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The Catholic Imaginations of J.R.R. Tolkien and Oscar Wilde

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The Catholic Imaginations of J.R.R. Tolkien and Oscar Wilde

Abstract

This paper uses terminology from *The Catholic Imagination* by Andrew Greeley to explore the influence of Catholicism on the writings of Oscar Wilde and J.R.R. Tolkien. Greeley asserts that Catholics see metaphors for the transcendent in matter, value community within a well-ordered hierarchy, and sanctify suffering—qualities that abound in the writings of Wilde and Tolkien. I begin with short biographical sketches of both authors, paying special attention to Wilde's and Tolkien's varied involvement with orthodox Catholicism. I then move into a discussion about both authors' aesthetic philosophies and the similar value they see in art. Next, I detail the authors' transubstantiation of matter into the divine and demonic. I then examine various poems, letters, and essays of both authors to determine how the Catholic sense of community informed their political outlooks. Finally, I examine the Catholic insistence on the value of suffering as it appears in the writings of these authors. This study reveals the extent to which the Catholic worldview affected the aesthetic quality of Tolkien's and Wilde's works, deepening our understanding of the interplay between religion and fantasy. While the critical conversation surrounding the commonalities between these hitherto incongruous authors is small, recent scholarship is beginning to note the striking connections between these two masters of fantastical literature.

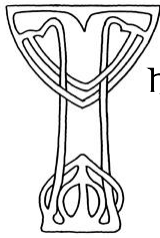
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Oscar Wilde; Catholicism; Fantasy; Imagination

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THE CATHOLIC IMAGINATIONS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN AND OSCAR WILDE

FRAZIER ALEXANDER JOHNSON

INTRODUCTION: CATHOLIC AUTHORS

IN HIS CONTROVERSIAL BOOK, *The Catholic Imagination*, priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley argues that Catholics—more than any other religious community—produce great art because of their conviction that all aspects of life are sacramental. Because of this sacramental vision, “Catholics live in an enchanted world” (1). While Greeley references several renowned Catholic artists and thinkers to support his thesis, he fails to mention either Oscar Wilde or J.R.R. Tolkien as exemplars of the Catholic imagination, an oversight this essay aims to correct. To esteem Wilde and Tolkien as Catholics of the same degree may raise the eyebrows of devout churchgoers; and to hold them as writers of the same stature may summon the pitchforks of devout academics. Nevertheless, a closer look at the literary criticism, fiction, and political philosophies of Wilde and Tolkien (with Greeley’s theories firmly in mind), will illumine the shared catholicity of these two writers so vastly different that, until recently, few scholars have mentioned them in the same breath. Despite Wilde’s and Tolkien’s contrasting lifestyles, their writings display similar visions of the world and explore common themes, all of which supports Greeley’s conviction that Catholics share not just a common theology but a common imagination.¹ While some may find it obvious that when two *Catholic* authors are compared their works display *Catholic* tendencies, we must remember that Wilde’s Catholicism remains a point of scholarly contention,² whereas only Tolkien’s faith is widely accepted.³ Still, one may object to this investigation on the basis that there is no evidence for reading Wilde’s and Tolkien’s works as somehow in conversation, and this objection is fair. To date, only two scholarly articles compare the fiction of Wilde and Tolkien, both of which were published within

¹ The use of the term “Catholic” in this essay encompasses not only the thought and practice of the Roman Catholic tradition but also the Anglo-Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions.

² See Killeen; Hanson; and Pearce, *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde*.

³ Studies on Tolkien’s Catholicism abound. See Ordway, *Tolkien’s Faith: A Spiritual Biography*; Kosloski and Tuttle; Purtill; Kreeft; Hein, “Chapter 6: J.R.R. Tolkien Myth and Middle Earth” in *Christian Mythmakers*; Birzer; and Pearce, *Tolkien: Man and Myth*.

the same journal.⁴ Additionally, the recent scholarship of Holly Ordway in *Tolkien's Modern Reading* assures us that Wilde had no significant literary influence on Tolkien beyond the latter's owning a fairy tale collection that contained "The Selfish Giant," hardly proof of a Wildean influence (305). What, then, do Wilde and Tolkien have to do with one another, and in what sense are their imaginations "Catholic"? Although the critical conversation on the commonalities between Wilde and Tolkien remains in its infancy, we should not ignore the striking connections between these two writers, nor the religious wellspring from which their aesthetic outlooks arose. Although Wilde and Tolkien varied in the degree of their formal involvement with the Catholic Church, the writings of both authors evince a particularly Catholic way of seeing all aspects of life as sacramental. A closer examination of their works reveals Wilde's and Tolkien's kindred visions regarding art and life and sheds light on these two rarely paired exemplars of the Catholic imagination. By analyzing the writings of two personalities so different as Wilde's and Tolkien's, we will deepen our understanding of the interplay between the Catholic faith and imaginative art.

CATHOLIC LIVES

We can begin our analysis of Wilde and Tolkien by examining their more obvious similarities before delving into the deeper resonances between their writings. Both writers studied Classics at Oxford and were influenced by Cardinal Newman to varying degrees (Pearce, *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde* [Unmasking] 29, 51-54; Ordway, *Tolkien's Faith* 63-70; Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading* 275n1). Both men had children. And both were writers of fairy tales. But there the likenesses end. Despite a few surface-level similarities, the lifestyles of Tolkien and Wilde could not have been more different. Wilde was a closeted homosexual and, at the height of his success, lived a life of great flair and eccentricity, a veritable peacock. Tolkien, on the other hand, was extremely conservative, especially by today's standards, as well as a quiet, soft-spoken type who rarely drew attention to himself; an owl-like man, to continue our animal analogies. Humphrey Carpenter even describes Tolkien's "plain masculine" clothing style as a "reaction to the excessive dandyism and implied homosexuality of the 'aesthetes'," Wilde's cultural milieu (123). If both men were so different in personality, we may rightly wonder what their imaginations have in common with one another—besides their proclivity for writing characters with a strong fondness for tobacco.

⁴ See Waskovitch; Rowan; and Robinson, who examines notions of property rights in various fairy tales, including *The Lord of the Rings* and "The Selfish Giant."

Furthermore, if we dig deeper into the biographies of Wilde and Tolkien, we inevitably run into the puzzling issue of Wilde's apparent lukewarm faith when compared to Tolkien's flame-like passion for Catholicism. Tolkien was indeed a good Catholic. His mother believed so strongly in the faith, that she converted despite the wrath of her family, who subsequently disowned her (Carpenter 23-24). Tolkien never wavered in his faith, was raised by a Catholic priest after his mother's death, and he attended mass regularly at St. Aloysius' Catholic Church in Oxford (Carpenter 26-27, 65, 66, 115). By contrast, Wilde, "the self-proclaimed arch-sinner and archetypal cynic," was anything but a devout Catholic (Pearce, *Literary Converts* 3). Homosexual hedonist that he was, how could Wilde have seen life from the standpoint of a religion with a two-thousand-year reputation for dogmatically opposing his sexual orientation?⁵ However, if one looks past the glitz and glamor of Wilde's biography, one finds in Wilde's life story the tragic tale of a soul caught between Heaven and Hell, or as Jarlath Killeen has termed it "a continuing and conflicted relationship with Catholicism" (35). If by "Catholic" one means a devout convert to the Church of Rome, then we have strong evidence for doubting Wilde's faith; at best, we can describe Wilde's life as merely being bookended by the sacraments of baptism at birth and the last rites on his deathbed (Pearce, *Unmasking* 29-30, 395-96). In between birth and death, Wilde flirted with the idea of becoming a practicing Catholic but never fully committed. As a young man, Wilde held a strong "attraction to Catholicism," an attraction that best reveals itself in his writings, though he also openly supported such controversial figures as Pope Pius IX and Cardinal Manning (Killeen 43; Pearce, *Unmasking* 75). As Ellis Hanson comments, one should not "discuss Wilde as though he were Cardinal Newman," ignoring Wilde's eccentricities and more unorthodox beliefs (232). But simultaneously, one should avoid downplaying Wilde's relationship with the Church as if Catholicism had no impact whatsoever on his worldview (Hanson 229-96). Fortunately, the aim of this essay is not to write a biography of Wilde. Wilde need not have been a practicing Catholic to have had a Catholic imagination, or as Greeley puts it, "[t]o see God and creation through Catholic eyes, it is not necessary to be a good Catholic, whatever that is" (19).

⁵ One should keep in mind that despite Tolkien's conservatism, he maintained deep relationships with his student Eileen Mary Challan (Mary Renault), who was openly homosexual. Another homosexual student of Tolkien's, W.H. Auden, was a devout High Church Anglican and considered *The Lord of the Rings* to be one of the greatest works of the twentieth century. Thus, if differences in sexual moralities did not inhibit Tolkien from forming friendships with the likes of an Auden or Renault, we can surmise that Tolkien may have been able to find common ground with Wilde. See Ordway, *Tolkien's Modern Reading* 258-259.

CATHOLIC THEORIES OF LITERATURE AND ART

A closer examination of the literary criticism of Tolkien and Wilde reveals a shared link between visionary critics and visionary artists. Our analysis of Wilde's and Tolkien's literary theories will begin with similarities that, while not explicitly Catholic, reveal a kindred spirit between both authors. We will then explore shared ideas between both authors that are more explicitly Catholic in inspiration. Despite being a professor of English language and literature, Tolkien's output as a literary critic remains relatively small when compared to his output as a writer of fiction. Tolkien's most celebrated piece of criticism, his essay "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," springs from years of erudition and passion for his subject-matter. Tolkien's essay criticizes those critics of *Beowulf* who disparage the poem for an apparent lack of cohesion and an (alleged) overabundance of fantastical elements, like the monsters Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon at the ending of the poem. Such fantastical elements of the story are seen by the critics as a "blunder of taste" on the part of the poet ("*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" ["Monsters"] 19). Tolkien, however, rushes to the defense of the *Beowulf* poet and asserts that the fairy tale monsters are "allied to the underlying ideas of the poem," giving *Beowulf* its "lofty tone and high seriousness" (19). Tolkien's defense reveals his somewhat personal bias, being himself an artist of a similar vein and outlook as the unknown Anglo-Saxon bard. "[W]e have to deal with a poem by an Englishman using afresh ancient and largely traditional material," writes Tolkien of the *Beowulf* poet, but the same could be said of Tolkien himself (9). Additionally, one could say of Tolkien's legendarium that "[i]t is a poem by a learned man writing of old times, who looking back on the heroism and sorrow feels in them something permanent and something symbolical," though Tolkien wrote these words to describe *Beowulf* (26). We have, then, a criticism of *Beowulf* that springs not merely from the mind of an objective scholar but from the soul of a fellow artist working toward the same ends. This kindred spirit allows Tolkien to inhabit the mind of the *Beowulf* poet with greater accuracy than the stuffy, ivory-tower professors who disparage the poem. Moreover, Tolkien's critical analysis of *Beowulf* becomes truly "Wildean" when one views Tolkien's writing of *The Hobbit* as an extension of the analysis of *Beowulf* in "Monsters and the Critics." In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien is "recreating the ancient world" of *Beowulf* "for modern readers," and many of *The Hobbit*'s elements—a company of fourteen adventurers and a stolen cup from a dragon hoard, to cite a few examples—"reproduce" portions of *Beowulf* in new trappings (Shippey, *The Road to Middle Earth* 71, 91-92; see also Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* 36). In so doing, Tolkien not only expresses his admiration of *Beowulf* as a work of art (as he does in "Monsters and the Critics") but creates a piece of art himself—*The Hobbit*—that completely changes the way readers think of *Beowulf*. In fact,

Tolkien's work has almost become synonymous with *Beowulf*. We can, therefore, see *The Hobbit* and "The Monsters and the Critics" as two halves of the same coin: the novel provides an insight into why Tolkien would make such a strong defense of the *Beowulf* poet in his academic essay. As we shall see below, Wilde maintained that criticism requires greater artistry than artwork itself. Whether Tolkien's criticism of *Beowulf* (in the form of *The Hobbit* and "Monsters") has influenced modern minds more than *Beowulf* itself remains open for debate, though popular culture knowledge of Tolkien's works, even among those who have never read him, may provide all the evidence we need. In Tolkien's hands, criticism has become a work of art that surpasses the influence of the original piece being criticized, which is precisely Wilde's idea of what a great critic can achieve.

If we examine Tolkien's critical analysis of *Beowulf* in light of Wilde's theories as presented in "The Critic as Artist" and "The Decay of Lying," we find that Tolkien is a true critic and therefore, a true artist. "The Critic as Artist" is a philosophical dialogue between the characters Gilbert and Ernest, who discuss the value and practice of art criticism. The chief speaker, Gilbert, contends that criticism is actually an art form in itself, making something new and beautiful from the raw material of the art being criticized, "a new world that will be more marvelous, more enduring, and more true than the world that common eyes look upon" (Wilde, "The Critic as Artist" ["Critic"]1026). Wilde's dialogue on art describes, in an almost prophetic sense, the kind of magisterial artist-creator that Tolkien would one day become. When speaking of the visionary artist-critic who will create a new world, the character Gilbert looks to Homer and Shakespeare as models who "had old ballads and stories to deal with" as well as "chronicles and plays and novels from which to work," all of which were simply the "rough material" that the great poets drew from and "shaped [...] into song" ("Critic" 1020-21). Following in the footsteps of Homer and Shakespeare Tolkien indeed taps into the wellspring of the great mythologies and literatures from around the world to create his own epics. Furthermore, the character Gilbert proposes a theory on the creation of mythologies that Tolkien would one day prove true. "Indeed, I am inclined to think," says Gilbert, "that each myth and legend that seems to us to spring out of the wonder, or terror, or fancy of tribe and nation, was in its origin the invention of one single mind" ("Critic" 1021). While the alleged inventors of the old mythologies are no longer alive to defend Gilbert's assertion, one can look to the works of Tolkien to see how a single mind is in fact capable of creating an entire mythology on its own; Tolkien's myths, novels, poems, histories, and languages have all entered the cultural vernacular. "Anybody can write a three-volumed novel," says Gilbert, and Tolkien has done so, but only a truly visionary artist could give the world a new *mythology*, a new way of comprehending reality ("Critic" 1022). While we

have not yet examined an explicitly Catholic aesthetic in the writings of Wilde and Tolkien, we nonetheless find Tolkien fulfilling what Wilde can only dream of.

Shared beliefs about the purpose of art also underpin the writings of Wilde and Tolkien. Wilde's preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* famously asserts that "[a]ll art is quite useless," a terse summarization of the critical stance Wilde elaborates in longer works such as "The Critic as Artist" and "The Decay of Lying" (*Dorian Gray* [DG] 42). Wilde opposes those who seek to reduce works of art to simple, didactic tools. "Art never expresses anything but itself," he asserts ("The Decay of Lying" ["Decay"] 987). Wilde also stresses the freedom of the beholder to imbue art with meaning through the act of interpretation, writing that "it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings" ("Critic" 1029). There is a tendency to see Wilde's statements about subjectivity as a proto-modernist or proto-postmodernist belief that individuals construct meaning through the purposed selection of cultural symbols (art and language). Lawrence Danson's argument that Wilde "deploys subjectivity, individuality and the autonomy of art" against objectivity, fails to address that Wilde argued for the subjectivity of the critic's response before the advent of modern and postmodern art (85). One cannot confidently say whether Wilde would have found modern or postmodern art beautiful, but it is also no stretch of the imagination to assume that he would have found most of it horrendous. It is one thing to envision Wilde championing subjective responses from La Pietà, but from a Pollock? Perhaps it was the only objective truth Wilde believed in, but a belief in objective beauty is the golden thread connecting all of Wilde's work. Furthermore, this objective beauty is not utilitarian and serves no end other than its own enjoyment. As we shall see, Tolkien's statements about art's inherent value compliment Wilde's critical stance.

Tolkien's aesthetic philosophy, as glimpsed in the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, echoes Wilde's preface to the revised edition of *Dorian Gray*. In Tolkien's foreword, he addresses the "many opinions or guesses" as to the "motives and meaning of [his] tale" (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] I.fwd.xxiii). In response to reviewers attempting to reduce his work to a thinly veiled allegory of World War II, Tolkien states: "As for any inner meaning or 'message', it has in the intention of the author none. It is neither allegorical nor topical" (LotR I.fwd.xxiii). Regardless of Tolkien's assertion, simple, chronological facts disprove any theories about *The Lord of the Rings* allegorizing the second World War, the earliest drafts of *The Lord of the Rings* being written well before Germany invaded Poland. Later in the foreword, Tolkien writes,

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of 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. (*LotR* I.fwd.xxiv)

Tolkien shares Wilde's belief that "the meaning of any beautiful, created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it as it was in his soul who wrought it" (Wilde, "Critic" 1029). There is more freedom in "applicability," where the reader can deduce an infinite number of meanings from a work of art. In this sense, both Wilde and Tolkien discouraged reductive interpretations of their art and never intended their works to have one-dimensional messages or uses. Tolkien has certainly been vindicated in this regard, and his books are still in print, in multiple editions, in practically every bookstore: a testament to applicability of his work. At this point, however, the careful reader may well be wondering what subjectivity and applicability have to do with Catholicism. Just as our exploration of Wilde's and Tolkien's ideas of the artist-critic did not find any definitive thread linking such ideas back to Catholic theology, so too are these ideas about the purpose of art not explicitly Catholic in origin. Two points must be made: 1) our analysis up to this point demonstrates that Wilde and Tolkien are in step with each other's literary theories, and 2) this is not the last word on their shared literary theories. Catholic theology more explicitly influences Wilde's and Tolkien's shared ideas about the artist's divine calling.

Wilde and Tolkien justify the artist's calling by speaking of artists as sub-creators who imitate God through the creation of imagined, secondary worlds. While Tolkien explicitly states the Christian foundation for this theory, Wilde implies the theological underpinnings of his ideas more subtly. For Tolkien, his creation of the languages, mythology, and history of Middle-earth were not merely the whimsical exercises of a daydreamer but were in fact his enactment of humanity's rightful duty as "sub-creator," that is, an artist creating a believable secondary world in imitation of God (Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories" [OFS] 59-61; Hein 182-85). Just as God made mankind in his image (Gen. 1:26), humanity creates images from a natural desire to imitate our heavenly Father (Birzer 39). Despite Wilde's troubled relationship with the Church, his own ideas about art reflected this Christian notion of sub-creation. In *The Duchess of Padua*, Guido remarks that love imbues life with the same divinity artists give their artwork, saying that "without love / Life is no better than the unhewn stone / Which in the quarry lies, before the sculptor / Has set the God within it" (Wilde, *Duchess* 598; see also Pearce, *Unmasking* 161). Guido's statement reflects the artist's divine commission to make life in imitation of God. Moreover, in "The

Critic as Artist," the character Ernest suggests that all artists are sub-creators when he states, "it is the function of Literature to create, from the rough material of actual existence, a new world" ("Critic" 1026). Not only does this statement anticipate Tolkien's efforts in the creation of Middle-earth, but we find here a terse summarization of the artist's divine calling, a calling justified by Christianity's emphasis on God's role as an artist-creator who made mankind made in His image.

While Tolkien calls the visionary artist a "sub-creator," Wilde calls the true artist a "liar," but both terms connote the same kind of imaginative influence. When Tolkien writes of his preference for history, "true or *feigned*," (emphasis mine) we find a potential verbal link back to Wilde's "The Decay of Lying," a dialogue between the characters Cyril and Vivian about the nature of art and the artist's calling to awaken humanity's sense of wonder, a sense dulled by modern life. With his typical flair for shock and awe, Wilde employs the word "liar" when he is describing a "sub-creator" (Fletcher xv; Tolkien, OFS 60). "[T]he aim of the liar," writes Wilde, "is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure," hardly the description of a villain ("Decay" 981). In the same dialogue, Wilde also defines "lying" as "the telling of beautiful untrue things," which he claims "is the proper aim of Art" (992). One can easily describe Tolkien's books as "beautiful untrue things" without disparaging them. Tolkien's *legendarium* and maps reimagine the real-world history and geography of Europe (*Letters* 320, #165), fulfilling the calling of the artist, who Wilde maintains "takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms" ("Decay" 978). Or, as Wilde states elsewhere: "The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it" ("Critic" 1023). The secondary world imagined by the artist, no matter how fantastical, can sometimes allow for an easier suspension of disbelief by the reader. By drawing readers into the imaginary world, they return to the real world with a newly awakened sense of wonder. "[W]hat we see, and how we see it," writes Wilde, "depends on the Arts that have influenced us" ("Decay" 986). In other words, Wilde asserts that one's view of the world is shaped by one's encounters with art, and these artistic encounters are then projected back onto the real world. Wilde argues that "Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life," and points to many instances in which our perception of a place or a people is shaped by art more than real encounters with said place or people. "At present," writes Wilde of Victorian London, "people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects" ("Decay" 986). Similarly, Tolkien writes of a phenomenon he calls "recovery," whereby one's encounters with a vivid secondary world help the reader "regain a clear view" of reality (OFS 67). "We should mee the centaur and the dragon," writes Tolkien, "and then perhaps suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep,

and dogs, and horses—and wolves” (67). For Tolkien, the artist helps the reader see the things of this world “as we are (or were) meant to see them,” for art frees the ordinary world “from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity” (67). In summary, although Wilde and Tolkien employ terms for the artist that connote vastly different meanings (“liar” and “sub-creator,” respectively), these terms denote the same imaginative power of the artist to awaken one’s sense of wonder and restore a true vision of the world, a vision that the God of the Bible intended humanity to have. Here, the Christian influence on Wilde’s and Tolkien’s theories of art shines through.

If Wilde’s and Tolkien’s ideas about sub-creation derive from a theological point that is broadly Christian (and not exclusively Catholic) then what right does this essay have to claim that Wilde’s and Tolkien’s imaginations are exclusively Catholic? Greeley is not the first thinker to claim that Catholics possess a unique aesthetic sensibility when compared to other Christian sects, he merely builds upon what thinkers like Hans Urs von Balthasar, Aidan Nichols, and David Tracy—among many others—have all expressed regarding the Catholic approach to art. What these thinkers agree on is that “historically, there has been a close connection between Catholicism and the arts and literature” as opposed to Protestantism, which has discouraged believers from engaging in art that lacks explicitly biblical content, themes, or theology (Sherry 463). The most obvious example of the divide between the Catholic and Protestant artistic sensibilities can be found in their places of worship. “Catholicism has favored the use of painting, both in murals and in altarpieces” where “the Protestant Reformers in the sixteenth century reacted against this practice” (Sherry 464). The old cathedrals of Europe, with their ornate spires, stained glass windows, and divine harmonics take one’s breath away. Within these structures, objects of everyday life—stone, glass, wood, bread, and wine—are transformed by the magic of art. By contrast, Protestant places of worship tend to be stark, sparsely furnished, and (especially today) consist mainly of bare, beige walls to “avoid the risk of idolatry” (Sherry 466). This fundamental divide stems from diverging views of creation. Catholics tend to emphasize Genesis 1:10 and 1:26 when thinking about creation, believing that the world, because it was made by a good God, still retains some element of its original goodness (Sherry 472). Catholics see “God’s presence in all things” (Carroll 130). Thus, “the Catholic imagination loves metaphors,” and Catholics stress “the ‘like’ of any comparison” (Greeley 9) as opposed to the Protestant view. Protestants emphasize Calvin’s theory of total human depravity in regard to creation and look to Exodus 20:4 as a justification for avoiding non-biblical artistic pursuits (Sherry 466, 472). Rather than seeing God in all things, the Protestant worldview “stresses the unlike” between matter and God (Greeley

9).⁶ Thus a Catholic view of art is more likely to explore the ways in which creation (mankind, nature, art) reflects God rather than the Protestant view of art which emphasizes the extent to which the created order has fallen away from (and is, therefore, unlike) God, leading to a trepidation about artistic endeavors that are not explicitly biblical in theme or content. If Wilde and Tolkien hold the artist in high regard, it is safe to assume that Catholicism, not Christianity in general, is influencing their ideas.

CATHOLIC FICTIONS

If we turn to Wilde's and Tolkien's fictional works, we find both authors imbuing common, everyday objects with metaphoric value through transformation and transubstantiation, further evidence of the Catholic sacramental vision. Greeley employs the term "sacramentality" to describe how Catholics see "created reality as a 'sacrament,' that is, a revelation of the presence of God" (Greeley 137, 1). The Catholic worldview sees magic in matter because it was spoken into existence—almost spell-like—by God. As stated above, "the Catholic imagination loves metaphors," and Catholics stress "the 'like' of any comparison" as opposed to a more Protestant worldview which "stresses the unlike" between matter and God, or the materialist view which sees creation not as a work of art but as a random assemblage of atoms and molecules (Greeley 9). Wilde demonstrates this divine transformation most clearly in his fairy tales. In "The Young King," the eponymous hero's "rough sheepskin coat," "rude shepherd's staff," and "circlet" of "wild briar" are symbols of Christ-like humility, though such items are seen by the king's materialist community as symbols of shame, scorn, and low status (231). Similarly, in "The Happy Prince," the enchanted statue, while loved for its gilding, is disregarded when the effigy becomes "dull and grey" through its acts of kindness (290). Additionally, if we turn to "The Selfish Giant," we see that the Giant fails to grasp the transcendent value of children, instead believing them to

⁶ For recent evidence of the Protestant fear of art and reliance on the Bible as the only way to perceive God, we can examine the recent fracas surrounding the television series, *The Chosen*. Many Christians argue that actor Jonathan Roumie's portrayal of Jesus on *The Chosen* is deceiving viewers into accepting a false portrayal of Jesus. On this issue, see Le Cras. Articles like Le Cras's reveal the extent to which Protestants of the Calvinistic bent stand nearer to Islam, with Islam's firm conviction that no image of God or the Prophet are permissible. This kind of skepticism evinces a Protestant mistrust of art and helps us better understand why writers like Greeley speak of a Catholic imagination, as opposed to a generically Christian imagination.

be a nuisance (297). In each case, what had before been deemed base, or worthless, or plain becomes transformed into something angelic, or precious, or beautiful. Firstly, in "The Young King," the sheepskin, rude staff, and briar crown are transformed after the hero "climb[s] up the steps of the altar" and stands "before the image of Christ" (233). At the altar, matter is transubstantiated as

sunbeams wove round [the king] a tissued robe that was fairer than the robe that had been fashioned for his pleasure. The dead staff blossomed, and bare lilies that were whiter than pearls. The dry thorn blossomed, and bare roses that were redder than rubies. Whiter than fine pearls were the lilies, and their stems were of bright silver. Redder than male rubies were the roses, and their leaves were of beaten gold. (233)

The transubstantiation of the Young King's attire at the altar is most obviously drawn from the Catholic mass, particularly the ritual whereby the priest sanctifies bread and wine, transforming them into the body and blood of Jesus. Secondly, in "The Happy Prince," God regards the "leaden heart" of the prince and his companion, the dead Swallow, as "the two most precious things in the city" (291). In paradise, the bird and statue are transformed, becoming like angels in the presence of God. Lastly, in the transformation of the little boy in "The Selfish Giant," we see an echo of the transformed human nature that Christ's incarnation brings about (300). Not only do Wilde's fairy tales awaken in us a sense of wonder, allowing us to return to the real world "refreshed," to use Tolkien's phrasing, so that we look upon children, and statues, and birds in a new light, but we are also given hope that we are more than clusters of atoms, that we too will enter paradise in new bodies to gaze in wonder at the beauty of Christ.

This Catholic tendency to find sacraments in ordinary objects finds expression in Tolkien's fiction as well. In "On Fairy-stories" Tolkien writes:

Faërie contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted. ("On Fairy-stories" [OFS] 32)

Tolkien's creative writing displays a similar knack for elevating matter through our experience of reading, what he calls "recovery" (OFS 67). As previously mentioned, Tolkien maintained that our experience with art (specifically fairy tales and mythopoetic literature) allows us to regain "a clear view" of the created world (67). Like Wilde, Tolkien masterfully transubstantiates bread and wine

into the *lembas* and *miruvor* of the Elves which have the power of nourishing more than ordinary bread and wine (*LotR* II.3.290, II.8.369)⁷. According to Tolkien's theory, our encounter with *lembas* and *miruvor* provides a deeper appreciation of bread and wine the next time we encounter them in ordinary life. Tolkien also fashions *lembas* and *miruvor* in a way that suggests the Catholic eucharist, where bread and wine are imbued with not just metaphoric value, but also substantive value. Thus, in the writings of Wilde and Tolkien, matter is saturated with divine significance. But matter is also corruptible, or in the words of Dorian Gray, "[e]ach of us has Heaven and Hell in him" (Wilde, *DG* 188).

The Catholic ability to see the world as metaphoric not only allows for creation to transform into the divine; the created order can also devolve into the demonic. We see this best pictured in the medieval Catholic cosmology of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, wherein Dante the pilgrim must observe those who fell away into the demonic inferno before he attains the beatific vision of the blessed souls in paradise. The Catholic cosmos holds both Heaven and Hell. In Wilde's writings, the corruption of matter into the demonic appears most prominently in "The Star-Child" and *Dorian Gray*. In the former work, the beautiful youth, through his cruelty, is cursed with "the face of a toad," and a body "scaled like an adder" ("The Star-Child" 278). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the portrait of Dorian begins as a "wonderful work of art," a "portrait of a young man of extraordinary personal beauty" (*DG* 64, 43). Dorian Gray fears the loss of his beauty, while the painting shall forever bear an image of his youth. Gray prays that his role could be reversed with the painting, that he would be "always young," and the picture "grow old" (*DG* 65-66). His wish is granted, and Dorian embarks upon a pursuit of shallow beauty, what Guy Willoughby dubs a "limited aestheticism" (74). Gray's pursuit of this shallow beauty devolves into a "madness for pleasure," and though he remains forever young, his portrait must "bear the burden of his sin," becoming slowly transformed into a "hideous face" with each successive evil deed that Dorian commits (*DG* 64, 173, 186). If divine transformations in stories help readers return to the world refreshed, these demonic transformations help us return with greater caution for our actions.

Tolkien's Gollum bears striking similarities to Wilde's Gray and the Star-Child.⁸ Before his corruption, Gollum came from a family of "high repute" (*LotR* I.2.53). But the presence of the magic One Ring corrupts Gollum, who subsequently murders his friend Déagol, just as Dorian murders his friend, Basil Halward (*LotR* I.2.53). As rumors of Gollum's cruelties grow, like the "hideous

⁷ See also Birzer, J.R.R. *Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth* 63-64.

⁸ For a more detailed analysis of these parallels, see Waskovitch 20-21.

things" that are rumored of Dorian, Gollum's community curses and expels him (DG 181; *LotR* I.2.54). The language of Gollum's expulsion echoes the description of how the Star-Child's community "dave him away" at the sight of his hideous features, the outward manifestation of his corrupted heart ("The Star-Child" 279). Once again, Wilde and Tolkien not only use their stories to convey the spiritual realities of Catholic belief, they also use material objects as metaphors for sin: Dorian's painting and Gollum's body, respectively. Dorian declares that the picture is "the face of [his] soul," its deformed appearance representative of his corrupted nature, just as Gollum's physical appearance is twisted due to his possession of the evil Ring (DG 188; Waskovitch 20). These transformations bear witness to the Catholic belief that creation, while "not evil in itself," can "turn demonic" through a corrupted will (Greeley 61).

CATHOLIC POLITICAL PHILOSOPHIES

After discussing Catholics' sacramental vision, Greeley embarks upon the stormy seas of politics, presenting "community and hierarchy" as two other facets of the Catholic imagination. We shall now explore how this Catholic tendency to love one's neighbor whilst maintaining traditional social hierarchies appears in the writings of Wilde and Tolkien, braving the fraught waters of politics that Greeley manages to traverse. The author hopes his readers will breathe a sigh of relief: this essay does not seek to assume how either Wilde or Tolkien would vote in the context of twenty-first century American or British politics. Nor is it the author's intention to speak of politics in a reductive, "Tolkien voted for so-and-so politician in his day" manner. As we shall see in our discussion below, this portion of the study seeks to elucidate how the Catholic political principles outlined in Greeley's study appear in the writings of Wilde and Tolkien in the broadest possible sense. Any individual, should one have the good fortune of getting to know them on a deep and personal level, will hold opinions and ideas about politics that avoid easy classification within our present political system. It is the same with Wilde and Tolkien. The knee-jerk assumption, from the standpoint of our present-day political climate, is to see Wilde's homosexuality, his "unconventional private life," and his essay on socialism as evidence for far-left leanings (Pearce, *Unmasking* 127). But in true Wildean fashion, much of his life and work throws this idea into confusion. In Tolkien's case, his abiding Catholic faith, thoughts on women in the workplace (*Letters* 69, #43), and opinions regarding the Spanish Civil War (*Letters* 136, #83) make him an easy target for being branded a poster child for far-right fascism.⁹ Others, like Ewan Cameron, seek to demonstrate that Tolkien was a fellow

⁹ See Hauschild.

traveler with leftist thinkers.¹⁰ As we shall see, Catholic ideas allowed Wilde and Tolkien to marry two seemingly paradoxical beliefs: the belief that hierarchy, monarchy, and authority are positive, mythic symbols of order and beauty; and that freedom from oppression must be fought for, though not at the risk of mob violence and iconoclasm.

According to Greeley, Catholics both tend to the wellbeing of their neighbors while ardently defending the traditions and structure of their Church. In other words, they form tight-knit communities located around their parish. The Protestant worldview, on the other hand, emphasizes political and spiritual individualism and is also distrustful of the strict formality of Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox. Greeley maintains that Catholics are both more conscious of the welfare of their neighbors than Protestants (a trait one tends to associate with left-leaning politics, however true this assessment) and more traditional than Protestants (traditionalism being most often associated with the Right). Greeley also notes that while Catholics are communalists, they also believe in well-ordered communities with “leadership organized in ascending layers of authority and power” (Greeley 137). Taking the model of the Church itself, with its hierarchy of leaders ranging from the Pope down to the local parish priest, the Catholic political worldview can best be characterized as an “organized community of organized communities” (142). Greeley is careful to mention that this structure is frowned upon by both “centralizing capitalism” and “centralized socialism,” a fitting remark considering both Wilde’s and Tolkien’s political philosophies (142). Both authors champion freedom but not at the cost of our hallowed traditions.

Beginning with Wilde, whose biography would most likely lead one to classify him as a Leftist, we soon find that he is anything but a radical Bolshevik. In “The Soul of Man Under Socialism,” Wilde calls for socialist economic reforms with sober realism regarding political revolutions, stating that if “Socialism is Authoritarian [...] then the last state of man will be worse than the first” (“Soul” 21). As Danson points out, Wilde’s socialism has “little in common with classical Marxism,” as its intended purpose is to “lead to Individualism” rather than to a collectivist state (Danson 93; Wilde, “Soul” 20). Instead of advocating for the romanticized community of united workers that Marx envisioned, Wilde imagines a utopia where individuals are freed from the burden of looking after their neighbor, where each soul is given the space and time to pursue artistic fulfillment. Wilde’s essay reads more like an anarchist’s

¹⁰ Cameron seeks to demonstrate how Tolkien’s political beliefs align with those of “socialist humanist” E.P. Thompson (159).. This article can be misleading if one takes Thompson’s romanticized leftist beliefs as “Leftism” *par excellence*, without regard for the darker side of leftist political movements in history that Tolkien opposed (persecution of Christians, for example).

manifesto than a call for a brotherhood of revolutionaries. In fact, Wilde takes a more Orwellian approach to his essay, readily admitting that any form of government can become totalitarian—not simply monarchies and dictatorships. Even democracy, Wilde reminds us, can become “simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people” (“Soul” 30). Wilde’s politics stem from the position of the artist, where the worst evil is censorship, “whenever a community or a powerful section of a community, or a government of any kind, attempts to dictate to the artist what he is to do” (34). Still, there is a tendency to look beyond the words of this essay and see Wilde’s “flouting of Victorian conventions” in life as indicative of a far-left stance, or that Wilde’s homosexuality puts him in opposition to Christianity, Catholicism, or traditional Western mores (Pearce, *Unmasking* 139). Danson, for example, reads Wilde’s rejection of Victorian morality as a “precursor of ideas that reappear [...] in modern and postmodern theory,” asserting that Wilde rejects “transcendent, objective truth, whether it goes by the name of ‘history’, ‘culture’ or ‘nature’” (81). But Danson mistakes the accepted social customs of the Victorian era for universal, objective truth. A more precise way of defining the “objective truth” Wilde allegedly rejects is to use Wilde’s own phrase, “Public Opinion” (“Soul” 42). According to Wilde, Public Opinion represents transitory social customs “dictating to the artist the form which he is to use, the mode in which he is to use it, and the materials with which he is to work” (42). In the context of Wilde’s puritanical Victorian culture, it is easy to laud his rejection of Public Opinion as a battle cry for all “dissident or marginalized people,” as Danson suggests (94). But as Angus Fletcher notes, Wilde’s worldview rejects “*all* kinds of political correctness,” not merely stuffy Victorian morality (xv, emphasis mine). If the dominant Public Opinion should suddenly become the opinion of those who were formerly marginalized, Wilde would still reject their censorship. Although Wilde may be sympathetic toward socialist causes, he does not wear rose-colored lenses, especially when considering the effects that revolutions can have on the free spirit of the artist.

A look at Wilde’s poetry affirms his desire for progressive social reform without destroying Western culture’s finest achievements and traditions. Read together, “Libertatis Sacra Fames” and “Sonnet to Liberty” embody this seemingly paradoxical political standpoint. Wilde desires justice, as his sonnet attests, and revolutionaries with their “reigns of Terror” and their “great Anarchies, / Mirror [Wilde’s] wildest passions like the sea” (“Sonnet to Liberty” [“Sonnet”] 709). He dubs the revolutionaries “Christs” and admits “I am with them, in some things” (ibid.). Breaking the formal rules of sonnets, Wilde places his “turn” in the last three words of the poem: “in some things.” These words suggest a sober attitude toward revolution, suggesting that Wilde will not blindly follow the whim of radicals who seek to merely burn down civilization.

"*Libertatis Sacra Fames*" expands on this notion. Wilde, while "nurtured in democracy / And liking best that state republican," admits that in the face of "clamorous demagogues" who "betray / Our freedom with the kiss of anarchy" he prefers "the rule of One" ("*Libertatis Sacra Fames*" ["*Libertatis*"] 715). He would rather live in an ordered monarchy than a liberated wasteland. Wilde does not "love them [...] whose hands profane" hallowed relics and "Plant the red flag upon the piled-up street / For no right cause" (ibid.). Such revolutionaries wreak havoc for the sake of wreaking havoc, and Wilde wants nothing to do with them. If the revolutionaries have no transcendent purpose, then under their "ignorant reign" all "Arts, Culture, Reverence, Honour [...]" fade, / Save Treason and the dagger of her trade" (ibid.). We see, then, that Wilde—homosexual, hedonist, and flouter of conventions though he was—yearns for social reforms within the framework of the Western tradition. As Pearce puts it, "Wilde is popularly perceived as an iconoclast when, artistically and aesthetically speaking, he was the very opposite" (Pearce, *Unmasking* 127). Wilde's essay on socialism and his poems on liberty also evince Greeley's statement that "[t]he liberal/conservative paradigm cannot cope with the Catholic propensity to support liberal policies on government intervention and egalitarianism and conservative policies in response to crime" (130). Wilde welcomes broadened horizons of personal liberty, but not at the cost of destroying hallowed traditions. He welcomes change by peace, not by force or violence.

Tolkien not only exemplifies this Catholic political outlook but helps one better understand Wilde's position, particularly those moments where Wilde seems to advocate for anarchy. In a letter to his son, Christopher, dated 29 November 1943, Tolkien writes: "My political opinions lean more and more to Anarchy (philosophically understood, meaning abolition of control not whiskered men with bombs)—or to 'unconstitutional' Monarchy" (*Letters* 90, #52). We see here echoes of Wilde's attitude in "*Soul of Man*," the liberated individual, free of all authoritarian control. In a later letter, Tolkien writes that he would "have hated the Roman Empire in its day" but "remained a patriotic Roman citizen" (*Letters* 128, #77). Like Wilde, Tolkien values his cultural heritage despite the knowledge of his ancestors' injustices. Such injustices should be rejected, but not at the expense of the entire culture; the baby should not be thrown out with the bath water. Additionally—and somewhat confusingly—Wilde and Tolkien seem to vacillate between advocating for anarchy and supporting monarchy. To understand how both men could prefer "the rule of One" over radical liberation, we can look to their Catholic backgrounds. Catholics, "while alert to the abuse of authority, tends to feel that authority in itself is not evil and that order in a community is essential," writes Greeley (141). For Wilde and Tolkien, monarchy is a positive mythic symbol representative of

order, an essential attribute of beauty. Justice must be sought, but not at the risk of devolving into mob chaos or Godless totalitarianism.

CATHOLIC EUCATASTROPHES

Greeley ends his study with an analysis of the Catholic belief in “salvation through sadness and the sacrament of hope,” a prominent theme in the writings of both Wilde and Tolkien (Greeley 161). During Wilde’s imprisonment, while penning “De Profundis,” he realizes that “[s]uffering [...] is the only means by which we become conscious of existing” (“De Profundis” 112-13). In true Catholic fashion, no aspect of reality is without transcendent meaning, “suffering least of all” (152). Suffering is “a revelation,” and Wilde feels the purpose of his letter is to teach Lord Alfred Douglas—and by extension us—“the meaning of sorrow and its beauty” (160, 211). But Wilde’s art reflected this deeper understanding of the meaning of sorrow long before his imprisonment. The “old and evil-visaged man” who enslaves the Star-Child and abuses him is the instrument through which the Star-Child receives his humility and redemption (“Star-Child” 280-84). Similarly, the shallow aestheticism that Dorian Gray inherits from Henry Wotton, the kind that ignores “life’s sores,” is painted as corrupting and harmful to Dorian, who could not see the sacramental value of life’s hardships (*DG* 79). Even before he penned “De Profundis,” Wilde’s art reveals his inherently Catholic understanding that suffering, as much as, if not more than, pleasure, provides transcendent meaning.

To help his readers understand the strange unity between suffering and joy in Catholic thought, Tolkien coined the phrase “eucatastrophe,” meaning the sudden change from bad to good (OFS 75). Although he mainly employs eucatastrophe to describe the “happy endings” essential to all fairy tales, Tolkien stresses that eucatastrophe “does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure,” for,

the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; [the eucatastrophe] denies [...] universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. (OFS 75)

Tolkien illustrates his own literary technique in the conclusion to *The Lord of the Rings* when all hope seems lost. The wicked Gollum has just taken the ring for himself, and the Hobbit heroes appear to have failed. But then—as Gollum gloats, his foot slips off the precipice, he plummets into the fires Mount Doom whilst holding the ring, and victory is achieved through an apparent blunder (*LotR* VI.3.946). Greif has transformed into joy. But through such a eucatastrophe, Tolkien does not deny that pain and suffering do not have their

lingering effects. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo has been so “deeply hurt” that he cannot remain in the world even after victory and peace have been achieved (*LotR* VI.9.1029). An equally keen awareness of the value of suffering runs through Wilde’s fairy tales, especially in “The Selfish Giant,” “The Happy Prince,” and “The Nightingale and the Rose.” Firstly, in “The Selfish Giant,” the little boy’s wounds, that so incense the Giant, are “the wounds of Love,” Christ’s redemptive wounds (300). Additionally, in “The Happy Prince,” The Swallow bestows a final kiss upon the enchanted statue of the Prince before dying, and both take joy in their suffering (290). And finally, in “The Nightingale and the Rose,” the heroic songbird gives up her life for “the Love that is perfected by Death” (295). In the Nightingale’s ignored sacrifice, one is reminded of the failure by the community of Shire Hobbits to acknowledge Frodo’s sacrifice. Frodo’s companion, Sam, is “pained to notice how little honour [Frodo] had in his own country. Few people knew or wanted to know about his deeds and adventures” (*LotR* VI.9.1025). In these fictional instances of suffering, sacrifice, and redemption, Wilde and Tolkien display their profound understanding of Jesus’s passion.

While Jesus appears in many of Wilde’s writings, he finds his most Catholic expression in “De Profundis.” There, Wilde describes Christ as the true artist whose life is a work of art incarnate, contact with him inspiring a love of beauty and romance (“De Profundis” 165-75). Wilde, like Plato, understood that “every work of art is the conversion of an idea into an image” and that some of these images are more real than others. The personhood of Christ is the ultimate actualization of an artistic ideal, the opening lines of the Gospel of John implying that the author spoke himself into reality (172). In fulfilling the “dream of the Virgilian poet” and “the signs noted by Isaiah,” Christ actualized all the mythic symbols of the Western world that preceded him (172). Wilde believed that “an idea is of no value till it becomes incarnate and is made an image,” so Christ “made of himself the image of the Man of Sorrows,” an archetype recurrent in myth (171). Through Jesus, God was archetype incarnate. Metaphor made man. Art become life.

Tolkien writes of Christ in almost the same terms. “The Gospels contain a fairy-story,” writes Tolkien, “or a story of a larger kind which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories” (OFS 78). He describes the Gospels as “artistic,” in and of themselves, not in any artificial sense (78). “But,” adds Tolkien, “this story has entered History and the primary world. [...] The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history” (78). For Tolkien, the Gospels contain all the elements of a compelling story, especially the sudden turn to joy at the end, at the brink of doom, when all hope seems lost and Christ suffers on the cross. But this story is not merely compelling, “it is true” (78). And because of this “Art has

been verified. God is the Lord, of angels, and of men—and of elves. Legend and History have met and fused” (78). Art has become life.

CONCLUSION: CATHOLIC IMAGINATIONS

Wilde and Tolkien shared a Catholic vision of the world, one that sees artistic creation as imitative of God; that sees our ordinary world as enchanted; that sees community as both loving and well-ordered by traditional values; that sees suffering as a sacrament and Christ as the ultimate incarnation of beauty. The connection between these famed British authors reveals the deeply religious underpinnings of the fantasy genre, a conjecture that may be as heretical as mentioning Wilde and Tolkien in the same breath, so different as their lives were. Nonetheless, their vastly different lifestyles should not detract from the kindred spirit glimpsed through their words, like sunlight pouring in through stained glass windows of different design. As stated before, the old Catholic cathedrals provide a fitting analogy for the Catholic imagination. In places like Chartres and Notre Dame, ordinary stone is enchanted under the sculptor’s hand, and plain bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ through the priest’s blessing. Within these structures, the walls resound with the music of heaven, and our eyes cannot help but lift upward to the vaulted ceiling, painted with the stars of heaven. Such places are temples to not only the Holy Trinity, but the Platonic trinity of truth, goodness, and beauty. And of these three, the Catholic imagination pays homage to beauty most of all. On the surface, Wilde and Tolkien would appear to have disagreed over a great many things, but perhaps not over the importance of beauty. When compared, their work reveals the extent of their souls’ fellowship on the pilgrimage to Paradise.

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and Robin Anne Reid



Join us for an online conference that focuses on intersectional feminist approaches to women and gender in fantasy, science fiction, speculative fiction, or other mythopoeic work and that will honor the first anthology on women and Tolkien, *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J.R.R. Tolkien* (2015), edited by Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie A. Donovan.

Intersectionality, or intersectional approaches, developed out of research and scholarship by Black women, highlighting how aspects of identity (such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or class) overlap and intersect. Since then, feminist scholars in a number of disciplines, including literary studies, have adapted intersectionality in their work.