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How Trees Behave-Or Do They?

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Abstract

Flieger takes as her departure point a passage on tree-spirits in one of the manuscripts for “On Fairy-stories,” and considers the development of Tolkien’s ideas about more-or-less enspirited trees throughout his oeuvre. Begins with the earliest appearance of Old Man Willow in the Tom Bombadil poems, progressing through his maturation as an idea in *The Lord of the Rings*. Pays special attention to Treebeard and the Huorns, and ends with the birch tree in *Smith of Wootton Major*.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Huorns; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Old Man Willow; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Treebeard; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Objects—Trees; Tolkien, J.R.R. “The Adventures of Tom Bombadil”; Tolkien, J.R.R. Smith of Wootton Major; Trees in J.R.R. Tolkien



HOW TREES BEHAVE—OR DO THEY?

VERLYN FLIEGER

ON MARCH 8 1939 J.R.R. TOLKIEN GAVE A LECTURE on “Fairy Stories” at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. Some four years later, probably some time in 1943, he revised his talk for publication in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, adding new material to the original lecture. Among the additions was a lengthy discussion on the possibility of fairies (which he conflates with elves) as real beings. It includes the following passage, introduced by a phrase that comes up more than once in the essay, “If Fairies exist”: a conditional followed by the implicative conjunction “then.” In logic this is called the “if-then” construction, a hypothesis followed by a deduction and its consequences. For Tolkien the consequence in this case was that fairies “are a quite separate creation living in another mode.” He went on to say, “They appear to us in human form (with hands, faces, voices and language similar to our own) [...]. For lack of a better word they may be called spirits, daemons [...] subject to Moral Law, capable of good and evil, and possibly (in this fallen world) actually sometimes evil.” He then gave an example:

Thus a tree-fairy (or a dryad) is, or was a minor spirit in the process of creation who aided [...] in the making effective of the divine Tree-idea or some part of it, or of even of some one particular example: some tree. He is therefore now bound by use and love to Trees (or a tree), immortal while the world (and trees) last—never to escape, until the End. It is a dreadful Doom [...] in exchange for a splendid power. What fate awaits him beyond the Confines of the World, we cannot know. It is likely that the Fairy does not know himself. It is possible that nothing awaits him—outside the World and the Cycle of Story and of Time. (Manuscript B 254-255, emphasis in original)

This is an arresting passage for several reasons. First, few people today believe in fairies. Tolkien writes as if he did. Starting in the conditional mode with “if” Tolkien moves almost immediately to the declarative, assuming the reality of what is for most people the stuff of myth and fable. Second, he picks a specific kind of fairy, a dryad, to illustrate his hypothesis. In Greek mythology the dryad was a spirit in the form of a young maiden or woman. While Tolkien uses the

Greek word to support the English phrase, his interest in folklore would have almost certainly made him aware of more Northern European examples, such as those mentioned by the anthropological folklorist Edward Burnet Tylor in *Primitive Culture*:

The peasant folklore of Europe still knows of willows that bleed and weep and speak when hewn, of the fairy maiden that sits within the fir-tree, of that old tree in Rugaard forest that must not be felled, for an elf dwells within, of that old tree on the Heinzenberg near Zell, which uttered its complaint when the woodman cut it down [...]. (qtd. in Dorson 194)

Third, Tolkien's discussion appears in a scholarly essay, not a piece of imaginative fiction. Dryads were much beloved of the Romantics such as Keats and Coleridge, and romantic Edwardians such as Arthur Rackham, but they were rather out of fashion in the modern and post-modern criticism of Tolkien's twentieth century. Tolkien, psychologically and spiritually closer to Keats and Coleridge and Rackham, has in his fiction many kinds of fairies, which he called elves. He has Light Elves, Dark Elves, Grey Elves, High Elves, Deep Elves, Wood Elves, even Half-elves. Does he have any Tree-fairies? Any dryads?

Given its faërian beauty, we might be tempted to start with Lórien, whose mallorn trees with silver bark and gold leaves and white blossoms seem obvious candidates, and whose presiding spirit Galadriel could easily pass for a dryad as the term is conventionally understood. But obvious is not always best, and a close look shows more differences from Tolkien's Tree-fairy than similarities. Although the Lórien elves are called Galadrim, "Tree-folk" or "tree-elves" (which comes close to tree-fairy), they do not really fit the type described in the essay. They live in trees, but residentially, in tree-houses, not as inhabiting spirits. The trees themselves, however beautiful, are inanimate in all senses of that word. They have neither awareness nor personality. They have no soul. Tolkien creates no spiritual connection between the elves and the trees. As for Galadriel, she has no special power over, nor any particular affinity with, trees. She reigns but she does not rule. Furthermore, she is female, and although this fits the Greek paradigm, where the tree-fairy was a young woman, it doesn't fit Tolkien, who was going against type in making this traditional figure male, using the pronouns "he," "him," "himself."

We may have better luck his other forests—the Old Forest, Fangorn, the mysteriously appearing and disappearing Huorn-wood. Here the trees appear sentient, their inhabiting spirits are a part of their nature, and they are or seem to be male. Though they look more tree than fairy, Tolkien's actual tree-characters, Old Man Willow and Treebeard and the mysterious Huorns, fit his description far better than does Galadriel. Like his tree-fairy they are "subject to Moral Law,

capable of good and evil, and possibly in this fallen world actually sometimes evil." They certainly qualify as "minor spirit[s] in the process of creation who aid [...] in the making effective of the divine Tree-idea or some part of it, or of even of some one particular example: some tree."

Granted, the relationship is not immediately obvious. Tolkien's characters are not sprites, they are actual trees rooted in the soil of the Old Forest and Fangorn. They are covered in bark, not skin. They are not young and pretty but old and rugged. They do not look or act like spirits. Yet in spite of these obvious differences, I suggest that there is a reciprocal connection between the fiction and the essay in which each influenced the creation of the other. Some chronology will clarify the relationship. The tree-fairy is conspicuously absent from the earliest essay draft, Manuscript A. This was written in March of 1939 when *The Lord of the Rings* was in its embryonic stages of conception and where the tree-characters were only notes or outlines, if they appeared at all. In contrast, Manuscript B, where the passage appears, was written in 1943, four years later, when these characters were well-developed.

Old Man Willow

I will begin with Old Man Willow, the earliest in the interior chronology of the story as well as in the exterior chronology of composition. His actual introduction into Tolkien's sub-created world came in a 1934 poem called "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil," where already a predatory tree, Old Man Willow captures Tom Bombadil, and has to be told by Tom to go "back to sleep again" (13). The poem was published as part of the 1962 collection *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*. But Old Man Willow can be said to have hit the big time with Tolkien's early work on *The Lord of the Rings*. In a 1938 note on draft Chapter One Tolkien talks about the hobbits getting "caught by Willowman" (*Return of the Shadow* [RS] 42-43), and further notes have Willowman trapping Bingo and Odo (112, 115), who are then rescued by Tom Bombadil (117). Further notes mention the Willow but do not develop the scene we know from the finished text where the hobbits are actually captured. A more developed treatment, also from 1938, appears in the second version of the Tom Bombadil chapter, which includes an early version of Tom's description of the Forest to the four hobbits.

Amongst [Tom's] talk there was here and there much said of Old Man Willow, and Merry learned enough to content him [...] though not enough for him to understand how that grey thirsty earth-bound spirit had become imprisoned in the greatest Willow of the Forest. The tree did not die, though its heart went rotten, while the malice of the Old Man drew power out of earth and water, and spread like a net, like fine root-threads in the ground, and invisible twig-fingers in the air, till it had infected or subjugated nearly all the trees on both sides of the valley. (RS 120-21)

Here the Willow and the Old Man are not yet the indivisible being they will become as the character develops. Both Manuscript B and the 1938 draft of the chapter associate a tree and a spirit, a “non-incarnate mind.” Both refer to that spirit as being bound to or imprisoned in a particular tree. The notion that the spirit is “subject to moral law” and “capable of good and evil” is reflected in “the malice of the Old Man,” who apparently turns the Willow’s heart rotten, making them both evil. The fact that Merry cannot understand the process by which the “thirsty earth-bound spirit” became “imprisoned” in the willow without any agency, including that of the tree, suggests that at that time Tolkien did not understand the process either. He had the idea but not the mechanism, and solved the problem later on by simply merging them into one entity, making Old Man Willow both tree and spirit.

This seems to have occurred in what Christopher Tolkien calls the “third phase” of revision for these opening chapters, which he conjecturally dates to mid or late 1939, that is, after Tolkien’s lecture and the draft Manuscript A he wrote for it. The published version includes this revision, and uses Tom’s authority to add some significant sentences to his description. The revision reads as follows:

Moving constantly in and out of [Tom’s] talk was Old Man Willow, and Frodo learned now enough to content him [...]. Tom’s words laid bare the hearts of trees and their thoughts, which were often dark and strange, and filled with a hatred of things that go free upon the earth [...]. [N]one were more dangerous than the Great Willow: his heart was rotten, but his strength was green, and [...] his song and thought ran through the woods on both sides of the river. His grey thirsty spirit drew power out of the earth and spread like fine root-threads in the ground, and invisible twig-fingers in the air, till it had under its dominion nearly all the trees of the Forest [...]. (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] I.7.130)

No longer is the Old Man “imprisoned” in the Willow; their characteristics are now melded. It is the tree itself that has the “grey thirsty spirit,” the tree whose roots and twigs “draw power” out of earth and air. Tree and tree-fairy are one entity. At first glance, the willow is only a tree, albeit an impressive one. “Enormous it looked, its sprawling branches going up like reaching arms with many long-fingered hands, its knotted and twisted trunk gaping in wide fissures that creaked faintly as the boughs moved.” The hobbits see “the grey and yellow leaves, moving softly against the light, and singing” (I.6.116).

Consonant with its tree-appearance, the “singing” leaves could be read as metaphor. But Tolkien’s choice of “singing,” over the more conventional “rustling” for the leaves has an anthropomorphizing—or dryadmorphizing—effect. Tolkien is animating nature by subtly cranking up the level of

consciousness in a natural phenomenon, as he does later with Caradhras, not taking it far beyond probability but implying intent in what is usually seen as natural activity. Old Man Willow retains what Tolkien deemed essential for successful fantasy, the “inner consistency of reality,” the necessity of any particular element to conform to the norms of the Secondary World. He is a logical extension of the Old Forest, making actual what the hobbits think they perceive in the trees. His subsequent actions in engulfing Pippin, entrapping Merry, and trying to drown Frodo are malevolent, the dark side of the tree-fairy. Moreover, the reaction of Old Man Willow to Sam and Frodo’s attempts to set him on fire—“a tremor” that runs through the whole tree, leaves that seem “to hiss [...] with a sound of pain and anger” and branches that sway violently (I.6.118), recalls Tylor’s “willows that bleed and weep and speak when hewn.”

In addition, the trees of the Old Forest, though they never exceed the observed characteristics of trees—dropping branches, sticking up roots—seem to react to the hobbits’ presence, giving an impression of motivation and intent that is enhanced by the ominous crowding that herds the hobbits “eastwards and southwards, into the heart of the forest,” which is “not at all the direction they wished to take” (*LotR* I.6.114). They finally arrive where they do not want to go, the Withywindle valley, according to Merry “the queerest part of the whole wood—the centre from which all the queerness comes, as it were” (113). Here Frodo sees “leaning over him a huge willow-tree, old and hoary” (116). The implication is that the willow has maneuvered their arrival, and it is not hard to imagine that it has planned the capture (and possible death) of the hobbits. Tom’s words about the thoughts of trees, that they are “filled with a hatred of things that go free upon the earth” would be sufficient motive. It is worth noting that in Manuscript B Tolkien never said the fairy was nice, just that he was bound to his tree and responsible for it. In fact, he deliberately raised the possibility that such a being could be evil.

Treebeard

The same progression seen in Old Man Willow—from embryonic concept to fully realized creature blending the natural with the super-natural—also distinguishes my next tree-fairy candidate, Treebeard. In 1956 Tolkien wrote to ‘Mr. Thompson,’ “I have no recollection of inventing Ents. I came at last to the point, and wrote the ‘Treebeard’ chapter without any recollection of any previous thought: just as it now is” (*Letters* 231). The creative process was not quite as simple as Tolkien remembered it. Treebeard was a late addition to the story in what Christopher Tolkien calls the “third phase” of *The Fellowship* in 1939, appearing initially as the “Giant Treebeard” (and thus not a tree at all) who was at first on the side of Sauron and imprisoned Gandalf in Fangorn. An early draft describes him as having a “thick gnarled leg with a rootlike foot” which

Frodo at first mistakes for “the stem of a monstrous oaktree” (*RS* 384). Although the tree-association is present in embryo with the comparison to a monstrous oaktree, Treebeard was still a giant (*Treason of Isengard* [*TI*] 6). In a subsequent note Tolkien jotted, “If Treebeard comes in at all—let him be kindly and rather good? About 50 feet high with barky skin. Hair and beard rather like *twigs*. Clothed in dark green like a mail of short shining leaves” (*RS* 410, emphasis in original). The “mail of short shining leaves” evokes the folklore figure of the Green Man or Jack in the Green, a vegetation spirit celebrated in fertility rituals, and the twiggy hair and beard recall the foliate heads of medieval sculpture. He is on his way to becoming a tree.

Treebeard is called an “Ent” for the first time in circa 1940 (*TI* 250). But since *ent* is an Anglo-Saxon word meaning “giant” his essential character may not have changed much. By 1944 (i.e. just prior to the 1945 Manuscript B with the Tree-fairy passage), he was as we know him from the published text, a walking talking guardian of trees, in function the closest thing to Tolkien’s idea of a tree-fairy without being called one you can get. Treebeard’s looks now seem consciously designed to merge fairy into tree. Described as “Man-like, almost Troll-like” (*LotR* III.4.463), a reminder of the giant he once was, he is still far more tree than man or troll, being a “figure, at least fourteen feet high [...] with a tall head and hardly any neck [...] clad in stuff like green and grey bark,” his lower face “covered with a sweeping grey beard, bushy, almost twiggy at the roots, thin and mossy at the ends,” and having “large, knob-knuckled” hands. His “large feet,” no longer “rootlike,” have “seven toes each” (463). And unlike Man or Troll, he is certainly, like the tree-fairy, “bound by use and love to trees.” While Old Man Willow fits Tolkien’s idea of the tree-fairy as an entity with the potential for evil, Treebeard, in his position as shepherd of trees, better fits the tree-fairy’s more benevolent role as “‘agent’ in the making effective of the divine Tree-idea or some part of it” (Manuscript B 255). As the old Ent tells Merry and Pippin, “we do what we can. We keep off strangers and the foolhardy; and we train and we teach, we walk and we weed” (*LotR* III.4.468).

Treebeard, of course, is a much more fully developed character than Old Man Willow. He has a voice, not mere singing leaves; he has a personality, not just an aura of evil; he has opinions, not just tendencies. Moreover—and this will become more important as the story develops—he wants only to watch and guard, not dominate, as Old Man Willow with his grey thirsty roots quite clearly does. Treebeard has a memory, which gives him a temporal space within the history of Middle-earth, and he has a sense of his own identity and place in the natural scheme of things. He is Tolkien’s first fully conscious and self-aware creation from the natural world. Probably Old Man Willow, rooted at the center of the Old Forest and staying closer to the demeanor and appearance of a real tree, is the more realistic sub-creation. But Treebeard, because he demands

greater suspension of disbelief—trees do not have hands and feet, and cannot talk or walk, with a gait like “wading herons” (III.8.549)—Treebeard, a tree yet not a tree, is paradoxically the more believable one.

The Huorns

Yet without Treebeard and Fangorn Forest we would not have the Huorns, whose dark destructiveness actually seems closer to Old Man Willow than to Treebeard. I have called the Huorns mysterious not only because they seem less tree-fairylike than my other two examples—they are not individuals but a collective, and have no discernible personality—but also because their appearance in the story seems less defined than that of the other two. At first glance they are just a kind of surreal picture of nature on the rampage. Old Man Willow is a tree. Treebeard is an Ent. But what exactly is a Huorn? Is there even such a thing as *a* Huorn (singular), or are they simply an aggregate, a moving mass? They are anticipated in early draft notes by a reference to “Treebeard and his Three Giants” (*TI* 210), suggesting that Treebeard (still a giant at this point) has followers, related beings whom he can summon at need. In the story as published, however, they are neither giants nor Ents (though the latter is debatable, as we will see), and they certainly don’t behave like trees. Unlike the Old Forest, they exceed what trees are known to do; and unlike Old Man Willow they are not rooted but can move at will, and attack in a mysterious way that is never defined. In spite of this, I want to make the case that they are variations of the tree-fairy, neither good (like Treebeard) nor evil (like Old Man Willow), but dark, violent, revengeful, with a past history hinted at but never revealed.

The Huorns first appear in drafts dated by Christopher Tolkien to the winter of 1941-42 (*TI* 379). There is little or no description of them, and they appear only in notes for the Battle of Isengard. Here they are called Galbedirs, then Lamorni, then Orónomar/Oróními, all of which have the same meaning, “Talking Trees” (*War of the Rings* [*WR*] 47, 50), and are described by Merry as “trees [the Ents] have trained and made half-entish” (*WR* 50). A later draft has him add “though far wilder, of course, and crueller” (*WR* 55). It is here that the word *Huorn* first enters the text, and also Merry’s uncertainty about them. “I cannot make out whether they are trees that have become Entish, or Ents that have become tree-like, or both” (*WR* 56). This is close to the published text, where Merry says, “I think they are Ents that have become almost like trees, at least to look at.” He then goes on,

They stand here and there in the wood or under its eaves, silent, watching endlessly over the trees, but deep in the darkest dales there are hundreds and hundreds of them, I believe. [And he adds] [I]t is difficult to see them moving. But they do. [...] You stand still looking at the weather, maybe, or

listening to the rustling of the wind, and then suddenly you find that you are in the middle of a wood with great groping trees all around you. They still have voices, and can speak with the Ents—that is why they are called Huorns, Treebeard says—but they have become queer and wild. Dangerous. I should be terrified of meeting them, if there were no true Ents about to look after them. (*LotR* III.9. ix 170)

Merry's suggestion that Huorns are Ents that have become "almost like trees" suggests a regression from personality to type, from a higher level of consciousness to more instinctive behavior. It would explain their mobility, since Ents are mobile and can move fast. But it raises a mechanical problem, for where Ents have feet to travel on, Huorns have roots, which by their nature are anchors to place. What Merry tells us is opinion based on observation, not fact. Maybe Merry is an unreliable narrator.

Knowing Tolkien's predilection for languages, we might expect some etymology at work, even though these names were abandoned. *Parma Eldalamberon XVII: Words, Phrases & Passages in Various Tongues in The Lord of the Rings* glosses *Huorn* with a question mark as "tree" which is not much help, and offers *hō* "spirit, shadow," which is not bad, but also *hū* "hound" which is no help at all. *Orne* is easy; it's a Sindarin word meaning "(tall) tree." The *hu* element is harder to identify if you don't like "shadow" or "hound." In light of the earlier names (Galbedir, Lamorni, etc.) Treebeard's explanation that they are called Huorns because they have voices seems reasonable. All well and good, except that the Huorns do not speak. Maybe Treebeard is an unreliable linguist.¹

¹ Some etymological connections that Tolkien deleted, but which nonetheless show his thoughts, include: "*ho, syogo; hu, khugu; = fōa*" (suggesting a connection at least of sense with "*√PHAW-*, emit (foul breath etc.). *phawalōkō > foalōke*" (*PE* 17:181). Also cited are related (or possibly related) roots/elements in the corpus:

"[The question mark in the gloss of *Huorn* is in the manuscript. The gloss of *hō* is uncertain, and might be 'speak, show'.

Deleted: *ho, syogo; hu, khugu; = fōa*. The gloss of *hū* might be 'heart'. Cf. GL *hond* >> *honn* 'heart', *hū* 'dog'; Etym.

KHŌ-N- 'heart (physical)', Q *hōn*, N *hūn*; *Khō-gorē*, N *Huor* 'heart-vigour; courage', KHUGAN-, Q *huan* 'hound',

N *huan*; Huorns, WR 30, *Galbedirs* 'Talking Trees', 47, *Lamorni* >> *Ornōmar*, 50, *Ornómi* 'trees with voices', 55.

For *orn* '(tall) tree', see I 356 s.v. *mellyrn*.]" (*PE* 17:86)

Other roots/elements possibly related to *hu-* if having to do with voices appear in *Parma Eldalamberon XVII: Qenyaqesta: The Qenya Phonology and Lexicon*:

"HO- (OHO ?) shout, scream. *hō* an owl. *holle* a shout. *holtó-* call out. *holále* babble, chatter, conversation."

"HUHU- (= *hoho.*) whoop. *hulále* = *holále*."

But if, as I want to suggest, the Huorns are a kind of Tolkienian tree-fairy, how do they “make effective the tree-idea”? By a masterful use of authorial legerdemain. Tolkien’s staging of the Huorns is one of the slickest tricks in his sub-creative bag, for they are never clearly defined or explained, as are Old Man Willow and Treebeard. Now you see them. Now you don’t. Tolkien builds up an impression largely through other characters’ reactions to them, starting with Legolas’s intuition before ever the Huorns enter the story by name. When the Three Hunters first come to the eaves of Fangorn, Legolas says, “I catch only the faintest echoes of dark places where the hearts of the trees are black” (*LotR* III.5.491). There is something mysterious about Fangorn Forest, and it is not just the imposing but surprisingly friendly Treebeard whom the hobbits first encounter. Tolkien intensifies the mystery later with phrases such as, “strange trees,” “darkness blacker than the night,” “moving towers of shadow,” “whisperings and groanings and an endless rustling sigh” that shake the earth (III.8.552), describing not the Huorns themselves, but the impression they make on observers.

Treebeard echoes Legolas when he tells Merry and Pippin rather obscurely, “*Taurelilómëa-tumbalemorna Tumbaletaurëa Lómëanor*,” (III.4.467) which Appendix F under *Ents* translates as “Forestmanyshadowed-deepvalleyblack Deepvalleyforested Gloomyland,” which means, says the Appendix, “more or less: ‘there is a black shadow in the deep dales of the forest’” (Appendix F 1131). Just what this refers to is uncertain. It seems akin to Legolas’s description, and even closer to Treebeard’s account of Fangorn as having trees that are “bad right through [...] some very dangerous parts [...] some very black patches.” “Like the Old Forest away to the north, do you mean?” asks Merry, and Treebeard replies,

aye, something like, but much worse. I do not doubt there is some shadow of the Great Darkness lying there still away north; and bad memories are handed down. But there are hollow dales in this land where the Darkness has never been lifted, and the trees are older than I am. (III.4.468)

Are these supposed to be Huorns? We are never told. And then he tells Merry and Pippin, “I do not understand all that goes on myself, so I cannot explain it to you” (468). If Treebeard, the character who might be expected to know the most about the Huorns, cannot explain “all that goes on,” who can?

Apparently not Tolkien, who doesn’t even try. In good creative writing fashion, he practices “show” rather than “tell.” This is how the Huorns first appear to Théoden and his Company after Helm’s Deep.

And in “The Etymologies” under KHUGAN–:

“KHUG– bark, bay. **khugan*: Q *huan* (*húnen*) hound; N *Huan* (dog-name); Q *huo* dog; N *hú*.”

The land had changed. Where before the green dale had lain, its grassy slopes lapping the ever-mounting hills, there now a forest loomed. Great trees, bare and silent, stood, rank on rank, with tangled bough and hoary head; their twisted roots were buried in the long green grass. (*LotR* III.7.541)

The suddenly-appeared trees look like a forest that has stood for many years. In that respect they are trees, and there are references in the drafts to the “Huorn wood” (*WR* 39, 70). But in their unexplained mobility and ability to move with the speed of wind, they are not trees. They were not at Helm’s Deep the day before. They have not grown overnight (though they look like they have), but have arrived from somewhere else. But where? Those “hollow dales where the Darkness has never been lifted”? We are not told. Leaving Helm’s Deep Gandalf and his companions come to a wood—the same wood? Presumably, although again we are not told—where the trees are “grey and menacing, and a shadow or a mist was about them. The ends of their long sweeping boughs hung down like searching fingers, their roots stood up from the ground like the limbs of strange monsters, and dark caverns opened between them.” The company hears “the creaking and groaning of boughs, and far cries, and a rumour of wordless voices, murmuring angrily” (III.8.546). The “wordless voices murmuring” implies sound, but stops short of speech. It harks back to the singing of Old Man Willow. The Huorns can vocalize but they cannot talk. They have voices but no words, no language.

So if they’re not trees and they’re not Ents, what exactly are the Huorns? Gandalf calls them “a thing beyond the counsels of the wise” (III.8.543). They may have been beyond the counsel of Tolkien, which may be why he gives Merry and not the narrator the only explanation of them that we get. The fact is, Tolkien never tells his readers what the Huorns are; he just shows us what they do and tells us why (though not how) they do it, leaving us to fill in this partial outline by connecting the hints that he has given us. Although we cannot truly comprehend them, we can visualize them. Their “tangled boughs,” “hoary heads,” and “twisted roots” seem straight out of an Arthur Rackham illustration, and indeed Rackham, the premier illustrator of Tolkien’s boyhood, may have been one inspiration for their depiction. Nonetheless, the result of Tolkien’s reticence is that the Huorns are the most mysterious, most provocative because least explicit, most purely mythological of all the phenomena of his sub-created world. They are tree-fairies defined by their actions, aiding in the process of creation by making effective (against the orcs) the divine Tree-idea. How they do it remains their secret.

Smith's tree

A postscript and exception to this discussion is Tolkien's most traditionally dryad-like tree, this one outside the realm of Middle-earth but firmly within the realm of Faërie. This is the "young birch" that shelters Smith of Wootton Major from the Wild Wind that harries him when he steps on the Lake of Tears (29-30). Of all Tolkien's trees, the birch seems most in line with the conventional image of the dryad. Unlike Old Man Willow and Treebeard (and by implication the Huorns) the birch not only is not male, it has no gender, being referred to consistently with the neuter pronoun "it." Yet taxonomically the birch produces both flower and fruit; this, coupled with its slender trunk and fluttering dancing leaves makes it seem quintessentially, almost stereotypically female. Moreover, its flexibility—it is "bent down to the ground" by the wind—its white skin, and its vulnerability—it is naked, "stripped of every leaf," and its tears fall like rain—give it a distinctly feminine quality very much in keeping with classical depictions of dryads. Having been created in the years 1964-67, Smith's birch cannot have contributed to Tolkien's 1943 concept of the Tree-fairy, but (gender excepted) may still have derived from it. It is certainly Tolkien's most fairy-like tree, making effective for the reader the "divine tree-idea," and could easily have been the inspiration for a Rackham illustration. One wishes it had been.

Conclusion

With the possible exception of the birch, it's pretty clear that when Tolkien says "tree-fairy" he is not thinking of a pretty girl in a filmy tunic. He is thinking of something rough and rugged that conveys the height and weight and breadth and durability of a tree, that captures the essence of a tree, that gives a tree its soul. In this respect, the Tree-fairy of Manuscript B and the tree-characters of *The Lord of the Rings* are members of the same body of lore, reciprocally connected in time as well as in spirit. A time-line of their appearance in his writing will show the relationship.

1938. First mention of "Willowman," "Willow of the Forest," "the Old Man."

March 1939. Manuscript A. No Tree-fairy.

Mid 1939. Old Man Willow fully developed.

1940. Treebeard changed from Giant to Ent.

1941-42. First appearance of Huorns.

1943. Manuscript B with Tree-fairy passage.

1944. Treebeard fully developed.

What I deduce from this is that the idea grew over time, that it was a “tale that grew in the telling,” to borrow a phrase. It was Tolkien’s creation of and engagement with his fictional tree-characters that led him to the explicit tree-fairy of Manuscript B, and the concept of the tree-fairy as described in Manuscript B that personalized and animated those characters. Neither, I suggest, could have occurred without the other. When we read Old Man Willow and Treebeard and the Huorns as variations on Tolkien’s idea of the tree-fairy we are reaching back to a longer and more profound mythological history than his present Middle-earth. When we understand the phrase “tree-fairy” in light of Old Man Willow or Treebeard or the Huorns—or even Smith’s birch—the phrase and indeed the whole passage in Manuscript B take on a gravity and seriousness that the word “dryad” does not suggest and even the compound “Tree-fairy” does not by itself invite.

I suggest that this gravity, this seriousness, is what Tolkien felt when he was writing, and what he intended his readers to understand in both his fiction and his scholarship. The two genres are interlocking and interdependent, like the dryad and his tree, and both derive from, as Tolkien said of *Beowulf*, “antiquity with a greater and yet darker antiquity” behind it (*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics* 31). What Tolkien was trying to convey was something both supernatural and spiritual that he felt was important for the world to know. His tree-fairy and his tree-characters are archaic yet tenacious, ancient yet curiously vital manifestations of a mythic world of sentient nature. This is a world that is, as he said in his *Beowulf* essay, “alive at once and in all its parts” (15), a world aware of itself and us, not only watching us but interacting with us and affecting us, if we only knew it.

Tolkien knew it.

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