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Abstract

Student paper award, Mythcon 2013. Abrahamson makes a particularly convincing case for the validity of fanfiction by applying Tolkien’s own statements about the “dominion of the author,” the “Cauldron of Story,” and subcreation to the issue. Discusses Tolkien’s experiences with early fanwork and his own use of sources as an author.

Additional Keywords

Fanfiction; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Fanfiction; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Sources; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Theory of sub-creation; Tolkien, J.R.R. “On Fairy-stories”



J.R.R. TOLKIEN, FANFICTION, AND “THE FREEDOM OF THE READER”

MEGAN B. ABRAHAMSON

“I SEND YOU THE ENCLOSED impertinent contribution to my troubles,” J.R.R. Tolkien wrote to his publishing house Allen & Unwin in 1966 upon receiving a manuscript for a sequel to *The Lord of the Rings* from a fan who proposed to publish the work. Tolkien went on:

I do not know what the legal position is, I suppose that since one cannot claim property in inventing proper names, that there is no legal obstacle to this young ass publishing his sequel, if he could find any publisher, either respectable or disreputable, who would accept such tripe.

I have merely informed him that I have forwarded his letter and samples to you. I think that a suitable letter from Allen & Unwin might be more effective than one from me. I once had a similar proposal, couched in the most obsequious terms, from a young woman, and when I replied in the negative, I received a most vituperative letter. (*The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* [Letters] 371)

What these (very brave) fans sent to Professor Tolkien were works of fanfiction: texts based on another or groups of texts that form a canon of characters, settings, or plots. Tolkien’s response was instinctive and, like many authors, understandably defensive of his work, even though many studies have covered how Tolkien himself re-used mythic and medieval sources—a move that, as will be discussed, arguably makes his work fanfiction. Plenty of scholarship has dealt with Tolkien’s derivativeness, especially from medieval canons, but almost nothing has been written about Tolkien’s artistic strategies as fanfiction.¹ Although the scholarly Tolkien community has tried to distance itself from association with fan practices and activity,² much can be gained by applying fan

¹ The line between derivative texts and fanfiction is a blurry one at best, especially since definitions of fanfiction vary so widely. This paper deals only tangentially with this problem of definition, below, which other fanfiction scholarship has done in better detail (Pugh’s handling of fanfiction as literature is especially interesting).

² I do not mean separation from the academic study of Tolkien fandom and fanfiction, by which I would be excluding the scholarship of Reid, Smol, Sturgis, and others. Instead, the struggle Tolkien scholars face is that some others perceive that the popularity of *The Lord of*

theory not only to Tolkien's fans, but to Tolkien himself as a "fan" of medieval language and literature as well as an advocate of the freedom of the reader, an important cornerstone in fan studies. In fact, Tolkien's attitudes toward fanfiction writing turn out to be a good deal warmer than we might expect from the letter quoted above. Although Tolkien would of course have used different terminology in place of "fanfiction" (or even "source studies," preferring instead to use "sub-creation," "deep roots," and to talk instead about the "Cauldron" of story), he seems to have been at least theoretically open to the idea of fanfiction—even of his own work, and even in spite of the above example.

Internet sources can offer useful and relevant materials for discussing the nature and purpose of fan activity, reflect how Tolkien's approach to his works may have resembled such activities, and help us to speculate about how he might have viewed similar fan activities. The Tolkien Music List, for example, is an online collection of songs, artists, and album titles of music that are fanworks of Tolkien's legendarium, either in name or by theme. The home page quotes Letter 131 in part, where Tolkien (apparently rather magnanimously) writes that he had initially planned to "draw some of the great tales in fullness, and leave many only placed in the scheme, and sketched. The cycles should be linked to a majestic whole, and yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama" (*Letters* 144-45). Reid's study of competing discourse in Tolkien fandoms notes another fan's use of this quote in an online space, and claims that "this sentence, [as used] by a fan who cites Tolkien's authority for writing fan fiction (a complex subject in today's world of copyrights, intellectual property, and 'Cease and Desist' letters feared by fans) is a sophisticated rhetorical choice. Superficially, it can be read as a standard/academic/masculine appeal to an outside (in this case, canonical) authority" (Reid 359). From this alone, we are tempted to assume not only permission, but even a mandate from Tolkien for fanworks of his texts (though not necessarily fanfiction in the strictest sense)³ to be created in art, music and drama (implicit still is to leave prose and poetry to Tolkien).

It is disheartening for any fan who checks the full context of this letter, because the quotation stops short, and Tolkien's next word is the exclamation "Absurd!" However, the letter's wider context is actually the closest Tolkien got to a discussion of Humphrey Carpenter's coinage "a mythology for England":

the Rings "precludes 'real' academic work" on it (Reid 351; see also Isaacs). We might even think of *Mythlore's* shift from fanzine to journal, and its Statement of Editorial Purpose in accepting no "Fiction, poetry, fan fiction, fan art" and the parenthetical addition "All but fan fiction may be submitted to our sister publication *Mythic Circle*" ("Submissions").

³ Fanworks being the inclusive term for any fan-produced text regardless of medium, including fanfiction, music, art, etc., while fanfiction refers specifically to written texts.

Do not laugh! But once upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story—the larger founded on the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths—which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country. (*Letters* 144)

This goal is what Tolkien calls absurd. Although clearly meant to be self-deprecating to his own designs, it also makes suspect fans' use of his quote as a kind of letter of marque to write music and fanfiction derivative of Tolkien's works.

Still further, in Letter 187 we see Tolkien expressing concern as to his ability to produce all the examples and information on the wider world of Middle-earth that his fans demanded: "many like you demand *maps*, others wish for *geological* indications rather than places; many want Elvish grammars, phonologies, and specimens [...]. Musicians want tunes, and musical notation; archaeologists want ceramics and metallurgy. Botanists want a more accurate description of the *mallorn*," and so on, concluding that "It will be a big volume, even if I attend only to the things revealed to my limited understanding!" (*Letters* 248). Here, Tolkien takes on the Herculean task entirely himself, where he might have had a perfect opportunity to leave Middle-earth to others to flesh out in more detail. If we stopped here, we might confirm Tolkien's disapproval of fanfiction completely.

Whatever Tolkien's attitude toward fanfiction of his own works, under the current circumstances of Internet culture and fandom, derivative fanworks are simply going to exist as long as a text has fans. Within a general audience, "there are differing degrees and inflections to [the] saturation" of a text: "fans bear a more conscious and intense affective relationship to media objects" compared to "normal" viewers, and, while "'fan' is derived from 'fanatic,' a term with heavy connotations of extremism and irrationality," this characterization reduces fandom to "a kind of pathology" that should be avoided (Bailey 48-49). By "rereading" their target text over and over (Storey 146), they are "often very intense interpreters and indeed have a profoundly aesthetic view of the objects of their engagement," which is "directly related to the issue of selfhood" (Bailey 49) because fans define themselves by their devotion to their texts (Jenkins 36). Fan studies' primary objective is to highlight "the relative value of all texts and the inherent supremacy of the reader over the text" (Sandvoss, "The Death of the Reader?" 27) and

With few exceptions, studies of fan audiences have challenged the idea of "correct" or even dominant readings. Hence, fan studies with their critical attention to the power of meaning construction not only underline

Barthes's pronouncement of the terminal state of the modern author but also inherit its inherent ideological stance: "Once the author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on the text." (27)

Fan studies theory also moves the focus "from the text to the processes of reading," and, much as in the case of reader-response theory, is based on the premise that texts only acquire meaning when they are being read; the focus is on "textual elements of indeterminacy that only come to life through the interaction with the reader: textual gaps and blanks" (28). Fans will then "reconcile their object of fandom with their expectation, beliefs, and sense of self," and as "the fan's semiotic power extends beyond the bridging of textual gaps to the inclusion and exclusion of textual episodes, fan readers exclude those textual elements that impede the normalization of the text and fail to correspond with their horizon of expectation" (30). That is, fans, by virtue of their close relationship to and rereading of their fan texts, actually develop critical interpretive power over a text similar to that of a scholarly reader. Indeed, the power of popular culture hinges on the "polysemic popular text," or the "ability of popular texts to incorporate a variety of different [...] interpretations of such texts, thus distinguishing [fans] from 'normal' audiences" (Sandvoss, *Fans* 12).

While Tolkien may have been squeamish about seeing fanworks produced directly from his fiction, he supported individual reader interpretation as well as the text's ability to support various interpretations. Tolkien's stance on allegory as given in the Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings* is often quoted, though the latter part of Tolkien's comment is not usually addressed (so I here reproduce it in full):

But I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse "applicability" with "allegory"; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author. (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] Foreword xxiv)

Aside from Tolkien's interesting use of "cordially," this statement is especially enlightening in terms of "the freedom of the reader," which Tolkien seems to value over allegory that represents the "domination of the author." However, regarding allegory at least, Shippey says that "the evidence is rather against Tolkien here" (Shippey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* [Author] 161),

considering that Tolkien wrote at least one, possibly two⁴ allegorical texts, but concludes that “Tolkien disliked vague allegories, allegories which didn’t work, though he accepted them readily in their proper place, which was either advancing an argument (as in the *Beowulf* example) or else constructing brief and personal fables” (164). In all other cases, then, Tolkien “much preferred” texts that could allow for “varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers.” He privileges reader interpretation and states his belief not just in a private letter, but in the prominent space that is the introduction to his *magnum opus*. According to fan studies, this allowance for a multiplicity of interpretations or “varied applicability” is what gives a popular culture text its longevity.

If the act of interpreting a text is the first step, then writing down these interpretations, either in metacommentary or narrative form (or drawing them, or producing any other form of fanwork), is not significantly any more transgressive than the initial, internal act of interpretation. Because “fans do not just read texts” but “continually reread them,” it “profoundly changes the nature of the text-reader relationship,” according to Storey: rereading “shifts the reader’s attention from ‘what will happen’ to ‘how things happen’, to questions of character relations, narrative themes, the production of social knowledges and discourses” (146). These same questions are asked by literary critics every day. Storey explains how “[f]an culture is not just about consumption, it is also about the production of texts—songs, poems, novels, fanzines, videos, etc.—made in response to the professional media texts of fandom,” though this is not necessarily acceptable or even appreciated by the creators of those professional media texts (143). In fandom communities, as opposed to purely critical ones, interpretation and fanfiction often go hand in hand—in ideology as much as in practice.

An example of this can be found among “the Silmarillion”⁵ fandom on the social networking site Tumblr, where user bandersnatchftw created a challenge called the “30 Days of Headcanon Challenge” (Jess). Such memes are common on the site (the idea being a post per day which ultimately answers thirty questions regarding the blogger or a topic of interest), and this particular challenge is not limited to Tolkien fandom, using vague enough wording to be transferable to other fandom texts. Headcanon (as opposed to “canon,” the concrete facts given in a text) is a term for one’s personal interpretation of

⁴ See Shippey’s discussion of “Leaf by Niggle” (*The Road to Middle-earth* 266) and *Smith of Wootton Major* (296).

⁵ I use Shippey’s distinction between “the immense complex of stories, repeatedly told and retold in quite different forms” and *The Silmarillion* text published by Christopher Tolkien (Shippey, *Road* 223).

something not explicitly stated⁶—which describes most of “the Silmarillion” material. What is interesting about “the Silmarillion” fandom on Tumblr in particular is that while these challenges can prompt “answers” in the form of fanfiction, fan art, or critical commentary (referred to as “meta”), this niche of the fandom will usually produce *both* critical commentary and an accompanying illustrative fanfiction (usually short) as a single unit. One user, lintamande, describes her post for “Day 2: Something about a character you are hopelessly in love with” in terms of “it kinda turned into a headcanon/meta/ficish thing” and provides an introductory explanation of the choices she made and why they are supported in the text before beginning her narrative (Piper). Alverman and Hagood also apply Buckingham’s definition of parody to fanfiction, which “can function as a critical mode in its own right, which provides access to the parts that more closed forms of analysis cannot reach” and offers “safe space in which difficult tensions and conflicts can be explored, and in which new and challenging insights can be generated” (Buckingham 70; see also Alvermann and Hagood 438). In a community where fanworks (art, narrative fiction, etc.) are acceptable and even privileged, the same criticisms are often borne out in creative rather than purely scholarly ways.

Popular definitions of fanfiction, such as Pimenova’s, assert that to qualify as a fanfiction, works must be “non-profitable, non-commercial texts based on other fictional texts [...] and written by their fans,” but this definition is not entirely satisfactory (44). Because of the fluidity of the genre of fanfiction, Sheenagh Pugh selects one of the broader definitions of fanfiction as “writing, whether official or unofficial, paid or unpaid, which makes uses of an accepted canon of characters, settings and plots generated by another writer or writers. [...] [O]ne thing all fanfic has in common is the idea of ‘canon’, the source material accepted as authentic and, within the fandom, known by all readers in the same way that myth and folk-tale were once commonly known” (25-26). The fact remains that no single definition or delineation satisfies all concerned parties completely.⁷ Because of this problem of definition, for the purpose of this study I

⁶ According to Moonbeam’s *Fanfiction Terminology*, Headcanon “refers to the personal beliefs or interpretations about canon that an author or reader makes to explain or account for some aspect of the actual canon. The headcanon itself, while not officially supported by the canon, tends also not to be actually *disproven* or refuted by the canon and will therefore seem plausible in the mind of the fan who imagines it. Headcanons are as many and varied as the fans themselves, may be about the past, present, or future of the character or plot, and can be shared by others if particularly enticing or believable” (Moonbeam).

⁷ Many see the definition as between paid/authorized or unpaid/unauthorized (what should we call a *Doctor Who* novel?; see Pugh 143), or the degree to which a text is different from the original (what should we call *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James, a professionally published alternate universe (AU) fanfiction of *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer?; see Boog), or

argue that fanfiction is not a new phenomenon, although the term and many of the nuances of form and mode are. We need merely see that fanfiction and other derivative texts are related, and that the delineation between them may ultimately be impossible to define. Because lines between fanfiction and professionally published “original” fiction are so easy to blur, drawing the line between the two is subjective at best.

Fanfiction is usually maligned on grounds of legality, the ownership of ideas, and intellectual property. However, as Tushnet argues, “[t]exts invite interpretation,” and therefore, “making a text available to the public necessarily cedes some control over it” (Tushnet 67). That texts invite interpretation does not necessarily call for a Barthesian death of the author, but, as we have seen, Tolkien says that texts invite reader interpretation, and he even dismisses the “purposed domination of the author” as a literary mode he finds distasteful. Although laws and practices were different in Tolkien’s time, today,

Fan fiction has attracted more attention from ‘free culture’ advocates who are concerned about copyright owners’ attempts to channel and control popular culture [...]. The formal legal landscape is more favorable to fans [...] as courts have been more willing to protect “transformative” unauthorized uses against copyright owners’ allegations of infringement. Transformative uses are uses that add new insights or meaning to the original work, often in ways that copyright owners don’t like [...]. Recent cases emphasize that copyright owners can’t suppress unwanted interpretations of their works by asserting copyright. (Tushnet 60-61)

“Transformative” has become a defensible word for fanfiction and derivative works, by which such genres as parody and satire are legal (genres that most people will agree are necessary aspects of popular culture and free speech). Tushnet asserts that “transformative fair uses make subtext text,” but discomfort arises when readers or fans interpret subtexts with which the author does not agree (68).⁸

the degree to which something is transformative (what should we call *The Wind Done Gone* by Alice Randall, a reinterpretation which highlights the racism of *Gone With The Wind*?; see De Kosnik 121-22), or whether or not a derivative text is legal (copyright laws as they stand are unclear on what constitutes a “legal” derivative work; see Schwabach 60).

⁸ We are probably lucky, for example, that the orthodox Catholic Tolkien never had to negotiate the now somewhat commonplace interpretation of Frodo and Sam’s relationship as homoerotic, but it is unfair to claim that their relationship *cannot* be viewed in this way. Indeed, such a view is more and more considered especially important by advocates for queer representation in popular media.

In highlighting the reader's agency for interpretation, Jenkins says that

The raw materials of the original story play a crucial role...providing instructions for a preferred reading, but they do not necessarily overpower and subdue the reader. The same narratives [...] can be read literally by one group and as camp by another. Some groups' pleasure comes not in celebrating the values of their chosen works but rather in "reading them against the grain," in expressing opposition to rather than acceptance of textual ideology. (Jenkins 63)

I turn again to "the Silmarillion" fandom on Tumblr, who, on the Saturday of this year's Mythcon (entirely coincidentally, as far as I could tell), "celebrated" through online venues a predetermined "Noldor Independence Day" by posting fanworks in various mediums that characterized the Noldor's defiance of the Valar and journey to Middle-earth as a bold and positive move away from a corrupt system of government, in defiance of the narrative in *The Silmarillion* that describes this as the Noldor's "folly" and as a kind of fall (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 92). This was such a large movement that the "trending tags" for all of Tumblr for that that day included "silmarillion," "mandos," "maglor," "maedhros," "fingon," "tolkien," and "noldor," according to one poster (Rottler). It is these "against the grain" readings which creators and authors find most problematic, but which are a hallmark of fan activity, and only possible with a text that can support multiple readings—a polysemic popular text.

We have at least one example of Tolkien interacting with fans in such a way that shows how he felt about defiance or ignorance of his established canon of Middle-earth. In a never-sent draft of a letter to a Mr. Rang regarding questions about nomenclature in his works, Tolkien wrote that

I am honored by the interest that many readers have taken in the nomenclature of *The Lord of the Rings*; and pleased by it, in so far as it shows that this construction, the product of very considerable thought and labour, has achieved (as I hoped) a verisimilitude, which assists probably in the "literary belief" in the story as historical. But I remain puzzled, and indeed sometimes irritated, by many of the guesses at the "sources" of the nomenclature, and theories or fancies concerning hidden meanings. (*Letters* 379)

He adds that "these seem to me no more than private amusements, and as such I have no right or power to object to them, though they are, I think, valueless for the elucidation or interpretation of my fiction" and, "[i]f published, I do object to them, when (as they usually do) they appear to be unauthentic embroideries on

my work, throwing light only on the state of mind of their contrivers" (379-80). We might be tempted to think that in practice, then, Tolkien was less warm toward his readers' interpretations of his works than we might have hoped from the magnanimous language in the Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings*. However, he clarifies his angle when he says that "[m]any of them seem to show ignorance or disregard of the clues and information which are provided in notes, renderings, and in the Appendices," indicating that the problem is less with fan interpretation and more with fan interpretation in ignorance of the canon he provided (380). Tolkien is less concerned by incorrect *interpretations* of meanings of names, but rather with defiance of the given information on his nomenclature. Although in practice this defiance of canon happens a lot in fandom, and individual fan interpretations may willingly exclude as much information as they deem necessary to "normalize" the text for themselves (Sandvoss, "The Death of the Reader?" 30), this is a fair complaint of Tolkien's, and one that does not exclude him from valuing the freedom of reader interpretation of his own works.

As in our opening example of Tolkien's vehement reaction to a proposed sequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, the strongest opponents of fanfiction tend to be the authors of the original text. One fan, in an open letter to authors who condemn fanfiction or (attempt to) forbid fanfiction of their works, says

You think fanfic is a personal affront to the many hours you've spent carefully crafting your characters. You think fanfic is "immoral and illegal." You think fanfiction is just plagiarism. You think fanfiction is cheating. You think fanfic is for people who are too stupid/lazy/unimaginative to write stories of their own. You think there are exceptions for people who write published derivative works as part of a brand or franchise, because they're clearly only doing it because they have to. You're personally traumatized by the idea that someone else could look at your characters and decide that you did it wrong and they need to fix it/add original characters to your universe/send your characters to the moon/Japan/their hometown. You think all fanfic is basically porn. You're revolted by the very idea that fic writers think what they do is legitimate.

We get it.

Congratulations! You've just summarily dismissed as criminal, immoral, and unimaginative each of the following Pulitzer Prize-winning writers and works [...] (Romano)

The letter then lists over one hundred examples of what she calls professionally published fanfiction, many of which are considered integral to the Western

literary canon,⁹ and even includes works published within an original author's lifetime while a text is still under copyright. She clarifies that "it is absolutely *not* my intention to make the claim that anything with the least resemblance to something else is fanfiction. All of the works in this post have been deliberately sourced from pre-existing sources, with the intention of changing those sources, or adding to/expanding them in some way," giving a definition of fanfiction that is as good as any (Romano). Further, she adds, as a defense of fanfiction,

the story is not defined by the barriers you place around it. The moment you gave it to us, those walls broke. You may hate the fact people are imagining more to your story than what you put there. But if I were you, I'd be grateful that I got the chance to create a story that *has* a culture around it, a story that people want to keep talking about, reworking, remixing, living in, fantasizing about, thinking about, writing about. (Romano)

We might see in this the "mythology for England" dream that Tolkien aimed for at one point in his life at least: a mythic cycle that stood on its own and which could "yet leave scope for other minds and hands, wielding paint and music and drama" (*Letters* 145).

Although many have discussed the indebtedness of Tolkien's fiction to medieval language and literature,¹⁰ few have explored this intratextual relationship in terms of fanfiction. The implication, however tentative, that Tolkien wrote fanfiction is not—or should not be—a pejorative. Rather, seeing Tolkien's work in this light should increase the value and reputation of fanfiction, as the genre deserves more respect and attention than it has often had among the academic community and among professional fiction authors. Tolkien at least engaged in fanfiction writing in a few ways. One necessitates an introduction of the "fix-it" genre of fanfiction, in which fans who are dissatisfied with some aspect of the canon of their source text compose their fiction to change or "fix" what they perceived as "wrong" in the canon narrative, either in defiance of the canon itself or striving to be compliant with it if the original

⁹ The list includes many film and play examples, but as far as literature, in addition to listing most of the Shakespearean canon (less two) and every Arthurian retelling, the author includes John Gardner's *Grendel*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone*, just to name a few.

¹⁰ For a more thorough handling of examples of Tolkien's medieval influences, see especially Flieger, "The Story of Kullervo"; Lee 64-65, 77, 79, 110, 125, 166, 179, 195, 200; Shippey, *Road* 16, 38, 43, 62, 69, 70, 80, 83, 98, 123, 140-41, 142, 146, 177-79, 182, 183, 201, 240-41.

authors are not consistent. An important use of this type of fanfiction is to explain “plot holes or inconsistent characterization,” and to address other inconsistencies in the canon (“Fix-it”). This concept relates to the desire of fans to create what Jenkins termed a “meta-text”: a “tertiary, fan-made construction—a projection of the text’s potential future, based on specific fan desires and interests” (Johnson 286). In much the same way, we might look at Tolkien’s fiction as improving upon certain medieval “texts” he felt needed “fixing”: the Rohirrim, for example, as Anglo-Saxons on horseback, might be an improvement on the (at least fictional, poetic, from medieval literature) “Anglo-Saxons’ reluctance to have anything militarily to do with horses [...] *The Battle of Maldon* begins, significantly enough, with the horses being sent to the rear. Hastings was lost, along with Anglo-Saxon independence, largely because the English heavy infantry could not (quite) hold off the combination of archers and mounted knight” (Shippey, *Road* 123-24). For Tolkien, who at least jokingly lamented the Norman Invasion of 1066, these mounted Anglo-Saxon warriors “fix” a problem with the heroic culture from *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*.

In order to compare Tolkien more effectively with the stereotyped fanfiction author today, we might here take a moment to imagine the process of Tolkien as author of fanfiction. Before or around 1914, when Tolkien was only twenty-two years old (a young, impressionable age, where “fan” behavior is arguably more socially acceptable, or at least more common), he read the Finnish mythic cycle *The Kalevala*. He was so intrigued by it that he half-wrote (and jotted down notes for an end to) “The Story of Kullervo,” which is difficult to argue is *not* a work of fanfiction. Out of this text grew the story of Túrin Turambar, whose tragic adventures closely parallel those of Kullervo, and from which the “germ” of “the Silmarillion” material first began to grow (Flieger, “The Story of Kullervo”; see also West). Tolkien may not have liked to recognize *The Kalevala* as a “source” for “the Silmarillion” (“deep roots” is really more applicable, or indebtedness, or medievalism), and he might have liked even less that this is precisely the process of fanfiction (if fanfiction writers do not always go as far as Tolkien went), but it is arguable that Tolkien’s problem with source studies is simply one of semantics.

An important bar to studying Tolkien’s fiction in terms of fanfiction is his complicated opinion of source studies, a subject that by definition is also common to fanfiction. As Shippey warns us, “Tolkien’s mind was one of unmatched subtlety, not without a streak of deliberate guile” (*Road* 5). Indeed, source study is an oft-maligned field in English literature in general, but it is a necessary approach especially for the study of medieval literature. Tolkien’s works offer a particularly interesting case study of source material because of the relationships between his fiction and the medieval texts he dealt with in an academic context. Tolkien’s scholarship and fiction were closely intertwined, and

the medieval literature he studied—and clearly personally enjoyed—inform his fiction in a number of remarkable ways, even in spite of Tolkien's stated dislike of such direct comparisons. Again, in his Foreword to *The Lord of the Rings* and immediately following the business of allegory, Tolkien remarks that "an author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience, but the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex, and attempts to define the process are at best guesses from evidence that is inadequate and ambiguous" (xxiv). He is here speaking in terms of lived experience, but Tolkien's academic experiences are just as applicable and relevant—perhaps even more so in terms of his fiction. And if it is the case that all we have are "best guesses," then I am in good company with Shippey, Chance, Lee, Flieger, and many others whose studies of Tolkien's medieval analogues are especially revealing.

To Tolkien, it was ultimately more important to study the work of art itself, as a work of art, than it was to study the sources that influenced it.¹¹ In *The Keys of Middle-earth*, Lee quotes Shippey who notes that "Tolkien did not like source studies, that is books that attempt to identify where passage *x* and passage *y* are taken from or based on. He felt they 'tended to distract attention from the work of art itself, and to undervalue the artist by the suggestion that he had "got it all" from somewhere else,'" although of course "he was aware of the attraction of source studies. In a letter written in 1972, toward the end of his life, Tolkien complained that 'the search for the sources of *The Lord of the Rings* is going to occupy academics for a generation or two', but he wished it wasn't so" (Lee 3). Part of Tolkien's problem with source studies, at least as explained in "On Fairy-Stories," seems to be that if you are going to ask where a particular author "got" a particular idea, you might as well ask "what is the origin of stories?" I quote Tolkien at length here to suggest the source for his "cordial" dislike of source studies as it relates to his search for the origins of stories:

Such studies are, however, scientific (at least in intent); they are the pursuit of folklorists or anthropologists: that is of people using the stories not as they were meant to be used, but as a quarry from which to dig evidence, or information, about matters in which they are interested. A perfectly legitimate procedure in itself—but ignorance or forgetfulness of the nature of a story (as a thing told in its entirety) has often led such inquirers into strange judgements. To investigators of this sort recurring similarities [...] seem specially important. So much so that students of folk-lore are [...] inclined to say that any two stories that are built round the same folklore motive, or are made up of a generally similar

¹¹ The same may be said of fanfiction, which is more often studied in terms of sociology and popular culture than it is viewed as literature in its own right.

combination of such motives, are 'the same stories'. [...] Statements of that kind may express (in undue abbreviation) some element of truth; but they are not true in a fairy-story sense, they are not true in art or literature. It is precisely the colouring, the atmosphere, the unclassifiable individual details of a story, and above all the general purport that informs with life the undissected bones of the plot, that really count. (Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories" ["OFS"] 119-120)

It was more important to Tolkien to study the work than to study its sources, the best example of this attitude in practice being his scholarship and thoughts on *Beowulf*. He complains that "*Beowulf* has been used as a quarry of fact and fancy far more assiduously than it has been studied as a work of art," and implies that such studies actually damage the art, tragically and irreparably, as his tower analogy in "The Monsters and the Critics" shows (Tolkien, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics" ["MC"] 5). Although he admits in Letter 25 that "*Beowulf* is among my most valued sources," for *The Hobbit*, he quickly adds that "it was not consciously present to the mind in the process of writing, in which the episode of the theft arose naturally (and almost inevitably) from the circumstances. It is difficult to think of any other way of conducting the story at that point. I fancy the author of *Beowulf* would say much the same," perhaps dodging the issue as much as explaining it (*Letters* 31).

While resisting source studies, Tolkien used alternative terms (such as "deep roots" and "Cauldron" of story) for what is essentially the same approach, and even coined another term (sub-creation) to negotiate his problems with such studies. According to Lee, "Tolkien once remarked, 'If you want to write a tale of this [sort] you must consult your roots'" (12). Tolkien refers also to the "deep roots" in the story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in his essay of the same title, which Shippey explores in terms of Tolkien himself:

Tolkien declared that the poem 'belongs to that literary kind which has deep roots in the past, deeper even than its author was aware. It is made of tales often told before and elsewhere, and of elements that derive from remote times, beyond the vision or awareness of the poet' [...]. [H]e had made the point (using in fact the word 'flavour') that deep roots for a text are not just something incidental, to be studied by scholars: they also affect the nature of the text itself, and can be detected by the sympathetic ear, possibly even the naive or unscholarly ear. (Shippey, *Road* 308-09)

As a medievalist, Tolkien was acutely aware of his "deep roots," and even consciously tried to incorporate them into his own writing. "[W]e must recognize," says Lee, "that Tolkien held many of the tales, myths and poems that he taught and researched in his memory and occasionally fused these with his

own creations to form something new. As he himself stated: 'one's mind is, of course, stored with a 'leaf-mould' or memories . . . and these rise up to the surface at times'" (8). Nevertheless, Lee also notes that Tolkien

would have been the first to acknowledge that these memories and original leaves—the medieval texts themselves—should be recognized and that their influence should not be ignored. This is different from source analysis. [...] This does not detract from the importance of the poem, and more importantly does not attempt a detailed source study, but it does show its indebtedness. (Lee 8)

It is the mentality behind this fear of source studies shown by the descriptive acrobatics of Tolkien and other scholars that prompted Tolkien to find alternative modes to discuss what he accomplished with his fiction.

Understanding Tolkien as a medievalist is an important cornerstone in Tolkien scholarship, and rightly so. Lee states that by using medieval literature, "Tolkien had a wealth of ideas, but more importantly stories or elements of stories that would strike a chord of familiarity with his audience. This association with hidden memories would add to the depth of the story and make it 'feel right'. In other words, he was reconstructing his story as well as creating something new" (11). Even more strongly, Lee argues "we already know that Tolkien often toyed with composing his own medieval texts in the original languages using his extensive linguistic knowledge. Tolkien's typical response to reading a medieval work 'was to desire not so much to make a philological or critical study of it as to write a modern work in the same tradition,'" as we see in the recently published *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun* and *The Fall of Arthur* (9). "It is natural, therefore, that when turning to his great works of fiction," Tolkien would "continue this practice of creating something new from the old" (9). Chance concurs, arguing that "[o]ne way to understand Tolkien's popularity that has emerged, slowly, over the [...] years since the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* is to acknowledge the indebtedness of his creative work to the medieval languages and literatures he professed at Oxford and other universities over his lifetime" (Chance 2). Chance's collection of essays on Tolkien's medievalism demonstrates

in varied fashion how Tolkien from the beginning responded to his modern contexts by retelling his medieval sources and adapting his medieval scholarship to his own voice. Tolkien was, over time, influenced by his own personal medievalism, his profession as a medievalist, his relationships with other medievalists, and his own mythologizing in constructing his major fiction. (Chance 4)

She adds that what her collection of essays can accomplish “is to suggest new ways in which Tolkien’s medievalness and his medievalism informed and shaped his fantasy [...] through the modes and genres he revitalized—retextualized—in the fantastic histories of Middle-earth he created” (Chance 11). Chance’s mixed vocabulary is critical, because it indicates that Tolkien can both be “informed and shaped” and “influenced” by medieval literature, and can “retell his medieval sources” and yet “create” his own world—which is what fanfiction authors do every day, for to simply retell a work without incorporating one’s own creativity defeats the purpose of fanfiction.

Tolkien’s creation of Middle-earth relies perhaps less on lived experience than on read experience, from the medieval texts he studied and enjoyed. The most sensible reason for “Tolkien drawing on medieval literature as his inspiration,” Lee argues,

was that it satisfied his role as a ‘sub-creator’, something he stated in his essay ‘On Fairy-Stories’ that was essential if your audience was to be drawn into the tale. In essence this means the creation of a credible secondary world (in this case Middle-earth), and the way to achieve this was by giving it depth, in terms of history, mythology, geography, flora and fauna. Even his most savage critics recognize that this is one of Tolkien’s strengths. (Lee 11)

Tolkien’s Middle-earth is profoundly well developed and its depth comes less from its possible analogues to Tolkien’s own world (he rejects out of hand a comparison of the One Ring to the Atomic Bomb; see *Letters* 303) and more from its analogues to medieval history, literature, and language. Sub-creation is the means by which fantasy comes about, and “when we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter’s power—upon one plane; and the desire to wield that power in the world external to our minds awakes. [...] But in such ‘fantasy,’ as it is called, new form is made; Faërie begins; Man becomes a subcreator” (“OFS” 109). He continues that story-maker as sub-creator “makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside” (132). Tolkien saw himself as a sub-creator, both “sub,” at a lower or less original level of creation, yet still “creator”—under a God that created the world he lived in, with its deep history and natural order. If it is Tolkien’s read and studied experience (literature, mythology, language) that influenced so much of his Middle-earth, so, too, any author of any derivative text is a sub-creator, an offshoot, using and re-using created stories as much as the physical world for inspiration. Even authors of “original” material are, according to Tolkien, still sub-creators. “Perhaps the real danger in picking over ‘the bones of the ox’ is no more than this: it comes as a

threat to our general notion of creativity," notes Shippey (*Road* 294). Fanfiction, because it is by definition derivative, challenges the stereotype we want to believe of the lone creative genius. Tolkien would argue, I think, against the existence of this genius, because it challenges his notion of every human creation being subordinate to God's Creation. Source studies are a waste of time in Tolkien's worldview, because anything created by man can only be traced back to the Divine source.

Therefore, Tolkien was concerned, ultimately, less with whether material was derivative or original and more with failing to value the individual skill of the creator. In "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien speaks of the "Cauldron" of story, of "the 'soup' of story, that rich mixture which has been simmering since man first told tales, from which stories have been ladled out to nourish the imagination in every age, including our own [...] the hero, the quest, the struggle with monstrous forces of evil, the ordeal and its outcome" (Flieger, "Frodo and Aragorn" 123). Tolkien draws this language from Dasent's translation of Norse fairy-tales, where Dasent claims

the reader 'must be satisfied with the soup that is set before him, and not desire to see the bones of the ox out of which it had been boiled.' [...] In this setting, what Dasent meant by his image was that he wanted his reader to accept his conclusions, and not demand to see the philological 'workings' on which they were based. Tolkien did not approve. Nevertheless, he was struck by the image, and he repeated it in his essay 'On Fairy-Stories'. Only what *he* meant by it, he said, was this:

By 'the soup' I mean the story as it is served up by the author or teller, and by 'the bones' its sources or material—even when (by rare luck) those can be with certainty discovered. [...]

In other words, critics should study stories in their final forms, as 'served up' or published, not in their intermediate stages. (Shippey, *Road* 289-90)

Tolkien believed that elements of stories "have been put into the Cauldron, where so many potent things lie simmering agelong on the fire [...]. But if we speak of a Cauldron, we must not wholly forget the Cooks. There are many things in the Cauldron, but the Cooks do not dip in the ladle quite blindly. Their selection is important" (Tolkien, "OFS" 127-8). This is of course a most important point, for Tolkien stresses that the value of authorial choice, agency, and ability rather than where the inspiration for the idea of a text comes from, is informed by, or is even directly based on.

Tolkien confirms this notion of the problem of originality in his fiction in the "Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age" chapter of *The Silmarillion*. In this story, Sauron as Annatar instructs the Elves of Eregion in crafts to "labor

together for [Middle-earth's] enrichment, and for the raising of all the Elven-kindreds that wander here untaught to the height of that power and knowledge which those have who are beyond the Sea" (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* 344). There the Elven-smiths "took thought, and they made Rings of Power," but "Sauron guided their labours" and indeed inspired them: but when Sauron crafted the One Ring and put it on, "they perceived that he would be master of them, and of all that they had wrought," reacting in "anger and fear" (345). As the villain in this situation, it is no surprise that Sauron "came against them with open war" or even that he "demanded that all the rings should be delivered to him," but his reasoning is interesting, for "since the Elven-smiths could not have attained to their making without his lore and counsel" (345), Sauron asserts a legal right to the rings the Elves made on the grounds of his inspiration and instruction of their making. Sauron's claim of inspiration means nothing to the Elves, of course, and no one in the narrative even considers answering him on these terms: the idea is absurd. Through this scenario Tolkien includes, and then summarily dismisses, the problem of ownership of ideas and the notion of originality in art. The direct creators and their finished products are set against inspiration and influence dictating ownership.

Tolkien argues that between invention, inheritance, and diffusion, "*invention* is the most important and fundamental, and so (not surprisingly) also the most mysterious," but even this is itself a kind of "evolution." Even "[d]iffusion (borrowing in space) [...] only refers the problem of origin elsewhere" and "similarly with *inheritance* (borrowing in time): in this way we may arrive at last only at an ancestral inventor" (Tolkien, "OFS" 121, emphasis in original). In other words, all stories are ultimately derivative. Tolkien even admits that the author of his beloved *Beowulf* is a fanfiction author without any sign of reproach: "The plot was not the poet's; and though he has infused feeling and significance into its crude material, that plot was not a perfect vehicle of the theme or themes that came to hidden life in the poet's mind as he worked upon it" ("MC" 29). Myth, he says, "is at its best when it is presented by a poet who feels rather than makes explicit what his theme portends; who presents it incarnate in the world of history and geography, as our poet has done" (Tolkien, "MC" 15).

If we, like Tolkien, value the "freedom of the reader" over the "purposed domination of the author," then we must accept the possibility of transformative interpretations of a text, and that these transformative interpretations will make their way into various fan expressions, including fanfiction. As Tolkien argues in "On Fairy-Stories," the "bones" in the "Cauldron" of story are of far less importance than the individual skill of the

author.¹² The skill of the Cook in selecting and seasoning the bones provides the taste by which a story ought to be judged. We know that Tolkien said he preferred readers drawing their own personal conclusions over speculating about what his ox-bones were. We also might hope that in practice Tolkien only so harshly judged the fanfiction with which he came into contact based on their (presumable lack of) aesthetic merit and/or disregard of his established canon, and not on their derivativeness. As the father of modern fantasy, Tolkien could hardly resent subsequent fantasy authors, or for that matter fanfiction authors, for using nearly the same bones as he to make their soups.

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¹² I have purposefully avoided the issue of aesthetic and fanfiction. A stereotype of fanfiction is that because anyone with Internet access can write and post fanfiction, much of it is simply "bad." One might argue, however, the same of any published fantasy fiction, dependent on one's personal taste, in spite of editors and publishers. The issue is one of aesthetic and socially constructed paradigms regarding what constitutes "art," rather than a quality inherent in the art. At any rate, it is not a call I would dare to make.

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