

J. R. R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth

Introduction

To enter faerie—that is, a sacramental and liturgical understanding of creation—is to open oneself to the gradual discovery of beauty, truth, and excellence.¹ One arrives in faerie only by invitation and, even then, only at one's peril. The truths to be found within faerie are greater than those that can be obtained through mere human understanding; and one finds within faerie that even the greatest works of man are as nothing compared with the majesty of creation. To enter faerie is, paradoxically, both a humbling and exhilarating experience. This is what the Oxford don and scholar J. R. R. Tolkien firmly believed.

The last story Tolkien published prior to his death, "Smith of Wootton Major," follows a normal but charitably inclined man who has been graced with the ability to make extraordinarily beautiful things while metal smithing. Smith, as he is known, discovered the gift of grace on his tenth birthday, when the dawn engulfed him and "passed on like a wave of music into the West, as the sun rose above the rim of the world."² Like the earth at the end of Eliot's "Wasteland," Tolkien's Smith had been baptized, and through this gift he receives an invitation to faerie. While visiting that world, he discovers that in it he is the least of beings. Its beauty, however, entices him, and he spends entire days "looking only at one tree or one flower."³ The depth of each thing astounds him. "Wonders and mysteries," many of them terrifying in their overwhelming beauty and truth, abound in faerie, Smith discovers, and he dwells on such wonders even when he is no longer in faerie.⁴ Nevertheless, some encounters terrify him:

He stood beside the Sea of Windless Storm where the blue waves like snow-clad hills roll silently out of Unlight to the long strand, bearing the white ships that return from battles on the Dark Marches of which men know nothing. He saw a great ship cast high upon the land, and the waters fell back in foam without a sound. The elven mariners were tall and terrible; their swords shone and their spears glinted and a piercing light was in their eye. Suddenly they lifted up their voices in a song of triumph, and his heart was shaken with fear, and he fell upon his face, and they passed over him and went away into the echoing hills.⁵

And yet, despite the fact that he portrayed the man Smith in prostration before such grand visions, the rest of the story reveals that it was not Tolkien's intention to denigrate Smith's importance, but only to emphasize his place—and therefore the place of humanity in general—in the economy of creation. The English Roman Catholic G. K. Chesterton, who served as a significant source of inspiration to Tolkien when he was a young man, once wrote that "[h]e not only felt freer when he bent; he actually felt taller when he bowed."⁶ Likewise, Tolkien shows in "Smith of Wootton Major" that it is an understanding of the transcendent that allows Smith to fully become a man. This was a teaching to which Tolkien ascribed his entire life.

For Tolkien, one of the best ways to understand the gift of grace was through faerie, which offered a glimpse of the way in which sacrament and liturgy infuse the natural law and the natural order. Faerie connects a person to his past and helps order his

understanding of the moral universe. In an essay describing the greatness of the medieval poem, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Tolkien wrote:

Behind our poem stalk the figures of elder myth, and through the lines are heard the echoes of ancient cults, beliefs and symbols remote from the consciousness of an educated moralist (but also a poet) of the late fourteenth century. His story is not about those old things, but it received part of its life, its vividness, its tension from them. That is the way with the greater fairy-stories—of which this is one. There is indeed no better medium for moral teaching than the good fairy-story (by which I mean a real deep-rooted tale, told as a tale, and not a thinly disguised moral allegory).⁷

Not only does faerie teach us higher truths; it also bonds us together in communities, of which there are two kinds: the one which is of this time and place, and the one which transcends all time and all places. As Chesterton wrote, "[B]eauty and terror are very real things," but they are also "related to a real spiritual world; and to touch them at all, even in doubt or fancy, is to stir the deep things of the soul."⁸

Certainly myth, of which faerie is one kind, holds an estranged place in the modern world, as Tolkien well knew.⁹ But, he believed, so much the worse for the modern world. Indeed, myth might just be the thing needed to save the modern world from itself, as Tolkien suggested in his famous poem, "Mythopoeia," which echoes the Beatitudes:

*Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme
of things not found within recorded time.
It is not they that have forgot the Night,
or bid us flee to organized delight,
in lotus-isles of economic bliss
forswearing souls to gain a Circe-kiss
(and counterfeit at that, machine-produced,
bogus seduction of the twice-seduced).*¹⁰

Myth, Tolkien thought, can convey the sort of profound truth that was intransigent to description or analysis in terms of facts and figures, and is therefore a more powerful weapon for cultural renewal than is modern rationalist science and technology.¹¹ Myth can emphasize the beauty of God's creation as well as the sacramental nature of life.¹² "Our time, sick nigh unto death of utilitarianism and literalness, cries out for myth and parable," American novelist and political philosopher Russell Kirk explained. "Great myths are not merely susceptible of rational interpretation: they are truth, transcendent truth."¹³ Tolkien believed that myth can teach men and women how to be fully and truly men and women, not mere cogs in the vast machine of modern technological society.

In his inimitable way, Chesterton once wrote that

imaginative does not mean imaginary. It does not follow that it is all what the moderns call subjective, when they mean false. Every true artist does feel, consciously or unconsciously, that he is touching transcendental truths; that his images are shadows of things seen through the veil. In other words, the natural mystic does not know that there is something there; something behind the clouds or within the trees; but he believes

that the pursuit of beauty is the way to find it; that imagination is a sort of incantation that can call it up.¹⁴

Besides offering an essential path to the highest truths, myth plays a vital role in any culture because it binds together members of communities. “It is quite easy to see why a legend is treated, and ought to be treated, more respectfully than a book of history. The legend is generally made by a majority of the people in the village, who are sane. The book is generally written by the one man in the village who is mad,” Chesterton wrote in *Orthodoxy*.¹⁵ Communities “share symbols and myths that provide meaning in their existence as a people and link them to some transcendent order,” political theorist Donald Lutz explains. “The shared meaning and a shared link to some transcendent order allow them to act as a people.”¹⁶ The man “who has no sympathy with myths,” Chesterton concluded, “has no sympathy with men.”¹⁷ One cannot, it seems, separate men from their myths.

Yet many of our contemporaries—a bizarre combination of those who have embraced secular modernity as well as those who abhor it, the Christian fundamentalists—have rejected the importance of myth. For the modernist, imbued with the doctrines of Jamesian and Deweyite pragmatism, myth is a lie. One cannot, after all, see, feel, smell, taste, or hear myth. Myth remains just beyond our material and physical senses, and we most certainly cannot scientifically verify it. Though myth is essential to man qua man, as Chesterton rightly contended, one of modernity’s chief characteristics is the watering down of richly felt and imagined reality, and the substitution of cheap counterfeits and thin shadows for the mythic vision. “In this new sphere,” wrote theologian Romano Guardini in the mid-1920s, “things are no longer directly detected, seen, grasped, formed, or enjoyed; rather, they are mediated by signs and substitutes.”¹⁸ To the modernist, “myth,” like religion, merely signifies a comfortable and entrenched lie. For the postmodernist, myth simply represents one story, one narrative among many; it is purely subjective, certainly signifying nothing of transcendent or any other kind of importance.

For religious fundamentalists, myths also represent lies. Myths, the argument runs, constitute dangerous rivals to Christian truth and may lead the unwary astray, even into the very grip of hell. Why study *The Volsunga* or Homer, for example, when the Christian Gospels tell us all we need for salvation? It is likely, the fundamentalist concludes, that all myth comes from the devil and is an attempt to distract us from the truth of Christ. The ancient gods and demigods of Greece, Rome, and northern Europe, after all, must have been nothing more than demons in disguise.

For Tolkien, however, even pagan myths attempted to express God’s greater truths. True myth has the power to revive us, to serve as an *anamnesis*, or way of bringing to conscious experience ancient experiences with transcendence. But, Tolkien admitted, myth could be dangerous, or “perilous,” as he usually stated it, if it remained pagan. Therefore, Tolkien thought, one must sanctify it, that is, make it Christian and put it in God’s service. Medieval believers had the same idea, and the story told of the early-medieval saint Boniface of Crediton exemplifies one such attempt. The story (a non-factual myth, certainly!) of Boniface claims that while evangelizing the pagan Germanic tribes in north-central Europe, he encountered a tribe that worshiped a large oak tree. To demonstrate the power of Christ as the True God, Boniface cut down the tree, much to the dismay of the tribe. But rather than seeing Boniface struck down by their gods, the

pagan tribe saw an evergreen instantaneously spring up on the same spot. So that Boniface could continue preaching to the astounded pagans, the story continues, his followers placed candles on the newly grown evergreen, which eventually became the first Christmas tree. This motif of “sanctifying the pagan” has been repeated throughout history by Christians in a multitude of ways, and was instrumental in contributing to the wildly successful spread of the faith. Christmas and Easter, for example, were placed on high pagan holidays; St. Paul attempted to convert the Athenians with reference to their statue of the “Unknown God”; St. Augustine re-read the works of Plato and Cicero in a Christian light in his *City of God*; St. Aquinas uncovered the synchronies between Aristotelian and Christian thought; and on our own continent, we see that Catholic monks built a monastery on top of the highest mound-temple in Cahokia, Illinois, former site of the priest-king of a vast Native American empire. Indeed, churches throughout Europe and North America sit on formerly sacred pagan sites. In building churches in such places Christians sought, in essence, to baptize the corrupt ground, just as Sts. Augustine and Aquinas baptized pagan ideas.

It was Tolkien’s understanding that man’s role in the sanctification of the world is a cooperative and limited one. Given the constraints of his materiality, man ultimately only catches a glimpse of the highest things, and his attempts to emulate them in their truth, beauty, and excellence are but meager. When Smith of Wootton Major discovers to his embarrassment that a doll of a beautiful woman his village has revered is horribly shabby and trite when compared to its transcendent model, the Faery Lady, whom he has just met, she calms his fears: “Do not be grieved for me. . . Nor too much ashamed of your own folk. Better a little doll, maybe, than no memory of Faery at all. For some the only glimpse. For some the awakening.”¹⁹ As an artist, a scholar, and a mythmaker, Tolkien gave us a glimpse of the truth, beauty, and excellence that lies beyond and behind our tangible world. That glimpse, which leads to real joy, Tolkien labeled the *euchatraprophe*.

Throughout his entire mythology—*The Silmarillion*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and the other works on Middle-earth—Tolkien stubbornly affirmed that the hope of the modern world lay in a return to some form of the *Christiana Res Publica*. “Someday Christendom may come/Westward/Evening sun recedent/Set my resting vow/Hold in open heart,” cries the poet Mark Hollis.²⁰ What form such a transfigured world would take, of course, is unclear. After all, Tolkien believed, man’s job is not to plan the universe, but to use the gifts God has given him for the betterment of all. “The awful Author of our being,” one of Tolkien’s favorite thinkers, Edmund Burke, wrote, “is the author of our place in the order of existence.” He, “having disposed and marshalled us by a divine tactic, not according to our will, but according to His, He has, in and by that disposition, virtually subjected us to act the part which belongs to the part assigned to us.”²¹

In his thinking about truth, reason, science, art, and myth, and in his hope for a renewal of Christendom and an end to the ideologically inspired terror of the twentieth century, Tolkien fits in nicely with a group of twentieth-century scholars and artists which we might collectively label as “The Christian humanists.”²² The Christian humanist asks two fundamental questions: (1) what is the role of the human person within God’s creation? and (2) how does man order himself within God’s creation? Christian, or theocentric, humanism, as opposed to anthropocentric, secular, Renaissance, or Enlightenment humanism, argues that one cannot understand man’s position in the world until one first acknowledges that man is created in the image of God and lives under the natural law as well as the divine law.²³ The ranks of the Christian humanists include such poets and

scholars as T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, Christopher Dawson, Eric Voegelin, Russell Kirk, and Romano Guardini. As will become readily apparent in the following chapters, Tolkien should be counted as one of their foremost thinkers and spokesmen.

Each of the seven chapters of this book examines a different aspect of Tolkien and his mythology. Chapter 1 considers Tolkien himself; in essence, it is a mini-biography. Chapter 2 describes the nature of myth and the realm of faerie; specifically, it explores Tolkien's academic ideas on myth and language, as well as his broader goal for his own mythology, which was, in short, to revive the northern spirit of courage by infusing it with the Christian doctrine of grace. Tolkien thought such a coupling necessary in order to bring back a genuine and effective Christendom. Chapter 3 considers Tolkien's conceptions of the Good and the created order. It looks at the role of God/Illúvatar in Tolkien's mythology, as well as the various sacramental symbolisms and parallels found within the *legendarium* (Tolkien's word for his entire mythology). Chapter 4 follows chapter 3 in theme. It attempts to show, at least from Tolkien's perspective, what man's duty is within God's created order by focusing on five characters from *The Lord of the Rings*—Gandalf, Aragorn, Faramir, Frodo, and Sam—as representative archetypes of Western heroes. Chapter 5 delves into Tolkien's conception of evil and its role within the created order. Chapter 6 looks at Tolkien's political philosophy, with special attention to his views regarding modernity and the perverse ideologies of the twentieth century. Finally, the conclusion evaluates Tolkien's legacy and considers the future of his mythology and its power to revive the world's understanding of right reason.

Notes

1. Tolkien spelled Fairy in a variety of ways throughout his life: fairy, faerie, and fäerie were the most common ways.
2. J. R. R. Tolkien, *Smith of Wootton Major and Farmer Giles of Ham* (Garden City, N.Y.: Nelson Doubleday, 1976), 13.
3. *Ibid.*, 17.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, 18.
6. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 112.
7. J. R. R. Tolkien, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," 73.
8. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 108.
9. Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 144.
10. J. R. R. Tolkien, "Mythopoeia," in *Tree and Leaf, including the Poem Mythopoeia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 99.
11. Carpenter, ed., *Letters*, 147.
12. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 104–5.
13. Russell Kirk, *Prospects for Conservatives* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1989), 18. On Tolkien's significant influence on Kirk, see James E. Person Jr., *Russell Kirk: A Critical Biography of a Conservative Mind* (Lanham, Md.: Madison Books, 1999), 18.
14. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 105.
15. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Colorado Springs: Shaw, 1994), 47.
16. Donald Lutz, ed., in the preface to *Colonial Origins of the American Constitution* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1998), xv. *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth* 168
17. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 109.
18. Romano Guardini, *Letters from Lake Como: Explorations in Technology and the Human Race* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 20.
19. Tolkien, *Smith of Wootton Major*, 26.

20. Mark Hollis, "New Grass," *Laughing Stock* (Polydor/EMI, 1991).
21. Quoted in Kirk, *Prospects*, 196. For Tolkien and Burke, see Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography*, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 158–59.
22. See, for example, Christopher Dawson, *Christianity and the New Age* (1931; Manchester, N.H.: Sophia Institute Press, 1985).
23. For an excellent overview of Christian Humanism in the late twentieth century, see George Weigel, "John Paul II and the Crisis of Humanism," *First Things* 98 (December 1999): 31–36; and Gleaves Whitney, "Sowing Seeds in the Wasteland: The Perennial Task of Christian Humanists," an ISI/Trinity Christian College Evening Lecture (Palos Heights, Ill.), 13 October 1997, paper in possession of the author.