

UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED  
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THESES OF THE PhD DISSERTATION  
'YE OLDE AUTHOUR':  
TOLKIEN'S ANATOMY OF TRADITION IN *THE SILMARILLION*  
by  
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## 1. Preliminaries

The purpose of this dissertation is to synthesize and continue the work on J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* (1977) I have started in previous publications (see the list of related publications at the end): to show that this work can indeed be taken as the center of the Tolkien canon, and with the combined methodologies of textual criticism and contemporary theory, a new, theoretical reading of the whole corpus can be established. Tolkien's works have enjoyed some critical attention ever since their publication in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, but recently more concentrated critical activity has brought Tolkien studies to another level: this is evidenced in important academic publishers' attention to the subject (Routledge, Palgrave Macmillan, and Oxford University Press have all published monographs and essay collections on Tolkien, and the first academic periodical, *Tolkien Studies*, was also established in 2004), a greater interest in him at conferences and universities, and in his slowly shifting position in both the literary canon and in discussions of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century literary fantastic. The dissertation sets itself the task of remedying the relative lack of critical focus on contemporary theoretical readings of Tolkien. Even though some studies have appeared that adapt such an interpretive framework,<sup>1</sup> theorizing Tolkien has largely focused on individual concepts (race, gender, power) and *The Lord of the Rings*, leaving out Tolkien's other works and failing to provide a coherent theoretical framework within which the compositional logic (and the overall aesthetic principles) of the author could be approached.

This is partly the result of the peculiarities of the published Tolkien corpus. In his lifetime, Tolkien failed to finish and publish the stories he first started writing in the 1910s, and which he kept returning to and rewriting until the end of his life: the overview of the history of his fictional world that eventually became *The Silmarillion*. While writing his popular classics *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, he never gave up on polishing the material that he hoped to publish one day: but at his death in 1973, he still did not leave a coherent and consistent version of these. It fell to his youngest son and literary executor, Christopher Tolkien, to oversee their publication. Christopher Tolkien undertook the task of

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<sup>1</sup> Primarily the essays in Jane Chance and Alfred K. Siewers, eds., *Tolkien's Modern Middle Ages* (Basingstoke–New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), and Robert Eaglestone, ed., *Reading The Lord of the Rings. New Writings on Tolkien's Classic* (London–New York: Continuum, 2005). Jane Chance's *The Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power* (New York: Twayne, 1992, rev. ed. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001) was an important early study (happily reissued recently).

processing his father's (mostly unfinished) manuscripts, and to edit a version of Tolkien's Middle-earth stories that would fit within the covers of one volume. This became the first of the posthumous publications in 1977, the book entitled *The Silmarillion*, and was followed by *Unfinished Tales* (1980) and a twelve-volume series between 1984 and 1996, *The History of Middle-earth*. Further insight into Tolkien's manuscripts was gained in 2007, when John Rateliff published his two-volume examination of the *Hobbit* manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> The posthumous publications show that Tolkien was an author who very rarely produced anything finished and ready to print: most of his work is unfinished versions of basically the same stories that he started writing in the 1910s, and in which he first started creating the fictitious world of Middle-earth. Even his two novels, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* were (sometimes substantially) modified between editions. This variable, plural, unfixed nature of his work, however, makes perfect critical sense if it is placed in a proper framework, and even enhances the readings of his finished novels.

The 1977 *Silmarillion* is, as I argue, both central and problematic in Tolkien's oeuvre. Being an editorial text, put together from (part of) the manuscript corpus, it represents that variety and plurality in an accessible and readable form; but it is problematic as a 'Tolkien text' since it was not finished and published by the author himself. The 1977 text's relation to the actual manuscript corpus has been mapped out quite comprehensively by the versions published in *The History of Middle-earth*, and in Douglas Charles Kane's recent monograph *Arda Reconstructed*.<sup>3</sup> Since part of Tolkien's last known presentation strategy for the 'Silmarillion' material was built on instituting in the fiction a fictitious manuscript, collecting and translating the (fictitious) texts about the history of the world, the 1977 *Silmarillion* text can reasonably be taken as a fair representation of that position, and examined in its relation both to the variant corpus and the finished texts.

The dissertation thus aims at supplying the critical examination of *The Silmarillion* that takes into account its relations to the other parts of the corpus and its emphatic fictionality; but it is also among its purposes to use these conclusions in a larger theoretical discussion. Both Tolkien's handling of what literary history classifies as the 'fantastic' and of what is customarily called 'mythopoesis' come up for scrutiny in the theoretical part of the

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<sup>2</sup> John D. Rateliff, *Mr. Baggins* (The History of *The Hobbit*, Part One. Boston–New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007) and *The Return to Bag End* (The History of *The Hobbit*, Part Two. Boston–New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Charles Kane, *Arda Reconstructed: The Creation of the Published Silmarillion* (Bethlehem: Leigh UP, 2009).

dissertation, to specify and refine Tolkien's relation to fictionality and an overall evaluation of the 'fantastic', and to attain a closer, more accurate definition of 'mythopoesis', better grounded in cultural history than before.

## 2. Method and structure

One of the most important figures of Tolkien criticism, Tom Shippey, in his seminal monograph *The Road to Middle-earth*<sup>4</sup> showed the importance of the discipline of philology in approaching Tolkien's fiction. Even though Shippey meant to supply a guide to Tolkien's literary historical precedents (in medieval languages and literature) and the relations to them, with the relentless emphasis on texts and their versions running through both the corpus of unfinished stories and Tolkien's last conceptualizations of the 'Silmarillion' material, philology can be taken as a theoretical guideline too. Tolkien's insistence on 'doubling' the textuality of his works (by claiming that his texts, just as they are, are translations, counterparts of texts in the fictional world) serves to highlight that philological relations are not only an integral part of the fiction, but also that philology is a method that can profitably be applied within the fictional world as well, to elucidate the points that make *The Silmarillion* problematic. This basically medieval conception of the text (as manuscripts composed and transmitted by individual authors, contextualized within traditions, conventions, and the cultures, institutions of the fictional reality) offers a way of approaching *The Silmarillion* that goes further than previous critical considerations. Verlyn Flieger's *Interrupted Music*<sup>5</sup> and Elizabeth A. Whittingham's *The Evolution of Tolkien's Mythology*<sup>6</sup> have both recently engaged with the logic of Tolkien's lifelong composition of a corpus of manuscripts, but while Whittingham concentrated on how Tolkien's mythic (cosmogonical, cosmological, etc.) 'themes' changed significantly in the course of the reshaping of the 'Silmarillion' material, Flieger, with the help of the 'idea of the book', placed *The Silmarillion* in the context of the manuscript corpus in an attempt at a diachronic examination of the 'evolution' of Tolkien's thought about creating a mythological complex. Both works show that the role of the manuscript corpus is now a more and more important critical

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth: How J.R.R. Tolkien Created a New Mythology* (3<sup>rd</sup>, rev. ed., Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Verlyn Flieger, *Interrupted Music. The Making of Tolkien's Mythology* (Kent and London: The Kent State UP, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth A. Whittingham, *The Evolution of Tolkien's Mythology: A Study of The History of Middle-earth* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2008).

question of Tolkien studies, but to date no study of how exactly *The Silmarillion* is situated in this context has been published. Indeed, *The Silmarillion* started to enjoy the attention of critics only in the last decade: before that, only very little of published Tolkien criticism engaged with it. Doubtless the conclusion of the *History* series motivated more study; but the overall evaluation of the general characteristics of the manuscript corpus and the *Silmarillion*'s relation to it was also slow to come.

This dissertation remedies this lack in two parts, combining the methods of textual criticism and contemporary theory. Tolkien's characteristic conception of the text, the 'duplication' of his texts into the fictional word (here termed 'metatextuality' because it serves to highlight the considerations of textuality and also as a very effective metafictional device to draw attention to the role of texts in the operations of culture) is the principle which defines the levels of the approach. Since with the publication of the manuscript corpus, a very real 'Tolkien philology' became possible, I differentiate the examination of the philological relations between Tolkien's texts/manuscripts from the consideration of the fictitious texts and manuscripts the metatextual emphasis creates. This is termed 'secondary philology' (since it looks at fictional texts in what Tolkien calls the "secondary world"), as opposed to 'primary philology', the study of Tolkien's texts as 'Tolkien texts' in the "primary world". *The Silmarillion* is claimed by the fiction to be a compendious manuscript containing the "Translations from the Elvish" of a well-known Tolkien character, Bilbo Baggins, hero of *The Hobbit*. By the application of the principles of medieval manuscript textuality and textual criticism, this fictional compendium can be opened up to supply 'philological depth' to the work: the suggestion that not only stories but also emphatically textual, necessarily historical networks stand behind the current text. It has always been a critical commonplace about Tolkien's work that one of its aesthetic principles is 'depth': Shippey describes this as a "sense that the author knew more than he was telling, that behind his immediate story there was a coherent, consistent, deeply fascinating world about which he had no time (then) to speak".<sup>7</sup> The network of fictionalized texts suggested behind a fictional compilation simply extends this into an explicitly philological dimension, inviting the attention of the textual critic.

Two chapters of the dissertation, therefore, use the philological method to uncover the content of the 'philological fiction': alongside the thematic content of *The Silmarillion*, the concepts and processes of a medieval-style manuscript textuality are also inscribed into the

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<sup>7</sup> Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*, 229.

fictional world. These concepts prove to be text-related and culture-related: strictly textual and more widely cultural implications are surveyed in the 1977 text. Thus Tolkien is shown not only to construct ‘philological depth’ behind his text to complement the most pervasive aesthetic principle of his work (one he detected and valued in medieval literature, in works like *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), but also to create a very complex model of culture that is strikingly accurate and realistic at the same time.

This cultural space, coupled with the ‘philological space’ opened up by the metatextual focus, is very suitable for a theoretical reading. The central concepts that emerge from the secondary philological examination find their place easily in contemporary theoretical approaches, but they also fit well with recent studies of antique and medieval cultural history. Tolkien’s text is here seen to play with exactly the plurality, variability that Roland Barthes attributes to the “text”,<sup>8</sup> his term for a typically contemporary conception of the literary work which requires the reader’s contribution to function as an ‘open’ space where meaning is produced in an irreducible excess. The structural uncertainties and variability of *The Silmarillion* create it, similarly, as a field where various languages, subjects, and discourses come together to negotiate meaning in an essentially unfixed and unfinished process. But as recently the philological practice itself came to be reexamined and thoroughly theorized,<sup>9</sup> the concept of variance can also be seen as an aspect of Tolkien’s representation of textual operations in culture, where the discourses of modern philology and its concepts are not appropriate any more, and explicitly medieval models of signification need to be brought in to accurately represent what Tolkien’s fiction models. As Cerquiglini writes, “medieval writing does not produce variants; it *is* variance”<sup>10</sup> – the excess (of manuscript variants, of meaning) that the (modern) editing process removes (or at least relegates to the apparatus) is exactly what Tolkien’s philological depth re-inscribes into the text with its metafictional devices. The role and operation of cultural institutions and ideologies can be seen very clearly in the philological fiction, and point to the crucial role of (textual) representations in the processes of culture.

Further, the discourses of culture that secondary philology can detect in *The Silmarillion* can be approached from different cultural historical directions as well. Recent rethinking of

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<sup>8</sup> In ‘From Work to Text.’ In *Image, Music, Text* (sel. and transl. Stephen Heath, London: Fontana, 1977), 155-64.

<sup>9</sup> See primarily Bernard Cerquiglini’s *In Praise of the Variant. A Critical History of Philology* (transl. Betsy Wing, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant*, 77-8.

the practice of historiography also shows that the construction and writing of history happens in a space that Tolkien's fiction models very realistically, while Michel Foucault's theories about the role of ideology, the inevitable connection between positions of power and language use show how Tolkien's fictionalization of the system of texts in fact also encodes ideological relations that necessarily lead to an account of history positioned in prefabricated ways. The ideology recoverable from the fictional texts of Tolkien's fictional world highlight the makeup and structure of that world too, in the process showing how an epistemology is created and maintained in the network of text. The inevitable cultural biases clarify the role Tolkien assigns to subjects and subject positions, and thus invites the terms and methods of the theories of subjectivity, even though these are more profitably applicable to *The Lord of the Rings* than *The Silmarillion*. Still, the importance of the individual meaning-producing subject, embedded in the various discourses of culture surrounding it, is also a central concept of *The Silmarillion*, and this is well seen in examining the positions of the individual producers of meaning (and text) that the secondary philological study uncovered with the vocabulary of newer conceptions of medieval authorship and authority.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Tolkien's characteristic creation of cultural background with the construction of textual networks which at the same time sketch out and substantiate such backgrounds, evolving authority and its uses, can be seen in relation to antique and medieval mythological systems and their cultural uses. Greek and Norse mythology are today seen as huge intertextual systems, where authorization depends less on textual ('originary') authority, but more on the involvement with tradition, the acts of public remembrance that myth seems to be in an essentially oral context. Tolkien's philological fiction successfully implies an underlying oral cultural condition too, and his metafictional emphasis allows us to bring such contemporary approaches to the reading and interpretation of *The Silmarillion*, thus showing that one of the main focuses of the work is a detailed and sensitive representation of how cultures produce meaning in a system of texts.

### 3. Results

The two parts of the dissertation, applying different methodologies, offer two sets of related conclusions, which contribute to a more detailed understanding of *The Silmarillion* and the

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<sup>11</sup> E.g., Tim William Machan's *Textual Criticism and Middle English Texts* (Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 1994), which has the added value of evolving these concepts in the context of Middle English literature and its scholarly editing.

nature of Tolkien's philological fiction and, more generally, to a critical evaluation of his work in the context of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century fantastic. Both have wider implications that the dissertation has no space to pursue, but I have occasionally already elaborated on them in publications.

The first part of the dissertation, which applies the method of textual criticism to the fictional manuscript of *The Silmarillion*, is itself made up of two parts. Consequently, this first unit yields *textually* and *culturally* oriented conclusions (bearing in mind that what are 'textually oriented conclusions' within Tolkien's fictional world are in fact interpretive/critical points about how the Tolkien text is structured and generates its meaning).

- The examination of the *Silmarillion* text highlights the concepts of *authorship* and a series of *author positions*, elaborating on the various authorial activities (copying, translation, compilation, selection, editing, etc.) that can be attributed to them.
- This is closely linked to the aspect of *transmission*, constructing not only a fictitious provenance for all parts of the fictional manuscript and its text, but also refining the authorial actions that happen along the transmission chain (adaptation of verse to prose, the arrangement of material into larger and smaller units, the conceptualization of the work as focusing on specific subjects, etc.).
- The heavily composite text, through the emphasis on authorial positions/actions and the process of transmission necessarily fictionalizes *a network of sources* for itself, creating a network of (fictitious) texts organized around philological principles. Signification is seen here as a relation between original and derivative, the textual relation (real or fictional) between the units and elements of the text. The *Silmarillion* text posits not only fictitious *texts and compositions* as sources, but entire *conventions* of writing/storytelling as well, an example for which is the well-describable poetic remnants.
- This system of texts constitute what can be termed '*philological depth*', a well discernible effect of *The Silmarillion*, to be set alongside the aesthetic principle of 'depth' his more popular works are always seen to create. In this system, Tolkien evolves a concept of *authority* very similar to that of medieval manuscript textuality. He also signals an unavoidable cultural embeddedness for such textual systems.
- The composite text's various parts and units construct *cultural horizons* and *points of view*, closely connected with authorial positions and acts. The fact that such

cultural points are recoverable from textual details lead to the conclusion that Tolkien's representation of culture is a multi-layered and sensitive one, always taking into account the internal positions of representation and the complex layering of these representations in the signifying processes of culture.

- Such representations are always necessarily *ideologically* determined, and the *Silmarillion* text shows a fine depiction of ideological positions and their relations. As the focus of the story moves from one culture to the other, Tolkien gains the opportunity to depict how such positions also shift, change, and assume places in a hierarchical system.
- This hierarchy is also seen to be that of *authority*, now on a different level: Tolkien's fictional cultures are thus endowed by their characteristic theological and epistemological positions. Apart from textual authority, the ideologically governed epistemological authority of certain cultures also comes up for scrutiny, while with the help of the philologically structured system of texts Tolkien manages to point attention to the fact that these are merely culturally privileged representations, not in any sense objective truth.
- *Knowledge and its contexts*, therefore, also figure among the conclusions of the secondary philological examinations. The various terms and constructions of knowledge that the text employs identify the space of textual transformations and exchanges as the site of the negotiations of knowledge, while the cultural hierarchies also work here to secure privileges and maintain the epistemological status quo.

The theoretical part of the dissertation takes over the terms and concepts that emerged from the philological examination, and proceeds to place these in a contemporary theoretical framework. This offers not only a good opportunity to see how theoretical approaches can easily accommodate Tolkien's main concerns (or how Tolkien's text is in fact very easily approachable with the conceptual systems and vocabulary of contemporary theory), but also to sketch out the theoretical trajectory where Tolkien's most important concerns are situated.

- The epistemology forming in the system of representations in Tolkien's fictional world clearly points to a *medieval-type world model* (Lotman's *pansemiotic* model) where meaning (and therefore all acts of signification) is guaranteed by a central metaphysical signifier, the theological center of Tolkien's invented world. This fundamentally determines all meaning-producing acts, but it also conditions the

hierarchies of authority that emerged from the philologically structured textual system created behind the surface of the fictional manuscript. Apart from clarifying the principles of meaning in *The Silmarillion*, this also contributes to an understanding of how Tolkien depicts signifying actions elsewhere in his work, most importantly in *The Lord of the Rings*, where the theology and epistemology of *The Silmarillion* appear only implicitly.

- The emphasis on *interpretation* as a crucial and, indeed, theologically sanctioned act runs through all levels and layers of *The Silmarillion*, and highlights the value Tolkien associates with acts of interpretation. The text represents all authorial acts, resulting in textual transformations (but also in the preservation of the text), as by definition interpretive acts, and in detailing and differentiating these, it posits interpretation (of previously produced meaning) as the essential act that constitutes culture.
- With taking over the framework of a medieval, manuscript textuality, Tolkien makes the concepts of *variance* and *plurality* an essential factor in his fictional world. This system, together with the role assigned to interpretation, results in the emphasis on the unfinished, unfixed nature of meaning in both textual and cultural systems, always depending on the various contexts of the signifying acts in which it emerges. The role of the individual subject is perhaps less examined in *The Silmarillion* (as opposed to *The Lord of the Rings*, where the use of traditions and texts is shown to determine fundamentally the way individual subjects act out and write their stories), but the discourses and ideologies of culture are presented as unavoidable products of tradition and its preservation.
- With the use of this essentially plural space that Tolkien's work creates, and the role and internal dynamics of the philological fiction, some cultural historical considerations help clarify the concept of mythopoesis (one of the most frequently applied critical terms, yet still one of the haziest and least explained). On the analogy of antique and medieval mythological systems, grounded in oral culture, Tolkien is here seen to model exactly that system of culture that 'represents' the workings of antique mythology for us in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His fiction thus turns out to be 'productive of myth' not in the sense that his stories somehow reach or mirror the status of myths, but in constructing a (textually determined and structured) system which behaves much as the textualized systems built up on the foundation

of ancient Greek or Norse religions. Mythology is the missing, implied background that these systems imply; this is one more reason to take into critical consideration Tolkien's plural, unfixed and unfinished corpus, and not only his more popular works.

- Finally, Tolkien's own semi-theoretical essay, 'On Fairy-stories'<sup>12</sup> already argued that the 'fantastic' effect in literature depends for a very large extent on the neat separation of the world of the fiction and the consensus reality of the reader. Tolkien's claim that this 'radical fictionality' is a very large part of the effect seems to be supported today by a number of theoretical treatments of the fantastic, and argues that it is (at least partly) the subversion or suspension of the representational strategies of mimetic realism that constitute the fantastic. Within the fiction, however, even Tolkien freely uses these representational strategies; but he makes sure the only connection between the fictional world and the readers' consensus reality is the persona of the editor/translator. This authorial pose is an old metafictional device that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was used more and more consciously to uncover the constructedness of any account of the world (fictional or historical), and with a complex examination of the philological fiction (itself a metafictional device) the dissertation contributes to the description and critical evaluation of Tolkien's use of metafictional strategies in his representation of culture.

The dissertation thus contributes substantially to Tolkien studies and particularly to the studies of *The Silmarillion* by the unprecedented fictionalized detail it uncovers in the text, which is a practically entirely novel approach to this important Tolkien work. But it also creates the fundamentals of a more general theoretical reception than has hitherto been produced, enabling further work on not only this particular text, but also on Tolkien's better-known and more widely read novels, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Additionally, it comes up with a feasible and cultural historically tenable explanation of what constitutes the 'mythopoeic' effect in Tolkien, and identifies the author's central concern as evolving a very complex representation of how representations constitute culture and cultural operations.

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<sup>12</sup> J.R.R Tolkien, *Tolkien on Fairy-stories* (expanded ed. with commentary and notes, ed. by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, London: HarperCollins, 2008).

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## 5. Related publications

- ‘A Body of Myth: Representing Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings*.’ In Christopher Vaccarro, ed. *Bodies of Light and Shadow* (forthcoming).
- ‘Fictitious Fairy Tales: Writing a Fictitious Character in *The Lord of the Rings*.’ In Anna Kérchy, ed. *Postmodern Representations of Fairy Tales. How Applying New Methods Generates New Meanings*. Lewiston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011, 367-82.
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