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## Mythos: the Daughter of Mountains, the Mother of Pearls

Paul Nolan Hyde

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### Mythos: the Daughter of Mountains, the Mother of Pearls

#### Abstract

Discusses various definitions of myth, and its relationship to the fairy-tale. Considers Tolkien's views of these and use of them as subcreator.

#### Additional Keywords

Fairy tales—Relation to Myth; Myth—Definition; Myth—Relation to fairy tales; Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"

# Mythos: the Daughter of Mountains, the Mother of Pearls

by Paul Nolan Hyde

Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme  
of things not found within recorded time.  
(from "Mythopoeia", *Tree and Leaf*, p. 99)

If I were to metaphorically insert myself into the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, I think that I would be Atkins in the little tale "Leaf By Niggle". Atkins, as you may recall, was the fellow who found the surviving corner of Niggle's great masterpiece, and, admiring it, framed the fragment, eventually leaving it to the Town Museum. I am not sure if Atkins's passion for Niggle's painting is comparable to my passion for Tolkien's philology, but I do know that it is not uncommon for me to run into Tompkins and Perkins of "Silly footer" and "Never knew he painted" fame. They are still about, still wondering what linguistics has to do with the stories.

Contrary to popular belief, the entire Unfinished Tree holds great fascination for me; the Hill, the Forest, and the River also. From time to time, once I knew it existed, I have left off looking at the Philological Leaves, to contemplate the rest of the painting. The theme of the 20th Annual Conference of the Mythopoeic Society, focussing as it does on the Mythic Elements in Fantasy, as given me an opportunity to look to the Mountains "tipped with snow". I fully expect to hear the Laughter before I am done; but Niggle and Parish were gentle souls, for all of their faults; their amusement will not be mockery or disdain.

## Mythology and Myth:

### Coming to Terms with a Definition

Before any discussion can begin about what J.R.R. Tolkien achieved in his creation of Middle-earth, it is necessary to come to some sort of an agreement on terms. Mythology as a discipline struggles internally with the problem of self-definition, self-contradiction and divergence of view. James Weigel, Jr., in the preface to his *Cliffs Notes on Mythology*, declares:

Frequently there are many versions of a legend or myth.

And this accounts for discrepancies between what one writer will say and another's telling of the same tale. Any comparison of the various mythology books on the market will show marked divergences, running from the spelling of names to details of events to the shape and emphasis of the myths. It is impossible to achieve uniformity in this field, both practically and theoretically. (*Mythology*, p. 7)

Part of the problem "theoretically" springs from the wide spectrum of usage of the words "myth" and "mythology". They are profuse and sometimes mystifying. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, for

instance, offers five related, though quite distinct definitions for "myth":

1. A traditional story originating in a pre-literate society, dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serve as primordial types in a primitive view of the world....
2. Any real or fictional story, recurring theme, or character type that appeals to the consciousness of a people by embodying its cultural ideals or by giving expression to deep, commonly felt emotions....
3. One of the fictions or half-truths forming part of the ideology of a society....
4. Any fictitious or imaginary story, explanation, person, or thing....
5. A notion based more on tradition or convenience than on fact; a received idea....

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is a bit more concise overall:

1. A purely fictitious narrative usually involving supernatural persons, actions, or events, and embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena.  
Properly distinguished from allegory and from legend (which implies a nucleus of fact) but often used vaguely to include any narrative having fictitious elements....
2. A fictitious or imaginary person or object....

Dictionary definitions, of course, merely reflect usage by the general body of English speakers in time or specifically at editing time. We ought not to be led astray by that annoying, typically American, penchant for consulting the dictionary as the arbiter of all rational polemics. Depending on such unspecialized volumes gives a false sense of understanding, as treacherous as climbing broken shale or crumbling sandstone. Yet the definitions make us aware of how wide the popular parameters are. (As an aside: the *OED* not only points out that "myth" first entered the English language around 1830 (somewhat of a late-comer), but that its spelling (Myth vs. Mythe) and its pronunciation (mith vs. meyeth) has been in flux among the scholars since then.)

Twentieth century academicians have attempted to refine the concept of myth with only limited success. Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman, in their *A Handbook to Literature*, define myths as being

Anonymous stories having their roots in the primitive folk-beliefs of races or nations and presenting supernatural episodes as a means of interpreting natural events in an effort to make concrete and particular a

special perception of man or a cosmic view. *Myths* differ from *Legends* in that they have less of historical background and more of the supernatural; they differ from the *Fable* in that they are less concerned with moral didacticism and are the product of a racial group rather than the creation of an individual. (p. 298)

Padraic Colum concludes that myths are "stories regarded as sacred that form an integral and active part of a culture" (*Myths of the World*, p. viii). Robert Graves asserts that "Mythology is the study of whatever religious or heroic legends [that] are so foreign to a student's experience that he cannot believe them to be true" (*New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, p. v). Even the great Joseph Campbell, in the concluding pages of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, is compelled to accommodate the obvious scholarly diversity:

Mythology has been interpreted by the modern intellect as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature (Frazer); as a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages (Müller); as a repository of allegorical instruction, to shape the individual to his group (Durkheim); as a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche (Jung); as a traditional vehicle of man's profoundest metaphysical insights (Coomaraswamy); and as God's Revelation to His children (the Church). Mythology is all of these. (p. 382)

Campbell's convivial observation may not be universally received even in such an amicable gathering as we find ourselves here in British Columbia. However well intended, no amount of accommodation provides access to the heights of the mountain, it only establishes its girth. The continuing problem lies in the fact that there is no invariable definition as to what constitutes myth and everyone seems compelled or inclined to create their own semantic equations. However, Jeremiah Curtin, in his *Myths and Folklore of Ireland*, provides what I feel to be a beginning point, a philological handhold with which to initiate our ascent of the mountain.

There are two nouns in the Greek language which have a long and interesting history behind them; these are *mythos* and *logos*. Originally they had the same power in ordinary speech; for in Homer's time they were used indifferently, sometimes one being taken, and sometimes the other, with the same meaning that *Word* has in our language.... *Logos* grew to mean the inward constitution as well as the outward form of thought, and consequently became the expression of exact thought — which is exact because it corresponds to universal and unchanging principles — and reached its highest exaltation in becoming not only the reason in man, but the reason in the universe — the Divine *Logos*, the Son of God, God Himself.... *Mythos* meant, in the widest sense, anything uttered by the mouth of man — a word, an account of something, a story understood by the narrator.... In Attic Greek, *Mythos* signified a prehistoric story of the Greeks. The application of the word *Myth* among scholars is plain enough up to a certain point; for from being a myth of Greece only, it is now used to mean a myth of any tribe of people on earth.... The reason is of ancient date why

myths have come, in vulgar estimation, to be synonymous with lies; though true myths — and there are many such — are the most comprehensive and splendid statements of truth known to man. A myth, even when it contains a universal principle, expresses it in special form, using with its peculiar personages the language and accessories of a particular people, time, and place; persons to whom this particular people, with the connected accidents of time and place, are familiar and dear, and receive the highest enjoyment from the myth, and the truth goes with it as the soul with the body. (as quoted in Colum, p. viii)

Myth is, the, according to Curtin, primarily about origins, about why things are the way they are or the way they were. Curtin's phrase, "prehistoric stories", seems at first to be a little odd, but when it is understood that history is generally based on primary documents surviving from the time period being written about, "prehistoric stories" could just as easily be called "undocumented history". Myth is about utterance and tradition, about communication and the perpetuation of truth. In conjunction with this is the correct idea that for any given myth, someone, somewhere, at some time, believed it or believed in it. Edith Hamilton correctly observed that the "best guides to a knowledge of Greek mythology are the Greek writers, who believed in what they wrote" (*Mythology*, p. 23). By the same token, the best guide to the mythology of Middle-earth, both in definition and interpretation, is the one who believed it first: John Ronald Reuel Tolkien.

#### Myth and the Fairy-Story: Tolkien's Views

At this point, hardly anything would be of more value than a careful reading of Tolkien's essay, "On Fairy-stories". A detailed analysis of the fifty-page lecture given at the University of Saint Andrew in March of 1939 would be impossible in such a setting as the present one, but a few observations can be made to establish the tenor of his views. The essence of his discourse revolves around three questions: What are fairy-stories? What is their origin? What is the use of them?

Tolkien begins the section entitled "Fairy-Story" by attempting to define precisely what a Fairy-Story is by first resorting to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

What is a fairy-story? In this case you will turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in vain. It contains no reference to the combination *fairy-story*, and is unhelpful on the subject of *faeries* generally. In the Supplement, *fairy-tale* is recorded since the year 1750, and its leading sense is said to be (a) a tale about fairies, or generally a fairy legend; with developed senses, (b) an unreal or incredible story, and (c) a falsehood. (MC, p 109-110)

What is intriguing here, is the obvious semantic similarity between "myth" and "fairy-tale" within the confines of the OED. Tolkien continues his argument about the significance of fairy-stories by citing the OED definition of *faeries*:

'supernatural beings of diminutive size, in popular belief supposed to possess magical powers and to have great

influence for good or evil over the affairs of man'. (Ibid., p. 110)

The shared supernatural aspect of Myth and Fairy-story draws the two definitions even closer, but Tolkien's qualifying remarks which follow in the essay illustrate his bias for and, thus, his definition of myth in Middle-earth.

*Supernatural* is a dangerous and difficult word in any of its senses, looser or stricter. But to fairies it can hardly be applied, unless *super* is taken merely as a superlative prefix. For it is man who is, in contrast to fairies, supernatural (and often of diminutive stature); whereas they are natural, far more natural than he. Such is their doom...

As for *diminutive size*: I do not deny that the notion is a leading one in modern use. I have often thought that it would be interesting to try to find out how that has come to be so; but my knowledge is not sufficient for a certain answer. Of old there were indeed some inhabitants of Faerie that were small (though hardly diminutive), but smallness was not characteristic of that people as a whole. The diminutive being, elf or fairy, is (I guess) in England largely a sophisticated product of literary fancy... (Ibid., p. 110-111)

Again, it is clear that Tolkien is partly reaching into his own perception of Middle-earth for his definitions that appear to contradict the dictionary definitions. To his credit, however, and typical of his creative process, he demonstrates that his conception is the older, more historical view; the implication being that it is more correct. This is quite prominent when he discusses the term *fairy*.

*Fairy*, as a noun more or less equivalent to elf, is a relatively modern word, hardly used until the Tudor period. The first quotation in the *Oxford Dictionary* (the only one before A.D. 1450) is significant. It is taken from the poet Gower: as he were a *faerie*. But this Gower did not say. He wrote as he were of *faerie*, 'as if he were come from Faerie'. Gower was describing a young gallant who seeks to bewitch the hearts of the maidens in church.... This is a young man of mortal blood and bone; but he gives a much better picture of the inhabitants of Elfland than the definition of a 'fairy' under which he is, by a double error, placed. For the trouble with the real folk of Faerie is that they do not always look like what they are; and they put on the pride and beauty that we would fain wear ourselves. At least part of the magic that they wield for the good or evil of man is the power to play on the desires of his body and his heart. (Ibid., pp. 112-113)

Tolkien then continues his discussion of the fairy-story by dismissing several categories of stories (and several individual stories) because they do not, in his estimation, fit the meaning he has ascribed to it: travellers' tales, dream-tales, Beast-fables, and others. His discussion of the origins of the fairy-story then swings the essay to mythology.

I shall... pass lightly over the question of origins. I am too unlearned to deal with it in any other way; but it is the least important of the three questions for my purpose, and a few remarks will suffice. It is plain enough that fairy-stories (in wider or in narrower sense) are very ancient indeed. Related things appear in very early

records; and they are found universally, wherever there is language... (Ibid., p. 121)

Tolkien does not immediately tell us what the "related things" are which have universality in language. But in the next paragraph he hints at it:

Philology has been dethroned from the high place it once had in this court of inquiry. Max Muller's view of mythology as a 'disease of language' can be abandoned without regret. Mythology is not a disease at all, though it may like all human things become diseased... It would be more near the truth to say that languages, especially modern European languages, are a disease of mythology. (Ibid., pp. 121-122)

Although there is much to spark controversy here, in the midst of his commentary Tolkien has made a tacit connection between the fairy-tale and myth. Certainly the semantic connections between the two words have been clear up to this point in the present essay. During the later half of the cited paragraph and in the beginning of the following, Tolkien explains how certain aspects of language produces the fantastic, the world of Faerie, and mythology.

But how powerful... was the invention of the adjective: no spell or incantation in Faerie is more potent... We may put a deadly green upon a man's face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon to shine; or we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold, and put hot fire into the belly of the cold worm. But in such 'fantasy', as it is called, a new form is made; Faerie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator.... This aspect of 'mythology' — sub-creation, rather than either representation or symbolic interpretation of the beauties and terrors of the world — is, I think, too little considered. (Ibid., pp. 120-122)

The implication here is that Fairy-tales represent the creative aspect of mythology; that is, myth can be the conscious product of an individual as well as of time or of society or of race. In fact, I think that it is safe to say that J.R.R. Tolkien believed that all myth, as we define it today, was once Fairy-tale, a story set in the realm of Faerie, a realm invented by words, primarily adjectives. W.H. Auden once lauded Tolkien's extraordinary nominative gift, the power to *name* things; but a moment's reflection on the nomenclature of Middle-earth, the translatable meanings of the names, reveals that the power lay in the description of people, places, and things through the name given. Moria is not just an abyss, it is a black, lightless one. Galadriel is not just a woman, but "a maiden crowned with golden hair" (L, p. 428), and a "glittering garland" (L, p. 423).

Notwithstanding his forthright approach, Tolkien freely admits that the complexity of the relationship between Fairy-tale and Myth is quite difficult to unravel. Part of the problem is created by the way Story and Myth are transmitted through time. Ruth Noel, in *The Mythology of Middle-earth*, contributes another view of myth through time:

Mythology is a conservative medium: myths are always

repeated in a traditional way, rather than being casually left to the teller's whim. However, the constant retelling of myths over hundreds, even thousands of years wears them smooth, concentrates them, until everything superfluous is worn away. (p. 7)

Although Noel's definition muddies the water a bit, yet her point regarding the effect of the passage of time is well taken. Speaking of the effect of Fairy-tales long told, Tolkien himself suggests:

Such stories have now a mythical or total (unanalyzable) effect, an effect quite independent on the findings of Comparative Folk-lore, and one which it cannot spoil or explain; they open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe.

If we pause, not merely to note that such old elements have been preserved, but to think himself *how* they have been preserved, we must conclude, I think, that it has happened, often if not always, precisely because of this literary effect. It cannot have been we, or even the brothers Grimm, that first felt it... The ancient elements can be knocked out, or forgotten and dropped out, or replaced by other ingredients with the greatest ease... The things that are there must often be retained (or inserted) because the oral narrators, instinctively or consciously, felt their literary 'significance'. (MC, pp. 128-129)

It is to that literary significance that we now turn.

### A Mythology for England

In a letter to Milton Waldman, written about 1951, J.R.R. Tolkien wrote of his love for language and his desire to create linguistically. In the long quote from that letter that follows, much which is discussed above is brought into perspective.

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. I am not learned in the matters of myth and fairy-story, however, for in such things (as far as known to me) I have always been seeking material, things of a certain tone and air, and not simple knowledge. Also — and here I hope I shall not sound absurd — I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in the legends of other lands. There was Greek, and Celtic, and Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish (which greatly affected me); but nothing English, save impoverished chap-book stuff. Of course there was and is all the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not with English; and does not replace what I felt to be missing. For one thing its 'faerie' is too lavish, and fantastical, incoherent and repetitive. For another and more

important thing: it is involved in, and explicitly contains the Christian religion.

For reasons which I will not elaborate, that seems to me fatal. Myth and fairy-tale must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary 'real' world...

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. I should possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our 'air' (the climate and soil of the North West, meaning Britain and the hither parts of Europe: not Italy or the Aegean, still less the East), and, while possessing (if I could achieve it) the fair elusive beauty that some call Celtic (though it is rarely found in genuine ancient Celtic things) it should be 'high', purged of the gross, and fit for the more adult mind of a land long now steeped in poetry. I would draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. 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.

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. An absorbing, though continually interrupted labour (especially since, even apart from the necessities of life, the mind would wing to the other pole and spend itself on linguistics); yet always I had the sense of recording what was already 'there', somewhere: not of 'inventing'.

Of course, I made up and even wrote lots of other things (especially for my children)... The Hobbit, which has more essential life in it, was quite independently conceived: I did not know as I began it that it belonged. But it proved to be the discovery of the completion of the whole, its mode of descent to earth, and merging into 'history'. As the high Legends of the beginning are supposed to look at things through Elvish minds, so the middle tale of the Hobbit takes a virtually human point of view — and the last tale blends them. (L, pp. 144-145)

The remainder of the letter is fascinating for its discussion of the various parts of the Middle-earth corpus and their roles as myth and story. The major point to be made here is that Tolkien's *creative sensation* was one of belief in what he was writing: a willing suspension of disbelief in the mind and heart of the author as the creative process was going on. As a result, the central focus of the mythology was its literary significance: it was true, it was believable. Perhaps this has been the greatest appeal of the Hobbit and of the Lord of the Rings all along (and by association, all of the subsequent texts): it was myth that was believed in by one, and then many.

Part of the capacity for belief came from the other pole,

as J.R.R.T. called it; the linguistic aspect. In a letter to a Mr. Thompson in January 1956, Tolkien points out the relationship between language and mythology and why most academically invented languages have not won wide appeal:

Having set myself a task, the arrogance of which I fully recognized 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.

It has been a considerable labour, beginning really as soon as I was able to begin anything, but effectively beginning when I was an undergraduate and began to explore my own linguistic aesthetic in language-composition. It was just as the 1914 War burst on me that 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. (For example, that the Greek mythology depends far more on the marvellous aesthetic of its language and so of its nomenclature of persons and places and less on its content than people realize, though of course it depends on both. And vice versa. Volapuk, Esperanto, Ido, Novial, &c &c are dead, far deader than ancient unused languages, because their authors never invented any Esperanto legends.) So though being a philologist by nature and trade (yet one always primarily interested in the aesthetic rather than the functional aspects of language) I began with language, I found myself involved in inventing 'legends' of the same 'taste'. The early work was mostly done in camps and hospitals between 1915 and 1918 — when time allowed. But I think a lot of this kind of work goes on at other (to say lower, deeper, or higher introduces a false gradation) levels, when one is saying how-do-you-do, or even 'sleeping'. I have long ceased to invent (though even patronizing or sneering critics on the side praise my 'invention'): I wait till I seem to know what really happened. Or till it writes itself. Thus, though I knew for years that Frodo would run into a tree-adventure somewhere far down the Great River, I have no recollection of inventing Ents. I came at last to the point, and wrote the 'Treebeard' chapter without any recollection of any previous thought: just as it is now. And then I saw that, of course, it had not happened to Frodo at all.... I cite myself simply because I am interested in mythological 'invention', and the mystery of literary creation (or sub-creation as I have elsewhere called it) and I am the most readily available *corpus vile* for experiment or observation. (L, pp. 230-231)

The process of invention is especially intriguing in Tolkien's case because he seemed to be a purveyor of roots, an adopter of linguistic and literary orphans, and an ennobler of the commonplace. As he said later to Thompson: "The hobbits had been welcomed. I loved them as myself, since I love the vulgar and simple as dearly as the noble, and nothing moves my heart (beyond all the passions and heartbreaks of the world) so much as 'ennoblement' (from the Ugly Duckling to Frodo). I would build on the hobbits" (Ibid., p. 232).

### From Grain of Sand to Pearl

I have elsewhere spoken of the translation of a misspelled word ("dwarves") into an elaborate history of its viability in the English language over its "correct" form (dwarfs). Tolkien himself discusses the invention of the legend of Earendil from the Anglo-Saxon phrase *Eala Earendel engla beorhast* from the poem *Crist* (L, pp. 385-387). But here I have chosen to present a simple, though illustrative example of the catalytic effect of a folk-element which has come to us without a clear, historical parentage, by demonstrating the relationship between the nursery rhyme "Hey diddle, diddle" and Tolkien's "The Man in the Moon Stayed Up Too Late".

The poem given below is Iona and Peter Opie's version, #213 in their *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*.

#### Opie #213

Hey diddle diddle,  
The cat and the fiddle,  
The cow jumped over the moon;  
The little dog laughed  
To see such sport,  
And the dish ran away with the spoon.

Baring-Gould's *The Annotated Mother Goose* gives a slightly different form:

#### B-G #45

High diddle, diddle,  
The Cat and the Fiddle,  
The Cow jump'd over the Moon;  
The little Dog laugh'd  
To see such Craft,  
And the Dish ran away with the Spoon

A number of observations about vocabulary are in order at this point. The words "Hey" and "High" (and their variants "Hi", "Heigh", and "Hay") are defined in the *OED* as exclamations associated with haste and encouragement. "Diddle" (var. "Diddle") is defined by the *OED* in extraordinary fashion: (1) to walk unsteadily, (2) to move from side to side by jerks, to shake and quiver; (3) to sing without utterance of words; (4) to waste time in the merest trifling, (5) to cheat or swindle; (6) the sound of a fiddle; (7) a slang name for gin. In almost every instance, the origin for the word and usage is declared obscure or unknown. The rest of the rhyme is almost as diverse and opaque in terms of its original historical setting.

The Opies say of this poem, "Probably the best-known nonsense verse in the language, a considerable amount of nonsense has been written about it", but they do suggest that Thomas Preston's play, *Cambises King of Persia* (1569), makes reference to the refrain in the couplet, "They be at hand Sir with stick and fiddle;/ They can play a new dance called hey-didle-didle." (ODNR, p. 203). They then list, with deprecation, a number of "scholarly" theories about the origins of the refrain, including:

- (i) that it is connected with Hathor worship; (ii) that it refers to various constellations (Taurus, Canis minor, &c.); (iii) that it describes the flight from the rising of the waters in Egypt (little dog, the Dog Star, or 'Sohet'; fiddler, beetle, hence scarab; cow jumping over the

moon, symbol of sky, &c.); (iv) that it portrays Elizabeth, Lady Katherine Grey, and the Earls of Hertford and Leicester; (v) that it tells of Papist priests urging the labouring class to work harder; (vi) that the expression 'Cat and the fiddle' comes (a) from Katherine of Aragon (Katherine la Fidele), (b) from Katherine, wife of Peter the Great, and (c) from Caton, a supposed Governor of Calais (Caton le fidele). There are grounds, albeit slight, for believing the expression comes from the game of cat (trap-ball) and the fiddle (i.e. music) provided by some old-time inns. (ODNR, pp. 203-205)

The Baring-Gould text gives much more credence to the theory that the rhyme has to do with court of Elizabeth I: Elizabeth = the Cat (who played with her ministers like mice); the fiddle = literal, the Queen loved dancing in her apartments to the fiddle; cow = an oblique reference to charades played at Whitehall and at Hampton Court; the Little Dog = Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester (Elizabeth called him, one of her suitors, her "little lap-dog"); the Dish = the courtier designated to carry certain golden dishes into the state dining room (Edward, Earl of Hertford); the Spoon = a beautiful young lady selected to be the taster at royal meals (Lady Katherine Grey). Of these latter two, the Baring-Goulds suggest that the secret marriage of Edward and Katherine is what is being referred to in the rhyme. (see AMG, pp. 55-58).

Tolkien's development of the rhyme, typical of him, appears to hearken to the oldest possible interpretation of the evidence as to its origin, woven into his own narrative tapestry. In the chapter entitled "At the Sign of the Prancing Pony" in the *Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo and his companions take their rest at the inn at Bree. After being introduced, Frodo makes some introductory remarks and then:

Everyone in the room was now looking at him. 'A song!' shouted one of the hobbits, 'A song! A song!' shouted all the others. 'Come now, master, sing us something that we haven't heard before!'

For a moment Frodo stood gaping. Then in desperation he began a ridiculous song that Bilbo had been rather fond of (and indeed rather proud of, for he had made up the words himself). It was about an inn; and that is probably why it came into Frodo's mind just then. Here it is in full. Only a few words of it are now, as a rule, remembered.

There is an inn, a merry old inn  
beneath an old grey hill,  
And there they brew a beer so brown  
That the Man in the Moon himself came down  
one night to drink his fill

The ostler has a tipsy cat  
that plays a five-stringed fiddle;  
And up and down he runs his bow,  
Now squeaking high, now purring low,  
now sawing in the middle.

The landlord keeps a little dog  
that is mighty fond of jokes;  
When there's good cheer among the guests,  
He cocks an ear at all the jests  
and laughs until he chokes.

They also keep a horned cow  
as proud as any queen;  
But music turns her head like ale,  
And makes her wave her tufted tail  
and dance upon the green.

And Of the rows of silver dishes  
and the store of silver spoons!  
For Sunday there's a special pair,  
And these they polish up with care  
on Saturday afternoons.

The Man in the Moon was drinking deep,  
and the cat began to wail;  
A dish and a spoon on the table danced,  
The cow in the garden madly pranced,  
and the little dog chased his tail.

The Man in the Moon took another mug,  
and then rolled beneath his chair;  
And there he dozed and dreamed of ale,  
Till in the sky the stars were pale,  
and dawn was in the air.

Then the ostler said to his tipsy cat:  
The white horses of the Moon,  
They neigh and champ their silver bits;  
But their master's been and drowned his wits,  
and the Sun'll be rising soon!

So the cat on his fiddle played hey-diddle-diddle,  
a jig that would wake the dead:  
He squeaked and sawed and quickened the tune,  
While the landlord shook the Man in the Moon:  
'It's after three!' he said.

They rolled the Man slowly up the hill  
and bundled him into the Moon,  
While his horses galloped up in rear,  
And the cow came capering like a deer,  
and a dish ran up with the spoon.

Now quicker the fiddle went deedle-dum-diddle;  
the dog began to roar,  
The cow and the horses stood on their heads;  
The guests all bounded from their beds  
and danced upon the floor.

With a ping and a pong the fiddle-strings broke!  
the cow jumped over the Moon,  
And the little dog laughed to see such fun,  
And the Saturday dish went off at a run  
with the silver Sunday spoon.

The round Moon rolled behind the hill,  
as the Sun raised up her head.  
She hardly believed her fiery eyes;  
For though it was day, to surprise  
they all went back to bed!

There was loud and long applause. Frodo had a good voice, and the song tickled their fancy. (I, pp. 170-172)

The connection with the nursery rhyme is clear, especially in light of its original title in the manuscript of the *Lord of the Rings*, "The Cat and the Fiddle". Of noteworthy interest is the whole discussion given by Christopher Tolkien in *Return of the Shadow* about the various verses that were proposed for this part of the story, and Christopher's reconstruction of the sequence of events that led to "The Cat and the Fiddle" being inserted. The most



important revelation is that the song had been composed in a similar form many years before entitled "The Cat and the Fiddle: or A Nursery Rhyme Undone and its Scandalous Secret Unlocked" (see RS, pp. 141-147)

"The Cat and the Fiddle" had been published originally in 1923 in *Yorkshire Poetry* (Vol II no. 19) while Tolkien taught at Leeds; indeed, the holograph is written on Leeds University paper. The point is that the poem was originally a light-hearted commentary about all of the "nonsense" that had been written about the rhyme; this was accomplished in much the same vein as the learned asides on "Thames" versus "Tames" or the definition of "blunderbuss" in "Farmer Giles of Ham". The "Scandalous Secret" would easily have been understood initially as a reference to Elizabeth's court, but the poem throws all of that to the wind and creates an atmosphere (perhaps a mythical atmosphere in light of the Elvish legend of Tilion, the steersman of the island of the Moon (see S, pp. 99-100)) wherein a completely different interpretive tack is taken. The story of Tilion is myth; the "Cat and the Fiddle" would eventually be a Faerie-tale fit into the myth by sub-creation. The writing of the *Silmarillion* and of "The Cat and the Fiddle" is, of course, all prior to Tolkien's discovery of hobbits and of their literature. When Tolkien identifies Bilbo as the author of "The Cat and the Fiddle" in *The Lord of the Rings*, he is making the connecting link between the fairy-tale and the myth within the confines of the history of Middle-earth. The process does not stop there. When the *Adventures of Tom Bombadil* was published in 1962, the Preface contained a rather elaborate discussion about Hobbitish poetry as found in the Red Book of West March. It is a learned, fanciful treatise demonstrating that what began as "self-plagiarism", Tolkien "raiding his own larder" (as T.A. Shippey would say; see RME, p. 80), ended as a mythical embrace of as much material as was possible in the guise hobbit folk-lore. That had been made possible by Tolkien's realization that the affairs of the hobbits were inexorably connected with the affairs of Middle-earth.

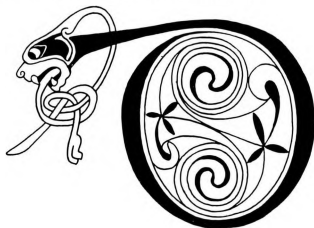
### Conclusion

THIS has not been, as I have confessed so many times before, definitive. It has been, however (for me at least), a tramping of old roads, worn and rutted by the wagonloads of pontificators (such as myself) who have attempted to solve a literary jigsaw puzzle which is missing more than just a few pieces. The whole academic notion of myth and mythology is self-destructive beginning with its own terminology and ending with the great lie, that it is not believable nor true. Tolkien's essay may not settle the issue, but it does set the pattern which gives us insight into his own creations and the process by which they came to be. Frodo's song at the Prancing Pony is only one of many, perhaps hundreds or thousands, of instances where mythology, Faerie, and Tolkien's genius for story and language have joyously met together for a time. They are leaves in a literary museum, framed and hung on walls of academic prose, brilliant hints that there is a Tree, a Forest, and, in the distance, Mountains ringing with laughter.



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### Tolkien's Monsters (continued from page 26)

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