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Lectio praecursoria:
Constructive Mythopoetics In J. R. R. Tolkien's *Legendarium*

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John Ronald Reuel Tolkien is the father of modern fantasy. Tolkien was a writer and scholar, a
professor at Oxford University and the co-founder of the literary association "The Inklings". Today
Tolkien is known as the writer of *The Lord of the Rings*, the most influential work on the genre. *The
Oxford Companion to English Literature* (352) has called him "the greatest influence within the
fantasy genre". His position in the genre of fantasy literature is monolithic.

In my doctoral dissertation, I discuss constructive mythopoetics in Tolkien's *legendarium*,
the logics and elements on which Tolkien's texts and his fantasy world (Arda, and Middle-earth
inside it) is constructed. The central focus of the dissertation is on the logics of constructive
mythopoetics. In this case, mythopoetics means creative myth-making.[1] The term itself has been
connected with authors of fantasy who integrate mythological themes and archetypes into fiction. J.
R. R. Tolkien's creative work could be seen as a central example of such practise.

Legendarium, another important term mentioned in the title, refers to Tolkien's writing
concerning his fictional fantasy world. Tolkien used the word himself in a letter to Milton Waldman
in 1951 (Tolkien, *The Silmarillion* xvii). For me, all Tolkien's texts that deal with Middle-earth, both
the legends of Elves (e.g. *The Silmarillion* and *The History of Middle-earth* -series) and the fictional
history of the Hobbits (*The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*), form a complete and coherent
legendarium. These texts also function as primary sources for my dissertation.

My research argues for a reading of Tolkien's fiction that shows that it is possible to discern
a mythopoetic **code** in Tolkien's *legendarium*. My hypothesis is that Tolkien's mythopoetic fiction
aims to be coherent on the levels of languages, myths, and inter- and intratextual background. This
coherence can be found throughout the various texts and fragments of Tolkien's fiction. From the
cosmogonical creation myth of *The Silmarillion*, to the fairy-story lightness of *The Hobbit* and the

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[1] Mythopoetics could be seen as reimagining of myths and mythical situations, for example such constitutive myths as the creation
myth or myths of the apocalypse. In my dissertation, I discuss various mythopoetic examples from Tolkien's legendarium, for
example creation, mortality/immortality, and reimagining of the myth of Atlantis.

quest fantasy of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien's fiction has its roots in the mythopoetic logics of his theory of creative writing (or *myth-making*). Tolkien is the *sub-creator*; he is creating myths and building his own world. For Tolkien, God is the primary creator, but the author is the (sub-)creator of his own creation.

In my dissertation, I trace the inner timeline of Tolkien's *legendarium*. Starting from the creation of the world, I move on to the long fall and struggle and to the end of the world. When discussing the theme of creation, I focus on the concept of creation on the intratextual level of Tolkien's *legendarium* as well as on Tolkien's aesthetics of creative work. In the end of the dissertation, I turn my attention also to the creative work of the reader.

The theoretical approach of the dissertation is influenced by both Northrop Frye's constructive theory of literature and Benjamin Harshav's theory of constructive poetics. I discuss the creative methods of speculative historical epic and the dichotomies of beginning and end, good and evil, mortality and immortality, spiritual and physical, and visibility and invisibility, as well as how these elements manifest themselves in Tolkien's mythopoetic vision. The structure of Tolkien's constructive mythopoetics is illuminated through the grand concepts of the Creation, the Existence, the Fall and the Struggle.

The great inner story, the mythopoetic code, of Tolkien's *legendarium* begins with music – the Music of the Ainur – played by the divine spirits, the Ainur, made from the creator's thoughts, and executing (at first, it seems) the creator's exact wishes. The timeline of Tolkien's *legendarium* reaches from the beginning of his "cosmos" to its destruction – from start to finish, although this is not exactly evident in his central fictional works. The main popular works, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, portray only a tiny temporal segment of Tolkien's *legendarium*.

The table 1 below demonstrates that the timeline of Tolkien's *legendarium* is linear and (in a way) Biblical. It begins with the creation of the world and ends with its destruction, and hints at an apocalyptic future where everything will be healed and unmarred again. The image reflects my research logic in the dissertation. I begin from the creation of the world and chronologically move on to the long fall and struggle.

Table 1. The Timeline of Tolkien's *Legendarium*

Era	Theme	Active Inhabitants	Source material in the *legendarium*
Creation	"Arda Unmarred" & The Song of Ainur	Eru Ilúvatar and Ainur (Valar/Maiar)	"Ainulindalë"
Building the World	The First great cosmological battles between Good and Evil	Ainur (Valar/Maiar)	"Valaquenta" and the beginning of "Quenta Silmarillion"
The Fall	"Arda Marred"	Ainur (Valar/Maiar) Elves	"Quenta Silmarillion"
The Struggle	"Arda Marred" and "The Long Defeat"	Elves Men (Hobbits)	"Akallabêth", *The Lord of the Rings* (*The Hobbit*)
The End	The Second Music & "Arda Healed"	All	*The History of Middle-earth* (e.g. *Morgoth's Ring*)

The table 1 above demonstrates my reading of Tolkien's *legendarium*. The constructive structure of the legendarium follows the given order: 1) Creation, 2) Building the World, 3) The Fall, 4) The Struggle, and 5) The End. Thus, it is a coherent cosmological account that starts with the creation of the world and ends with an apocalyptic vision of the end of the world. A quite similar structure can be seen in the Christian *Bible*, where in the Old Testament, God is active and Creation is described in detail. In the Christian New Testament, God's activity is seen through the incarnation of Christ and through the results of Christ's preaching. This is the construct that I discuss in the main chapters of the dissertation.

Chapter two discusses the themes of "The Creation" and "The Existence". The chapter focuses on both the *legendarium*'s intratextual creation myth and the built-in cosmology of Tolkien's works, but also on Tolkien's creative methods and aesthetic theory. The creation myth of Tolkien's fantasy world is examined in comparison with Plato's *Timaeus*. The intertextual similarities are as follows: 1) The world is made by a good Creator, and in both cases, the Creator subsequently does not affect the created world directly, but through the actions of his own offspring. 2) Plato's model of two levels has similarities to the cosmology of Tolkien's fantasy world. Most importantly, this comes up concerning the dichotomies between visible and invisible, and physical and spiritual. 3) In Tolkien's cosmology, the world is created from the model of an original vision. So the natural world itself is a copy of the original idea of the world, as it is in Plato's *Timaeus*.

Also, there is a hierarchical structure of living beings, a so-called *scala naturae* or a chain of being, in Tolkien's *legendarium*. In this hierarchical chain of being, where some races and creatures are higher or lower in hierarchy than others, highest is Eru Ilúvatar, the creator god of Middle-earth. After Eru come the Ainur, The Holy Ones. After the spiritual creatures, come the races that Eru had created, which in *The Silmarillion* are called The Children of Ilúvatar. They are Elves and Men. Elves are considered to be higher in the hierarchy than Men because they are created first and resemble more the Ainur. After the Children of Ilúvatar come other intellectual and rational beings in Tolkien's chain of being, such as Hobbits and Dwarves.

Then again, from the internal perspective, the central focus is on Tolkien's aesthetics and Tolkien's creative method: the sub-creation, most evident in his essay *On Fairy-Stories*. Tolkien's aesthetics are seen in the continuum of the tradition of such creative theorists as Sir Philip and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Also, I discuss the question of historical poetics in Tolkien's *legendarium*. Tolkien uses creative methods that can be compared to the methods of historical novels, since Tolkien's intratextual references – references between his own texts – create an illusion of (fictional) older eras. Tolkien uses these methods in a quite humorous way, since Tolkien's *legendarium's* seemingly factual sources are created by the author as historical documents written by for example Elves of Hobbits.

Chapter three focuses on the central themes of "The Fall and the Struggle" . There, I discuss the functions of good and evil, and heroic, mythical heroes in the *legendarium*. One of the interesting mythical heroes discussed here is Túrin Turambar, whose character is seen as a re-imagining of Kullervo from Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*.

My three chosen examples of constructive mythopoeia in Tolkien's *legendarium* are: 1) Númenor as a re-imagined myth of Atlantis, 2) The motif of The Ring, and, 3) familiarisation and defamiliarisation of Myth.

The first example here is Númenor the Fallen, from "the Akallabêth", the fourth part of *The Silmarillion*. Akallabêth is a story about Middle-earth's greatest Human kingdom, Númenor, whose inhabitants after thousands of years grow in power and become proud and forget the morality of their actions. The story tells how the kingdom was destroyed by a divine judgment. There, I consider this re-imagined myth of Atlantis in the light of the overall theme of Tolkien's *legendarium*, as a story of fall from greatness. This seemingly Catholic (and Platonic) view of "the

world of change" – that everything "fades" – could also be seen as the overarching theme of *The Silmarillion* and Tolkien's *legendarium*.

Secondly, I discuss the myth of the One Ring in Tolkien's *legendarium*. As a major intertextual field of reference, I discuss the Platonic ring myth, The Ring of Gyges, from the second book of the *Republic*. In Plato's story, the shepherd Gyges finds a golden ring which makes its user invisible. After gaining the power of invisibility, Gyges loses the morality of his actions. Therefore, Plato's myth has similarities to Tolkien's motif of The Ring also on the level of morality. In Tolkien's *legendarium*, The Ring corrupts everyone who uses it; even the Hobbits, although they prove to be most resilient against its powers.

Thirdly, I turn my attention to this resilient race, The Hobbits. My main point is that Hobbits are characters that the readers can identify with, but, at the same time work are "alien" to the surrounding milieu, the Middle-earth outside the Shire, the idyllic home of the Hobbits.

As a tool to integrate myths and legends for contemporary readers, Tolkien uses "modern" literary devices, such as English language and choosing contemporary protagonists in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. In *The Silmarillion*, for example, where the protagonists are harder to find, this familiarising perspective disappears and the book becomes unreadable for the most parts of the reading audience.

The questions of familiarisations (*Heimlich*) and defamiliarisations (*uncanny*, *Das Unheimliche*) become relevant, and it could be researched how these activate the myths for contemporary readers.

That is also the case in Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, where the Hobbit protagonists move from idyllic and homely (*familiar*) milieu of the Shire to the surrounding, sinister world, where they sometimes feel themselves to be strangers.

The Hobbit protagonists could be seen as an answer to the question of familiarisation in Tolkien's *legendarium*. In *The Hobbit,* the main character Bilbo Baggins resembles "homely", early middle-aged Englishman living comfortably alone in his bachelor house. Bilbo is living in the idyllic, rural countryside of the Shire, which in close ways echoes English countryside of the 18th or 19th century before the industrial revolution. In the story, Bilbo is forced out from his comfortable livelihood in a dangerous and adventurous quest with wizard Gandalf and the dwarves to claim back the dwarves' treasure which the evil dragon Smaug has stolen.

In the book, revealingly titled *There and Back Again*, Bilbo Baggins returns to his idyllic home as a changed and transformed character. The idyllic countryside of the Shire resembles England, but the other milieus in the book have older and more mythical appearances. Danger is lurking everywhere, and even if the book is written in a fairy-story mode it has a kind of a medieval tone in its story-telling.

The familiarisation of pre-modern, medieval and mythological myths, locations and milieus' is even plainer in *The Lord of the Rings*. The book starts as a sequel to *The Hobbit*, but the tone of writing changes early on to more adult and more epic style. The main protagonist in *The Lord of the Rings* is once a again a Hobbit, Frodo Baggins, who starts a dangerous and difficult quest with his fellow hobbits Sam Gamgee, Peregrin "Pippin" Took, and Meriadoc "Merry" Brandybuck. In the book, the four hobbits represent contemporary Englishmen, simplified and caricatured. This way, the reader relates to the unfamiliar surroundings from the view of the Hobbit characters.

As the unfamiliar surroundings and milieus, and Tolkien's horror elements of beasts, monsters and mythological creatures evoke a defamilarising effect in the reader, the characters of Hobbits acts as the familiarising elements, or "middlemen".

I suggest that without the "middle-men" of Hobbits, without those familiarising characters for the contemporary reading audience, J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* would not have become the cornerstone of 20th century fantasy, or any fiction, and Tolkien would not have become the father of fantasy literature that he is today.

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