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## All Worthy Things: The Personhood of Nature in J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium

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## All Worthy Things: The Personhood of Nature in J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium

### Abstract

This paper argues that J. R. R. Tolkien's portrayal of plants, animals, and geographical features as morally complex persons is central to the ecocentric model of environmental stewardship developed within Tolkien's legendarium. Tolkien's Middle-earth writings endow non-human beings such as animals, plants, and even rivers with personhood by emphasizing their individuality, their capacity for interpersonal relationships, and their agency to make moral choices. I build on work done by critics such as Matthew Dickerson, and Jonathan Evans (Ents, Elves, and Eriador) to find a practicable and inspirational environmental ethic in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and *Unfinished Tales*. The most common philosophical framework for analyzing Tolkien's environmentalism is a Catholic model of stewardship. But a traditional stewardship ethic, in which environmental responsibility belongs to human beings acting as God's stewards, risks falling into anthropocentrism or a sense of entitlement over a nature that is understood as resources existing for human extraction. By analyzing three of Tolkien's works—*The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and the unfinished tale "Aldarion and Erendis"—this paper argues that Tolkien was aware of the limits of human environmental stewardship. Tolkien's Catholic Christian background and his deep love for natural features interact to create an ecological ethic indebted to the stewardship model, but in which humanity does not have a monopoly on stewardship, and in which

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the value of non-human Creation comes directly from its personhood.

### **Additional Keywords**

Mythlore; All Worthy Things: The Personhood of Nature in J.R.R. Tolkien's Legendarium; Sofia Parrila; ecocriticism; environmentalism; environmental ethics

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## ALL WORTHY THINGS: THE PERSONHOOD OF NATURE IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S LEGENDARIUM<sup>1</sup>

SOFIA PARRILA

IN A LETTER TO HIS PUBLISHERS IN 1955, J.R.R. TOLKIEN wrote "I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all trees, and have always been; and I find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals" (*Letters* 220, #165). Tolkien's love of plants often led him to discuss them in lively and individual terms. In telling the story of a tree he was acquainted with in his youth, Tolkien wrote:

There was a great tree—a huge poplar with vast limbs—visible through my window even as I lay in bed. I loved it, and was anxious about it. It had been savagely mutilated some years before, but had gallantly grown new limbs—though of course not with the unblemished grace of its former natural self; and now a foolish neighbour was agitating to have it felled. Every tree has its enemy, few have an advocate. (Too often the hate is irrational, a fear of anything large and alive, and not easily tamed or destroyed, though it may clothe itself in pseudo-rational terms.) (*Letters* 321, #241)

Tolkien's letters show his fascination and humility towards other living beings and his memory for plants as individual acquaintances. The level of detail in Tolkien's descriptions reveals his deep care for variation and individuality in the natural world; so does his word choice, which emphasizes the equal footing between himself and trees or flowers. In another letter to Christopher, Tolkien asked his son, "Are you still inventing names for the nameless flowers you meet?" (*Letters* 106, #93). *Meeting* flowers or *loving* a particular tree places these relationships in the same conceptual space as relationships between humans.

Tolkien's famous love for trees has long been discussed by his biographers, fans, and critics. If the reception of his writing, both critical and fan-based, is any indication, Tolkien's love for the nonhuman world has been infectious. Tolkien is one of few writers accorded critical, pop cultural, and political attention. According to Jane Ciabattari, Tolkien's "anti-materialistic

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<sup>1</sup> Winner of the Alexei Kondratiev Award for best student paper, Mythcon 51, Virtual, 2021.

worldview, in which he extolled the wonders of growing things and of the ordinary" has inspired hippies and fascists, and many in between. Justin Edward Everett writes of incorporating Tolkien into his science curriculum to foster critical thinking and moral responsibility. He writes that *The Lord of the Rings* pushes students to consider perspectives they had not otherwise considered, that "Breaking free of scripted views, they develop perspectives that appeal both to evidence and to systems of morality, ethics, and cultural value. *The Lord of the Rings* makes this possible in its journey through a secondary world, where the strangeness of the setting allows students to see their own world more clearly" (189).

In his essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien has a strong argument for the value and applicability of fantastic fiction to real-world dilemmas. Secondary worlds re-introduce us to our primary world, which has been dulled by familiarity. Tolkien calls this process "Recovery," the "regaining of a clear view" (67). According to Tolkien, good fairy-stories deal "with simple or fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting" (68-9). When fairy-stories invest everyday things such as "stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine" with "wonder," they renew their real-world equivalents in the eyes of the reader (69). Tolkien's affirmation of the power of fairy-story is especially relevant to the many 'Green' movements and critics who cite him as inspiration. Patrick Curry in his *Tolkien Encyclopaedia* entry on environmentalism lists some of Tolkien's Green influences:

Tolkien was enthusiastically taken up by the same counterculture, beginning in the 1960s, that gave birth to the ecology movement. [...] A later generation of environmentalists took nonviolent direct action to resist new motorways running through green places in England in the 1990s: Newbury, Twyford Down, Batheaston, and elsewhere. [...] [F]or them, Tolkien's work was a — perhaps even the — principal inspiration.

All this surely gives the lie to the accusation (seemingly commonest among the critics who know his work least) that Tolkien encourages a reactionary escapism or political quietism. (165)

On the critical side, Allan Turner points out, it "is commonplace of Tolkien criticism to assert that Middle-earth can be seen almost as a character in its own right" (8). Books like Susan Jeffers's *Arda Inhabited* and Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans's *Ents, Elves, and Eriador* have turned to Tolkien for practicable and inspirational environmental ethics.

How, then, does Tolkien's writing re-orient readers to the natural world, with a renewed appreciation for the diversity and individuality of the life it contains? In the first part of this essay I will examine Tolkien's endowment of

plants, animals, stones, mountains, rivers, lakes, fields, etc., with a sense of individual character—a ‘personhood’ in the sense of the possession of an individual identity distinct from any other being and worthy of being treated as such. My primary arguments for the personhood of plants, animals, earth, and rock in Tolkien’s work are, firstly, nature’s capacity for relationships on an interpersonal level, both positive and negative; secondly, the naming and the individuality of natural features in Tolkien’s legendarium; and lastly, the protagonism of Tolkien’s landscapes. In the second part of this essay, I will argue that the personhood of nature in Tolkien’s work interacts with, but does not compromise, Tolkien’s monotheistic environmental ethic, ultimately shaping it into a form not adequately described using exclusively the framework of ‘Catholic Stewardship’ typically applied to Tolkien.

#### NATURAL CREATURES AND FEATURES AS ‘PEOPLE’ IN TOLKIEN’S LEGENDARIUM

*The Lord of the Rings* frames its examples of friendship between humans or humanoids (such as Elves, Hobbits, or Wizards) and nature (such as plants, animals, and stones) as normal bonds between moral and feeling individuals. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tom Bombadil’s sometimes-mount is his “four-legged friend” (I.8.145) and Gandalf mentions his “friendship” with the horse Shadowfax (II.2.264). Radagast, “a worthy wizard,” is said to “have much lore of herbs and beasts, and birds are especially his friends” (II.2.257). In fact, friendship and conversation across species lines are apparently so common in Middle-earth that when Aragorn says certain histories come from “so long ago that the hills have forgotten them,” Pippin asks him, “Where did you learn such tales, if all the land is empty and forgetful? [...] The birds and beasts do not tell tales of that sort” (I.12.201). In addition to friendship, grief across the boundaries of species or even of sentience is common. After narrowly escaping the kraken-like Watcher by fleeing into Moria, Gandalf takes a moment to grieve for two ancient holly trees that he fears were “uprooted” by the monster, saying, “I am sorry; for the trees were beautiful and had stood so long” (II.4.309). Legolas relates to the rest of the Fellowship the grief of the land of Eregion for its previous Elven inhabitants: “the trees and the grass do not now remember them. Only I hear the stones lament them: *deep they delved us, fair they wrought us, high they builded us; but they are gone*” (III.3.283-4). It is not clear whether Legolas is translating a language spoken by stones, or putting words to a wordless lament, but all of Tolkien’s protagonists take as granted nature’s capacity for emotion and friendship.

Tolkien’s attunement to the experiences of plants, animals, and stones translates to care from his narrative and its heroic characters for the fates of beings who might otherwise be considered peripheral, if not utterly negligible, to the story. Gandalf’s grief over the holly trees is one such example; another

comes when the Fellowship, unable to take him underground, is forced to part ways with Bill the pony. Gandalf blesses Bill with words of power while emphasizing Bill's personal experiences and free will: "Go with words of guard and guiding on you. [...] You are a wise beast, and have learned much in Rivendell. Make your way to places where you can find grass, and so come in time to Elrond's house, or wherever you wish to go" (II.4.303). When the hobbits first lose their ponies, a narrative aside fills in exactly what happens to them, concluding that on the whole they "were well-off" (I.11.179). In contrast, disregard for life, animal or vegetal (without the motive of fear and misunderstanding), is associated with figures who are not only evil, unpleasant, or power-hungry, but are also unable to maintain healthy relationships with members of their own species. Bill Ferny, a petty figure who mistreated Bill the pony, is a social outcast, living on the outskirts of his hometown, and is widely disliked by the locals (I.11.180). The revelation of Saruman's fall to evil is shown through his devaluing of relationships with other living beings. Saruman mocks the idea of friendship with animals when he exclaims scornfully, "Radagast the Bird-tamer! Radagast the Simple! Radagast the Fool!" (II.2.258). He also decries not achieving "all the things we have so far striven in vain to accomplish, hindered rather than helped by our weak or idle friends" (II.2.259). Gandalf escapes Saruman thanks to Gwaihir the Eagle, who rescues him out of friendship (II.2.261). The cases of Bill Ferny and of the three wizards clearly establish friendship between consenting individuals as the normal and healthy template for interspecies interactions. Hierarchical thinking—even the subtle hierarchy implicit in viewing birds as creatures to be tamed, not people to befriend—is the mindset of the fallen.

If friendship with plants, animals, and natural features on an individual level is possible, then enmity on an individual level ought to be possible as well. Tolkien's exploration of these enmities further emphasizes that every being, sentient or not, has personal moral agency. Aragorn warns the hobbits approaching Weathertop, "Not all the birds are to be trusted, and there are other spies more evil than they are" (I.11.183) while Gandalf directs Radagast to "send out messages to all the birds and beasts *that are your friends*" (II.2.257, emphasis mine). The implication is that animals have freedom of moral choice and personal loyalty. If animals can be good, they can also be evil, and if they can be friends they can also be *unfriends*, like the nature-antagonists Caradhras and Old Man Willow. Caradhras is said to have deliberately prevented the Fellowship from crossing his pass using targeted boulders and snowstorms, eventually forcing their retreat. When Boromir speculates that Sauron could be causing the mountain's "ill will" (II.3.292), Gimli points out, "Caradhras was called the Cruel," even "long years ago, when rumour of Sauron had not been heard in these lands." Aragorn adds, "There are many evil and unfriendly things

in the world that have little love for those that go on two legs, and yet are not in league with Sauron" (II.3.289). The chapter's last sentence, "Caradhras had defeated them," (II.3.294) suggests that the mountain's actions belong to it as an independent being.<sup>2</sup>

Old Man Willow is an antagonist with clearer motivations for his cruelty. From Tom Bombadil, the hobbits learn

of trees and their thoughts, which were often dark and strange, and filled with a hatred of things that go free upon the earth, gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning: destroyers and usurpers. It was not called the Old Forest without reason, for it was indeed ancient, a survivor of vast forgotten woods [...]. But none were more dangerous than the Great Willow: his heart was rotten, but his strength was green; and he was cunning, and a master of winds, and his song and thought ran through the woods on both sides of the river. (I.7.130)

Tolkien scholar Verlyn Flieger interprets the Old Forest and Old Man Willow as indicative of "at least a double standard, if not a fundamental contradiction" to Tolkien's tree-loving perspective (264). She contrasts the Old Forest and Old Man Willow to Fangorn Forest and the Ents, whose march to war and destruction against Saruman and his Orc armies is presented as righteous and good, while the Old Forest's attempt at revenge on the Hobbits for the same thing—the felling of trees—is evil. "If the Forest is presented as dangerous and threatening, Old Man Willow is shown as worse, for he is beyond threat; he is simply evil," Flieger argues, citing the attempted murder of the hobbits. She adds, "Frodo and Sam seriously consider chopping him down or burning him up, and there is no suggestion in the text that either action is ecologically insensitive" (264). It is fair to call Old Man Willow "evil," for ultimately his acts of revenge and spite are misplaced against innocent beings; but I believe Flieger's argument sees a contradiction where there is none. Frodo and Sam's attempts to threaten the Willow with fire are entirely ineffective; they only cause the Willow to hurt Pippin and Merry (118). What does free Merry and Pippin is the intervention of Tom Bombadil. Despite his blustering threats,<sup>3</sup> Bombadil does not hurt Old Man Willow. He tells the willow to be a willow again: "You should not be waking. Eat earth! Dig deep! Drink water! Go to sleep!" (I.6.120). Bombadil is intimately familiar with the worst feelings and instincts of the trees

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<sup>2</sup> Allan Turner concurs that Caradhras is portrayed as "an agent in itself" (13), citing Gimli's comment that the mountain "has not forgiven" the Fellowship, as well as Tolkien's depiction of "animate landscapes" created by metaphors that mingle "the living and the non-living, vegetable and mineral, botany and geology" (11).

<sup>3</sup> "Old grey Willow-man! I'll freeze his marrow cold, if he don't behave himself. I'll sing his roots off" (I.6.120).



and, as evidenced by his ability to sing Old Man Willow into compliance, has enormous power over the Forest. He could end the Willow's life and conniving, but he does not. Tom Bombadil is, as Tolkien puts it, a "comment" on the renunciation of control and "a particular embodying of pure (real) natural science: the spirit that desires knowledge of other things, their history and nature, *because they are 'other'* and wholly independent of the enquiring mind" (*Letters* 192, #153, emphasis in original). That Bombadil's approach succeeds where the hobbits' fails suggests that Tolkien would prefer a nonviolent 'natural science' approach, where knowledge of the Old Forest mitigates its danger, to the killing of trees, even trees that hunger for revenge. More importantly, Old Man Willow's portrayal as the black-hearted, "cunning," "thirsty," ruler of a forest-dominion is not, as Flieger argues, a "fundamental contradiction" in Tolkien's portrayal of trees, but an important element in establishing their personhood. The statement "I love humans" does not erase the fact that some humans do terrible, unlovable things. The statement "I love trees" can be taken similarly, provided that trees are understood to be persons. Tolkien's portrayal of Wilderness is not a transcendentalist construction of the kind ecocritic Greg Garrard would describe as a "space of purity," contrasting with a fallen civilization (66), but rather a complex moral space inhabited by individuals capable of goodness and evil, friendship and cruelty.

Throughout all of his works Tolkien shows the individuality and characters of natural features, of plants, of mountains, and of rivers. In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien does not refer to rivers in the way that we would say, for example, "the North Saskatchewan" or "the Nile." He omits the article, as one would when referring to people, when he writes about Sirion, Gelion, and Narog, the three most prominent of Beleriand's rivers. These three rivers possess animate pronouns (he/him/his), and play a significant role in *The Silmarillion*<sup>4</sup> alongside human and elvish characters. In the chapter "Of Beleriand and its Realms," the rivers take over the active narrative role from the elves. The chapter follows the rivers' courses, beginning with Sirion flowing through his Pass and "hastening towards Beleriand" (120). Tolkien's narration twists and flows with the waterways, follows their tributaries, confluences, and journeys, and names the lands in the order they touch the rivers. The rivers are not personified, but each has his own character and unmistakable dynamism. Loud Sirion "[falls]

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<sup>4</sup> Water, of course, also plays an important role in *The Lord of the Rings*. Turner comments on the "cognitive metaphors" in Tolkien's description of "the young Entwash, leaping from its springs high above, ran noisily from step to step to meet them" (14). While Turner comments on Old English and Romantic predecessors for personifying words like "young," "leaping," and "ran," he does not provide commentary on his last underlined word, "meet." This word, above all others, suggests to me a personhood comparable to Sirion, Gelion, and Narog, despite the Entwash's preceding article.

from the north in a mighty fall below the Meres, and then he plunge[s] suddenly underground into great tunnels that the weight of his falling waters delved; and he issue[s] again three leagues southward with great noise and smoke through rocky arches at the foot of the hills which were called the Gates of Sirion" (122). In contrast, "Gelion had neither fall nor rapids throughout his course, but was ever swifter than was Sirion " (122). Ulmo, the god-creator of water, is shown to differentiate between his rivers and is described as loving Sirion and Gelion best of "all the waters of the western world," not as a creator taking pride in a finished work, but as a being loving another being (123), as Tolkien loved the "huge poplar with vast limbs" outside his bedroom window (*Letters* 321, #241).

Though the rest of *The Silmarillion* is more anthropocentric than "Of Beleriand and its Realms," in the book's narrative of long defeat, the defilement of water and the ravaging of lands are carefully noted in the unfolding and aftermath of battles, alongside other major events such as the fall of cities or the deaths of kings. Helevorn, a mountain lake that feeds Gelion, is defiled in one of *The Silmarillion's* most pivotal battles, the Battle of Sudden Flame (153). The later defilement of Ivrin at the source of Sirion also receives narrative attention: to quote, "Glaurung the Urulóki passed over Anfauglith, and thence came into the north vales of Sirion and there did great evil. Under the shadows of Ered Wethrin he defiled the Eithel Ivrin, and thence he passed into the realm of Nargothrond, and burned the Talath Dirnen, the Guarded Plain, between Narog and Teiglin" (212). Before Glaurung even arrives at the Elven-city of Nargothrond, his burning of a plain and defilement of a water source have been unambiguously condemned as evils of the highest order. Additionally, by placing the defilement of water immediately before the fall of a kingdom, the two events become linked in tragic weight. The fouling of water is also far from the only significant hurt done to the land in *The Silmarillion*. Formerly the green plateau of Ard-galen, Anfauglith, "the Gasping Dust," is the name given to the land after it "perished" in the Battle of Sudden Flame, "and fire devoured its grasses; and it became a burned and desolate waste, full of a choking dust, barren and lifeless" (151). Tolkien's choice of the word "perished," as well as his vivid descriptions of the aftermath of the tortured landscape leaves no doubt that the 'death' of every river or field is a unique, singular tragedy—the death of a person, not the destruction of a set of resources.

In *The Lord of the Rings* as well, plants and landscape features participate in the wars that rock Middle-earth. The more personal and less sweeping lens of *The Lord of the Rings* shows many instances of nature fighting actively against evil. The Ents are many critics' quintessential example of Tolkien animating nature and giving it the power to fight against its abuse. Tolkien wrote that in his schoolboy days he was filled with "bitter disappointment and disgust" at the "shabby use made in Shakespeare of the

coming of 'Great Birnam Wood to High Dunsinane Hill,'" he "longed to devise a setting in which the trees might really march to war" (*Letters* 212, #163). Ents, he speculates, arose subconsciously out of that longing. Andrea Denekamp considers Ents to be demonstrations of "sylvan biocentrism" in Tolkien (1), a speculation on what a complex sylvan-centric culture and land ethic independent of human and human-like creatures might look like. Tolkien's Ents endow trees with agency, self-interest, and political power. Turner and Ike Reeder also pick up on the Ents' agency. For Turner, Ents "represent a point where cognitive metaphor breaks through into real, independent life, since they incorporate all the treeishness of trees but are nevertheless animate personalities with the free will to defend themselves against their enemies" (15); for Reeder, Ents "represent an attempt to give power to and allow for a newly ordered literary ecology that forces the characters in the story, and thereby, through identification, the reader, to consider the trees as agents in Middle Earth [sic]" (114). Reeder points out that Ents were originally created "out of a need for defense" and a need for advocacy, "to protect all living, non-speaking entities from the domination of the walking, talking creatures." They are thus given the abilities to speak and to move, as trees cannot (115). It makes sense that Tolkien would emphasize the Ents' independence, particularly considering his disappointment in the anthropocentric appropriation of nature in *Macbeth*. But there are instances of mute plants showing agency in *The Lord of the Rings* outside of the Ents, limited though their power may seem by human standards.

To an audience accustomed to anthropocentric narratives, Frodo and Sam's journey through the land of Ithilien, alongside numerous other passages, might read as a tedious catalogue of flora. Christine Brooke-Rose argues Tolkien's descriptions of nature "[weigh] down the narrative" and "[interfere] with the war story, cheating it" (qtd. In Jeffers 1). Brooke-Rose's critique suggests the non-human environment is irrelevant in the war against Evil. While Brooke-Rose accurately dubs *The Lord of the Rings* a "war story," her assumption that war is the exclusive domain of humanoids is mistaken. Tolkien consistently shows how all life suffers, and even rebels, under Sauron's tyranny. Ithilien, the contested borderland between Gondor and Mordor, is an occupied country resisting domination. Frodo and Sam remark upon the difference between Ithilien, a land that has "only been for a few years under the dominion of the Dark Lord and was not yet fallen wholly into decay" and the "barren and ruinous" land of the Enemy they are leaving (IV.4.649). Since Frodo and Sam project "decay" as the inevitable fate of lands fallen under Sauron, resistance to decay is resistance to Sauron's power. Spiting evil, life flowers defiantly in Ithilien. While closer to Mordor, Frodo and Sam were unable to detect the signs of spring, in Ithilien there is new life: "Here Spring was already busy about them: fronds pierced moss and mould, larches were green-fingered, small

flowers were opening in the turf [...]” (IV.4.650). Grammatically, Tolkien’s descriptions consistently place Ithilien’s plants in the subject position. In one example, “Primeroles and anemones were awake in the filbert-brakes; and asphodel and many lily-flowers nodded their half-opened heads in the grass” (IV.4.650). The flowers’ subject status and their wakefulness hint at Ithilien’s willfulness, as do active, even violent, verbs such as “riot” in the description of trees “falling into untended age amid a riot of careless descendants” (IV.4.650). Life’s perseverance contrasts with the effects of war. Frodo and Sam witness “scars of the old wars, and the newer wounds made by Orcs and other foul servants of the Dark Lord: a pit of uncovered filth and refuse; trees hewn down wantonly and left to die, with evil runes or the fell sign of the Eye cut in rude strokes on their bark” (IV.4.651). This visceral description of the trees’ mutilated bodies paints Ithilien as capable of suffering and evokes empathy for nonhuman, non-sentient bodies. By the time the hobbits leave Ithilien, regretting the thinning of the trees and plants, Sam’s adage “*where there’s life there’s hope*” (IV.7.700) echoes with wider implications about the growing life in Ithilien. When contrasted with Sauron’s ongoing efforts to pervert or destroy beauty, Ithilien’s resistance to decay is direct defiance of the Enemy, an Enemy who wages war against all life, not just human life. After all, Sauron is a villain who is known to “torture and destroy the very hills” (II.2.266). The barren and blasted wastes he leaves behind show only too well that Sauron’s war is one waged against plants as much as it is against sentient life. In the chapter “Journey to the Crossroads,” images of Ithilien’s resilience and resistance appear throughout the journey, culminating in a small moment of triumph. Within a circle of trees “still towering high, though their tops were gaunt and broken” (IV.7.701) and mirroring the key qualities of their description (age, majesty, brokenness, resilience), Frodo witnesses, in the last light of sunset,

a huge sitting figure, still and solemn as the great stone kings of Argonath. The years had gnawed it, and violent hands had maimed it. Its head was gone, and in its place was set in mockery a round rough-hewn stone, rudely painted by savage hands in the likeness of a grinning face with one large red eye in the midst of its forehead. [...]

Suddenly, caught by the level beams, Frodo saw the old king’s head: it was lying rolled away by the roadside. ‘Look, Sam!’ he cried, startled into speech. ‘Look! The king has got a crown again!’

The eyes were hollow and the carved beard was broken, but about the high stern forehead there was a coronal of silver and gold. A trailing plant with flowers like small white stars had bound itself across the brows as if in reverence for the fallen king, and in the crevices of his stony hair yellow stonecrop gleamed.

‘They cannot conquer for ever!’ said Frodo. (IV.7.702)

In a chapter that names the kinds of almost every tree, flower, and herb, the fact that this trailing, star-flowered plant remains unnamed is striking. Walter S. Judd and Graham A. Judd suggest this plant is a white stonecrop (282), but Tolkien's description differentiates it from the yellow stonecrop. One explanation is that neither Frodo nor Sam was able to identify the plant, a remarkable fact since both hobbits possess extensive botanical knowledge.<sup>5</sup> The "trailing plant with flowers like white stars" stands out in the mystery of its namelessness, holding it just outside the realm of human categorization. The description "bound itself" suggests will and choice on the part of the plant. Crowning the King of Gondor is an act of allegiance and an act of rejection of the occupying rule. It is also an act that reminds us that Ithilien is the "Garden of Gondor;" not only do its caves and trees harbor a secret resistance in the form of Captain Faramir and his men, but the land itself has chosen its loyalties. That this act of defiance so inspires Frodo ultimately reinforces the solidarity between humans and non-humans in the war against Sauron.

#### **'STEWARDSHIP PLUS': TOLKIEN'S MONOTHEISTIC ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC**

Stewardship is the most common focus for those attempting to draw an environmental ethic from Tolkien's writings. The first section of Dickerson and Evans's *Ents, Elves, and Eriador*, "The Tides of the World: Gandalfian Stewardship and the Foundations of Tolkien's Vision," is exemplary. Critical focus on stewardship is not surprising, as in *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, since, as Dickerson points out in *A Hobbit Journey* and Sam McBride in "Stewards of Arda," Tolkien works fairly explicitly with a Catholic model of stewardship. However, the ways in which Tolkien decenters humanity in his stewardship model are significant and worth expansion.

According to Sarra Tili, stewardship as an option for monotheistic environmental ethics has been significantly criticized, especially since Lynn White's claim that "because of humans' moral limitations, stewardship will exacerbate rather than put a stop to the environmental disaster" (Tili 112). Tili explains that critics of the stewardship model "protest that through its hierarchical paradigm and managerial role the notion of stewardship continues to place humans above nature and to view nature as a resource to be managed. More practically, many believe that humans do not possess the [moral or

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<sup>5</sup>Among the many plants Tolkien invented for Middle-earth are two star-shaped white flowers: *simbelmynë*, or Evermind, inspired by wood anemone ("Simbelmynë") and *niphredil*, or "stars from the earth" (*Silmarillion* 91), a "delicate kin of a snowdrop" (*Letters* 402, #312). The king's crown as a relative of either plant would be symbolically appropriate, since both are associated with the half-elf, half-human lineage of the king of Gondor, *niphredil* through association with Lúthien (*Silmarillion* 91) and *simbelmynë* through association with Tuor and Elendil (*Unfinished Tales* 64 and 393).

intellectual] qualifications needed to perform this task." Traditionally understood as the stewardship of the non-human world, or environment, by humans (evidenced by Tlili, Everett, and McBride), the stewardship model is inherently anthropocentric.

Tolkien's writing shows his awareness both of the ideal form of Christian stewardship and of the problems inherent in focusing on humans as stewards. The story "Aldarion and Erendis," published posthumously in *Unfinished Tales*, grapples with the fatal flaw of anthropocentric stewardship: the propensity of humans to view nature as a composite of resources. Aldarion earns his name, meaning "Son of the Trees" (Hynes 128), for his "Mastership of Forests." His large-scale forestry efforts "gave [...] heed to the future, planting always where there was felling." Yet behind his seemingly wise and responsible actions it is clear to his wife Erendis and to the people of Númenor that "he had little love for trees in themselves, caring for them rather as timber that would serve his designs" (*Unfinished Tales* 245). Aldarion's inability to love trees for themselves ensures that he can never be a good steward; with no compassion and no care for trees beyond their instrumental value, Aldarion has no reason to let trees live if they are more useful to him dead. In one telling exchange, Aldarion receives as a wedding gift from Elven messengers "a sapling tree, whose bark was snow-white and its stem straight, strong, and pliant." His immediate response is, "The wood of such a tree must be precious indeed." The Elves answer, "Maybe; we know not," explaining, "None has ever been hewn. It bears cool leaves in summer, and flowers in winter. It is for this that we prize it" (244). As Gerard Hynes adds, it is actually Aldarion with his shipbuilding who is responsible for much of the deforestation of the regions of Minhiriath and Enedwaith in Middle-earth, eventually decimating the vast forests of which the Old Forest and Old Man Willow are the unforgiving remnants (129). Aldarion's story shows that stewardship without true love, appreciation, and respect for other life is doomed to failure.

In contrast to Aldarion, Gandalf is posited as the ideal steward. According to Dickerson, "the essence of stewardship is really the essence of moral responsibility. But Gandalf's task is also to train others to be good stewards: first, to help the people of Middle-earth to realize that they *are* stewards, each one of them, and then to help them grow in the wisdom to be *good* stewards" (Dickerson 144). In Tolkien's world, where there is a standard of objective morality: "The moral responsibility of those in Middle-earth is to be good stewards of their gifts—that is, of those things under the authority that has been given them—and not to usurp authority that is not theirs" (Dickerson 146; see also Dickerson and Evans 25). The passage most revelatory of what good stewardship is in Middle-earth is the short speech Gandalf gives chastising Denethor for his failings as a steward:

The rule of no realm is mine, neither of Gondor nor any other, great or small. But all worthy things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care. And for my part, I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower again in days to come. For I also am a steward. (V.1.758)

This passage emphasizes that stewardship is important for Tolkien as an ethic of responsible, humble, and selfless leadership. "I shall not wholly fail of my task, though Gondor should perish, if anything passes through this night that can still grow fair or bear fruit and flower again," is a powerful condemnation of Denethor's narrow vision, blinded as he is to the tides of the world by his exclusive focus on Gondor's political independence. Gandalf counters Denethor's narrow view by proclaiming that even if the entire human population of Gondor were to die, he would not have "wholly failed" if any life, including plant life, were to survive. Not only does this statement challenge the traditional Catholic hierarchy of being that generally undergirds a Catholic stewardship ethic, but it also brings a non-human perspective to stewardship. Gandalf tears down Denethor's conception of humanity's primacy and equalizes the value of human and vegetal life.

It must be noted that Tolkien's writing sometimes falls close to a hierarchical anthropocentric portrayal of stewardship. In Tolkien's version of Genesis, the *Ainulindalë*, or the Music of the Ainur, we are told Ilúvatar intends Arda to be a "habitation" for his Children, Elves and Men (7). Thus Elves and Men are positioned as the pinnacle of creation, with all other things existing for them. However, the duty of Tolkien's Elves and Men is not, as in Genesis, to "be fruitful and prosper" but instead to serve Ilúvatar's design for beauty and peace and to heal Arda of its hurts (xxi). The *Silmarillion* chapter "Of Aulë and Yavanna" casts even greater doubt on the Children of Iluvatar's privileged position. When the Yavanna learns that her creations—plants and animals—will be placed under the "dominion" of the Children of Ilúvatar (45), she pleads with Manwë, "Would that the trees might speak for all those that have roots, and punish those that wrong them!"<sup>6</sup> Manwë grants her wish after Yavanna points out that in the Song (the *Ainulindalë*), some of her trees "sang to Ilúvatar" (46). This is Tolkien's creation story for the Ents. According to Andrea Denekamp, "Even mostly-successful human stewardship will fail in the end, because any system which puts humans first is bound to serve human ends first" (8).

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<sup>6</sup> Tolkien's arguable privileging of trees can be viewed as problematic; John Charles Ryan's article, "Tolkien's Sonic Trees and Perfumed Plants: Plant Intelligence in Middle-earth" explores the difference between Tolkien's verbal trees and his non-verbal healing herbs in detail.

Tolkien's awareness of this failing manifests in his choice to cast nature as its own steward instead of portraying humanity as the stewards of nature.<sup>7</sup> This is not to say that humanity should not strive to become better stewards—Gandalf's mission, after all, is to train all beings in the highest moral responsibility—but to emphasize that humanity does not have a monopoly on stewardship.

An analysis of stewardship in Tolkien remains incomplete without answering one final question: where does the intrinsic value of everything in the world come from? Any environmental ethic must answer this question. Sarra Tili summarizes the various approaches to the question of intrinsic value. From a religious perspective,

[V]alue is linked to divinity, either in a pantheistic sense, where natural entities themselves are considered divine, or in a transcendental sense, characteristic of monotheisms. [...] [M]any scholars have argued that monotheism de-divinizes but does not desacralize nature [...]. (110)

Tili adds that "In some discussions, the idea of nature's sacredness comes too close to the pantheistic model to fit smoothly with monotheistic doctrines" (110). A devout monotheist, Tolkien's ethic is not rooted in pantheism, though some reception would appear to show a monotheistic environmental ethic that portrays the natural world as 'too' alive, valuable, or independent being misread as animistic pantheism, as in the case of Patrick J. Callahan's article, "Animism & Magic in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*." Callahan fixates on the "panvitalistic" aliveness of Middle-earth as evidence of animism (240). He rightly points out that Tolkien's descriptions suggest that "landscapes possess a kind of independent light," and "genuine life" (241). Callahan hits close to the mark when he argues, "In Middle-earth, all of existence is in vital flux [...] participating in a kind of continual, creative transformation" (240). However, while Callahan attributes the continually creative and transformative nature of the world to animism, it instead arises from a chorus of individual creatures all participating in a Song of Ilúvatar's design.

Tili, working within an Islamic tradition, offers her own solution to the question of nature's value: a monotheistic environment ethic that "is not animistic in the sense of ascribing divinity to nature, [but] still perceives nature as alive," the idea that creation is devoted to and worships its Creator (109). According to Tili, "[B]y ascribing to the created realm behavior that is pleasing to God," it becomes possible to argue God doesn't simply value the world because He made it, but "by virtue of its possessing a quality that God values: devotion to Him" (114). This view emphasizes the relationship between "a

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<sup>7</sup> For more on Ents as stewards, see Martin Simonson's article, "The Arboreal Foundations of Stewardship in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*."



caring God who is tuned to the interests of creation and who attends to each creature's needs" and a world "full of awe of God's majesty and of gratitude for his care." This portrayal results in "a world vibrant with life and emotion" where all creatures' "God-consciousness endows them with purposefulness" (116). In addition, each being's choices matter, since "Creation *earns* its right to considerate treatment through its moral uprightness" (117). I found no existing case for a Qur'anic influence on Tolkien, but Tlili's analysis could easily describe Tolkien's legendarium where nature, without being divine, still has personhood. The most direct example of the kind of God-Creation relationship described by Tlili occurring in Tolkien's legendarium is when Yavanna tells Manwë, "while thou wert in the heavens and with Ulmo built the clouds and poured out the rains, I lifted up the branches of great trees to receive them, and some sang to Ilúvatar amid the wind and the rain" (*Silmarillion* 45-6). Yavanna's case for the worthiness of her trees is that they have demonstrated devotion to God. Manwë's reaction also illustrates the importance of perspective: even Manwë, highest divine authority of Middle-earth under Ilúvatar, was unaware of the songs of trees before Yavanna tells him, but upon reflection he recognizes the truth of her words. This would in turn suggest that an attitude of humility is necessary for humanity, since they cannot know if other beings speak in voices that only God can hear. Overall, it is difficult to prove the religious devotion of nature in Tolkien's legendarium, as Middle-earth lacks formal religion. But in a letter to a fan, Tolkien argued that religion exists differently in Arda, where Evil is a literal incarnate being (first Morgoth, then Sauron). In such a world, "physical resistance to [Evil] is a major act of loyalty to God," and good people are "concentrated on the negative: the resistance to the false" (*Letters* 207, #156). Within this framework, Ithilien's physical resistance to Sauron's occupation is a form of worship, as is Frodo and Sam's quest. Tolkien's nature exists, morally, the same way his humanoid beings do, worshipping their Creator by resisting evil in whatever capacity their forms allow.

Tolkien argues in "On Fairy-Stories" that fairy-stories have the power to inspire radical change. Defending the function of escapism, he argues Escape is rarely without "its companions, Disgust, Anger, Condemnation, and Revolt" (69). Tolkien points out "the 'escape' of archaism" may not be an irrational fugue but rather the rational conclusion that "progressive things like factories or the machine-guns and bombs that appear to be their most natural and inevitable, dare we say 'inexorable', products" are artificial and therefore changeable (71). Escapist fiction can, therefore, help one break free of a socio-technological script that has seemed eternal and natural, but is in fact nothing more than the result of continued human choices—choices that, once exposed, can be changed or opposed. The strength of Tolkien's environmental 'escapism' shows in the many critics and activists who draw on his philosophy to defend the non-human

world. Grounded in his love of trees and streams and flowers, and in his insistence upon the individuality of every being, Tolkien's ecopoetics foster respect and admiration for our real environment long after we have closed the pages of his books.

As a concluding note, treating nature as a collection of people is a tactic that has been very recently gaining ground. Innovative legal conservation work is being done around the globe to gain personhood status for natural features. Largely, the people fighting for the legal rights of these features are members of indigenous groups worldwide, often with a cultural history of knowing these natural features as complete entities, people rather than collected resources. Kennedy Warne reported in *National Geographic* that as of March 20, 2017, the Whanganui River was recognized as a legal person by the government of New Zealand. This legal recognition came to echo "what Maori had been insisting all along: The river is a living being." The legislation passed by New Zealand's Parliament declared "that Te Awa Tupua—the river and all its physical and metaphysical elements—is an indivisible, living whole, and henceforth possesses 'all the rights, powers, duties, and liabilities' of a legal person" (Warne). The new legislation, according to Warne, achieves "Recognition that the river is the 'indivisible and living whole' of Maori understanding, and not the fragmented, inanimate components of water, bed, banks, tributaries, and catchment that has been the European approach." The birthplace of the Whanganui River is Ngauruhoe, better known to some, thanks to Peter Jackson's cinematic adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings*, as Mount Doom.

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