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Richard Mathews

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### The Edges of Reality in Tolkien's Tale of Aldarion and Erendis

#### Abstract

Calls "The Tale of Aldarion and Erendis" one "which uniquely employs hard edges of reality to heighten the success of the fantasy."

#### Additional Keywords

Mimesis in "The Tale of Aldarion and Erendis"; Sex roles in "The Tale of Aldarion and Erendis"; Tolkien, Christopher—Editorship; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Aldarion; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Erendis; Tolkien, J.R.R. "The Tale of Aldarion and Erendis"

# The Edges of Reality

## in Tolkien's Tale of Aldarion and Erendis

Richard Matheus

Among the stories collected by Christopher Tolkien in *Unfinished Tales* is one by his father which uniquely employs hard edges of reality to heighten the success of the fantasy. As Brian Attebery reminds us in his recent *Strategies of Fantasy*, "Fantasy depends on mimesis for its effectiveness" (4). All of Tolkien's work makes use of strong mimetic elements. In this instance, however, the mimetic elements seem particularly realistic and central to the message of the story. If fantasy involves a raising of the limits on the possible, allowing the imagination to set sail upon the oceans of impossibility, the mimetic serves to anchor us firmly to the real. In this tale splendor, magic, and mythic struggles over power (and good and evil) are set against the real limits of temporal, ecological, and emotional reality which are vividly down-to-earth and contemporary. Tolkien makes his heightened mythic world immensely personal and immediate. Moreover, his extension of mimetic elements to encompass the text itself, a heightened awareness of the text as text, enlarges our understanding of the possible set of texts for fantasy — history, literature, and even scholarship as fantasy. It is a tale which offers insight into Tolkien's own creative project and a powerful testament affirming shared creative vision through the gifted contributions of his son.

Christopher Tolkien notes in his introduction that the text for this charming story "was left in the least developed state of all the pieces in this collection" (xviii), a fact which called for special editorial handling on his part. However, he also recognized it "as a story unique in its content among my father's writings" (xviii). Part of its uniqueness resides in the fact that it is the only full story to have survived from the ages of Númenor other than "The Akallabêth," the account of the end of the age and the land. The star-shaped island of Númenor had emerged from the sea at the start of the Second Age of the Sun following the great catastrophe of the War of Wrath when Beleriand sank into the oceans. Númenor subsequently became the realm of the mightiest Men on Arda during the Second Age, a span of some 3,441 years, until the Second Age ended in its turn with the sinking of Númenor and the great change of the flat earth into a globe.<sup>1</sup> This unique text has been assembled by a careful scholar, and the scholarly additions seem perfectly consistent with the project Attebery refers to as Tolkien's creation of the "megastory of Middle-earth" (28). The scholarship surrounding the final presentation of the tale becomes part of the mimesis, lending an air of reality and antiquity to our experience of the story, which

seems all the more vivid for its presentation in a manner similar to actual, ancient fragmentary texts. In this and other unfinished tales and fragments of his mythic megastory Tolkien seeds a radical reconception of the form of fantasy text. Full investigation of the implications are beyond the scope of this brief paper, for I do want to talk more specifically about the story, but there are significant suggestions about form here. There is a willingness to accept found or given "form" resembling fragments of the ancient texts Tolkien himself studied as a scholar. And perhaps this an invitation to reconceive authorship with respect to form. Following this line of thought, fantasy may lead us to see mythic invention and even contemporary textual fragments as literary texts worthy of study, revealing perhaps as much as "finished" formal works the qualities of insight and discovery we look for in great literature.

The Tale of Aldarion and Erendis begins and ends by establishing lineage, thus clearly defining its place within the megastory.<sup>2</sup> Tolkien's text starts by stating that "Meneldur was the son of Tar-Elendil, the fourth King of Númenor. He was the king's third child, for he had two sisters, named Silmarien and Isilmë. . . ." (173). By reciting marriages and generations over time the author rehearses us in the defining qualities of change, mortality, and again associates his work with ancient literatures which also relate epic and mythic histories in the context of genealogy: the histories of the kings of Iceland in the *Heimskringla*; the generations enumerated in the Old Testament; the lineages detailed in *Beowulf* or in the Finnish *Kalevala*.<sup>3</sup>

Within the overview of history and lineage, the tale turns quickly to focus on a contrast between Meneldur, "a man of gentle mood, without pride, whose exercise was rather in thought than in deeds of the body" (173), and his son Aldarion, "a man of great stature, strong and vigorous in mind and body, golden-haired as his mother, ready to mirth and generous, but prouder than his father and ever more bent on his own will" (174).<sup>4</sup> Meneldur seems to have been one of the wisest and least pride-plagued rulers of Númenor, but his son, in addition to inheriting his mother's golden hair, shares an interest from her side of the family in shipbuilding, and in sailing on the seas. "From the first he loved the Sea, and his mind was turned to the craft of ship-building" (174).

The fact that the tale is subtitled "The Mariner's Wife" forewarns us about Aldarion's calling as a sailor, and it also directs the reader's attention to his future wife, Erendis. In



fact, the female role of wife as well as the male role of mariner (and king) within the story present from the first a suggestion that the tale is concerned with a thematic exploration of role. We will come to see that there are significant struggles posed here regarding both male and female gender roles. They are focused in struggles over pride, for Aldarion is "prouder than his father and ever bent on his own will," and Erendis, a lover of trees and the land, is filled with pride as she determines "she must utterly defeat the Sea and the ships, or else be herself defeated utterly" (182). But Tolkien observes that there is another conflict for "her heart was not under her will," which is the case for both Aldarion and Erendis. For both of these strong characters the overwhelming power of feelings and emotions, the love and fate which draw them inexorably to one another, prescribe a limit to the bounds of will or rational intention.

Tolkien creates strong characterizations of both Aldarion and Erendis, both of whom prove to be wise and good, if filled with flaws which will destroy their relationship. If male-female relationships in *The Lord of the Rings* suffer from a lack of believable physical and intellectual dimension, this is far less the case in this tale. Erendis in particular is given strength and wisdom early in the story. Aldarion has seen a shadow upon the sea, and Erendis questions him, "Do you not love the Yözáyan?" using the Adûnaic name for Númenor, "Land of Gift." He explains that he does indeed love it, but that he is thinking "of what it may be in time to come." She replies,

Such gifts as come from the Valar, and through them from the One, are to be loved for themselves now, and in all nows. They are not given for barter, for more or for better . . . and we cannot dwell in the time that is to come, lest we lose our now for a phantom of our own design (184).

Here then is a debate about the nature of and limits of time, expressed through opposing male and female perceptions of it. Aldarion, it turns out, has an inkling of dark forces rising, and an instinct for what needs to be done to battle against them, but the very things which equip him for a role in that great struggle, draw him away from Erendis, their love within the here and now, the light she has to shed upon the looming darkness, and the care of the land and forests which an ecology for future life demands. Aldarion, even while he is drawn out onto the seas toward the coming struggle against powers of darkness, recognizes great light in Erendis, giving her a jewel, and observing that "it is dimmed by the light of your eyes." (184) Until sorrow comes upon her, Erendis is known by a name of light and the image of the jewel she wears, Tar-Elestirne, the Lady of the Star-brow. And "Star-brow" echoes the star shape of the island of Númenor itself which like Erendis will sink into the sea. (It also recalls the light of Eärendil the Mariner, sailing the firmament with the Silmaril on his brow, who led the Edain to Númenor at the end of the First Age, and whose wife had thrown herself into the sea.)

While Tolkien's love of trees and land is well estab-

lished in *The Lord of the Rings*, his elemental understanding of the sea, so important in the sailing of Eärendil the Mariner and the total mythos of Arda, is nowhere more strongly conveyed than in this tale in which Aldarion is pulled in two directions. The power of the sea is so strong upon him that it is physical: "Then suddenly the sea-longing took him as though a great hand had been laid on his throat, and his heart hammered, and his breath was stopped" (185). The power is as strong as the power of love or death. It couldn't be more opposed to the similarly powerful natural forces which grip Erendis: "to the woods of Númenor my heart is given. And, alas! if for love of you I took ship, I should not return. It is beyond my strength to endure; and out of sight of land I should die" (180). These characters so strongly attracted to each other are simultaneously constrained by emotional limits delineated by their love for sea and land as for each other.

The symbols of this conflicting union are not merely female and male, but earth and sea, time and eternity. Aldarion would dedicate himself unrealistically to timeless and infinite possibilities on the sea [the medium of eternity which surrounds and contains the megastory]. He is described as a great Elf friend for in his sea-drawn impulse is hope of future victory over the narrowing darkness of Sauron. Yet, Erendis with her love of the land, sees that all moments and each moment will be consumed within the lure of infinite voyage, just as the land's ecology, time-based and finite, are wasted in the building of many ships. Aldarion himself recognizes this: "He found that there had been much felling of trees for building and the making of many things, but all was done without foresight, and little had been planted to replace what was taken. . . ." (181). Aldarion looks to the replanting of the forests, but Tolkien reminds us repeatedly of ecological limits: "timber was become scarce for the shipyards, for Aldarion neglected the forests" (185) in favor of ships and the training of voyagers. Whenever he sets sail upon the sea Aldarion loses all track of time, and is gone years longer than expected. His best intentions to shape the land to his purposes seem also thwarted by time and ecology as he discovers "the haven of Vinyalondë now wholly ruined . . . great seas had brought to nothing all his labours to restore it" (188) and when he returns home he must throw himself into the role of Master of Forests, "yet since the people were now more numerous there was ever need for wood for building and for the making of many things beside" (191). Yet, his dedication to the forests rather than becoming a bond to Erendis, is a source of pain and separation, for "she was saddened by the sight of trees felled in their prime, and afterwards hewn and sawn" (185) while Tolkien observes with some objectivity "to many beside Erendis it seemed that he had little love for trees in themselves, caring for them rather as timber that would serve his designs" (191).

Despite the fateful conflicts of their hearts and wills Aldarion and Erendis are married, their union blessed by the Elves, the Firstborn, who travel to Númenor from the

Undying Lands in a great white Elven ship to grace the wedding feast. From the Elves Aldarion and Erendis receive a pair of birds, wedded for life, and a tree with snow-white bark, which Aldarion, true to form, seems only to admire for its potential strength as timber, but which the Eldar prize for its own sake, noting that it has never been cut for wood. [It is a descendant of Telperion, Eldest of Trees, through its seedling Galathilion, the White Tree of Eressëa, holiest of trees to the Elves — a reminder that in natural history as in human history geneology is important.] This tree eventually affords Aldarion at least partial recognition in the story, for when the sea has once again claimed Aldarion's attention, when Erendis in consequent despair has sent the Elf-given birds to fly back home and Aldarion has razed their wedding house, he spares the white Elven-tree, and "standing amid the desolation . . . he saw for the first time that it was in itself beautiful" (201-202). He names it after their daughter, Ancalimë, who in turn will succeed him as ruler.

The story of this relationship between Aldarion and Erendis is powerful, and rendered vividly on each side. Aldarion sees the world and Erendis his way: "She loves herself with Númenor as a setting, and myself as a tame hound, to drowse by the hearth until she has a mind to walk in her own fields" (203). Equally powerful is the female point of view — actually, a feminist point of view, from Erendis, rendered most articulately in an example of her "teaching" quoted from Tolkien's manuscript in "The Further Course of the Narrative":

Men in Númenor are half-Elves (said Erendis), especially the high men; they are neither the one nor the other. The long life that they were granted deceives them, and they dally in the world, children in mind, until age finds them — and then many only forsake play out of doors for play in their houses. They turn their play into great matters and great matters into play . . . and women to them are but fires on the hearth — for others to tend, until they are tired of play in the evening. All things were made for their service: hills are for quarries, rivers to furnish water or to turn wheels, trees for boards, women for their body's need, or if fair to adorn their table and hearth; and children to be teased when nothing else is to do — but they would as soon play with their hounds' whelps" (206-07).<sup>5</sup>

For thirty-three pages the tale of Aldarion and Erendis is complete and engaging; the text seems satisfactorily polished in a comfortable, formal but not lofty style. But it breaks off on page 198 where the relationship between Aldarion and Erendis is apparently irrevocably broken. There are several surprising twists just before it stops, however. For one thing, Aldarion's relationship with his father, which has seemed just as unlikely to survive as the wedding of the male-female opposites is mended through two means. First, Meneldur gains insight into Aldarion's voyages by reading an urgent letter from Gil-galad, High King of the Noldor, who speaks of Aldarion as "the greatest Elf-friend that now is among Men" (199) and apologizes for having delayed his return because of having desperate need of his services:

"A new shadow arises in the East. It is no tyranny of evil Men, as your son believes; but a servant of Morgoth is stirring, and evil things wake again. Each year it gains in strength, for most Men are ripe to its purpose" (199).

He explains that Aldarion has had the foresight to recognize how the coast can be defended, "and he understands better than any the needs of your great ships." (200) Gil-galad requests help which Meneldur feels himself unable to give, and so a second surprise comes as the narrative draws to a close when Meneldur passes his sceptre and his rule to his son. This is a high point of male selflessness and virtuous nobility. Male pride is put aside. Aldarion's best nature rises in response; he falls to his knees before his father in a truly memorable gesture and passage: "Father," he said, "ask the King to forget my insolence to him. For he is a great King, and his humility sets him far above my pride. I am conquered: I submit myself wholly" (204).

Tolkien's refusal to allow the characters of the story to be portrayed in black and white is a credit to the sophistication of emotion and mythos he conceives. The complete version of the tale closes with a symmetry of texts in this parallel reading of two letters, both of them addressed to Meneldur (King and father). The first is the letter from Gil-galad I have just discussed; the second is a letter from Erendis, declining to come with her daughter to her father-in-law's castle and asking that she be permitted to remain in solitude. Aldarion is handed the letter to read in his turn. He responds that he would rather she had flouted him than choose to fall "down dim into her own twilight," (205) but as she rejects his choice of life, he equally rejects life "of a sheep-farm among serving-women" (205). With resignation he returns the letter to the king, saying "Well: so it is" (205). The matter ends acknowledging the fact of separation and with Aldarion resolving that his daughter have the opportunity to choose her life "by knowledge" (205).

Perhaps mimesis overwhelms fantasy at last in this tale, or seems to, for not only does the narrative break off as does the marriage without the requisite happy ending, the lack of resolution seems calculatedly modern, indeterminate. The story contains overwhelming elements of the impossible, but in the very midst of violations of natural law there are insistent reminders of the limits of the same reality we know, frustrated relationships, wasted ecology, doomed history. And if as Attebery reminds us "the characteristic structure of fantasy is comic. It begins with a problem and ends with resolution" (15), the ending of this unfinished tale, with its separations and disintegration of family and violation of traditional lineage, is imitative of realism while it flouts romance. Yet there are resolutions at the end: father reconciled with son, son with daughter, and textual fragments with hints toward completion. Ultimately, it seems to be the text itself which makes a fantasy of this unfinished tale, for the final unity is achieved through an act of scholarship, interpretation, historical overview and placement within megastory.

Christopher Tolkien provides through notes and frag-



ments of his father's text a final section of "The Further Course of the Narrative." In it the son completes a beautiful aesthetic whole which seems to me perfectly to reflect his father's accomplishments and intent. It is a seamless assumption of the mantle of authorship through scholarship, a mirroring of the passing of the scepter from Meneldur to Aldarion. His writing is careful and meticulously accurate, but also clean and lyrical; it never slips into a dry or predictable academic tone. His summation of further action echoes without imitating the spirit of the original, and captures a reader's imagination afresh in the persons and events described. Christopher Tolkien's skill in recreating the story can be found on every page, but consider one brief description of Aldarion's daughter as an example:

Ancalimë, like her father, was resolute in pursuing her policies; and like him she was obstinate, taking the opposite course to any that was counselled. She had something of her mother's coldness and sense of personal injury; and deep in her heart, almost but not quite forgotten, was the firmness with which Aldarion had unclasped her hand and set her down when he was in haste to be gone. She loved dearly the downlands of her home, and never (as she said) in her life could she sleep at peace far from the sound of sheep. But she did not refuse the Heirship, and determined that when her day came she would be a powerful Ruling Queen; and when so, to live where and how she pleased (207).

How much of the wording and cadences might have been recovered *in toto* from "glimpses and snatches, from notes and jottings" by his father Christopher Tolkien does not make clear, but here he has assumed for his father's work the very task Bilbo undertook in rendering translations for the Red Book to preserve its treasure trove of lore. His work becomes wedded to the original, and just as the setting of the precious gem presented by Aldarion to Erendis enhanced its radiance and allowed its glow to be seen, the notes and summaries of the scholar support and display this gem of an uncompleted tale to full advantage and make of the piece a satisfying, whole work of art. The final paragraph of the "endnotes" will serve to illustrate the loveliness, and the sense of completion with which this tale is finished by the son:

Of Erendis it is said that when old age came upon her, neglected by Ancalimë and in bitter loneliness, she longed once more for Aldarion; and learning that he was gone from Númenor on what proved to be his last voyage but that he was soon expected to return, she left Emerië at last and journeyed unrecognised and unknown to the haven of Rómenna. There, it seems, she met her fate; but only the words 'Erendis perished in water in the year 985' remain to suggest how it came to pass (212).

The dark force awakening beyond the isle of Númenor is Sauron, gradually gathering power for a nearly devastating battle, and this tale foreshadows in all its elements

forthcoming great struggles which will lead to the ending of the Second Age.<sup>6</sup> Sauron will take a horrible revenge as the Second Age draws to a close, and Númenor (like Erendis) will be drowned beneath the sea.<sup>7</sup> With this motion a full separation between mortal and undying lands becomes final; Men find themselves forever fully in the limits of time, and place, and mortal feelings.

In this story Tolkien depicts the constraints placed on human heroes by the choices they make and the reality they inhabit. There is a trinity of limits which inexorably becomes clear in the tale: time, ecology, and emotion. The vividness with which these real human limitations are felt within the tale allows us to see that Tolkien's world involves more than an eternal cosmic struggle between good and evil. What becomes evident in Númenor is that this dwelling place of the greatest race of Men is complicated by some limits more complex than black and white. As the cycles of time, ecology, and emotion take on weight, the very island of Númenor sinks beneath the sea and disappears, the flat earth becomes a sphere, the mortal world of men is set apart from the Undying Lands, and the three-dimensional Third Age of the Sun begins. Once-clear edges of reality are much more difficult to discern and separate within the three-dimensions of the globe. This is the world of *The Lord of the Rings*, a fantasy construction where keen edges of reality resonate upon a sphere now recognizably like the one we live on, filled with struggles which lead directly to the Fourth Age of the Sun, historic time, ourselves in history, ecology, and love. Yet as the genealogy of the globe is reconceived as part of Tolkien's megastory, from this unfinished text there resonate the eloquent gestures of inheritance, of giving and receiving — the gifts of love between Aldarion and Erendis, the Elven gifts to grace a wedding, the gift of scepter passed from a father to a son, gifts of completion and understanding from original creator to appreciative scholar. The art of passing-on is the thing to be learned within time — the only way to transcend the edges and the limits of reality. ☛

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### Notes

- 1 Christopher Tolkien's perceptive appreciation for this genealogical function is also evident in his inclusion at the tale's end of a chart of "The earlier generations of the Line of Elros" (203), followed by the genealogical text "The Line of Elros: Kings of Númenor."
- 2 There is special reason to value this unique text from the Second Age. This period, vast in extent and crucial in the evolution of Middle-earth from the beginnings of Arda to the Third Age when the globed and mortal world is finally a land apart from the Undying Lands (set far beyond its sphere) is the period in which historic human time is fully formed and given final definition by being separated from the Undying (or immortal) lands. Despite the fact that Christopher Tolkien found it necessary to rewrite certain portions early in the story "in the attempt to give some degree of stylistic homogeneity throughout its course" (xviii), he makes it clear that the opening of this story (pages 165-168) is Tolkien's own, from a late typescript of "the beginning of

# SUBMISSIONS

*Mythlore* welcomes submissions of critical articles, biographical studies, comparative studies, book reviews, letters of comment and other relevant material. See page two for the addresses of the appropriate editor when making submissions. All written submissions must be in one of two forms:

- (1) Typewritten submission must be double spaced with two copies. Articles should be in "blind" submission format for editorial evaluation, with the name and address of the author indicated only on the cover letter. A short paragraph of biographical information should be included for publication.
- (2) IBM compatible formatted 5.25" or 3.5" floppy disk, with a text printout to verify format. The files should be straight ASCII files unless the material has been written using *Microsoft Word*, *Word Perfect* (4.2 version or later preferred), *Wordstar*, *Multimate*, *Xerox Writer*, *XyWrite*, or *Microsoft Windows Write*. We can also accept Mac files, which can be converted to IBM PC format. Disk submission save *Mythlore* time and money, and in effect represents a much appreciated contribution to The Mythopoeic Society, and is strongly encouraged whenever possible.

The preferred style for articles is the *MLA Handbook*, except that short citations such as *ibid.*, *op.cit.*, and author and page number, can be incorporated in parentheses in the text. Any additional questions about submissions should be addressed to the Submissions Editor — see page 2.



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## In This Centenary Year *Mythlore* wishes to express a special appreciation to Christopher Tolkien

We owe to Christopher Tolkien, J.R.R. Tolkien's son and Literary Executor, an immense debt of gratitude. Without his determination, dedication, and continuing commitment in bringing forth the hitherto unpublished manuscripts and letters of his father, we the readers, students, scholars, and lovers of J.R.R. Tolkien's works, would be impoverished of all that we know of and about his father's works since his death in 1973. Christopher is worthy of high praise for all that he has done.

what was to be a finished version of the whole story." Most of the rest of the tale is taken from Tolkien's 1965 typescript which was never completed, but which clearly determined the narrative theme and tone and provided the bulk of the published text. Following the point where Tolkien's manuscript breaks off, Christopher Tolkien appends a postscript on "The Further Course of the Narrative," developed from existing notes and outlines by his father, supplemented at appropriate points with passages which were fully written by his father. The materials are of considerable interest and importance to readers in forming a more complete outline of history, and were clearly important to Tolkien himself.

- 3 The tale is thus placed within a literary and temporal continuum. In terms of Tolkien's megastory it pragmatically explains the lines of inheritance of the Númenorean kings (contradicting *The Lord of the Rings* in providing for female heirs) and explains the reasons for marriage within the line of Elros (Aldarion has a less than ideal experience with Erendis, of the House of Bëor, descended from Bereth, the aunt of Morwen, mother of Túrin; this initiates a belief that future rulers would be well advised to marry within the line of Elros).
- 4 The father of Aldarion contrasts markedly with Túrin (whose character has been considered in the previous story "Narn I Hîn Húrin," the final tale of the First Age), and his antithetical son Aldarion is therefore interestingly more similar to Túrin than to his father.
- 5 The use of the dog metaphors in both points of view is evidence not only of Tolkien's consistent craftsmanship in literary construction, but also tends to lend equal weight to each perspective.
- 6 When Eregion eventually falls to Sauron's forces in 1697, the survivors retreat northward, and all Eriador is taken. Gil-galad is about to be defeated in a final assault when the eleventh King of Númenor, Tar-Minastir, sends a great naval force to Lindon, defeating Sauron and driving him out of the Westlands. This successful renewal of the alliance between The Eldar of Middle-earth and the Men of Númenor (like the earlier alliance between the earth-loving Erendis and sea-loving Aldarion) becomes a great image of hope.
- 7 The history of these events is told in *The Silmarillion* in "The Akallabêth."