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"A Fearful Weapon"

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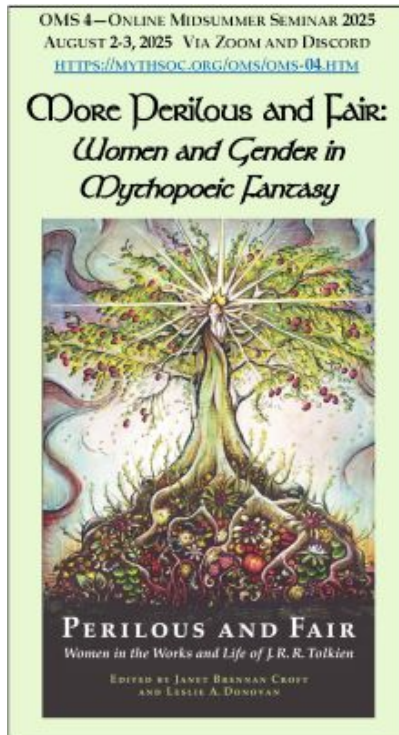
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Abstract

The changes to Tolkien's cosmology introduced in "Myths Transformed" were not well received. Certainly their realism is a 180% turn for the man who declared unequivocally that "Fantasy remains a human right" (72). Have Tolkien's revisions, radical as they are, been "a fearful weapon" against his own creation? And if they have, how has the perception of that creation changed since the publication of *Morgoth's Ring* in 1993? Has Tolkien's weapon destroyed his imaginary world?

Additional Keywords

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Notes and Letters

"A FEARFUL WEAPON"
VERLYN FLIEGER

The words of my title are taken from the "Myths Transformed" section of *Morgoth's Ring*, Vol. 10 of Christopher Tolkien's History of Middle-Earth. They vividly convey Christopher's opinion of his father's late revisions to the Silmarillion. "[It] seems to me," he wrote, "that he was devising—from within it—a fearful weapon against his own creation" (*Morgoth's Ring* [*MR*] 371).

When I first read these words (*Morgoth's Ring* was published in 1993) I had a sense of *deja vu*, for I had heard them—or something very like them—before, in a farmhouse kitchen in Provence where Christopher, pacing up and down in pajamas and bathrobe, breakfast mug of Nescafé in hand, worried out loud about the havoc that publication of the revisions would wreak on his father's mythology. He was right to be concerned. The changes were drastic and would destroy a major element of his creation myth, the role of the Two Trees in bringing light to Middle-earth. For Christopher this was an imminent, not a hypothetical problem, as he was then approaching the stage in his editing of his father's manuscripts when these revisions would be up next. In the end he did publish them. *Morgoth's Ring* was the result.

But the problem remains, and is the subject of this enquiry. Have Tolkien's revisions been in fact a weapon against the story he once wrote? Certainly their realism is a 180% turn for the man who declared unequivocally that "Fantasy remains a human right" ("On Fairy-stories" [*OFS*] 66). His 1932/33 poem "Mythopoeia," addressed to C.S. Lewis, had asserted much the same but more romantically:

> Though all the crannies of the world we filled
> with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
> Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
> and sowed the seeds of dragons—'twas our right
> (used or misused). (qtd. in OFS 65)

I call attention to the word *right*, used twice to defend what Tolkien called "sub-creation," the making of an imaginative Secondary World. But the concept of sub-creation was not just a nose-thumb at academia, it was a tenet of his belief

as well. "We make in our measure and in our derivative mode because we are made," he wrote in "On Fairy-stories," "and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker" (OFS 66). The late revisions that worried Christopher now threatened to revoke that right on the grounds that it had indeed been "misused" by the very man who claimed it. This was in specific reference to what he now called his legendarium's "astronomically absurd […] making of the Sun and Moon" from a flower and a fruit of the Two Trees (*MR* 371). Tolkien was now saying "You cannot do this anymore," that "the art of the 'Sub-creator' cannot, or should not attempt to, extend the 'mythical' revelation of a conception of the shape of the earth and the origin of the lights of heaven that runs counter to the known physical truths of his own days" (*MR* 371).

To be sure, Tolkien had made many revisions to his legendarium over the years, but none so literally world-shaking as this, which on its publication immediately generated some pushback. The changes introduced in "Myths Transformed" were not well received. Readers accustomed to the old version of Tolkien's legendarium did not welcome the readjustment, and resisted its arbitrary re-arrangement of their familiar fantasy world. One reader, Kaj André Apeland, compared it to Heraclitus's dictum that you cannot step in the same river twice, averring that Tolkien had left the river and was now observing it from the bank (Agøy 46). The word "anymore," with its implicit goodbye to a Middle-earth left behind, is wistful in its melancholy, carrying a feeling of regret for a paradise not so much lost as renounced.

Tolkien was not just saying goodbye to his invention; he was saying farewell to his art, for it is worth noting that in the years following that renunciation he produced only one new story, *Smith of Wootton Major*, in 1967. *Smith* is a brief and bittersweet fantasy in which the hero, a blacksmith given a magic star that admits him to Fairyland, learns that he must give up both his visits and the star to return to the everyday world. The known circumstances of Tolkien's life make it impossible not to read this story as thinly-veiled autobiography. Facing retirement, Tolkien himself had called it "an old man's story, filled with the presage of bereavement" and "written with deep emotion" (Carpenter 243). We must agree, for as "Myths Transformed" makes clear, Tolkien's own late exchange of fable for fact was hauntingly like Smith's farewell to Faery, a reluctant giving-up of an imaginative vision he could no longer rationally justify. But the seed had been planted years before.

As early as 1958 we find him writing, "It is now clear to me that […] the Mythology must actually be a 'Mannish' affair. […] [T]raditions […] handed on by *Men* […] blended and confused […] with their own Mannish myths and cosmic ideas" (*MR* 370). This was sub-creation one step down, no longer a God-given right but an authorial strategy that de-throned the original vision. The change that divided the legendarium into Mannish versus Elvish traditions

widened the story by introducing the notion of point of view. But it also narrowed each approach to the point of view being held. This undermined the authority of the original myth by making it one version instead of a mythological truth. Here is where Christopher's dictum comes into play and the fearful weapon is unleashed. "Myths Transformed" is the record of a "prolonged interior debate" over the revision process. It chronicles Tolkien's "intellectual and imaginative stress in the face of such a dismantling and reconstitution, believed to be an inescapable necessity, but never to be achieved" (*MR* 369). The key phrases—"intellectual and imaginative stress," "inescapable necessity," and "never achieved"—capture Christopher's concern for his father's struggle over his own past work.

This creates a kind of Grand Canyon stratification of literary layers frozen in time, each from a different era and all on view all at once—Christopher's present thinking about his father's past thinking about Tolkien's even farther past thinking about his work. The middle layer is the most revealing, for that is where the geographical and astronomical cataclysm—the struggle that created the fearful weapon—is recorded. That struggle was innate, for Tolkien's imagination has always been matched by his capacity for logical and analytic thinking. The one led him to the creativity of mythmaking, the other to the science of linguistics, and from early days he oscillated between the two. In his all-important letter to Milton Waldman Tolkien protested (but who was he arguing with?) that myth and language were not "divergent interests […] but integrally related" (144, #131). Yet in the same letter he referred to linguistics as "the other pole" (145), which suggests exactly the opposite. It is the paradox of his nature that both statements were true. His invented languages followed strict linguistic rules, while the fantasy world they generated followed his imagination.

He was like the man in Rudyard Kipling's paean to seeing both sides, who said of himself, "*Much I owe to the Lands that grew— / More to the Lives that fed— / But most to Allah Who gave me two / Separate sides to my head.*" There have always been two sides to Tolkien's head. His first biographer, Humphrey Carpenter called him "a man of antitheses" (95), by nature "cheerful almost irrepressible" but also "capable of bouts of profound despair" (31), and this two-sidedness persisted throughout his life. In terms of Christopher's dictum it is a pity that it was the logical and not the imaginative side that got the last word and made the final decision; that became in effect a weapon against his own creation.

How and when and most importantly why did this momentous change take place? Christopher has done a meticulous job of laying out the how of Tolkien's process insofar as that can be divined from the physical evidence, collating and setting in approximate order the bewildering sequence of rewrites

that led to Tolkien's brave new world. If the Silmarillion as originally published can be conjecturally called **A**, the text Christopher designates as **B** was the "fine pre-*Lord of the Rings* manuscript" which "became the vehicle of massive rewriting many years later" (*MR* 3) This revision was carried out "on the blank verso pages" of **B,** thus creating two distinct texts on the same physical manuscript and one nightmare for the editor. Christopher calls the second text **C**, but goes on immediately to a typescript "also directly based on *Ainulindalë* **B**" and containing what he saw as "a much more radical—one might say a devastating change in the cosmology," the sun as already pre-existent in Arda (*MR* 3). This typescript he calls **C***.

The changes and variations among **B**, **C,** and **C*** are dizzying, and I won't attempt to sort them out; my purpose is to call attention to their existence, for such overlapping and piggy-backing of version on version on version gives a vivid picture of the mental gymnastics Tolkien must have gone through as he transferred his legendarium (I suspect painfully) from the rich, artistically coherent worldview he had developed over decades to the mythologically barren, meaning-impoverished skyscape that reflected his own world. So complex a process cannot have happened all in an instant, and was much more likely to have taken shape over time. *When* is the most difficult question to answer for the scholar trying to chart a straight course, for unlike actual revision, which is demonstrable, inspiration is ephemeral and hard to pin down. Scull and Hammond point to a time "in the mid-1940s when he had considered whether to make Arda a round word from the beginning, but rejected the idea, at least temporarily" (Chronology 569).

Christopher has taken an educated guess. "I believe," he writes, "that virtually all of [the changes] came from […] the late 1950s, in the aftermath of the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*" (*MR* 369). Christopher's *when* may help to answer the final and to my mind most important question of *why*. Why did Tolkien decide to dis-assemble his own creation? What happened that impelled him to replace the beautiful concept of the light from the Trees with our contemporary-oriented but story-impoverished Solar System? My answer is *The Lord of the Rings.* In this case the *post hoc* fallacy may not be as fallacious as usual. The overwhelming success of *The Lord of the Rings* may actually have retrospectively affected its precursor, the Silmarillion. A look at Tolkien's published letters from, say, 1955 (when *The Return of the King* was published) onward shows that many were in response to readers who had written with questions about this or that aspect of Middle-earth, from its geographic relationship to the real world to genetic aspects of the cross-breeding of Elves and Men to free will and the nature of evil.

The phenomenon is not unlike the crossover into the real world of the fictive Sherlock Holmes, whose flat at 221b Baker Street came to be seen as a real

address, with the added corollary that it now is one, a real building on a real street with its own blue plaque marking it as a historic site. An important distinction is that Holmes's London was contemporary with that of his readers, while Tolkien's Middle-earth is a never-land calqued on the real one, a fictive overlay of a Secondary World on a distant and ill-defined past of the Primary one. As it did with Holmes, whose creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was forced at the insistence of his voracious fans to resurrect the hero he had killed off, I suggest that Tolkien's phenomenon also worked against itself. The concrete details of his Middle-earth piqued readers' curiosity about its actual operation—laws of time and place, mortality and deathlessness (as in Elves)—and their eagerness for evidence of its reality invited him to take their queries seriously, and ultimately to reconceive his mythology in response to their expectations.

His painstaking and sometimes lengthy explanations of how things were supposed to have worked in his fictive world forced him to look with a critical eye at the relationship of that world to the real one, and eventually caused the real one to assume dominance. This was not revision but re-envision, a complete re-structuring of some of the most visible aspects of his imaginary world. The geographic shift from a flat earth to a round one inevitably changed the orientation of the sky and everything in it—sun and moon, stars, night and day—and time itself. This was a seismic change, and according to Christopher, not for the better. "[W]hy is the myth of the Two Trees," he wrote, "more acceptable than that of the creation of the Sun and Moon from the last fruit and flower of the Trees as they died? Or indeed, if this is true, how can it be acceptable that the Evening Star is the Silmaril cut by Beren from Morgoth's crown" (*MR* 371)? Good questions, both. But if the Silmaril is not the Evening Star, then how does its light—first in Galadriel's mirror and then in her Phial—function as the salvation of Frodo and Sam in Shelob's tunnel? As each question arises one can see the dominos begin to topple—one against another against another until the original integrated and consistent sequence of events falls of its own weight.

The questions, and Tolkien's answers, were almost certainly instrumental in nudging him toward another debate arising out of the same dilemma of myth versus logic. The "Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth" is the debate of Finrod (an Elf) and Andreth (a human woman)—with occasional help from her ancestress Adanel—about the necessity for death, hitherto provided as the "gift" of Eru/Ilúvatar to his race of Men. But unlike Tolkien's earlier debate with himself, this was a dialogue played out in the theatre of his imagination, using as mouthpieces an Elf and a human who argue about their perceptions and misconceptions regarding the designs of their creator. Of all Tolkien's late writings, the "Athrabeth" is the most perplexing to understand and the most problematic from which to draw any conclusions, predicated as it is on

unresolved argument, dependent for its power entirely on opposing points of view—the Mannish as over against the Elvish version. If this sounds familiar, there's a good reason. Christopher conjecturally dates its writing to 1959 and puts it among the "late 1950s" writings that included "Myths Transformed" (*MR* 304, 369) together with which it is paired in the volume.

For those looking for a message in Tolkien's work, "The Athrabeth" has something for everyone, with Tolkien arguing all sides at once, playing a kind of writerly hide-and-seek, dodging in and out among conflicting opinions, teasing his reader with unsubtle allusions to Christianity in one breath and questioning them in the next. Using circumstantial evidence—it was written on a new typewriter, and preserved folded in newspapers of January 1960 (*MR* 304)—Christopher conjecturally dates its writing to 1959, the epicenter of Tolkien's revisionist period and its most extreme representation. It can be seen as something like Tolkien's *Rashomon*, an exercise in point of view wherein the object is not to arrive at "truth" but, by showing how differing perceptions may color the same phenomena, to undermine the notion that a single truth can be arrived at. In this case the phenomenon is death, and it is clear that in spite of his subdivision of species into Men and Elves, and his statements in the *Letters* about death and deathlessness, Tolkien had not entirely resolved to his own satisfaction the ultimate human question—why do we die? As an Elf, Finrod is certain that death is Ilúvatar's gift not to be questioned. The human woman Andreth thinks it is that same god-figure's punishment, for which she is angry and resentful. To the "wise-woman" Adanel it is a mystery, a "voice out of the dark" (*MR* 309), which is the ultimate cop-out and the only answer that covers all the bases. Having had Finrod ask the final question: "What did ye do, ye Men" [to anger Eru]?" (*MR* 313), Tolkien threw in the towel, and finally admitted that the Athrabeth was "too like a parody of Christianity" (*MR* 354).

A final question to be answered loops back to the phrase that provides my title and to the attendant decision that was Christopher's in deciding to publish what his father had not. Have Tolkien's revisions, radical as they are, been "a fearful weapon" against his own creation? And if they have, how has the perception of that creation changed since the publication of *Morgoth's Ring* in 1993? Has Tolkien's weapon destroyed his imaginary world? My answer would have to be a qualified 'yes.' 'Yes' because we cannot pretend the changes do not exist. Middle-earth can no longer claim to be "the actual Old World of this planet" without acknowledgment of the changes Tolkien mandated to actually make it so, changes which validated the science even as they ruined the faery. 'Qualified' because readers can still make a choice; still choose the old over the new and ignore *Morgoth's Ring* as an aberration. We can still re-visit *The Lord of the Rings* with something of the same old pleasure (though the Jackson films have skewed its values; still more the Amazon series), but its presumed

background in the parent myth of the Silmarillion has been at the least tarnished, at the worst called into question, while textual references to the earlier stories may no longer have the same power to illuminate. The mythological ground has shifted and the arc of the story has literally come down to earth—or to geology—where we land with a thud at a destination to which we hadn't planned to arrive, looking around us for a road we can follow that will still go ever on.

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