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Interpretations of J.R.R. Tolkien's Moria A Competent Reader or Overinterpretation?

Ruben J. van Wingerden¹

INTRODUCTION

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (*LotR*) and other works have been the subject of many interpretations, fantastic speculations,² and allegorizations of what certain aspects might mean. One can think of the One Ring, which, according to some, stood for the atom-bomb. Or the industry built by force in the Shire by Saruman (or the industries in Isengard, Mordor, Thangorodrim for that matter),³ that stood for criticism of the industrialization of the nineteenth century. With the recent *Hobbit*-trilogy in cinemas, interest in Tolkien's world has been rising even more. The Dwarves in Tolkien's world, for example, remind some of the Jewish people, as Tolkien drew inspiration from Hebrew texts

and Jewish history for developing the Dwarvish people.⁴ For instance: "According to some Tolkien scholars, the author's heroic dwarves are a conscious inversion of Wagner's negatively 'Jewish' dwarves, meant to flip the switch on damaging stereotypes. As a lover of Norse mythology, Tolkien despised the Nazis' distortion of ancient tales to incite hatred."⁵

In particular Christians, knowing that Tolkien was a devout Catholic and a member of the Inklings, which included C.S. Lewis – very important to many Christians, search for Christian themes and generate the most ingenious and fantastic connections and interpretations.⁶ No strange coincidence

- 1) This paper is the product of a PhD-project in Early Christian interpretations in which I try to apply Umberto Eco's model of the cooperative reader to texts and interpretations.
- 2) Somehow, Moria and other aspects of Tolkien's work have been connected to Freemasonry and Illuminati on the Internet; the crux of hermetic thought is that everything is connected to everything. In that sense we should not be surprised by the manifold strange connections and conspiracy theories about Tolkien's (or any fictitious) work.
- 3) Cf. David Harvey, *The Song of Middle Earth: J.R.R. Tolkien's Themes Symbols and Myths*. London: HarperCollins, 2016, 104.
- 4) John D. Rateliff, *History of the Hobbit*, 2 Vol's. New York: HarperCollins, 2007.
- 5) E.g., Renée Vink, "Jewish' Dwarves: Tolkien and anti-Semitic stereotyping". *Tolkien Studies* 10, 2013, 123-146, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/are-tolkiens-dwarves-an-allegory-for-the-jews>, accessed 6 February 2019.
- 6) Cf. Harvey, *Song*, 67-68. Perhaps this was encouraged by Tolkien himself in letter 142 to Robert Murray, S.J., stating: "*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like 'religion', to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism." Humphrey Carpenter, Christopher Tolkien (eds.), *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013, electronic book. Letter numbering follows Carpenter's edition.

then, that Tolkien's Moria, most infamous for the fight between Gandalf and the fiery Balrog, has been connected to the Hebrew Moriah (Hebrew: מוֹרְיָה), a mountain range mentioned in the story of the binding of Isaac, in the Jewish Scriptures. Or, one scholar suggests that Moria refers to a tomb and womb simultaneously: the lake at the entrance and Mirrormere at the other end suggest "that for the fellowship, the experience in Moria is a baptism – the central Christian symbol of passage through death to life".⁷

My own associations with Moria were roughly the same. I too thought I had an epiphany when I connected Moria to the Abraham-narrative, thinking at the same time that it could also contain a reference to the Latin *moriar* (a mode of *morior* – to die)⁸ or the Greek μωρία (folly). Especially the reference to the ancient Greek μωρία⁹ generated more associations as I connected this to the New Testament (extensive discussion below). One can quickly see why the associations with the Latin and Greek are made with regard to Tolkien's Moria: Gandalf falls into the abyss (and seems to die), and it was the place where many Dwarves were slain by a Balrog or Goblins (Balin and his followers, for example); folly seems to fit in because of Gandalf's last cry to the fellowship before he slid into the abyss ("Fly, you fools!"), while it could also refer to the foolishness of Balin who tried to re-establish the kingdom years before the fellowship of the Ring passed through.

Yet, inevitably, the question pops up: are these interpretations justified? Are these connections and meanings inferential walks¹⁰ or (unintentional)

clever word-puns? Am I interpreting the text, or misinterpreting; am I simply *using* the text for my own ventures in search of meaning? Intertextuality, the referring to other text-frames (or concepts) is a risky business.¹¹ After all, if you want to find a reference to a text in another, you will surely find it: *Quae volumus credimus libenter* (What we wish, we believe gladly). In this essay, we will explore the issues of (mis)interpretation and intertextuality concerning Tolkien's Moria. It is interesting that Tolkien scholarship is mainly concerned with *interpreting* Tolkien's work, but not with reflection on those interpretations or the process of interpretation. Either it is not deemed interesting enough or it is a lacuna in scholarship.¹² I will draw upon the hermeneutic and semiotic theory of Umberto Eco (1932-2016) as well as engage in Tolkien's own ideas about the interpretation of Moria.

UMBERTO ECO AND THE MODEL OF THE COOPERATIVE READER

The well-known Italian novelist and semiotician Umberto Eco was engaged in the study of processes of interpretation. The young Eco can be placed in the structuralist camp (of course a gross generalization), which held that meaning was imbedded in the structures of a text. Later developments made Eco shift to a more reader-oriented position; to find meaning, the reader must cooperate with the text. This is a moderate view in contrast to more radical reader-response theorists, like Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, who argued that the reader decides what a text means and that one can do with a text what she wants.

7) Matthew Dickerson, 'Moria'. *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, edited by Michael D.C. Drout. New York: Routledge, 2007, 438-439.

8) *Moriar* may indicate the first-person singular of the present subjunctive passive, or the first-person singular future indicative passive voice.

9) There is also the likeness to the ancient Greek μωρία (referring to the sacred Olive trees in the Academy or generally olive trees in the precinct of temples), but that only came up after some research in Greek.

10) This term is used by Umberto Eco, see below.

11) See e.g., Graham Allen. *Intertextuality*, Second edition. London/New York: Routledge, 2011; also useful is Silvia Pellegrini. *Elija - Wegbereiter des Gottessohnes: Eine textsemiotische Untersuchung im Markusevangelium*. Herders Biblischen Studien 26. Freiburg: Herder, 2000, 123-145. On Tolkien and intertextuality (texts from the Middle Ages), see e.g., Stuart D. Lee, Elizabeth Solopova. *The Keys of Middle-earth: Discovering Medieval Literature Through the Fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005. For studies on religious elements in *LotR*, see e.g., Bradley Birzer. *J.R.R. Tolkien's Sanctifying Myth: Understanding Middle-earth*. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002; Ralph Wood. *The Gospel According to Tolkien*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003; Stratford Caldecott. *The Power of the Ring: The Spiritual Vision Behind The Lord of the Rings*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2005; Paul E. Kerry (ed.). *The Ring and the Cross: Christianity and the Writings of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Madison/Teaneck, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010.

12) E.g., the 4 volume critical assessments, edited by Stuart Lee (as well as other studies), contains no essays on interpretation and their processes. Stuart Lee (ed.). *J.R.R. Tolkien: Critical Assessments of Major Writers*, 4 vols. Oxford/New York: Routledge, 2017. Nor does this type of research seem to appear in the *Cormarë Series* published by Walking Tree Publishers, nor (to my knowledge) in the journal *Tolkien Studies*, to name a few influential series in Tolkien scholarship.

Eco argues for this moderate position by introducing the Model Reader. This is not to be confused with the empirical (or actual) reader like you and me, but a postulate by the author (e.g., the 'you' in this sentence): the author assumes that the reader has the required competence to understand the communication act (e.g., an English article for a learned audience). The Model Reader is able to help actualize and interpret the text the same way as the author himself has traversed in generating the text and is hidden in the text.¹³ To interpret, the empirical reader must seek out the Model Reader and follow the rules of the text. These rules consist of choice of language, certain jargon, genre and special keywords, which can only be understood by corresponding rules or codes or foreknowledge. Thus, the reader is limited to the text, but also by his/her own, as Eco calls it, "encyclopaedic" knowledge: cultural and linguistic background are indispensable when interpreting.¹⁴

Umberto Eco distinguishes between 'use' and 'interpretation', in which he gathers that 'use' is a private activity. He states:

to interpret a text means to read it in order to discover, along with our reactions to it, something about its nature. To *use* a text means to start from it in order to get something else, even accepting the risk of misinterpreting it from the semantic point of view.¹⁵

Of course, as a novelist, Eco has himself dealt with curious interpretations especially because he, in several of his novels deals with hermetic thought

(e.g., Foucault's Pendulum). Eco: "I can certainly use Wordsworth's text for parody, for showing how a text can be read in relation to different cultural frameworks, or for strictly personal ends (I can read a text to get inspiration for my own musing)."¹⁶ Yet Eco explains by using the metaphor of wandering through the woods that while *using* a text is not forbidden, it is also not a public affair, but a personal one. While the woods "are created for everybody", to interpret is to follow the game's rules, that is, to follow the Model Reader.¹⁷

Eco has developed a model in which several levels of textual cooperation are distinguished on an abstract level. There are three major parts:

- a. the actualized content, that is the text(s) as we have it;
- b. the intensions, which contain the textual levels of the discursive structures, narrative structures, actantial structures and elementary ideological structures (abstractions from the text);
- c. the world of the reader, or extensions: the bracketed extensions, forecasts and inferential walks, and world structures.

The boxes in the model as shown below¹⁸ are not to be confused with 'steps' one has to take: They are 'virtual poles of an interpretative movement which is far and away more continuous and whose timing is rather unpredictable'.¹⁹

13) Umberto Eco. *Lector in fabula: la cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi*. Milan: Bompiani, 1979, 55: 'Pertanto prevederò un Lettore Modello capace di cooperare all'attualizzazione testuale come egli, l'autore, pensava, e di muoversi interpretativamente così come egli si è mosso generativamente'. For further reference I will also use the English version, which is shortened and includes other essays – Umberto Eco. *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979, First Midland Book Edition 1984.

14) Umberto Eco. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, edited by Stefan Collini. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 69.

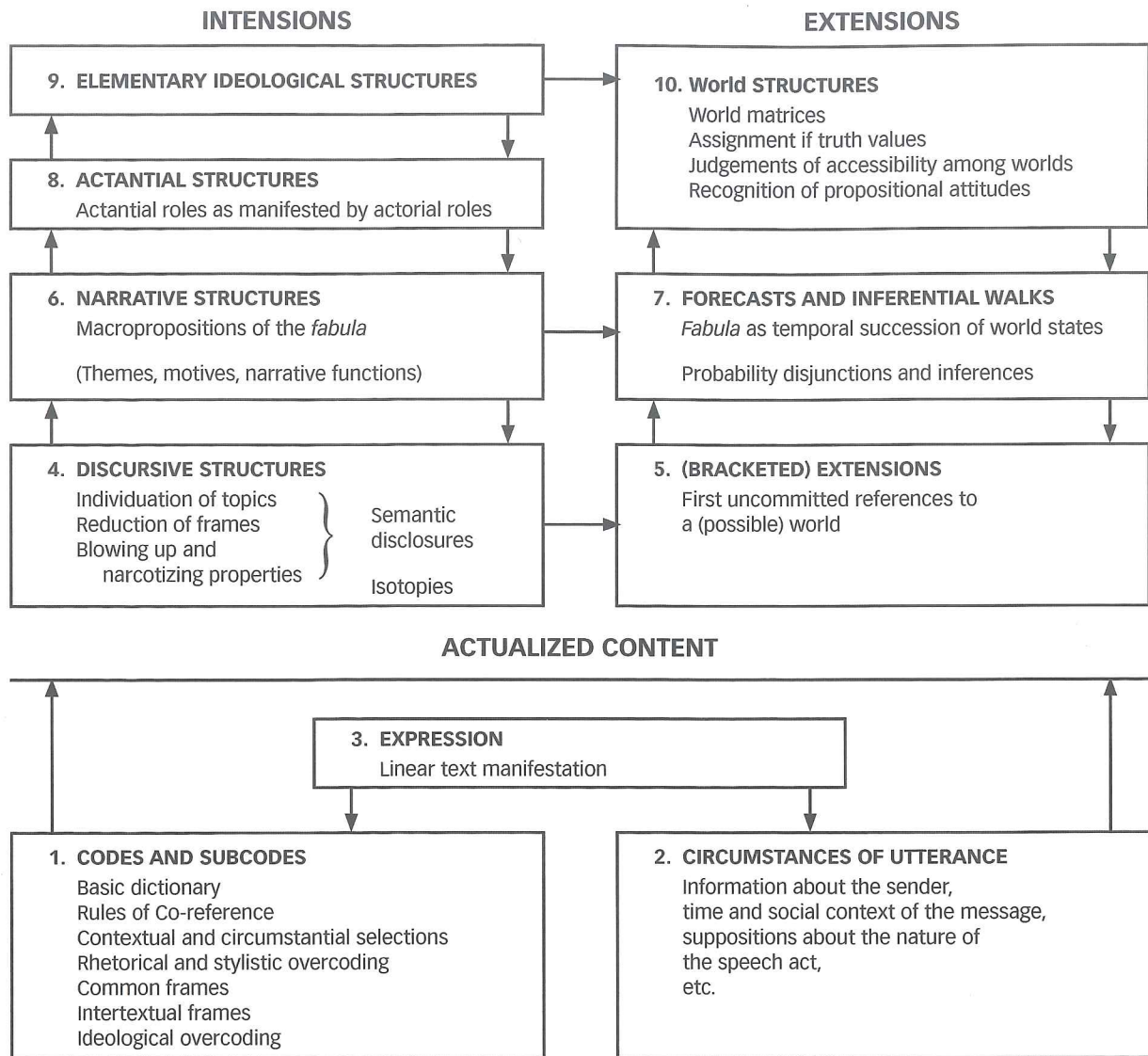
15) Umberto Eco. *The Limits of Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, 57. Emphasis mine.

16) Eco. *Overinterpretation*, 68-69. And in Umberto Eco. *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1994, 8, he says: "they [i.e., the empirical readers] often use the text as a container for their own passions, which may come from outside the text or which the text may arouse by chance." Brackets mine.

17) Eco. *Six Walks*, 9-10.

18) Eco. *Role*, 14; Eco. *Lector*, 72.

19) Eco. *Role*, 18.



Elaborate discussion of the 'boxes' so to say, will be left out of this essay for consideration of space, but in our example below we shall note some terms briefly.

One starts necessarily with box 3, the actual text, the book, journal, pdf-file, hand-out, etc. That presupposes a work written: that is where box 1 and 2 step in, with all the information about the circumstances of the utterance/writing, and, the text itself, with grammar, figures of speech, intertextual references. The reader is asked to recognize this (competence), which is often in itself not an easy task (recognizing a language as well as sentence constructions is fairly simple, due to interpunction rules, etc.). All this information is 'put' into the encyclopaedia (knowledge) of the reader. Box 4 is the abstraction of sentences and parts of the text to topics, the 'aboutness' of a given sentence or part of the text, etc. (not un-

like summarizing a text). Here it becomes apparent which parts of the encyclopaedia should be actualized or narcotized (see example below). The result of asking what a text is about, leads to formulating macro-propositions, which is in fact a telling of what the text says (e.g., the last sentence summarizes what 'happens' in box 6 of the model printed above): Box 6 is also the box where the Model Reader encounters the themes and motives of a given text. The *fabula* is no other than the chronological story, this in contrast to the plot, which is how the story is actually told (with flashbacks/forwards etc.). Box 8 puts everything in actantial structures (Eco is here dependent on Algirdas Greimas), i.e., is the given character/trait/concept a helper, opponent, is it subject or object of the sender or receiver? Box 9 is a more abstract summary, and is axiological in nature: is the text about death vs. life, light vs. dark, good vs. bad, beautiful vs. ugly, etc.

Now the extensional aspects of the model: from early on the Model Reader makes references to possible worlds, the empirical reader to their 'actual' world (box 5), and if the Model Reader encounters aspects that are inconceivable, one can choose to put the 'disbelief into brackets', for example: a talking wolf in Red Riding Hood is impossible in our 'actual' world, but for the sake of the story we do not make a harsh judgement about the text's factual credibility (box 10). That said, the actions executed in box 10 are very complex, but discussion of that is not necessary in this article. That leaves us with box 7, in which is described that the Model Reader makes forecasts and inferences of what will happen, both on a sentence level as on the level of the story, based on already known courses of actions, both intra-textual and extra-textual. For example, when a text with a woman and a man disputing reads: "Raoul raised his hand", we all assume that Raoul is going to hit the woman, by common knowledge of this type of action. Maybe a short example can clarify this. Note: A Model Reader in actual interpretation jumps from one box to another and can skip some. It is a dynamic process.

When I interpret the sentence "Joseph has murdered millions of people", multiple boxes are activated. It is impossible to say which boxes are first, but several things are in order. There is the recognition of language (automatically), words, the sentence as a sentence, figure of speech, etc. (box 1). We can follow its syntax and grammatical structure and follow over to the topic, the 'about-ness' of the sentence (box 4; topics). We recognize that 'Joseph' is a name and stands for something else (*aliquid stat pro aliquo*); a person, a human being (box 1, 4, 5 references to our world), and make an inferential walk through our cultural 'encyclopaedia'; do we know a Joseph? Does this text refer to other (known) texts about Joseph? (box 5, 7) On a syntax level we acknowledge that 'Joseph' is the subject of the verb, and that the 'people' who are murdered are the object. We know that to murder someone is bad (ideological verdict; box 10), that to murder millions is genocide; that murder can be done in many ways (box 7), but that all those ways are not the point here, we 'narcotize' these aspects (box 4). Accordingly, Joseph has done something horrible, so that in actual roles he would be the bad guy, the op-

ponent of the people. When we combine 'Joseph' with the murdering of millions, we again move into our cultural 'encyclopaedia' and think immediately of Joseph Stalin, a person who has really lived and killed millions in the empirical reader's world, in 'our' extratextual actual reality (box 5, 10). However, this is a working hypothesis, our judgment is put in brackets, for if I were to continue the sentence with 'with a shovel', these assumptions are proven to be false; at least, in our common knowledge Stalin did not kill millions personally with a shovel, but by his policies. Accordingly, then, the sentence would gain something to our knowledge unbelievable (which is a judgement), but we wait until further instructions by the text which lead us to make presumptions about the text, such as genre (is it historical fantasy? A (science) fiction, or non-story, etc.). By this short exercise, we can see that a lot of boxes have been passed already and this was neither an accurate analysis, nor an extensive one. We will, however, try to describe what happens when we interpret Moria in the different ways described in the introduction. But first we must turn to Tolkien himself, for he has commented on interpreting Moria, and interpretation itself.

LETTER 297

With this theoretical background, we will now take letter 297 into consideration, because it touches on the heart of this essay's issue: Moria and (mis)interpretation. In a rather lengthy draft in reply to a certain Mr. Rang –who had inquired after the nomenclature of *LotR*– Tolkien replies to Mr. Rang's suggestion that the Abraham-narrative was referred to in Moria, expressing his dismissal at this train of thought:

As for the 'land of Morīah' (note stress): that has no connexion (even 'externally') whatsoever [no connection to Germanic mythology, suggested by a certain J.S. Ryan]. Internally there is no conceivable connexion between the mining of Dwarves, and the story of Abraham. I utterly repudiate any such significances and symbolisms. My mind does not work that way; and (in my view) you are led astray by a purely fortuitous similarity, more obvious in spelling than speech, which cannot be justified from the real intended significance of my story.²⁰

20) Letter 297. Tolkien uses the phrase "nonsensical article by J.S. Ryan". Brackets mine.

Furthermore, in the same letter, Tolkien states that “[i]t would be entirely delusory to refer to the sources of the sound-combinations to discover any meanings overt or hidden”. Tolkien clearly thinks that Mr. Rang has sought much more in the name Moria based not on phonetic or linguistic grounds, but merely on the similarity in spelling (called homograph). In Tolkien’s world, Moria is the name given to Khazad-dûm, the grandest of dwellings of the Dwarves, after the dwarves mined too deep and unleashed a nameless terror that would eventually cross the path of the Fellowship of the Ring: a Balrog.²¹ The name Moria is derived from the Sindarin language (Tolkien’s invention), and is composed of the elements *mor* (black, dark) and *iâ* (void, abyss).²² That Moria would refer to Abraham’s narrative has been clearly rebutted by the author and inventor of the name himself on several grounds, which we will explore further. Moreover, at the beginning of the same draft, Tolkien states:

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. 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. If 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, not on me or on my actual intention and procedure. Many of them seem to show ignorance or disregard of the clues and information which are provided in notes, renderings, and in the Appendices. Also since linguistic invention is, as an art (or pastime) comparatively rare, it is perhaps not surprising that they show little understanding of the process of how a philologist would go about it.²³

From this we can draw several points. I will not

dive into Tolkien’s thought on allegory, or hidden meanings. (Elsewhere, Tolkien has written in the Foreword to the Second Edition of *LotR* (*nota bene!*))

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.²⁴

Allegory, although a contested term, is typically explained as ‘hidden meaning’.²⁵ Tolkien states that these musings, or interpretations, are “private” and “valueless” for the interpretation of fiction in their own regard. As we have seen with Eco, interpretation is a public activity, and those that are not, are called ‘private’ and ‘use’ by Tolkien and Eco respectively. Both Tolkien and Eco are of the opinion that these ‘uses’ of the text are legitimate, but that in doing so one does not “play the rules of the game” provided by the text and the world of the text. It requires competence, again something shared by Tolkien and Eco, for Tolkien says that and that these interpretations “show ignorance or disregard of the clues and information which are provided in notes, renderings, and in the Appendices”.

Tolkien thus criticizes his readers for a lack of competence. The ‘encyclopaedic’ knowledge (central to Umberto Eco’s Model Reader) to understand and interpret many names in *LotR* has been generated and given by Tolkien himself in many occasions, yet, those who have engaged in the fancy theories and those seeking hidden meanings have not sought the Model Reader, who, according to Tolkien, would have known the world behind the names. That includes the languages and their formation. That is why Tolkien is so adamant to emphasize the importance of the languages he crea-

21) It is interesting that at the time of *The Hobbit* “The Mines of Moria had been a mere name”. See letter 163.

22) J.R.R. Tolkien, Christopher Tolkien (ed.). *The Silmarillion*, ‘Appendix: Elements in Quenya and Sindarin Names’, entries *mor* and *iâ*. See also letter 297 and Dickerson, ‘Moria’.

23) Letter 297. See also on Tolkien’s dismissal of allegory, letter 203 to Herbert Schiro.

24) See also, John R. Holmes, “The Lord of the Rings,” in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Stuart D. Lee (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 140, especially on applicability on p. 141. It is interesting that scholars continue to describe allegory to Tolkien’s work while they acknowledge that Tolkien himself hated it. See for example: Harvey, Song, 175 on the hobbits as allegory for the “pre-Industrial Revolution English yeomen”. Purtill sees Tolkien’s dismissal cited above as “exaggeration”, see Richard Purtill, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Myth, Morality, and Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984; repr. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 23–24.

25) <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/allegory>, accessed 12 February 2019.

ted. It is part of his created narrative, of the created fictional history, and one should first seek there for answers. From thence, the name Moria is very well explained without resorting to the Hebrew narrative of Abraham.

Tolkien adds that these inventions throw "light only on the state of mind of their contrivers". That is, they are a product of the reader's overcoding of the text. In other words: the reader does not try to seek the Model Reader and bulges into the text with their own ideological values and presses these into the text. This criticism can be said to be aimed at the motto of many reader-response critics that, in the words of Valéry "*Il n'y a pas de vrai sens d'un texte. Pas d'autorité de l'auteur*" – the reader decides what the text means (*intentio lectoris*). Tolkien, as well as Eco, strongly denies this; Tolkien notes that, as said above, these are private musings and not his intentions (*intentio auctoris*). Eco differs, however, in that he places the intention in the text (*intention operis*), in the Model Reader. The readers that interpret in the way Tolkien criticizes are effectively 'overcoding' the text, they enter the text with their own knowledge of their own world (their own 'encyclopaedia')²⁶ and do not play the rules of the game, they do not respect the intention of the work (*intention operis*). This happens especially to those who 'enter' the world of Tolkien with a sense that it is a 'Christian' story, and thus presuppose that the story has to render Christian symbols and (hidden) meanings.

WHAT WENT (WR)ON(G) WHILE INTERPRETING?

HEBREW

Although Tolkien disapproves of interpreting the names in his works based on sound combinations, we will turn now to the interpretations presented above as there is abundant evidence that this is the way readers interpret Moria practically. We shall thus examine the connection with the Hebrew מוֹרְיָה, the Latin moriar and the Greek μωρία. The resemblance of Abraham's story with the mining of the Dwarves, and especially Tolkien's reply to that idea is interesting, for it shows us several things: Tolkien

stresses that there is no external and internal connection between 'his' Moria and the Biblical one. The spelling is the only connection between the two, whereas the etymology is completely different. Furthermore, Tolkien is adamant in his claim that the stories as such have no connection; Tolkien notes that it was not an intended similarity. It is difficult to reconstruct the thought of a man extracted from a response by another, but we will at least try to show some interpretative moves of Mr. Rang, as well as my own interpretation concerning the Hebrew Moriah (henceforth both of us will be presented as the 'reader').

The reader encounters the name Moria in *LotR*, where it is connected to the mines that the fellowship comes through. The reader, has up till then, made propositions based on a shared lexicon, and has assumed a "transitory identity between his world and the world of his experience"²⁷ unless this is challenged. And indeed, many aspects have challenged this 'transitory identity': He understands that the story is fantasy (which is a judgement of the truth values of the story, e.g., that the wolf can talk in *Red Riding Hood* is an indication that the world is not 'ours' or 'actual'), but the reader remains 'in' the story. For the moment he accepts the fictional world's truth values, though he knows already that it is not 'real life'. Frequently, the names in *LotR* are not part of a shared lexicon, as they are fictitious and novel. But in the instance of Moria, which the reader recognizes as a proper name in the story, the reader shares the code. Yet the code the reader shares is known from another text. The reader pauses: Moria in the reader's encyclopaedia coincides with the proper name Moriah in the Hebrew Bible, which evokes the whole Biblical narrative of Abraham (which is in itself an interesting move, but we will leave it at that). He uses his intertextual competence – and all the corresponding 'knowledge' – to interpret the code and decide whether or not it refers to something extra-textual. Because the rest of the proper names are unfamiliar, and this one stands out as being familiar, the reader jumps to the conclusion that this is no coincidence and decides that the text *must* refer to something extra-

26) For encyclopaedia, see Umberto Eco. *From the Tree to the Labyrinth: Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation*, translated by Anthony Oldcorn. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014, 3-94; for more on his understanding of encyclopaedia, see Patrizia Violi. 'Individual and Communal Encyclopedias', in *Umberto Eco's Alternative: The Politics of Culture and the Ambiguities of Interpretation*, edited by Norma Bouchard and Veronica Pravadelli. New York: Peter Lang, 1998, 25-38, or in the same volume, Rocco Capozzi. 'Libraries, Encyclopedias and Rhizomes: Popularizing Culture in Eco's Superfictions', 129-146.

27) Eco. *Role*, 17.

textual. This is brought back into the text. Loaded with presuppositions, the reader enters the world of the text, effectively 'ideologically' overcoding the text, which colours the reader's further reading until the assumption is challenged or disposed of: One goes looking for clues to confirm the assumption, but there is little support. On the basis of *fabula* or *sjuzet* (plot), we see no agreements as recounted in Genesis 22: God tests Abraham by telling him to go sacrifice his son on mountain range of Moriah. They go (together with two servants and a donkey), but Isaac does not know that he will be sacrificed. Isaac carries the wood up the mountain and queries where the sacrifice is. Abraham answers that God will provide the sacrifice. Abraham binds his son Isaac to a mounted altar and is ready to strike Isaac with a knife. An angel interrupts and calls Abraham to a halt; Abraham fears God and is willing to sacrifice his son. When Abraham looks up, he sees a ram ensnared in the bushes. Because Abraham is willing to give up his son, God promises that Abraham will be blessed with great offspring, which will be a blessing to the whole world.²⁸

The difficulty with establishing a link with the Hebrew Moriah is that in Tolkien's Moria various stories take place, as described briefly above. However, the most obvious identification would be the passage of the fellowship through the mines, but as a manner of *story*, I can see no agreements. Only by way of the themes <sacrifice>, and <near death> (both could be applied to Gandalf) could a link be established, but then I am arguing from the story of the binding of Isaac towards *LotR*, which would seem to me a faulty starting point. Moreover, in no way does Gandalf resemble Isaac, or Abraham for that matter.

In effect, in the reading process, the reader forgets the connection probably, because the hypothesis that both Moria(h)'s are identifiable is nowhere confirmed.

LATIN

As for the Latin *moriar*, (infinitive present active *moriar*) we can be clear. This is clearly based on a similarity of spelling and Tolkien has shown that

there are no hidden meanings based on identifiable sources in spelling combinations. I brought in a term and language foreign to Tolkien's narrative, and thereby effectively 'overcoded' the narrative, because I did not pay attention to the required 'encyclopaedia', that is, I gave priority to my own 'encyclopaedia'. I was, moreover, ignorant of the Sindarin language and of the linguistic formation of Tolkien's Moria. In effect, I showed a lack of competence. Because I presumed that a similarity *must be intentional*, I assumed that *moriar* would *have* to be as well, especially when Tolkien was familiar with the Classical languages.²⁹ Furthermore, I connected <dying> (note that I jumped from the *moriar* to the infinitive present active *moriar*) to Tolkien's Moria. I actualized these aspects (<dying>, <death>) and most interestingly, I detected an intertextual frame which was part of my encyclopaedia of Tolkien's world (but absent in the book): In the movie adaptation of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Boromir reacts to Gimli upon entering the mines and seeing Dwarven skeletons: "This is no mine, it's a tomb!" The tomb, connected to death and the visuals of the skeletons were my, so-called intertextual, frame (Eco mentions this sort of phenomenon, characters are *personaggio fluttuante*, or fluid characters, they can "live outside the original text" and become more true than any original version/event).³⁰ Tolkien's Moria was connected to <tomb> and <death> from the moment I saw that scene many years ago, blurring my initial ideas of Moria, adding to my own 'encyclopaedia'. <Death> as a theme in Moria has been noted above,³¹ the death of Balin and his followers, and of course the deaths of those Dwarves in the year 1980 of the Third Age when the Dwarves unleashed the Balrog that killed so many dwarves, as well as the seeming death of Gandalf. Although these specific aspects were actualized, many other aspects remained dormant in my interpretation, for Gandalf did not die there; the fellowship came out alive; the death of many Goblins was not included, not to mention that in Tolkien's world Moria was once the greatest of the Dwarven dwellings and had known a Golden age, which in the passages in *LotR* is particularly emphasized. Thus, the history of Moria or Khazad-dûm was left dormant as well. However, the importance of the theme

28) Note that I by summarizing the Abraham story, I have made macro-propositions about the text on sentence level, identified the topics in the text. This is also an interpretative move.

29) Letter 142.

30) See Umberto Eco. *Sulle spalle dei giganti*. Milano: La nave di Teseo, 2017, digital edition. Found in the essay 'L'invisibile'.

31) Cf. Dickerson. 'Moria',

<death>, which is recurrent in *LotR* as well as the other writings on Middle Earth's history, cannot be understated. In *LotR*, <death> plays a large role, although few important characters die in the story (Boromir, Denethor, Théoden, Gollum, Saruman).³² We could say that by happy mistake I stumbled on one of the great themes of *LotR*, namely, that "the tale is not really about Power and Dominion: that only sets the wheels going; it is about Death and the desire for deathlessness".³³ This seems to be the ideological structure of the text (see box 9 above). Effectively I have touched on the main theme of Tolkien's (entire) myth, but not in a way the text would have it. That Tolkien's myth is about death and deathlessness should not *only* be activated by this coincidental part of *LotR*, but by the *whole story* as such (e.g., the extension of life given by the One Ring, the Ringwraiths who are neither living nor dead, etc.; there are many more clues to this theme). To conclude, my competence has failed me on the one hand, but on the other helped me. To pick up Eco's metaphor of wandering through the woods: I have taken a wrong turn at a junction, but in the end came back to a path that certainly has touched on the great path of the myth. Has Tolkien foreseen this move? Probably not. Would he have accepted it? Certainly not.

GREEK

We turn to the analysis of the last interpretation, that Tolkien's Moria is related to the Greek μωρία, folly. Other than the two preceding interpretations, this one is not based on a likeness of spelling (only if we transcribe the Greek letters to roman letters), but on phonetics. Tolkien's comment in letter 297 that the stress is on the 'i' is present as well in the Greek. I will try to retrace my steps, and in a way, this is similar to the preceding analysis. The association, and further interpretation with the Greek μωρία was made when I came across the book *Paul: the Fool of Christ* by Laurence L. Welborn. It is a study of I Corinthians 1-4 in the comic-philosophic tradition. Only then I realized that μωρία resembles Tolkien's Moria in pronunciation. *LotR* was al-

ready in my own 'encyclopaedia', which was now enriched by a study of the Greek comic-philosophic tradition. Again, I came across a shared lexicon (or more precisely, a case of homophony). Again, my intuition was that this could not have been coincidence, especially when I reread *LotR*. Thus I 'over-coded' the world of Tolkien as I re-entered it. My expectations were twofold, first of all I hoped that there would be an echo of the 'foolishness of Christ' as surveyed in the book by Welborn, and secondly, I hoped to find clues that 'folly' would somehow be a theme in these passages.

The hope of coming across something that resembled the 'foolishness of Christ' was short-lived, for nothing in the narrative seemed to point towards an absurdity that one believed in a resurrected person (for that is more or less meant with the 'foolishness of Christ' – you are a fool if you believe that Jesus has been resurrected from the dead). One could argue that Gandalf is Christ-like, in Moria that he only is able to stop the balrog and gives up his life to save the others fighting against a demonic creature etc., but I deem that too simplistic, and that would be ideologically incorrect; there are too many inconsistencies with such a view. Numerous Christ-like aspects or actions are present in *LotR* characters, but nowhere is it that explicit: There is no Son of Eru, the One, who came to save Arda.³⁴ But there was another trail, which was not challenged, but in fact confirmed by four verbal cognates of μωρία's translation, 'folly' in or around the Mines of Moria. First, there is the occurrence in the chapter 'A Journey in the Dark' when Pippin asks Gandalf what he is about to do when the doors of Moria would not open: Gandalf admonishes Pippin with saying: "If I am allowed a little peace from foolish questions, I will seek for the opening words." Further on in the same chapter, it is Pippin who out of curiosity throws a stone in a well. Gandalf replies: "Fool of a Took!" The third time it is Gandalf again who criticizes Balin's attempt to reclaim Moria, 'valiant but foolish', and most famously, Gandalf cries: "Fly, you fools", before sliding into the chasm after

32) For a useful discussion on death in *LotR*, see Amy M. Amendt-Raduege. 'The sweet and the bitter', *Death and dying in J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*. Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2018.

33) Letter 203.

34) Cf. Harvey. *Song*, 54-56; there is no such thing as a 'fall from grace' with death as a punishment, death was a blessing from Ilúvatar. No saviour is needed to 'rescue' creatures from eternal punishment or to reconcile humankind (or any kind of creature) to Ilúvatar. Many thanks to Renée Vink however, who pointed out to me that in the *Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth* some kind of Fall is referred to. See J.R.R. Tolkien, Christopher Tolkien. *Morgoth's Ring*. London: Harper Collins, 1993, 306-366; also see, 'Morgoth's Ring' in *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia*, 437, which states that "This is clearly Tolkien's myth of Original Sin, only hinted at elsewhere in his works, describing how Men were corrupted into the worship of Morgoth and thereby tainted forever".

his confrontation with the balrog on the Bridge of Khazad-dûm. On a more thematic level (*ipso facto* with the previous discussion, our reading is dominated by the theme 'folly' and thus many things can be related to it), one could claim that the greed of the Dwarves which unleashed the balrog was foolish, as well as the choice to go through Moria in the first place. We have then, several verbal instances, as well as one 'historical' event, that lie in the background of the fellowship's passage, and probably many more. The fact that, again, the internal evidence is ignored (i.e., the origin of Moria lies in the Sindarin language, not in Greek), gives my interpretation a bad start. Yet, with the verbal occurrences of folly's cognates, it seems that my interpretation has touched upon a greater theme revolving around Gandalf. However, Gandalf is quite fond of the word 'fool' and cognates: of a total of 85 occurrences in *LotR*, 21 are found on the lips of Gandalf. It seems therefore unlikely that it has special significance in the two chapters situated in/around Moria. The interesting thing is, of course, that I actualized and highlighted these verbal occurrences, while earlier and later, the word 'folly' and cognates did not elicit such a response.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Moria can be connected to many aspects of *LotR* and can be read in many ways, and often the reader is tempted to do so. The question is whether a particular interpretation can be supported by the text as a whole. Interpreting a text requires competence, and to interpret Tolkien's work asks quite some knowledge of the created myth. Luckily, Tolkien provided much background information and history of his fictional world. Along with the collection of preserved letters, we can complement caveats from the published stories (although to some the question remains what is canon and what is not). In the case of the particular interpretations that Moria would refer to the Hebrew Moriah and corresponding story as well as the Greek word for 'folly' (μωρία),

my own competence did not meet the standards: I overinterpreted or misinterpreted on the basis of homography or homophony. Besides that, I discovered a bias towards that if invented nomenclature could be identified with language available from my own 'encyclopaedia', it *must* mean something, rather than that it could be coincidence. Furthermore, we have shown that assumptions can be challenged when reading on in the narrative, and we highlight the case that certain words/aspects/themes remain dormant until a lexical agreement appears, and only then are actualized. The case of the Latin *moriar* is a curious one. I am convinced that this is a case of homography and therefore is a coincidence and the following an overinterpretation. Yet, by focussing on this interpretation, a main theme in Tolkien's work has been discovered; it is possible to start on the wrong foot, but by carefully examining (and retracing one's steps), one can be brought back to the right track, although this must be confirmed by the reading process further on. We must acknowledge that Tolkien's Moria is not the only aspect of the narrative world that evokes the themes of death and deathlessness, and therefore my interpretation with the Latin *moriar* should not be deemed significant: the means are questionable, although for the moment the result is confirmed, not only by the narrative itself, but also by other writings (and Tolkien himself). That is not to say that there is but one interpretation possible (as we have seen in actual reader experiences).

This exercise has given insight in how interpreting a text works, how a reader approaches a text, how a text asks competence of the reader and can challenge certain assumptions. This asks of the reader respect towards the (intention of the) text as well as preparedness to be corrected. If not, one *uses* the text, which is legitimate, but shows the mind of the reader. Hopefully, this exercise encourages many to inquire into one's process of interpreting one of the greatest modern myths.