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The Chronicle Without an Author: History, Myth and Narration in Tolkien's
Legendarium

Construction of Authorship in and around the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien, ed. Judith
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Creating a myth for England: Tolkien's ambition may have seemed unrealisable in the 20th century, at a time when 'myths' couldn't have meant more than 'stories'. His attempt to blend Northern European legends¹ with Christian narratives to reconstruct what might have been the mythical past of the British Isles may have been no more than an intriguing exercise in weaving anthropology and literature together. Instead, Tolkien's endeavour helped codify what became a prominent genre in popular literature: high fantasy.

The concept of 'secondary world' is one of Tolkien's most important contributions to fantasy. While Middle Earth was not the first secondary world ever written, Tolkien was the first author to conceptualise it as such. A 'secondary world' is a world that is created by a work of fiction; its very ambition is to be different from the 'primary world', the real world, the world as we know it. Why bother with phrases such as 'primary' and 'secondary', when one could refer to the real world and the fictional world? First, 'real' need not refer to a physical, tangible reality. Fictional worlds exist in their own right, and stories are 'real' in the sense that they can be experienced their readers. The second problem posed by the word 'real' becomes evident once we examine another concept Tolkien developed in 'On Fairy-stories': the idea of 'secondary belief'. The idea is drawn from Coleridge's 'willing suspension of disbelief', but Tolkien distances himself from it, asserting that if a reader has to make an effort of the will to believe in a work of fiction, then the work in question is a failure ('On Fairy Stories' 38). Belief in the secondary world must be actual belief, while the reading lasts. This makes it somewhat more complicated to address the notion of 'reality' while attempting to differentiate between primary and secondary world: can a fictional world be believed in unconditionally (even though that belief should still see the distinction between primary and secondary worlds), and at the same time, not be real? The secondary world is actually meant to give a strong impression of reality; in the words of critic Rosemary Jackson, 'The tale seems to deny the process of its own telling, it is merely reproducing established 'true' versions of what happened.' (33). Ideally, the secondary

¹ Germanic legends inspired some of the best-known elements of Tolkien's legendarium, such as the story of

world should feel as real as the primary world: an independent entity, not the creation of an author.

Tolkien's collected papers, first drafts and essays, published after his death, were aptly titled *The History of Middle Earth*. Indeed, this is how readers are given to experience Middle Earth: by following its history, from its creation to shortly after the events in *The Lord of the Rings*. This history spans millennia, with the Elves as protagonists in the *Silmarillion*, followed by Men and Hobbits. Yet there is one character that never appears: a historian, a character who could be the origin of 'the established 'true' version' of the history of Middle Earth. Even Bilbo doesn't have this function: although he does write an account of his travels, it is clear enough that this account is not *The Lord of the Rings*, and while Tolkien claims that *The Hobbit* is indeed a direct translation from the Red Book, he does not make such an explicit claim regarding *The Lord of the Rings* (*The Lord of the Rings* 1). The Red Book has eighty chapters, whereas there are eighty-one chapters in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; it is supposed to include 'extracts from the Books of Lore translated by Bilbo in Rivendell' (1344), yet those extracts are not to be found in *The Lord of the Rings*. Sam remarks that Bilbo never appeared to have finished writing the account of his own adventures (1294), and it is not even clear whether the task will ever be completed, although Sam is entrusted with the task of writing the last chapters. As Besson remarks (188), *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* show Bilbo as he writes his book, suggesting the presence of another narrator besides him, and at any rate distancing his own book from the book the readers have in their hands. Moreover, after the end of his quest, Frodo leaves Middle Earth to enter Valinor, which no mortal is supposed to have seen, making the relation of his journey most problematic. The Red Book may indeed have been written; but how it was passed on afterwards, by whom, and what additional sources were used to complete the final version contained in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* remains a mystery. Tolkien poses as a historian, compiling from various sources and traditions (see for instance *The Silmarillion* 189, 136; *Morgoth's Ring* 304, 336, 370 etc.); however, what this original material was is never established in his stories. What are *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, then--real stories, fictional history? And who is this supposed 'missing link' between Tolkien the author, and the stories he is supposed to have compiled from earlier sources?

the Rings; but Tolkien also drew inspiration from the Kalevala and Celtic traditions, among others.

There are many ways of writing history in the primary world, and many reasons to do so. While that may not seem immediately relevant to a secondary world, it must be noted that Tolkien did imagine Middle Earth mostly in the context of a chronology, divided in ages and oriented towards successive goals (the recovery of the Silmarils; the departures of the Elves from Middle Earth...), as opposed to, for example, focusing on examining the details of its geography, its ethnography... To some extent, this piece of fictional history can therefore be examined as historiography.

The Christian tradition let its mark on Western narratives of history. In an eschatological perspective, history has a direction, from Creation to the end of times (Le Goff 241). This conception is evident in Tolkien's works. The history of Middle Earth is divided in ages, that do not amount to a cyclical return of the past but show an eschatological progression (Melkor is imprisoned at the end of the First Age, the end of the Second Age sees the destruction of Numenor and Sauron's temporary defeat, the Third Age ends with a definitive victory over Sauron, thus ending the direct influence of Melkor or his servants in Middle Earth). There is an implication that Middle Earth is actually an imagined past of the Earth, among others in *The Lord of the Rings* (106), where a description of the constellations of Middle Earth shows that they are identical to the ones in the sky of the Earth, and in the 'Athrabeth Finrod Ah Andreth', where Andreth alludes to a legend among Men that claims that Iluvatar will one day enter the Earth in person to mend it, a clear allusion to the dogma of the Incarnation (321). What this remark in the 'Athrabeth' shows is that the progression is not yet complete. Our present is supposed to be a part of it, though it is set apart from the events Tolkien relates by the very fact that they are put in a coherent written whole our present is not a part of; but this is, after all, one of the very purposes of historiography: separating the present from the past, dividing the past into meaningful periods (Certeau 16). Tolkien's works (for want of a better word, we'll refer to the cycle constituted by *The Lord fo the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* as the history of Middle Earth, without italics, to distinguish it from the published *History of Middle Earth*) are indeed fictional historiography, written from a perspective that is distinctly Western; furthermore, we might draw parallels between the history of Middle Earth and Mediaeval historiography, as I will attempt to show.

Guénée wrote--'During the Middle Ages, historians had to choose between two [...] genres: histories, and chronicles' (4). The distinction between chronicles and histories is irrelevant today, but shaped all mediaeval historiography. During the first half of the Middle Ages, histories were considered a 'noble' genre (6), with Greek historians serving as model:

histories took the form of a tale, 'following the course of time but omitting dates' (8). Their ties with literature were significant: while histories were supposed to deal with actual events, they were largely concerned with the beauty of the story. Embellishing was one of the tasks of the mediaeval historian. Events were valuable as far as they could be turned into meaningful stories (Gauvard and Labory 191). On the contrary, chronicles, a 'minor' genre until the 12th century (Guénée 9), represented the more technical side of history. Chronicles were based on a series of dates, and aimed at representing the past in the driest, most factual way they could. Unlike histories, their initial purpose was the recording of dates and facts, without any literary concern. Indeed, while the authors of chronicles were usually known, Guénée insists that they did not perceive their work as autonomous, but as the continuation of Eusebius of Caesarea's original chronicle (6). The idea that the work of individual historians might be unique, offering an original point of view on the past, was unknown: historians saw themselves as merely adding their own contribution to a universal chronicle, started by Eusebius. The notion that the more exact and factual form might be considered the minor one, and the more literary, but less scrupulously precise, the major form, may come as a surprise to modern mentalities; however, in the early mediaeval mind, the literary aspect was often more valued than adherence to established facts.

This picture was not unchanging, nonetheless: thus, in Iceland, Snorri Sturluson took great pains to satisfy his audience of the veracity of his stories (Boyer 133), and it was considered a disgrace for skalds to over-embellish the truth or invent facts, even for the sake of writing a pleasing story (124). For Snorri, writing about history involved both respecting the truth and giving it a literary value. Around the same period in the rest of Europe, chronicles gained value in the eyes of historians, who were starting to feel more concerned about precise facts (although literary aesthetics were still a prominent concern). The fact that chronicles recorded dates and places with precision made them especially valuable. After the 12th century, chronicles were no longer considered as a minor genre, but viewed as having an advantage over histories: besides being good works of literature, they were also reliable documents on the past (Guénée 9). The transition from histories as literary works to history as mainly document was thus not completed during the Middle Ages. Gauvard and Labory remark that as late as the 15th century, chronicles could still be works aimed at a popular audience, that meant to entertain (190) or else moralise, by deducing a morality from actual events (191). Writing history for the sake of knowing the past was an enterprise limited to lawyers, judges or notaries, who had an immediate, concrete use for it (Autrand 163, Heers 77). Outside these professions, historians were authors of literary works as much as

scientists.

After these preliminary notes, examining the history of Middle Earth in the light of mediaeval narratives of history may lead to a number of remarks. First of all, it is quite obvious that if it is history, it is not a pastiche of 20th-century historiography: dates are very rare, there is no discussion of the sources in the text, nor any attempt at placing the author in the position of an interpreter of the facts he writes about, a role that is today understood to be part and parcel of a task. At first glance, the history of Middle Earth seems to have much in common with ancient or mediaeval histories, writing about the past in a literary form, with few concerns for asserting or proving the objectivity of the text, unlike what late mediaeval chronicles often did through the inclusion of a formula giving the name of the author and stating that he compiled his notes from trustworthy sources or first-hand accounts (Marchello-Nizia 14). One could picture *The Silmarillion* as the work of a historian writing shortly after Aragorn's return on the throne of Gondor, retrospectively compiling the events that led to the fall of Sauron, the departure of the Elves and the return of peace after three long ages in Middle Earth. However, the structure of the book itself² suggest a counter-argument: *The Silmarillion* is hardly a unified work. The opening sections ('Ainulindalë' and 'Valaquenta') are written in the style of religious texts. The phrasing of the 'Ainulindalë' may remind the reader of Genesis: short propositions taking the form of statements with few stylistic embellishments, a simple, occasionally archaic vocabulary:

'There was Eru, the One, who in Arda is called Iluvatar; and he made first the Ainur, the Holy Ones, that were the offspring of his thought, and they were with him before aught else was made. And he spoke to them, propounding to them themes of music; and they sang before him, and he was glad.' (3)

The following section, the 'Valaquenta', opens with a paragraph that reads like a shorter version of the paragraph quoted above,³ suggesting two different versions of the same text rather than a continuation. The style of the Valaquenta is more didactic, and the

² The structure of *The Silmarillion* is mostly a result of the circumstances of its publication: Christopher Tolkien, helped by Guy Gavriel Kay, had to collect the manuscripts of his late father and give a publishable form to papers that were largely unrelated to each other, and what the final form *The Silmarillion* would have been if Tolkien had lived long enough to finish it is a matter of conjecture. However, given the nature of the manuscripts that were later collected in *A History of Middle Earth* (isolated stories or essay, often with their own beginning and end, that do not always appear to be part of a larger project), it seems quite plausible that a hypothetical *Silmarillion* written and edited by Tolkien himself would have had a similar form--supposing, of course, that such a project could possibly have seen the light in spite of Tolkien's tendency to rewrite and revise elements of the history of Middle Earth to no end. We might argue, moreover, that the history of Middle Earth that contemporary readers are acquainted with is the result of a collective effort (from Tolkien, his son and Kay), and that dismissing Christopher Tolkien and Guy Gavriel Kay's work by speculating on what Tolkien himself would have wanted may be misguided in itself.

³ 'In the beginning Eru, the One, who in the Elvish tongue is called Iluvatar, made the Ainur of his thought...'

titles of the sub-chapters evoke the form of the essay or treatise ('Of the Valar', 'Of the Maiar', 'Of the Enemies'). The chapter itself is a catalogue of the various Powers who came to live inside Arda, and their attributes, possibly evoking Hesiod's *Theogony* and its catalogue of gods and heroes. The following chapters retain a style that is characterised by poetic or archaic structures,⁴ reminiscent of an epic style. Some of the chapters feature many characters instead of a single protagonist, use an external focus and span long periods of time (such as the first chapter of the 'Quenta Silmarillion', 'Of the beginning of days'), while others focus on a restricted number of protagonists and function in a way that is much closer to the standards of contemporary fantasy: they are centred on the struggles of individual characters whose thoughts may be revealed, develop on a shorter period of time and come to a conclusion when the protagonists' struggles reach a solution. The stories of Beren and Lúthien, and of Túrin Turambar, are the most notable of those.

There is, then, a great variety of styles and narrative mode inside the *Silmarillion* itself, with occasional repetitions (such as the beginnings of the 'Ainulindalë' and 'Valaquenta'), and breaks of the narrative continuity marked by a disruption of the chronology (when the focus shifts from the Noldor in Valinor to the Sindar in Middle Earth, and from the Valar to the first awakening of Men), or by a shift to a story that forms a secondary plot and does not further the main plot of the Silmarils (the story of Túrin). It is therefore impossible to read it as the work of one fictional historian, all the more if one adds *The Lord of the Rings* and the posthumously published *The Children of Hurin*, which are separate works in their own right, but part of the continuity as well. The necessity of including *The Lord of the Rings* is obvious, as it closes the story of the battle against evil in Middle Earth. *The Children of Hurin* may seem to be a more peripheral tale: Túrin does slay an important member of Morgoth's army (the dragon Glaurung), but that killing does not end the war, nor even tip the balance to either side. However, while Túrin's story does not immediately further the plot of the *Silmarillion*, a fragment, that was not included in the *Silmarillion* although it is alluded to (45), and although Tolkien found it important enough to rewrite it several times, casts a new light on his story. This fragment refers to one of Mandos's prophecies, and is the only depiction of the end of times in Tolkien's works. According to it, the end of the world will start with Melkor breaking free, and Túrin coming back to fight him and avenge his family (*The Lost Road* 333). If Túrin is to be

(15)

⁴ 'and ere yet there was anything that grew...' (27), 'And when Valinor was full-wrought and the Valar were established, in the midst of the plain beyond the mountains they built their city, Valmar of many bells' (31)

given such a crucial role, then there is no doubt that his story should feature in detail in the history of Middle Earth. The disparity between his story and the rest of the *Silmarillion*, however, is noteworthy.

Tolkien once expressed his ambition to write ‘one long Saga of the Jewels and the Ring’ (*Silmarillion* xiii). By ‘saga’, he certainly referred to the original Norse definition: a work of prose, the most famous of which depicted the lives of saints, heroes or kings, and were historical works as well as entertainment (as pointed out earlier, from Snorri’s commitment to the truth). This statement must be discussed: unlike some popular mediaeval texts of mainland Europe (such as the Reynard cycle), that were largely anonymous compilations realised by more than one person, or even the Sagas of the Icelanders whose authors are still unknown, the sagas of kings and heroes were generally put in written form by one known author who unified the text. However, the writing of sagas such as the *Heimskringla*, or of course the *Eddas*, relied heavily on earlier sources, including oral traditions; the author who put the text into unified written form may be known, but as was most often the case in mediaeval literature, the subject matter was largely not his. Maybe Tolkien’s intent, then, was simply to pose as a modern day Snorri, compiling earlier material into one long contemporary saga. However, the resulting work is too diverse to believe that this ambition was realised: the fictional sources are far from perfectly unified.

In fact, the one historical genre that required a variety of authors to write, all augmenting it instead of writing their own version, was the chronicle--the universal chronicle that, according to Guénée, was supposed to constitute one large tapestry, rather than a collection of isolated documents. Moreover, this genre required its authors to be absolutely truthful, which meant that the best chroniclers were supposed to be not mere observers, but actors in their own right (Heers 73). Heers argues that in Italy, notaries made respected chroniclers, because their status as lawyers meant that their words were trustworthy, but especially because they were direct witnesses of many important events where the law or the administration might be concerned (77). Chronicles were the raw fabric of history, directly composed by actors in the events themselves, instead of being put in literary form by a writer who had not actually been present; this is why skalds in Iceland were to march with a king’s army, to be able to tell first-hand accounts of the king’s feats (Boyer 124). And we should note that in the history of Middle Earth, there are few casual observers. Maglor, the great poet, was a king in Middle Earth; Daeron took an active part in the adventures of Beren and Lúthien, even though that part mostly consisted in trying to forestall Lúthien’s efforts to flee Doriath (*Silmarillion* 201); Bilbo and Frodo were the

heroes of their own adventures. In Middle Earth, anyone who writes also appears to be a man of action, or at least to have directly experienced or witnessed the events they write about.

Should we stop talking about the history of Middle Earth, and call it the chronicle of Middle Earth instead, viewing it as raw material rather than a completed history⁵? The first problem that arises is that the text is not a collection of first-hand accounts, but clearly a collection of rewritten stories. Even if we choose to understand it as a rewriting (most likely an abridged translation) of a universal chronicle, the question of authorship becomes problematic. Chronicles were not anonymous; quite the opposite, in fact, as showed earlier. If one sought to compare the history of Middle Earth to a fictional 'universal chronicle', one should note that the various parts of that chronicle are anonymous, unlike what happened in the Middle Ages of the primary world. In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien makes numerous allusions to the legends that were written about the events he depicts, often introducing a chapter with 'It is said' or 'It is told' (sixty-two times in the *Quenta Silmarillion* alone), but names of actual writers of these legends are extremely rare; only three of them are named (Elenmirë, Maglor and one Glirhuin), and they are never the writers of the text itself, but its sources (as is quite clear when the text alludes to the lays of Beren and Lúthien, or of Túrin , and points out that it is only giving a shortened prose version of these works: *Silmarillion* 189, 236). Of the two great minstrels of Beleriand mentioned in the text, only one, Maglor, is credited with a supposed source for the *Silmarillion*; the other one, Daeron, is said to have invented writing, but to which he put his writing is never told. Who, then, is the author of the universal chronicle of Middle Earth?

In fact, a very large number of factor make that question extremely hard, and perhaps impossible, to answer. First of all, the question of the point of view. According to the perspective of modern readers on narration, some coherence between the source of the story (the narrator) and the viewpoint is expected. For example, only an external, omniscient narrator (often referred to by narratologists as God's viewpoint) is supposed to have access to any and all characters' thoughts or private life. If the narrator is a character in the story, then this character is supposed to be able to relate an eyewitness account of the events they took part in, and no others. If the narrator is supposed to have compiled the story from

⁵ I understand 'raw material' independently of any consideration on value, but simply as a means to differentiate between first-hand accounts (the chronicles) and rewritten, embellished and stylised second-hand accounts (histories).

earlier sources, then the same requirements apply to those sources, and besides, there should be at least a plausible explanation as to how the narrator came into the possession of the source material. This is not the case in the history of Middle Earth. *The Lord of the Rings* is supposed to come from Frodo's eyewitness account; yet a good third of the novel relates events for which Frodo wasn't present, and books VI and VI, although depicting Frodo's journey, nonetheless adopt Sam's point of view in many sections. It could be argued that Frodo may have had long conversations with his companions after the victory. However, even though the Red Book is mentioned and seems to be of some importance to Bilbo and Frodo, and even though the aftermath of the quest is described at length, there is a gap where the conversations between former members of the Fellowship, leading to an exchange of information, are concerned. While it was common practice for mediaeval historians to quote the names of the eyewitness from whom they learned the information they used in their books, as a guarantee of the reliability of their sources in a context where facts could be difficult to ascertain, Frodo's process of research in *The Lord of the Rings* is occulted, even though it would probably have been more crucial to the writing of the book than his conversations with Bilbo, that are described at length. Instead, it seems that Tolkien purposefully left an open gap between events and story⁶. The same inconsistency can be observed between the viewpoint and the supposed sources in *The Silmarillion*. Private conversations between Melian and Galadriel in Doriath are reported in detail (145-46), even though the Sindar of Doriath are supposed to have little taste for writing, except events of the utmost importance. The private feelings of Eöl as he chases after Aredhel and Maeglin are also exposed, even though Eöl was put to death very shortly afterwards, and could not possibly have told anyone about his journey (157). The land of Durgortheb, that Beren crosses to reach Doriath, is described in details, even though no Men or Elves ever inhabited it, and Beren supposedly never spoke about his journey (192). As for the story of Fingolfin's death, it is even more striking: the text states that no songs were ever written about it (179), yet describes the event in great detail. How could a hypothetical compiler of the story have come across such a detailed account if no documents exist?

Of course, if we were dealing with actual mediaeval historiography rather than contemporary fiction, this would be quite easy to explain. After all, mediaeval historians did

⁶ It is worth noting that in the unpublished epilogue to *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien does show Sam as he researches and collects details of the adventures of his former companions, before completing the Red Book. There exist different versions of this epilogue, showing that Tolkien gave it a lot of consideration; however, he ultimately chose not to include it, even though it answered some important questions about the writing of the story.

not hesitate to embellish their stories, and could quite simply have invented feelings and thoughts for their protagonists, to strengthen the emotional impact of their tales. This would not be an altogether unacceptable explanation for the discrepancy between supposed narrator and viewpoint in *The Silmarillion*. However, a problem remains: the fact that *The Silmarillion* consists of one book, telling the story of the world from its creation to the end of the Third Age, implies that there was one person, at least, who was in a position to collect all the different stories and compile them into one book. But examination of the few known authors of the different sources for the book shows that this would hardly have been possible. One of the authors mentioned is one Elemmirë of the Vanyar, a people that went to Valinor and never came back to Middle Earth (80). Another one is Maglor, one of the sons of Fëanor who wrote his songs after spending a long time in Middle Earth after the flight of the Noldor. The other two major ones, of course, are Bilbo and Frodo. Our hypothetical compiler, then, should have been in a position to have access to documents in Valinor, and in Middle Earth at the beginning of the Fourth Age, where they should have had access to both the Elves' songs and documents in the Shire. Frodo is ruled out, given that *The Lord of the Ring* ends after his departure, and so are Gandalf and Elrond, the two characters most likely to have had access to Bilbo's *Red Book*. In fact, only an Elf leaving Middle Earth after Aragorn's death would have been in a position to gather the documents relating the history of Middle Earth. This leaves Legolas as the only possible candidate, since, according to the appendix at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*, he did not leave Middle Earth until after Aragorn's death. Of course, presenting Legolas as the hidden author of the history of Middle Earth would sound far-fetched to many readers, and not only because the text shows him as a warrior rather than a writer. The main problem is that the text hardly shows any trace of unification, which means that no discussion on which character might have written it could yield a truly satisfactory result. One could go as far as argue that Tolkien may have deliberately erased any traces of a possible universal historian, not by placing all of his characters in a position where none of them could possibly have compiled all the information contained in the various books (technically, Legolas could have, and perhaps a few other unnamed Elves as well), but by making the very idea of a universal historian unlikely, by the sheer diversity and scope of the text.

It should be noted that Tolkien, in his very first versions of the myths of Middle Earth, apparently thought of this problem. The character of Ælfwine, who went to Valinor long after the Elves had departed, satisfyingly fulfilled the part of the historian. But that character does not appear in later versions, and since the later *Silmarillion* tells that as the

Earth became round, Valinor was sundered from it, and there only remained a path that that was not actually physical, and that none but the Elves could use, this story does not fit well within the final version of the history of Middle Earth⁷. In any case, it is not consistent with the body of myths gathered in *The Silmarillion*.

The legends remain, then, a hybrid compilation: too diverse to pass as the work of one author alone, but impossible to explain in the contemporary terms of narratology except with the vague notion of a fluid, shifting narrative voice. But legends are not the only narratives present in the history of Middle Earth. Prophecies are quite frequent, too: not omens, but explicitly voiced prophecies, by divine or heroic characters. The prophecies of Mandos are the most important (Mandos foretells Finwë's death and the ruin of the Noldor in Middle Earth, among others), but other characters, such as Finrod, also seem to possess a limited capacity to foretell events (Finrod told Galadriel about the oath he would have to take that would result in his death, long before he even became acquainted with Beren's ancestors: 150). In a way, then, stories appear before the events themselves. Flieger stated that 'Tolkien's fictive assumption, the very foundation and basis of his invented world, [is] that language creates the reality it describes and that myth and language work reciprocally on each other' (xxi). She did have a point in this, although the notion that 'language creates the reality it describes' might be debated. There is indeed a reciprocal relationship in Tolkien's works between language and myths, stories and events, which may become more evident with a brief explanation of what 'myth' could mean. Myths are tales; but there is more to them. Myths are events told in a way that puts the emphasis on their meaning and unity. They are the opposite of anecdotes: instead of simply narrating events, they construct them as meaningful stories; or even, as Barthes argued, as signs, where the story becomes a signifier with a whole new signification (228). Barthes's theory of myths was primarily intended as a sociological tool, but it can apply to literature as well: in a literary work, then, a myth would be a narrative told in the form of a tale that is suffused with meaning. In the context of the fictional history of Middle Earth, myths would be events written into meaningful tales, and the telling of those tales has a particular place in Tolkien's works. In *The Notion Club Papers*, the characters, who receive visions of the past in their dreams,

⁷ The character seemed to reappear sporadically in Tolkien's text. In *The Notion Club Papers*, an abandoned novel dating from the 1940's, where a group of academics explore the past through their dreams, one member of the group is named Ælfwine, and has visions of the past history of Númenor and Valinor. In some versions of the *Narn i Hîn Hurin*, the text is introduced by--'Here begins that tale which Ælfwine made from the *Húrinien*.' (*The War of the Jewels* 311). The identity of Ælfwine in that text is not elaborated on, however; and *The Notion Club Papers* was never finished, nor does it explicitly claim that the whole history of Middle Earth was written by that selfsame Ælfwine who claimed to have confused visions of Númenor.

make just such a distinction: what they look for on the past is not raw facts, but meaningful stories. Yet they recognise that these stories would necessarily exist with ‘uncompleted passages, weak joints, gaps’. The gaze that sees events as if they were happening before it may see a complete picture, but this picture would be impossible to understand; the gaze that sees meaning has to be content with a partial picture, in which there will always remain gaps to be filled, different points of view to adopt, different stories to emphasise (*The Notion Club Papers* 230).

I attempted to establish that if one examines the changes in point of view through *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings*, authorship in the history of Middle Earth becomes impossible to trace. The stories are there, but no hypothesis concerning their source seems satisfying. Given the facts that a number of narratives actually start as prophecies, it may be possible to formulate another hypothesis. There is in fact no author; stories and events function in a kind of symbiosis. Outwardly, the history of Middle Earth seems to be inspired by mediaeval historical narratives, drawing elements from both histories and chronicles: the past is rewritten as legends with a high aesthetic and symbolic value, as in histories, but the text appears as a collection of fragments, taken from direct eyewitness reports and gathered in one long winding thread, as if it represented a sort of universal chronicle. But the relationship between events and stories is actually even closer. The stories may start even before the events they depict have taken place, in the form of prophetic narratives. The legends then grow organically out of history, seemingly without the assistance of an author. Writers are not absent from Middle Earth, but whatever they do write is rarely shown, and when it is, it can fluctuate (thus Bilbo’s song ‘The Road Goes Ever On and On’ changes depending on whether he sings it or Frodo does: 46-47, 96). In any case, aside from Bilbo’s poetry, the rendition of which is not always to be trusted if it is subject to variations, no actual excerpt from the writing of known Middle Earth authors is featured in the text. Writers and poets are characters among others, and do not have a special place as narrators or author figures. The stories are disconnected from actual authorship. I hesitate to second Flieger’s claim that language creates reality, precisely because of this lack of authors, and because while the various episodes of Middle Earth history often do start with prophecies, these do not account for everything that comes to pass in *The Silmarillion* or *The Lord of the Rings*. In fact, the end of the whole story is depicted only in a prophecy, that describes the last battle at the end of the world, in a way that is more reminiscent of Ragnarok than of Saint John’s Apocalypse (*The Lost Road* 333); there is no description of those events outside the vision of Mandos. Prophecies, then, are not a systematic way to hint

that history is born in language. I am more inclined to point at the symbiotic growth of history and legends, fusing into 'myths': narratives originating in reality, but stylised and embellished (though that does not have to mean transformed) until they become meaningful in themselves. In this context, the question of authorship becomes extremely uncertain, to the point that the traditional role of the author as go-between in the relationship between history and narratives of history seems inexistent. History is embedded in its narrative, and vice-versa.

It is time now to go back to the concept of 'secondary world' with which I opened this paper. Tolkien chose to emphasise the complexity of the history of the world he had created to give the readers an impression of its depth. However, there is an important difference between history in the primary world and history in a secondary world. In the primary world, events do not immediately have meaning. They may be written about in various different ways, that may picture them as meaningful unities; but that meaning is far from fixed, and new versions can always be written. This cannot be the case in a secondary world, as there is no body of archives, no archaeology that the reader could experience, and from which they might draw their own interpretation of what happened. Instead, history is delivered as an already elaborate narrative, that cannot be any more scrupulously objective than historiography is in the primary world. The risk, then, is for the author to deliver a one-dimensional view of the history of their secondary world, implying that the events and their interpretation were one, or at best suggesting unsubtle binary interpretations, such as revealing midway through the story that the version of history told until then is propaganda, and the reality of what happened is in fact the opposite. What Tolkien did, however, was far more intricate. While showing the history of Middle Earth in the form of an already arranged narrative, Tolkien left his readers to draw their own conclusions: should the text be considered, not as a second-hand tale, but as a faithful reflection of the 'reality' of Middle Earth? Is it an incomplete, unreliable narrative? A perfectly objective one? Or does it create the reality of Middle Earth altogether? But he also avoided suggesting easy interpretations, such as driving his readers to conclude that narratives are always untrustworthy, that secondary worlds are nothing more than a fallacy that must be exposed, or on the contrary, that the story must be true because of the nature of its authors or the conditions in which it was written. Quite the opposite, in fact: Tolkien draws the readers' attention, not towards the question of the reliability of texts, but rather to the idea that there will always be gaps, stories to be told, other narrative paths to explore. Who the historians were, how they may have

interpreted the facts and whether or not they introduced changes that important enough to be taken into account will not be known. The very elusive quality of authorship (if, indeed, it is possible to talk about authorship when the narration is so difficult to grasp), the mystery that remains on the exact route taken by the various accounts that were gathered in the final text, even suggests a possible absence of authors, and instead, a symbiotic growth of events and legends together. This construction both openly reminds the reader that this is, after all, the only way secondary worlds can develop (since the history of a fictional world in fantasy fiction can only unfold through the texts that give it birth), and makes the most of it instead of making it seem like a limitation. The many uncertainties, near-contradictions and unanswered questions are, after all, part of what makes Middle Earth such a fascinating world for so many readers. Suggesting that by its essence, a secondary world must bring some unanswered questions is perhaps not admitting a weakness of the genre, but on the contrary, reinforcing the illusion of reality: only fiction can carry all its answers. Reality must ultimately be left open for interpretations. As for fantasy, it bridges the gap between the two: it begins as fiction, but builds layer upon layer of complexity, until it gains the elusiveness and uncertainty of the real.

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