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1

Introduction

His ‘private and beloved nonsense’: *The Silmarillion* and the ‘Silmarillion’

Contemporary critics of Tolkien’s best-known work either loved or hated *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–5). Both glorious eulogies and strongly worded dismissive comments were written about the three volumes that make up the work during the first few years after their staggered publication. Tolkien recognized this when he wrote:

The Lord of the Rings
Is one of those things:
If you like it you do:
If you don’t, then you boo!

(quoted in *Biography*: 223)

Although this little rhyme seems like a very light-hearted and humorous comment on the popularity or infamy of *The Lord of the Rings*, it should be remembered that Tolkien was by this time a mature, successful writer. In contrast the younger Tolkien had taken criticism of the ‘Silmarillion’ – his unfinished personal mythology that pre-dated and informed the historical backgrounds of both *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* – far more seriously. As an insecure venturer into the publishing industry, he first submitted the ‘Silmarillion’ to Allen & Unwin for publication in 1936. Even though Tolkien half-expected that the manuscript would be rejected, he felt relieved that it had not been ‘rejected with scorn’. He wrote to his publishers: ‘I have suffered a sense of fear and bereavement, quite ridiculous, since I let this private and beloved nonsense out; and I think if it had seemed to you to be nonsense I should have felt really crushed’ (*Letters*: 26). Although these two statements were made in different phases of Tolkien’s life, the difference they betray in his attitude towards criticism of his two main works also underline their personal significance for the author.

Most Tolkien fans would identify Tolkien's mythology with *The Silmarillion*, published four years after the author's death. Somewhat unusually, the unfinished manuscript for *The Silmarillion* was edited and 'reconstructed' by Tolkien's son Christopher before its publication in 1977. However, the publication of this book was only the beginning of a phenomenon in twentieth-century literature. *The Silmarillion* was followed by the publication of thirteen volumes of Tolkien's other writings never finished or prepared for publication in his lifetime. The twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* (1983–96) together with the volume *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* (1980) gradually unveiled the immense depth of Tolkien's 'private and beloved nonsense' and represent the vision of his mythology during a span of sixty years. During his lifetime Tolkien often referred to this vast personal mythology as the 'Silmarillion' or *legendarium*.

Perhaps it would be easier to tell the story from the beginning. Tolkien had started working on his legendarium nearly forty years before the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*. During that forty-year period he had failed twice to convince potential publishers that the 'Silmarillion' was worth publishing. But the great success of *The Lord of the Rings* changed everything: at last, his mythology had a chance of appearing in print. On many occasions during the last years of his life Tolkien referred to the 'Silmarillion' in both letters and interviews. He indicated that he was busy revising the 'prequel' to *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* for publication. Large numbers of fans waited with great expectation for this book, hoping that it would provide the background mythology to the much-loved *Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*. Although he continued to work on it throughout his life, Tolkien never saw his mythologies in print. *The Silmarillion* was finally published in 1977 after Tolkien's son and literary executor, Christopher, had undertaken the task of editing and preparing the work for publication. The book was presented as a coherent, finished narrative with no evidence of Christopher's intervention, except for his brief 'Foreword'.

However, the unfinished nature of Tolkien's mythology at the time of his death did raise some difficulties. To begin with there was no complete, single text that narrated all the myths and legends in a clearly structured and coherent way. The last version of the 'Silmarillion' that Tolkien left was missing its final chapters. Versions of the complete narrative had been written more than forty years earlier, but many elements of the mythology had changed in the intervening period. Consequently there were many different versions of the same story all from different times of Tolkien's life, with variations of names, plot elements and characters. The story of Beren and Lúthien serves as a good example: it is briefly mentioned in *The Lord of the Rings* (FR: 193–4), was first written in 1917 and exists in at least another eight versions, the latest written in the early 1950s. The illusion of a coherent and self-contained narrative in the published *Silmarillion* (1977) was achieved by cutting and pasting from a great wealth of material, along with

an imposed 'regularisation' of names and storylines. But this was soon to change.

In 1980 Christopher Tolkien published another volume of his father's writings related to *The Silmarillion*. In *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* (1980) – which contained mainly pieces of the *legendarium* that Tolkien had written in his last years – Christopher undertook the role of editor. He provided commentaries and notes on the numerous fragments and 'unfinished tales' contained in the book, without intervening in the texts themselves. *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-earth* raised doubts in the minds of some critics, making them question how much of *The Silmarillion* was Tolkien's own work and how much had been written afterwards by his son.¹ In order to answer these concerns, Christopher Tolkien embarked on the immense task of editing and publishing the whole corpus of fragments, unfinished stories, revisions and earlier versions of the Middle-earth saga. Clearly he also felt that study of the development of his father's invented world and mythology was valuable in its own right (see *Lost Tales 1*: 1–11). In the space of thirteen years the bulk of Tolkien's unpublished mythology appeared in print in twelve volumes under the general title *The History of Middle-earth* (1983–96). Mostly chronological, this monumental publication does not attempt to 'regularize' or homogenize Tolkien's writings, but rather celebrates the variations in style, nomenclature, plots, characters and ideas.

The *History of Middle-earth* series seems like a daunting task for the reader to face, but it becomes more accessible once it is structured into smaller units. The twelve volumes can be divided into three parts: Part 1: volumes I–V, Part 2: volumes VI–IX, and Part 3: volumes X–XII.

The first five volumes largely represent Tolkien's mythology before the writing and publication of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The first and second volumes (1983–4) present *The Book of Lost Tales* written in the 1910s and 1920s; they include many of Tolkien's early poems, written before and during the *Lost Tales*. One of the main differences between the *Lost Tales* and the published *Silmarillion* is in the presentation of the mythology through a 'framework': the character of Eriol (later called Ælfwine) is a traveller who hears the stories of the Elves and narrates them for mankind. The third volume, *The Lays of Beleriand* (1985), includes two long poems on the story of Túrin along with that of Béren and Lúthien, all written during 1921–32. These poems represent a period in Tolkien's creative expression of his mythology when he turned from prose to verse. But writing in verse proved to be temporary: both poems were left unfinished. The fourth volume, *The Shaping of Middle-earth* (1986), contains the *Sketch of the Mythology*, which is a prose synopsis of his mythology written in 1926. In this short piece, Tolkien tries to 'explain' how his vision of the long poem on the story of Túrin fitted within the whole *legendarium*. Tolkien then returns to prose for good in *Qenta Noldorinwa*, which also represents his next attempt to record his mythology. The *Sketch of the Mythology* and the *Qenta Noldorinwa* are the only complete accounts of the *legendarium*,

covering the whole of the First Age of Middle-earth from the arrival of the Valar in Arda to the overthrow of Morgoth. At that stage of the mythology's evolution, no Second or Third Ages had yet been conceived. The matter of Númenor along with the setting of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* had yet to be invented. The fifth volume, *The Lost Road and Other Writings* (1987), introduces the story of Númenor into the mythology. Written around 1936–7, it contains the first version of the legend of Númenor, *The Fall of Númenor*, and Tolkien's first abortive time-travel story, entitled *The Lost Road*. Closely associated with the Númenórean material, *The Lost Road* involved a series of fathers and sons reliving northern European myths and legends through dreams, concluding with the fall of Númenor from Tolkien's own mythology. Finally, the volume contains Tolkien's fourth attempt to record his mythology: the unfinished *Quenta Silmarillion*, written between the mid-1930s and 1938.

By 1937, Tolkien's story *The Hobbit*, originally created to amuse his children and initially totally independent from Middle-earth, was published. After its success his publishers asked for a 'sequel'. Instead, Tolkien offered them his 'private and beloved nonsense': the incomplete *Quenta Silmarillion* and a few other texts. The work was rejected, but Tolkien was still very much encouraged to write another story about hobbits. He started writing it reluctantly in the beginning, but soon realized that the story was growing into something different than a mere children's story. The next four volumes (VI–IX) of the *History of Middle-earth* record step by step how Tolkien created *The Lord of the Rings*, following his creative path from manuscript to manuscript during the period 1937–50, including rejected versions and revisions (*The Return of the Shadow*, published in 1988, *The Treason of Isengard*, 1989, *The War of the Ring*, 1990, and *Sauron Defeated*, 1992). During this time he stopped working on his mythology and devoted all his time to the 'new Hobbit' his publishers had requested. *The Notion Club Papers*, written between December 1945 and August 1946, represents the only period during which he deviated from his task. Tolkien wrote *The Notion Club Papers* as a time-travel story; it is included as the second part of the ninth volume of *The History of Middle-earth* entitled *Sauron Defeated*. Similar in theme to *The Lost Road*, this story was also left unfinished. In *The Notion Club Papers* the dreamers travelling to the past are Oxford dons belonging to a literary group called the 'Notion Club', similar to the Inklings group that C.S. Lewis and Tolkien belonged to. In this work the dreamers travel back in time, mainly to places from Tolkien's own mythology like Númenor and Valinor. *The Notion Club Papers* was not just another attempt to write a time-travel story, but also a narrative experiment to find a 'framework' for presenting his whole mythology. Instead of using a 'mediator', like Eriol/Ælfwine in *The Book of Lost Tales*, Tolkien seems to have considered time travelling as a way of 'introducing' his *legendarium* to readers.

After the great success of *The Lord of the Rings*, the publication of *The Silmarillion* was finally a possibility. The Appendices of the former had wetted

the appetites of readers for the myths and legends of Middle-earth. The last three volumes of the *History of Middle-earth* represent Tolkien's efforts to fulfil this demand by compiling a mythology fit for publication. The tenth and eleventh volumes of the series, *Morgoth's Ring* (1993) and *The War of the Jewels* (1994), include the *Later Quenta Silmarillion*.² From 1950 to the mid-1960s Tolkien returned to the earlier *Quenta Silmarillion* to rewrite large parts and make changes, but the work remained unfinished. At the same time he wrote a plethora of other texts related to the *Quenta Silmarillion*. These texts included essays on specific characters, moral and theological issues raised by his mythology, as well as parts of stories from the mythology rewritten in a different prose form. Many of these texts are included in the twelfth volume of the series, *The Peoples of Middle-earth* (1996), which also records the compilation of Appendices to *The Lord of the Rings*. Some of these late texts are also found in *Unfinished Tales* (1980).

A Victorian beginning and a modern end

The publication of Tolkien's complex mythology with all its different versions, variations and marginalia, gives an unprecedented insight into the creative process of one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. At the same time it shows the progress of Tolkien's ideas and aesthetic values within the historical framework in which each 'phase' of his mythology was written. His writing started as a traditional 'mythology', but ended up as something different. Examining the reasons for this transition provides a significant insight into Tolkien's work.

When Tolkien started writing *The Book of Lost Tales*, he envisaged the creation of a body of interconnected legends that would fulfil the need for a specifically English mythology (as opposed to Celtic, Arthurian, or Norman). This mythological project was in tune with the historical context of his era: in Edwardian times the Romantic interest in Northern European mythological texts was still strong. During this period the myths and language of a nation were considered an important part of its heart and soul. The early 'Silmarillion' saga was full of fairies, magic and nationalistic pursuits. But by the end of his life Tolkien had succeeded in creating something fundamentally different. By then, he had introduced novel, non-traditional creatures such as hobbits into an original 'mythology' which had a profound influence at the time. As evidenced in the ongoing study of Tolkien's work, this influence continues to have an unprecedented effect on modern popular culture. The pivotal moment of this gradual transformation of his *legendarium* was the 'accidental' publication of *The Hobbit* and the demanded sequel, which became *The Lord of the Rings*. But writing *The Lord of the Rings* necessitated changes that transformed the whole mythology. Prior to 1937, during the first writing phase of the *legendarium* (represented by volumes I–V in the *History of Middle-earth* series), Tolkien was mainly writing in a

'mythological mode'. He imitated ancient as well as medieval myths and legends by writing creation myths. In this process he shaped a pantheon of divine and semi-divine creatures and fashioned epic tales of heroes. Although he experimented with different narrative forms during that time,³ it was not until *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* that Tolkien turned to a 'novelistic mode', or more accurately, a 'historical mode' for his mythology. He found himself writing in a completely different genre, set in the Third Age of Middle-earth, for which his previous mythological material served as a background. The hobbits were not the Valar, nor the tragic, heroic Elves or Men of the First Age. Tolkien was no longer writing a 'mythology', but a novel set in a 'secondary' world with a group of main characters at the forefront and numerous sub-plots in the margins. For Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* was the point where myth became history.

In the aftermath of the paradigm shift caused by *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was unable to complete his mythology for publication. *The Lord of the Rings* had altered so many fundamental ideas and conceptions of his older mythology that the rifts were irreconcilable. The mythology was still extremely important to Tolkien, but for completely different reasons.

Tolkien, Race and Cultural History will explore the development of Tolkien's legendarium from its earliest fragments and versions to its last revisions and modifications. Special attention will be paid to how Tolkien's own life story, as well as the historical times he lived in, shaped the transformation of his mythology. The book will also explore why Elves substituted the fairies and why pseudo-myth was eventually replaced by pseudo-history; it will show Tolkien's fiction as integral to twentieth-century British literature rather than as an idiosyncratic 'one-off'.

'I hold the key': constructing a 'biographical legend'

Taking an author's life and times into account when analysing his/her literary work has been hotly debated during the last few decades. Late twentieth-century literary criticism has been dominated by arguments surrounding ideas such as the 'death of the author' proposed by Barthes' or Foucault's attempts to make the text 'speak for itself'.⁴ Such ideas would challenge and dispute biographical approaches to an author's work. One of the problems of bypassing the author is the rendering of literature as a-historical and self-contained. To state the obvious: every text has an author with a life beyond the text, defined by a specific place and historical circumstances. Literary critics now acknowledge that the author cannot so easily be discarded. Biographical information may not fundamentally alter the way individual readers experience and understand a literary work, nor can it 'explain' a text. But the author is still a central, powerful factor in the modern production and consumption of literature.⁵ The importance of the author is especially observable when he/she consciously seeks to influence critical reception of

the text. Authorial manipulation can take many forms, but is most visible when the author establishes a personal 'interpretation' through the use of notes and prefaces (the 'paratext'), or through letters, interviews, diaries and other statements located outside the text (the 'epitext').⁶

The exercise of authorial control can clearly be seen in Tolkien's fiction: he provided endless documentation of how he viewed his own work and its meaning. These documents include letters, essays, prefaces and introductions to his books, as well as interviews and anecdotes. These 'authorial interventions' not only justify a biographical and historical approach to his literature, but also provide a vantage point for the reverse process. Apart from discussing Tolkien's fiction in relation to history, this study will also explore history and particularly biographical history in relation to fiction. According to the Russian formalist critic Boris Tomaševskij, authors often create their own 'biographical legend': a romanticized, distorted, image of their biography as a reference point for literary criticism ultimately controlled by the author (see Tomaševskij 1995). The immediate success of *The Hobbit*, as well as the 1960s Tolkien craze when *The Lord of the Rings* swept the USA, created a demand for more personal information about the author. Tolkien obliged by participating in a number of interviews and radio programmes, while also writing numerous letters to fans and friends. He consciously fed the hunger for 'mythical' biographical details to the point where he believed some of these fictions himself. In an interview with Henry Resnick in March 1966, Tolkien pointed out that doctoral and master's theses had already been conducted on his fiction. To Resnick's question on whether he approved of such research on *The Lord of the Rings*, he replied:

I do not while I am alive anyhow. I do not know why they should research without any reference to me; after all, I hold the key.

(*Niekas Interview*: 38)

Tolkien's claim of 'holding the key' to his own created world is significant for two reasons. Firstly it confirms the validity of researching his fiction and 'personal legend' biographically; secondly it illustrates Tolkien's desire to control information by 'guiding' research in specific directions. *Tolkien, Race and Cultural History* attempts to 'unlock' Tolkien's creation not only with the 'keys' he provided, but also with 'keys' hidden or lost by the author. Consequently this book is also a case study for comparative research between fiction and biography, and the ways in which such comparisons can be mutually illuminating.

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