argument is that when *mythology* is used as a definition of Tolkien's project a highly-charged sense is assumed, which obscures a quintessential quality of his works.

[3] I adopt this term from T. A. Shippey (1982).

[4] What I mean is not that the rendering would be fragmentary: the list would be a mere assemblage, and as such no rendering at all. A list of all the Latin-derived words in this article would preserve nothing of it. Granted, that would be true even if the text were indeed precisely an exercise in writing Latin-derived words; but that they are prevalent and often important is no indication that it is one.

[5] "There has been been much debate concerning the relations of these things, of *folk-tale* and *myth*", the Author noted in "On Fairy-Stories" (1964), Origins, paragraph 6. In the following paragraphs (7-12) he argued that "the higher aristocracy of mythology" and the characters of "folk-tales, *Märchen*, fairy-stories – nursery-tales" live by the same life, the life of Faërie, derived from sub-creative man; there is "no fundamental distinction between the higher and lower mythologies", and, moreover, neither is prior to the other. According to Tolkien a pure mythology (in the current sense) has never existed and would be totally artificial: the intrinsic place of mythology is the marches of Faërie, related to its "Mystical [face] towards the Supernatural".

line of descent in English; he tried borrowing also from Norse. Neither of these, I think, would have been successful tactics.

(Shippey, 1992, pp. 23, 23-24, 25, 27)

In other words: could Tolkien ever have thought that the English would accept his writings as their mythology? (This is in effect a criticism of *for* in Carpenter's formula.)

The question is rhetorical and need not be pondered; the Author has with sufficient clarity described what he set out to do. The most comprehensive exposition is that in the justly famous Waldman letter (Tolkien, 1981, number 131). Picking the crucial points from the crucial paragraphs (2, 3, 5 and 6), what Tolkien says is this;

2. "[T]his stuff began with me . . . I mean, I do not remember a time when I was not building it. Many children make up, or begin to make up, imaginary languages. I have been at it since I could write. But I have never stopped."

3. "But an equally basic passion of mine *ab initio* was for myth (not allegory!) and for fairy-story, and above all for heroic legend on the brink of fairy-tale and history, of which there is far too little in the world (accessible to me) for my appetite. I was an undergraduate before thought and experience revealed to me that these were not divergent interests – opposite poles of science and romance – but integrally related . . . Also I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved county: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil)." Much of what is said in those two paragraphs reappears in letter 163, paragraphs 4-10:

It was an inevitable, though conditionable, evolvement of the birth-given. It has been always with me: the sensibility to linguistic pattern which affects me emotionally like colour or music; and the passionate love of growing things;[6] and the deep response to legends (for want of a better word) that have what I would call the North-western temper and temperature . . . I discovered . . . the acute aesthetic pleasure derived from a language for its own sake . . . – it is not quite the same as the mere perception of beauty: I feel the beauty of say Italian or for that matter of modern English (which is very remote from my personal taste): it is more like the appetite for a needed food . . . All this only as background to the stories, though languages and names are for me inextricable from the stories. They are and were so to speak an attempt to give a background or a world in which my expressions of linguistic taste could have a function.

To synthesize: a) Tolkien had a specific linguistic appetite which he satisfied partly by inventing languages of his own. b) He had also an appetite for myth and for stories on the brink of fairy-tale and history, for which *legends* was the best word he could find. c) He was especially responsive to legends of the North-western temper, and regretted that there were none bound up with the English tongue and soil. d) He discovered that language and legends were integrally related;

his own invented languages and legends each reinforce the other. The last point is driven home in letter 180, the Thompson letter, paragraph 2:

I made the discovery that "legends" depend on the language to which they belong; but a living language depends equally on the "legends" which it conveys by tradition . . . So though . . . I began with language, I found myself involved in inventing "legends" of the same "taste".

5. "Do not laugh! But once upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story – the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths – which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country. It should possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our 'air' (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe . . .) . . . The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama. Absurd." That his crest had by 1951 fallen apparently means that he no longer absurdly envisaged his opus as a majestic matter for elaboration in other arts, and that he would not pathetically dedicate it to England. In any case, he was still engaged on *a body of legend*, for this label is a gloss on the term *legendarium* or *legendary* which he had begun to use the year before (the earliest instance I have found is in letter 124, paragraph 6) about *The Silmarillion*, and which is also so used in paragraph 15 of the present letter. *The Silmarillion* (or what had acquired that overall title), then, was shaped to a) have the desired quality of the North-western clime and soil, and b) range from vast cosmogonic backcloths to the level of romantic fairy-story. The subsequent exposition in the letter turns on the latter fact; it was this inherent range which found its appropriate extension in the later works – *The Hobbit* "proved to be the discovery of the completion of the whole, its mode of descent to earth, and merging into 'history'" (paragraph 7; the Author had, as we now know, previously tried various modes of merging the high romance into history without finding what he wanted). The contents of *The Silmarillion* are also described in terms of the same gradation: "The cycles begin with a cosmogonical myth: the *Music of the Ainur*" (paragraph 10); "It moves then swiftly to the *History of the Elves*, or the *Silmarillion* proper . . . in a still half-mythical mode" (paragraph 11); "As the stories become less mythical, and more like stories and romances, Men are interwoven . . . The chief of the stories of the *Silmarillion*, and the one most fully treated is the *Story of Beren and Lúthien the Elfmaiden* . . . the story is (I think beautiful and powerful) heroic-fairy-romance" (paragraphs 16, 17).

6. "Of course, such an overweening purpose did not develop all at once. The mere stories were the thing. They arose in my mind as "given" things, and as they came, separately, so too the links grew." Letter 257, paragraph 4,

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[6] Regrettably, Tolkien did not expand on the "inevitable evolvement" of this element into literary creation.

contains a fuller account:

> The germ of my attempt to write legends of my own to fit my private languages was the tragic tale of the hapless Kullervo in the Finnish *Kalevala*. It remains a major matter in the legends of the First Age (which I hope to publish as *The Silmarillion*), though as "The Children of Húrin" it is entirely changed . . . The second point was the writing, "out of my head", of the "Fall of Gondolin", the story of Idril and Earendel . . . and the original version of the "Tale of Lúthien Tinúviel and Beren" later . . . I carried on with this construction after escaping from the army . . . In Oxford I wrote a cosmogonical myth, "The Music of the Ainur" . . .

Some of the leaves caught in the wind became a tree, and the tree required a sky behind it. The stories required the splendid mythological backcloths; the larger was founded on the lesser.[7] *The mere stories were the thing.*

Thus has Tolkien recounted the formation of his project. Against that background I have investigated his usage of *mythology* in his published letters. I have found 54 instances, distributed in 22 letters, where *mythology* (*-ies*, *-ical*, *-ically*) relates to his own works.[8] Schematically, the usage has three elements:

1) As I have already indicated, Tolkien not seldom used *mythology* broadly for "invention: nexus of imaginary tales, epic corpus; construction", as in letter 165, paragraph 12 (the first of the three attached paragraphs), where the tale of Lúthien and Beren is called "the kernel of the mythology", or in letter 229, paragraph 13, where the placing of Mordor is a "narrative and geographical necessity, within my 'mythology'". (It was apparently in this sense that the word was used by Mr. Thompson and paraphrased in Tolkien's answer.)

2) Again, he often used it strictly, connoting "the large and cosmogonic" (the earlier-mentioned notions adjoining): letters 156, 181, and 200 contain good examples.

3) It might also be used more loosely to connote, as it were, "an aura of mythology"; in especial, when he was speaking, as often, and for instance in letter 163, with the enlarged "legendarium, of which the Trilogy is part (the conclusion)" (paragraph 12) in view, he sometimes used *mythology* about the earlier past as a block, as in "the background mythology" (paragraph 17), leaving out of account that progressively within that block "the matter becomes 'storial' and not mythical" (Tolkien, 1981, number 212, footnote to paragraph 6).[9]

Senses 1 and 2 are clearly discriminable, but sense 3 overlaps both and has hardly any room of its own. Especially it overlaps sense 1: should the quoted "the kernel of the mythology" be taken simply as "the kernel of the nexus of stories" or as "the kernel of the nexus of notably mythical stories" – even though the same story is explicitly reckoned among the "less mythical" ones in a passage quoted above, and implicitly among the "not mythical" ones in another? Would the quoted "the background mythology" be better taken as a mere variation on "the greater construction" four paragraphs earlier in that letter? But sense 3 grows naturally out of sense 2: the lesser that draws splendour from the mythology behind may from a distance melt into it.

The lesson of that is not that the *legendarium*, or *The Silmarillion*, or the original project may after all be seen as "a mythology" – if they may be so seen it is when reduced (or raised) to the background of something else. The lesson is that when you are there, in the actual stories, the stage is always set in front of the vast backcloths, where things are becoming less mythical and more storial, passing into history. Tolkien desired, as we have seen, legends "on the brink of fairy-tale and history", and the transition is going on throughout the whole *legendarium*.[10]

To sum up, what Tolkien set out to make was languages to his taste. Because he made languages to his taste he found himself writing stories to his taste. Writing stories to his taste meant giving them the splendour of background mythology and a merging into history. That is what he was doing. The

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[7] This is not to say that the mythology was added *ex nihilo*. The existence of such a background was already implied in the stories.

[8] I have also noted twelve occurrences of *mythology* with other references. However, when the sense is not independently indicated by the context it cannot be defined without circular argument (the same is true about the use in "A Secret Vice", paragraph 36). To the extent that the context does suggest the sense, the usage seems congruent to that in the examined cases.

The Thompson case shows that when *mythology* does refer to Tolkien's works, he may not always have chosen it wholly of his own accord. I have not included the occurrence in what is marked as a quotation from Lord Halsbury, in Tolkien, 1981, number 204, paragraph 1.

[9] To ascribe a given occurrence of *mythology* to sense 1, 2 or 3 is necessarily a matter of interpretation, but on my reading there are 17 instances of sense 1, 27 instances of sense 2, and 10 instances of sense 3. The adjectival and adverbial forms are found only in senses 2 and 3.

There are at least twenty-five letters where the Author characterizes his works without recourse to the word *mythology*, and is peripheral in some of the letters where he did use it. The term most frequently relied on is *legend* (derivatives included). Composite expressions are usual, like *legends and stories, legendary and history, mythical history, Elvish histories, fabulous history, Elvish legends, stories and romances, legends and annals*, etc. There is thus nothing like a settled and consistent terminology, which no doubt shows that, like *legend*, all the terms were used "for lack of a better word".

[10] This "brink of fairy-tale and history" is presumably the brink between the two; but in context it might conceivably mean the brink between on the one hand fairy-tale and history and on the other heroic legend, or possibly myth. From the ensuing exposition in letter 131 all the interpretations can be justified.

In all the stories there is an awareness of an exalted past, and with it intimations of the eternity whence it sprang. Glimpses from beyond the walls of the world come into the everyday in this historical, mediate, mode as well as in a fairy-story, immediate, mode, the eucatastrophe. The "brink" is thus really a complex borderland of three regimes: the mythical, the mundane and the miraculous.

stories were the thing. Not a mythology: a body of legend.

Tolkien was creating "for England", Carpenter said. What the Author himself spoke of was, we saw, presenting his work "to England", "to the English". His statements are not much elaborated. He said, as we read above, that England lacked stories "bound up with its tongue and soil", and he decided to make a legendarium redolent of its "clime and soil". What about the tongue? The Author always stressed that his stories are bound up with his own languages, and that "*mythically* these tales are Elf-centred" (Tolkien, 1981, number 212, paragraph 6; italics original). Yet of course he wrote in English, and while he never translated any longer passage into Elvish he did translate parts into Old English. Tolkien wished for a body of legends "bound up" with English by immemorial tradition, and he could not really create that. But Elvish and its legends have the North-western temper and therefore fit England's soil. And when they are presented to the English, the English might become Elf-friends. As these legends are written in English, the English have the birthright to them, not Celts or Scandinavians.

Where I broke the previous quotation from him, Shippey goes on to say:

> If he had succeeded, he would have run into another problem – one which should be considered some other time –: what is a "myth"? There are many definitions of "myth", but I would have thought that a myth was something that you believed in. But can you, then, present something to be believed in when you have invented it yourself? About that I am very doubtful. And if he had succeeded in doing it, there would have been a deep problem of belief. The myth that he created would have been a rival to Faith, and I think Tolkien would have found that particularly difficult if it had really appeared as a challenge.
> (Shippey, 1992, p. 27)

Tolkien, I think, would not have said that a myth is something you believe in.[11] But he was wary: "humility and an awareness of peril is required . . . Great harm can be done, of course, by this potent mode of 'myth'" (Tolkien, 1981, number 153, paragraphs 16-17). Creating an Elvish mythology for the legendary, one which becomes to the reader an awesome and edifying "mythology once removed", was a less problematic enterprise than it would have been to create a mythology for England.

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[11] See for instance letter 211, paragraph 25, where he says that "all this is 'mythical', and not any kind of new religion or vision". In "On Fairy-Stories" (Tolkien, 1964), Origins, paragraphs 11-12, mythology and religion are described as two entangled but different things (though possibly fundamentally connected).