



Hutton, R. (2016). Tolkien's Magic. *Year's Work in Medievalism*, 2016, 144-153.

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Tolkien's Magic

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It is a privilege to be one of the contributors to this volume in honor of Gwendolyn Morgan, and it seems fitting to do justice to one of the great figures in the study of medievalism by tackling one of the greatest figures who have represented it: J. R. R. Tolkien. I propose to do so in a manner which ought to be especially dear to Gwen: by looking at Tolkien's attitudes to magic in his creative fiction.

Most readers of that fiction would regard it as being set in a magical universe, in which spell-making is a routine activity for many characters and pivotal to the action. What is not always appreciated is how remarkable this quality is for an author as devout and conventional in his Christian faith as Tolkien undoubtedly was. I am not suggesting that devout old-fashioned Christians cannot write stories which feature acts of magic, applied by characters of whom their readers are expected to approve. I am only saying that they need, if they wish to make such acts consistent with traditional orthodox theology, to pay some special attention to the context in which the acts concerned are performed. I have three contentions to make in this regard. The first is that Tolkien himself did not in fact pay such attention when he wrote his fiction, tending instead to write instinctively and to draw in the process on other traditions, more favorable to magic than the established Christian one.

The second is that after the publication and initial reception of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, he did become aware that there was a problem, and attempted to confront it, with total failure. My third argument is that much of the success of his writing is due to his fidelity to literary sources which are similarly not easy to reconcile with Christian orthodoxy. In many ways, his fiction represents a modern extension of them.

Let me commence with his own attempt to confront the problem. It took the form of a paragraph in a letter which he drafted in September 1954 to thank his fellow novelist Naomi Mitchison for a glowing review that she had published of *The Fellowship of the Ring*.¹ In this, he confessed that he thought that he had been "far too casual" about his depiction of magic in the book and his characterization of it. He excused himself by saying that it was a "large question, and difficult," and that he could not "burden" his story with a discussion of it. He went on in the letter, however, to supply such a discussion, and to base it on the ancient and medieval distinction between *magia* and *goeteia*. Unfortunately, he didn't himself define what he took to mean by these terms, and he doesn't seem to have followed the conventional meaning of them. Both are Latin words based on Greek originals. *Magia* was simply a neutral term for any magical acts, and is indeed the one from which our modern word *magic* directly derives. *Goeteia* was always a disreputable form of magic, increasingly identified with the conjuring of evil spirits. Tolkien, however, *seems* to treat the former as meaning "actual" magic, which creates real physical changes, and the latter as illusion, intended to deceive

¹ *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 199-200.

observers into thinking that real magic was taking place. What is not in doubt is what follows, a ringing statement from Tolkien that neither form of magic was bad in itself, but distinguished by its motivation and use. Both of the opposing sides in his story used both kinds, but Sauron and his followers used it to impose their will on others, and the good characters did not.

In other words, the magic used by the characters on the right side was always employed for benevolent ends, and so it was effectively good. Magic, real or illusory, was to Tolkien simply a mechanism, morally neutral in itself. He then concluded with a further defense of his portrayal of it, and of a different kind: that it was an inherent and natural power in certain species of being, like elves and wizards, and neither possessed by the humans of Middle Earth nor attainable by them. At this point he hit a snag: that Aragorn, as a hereditary king, had healing powers of a kind that most would regard as magical. He wriggled out of this with two further excuses, that Aragorn was not quite human, having Elven blood in him, and that his powers might have rested largely on a combination of good pharmacological knowledge and hypnosis. The first excuse was entirely reasonable, but the second showed how desperate he was getting. There can be no doubt that Tolkien took the idea that a legitimate hereditary king had healing powers from actual history. In particular, the monarchs of late medieval and early modern Europe, including England, were believed to have a divinely-given power to heal scrofula, the disease nicknamed the “King’s Evil,” by touch. To try to explain it away in terms of reason and of natural phenomena was to import an extreme rationality into a fictional world which was deeply magical in virtually every other way. None the less, as an explanation, though a rather disappointing one, it could hold up.

Here, however, he remembered a further detail of his own writing which torpedoed his entire argument about the human lack of magic. In the margin of his draft letter, he scribbled “but the Numenoreans used ‘spells’ in making swords?” Here, of course, he was absolutely right. When Aragorn examined the daggers taken from the human tomb on the Barrow Downs, and given by Tom Bombadil to Merry and Pippin, he noted that they were “work of Westernesse, wound about with spells for the bane of Mordor.”² At this point Tolkien simply gave up. He laid aside the draft letter—which is why it survived among his manuscripts—and sent a new version, which lacked the tricky discussion of magic. Nor, as far as is known, did he ever attempt a consideration of the place of it in his work again.

It is time now to look at definitions of acceptable and unacceptable forms of magic in ancient and medieval Europe, and in Christian theology, to see how those provided by Tolkien matched up to them. The ancient definitions and attitudes have been much studied in the past quarter of a century, by authors including Jan Bremmer, Robert Fowler, Naomi Janowitz, Sarah Iles Johnston, Fritz Graf, Peter Green, Matthew Dickie, and Daniel Ogden, and, lagging behind these, me.³ It is rare for so

² J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, book 3, chap. 1.

³ *Envisioning Magic*, ed. Peter Schafer and Hans G. Kippenberg (Leiden: Brill, 1997); *The World of Ancient Magic*, ed. David R. Jordan et al. (Bergen: Norwegian Institute at Athens, 1999); *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early*

many historians to agree unanimously on anything, but on the question of ancient definitions, they do. Of Tolkien's two terms, *goeteia* was, as I have said, distinctly grubby. It was the manipulation of uncanny power for disreputable purposes. *Magia* was, as I have also said, a more neutral term, meaning just the use of spells and other mechanisms to control supernatural power in order to affect human desires. What needs to be emphasized here, however, is that most ancient people who used it did so with strong disapproval. This hostility only became greater as the ancient world grew old, and the era of Greek cultural supremacy in the Mediterranean world gave way to the Roman Empire. Magic was disliked for two different reasons. One was simply that it tended to be carried out in secret and to gratify private wishes. To ancient societies, which were strongly communal, for one or a few of their members to gain apparent supernatural power to achieve their ends was inherently anti-social, and menacing. The other reason was religious, and embedded in the belief that the proper and respectable way to gain such power was to ask a deity for help. Prayer was entirely permissible, because it left the decision over whether or not the end would be accomplished to superhumans, to whose will humans should always submit. To try to take control of the process of wielding supernatural force was to usurp the role of deities, and so added a risk of subverting the divine order as well as the social one. As such, it could easily bring down divine anger on the whole of a community. It should be emphasized that this was specifically a European viewpoint. Across the Mediterranean, in Egypt, was a much older civilization in which the use of magic, even to control the deities themselves, was considered entirely permissible.⁴ In Europe, however, the prejudice against it ran very deep. It was voiced as soon as Greek civilization took shape, by authors as famous and influential as Plato. On the whole, the pagan Greeks and Romans united to define the magician as somebody on the margins of society, who threatened it as a whole, and had either to be cast out of it or forced to stop her or his activities.

Magic emerged into European culture from the ancient world as a definition of acts that bypassed the ordinary laws of nature. They were propelled by an effort by individual humans, using arcane power and knowledge, to tap into supernatural force for their own personal benefit. Christianity absorbed this definition wholesale, and with it the distrust and dislike that was attached to it. It added, however, a completely new context, of a cosmos ruled by a single, all-powerful, ever-present and completely good god. This caused a redirection of attention, when looking at the use of

Modern Period, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra (Leuven: Peeters, 2002); Robert Fowler, "Greek Magic, Greek Religion," *Illinois Classical Studies* 20 (1995): 1-22; Naomi Janowitz, *Magic in the Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2001); Susan Iles Johnston, "Magic," in *Religions of the Ancient World*, ed. Susan Iles Johnston (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2004), 139-51; Fritz Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Matthew Dickie, *Magicians and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 2001); Daniel Ogden, *Greek and Roman Necromancy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), and *Night's Black Agents* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2008); Ronald Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London: Hambledon and London, 2003), 87-136.

⁴ Geraldine Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum, 1994); Ian Assmann, "Magic and Theology in Ancient Egypt," and David Frankfurter, "Ritual Expertise in Roman Egypt and the Problem of the Category 'Magic,'" in *Envisioning Magic*, ed. Schafer and Kippenberg, 1-18 and 115-35, respectively; Robert Kriech Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of University of Chicago, 1993); *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts*, ed. Joris F. Borghouts (Leiden: Brill, 1978).

supernatural power by humans, onto one issue above all: its source. The Bible taught, in both testaments, that holy people were able to achieve miraculous cures and transformations, if empowered by the true God. All other acts which apparently bypassed the laws of nature, by definition, had now to be considered the work of the Devil, and his attendant demons. Magicians, who were invariably people operating outside orthodox religious structures, and for personal gain or that of their clients, therefore became inherently satanic. The polar opposite of the magician became the saint, who, as somebody working within orthodox religion, was naturally using powers granted directly by divine favor. Any alleged or presumed act of magic was now a matter for concern to orthodox churchmen. Attitudes to magic in medieval and early modern Christianity have also recently been submitted to intensive study by Matthew Dickie and me, again, but also more prominently by Richard Kieckhefer, Michelle Sweeney, Karen Jolly and Valerie Flint.⁵ Again, a very large degree of consensus has resulted. It is clear that the only open division of opinion among medieval Christians concerning magic was over the degree to which it could be seen as natural. Natural magic consisted of those powers and essences hidden within the created universe, which, if properly understood, could be manipulated by humans for their mutual benefit. As such, it was barely distinguishable from science. In general, from St Augustine onward, Christian thought lumped together all other forms of magic and divination as harmful, because it was demonic. It distinguished between the manipulation of material forms for human good and prosperity, which was wholly permissible, and attempts to transcend the limits of the material world using spiritual forces, which were not.

Such considerations were, however, largely confined to a scholarly and political elite. There is every sign that ordinary people, until relatively modern times, continued to resort to spells and charms for practical needs, just as they did to material remedies. Specialists in these services, called charmers, or wise or cunning folk, remained a feature of local society all over Europe until the twentieth century. What is more, learned magicians also continued to operate all through the medieval and early modern periods. What propelled most people when using magical remedies was simply a matter of cause and effect. If they were believed to work, in practical terms, then they had the same status as any other remedies. The learned magicians, when they attempted to justify their activities at all, used very much the same argument. If the results of their rites were beneficial to humanity, then they had to be a part of God's plan. As for the question of their origin, magicians suggested that either the powers used derived from angels, in which case they had to be godly, or from the success of magicians in overpowering demons and forcing them to work for the good of humans. In that case, magic counted as a victory against Satan. At all levels, the basic test that was applied to justify magic

⁵ Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World*; Hutton, *Witches, Druids and King Arthur*, 137-92; Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and "The Specific Rationality of Medieval Magic," *American Historical Review* 99 (1994): 813-36; Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, ed. Karen Jolly et al., vol. 3 (London: Athlone, 2002); Valerie J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), and "The Demonisation of Magic and Sorcery in Late Antiquity," in *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, vol. 2 (London: Athlone, 1999), 277-348.

was the use to which it was put: good or bad. This was never acceptable to established Christianity, but, as may now be recognized, it was the one proposed by Tolkien. There is no sign that orthodox Christian attitudes to magic have altered much over the past few hundred years. The official hostility to it has merely blended with, and been reinforced by, the modern rationalist one, that it is all superstitious nonsense. It must be emphasized that the orthodox attitudes were embedded in texts with which Tolkien was thoroughly familiar. Some, indeed, he edited, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Nor has the recent scholarship that I have quoted overturned any earlier scholarly thought about ancient and medieval attitudes to magic, of the sort to which Tolkien would have been used. It has merely amplified it with a greater quantity of data, of a more precise kind.

To see how a different author of fantasy literature handled the same problem in the same period, we need turn only to another celebrated member of Tolkien's own literary circle: C.S. Lewis. In his sequence of novels about the land of Narnia, Lewis came to be more and more careful to assimilate his stories to Christian orthodoxy. Like Tolkien, his land was invested with what has conventionally been termed magic, and towards the end of the sequence, he defined his stance with regard to that along wholly traditional lines. In the fourth book, *The Silver Chair*, he has his two current child protagonists discuss how to call on the deity-figure of Narnia, Aslan. One considers invoking him in a magical rite, with circle and incantations. The more experienced and reflective replies that this would seem to be trying to make Aslan do something, when humans should really only ask him.⁶ Here we see the ancient distinction between religion and magic. The sixth book, *The Magician's Nephew*, is largely devoted to a condemnation of magic, with a repeated emphasis on the point that magicians are never truly in control of the powers which they release. The only genuine, and good, magical activity is that of the Creator of Narnia, Aslan. Right from the beginning, moreover, the Narnia stories embodied one further feature of the hostile European tradition with regard to magic. This was to see its most dangerous and natural practitioners as being female. This runs from the ancient world, with unscrupulous and destructive sorceresses like Circe and Medea, to the procession of villainous enchantresses in medieval romance, of whom Morgan le Fey, Vivianne and Nimue stand at the head. Whereas conventional witches, also from ancient times onward, were usually portrayed as repulsive hags, the sorceresses were physically attractive, and their magic was commonly related implicitly to their sexual power over men. With their sexuality played down, because these are, after all, children's books, such figures feature in four of the six Narnia novels. Jadis, the White Witch, is the chief villainess in the first and almost makes a comeback in the second before being shown in her younger guise in the fifth. Even more interesting in this respect is the nameless sorceress, referred to vaguely as another of the same kind as Jadis, who is the evil character in the fourth book. This is because she can transform herself into a lethal snake, thereby blending the figure of the enchantress with another medieval stereotype of supernatural female menace and allure, the lamia.⁷ It makes a dramatic contrast that not merely does Tolkien not engage in any

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (London: Bles, 1953), chap. 1.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* (London: Bles, 1950); *Prince Caspian* (London: Bles, 1951); *The Magician's Nephew* (London: Bodley Head, 1955); *The Silver Chair*, chap. 10-12.

discussion of the theoretical problems of using magic in the course of his fiction, but he has no prominent, unequivocal and obvious, villainous sorceresses.⁸ Very strikingly, the mighty enchantress of *The Lord of the Rings* is perhaps the most imposing and admirable female character in the whole of the three books: Galadriel. As if to emphasize this, Tolkien puts into the mouths of some of the other good (or ultimately good) characters—such as Boromir and the Riders of Rohan—doubts about her, which echo exactly the bad opinion of female magicians found in medieval romance.⁹ The whole point of these is that they are completely misplaced and unjust.

It is time now, in the final part of this discussion, to look at the well-springs of Tolkien's attitude to magic, and treatment of it, and ask why it was so different from the theological norm. It can be said at once that in this matter his difference from C.S. Lewis was completely in character for both men. Although both were equally devout in their Christianity, Lewis, the convert and the Protestant, was much more analytical and self-conscious in his relationship with it. Tolkien, the Catholic from boyhood, was a much more instinctual and organic sort of believer, less inclined to intellectualize his religion, except when forced to do so in self-defense.¹⁰ Furthermore, his attitude to magic must be put into two particular contexts that made the usual application of traditional European attitudes in general, and those of orthodox Christianity in particular, very difficult for him. The first was that, as he occasionally reminded correspondents, although Christians could feel that his imagined world was completely compatible with their own basic ethics and instincts, it was not actually a Christian cosmos. Its supreme deity was much more remote and less interventionist than the Christian one, and far more inclined to sub-contract day-to-day concern with events on his created earth. As a result, miracles of the Christian kind could not occur, and the opposition between magic and miracle could not exist. The other very unusual feature about Tolkien's stories is that human beings are not at their center. This space is occupied by hobbits, who happen to be one of the minority of races in their world who do not have any magical abilities. As such, they play out much of the role of humans in most fantasy fiction, of representing the everyday, practical and rational, while struggling to cope with the enchanted and the fantastic. Their presence as the vehicles for the stories in many ways frees at least some kinds of human to become more magical.

The question of the roots of Tolkien's use of magic as a motif can now be addressed directly, and it can be found in the sources which he employed, as a famous medievalist and a consumer of fantasy literature himself. They can be considered with respect to each of the magically-empowered kinds of being which take their place in his fiction. To start at the top, there is no problem at all with the dominant beings actually in his sub-created world, the Valar. Tolkien came to equate them as much

⁸ He once toyed with the figure of a wicked human sorceress, in Queen Berúthiel of Gondor, but never developed her story: J. R. R. Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: HarperCollins, 1980), 519-20.

⁹ Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, book 2, chap. 7; book 3, chap. 2.

¹⁰ This impression of their natures is based on their writings, but also their biographies: Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1977); George Sayer, *Jack* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988); Colin Duriez, *Tolkien and C. S. Lewis* (Mahwah, NJ: Hiddenspring, 2003); Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian* (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 2005); John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War* (London: HarperCollins, 2003).

as possible with angels, of the supreme deity, but in his earlier writings he referred to them simply and accurately as gods. They may be lesser deities in comparison with the supreme one, but they are still much more active and powerful on their own account than Christian angels. As I have emphasized elsewhere, they form a bickering, dynamic and often badly-behaved pantheon of the sort familiar from most pagan mythologies. They also started by having effective control of the day-to-day management of the world, even if they retired more and more from it with time.¹¹ Although strictly speaking unable to create anything from new themselves, they could reshape both heavens and earth to a very great extent. Effectively, they could even form new species by this process.¹² Their powers are effectively so tremendous that the term *magic* is really too limited to comprehend them, but sometimes they use apparent magical techniques to achieve their will. The real bad egg among them, Melkor or Morgoth, for example, is described as “cursing” a captured enemy and his kin, as an act of punishment and vengeance.¹³

The case of the elves is more interesting, and for our present purposes more significant. Tolkien was so very fond of fairies that he included at points in his fiction virtually every kind of them represented in the traditional folklore and medieval literature of the British Isles. At the one extreme stand his High Elves, who are most similar to the Irish Tuatha de Danaan, themselves originally goddesses and gods, and the British “high fairies” or “trooping fairies,” with their royal court and aristocratic lifestyle.¹⁴ At the other, in some of his earlier poems and stories, are small fairies of the kind familiar from Victorian and Edwardian children’s books.¹⁵ It is worth stressing quite how anomalous the medieval, northern European fairies, of whom Tolkien was so fond, are in both the classical ancient world and Christian theology. They have no real equivalents in Greek or Roman mythology. They are not deities, and neither are they nature spirits like the water or tree nymphs of the ancient Mediterranean, because they had a royal court, and industries, and went on processions and raids. Nor could a place be easily made for them in the Christian cosmos. Attempts were made in the Middle Ages to declare them a lesser sort of fallen angel, not quite bad enough to be thrown all the way to Hell, or to declare them the ghosts of unusual human beings. Neither explanation found as much favor with medieval writers as the third one, which was that they were simply baffling, having no obvious origin point in Christian tradition. At the time of the Reformation, many evangelical Protestants dealt with the problem by deciding that they had to be demons, pure and

¹¹ Ronald Hutton, “The Pagan Tolkien” and “Can We Still Have a Pagan Tolkien?” in *The Ring and the Cross*, ed. Paul E. Kerry (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), 57-70, 90-105.

¹² Indeed, of all the races of his world, Tolkien acknowledged that the Creator only made elves and humans directly: *Letters*, 147.

¹³ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, chap. 20-21.

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 122-33; Katharine Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck* (London: Routledge, 1959), 8-43.

¹⁵ For example, in his early poem “Goblin Feet,” first published in *Oxford Poetry* in 1915 and since anthologized twice. John D. Rateliff, *The History of the Hobbit. Part One: Mr Baggins* (London: HarperCollins, 2007), 111-21, also notes that in the original version of “The Tale of Tinúviel,” the elvish heroine hides underneath a tall flower, and that *The Hobbit* saw the last appearance of this sort of elf (at Rivendell) in Tolkien’s fiction.

simple.¹⁶ That, of course, was the very last way in which Tolkien regarded them. He adhered faithfully to mainstream medieval tradition by declaring simply that they were another race of being, who were wholly themselves.

A large part of their appeal to him is that, in all traditional bodies of lore, they were inherently magical beings, adept in casting spells and glamours and changing shape. Here his essay on fairy stories, written before he began work on *The Lord of the Rings* and revised as he was near the end of it, serves as a manifesto for his attitude to magic in general. In it, he defined a fairy story as any which contains spontaneous and inherent magic, which he opposed directly to the labored and artificial rites of ceremonial magicians.¹⁷ To him, fairy stories were tales which embody the marvelous: the property of enchantment, which he called the “elvish craft,” par excellence. To him that property allowed the refreshment of the human imagination which he held to be essential to mental health, as an antidote to the ugliness that he perceived in modern life, but also to the sufferings of life in general.

It also, however, served a Christian purpose to him, in keeping the human imagination open to the possibility of the supernatural and the miraculous, and so to the reception of the Christian message. The irony of this argument is to me as breathtaking as its tactical brilliance: after almost two millennia in which orthodox Christianity had looked upon the concept of magic with deep suspicion, Tolkien was suggesting that a love of the magical could be to his religion’s advantage. Such an argument could only have potency, however, in a modern and rationalist age in which people were no longer afraid of spells, and no longer relied on them to ward off misfortune or cure disease. It was fitted for one in which people now regarded elves as an entertainment, and not as a potentially serious problem. This is the essence of Tolkien’s approach to magic: that his vision of it was a post-industrial, post-rationalist one, but that he drew on very old materials to fashion its products. This was, indeed, exactly what he said that people should do in fairy stories. One further example of it can be given here: that whenever the medieval and early modern British identified elves and fairies as having monarchs, it was more often the queen than a king whose importance was emphasized.¹⁸ That is the true reason why Galadriel is so powerful and so admirable; transcending the stereotype of the dangerous enchantress—she occupies an equivalent position among the elves of Middle Earth.

¹⁶ Minor White Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), 23-64; Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck*, 8-43, and *The Fairies in Tradition and Literature* (London: Routledge, 1967), 48-57, 105-10; Diane Purkiss, *Troublesome Things* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), 52-82; Jeremy Harte, *Explore Fairy Traditions* (Loughborough: Heart of Albion Press, 2004), 8-27, 115-50.

¹⁷ First published in 1947, in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams*, and reprinted in J. R. R Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: Unwin, 1964), 11-72.

¹⁸ Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies*, 65-110; Lucy Allen Paton, *Studies in the Fairy Mythology of Arthurian Romance* (New York: Franklin, 1960); Diane Purkiss, “Old Wives’ Tales Retold: The Mutations of the Fairy Queen,” in *This Double Voice*, ed. Danielle Clarke and Elizabeth Clarke (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 103-33.

The other magical races can be dealt with swiftly. Dwarves, from their first appearances in Tolkien's unpublished fiction, in Beleriand, and their first appearances in his print, in *The Hobbit*, automatically use magic as well as practical skills when making objects. This is simply because that is what they do in the medieval northern texts which Tolkien knew so well. The basic plot of the *Nibelungenlied*, or of the problems given to the Norse gods by the Brisingamen necklace, would have been impossible without this trait. Wizards changed their nature in the course of the development of his body of legend: or rather, they had their nature better defined, in a way that was more theologically comfortable. When Tolkien's greatest wizard first appears, under the name Bladorthin in the first drafts of *The Hobbit*, there is nothing to indicate that he is not, as wizards have always been supposed to be, a human being who has become expert in magic. He is indeed repeatedly called a man, and continued to be so after he had been renamed Gandalf. None the less, as Gandalf grew more powerful, in successive drafts, Tolkien classed wizards in a letter with supernatural beings.¹⁹ In an earlier, unpublished, work, the Book of Lost Tales, he had already done so, creating a being called a wizard who was also a fairy, and was, after many changes, to become the figure of Sauron.²⁰ None the less, in print, the status of Gandalf and his fellows long remained ambiguous. It was only in the 1950s that he began to declare roundly that they were not human.²¹ He developed instead the concept of wizards as a category of spirit related to the Valar: the Istari, sent out from Valinor to aid Middle Earth.²² This rescued them completely from association with professional human magicians, a category of person with whom, as explained, European tradition, including the Christian, had always been profoundly uncomfortable. Indeed, in Middle Earth humans are generally devoid of magical powers. Yet, as Tolkien ruefully acknowledged in that unpublished section of letter, he let himself be carried away in the matter of making weapons. How could he resist this, when the use of spells in smithcraft was embedded in some of those northern texts on which he drew primarily for inspiration? One such was *Völsunga Saga*, in which is described the cutting of magical runes upon a sword to aid the person who used it.²³ The tradition of ancient northern Europe, that the skill of the smith was at least partly magical, ran too deep to be expunged by any fear of magic; after all, it was just that kind of use of uncanny power, for the good of others, which popular tradition (and Tolkien) instinctually approved.

The place of magic in the fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien is therefore a matter of quite considerable complexity. On the one hand, he himself simply loved it, as a motif in stories, and saw it as meeting a crucial imaginative need in modern society, which was of some benefit to Christianity, as it was to any religious faith. On the other hand, he was also aware, if belatedly, of a long hostility to, and suspicion of, magic in Christian tradition, which drew on strong and ancient roots. This was offset in turn, however, by other ancient and medieval texts, and a strong folkloric tradition, which not only

¹⁹ Rateliff, *History of the Hobbit*, 28-53.

²⁰ This is Túvo or Tü, in J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Book of Lost Tales*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London: Unwin, 1983), 232-5.

²¹ As in the letter to Robert Murray in 1954. *Letters*, 202.

²² Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales*, 502-20.

²³ *Völsunga Saga*, ed. H. Halliday Sparling (London: Scott, 1888), 71.

spoke of the existence of inherently magical races, but justified the use of spells by humans in a good cause. These texts, and that tradition, represented some of Tolkien's own greatest sources of pleasure and inspiration. I have previously suggested that Tolkien's fiction ultimately rested on three main, and different, traditions: the Christian, the pagan and the fairy-tale.²⁴ Much of the time they co-existed in harmony in his own creations, but occasionally there were tensions between them, and these became greater after the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* began, and he became more self-conscious about his writing. This essay aims to substantiate that view further, but it has also taken further another major point that I have made before, that it is precisely the co-existence of these different elements in his work that provides its sheer richness and complexity.

²⁴ Hutton, "The Pagan Tolkien."