CHAPTER ELEVEN

WRITING BACK TO TOLKIEN: GENDER, SEXUALITY AND RACE IN HIGH FANTASY

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> They came to the top of the hill and looked down onto a small village. A group of thatched cottages hugged the banks of a shallow river, their chimneys all working overtime sending white smoke up to mingle with a few clouds scudding westward … Most of the cottages already had light in their windows. The distinct smell of home cooking wafted up from the town, carried on a lazy breeze. As the breeze reached them, bringing with it a bouquet of mouth-watering fragrances, Harriett gasped with joy. The sight and smell of the quaint little village was like something from one of the books she loved so much.
> "Do you think Frodo's home?" she asked in all seriousness. (McPhee 2016a, 45)

Introduction

Without naming him, the excerpt above invokes Tolkien, not the person J. R. R. Tolkien but the works written by him, what could be called his textual or discursive trace. The excerpt is also an explicit example of, and intertextual jape referring to, the near ubiquitous influence of Tolkien on certain types of fantasy fiction. The excerpt is from *Waycaller,* the first book of *The Faeden Chronicles*, a Young Adult epic fantasy trilogy that also includes *Keysong* (McPhee 2016b) and *Oracle* (McPhee 2017). *The Faeden Chronicles* are the product of a "writing back" to Tolkien, which will be described in detail later in this essay.

Fantasy novelist John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892–1973) is the opposite of forgotten. He is internationally renowned, remembered by legions of readers, by a global scholarly community focused on his work[1] and by fans of the highly-successful film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002 & 2003) and *The Hobbit* (2012, 2013 & 2014). Tolkien Studies is an established academic discipline, with informal beginnings in 1969, with at least two dedicated peer-reviewed journals, *The Journal of Tolkien Research* and *Tolkien Studies*, published since 2014 and 2004 respectively.[2] It is also now possible to study for a degree in Tolkien Studies at Signum University in the United States.[3] Tolkien's work has, indeed, inspired an entire genre of fiction, referred to interchangeably as epic fantasy, High Fantasy or sword and sorcery (Fultz 2013). Those few fantasy authors not inspired directly by Tolkien follow his lead indirectly by contributing to a tradition of epic fantasy supported by intricate world building that includes invented languages (Stockwell 2006; Beckton 2015), diverse cultures and a detailed fictional topography (often presented in map form).

The races Tolkien imagined for *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* are drawn from European folklore, though adapted and refined by him so that they are distinct. The characteristics these races display are now features of those races as they appear in the fantasy fiction of numerous other authors. The clearest example of this is Tolkien's rendering of the race of Elves, who are now depicted in dozens of fantasy narratives just as Tolkien imagined them – as tall, virtuous, beautiful, immortal and light-skinned.[4] The fantasy fiction of Raymond E. Feist (*The Riftwar Saga, 1982-1986*), Markus Heitz (*The Dwarves* series, 2009-2018), Terry Brooks (*Shannara* sequence, 1977-2017) and R. A. Salvatore (*Forgotten Realms, 1988-2004*) all include depictions of fantasy races that owe a debt to Tolkien. Tolkien's creation of an elaborate and racially diverse fictional world is a model that many fantasy authors following after him have used when populating their own imagined worlds. Take as

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[1] See *The Tolkien Society*, established 1969. Accessed 20th April 2017, https://www.tolkiensociety.org/
[2] See *Tolkien Studies: An Annual Scholarly Review*, Accessed 20th April 2017, http://wvupressonline.com/journals/Tolkien_studies and *Journal of Tolkien Research*, Accessed 27th April 2017, http://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/
[3] See 'Tolkien Studies', Signum University, Accessed 20th April 2017, https://signumuniversity.org/departments/language-literature/tolkien-studies/
[4] See 'Elven Characteristics', *Tolkien Gateway*, Accessed 20th April 2017, http://tolkiengateway.net/wiki/Elven_Characteristics

examples Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* series (1968-2001), David Eddings' *Belgariad* (1982-1984)*,* Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series (1983-2015) and the *Game of Thrones* series (1996-2011) by George R. R. Martin. (Even Martin's middle initials invoke the ghost of Tolkien, whether intentionally or not.)

Given that Tolkien is internationally renowned and profoundly influential, why then is he a subject for a chapter in a book on forgotten lives? This is because there is now more than one Tolkien. At the very least there are four J. R. R. Tolkiens. There is the Tolkien of history, the actual person who lived and wrote and died. Then there is the subject of the numerous biographies based on that actual person.[5] There is the Tolkien as imagined by the, perhaps millions, of people who have enjoyed his novels or the film adaptations. This Tolkien is perceived as akin to Gandalf, a kind of wizard genius who created a world that many of his fans feel more at home in than the real world.[6] Finally, there is the Tolkien as constructed in the scholarly research about his writing.

It is this last Tolkien, perhaps the least broadly known, that I address here. This Tolkien emerges from discussions and analysis of his many literary works, but mostly those set in the fictional world of Middle-Earth. This Tolkien is a contested figure, precisely because he is a *discursive* figure, a figure that emerges from text. The meanings of text or discourse are dependent on the subjective position of the reader (van Dijk 1997; Kress, Leite-Garcia & van Leeuwen 1997; Klages 2006). Text is open to interpretation and changeable and often, if not always, ambiguous (van Dijk 1997; Klages 2006). In other words, texts are always multi-modal (Kress, Leite-Garcia & van Leeuwen 1997). The Tolkien who emerges from this textual haze is paradoxical – simultaneously sexist (Roberts 2014) and an advocate for women's power (Brennan-Croft & Donovan 2015), Christian (Agoy 2011) and pagan (Hutton 2011) at the same time, and both conservative (Coulombe 2008)[7] and radical (Shippey 2002). The textual Tolkien is also overtly racist (Ibata 2003; Fimi 2009; Brackmann 2010; Sinex 2010) and not racist (Chance 2001; Straubhaar 2003; Evans 2003; Rogers 2013).

Who, then, is the real Tolkien? This is a question that is impossible to answer of the discursive Tolkien. The real Tolkien's attitudes to gender and race appear to be complicated, ambiguous, dependent on environment and place and are also likely to have changed over his lifetime. The discursive Tolkien, the Tolkien that can be gleaned from his written works, is even more ambiguous and contradictory. For me, the inability to define a real (textual) Tolkien is a good thing. A contested Tolkien provokes discussion and debate, and keeps questions of gender and race in fantasy fiction on the agenda. Unfortunately, this contested Tolkien is obscured by the huge success of his books and the film adaptations (Isaacs 1976; Rearick 2004). Some decades ago Neil Isaacs (1976, 1) had already noted that '*The Lord of the Rings* and the domain of Middle-earth are eminently suitable for faddism and fannism, cultism and clubbism' and that the popularity and cultish appeal of Tolkien's works 'acts as a deterrent to critical activity' (Isaacs 1976, 1). There is a danger that the Tolkien who survives in the public memory will be the Tolkien as wizard genius, an uncomplicated and unproblematic figure whose Gandalf-like status makes it difficult to get any popular attention for questions like: How are race, gender and sexuality represented in Tolkien's writing? Do Tolkien's books privilege racist, sexist or homophobic interpretations? What happens when the contested, problematic and ambiguous Tolkien is forgotten, or obscured by the celebrity of the Tolkien imagined by fans? What can be done to address or intervene in any problematic representations of race, gender or sexuality in Tolkien's work? How might those interventions be disseminated beyond scholarly circles, to the broader public? These are the questions I will engage with below.

Race, gender and sexuality in Tolkien

Debates about gender and race in Tolkien began almost as soon as the first book of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was released (Isaacs & Zimbardo 1976; Rearick 2004). Academics have noted race-based and arguably racist elements in his work, and *The Lord of the Rings* in particular (Ibata 2003; Rearick 2004; Fimi 2009; Brackmann 2010; Sinex 2010; Vink 2013). Some of these critics argue that Tolkien's writing is influenced by racist theories such as eugenics (Fimi 2009) and others that Tolkien uses stereotypes and symbols to create racial embodiments of good and evil (Brackmann 2010). C.S. Lewis, a friend and colleague of Tolkien, suggested that readers were interpreting Tolkien's clear demarcation of good and evil as 'a rigid demarcation between black and white people' (qtd. in Abate & Weldy 2012, 163). Christine Chism (2007) argues that accusations of racism in the pages of *The Lord of the Rings* fall into three categories: accusations of intentional racism, of unconscious Eurocentric bias, and arguments that posit that Tolkien's writing shows an evolution from latent racism in the early works to a conscious rejection of racist tendencies in the later ones. Alternatively, a number of critics have argued that

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[5] See 'Books about Tolkien', *The Tolkien Society*, Accessed 20th April 2017, https://www.tolkiensociety.org/author/books-about-tolkien/

[6] See *LOTR/Hobbit Cosplay*, Accessed 20th April 2017, http://one-cosplay-to-rule-them-all.tumblr.com/ and *Middle-Earth Cosplay*, Accessed 20th April 2017, http://middle-earth-cosplay.deviantart.com/

[7] This work is also online: http://www.tumblarhouse.com/lounge/column/romantic-conservatives-the-inklings-in-their-political-context

Tolkien's works are to be lauded because they depict a diversity of peoples, cultures and social practices (Chance 2001; Evans 2003; Rogers 2013). Some have gone so far as to claim that Tolkien's works are examples of multiculturalism (Chance 2001), while others suggest that it displays ambiguous *racialism* rather than racism (Rearick 2004; Cramer 2006; Vink 2013), that is, the belief that separate races with distinct physical and behavioural characteristics exist rather than the belief that one race (Caucasians) is superior to other races. These competing arguments about race and the discursive Tolkien are well-represented by the following quotes:

> … returning the Ring to its origin means refusal of power as domination by the One – by sameness, homogeneity – and therefore acceptance of respect for difference and diversity" (Chance 2001, 33).

> It is undeniable that darkness and the colour black are continually associated throughout Tolkien's universe with unredeemable evil, specifically Orcs and the Dark Lord Sauron. So unredeemable is this evil, in fact, that, especially in encounters with the Orcs during the war's action, it is dealt with by extermination. Contrariwise, the Orcs' mirror-selves, the Elves, are called "the noblest of the children of Eru" … and continuously described as extremely fair. (Rearick 2004, 861)

A number of critics of Tolkien have suggested that his works are also sexist, specifically because women are scarce in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and those female characters that are present reinforce female gender norms and passivity (Roberts 2014, 476). Alternatively, some feminist critics have argued that Tolkien's writing depicts a number of powerful women who are not subject to men (Enright 2015; Rawls 2015). As Laura Michel (2006, 56) writes about this debate:

> For years, Tolkien has been criticized, attacked, explained, forgiven, and mainly misunderstood when it comes to the matter of women. Criticism on this topic has ranged from mild attempts to excuse Tolkien's point of view to truly violent accusations of misogyny and chauvinism.

With each passing year, the pendulum swings one way or the other, either adding more fuel to the argument that Tolkien's works are racist and/or sexist or to the counter idea that Tolkien's works are not sexist or racist at all. All of this discussion is about the textual or discursive Tolkien rather than the actual person named J. R. R. Tolkien. This perpetual debate evidences the heart of my argument – that the discursive Tolkien who emerges from discussion of the books is shaped mostly by the reader. This means that the questions about race and gender in Tolkien's writing are not likely to ever be settled. Certain readings of Tolkien's works are, however, privileged over others.

The privileged readings of a text are the ones that are easier to make, that require less cognitive acrobatics on the part of the reader for them to work, and to make meaning out of that text. A privileged reading is one that can be made by non-scholarly readers without use of a critical framework to interpret or build meaning. They are easy and seem "natural". They are also the readings, or meanings, supported and reinforced by the dominant groups and institutions in societies (Kress, Leite-Garcia & van Leeuwen 1997), which are almost universally patriarchal and heteronormative. As Kress, Leite-Garcia & van Leeuwen (1997, 270) argue:

> The meanings of the dominant will remain dominant for me, and it is they who shape, more than I can, the representational resources of my community and thereby the means of my making of meaning. Cognitively, psychically and *affectively*, I am in the position of making meanings through means of making meaning developed by others – precisely those who dominate my world. (emphasis original)

The privileged reading of Tolkien is arguably one that places white skin as superior to black skin, men as superior to women. I would add that the privileged reading of Tolkien constructs heterosexuality as presumed norm and homosexuality or bisexuality as non-existent. This privileged reading makes it difficult to interpret any of the beings of Middle-Earth as non-heterosexual or non-gender normative. The dominance of this privileged reading of Tolkien is evidenced by the fact that Tolkien's books are required reading for a number of racist and fascist organisations, such as the youth wing of the British National Party.[8] As David Ibata (2003) of the *Chicago Tribune* has noted: 'For years, Tolkien scholars have waged a fight on two fronts: against an academic establishment that for the most part refused to take the author's work seriously, and against white supremacists who have tried to claim the professor as one of their own' (n.p.). The connection between Tolkien's writing and extreme right wing politics is made explicit by the following facts: the Heathen Front (a British organisation of right wing "volkists") admired him as "racialist"; at least one far right movement ran paramilitary youth groups called "camp Hobbits", and; there are strong links between the spiritual fathers of modern Italian fascism and Tolkien's writing.[9]

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[8] See 'Tolkien: Master of Middle Earth', *Our Race is our Nation*, Accessed 20th April 2017, http://library.flawlesslogic.com/tolkien.htm
[9] See, 'The use of Tolkien to defend fascism', *Compromise and Conceit*, Accessed 20th April 2017, https://faustusnotes.wordpress.com/2010/03/18/the-use-of-tolkien-to-defend-fascism/

Tolkien's writing would not be used by these groups unless a racist interpretation of the works was relatively easy. As one white nationalist, also anonymous, notes:

> There is much with which nationalists can identify in J. R. R. Tolkien's writings: the nobility of ancient and self-reliant peoples; the neighbourliness, comradeship and community spirit of The Shire, with its clean air and green landscape; the heroic life or death struggle for a great cause, between the forces of light, freedom and *racial survival*, against the conspiracy of corruption and tyranny.[10] (emphasis added)

None of this means that the actual Tolkien was racist and/or sexist. That may never be known for sure. It is possible that the privileged racist and sexist readings of *The Lord of the Rings* and the other Tolkien works do not reflect the author's intended meaning. The most likely explanation about the *real* Tolkien, the actual person, is that he unwittingly created a racist discourse in his earlier works and attempted to address and atone for that in his later ones. For me, the ongoing debate about gender and race that the *discursive* Tolkien inspires shows that the works are complex and nuanced. This does not diminish the fact that the discursive Tolkien evidently privileges some unsavoury readings. Instead, it places the onus on Tolkien's readers to actively intervene in, and work against, these kinds of interpretations, in whatever way they can.

As the textual Tolkien emerges from subjective readings of text, from an engagement with, and reflection on, his writing, it is worthwhile to outline my own history of reading and thinking about *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. My reading of these works highlights (some of) the specific ways that the texts privilege normative masculinist and heteronormative discourse and how that triggered my intention to work against that discourse by "writing back" to Tolkien.

Acts of reading: A brief auto-ethnography

Some books are like portals that drag us (willingly) into other worlds. We are more susceptible to this when we are young. The excerpt below, also from my Young Adult novel *Waycaller* (McPhee 2016a, 24), refers to this experience of being transported to another (fantastical) place:

> A wave of overwhelming pleasure rolled up his arm and spread through his entire body. Glittering silver light surrounded them, blocking all view of the cemetery and enfolding them in utter silence. The pleasure mounted as the glittering light increased. Jack closed his eyes to enjoy it and felt himself being forcefully pulled away, hurtling through the silver light to another place.

This section of text is a subtle encouragement for readers to keep the notion of crossing (from page to mind, from text to imagining) in mind, so that what they are about to read might communicate with what they have already read (in this genre). It is a flag that their intertextual knowledge will enrich their experience, and that their knowledge of the genre will deepen and change as they read.

The first book portal I crossed was J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937), which transported me at the age of eight to Middle Earth, right into the parlour of Bilbo Baggins. Once there, I didn't want to come home – mostly because the idea of second-breakfast appealed to me greatly, but also because I found that world so rich and engaging. The world of my everyday existence was pale and uninteresting compared to Bilbo's world, though inarguably safer. After *The Hobbit*, I read *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), and then my own world seemed exceedingly bland. It had no Gandalf or Lady Galadriel, only soapie stars and dull politicians. On the upside, my everyday world had no Orcs or mountain trolls to threaten me in the dark hours of the night. Still, I would have willingly forgone the safety of my run-of-the-mill existence for a little danger if it meant I could tramp in the Misty Mountains or visit the enchanted woods of Lothlórien.

My love for the world that Tolkien created was an unquestioning one. That changed one autumn morning in 1986, when I was eighteen. I remember it vividly. It was the kind of morning perfect for reading in a patch of sunlight by a window, cool yet sunny with a clear sky. A Hobbity kind of day. I'd settled myself by just such a window to finish re-reading *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. I hadn't picked up those books for many years and had thrown myself into the re-reading with some excitement. When I finished *The Return of the King* (1955) later that day I was left with an uneasy feeling.

By that point I had noticed the overt environmental messages of Tolkien's work (Curry 1998; Dickerson & Evans 2006; Campbell 2011). The ecological interpretations of Tolkien are, perhaps, the least contested. As Kristine Larsen (2012, 84) argues:

> At this late date there can be no serious Tolkien scholar who denies the environmental themes in Tolkien's legendarium. After countless essays and conference presentations on the topic, and an entire conference devoted

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to it at the University of Vermont in 2011, saying that Tolkien was concerned about the environment is like saying that *The Lord of the Rings* contained rings.

As a committed environmentalist myself I found the ecological elements of the books gratifying. But now, on this re-reading, I could not help but notice other things that unsettled me. Unlike my earlier (childhood) readings of Tolkien, this fresh reading brought to my attention the problematic representation of race and gender in Tolkien's work. All the good characters, the heroes and heroines, are white people, some of them are even described that way – the White Lady Galadriel for example. The most noble of the races of Middle-Earth, the Elves, are all white-skinned. Worse, all of the bad or evil characters are often described in language associated with non-white people (Ibata 2003; Fimi 2009; Brackmann 2010; Sinex 2010). Tolkien himself described the Orcs, the principle antagonists and evil-doers of his novels as:

> …squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes; in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types (Carpenter & Tolkien 2012, letter 210, n.p.).

Furthermore, physical descriptions of evil humans indicate that they are dark-skinned, and possibly inspired by middle-eastern or Oriental cultures (Luling 1995; Curry 2004; Sinex 2010). This excerpt, from *The Two Towers* (Tolkien 2005, 660) when the fictional race the Haradrim first appear, illustrates this:

> His scarlet robes were tattered, his corslet of overlapping brazen plates was rent and hewn, his black plaits of hair braided with gold were drenched with blood. His brown hand still clutched the hilt of a broken sword.

Cementing this vision of the 'wicked' Haradrim as Orientals is this description from the character Smeagol or Gollum:

> 'Dark faces ... They are fierce. They have black eyes, and long black hair, and gold rings in their ears ... some have red paint on their cheeks, and red cloaks; and their flags are red, and the tips of their spears; and they have round shields, yellow and black with big spikes. Not nice; very cruel wicked Men they look. Almost as bad as Orcs, and much bigger. Sméagol thinks they have come out of the South beyond the Great River's end.' (Tolkien 2005, 646)

The only exception to this white is good and dark is bad discourse is, of course, Saruman, the White Wizard, but his presence in the novels does not lessen the sense that the books present white people as noble and black people as degenerate and wicked. This is mainly because Saruman is not intrinsically evil. He starts out as good and is turned evil by Sauron. In contrast, many of the dark-skinned races in *The Lord of the Rings* are constructed as intrinsically evil, as beyond redemption (Rearick 2004).

None of the main characters in *The Lord of the Rings* are female. There are a number of positive female secondary characters (Brennan-Croft & Donovan 2015), particularly, Arwen, Galadriel and Eowyn of Rohan, but none of the members of the Fellowship of the Ring are women. Most glaring of all for me was the complete absence of any non-heterosexual, non-gender-normative characters. Apart from one scene in which Eowyn masquerades as male in order to join in the battle against Sauron, gender performance in *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* is starkly normative. Since the release of the films, some fans and commentators have questioned whether or not Frodo Baggins' relationship with Sam Gamgee can be read as having homosexual undertones.[11] This is more a result of Elijah Wood's portrayal of Frodo in the films than anything present in the books, in which their relationship reads as a platonic friendship with Sam's commitment to Frodo arising from his role as Frodo's servant rather than from (sublimated) romantic love.

Writing back to Tolkien

The unease I felt with a world I had loved so much percolated over the years and deepened when I noticed the same disturbing elements in other fantasy fiction. It is no overstatement to say that fantasy fiction, and especially epic fantasy, is dominated by white heterosexual male characters and white heterosexual male authors (Ahmed 2015). With the release of the first *Lord of the Rings* film in 2001, a film that made visual my concerns with the books, my unease transformed into a desire to intervene in the problematic representations of race, gender and sexuality in Tolkien's work, and to do this by "writing back" to Tolkien. In order to ensure that this was disseminated beyond scholarly circles, I set out to produce a Tolkienesque fantasy series of three Young Adult

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[11] See 'Were Frodo and Sam Gay?', Accessed 22nd April 2017, https://www.quora.com/The-Lord-of-the-Rings-creative-franchise-Were-Frodo-and-Sam-gay, and 'Relationship Between Frodo and Sam', Accessed 22nd April 2017, http://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/6497-relationship-between-frodo-and-sam

novels.[12] More to the point, I wanted to create a fantasy world in which women and girls were central and people of non-European backgrounds were represented fairly.

Fig. 4. Book covers of The Faeden Chronicles by D.J. McPhee

"Writing back" is a commonly used literary strategy employed by feminist, postcolonial and queer writers to reclaim, re-imagine and complicate normative or marginalizing narratives that are canonical or widely disseminated (Tiffin 2003; Klages 2006; Baker 2010). Postcolonial writers often frame this as an act of resistance, as writing back from the margins to the imperial centres of colonisation (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 2003; Tiffin 2003; Yang 1999). As John Yang (1999, n.p.) argues:

> Resistance theory in post-colonial literature refutes the very notion that idea of representation also connotes further subjugation. Resistance literature uses the language of empire to rebut its dominant ideologies. In other words, the colonized nation is "writing back," speaking either of the oppression and racism of the colonizers or the inherent cultural "better-ness" of the indigenous people.

Feminist and queer writers characterise writing back as a rewriting, or appropriation and reframing, of dominant, masculinist and/or heteronormative discourses (Hite 1989; Tiffin 2003; Baker 2010). Feminist and queer rewritings of Shakespeare and fairy tales are clear examples of how rewriting can have both a creative and political or social impact (Baker 2010). An example of both postcolonial and feminist writing back is the novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), in which Jean Rhys writes back to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). In it, Rhys addresses the naturalised assumptions about Britain's imperialistic enterprise in their many colonies that dominated thinking in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain, and that went unchallenged in *Jane Eyre*. The inspiration for the novel was the shock Rhys felt at Brontë's portrayal of the character Bertha Mason, Rochester's Creole wife, who was imprisoned in the attic of Thornfield Hall for most of the novel (Raiskin 1999, 144). Rhys turned the story of Brontë's "madwoman in the attic" into a full-length novel that was not only a significant re-writing of one of the classics of Victorian fiction but also a narrative in which issues of race, gender and social and economic power are contested.

In the context of *The Lord of the Rings*, my own writing back is an act against forgetting the complicated and ambiguous (textual) Tolkien, an act that aims to produce (creative) discourse that adds to the discussion of race and gender in Tolkien's writing and in the genre and individual works inspired by him. *The Faeden Chronicles*, a Tolkienesque fantasy trilogy thus includes all the things we expect of the genre (halflings, elves, dragons, magic and so forth) but also not only features a diversity of race and gender but makes that diversity central to the story.[13]

The Faeden Chronicles are, however, not a dramatic departure from Tolkienesque fantasy. Writing back is not about creating something completely new or original (Hite 1989; Tiffin 2003; Baker 2012), but rather about strategic appropriation and shifted emphasis (Hite 1989; Baker 2010). For me, writing back is also about celebrating Tolkien-inspired fantasy whilst making it more inclusive and appealing to a more diverse range of readers by contributing a counter voice to the marginalizing readings of High Fantasy.

The act of writing back need not completely abandon conventional genre traits or conventions to achieve its ends (Hite 1989). In fact, the opposite – that is, the maintenance of conventional form and familiar characters

[12] The Faeden Chronicles were situated in the Young Adult domain because young adult readers are at the forefront of demanding and embracing diverse fantasy fiction.

[13] There is a strong tradition of fantasy, and epic fantasy in particular, engaging with questions of diversity, such as Kameron Hurley's *Worldbreaker Saga* (2014-2017), Lynn Flewelling's *Tamir Triad* (2001-2006) and Ashok Banker's *Ramayana* series (2003-2010), however there is little explicit, direct appropriation of Tolkien, in terms of the types of characters, races (esp. halflings) and settings. For this "writing back" to work, *The Faeden Chronicles* needed to be identifiably Tolkienesque.

and settings – is more likely to produce results (Hite 1989; Baker 2010). Even the use of cliché, much derided in fiction of any kind, has a role to play in writing back to genre (Baker 2010). When writing back to a dominant discourse the use of clichés, such as ubiquitous character types (wizards, orphans), stock scenes (final battle) and repeatedly used settings (idyllic village, mysterious forest), is a potent strategy. Indeed, Molly Hite (1989, 4) has argued that clichés 'tend to have unanticipated potency in relevant contexts, and certainly the notion of telling the other side of the story in many ways describes the enterprise of feminist criticism'. Hite further suggests that 'changes in emphasis and value can articulate the "other side" of a culturally mandated story, exposing the limits it inscribes in the process of affirming a dominant ideology' (1989, 4). In other words, the utilisation of familiar characters, stereotypes as it were, in familiar settings, with familiar plot devices but with a shifted emphasis, a revaluation, 'can have a deconstructive potency that is beyond what one would anticipate for such a, seemingly, simple undertaking' (Baker 2010). The use of clichés is thus a powerful way to keep the ambiguous (textual) Tolkien alive. The appropriation of Tolkienesque discourses, particularly those ubiquitous character types, fantasy races, stock scenes and common settings, and the *re*-emphasis of same, promises some considerable deconstructive and resistant potency.

Hite (1989) argues that this kind of rewriting – a mixture of appropriation, reframing and shifting emphasis – is a more suitable method to the methods espoused by Postmodernism. She writes that though experimental fictions by women share with Postmodernism certain 'decentering and disseminating strategies' these experimental narratives are arrived at 'by an entirely different route, which involves emphasising conventionally marginal characters and themes, in this way re-centering the value structure of the narrative' (1989, 2). This different route 'privileges a politics of representation which, under the influence of Postmodernism, has been largely abandoned despite the fact that *mis*representation of marginal groups in discourse continues to be the norm rather than the exception' (Baker 2012, 156).

Thus, the rewritten Tolkienesque fantasy trilogy *The Faeden Chronicles* employs "decentering" and reframing strategies that emphasise marginal characters and themes, specifically relating to representations of race, gender and sexuality. It is the continued production and circulation of the clichés of the genre – but rewritten to emphasise racial, gender and sexual diversity – that evokes an instability in the (masculinist and heteronormative) narrative tradition. This discursive resistance is potent precisely because the most widely disseminated norms – those that privilege masculinist and heteronormative discourse – are perceived as stable, singular and true. When other discourses (other stories) are circulated a multiplicity, a plurality, arises that reveals the fiction of the dominant normalizing and marginalizing narrative. The excerpt below, another from *Waycaller* (McPhee 2016a, 304), demonstrates how a revaluing of standard fantasy characters, in this case elves, produces different, more positive, messages about race, especially as it is constructed in this genre:

> The horn blew again, closer now, and the doors opened. A dozen fearsome-looking elves strode out into the courtyard, all with black skin and brilliant yellow eyes. All but one was armed with spears and wore breastplates and helms of white metal over their long black dreadlocks, helms that took the shape of dragon-heads breathing flame. Jack recognised them at once from the Battle of Bright ... These were members of the Elvish Guard. In the centre of them paced a seemingly young man, unarmed and unarmoured, his eyes more gold than yellow and his skin almost glowing, if the night sky could glow. Jack recognised him immediately. The ornate winged crown of Elvinidd kept his black dreadlocks in place, which otherwise hung well below his waist. The man's bearing declared him as the elvish Sovereign more than any crown or blaring horns.

In this way, *The Faeden Chronicles* seek to disseminate different knowledges about gender and race, knowledges that emphasize diversity, powerful women and positive depictions of non-white characters. In terms of negative depictions of race, Tolkien describes the principle villain of his ring trilogy, the Dark Lord, thus: 'Sauron should be thought of as very terrible. The form that he took was that of a man of more than human stature, but not gigantic' (Carpenter & Tolkien 2012, letter 246, n.p.). In the novels themselves the character Smeagol (Gollum), who has come face-to-face with Sauron, describes the Dark Lord with these words: 'Yes, he has only four [fingers] on the Black Hand, but they are enough' (Tolkien 2005, 641). The character Isildur, who had also come face to face with Sauron, says this: 'The Ring misseth, maybe, the heat of Sauron's hand, which was black and yet burned like fire' (Tolkien 2005, 253). This strongly suggests that Sauron, the ultimate evil antagonist of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, has dark skin. The film adaptations reinforce this, without showing any actual skin, by representing Sauron as a large, black-armoured being. The messages about race these descriptions and images encourage are far from balanced. In fact, they equate dark-skin with evil.

The following excerpt communicates quite different things about race and the notion of evil to those evoked by *The Lord of the Rings*. This excerpt is the scene in which the main antagonist of The *Faeden Chronicles* (McPhee 2016a, 64) is revealed:

> Coming towards him from out of the darkness was a pale woman, beautiful and yet terrifying, with white hair in long dreadlocks. Her eyes shone in the dark, a luminous emerald green. The nausea increased as Jack was struck by an awful stench. His stomach heaved, but he held it down. The woman opened her mouth, parting lips that

were blackened and scarred, as if burned. Out of her ashen mouth came a burst of power that knocked Jack onto the ground, spreadeagled on his back.

Whereas in Tolkien, and most High Fantasy, the antagonist is an evil male, dark of mind and often of complexion (and just as often somehow effeminate), the antagonist of *The Faeden Chronicles* is fair – with pale skin, white hair and green eyes. Based on and named after the Celtic goddess of war and death, Morrigan, she is also, obviously, female. In order to decouple racial associations with the word "dark" when used to describe evil, Morrigan is referred to interchangeably as the *Dark* Goddess and the *Pale* Mother.

There is a long history of discourse that constructs the female as evil or corrupt and the male as good and incorruptible. Even so, the impression given by much fantasy fiction is that women can never be so powerful that they pose a significant (global) threat. The ultimate evil in David Edding's *Belgariad* series (Torak), J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (Lord Voldemort) and Stephen Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant* series (Lord Foul), and dozens of others, are all male. In Tolkienesque fantasy the most powerful beings on both sides are usually male. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the Dark Lord Sauron and his opponents, the wizards, are all male. The Lady Galadriel, who does display temporal and magical power, is not present in the final battle with Sauron and plays only a supporting role in the fight against him. I would suggest this is because her powers are constructed as wholly feminine (protective and defensive, prophetic and personal) rather than the "masculine" powers accorded to Gandalf and the wizards, that are offensive and destructive, potent and global. *The Faeden Chronicles* addresses this by making the most powerful beings on both sides of the good/evil spectrum female. Morrigan is the ultimate (and potent) evil who poses a global threat. In contrast, the head of the Druid Order, my version of Tolkien's brotherhood of wizards, is Kashashem, a black, elvish woman. There are also supporting characters of both genders on both sides of the good/evil spectrum, making it clear that gender is not an obstacle to power and does not determine whether a person is good or bad. Thus *The Faeden Chronicles* decouple good and evil from race and present women as capable of ultimate power, and able to be as good or wicked as they please, just like men.

Despite some fans questioning of Frodo and Sam's sexuality, the works of Tolkien and other Tolkienesque fantasy are almost completely devoid of non-heterosexual characters. The recent works of George R.R. Martin are a notable exception, however these works, though influenced by Tolkien and in the epic fantasy genre, could not reasonably be described as Tolkienesque. In many ways, Martin's *Game of Thrones* series is a refusal of many of the themes (and innocence) of Tolkien's writing. In writing back to Tolkien, one of my goals was to include characters who occupied the full spectrum of sexuality. *The Faeden Chronicles* includes heterosexual, bisexual, gay and lesbian characters, whose sexuality is a significant part of their characterisation, but who are not solely defined by it. One of the important secondary characters, Ellisenn, is an elvish bisexual male. Another character, Tru, a Fennling (a kind of halfling) is gay and also effeminate, in a way that does not trivialise or demean effeminacy.[14] There is also a lesbian warrior queen (human) and a female bisexual druid (also human). *The Faeden Chronicles* reflect contemporary questions about whether or not sexuality is inborn or a choice, a question which I believe does not have a single answer, by including more than one pathway to sexual orientation or behaviour for the characters. One of the human characters states that she has chosen to be bisexual. On the other hand, the elves in *The Faeden Chronicles* experience a thing called 'the twining', which is a life-long, magical bonding to a mate in which gender matters not at all. As the character Ellisenn explains:

> "The twining is how elves experience attraction, love. For the elves, love comes just once in their long lives. We do not choose who to love. The twining strikes us and we cannot fight it. When one elf twines with another the bond is unbreakable. It is a magical bond, eternal." (McPhee 2016b, 263-264)

Thus, the diversity of race, gender and sexuality in *The Faeden Chronicles* writes back to Tolkien in a way that enriches the field of Tolkienesque fantasy and keeps the questions of how race, gender and sexuality are represented in the genre, and in Tolkien's writing, in discussion.

Conclusion

It is important that the Tolkien that survives in public memory is not one that silences discussion about gender, sexuality and race. One potent way to work against this forgetting, to keep the ambiguous discursive Tolkien alive, is to produce creative works that contribute to readers' knowledge about race, gender and sexuality in Tolkien's writing and Tolkienesque literature. Using fiction to foreground the ways that gender, race and sexuality are represented in Tolkienesque fantasy broadens the discussion beyond the scholarly domain, making such discussions part of everyday culture for many readers. *The Faeden Chronicles* are one contribution to the

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[14] For my scholarly work on effeminacy see Baker, D.J. (2017) '(Re)Scripting the Self: Creative Writing, Effeminacy and the Art of Subjectivity', *Writing In Practice: The Journal Of Creative Writing Research*, volume 3, n.p., https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/current-wip-edition-2/articles/rescripting-the-self-creative-writing-effeminacy-2.html

broadening of this discussion. They also reframe epic fantasy worlds as places rich in diversity of race, gender and sexuality.

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