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J.R.R. Tolkien, Eucatastrophe, and the Re-Creation of Medieval Legend

by Jane Beal, PhD

J.R.R. Tolkien, a medievalist, often incorporated elements from medieval literature in his own mythological work.¹ When studying Tolkien's re-creation of medieval sources in his own tales, poems, and grand epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, it is possible to perceive that Tolkien changed aspects of the stories he encountered – especially their endings. In several cases, over the years, he chose to re-imagine medieval poems that he loved, but with certain elements transformed. His concept of *eucatastrophe* informs his writing to such a degree, and so consistently, that there appears to be a “principle of eucatastrophe” that consistently guided Tolkien's revisionary processes.²

Tolkien invented the term “eucatastrophe” in an essay, in which he defined it as the *opposite* of tragedy. He further defined it as the opposite of the “dyscatastrophe” of sorrow and failure, which, Tolkien admits, may be “necessary to the joy of deliverance.”³ For the philologist, eucatastrophe is a *good* catastrophe, the consolation of a happy ending, and “the eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale – and its highest function.”⁴

¹ Many scholars have considered the reception of medieval literature in the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. For a selection of diverse approaches, see Jane Chance, ed., *Tolkien the Medievalist* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2003), T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), including Appendix A “Tolkien's Sources: The True Tradition,” and Verlyn Flieger, *Green Suns and Faerie* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2012), esp. Part II “Tolkien in Tradition.” See also Michael C. Drout, ed., *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment* (New York, N.Y.: Taylor & Francis, 2007).

² Tolkien's use of eucatastrophe in his own work has been considered in a variety of studies including, for example, Jen Stevens, “From Catastrophe to Eucatastrophe: J. R. R. Tolkien's Transformation of Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe into Beren and Lúthien,” in *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth. A Reader*, ed. Jane Chance (Lexington, K.Y.: University of Kentucky Press, 2004), 119-132 and Janet Brennan Croft, “The Thread on Which Doom Hangs: Free Will, Disobedience, and Eucatastrophe in Tolkien's Middle-earth,” *Mytholore* 29 (2010): 131-50. The term has also been used in comparative literary studies to explain shared elements in the work of Tolkien and other writers, such as Julian of Norwich, Thomas Malory, C.S. Lewis, Flannery O'Connor, and J.K. Rowling.

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-stories,” in *Tales from the Perilous Realm* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 384. For additional scholarly detail on this essay, its revisions and expansions, see J.R.R. Tolkien, *On Fairy-stories*, ed. Verlyn Flieger and Douglas Anderson (New York, N.Y.: HarperCollins Ltd., 2008, 2014).

Using comparative literary analysis, this essay examines three case studies from Tolkien's oeuvre, in which Tolkien practiced eucatastrophic rewriting: his folktale, "Sellic Spell," in which he re-creates the Old English poem *Beowulf*; his poem, "Princess Mee," in which he re-envisioned aspects of the myth of Narcissus and the Middle English dream vision poem, *Pearl*; and the character of Éowyn from *The Lord of the Rings*, in which he re-imagines the fate of Brynhild, a shield-maiden and valkyrie from Old Norse legend. In each case, Tolkien transforms the original so that sorrow is turned to joy in Tolkien's new versions. As part of the analysis of these transformations, this essay considers a possible personal motivation as well as a larger purpose behind Tolkien's artistic choices: his relationship to his beloved wife, Edith, and a desire to convey to others the hope he found in his own faith.

Eucatastrophic Re-Creation of *Beowulf* in "Sellic Spell"

Tolkien's life-long fascination with the Old English poem *Beowulf* is well known, particularly from his landmark essay, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics."⁵ Tolkien viewed the poem not as an epic, as it is most commonly regarded, but as a "heroic elegy" because the story advances through its focus on one hero, Beowulf, and the trials that lead up to his eventual death and funeral commemoration at the end of the poem. Less well known is Tolkien's essentialized, folktale version of the epic, "Sellic Spell." Christopher Tolkien's publication of his father's prose translation of *Beowulf*, together with "Sellic Spell" in 2014, however, has brought both to the attention of a larger audience. A brief comparison of key differences between these two works reveals how Tolkien's principle of eucatastrophe affected his re-creation.

Tolkien completed his prose translation of *Beowulf*, along with a commentary on the poem, in 1926, but did not write "Sellic Spell" until the early 1940s. He wrote his story in both modern English and in Old English, and he wrote a related text, a poem called "The Lay of Beowulf" as well as various notes on these original compositions. Tolkien's title for his story, "Sellic Spell," comes from line 2109 of the *Beowulf*: *hwilum syllic spell rehte aefter rihte rúmheort cyning* ("or again, greathearted king, some wondrous tale rehearsed in order due").⁶ His story

⁴ Ibid., 384.

⁵ This work was originally a lecture given in 1936 and then published as an essay shortly thereafter in the *Proceedings of the British Academy*. For a critical edition, see J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, 2nd rev. ed., ed. Michael Druot (Tempe, Ariz.: Arizona Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 2002, rpt. 2011).

⁶ Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015), 358.

title means “wondrous (or marvelous) tale.” Tolkien expressed his intentions for his story in a note later preserved and published by his son:

This version is *a* story, not *the* story. It is only to a limited extent an attempt to reconstruct the Anglo-Saxon tale that lies behind the folktale elements in *Beowulf*— in many points it is not possible to do that with certainty; in some points (e.g. the omission of the journey of Grendel’s dam) my tale is not quite the same.⁷

As this note suggests, Tolkien was not so much re-writing *Beowulf* as re-creating a version of *Beowulf* as he imagined it would be if it were a short, prose tale rather than long, narrative poem. Tolkien quite rightly says that it is “not quite the same” as *Beowulf*, for Tolkien’s folktale version differs significantly from the extant poem, deliberately so. The differences demonstrate how the concept of “eucatastrophe,” a sudden joyous turn of events, inspired Tolkien’s imaginative re-creation of the *Beowulf* story.

Although written in England, sometime between the seventh and the tenth centuries, *Beowulf* is set in Scandinavia. The plot of the Old English poem develops through a sequence of three fight scenes in which the hero, Beowulf, combats three supernatural foes: Grendel, Grendel’s mother, and a dragon. The historical sub-plot of the poem concerns feuds between medieval Scandinavian tribes: Geats, Swedes, Danes, Heathobards, and Frisians.⁸ Interwoven with the main plot and the historical sub-plot are several lyrical digressions recalled by the poet-narrator and/or sung by a *scop*, a maker-poet and harper-singer within the story, some of which reveal the stories of women: Hildeburgh, Hygd, and Modthryth. Wealtheow, queen of the Danes, features importantly in the poem as does a Geatish woman who wails out the hero’s funeral oration at the poem’s end.

In contrast, in composing “Sellic Spell,” Tolkien sets aside the historical sub-plot in order to focus on the main plot and poetic narrative of *Beowulf*. In Tolkien’s folktale version, Beowulf becomes Beewolf; Hrothgar, the King of the Golden Hall;⁹ Breca, against whom the hero competes in a swimming contest on

⁷ Ibid., 355.

⁸ A chronology of the development of these feuds is clearly laid out in Marijane Osborn’s *Beowulf: A Guide to Study* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Pentangle Press, 1986), 38-41.

⁹ The equivalent of the Golden Hall in “Sellic Spell” is Heorot in *Beowulf*, but the phrase “King of the Golden Hall” is notable in relation to Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, as it is an epithet for King Théoden of Rohan. For additional insights into how the fictional realm of Rohan and the historical culture of Anglo-Saxon England compare to one another, and thus into how

the monster-infested deep, Breaker; Unferth, his “flyting” opponent, Unfriend; Grendel, Grinder; and so on. Beowulf is raised an orphan who acts much like a bear and lacks courteous speech, but eventually succeeds as a warrior, defeating Grinder and his “dam,” as Tolkien calls her, comparing her to the female parent of an animal, such as a horse. The Old English poem actually calls Grendel’s mother a *brim-wulf* or “sea-wolf.”¹⁰

Yet even with this focus on the main plot, Tolkien’s re-creation of *Beowulf* in his folktale version is dramatically different from the extant poem. Notably, he entirely drops the final fight with the dragon, and he introduces new characters, Handshoe, whose magical gloves enable him to move aside or tear apart great stones, and Ashwood, who carries a powerful spear. The addition of these characters may suggest that Tolkien was aiming to create a variant of the “skillful companions” type of folktale,¹¹ but inverting its usual narrative results: instead of helping, Beowulf’s companions and their skills actually hinder his progress until he overcomes them.

But perhaps the most notable change Tolkien makes comes at the end of his story. Whereas *Beowulf* ends with the death and funeral of the hero, “Sellic Spell” ends with his marriage. This is announced in the second half a single sentence: “A great lord he became, with broad lands and many rings; and he wedded the King’s only daughter.”¹² Even without further elaboration on this marriage, suddenly, the story is no longer a heroic elegy: it is a fairy-tale. Tolkien has applied his principle of eucatastrophe, and now *Beowulf*, as re-created in “Sellic Spell,” has a “sudden joyous turn of events”: a royal marriage.

The audience knows that this marriage contributes to the hero’s social advancement and reputation, to a good life and later victories, for the story concludes by observing, “And after the King’s day was done, Beowulf became king in his stead, and lived long in glory. As long as he lived, he loved honey dearly, and

Tolkien further applied his re-creative methods in the LOTR, see Richard Fehrenbacher, “*Beowulf* as Fairy-story: Enchanting the Elegiac in *The Two Towers*,” *Tolkien Studies* 3 (2006): 101-115.

¹⁰ The Bosworth-Toller Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, now available online, gives this entry for “brim-wylf”: “e; f. [brim, wylf a *she-wolf*] A *sea-wolf*; marina lupa. An epithet applied to Grendel’s mother Hine seó brimwylf abroten hæfde *the sea-wolf had destroyed him*, Beo. Th. 3202; B. 1599.” See <http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/finder/3/brim-wylf>.

¹¹ The Aarne-Thompson classification system for fairy-tales was first published in 1910; it identifies approximately 2500 basic plots used by European storytellers to structure their tales. It was revised and expanded in 1928 and 1961, and it remains a valuable resource for folklorists today. For discussion, see Alan Dundes, “The Motif-Index and Tale Type Index: A Critique,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 34:3 (1997): 195-202.

¹² Tolkien, “Sellic Spell” in *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary*, 385.

the mead in his hall was ever of the best.”¹³ After suffering with Beowulf on his hard road, readers now can be consoled by this happy ending.¹⁴ *Beowulf* is no longer an elegy. It has been transformed by the eucatastrophic joy of marriage.

Tolkien’s knowledge of folktale certainly inspired “Sellic Spell.” But perhaps so too did his personal experience. His marriage to Edith, his sweetheart, whom he had met as a young man, only occurred after he was separated from her at the insistence of his guardian.¹⁵ Later, when the two happily reunited, their love inspired Tolkien’s creation of at least two extraordinary marriages in Middle-earth: those of Beren and Lúthien Tinúviel and Aragorn and Arwen Evenstar. It also may have inspired Tolkien to change the ending of *Beowulf* in “Sellic Spell” in the 1940s, when he had been married to Edith for about twenty-five years. Her role in Tolkien’s life, his mythology, and, indeed, all of his eucatastrophic rewriting is highly significant. This influence can be further considered in Tolkien’s poem, “Princess Mee.”

Eucatastrophic Re-Envisioning of the Myth of Narcissus and *Pearl* in “Princess Mee”¹⁶

“Princess Mee” is longer version of a shorter poem called “Princess Ni,” which Tolkien originally published in *Leeds University Verse, 1914-1924*. In 1961, Tolkien aunt, Jane Neave (his mother’s younger sister), asked him to write a collection of verse with Tom Bombadil “at the heart of it.”¹⁷ Tolkien subsequently published *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil and Other Poems from the Red Book* (1962). Nearly all of the poems had been published previously and then revised,

¹³ Ibid., 385.

¹⁴ For more on the consolatory function of fairy-tales, see J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-stories,” 384-89.

¹⁵ On Tolkien’s own love-story, see chap. 3 “Private lang. – and Edith” in Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977, 1978, 1987, 2000), 39-51.

¹⁶ Some of the material in this section is indebted to Jane Beal, “Three Approaches to Teaching *Pearl*: Introduction to Literature, British Literature I, and the Mythology of J.R.R. Tolkien,” *The Once and Future Classroom* (Spring 2016). See <http://once-and-future-classroom.org/6-three-approaches-to-teaching-pearl-introduction-to-literature-british-literature-i-and-the-mythology-of-j-r-r-tolkien/>.

¹⁷ T.A. Shippey, “Poems by Tolkien: *Adventures of Tom Bombadil*,” in *The J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, ed. Michael Drout (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2013), 515-17.

including the fourth poem in the collection, “Princess Ni,” now entitled “Princess Mee.” In this poem, Tolkien used his principle of eucatastrophe to re-envision aspects of both the myth of Narcissus and the Middle English dream vision poem, *Pearl*.

According to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus was a beautiful and vain young man, adored by both men and women. A girl named Echo fell in love with him, but wasted away from longing when he spurned her, until she was only able to repeat the words he said to her. When almost nothing was left of her but her voice, she asked the gods for vengeance, and they granted it to her. One day when Narcissus saw his own reflection in a pool of water, he fell in love with himself, without realizing he was looking at a mirror-image that he could never have or hold. His love-sick state caused him to waste away in turn, until finally, the gods took pity on him and turned him into a white-petaled flower with a yellow center: the narcissus flower, a type of daffodil.¹⁸

In “Princess Mee,” Tolkien is apparently intent upon re-envisioning the myth of Narcissus, changing the lead character from a man to a woman (and from a human to an elf) and changing the narrative from a sad tale of self-absorption and paralysis to a delightful story about self-awareness and free movement.¹⁹ For in “Princess Mee,” the protagonist of the poem does not reject a lover (as Narcissus does Echo) or fall in love with herself (as Narcissus does when he sees his own reflection) or waste away from longing for her own reflection (as Narcissus does until the gods take pity on him and transform him into a flower). Instead, the princess accepts herself, without becoming obsessed with herself, and indeed appears to have great delight in seeing the reflection of her own existence.

This approach to re-creating Greek myth, making dramatic changes that re-write love, death, and gender, also can be seen in Tolkien’s legend of Beren and Lúthien. Tolkien said that his most famous love-story was a “kind of Orpheus-legend in reverse.”²⁰ As observed elsewhere, Tolkien:

¹⁸ For an English version of the story, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, Ind.: University of Indiana Press, 1995), Book III, 67-73. A Latin version is online: “Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, Liber III,” *The Latin Library* (<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/ovid/ovid.met3.shtml>).

¹⁹ The connection between “Princess Mee” and the myth of Narcissus has been noted by others, including Mans Björkman, “On the Points of Her Toes: Some Notes on the Development of Nieninque,” *Arda Philology 5: Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on J.R.R. Tolkien’s Invented Languages, Helsinki 2013*, ed. Anders Stenström (Arda Society, 2015), 16-29, esp. 25.

²⁰ *Letters*, 193.

divided the Orphic powers between Beren and Lúthien, gave the Orphic role of redeemer from the dead to Lúthien, and then “reversed” the plot so that the goal of the lovers is not to live together in Middle-earth, where they would be separated eventually because of their contrasting racial destinies – Beren’s human mortality, Lúthien’s Elven immortality – but rather to die together, under Iluvatar’s doom for Men, and so be reunited beyond death. Unlike the classical myth, the lovers are reunited in both life and beyond death. This new eucatastrophic ending is influenced by medieval versions of the Orphic myth.²¹

In other words, Tolkien re-created the Orphic myth in his mythology. In his legendarium, Lúthien becomes a passionate Eurydice who still loves Beren after death (a reversal of the female character’s feeling, for Eurydice’s feelings are insipid in hell in the classical versions of the story); the death that separates the two lovers is his, not hers (a reversal of death’s object, for it is Beren, the man, not Lúthien, the woman, who dies); and the goal is not life together on earth (though Beren is resurrected temporarily), but rather reunion beyond death under the doom of Men granted by Iluvatar. If Tolkien so dramatically can transform the Orphic myth, the Narcissus myth can be considered fair game for Tolkien’s imagination. But Greek mythology was not Tolkien’s only source of inspiration for “Princess Mee.” Medieval English poetry played its influential part, too.

“Princess Mee” is a simple narrative poem about a lovely, little elven princess. It describes the physical appearance of the princess and how she dances with her reflection in a pool of water. The imagery associated with the princess is similar to that associated with the Maiden who appears in the late-fourteenth century, Middle English dream vision *Pearl*: “pearls in her hair / all threaded fair; / of gossamer shot with gold / was her kerchief made.”²² Like pearls, the colors white and gold (which traditionally stand for purity and holiness) are clearly associated with both the Maiden and the Princess. Tolkien refers to the pearls of his princess no less than three times (lines 4, 67, 74), including in the very last line of the poem, making the pearls a significant visual element in her description and a symbol of her identity. Other repeated elements, her “kirtle fair” and “slippers frail / Of fishes’ mail” are clearly significant markers of her identity as well.²³

²¹ Jane Beal, “Orphic Powers in the Legend of Beren and Lúthien,” *The Journal of Tolkien Research*, Vol. 1 (2014), Iss. 1, Art. 1: 15.
<http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol1/iss1/1/>.

²² Tolkien, “Princess Mee,” in *Tales from the Perilous Realm*, 196, lines 4-7.

²³ It is interesting to compare the representations of the Pearl-Maiden in the late-fourteenth century Cotton Nero A.x manuscript to Tolkien’s descriptions of Princess Mee. See <https://medievalpearl.wordpress.com/illustrations/>. In the illustrations, fish appear in stream

Pearl begins with a man in a garden. The man has lost a precious pearl and he is grieving over that loss. Upon falling asleep, his “spirit sprang”²⁴ into space. He wanders in a bejeweled paradise until he encounters a stream he cannot cross. On the other side of it stands his beloved Pearl-Maiden. They converse at length about his sorrow over losing her until she reveals that she has asked for him to be shown a vision. He beholds the New Jerusalem and the Lamb of God, bleeding from his side, yet with a joyous countenance. At first, the man wonders at the cause of this, but then he is distracted when he sees his Pearl-Maiden in procession with other virgins following the Lamb. He starts toward the water, desiring to cross it in order to be with the Pearl-Maiden, but before he can set one foot therein, he is startled awake to consider the significance of this dream.²⁵

In “Princess Mee,” using his principle of eucatastrophe, Tolkien adapts elements from *Pearl* in order to introduce a fairy-tale element of happiness in the re-creation for his protagonists. First, Tolkien appears to cut out everyone and almost everything from *Pearl* except for the Princess (Maiden) and her dancing-pool (the stream), characterizing her as “alone.”²⁶ But she only seems to be so. In fact, the writer-reader-viewer is watching her, and so is in the role of the Dreamer.

Notably, the Pearl-Maiden transformed into Princess Mee is not static, but dynamic, literally dancing for joy. She is not a strict teacher, but a happy learner. She can look at herself, at the reflection of “Mee,” and the writer-reader-viewer can behold her to his heart’s content without ever contending with a suffering Lamb’s contrary will. The fact that Tolkien has the Princess looking at “Mee” in the pool is surely a play on words: it is not only her name, but also “me.” It is as if the Princess is the writer-reader-viewer’s *anima*.

(although no fish are mentioned in the poem itself), close by the Pearl-Maiden’s feet. The Pearl-Maiden is dressed in a “fair kirtle”: fair in the sense that it is both beautiful and white. As Kimberly Jack has shown, the Pearl-Maiden wears a sideless surcoat, an aristocratic form dress for ceremonial occasions. The sideless surcoat was worn by noble English brides, though it also appears in funeral effigies between the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. See Kimberly Jack, “What is the Pearl-Maiden Wearing, and Why?” *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, vol. 7, eds. Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011), 65-86.

²⁴ Tolkien, “Pearl,” 125.

²⁵ For a much more detailed exposition of the medieval dream vision and its meaning, see Jane Beal, *The Signifying Power of Pearl: Medieval Literary and Cultural Contexts for the Transformation of Genre* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2017). The standard edition of the poem in Middle English is Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron, eds., *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 5th ed. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007). For additional editions and translations, see <https://medievalpearl.wordpress.com/pearls-editionstranslations/>.

²⁶ Tolkien, “Princess Mee,” 198.

Significantly, the Princess also has similarities to Lúthien, being dressed in a gray mantle with a blue hood as she is, and being so very beautiful in her dancing. This picture of a beautiful, fairy-woman dancing alone in a wood is iconic in Tolkien's imagination, inspired by a day when his own wife danced for him.²⁷ It is most fully realized in his versions of the legend of Beren and Lúthien, in which Beren sees Lúthien dancing and desires her: the beginning of their love-story. In "Princess Mee," the parallel character for Beren (or for Tolkien) is the writer-reader-viewer.

This imaginative participation of writer and reader in the viewing of Princess Mee, a woman ostensibly dancing alone with her reflection, recalls the Dreamer's gaze upon the Pearl-Maiden and Beren's on Lúthien. The *Pearl*-poet subtly critiques the Dreamer's preoccupation with what he sees, especially because the Dreamer apparently values it over what he hears (and thus over the divine truth the Pearl-Maiden is trying to speak to him), but Tolkien's take on Beren's gaze is more sympathetic. While Tolkien, like the *Pearl*-poet, does critique men who see Lúthien's beauty and wish to possess Lúthien as a object – men like her father Thingol, her lover Beren, her enemy Thu/Sauron (especially in the verse version published in *The Lays of Beleriand*)²⁸ – he also, ultimately, makes his legend a great love-story, the goal of which is not renunciation, but consummation for the greater good of Middle-earth. For ultimately, the descendents of Beren and Lúthien will help to resist evil and drive it away from their lands.

The existence of "Princess Mee" suggests the complex ways in which Tolkien's imagination interacted with his sources and experiences from his own life, elements from his legendarium, and details from *Pearl* (highlighted in his translation and the commentary contained in his introductory essay to it). "Princess Mee" is surprisingly complex in content, and in transmission history (developing as it does over time from "Princess Ni" and in relation to both the Pearl-Maiden and Lúthien, as well as Tolkien's wife, Edith), in a way not implied by the way the author characterizes it and other poems in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* in a preface, saying: "a better example of their general character would be the scribble ..."²⁹

²⁷ See Tolkien, *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin; Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 420. This letter to his son Michael, dated 11 July 1972 after his wife's death, describes Tolkien's experience of watching Edith dance for him in 1917.

²⁸ See J.R.R. Tolkien, "Lay of Leithian," *Lays of Beleriand*, *The History of Middle-earth*, Vol. III, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 150-308, 330-363. For discussion, see Beal, "Orphic Powers in the Legend of Beren and Lúthien."

²⁹ Tolkien, *Tales from the Perilous Realm*, 169.

The very dismissiveness implied by such characterization, compared to the intensive re-writing Tolkien did of these poems, compels us to reconsider Tolkien's intentions in these poems in relation to his larger legendarium. In "Princess Mee," Tolkien re-envisioned classical and medieval legend to emphasize the eucatastrophic joy of healthy self-love and the acceptable, fulfilling gaze of the lover upon the beloved. These changes, like the marriage of Beowulf in "Sellic Spell," appear to be motivated by Tolkien's own love-story and by the woman central to it, his beloved wife, Edith. Her influence may also be perceived in the character of Éowyn.

Eucatastrophic Re-Imagining of Brynhild's Fate in Éowyn's Character in *The Lord of the Rings*

Tolkien re-imagined aspects of Old Norse legends, which are preserved in differing versions in the thirteenth-century, Icelandic prose *Völsunga Saga* and the still older Poetic Edda preserved in the Codex Regius, in his own "New Lay of the Völsungs." In 2009, Tolkien's son and posthumous editor, Christopher Tolkien, published the "New Lay" with other materials as *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*. In the foreword, Christopher estimates that his father completed this poem in the early 1930s, after laying aside the Lay of Leithian, concerning Beren and Lúthien.³⁰ Tolkien made a number of striking changes to the legend of Sigurd in his "New Lay," which Christopher discusses in his commentary,³¹ but Tolkien took his re-imagining of at least one aspect of the medieval Old Norse legend to a eucatastrophic level. Specifically, Tolkien's character of Brynhild in his "New Lay" bears remarkable resemblance to the character of Éowyn in *The Lord of the Rings*, in key respects,³² but the fates of the two shield-maidens are distinctly different.

In the "New Lay," as in the *Völsunga Saga*, Brynhild is a shield-maiden and a valkyrie. The Old Icelandic word *valkyrie* means "chooser of the slain," which

³⁰ Christopher Tolkien, "Foreword," *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, ed., Christopher Tolkien (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Mariner Books / Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 183-249.

³² These aspects have been discussed by Leslie Donovan in "The Valkyrie Reflex in *The Lord of the Rings*: Galadriel, Shelob, Éowyn, and Arwen," in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. Jane Chance (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2003), 106-132. This essay is reprinted as chap. 11 in *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, eds. Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie Donovan (Altadena, Calif.: Mythopoeic Press, 2015). The volume itself is excellently reviewed by Dierdre Dawson:
<http://scholar.valpo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=journaloftolkienresearch>.

reflects the role valkyries play in Old Norse mythology: as the handmaidens of the god Odin, they choose fallen warriors from battlefields and convey them to Valhalla. Brynhild first appears in Tolkien's poem when the hero Sigurd sees a war-clad warrior he thinks is a man lying on the ground with a sword. Sigurd literally discovers her when he lifts her helmet and sees her shining hair: a woman!³³ For readers of *The Lord of the Rings*, this recalls Éowyn's decision to disguise herself as Dernhelm and her later discovery on the battlefield by the riders of Rohan and subsequently, in Gondor's Houses of Healing, by Aragorn, who awakens her as Sigurd awakened Brynhild.

In the Norse myth, Brynhild has been cursed by Odin to wed, but she has taken a vow to marry only a fearless man. In Tolkien's version, Brynhild's desire is for Sigurd because he is the "World's Chosen" and the "serpent-slayer" of the dragon Fáfir.³⁴ They pledge their troth to be married, but Brynhild wants to wait until Sigurd becomes a king before wedding. In the interim, Brynhild becomes a great queen, but Sigurd breaks his vow and marries Gudrún. Brynhild is later tricked by Sigurd into marrying his friend, his wife's brother, Gunnar. This betrayal leads Brynhild to desire vengeance when she realizes it. She urges Gunnar to kill Sigurd, and Gunnar in turn urges his brother to do the deed for him. So Sigurd is murdered, and Brynhild later kills herself: a tragedy, and from Tolkien's perspective, apparently, one in need of a eucatastrophe.

Like Brynhild, Éowyn is a shield-maiden (though not a valkyrie). She is also under some external pressure and internal expectation that she marry when Aragorn arrives in Rohan, and she desires him because of his greatness: a motive she shares with Brynhild. Éowyn, as already noted, also disguises herself in man's battle-gear. She then fights against the forces of Mordor besieging Gondor, where she slays both a wraith and his winged steed, but is herself badly wounded in the encounter. It is at this point that Tolkien applies his principle of eucatastrophe to change the tragic fate of Brynhild in the happier experience of Éowyn.

Éowyn's Gunnar is not a deceiver, but the honorable Faramir of Rohan who wishes to wed her. Éowyn, unlike Brynhild, chooses to surrender the ways of a shield-maiden, marry Faramir, and become a healer.³⁵ The marriage is approved

³³ Tolkien, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, 139.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁵ Some readers do not see this as a particularly happy or empowering trajectory for Éowyn, critiquing it as anti-feminist. See, for example, William Henry Harrison, *Éowyn the Unintended: The Caged Feminine and Gendered Space in The Lord of the Rings* (University of British Columbia, Master's Thesis, 2013). However, it is notable that some male characters in *The Lord of the Rings* follow a similar path. Samwise Gamgee, for example, takes up the sword for the quest but gladly lays it down to return to the Shire, marry Rosie Cotton, and restore his own land to the state of a garden with the help of the gift of Galadriel: a box of good earth from Lothlórien.

and blessed (not forced or finagled) by King Aragorn, and Éowyn dwells in Ithilien with Faramir happily thereafter.

It is notable that Tolkien wrote that, of all his characters, he felt himself to be like Faramir.³⁶ Indeed, Tolkien and Faramir were both steadfast soldiers in long, dark wars who sought to use wise judgment in the hard choices they faced; other parallels in their characters could be enumerated.³⁷ This being so, it is natural to wonder if Faramir's relationship to his beloved Éowyn is in some way like Tolkien's relationship to his beloved Edith. It would seem that Tolkien transformed Brynhild's tragic fate to Eowyn's happy ending, emphasizing the eucatastrophic joy of healing after a terrible experience of battle with a demonic power. Ennobling Éowyn's character so that she chooses a good marriage to a man who loves her, rather than insisting out of pride on a match to a man famous for his greatness, fits with Tolkien's implied ideal behind all eucatastrophe: that honorable character, despite all intervening suffering, will eventually result in a good destiny.

Conclusions

J.R.R. Tolkien's principle of eucatastrophe led him to transform medieval legends when he incorporated them into his own tales, poems, and larger legendarium. He re-created a folktale version of *Beowulf* in "Sellic Spell," and he specifically rewrote the ending to emphasize the joy of marriage. He re-envisioned the myth of Narcissus and the dream vision *Pearl* in "Princess Mee" to reveal the joy of healthy self-love and the acceptable, fulfilling gaze of the lover upon the beloved. He re-imagined the fate of Brynhild in the character of Éowyn, doing away with the tragedy of a lover's murder and the beloved's suicide in favor of a shield-maiden's physical and psychological healing from a wraith's demonic attack on her life. In

For discussion of male and female roles in Middle-earth, see chap. 12 "Tolkien and Feminist Criticism" in Lisa Coutras, *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty: Majesty, Splendor, and Transcendence in Middle-earth* (London and New York, N.Y.: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 187-215. For additional insight, see Melissa Smith, "At Home and Abroad: Eowyn's Two-Fold Figuring as War Bride in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mythlore* 26 no. 1-2 (2007): 161ff, which is reprinted as chap. 10 in *Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien*, eds. Croft and Donovan.

³⁶ Tolkien, *Letters*, 232.

³⁷ For more on Tolkien's experience in World War I, see the major biographies: Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, Jane Chance, *Tolkien, Self, and Other: "This Queer Creature"* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), and John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin, 2003). See also Jane Beal, "Why is Bilbo Baggins Invisible? The Hidden War in *The Hobbit*," *The Journal of Tolkien Research* 2 (2015), Iss. 1, Art. 8: 1-28, which discusses the incorporation of Tolkien's war experiences in the character of Bilbo.

The Lord of the Rings, Éowyn's joy continues to grow in her marriage to Faramir and their purposeful work together in Ithilien. In each case, these eucatastrophic transformations appear to be tied to Tolkien's own personal love-story and to the inspiration of his wife, Edith, which shows the interplay between Tolkien's knowledge of medieval literature and his real-life experience of loving and being loved. They also appear to be tied to Tolkien's own Christian faith, and the hope he found in the ultimate "eucatastrophe," of which all other eucatastrophes are only smaller versions anticipating a greater fulfillment:

It is not difficult to imagine the peculiar excitement and joy that one would feel if any specifically beautiful fairy-story were found to be "primarily" true, its narrative to be history ... The joy would have exactly the same quality, if not the same degree, as the joy which the "turn" in a fairy-story gives: such joy has the very taste of primary truth. (Otherwise its name would not be joy.) It looks forward (or backward: the direction in this regard is unimportant) to the Great Eucatastrophe. The Christian joy, the *Gloria*, is of the same kind, but it is pre-eminently (infinitely, if our capacity were not finite) high and joyous. Because this story is supreme, and it is true. Art has been verified ... The Evangelium has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them, especially the "happy ending."³⁸

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³⁸ Tolkien, "On Fairy-stories," 388-89.

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