

The Genesis and the Legacy
of
The Lord of the Rings

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Introduction

By simply looking at the fact that it found a place in the heart of millions of people for over 67 years, it is quite safe to say that J. R. R. Tolkien's most significant book, *The Lord of the Rings*, is one of the most popular literary works in history. Published in 1954, a period after the end of World War II and at the beginning of the modern age of information and technology, the novel was immediately successful as it soon attracted the interest of large numbers of readers all over the world, making its author one of the most famous writers of all time. *The Lord of the Rings* (along with most of Middle-earth related works) became so widely known and appreciated that its fame effortlessly increased throughout the following decades, so much that it had an immense impact on later works of non-realistic literature: in fact, since its publication, *The Lord of the Rings* quickly grew to become the basis and the inspiration for most (if not all) of the writers whose works are considered part of what is commonly known as *fantasy fiction*. The novel's fame managed to endure even after the turn of the 21st century, especially thanks to its influence on cinematography and TV, producing various adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings*. These representations, and in particular the successful movies of the early 2000s, could be considered the reason that most of today's people have a great affinity with Tolkien's world, even without having read any of his writings.

While big screen adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* are very well known to anyone remotely acquainted with Tolkien's works, not everyone is aware of the strong influence that the book had on other media, such as literature and games, or even to fantasy in general. Moreover, it is also difficult for the majority of people to be familiar with the nature of the sources on which *The Lord of the Rings* was based. In fact, it would be wise to remember that the author was not the first writer using fantasy, and that his works were not solely the product of his own imagination. Tolkien found his inspiration in a myriad different literary, poetic and mythological sources, most of them tied to the traditions of ancient European societies: many of the fictional places, characters and populations represented in his book were in fact directly taken from or based on folkloric and mythic tales, and various themes and devices he uses are actually rooted in older literary traditions.

The goal of this thesis is to find the origins and inspirations for *The Lord of the Rings*, and to discover the immense impact that it has had on contemporary culture. To succeed in this goal, this thesis is divided into three chapters in order to focus on specific thematics regarding the nature of Tolkien's novel and its success. The first chapter aims at establishing some background for the book and analysing some of its main characteristics. It begins by introducing the reader to the author's life, highlighting some of his interests and subjects of study, in order to give context to the novel's origins. This short biography obviously includes a few references to the author's love for languages,

which in a sense formed the basis for most of his writings, and his involvement in the two world wars, an experience that had a powerful impact on the creation of Middle-earth. The second part of the chapter focuses on some of the characteristics and on the history of fantasy fiction, the literary genre to which *The Lord of the Rings* is supposed to belong. The structural features of fantasy are explored by describing the difficulty that lies in trying to define its nature, while the relation between Tolkien's works and this genre is explored by referencing some of the earliest fantasy writers who influenced the production of *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as by mentioning the later authors on whom the novel had a significant impact. The last two paragraphs then deal with two of the most important characteristics that granted the book its incredible success: the use of real-world and invented languages in the novel, in all their forms and variations, and the so-called act of world-building, or the expansion of the literary world in which *The Lord of the Rings* takes place, a procedure that was introduced into fantasy fiction by Tolkien himself.

The second chapter focuses on three of the novel's most significant sources. It is important to note that there are many different sources behind *The Lord of the Rings*: in fact, Tolkien found his inspiration in literature, mythology and folklore, but (as stated in his biographies and in some of his letters) he is also said to have created Middle-earth out of his personal life experiences, especially in regards to his involvement in the war. However, the question of which exact elements of the book are based on his life can be considered a matter of interpretations, as there are no precise confirmations in this matter. Because of this, and also for the fact that Tolkien himself always claimed to have never written *The Lord of the Rings* as an allegory of specific real-world issues, the sources for the novel's inspiration that are described in this thesis are the ones pertaining to the author's academic experience, mainly the literary and oral heritage of Norse, Celtic and Christian traditions with which he was acquainted during his life. The first paragraph of the second chapter focuses on the parallels between *The Lord of the Rings* and Norse mythology. Of course, since the quantity of similarities between the book and Norse tales and legends is quite vast, the chapter will be limited to the most notorious traits that some Middle-earth characters and situations share with ancient Norse literature. The following paragraph is concerned with the themes that the novel and Celtic tradition have in common. This would actually be more difficult to prove, since Tolkien denied he had ever been influenced by Celtic legends, nor did he comment on these parallels. However, whether it was done consciously or not, *The Lord of the Rings* undoubtedly includes such elements, ranging from Celtic mythology references to the employment of the magical races that inhabit Middle-earth: elves, hobbits and orcs are in fact folkloric figures stemming from Celtic tradition, creatures that Tolkien was familiar with and that he adapted in order to fit them into his world. The last paragraph then deals with the influence that Christian mythology had on *The Lord of the Rings*, a religion to which Tolkien (as a devout catholic) was

strongly attached since his early years. Religious motives, especially regarding the figure of Christ, are found in multiple instances throughout the book. Moreover, the same sub-chapter also describes how the novel appears to be connected to some Medieval and Christian literary features: the paragraph will show how the plot of *The Lord of the Rings* presents a few similarities with the works of authors from the Middle Ages, and, at the same time, how the book also subverts certain archetypes of Medieval tales, such as the characteristic figure of the pure and honest knight.

The last chapter focuses on the effects that Tolkien's novel had (and is still having) on different forms of artistic production throughout the world. The first paragraph concerns the influence that *The Lord of the Rings* has had on fantasy fiction to this day, presenting a list of authors to demonstrate how they, just as all fantasy writers, have to deal with Tolkien's impact on the genre. The second sub-chapter shifts the attention from literature to cinema, listing the major animated and live-action representations of the novel and analysing the necessary changes and adjustments that occurred in the transition from book to screen. Along with the many failed Hollywood projects and a few stage adaptations all based on Tolkien's novel, this chapter does not include a survey of *The Rings of Power*, the 2022 series produced by Amazon Studios, since the show was created to function as a prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, and thus it is not concerned with the timeline and the events of the book. Finally, even if it still a matter of discussion whether they are a form of artwork or not, the last paragraph focuses on the various kinds of board (and card) games that were especially fashionable in the second half of the last century, describing how their production was profoundly changed by the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings*. The same sub-chapter ends by showing how the novel's influence on this matter has never waned through the years, as it still shapes the creation of the modern video games that have quickly replaced their cardboard ancestors.

As regards the sources for this thesis, apart from Tolkien's own works, I used Internet archives and databases, such as *Proquest*, *Galileodiscovery* (both in collaboration with the University of Padua) and *Jstor*. Just as useful were the websites pertaining to the annual or monthly periodicals from which most of the essays were extracted, such as *The Mythopoetic Society*, *Mythlore*, *Folklore*, and the *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, as they all contained relevant information on the topics presented in the thesis, from broader thematics such as fantasy and mythology to more specific details, like the disappointment that Tolkien's fans expressed towards the first animated representation of *The Lord of the Rings*. In particular, *Mythlore* turned out to be a surprisingly essential source, as a good part of the essays in its issues deal with the themes and elements of Tolkien's compositions, especially in respect to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Apart from the information found in these periodicals, a number of books and manuals were employed: the most helpful turned out to be Stuart D. Lee's *A Companion to J. R. R. Tolkien*, a

large collection of essays dealing with specific elements of Tolkien's life, interests and works.

I also used other books, tackling various themes not exclusive to Tolkien and his works. As an example, Humphrey Carpenter's *J. R. R. Tolkien: a Biography* helped much in the production of the first chapter; Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* presented a great guideline in order to properly analyse the cinematic adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings*; Snorri Sturluson's *Poetic Edda* was beneficial in finding the references to prove the parallels between Norse mythology and *The Lord of the Rings*, while compendiums such as Katharine Briggs' *An Encyclopedia of Fairies* were useful in finding the common traits between Tolkien's characters and real-world folkloric figures.

The novel and its genre

A glimpse of Tolkien's life

Born on January 3, 1892, in Bloemfontein, South Africa, John Ronald Reuel Tolkien was the son of Arthur Tolkien, a bank manager, and Mabel Suffield, both of whom had migrated from Birmingham to South Africa. After spending the first years of his life in his native country, in 1895 his mother took him and his 1 year old brother Hilary to visit her English hometown, but they were later forced to remain there due to the untimely death of Arthur, caused by a fever. Mabel's conversion to Catholicism, and the consequent estrangement from her family, led her to teach her two children at home.¹ Tolkien soon developed an interest in languages, art, literature, nature and mythology, but homeschooling did not last long: Mabel died of diabetes, causing the 8 year old boy to retain a strong catholic faith throughout his life. The two brothers were immediately taken under the protection of Father Francis Morgan, who moved them in their aunt's house. In this period Tolkien, who had just won a scholarship at King Edward's school, first started to experiment with languages, learning Gothic, Anglo-Saxon, Greek and inventing new ones (such as the nonsensical Nevbosh or the Spanish-based Naffarin)², while simultaneously reading poetry, ranging from Homer's classical tales to Norse poems such as *Beowulf*. Because of a few issues with their aunt, in 1910 the brothers were moved to a nearby street: here Tolkien met a young orphan, Edith Mary Bratt, and the two quickly fell in love. However, mainly because of age and religion-related differences, the two brothers were shifted to another location while Edith moved to another city.³

Falling in a temporary depressive phase, Tolkien coped with the situation by reading (and occasionally composing) poetry, literature and Finnish mythology, a hobby that led him and his fellow rugby players to found a literary circle, the *Tea Club or Barrovian Society*. In 1911 Tolkien was accepted at Exeter College in Oxford, and there he studied Classics and involved himself in clubs and theatre until 1913, when he turned 21 and immediately asked Edith to renew their love. Despite her initial refusal, Tolkien managed to convince her to leave her current fiancé and to start a secret engagement.⁴ After the end of his classical studies, Tolkien switched to English Language and Literature, devoting himself to Gothic, Old Norse and Old English. Because of his idea that languages are empty without an accompanying mythology,⁵ he simultaneously wrote a retelling of the Finnish epic *Kalevala* and composed "The voyage of Éarendel the Evening Star", the first text related to Middle-Earth. Moreover, inspired by old Finnish and Norse mythology, he started to

1 John Garth, "A Brief Biography", in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien*, edited by Stuart D. Lee, Oxford, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2014, p. 8.

2 Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: a Biography*, Harper Collins, 2011, p. 36.

3 John Garth, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

4 *Idem*, p. 10.

5 *Idem*, p. 11.

construct the elvish language Quenya and to explore the concept of Elves.⁶

Just as he passed his final exams in 1915, Tolkien immediately joined the army to take part in World War 1 and, a few months after his marriage with Edith in 1916, he was shipped to France. There he underwent a profound experience that had a life-long influence on his works: during the numerous battles of the trenches along the river Somme he was left scarred by the horrors of war, which took the life of 21,000 men, including many of his friends from school, college and the *Tea Club*. In this period he wrote very little, and before the end of the war he was sent back to England to be cured from trench fever.⁷ He then resumed the composition of languages and tales that would later form the Middle-earth Legendarium, with its main focus on desperate heroes battling supernatural tyrants (clearly based on his war experiences). While building Middle-earth Tolkien was employed as lexicographer and reader at Leeds University from 1919 to 1925, around the same period in which Edith bore three sons: John, Michael and Christopher. The family then moved to Oxford, where Tolkien was hired as professor of Anglo-Saxon and started a friendship with C. S. Lewis, the future author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*.⁸ As he focused more on the mythic material of the “Silmarillion”⁹ (centered on the origins of Middle-earth), another child, Priscilla, was born, and in 1930 he came up with “The Hobbit”, a fantastical story written only for his children. In 1931 he released his translations of various ancient poems (most notably *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight* and *Beowulf*, to which he also dedicated the essay “*Beowulf*: the monsters and the critics”) and, after an abandoned attempt to write a science-fiction story about the mythical city of Numenor,¹⁰ in 1937 *The Hobbit* was published.¹¹ This novel, mainly inspired by his travels and experiences in France, had an incredible success, and a sequel was soon requested, causing the author to work on it immediately.

After the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939, Tolkien was hired as an air raid guard, while his sons Michael and Christopher were sent to fight: this period caused the horrors of the first war to resurface in him, and as a result they probably influenced the production of the sequel to *The Hobbit*. In fact, Tolkien abandoned the fairy-tale setting and style of his previous child-oriented story, dedicating the new novel to a more mature audience and adding serious thematics such as war, morality and the seduction of power.¹² Following this stylistic and narrative change, in 1947 Tolkien had already finished writing the first 4 books of *The Lord of the Rings*, a novel that, from that moment, would have left its mark not only on the literary genre to which it belonged, but also on almost every other type of media of the next decades. With the end of the conflict in 1945,

6 Humphrey Carpenter, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

7 John Garth, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

8 *Idem*, p. 14.

9 Humphrey Carpenter, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

10 *Idem*, p. 168.

11 John Garth, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

12 Humphrey Carpenter, *op. cit.*, chapt. II.

Tolkien was hired as professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford, and, after several revisions of *The Hobbit* and its sequel, *The Lord of the Rings* was completed in 1950. Due to a few issues with the publisher the author returned to work on *The Silmarillion*, and it wasn't until 1954 that *The Lord of the Rings* was published,¹³ with an enormous success that granted him a large retribution.

After the publication, however, Tolkien's health started to decline and he was forced to remain at home, working on his *Legendarium* and publishing minor works (including a sequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, soon abandoned).¹⁴ After a series of unfortunate events, such as the death of his dear friend Lewis in 1963, the author and his wife moved to Bournemouth: there his Middle-Earth writings made no progress, and Edith died in 1971. A few months later Tolkien was welcomed to live in Merton College, Oxford, and on September 2, 1973, he died in the hospital and was buried with Edith in one of the city's cemeteries.¹⁵

Fantasy: a complex genre

The Lord of the Rings was, and still is, famously known all over the world: its suitability to different ages and social groups, its unique and detailed narrative style and its fantastical elements are only some of the reasons for its success, which has also led to different adaptations throughout the following decades, making the novel - or at least its essence - known even to non-readers. In fact, most people are somewhat familiar with *The Lord of the Rings* even without having read the novel, regarding it as the archetype of what is called "fantasy", the literary genre to which the book supposedly belongs. Indeed many readers and critics, past and present, have often agreed to consider the novel as one of the best examples (if not the best) of fantasy literature. However, when it comes to defining this genre, there always appears to be some confusion and disagreement. Most people have a very specific vision of fantasy, associating it to particular elements and themes that seem to be exclusive to it, but it also shares various components with other categories of literature, thus creating difficulties in discerning so-called "fantasy texts" from other types of fiction. In fact, the term "fantasy" is possibly one of the most ambiguous labels used to categorize a series of literary writings.

According to Rosemary Jackson's *The Literature of Subversion*¹⁶ the name fantasy, or "fantastic"¹⁷ as some scholars prefer, derives from the Latin *phantasticus*, meaning "imagination", which in turn comes from the Greek *φανταζω* (*phantázō*), "to make visible".¹⁸ Through this

13 *Idem*, p. 218.

14 *Idem*, p. 229.

15 John Garth, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

16 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Taylor & Francis e-Library, Routledge, 1981.

17 Dieter Petzold, "Fantasy Fiction and Related Genres", in *Modern Fiction Studies*, pp. 11-20, 1986, p. 12.

18 Rosemary Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

association with the concept of imagination we already find some difficulties in defining the genre, since all works of literature are a product of the imagination.¹⁹ A better way to describe fantasy may be given by the fact that its writers always refuse to copy nature: one of the clearest features of its works is that they are not written with the intent of describing a realistic world – such a goal is achieved by what could be called *mimesis* fiction, which tries to write of lifelike events so that they can feel familiar to the reader.²⁰ However, in order to make sense and to be understood by the reader, fantasy must present some similarities with reality (such as the basic laws of nature and physics) and so cannot encompass all non-realistic written works. The problem here is the concept of reality and how it is considered by the reader, since it may change depending on time and space; for example, people living during the Elizabethan era may have found the existence of ghosts, witches and fairies possible,²¹ so any of Shakespeare's plays making use of the supernatural may not have been considered fantastical at the time. In fact, despite being generically categorized as fantasy, non-realistic literature before the 18th century was probably not seen as completely fictional. It is only with the advent of the Enlightenment, which imposed a materialistic and pragmatic point of view of the world, that life started to lose its supernatural side, leading to a sort of rebellion during the Romantic era.²² In this period, literature and writers started to adopt a conscious detachment from consensus reality, a process which influenced every other non-realistic work to date: this attitude causes the writer and the reader to accept the existence (in the secondary-literary world) of supernatural events and creatures while still knowing such things would be impossible in the primary world.²³

The relation between the two worlds may then be the foundation for the most efficient categorisation of non-realistic texts (and thus a proper definition of fantasy). In his essay "Fantasy Fiction and Related Genres"²⁴, Dieter Petzold makes use of this relation to suggest a categorisation of non-realistic literature, dividing the latter in four different groups. The first one is formed by texts that could be said to "subvert" reality: here the secondary world looks more or less ordinary until some unnatural or unexplainable elements start emerging, creating an uncanny feeling, such as the one typical of gothic and horror tales. Another category presents the secondary world as a possible "alternative" to our own, created through logical thinking by the author without disrupting the laws of nature – all this in order to make the fictional reality seem theoretically possible. This example is mainly found in utopian and science-fiction novels, where supernatural themes are reduced and replaced by the use of advanced technology and science. The third group portrays in a

19 *Idem*, p. 8.

20 Peter Hunt, *Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, Oxon, Routledge, 2004, p. 436.

21 Peter Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 440.

22 Dieter Petzold, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

23 Greer Watson, "Assumptions of Reality: Low Fantasy, Magical Realism and the Fantastic", in *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, p. 164-172, 2000, p. 165.

24 Dieter Petzold, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

“desiderative” way the secondary world, created in a specific fashion so that it looks and functions better than our own. This kind of literature could be defined as purely escapist, since its main goal is to gratify the reader’s desires and wishes. Because of this it includes a vast variety of writings, ranging from child-oriented adventure stories to romances and even to texts restricted to more mature readers, such as pornographic novels. Fantasy literature, however, may be best placed in a last categorisation, shaped by an “applicative” way of relating to reality. In this case, created also by the desire of escapism, the secondary world offered by the author is completely different from reality, but it still retains some of its rules (like the basic laws of nature) in order to be understood by the reader; not only that, but it also presents a tacit connection with the real world and human concerns. This kind of literature, too, is composed by many different texts, with examples being fairy tales (which plunge the reader in a wondrous world but also tackle societal issues) and even allegories, which can be very direct - like Orwell’s *Animal Farm* - or more cryptic, such as Tolkien’s works and their depiction of power.²⁵

Despite such difficulties in the academic world in finding a precise definition for fantasy, popular culture seems to have a particular conception of the genre, which lists a medieval setting and society, the presence of magic and fantastical creatures such as dragons and elves. This simplistic outlook is, however, easily refuted, as not all fantasy fiction necessarily entails all of these elements: Ursula Le Guin’s *Earthsea* cycle (1968-2001), for instance, is set in an oriental-styled group of islands populated by tribal societies;²⁶ Susanna Clarke’s *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (2004) describes the return of magic in early 19th century England, without the presence of typical fantasy creatures (apart from a handful of very un-Tolkienian fairies).²⁷ Tony DiTerlizzi and Holly Black’s *The Spiderwick Chronicles* (2003-2004) describes the adventures of three children with folkloric beings in today’s America.²⁸ It becomes clear, then, that the genre is not just difficult to discern from other kinds of literature, but that it is also split in different categories: most fantasy works represent their own version of the genre, each one possessing specific characteristics that distinguish it from the others. However, despite the many differences that separate its components from each other, fantasy has often been divided in two specific groups that give a somewhat general classification of many of the genre’s texts. “High” (or “immersive”)²⁹ Fantasy could be said to represent the genre in its “purest” form, and the category that is closer to popular culture’s idea of it: this subgenre contains all fantasy texts where the secondary world is completely different from the primary, having its own history, societies, and rules of physics. The most famous example for such texts is *The Lord of the Rings* itself, whose events take place in a medieval-styled world

25 *Idem*, pp. 17-19.

26 Dimitra Fimi., “Later Fantasy Fiction”, in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien*, *cit.*, p. 340.

27 Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005.

28 Holly Black, Tony DiTerlizzi (eds), *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, Simon & Schuster, 2010.

29 Dimitra Fimi., *op. cit.*, p. 339.

completely different from ours, where magic and fantastical creatures are found everywhere. Despite the absence of a medieval setting and culture, the secondary world of Le Guin's *Earthsea* series appears quite unlike our reality, a characteristic that labels the series as high fantasy fiction. "Low" (or "intrusion")³⁰ Fantasy, on the other hand, presents a secondary reality that resembles very much our own, with the exception of the supernatural elements that characterize the story. In addition, in most low fantasy fiction the protagonist (or protagonists) suddenly comes in contact with the magical side of reality, while the rest of the characters are completely oblivious to the presence of the fantastic in the secondary world they inhabit.³¹ The aforementioned series titled *The Spiderwick Chronicles* is a good example for this: on the contrary of most side characters, only the three young protagonists discover the presence of invisible fairies and monsters in the area, which is not part of an alien world like Middle-earth, but a fictional small town in modern-day Maine. J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* could also be classified as low fantasy, since the protagonist is unexpectedly summoned to the magical school of Hogwarts after years of living in "real-world" England and ignoring the existence of wizards. In this case, however, the complicated notion of the coexistence of a magical world and an ordinary one have led some scholars to categorize Rowling's series under a third subgenre that stands between high and low fantasy.³²

As noted before, *The Lord of the Rings*, along with all of the ensemble of Middle-earth related works, has often been considered by readers the origin of fantasy literature, with Tolkien himself being considered by many the inventor of fantasy. However, even though the author's writings have definitely deeply changed the genre's appearance and thematics in every form of media, fantasy as we know it has its roots in writings produced earlier, even before the 20th Century. An example of early fantastical literature can be found in the works of William Morris, such as the notorious novel *The Wood Beyond the World*,³³ published in 1895: this narration perfectly encapsulates the desire of travelling to wonderful strange lands, while still sharing elements and connections with reality. With their medieval setting, the presence of magic and supernatural creatures and the adventure or quest-like plots, Morris' novels are often regarded as (and may very well be) the first true example of (high) fantasy literature in history. T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* (1939)³⁴ also contains various elements that help to enclose it in the fantasy genre. Here the author retells the tale of King Arthur, whose life is set in a world much like our own, a sort of alternate medieval England, but still featuring the supernatural and the impossible. These two examples are of course only a small part of a long line of texts that could be considered the earliest

30 *Idem*, p. 339.

31 Greer Watson, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

32 Dimitra Fimi, *op. cit.*, pp. 346-347.

33 William Morris, *The Wood Beyond the World*, Wildside Press, 2005.

34 T. H. White, "The Sword in the Stone", *The Once and Future King*, Harper Voyager, 2001.

embodiments of fantasy literature.³⁵ Eventually, many of these managed to come in contact with Tolkien and deeply influenced him and his writings, thus leading to the creation of the notorious Middle-earth.³⁶ Along with a considerable list of predecessors, Tolkien could be said to have an even larger group of descendants: the enormous success of *The Lord of the Rings* (and its related works) increased the interest and enthusiasm of audiences in fantasy literature, forever affecting the concept of the genre and ensuring its survival to this very day, even in different media.

From Old English to Elvish

Among all the elements that make *The Lord of the Rings* one of the most original works of literature of the last two centuries, the narration style is particularly significant. Given that its use revolves mainly around the language spoken by both the third-person narrator and the characters, its origins can be found all throughout the author's life: since his early years, Tolkien had always been fascinated with languages, especially ancient ones, an interest that led him to study Old, Middle and Modern English, Finnish, Anglo-Saxon and Gothic. He often amused himself by trying to accurately recreate and expand their vocabulary, and he even invented new languages for his own pleasure; in fact, he considered the act of language creation as a sort of hobby. This fascination was obviously integrated in the novel, but not solely to expand and give depth to its world and characters. It was his idea that stories are actually created in order to ground and give consistency to a language, and the procedure through which he created most of the Legendarium always started by inventing languages. This can be seen in the creation of elvish speeches, such as Quenya, influenced by Latin, Finnish and Greek, and of Sindarin (originally Gnomish), a variant of the former made to sound more like British and Welsh. It is worth noting that none of these languages comprises of a very long and concrete vocabulary, as they were in fact invented for fun and often changed and revised, even though a whole world was later built around them.³⁷ In addition, a peculiar characteristic of the speech of the Elves was its own alphabet, completely different from the one used to portray our language. Despite this particularity, most Elvish in the book is portrayed in Latin alphabet, with only a few exceptions – the main one being the rhyme present on the surface of the One Ring. This “art-language” (as Tolkien called it), with all its dialects and variations belonging to different Elf groups, was of course not the only one used in *The Lord of the Rings*: Khuzdul was devised for the Dwarves, and is sometimes seen written in Futhark runes; Sauron created the infamous “black speech” for his legions of Orcs and other fell creatures, with an example being the inscription on the One Ring, which is written in elvish characters; even Ents

35 Peter Hunt, *op. cit.*, pp. 439-441.

36 Rachel Falconer., “Earlier Fantasy Fiction: Morris, Dunsany and Lindsay”, in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, p. 304.

37 Arden R. Smith, “Invented Languages and Writing Systems”, in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, pp. 202-204.

have their own long and slow way of speaking, though not particularly explored. However, despite the rich and various speeches in Middle-Earth, Tolkien limited most of his characters and creatures to the use of English and the Latin alphabet, obviously in order to help the reader understand the narrative. Men, too, are shown to have their own languages, depending on their origin and the realm they belong to. Different human characters are showed to be speaking different languages; for example, the inhabitants of Rohan speak Rohirric, just as Gondorians, Hobbits, Wild men and the Men of Bree have their own speeches. In addition to all these variations Tolkien introduced Westron, or Common Speech, a “Mannish” language that most Middle-Earth races share in order to understand one another³⁸: it is this one that all characters speak during the whole narrative. Obviously, in the novel, apart from a few lines, no Mannish language is used and Westron is transformed into English and portrayed through the Latin Alphabet, all for the comfort of the reader.

The use of English in *The Lord of the Rings* is also a very interesting and multi-faced concept. Most of the novel’s dialogue is in fact portrayed through English, but it is not spoken in the same manner by everyone: there are instances of characters using Old English, others speaking more modern versions, and the register, too, changes depending on which figure is talking. To analyse this situation, it is important to present the differences between the historical variations of this language: Old English is what was spoken after the Roman rule of Britain, with much influence coming from the speech of migrants from the area between Denmark and Germany; Middle English was the language used from 1150 to 1500 A.D., Modern English is the language that has been spoken in later periods until now, though scholars have recently started to distinguish it from Contemporary English.³⁹ The main difference between these variants is that the older ones had much flexibility and could easily change the position of elements in a sentence, while the more modern versions developed stricter rules.⁴⁰ In *The Lord of the Rings*, all these English variations are used in many different ways, depending on a character’s social position and “nationality”. In this way the people of Gondor and most Mannish kingdoms are shown to be speaking Modern English, though with distinct registers. An example of this can be seen in the solemn and more archaic speech of Gondor and the plain and simpler register of Hobbits: this contrast is given by the difference between these two cultures, one portrayed in a more medieval style and the other closer to the 19th Century. At the same time, the Shire is also divided in social positions, and so a character like Sam, a gardener, uses more dialectal forms than Frodo, the heir to a rich Hobbit. However, the register of a character is not always static and can change depending on the situation, with an example being Gandalf: the simple and affectionate way in which he addresses the Halflings is

38 Arden R. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 206-207.

39 Mark Atherton, “Old English”, in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, pp. 218-219.

40 Allan Turner, “Style and Intertextual Echoes”, in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, p. 400.

completely different from the more serious and formal speeches he has with powerful figures such as Denethor. It is of course not a coincidence that Hobbits are portrayed using a speech closer to our time: along with their more modern lifestyle and their ignorance of the supernatural ongoing of Middle-earth, they are the characters that have more affinity with the reader, and help him dive into a completely different world that would otherwise be difficult to understand to him alone. On the other hand, Theoden and his riders are shown to be speaking Old English, which links them even more to the Germanic world that inspired them. Apart from their dialogue, this can be seen in the names of places throughout Rohan, whose alternate name is “the Mark”, a word of Old English origin, just like its capital Edoras and the palace of Meduseld.⁴¹

The use of these English variations is not solely limited to the characters, for they are also employed by the narrator himself, who describes scenes using words and sentences from both Old and Modern English. The reason for this is, again, dependant on the characters and situations: in the first part of the book, mostly related to the Shire, the dialogue between Hobbits is described in a modern way, but as the narration progresses the scene is focused more and more on the medieval side of Middle-earth, and so events such as the Battle of the Pelennor Fields are portrayed in a much more epic and archaic fashion. Obviously, the problem of the use of ancient languages like Old and Middle English (as seen in Tolkien’s translations of poems such as *Sir Gawain*) is that readers with little knowledge of them would have no small difficulties in understanding the narrative. In fact, despite the language used in the translations of the Bible, Old English was mainly familiar to language scholars. Tolkien’s solution to this problem was then to reduce the number of archaic words (employing more compounds in order to give the story a more heroic sensation) and to limit the use of Old English to its sentences, mainly characterized by alliteration and “fronting”, the way elements are moved to the beginning of the sentence. Through this procedure the author managed to keep the dialogue fairly simple and easily comprehensible by everyone, while still maintaining a style that could evoke a sense of epic and heroism.⁴²

A secondary world

Along with its linguistic complexity, *The Lord of the Rings* is also characterized by another particular form or style: the way in which the author perfectly creates a precise and detailed fictional world, causing the reader to be completely immersed in the novel. Tolkien has often been considered by many as a master of “world-building”, and he himself had talked about this concept in his works and letters. In his essay “On Fairy Stories”⁴³ the writer presents his theory that any

41 Mark Atherton, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

42 Allan Turner, *op. cit.*, pp. 396-400.

43 J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories”, in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, London, Oxford University Press, 1947.

well-built work of literature or storytelling can create a suspension of disbelief in the reader, who is persuaded to accept the reality presented in the narration and can therefore properly enjoy it as if it were real. Tolkien compares the writer to a sort of sub-creator, the producer of a (fictional) secondary world which, if built in depth, can be perceived as real and detach the reader from the true or primary world. By this same principle, the inability of a writer to create a realistic world causes the reader to suspend its belief and prevent him from truly enjoying the story. As Tolkien states:

The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed. You are then out in the Primary World again, looking at the little abortive Secondary World from outside.⁴⁴

It is important to note that by “belief” Tolkien does not mean the action of considering the possibility of the supernatural in the primary world, but rather a “literary belief”, through which the reader accepts the rules of the secondary world as long as he is mentally in it.⁴⁵

As noted above, in order to create a literary belief in the reader, the writer must make the narrative look realistic through the creation and expansion of the secondary world portrayed in it. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien does this by exploring Middle-earth even beyond the places and situations essential to the story, employing different methods. The first is represented by the paragraphs external to the narrative, found at the beginning and at the end of the book. These sections contain various historical and cultural data related to the fictional characters, places and situations presented in the book, but written as if the author were professionally relating real world information. One example can be found in the prologue, which deals mainly with the Shire and its inhabitants, or in appendix A, where the story of the Numenorean kings is told. In addition to these devices, the author presented his fictional mythology as if it were an actual forgotten prehistory, employing what could be called the trope of the “found manuscript”: according to the prologue, *The Lord of the Rings* is only Tolkien’s rendition of what he read in a copy of the mysterious “Red Book of Westmarch”, the diary in which Bilbo was said to have recounted the events of the fellowship many ages ago.⁴⁶ The second method is found in the narrative itself, and is comprised by the extensive explanations about Middle-earth related matters given by some characters. Gloom’s tale about Sauron’s emissary visiting Erebor and Gandalf’s testimony of Saruman’s betrayal, both of which are told during the council of Elrond (who briefly recounts the origin of the rings of power), are perfect examples for this: just as these reports are given to unaware characters, so they are told to the reader, who receives the idea of a larger world and a myriad different events happening in it.

44 J. R. R. Tolkien, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

45 *Idem*, p. 59.

46 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of The Rings*, 50th anniversary edition, London, Harper-Collins, 2005, p. 14.

The other method of world-building consists in the information contained in the author's letters and other Middle-earth related works, such as *The Silmarillion*, which acts as a sort of cosmology to Tolkien's world, and even *The Hobbit*, where one can learn how Bilbo came across the Ring, or vice versa. A lot of the content of these works is somehow mentioned in *The Lord of the Rings*, but not much explored: an example can be found the chapter "A knife in the dark", where Aragorn mentions the "Great Enemy", another name for Morgoth, the first dark lord and Sauron's master. Except for very few instances such as this, nothing else related to this character is told, and the only way to acquire more information about Morgoth is by reading Tolkien's other works (mainly *The Silmarillion*).⁴⁷

Through the use of all these devices the author manages to give more depth and consistency to the story told in *The Lord of the Rings*, enriching its backstory and all secondary characters and situations. Thanks to this the reader is able to let go of his disbelief and skepticism, submerging himself in the narration and thus properly enjoying it. An additional testimony to the incredible world-building and belief-stirring abilities of *The Lord of the Rings* is the fact that some people seriously thought it was a real account of events that took place in a prehistoric age: according to Tolkien himself, his work was believed by some to be a more elaborate retelling of the world's true history, which was supposed to have been described in the Red Book of Westmarch.⁴⁸ After a brief summary of the author's life, a general view of fantasy as a literary genre and a description of Tolkien's linguistic interests and narration modalities in relation to *The Lord of the Rings*, the next chapter will deal primarily with the novel's literary and mythological origins (with a particular focus on ancient texts and folklore), showing how numerous elements and themes in Tolkien's work directly stem from both Christian and "Pagan" backgrounds.

47 Fry L. Carroll, Wayne A. Chandler (eds), "Tolkien's Allusive Backstory", in *Mythlore*, pp. 95-113, 2017, p. 99.

48 Elizabeth Solopova, "Middle English", in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, p. 241.

Origins and Inspirations

Whether earlier fantasy works had a profound effect on his mind and introduced him to the genre, or whether they only reflected an already existing love for medievalism and mythology, Tolkien was obviously heavily influenced by his predecessors. However, the writings of authors like Morris and White were not the only elements that contributed to the creation of *The Lord of the Rings*, since Tolkien based many of his characters and storylines on much older materials.

Norse mythology and folklore

The Lord of the Rings shows many affinities with Old Norse tradition, literature and myths, ranging from subtle motifs and themes to more direct references, at least to who holds a discrete knowledge of these matters. Middle-earth itself may be considered the most evident example: it is obviously based on Miðgarðr, the name under which the world was known in Norse mythology.⁴⁹ Of course, the origin for such inspirations are to be found in Tolkien's linguistic and literary studies, born out of his childhood's love for northern European folktales. The influence of Finnish on the creation of Elvish languages has already been mentioned, but Finnish mythology, too, had an important impact. Throughout his studies Tolkien developed a strong interest in Elias Lönnrot's *Kalevala*,⁵⁰ a 19th century work of epic poetry containing various tales from Finnish folklore and mythology, previously told orally. Since Tolkien never clearly elaborated on the influences of Finnish culture on his works, readers and critics can only formulate hypotheses on the presence of such elements in *The Lord of the Rings*, however a few common themes can be found in both the *Kalevala* and the novel. The most important may be the contrast between the past and modernity. Among the tales collected by Lönnrot, "The Singing Match" contains such a motif. The story describes a singing contest between the wise Väinämöinen, the primordial being of creation considered an "eternal bard", and the young and haughty Joukahainen, who considers himself to be much better at singing than the former. The difference between their canary abilities is that Väinämöinen's singing, as a true bard, originates from ancient tradition and thus even holds mystical power, while Joukahainen (who embraces what is new and rejects the past) has in store only songs with no deeper knowledge. The latter starts referencing invented facts about times that came before he was born, resulting in Väinämöinen mocking him and trapping him in the earth with his magical abilities.⁵¹ Just like Lönnrot, Tolkien also associates ancient beings with wisdom and power, contrasting them with a

49 Tom Birkett, "Old Norse", in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, p. 245.

50 Elias Lönnrot, *The Kalevala: The Epic Poem of Finland*, Translated by John Martin Crawford, New York: The Columbian Publishing & Co., 1891, pp. 27-47.

51 Matthew R. Bardowell, "J.R.R. Tolkien's Creative Ethic and its Finnish Dialogues", in *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, pp. 91-108, 2009, pp. 96-97.

weak modernity: an example can be found in the characters of Tom Bombadil and Treebeard. The first is a mysterious human-like being who lives in a hut near the forest with his equally mysterious wife Goldberry. He describes himself as being the oldest being on Middle-earth and displays a vast knowledge of things past. Along with a great wisdom, Tom appears to possess incredible powers: he seems to be unaffected by the ring, and through singing he easily defeats the violent Willow-man and the terrible Barrow-wights (a possible reference to Väinämöinen). Treebeard, too, shows a great knowledge of the world and its past, like the war between Sauron and the Numenoreans: as an Ent, one of the oldest races of the world, he can live for ages, if not forever. He even possesses an incredible strength, as seen when, with the help of his people, he quickly manages to destroy Saruman's stronghold.⁵² On the other hand the Hobbits, a relatively modern and mortal species, have very little knowledge of what happens or has happened beyond the borders of the Shire, and have little to no power when compared to other characters. In fact, they are effortlessly subdued by both Old Willow-man and the Barrow-wights, and defeating Isengard on their own would have been impossible.⁵³ The same theme of past and tradition against modernity and invention could also be seen in the wizard Saruman, who betrays his mission and his allies in order to pursue the desire to change the world according to his will, much like Sauron. By replacing his white robe with new multicoloured clothes (stating that "The white page can be overwritten"⁵⁴), Saruman makes clear that he has forsaken the order of wizards, their wisdom and their purpose of helping the free people of Middle-earth. At this point he has abandoned all loyalty towards the knowledge of the past and the already existing natural order of the world, deciding instead to follow the way of machinery and innovation in order to reshape Middle-earth in his own fashion.⁵⁵

Finnish language and myths, however, are not the only Nordic influences on *The Lord of the Rings*: some connections can also be found in Snorri Sturluson's *Poetic Edda*, a 13th century manuscript containing a series of anonymous poems in Old Norse-Icelandic, dealing with mythological and ancient heroic material. The text begins with *Völuspá*, a poem that explains the origin of the world and prophesies its death and rebirth.⁵⁶ These events are recounted by a seeress, who also utters a list of dwarf names very similar to the ones of the thirteen dwarves in *The Hobbit*, some of whom were found dead by the Fellowship in the mines of Moria. Surely Sturluson's works had a part in the creation of these characters, and more: they also mention *Gandálfr*, meaning "staff-elf", *Fróði* and *Alþjófr*, "great thief".⁵⁷ The first two are obviously the inspiration for Frodo and the wizard Gandalf, who always carries a staff and has a close association with elves (with himself

52 Matthew R. Bardowell, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-102.

53 *Idem*, pp. 100-103.

54 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of The Rings, cit.*, p. 259.

55 Matthew R. Bardowell, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-105.

56 Terry Gunnell, "Eddic Poetry", in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, edited by Rory McTurk, Blackwell Publishing, pp. 82-100, 2005, p. 82-85.

57 Tom Birkett, *op. cit.*, p. 250/255.

being considered an elf by some). *Alpiófr*, on the other hand, has no correspondent in Tolkien's works, but he may be the origin for Bilbo Baggins, who found the One Ring while working as a burglar for the company of dwarves. Apart from the list of names, *Völuspá* also describes Ragnarök, the end of the world, in a particular passage that highlights the hopelessness of gods and men, who prepare to meet their doom in the battle against the giants:

An axe age, a sword age,
shields will be cloven
a storm age, a wolf age,
before the world sinks.⁵⁸

This set of verses shows many similarities with Theoden's speech before the Battle of the Pelennor Fields:

Fell deeds awake, fire and slaughter!
spear shall be shaken, shield be splintered,
a sword-day, a red day, ere the sun rises!
Ride now, ride now! Ride to ruin, and the world's ending!⁵⁹

Here, too, the sense of hopelessness is central as the riders of Rohan, much like gods and men in *Völuspá*, ride to fight against an enormous army of Orcs with a small chance of success and little prospect of survival.⁶⁰

Along with this apocalyptic prologue and numerous mythic and heroic tales, the Poetic Edda also contains poems regarding the hero Sigurðr, slayer of the dragon Fáfnir, on whom the *Völsunga saga* is based. This 13th century saga, written in Old Norse, describes how the Norse gods accidentally kill the son of king Hreiðmarr, who demands a ransom for his loss. In order to pay him, they steal a treasure and a magical ring from the dwarf Andvari, who curses his gold – especially the ring- to bring death to whoever owns it. As an effect of the curse, Hreiðmarr is killed and robbed by his other son Fáfnir, now transformed into a dragon. Some time later, the beast is killed by the hero Sigurðr, who takes the gold and the ring. The treasure ultimately causes the death of Sigurðr and brings misfortune to his descendants.⁶¹ Apart from Fáfnir and his treasure, a possible inspiration for Smaug in *The Hobbit*, the saga seems to have many common elements with Tolkien's work: Andvari's gold and his ring bear an obvious resemblance to Sauron's One Ring, which corrupts and even brings to death everyone who possesses it. This connection is made even

58 Snorri Sturluson, *Völuspá*, translated by Olive Bray, London, King's Weighhouse Rooms, 1908, p. 291, st. 45, v. 4-5.

59 J. R. R. Tolkien, *op. cit.*, p. 838.

60 Tom Birkett, *op. cit.*, p. 253.

61 *Idem*, p. 254.

stronger in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, a *Völsunga*-inspired epic opera written by the 19th century composer Richard Wagner, where the ring plays an even more central role. The play begins with the character of the dwarf, here named Alberich, whose sexual advances are rejected by the nymphs of the river Rhine. Deeply hurt, Alberich renounces love, an act that can allow him to collect the river's magical gold, from which he creates a ring: this object allows its owner to have power over the world, but it also causes everyone to desire it. For this reason, the ring is stolen by Odin, who reluctantly uses it to pay the giant Fasolt for building Valhalla, the realm of the gods. Later Fasolt is killed by his brother Fafnir, who transforms into a dragon and keeps the ring to himself. Just like the rest of the plot, the first part of the opera shares many similarities with *The Lord of the Rings*: despite its eros-centered origins and powers, Alberich's ring possesses the same ability of seduction that is characteristic of the One Ring, and the way Fafnir kills his brother in order to obtain the object is reminiscent of Sméagol and Déagol's deadly fight. Due to these (and more) common elements one would be led to think that Tolkien based his work on *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, even though he specifically denied this hypothesis (according to him "both rings are round, and there the resemblance ceases"⁶²), mostly because of the blasphemy of Wagner's works and their appropriation by the Nazi Party, that founded its ideology on some elements of Norse tradition. It has even been theorized that, in order to contrast Nazi Germany's use of Wagner, Tolkien deliberately chose the *Völsunga* and its ring-plot as a basis for his novel, which was supposed to become a mythology for England's national identity.⁶³

It is safe to say that Tolkien makes use of the creatures and beings of Norse tradition, myth and folklore, trying to incorporate them into his works in an accurate way. His Dwarves, for example, are based on the Dverg of the aforementioned sagas and poems: their small, hairy appearance, their underground dwellings and the connection with forgery are faithfully portrayed in *The Lord of the Rings*.⁶⁴ Elves, too, are mentioned in the *Edda* under the name of "Alfar", although they appear rarely and are sometimes conflated with the gods. They are classified in two groups: the light elves, who inhabit their own realm of Alfheim, and the subterranean dark elves, who are considered by some to be dwarves.⁶⁵ It is interesting to note that Tolkien's Elves are also tied to their own separate realm, Valinor, and they, too, can be divided in two groups: the Calaquendi, those that inhabited or at least reached their land, and the Moriquendi, or "dark elves", who never departed from Middle-earth.⁶⁶ Another famous race of beings that are native to northern Europe are Trolls, whose aspect can vary. In fact, the word "troll" can be used to denote a number of different

62 Jamie McGregor, "Two Rings to Rule them All: A Comparative Study of Tolkien and Wagner", in *Mythlore*, pp. 133-153, 2011, p. 133.

63 *Idem*, p. 134-140.

64 Theresa Bane, *Encyclopedia of Giants*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company Inc., 2016, pp. 61-62.

65 Martinez Helios De Rosario, "Fairy and Elves in Tolkien and Traditional Literature", in *Mythlore*, pp. 65-84, 2010, p. 67.

66 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, edited by Christopher Tolkien, London: Harper-Collins, 1999, ch. 3, p. 73.

beings, from wizards and fairies to evil spirits⁶⁷, although folklore usually depicts them in two specific ways. The first variation – and the one employed by Tolkien- is that of enormous anthropomorphic creatures, who delight in eating and tormenting humans, but in some tales they are described as small, ugly and morally ambiguous beings. Both incarnations, however, are said to turn into stone if they come in contact with sunlight, a weakness that forces them to live underground.⁶⁸ This characteristic often causes Trolls to be conflated with Dwarves⁶⁹ and Elves, but there generally seems to be a thin line that separates these three classes of beings, leaving one to wonder whether they are just different interpretations of the same species.

Celtic mythology and folklore

Northern Europe isn't the only place whose folklore and mythology helped in the creation of Middle-earth: Tolkien also drew inspiration from the Celtic world, adapting many elements from the tradition of pre-Roman Britain and Ireland. The relationship between the author and Celtic mythology, however, is a complicated one, since he often claimed to dislike “things Celtic” when confronted about their presence in *The Hobbit*.

Needless to say they are not Celtic! Neither are the tales. I do know Celtic things (many in their original languages Irish and Welsh), and feel for them a certain distaste: largely for their fundamental unreason.⁷⁰

This sentiment becomes even less clear by the fact that the author always had an interest in languages like Welsh and in Celtic literary works, such as the earliest Arthurian tales and the *Mabinogion*,⁷¹ a collection of the first British prose tales written in *The Red Book of Hergest* (which may stand as a possible inspiration for Bilbo's *Red Book of Westmarch*).⁷² The reason for this may lie in what Carpenter calls Tolkien's “desire to create a mythology for England”⁷³: while Ireland and the “non-English parts” of Britain already had an ancient system of myths and cosmogony, the author thought England lacked an actual mythology, essential for its national identity. His plan was then to compose a series of legends that would fulfill this task (writing *The Book of Lost Tales*, later evolved into *The Silmarillion*), thus contrasting the Celtic origins of Scotland, Wales and Ireland, whose nationalism was growing at the time.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, Tolkien's disapproval of Celtic things gradually waned, arriving to the point where he confirmed the influence of such elements on *The*

67 Thomas Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology*, vol. 1, London, 1828, p. 159.

68 Theresa Bane, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-152.

69 R. B. Anderson, *Norse Mythology*, Chicago: S. C. Griggs & Co., 1879, p. 202.

70 J. S. Lyman-Thomas, “Celtic”, in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, pp. 272-273.

71 Lady Charlotte Guest, *The Mabinogion*, Global Grey ebooks, 2018.

72 Stuart D. Lee, “Manuscripts”, in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, p. 61.

73 Humphrey Carpenter, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

74 Dimitra Fimi, “Mad Elves and Elusive Beauty”, in *Folklore*, pp. 156-170, 2006, pp. 157-160.

Lord of the Rings.

One of the most notorious Celtic traditions employed by Tolkien is the belief in fairies, a race of supernatural creatures that often appear in British and Irish folklore. Despite being nowadays associated with minuscule, innocuous winged beings (a relatively recent interpretation that Tolkien despised⁷⁵), the term “fairy” - from the French “faerie” (enchantment)⁷⁶ - was later used to denote a wide range of spirits, some short and child-like and others tall and beautiful. The latter category seems to be the one that Tolkien employed in his *Legendarium*, though by replacing the ambiguous name *Fairy* with the more specific *Elf*: with their beautiful and majestic appearance, their semi-spiritual bodies and their traditional surnames (such as “Fair Folk”) Tolkien tried to accurately include England’s fairy tradition.⁷⁷ Along with the Norse *Alfar* and the fairies of folklore, Middle-earth’s Elves also present a resemblance to the Tuatha Dé Danaan, a mythical race that was said to inhabit Ireland before the coming of humans. According to Irish mythology, these tall and beautiful demigods arrived from an otherworld in dark clouds and fought against the invading Fomorians, led by Balor of the evil eye. They were eventually defeated by the first men, and while most of them fled to enchanted places beyond the sea, some took refuge underground, becoming the Irish fairies. Just like these beings, Elves are described as being extremely fair and of high stature - not divine but also not mere mortals - and they also belong to their own continent. Moreover the Noldor, the group of Elves who left Valinor, burned their ships after reaching Middle-earth (just like the Tuatha according to some theories regarding the nature of the “dark clouds”⁷⁸), and their later wars against Sauron remind of the threat of the one-eyed Balor.⁷⁹ In addition, since they were not meant to dwell in Middle-earth, Elves, too, were replaced by men, causing them to flee to their true home in Valinor. However, those who stayed in Middle-earth would have slowly lost their physical form, becoming only weak spirits haunting natural places and occasionally possessing living beings: in this way, like the Tuatha Dé Danaan, Tolkien managed to link his world with our own, explaining the presence of fairies in modern times.⁸⁰

As noted before, the tall and handsome fairies are only a specific group of this folkloric species: there are also accounts of shorter variants who live underground, which seem to have entered the author’s world under the guise of Hobbits. These characters, in fact, are shown to be child-sized, living under hillocks away from humans and they are even given the ability to move quickly and silently, linking them to the power of fairies of disappearing and becoming invisible to human eyes. According to Tolkien, their stature was said to be symbolic of the limited mentality of

75 Nick Groom, “The English Literary Tradition”, in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, pp. 287.

76 Martinez Helios De Rosario, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

77 *Idem*, p. 73.

78 Dimitra Fimi, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

79 Annie Kinniburgh, “The Noldor and the Tuatha De Danann: Tolkien’s Irish Influences”, in *Mythlore*, pp. 27-44, 2009, p. 33.

80 Annie Kinniburgh, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

the inhabitants of the English countryside, who were supposed to be represented by Hobbits.⁸¹ However, the similarities between the Shire-folk and the small fairies of folklore are too many to be ignored as purely coincidental: the only substantial difference is the Hobbits' lack of supernatural powers.

Another Middle-earth species that has its origin in Celtic tradition are the Orcs, though they could be considered a genuine invention on Tolkien's part. Despite some vague references in ancient literary works, such as the "orc-néas" of *Beowulf*, these creatures do not appear in any mythology. Tolkien simply employed the Old English word "orc", a synonym for "demon", and thus renamed the creatures that were already called "goblin" in *The Hobbit*.⁸² Nonetheless, even if not much can be extrapolated from their name in *The Lord of the Rings*, their original denomination can shed some light on the inspiration for their creation. The word "goblin" was at first used to term any mischievous or dangerous fairy or spirit, creatures of Celtic tradition, but it came to address a specific race of small beings during the 19th century, especially after Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* and *The Princess and the Goblin* by George MacDonald⁸³ (who had an impact in the invention of Orcs⁸⁴). Tolkien then devised a similar race of beings for his works, though he changed their name and revised their diminutive and annoying nature, turning them into evil and immoral creatures with a human-like shape and horrible features.⁸⁵

Just as it was the case for Finnish, some Celtic languages and traditions also helped to shape Middle-earth: Tolkien's life-long love for Welsh had a part in the creation of Sindarin, and its related myths influenced the plot of his novel. Arthurian Mythology, or rather its pre-Christian version before it was appropriated by the English, presents various parallels with *The Lord of the Rings*. The most obvious similarity is the theme of the quest, the destruction of the One Ring, reminiscent of the various missions and adventures which the Knights of the Round Table undergo, such as the search for the Holy Grail. The character of Aragorn shares some characteristics with King Arthur: both are the heir of a powerful deceased ruler and therefore doomed to become king themselves, and both are in possession of a named mythical sword. The main difference between them is that, after living in the shadows for a long time, Aragon eventually returns to Gondor as its rightful king, thus fulfilling the promise of returning; on the contrary, after his death Arthur is sent to the isle of Avalon to be healed, but never manages to come back to England as prophesied: a fate mirrored by Frodo, who departs for Valinor in order to be healed from his physical and

81 Martinez Helios De Rosario, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

82 Robert T. Tally Jr., "Let Us now Praise Famous Orcs: Simple Humanity in Tolkien's Inhuman Creatures", in *Mythlore*, pp. 17-28, 2010, p. 3.

83 Katharine Briggs, *An Encyclopedia of Fairies*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1977, p. 193-194.

84 Wayne Hammond, Christina Scull (eds), *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*, London: Harper-Collins, 2017, p. 1040.

85 Richard Angelo Bergen, "A Warp of Horror: J.R.R. Tolkien's Sub-Creations of Evil", in *Mythlore*, pp. 103-121, 2017, p. 113.

psychological wounds, possibly never to return.⁸⁶ Another character that could be said to have a sort of Arthurian counterpart is Gandalf, who, like the wizard Merlin, is a wise and humorous magician who often departs and suddenly reappears to help those in need.⁸⁷ Galadriel also shares some similarities with a supernatural character, Morgan Le Fey, especially her portrayal in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.⁸⁸ In this tale Gawain's whole quest is revealed to be a playful trick orchestrated by the sorceress with the help of the Green Knight, both of whom previously gave him hospitality in disguise. However, the exact nature of Morgan's relationship with the Green Knight and the extent of her powers and of her influence over men's lives are not wholly explained, giving the witch an aura of mystery and threat. The same could be said of Galadriel, a powerful elven sorceress who rules over a mysterious wood and is considered dangerous by the inhabitants of other realms. Her enigmatic qualities are enhanced by the lack of information regarding her involvement in the destruction of the One Ring: the whole quest is in fact implied to have been organized mostly by her, suggesting that she may be a much more central and powerful character than she seems.⁸⁹

Christian anti-knights

The languages and myths of ancient pagan populations are of course not the only sources of *The Lord of the Rings*: being a devout Catholic since his earliest years, Tolkien also included Christian themes in all his works. This may not have been done on purpose, since the author himself stated that he had no interest in instructing his readers in religion and theological matters. Despite this affirmation, it is evident that some elements of the novel show some affinities with Christian ideology. The most significant example is the theme of temptation related to the One Ring, which preys on the good intentions and virtues of characters to corrupt them and turn them into greedy and violent beings⁹⁰, a role reminiscent of Christianity's concept of Satan, who tempts people into committing sinful acts to divide them from God. As a consequence of this power, the ringbearer also becomes an agent of temptation – this is shown in the instances when Frodo tries to hand the magical object over to Gandalf and Galadriel, both of whom (conscious of the evil that they would eventually cause) are able to refuse the offer and thus “pass the test”.⁹¹ This theme of seduction and evil is contrasted by the presence of forgiveness and redemption, best represented by Frodo's tolerance and compassion towards Gollum: this sentiment causes the former to spare the latter's life despite its fundamentally evil nature, allowing Gollum to violently steal the Ring from the

86 J. S. Lyman-Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

87 Wayne Hammond, Christina Scull (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 1134.

88 Anonymous, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Middlesex, Penguin Classics, 1974

89 Susan Carter, “Galadriel and Morgan le Fey: Tolkien's Redemption of the Lady of the Lacuna”, in *Mythlore*, pp. 145-160, 2007, pp. 72-73.

90 Christopher Garbowski, “Evil”, in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, pp. 423.

91 Farir Mohammadi, “Mythic Frodo and his Predestinate Call to Adventure”, in *International Journal of Applied Linguistic & English Literature*, pp. 117-126, Australian International Academic Centre, 2013, p. 121.

protagonist and eventually die in the fires of Mount Doom, helping in the destruction of Sauron. Through his act of forgiveness Frodo is spared from a horrible fate, and in this way he too is forgiven and redeemed for having succumbed to the temptation of the Ring.⁹²

Apart from these general thematics characteristic of Christian mythology, *The Lord of the Rings* also shows associations between its characters and the ones present in the sacred texts. As an example: Gandalf's sacrifice and resurrection, Aragorn's return as a king and Frodo's journey to Mount Doom while bearing a burden all present similarities with Jesus' life. Indeed some theorists see these characters as different embodiments of Christ, symbolizing his nature of saviour and resurrected man. All of them, in fact, manage to save Middle-earth through their actions, and also undergo a sort of experience of death and rebirth during their quest: Aragorn takes the Paths of the Dead but unexpectedly returns, Frodo is fatally wounded multiple times but always survives, and Gandalf is literally brought back to life after his deadly fight with the Balrog.⁹³

It could be stated that Tolkien's moral values, portrayed through major themes and references to Christian texts, are made even stronger by the fact that *The Lord of the Rings* is portrayed in a mainly medieval style: in fact, most settings, roles and even the narration style share a strong link with the Middle Ages, a time deeply shaped by Christian religion. At first sight, the novel appears to include among its characters what could be defined as knights typical of medieval romances, with high morals representative of chivalric ideals. However, despite his belief on the superiority of good and its fight against evil, Tolkien doesn't actually employ true medieval heroes, as their distinctive purity and invulnerability would not be in harmony with the unreligious period of the World Wars. Instead, the author gives life to a number of characters that experience fear, suffering and temptation, far from being the fearless riders of medieval romance: Faramir, disliked by his own father, is presented as a camouflaged ranger who organizes an ambush on the Haradrim and later hides in a secret lair; Aragorn (also a ranger) lives in the wilderness and his looks have him often mistaken for a criminal;⁹⁴ Frodo, a halfling, often rejects the use of violence and regrets his involvement in the quest, trying to hand the Ring to someone else. In addition, instead of feeling proud for his deeds, he is left scarred by the physical and psychological horrors he has experienced, a condition worsened by the destruction of his beloved Shire at the hands of Saruman.⁹⁵ The only character that comes closer to representing chivalry is Boromir: his shield, sword and horn, the love of his people and his refusal to depart from Rivendell "as a thief in the night"⁹⁶ are all typical elements of the medieval knight's nature. Obviously, the values he is supposed to portray are

92 John R. Holmes, "The Lord of the Rings", in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, pp. 141-142.

93 Paul E. Kerry, *The Ring and the Cross: Christianity and the Writings of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Maryland, Lanham: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011, pp. 33-34.

94 Ben Reinhard, "Tolkien's Lost Knights", in *Mythlore*, pp. 177-194, 2020, pp. 182-184.

95 *Idem*, pp. 110-112.

96 J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings, cit.*, p. 279.

contrasted by his inability (unlike Aragorn and Faramir) to pass the test of the Ring's temptation, caused by his own pride concerning his heroic deeds and the greatness of Gondor.⁹⁷ In the end, flawed but worthy and compassionate anti-heroes like Faramir, Aragorn and Frodo (in total contrast with the archetypal medieval knight) may be the characters of the novel who are closest to the ethics and values of Christianity.⁹⁸

Concerning the narration style of *The Lord of the Rings*, the plot presents similarities with the double interlace structure typical of medieval romance, where the plots of two separated characters continue on their own, alternating themselves all throughout the story. As an example, a tale about a knight trying to rescue a kidnapped princess would be divided in two parts, one focusing on the hero's quest and the other centred on the woman's captivity. Tolkien seems to have adapted this interlace and to have rendered it more complex after book II with the breaking of the Fellowship: in books IV and VI the journey of Frodo and Sam takes a different course from the other characters, whose adventures take place in books III and V. With the latter group the intertwined plot becomes even more intricate, since the characters are divided and rejoined on multiple occasions – an example being Merry and Pippin, who are kidnapped by Orcs and are later separated from each other when Gandalf takes Pippin to Minas Tirith. Simultaneously, in order to avoid confusion, Tolkien manages to create links between the different storylines, helping the reader understand what happens to the rest of the Fellowship while the chapter focuses on a particular group of characters: one of these links is the changing of the wind that dispels Sauron's clouds, witnessed by Ghân-buri-Ghân near Minas Tirith, and also by Sam while traveling through Mordor.⁹⁹

With the end of this chapter, whose goal was to show the literary, mythological and folkloric origins of *The Lord of the Rings*, revealing its roots in Norse, Celtic and Christian traditions, the next part of this thesis will describe the novel's legacy up to this day, presenting its own influence on most later fantasy fiction and its various different adaptations in other media.

97 Ben Reinhard, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-185.

98 *Idem*, p. 191.

99 John R. Holmes, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-137.

The influence of Tolkien's work

After Tolkien

As stated in the previous chapters, *The Lord of the Rings* has had a profound impact on most of the fantasy literature produced after its publication. Despite having its basis on different older sources, such as ancient European mythologies and a few texts that are considered by many as the first fantasy works ever (e.g. Morris' and MacDonald's tales), Tolkien's novel has forever changed this genre in various ways, imposing a series of expectations on which the examination of later writings is often based, especially in regards to high fantasy fiction.¹⁰⁰ The use of real-world folkloric figures as characters, the medieval setting, the extensive and detailed world-building and the use of archaic terms are just some of the elements that many post-Tolkienian fantasy authors have tried to insert in their compositions.

By asserting this I do not intend that every later writer has done their best to emulate Tolkien's style in every aspect: some authors, in fact, have tried to produce works whose characteristics are as different as possible from *The Lord of the Rings*. In his book *A Slip of the Keyboard: Collected Non-Fiction*, English author Terry Pratchett humorously summarized the connection between fantasy and Tolkien through a metaphor:

Tolkien appears in the fantasy universe in the same way that Mount Fuji appeared in old Japanese prints. Sometimes small, in the distance, and sometimes big and close-to, and sometimes not there at all, and that's because the artist is standing on Mount Fuji.¹⁰¹

By taking Pratchett's claim in consideration, every novel pertaining to the fantasy genre could be roughly divided into three categories,¹⁰² according to their relation to the standards set by Tolkien: the first category encloses literary works that are explicitly based on *The Lord of the Rings*, presenting very similar characters, fictional races and places; the second one sees novels in which world-building and writing style are made to avoid any similarity with Tolkien's;¹⁰³ the last group includes narratives which are partly based on Middle-earth related writings, but with more original characteristics and themes. A perfect example for the first category is Terry Brooks' *The Sword of Shannara* (1977)¹⁰⁴ and the homonymous trilogy to which it belongs, which present numerous similarities with Tolkien's creations. Brooks' secondary world, in fact, is a post-apocalyptic earth where magic has returned and creatures such as elves, dwarves and trolls have emerged. The plot

100 Peter Hunt, *Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, Oxon, Routledge, 2004, p. 444.

101 Terry Pratchett, *A Slip of the Keyboard: Collected Non-Fiction*, London, Transworld Publishers, 2015, p. 86.

102 Dimitra Fimi, "Later Fantasy Fiction", in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien*, cit., p. 335.

103 Dimitra Fimi, *op. cit.*, pp. 336-337.

104 Terry Brooks, *The Sword of Shannara*, USA, The Random House Publishing Group, 2002.

follows Shea, the young protagonist who, with the help of a magical sword, is sent by a wise druid to travel a long distance in order to defeat the powerful Warlock Druid and his dark servants. Apart from the fact that most of the fantastical species depicted in Brooks' novel were directly borrowed from Middle-earth, *The Sword of Shannara* also shares numerous plot elements with *The Lord of the Rings*: a young man whose destiny is revealed by an old magician and a far realm inhabited by a dark overlord who can be only killed with a magical artefact are two of the most obvious common themes. The connection between these two novels has always been clear, and Brooks himself has often confirmed it. In fact, his goal was to create an entertaining secondary world very much like Middle-earth, in which the reader could enter the realm of adventure and magic once again, even though it lacked some elements that did not belong to Brooks' sphere of expertise or his interests, like poetry, languages, lore and long descriptions.¹⁰⁵

On the other hand, the aforementioned *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, written by Susanna Clarke, serves as a great representative of the category of fantasy fiction whose authors try to deviate from Tolkien's path. In her book, Clarke imagines an alternative 19th century England where magic, which has been absent for three hundred years, is suddenly restored by two upper-class magicians, whose contrasting personalities later lead to disastrous consequences. Here the independence from Tolkien's influence can be found in different elements, from the creation of the secondary world to the themes that are found throughout the narrative. From an in-world point of view, while the presence of magic and folkloric creatures would easily classify Clarke's novel as fantasy, the subgenre to which it is supposed to belong is more difficult to define: since the narration does not take place in an other world independent from ours, nor is it set in a medieval-style country, the book surely cannot be considered an exponent of high fantasy fiction. It would probably be best described as a hybrid of historical fiction and low fantasy, since the element of magic is introduced in what would be a real-world 1800s England. This classification, along with the absence of a clear distinction between good and evil characters and of a quest to defeat a one-dimensional evil antagonist, allowed *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* to be met with positive criticism and to escape the constant confrontation with the standards established by *The Lord of the Rings*, although some similarities are inevitably present. For example, even though Clarke's England is not populated by a wide range of beings such as dragons, dwarves and trolls, mythical creatures are an essential part of her composition: indeed the closest thing to an actual villain that the reader can find is the Gentleman with the thistledown hair, a fairy whose appearance very much resembles the elves of Middle-earth;¹⁰⁶ in addition, Clarke's commitment to detailed world-building could be considered *au pair* with Tolkien's extension of Middle-earth within and beyond the pages

105 Dimitra Fimi, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

106 Douglas C. Kane, "A Modern Fairy Story: Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell seen through the Prism of Tolkien's Classic Essay", in *Mythlore*, pp. 133-145, 2018, p. 135.

of his narration. These two common points, however, are executed in ways so different to be almost irrelevant – *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*'s fairies, in fact, are not presented as an enlightened and almost divine race of beings, but as a species of selfish and impulsive creatures more in line with the elves of folklore,¹⁰⁷ and the additional information regarding the secondary world is to be found in countless exhaustive footnotes scattered throughout the pages of the book (a quite innovative method of world-building).¹⁰⁸

Finally, in respect to the last group of fantasy fiction, represented by novels which are partly based on Tolkien's literary impact, an example could be found in Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* cycle, which was already mentioned in the previous chapters. In this case, the most striking departure from the Tolkienian fantasy tradition is the secondary world, which is significantly different from Middle-earth and its inhabiting societies. In fact, *Earthsea*, the fictional country where the narrative is set, is not a large continent covered by woods, mountains and hills, but a vast archipelago located in the middle of the ocean, where tribes composed by people of reddish-brown skin complexion¹⁰⁹ coexist in a pre-industrial society. In this way the author distances herself from the tradition begun by Tolkien, which caused later writers to associate Fantasy with a Northern European environment where light skinned protagonists are set against dark skinned enemies from the south-east: Le Guin deliberately goes against this trend by turning the "standard" medieval fantasy into an oriental-looking world where dark skinned characters battle white antagonists. This change of scenery was a direct consequence of Le Guin's desire to build a world to which her 21st century audience could relate, an audience in which, as she herself stated, "whites are a minority";¹¹⁰ for similar reasons, *Earthsea*'s last novels show also an increase in the use of female characters and of anti-patriarchal themes, elements which could be more compatible with the rise of feminism in the last decades.¹¹¹

Despite these drastic and innovative changes, however, the *Earthsea* series still shares various similarities with *The Lord of the Rings* and the fantasy heritage that stemmed from it. Le Guin herself has confirmed her status as a writer belonging to the Tolkienian tradition,¹¹² terming her own work as an example of high fantasy, mainly due to the extensive world-building that enriches her novels and helps the reader connect with her secondary world.¹¹³ In addition, between the islands of *Earthsea* we can still find the presence of well-known mythical creatures, in this case wizards and dragons, and the plot that animates every book in the series is composed of travels and quests to defeat magical enemies, a theme that has become the common ground for most high fantasy fiction.

107 Douglas C. Kane, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

108 *Idem*, p. 139.

109 Dimitra Fimi, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

110 *Idem*, p. 341.

111 *Idem*, p. 342.

112 Peter Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 444.

113 *Idem*, p. 437.

Thus, by looking at some of the most famous products of post-Tolkienian fantasy, it is easy to see how, whether in an evident and obvious way or in a more subtle manner, *The Lord of the Rings* has had a significant part in shaping and influencing this literary genre up to this day.

On the big screen

The impact of *The Lord of the Rings*, along with Tolkien's works in general, has not solely affected the production of later literature, but it has also found its way in a number of different media. From music¹¹⁴ and the radio to the stage¹¹⁵ and visual art,¹¹⁶ Tolkien's influence has reached many various forms of entertainment, with a particular success in regards to cinema and television, especially during the last decades. The possibility of producing movies based on *The Lord of the Rings*, however, did not quite begin as soon as the book was published. Despite the growing interest in the production of science-fiction films, in the 1950s the only company truly invested in fantasy was Disney, with whom Tolkien had a few issues. The author openly expressed his dislike for Walt Disney's innocent and childlike adaptations of fairy-tales, which were considered by the author as stories that concealed important notions and deep teachings.¹¹⁷ Because of problems such as these, no movie was ever developed before Tolkien's death. In fact, the first big screen interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings* came out in 1978 with an animated movie of the same name directed by Ralph Bakshi, who was known for his politically innovative motion pictures, such as *Fritz the Cat* (1972) and *Wizards* (1977). Just like in his previous works, Bakshi produced most of the film through the use of classic animation, but, since he was granted a relatively low budget, *rotoscoping* was also employed: this animation method consisted in artists drawing and painting on an already filmed live action scene in order to give it the appearance of a cartoon.¹¹⁸ Because of this technique, characters that looked animated moved in an eerily realistic way, a curious feature that attracted various negative reviews from critics and fans. Such a backlash was also caused by the particular approach in adapting some of the characters, which were changed so much to become almost unrecognizable (e.g. rendering Sam a cowardly and immature hobbit,¹¹⁹ portraying Aragorn like a native American warrior,¹²⁰ or naming Saruman "Aruman" to prevent any confusion with Sauron and dressing him in red), and also by some drastic cuts made in order to shorten the film's duration, which caused confusion throughout the plot structure and the removal of meaningful characters (and thus meaningful storylines) such as Arwen and Eowyn. All of these questionable choices,

114 Bradford Lee Eden, "Music", in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, pp. 501-513.

115 Wayne Hammond, Christina Scull (eds), *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide, cit.*, pp. 12-24

116 Christopher Tuthill, "Art", in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, pp. 487-500.

117 Wayne Hammond, Christina Scull (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 410-411

118 Kristin Thompson, "Film Adaptations: Theatrical and Television Versions", in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, p. 521.

119 Dale Ziegler, "Ring-Wrath: or therein Bakshi again", in *Mythlore*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1979, p. 37.

120 Steven C. Walker, "Tolkien according to Bakshi", in *Mythlore*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1979, p. 36.

combined with various animation mistakes, dialogues out of sync and a superficial interpretation of *The Lord of the Rings*' deep world-building,¹²¹ caused the movie's producers to deny the possibility of a sequel.¹²²

Despite being the first cinematic adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*, Bakshi's production was not the first animated movie based on Tolkien's works. In fact, a few years earlier, American directors Arthur Rankin Jr. and Jules Bass developed *The Hobbit* (released in 1977), a television movie based on Tolkien's story of the same name.¹²³ This animated TV program, aimed for a young audience, had enough of a discrete success to be granted a sequel: the Rankin/Bass company seized the opportunity and spent the following years producing *The Return of the King*, which was shown on television in 1980. Given the (negative) fame that the animated *The Lord of the Rings* achieved, many people were led to assume that this new movie was created in order to concede an ending to Bakshi's failed film, but in reality Rankin/Bass had already planned the development of a second movie as soon as their *Hobbit* was released.¹²⁴ However, *The Return of the King* did not meet the same positive criticism of its predecessor for a number of reasons, the main one being the improper arrangement of the plot: the movie begins after the destruction of the ring (reducing any possible sense of suspense) with the meeting at Rivendell between Bilbo and the fellowship. The rest of the plot, which consisted only in Frodo and Sam's quest through Mordor and in the battle for Minas Tirith, are simply shown in flashbacks to Bilbo, who wishes to know what happened to the ring. The situation is worsened by the modernized and simplified dialogues (mostly monologues), the pacing, too fast and superficial, and the over-use of songs and poems, which was only successful in the animated *Hobbit* because of its young audience. In addition, as it was the case with Bakshi's *The Lord of the Rings*, characters and events were neglected or cut: Legolas and Gimli were omitted from the plot, Aragorn is shown in very few scenes (even though he's the title character),¹²⁵ Eowyn's only appearance is during the defeat of the Witch-king, and there is also no mention of major occurrences such as the encounter with Shelob and the defeat of Saruman, relevant information that would tie the movie with the whole narrative.

Apart from these two instances, and a mostly unknown Russian interpretation,¹²⁶ no other version of *The Lord of the Rings* was ever produced. However, in 2001 *The Fellowship of the Ring* was released in theatres, a live-action movie produced by New Line Cinema and directed by Peter Jackson, a formerly obscure producer of independent horror films. The movie, set in New Zealand (Jackson's homeland) and supported by the use of computer-generated imagery, was met by such an

121 Steven C. Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

122 Kristin Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 521.

123 *Idem*, p. 522.

124 *Idem*, p. 523.

125 Wayne Hammond, Christina Scull (eds), *op. cit.*, pp. 35-36.

126 Kristin Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 523.

incredible success and positive responses¹²⁷ that two sequels were quickly produced and released, *The Two Towers* (2002) and *The Return of the King* (2003), both of which lived up to the standards of the first movie. The trilogy's success was due to a number of reasons, with the main one being Jackson's faithfulness to the novel and the inclusion of its sense of epic, at least when compared to the animated features. Even in this instance, however, changes were made: just like with the adaptations of Bakshi and Rankin/Bass, various scenes present in the books, like Tom Bombadil's storyline and most poems and songs, were cut in order to reduce the movie's length. Jackson, however, managed to solve the problem by releasing the trilogy's extended version on DVD, in which all deleted scenes were added, expanding each movie's duration to a span of three hours or more.¹²⁸ Apart from these few technicalities, the director made also a few changes by altering some elements of the narrative: examples for this can be found in the role of Arwen, which was expanded in order to give more depth to her character, Theoden's strong resentment towards Gondor and the help of the elves at Helm's Deep (both almost absent in the book) and the portrayal of Sauron as a literal enormous fiery eye. In addition to these changes, Jackson also "imported" his experience in scary movies by adding splatter and horror features to the nature of Middle-earth, especially when dealing with the antagonists: the slimy and violent birth of the Uruk-hai, for example, is a disturbing scene that the reader will not find in the novel.¹²⁹ Obviously, all of these alterations also caused negative responses (although minimal) from the fans, some of whom accused Jackson of behaving disrespectfully towards Tolkien's work.¹³⁰ Overall, however, Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy was remarkably faithful to the source material and, thanks to the employment of a talented cast and the use of skilled writing, it is still acknowledged by many as the novel's ultimate adaptation. As a consequence of this success, the movies inspired the development of various products, especially video-games and a related merchandise,¹³¹ and caused a sudden growth in the sale of Tolkien's books¹³², which became more and more famous even among non-readers: in fact, from the early 2000s onward the fandom grew so much as to cause the organization of conventions and comic-cons¹³³ based on both the books and movies, and some fans even managed to direct self-made films set in Middle-earth. "Official" movies tied to the trilogy were released, too: from 2012 to 2014 New Line and Jackson produced *The Hobbit*, a prequel to *The Lord of the Rings* which was split in three films. This new trilogy, however, did not meet the same positive responses of the original movies, as Jackson decided to focus less on the adventurous, child-oriented plot of *The*

127 Wayne Hammond, Christina Scull (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 33.

128 Kristin Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 526.

129 R.D. Hall, "Through a Dark Lens: Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings as Abject Horror", in *Mythlore*, pp. 55-59, 2007, p. 55.

130 Kristin Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 527.

131 *Idem*, p. 526.

132 Wayne Hammond, Christina Scull (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 339.

133 *Idem*, p. 538.

Hobbit and more on the serious and epic events tied to *The Lord of the Rings*.¹³⁴

Entering Middle-earth

As stated previously, Peter Jackson's cinematic trilogy managed to inspire, among many things, the creation of video-games through which the player could enter and experience Middle-earth in a much more realistic way than with the novel's narrative world-building. However, this was not the first instance of games developed after the fashion of Tolkien's literary works. In fact, after the success of *The Lord of the Rings* in the 50s, a number of companies had already begun to think of a way to create a "playable" Middle-earth, and in 1971 the war game *Chainmail* was published.¹³⁵ This board game, which consisted in enacting medieval-styled miniature battles, allowed players to simulate wars based on both historical events and fantasy fiction, the latter through the use of figures representing mythical races such as Elves, Dwarves and Orcs. *Chainmail*'s positive outcome then led to the development of licensed board games, such as *Quest of the Magic Ring* (1975)¹³⁶ and *Middle-earth* (ideated by the South Essex League of Wargamers in 1976),¹³⁷ which functioned in the same way as *Chainmail*, but with the peculiarity of being set in an official adaptation of Middle-earth.

In a short time, the popularity of board games, especially fantasy-themed ones, led to their modification and evolution, resulting in the invention of role-playing games. RPGs still required the presence of the board game equipment, with the difference being that the participants would actively interact with each other while playing, giving the game a plot and a story: such an innovative gaming technique gifted the player with an even better way to enter a fantasy secondary-world. The most famous example for RPGs is *Dungeons & Dragons*,¹³⁸ created in 1974 by Tactical Studies Rules, the same company responsible for *Chainmail*. Here the contenders would create their own characters and play with many-sided dice, while the "Dungeon Master" had the task of making up the rules and craft a story out of the game. Since it was based on, and set in, a fantasy fiction universe, *D&D* ended up including various elements of Tolkienian literature among its components and characters, an issue that caused the producers to be confronted by Tolkien Enterprises.¹³⁹ The latter, a few years later, also decided to license the development of RPGs, resulting in the publication of the *Middle-earth Role-playing Game* (1982),¹⁴⁰ which, as with the case of board games, differed from *D&D* only in its genuine Middle-earth appearance.

134 Judith Kollmann, Frank P. Riga, Maureen Thum (eds), "From Children's Book to Epic Prequel: Peter Jackson's Transformation of Tolkien's *The Hobbit*", in *Mythlore*, vol. 32, no. 124, pp. 99-118, 2014, p. 100

135 Péter Kristóf Makai, "Games and Gaming: Quantasy", in *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien, cit.*, p. 532.

136 Péter Kristóf Makai, *op. cit.*, p. 533.

137 *Idem*, p. 534.

138 Wayne Hammond, Christina Scull (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 540.

139 *Idem*, p. 540.

140 *Idem*, p. 540.

After the 1980s, no further substantial variety of game was produced, with the exception of card games, whose world-building and secondary-world immersion were, however, much poorer than the one that board or role-playing games granted. Nonetheless, Tolkien Enterprises decided to invest even in the licensing of this subgenre of board game, given the popularity of the phenomenon at the time. And so in the 1990s games such as the *Middle-earth Collectible Card Game* (1995)¹⁴¹ were produced: the procedure was very similar to that of playing cards, where rare cards of high rank win against those of lower rank, which were much more easy to find. The difficulty in finding the former type of cards brought players to buy, sell or wager the ones they owned, thus stimulating the act of playing and causing the organisation of an actual “card trade”.

With the rise of interest in technology, which has been continuously and quickly perfected since the beginning of the previous century, the interest in computer games grew, too. Despite the popularity that Tolkien-related games reached in the last few decades, the possibility to enter Middle-earth through technological means actually appeared in the 1970s. The phenomenon started in 1975 with *ADVENT* (short for *Adventure*), which consisted in a series of complicated cave mazes in which the player had to find hidden treasures, fight and find an escape exit.¹⁴² Despite not being officially set in Middle-earth, *Adventure* was characterised by the presence of magical elements such as dwarves, dragons and treasures, allowing the player to enter a similar fantastical world. On the basis of *ADVENT*, official computer games centered on *The Lord of the Rings* were then released, starting with *Moria* and *Orthanc* (1978), set in some of the locations featured in Tolkien’s novel.¹⁴³ Apart from the Middle-earth environment, these games had also the advantage of allowing players to engage with each other and with the fictional world around them, improving the possibility to (almost) realistically enter Tolkien’s world. The popular interest in this kind of entertainment also led to the development of what could be considered some of the most famous fantasy games ever, *Elder Scrolls* (1994) and *World of Warcraft* (2004), which basically consisted in the simulation of battles set in a fantastical world, featuring magic and mythical creatures like elves and orcs. The incredibly positive response to these computer wargames, along with the general enthusiasm for Jackson’s trilogy, brought Tolkien Enterprises to develop their own versions, with *The Lord of the Rings: The Battle of Middle-earth* (2004) being the first. As with all the successors that followed it to this day, this video game, enriched with a detailed world-building, consisted in simulating battles set in Jackson’s version of Middle-earth, allowing the player (and all fans of the movies) to visit Tolkien’s world in an almost life-like fashion.¹⁴⁴ In time, this particular quality pertaining to games based on *The Lord of the Rings* was improved with the advent of

141 Péter Kristóf Makai, *op. cit.*, p. 535.

142 *Idem*, p. 538.

143 *Idem*, p. 538.

144 *Idem*, p. 539.

Multiplayer Online RPGs: in this perfected version of video games the fictional world “lives” independently on the web, continuing to exist even after the multiple players (who can access from any part of the world) abandon the game.¹⁴⁵

145 *Idem*, p. 540.

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