

Alicia Matz and Maciej Paprocki (Eds.)

There and Back Again: Tolkien and the Greco-Roman World



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Contents

PREFACE

Alicia Matz & Maciej Paprocki There and Back Again: Tolkien and Greco-Roman Antiquity. Preface _____	i
--	---

ARTICLES

Marco Cristini The Fall of Two Cities: Troy and Gondolin _____	1
Giuseppe Pezzini (Classical) Narratives of Decline in Tolkien: Renewal, Accommodation, Focalisation _____	25
Elena Sofia Capra “Orfeo Out of Care”. The Reception of the Classical Myth of Orpheus from <i>Sir Orfeo</i> to Tolkien _____	52
Kevin Kambo Platonic Tripartition and the Peoples of Middle-Earth _____	90
Charles W. Oughton Roman Heroes at Helm’s Deep? Livy, Macaulay, and Tolkien on the Horatius Cocles Episode _____	123
Christopher Chinn & Phoebe Thompson Tolkien’s Ithilien and the Landscape of the Ancient Mediterranean _____	163

Alicia Matz <i>Quis enim laesos impune putaret esse deos?:</i> Ents, Sacred Groves, and the Cost of Desecration _____	204
Raf Praet The Throne of the King. The Throne Room in Minas Tirith and Late Antique Ruler Ideology _____	232
Kathryn H. Stutz G. B. Smith's "Elzevir Cicero" and the Construction of Queer Immortality in Tolkien's Mythopoeia _____	253
Tony Keen Legolas in Troy. The influence of Peter Jackson's <i>Lord of the Rings</i> movies on cinematic portrayals of ancient Greece and Rome _____	285

BOOK REVIEWS

Christian Beck Review of Hamish Williams: Tolkien and the Classical World _____	314
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ALICIA MATZ & MACIEJ PAPROCKI

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There and Back Again: Tolkien and Greco-Roman Antiquity

Preface

Abstract The following introduction sketches the *status quaestionis* of the research on the influence of Greco-Roman antiquity on the works of Tolkien and provides details about the volume's theoretical impetus and its broad themes. The editors discuss Tolkien's complicated and indirect relationship with classical models, underscoring certain emergent themes in this volume's contributions, such as decline, multifocal reception and relationship with nature.

Keywords Tolkien, classical reception

THERE AND BACK AGAIN: TOLKIEN BETWEEN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY AND THE MIDDLE AGES

When one thinks of Tolkien, the first thing that comes to mind is probably not the ancient Greco-Roman world. Although Tolkien received a thorough classical education, cherished Latin poems, and started his university studies with classical philology, he soon turned to Anglo-Saxon literature and Norse mythology. His passion for the Anglo-Norse legendarium manifests clearly in his Middle-earth legendarium, so much so that when scholars of other ancient cultures argue for Tolkien being influenced by antiquity, they are often met with rebuttals such as “But Tolkien was a medievalist!”. However, Tolkien’s predilection for the Germanic cultural stratum does not mean other influences cannot be found lurking in the depths, especially if one considers how deeply and passionately Tolkien engaged with Roman poems. In fact, we believe that there is still much to be said about Tolkien’s classical inspirations – the conviction that gave powerful impetus to us as we were working on this journal issue.

STATUS QUAESTIONIS

The premise of this collection of papers is that Tolkien’s early work with Greco-Roman antiquity has had more influence on his Middle-earth than previously agreed upon. We have chosen to focus on ancient Greece and Rome as these cultures stand at the center of our research interests. Significantly, Greco-Roman reception in Tolkien is becoming an increasingly popular topic of scholarly investigation. For a long time, research on this topic was published as individual articles in Tolkien-specific journals such as *Tolkien Studies*, *Mythlore*, and *Mallorn*. Examples include Pace (1979), Morse (1980), Greenman (1988, 1992), Reckford (1988), Houghton (1995), Flieger (2004), Moreno (2005, 2007), Obertino (2006), Prozesky (2006), Smith (2007), Manni (2009), Markos (2009), Branchaw (2010), Bruce (2012), Livingston (2013), Testi (2013), Lynch (2018), and Williams (2020). What we listed above is by no means an exhaustive list of articles.

Beyond journal articles, certain authors produced individual contributions on Tolkien’s debt to the classical antiquity and published them in collected volumes, although the number of these chapters is considerably smaller than that of journal articles on the same topic. Reckford (1974) published a chapter in *Perspectives of Roman Poetry: A Classics Symposium*; Bartoňková (2008) appears in

Sborník Prací Filosofické Fakulty Brněnské University: Rada archaeologicko-klassická; Piętka (2011) was published in *Symbolae Philologorum Posnanensium Graecae et Latinae*; Delattre (2011) has a chapter in *Présence du roman grec et latin: actes du colloque tenu à Clermont-Ferrand*; and Stevens (2017) has a chapter in the edited volume *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy*. There are also three chapters on Tolkien and authors from antiquity in Arduini, Canzonieri, and Testi (2019), *Tolkien and the Classics*.

To wrap up this brief *status quaestionis*, it seems pertinent to briefly examine longer works dedicated solely to Tolkien and Greco-Roman antiquity, as this special edition now counts as part of that list. The earliest is Morse's (1986) *Evo-cation of Virgil in Tolkien's Art: Geritol for the Classics*, which argues that "both Virgil and Tolkien present myth as an aspect of a historical continuum. For them, myth does not seem to represent a falsehood, but rather it seems to narrate a record of experience from which man learns."¹ Kohns's and Sideri's (2009) *Mythos Atlantis: Texte von Platon bis J. R. R. Tolkien* examines literary depictions of Atlantis from Plato to Tolkien's Númenor. In a similar vein, Delattre's (2009) *Le cycle de l'anneau: de Minos à Tolkien* examines rings and ring cycles from the myth of Minos up to Tolkien. However, the most recent addition to the Tolkien reception studies family is Williams's (2021) *Tolkien and the Classical World*. We will not go into too much detail on this volume in this introduction as this special edition includes its review. This brief examination shows that, despite the continuing efflorescence of works about the influence of Greco-Roman antiquity on the works of Tolkien, scholars still find novel ways to engage with the Tolkienian corpus. The contributions featured in this issue show that this avenue of research continues to inspire and elucidate.

THEMES OF THE VOLUME

When putting together the pieces that appear in this volume, the guest editors had only one specific request of the authors – to engage with reception theory. Our relationship with the theoretical underpinnings of classical reception is best expressed by the following quote by Lorna Hardwick:

¹ Morse (1986), vii–viii.

“[B]ecause reception is concerned with the relationship between ancient and modern texts and contexts, as well as with those separated by time within antiquity, it has implications for the critical analysis of both. It used sometimes to be said that reception studies only yield insights into the receiving society. Of course they do this, but they also focus critical attention back towards the ancient source and sometimes frame new questions or retrieve aspects of the source which have been marginalized or forgotten.”²

Since we felt that a strong grounding in reception theory was vital to articulating Tolkien’s relationship with Greco-Roman antiquity, we asked each author to read selections from works by Hardwick (2003) and Keen (2006, 2016). The proposed readings offer a constructive methodological matrix within which to concretize “the ways in which Greek and Roman material has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, rewritten, re-imaged and represented” by Tolkien.³ Our contributors engaged with Hardwick’s and Keen’s typologies of classical reception to define what sort of relationship exists between their chosen work(s) of Tolkien and its classical antecedents. By grounding their research in theory, the contributors to this issue perceptively reevaluated Tolkien’s debt to the classical antiquity with several broader themes emerging across a range of papers.

One such emergent theme is that of decline, a perennial subject of Greco-Roman antiquity that captivated Tolkien to such a degree that it arguably became Middle-earth’s *Leitmotiv*. Cristini’s and Pezzini’s contributions both speak of tangible decline reflected in the people and social structures of Middle-earth, while Matz shows how this decline has led to a loss of knowledge about Middle-earth’s non-human inhabitants within Tolkien’s works.

Another theme that spans several entries in this issue is diffuse, multistage reception. Contributors to the issue demonstrated that Tolkien often drew upon the classical models via late antique and medieval intermediaries. Capra’s paper traces Tolkien’s Orphic substratum, percolating through the medieval *Sir Orfeo*, whereas Praet’s contribution demonstrates that the throne room of Minas Tirith manifests its classical heritage through the medium of Byzantium. In addition, Keen’s entry examines an example of recursive reception with cinematic portrayals of Middle-earth shaping subsequent film representations of classical antiquity.

2 Hardwick (2003) 4.

3 Hardwick & Stray (2008) 1.

Other contributions touch upon the natural world, famously beloved and lovingly described by Tolkien. Matz traces the intertextual fates of Tolkien's Ents, the animated shepherds of trees who watched over nature and acted against those who dared to harm it. In turn, Chinn and Thompson draw intertextual parallels between Tolkien's wonderland of Ithilien and Augustan depictions of supernaturally fertile flora.

THE ARRANGEMENT OF PAPERS

The pieces in this volume are arranged chronologically in accordance with stages of the history of Middle-earth they refer to. The two pieces that do not speak specifically about *The Lord of the Rings* and the history of Middle-earth (Stutz and Keen) found their place at the end of the issue.

There are three pieces which examine the influence of Greco-Roman antiquity on the ancient history of Middle-earth, long before the events of *The Lord of the Rings*. Marco Cristini builds with in "The Fall of Two Cities. Troy and Gondolin," upon the previous research of Greenman (1992) and Bruce (2012) to examine how Gondolin's last day in 'The Fall of Gondolin' is modeled on the fall of Troy in Aeneid Book 2. Giuseppe Pezzini shows in "(Classical) Narratives of Decline in Tolkien. Renewal, Accommodation, Focalisation" how Tolkien's conception of history as a "long defeat"⁴ constitutes the pivotal myth of Middle-earth, making comparisons to narratives of decline in Hesiod, Homer, Plato, and Vergil. Elena Sofia Capra, in "Orfeo out of Care. The Reception of the Classical Myth of Orpheus from Sir Orfeo to Tolkien," looks at the reception of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in the story of Beren and Lúthien, filtered through the medieval Sir Orfeo, a text which Tolkien both translated and took inspiration from.

Moving on to *The Lord of the Rings*, we start with Kevin Kambo's "Platonic Tripartation and the People of Middle Earth." Kambo argues that the races of Middle-earth are inspired by Plato's conception of the tripartite soul from the *Republic*, linking the dwarves with Plato's artisans, humans with the auxiliaries who seek honor, and the elves with the guardians. Next is Charles Oughton's "Roman Heroes at Helm's Deep?". Oughton shows how Tolkien's knowledge of Macaulay's "Horatius" provides compelling parallels between Aragorn's actions

⁴ Tolkien (*Letters* 195) 255.

at Helm's Deep and Horatius's on the bridge. Christopher Chinn and Phoebe Thompson look at the intertextual relationship between Ithilien and literature and art from Augustan Rome that show natural 'superbloom' scenes, in "Tolkien's Ithilien and the Landscape of the Ancient Mediterranean". "*Quis enim laesos impune putaret esse deos?* Ents, Sacred Groves and the Cost of Desecration" by Matz argues that there are illuminating correspondences between Roman conceptions of sacred trees and Tolkien's depiction of the Ents, and goes on to show that, in his ambitious deforestation of Fangorn, Saruman can be read as an analogue to Caesar as depicted in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. Raf Praet argues in "The Throne Room in Minas Tirith an Late Antique Ruler Ideology" that the description of the throne room in Minas Tirith is indebted to how Byzantine throne rooms were depicted, and argues that Tolkien draws this parallel in order to emphasize correspondences between *The Return of the King* and Christ's restoration of a fallen world.

Last but not least, we have two pieces that do not fall within Middle-earth but deal with broader themes of Tolkien's oeuvre. Kathryn Stutz argues in "G. B. Smith's 'Elzevir Cicero' and the Construction of Queer Immortality in Tolkien's Mythopoeia" that the engagement with the ancient world found in Geoffrey Bache Smith's collected poems, published posthumously by Tolkien himself, influenced Tolkien's own mythmaking. The final paper by Antony Keen, "Legolas in Troy. The Influence of Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings movies on cinematic portrayals of Greece and Rome," shows how the cinematography and casting of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* impacted the movies set in the ancient world that came after them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Alicia and Maciej, the guest co-editors of this special edition of *thersites*, would like to thank the editors of *thersites* for giving us a venue to present this research as well as the many peer reviewers who read each of the pieces. We would also like to thank our contributors and hope you, the reader, enjoy this volume.

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS VOLUME

Every scholarly collection on Tolkieniana will attempt to impose some order on Tolkien's literary efflorescence: what we propose below is a shorthand referencing system for the most popular and widely quoted texts in this issue. Some of the contributors have opted to use other editions than those listed below. In such cases, abbreviations remain the same, but bibliographies appended to their contributions will specify the edition used.

- BLT*₁ *The Book of Lost Tales, Part One*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London 1983/Boston 1984) (= *The History of Middle-earth* 1).
- BLT*₂ *The Book of Lost Tales, Part Two*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1984) (= *The History of Middle-earth* 2).
- FG* *The Fall of Gondolin*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (Boston 2018).
- FR* *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London 1954).
- GPO* *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, and Sir Orfeo*, translated by J.R.R. Tolkien (London 1975).
- HBBS* 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son,' (London 1953) 1–18.
- HME* *The History of Middle-earth*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London 1983–1996).
- Hobbit* *The Hobbit* (First edition = London 1937; second edition = London 1951; 50th anniversary edition = Boston 1987).
- LB* *The Lays of Beleriand*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1985) (= *The History of Middle-earth* 3).
- Letters* *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, edited by Humphrey Carpenter, with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1981).
- LotR* *The Lord of the Rings*, 50th anniversary edition (Boston 2004).
- LR* *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1987) (= *The History of Middle-earth* 5).
- MC* *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London 1983/Boston 1984).
- MR* *Morgoth's Ring*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1993) (= *The History of Middle-earth* 10).
- Myth* 'Mythopoeia,' first published in *Tree and Leaf*, second edition (London 1988/Boston 1989).
- OFS* 'On Fairy-Stories,' *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (London 1947) 38–89.

- PS *Poems and Stories* (London 1980/Boston 1994).
RK *The Return of the King* (London 1955).
Sil *The Silmarillion* (London 2013).
SME *The Shaping of Middle-earth*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1986) (= *The History of Middle-earth* 4).
ST *The Story of Kullervo*, edited by Verlyn Flieger (London 2015).
TNoME *The Nature of Middle-earth*, edited by Carl F. Hostetter (London/Dublin 2021).
TOFS *Tolkien On Fairy-Stories*, edited by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (London 2008).
TT *The Two Towers* (London 1954).
UT *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1980).
WR *The War of the Ring*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (London/Boston 1990) (= *The History of Middle-earth* 8).

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The Fall of Two Cities: Troy and Gondolin

Abstract Vergil was a fundamental source of inspiration for Tolkien, not only when writing the *Lord of the Rings*, but also at the beginning of his “world-building”. *The Fall of Gondolin*, written in 1916, was modeled upon the *Aeneid*, whose second book shares many similarities with the description of Gondolin’s last day. For instance, the attack that seals the fate of the city takes place during a feast in both works, whereas both protagonists (Aeneas and Tuor) leave wives and sons to fight the enemy and witness deaths of their kings (Priam/Turgon). Other analogies include the *topos* of the fall of the tallest tower of the city as well as the scenes of Creusa/Idril clasping the knees of her husband and begging him not to go back to the battle. Tolkien chose the *Aeneid* as his main model because, in his opinion, the *Aeneid* and *The Fall of Gondolin* evoked the air of antiquity and melancholy. Vergil’s nostalgia for a “lost world” conveyed in the *Aeneid* greatly resembles the nostalgia pervading both Tolkien’s writing and life.

Keywords Tolkien, Reception of Vergil, *Aeneid*, Troy, Gondolin

1. INTRODUCTION

Middle-earth was born in a hospital bed shortly after the Battle of the Somme when a sick signaling officer of the 11th Lancashire Fusiliers, who had achieved First Class Honours in English at Oxford, wrote about the fall of an imaginary city after an epic battle between its besiegers and the besieged.¹ The officer's name was John Ronald Reuel Tolkien and his tale, hastily drafted in pencil in two school exercise books, marked the beginning of one of the most famous fictional universes of the twentieth century.²

The plot of Tolkien's first story, especially as far as its end is concerned, sounds familiar to all classicists: a famous city is suddenly attacked by an enemy, and falls after a siege, but a handful of inhabitants manage to flee, while their leader and his descendants found town(s) and kingdom(s) bound to rule over most of the (Middle-)Earth. In spite of these evident analogies with Troy and the fate of its exiles, the relationship between the *Aeneid* and *The Fall of Gondolin* has received little attention by scholars, who prefer to focus on Vergilian echoes in the *Lord of the Rings*. The few who have investigated this topic usually point out a only little parallels and similarities without carrying out a systematic study of the role that Vergil played at the dawn of Tolkien's mythology: they have not pondered over the reason why a young man who started his university career by reading Classics but then devoted himself wholeheartedly to Old English and Comparative Philology decided to shape his first story after the second book of the *Aeneid*. The present paper will cast some light on these issues as well as address a few aspects of Tolkien's literary *Weltanschauung*.

Some points of methodology are now necessary. Source criticism in Tolkien's writings (and indeed in the works of every ancient and modern author) requires a few steps in order to obtain reliable and meaningful results. As Jason Fisher has indicated, this process can be summarized by three questions: "Could Tolkien have known a source? And assuming he could have known it, and did indeed use

1 The final version of this paper was prepared during my time as a research fellow at the DFG-Kollegforschergruppe, Migration und Mobilität in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter at the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen. I would like to thank Mischa Meier, Steffen Patzold, and Sebastian Schmidt-Hofner for inviting me to participate. I am grateful to anonymous reviewers of *Thersites* for their useful comments.

2 The most complete biography of Tolkien is still Carpenter (2000), especially 17–106 for his life up to 1918. The years of the First World War are covered in detail by Garth (2003) who offers important chronological information.

it, what did he do with it? And how does the knowledge of this source help us to understand or appreciate *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or whatever work we are investigating?”.³ The first point will be addressed in Chapter 2, the second in Chapter 3 and the third in Chapter 4. Of course, reception studies cannot limit themselves to intertextuality, even when based upon a text-to-text approach, since any process of imitation involves both transformation and interpretation.⁴ Therefore, due attention should be given to how Tolkien modified situations, expressions and images possibly taken from another work in order to adapt them to his fictional universe.

Before addressing the first point, however, a few textual remarks on *The Fall of Gondolin* and its place within Tolkien’s works may be useful. As is widely known, Tolkien worked on his mythology throughout his entire life, continuously adding, changing, or removing characters and episodes. Among his major fictional works only *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were published during his lifetime, whereas all other Middle-earth books, starting from *The Silmarillion*, have been edited by his son Christopher Tolkien (1924–2020), who used his father’s drafts, notes, and sketches to give shape to one of the most intricate and detailed fictional realms of the Modern Age.

The textual history of *The Fall of Gondolin* starts during the Great War. Tolkien himself offers a few clues about the time when he began composing it. In a letter to W.H. Auden, who had reviewed *The Fellowship of the Ring* in the *New York Times Book Review*, he wrote that “the first real story of this imaginary world almost fully formed as it now appears was written in prose during sick-leave at the end of 1916: *The Fall of Gondolin*, which I had the cheek to read to the Exeter College Essay Club in 1918”,⁵ although Christopher Tolkien remarks that the story was in fact read on 10 March 1920 and not in 1918.⁶ On 30 June 1955, Tolkien sent a letter to the Houghton Mifflin Co., his American publisher, arguing that “*The Fall of Gondolin* (and the birth of Eärendil) was written in hospital and on leave after surviving the Battle of the Somme in 1916”.⁷

3 Fisher (2011) 36. See also Hardwick (2003) 5.

4 Willis (2018) 41–54.

5 *Letters* 215 (§ 163, 7 June 1955).

6 See *Letters* 445–446 (note 163.5).

7 *Letters* 221 (§ 165).

After forty years, recollections were not always precise, as shown by a letter that Tolkien wrote in 1964, where he states that he started working at “*The Fall of Gondolin* [...] during sick-leave from the army in 1917”.⁸ Three years later, the uncertainty about the years becomes evident when he writes that “Eärendil became a character in the earliest written (1916–17) of the major legends: *The Fall of Gondolin*”.⁹ According to Christopher Tolkien, his father wrote him in 1944 that he “first began to write the History of the Gnomes in army huts, crowded, filled with the noise of gramophones”,¹⁰ yet John Garth convincingly argues that none of the *Lost Tales* can be dated to the months that Tolkien spent in France, since life in trenches and dugouts was far too dangerous and noisy to find the concentration necessary to sketch such an elaborate story.¹¹

It may be that Tolkien began to think about *The Fall of Gondolin* during his stay in France, where he possibly wrote down a few names and ideas, and then composed the story after he came back to England. In October 1916, Tolkien caught the so-called trench fever, a disease transmitted by body lice that was quite common during the Great War, and by 9 November he was at Birmingham University Hospital,¹² where he remained for less than a month. On 2 December, he was declared unfit for service and sent home to recover,¹³ where he enjoyed the company of his wife Edith until the end of February 1917 when a medical board found that his health had slightly improved. Therefore, he was sent to a convalescent hospital for officers in Harrogate, Yorkshire, and then dispatched to the Humber Garrison at Thirtle Bridge in April.¹⁴

Tolkien’s chronological inaccuracies are not surprising: *The Fall of Gondolin* was written in late 1916 and/or early 1917, many decades before he wrote the letters in which he mentions it. In his published letters, he always states that he began the story during his sick-leave – therefore, neither in France nor at Thirtle Bridge. On this basis, we can infer that *The Fall* was composed between

⁸ *Letters* 345 (§ 257, 16 July 1964).

⁹ *Letters* 386 (§ 297, draft of a letter to a certain Mr. Rang, written in August 1967).

¹⁰ *FG* 21.

¹¹ Garth (2003) 186.

¹² Garth (2003) 200 and 205.

¹³ Garth (2003) 207.

¹⁴ Garth (2003) 231–234.

November 1916 and April 1917, in all likelihood by the end of February 1917. The letter to Houghton Mifflin is quite important, since it is likely that Tolkien was able to remember, even forty years later, whether he started shaping his mythology in a hospital bed or at home together with his wife. This leads us to conclude that the first draft of *The Fall of Gondolin* was possibly written (or at least begun) in November 1916 at Birmingham University Hospital.

Unlike other episodes of his mythology, the tale of Tuor never underwent drastic changes. As Christopher Tolkien remarks, “Gondolin and Nargothrond were each made once, and not remade”.¹⁵ The textual history of *The Fall of Gondolin* begins with a manuscript titled “Tuor and the Exiles of Gondolin”, contained in two school exercise books, in all likelihood written in November (and possibly December) 1916 during sick-leave. This version, which is usually called *Tuor A* (the name used by Christopher Tolkien in the *Lost Tales*), was later extensively corrected and overwritten, but without altering the main elements of the story. From the revised and overwritten version of *Tuor A*, Edith Tolkien made a fair copy (*Tuor B*) possibly in 1919–1920, when her husband was working at the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Then Tolkien emended it quite heavily, focusing almost entirely on style and leaving the narrative unchanged. Not all emendations were made at the same time, but most of them were most likely written before he read the tale at the Essay Club of Exeter College in the spring of 1920. There is also a typescript (*Tuor C*) which breaks up when Tuor arrives in Gondolin and therefore does not include the pages dealing with the fall of the city. The text transcribed by Christopher Tolkien (and used in this article) is that of *Tuor B* in its final form.¹⁶

Leaving aside all subsequent versions which do not cover the actual fall of the city, Tolkien dealt briefly with the last days of Gondolin in the *Sketch of a Mythology* (1926),¹⁷ then in the *Quenta Noldorinwa* (1930), of which two versions survive (*Q I* and *Q II*). Christopher followed the text of the latter when editing this work.¹⁸ However, the differences between these two versions need not concern us here, since they have no relevance for the study of *The Fall of*

¹⁵ FG 18.

¹⁶ BLT2 146–147. See also FG 21–23. The text of *The Fall of Gondolin* can be read in BLT2 144–220 (§ 3) = FG 37–111.

¹⁷ SME 40–42 (§ 16) = FG 120–127.

¹⁸ SME 168–178 (§ 16) = FG 128–144.

Gondolin. The *Quenta* is the main source of the *Silmarillion*, which was edited by Christopher after his father's death in order to offer a comprehensive overview of the history and mythology of Middle-earth. While all material and most of the text come from Tolkien, it was his son who arranged them in a chronological sequence, chose what version should be included if different ones existed, and removed a few minor inconsistencies. The narrative of *The Fall of Gondolin* that we can read in the *Silmarillion* is a mere summary of Tolkien's tale,¹⁹ not unlike the *Sketch of a Mythology* and the *Quenta Noldorinwa*,²⁰ and is of limited interest for the present paper. Tolkien never revised his tale substantially, therefore any study of its intertextual relations or models should examine the text of *Tuor B* as edited by Christopher in the *Lost Tales* and then reprinted in *The Fall of Gondolin*.

2. TOLKIEN AND VERGIL

Tolkien knew Latin language and literature very well.²¹ His mother began to teach him Latin when he was four years old and he immediately liked the language.²² As customary for pupils who attended a private school in the early twentieth century (in his case, King Edward's School at Birmingham), Tolkien studied the classics from a very young age. Latin and Greek were the backbone of the curriculum and often received more attention than English. Tolkien himself writes that, while at school, he "spent most of [his] time learning Latin and Greek [...] the chief contacts with poetry were when one was made to try and translate it into Latin".²³ Thanks to Oronzo Cilli's careful study of Tolkien's library, we now know that, by 1907 at the latest, Tolkien owned Arthur Sidgwick's

¹⁹ See *Sil* 285–294 (§ 23).

²⁰ Another very brief mention of the end of Gondolin can be found in *The Earliest Annals of Beleriand*, which were written shortly after the *Quenta*, see *SME* 368–369 (year 207).

²¹ For a comprehensive overview of Tolkien's classical education, see Williams (2021). See also Swain (2007), and Librán Moreno (2015) 48–50.

²² Carpenter (2000) 29; Williams (2021) 4. See also Librán Moreno (2007).

²³ *Letters* 213 (§ 163, 7 June 1955).

edition of the works of Vergil and that he had it with him while studying at Exeter College.²⁴

At King Edward's, teachers and pupils held an annual debate entirely in Latin and Tolkien took part in at least three of them. In 1909, he played the role of a haruspex, in 1910, the part of a Greek ambassador (speaking in Greek), and in 1911, the part of a senator called T. Portorius Acer Germanicus. A brief summary of the debates was published in Latin on the *King Edward's School Chronicle*, and the debate of March 1911 was summarized by Tolkien himself.²⁵ A few months later, he went to Oxford to study Classics after being awarded an Open Classical Exhibition to Exeter College. In all likelihood, Tolkien attended E. A. Barber's lectures on Vergil.²⁶ His first years were not outstanding, since he devoted more energy to university activities (such as the Essay Club, the Dialectical Society, the Debating Society, or rugby matches) than to the study of Homer and Cicero. However, he also developed a sharp interest in Comparative Philology, Finnish, and Old English, which led him to abandon Classics and begin to read English at the beginning of the 1913 summer term.²⁷

This brief biographic overview shows that Tolkien undoubtedly had a good knowledge of Vergil and the *Aeneid* when he wrote *The Fall of Gondolin* at twenty-four. By that point, he would have been studying Latin for almost twenty years. It is likely that the history of the fall of Troy was one of the first episodes of Roman mythology that his mother taught him. Hence, it would be far from surprising if Tolkien had learned of Aeneas before he ever heard of Beowulf or Sigurd. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that Classical mythology mattered more than Norse or Old English legends for his fictional universe. However, we have to take into consideration the fact that, by late 1916, Tolkien had been seriously studying these subjects for less than three years, whereas he had been learning Latin for almost twenty years. It is beyond question that the *Nibelungenlied* or *Beowulf* exerted a strong influence on *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; yet, we should stress that Tolkien wrote these works in the 1930s

24 Cilli (2019) 298–299 (n° 396–397). See also Williams (2021) 8. The edition is: P. Vergili Maronis *Opera*, with introduction and English notes by A. Sidgwick, 2 voll., Cambridge 1897.

25 Hammond (1993) 345; Garth (2003) 18–20. The text of the *acta senatus* written by Tolkien can be read in *King Edward's School Chronicle* 186 (March 1911), pp. 26–27. It has been reissued with a commentary by Cristini (2021).

26 Williams (2021) 14.

27 Carpenter (2000) 71.

and 1940s as a professor of Anglo-Saxon at Oxford who had been investigating these legends academically for more than two decades. On the other hand, *The Fall of Gondolin* was composed two years after leaving the faculty of Classics. For these reasons, it should not be assumed that, at the very beginning of Tolkien's writing activity, Norse mythology played a much more prominent role than his background in Classics.

With these points in mind, we should turn our attention to references to Vergil detectable in Tolkien's works. Most unfortunately, his letters have been edited only partially, although they could offer important insights into his models. However, available evidence still offers several clues on the importance of Vergil to Tolkien's reflections on literature. In a letter to Robert Murray (1925–2018), a Jesuit friend, Tolkien implicitly compares *The Lord of the Rings* to “Homer, or Beowulf, or Vergil, or Greek or Shakespearean tragedy” while speaking of large-scale works of art that are “founded on an earlier matter which is put to new uses”.²⁸ This brief quotation has much relevance to the present study for two reasons. First, Tolkien mentions only five authors or works, three of them Classical. Vergil is mentioned shortly after the *Beowulf*, which Tolkien studied for most of his life, and this alone shows the high regard in which he held the Roman poet. Then, Tolkien states that the works of these authors “are founded on an earlier matter which is put to new uses”, exactly like his own books. In all likelihood, Tolkien did not intend to point them out as his models, but he admits that *The Lord of the Rings* had been composed in a similar way.²⁹

His famous essay *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* includes some significant mentions of Vergil.³⁰ Tolkien writes that *Beowulf* “succeeded admirably in creating in the minds of the poet's contemporaries the illusion of surveying a past, pagan but noble and fraught with a deep significance. [...] This impression of depth is an effect and a justification of the use of episodes and allusions to old tales”. He then points out that a “similar effect of antiquity (and melancholy)” can be found in the *Aeneid*, especially when Aeneas reaches Italy, and quotes

²⁸ *Letters* 201 (§ 156).

²⁹ See also Williams (2021) 22: “This statement does reveal a consciousness of how his work could be seen as a continuation in the tradition of those great Classical epics and tragedies which drew on lost tales”.

³⁰ It was a British Academy lecture delivered on 25 November 1936, and published one year later in the *Proceedings* of the Academy, see Hammond (1993) 3; Pantin (2014) 152–155.

Aen. 7.204.³¹ Every reader of Tolkien's works cannot but agree that a similar sense of antiquity and melancholy pervades his works too, especially *The Fall of Gondolin*. Immediately afterwards, he exclaims: "Alas for the lost lore, the annals and old poets that Vergil knew, and only used in the making of a new thing!"³² Again, Tolkien dwells on "earlier matter which is put to new uses" in association with Vergil. The focus here lies on two aspects of the process of literary creation: the sources and the new stories originating from them with Vergil becoming a case study.

It would be misleading to use these few excerpts to reconstruct Tolkien's comprehensive attitude towards the imitation of previous authors, but the quoted passages clearly indicate that Vergil played a prominent role when Tolkien wrote about the genesis of great works of literature and claimed that putting earlier stories to new uses was a fundamental part of fashioning every new tale. Interestingly, Tolkien does not linger on intertextuality in itself or the purpose of re-using previous authors, and focuses instead on the story's newness. Intertextuality is not a learned game between philologists or a kind of riddle for readers.³³ It is only the framework which enables a writer to build something new and ancient at the same time: new because it was never written or imagined before, and ancient because it gives an impression of antiquity and melancholy, as it will be argued more extensively in Chapter 4.

It is now instructive to take a closer look at Vergilian echoes in Tolkien, leaving aside *The Fall of Gondolin* for the time being. During the last four decades, scholars of Tolkien's writings have been finding plenty of allusions to (or reminiscences of) the *Aeneid*.³⁴ Although a few of these allusions are slightly far-fetched, many characters, stories, and situations in Tolkien's work undoubtedly evoke those of Vergil, either intentionally or not. For instance, Morse devotes a whole booklet to the similarities between a few characters of the *Lord of the*

³¹ MC 27. See also MC 46, note 21: "In fact the real resemblance of the *Aeneid* and Beowulf lies in the constant presence of a sense of many-storied antiquity, together with its natural accompaniment, stem and noble melancholy. In this they are really akin and together differ from Homer's flatter, if more glittering, surface".

³² MC 27–28.

³³ Tolkien's own attitude towards a strictly philological *Quellenforschung* is famously critical. See MC 120: "We must be satisfied with the soup that is set before us, and not desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled" (quotation taken from Dasent [1859] xii).

³⁴ For an overview, see Barella (2007).

Rings (Frodo, Aragorn, Denethor) and Aeneas or Dido,³⁵ whereas Obertino investigates the relationship between Aeneas' descent to the underworld and the journey through Moria in *The Fellowship of the Ring*,³⁶ and Librán Moreno argues that the iconography of the star borne on a ruler's brow as a symbol of royalty is taken from the *Aeneid*.³⁷ According to Sundt, Vergil's *Georgics*, and especially the verses on Orpheus and Eurydice, exerted a considerable influence on the tale of Beren and Lúthien, while Jordan argues that the pastoralism of Tolkien's hobbits is reminiscent of Vergil's *Eclogues*.³⁸ More generally, the relevance of the Trojan myth to Tolkien's fictional universe has been demonstrated by Livingston,³⁹ while Pace (and, more recently, Newman and Scolari) pointed out several echoes of Vergil in *The Lord of the Rings*.⁴⁰

It is beyond doubt that, in many cases, Tolkien simply used archetypal situations universally found in most ancient, medieval, and early modern Western works of literature; yet, his education, his early academic career, and the mentions of Vergil, which are present in his works, indicate that these analogies should not be dismissed as mere coincidences, since Tolkien, just like many young men who attended a private school in the first decade of the twentieth century, had been "brought up in the Classics".⁴¹ His attitude towards myth and literature was forged by a constant and careful reading of Greek and Roman authors, who exerted a strong influence on his works. Since contemporary scholarship has devoted a growing attention to Vergilian memories and reminiscences in the works that Tolkien wrote when he had been teaching Anglo-Saxon for decades, it is now time to investigate what role the *Aeneid* played at the very beginning of his fictional universe, just three years after Tolkien had abandoned Classics to study English Language and Literature.

35 Morse (1986). See also Anzinger (2010).

36 Obertino (1993). See also Whittingham (2008) 123–153, and Makins (2016).

37 Librán Moreno (2015).

38 Sundt (2021); Jordan (2021).

39 Livingston (2013).

40 Pace (1979); Newman (2005); Scolari (2019). See also Parry (2012), and Scolari (2016).

41 *Letters* 172 (§ 142).

3. THE FALL OF TROY AND THE FALL OF GONDOLIN

By Tolkien's own admission, the tale of Gondolin (and especially its end) resembles that of Troy. Near the end of *Tuor B* he writes that "glory dwelt in that city of Gondolin of the Seven Names, and its ruin was the most dread of all the sacks of cities upon the face of Earth. Nor Bablon, nor Ninwi, nor the towers of Trui, nor all the many takings of Rûm that is greatest among Men, saw such terror as fell that day upon Amon Gwareth".⁴² His son Christopher remarks that "the original text of *Tuor A* had *Babylon, Nineveh, Troy, and (probably) Rome*".⁴³ This brief catalogue of the most famous sacks of cities is the starting point for studying the main classical model that influenced *The Fall of Gondolin*: namely, the second book of the *Aeneid*.

At first sight, it seems that Tolkien could not have been unaware of the similarities between his story and Vergil's narrative of Troy's last night. Yet, we should keep in mind that he might have drawn "on Classical material without being conscious, or even without even wanting to be conscious, of this borrowing", as Williams points out.⁴⁴ For a man who had been studying Vergil and Classical mythology since early childhood, certain situations and images constituted a fundamental part of his cultural background, and in all likelihood they had become so deeply embedded within him that using them was no longer perceived as an intentional allusion or imitation but rather as an indispensable narrative device. Therefore, I will not linger on the aims of Tolkien (for now) but only on the similarities between *The Fall of Gondolin* and the *Aeneid*, regardless of their putative intentionality (which will be addressed in the next chapter).

Quite a few analogies between *The Fall of Gondolin* and the *Aeneid* have already been pointed out by Greenman (1992), Bruce (2012), and Freeman (2021); yet, they have missed a few significant parallels and included episodes or passages that only show a superficial resemblance.⁴⁵ Therefore, I will briefly survey

⁴² *BLT*2 196 = *FG* 111. See Spirito (2009) 192–193; Bruce (2012) 103–104; Freeman (2021) 132–133.

⁴³ *BLT*2 203, see also *FG* 267.

⁴⁴ Williams (2021) 25.

⁴⁵ If Greenman (1992) or Bruce (2012) have dealt with an episode or passage, the notes below will mention the page(s) in question. Freeman (2021) does not analyze the passages in depth but offers only a very brief survey, focusing instead on *pietas/estel* in Tolkien's writings.

the points of contact between the two works, listing them according to the order in which they appear in *The Fall of Gondolin*:

1. The first analogy concerns the background of the story, since the fall of both cities is ultimately caused by the desire for a woman, Helen and Idril. However, Paris manages to reach his goal and this leads to the War of Troy, whereas Maeglin betrays his people in order to be able to lay his hands on Idril but fails.⁴⁶
2. Both Aeneas and Tuor marry a daughter of the king (Creusa and Idril) and are fathers of children who play a fundamental role in the mythology of Rome/Middle-earth.⁴⁷ Their descendants found empires bound to rule over most of the known world, that is, Rome and Númenor.
3. The protagonists (Aeneas and Tuor) live in a house that is not located in the center of the city, which enables their families to avoid the first fightings.⁴⁸
4. In both stories a female character (Cassandra and Idril) understands the treachery that will doom her city (respectively, the Trojan Horse and Maeglin's betrayal), but she is not believed.⁴⁹
5. Both Troy and Gondolin are attacked when the inhabitants are celebrating a moment of joy: respectively, the departure of the Greeks and the feast of the Gates of Summer.⁵⁰
6. The Trojan horse resembles Morgoth's beasts of iron, both carrying warriors in their bellies, but these are indebted to WW1 tanks and flame-throwers too, and are much less important to the plot.⁵¹

⁴⁶ See Greenman (1992) 5

⁴⁷ See also Greenman (1992) 5.

⁴⁸ Verg. *Aen.* 2.299–300, and *FG* 60.

⁴⁹ Verg. *Aen.* 2.246–249, and *FG* 65. See Greenman (1992) 5.

⁵⁰ Verg. *Aen.* 2.250–267, and *FG* 72. See Greenman (1992) 6; Bruce (2012) 107.

⁵¹ Verg. *Aen.* 2.13–20 and *FG* 79. See Greenman (1992) 5, Bruce (2012) 107, and Freeman (2021) 136–137. Cf. especially Verg. *Aen.* 2.50–53 (*Laocoon sic fatus validis ingentem viribus hastam / in latus inque feri curvam compagibus alvum / contorsit. Stetit illa tremens, ute-*

7. The fate of the sons of Hector and Tuor could have been similar, since Astyanax is flung from the walls of Troy by Pyrrhus, and Maeglin tries to cast Eärendil into the fire burning under Gondolin's walls, but ultimately falls over himself.⁵² However, this scene is more reminiscent of Euripides' *The Trojan Women* than of the *Aeneid*, since Vergil does not describe the death of Astyanax in detail.⁵³

8. Tuor carrying Echtelion on his shoulders is clearly reminiscent of Aeneas carrying old Anchises while leaving Troy.⁵⁴

9. There is a certain resemblance between Panthus' famous sentence *fuimus Troes, fuit Ilium et ingens gloria Teucrorum* ("We were Trojans, this was Ilium and the mighty glory of the Teucrians") and Turgon's "Great is the fall of Gondolin".⁵⁵ Surely, the wording is different, but they both seal the fate of the city with a lapidary phrase, and the presence of the adjective *ingens*/great in both cases is telling.

10. The most evident analogy is perhaps the behaviour of Creusa and Idril, who clasp the knees of their husbands to prevent them from joining again the battle when all hope is lost.⁵⁶

11. Both Aeneas and Tuor are eyewitnesses to the death of their kings. Moreover, Turgon dies after Morgoth's dragons crush the base of his tower, the tallest building of the city, and throw it down, whereas Aeneas brings down Troy's highest tower in an attempt to stop the Greeks from breaking into the palace of Priam.⁵⁷

roque recusso / insonuere cavae gemitumque dedere cavernae) and FG 79 ("the engines and the catapults of the king poured darts and boulders and molten metals on those ruthless beasts, and their hollow bellies clanged beneath the buffeting").

52 FG 81–82. See Greenman (1992) 5.

53 See Bruce (2012) 108.

54 Verg. *Aen.* 2.707–710, and FG 87–88. See Greenman (1992) 6.

55 Verg. *Aen.* 2.325–326, and FG 92.

56 Verg. *Aen.* 2. 671–678, and FG 96. See Greenman (1992) 5–6.

57 Verg. *Aen.* 2.460–467, and FG 96.

12. Aeneas comes back to his house while looking for Creusa, and finds it destroyed by fire; in a similar way, Tuor and Idril take a last look at their house while fleeing, and see it cast down and burning.⁵⁸

A questionable parallel is the role of treason in both stories, since Maeglin, Turgon's nephew, hardly resembles Sinon.⁵⁹ It is true that both cities fall because of treachery, but the betrayal itself is quite different. Another doubtful similarity is the presence of trees in Priam's palace and in front of Turgon's tower, which seems to be a mere coincidence.⁶⁰

There are also notable differences. For instance, the narrator of the fall of the city is Aeneas himself in Vergil and the bardic figure of Littleheart, son of Bronweg, in Tolkien.⁶¹ Idril plays a much more active role than Creusa, and there is indubitably a certain romanticism in Tolkien which is absent in Vergil.⁶² Moreover, Morgoth stands for the absolute evil, whereas the Greeks are treacherous and cruel, but by no means demonic characters. The background of Vergil and Tolkien's stories is therefore different: the former depicts the most famous of many wars that have pitted a city against another in the ancient world, whereas the latter relates an episode of the eternal conflict between the good and evil. However, these (and many more) dissimilarities are normal in works written in very different cultural contexts and should not take our attention away from the many parallels between the two works, which now need to be explored more carefully.

⁵⁸ Verg. *Aen.* 2.756–759, and *FG* 98.

⁵⁹ See Greenman (1992) 5; Bruce (2012) 106–107.

⁶⁰ Verg. *Aen.* 2.513 and *FG* 54–55. See Greenman (1992) 6.

⁶¹ Greenman (1992) 4 questionably considers this an analogy.

⁶² See for instance *FG* 96–97: immediately after seeing the ruin of the Tower of Turgon, Tuor “lifted and kissed her [Idril], for she was more to him than all the Gondothlim”. Compare with Verg. *Aen.* 2.559–563: after witnessing the death of Priam, Vergil describes Aeneas' thoughts as follows: *At me tum primum saevus circumstetit horror / obstipui; subiit cari genitoris imago / ut regem aequaevum crudeli vulnere vidi / vitam exhalantem, subiit deserta Creusa / et direpta domus et parvi casus Iuli.*

4. ANTIQUITY AND MELANCHOLY AT THE BEGINNING OF MIDDLE-EARTH

Once the “earlier matter” that Tolkien borrowed from Vergil has been illustrated, it is time to address the “new uses” to which it has been put by him. Of course, according to the internal chronology of Tolkien’s mythology, the fall of Gondolin is not the first episode, but it is the first complete story written in his imaginarium. It is possible that, by the time of writing *The Fall*, Tolkien already had in mind plots of quite a few other first-age tales; still, we cannot take this for granted and have to work with what we know of his writings and life before December 1916 in order to avoid teleological misconstructions. Up to now, only a few (partial) explanations of Tolkien’s use of Vergil have been offered.

Greenman is mostly concerned with the Aeneadic pattern of escape and does not linger on Tolkien’s aims, pointing out a few analogies and differences between him and Vergil. In contrast to that, Bruce pays more attention to how and why Tolkien reshaped the *Aeneid*. According to him, “in the battle with Gondolin, Tolkien gives us heroes who embody the Germanic ‘heroic spirit’ with its ‘creed of unyielding will’”.⁶³ Bruce draws attention to the Germanic and Christian undertone of *The Fall of Gondolin*, arguing that “the story moves toward a reconciliation first of body with soul, and then of body and soul with the divine”, since Tuor stands for the physical and Idril for the spiritual, whereas Eärendil and Elwing reconcile the peoples of Middle-earth with the Valar. In conclusion, if Vergil dealt with arms and the man, Tolkien is more interested in a soteriological tale aimed at offering salvation to the inhabitants of Middle-earth.⁶⁴

However, the alleged “Northern courage” shown by Tolkien’s heroes is often hardly distinguishable from the *virtus* of Vergil’s characters, as Freeman convincingly remarks,⁶⁵ and Bruce’s Christian-Platonic interpretation of Tolkien’s mythology is unlikely, since such an elaborate allegory is foreign to Tolkien’s literary tastes. When writing to Milton Waldman in 1951, he is quite explicit in stating that his works should not be considered as allegories: “An equally basic passion of mine *ab initio* was for myth (not allegory!) and for fairy-story, and

⁶³ Bruce (2012) 109.

⁶⁴ Bruce (2012) 112–114.

⁶⁵ Freeman (2021) 139–143.

above all for heroic legend on the brink of fairy-tale and history, of which there is far too little in the world (accessible to me) for my appetite. [...] I dislike Allegory – the conscious and intentional allegory”.⁶⁶ More convincing are Bruce’s remarks on the power of selfless love, which is present also in the *Aeneid*, but here the reason of state (often) prevails.

Freeman examines how Vergil’s concept of *pietas* influenced Tolkien works, especially the *Fall of Gondolin*.⁶⁷ He rightly downplays the importance of “Northern courage” and correctly highlights the Christian undertone of Tolkien’s first story. Yet, his attempt to show that Tolkien’s concept of *estel* owes much to Vergil’s *pietas* is not entirely convincing. Of course, several analogies and similarities do exist between these two concepts, but Freeman fails to properly address the topic of intentionality. Did Tolkien intend from the start to borrow Vergil’s *pietas* and use it in *The Fall of Gondolin*, or do we find parallels simply because the tale of Tuor and Idril is modelled upon the *Aeneid*? I suspect that the second reconstruction is correct, since Tolkien heartily disliked allegory and was above all interested in myth, not in moral or didactic literature. It is possible that he combined a few elements of Vergil’s *pietas*, the Northern indomitable will, and Christian *pistis* in order to create the virtue of *estel*, but it was a completely unintentional process, which tells us precious little on the reasons why Tolkien decided to establish his fictional universe with a tale echoing the *Aeneid*, a question that shall now be addressed.

We have already seen that Tolkien did not intend to hide his main source of inspiration, since he mentioned Troy quite explicitly at the end of *The Fall of Gondolin*. His brief catalogue of cities (Bablon/Babylon, Ninwi/Nineveh, Trui/Troy, Rûm/Rome) holds relevance for another reason – it allows us to cast some light onto Tolkien’s subcreative activity at the very beginning of his writing

⁶⁶ *Letters* 144–145 (§ 131). See also a letter to Stanley Unwin sent in 1947: “Of course, Allegory and Story converge, meeting somewhere in Truth. So that the only perfectly consistent allegory is a real life; and the only fully intelligible story is an allegory. [...] But the two start out from opposite ends. You can make the Ring into an allegory of our own time, if you like [...]. But that is only because all power magical or mechanical does always so work” (*Letters* 121, § 109). The draft of letter 181 to Michael Straight (*Letters* 232, January or February 1956) is even more explicit as far as *The Lord of the Rings* is concerned: “There is no ‘allegory’, moral, political, or contemporary in the work at all”. See also Tolkien’s foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*: “I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence” (*LotR* xxiv).

⁶⁷ Freeman (2021).

career. The four cities he lists can be traced back to two different archetypical literary “universes”: the Bible (Babylon and Nineveh) and the Classical mythology and history (Troy and Rome). When Tolkien decided to put into writing his ideas about a fictional universe that he had been pondering for a few years, he might have started with a vaguely Biblical story (imitating, for instance, the Exodus) or with a more ‘historical’ narrative (reminiscent of the birth of Rome). He chose instead to begin from the end (metaphorically speaking), that is, from a story focused on the fall of a city, therefore neither on a people (as in the Bible) nor on a long war (*Iliad*), a quest/return (*Odyssey*), nor the founding of a city or kingdom (e.g. Romulus and Remus).

The Northern World is notably absent from Tolkien’s catalogue of cities, and episodes of Norse mythology are never openly acknowledged. This cannot be a coincidence, since he could have mentioned – for instance – Worms, Attila’s palace, Asgard, or Heorot. I believe that the Northern World was intentionally left out by Tolkien when mentioning Gondolin’s illustrious predecessors because the *Völsunga Saga* or *Beowulf* did not belong to the past of his fictional mythology, but to its present, or better still to alternative present(s). Tolkien aimed to create a new (Northern) mythology, much more detailed and consistent than the few old Germanic tales that have come down to us, and he obviously took advantage of the *Aeneid*, just as Vergil had used Homer for his own purposes. His goal was to create a synthesis of Classical, Biblical and Northern myths to give birth to a fictional universe which may be compared to that of the Greek and Roman heroes.

In a letter to Milton Waldman (late 1951), Tolkien admits: “I was from early days grieved by the poverty of my own beloved country: it had no stories of its own (bound up with its tongue and soil), not of the quality that I sought, and found (as an ingredient) in legends of other lands. There was Greek, and Celtic, and Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish (which greatly affected me); but nothing English”. He then goes on by writing that “once upon a time [...] I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story [...] which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country”.⁶⁸

The myths of all cultures are set in a more or less remote past, and Tolkien was well aware that the few surviving English legends take place in a fictional Medieval universe. Therefore, he had to choose a Medieval setting, not a Classi-

68 *Letters* 144 (§ 131).

cal or Biblical one, if he desired to create a new mythology for England. As it has already been noted, according to Tolkien an important part of every story was an effect of antiquity and melancholy, which could not be obtained by alluding to the *Nibelungenlied* or *Beowulf*, since these were perceived to belong to timelines that were roughly contemporary with (albeit alternative to) Middle-earth. The only logical choice was to create a Medieval fictional universe independent from Norse myths and whose origins were reminiscent of the Classical world.

So far, the discussion focused exclusively on the reasons why Tolkien chose a Classical and not a Germanic or Norse archetype for *The Fall of Gondolin*. It is now time to focus our attention on the *Aeneid*. As I have already argued, Tolkien had quite a few alternatives at his disposal when he began his first tale on Middle-earth. The *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and several episodes of the Bible offer a wealth of models which can be easily borrowed when starting a fictional universe. However, we should not forget that Tolkien attached equal importance to antiquity and melancholy, more specifically to a kind of nostalgia for a “lost world”, be it Valinor, Gondolin itself, the First Age, Númenor, or Gondor in its heyday. It is very difficult to feel such an emotion when reading Achilles’ deeds or Ulysses’ voyages. A few books of the Bible do have similar undertones, but the expulsion from the Garden of Eden or the fall of Jerusalem are difficult to reconcile with a new mythology, not least because Tolkien believed that “myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary ‘real’ world”.⁶⁹

Vergil’s *Aeneid* represented a perfect alternative, since it did convey an effect of both antiquity and melancholy and it was a convenient beginning for a new mythology, as it left ample space to narrate the past of Gondolin and the deeds of its exiles. This explains why Tolkien chose to model his narrative upon it, and indicates the intentionality of the analogies with Vergil, which would have been meaningless if unintentional, because they would not have transmitted any sense of antiquity. It would be pointless trying to analyze Tolkien’s psychology half a century after his death, but we may conjecture that certain traumatic events, such as the death of his father and mother, his move from Sarehole to Birmingham, the forced separation from Edith, and the First World War, exerted a strong influence on his personality, and that he felt a certain affinity with the

⁶⁹ *Letters* 144 (§ 131). See also *MC* 153: according to Tolkien, fairy-stories should satisfy “the oldest and deepest desire, the Great Escape: the Escape from Death”.

plight of Aeneas. The fall of Troy provided Tolkien with a model rich in antiquity, which was fundamental to give the necessary (internal and intertextual) depth to his fictional world, and at the same time not devoid of melancholy, which was an important ingredient of the life of Tolkien himself.

5. CONCLUSION

There is one last analogy to be considered, which tells us little on the genesis of *The Fall of Gondolin* but can shed some light onto the personality of Tolkien. Both he and Vergil circulated only two major works and left unfinished what they regarded as their most important literary creation, then published by others. The *Aeneid* and all tales of the First Age (including *The Fall of Gondolin*) never went beyond the stage of draft, although parts of them had already been read aloud in front of a few friends, and received warm praise. Varius and Tucca, as well as Christopher Tolkien, slightly edited them and ultimately published an unfinished version, containing half-verses or half-stories. Not unlike Vergil, Tolkien paid an obsessive attention to details and was unwilling to circulate works that were less than perfect, thereby entrusting his heirs with the responsibility to decide their fate. Clearly, this did not exert any influence on a young officer who was writing about a new Troy in a hospital bed, but we should always consider that the *Aeneid* and all Tolkien's First-Age stories are the product of both their authors and their editors: without the latter, we would never have read them.

Turning back to *The Fall of Gondolin*, the previous pages have shown that Tolkien knew Vergil very well, he had been studying his works since childhood, and he used the *Aeneid* as a model when writing his first Middle-earth story. The last days of Gondolin are modelled upon the fall of Troy, since the plot, the depiction of the characters, and the general sense of antiquity and melancholy pervading both works are quite similar. Tolkien did not slavishly follow his model but inserted into his tale a number of elements drawn from the *Aeneid*, which enabled him to start his mythology with a story that was at the same time old and new, Classical and Medieval, epic and "fairy". As Fisher correctly remarks, intertextuality in itself runs the risk of becoming a pointless exercise of erudition if it cannot add anything to our understanding of a work. This paper has indicated the importance of recognizing the *Aeneid* as the main source of *The Fall of Gondolin*, since the choice of this work as a model casts light on Tolkien's

ideas on literature at the very beginning of his “sub-creation” of Middle-earth and on the role of antiquity and melancholy in his writings.

The end of a city or civilization often marks the beginning of a new one, and both Númenor and Eärendil’s voyage to Valinor (as well as Morgoth’s defeat) would have been impossible without the death of Turgon and the destruction of Gondolin. Tolkien was a devout Catholic, and he was surely aware that this succession of events was somewhat reminiscent of Christ’s Passion, which was ultimately necessary in order to offer salvation to humankind. In other words, *The Fall of Gondolin* touches upon – without intentionally dealing with – theodicy, the “problem of Evil”, and its seeming paradoxical necessity to arrive at the triumph of Good.⁷⁰ These were concepts quite close to the life and writings of Tolkien. Without the death of his mother, he would never have moved to Mrs Faulkner’s home and met Edith Bratt; without the trench fever, he would have remained in France and possibly died shortly afterwards, like many of his friends; without Gollum’s final aggression, Frodo would not have destroyed the Ring. I doubt that this kind of consideration consciously exerted some influence on *The Fall of Gondolin*, but we cannot rule out the possibility that the choice of the *Aeneid* as a model was also due to the resonance of his plot for Tolkien, who was well aware that “unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit” (*Jn* 12.24).

⁷⁰ See *Letters* 280 (§ 211, to Rhona Beare, 14 October 1958): “The problem of evil, and its apparent toleration, is a permanent one for all who concern themselves with our world”. Cf. also Shippey (2000) 242: “Tolkien indeed built the concept of the *felix peccatum* into his own mythology”. This is clearly indicated by *TNoME* 216: “The weakest and most imprudent of all the actions of Manwë [...] was the release of Melkor from captivity. From this came the greatest loss and harm: the death of the Trees, and the exile and the anguish of the Noldor. Yet through this suffering there came also, as maybe in no other way could it have come, the victory of the Elder Days: the downfall of Angband and the last overthrow of Melkor”.

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(Classical) Narratives of Decline in Tolkien: Renewal, Accommodation, Focalization*

Abstract The paper investigates Tolkien’s narratives of decline through the lens of their classical ancestry. Narratives of decline are widespread in ancient culture, in both philosophical and literary discourses. They normally posit a gradual degradation (moral and ontological) from an idealized Golden Age, which went hand-in-hand with increasing detachment of gods from mortal affairs. Narratives of decline are also at the core of Tolkien’s mythology, constituting yet another underresearched aspect of classical influence on Tolkien. Such Classical narratives reverberate e.g. in Tolkien’s division of Arda’s history into ages, from an idealized First Age filled with Joy and Light to a Third Age, described as “Twilight Age (...) the first of the broken and changed world” (*Letters* 131). More generally, these narratives are related to Tolkien’s notorious perception of history as a “long defeat” (*Letters* 195) and to that “heart-racking sense of the vanished past” which pervades Tolkien’s works – the emotion which, in his words, moved him “supremely” and which he found “small difficulty in evoking” (*Letters* 91). The paper analyses the reception of narratives of decline in Tolkien’s legendarium, pointing out similarities but also contrasts and differences, with the aim to discuss some key patterns of (classical) reception in Tolkien’s theory and practice (‘renewal’, ‘accommodation’, ‘focalization’).

Keywords Narrative of decline, Hesiod, reception, focalization, accommodation

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The aim of this chapter is to discuss some key patterns of (classical) reception in Tolkien's* theory and practice ('renewal', 'accommodation', 'focalization'), taking as a case study Tolkien's expansive use of narratives of decline – story patterns positing a gradual degradation (especially moral and ontological) of humans and/or nature from an idealized past (a 'Golden Age' or 'Eden') – with Tolkien's decline narratives partially inspired by their classical precedents.¹

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

To introduce the topic, as well as to address a fundamental methodological issue in dealing with (classical) reception in Tolkien, one can begin by comparing two passages. The first is the ending of Catullus poem 64, after the *Parcae* have finished singing their bleak oracular song at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis; the second comes from Tolkien's *Silmarillion* and is part of a prophecy addressed to the rebellious people of the Noldor (one tribe of his Eldar or 'Elves') before they leave the Paradise-like land of Valinor. The speaker is the Vala Mandos – roughly corresponding (within Tolkien's cosmology) to the Greek god Hades and similarly governing an eponymous netherworld.²

talia praefantes quondam felicia Pelei
carmina divino cecinerunt pectore Parcae. (...)
sed postquam tellus scelere est imbuta nefando
iustitiamque omnes cupida de mente fugarunt,
perfundere manus fraterno sanguine fratres, (...)

* The writings of John R. R. and Christopher Tolkien are referenced and quoted according to the abbreviations set out in the introduction to this volume by Alicia Matz and Maciej Paprocki. The reader is kindly directed to the introduction for full bibliographical references.

1 As will soon be clear, this chapter is not exactly an exercise in *Quellenforschung* or comparative criticism but rather an analysis of Tolkien's own understanding of (classical) reception and its practical implications. For a collection of studies on classical material in Tolkien, see Williams (2021). For an overview of Tolkien Medieval sources, see e.g. Shippey (2005), esp. Appendix. For an investigation of Tolkien's engagement with modern literature, see Simonson (2008) and Ordway (2021).

2 For a comparison between classical gods and the Tolkienian Valar, and their narrative roles, see Pezzini (2021).

omnia fanda nefanda malo permixta furore
 iustificam nobis mentem avertere deorum.
 quare nec talis dignantur visere coetus,
 nec se contingi patiuntur lumine claro.

With such soothsaying songs of yore did the Parcae chant from divine breast the felicitous fate of Peleus. (...) But after the earth was infected with heinous crime, and each one banished justice from their grasping mind, and brothers steeped their hands in fraternal blood, (...) everything licit and lawless commingled with mad infamy turned away from us the just-seeing mind of the gods. Wherefore neither do they deign to appear at such assemblies, nor will they permit themselves to be met in the daylight. (Catull. 64.382–3, 397–9, 405–8, Transl. Merrill 1893)

Tears unnumbered ye shall shed; and the Valar will fence Valinor against you, and shut you out, so that not even the echo of your lamentation shall pass over the mountains. (...) To evil end shall all things turn that they begin well; and by treason of kin unto kin, and the fear of treason, shall this come to pass. (...) Ye have spilled the blood of your kindred unrighteously and have stained the land of Aman. For blood ye shall render blood, and beyond Aman ye shall dwell in Death's shadow. (...) by weapon and by torment and by grief; and your houseless spirits shall come then to Mandos. There long shall ye abide and yearn for your bodies, and find little pity though all whom ye have slain should entreat for you. (*Sil* 88)

There are many similarities between the two passages: the prophetic context, the looming imagery of death, the presence of an ancestral fratricidal offence, which paved the way for a string of heinous crimes and family strife, as well as the withdrawal of divine entities (the Greek gods, the Tolkienian Valar) from the affairs of lesser beings. More subtly, both passages allude to a model of historical fractures, marked by momentous moral offences, which punctuate a deteriorating sequence of different Ages. In the case of Catullus, this is of course the Hesiodic myth of the five (or perhaps four) Generations or Ages of man (cf. Hes. *erg.* 106–201³), which is repeatedly alluded to in the poem: more specifically, the events recalled in the above passage mark the transition to the final fifth (or fourth) age

3 On this influential myth, the classic Boas and Lovejoy (1935) and Gatz (1967) are still useful; see Most (1998) for a nuanced reading of the myth and Rosati (2009) for its reception in Rome.

(of iron), when humans will no longer “live with a carefree heart on the Islands of the Blessed” (Hes. *erg.* 170–1) but will never be free “from toil and suffering” (*erg.* 177), and the time will come “when the father will not have equanimity with his children, nor the children with their father” (*erg.* 182). In Tolkien’s chronology, the departure of the fratricidal Noldor from the Blessed Land of Valinor instead marks the end of the Age of the Trees, and the beginning of the First Age of the Sun, which initiates historical (annual) time in the proper sense, according to the complex chronology of Tolkien’s secondary world (‘Arda’).

If not proper hypotexts, then it is very tempting to speak of important sources, or at least of strong classical influences: Tolkien had an extensive training in Classics at King Edward’s School (KES), the prestigious grammar school that he attended from 1900 to 1910 (with a hiatus of two years due to financial problems). He had learned Latin from his mother by the time he was six; he mastered that language and always considered it aesthetically appealing. At KES, students were not only required to read literary texts but were also expected to converse and compose original texts in Greek and Latin – a skill at which Tolkien’s headmaster Robert Cary Gilson, a former lecturer at Cambridge, excelled. Tolkien actively engaged in these exercises, also participating in debates in Latin and plays in Greek. Tolkien most likely read Catullus at KES, and he certainly did so at university. Catullus 64 was, in fact, part of the syllabus for the Classics exams he took in his second year at Oxford (MODS) in February 1913 (passing with a 2nd grade), before he transferred to the English School, to eventually complete his degree in English Language and Literature.⁴

But, as C. S. Lewis suggested with a famous hyperbole,⁵ it is always dangerous to speak of ‘influences’ in regards to Tolkien. One can compare now the following passages from two other texts which Tolkien was very familiar with:

Listen to the sound of your brother’s blood, crying out to me from the ground. Now be accursed and driven from the ground that has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood at your hands. When you till the ground it shall no longer yield you any of its produce. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer over the earth. (Genesis 4.10–12).

4 On Tolkien’s Classical training see Williams’ chapter in Williams (2021).

5 “No one ever influenced Tolkien – you might as well try to influence a bandersnatch”, in Lewis (2006) 1049; also *ibidem* 824, 1458.

Brœðr muno beriaz ok at þonom verða[z]
 muno systrungar sifiom spilla.
 Hart er í heimi, hórdómr mikill
 – skeggöld, skálmöld – skildir ro klofnir –
 vindöld, vargöld – áðr veröld steypiz.
 Mun engi maðr qðrom þyrma.

Brother shall strike brother and both fall,
 Sisters' sons defiled with incest;
 Evil be on earth, an Age of Whoredom,
 Of sharp sword-play and shields clashing
 a Wind-age, a Wolf-age – till the world ruins.
 No man to another shall mercy show. (*Völuspá* st. 45)

The first excerpt voices God's threatening prophecy to Cain after the murder of Abel, symbolically taken from the 1966 Jerusalem translation of the Bible to which Tolkien himself contributed; it does not require extensive commentary.⁶

The second passage is a stanza from the cosmogonic poem *Völuspá*, a part of the Old Norse collection Poetic Edda, dated to the c. 10th century CE. Well known to Tolkien,⁷ this poem certainly provided a constant source of inspiration for him, as patently suggested by the fact that, by Tolkien's admission in *Letters* 25, he reused names found in *Völuspá* to name many of his dwarves (Thorin, Durin, Dain, etc.) and the wizard Gandalf. The translation of *Völuspá* given above, by W.H. Auden and P.B. Taylor, came from their edition of the poem, which they sent to Tolkien in advance of its publication and eventually dedicated to him.⁸

⁶ On the probable resonance of Cain's myth in the curse of the Noldor, one could mention that the 'elves' in *Beowulf* are "associated with trolls, giants, and the Undead, as the accursed offspring of Cain", as Tolkien himself notes in *Letters* 236. Another important influence is of course the expulsion of Adam from Paradise in *Genesis* 3.17–19.

⁷ Tolkien's general expertise in Icelandic literature (dating to his university years) notwithstanding, one should note that the *Völuspá* was featured in Tolkien's university lectures and it inspired Tolkien to compose a poem ("The Prophecy of the Sybil") in the 1930s. Cf. Hammond and Scull (2017) *Ch* 162, 176; *RG* 1028–9.

⁸ Cf. *Letters* 295, where Tolkien also promises to send to Auden his poem *Volsungakviða En Nyja* (now published in *LSG*), written several years before and described "as an attempt to unify the lays about the Völsungs from the Elder Edda, written in the old eight-line fornyrðislag stanza".

The speaker of the poem, the *Völva*, is a sort of prophetess or seeress – a figure that clearly owes much to the sybil-like figures of the classical tradition (such as, indeed, the *Parcae* of Catullus, with their prophetic song), as well as to biblical prophetesses and the speaker of the Apocalypse.⁹ The *Völva*'s song bleakly presages the progressive decline of the world, through different Ages, and its eventual collapse in water. The song also foretells the eventual coming of a Hesiodic golden age (*gullaldr*); therefore, in this version the golden age is crucially postponed to the future, in the aftermath of the Armageddon (*Ragnarök*), and not projected into the past. As such, the eventual return of the era of prosperity in the *Völuspá* resembles a cyclical version of the myth of Ages, also attested in antiquity, e.g. in Virgil's famous *Eclogue 4* or in Stoic cosmology (on which see below).

The four texts quoted above show distinct thematic correlations, building on the same motive of the decline of Ages and its moral consequences; Tolkien's own version – directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously – probably owes something to the other three (and others). Nonetheless, it is difficult – if not impossible – to disentangle the terms and the direction of this relationship, the stages of intermediation, and the degree of authorial intention, not least because some connections could well be transcultural and related to cultural or psychological archetypes, inherited or not.

The comparison above suffices to show the complexity of any *Quellenforschung* study on Tolkien, who – himself a literary critic – notoriously advised others to “be satisfied with the soup” (i.e. the “story as it is served up by its author or teller”) and not the “desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled” (i.e. “its sources or material – even when (by rare luck) those can be with certainty discovered”).¹⁰ Certainly, I do not mean to suggest that *Quellenforschung* in Tolkien has no rationale and should be avoided at all costs as

⁹ On the classical and biblical ancestry of the *Völuspá*, see Steinsland (2013), Johansson (2013) and Pétursson (2013).

¹⁰ *TOFS* 39–40. As regards the history and problems of source criticism in Tolkien, cf. Fisher (2011), esp. the editor's preface and the introductory discussion by Shippey. An influential theoretical concept in this respect is that of ‘calquing’; this concept was first used by Shippey (cf. esp. Shippey (2005) 101–2, 234–7 and *passim*) and it informs most of his works (e.g. Shippey (2013)) and many of those of his epigones. Calquing and its theoretical justifications are certainly more sophisticated and nuanced as a concept than those used by traditional *Quellenforschung* and have the merit to give the right emphasis to the individuality of the ‘target language’ (i.e. the literary code of Tolkien's secondary world). Nevertheless, in my

an inevitable dead end. What I mean is that, in this chapter, I will take a sceptical stance on the matter and generally avoid positing any direct, unilateral relationship between a classical comparandum and a Tolkien text. I will rather endeavour to follow Tolkien's own advice, which, I believe, offers good guidance for any study of (classical) reception in Tolkien:

I fear you may be right that the search for the sources of *The Lord of the Rings* is going to occupy academics for a generation or two. I wish this need not be so. To my mind it is the particular use in a particular situation of any motive, whether invented, deliberately borrowed, or unconsciously remembered that is the most interesting thing to consider. (*Letters* 337)

The “motive” I will be focusing on in this chapter as a case study is that of the narrative of decline; the “particular use” I will specifically investigate might be described by the term ‘accommodation’ and ‘focalization’, the meaning of which I will better illustrate in the discussion to follow below.

CLASSICAL NARRATIVE OF DECLINE BEYOND HESIOD

In the Greek and Roman tradition, narratives of decline abound in sources not directly related to Hesiod's myth of the Ages and its reception (e.g., Ovid *met.* 1.89–150). For example, works of Hesiod's predecessor Homer already insinuate that the present generation is weaker than the earlier one (*Il.* 1.272, 5.302–4 = 20.285–7), with remarks of this sort duly reproduced in Virgil (cf. *Aen.* 12.896–902) – and Tolkien obviously conversant with works of both authors. In the Roman context, narratives of decline emerged from and soon coalesced with a popular wisdom on the degeneracy of younger generations (cf. e.g. Plaut. *Trin.* 1028–45, *Bacch.* 437–41), as well as with traditionalist idealizations of the *mores maiorum* (cf. e.g. Cato *Carmen de moribus*). The belief in the gradual decline of generations crystallized into archaising discourses (such as those found in Salust's historical theory, informed by the Hesiodic tradition)¹¹ and continued to

opinion, Shippey's use of calquing does not always account for Tolkien's scepticism towards any search for direct primary correspondences.

11 See Conley (1981).

develop in the following centuries; the later pagan writers idealized early Romans to such a degree that they earned scorn of Augustine, expressed in the first books of *De Civitate Dei*.¹²

In one significant version of the narrative, the idealization of the past assumes a strong primitivist dimension. Within the surviving sources, this version emerges in Hesiod (to whose golden race of men “the grain-giving field bore crops of its own accord, much and unstinting” (*erg.* 117–18)) and reappears e.g. in Aratus (96–136) and Catullus 64 (*esp.* 1–24, 384–408). The last poem links the decline from one Age to the other to a (deplored) advancement in technology, epitomized in the opening of the poem by the invention of seafaring; other Classical works (e.g. Propertius 1.17.13–14 or Seneca’s *Medea* 301–79) also stigmatise this development and praise the men of yore, belonging to “a honest age, far removed from deceit” (329–30).

In another, less primitivistic version of the decline myth, moral deterioration does not directly stem from technological or cultural advancement. A relevant reinterpretation of this approach is the partially preserved myth of the fall of Atlantis, found in Plato’s *Timaeus* (24E–25A) and *Kritias* (at length). Although the description of the island of Atlantis follows the pattern of a natural paradise,¹³ its early inhabitants engaged not in primitive pastoralism but in mine-work, agriculture, workmanship, and, indeed, seafaring, and their art and architecture “was such as befitted the greatness of the kingdom” (Plat. *Kritias* 117A, transl. Bury). For this reason, the wealth they possessed was “so immense that the like had never been seen before in any royal house nor will ever easily be seen again; and they were provided with everything of which provision was needed” (*ibidem* 114D). Similarly, in Stoic philosophy of history and language (as far as that can be reconstructed), the idealized early men were enlightened Sages, inventors of arts, and users of the perfect language.¹⁴

A common trait of both primitivist and technological golden era narratives is the correlation between decline (cultural and/or moral) and the widening gap between the human and the divine. The “Golden men” of the Hesiodic tradition

12 Cf. Bonamente (1975) and Murphy (2005); also Lambert (1999).

13 Cf. Plat. *Kritias* 115A: “it produced and brought to perfection all those sweet-scented stuffs which the earth produces now, whether made of roots or herbs or trees, or of liquid gums derived from flowers or fruits”.

14 Cf. Pezzini and Taylor (2019) with bibl., esp. the chapters by De Melo and Blank (126, 139–40).

“lived like gods” and were “loved by the blessed gods” (Hes. *erg.* 112, 120). In contrast, in Catullus’ bleak present the interaction with divine beings is no longer possible. Similarly, in the case of Atlantis, it is the gradual fading in its people of their original “portion of divinity” and its “becoming faint and weak through being oftentimes blended with a large measure of mortality” (Plat. *Kritias* 121A–B) that causes the moral (and eventually also political) decline and collapse of their civilization.

Both primitivist and technological versions of the decline narrative can co-exist in the same source: in Plato’s *Kritias*, Atlantis’ decadent magnificence eventually succumbs to the moral superiority of less advanced ancient Athens (lesser still than Plato’s own Athens).¹⁵ Often not exclusive, narratives of decline tend to intertwine with progressive models and/or become integrated into cyclical frameworks. Decline in one aspect of natural or human life can be complemented by progress in another aspect. In the case of the kings of Atlantis, for example, technological progress conceals moral decline. Vice versa, in Epicurean philosophy a largely progressive model of cultural development coexists with a traditional declinist cosmology.¹⁶

Finally, within a cyclical framework, periods of decline can be followed by returns (complete or partial) to an original ‘golden state’, either thanks to the intervention of a saviour-like figure (as in Virgil’s *Eclogue* 4, imbued by oriental discourses¹⁷) or after a cataclysm of sort (such as the Stoic *ekpyrosis*). However even within these versions, decline normally remains an unavoidable trajectory of history. This generally declinist outlook pervades ancient culture, from philosophy down to popular wisdom, and presumably fed into Tolkien’s imagination since his early years.

¹⁵ Cf. Plat. *Kritias* 112C: “all was devoid of gold or silver, of which they made no use anywhere”.

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. Verlinksy’s chapter in Pezzini and Taylor (2019), with bibl.; also Reinhardt (2008).

¹⁷ See the still useful Nisbet (1978).

NARRATIVES OF DECLINE IN TOLKIEN

Narratives of decline are omnipresent and wide-ranging in Tolkien's works. The *Lord of the Rings* abounds in allusions to the superiority of past generations and cultures, very similar to those found in Homer or Virgil (cf. e.g. *LotR* 2 “[the hobbits] have dwindled, they say, and in ancient days they were taller”¹⁸). These declinist allusions resonate with the visual landscape, strewn with ruins or ancestral buildings (such as the tower of Orthanc or the statues of the Argonaths), vestiges of a lost civilization. As in the Hesiodic myth, present humans in the *Lord of the Rings* fall ill and die much more easily than their ancestors, who lived much longer and led lives like the Hesiodic men of the Golden Age, who did not suffer “miserable age” and “when they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep”.¹⁹ Artifacts and artworks produced by present generations cannot equal with works of ancient masters.²⁰ Learning is no longer widely pursued, and much knowledge has been irremediably lost.²¹ Even the language used by characters is described as a corrupted shadow of an ancestral perfection,²² a turn that parallels the Stoic philosophy of language. The *Lord of the Rings* is thus set in a sort of fictional ‘late antiquity’ (*qua* historiographical, rather than historical, construct), dominated by a sense of loss and decline. Not casually, Tolkien himself observed that “the heart-racking sense of the vanished past” was the emotion which moved him “supremely” and he found “small difficulty in evoking” (*Letters* 96).²³

18 For an extensive list, see Huttar (2009) 9.

19 Hes. *erg.* 116–17. Cf. Tolkien's description of the fallen Númenóreans: “(...) whereas aforetime men had grown slowly old, and had laid them down in the end to sleep, when they were weary at last of the world, now madness and sickness assailed them” (*Sil* 274).

20 Cf. e.g. “in metal-work we cannot rival our fathers, many of whose secrets are lost” (*LotR* 229).

21 Cf. e.g. “all lore was in these latter days fallen from its fullness of old” (*LotR* 860).

22 Cf. e.g. “There are no words left to express his staggerment, since Men changed the language that they learned of elves in the days when all the world was wonderful” (*Hobbit* 250); on Tolkien's philosophy of language cf. in particular Turner (2007), Fornet-Ponse, Honegger, Eilmann (2016), and the editors' introduction and notes in Fimi and Higgins (2020).

23 Tolkien's declinism has been often noted by scholarship: cf. Rateliff (2006), Fimi (2009), Caldecott (2012) 1–3, 29–30, 119–20, Drout (2013); also Fontenot (2019).

Tolkien's declinism is even more evident at the macro-historical level, palpable in the *Silmarillion* and other posthumous works. The history of his secondary world (Arda), as mentioned before, is in fact divided into a series of Ages. Each age is inferior to the previous one in some respect; each one (as is typical in classical narratives of decline) gradually degenerates through moral corruption, has less and less divine interaction, and ends in a final catastrophic event.²⁴ A key notion within Tolkien's declinism is in fact that of the 'Fall', which affects all different 'races' within Arda, in different ways.²⁵ For a committed Christian like Tolkien, the concept of the Fall undoubtedly ties to the doctrine of original sin and the exile from Eden;²⁶ however, in Tolkien's case, the Fall was also clearly informed by the (non-Christian) literary models that had nurtured his imagination since childhood. To give but one example, in Tolkien's story of the fall of Túrin Turambar, one can easily identify traces of classical (Oedipus' incest), Nordic (Sigurd's slaying of a dragon) and Finnish (Kullervo's suicide) parallels.

In at least one example of Tolkien's narrative sequences of 'fall', 'decline', and 'catastrophe', classical ancestry is difficult to deny. Namely, I am referring to the tale of the fall of Númenor, unambiguously and intimately connected to Plato's story of Atlantis. In fact, Tolkien refers to the island as "Númenor-Atlantis" in many letters (*Letters* 131, 151, 252);²⁷ even in a later emended version of the myth (where the classical ancestry is less evident, see below), the narrative parallelism remains striking, with similarities in the islands' divine origin, landscape, topography, moral corruption, nature of the catastrophe that befell them etc. It

²⁴ See Simonson (2018), focusing on the diminution of the relationship between the Children of Ilúvatar and trees, as an epitome of this decline, and Williams (2023, esp. Chapter 1) for an overview. On the relationship between Ages in Christian theology and Tolkien's Ages, see *Appendix Ages of the world* in *TNoME*.

²⁵ Cf. e.g. "In the cosmogony there is a fall: a Fall of angels we should say" (*Letters* 131); "The main body of the tale, the *Silmarillion* proper, is about the fall of the most gifted kindred of the Elves, their exile from Valinor (a kind of Paradise, the home of the Gods)" (*ibidem*); "the first Fall of Man, for reasons explained, nowhere appears" (*ibidem*).

²⁶ Cf. e.g. "Genesis is separated by we do not know how many sad exiled generations from the Fall, but certainly there was an Eden on this very unhappy earth. We all long for it, and we are constantly glimpsing it: our whole nature at its best and least corrupted, its gentlest and most humane, is still soaked with the sense of 'exile'" (*Letters* 96).

²⁷ Cf. also *Letters* 131 "the great 'Atlantis' isle of Númenóre"; *Letters* 144. On Númenor and Atlantis in Tolkien see esp. Delattre (2007), (2011), Leśniewski (2020), Kleu (2021).

is thus not surprising that Tolkien decided to keep the allusive epithet “*atalantë*” for Númenor.²⁸ As he explained:

It is a curious chance that the stem $\sqrt{\text{t}}\text{alat}$ used in Q[uenya] for ‘slipping, sliding, falling down’, of which *atalantie* is a normal (in Q) noun-formation, should so much resemble Atlantis. (*Letters* 347n)

The very etymology of this word confirms how the tale of Númenor is prototypical of Tolkien’s omnipresent declinism as well as alluding to its classical ancestry – or at least it would seem that way. In fact, in the quote above, Tolkien claims that allusive etymology of “*atalantë*” is just “curious chance” rather than an intentional allusion. How and why is Tolkien able to say that a word from his own language ‘accidentally’ resembles its very fitting Greek equivalent? To answer this question, we now need to address Tolkien’s own conception of (classical) reception more directly.

TOLKIEN’S RECEPTION THEORY

I spoke above of classical ancestry, but in the case of Númenor-*atalantë* one might be tempted to talk of ‘rewriting’. According to an unpublished, incomplete version of the myth, known as *The Lost Road*, the protagonist (Tolkien’s alter-ego,²⁹ studying Classics at Oxford and with a “Latin-mood”³⁰) should have gone back to the time of Atlantis and witnessed its collapse. This would have made the identification of Númenor with Atlantis as explicit as it could be, as Tolkien himself indicated:

I began an abortive book of time-travel of which the end was to be the presence of my hero in the drowning of Atlantis. (*Letters* 257)

²⁸ Cf. *Sil* 281 “Akallabêth the Downfallen, *Atalantë* in the Eldarin tongue”.

²⁹ As noted by Christopher Tolkien at *LR* 53.

³⁰ Cf. *LR* 41 “(...) get a Latin and Greek mood!’ ‘I do. I have had one for a week, and I have got it now; a Latin one luckily, and Virgil in particular”.

In fact, even just a glance at this unfinished text reveals that, already at this stage of his writing career, Tolkien was unable to simply ‘rewrite’ the Platonic myth but was compelled to integrate his own authorial mediation, complementing untold parts of the narrative out of his own imagination, changing names and details, and especially inserting his own viewpoint, experience, creative idiosyncrasies, and concerns into the story, retold through a frame narrative and focalized from the perspective of a 20th century Englishman.

It was indeed his literary urgency to create something distinct from its source that explains his eventual decision to abandon the story:

My effort, after a few promising chapters, ran dry: it was too long a way round to what I really wanted to make, a new version of the Atlantis legend. (*Letters* 94).

The adjective ‘new’ is key to Tolkien’s literary theory and is related to what Tolkien describes in his literary manifesto *On Fairy-stories* as the foundation and purpose of the creative urge:

This recovery fairy-stories help us to make. (...) Recovery (...) includes return and renewal of health (*TOFS* 67)

Creative fantasy (...) is mainly trying to do something else (make something new) (*TOFS* 68)

It is not by chance that, within Tolkien’s literature, his stories’ ‘happy endings’ are constantly associated with the notion of ‘renewal’.³¹

Tolkien’s urge for ‘literary newness’ explains why he decided, against his original intentions, to integrate the tale of Númenor into his own *legendarium*

31 Cf. e.g. the eagle’s announcement to the city of Minas Tirith, after the fall of Sauron: “the Tree that was withered shall be renewed, | and he shall plant it in the high places, | and the City shall be blessed” (*LotR* 963). The verb ‘to renew’, and derivatives, is extremely common in *LotR* and is especially associated with the character of Aragorn, whose key epithet is that of “renewer” (*LotR* 170) and whose blade will be “renewed” (*LotR* 170), just like the “dignity of the kings of old” (*LotR* 1044) and the “kingship” in general (*LotR* 1057). The renewal of the tree of Gondor is analogical to that of its kingship, as Gandalf explains to Aragorn in a key scene of the novel, when a new sapling of the ancient Tree is providentially found under the snow of the sacred mountain (*LotR* 970–2).

(indeed ‘a new mythology’, different from the classical one). In later years, he would be bolder in his claims of authorial freedom and originality:

The legends of Númenórë (...) are my own use for my own purposes of the Atlantis legend, but not based on special knowledge, but on a special personal concern with this tradition of the culture-bearing men of the Sea, which so profoundly affected the imagination of peoples of Europe with westward-shores. (*Letters* 227)

N. is my personal alteration of the Atlantis myth and/or tradition, and accommodation of it to my general mythology. Of all the mythical or ‘archetypal’ images this is the one most deeply seated in my imagination, and for many years I had a recurrent Atlantis dream: the stupendous and ineluctable wave advancing from the Sea (...) (*Letters* 276)

Note how Tolkien stresses the ‘personalism’ of his literature in both passages. This emphasis on the personal (or “individual”, “peculiar”, “particular”, “special”) is another key element of Tolkien’s literary theory, which applies to both production and reception:

Literature works from mind to mind and is thus more progenitive. It is at once more universal and more poignantly particular. If it speaks of bread or wine or stone or tree, it appeals to the whole of these things, to their ideas; yet each hearer will give to them a peculiar personal embodiment in his imagination. (*TOFS* 82)

At the same time, as introduced in the last passage, the “personal” element of literature is just one of two inextricable poles. On the other side we find what Tolkien refers to as “universal” or “traditional” (according to two different theoretical frameworks which coexist in Tolkien), or, alternatively, as a “pattern” or a “motive”.

I can illustrate this pervasive set of polarities with a powerful meta-artistic analogy from *On Fairy-stories*:³²

32 For Tolkien’s meta-literary use of the imagery of Tree cf. e.g. “It is easy for the student to feel that with all his labour he is collecting only a few leaves, many of them now torn or decayed, from the countless foliage of the Tree of Tales” (*TOFS* 66).

Who can design a new leaf? The patterns from bud to unfolding, and the colours from spring to autumn were all discovered by men long ago. But that is not true. (...) Spring is, of course, not really less beautiful because we have seen or heard of other like events: like events, never from world's beginning to world's end the same event. Each leaf, of oak and ash and thorn, is a unique embodiment of the pattern, and for some this very year may be the embodiment, the first ever seen and recognized, though oaks have put forth leaves for countless generations of men. (TOFS 66)

From this analogy, according to Tolkien, every “new”, “personal” event – which can be literary (the tale of Númenor) or experiential (Tolkien’s Atlantis’ dream) – is an “unique embodiment” of an archetypical motive (‘the decline and fall of human affairs’). Each embodiment (or “mode”) is somehow related to all its previous (and future) embodiments (as e.g. Plato’s myth of Atlantis), both literary or real (even just by transitive property through their shared underlying pattern), but the terms of this relationship cannot be easily explained in genealogical terms, as within a framework of intertextuality or *Quellenforschung*. It might well be possible that the “universal” or “traditional” element within a new embodiment is somehow derived from or influenced by previous ones (*qua* ‘sources’), but this “remains unproven”, as Tolkien says in reference to an analogous dualistic tension in his essay *A Secret Vice*:

Of great interest to me is the attempt to disentangle – if possible – (...) (1) the personal from (2) the traditional. The two are doubtless much interwoven – the personal being possibly (though it is not proven) linked to the traditional in normal lives by heredity, as well as by the immediate and daily pressure of the traditional upon the personal from earliest childhood. (MC 211)³³

Whatever its origin, this genealogical derivation (“by heredity”), whether biological or literary, is not exclusive, as shown by Tolkien’s insistence on his own

³³ The tension between tradition and the personal was also a central concern of modernist poetry and criticism (and beyond), especially after T. S. Eliot’s influential essay 1919 *Tradition and the Individual Talent* (see Cianci and Harding (2007) for an overview of its content and context, as well as sources and reception). Tolkien was apparently not a fan of Eliot (cf. *Letters* 261, 267), but he engaged with modernism more than has been traditionally believed (see e.g. Simonson (2008), Hiley (2011)).

Atlantis-dream as one of main ‘sources’ of Númenor (see above) or his talking about human preoccupation with the ‘fall’ in psychological terms:

There cannot be any ‘story’ without a fall – all stories are ultimately about the fall – at least not for human minds as we know them and have them. (*Letters* 131)

The ‘narrative inevitability’ of the Fall motive (and its related declinism) is something which Tolkien himself underlines:

Anyway all this stuff [i.e. the *Silmarillion*] is mainly concerned with Fall, Mortality, and the Machine. With Fall inevitably, and that motive occurs in several modes. (*ibidem*).

An important implication of this ‘fatalistic’ outlook on literary themes is an implicit agnosticism about relationships between different “modes” or “stories” (i.e. different embodiments of the same pattern) and a related scepticism in regards to the possibility of reconstructing them; these have important implications on Tolkien’s views on what we might call reception. This should also explain, finally, why Tolkien could half-jokingly claim that the meta-literary allusiveness of the name *atalantie* was in fact merely “curious chance”.

To sum up, Tolkien describes his own literary endeavour as consisting in producing a new, ‘personal(ized)’ version of an archetypical “theme” or “motive”; this can also involve the “alteration” or “accommodation” of an earlier text (i.e. a pattern of reception). However, rather than as a ‘source’ in its traditional sense, this is construed as just an earlier version (“embodiment”) of the same universal, transcultural archetype³⁴. It is at this inner, ‘deep’ level of literature (and human experience) – Tolkien seems to suggest – that real influence is found, just like, in the life of a tree, a new leaf is more influenced by its underlying pattern rather than by a leaf from a previous year. How this relationship works at this latter, ‘more superficial’ level (i.e. whether the motive is “invented,

³⁴ Although scanty, there is evidence that Tolkien was acquainted with Jung and his theories (cf. *TOFS* 129), and in at least one place he does explicitly refer to the concept of ‘archetype’, in inverted commas (*Letters* 276 “Of all the mythical or ‘archetypal’ images this [*i.e. that embodied in the Atlantis story*] is the one most deeply seated in my imagination.”) For two examples of psychoanalytical readings of Tolkien, cf. O’Neill (1979), reading *LotR* in Jungian terms, and more recently (and less scholarly) Robertson (2016), arguing that *The Lord of the Rings* is a report of a dream. Cf. also Rosegrant (2022).

deliberately borrowed, or unconsciously remembered”) is often unclear and is ultimately interesting (at least according to Tolkien’s (self-)analysis). This is also why, in contrast, “it is the particular use in a particular situation of any motive (...) that is the most interesting thing to consider”. It is indeed to “a particular use” of the motive of decline that I will now turn my attention, in the next, and final, section.

RECEPTION AS FOCALIZATION

In the previous section, I focused mainly on discussing Tolkien’s own self-understanding of his (classical) reception, which, as I showed, comes close to an implicit theoretical deconstruction of its foundations and purposes. Authors cannot be trusted, not even when they act as detached critics of their work (a stance Tolkien was keen to take, especially in his final years³⁵). In this case, however, I largely agree with Tolkien’s self-analysis but at the same time still believe in the merit of comparative criticism even for an author as resistant to influence and as ‘personalist’ as Tolkien, who only aims to investigate “the particular use...in a particular situation”, that is to say, to “disentangle” the “traditional” from the “personal” (without caring too much about the exact origin of the “traditional”).

What, then, is the “personal” use of the traditional motive of the narrative of decline, for which classical declinism, and the myth of Atlantis in particular, is a certain, although not exclusive, parallel? There are in fact many different answers to this question, each related to the different contexts and natures of the many different “embodiments” of the motive. Here, I will only focus on one specific use which I believe to be widespread and significant. This is related to the focalization of the motive through the viewpoint of the Elves, who are in fact the declinists *par excellence* within Tolkien’s *legendarium*, as he repeatedly suggests:

35 Cf. e.g. “Much of my own book puzzles me; and in any case much of it was written so long ago (...) that I read it now as if it were from a strange hand. (...) I have not named the colours because I do not know them” (*Letters* 211).

The Elves (...) became obsessed with ‘fading’, the mode in which the changes of time (the law of the world under the sun) was perceived by them. They became sad, and their art (shall we say) antiquarian, and their efforts all really a kind of embalming (...) (*Letters* 131)

The declinism of the Elves is also visible in their obsession with memory, their typical opposition to change (“embalming”),³⁶ and their related effort to preserve the ‘Golden age’ in secluded *loci amoeni*, including especially in *LotR* the timeless land of Lórien (“the Golden Wood”). The ‘golden’ status of this place derives from Galadriel’s ring, whose power in fact was:

(...) the prevention or slowing of decay (i.e. ‘change’ viewed as a regrettable thing), the preservation of what is desired or loved, or its semblance – this is more or less an Elvish motive. (*Letters* 131)³⁷

Three Rings of the Elves, wielded by secret guardians, are operative in preserving the memory of the beauty of old, maintaining enchanted enclaves of peace where Time seems to stand still and decay is restrained, a semblance of the bliss of the True West. (*ibidem*)

The Elves’ viewpoint is thus analogous to the classical perception of time and history, and it would not be too far-fetched to say that the Elves, in some ways, represent the position of ancient Greeks and Romans, of course ‘accommodated’ into Tolkien’s mythology.³⁸

The Elves lie at the heart of Tolkien’s *legendarium* and are the characters most beloved by Tolkien, who was compelled to write stories about them from a young age. At the same time – and this is crucial – Tolkien does not fully ‘agree’ with the Elves, stating that their declinism, and thereby conservatism, is not “in the right”:

36 The same obsession with embalming is associated with the Númenóreans in their decline, when they refuse to accept the Valar’s authority and Death, the Gift of Ilúvatar (cf. *Sil* 266).

37 Cf. also “the Elven-rings (...) those who had them in their keeping could ward off the decays of time and postpone the weariness of the world” (*Sil* 288).

38 It might be not coincidental that Tolkien often refers to the ancestral language of the Elves as “Elvish Latin”.

the Elves are not wholly good or in the right (...) They wanted to have their cake and eat it: to live in the mortal historical Middle-earth because they had become fond of it (...) and so tried to stop its change and history, stop its growth. (*Letters* 154).

For Tolkien the (Christian) thinker the Elves' refusal of change, however understandable, is just a 'partial' and imperfect outlook on history, because:

mere change as such is not represented as 'evil': it is the unfolding of the story and to refuse this is of course against the design of God. But the Elvish weakness is in these terms naturally to regret the past, and to become unwilling to face change: as if a man were to hate a very long book still going on, and wished to settle down in a favourite chapter. (*Letters* 181)

According to Tolkien, the changes brought about by time, however dramatic and traumatic, are thus not catastrophes to avoid or bemoan, but rather "the law of the world under the sun", that is, the mysterious unfolding of the history of Creation, to be embraced with hope and courage.³⁹ To try to arrest this unfolding, to refuse to engage with change, is a temptation to overcome; the Elves' redemption in the *Lord of the Rings* does not by chance follow their acceptance to give up the power of their Rings and accept the development of the history of Ilúvatar, the Creator of Arda, and the Author of its Story.

Tolkien therefore 'accommodates' the declinism of classical ancestry but integrates it into a larger picture, focalising it through his characters and thereby disclaiming any full assent to it, with an authorial detachment that is well documented in his letters⁴⁰.

That Tolkien the theorist had anti-declinist views, quite different from those of his beloved Elves, can also be traced in his non-literary texts, in which he talks, for example, of the "unwholesome modern thirst for the 'authentically primitive'" (*SK* 250; cf. Flieger *ad loc.*) or berates some Christian theologians for

³⁹ See also Tolkien's own explanation in *TNoME* chapter 18 (*Elvish Ages and Númenórean*) concerning the *natural* process by which the Elves' *fëar* (souls) gradually consume their *hröar* (bodies) until the latter fade and eventually disappear altogether. I owe this point to Martin Simonson.

⁴⁰ Cf. e.g. "Treebeard is a character in my story, not me; and though he has a great memory and some earthy wisdom, he is not one of the Wise, and there is quite a lot he does not know or understand" (*Letters* 153). See also below.

their primitivist views, noting that “‘primitiveness’ is no guarantee of value, and is and was in great part a reflection of ignorance”, as well as that the Christian Church

was not intended by Our Lord to be static or remain in perpetual childhood; but to be a living organism (likened to a plant), which develops and changes in externals by the interaction of its bequeathed divine life and history – the particular circumstances of the world into which it is set. (*Letters* 394).

This might all be well, but an important question remains: given Tolkien’s ‘progressive’ (or rather Providentialistic) views, how can one explain the undoubted pervasiveness of narratives of decline in his work, as discussed above? The reason may be that the whole of his *legendarium* is in fact focalized through a complex web of frame narratives, according to which Tolkien is just a collector and translator of ancient tales, originally written by other authors (with their idiosyncrasies, errors, and incomplete viewpoints⁴¹). In the case of the *Silmarillion*, these authors are indeed Elves, authors of “Elvish Legends” (*Letters* 212)⁴²: this explains why “the point of view of the whole cycle is the Elvish” (*Letters* 131) and therefore why ‘declinist’ views are so present in their stories. These views do not need to be sanitized, to square with the author’s (Christian) beliefs; in fact, as Tolkien comments:

it must be remembered that mythically these tales are Elf-centred, not anthropocentric (...). This [*i.e. the conception of death as the ‘gift of God’*] is therefore an ‘Elvish’ view, and does not necessarily have anything to say for or against such beliefs as the Christian that ‘death’ is not part of human nature, but a punishment for sin (rebellion), a result of the ‘Fall’. (*Letters* 212)

41 Cf. also Gandalf’s meta-literary comment on *The Hobbit*, allegedly written by Bilbo: “But you know how things went, at any rate as Bilbo saw them. The story would sound rather different, if I had written it” (*UT* 323). On Tolkien’s meta-textual frames and its implications on focalization see Pezzini (2018).

42 In the early versions of his mythology, Tolkien conceived an elaborate meta-textual frame to justify the Elvish focalization, according to which an ancient traveller compiled oral stories, recorded directly from Elves that he encountered during a journey to a distant island. On meta-textual frames in the *Book of Lost Tales* and its later revisions, see in particular Noad (2000), Flieger (2007), and Atherton (2012), esp. 97–118, 189.

This is, of course, all authorial construct, but an important and revealing one, through which Tolkien self-reflects on an important mode of reception, including the classical one. Earlier influential sources are accommodated into his ‘new’ literary event by a process of focalization, through which they are ‘partialized’ and integrated into a Whole. This Whole is superior to the parts, but within that all individual parts are fully embraced (and not sanitized or censured), with the awareness that the part (however incomplete) is always the starting point toward the Universal;⁴³ there is indeed nothing that has no part in the Whole, since, as Ilúvatar (the One Author) says to the rebellious artist Melkor in the cosmogonic myth of the *Silmarillion*, “no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me” and “all the secret thoughts of thy mind (...) are but a part of the whole and tributary to its glory” (*Sil* 17).

Among these, the part of the Elves, with their characteristic declinism of classical ancestry, has certainly assumed a primary position in Tolkien’s work, not least because it resonates with an important dimension of his own psyche, wounded by the early loss of his parents, the catastrophic First World War, and in general the trauma of the sudden and precipitous end of an Age:

Imagine the experience of those born (as I) between the Golden and the Diamond Jubilee of Victoria. Both senses and imaginations of security have been progressively stripped away from us. Now we find ourselves nakedly confronting the will of God, as concerns ourselves and our position in Time. ‘Back to normal’ – political and Christian predicaments – as a Catholic professor once said to me, when I bemoaned the collapse of all my world that began just after I achieved 21 (*Letters* 306).⁴⁴

⁴³ Cf. on this: “You must concentrate on some part, probably relatively small, of the World (Universe), whether to tell a tale, however long, or to learn anything however fundamental – and therefore much will from that ‘point of view’ be left out, distorted on the circumference, or seem a discordant oddity. The power of the Ring over all concerned, even the Wizards or Emissaries, is not a delusion – but it is not the whole picture, even of the then state and content”. (*Letters* 153).

⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, declinist views are widespread in the cultural landscape following the First World War (and beyond) and are traceable in a range of works including the poetry of Yeats, Joyce, Pound and other modernists, Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, Toynbee’s *A Study of History*, Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, etc. For a comparative discussion see Simonson (2008), convincingly arguing that Tolkien deviates from these through the construction of a secondary world, which penetrates the veil of inevitable despair and defeatism and of-

It is in fact beyond doubt that the declinist mode formed part of Tolkien's complex personality, despite (or rather together with) his Providentialist views, as he himself reflected upon in his letters:

A small knowledge of history depresses one with the sense of the everlasting mass and weight of human iniquity: old, old, dreary, endless repetitive unchanging incurable wickedness. All towns, all villages, all habitations of men – sinks! And at the same time one knows that there is always good: much more hidden, much less clearly discerned, seldom breaking out into recognizable, visible, beauties of word or deed or face (...) (*Letters* 69).

As suggested by this final observation, Tolkien considered even his own bleak perception of life and history as 'partial',⁴⁵ just like that of the Elves (and his sources), but he nevertheless embraced it, recognising its value and beauty, exorcising it into his Art, and using it as fuel for it.⁴⁶

EPILOGUE

In conclusion, Tolkien's theory and practice of reception involves an unscrupulous and largely unacknowledged accommodation of (classical) sources into a very personal, 'new' version of motives allegedly subsumed within those sources. An important feature of this accommodation consists in the focalization of the source (also achieved through meta-textual frames) and their integration into a single, larger framework, where, however, they abide with no ideological saniti-

fers a glimpse of future hope. In some sense, Tolkien's work could thus be considered as involving an overarching focalization of contemporary declinist views (which he certainly partly shared).

45 Cf. also: "Gloomy thoughts, about things one cannot really know anything [of]; the future is impenetrable especially to the wise; for what is really important is always hid from contemporaries, and the seeds of what is to be are quietly germinating in the dark in some forgotten corner, while everyone is looking at Stalin or Hitler (...)" (*Letters* 79).

46 On this cf. e.g. Tolkien's description of the origin of his *legendarium*: "I sense amongst all your pains (some merely physical) the desire to express your feeling about good, evil, fair, foul in some way: to rationalize it, and prevent it just festering. In my case it generated Morgoth and the History of the Gnomes" (*Letters* 66).

zation. This results in a tension which is arguably very productive and effective, as well as liberating. For Tolkien, reception also means coming to terms with his own literary tastes and sensitivity, by finding a place and meaning for them. For him, therefore, reception could also be construed as a sort of literary therapy, with important theological implications, which, however, cannot be fully discussed here.

These can, however, be summarized by the epilogue sentence from *On Fairy-stories*, which I think also works well as an epigraph for this chapter:

All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and as unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be like and unlike the fallen that we know. (*TOFS* 79)

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“Orfeo Out of Care”

The Reception of the Classical Myth of Orpheus from *Sir Orfeo* to Tolkien

Abstract The paper focuses on an example of multiple-step reception: the contribution of the classical story of Orpheus and Eurydice and the mediaeval lay *Sir Orfeo* to Tolkien’s work.

In the first part, I compare the lay with Virgilian and Ovidian versions of Orpheus’s myth. This comparison shows the anonymous author’s deep knowledge of the ancient texts and complex way of rewriting them through stealing and hybridization.

The lay was highly esteemed by Tolkien, who translated it and took inspiration from it while describing the Elven kingdom in *The Hobbit* and building the storyline of Beren and Lúthien in *The Silmarillion*. Through this key tale, Orpheus’s/Orfeo’s romance has a deep influence also on Aragorn and Arwen’s story in *The Lord of the Rings*. The most important element that Tolkien takes from the *Sir Orfeo* figuration of the ancient story is undoubtedly the insertion of the political theme: the link established between the recovery of the hero’s beloved and the return to royal responsibility.

Thus, the second part of the paper is, dedicated to the reception of *Sir Orfeo* and the classical myth in Tolkien. It shows how in his work the different steps of the tradition of Orpheus’s story are co-present, creating an inextricable substrate of inspiration that nourishes his imagination.

Keywords Orpheus and Eurydice, *Sir Orfeo*, Reception, Tolkien, Beren and Lúthien

Once and for all, when there's song, it's Orpheus.¹

Rainer Maria Rilke

INTRODUCTION²

The aim of this paper is to focus on an example of what we could provisionally call a “two-step” reception: the relationship among the mediaeval lay *Sir Orfeo*, its classical models (in particular Virgil, Ovid, and Boethius), and Tolkien's work. *Sir Orfeo*, composed in Middle English between the 13th and the 14th century, is a greatly interesting piece of mediaeval reception of the ancient world, which has often been studied by mediaeval philologists in his historical and literary context. To classicists, however, it is almost unknown.³ It was specifically studied and appreciated by Tolkien, who found in it a long-lasting source of inspiration. The different levels of this relationship have already been the subject of many studies, as it will be seen. However, an overall view can induce fruitful reflection on the mechanisms of reception and literary memory.

First, we will summarize the first steps of how the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice was received before *Sir Orfeo*. Later, we will show how the mediaeval lay offers a refiguration⁴ with profound modifications of the classical literary incarnations of this myth. What is meant by ‘refiguration’ is that the lay combines themes and aspects of the plot of the different predecessors, thus creating a new structure. By doing this, it emphasizes certain aspects on which, as we shall see, Tolkien focuses. This will be useful to contextualize how Tolkien revives the story of Orpheus/Orfeo, which will be the theme of the last section of the essay.

1 “Ein für alle Male / ists Orpheus, wenn es singt” Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Sonnets to Orpheus* 1. 5. I am indebted for the suggestion to Giaccherini (1994).

2 The title of the paper comes from *Sir Orfeo* 603 (modified). I wish to thank Professor Elisa Romano, who held, the course “Classical Tradition and Reception” at the University of Pavia in 2019; during her lessons I presented the first idea of this paper. I would also like to thank André Faletti for drawing my attention to Tolkien. Finally, I am particularly grateful to the anonymous reviewers, who have been generous with valuable corrections, observations, bibliography, and even pdfs in the post-pandemic difficulties. Any errors and imperfections still present are on me only.

3 Out of curiosity, I put “*Sir Orfeo*” in the search tool of the widely used bibliographical database *L'Année Philologique*; just one result – Friedman (1966) – turned out.

4 As Hardwick (2003) 10 defines it, “selecting and reworking material from a previous or contrasting tradition”.

This introduction will deal with the reception of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice up to the Middle Ages. It is a Greek myth, but it is not presented in an extended form by any Greek source that has come down to us.⁵ In its basic form it narrates the premature death of Orpheus’s bride. The desperate harpist uses his skills in music to enter the Underworld; he dares to ask the god and goddess of the dead to return his beloved. As a special grace, they give him back Eurydice. In some versions he must comply with one condition: Orpheus must not look at her until they have left the kingdom of the dead. The harpist fails to meet this condition and loses his wife for good.

The love story could be a development of the shamanic figure, traditionally seen as founder of the Orphic doctrine.⁶ We can read short allusions, for example, in Euripides’s *Alcestis*⁷ and Plato’s *Symposium*.⁸ Euripides seems to allude to a version of the myth with a happy ending, *i.e.*, Eurydice’s return to life; other ancient passages seem to point to a similar resolution.⁹ Plato’s version, which tells that Orpheus obtained a mere simulacrum of Eurydice from the gods, since he was guilty of having tried to save his beloved without sacrificing himself, could be an ironic reinterpretation of the current story,¹⁰ or a reworking of preceding yet lost narratives such as the Orpheus drama by Aristias about which very little is known.¹¹ There was a tragedy by Aeschylus (*Bassarides*), which probably focused more on Orpheus’s death than on the love story of Orpheus and Eurydice.

That the version known to us, with the famous condition imposed on Orpheus not to turn to look at his beloved and his inexorable loss, was a Hellenistic cre-

5 There is no claim here to provide a complete bibliography of a broad and strongly debated question. For a first orientation, see *e.g.*, Miles (1999) 61–195, Susanetti (2005) 101 ff., Fletcher (2019) 35–40.

6 On Greek shamanism and the place of Orpheus in it, see Dodds (1951) 135–156. For the history of this notion in classical studies, see Bremmer (2016).

7 Eur. *Alc.* 357–362 (Admetus speaking).

8 Plat. *Symp.* 179d (Phaedrus speaking).

9 See Heurgon (1932), Bowra (1952), Lee (1965). The latter gives short notice of every ancient author dealing with the myth.

10 See Lee (1965) 403: “Plato’s private myth-making”.

11 See Sansone (1985) 55–56.

ation remains indemonstrable; likewise, it cannot be definitely proven that it is an innovation by Virgil.¹²

Complete narratives of the sad love story of Orpheus and Eurydice only come to us from the Latin world. It plays a key role in two of the most studied works of classical literature Virgil’s *Georgics* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In Virgil, the story appears at the end of book 4 of the didactic poem on agriculture.¹³ This tale of love and death precedes the final image of resurrection and the rebirth of bees.

In Ovid, the story of Orpheus connects books 10 and 11, containing other narratives and creating a *mise en abyme* of considerable complexity.¹⁴

The third important author who retells this story is Boethius, in the twelfth song of book 3 of *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Here, the story, told mostly in Virgilian terms, is christianized as an *exemplum* against evil worldly temptations. The three authors are already links in the chain of reception: Virgil receives Greek predecessors, possibly Hellenistic; Ovid receives Virgil;¹⁵ Boethius rewrites the Augustan age poets from another point of view.¹⁶

Virgil and Ovid, unlike most ancient authors, enjoyed an uninterrupted fortune in the Middle Ages.¹⁷ Scholars have long speculated on the existence of lost French or Old English lays which would have received Orpheus’s and Eurydice’s story.¹⁸ This would have been the connecting point with the classical texts and

12 Otis (1972) 57–58 finds the hypothesis tempting, albeit maybe unnecessary, and admits that there is no proof. See also Perkell (1978) 217 ff.

13 Verg. georg. 4.457–527.

14 Ov. met. 10,1–85 (Orpheus and Eurydice), 86–739 (other myths narrated by Orpheus), 11,1–66 (death of Orpheus and final reunion with Eurydice).

15 It is enough to remember the so-called Ovidian Aeneid, *i.e.*, Ov. met. 13,623–14,608, where Ovid re-narrates Aeneas’ story establishing an emulative relationship with its predecessor.

16 On Boethius (and *Sir Orfeo*) as examples of the reception of the myth, see Lee (1961) 307.

17 This is no place for a complete bibliography on Virgil’s and Ovid’s fortune in the Middle Ages. In relation to *Sir Orfeo*, see Davies (1961), Gros Louis (1967) 245–247, Pisani Babich (1998) 477.

18 Allen (1964) is probably right pointing out that “about the origin of *Sir Orfeo* all that is certain is that in it we have a remote and Celtic descendant of the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice; beyond that, everything is a matter of speculation, particularly the exact nature of the imaginative process by which that legend was moulded” 108. On the antecedents of *Sir Orfeo*, see the essential article by Kittredge (1886); furthermore, Davies (1936), Loomis (1936), Lee (1965).

Celtic culture, a connection very evident in *Sir Orfeo*. Other intermediaries could have been relevant, such as the translation of Boethius’ *Consolation* into Old English by King Alfred as well as the *Ovide moralisé* of the 13th century.¹⁹ Illuminating convergences between these translations/rewritings and the lay have been studied.²⁰

However, the presence of numerous intermediate moments should not make us lose sight of the deep knowledge the unknown author of *Sir Orfeo* displays of the Virgilian and Ovidian versions of Orpheus’s romance.²¹ Moreover, the author of *Sir Orfeo* does not select and follow one source but combines the gamut of ancient, late antique, and mediaeval sources: what results is, as we said, a refiguration. His work is a proper rewriting, approaching the ancient story with an attitude that we could also define (through the vocabulary of modern reception studies) as “stealing”:²² the plot is closely similar to the classical one despite the introduction of major changes in the order of events and new ethical and political issues belonging to the mediaeval British setting. Considering the convergence of the mediaeval context contemporary with the composition of the lay, its biblical-Christian elements, and the Celtic substratum one can classify *Sir Orfeo* as a hybridization, *i.e.*, “a fusion of material from classical and other cultures”.²³

We will return to Tolkien after analyzing some of the most important correspondences between the ancient sources and *Sir Orfeo*, with “correspondence” used here in its technical sense (an aspect “of the new work which directly relate to a characteristic of the source”).²⁴ This first part will then be employed to show how the lay constitutes an essential link between Orpheus and Middle-Earth.

19 On the myth of Orpheus in the Middle Ages, see Gros Louis (1966)

20 On King Alfred’s translation, see Burke Severs (1961), with rich textual analysis; see also Battles (2010) 181–182 and *passim*. On the *Ovide moralisé*, see Vicari (1982) 69 ff.

21 A knowledge that any educated man of his age must have shared: see Frappier (1976) 215, or. Frappier (1973).

22 As defined by Keen (2019) 12 – referring to Keen (2006): “R. [reception] story derives from ancient S. [source]”. The example proposed (Joyce’s *Ulysses*) is extremely fitting here, since it is another case of re-telling of the ancient myth with strong modernization in situations, relationship between the characters, and the very names.

23 Hardwick (2003) 9. For the relationship with the Celtic imagery, see, *e.g.*, Grimaldi (1981).

24 I refer again to the very appropriate “working vocabulary for reception studies” by Hardwick (2003) 9–10.

REFIGURATION AND HYBRID. FROM LATIN ORPHEUS TO MEDIAEVAL ORFEO

This section will focus on *Sir Orfeo*²⁵, examining convergences with and divergences from its classical antecedents. The very names of the tale's protagonists point to the overwhelming classical influence on this lay.²⁶ However, we will focus on other aspects of the Orpheus/Orfeo story, those that most strongly attracted Tolkien's attention. These said aspects are: the image of Eurydice/Heurodis in a *locus amoenus* setting; the character of the antagonist (serpent and god of the dead/King of the Faeries) and his kingdom; the theme of marital love and mourning; the positive relationship of the protagonist with the natural world; the royal role of the protagonist, with the sub-themes of exile and inheritance. This last theme, *i.e.*, the responsibility of king and the fight for recognition, linked with the quest for the lost bride, constitutes perhaps *Sir Orfeo*'s greatest innovation with respect to its classical precedent. Undoubtedly, it is the most important one for *Sir Orfeo*'s reception in Tolkien, particularly in the story of Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*.

A first point of interest to be discussed concerns the metamorphosis undergone by the character of Orpheus who, in becoming Orfeo, takes on the title of king and political leader, a trait alien to the classical musician. The politicization of his character aligns with the presentation of the location of capitals of these two protagonists. The author of the lay "poker-facedly"²⁷ states that Orfeo's city was Winchester, but that at the (unspecified) time of the events it

25 For the text of the *Sir Orfeo* I used the edition by Laskaya and Salinsbury (1995) and, of course, the translation by Tolkien himself in *GPO*, on which we shall return.

26 Many have noted that the onomastics are one of the most glaring aspects of classical inspiration behind *Sir Orfeo*: see Smithers (1953) 85, Lee (1960) 92, Burke Severs (1961) 187, Davies (1961) 161. The Italianized name of the main character (Orfeo) has led Lee (1960) 97 to postulate the existence of some form of intermediate Italian text, otherwise untraceable in the material. Even more interesting are the very names of the ancestors of Orfeo, King Pluto and King Iuno (*Sir Orfeo* 29–30), presented as ancient sovereigns once deified in a euhemeristic manner. What we see operating here is something more complex than the simple "refreshing ignorance of classical mythology and geography" – as dismissed by Burke Severs (1961) 197. Relevantly, it is difficult to understand why one should try to correct the text to avoid excessive discrepancy with the classical myth – see Davies (1961) 166.

27 The amusing expression is used by Honegger (2010) 119.

was called Traciens.²⁸ This name contains a clear allusion to the classical Orpheus’s epithet *Threicius vates*,²⁹ the form Traciens is probably due to a French intermediary.³⁰ Thrace of the classical myth is a periphery land with close ties to the shamanic side of Orphism. In *Sir Orfeo* it is transposed and hybridized, becoming the heartland of England.³¹ What was once a geographical characterization of otherness becomes a centerpiece of the protagonist’s royalty. Orpheus, stranger *par excellence* who, unlike many other heroes, was never a king,³² becomes Orfeo, the protagonist of a story focused on the renunciation and resumption of a king’s responsibility.

Both in surviving versions of the classical myth and in *Sir Orfeo*, the story begins with the fall of the female protagonist. The opening scene of *Sir Orfeo*, to which the first appearances of Lúthien and Arwen are indebted, is feminine and idyllic: in the lay, dame Heurodis of Traciens enjoys a peaceful late spring day with her ladies-in-waiting.³³ The mediaeval maidens are the hybridized version of a group of Naiads who accompanied the Ovidian Eurydice.³⁴ To that point, the scenario closely follows its classical antecedent, but the disappearance of Orfeo’s bride happens by different means: if Eurydice falls victim to a snake hidden in the grass,³⁵ Heurodis is kidnapped by a shining King of the Faeries.³⁶ Dazzling and merciless, this character threatens horrible repercussions should Heurodis reject him.

The inevitability of Heurodis’s destiny resembles the commonplace classical motif of the inevitability of the Manes, *i.e.*, death. At this moment of the lay,

28 *Sir Orfeo* 47–50 = GPO 124.

29 Ov. met. 11,1–2, Boeth. cons. 3,12,6.

30 See Burke Severs (1961) 197.

31 See Davies (1961) 166. On the historical significance of this mention, see Battles (2010) 190 ff. Other historical interpretations of the lay have been proposed, *e.g.*, by Falk (2000).

32 Such as Orpheus’s travelling companion Jason, or Odysseus.

33 *Sir Orfeo* 57–76 = GPO 124.

34 Ov. met. 10,8–10; for Virgil and Ovid, I used the Loeb Classical Library editions (translations by Henry Rushton Fairclough and Frank Justus Miller, respectively; see bibliography). Eurydice’s companions appear also in Verg. georg. 4,460.

35 See Verg. georg. 4,458–459; Ov. met. 10,10 and 23–24.

36 *Sir Orfeo* 131–174 = GPO 126–127.

the King is acting as a reposition of the snake that kills the young woman, while he will then assume the part of the god of the dead who keeps her in his kingdom. It is easily understood if one considers the Christian conflation of the snake with the devil, who, recast as the King of the Faeries, abducts Heurodis both with temptation and cruelty.³⁷ Relevantly, noon is Satan's time:³⁸ by falling asleep at that inopportune time, Heurodis is befallen to the same helplessness as her classical antecedent, with her bare feet in the tall grass.³⁹ The Virgilian-Ovidian image directly adumbrates the fate of Heurodis: a young woman is taken while sleeping soundly in a flowery meadow, snatched from her husband by an invisible threat embodied by a reptile. However, certain less obvious parallels can also be drawn here. Allegorical readings mediate the reinterpretation of the snake as a figure of sin, *i.e.*, of Satan; the tree under which Heurodis falls asleep is also reminiscent of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Eden.⁴⁰

Another mediation lies in the story of Proserpina's kidnapping.⁴¹ The goddess, snatched from her entourage in a flowery meadow, explicitly comes under the power of the lord of the dead. The superimposition between Proserpina and Eurydice already appeared in Ovid⁴² and predates mediaeval culture.⁴³ Hence, the refiguration in *Sir Orfeo* blends the classical Eurydice, the Eurydice/Eve of Christian allegory (as applied to Ovid),⁴⁴ the classical Proserpina (who will also

37 See Friedman (1966), Jeffrey (1976) 48. Note that the King of the Faeries will use the temptation of beauty also as a final attempt to keep Heurodis in his kingdom (ll. 467–462).

38 As Friedman (1966) 29 puts it: "A mediaeval author such as the *Orfeo* poet need not have been a student of theology to be interested in the idea that the devil appears at noon-day".

39 See Kinghorn (1966) 363.

40 See Hill (1961) 140–141.

41 As narrated, *e.g.*, by Claudian, just to mention one text that extensively narrates this myth and was well known in the culture of mediaeval England: see Bloomfield (1976) 728, reviewing Clarke/Giles (1973). For a reprise of *De raptu Proserpinae*, *e.g.*, in Chaucer, see Turner 2016.

42 See Ov. met. 10,28–29.

43 See Frappier (1976). On the problematic mingling of Eurydice and Proserpina in Heurodis, see Davies (1961) 162.

44 See Vicari (1982) 70.

feature in Eurydice’s story) and the Eurydice/Proserpina of other mediaeval narratives. Furthermore, we should not forget that Tolkien, not unlike many named and anonymous mediaeval authors, regularly filtered classical imagery through Biblical and Christian lenses.

In the Virgilian and Ovidian versions of the myth of Orpheus, the loss of Eurydice occurs in two successive moments: the first loss comes about due to the carelessness and innocence of the young woman, the second one comes about due to the failure of Orpheus himself, who is not able to emerge victorious from the ultimate test of character set by the gods of the Underworld. Some have argued that this constitutes one of the most striking differences between the classical story and that of *Sir Orfeo*, where the fall of Orfeo does not occur.⁴⁵ That assumption holds true only if a rewriting by “stealing” (like this one) is required to adhere precisely to the scheme and order of events of the original, which is, of course, absurd. The author of *Sir Orfeo* proposes a story that faithfully traces the classic one but changes the order of events.

In the classical myth, the structure is as follows: a) capture/death of Eurydice; b) bereaved wanderings of Orpheus; c) descent to the Underworld, an audience with the god of the dead; d) illusory reconquest of Eurydice; e) failure and definitive loss; f) a new period of wandering characterised by hopeless mourning.⁴⁶

In *Sir Orfeo*⁴⁷, the moment in which Orfeo deludes himself to be able to save his bride (but makes a fatal mistake) precedes his wandering and his entry into the world of the dead: it is an Orfeo still fully entangled in his role in the human society who sees Heurodis slipping away from his hands. Both in *Sir Orfeo* and in Virgilian and Ovidian poetry, the measure of his error is disobedience to the explicit instructions given to save his love. Orpheus turns to look at his bride before his time; Orfeo attempts a resistance which the King of the Faeries has already sanctioned as vain.

The hybridization of *Sir Orfeo* means that this failure does not concern only the personal, amorous destiny of the hero but calls into question his role as sovereign: Orfeo’s mistake is above all that of having tried to beat the King of the

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Burke Severs (1961) 188, Kinghorn (1966) 367. For a wide reflection on this problem, see Jeffrey (1976).

⁴⁶ Verg. georg. 4: a) 457–463; b) 464–466; c) 467–484 (the meeting is implicit); d) 485–487; e) 488–502; f) 502 ff. Ov. met. 10: a) 8–10; b) 11–12; c) 13–49; d) 50–54; e) 55–63; f) 56 ff.

⁴⁷ *Sir Orfeo* 175–194 = GPO 127.

Faeries on the level of worldly and military⁴⁸ power, which will prove useless and counterproductive.⁴⁹ We see here the destiny of the lover entwined with an unprecedented destiny as the king.⁵⁰ For Orpheus was only a lover, devoid of any royal role, whereas royalty is central to Orfeo's figuration. Orfeo's self-exile and the theme of kinship deserve our attention because they will prove to be relevant to Tolkien's revival of the story.⁵¹

Faced with the failure of his attempt to restrain Heurodis, Orfeo experiences a moment of pain of unbearable intensity, which seem to rewrite the Ovidian text.⁵² He forswears his royal role and follows his voluntary political exclusion with a renunciation of worldly pleasures of love and human society,⁵³ peremptorily affirming his bereaved chastity in clearly classical terms.⁵⁴ Compare *Sir Orfeo* 209–211

For now ichave mi quen y – lore,
The fairest levedi that ever was bore,
Never eft y nil no woman se.

For now that I have lost my queen,
the fairest lady men have seen,
I wish not woman more to see.⁵⁵

to Virgil

48 A full military interpretation of the passage can be found in Battles (2010).

49 See Pisani Babich (1998).

50 The theme has been often studied: see Gros Louis (1967), Kennedy (1976), Riddy (1976) 7, Edwards (1981), Nicholson (1985).

51 On exile and return from exile in *Sir Orfeo's* cultural context, see Field (2005); on our lay, see specifically p. 48. See also Battles (2005) 196 ff.

52 Compare Ov. met. 10,75 with *Sir Orfeo* 195.

53 *Sir Orfeo* 201–236 = *GPO* 127–128.

54 In classical models put this theme after the definitive loss of the bride, alongside with the more extensive description of Orpheus's pain; this is in fact, be the reason of Orpheus' death: see. Verg. georg. 4,520–527; Ov. met. 11,3–41. For more information, see Giaccherini (2002) 2.

55 Translation: *GPO* 128.

Nulla Venus, non ulli animum flexere hymenaei

No thought of love or wedding song could bend his soul⁵⁶

and Ovid

omnemque refugerat Orpheus
femineam Venerem, seu quod male cesserat illi,
sive fidem dederat

and Orpheus had shunned all love of womankind, whether because of his ill success in love, or whether he had given his troth once for all.⁵⁷

Indeed, the voluntary rejection of human society, framed as a rejection of erotic and married life, is profoundly classical.⁵⁸ The desperation of Orpheus/Orfeo reflects his lonely seclusion among the hostile forces of nature:⁵⁹ a key theme for both Virgil⁶⁰ and Ovid⁶¹ as well as the lay. The innovation of *Sir Orfeo* comes through the lay’s insistent contrasting of the current, miserable life of the former king and his past splendours.⁶² This is consistent with the greater interest in Orfeo’s ties with the social and political context mentioned above; Tolkien will reuse this motif while crafting the adventures of Beren and Aragorn.

Another parallel to ancient models is the minstrel’s ability to enchant and pacify wild animals and beasts encountered during his wanderings beyond the margins of human civilization.⁶³ It is a capacity that Orfeo shares with the

⁵⁶ Verg. georg. 4,516.

⁵⁷ Ov. met. 10,79–81. Ovid gives two reasons for Orpheus’ renunciation of love (excessive pain or lifelong fidelity); of them, “in *Sir Orfeo* the former [...] is given, through the latter is very strongly implied” Hill (1961) 146.

⁵⁸ See Smithers (1953) 85–86.

⁵⁹ *Sir Orfeo* 237 ff. = GPO 128.

⁶⁰ See Verg. georg. 4,507–509 and 517–519.

⁶¹ See. Ov. met. 10,76–77.

⁶² *Sir Orfeo* 241–266 = GPO 128–129. See Gros Louis (1967) 248.

⁶³ *Sir Orfeo* 272–280 = GPO 129.

Virgilian, Ovidian, and Boethian Orpheus,⁶⁴ and, as we shall see, with Tolkien's Beren.

In his solitary ten-year wanderings Orfeo shows no intention or hope of recovering his lost bride.⁶⁵ By chance, Orfeo enters a world far removed from the human one, the world crossed by tracks of mysterious hunts of the people of the faery, who fascinate Orfeo due to their closeness to the refinement of life, long abandoned by mourning Orfeo. Approaching a group of faery hunters, he is surprised to meet Heurodis. The encounter between husband and wife is marked by his amazement and her compassion. Their strong feelings prevent both from speaking a word, while their mutual love becomes exceptionally evident.⁶⁶ Classical ancestry can be recognised in these three themes: the compassion expressed by the shadow of Heurodis/Eurydice for the husband,⁶⁷ the issue of incommunicability,⁶⁸ and Orpheus's/Orfeo's disregard for endangering his own life. For the third theme, compare *Sir Orfeo* 342 (marking Orfeo's decision)

Of liif no deth me no reche

for life or death no more I care⁶⁹

to Ovid

64 Verg. *georg.* 4,510, Ov. *met.* 10,90, 143–144 and 11,1–2, 44–45, Boeth. *cons.* 2,12,7–13. While Orfeo just enchants animals, Orpheus is also said to have power over trees and stones: on this point, see Burke Severs (1961) 190–191. Orfeo's skill with the harp is recognized as a major correspondence with classical texts: e.g., by Smithers (1953) 85. Another character who shares this ability is the Biblical David: on the assimilation of Orpheus and David in the Middle Ages, see Gros Louis (1966) 644, Friedman (1970) 148 ff., Jeffrey (1976) 49 ff., Giaccherini (1994) 14.

65 See Gros Louis (1967).

66 On this theme in *Sir Orfeo*, see Bergner (1979).

67 Compare *Sir Orfeo* 325–327 = *GPO* 130–131 with Verg. *georg.* 4,494–498 and Ov. *met.* 10,60–61. In Vergil, Eurydice actually talks to Orpheus – the only direct speech in Virgil's account, as Anderson (1982) 29–30 points out – while Heurodis cannot.

68 Compare *Sir Orfeo* 335–337 with Verg. *georg.* 4,500–502 and Ov. *met.* 10,62–63.

69 *GPO* 131.

quodsi fata negant veniam pro coniuge, certum est
nolle redire mihi: leto gaudete duorum

but if the fates deny this privilege for my wife, I am resolved not to return. Rejoice
in the death of two.⁷⁰

This aspect will be particularly dear to Tolkien while constructing his own heroes.

Orfeo decides to follow Heurodis’s companions regardless of any danger. Orfeo’s entry into the realm of the faeries is of interest to us because, as we shall see, it constitutes a foundation of Tolkien’s elvish imagery in its characteristic ambiguity, mixing the wonderful and the cruel. Inside a splendid castle⁷¹ that reminds us more of Dante’s limbo⁷² than the Hades of the ancient, the hero meets a horrible multitude of men and women kidnapped by the King of the Faeries now gathered there in apparent death.⁷³ Critics have noted⁷⁴ the incoherence of the passage. It is said that these figures are dead, then that they are not. It is not clear whether they are blocked in the instant of their departure, or they are prisoners of the atrocious punishments that the King of the Faeries inflicts on those who refuse to follow him spontaneously.⁷⁵ This passage reminded most readers of the famous description of the Hereafter in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, populated with all the world’s evils.⁷⁶ The Virgilian text featured abstract concepts, while *Sir Orfeo* depicts singular victims of various painful destinies. Yet, these

70 Ov. met. 10,38–39. Here Orpheus challenges the Underworld gods to take his life if they don’t want to give him Eurydice’s one.

71 *Sir Orfeo* 343–386 = *GPO* 131–132. On the palaces in *Sir Orfeo* see Battles (2010) 186 ff. The guardian is not a monster like the classic Cerberus (Verg. georg. 4,483), but a very mediaeval figure of gatekeeper. In Virgil and Ovid, the moment of entry into the kingdom of the dead was left implicit; here, it is made clear that it is his minstrel capacity that grants Orfeo access.

72 See *Divine Comedy, Inferno* 4.106–111.

73 *Sir Orfeo* 387–404 = *GPO* 132.

74 See, e.g., Allen (1964) 103 ff. The passage has also been suspected of interpolation: see Mitchell (1964).

75 With the same tortures he had threatened Heurodis, as Allen (1964) 105 highlights. See also Kinghorn (1966) 368–369, Williams (2012).

76 Verg. Aen. 6,273–289. See, e.g., Davies (1961) 164–166, Giaccherini (1994) 18.

two scenes show a striking correspondence. Even more striking is the similarity of this passage to the shorter one in *Georgics*, where the poet describes the dead people Orpheus meets, summarizing the entirety of human pain.⁷⁷

At the end of this review of “horrid authenticity”,⁷⁸ Orfeo sees his bride again.⁷⁹ This time, Heurodis is asleep under a tree – the same position she was in when she met the King of the Faeries and was bound to follow him;⁸⁰ furthermore, she wears the same clothes. Therefore, she too is suspended in the decisive moment of her separation from the world of the living; a trait subtly similar to Ovid’s text, which underlines marks of the snake’s bite on Eurydice’s body;⁸¹ that is, her own way to leave her husband and join the Underworld.

What follows⁸² is the hybridized version of the backbone of the Orpheus story. The protagonist introduces himself to his wife’s powerful captor and his queen, propitiates them thanks to his singing ability and persuades them to grant his spouse a second chance at life.⁸³ Significant is the presence of the king’s bride, which demonstrates that the kidnapping of Heurodis had no erotic motivations.⁸⁴ In Celtic fairy tales the kidnapping generally happens because the kidnapper desires to marry his victim. Here this is not the case,⁸⁵ with the classical influence proving more dominant than the Celtic models: indeed, the god of the Underworld to whom Orpheus speaks, Pluto, has his wife Proserpina next to him. Pluto and Proserpina’s bond is the result of a kidnapping as well, and the Ovidian musician refers to it as a *captatio benevolentiae*.⁸⁶

77 Verg. georg. 4, 475–477.

78 Riddy (1976) 6.

79 *Sir Orfeo* 405–408 = *GPO* 132.

80 See Davies (1961) 163–164.

81 Ov. met. 10,49.

82 *Sir Orfeo* 409–476 = *GPO* 132–134.

83 This passage is quite elliptic and emotional in Virgil (*Georg.* 4,467 ff.), while Ovid makes of Orpheus’ appeal to Hades a piece of rhetorical ability (*met.* 10,17–39). See Reed (2013) 170.

84 See Smithers (1953) 88.

85 For an interpretation on the reasonless abduction of Heurodis, see Davies (1961).

86 As a useful aside, Geoffrey Chaucer explicitly calls Pluto the King of the Faeries: see *The Merchant’s Tale* 2227 with Giaccherini (1994) 19 and (2002) 6 n. 11: “it may be significant that

The hybridization is very evident: if the scenario is classic and the characters are very close to their classical counterparts, the dialogue between Orfeo and the king retraces the form of a fairy tale (the faery promises the fulfilment of a wish chosen by the mortal, then tries to take back his word⁸⁷) and the rules of behaviour of the good ruler of the mediaeval age. Here, the real victory of Orfeo is brought about: after having enchanted the King of the Faeries with his music, Orfeo teaches him a lesson in true royalty, forcing him to keep his word and to give him Heurodis.

So, the new Orpheus remedies his second fall and gets his reward: the King of the Faeries explicitly allows him to take Heurodis’s hand and leave his kingdom. The emphasis on the long-desired physical contact between the two spouses seems to recall the final verses of Ovid’s account of Orpheus and Eurydice⁸⁸ with a sort of a reparative correction of the reference text: if Orpheus and Eurydice, in the classical world, could walk together again only in Hades, Orfeo and Heurodis leave behind the world of the non-living and return to their own hand in hand. This is a happy ending that pays homage to the rules of the genre and to the Christian *Weltanschauung*⁸⁹ rather than restoring hypothetical pre-Virgilian positive resolutions of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, if they ever existed.⁹⁰

The lay ends with a section about Orfeo’s return to Traciens, first disguised as a beggar, then as a king.⁹¹ It has very little to do with the classical story of Orpheus and Eurydice, with more parallels to Ulysses’ fate;⁹² to discuss this further would deserve more space. However, we should emphasize that the destiny

precisely in this tale can be found one of Chaucer’s not-too-frequent allusions to Orpheus (1. 1716).”

87 For an example see Smithers (1953) 86.

88 Ov. met. 11,61–66.

89 On the “third Orpheus”, the Christian one, see Kinghorn (1966) 360. On other mediaeval stories of Orpheus’ success in rescuing Eurydice, and on the significance of the happy ending, see Dronke (1962).

90 And possibly known in the Middle Ages: see Allen (1964) 109. On *Sir Orfeo*’s ending, see also Honegger (2010) 123–124.

91 *Sir Orfeo* 477–592 = *GPO* 134–137.

92 For example, Kinghorn (1966) 368 and Bridgwater (2012) 58 n. 3 see the contiguity between Orfeo and Ulysses (without dwelling on it). For a comparative view, see Parks (1983).

of Orfeo makes his reconquest of power, return to his role as king and enjoyment of considerable longevity conditional upon Heurodis’s recovery.⁹³ Their longevity, however, does not go beyond the limits of the human mortal destiny, of which the Ovidian Orpheus was aware.⁹⁴ Not a “happily-ever-after”,⁹⁵ this is an anticipation of the death of Orfeo and the subsequent succession to power of his loyal steward.⁹⁶

TRANSLATION AND EQUIVALENT. *SIR ORFEO* IMAGERY IN TOLKIEN’S FANTASY

Let us now focus on the second step of our analysis – to discuss Tolkien’s work: as a whole, as an instance of a reception of the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, and as a reception of *Sir Orfeo*, with classical myth positioned as an indirect reference for Tolkien.⁹⁷ The receiving author’s knowledge of the ancient source/story⁹⁸ can be taken for granted here. There is no reason to doubt Tolkien’s knowledge of one of the best-known mythical stories of the ancient world, not only to the classicists; Tolkien had a complete classical education, starting at the age of four, the significance of which has been thoroughly studied

93 See Burke Severs (1961) 199 ff.

94 See Ov. met. 10,32–37 (Orpheus to Pluto and Proserpina): “We are totally pledged to you, and though we tarry on earth a little while, slow or swift we speed to one abode. Hither we all make our way; this is our final home; yours is the longest sway over the human race. She also shall be yours to rule when of ripe age she shall have lived out her allotted years. I ask the enjoyment of her as a boon” (omnia debemur vobis, paulumque morati / serius aut citius sedem properamus ad unam. / tendimus huc omnes, haec est domus ultima, vosque / humani generis longissima regna tenetis. / haec quoque, cum iustos matura peregerit annos, / iuris erit vestri: pro munere poscimus usum). On the matter, see Falk (2000), esp. p. 248.

95 *Contra* Lee (1960) 97.

96 “Now King Orfeo newe coround is, / And his quen, Dame Heurodis, / And lived long afterward, / And sethen was king the steward” (*Sir Orfeo* 593–596 = *GPO* 137).

97 Following the definition of Marshall (2016) 21: “indirect reference acknowledges that while there may be a classical source, its use is derivative, and an intermediate source is to be seen as primary”. Tolkien’s primary source would be, of course, *Sir Orfeo*. See Keen (2019) 12.

98 See Hardwick (2003) 5 on the importance on this notion in reception studies.

by scholars.⁹⁹ In his correspondence, Tolkien explicitly mentions that Ovid (and certainly Virgil¹⁰⁰) constituted a part of his curriculum:

“I never learned Finnish well enough to do more than plod through a bit of the original, like a schoolboy with Ovid [...]”¹⁰¹

In another letter, Tolkien openly cites the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as his source of inspiration (we will return to this important passage). As far as *Sir Orfeo* is concerned, there is ample evidence of Tolkien’s “lifelong involvement”¹⁰² with it, as demonstrated by scholarship.¹⁰³ Finally, Tolkien’s translation of *Sir Orfeo* was released in 1975 along with the translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*.¹⁰⁴ According to his son Christopher, the translation dated back many years.¹⁰⁵ Tolkien intended to equip it with an appropriate critical and exegetical apparatus to eventually publish it, but the plan was never fulfilled, and Christopher found no extant commentary written by his father.¹⁰⁶ Although Tolkien never completed this and many other projects, his interest in

99 Swain (2007), Williams (2021). On the importance of classics for Tolkien, see also B. E. Stevens (2017).

100 For the influences of Virgil’s *Aeneid* on *The Lord of the Rings* see Swain (2007) 346, Barrella (2007), Cilli (2019) 298–299. For some examples, see Morse (1986), Greenman (1992), Obertino (1993), Freeman (2021).

101 The letter, published in *Letters* 229 (n. 163), is dated 7 June 1955 and addressed to W. H. Auden.

102 Bridgwater (2012) 49. As Shippey (2003) 64 put it, “Many hints from this took root in Tolkien’s mind”. On the general influence of philological work on his fiction, see Jeffrey (2004).

103 For a brief overview of Tolkien’s academic experience on *Sir Orfeo*, see Ryan (1987, now in Ryan 2009). The love for mediaeval romance was shared by C. S. Lewis: see Lazo (2003) 46–47. In 1944, Tolkien prepared a student edition for the naval cadet’s course in Oxford: see Hostetter (2007) 487 and Hammond/Anderson (1993) 299–300 (for bibliographical description). It is noteworthy that the fundamental critical edition of Bliss (1954) was born under his influence.

104 See Hammond/Anderson (1993) 321–322.

105 Tolkien (1975) 7.

106 Tolkien (1975) 8.

Sir Orfeo, as a reader and scholar, is undeniable and has so far inspired several studies on themes and motifs drawn from *Sir Orfeo* in Tolkien’s main works.¹⁰⁷

To those who know Tolkien’s works even in a superficial manner, *Sir Orfeo* sounds strangely familiar¹⁰⁸ and recalls the atmosphere surrounding the Tolkienian moments of contact between the human/hobbit and elven worlds, especially in *The Hobbit* and in *The Silmarillion*. The latter work shows clearer parallels with the mediated and non-mediated Orphic story (on which more anon).

Let us begin with the meeting of Thorin Oakenshield’s company with the elves of Mirkwood¹⁰⁹ in *The Hobbit*,¹¹⁰ which leads to their imprisonment by an unnamed Elvenking (named Thranduil in *The Lord of the Rings*¹¹¹). The Tolkienian scholarship noted profound affinities between the fate of Thorin’s company and Orfeo’s wanderings and highlighted the central role of *Sir Orfeo* in the construction of Tolkien’s elven imagery: Orfeo treads into the liminal woods between the human and faery worlds, encounters the faery hunts, and discovers the place where Heurodis is held captive.¹¹² Evidently, Tolkien draws more prominently on the fairy tale aspects and less prominently on classical narratives, which illustrates a tangible permanence of our intermediate (or central) text in the author’s narrative construction.

107 Tolkien notoriously hated source criticism; but I believe that Shippey is right apologizing for such an approach: “No one can ever tell for sure what someone has thought or is thinking, but in practice we all operate, often successfully, on our best guesses, and degrees of probability are possible, in some cases, as Tolkien conceded, approaching 100 percent. [...] It is true, as they say, that you do not have to have the recipe to appreciate a cake: but it is also true that you can learn a lot from seeing what a great cook has in his kitchen” (2011) 15.

108 Of the same opinion: Hostetter (2007) 487.

109 On this place, which “contributes [...] to the fairy-tale atmosphere of *The Hobbit*” see Evans (2007); the citation comes from p. 429.

110 *Hobbit* 203–204, 218 ff.

111 *LoTR* 240. The name appears also in Tolkien’s account of the “Quest of Erebor”; on its publishing history see Anderson in Tolkien (2002) 367–377.

112 See Shippey (2000) 34–36. As Hostetter (2007) 488 puts it, “the Elves of Middle-Earth are certainly far more reminiscent of the fairies of *Sir Orfeo* than they are of those in Shakespeare or Spenser”. The problem has been fully studied by Hillman (2018) who highlights very subtly how Tolkien “resolves ambiguities present in the portrayal of the fairies in *Sir Orfeo*, for the fairy king and his people seem crueler [*sic*] than in fact they are” 47.

Before going into the analysis of the two major Tolkienian narratives drawing on *Sir Orfeo* and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, it is worth briefly mentioning that, in the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien mentions Winchester, the city identified in the lay with Orfeo’s capital.¹¹³

“But to refer to Rivendell as Imladris was as if one now was to speak of Winchester as Camelot, except that the identity was certain, while in Rivendell there still dwelt a lord of renown far older than Arthur would be, were he still king at Winchester today.”¹¹⁴

As has been pointed out,¹¹⁵ these few words could create a vague but significant connection with the line of the lay, making *Sir Orfeo* appear particularly vibrant in Tolkien’s creative vision.

The “Song of Parting” of Beren and Lúthien. Orpheus/Orfeo in *The Silmarillion*

The influence of the Orphic myth and *Sir Orfeo* is particularly noticeable in the story of Beren and Lúthien. Central to the Tolkienian construction of Arda,¹¹⁶ it is alluded to several times in *The Lord of the Rings* and narrated in its entirety in chapter 19 of *The Silmarillion*. First, we should bear in mind that within *The Silmarillion* the source is cited several times as “the Lay of Leithian, Release from Bondage”¹¹⁷ – an imaginary composition of the same literary genre as *Sir Orfeo*. The story of love and death that unites human Beren and elf Lúthien, leading

113 *Sir Orfeo* 49–50 = *GPO* 124.

114 *LoTR* 1134.

115 Hillman (2018) 38. I am especially grateful to one the anonymous readers for their discussion of this point.

116 On this influence in general, see Librán-Moreno (2007), Brunetti (2011), B. E. Stevens (2021) 113–114, Astrup Sundt (2021). The latter has provided a significant inspiration for this work, even if he focuses only on the Virgilian antecedent. For other classical influences on the tale, see West (2003) 265 (the Calydonian boar hunt), J. Stevens (2004; Pyramus and Thisbe).

117 *Sil.* 19.

them to challenge Morgoth and question their ontological limits, is defined by Tolkien himself as

“a kind of Orpheus-legend in reverse, but one of Pity not of Inexorability.”¹¹⁸

The story of Beren and Lúthien qualifies as a programmatic rewriting of the myth,¹¹⁹ albeit with profound differences – concatenation of events and eventual reversal of character roles. The abovementioned definition, even if it comes from Tolkien himself, seems to oversimplify the relationship between the story of Orpheus and Eurydice (and of Orfeo and Heurodis) to that of Beren and Lúthien: in fact, as we will see, at the beginning of the story Beren resembles Orpheus/Orfeo and Lúthien takes after Eurydice/Heurodis; only in the final will there be a role reversal.¹²⁰

The chapter in *The Silmarillion* begins with the betrayal and killing of Beren’s father Barahir due to the intrigues of Sauron.¹²¹ Therefore, young Beren is in mourning (albeit not for his wife) and forced to wander, deprived of all security. Some elements of this story stand out:

Thereafter for four years more Beren wandered still upon Dorthonion, a solitary outlaw; but he became the friend of birds and beasts, and they aided him, and did not betray him, and from that time forth he ate no flesh nor slew any living thing that was not in the service of Morgoth. He did not fear death, but only captivity, and being bold and desperate he escaped both death and bonds [...] Beren was pressed so hard that at last he was forced to flee from Dorthonion. In time of winter and snow he forsook the land and grave of his father, and climbing into the high regions of Gorgoroth, the Mountains of Terror, he descried afar the land of Doriath. There it was put into his heart that he would go down into the Hidden Kingdom, where no mortal foot had yet trodden. Terrible was his southward journey. [...] No food for Elves or Men was there in that haunted land, but death only.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Draft of a letter to Peter Hastings of September 1954, published in *Letters* 209 (n. 153).

¹¹⁹ See Brunetti (2011) 59.

¹²⁰ See Astrup Sundt (2021) 171.

¹²¹ The story of his traitor, Gorlim, is a smaller story of love, loss, and death, that anticipates the main one.

¹²² *Sil* 159.

As we can see, Beren’s ordeals show echoes of those of Orpheus by Virgil and Ovid and travails of Orfeo in *Sir Orfeo*. Here, we find long solitude, inhospitable and icy territories, and fostering positive relationships with wild animals. These interspecies friendships will be stressed later, with Beren described as “the friend of all birds and beasts that did not serve Morgoth”.¹²³ Beren’s journey is also framed as a descent into hell.¹²⁴ Within the context of the passage from the classical myth to *Sir Orfeo*, Beren’s path into the kingdom of the elf/faeries and the Underworld align very closely. Furthermore, the first meeting between the two protagonists brings to mind the atmosphere of *Sir Orfeo*:

It is told in the Lay of Leithian that Beren came stumbling into Doriath grey and bowed as with many years of woe, so great had been the torment of the road. But wandering in the summer in the woods of Neldoreth he came upon Lúthien, daughter of Thingol and Melian, at a time of evening under moonrise, as she danced upon the unfading grass in the glades beside Esgalduin. Then all memory of his pain departed from him, and he fell into an enchantment; for Lúthien was the most beautiful of all the Children of Ilúvatar. [...] But she vanished from his sight; and he became dumb, as one that is bound under a spell, and he strayed long in the woods, wild and wary as a beast, seeking for her.¹²⁵

The scene easily recalls the meeting between Orfeo and Heurodis in the forest: of course in their case it was not the very first meeting, but Orfeo and Heurodis were seeing each other again after many years, both having been changed in significant ways. Not unlike Tolkien after him, the author of *Sir Orfeo* insisted on the contrast between the miserable conditions of Orfeo and his previous splendour and with the faery companions of Heurodis.

Fundamental to the subsequent development of the plot of *Sir Orfeo* was the sudden disappearance of Heurodis – an afterimage of the classical Eurydice’s final death – and the equally sudden decision to go in search of his beloved. This choice, both for Orfeo and for Beren, marks a break with their previous period of wandering without any purpose. In Tolkien’s text, the moment of short approach and the abrupt disappearance of the beloved is crafted in terms even closer to the classical antecedents than to those of *Sir Orfeo*. Tolkien takes up

123 *Sil* 168. See Astrup Sundt (2021) 171.

124 As noted by Astrup Sundt (2021) 171.

125 *Sil* 159.

themes of deadly sleep (here attributed to the abandoned man) and forced removal of the woman, who reciprocates the love of the protagonist, from his arms.

Then the spell of silence fell from Beren, and he called to her, crying Tinúviel; and the woods echoed the name. [...] But as she looked on him, doom fell upon her, and she loved him; yet she slipped from his arms and vanished from his sight even as the day was breaking. Then Beren lay upon the ground in a swoon, as one slain at once by bliss and grief; and he fell into a sleep as it were into an abyss of shadow, and waking he was cold as stone, and his heart barren and forsaken.¹²⁶

This, in turn, leads us to consider two Virgilian passages:

Eurydicen vox ipsa et frigida lingua,
a miseram Eurydicen! anima fugiente vocabat:
Eurydicen toto referebant flumine ripae

the disembodied voice and the tongue, now cold for ever, called with departing breath on Eurydice – ah, poor Eurydice! ‘Eurydice’ the banks re-echoed, all along the stream.¹²⁷

And

illa “quis et me’ inquit ‘miseram et te perdidit, Orpheu,
quis tantus furor? en iterum crudelia retro
fata vocant conditque natantia lumina somnus.
iamque vale: feror ingenti circumdata nocte
invalidasque tibi tendens, heu! non tua, palmas”.

She cried: “What madness, Orpheus, what dreadful madness has brought disaster alike upon you and me, poor soul? See, again the cruel Fates call me back, and sleep seals my swimming eyes. And now farewell! I am borne away, covered in night’s vast pall, and stretching towards you strengthless hands, regained, alas! no more”.¹²⁸

126 *Sil.* 160.

127 *Verg. georg.* 4,525–527.

128 *Verg. georg.* 4,494–498.

Lúthien thus alternates between traits that bring her closer to the faery image of *Sir Orfeo* and others that bring her back to the devoted wife of classical myth. As we can see, Tolkien decidedly thins the boundaries between his assorted influences across the Orphic tradition. It should also be noted how Lúthien’s falling in love at first sight closely recalls¹²⁹ the Ovidian tale of the kidnapping of Proserpina, a story that (as we have seen) Ovid himself relates to that of Orpheus.

In the first part of this tale, Beren constitutes a Middle-Earth equivalent¹³⁰ of Orfeo, and Lúthien of Heurodis. The role of the King of the Faeries falls to Lúthien’s father, Thingol; like the aforementioned Thranduil of *The Hobbit*, Thingol, a powerful elven king, resembles the monarch of *Sir Orfeo*. In this story, the King of the Faeries emphatically does not equal the god of the dead, who will yet appear in a guise much closer to that of the classic Pluto at the end of the chapter. The similarities between stories go beyond the generic attempt to separate two lovers by a typical fairy tale antagonist (mark their classical antecedent: Venus in the story of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*¹³¹) who tests the protagonists by giving them an impossible task.¹³² Even the mistake made by Thingol resembles that of the king in *Sir Orfeo*.¹³³

Then the King was filled with anger [...]. Therefore he spoke in grief and amazement to Lúthien; but she would reveal nothing, until he swore an oath to her that he would neither slay Beren nor imprison him. [...] But Thingol spoke slowly, saying: ‘Death you have earned with these words; and death you should find suddenly, had I not sworn an oath in haste; of which I repent, baseborn mortal, who in the realm of Morgoth has learnt to creep in secret as his spies and thralls.’ Then Beren

129 The textual resemblance with Ov. met. 5,395–396 is striking: “almost in one act did Pluto see and love and carry her away: so precipitate was his love” (paene simul visa est dilectaque raptaque Diti: / usque adeo est properatus amor). I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for this precious suggestion.

130 See Hardwick (2003) 9: equivalent is something “fulfilling an analogous role in source and reception but not necessarily identical in form or content”.

131 Apul. met. 6,10–21.

132 See Baltasar (2004) 24.

133 On the similarities between Thingol and the King of the Faeries, see Hillman (2018) 49–50.

answered: "Death you can give me earned or unearned; but the names I will not take from you of baseborn, nor spy, nor thrall".¹³⁴

Orfeo was able to obtain Heurodis because the King of the Faeries had taken an authentic "oath in haste" (to use Tolkien's terms), promising him a prize of his choice in exchange for his music. Moreover, the King tried to deny Orfeo his chosen prize by highlighting his unworthiness of her: Thingol repeatedly adopts the same attitude.¹³⁵ Even Beren's contempt of death is an explicitly underlined trait of Orpheus in Ovid and Orfeo in the lay. Many of these correspondences are general topoi in fairy tales and fiction; however, their sheer concentration in the discussed narrative, their direct connection to the precedent stories of interest, and Tolkien's adoption of the equivalent literary form of the lay shows their significance as a source of inspiration and reference material.

During their subsequent adventures, Beren and Lúthien search the Silmaril requested by Thingol; relevantly, the Orphic theme of music and its value as an instrument of salvation recurs several times. Initially, Tolkien's story prioritizes Lúthien's singing talent.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, one passage has Beren, exactly like Orpheus/Orfeo, express his pain due to one of the many separations from his beloved with music, and manages to reunite with her thanks to his intoned melody:

Then being now alone and upon the threshold of the final peril he made the Song of Parting, in praise of Lúthien and the lights of heaven; for he believed that he must now say farewell to both love and light. [...] And he sang aloud, caring not what ear should overhear him, for he was desperate and looked for no escape. But Lúthien heard his song, and she sang in answer, as she came through the woods unlooked for.¹³⁷

134 *Sil* 161.

135 *E.g.*, "But Thingol looked in silence upon Lúthien; and he thought in his heart: 'Unhappy Men, children of little lords and brief kings, shall such as these lay hands on you, and yet live?'" *Sil* 161. See on this Honegger (2010) 118.

136 Since her second appearance: "The song of Lúthien released the bonds of winter, and the frozen waters spoke, and flowers sprang from the cold earth where her feet had passed. Then the spell of silence fell from Beren" *Sil* 160.

137 *Sil* 172.

As Tolkien suggested, the two lovers begin to swap their roles when they approach the conclusion of their quest. Faced with Morgoth, Lúthien fully assumes Orphic prerogatives for the first time. In this way, she gains privileged access to the Great Enemy:¹³⁸

She was not daunted by his eyes; and she named her own name, and offered her service to sing before him, after the manner of a minstrel. Then Morgoth [...] was beguiled by his own malice, for he watched her, leaving her free for a while, and taking secret pleasure in his thought. Then suddenly she eluded his sight, and out of the shadows began a song of such surpassing loveliness, and of such blinding power, that he listened perforce; and a blindness came upon him, as his eyes roamed to and fro, seeking her. All his court were cast down in slumber, and all the fires faded and were quenched.¹³⁹

We should remember that the classical Orpheus descended into Hades thanks to his music being able to paralyse monsters, stun the damned, and fill the god of the Underworld with wonder¹⁴⁰ and that Orfeo managed to get himself admitted into the faery king’s castle by offering himself as a minstrel.¹⁴¹ Morgoth’s enchantment, however, is short-lived and the couple has to face numerous other tests and travails to achieve their objective.

The conclusion of their quest inexorably leads to Beren’s death. For the last time, the couple’s fate is played out through the power of a song. Lúthien goes to the halls of Mandos (the equivalent of classical Hades for the people of Arda). As such, she once again takes on the role of the mythical cantor who rejects the death of his beloved and regains her life with singing:

But Lúthien came to the halls of Mandos, where are the appointed places of the Eldalië, beyond the mansions of the West upon the confines of the world. There those that wait sit in the shadow of their thought. But her beauty was more than their beauty, and her sorrow deeper than their sorrows; and she knelt before Mandos and sang to him. The song of Lúthien before Mandos was the song most fair that

138 Morgoth is so called *e.g.*, in *LoTR* 193.

139 *Sil* 174.

140 See Verg. *georg.* 4,471–484, *Ov. met.* 10,40–46, *Boeth. cons.* 3,12,20–39.

141 On the similarity between this passage and *Sir Orfeo*, see Astrup Sundt (2021) 177.

ever in words was woven, and the song most sorrowful that ever the world shall hear. Unchanged, imperishable, it is sung still in Valinor beyond the hearing of the world, and listening the Valar are grieved. For Lúthien wove two themes of words, of the sorrow of the Eldar and the grief of Men, of the Two Kindreds that were made by Ilúvatar to dwell in Arda, the Kingdom of Earth amid the innumerable stars. And as she knelt before him her tears fell upon his feet like rain upon the stones; and Mandos was moved to pity, who never before was so moved, nor has been since.¹⁴²

The similarity of this passage with the antecedents mentioned above speaks for itself. Note how the motif of customary inflexibility of the god of the dead is entirely Virgilian:

Manisque adiit regemque tremendum
nesciaque humanis precibus mansuescere corda.

[Orpheus] made his way to the land of the dead with its fearful king and hearts no human prayers can soften.¹⁴³

This conclusion is the direct reference of Tolkien’s words cited above: since it is the bride who moves death with her song in *The Silmarillion*, the whole story is qualified as “Orpheus-legend in reverse”.¹⁴⁴ Tolkien then claims to have composed a tragedy of pity and not of inexorability because Lúthien, as a heroine of the twentieth century (and like many contemporary versions of Orpheus¹⁴⁵), has the freedom to consciously choose her own destiny; faced with the choice between an eternal oblivion and a mortal life with her beloved Beren, she chooses to renounce immortality. Their chapter closes, like Ovid’s narrative and like *Sir Orfeo*, in a happiness tinged by the taint of their upcoming death, which, as is stated in the *Silmarillion*, is “the gift of Ilúvatar to Men”.¹⁴⁶

142 *Sil* 181.

143 Verg. *georg.* 4,469–470.

144 West (2003) 265–266 sees a relationship with the story of Orpheus/Orfeo only here.

145 See, e.g., Cesare Pavese’s version of the myth (*L’inconsolabile*) in Pavese (1947). For other contemporary Orpheus figurations, see Fletcher (2019).

146 Compare the end of *Sil* 33: “It is one with this gift of freedom that the children of Men dwell only a short space in the world alive, and are not bound to it, and depart soon whither

Lúthien’s Doom and Aragorn’s Destiny. Orpheus/Orfeo in *The Lord of the Rings*

The tale of Beren and Lúthien constitutes, as it has been said here, a fundamental nucleus of the Tolkien universe. Tolkien himself admitted its prominence and connected with it personally, to the point of having Lúthien’s name inscribed on his wife’s grave.¹⁴⁷ In *The Lord of the Rings*, the tale of Beren and Lúthien is a mirror and leitmotif of the romance of Aragorn and Arwen. This does not mean, of course, that one should or can expect an exact correspondence between the two stories, and *a fortiori* of the story of Aragorn and Arwen with Orphic precedents.

Anyway, the bond is evident from the beginning: one of the first moments of rapprochement between Frodo and his friends and Strider/Aragorn takes place through the narration, initially in sung form, of the love story of the two, ancestors of the house of Númenor. Music and the story of Beren and Lúthien are also the intermediaries of the first meeting between Aragorn and Arwen in Appendix A: here Aragorn identifies himself in the song and sees Arwen as the incarnation of Lúthien. Arwen herself reiterates her resemblance to the heroine:

For Aragorn had been singing a part of the Lay of Lúthien which tells of the meeting of Lúthien and Beren in the forest of Neldoreth. And behold! there Lúthien walked before his eyes in Rivendell, clad in a mantle of silver and blue, fair as the twilight in Elven-home; her dark hair strayed in a sudden wind, and her brows were bound with gems like stars. For a moment Aragorn gazed in silence, but fearing that she would pass away and never be seen again, he called to her crying, *Tinúviel, Tinúviel!* even as Beren had done in the Elder Days long ago. Then the maiden turned to him and smiled, and she said: “Who are you? And why do you call me by that name?”. And he answered: “Because I believed you to be indeed Lúthien Tinúviel, of whom I was singing. But if you are not she, then you walk in her likeness.” “So many have said,” she answered gravely. “Yet her name is not mine. Though maybe my doom will be not unlike hers. But who are you?”.¹⁴⁸

the Elves know not. [...] Death is their fate, the gift of Ilúvatar, which as Time wears even the Powers shall envy”.

¹⁴⁷ He explains his choice in a letter to his son Christopher dated 11 July 1972, published in *Letters* 463 (n. 340). On the autobiographical aspects of the story, see West (2003), Baltasar (2004) 25, Astrup Sundt (2021) 177–178.

¹⁴⁸ *LoTR* 1058.

Aragorn’s desire for Arwen is condemned to the same impossibility as Beren’s. Of this, he is painfully aware.¹⁴⁹ In replicating the fate of Beren and Lúthien,¹⁵⁰ Aragorn and Arwen become new equivalents of Orpheus and Eurydice/Orfeo and Heurodis. The first eminent parallel is the importance of singing, which creates a bridge between two lovers from different worlds. Aragorn then shares with Orfeo a feature we have thoroughly analyzed here: he is a king in exile, even if he can hide his royalty behind humble disguises.¹⁵¹ As in *Sir Orfeo*, the distance from Aragorn’s beloved and the impossibility of reaching her are combined with the uprooting from the role of king. For her part, Arwen’s choice to renounce immortality for the love of Aragorn is now very far from the condition set by the rulers of Hades: it is the result of a resigned awareness that does not imply external impositions.¹⁵²

Other characters in *The Lord of the Rings* share Orphic features, such as love for music and friendship to natural forces: they are, for example, Tom Bombadil and the Ents.¹⁵³ But the resemblances between Orpheus and Aragorn are stronger. Like every Orpheus of the millennial history of this myth, Aragorn must be very careful not to be hasty with his gaze and “stumble at the end of the road”, when receiving the palatír;¹⁵⁴ most significantly of all, during the War of the Ring, he visits the world of the dead¹⁵⁵ – which is, in Tolkien, a privileged theme

149 “‘I see,’ said Aragorn, ‘that I have turned my eyes to a treasure no less dear than the treasure of Thingol that Beren once desired. Such is my fate’” *LoTR* 1059.

150 As West (2003) 261 notices.

151 “His ways were hard and long, and he became somewhat grim to look upon, unless he chanced to smile; and yet he seemed to Men worthy of honour, as a king that is in exile, when he did not hide his true shape. For he went in many guises, and won renown under many names” *LoTR* 1060. On the disguising ability of Orfeo and Aragorn see Bridgwater (2012) 55–56. “A king returning from exile to his own land” is what Aragorn seems to Frodo in *LoTR* 393; in the Appendixes, the lexicon of exile is consistently connected to the house of Númeanor, to which Aragorn belongs.

152 “[...] for I am mortal, and if you will cleave to me, Evenstar, then the Twilight you must also renounce’ [...] ‘I will cleave to you, Dúnadan, and turn from the Twilight [...]’” *LoTR* 1061.

153 These similarities have been studied by Astrup Sundt (2021) 180–186.

154 *LoTR* 594. See Bridgwater (2012) 64 n. 5.

155 *LoTR* 786 ff.

of classical reception.¹⁵⁶ Even in this case, however, Aragorn reveals himself to be more Orfeo than Orpheus, as the contact with the Underworld strengthens him, allowing him to return to his royal role.¹⁵⁷ Significant similarities with the final section of *Sir Orfeo*, which sees the return of the king and the re-establishment of a constructive relationship with the loyal steward, have been recognized.¹⁵⁸ The entire institution of the stewards of Gondor owes much to the more innovative (*i.e.*, far from the classical myth) section of *Sir Orfeo*.

We have repeatedly highlighted how the presence, in the finale, of a mixture of enjoyment of love and the destiny of mortality is a common thread from antiquity (in particular from Ovid’s version of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice) to *Sir Orfeo*, to the story of Beren and Lúthien. In this respect, too, the tale of Aragorn and Arwen is a point of arrival. In the poignant finale of the section dedicated to them in Appendix A, the narration of Aragorn’s death is long and insistent. Here, we find the ancient theme of the inevitability of death, the ultimate goal from which love can only subtract for a brief parenthesis, affirmed splendidly; *Sir Orfeo*’s theme of royal inheritance is also stressed.¹⁵⁹ Faced with the death of her beloved, which she cannot in any way redeem, Arwen refuses to revoke her choice and leaves the re-conquered kingdom.

But Arwen went forth from the House, and the light of her eyes was quenched, and it seemed to her people that she had become cold and grey as nightfall in winter that comes without a star. Then she said farewell to Eldarion, and to her daughters, and to all whom she had loved; and she went out from the city of Minas Tirith and passed away to the land of Lórien, and dwelt there alone under the fading trees until winter came. [...] There at last when the mallorn-leaves were falling, but

156 For the reception of classical underworlds in Tolkien, especially in *Hobbit*, see Stevens (2017).

157 There are also clear reminiscences of Odysseus’ and Aeneas’ voyages in Aragorn’s *katabasis*: see Morse (1986) 19, Spirito (2009) 195–196.

158 The correspondence between Aragorn and Orfeo’s careers has been noticed, in a famous article, by Honegger (2010). See also Bridgwater (2012).

159 “‘Would you then, lord, before your time leave your people that live by your word?’ she said. ‘Not before my time,’ he answered. ‘For if I will not go now, then I must soon go perforce. And Eldarion our son is a man full-ripe for kingship.’” *LoTR* 1062.

spring had not yet come, she laid herself to rest upon Cerin Amroth; and there is her green grave.¹⁶⁰

The Evenstar finds herself wandering, plunged into mourning, in a winter landscape; her disconsolate widowhood after the definitive loss of her beloved is still reminiscent of Orpheus's wandering. In short, Arwen becomes the last Orpheus of Middle-Earth: a disillusioned Orpheus of contemporaneity.

CONCLUSION. RECEPTION OF RECEPTION (OF RECEPTION...)

In conclusion of our analysis, we can see that the path leading from the myth of Orpheus to Tolkien consists not only of two but of several steps, some of which are difficult to reconstruct: a) narratives of the myth of Orpheus within Orphism; b) classical/Hellenistic narratives; c) Virgil's *Georgics*; d) Ovid's *Metamorphosis*; e) Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*, with f) its translation by King Alfred; g) mediaeval adaptations of the story taken from the classics; h) *Sir Orfeo* (as we know it, with possible antecedents); i) Tolkien's tale of Beren and Lúthien and l) Tolkien's tale of Arwen and Aragorn. Moreover, in the fictional construction of Tolkien's *legendarium*, l) is presented as a moment of reception of i), since, as we have said, the characters (and narrator) know that they are repeating another story already told in poetic texts. It is a creative literary flow full of detours and returns, concerning a mythical story that has permeated through the entire Western culture (as Rilke splendidly reminds us in the lines quoted as epigraph).

In this literary flow, *Sir Orfeo* is just a moment, an example of rewriting with a close relationship with preceding sources. In it, the classical material, as mentioned, is demonstrably hybridized with Celtic and mediaeval motifs contemporary to the lay's anonymous author. This moment becomes particularly significant if we consider Tolkienian work while also looking at the literary flow inspired by Orpheus. Indeed, Tolkien never receives the myth of Orpheus without simultaneously receiving *Sir Orfeo* through translation and allusion. As we have seen, different sources often surface in the same allusions at the same time. This should lead to a reflection on any mechanical attempt to explain intertextuality in terms of a unique and demonstrable transfer from one text to another.

160 *LoTR* 1063.

Within different contexts in Tolkienian fiction, texts Tolkien had loved and studied (both as a student and scholar) come together and create a web of literary memories, part of the same imaginarium. Tolkienian texts can thus be read as literature fed by other literature, palimpsests, or literature in the second degree, as Genette would put it.¹⁶¹ One cannot say that Thranduil, Thingol, or even Elrond are Hades or that Beren, Lúthien, Aragorn, and eventually Arwen are Orpheus. But beneath the surface of the Middle-Earth context, the classical myth and its never-ending life are still readable, readily available for the next moment of reception, an Orpheus/Orfeo/Aragorn for the 21st century.

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¹⁶¹ *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* is the original title of the influential work by Gérard Genette (1982). Directly quoting this famous expression, Hutcheon (2013, or. 2006) 6 defines this kind of texts “palimpsestuous’ works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts. If we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly”. See on this Willis (2018) 40–41.

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Platonic Tripartition and the Peoples of Middle-Earth

Abstract Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* employ traditional races from fairy tales: elves, men and dwarves. These peoples are differentiated principally by their dominant desires but also by their speech, diet, and realms. I argue that these three races are significantly inspired by the three aspects that characterize the *Republic's* tripartite soul – *logistikon*, *thumoeides*, and *epithumetikon* – along with their respective principal desires: desire for truth, greatness, and material goods. For Tolkien, therefore, these races have a corporate or political psychology that explains who they are as peoples in the history of Middle-earth. I offer a comprehensive view of the major races, connecting the dwarves with the appetitive artisans of the *Republic*, humans with the honour- and glory-seeking auxiliaries, and elves with the ruling guardians. This treatment explains the artisanal dwarves as well as the battle-loving men (and women) of Rohan and Gondor and the nostalgic, 'anamnetic' condition of exile that distinguishes the elves. Indeed, the condition of elves in many descriptions recalls a Platonic philosopher returned to the Cave as well as the Neo-Platonic sagacity pictured in the biographies of Plotinus and Proclus.

Keywords Plato, Tolkien, Republic, Tripartite, Race

The relationship and connections of Tolkien's writings to the Platonic philosophical tradition are vast and exciting fields open to exploration from a rich diversity of directions. There is, for example, the obvious similarities between the Ring of Power and the Ring of Gyges of the *Republic*.¹ More popular are studies that explore Tolkien's cosmology in light of Neo-Platonic metaphysics of late antiquity, whether of Christian (e.g., Augustine, Boethius) or pagan (e.g., Plotinus) derivation.² Less attention is given to attempting a comprehensive view of the political view that Tolkien employs in his legendarium. Such an analysis will be essayed here, though with my scope focused mainly on *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* as more mature expressions of Tolkien's vision of Middle-earth.

In what follows, I shall eschew commenting on whether I am toiling in vineyard of the classical tradition or in classical reception.³ Tolkien's work has been argued to be within the tradition of the classical epic,⁴ but my specific interest here is in how Platonic themes are handled in Tolkien's work. In many ways, he employs a Platonic style. Plato's dialogues are works in which the treatment of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics overlap and are closely intertwined; Tolkien, who was professionally familiar with various Platonic corpora,⁵ also produced tales in which various philosophical themes intersect and play off each other. This feature partly motivates me: to show how Tolkien's political psychology is embedded in his larger philosophical vision.

As Tolkien is not Plato, and because he has other theological commitments, we can expect that what is received from Plato will be reshaped and accommodated in a different picture than the one Plato assumes. As such, my approach to the reception of the politics of the *Republic* will be to see how it is borrowed or revisioned, in the language of Keen and Marshall,⁶ rather than simply copied.

1 See Katz (2003).

2 Scarf (2013) 127 and Vaccaro (2017) 81–2 provide helpful introductions to such approaches.

3 Following Tatum (2014), I shall avoid drawing hard boundaries on this point. In any event, a work (e.g., the *Aeneid* or the *Divine Comedy*) can be part of the classical epic tradition and studied as a locus of classical reception.

4 Newman (2005) 236.

5 Chisholm (2019) 89.

6 Keen (2006) and Keen (2019) 12. In the context of reception studies, Keen defines borrowing as when “elements of Classical antiquity are used to build an imagined society. ... [O]nly the author and audience are aware of the origins of features of imagined culture – the mem-

But before starting on my main theme, it is profitable to begin with a juxtaposition of the views of Tolkien and Plato on craft and creation as an avenue towards appreciating the latter's influence on the former.

INTRODUCTION: THE CRAFT OF CREATION

Tolkien is, so to speak, a poet of reception. The human poet or maker, in his view, produces or crafts from what she has received. We make using materials that have been given to us, that have been handed on to us, and not from raw, empty, 'content-less' creativity. The human poet is always within a tradition that is grounded, at the very least, in the natural world, to say nothing of the oral and literary traditions that artists necessarily find themselves in. In the poem *Mythopoeia*, the speaker observes, "Yet trees are not 'trees', until so named and seen – / and never were so named, till those had been / who speech's involuted breath unfurled,"⁷ making a connection between seeing and naming, meaning that human perception is "but neither record nor a photograph, / being divination, judgement, and a laugh." Perception is not the dead, physical capture of impressions but a vital act, responsive to and interpretive of the natural world. In this living response, the mind takes up images of the world into its "cunning forges" and "secret looms" where, as Tolkien describes in the essay "On Fairy-Stories", imagination combines, separates, and recombines what it received from perception.⁸ Learning to see things as they are (perception) awakens our capacity and desire to see how they might be (imagination).

This desire to create, to make and remake, is part of who and what we are as human beings. *Mythopoeia* designates the human being as, by nature, a sub-creator, i.e., a subordinate of the Creator of the universe. The speaker also recognizes that even if humans have misused their powers of craft to produce wicked

bers of the culture themselves are not, and cannot be, for there is no connection between them and Earth's antiquity." Marshall's revisioning is operative where "[w]orks [are] not set in the ancient world... [and] [k]nowledge of specific facts [is] needed to interpret [the latter text]"; without this knowledge the reader has only a "partial reading" of the text.

7 TL 86.

8 PS 133.

creations,⁹ we – following a classical principle¹⁰ – nevertheless make by right and, indeed, “[t]he right has not decayed. We make still by the law in which we’re made.”¹¹

In exercising his power as a sub-creator, man fulfills his nature and takes up his proper place in Tolkien’s ordered and hierarchical universe. As such, human beings are called to be creative in their lives (and indeed cannot help being so in at least some minor capacity). According to Matthew Dickerson, Tolkien’s position is that through our creativity we partner with and glorify the Creator as well as enrich the world.¹² This partnership is not just fulfilling a role but imitating the Creator himself; as a sub-creator, the human being participates in the dignity and activity of the Almighty. In *Mythopoeia*, poetry is part of the lives of even the blessed in heaven. For Tolkien, imitation of God is part of the human vocation or purpose.

The centrality of art and craft in Tolkien’s anthropological vision is not a theme reserved to his commentaries; it is a topic that is directly engaged, at various levels, in much of his artistic work. Thus, beyond *Mythopoeia* and “On Fairy-Stories”, making and creativity are prominent in the plots of *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Smith of Wootton Major*, and *Leaf by Niggle*. Tolkien is not just a poet of reception; he is a poet of creation.

On the face of it, Tolkien’s insistence on the dignity and necessity of making would seem to put him at odds with Plato, particularly with regard to the ethical and political vision of the *Republic*. Plato’s Socrates famously banishes the poets from the ideal city, Kallipolis, in Book X of the *Republic*, on account of “an ancient quarrel” between poetry and philosophy. The basic thrust of the argument, it would appear, is that poetry is misleading and deceptive, and thus a threat to the right order – i.e., the justice – of the city.¹³ And yet, Plato regularly employs unverifiable myths in his dialogues. How might one deal with the apparent inconsistency? Max Latona proposes that the danger lies not in myth *per se* but in poetry as an instance of making. He argues that Plato has a low opinion of

⁹ As Walsh (2015) 16 notes, for Tolkien, one’s moral character is often revealed in how one employs one’s creative powers.

¹⁰ *Abusus non tollit usum*, i.e., abuse of a good does not take away the (right) use of it.

¹¹ TL 87.

¹² Dickerson (2016), 132–5.

¹³ Plat. res. 10,595b.

makers and is suspicious of things innovative and creative, because truth is reality received, not made, delivered to us through memory. Hesiod and Homer are banished from Kallipolis because they are novel and original, relative to the Platonic myths, which Socrates claims not to have authored but to have heard and inherited through even more ancient tradition.¹⁴ Creativity would therefore be a departure from truth. There are of course many different attempts to address Plato's apparent inconsistency; I bring up Latona because his interpretive missteps are instructive.

Plato cannot think that the truth is something made, but that is not because he thinks the truth is old; it is because he thinks the truth is eternal. Antiquity is not a marker of veracity.¹⁵ More importantly, *Republic X* has the curious distinction of being the only place in the Platonic corpus where God is said to be a "real maker" of a Form, which as eternal cannot have been created.¹⁶ Immediately following this statement, we are also told that, in imitation of the creative God, the human craftsman fashions the physical object that is patterned after the Form. Furthermore – still in *Republic X* – Socrates goes on to say that in living virtuously, the just man aims "to make himself as much like a god as a human being can."¹⁷ Our approximation of the divine life cannot simply mean attaining immortality as far as humanly possible,¹⁸ since, according to *Republic X*, humans have immortal souls. We become godlike, rather, by adopting a godlike way of life, i.e., by imitating God. While it is outside our scope to untangle Plato's thoughts on art, we can at least say that humans are to aspire to godlike virtue and activity, which means that Plato cannot have a low opinion of makers. Plato and Tolkien therefore coincide in their high view of art.

Beyond even his use of myths, Plato is a poet after Tolkien's heart. The philosophical dialogue, likely based on the mimes of Sophron of Syracuse from early 5th Century BC, reaches a level of stunning artistic accomplishment in Plato. The diversity of ways in which literary devices, styles, and genres are combined and

¹⁴ Latona (2004) 192, 198, 208–10.

¹⁵ Latona attempts to leverage Plato's theory of recollection to justify the claim that Plato cares about the historical pedigree of a theory, but recollection is transcendent: not memory into the past, but rather memory out of time, of the eternal.

¹⁶ Plat. res. 10,597d. This claim is in apparent contradiction with the preceding 10,596b where it is explicitly stated that "no craftsman makes the form itself."

¹⁷ Plat. res. 10,613b.

¹⁸ Pace Gerson (1987) 94.

mixed in the corpus is an example of imagination functioning in exactly the way Tolkien admires. It is therefore unsurprising to find Platonic themes and imagery to find themselves in Tolkien's work.

My particular project here is to explore how Socrates' division of the soul and city into three elements – reason, spirit, and appetite – corresponds to the three main races of Middle-earth – elf, human, and dwarf. By understanding the psychology of the *Republic*, we may better understand the corporate psychology of the different communities. In the history of reception, this idea is a delicate one, given how Plato was adopted as a political philosopher in the Weimar Republic. The outlook of the *Republic* was used to argue that *human* inequity is a law of nature and that peoples have predispositions that are grounded in biological race. The Platonic tripartite city was interpreted and appropriated as a precursor to the racist vision and politics of the National Socialist party.¹⁹ Still, that is only one example of Platonic reception, and it helpfully demonstrates the mediaeval maxim that what is received is received according to the mode of the receiver:²⁰ thus, we too often see what we want to see. Tolkien has rather different ends in employing Plato, ends which affect what he selects to use and how he elects to use it.

I should nevertheless point out that on this theme Plato is himself a philosopher of reception. The division of the city into three classes is a trope that has its roots in Hesiod and Indo-European cultures in general.²¹ My narrower interests are in how Plato distinctively borrows and revises this schema in his articulation of political and individual psychology, and how Tolkien develops the Platonic picture for his own artistic purposes. This approach will be mutually illuminating, offering insights for how we read both Plato and Tolkien. To that end, a brief overview of the *Republic's* tripartite psychology is in order.

Socrates develops the constitution of Kallipolis as a means to understand virtue in the soul of the virtuous man: the just city is a model, as it were, of the just man. Kallipolis' founding myth is that its people, who as children of the Land

¹⁹ Chapoutot (2016) 195, 200, 227.

²⁰ *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*. See, for example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a, q. 75, a. 5.

²¹ Latona (2004) 201–2. The three classes in Socrates' Kallipolis appear to be a simplified version of the five generations of society in Hesiod, typed by four metals of varying worth. More generally, the priest-king, warrior and labourer are a pattern for many traditional Indo-European class structures. Socrates acknowledges his debt to Hesiod in Plat. res. 8,546e–574a.

share the same parentage, are divided according to which metals are mixed into their souls: gold and silver for the rulers and auxiliaries respectively, while iron and bronze are found in the farmers and other craftsmen.²² As the city develops, these groups become the guardians, the warrior-auxiliaries, and the artisans. The philosopher-kings are essentially drawn from the first class. In the individual human being these categories correspond to the calculating, spirited and appetitive elements of the soul.²³ One useful way of thinking of these elements is as possible lifestyles we continually choose between, each with its own attractions and a shape that it gives to life,²⁴ since, as Socrates later explains, each has its own pleasures and proper loves: the rational element loves wisdom, the spirited loves honour, and the appetitive loves profit. The three different groups in the city correspond, ultimately, to different ways of life.

The *Republic* clearly treats the three classes as within a single people, while I argue that Tolkien creatively reflects them in the three races of elf, human, and dwarf. Socrates himself provides the precedent for this application, since he, like Caesar dividing Gaul, parses the Mediterranean into three, according to which of the three psychologies is dominant: Phoenicia and Egypt for money-lovers; Thrace, Scythia, and northern territories for the spirited; and, unsurprisingly, love of learning characterizes the Greeks.²⁵ Beyond the unexamined, if understandable, Hellenocentrism of this view, Plato is a forerunner to Vergil's invocation of the *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, in the *Aeneid*.²⁶ It is unremarkable,

²² Plat. res. 3,414d–415c.

²³ Plat. res. 4,439d–e.

²⁴ Rist (1996) I,109. Charlton (2008) 294, in a related vein, says that the three classes represent the three basic kinds of goals or objectives (the altruistic, the social, and the individual) that humans have.

²⁵ Plat. res. 4,435e–436a. Ferguson (1950) 11 drily calls this connection between a people, their land, and their psychology the “climatological point of view,” but with Bell (2015) 122 I believe that “individuals and regimes do not develop autochthonously but emerge, in large part, from out of a given socio-political milieu,” taking into consideration the terrain, resources, and climate of the region.

²⁶ Verg. Aen. 7,136. In his commentary on the *Aeneid*, Maurus Servius Honoratus observes *nullus locus sine genio*, that there is no place lacking its proper spirit, i.e., a spirit proper to both place and people. Even today such an instinct informs our habit of characterizing peoples (e.g., nations, cities, tribes, colleges and universities, etc.) according to regional stereotypes. Per Christie (2013) 86, Tolkien takes the figure of the hero to be “an embodiment of national character.”

therefore, to see Legolas, as he traverses Rohan and hears Aragorn chant one of the native people's songs, reflect that "the language of the Rohirrim" is "like to this land itself; rich and rolling in part, and else hard and stern as the mountains ... laden with the sadness of Mortal Men."²⁷ Tolkien appreciates the tradition of discerning the spirit of a people in their land, their tongue, and their ways. This perspective should inform how we view his fictional peoples.

ON THE DWARVES

I shall begin with the Dwarves, whom we know the least about, in part because Gimli and his father Glóin are the only ones we meet in *The Lord of the Rings*, which makes extrapolation more complicated, even if Dwarves are much more central to *The Hobbit*. The genesis of the race is given in the *Silmarillion*, where we learn that they were not created directly by the creator-God Ilúvatar but by one of his Valar or high angelic servants, Aulë, without Ilúvatar's permission. Aulë is eventually found out, though he is unable to give his creations real life and intelligence as the planned Elves and humans will have. Ilúvatar, however, forgives Aulë and grants the 'new' race life and consciousness, but he keeps them in slumber or stasis until after the other two races are brought to life. These latter two are Ilúvatar's children by choice and the Dwarves are his children by adoption, and on account of Aulë's unsanctioned initiative, there will often be discord between the Dwarves and the other races.²⁸ Already, there are parallels with Plato.²⁹ Socrates in the *Republic* and *Phaedrus* says that often the rational and spirited elements need to be allied against the appetitive.³⁰ In the *Republic*, the higher political classes are of precious metals, while the lower class is of a base metal: with education, one can draw leaders from either of the two higher classes but not from the lower.

²⁷ *TT* 508.

²⁸ For a useful summary of the creation of the Dwarves see Dickerson (2016) 128–30.

²⁹ I say "parallels" because on this point it is less clear whether we are dealing with borrowing or coincidence. As Newman (2005) 232 points out, "convergence" is possible because an author intimately familiar with classical culture could arrive at a 'classical' idea without consciously drawing from sources with which he is familiar.

³⁰ Plat. res. 439d–e; Phaidr. 246a–257a.

A more direct connection of the Dwarves to Kallipolis' artisanal class can be found in the description of the Dwarves and their desires. As we have already seen, the third class is characterized by money-loving. This is meant to communicate their attentiveness to material goods in general, even though Socrates, for the sake of vividness, is wont to play up the more titillating and scandalous appetites for the pleasures of lust and gluttony.³¹ Similarly, Tolkien's Dwarves are reliable lovers of precious artefacts. Their quest song in Bilbo's home relates their desire "to seek the pale enchanted gold ... to claim our long-forgotten gold ... [and] to win our harps and gold from [Smaug]!" Hearing them, Bilbo feels "the love of beautiful things made by hands and by cunning and by magic moving through him, a fierce and jealous love, the desire of the hearts of dwarves." And later the narrator informs the reader that the noble Elrond "did not altogether approve of dwarves and their love of gold" and that Bilbo does not wholly appreciate the hold of gold on dwarvish hearts.³²

Tolkien's characterization of the Dwarves has contributed to discussions about anti-Semitism in his works. Rebecca Brackmann, for instance, interprets the Dwarves of *The Hobbit* to be coded with anti-Semitic tropes, which she says are abandoned in *The Lord of the Rings*. She reads the creation of the Dwarves as similar to supersession, in which Christians understand themselves to succeed and surpass Jews as the Chosen People, and takes issue with *The Hobbit* for describing Dwarves as generally bearded, whiny, timorous, and avaricious.³³ Her chief proofs are that the Dwarves "complain constantly"; that their "dominant psychological attribute in *The Hobbit* is their love of gold", such that they "intertwine their very identity with their artifacts"; and that Tolkien undermines Thorin's seemingly heroic entrance into the Battle of the Five Armies by stating that "the great dwarf gleamed like gold in a dying fire", thus turning the reader's mind to recalling "the Dwarves' love of gold, their definitional trait."³⁴ These pernicious depictions are undone and repudiated through the characterization of Gimli in *The Lord of the Rings*, who is courageous and alive to the aesthetic – rather than merely monetary – value of the material world.³⁵ Putting

31 Rist (1996) 106.

32 *Hobbit* 14–6, 50, 241.

33 Brackmann (2010) 89, 93.

34 Brackmann (2010) 90–3.

35 Brackmann (2010) 97.

aside the question of supersession, since, *inter alia*, there are no covenants between Ilúvatar and the races for Tolkien, and that the Dwarves actually come later in the intention of the Creator than Elves and humans,³⁶ I argue that the Platonic frame better explains the Dwarves,³⁷ who are consistently depicted throughout the Ring Saga.

The chief trouble, perhaps, comes from the narrator of *The Hobbit* remarking that “dwarves are not heroes, but calculating folk with a great idea of the value of money; some are tricky and treacherous and pretty bad lots; some are not, but are decent enough people like Thorin and Company, if you don’t expect too much.”³⁸ As harsh as this sounds, it is actually consistent with the *Republic*, where greatness is not expected from the bronze-souled artisanal class, but may be found among the silver- and gold-souled warriors and guardians. Indeed, *Republic* VIII offers the pattern that possibly inspires the ‘ordained’ tension between Tolkien’s Elves and Dwarves when Socrates explains that there is natural opposition between the pursuit of virtue and the pursuit of wealth, and that “when wealth and the wealthy are honoured [highly] in a city, virtue and good people are honoured less.”³⁹ Furthermore, Book IX describes the profit-lovers in ‘dwarvish’ language, explaining that they are often “looking downward like cattle ... with their heads

36 It is nevertheless worth pointing out that the idea of supersession, that a person or people can be “supplanted and replaced”, is in fact native to the Hebrew scriptures. In the case of peoples, the covenant with Noah, made with all men, is superseded by the covenant with Abraham. And in the case of persons, Jacob, through trickery, takes the place of Esau and receives the blessing of Isaac: the Israelites become the Chosen People in part because their patriarch supplants and replaces his elder brother. Furthermore, Jacob elevates Judah over Reuben, his firstborn son, when giving his children his final blessing, thus setting the stage for the covenant with the prophet-king David, who is of the tribe of Judah. Supersession is integral to the story of the Hebrew people; even if the theme was present in Tolkien’s work, it would be more likely to be a Judaic trope than an anti-Semitic one. In fact, the creation of the Dwarves has more parallels with the story of Ishmael and Isaac, since Ishmael is born first but is never considered the legitimate heir of Abraham since he is not born of Abraham’s lawful wife. Isaac and his descendants (i.e., the Jewish people) parallel the Elves and the humans, and that would make Tolkien’s cosmology pro-Hebrew, not anti.

37 For instance, Reid (2017) 162 points out that ranking species of soul with regard to their dwellings is a longstanding Platonic trope.

38 *Hobbit* 196.

39 Plat. res. 8,550e–551a. See also res. 2,439d. Weiss (2012) 74 goes as far as to argue that the reason why the ascent from the Cave is so arduous and needs to be compelled is that the journeying soul is fighting against its appetitive element.

bent over the earth,” and are susceptible to “mad passions.”⁴⁰ So much, then, for the Dwarves’ weakness to irritability and lust for gold.

Brackmann’s chief mistake is to assume that the Dwarves’ love for material artefacts is inherently avaricious,⁴¹ whereas Plato and Tolkien are subtler. What one wants is a healthy love for material goods, hence why Galadriel blesses Gimli to possess wealth without being possessed by it.⁴² *The Hobbit* takes care to contrast the Dwarves with goblins, who “are cruel, wicked, and bad-hearted. They make no beautiful things, but they make many clever ones ... especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once.”⁴³ Relatedly, dragons “hardly know a good bit of work from a bad, though they usually have a good notion of the current market value; and they can’t make a thing for themselves.”⁴⁴ The Dwarves, on the other hand, are makers of *beautiful* works, the best craftsmen in the Third Age of Middle-earth. This is true both in *The Hobbit* where even the Elvenking of Mirkwood admires their handiwork – and had tried to cheat them out of due payment (i.e., the narrator sides with the Dwarves over Elves in this instance)⁴⁵ – as well as in *The Lord of the Rings* where the material renewal of Gondor will be had, Legolas and Gimli pledge, through Elven gardeners and builders from the Dwarves.⁴⁶

More important than their virtuous craftsmanship, the Dwarves in *The Hobbit* are courageous and loyal. At several moments, e.g., with the trolls and goblins, they have an opportunity to abandon Bilbo and clearly do not wish to. And as for Thorin’s appearance at the Battle of the Five Armies, I propose that Brackmann misses an allusion to the *Iliad*. Like the son of Peleus, Thorin takes to the field of battle after harbouring anger on account of losing what is, in his mind, his legitimate war prize. The imagery of gold and flame recalls Achilles at the ships as the Greeks fight desperately for the body of Patroklos and his new brilliant ar-

⁴⁰ Plat. res. 586a–c.

⁴¹ Brackmann (2010) 97.

⁴² *FR* 376.

⁴³ *Hobbit* 59.

⁴⁴ *Hobbit* 23. Importantly, Hawkins (2008) 32–5 convincingly argues that greed is one of the most prominent sins in Ring Saga, experienced by characters from each of the races, whereas lust, for example, is only depicted in a human being.

⁴⁵ *Hobbit* 155.

⁴⁶ *RK* 872.

mour, which incorporates gold, that Hephaistos fashions for him.⁴⁷ At the risk of tedium: gold is not intrinsically compromised for Tolkien. And, as with Achilles, joining the fray costs Thorin his life.

Crucially, Tolkien's Dwarves are capable of wonder in the face of beauty and goodness. They are, of course, the makers of the Arkenstone, which stuns even the Elvenking and Bard the grim archer of Lake-town. Amidst the dragon hoard, Fili and Kili, young Dwarves, noticeably reach for harps to play music, which we are informed dragons do not have real interest in. And throughout their adventure, the Dwarves' relationship with Bilbo steadily grows from one of professional usefulness to one of real esteem, admiration, and devotion.⁴⁸ Poignant is the parting of Thorin and Bilbo, where the dying Dwarf king confesses, "[i]f more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world," affirming that he ultimately holds friendship over material wealth and beauty. Like Bilbo, Thorin does not begin *The Hobbit* as a hero, but he is arguably one by the end. Just as Socrates recognizes a capacity for goodness in his artisans, so does Tolkien in his Dwarves – indeed to a greater degree.⁴⁹

ON HUMANS

According to my paradigm, Tolkien's humans should correspond to Socrates' class of auxiliaries, those who possess *thumos* or spiritedness. Of the three classes, the thumotic soul is the most controversial among readers of the *Republic*. Part of the problem is that Socrates appears to begin with a bipartite soul, dividing reason from appetite, before arguing for the need of a third element.⁵⁰ This has led to debates about whether *thumos* is a distinct element in the soul,⁵¹

⁴⁷ Hom. Il. 18,205–214, 608–616.

⁴⁸ Keys (2013) 222 relates the evolution of the friendship between Bilbo and the Dwarves in an Aristotelian key.

⁴⁹ I prefer not to comment on the Dwarves' beards as connected to anti-Semitism.

⁵⁰ Plat. res. 439d–e.

⁵¹ See Burger (2003) and Burger (2005) for some of questions raised on this point. She believes that the thumotic soul has its own proper conception of justice, insofar as there is a desire to see others praised, blamed, rewarded and punished for what they do, independent of the preoccupations of reason and appetite.

or whether the warrior class of auxiliaries are a natural part of the polis.⁵² We may proceed with a general impression based on Socrates' descriptions: the spirited have the disposition of warriors, are susceptible to anger and shame, are lovers of victory, and need to be tamed.⁵³

A workable, if somewhat over-simple, heuristic for thinking about spiritedness is considering Aristotle's two descriptions of the human organism as possessing reason and as a political animal.⁵⁴ The appetitive element in our souls is concerned with the material goods that are necessary for or attractive to us as animals, and the rational element is attentive to truth and learning. The spirited element speaks to our condition as socio-political beings. As Thomas Smith puts it, *thumos* "urges us to a sense of dignity and self-worth ... [and] is also the locus in the soul of the desire for honour and glory. Thus, it is the wellspring of ambition, a drive both essential and profoundly dangerous to political order."⁵⁵ Plato's Socrates twice invokes Homer's Odysseus as a valuable model of moderated spiritedness.⁵⁶ In both instances, Socrates quotes Odysseus calming himself after suffering a slight, so that he may exact his vengeance at the opportune moment rather than sabotage his plans through immoderate anger and recklessness. The episode is offered as a lesson in taming spiritedness – and a reminder that without *thumos* Odysseus could not have endured and succeeded in his quest home.

Turning to the Third Age of Middle-earth, we see that heroic humans are patterned after Plato's auxiliaries. Even in *The Hobbit*, where the denizens of Lake-town are not significant players, the grim figure of Bard the Bowman is clearly thumotic. In *The Lord of the Rings*, spiritedness is more visible, both collectively and individually.

Honour, courage, and military prowess are some of the chief values and virtues of the Rohirrim. Faramir, a wise captain of Gondor, describes the people of

52 Coby (2001) defends the place of the auxiliaries in the city but does so in part by arguing that spiritedness is ultimately rooted in acquisitive desire.

53 Plat. res. 2,375b–c; 3,410e; 4,439e; 581c.

54 Aristot. eth. Nic. 1102b; pol. 1253a.

55 Smith (2016) 40–1. Contrary to Robinson (1995) 125, the *Republic* does not generally assume spiritedness to be an evil influence.

56 Plat. res. 3,390d; 4,441b. See Hom. Od. 20,17–8. For discussion of Plato's elevation of Odysseus over other Homeric heroes, see Adluri (2014) 10, 25.

Rohan as “tall men and fair women, valiant both alike,” who have lately come to be “enhanced in arts and gentleness,” seemingly an echo of Socrates’ injunction that the ideal warriors of the city should be both spirited and gentle.⁵⁷ Comparing Gondor and Rohan, Faramir continues: “[A]s the Rohirrim do, we now love war and valour as things good in themselves, both a sport and an end.”⁵⁸ Rohan’s loves of honour and valour are never far from being invoked as inspiration or explanation for their actions and interactions. As the Wild Men negotiate with Théoden, the king of Rohan, about helping the Rohirrim chart their way to Gondor, their leader pledges his loyalty by saying that “[h]e will go himself with the father of Horse-men, and if he leads you wrong, you will kill him.” Théoden replies: “So be it!”⁵⁹ The exchange presents two very different human cultures, which achieve mutual understanding in view of their shared respect for honour. Upon reaching the threshold of battlefield, Théoden marshals his men by crying, “Yet, though you fight upon an alien field, the *glory* that you reap there shall be your own for ever” (emphasis added). The appeal to glory is a fitting preparation for the Achillean vision of Théoden charging down to succor Gondor: “His golden shield was uncovered, and lo! it shone like an image of the Sun, and the grass flamed into green about the white feet of his steed.”⁶⁰ The Rohirrim are a people of spiritedness.

With the Gondorians, circumstances are rather more complex. As descendants of the Númenóreans, the noblest race of men who became, collectively, Elf-friends in the First-Age, elven virtues – art, learning, longevity of life – set the people of Gondor apart from the other races of men. But by the time of the Third Age, Gondor is in decline, partly evidenced in their becoming more warlike, i.e., more spirited. As Faramir reflects, “though we still hold that a warrior should have more skills and knowledge than only the craft of weapons and slaying, we esteem a warrior, nonetheless, above men of other crafts.”⁶¹ As a consequence of this evolution of Gondor’s corporate spirit, Boromir, Faramir’s elder, more

57 Plat. res. 2,375b–c. Coby (2001) 380 notices that it is education in the liberal arts that moderates spiritedness.

58 *TT* 678–9.

59 *RK* 833.

60 *RK* 836, 838. The parallels with Thorin’s entrance into (and end in) the Battle of the Five Armies further confirm that Tolkien was not undermining the Dwarf.

61 *TT* 679.

thumotic brother is revered both by the people and by their father Denethor as the best of the men of Gondor. Faramir, though recognized by a few as “wise and learned in the scrolls of lore and song, ... and yet a man of hardihood and swift judgement in the field”, is gentler and less esteemed. These fathers and sons remind us of Socrates’ observation that the particular weaknesses of the spirited soul are tendencies towards envy, violence and peevishness.⁶² Both Denethor and Boromir are willing to use the Ring as an advantage in the defence of Gondor and exhibit irritability and impatience when Gandalf or Frodo frustrate their designs.⁶³ Faramir, in contrast, forswears the Ring even before he knows its full significance, essentially deferring to the judgement of the Council of Elrond. Faramir thus represents moderated spiritedness, though the people of Gondor are sliding towards a ‘purer’ – and more unbalanced – form.

Tolkien’s most subtle treatments of spiritedness come in how thumotic characters respond to death and defeat. If these characters have little beyond honour and valour to rely on, they tend to collapse and become dispirited, i.e., they fall into despair. Unharmonized *thumos*, Thomas Smith perceives, presents as disordered fight or flight: “either a kind of psychic paralysis that refuses to risk what one cherishes, or an excessive combativeness that sees threats everywhere and strikes out to combat them.”⁶⁴ Despair intensifies both these tendencies to self-annihilating extremes, i.e., despair can be implosive or explosive. Denethor and Éowyn are examples of implosion, and Éomer of explosion.

After Boromir’s death and Faramir’s grave injury, and having become aware of the extent of Mordor’s forces, Denethor opts to commit suicide by burning himself and his wounded son on a pyre. His line having seemingly failed and his city apparently falling, he loses all hope and gives up. As Gandalf diagnoses, “the despair of his heart ... overthrew his mind.”⁶⁵ For her part, Éowyn of Rohan, a “fearless and high-hearted” (i.e., greatly spirited) soul⁶⁶ who, above all, fears to be caged without a “chance of doing great deeds,”⁶⁷ suffered grievously in “bitter-

⁶² Plat. res. 9,586c.

⁶³ Smith (2016) 34 points out that immoderate *thumos* is liable to overreact in the face of threats.

⁶⁴ Smith (2016) 46.

⁶⁵ *RK* 856.

⁶⁶ *TT* 523.

⁶⁷ *RK* 784.

ness and shame” as she impotently watched Théoden fall into “dishonoured dotage” before the arrival of Aragorn, whom she naively came to love not for himself but as symbolizing “a hope of glory and great deeds.” After Aragorn heals her physically but does not requite her love nor take her as a companion, she acknowledges that she is restored to health but not (yet) to hope: she is still suffocating in “sorrow and unrest.”⁶⁸ In contrast, the despair of Éomer after the death of Théoden and (seemingly) Éowyn is explosive in that he throws himself upon his enemies without any desire to live. “Death, death, death! Death takes us all!” he cries, succumbing to a berserker rage without attending to how “his fury had betrayed him.”⁶⁹ His despair would have killed him if he did not regain his senses.

How, then, ought a thumotic soul face doom? The key is to keep one’s mind. As Glaucon says to Socrates, “[i]t is not in accord with divine law to be angry with the truth.”⁷⁰ Unlike those in Rohan and Gondor who bristle when Gandalf bears evil tidings,⁷¹ the right response of the thumotic soul to difficulty is to meet it, and, if death and defeat are unavoidable, to meet them with sober resignation. Thus Éomer, recovering from his battle frenzy and seeing the numbers of his foes only increase, recognizes that “he was still unscathed, and he was young, and he was king: the lord of a fell people. And lo! even as he laughed at despair he looked out again on the black ships, and he lifted up his sword to defy them.”⁷² Better still is the clear-sightedness with which Faramir renounces the Ring: “I would not take this thing, if it lay by the highway. Not were Minas Tirith [the capital of Gondor] falling in ruin and I alone could save her, so, using the weapon of the Dark Lord for her good and my glory. No, I do not wish for such triumphs.”⁷³ Spiritedness tempered by wisdom raises the gaze of the soul beyond perishable glories and victories to enduring realities that make it truly noble.

⁶⁸ *RK* 867, 959. For critiques of Éowyn’s love for Aragorn, see Walsh (2015) 34–42; Moore (2015) 206.

⁶⁹ *RK* 844, 846.

⁷⁰ *Plat. res.* 5,480a.

⁷¹ *TT* 512–3. *RK* 749. In Rohan he is called “a herald of woe,” “Stormcrow,” and “Ill-news”; in Gondor some say that he comes “with tidings of grief and danger, as is [his] wont.”

⁷² *RK* 847.

⁷³ *TT* 671.

ON THE ELVES

The three elements of the soul in the *Republic* have distinct pleasures and loves. The rational element enjoys learning, on account of its love of wisdom.⁷⁴ Among the classes of the polis, it is the guardians – i.e., those who correspond to the rational element – from whom the rulers of the city are best raised. On the face of it, these are two rather different aims: wisdom and rule. However, in the Platonic tradition, these stand for two activities of reason, which we might characterize as mind acting speculatively and mind acting practically. Given the centrality of truth and wisdom in Platonic philosophy, it is no surprise that right action flows from right understanding. As such, Tolkien’s Elves, particularly the High Elves who lived for a while with the Valar,⁷⁵ are distinguished both for their wisdom – they are the most learned of the major races – and for their superior, otherworldly arts. As their story is summarized in *The Hobbit*, the Eldar, the Elves who journeyed into “Faerie in the West, ... [there] lived for ages, and grew fairer and wiser and more learned, and invented their magic and their cunning craft in the making of beautiful and marvelous things, before some came back into the Wide World.”⁷⁶

Part of the rule that the rational element exercises in the soul is purifying and ennobling the spirited and appetitive elements’ pursuit of their proper pleasures.⁷⁷ In making sure that lower pleasures are sought and enjoyed in due measure, the rational part exercises custody for the whole; and in ordering the activities for the lower classes, the guardians govern the polis as a unity.⁷⁸ A variation of this idea appears in how characters close to the High Elves become more integrated or even develop preternatural abilities. Thus, in Rivendell Bilbo’s *Hobbit* appetite for food and drink becomes more temperate, even as he

74 Plat. res. 9,580d–581c.

75 An image that resonates with Socrates’ belief in the *Phaedo* that beyond this world the just man may live with the gods and other just men. Plat. Phaid. 63b–c.

76 *Hobbit* 154. Importantly, while Dwarves are exceptional craftsmen, Elven arts are portrayed in a significantly more fantastic or mystical register.

77 Plat. res. 9,586e.

78 Coby (2001) 390 is therefore wrong to claim that reason has no interest in right order *per se*.

better appreciates “the Elvish appetite for music and poetry and tales.”⁷⁹ Likewise, Galadriel’s blessing purifies Gimli’s love for gold. And, of course, Aragorn and Faramir, possessing and honouring their Númenórean lineages, exhibit mature spiritedness and, indeed, the capacity for prophetic insight.⁸⁰

The Elves also recall a crucial Platonic doctrine, viz., that of *anamnesis* or recollection. In the *Meno* and the *Phaedo*, Socrates suggests that true wisdom and understanding is pursued through recovering or recollecting prior knowledge we had in a disembodied state, wisdom which we lost in being incarnated in this world. The *Republic* dramatizes a related account in the journey of the soul out of the Cave of ignorance, only to return back inside after having perceived the truth outside.⁸¹ Common to these descriptions is the notion that for one who seeks wisdom, life among men is an experience of being displaced, and yearning for a return to or recovery of something lost. Such, as it happens, is the condition of the Elves. The first Elves to appear in *Fellowship* thus describe themselves: “We are Exiles, and most of our kindred have long ago departed and we too are now only tarrying here a while, ere we return over the Great Sea.” Likewise, the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings* speak of the restlessness of Elvish hearts and their desire for a respite that transcends this world: “In the hearts of the Exiles the yearning for the Sea was an unquiet never to be stilled; in the hearts of the Grey-elves it slumbered, but once awakened it could not be appeased.”⁸² The Elves are incarnations of Plato’s erotic intellect, their hearts nicely expressed by Elrond: to desire not “strength or domination or hoarded wealth, but understanding, making, and healing, to preserve all things unstained,”⁸³ all while living in a fading or passing world.⁸⁴

79 *FR* 230, 237.

80 *FR* 246, 297. Boromir comes to Rivendell after Faramir is visited several times by an apparition in a dream (a visitation that comes only once to Boromir), and Aragorn has a premonition of the danger that passage through Moria poses to Gandalf. Also, part of the reason that the Rohirrim are more developed than the Wild Men may be that they have something of the Elves’ reverence for memory. See Garth (2020) 152.

81 Plat. *Men.* 81b–e, 86b–c; *Phaed.* 72e–77a; res. 514a–520e.

82 *RK* 1128.

83 *FR* 268.

84 Tolkien (2021) 162 dramatically articulates the Elves’ sense of loss and remembrance: “In Elvish sentiment the future was not one of hope or desire, but a retrogression from for-

It is fitting, therefore, that the two principal seats of Elven power allied against Sauron are themselves political and ecological achievements and manifestations of recollection. Not only are the Elves ‘anamnetic’ as a people, their realms are such as well: for Frodo, “[i]n Rivendell there was the memory of ancient things; in Lórien the ancient things still lived on in the waking world.” The former is Remembrance, the latter Remnant. Rivendell is more associated with renewal and healing (“Merely to be there was a cure for weariness, fear, and sadness.”), a homely rest open to guests, while Lothlórien is a closed preservative that somehow conserves the freshness of the first experience of the world’s beauty. In both realms, time passes more slowly,⁸⁵ somewhat arresting decay and decline.⁸⁶

The ‘anthropology’ of the Elves also makes use of several Platonic tropes that have their roots in Plato’s portrait of Socrates. In the *Phaedo* and *Symposium*, Socrates is presented as a contemplative sage with wisdom and virtue superior to other men. These depictions are the motif for later Neo-Platonic hagiographies, such as Porphyry’s *Life of Plotinus* and Marinus’ *Life of Proclus*. Typically the work of the students or followers of eminent philosophers, such biographies aim both to provide a history of the life of a godlike man and, in inspiring and impressing readers, to promote a philosophical school.⁸⁷ They provide possible inspirations for Tolkien’s Elves.

Light is one of Plato’s preferred images for wisdom and virtue as seen, for example, in the *Republic*’s Allegory of the Cave or the description of Socrates in the *Symposium* as hiding within him, behind a plain exterior, “godlike [figures] – so bright and beautiful, so utterly amazing.”⁸⁸ Plotinus and Proclus are likewise depicted as luminous, with their excellence shining forth through their bodies, particularly in the face and eyes.⁸⁹ Tolkien, too, favours a metaphysics and epis-

mer bliss and power. ... Their position, as of latter-day sentiment, was as of exiles driven forward (against their will), who were in mind or actual posture ever looking backward.”

⁸⁵ *FR* 224, 231, 350–1, 388.

⁸⁶ Christie (2013) 90–1 explores how in the *Silmarillion* the Elven rings are noted for their power against weariness and deterioration.

⁸⁷ Dillon (2006) 162, 164.

⁸⁸ *Plat. symp.* 217a.

⁸⁹ *Porph.* 13; *Marinus* (1986) 18. Dillon (2006) 163 mentions the eyes as especially important since they are “the most significant physical aspect of a divine man, or indeed of any intellectually distinguished individual.”

temology of light, “rife with ... luminous imagery.”⁹⁰ This leads him to depicting superior Elves as walking with “a shimmer, like the light of the moon ... [that] seemed to fall about their feet.” The Elf-lord Glorfindel initially appears to Frodo with “a white light ... shining through the form and raiment ..., as if through a veil,” which he unveils to become “a shining figure of white light” during the pursuit of the Black Riders. This transfiguration is possible because the lords of the Eldar, like Platonic sages, “have dwelt in the Blessed Realm [and] live at once in both worlds.”⁹¹ And in general Tolkien’s Elves have radiant eyes aglow with brightness akin to starlight.

Alongside their luminosity, Plotinus and Proclus are said to possess unusually penetrating minds and senses. Porphyry reports how Plotinus could discern the characters of men, at one moment detecting a thief simply by looking upon the criminal. He also relates how Plotinus, reading his heart, perceived that Porphyry was suffering from suicidal ideation and counseled him to take a holiday to rest. Marinus also takes care to stress that Proclus was an excellent examiner and judge, especially when giving counsel.⁹² Elrond and Galadriel are Elves distinctively gifted in this way, the former discerning that the addition of Pippin to the Fellowship would be risky and the latter being able to read the desires of the hearts of the Company who manage to arrive at Lórien.⁹³

Tolkien further drives home the spirituality of the Elves through their food and drink. Like Plotinus and Porphyry, who strictly abstain from eating meat,⁹⁴ the Elves – excepting the lower Mirkwood Elves⁹⁵ – appear not to be flesh eaters, if they can help it. From Rivendell and Lórien respectively, the Fellowship receive *miruvor* and *lembas*, an invigorating liquor and a waybread that is food for both soul and body.⁹⁶ At Isengard, Merry and Pippin find salted pork and

⁹⁰ Vaccaro (2017) 89.

⁹¹ *FR* 80, 209, 214, 222–3. In Neo-Platonism, this trope communicates profound interior life made manifest in exterior features. See Goarzin (2017) 16.

⁹² Porph. 11; Marinus (1986) 31.

⁹³ *FR* 276, 356–8.

⁹⁴ Porph. 2; Marinus (1986) 27, 34.

⁹⁵ *Hobbit* 140.

⁹⁶ *FR* 290, 369. Dickerson and Evans (2011) 112 argue that Elven food for the way is a fore-taste of fulfillment beyond this world.

rashers of bacon, which Treebeard refers to as “man-food,”⁹⁷ supporting the claim that Elves are vegetarian. Tom Bombadil and the Ents, beings as ancient as the Elves, host meatless tables.⁹⁸ The eating of flesh from rational animals is a sign of special depravity, as seen in the habits of trolls, orcs, goblins, and monstrous spiders – and Gollum. Grasping at a reason for the Elven diet, it would seem that, given Elves’ reverence for living things, they do not do violence to animals for the sake of consumption. Honey, milk, fruit, grain, and so on are naturally replenished foods, the harvesting of which does not take any lives. As Dickerson and Evans put it, Elves do not even appear to farm, but “simply partake of the earth’s bounty as it occurs naturally.”⁹⁹

And just as Neo-Platonic sages live a less corporeal life than regular men – e.g., having less interest in sleep, eating, drinking and sex¹⁰⁰ – so do the Elves. They sleep less than men and depend less on food and drink. Long lived though they are, they also have few children. And their sexes are morphologically closer to each other than those of humans: Galadriel and Celeborn are both tall, grave and beautiful, and Galadriel possesses a voice “deeper than a woman’s wont.”¹⁰¹ This may be Tolkien’s interpretation of Socrates’ insistence that both men and women, as long as they are qualified in intelligence, may rule as philosophers.¹⁰²

But even though Tolkien ascribes to the Elves’ ‘incorporeality’ or high spirituality its special dignity, he also underlines that their mode of life is not for the rest. This tracks with Socrates’ definition of justice or right order as every part fulfilling its proper role.¹⁰³ While Elven gifts can bestow blessings, we have already seen that their diet and farming practices are not for all. In a similar vein, Faramir diagnoses Gondor’s decline as due not just to increased spiritedness but also to excessive Elvish spirituality and neglect of human corporeality: the

97 *TT* 561.

98 *FR* 124–5; *TT* 471.

99 Dickerson and Evans (2011) 97.

100 *Porph.* 23; *Marinus* (1986) 35.

101 *FR* 354–5. Martinez (2010) 69 helpfully point out that traditionally, elves in literature are described in ways that ‘shortened’ the distance between genders (e.g., application of adjectives usually reserved to womanly (i.e., female human) beauty to male elves).

102 *Plat. res.* 5,454d–e. The Elves are instances of physical and spiritual stature in harmony. See *Plat. res.* 3,402d; Martinez (2010) 73; Walsh (2015) 28.

103 *Plat. res.* 4,433a.

Númenóreans “hungered after endless life unchanging. ... Childless lords sat in aged halls musing on heraldry; in secret chambers withered men compounded strong elixirs, or in high cold towers asked questions of the stars. And the last king of the line of Anárion had no heir.”¹⁰⁴ Part of the renewal and healing that Aragorn brings to Minas Tirith is that eventually “the houses were filled with men and women and the laughter of children.”¹⁰⁵ The Elves are inspiring and orienting figures for the other races, but they are not the model. The peoples of Middle-earth are to obey the natures given them by their Creator, not to aspire to what they are not.

ON WIZARDS

The idea of flourishing in one’s proper place has its roots also in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates explains we have been given posts that we cannot abandon and must discharge honourably.¹⁰⁶ This advice fits perfectly with Gandalf’s counsel that the vocation of each and all is not to define our place in the world, but “to decide ... what to do with the time that is *given* us” (emphasis added).¹⁰⁷ Gandalf’s consistent willingness to offer advice, both wanted and unwanted, and to intervene in historical events stands in marked contrast to the Elves of the Third Age, who are more reticent with counsel, but supportive.¹⁰⁸ Since wizards thus appear to have greater authority to guide the affairs of the races, they correspond more faithfully to Plato’s philosopher-kings, whom Socrates names as necessary for the right ordering and coordination of the city.¹⁰⁹ As servants of the Valar, the wizards rank higher in nobility than the Elves, but this also means that their cor-

104 *TT* 678.

105 *RK* 968. Tolkien may also be critiquing Socratic sayings that appear to pit soul against body. See Collier (2013) 27.

106 Plat. *Phaid.* 62b.

107 *FR* 51.

108 *FR* 84, 363. Both Gildor and Galadriel shrink from giving Frodo advice, and Gildor specifically is uneasy about interfering with the affairs of wizards. They do help, however, with discerning what choices are to be weighed.

109 Plat. res. 5,473c–d.

ruption produces greater evil. This accords with Socrates, who says that “if souls with the best natures get a bad education, they become exceptionally bad,” and Marinus, who reports a Platonic saying about the figure of the genius: “Here is a man who will be a great good, or its contrary!”¹¹⁰ The opposite of the philosopher-king is the tyrant, and that is just what Saruman and Sauron are, to lesser and greater degrees.¹¹¹

The philosopher-kings of the *Republic* marry two activities, contemplating enduring truth and ordering the city: they look “toward what is in its nature just, beautiful, temperate, and all the rest; and ... toward what they are trying to put into human beings.” On the basis of this dual activity, combining the contemplative and the practical, the Neo-Platonists taught that the Platonic sage cares for himself, for his friends, and for his community – perhaps even for the whole world.¹¹² The wizards of Middle-earth exhibit such concerns, in healthy and unhealthy ways. Gandalf notes of himself, “Yet the way of the Ring to my heart is by pity, pity for weakness and the desire of strength to do good,” while Saruman invokes “[our] high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order: all the things that we have so far striven in vain to accomplish, hindered rather than helped by our weak and idle friends.” And even after they become estranged, Saruman tempts Gandalf by proposing, “[m]uch we could still attempt together, to heal the disorders of the world.”¹¹³ Both are therefore moved to order the world but come to view their roles in radically different ways.

Gandalf sees himself as a servant and a steward. He tells Pippin, “the rule of no realm is mine, neither in Gondor nor any other, great or small. But all worthy

110 Plat. res. 6,491d–e. Marinus (1986) 26. The general Latin principle is *corruptio optimi pessima*, that the corruption of the best does the worst harm.

111 Intriguingly, both Sauron and Saruman served Aulë, the smith of the Valar, *pace* Tally, Jr. (2010) 18, this does not mean that “the instinct or desire to create new things – that is, to become like God himself – almost inevitably leads to the Fall,” but that deviating from will or providential order of Ilúvatar is self-destructive. See Moore (2015) 208 on the liberating power of obedience to reality and Hawkins (2008) 36 on Sauron and Saruman’s pride. As Rist (1996) 122 notes, Plato sees the grasp for power, especially power beyond one’s station, as corrupting.

112 Plat. res. 6,501a–b; Porph. 2; Marinus (1986) 28–32. Contrary to Coby (2001) 387–8 and Boys-Stones (2004) 5, the philosopher is not disengaged or indifferent. As Bell (2015) 116–7, 128 and Goarzin (2017) 12 argue, care for the other and for the city are natural concerns of the philosopher.

113 *FR* 61, 259; *TT* 581.

things that are in peril as the world now stands, those are my care.” Saruman, for his part, “will not serve, only command.”¹¹⁴ Like Plato’s philosopher-king, Gandalf serves an order beyond himself. In Tolkien’s mythos, there is only one true King, Ilúvatar, and all others – the kings of the Valar, the Elves, men and Dwarves – have mere delegated authority, which they must exercise wisely, humbly, and obediently, in a necessarily hierarchical cosmology.¹¹⁵ Hence the constant refrain that those who attempt to establish themselves as a sovereign power, independent of the providential order of the cosmos, only deform themselves and their environments.¹¹⁶ The distinction between those who serve and those who manipulate, between Gandalf and Saruman, is further stressed in their speech. Gandalf’s mode is prophetic, ready to discover and disclose difficult truths, while Saruman, by way of threat, flattery, or fraud, seeks merely to persuade for the sake of his private purposes, being sophistic and anti-philosophical.¹¹⁷ In the end, Gandalf is the philosopher-king Saruman could have been, the chief Enemy of Sauron in Middle-earth.¹¹⁸

114 *RK* 758; *TT* 584.

115 Dickerson and Evans (2011) 38, 42; Scarf (2013) 132–3; Vaccaro (2017) 89.

116 *TT* 486: “But Trolls are only counterfeits, made by the Enemy in the Great Darkness, in mockery of Ents, as Orcs were of Elves.” *RK* 914: “The Shadow that bred [the orcs] can only mock, it cannot make: not real new things of its own. I don’t think it gave life to the orcs, it only ruined them and twisted them; and if they are to live at all, they have to live like other creatures.” In these passages, Tolkien skillfully captures the Platonic doctrine that tyranny is a perversion of the self and the cosmological order; it is not, as Sushytska (2012) 67 claims, simply a lack of political order.

117 Vaccaro (2017) 99; Chisholm (2019) 92–4. Relatedly, in another happy coincidence, Socrates says that tyrants are unable to have friends, and Sauron is said to have “few servants but many slaves of fear.” Saruman is in a similar position; in the end, he is alone with Wormtongue, who follows him resentfully, not out of devotion, and who eventually kills him. See *Plat. res.* 9,580a; *TT* 576–87; *RK* 900, 983, 1020.

118 *TT* 459; *RK* 971, 979.

CONCERNING HOBBITS

If wizards can be accommodated in the Platonic scheme, can Hobbits? It does not seem so, but that is possibly by design. Throughout the Ring Saga, Hobbits are continually remarked to be out of place. During Bilbo's adventure, the Dwarves are received as the fulfillment of near-forgotten prophecy, but the people are not quite sure what to do about Bilbo: "no songs have alluded to him even in the obscurest way." Hobbits do neither feature in the old songs, nor in the old smells, according to Smaug, nor in the old lists, by Treebeard's reckoning.¹¹⁹ They are the overlooked and the underestimated, the simple whose worthiness for the grand stage is often doubted.¹²⁰ But in Middle-earth, they too get to be heroes. Though Tolkien revises many aspects of the *Republic's* political framework, through the Hobbits he fashions the tip of his Christian critique of Plato.

The wizards and the Elves in many ways represent the right understanding and exercise of wisdom and power in the Third Age of Middle-earth. Tolkien, however, makes sure to show that these characters are neither infallible nor perfectly efficacious in their plans and purposes. Saruman succumbs to temptation, the Brown (Radagast) and Blue wizards (Alatar and Pallando) lose themselves in distraction, and the Elves of the White Council trust Saruman longer than they should. Through small, simple loves, on the other hand, Bilbo is immune to gold lust and Sam is victorious over the temptations for the Ring.¹²¹ Tellingly, Elrond is against the inclusion of Merry and Pippin in the Fellowship, though Gandalf – who also recruited Bilbo for the Dwarves – supports them, albeit more out of intuition than with argument. Though Pippin makes mistakes at Moria and Isengard, the younger Hobbits play a crucial role in the rousing of the Ents and the slaying of the Lord of the Nazgûl. Through them, both Rohan and Gondor are saved – and Boromir atones for attempting to claim the Ring.¹²² The validation of the weak and unlearned Hobbits recalls the canticle of Mary of Nazareth, which celebrates the elevation of the lowly and the humiliation of the

119 *Hobbit* 183, 206; *TT* 464–5.

120 Tyson (2014) 30.

121 *Hobbit* 262–3; *RK* 900–1.

122 *TT* 496–7; *RK* 859.

proud, and the letter of the Apostle Paul which teaches that, in the eyes of the world, the Christian Gospel is folly and weakness.¹²³

In highlighting the limits of the Wise, Tolkien stresses that history is ultimately guided and guarded by a hidden Providence.¹²⁴ While the *Republic* does recognize an ultimate, invisible order that governs all, it is still the responsibility of the philosopher-king to discover this luminous order and to dispose affairs in the world after its pattern. The Christian, however, gives himself in trust to a good but dark Providence, an order not simply beyond his comprehension but also mainly beyond his perception. Thus, Gandalf asks Bilbo rhetorically, at the end of *The Hobbit*, “You don’t really suppose, do you, that all your adventures and escapes were managed by mere luck, just for your sole benefit?” When the Council of Elrond convenes, the Lord of Rivendell meditates, “[you are] called, I say, though I have not called you to me. ... You have come and are here met, in this very nick of time, by chance as it may seem. Yet it is not so. *Believe* rather that it is so ordered.” (emphasis added).¹²⁵ Unlike Plato’s Socrates, Tolkien greatly values faith, relinquishing the need to know and to control. History’s “long defeat”¹²⁶ can be faced only through trust and hope in Providence. The Hobbits capture the view that redemption is not found through worldly wisdom and power, which Sauron has in abundance.

An important challenge to the wisdom of Sauron is sacrificial love. We see this when the Captains of the West launch a futile attack on Mordor, presenting themselves as bait in an attempt to create a chance for Frodo to destroy the Ring.¹²⁷ But it is Frodo who is the best portrait of Christlike suffering. His journey through Mordor is reminiscent of Christ’s walk to Calvary and death.¹²⁸ Walking his path, he loses not only his companions, his weapons, and his hope of survival, but loses even himself, insofar as his Hobbit consolations are stripped from him: “No taste of food, no feel of water, no sound of wind, no memory of tree or grass or flower, no image of moon or star are left to me. I am naked in

123 Luke 1: 46–55; 1 Corinthians 1: 17–25. Newman (2005) 238–9 notices how Tolkien subverts or frustrates genre expectations.

124 Tyson (2014) 33 discusses visibility and invisibility as an important theme for Tolkien.

125 *Hobbit* 276; *FR* 242, 357.

126 *FR* 357.

127 *RK* 880.

128 Dickerson (2015) 211.

the dark.”¹²⁹ This language parallels the Apostle Paul’s description of Christ’s entry into the world as *kenosis*, a self-emptying.¹³⁰ Even after succeeding in the quest,¹³¹ he is not honoured in the Shire, bears his wounds – of “knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden” – like stigmata, and finally is destined not to recover a home among his people.¹³² Not only does Frodo represent the small in the world, accept a trial beyond the ability of the wise and the powerful, and place his trust in hidden Providence, he must also give up his life, his home, his place in the world: more than any other character, he is a complete sacrifice, a literary imitation of Christ, not of Socrates.

CONCLUSION: ART IN A BROKEN WORLD

Tolkien stands, therefore, within the Platonic tradition. He does not simply repackage the vision of his predecessors, but enters into dialogue with it and makes his own mature poetic and philosophical contributions. His mythos illuminates the abiding relevance of Platonism in the contemporary world, across the different branches of philosophy. Through Tolkien we can appreciate how Platonism allows for ethics that value craftsmanship and the pursuit of glory and honour, rather than falling back on the caricature of the philosopher as aloof from and indifferent to the world. Indeed, Tolkien shows that Platonism may even be a valuable tradition from which to articulate political concern for the environment. That said, Tolkien does also offer a critique of ancient Platonism’s picture of human excellence: the learned philosophical sage. Middle-earth shows us other, humbler forms of exemplary goodness.

Beyond appreciation and critique, there is also development. As is clear in the *Republic*, Socrates is attentive to the need for the world, and especially for human society, to be rightly ordered. So insistent is Plato on this theme that

129 RK 938.

130 Philippians 2:6.

131 Dickerson (2015) 214 believes that Frodo fails, but I argue that Frodo fulfilled his role in the Providential plan and thus succeeded.

132 RK 989, 1025, 1029.

for Socrates even punishment for evil should (ideally) be therapeutic,¹³³ i.e., aimed at restoring order. Tolkien elaborates on this theme by making mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation one of the principal foci of the War of the Ring.¹³⁴ In conversation with Frodo, Gandalf prophesies that “the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many”; Bilbo’s merciful refusal to slay Gollum – as well as Frodo and Sam’s choices to appreciate and respect that decision while Gollum is in their power – leads to the success of the quest and Frodo’s final forgiveness of Gollum.¹³⁵ Likewise, what marks and confirms Aragorn as the true king of Gondor is not his skill at arms, but his arts of healing: “*The hands of the king are the hands of a healer. And so the rightful king could ever be known.*” One of his names is “*Envinyatar, the Renewer,*” and at his coronation it is said that “wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands.”¹³⁶ Also, Théoden names Gandalf as skilled in healing,¹³⁷ and Elrond is a master healer. These are but a few examples of a persistent melody: that to create and to restore are analogous acts, and that we are called to imitate both of these divine activities, both for our good and for the good of the world.¹³⁸

In this context, Plato casts a light that, intriguingly, may reveal Tolkien’s shortcomings. While Socrates recognizes that it is beyond our power to purify ourselves – as individuals or communities – of all tendencies to evil,¹³⁹ Tolkien goes further and gives us whole races that are *necessarily* morally corrupt. No nature in the Platonic cosmos is inherently evil, which means Tolkien’s world is more broken. While orcs, goblins, trolls are useful for the plot, their metaphysical status is unclear: where do they actually come from, and are all their desires corrupt? Importantly, Tolkien is himself troubled by the status of these races in his legendarium, even saying that the orcs “are not easy to work into

133 Plat. res. 2,38ob.

134 Bruce (2012) 113.

135 *Hobbit* 81; *FR* 59; *RK* 947.

136 *RK* 863–71, 968.

137 *TT* 518.

138 Dickerson (2016) 141; Keys (2013) 212.

139 Plat. res. 571b, 572b. Gerson (1987) 88.

the theory and system.”¹⁴⁰ Indeed, the goblins of *The Hobbit* have children (who are born evil?) and some orcs in *The Lord of the Rings*, like Shagrat and Gorbag, evince a capacity to value trust and wish for more peaceful lives.¹⁴¹ If Gollum, who enjoys goblin-flesh and is ready to consume hobbit, is theoretically redeemable, Tolkien offers no satisfying explanation why the rehabilitation of the foul races is beyond the pale.¹⁴² So, while Tolkien has some questions for the *Republic*, Plato would have his own for Middle-earth. And this is one kind of the fruitful dialogues possible when studying classical reception.

In Tolkien’s works, some of the most enduring ideas and images in the Platonic corpus are borne to us through time, not entirely unlike how hallowed relics are translated through space in reliquaries. And, like reliquaries, Tolkien’s tales inform how the Platonic ideas are presented and approached, as well as contribute to their ongoing, developing reception. But Tolkien’s mythos also has its own integrity as an artistic achievement, and so appreciating its Platonic inheritance helps us as readers see it in a light at once ancient and new.

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140 MR VIII–X shows that the author entertained various possibilities for the origins of orcs as he tried to work out how a corrupt race might come into being and reproduce. Tolkien goes so far as to consider that perhaps orcs are irredeemable not per se. It was the teaching of the Wise in the Elder Days that “[Orcs] might have *become* irredeemable (at least by Elves and Men).” (emphasis added).

141 *Hobbit* 76; *TT* 738.

142 Tally, Jr. (2010) 23.

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Roman Heroes at Helm's Deep?

Livy, Macaulay, and Tolkien on the Horatius Cocles Episode

Abstract This article analyzes Tolkien's narrative of the Battle of Helm's Deep as a retelling of the Horatius Cocles episode from Livy's *AUC*, which contains descriptions of the defenses and the bridge, a rally encouraged by Horatius, his bold stand both with his companions and alone, and the honors paid to him after the battle. Tolkien's Battle of Helm's Deep contains the same elements split across two narratives: the defense of the causeway leading to the gates of the Deep by Aragorn, Éomer, and Gimli; and, after the fall of the Deeping wall, Aragorn's defiant stand alone on the stairway leading to the inner doors of the Hornburg. Aragorn's double action demonstrates a fulfillment of Livy's exemplary arc. Tolkien's knowledge of Macaulay's "Horatius" provides a possible intermediary that accounts for various additions to the story. However, the larger structure of Tolkien's narrative as well as the imagery that resonates throughout the text distinctly evoke the vivid descriptions of Livy. While both sets of heroes make brave stands against their enemies, Tolkien's warriors represent a civilizing force in their efforts to build and restore their defenses while Livy's Roman heroes destroy the bridge to save their state.

Keywords Livy, Horatius Cocles, Tolkien, Macaulay, Reception, Exemplarity

ROMAN HEROES AT HELM'S DEEP?¹

In the middle of the narrative of the battle of Helm's Deep, Tolkien provides several lighthearted interactions between Gimli and Legolas, as the two compare the counts of the enemies each has killed, in an attempt to outperform the other. In the first of these exchanges, Legolas scorns the dwarf's paltry count:

'Two?' said Legolas. 'I have done better, though now I must grope for spent arrows; all mine are gone. Yet I make my tale twenty at the least. But that is only a few leaves in a forest.'²

Legolas does not merely one-up the count of his friend here. He describes his efforts as a "tale" and then compares the dead to falling leaves, reminiscent of a famous Homeric simile from the sixth book of the *Iliad*:

As are the generations of leaves, so too are the generations of men.
The wind pours some leaves upon the ground, but the forest, blooming,
produces others as the time for spring arrives:
as for the generations of men, as one springs up, another falls.³

Since Legolas makes no mention of the falling of the leaves or the season of autumn, Tolkien's reader must be aware of Homer's simile or perhaps another like it for the elf's metaphor to make sense. There are, of course, numerous works that draw a comparison between autumn leaves and human mortality, including, for instance, texts that are Classical (Verg. *Aen.* 6.309–10), Medieval (Dante *Inf.* iii.112–17), biblical (*Isaiah* 34:3–4), or, for Tolkien, even more recent (Margaret Postgate-Cole's "The Falling Leaves").⁴ Given Tolkien's well-established and well-known study of Greek and Latin and love for Homer, the locus

1 I would like to thank my colleagues of the Utah Classical Association and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. The final version profited much from their feedback.

2 *LotR* 535.

3 Hom. *Il.* 6.146–49: οἷη περ φύλλων γενεή, τοίη δὲ καὶ ἀνδρῶν. / φύλλα τὰ μὲν τ' ἄνεμος χαμάδις χέει, ἄλλα δὲ θ' ὕλη / τηλεθόωσα φύει, ἔαρος δ' ἐπιγίγνεται ὄρη. / ὧς ἀνδρῶν γενεή ἢ μὲν φύει ἢ δ' ἀπολήγει. Text from Munro and Allen's OCT edition.

4 Postgate-Cole's "The Falling Leaves" (1915), might even have a special resonance for

classicus for a simile on this theme would likely be the Homeric lines just cited.⁵ However, I offer this potential intertext not because it matters whether Tolkien had these exact Homeric lines in mind or some other simile on leaves and men falling but instead because the tenor of Legolas' comment in the preceding line promotes a sense of intertextuality and adaptation and encourages the reader to consider a possible intertextual relationship with some other narrative. His claim "I make my tale," can function as the Alexandrian footnote does in ancient literature, wherein the briefest mention of a narrative marks an intertextual relationship between the passage in which it occurs and some previous text.⁶ Legolas' "tale" mobilizes a reference to the entire poetic discourse of the well-established simile of autumn leaves and death. It matters not whether Tolkien had in mind any particular text within that dialogue, since Legolas opens the door for the reader to consider the entire discourse as an intertextual node.

This article explores another example of intertextuality between *The Two Towers* and Livy's *ab Urbe Condita* (*AUC*) by arguing that Tolkien's narrative of the Battle of Helm's Deep and, more directly, the episodes that immediately surround Legolas' poetic turn constitute a retelling and adaptation of the story of Horatius Cocles at the bridge from the *AUC*. The correspondences between Tolkien's account and Livy's include the structure of each story as well as specific imagery and language shared between the two narratives.⁷ While some elements of the text, such as Legolas' possible Homeric allusion, suggest a type of adaptation that corresponds to ghosting or cultural correspondence in Keen's and James' terminologies, respectively, the details present in Tolkien's narrative rise to the level of engagement in Marshall's schema of reception.⁸ As I will argue below, the narrative beats of Livy's version, as well as several of his de-

Tolkien, given his own initial hesitation to enlist during the First World War. On this reluctance, see his letter to his son, Michael (6–8 March 1941, *Letters* #43) and Garth (2003) 40–44.

⁵ For Tolkien's study of Classics and Homer, specifically, consider his own words: "I was brought up in the Classics, and first discovered the sensation of literary pleasure in Homer" (2 December 1953, *Letters* #142), as printed in Carpenter's (1981) edition of *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. In that same edition see also *Letters* #144, 163, and 209 for other references to Tolkien's study of the Classics.

⁶ On the Alexandrian footnote, see esp. Ross (1975) 78; on its use to establish intertextual relationships between various passages, see Hinds (1998) 1–5.

⁷ The term "correspondence" here follows the definition laid out in Hardwick (2003) 9.

⁸ Keen (2006) and (2019) 10–11; James (2009) 239; Marshall (2016) 20–23.

scriptive images, find their way into Tolkien's *The Two Towers*, which suggests the latter's direct engagement with the former's text. Additionally, as Tolkien adapts elements from the variations of the Horatius story into his narratives of both Helm's Deep and Gandalf at the Bridge of Khazad-Dûm, he employs elements from variants in the ancient traditions surrounding Horatius Cocles and thereby engages with the tradition itself in his revisioning of the story.⁹ Tolkien therefore takes the act of reception one step further: instead of retelling a single narrative, he adapts an ancient literary dialogue about Horatius into his text and makes the variations between those accounts a key feature of his own story.

First, then, let us consider the likelihood that Tolkien was aware of the story of Horatius Cocles and, specifically, Livy's version of it. Aside from the general popularity of the story, there is ample evidence that Tolkien had specific knowledge of the tale of Horatius from Lord Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*.¹⁰ Tolkien's earliest known published poem, "The Battle of the Eastern Field," is a parody of Macaulay's *Lays* and Garth argues that the impetus for Tolkien's "Lost Tales" may also be found in the *Lays*.¹¹ Tolkien's *On Fairy-stories* recalls an encounter with a young boy, whom Garth has identified as Hugh Cary Gilson, who put no stock in the titular woodland creatures.¹² Tolkien was a friend of the Gilson family, especially Hugh's half-brother Rob, and regularly stayed with them.¹³ A letter between the Gilson parents notes that Hugh recited a significant

9 Revisioning: Marshall (2016) 22.

10 On the general popularity of the story of Horatius Cocles in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, "A Nation Once Again" (1844) by Thomas Osborne Davis and "The Longest Odds" (1915) by Jessie Pope both feature references to the story. Winston Churchill, too, recalls a story from his childhood in which he recited Macaulay's entire poem at the Harrow school and then engaged with Macaulay again in his studies in Bangalore: Churchill (1930) chs. ii and ix.

11 On the adaptation of Macaulay in "The Battle of the Eastern Field" see Garth (2003) 20. On the connection between the *Lays* and the "Lost Tales" see Garth (2003) 229–230.

12 Tolkien OFS 248; Garth (2010) explores the relationship between Tolkien and the Gilson family and the significance of the exchange between the Gilson youth and Tolkien.

13 Tolkien's signature appears in the Canterbury House visitors' book (Gilson family papers), as shown in Garth (2010) 282. For more on the relationship between Tolkien and the Gilsens, see Garth (2003) esp. 169–170. Tolkien was both a close friend of Rob's and a pupil of R.C. Gilson.

portion of Macaulay's "Horatius" every morning.¹⁴ As Tolkien often stayed with the Gilson family, he had ample opportunity to hear Macaulay's poem on a regular basis.

As for his possible knowledge of Livy's account of Horatius Cocles, Tolkien's training in the Classics, of course, included ample readings in Latin.¹⁵ While he never mentions reading Livy in any of his published letters, the narrative of Horatius is often included among the excerpts of Livy's *AUC* selected for student editions and the story's enduring popularity, mentioned above, makes it not unlikely that Tolkien had had a chance to read the version of the tale found in the *AUC*.¹⁶ Of course, the story was also popular in antiquity, with several authors including accounts of Horatius at the bridge.¹⁷ Additionally, Tolkien's familiarity with Macaulay's *Lays* also provides the opportunity for him to learn of Livy's version even in the unlikely case that he might not have read it otherwise. The introductory essay to Macaulay's "Horatius" discusses the various versions of the story in the ancient tradition and notes the overwhelming preference for Livy's account.¹⁸ Even in the unlikely chance that Tolkien never had the oppor-

14 Letter from R. C. Gilson to Marianne Gilson, 21 March 1939 (Gilson family papers): "Hugh and I recite more than 300 lines of 'Horatius' every morning. He never seems to tire of it... Somehow the proper Italian pronunciation does not seem to suit the *Lays of Ancient Rome*." Importantly, this letter dates to the approximate period in which the exchange between Tolkien and Hugh about fairies must have occurred. For additional discussion about how this letter informs the nature of the interaction between Tolkien and the young Hugh see Garth (2010).

15 For Tolkien's study of Latin, see his personal letters cited in n. 5 above. Garth (2003) 12–18 explores Tolkien's earliest steps into various languages, including Latin and Greek, as well as his growing love of linguistics. Goering (2014) explores what Tolkien says about the impact of his study of Latin on his creation of the languages of Middle Earth.

16 For the Horatius story among student editions of Livy that might have been in use during Tolkien's studies, see e.g. Lincoln (1882) 57–58.

17 e.g. Pol. 6.55.1–4, Dion. Hal. 5.23–25, Val. Max. 3.2.1 and 4.7.2, Plin. nat. 34.29, Plut. *Po-plicola* 16.4–7, Flor. epit. i.10 (of course, derived from Livy), Sen. epist. 120.7. There are also brief mentions of Horatius in Verg. Aen. 8.650 and Prop. 3.11.63.

18 Macaulay, "Horatius" introduction: "Polybius, there is reason to believe, heard the tale recited over the remains of some Consul or Prætor descended from the old Horatian patricians; for he introduces it as a specimen of the narratives with which the Romans were in the habit of embellishing their funeral oratory. It is remarkable that, according to him, Horatius defended the bridge alone, and perished in the waters. According to the chron-

tunity to read Livy's version directly, then, he was aware of Livy's account and its main details through Macaulay's reference to it.

Various historical schools have examined the nature of the legend of Horatius Cocles. While the source critics attempt to remove later accretions to reveal the simplest, purest version of the story, the structuralists break down the myth to its component parts to uncover the elements shared between various Indo-European cultures.¹⁹ More significantly for this study, recent takes on the *AUC* examine how Livy's account of Horatius Cocles at the bridge (2.10) represents an essential illustration of Livy's method of exemplary historiography.²⁰ The structure of Roman exempla, as schematized in Roller's recent update to his earlier work on the topic, includes: an action, an evaluation of that action by an audience, its commemoration through a monument, and finally the deed is accepted as a moral standard which other Romans are encouraged to follow.²¹ Livy's narrative, too, is distinct from some of the ancient accounts in placing the story of Horatius Cocles within a larger narrative and historical context.²² As Roller notes, Livy joins his story of Horatius with his narratives of Cloelia and Mucius Scaevola to form a heroic triptych that demonstrates the valor needed to preserve the nascent Republic.²³ Even in the ancient tradition, these three accounts

icles which Livy and Dionysius followed, Horatius had two companions, swam safe to shore, and was loaded with honors and rewards. ...while the story which Livy has transmitted to us was preferred by the multitude, the other, which ascribed the whole glory to Horatius alone, may have been the favorite with the Horatian house." The text of Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* used throughout the paper is available here: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/847/847-h/847-h> (accessed 28 June 2021), produced for Project Gutenberg by David Reed and David Widger (2006).

19 For the source-critical approach to Horatius Cocles, see Fugmann (1997) 37–49; for the structural anthropological take, see Dumézil (1988) 143–48; Briquel (2007) 58–89 and (2015) gives a recent and updated take on the significance of the comparative Indo-Europeanist approach to the Horatius legend and Livy's *AUC*, respectively.

20 Roller (2004) and (2018) 32–94 examines the cases of Horatius Cocles and Cloelia in detail to establish his model for exemplarity in Livy. Chaplin (2000) 48–49 notes that the story of Horatius is like many of Livy's other *exempla* in that the story is never raised again after its initial appearance in the text.

21 Roller (2018) 4–8, which is a revision of the model laid out in Roller (2004).

22 Among the texts cited above, Dionysius, Plutarch, and Florus are the only others to place the story within its wider historical context.

23 Roller (2018) 32–33.

were taken together as evidence of extraordinary behavior, as Florus calls them the “portents and wonders ...who would seem like tall tales today were they not in our annalists.”²⁴ For Livy and the authors who follow him, Horatius Cocles, Cloelia, and Scaevola represent key narratives that help establish the values linked to the founding and subsequent preservation of the Republic. As argued below, Tolkien engages with the concept of exemplarity in Livy and uses the importance that the Horatius myth has for the early Republic to demonstrate how his world and his heroes can surpass their Roman equivalents. First, however, I will examine the narratives of Livy's Horatius and Tolkien's Battle of Helm's Deep to explore the correspondences between these two accounts.

HORATIUS AND ARAGORN HOLDING THE CROSSING

Livy's story of Horatius opens by establishing the danger the Romans are facing and describing what defenses they have at their disposal. He first establishes that Porsenna's attack is an existential threat for the Republic:

Not ever before this had such fear come upon the senate: that is how powerful Clusium was at that time and how great the fame of Porsenna was. They were not only afraid of the enemy but even their own citizens, as they feared that the plebs would be shaken by fear, admit the kings into the city, and accept peace even if it were accompanied by slavery.²⁵

Fear, felt across the spectrum of Roman society, resonates throughout the passage (*terror ... timebant ... metu*). While Livy frames the dread from the perspective of the senate, the people too are expected to become terror-stricken at the approach of Porsenna's forces. In fact, in anticipation of the plebs' terror, the

²⁴ Flor. epit. 1.10.3–4: *Tunc ill atria Romani nominis prodigia atque miracula, Horatius, Mucius, Cloelia, qui nisi in annalibus forent, hodie fabulae viderentur.* Vergil, too, joins Horatius and Cloelia on the Shield of Aeneas at *Aen.* 8.646–651.

²⁵ Liv. 2.9.5: *Non unquam alias ante tantus terror senatum invasit; adeo valida res tum Clusina erat magnumque Porsennae nomen. Nec hostes modo timebant sed suosmet ipsi cives, ne Romana plebs, metu percussa, receptis in urbem regibus vel cum servitute pacem acciperet.* The text for all citations of Livy comes from Ogilvie's OCT edition.

senate makes concessions to the people in order to avoid their fear leading to the capitulation of the city.²⁶

In Tolkien's *Two Towers*, the people of Rohan experience a similar existential threat with the approach of Saruman's army. As Théoden and his forces march toward Helm's Deep, they share exchanges among themselves and with those they encounter that drive home how dire the threat they face is:

The host rode on. Need drove them. Fearing to come too late, they rode with all the speed they could, pausing seldom. ...

'Many miles lie between,' said Legolas, gazing thither and shading his eyes with his long hand. 'I can see a darkness. There are shapes moving in it, great shapes far away upon the bank of the river; but what they are I cannot tell. It is not mist or cloud that defeats my eyes: there is a veiling shadow that some power lays upon the land, and it marches slowly down stream. It is as if the twilight under endless trees were flowing downwards from the hills.'

'And behind us comes a very storm of Mordor,' said Gandalf. 'It will be a black night.' ...

At length [the horseman they encountered] spoke. 'Is Éomer here?' he asked. 'You come at last, but too late, and with too little strength. Things have gone evilly since Théodred fell. We were driven back yesterday over the Isen with great loss; many perished at the crossing. Then at night fresh forces came over the river against our camp. All Isengard must be emptied; and Saruman has armed the wild hillmen and herd-folk of Dunland beyond the rivers, and these also he loosed upon us. We were overmastered. ...Where is Éomer? Tell him there is no hope ahead.' ...

The rumour of war grew behind them. Now they could hear, borne over the dark, the sound of harsh singing. They had climbed far up into the Deeping-coomb when they looked back. Then they saw torches, countless points of fiery light upon the black fields behind, scattered like red flowers, or winding up from the lowlands in long flickering lines. Here and there a larger blaze leapt up.

'It is a great host and follows us hard,' said Aragorn.

²⁶ Liv. 2.9.6–8. Miles (1995) 115–116 describes how this action represents Livy's idea that the virtue and wisdom of the senate ensures the survival of the city in various moments of crisis.

'They bring fire,' said Théoden, 'and they are burning as they come, rick, cot, and tree. This was a rich vale and had many homesteads. Alas for my folk!'²⁷

Fear, hopelessness, destruction, and darkness loom over the people of Rohan and Tolkien's heroes in these passages. Present participles ("fearing ... pausing seldom") drive the action and show the progressive nature of the concern felt by the heroes. Their greatest fear ("to come too late") becomes fulfilled when the nameless horseman the group encounters tells them "You came at last, but too late" and "there is no hope ahead." Much like Livy's Rome, both the leaders of the group – Théoden, Gandalf, Aragorn, and Legolas among them – and the common folk of Rohan are shown to share the fear of the approaching storm that Saruman's army represents. As Legolas first looks back to see what follows them, he sees only shadows and darkness. Later, as their company looks behind them, they can discern the path of destruction that their foes have left in their wake. Théoden speaks of the area they are observing as no longer rich and populated, as it once was, but as already destroyed. Just as Porsenna and the Etruscans destroy the Janiculum on their way to Rome, Saruman's army has already devastated the Westfold on their approach and now intends to destroy the forces at Helm's Deep.²⁸ The anonymous horseman notes his total despair after narrating several of these skirmishes. In his description of one such clash, he says, "we were overmastered," which subtly echoes Livy's sentiment that the Roman plebs would accept slavery (*servitute*) if only it meant peace. As Porsenna falls upon Rome and Saruman's army upon Helm's Deep, terror descends on all parties as the consequences of losing the impending battles mean the loss of Rome and Rohan, respectively.

Livy next tells how the people from the surrounding areas flee into Rome and describes the defenses that will protect the city:

As the enemy approached, every single person departs their fields and makes for the city. They surround the city itself with guards, some parts seem to be safe because of the walls, others because the Tiber blocked the way.²⁹

²⁷ *LotR* 526–530.

²⁸ Liv. 2.10.3: *captum repentino impetu Ianiculum*. "Janiculum was taken by a sudden attack."

²⁹ Liv. 2.10.1: *cum hostes adessent, pro se quisque in urbem ex agris demigrant; urbem ipsam saepiunt praesidiis. alia muris, alia Tiberi obiecto vibebantur tuta*.

Tolkien, too, describes the people of the Westfold finding refuge at Helm's Deep and the defenses that will protect them:

'Behind us in the caves of the Deep are three parts of the folk of Westfold, old and young, children and women,' said Gamling. 'But great store of food, and many beasts and their fodder, have also been gathered there.' ...

The king and his Riders passed on. Before the causeway that crossed the stream they dismounted. In a long file they led their horses up the ramp and passed within the gates of the Hornburg. There they were welcomed again with joy and renewed hope; for now there were men enough to man both the burg and the barrier wall.

Quickly Éomer set his men in readiness. The king and the men of his household were in the Hornburg, and there also were many of the Westfold-men. But on the Deeping Wall and its tower, and behind it, Éomer arrayed most of the strength that he had, for here the defence seemed more doubtful, if the assault were determined and in great force. ...

The Deeping Wall was twenty feet high, and so thick that four men could walk abreast along the top, sheltered by a parapet over which only a tall man could look. Here and there were clefts in the stone through which men could shoot. This battlement could be reached by a stair running down from a door in the outer court of the Hornburg; three flights of steps led also up on to the wall from the Deep behind; but in front it was smooth, and the great stones of it were set with such skill that no foothold could be found at their joints, and at the top they hung over like a sea-delved cliff.³⁰

In each case, there is a focus on the totality of the residents of the surrounding land retreating to the defenses. Livy's "every single person" (*pro se quisque*) is reflected in Tolkien's "old and young, children and women." The Deeping Wall and the Hornburg correspond to Livy's walls (*muris*) and city (*urbem*), respectively. In both narratives, the defenders are divided up between these places and the farmers from the surrounding countryside take refuge behind these fortifications. The Deeping Wall also serves as an analogue to the Tiber from the story of Horatius Cocles. Where Livy's Tiber serves as the key blocking feature (*obiecto*) for the Etruscan attack, Tolkien's Deeping Wall will be the key barrier stopping

³⁰ *LotR* 531. Tolkien had also, just a little earlier in his narrative, provided a more general description of the Hornburg and Helm's Gate.

the attack of Saruman's army. The description of the Deeping Wall is expanded, compared to the other parts of the fortifications, to include its height, battlement, the closely-fitted stones, the overhang at the top, and even its capacity for troops. The Deeping Wall becomes insurmountable to the attacking army. The heroes of each account must hold the points where the Tiber and the Deeping Wall are traversable or accessible if they want to stave off the attack of the enemy.

There are two such passable points in the defenses at Helm's Deep: the causeway that leads to the main gates and a staircase that leads from the Deep to the Hornburg. Tolkien notes the presence of the staircase in the description just cited and the causeway will be discussed further below. These two crossing points are Tolkien's equivalents to the Pons Sublicius, which Livy describes as follows:

The wooden pile-bridge nearly provided an entrance to the enemy, had there not been one man, Horatius Cocles. The city of Rome was fortunate to have had him as its bulwark that day.³¹

While Livy leaves no suspense as to the outcome of the ensuing battle, he does make it clear that the bridge could provide access (*iter*) to the city. Of course, given the various means of public commemoration of Horatius Cocles that existed in Livy's day, there would be little point in attempting to build tension by withholding the outcome of this battle.³² Instead, Livy can develop some suspense in his narrative by not indicating directly or immediately which version of the story he will tell. Livy's *unus vir* hints that he may tell the account where Horatius stands alone, as the hero does in Polybius.³³ Livy's use of the perfect tense (*habuit*) and a past contrafactual (*ni ... fuisset*) marks a shift from the

³¹ Liv. 2.10.2: *pons sublicius iter paene hostibus dedit, ni unus vir fuisset, Horatius Cocles; id munimentum illo die fortuna Urbis Romanae habuit.*

³² Roller (2018) 36–53 discusses the various types of monuments that could serve to commemorate Horatius' deed, including: a statue, the Pons Sublicius, his wound and cognomen, the so-called "Path of Cocles" mentioned in Prop. 3.11.63 (*Coclitis abscissos testator semita pontes*), and various images or narratives that depict a soldier swimming in full armor.

³³ Pol. 6.55.1–4. Note that Macaulay's introduction to the "Horatius" lay, cited above in n. 18, notes this basic difference between Polybius' and Livy's versions of the story. I will discuss the various versions of the Horatius story and how Tolkien's narrative engages with them in the conclusions below.

present verbs (*demigrant ... saepiunt*) favored in the narrative up to that point. Livy also compares Horatius to a *munimentum*, a word that audibly echoes the eventual results of his actions, the *monumentum*. Livy's description of the infamous bridge and his introductory remarks to the character of Horatius thereby signal that the hero might die in this telling of the story, as if he is already in the past and preserved by a monument. This feature, like the *unus vir* above, hints toward the Polybian version of the story, in which Horatius Cocles dies after leaping into the Tiber.

Tolkien also makes a brief description of each of his navigable points as he launches into his narrative of the battle of Helm's Deep. The stairway that leads up to the Hornburg and that will later come under attack was noted in the description above. First, however, our heroes must defend the Hornburg gate which takes the brunt of the first wave of attack:

The enemy surged forward, some against the Deeping Wall, other towards the causeway and the ramp that led up to the Hornburg-gates. ...

Éomer and Aragorn stood together on the Deeping Wall. They heard the roar of voices and the thudding of the rams; and then in a sudden flash of light they beheld the peril of the gates.

'Come!' said Aragorn. 'This is the hour when we draw swords together!'³⁴

The attacking army has gained the causeway that leads to the main gate of the Hornburg and begun to assault the gates directly. Tolkien focalizes the realization of the danger this battering represents through the eyes and ears ("they heard ... they beheld ...") of Éomer and Aragorn. Livy also frames his description of the initial attack of the Etruscans from the perspective of his hero:

[Horatius] happened to be stationed at the bridge when Janiculum was taken by a sudden attack and then he saw that the enemy was running down impetuously and that the terrified throng of his soldiers was abandoning their arms and their ranks.³⁵

³⁴ *LotR* 533.

³⁵ Liv. 2.10.3: *qui positus forte in statione pontis cum captum repentino impetu Ianiculum atque inde citatos decurrere hostes vidisset trepidamque turbam suorum arma ordinesque relinquere.*

Horatius, Aragorn, and Éomer themselves note the dangers that they are facing at the hands of their enemies. The realization spurs Horatius and Aragorn to action to oppose the enemy's attack. In each instance the sudden nature of the hero's comprehension ("in a sudden flash"; *repentino*) of the danger incites their fear. While Tolkien mirrors Livy's point of focalization and the heroes' reactions in the opening narratives of the battle, his heroes surpass Livy's by both hearing and seeing the attack. Tolkien's heroes also outnumber Livy's in this initial encounter: Aragorn and Éomer act as a pair, both in sensing the danger and in responding to it jointly ("together ... together"), while Horatius has – up to this point – stood alone (*unus vir*).

Aragorn's response to the attacks also demonstrates points of correspondence between Livy's and Tolkien's narratives. Horatius rallies his fellow defenders, orders the bridge to be destroyed, and shifts the fear from the Romans to the enemy:

He grabs each of them, one by one, and blocks their way and calls on them to witness as he swears by the faith of both gods and men that they are fleeing from their abandoned posts in vain. If they were to leave a passageway in the bridge behind them, then there would be more of the enemy on the Palatine and Capitoline soon than there were on the Janiculum. So, he admonishes them to tear apart the bridge with steel, with fire, with whatever they could, and he would receive the enemy's attack, as much as he could resist with one body. Then he advances to the entrance of the bridge, conspicuous among the backs that could be seen of those already fleeing the battle, and, with his arms at hand and turned for giving battle, he astounded the enemy, in complete surprise at his audacity.³⁶

Horatius physically impedes the retreat of his countrymen as he rallies them to aid in the defense of the city. Since he is the one who sees the enemy's initial approach, he is in the best position to advise the most appropriate course of action.

³⁶ Liv. 2.10.3–5: *reprehensans singulos, obsistens obtestansque deum et hominum fidem testabatur nequiquam deserto praesidio eos fugere; si transitum pontem a tergo reliquissent, iam plus hostium in Palatio Capitolioque quam in Ianiculo fore. itaque monere, praedicere ut pontem ferro, igni, quacumque vi possint, interrumpant: se impetum hostium, quantum corpore uno posset obsisti, excepturum. vadit inde in primum aditum pontis, insignisque inter conspecta cedentium pugna terga obversis comminus ad ineundum proelium armis, ipso miraculo audaciae obstupescit hostes.*

Here that means taking down the bridge, the enemy's only means of approaching the city. At this point in the narrative, Livy continues to hint that Horatius will stand alone in his account (*corpore uno*). He then shifts the perspective from Horatius to the enemy, as the hero strides onto the bridge and becomes highlighted (*insignis*) against a backdrop of fleeing Romans. Thereupon the Etruscans are struck with fear (*obstupefecit*) as Horatius' boldness (*audaciae*) shocks them. The alteration in perspective here presents the Etruscans as the first audience of Horatius' defiant act. As noted above, the audience and its evaluation of the deed is a vital step in the exemplary loop.³⁷

After they see the danger posed by the attack of the Orcs along the causeway, Aragorn and Éomer sally out in an attack to defend the causeway and the gates in an account that contains many narrative beats similar to Livy's. They rally a few troops and make their way through a door that opens to a side path with access to the causeway.³⁸ As they charge forth, they stun the attackers much as Livy's Horatius does:

Together Éomer and Aragorn sprang through the door, their men close behind. The swords flashed from the sheath as one. ...

Charging from the side, they hurled themselves upon the wild men. Andúril rose and fell, gleaming with white fire. A shout went up from wall and tower: 'Andúril! Andúril goes to war. The Blade that was Broken shines again!'

Dismayed the rammers let fall the trees and turned to fight; but the wall of their shields was broken as by a lightning-stroke, and they were swept away, hewn down, or cast over the Rock into the stony stream below. The orc-archers shot wildly and then fled.³⁹

37 Roller (2004) 3–4 describes how “the Etruscans focalize much of Livy’s account ... it is to their gaze that most Romans turn their backs, but Horatius (to their amazement) turns his weapons” (n. 2).

38 *LotR* 533: “Running like fire, they sped along the wall, and up the steps, and passed into the outer court upon the Rock. As they ran they gathered a handful of stout swordsmen. There was a small postern-door that opened in an angle of the burg-wall on the west, where the cliff stretched out to meet it. On that side a narrow path ran round towards the great gate, between the wall and the sheer brink of the Rock.”

39 *LotR* 533–534.

The lightning that had previously revealed to our heroes that the gates were in peril now serves to undo the would-be attackers. As the heroes jump out, their swords “flash,” “gleam,” and “shine.” The enemy then becomes afraid (“dismayed”) at the sudden appearance of a foe and find themselves easily swept aside by the “lightning-stroke” of the attack. While the note of their dismay indicates momentarily the perspective of the attackers, Tolkien focalizes this account from the perspective of the other defenders on the wall, who shout when they see Andúril flash in the darkness. Just as a bolt of lightning allowed Aragorn and Éomer to see the danger from the wall, now their fellow defenders see the flashes from the heroes’ attack shine out in the darkness and take heart. Although Aragorn and Éomer are not alone in this defense, Tolkien does highlight throughout this narrative how they work “together” and their swords flash “as one,” as a subtle hint toward Livy’s *unus vir* or to prescriptively suggest how Aragorn will later stand as the sole defender of the stairway.

The danger, however, has not passed as Aragorn and Éomer now evaluate the status of the gates:

‘We did not come too soon,’ said Aragorn, looking at the gates. Their great hinges and iron bars were wrenched and bent; many of their timbers were cracked.

‘Yet we cannot stay here beyond the walls to defend them,’ said Éomer. ‘Look!’ He pointed to the causeway. Already a great press of Orcs and Men were gathering again beyond the stream. Arrows whined and skipped on the stones about them. ‘Come! We must get back and see what we can do to pile stone and beam across the gates within. Come now!’⁴⁰

While they stand there in front of the gates, the arrows of the Orcs fly around them. Livy’s Horatius, too, faces the missiles of his enemies as he makes his stand on the bridge.⁴¹ These gates offer the only protection from the approach of the causeway, which is again filling with attackers. In a similar vein to the way that Horatius knows that the reprieve granted by his bold stand is only temporary and thus directs his compatriots to break down the bridge, here Éomer ad-

⁴⁰ *LotR* 534.

⁴¹ Liv. 2.10.9–10: *clamore sublato undique in unum hostem tela coniciunt. quae cum in obiecto cuncta scuto haesissent, neque ille minus obstinatus ingenti pontem obtineret gradu.* “With a shout, they threw their spears from all sides against their sole opponent. All these stuck fast in his outthrust shield and he no less resolutely blocked the bridge with his massive stride.”

vises that they rebuild and reinforce the gates to block off the entrance allowed by the causeway. The Pons Sublicius is, of course, a wood-pile bridge as the name implies.⁴² The gates of the Hornburg are here made of “timbers” and the heroes use “beams” to reinforce them further. The tools Horatius encourages his compatriots to use to break down the bridge also appear in Tolkien's narrative. Livy's “iron” (*ferro*) is repeated as the “hinges and iron bars” of the gates. The “fire” (*igni*) appears in the imagery of Aragorn's sword, as noted above, as well as the speed with which the heroes run toward the causeway (“like fire”). In a separate episode shortly after this, Gimli assists Gamling in blocking up the culvert of the Deeping-stream. As the dwarf offers his help, he says, “We do not shape stone with battle-axes ... but I will help as I may,” using language that approximates Livy's *quacumque vi possint*.⁴³ Every means for destroying the bridge that Horatius describes thus appears in Tolkien's narrative of the reinforcement of the gates and, later, the culvert, with most of them doubled in Tolkien's account.

As Aragorn and Éomer begin to rush toward the gates and make the repairs, they are ambushed by a sudden attack from some of the orcs who previously were hiding along the causeway:

They turned and ran. At that moment some dozen Orcs that had lain motionless among the slain leaped to their feet, and came silently and swiftly behind. Two flung themselves to the ground at Éomer's heels, tripped him, and in a moment they were on top of him. But a small dark figure that none had observed sprang out of the shadows and gave a hoarse shout: *Baruk Khazâd! Khazâd ai-mênu!* An axe swung and swept back. Two Orcs fell headless. The rest fled.

Éomer struggled to his feet, even as Aragorn ran back to his aid.

The postern was closed again, the iron door was barred and piled inside with stones. When all were safe within, Éomer turned: ‘I thank you, Gimli son of Glóin!’ he said. ‘I did not know that you were with us in the sortie. But oft the unbidden guest proves the best company.’⁴⁴

⁴² OLD s.v. *sublica*, “wooden stake” or “pile.”

⁴³ *LotR* 536.

⁴⁴ *LotR* 534. The two Orcs that Gimli kills here are the two that he proudly tells Legolas that he killed in the quote shared at the opening of the paper. That passage immediately follows Gimli's action on the causeway.

Gimli's appearance on the causeway surprises not only the Orcs, but even Éomer, whom he saves. In fact, Tolkien notes that "none had observed" him. The dwarf's sudden attack startles the Orcs, who flee before his onslaught. Although Gimli was not involved in the initial assault on the causeway, his action here mirrors that of Aragorn and Éomer. All three of the heroes leap out, flash their weapons, and cause the enemy to flee in fear. With Gimli's arrival, Tolkien's narrative of the holding of the causeway provides the major thematic notes of the prevailing tradition of Horatius Cocles: three heroes stand together to defend a narrow passageway, the fall of which would give access to the defenseless citizens within, and they block subsequent access by reinforcing the gates (in contrast to the Romans who dismantle the bridge), before escaping to safety behind the newly barred passageway. However, Tolkien's adaptation of the Horatius legend will continue with a second parallel event occurring later at Helm's Deep, and to which I will return below.

As shown above, in several ways Livy alludes to the tradition that Horatius Cocles stands on the bridge alone (*unus vir ... corpore uno*). As the narrative continues, Livy has Horatius' two companions (*duos tamen*) arrive on the bridge.⁴⁵ The audience may be surprised at their sudden appearance: note, for instance, the impactful position of *duos tamen* at the beginning of the line. In a similar way, Tolkien's readers might be stunned by the unexpected arrival of Gimli on the causeway, as "none had observed him" before he leaps out to attack these Orcs.

While the assistance of Larcius and Herminius is a well-known part of the ancient tradition, Livy's ordering of the account allows Horatius to strike fear into the enemy on his own first and builds the suspense of what version of the story Livy intends to tell.⁴⁶ Once Horatius' companions do appear, however, Livy transitions into the traditional account by having them join in his defense of the bridge:

With [Larcus and Herminius] he checked the initial storm of the attack and what was the most tumultuous part of the battle for a while. Then, when there was just a

⁴⁵ Liv. 2.10.6: *duos tamen cum eo pudor tenuit, Sp. Larcium ac T. Herminium, ambos claros genere factisque*. "However, shame held two men there with him: Spurius Larcius and Titus Herminius, both of them distinguished in birth and in their deeds."

⁴⁶ Ogilvie (1965) 259 describes what can be said about Larcius, Herminius, and their families, both of which are ultimately of Etruscan origin.

small part of the bridge remaining and those who were breaking it apart were calling them back, he forced even them to head back to safety.⁴⁷

While their part in the action is brief (*parumper*), Larcus and Herminius join Horatius in withstanding the brunt of the enemy's attack, which Livy describes as a violent approaching storm (*procellam ... tumultuosissimum*). Tolkien uses a similar set of imagery to portray Saruman's army. As described above, when the heroes set out toward Helm's Deep and Gandalf and Legolas looked behind them, Gandalf remarks, "And behind us comes a very storm of Mordor."⁴⁸ Throughout that passage, Tolkien frequently used darkness ("black night," "veiling shadow," "black fields"), contrasted with flashes of light ("countless points of fiery light"), to describe the impending gloom and destruction that the advancing enemy represents.

As the Orcs begin their assault on Helm's Deep, another storm breaks out, literally and figuratively:

The sky was utterly dark, and the stillness of the heavy air foreboded storm. Suddenly the clouds were seared by a blinding flash. Branched lightning smote down upon the eastward hills. ... Thunder rolled in the valley. Rain came lashing down.

Arrows thick as the rain came whistling over the battlements, and fell clinking and glancing on the stones. ...

Ever and again the lightning tore aside the darkness. Then the Orcs screamed, waving spear and sword, and shooting a cloud of arrows at any that stood revealed upon the battlements; and the men of the Mark amazed looked out, as it seemed to them, upon a great field of dark corn, tossed by a tempest of war, and every ear glinted with barbed light.

A storm of arrows met them, ...⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Liv. 2.10.7: *cum his primam periculi procellam et quod tumultuosissimum pugnae erat parumper sustinuit; deinde eos quoque ipsos exigua parte pontis relicta revocantibus qui rescindebant cedere in tutum coegit.*

⁴⁸ *LotR* 527.

⁴⁹ *LotR* 532–533.

As the attack begins, the stormy imagery works on multiple levels. The sky itself is torn apart by the bad weather that has been threatening the heroes since they were first approaching Helm's Deep. Then Tolkien paints the waves of arrows fired at the defenders by the Orcs as "rain" and "cloud."⁵⁰ Finally, as the defenders look out from the wall, the approaching army resembles a storm-tossed field of grain. Both Livy and Tolkien thereby use the image of an oncoming storm to describe the attacks of the Etruscans and Orcs, respectively. Tolkien, however, has taken Livy's imagery and expanded it by including an actual thunderstorm and by focalizing a storm-based simile through the eyes of the defenders.

Livy resumes his narrative after Larcius and Herminius depart by having Horatius issue a challenge to the Etruscans that stuns them again, as he did when he began his defiant stand on the bridge:

Then [Horatius], casting his fierce eyes menacingly toward the leaders of the Etruscans, he calls them out one by one, then he rebukes them as a group: 'Slaves of arrogant kings, forgetful of your own liberty, you come to attack others!' They hesitated for a short time, while each one was hoping that someone else would begin the fight. Then shame provoked them to attack and with a shout they threw their spears from all sides against their sole opponent. All these stuck fast in his outthrust shield and he no less resolutely blocked the bridge with his massive stride. Now they were trying to drive him away by assault.⁵¹

Horatius makes a heroic stand here alone, after his companions retreat across the few remaining pieces of the bridge. The description of his stride as "massive" (*ingenti*) and positioned around the bridge (*ingenti pontem obtineret gradu*) in the text lends to him an epic flair. In other ways, too, Livy shifts toward poetic language here as his story nears its climax. Variations on the expression *circumferens ... truces minaciter oculos* appear in Vergil, Ovid, and Lucan and the de-

⁵⁰ A "cloud" of arrows might also recall the famous retort at Hdt. 7.226.2, in which the Spartan Dienekes quips that the multitude of Persian arrows will allow them to fight "in the shade" (ὑπὸ σκιῇ).

⁵¹ Liv. 2.10.8–10: *circumferens inde truces minaciter oculos ad procures Etruscorum nunc singulos provocare, nunc increpare omnes: servitia regum superborum, suae libertatis immemores alienam oppugnatum venire. cunctati aliquamdiu sunt, dum alius alium, ut proelium incipiant, circumspectant; pudor deinde commovit aciem, et clamore sublato undique in unum hostem tela coniciunt. quae cum in obiecto cuncta scuto haesissent, neque ille minus obstinatus ingenti pontem obtineret gradu, iam impetu conabantur detrudere virum.*

scription of Horatius' actions echoes Hector's assault on the gates of the Greek camp.⁵² The language here thus heightens the impact of Horatius' final moments on the bridge, where he stands as one against many. As I noted above, Livy hints earlier in his narrative at the variant tradition in which Horatius holds the bridge alone. Here, Horatius makes a significant impact fulfilling the role of the sole defender, allowing Livy's account to present both major ancient variations to the story – the trio of defenders and the lone defender – within a single narrative.

As Horatius makes this solitary stand against the Etruscans, the bridge comes down with a crash and the Roman cheers curb the enemy momentarily.⁵³ Horatius uses that fleeting pause to leap into the Tiber and away from his attackers: "Then, armed as he was, he jumped down into the Tiber and swam across unharmed and reached his own people, despite all the weapons flying at him from above."⁵⁴ Livy emphasizes Horatius' current state of armor (*armatus*), a vital detail to the story that makes his survival of the river even more miraculous and to which other ancient authors consistently draw attention.⁵⁵ According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Horatius' armor is even featured in the statue that commemorates the deed.⁵⁶ While Livy follows the prevailing trend with that detail, he diverges in a significant way here: he claims that Horatius swims across "unharmed" (*incolumis*). In every other account, Horatius either dies or

52 Ogilvie (1965) 260 discusses the various poetic facets of the language in this scene and gives several examples of verbal parallels to the Homeric passage in question (*Il.* 12.440–471). *circumferens oculos*: Verg. *Aen.* 12.558: *acies circumtulit*; Ov. *Met.* 6.169 and 15.674: *oculos circumtulit*; *truces minaciter oculos*: Lucan 7.291: *faciesque truces, oculosque minaces*. Ogilvie notes that the language here may have come to Livy through Ennius.

53 Liv. 2.10.10: *cum simul fragor rupti pontis, simul clamor Romanorum alacritate perfecti operis sublatus, pavore subito impetum sustinuit*. "At that same time, the crash from the breaking of the bridge and the shout of the Romans, which arose due to their joy at completing the task, stopped [the Etruscans'] attack in sudden fear."

54 Liv. 2.10.11: *ita sic armatus in Tiberim desiluit multisque superincidentibus telis incolumis ad suos tranavit*. Horatius also prays to the Tiber before his jump, with language mirrored by Vergil (*Aen.* 8.72–73), which, in turn, Macrobius (6.1.12) says is modelled on Ennius. Ogilvie (1965) 260 draws attention to these parallels and proposes that the Ennius fragment in question (*Ann.* 54V) might have been treating Horatius. Ogilvie also notes the formulaic and ceremonial parallels between Horatius' prayer here and a known prayer offered to the Tiber.

55 Pol. 6.55.3, Dion. Hal. 5.24.3, and Plut. *Poplicola* 16.6.

56 Dion. Hal. 5.25.2. Plin. nat. 34.29 also discusses the statue and claims that Horatius' image and Cloelia's were the first built at public expense in Rome.

receives at least one serious wound before or after leaping into the Tiber.⁵⁷ As an explanation of why Horatius appears on the Shield of Aeneas, Servius records that Horatius made much of this wound even long after the battle.⁵⁸ The fact that Livy's Horatius exits the river without a wound marks his account as separate from the rest.

Near the end of the Helm's Deep narrative, Aragorn and the rest of the defenders have withdrawn inside the Hornburg (on which retreat, see below). From this final point of refuge, Aragorn looks out and admonishes the enemy:

'No enemy has yet taken the Hornburg. Depart, or not one of you will be spared. Not one will be left alive to take back tidings to the North. You do not know your peril.'

So great a power and royalty was revealed in Aragorn, as he stood there alone above the ruined gates before the host of his enemies, that many of the wild men paused, and looked back over their shoulders to the valley, and some looked up doubtfully at the sky. But the Orcs laughed with loud voices; and a hail of darts and arrows whistled over the wall, as Aragorn leaped down.⁵⁹

While Horatius' taunts above focus on the misplaced aims of the Etruscans' actions, Aragorn here voices the threats that Livy's Horatius makes with his eyes. With their appearances and words, both heroes cause at least some of their enemies to stand back and question the attack. For Aragorn, however, it is only the "wild men" of the Dunland who pause their assault. Tolkien is careful to separate the reaction of these humans from that of the Orcs, who merely laugh and continue the attack. As Obertino has argued, Tolkien's Orcs represent the uncivilized "other," in comparison to Greco-Roman *barbaroi*, and thus allow Tolkien to

57 e.g. Dion. Hal. 5.24.3: τραυμάτων πλήθος ἐν πολλοῖς μέρεσι τοῦ σώματος ἔχων, μίαν δὲ πληγὴν λόγχης, ἣ...ἐκάκωσεν αὐτὸν ὀδύναις καὶ τὴν βάσιν ἔβλαπτεν. "He had a great number of wounds in many parts of his body and there was one blow of a spear, in particular, which troubled him with pain and was hindering his step." Plut. *Poplicola* 16.6 states that the statue was made "to console him for the lameness caused by his wound with this honor" (τὴν γενομένην ἐκ τοῦ τραύματος τῷ ἀνδρὶ χολότητα μετὰ τιμῆς παρηγοροῦντες).

58 Serv. *in Aen.* 8.646. Roller (2004) 12–16 and (2018) 38–42 discuss how the wound itself acts a kind of commemorative monument that other authors use to engage with the idea and meaning behind Horatius' exemplary act.

59 *LotR* 540.

question "Sauron's cruel and expansionist imperium."⁶⁰ Here, the wild men are shown to have the expected response to Aragorn's majesty while the Orcs are too unaware to be fazed by Aragorn's threats and appearance. As they resume firing, then, their spears and arrows sail around Aragorn as he jumps down from the battlements. The imagery of the hero leaping down with missiles flying around him cleverly echoes Livy's imagery of Horatius' dive into the Tiber. Tolkien carefully focalizes this portion of the narrative from the perspective of the wild men and Orcs, who "looked back ... and looked up." Aragorn's jump over the wall would make him disappear from the sight of his enemies, much like Horatius vanishes into the river. Aragorn lands safely among his comrades on his side of the wall, just as Horatius successfully navigates his way through the Tiber.

In the last part of Livy's story, he catalogues the public reaction to and commemoration of Horatius' action.⁶¹ The state puts up a statue of him in the Comitium and gives him a grant of land.⁶² Additionally, the people of Rome offer private repayment to Horatius.⁶³ At Helm's Deep, Éomer makes the following offer to Gimli after the dwarf unexpectedly appears on the causeway to save him: "I shall not find it easy to repay you," to which Gimli replies, "There may be many a chance ere the night is over."⁶⁴ Shortly thereafter, the two of them disappear as the defenders retreat back into the Deep after the wall falls. When

⁶⁰ Obertino (2006) 119. The article argues that Tacitus' works inspire *The Lord of the Rings* in various ways. I will return to the idea of the representation of Roman imperialism in Tolkien's work and his criticism of such below.

⁶¹ Roller (2004) 5 and (2018) 6–8 describe the centrality of the commemoration to the exemplary loop.

⁶² Liv. 2.10.12: *grata erga tantam virtutem civitas fuit: statua in comitio posita; agri quantum uno die circumaravit datum*. "The state was grateful for his great virtue: a statue was put up in the Comitium and a gift of land was given to him, as much as he could plow in one day." On the statue and the gift see Dion. Hal. 5.25.2, Plin. nat. 34.29, Plut. *Poplicola* 16.7. Ogilvie (1965) 258–260 and Roller (2018) 48–53 each discuss the statue and the evidence for it and its potential placement. Ogilvie additionally describes the precedents for gifts of land of this type.

⁶³ Liv. 2.10.13: *privata quoque inter publicos honores studia eminebant; nam in magna inopia pro domesticis copiis unusquisque ei aliquid, fraudans se ipse victu suo, contulit*. "Private thanks also stood out among the public honors. For, even in this time of great scarcity, each person made some kind of offering to [Horatius] from his own resources, robbing himself of his own provisions."

⁶⁴ *LotR* 534.

Aragorn inquires into their whereabouts, he is told both were last seen fighting together around the entrance to the Deep.⁶⁵ While Tolkien does not tell us what befalls these heroes as they retreat back into the Deep, he makes it clear that they were in the thick of combat. When Gimli later reappears with a battle-weary appearance, he has ultimately passed Legolas' count following the fighting that occurred in the Deep.⁶⁶ As both Éomer and Gimli emerge from the Deep alive, if exhausted, despite the fierce resistance they met there, there certainly would have been plenty of opportunities for Éomer to repay his debt to Gimli.

In the middle of the Battle of Helm's Deep, Tolkien incorporates a separate narrative of one of his heroes holding a passageway. After an explosion destroys the culvert and the last defenses of the wall fail, Aragorn defends the stairway that leads from the outer defenses into the Hornburg:

A broad stairway climbed from the Deep up to the Rock and the rear-gate of the Hornburg. Near the bottom stood Aragorn. In his hand still Andúril gleamed, and the terror of the sword for a while held back the enemy, as one by one all who could gain the stair passed up towards the gate. Behind on the upper steps knelt Legolas. His bow was bent, but one gleaned arrow was all that he had left, and he peered out now, ready to shoot the first Orc that should dare to approach the stair.

'All who can have now got safe within, Aragorn,' he called. 'Come back!'

Aragorn turned and sped up the stair; but as he ran he stumbled in his weariness. At once his enemies leapt forward. Up came the Orcs, yelling, with their long arms stretched out to seize him. The foremost fell with Legolas' last arrow in his throat. but the rest sprang over him. Then a great boulder, cast from the outer wall above, crashed down upon the stair, and hurled them back into the Deep. Aragorn gained the door, and swiftly it clanged to behind him.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ *LotR* 538: "I last saw [Éomer] gathering men about him and fighting in the mouth of the Deep. Gamling was with him, and the dwarf; but I could not come to them."

⁶⁶ *LotR* 543: "There came Gamling the Old, and Éomer son of Éomund, and beside them walked Gimli the dwarf. He had no helm, and about his head was a linen band stained with blood; but his voice was loud and strong. 'Forty two, Master Legolas!' he cried. 'Alas! My axe is notched: the forty-second had an iron collar on his neck. How is it with you?' 'You have passed my score by one,' answered Legolas." This count, of course, is the one mentioned in the quote at the start of the paper.

⁶⁷ *LotR* 537–538.

There is much here that corresponds to Livy's account of Horatius. Tolkien first notes the description of the stairway, including the access it provides to the innermost defenses. Then the terror the Orcs feel at seeing Andúril holds them back for a time, while the remaining defenders make their way up the stair towards the gate. Legolas calls to Aragorn that it is time to retreat, just as Livy's Romans warn Horatius and his companions that the time has arrived to pull back across the Pons Sublicius. Aragorn stumbles and is attacked, but Legolas' last arrow saves him from the Orc closest to him and he reaches the safety within the Hornburg. Aragorn's stumble hints at Horatius' dive into the Tiber. The boulder that falls onto the stairway "crashes," which suggests the noise made by the final crash of the bridge (*fragor rupti pontis*) in Livy. However, Aragorn makes this final stand on the passageway alone. While Livy's narrative, as I argued above, hints near its beginning at the story of Horatius standing on the bridge alone, the hero is ultimately joined by Larcius and Herminius. Only after these two depart from the bridge does Horatius stand truly alone in Livy's account. As Tolkien adds the tale of the lone defender here to what happened earlier at the causeway, he separates these two accounts from one another, both narratively and geographically. Since the story here with Aragorn standing alone contains many of the narrative elements of Livy's account of Horatius at the bridge, Tolkien effectively doubles the tale of Horatius in his account of the Battle of Helm's Deep and, in so doing, incorporates both major versions of the story into his text.

In the section above, I have laid out the narratives of Livy and Tolkien and described the series of correspondences which tie the two accounts together. To help the reader visualize the parallels between the two stories, including how Tolkien doubles and reorders the narrative at times, here is a numbered list of each of the major elements of Livy's versions of Horatius:

- 1) Existential threat for Rome
- 2) Plebs and country people enter the defensible parts of the city; a description of defenses and garrison
- 3) Description of the Pons Sublicius
- 4) Horatius Cocles rallies the defending troops
- 5) Horatius orders the bridge to be destroyed
- 6) Horatius' bold stand terrifies the enemy
- 7) Two named companions join him to hold back the storm of battle
- 8) The companions retire and Horatius stands alone
- 9) Horatius taunts the enemy, and they stop their advance

- 10) The enemy attack with spears and by assault
- 11) When the bridge falls, Horatius leaps into the river, swimming to safety with spears still flying around him
- 12) Public and private honors given to Horatius

And here is a layout of Tolkien's account of Helm's Deep, numbered to match the order of the episode in Livy and, where an element of the story is split or repeated in Tolkien, lettered "a" and "b":

- 1) Existential threat for Rohan
- 2) People of the Westfold enter Hornburg; a description of the defenses and garrison
- 3) Descriptions of the causeway leading to the gates and staircase leading to the Hornburg
- 4) Aragorn and Éomer rally some swordsmen and sortie out to the causeway
- 6a+7a) Aragorn and Éomer's bold attack startles the enemy, who flee
- 5a) Aragorn and Éomer consider the status of the gates and order them to be reinforced
- 7b) Gimli makes a surprising appearance to defend Éomer and Aragorn
- 12a) Éomer offers private repayment to Gimli
- 5b) Gimli and Gamling repair and block the culvert
- 6b+8) As the rest fall back within the Hornburg, Aragorn stands alone to defend the stairway
- 9) Aragorn looks out over the wall and taunts the enemy
- 6c) Aragorn's power and royalty cause the wild men to stop their advance
- 10+11) The Orcs attack with "a hail of darts and arrows" as Aragorn jumps down
- 12b) Éomer's repayment of the debt owed to Gimli is suggested in their appearance after emerging from the Deep

The lists exhibit the totality of Tolkien's treatment of the Horatius Cocles story in his narrative of Helm's Deep, wherein each of the major elements of Livy's version appear. However, Tolkien's adaptation of the story goes further in repeating the narrative of a hero or set of heroes holding the narrow passageway twice: once with Aragorn, Éomer, and Gimli and a second time with Aragorn alone. As noted above, Tolkien's familiarity with "Horatius" from *The Lays of Ancient Rome*, which opens with an introductory essay discussing the variations in the

ancient accounts, demonstrates his awareness of both traditions.⁶⁸ Aragorn's actions and doubled defenses of the passageway allow Tolkien to include both variants of the story within his text.

While the parallels between these two narratives are many, there are several key differences that build upon Tolkien's engagement with the classical tradition in other ways in his writings. Ford has argued that the story of Gondor in *The Lord of the Rings* and elsewhere constitutes a creative reimagining of the relationship between the Germanic peoples and the Roman Empire.⁶⁹ In this schema, the people of Gondor represent the Romans, as viewed from a late antique or medieval perspective. As Gondor struggles to survive the assault of Sauron and then recapture its old glory under Aragorn's kingship in *The Return of the King* and Tolkien's later universe-expanding writings, the people of Rohan come to their assistance. In Ford's analogy, the Rohirrim, along with other free peoples of Middle Earth, represent the Germanic peoples of northern Europe. The story of the cavalry of Rohan riding to save Minas Tirith is, as Ford terms it, "a constructed memory of Rome saved by the Germanic peoples from a final collapse from internal weakness and an attack from the east."⁷⁰ For the future King of Gondor to be intricately involved with the preservation of Rohan at the Battle of Helm's Deep complicates the narrative of the renaissance of Gondor, qua Rome, later in the story. The differences between Tolkien's and Livy's versions of the Horatius mythos, however, are revealing here. While the original Roman story, in all accounts, has the bridge broken down behind Horatius, Tolkien's heroes reinforce the gates and repair the culvert, in effect reversing the action undertaken by the Romans. It is the Orcs who inflict destruction upon the world, as they bring the culvert and the gates crashing down with the fire of Orthanc. Another reversal in the story is shown in the arrow flying by Aragorn in his final retreat from the stairway: Legolas' final shot protects the hero, while the Etruscan arrows and spears in Livy attack Horatius. Tolkien's adaptation of the account of Horatius at the bridge therefore reverses key elements of Livy's narrative: the free peoples of Middle Earth succeed through cooperation, not merely individual excellence, and they represent the civilizing act of build-

68 n. 18 above.

69 Ford (2005).

70 Ford (2005) 58.

ing rather than tearing down.⁷¹ As Aragorn survives the Battle of Helm's Deep due to the cooperation of various peoples – the Rohirrim, an Elf, and a Dwarf – he learns the power of mutual assistance and reconstruction and thereafter uses these lessons as he later restores the glory of Gondor during his reign.

MACAULAY'S "HORATIUS"

The "Horatius" lay of Lord Thomas Babington Macaulay contains many elements similar to Livy's version of the story. The people of the countryside flee to Rome before the approach of Porsenna's troops (xiii–xv), Horatius prepares to make his stand along with two companions, while others plan to break apart the bridge (xxvii–xxxiv), Horatius' companions dart back as the bridge falls (liii–lv), Horatius prays to the Tiber and leaps into the river (lix–lxi), he escapes the torrent alive (lxiv), and is then celebrated and commemorated by the people of Rome (lxv–lxx). However, there are also significant differences between the two accounts. For instance, the poem has a surprising focus on Porsenna, with the first twelve stanzas devoted to him and the gathering of his forces (i–xii).⁷² The decision to dismantle the bridge comes not from Horatius, but from the Consul, who is notably absent from Livy's account (xviii–xix). As Horatius and his companions face off against the Etruscans, each fights with named heroes from the other side, in an echo of Homeric duels (xxxvii–xl).⁷³ Macaulay keeps all of the fighting at the bridge contained to the portion where the three Roman heroes stand together.⁷⁴ After Larcius and Herminius leap back over the last few planks of the bridge, Horatius stands on his own for just a moment and fights

71 Obertino (2006) 128 shows other ways in which Tolkien emphasizes the cooperation seen between the various peoples of Middle Earth.

72 Martin (2015) 355–356 describes the impact of the poem's opening focus on Porsenna.

73 McKelvy (2000) places Macaulay's *Lays* within its Victorian context and, significantly, discusses a contemporary reaction that Macaulay was trying to be "the Homer of Ancient Rome." Macaulay mentions Homer as an inspiration several times in his introductory remarks.

74 Martin (2015) 357–359 shows how the structure of the poem is built around multiples of three throughout the section where Horatius is joined by his companions. The structural and metrical focus on threes helps reiterate the version of Horatius's story in which he is joined by both companions for the bulk of the battle, as he is in Macaulay.

no one in this solitary state before the bridge falls and he leaps into the Tiber (liv–lix).⁷⁵ In fact, the taunting that Livy's Horatius hurls toward the Etruscans is conspicuously absent as Macaulay keeps his hero silent in the face of his enemy by repeating the idea "naught spake he" across two lines.⁷⁶ So, although Macaulay demonstrates an awareness of the ancient variant traditions surrounding Horatius Cocles in his introductory essay, as noted above, the *Lay* itself presents little indication of these variations and does not constitute a direct adaptation of Livy's version of the story. Where Tolkien has so many details that do correspond to Livy's account of Horatius, then, these cannot have come from Macaulay's *Lay* and instead must have arisen from Tolkien's engagement with Livy himself.

However, there are a few elements of Macaulay's "Horatius" that likely did influence Tolkien's narrative of Helm's Deep. While each of these elements that I examine below – the fleeing inhabitants, the distant fires glowing in the darkness, and the trumpet blasts – occur in many war narratives in the ancient, biblical, and medieval traditions, the correspondences between these and the various Horatian elements of Tolkien's larger Helm's Deep narrative suggest that the *Lays* are a likely origin of this imagery. After Macaulay sets up the character of Porsenna, as noted above, he finally turns to the Romans to describe them fleeing toward the city as follows:

For aged folks on crutches,
And women great with child,
And mothers sobbing over babes
That clung to them and smiled,
And sick men borne in litters
High on the necks of slaves,
And troops of sun-burned husbandmen
With reaping-hooks and staves,

75 Following Ogilvie's (1965) 259 suggestion in his commentary on Liv. 2.10.6, Larcius is the appropriate spelling of the *gens*.

76 Macaulay, "Horatius" lviii: "Round turned he, as not deigning / those craven ranks to see; / Naught spake he to Lars Porsena, / To Sextus naught spake he."

And droves of mules and asses
 Laden with skins of wine,
 And endless flocks of goats and sheep,
 And endless herds of kine,
 And endless trains of wagons
 That creaked beneath the weight
 Of corn-sacks and of household goods,
 Choked every roaring gate.⁷⁷

This procession from the Roman countryside recalls Gamling's description of the people of the Westfold as they take refuge in the keep at Helm's Deep:

'Behind us in the caves of the Deep are three parts of the folk of Westfold, old and young, children and women,' said Gamling. 'But great store of food, and many beasts and their fodder, have also been gathered there.'⁷⁸

In both Macaulay's and Tolkien's accounts, individuals of all ages are accompanied by their livestock and other supplies as they advance toward the safety of the city and the keep, respectively. Tolkien almost directly mirrors the order with which the list is presented in Macaulay. Macaulay's "aged folks ... women great with child, and mothers sobbing over babes" become Tolkien's "old and young, children and women." The "great store of food, and many beasts and their fodder" encapsulates in brief the second of Macaulay's stanzas above.

The next stanza of Macaulay's *Lay* also contains an image that is echoed in Tolkien's narrative. As the Romans look toward the Etruscan advance from the Tarpeian Rock, to which Tolkien's Hornrock may be an analogue, Macaulay describes their view:

Now, from the rock Tarpeian,
 Could the wan burghers spy
 The line of blazing villages
 Red in the midnight sky.

⁷⁷ Macaulay, "Horatius" xiv–xv

⁷⁸ *LotR* 531.

The Fathers of the City,
They sat all night and day,
For every hour some horseman come
With tidings of dismay.⁷⁹

Macaulay's Romans see in the distance a line of fires caused by the destruction of the approaching Etruscans, much as the defenders at Helm's noted the approach of Saruman's army as they saw the fires blaze along the horizon:

They had climbed far up into the Deeping-coomb when they looked back. Then they saw torches, countless points of fiery light upon the black fields behind, scattered like red flowers, or winding up from the lowlands in long flickering lines. Here and there a larger blaze leapt up.⁸⁰

In each narrative the destruction is focalized by a crowd behind the defenses looking out from a high place. In each instance the fires form a line in the distance ("the line of blazing villages"; "long flickering lines") that represents the oncoming destruction. Red and black are contrasted directly ("Red in the midnight sky"; "upon the black fields ... like red flowers"). Tolkien's fires approach with the progressive participles "winding" and "flickering" to animate their actions and heighten the sense of their continuous advance. In both texts, fires leap out of the darkness at a distance and signify both the destruction that has already occurred and that which hangs over the viewers at the hands of the oncoming enemy.

Lastly, the many horns and trumpet blasts that feature in Tolkien's account of Helm's Deep, including the blowing of the eponymous horn within the Hornburg, correspond to a repetition of such sounds in Macaulay's *Lay*. Five trumpet-blasts sound in Macaulay's "Horatius," with the first four corresponding to the advance of the Etruscan forces.⁸¹ The last peal, "the trumpet-blast that cries to them," calls to the Romans to attack, only after Horatius has successfully curbed

⁷⁹ Macaulay, "Horatius" xvi.

⁸⁰ *LotR* 530.

⁸¹ Macaulay, "Horatius" ii: "the trumpet's blast"; xxi: "the trumpet's war-note proud"; xxxv: "four hundred trumpets sounded"; l: "the victorious trumpet-peal dies fitfully away."

the advance of Porsenna.⁸² In this way, Macaulay's Horatius effectively steals the war-note of the Etruscans and the Romans now use it to their own ends. Similarly, the armies of Saruman advance upon Helm's Deep to the blaring of trumpets: "Brazen trumpets sounded. The enemy surged forward," "Again trumpets rang," "there came a blare of trumpets."⁸³ At the end of the siege of Helm's Deep, however, Théoden and his forces ride out against the attacking Orcs to the blast of the great horn of the keep: "the sound of the great horn of Helm rang out," "back from the Deep the echoes came, blast upon blast, as if on every cliff and hill a mighty herald stood," "ever the horn-blasts wound on among the hills."⁸⁴ As Gandalf and Erkenbrand appear at the top of the valley to bring the final destruction to the attackers, "horns were sounding" and Erkenbrand "set to his lips a great black horn and blew a ringing blast."⁸⁵ Much like Macaulay's Romans appropriate the Etruscan trumpets with their victory, the blaring of the horns of the forces of Rohan signal their final triumph over Saruman's forces at Helm's Deep. And just as Tolkien doubles the trope of Horatius at the bridge that he adapts from Livy's version, here Tolkien doubles the eventual victors' horns in their movement to appropriate their enemies' war-note.

While Macaulay's *Lay* cannot account for all the Horatian details found in the narrative of Helm's Deep, a few vivid images resonate in both texts. To this end, the discrepancies and correspondences between their various accounts, as I have argued above, suggest that Tolkien adapts the Livian story of Horatius and hangs upon its structure various elements of descriptive imagery appropriated from Macaulay. Tolkien weaves together various components of Livy's and Macaulay's narratives into his own engaging and moving story.

82 Macaulay, "Horatius" lxvii.

83 *LotR* 533 and 537.

84 *LotR* 540.

85 *LotR* 541.

GANDALF AND ARAGORN AT KHAZAD-DÛM

There is, of course, another famous moment in *The Lord of the Rings* that contains the image of a heroic figure holding a bridge against an overpowering enemy: Gandalf at the bridge of Khazad-dûm in the *Fellowship of the Ring*:

'Over the bridge!' cried Gandalf, recalling his strength. 'Fly! This is a foe beyond any of you. I must hold the narrow way. Fly!' Aragorn and Boromir did not heed the command, but still held their ground, side by side, behind Gandalf at the far end of the bridge. The others halted just within the doorway at the hall's end, and turned, unable to leave their leader to face the enemy alone. ...

There was a ringing clash and stab of white fire. The Balrog fell back, and its sword flew up in molten fragments. The wizard swayed on the bridge, stepped back a pace, and then again stood still. 'You cannot pass!' he said.

With a bound the Balrog leaped full upon the bridge. Its whip whirled and hissed. 'He cannot stand alone!' cried Aragorn suddenly and ran back along the bridge. 'Elendil!' he shouted. 'I am with you, Gandalf!'

'Gondor!' cried Boromir and leaped after him.

At that moment Gandalf lifted his staff, and crying aloud he smote the bridge before him. The staff broke asunder and fell from his hand. A blinding sheet of white flame sprang up. The bridge cracked. Right at the Balrog's feet it broke, and the stone upon which it stood crashed into the gulf, while the rest remained, poised, quivering like a tongue of rock thrust out into emptiness.

With a terrible cry the Balrog fell forward, and its shadow plunged down and vanished. But even as it swung its whip, and the thongs lashed and curled about the wizard's knees, dragging him to the brink. He staggered and fell, grasped vainly at the stone, and slid into the abyss. 'Fly, you fools!' he cried, and was gone.⁸⁶

There is much in this story that corresponds to the narrative of Horatius Cocles: Gandalf recognizes the need to "hold the narrow way." The bridge needs to be blocked and destroyed to save the hero's companions from a dangerous enemy ("a foe beyond any of you"). Two companions (Aragorn and Boromir) stand "side by side" behind Gandalf in an attempt to come to his aid, just as Larcius and Herminius come up from behind to assist Horatius. The imagery of clanging metal, fire, and lightning all resound here ("ringing clash ... white fire ... molten frag-

⁸⁶ *LotR* 330–331.

ments ... white flame ... cracked ... crashed”), as they did in Livy and do later in Tolkien’s Helm’s Deep. Several key differences, however, separate the bridge at Khazad-dûm from Livy’s Horatius: At Khazad-dûm Gandalf breaks the bridge himself with his staff, as opposed to having the others break it down behind him. Aragorn and Boromir do not reach him in time to help. The Balrog falls into the depths in a way that is not mirrored by the Etruscans in Livy’s text who are instead shielded from the broken portion of the bridge by the defiance of Horatius. And, as I will discuss below, Gandalf’s fall into the abyss separates itself from Livy’s account.

Aside from the narrative parallels between Gandalf and Aragorn holding their respected passageways, Tolkien draws a verbal parallel between these two accounts. As Gimli jumps out to save Éomer on the causeway, he shouts “*Baruk Khazâd! Khazâd ai-mênu!*”⁸⁷ This is the first appearance of his war cry in *The Lord of the Rings* and he shouts it twice more during the Battle of Helm’s Deep. Khazad is the Dwarfish word for themselves, and thus it is a fitting part of their war cry.⁸⁸ However, a portion of the cry (“*Khazâd ai-m...*”) nearly echoes the name Khazad-dûm. This verbal mirroring, and its repetition by Gimli, brings the bridge at Khazad-dûm to mind for Tolkien’s audience, thereby encouraging them to consider what parallels there might be between these two accounts.

Gandalf’s stand in Moria has been taken as an analogue for the heroics of Byrhtnoth in the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Battle of Maldon*. In the remnants of this Old English epyllion, a trio of Saxons hold off the Viking advance across a narrow bridge. Despite these heroes’ ability to secure the bridge, the Saxons lose the battle after Byrhtnoth, the ealdorman, allows the Vikings to cross safely and draw up for a traditional battle, a fight which leaves Byrhtnoth dead.⁸⁹ Tolkien himself wrote an adaptation of *The Battle of Maldon* and an accompanying essay in which he explains the background of the battle.⁹⁰ Bruce argues that Tolkien

⁸⁷ *LotR* 534.

⁸⁸ On the word Khazad, *LR* 305.

⁸⁹ A translation of the poem is available as part of the Old English Poetry Project maintained by Prof. Hostetter at Rutgers University: <https://oldenglishpoetry.camden.rutgers.edu/battle-of-maldon/> (accessed 19 January 2022). For the portion of the poem described here see lines 62–105 and 159–184.

⁹⁰ Tolkien (1953). Shippey (1991) argues that Tolkien’s writing on Byrhtnoth is, in part, to oppose what Tolkien saw as a resurgence of Nordic attitudes in Nazi Germany. See also Nelson (2008).

adapts the story of Byrhtnoth for the narrative of Gandalf at Khazad-dûm in order to present a more straightforward depiction of heroism in his heroes in *The Lord of the Rings* than that found in *The Battle of Maldon*.⁹¹ Gandalf stops the advance of the Balrog and protects his companions before falling into the chasm after the monster, whereas Byrhtnoth foolishly (in the poem, “due to his *ofermod*,” line 89) puts his soldiers at risk by allowing the Vikings to cross.⁹²

The Battle of Maldon itself has also been compared to the mythos of Horatius.⁹³ The similarities between the defenses of Khazad-dûm, Helm's Deep, Maldon, and the Pons Sublicius warrant their comparison and encourage further examination of their various differences. The fate of each hero stands as a significant point of disagreement separating the various stories. Byrhtnoth dies and Gandalf's fall into the chasm leaves the rest of the fellowship assuming that he is dead until his surprising return in the next book.⁹⁴ Aragorn and the rest of the fellowship grieve at the loss of their companion.⁹⁵ Aragorn, much like Livy's Horatius, comes away from both of his bold defenses at Helm's Deep unharmed.⁹⁶ While Livy's version of Horatius Cocles survives his leap into the Tiber, the ancient tradition is not unanimous in his survival. Other accounts from antiquity have their Horatii die or at least hint at the possibility of death. The earliest extant version, found in Polybius' *Histories*, finds the story's moral in the way Horatius

91 Bruce (2007). On some of the perceived problems with Byrhtnoth's actions see Mills (1966).

92 See Bruce (2007) 153–157 on the term *ofermod* and Tolkien's reaction to it, both in his adaptation of *Maldon* and in his account of Gandalf at Khazad-dûm.

93 Williams (1992) 35–36 has noted that the legendary qualities to the story of Byrhtnoth recall the general myth of Horatius Cocles as well as the Viking at the Battle of Stamford Bridge.

94 Gandalf returns in “The White Rider” (*TT* iii.5). Before that, however, the fellowship mourns him as if he were dead.

95 Tolkien shows the desperation of Aragorn after the group successfully exits the mines by having the hero cry out: “‘What hope have we without you?’ [Aragorn] turned to the company. ‘We must do without hope,’ he said.” (*LotR* 333).

96 While Aragorn is never described as “unharmed,” he is also never said to receive a wound and he is shown in the subsequent chapter (*TT* iii.8) to heal Gimli, the most heavily wounded member of the fellowship after Helm's Deep.

willingly sacrifices his life to save the state.⁹⁷ As discussed above, each of the non-Livian accounts have Horatius receive at least one not insignificant wound. In Dionysius' version, although Horatius survives, the expectation of his death hangs over the narrative: "all the people at home were rushing out, hoping to catch a last sight of Horatius, while he was still alive, for it seemed that he was not far from death because of his wounds."⁹⁸ Valerius Maximus includes two mentions of Horatius Cocles in his work. As he tells the story the first time, Horatius is only saved by the grace of the gods despite the narrator listing all the various ways he should have died:

The immortal gods, admiring his bravery, answered for his safety and security: for he was neither shaken by the height of the fall, nor pressed by the weight of his arms, nor driven by some circling whirlpool, nor even struck by any of the weapons which were heaping up all around, but his swim had a safe outcome.⁹⁹

Valerius gives his reader every reason to have expected Horatius' death without the gods' assistance. In a later discussion on friendship (iv.7.2), Valerius leaves Horatius' fate less clear by making a surprising, though geographically appropriate, comparison. Valerius describes Laetorius' death on the Pons Sublicius as an effort to save the life of Gaius Gracchus. After describing Laetorius blocking the bridge and committing suicide as he leapt into the Tiber, Valerius equates his death with Horatius Cocles' defiant stand on the same bridge: "That love

⁹⁷ Pol. 6.55.3: διασπασθείσης δὲ τῆς γεφύρας, οἱ μὲν πολέμιοι τῆς ὁρμῆς ἐκωλύθησαν, ὁ δὲ Κόκλης ῥίψας ἑαυτὸν εἰς τὸν ποταμὸν ἐν τοῖς ὅπλοις κατὰ προαίρεσιν μετήλλαξε τὸν βίον, περὶ πλείονος ποιησάμενος τὴν τῆς πατρίδος ἀσφάλειαν καὶ τὴν ἐσομένην μετὰ ταῦτα περὶ αὐτὸν εὐκλειαν τῆς παρούσης ζωῆς καὶ τοῦ καταλειπομένου βίου. "After the bridge was broken up, the enemy were barred from the attack and Cocles threw himself into the river still in his armor and willingly exchanged his life, considering the safety of his country and the glory that would come to him after this as more important than his current existence and what was left of his life."

⁹⁸ Dion. Hal. 5.25.1: πᾶς ὁ κατοικίδιος ὄχλος ἐξεχεῖτο ποθῶν αὐτόν, ἕως ἔτι περιῆν, θεάσασθαι τὴν τελευταίαν πρόσοψιν: ἐδόκει γὰρ ὑπὸ τῶν τραυμάτων οὐκ εἰς μακρὰν διαφθαρῆσεσθαι.

⁹⁹ Val. Max. 3.2.1: *cuius fortitudinem di immortales admirati incolumitatem sinceram ei praestiterunt: nam neque altitudine deiectus quassatus nec pondere armorum pressus nec ullo verticis circuitu actus, ne telis quidem, quae undique congeriebantur, laesus tutum natandi eventum habuit.*

which Horatius Cocles showed for his whole country on that bridge, [Laetorius], with his voluntary death, applied to his friendship with one man.”¹⁰⁰ The self-sacrificing leap into the Tiber echoes the Polybian version of Horatius, where the hero also knowingly jumps to his death.¹⁰¹ Gandalf's assumed (on the part of his companions) death and Aragorn's survival combine the various traditions concerning Horatius found in antiquity. Tolkien thereby incorporates elements of the mythos of Horatius as well as the ancient dialogue about his stand at the bridge into his narratives of Khazad-dûm and Helm's Deep.

Tolkien's various means of linking Khazad-dûm and Helm's Deep suggest that the stories should be interpreted in light of each other. Aragorn's actions at both Moria and Helm's Deep engage with the concept of exemplarity in Livy. Tolkien, like Livy, stresses the presence of the audience in each of these accounts. Aragorn and Boromir serve as both analogues for Larcius and Herminius in the Horatius episode and as spectators of Gandalf's fall in Moria. The rest of the fellowship provides an additional audience for Gandalf's exemplary act, as Tolkien notes their view of his plummet into darkness.¹⁰² The presence of an audience is stressed in both of Aragorn's defensive stands at Helm's Deep. Gimli tells Éomer and Aragorn that he was sitting beside “to see your sword-play” as they began their defense of the causeway and Legolas “peers out” as Aragorn holds the stairway.¹⁰³ As Aragorn defends Helm's deep, he follows the example set by the wizard at Khazad-dûm and thereby completes the Livian exemplary loop. Unlike Gandalf, however, Aragorn has learned to avoid the need for his companions to feel despair at his loss. He takes efforts to withdraw to safety once the chance presents itself and he comes away unscathed, just as did Livy's Horatius, who alone among the ancient versions of the hero remains unharmed. With a prospective view toward the final element of Livian exemplarity, the encouragement toward future actions in the vein of the *exemplum*, the audiences that view Aragorn's heroics at Helm's Deep will ensure subsequent actions are performed

100 Val. Max. 4.7.2: *quamque in eo ponte caritatem toti patriae Horatius Cocles exhibuerat, unius amicitiae adiecta voluntaria morte praestitit.*

101 Roller (2018) 57–59 contrasts Valerius' two mentions of Horatius and how the story of Laetorius does and does not fit the typical pattern. He also notes the Polybian echo at p. 58 n. 60.

102 *LotR* 331: “The Company stood rooted with horror staring into the pit.”

103 *LotR* 534 and 537.

by the other free peoples of Middle Earth. Through this closure of the exemplary loop, the idea of Aragorn holding the passageway to save Rohan can resonate and repeat across the subsequent history of Middle Earth.

CONCLUSIONS

Tolkien incorporates various versions of the Horatius myth across his epic tale. Aragorn's defense of Helm's Deep contains the narrative elements of Livy's version of Horatius Cocles, but Tolkien doubles the story across two separate actions, both to allude to the variations in the ancient traditions of Horatius and to demonstrate his hero's superiority to Livy's. Gandalf's stand at Khazad-dûm, too, echoes Livy's Horatius in various ways while still engaging with other ancient and medieval forms of the story. Rather than merely imitate or transfer the story of Horatius Cocles into one part of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien carefully weaves into his saga a complicated tapestry of the various narratives of the heroic stand and the entire "Horatius at the Bridge" mythos, spanning from Livy and his predecessors to Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*.

While the heroes of *The Lord of the Rings* take actions that mirror their Roman and medieval counterparts, Tolkien's narrative ensures that they outperform them in various ways. Tolkien's heroes build and reinforce their defenses, whereas the Romans destroy their bridge. The exchange of constructing civilization in place of its destruction thereby develops further the author's criticisms of Roman imperialism as evident elsewhere in his text. While Gandalf shows his superiority to Byrhtnoth in his actions at Khazad-dûm by saving his companions rather than allowing the enemy to cross, Aragorn demonstrates how he, in turn, learns from Gandalf's earlier fall. He performs two heroic stands to defend a narrow passageway and he pulls back when the danger is kept in check to avoid the need to abandon his comrades to their grief. Throughout his various narratives that engage with the Horatius mythos, Tolkien demonstrates how his heroes outstrip their Roman analogues, providing an additional perspective to the power that his work can have as an adaptation and reinterpretation of classical and medieval history.

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Tolkien's Ithilien and the Landscape of the Ancient Mediterranean

Abstract This paper examines the intertext between Tolkien's Ithilien episode in *Two Towers* and artistic presentations of plants in the art and literature of Augustan Rome. We argue that the evident 'superbloom' depicted in the ekphrasis of the flora of Ithilien recalls both Vergilian botanical adynata (especially in the *Georgics*) and Roman wall paintings of the Augustan period.

Keywords Tolkien, Vergil, Ecocriticism, Ithilien, Flora

Scholars have frequently remarked that Tolkien's conception of Gondor finds parallels in the history of the Late Roman Empire.¹ They have noted how the transposition of its capital city from Osgiliath to Minas Tirith resembles the shift of the imperial seat from Rome to Ravenna in the fifth century.² Additionally, the Rohirrim (who become allied to Gondor during a period of 'barbarian invasions') have been compared to Gothic mercenaries who come to the aid of the western Roman empire during a similar period of invasion.³ Tolkien himself states:

...Minas Tirith, 600 miles south [of Rivendell], is at about the latitude of Florence. The Mouths of Anduin and the ancient city of Pelargir are at about the latitude of ancient Troy... The progress of the tale ends in what is far more like the re-establishment of an effective Holy Roman Empire with its seat in Rome... (*Letters* 294).⁴

It is clear, then, that we are meant to imagine Gondor and the Gondorians in Mediterranean terms (as opposed to the 'Northern Spirit' that animates much of the story).⁵ In this paper we examine the physical landscape of Gondor generally, and of Ithilien in particular, for evidence of a specifically ancient Roman character of the region. Scholars have noted that the landscape of Ithilien, 'the garden of Gondor' (*TT* 636) is undeniably Mediterranean in its depiction.⁶ It has also been observed that Tolkien makes the landscape of Middle-earth a kind of protagonist in the novel.⁷ These observations have led to our examination of the intertextual connections between Tolkien's landscape and Roman literature and art. Specifically, this paper examines how the flora of Ithilien demonstrate 'botanical anomalies' that recall Vergilian landscape ekphrases in the *Eclogues*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid*. Scholars have long noted affinities between *Lord*

1 See, generally, Straubhaar (2004) and Harrisson (2021) 333–339.

2 Ford (2005) 60.

3 Shippey (2013) 24–28.

4 On the settings of Gondor and Troy see Livingston (2013) 81–82.

5 On the 'Northern Spirit' of *Lord of the Rings* see e.g., Russell (1978) and Burns (1989). On Tolkien's combination of the 'northern' and the Mediterranean, see Burton (2021).

6 Judd & Judd (2017) 323–324. Cf. Burton (2021) 277–282,

7 Conrad-O'Briain & Hynes (2013) 13. Cf. Brisbois (2005) 211–214.

of *the Rings* and the writings of Vergil.⁸ So, for example, Tolkien's conception of heroism may be considered Vergilian.⁹ Similarly, Tolkien appears to appropriate Vergil's Golden Age imagery throughout the novel.¹⁰ Finally, even Tolkien's well-known reverence for trees (e.g., *Letters* 165) finds parallels in the *Aeneid*.¹¹ Vergil's landscapes are themselves part of a larger ideological program in Augustan Rome that is reflected in the flora of Roman wall-painting and sculpture of the period.¹² Scholars have noticed peculiarities of Augustan flora programming.¹³ Likewise, previous studies have noted peculiarities in Tolkien's landscapes, including Ithilien.¹⁴ Accordingly, we will demonstrate the existence of an 'idealized superbloom,' or unrealistic blooming of the flora in Ithilien that recalls the aesthetics and Golden Age rhetoric of these Roman visual and literary representations. In this paper we examine (1) Tolkien's intertexts with Vergilian landscapes generally, (2) Tolkien's intertexts with the *Georgics* and its botanical *adynata*, and (3) the 'botanical anomalies' in the ekphrasis of Ithilien and Augustan visual art. Our intertextual analysis suggests that Tolkien, in his presentation of Ithilien, has appropriated an Augustan landscape aesthetic, typified by the metaliterary, visual, and ecological aspects of the Vergilian Golden Age.

8 See generally Morse (1986). Cf. Scolari (2015) who, following Shippey (2003) 228–229, explores the connection between Tolkien's subcreation and Vergil's transformation of ancient Roman tales. See also below.

9 Morse (1986) 1–26. See Freeman (2021) on Tolkien's combination of Vergilian *pietas*, northern courage, and Christian faith..

10 Huttar (1992).

11 Reckford (1974).

12 On the interaction between literature and Augustan art historical material, see Gabriel (1955); Kellum (1994); Rossini (2009); Jones (2016); Caneva and Bohuny (2002); for the limits of reading Vergil and contemporary authors in Augustan art historical material, see Galinsky (1996) 90–121, 141–213.

13 Caneva & Bohuny (2003); Kellum (1994); Caneva (2010).

14 Forest-Hill (2015).

TREES AND TREE-FELLING

The potential intertexts between *Lord of the Rings* and the works of Vergil are well-known.¹⁵ The intertext extends to the end of the Ithilien episode. In 'Journey to the Crossroads,' the Hobbits travel through the forest south of Henneth Annûn, keeping to the west of the road. During the second day's journey, just before the Hobbits reach the Morgul Road, we get a description of the forest:

Great ilexes of huge girth stood dark and solemn in wide glades with here and there among them hoary ash-trees, and giant oaks just putting out their brown-green buds. About them lay long launds of green grass dappled with celandine and anemones, white and blue, now folded for sleep; and there were acres populous with the leaves of woodland hyacinths: already their sleek bell-stems were thrusting through the mould. (*TT* 681)

If we look closely at the details, we can see strong echoes of Vergil. First, note the catalog of trees. Tolkien's ilex, ash, and oak all appear in Vergil's famous tree-felling scene in *Aeneid* 6:

itur in antiquam silvam, stabula alta ferarum;
procumbunt piceae, sonat icta securibus ilex
fraxineaeque trabes cuneis et fissile robur
scinditur, advolvunt ingentis montibus ornos
(*Aen.* 6.179–182)

They go into an ancient forest, the lofty homes of beasts; pitch-pines slump down, the ilex, struck by axes resound; the stems of the ash and the breakable oaks are split with wedges; they roll the huge manna-ashes down the mountain.

Vergil depicts the Trojans as gathering wood to build a funeral pyre for their companion Misenus. Vergil catalogues five trees: *picea* (pitch pine? see below),

¹⁵ General on parallels between *Lord of the Rings* and the *Aeneid*: Pace (1979); Morse (1986); Huttar (1992); Freeman (2021). Bruce (2012) compares the *Fall of Gondolin* to the Fall of Troy in *Aeneid* 2. Obertino (1993) compares the *katabases* in the *Aeneid* and *LotR*. On trees in Tolkien and Vergil, see Reckford (1974). Reckford (1974) 70 sees Aeneas' finding of the Golden Bough (and the doves that lead him to it) as a journey to 'Faerie.' On Tolkien's experience with Vergil: Librán Moreno (2015) 48–50 and Williams (2021).

ilex (holm oak), *fraxinus* (ash), *robur* (oak), and *ornus* (manna ash). As is well-known, the passage is based upon both Homer (the funeral pyre for Patroclus in *Iliad* 23) and Ennius (probably also a funeral pyre).¹⁶ It is also well-known, at least since the latter half of the twentieth century that Vergil is self-consciously and cleverly positioning his imitation within the epic tradition. As Stephen Hinds has pointed out, the introductory phrase *itur in antiquam silvam* is an intertextual double entendre: the Trojans literally go into an ancient grove but Vergil himself figuratively enters (note the ambiguously passive *itur*) ancient poetic material (*silva* understood in its extended sense).¹⁷ Although this sort of sophisticated intertextual analysis may not have been available in Tolkien's day, it certainly was the case that educated people knew about the Homer and Ennius allusions.¹⁸ We will see that Tolkien appropriates Vergil's intertextual self-awareness in order to imbue Ithilien with metaliterary qualities.¹⁹

The intertext consists in tree catalogs connected to groves located on the threshold of the 'underworld,' accompanied by extensive alliteration.²⁰ Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, Tolkien appears to be engaging in a form of intertextual 'correction' of Vergil by omitting the pitch pine: it has been argued that Vergil mistakenly includes the *picea* which does not occur at sea level (i.e. where the Trojans are gathering their wood).²¹ Finally, Tolkien employs the adjective 'hoary' in his description of the ash trees. On the surface, the adjective is used in its extended sense of 'old.' Given Tolkien's etymological habits²², it is also likely that he is accessing the literal meaning of 'grey-haired' (*OED* s.v. 'hoary' 1a–b). It would seem, on this analysis, that Tolkien is aware of both the overall topos of epic tree-felling and specifically of Vergil's own metaliterary awareness of the topos. Just as Vergil's *antiquam* signals a sense of metapoetic belatedness, so also Tolkien's 'hoary' acknowledges both Vergil's belatedness and that

16 Austin (1977) 93–5. Cf. Horsfall (2013) 183–185.

17 Hinds (1998) 11–14, esp. 12. Cf. Wray (2007) 128–136 and Armstrong (2019) 295.

18 Noted, for example in Conington's well-known commentary on the *Aeneid* (1876).

19 The word "mould" (present in the tree passage we are analyzing) has metaliterary connotations for Tolkien: see Carpenter (1977) 126.

20 See Horsfall (2013) 184 on Vergilian alliteration. In Tolkien we see 'Great ilexes of huge girth...in wide glades'; 'lay long launds of green grass...'

21 From Tolkien's time: Sargeaunt (1920) 100.

22 On Tolkien's etymological interests, see Shippey (2003) *passim*.

which causes it – Vergil's model Homer! In Homer, the single tree mentioned by name (the oak) is described as 'high-haired' (ὕψικόμους, *Il.* 23.118), where 'hair' is a metaphor for foliage. In this way, Tolkien combines Vergil's sense of antiquity with Homer's hair metaphor. In other words, Tolkien's text acknowledges the intertextual nexus of Vergil and Homer in their respective tree-felling scenes.

Recall that Tolkien seems to omit Vergil's impossible inclusion of the pitch-pine. As we noted, this would seem to constitute a form of intertextual correction. Yet, tellingly, Tolkien includes his own *adynaton* in this very passage. Notice the list of flowers: celandine, anemones (two types), and woodland hyacinths. As we will see, these flowers are portrayed as blooming out of season. It seems that Tolkien has substituted one botanical *adynaton* (Vergil's inclusion of the pitch-pine at sea level) with another (the out-of-season blooms). Tolkien has thus acknowledged the Vergilian *adynaton* both through correction and appropriation. In other words, the trees of Ithilien near the Morgul-road have a distinctly Vergilian inflection, perhaps implicitly comparing the Hobbits' incipient journey into Mordor with Aeneas's incipient journey to the underworld.²³

The trees of Ithilien also mark out the region as a uniquely Mediterranean landscape. Tolkien himself placed Ithilien between the earthly latitudes of Florence and the ancient city of Troy (*Letters* 294, see above), a placement that is reflected in the flora.²⁴ While some trees he mentions – fir (*Abies sp.*), larch (*Larix sp.*), juniper (*Juniperus sp.*), and myrtle (*Myrtle communis*) – are broadly distributed across the Northern Hemisphere, the other trees – cedar (*Cedrus libani*), cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*), tamarisk (*Tamarix sp.*), terebinth (*Pistacia terebinthus*), olive (*Olea europaea*), and bay (*Laurus nobilis*) – are unmistakably Mediterranean (*TT* 636).²⁵ Tolkien, who loved all plants but 'above all trees' (*Letters* 165), was certainly aware that most of these trees are endemic to the Mediterranean region. Although some of these trees were utilized in English planting (e.g.,

23 Cf. Obertino (1993) 153–154 who sees connections between the entrance of Moria and that of the Vergilian underworld.

24 While many of the flowers in Ithilien are broadly distributed across Europe (or originally Mediterranean, but naturalized across Europe), the asphodel is distinctly Mediterranean. Hazell, who sees Ithilien as an English landscape, calls the asphodel 'Tolkien's most curious plant selection, since it is not native to Britain or woodland' (2006) 57.

25 According to Judd and Judd (2017) 324, the trees are not limited to one Mediterranean region, but encompass those clearly native to the eastern Mediterranean (such as the cypress, tamarisk, and terebinth) as well as trees that now only occur in the western Mediterranean (such as the holm oak).

cedars, which were commonly planted on estate grounds from the 1740s onwards²⁶), the majority of these species have not been naturalized in England. Additionally, the woodlands of Ithilien are the only place in Middle-earth that cedar, cypress, tamarisk, terebinth, bay, olive, and juniper trees call home.²⁷ By depicting Gondor and Ithilien as distinctly Mediterranean *botanically*, Tolkien provides further means of activating the Augustan metaphor of the Golden Age.²⁸ In the next section we argue that Tolkien, in the description of Ithilien, has specifically in mind the landscape of Vergil's *Georgics*.

GIMLI'S GEORGIC METAPHOR

Near the beginning of 'The Last Debate,' Gimli and Legolas encounter Imrahil, prince of Dol Amroth. After exchanging news and greetings, Imrahil departs, prompting the following exchange:

'That is a fair lord and a great captain of men,' said Legolas. 'If Gondor has such men still in these days of fading, great must have been its glory in the days of its rising.' 'And doubtless the good stone-work is the older and was wrought in the first building,' said Gimli. 'It is ever so with the things that Men begin: there is a frost in Spring, or a blight in Summer, and they fail of their promise.'

'Yet seldom do they fail of their seed,' said Legolas. 'And that will lie in the dust and rot to spring up again in times and places unlooked-for. The deeds of Men will outlast us, Gimli.'

'And yet come to naught in the end but might-have-beens, I guess,' said the Dwarf.

'To that the Elves know not the answer,' said Legolas. (*RK* 855)

Gimli's agricultural metaphor connects the military and political decline of Gondor ('fading...glory...rising') – itself linked to the diminution of the Gondorians' architectural and engineering skill ('good stone-work is the older') – with the overall nature of the race of Men ('fail of their promise'). Legolas picks up on

²⁶ Woodland Trust (2021).

²⁷ Judd & Judd (2017) 324.

²⁸ Again, cf. Huttar (1992) on Tolkien's evocation of the classical Golden Age.

the metaphor to respond to Gimli and assert the resilience of Men: 'seed,' 'dust,' and 'rot' extend Gimli's agricultural notions. Tolkien's use of 'rot' to refer to the soil is particularly unusual: the word appears to answer Gimli's 'blight' by evoking its sense of decay (the soil is rotted plant material) while also implying the potential of such compost for rebirth. Notice that the metaphor works in two ways. In Gimli's formulation men are like the (stunted) crops while in Legolas's statement men are like seeds.

Shippey has noticed that Legolas's formulation recalls the 'Parable of the Sowers,' most famously articulated in the Gospel of Matthew.²⁹ The allusion is slightly more complex than this: Tolkien has combined the 'Parable of the Sowers' (in which the seeds are the Word of God) and the immediately subsequent 'Parable of the Wheat and Tares' (in which the seeds are people). This combination is also typical of early Christian exegesis.³⁰ Gimli's equation of men and stunted crops resembles the 'Tares' (Men are like the bad type of crop), whereas Legolas's sowing image recalls the 'Sower' (seeds may be sown on poor ground). As Jorgensen points out, Tertullian engages in a similar interpretative recombination of the two parables:³¹

Sed ab excessu revertar ad principalitatem veritatis et posteritatem mendacitatis disputandam, ex illius quoque parabolae patrocinio quae bonum semen frumenti a Domino seminatum in primore constituit, auenarum autem sterilis faeni adulterium ab inimico diabolo postea superducit. Proprie enim doctrinarum distinctionem figurat quia et alibi verbum Dei seminis similitudo est. (*De Praescript. Haer.* 31.1–2)

Let me return from this digression to argue the priority of truth and the posterity of falsehood. The evidence is that parable which established that the good seed was sowed by the Lord first, but the corrupt crop of sterile wild oats was brought in later by his enemy, the Devil. The story appropriately depicts the distinction between the doctrines, since elsewhere the Word of God is compared to seeds.

Tertullian adduces the 'Tares' when he equates orthodoxy ('truth') with good wheat and heresy ('falsehood') with weeds. He then immediately refers to other

29 Shippey (2003) 220. The Parable and its 'dominical interpretation' are found at Matt. 13: 18–23.

30 Jorgensen (2016) 156–187.

31 Jorgensen (2016) 179–185.

parts of the Gospel ('elsewhere') in which seeds are like the Word of God, a clear allusion to the 'Sower': Tertullian alludes to the 'Sower' as a way to substitute words for the people in the 'Tares.' What is important for our purposes is that Tertullian alludes to Vergil in a strikingly complex way when he refers to the 'Tares.' He refers to the weeds as *avenarum...sterilis faeni adulterium* (lit. 'the adultery of the sterile crop of wild oats'). This phrase evidently points to Vergil's *interque nitentia culta / infelix lolium et steriles dominantur avenae* ('and among the gleaming crops unlucky darnel and sterile wild oats dominate,' *Geo.* 1.153–4). This statement occurs in Vergil's famous exposition of toil resulting from the fall from the Golden Age. What is striking is that Tertullian references Vergil's 'wild oats' rather than the darnel (*lolium*) which is also contained in the 'Tares' (ζιζάνια, Matt. 13.27). In other words, Tertullian has remembered the parable in terms of the Vergilian passage (presumably because of its Golden Age imagery) and 'misquoted' Vergil by alluding to the wrong type of weed. Indeed, the collocation of *lolium* and *avena* appears twice in Vergil, seems to have its source in Ennius, and is repeated relatively frequently in subsequent Latin literature, often in similar contexts of agricultural decline.³²

Like Gimli, Vergil links agriculture with both the decline of mankind (in the form of an allusion to the Golden Age myth) and the natural propensity of mortals toward failure. Vergil brackets his famous enumeration of the 'weapons' of the farmer with the following two 'pessimistic' statements:³³

prima Ceres ferro mortalis vertere terram
 instituit, cum iam glandes atque arbuta sacrae
 deficerent silvae et victum Dodona negaret.
 mox et frumentis labor additus, ut mala culmos
 esset robigo, segnisque horreret in arvis
 carduus: intereunt segetes, subit aspera silva
 lappaeque tribolique, interque nitentia culta
 infelix lolium et steriles dominantur avenae.
 (Verg. *Geo.* 1.147–154)

32 *Ecl.* 5.37. Cf Enn. *Praecept.* (in Priscian *GL* 1.54K); Ov. *Fast.* 1.691–692, *Met.* 5.484–486; Calp. Sic. 6.116; Plin. *HN* 18.153.2.

33 On Vergil's 'pessimism' in the *Georgics*, see Zanker (2011). Zanker argues that the view of Vergil as a pessimist dates back to the nineteenth century. Tolkien may have been aware of this interpretation.

Ceres first taught mortals to turn the earth with iron, when the acorns and fruit of the sacred grove became insufficient, and when Dodona denied them its nourishment. Soon toil was added to farming such that there was evil blight upon the stems and slothful weeds bristled in the fields. The crops perish, and harsh forests of burs and thorns invade, and among the smiling crops unlucky darnel and sterile wild oats prevail.³⁴

In this extract Vergil states first of all how mortals achieved surplus through agriculture only to discover that difficulties followed in its train. As Richard Thomas points out, Vergil employs the imagery of acorns as sustenance to allude to the Golden Age.³⁵ The Iron Age farmer, in contrast to his Golden Age counterpart, must fight with 'weapons' against his weedy 'enemies.' And indeed just before the passage quoted above Vergil had alluded to the Golden Age myth as a way of explaining the existence of mortal suffering:

ante Iovem nulli subigebant arva coloni:
ne signare quidem aut partiri limite campum
fas erat; in medium quaerebant, ipsaque tellus
omnia liberius nullo poscente ferebat.

(*Geo.* 1.125–128)

Before the age of Jupiter no farmer used to subjugate his fields: it was not even right to mark off or divide the boundaries of the fields. Moderation was sought and the earth itself was producing everything freely with no one demanding it.

Here we have the classic statement of the existence of agricultural ease before the advent of the so-called Iron Age of Jupiter. The discussion of Gimli and Legolas on the decline of Men (embodied in the counterexample of Imrahil) and their extended agricultural metaphor establish an intertext generally with the Vergilian statement on toil. More specifically, there is an intertext with Vergilian bo-

34 Dryden translates: 'Oats and Darnel choak the rising Corn.' This seems to point to the thorns 'choking' the Word in the Parable of the Sower: ὁ δὲ εἰς τὰς ἀκάνθας σπαρείς, οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ τὸν λόγον ἀκούων καὶ ἡ μέριμνα τοῦ αἰῶνος καὶ ἡ ἀπάτη τοῦ πλούτου συμπνίγει τὸν λόγον, καὶ ἄκαρπος γίνεται ('The one who is sown among the thorns is the one who has heard the Word but who, because of the cares of the age and the trickery of wealth chokes off the Word and becomes unfruitful,' Matt. 13:22).

35 Thomas (1988) 93–94. Cf. Armstrong (2019) 118–119.

tanical language via the combinatorial allusion to the Parables of the Sower and of the Wheat and Tares. Thus, Tolkien has brought Gondor into dialogue with the notions of agricultural toil and the decline from the Golden Age as articulated in the *Georgics*. In what follows, we examine how Tolkien specifically alludes to the *Georgics* in the Ithilien episode by evoking the mysterious 'Old Man of Tarentum' in Book 4.

SAM, ITHILIEN, AND THE OLD MAN OF TARENTUM

Tolkien's ekphrasis of Ithilien begins with a description of trees and herbs, and of beginnings of the flowering of spring. Near the end of the first paragraph of the ekphrasis Tolkien states: 'Ithilien, the garden of Gondor now desolate kept still a dishevelled dryad loveliness' (*TT* 636). Although Tolkien probably uses 'garden' in its extended sense here, there are many ways in which the land is literally a garden. As the Hobbits enter Ithilien along the ancient Gondorian road they notice 'a broken pillar here and there, peering out of the bushes at the side...' (*TT* 635) that appears to be decorative in nature.³⁶ In addition, we are told that the trees were planted deliberately: 'Many great trees grew there, planted long ago, falling into untended age amid a riot of careless descendants...' (*TT* 636). Finally, the pool the Hobbits discover 'lay in the rings of an ancient stone basin, the carven rim of which was almost wholly covered with mosses...' (*TT* 636–637). This man-made lake resembles the formal gardens of both the British and Roman empires. The overall impression one gets from the description of Ithilien is of a botanical park that has recently been abandoned. The Hobbits themselves seem to view the area in this way. We are told they feel that their first full day in the country is '[a] good day for strolling on their way along the groves and glades of Ithilien.' (*TT* 637). Taking our cue from Gimli's 'georgic metaphor,' then, we will compare Tolkien's garden ekphrasis with Vergil's only garden description: the garden found in the story of 'The Old Man of Tarentum.'³⁷

³⁶ On Tolkien's use of archeology as part of the subcreation of Middle-earth, see Sabo (2007).

³⁷ The *Orpheus* of Tolkien's Inklings friend Owen Barfield was inspired by the myth which immediately follows the Old Man of Tarentum (Foreword to *Orpheus* accessed at <https://www.owenbarfield.org/read-online/orpheus/>): 'Apart from the actual writing, the 'getting down to

Vergil famously declines to discuss gardening in the *Georgics*, leaving the task to later writers such as Columella.³⁸ In his *recusatio* of gardening, Vergil offers the story of an old Corycian who manages to establish a garden on a piece of wasteland near Tarentum. The old man (possibly a former mercenary in the service of Sextus Pompey)³⁹ grows vegetables and flowers on land that is unsuitable for other forms of cultivation. There are several intriguing parallels between the Old Man of Tarentum episode and the description of Ithilien, the aggregate of which would seem to suggest, once again, deliberate allusion. The parallels are as follows: the metapoetic aspects of both landscape ekphrases; the etymological wordplay in both writers; and the presence of botanical and climatic impossibilities (this last point we will address at length).

Sam views Ithilien from the perspective of a gardener.⁴⁰ When the Hobbits enter the heathland that marks the boundary between the no-man's land and Ithilien, we are given a catalog of the shrubs there. The list concludes with the focalized statement that there were 'other shrubs that they did not know' (*TT* 635). A little later, in the ekphrasis proper, we get the main botanical catalog. This list begins with trees: 'All about them were small woods of resinous trees, fir and cedar and cypress, and other kinds unknown in the Shire' (*TT* 636). Again, near the conclusion of the catalog we find that there were 'many herbs of forms and scents beyond the garden-lore of Sam' (*TT* 636). And indeed the narrator emphasizes the value Sam places on plants: '... and everywhere there was a wealth of sweet-smelling herbs and shrubs' (*TT* 636). The wealth metaphor here obviously has most meaning for Sam-as-gardener.

Like Sam, the *Corycius senex* is an outsider in a garden (again, he was perhaps one of Sextus Pompey's mercenaries).⁴¹ He has been given a plot of poor land, unsuitable for grain farming, herding, or vine cultivation (*Geo.* 4.125–129). He has, therefore, dedicated his life to gardening both vegetables and flowers.

it' consisted almost exclusively of a careful re-reading, with a classical dictionary beside me, of Virgil's presentation of the myth in the fourth Georgic. I had 'done' it at school, but my recollections of Virgil, apart from a line here or a phrase there, were pitifully vague.' Tolkien himself viewed Beren and Luthien as an Orpheus myth in reverse (*Letters* 153).

38 See Gowers (2000) for bibliography on this passage. Cf. Armstrong (2019) 184–188.

39 The suggestion comes from Servius. See Ross (1987) 204–205.

40 For Sam as primary focalizer for *TT* and *RK* see Bowman (2006) 290 n. 13 and Kullmann (2021) 108–111.

41 Thomas (1992) 36 with n. 2.

Like Sam, the Old Man views his vegetables and flowers as the 'wealth of kings' (*regum aequabat opes animis*, *Geo.* 4.132). Indeed, the Old Man 'was loading his tables with unbought feasts' (*dapibus mensas onerabat inemptis*, *Geo.* 4.133). This hyperbole sounds like the internal focalization of Sam's rabbit stew (*TT* 641 'it seemed a feast').

The garden of the *Corycius senex* is also highly metaliterary in character.⁴² The two most obvious examples of this are the plane trees (*Geo.* 4.146) that recall both Plato's *Phaedrus* and sympotic poetry.⁴³ In addition, Vergil's description of winter (*Geo.* 4.135–136) looks like a poetic commonplace.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the Old Man's trees are arranged *in versum*: the double entendre here suggests both straight lines and poetic verses.⁴⁵ We can compare this with Tolkien's characterization of Sam as both gardener and poet. We have already noted Sam's botanical focalization of Ithilien. Sam also has poetic interests: recall his partial recitation of *The Fall of Gil-gilad* (*FR* 181), his 'Troll poem' (*FR* 201–203), his interest in learning Gimli's 'Moria poem' (*FR* 309), and his *Oliphaunt* (*TT* 632). In addition, right after leaving Ithilien Sam articulates a 'poetic program' that connects ancient epic (e.g., *Beren and Luthien*) to the present narrative situation ('We've got – you've got some of the light of it [the Silmaril] in that star-glass that the Lady gave you! Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still!', *TT* 696–697). Significantly, he continues by connecting gardening and poetry ('I mean plain ordinary rest, and sleep, and waking up to a morning's work in the garden. ... Still, I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales,' *TT* 697). Finally, within the Ithilien episode, we may note Sam's 'poetic language of landscape' he uses to describe Galadriel to Faramir ('But I wish I could make a song about her. Beautiful she is, sir! Lovely! Sometimes like a great tree in flower, some-

⁴² Gowers (2000) 127–133; Clay (1981) 62. For the Old Man as sage, see Perkell (1981) 167–168 for bibliography.

⁴³ Plato *Phdr.* 230b, already appropriated by Cicero (*de Or.* 1.28). See Hor. *Carm.* 2.11.13–17 for drinking beneath a plane tree. For Horace's ironic allusion to Plato, see Harrison (2017) 141–142. Perkell (1981) 173 argues that the Old Man resembles the ur-poet Orpheus in his ability to transplant full-grown trees.

⁴⁴ Vergil's winter scene here is itself probably an *adynaton* since Tarentum never gets this cold: Thibodeau (2001) 177. The passage seems to anticipate Horace's 'Soracte Ode,' itself conventional and a homage to Alcaeus, see Nisbet and Hubbard (1970) 116–117: *glacie cursus frenaret aquarum* (*Geo.* 4.137); *geluque/flumina constiterint acuto* (Hor. *Carm.* 1.9.3–4).

⁴⁵ Gowers (2000) 131.

times like a white daffadowndilly, small and slender like. Hard as di'monds, soft as moonlight. Warm as sunlight, cold as frost in the stars. Proud and far-off as a snow-mountain, and as merry as any lass I ever saw with daisies in her hair in springtime.' *TT* 664). For Sam, the landscape and gardening provide material for poetry, and his conception of poetry is itself linked to the creation of the narrative of *Lord of the Rings*.

Second, both writers engage in etymological wordplay in describing plants. Vergil provides a false etymology in describing the myrtle: *amantis litora myrtos* (*Geo.* 4.124).⁴⁶ There is also likely a folk etymology in the description of narcissus: *sera comantem/narcissum* (*Geo.* 4.122–123).⁴⁷ We may compare this to Tolkien's wordplay in the juxtapositions of 'ling,' 'heathland,' and 'heather' (*TT* 635) and with 'rocky walls,' 'saxifrages,' and 'stonecrops' (*TT* 636). In the first set of words Tolkien glosses both ling (= heather) and the heath- prefix in heathland. In the second, Tolkien plays with the Latininate saxifrage ('stone-breaker') in both its location (the rocky walls) and with the apparent gloss 'stonecrop.'

Finally, scholars have remarked that Vergil's Old Man episode activates several climatic and botanical *adynata*.⁴⁸ Perhaps most famous is Vergil's reference to the 'twice-blooming rose of Paestum' (*biferique rosaria Paestum*, *Geo.* 4.119).⁴⁹ This phrase has puzzled readers of Vergil throughout the ages since remontant roses do not seem to have appeared in Paestum until the 16th century.⁵⁰ Moreover, in characterizing the gardener's concern for the hyperproductivity of his produce, Vergil says:

primus vere rosam atque autumnno carpere poma,
et cum tristis hiems etiamnum frigore saxa

⁴⁶ See O'Hara (2017) 268. The etymology is found in Isidore 17.7.50, who connects *myrtus* with *mare*.

⁴⁷ White (2013), 181. Pliny (*HN* 21.128) believed the word came from *ἄρρη* ('sluggishness'), due to its physiological effects.

⁴⁸ Ross (1987) 203–204. On the temporal displacements, see Thibodeau (2001). Cf. Perkell (1981) 173. On the Golden Age aspects of the episode, see Armstrong (2019) 185–186.

⁴⁹ Thomas (1988) 168. Cf. Potter (2010) 13–14 who thinks the gardeners of Paestum may have forced roses to bloom earlier in the year.

⁵⁰ See Potter (2010) 54 and Armstrong (2019) 185. Some have argued that *bifer* simply means 'long blooming.' Thomas (1961) 67–68 connects Vergil's rose here with the wall paintings in Pompeii.

rumperet et glacie cursus frenaret aquarum
 ille comam mollis iam tondebat hyacinthi
 aestatem increpitans seram Zephyrosque morantis.
 (*Geo.* 4.134–138)

He's first to harvest the rose in Spring and the apple in Autumn, and when harsh Winter still breaks the rocks with cold and bridles water-courses with ice, he was already trimming the foliage of the hyacinth and complaining of late-arriving Sumer and the delaying West Winds.

Note first the impossible winter scene: Tarentum would not have featured frozen rivers. In addition, the Old Man's impatience about time is explicit at the end of the passage and emphasized by the juxtaposition of spring and autumn at the beginning.⁵¹ The strange detail of trimming hyacinths during winter perhaps suggests the 'forcing' of flowers. The Old Man's fruit trees also seem to defy normal behavior:

quotque in flore novo pomis se fertilis arbos
 induerat, totidem autumnno matura tenebat.
 ille etiam seras in versum distulit ulmos
 eduramque pirum et spinos iam pruna ferentis
 iamque ministrantem platanum potantibus umbras.
 (*Geo.* 4.142–145)

With however much fruit the fertile trees had clothed themselves in Spring, so much they were keeping ripe in Autumn. He even planted late elms in lines, and the hardy pear and the thorny trees that bear plums, and the plane trees that already serve drinking parties with shade.

Vergil's language here literally means that the trees produce fruit from spring all the way through fall.⁵² In addition, the trees are depicted as simultaneously being planted and being full-grown. The speeding up of time may be seen in the plane trees 'already' (*iam*) providing copious shade, implying an accelerated growth rate.

⁵¹ Thibodeau (2001) 177.

⁵² Thibodeau (2001) 176. Cf. Armstrong (2019) 186.

Tolkien's Ithilien also exhibits botanical and seasonal displacement. We will discuss this in detail in the next section. For now, we should note that, in its first conception, the botanical description of Ithilien was set in February! In early versions of 'The Ring Goes South' (*HME VII*, 163–164), the company departs Rivendell in late November after a stay of about three weeks. This chronology is reflected in early drafts of what becomes *Two Towers*, chapters iv–vii. That is to say, the events in Ithilien occur largely in February according to this early conception. At a later stage in writing, Tolkien advanced the company's departure from Rivendell by one month to mitigate the fact that 'too much takes place in *winter*' (*HME VII*, 323–324).⁵³ The February dates appeared in the drafts until the composition of the chapter that was to become 'The Siege of Gondor' when the March dates now permanently supplant the February ones (*HME VIII*, 325). This change in dating, moreover, seems to have taken place *after* the writing of the ekphrasis of Ithilien and its vegetation, as is evident in Christopher Tolkien's remark:

'He [Tolkien] now returned again to the fair copy of the manuscript, and without changing, then or later, the opening of the chapter he wrote the story almost as it stands in TT, pp. 258 ff. (from 'so they passed into the northern marches of that land that Men once called Ithilien'). At this stage, therefore, the chronology was thus: Feb. 5 Left the Morannon at dusk, and came south into a less barren country of heathland. Took to southward road about midnight (p. 132). Feb. 6 Halted at dawn. Description of Ithilien and its herbs and flowers. Sam's cooking, and the coming of the men of Gondor' (*HME VIII*, 134–135).

As can be seen, the description of the flora of Ithilien occurs even in early drafts (the ones read to the Inklings in the summer of 1944) containing the February dates. In its initial conception, the Ithilien episode had springtime arriving extremely early or, to put it bluntly, had plants blooming in winter. The idea of floral superabundance not only recalls the Old Man of Tarentum episode, it also points to the larger context of Vergil's writing: the notion of the return of the Golden Age during Augustan Rome.

⁵³ Reflected in the published departure date of December 25 (*FR* 267 with *RK* Appendix B, 1066) and the subsequent arrival of Frodo and Sam in Ithilien in March.

THE AUGUSTAN GOLDEN AGE AND THE 'SUPERBLOOM'

Breaking with previous understandings of a bygone state never again attainable due to the degradation of man,⁵⁴ Vergil prophesied the return of a Golden Age first in his fourth *Eclogue* and eventually in the *Aeneid* after Augustus's reign was established (*Aen.* 1.291–296, 6.792–794).⁵⁵ In the fourth *Eclogue*, this new golden race (*gens aurea*, *Ecl.* 4.9) is marked by the birth of a boy who will end the Age of Iron and usher in a new age of peace. Vergil describes this age as one of supernatural prosperity:

At tibi prima, puer, nullo munuscula cultu
errantis hederas passim cum baccare tellus
mixtaque ridenti colocasia fundet acantho.

...

molli paulatim flavescet campus arista,
incultisque rubens pendebit sentibus uva,
et durae quercus sudabunt roscida mella.

(*Ecl.* 4.8–10, 15–17)

But for you, boy, the earth will pour out its first gifts without cultivation: wide-spreading ivy with baccaris and the Egyptian bean mingled with laughing acanthus. ... by degrees the plain will grow golden with tender ears of grain; the ruddy grape will hang upon the thorns uncultivated; the hard oak will sweat out moist honey.

In this passage, the Golden Age is associated with botanical prosperity where the earth spontaneously produces everything for mortals (*omnis feret omnia tellus*, *Ecl.* 4.39; cf. *tellus/omnia liberius nullo poscente ferebat*, *Geo.* 1.127–128).⁵⁶ The

⁵⁴ Hesiod's Ages of Metal myth traces the degradation of the human race from a Golden Age to an Age of Iron (*Works and Days* 106–201). See Wallace-Hadrill (1982) for further discussion. Other versions: *Ov. Met.* 1.76–150; *Hor. Epod.* 16; *Plato Crat.* 397e–398c.

⁵⁵ See Perkell (2002) on the complexity of Vergil's conception of the Golden Age. The conception of the Golden Age in the *Georgics* is arguably more pessimistic: see Johnston (1980) 12–13, 43–47.

⁵⁶ On the intertextuality and symbolism of the botanical aspects of this passage, see Peraki-Kyriakidou (2016) 245–247.

idea of the botanical prosperity of the Golden Age has a long Classical tradition,⁵⁷ which Vergil incorporates in his description of the new golden race. Some scholars argue that the concept of a Golden Age during the Augustan period was not clearly defined.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, an examination of Augustan literary and visual evidence reveals the continued and widespread association between botanical prosperity and peace, abundance, and fertility in Rome. According to George Kennedy, Augustus 'had a profound understanding of the rhetoric of empire... art, architecture, inscription, and urban planning conveyed the aura of a new golden age,'⁵⁹ and botanical programming was utilized in all these forms. For example, the cornucopia was pervasive in sculpture, such as the Ara Pacis or in the Forum Augustus, on coinage, and in literature (Hor. *Epist.* 1.12.28–9).⁶⁰ Horace also wrote that the age of Augustus restored fertility to the orchards and fields (*tua, Caesar aetas / fruges et agros rettulit uberes, Carm.* 4.15.4–5), even though there is little evidence of agricultural improvement under Augustus.⁶¹

Scholars have also noted the interest Augustus took in 'greening' Rome and the significance he placed on certain species of flora to create a botanical code that associated his reign with ideas of rebirth or the favor of Apollo.⁶² Public gardens around Rome became a symbol of prosperity ushered in by Augustus after the chaos of the Civil War and triumvirate. Barbara Kellum also describes Augustus's establishment of an 'arboreal mythology,' using trees such as the miraculous Palatine palm tree (Suet. *Aug.* 92.1–2) as a symbol of his right to rule or his connection to Apollo.⁶³ The dedication of laurel branches and planting of laurel trees across the city, as attested by Solinus (1.18), Servius (ad *Aen.* 6.230, 8.276), Martial (*Ep.* 1.108.3), Strabo (5.3.8), Vergil (*Culex* 402), and Ovid (*Fast.*

57 Hes. *Op.* 109–126; Hor. *Epod.* 16; Ov. *Met.* 1.101–6; see Young (2015) 27–31 for a review of botany and the Golden Age.

58 Galinsky (1996) 100; see Galinsky (1984) 240–241 on the popularity of an Augustan Golden Age in recent centuries; on pastoralism in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, and thus the interpretation of Vergilian Golden Age rhetoric potentially most familiar to Tolkien, see Ruff (2015) 181–210.

59 Kennedy (1994) 159.

60 Galinsky (1996) 111–114.

61 Galinsky (1996) 119.

62 See generally Kellum (1994); Evans (2003); Jones (2016); Spenser (2010) 155–156, n. 72.

63 Kellum (1994) 218; Young (2015) 22–23.

3.137–138), as well as recent archaeobotanical analyses of sites like the Temple of Divus Iulius, likewise supported Augustus's connection to Apollo and became a symbol of peace during the Augustan era.⁶⁴ The symbolic representations of this prosperity were also highly visible in Augustan architecture, art, and even in the coins.⁶⁵ These representations were not limited by a realistic conception of nature: they often represented this new Golden Age through unnatural botanical prosperity. For instance, we find such 'unnaturalness' in the fourth *Eclogue* (passage quoted above) and other authors explored below. One common manifestation of botanical prosperity in Augustan literary and art historical material is the superbloom, or a group of blooming or leafing flora that realistically should not be blooming together in nature such as the flowers of spring with the fruits of autumn.

There are two famous examples of Augustan art historical material that reflect Vergilian Golden Age rhetoric through the depiction of superblooms: the Ara Pacis Augustae and the Garden Room at Prima Porta. The Ara Pacis was consecrated on January 30th, 9 BCE after Augustus returned from campaigns in Hispania and Gaul, and was considered to be one of the most significant examples of Augustan visual rhetoric.⁶⁶ The monument depicts the figures of Aeneas, Roma, Augustus, and his family, and is covered with emblems of Augustan peace, prosperity, and morality. The extensive flora depicted on the acanthus friezes on the monument's lower half, and in the garlands on the monument's interior, support this visual rhetoric of peace and prosperity through floral abundance. Caneva argues that the specific variety of flora, such as the acanthus, ivy, and laurel, allude to divine messages of fertility, prosperity of the earth, Apollonian elements of rebirth, and symbolize the rebirth of Rome into a Golden Age.⁶⁷ Galinsky argues that the monument reflects the Augustan conception of the new Golden

⁶⁴ See Kellum (1994) 213, n. 19 for a full bibliography of ancient authors on Augustus's tree planting and n.20 for a bibliography on archaeobotanical analyses of the Temple of Divus Iulius.

⁶⁵ On botanical prosperity as a symbol of the *aurea aetas* in Augustan art historical material, see Zanker (1988) 167–193; for botanical programming on Augustan coinage, see Kellum (1994) 211–213, n. 22.

⁶⁶ Kennedy (1972) 383, cf. Lamp (2009); Young (2015) 27 calls the Ara Pacis and the work of Vergil 'the touchstones of Augustus' Golden Age iconography'; for Golden Age themes on the Ara Pacis beyond the plants, see Holliday (1990); Galinsky (1996) 141–155; Lamp (2009).

⁶⁷ Caneva (2010).

Age as the product of labor, reflecting Vergil's *Georgics* (*Geo.* 1.118–146). On the altar we see the Golden Age resulting from the labor of war (*parta victoriis pax*, *RG* 13) rather than connoting a 'paradisiac state of indolence.'⁶⁸ The Ara Pacis's superblooms occur in twelve highly detailed sacrificial garlands hanging from the *bucrania* found on the monument's interior. These garlands are composed of fruit and flowers of all seasons, including wheat, pomegranates, figs, apples, poppies, and pinecones.⁶⁹ The hyper-floral prosperity of these garlands contributes to the overall botanical code of the Ara Pacis, which uses botanical richness to symbolize the peace and prosperity established by Augustus.

Superblooming also occurs in the Garden Room at the Villa *ad Gallinas Albas*.⁷⁰ In 1863, excavators discovered an underground room at the Villa at Prima Porta, nine miles north of Rome where the Via Tiberiana and Via Flaminia split.⁷¹ The site has produced two well-known examples of early Augustan era art: the Prima Porta statue of Augustus and the Garden Room wall paintings. The latter are detailed frescos of a blooming garden that covered all four walls of the underground room, which is thought to be a *triclinium* dating from 30–25 BCE.⁷² With twenty-four species represented, the Garden Room is one of the earliest examples of the inclusion of hyperrealistic garden floral design on Roman walls, breaking from the more stylized architectural elements of the Second style of Roman wall painting.⁷³ Although the plants of the Garden Room might be painted in a hyperrealistic detail, their manner of blooming is not. Indeed, all twenty-four species are depicted as being in bloom simultaneously. Spring flowers – periwinkles, irises, roses, poppies, and daisies – flourish alongside late summer plants – oleander and chrysanthemums – and late autumn fruits, such as quinces and pomegranates.⁷⁴ Like the garlands of the Ara Pacis,

⁶⁸ Galinsky (1996) 93, 107, 118, 141–155; For a discussion of achieving the Golden Age through labor in Vergil, see Chinn (2017) 119.

⁶⁹ Holliday (1990) 545; Kellum (1994) 221.

⁷⁰ On the Villa's name and its botanical significance, see Gabriel (1995) 1; Plin. *HN* 15.136–138.

⁷¹ Gabriel (1995) 2–3; for further detail on the excavations, see Calci & Messineo (1984) 7–13.

⁷² On the dating of the site, see Young (2015) 17 and citations therein.

⁷³ Gabriel (1955) 7, n. 9; see Spencer (2010) 156–157 and Jones (2016) 59 n. 10 for a list of similar frescos.

⁷⁴ Kellum (1994) 221; Caneva & Bohuny (2003) 153; Jones (2016) 61–62; Hales (2003) 159.

flora in the Garden Room represents all seasons and is immortalized in a highly detailed superbloom. In both cases the first flowers of spring are depicted side by side with the fruits of autumn, not unlike the garden of Corycian, who is 'first to harvest the rose in Spring and the apple in Autumn' (Verg. *Geo.* 4.134, see above). Additionally, not only are all the plants blooming simultaneously, they are young and full of life, breaking from the aged tree more commonly featured in pastoral wall paintings, and thus adding to the sense of fertility evoked by the Garden Room.⁷⁵ Although wall paintings were a less public medium than monuments like the Ara Pacis, the development of the Second Style to include more landscape elements speaks of the wide reach of representations of botanical prosperity during the Augustan period.⁷⁶

The interpretation of the Garden Room's superbloom within the context of Augustan botanical programming is aided by additional motifs that symbolize other Augustan era ideals, such as peace through war.⁷⁷ The scene is rife with triumphal foliage, such as oak, palm, laurel, myrtle, ivy, and pine.⁷⁸ Additionally, many of the plant species depicted in the Garden Room are not native to Italy, such as the quince and pomegranates of the Persian Empire or the date palm of Egypt.⁷⁹ These plants suggest Roman imperialism and colonialism. The clearest symbol of Roman colonization in the Garden Room is the inclusion of four Norway spruces (*Picea abies* or *P. excelsa*), which are non-native to Italy nor previously depicted in Rome.⁸⁰ The regions of Europe to which this tree is native – Germania, Raetia, Noricum, and Gaul – were newly under Roman control in the first century BCE. In 38 or 37 BCE, Agrippa was awarded a triumph by Augustus for his defeat of the Suebi in transalpine Gaul, a native region of the

75 Spencer (2010) 158.

76 Galinsky (1996) 179; on the style of the Garden Room frescos, see Gabriel (1955) 7; Pappalardo (2008) 103–109; Young (2015) 24–26; on the style of the Villa of the Golden Bracelet at Pompeii, see Pappalardo (2008) 135–143.

77 On the interpretation of the Garden Room's botanical prosperity within the context of other Augustan botanical programming across mediums, see Gabriel (1955); Simon (1986); Fortsch (1989); Kellum (1994); Sauron (1994) 571–573; Young (2015) 27.

78 Kellum (1994) 218–219; Spencer (2010) 159.

79 On other Egyptian imagery used in Augustan art, propaganda, and the private sphere, see Broadbent (2012).

80 Caneva & Bohuny (2003) 151; Möller (1890) 78–80; Penso (1986); Gabriel (1955) 32–42.

Norway spruce.⁸¹ And while Agrippa never celebrated the triumph (Dio 48.48), Pliny notes that trees became a sort of booty in Roman triumphs (*HN* 12.111). The spruces in the Garden Room, as new trees in the garden of Augustus's empire, are symbolic of the regions now controlled by Rome. When taken together with the superbloom and the specific flora, like laurel and palm, that played such a significant role in Augustan botanical programming, the inclusion of foreign flora in the Garden Room acts as a symbol of the achievement of *pax Romana* through the labor of war. The inclusion of foreign species in a scene of botanical prosperity is also present in Vergil's description of the flora of the new golden race, with the *colocasia*, often understood to be the Egyptian bean, and the acanthus, a Greek symbol widely co-opted by Augustus, as seen in the Ara Pacis.⁸² As with the foreign plants of the garden room, it is significant that the foreign plants included in this passage come from locales – Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean – under Roman power.⁸³ The use of botanical motifs as symbols of Golden Age ideas – seen in both the Ara Pacis and the Garden Room at the Villa *ad Gallinas Albas*, as well as in contemporary literature, coinage, and the green spaces of Rome – speaks to the widespread nature of this theme in Augustan Rome and the close interaction between the visual and literary material at this time.

A specific connection between Augustan literature – the Old Man of Tarentum story – and Roman botanical wall painting may be seen in the references to the enigmatic Rose of Paestum. In antiquity, Paestum was famous for its rose production.⁸⁴ We have already noted Vergil's reference to the 'twice-blooming rose of Paestum' and how it seems to be a historical impossibility, since remontant roses (such as *Rosa x damascena*) were not introduced into that part of Italy until the Renaissance (see above). Some scholars have argued, since the adjective *bifer* (lit. 'twice-bearing') is actually applied to Paestum and not the rose, that Vergil means the rose-gardens of Paestum produced flowers for a

81 Niemeier & Tally-Schumacher (2017) 71.

82 Cucchiarelli (2011) 161–162; Plin. *HN* 21.87: '*in Aegypto nobilissima est colocasia quam cyamon aliqui vocant*'.

83 On Bacchic imagery in *Ecl.* 4, see Cucchiarelli (2011) 161–162; on bacchic imagery in the Garden Room, see Kellum (1994) 218.

84 See White (2013) 137–138 for bibliography. Ancient references: Ov. *Met.* 15.708; Prop. 4.5.61–62; Columell. *RR* 10.35–40; Mart. *Ep.* 4.42.10, 6.80.

long time.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the idea of twice-yearly blooms was a feature of ancient fantastical landscapes: think, for example, of King Alcinoüs's twice-bearing fruit trees in the *Odyssey*.⁸⁶ At any rate, remontant roses typically bloom in spring and fall. Here, the fantastical element of Vergil's 'twice-blooming rose' appears in wall painting. In the House of the Golden Bracelet in Pompeii, we find a garden painting that mostly depicts summer flowers.⁸⁷ Near a basin, however, a cultivated rosebush in bloom is depicted. While this may seem unproblematic at first glance, De Carolis points out that the rosebush is surmounted by a nightingale, a bird that in Roman literature signifies the beginning of spring.⁸⁸ It is possible that this means the rose in the painting is twice-blooming; yet this conclusion is immaterial for our purposes.⁸⁹ What is important is that we have a spring-blooming rose amid other summer-blooming flowers. We have, in other words, a botanical *adynaton* of the sort we noticed in the Old Man of Tarentum story. Like Vergil's Corycian, the wall painting depicts flowers blooming too early in the year. What is more, the wall painting seems to partake of the literary *adynaton* of the rose.

As seen in all of the above examples – from Augustus's greening of Rome and his arboreal mythology to superblooms of Vergil, the Ara Pacis, the Garden Room, and the Villa of the Golden Bracelet – it is clear that during the Augustan era, botanical prosperity came to be a symbol of peace, abundance, and a Golden

85 Cf. Potter (2010) 14.

86 τᾶων οὐ ποτε καρπὸς ἀπόλλυται οὐδ' ἀπολείπει / χεῖματος οὐδὲ θέρεως, ἐπετήσιος· ἀλλὰ μάλ' αἰεὶ / Ζεφυρὴν πνεῖουσα τὰ μὲν φύει, ἄλλα δὲ πέσσει (*Od.* 7.117–119, 'the fruit never goes bad, nor does it fail in winter or summer, it lasts all year; but the West Wind always blows on it and causes some to grow, some to ripen'). This fruit is interpreted by Statius as 'twice-bearing': *quid bifera Alcinoi laudem pomaria* (*Silv.* 1.3.81).

87 VI.17.42 Pompeii. Triclinium 32. Parco Archeologico di Pompei, inventory number 40692. Blooming summer flowers: chamomile, marigold, opium poppy. Description: Jashemski (1993) 354–355.

88 De Carolis (2017) 15. Cf. Bergmann (2008) 59; Sparkes (1997) 353. Others identify the bird as a kind of warbler: see Jashemski (1993) 355. On the potential unrealistic nature of the bird species that transcends seasons, see Sparkes (1997) 353.

89 Kumbaric and Caneva (2014) 187 identify the rose in the painting as the *Rosa gallica*, a summer-blooming flower. Mattock (2017) 119–120 asserts that the rose in the painting is in fact *Rosa x damascena* based upon its appearance (though Mattock misidentifies the painting as belonging to the Villa of Livia).

Age that was not a lazy paradise, but one achieved through labor. While it is unclear how familiar Tolkien was with the above visual representations of botanical prosperity as a symbol of Augustan Golden Age rhetoric, he was certainly familiar with the literary representations, as seen in the direct allusion to Vergil in the Ithilien episode (see above).⁹⁰ Considering the intertextuality between the Augustan visual material and the literary material, the above review provides a more complete context for the classical influences within Ithilien. And just as in Augustan art, Tolkien includes a superbloom in Ithilien, which appears to signal an earthly power in the Ithilien landscape.

THE 'SUPERBLOOM' IN ITHILIEN

As Frodo, Sam, and Gollum travel from northern Ithilien to the Cross-Roads, they encounter more than fifty species of flora. This count does not include flora that remain unnamed due to their foreign nature.⁹¹ The sheer number of floral species make Ithilien the most detailed floral landscape in Middle-earth. Current scholarship on the flora of Ithilien is limited and in no way conclusive. Dinah Hazell⁹² sees Ithilien as an English woodland full of the first flowers of spring, but ignores the Mediterranean character of many of the trees and the fact that much of the flora does not bloom in early March. Judd and Judd identify the flora of Ithilien as that of Greece, Turkey, and the western Mediterranean.⁹³ Although they disagree on the English or Mediterranean nature of Ithilien, both Hazell and Judd and Judd remark on the significance of Ithilien as a place of healing and restoration during the Hobbits' journey.⁹⁴ As the Hobbits and Gollum enter Ithilien, the air is fragrant and the herbs are 'sweet-smelling' (*TT* 636), in stark contrast to the 'bitter reek' of the land before the Black Gate (*TT* 617). It is a

⁹⁰ Scholarship on the floral impossibilities of the Garden Room dates to 1890 (Moller); scholarship on the unrealistic nature of the Ara Pacis's garlands dates to at least 1931: Holliday (1990) 545 n. 27; on Tolkien's knowledge of general archeological material, see Sabo (2007) 93–95; on Tolkien's demonstrated knowledge of Vergil, see Moreno (2015) 48–50.

⁹¹ Much of the Ithilien flora is seen through Sam's eyes as a foreign gardener, see above.

⁹² Hazell (2006) 47–61.

⁹³ Judd & Judd (2017) 324.

⁹⁴ Hazell (2006) 47–48.

landscape that offers respite from the neighboring desolation of Mordor, and it is where Aragorn heals Sam and Frodo after their ordeal on Mt. Doom (*RK* 930–931). Ithilien is also a place of resilience both for people against the incursion of the host of Mordor (e.g. *TT* 645) and in the literal resilience of its plant life: walking through Ithilien, Sam encounters a recent fire which has scorched the earth, however, ‘the swift growth of the wild with briar and eglantine and trailing clematis was already drawing a veil over this place of dreadful feast and slaughter’ (*TT* 637). Hazell sees Ithilien’s power to heal and revive as ‘remnants of grace left from its past greatness’ and both she and Judd and Judd agree that the botanical richness of Ithilien is the product of the land being under the destructive power of Sauron for only a short while.⁹⁵

A closer look at the flora of Ithilien reveals botanical abnormalities similar to those of Augustan botanical programming. Figure 1 below lists all the flora that Tolkien explicitly describes as either blooming, budding, or growing leaves.⁹⁶ Of the 21 blooming plants, only four bloom in early March, with three of these plants being different species of anemones.⁹⁷ Some of the species, such as the sages (*Salvia officinalis*, *S. pratensis*, *S. verbenaca*, *S. mexicana*, *S. splendens*, *S. coccinea*),⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Hazell (2006) 47–48; Judd & Judd (2017) 324.

⁹⁶ The figure is based upon the blooming times with which Tolkien was most familiar, e.g. English blooming time. If we consider the blooming time of these 21 plants in the Mediterranean (Italy), superblooming is still present.

⁹⁷ It must be noted that some of the flowers in the Ithilien episode are named by Tolkien in a manner that is too general to determine the exact species of plant, although it is possible to hypothesize based on the textual context and Tolkien’s own personal botanical experience: Hazell (2006); Judd & Judd (2017). Then anemones described have blue and white flowers, and are therefore likely one of the following species: the native wood anemone, *Anemone nemorosa*: Hazell (2006) 56; Judd & Judd (2017) 88; the blue anemone, *A. apennina*, which is commonly cultivated in England but native across southern Europe: Judd & Judd (2017) 88; or *A. blanda*, introduced and widely cultivated in the UK from 1898 (<https://www.brc.ac.uk/plantatlas/plant/anemone-blanda>).

⁹⁸ The blue sage could be *Salvia officinalis*, used for cooking, native to the Mediterranean, and broadly naturalized, *Salvia pratensis*, native to Europe, including Oxfordshire, the UK county in which its population density is the highest, or *Salvia verbenaca*, also native to the British Isles; potential red sages include *S. coccinea* or *S. splendens*, although the former is tropical American species and the latter, native to Brazil. The green flowers are more difficult to identify as no species of sage has green flowers. However, *S. mexicana* has pale green calyces, although this species is native to Mexico was not cultivated until the 1970s: Judd & Judd (2017) 267–268; Clebsch & Barner (2003) 198.

parsley (*Petroselinium crispum*), saxifrage (*Saxifraga* spp.),⁹⁹ asphodel (*Asphodelus* sp.), lily (*Lilium* sp., possibly *L. candidum*),¹⁰⁰ and stonecrop (*Sedum* spp.) do not start blooming until at least late spring to early summer. Nevertheless, all these species are blooming at the same time in early March (or early February according to Tolkien's original timeline, see above). There are three additional species – eglantine (or sweet briar, *Rosa rubiginosa*), trailing clematis (*Clematis* sp.), and celandine (likely *Chelidonium majus*)¹⁰¹ – that are potentially blooming, based upon Tolkien's descriptions. Eglantine and celandine do not start blooming until late spring, with clematis appearing from summer to early fall. In his description, Tolkien acknowledges the early blooming of some of these plants with his use of the word 'already': 'Spring was *already* busy around them' and 'the grotts and rocky walls were *already* starred with saxifrages and stonecrops' (*TT* 636, emphasis added). Considering the early blooming of the vast majority of species as well as Tolkien's acknowledgement of the early nature of these blooms, the superbloom is a significant part of the landscape ekphrasis of Ithilien. With this conclusion in mind, what is the purpose of Ithilien's superbloom among the wider themes of Middle-earth?

Placing it in its extratextual and intratextual contexts, superblooming in Ithilien is not a coincidence. It is evident from his *Letters* that Tolkien was an avid gardener with extensive knowledge of the flora that surrounded him. Not only does he frequently mention his own gardening (*Letters* 45, 61, 67, 89, 94, and 312), he also discusses both contemporary botanical knowledge (*Letters* 93, 297, and 312) and that of old herbals (*Letters* 93). Likewise, he mentions owning and reading multiple illustrated botany books, for which he admits to having a 'special fascination' (*Letters* 312).¹⁰² In remarking upon the extraordinarily early leafing of oak trees during a trip he took to Devon (*Letters* 323), he demonstrates knowledge of the growth patterns of the flora around him. Tolkien's special fas-

⁹⁹ Depending upon the species Tolkien had in mind, the saxifrage could bloom as early as March (*Saxifraga oppositifolia*), although most species do not begin blooming until April (*S. granulata*; *S. tridactylites*), May (*S. hypnoides*) or even June (*S. stellaris*; *S. aizoides*). It must be noted that *S. oppositifolia* is not the most likely species of saxifrage that Tolkien was envisioning for the Ithilien episode due to its distribution being mainly limited to the Arctic, Northern Britain, and the Alps: ITIS (2021).

¹⁰⁰ Judd & Judd (2017) 207.

¹⁰¹ Judd & Judd (2017) 325.

¹⁰² On Tolkien's private library, see Cilli (2019).

Tolkien's Ithilien and the Landscape of the Ancient Mediterranean

Plant	Scientific Name	Note from Text	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Larch	<i>Larix</i> sp.	"already green fingered"			✓* (late)	✓								
Sage	<i>Salvia officinalis</i>	blue					✓		✓					
	<i>S. pratensis</i>	blue					✓		✓					
	<i>S. verbenaca</i>	blue					✓		✓	✓				
	<i>S. mexicana</i>	pale green					✓		✓	✓			✓	
	<i>S. splendens</i>	red					✓		✓	✓			✓	
	<i>S. coccinea</i>	red					✓		✓	✓			✓	
Parsley	<i>Petroselinum crispum</i>	"new sprouting"					✓		✓	✓				
Saxifrages	<i>Saxifraga</i> sp.	"starred"			✓**	✓	✓		✓	✓				
Primeroles	<i>Primula vulgaris</i>	"awake"			✓	✓	✓							
	<i>P. veris</i>	"awake"				✓	✓							
Anemones	<i>Anemone apennina</i>	"awake in the filbert-brakes"; blue flowers			✓	✓	✓							
	<i>A. nemorosa</i>	white flowers			✓	✓	✓							
	<i>A. blanda</i>	blue flowers			✓	✓	✓							
Asphodel	<i>Asphodelus</i> sp.	"half open heads"				✓	✓		✓	✓				
Lily-flowers	<i>Lilium</i> sp.	"half open heads"				✓	✓		✓	✓				
Oaks	<i>Quercus</i> sp.	"budding"			✓* (late)	✓	✓							
Woodland hyacinths	<i>Hyacinthoides non-scripta?</i>	"already thrusting through mould"			✓ (late)	✓	✓							
Gorse	<i>Ulex europaeus</i>	"already putting out yellow flower"				✓	✓		✓	✓				
Trailing plant	<i>Ipomoea?</i>	"with flowers"; morning glory? [Judd & Judd 2017: 282]				✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	
Stonecrop	<i>Sedum</i> sp.	"starred"; "yellow stonecrop gleamed"				✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	

(late) = activity that begins late in the month, significant as the Hobbits spend the 7th – 10th of March in Ithilien

* The average oak budburst date in the U.K. (<https://naturescalendar.woodlandtrust.org.uk/analysis/seasonal-reports/>) was 6 April for 2020. March has been marked on this figure to allow for budbursts earlier than the national average. However, like many U.K. tree species in 2020, this date is two weeks or more earlier than the budburst averages for 1961–90, also pushing up the earliest budding of oaks in the U.K.

** Of six potential species of saxifrage reasonably represented in Ithilien, only *S. oppositifolia* blooms in March; the starry saxifrage (*S. stellaris*) most resembles Tolkien's description of the "starred" saxifrage, yet this species does not bloom until June

Table 1 List of all the flora which Tolkien describes as explicitly blooming or leafing in Ithilien. Only two types of flowers (primroses and anemones) bloom in early March. None of the flower species bloom in February, which is when the Hobbits were in Ithilien in Tolkien's original draft

ination with the natural world is readily apparent in his creation of the natural world of Middle-earth. In answering a letter from a fan, Tolkien stated that he 'visualize[s] with great clarity and detail scenery and 'natural' objects, not the artefacts' of Middle-earth (*Letters* 211). Not only did he name over 150 species of real plants across all of his works, but he also invented plants to enrich his landscapes from the *mallorn* trees of Lothlórien to the *sybelmynë* dotting the barrows of the Rohirrim to *athelas* with its healing properties.¹⁰³ Nor were these flowers created on a whim, but they were envisaged in detail (*Letters* 312) and created to play a significant role in what Tolkien describes as the subcreation of Middle-earth.

In reading *The Lord of the Rings*, one can see – as many scholars have remarked – how Tolkien used landscape ekphrasis to both make the world of Middle-earth more real to his reader and to signal themes within his works.¹⁰⁴ Frequently Tolkien's landscape descriptions echo the widespread Augustan metaphor of botanical prosperity as a symbol of peace or moral prosperity. Examples of this include but are not limited to: the desolation of Isengard made green by the Tree-garth of Orthanc (*RK* 956–957) and victory in Gondor being marked by both the city being filled with trees (*RK* 947) and by the growth of a sapling of the line of Telperion, the Eldest of Trees (*RK* 950).¹⁰⁵ Conversely, Tolkien marks the presence of evil by desolation in a landscape: the natural beauty of Isengard is used for the evil machinations of Saruman, such that 'no green thing grew there in the latter days' of the wizard (*TT* 541);¹⁰⁶ the earth, water, and air of Dead Marshes (which previously had been the site of a great battle) is made 'rotten' and 'black and heavy' (*TT* 614); the land around the Black Gate is 'barren and ruinous' (*TT* 634); and the flora of Mordor itself, 'maggot ridden', 'withered', and possessing 'long stabbing thorns' and 'hooked barbs that rent like knives' (*RK* 900) actively harms Sam and Frodo during their journey. Considering Tolkien's tendency to use landscape ekphrasis to literalize good or evil within a landscape,

103 Judd & Judd (2017).

104 Hazell (2006); Brisbois (2005); Conrad-O'Briain & Hynes (2013); for pastoral themes signaled through Tolkien's landscapes see Koch (2017); for an ecocritical examination of the Dead Marshes (also reception of Tacitus in the marshes), see Makins (2016).

105 This sequence of the miraculous growth of a single tree that then becomes a symbol of essentially the 'divine right' of the new regime is similar to the miraculous Palatine palm tree described by Suetonius (*Aug.* 92.1–2). For further, see Kellum (1994) 211.

106 For further on Saruman and landscape, see Huttar (1992) 102; see also Ruff (2015) 181–199.

his inclusion of hyper-prosperity, or superblooms, in certain landscapes is significant. The two other superblooms in *Lord of the Rings* occur in Lothlórien and the reconstructed Shire at the end of *Return of the King*. While it does not contain a superbloom, Rivendell is also characterized by a natural prosperity that transcends seasons: 'The air was warm...the evening was filled with a faint scent of trees and flowers, as if summer still lingered in Elrond's gardens' (*FR* 220) though it was already late autumn by the time the Hobbits arrived. Lorien and Rivendell have the power of the elves, seemingly symbolized by hyper-natural prosperity that protects the lands from the forces of Sauron. But as Gandalf explains to Frodo in Rivendell, even the Shire has a sort of power to withstand the might of Mordor (*FR* 217). Both the Shire and Lorien have general Golden Age associations, which will be examined below, and thus support the connection between Ithilien's superbloom and Augustan Golden Age ideals.¹⁰⁷ However, it is the differences between these three landscapes that make us question the significance of the superbloom coupled with the direct reception of Vergil in Ithilien as part of Tolkien's subcreation of Middle-earth.

Traveling from the borders of the Lothlórien to the seat of Galadriel and Celeborn, the fellowship passes by Cerin Amroth, which is described by Haldir: 'Here *ever bloom* the winter flowers in the unfading grass: the yellow *elanor* and the pale *niphredil*' (*FR* 341, emphasis added). Thus begins the numerous descriptions of Lorien as unnaturally prosperous. Frodo later observes that 'no blemish or sickness or deformity could be seen in anything that grew upon the earth' (*FR* 341) and remarks several times on the timeless or unfading nature of the Lorien woods (*FR* 340–341). The grass of Cerin Amroth is 'as green as Spring-time in the Elder Days' and Frodo 'felt that he was in a timeless land that did not fade or change or fall into forgetfulness... [and] stood still hearing far off great seas upon beaches that had long ago been washed away, and sea-birds crying whose race had perished from the earth' (*FR* 341). In Lothlórien, a pocket of the Elder Days exists, stamped onto the landscape and reflected in the hyper-prosperity of the flora.¹⁰⁸ Although the Company stays in Lorien in mid-January, the

¹⁰⁷ The valley seems frozen in a bygone age. It is a place where the Hobbits cannot help but feel joyous (*FR* 220) and 'merely to be there was a cure for weariness, sadness, and fear' (*FR* 219). Sitting at dinner with Elrond, Gandalf seems transformed into 'some wise king of ancient legend' (*FR* 220).

¹⁰⁸ As stated in the *Unfinished Tales* (2: IV), Galadriel establishes Lothlórien as 'a refuge and an island of peace and beauty, a memorial of ancient days.' The reflection of these 'ancient days' can be seen in both the particular flora of Lorien as well as its unnatural botanical pros-

elven flora blooms untouched by the decay of winter¹⁰⁹ and the *mallorn* trees retain their leaves. The botanical prosperity of its landscape mirrors the role Lorien plays as a place of peace and safety for the fellowship during their difficult journey.¹¹⁰ It must be noted, however, that the superbloom of Lorien is composed entirely of invented, or elven, flora rather than the familiar flora of Ithilien. The superbloom of Lorien recalls the bygone Golden Age of the elves, or the Elder Days. Tolkien's invented flora is predominantly found in Lorien (with the exception of *symbelmynë* and the *mallorn* tree given to Sam by Galadriel). The *mallorn* tree is not native to Middle-earth but was originally brought out of the West by the elves to the eastern coast of Númenor during the Second Age.¹¹¹ During the Third Age, the *mallorn*'s distribution is confined to Lothlórien, where they are able to grow due to Galadriel's power (*FR* 339–343 cf. *FR* 379), but they and other elven flora fade from Middle-earth with the passing of the elves and the death of Arwen (*RK* Appendix A, v, 1038). Lorien's superbloom, marked by its foreign flora, constitutes one of the last vestiges of the Second Age in Middle-earth. With the coming of the Fourth Age, or the Age of Man, the elves of Middle-earth travel to the West and their unearthly mark on the landscapes of Middle-earth must pass with them.

perity. Even the name 'Lothlórien', meaning 'Lorien of the Flower' evokes the garden-like dwelling of the Vala Irmo: Judd & Judd (2017) 139. In *The Silmarillion*, Valinor is first described as a land in which were gathered 'all the fairest things that were saved from ruin...Valinor became more beautiful than Middle-earth in the Spring of Arda; and it was blessed...there naught faded nor withered, neither was there any stain upon flower or leaf in that land...' (*Sil* 1). Like Valinor, the land of Lorien is a pocket of natural prosperity in a darkening world. Additionally, the *mallorn* trees, *elanor*, and *niphredil* are distinctly elven plants that were important in earlier ages. *Niphredil* grew in Neldoreth to mark the birth of Lúthien (*Sil* 10) and *elanor* bloomed in Doriath and Gondolin during the First Age: Judd & Judd (2017) 139. Finally, both the gold and silver flowers of the *elanor* and the silver (of the trunks, lower surfaces of the leaves, and the fruits) and gold (of the autumn/winter leaves and flowers) *mallorn* trees recall the silver and gold lights of the Two Trees of Valinor.

109 Although his invented plants are 'lit by a light that would not be even ever in a growing plant' and therefore do not have one-to-one parallels in the real world, Tolkien wrote that a *niphredil* would be most similar to a snowdrop and the *elanor*, to a pimpernel (*Letters* 312). While the cousin of the snowdrop would likely be blooming in January when the fellowship is in Lorien, the pimpernel blooms in the summer.

110 For the Medieval influence on Lorien's flora, see Hazell (2006) 34–37.

111 Judd & Judd (2017) 213.

After the scouring of the Shire at the end of *Return of the King*, Sam uses the *mallorn* seed and the dust given to him by Galadriel, and with extensive labor re-greens the Shire. The spring that followed is unnaturally prosperous:

'Spring surpassed his wildest hopes. His trees began to sprout and grow, as if time was in a hurry and wished to make one year do for twenty. In the Party Field a beautiful young sapling leaped up: it had silver bark and long leaves and burst into golden flowers in April...an air of richness and growth, and a gleam of a beauty beyond that of mortal summers that flicker and pass upon this Middle-earth. All the children born or begotten in that year, and there were many, were fair to see and strong, and most of them had a rich golden hair that had before been rare among hobbits. The fruit was so plentiful that young hobbits very nearly bathed in strawberries and cream...In the Southfarthing the vines were laden, and the yield of 'leaf' was astonishing; and everywhere there was so much corn that at Harvest every barn was stuffed' (*RK* 1000).

Through elven flora, the Shire is restored to the agrarian ideal, or a representation of a time 'long ago in the quiet of the world when there was less noise and more green.'¹¹²

The description of spring in the Shire is rife with unrealistic botanical prosperity as a symbol of newfound peace and plenty after a period of violence done against the people and land of the Shire under Saruman. Huttar picks up on what he calls 'Golden Age motifs' in the above passage, such as the sapling 'burst into golden flowers' and the 'rich golden hair' of the fauntling born that year (*RK* 1000).¹¹³ However, rather than recalling the Golden Age of the elves as the flora of Lorien does, the life infused in the Shire by the elven flora adds a nostalgia for 'prewar quietness' or the 'good old days' and seems to reflect the same early twentieth century pastoralism seen throughout Middle-earth.¹¹⁴ It is of note that Tolkien considered creating additional plants for Sam's garden at the end of *Return of the King* (*Letters* 93), thus emphasizing the presence of unnatural flora in this episode. The key to the superblooms of both the Shire and Lorien are the elven flora and thus elven power. Linked so closely to elven power, it is

¹¹² *Hobbit* 13.

¹¹³ Huttar (1992) 95, cf. Vergil *Geo.* 1.126; Putnam (1973) 20, 80; Morse (1986) 49–50.

¹¹⁴ Huttar (1992) 95.

impossible for these landscape ekphrases not to evoke longing for a better past age. Ithilien, although characterized by a superbloom, lacks the elven power of the Shire and Lorien.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that the description of Ithilien is characterized by three key elements: its Mediterranean characteristics, the superbloom, and direct reference to passages from the *Aeneid*, *Georgics*, and *Eclogues*. We began from the assumption that the Mediterranean qualities of Ithilien and the Roman aspects of Gondor call for a close examination of the Classical influences on the landscape of Ithilien. We have demonstrated the direct reception of Vergil as well as the reception of the motif, widely utilized across Augustan era literature and art historical material, of botanical prosperity – often unrealistic prosperity – as a symbol of an *aurea aetas*. While unrealistic botanical prosperity – the result of elven power manifested in flora and the landscape or the last remnants of the Elder Days in Middle-earth – also features in Lothlorien and the Shire, the superbloom of Ithilien is different in character. Lacking any elven influence, botanical prosperity in Ithilien does not recall the Golden Age of the elves nor the agrarian Golden Age of the Shire. When reading the superbloom of Ithilien in terms of its Vergilian references, the landscape of Ithilien seems to anticipate the new prosperity that will accompany the Fourth Age of Middle-earth, when Gondor is once again green and a sapling of Telperion grows in the Citadel. The days of the dawning Fourth Age are ‘golden, and Spring and Summer joined and made revel together in the fields of Gondor’ (RK 942). After the fall of Sauron, the Hobbits are healed by Aragorn and the fragrant air of Ithilien (RK 931), which has been restored as the garden of Gondor.¹¹⁵ The rule of Ithilien is bequeathed to Faramir, where he ‘there makes[s] a garden’ (RK 943–4) and it ‘became once again the fairest country in all the westlands’ (RK Appendix A, 1053). Legolas, with other elves from the Greenwood, settle in Ithilien to rest in a land that is ‘blessed, for a while’ (RK 935). The new Fourth Age reflects the ideals of the Augustan *aurea aetas*: through *labor*, *ars* (skill), and war (*parta victoriis pax*), a new Golden Age

115 There is now a ‘beech grove’, a ‘long green lawn..bordered by stately dark-leaved trees laden with scarlet blossom’ and an ‘aisle of trees’ (RK 931–2).

can be achieved, and with it botanical prosperity. However, even in the language used by Legolas ('blessed, for a while'), we can see that the prosperous Fourth Age does not compare with the golden Elder Days of the Elves. To this we may compare Vergil's 'pessimistic' version of the Golden Age: conflict is still possible (*Ecl.* 4.31–9), the farmer's toil may be all for naught (*Geo.* 1.199–203), and in the *Aeneid* the founders of Rome have arguably disrupted a pastoral utopia.¹¹⁶ Although there is peace with the defeat of Sauron and the lands of Gondor seem again to be prosperous, the degradation of the races of Middle-earth – from Elves to Numenorian and now to the 'men of twilight' – cannot be reversed.¹¹⁷ As in the ancient myths of the Golden Age, *The Lord of the Rings* is filled with a longing for the inaccessible paradise of earlier ages.¹¹⁸

ABBREVIATIONS

FR – *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2012).

HME – *History of Middle-earth* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin 2000).

Letters – *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin 2000).

RK – *The Return of the King* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2012).

Sil – *The Silmarillion* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2014).

TT – *The Two Towers* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2012).

¹¹⁶ See Parry (1966) 68–69.

¹¹⁷ We see this theme also with the dwarves. Talking with Gloom in Rivendell, Frodo learns that the dwarves of Erebor cannot 'rival [their] fathers' in metal-working, nor can they 'again make mail or blade to match those that were made before the dragon came' (*FR* II, i, 223).

¹¹⁸ On longing for the past Golden Age of Middle-earth, see Huttar (1992) 98–100.

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Quis enim laesos impune putaret esse deos?: Ents, Sacred Groves, and the Cost of Desecration

Abstract Seneca the Younger, in his *Letters*, describes a sacred grove as a “thick grove of ancient trees which rise far above the usual height and block the view of the sky with their umbrella of intertwining branches” (Seneca the Younger, *Letters* 41.3). Fangorn Forest is clearly a sacred site as defined by Seneca, made even more sacred by the presence of the Ents. Thus, to violate it would be a terrible act of desecration, not unlike Lucan’s narrator’s shock at Caesar’s desecration of the sacred grove at Massilia (Lucan *BC* 3.447–8, quoted in the title of this paper). After exploring the relationship between Ents and sacred groves, the paper will compare the fate of Caesar to that of Saruman, who violated Fangorn Forest. Just as Augoustakis (2006) argues that the violation of the grove foreshadows Caesar’s death, so too Saruman’s death at the hands of Wormtongue becomes a fitting punishment for his violation of Fangorn.

Keywords sacred trees, Ents, Tolkien, Saruman, Julius Caesar

INTRODUCTION

Religion is a paradox within Tolkien's fantasy world of Middle-earth. Scholars of Middle-earth and Religion alike have been baffled by the apparent lack of any institutionalized religion within the text. Although "the *Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work, unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision" according to Tolkien himself, it is not blatantly so in the text because "the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism".¹ Despite this assertion to the Catholic nature of Middle-earth, many scholars have found influence of other religions within the text. Fuller, in his "The Lord of the Hobbits," argues that, given Tolkien's assertion that fans can read whatever allegories they want into the text,² he himself sees *The Lord of the Rings* as "an allegorical relation to the struggle of Western Christendom to the forces embodied, successfully but overlappingly, in Nazism and Communism".³ Allen counters that the underlying theology of *The Lord of the Rings* is actually the ancient Persian religion Mithraism.⁴

However, the reverence found for the natural world in Tolkien's legendarium goes far beyond that found in Mithraism. The only reference to trees in Allen's argument is that the crescent moons borne by the two trees on the doors of Moria might represent "the sacred tree under which Mithras was born".⁵ And yet, Tolkien can spend paragraphs describing with reverence a tree, grove, or forest.⁶ This is especially interesting combined with the fact that some of the

1 *Letters* 172.

2 Fuller (1962) 32: "Reluctantly he concedes the right of readers to find certain 'correspondences' to the modern world, if they insist."

3 Fuller (1962) 32.

4 Allen (1985) 202: "It would seem then, that the critics who question why Middle-earth has no religion are asking the wrong question. The question should be: what kind of religion is there? Tolkien's answer, 'natural theology,' although satisfactory to him, fails to satisfy the rest of us. But an understanding of the Persian sources of Tolkien's work helps to make clearer this 'natural theology' that undergirds, or rather overarches, Middle-earth."

5 Allen (1985) 190.

6 For example, the description of Caras Galadhon, or "The City of Trees," in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is three paragraphs long and about a page in length in a trade paperback version.

oldest beings alive in Middle-earth are the Ents, the Tree Shepherds,⁷ the “oldest living rational creatures” in Middle-earth.⁸ Dickerson and Evans, in their examination of Tolkien’s environmental vision, emphasize the importance of the wilderness to Tolkien’s worldbuilding: “Wilderness in general, and forests in particular, must be cared for and preserved, and the necessity of doing so transcends all political boundaries, alliances, or sides”.⁹ Thus, trees, and forests, must represent more in Tolkien than originally thought. And yet, the Ents are not even mentioned once in Hart and Khovacs’ *Tree of Tales: Tolkien, Literature, and Theology*.

In fact, this article will examine parallels between the reverence for trees and tree-beings in Tolkien and the similar treatment of trees by ancient Romans. Writings from and about ancient Rome are full of references to sacred trees, and as such this parallel will be illuminating to how the Ents are characterized by Tolkien. First, I will start by examining the two schools of scholarly thought on sacred trees in ancient Rome: the first, animism, was very popular when Tolkien was researching and writing but subsequently supplanted by the more theological approach put forward by Hunt in her *Reviving Roman Religion: Sacred Trees in the Roman World*. After this, I will apply the theories from both approaches to Tolkien’s treatment of the Ents of Fangorn forest in order to argue for the sacrality of Ents in Middle-earth. By comparing Tolkien’s treatment of Ents to the theology behind sacred trees put forward by Hunt, I hope to shed light on the lack of ‘religion’ in Middle-earth by showing that honoring the sacrality of nature can be religion in itself. Finally, I will end by examining what happens when these sacred spaces are violated by comparing Saruman and Julius Caesar and their eventual downfalls.

7 Foster (1978) 160: “[Ents:] Tree-herds, evidently trees inhabited by spirits summoned by the thought of Yavanna to be the guardians of the olvar until the Dominion of men.”

8 *Letters* 160.

9 Dickerson & Evans (2006) 119.

SACRED TREES IN THE ROMAN IMAGINATION

For centuries, scholars have been grappling with the sacred tree, not just in Rome but across ‘primitive’ cultures. Alisa Hunt, in her recent *Reviving Roman Religion: Sacred Trees in the Roman World*, aptly summarizes the history of scholarship on sacred trees: “in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars of comparative religion and the first scholars of Roman religion – then developing as a discipline in its own right – placed sacred trees on a pedestal”.¹⁰ However, the most popular of these theories was that of animism, or the belief that things in the natural world have a spirit or divine power and as such must be worshipped. This idea fascinated the scholars of the time. Philpot argued that “most if not all races, at some period of their development, have regarded the trees as the home, haunt, or embodiment of spiritual essence”.¹¹ Building on this, Jennings argues that trees are home to the souls of the dead: “Their beauty when single, their grandeur as forests, their grateful shade in hot climates, their mysterious forms of life, suggested them as abodes of departed spirits, or of existing agencies of the creator”.¹² To these scholars, tree worship was an evolution: from “pure and simple”¹³ tree worship, to regarding the tree “sometimes as the

10 Hunt (2016) 26. Hunt also provides an extensive history of the study of tree worship, which bears summarizing. One way of examining these trees was through *Baumkultus*, or tree worship. Within this realm, scholars like Ouseley (1819), Barlow (1866), Tylor (1871b), Mannhardt (1875) and (1877), Allen (1897), Philpot (1897), Jennings (1890) and Frazer (1911) examined modern ‘primitive’ religions and compared them to ancient ones to come to examine the ancient roots of surviving evidence of tree worship in their contemporary world. Contrary to this, Boetticher (1856) focused solely on ancient *Baumkultus*, with more emphasis on the Greek world than the Roman. Others focused their efforts on tracing the development of religion to argue that “all religious ideas – even the most sophisticated Christian ones – could be traced back to primitive, deluded thinking”, Hunt (2016) 35. While some, like Tylor (1871a), Farnell (1905), and Caird (1893), aimed to avoid implications that modern religion is untrue, for the most part these arguments were used by Protestant scholars who wanted to reduce Catholic rituals to idolatry. For this, see Keary (1882), Waring (1870), Philpot (1897), Tylor (1871b), Allen (1892), Dalyell (1834), Fergusson (1868), Jennings (1890), Barlow (1866), Ousley (1819), De Brosses (1760), Farnell (1905), Müller (1901).

11 Philpot (1897) 1.

12 Jennings (1890) 2.

13 Robertson-Smith (1889) 185.

body, sometimes as merely the house of the tree spirit”,¹⁴ ending with the spirit becoming a “god of trees”.¹⁵ This progression was seen as the first steps to developing a monotheistic religion like Christianity.¹⁶ Given the fact that “the idea of Roman sacred trees is rooted in scholarship which is now dismissed for being comparativist, animistic, Christianocentric and imperialistic”¹⁷, this idea quickly fell out of favor.

Recently, scholars of religion and theology have become interested in moving away from the idea of animism to examine what sacrality really meant, especially to ancient cultures. Bell defines sacrality as “the way in which the object is more than the mere sum of its parts and points to something beyond itself”.¹⁸ Using this as her background, Hunt argues that sacred trees are not those which are described as *sacer*, sacred, but “trees which *mean* something in religious terms to those engaging with them”.¹⁹ While this may seem nebulous, there are some characteristics that can make a tree sacred: a focus of a community’s memories, established relationship, unruly agency, a ‘certain quality,’ behavior that possibly articulates divine intervention, and the local religious landscape. In addition, Hunt argues that “such trees urged people to ask and explore questions about where they stood in relation the divine”.²⁰ By this she means that discussions about sacred trees reveal Roman theological thought. While some have argued that Greco-Roman religion is too simplistic to reveal any theological underpinnings, if theology is defined as “the articulation of conceptions, representations, and questions about gods,”²¹ it is surely hard to deny theology to the

14 Frazer (1911) 40.

15 Frazer (1911) 45.

16 Hunt (2016) 49: “Since the issue at stake here is essentially how savage communities could, given enough time, convert to Christianity, the act of identifying the boundaries between incorporate, indwelling and entirely independent tree spirits was deeply charged.”

17 Hunt (2016) 66.

18 Bell (1997) 157.

19 Hunt (2016) 9.

20 Hunt (2016) 14.

21 Eidinow, Kindt & Osborne (2016) 4.

Greeks and Romans”.²² This is the idea of theology that I will use for the rest of this examination, as it is very broadly applicable.

But what does all of this have to do with Tolkien and his conceptualizing of the divine? As a student of philology in 1911–1915, Tolkien would have been receiving his education amidst the animism boom. Hunt’s idea that sacred trees were a prominent medium through which the Romans contemplated their relationship with the divine is an interesting way to think of the theological underpinnings of Middle-earth, a land in which trees specifically are granted extreme reverence. Given the fact that “comparativist scholarship ... singled out the culture of Rome as being unusually rich in primitive, animistic conceptions of trees”,²³ ancient Rome provides not only much evidence on sacred trees but also an interesting parallel to Tolkien’s legendarium. As such, an examination of both animism and trees as a medium for theology can provide interesting insight into Tolkien’s Ents. By comparing the forest of Fangorn and its inhabitants to Roman accounts of sacred trees, I hope to show that there are many theological correspondences.²⁴ I will then go on to examine the analogous²⁵ relationship between Saruman and Caesar in their acts of violation against sacred groves.

THE SACRALITY OF ENTS

It should come as no surprise that trees would be considered sacred in Tolkien’s legendarium. In response to a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* in June 1972, which used his last name as an adjective qualifying the word ‘gloom,’ Tolkien wrote the following response:

In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies. Lothlórien is beautiful because there the trees were loved; elsewhere forests are represented as awakening to consciousness of themselves. The Old Forest was hostile to two

²² Hunt (2016) 14.

²³ Hunt (2016) 50.

²⁴ Hardwick (2003) 9: “aspects of a new work which directly relate to a characteristic of the source.”

²⁵ Hardwick (2003) 9: “a comparable aspect of source and reception.”

legged creatures because of the memory of many injuries. Fangorn Forest was old and beautiful, but at the time of the story tense with hostility because it was threatened by a machine-loving enemy. Mirkwood had fallen under the dominion of a Power that hated all living things but was restored to beauty and became Greenwood the Great before the end of the story.²⁶

Given his Lorax-like position,²⁷ and clear reverence for the many forests of his fantasy world, Tolkien's creation of the Ents as sacred beings seems almost natural.

The impetus behind the creation of the Ents in Middle-earth is not described in *The Lord of the Rings* but in *The Silmarillion*. Not long after the creation of Middle-earth, one of its guardian spirits (the Valar) called Yavanna²⁸ worries about the vulnerability of the beings in her domain, especially trees.²⁹ She tells her superior Manwë³⁰ that she wishes that “the trees might speak on behalf of all things that have roots, and punish those that wrong them!” since “it was so in the Song [that created Middle-earth]”.³¹ Specifically, Yavanna is responding

²⁶ *Letters* 429–30.

²⁷ From Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax*, which “...chronicles the plight of the environment and the Lorax, who is the titular character, ‘speaks for the trees,’ and confronts the Once-ler, who causes environmental destruction” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lorax; last accessed 9/22/2022).

²⁸ *Sil* 18: “...the Giver of Fruits. She is the lover of all things that grow in the earth, and all their countless forms she holds in her mind, from the trees like towers in forests long ago to the moss upon stones or the small and secret things in the mould.”

²⁹ *Sil* 40: “‘All have their worth,’ said Yavanna, ‘and each contributes to the worth of others. But the *kelvar* [animals] can flee or defend themselves, whereas the *olvar* [growing things with roots in the earth] that grow cannot. And among these I hold trees dear. Long in the growing, swift shall they be in the felling, and unless they pay toll with fruit upon bough little mourned in their passing. So I see in my thought.”

³⁰ *Sil* 16: “...dearest to Ilúvatar and understands most clearly his purposes. He was appointed to be, in the fullness of time, the first of all Kings: lord of the realm of Arda and ruler of all that dwell therein. In Arda his delight is in the winds and the clouds, and in all the regions of the air, from the heights to the depths, from the utmost borders of the Veil of Arda to the breezes that blow in the grass. Súlimo he is surnamed, lord of the Breath of Arda. All swift birds, strong of wing, he loves, and they come and go at his bidding.”

³¹ *Sil* 40.

to the creation of the dwarves by her spouse Aulë, since she knows that dwarves will harm trees in their search for resources. After thinking it over, Manwë responds that Ilúvatar remembers the entirety of the song³² and promises that “when the Children awake, then the thought of Yavanna will awake also,” meaning that “in the mountains the Eagles shall house, and hear the voices of those who call upon us [b]ut in the forests shall walk the Shepherds of the Trees”.³³ As Cohen has said, “Tolkien’s usage of tree-like beings with human-like characteristics and culture reminds us that, in the Primary World, people are the only real defense that trees have against most of the modern threats that they face”.³⁴ In Tolkien’s world, the Secondary World, the role of defending the trees is thus handed over to the ‘Shepherds of the Trees.’

Who are these ‘Shepherds of the Trees?’ These would be the Ents, the

Tree-herds, evidently trees inhabited by spirits summoned by the thought of Yavanna to be the guardians of the *olvar* until the Dominion of men. The nature of the Ents was closely connected with that of the trees they protected and the tree-spirits (cf. Huorns) they guarded. The Ents awoke at the same time as the Elves; the Eldar gave them the desire to speak and taught them Quenya and Sindarin.³⁵

The chief of these Shepherds of the Trees is Treebeard of Fangorn. Treebeard himself speaks to Merry and Pippin about the origin and nature of the Ents:

Sheep get like shepherd, and shepherds like sheep, it is said; but slowly, and neither have long in the world. It is quicker and closer with trees and Ents, and they walk down the ages together. For Ents are more like Elves: less interested in themselves than Men are, and better at getting inside other things. And yet again Ents are more like Men, more changeable than Elves are, and quicker at taking the colour of the outside you might say. Or better than both: for they are steadier and keep their mind on things longer ... Elves began it, of course, waking trees up and teaching

32 *Sil* 41: “Do any of the Valar suppose that I did not hear all the song, even the least sound of the least voice?”

33 *Sil* 41.

34 Cohen (2009) 119.

35 Foster (1978) 160.

them to speak and learning their tree-talk. They always wished to talk to everything, the old elves did.³⁶

There are many important aspects of Ents to consider in this description. First of all, this passage sets up an important distinction between Ents and regular trees. Second, it highlights the fact that the Ents only became special through a close relationship with the Elves.

While Tolkien's conceptions of the Ents are important, given that the aim of this paper is to examine their theological importance to Middle-earth, what is more important is how they are perceived by the inhabitants of Middle-earth. In *The Two Towers*, Tolkien remarks that

[o]ften afterwards Pippin tried to describe his first impression of [Treebeard]. 'One felt as if there was an enormous well behind [his eyes], filled up with ages of memory and long, slow, steady thinking; but their surface was sparkling with the present; like sun shimmering on the outer leaves of a vast tree, or on the ripples of a very deep lake. I don't know, but I felt as if something that grew in the ground – asleep, you might say, or just feeling itself as something between root-tip and leaf tip, between deep earth and sky and suddenly waked up, and was considering you with the same slow care that it had given to its own inside affairs for endless years.'³⁷

This description of Treebeard matches well with the descriptions of Fangorn forest itself. The trees of this forest are described as "old beyond guessing ... [with] great trailing beards of lichen hung from them, blowing and swaying in the breeze".³⁸ Thus, this forest owes more to Treebeard than just its name, as its age and appearance seem to reflect its most important inhabitant.

Fangorn forest and its most famous inhabitant seem thus to be shining examples of trees with spirits of their own, the embodiment of animist thinking about

³⁶ *TT* 70.

³⁷ *TT* 64. Cf. Dickerson & Evans (2011) 127: "The image here is one of deep and profound understanding. We see in Treebeard both wisdom and knowledge, both earth and sky, and both past and present. An analogue of this can be found in the mythology of ancient Scandinavia, where Yggdrásil, the 'World Ash,' is the pillar of the world, its branches holding up the roof of the sky, its trunk anchoring the center of the earth, its roots reaching down into the Well of Being where the three Norns – Urð, Verðandi, and Skuld (that which was, that which is, and that which is to come) – weave the fates of human beings."

³⁸ *TT* 59.

trees of special significance.³⁹ But there is more to these trees than meets the eye. In fact, although incredibly animistic, Treebeard and the rest of the Ents encompass almost all of Hunt's criteria for sacred trees and groves from the perspective of ancient Roman religion. While some, like Dickerson and Evans,⁴⁰ have noted the spiritual role that Treebeard and the Ents play in Middle-earth, none have yet to examine them as sacred beings. By comparing the description and actions of Fangorn Forest, Treebeard, and the Ents to the criteria for sacrality outlined by Hunt, it is clear that the Ents play a sacred role in Middle-earth.

According to Hunt, there is "a particular *quality* about wooded spaces which might prompt religious responses to them".⁴¹ Hunt cites three examples from Latin literature that describe wooded spaces of this nature. The first is in Ovid's *Fasti*: "There was a grove under the Aventine, black with the shade of the holm oak/ which, if you saw it, you might say there was divine power in it" (*lucus Aventino suberat niger ilicis umbra / quo posses viso dicere numen inest*).⁴² According to Ovid, what makes this grove seem to have power is the darkness of its shadows (*niger ... umbra*). The next is from Seneca's *Epistles*:

Si tibi occurrerit vetustis arboribus et solitam altitudinem egressis frequens lucus et conspectum caeli <densitate> ramorum aliorum alios protegentium summovens, illa proceritas silvae et secretum loci et admiratio umbrae in aperto tam densae atque continuae fidem tibi numinis faciet.

If you find a grove, full of trees, old and exceeding ordinary height, and keeping at a distance the sight of the sky with the <density> of some branches as they cover others, the height of the forest and the solitude of its location and the wonder of its so dense and continual shade in the open give you faith of its divinity.⁴³

³⁹ Dickerson & Evans (2011) 129: "The Ents serve both as an incarnation – or *inarboration* – of the vegetative life of that world and as sentient stewards of the untamed sylvan domain that is their province". Cf. Siegel (2004): "For Tolkien the individual details of nature have spiritual significance that ascend a ladder from the physical world to the spiritual" (personal correspondence at Dickerson and Evans 2011, 129).

⁴⁰ See above, fn. 37.

⁴¹ Hunt (2016) 187.

⁴² Ov. fast. 3.295–6. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁴³ Sen. epist. 41,3.

The qualities here that make this grove sacred (*fidem tibi numinis faciet*) include the age of the trees (*vetustis arboribus*), their height (*altitudinem, proceritas*), the seclusion of the forest (*secretum loci*), and the denseness of their shadow (*umbrae...continuae*). Finally, in Statius' *Thebaid* there is a wood that "stands sacred through the divine power of its old age" (*stat sacra senectae numine*),⁴⁴ suggesting that old age is another quality that can make a tree sacred. Thus, from this evidence, sacred woods are shadowy, old, tall, and secluded. The importance of these characteristics to recognizing a grove as sacred will be discussed later, in reference to the Massilian grove in Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, which has all three characteristics.⁴⁵

Many aspects of these ancient wooded spaces that make them divine to Roman eyes are also found in descriptions of Fangorn forest. Full of shadows, it is described by Pippin as "dim and stuffy".⁴⁶ Even Treebeard himself emphasizes the shadowiness of the forest when he describes it as "*Taurelilómëa-tumblalemorna Tumbaletaurëa Lómëanor*, which may be rendered 'Forestmany-shadowed-deep-valleyblack Deepvalleyforested Gloomyland,' by which Treebeard meant, more or less 'there is a black shadow in the deep dales of the forest'".⁴⁷ While this does hint at a shadow of darkness, Merry also says that "[i]t does not look or feel at all like Bilbo's description of Mirkwood. That was all dark and black, and the home of dark black things. This is just dim, and frightfully tree-ish".⁴⁸ Thus, just like Ovid and Seneca's sacred groves, Fangorn is notable for its shadows. It is also remarkably old. The first thing that Tolkien notes about the appearance of the trees in the forest are the "huge branches of the trees. Old beyond guessing, they seemed. Great trailing beards of lichen hung from them, blowing and swaying in the breeze".⁴⁹ A few lines later, Pippin remarks "It reminds me, somehow, of the old room in the Great Place of the Took's away back in the Smials

⁴⁴ Stat. Theb. 6,93–4. Cf. Kozak (2020).

⁴⁵ Lucan. 3,399–401: "the grove was unviolated since ancient times / enclosing the dark sky and the chilly shadows in its / interwoven branches with the sun having been moved far above" (*lucus erat longo numquam violates ab aevo, obscurum cingens conexis aera ramis / et gelidas alte summotis solibus umbras*).

⁴⁶ TT 61.

⁴⁷ RK 457.

⁴⁸ TT 62.

⁴⁹ TT 59.

at Tuckborough: a huge place, where the furniture has never been moved or changed for generations ... but that is nothing to the old feeling of this wood”⁵⁰ And so, just like Seneca and Statius’ groves, the age of Fangorn gives it a certain quality that could be called sacred.

Seneca too remarks that the trees of his sacred grove are extremely tall. While Tolkien states nowhere exactly how tall the trees of Fangorn are, in describing Treebeard’s hall he states that there was “a wide level space, as though the floor of a great hall had been cut in the side of the hill. On either hand the walls sloped upwards, until they were fifty feet high or more, and along each wall stood an aisle of trees that also increased in height as they marched inwards”.⁵¹ As Treebeard’s hall is within the forest but not deep in the middle, this suggests that the trees of Fangorn are well over 50 feet tall. And so, although vague in the text of the *Lord of the Rings*, the trees of Fangorn are most likely comparable to the trees of Seneca’s sacred grove.

The last criterion specified by Roman writers is seclusion. Although the forest itself is readily accessible, the haunts of the Ents, its most famous inhabitants, are well secluded within the forest. The previously mentioned hall of Treebeard is 70,000 Ent-strides from the edge of the forest where Merry and Pippin enter it,⁵² and when trying to communicate with all the Ents of the forest, Treebeard then states that to contact many Ents for an Entmoot, he had traveled “many a hundred strides”.⁵³ And so, while Fangorn forest is so vast that it is a landmark, the inhabitants that make it special are relatively secluded from each other. Thus, Fangorn forest and its inhabitants can be said to exhibit all the same ‘special qualities’ as Roman sacred groves.

The next aspect that, according to Hunt, could make a tree sacred to a Roman is its status as a focus of collective memory. When speaking about the *ficus Ruminalis* and its many iterations, Pliny states that it is *sacra ... ob memoriam*,⁵⁴ which suggests to Hunt that this fig tree “was sacred as a new focus for the community’s memories of the suckling of Romulus and Remus, as a new instanti-

50 *TT* 61–2.

51 *TT* 71.

52 *TT* 72: “I have brought you about seventy thousand ent-strides, but what that comes to in the measurement of your land I do not know.”

53 *TT* 82.

54 *Plin. nat.* 15,77.

ation of that memorial tradition”.⁵⁵ Beyond the fact that the Ents represent the oldest beings in Middle-earth,⁵⁶ the Ents have also left traces in the oral traditions of Middle-earth. The first evidence of this is the “Song of Ent and Entwife,”⁵⁷ recited by Treebeard to Merry and Pippin. Before singing the song, Treebeard states

There was an Elvish song that spoke of this, or at least so I understand it. It used to be sung up and down the Great River. It was never an Entish song, mark you: it would have been a very log song in Entish! But we know it by heart, and hum it now and again.⁵⁸

As this passage shows, although now ensconced as a song of Entish folklore, this song about the Ents did not originally come about because of the Ents – it is a piece of oral history created by the Elves to memorialize the Ents. Thus, it is a piece of evidence that the Ents are part of a memorial tradition.

But it is not just the Elves that have memories of the Ents. Gandalf and Théoden have the following conversation when Théoden questions what the Ents are:

‘They are the shepherds of the trees,’ answered Gandalf. ‘Is it so long since you listened to tales by the fireside? There are children in your land who, out of the twisted threads of story, could pick the answer to your question. You have seen Ents, O King, Ents out of Fangorn Forest, which in your tongue you call the Entwood. Did you think that the name was given only in idle fancy? Nay, Théoden, it is otherwise: to them you are but the passing tale; all the years from Eorl the Young to Théoden the Old are of little count to them; and all the deeds of your house but a small matter.’

The king was silent. ‘Ents!’ he said at length. ‘Out of the shadows of legend I begin a little to understand the marvel of the trees, I think. I have lived to see strange days ... Songs we have that tell of these things, but we are forgetting them, teaching them only to children, as a careless custom. And now the songs come down among us out of strange places, and walk visible under the Sun.’⁵⁹

55 Hunt (2016) 113. Cf. Lucan. 1,135–143.

56 *Letters* 160: “...the oldest living of rational creatures.”

57 *TT* 80–81.

58 *TT* 80.

59 *TT* 168.

Théoden's comment that the Rohirrim are forgetting the elves speaks to a decline of knowledge about the inhabitants of Middle-earth. And he is not the only one who seems to have relegated them to mythology. When Gandalf mentions the Ents to Legolas, Gimli, and Aragorn during their reunion in Fangorn, Aragorn exclaims "The Ents!...then there is truth in the old legends about the dwellers in the deep forests and the giant shepherds of the trees? Are there still Ents in the world? I thought they were only a memory of ancient days, if indeed they ever were more than a legend of Rohan," and Legolas responds "A legend of Rohan! ... nay, every elf in Wilderland has sung songs of the old Onodrim and their long sorrow. Yet even among us they are only a memory".⁶⁰ Even though they may have doubted their existence, the fact that members of the Dúnedain, Rohirrim, and Elves know *of* them from songs and legends speaks to an enduring collective memory. Tolkien also hints that this collective memory is still being handed down in Rohan, as is seen not only when Gandalf questions if Théoden listens to fireside stories but also in Théoden's comment that such songs are still being taught. The passing on of knowledge, even as a 'careless custom,' still ensures that later generations will know of the Ents. Thus, just like the *ficus Ruminalis*, the Ents are a focus of the Middle-earth's memories.

Sacred trees are also those with whom an individual or individuals have an established relationship. When describing the care and attention the Arval Brothers took when caring for the trees of the sacred grove of the Dea Dia, Hunt states that "through their *choice* to engage in some light pruning – indeed making rather a song and a dance of their cutting off some arboreal matter – ... the Arvals expressed just how much their relationship with these trees mattered to them".⁶¹ Although the Ents seem to only survive in Rohan as memories in children's songs, there is one who has kept up a relationship with the Ents: Saruman. When Merry and Pippin ask Treebeard who Saruman is, Treebeard replies:

Saruman is a neighbour ... but at any rate he used to give no trouble to his neighbours. I used to talk to him. There was a time when he was always walking about my woods. He was polite in those days, always asking my leave (at least when he met me); and always eager to listen. I told him many things that he would never have found out by himself.⁶²

⁶⁰ *TT* 107.

⁶¹ Hunt (2016) 152.

⁶² *TT* 75.

Saruman's respect towards Treebeard in the past, asking for his leave and talking with him, shows that he values their relationship. And so, just like the Arvals who cared for their grove, Saruman's care for Treebeard suggests an established, sacral relationship. The consequences of violating this relationship will be discussed later.

Finally,⁶³ sacred trees also have an unruly agency that sets them apart from regular trees: "The agency of trees is ... 'unruly,' in the sense that it often feels beyond human control and prediction".⁶⁴ In addition to this, they also exhibit behavior that possibly articulates divine intervention in the human world. In Middle-earth, this is seen not only in the Ent's sacking of Isengard but especially in the actions of their charges, the Huorns. As evidenced by Théoden's lapse of memory when it comes to their existence, the Ents have been relatively quiet in Middle-earth. But, when they decide to attack Isengard at the end of the Entmoot, it is as if the forest has reawakened:

Suddenly they were aware that everything was very quiet; the whole forest stood in listening silence. Of course, the Ent-voices had stopped. What did that mean? ... [T]hen with a crash came a great ringing shout: *ra-hoom-rah!* The trees quivered and bent as if a gust struck them. There was another pause, and then a marching music began, and above the rolling beats and booms there welled voices singing high and strong.⁶⁵

Treebeard later notes that "we Ents do not like being roused; and we never are roused unless it is clear to us that our trees and our lives are in great danger. That has not happened in this Forest since the wars of Sauron and the Men of the Sea".⁶⁶ The Ents' uprising can be seen as not only an exhibition of agency that is

⁶³ Hunt does have one other criterion, local religious landscape. Hunt bases this off of arboreal epithets, which "reveal how a multitude of such relationships [between gods and trees] were constructed, and had their meaning, at the micro level of individual communities" (Hunt 2016, 249). However, as the forest of Fangorn itself is a landscape and its inhabitants can move, I have decided to exclude this. For while sacred through the creature it is named after, Treebeard, neither forest nor Ent loses its sacrality when it moves, as evidenced by not only the fall of Isengard but the role of the Huorns at Helm's Deep.

⁶⁴ Hunt (2016) 174.

⁶⁵ *TT* 89–90.

⁶⁶ *TT* 91.

unpredictable and out of control, but also a portentous act, since it is made more significant by the fact that it is a rare occurrence.

What is even more unruly and portentous than this, as it actually attracts human attention, is the way in which the Ents decide to use their charges, the Huorns. Towards the end of the Battle of Helms Deep, the soldiers notice that

the land had changed. Where before the green dale had lain, its grassy slopes lapping the ever-mounting hills, there now a forest loomed. Great trees, bare and silent, stood, rank on rank, with tangled bough and hoary head; their twisted roots were buried in the long green grass. Darkness was under them ... the Orcs reeled and screamed and cast aside both sword and spear. Like a black smoke driven by a mounting wind they fled. Wailing they passed under the waiting shadow of the trees; and from that shadow none ever came again.⁶⁷

And so, this miraculous forest appears just in time to help the Rohirrim win the battle. The sudden appearance of this forest disturbs some,⁶⁸ and Gandalf himself admits that he had nothing to do with its appearance.⁶⁹ Thus, to the Rohirrim, it is as if these woods have come from some divine source. Talking with Merry and Pippin later, Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas learn that these miraculous trees are actually Huorns,

Ents that have become almost like trees, at least to look at. They stand here and there in the wood or under its eaves, silent, watching endlessly over the trees ... there is a great power in them, and they seem able to wrap themselves in shadow: it is difficult to see them moving. But they do. They can move very quickly, if they are angry ... they still have voices, and can speak with the Ents – that is why they are called Huorns, Treebeard says – but they have become queer and wild.⁷⁰

This description tells us many things about the Huorns. First of all, if left to their own devices they do nothing – they have agency, but only act when prodded,

⁶⁷ *TT* 158.

⁶⁸ *TT* 161: “Some glanced darkly at the wood.”

⁶⁹ *TT* 161: “Gandalf laughed long and merrily. ‘The trees?’ he said. ‘Nay, I see the wood as plainly as you do. But that is no deed of mine. It is a thing beyond the counsel of the wise.’”

⁷⁰ *TT* 186.

like when roused by the Ents to deal with the Orcs. The rest of the time they are passive observers. And so, while they are not sacred trees to the plain eye, they are agents of the divine force that is the Ents.

And so, it is easy to see how, theologically, Ents are sacred beings within Middle-earth.⁷¹ Corresponding to sacred trees in the Roman world, these living trees have certain qualities, a place in collective memory, an established relationship with the people of the world they inhabit, and an unruly agency that suggest they are more than special – they are sacred.

THE COST OF DESECRATION: SARUMAN AND CAESAR

But what happens when a sacred tree is violated? A main argument of the comparativist camp was that the divine nature of a sacred tree or grove meant that it was inviolable.⁷² In contrast, Hunt has argued that for ancient Romans these trees could be and were violated.⁷³ While these two views may seem to be con-

71 It has not escaped my attention that some argue that Ent may be a derivative of the late Latin *ens, entis*, the present active participle of *sum, esse*, ‘to be.’ To quote Dickerson and Evans, “[t]he second sense of the word Ent is philosophical, and it describes a concept very close to that of “essence of being.” The *OED* refers us to another entry, *Ens*, where we learn that the word means “something which has existence; a being, entity, as opposed to an attribute, quality, etc.” or “an entity regarded apart from any predicate but that of mere existence.” Finally, the editors of the dictionary tell us, *ens, entia* (and *ent*, we can surmise – a hypothetical abbreviation) means “essence.” Putting all this together, then, an Ent can be said to be a giant as well as a scion, a sprig, or a graft and thus a tree, connected to (dare we say, ‘rooted in’) the essence of being”, Dickerson & Evans (2011) 127. However, as Evans and Dickerson go on to state themselves, “Tolkien disavowed this final meaning,” (*ibid.*), referencing a letter in which Tolkien states “in ordinary philology it is ‘quite unconnected with any present participle of the verb to be’”, *Letters* 208.

72 Hunt (2016) 121: “Scholars from Boetticher onwards, reliant on the idea that Roman sacrality means the transfer of an object to the gods’ property, have understood any interference with a sacred tree to be blatant sacrilege, even if not all follow Boetticher go so far as to deem it punishable by death or exile.”

73 Hunt (2016) 129: “Scholars have not allowed ... practical questions to deter them from concluding that interference with any sacred tree’s matter was sacrilege. A property-centric model of sacrality, combined with a narrow generic focus on poetic images of violated sacred trees and unviolated woods, have led to this conclusion seeming inescapable. Yet, if

tradictory, any violence to a sacred grove, even when warranted, had to be compensated with sacrifices or the sacred bond between human and divine would be broken. As previously mentioned, one aspect that could make a tree or grove divine was an established relationship between nature and human (and also therefore between divine and human). Thus, Dyson notes that “to harm any part of a tree without proper propitiatory rites was a dangerous act of impiety that invited retribution”.⁷⁴ And so, a sacred tree or grove could be ‘violated’ or subject to some sort of violence, but only if the relationship between them and the humans that cared for them was kept intact through proper sacrifice.

While there are many instances throughout Latin literature that show the consequences of breaking this relationship, one stands out in the magnitude of the consequences: Julius Caesar’s cutting down of the Massilian grove in Gaul, as depicted by Lucan. Lucan’s description of this grove states that it has not been violated by a human hand in a very long time (*lucus erat longo numquam*

we examine just a few passages within with a broader generic focus, we will encounter trees which, although clearly of religious significance thanks to their association with a deity or hero (and thus in my terms considered sacred), were by no means assumed to be inviolable.” One example she provides is Aelian *VH* 5.17 as well as a series of inscriptions from Lydia which show multiple people seeking expiation for accidentally cutting down oaks sacred to Zeus. Hunt concludes that “this hints at a broader picture of men felling trees connected to this otherwise unheard of Zeus, and trading in their timber: Zeus was lashing out against standard behaviour! Despite cautionary tales about these trees’ sacrality which were publicly recorded on stone, it seems that interfering with them was a risk some were prepared to take: once again we see that arboreal inviolability was by no means assumed”, Hunt (2016) 132.

⁷⁴ Dyson (2001) 146. Cf. Thomas (1988) 265: “In short, both documentary and literary evidence conspire to show that in Greek and Roman society, as in so many others, the felling of trees was an extremely hazardous enterprise and was, if performed without due reverence, likely to be met with retribution exacted either by the gods or by society. So widespread is this evidence that it is virtually inconceivable that an account of such violation would not be attended by at least a suggestion of retribution.”; Armstrong (2019) 58: “On the one hand, as a rule, there were clear boundaries and demarcation of sacred areas of woodland: they may have been walled or fenced off from surrounding land, and marked by boundary stones and inscriptions (some of which, as in the case of the *Lex Luci Spolentina*, even specifying penalties for the misuse and desecration of the place). On the other hand, as Varro’s remarks about the narrowing of the boundaries of groves on the Esquiline indicate (*LL* 5.49), economic exigencies (or, as Varro has it, greed) were in practice liable to encroach on these sacred places, even if not necessarily to eradicate the entirely.”

violatus ab aevo).⁷⁵ Even though this grove is sacred to the Gauls⁷⁶ not the Romans, Caesar's soldiers recognize it as numinous and fear to harm it.⁷⁷ Given the Roman tendency toward syncretism,⁷⁸ it is not surprising that pious Romans would fear to upset the deities within the grove. But Caesar convinces them that the sacrilege would be his, not theirs: "if any of you hesitate to destroy the forest / believe that I have committed a crime" (*Iam ne quis vestrum dicitur subvertere silvam, / credite me fecisse nefas*). In telling his men to blame him, Caesar is admitting he sees something sacred about the grove and that there is something wrong in destroying it. And yet, the grove is cut down. The Massiliains, when they see their grove destroyed, ask "who would think that the gods could be harmed with impunity?" (*quis enim laesos impune putaret / esse deos?*).⁷⁹ In accepting that the grove is sacred, Caesar reveals an established relationship with the divinity, even if he is not one who cultivates it. His chopping down of the sacred grove of Massilia without proper sacrifices represents not the violation of the inviolable but the breaking of an established relationship.

⁷⁵ Lucan. 3,399. Cf. fn 44 for a full description of the grove.

⁷⁶ Lucan. 3,403–4: "...[it contained] sacrifices to the gods / with barbaric ritual" (...[*tenet*] *barbara ritu / sacra deum*).

⁷⁷ Lucan. 3,329–31: "but the brave armies trembled, and moved by the divine dignity / of the place, which must be revered, they believed that if they struck / the sacred oaks, the axes would be turned back onto their own limbs" (*sed fortes tremuere manus, motique verenda / maiestate loci, si robora sacra ferirent, / in sua credebant redituras membra secures*). Cf. Leigh (2010) 205: "There is something about the grove which prompts the Celtic population of the surrounding countryside, the Massiliotes of the city, and Caesar's troops alike to attribute religious significance to it."

⁷⁸ Beard, North & Price (1998) 54: "The expansion of the Roman empire beyond the Graeco-Roman heartland of the Mediterranean brought the Romans into contact with a yet wider range of 'native' deities. This contact between Roman and native religions often resulted in the merging of the different traditions and their various gods and goddesses. This process (now sometimes referred to as 'syncretism') was not new. The early contacts between Rome and the Greek world had, after all, resulted in a range of equivalences between Roman and Greek deities that we now take for granted ... but wider expansion of the empire led to a process of syncretism on a wider scale."

⁷⁹ Lucan. 3,447–8.

As there is no historical basis for this episode,⁸⁰ scholars have speculated as to how this act reflects upon Caesar's character. Phillips suggests it is added to "characterize Caesar as a blasphemous and sacrilegious destroyer" but that to see the assassination of Caesar, which is not included by Lucan, as retribution "is surely carrying the parallel too far".⁸¹ Conversely, Augoustakis argues that "the manner of death imposed on Caesar's body seems to resurface in the way Lucan portrays the violation perpetrated on the sacred grove".⁸² With this statement, he suggests that assassination of Caesar by the conspirators on March 15, 44 BCE is retribution for his violation of the grove.⁸³ Most recently, Kersten has argued that Caesar's destruction is far from usual for the Romans in his aim to create something new, useful, and better,⁸⁴ suggesting progress is inherently destruction and thus not always good. Contrary to all of these, Leigh has argued that "Lucan's episode casts doubt on the presumption that crime against the sacred will inevitably be followed by punishment from the gods",⁸⁵ and concludes that it paints Caesar as a figure of reason, progress, and enlightenment.⁸⁶

80 Leigh (2010) 207: "It should be stated from the outset that there is no independent historical evidence for this act of deforestation. It is not even very likely that Caesar was present at the time." Cf. Phillips (1968) 299: "In all likelihood, then, Lucan invented the incident, in the ancient sense of *inventio*, not the modern. That is, he came across it in his reading, recognized it as suitable material for his epic, and cast Caesar in a role which he deemed appropriate to the circumstances and to his interpretation of Caesar's character."

81 Phillips (1968) 300.

82 Augoustakis (2006) 638.

83 Augoustakis (2006) 638: "[O]ne may notice the identification of the grove with Caesar in Lucan, of nature with human beings, inasmuch as both the *lucus* and Julius are depicted as reluctant in conceding any role to the gods, and yet they are both equally violated in the end, the grove by Caesar, Caesar by his murderers."

84 Kersten (2008) 152: "Das Verhältnis, das Caesar in Lucans *Bellum Civile* zur Natur und zur Umwelt hat, ist nicht in der Weise destruktiv, wie ein gewöhnlicher Feldherr zu militärischen Zwecken eben Äcker verwüstet und Wälder abholzt; es ist vor allem nicht primitiv. Zwar zerstört Caesar, der Blitzartige, mit Lust. Aber nicht, jedenfalls nicht nur, wegen der Freude an der Zerstörung, sondern weil er glaubt oder wenigstens vorgibt, dadurch etwas Neues, Nützliches, Besseres zu schaffen."

85 Leigh (2010) 212.

86 Leigh (2010) 235: "Lucan's Caesar may seem an unlikely champion of reason but the narrator's closing commentary on the fiction of divine retribution requires his agency, requires his survival ... Lucan's Caesar stands on the cusp between different ages, different beliefs. The

An important intermediary text to our understanding of how Lucan's Caesar may be an important analogue to Saruman is Ovid's Erysichthon from the *Metamorphoses*. In book 8 of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid describes how Erysichthon cuts down a tree that is sacred to Ceres, killing the nymph within, a crime for which Ceres punishes him with an insatiable hunger that causes him to eat himself. Phillips, Leigh, and Kersten all note that Lucan seems to be very intentionally drawing an intertextual relationship with Ovid in this tale.⁸⁷ Both Erysichthon and Caesar are motivated by ambition: Erysichthon to build a great feast-hall and Caesar to complete his campaign in Gaul. Thus, we have a confluence of ambition and progress expressed through the idea of violating sacred groves. It is in this ambitious deforestation for the sake of 'progress' where Saruman becomes an analogue of Julius Caesar.

As previously mentioned, in the past Saruman has honored his relationship with Fangorn (both the forest and the Ent). And yet, even Treebeard noticed a darkening of Saruman's purpose:

I told him things that he would never have found out by himself, but he never repaid me in like kind. I cannot remember that he ever told me anything. And he got more and more like that; his face, as I remember it – I have not seen it for many a day – became like windows in a stone wall: windows with shutters inside. I think I now understand what he is up to. He is plotting to become a Power. He has a mind of metal and wheels; and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment. And now it is clear that he is a black traitor ... Only lately did I guess that Saruman was to blame, and that long ago he had been spying out all the ways, and discovering my secrets. He and his foul folk are making havoc now. Down on the borders they are felling trees – good trees. Some of the trees they

new myth which he represents casts a long shadow over the early history of Christian Europe. For later ages the charismatic axeman who chops down unenlightened superstition and lets in the light of new belief is the Christian missionary converting the peoples of Northern Europe."

⁸⁷ Phillips (1968) 299: "The incident seems to have been suggested by Ovid's story of Erysichthon, as not only context but even verbal borrowings indicate."; Leigh (2010) 212: "The poetic account with which the language of Lucan's episode bears the most densely intertextual links is, by common consent, the description of the impious axeman Erysichthon in Book 8 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 8."; Kersten (2018) 153: "Einerseits scheint es, dass Caesar und seine Soldaten für ihre erysichthonische Tat bei Massilia keine Strafe leiden müssen, andererseits trifft die Caesarianer immer wieder entsetzlicher."

just cut down and leave to rot – orc-mischief that; but most are hewn up and carried off to feed the fires of Orthanc. There is always smoke rising from Isengard these days. Curse him, root and branch! Many of those trees were my friends, creatures I had known from nut and acorn”.⁸⁸

The language of this description hints that Saruman’s purpose and reverence for the forest has changed in order to serve what he sees as progress, motivated by his ambition to be a Power. Thus, like Caesar, he starts cutting down Fangorn for the sake of progress and ambition. Also, just as Leigh saw Caesar’s destruction of the grove as a marker of reason, in “Saruman’s Isengard ... environmental destruction is defended by the very reasonable sounding arguments of the white wizard”.⁸⁹ Prompted by this break in the established relationship, Treebeard and the Ents decide that it is time to take action, rise up, and siege Isengard. Thus, whereas the Massilians asked who could harm the gods unpunished, for Saruman the sacred personally exacts punishment.

But Saruman does not die in the destruction of Isengard. Instead, his downfall comes not as punishment for his sacrilege, but through a betrayal that echoes the breaking of the relationship with the sacred, similar to Augoustakis’ argument about Caesar and the grove. Saruman finally perishes, once Sauron has fallen, in the Shire, where his ambition to become a Power has lead him since he was thwarted in Isengard.⁹⁰ Saruman’s mistreatment of the Shire is depicted as almost worse than that of Fangorn:

This was Frodo and Sam’s own country, and they found out now that they cared about it more than any other place in the world. Many of the houses that they had known were missing. Some seem to have been burned down. The pleasant row of hobbit-holes in the bank on the north end of the Pool were deserted, and their little gardens that used to run down bright to the water’s edge were rank with weeds. Worse, there was a whole line of the ugly new houses along Pool Side, where the Hobbiton Road ran close to the bank. An avenue of trees had stood there. They

⁸⁸ *TT* 75–6.

⁸⁹ Dickerson & Evans (2006) 194.

⁹⁰ Dickerson & Evans (2006) 195: “In Saruman’s ecology growing things have no inherent value, to the while wizard, growing things are just that: things. Their only value is in how they can be used by Saruman to gain power.”

were all gone. And looking with dismay up the road towards Bag End they saw a tall chimney of brick in the distance. It was pouring out black smoke into the evening air.⁹¹

The emphasis on the gardens and trees in this description of the changes in the Shire show that what is of concern is the abuse of nature. And so, in the end the four hobbits wage a battle against the ruffians who have overtaken the Shire.⁹² As it is revealed, these ruffians were led by Saruman (aka 'Sharkey').⁹³ Frodo witnesses the end of Saruman, not at his own hands, but of one whom Saruman had trusted:

Saruman laughed. 'You do what Sharkey says, always, don't you, Worm? Well, now he says follow!' He kicked Wormtongue in the face as he grovelled, and turned and made off. But at that something snapped: suddenly Wormtongue rose up, drawing a hidden knife, and then with a snarl like a dog he sprang on Saruman's back, jerked his head back, cut his throat, and with a yell ran off down the lane.⁹⁴

And so, Saruman is not even killed in battle but by Grima Wormtongue, who had been his confidant for years, aiding him in his attempted psychological domination of Théoden and crawling back to him when that fails. Significantly, and in parallel to Caesar, Saruman meets his end by knife-blade. And so, just like Caesar who is killed by confidants turned assassins, so too Saruman dies. While neither death is explicitly connected with their treatment of the sacred groves, both men's deaths at the hand of a trusted friend replicate the breaking of the relationship between man and sacred grove they perpetrated. And so, in the end,

91 Tolkien (*RK*) 307.

92 Tolkien (*RK*) 321: "Nearly seventy of the ruffians lay dead on the field, and a dozen were prisoners. Nineteen hobbits were killed, and some thirty were wounded. The dead ruffians were laden on wagons and hauled off to an old sand-pit nearby and there buried: in the Battle Pit, as it was afterwards called. The fallen hobbits were laid together in a grave on the hill-side, where later a great stone was set up with a garden about it. So ended the Battle of Bywater, 1419, the last battle fought in the Shire."

93 Tolkien (*RK*) 324: "There standing at the door was Saruman himself, looking well-fed and well-pleased; his eyes gleamed with malice and amusement. A sudden light broke on Frodo. 'Sharkey!' he cried. Saruman laughed. 'So you have heard the name, have you? All my people used to call me that in Isengard, I believe. A sign of affection, possibly.'"

94 Tolkien (*RK*) 326.

both of these violators face a fitting end – they both violated a grove that was considered sacred by their respective communities without properly honoring the established relationship, and so, both were killed in a similar breaking of a relationship.

CONCLUSION

While it is not the best practice to introduce new ideas in a conclusion, the ecocritical lens of both the ancient and modern sources examined today cannot be ignored. Schliephake, in the introduction to *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity*, explains that “ecocriticism both registered nature’s aesthetic dimension as well as its presence in and impact on cultural practices”.⁹⁵ The ancient idea of the protection of sacred groves and the wrongness of violating them can be seen as a sort of Roman ecocriticism, in that it both appreciates groves for their aesthetic but also sees them as actively contributing to the cultures which venerate them. In the same way, Tolkien’s reverence for trees is reflected in his treatment of trees in his legendarium.⁹⁶ In creating the Ents, living trees that punish environmental destruction, Tolkien shows that nature is not just pretty but an important contributor to the culture of Middle-earth. Thus, the idea of ecocriticism adds another layer to the correspondences between sacred groves and the forest of Fangorn as well as the analogous relationship between Saruman and Caesar.

Through this examination of sacred groves in ancient Rome, well informed by Hunt’s recent work, I hope to have established that there is a relationship or correspondence between a Roman sacred grove and the forest of Fangorn in Tolkien’s Middle-earth. As shown, both share many characteristics that make them sacred within their own civilizations. And, as the comparison of Lucan’s Caesar to Saruman shows, the violation of the relationship with the divine can have very fatal consequences. Juxtaposing the Ents and their role in Middle-earth with Roman theological reflections on sacred trees allows us to gain greater insight into the inner workings of Tolkien’s fantasy world. Saruman, while having perpetrated some terrible acts, meets his downfall because of his mal-

⁹⁵ Schliephake (2017) 1.

⁹⁶ For more on the ecocritical examination of Tolkien, see Dickerson & Evans (2006).

treatment of nature. In this way, he is similar to Julius Caesar, whose death at the hand of those with whom he had an established relationship echoes the breaking of the relationship he perpetuated in his violation of the Massilian grove. Thus, as embodied by the Ents, the trees of Fangorn forest exemplify similar ideas about divinity as the ancient Romans held about their sacred groves.

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The Throne of the King*

The Throne Room in Minas Tirith and Late Antique Ruler Ideology

Abstract A conspicuous feature of Tolkien's description of the city of Minas Tirith in *The Return of The King* is the depiction of two thrones in the Great Hall: one empty throne reserved for the king and one seat for the steward of Gondor. This paper aims to ascertain the late antique and mediaeval sources of inspiration behind Tolkien's creation of the throne room in Minas Tirith. As a starting point, we shall compare the setting of the two thrones in Minas Tirith with a motive in Christian iconography, the *hetoimasia*, and its architectural expression in the *Chrysotriklinos*, the throne room in the Byzantine Great Palace in Constantinople. Next, we shall show that Tolkien intentionally obscured his appropriation of the Byzantine throne room to create a multi-layered image of rulership, in accordance with his aesthetics of applicability and allegory. In conclusion, we shall formulate some remarks on the interpretation of the association between the Byzantine *Chrysotriklinos* and the Gondorian Great Hall. As a form of Tolkien's literary process of *sub-creation*, the description of the throne room in Minas Tirith serves to emphasise the significance of *The Return of the King* as a retelling of Christ's restoration of the fallen world, placing the work of Tolkien in the context of a strong personal Catholic piety.

Keywords Late antique palace architecture, *Chrysotriklinos*, Allegory and applicability, *Sub-creation*, Christ the King

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The last part of the *Lord of The Rings* trilogy (*LoTR*), *The Return of The King*, starts with a description of Minas Tirith, the capital city of Gondor. The description of the Great Hall of the king, where Gandalf and Denethor have their first battle of words, is central to the description of the Gondorian capital. It is worth quoting in full:

The door opened, but no one could be seen to open it. Pippin looked into a great hall. It was lit by deep windows in the wide aisles at either side, beyond the rows of tall pillars that upheld the roof. Monoliths of black marble, they rose to great capitals carved in many strange figures of beasts and leaves; and far above in shadow the wide vaulting gleamed with dull gold, inset with flowing traceries of many colours. No hangings nor storied webs, nor any things of woven stuff or of wood, were to be seen in that long solemn hall; but between the pillars there stood a silent company of tall images graven in cold stone. Suddenly Pippin was reminded of the hewn rocks of Argonath, and awe fell on him, as he looked down that avenue of kings long dead. At the far end upon a dais of many steps was set a high throne under a canopy of marble shaped like a crowned helm; behind it was carved upon the wall and set with gems an image of a tree in flower. But the throne was empty. At the foot of the dais, upon the lowest step which was broad and deep, there was a stone chair, black and unadorned, and on it sat an old man gazing at his lap. In his hand was a white rod with a golden knob. He did not look up. Solemnly they paced the long floor towards him, until they stood three paces from his footstool. Then Gandalf spoke.¹

The purpose of this paper is to ascertain the late antique and mediaeval sources of inspiration which fuelled Tolkien's imagination in his creation of the Gondorian throne room. Starting from the Christian iconographic motive of the *hetoimasia* and the parallels between the two thrones in Minas Tirith and the Byzantine throne room, or *Chrysotriklinos*, I shall show that Tolkien, in accordance with his aesthetics of applicability and allegory, intentionally obscured his appropriation of the Byzantine throne room to create a multi-layered image of rulership. This paper shall conclude by interpreting the association between the Byzantine and the Gondorian throne room as a form of Tolkien's *sub-creation*, which makes the *Return of The King* a retelling of Christ's restoration of the fallen world.

¹ *LotR* 754.

THE THRONE ROOM IN MINAS TIRITH AND THE *CHRYSOTRIKLINOS*

A conspicuous feature of the description of the Great Hall is the empty throne of the king and the position of the steward at the base of the throne. This feature was, as demonstrated by the composition history of this chapter (described in *The History of Middle Earth*), central to the description of the throne room.

The chapter *Minas Tirith*, the first chapter of Book V of *LoTR*, was written in two phases, one in 1942 and one in 1946. From its first inception onward, the passage remained largely unchanged.² The empty throne appears to be a central element to the description of the Great Hall in Minas Tirith, as it is mentioned in the earliest outlines of Book V. ‘Outline IV’, which was written before 1944, is a note with the first conceptualisation of Minas Tirith, including the first drawing of the city.³ This outline consists of four paragraphs of notes, written around the drawing. The fourth paragraph starts with the words “Throne empty. Denethor has a seat in front.”⁴ Another outline, the so-called ‘Outline VI,’ was derived from ‘Outline IV’ and written in 1944. This outline also has the note “Empty throne. Denethor has a seat in front.”⁵ Apart from these two early sketches of Minas Tirith, the two thrones are mentioned in the very precise outline dating to the year 1946.⁶

As the composition history of the chapter shows, the two thrones are a central element to the description of the Great Hall, an element which was already established at the onset of Tolkien’s conceptualisation of Book V of *LoTR*. One of the possible sources of inspiration for this striking image of the empty throne of the king and the unadorned chair of the steward could be found in the history of Christian iconography.

The *hetoimasia* is a motive in Christian iconography, depicting an empty throne, which can be interpreted as the seat of one of the Trinity or, more specifically, as the throne of Christ which is prepared for his judgment during his Sec-

2 *LoTR* xix.

3 As Christopher Tolkien comments, “This seems to have been my father’s first setting down on paper of his conception of Minas Tirith,” *WR* 261.

4 *WR* 260–262.

5 *WR* 263.

6 *WR* 276.

ond Coming.⁷ As such, the term *hetoimasia* is a transcription of the Greek word *ἑτοιμασία*, meaning preparation or willingness. In turn, the term derived from a passage in the *Psalms*, 9.8:

But the Lord shall endure for ever:
He has prepared his throne for his judgment.⁸

As such, the *hetoimasia* is used to underscore the sovereign rule of God over men and his final judgment. Although the motif is much older than Christianity, it is a common and recognizable feature of early Christian art, with innumerable examples in Late Antiquity and the Byzantine period. The motive consists mostly of a golden and jewelled empty throne, with a cushion, as a reference to the imperial throne, or with another jewelled object of religious significance, such as a cross, a cloth or a gospel. Famous representatives of the *hetoimasia* in the late antique West are a fifth-century mosaic depicting an empty throne with cushion and cross in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome and a similar mosaic in the Arian Baptistery, erected by Theodoric (454–526) in Ravenna between the end of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth century. Apart from these famous examples in the Byzantine-influenced West, the *hetoimasia* remained a specifically Byzantine motive, and, apart from Byzantine-influenced traditions at the periphery of the Byzantine Empire, the motive gradually disappeared in the West from the High Middle Ages onward.⁹ The only place, therefore, where we can find, as in the throne room in Minas Tirith, the symbol of the empty throne embedded in the structure of palace architecture is in the Great Palace in Constantinople.

From its rechristening in AD 324 by emperor Constantine (reigned from 306 to 337), the city of Constantinople, formerly known as Byzantium, gradually established itself as the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. The second foundation of the city was accompanied by the building of what would later become the so-called Great Palace.¹⁰ Constantine began the building of the Great Palace,

⁷ On the *hetoimasia*, see Bogyay (1971); Townsley (1974) 140–147.

⁸ καὶ ὁ κύριος εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα μένει, / ἠτοιμάσεν ἐν κρίσει τὸν θρόνον αὐτοῦ, own translation.

⁹ Bogyay (1971) 1194.

¹⁰ On the Great Palace, see Kostenec (2004); (2005); Westbrook (2019). The main sources on the Great Palace are the *De Caerimoniis*, a book on ceremonial protocol commissioned by em-

which developed into an irregular agglomeration of edifices to which buildings were added and refurbished in different phases. The palace remained the actual residence of the emperors until Alexios I (reigned from 1081 to 1118) and the official residence of the emperors until the end of the Latin Empire of Crusaders (1261).

The *Chrysotriklinos*,¹¹ a throne room which was allegedly built by Justin II (reigned 565 to 574),¹² adorned by emperor Tiberius II (reigned 578 to 582),¹³ and restored by emperor Constantine VII (reigned 913 to 959),¹⁴ gradually became, from the late sixth century onward, the ceremonial centre of this palace. It was used for audiences of foreign embassies, for the distribution of offices, for the daily presentation of dignitaries, and for the organisation of numerous feasts and receptions, notably the great reception which was held at Easter.¹⁵ It consisted of a domed octagon which was lit by sixteen windows. The imperial

peror Constantine VII, see Featherstone (2005), the continuation of the history of Theophanes the Confessor (ninth to eleventh centuries), and the work of the historian Nicolas Mesarites (ca. 1163 – after 1216).

11 On the *Chrysotriklinos*, see Janin (1950) 115–117; Dagron (2003) 191–201; Kostenec (2004) 19–20, 23; Featherstone (2005); Walker (2012) 159; Westbrook (2013) 129–130, 137–142; Westbrook (2019) 121–134. Until Justin II, the ceremonial centre would have been the *Konistorion* (for audiences) and the famous Hall of the 19 Couches (for banquets). From the late sixth century onwards, the *Chrysotriklinos* became the main throne room and included the private apartments of the emperor and several other important rooms. By the tenth century, the *Chrysotriklinos* had become the centre of the Great Palace, Janin (1950) 115; Kostenec (2004) 14; Featherstone (2005) 833; Westbrook (2019) 121; and of the emperor's authority, Walker (2012) 159.

12 Featherstone (2005) 833. The tenth-century Byzantine encyclopaedia *Suda* erroneously attributes the construction of the throne room to emperor Justin I (reigned from 518 to 527), Adler (1939) 646. Justin II might have renovated the Heptaconch Hall, as it possibly suffered damage from a post-548 fire which damaged the Hormisdas Palace. This renovation may be the cause for the attribution of the *Chrysotriklinos* to Justin II, Kostenec (2004) 27; Westbrook (2019) 121, 131.

13 Westbrook (2019) 131.

14 Constantine VII added silver doors and a silver table to the *Chrysotriklinos*, embellishing the hall with mosaics of a rose garden enclosed by a silver border, Westbrook (2019) 132.

15 Foreign embassies, Dagron (2003) 180, 186, 188, 194; the distribution of offices, Dagron (2003) 184, 191, 194, 195–197; the daily presentation of dignitaries, Dagron (2003) 197–201; feasts and receptions, Dagron (2003) 180, 186, 194–195. See also Featherstone (2005) 833; Klein (2006) 90–91; Featherstone (2007); Westbrook (2019) 125–128.

throne was placed in an apse of the room with a vault shaped in the form of a conch. The *Chrysotriklinos* and its adjacent rooms, such as the *Lausiakos* and the *Kainourgion*, were lavishly decorated by mosaics.¹⁶ The vault above the emperor's throne was adorned with a mosaic representing an enthroned Christ,¹⁷ as we can read in an epigram which was written on occasion of the restoration of the decorations (between 856 and 866)¹⁸ by Michael III (reigned 842 to 867):

The light of Truth hath shone forth again, and blunts the eyes of the false teachers. Piety hath increased and Error is fallen; Faith flourisheth and Grace groweth. For behold, Christ pictured again shines above the imperial throne and overthrows the dark heresies. (...) whence we call this now the Christotricilinum (the hall of Christ) instead of by its former name Chrysotriclinum (the Golden Hall), since it has the throne of the Lord Christ and of his Mother, and the images of the Apostles and of Michael, author of wisdom.¹⁹

The positioning of the mosaic of the enthroned Christ directly above the throne of the emperor²⁰ was a powerful expression of Byzantine political theory; as the

16 The Western gate of the *Chrysotriklinos* had a mosaic of the Theotokos and the emperor, accompanied by the patriarch of Constantinople and saints, Janin (1950) 115. The mosaics in the *Lausiakos* were added by emperor Theophilos (reigned from 829 to 842), Janin (1950) 115. The *Kainourgion* was a room with mosaics depicting the imperial expeditions of Basil the Macedonian (reigned from 867 to 886). Its columns had grapevines and animal motives, Janin (1950) 115–116; Kosteneč (2004) 24.

17 Dagron (2003) 192; Walker (2012) 2–3; Westbrook (2013) 129, 142.

18 The renovation of the decorations and the installation of the icon of Christ was executed after the conclusion of the iconoclastic period (in 843), Westbrook (2019) 131–132. On the date of the renovation of the *Chrysotriklinos*, see Mango (1986) 184; Dagron (2003) 192; Klein (2006) 80; Walker (2012) 47, 161 n. 60.

19 “Ἐλαμψεν ἀκτὶς τῆς ἀληθείας πάλιν / καὶ τὰς κόρας ἤμβλυσε τῶν ψευδηγόρων· ἠϋξήσεν εὐσέβεια, πέπτωκε πλάνη, / καὶ πίστις ἀνθεῖ, καὶ πλατύνεται χάρις. / ἰδοὺ γὰρ αὐθὶς Χριστὸς εἰκονισμένος / λάμπει πρὸς ὕψος τῆς καθέδρας τοῦ κράτους / καὶ τὰς σκοτεινὰς αἰρέσεις ἀνατρέπει. (...) / ὅθεν καλοῦμεν χριστοτρίκλινον νέον / τὸν πρὶν λαχόντα κλήσεως χρυσωνύμου, / ὡς τὸν θρόνον ἔχοντα Χριστοῦ κυρίου / Χριστοῦ τε μητρός, χριστοκηρύκων τύπους / καὶ τοῦ σοφουργοῦ Μιχαὴλ τὴν εἰκόνα.” *Anth. Pal.* I.106, translated by Patron (1953) 44–47. See also *Anth. Pal.* I.107. Dagron (2003) 192–193; Walker (2012) 2–3, 159–161.

20 The emperor only sat in this throne during the most important Christian feast of Easter, underscoring its solemnity. There were also different ceremonies in which the throne was left explicitly empty to symbolise the presence of Christ, Bogyay (1971) 1193. For weekdays and

representative of Christ on earth, the emperor portrayed himself as ruling with utter authority.²¹ However, his power as vice-regent of Christ was also inextricably linked to his humility. The emperor remained the ‘slave of God,’ who ruled by the grace of the ‘King of Kings.’²² Furthermore, the symbolism of the *Chrysotriklinos* also stressed the temporality of the rule of the vice-gerent, pending the return of Christ on the Last Day.²³

A similar situation is suggested by Tolkien’s positioning of the steward of Gondor in a chair at the foot of the empty throne of the king. The empty throne serves as a reminder of the absent king of Gondor and of the conditionality of the steward’s rule as a substitute to royal power awaiting the return of the king.²⁴

Previous research has touched upon the possible parallels between the kingdom of Gondor and the history of the later Roman Empire and Byzantium in the imagination of Tolkien.²⁵ In the case of the depiction of the Great Hall in Minas Tirith, there are some elements which point to the possibility that Tolkien was inspired by Byzantine history for his depiction of the two thrones.²⁶ As a professor at the universities of Leeds and Oxford, Tolkien had a ready access to the

Sundays, the emperor used several different thrones. During embassies, multiple thrones and crowns were also installed, Westbrook (2019) 133.

21 Dagron (2003) 191; Walker (2012) 159–161; Westbrook (2013) 129, 136.

22 Dagron (2003) 191, 193. To stress his subservient role, the emperor addressed a daily morning prayer to Christ directly to the mosaic, Dagron (2003) 192–193.

23 “(...) le trône du Chrysotriklinos pourrait être défini comme celui de l’empereur vicaire du Christ, choisi par Dieu pour le gouvernement des hommes dans une économie du temps chrétien qui prévoit la restitution de ce pouvoir délégué à l’approche du Dernier Jour.” Dagron (2003) 191.

24 Another resemblance between the Great Hall in Minas Tirith and the *Chrysotriklinos* is their golden ceiling. On the golden ceiling of the *Chrysotriklinos*, see Westbrook (2013) 136, 142; Westbrook (2019) 131–134. Another parallel can be found in the chapter *The Long-Expected Party* of the *Fellowship of The Ring*, where Frodo Baggins, as the heir to the legacy and the inheritance of his uncle Bilbo, sits in a chair next to the empty chair of Bilbo after the latter’s disappearance, *LotR* 31.

25 Librán-Moreno (2011); (2013). For a list of parallels between late antique Rome and Gondor, see Ford (2005) 60–68. For a comparison between the rule of Aragorn in Gondor and the rule of Charlemagne in the Holy Roman Empire, see Gallant (2020).

26 Ford compares the Great Hall of Minas Tirith with: “a church typical of the Byzantine-influenced architecture of Ravenna in the fifth and sixth centuries, with domed ceilings dec-

written sources on the Byzantine palace and could have easily read them, as he had a good command of the Greek language.²⁷ Furthermore, both his academic works and his personal correspondence indicate that Tolkien had some acquaintance with archaeology and Byzantine history. In 1932, Tolkien contributed to the report of the archaeological excavations of Lydney park in Gloucestershire with a note on the etymology of the Celtic deity Nodens, in which he referred to an archaeological reference work, namely the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, a collection of Latin inscriptions.²⁸ In the opening remarks of his 1936 lecture *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, Tolkien used an archaeological allegory to describe the state of the research on Beowulf, and in a letter dated 18/12/1949 he gave an archaeological digression on the Byzantine weapon of Greek fire and the absence of similar weapons in Britain.²⁹

Perhaps the Byzantine palace and the *Chrysotriklinos* were brought to Tolkien's attention by R. M. Dawkins (1871–1955), the first holder of the Bywater and Sotheby Professorship of Byzantine and Modern Greek Language and Literature at Oxford from 1920 to 1939, who is known to have attended gatherings of the so-called Coalbiters,³⁰ an informal reading club founded by Tolkien for the furthering of Icelandic studies.³¹

orated with mosaic tiling. The best example of this style in Ravenna, the church of S. Vitale, built in the early to mid-sixth century, echoes the description of Denethor's great hall in a number of ways," Ford (2005) 60–61. However, the parallels between the throne room in Minas Tirith and the *Chrysotriklinos* went unnoticed.

27 On Tolkien's fondness for Greek, see Carpenter (1977) 27, 46, 131. Tolkien also had a knowledge of Byzantine Greek as his use of the Byzantine word *σιγγίλλιον* in an article from 1934 shows, Tolkien (1934) 102 n. 5. In *Farmer Giles of Ham* and in a planned but later abandoned sequel to this mediaeval fable, Tolkien named a dragon *chrysophylax*, a name which bears resemblance to the name of the *Chrysotriklinos*, Carpenter (1977) 166. It should be acknowledged, however, that the semantic meaning of *chrysophylax*, 'a gold-keeper,' is very much in-line with dragons.

28 Tolkien (1932).

29 *Letters* 122.

30 Carpenter (1977) 120. On Dawkins, see Mackridge (1990); (2000). Dawkins, a dialectologist renowned for his contribution to the study of Cappadocian Greek, comparative philologist, and folklorist, also worked on the archaeology of Constantinople and gave lectures on Byzantine historiography in his Oxford period. He is known to have bought a copy of *The Hobbit*, *Letters* 17.

31 On this informal reading club, see Carpenter (1977) 119–120, 137, 144.

Furthermore, Tolkien's conception of the *LoTR* largely coincided with the excavation of the Great Palace in Istanbul by the British, which must have boosted British academical interest in the site during the writing process of the *LoTR*. Indeed, from the second half of the 19th century and throughout the first decades of the 20th century, the city of Istanbul, capital of the crumbling Ottoman Empire, was a geopolitical point of concern for British policy makers. As such, Istanbul became a fixed presence in British public imagination, a presence which was perpetuated by the disaster of the British Gallipoli Campaign in 1915–1916 and the occupation of Istanbul by British forces at the end of the Great War (from 13/11/1918 to 04/11/1923). Istanbul also attracted British interest for other reasons than its geopolitical and strategic importance.³² Shortly before the Great War, the spiritualist and mystic Wellesley Tudor Pole (1884–1968) convinced the manufacturer and philanthropist Sir David Russell (1872–1956) to set up a search for the missing library of emperor Justinian (reigned 527 to 565) in Constantinople. These plans materialised in a major excavation from 1935 to 1938, funded by Russell and the Walker Trust of the University of St Andrews, under the supervision of James Houston Baxter (1894–1973), Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the University of St Andrews, and Wellesley Tudor Pole.³³ This excavation soon became a touristic attraction and even aroused interest from the British court. When king Edward VIII (1894–1972) visited Istanbul in September 1936, he sent a written apology to Baxter for not having visited the excavation site.³⁴ After the interruption caused by the Second World War, work was resumed under the supervision of David Talbot Rice (1903–1972) from 1952 to 1954.³⁵ Tolkien might have caught first-hand information on the results of the 1935–1938 excavation in March 1939, as he was invited to participate on 08/03/1939 in the Andrew Lang Lecture series at the same University of St Andrews.³⁶

32 On the various aspects of British scholarly interest in Byzantine studies, see Cormack & Jeffreys (2016).

33 On the colourful personalities behind the Walker Trust Excavation of 1935–1938, see Whitby (2016). On James Houston Baxter, see Cant (1970); Anonymous (1973).

34 Whitby (2016) 55.

35 Kostenec (2004) 15. The findings of these excavations were published in respectively Brett et al. (1947) and Rice (1958). A French team of archaeologists conducted a preliminary excavation between 1921 and 1923.

36 Carpenter (1977) 190–192.

Besides the circumstantial evidence for Tolkien's knowledge of the Byzantine palace, Tolkien explicitly compares the kingdom of Gondor to Byzantium in some of his letters, such as in his presentation of *LoTR* addressed to Milton Waldman (1895–1976) at the end of 1951:

In the south Gondor rises to a peak of power, almost reflecting Númenor, and then fades slowly to decayed Middle Age, a kind of proud, venerable, but increasingly impotent Byzantium. The watch upon Mordor is relaxed. The pressure of the Easterlings and Southrons increases. The line of Kings fails, and the last city of Gondor, Minas Tirith ('Tower of Vigilance'), is ruled by hereditary Stewards.³⁷

A LAYERED IMAGE OF RULERSHIP

Tracing the description of the throne room in Minas Tirith to the Byzantine palace could provide us with an interesting starting point for the comparison between Tolkien's kingdom of Gondor and the Byzantine Empire. However, this would go against the grain of Tolkien's own aesthetics of reception, as he rejected the notion of allegory, both in his own work as in the work of others.³⁸

Given Tolkien's stance on allegory, it is, in my opinion, more fruitful to approach Tolkien's use of Byzantine history in his description of the throne room from his own aesthetic viewpoints, such as outlined in his 1966 preface to *LoTR*:

Other arrangements could be devised according to the tastes or views of those who like allegory or topical reference. But 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.³⁹

37 *Letters* 157; Carpenter (1977) 212; Librán-Moreno (2013) 66.

38 On Tolkien's attitude to allegory, see Carpenter (1977) 91–92, 202–203, 225, 242–243.

39 *LoTR* xx; Carpenter (1977) 189–190.

In Tolkien's description of the throne room, we can see that he applied his aesthetics of reception, privileging applicability, based on the freedom of the reader, over allegory, based on the dominant intention of the author, by both intentionally obscuring his appropriation of Byzantine history as by adding different layers of historical allusion.

Indeed, we can perceive that, throughout the writing process of the chapter *Minas Tirith*, Tolkien made the parallel to the Byzantine throne room less obvious by effacing the recognisably Byzantine elements. We can see this in several changes to the description, changes which must have been significant and which were made consciously, as the rest of the chapter remained by and large unaltered through different drafts,⁴⁰ and as Tolkien was known for his tendency for rigorous rewriting and attention to detail.

A first change is the position of the seat of the steward. In the 1944 'Outline IV,' Denethor is seated "in Front" of the throne of the king, a position which corresponds closely to the Byzantine setting of the emperor sitting in front of and below the mosaic of the seated Christ. This description has been altered in the final version, "At the foot of the dais, upon the lowest step," which allows the reader to interpret that the steward sat below the throne of the king and more to the side, obscuring the reference to the Byzantine setting.

Another significant change is the description of floor mosaics, which were included in an earlier draft, but which were left out in the final version of the chapter.⁴¹ In this case, the element of mosaics, an element which is most readily associated with the Byzantine world, and which is lavishly present in the Byzantine throne room (mosaic of the seated Christ, mosaics in the adjacent *Lausiakos* and *Kainourgion*), was intentionally left out by Tolkien to obscure the link between Byzantium and Gondor.⁴²

Furthermore, Tolkien intentionally diminished the importance of the one-dimensional link between Byzantium and Gondor by adding different layers of

⁴⁰ The chapter, and in particular its description of the Great Hall, remains in essence unchanged from its inception onwards, *WR* 277, 281.

⁴¹ As Christopher Tolkien mentions in his *History of Middle Earth*: "On the other hand, the floor of the hall is described: 'But the floor was of shining stone, white-gleaming, figured with mosaics of many colours.'" *WR* 281.

⁴² The same can be said of the eventual omission of carved capitals of the pillars in the throne room, *WR* 281, 288, which could infer to the *Kainourgion*, which had columns with grapevines and animal motives, Janin (1950) 115–116.

historical allusion in the description of the throne room. First of all, the setting of the Byzantine *Chrysotriklinos* can also recall the Byzantine-influenced adaptations of the *Chrysotriklinos* in Western architecture, such as the Palatine Chapel in Aachen (built by Charlemagne between 792 and 805)⁴³ and the Oratory at Germiny-des-Près in France (built in 806).

Second, the “canopy of marble shaped like a crowned helm,” which hovered above the throne of the king, can refer to late antique iconography, in which the imperial throne was surrounded and surmounted by an actual canopy resting on four columns, decorated with eagles and victories bearing crowns. Examples of these late antique imperial canopies are two fifth-century ivory diptychs representing empresses, one in Florence and one in Vienna.⁴⁴ And, in case we interpret Tolkien’s canopy as a hovering crown, this could bring to mind another feature of late antique and mediaeval throne rooms, namely a crown suspended above the head of the monarch.⁴⁵

The hanging crown was introduced in the Sassanian empire (224 to 651) by the king of kings Chosroes I (reigned from 488 to 496 and from 498/9 to 531) as a part of the throne room in the Sassanian palace at Ctesiphon.⁴⁶ After the collapse of the Sassanian empire due to the Arab conquests in the seventh century, the symbol of the hanging crown was incorporated into the palace architecture of the Umayyad rulers (661 to 750), such as in the palace complex of the

43 This connection between the Palatine Chapel and the throne room in Minas Tirith seems to have been taken up in the *LoTR* film adaptations by Peter Jackson. In particular, the use, in the movie setting, of black columns, white marble, an intercolumnar sculpture gallery, and the use of arches with their rhythm of black and white elements, both on the ground floor and in the upper level, seem to recall the Palatine Chapel.

44 Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Collezione Riccardi, Inv. No. 24 C, and Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, Antikensammlung, X 39.

45 Ettinghausen (1972) 28–30; Westbrook (2013) 136.

46 Christensen (1944) 397–398; Erdmann (1951) 114–117; Ettinghausen (1972) 28; Westbrook (2019) 130. The Sassanian hanging crown is attested by Ibn Ishaq (704–767), *Sirat an-Nabi* or *Life of The Prophet*, in the edition of Ibn Hisham (died in 833), Tabari (839–923), Ferdowsi (932–1021), Tha’alibi (961–1038) and Mirkhwand (died in 1498), see Ettinghausen (1972) 28–39. The introduction of the hanging crown was generally associated with Chosroes I, see Ettinghausen (1972) 29. However, Mirkhwand stated that the crown was already present at the election of Shapur II (309–379). Ferdowsi connects the crown to five mythical Iranian Kings and four Sasanian rulers.

Umayyad Caliph Hisham (724 to 743), built at Khirbat Al-Mafjar near Jericho.⁴⁷ Significantly, the hovering crown was at some point in time also integrated into the Byzantine court ritual by emperor Manuel I Komnenos (reigned from 1143 to 1180), as featured in a report of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela's visit to Constantinople:

The Emperor (Manuel) had built for himself a palace at the shores of the sea, to which he gave the name of Blachernes. The walls and columns he had covered with gold and silver and the paintings represented former wars, as well as those which he had conducted himself. His throne was of gold, incrustated with jewels, and above it hung on a golden chain the golden, jewel-studded crown whose value was unaccountable, as its luster makes one dispense with light at night.⁴⁸

From the Middle Ages onward, the suspended crown became a standard part of the popular imagination surrounding rulership. A hovering crown figured in the account of the Ottoman explorer Evliya Çelebi of the Ottoman embassy to the imperial court in Vienna in 1665⁴⁹ and in a drawing of the biblical king Ahasverus made in 1891 by Josef Geiger.⁵⁰

Third, the same mechanism can be seen at the beginning of the description of the throne room, "The door opened, but no one could be seen to open it," which seems to allude to the existence of automated doors in the palace of Minas Tirith. In the same vein as the hovering crown, these automatic doors can recall the existence of different automates, not only in the Byzantine, but also in Sassanian and Arabic palaces. According to Liutprand (ca. 920–972), the envoy of the Italian king Berengar II (ca. 900–966) to the Byzantine court and later bishop of Cremona, one hall in the Byzantine palace, the Magnaura, had machines which were capable to raise the throne and to reproduce the sounds of birds and roaring lions. This automat for the raising of the throne had precedents in Abbasid Da-

⁴⁷ Ettinghausen (1972) 30; Hamilton (1988); Grabar (1990) 19; Grabar (1993); Westbrook (2019) 130. According to al-Tabari, the most significant Arab historian of the ninth and tenth centuries, not only the symbol but also the actual crown of Chosroes I was captured during the sack of Ctesiphon. It was then later allegedly sent to Jerusalem and hung above the exposed rock surface in the Dome of the Rock, Shalem (1994).

⁴⁸ ben Yona et al. (1903) 17; Erdmann (1951) 117; Ettinghausen (1972) 29.

⁴⁹ Kreutel (1957) 166; Ettinghausen (1972) 29–30, n. 4.

⁵⁰ Shachar (1971) 160; Ettinghausen (1972) 29–30, n. 4.

mascus and Iran.⁵¹ On the other hand, the eleventh-century historian Cedrenus mentions the existence of machines producing thunder around the throne of Chosroes II in Sassanid Persia.⁵²

As these examples have shown, different elements in the description of the throne room in Minas Tirith carry different layers of historical allusion to different rulers in different epochs. By adding the Sassanian/Arabic/Byzantine/Holy Roman crown and Sassanian/Arabic/Byzantine machines to his description of the throne room in Minas Tirith, Tolkien toned down the exclusivity of the allusion to Byzantine history behind his description of the two thrones, creating a layered image of rulership which allows the reader a margin of interpretation.

THE RETURN OF THE KING

Our analysis has shown that Tolkien's description of the throne room in Minas Tirith was densely laden with historical allusions to different throne rooms from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, resulting in a multi-layered image of rulership. At the centre of this description is the juxtaposition of two thrones, a vacant upper throne and an occupied lower throne, a juxtaposition which can also be found, *mutatis mutandis*, in the *Chrysotriklinos* of the Byzantine Great Palace at Constantinople. The parallels between these two pairs of thrones can be a key to interpreting the significance of the steward, the king, and the return of the king in the concluding part of Tolkien's trilogy.

The position of both lower thrones stresses the absolute conditionality of the rule of their occupants. Although they rule with utter authority, both the Byzantine emperor and the steward of Gondor rule by grace of the power bestowed upon them by a higher authority, be it the transcendental authority of the Christian God in the case of the Byzantines or the delegated authority of a – temporarily – absent king in the case of the steward of Gondor. The tragedy of the character of Denethor resides exactly in the fact that he confuses his temporarily delegated powers with permanently granted privilege.

⁵¹ Liutprand of Cremona, *Anapodosis* 6, Westbrook (2019) 130. On the Magnaura, see Kostenev (2005) 42–46; Westbrook (2019) 197–203.

⁵² Cedrenus, *Σύνοψις ἱστοριῶν*, Bekker (1838) 721–722. Westbrook (2019) 129–130.

The position of both upper thrones creates a strong association of the throne of Christ with the throne of the king,⁵³ which is, in a sense, both Christian and pre-Christian in nature. This association is deeply Christian in the sense that it underscores the divinity of the messianic return of the king. Seen in this light, the divine stature attributed to the king of Gondor through his association with the seated Christ conforms to Tolkien's view on mythology as a form of truth or *sub-creation*,⁵⁴ through these messianic associations, the return of the king becomes a mythological retelling of Tolkien's deeply Catholic views on the eventual divine restoration of a fallen world.⁵⁵

In this respect, we should not underestimate the impact of contemporary Catholic practice on Tolkien, who was an ardent churchgoer. His description of the throne of the king of Gondor under a canopy of marble, analysed above, might as well have been inspired by the baldachins above the altars at the Birmingham oratory, where Tolkien spent a part of his childhood serving the early Mass under the guidance of his guardian Father Francis Xavier Morgan (1857–1935),⁵⁶ or at the Oxford Oratory Church of St Aloysius Gonzaga, which Tolkien assiduously frequented on a daily basis from his tenure in Oxford onward. On a more profound level, some liturgical innovations from the beginning of the 20th century might have shaped Tolkien's conception of the relations between worldly and divine power. For instance, from 1907 onward, R. Mateo Crawley-Boevey (1875–1960), a priest connected to the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, propagated, with the support of Pope Pius X (1835–1914), the ritual of Enthronement of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.⁵⁷ More significantly, Pope Pius XI (1857–1939) instituted, in the aftermath of the Great War, in his 1925 encyclical *Quas primas* the Feast of Christ the King as a response to the growing threat of

53 For this close association between Christ and the emperor in Byzantine political thought, also designated with the term *christomimesis*, see Walker (2012), 2–3, 159–161, Westbrook (2019) 128, 130.

54 Lefler (2017).

55 Presenting a *status quaestionis* of the intricate debate on Tolkien's Catholic faith and his agnostic *legendarium* exceeds the scope of this paper. Some useful references can, however, be found in Cooper & Whetter (2020) 1. On Tolkien's beliefs on the final restoration of the fallen world and its precedents in Christian theology and late antique historiography, see Librán-Moreno (2013) 66–72.

56 On Father Francis Xavier Morgan, see Ferrandez-Bru (2018).

57 On R. Mateo Crawley-Boevey, see Vivas (2019).

nationalism.⁵⁸ We might easily imagine that the institution of this feast, with its pacifistic and anti-nationalistic overtones, resonated with Tolkien, who witnessed the horrors of the trenches first-hand.

However, the association between Christ and the king of Gondor is also pre-Christian in nature. Instead of retelling in a spiritual way the story of spiritual restoration of the fallen world which Christ initiated through his resurrection, Tolkien frames the return of the messianic king in the form an earthly, concrete, i.e., non-spiritual, return to power of a monarch which restores the political and social order.⁵⁹ In doing so, Tolkien harks back to the Jewish and pre-Christian conception of the Messiah as a political leader and liberator of a people.⁶⁰

As this paper has tried to show, the Great Hall in Minas Tirith is densely laden with allusions to various aspects of late antique and mediaeval rulership. Through these different allusions, the Great Hall echoes with different throne rooms from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, leaving the readers the choice where these echoes will lead them, whether to the Byzantine Great Palace or to the Sassanian palace at Ctesiphon, to the residence of the Caliph at Khirbat Al-Mafjar or to the Holy Roman Empire, to the Palatine Chapel at Aachen or to the court of the Holy Roman Emperor at Vienna. At the centre of the Great Hall, we encounter a strange juxtaposition of two thrones, a throne for the king and a seat for the steward, which recalls the enthroned Christ and the throne of the emperor in the Byzantine *Chrysotriklinos*. The parallels between these two pairs of thrones can be a key to assessing the tremendous significance of the return of the king within the imagination of Tolkien. In Tolkien's imagination, the return of the king is more than the mere conclusion of his narrative on the war of the

58 For instance, *Quas primas*, 4: "We saw men and nations cut off from God, stirring up strife and discord and hurrying along the road to ruin and death, while the Church of God carries on her work of providing food for the spiritual life of men, nurturing and fostering generation after generation of men and women dedicated to Christ, faithful and subject to him in his earthly kingdom, called by him to eternal bliss in the kingdom of heaven."

59 "His mythological messianic role as redeemer is displaced by that of a human king of romance who renews a declining world. His task is to provide hope." Gallant (2020) 4. For an analysis of the character Aragorn as a restoration king, see Gallant (2020), who makes an elaborate case for the comparison between Aragorn and the Western counterpart of the Byzantine emperor, namely Charlemagne. For a reading of *LoTR* as a narrative on the political restoration of Rome, see Ford (2005) 54, 59, 69–71.

60 On the parallels between the Númenóreans/Dúnedain/people of Gondor on the one hand and the Israelites on the other hand, see Cooper & Whetter (2020).

rings; through the allusions to Byzantine palace architecture, it becomes the literary emanation of his strongly rooted Catholic beliefs in an ultimate restoration of a fallen world.

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G. B. Smith’s “Elzevir Cicero” and the Construction of Queer Immortality in Tolkien’s Mythopoeia

Abstract Following the death of J.R.R. Tolkien in 1973, an obituary appeared in *The Times* quoting Tolkien as having said that his “love for the classics took ten years to recover from lectures on Cicero and Demosthenes.” This contentious relationship between Tolkien and the Greco-Roman past contrasts with the work of unabashedly classicizing poet Geoffrey Bache Smith, a school friend of Tolkien’s who was killed in the Great War. When Tolkien collected Smith’s poems for posthumous publication, this paper shows, Smith’s engagements with the ancient world became part of Tolkien’s own philosophy of immortality through literary composition. Within his 1931 poem “Mythopoeia,” and his 1939 speech “On Fairy-Stories,” Tolkien articulated a unified method of myth-making by looking back to his lost friend’s understanding of mythology as a type of ancient story-craft that enabled poets to preserve the dead against the ravages of time. By tracing a triangular path through the relationships between Tolkien, Smith, and the classical past inhabited by figures like Cicero, this paper argues that Tolkien not only recovered a “love for the classics,” but used classical texts to “recover” his lost friend, granting Smith a queer, classical immortality in return.

Keywords John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, Geoffrey Bache Smith, Hauntology, Queer Theory, Mythopoeia

1. THIS IS THE ROAD THE ROMANS MADE: INTRODUCTION

Within the expansive imagined world of Middle-earth, for which John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892–1973) attained well-earned acclaim, there dwell numerous obvious references to the medieval world of northern Europe. Given Tolkien's professional work as a medievalist and philologist of Old English, these particular historical allusions have been well-explored over the past seventy-odd years. More recently, similar scholarly attention has also been paid to how the classical cultures of ancient Greece and Rome shine their own light upon Tolkien's fantastical stories of hobbits, dwarves, and elves.¹ Tolkien himself noted that the ancient literature of the Mediterranean formed a significant part of his upbringing: "I was brought up in the Classics," he wrote in a letter in 1953, "and first discovered the sensation of literary pleasure in Homer."² This youthful delight with the Greeks and Romans was not to last, however, for although Tolkien enrolled at Oxford in 1911 to study Classics, he soon arranged to pursue his degree in English Language and Literature instead.³ Later, Tolkien explained some of the frustration that had led him away from the Mediterranean (and up north to medieval Britain), by saying that his "love for the classics took ten years to recover from lectures on Cicero and Demosthenes."⁴ In singling out these two authors – Cicero and Demosthenes – Tolkien seemed to draw a generic distinction between Homer, the poet who introduced him to "literary pleasure," and the two later orators who failed to inspire in him the same admiration when they featured so heavily within the early phases of his Oxford education.

Demosthenes (384–322 BCE), an Athenian statesman, and Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE), a Roman senator, make a natural pairing. The ancient biographer Plutarch paired Demosthenes and Cicero in his *Parallel Lives*, a series of corresponding life histories in which each famous Greek figure appeared alongside a similarly notable Roman individual, and Cicero himself recognized his

1 See entries such as "Greek Gods", "Latin Language" and "Latin Literature" in Drout (2007), as well as the entirety of the edited volume Williams (2021).

2 *Letters* 172. In the terminology of classical reception as outlined by Lorna Hardwick, this early engagement during Tolkien's childhood was a type of acculturation both "through nurturing or education or domestication," in the case of Homer, and "by force" in other instances; see Hardwick (2003) 9.

3 Garth (2003) 30.

4 *The Times*, 3 September 1973, quoted in Pearce (1998) 33.

debt to the Greek statesman when he modeled his infamous invectives against Mark Antony upon Demosthenes's earlier *Philippics* against Philip II of Macedon.⁵ Although Tolkien never returned to the works of Demosthenes, the Roman orator Cicero eventually came to play an important role in the development of Tolkien's philosophies of literature and mythology.

To trace this subtle connection between Tolkien and Cicero, we must introduce a third interlocutor: Tolkien's school friend, the youthful poet Geoffrey Bache Smith, who posthumously served as Tolkien's guide over paths "half lost in the green hills," and back to the ruins of the "roads the Romans made," by invoking the ancient Mediterranean that Tolkien had seemingly abandoned in favor of the medieval North.⁶ This friendship would impact both Smith and Tolkien in ways that can be traced through their innovative writing, which they shared with each other in a Ciceronian process of collaborative editing and authorship. It is this collaboration that allows us to see how Smith's Romantic nostalgia for Greek and Roman antiquity impacted Tolkien; as Marian Makins wrote of Tolkien's reception of Tacitus, this was a process of "double reception," that is, Tolkien's writing can be seen as "responding simultaneously" to classical figures like Cicero *and* to Geoffrey Bache Smith's reception of Cicero.⁷

In Tolkien's reception of these classical elements, I argue, there appear specific "syntagms" composed from ideas that Geoffrey Bache Smith identified within the classical world and thus passed on to Tolkien. These syntagmatic networks – collections of related themes and motifs – settle like ghostly films over Tolkien's own writing, lying hidden under the surface and haunting the text while still retaining their original classical character.⁸ After Smith's death in the Great War, Tolkien became increasingly concerned with the ghostly presences

5 For more discussion of the specific connections between the two series of *Philippics*, see Bishop (2020).

6 Smith (1918) 48.

7 Makins (2016) 211.

8 This hauntological approach to classical reception is derived from the term "ghosting," coined by Keen (2006) as a way to grapple with the difficulty of identifying receptions whose unifying characteristic is that they are "stories where no direct influence of classical originals can be established, but where nevertheless there are strong hints of themes derived from antiquity." Keen (2019) later questioned the inclusion of ghosting in his own taxonomy, although Rogers (2017) reinforced Keen's "ghosting" through the addition of syntagmatic networks, providing the notion of the "syntagm" used here. More recently, Uden (2020) has offered a gothic model of hauntological reception.

of the dead in his own internal creative vision. Just as the word "greatness" will be used throughout this paper in deference to Tolkien's own usage of this term to describe the renown that he and his schoolmates hoped to achieve, the notion of ghostliness appears often within Tolkien's own writings about memory and remembrance. In a letter to his son written during the Second World War, Tolkien described the uncanny experience of visiting the town of Birmingham and seeing the landscape of his school days shockingly altered not so much by war as by time itself:

"Except for one patch of ghastly wreckage (opp[osite] my old school's site) it does not look much damaged: not by the enemy. The chief damage has been the growth of great flat featureless modern buildings. [...] I couldn't stand much of that or the ghosts that rose from the pavements."⁹

As Marian Makins asserts, summarizing the earlier argument of John Garth, "these 'ghosts' must surely refer, not merely to memories of Tolkien's schooldays, but to the 'brutal and tragic' deaths of so many of his classmates in the Great War."¹⁰ Certainly, the traumatic experiences of the war had an effect upon Tolkien and upon his writing.¹¹ This paper will therefore begin by following both young men from their schooldays in Birmingham to their epistolary engagements on the battlefields of the First World War as each became increasingly concerned with questions of grief, greatness, and immortality. Then this analysis will turn toward the afterlives of this pivotal friendship in queer biographical media of Tolkien and Smith and within Tolkien's own writings about his mythopoetic process, that is, the spiritual and creative philosophy that formed the foundation of his fantastical myth-making, as seen in (1) his metapoetic 1931 verses entitled "Mythopoeia," and (2) his self-reflective 1939 lecture "On Fairy Stories."

⁹ *Letters* 70. See Susanetti (2016) for an archaeological model of this type of reception.

¹⁰ Garth (2008) 10 as summarized in Makins (2016) 207 note 25.

¹¹ Livingston (2006).

2. IN OXFORD, EVERMORE THE SAME: SMITH AT SCHOOL

Born in Staffordshire on the 18th of October 1894, Geoffrey Bache Smith's early biography happens to look a lot like that of the young Marcus Tullius Cicero. Smith came from "a commercial family and agricultural stock," while Cicero's family had for a number of generations owned farmland in the rural town of Arpinum, far enough outside the city of Rome to make him initially an outsider to urban politics.¹² Just as Cicero was a "polymath with diverse interests" (πολυμαθῆς καὶ ποικίλος, Plut. *Comp. Dem. Cic.* 1.2), Smith had "voracious and wide-ranging literary tastes," and a particular interest in historical literature and mythology, despite the fact that, alone among his friends, Smith pursued a 'modern' or commercial track in his early education, and thus did not study Greek alongside Latin.¹³ Both Marcus Tullius Cicero and Geoffrey Bache Smith also wrote poetry. Though Cicero's reputation as a poet has since waned,¹⁴ Plutarch argues that Cicero was once "considered not only the best orator among the Romans, but also the best poet" (ἔδοξεν οὐ μόνον ῥήτωρ, ἀλλὰ καὶ ποιητῆς ἄριστος εἶναι Ῥωμαίων, Plut. *Cic.* 2.3). Geoffrey Bache Smith's poetry similarly garnered him early success and filled him with additional eagerness to create, which extended beyond poetry into history and oratory.¹⁵ Regarded as a "witty conversationalist," Smith was a talented public speaker in school; however, during a school debate at King Edward's School in Birmingham, in October of 1911, Smith showed a fatal optimism in his views on contemporary politics:

"G. B. Smith claimed that the growth of democracy in Germany and Russia would curtail any threat of war, assuring the debaters, with his tongue as usual in his cheek, that the only causes for alarm were the bellicose *Daily Mail* 'and the Kaiser's

¹² Garth (2003) 7; Plut. *Cic.* 8.3.

¹³ Garth (2003) 7–18.

¹⁴ Volk (2013) observes that *De consulatu suo*, a verse composition by Cicero about his consulship, "may well be the most reviled work of ancient literature," 93. Volk goes on to argue this bad reputation is not entirely deserved; for a similarly nuanced view of Cicero's broader poetic corpus, see Knox (2011), and for discussion on the role of Cicero's translations of Greek poetry as quoted within his prose treatises on philosophy, see Čulík-Baird (2018), explored in greater detail later in this paper (see Section 8).

¹⁵ Garth (2003) 106.

whiskers' [...] Smith wildly overestimated the strength of democracy in both countries, underestimated the influence of the press, and failed to see the real danger posed by Wilhelm II, an autocrat plagued by deep-seated insecurities."¹⁶

The Ciceronian parallels do not require undue digging to excavate; one might assert that the overconfident Cicero who wrote the *Philippics*, attacking Mark Antony during the last years of the republic, may have, to borrow some of the words of John Garth, wildly overestimated the strength of the senate, underestimated the influence of Julius Caesar's partisans, and failed to see the real danger posed by the young Octavian, an autocrat plagued by deep-seated insecurities.¹⁷ Although Smith missed out upon the ancient Greek lessons in which his friends were enrolled, both Latin literature and Roman history formed an essential vocabulary for Smith and his group of friends.¹⁸ The parallels to Roman republican politics could hardly have escaped the notice of these young men who named themselves after such figures as Cicero's contemporary, the radical anti-Caesarian politician Marcus Porcius Cato.¹⁹

After finishing his term at King Edward's School, Geoffrey Bache Smith entered Corpus Christi College at Oxford in October of 1913 and began studying for a degree in history.²⁰ This was an important moment in Smith's life: though he had been part of a well-established group of friends at King Edward's, his enrollment at Oxford brought him closer to one schoolboy friend in particular: John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, who had gathered around himself a group of friends who came to refer to themselves as the Tea Club & Barrovian Society (or the "TCBS") named after the tea shop – Barrow's Stores – where they would meet after school to discuss poetry, literature, and history, and craft elaborate lin-

¹⁶ Garth (2003) 22.

¹⁷ Pieper & van der Velden (2020) outline the history of scholarship on Cicero's final years.

¹⁸ See, for example, Tolkien's first published poem, "The Battle of the Eastern Field" modelled upon Lord Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*. In its original publication context, this poem was followed immediately by a document in Latin titled "Acta Senatus" and containing elaborate Latin nicknames for Tolkien and his friends. For further discussion of "Battle of the Eastern Field," see Yates (1979) and more recently Garth (2003) 19–20.

¹⁹ Within the *Acta Senatus* composed by Tolkien, one classmate at Birmingham was given the name "M. Corcius Pato." See Garth (2003) 19.

²⁰ Smith (1918) 4; Garth (2003) 31–32.

guistic in-jokes.²¹ Although this fellowship was, for a time, a wide-ranging and loosely affiliated group with multiple members, by the time Tolkien had both established himself at Oxford and concluded that English was his path forward, the TCBS had narrowed down to four central members. Two of their number, Robert Quilter Gilson and Christopher Wiseman, had begun studying at Cambridge, while the others – Smith and Tolkien – had settled in at Oxford. Though at different colleges – Corpus Christi and Exeter, respectively – the two young men formed a firm bond. Over the next several years while both pursued their degrees, this friendship served not only as a system of social support but also as a place for both to share their written work – offering encouragement, giving feedback, and developing an idiosyncratic intertextual language of their own.²²

The short time that Smith spent as a student at Oxford influenced both his own experience of the world and that of his friends. Linked by a shared love for ancient literature, Smith and Tolkien developed similar styles of writing. Both men were inclined toward themes of memory, immortality, and the inevitable passage of time, on both a personal and a historical scale. This longing for the historical past can be seen in Smith's wistful poem "Ave atque Vale," first published in 1914 in the *Oxford Magazine*. These verses had been written after Smith's enlistment in the army but before his formal departure from university to join the war effort.²³

In Oxford, evermore the same
 Unto the uttermost verge of time,
 Though grave-dust choke the sons of men,
 And silence wait upon the rime,

21 Garth (2003) 6.

22 The practice of sharing and critiquing poetry continued between Smith and Tolkien even when both had gone to war, for which see Carpenter (2002) 106–109. See also Garth (2014) on how these early poems formed the foundation for Tolkien's later creation of the fiction set in Middle-earth.

23 Garth (2003) 57; Khuri (2019). The poem's title evokes both to Catullus 101 and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Frater Ave atque Vale," blending the grief-stricken lament of the poet's elegy for his brother Catullus in 101 with the bittersweet nostalgia of Catullus 31. In its attention to themes of place and homecoming, Smith's "Ave atque Vale" leans perhaps especially on Tennyson. For more on Tennyson's poem as an act of reception and its geographic specificity as a poetic device, see Chapman (2021).

At evening now the skies set forth
Last glories of the dying year:
The wind gives chase to relict leaves:
And we, we may not linger here.²⁴

Smith's poem, with its focus on the unchanging stability of Oxford being "evermore the same," fits into a broader concern for change and continuity which would occupy both Smith's mind and Tolkien's, as the two men stepped off the quiet green paths of the university and into the muddy trenches of the battlefield.²⁵

Even before experiencing the brutality of the war, an abiding sense of grief pervaded Smith's work – what John Garth called "something of the same pessimism" as that which Garth found in the poems of A.E. Housman and Rupert Brooke – which can be seen here in the heavy weight of the term "grave-dust" and the fading glory of "relict leaves," as well as the doubled meaning behind the last lament, "we may not linger here."²⁶ The poem concludes, however, with a slightly-altered repetition of its own opening line, reassuring the reader that "Oxford *is* evermore the same," suggesting that some comfort could be found in the notion that, despite death and grief, certain ideas and places would nevertheless withstand the ravages of time.²⁷ This implication – that the immortality of memory could be a balm for those experiencing grief, loss, and separation – became quickly and tragically useful in the following years.

²⁴ Smith (1918) 53.

²⁵ For further discussion on the impact of the battlefield landscape upon Tolkien, and the classical ghosts that haunt the fictive space of the Dead Marshes in *The Lord of the Rings*, see Makins (2016).

²⁶ Garth (2003) 26–27; Smith (1918) 53.

²⁷ Smith (1918) 54. (Emphasis my own).

3. SACRIFICE OF BLOOD OUTPOURED: THE FIRST WORLD WAR

All four main members of the TCBS fought in the Great War, but only two returned home alive. The first casualty was Robert Quilter Gilson, killed in action on July 1st, 1916, during the very first day of the prolonged Battle of the Somme.²⁸ Following this loss, the three remaining friends wrote letters to each other sharing their grief and attempting to reconcile themselves with Gilson's death. Smith composed a poem titled "For R. Q. G." in the form of a prayer to God:

O Thou who only canst be glorified
By man's own passion and the supreme pain,
Accept this sacrifice of blood outpoured.²⁹

Tolkien, though similarly preoccupied with questions of faith and doubt, focused less upon Smith's idea of Gilson's death as a "sacrifice," and instead turned his mind toward how Gilson would be remembered, and whether his "greatness" would be placed in the minds of the living. Writing to Smith, Tolkien said:

"I cannot get away from the conclusion that it is wrong to confound the greatness which Rob has won with the greatness which he himself doubted. He himself will know that I am only being perfectly sincere and I am in no way unfaithful to my love for him – which I only realise now, more and more daily, that he has gone from the four – when I say that I now believe that if the greatness which we three certainly meant (and meant as more than holiness or nobility alone) is really the lot of the TCBS, then the death of any of its members is but a bitter winnowing of those who were not meant to be great – at least directly. God grant that this does not sound arrogant – I feel humbler enough in truth and immeasurably weaker and poorer now. The greatness I meant was that of a great instrument in God's hands – a mover, a doer, even an achiever of great things, a beginner at the very least of large things. The greatness which Rob has found is in no way smaller – for the greatness I meant and tremblingly hoped for as ours is valueless unless steeped

²⁸ Garth (2003) 154–156.

²⁹ Smith (1918) 69.

with the same holiness of courage suffering and sacrifice – but is of a different kind. His greatness is in other words now a personal matter with us.”³⁰

Central to Tolkien's internal struggle was the meaning of “greatness” and whether it was possible to achieve greatness in death or even *through* death. Tolkien felt himself, as a living member of the TCBS, to still be “a great instrument in God's hands – a mover, a doer, even an achiever of great things, a beginner at the very least of large things,” and thought of his own work as colored by value only inasmuch as it could be “steeped with the same holiness of courage, suffering, and sacrifice” experienced by his lost friend. This perspective on the reflective but hierarchical relationship between the real world (made by God) and fictional worlds (written by mortals) prefigures the way that Tolkien would come to talk about his literary efforts as a form of “sub-creation,” a worshipful mimicry of the divine design through the development of mythology.³¹ To Tolkien, Gilson could no longer achieve “greatness” without the aid of his still-living friends to actively remember him. There was, however, very little Tolkien could do at that moment in the midst of the war. Responding again to Smith, he merely added further that Gilson's death appeared to him to be a sign that the world had been changed irreparably:

“I honestly feel that the TCBS has ended – but I am not at all sure that it is not an unreliable feeling that will vanish – like magic perhaps when we come together again. Still I feel a mere individual at present – with intense feelings more than ideas but very powerless.”³²

Tolkien's prediction essentially proved true. At the end of November, only months later, Geoffrey Bache Smith was struck by fragments from a bursting shell. He died on the third of December from the infection of these wounds.³³ With the deaths of Gilson and Smith the TCBS had been halved, and though the remaining pair of J.R.R. Tolkien and Christopher Wiseman maintained a two-person correspondence for the rest of their lives, the community of ideas upon

³⁰ *Letters* 9–10.

³¹ OFS 122; see also Yohn (2021).

³² *Letters* 10.

³³ Garth (2003) 211.

which their fellowship had been founded nevermore existed in the living world. Whatever "magic" Tolkien had hoped would allay their grief had faded from the world of men.

4. THAT VERY FEW MEN KNOW: PUBLICATION OF SMITH'S POEMS

Following Smith's death, his surviving friends Tolkien and Wiseman sought a way to commemorate him. With the aid of Geoffrey's mother Ruth Smith, the two collected Smith's poetry and began seeking a publisher.³⁴ By June of 1918, they had arranged to have the collection printed, and Tolkien composed a painfully laconic introduction explaining when and where the poems had first been written. Tolkien's single page prefatory note affords only sideways glimpses at the friendship he shared with Smith such as the observation that the "final version" of one poem was sent to him "from the trenches."³⁵ Smith's small chapbook, titled *A Spring Harvest*, totals fewer than eighty pages and comprises only fifty poems, many of them less than a page in length.

Previous scholarship on *A Spring Harvest* has argued that Smith's cast of characters is "largely medieval," and that his language is "antiquarian," predominantly by virtue to its attention to medieval history.³⁶ Smith's collection does begin with a lengthy Arthurian poem titled "Glastonbury," but this is the only poem that refers to specific medieval figures. In contrast, several of Smith's verses reference notable classical elements, such as the "wine-dark seas" in "A Preface for a Tale I Have Never Told" or modern places reframed with classical terms such as the colleges of Oxford listed out in the aforementioned "Ave atque Vale."³⁷ Smith's poetry abounds with affection for the ancient world, and nowhere is this more apparent than in one short entry in the section "First Poems," a mere two

³⁴ Garth (2003) 212.

³⁵ Smith (1918) 7; Garth (2003) 246. For further analysis of this short note as the first foreword Tolkien ever published, see Croft (2018) 178.

³⁶ Garth (2007) 626. More recently, Kris Swank has demonstrated connections between nineteenth-century literature and Smith's poetry, allusions which were later picked up by Tolkien in the same type of "double reception" described in this paper; see Swank (2021).

³⁷ Smith (1918) 29, 53.

stanzas titled "To an Elzevir Cicero." In this titular apostrophe, Smith speaks directly to a volume of the writings of Marcus Tullius Cicero. Smith furthermore clarifies in his title that he is speaking to an edition published by the seventeenth-century Dutch printing house Elzevir, giving his poem an immediate aesthetic of classicism on top of its obvious Roman subject.

Dust-covered book, that very few men know,
Even as very few men understand
The glory of an ancient, storied land
In the wild current of the ages' flow,
Have not old scholars, centuries ago
Caressed you in the hollow of their hand,
The while with quiet, kindly eyes they scanned
Your pages, yellowed now, then white as snow?

A voice there is, cries through your every word,
Of him, that after greatest glory came
Down the grey road to darkness and to tears;
A voice like far seas in still valleys heard,
Crying of love and death and hope and fame
That change not with the changing of the years.³⁸

Though "Elzevir Cicero" lacks the profuse, conspicuous allusions to the ancient world that appear in some of Smith's other classical poems such as "The Burial of Sophocles," Smith's romantic engagement with the memory of ancient Rome ranges far beyond the superficial. Within its first stanza, Smith's short poem appears almost Catullan or Ovidian in its playful apostrophe to the personified edition of Cicero's writings; a reader with an education in the Latin classics – like Tolkien – might be reminded of the "new little book" (*novus libellus*) from Catullus' first *carmen*, or the proem of Ovid's *Tristia*, where the poet asks his book (*liber*) to return to Rome in his absence and reinforce his legacy.

Smith's text similarly invokes its subject's own immortality and materiality, the pages "yellowed now," but originally "white as snow." Once Smith shifts to the second stanza, however, the significance of using Cicero as a specific historical figure becomes apparent. The repeated line-initial phrase "a voice" recalls

³⁸ Smith (1918) 26.

Cicero's millennia-long reception as a disembodied "voice of eloquence" (*vox eloquentiae*), so useful for his turns of phrase that there arose a "pervasive trend" of seeing Cicero as a mere "storehouse of useful philosophical aphorisms, or didactic anecdotes" rather than as a complex human being.³⁹ As Shakespeare's Cicero in *Julius Caesar* suggests that "men may construe things after their fashion, clean from the purpose of the things themselves," so too has the historical Cicero been construed after the fashion of each successive age, clean from the purposes of the man himself – or so it may at first appear.⁴⁰ Geoffrey Bache Smith, however, avoided this common vogue of using Cicero's gilded name merely to add a veneer of antiquity to his poem. Though still addressing the little book when referring to how Cicero's voice "cries through your every word," Smith's abrupt enjambment on the next line forces his reader to confront Cicero directly: this is the specific voice "Of *him*, that after greatest glory came / Down the grey road to darkness and to tears." Though the "grey road to darkness" most closely resembles the 'shadowy road' of Catullus 'from which they say no one returns' (*iter tenebricosum [...] unde negant redire quemquam*, 3.11–12), these lines clearly retell the story of Cicero who rose to the highest elected office in Rome ("greatest glory") before witnessing the fall of the republic to the whims of the dictator Julius Caesar and then ultimately facing his own violent death ("down the grey road") and mutilation at the hands of Marc Antony's henchmen. The "tears" that Smith describes could come directly from the account of Livy who wrote that the citizens of Rome "could hardly look at the truncated limbs [of Cicero], lifting their eyes made wet by tears" (*uix attollentes lacrimis oculos humentes intueri truncata membra cives poterant*⁴¹).

And yet, though Cicero's story came "to darkness and to tears," Smith's poem is not finished. The final line, with its triumphant assertion that certain human emotions and experiences ("love and death and hope and fame") carry their own specific immortality and thus "change not with the changing of the years," is perhaps the most Ciceronian of all. The commemoration of "great deeds," and preservation of the entire lives of those who had died (*vita mortuorum*) within the

³⁹ Fox (2013) 329. For an examination of how this process of disembodiment arose within the ancient rhetorical classroom of the early imperial period, see Keeline (2018) 73–101.

⁴⁰ *Julius Caesar* 1.3.455–456, from Shakespeare (1977) 75.

⁴¹ Preserved through quotation in Seneca the Elder's *Suasoriae* 6.17.

memory of the living (*in memoria vivorum*) was a central concern for Cicero.⁴² In his second (and most often-read) *Philippic* against Marc Antony, Cicero proclaimed the undying place in history which would be given over to the senators who killed Caesar in an attempt to restore the republic:⁴³

Quae vero tam immemor posteritas, quae tam ingratae litterae reperientur quae eorum gloriam non immortalitatis memoria prosequantur? Tu vero ascribe me talem in numerum.

What succeeding generations will be found so forgetful, what literature will appear so ungrateful, that they would fail to honor the glory of these men with the memory of immortality? Write me down among such a number indeed.⁴⁴

It is "Elzevir Cicero," therefore, that forms the connecting thread between the notions of grief, greatness, and immortality that so enchanted Geoffrey Bache Smith, and through him, J.R.R. Tolkien. Though dedicated and attentive scholars of Tolkien's biography may understandably assert that Tolkien, in shifting his academic allegiance away from Greek and Latin, "turned his back enthusiastically on the Classics that had nurtured his generation at school," the ties that bound Tolkien to the ancient world were not, in fact, so easily severed.⁴⁵ Recent scholarship on Tolkien and the Classics has shown that Greece and Rome continued to have a profound influence on Tolkien's later literary works. So why have Tolkien's biographers so consistently been eager to separate Tolkien from his classical roots?

⁴² Cic. *Phil.* 9.5.

⁴³ Cic. *Phil.* 2.33

⁴⁴ The text of Cicero is taken from Clark (1918) and the translation is my own; for discussion of the ironic and haptic implications of this passage, see Butler (2002) 121.

⁴⁵ Garth (2003) 42.

5. ONE I LOVED WITH A PASSIONATE LONGING: QUEER READINGS

The clear emotional impact of Smith's death upon J. R. R. Tolkien has recently led some scholars and writers to reexamine the nature of the relationship between the two men. In part, this can be seen as a natural result of the fact that queer readings of J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle-earth have gained great popularity over the last twenty years since the publication of David M. Craig's foundational article, "Queer Lodgings': Gender and Sexuality in *The Lord of the Rings*."⁴⁶ As Yvette Kisor articulates, the term "queer," in its original sense meaning "strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric," appears often in Tolkien's works, and with the resurgence of the modern LGBTQ rights movement of the 21st century "there has been a slippage between the two meanings [of "queer"] in contemporary understanding, regardless of Tolkien's intentions."⁴⁷ Many readers have found a mirror of their own queer sexuality in between the lines of Tolkien's stories, most visibly in the love between two of the protagonists of *The Lord of the Rings* – the hobbit characters Frodo Baggins and Samwise Gamgee – whose relationship is explored with great care and personal vulnerability in an essay by graphic novelist Molly Ostertag.⁴⁸

Historiographical applications of queer theory to Tolkien's personal life are, however, far less common – or have been, at least until recently. The biopic film *Tolkien* (2019), directed by Dome Karukoski for Fox Searchlight, engages more directly with the idea of queering Tolkien's "homo-amorous" friendships than any previous depiction of Tolkien's life.⁴⁹ Though the young Tolkien's romance with his beloved Edith – the woman who became his wife and the mother of his children – remains a main subplot of the film, the core narrative thread follows the Tea Club & Barrovian Society during their journey from the school-halls of

⁴⁶ Craig (2001).

⁴⁷ Kisor (2017) 17–18.

⁴⁸ Craig (2001) 16–18; Smol (2004); Ostertag (2021).

⁴⁹ For reviews of the film by Tolkien scholars, see Fimi (2019) who outlines the (in)accuracy of the film's precise chronology, and Vaccaro (2018) who discusses the depiction of Smith as queer and in love with Tolkien and coins the term "homo-amorous" used here to describe the fact that Smith's love for Tolkien is clearly romantic but seemingly divorced from the more physical or sexual aspects of love invoked by the "erotic" component of "homoeroticism."

Birmingham, Oxford, and Cambridge, to the blood-soaked fields of France. Over the course of the film, Geoffrey Bache Smith (portrayed by Anthony Boyle) is depicted as subtly yet clearly in love with Tolkien. As reviewer Kaila Hale-Stern describes, the film's version of Smith "writes a poem about the love of comrades that his friends praise as 'Greek in a way,' leaning upon notions of Greek homosexuality.⁵⁰ Later, when consoling Tolkien about the obstacles that Tolkien faces in loving Edith, Smith "gives a moving speech about the purity of unrequited love while gazing meaningfully at his best friend."⁵¹ The emotional climax of the film occurs when Tolkien persuades Smith's mother to allow him to publish Smith's poetry posthumously, in what would eventually become the small volume *A Spring Harvest*.

Some of Smith's poems certainly resonate vividly with this queer reading of his feelings for Tolkien.⁵² The work "Memories," in the section "Last Poems," reflects upon three unnamed but clearly identifiable friends, one of them dead ("Death stands now betwixt him and me,") placing its composition after the death of TCBS member Robert Gilson in July of 1916. One stanza describes the third of these three friends in deeply emotional, even romantic terms:

One I loved with a passionate longing
Born of worship and fierce despair,

50 Hale-Stern (2019); for additional context about the conflation of the ancient Greeks with queer male homosexuality during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Shane Butler's discussion of *A Problem in Greek Ethics* by John Addington Symonds, in Butler (2019) 401–402.

51 Hale-Stern (2019).

52 Vaccaro (2018) 2 denies that any evidence can be pulled from Smith's writings, saying that, if the "homo-amorous" relationship between Smith and Tolkien was "physical" on Smith's side, "there appears no evidence from the published correspondences, biographical scholarship, nor from *A Spring Harvest*, his collection of poetry published by Tolkien in 1918 of any internal moral struggle." Though Vaccaro's assessment is accurate in that no indisputable evidence of a physical relationship existed, Smith's poems often refer to some unspoken spiritual transgression or "internal moral struggle" which Smith wished to set aside: see for instance, "Let us forget our weariness / Forget that we have sinned" (1918) 33; "And in the cold earth we must lie, / What matter then if we have sinned?" (1918) 44. Of course, it is not possible to determine what precise type of "sin" Smith had been imagining while writing these lines, but some "internal moral struggle" evidently plagued him.

Dreamed that Heaven were only happy
If at length I should find him there.⁵³

This type of passionate language evidently resonated with *Tolkien* co-screenwriter Stephen Beresford, perhaps best-known for writing the historical film *Pride* (2014), about the solidarity networks formed in the 1980s between gay and lesbian activists who raised money for striking British miners. Beresford, according to Geoffrey Bache Smith actor Anthony Boyle, defended his *Tolkien* script's queer interpretation of Smith, saying, "it's not taking a liberty with this character, there's no direct proof that he was in love with [Tolkien], but if we don't follow our nose when these clues are given to us then we're writing these people out of history," sentiments which were later repeated by director Dome Karukoski.⁵⁴ Because, as Dimitra Fimi asserts, "biopics are hybrids," both "biographical stories" as well as "cinematic" ones, the film *Tolkien* (2019) found a unique opportunity to initiate a historiographic conversation about the romantic feelings Geoffrey Bache Smith may possibly have had for Tolkien, beneath (and beyond) their "profound, loving connection" and shared artistic legacy.⁵⁵

In the spirit of Kisor's invocation of the "slippage" between different meanings of the term "queer" both within and with regard to Tolkien's works, this paper invites readers to view the relationship between Smith and Tolkien not only as potentially queer according to strict historicist definitions of romantic love and "longing," but, even more importantly, as part of a queer genealogy of classical ancestors and posthumous interlocutors.⁵⁶ The queer, the classical, and the hauntological are often intertwined; the three-way relationship of reception between the long-dead Cicero, the recently lost Smith, and the then-still-living Tolkien can hardly be anything *but* queer. Indeed, Smith never again saw Tolkien after composing the poem "Memories," and beyond the "Heaven" he imagined – in which he might be happy only if he could find himself reunited with his friend – Smith's words lived on only in the form of the short anthology *A Spring Harvest* and its impact upon Tolkien himself. This impact was not neg-

53 Smith (1918) 63.

54 Boyle quoted in Fishwick (2019), and Karukoski quoted in Hale-Stern (2019).

55 Fimi (2019); Hale-Stern (2019).

56 Butler (2019) describes this queerness of classical reception and specifically outlines how classicists like the Victorian queer scholar John Addington Symonds used classics to frame their own contemporary experiences.

ligible; in the concluding sections of this paper, I will trace several of Smith's primary motifs and themes into Tolkien's own writing, showing how this queer friendship and its ties to the classical past continued to inform Tolkien for the rest of his life.

6. SAVE THAT POETIC FIRE: MYTHOPOEIA IN POETRY

On September 19th, 1931, J.R.R. Tolkien found himself embroiled in a debate about mythology and creation with two of his friends – C.S. Lewis and Hugo Dyson – fellow members of the group of academic companions he gathered during adulthood, who famously called themselves the Inklings.⁵⁷ When considering how to define "creation," Tolkien argued that two very different practices could both be encompassed by the same word: both (human) literary production and (divine) spiritual origination. The link between these two branches of creation led Tolkien to write a poem entitled "Mythopoeia," dedicated as a direct rebuttal to Lewis's Platonic assertion that myths are "lies and therefore worthless, even though breathed through silver."⁵⁸ Tolkien's "Mythopoeia" proclaims the validity of creating a fictional world with an internal mythology, or, as Tolkien referred to it, the act of "sub-creation," in imitation of – and subordinate to – the efforts of the original (divine) creator, God.⁵⁹

To begin his poetic defense of the art of myth-crafting, Tolkien provides a signal that the ancient world of Greece and Rome serves as a major shibboleth for the conversation. After the brief slant-wise dedication to Lewis, "To one who said that myths were lies and therefore worthless, even though 'breathed through silver,'" Tolkien adds a header: "Philomythus to Misomythus," or, from one who loves myths to one who hates them.⁶⁰ This is an English translation of the Latin phrase *Philomythus Misomytho* that appeared on a previous draft of the

⁵⁷ Carpenter (2002) 196–197.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Carpenter (2002) 197.

⁵⁹ For further examination of the religious dimensions of "sub-creation," see Yohn 2021. For discussion of how Lewis's view of myths (as having aesthetic and perhaps moral value, if not inherent truthfulness) influenced Tolkien's prefatory dedication as well as the poem itself, see Weinreich (2008) 5.

⁶⁰ Myth 97.

text.⁶¹ Previous scholars have spoken of this poem's classical intertextualities, highlighting how the poem's didactic qualities resemble Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* (*De Rerum Natura*), and how the final lines, which speak of "Paradise," share a vision of heaven with the *Divina Commedia* of Dante.⁶² Between references to the materialist universe "where destined atoms are each moment slain," and the "Blessed Land" of Dante's *Paradiso*, however, Tolkien composed an even clearer sequence of references to the ancient world:

Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme
of things not found within recorded time.
It is not they that have forgot the Night,
or bid us flee to organized delight,
in lotus-isles of economic bliss
forswearing souls to gain a Circe-kiss
(and counterfeit at that, machine-produced,
bogus seduction of the twice-seduced).
Such isles they saw afar, and ones more fair,
and those that hear them yet may yet beware.
They have seen Death and ultimate defeat,
and yet they would not in despair retreat,
but oft to victory have turned the lyre
and kindled hearts with legendary fire,
illuminating Now and dark Hath-been
with light of suns as yet by no man seen.⁶³

61 According to Christopher Tolkien, for which see Myth 7.

62 On Lucretius, see Weinreich (2008) 2, as well as 6–7 for remarks on how the use of atomic theory in the poem relies upon the theories of Democritus and Leucippus. For a reading of C. S. Lewis as the "Lucretian, Newtonian Misomythus," in contrast to the (Stoic, Galilean Philomythus) Tolkien, see Holmes (2007) 451, though this view omits the more poetic qualities of Lucretius's work, and the importance of his influence not only on Renaissance and Enlightenment authors but upon the Romantic poets as well, for which see Priestman (2007) and also Weiner (2015) 50–55, where a bibliography on the reception of Lucretius can be found on 54–55 note 30. On Dante, see Pearce (1998) 176–177. Elsewhere, Pearce observes that "Mythopoeia" provides the "most incisive insights into Tolkien's understanding of Heaven" in any of Tolkien's numerous writings (2007) 267.

63 Myth 99.

In this passage, Tolkien puts forth multiple arguments all at once: he refutes the slander of those who denounce "legend-makers," from C.S. Lewis all the way back to Strabo, who first used the term *mythopoeia* in Greek; he invokes (and appropriates) the narrative of Homer's *Odyssey* to comment upon the "lotus-isles" and "Circe-kiss[es]" of the modern day, which threaten to distract from the age-long continuity of mythology; and he defends the TCBSian causes of greatness and immortality by asserting that those who "have seen Death and ultimate defeat," can nevertheless "[kindle] hearts with legendary fire."

Tolkien's focus upon "legendary fire" makes use of a metaphor for literary composition that can be traced directly back to Geoffrey Bache Smith. In one short poem near the end of *A Spring Harvest*, Smith prefigures Tolkien's valorization of the "legend-makers" and follows this argument to its most extreme conclusion.

Save that poetic fire
Burns in the hidden heart,
Save that the full-voiced choir
Sings in a place apart,

Man that's of woman born,
With all his imaginings,
Were less than the dew of morn,
Less than the least of things.⁶⁴

For Smith, not only did this "poetic fire" define the human experience, but human life was nothing without the passionate longing to write and to create new myths and stories. It is only through this burning desire to sing – and to sing in a "full-voiced choir," a fellowship of other poets and listeners in a "place apart" much like the music of the heavenly spheres in Cicero's *Dream of Scipio* – that one can imagine any immortality more permanent than morning dew.

In answer to Smith's assertions, Tolkien, in the very last lines of "Mythopoeia," (which have been described as "Tolkien's highest achievements in verse") promises that "legend-makers" will gain the true eternal life that Smith imagined in his "place apart."⁶⁵

64 Smith (1918) 72.

65 Pearce (1998) 176.

Be sure they still will make, not been dead,
 and poets shall have flames upon their head,
 and harps whereon their faultless fingers fall:
 there each shall choose for ever from the All.⁶⁶

By representing "poets" with "flames upon their head," Tolkien invokes both Smith's "poetic fire," as well as the fiery tongue that crowned the heads of the disciples at the first Pentecost (Acts 2.1–4). This slippage between Christian and Ciceronian allusions enabled Tolkien to place his friend's poetic legacy at the center of his own image of immortality, as though alluding to Smith's dream of a "happy" afterlife, which, "if at length [he] should find [Tolkien] there," might yet become a Heaven.⁶⁷

7. RUIN'D COLUMNS, WONDROUS TALL: MYTHOPOEIA IN PROSE

On March 8th, 1939, J.R.R. Tolkien delivered the Andrew Lang lecture at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. This talk was later published under the title "On Fairy-Stories" in a 1947 memorial volume to Tolkien's friend Charles Williams, and then reissued as part of the first edition of the collection *Tree and Leaf* in 1964.⁶⁸ Though predated by a 1931 philological lecture which would later evolve into the essay "A Secret Vice" about Tolkien's creation of invented languages for his world of Middle-earth, "On Fairy Stories" best preserves Tolkien's early ideas about the value of mythology, laying a foundation for the practice of mythopoeia which would form the most significant part of his legacy.

In seeking the origins of what we might call Tolkien's "mythopoetic habit," the field of classical reception can serve as both foundation and aesthetic façade: not only does a deep love for the ancient world lie in the communal "language" of the TCBS, the bedrock of Tolkien's youthful imagination, but so, too, do certain metaphors of classical reception help explain how the notion of antiquity

⁶⁶ Myth 101.

⁶⁷ Smith (1918) 63.

⁶⁸ For more on this chronology and on the manuscript tradition for Tolkien's several lectures which later became formal published essays, see *MC* 3.

itself haunts Tolkien's text. Rather than directly appropriating the imagery of ancient Greece and Rome, Tolkien utilized the aesthetic of his own scholarly *interaction* with Greece and Rome, building not upon the classical world, but upon its reworked ruins. By doing so, Tolkien carved into a rich bedrock of existing notions about philology and the textual tradition as types of archaeological excavation, which are now rising to the surface of classical reception scholarship through models such as "deep Classics."⁶⁹ The specifically archaeological significance of antiquity within Tolkien's work has been explored in part – and with a particular focus on archaeology in northern Europe rather than the Mediterranean – but the stratigraphic instinct within Tolkien's myth-making can be separated neither from the world of ancient Greece and Rome nor from Tolkien's deeply personal engagement with the classics.⁷⁰ Tolkien speaks in subtle terms about his own view regarding how models of geological "excavation" should (and should not) be applied to the study of myths, legends, and fairy-stories.⁷¹

"Fairy-stories are by no means rocky matrices out of which the fossils cannot be prised except by an expert geologist. The ancient elements can be knocked out, or forgotten and dropped out, or replaced by other ingredients with the greatest ease: as any comparison of a story with closely related variants will show. The things that are there must often have been retained (or inserted) because the oral narrators, instinctively or consciously, felt their literary 'significance'."⁷²

Though Tolkien denies the notion of fairy-story features as natural historical specimens petrified within the hard rock of myth, he does not dismiss the model entirely, preferring instead to suggest the image of a living archaeological context, full of human interventions upon the landscape, as ancient elements are

69 See Susanetti (2016) on ghosts as a mode of classical reception, as well as Butler's introduction within the same volume (2016) 1–20, for discussion of the archaeological metaphor for philology, and compare the appearance of "ruins" in Butler (2018).

70 For further examination of the archaeological qualities of Tolkien's fiction, see Sabo (2007).

71 The excavation model itself also appears in Tolkien's "Mythopoeia" where he describes "digging the foreknown from experience." Though, as Weinreich (2008) asserts, "Ancient Greek philosophy would not use the term 'digging'," (12) the phrase is nevertheless antiquarian in its archaeological valence.

72 OFS 129.

used and reused "with ease," just as when an ancient site appears embedded in a modern city where the newer layers intrude upon the older history and where the living cohabit with the memory of those who lived before. Geoffrey Bache Smith, too, speaks of the archeological layers of history; in a poem titled "Ære Perennius," he invokes:

[...] ruin'd columns, wondrous tall,
 Built in old time with labour sore,
 The mighty deeds done once for all,
 The voice heard once, and heard no more.⁷³

This text, written "on commemoration Sunday" at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, pulls together the imagery of classical ruins and the motif of lost texts. This is not Cicero's immortal "voice like far seas in still valleys" but rather a "voice heard once, and heard no more," lost to the ravages of time but summoned to memory by the ever-present physicality of the columns that remain.

Sigmund Freud's depiction of a multi-temporal Rome – an Eternal City within the mind – makes use of the same archaeological metaphors as Tolkien and Smith:

"Now let us, by a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past – an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one."⁷⁴

While Freud imagines, however, that the viewer of his archaeological fantasy can see every feature at the same time, looking upon the crumbling ruins of the Colosseum and "at the same time" admiring "Nero's vanished Golden House," Tolkien admits that these ancient elements can be "knocked out, or forgotten" even within the cultural memory, and that active effort on the part of "oral narrators" is required to retain ideas, themes, and specific stories lest they be lost to time's decay: the "selection" made by these narrators and myth-makers "is im-

⁷³ Smith (1918) 36.

⁷⁴ Freud (1930) 70. See also Butler (2016) 9–12 for additional discussion of this passage.

portant" – not to be dismissed as mere geological accident but rather archeologically significant appropriation and reuse.⁷⁵

8. TO BUILD GODS: MYTHOPOEIA IN QUOTATION

In addition to his use of archaeological metaphors, Tolkien engages with philological methods of argumentation, developing a classicism within his method of mythopoeisis. The most clearly classical aspect of Tolkien's writing style is a rhetorical strategy he shares with Cicero: the practice of poetic self-quotation. Before the publication of the complete "Mythopoeia" in the 1988 edition of *Tree and Leaf*, the poem was known only in part, from an excerpt added into the earlier-published "On Fairy-Stories," quoted here with its full context.⁷⁶

"To many, Fantasy, this sub-creative art which plays strange tricks with the world and all that is in it, combining nouns and redistributing adjectives, has seemed suspect, if not illegitimate. To some it has seemed at least a childish folly, a thing only for peoples or for persons in their youth. As for its legitimacy I will say no more than to quote a brief passage from a letter I once wrote to a man who described myth and fairy-story as "lies"; though to do him justice he was kind enough and confused enough to call fairy-story-making 'Breathing a lie through Silver'."

'Dear Sir,' I said – 'Although now long estranged,
Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned,
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:
Man, Sub-creator, the refracted light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build

⁷⁵ Freud (1930) 70, OFS 128–129.

⁷⁶ For further discussion on the initial reception of the full version of "Mythopoeia," see the anonymous review published in *Mallorn*, *Mythopoeia* (1988).

Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
 and sowed the seed of dragons – 'twas our right
 (used or misused). The right has not decayed:
 we make still by the law in which we're made.⁷⁷

If Christopher Tolkien had not elected to posthumously publish the rest of his father's poem in 1988, this might have been all the world would ever know of "Mythopoeia," which would have been a great loss.⁷⁸ Yet through this practice of intertextual self-reference, the insertion of the (almost-)lost poetic into the (better-preserved) prosaic, a part of Tolkien's poem was rescued twice-over from destruction. Cicero's poetry was not so lucky, yet his practice of inserting quotations from his own translation of an ancient Greek astronomical poem, the *Phaenomena* of Aratus, into his philosophical treatise *On the Nature of the Gods* (*De Natura Deorum*) enabled much of his otherwise-lost *Aratea* to survive. As a philologist, Tolkien would have been well aware that procedures like self-quotation were not only persuasive ways of constructing a layered argument, but indeed *essential* for the preservation of different layers of text.

Not only does Tolkien make use of this Ciceronian scholarly practice of self-quotation, but he refers also to similar themes of creation and divine order. Tied into a broader interest in the properties of light,⁷⁹ Tolkien's depiction of the act of mythopoetic creation as a process of reflection and refraction ("Man, Sub-creator, the refracted light / through whom is splintered from a single White") presents the same concern for both astronomy and philology as dual scholarships of the divine, as practiced by the Stoic philosophers depicted in Cicero's

⁷⁷ OFS 143–144, which prints several small variations of punctuation and capitalization from the version in Myth 98, as well as two larger changes: the insertion of the initial "Dear Sir," in place of the alternate line-initial phrase ("...and still recalls him," enjambed in the original), and the absence of one additional couplet ("his world-dominion by creative act: / not his to worship the great Artefact,") following "and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned," but before "Man, Sub-creator, the refracted light." For further discussion of the textual tradition, see Myth 6–7, where Christopher Tolkien observes that, "it is clear that the 'letter' was a device."

⁷⁸ Two and a half additional verses were published in Carpenter's biography of Tolkien, first published in 1977. Carpenter had access to unpublished drafts at this time; see Carpenter (2002) 254 and Weinreich (2008) 2–5.

⁷⁹ Flieger (2002) is a comprehensive study, and Flieger (2007) a short summary of the key concepts.

philosophical treatises.⁸⁰ For example, the Stoic interlocutor Quintus Lucilius Balbus argues in *De Natura Deorum* that a relationship exists between the orderly behavior of the celestial spheres and the "power of poetry" to communicate the "epiphanic" nature of the heavens to humanity, a notion very similar to the connections that Tolkien draws between the stars and poetry.⁸¹

He sees no stars who does not see them first
of living silver made that sudden burst
to flame like flowers beneath an ancient song.⁸²

In this refashioning of C.S. Lewis's accusation that myths are nothing more than "lies breathed through silver," Tolkien ultimately claims that myths are what allow us not merely to appreciate the stars, but even to see them at all; myths not only *enrich* life but *enable* it. Although this philosophical defense of mythopoeia goes beyond any argument made by Geoffrey Bache Smith in his small corpus of poetry, the first flickers of this idea still gleam in Smith's longest classicizing verse, the five-page penultimate poem in the collection titled "The Burial of Sophocles." Here, Smith apostrophizes the stars themselves, and then juxtaposes their light against the power of the written word to create a type of immortality:

Fortunate star and happy light,
Ye benison the gloom of night.
All hail, unfailing eye and hand,
All hail, all hail, unsilenced voice,
That makest dead men understand,
The very dead in graves rejoice:
Whose utterance, writ in ancient books,
Shall always live, for him that looks.⁸³

80 OFS 144.

81 Čulík-Baird (2018) 655.

82 Myth 98.

83 Smith (1918) 76–77.

Smith's elegy for the Athenian playwright looks back to his own "dust-covered" Elzevir Cicero volume "that very few men know," and simultaneously forward to Tolkien's neo-Stoic notion of tracing the stars through mythopoeia as a way to worship the divine creation. In this union of posthumous poets and living literature, Smith leads Tolkien, Virgil-like, through the land of the dead, back to the classical past and then into the starlit paradise to come.

9. CHANGE NOT WITH THE CHANGING OF THE YEARS: CONCLUSIONS

Finding ways to honor and immortalize the memory of Geoffrey Bache Smith must have been, for J.R.R. Tolkien, a complicated task. By publishing Smith's poetry in 1918, Tolkien won an important victory for Smith's claim to greatness, but Smith's ghostly presence lingered on within Tolkien's writing long after *A Spring Harvest* had been printed, bound, and placed lovingly on the shelf. Glimpsing Smith within the smooth surface of Tolkien's sprawling Middle-earth remains a challenging task – though one which deserves further scholarship – but Smith's queer, ghostly influence upon Tolkien's metapoetic writings shines forth clearly from the darkened corners both through imagery of starlight and broken columns, and through the TCBSian values of "love and death and hope and fame," the only things that, in Smith's words on Cicero, "change not with the changing of the years."⁸⁴

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⁸⁴ Smith (1918) 26.

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Legolas in Troy

The influence of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies on cinematic portrayals of ancient Greece and Rome

Abstract The Lord of the Rings movies were a cinematic phenomenon, extremely popular. They are not often considered as works of Classical Reception. These films' influence on subsequent ancient world movies has been understudied, and undervalued. A common model of cinematic Greece and Rome in the twenty-first century looks solely back to *Gladiator*. Undoubtedly *Gladiator*, and its commercial success, is important to how ancient world movies developed; but focussing solely on *Gladiator* does not explain a move away from Roman history towards Greek mythology, culminating in a flurry of movies about Greek mythological heroes. *Lord of the Rings* is an overlooked factor. Already in *Troy* two LOTR stars are in key roles, and the battle scenes seek to imitate those of Jackson's trilogy. 300 mythologizes far beyond Frank Miller's graphic novel, adding several monsters; LOTR's influence is at play here. LOTR's influence was one factor in a complex process that saw ancient world movies change in the twenty-first century. LOTR fed into an atmosphere that moved ancient world movies towards Greece, away from Rome, through promoting the appeal of a combination of epic and the fantastic.

Keywords Classical movies, *Lord of the Rings*, Classical reception, Peter Jackson, fantasy movies

INTRODUCTION

Though his academic career was mainly in English literature, particularly that of the medieval period, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was, like all middle and upper-class Englishmen of his generation, steeped in the languages and history of ancient Greece and Rome. Indeed, he began his university career reading Classics, only switching to English Language and Literature after two years of study.¹ Nor did this mark the end of Tolkien's Classical scholarship; he published a note on the Romano-British deity Nodens in 1932.² It is therefore inevitable that there is a strong Classical influence in his writings on Middle-Earth.³ It would not be surprising if this influence then pervaded the movies drawn from his work, in particular the phenomenally successful trilogy directed by Peter Jackson, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002), and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003). Whilst it is not the main thrust of this article to consider the movies as instances of Classical reception, it is necessary to briefly discuss the point.

Whilst these movies are evidently epics,⁴ little has been written on Classical influences in these movies.⁵ The movies are only mentioned briefly in Hamish

1 This article draws upon a number of previous publications: Keen (2013), (2014a), (2014b), (2014c), and (2015). I am grateful to several respondents, especially Joanna Paul, for encouraging me to take this further, and to the editors of this issue of *Thersites* and the anonymous reviewers. Some of the points made here are anticipated in Paul (2010). The piece follows, with some inconsistency, the practice of using 'movie' rather than 'film' for the distinct texts experienced, either in the cinema or through home entertainment; see Maltby (2003) 7. For the details of Tolkien's career and his early experience of the Greek and Roman worlds, see Carpenter (2002), esp. 60 on Tolkien's switch to English, and Williams (2021c). See also Cristini and Oughton in this volume.

2 Tolkien (1932).

3 The starting points for investigating this are, of course, now Arduini, Canzonieri & Testi (2019), and Williams (2021a). See also the other articles in this volume, in particular, Cristini.

4 The *Lord of the Rings* movies are firmly placed in the epic tradition in Elliott (2014a): see within that work, Elliott (2014b) 1; Sturtevant (2014) 110, 112, 117–119; Bridge (2014) 189.

5 There are fleeting references in Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 37, 125, Paul (2013) 19, 227 n. 58, Pomeroy (2017) (in Radford (2017) 124, and Margolis (2017) 404), and Augoustakis & Raucci (2018) (in Toscano (2018) 114). There are no mentions in Richards (2008), or Winkler (2009) or (2017).

Williams' introduction to his edited collection *Tolkien and the Classical World*. When Williams does mention them, it is to argue that Jackson suppresses a Classically-influenced version of Middle-earth in favour of a 'quasi-medieval or Gothic' version.⁶ This is true, and, as Williams notes, this is hardly an unjustified reading of Tolkien's work.

Nevertheless, there are examples of Classical influences in the movies. For one, Gondor as visualized by Peter Jackson seems to me to be drawing on the visual aesthetic of the Byzantine empire, especially when the armoured knights of Gondor are compared with the *kataphractoi* of the late Byzantine period. This is not surprising; there is much of the Byzantine/Eastern Roman empire in Tolkien's Gondor, as Tolkien himself hinted at (*Letters* 157) and as Juliette Harrisson notes.⁷ Moreover, the ruins of Gondor outside Minas Tirith are, in Tolkien's text, evocative of the Roman ruins left in Britain, again as Harrisson says.⁸ Hence, the same Romano-British atmosphere is evoked by these Gondorian ruins when they are presented on screen (an example is the depiction of the ruins on top of Amon Hen, where Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli fight orcs as the Fellowship of the Ring is broken).

I suspect that these echoes of the ancient world are overlooked because they are too easily dismissed as being really medieval. There are medieval ruins in Britain, just as there are Roman ones, and so the ruins of Gondor can be seen as looking as much like medieval ruins as like Roman ones. And whilst there is clearly a connection between Byzantium and Rome, it is often played down in modern scholarship; hence, a connection between Tolkien and Rome *via* Byzantium can be overlooked.⁹

However, a full consideration of these movies as works of Classical Reception in their own right is a topic which lies outside the scope of the present article. Instead, I want to look at their influence on subsequent cinematic portrayals of ancient Greece and Rome. This is something that I believe has been understudied, and the full significance of Jackson's movies in this context is not always

6 Williams (2021b) xix–xx.

7 Harrisson (2021) 336–337; see also Librán Moreno (2011) and (2013) and also Praet in this volume on the throne room of Gondor and its models.

8 Harrisson (2021) 339.

9 Cf. Williams (2021b) xiii–xiv, who offers both the end of the Western Roman empire in 476 and the end of the Eastern empire in 1453 as the ends of the Classical timeline.

recognised.¹⁰ My argument is that the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy fed into an atmosphere that moved the ancient world movie¹¹ away from Rome and towards Greece, through promoting the appeal of a combination of epic and the fantastic. This becomes clearer if, as I shall argue later, Greek and Roman epics are seen as a subgenre within the wider phenomenon of the pre-modern epic.

THE *GLADIATOR* EFFECT?

It is necessary, first, to construct a more sophisticated model of how the ancient world movie developed in the twenty-first century. Following in the wake of the massive commercial success of *Fellowship of the Ring*'s near contemporary, *Gladiator* (2000), the early twenty-first century is often, and not unreasonably, seen as a new golden age for movies set in the worlds of ancient Greece and Rome, one that bears comparison with the height of the epic in the 1950s and 1960s.

However, there is a shortage of coherent models and theorized approaches to movies of this genre and period,¹² in comparison with those available for examples made in the twentieth century. In comparison, those examples of the ancient world movie made in the twentieth century have been much studied and

10 I have addressed these issues before, in Keen (2015). However, I have subsequently revised my views to properly take into account both the shape of developments in twenty-first century Classics cinema and the influence of the superhero movie on the wave of Greek mythology movies in 2010–2014.

11 I use this term here for movies set in ancient Greece or Rome, to the exclusion of other ancient world settings. I am, of course, aware that it is not entirely accurate, since there are movies set in other ancient worlds, such as the Ancient Near East, India, Biblical Lands, etc., but this is the best term I have been able to come up with. As I argue below, I think that this categorization means a lot more to Classical Reception scholars than it does to anyone else. I will not consider movies set outside Greece and Rome to any great degree in this article, with the exception of *The Lord of the Rings* movies themselves.

12 The most sustained attempt is Elliott (2014a), which notably comes at the issue from a film studies perspective rather than a Classical Reception approach. Paul (2010) largely addresses scholarly publications up to 2010, rather than actual movies.

theorized.¹³ This is in some ways understandable. Many of the current general survey volumes were written in the decade 2000–2010,¹⁴ and it was too soon for their authors to take much of a view on what was happening around them. Consequently, a number of these works end with *Gladiator*, even where it is noted as a potential new start.¹⁵ More recent texts, such as those in Edinburgh University Press' *Screening Antiquity* series, tend to take a narrower focus and do not engage much with a wider theory of the ancient world movie in the twenty-first century. A good general study of movies of Greece and Rome in the twenty-first century is currently lacking and is much to be desired.¹⁶

On those occasions when the post-*Gladiator* boom is discussed, a common model is often encountered. That model goes as follows: after failure of *Cleopatra* (1963) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), no-one was much interested in making ancient world epic movies in Hollywood. This did not change until CGI had developed to the point where the spectacle of Greece and Rome, on which Hollywood epics had depended for much of their appeal, could be recreated without using physical sets. Along came *Gladiator* in 2000, demonstrating that there was a market for ancient world movies. After that, the model goes, the production of ancient world movies has continued apace, with examples such as *Troy* (2004), *300* (2006), *Clash of the Titans* (2010) and *Pompeii* (2014); the momentum seemingly never dissipates.¹⁷ This is a nice, simple model. But I believe it is too simple.

13 A full list of such discussions would be almost as long as this article, but key texts include Wyke (1997), Solomon (2001), Cyrino (2005), Nisbet (2008), Richards (2008), Winkler (2009), Theodorakopoulos (2009), Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011), Paul (2013), Pomeroy (2017), and Winkler (2017).

14 See Paul (2010) 137 & n. 2, on 2001 as a 'pivotal year for establishing "Classics and film" scholarship'.

15 For *Gladiator* as a new start, see e.g. Theodorakopoulos (2010) 96–121 and Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 216–234. Compare also Cyrino (2005). Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 235–237 give brief consideration to post-2000 movies.

16 Carl Buckland is currently working on *The Classical World on Film in the 21st Century* (see under the "Research" tab at <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/humanities/departments/classics-and-archaeology/people/carl.buckland>, accessed 4 July 2022), and I hope to address this topic myself at some point in the future.

17 Emphasis on the role of *Gladiator* can be seen, for instance, in Winkler (2007b) 4 & n. 12. Elliott (2014a) has a still from *Gladiator* on the cover, and note also the reference to 'the post-

To treat all post-2000 ancient world movies as part of a generic post-*Gladiator* boom risks missing out on subtle differences between the movies. For a start, there has not been a simple, steady linear progression of Greek and Roman movies in the last twenty-two years. Instead, there has been a series of mini-waves in various sub-genres. The post-*Gladiator* boom in epics effectively fizzled out after 2004 and the release in that year of *Alexander*, *Troy* and *King Arthur*. *300* in 2006 was less a follow-on from *Gladiator* than the next in a series of movies based on graphic novels, with predecessors such as *Road to Perdition* (2002), *V For Vendetta* (2005) and *Sin City* (2005). From 2010 to 2014 there was a wave of Greek mythological hero movies; *Clash of the Titans* (2010) and its sequel *Wrath of the Titans* (2012), two Percy Jackson movies (2010 and 2013), *Immortals* (2011), and *The Legend of Hercules* and *Hercules* (both 2014) being the main examples (this wave will be discussed further on in this article).

2014 to 2018 saw a wave of new Biblical epics (a genre that is closely related to and intertwined with the Roman epic). Mel Gibson had tried and failed to revive this genre with *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), but the later wave can clearly be seen in movies such as *Noah* (2014), *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014), *Risen* (2016), *The Young Messiah* (2016), *Ben-Hur* (2016), and *Mary Magdalene* (2018) – with the 1950s epic pastiche sections of the Coen brothers' *Hail, Caesar!* (2016) perhaps to be seen, at least in part, as an ironic commentary upon this wave.¹⁸ The poor critical and financial performance of *Ben-Hur* was a key factor in killing this wave off.

All through this period there were also individual movies that do not fit easily into these waves, such as *Agora* (2009), *Mr. Peabody and Sherman* (2014), a children's animation that is replete with Classical references, and *Horrible Histories*:

Gladiator historical epics' in the subtitle of Jancovich (2014). Note also this from a 2021 call for papers (<https://antiquityinmediastudies.wordpress.com/2021/11/29/cfp-aims-special-issue-of-journal-of-popular-film-television/>, accessed 4 July 2022): 'the prestige and popularity of 2000's *Gladiator* spearheaded a resurgence of the historic ancient world in the epic mode'.

18 I am not convinced by the argument, suggested by McAuley (2016), that *The Passion of the Christ* began this later wave. A full decade elapsed between that movie and *Noah*, and that is, for me, too long to group them together. It took more mainstream Hollywood presences than Gibson – and whilst it seems odd talking about Darren Aronofsky in those terms, I think this has been true since *Black Swan* (2010) – to get the Biblical movie going again. Quite why this happened I am not entirely sure. But I do not think that it was a direct response to Gibson's movie.

The Movie – Rotten Romans (2019). However, of those, only *Mr. Peabody* is a true Hollywood product.

The other issue with the standard post-*Gladiator* model is that it fails to provide an explanation for one interesting, and perhaps slightly odd, phenomenon of post-*Gladiator* ancient world movies: the relative dearth of Roman settings, as opposed to Greek ones.¹⁹ Many of the big ancient world movies that followed *Gladiator* have Greek settings: *Alexander*, *Troy*, *300*, *Clash of the Titans*, the two Percy Jackson movies, *Immortals*, *Wrath of the Titans*, *The Legend of Hercules*, *Hercules*, and *300: Rise of an Empire*. This is especially noteworthy in comparison with movies made in the 1950s and 1960s, where Greek settings were rarer than Roman ones.²⁰ There were Greek Hollywood epics in the 1950s and 1960s, such as *Alexander the Great* (1956), *Helen of Troy* (1956), *The 300 Spartans* (1962), or *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), but these were outnumbered by, and had less commercial success and cultural impact than, movies dealing with Roman materials.²¹ The first ancient world movies that people think of when considering this period of Hollywood history are the Roman ones.

Partly, this was for reasons discussed by Gideon Nisbet: primarily a difficulty in coding Greece as notably different from Rome, a sense that Greece is boring, and an inability to escape notions of camp.²² However, this was also partly because Greek materials were less easy to rework with a Biblical angle, and much of ancient epic in the 1950s was essentially Biblical epic, either directly or indirectly. Many movies dealt with events in the Bible, examples being *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *King of Kings* (1961) or fictional tales of early Christianity, examples being *Quo Vadis* (1951) and *The Robe* (1953). This extended even to movies of Rome before the Christian era, such as *Spartacus* (1960), and ostensibly non-Biblical movies such as *The Egyptian* (1954); in each of those examples, a main character, Spartacus and the pharaoh Akhenaten respectively, stands in as a substitute Christ figure.

The simple post-*Gladiator* model, if accurate, ought to have meant that a number of Roman-set movies followed directly on from *Gladiator*, in the tradi-

19 As noted by Paul (2010) 142 and Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 220.

20 See Nisbet (2008) 7–9; Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 39 and 101.

21 I count a movie such as *Cleopatra* (1963) as essentially Roman rather than Greek. The pattern is, of course, reversed in the Italian *peplum* movie, where Greek heroes such as Hercules, Theseus, and Atlas predominated, though Roman movies also were made.

22 Nisbet (2008), *passim*.

tion of the Hollywood historical Roman epics of the 1950s and 1960s. In reality, such movies, the sort of movies that *Gladiator* was imitating, the likes of *The Robe* (1953), *Spartacus* (1960), or *Gladiator*'s model, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), are notably absent from the post-2000 cinema screen. Sixteen years passed between *Gladiator* and what would appear to be a movie firmly in the Roman epic tradition that *Gladiator* supposedly revived. That movie is the 2016 remake of *Ben-Hur*. However, I have already argued that this movie, with its heavy emphasis on religion, was part of a mini-revival of the Biblical epic, rather than simply a post-*Gladiator* project.

There are Roman-set movies such as Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, but that is a movie that I consider very much *sui generis* and outside the Hollywood system. It was an attempt to ride the coat-tails of *Gladiator* to restart the Biblical genre but one which failed, partly because the commercial and critical failure of *Alexander* (2004) and the critical failure of *Troy* (2004) came close to killing off entirely the post-*Gladiator* ancient epic.²³ There is also *Agora* (2009), but that emerges from a European tradition, rather than Hollywood, and is not really 'epic'. There is *Pompeii* (2014), but, as I shall argue later, this belongs as much to the tradition of fantasy movies as to the post-*Gladiator* tradition. And there are four Hadrian's Wall movies: *King Arthur* (2004), *The Last Legion* (2007), *Centurion* (2010), and *The Eagle* (2011). Though these are clearly influenced by *Gladiator* in some aspects, they are not full-on Roman epics in the *Gladiator* style but more concerned with the circumscribed setting of Roman Britain than the full imperial stage on which the great epics of the 1950s and 1960s were played out.

The sort of Roman empire stories that used to be staples of 1950s Hollywood epic instead transferred to television. Since 2000 audiences have seen HBO's *Rome* (2005–2007), which recycles the material of the Richard Burton/Elizabeth Taylor *Cleopatra* (1963), amongst other sources; the various STARZ *Spartacus* series (2010–2013); and mini-series such as *Julius Caesar* (also known as *Caesar*, 2002), *Imperium: Augustus* (2003), *Spartacus* (2004), based on Howard Fast's novel, *Empire* (2005), and *Ben-Hur* (2010).²⁴ It is worth noting that two of these mini-series, *Spartacus* and *Ben-Hur*, were based on novels that in the 1950s and

23 See Nisbet (2008) 67.

24 The 2002 *Julius Caesar* and 2004 *Spartacus* are sometimes presented as single TV movies, but each was originally a two-episode mini-series.

1960s had given rise to movies. The small screen now seems to be often viewed as a more appropriate venue for these sorts of stories.²⁵

It is not my intention to suggest that *Gladiator* is not an important factor in shaping the ancient world movie in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Its influence is obvious in movies such as *Pompeii* (2014) and *The Legend of Hercules* (2014), both of which have substantial sections in which they are trying to be *Gladiator*. But it is simplistic to see all the post-2000 ancient world movies as solely direct consequences of *Gladiator*'s success.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS EFFECT

So what factors are behind the increased predominance of Greek subjects in the ancient world movies of the twenty-first century? There is a complex set of ideas at work here. One, suggested by Blanshard & Shahabudin, is that Greek settings were thought to resonate better with political concerns of the twenty-first century, offering more complex and less clear-cut issues than the tyranny of the Roman empire.²⁶ But even they admit that such moral complexity can be off-putting to an audience, and indeed the rise of the superhero movie has demonstrated the appeal of the less complex setting. Hence, I do not consider this to be a major factor.

An underappreciated element is the influence of Sam Raimi and Robert Tapert's two television series *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995–1999) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001). The latter of these series was still being produced at the time of *Gladiator*, and the former had only just finished. Many of the crew of *Hercules* and *Xena* would go on to work on *Lord of the Rings*, and the trilogy was also filmed in New Zealand. As Jon Solomon has recently argued, the success of these series, and that of Disney's *Hercules* (1997), helped pave the way for the general revival of the ancient world on screen of the early twenty-

²⁵ Of course, television has dealt with lengthy historical narratives of this sort long before 2000; examples include *The Caesars* (1968), *I, Claudius* (1976), *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), and *A.D.* (1985). Nor should it be thought that Greek mythology is not treated on television in the twenty-first century; note the TV miniseries *Hercules* (2002).

²⁶ So Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 220.

first century.²⁷ This meant that an audience had been created that was already predisposed more in the direction of Greek mythology than of Roman history.²⁸ It is true, as Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones notes, that Roman history was already generally presented in Hollywood epic in a mythologized fashion; but in that case, it was mythologized through presentation in a series of heroic narratives. The mythology of Greek-set movies included a large element of the fantastic that was not as noticeable in Roman epic, though, as I discuss later, that element certainly was there.

The third factor, I believe, is *The Lord of the Rings*. I would argue that this has been neglected because the generic similarities between *Lord of the Rings* and ancient world movies are not given the emphasis they deserve. Classical Reception scholars will tend to draw quite firm lines between movies with Greek and Roman settings and those with medieval settings. But Hollywood audiences and producers probably draw less firm lines between the ancient and medieval periods than Classicists do.²⁹ Film critics have often defined the 'historical epic' as relating to settings before the late medieval period, with Derek Elley placing the boundary at the end of the eleventh century and Gary Smith making the thirteenth century the boundary.³⁰

There is perhaps a stronger case for making a division between the modern and the pre-modern. Hegel and Marx (each writing before the invention of cinema) both believed that epic could not exist in a modern setting, Hegel expressing this in *Aesthetics* and Marx in *Grundrisse*.³¹ Joanna Paul has strongly argued that the notion that 'epic' and 'modern' are incompatible is a false one,³² and I myself am very happy to accept quite a wide definition of what an epic might be.³³ Nevertheless, such a perception as is expressed by Hegel and Marx may perhaps be widespread in how many people think of movies and other cul-

27 Solomon (2021). This was combined with serial repetition on television of Hollywood epics of the 1950s and 1960s; Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011) 218–219.

28 Llewellyn-Jones (2009) 569.

29 The following discussion owes much to Paul (2013) 13–15.

30 Elley (1984) 12; Smith (1991) xv.

31 Available in Marx (1973) 111; Hegel (1975).

32 Paul (2013) 14–15, and 175–212.

33 As is Paul (2013) 12–23; cf. Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 36–40.

ture. From this, one may postulate that those outside the field of Classics perceive a more distinct difference between the modern and the pre-modern than they do between the medieval and the ancient or between the Greco-Roman and other forms of antiquity. I do not mean to say that Hollywood producers and audiences do not at all see any divisions between the Greco-Roman and the non-Greco-Roman world, because I do think they see Greek and Roman movies as something of a genre of their own. But I do want to argue that they do not see these divisions in quite the same way as Classicists do. Greek and Roman epics, I believe, can be seen as a subgenre within the wider phenomenon of the pre-modern epic. This was true in the 1950s and 1960s, when Roman epics operated within the wider context of the Biblical epic. I myself have made a case for considering Ray Harryhausen's *Jason and the Argonauts* and *Clash of the Titans* (1981) alongside his three Sinbad movies.³⁴

This blurring of lines between the ancient and the medieval remains true now. This should not be a surprise. Gideon Nisbet has made the point that movies are often unable to draw a clear distinction between Greece and Rome,³⁵ and this can still be seen, for instance, in the adoption of the Roman *testudo* formation of interlocking shields by Greek troops in *Troy*, *300*, and (explicitly named as such) *The Legend of Hercules*. If no clear distinction is being drawn between Greece and Rome, why should we expect one between the ancient and medieval worlds?

So, whilst I am not aware of anyone formally saying that an ancient world movie was greenlit because of *Lord of the Rings*, I think that, when movies set in ancient Greece or Rome are greenlit, the studio bosses are thinking as much of the success of *The Lord of the Rings* as they are of that of *Gladiator*. *The Lord of the Rings* showed that adding magic, monsters, and fantasy to the mix could be a ticket to financial success. Therefore, those inclined to make cinematic epics with a pre-modern setting in the later 2000s were looking for other stories with magic or monsters. And that pushed people in the direction of Greece.

34 Keen (2013). The Sinbad movies are *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (1958), *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (1973), and *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger* (1977).

35 Nisbet (2008) *passim*. See in particular Nisbet (2008) 8 on the difficulty in making Greece distinct, and 79–82 on *Troy* as a Greek movie made faux-Roman; but the argument is sustained throughout his book.

At a conference on Classics in children's literature that took place in 2009,³⁶ it was observed that authors in this field tend to turn to Rome when they want historical stories but to Greece when they want mythology. This, of course, conceals the degree to which what is thought of as 'Greek myth' is actually dependent upon Roman sources such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but this is not, I believe, an issue to which the media in general pays much attention. Here we are concerned with general impressions, it often being assumed, wrongly as it happens, that Roman mythology is no more than Greek mythology with different names for the gods.³⁷ I myself have observed in print that that this selection of Rome for history and Greece for myth can be seen in *Doctor Who* in the 1960s and 1970s.³⁸ This selection of Rome for history and Greece for myth is also apparent in ancient world movies.³⁹

Of course, the fantastic had long been present in ancient world movies. Movies based upon Greek mythology naturally featured gods and monsters, whilst miracles were often featured in Biblical movies. Even an apparently historical and secular movie such as *Cleopatra* (1963) includes magic, as Cleopatra watches the assassination of Julius Caesar through a vision conjured up in a fire.⁴⁰ The success of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy pushed ancient world cinema more in the direction of the fantastic. By doing so, it probably helped the ancient world movie to survive the perceived critical and commercial failure of *Alexander*.

36 'Asterisks and Obelisks: Classical Receptions in Children's Literature', University of Wales, Lampeter, 6–10 July 2009. A selection of contributions is now published as Hodkinson and Lovatt (2018a).

37 Hodkinson and Lovatt (2018b) 32 n. 7, note that this fact complicates the division between 'Greek myth' and 'Roman history'.

38 Keen (2010).

39 Sadly, whilst everyone working on reception in popular culture is aware of the selection of Rome for history and Greece for myth, there is, as far as I am aware, no definitive theorized academic article that focusses on it. It is addressed a little in Maurice (2015) 1 and Hodkinson and Lovatt (2018b) 32 n. 7.

40 The depiction of the fantastic in relation to the divine is discussed in Maurice (2019).

TROY

The first movie to show the influence of *The Lord of the Rings* is *Troy* (2004). In some ways this is a very traditional epic treatment of the Trojan War, following a standard pattern of historicizing the material and removing the gods from the narrative, a pattern seen in the 1956 *Helen of Troy*.⁴¹ A lot of the impetus for *Troy* being greenlit certainly must have come from *Gladiator*, to which it makes frequent reference.⁴² Clearly the trope of removal of all elements of fantasy from the Trojan War, and its treatment as historical fiction, was stronger in this instance than the permission *Lord of the Rings* gave for the inclusion of fantastical elements.

Nevertheless, there are strong influences from *Lord of the Rings* on *Troy*. In Martin Winkler's second book on *Troy*, *Return to Troy: New Essays on the Hollywood Epic*, Antonio Martín-Rodríguez spends a couple of pages of his chapter looking at the influence of *The Lord of the Rings* on *Troy*.⁴³ Considering *The Lord of the Rings* as an 'unconscious' entry in the Classical tradition,⁴⁴ Martín-Rodríguez identifies a number of aspects of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy's influence on *Troy*. He rightly notes that Orlando Bloom, Paris in *Troy*, had previously been Legolas in *The Lord of the Rings*, and it seems doubtful that Bloom would have come to the attention of the casting director of *Troy* were it not for *The Lord of the Rings*. It seems hardly coincidental that Bloom's role in both *Lord of the Rings* and *Troy* is as an accomplished archer. In an interview with Petersen in the same volume, Winkler rightly raises the expectations of Bloom as a heroic figure that the audience would bring with them and how those would not wholly be met by his Paris (though ultimately Bloom's Paris is a heroic figure of sorts).⁴⁵ The casting of Sean Bean, who had been Boromir in *The Fellowship of the Ring* and plays

41 I briefly discuss tropes of modern versions of the Trojan War in Keen (2021), which will form the basis of a future detailed study. *Troy* ticks all of these tropes off.

42 See the quotes from Petersen in Russell (2004).

43 Martín-Rodríguez (2015) 221–222. There are only three references to *The Lord of the Rings* in Winkler's *Troy: From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic* (2007a), and all three use Jackson's series as comparative material, rather than examining its direct influence upon *Troy*. The mentions are Winkler (2007b) 9, Solomon (2007) 93–94, and Cyrino (2007) 141.

44 Martín-Rodríguez (2015) 205. Blondell (2016) criticises the use of this term, but it does not matter for my argument.

45 Winkler (2015b) 21.

Odysseus here, may also have been shaped by Jackson's fantasy epic, though Bean had played leading roles before, such as in *GoldenEye* (1995).⁴⁶

Martín-Rodríguez may be on less firm ground when he suggests that Eric Bana's Hector in *Troy* is modelled on Viggo Mortensen's Aragorn, as it is hard to argue that there is anything in Bana's Hector that is not just the quality of a generic hero. But the battle scenes in *Troy* are clearly imitative of those in *Lord of the Rings*, particularly the Battle of Helm's Deep in *The Two Towers*. In both, the audience are shown wide aerial pans of CGI armies, each soldier moving individually; both *Troy* and *The Two Towers* feature an assault upon a defended wall.

HELICOPTER SHOTS AND HADRIAN'S WALL

One of the features of Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* is aerial footage, taken from helicopters, showing parties of characters striding across the landscape. These are particularly prevalent in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, such as a shot of the Fellowship attempting to cross the snowy ridges of Caradhras, are also used in *The Two Towers*, and then are much less found in *The Return of the King*; they then come back in *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* (2012). These show off the New Zealand landscapes particularly well.

Similar helicopter shots of small groups of people crossing mountainous and often snow-covered wastelands turn up in four movies set largely or wholly in Roman Britain. In *King Arthur* (2004), Arthur and his Sarmatian knights have rescued a group of refugees from a villa improbably located north of Hadrian's Wall; all are seen heading along a snow-filled valley and a frozen lake, with mountains to either side.⁴⁷ In *The Last Legion* (2007), a party of Roman heroes are seen climbing snow-clad mountains (presumably intended to be the Alps) on their way from Italy into Gaul and eventually to Britain. In *Centurion* (2010), a party of Roman soldiers trapped in Scotland are seen running across snowy ridges. In *The Eagle* (2011), a crane seems to substitute for a helicopter as camera

⁴⁶ Audiences familiar with the idea that Bean tends to die in all his movies – see Fowler (2014) – might be surprised by his survival in *Troy*, but the idea had not taken as firm root in 2004 as it did later.

⁴⁷ The sequence with the frozen lake also makes reference to the Battle on the Ice, as depicted in Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938).

platform, but the principle, of looking from a height at our central characters as they look out over the mountains of Scotland, is the same.⁴⁸ These four movies seem to be using these shots to deliberately place themselves in a tradition that audiences will recognise from *Lord of the Rings*, and perhaps hope to intensify the audience's empathy with the main characters. At the same time, all four movies, and *Lord of the Rings*, show how their central characters are dwarfed by the landscapes in which they find themselves, which are, it is implied, outside civilization. (In all the Roman examples except *The Last Legion*, the landscapes through which the figures are seen travelling are beyond Hadrian's Wall; in *The Last Legion*, as noted, the party are crossing the Alps.)

There is a similarity between the musical soundtracks of all these movies and *The Lord of the Rings*. All feature a certain degree of Celtic-style non-verbal singing. This may well be influenced by Howard Shore's score for Jackson's movies (perhaps ultimately drawing from *Xena: Warrior Princess* via Jackson's movies). However, these also need to be seen in the overall context of scores for epic movies in the twenty-first century. In particular, Hans Zimmer's score for *King Arthur* owes more to the same composer's music for *Gladiator*, and *Gladiator* is also presumably a touchstone for Patrick Doyle on *The Last Legion*, Ilan Eshkeri on *Centurion*, and Atli Övarsson on *The Eagle*, though each composer brings something of their own to each score.

Further influences in these movies can be traced back to *The Lord of the Rings*. For example, *Centurion* opens with helicopter shots of mountains, much as *The Two Towers* does. What all these elements show are the new tropes for epic that *Lord of the Rings* established.

Also, though these movies are Roman-set and so should be inclined towards being historical, there is something mythological about all of them. In two of them, the mythology is the Matter of Britain and the Arthurian legends, rather than Greek or Roman mythology. *King Arthur* and *The Last Legion* present themselves as historical movies of the end of Roman Britain, but both draw upon mythological material from the Arthurian cycle. *The Last Legion*, in particular, codes much of its action as a fantastic quest, with legendary swords and Ben Kingsley's Ambrosinus (who turns out to be Merlin) being very much in the mould of Obi-Wan Kenobi from the space fantasy *Star Wars* series. He never actually performs any magic, but the movie wants the viewer to believe that he is always on the verge of doing so. *Centurion* and *The Eagle* are more realistic

48 *Ben-Hur* (2016) also includes a brief sequence of battle on a snow-covered mountaintop.

movies, but these are dealing with a modern myth of the Roman empire. This is the supposed disappearance of the Ninth Legion in Scotland, a thesis advanced by Theodor Mommsen, and dramatised and popularised by Rosemary Sutcliff in her children's novel *The Eagle of the Ninth* (1954). There is precious little actual evidence for the hypothesis, though it is still supported by some scholars.⁴⁹ One might argue that this is using myth in a different fashion, but nevertheless, there is a slight deviation from the purely historical.

Subsequent Roman productions show a similar tilt towards the fantastic. Nothing actually fantastical happens in *Pompeii* (2014), but it codes towards fantasy. This is shown by its use of fantastical effects, much in the way as *Titanic* (1997) was coded towards science fiction through its effects and its director, James Cameron, otherwise known for science fiction movies such as *The Terminator* (1984) and *Aliens* (1986). *Pompeii* casts in its lead role Kit Harrington, who had made his name in epic fantasy television series *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019). One might argue that this is simply cashing in on the actor's popularity, but every star brings with them audience expectations formed on the basis of their previous roles.⁵⁰ It is not unreasonable to suggest, therefore, that the casting of Harrington codes the movie, if not directly towards *The Lord of the Rings*, then towards the fantastical *Zeitgeist* in ancient world movies that *The Lord of the Rings* has helped bring about.⁵¹

Such a trend is further developed in *Britannia* (2018–2022), a series about the Roman invasion of Britain that was part co-created by Jez and Tom Butterworth, who had co-written *The Last Legion*. *Britannia* involves a strong element of the fantastic, through the magical powers of the Druids.⁵² This intensified focus on the fantastic can also be found in movies set outside Greece and Rome; Darren Aronofsky's version of *Noah* (2014) presents the angels as fantastical alien beings and owes much to the post-apocalyptic dystopian science fiction movie.

49 E.g. Russell (2010) 180–185. On the historicity of the disappearance of the Ninth Legion, see now Elliott 2021, who handles the evidence evenly and fairly.

50 For the principle, see Butler (1998), and for an example of this functioning in the ancient world movie, see Cyrino (2018).

51 On other aspects of *Pompeii*, see Joanna Paul's excellent article (2019).

52 Such a portrayal of magical Druids is also to be found in *Boudica*, aka *Warrior Queen* (2003). On the fantastic in *Britannia*, see Harrison (2018). I hope to address both *Britannia* and *Boudica* as part of a future project on Roman Britain on screen.

300

It has long been recognised that *300* is heavily influenced by *The Lord of the Rings*, as shown, for instance, by Susanne Turner.⁵³ Frank Miller's original comic (1998) had already, overtly and deliberately, mythologized the story of Spartan King Leonidas' last stand against the Persian invasion of Greece. The movie takes that process considerably further. The Persian Immortals in the movie wear the Japanese ninja masks that Miller anachronistically gives them in the graphic novel; but underneath, they are deformed; Miller does not make them like this at all. In their deformity, the Immortals of *300* echo the Orcs of Jackson's epics.⁵⁴ And like the Orcs in Jackson's movies (and, to be fair, the Orcs in Tolkien),⁵⁵ all the Persians are dehumanized, othered, and treated as sword fodder for the heroes and their allies. Of course, plenty of movies other the enemy, but *300* also includes an 'Uber Immortal', a near-mindless character not to be found in the comic and which is strongly reminiscent of *Fellowship's* cave troll. The elephants of Xerxes' army are something that is to be found in Miller's comic, but one suspects there is an element of influence from the Mûmakil of *The Return of the King*. The same might be said for the armoured rhinos ridden into battle by Persians, which are an invention of the movie.

And then there is Xerxes. Miller's Xerxes is a king worshipped as a god, festooned with jewellery, but ultimately mortal. The movie makes him something more, impossibly tall, with an impossibly deep voice. His temptation of Leonidas takes on supernatural elements, and it is hard not to draw parallels between Xerxes and Sauron; both appear as mythological embodiments of evil. Both are otherworldly, no longer human, and demand (and receive) total obedience from their followers.

The positioning of Xerxes in the world of the fantastic is even more emphasized in the sequel, *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014), where the human Xerxes wanders the desert, finds a mysterious hermit's cave, and dips himself into a pool imbued with power that is 'evil and perverse', before emerging as the re-born god. However, fantastical elements are then somewhat played down as the focus of the action shifts to Artemisia and her naval battle, with Xerxes and his

53 Turner (2009) 129.

54 Again, see Turner (2009) 129.

55 Obertino (2006) 119.

army, still including elephants, playing a smaller role in this movie than in the previous one.

GREEK SUPERHEROES

Between 2010 and 2014, there was another cinematic wave, this time of heroic mythological narratives, centring around three figures from Greek myth, Perseus, Theseus, and Hercules: *Clash of the Titans* (2010); *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (2010), *Wrath of the Titans* (2012), and *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters* (2013), work with the Perseus myth, *Immortals* (2011) depicts Theseus, and Hercules is represented in *The Legend of Hercules* (2014) and *Hercules* (2014).⁵⁶ The Asylum, a company famous for making low-budget 'schlock' movies, contributed to the movement with *Hercules Reborn* (2014). At the same time, other ancient world movies appeared that are tangential to this wave, such as *300: Rise of an Empire* and *Pompeii*. There are a number of reasons why such a type of movie suddenly became popular.

There was still a residual *Gladiator* effect, seen to its greatest in *The Legend of Hercules*, which includes an amphitheatre sequence that clearly owes a lot to Ridley Scott's epic. In contrast, the inspiration behind the two *Percy Jackson* movies was not so much *Gladiator* as the desire to find a new children's fantasy franchise to take the place of the *Harry Potter* series, then coming to its end.⁵⁷ (Hence the director of the first *Percy Jackson* movie, Chris Columbus, was the same man who had directed the first two *Harry Potter* movies and produced the third.)

The rise of the superhero movie was also a factor. The *X-Men* movies had begun in 2000, Warner Brothers had revived the Batman franchise in 2005 with *Batman Begins*, and 2008 saw the debut of the Marvel Cinematic Universe with *Iron Man*. The fourth MCU movie, *Thor* (2011), would be particularly influential upon later entrants into the Greek hero wave, especially *The Legend of Hercules*. In the final scenes of that movie, Hercules is able to call upon the divine powers of his

⁵⁶ Many of the movies of this wave are discussed in Augoustakis & Raucci (2018), and Salzmann-Mitchell & Alvares (2018) 97–180.

⁵⁷ As rightly pointed out by Blanshard & Shahabudin (2011) 219–220.

sky-god father, and wield lightning. The interests of the MCU in Norse mythology also left room for a superhero-influenced approach to Greek mythology; it is notable that the DC Expanded Universe's Greek myth influenced movies, *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Aquaman* (2018), and *Shazam!* (2019), appeared after this wave of Greek myth movies had exhausted itself.

Clearly another factor was the success of *300*. This highly mythologized version of Greek history did not result in any more Greek history movies, with the exception of *Rise of an Empire*. Instead, it begat more Greek mythology movies. Since we have established the clear influence of *The Lord of the Rings* upon *300*, it is fair to say that this wave of Greek hero movies has been produced under the influence, at one remove, of *The Lord of the Rings*.

HERE COMES THE THEORY

So what advice can be drawn from this study for those working on Classical reception in cinema? Part of the reason why *The Lord of the Rings*' influence is not properly discussed is, of course, that some people are aware of it, but that it is not their particular subject at any one time.⁵⁸ However, there is also a disciplinary issue.

Though the best scholars on Classical Reception in cinema, such as Martin Winkler or Maria Wyke, are knowledgeable in a wide range of genres, many, perhaps understandably, limit their scholarly interests to those movies set in, or directly referencing, the ancient Greco-Roman world. There is a danger that this approach, and indeed Classical Reception theory in general, can become intrinsically very inward-looking, in a way that I think is not helpful.⁵⁹ This is compounded by the fact that most people working on cinematic representations of Greece and Rome are Classicists or Ancient Historians. There are not too many people working on depictions of antiquity from film studies scholarship, James Russell, Robert Burgoyne, and Jeffrey Richards being notable excep-

⁵⁸ So, for instance, this is only the second time I have addressed the series' influence in citable form (the other being Keen 2015).

⁵⁹ Cf. Paul (2010) 138: "Too often, reception studies – including cinematic ones – are in danger of paying insufficient attention to the full range of contexts that inform the reception."

tions.⁶⁰ Even there, one must note that both Russell and Burgoyne are writing more widely on genres that include ancient world movies, rather than having them as their focus, as is the case with Richards. Such a charge of taking an insular and inward-looking view could certainly be levelled at this present article, which engages far more with Classical Reception publications on movies than film studies treatments of *The Lord of the Rings* movies.⁶¹

The inward-looking nature of Reception Studies on a wider theoretical level is in part (especially in the United Kingdom) a result of research funding protocols that privilege – or at least are thought to privilege – publishing in subject-related journals and series, and tend to militate against genuinely interdisciplinary studies.⁶² But it is also partly a product of ideas about what is important about Reception Studies.

In 2003, Lorna Hardwick rejected the idea that studies of Reception only illuminate the receiving society; she insisted that they also ‘focus critical attention back towards the ancient source and sometimes frame new questions or retrieve aspects of the source which have been marginalized or forgotten’.⁶³ This is very true, but an argument has built up that this reflection back upon the ancient sources should be the prime or only concern of Reception Studies. This has been most forcefully expressed by Charles Martindale, who argues⁶⁴ that Classicists should only be interested in a reception if that reception ‘initiate[s] or inform[s] a significant dialogue with antiquity’.⁶⁵ He argues this in such a way as to privilege a focus upon antiquity. This, according to Martindale, justifies the presence of courses on Reception in the portfolio of Classics departments.

Whilst I understand Martindale’s desire to justify Reception within university Classics departments, I see a number of issues with this inward-looking approach. First, whether a text’s dialogue with the ancient world is ‘significant’ is subjective, though Martindale writes as if it is possible to make an objective

60 Russell (2007); Burgoyne (2008); Richards (2008).

61 For which see, as a starting point, Thompson (2018).

62 The following discussion draws upon Keen (2014a) 246–247, (2014b), and (2014c).

63 Hardwick (2003) 4.

64 Most recently in Martindale (2013) 175–177.

65 Martindale (2013) 176.

judgement about this.⁶⁶ Moreover, Martindale's 'dialogues' seem a little one-sided. This article has, I hope, shown that Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* movies demonstrate a complex pattern of Classical reception. Classical ideas are transmitted through Tolkien's own education into his texts and then into the movies. *The Lord of the Rings* then reshaped the ancient epic genre in general. This can stand as an example of the sort of receptions we should be aware of.

Secondly, this approach of privileging certain receptions over others seems to me to be an attempt to reaffirm the (or a) canon of literature and the primacy of written literature over other media and genres. This comes at a time when others (and I would include myself among them) see Reception Studies as a means of democratizing Classics.⁶⁷

Thirdly, it has the potential to demean the academic areas in whose fields of study the receiving texts lie. As Martindale himself recognizes, it is important in Reception to be credible both to Classicists and to those who study the receiving text.⁶⁸

It also follows, then, that the best scholars in Classical Reception will be those who are able to become credible both as Classicists and scholars in the receiving field.⁶⁹ This means that interdisciplinary collaboration is vital, and that requires a meeting of equals. That means that Classicists need to take an interest in the receiving text in its own right, not just as a means of illuminating Classical antiquity. We must not act as if all other disciplines are merely means of understanding the ancient world better.

Finally, to privilege the illumination of Greco-Roman antiquity detracts from the question of how later societies, including our own, engage with the Classical past. This is surely a question in which Classicists should be interested. Without wanting to invoke the dreaded term 'relevance', Classical Studies as a discipline should be engaging with the wider world, and understanding how the

⁶⁶ Martindale (2006) 11 famously dismisses much of what is studied in Classical Reception as 'banal' and 'quotidian'. For challenges to this see Nisbet (2007) 157; Winkler (2009) 12–13; and Bakogianni (2017) 481.

⁶⁷ This is discussed from a number of angles in Hardwick & Harrison (2013).

⁶⁸ Martindale (2006) 9.

⁶⁹ A good example is Maria Wyke, who followed her doctorate in Classics with a year's study at the British Film Institute; see <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/classics/people/full-time-staff/maria-wyke> (accessed 4 July 2022).

wider world engages with our subject matter is an important part of strengthening the position of the discipline. Focusing primarily on the illumination of antiquity carries with it the danger of re-establishing under a different name the much-criticized ‘classical tradition’.⁷⁰

In conclusion, then, to fully understand trends in ancient world movies of the twenty-first century, it is necessary to understand wider trends in cinema, in this case the influence of *The Lord of the Rings*. This is another example of the need for Classical Reception scholars to not just be experts in Classical Reception but also experts in the subject areas in which the receptions are taking place. Thus, we see (once again) that far from being the sinecure that its detractors sometimes allege, Classical Reception studies is one of the most intellectually demanding fields within Classics.

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⁷⁰ On the Classical tradition, see Hardwick (2003) 1–3; but see also the reassertion of the ‘Classical tradition’ as distinct from ‘reception’ in Silk, Gildenhard & Barrow (2014) 3–9.

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Review of Hamish Williams: *Tolkien and the Classical World*

Walking Tree Publishers (Zurich/Jena 2021) (= Cormarë
Series No. 45), 414 pp. ISBN: 978-3-905703-45-0, 44 €.

The monumental volume is dedicated to the challenging task¹ of exploring the extent to which Tolkien received and drew on the classical world in creating his own world. The book contains 14 contributions divided into 5 chapters, as well as a preface by the editor Hamish Williams, an accounted Tolkien expert², and closing remarks by D. Graham J. Shipley. Except for the

1 It has already been shown in detail that Tolkien's works were mainly influenced by the medieval world, Williams (2020) xx, with reference to Fisher (2011) 32–34, and Honnegger (2005) 45 f., 50 f., whereas the study of classical influences has so far played only a minor role.

2 Williams continues to research Tolkien's relationship with the classical world and a new

last chapter (5: Shorter Remarks and Observations), the chapters are coherent in their content and their order is structured.

Already in the introduction, Williams shows that he is aware of the challenges of researching classical influences in Tolkien's work. He makes it clear that the reception process is wide-ranging and consists of different processes such as transmission, translation, excerption, interpretation, re-writing, re-imagining, and representing. Therefore, the articles included not only consider the works of classical antiquity, beginning with

book titled J. R. R. Tolkien's Utopianism and the Classics is scheduled for publication in 2023.

Homer up to the fall of the Western or Eastern Roman Empire (750 BC–476/1453 AD), but also the reception of antiquity in the late Victorian Edwardian period, which influenced Tolkien throughout his life. He also points out that contemporary readers have difficulties recognizing classical motifs and he can show that this development goes so far that such elements can even disappear from modern adaptations of “classical” fantasy literature³.

Consequently the first chapter is devoted to Tolkien’s education in order to show how well versed he was in classical studies and how his training affected his work. In this way, Williams creates a common framework for the following chapters and contributions. He devotes himself in detail to the letters written by Tolkien and is thus able to convincingly demonstrate to the reader that Tolkien’s interests have fluctuated over time. Not surprisingly for his time, Tolkien received a thorough classical education and excelled in Latin and Greek followed by his years as a student before the First World War, in which his interest in classical subjects waned in favor of a turn to themes and motifs of the

Nordic sphere⁴. Nevertheless, Williams shows that Tolkien incorporated his classical training into his works during his professional years. He distinguishes Tolkien’s way of thinking in five points⁵. His third point, “intertextuality”, is especially striking, for Williams chooses examples in which Tolkien himself has his say on his work⁶. Only a single example among many can be pointed out here, namely Tolkien’s view of Gondor as a “venerable and proud but increasingly impotent Byzantium”, which by implication gives Arnor the role of the Western Roman Empire⁷.

The introductory chapter concludes with a contribution by Ross Clare, who compares the history of Númenor and its Kings, as recorded in the Appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Silmarillion*, and *The Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth*, to that of Athens in the 5th century BC, handed down through

3 Vividly demonstrated through the absence of Bacchus and Dionysian elements from the film adaptations of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, created by Tolkien’s contemporary and friend C. S. Lewis, see Williams (2020) xxii.

4 A situation that has been reinforced by a growing “Nordic turn”, an overemphasis on classical texts, Tolkien’s social environment and his tutors, Williams (2020) 16.

5 Explanations of classical concepts, artistic legacy, intertextuality, analogy, recreational reading, Williams (2020) 20.

6 Especially the *Letters* 131, 150–154 in which he draws a connection between Túrin Turambar and Oedipus and *Letters* 154, 197 f. in which the fall of Numenor is compared with the myth of Atlantis, see. Williams (2020) 22 f.; Scull & Hammond (2006) 371.

7 *Letters* 131, 157; Williams (2020) 23.

the historiographies of Herodotus and Thucydides,⁸ as well as to the descriptions of Roman emperors by Roman and early Christian authors.⁹ The great strength of Ross's contribution is that she sees her examples as only a part of thinkable influences on Tolkien's work and identifies other sources of inspiration as well. Sauron, thus, can be seen as a bad ruler as described by early Christian biographers and as an evil entity as described in the New Testament¹⁰.

On this general basis, the individual sections are devoted to specific comparisons with Tolkien's work. The first section deals with the influence of ancient mythological and epic stories which are reflected in the work of Tolkien. The first contribution by Giuseppe Pezzini shows that there are several classical patterns of interaction (dreams, inspiration), but these differ from the *Silmarillion* to *The Lord of the Rings* and are re-negotiated by Tolkien. In this context, the relationship between the gods and their children is crucial. Pezzini concludes that the Valar do not treat humans and elves

as tokens but act out of compassion towards them, even when they anger them, a strong contrast to the Olympian deities. In addition, he can show through the arrow-shot *topos* that Tolkien made use of a popular ancient theme. The second article by Benjamin Eldon Stevens analyses how themes of loss, death, and forgetting play with ancient models in Tolkien's works. The ancient *topos* of the 'underworld journey' (*katabasis*) serves as the central point of his article and he can show that several Stories bear resemblance to the works of ancient authors, for example the Fellowship in Moria in *The Fellowship of the Ring* with Virgil's Aeneas hoping to meet the shade of his father. In the third paper, Austin M. Freeman argues that Tolkien's most important virtue (*estel*) derives not only from the Northern (indomitable will) and the Christian (*pistis* or 'faith/trust'), as previously thought, but also from Virgil (*pietas*) and thus stands on three pillars (Classical, Nordic, Christian). To do this, he compares Virgil's story of the fall of Troy with Tolkien's narrative of the fall of Gondolin and the siege of Minas Tirith. Freeman can show that Tolkien's notion of duty cannot be explained solely by Northern notions of courage (as expressed in the fall of Gondolin), which always carry an element of self-focused pride. In strong contrast, Beregon, Pippin and Faramir are acting during the siege of Minas Tirith, coming close to Virgil's ideal of *pietas* in their virtues.

⁸ Clare (2020) 41–56.

⁹ Mainly Tacitus, Sueton, Cassius Dio, St. Augustine and the New Testament, Clare (2020) 58–62.

¹⁰ Clare (2020) 62 shows that the persecution of believers and the prohibition of the Elvish language in Númenor by King Ar-Adûnakhôr bears features similar to the persecution of Christians instructed in the fourth decree of Diocletian.

In the last contribution to the second section, Peter Astrup Sundt argues that the mythological story of Orpheus and Eurydice is not only reflected in the story of Beren and Lúthien but also in *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Simarillion*. Orpheus can be found in the Ents as well as in Tom Bombadil.

The third section is dedicated to the dialogue between Tolkien and the Greek philosophers. Michael Kleu shows in detail Tolkien's enthusiasm for the sinking of Atlantis as described by Plato in the dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias*. Although Tolkien mentions Plato only in a single letter, details of his story show clear connections to the Greek philosopher. For example, his account of the downfall of Númenor, the *Akallabêth*, ends with notes on being and becoming, topics that are also discussed by Plato. Kleu also identifies several post-Platonic Atlantis narratives that found their way into Tolkien's Númenor narrative. As a result, he concludes that the story of the fall of Númenor is a fantasy version of the fall of Atlantis according to Plato.

Łukasz Neubauer's article attempts to present Plato's story of the Ring of Gyges as a model for Tolkien's One Ring. Besides the fact that both render the wearer invisible Neubauer also lists similarities in the narrative between Plato's Republic and *The Hobbit*. However, the connection to Gyges is only another option to the numerous medieval and Norse models for the Hobbit.

The last contribution of the section undertakes a reinterpretation of the story *The Children of Hurin* in terms of Aristotle's theory of tragedy. In addition to the fact that Tolkien himself described the story as tragic, the author Julian Eilmann elaborates on aspects of the story which, in Aristotle's understanding, also lead to the hero's failure through error or frailty. These shortcomings of the hero include his excessive pride, his difficulty in making friends, his poor judgment, and his fury.

The fourth section deals with the limits of the classical world in Tolkien's works. In the first article, Philip Burton uses four case studies (plant names, wine, oliphants, and dragons) on an ethnological and linguistic background to argue that Tolkien fundamentally assumes a unity of northern Europe and the Mediterranean. The author also considers medieval receptions of ancient individuals who were known to Tolkien. For example, the apocryphal letters of Alexander to Aristotle in middle English speak of *oliphantis* and *serpentis* which the Macedonian king encounters in a desert in India. The text thus connects all spheres with each other.

In his article, Richard Z. Gallant shows similarities between the Noldorisation of the Edain in the First Age and the Romanisation of the Germanic tribes in the Western Roman Empire. Like the Romans, the Noldor have an ideological framework that is adaptable and designed to cooperate to maintain

their power and to integrate foreigners into their reign. Eventually, both Edain and Germanic people develop into rulers within this structure. However, the author argues that Tolkien might not have been fully aware of these references and that this model of cultural adaptation of tribal societies to an ‘advanced’ culture was common in Tolkien’s time.

Juliette Harrison draws a compelling image of the historical background of Gondor’s and Rohan’s relationship with each other. While Gondor (also from Rohan’s point of view) appears like a Mediterranean empire, the Rohirrim have many different models (Angles, Saxons, and Jutes). The Author takes up Tolkien’s ideas of Gondor as a kind of Byzantium, invoking not only the geography¹¹ but also the names of the inhabitants of Gondor¹² as an argument. In contrast to the conflicts between the Germanic tribes and the remnants of the Roman Empire, however, a peaceful relationship is established between Rohan and Gondor, which is further strengthened by marriage (Éowyn and Faramir). Tolkien thus creates an alternative history.

¹¹ See Miryam Librán-Moreno (2011) 86–108, who states that “at a macroscopic level, Tolkien made Gondor functionally similar to Constantinople”.

¹² The residents bear names in Sindarin and are thus part of an older tradition.

The last section starts with a contribution by Alley Marie Jordan, who gives an insight into pastoralism in Middle Earth. Starting with a definition of pastoralism she demonstrates that there are certain landscapes, like arcadia or the shire, which cannot be located but share common features which mark their inhabitants as pastoralists in a bucolic way.

The last paper by O. Filonenko and V. Shchepanskyi reveals references between classical influences on Music in Tolkien’s *Legendarium*. Regarding classical philosophers, they identify some categories (arrangement and disposition, harmony and discord) which Tolkien also refers to.

In my opinion, the otherwise comprehensive volume at this point only lacks a final article dealing with architecture, buildings, and art objects described in Tolkien’s works, which could also be analyzed in terms of classical motifs.

The volume is concluded by a paper by D. Graham J. Shipley, who puts the contributions into a wider context. He observes that Tolkien was not only interested in expanding classical themes with a happy ending but reinterpreted them to serve his narrative. In Shipley’s view, this reinterpretation is also Tolkien’s greatest achievement in dealing with classical themes. He also points out that the ancient references are not the most important part of Tolkien’s work but are nevertheless unmistakably present.

In addition, there is a useful index in the appendix in which figures from Tolkien's works are cross-referenced with ancient characters. In this way, the reader can quickly establish references and pick out relevant themes for himself.

This comprehensive volume thus not only sheds new light on classical references in Tolkien's works but also offers the reader easy access to various references between Middle-earth and antiquity.

Contents

Editor's Notes – Hamish Williams – i

Introduction

Classical Tradition, Modern Fantasy, and the Generic Contracts of Readers – Hamish Williams – xi

Section 1: Classical Lives and Histories

Tolkien the Classicist: Scholar and Thinker – Hamish Williams – 3

Greek and Roman Historiographies in Tolkien's Númenor – Ross Clare – 37

Section 2: Ancient Epic and Myth

The Gods in (Tolkien's) Epic: Classical Patterns of Divine Interaction – Giuseppe Pezzini – 73

Middle-earth as Underworld: From Katabasis to Eucatastrophe – Benjamin Eldon Stevens – 105

Pietas and the Fall of the City: A Neglected Virgilian Influence on Middle-earth's Chief Virtue – Austin M. Freeman – 131

The Love Story of Orpheus and Eurydice in Tolkien's Orphic Middle-earth – Peter Astrup Sundt – 165

Section 3: In Dialogue with the Greek Philosophers

Plato's Atlantis and the Post-Platonic Tradition in Tolkien's Downfall of Númenor – Michael Kleu – 193

Less Consciously at First but More Consciously in the Revision: Plato's Ring of Gyges as a Putative Source of Inspiration for Tolkien's Ring of Power – H. Łukasz Neubauer – 217

Horror and Fury: J. R. R. Tolkien's The Children of Húrin and the Aristotelian Theory of Tragedy – Julian Eilmann – 247

Section 4: Around the Borders of the Classical World

“Eastwards and Southwards”: Philological and Historical Perspectives on Tolkien and Classicism – Philip Burton – 273

The Noldorization of the Edain: The Roman-Germani Paradigm for the Noldor and Edain in Tolkien’s Migration Era – Richard Z. Gallant – 305

“Escape and Consolation”: Gondor as the Ancient Mediterranean and Rohan as the Germanic World in *The Lord of the Rings* – Juliette Harrisson – 329

Section 5: Shorter Remarks and Observations

Shepherds and the Shire: Classical Pastoralism in Middle-earth – Alley Marie Jordan – 353

Classical Influences on the Role of Music in Tolkien’s *Legendarium* – Oleksandra Filonenko and Vitalii Shchepanskyi – 365

Afterword

Afterword: Tolkien’s Response to Classics in Its Wider Context – D. Graham J. Shipley – 379

Index – 399

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