



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 40
Number 2

Article 14

4-2022

A Queer Atheist Feminist Autist Responds to Donald Williams's "Keystone or Cornerstone? A Rejoinder to Verlyn Flieger on the Alleged 'Conflicting Sides' of Tolkien's Singular Self"

Robin A. Reid
Independent Scholar

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reid, Robin A. (2022) "A Queer Atheist Feminist Autist Responds to Donald Williams's "Keystone or Cornerstone? A Rejoinder to Verlyn Flieger on the Alleged 'Conflicting Sides' of Tolkien's Singular Self"," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 40: No. 2, Article 14.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol40/iss2/14>

This Notes and Letters is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSUTM

Mythopoeic Society's Online Midwinter Seminar 2024

17th–18th February 2024: Something Mighty Queer

Submission Deadline: November 30, 2023

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2024.htm>



A Queer Atheist Feminist Autist Responds to Donald Williams's "Keystone or Cornerstone? A Rejoinder to Verlyn Flieger on the Alleged 'Conflicting Sides' of Tolkien's Singular Self"

Abstract

This response traces what the author sees as significant areas of disagreement between Flieger's essay "The Arch and the Keystone" and Williams's rejoinder in *Mythlore* #139, and touches on the wider contemporary context of pushback against diverse scholarship about and readings of Tolkien's works.

The repository PDF of this note includes an online-only supplement.

Additional Keywords

Flieger, Verlyn. "The Arch and the Keystone"; Williams, Dom. "Keystone or Cornerstone?"; Reader response theory; Tolkien Society (new); Diversity in J.R.R. Tolkien's works

WORKS CITED

- "A Conversation with Ursula K. Le Guin." *Conversations with Ursula K. Le Guin*, edited by Carl Howard Freedman, University Press of Mississippi, 2008. pp.163-176.
- Firenze, Paul. [T]Hey, Like the Child, Are Not Free': An Ethical Defense of the Ones Who Remain in Omelas | Response. responsejournal.net/issue/2017-11/article/%E2%80%98hey-like-the-child-are-not-free%E2%80%99-ethical-defense-ones-who-remain-omelas. Accessed 4 Oct. 2021
- Freeman, John. "Ursula Le Guin: She Got There First." *BostonGlobe.Com*, www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2014/11/22/ursula-guin-she-got-there-first/aQURr2fiFuKjxf1Fv6zW3O/story.html. Accessed 9 Oct. 2021.
- Jemisin, N. K. "The Ones Who Stay and Fight." *Lightspeed Magazine*, 23 Jan. 2020, www.lightspeedmagazine.com/fiction/the-ones-who-stay-and-fight/.
- Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching*. thetaoteching.com/taoteching1.html. Accessed 4 Oct. 2021. Translation by S. Mitchell.
- Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Wind's Twelve Quarters: Stories*, Perennial, New York, 2004.
- . "The Feminine and the Tao: An Interview with Ursula K. Le Guin." Interviewed by Brenda Peterson. *Embrace the Moon*, embracethemoon.com/ursula-k-leguin. Accessed 21 March 2022.
- . "Foreword." *The Wind's Twelve Quarters: Stories*, Perennial, New York, 2004.
- Swank, Kris. "Ursula's Bookshelf." *Mythlore* vol. 39, no. 2 (#138), 2021, pp. 137-155.

SABINA SCHRYNEMAKERS will attend Cornell University's College of Arts and Sciences. She is especially interested in moral psychology, free will, and animal ethics, and her "Animal Morality" is forthcoming in *Between the Species*.



A QUEER ATHEIST FEMINIST AUTIST RESPONDS TO DONALD WILLIAMS'S "KEYSTONE OR CORNERSTONE? A REJOINER TO VERLYN FLIEGER ON THE ALLEGED 'CONFLICTING SIDES' OF TOLKIEN'S SINGULAR SELF"

ROBIN A. REID

I ATTENDED DONALD WILLIAMS'S PRESENTATION at MythCon 51, "A Virtual Halfling' MythCon," in which he responded to Verlyn Flieger's essay "The Arch and the Keystone," and which has subsequently been published in *Mythlore* #139. Since I did not have an opportunity to respond to his presentation in the Q&A, I want to continue the conversation here in the pages of *Mythlore*.

I read Flieger's essay as soon as it appeared in 2019 and wrote an enthusiastic recommendation in my Dreamwidth journal explaining why I liked the essay so much and how I was going to use it in the last graduate Tolkien class I would teach before my retirement (Ithiliana). My expanded response here

describes areas of disagreement between Flieger's essay and Williams's rejoinder; then explains why I agree with Flieger and disagree with Williams; and concludes with an overview of the academic and personal contexts that drove me to produce this response, with a bonus Epilogue on arguments by analogy.

To start with, here are quotes that clearly show their disagreement:

Flieger:

We have pasted labels on him, called him a medievalist, a modernist, a post-modernist, a royalist, a fascist, a misogynist, a feminist, a racist, an egalitarian, a realist, a romantic, an optimist, a pessimist. He's been variously characterized as homophobic and homo-social in both work and life. His fiction has been interpreted as Boethian, Manichean, Augustinian and Aquinian. He's been typed as a radical and a conservative, a Christian apologist and a pagan, a Catholic who believed in Fairyland, a monarchist who exalted little people, a Tory whose political views leaned toward anarchy [...] The fact that all these labels can find a fit only adds to the confusion. [...]

I have to admit that Tolkien himself makes it [the conflicting "labels" readers attach to him] easy, because so much of the primary evidence—that is to say, his writing—seems to toggle between diametrically opposite positions. (Flieger, "The Arch and the Keystone" ["Arch"] 6-7)

Flieger's title is a strong analogy that is directly relevant to the argument she makes here about Tolkien's work in two ways: the first is how it graphically represents her argument for a new way of thinking about Tolkien's work given the current state of popular reception and academic scholarship. The second is how her use of an architectural term echoes the monumental ruins that are such an important part of the landscape of Middle-earth. Her analysis of Tolkien's letters, essays, short stories, and key scenes from *The Lord of the Rings* supports her argument that contradictory readings by Tolkien's audience are caused, at least in part, by contradictions in his written work; that the contradictions in his work are due, at least in part, to his personal conflicts; and that those unresolved contradictions are part of what gives his work such power.⁷

Williams:

Keystone or cornerstone? Perhaps we can see both if we stand back at the right distance to see the Tower as a whole. Darkness and light, despair and hope, paganism and Christianity are indeed presented with a

⁷ I think it is worth keeping in mind that the *Letters* were selected and edited, as were the later compilations of Tolkien's fiction, and that there is probably still material in the family's archives that has not been published or read. "Tolkien" (meaning the great body of his work) is destined to be incomplete, even given the wealth of material Christopher Tolkien has made available.

creative tension that, precisely because it is able fully to embody the power of both sides of those pairs, drives the plot arc so that it pierces the profoundest depths of reality. Tolkien as the keystone who holds this two-sided arch together is a wonderful metaphor for which we are grateful to Verlyn Flieger. But perhaps a better understanding of the Christian philosophy of history, the biblical eschatology, that underlies Tolkien's work can allow us to see that it is the coherence, not the contradiction, between those pairs, when seen in that larger context, that allows them to function so powerfully. It allows us, in other words, to see that the keystone and the arch it holds together are solidly grounded in the cornerstone of Tolkien's worldview. That is why, from the top of this Tower, we may still look out upon the sea. (Williams, "Keystone" 225)

In contrast, Williams's title and analogy foreground assumptions I do not share, and these assumptions are one reason I disagree with his argument. I neither share his assumption that human beings have a "singular self" nor the claim that knowledge of Christian eschatology is required to interpret Tolkien's fiction correctly. A second reason is that Williams's disagreement with a secondary thread of Flieger's argument, the "Christian / pagan" contradiction, ignores her major argument which I summarize above. My disagreement would not have been enough, on its own, to inspire this response. Additional factors include how Williams's rejoinder is written and my recent experiences with a backlash against a seminar on "Tolkien and Diversity" by critics who share the widespread assumption that Tolkien's religion limits interpretation of Tolkien's legendarium.

I want to focus first on four examples of specific words and phrases that appear in Williams's title, abstract, and essay that I see weakening his argument. The first example is a single word in Williams's title that is repeated twice in the abstract but never appears in the essay: "alleged." The abstract is not the essay, but I tend to expect that key words in abstracts will be repeated in titles and the major arguments of essays. Williams's use of "alleged" implies a negative judgement of Flieger's argument that I neither agree with nor see supported in his essay. "Alleged" appears in the abstract as part of his claim that there is a "failure" on Flieger's part, the failure being her inability "to [fully] understand Tolkien's biblical worldview":⁸

Unfortunately, *the alleged contradictions*, e.g. between the despair of the Beowulf essay and the hope for *euclatostrophe* [emphasis in original] in the essay "On Fairy- Stories," reflected by light and darkness in *The Lord of the Rings*, are created by [Flieger's] failure to understand Tolkien's biblical worldview, where the impossibility of salvation *in this life* [emphasis in

⁸ "Fully" appeared in the original abstract, but not the final published version quoted below.

original] does not contradict, but is the logical setting for, the hope of a redemption not fully realized until the next. Thus *an understanding of Tolkien's biblical eschatology dissolves the alleged tension* and lets us supplement Flieger's keystone with the cornerstone of faith in Iluvatar [sic] and the true hope of Middle-earth. ("Abstract," most emphases added)

At first reading, Williams's claims in the body of his essay seem less confrontational than the language in his abstract because he does not reference allegations or Flieger's "failure." However, as the italicized phrases in the following excerpts from Williams's introduction and the conclusion show, the negative judgement which was stated in the abstract is strongly implied at key points in the essay. In the first excerpt, Williams replaces "failure" with a more measured evaluation of her "metaphor" as "arresting" but flawed, and needing correction.⁹

It [the arch and the keystone] is an arresting metaphor that effectively captures an analysis that I *think contains enough truth and is close enough to being right that the attempt to bend it just a little closer to the reality can produce some important insights.* (209, emphasis added)

Williams's essay attempts to correct Flieger's failure and provide what is needed to bring her "wonderful metaphor" and analysis into alignment with "truth [...] right [correctness] [...] reality": specifically, Tolkien's (and I infer, Williams's) Christianity. The conclusion then supplies Williams's correction, the cornerstone which corrects Flieger's argument by subordinating her keystone and arch to "Tolkien's worldview," the "Singular Self" of Williams's title.

Tolkien as the keystone who holds this two-sided arch together is a wonderful metaphor for which we are grateful to Verlyn Flieger. But *perhaps a better understanding of the Christian philosophy of history, the biblical eschatology, that underlies Tolkien's work can allow us to see that it is the coherence, not the contradiction, between those pairs, when seen in that larger context, that allows them to function so powerfully. It allows us, in other words, to see that the keystone and the arch it holds together are solidly grounded in the cornerstone of Tolkien's worldview.* (225, emphasis added)

The primacy of the Williams's imagined cornerstone depends upon what he claims to be a singular Christian worldview, the "larger context," that

⁹ Williams calls Flieger's figure of speech a metaphor throughout as well as referencing Tolkien's Tower—which I consider to be an allegory—in his conclusion, but considerable overlaps exist between comparative figures of speech. I chose to use "analogy" throughout, considering that both scholars are making arguments from analogy as I discuss in the "Epilogue."

William assigns to Tolkien in an attempt to dismiss the contradictions and tensions of Flieger's metaphor and argument about the reception of Tolkien's work. By the end of Williams's essay, Flieger is no longer accused of "failing" to understand Tolkien's worldview. Instead, a "better understanding of the Christian philosophy of history" is prescribed for her and, by implication, for all readers who find Flieger's (flawed) argument convincing (Williams 225).

Williams's argument seems effective only if his primary audience consists of Christians who share his knowledge and understanding. Not only do I not share his assumption, I am also fairly sure there are Christian readers and fans of Tolkien who interpret Tolkien differently than Williams does.¹⁰ Flieger's primary audience, in contrast, is Tolkien scholars (a group which includes academic, independent, and fan scholars and includes, but is not limited to, Christians).

I evaluate scholarly arguments on a spectrum of weak to strong depending on a variety of factors including clarity of expression, the amount and handling of evidence from primary texts, and knowledge of and engagement with the relevant scholarship; that is by evaluating the ethos, pathos, and logos of the work. I try to avoid basing my evaluation on my subjective position. I cannot imagine characterizing an analytical argument, no matter how weak, as "alleged" because I associate the term with criminal acts. Nor does my evaluation of academic work depend on assessing whether the argument is true, correct, or real, given how multi-valent those terms are.

I do not consider that the goal of scholarship is to figure out the "right" answer (presumably, what the "author" intends?), or to achieve some falsely universal Truth that dismisses other interpretations as wrong, or failures. While I can and do disagree with arguments about the meaning or significance of a work of literature, or can find an essay weak for a number of reasons even if I agree with the argument, I cannot understand describing an argument about the interpretation of a fictional text as right or as wrong, although essays can contain errors of various kinds, or lack sufficient evidence to convince me of their argument. I am not sure how an analogy relating to an analytical argument can "contain enough truth" as opposed to apparently not containing enough truth,

¹⁰ There are centuries of debates over differences regarding theological, doctrinal, and political stances in different Christian denominations, so much so that it seems to this outsider that Christianity is, and has been for years, a fragmented and contradictory system. *Christianity Today* cited the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, published in 2001, as having identified "33,830 denominations worldwide; with the amount of debate and division over theology and orthodoxy since then, that number is undoubtedly higher." Just as there is debate over the contradictions in Tolkien, so too it seems there is debate over the divisions among denominations: "But is this myriad of denominations a sign of chronic division amongst the church? Or is it, as some argue, the prime example of the church working together as different parts of one body?" ("Denominations").

or how, in this context “truth” can be measured. Does a lack of sufficient truth mean the same thing as a lie? How does “bending truth” get us closer to “reality”? What is the referent for “us” in Williams’s claim? (Williams 210). His essay provides no answer to these questions other than “Christianity” which he assigns as Tolkien’s worldview which is supposed to, from a distance, resolve all contradictions and conflicts.

I suspect one significant difference between Williams and me as readers of Tolkien and as readers of Flieger is that we live in different realities of our shared Primary World. Williams is, I infer, a Christian, and I am an atheist.¹¹ We are reading and writing about “Tolkien” and “Flieger” through the perspectives of our different experiences.¹² Another difference between us is that, despite my strong disagreement with Williams’s argument, I do not claim his interpretation of Tolkien’s work is objectively wrong (or untrue, or unreal). I am quite sure that his interpretation is right and true and real for him; I am equally sure it is not for me.

My goal is to challenge the false universality of his claim: that if Flieger, and those of us who are convinced of her argument, just read Tolkien’s work the right way, “we” would all see what Williams sees. Had Williams stated he disagreed with Flieger’s argument about the contradictions in the legendarium because of his Christian belief and knowledge, using first-person singular (“I”) rather than first-person plural (“we” and “us”) throughout, and if he had avoided language like *alleged*, *truth*, *correct*, and *real*, I would have had no desire to write this response. Besides not being persuaded by his use of Flieger’s earlier research (specifically *Splintered Light*) to counter her current argument or by his analogy of the cornerstone, I am not convinced by his analogy and argument because the impression I have of the contradictions in her work is that they show the process of someone re-reading Tolkien over decades, delving deeper into the

¹¹ I more or less drifted into atheism while retaining the animist perspective that *The Lord of the Rings* inspired in me when I was ten.

¹² I put the authors’ names in quotation marks to emphasize that the names of the human beings who wrote the works we are reading function as synecdoches for their publications. Conventionally, literary criticism uses this figure of speech to refer to both the author’s work and biography. As Flieger notes, it can be confusing: “The fact that all these labels can find a fit only adds to the confusion. [...] What exactly is the goal? *Is it the tremendous body of work? Is it the man himself? And how do you — or even can you — tell the difference?*” (“Arch” 6, emphasis added). Arguments made about “the man himself” seem to me to require a different type of evidence than arguments made about the “tremendous body of work,” but critics do not always make clear distinctions between the two. I have no problem answering the question Flieger poses for myself: my focus in all my work is on the text, not the human being, because the “author” is quite literally dead. I use the word “Tolkien” as a shorthand for his work. I don’t worry about his intentions to the limited extent I can discern them. I have made an intentional claim about Tolkien’s intentions only once, and it was to explain that my queer reading of Eowyn does not depend upon Tolkien’s stated intentions about her character (Reid, “Light”).

contradictions and complexities of his legendarium. Her later work builds on but does not repeat her earlier research, something that cannot always be said of all scholars' work. Since I do not see Flieger as having a singular/static self any more than I see Tolkien as having a singular / static self, I do not demand a simplistic consistency over decades from their work.¹³

The final aspect of Williams's rejoinder that weakens his argument in my evaluation is his failure to acknowledge, let alone engage with, what I consider to be the major argument of Flieger's essay. This argument is developed in the first eleven paragraphs which describe the complex and contradictory reception Tolkien's work has received since it was first published in 1954 (sixty-five years ago, at the time "The Arch and the Keystone" was written; now sixty-seven years ago). By "reception," I mean the huge mass of critical commentary by critics, fans, and academics in print and on the internet. The reality is that Tolkien scholarship has grown immensely in both scope and variety in the opening decades of the 21st century.¹⁴ Similar conflicts and debates exist in Tolkien fandom as well, but Williams's presentation and publication are framed as scholarship.

Flieger argues that this reception can best be understood by acknowledging the contradictions that exist in Tolkien's work and conceptualizing "Tolkien [the author as] the keystone in the great arch of his work," meaning, as the "central element that will sustain and bridge in opposition two sides that do not meet" ("Arch" 15). The two opposing sides are necessary to create the "great arch," and this analogy presents the opposition as essential to the structure rather than a problem that must be solved. I see no way that Williams can disprove the fact that varying and contradictory interpretations of Tolkien's work have been written and published during the past nearly seventy years. All Williams can do is ignore that part of Flieger's essay, or declare, explicitly or implicitly, that some of those contradictory (to his argument) interpretations are wrong.

Flieger is not the only scholar to note the complexities of Tolkien's reception. Dallas John Baker's essay on Tolkien briefly summarizes this complex history of reception, identifying some of the same contradictions Flieger does,

¹³ By the terms "static" and "singular," I mean showing no change over time and lacking contradictions, uncertainties, and doubts.

¹⁴ The body of Tolkien scholarship is even more complex than the opposite sides Flieger identifies. While oppositions do exist, even scholars on the "same side" often disagree. Some of the differences among feminist scholars on Tolkien's work are covered in my bibliographic essay in Croft and Donovan's *Perilous and Fair*, for instance. I also assume there are disagreements among Christian scholars as well as among pagan scholars. In addition, I suspect there are interpretation from sides that are not acknowledged as existing: for instance, until a recent project of mine which I presented at the "Tolkien and Diversity" seminar discussed below, nobody ever asked how atheists and agnostics read Tolkien!

specifically that different readers have characterized him as a sexist/an advocate for women's power; a Christian/a pagan; conversative/radical; overtly racist/not racist:

[T]here is now more than one Tolkien. At the very least there are four J.R.R. Tolkiens. There is the Tolkien of history, the actual person who lived and wrote and died. Then there is the subject of the numerous biographies based on that actual person. There is the Tolkien as imagined by the, perhaps millions, of people who have enjoyed his novels or the film adaptations. This Tolkien is perceived as akin to Gandalf, a kind of wizard genius, who created a world that many of his fans feel more at home in than the real world. Finally, there is the Tolkien as constructed in the scholarly research about his writing. [...] This [fourth] Tolkien is a contested figure, precisely because he is a *discursive* figure, a figure that emerges from text. The meanings of text or discourse are dependent on the subjective position of the reader [...]. Text is open to interpretation and changeable and often, if not always, ambiguous [...]. In other words, texts are always multi-modal. (Baker 125, emphasis in original)

Flieger and Baker acknowledge the importance of reception theory without applying the method in their work. Baker identifies at least four Tolkiens; Flieger notes an even larger number of Tolkiens: "when we look at Tolkien we are likely to see ourselves, and thus to find in his work what we want to see. [...] Everybody has their own private Tolkien—more Tolkiens than you can shake a stick at" ("Arch" 6-7). In an earlier essay, "But What Did He Really Mean," she also describes *The Lord of the Rings* as "in all its richness and multivalent texture, [as] a book from which readers have been taking what they want and need for sixty years and show no signs of stopping" (162, emphasis added).¹⁵ Reception theory does not declare Christian interpretations to be wrong—unless the existence of pagan or atheist interpretations of the legendarium is perceived as such a declaration. The extent to which contradictory interpretations that exist among readers can be connected to contradictions in Tolkien's work is, of course, more open to debate. I would enjoy seeing more work that engages with what might be called a meta-bibliographic approach that would develop what Flieger and Baker have done so far.

In his rejoinder to Flieger, Williams focuses on the "Christian apologist/pagan" contradiction, arguing that "Tolkien's worldview" is solidly grounded in his religion ("the Christian philosophy of history, the biblical

¹⁵ I agree with her claim although I would extend it to the totality of Tolkien's legendarium.

eschatology”) (225).¹⁶ Williams ignores all the other contradictory labels that Flieger argues have been applied to Tolkien and/or to his work over the decades:

medievalist/modernist/post-modernist
royalist/fascist
misogynist/feminist
racist/egalitarian
realist/romantic
optimist/pessimist
homophobic/homo-social
radical/conservative
Christian apologist/pagan
Catholic/believer in Fairyland
“monarchist who exalted little people/Tory [who] leaned toward anarchy”¹⁷

Some of the paired contradictions, such as “misogynist/feminist” and “racist/egalitarian,” are routinely dismissed by Tolkienists as too political, meaning the critics draw on contemporary critical theories created by and relating to marginalized populations which are not relevant to what some see as Tolkien’s universal themes.¹⁸ However, Williams’s choice to ignore the conflict in “Catholic/ believer in Fairyland” which follows “Christian apologist/pagan” in Flieger’s list, seems odd. The word “Catholic” appears five times in Williams’s essay, always in quotes from Tolkien or Murray; Williams uses “Christian” and “biblical” in his argument. I have seen a similar pattern in other scholarship on

¹⁶ One weakness I see in Flieger’s and Baker’s lists of oppositional interpretations is that they tend toward the simplistic binary, either/or structure. After reading Flieger’s essay, “But What Did He Really Mean,” I began working on a project that surveyed atheist, agnostic, and animist readers of Tolkien who have been mostly ignored in the reliance upon the simplistic “Christian/pagan” shorthand.

¹⁷ Flieger does not cite specific sources for all the different ways readers have characterized Tolkien’s work and/or the author, but “The Arch and the Keystone” was written to be presented during her Guest of Honor session at MythCon, hardly a setting in which to recite lengthy lists of citations. One of the ways I used Flieger’s essay in my last Tolkien graduate course was as the start of a semester-long class exercise to teach students how to use subscription databases for their research. We took the terms from Flieger’s introduction and did searches for scholarship on Tolkien that included a term or terms as descriptors.

¹⁸ See Drout and Wynne for their ambivalent argument for why Tolkien scholars need to draw on the “laundry list” of contemporary critical theories (dealing with “race, class, and gender” but ignoring sexuality) in order to avoid being marginalized, as scholars, and to “debunk many of the sprawling truth-claims of theoretically centered critics” (122). One of the flaws in work drawing on contemporary theory that Drout and Wynne identify is the lack of any “discussion of Good and Evil” (123). Sue Kim has noted the extent to which Tolkien scholars have no problem considering Tolkien’s work in the context of wars and industrialism, which are political issues, while setting aside other contemporary political issues such as race and gender.

Christianity and Tolkien. Given the long history of theological and doctrinal differences between Protestants and Catholics, a history which includes religious wars as well as anti-Catholic prejudice in the United States where a number of Protestant scholars live, I have noted how at times Christian fans and scholars bury Tolkien's Catholicism in the more generic term of "Christianity." Williams's focus on Tolkien's "worldview" allows Williams to use many of the same quotes that Flieger did while dismissing the contradictions she examines as resolvable and "coherent" from within Christianity.¹⁹

My agreement with Flieger's evaluation of the contradictions in the scholarship is based, in part, on my own bibliographic research and scholarly interests which I discuss in my 2018 Guest of Honor Speech, "On the Shoulders of Gi(E)nts: The Joys of Bibliographic Scholarship and Fanzines in Tolkien Studies." As I note in this talk, the result of my subject search for "Tolkien" in the Modern Language Association International Bibliography was a list of "2800 works including single-author monographs, essay collections, peer-reviewed articles, general articles, and editions. The earliest publication listed appeared in 1952" ("Gi(E)nts" 29). I no longer have easy access to the subscription databases since I retired, but I am sure that the number of publications has only increased. It has been impossible for some time for any one person to read all the published scholarship on Tolkien, even focusing only on peer-reviewed books and essays, which is why bibliographic scholarship is so important.²⁰ We all have to select what we can read based on our areas of interest. However,

¹⁹ Williams's rejoinder to "The Arch and the Keystone" would be more relevant as a response to the major argument in Flieger's 2014 essay, "But What Did He Really Mean?" The earlier essay is specifically about conflicts between Christian and pagan readers/scholars. In this essay, Flieger shows the extent to which Christians and pagans cherry-pick the same quotes to support their oppositional readings while ignoring other quotes that contradict their position, whether Christian or pagan. She also presents additional textual evidence as well as more sustained engagement with relevant secondary scholarship than she does in the later presentation. The evidence from sources in the earlier essay includes a longer discussion of Tolkien's letters, and more analysis of the various drafts of "On Fairy-Stories" which reflect her knowledge of the revisions Tolkien made which are documented in the volume she co-edited with Anderson. She extends her argument by comparing paired works, "Beowulf" and "On Fairy-Stories," the letters to Murray and Resnick, "Niggle" and "Smith," focusing on the key aspects of Frodo's story and a longer description of Murray's letter to the graduate student.

²⁰ Bibliographic scholarship includes both bibliographies of relevant publications but also bibliographic essays. The major bibliographies in Tolkien studies are by Johnson and West; they include fanzines along with academic publications. Bibliographic essays analyze trends in the scholarship, sometimes with a broad focus but limits on type of publication and other times focusing on a specific topic or theme. See Drouot and Wynne for an example of the first type, and Reid, "History of Scholarship on Female Characters" and "Race in Tolkien Studies," for examples of the second type.

confusing our individual area of interest with the whole of Tolkien scholarship must be avoided.

There is evidence beyond my personal experience, of course. In her "Appendix" in *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits* (2009), Dimitra Fimi argues that Tolkien scholarship is undergoing significant changes as the field grows, pointing to the increasing number of Tolkien conferences, Tolkien journals, and Tolkien classes, all contributing to the complexity and contradictions in the reception of Tolkien's work. A list of the presentations given between 2014 and 2021 at the Tolkien Studies area of the Popular Culture Association, which I run, provides a fair example of the varied period, disciplinary, and theoretical approaches to be found in Tolkien scholarship ("Tolkien Studies Area").

Finally, I find Flieger's essay stronger and more persuasive than Williams's because her conclusion, the capstone to her essay, to risk an architectural analogy of my own, explicitly invites participation and dialogue among a more diverse group of readers, fans, and scholars by emphasizing contradictions in Tolkien himself and his legendarium and rejecting the need to judge readings as "right" or "wrong." She opens a space for the disagreements and contradictions that already exist and validates them as "right." Her conclusion, and her essay as a whole, invites me, and many others, into Tolkien studies:

And it is these same forces creating this same friction that invite the disagreeing and debating Tolkien scholars and critics to find in Tolkien's work what they are looking for. I am not saying they're wrong. *I'm saying they're right. What they see is there, even when they're seeing contradictory things.* ("Arch" 18, emphasis added)

In contrast, Williams's conclusion, and essay as a whole, presents a single interpretation as right, closing off any space for discussion, and excluding me and, likely, many others:

But *perhaps a better understanding of the Christian philosophy of history, the biblical eschatology, that underlies Tolkien's work* can allow us to see that it is the coherence, not the contradiction, between those pairs, when seen in that larger context, that allows them to function so powerfully. (Williams 225, emphasis added)

I find Flieger's essay useful for my scholarship because I read her work as saying something along the lines of: *here is a way to conceptualize Tolkien the author and his work in order to move past unproductive conflicts in interpreting his work.* I fail to see Williams's essay as useful for my scholarship because I read

his work as saying something along the lines of: *the only right way to interpret Tolkien's work is to study my religion.*

As an atheist, I have no problem with readers finding Christian themes and messages in his work and sharing their ideas with other readers, whether as fans or scholars.²¹ As with any sub-field in Tolkien scholarship, strong work, as well as weak, on Christian themes exists. As an atheist, and as a queer woman, I have significant problems with rhetoric that insists that one particular belief system, or theory, is the only key to understanding Tolkien's work, especially when that rhetoric accompanies claims that other approaches are to be condemned, often in the harshest terms. The demands for what I consider an allegorical reading of Tolkien's work through the lens of Christianity, which I suspect has been present in Tolkien studies all along, has increased in recent years, perhaps in response to the growing diversity in Tolkien studies along with greater participation on social media. In the next section I describe, briefly, the backlash to the Tolkien Society's Summer 2021 Seminar, "Tolkien and Diversity," as an example of what happens when the Christian focus requires condemnation of the perceived un-Christian.²²

THE TOLKIEN AND DIVERSITY SEMINAR

The backlash began after the Tolkien Society posted the schedule for their Summer 2021 Seminar on "Tolkien and Diversity." The theme of the event as well as specific presentations were criticized on the Society's Facebook group. The critics included members of the Society as well as followers of the group who are not members.²³ Within a few days, a number of right-wing critics targeted the event, often in violent terms, with comments on those sites that allowed comments, often moving into explicit calls for violence (Abbott, Basham, Birzer, Davison, Dreher, Foust, Huston, Leach, Nolte, O'Neil, Tettenborn, and Wright).²⁴

²¹ The scholarship on the topic of "religion and Tolkien" is more diverse than scholarship on "Christianity and Tolkien." For examples, see Eden and Raza.

²² I should note that Donald Williams's rejoinder to Flieger's essay never condemns other theories or approaches, although he does attempt to present a Christian analysis as the true and correct reading of Tolkien.

²³ A number of comments were removed by moderators of the Facebook group. Information on the virtual seminar can be found on the Society's webpage. The original program announcement simply listed titles and presenters; later, the abstracts were added. After the conference ended, some of the recorded presentations were uploaded to the Society's YouTube Channel ("Tolkien Society Summer Seminar 2021" and Tolkien Society YouTube). An earlier conference theme, "Tolkien the Pagan," apparently received similar responses in the Society's social media spaces but did not make the jump to alt-right blogs and periodicals.

²⁴ The beginning of the first article to appear, Abbott's, indicates that he was sent information about the Seminar by, I infer, one of the critics who protested on Facebook: "The reader who sent this in cites it as an example of O'Sullivan's First Law: 'All organizations that are not

This particular backlash is not an isolated event: similar attacks on theories used by humanities and social science researchers have been taking place for decades in the “culture wars” in the United States.²⁵ The attacks rely on stock phrases such as “politically correct / cultural Marxism / woke.”²⁶ Three excerpts from right-wing publications and blogs arguing that Tolkien’s intentions and his fiction are so grounded in Catholicism that to present any ideas about his work that are not Catholic is to misrepresent, hate, or destroy “Tolkien” follow. The backlash was against nothing more than the titles of the presentations and, in some cases, the language in the Society’s call for proposals. As far as I can discover, none of the critics attended the Seminar to hear the presentations.²⁷

The general consensus is that the Tolkien Society and the presenters, especially those of us using queer theory, hate Tolkien; espouse postmodern or cultural Marxist ideas; are pedophiles; plan to “cancel” or rewrite Tolkien, and have joined the forces of the Dark Lord.²⁸ Critics proclaim, triumphantly, that the “fact” of Tolkien’s Catholicism is all that is needed to prove us wrong.

Joel Abbott, *Not The Bee*:

I think I finally understand how Gimli felt when he discovered Balin’s tomb, and the foul truth that all his kin had been slaughtered by the goblins and Durin’s Bane.

Where does the Tolkien Society even go from here? They’ve already hijacked a devout Catholic’s epic saga of heroism and hope against all odds.

actually right-wing will over time become left-wing” (para. 1). Besides the text attacks, a number of critics made YouTube videos. I have not viewed those (some run more than an hour) and have not cited them although I can provide a list of links upon request. Many of the links to the articles and videos were sent to me by Tolkien Society members who were monitoring the material for possible threats to the Seminar, presenters, and audience. Others were shared by my Facebook friends.

²⁵ These attacks are not unique to the U.S. but I am not familiar with what happens in other countries.

²⁶ The most recent theory to come under this ideologically-motivated attack is Critical Race Theory (George, Sawchuk).

²⁷ One blogger, a self-identified conservative and Christian who is “an upholder of Tolkien’s Catholicism” as well as a member of the Tolkien Society, wrote a defense of the Tolkien Society’s event after attending it (Green Girdle). I discuss that article below because Green Girdle was not a part of the backlash.

²⁸ As a queer woman who works with queer theory, I have been criticized in similar terms in several online Tolkien groups in the past. My response then was to block the bigots and to leave the groups. After recent events, I have decided to do more, including writing this response. I will be presenting on the backlash in the Tolkien Studies Area of the 2022 Popular Culture Association, in a paper titled “J.R.R. Tolkien, Culture Warrior: The Alt-Right Religious Crusade against ‘Tolkien and Diversity.’”

What's next? Promoting transhumanism? Giving talks on polyamory? Advocating for pedophilia? They've got to be somewhat careful, otherwise they'll cancel the straight, white, Christian author that made the very world they now seek to destroy.

Nathanael Blake, *The Federalist*:

The group's latest academic seminar includes presentations such as "Transgender Realities in The Lord of the Rings," "The Queer in Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings" and "Destabilizing Cishetero Amatonormativity in the Works of Tolkien." Were these papers honest scholarship, they would be blank pages. Tolkien was a faithful Catholic whose work reflected his beliefs.

But as Tolkien knew, men are easily bored and dissatisfied, even with the good. So these scholars are narcissistically appropriating Tolkien's greatness to serve the latest intellectual fashions, rather than appreciating it and engaging with it honestly. Whether just to impress tenure committees or out of true radicalism, these scholars approach Tolkien's work as Sauron did Middle-Earth—with a lust for domination.

John C. Wright, *John C. Wright Author*:

The investigation of such matters rightly belongs to the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition, currently called the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Any punishments, penalties, or lingering yet sadistic and brutally inhuman tortures are matters for the secular authorities.

Despite what may seem, this is not blasphemy.

Blasphemy is any malicious or wanton reproach of God, or malicious accusation made against God or the Church with the purpose of dishonoring the divine majesty and alienating mankind from the love and reverence of God. Blasphemy must be published, that is, uttered in the presence of another party to be an offense. Mere use of profanity is not considered blasphemy.

In France, before the Revolution, it was a blasphemy also to speak against the holy virgin and the saints, to deny one's faith, to speak with impiety of holy things, and to swear by things sacred. Spain had a similar law against uttering injuries against the Virgin Mary and the saints. Those were sane and wholesome times, not to be seen again.

Until and unless Professor Tolkien is canonized, despite the universal and ferocious sentiment of all hale and sound Men of the West,

technically it is not blasphemy to utter injuries and libels against him, not even by grotesque and orkish [sic] freaks in service to the Dark Lord.²⁹

My experience tracking and reading the backlash during the weeks preceding the “Tolkien and Diversity” Seminar (July 3-4, 2021) and after it ended means that when Mythcon 51 began (July 31-August 1, 2021), I had spent several hours most days for over a month immersed in rhetoric that weaponized Tolkien’s religion against the presenters and the Tolkien Society. I was lucky in not being personally targeted by most of the critics, but several presenters’ names and titles appeared in the majority of the articles.³⁰

My presentation for “Tolkien and Diversity” was on how queer atheist, agnostic, and animist fans interpret his work. The presentation is part of a book project that draws on a survey (supervised by my university’s Institutional Research Board) I created to discover how atheist, agnostic, and animist fans read Tolkien. The presentation focused on the 34% of the respondents to my survey who identified themselves as asexual, bisexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, or queer. One of the open-ended questions on my survey focuses on what I see as a growing problem in fandom and academic spaces: #7. “A widespread assumption is that Tolkien’s religious beliefs must be taken into account in reading and interpreting his work. How do you feel about this assumption

²⁹ Wright is presumably referring to the effort to petition the Vatican to confer sainthood upon Tolkien. See Mike Glycer’s compilation of articles at File 770 for further information on the attempt.

³⁰ Reading through all of the published pieces, it seems clear that there is a great deal of similarity in the language and points made, so much so that if I saw the same pattern in a group of student papers, I would suspect plagiarism! The presenters whose work was singled out most frequently are part of a group of scholars whose work Christopher Vaccaro, Stephen Yandell, and I have accepted for our anthology of queer scholarship *We Could Do With a Bit More Queerness in These Parts: Tolkien’s Queer Legendarium* (in progress). In addition to my “Works Cited” list for this response, a “Selected Bibliography” that includes citations for the articles opposing the Seminar is available as an online supplement to this Note. In addition to the standard bibliographic information for these sources, I provide links to archived versions of the articles. While most of the attacks singled out queer presentations, some anger was spared for work by two Indian scholars. Given the widespread stereotype that academics are all part of the liberal, radical, “woke” brigade, I note that two of the writers participating in the backlash against the Tolkien Society are academics. One is Bradley Birzer, an historian at Hillsdale College (“Brad Birzer”). He published a monograph on Tolkien’s Roman Catholicism, and his article ran in the *National Review*. He announces the forthcoming publication of his second book at the end of the article: *The Inklings: Tolkien and the Men of the West*. The second, Andrew Tettenborn, has not published any scholarship on Tolkien. Tettenborn is a Professor of Commercial Law at Swansea (“Professor Andrew Tettenborn”). His article on the Tolkien Seminar is one of thirty publications he has published in the “Artillery Row” section of *The Critic* (“Andrew Tettenborn”). The “Selected Bibliography” contains other articles that trace how alt-right and neo-Nazis use popular culture—including but not limited to Tolkien—as part of their recruiting strategies (Black, Crossley, Makuch and Lamoureaux, Osworth, and Serwer).

among readers and critics when you encounter it?" Those interested in the project can view the recording of my presentation at the Society's YouTube (Reid "Queer Atheists"). I am sure that the majority of Christian fans and scholars of Tolkien's work are unaware of the existence of this polarizing rhetoric in online communities and in some academic work.³¹ Indeed, a number of the respondents in my project indicated that they had never heard anyone make that claim; others, however, reported a pattern of unpleasant confrontations online leading to negative judgements about the individuals involved.

One reason I am writing this response is to encourage officers and members of The Mythopoeic Society, and other organizations focusing on Tolkien or Inklings scholarship, to become aware of the growing toxicity of this rhetoric and to consider how they might work, as individuals or as organizations, to support freedom of speech and the freedom to explore ideas, whether in fan or academic groups and publications. I would also hope they could find ways of offering support to The Tolkien Society.³² A possible model for such efforts can be found in a recent blog post by a Tolkien Society member who writes under the pseudonym of "The Green Girdle." Green Girdle read the articles against the Tolkien Society's seminar, decided to attend the event, and then wrote a response to those who attacked it based on nothing more than paper titles:

As a personal rule, I prefer to review a restaurant after actually having had the chance to dine there, at least once. Instead, there are myriad people who have already reviewed the upcoming Amazon LotR series, and apparently also as many people, citing Tolkien's Catholicism as a reason, saw as a scandal the titles of the talks at Tolkien Society Seminar held online last weekend. *So, as a Christian myself, as well as a Tolkien scholar, an upholder of Tolkien's Catholicism, and a member of the Tolkien Society since 2015, I could never miss the occasion to see clearer the truth of the matter. [...] I enjoyed the Seminar very much, even when I disagreed, and absolutely want to bear witness that the Tolkien Society did not lose their heads, nor have we (speaking as a member) significantly changed our*

³¹ As a queer woman, I am well aware that there are opposing positions among Christians, and among Christian institutions, on equal rights for members of gender, romantic, and sexual minorities (GRSM), as well as on many other contemporary social issues.

³² I have never seen a presentation or read an essay by a scholar working in the areas of Tolkien studies I am familiar with that argues that Christian interpretations of Tolkien's legendarium are wrong or should not be made. My sense is that those of us working with other critical approaches pay little, if any, attention to Christian scholarship and rarely engage with it. However, if such work exists, I would condemn such attacks on Christian scholars or readers, with the stipulation that I do not consider the mere existence of queer, feminist, gender, or critical race approaches to be an attack on Christians or Christianity.

minds towards Tolkien, nobody forgets Tolkien's Catholicism [...].
(emphasis added)

As a Tolkienist and a member of the Tolkien Society, I do not forget Tolkien's Catholicism, any more than I forget his service during World War I, or his marriage to Edith Bratt. Those biographical facts simply have no relationship to questions I am interested in asking about Tolkien's legendarium or the scholarly (and fan) work I do, work that grew out of the feminist scholarship I did for ten years, before I became involved in Tolkien scholarship.

One of the theories I bring to Tolkien scholarship from my earlier work is reception theory, the idea that readers interact with what they read (and see) to create meanings that are shaped by their personal experiences rather than having to seek the objective or correct meaning that reflects creators' intentions in texts. At times, Tolkien seems to support this theory, stating that

I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of the readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author. (*The Lord of the Rings*, Foreword xxiv)

At other times, of course, he claims a great deal of authority as the author, one of the many contradictions in his work as a whole, even in the same essay. He was quite capable of criticizing the meaning readers saw in his fiction, or the methods used by scholars to write about Tolkien. His criticism has shaped Tolkien scholarship although, arguably, many of his comments about critics are best understood in context of the extent to which the conventions and standards of "literary criticism" were changing during his lifetime.³³ I have seen major changes in literary studies/criticism during my lifetime, as has Flieger and, perhaps, Williams. Those changes are likely part of the reason for the differences, disagreements, and contradictions in Tolkien studies.

Fragmentation is, I think, inevitable, if Tolkien scholarship is going to continue to grow, although I do not see fragmentation as inherently negative. Polarization does exist, but I hope that it is not inevitable and that some of the most negative aspects of polarization can be avoided although I admit the state of affairs in the United States in 2021 offers me little hope for such an outcome. My impulse is to celebrate the potential of the current state of Tolkien studies, one of fractal growth and chaos of opinion, rather than condemn it, in part

³³ Sherrylyn Branchaw's essay analyzing how Tolkien's ideas on literary criticism were connected to what was happening in the field during his lifetime is worth reading for context and an argument against Tolkien scholars being directed by what Tolkien is perceived to have said about scholarship.

because I think such chaos is related to the process of canonization of his work.³⁴ Tolkien scholarship lacks any group consensus on the “correct” meaning of Tolkien’s legendarium, but I doubt such a consensus ever existed, either in fandom or in academia.³⁵

I will note one area of widespread consensus in the field: specifically, the idea that Tolkien’s work, and (perhaps less agreed-upon) the associated aspects of the global phenomenon of translations, films, videos, and fan creations that have grown up around Tolkien’s legendarium, is worth teaching and analyzing. I suspect that sort of consensus, rather than agreement on what “label” best fits an author, or their work better serves the process of canonization. What does not seem to be required is unified academic agreement on the essential author or meaning of the work. The process instead seems to involve many readers arguing for many years as well as a churn in the development of new and, yes, controversial, theories being applied to the work. Since the process of literary canonization requires many years, inevitably, the process will require multiple generations of readers and critics whose lives and experiences will lead them to apply very different meanings to a work over time.³⁶

As one small part of a global, multinational, multigenerational, multilingual, multidisciplinary group of readers, I consider myself immensely lucky to have connected with those who share my areas of interest as a presenter at the Tolkien Society’s Summer Seminar and at Mythcon 51. I hope that all scholars find such communities in the expanding world of the scholarship which, given the existing controversies over the Amazon adaptation, is only likely to increase in the next few years. I would hope to follow Flieger’s example and become a guide rather than a gatekeeper in that expanding world.

³⁴ I am using “canonization” in the sense of literary studies, with the word meaning that the legendarium, or parts of it, should be part of the ever-shifting body of material that academics consider important enough to research and teach.

³⁵ During a fascinating visit to the J.R.R. Tolkien collection at Marquette University, I spent some time reading fanzines from the 1960s and 1970s and finding disagreement among fans on the purpose of Tolkien fan groups, and the Vietnam War, among other things. Some of that research is detailed in my “Gi(E)nts” talk. Since I was active in a Star Trek fan group during the late 1970s and in an Amateur Press Association (APA) during the 1980s, I also remember a number of points of political and personal disagreements among the fans.

³⁶ Drout and Wynne’s bibliographic essay gives a good overview of some of the assumptions and attitudes in Tolkien scholarship that they believe need to change as well as emphasizing that Tolkien studies will change as newer generations of scholars come to it: “Younger critics, without personal investment in the literary politics of the beginning and middle of the 20th century, and without memories of 60’s Tolkien fanaticism or mania, are less hostile, and they seem to be willing to analyze Tolkien without constantly defending themselves from the shade of ‘Bunny’ Wilson” (117).

Here, nearly at the end of this response, I want to highlight something that Pippin, one of Tolkien's hobbits who are often overlooked or underestimated not only by the antagonists in Middle-earth but also, at times, by the heroic characters, says. He is speaking to Beregon who asks if Pippin knows Mithrandir: "I have known *of* him all my short life, as you might say, and lately I have travelled far with him. But there is much to read in that book, and I cannot claim to have seen more than a page or two" (*LotR* V.1.760, emphasis in original).

There is much to read in Tolkien's Book, and I cannot claim to have seen enough to make any claim about the right meaning of that book, only about what it means to me.

EPILOGUE: ARGUMENTS FROM ANALOGIES

Both scholars feature their chosen analogy in the titles and conclusions of their essays. I call the figures of speech "analogies" rather than metaphors on the grounds that when figures of speech are used a significant part of supporting an argument, as opposed to brief stylistic flourishes, the strength of the resulting arguments from analogy depend, in part, on the similarities between the two parts of the analogy. Williams refers to Flieger's "metaphor," and I also consider Tolkien's Tower, which he references, to be allegorical. However, there are overlaps between the different categories of comparative figures of speech.

I find Flieger's analogy stronger than Williams's in part because she explains the meaning of the architectural term she uses and makes the connection between the term and what she is comparing it to: the contradictions in Tolkien the author and in his writing which result in conflicting interpretations of his work among readers, resulting in what Baker calls multiple "discursive" Tolkiens.³⁷

What holds a keystone in place is not cement but friction, the grinding of the two sides against each other that only the middle prevents from destruction. It is the pressure of competing forces not against each other but against what keeps them separate—the keystone that holds the arch. It is these same forces that generate the curious power of Tolkien's work. And it is these same forces creating this same friction that invite the disagreeing and debating Tolkien scholars and critics to find in Tolkien's work what they are looking for. (Flieger, "Arch" 18)

In contrast to Flieger's definition, Williams assumes the reader knows what the architectural term "cornerstone" means. It appears eight times in his essay: five times in titles, sub-titles, and the abstract, three times in the essay

³⁷ I also find Flieger's essay to be beautifully written on the stylistic level, something I have noticed of her other scholarship!

itself. Williams introduces the term with a single sentence: “Perhaps we can find in this pile [of bricks] not just a keystone but also the cornerstone of a foundation that could let us see these bricks as parts of a Tower from which we could look out upon the sea” (215). He also structures the relationship between Flieger’s keystone and his cornerstone as oppositional while attempting a kind of synthesis which can only be achieved by removing to “the right distance”:

Keystone or cornerstone? Perhaps we can see both if we stand back at the right distance to see the Tower as a whole. [...] [T]o see that the keystone and the arch it holds together are solidly grounded in the cornerstone of Tolkien’s worldview. That is why, from the top of this Tower, we may still look out upon the sea. (225)

I found it difficult to imagine what an arch “grounded in [a literal] cornerstone” would look like which made me realize I did not know the architectural meaning of “cornerstone.” I searched online and found an architectural blog which provided not only a definition but useful history and background:

In relation to architecture, a cornerstone is traditionally *the first stone laid for a structure, with all other stones laid in reference*. A cornerstone marks the geographical location by *orienting a building in a specific direction*. (“Architectural Cornerstones,” emphasis added)

Cornerstones seem to have been invented by people constructing stone and brick buildings who created rituals asking the protection of their gods when they were laid. The blog continues:

“Foundation deposits,” or hollowed out stones filled with small vessels, animal deposits, and other symbolic items, were standard in the construction of *temples, palaces, tombs, and forts*. *Depending on the type of structure, the deposits were placed at the corners of buildings, or at points of importance in a structure, such as the entrance*. (emphasis added)

I realized I had assumed that cornerstones are always placed at the corner of a building, but I was wrong! Cornerstones can be placed at a number of other important locations and still be called “cornerstones.” The first stone placed carries symbolic meaning no matter where it is located although the symbolic meanings change over time and across cultures. The phrase which resonates most for me is to how a cornerstone’s function is to “[orient] a building in a specific direction” in a landscape. The specialized information let me make sense of Williams’s analogy even though he fails to convince me of either the unity of Tolkien’s work or his worldview.

Both analogies work to center the author (Tolkien), or an aspect of the author (“Tolkien’s contradictions” and “Tolkien’s worldview”) in the argument.

Flieger and Williams present their opposing interpretations, building their own Towers. Flieger's analogy works for me as a figure of speech because I can clearly see similarities between how an arch and keystone function and how the contradictions in Tolkien and in his work relate to the contradictory reception of the work. Her analogy works equally well for me on the global level of her argument, supporting her overall argument about his work, and its reception, as consisting of oppositional, "grinding," forces that are nonetheless essential to the beauty and grace of the final structure. Williams's analogy did not work for me as a figure of speech until I did my own research and learned what the term means in architecture. His argument could work for me if, as I noted above, he limited it to his personal interpretation of Tolkien's work that is supported not only by the biographical fact of Tolkien's religion but also by Williams's own knowledge and belief, if, in fact, Williams wrote a reader response rather than a distanced analytical rejoinder.³⁸

However, I think the analogy of the cornerstone has potential if it is changed from meaning "Tolkien's worldview"/Christianity to meaning the worldview of an individual reader. The transformative meaning of the reader's worldview is that it becomes the cornerstone which orients that particular reader's interpretation of Tolkien's work, the basis for their personal Tower. I infer that Williams's cornerstone is Christianity which he projects onto Tolkien's "singular self" as if there is some singular meaning of "Christianity" that the two share. I am still trying to figure out my cornerstone, although I have the strong sense that it may have changed during the fifty-six years since I first read *The Lord of the Rings*. Alternately, other than or as well as, changing, my cornerstone may have been hollow and filled with different "symbolic items" that changed over time (though, pushing the analogy further than may be wise, that implies I had to tear down previous Towers in order to build anew!).

Thinking of advice I have given my students over the decades, that a work of scholarship can be a model of how to write scholarship as well as a source of arguments with which to engage, I realize that my reworking of Williams's analogy of the cornerstone is inspired by two excellent reader response essays in Tolkien studies, one being Michael D.C. Drout's "Reflections

³⁸ My hypothetical revision of Williams's argument requires his essay give up the implicit claim of "authorial intentionality," that is, the author's metaphorical seal of approval on the argument. Even if such a revision were made, I would still characterize sub-claims about Flieger's failure and Williams's prescriptive attempt to correct her "metaphor" as flaws. The issue of authorial intent, and whether it should be the goal of literary criticism or is a fallacy, is a complex one that will not be resolved here. I will note that the reason I challenge claims of intentionality is the extent to which scholars or fans claim that their statement of the author's intentions (or their quotes—which, as Flieger ["But What Did He Really Mean?"] notes, are often cherry-picked) allows opposing interpretations to be classified as "wrong" based the perception that they go against the author's "intentions."

of Thirty Years of Reading *The Silmarillion*,” and the other being Martin Barker’s “On Being a 1960s Tolkien Reader.” Reader response scholarship, when done well, as Drout and Barker both do, is powerful because the scholar engages in a process of self-analysis of their own reading and interpretative process rather than claiming an objective / distanced / correct meaning, or claiming that they have discovered the author’s intention. Both scholars use their writing to discover what their cornerstones are and the orientation of the Towers they build built of Tolkien’s work.

Drout’s and Barker’s essays share what I consider to be a characteristic of strong reader responses while focusing on entirely different cornerstones and building very different Towers. Neither makes any claim, explicit or implicit, that what they see and find important and meaningful is Tolkien’s (only) intention, or that what they see is, or must be, true for others. Drout provides an explicit disclaimer as well as stating other limitations to his interpretation in order to emphasize that he is discussing his “personal mythology” (40, 53, 55), his Tower, or perhaps the Sea he discovers from its top. Significant portions of Barker’s essay challenges the too-easy assumptions made around “interpretive communities” and presents a set of questions that “ought to be asked about interpretive communities if the concept is really to become an active tool for research, instead of a convenient labelling device, offering rhetorical closure” (88). I would extend his point about a specific theoretical concept to the need for all scholars to take care that their theories, methods, critical language, are “active [tools] for research, instead of [...] convenient labeling [devices], offering rhetorical closure” (88). Both Drout and Barker have made significant contributions to Tolkien scholarship from two different disciplines: medieval studies and applied linguistics (Drout) and media and audience studies (Barker).³⁹ These reader response essays differ from their other scholarship which I have enjoyed. But I also enjoy seeing the Seas they show me from their different Towers and learning about their cornerstones.

To close this Epilogue, and this response, I think their essays, which I highly recommend, have the potential to serve as foundations (another architectural analogy!) for more reception scholarship whether on the personal level of Drout’s or on the larger level of Barker’s work. Tolkien studies tends to be dominated by the humanities model of individuals working alone who, especially in literary studies, tend to use the authorial “we” when presenting their interpretation, at times invoking hypothetical readers (those 1960s Tolkien readers) rather than asking what actual readers see in Tolkien, or considering

³⁹ Barker worked with scholars all over the world on two global projects to gather and analyze audience responses to Peter Jackson’s films in the *Lord of the Rings Project* and *The World Hobbit Project* (“I Have Seen the Future”).

what they might discover about themselves if they incorporated reader response elements into a project. This change in Tolkien scholarship could lead to the discovery of many more Towers.

WORKS CITED

- Abbott, Joel. "The Tolkien Society Goes Full Woke, Bows to The Will Of Sauron in Unbelievable New Summer Seminar." *Not the Bee*, 10 June 2021. notthebee.com/article/the-tolkien-society-goes-full-woke-bows-to-the-will-of-sauron-in-new-summer-seminar.
- "Andrew Tettenborn." *The Critic*. thecritic.co.uk/author/andrew-tettenborn/. Accessed 10 Aug. 2021.
- "Architectural Cornerstones: The Meaning, History, and Intent." *New Studio Architecture*, 3 June 2019, www.newstudioarchitecture.com/newstudio-blog/architectural-cornerstones.
- Baker, Dallas John, "Writing Back to Tolkien: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in High Fantasy." *Recovering History Through Fact and Fiction: Forgotten Lives*, edited by Dallas John Baker, Donna Lee Brien, and Nike Sulway, Cambridge Scholars' Publishing, 2017, pp. 123-43.
- Barker, Martin. "On Being a 1960s Tolkien Reader." *From Hobbits to Hollywood: Essays on Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings*, edited by Ernest Mathijs and Murray Pomerance, Rodopi, 2006, pp. 81-99.
- . "I Have Seen the Future and It Is Not Here Yet ...; or, On Being Ambitious for Audience Research." *The Communication Review*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2006, pp. 123-141, DOI: 10.1080/10714420600663310
- Birzer, Bradley J. *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth*. Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2003.
- Blake, Nathaniel. "Leftist Ghouls May Desecrate J.R.R. Tolkien, But His Ideas Will Live Forever While Theirs Are Already Dead." 23 June 2021. thefederalist.com/2021/06/23/leftist-ghouls-may-desecrate-j-r-r-tolkien-but-his-ideas-will-live-forever-while-theirs-are-already-dead/
- "Brad Birzer." Hillsdale College, www.hillsdale.edu/faculty/bradley-birzer/. Accessed 13 Aug. 2021.
- Branchaw, Sherrylyn. "Contextualizing the Writings of J.R.R. Tolkien on Literary Criticism." *Journal of Tolkien Research*, vol. 1, iss. 1, article 2, 2014, scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol1/iss1/2.
- "Denominations." *Christianity Today*, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/topics/d/denominations/. Accessed 13 Aug. 2021.
- Drou, Michael D.C. "Reflections on Thirty Years of Reading *The Silmarillion*." *The Silmarillion Thirty Years On*, edited by Allan Turner, Walking Tree, 2007, pp. 33-57.
- Drou, Michael D.C. and Hilary Wynne. "Tom Shippey's *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* and a Look Back at Tolkien Criticism since 1982." *Envoi*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2000, pp. 101-134.
- Eden, Brad, "Tolkien and Buddhist Influences: Thoughts and Perspectives" *Library Faculty Publications*, 2015. scholar.valpo.edu/ccls_fac_pub/44.

- Fimi, Dimitra. *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History: From Fairies to Hobbits*. Palgrave, 2009.
- Flieger, Verlyn. "The Arch and the Keystone." *Mythlore*, vol. 38, no. 1 (#135), 2019, pp. 7-19.
- . "But What Did He Really Mean?" *Tolkien Studies*, vol. 11, 2014, pp. 149-166.
- Flieger, Verlyn, and Douglas A. Anderson, eds. *Tolkien On Fairy-stories*. Expanded Edition. HarperCollins, 2014.
- George, Janel. "A Lesson on Critical Race Theory." *American Bar Association, Human Rights Magazine*, vol. 26, no. 2, Civil Rights Reimagining Policing. 11 Jan. 2021, www.americanbar.org/groups/crsj/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/civil-rights-reimagining-policing/a-lesson-on-critical-race-theory/.
- Glyer, Mike. "Tolkien: An Unexpected Sainthood." *File 770*, 25 Oct. 2017, file770.com/tolkien-an-unexpected-sainthood
- Green Girdle. "The Once and Future Queer, Being a Report on Tolkien Society Seminar 2021 (2)." *The Green Girdle*, 5 July, 2021, greengirdle.wordpress.com/2021/07/05/the-once-and-future-queer-being-a-report-on-tolkien-society-seminar-2021-2/.
- Ithiliana. "'The Arch and the Keystone' by Verlyn Flieger (recommendation!)." *Dreamwidth*. 30 Aug. 2020, ithiliana.dreamwidth.org/1867320.html.
- Johnson, Judith A. *J.R.R. Tolkien: Six Decades of Criticism*. Greenwood, 1986.
- Kim, Sue. "Beyond Black and White: Race and Postmodernism in *The Lord of the Rings* Film." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2004, pp. 875-907.
- Lord of the Rings Project Database*. Aberystwyth University. 25 Jun 2008, [pure.aber.ac.uk/portal/en/datasets/lord-of-the-rings-world-audience-database\(b403222b-74b6-4686-9cc6-dfd1de16a31a\).html](http://pure.aber.ac.uk/portal/en/datasets/lord-of-the-rings-world-audience-database(b403222b-74b6-4686-9cc6-dfd1de16a31a).html).
- Raza, Sultana. "Projecting Indian Myths, Culture and History onto Tolkien's Worlds," Tolkien Society Summer 2021 Seminar, "Tolkien and Diversity," 27 July, 2021. www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqGPRJIMJhs
- Reid, Robin Anne. *The Encyclopedia of Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Greenwood, 2008.
- . "The History of Scholarship on Female Characters in J.R.R. Tolkien's *Legendarium*; A Feminist Bibliography." *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie Donovan, Mythopoeic Press, 2015, pp. 13-40.
- . "Light (noun, 1) or Light (adjective, 14b)?: Female Bodies and Femininities in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*." *The Body in Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on Middle-earth Corporeality*, edited by Christopher T. Vaccaro, McFarland, 2013, pp. 98-118.
- . "On the Shoulders of Gi(E)nts: The Joys of Bibliographic Scholarship and Fanzines in Tolkien Studies," *Mythlore*, vol. 37, no. 2 (#134), 2019, pp. 23-38.
- . "Queer Atheists, Agnostics, and Animists, Oh, My!" Tolkien Society Summer 2021 Seminar, "Tolkien and Diversity," 27 July, 2021. www.youtube.com/watch?v=CF7kbPPPkUc
- . "Race in Tolkien Studies: A Bibliographic Essay." *Tolkien and Alterity*, edited by Christopher Vaccaro and Yvette Kisor, Palgrave, 2017, pp. 33-74.
- . "Tolkien Studies Area: The Tenth Anniversary!" *Tolkien on the Web*. 11 June 2021, tolkien-on-the-web.dreamwidth.org/3802.html.

- Sawchuk, Stephen. "What is Critical Race Theory, and Why is it Under Attack?" *Education Week*, 18 May 2021, www.edweek.org/leadership/what-is-critical-race-theory-and-why-is-it-under-attack/2021/05.
- Tettenborn, Andrew. "Professor Andrew Tettenborn." *Swansea University*. www.swansea.ac.uk/staff/law/tettenborn-a-m/. Accessed 9 Aug. 2021.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lord of the Rings*. 50th Anniversary edition. Houghton Mifflin, 2004.
- "Tolkien Society Summer Seminar 2021." *Tolkien Society*, www.tolkiensociety.org/events/tolkien-society-summer-seminar/. Accessed 13 Aug. 2021.
- The Tolkien Society. *YouTube*. www.youtube.com/c/TolkienSociety
- West, Richard. *Tolkien Criticism: An Annotated Checklist*, Kent State UP, 1970.
- . *Tolkien Criticism: An Annotated Checklist*. Rev edition, Kent State UP, 1981.
- . "A Tolkien Checklist: Selected Criticism 1981-2004." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2004, pp. 1015-1028.
- Williams, Donald. "Keystone or Cornerstone?: A Rejoinder to Verlyn Flieger on the Alleged 'Conflicting Sides' of Tolkien's Singular Self." *Mythlore*, vol. 40, no. 1 (#139), 2021, pp. 209-225.
- . "Keystone or Cornerstone?: A Rejoinder to Verlyn Flieger on the Alleged 'Conflicting Sides' of Tolkien's Singular Self [Abstract]." dc.swosu.edu/mythcon/mc51/
- The World Hobbit Project Database*. Aberystwyth University. 18 Oct. 2017, [pure.aber.ac.uk/portal/en/datasets/the-world-hobbit-project-database\(aa40f8e7-00d3-45dd-b63b-e5da58168312\).html](http://pure.aber.ac.uk/portal/en/datasets/the-world-hobbit-project-database(aa40f8e7-00d3-45dd-b63b-e5da58168312).html).
- Wright, John C. "Tolkien and Diversity." *John C. Wright Author*, 12 June 2021. www.scifiwright.com/2021/06/tolkien-and-diversity/

ROBIN ANNE REID, Ph.D., retired as a Professor of the Department of Literature and Languages, Texas A&M University-Commerce, in May 2020. She declined to apply for emerita status because of her deep disdain of the corporate exploitation of faculty, staff, and students that characterizes the current system of higher education. She is enjoying retirement as an independent scholar while serving as the Area Chair for the Tolkien Studies Area of the Popular Culture Association and writing. Current projects in progress include a reception study of atheist, agnostic, and animist readers of Tolkien's *Legendarium*; an anthology (co-edited with Christopher Vaccaro and Stephen Yandell), titled "*We Could Do With a Bit More Queerness in These Parts*": *Tolkien's Queer Legendarium*; a second anthology, *Race, Racisms, and Racists: Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium, Adaptations, and Readers*, under contract at McFarland, and an essay about her love of and cornerstones for Joanna Russ and J.R.R. Tolkien.



A QUEER ATHEIST FEMINIST AUTIST RESPONDS TO DONALD WILLIAMS'S "KEYSTONE OR CORNERSTONE? A REJOINER TO VERLYN FLIEGER ON THE ALLEGED 'CONFLICTING SIDES' OF TOLKIEN'S SINGULAR SELF"

ROBIN A. REID

Supplement: Selected Bibliography on the Backlash against "Tolkien and Diversity" Seminar & Background on White Nationalist Tolkien Fans

- Abbott, Joel. "The Tolkien Society Goes Full Woke, Bows to The Will Of Sauron in Unbelievable New Summer Seminar." *Not the Bee*, 10 June 2021. notthebee.com/article/the-tolkien-society-goes-full-woke-bows-to-the-will-of-sauron-in-new-summer-seminar. Archive: archive.ph/t2Ext.
- Basham, Megan. "Frodo Fights Back: New Tolkien Group Counter-Programs Tolkien Society's LGBTQ Seminar." *Daily Wire*, 30 June 2021. www.dailywire.com/news/frodo-fights-back-new-tolkien-group-counter-programs-tolkien-societys-lgbtq-seminar. Archive: archive.ph/93J7u.
- Basham, Megan. "'Transgender Realities in The Lord of The Rings': Facing Accusations of Racism, Tolkien Society to Focus on 'Diversity' At Seminar." *Daily Wire*, 16 June 2021. www.dailywire.com/news/transgender-realities-in-the-lord-of-the-rings-facing-accusations-of-racism-tolkien-society-to-focus-on-diversity-at-seminar. Archive: <https://archive.ph/zttqQ>.
- Birzer, Bradley, J. "J. R. R. Tolkien's Work Transcends 'Wokeness.'" *National Review*, 24 June 2021. www.nationalreview.com/2021/06/j-r-r-tolkiens-work-transcends-woke/. Archive: archive.ph/pP10D.
- Black, Derek. "'The Daily' Transcript: Interview with Former White Nationalist Derek Black." Michael Barbara. *New York Times*, 22 Aug. 2017. www.nytimes.com/2017/08/22/podcasts/the-daily-transcript-derek-black.html.
- Crossley, Laura. "Stand, Men of the West! The Battle for Middle-earth (and Britain)." *Film International*. Apr. 19, 2015. filmint.nu/stand-men-of-the-west-the-battle-for-middle-earth-and-britain/.
- Davidson, John Daniel. "In An Affront to Its Namesake, The Tolkien Society Goes Woke." *The Federalist*. June 18, 2021. thefederalist.com/2021/06/18/in-an-affront-to-its-namesake-the-tolkien-society-goes-woke/. Archive: archive.ph/K5twV.
- Dreher, Rod. "The Woke J. R. R. Tolkien." *The American Conservative*, 10 June 2021. www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/woke-jrr-tolkien/. Archive: archive.ph/eqGMQ.

- Foust, Michael. "Tolkien Society to Examine Diversity in *The Lord of the Rings*." *Christian Headlines*, 1 July 2021. www.christianheadlines.com/contributors/michael-foust/tolkien-society-to-examine-diversity-in-the-lord-of-the-rings.html. Archive: archive.ph/Rfwji.
- Greengirdle. "The Once and Future Queer, being a Report on Tolkien Society Seminar 2021 (2)." *The Green Girdle*, 5 July 2021. greengirdle.wordpress.com/2021/07/05/the-once-and-future-queer-being-a-report-on-tolkien-society-seminar-2021-2/.
- Huston, Warner Todd. "Woke Infiltrators in the Tolkien Society have 'Found' Transgenders and Queers in 'Lord of the Rings.'" *Story Warrant*, 2 July 2021. storywarrant.com/2021/07/02/woke-infiltrators-in-the-tolkien-society-have-foundtransgenders-and-queers-in-lord-of-the-rings/. Archive: archive.ph/gF1FQ.
- "J.R.R. Tolkien Returns with Army of The Dead to Destroy Everyone Trying to Make 'Lord of The Rings' Woke." *Babylon Bee*, 8 July 2021. babylonbee.com/news/jrr-tolkienappears-with-army-of-the-dead-to-attack-anyone-who-tries-to-make-lord-of-the-rings-woke. Archive: archive.ph/0gpbj.
- Leach, JR [sic]. "The Woking of Tolkien: Don't Let Identify Politics Infect Middle Earth [sic]." *Off Guardian*, 4 July 2021. off-guardian.org/2021/07/04/the-woking-of-tolkien-dont-let-identity-politics-infect-middle-earth/. Archive: archive.ph/r6XzO.
- Makuch, Ben and Mack Lamoureaux. "Jailed Ex-Atomwaffen Division Leader Needs Some *Lord of the Rings*." *Motherboard, Vice*, 21 May, 2020. www.vice.com/en/article/k7qagy/jailed-ex-atomwaffen-division-leader-needs-some-lord-of-the-rings.
- Nolte, John. "Tolkien Society's 'Diversity' Seminar Includes 'Transgender Realities in The Lord of the Rings.'" *Breitbart*, 18 June 2021. www.breitbart.com/entertainment/2021/06/18/nolte-tolkien-societys-diversity-seminar-includes-transgender-realities-in-the-lord-of-the-rings/. Archive: archive.ph/xG6oo.
- O'Neil, Tyler. "Tolkien Society Goes Woke, 'Finds' Transgenderism, 'Antiracism,' and Queerness in *The Lord of The Rings*." *PJ Media*, 30 June 2021. pjmedia.com/news-and-politics/tyler-o-neil/2021/06/30/tolkien-society-goes-woke-finds-transgenderismantiracism-and-queer-ness-in-the-lord-of-the-rings-n1458674. Archive: archive.ph/Mimx6.
- Osworth, A. E. "Fascist Fandom and Raging Incels: Tracing the Baffling Nerd-to-WhiteNationalist Pipeline." *Literary Hub*, 16. Aug. 2021. lithub.com/fascist-fandomand-raging-incels-tracing-the-baffling-nerd-to-white-nationalist-pipeline/
- Serwer, Adam. "Tolkien and Diversity." *The American Prospect*. 1 Dec. 2010. prospect.org/article/tolkien-diversity/ Archive: archive.ph/wXar3.
- Tettenborn, Andrew. "Woke of the Rings." *The Critic*, 24 June 2021. thecritic.co.uk/woke-of-the-rings/. Archive: archive.ph/QcZD0.

Wright, John C. "Tolkien and Diversity." *John C. Wright Author*, 12 June 2021. www.scifiwright.com/2021/06/tolkien-and-diversity/?fbclid=IwAR2_8MNUet6s5zR0vqJbdOC0HZ32NuYwhjUn8jyO6GJaPd0XlaD35Si9j8. Archive: <https://archive.ph/0rSzQ>.