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Abstract

Among the most central of Tolkien's myths is the creation of the Sun and Moon as the last fruit and flower of the Two Trees of Valinor. The death of the Trees is central in a long chain of events that directly leads to the later battles, kin slayings, and geological upheavals in Middle-earth. It is therefore curious that during the writing of *The Lord of the Rings* (and continuing into the later 1950s and 1960s), Tolkien began second-guessing himself, and became concerned with what he called "the astronomically absurd business of the making of the Sun and Moon." Beginning with the experimental 1948 "Round World" cosmology of the *Ainulindalë* C*, the elder Tolkien explores what his son terms a "radical transformation of the astronomical myth," changes that appear jarring to his son's sensibilities concerning what his father came to call a "primitive" mythology but Christopher defends as "in conception beautiful." As the cosmological writings become further removed from the medievalist geocentric worldview reflected in writings Christopher (himself a medieval scholar) had been carefully collecting and editing for nearly two decades, his commentary seems severely curtailed, mainly limited to philology and drawing a few cursory connections to similar passages within the same volume.

Additional Keywords

cosmology; astronomy; Tolkien, Christopher—Editorship; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge of astronomy; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Revision process; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Settings—Middle-earth—Cosmology; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Technique

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THE SUN, THE SON, AND THE *SILMARILLION*: CHRISTOPHER TOLKIEN AND THE COPERNICAN REVOLUTION OF *MORGOTH'S RING*¹

KRISTINE LARSEN

IN *THE DISCARDED IMAGE* (216), C.S. LEWIS extols the aesthetics of the medieval geocentric cosmology, a viewpoint reflected in numerous aspects of Tolkien's *legendarium* (Larsen, "Medieval Cosmology" 2-3). Among the most central of the etiological myths is the creation of the Sun and Moon as the last fruit and flower of the Two Trees of Valinor. The death of the Trees is central in a long chain of events that directly leads to the later battles, kin slayings, and geological upheavals in Middle-earth, because Fëanor's beloved hand-crafted crystals—the three legendary Silmarils—contain the last remaining vestiges of the light of the Two Trees. It is therefore curious that during the writing of *The Lord of the Rings* (and continuing into the later 1950s and 1960s), he began second-guessing himself, and became concerned with what he called "the astronomically absurd business of the making of the Sun and Moon" (Tolkien, *Morgoth's Ring* [MR] 371). For example, as a well-read 20th century academic, he was painfully cognizant that his tale was in direct opposition to modern scientific hypotheses concerning the formation of the Moon itself (Larsen, "A Little Earth" 397).

Christopher Tolkien once wrote to Carl Hostetter "As I see it, I have called myself a 'literary archaeologist.' I have never been more than a discoverer, and interpreter of what I discovered" (qtd. in Ferré 67). However, the size of his trowel scoops, and the joy in his brush strokes, over the course of his work producing a dozen volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* [HOME], varied tremendously. In particular, his uniquely insightful commentary on his father's myriad drafts—including a seemingly endless tangle of literary rabbit holes—becomes uncharacteristically scant for the later cosmological writings in the tenth volume of HOME, *Morgoth's Ring*, published in 1993. I posit that this is directly related to the Middle-earth equivalent of a Copernican Revolution in the *Silmarillion* cosmology in his father's post-*Lord of the Rings* writings. Beginning with the experimental 1948 "Round World" cosmology of the *Ainulindalë* C*, the elder Tolkien explores what his son terms a "radical transformation of the astronomical myth" (MR 359), changes that appear jarring to his son's sensibilities concerning what his father came to call a "primitive" mythology but Christopher defends as "in conception beautiful" (MR 371). As the cosmological writings become further removed from the medievalist geocentric worldview reflected in writings Christopher (himself a medieval scholar) had been carefully collecting and editing for nearly two decades, his

¹ Slightly modified from a May 13, 2023, presentation at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University.

commentary seems severely curtailed, mainly limited to philology and drawing a few cursory connections to similar passages within the same volume.

It is important to point out that Christopher showed no compunction in commenting on the earlier cosmological works. The first detailed descriptions of Tolkien's cosmology are collected in *The Book of Lost Tales*. These are accompanied by "I Vene Kemen," a circa 1916-20 cosmological diagram. Christopher describes this as a "very remarkable" sketch in which the cosmology is "presented as a huge 'Viking' ship, with mast arising from the highest point of the Great Lands, [a] single sail on which are the Sun and Moon" (Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales Part I* [BOLT I] 83). In *The Shaping of Middle-earth* [SOME] Christopher carefully details how the cosmology of "The Earliest 'Silmarillion'" (also known as the "Sketch of the Mythology" [SOME 11]) has "undergone a profound shift, an entire re-making" in this next iteration in terms of the motions of the Sun and Moon through the cosmos (SOME 49). Christopher also has much to say in the same volume about the cosmological work *Ambarkanta*, exclaiming "This elegant universe, while certainly in many respects an evolution from the old cosmology of the *Lost Tales*, shows also radical shifts and advances in essential structure," followed by at least five pages of thorough analysis (SOME 241). His tone here is reminiscent of an excited archaeologist eagerly digging up a new find. Among the most keenly analyzed topics are the various Gates and Doors in the Walls of the World that lead to the outer void, as well as the different layers in the atmosphere. He engages in similar detailed examination in one part of *Morgoth's Ring*, "The Annals of Aman," suggesting that his overall enthusiasm for detailed analysis has not waned (and that he was not simply succumbing to burn out with the admittedly ambitious *HOME* project). It is also important to note that Christopher had a childhood interest in astronomy (owning a telescope) and like his siblings was encouraged by his father to "learn about the stars and planets and eclipses of the sun and moon" (P. Tolkien 9). I argue that the shift to a more 'hands-off' policy for the later cosmological texts can perhaps be most easily explained as a disapproval of/confusion with/detachment from his father's attempts to engage with a more modern and less medieval cosmology.

Morgoth's Ring, the first of two volumes focused on the later versions of the *Silmarillion* texts, sensibly begins with Tolkien's revisions of the first chapter in *The Silmarillion*, the *Ainulindalë*, the great creation myth of Middle-earth. Christopher provides excerpts from and gives commentary to one early version (B, dating from the 1930s) and three late versions, which he terms (in order of their writing) C*, C, and D. C follows directly from B with many emendations and corrections, while the C to D transition is far gentler (MR 6). His father intentionally wrote "Flat World Version" on B and "Round World Version" on C* before lending them to Katherine Farrer (MR 6; Tolkien, *Letters*

130, #115). Christopher's opinion of the circa 1948 C* is obvious; he terms it an "experiment" and "a much more radical—one might say a devastating—change in the cosmology: for in this version the Sun is already in existence from the beginning of Arda" (MR 6; 3). Katherine Farrer voiced a preference for the Flat World Version B, and Tolkien set to work revising it to create version C. Christopher notes that C* was "set aside; but [...] it was by no means entirely forgotten" (MR 6).

In *Ainulindalë* C* the Sun is coeval with Earth, and the Moon is formed when Melkor, in his hatred and hubris, declares that, since he is not able to claim the Earth for his own domain, he will "rend the Earth asunder, and break it, and none shall possess it" (MR 41). All he manages to accomplish is tearing off a piece of the Earth, which becomes the Moon. When the Valar cast out Melkor the Moon endures "both blinding heat and cold intolerable," and becomes "utterly barren; and nought liveth there, nor ever hath, nor shall" (MR 42). While these are scientifically accurate descriptions of our natural satellite, they certainly lack the charm of the tale of the Moon's creation in *The Silmarillion* (99–101) as the final flower of the silver tree Telperion, carefully placed into a vessel and set to sail among the stars with the love-struck Maia Tilion at the helm ever seeking his beloved, the sun maiden Arien. But as I have argued elsewhere, this description of the bleak lunar landscape and origin of the Moon as having been ripped from the flesh of our planet reflect scientific hypotheses well-known in the popular press at the time of Tolkien's writing (Larsen, "A Little Earth" 398).

Christopher voices discomfort with this modernized mythology, admitting that it "seems strange indeed that my father was prepared to conceive of the Moon—the Moon, that cherishes the memory of the Elves—as a dead and blasted survival of the hatred of Melkor, however beautiful its light" (MR 43). Due to the new solar timeline, the two lamps of the Valar were abandoned, although Christopher notes that there is "no indication whatsoever of how the myth of the Two Trees was to be accommodated to these new ideas," a significant lacuna in the potential revision given the centrality of the Silmarils (themselves bound to the Trees in the original mythology) (MR 43). Christopher offers no further commentary on this problematic new cosmology, instead voicing confusion over his father's references in version C* to the "Halls of Anar" and "Kingdom of Anar," i.e., far more concerned with philology than astronomy (MR 44). I posit that there is no inconsistency with the names here, if one embraces the proposed revisions; in making the Sun the central object in the solar system (a more modern heliocentric view) one would naturally name objects in space in reference to the Sun rather than the Earth. Christopher does, however, spend considerable time on the more traditional revision C, which he opines "introduces a radical re-ordering of the original matter of the *Ainulindalë*, together with much that is new" (MR 23). Over several pages he details

alterations to Melkor's actions and how he enters and leaves the world, relating these motions to the Walls of the World, aka the cosmological structure. He is seemingly quite concerned with these more medieval/classical details (Larsen, "Walls of the World" 6-8) and considers these changes "radical," yet he has little to say about the *truly* radical version C*. Perhaps C* was simply too radical for Christopher to consider.

Cosmological texts also end the volume, late writings dubbed "Myths Transformed" that Christopher describes as "concerned with, broadly speaking, the reinterpretation of central elements in the 'mythology'" dating from the late 1950s and perhaps later, after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* (MR 369). Christopher explains that "In these writings can be read the record of a prolonged interior debate" dating back to *Ainulindalë* C* (MR 369). He intentionally begins the section with one particular c.1958 document he labels 'I' in which his father states "It is now clear to me that in any case the Mythology must actually be a 'Mannish' affair [...]. What we have in the *Silmarillion* etc. are traditions [...] handed on by *Men* in Númenor and later in Middle-earth [...] blended and confused with their own Mannish myths and cosmic ideas" (MR 370). Tolkien explains that this shift was necessitated by an inclination to "adhere to the Flat Earth and the astronomically absurd business of the making of the Sun and Moon" despite the fact that when "it is the general belief that we live upon a 'spherical' island in 'Space' you cannot do this any more" (MR 370).

Christopher stresses that here his father "appears to have accepted that these ideas do not in themselves necessarily lead to great upheaval in the essential 'world-structure' of *The Silmarillion*, but on the contrary provide a basis for its retention" (MR 371). Christopher seems to believe that the "Mannish" explanation is a reasonable excuse to keep the medieval cosmology as is, what he terms "in conception beautiful, and not absurd; but it is exceedingly 'primitive'" (MR 371).

Tolkien experimented with at least two additional alternate explanations for the Moon's origin that differed significantly from the origin proposed in *Ainulindalë* C*. These are found in the "problematic" two-part text Christopher Tolkien dubbed II (MR 375). IIa explained that the "Sun should be coeval with Earth, though its relative size need not be considered, while the apparent revolution of the Sun around the Earth will be accepted" (MR 375). A new myth is then outlined, in which Melkor and the Valar battled during "supposed primeval epochs before Earth became habitable. A time of fire and cataclysm"; in order to provide light by which to watch Melkor, the Valar then created the Moon "Out of earth-stuff or Sun?" (MR 376).

In IIb, it is written that the Valar "resolved to alter the fashion of Arda and of Earth, and in their thought they devised Ithil, the Moon [...]. Some say that it was out of Earth itself that Ithil was made, and thus Ambar was

diminished; others say that the Moon was made of like things to the Earth" (MR 382). As I have noted elsewhere, it is possible to draw a connection between the scientific model of lunar creation from preplanetary material in the Earth's neighborhood and Tolkien's Ilb myth where the Moon was "made of like things to the Earth" (Larsen, "A Little Earth" 397-8). It is also possible to draw a connection with myth Ia (where it was said that the Moon might be made of solar material) to the solar nebula model or any of the various popular tidal models of the early 20th century in which the planets and moons were ripped out of the sun by the tidal action of a passing star. But despite all the fascinating modern science connections (some of which he should have known about given his own education and aforementioned childhood exposure to astronomy), Christopher has very little commentary on this document, largely limited to reminding the reader of statements by his father in the Commentary to the *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth* (reprinted earlier in the same volume).

It is unfortunate that Christopher ignores the truly revolutionary cosmological changes these connections actually suggest. For example, in document II of the "Myths Transformed" essays it is said that while the Valar started their labors "Others there were, countless to our thought though known each, and numbered in the mind of Ilúvatar, whose labour lay elsewhere and in other regions and histories of the Great Tale, amid stars remote and worlds beyond the reach of the furthest thought" (MR 378). Christopher correctly draws the reader's attention to this passage in his commentary to a separate excerpt (MR 388) describing Varda's demiurgical work, and notes that these comments can be seen to limit her star-kindling to only those stars seen from Earth; however, he completely ignores (perhaps intentionally) the truly radical point his father is making—an admission of the possible existence of life elsewhere in the universe!

Christopher similarly largely refrains from commenting on his father's lengthy notes to the *Athrabeth*, a document dated to perhaps 1959 and hence contemporaneous with some of the "Myths Transformed" documents. Christopher describes the essay as "the culmination of my father's thought on the relation of Elves and Men" including the "fundamental differences of destiny, nature, and experience" (MR 328). He notes that "to this passionate work my father appended a long discursive and critical commentary in a very different vein which follows here" (MR 329), one "very different vein" being the inclusion of numerous references to the possibility of extraterrestrial life elsewhere in the universe, as I have detailed elsewhere (Larsen, "Perilous, Lonely Venture" 281). Again, Christopher appears to ignore all of this fascinating material. Instead, what limited footnotes we have from him are mainly philological in nature. Christopher takes the time to analyze his father's

other writings on Elvish immortality (including the Finwë and Míriel related texts) in *Morgoth's Ring*, so his relative silence on the *Athrabeth* is curious indeed.

Finally, we see Christopher voicing discomfort and even open confusion when his father also includes updated references to the planets in the post *Lord of the Rings* texts. In a footnote to "Myths Transformed" Essay II he mentioned "other scribbled notes" related to the essay that describe how "Varda gave the holy light received in gift from Ilúvatar [...] not only to the Sun and to the Two Trees but also to 'the significant Star'. The meaning of this is nowhere explained. Beside it he wrote *Signifier*, and many experimental Elvish names" (MR 385). It is a shame indeed that Christopher didn't take the obvious leap and suggest that this is a demythologized (or rather re-mythologized) version of the Evening Star.

More interestingly, the index to *Morgoth's Ring* begins with an essay on Star-names, describing a manuscript page in the Marquette archive on which Tolkien writes what appear to be planet names above certain star names from the *Silmarillion* texts. In particular, Christopher admits "I find it so extraordinary as to be altogether incredible" that his father would include the relatively dim planets Uranus and Neptune because the Elvish names must denote "very conspicuous objects in the heavens of Arda" (MR 435). Instead, he comes to the conclusion that this is a case of his father at play, amusing himself and acting "whimsically" rather than scientifically (MR 435). However, I believe Christopher was thinking rather narrowly, in terms of the apparent *brightness* of the planets. All planets are special objects in the sky due to their apparent wandering along the ecliptic relative to the background stars, this motion the etymological source of the term *planet*, 'wanderer.' Granted, the 'wandering' of Uranus and Neptune is quite slow in human terms, but over the life of an Elf these objects would also show obvious planetary motion.

It is perhaps not an accident that among the contemporaneous pieces that Christopher chose not to include in *Morgoth's Ring*, but instead only found publication in *The Nature of Middle-earth* [NOME], are the 1960s texts called "Dark and Light." One of these texts describes "Certain stars (no doubt those we call planets)" which the Elves "early observed were 'wayward' and altered their places with regard to the 'far-stars' (fixed stars). These they called companions of the Sun and thought them quite small heavenly bodies – derived from the Sun" (NOME 281), again suggestive of tidal theories of planet formation. Another related piece further explains of the Elves that "Their 'imagination' was thus not properly a flat-earth cosmology; and it was *geocentric* only as regards the Sun, Moon, and certain stars ('companions of the Sun' or wayward stars = our planets)," again highlighting both the different appearance of the planets and suggesting the existence of *other* solar systems (NOME 281).

In a 1954 letter to Naomi Mitchison, Tolkien explained “So deep was the impression made by ‘astronomy’ on me that I do not think I could deal with or imaginatively conceive a flat world, though a world of static Earth with a Sun going round it seems easier (to fancy if not to reason)” (*Letters* 197, #154). Still, he could not bring himself to take this final evolutionary step in earnest, as it would break much of what was so poetic in his fictional cosmology. Indeed, John Rateliff has argued that it was this “impasse” which played a large part in Tolkien’s inability to complete *The Silmarillion* in his lifetime, contending that the Mannish or Númenórean solution proposed in “Myths Transformed” would cause a “breakage of secondary belief” in the mind of the reader (14). It appears that Christopher also rejected this cosmological revolution in his own way, as he chose not to analyze the more modern astronomical aspects of his father’s evolving universe. This included those aspects hiding in plain sight, and which posed far less of a threat to the central mythology (such as the possible existence of extraterrestrial life). I count all of this most unfortunate, not only because we missed out on valuable insights from Christopher (not to mention the particularly distressing—to this astronomer—possibility that astronomy might have robbed us of a completed *The Silmarillion*), but because I personally have never found Tolkien’s flat Earth geocentric cosmology to be anything other than (as Christopher sagely noted) *beautiful*.

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ON THE RINGS OF POWER: THOUGHTS INSPIRED BY LARRY BURRISS'S "SENTIENCE AND SAPIENCE IN THE ONE RING"

NANCY MARTSCH

I READ WITH INTEREST LARRY BURRISS'S ESSAY on "Sentience and Sapience in the One Ring" in *Mythlore* #142. I agree that the Ring is at least semi-sentient. Tom Shippey characterized the Ring as an "addiction." Now we can add the idea of the Ring as a parasite, for parasites can modify the behavior of their hosts.

But there's more to be said about the One Ring. It was used more than twelve times (Burris 193, Table 2). In addition to escaping from Gollum, Bilbo used the Ring to rescue the Dwarves from the spiders; while hiding in the Elvenking's halls (and rescuing the Dwarves again); for the "interview" with Smaug; to sneak out with the Arkenstone; and during the Battle of the Five Armies. However, when *The Hobbit* was written, the Ring was "just" a magic ring which conferred invisibility. The idea that it was the One Ring of Sauron, imbued with