

The Arboreal Foundations of Stewardship in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*

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Introduction

In literature of all times, forests have been used as places beyond human control where characters lose themselves, are transformed by the experience and emerge with a better understanding of themselves and the world. Already in the oldest known literary work in history, the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* (ca. 2500-200 BC), the forest is pictured as a space beyond culture that the hero needs to come to terms with before making further progress. In Virgil's *Aeneid* (29-19 BC) the underworld is described as a bewildering forest, and much later, in medieval Europe, Dante sets the scene for *The Divine Comedy* (1320) using the image of the forest as a symbol of the existential crisis affecting the narrator-protagonist, who has lost his bearings. In 1784, one of the foundational literary texts of North American culture, *The Adventures of Coronel Daniel Boone*, has the eponymous hero abandon an incipient civilization founded on agriculture to undergo a series of trials in the forested wilderness of Kentucky, so that he can return with an enriched sense of what it means to be American. The forest as a literary trope figures in all ages and all over the world, acting as a backdrop for the universal experience of crisis and return to reason (Bettelheim 1991, 94).

British fantastic narratives are no exception. In the well-known English fourteenth-century romances *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo* and *Pearl*, forests feature as the setting for the strange and unsettling adventures that befall the protagonists, and Malory's compilation of Arthurian romance, *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1485), assigns a similar role to them. In Elizabethan times, supernatural beings and magic abound in the forests of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*, while in the nineteenth century, George Macdonald and William Morris perpetuated this legacy in original fairy tales and pseudomedieval romances such as *Phantastes* (1858) and *The Wood Beyond the World* (1894). This use of the forest is still present, for instance in Robert Holdstock's modern fantasy classic *Mythago Wood* (1984) where an English forest allows the protagonist a passage into mythical realities of the past.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's literature, one of the most important features of Middle-earth¹ is forests and trees, and not only because of their ubiquitous presence in the world. In Tolkien's *legendarium*, trees and forests take on much more prominent roles than merely as a symbolic backdrop for the transformation of the protagonists; here, woods and individual trees are depicted as autonomous to an extent that goes far beyond previous literary renderings of this species.²

¹ For a thorough discussion of nature in Middle-earth, see Simonson (2015).

² In one of his letters, Tolkien states (however uncategorically) that this was one of his aims in writing about the Ents in *The Lord of the Rings*: "[the Ents'] part in the story is due, I think, to my bitter disappointment and disgust from schooldays with the shabby use made in Shakespeare of the coming of 'Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane Hill' [in

It is perhaps no surprise that trees should occupy the central stage in the dramatic unfolding of Tolkien's tales. In his *Letters* he makes several references to his particular love for trees—one frequently quoted instance of this is his claim that "I am (obviously) much in love with plants and above all trees and always have been; and find human maltreatment of them as hard to bear as some find ill treatment of animals", and on another occasion he claims that "In all my works I take the part of trees as against all their enemies" ([1981] 2000, 220 and 419, respectively). Furthermore, in many of Tolkien's drawings, conceived as artistic accompaniments to his literary works, trees abound. In their pioneering study of Tolkien's achievements as an illustrator, *J.R.R. Tolkien: Artist and Illustrator*, Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull conclude that, apart from mountains, the predominating pictorial element in his art were trees, "with which he was even more enamoured. He incorporated them not only into dramatic forest scenes [...] but also in quieter and more decorative pictures" (1998, 64). One of the drawings belonging to the latter category is entitled 'The Tree of Amalion' and Hammond and Scull (65) relate it to Tolkien's one allegorical tale, *Leaf by Niggle*, in which the author describes his own artistic endeavour as the painting of an ever-growing tree with leaves continuously unfolding.

My aim in this article, however, is not to highlight the correspondences between Tolkien's personal life and opinions and the depiction of trees in his literature and art. Rather I wish to focus on the mythical role of trees and forests in the process that defines the interconnected fate of Elves, Men, and the entire physical world, Arda, and to see how this fate is related to the ethical imperative of stewardship of the natural world in Tolkien's world.

Most recent scholarship on nature in Tolkien's work—Brisbois (2005), Campbell (2011), Carroll (2013), Curry (2004), Dickerson and Evans (2006), Dufeu (2005) and Siewers (2005)—, as well as articles and chapters centering specifically on trees in the *legendarium* (Denekamp (2015), Flieger (2000), Light (2003), Saguaro and Cogan Thacker (2013), Maczynska (2015), McGonagill (2015), McMahon and Csaki (2003) adopt the perspectives of ecological and non-anthropocentric ethics, memory and mythography in general, but as of yet the role of trees in the mythical foundations of stewardship in Middle-earth has not been explored. The topic is surely worthy of attention, because the twin destiny of Elves and Men provides the foundation for almost all of the ensuing tales, an arboreal thread running through Tolkien's entire oeuvre. For this purpose I wish to analyse the early sections of *The Silmarillion*, in order to show to what extent trees act as a central component in the process.

One of the basic premises of the human condition, as Tolkien saw it, was the tension between death and immortality (Tolkien [1981] 2000, 246), two opposed existential prerogatives which in his mythology are mainly connected to Men and Elves, respectively. However, through trees as articulations of a combination of

Macbeth]: I longed to devise a setting in which the trees might really march to war" ([1981] 2000, 212). In *The Lord of the Rings*, for instance, Old Man Willow in the Old Forest and the Ents and Huorns of Fangorn are depicted as sentient beings that embody Tolkien's conception of trees as guardians of memory, as well as active agents of change: both Old Man Willow's attack on the hobbits on the banks of the Withywindle, and the destruction of Isengard on behalf of the Ents, are conscious acts of retaliation for previous injuries inflicted by creatures walking on two legs. For an interpretation of trees and forests as metaphors of memory in Tolkien's work, see McGonagill (2015).

spirit and matter that represents the whole of creation, the fate of both races—one doomed to die and the other doomed to live forever—becomes intertwined. In particular, trees teach Elves and Men important lessons concerning the need to perceive the world as a gift of the godhead Ilúvatar to be cherished and carefully nurtured, and they also hint that a forgetfulness of this gift can easily turn into possessiveness and thus run counter to Ilúvatar's designs, causing pain and suffering.

Trees and the conjunction of elements

Trees are not singled out from the beginning of *The Silmarillion* as the most important natural element in Arda, but their role as catalysts of other components of the natural and spiritual world becomes manifest already in the opening sections of the book. Before the Valar (subordinate deities in Tolkien's mythology) descend to Arda, they behold the vision of the world wrought by their music. The descriptions center on the elements, the raw materials³ for future sub-creative work, in which they take great delight:

their hearts rejoiced with light, and their eyes beholding many colours were filled with gladness . . . and they observed the winds and the air, and the matters of which Arda was made, of iron and stone and silver and gold and many substances: but of all these water they most greatly praised. . . . It is said . . . that in water there lives yet the echo of the Music of the Ainur more than in any other substance else that is in this Earth. (Tolkien [1977] 1979, 20)

As we can see, the descriptions move progressively from the abstract to the tangible: light and colours, winds and air, metals and stone, water. These elements are in turn categorized according to the order of importance given to the Valar, those of the Ainur who descended to Arda to tend the world. Highest of these is Manwë, the lord of air, winds and clouds, the breath of Arda and sight (28). Varda, spouse of Manwë, is the Lady of the Stars, associated with light and hearing (28). In the third place we find Ulmo, the Lord of Waters (28-29), who dwells alone. Then comes Aulë, who is lord of crafts (technique)—and of metals and minerals (29-30). Collectively, they represent the abstract, ethereal and spiritual side of reality as well as the physical, tangible one.

The biological world, the world of the living earth—trees, plants and other growing things—comes only later. Of these things, Yavanna, spouse of Aulë, is the main deity. She is said to be a lover of things that grow in the earth, “from the trees like towers in forests long ago to the moss upon stones or the small and secret things in the world” (30). Among the female Valar, Yavanna would be second to

³ As Christopher Tolkien points out in *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, in the preceding versions of *The Music of the Ainur*, the first of which was written in 1918-20 and the second, entitled *Ainulindalë*, in the 1930's, the Ainur behold a real, physical world, not a vision. This changes in the final version, published in *The Silmarillion*, where it is a vision that can only be “given existence in the words of Ilúvatar: Eä! Let these things Be!” (Tolkien 1987, 181). However, these elements, and “the matter of which Arda was made,” retain their connotation of being physical embodiments of the spirit of Ilúvatar, which is consistent with Tolkien's conception of trees and their relationship to the fate of the Children of Ilúvatar.

Varda, spouse of Manwë (as Ulmo, Lord of Waters, did not have a female companion but dwelled alone). She is not, however, second to her spouse Aulë; on a list of the most powerful of the Valar, she is mentioned before him (32), and she is at least established as his equal, which is of some importance to the present analysis, as we shall see.

Once the Music of the Ainur has created the physical world, trees are among the first things mentioned. Indeed, already in the first pages of the *Valaquenta*, we come across a symbolic use of a tree as catalyst both of the elements and of the corresponding deities. In a description of Yavanna, the narrator says that “some there are who have seen her standing like a tree under heaven, crowned with the Sun, and from all its branches there spilled a golden dew upon the barren earth . . . but the roots of the tree were in the waters of Ulmo, and the winds of Manwë spoke in its leaves” (30).

This description is telling, because although Yavanna is not foremost among the Valar, she is the female deity that *connects* the most important male deities. In Campbell’s view, with this “Tolkien . . . indicates that it is the interconnectivity of all things which sustains life” (2011, 66), to which we could add that it is the symbol of the tree, specifically, that imaginatively articulates such an enmeshment. Furthermore, the relationship is primarily between spirit and matter: Yavanna, when appearing in the shape of a tree, embodies the connection between the winds of Manwë, the water of Ulmo and the barren earth of Aulë, and while these elements are imbued with the spirit of the corresponding deities—Campbell’s second principle of the relationship between God, nature and earth rightly holds that “the wonders of the natural world are fashioned, sustained, and propelled by the ‘sub-creative’ powers of spiritual energies” (67)—such energies have physical implications for the created beings. Unlike the energies of Varda, embodied by the distant, abstract and more purely spiritual stars, the energies that Yavanna connects will make things grow and create physical manifestations of the divine spirits. In this sense, Tolkien’s conception of the world is certainly ecological, but with spiritual overtones.

Trees, then, are symbolically used from the outset as entities that combine, connect and enhance other spiritual energies. This is in turn representative of the whole of creation, which is continuously unfolding and flourishing, aided by the action of those created beings who are faithful to the premise of the world as a Gift of Ilúvatar. Creation, however, is also threatened by the corruptive and disruptive forces of those following the example of Melkor, the discordant Vala, as we shall presently see.

The Lamps, spirit and matter, and trees

The first chapter of the *Quenta Silmarillion*, “Of the Beginning of Days”, consolidates the connection between trees, on the one hand, and matter and spirit on the other. Here, Yavanna plants her seeds and prays to Aulë for light, and in a joint effort of the Valar, Aulë creates two mighty lamps for the lighting of Middle-earth (Tolkien [1977] 1979, 39), Varda endows them with light, Manwë hallows them, the Valar place them on two high pillars and plants begin to grow. Of these plants, trees, “crowned with cloud as they were living mountains, but whose feet were wrapped in a green twilight” (40) are the most majestic. This first growth of

living organisms in Middle-earth, where the lights of the Lamps cross most potently, is called the Spring of Arda, but the process is marred by Melkor, who already in the Music of the Ainur showed signs of pride and, most importantly, a wish to possess the created world and what is in it—among other things, it is said of him that “he coveted Arda and all that was in it, desiring the kingship of Manwë and dominion over the realms of his peers” (34). Melkor has established himself alone, far in the north where he has built his stronghold Utumno. The consequence of his presence in Middle-earth is that “green things fell sick and rotted, and rivers were choked with weeds and slime . . . and forests grew dark and perilous” (41).

Melkor is portrayed as a contrast to light, water and growing things (all infused with the angelic spirit of the Valar) and the effects of his presence in Middle-earth clearly show that these things are prone to corruption: growth is prevented, water is fouled, forests become dark. In other words, the conjunction of elements, the process of water and light combined with the spirit of the Valar that has fertilized the earth, is undone by Melkor, who ruins the process. Through the image of the forest, Tolkien thus makes it manifest that apart from spiritual energies, the natural world is made up of matter and physical energies—we are not in an Edenic realm but in a pre-human (and pre-Christian) world, which is already marred due to the presence of Melkor, and it is therefore a fragile entity. As Campbell says of Arda, “spiritual energy may be malevolent as well as benign and all of creation (in the absence of God) is threatened by it” (2011, 68).

Apart from corruption, the idea of perversion is also very much present in the episode dealing with the destruction of the Lamps. Among other things, it is said that Melkor has abducted spirits from the halls of Eä and “perverted them to his service” (40), and one of the central images of the process, that of forests turning dark, is probably a reference to the way the trees began to grow due to Melkor’s influence, in a way not consistent with the will of Ilúvatar, blocking out the light. Melkor, having departed from the Music from the very beginning, does not create but thrives on corruption, destruction and the perversion of Ilúvatar’s will, as the twisting of captured Elves into Orcs shows at a later stage in the history of the First Age (58). Not content with perverting and corrupting the natural world, however, Melkor goes on to actually break the two Lamps, the source of light that enables natural things to grow. As a consequence of this, the Valar chase Melkor back to Utumno and prevent the earth from rending, and so ends the Spring of Arda.

Unlike the stars, that are of Varda and represent spirit only, the Lamps were in part a product of Aulë’s technique, and plants arise as a result of a combination of this technique, Varda’s spiritual light and the seeds of Yavanna. Trees, then, although related to matter and technique, are also very much associated to spirit—which is clearly seen in Valinor, the place to which the Valar withdraw after their first clash with Melkor.

Trees in Valinor

In Valinor, the protected realm of the deities in Tolkien’s mythology, the most important and holy places save Taniquetil are related to trees in one way or another. The Gardens of Lórien, for instance, is a garden full of trees, given its name by the Vala called Lórien. Irmo, it is told, is “the master of visions and

dreams” (Tolkien [1977] 1979, 31), and the main function of his gardens is to provide rest, shelter and consolation for those who are weary of body and spirit: “from the fountains of Irmo and Estë all those who dwell in Valinor draw refreshment; and often the Valar come themselves to Lórien and there find repose and easing of the burden of Arda” (31).

Again, as in the image of Yavanna as a tree, in the Gardens of Lórien matter and spirit are related and combined. Water is one of the most prominent elements in this relationship—not in vain, Estë, the spouse of Irmo and goddess of healing and rest, sleeps on an island in a Lake called Lórelinn, which is bordered with trees. The connection between fresh water (lakes, fountains), visions (the Vala Lórien), healing and rest (Estë), and trees and forests, which is established here, prefigures the connections between these elements that are later to be found in many forested areas throughout Tolkien’s *legendarium*—not only in Lothlórien of Middle-earth but also in the dwelling of Tom Bombadil in the Old Forest and Henneth Annûn of Ithilien, to name but a few. Enchantment is another feature related to trees and forests which is present in these gardens. Melian, a lesser deity who tends the trees that flower here (34) is the greatest singer in Valinor, with strong ties to nightingales and to enchantment (Melian later meets and enchants the elf Thingol in Nan Elmoth, another forest).

Other important places related to trees in Valinor include Aulë’s *Great Court* outside the city of Valmar, which holds “some of all the trees that after grew upon the earth, and a pool of blue water lay among them”, as stated in *Book of Lost Tales I* (Tolkien [1983] 2015, 74). Again, the stress falls upon the proximity of the dwelling of a deity to trees and water. The prodigious hunter Oromë, another Vala, also has a particular love for trees and indeed dwells in a wood called Woods of Oromë: “all trees he loves, for which reason he is called Aldaron, and by the Sindar Tauron, the Lord of Forests” (Tolkien [1977] 1979, 32). Tolkien ([1981] 2000, 335) further states that Oromë is so intimately connected with trees that the male ents Ents will later worship him (while the female Entwives look to Yavanna in the first place).

However, no place related to trees in Valinor outshines the importance and sanctity of the Two Trees of Valinor, and it is the creation of these trees, and their subsequent destruction, that will establish the basis for the Fall in Tolkien’s mythology, which in turn is intimately related to the idea of stewardship of the natural world.

The Two Trees

We have previously seen that the two Lamps were made by Aulë in response to Yavanna’s pleas for light, needed for the growth of the seeds she had planted, and that these lamps were later destroyed by Melkor. Something similar, but with important differences, now occurs in Valinor: Yavanna, unbidden, sings the two Trees of Valinor to life: it is “a song of power, in which was set all her thought of things that grow in the earth” (Tolkien [1977] 1979, 43). The Vala Nienna, who “is acquainted with grief, and mourns for every wound that Arda has suffered in the marring of Melkor” (31), waters the mould with her tears, and the trees grow under Yavanna’s song. Here, there is an even stronger emphasis on the role of spiritual energies present in the biological processes of growth. In Campbell’s

opinion, “the account of the creation of these trees seems to present nature as sacred and possessed of angelic energy” (2011, 66), which I believe is not far off the mark, as subsequent events will show.

What are they like, then, these trees? To begin with, they are complementary, male and female, emitting gold and silver light, respectively. The light of Telperion, the male tree, is silvery, and related to the moon and to night. Laurelin, the female tree, beams with a golden light, and is associated to day and to the sun. Indeed, time begins to be measured when the Two Trees are created. Twice every day, there is a softer light when gold and silver beams mingle (Tolkien [1977] 1979, 43), and so begin the so-called Days of the Bliss of Valinor (44).

However, the light of the Trees does not reach Middle-earth. This is not a light intended for the growth of earthly things, as that of the Two Lamps; it is *holy* light, pure spirit, more symbolic than “real” in the physical sense. Campbell feels that it is “representative of the benevolent and sustaining power of nature itself” (2011, 67), while Tolkien himself asserts that the light of the Trees, “(derived from light before any fall) is the *light of art undivorced from reason* that sees things *both scientifically (or philosophically) and imaginatively (or subcreatively)* and ‘says that they are good’ — as beautiful” (Tolkien [1981] 2000, 148; my emphasis).

This comes through as a declaration of the principles that should inform any approach to creation, a combination of spirit and matter, and it is articulated through the image of the Two Trees. Yavanna, mainly concerned with things that grow—and especially with trees, as we have seen—takes delight in the unchecked, spontaneous, living and evolving qualities of creation, and draws her power from the imaginative, subcreative and spiritual side of Creation. On the other hand, Aulë, her spouse, is the main deity of craftsmen and those who wish to understand and apply the matter of which the earth is made, living as well as inanimate, and he is primarily concerned with the scientific, philosophical approach to matter, to use Tolkien’s terms. We should notice here that just as Yavanna did not participate in the creation of the two Lamps, Aulë does not participate in the creation of the Two Trees—spirit (poetry, song) and matter (tears, earth) are combined in the creation of the Two Trees, but no *technique* is involved. The ensuing light is poetic and transcendent, not practical or technical.

Yavanna and Aulë

In order to understand the role of trees in the context of stewardship in Tolkien’s works—the desired combination of matter and spirit and the dangers of letting either of them upset the balance—the interaction and diversity of approaches to the physical world embodied by Yavanna and Aulë is illuminating. When Aulë decides, out of impatience, to create a race of his own making, the Dwarves, Ilúvatar admonishes Aulë because such a creation is not harmony with his intentions: “though you have devised a language for them, they can only report your own thought. This is a mockery of me” (Tolkien [1981] 2000, 287). The gift of Ilúvatar’s spirit has not informed the creation of the Dwarves, so true subcreation is not involved here, only “science.” In keeping with Tolkien’s above-stated description of the light of the Two Trees, which constitutes the ideal guiding principle with regards to creation, the outcome of Aulë’s scientific approach, deprived of the spiritual counterpart, is a race which is not characterized by its

beauty, stately stature or good intentions (Seymour 2015). Moreover, the Dwarves were created for the wrong reason: for Aulë's personal pleasure. Because of this, Dickerson and Evans feel that they are "only puppets," contending that "there are limits, even for the most powerful" (2006, 27). Aulë acknowledges Ilúvatar's authority and volunteers to destroy the Dwarves, but instead Ilúvatar puts them temporarily to sleep. However, knowing that they will one day awake and walk the earth, Yavanna says:

"Yet because thou hiddest this thought [the creation of Dwarves] from me until its achievement, thy children will have little love for the things of my love. They will love first the things made by their own hands, as doth their father. They will delve in the earth, and the things that grow and live upon the earth they will not heed. Many a tree shall feel the bite of their iron without pity" (Tolkien [1977] 1979, 51).

Yavanna did not take part in the creation of the Dwarves, Aulë's creatures, as Aulë took part in the growth of the trees, Yavanna's creations, by making the lamps. In other words, the one deity that channels both matter and spirit was not involved. This entails an oblivion or neglect of subcreation as gift: the product of purely scientific minds that become obsessed with their own creations, will not have love for nature—and trees (the main object of Yavanna's love) are singled out by Yavanna as victims of this attitude.

Aulë, however, replies to Yavanna that Eru will give the Children of Ilúvatar (Elves and Men, as well as his adopted children, the Dwarves) "dominion, and they shall use all that they find in Arda: though not, by the purpose of Eru, without respect or without gratitude" (52). To this Yavanna replies: "Not unless Melkor darken their hearts" (52).

Four things can be inferred from this dialogue: 1) spirit and matter should be combined in any interaction with the natural world; 2) if the spiritual side is neglected, the outcome will endanger the natural world (particularly trees); 3) the Children of Ilúvatar will one day shoulder the role of stewards of Arda; 3) it will not always be easy for them to make the right choice, because of Melkor's presence in the world.

This tension is expressed through the making of the Silmarils and the doom of the Noldor.

The Silmarils, the Children of Ilúvatar and the fate of Arda

After the light of the Lamps that brought physical trees and plant-life into the world, and the Two Trees, that brought the divine light of Ilúvatar to Valinor, the third created source of light is not fashioned by the Valar but by an Elf. Fëanor, "the most subtle in mind and the most skilled in hand" (Tolkien [1977] 1979, 74) of the Elves, marries Nerdanel, the daughter of an Elf-smith by the name of Mahtan who is "of the Noldor most dear to Aulë" (75). With the help of Mahtan—and hence of Aulë, whether directly or indirectly we do not know—Fëanor perfects his technique and applies it to the making of the Silmarils, three gems in which he captures the imperishable, blended light of the Two Trees. Thus, matter and technique (the vessels) are combined with the purely spiritual light of the Trees. This time, however, the container of the light is fashioned by an Elf, not a Vala, and this marks a shift in the fate of the world, which will from this point on be

connected to the fate of the Children of Ilúvatar. Let us take a look at how this works.

To begin with, evil always threatens to upset the balance between spirit and matter, subcreation and science, of which trees is the main embodiment. Indeed, as we saw in the corruptive forces of Melkor acting upon the plant-world, the vulnerability of the natural world is an inherent feature of Arda, and throughout the legendarium, the idea that created beings are permanently exposed to potential dangers is dramatically expressed by the image of various kinds of threats lurking on the borders or penetrating into forested realms of transient safety and rest.⁴ This tendency begins already in the *Quenta Silmarillion*, where we not only learn that the Woods of Oromë are situated right next to Ungoliant's Lair (Wynn Fonstad 1991, 7), but also that the giant spider teams up with Melkor in order to perform a joint attack on the Two Trees in the most sacred place of Valinor, during a feast of celebration. Through the destruction of the Two Trees, then, we see that Melkor threatens not only matter but also spirit. This makes sense, because spirit is an inherent part of the subcreated world of growing things and Arda is made up of both (Campbell 2011, 70).

Tolkien now proceeds to connect this idea to the Silmarils, the fate of the Children of Ilúvatar and the fate of the world. To begin with, it is said that "Mandos foretold that the fates of Arda, earth, sea, and air, lay locked within [the Silmarils]" ([1977] 1979, 79). This is because Melkor and Ungoliant don't succeed in completely annihilating the blended light of the Trees, which acts as a guiding principle for the approach to creation ("earth, sea and air"), and which has been captured by Fëanor in the three gems.

However, to be a subcreator, which is what Fëanor has become, entails responsibility; the same responsibility that Aulë failed to show when he created the Dwarves out of impatience and for his own pleasure, applying science and technique but without paying attention to Yavanna's spirit, which is central to Ilúvatar's will concerning Arda. While Aulë realizes his mistake, humbles himself and relinquishes possession, Fëanor does not—however powerful, Fëanor is not a Vala but one of the Children of Ilúvatar, and the fate of Elves and Men is premised on the idea of a Fall. In Tolkien's own words, the difference between the Fall in Christian mythology and the one depicted in his own myth is that "the rebellion of created free-will precedes creation of the World (Eä); and Eä has in it, subcreatively introduced, evil, rebellions, discordant elements of its own nature [...] The Fall or corruption, therefore, of all things in it and all inhabitants of it, was a possibility if not inevitable" (Tolkien [1981] 2000, 286-287).

Furthermore, in Tolkien's work, the fall of the Elves is intimately related to the Two Trees, that are perceived as absolutely crucial to the tales of the *Silmarillion*: "...about their fate all the tales of the Elder Days are woven," it is

⁴ To mention just a few examples, in *The Silmarillion* Dorthonion turns into Taur-Nu-Fuin, or "Delduwath" ("Forest under Nightshade") because of Morgoth's influence; in *The Children of Húrin* (versions of which appear in *The Silmarillion*, *Unfinished Tales*, *The Book of Lost Tales* and *The Children of Húrin* proper) the dragon Glaurung lurks on the borders of Dorthonion and Doriath, finally attacking Brethil; in *The Hobbit* Greenwood the Great turns into Mirkwood due to the presence of the Necromancer (i.e. Sauron); in *The Lord of the Rings* we see the Old Forest containing corrupted and evil trees, Fangorn being threatened by Saruman and Ithilien gradually collapsing into darkness because of the proximity and incursions of the Enemy and his henchmen.

stated in “Of the Beginning of Days” (Tolkien [1977] 1979, 43). This is because Fëanor, having captured the imperishable flame of the Two Trees in the Silmarils, has become obsessed with his own creation, which leads to his fall (Tolkien [1981] 2000, 146). Instead of considering his subcreative powers and their outcome, the Silmarils, a gift of Ilúvatar, Fëanor increasingly contemplates the gems as a personal possession. What is more, once the light of the Trees is gone and he is asked to unlock the light of the Silmarils to restore it to the world, he refuses to do so. The crucial decision not to destroy the Silmarils for a greater good but to keep them to himself is an exercise of free will that brings down the doom of the Noldor. This doom, however, will not only affect the Noldor but almost all the Children of Ilúvatar (including Men) will sooner or later become involved, because Fëanor goes on to commit a major sin, slaying fellow Elves to get their ships, and finally leaves Valinor for Middle-earth. This can be construed, as Maczynzka rightly claims, as “a major betrayal and the abandonment of paradise” (2015, 120).

From here on, the epic tales of Elves and Men begin to unfold in Middle-earth. This, too, is coherent with the global vision of the mythology: it was here that the lights of the lamps mingled, the first trees grew and the Valar established themselves to begin with. Here is where Melkor marred Arda, and this is the region the Valar had to leave in order to protect themselves in Valinor, separating themselves from the rest of the created world—including most of the Children of Ilúvatar. Middle-earth is central to creation and it is only natural that this should be the destination of the exodus of the fallen Elves, the stage upon which the drama of free will in a fallen world will be explored. From this moment, the fate of Arda is increasingly in the hands of the Children of Ilúvatar.

Concluding remarks: trees and the mythical foundations of stewardship in Arda

Verlyn Flieger, referring to Tolkien’s biased response to orcs and hobbits chopping down trees, “activity for which one group is blamed while the other is commended” (2000, 156), holds that Tolkien’s position concerning stewardship is untenable: “The problem of how to live on earth without changing it, of how to answer growing human needs without sacrificing to them some portion of the natural environment, is unsolvable” (157), she states, concluding that the “promise [...] of a land in the West” where both the feraculture of Ents and agriculture of Entwives can coexist happily “may be impossible to fulfill in Middle-earth” (158).

This, however, is not a contradiction: on the one hand, Tolkien’s vision is not necessarily of a world which is potentially perpetual, but one which may well change fundamentally (the cataclysms of previous Ages in Middle-earth have provided abundant examples of such changes, at any rate). Gandalf, the messenger of the Valar in Middle-earth, in a metaphorical turn of phrase which can apply both to the proper attitude against the Enemy and to stewardship at large, hints at just that: “it is not our part to master all the tides of the world, but to do what is in us for the succour of those years wherein we are set, uprooting the evil in the fields that we know, so that those who live after may have clean earth to till. What weather they shall have is not ours to rule” (Tolkien [1966] 2007, 1150).

Nothing is said here about preservation of all species or about such an attitude being a guarantee for eternal preservation—the “weather”, whether metaphorical or real, may well change. On the other hand, the Hobbits are not

“commended” for their action, nor is it unequivocally stated by Tolkien that their actions were “necessary for ‘a well-ordered and well-farmed countryside,’” as Flieger (2000, 153) seems to imply. In fact, the experience may well have been an eye-opener that prevented them from embarking on a war against the trees—instead of annihilating the Old Forest, they build a protective boundary to stave off the rampant vegetation. Hobbits may learn to come to terms with Ilúvatar’s will in terms of stewardship, because they have evolved spontaneously, naturally—sub-creatively—whereas Orcs are the products of corruption and a perversion of Ilúvatar’s will and can expect no such illumination.

The central idea, then, is not that the world will go on forever if it is tended in the right way, but that the world should be perceived as a gift, not as a possession, because such is the will of Ilúvatar. And it is through trees that this vision is articulated. As we have seen, the importance of trees in Tolkien’s cosmological vision is evident already in the early sections of *The Silmarillion*. In *Ainulindalë* and the *Valaquenta*, Tolkien establishes the basic coordinates of the genesis of Arda, the principles governing the world and the main tensions of the conflicts that will take place in the rest of the legendarium. As we have seen, trees are associated with a combination of elements, with visions, dreams, enchantment, rest, comfort and water (in which the Music of the Ainur is most clearly heard), and with a desired combination of spirit and matter, best embodied by the two Trees and their light, as the guiding principle that will protect and enrich Arda, and all things living there. But trees and what they represent are also subjected to external threats. Yavanna foresees that a divided stance—science and technology separated from the subcreative spirit—will bring about an obsession with their own creations on behalf of the Children of Ilúvatar, because of Melkor’s presence and malign influence in the world. The stance that informed the making of the Silmarils, combining spirit and matter, is delicate and constantly under threat, and this is what both Elves and Men, endowed with a free will, have to grapple with throughout the legendarium, under the pressure from Melkor and later Sauron. The destruction of the Two Trees, and Fëanor’s decision to keep the Silmarils—now the only vestige of the blended light in the world—for himself, connect these artifacts to almost all strife told of in *The Silmarillion* hereafter, affecting both Elves and Men. Symbolically, they also transfer stewardship of Arda from the Valar to the Children of Ilúvatar, and the tenets of this stewardship (derived from a combination of spirit and matter mainly connected with trees) are at the very core of the moral struggle in Middle-earth.

The fate of Arda in a *fallen* world thus depends on the Children of Ilúvatar and the decisions they make as stewards, because as dwellers in this world, their relationship with creation—made up of matter and spirit both—will determine their fate. Hence, in Tolkien’s legendarium Arda becomes not only the backdrop of the struggle but the object of it as well, because, as Campbell says, “the struggle between good and evil . . . is indissolubly connected to the wonders of the natural world” (2011, 69), and in particular the world of and for itself, as the Trees and their light “embody all living things in Arda at [the time of their emergence,] the natural world apart from Men” (Dickerson and Evans 2006, 8).⁵

⁵ This is consistent with Tolkien’s ideas concerning the capability of fairy-stories to make us see “things as apart from ourselves,” which is one of the prerequisites for the “Recovery” that allows us to see the world with fresh eyes (Tolkien 2008, 67).

Matter and subcreative spirit, the main elements of Aulë and Yavanna, respectively, can and need to be combined to create a way of living in a fallen world that is yet consistent with Ilúvatar's design and will. In Dickerson and Evans's words, "it is implied that both Elves and Men are intended to use Ilúvatar's gifts to them 'in harmony with the design of Ilúvatar's music'" (2006, 34-35), and "for Eru Ilúvatar, the world exists to be enjoyed by him and by those he creates to enjoy it . . . its purpose is to be and to be a pleasure for those who witness, participate in, and share in its creation" (28). Hence, the mode of being in the world must not be dominated by the particular needs of Elves and Men, but premised upon the preservation of the beauty and wonder of the natural world, contemplating the world as a gift not a possession. This ethical stance is seen as fundamental for a proper stewardship, and this important for our understanding not only of the moral disposition of both Elves and Men, and of the stories of their misfortunes and triumphs that occupy the central stage in Tolkien's legendarium, but also of the role of trees in Tolkien's entire oeuvre, because trees and forests become central symbols of the moral battle in Arda, catalysts of moral disposition, landmarks of good or of evil⁶ among the Children of Ilúvatar. In this scheme of things, trees symbolically and thematically connect past, present and future (McGonagill 2015, 165) throughout Tolkien's work, linking the evolution of the world to the evolution of the legendarium.

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⁶ For the connection between the Two Trees and the Tree of Good and Evil, see Dickerson (2013, 502).

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