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## Soup, Bones, and Shakespeare: Literary Authorship and Allusion in Middle-earth

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### Abstract

Examines Tolkien's theory of authorship and storytelling by exploring the literary allusions to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in the Witch-king's fall and the theory of creation in Tolkien's description of the Silmarils. Tolkien alludes to *Macbeth* to undercut both the modern view of the author as an isolated genius and to critique the approach to literary allusion that reinforces this view. Fëanor's creation of the Silmarils serves as a symbolic representation of modern authorship, suggesting that Tolkien not only disagrees with a singular model of authorship but also believes it to be a manifestation of corrupted artistry. Ultimately, both the Witch-king and Silmaril passages reveal that Tolkien believed modern interpretations of authorship had become too narrow and failed to reflect the multiply-sourced nature of storytelling.

### Additional Keywords

Authorship, Theories of; Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*; Storytelling; Fairy tales; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Theory of sub-creation; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Technique



SOUP, BONES, AND SHAKESPEARE:  
LITERARY AUTHORSHIP AND  
ALLUSION IN MIDDLE-EARTH

OWEN DUGAN AND JAMES KRASNER

IN HER DISCUSSION OF NARRATIVE THEORY IN *The Lord of the Rings* Mary R. Bowman emphasizes the distinction between closed novelistic authorship and the unfinished nature of storytelling. Bowman argues that Bilbo's attempts to give his book "a decisive and satisfying ending" reveal his "rather naive faith in the possibility and desirability of complete and watertight closure" (274). This leads Bilbo to distort and misunderstand his own position as author, and the nature of the book he is writing. Bowman cites Walter Benjamin's distinction between story and novel to explain Bilbo's confusion.

For Benjamin, these roots in "oral tradition" [...] distinguish storytelling from novels, forms also contrasting in their openness: "[T]here is no story for which the question as to how it continued would not be legitimate. The novelist, on the other hand, cannot hope to take the smallest step beyond that limit at which he invites the reader to a divinatory realization of the meaning of life by writing 'Finis.'" (277-278)

It is no surprise that J.R.R. Tolkien would find a model of storytelling arising from oral tradition to be to his liking. Bilbo's continual attempts to finish his story, which inevitably fail, are his way of poking fun at a single-author model of artistic creation. Looking closely at Tolkien's model of authorship helps us understand some otherwise befuddling choices he makes in *The Lord of the Rings*, and serves to clarify his broader theories of aesthetic creation.

In his essay "On Fairy-Stories" Tolkien indirectly addresses the question of authorship by directly addressing the lineage of fairy tales. "Of course, I do not deny, for I feel strongly, the fascination of the desire to unravel the intricately knotted and ramified history of the branches on the Tree of Tales," he admits (39). Ultimately rejecting this desire for a "linear history" of a story's origins, he concludes that

it is more interesting, and also in its way more difficult, to consider [...] what values the long alchemic processes of time have produced in them. In Dasent's words I would say: 'We must be satisfied with the soup that is set before us, and not desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled.' [...] By 'the soup' I mean the story as it is served up by

its author or teller, and by 'the bones' its sources or material—even when (by rare luck) those can be with certainty discovered. (39-40)

Tolkien proceeds to extend the soup metaphor as he discusses the relationship between the fable of the Goose Girl and Charlemagne's mother, as well as the historical King Arthur and Hrothgar. All of them, he says, have been "put into the Pot" as "new bits added to the stock":

It seems fairly plain that Arthur, once historical (but perhaps as such not of great importance), was also put into the Pot. There he was boiled for a long time, together with many other older figures and devices, of mythology and Faërie, and even some other stray bones of history (such as Alfred's defence against the Danes), until he emerged as a King of Faërie. (46)

Tolkien's extension of the soup metaphor *ad nauseum* (literally) suggests how determined he is to dismember and mince a linear, author-driven notion of literary lineage. Matthew Bardowell offers an alternate, although similarly nauseating, metaphor. "The view of influence Tolkien describes in "On Fairy-Stories" suggests that he believed influence worked much like a compost heap. A story may be nourished by older materials while constituting, in itself, a new and complex creation" (Bardowell 105). Simon J. Cook explains that

behind the cauldron metaphor is an identification of story, not as a natural phenomenon, like language or biological species, but as an artistic product of the creative imagination. As such, we are not to look for gradual modification of the same story but to focus rather on discontinuous manifestations of (more or less) the same elements. From out of the same cauldron are served not so much variations on similar stock as quite different soups. (19)

In *The Discarded Image*, published 18 years after "On Fairy-Stories," Lewis was to use the more elegant metaphor of cathedral building, rather than soup pots or compost heaps, to discuss the medieval understanding of authorship.

It follows that the book-author unit, basic for modern criticism, must often be abandoned when we are dealing with medieval literature. Some books [...] must be regarded more as we regard those cathedrals where work of many different periods is mixed and produces a total effect, admirable indeed but never foreseen nor intended by any one of the successive builders. Many generations, each in its own spirit and its own style, have contributed to the story of Arthur. It is misleading to think of

Malory as an author in our modern sense and throw all the earlier work into the category of 'sources'. He is merely the last builder, doing a few demolitions here and adding a few features there. They cannot make the work his as *Vanity Fair* is Thackeray's. (210)

Like Benjamin, Lewis chooses the canonical novel as the quintessential example of the "book-author unit." Lewis takes both Benjamin's and Tolkien's argument further by associating it not just with "stories" or "fairy-stories" but "literature." Great literary works, like Malory's, are just as "mixed" or cobbled together as the Goose Girl. Perhaps his choice of the cathedral metaphor serves as a nod to the grandeur of the literary tradition he is commenting on; placing *Morte d'Arthur* and *Vanity Fair* in the soup pot or the compost heap might be too much for the notoriously fastidious Lewis.

One way to see Tolkien's rejection of authorial lineage in action is in his use of literary allusions. The implicit debate about literary allusion that arises when we look closely at the death of the Witch-king in *The Return of the King* resembles the implicit debate about narrative closure that Bowman identifies in Bilbo's repeated references to finishing his book. In both cases, Tolkien presents us with what seems a fairly obvious evocation of meta-literary, which begins to crumble the more we look at it and, in doing so, to reveal a clearer view of Tolkien's aesthetics. Understanding the operation of allusion in the Witch-king's death scene also helps answer questions about Merry's role in bringing down the Lord of the Nazgul which have preoccupied both fans and critics.

'Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!'

Then Merry heard of all sounds in that hour the strangest. It seemed that Dernhelm laughed, and the clear voice was like the ring of steel. 'But no living man am I! You look upon a woman.' (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] V.6.841)

Any reader of *The Lord of the Rings* with even a middle-school education will recognize in this exchange the echo of the final words between Macbeth and MacDuff in Shakespeare's play.

MACBETH

I bear a charmed life, which must not yield / to one of woman born.

MACDUFF

Despair thy charm, [...]

Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped. (V.8.15-20)

Like Macbeth, the Witch-king's arrogant reliance on prophecy is undercut by an inescapable fate concealed within a verbal trick. Men born by caesarean section

are not technically born of woman, and a women soldier of Rohan is not technically a man, but both can still kill you. Éowyn and Macduff both reveal the prophecy's fatal sleight-of-hand with a gotcha enthusiasm. Éowyn's laughter expresses the comic reversal underlying the anti-hero's tragic fall, her cross-dressing being itself a comic convention.

As literary allusions go, this is a fairly obvious one. Tolkien seems to want us to be thinking of Shakespeare at this enormously significant moment in the novel. Misinterpreted prophecies turn up in countless folktales, to say nothing of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, but the proximity of "no living man" and "no man that's born of woman" (Macbeth's phrasing a few scenes earlier in 5.3) ties this failed prophecy directly to Shakespeare's Scottish play.

The allusion functions, like all effective literary allusions, to complicate the reader's experience of the scene by asking them to compare the themes and characters of this moment with those of its literary antecedent. Éowyn's unyielding fierceness places her in the male heroic tradition of kin vengeance that MacDuff embodies. It also elaborates upon it, allowing her to step into the boots of a male hero by identifying herself as a woman. Pairing the Witch-king with Macbeth reminds us that he is no more than the ghost of a corrupt and power-hungry man, rendering him, and by extension Sauron himself, a foolish human rather than a supernatural being. The allusion also places *The Lord of the Rings* within a literary tradition that includes *Macbeth*, asserting its status as a towering literary work rather than just medievalist popular entertainment.

Yet, there are several strange aspects to Tolkien's evocation of Shakespeare here. Allusions create a sort of contract between author, reader, and character. When J. Alfred Prufrock notes that he is "not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be," (l.111) he, Eliot, and the reader all understand the self-loathing this implies. When Marlow compares Brussels to "a whited sepulcher" (110) in *Heart of Darkness*, he knows his in-story listeners, and Conrad knows the novella's readers, will understand how the Biblical reference condemns colonialist hypocrisy. This contract also implies a shared literary tradition that allows everyone involved to appreciate the allusion's implications—to get the reference.

Éowyn and the Witch-king, however, do not exist in a world that includes Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; nor does Merry from whose perspective we see their encounter. Only the reader and author can hear the Shakespearean echoes and understand their resonances. This makes the allusion feel uncomfortably out of place, like a conversation in which one member is being intentionally excluded. It's true that characters are often less aware of a given allusion's full implications than the reader and author. In the "whited sepulchre" example Conrad intends us to recognize Marlow's self-righteous idealism in his use of

the words of Christ to the Pharisees; this character trait elides him with Kurtz and will ultimately lead him astray in a similar, if less extreme, way.

If a character's understanding of the allusion is significantly less sophisticated than reader's and author's, the resulting imbalance typically renders the moment comic. Huckleberry Finn says that, along with the Bible, the Grangerfords have a copy of "*Pilgrim's Progress* about a man that left his family, it didn't say why" (93). Twain wants us to laugh at Huck's cluelessness while also recognizing that his naïve reading contains more wisdom than that of the cultured yet morally blind Grangerfords. Similarly, when the young Jane Eyre declares to her pious friend Helen Burns that "When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard" (68) we are charmed by her unknowingly shameless inversion of Christ's beatitudes. These characters also share in our Western religious and literary tradition, but, being children, they don't understand it enough to be on equal footing with the reader and author.

But there is no comic element to Éowyn and the Witch-king's unknowing allusion to *Macbeth*. We do not smile at the Witch-king's evocation of a play he could never have read; Éowyn echoes Macduff without knowing or caring that she does so. Perhaps Tolkien is just trying to dress up his popular entertainment with a little culture by suggesting to the reader that he can do Shakespeare too. But such a motive is at odds with Tolkien's stated antipathy to the dominance of Shakespeare in the English literary curriculum. He would seem to have had little desire to place his novel within a tradition foregrounding Shakespeare, or even Sophocles. So why *Macbeth*, and why at this particular moment?

Perhaps the moment itself can help answer the question. The death of the Witch-king, while an exhilarating and triumphant plot event, is beset by narrative inconsistencies that undercut the power of the *Macbeth* allusion. The first time the scene is portrayed, the similarity between Éowyn and MacDuff is most striking:

'Hinder me? Thou fool. No living man may hinder me!'

Then Merry heard of all sounds in that hour the strangest. It seemed that Dernhelm laughed, and the clear voice was like the ring of steel. 'But no living man am I! You look upon a woman. Éowyn I am, Éomund's daughter. You stand between me and my lord and kin.' [...] He bent over her like a cloud, and his eyes glittered; he raised his mace to kill.

But suddenly he too stumbled forward with a cry of bitter pain, and his stroke went wide, driving into the ground. Merry's sword had stabbed him from behind, shearing through the black mantle, and passing up beneath the hauberk had pierced the sinew behind his mighty knee.

‘Éowyn! Éowyn!’ cried Merry. Then tottering, struggling up, with her last strength she drove her sword between crown and mantle, as the great shoulders bowed before her. The sword broke sparkling into many shards. The crown rolled away with a clang. Éowyn fell forward upon her fallen foe. (*LotR* V.6.841-842)

This portrayal focuses the most attention on Éowyn’s determination to protect her “lord and kin,” like MacDuff who fights to avenge his king and family. Hers are the words of defiance that rouse the Nazgul and hers is the sword that finally cuts his crown from his head. In the end it is “her fallen foe” who lies in ruin. Merry contributes by causing the Witch-king to stumble at a crucial moment, but the victory, and the fulfillment of the misinterpreted prophecy, is Éowyn’s.

A few pages later, after various distracting plot events, we get what seems to be an explanatory footnote to the Nazgul’s death.

And still Meriadoc the hobbit stood there blinking through his tears [...]. And behold! there lay his weapon, but the blade was smoking like a dry branch that has been thrust in a fire; and as he watched it, it writhed and withered and was consumed.

So passed the sword of the Barrow-downs, work of Westernesse. But glad would he have been to know its fate who wrought it slowly long ago in the North-kingdom when the Dúnedain were young, and chief among their foes was the dread realm of Angmar and its sorcerer king. No other blade, not though mightier hands had wielded it, would have dealt that foe a wound so bitter, cleaving the undead flesh, breaking the spell that knit his unseen sinews to his will. (*LotR* V.6.844)

The heroic moment having passed, Merry’s insignificant contribution to great events seems rather pathetic, as does his dazed casting about for his lost sword. The scholarly framing of the paragraph with “So passed the sword . . .” seems little more than an attempt to step away from the narrative for a moment and offer an historical notation for bookish readers. Yet what Tolkien reveals radically undercuts our understanding of the duel that we have just witnessed. “No other blade” (which is to say, not Éowyn’s blade) “not though mightier hands had wielded it” (which is to say, not Éowyn’s hands) could have broken the magical bond that gave the Witch-king the power to fight. It is in fact the ancient power of the Dúnedain, channeled unknowingly through Merry, that breaks the Witch-king’s “spell,” making him mortal and susceptible to Éowyn’s final attack. Without it, all Éowyn’s cross-dressing, prophecy-breaking, and bravery would have come to naught.

This second telling suggests that the initial portrayal was misleading, and the allusion to *Macbeth* contributes to the distortion. By encouraging us to



read the scene through Shakespeare, rather than through the history of Middle-earth, Tolkien tricks the reader, just as the prophecy tricks the Witch-king. At the moment we believe we have seen through the prophecy's trick by understanding that the Witch-king will die by a woman, we fall prey to the distortion created by the literary allusion. We accept Éowyn's reading of the interpretation because she sounds so much like MacDuff speaking to Macbeth, and miss the important fact that it is the hobbit, not the woman, who contributes the most to the death of the Nazgûl. By alluding to Shakespeare, Tolkien hands us "the bones of the ox," and seems to be encouraging us to ignore the soup they become part of. We interpret the confrontation between Éowyn and the Witch-king as deriving from the confrontation between MacDuff and Macbeth, when in fact Shakespeare's version is only one element in a complex recipe.

The third telling of the story, which appears in the appendix to *The Lord of the Rings*, relies on "the songs of the Mark" and emphasizes Éowyn's heroism, while also noting Merry's, thus hewing an intermediate path between the first two.

In that day Éowyn also won renown, for she fought in that battle, riding in disguise; and was known after in the Mark as the Lady of the Shield-arm. [...] For her shield-arm was broken by the mace of the Witch-king: but he was brought to nothing, and thus the words of Glorfindel long before to King Eärnur were fulfilled, that the Witch-king would not fall by the hand of man. For it is said in the songs of the Mark that in this deed Éowyn had the aid of Théoden's esquire, and that he also was not a Man but a Halfling out of a far country. (LotR A.ii.1070. 1070f)

The Witch-king is not killed by a living man because he is killed by a woman and by a Hobbit. We probably can't rely on the singers of Rohan to give Merry all the credit he deserves, and they may be relatively unfamiliar with the blade-lore of the ancient Dúnedain. However, they do include a reference to Glorfindel's original prophecy, which is described earlier in the appendices. By identifying the prophecy with Glorfindel, Tolkien is intentionally replacing its Shakespearean lineage with an alternative one of Middle-earth lore. Rather than a literary reference it becomes a historical one.

Finally, if these three versions weren't enough, we can look to one of Tolkien's letters, in which he again seems to diminish the role of Merry's blade. Criticizing an animated version of the novel in which Sam stabs the Witch-king on Weathertop, Tolkien states that "[i]f he had, the result would have been much the same as [when Merry stabbed the Witch-king;] the Wraith would have fallen down and the sword would have been destroyed" (*Letters* 273, #210). This suggests that, although the blade does wound the Witch-king, it is only enough to cause him to fall, not to kill him or make him mortal. It is thus Éowyn who

ultimately kills the Ringwraith, benefitting from Merry's initial stab. Perhaps, as some critics<sup>1</sup> have argued, the crucial word here is "fall," as Glorfindel's original prophecy was that "not by the hand of man will he fall." But this seems at odds with the second rendering in the novel, in which Merry's blade breaks "the spell that knit his unseen sinews to his will."

What are we to make of all these versions, and where are we to find the authoritative, or canonical one? One would normally give the greater sway to the versions included in the text of the novel, but *The Return of the King* is probably written by Frodo, and perhaps Sam, in *The Red Book*. They don't have a clear understanding of the Witch-king's magical powers and what destroys him, relying on lore and second-hand information themselves. Perhaps if Gandalf or Galadriel were the author we could be sure, but Tolkien goes out of his way to identify the hobbits as our only source. Should we trust the Singers of Rohan cited in the appendix? Is Tolkien's letter complaining about an awful Rankin-Bass cartoon to be the final word?

The answer, of course, is that we should trust none of them, or all of them, because they are all, in Tolkien's terms, "in the Pot." The "soup" of different stories from different sources is "served up by its author or teller" (Tolkien, or Frodo, or Sam) and to try to trace every detail of the "bones" which are its "sources or material" is to miss the point. Glorfindel's prophecy, the songs of Rohan, bits of lore from Angmar, are all different bits of old bone. Tolkien does not in any way call into question the value of ancient tales, or of historical accounts, but he does insist that trying to establish hierarchies among them is a fool's errand.

The situation is similar in the great Northern "Arthurian" court of the Shield-Kings of Denmark, the *Scyldingas* of ancient English tradition. King Hrothgar and his family have many manifest marks of true history, far more than Arthur; yet even in the older (English) accounts of them they are associated with many figures and events of fairy-story: they have been in the Pot. (OFS 46)

Trying to define Arthur as a specific historical king, or the Arthurian stories as a specific literary line, will never work. Tolkien practiced what he preached in his own creation of fantasy narratives, as Michael John Halsall has argued in his discussion of Tolkien's use of "conjoined borrowed traditions": "The textual influences upon Tolkien do not rest solely in Anglo-Saxon sources, however, but are multi-layered, and contain traces of medieval works from the three literary traditions of England, Ireland, and Wales" (198-99).

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see the discussion "Is it Éowyn or Merry who kills the Lord of the Nazgûl (or both)?"

But if Tolkien wants us to ignore the bones, why does he create an unavoidable allusion to a well-known line from Shakespeare? Why does he, in effect, rattle the bones in our ears and insist that we notice them? Tolkien uses the *Macbeth* allusion to create a trap for the reader, which is analogous to the trap that Bilbo falls into when he obsesses over finishing his unfinishable book. Bowman sees Bilbo as a “spokeshobbit” (274) for narratives structured around a desire for closure: “As Peter Brooks might put it, Bilbo’s ‘narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire for the end [...], and *The Lord of the Rings* insists on frustrating that desire” (275). Bilbo’s certainty that he is the author of his story, rather than a supporting character in it, leads him to make the rather absurd offer to carry the ring himself at the Council of Elrond. Gandalf responds with a patient but patronizing correction:

If you had really started this affair, you might be expected to finish it. But you know well enough now that *starting* is too great a claim for any, and that only a small part is played in great deeds by any hero. [...] It has passed on. [...] Finish your book, and leave the ending unaltered! There is still hope for it. But get ready to write a sequel, when they come back. (LotR II.2.269-270)

Stories don’t really end, nor do they really begin, and trying to define their limits is always a mistake.

If Bilbo dwells too heavily on endings, then readers who identify *Macbeth* in Éowyn and the Witch-king’s exchange are dwelling too much on antecedents. Allusions that depend on a specific single text will always be distorting when dealing with a complex web of historical stories. This confusing and inconsistent record on Merry and Éowyn’s role prevents us from being entirely certain about how and to what degree the prophecy is fulfilled, and how closely it adheres to or diverges from the *Macbeth* prophecy. But that is the point. Because language, and especially prophetic language, is unreliable and deceptive, one can never fully decide what has or hasn’t been fulfilled. The structure of folkloric “soup” always involves multiple versions of a story, none of which are fully authoritative. Tolkien plants such an obviously, hyper-canonical literary allusion in his novel to call into question the nature of literary canons and allusions alike.

But what does Tolkien himself say about literary allusion and its operation in his critical writing? In his 1936 essay “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics” Tolkien addresses allusions by dwelling on what he considers a misguided distinction between literature and folk-tale. He quotes Chambers, who denigrates the *Beowulf* poet for choosing to write about fights with dragons rather than the hero Ingeld, who is alluded to briefly in *Beowulf* 2050-65. Chambers notes that “in this conflict between plighted troth and the duty of

revenge we have a situation which the old heroic poets loved, and would not have sold for a wilderness of dragons" (qtd. in Tolkien, "Beowulf" 108-109). By calling for a poem in which the story of Ingeld, with its themes of "plighted troth and the duty of revenge" is retold, Chambers is positing an artistic lineage in which "old heroic poets" tell similar tales with images and themes built upon one another. He is imagining *Beowulf* as part of a literary tradition not unlike the one running from Chaucer to T.S. Eliot being taught in college classes now—exactly the sort of literary education Tolkien vigorously opposed at Oxford. By alluding to the lost Ingeld tale, Chambers suggests, the *Beowulf* poet indicates that such a tradition existed but that he chose to reject it to write about dragons.

Tolkien finds this argument "irritatingly odd" (110) and undertakes to defend *Beowulf* by noting that while the poem is called a "*wild folk-tale*" the same could be said of "the main story of *King Lear*, unless in that case you would prefer to substitute *silly* for *wild*" (109). Tolkien's name-calling designation of *Lear*, often considered Shakespeare's most elevated tragedy, as "silly" suggests a clear desire to take down the literary canon a peg or two; *Lear* is silly, Tolkien suggests, dragons are not. He goes on to include Homer, Virgil, and Milton in his argument to view *Beowulf* primarily in the context of folklore. To Chambers's claim that *Beowulf* is not "a well-conducted epic" he responds that "it may turn out to be no epic at all," (110), which would remove it from the sort of literary canon Chambers calls for. Criticizing the plot of the poem is foolish, Tolkien argues, because even "if Milton had recounted the story of Jack and the Beanstalk in noble verse [...] (and he might have done worse)," his poetic handling of the material would have elevated it from being "base or trivial" (110).

Because Chambers sees the allusion to Ingeld as evidence that *Beowulf* belongs in the kind of literary tradition he desires and Tolkien deplors, it is important for Tolkien to offer an alternate version of how literary allusions work in *Beowulf*. He argues for allusions that evoke a vast and emotionally powerful "background" of "old tales" rather than particular themes attached to unique combinations of words:

The whole must have succeeded admirably in creating in the minds of the poet's contemporaries the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but noble and fraught with a deep significance—a past that itself had depth and reached backward into a dark antiquity of sorrow. This impression of depth is an effect and a justification of the use of episodes and allusions to old tales, mostly darker, more pagan, and desperate than the foreground. (124)

The sliding of meaning between "allusion" and "illusion" is revealing. Allusions, for Tolkien, help create the "impression" or "effect" of a "darker"

world, a “past that itself had depth and reached backward into a dark antiquity.” All this darkness and deepness, impressions and allusions, is hardly clear or specific; Tolkien seems to want to emphasize spooky atmospherics over verbal referents. Allusions, rather than phrases pegged to particular works by canonical authors, are shadowy masses evoking dark inchoate realms in which “episodes” from “old tales” form and reform. Simon J. Cook explains that Tolkien approached the history of stories like a philological scholar who “has more than one string to his bow.” He was perfectly happy to use textual source material, but “when textual exegesis reaches its limits it may give way to conjectural reconstruction—an imaginative exercise occupying an indeterminate borderland between scientific philology and literary creation” (14). Allusions may be grounded in specific texts, but they may also allow for reconstructions of unknown texts that dwell in a shadowy, imaginative borderland.

It is hardly insignificant that Tolkien chooses Shakespeare, the ultimate canonical author, to call into question the legitimacy of authorship. When C.S. Lewis compares our current understanding of “the book-author unit” to a medieval model of authorship he focuses on our conception of a literary work as a possession, a kind of property, that an author owns. “It would have been impossible for [medieval authors] to work in this way if they had had anything like our conception of literary property” (210). Tolkien’s allusion to *Macbeth* undercuts Shakespeare’s possession of his words and ideas. Shakespeare is an early (and perhaps the most obvious) example of the ideal of modern authorship; contrary to Tolkien’s authorship model, *Macbeth* is read not as a “soup” of multiple stories, but as an isolated work of unassailable genius. Other works may allude to it, but only to appeal to the original play. These principles of reading emerge from New Criticism, which Tolkien and Lewis were specifically warring against in their establishment of the Oxford English School. By contrast, as Bardowell notes, “Tolkien believed deeply in the derivative nature of just creation. [...] The creative act for Tolkien is an uncovering, a remembering, rather than the desire for something new apart from the ‘deep Origins’” (104).

With his allusion Tolkien launches an attack against Shakespeare’s possession of his story. He transplants the story into his world, forcing it into the soup of story elements he has rendered into Middle-earth. In this way, he recycles many central ideas the scene presents from *Macbeth*—the trickery of fate, the desire for revenge—and mixes them with those of Middle-earth’s own images and tropes, including the lineage of blades, the origin of the Nazgûl, and the status of women in Rohan. Or perhaps Tolkien would say that, by placing *Macbeth* in Middle-earth, he was reanimating the Anglo-Saxon stories lying behind Hector Boece’s *Scotorum Historiae*, which lies behind Holinshed’s

chronicles, which Shakespeare accessed when writing his play. Tolkien's rather extravagant claim in a letter that the history of Middle-earth "is supposed to take place in a period of the actual Old World of this planet" (*Letters* 220, #165) further scrambles the notion of influence here. If Éowyn is a historical figure (or at least as historical as Arthur, Hrothgar or the Macbeth we find in Shakespeare's play) then Macduff's declaration about not being born of woman can more accurately said to be alluding to Éowyn's words than hers to his.

Tom Shippey's notion of "asterisk-reality" may be a useful way to describe how Tolkien is approaching allusion here. Shippey has argued "that just as the philologist used the asterisk as a mark of the 'reconstructed' word, and moved on from it to the reconstructed story or poem, so Tolkien had gone on from the \*-word to the 'lost tale' and eventually to a kind of 'asterisk-reality'" (84). The use of such reconstructed asterisk words is common in philology when a word is unattested because the language is no longer spoken and lacks textual documentation. Tolkien is presenting us with an asterisk-story of Éowyn and the Witch-king that prefigures Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. This throws a clever spanner into the works of literary allusion as we typically understand it. Allusion offers a coherent literary history in which it is easy to identify the lineage of an image or phrase; when Ngaio Marsh titles a mystery novel *Light Thickens* we know she is referring to Shakespeare's play. Unlike the reconstructed words that philologists mark with an asterisk, Marsh's allusion has a documented lineage that can be identified by cracking open the complete Shakespeare. But if the story of prophecy in *Macbeth* is simply a repetition of an ancient tale that Tolkien reconstructs in Éowyn's encounter with the Witch-king, any reader who identifies the Shakespearean allusion in Tolkien's writing has it exactly backwards. As a result of this muddling of the stories' timelines, we are left uncertain about who really "owns" Macduff's and Éowyn's big reveal.

Tolkien would certainly take the view that it is owned by no one. In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien suggests that a monolithic view of authorship is not just deceptive, but a manifestation of fundamental moral corruption. The desire to possess one's creation, most fully realized in Fëanor's creation of the Silmarils, brings about the ruin of the Eldar. In a letter, Tolkien directly states that Fëanor's possessiveness is the source of much of the evil in the *Silmarillion*: "the fall of the Elves comes about through the possessive attitude of Fëanor and his seven sons to these gems" (*Letters* 148, #131). In Tolkien's terms, Fëanor is not so much a creator as a "sub-creator," or corrupted artist who desires to control his creation. Tolkien argues that the fear of mortality leads artists to "become possessive, clinging to the things made as 'its own', the sub-creator wishes to be the Lord and God of his private creation. He will rebel against the laws of the Creator—especially against mortality" (*Letters* 145, #131).

The description of Fëanor's motivations in *The Silmarillion* directly echoes the language of possessive sub-creation. Fëanor's original motivation to forge the Silmarils is centered on resisting the power of mortality; "and he pondered how the light of the Trees, the glory of the Blessed Realm, might be preserved imperishable" (67). But the desire to preserve quickly reveals itself to be a drive to possess. "The heart of Fëanor was fast bound to these things that he himself had made" (67) and he eventually "denie[s][...] the sight of the Silmarils to the Valar and the Eldar" (75), thus claiming not only the Silmarils but also all enjoyment of them to himself. Fëanor creates the jewels so that he can possess them; his possessiveness of his creation is endemic to it. This mirrors Sauron's creation of the Ring, which appears at first to be merely one beautiful ring among many, but is ultimately revealed to be a tool of coercive power designed to control the other rings. Just as Sauron's creation of the Ring encodes into it his desire for power, Fëanor creates the Silmarils as expressions of his desire for possession.

Aulë's creation of the dwarves offers a useful contrast to Fëanor's of the Silmarils. Aulë is in many ways a similarly profane sub-creator; his creation of the dwarves is clearly considered a transgression by Ilúvatar, who chides him for making creatures utterly under his control and interrogates his intentions: "For thou hast from me as a gift thy own being only, and no more; and therefore the creatures of thy hand and mind can live only by that being, moving when thou thinkest to move them, and if thy thought be elsewhere, standing idle. Is that thy desire?" (43). Ilúvatar's question shows his concern that Aulë's motivations are possessive, but Aulë replies, humbly, that "I did not desire such lordship. I desired things other than I am, to love and to teach them, so that they too might perceive the beauty of Eä" (43). Aulë's understanding of creation is non-possessive; he hopes to share the beauty of the world with others and imagines them as free beings.

He also demonstrates a willingness to destroy his creation, while Fëanor is willing to do virtually anything to maintain his hold on the Silmarils. When Morgoth steals them, Fëanor and his sons swear "a terrible oath," "vowing to pursue with vengeance and hatred [any who] should hold or take or keep a Silmaril from their possession" (83). Fëanor thus transitions from isolating the Silmarils to himself as a consequence of their creation to openly declaring his singular ownership of them. In a letter, Tolkien describes Fëanor's oath as "terrible and blasphemous" and he states that Fëanor and his sons "pervert the greater part of their kindred" (*Letters* 148, #131) by enticing them with the thought of land that they can rule instead of the Valar. This is made most clear with the oath taken by Fëanor's sons, the language of which dwells almost obsessively on possession: "neither law, nor love, nor league of hell, nor might of the Valar, nor any power of wizardry, shall defend him from the

pursuing hate of Fëanor's sons, if he take or find a Silmaril and keep it. For the Silmarils we alone claim, until the world ends" (*Silm* 169). Their oath of ownership precipitates the curse levelled by Mandos upon Fëanor. Interestingly, the language of Mandos' curse defines full possession as something that will perpetually elude Fëanor's line. "Their Oath shall drive them, and yet betray them, and ever snatch away the very treasures that they have sworn to pursue" (88). This seems entirely consistent with Tolkien's claim that such greedy modes of creation are "filled with the sense of mortality, and yet unsatisfied by it" (*Letters* 145, #131).

The encasement and preservation of the Trees's light in three jewels closely models Tolkien's view of the process of modern authorship. Just as a particular play by Shakespeare or Anglo-Saxon poem contains the vast history of living, changing stories behind it, the gems themselves are mere structures to materialize the intangible living essence of the Trees—as Tolkien himself states, "[y]et that crystal was to the Silmarils but as is the body to the Children of Ilúvatar: the house of its inner fire" (67). This light flows from a living and evolving organism, similar to how (in Tolkien's view) an author's ideas come from a complex and ever-changing cultural tradition of past works. However, like the untranscribed collective story of a culture, the Trees can, and do, die, "pass[ing] out of knowledge and legend" (*LotR* I.2.52) as Gandalf says of the Ring. So, Fëanor encases the light in a material which is "more strong than adamant, so that no violence could mar it or break it within the Kingdom of Arda" (*Silm* 67). In this way, the light is preserved eternally, but, as with written stories, it becomes static and unchanging, so that nothing can "mar it."

Tolkien carefully phrases his description of the gems to illustrate that they are no longer vibrantly evolving. He states that they reflect the light as if they were "indeed living things" (67), but they have in fact been frozen in time. There is only one maker of the Silmarils, and no one else can add to them, just as there is only one author to the modern novel or the Shakespearean play. The Trees have many names: Telperion, Silpion, Ninquelótë; Laurelin, Malinalda, Culúrien, "and many names in song beside" (38), reflecting the trees' communal identity. Many peoples contribute to the oral tradition of naming the trees, just as many traditions contribute to the story of the goose girl, or King Arthur, or Beowulf. But, the Silmarils have only one name which is linked to a single, authoritative creator.

Tolkien also explicitly elides the Silmarils with letters; controlling the stones and controlling language spring from the same selfish possessiveness. Fëanor is "the most subtle in mind and the most skilled in hand [...] he devised those letters which bear his name, and which the Eldar used ever after" (64). Every word in a sense belongs to Fëanor; the letters themselves "bear his name." He has, in effect, trademarked language and we can understand the vow of



Fëanor's son as an assertion of intellectual property rights. Moreover, it is hard to miss the use of the word "subtle" which is the word used to describe the serpent in the King James Version of Genesis. Fëanor becomes the quintessential fallen sub-creator, the embodiment of the corrupt and corrupting desire to possess both language and beautiful creations.

Tolkien sees the models of literary authorship in which a single author owns a story, or Shakespeare owns the language of his plays, as built upon these same corrupt principles of sub-creation. Tolkien's discussion of literary allusion, as we have seen, also points the finger at readers who are willing to cede possession of a story to a single creator. Like Fëanor's descendants, modern literary critics tend to enforce the ownership of literary works and police the lineage of certain stories. Being only a sub-creator, no author truly possesses a story, just as Fëanor never truly possessed the light of the trees. Tolkien's complex and deceptive use of Shakespearean allusion reveals that the contemporary view of stories as "complete and water-tight" (Bowman 274), and of authors as owning or controlling those stories, is misguided.

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