# A Response to Caitlin Eha

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Language enables our own introspection, equipping us with the sense necessary to define ourselves, as well as our community. The power of words dwindles under the vociferous debates consuming today's rhetoric. It is refreshing to turn to Tolkien's rhetoric: he built his life around language's essential role in human understanding. It impassioned him from a very early age. He revered the power of words—it was sacred to him, and he upholds this power in his own work. Caitlin Eha's article "One World to Rule Them All: How J.R.R. Tolkien used Original Intertext to Create Middle-earth" (*YSW* vol. 13, 2016) examines the creative strategies Tolkien employs in his fiction. She insightfully explores the relationship between our understanding of the physical world and the manifestation of imaginary worlds, using Tolkien's Middle-earth as the example. In doing so, she analyzes Tolkien's stories as subordinate to the development of Middle-earth, in some ways overlooking the significance of the individual stories themselves—Middle-earth's existence precisely in a specific mass of words—leading to some shortcomings in her analysis. Tolkien himself declares, "It is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really count" ("On Fairy-Stories" 119–120). Incorporating due respect to the individual story would enhance Eha's argument and our discourse on Tolkien's enchanting fiction, bringing her theories full circle.

Eha asserts that originality is the key to the appeal of Tolkien's fiction. She says, "When writing in the fantasy genre, the writer must create a story-world that feels unfamiliar to the reader—otherwise, the world would be merely a slight alteration of the world readers experience every day, thereby defeating the purpose of the genre" (113). She then argues for Tolkien's originality and centers on the notion of intertextuality, which she sees as counter to originality. She theorizes that Tolkien uses his own system of "intertextuality that is confined to [his] works alone" (114), calling this concept "original intertext": "Whereas intertextuality speaks to the relationship among the works of various authors… original intertext states that a similar relationship exists among works *by the same author*…. To use original intertext is to draw on one's own creations… to give intertextual support to another of one's creations" (114).

From Eha's perspective outside Tolkien's fiction looking inward, that which is "foreign" about Middle-earth is the important part. But from a perspective grounded in Middle-earth, in the stories which take place there, what do we see? Middle-earth actually participates in its own larger literary tradition. For his fiction's material, Tolkien undeniably pulled from ancient sources such as "The Wanderer," "The

Ruin," "Widsith," "The Battle of Maldon," *Beowulf*, Norse mythology, The *Kalevala*—the list goes on. Much literary scholarship analyzes the influence such works had on his fiction. But to reuse materials from other authors is not to rely on them.

Tolkien envisioned using his knowledge as a philologist to create a mythology for England, his homeland.[1] He would do this by uncovering the lost mythology of the region, the stories told there throughout history in many languages. A mythology is not one story, but a collection of stories attempting to explain certain realities in their own ways. This would mean Tolkien incorporating stories he encountered in his philology, such as those listed above, into a new style more compatible with the present civilization. For Tolkien, the sheer wonderment and applicability of mythology is inextricably tied to the human imagination:

> The nearer the so-called 'nature-myth', or allegory of the large processes of nature, is to its supposed archetype [the natural element which it symbolizes], the less interesting it is, and indeed the less is it of a myth capable of throwing any illumination whatever on the world. Let us assume for the moment, as this theory assumes, that nothing actually exists corresponding to the 'gods' of mythology: no personalities, only astronomical or meteorological objects. Then these natural objects can only be arrayed with a personal significance and glory by a gift, the gift of a person…. Personality can only be derived from a person. The gods may derive their colour and beauty from the high splendours of nature, but it was Man who obtained these for him, abstracted them from sun and moon and cloud; their personality they get direct from him; the shadow or flicker of divinity that is upon them they receive through him from the invisible world, the Supernatural. ("On Fairy-Stories" 123)

Tolkien's stories in Middle-earth are, simply put, fairy-tales given epic, mythological proportions. That which Tolkien deems "indescribable, though not imperceptible" ("On Fairy-Stories" 114), that which drives our imagination and our sense of virtue, is the Supernatural; the Supernatural manifests as the Mystical in fairy-stories and as the Divine in myth; and in Middle-earth, the Mystical precedes our knowledge of the Divine. Though the concerns of the Ainur and the Valar align with the characters of The Lord of the Rings, Tolkien tells the battle between good and evil from the perspective of the characters, who seem caught up in the celestial battle, always doing things because they must—but not necessarily understanding why they must or why Sauron wants to perpetuate suffering.

And in Tolkien's writings, the deities reflect conditions of morality which determine the natural elements they create in Middle-earth, which echoes mythological explanations of nature. But in "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien applies what he deems to be the most important quality of fairy-stories, the Magical, to the mythic sense of nature (125). It bestows everything natural independently with a personality, not just the "gods" who represent nature generally. In Middle-earth, each and everything which exists outwardly manifests its own particular moral condition (with a few deceptive exceptions such as Sauron's fair form). Both the physical form and the personality express a

moral state: elves with their physical beauty reflecting their inner grace and aptitude as opposed to warmongering orcs who literally fell from this grace, or the child-like size of hobbits and their innocent appetites contrasting with the massively oversized spiders and their murderous insatiability. Humans, on the other hand, retain their naturally fluid personalities. Tolkien fuses the trivial, familiar Magic of the fairy-tale with the universal significance of mythology to bestow meaning to the whole of Middle-earth.

Without each story, the meaning of Middle-earth's contents would be solely Supernatural. Their personalities do not exist on their own beyond the pages, but we understand them by the way they are collectively characterized in each story. How each personality, with its own natural moral state, interacts with others, or how changes occur in each personality, constitutes the image in the "Mirror of scorn and pity towards man," one facet of fairy-stories ("On Fairy-Stories" 125). Each particular interaction or change illustrates a certain portrayal of humanity, all of which is exclusive to the story in which they take place. Tolkien's stories cause such a lasting effect on his readers because of this feeling, seeing our own experience reflected in the words as they presently appear, not as they whisk us away from the human condition.

Tolkien understood language as something animated. Whereas we tend to understand stories as a construction of words which forms an action, Tolkien found that the reverse is equally true. He would unearth knowledge about a culture's history based on the language they used. He saw that there is no usage of a word without life, a story, behind it. He would examine the name of a place and follow its etymology to unearth things that must have been true about that place and the people who lived there. Tolkien's understanding of the "tangled skein of language" and the "intricately knotted and ramified history of the branches of the Tree of Tales" shaped the history of Middle-earth ("On Fairy-Stories" 120). But it also shaped the stories of Middle-earth, and therefore Middle-earth itself. Many stories are retold multiple times across Tolkien's fiction. For example, Tolkien's rendition of the book of *Genesis* appears as the "Ainulindale" in *The Silmarillion*, but the "Valaquenta" retells the same story, and another version appears in *The Book of Lost Tales*. In the appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*, the entire history of Middle-earth is recounted in a few pages; the events of the whole trilogy are retold in a paragraph. *The Book of Lost Tales* features an old bard who recounts tales passed down and translated from old languages.

Tapping into the oral tradition in this way, Tolkien creates for Middle-earth many degrees and filters through which its history has passed, capturing the development of a story the same as he found it in his philology—as retellings by different chroniclers in different ages and languages. Middle-earth, the collective story generated by all the stories which take place there, becomes about more than the lives in the civilizations it contains—the story of Middle-earth is one about humankind and storytelling itself. While Eha's construct of "original intertext" is a useful explanation for this immensely rich interweaving of stories, it's a notion that should be further developed to account for Tolkien's ideals for telling mythologies as he describes them, and as his many tellings of Middle-earth's stories demonstrates.

## Note

¹As taught by Dr. Alexander Bruce, who gives a course on Tolkien at Sewanee.

## Works Cited

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