

Found in Translation: Sources and Character Triads in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*

In *The Silmarillion*, J.R.R. Tolkien uses the idea of translation, the blending of orality and textuality, and the borrowing and adaptation of mythological sources to create a story that is at once ancient and new. To observe the way in which oral epic and myth may be adapted to suit a textual culture, one would do well to examine Tolkien's borrowing of myths from a primarily oral culture in his construction of a literary text. Oral epic usually contains inconsistencies that are unacceptable to modern audiences, who require of a text consistency, organization, and applicability to the known world for its acceptance.¹ However, adapting oral epic into the realm of modern literature can be accomplished, as Tolkien has proven, through careful study of language use in both oral culture and modern textual culture. Furthermore, it is important to note that along with his aim to create a new mythology by modifying Old Norse myths, Tolkien also adapts the languages of his myth sources to create a discourse unique to his mythology. Tolkien adapts his sources to make his myth more acceptable to an audience aware of Christian sensibilities; this modification allows him to use the Norse myths that so fascinated him while at the same time avoiding the overwhelming sense of paganism inherent in his sources and in direct conflict with his Catholic beliefs. In addition, Tolkien combines his borrowings from Norse myth with borrowings from Biblical sources.² He achieves unification by creating a triad composed of a character from Norse myth, a character from Biblical literature, and his own character, which exists as a moderation of the other two. As such, Tolkien's adaptation of Biblical and Old Norse myth centers on two important literary considerations: adequacy and acceptability.³ This melding helps Tolkien achieve a mythology that is both adequate as myth

and acceptable to modern audiences. Although Tolkien's stories are often thought to be Christian, historical, or ecological allegory ⁴, and while this may be a tempting conclusion at which to arrive considering Tolkien's use of Christian mythological sources, Tolkien often denied the intentional use of allegory, and even directly stated his dislike for it. ⁵ What I argue, then, is not that Tolkien uses Christian sources to create an allegorical myth, but that he translates from disparate sources in a way that has made the mythological creation story in *The Silmarillion* coincide with the medieval view of translation as making a text fit not only language, but also culture, time, and people.

Before Tolkien's adaptation of Norse mythological traditions can be examined, his use of language as a tool to facilitate their translation and adaptation in *The Silmarillion* must be considered. ⁶ According to original manuscript information given by Christopher Tolkien in his commentary on *The Book of Lost Tales*, Tolkien often wrote parts of his original drafts, usually the titles, in Old English (*Book of Lost Tales I*, 25, 151). This literal translation of his work from Old English to Elvish indicates Tolkien's awareness of sources and his desire to utilize and modify those sources in creating his own material. Furthermore, it demonstrates that Tolkien saw literal translation of language as a way to establish the ideas of origin and adaptation in his narrative. In the evolution from *The Book of Lost Tales* to *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien uses the character Eriol, a journeying man who has come upon the land of Faery, as a mediator of language and story between Faery and the Anglo-Saxon world. In the same way, Tolkien himself serves as the mediator between Anglo-Saxon England and the modern world. ⁷ Tolkien can assume Eriol's role as a mediator once translation and adaptation from Faery to Old English are made; thus, Eriol and the Old English pieces of the story are faded out in the final stage of the story's evolution, *The Silmarillion*.

The adaptation and translation of language also appears within Tolkien's elvish language. In *The Book of Lost Tales I*, a door-ward in The Cottage of Lost Play speaks to Eriol of the numerous languages he has learned: "and yet have I grey hairs in the study of all the tongues of the Valar and of Eldar" (*The Book of Lost Tales I*, 43). Later in the book, Christopher Tolkien comments on the linguistic differences in the speeches of the Teleri, Solosimpi, and Inwir, and on the merging of those dialects in "the 'tongue of the island elves'" (*The Book of Lost Tales I*, 45). This attention to the tendency of language to evolve, separate, and merge emphasizes not only the importance Tolkien placed on the study of language, but also the significance of Tolkien's use of this ever-changing, oral aspect of culture to create in his stories the requisite consistency for a textual audience.

One indication of Tolkien's adaptation of Old Norse myth is in his own admittance that "he sometimes felt that he was not so much writing stories as discovering something already written" (Hammond 20). This idea, however, presents a sense of anonymity, just as in Old Norse and Old English oral epic, in which authorship is not easily identified.⁸ One of the most important aspects of Tolkien's adaptation of Norse myth was his awareness of the modern audience's need for an identifiable author and source. Again, Tolkien addresses this issue of authorship by creating a mediator between Faery and the Anglo-Saxon world, and subsequently, between the Anglo-Saxons and modern England. As a result, the modern audience is given a sense of who told the story as well as who wrote it down. This blends the orality of traditional Old Norse myth—the fairies and elves relating to Eriol tales of their history—with the textuality of modern literature—a sense of authorship and a version written by one author.⁹

In addition to the need for modernization and civilization in a modern text, there exists for most literary academics the basic knowledge that oral epic contains inconsistencies that are

startling and unacceptable to the modern population. From this knowledge, as well as from his career as a philologist, sprang Tolkien's desire to make his myth organized and consistent, as he says himself in a letter to a reader of *The Lord of the Rings*: "The legends have to be worked over [...] and made consistent" (*Letters*, 333). Not only did each legend have to be consistent within itself in order to be acceptable, but it also needed to be consistent within the context of *The Silmarillion* in its entirety and with *The Lord of the Rings* as another offshoot of the tale. This practice of writing and re-writing each legend and individual aspect of both *The Silmarillion* and *The Lord of the Rings* was itself a mixture of oral culture and textual culture. As noted earlier, it was the standard in oral culture for a story to be revised and re-told many times; however, Tolkien's revisions were done as much for the needs of his audience as for his own need for organization. Any mythology that was less than perfectly consistent, at least to the fullest extent possible, would not have been, for Tolkien, an acceptable modern myth.

Tolkien's successful combination of two seemingly incompatible literary cultures is a result of the melding of his passion for established Norse myth with his passion for inventing language and belief in the sub-creative power of words.¹⁰ *The Silmarillion* joins the oral power of words to create a believable sense of antiquity with their equal textual power to create an acceptable narrative for the modern world. With this joining, Tolkien gives the impression of translating ancient works into modern idioms and creates a greater power encompassing both believability and acceptability in order to tell what he surely hoped would be the greatest mythology for England. This joining, however, would not have been possible without the adaptation and translation of language and oral myth-telling tradition, which in turn would have been impossible without Tolkien's awareness of the need for both adequacy and acceptability in a modern mythology.¹¹ Furthermore, Tolkien uses the idea of translation in his creation of an

Elvish language, which provides much of the foundation for the creation of his mythology, thus making adequacy and acceptability applicable to the study of Tolkien's creation of a mythology. All of these aspects were critical to Tolkien's creation of *The Silmarillion* as a successful mythology.

Another indication of Tolkien's modification of traditional oral myth is that, for many years, Tolkien had sole authorship of *The Silmarillion*, and this changed only because the tale was unfinished at his death. As Wayne Hammond notes, "[f]or decades, his mythology was almost entirely a private affair, written, revised, or begun anew as its author wished" (20). Oral myth, conversely, was modified based on the needs both of whoever might be telling the tale at a given time and the audience hearing the tale. While this constant revision seems to be consistent with Tolkien's method of writing, the major difference is that, over time, oral myths had many authors, whereas the creation of *The Silmarillion* was in the hands of only one author until Tolkien's death.

Tolkien also identified not only what is commonly referred to as England's need for her own mythology, but, as Tolkien stated in a 1967 interview with Henry Resnick, also the need for that mythology to be something "which we can bring up to our own grade of assessment" (Burns 163). Tolkien knew that in order to make a mythology acceptable to himself and modern audiences, the characters needed to fit his audience's conception of ideals inherent to Christianity and modernity. To help achieve acceptability, Tolkien modified the idea of a pantheon of gods. Instead of using a pantheon, Tolkien creates both an implicitly supreme god, Ilúvatar, and what can be considered an order of archangels, the Ainur. The Ainur, whose name means "The Holy Ones," are "the first beings created by Ilúvatar," and although they are a step below Ilúvatar in power, they each have some degree of power to create and/or heal (*Silmarillion* 314). This

hierarchy is consistent with that seen in Christianity. In *The Silmarillion*, Tolkien uses the Ainur to depict a separate plane of being from that of man and an image of creation that manages to maintain both an adequate rendering of Old Norse myth and an acceptable monotheistic creation story, as required by a largely Christian culture. The audience for which Tolkien wrote, while not entirely composed of practicing Christians, was largely familiar with the Church of England, and most people would have been familiar with Christianity and its teachings. Thus, while Tolkien knew that Old Norse myth adequately adapted the style typical of mythology, he also knew that because of its lack of author, the presence of a pantheon of gods, and other pagan ideals, the Old Norse myths would not be acceptable as up-to-date or recognizable as quality “modern” literature by most members of a modern audience. Because of this need for a higher degree of acceptability, Tolkien adapted the Old Norse myths of which he was so fond and moderated them with Biblical myth in an effort to adequately represent the Norse mythic style while adding Christian elements to increase its acceptability as a prose narrative to his “mythology for England”.

No words seem more appropriate to a consideration of J.R.R. Tolkien’s combination and mediation of mythology than those of T.A. Shippey in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*: “However fanciful Tolkien’s creation of Middle-earth was, he did not think that he was *entirely* making it up. He was ‘reconstructing’, he was harmonizing contradictions in his source-texts” (xv). Tolkien’s ultimate goal was to create a mythology that would appeal to a modern audience, and he sought to achieve this through the combination of pagan and Christian aspects. These two sources could temper one another and assist Tolkien in creating characters that drew from each side, and yet were more moderate than either. This practice helped Tolkien to create a mythology that contained both an adequate representation of Norse myth and an acceptable

rendering of Christian myth. Several of Tolkien's characters from *The Silmarillion* can be placed within a triad consisting of two source characters—one Norse, one biblical—and Tolkien's moderated character. The characters in each triad can then be placed on a spectrum that defines their places within the triad, with the Norse and Biblical source characters lying at either end of the spectrum and Tolkien's moderated character in the middle.

The first triad—one which especially encompasses both Tolkien's adaptation of oral literature to written text and his use of biblical and Norse myth sources for moderation—is composed of Tolkien's Eriol, the Norse figure of Gangleri, and John, the author of the book of Revelation.¹² Each of these figures represents a mediator between a divine source of information and the world of men. Tolkien's *The Book of Lost Tales* features the character of Eriol—described as “a traveller from far countries”—who arrives in Tol Eressëa and is told by the descendant's of the Eldar about the beginnings of the world (*The Book of Lost Tales* 1). As such, Eriol becomes a mediator between Faerie and Anglo-Saxon England. Likewise, in Snorri's *Prose Edda*, a king named Gylfi disguises himself as “Gangleri ‘the wanderer’ and travel[s] to the world of the gods in search for information” about the origins of all things (Flieger 186). Thus, Snorri uses the character of Gangleri to provide his readers with an account of the Norse origin and end-time myths. In Biblical myth, God sent “his angel to his servant John, who in telling all that he saw ha[d] borne witness to the word of God” (Revelation 1: 1-2). In these revelations from God, John is told how the end of the world will come to be. Considering each of these stories, one can observe that Tolkien's mythical traveler is a moderated version of the Norse figure, Gangleri, and the prophet John. Eriol, like Gangleri, is described as a traveler, and all three men are given information from a god or group of gods—or, in Eriol's case, the descendents of god-figures. One important difference between the revelations given to each man

is the type of information given. While Gangleri is told about both the beginning and end of the world, John is given information strictly pertaining to end times, and Eriol is given information about only the creation and history of the world up to present day. These revelation patterns place Tolkien's Eriol as a moderation of the Norse and Biblical characters.

The second triad concerns Tolkien's Melkor, the Biblical figure of Lucifer, and the Norse god Loki, who are all sources of discord and, to some extent, evil in their respective worlds. In the beginning of *The Silmarillion*, Melkor is a mischievous character who initially causes only minor disturbances, in the grander scheme at least, and who gradually worsens and becomes an evil being, cast out from the other Ainur. Melkor is a direct source of evil for men, elves, and for the Ainur, and through his discord and evil creations, he causes the Great Battle and the end of the Second Age. Also, Melkor's name is changed to Morgoth by the Ainur:

Last of all is set the name of Melkor, He who arises in Might. But that name he has forfeited; and the Noldor, who among the Elves suffered most from his malice, will not utter it, and they name him Morgoth, the Dark Enemy of the World. (*Silmarillion*, 31)

The biblical source for Tolkien's Melkor is, of course, Lucifer. Like Melkor, Lucifer experiences a fall from grace and, after this fall, his name is changed and he becomes more widely known as Satan; the original, Lucifer, means "light-bringing," and his new name, Satan, means "adversary" (Oxford English Dictionary). After his fall from Heaven, Satan descends into Hell, "where he commands all" his fellow fallen angels (Robbins 129). He also continues his evil deeds through these other fallen angels—his Demons. The Norse mythological source for Melkor is Loki, the mischievous Aesir who constantly causes problems for the other Aesir. Unlike Melkor, Loki is not a direct source of evil for man, but rather only for the gods, and he too creates greater evils. Akin to Melkor's Shelob, Balrogs, and Orcs, Loki literally creates his monstrous children, the Fenriswolf, the Midgard Serpent, and Hel.

Furthermore, Loki's deeds escalate in seriousness and end with his leading the Army of Evil at Ragnarok. Another difference that distinguishes Loki from Melkor is that, although he is occasionally referred to as Lopt, Loki's name never changes. This is because the phenomenon of the name change, as seen in the case of Melkor and Lucifer, is indicative of a character's change toward pure evil and denotes "the state from which [the character] has fallen," and while he is eventually unable to overcome his wayward tendencies, Loki's deeds are largely mischievous rather than purely evil (Maas 410). If these three characters were to be put into a spectrum of the measurement of evil, Lucifer would be at one end, Loki at the other, and Melkor in the middle. Melkor cannot be said to possess as much evil as Lucifer because, as Ilúvatar is not explicitly given the power and placement equal to that of God, Lucifer's wrong in defying God outweighs Melkor's defiance of Ilúvatar. However, because Ilúvatar is given the role of Creator and is consistent with the idea of "The One" often seen in world religions, Melkor's defiance of Ilúvatar outweighs Loki's acts of mischievousness toward the pantheon of gods in Norse myth.

A third triad is composed of the God figures of *The Silmarillion* and Tolkien's two sources. All three figures, Ilúvatar, Odin, and God, are known by many names. Furthermore, there are many similarities between the creation stories in *The Silmarillion* and biblical myth.

Tolkien's Ilúvatar creates through thought and song:

In the beginning Eru, the One, who in the Elvish tongue is named Ilúvatar, made the Ainur of his thought; and they made a great Music before him. In this Music the World was begun; for Ilúvatar made visible the song of the Ainur, and they beheld it as a light in the darkness...Therefore Ilúvatar gave to their vision Being, and set it amid the Void, and the Secret Fire was sent to burn at the heart of the World. (*Silmarillion* 25)

This creation story from *The Silmarillion* bears much resemblance to the biblical creation story, not only in structure, but also in the importance of words as a tool of creation. In the biblical creation story, God also speaks the world into being, where once there was but a void:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a vast waste, darkness covered the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the surface of the water. God said, "Let there be light", and there was light; and God saw the light was good, and he separated light from darkness. (Genesis 1:1-4)

In both of these stories, also, the replacement of a void with the creations of the God-figure are important, as is the separation of light and darkness. This separation is important because it further emphasizes the distinction between the creations of the supreme being from those distorted sub-creations of Melkor and Satan. The third God-figure, Odin, is unlike the other two in that he is not the ultimate God, nor did he create the world. Furthermore, while Ilúvatar and God are both characterized as wise and merciful, "Odin is characterized by his obsessive quest for wisdom" and his constant action for personal gain (*Edda* 39). In this triad, God stands at one extreme end of the spectrum of power, Odin at the other, and Ilúvatar in the middle. Ilúvatar, like God, is wise and merciful; however, he is not explicitly given the name of Ultimate God, and thus, Ilúvatar represents a unification of characteristics of both God and Odin.

The fourth triad presents the sources of the warrior-savior figure. Tolkien's warrior-savior in *The Silmarillion* is Tulkas, and his two source characters are the Norse figure of Thor and the Christian figure of St. Michael. In *The Silmarillion*, Tulkas is established as "[g]reatest [among the Valar] in deeds of strength and prowess" (28). Furthermore, the first chapter of the *Quenta Silmarillion* portrays Tulkas routing Melkor from Arda during the First War: "So came Tulkas the Strong, whose anger passes like a mighty wind, scattering cloud and

darkness before it; and Melkor fled before his wrath and laughter, and forsook Arda, and there was peace for a long age” (35). Later, after Melkor creates his stronghold, Angband, Tulkas is once more called forth to assist in the vanquishing of Melkor:

Then Tulkas stood forth as champion of the Valar and wrestled with him, and cast him upon his face; and he was bound with the chain Angainor that Aulë had wrought, and led captive; and the world had peace for a long age. (51)

Each time that Tulkas is called forth, he triumphs over evil, and there is “peace for a long age” (51). In this way, Tulkas is reminiscent of Saint Michael who, in the Bible, is described as “the great captain, who stands guarding your fellow countrymen” (Daniel 12:1). The *Blickling Homilies*, a collection of tenth-century English sermons, includes a homily given at the dedication of Saint Michael’s Church. In this homily, it is explained that Michael, as Tulkas and other Valar also have done, has chosen Earth:

“I am the archangel of heaven’s King, and I ever stand in his presence. I tell thee now that I especially love this place here on earth, and I have chosen it above all others, and will also show by all those tokens that befall there that I am especially the creator and guardian of that place” (*Blickling Homilies* 200).¹³

The job of the Archangel Michael is fourfold: to rescue the souls of the faithful from the power of the enemy; to be the champion of God’s people (e.g. as a patron saint of the Church and of orders of knights such as the Knights of St. Michael’s Wing); to call away from earth and bring men’s souls to judgment; and to fight against Satan (Holweck 275-77). The final aspect of Michael’s job is further depicted in the Book of Revelation:

Then war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but he was too weak, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent who led the whole world astray, whose name is the Devil, or Satan; he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels with him. (Rev. 12:7-9)

The previous description of Tulkas' binding of Melkor with the chain Angainor bears a striking resemblance to this description of Michael's defeat of Satan. The Norse mythological source character for Tulkas is Thor, the arch enemy of Loki. Like Tulkas, Thor is the one who has to vanquish Loki when he is misbehaving and causing trouble for the Aesir. An example of Thor's power over Loki is presented in "Loki's Quarrel," found in *The Edda*. In this story, Loki forces his way into a feast to which he has not been invited and proceeds to insult each of the other gods in turn. Only when "Thor [who is absent at the beginning of the feast] returns from his journeying in Giantland and threatens Loki with his hammer, Miöllnir" does Loki agree to leave (84). In a representation of the spectrum of the righteousness of these three characters, Saint Michael would be at one end, Thor at the other, and Tulkas in the middle. Unlike the Archangel Michael, Tulkas is not a pure and saintly warrior-savior, but neither is he a bloodthirsty, carousing god.

The fifth and final triad is made of Tolkien's Aulë, the biblical character, Abraham, and the Norse mythological character of Sigmund, each of whom must be willing to sacrifice a son or creation. In *The Silmarillion*, Aulë is one of the Ainur, and his only faults are impatience and a desire to create:

For so greatly did Aulë desire the coming of the Children, to have learners to whom he could teach his lore and his crafts, that he was unwilling to await the fulfillment of the designs of Ilúvatar. (43)

Because Aulë's desire to create is inspired only by the desire to teach new beings about the beauty of Ilúvatar's works, Aulë is tested rather than punished. The biblical story of Abraham and his son Isaac happens much the same way. Just as Aulë is the father of the nation of newly created dwarves, Abraham is the father of many nations: "I shall make you into a great nation" (Genesis 12:5). In the story of Abraham, however, God tests Abraham by directly commanding

him to sacrifice his son: “Take your son, your one and only son Isaac whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him as a sacrifice on one of the heights which I shall show you” (Genesis 22:2). Abraham immediately obeys God, thus proving himself and, just before Abraham kills Isaac, God stops him. As in the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, Ilúvatar questions Aulë’s creation of the Dwarves, and Aulë in turn offers to destroy them to please Ilúvatar: “As a child to his father, I offer to thee these things, the work of the hands which thou hast made. Do with them what thou wilt” (*Silmarillion* 43). At the point just before Aulë destroys his Dwarves with a hammer, however, Ilúvatar stops him. This is an example of Ilúvatar’s God-like mercy and compassion. The Norse source story does not end as happily as do the other two, nor is it a matter of obedience to one’s God or creator, but to another human being. In this story, Sigmund is directed by his sister, Signy, to kill her two sons, who have failed to prove themselves worthy companions for Sigmund:

Sigmund said that he thought himself no closer to having a companion, even though the boy was there with him. Signy answered: “Then take the boy and kill him. He need not live any longer.” And so he did. (*The Saga of the Volsungs* 42)

This scene repeats itself with Sigmund killing the second of Signy’s sons at Signy’s behest. Later, the problem of a companion for Sigmund is solved when Signy sleeps with her brother and gives him a son, Sinfjotli. While Tolkien uses the incest theme in the section of *The Silmarillion* devoted to the story of Túrin Turambar, who unknowingly marries his sister, it is a different aspect of the story that will be considered for this triad: the secret creation of a son to serve as companion. In *The Silmarillion*, Aulë creates his “sons”, the Dwarves, to serve as pupils. Once more, the biblical character would lie at one extreme of the spectrum of severity, with the Norse character at the other and Tolkien’s moderated character in the middle.

Although critical reception of his stories has been mixed, I believe Tolkien does succeed in creating a modern mythical creation story in *The Silmarillion*. His combination of textuality and oral tradition help create a balance that makes *The Silmarillion* both recognizable as a mythology and understandable to a modern audience. As Shippey notes, “Many people have remarked, and even more have felt, that *The Lord of the Rings* is in some way or other a ‘mythic’ work” (179). As the creation story that lays the ground for *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion* can also be included in this statement. *The Silmarillion* certainly fulfills what Shippey asserts is the main function of a myth: “to resolve contradictions, to act as a mediation between or explanation of things which seem to be incompatible” (179).

Notes

¹ See Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 1-15.

² The A-text of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, annal 855, demonstrates the familiarity people have long had with the combination of Anglo-Saxon Christian culture with Norse pagan culture. In the lineage given in this text, one can find both Christian, Anglo-Saxon names and Norse names, such as Woden, intertwined into the ancestry of one man. See also Wrenn, p. 28.

³ Toury, pp. 116-117.

⁴ See Shippey, pp. 161-168.

⁵ See the Forward to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, pp. 9-14.

⁶ Tolkien, as a philologist, would have been familiar with the ideas of translation, but an excellent example of his awareness of the various aspects of translation can be found in “Sigelwara Land”, pp. 183-196.

⁷ For more on this, see Drout, “A Mythology for Anglo-Saxon England”, specifically pp. 230-231

⁸ Such stories were most often transmitted orally, with no written form upon which an author could place his or her name. For more on this issue, see Ong, pp. 17-20.

⁹ For more on the oral tradition in early Norse myth and storytelling traditions, see Faulkes’ introduction to the *Edda*, pp. xi-xxiii.

¹⁰ Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories”, pp. 33-99.

¹¹ The terms “adequate” and “acceptable” as used in this essay come from modern translation theory, and they pertain to the importance of ensuring that the translation is not only true to the source, but also understandable and applicable to the target audience.

¹² For more on the relationship between Eriol and Gangleri, see Fliieger, “The Footsteps of Ælfwine”, pp. 186-187.

¹³ Tolkien would undoubtedly have been familiar with this text, but for further information on this idea, see Ælfric’s “Dedication of the Church of St. Michael” (Thorpe, pp. 502-519).

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